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Islam As Malay Identity: A Historical Perspective with A Special Reference to Lingga-Riau Sultanate

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Islam as the foundational and enduring element in the formation of Malay cultural identity, with special reference to the Lingga-Riau Sultanate. Employing a historical and interpretive approach, it examines how Islam became deeply intertwined with the political, intellectual, and socio-cultural fabric of the Malay world. The discussion begins with a historical overview of the Lingga-Riau Sultanate (its genealogy, political evolution, and encounters with colonial powers) to contextualize the transformation of Malay society under Islamic influence. The study reveals that Islam not only served as a religious orientation but also as the moral, legal, and philosophical foundation of Malay civilization. It shaped the Malay worldview, governance, and expressions of culture, from court traditions and literary production to everyday ethical conduct. Within the Lingga-Riau Sultanate, Islam played a pivotal role in defining authority, social cohesion, and collective identity. The sultans and the Malay nobility were instrumental in cultivating Islamic literacy, promoting religious scholarship, and integrating Islamic values into governance. Even amid colonial suppression and political fragmentation, Islam continued to function as a unifying and resilient cultural force. The findings suggest that Malay identity, as manifested in Lingga-Riau, cannot be understood apart from Islam, which has long served as its defining marker and cohesive principle, a legacy that continues to inform the consciousness of the Malay world today.

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Introduction

At the outset, it is essential to clarify that the term “Riau” in this article does not correspond to its current usage within the Indonesian government's administrative framework, where it denotes a province located in central Sumatra with Pekanbaru as its capital. Instead, the term “Riau” is employed in the historical context of the Lingga-Riau Sultanate during the 19th and early 20th centuries, referring to a region that approximately corresponds to the present-day administrative territory of the Riau Archipelago.

This paper combines two approaches proposed by Heddy Shri Ahimsa-Putra, namely the essentialist and contextualist paradigms. The essentialist paradigm seeks to identify the fundamental elements of Malay culture. Meanwhile, the contextualist paradigm views the essence in terms of external influences and historical heritage within a historical context, specifically Malay history after the arrival of Islam (Koentjaraningrat & Putra, 2007). In this paper, the discussion of Malay identity is conducted with special reference to the case of the Lingga-Riau Sultanate from a historical perspective.

Discussion

The Origin and Development of the Lingga-Riau Sultanate

The Western students and observers of Malay history and culture are of opinion that, based on ideas and perceptions recorded in the Malay historical literature such as the *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals); *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (The Precious Gift), and other similar works, the Lingga-Riau Malay Sultanate has a long line of tradition rooted in the distant past. The Lingga-Riau sultans were the heirs of the 17th-century Johor kingdom, who in turn inherited the Melaka dynasty that had a tradition going back to an earlier period, e.i, the Srivijaya era.

This view is confirmed and expressed clearly in the literature written by both pre-modern authors, such as Tomé Pires (Pires, 1944) (d. 1540) and Netscher (d. 1880) (Netscher, 1854), and modern authors, including O.W. Walter (Wolters, 1970), A. C. Milner (Milner, 1982), Virginia Matheson (Matheson, 1986), and van der Meulen. This later Ducht scholar says that, according to tradition recorded in the Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals), the sacred Seguntang Hill—an ancient site located in Palembang—is regarded as the birthplace and the cornerstone of Malay political authority (Meulen, 1974). The site is associated with an early centre of power, believed to be the Srivijaya Kingdom. Therefore, the origin of the Malay royal lineage in this tradition must be traced back to a period preceding the rise of Melaka.

The ruler of Palembang was unable to defend his palace when it was attacked. One of its rulers, Prameswara, fled with a number of his followers to the north via Bintan and Temasik, eventually arriving in Bertam, where they founded a settlement. This settlement is then called Melaka. According to Wolters, Prameswara and his followers arrived in Melaka between 1399 and 1400 (Wolters, 1970). In 1405, Parameswara sent an envoy to China, asking for the acknowledgement of Melaka. The Chinese king responded to this request by recognizing Melaka as a kingdom. The Chinese king later sent his envoy, Yin Ching, who arrived in Melaka the following year (1406) to present Prameswara a seal, a pair of silk clothes, and a yellow umbrella. Wilkinson considers this year to be the founding of Melaka as a kingdom (Wilkinson, 1935).

In 1436, the third king of Melaka, Sri Maharaja (1423-44), converted to Islam at the urging of

the king of Pasai and had the title Muhammad Syah (Pires, 1944; Wake, 1983; Wilkinson, 1935; Wolters, 1970). Since then, Islam has become a significant factor in the history of Melaka, where this kingdom not only served as the centre of Malay politics and international trade, but also as the hub of Islamic preaching in the Malay region. According to Nicholas Taylor, the rise of Melaka and the advent of Islam marked the beginning of Malay history as it was remembered in subsequent centuries. The *Sejarah Melayu* is primarily shaped by an Islamic historiographical perspective, which tends to overlook or downplay the pre-Islamic Malay past (Tarling, 1994).

In 1511, more than a century after its founding, Melaka was attacked by the Portuguese, marking the end of the Malay kingdom's history in Melaka. The last Sultan, Mahmud Syah, was forced to leave his kingdom and sought refuge in the Riau Islands, before eventually moving to Kampar. He died in 1528. Around 1435-1440, Sultan Mahmud's son, Alauddin (1528-64), succeeded in establishing a new kingdom as a successor to the Melaka dynasty in Johor. Therefore, from that time on, his kingdom was named the Johor Kingdom.

In 1673, under the leadership of Sultan Abdul Jalil (1622–1677), Johor was attacked by the forces of Jambi. As a result of the assault, Sultan Abdul Jalil sought refuge in Pahang (Kratz, 1973). He ordered his military commander to establish a new royal centre on Bintan Island, at a location named Riau. In 1678, under the reign of Sultan Ibrahim Syah (1677–1685), the royal capital was officially relocated to Riau. During this period, the capital frequently shifted between Johor and Riau: in 1689, it returned to Johor; in 1709, it moved back to Riau; and in 1716, it once again returned to Johor.

In 1699, a major political crisis occurred when the young Sultan Mahmud Syah II (1685–99) was assassinated by his bodyguard, Megat Sri Rama. As the Sultan left no heir, power was assumed by the Bendahara, who was subsequently installed as Sultan under the title Sultan Abdul Jalil Riayat Syah (1699–1719) (Andaya, 1975; Winstedt, 1932). This event marked the end of the Melaka dynasty and the beginning of the Bendahara dynasty's rule over the Riau-Johor Sultanate. The assassination also had far-reaching consequences for the political trajectory of Riau-Johor. The subsequent period is often referred to as the "Bugis period within the Malay dynasty," as Bugis nobles played a decisive role in supporting the Riau-Johor Sultan against Raja Kecik of Sumatra, who claimed the regalia of the Riau-Johor Sultanate. In return for their assistance, the Bugis princes were granted the title *Yang Dipertuan Muda* (*Yamtuan Muda*) (Under King). This powerful and hereditary position functioned as the de facto administrator of the Sultanate, leaving nothing for the sultan except the nominal authority.

In 1784, the fourth Yang Dipertuan Muda of Riau-Johor, Raja Haji (r.1777-1784), was killed in battle against the Dutch (Netscher, 1870). This event further emboldened the Dutch to assert their dominance and control over the Riau-Johor Sultanate, claiming that the kingdom belonged to the

Dutch and was merely lent to the Malays.

In 1824, the British and the Dutch signed the Treaty of London. Among other things, this divided the Riau-Johor kingdom into two political entities. The territory north of the Singapore Strait came under British control. Meanwhile, the southern region fell under Dutch authority (Netscher, 1870). From that point on, the Sultan's power was limited to the Lingga-Riau area, while Johor became a separate kingdom. Tengku Husen, the brother of Sultan Abdul Rahman, the ruler of Lingga-Riau, was installed as Sultan of Johor. The rulers of Lingga-Riau harboured strong resentment toward Dutch rule but were powerless to offer an effective resistance. As a form of symbolic defiance, they resisted several Dutch-imposed regulations. For example, Sultan Mahmud Syah (1834–1857) refused to appoint a new Yang Dipertuan Muda *following the death of* Yang Dipertuan Muda Abdur Rahman in 1844. However, such actions failed to exert meaningful pressure on the Dutch. On the contrary, they justified the Dutch in intensifying their control over Lingga-Riau. Among the measures taken was suspending monthly allowances for officials in Lingga-Riau (Ali Haji, 1982).

Another example is Sultan Abdur Rahman Muazzam Syah (1884–1913), the last ruler of the Lingga-Riau Sultanate, who frequently acted without the approval of the Dutch authorities. When the tenth Yang Dipertuan Muda, Muhammad Yusuf, passed away in 1899, the Sultan refused to appoint a successor and instead assumed the position himself. As a consequence of these actions carried out without Dutch consent, he was deposed in 1911, and the Lingga-Riau Sultanate was officially dissolved in 1913 (Matheson, 1986).

The Islamic Identity in the Malay Sultanate of Lingga-Riau

Islam played a central role in the Lingga-Riau Malay Sultanate, serving as a cultural identity for its society. It functioned as a factor of social integration, shaping a collective identity and fostering a sense of unity and solidarity. This sense of unity grew stronger in response to the presence of colonial powers that sought to impose values contrary to the local order (Anwar, 1991). B. W. Andaya and V. Matheson describe Islam in Lingga-Riau as a site of Islamic reform at the end of the 19th century. This movement developed under the influence of the piety of the Malay sultans and the Bugis *Yang Dipertuan Muda*. As a result, Riau gained a reputation among the Malays as a centre for the development of a pure and authentic form of Islam (Reid & G. Marr, 1983).

Islamic literacy experienced significant growth in the Sultanate of Lingga-Riau. This development was supported by several factors, one of which was the inherited concept of political authority rooted in the traditions of earlier Malay kingdoms, particularly the Sultanates of Melaka and Johor in the 17th century. In general, the model of Malay governance that developed around the Strait of Melaka such as in Samudra Pasai, Melaka, and Aceh Darussalam combined three main elements: political administration, economic activity, and the Islamic faith. Melaka, for instance,

not only served as a major centre of Malay political power in its time but also functioned as an international trading port and a hub for the spread of Islam (Burhanudin, 2017).

These three elements are metaphorically described as a "three-stranded steering rope," a phrase found in the lyrics of the traditional Malay song *"Lancang Kuning,"* symbolising the unified direction needed to guide a boat into deep waters. This concept of Malay statecraft undoubtedly served as an inspiration for many Malay sultanates, particularly the Sultanate of Lingga-Riau. It nurtured a vibrant Islamic spirit among the people of Lingga-Riau and reinforced the centrality of religion in their social and political life.

Second, the weakening of political and economic power in the Lingga-Riau Sultanate became a significant driving force behind the rise of cultural activities and the strengthening of Islamic literacy. This decline followed the defeat of Riau-Johor in the war against the Dutch in 1784, which forced the Sultan to acknowledge that his kingdom was merely on loan from the Supreme Government of the Dutch East Indies. Additionally, the Dutch and the British divided the kingdom's territory under the Treaty of London in 1824, further undermining Malay political authority. In the face of this political loss, the Lingga-Riau elite redirected their attention toward cultural and religious pursuits. Ironically, the Dutch colonial domination that had curtailed local political power also opened space for the growth of intellectual activity. The strong interest of Dutch scholars and officials in the Malay philosophical heritage contributed to this process. Figures such as Eijsinga, Klinkert, van de Wall, and Elisa Netscher were known for actively collecting, copying, translating, and publishing the works of Riau's cultural figures and writers (Eijsinga, 1847).

The cultural life of the Malay community in Lingga-Riau was deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, which had become central to their cultural identity. Arabic was studied primarily as the language of the Qur'an and Hadith, serving as a key medium for religious learning. Their familiarity with the Arabic script was also utilised as a tool for recording, documenting, and expressing their cultural heritage through written forms.

The development of Islamic literacy in Lingga-Riau had a different trajectory compared to the Islamization processes in Java or Minangkabau. In the cases of Java and Minangkabau, the rise of Islamic literacy often led to a dichotomy between the culture of *santri* (communities of religious scholars and devout Muslims, typically associated with Islamic boarding schools) and the *priyayi* or *kaum adat* (traditional aristocratic elites who upheld local customs and sociopolitical traditions). In contrast, such polarisation in the expression of Islam between Islam *santri* and *priyayi*, or *kaum adat*-oriented Islam, did not emerge in Lingga-Riau during the same period. This fact suggests that Islam had already become the core of Malay culture since the Melaka era. In other words, Islam had become inseparable from Malay identity. Moreover, the Islamic revival in Lingga-Riau did not originate from outside the aristocracy but emerged from within the *priyayi*

class itself, which was also the primary custodian of Malay customary order and tradition.

Ali Haji (d. after 1872) described the enthusiasm of the Lingga-Riau nobility in studying and practising Islamic teachings. He noted that Yamtuan Muda Ali I (1786–1805) was the first member of the royal family to study Islamic teaching and to follow the Khalwatiyyah Sufi order (Ahmad & Ali Haji, 1982). Sultan Abdur Rahman (1812–1832) was reportedly deeply involved in religious matters and was known for his devotion to worship (Netscher, 1870). He regularly attended Friday prayers, wearing a robe resembling that of the Arabs, and was even known to perform the *azan* (the call to prayer) in his distinct voice (Hooker, 1991). Meanwhile, the book *Tuhfat al-Nafis* portrays Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ja'far (1806–1833) as someone who enjoyed the company of religious scholars and actively pursued Islamic knowledge, studying Islamic teaching text such as *Mir'āt al-Ṭullāb* and *Uṣūl al-Dīn* under the guidance of his teacher, Haji Abdul Wahab (Ahmad & Ali Haji, 1982).

Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ali II (1845–1857) was recorded as a follower of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, one of the most influential and popular Sufi orders in Riau at the time. The order was led by Haji Abdullah, who, in 1857, succeeded Raja Ali II as the ninth Yang Dipertuan Muda of Riau. All members of the nobility in Penyengat studied *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism); every Friday and Tuesday, they recited the complete *tawajuh* litanyand (One sort of ẓikr (remembrance) recited in the tarikat) performed the five daily prayers in congregation (Ahmad & Ali Haji, 1982). This tradition of religious devotion, which served as a model for the broader community, was passed down from generation to generation among the rulers of Lingga-Riau. Raja Muhammad Yusuf, the last Yang Dipertuan Muda of Riau (1858–1869), was known for his deep piety. He not only joined but also led the Naqshbandi order and possessed a spiritual genealogy tracing back to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He built his residence close to the royal mosque to facilitate worship and established a personal library containing Arabic religious texts, which he imported from Egypt and India (Matheson, 1973).

The nobility of Lingga-Riau were pious in their conduct and acted as policymakers who shaped and advanced public life following Islamic principles. They actively invited Islamic scholars from outside Lingga-Riau to teach religion in the region. The administration of the kingdom was carried out in accordance with Islamic law. For instance, before the inauguration of Sulaiman Badrul Alamsyah, Yang Dipertuan Muda Haji Abdullah instructed Raja Ali Haji, as a member of the *ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd* (the council of religious and legal authorities), to ensure that the ceremony was conducted in line with Islamic legal norms. In his speech during the inauguration, Raja Ali Haji stated: "... We all hope that Your Majesty will follow the commands of Allah the Exalted and His Messenger" (Ali Haji, 1982).

This deeply rooted Islamic culture was not only confined to the political centre of the Lingga-

Riau Sultanate. However, it was also present among local leaders in regions far from the royal capital. One such area was the Pulau Tujuh region, particularly the island of Midai. During the Lingga-Riau period, Pulau Tujuh encompassed what is now Natuna Regency, the Anambas Islands Regency, and Tembelan territories that today fall under the administrative jurisdiction of the Riau Archipelago Province.

Although these areas had long been under the jurisdiction of the Lingga-Riau Sultanate and its predecessors, they only began to receive focused attention in the mid-19th century, during the reign of Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ali II (1845–1857). As part of an economic development and survival strategy, Raja Ali II dispatched two royal officials, Said Hasyim and Raja Endut bin Engku Raja Haji Ahmad, to Pulau Tujuh to organise local governance, including the regulation of trade and taxation (Hooker, 1991). According to Krosesen, the Dutch had shown little interest in Pulau Tujuh at that time. The colonial authorities viewed it as an unpromising region with no economic potential and thus of no strategic value to the Dutch administration (Kroessen, 1875). However, later Dutch officials criticised this opinion, deeming it dangerous. The reason was that, in the course of time, the condition of the area has experienced changes and become prosperous, providing significant added value to the community (Haga, 1920).

These two Malay noble figures (Said Hasyim and Raja Endut) and their descendants successfully developed the *klappercultuur en coprahandel* (coconut cultivation and copra trade) project, which brought increased prosperity to the local community (Haga, 1920). Raja Alias (d. ca. 1925), the son of Raja Endut and great-grandson of Raja Haji Fi Sabilillah (d. 1784), pioneered coconut cultivation on Midai Island and simultaneously served as the island's first *onderdistrictshoofd* (subdistrict head). Meanwhile, Raja Alias's paternal half-brother, Raja Ahmad, together with Raja Ali (1874–1955)—a fifth-generation descendant of Raja Haji Fi Sabilillah—founded a business partnership in 1906 called Ahmadi & Co (*al-Sharikah al-Aḥmadiyyah*) Midai. Raja Ahmad served as the head of the company, with Raja Ali as his deputy, who later succeeded him as head in 1912.

In addition to engaging in governance and business activities, they also played a significant role in fostering and developing religious life. Raja Alias, who served as the first subdistrict head (*onderdistrictshoofd*) and the initiator of coconut cultivation on Midai Island, established his administrative office along with the royal mosque in Suak Midai. The mosque served as both a place of worship and a centre for religious development, symbolising the inseparability of worldly and spiritual life and the interconnection between statecraft, the economy, and religion. Meanwhile, Raja Ali, the deputy head of Ahmadi & Co., who later served as the head of the trading company from 1912 to 1955, chaired the mosque construction committee in Sabang Barat, Midai, in 1923. He was a respected religious figure in the community. In 1939, Raja Ali became its first

chairman when the Muhammadiyah organisation was established on this remote island. He later endowed a piece of land owned by Ahmadi & Co. to construct a *surau* (prayer house) for Muhammadiyah, which today has become Masjid At-Taqwa. The community of Midai Island is known for its high level of Islamic religious literacy.

It is also worth noting that spiritual and religious life was not limited to the royal family or the Yang Dipertuan Muda alone. In general, the people of Lingga-Riau, as reported by De Bruijn Kops, were deeply devoted to practising their religion (Kops, 1855). In this context, the role of the nobility was highly central, reflecting the centrality of the concept of kingship in Malay society. Their expressions of piety served as a model for the community to practice their faith.

For the Malay people in general, including those of Lingga-Riau, Islam has become an integral part of their lives. As in many other Malay communities, Islam in Lingga-Riau society is seen as inseparable from Malay identity, to the extent that embracing Islam is often referred to as "becoming Malay" (Koentjaraningrat & Putra, 2007). Some scholars argue that being Malay is not merely an ethnic concept, but also a cultural one, defined by three key parameters: adhering to Islam, speaking the Malay language, and observing Malay customs and traditions.

As a final note, from a cultural perspective, the Islamic identity of the Malays is deeply embedded in their *petuah*, *petitih*, and *tunjuk ajar Melayu* traditional sayings and teachings that serve as moral and spiritual guidance in Malay life. This cultural embodiment of Islam is reflected, for instance, in the following expressions (Effendy, 2006):

Apa tanda Melayu jati,	*What is the sign of a true Malay,*
Bersama Islam hidup dan mati	*With Islam, they live and die*
Apa tanda Melayu jati,	*What is the sign of a true Malay,*
Islam melekat di dalam hati	*Islam is embedded in their heart*
Apa tanda Melayu jati,	*What is the sign of a true Malay,*
Dengan Islam ia sebati	*With Islam, they are in soul and body*
Apa tanda orang Melayu,	*What is the sign of a Malay person,*
Kepada Islam ia bertumpu	*It is upon Islam that they depend*
Apa tanda orang Melayu,	*What is the sign of a Malay person,*
Dengan Islam ia menyatu	*With Islam they are united as one*
Apa tanda orang Melayu,	*What is the sign of a Malay person,*
Islam menjadi kain dan baju	*Islam is their garment, their daily attire*
Apa tanda orang Melayu,	*What is the sign of a Malay person,*
Islam semata di dalam kalbu	*Islam alone dwells within their heart*

In *gurindam* poetry, the importance of upholding the teachings of Islam—whether in matters of creed (*ʿaqīdah*), ethics (*akhlāq*), worship (*ʿibādah*), or social transactions (*muʿāmalāt*)—is

strongly emphasised. *Gurindam* is a rhymed poetic form consisting of two lines, typically expressed in a conditional or semi-conditional structure. The most well-known example is *Gurindam Dua Belas* (The Twelve *Gurindam*), composed by Raja Ali Haji (d. 1873). Its content reflects Islam as an essential part of Malay identity. The following are selected verses from *Gurindam Dua Belas* (Ali Haji, 2004):

Barang siapa tiada memegang agama
Sekali-kali tiada boleh dibilangkan nama
Barang siapa mengenal yang empat
Maka ia itulah orang yang makrifat
Barang siapa mengenal Allah
Suruh dan tegahnya tiada ia menyalah
Whoever does not follaw a religion
He/she can not be considered a well-known
Whoever knows the four
That is a wise person
Whoever knows Allah
He/she won't violate His commands and prohibitions

In chapter 2 of *Gurindam Dua Belas,* the importance of practising the five pillars of Islam is strengthened as follows (Ali Haji, 2004):

Barang siapa meninggalkan sembahyang,
Seperti rumah tiada bertiang
Barang siapa meninggalkan puasa,
Tiadalah mendapat dua termasa
Barang siapa meninggalkan zakat,
Tiada hartanya beroleh berkat
Barang siapa meninggalkan haji,
Tiadalah ia menyempurnakan janji
Whoever neglects the daily prayer,
is like a house with no pillars to bear
Whoever gives up the fast of the day,
Shall miss the two joys along the way
Whoever abandons almsgiving's call,
Shall find their wealth brings no good at all
Whoever turns from the pilgrimage high,
Faills to fulfil their vow to the sky

One of the most well-known *pantuns* in the Malay world widely memorized and recited emphasizes the importance of practicing religious teachings, particularly the prayer (*ṣalāh*), a pillar and foundation of Islam. The *pantun* reads as follows:

Asam kandis asam gelugur
Ketiga asam si riang-riang
Menangis mayat di dalam kubur
Mengenang badan tidak sembahyang (Sinar, 2004)
Sour xanthochymus and atroviridis
Sour begonia represents a third
The corpse cries in the grave
Remembring his/herself abandoned prayer

Conclusion

The historical experience of the Lingga-Riau Sultanate clearly demonstrates that Islam constituted the core foundation of Malay cultural and political identity. From the Melaka period to the lineage of Johor and ultimately Lingga-Riau, Islam not only served as a religious orientation but also as the philosophical basis of governance, social ethics, and cultural creativity. It defined the moral vision of leadership, regulated social life, and inspired literary and intellectual expression among the Malay elite. In Lingga-Riau, the sultans and nobility played a pivotal role in internalizing and institutionalizing Islamic values through education, statecraft, and daily practice. The integration of religion, governance, and economy embodied the classical Malay concept of a balanced state, where faith, authority, and prosperity were inseparable. Even under colonial domination, the Malay community preserved Islam as the unifying principle that sustained their cultural continuity and moral resilience. This study affirms that Malay identity cannot be understood apart from Islam. The saying "to become Malay is to embrace Islam" encapsulates a historical truth: Islam has been both the soul and the substance of Malay civilisation. The legacy of Lingga-Riau thus represents a living testimony to the deep interconnection between Islam and Malayness—one that continues to inform the collective consciousness, values, and cultural expressions of the Malay world today.

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