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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MULTI-ETHNIC DA'WAH IN PENANG, MALAYSIA: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract: *Penang has historically developed as a space shaped by intersecting maritime networks, diverse Muslim communities, and a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. However, scholarship on the historical development of Islam, Muslim institutions, da'wah to non-Muslims, and interreligious relations in the state has largely evolved within relatively separate disciplinary domains. This article aims to trace the historical development of Islam and da'wah in Penang, while synthesize the conceptual foundations of multi-ethnic da'wah, and identify research gaps that have hindered the development of a framework grounded in the local context. The study employs a narrative literature review of journal articles, historical documents, and official institutional sources retrieved through Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, MyJurnal, MyCITE, and institutional repositories. The literature was organised into three main clusters and analysed across six themes: the historical development of Islam, the ethnic and religious landscape, the development of da'wah, conceptual foundations, institutional and community practices, and gaps in the literature. The synthesis indicates that trade and pilgrimage mobility, mosques and waqf, education, publishing, religious*

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administration, and NGO involvement collectively shaped an evolving da'wah ecology that progressed from strengthening Muslim communities towards more dialogical forms of public engagement. Five conceptual domains were identified: theological-ethical clarity, contextual wisdom, dialogical communication, social benefit and exemplary conduct, and institutional integrity. Not only that, this article does not propose a validated model but provides a more systematically organised historical and conceptual foundation for the development of a multi-ethnic da'wah framework in Penang.

Keywords: *Penang; multi-ethnic da'wah; Islamic history; da'wah to non-Muslims; interreligious dialogue; narrative review*

Introduction

Da'wah constitutes a fundamental obligation in Muslim life, aimed at conveying the message of Islam and guiding humankind towards goodness (al-khayr). This obligation is affirmed in Surah Āli ʿImrān (3:104), while the mission of Prophet Muhammad SAW as a mercy to all creation (raḥmatan li al-ʿālamīn) is stated in Surah al-Anbiyāʾ (21:107). However, da'wah does not take place within an isolated social space. The ways in which the Islamic message is understood and received are influenced by various factors, including history, social structures, language, culture, intercommunal experiences, and the position of religious institutions. Therefore, the study of multi-ethnic da'wah should begin with an understanding of the local context before normative principles are translated into appropriate methods and forms of engagement.

The Qur'an recognises human diversity as part of the divine order with social and moral purposes. The principle of li-taʿārafū in Surah al-Ḥujurāt (49:13) establishes mutual recognition and understanding as a foundation for relations among nations and groups of people. Surah al-Naḥl (16:125), meanwhile, calls for conveying the message with wisdom, good counsel, and engagement in the best manner. The principle of bi-allatī hiya aḥsan is also articulated in Surah al-ʿAnkabūt (29:46), which outlines the ethics of dialogue and the pursuit of the most appropriate approach. Surah Āli ʿImrān (3:64) further opens a space for seeking common ground (kalimatin sawāʾ), while Surah al-Anʿām (6:108) prohibits insulting the objects of worship of others through the injunction wa lā tasubbū alladhīna yadʿūna min dūni Allāh. Together, these Qur'anic principles of da'wah are grounded in the principle of no compulsion in religion (lā ikrāha fī al-dīn) in Surah al-Baqarah (2:256). These verses provide a foundation for da'wah that maintains clarity of creed while safeguarding human dignity, sensitivity, and freedom (Don & Salamon, 2009; Khambali @ Hambali, 2020; Muhamad Shukri & Mat Zain, 2020).

Moreover, Penang provides a significant context for examining the relationship between history and da'wah. Its position within the sphere of Kedah and the maritime networks of the Malay world, the development of George Town as a port, the formation of Malay, Acehnese, Arab, Indian Muslim or Chulia, and Jawi Peranakan communities, as well as the growth of non-Muslim Chinese and Indian communities, created a highly diverse space of interaction. Current population estimates record approximately 1.8 million residents in the state, while census patterns indicate considerable ethnic and religious diversity (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). Within such a context, encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims occur through

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neighbourhoods, education, trade, employment, tourism, public spaces, and community institutions, rather than being confined solely to formal dialogue or da'wah programmes.

Although scholarship on Penang encompasses colonial and legal history, the hajj, waqf, Islamic education, interreligious relations, and da'wah to non-Muslims, these areas continue to be discussed largely in isolation from one another. Historical literature describes figures, communities, and institutions, but does not necessarily examine the purposes, target groups, or strategies of da'wah. In contrast, the literature on multi-ethnic da'wah generally discusses principles and approaches at the Malaysian level without being firmly rooted in the historical experiences of a particular state.

This narrative synthesis compares the primary strands of prior literature and demonstrates a threefold gap in current scholarship. First, historical studies of Islam in Penang (Khoo, 2014; Musa et al., 2018; Muhamad & Othman, 2020; Merican & Mohamed Amin, 2021) trace communities and institutions but rarely identify the purposes, target audiences, or communication strategies of da'wah. Second, conceptual works on da'wah to non-Muslims and coexistence in Malaysia (Don & Salamon, 2009; Mohd Zin & Puteh, 2012; Khambali @ Hambali, 2020; Muhamad Shukri & Mat Zain, 2020) articulate principles at the national level, but they are not anchored in the historical experience of a particular state. Third, empirical studies either examine particular programmes or organisations in Penang (Khalid et al., 2015; Noor Azemy & Mohamad Rasit, 2019; Aini et al., 2025) or develop and validate frameworks in other states, notably Sarawak (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Ashaari et al., 2026); none connects contemporary practice with the historical development of Islam in Penang. While existing literature reviews and conceptual overviews address da'wah to non-Muslims at the broader national level (Meerangani, 2018; Kadir et al., 2021), to the authors' knowledge, no previous review has integrated the historical development of Islam, conceptual coexistence frameworks, and contemporary empirical practices for a single multi-ethnic state.

Accordingly, this study on the historical development and conceptual foundations of multi-ethnic da'wah in Penang outlines the following three objectives:

1. To trace the historical development of Islam and da'wah in Penang within a multi-ethnic environment;
2. To synthesise the conceptual foundations that can guide da'wah among communities of different ethnic and religious backgrounds;
3. To assess institutional and community practices in order to identify gaps in the literature.

Method

This paper uses a structured narrative review to examine the historical development of Islam and da'wah in Penang, synthesise the conceptual foundations of multi-ethnic da'wah, and identify research gaps related to the development of a da'wah framework in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. This approach is particularly suitable for synthesising fragmented literature, identifying conceptual patterns, and connecting historical and contemporary scholarship across different academic traditions (Snyder, 2019; Grant & Booth, 2009).

This review was organised in accordance with the general principles of the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Review Articles (SANRA). SANRA was used as a reporting guideline to strengthen the justification for the review, clarify the review objectives, describe the literature

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search strategy, support arguments with relevant evidence, and ensure rigorous scholarly reasoning throughout the synthesis process (Baethge et al., 2019). It was not used as a quantitative quality appraisal instrument.

Search strategy

The literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. The searches were run between June 2026 and September 2026 and search strings in Malay and English included: “Islam in Penang”, “history of Islam in Penang”, “multi-ethnic da‘wah”, “da‘wah to non-Muslims”, “interreligious dialogue in Malaysia”, “street da‘wah Penang”, “Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI) Penang” and “mosque tour Penang”. The search was based on four categories of information: (1) development of Islam and Muslim institutions in Penang; (2) da‘wah actors and activities in the state; (3) principles of da‘wah within Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multireligious society; and (4) interfaith dialogue, welfare initiatives, community engagement and the communication of Islam to non-Muslims. The publication-year limit are from 1999 to 2026 comprises the historical sources including important primary documents and classical scholarship relevant to the historical development of Islam in Penang.

The search string

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("Islam in Penang" OR "history of Islam in Penang" OR "Muslim community in Penang" OR "Islamic institutions" OR "Muslim institutions" OR da'wah OR dakwah OR "Islamic propagation" OR "Islamic outreach" OR "street da'wah" OR "mosque tour" OR "Islamic Propagation Society International" OR IPSI OR "interfaith dialogue" OR "interreligious dialogue" OR "community engagement" OR "religious diversity" OR "multi-ethnic society" OR "multicultural society" OR "non-Muslims") AND (Penang OR "Pulau Pinang" OR Malaysia)) AND PUBYEAR > 1998 AND PUBYEAR < 2027 Date of Access: February 2026
WoS	("Islam in Penang" OR "history of Islam in Penang" OR "Muslim community in Penang" OR "Islamic institutions" OR "Muslim institutions" OR da'wah OR dakwah OR "Islamic propagation" OR "Islamic outreach" OR "street da'wah" OR "mosque tour" OR "Islamic Propagation Society International" OR IPSI OR "interfaith dialogue" OR "interreligious dialogue" OR "community engagement" OR "religious diversity" OR "multi-ethnic society" OR "multicultural society" OR "non-Muslims") AND (Penang OR "Pulau Pinang" OR Malaysia) Date of Access: February 2026
Google Scholar	("Islam in Penang" OR "history of Islam in Penang" OR "Muslim community in Penang" OR "Islamic institutions" OR "Muslim institutions" OR da'wah OR dakwah OR "Islamic propagation" OR "Islamic outreach" OR "street da'wah" OR "mosque tour" OR "Islamic Propagation Society International" OR IPSI OR "interfaith dialogue" OR "interreligious dialogue" OR "community engagement" OR "religious diversity" OR

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	"multi-ethnic society" OR "multicultural society" OR "non-Muslims") AND (Penang OR "Pulau Pinang" OR Malaysia) Date of Access: February 2026

Inclusion and exclusion

This article prioritised peer-reviewed journal articles, while institutional publications and historical sources were retained when they provided authoritative evidence not available in academic journals. It excluded sources that mentioned Penang only incidentally without substantively discussing Islam or da'wah, as well as publications lacking identifiable academic or institutional authority. Works cited were those that discussed the historical development of Islam, Muslim institutions, waqf, Islamic education, or Islamic administration in Penang, da'wah actors, organizations, approaches, or activities in Penang, da'wah within multi-ethnic or multi-religious Malaysian society, interreligious dialogue, community engagement, social welfare, or communication with non-Muslim communities. Institutional sources such as the Penang Islamic Religious Council (MAINPP), the National Archives of Malaysia, and Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (YADIM) were selectively included to support historical chronology, institutional development, and community-based da'wah initiatives.

Screening and quality appraisal

In screening and appraising the quality of the literature, items were assessed for their alignment with the study objectives and research focus. During the eligibility assessment, publications were evaluated based on thematic relevance, transparency of information, credibility of the publication source, and their contribution to understanding the historical development or conceptual foundations of da'wah. Where historical accounts differed across sources, information was triangulated by comparing academic publications, historical documents, and official institutional records to minimize unsupported historical inferences. Sources meeting the inclusion criteria were incorporated into the literature matrix and analyzed through thematic narrative synthesis with 234 articles.

Data extraction and synthesis

Data extraction was conducted manually with particular attention to historical evidence, conceptual discussions, institutional practices, and implications for da'wah in multi-ethnic settings. The extracted literature was analyzed using thematic analysis integrated with interpretive narrative synthesis. Initial coding was guided by the review objectives and research questions. Related concepts and findings were subsequently grouped through a process of constant comparison until broader analytical themes emerged.

A key analytical principle in this review was the distinction between evidence describing the development of Islam and evidence explicitly demonstrating da'wah activities. For example, the presence of Muslim traders, settlements, mosques, or waqf institutions was not automatically interpreted as organized da'wah unless the literature explicitly identified communicative, educational, missionary, or religious outreach purposes. This distinction reduced retrospective interpretation and strengthened the conceptual consistency of the synthesis.

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The reviewed literature was subsequently organized into three analytical strands according to its primary focus and contribution to the synthesis. This paper evaluated a total of 51 references, comprising both journal articles and authentic reference materials. Rather than treating these strands as isolated categories, the analysis synthesized historical evidence, conceptual scholarship, and contemporary institutional practices into a coherent interpretive framework. The organization of the literature is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Scope and Organization of the Narrative Review Analysis

Literature strand	Primary source types	Analytical focus	Role in the narrative synthesis
Historical development of Islam	Historical studies, legal history, pilgrimage (hajj), waqf, Islamic education, and heritage studies.	Mobility, Muslim communities, chronology, and institutional development.	Identifies recurring social spaces and institutional foundations that shaped the historical development of Islam in Penang.
Literature strand	Primary source types	Analytical focus	Role in the narrative synthesis
Conceptual foundations of multi-ethnic da'wah	Da'wah scholarship, fiqh al-ta'ayush, interreligious dialogue, and contextual da'wah literature.	Ta'aruf, hikmah, dialogical communication, religious sensitivity, and social benefit.	Provides the normative and conceptual lens for interpreting historical and contemporary evidence.
Contemporary da'wah practices in Penang	Studies on NGOs, street da'wah, IPSI, mosque tours, and official institutional publications.	Communication strategies, program implementation, target communities, and community engagement.	Connects historical and conceptual foundations with contemporary da'wah practices in Penang.

Source: Developed by the author based on the reviewed literature.

Limitations of Study

As the method uses is narrative review, the study provides an interpretive synthesis rather than an exhaustive inventory of all publications related to Islam and da'wah in Penang. Consequently, the review prioritizes conceptual integration over comprehensive bibliographic coverage. The evidence base consists of heterogeneous sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theses, historical records, institutional publications, and heritage materials. These sources differ in methodological approach, purpose, and evidential strength. documentation concerning the early history of Islam in Penang, particularly during the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, remains fragmented and occasionally inconsistent. Historical interpretations therefore required triangulation across multiple academic and institutional sources

Findings

The analysis of the reviewed literature identified six interrelated themes: (1) the development of Islam in Penang; (2) the social context of Penang's multi-ethnic society; (3) the development of da'wah approaches; (4) the underlying Islamic conceptual principles of da'wah; (5) institutional and community engagement; and (6) existing research gaps. This thematic organisation enables the history of Islam, the realities of a plural society, da'wah practices, and

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their conceptual foundations to be analysed in an integrated manner. It also distinguishes between historical evidence, contemporary practices, and proposals for developing a future framework for multi-ethnic da'wah.

Theme 1: The Development of Islam in Penang

The historical development of Islam in Penang needs to be situated within a broader regional framework, particularly in relation to Kedah and the maritime networks that connected the Malay Peninsula with the Malay world and the wider Islamic world. Therefore, the year 1786, which is associated with the establishment of the British settlement by Francis Light, should not be regarded as the absolute starting point of Islamic history on the island. Rather, that year is more appropriately understood as a point of political and colonial transition that transformed the administrative, economic, and social structures of the local population. Merican and Mohamed Amin (2021), through their examination of the Light Letters and historical legal materials, demonstrate that the narrative surrounding the British acquisition of Penang needs to be critically reassessed. At the same time, documentation concerning Muslim communities and organised da'wah activities prior to 1786 remains inconsistent. Accordingly, the broader Islamic background of the Kedah region needs to be distinguished from evidence that specifically documents the development of Islam in Penang.

After the political changes of 1786, the legal and institutional position of Islam in Penang underwent gradual transformation under British colonial administration. The introduction of the First Charter of Justice in 1807 marked an important point in the reception of English law through the establishment of colonial judicial institutions in Penang, although local and Islamic laws were not immediately displaced from community life (Abd Rahim et al., 1999; Tang, 2023). Tang (2023) further emphasises that the reception of English law through the 1807 Charter was based on the colonial assumption that Penang constituted terra nullius, a premise that was subsequently challenged by evidence demonstrating the existence of an organised Malay community prior to the introduction of the Charter. Subsequent developments through the Second Charter of Justice 1826 and the judicial structure of the Straits Settlements further consolidated English law, while certain religious and family matters concerning the Muslim community continued to be administered by kadi and mosque officials at the qaryah level (Abd Rahim et al., 1999). Muslim marriages and divorces were later subjected to a more formal administrative structure through The Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance, 1880 (Ordinance V of 1880), which provided for the registration of marriages and divorces as well as the position of the kadi within the legal system of the Straits Settlements (Abd Rahim et al., 1999). Official historical legal records also confirm that Ordinance V of 1880 was The Mahomedan Marriage Ordinance, 1880, which came into force on 24 August 1880.

Following independence, the administration of Islam in Penang moved towards more systematic institutionalisation through the Administration of Muslim Religion Law 1959 (Law No. 3 of 1959). This legislation provided the basis for the establishment of the Penang and Province Wellesley Islamic Religious Council and specified areas of religious administration, including advising the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the administration of property and trusts, zakat, mosques, and matters concerning the Muslim community (Abd Rahim et al., 1999; MAINPP, n.d.). MAINPP records that the law was passed on 15 April 1959, before the appointment of the Council's first leadership in January 1960. Within a broader framework, Moustafa (2018) explains that Penang was among the states that enacted an Administration of Muslim Law Enactment in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a process reflecting the increasing institutional

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capacity of the state to administer matters concerning religion, marriage, divorce, and Islamic judicial institutions. These developments demonstrate that the history of Islam in Penang unfolded within changing structures of authority, organisation, and law. From the perspective of da'wah, these structures were not merely administrative mechanisms; they also shaped the institutional capacity of Muslim organisations, community management, and the social spaces that subsequently provided an organisational foundation for the development of more structured forms of da'wah engagement.

Maritime Mobility and the Formation of Muslim Communities

The development of George Town as a port attracted Malay, Acehnese, Arab, Indian Muslim, and other migrant communities. Among the significant groups were Tamil Muslim or Chulia traders, who had participated in the trading networks of the Straits of Malacca before settling in the newly established port. Khoo Salma Nasution (2014) demonstrates that the Chulia community developed religious and social spaces through the endowment of mosques, burial grounds, and community facilities. The mosque and burial sites granted in 1801 were later associated with the establishment of the Kapitan Keling Mosque under the leadership of Cauder Mohuddeen. These waqf properties not only sustained religious functions but also served as economic resources and foundations for community administration. More recent studies have also highlighted the developmental and governance challenges surrounding the Kapitan Keling waqf lands within a modern urban environment (Ismail et al., 2021).

Alongside the Chulia community, the development of the Malay-Acehnese community in Acheen Street further contributed to the formation of a Muslim urban space in George Town. Institutional sources record the establishment of a settlement by Tengku Syed Hussain al-Aidid towards the end of the eighteenth century and the construction of the Acheen Street Malay Mosque in the early nineteenth century (National Archives of Malaysia, n.d.; Penang State Islamic Religious Council, n.d.; Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia, 2019). The surrounding area gradually developed to include residential houses, shops, learning spaces, and facilities for pilgrims and worshippers. Although heritage sources occasionally differ in their details concerning particular dates, they collectively indicate that the early mosques of Penang functioned as religious, educational, economic, and social nuclei. In this context, the combination of local, Mughal/Indian Muslim, Moorish, Chinese, and colonial architectural elements found in George Town's historic mosques may be interpreted as a manifestation of the adaptation of Islamic institutions to a cosmopolitan and multicultural port-city environment (Hassan & Ali, 2019; National Archives of Malaysia, 2026).

Penang's position within regional maritime networks also made it an important centre of hajj mobility. The oral histories analysed by Musa et al. (2018) illustrate the relationship between sea travel, lodging houses, businesses, transportation, and the management of pilgrims around Acheen Street. Musa and Maslan @ Baharudin (2024) further trace Penang's role as a hajj embarkation point until 1977, including the role of hajj syeikhs as travel intermediaries and service providers for pilgrims. Connections with the Malay states, the Malay Archipelago and Makkah meant that the hajj functioned not only as an individual act of worship but also as an ecosystem of mobility, knowledge, trade and services that expanded Islamic social networks. These patterns of mobility also contributed to the formation of a hybrid Muslim identity in Penang. Ismail and Daud's (2013) study of the Jawi Peranakan community demonstrates the integration of Indian heritage, Malay customs, and Islamic teachings within family and social life. The experience of the Jawi Peranakan illustrates that Muslim society in Penang developed

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within ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse settings. The formation of this community was associated with marriages between Muslim migrants from India and Arabia and local Malay women, followed by processes of assimilation and cultural and linguistic adaptation (Yusoff & Mohamed, 2010; Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2015). At the social level, elements of ancestral heritage also interacted with local Malay customs, as reflected in the marriage practices of the Jawi Peranakan community in George Town (Ismail & Daud, 2013). Taken together, the experience of this community illustrates the diversity of Penang's Muslim society in terms of ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The Institutionalisation of Islam through Education, Publishing, and Administration

The institutionalisation of Islam in Penang developed through mosques, waqf, education, and intellectual networks. The Kapitan Keling Mosque and the Acheen Street Malay Mosque, for instance, provided spaces for worship, religious learning, welfare activities, transit, and community administration, while waqf institutions supported the economic continuity of these functions. The Kapitan Keling Mosque, whose historical roots date to 1801, developed alongside its waqf institution as a religious and social centre for the Indian Muslim community in George Town (Ismail et al., 2021; Dahlan et al., 2022). It also became an important symbol of the identity and continuity of the community's heritage (Azmi & Ismail, 2016). Viewed from the perspective of da'wah, these developments show that Islamic values were communicated not only through oral activities but also through social spaces that brought together knowledge, service, exemplary conduct, and communal relationships.

By the early twentieth century, formal education and publishing had broadened the channels through which Islam was communicated. Madrasah al-Mashoor al-Islamiah emerged as an important institution within the reform movement under the leadership of mudirs such as Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Shaykh Abdullah al-Maghribi, and Shaykh Abbas Bakar Rafiee. Changes in administration, curriculum, female education, and the expansion of branches reflected efforts to adapt Islamic education to the needs of society (Ahmad Dzulfahmi, 2016; Muhamad & Othman, 2020). Syed Sheikh al-Hadi also established Penang as a publishing base through Jelutong Press, the magazine al-Ikhwan (1926–1931), and the newspaper Saudara (1928–1941). Print media thus extended the communication of Islam beyond oral settings and physical institutions into the wider spheres of literacy and public discourse.

This process of institutional development continued after independence as the administration of Islamic affairs in Penang became increasingly structured through state administration, legislation, and fatwa. The Administration of Muslim Religion Law 1959 strengthened the functions of the Penang State Islamic Religious Council, while the later development of the mufti institution and the Administration of the Religion of Islam (State of Penang) Enactment 2004 further clarified authority in matters of Islamic law and fatwa (MAINPP, n.d.; Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pulau Pinang, n.d.). Within this framework, Sulong (2016) demonstrates that legal and fatwa mechanisms in Penang have given particular attention to the preservation of Islamic creed, including efforts to curb teachings regarded as deviant and address issues relating to apostasy. Although this orientation is important for the internal strengthening of the Muslim community, it should be analytically distinguished from da'wah to non-Muslims, which places greater emphasis on communication, education, dialogue, and the development of relationships between communities.

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Theme 2: The Social Context of Penang's Multi-ethnic Society

Penang's ethnic and religious diversity was shaped by its history as a port, patterns of migration, and the development of a cosmopolitan urban society (Ooi, 2015; Hui Shin & Maslan @ Baharudin, 2022). Within the Muslim community itself, considerable ethnic and cultural diversity exists, encompassing Malays, Arabs, Acehnese, Indian Muslims, Jawi Peranakan, and Chinese Muslims. These communities were formed through processes of migration, intermarriage, acculturation, and the development of local identities (Azmi & Ismail, 2016; Ismail & Daud, 2013; Wu, 2015). Accordingly, the concept of multi-ethnicity in Penang encompasses two main dimensions which are diversity across religious communities and diversity within the Muslim community itself.

This plural character remains evident in the contemporary demographic structure of the state, as census data and population estimates indicate substantial ethnic and religious diversity, particularly in urban areas such as George Town (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). Although contemporary data cannot be used to represent the entire historical development of the state, such data nevertheless point to the continuity of a plural social structure shaped by mobility and trade. Interreligious interaction takes place in everyday life through schools, workplaces, businesses, neighbourhoods, tourism, and the use of public spaces. The concept of dialogue of life helps explain such interactions as organic forms of engagement that precede or complement formal interreligious dialogue (Sintang et al., 2012).

The overlap between ethnic and religious identities also influences how communities understand and respond to da'wah. In the Malaysian context, the close association between Malay identity and Islam has contributed to a social perception that embracing Islam may at times be associated with changes in ethnic and cultural identity. Wu's (2015) study of the Chinese Muslim community in Penang shows that converts from minority groups may encounter social expectations to adapt to Malay identity, illustrating that religious and ethnic identities are not always perceived as separate categories. In the context of da'wah to Chinese communities, Mat Zain et al. (2021) similarly identify the perception that Islam and Malay identity are difficult to separate as one of the challenges in communicating da'wah, alongside language barriers and the need for culturally appropriate communication.

The implication is that da'wah in a multi-ethnic society must recognise that religious messages may be received through the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural experiences of the intended audience. Muhamad Shukri (2023), for instance, shows that prejudice, misunderstandings about Islam, and confusion between Islam and Malay society constitute some of the challenges in da'wah to non-Muslim Chinese communities. More recent research also indicates that language barriers, cultural misconceptions, and conflicts arising from multiple identities remain relevant in the experiences of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia. This suggests the need for da'wah approaches that employ appropriate language and remain sensitive to cultural backgrounds in order to reduce the perceived tension between religious and ethnic identities (Suo et al., 2026). In the context of multi-ethnic da'wah in Penang, this highlights the importance of clearly distinguishing Islamic principles from the customs of particular ethnic groups, so that da'wah can be communicated as a form of religious engagement that respects the continuity of the audience's cultural identity.

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Theme 3: The Development of Da'wah Approaches

The literature reviewed does not yet provide a specific and comprehensive chronology of the development of da'wah in Penang. Instead, existing studies tend to examine the history of Islam through separate themes, such as mobility and hajj (Musa et al., 2018), waqf and mosque institutions (Ismail et al., 2021), Islamic education and reformism (Muhamad & Othman, 2020; Akgun & Zakariya, 2019), religious administration and fatwa (Sulong, 2016), and contemporary da'wah activities (Khalid et al., 2015; Aini et al., 2025). The available evidence is therefore insufficient to establish a definitive periodisation of da'wah. Nevertheless, the synthesis of the literature reveals four broad tendencies: communication through individual networks and community life; the institutionalisation of education, welfare, and publishing; the internal strengthening of Muslim communities through religious administration; and increasingly direct engagement with non-Muslim communities.

In the earlier period, the mobility of traders, religious scholars, hajj pilgrims, and migrant communities created channels for social encounters and exchange. The presence of Muslim traders, however, should not automatically be equated with organised da'wah activity, as historical sources rarely provide details concerning their intentions, target audiences, or communication strategies. A more precise interpretation is that the formation of Muslim communities, mosques, waqf institutions, and scholarly networks created conditions through which Islam could become known through interaction, exemplary conduct, and communal life. The subsequent development of education and publishing made the transmission of Islamic knowledge more systematic while also extending discussions of Islam into the public sphere. From the contemporary context, multi-ethnic da'wah in Penang has increasingly involved direct engagement with non-Muslim communities through street da'wah, interreligious dialogue, and mosque tour programmes. Noor Azemy and Mohamad Rasit (2019) examined the street da'wah approach through a survey involving 60 da'wah practitioners from three Muslim NGOs in Penang, namely IPSI, Pertubuhan Dakwah Islamiah, and HALUAN. The study recorded a high level of street da'wah practice (mean = 4.74), including the use of kind and gentle language as well as the adaptation of approaches according to place, situation, time, and community background. Since the respondents consisted of da'wah practitioners, these findings are more appropriately interpreted as reflecting practitioners' understanding and approaches rather than as a direct measure of non-Muslim reception.

Khalid et al. (2015), through observations and interviews conducted at the Kapitan Keling Mosque and the IPSI headquarters, further show that the organisation played a role in implementing interreligious dialogue in Penang, including as a channel for addressing misunderstandings about Islam. More recently Aini et al. (2025) found that IPSI's mosque tour programme employed interpersonal communication grounded in empathy, structured engagement, personal narratives, and interactive dialogue to explain Islamic beliefs and practices to non-Muslim tourists. Taken together, these approaches point to the strengthening of a more interpersonal, dialogical, and contextual dimension of da'wah, without replacing the educational, welfare, and Muslim community-strengthening functions that had developed earlier.

Theme 4: The Underlying Islamic Conceptual Principles of Da'wah

Following the synthesis of normative, historical, and practice-based literature, the study identifies five interrelated conceptual domains: theological-ethical clarity, contextual wisdom, dialogical communication, social benefit and exemplary conduct, and institutional integrity.

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These domains do not yet constitute components of a validated model. Instead, they represent analytical propositions that explain the basic conditions required for da'wah to preserve its normative Islamic purpose while remaining responsive to the realities of a multi-ethnic society.

Theological-Ethical Clarity

Theological-ethical clarity refers to the ability to communicate the foundations of Islam accurately while observing the ethical boundaries of interreligious relations. This principle avoids two tendencies: obscuring theological differences for the sake of harmony, and communicating those differences through language that demeans others. The prohibition against insulting the objects of worship of others, together with the principle of no compulsion in religion, requires da'wah practitioners to consider the effects of communication on dignity, emotions, and social relationships. Dialogue and coexistence do not imply equating all religions in matters of creed; rather, they provide space for peaceful, honest, and mutually respectful interaction (Hasan, 2011; Khambali @ Hambali, 2020; Muhamad Shukri & Mat Zain, 2020).

Contextual Wisdom

Contextual wisdom translates *hikmah* into the ability to situate the message, method, and timing of da'wah appropriately. This principle requires an understanding of the target audience's language, culture, knowledge, religious experience, level of openness, and social needs. Meerangani (2019) highlights challenges relating to ethnic-religious perceptions and limitations in the skills of da'wah practitioners, while Sabtu and Omar (2023) associate da'wah bi al-hikmah with knowledge, patience, and adaptation to the level of the intended audience. A study involving 116 da'wah practitioners in Sarawak further demonstrates the importance of community participation, acceptance of cultural elements that do not conflict with Islamic law, and gradual communication (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Although findings from outside Penang cannot be transferred mechanically, such studies reinforce the need to conduct contextual analysis before developing a da'wah programme.

Dialogical Communication

Dialogical communication moves beyond one-way transmission by incorporating listening, questioning, providing space for clarification, seeking common ground, and explaining differences without judgement. The principle of al-taʿāruf builds knowledge and understanding of others, while positive interaction creates opportunities for al-taʿāwun in matters of social good (Mohd Zin & Puteh, 2012). In a plural society, dialogue operates at two levels: formal dialogue between leaders or institutions, and the dialogue of life that occurs through everyday relationships (Sintang et al., 2012). Experiences from mosque tours show that a welcoming atmosphere, accessible language, demonstrations, and question-and-answer sessions can make Islamic institutions more accessible as spaces of learning for people from diverse backgrounds (Aini et al., 2025).

Social Benefit and Exemplary Conduct

Social benefit and exemplary conduct position welfare, education, hospitality, and community service as manifestations of Islamic values. Fiqh al-taʿāyush brings together the concepts of taʿāruf, tasāmuḥ, taʿāwun, takāful, and maḥabbah as foundations for coexistence (Khambali @ Hambali, 2020; Khambali @ Hambali et al., 2021). In the history of Penang, waqf, hajj-related services, religious learning, and community assistance illustrate how institutional responsibility can contribute to social trust. These activities were not necessarily designed specifically as

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da'wah to non-Muslims, but they provide historical analogies for da'wah bi al-ḥāl, whereby Islamic values are manifested through consistent actions, treatment of others, and social benefit.

Institutional Integrity

Institutional integrity encompasses the competence of da'wah practitioners, governance, legal compliance, participant protection, resource sustainability, and programme evaluation. The literature often places greater emphasis on individual skills, whereas Penang's historical experience shows that da'wah also depends on assets, spaces, funding, leadership, and organisational legitimacy. Weak governance can undermine the trust developed through communication and social service. Training for da'wah practitioners should therefore be accompanied by interaction protocols, programme documentation, mechanisms for obtaining feedback from target communities, inter-institutional cooperation, and outcome measures that extend beyond the number of activities conducted.

Taken together, these five domains suggest that multi-ethnic da'wah in Penang can be understood as a process of communicating and manifesting Islamic values that connects clarity of message, understanding of the intended audience, communication ethics, social benefit, and institutional capacity within an ethnically and religiously diverse environment. This definition is broader than persuasive communication, yet more focused than the concept of coexistence alone. The normative purpose of da'wah is retained, while its approach is developed through non-coercive, knowledge-based relationships that remain sensitive to the local social and historical context.

Theme 5: Institutional and Community Engagement

Institutional and community engagement serves as a link between conceptual principles and the implementation of multi-ethnic da'wah within social realities. The history of Penang shows that mosques, waqf institutions, madrasahs, publishing activities, religious agencies, and non-governmental da'wah organisations have played different yet complementary roles. Mosques and waqf provide spaces and resources, education and publishing contribute to the formation of knowledge, religious agencies provide legitimacy and administrative frameworks, while non-governmental organisations and individual da'wah practitioners extend direct engagement with the wider community.

Islamic non-governmental organisations complement the role of religious institutions through approaches such as street da'wah, interreligious dialogue, mosque tours, welfare activities, and public outreach. In Penang, Noor Azemy and Mohamad Rasit (2019) show that Muslim NGOs use street da'wah as a face-to-face medium for engaging non-Muslim communities, while Khalid et al. (2015) document the involvement of the Islamic Propagation Society International (IPSI) in interreligious dialogue at the Kapitan Keling Mosque. Aini et al. (2025) further show that IPSI expanded such engagement through mosque tours, street da'wah, seminars, exhibitions, printed and electronic materials, and welfare activities, thereby extending access to da'wah beyond conventional institutional forms of communication.

Direct engagement in public spaces, however, requires more systematic preparation among da'wah practitioners. Hashim et al. (2024) show that the use of language not understood by the audience, insensitivity to religious issues and the sensitivities of target groups, and inadequate preparation in managing reactions and criticism can disrupt the communication of the message. Da'wah practitioners therefore need to understand the cultural backgrounds, taboos, and social

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contexts of the communities they engage. For this reason, the effectiveness of da'wah programmes should not be assessed solely on the basis of the number of activities, participants, or materials distributed. Evaluation should also consider the appropriateness of content, the understanding of the target audience, participant experiences, and acceptance of the approaches employed. A study of PERKIM programmes, for example, assessed participants' perceptions of programme content, clarity of delivery, timing, location, and methodology, demonstrating that effectiveness assessment should extend beyond operational output measures alone (Masyaa'il Tan Abdullah et al., 2014).

Islamic institutions in Penang also play an important role in developing the internal capacity of Muslim communities through education, welfare, community management, and religious preservation. In the field of education, Madrasah al-Mashoor al-Islamiah illustrates how a formal educational institution became a medium for knowledge development and Muslim social reform. Between 1916 and 1957, reforms in administration, curriculum, female education, and the expansion of madrasah branches strengthened its position as one of the important Islamic educational institutions in Penang (Muhamad & Othman, 2020). Mosques and waqf institutions, meanwhile, provide religious, social, and economic foundations for the community. Research on the Kapitan Keling Waqf shows that waqf assets centred on the Kapitan Keling Mosque developed from endowed land into more systematically planned development under the management of the Penang State Islamic Religious Council, illustrating the relationship between the sustainability of waqf assets and the continuity of Muslim institutional functions (Ismail et al., 2021). More recent research at Masjid At-Taqwa, Bertam, further demonstrates that mosque institutions can broaden their role through waqf management and community-based economic activities, including the cultivation of waqf land, the Bazar Wakaf Rakyat, and local economic initiatives (Ku Halim et al., 2023).

At the level of religious administration, the strengthening of the Muslim community is also supported through legislation, fatwa, welfare, and the management of new converts. Sulong (2016) shows that legal and fatwa mechanisms in Penang give particular attention to preserving Islamic creed and preventing matters considered deviant from the religious position established by state authorities. In relation to new converts, Din's (2004) study of PERKIM Penang highlights the need for continuous support after conversion, including religious education and assistance in addressing problems faced by converts. The Penang Islamic Religious Affairs Department also provides guidance, advisory services, and specific welfare assistance to registered converts in the state. The community development dimension can likewise be seen in the MASA@Sungai Nibong project, which involves collaboration between USM and Zakat Pulau Pinang in developing the asnaf community through programmes tailored to social and human development needs (Ammar & Mohamed Saniff, 2023).

Analytically, these functions demonstrate that education, welfare, governance, and religious preservation contribute to the internal capacity of Muslim institutions. Such capacity is important because engagement with wider society depends not only on the ability to communicate a message, but also on credibility, competence, organisational stability, and the capacity of institutions to translate Islamic values into community management.

Theme 6: Existing research gaps.

The thematic synthesis indicates that the literature on Islam and da'wah in Penang remains fragmented across disciplinary areas. Historical studies focus on colonial and legal

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developments; heritage studies examine hajj, mosques, and waqf; educational studies concentrate on particular institutions; while contemporary research tends to examine individual programmes or organisations. This fragmentation means that the relationship between the development of Islam, the formation of a multi-ethnic society, and the emergence of contemporary da'wah practices has yet to be explained in an integrated manner.

Historiographical and Periodisation Gaps

Historical sources provide substantial information on figures, communities, and institutions, but rarely record the identities of da'wah practitioners, intended target groups, message content, or communication strategies. This limitation makes it difficult to establish a robust periodisation of da'wah. Future research should integrate archival materials, historical newspapers, private correspondence, institutional records, and oral histories in order to distinguish between the growth of Muslim communities and deliberate da'wah efforts. Such an approach would help prevent trade, migration, or ordinary religious activities from being retrospectively labelled as organised da'wah.

Geographical Imbalance

A substantial proportion of existing studies focuses on George Town, the Kapitan Keling Mosque, and Acheen Street. Seberang Perai, Balik Pulau, Bayan Lepas, as well as industrial and suburban areas, remain comparatively underexplored. Differences in demography, social class, migration, and patterns of ethnic relations across these areas may produce different da'wah needs. Intra-state comparative research is therefore necessary to ensure that the experience of the urban centre is not assumed to represent Penang as a whole.

Limited Representation of Target Communities

Most studies adopt the perspectives of da'wah practitioners, religious officers, or Muslim institutions. The experiences of Chinese, Indian, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, religiously unaffiliated individuals, tourists, and converts from different backgrounds have yet to be represented on an equal basis. Studies on mosque tours have described interpersonal strategies, but further research is needed to examine visitors' experiences, changes in understanding, comfort in asking questions, and the factors that build or hinder trust in Islamic institutions.

Weaknesses in Long-Term Outcome Evaluation

Existing literature frequently reports types of activities, levels of understanding among da'wah practitioners, or participant numbers, but gives less attention to changes in knowledge, misconceptions, trust, social relationships, and willingness to interact after participation in a programme. Conversion statistics likewise cannot be treated as direct effects of a particular method without data tracing the relationship between programme participation and the decisions of target audiences. Longitudinal studies, pre- and post-programme designs, feedback from target communities, and measures of intercommunity relationships are needed to distinguish operational achievement from da'wah and social impact.

Limited Operationalisation of Normative Concepts

Concepts such as hikmah, taʿāruf, tasāmuḥ, taʿāwun, taʿāyush, and da'wah bi al-ḥāl are widely discussed at the level of principles in multi-ethnic da'wah, but they have not yet been consistently translated into indicators of practice. This limitation restricts the assessment of da'wah practitioner competence, cultural sensitivity, quality of dialogue, message accuracy, governance, and programme outcomes. Ashaari et al. (2026), in their study in Sarawak,

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demonstrate that elements of contextual da'wah can be assessed and validated by experts. A similar approach should be explored in the Penang context after a needs analysis involving relevant institutions and target communities has been conducted.

This review itself has four limitations. First, its narrative nature makes the processes of selection and synthesis more interpretive than those of a systematic review. Second, the diversity of source types results in uneven levels of evidence. Third, the historiography of the pre-colonial and early colonial periods contains documentary gaps. Fourth, the five conceptual domains identified have not yet been empirically tested. These domains should therefore be regarded as propositions that can be tested, refined, or rejected through field research rather than as a definitive model.

Future research should begin with a needs analysis involving religious agencies, mosques, educational institutions, da'wah organisations, da'wah practitioners, convert communities, and representatives from diverse religious and ethnic communities. The geographical scope should include George Town, Seberang Perai, Balik Pulau, and Bayan Lepas. Findings from the needs analysis can then be used to develop indicators for the five conceptual domains, followed by expert evaluation and pilot studies across multiple locations. This sequence would provide a stronger basis than claiming the existence of a "Penang multi-ethnic da'wah model" solely on the basis of a literature review.

Overall, the six themes discussed demonstrate that multi-ethnic da'wah in Penang has developed through a dynamic relationship between history, mobility, social diversity, the evolution of da'wah approaches, Islamic principles, and the capacities of institutions and communities. Although the existing literature provides an important foundation, the development of a robust multi-ethnic da'wah framework still requires empirical investigation involving the perspectives of da'wah practitioners, relevant institutions, and target communities in a comprehensive manner.

Conclusion

This narrative review demonstrates that an understanding of multi-ethnic da'wah in Penang cannot be separated from the history of Islam, maritime mobility involving ships that transported hajj pilgrims to the Holy Land of Makkah and the formation of a diverse urban society. Chulia, Malay-Acehnese, Arab, Jawi Peranakan, and other Muslim communities developed institutions through mosques, waqf, hajj networks, education, and publishing. In the post-independence period, religious administration strengthened the internal governance of the Muslim community, while the development of Islamic NGOs introduced more direct forms of public engagement through street da'wah, interreligious dialogue, and mosque tours.

From this synthesis, five conceptual domains were identified: theological-ethical clarity, contextual wisdom, dialogical communication, social benefit and exemplary conduct, and institutional integrity. These domains connect Qur'anic principles with historical patterns and the requirements of contemporary practice. The contribution of this article lies not in the development of a new model, but in establishing clearer connections between the historical, social, institutional, and methodological dimensions of da'wah that have previously been discussed largely in isolation.

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These five domains still require empirical validation involving relevant institutions and target communities. Nevertheless, they provide a starting point that is more firmly grounded in the Penang experience for the development of a systematic, culturally sensitive, and evaluable framework of guidelines for multi-ethnic da'wah. By distinguishing the historical growth of Islam from deliberately organised da'wah activities, and by connecting clarity of message with social relationships and institutional integrity, future research can move beyond programme description towards the cumulative development of a more systematic framework and set of guidelines for a multi-ethnic da'wah model.

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