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BEYOND ISLAM-MALAY: Hegemony, Exclusion, and Decolonial Resistance in Riau

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ABSTRACT

The narrative of "Islam is Malay, and Malay is Islam" has become a dominant identity construct in Riau. This article unpacks how such a narrative operates as a hegemonic discourse that excludes non-Muslim Indigenous communities—such as the Akit, Talang Mamak, and Anak Rawa peoples—from being recognized as part of the "Malay group." Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge and decolonial approaches in religious studies, this research reveals mechanisms of exclusion through language, cultural policy, and the distribution of resources—all of which privilege the dominant identity. At the same time, Indigenous communities engage in cultural resistance through silence, concealed spiritual practices, and adaptive identity strategies. This article calls for a re-reading of Malay identity through a more pluralistic and inclusive lens, and proposes a decolonial framework as a pathway toward representational and cultural justice in the Riau region.

INTRODUCTION

Riau Province is widely recognized as the cultural heartland of Malay civilization in Indonesia. In this region, the narrative that "to be Malay is to be Muslim, and to be Muslim is to be Malay" has long served as a foundational basis for cultural identity, social belonging, and even policy-making (Hanif & Dwi, 2021; Junaidi, 2020; Mahdini, 2003). The Malay identity appears inseparable from Islam; being Muslim is regarded as a prerequisite for being recognized as Malay. This singular narrative not only shapes public perceptions but is also embedded in government regulations, local history curricula, and official regional symbols. As a result, indigenous communities in Riau who are not Muslim—such as the Akit, Talang Mamak, Duano, and Asli Anak Rawa peoples—are excluded from the category of "Malay," and often deemed as "not truly Malay," despite their undeniable geographic and cultural roots in the region (Sulaiman @ Mohamad et al., 2020).

This condition illustrates how cultural identity can be politically and exclusively constructed. The Islam-Malay narrative did not emerge in a vacuum; it is the product of a long historical trajectory involving colonialism, Islamization, and the formation of the modern nation-state, all of which sought to unify diversity under a dominant symbol (Maryamah, 2016). This narrative often erases a more pluralistic historical truth—one in which Islam arrived relatively late, following the long-standing presence of local belief systems and indigenous spiritual practices in Riau (Huda, 2016). Even today, regional governments disproportionately allocate funding and resources to Islamic

institutions—such as state-sponsored mosques, Qur'an memorization teachers (tahfidz), and Islamic missionary activities—while the spiritual and cultural needs of non-Muslim or indigenous communities receive far less attention.

The refusal to recognize non-Muslim indigenous groups as part of the Malay community highlights a critical problem in discourses surrounding identity, religion, and cultural policy. When Malay identity is rigidly bound to Islam, it not only constrains the living space of indigenous peoples but also forecloses the possibility of pluralism within Malayness itself. Moreover, such an approach reinforces the symbolic power of the dominant group—Muslim-Malay elites—over marginalized communities, turning culture into an instrument of hegemony rather than a space for dialogue and coexistence (Mandasari, 2021).

To critically engage with this issue, a decolonial approach in the study of religion becomes essential. This framework offers a lens through which to dismantle the colonial epistemic structures that still shape how we understand religion, culture, and identity. Decoloniality not only challenges who has the authority to define "religion," but also critiques how modern systems of knowledge—shaped by colonial, Western-centric, and institutional logics—have discredited and silenced belief systems that are deeply embedded in indigenous ways of life.

The article *Decolonising Studies of Religion in So-Called Australia* (Halafoff et al., 2024), authored by scholars and activists from Australia's First Nations communities, offers a highly relevant mirror for the Riau context. It reveals how academic religious studies, inherited from British colonial traditions, have marginalized Aboriginal spiritualities simply because they do not conform to formal Western-Christian religious categories—lacking sacred texts, church institutions, prophetic figures, or hierarchical structures of religious authority. Their spirituality, rooted in a profound connection to the land (country), relationships with ancestral spirits, and oral transmission of knowledge, has been deemed "illegitimate" as religion. As a consequence, this spiritual heritage is excluded from national policies and educational discourse.

One of the central calls of this decolonial approach is the imperative of *truth-telling*—creating space for narratives that have long been excluded, not as supplementary or "local color," but as legitimate and central stories. Truth-telling in this context is not merely about acknowledging a dark past but about reclaiming space for lifeways, knowledge systems, and spiritualities that have been erased or ignored by dominant systems. It is not about adding to official history but rewriting that history from the standpoint of communities that have been historically silenced (Barolsky, 2023; Zolkefli, 2018).

This approach is especially relevant to Riau, where the spirituality of indigenous communities such as the Akit, Talang Mamak, Duano, and Anak Rawa peoples is often considered "not yet religious" or "uncivilized" simply because they do not adhere to Islam. Such judgments are not only misguided but represent a continuation of epistemic colonialism that acknowledges only institutionalized belief systems as valid. With a decolonial spirit, it is imperative to re-open the space for re-reading Riau's history and identity—not merely as a tale of Islamization and royal grandeur, but also as a narrative of spiritual lifeways rooted in the land, forests, rivers, and indigenous communities that remain faithful to their ancestral values.

Liberating Riau from the singular Islam-Malay narrative does not mean rejecting Islam as a central element of Malay culture. Rather, it means rejecting the hegemonization of a single interpretation of identity that excludes others. Decoloniality here invites us not only to acknowledge diversity but also to restructure epistemic frameworks and cultural policies in a way that gives equal recognition to all lifeways and belief systems—including those that do not conform to state-defined or majority religious categories.

This paper seeks to challenge the dominance of the Islam-Malay narrative in Riau by examining how it functions as a force of exclusion and by demanding symbolic recognition and justice for non-

Muslim indigenous communities in the region. By comparing the experiences of indigenous peoples in Riau with decolonial contexts such as Australia, this work aims to deconstruct unequal constructions of identity and promote a new vision of Malayness that is more inclusive and pluralistic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To examine the dominance of the Islam-Malay narrative in the construction of cultural identity in Riau, and to understand how non-Muslim Indigenous communities experience both symbolic and structural exclusion, this article employs two main theoretical approaches: Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge and the decolonial approach within religious studies, developed by scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Walter Mignolo. These frameworks not only provide sharp analytical tools to interrogate the dynamics of power and knowledge, but also open up space to reconsider marginalized forms of spirituality and local religious diversity that have long been suppressed by hegemonic knowledge systems.

Michel Foucault (1980) places the relationship between power and knowledge at the core of his social analysis. For him, knowledge is never neutral or free from interests; it is always entangled with power—those who possess the authority to define, classify, and delineate the boundaries of truth. In the context of Riau, the discourse that "Islam is Malay and Malay is Islam" can be understood as a product of power, sustained by religious institutions, local government bodies, and cultural elites to promote a singular, normative model of identity.

This discourse not only constructs identity but also actively marginalizes those who fall outside it. Indigenous communities such as the Akit, Talang Mamak, and Anak Rawa peoples—despite being native to Riau—are not recognized as part of the "Malay" category because they do not adhere to Islam. When religion becomes the primary determinant of Malayness, cultural identity is reduced to a matter of faith, and non-Islamic spiritualities are not only deemed deviant but are also rendered invisible within the official cultural framework.

In Foucault's logic, this constitutes a process of normalization: a mechanism through which one form of identity is marked as "normal," while others are framed as "abnormal" or "deviant." Power functions not merely through prohibition or repression but through the production of knowledge that shapes collective consciousness—including, in this case, the widespread belief that "to be Malay is to be Muslim," which is less a historical truth than a sociopolitical construction shaped by a long process of Islamization and nation-state discourse (Foucault, 2023).

The second framework is the decolonial approach in religious studies, which offers a critical perspective on how Western epistemological dominance—and, in local contexts, the dominance of formal religious systems—has systematically displaced Indigenous systems of spirituality. Scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith remind us that colonialism not only dispossessed people of land and bodies but also assaulted local ways of life, belief systems, and epistemologies. Walter Mignolo emphasizes the necessity of *epistemic disobedience* (Mignolo, 2011)—the act of resisting hegemonic knowledge systems that have dictated what counts as legitimate religion, culture, and identity.

In Riau, this approach is essential to understanding how the belief systems and spiritual practices of communities such as the Akit and Talang Mamak are often labeled as "irreligious" or "primitive" simply because they do not conform to the formal criteria of Abrahamic religions. In fact, their worldviews—which involve deep connections with nature, reverence for ancestors, and collective ritual life—constitute vibrant, meaningful, and intergenerationally transmitted forms of spirituality. Decolonizing religious studies demands that such traditions no longer be positioned as inferior but be acknowledged as legitimate and equal expressions of religiosity.

This approach also enables a re-reading of local histories that have long been written and

disseminated from dominant perspectives. The decolonial project calls for *truth-telling*—the recovery of silenced histories and the return of narrative agency to those who have been excluded from official religious and cultural discourse. In the context of Malay identity, this means deconstructing the assumption that Islam is its sole foundation, and opening space for more pluralistic and transformative definitions of what it means to be Malay.

Together, these two approaches illuminate how the exclusion of Indigenous communities in Riau is not merely a social or policy issue, but part of a deeper operation of power embedded in epistemological regimes that shape how we conceptualize "religion," "culture," and "identity." In doing so, this article seeks to challenge dominant narratives and contribute to a more just recognition of spiritual and cultural diversity in the region.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative-critical approach with an exploratory and reflective orientation, enabling an in-depth investigation into the dynamics of identity exclusion within Riau's cultural and religious context (Moleong, 2017; Susilo, 2017). The primary objective is not merely to describe social realities but to deconstruct the symbolic power structures embedded within dominant cultural narratives—particularly the "Islam-Malay" discourse that has systematically marginalized non-Muslim indigenous groups from the official definition of Malayness.

Methodologically, this research is grounded in reflective ethnography and critical discourse analysis (Pantao, 2021; Ulinnuha et al., 2013). Reflective ethnography is adopted to allow the researcher not only to document observable social practices but also to critically reflect on their own positionality within the power-knowledge nexus. This approach is crucial, considering that the study is situated in a region where identity is heavily charged with cultural and political significance, and where the researcher is not neutral, but an embedded actor within the social field under investigation (Jabar & Yunus, 2017).

Data collection was conducted through multiple methods, including in-depth interviews with key figures from indigenous communities such as the Akit and Anak Rawa peoples, customary leaders, and local religious figures. Participant observation was undertaken during cultural and ritual activities to capture dimensions of spirituality that are often absent from official records. In addition, archival research was conducted, including government documents, regional regulations, school textbooks, and media narratives, in order to trace how the "Islam-Malay" construct has been historically formed and institutionally maintained.

Data analysis follows the previously outlined theoretical frameworks—Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge and the decolonial approach in religious studies. These frameworks are employed to critically examine how dominant narratives operate through language, institutions, and symbols, while also illuminating how marginalized communities produce symbolic forms of resistance—through counter-narratives or through the quiet endurance of local spiritual practices that remain vibrant and meaningful, albeit unofficial or informal.

Importantly, ethical engagement serves as a foundational principle throughout this research. Given the historical marginalization and misrepresentation of indigenous communities, the researcher adheres to principles of cultural sensitivity, collective consent from customary authorities, and an openness to indigenous epistemologies. Rather than assuming the role of an "expert" who evaluates, the researcher positions themselves as a dialogical partner—learning from, and with, the communities under study.

Thus, the research methodology functions not only as a means of data collection and analysis but also as an epistemic and political stance aligned with the broader agenda of knowledge decolonization. It seeks to create space for voices that have long been silenced by monolithic identity

narratives. In this sense, methodology is not merely technical, but integral to the ethical and epistemological commitment to challenge dominance and advocate for representational justice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Islamization of Malay Identity and the Marginalization of Non-Muslim Indigenous Groups

In various official documents, media narratives, and cultural or religious speeches across Riau, the phrase *"Malay is Islam, and Islam is Malay"* is frequently reiterated as a marker of cultural authenticity. However, in practice, this narrative functions not merely as a cultural symbol but as a systemic mechanism of exclusion (Dahlan, 2015; Rab, 1990). Interviews with customary leaders from the Akit and Anak Rawa communities in Bengkalis and Siak Regencies reveal an acknowledgment that they are not recognized as "Malay" simply because they do not adhere to Islam.

A customary leader from the Akit community, interviewed ethnographically in Penyengat Village, Sungai Apit District, Siak Regency, expressed the discrimination they often face in public spaces:

> "If we are not Muslim, then we are not Malay—that's what they say. Yet we were born from Malay mothers, speak the Malay language, dance, sing, and mourn in the Malay tradition. But because we still uphold our ancestral beliefs, we are seen as incomplete humans. We are separated from the Malay identity, as if Malayness belongs to only one religion. This is painful. For us, being Malay is not only about religion—it is a way of life, a way of walking, of greeting the natural world and others. But those in power rewrote our identity map and made Islam the only entry point into being Malay. Since then, we have become the 'other,' the 'foreign,' the 'unrepentant,' or the 'not yet returned.' We lost the right to our own heritage." (*Don*, pseudonym, customary leader, Anak Rawa Indigenous Group, 2024)

Historically, the presence of the Akit community along the coastal regions of Riau predates the arrival of Islam and the establishment of the Siak Sri Indrapura Sultanate (Porath, 2018; Yance, 2022). Leonard Y. Andaya (2008:203) notes the privileged position of indigenous peoples within the Sultanate of Siak's structure, emphasizing their crucial roles in sustaining the kingdom's international trade networks. In the early 19th century, relations between the Malay and indigenous groups were built on mutual economic cooperation. Small indigenous groups were key in collecting forest products highly sought after in global markets, while Malay communities provided the infrastructure to facilitate transnational trade (Andaya, 2008:203).

Over time, these special relationships shifted—particularly with the transition from forest-based economies to plantation-based agriculture in the mid-19th century. The rise of modernity, the emergence of the nation-state concept, and the Malay community's increasing engagement in the global economy gradually marginalized the strategic role of indigenous peoples (Andaya, 2008:202). In modern identity discourse, Malayness came to be measured through religious affiliation, rather than kinship, language, or ancestral geography.

From Michel Foucault's perspective, the construction of Islamic-Malay identity in Riau exemplifies how power operates through the institutionalized production of knowledge (Foucault, 2013). For Foucault, knowledge is not a value-neutral pursuit of truth but a product of power relations that determine what may be known, who has the right to speak, and who must remain silent. In other words, truth is not discovered—it is constructed and enforced through discourse (Darmansyah et al., 2023).

The narrative of Malay as an Islamic identity functions as a *"regime of truth"*—a truth system produced by dominant actors and disseminated through institutions such as schools, media, Islamic cultural institutions, and state policies (Abdillah, 2023; Jubba et al., 2021; Pulungan, 2015). In this

context, local history is read through a specific lens where Islam becomes the sole foundation of Malayness, while all other forms of spirituality—particularly those of non-Muslim indigenous communities—are viewed as deviant, backward, or uncivilized.

This *regime of truth* governs public discourse and shapes how individuals perceive themselves and others. According to Foucault, power operates not only through prohibition but also through *normalization*—the creation of cultural and moral standards that render one identity form natural and others abnormal, heretical, or dangerous. Thus, non-Muslim indigenous groups in Riau are often positioned as "the other"—those outside the norms of Islamic-Malay civilization, and therefore in need of "guidance" or "conversion" (Masyhur, 2014).

Furthermore, these groups are not only seen as deviants but also as threats to the purity of Malay identity itself. In this logic, they are not merely different—they must be overcome or erased from official cultural narratives. Such mechanisms of exclusion are evident in many forms: the denial of these communities as Malay subgroups, the absence of their spiritual systems in education curricula, and the omission of their cultural traditions from regional development plans.

Viewing this through Foucault's framework allows us to understand that the idea of *"Malayness"* is not neutral or natural; rather, it is a historical construct laden with interests and power. Therefore, deconstructing the Islamic-Malay narrative is not merely about revisiting history—it is a political act that challenges epistemic structures and power formations that enforce a singular authorized version of identity. In this light, creating space for indigenous identity and spirituality is not only a cultural necessity but also a political effort to shift centers of power and broaden the horizon of truth toward greater justice and inclusion.

A decolonial approach further argues that such identity narratives continue the colonial legacy of privileging certain religious systems—particularly formal Islam—over indigenous spiritual traditions (Alfanani, 2019). Indigenous communities are often not recognized as religious because their belief systems lack institutional structures, scriptures, or formal clergy. However, their spirituality is embedded in ecological relationships, collective rituals, and ancestral reverence passed down through generations (Alwi Almanduri, 2021). Ignoring these systems constitutes a form of *epistemic violence*—the erasure of indigenous knowledge and ways of life from public recognition (Rumagit, 2013).

Field observations in several villages in Siak and Bengkalis confirm that local governments allocate public funding for Islamic programs such as Quranic recitation, mosque construction, and *tahfidz* (Quran memorization) training. In contrast, there are no similar allocations for the spiritual activities of indigenous communities, not even in the form of cultural preservation initiatives. This reinforces the notion that identity recognition is also shaped by the distribution of resources—a point emphasized by Honneth and Fraser (2003) as part of symbolic and distributive justice, which is often neglected.

Linguistic and Discursive Representation of "Orang Asli" in Cultural Policy

One of the most subtle yet powerful mechanisms of cultural exclusion against non-Muslim Indigenous communities in Riau lies in the use of language and discursive representation. In various official documents issued by local governments—such as regional cultural regulations (Perda Budaya), tourism publications, and locally oriented educational materials—the term *"Melayu"* is almost invariably associated with Islamic symbols: mosques, traditional Islamic attire (*baju kurung*), religious poetry, and the oft-quoted expression *"adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah"* ("customs rooted in Islamic law, Islamic law rooted in the Qur'an") which stands as an unassailable cultural credo (Hidayat, 2008).

Conversely, communities such as the Akit, Talang Mamak, and Anak Rawa ethnic groups are frequently portrayed in regional policy narratives and literature as *"isolated societies," "inland tribes,"*

or *"orang asli"* ("original people") who remain untouched by modernity. In an interview with a village head from a Duano-majority area, it was revealed that local cultural development programs facilitated by the district government are largely directed towards *"guiding communities to become more Islamic"*—rather than preserving their distinctive cultural and spiritual heritage.

The frequent use of terms such as *"guidance," "mental development,"* or *"customary empowerment"* within cultural and social policy discourse in Riau is far from neutral. These terms reflect an asymmetrical power relation in which the state and dominant culture—constructed through an Islam-Malay framework—position themselves as the morally and intellectually superior subjects, while Indigenous communities are cast as passive objects in need of *"direction," "consciousness-raising,"* or *"quality-of-life improvement."* This relationship governs not only actions, but also ways of thinking—determining who is deemed fit to define the cultural trajectory, and who is merely fit to receive external intervention.

From the perspective of Michel Foucault, such practices constitute a form of *symbolic biopolitics*—a mode of power that regulates social and cultural life not through physical coercion, but through seemingly neutral categories, language, and classifications. Policy language in this context functions not merely as a tool of communication, but as a mechanism of social control that imposes norms about what constitutes a *"developed society," "proper custom,"* or *"civilized culture."* In other words, language becomes an apparatus of power that constructs subjectivities: Indigenous communities come to view themselves as *"lacking," "backward,"* or *"incomplete,"* and thus in need of *"guidance"* (Budiman, 2018, 2019; Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1979).

Moreover, a decolonial approach allows us to recognize how terms such as *"orang asli"* still carry colonial symbolic weight that has not been fully dismantled in the post-independence consciousness. Rather than affirming authenticity, local wisdom, or valuable cultural heritage, *"orang asli"* in this context marks a difference that excludes—positioning Indigenous groups as the *"Other"* in contrast to the Islamicized Malay cultural mainstream. This process constitutes what Camp (2012) terms an *inversion of meaning,* whereby identities that once formed the historical foundation of the region are subordinated, even rendered illegitimate within the narrative of Islamic-Malay modernity.

As a result, many Indigenous individuals feel uncomfortable or even reluctant to self-identify as *"orang asli."* For them, the term no longer connotes pride in ancestral lineage or cultural legacy, but instead is laden with the stigma of backwardness, poverty, and social inferiority. A young man from the Akit community once remarked during a focus group discussion, *"Being called 'orang asli' makes us feel like we're not part of Riau... we're different, we're left behind."* Such expressions reveal that power operates not only externally, but also internally—penetrating communal consciousness and generating what Frantz Fanon (Fanon & Memmi, 2022) called *"the internalization of colonial inferiority."*

In this context, emancipation cannot be achieved solely through formal recognition or affirmative policy. It requires a transformation of collective ways of thinking, whereby the terms, symbols, and languages that have historically served as instruments of subordination are critically re-examined, challenged, and ultimately redefined by the Indigenous communities themselves. This is the deeper meaning of decolonization—not merely amplifying marginalized voices, but shifting the locus of enunciation: from being the object of discourse to becoming the subject who speaks for oneself.

This is where *truth-telling* becomes essential in the decolonial project—unveiling the layers of oppressive language and creating space for counter-narratives from the Indigenous communities themselves (Barolsky, 2023). These communities must be granted the right to name themselves, to narrate their own histories, and to construct systems of meaning grounded in their own epistemologies—not through the lens of the Islam-Malay cultural matrix, which for too long has

functioned as the sole legitimate standard of culture in Riau.

Silent Strategies and Cultural Resistance of Indigenous Communities

Amidst the symbolic and cultural pressures of the dominant Islam-Malay narrative, indigenous communities in Riau do not entirely submit. Although they rarely engage in overt opposition, this does not imply total surrender. On the contrary, within their silence and invisibility lies a subtle yet profound form of cultural resistance. This resistance is not manifested through open protest, but rather through silent strategies—a mode of survival and identity preservation enacted through daily practices, local spiritual rites, and oral narratives transmitted across generations (Disyacitta, 2019).

One compelling example is the annual ritual practices of the Asli Anak Rawa ethnic group, who continue to perform ceremonies such as *Bele Kampung*, *Buang Talam* (or *Buang Ketemas Bele Kampung*), *Tujuh Likur*, *Buang Teguh*, *Antar Sepighing Kighi Sepighing Kanan*, *Gendong* performances, and *Gong* rituals. The *Bele Kampung* ceremony, in particular, is a form of veneration for ancestral spirits and guardians of sacred natural sites, especially the *telaga* (sacred water bodies). This location is revered as a place for *niat*—a space to articulate inner spiritual intentions. When their requests are fulfilled, community members return to the site with offerings as an expression of gratitude. This ritual is typically held on the 15th day of the Hijri month, coinciding with the full moon. Additionally, *mandi balimau* (a purification bath) is performed at the same location as a spiritual cleansing act.

Belief in unseen powers is also expressed through the veneration of specific trees considered spiritually potent. These trees are often given offerings (*tetau*). In Penyengat Village, for instance, a *Punak* tree is regarded as sacred and remains under the care of a local guardian, Pak Din. Nearby, between the coast of Penyengat and Mungkal, a small shrine stands amid the mangrove forest—a modest stilted pavilion with zinc roofing and walls adorned in yellow, green, and red cloths, serving as a consecrated worship space for the local community.

Although such practices are never integrated into the region's official religious agenda, the communities continue to perform them in hidden spaces—on lake shores or within customary forests, far from the gaze of media and authorities. When asked why these rituals are not held openly, one community elder calmly responded, *"If we are too open, we will be labeled heretical... But this is our heritage. If we don't preserve it, we will disappear."*

This response illustrates how, within limitations, indigenous communities carve out cultural spaces they autonomously govern—spiritual zones independent of state or official religious legitimacy. In Foucault's terms, this can be read as *resistance through silence*—a form of withdrawal from disciplinary mechanisms of power. Silence, in this context, is not a sign of fear but a deliberate strategy of survival to safeguard identity from erasure (Allan, 2022; Mowitt et al., 1980).

From a decolonial perspective, this silent resistance is a form of *epistemic resilience*—the continuity of local epistemologies that survive systemic pressures from the state, dominant religions, and modernist discourses. These local knowledge systems encompass not only belief structures and rituals but also the indigenous ways of relating to the environment and maintaining spiritual equilibrium in daily life (Brayson, 2021; Escobar, 2016).

Across studies on Indigenous communities in Australia, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, such resistance is seen as the core of cultural resilience. These communities do not resist through confrontation or protest, but through covert endurance: preserving sacred forests, transmitting ancestral incantations outside formal schooling, and maintaining spiritual rites despite being excluded from official definitions of "religion." Within hegemonic systems, these practices often go unrecorded, unrecognized, and unseen. Yet from a decolonial lens, they represent the purest form of defiance against epistemic domination (Derpic, 2020).

Rather than seeking validation from the state or dominant religions, many Indigenous groups choose to sustain the meanings and values of life within autonomous spaces—outside the reach of institutional intervention. This choice does not signify inferiority or backwardness but reflects a conscious strategy to uphold cultural continuity without succumbing to external norms and standards. One elder of the Asli Anak Rawa community expressed during an interview, *"We know the government doesn't understand why we sing to the lake or burn forest wood before felling trees... But we keep doing it, because it's our way of protecting what's invisible."* This statement reflects a deeply embedded spiritual ethic and ecological knowledge often unreadable through the lenses of formal religion or modern science.

In the decolonial framework, such practices are forms of *epistemic resistance* that reject dichotomies like "modern-traditional" or "civilized-primitive." These communities do not reject progress per se—they reject the imposition of a singular version of progress that disregards their roots and life meanings. They assert the right to define progress, wellbeing, and truth on their own terms—rather than adopting definitions produced by centralized political or religious powers.

Thus, silence is not submission; it is a strategic, sovereign act of endurance. Through silence, they reconstruct worlds, safeguard collective memory, and signal that another life exists—beyond policy radars, yet full of dignity and meaning.

A decolonial approach helps us understand that their silence is not empty—it is full of voices. Voices unheard by formal systems, yet vividly embodied in subtle acts that preserve values, ethics, and the coherence of a world they continue to protect. In this sense, Indigenous survival strategies constitute the most authentic form of decolonization—not merely remembering, but sustaining life in their own way.

However, this strategy is not without challenges. Indigenous youth now face layered pressures: on one hand, they seek to retain ancestral identity; on the other, they are required to conform to educational and social systems shaped by Islam-Malay values. Many find themselves fragmented—not fully embraced by the dominant Islam-Malay culture, yet also distanced from their cultural roots. This duality often results in adaptive strategies, such as adopting Islamic symbols superficially to gain access to education and employment, while quietly preserving customary values in domestic and spiritual spaces.

Consequently, the cultural resistance of Indigenous communities is not political-confrontational in nature, but a form of *existential courage*: enduring within a system that refuses to recognize them, without relinquishing their sense of self. It is a grassroots decoloniality—a *silent decoloniality*—worthy of recognition as a profound expression of social and spiritual resilience.

CONCLUTION

This study demonstrates that the narrative *"Malay is Islam, and Islam is Malay"* in Riau is not merely a cultural expression, but a form of hegemonic discourse constructed and reinforced by institutions of power through education, policy, and official symbols. This narrative has operated as an instrument of exclusion against non-Muslim Indigenous communities such as the Akit, Talang Mamak, Duano, and Anak Rawa peoples. They have not only been excluded from the official definition of *Malayness*, but have also experienced marginalization in cultural policy, resource distribution, and symbolic representation.

Through Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge and a decolonial approach to religious studies, it becomes evident that the Islam-Malay discourse functions by normalizing a particular identity while silencing alternative ones. Terminologies such as *"indigenous people"* or *"isolated communities"* are not employed to recognize the existence of these communities, but rather to place them in subordinate positions. Nevertheless, these communities are not entirely silent. They have

articulated subtle forms of cultural resistance through concealed spiritual practices, oral narratives, and identity adaptation strategies in everyday life.

Hence, it is essential to develop alternative narratives that recognize the plurality of identities in Riau. Malayness should not be understood monolithically as an exclusively Islamic identity, but rather as a cultural home open to the diversity of histories, spiritualities, and communal expressions that have long coexisted and shaped this land. The decolonial approach offers a pathway toward a more just and equitable recognition of Indigenous groups—not only symbolically, but also in local and national cultural policies and practices.

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