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MALAYNESS AT THE NEXUS OF NATION AND UMMAH:
Rethinking the Cultural Politics of Postcolonial Malay Identity

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to reexamine the trajectory of Malay cultural politics within the broader contestations of identity, religion, and power in Southeast Asia—particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. Drawing on cultural sociology, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation, Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, and James Clifford's notion of "cultural routes," this study critiques state-driven and puritan Islamic projects that attempt to essentialize and purify Malay identity. Despite its historical formation through centuries of intercultural encounters—including Indian, Arab, Chinese, and maritime-local influences—Malay identity has increasingly been reduced to a homogenized ethno-religious category. Sufi expressions of Islam, customary aesthetics, and localized wisdom are being supplanted by normative-legalist interpretations propagated through state institutions, formal education, and Islamic media networks. Nonetheless, this article also highlights the presence of quiet, grassroots movements that continue to preserve an inclusive and spiritual Islam-Malay heritage, as seen in coastal traditions such as woodcarving, zapin music, hikayat storytelling, and adat practices. The article argues that the future of Malay culture cannot rest upon a singular identity project; rather, it must be grounded in plural expressions, inter-traditional dialogue, and the revitalization of culture as a liberating spiritual space.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the surge of globalization and the intensification of religious identity politics (Herianto & Wijanarko, 2022; Heryanto, 2015; Muhtadi, 2018), Malay culture has found itself in a state of directional uncertainty (YS. & Evawarni, 2017). On one hand, the discourse of "Malayness" continues to be reinforced within national narratives—particularly in Malaysia—as an identity inherently intertwined with formal Islam, i.e., Islam institutionalized through the state's legal and dakwah apparatus. On the other hand, in regions such as Riau, Siak, and the Riau Archipelago, Malay culture appears increasingly uprooted from the lived realities of its own people, reduced to ceremonial symbolism or commodified cultural heritage (Hidayat, 2008).

This paradox reveals a profound tension between two competing faces of Malay identity: on

one side, a historical product of cultural hybridity—flexible, open, and cosmopolitan; and on the other, a singular identity project, politically constructed and anchored in a hegemonic interpretation of Islam (Provincial Government of Riau, 1991). Historically, Malayness evolved through dialogical encounters with diverse cultural streams—from India, Arabia, and China, to local archipelagic traditions. The Islam that entered this region did not impose itself coercively but flowed organically through trade, literature, and spirituality, manifesting in refined cultural expressions such as Sufi poetry, *hikayat*, *zapin* music, and courteous adat customs.

However, recent developments show that Malay identity is being steered toward symbolic purification. Islam, once the animating spirit of Malay culture, is increasingly subjected to formalistic logic—reduced to law, regulation, and identity boundaries (Kurniati Fatia, 2023; Sidiq & Harto, 2015). The purification agenda, inspired by transnational Islamic currents such as Salafism, Wahhabism, and right-wing political Islam, has shifted cultural orientation from spirituality to sharia, from local interpretation to Middle Eastern standardization, from pluralism to forced homogeneity. This process not only impoverishes cultural expression but also obscures the unique character of Malay Islam, which for centuries flourished through dialogue with tradition rather than its erasure.

The symbolic Arabization currently underway—in dress codes, religious terminology, musical styles, and monolithic interpretations of doctrine—marks a deep transformation in the Malay cultural landscape (Fatimah et al., 2022). Islam no longer functions as a life-giving spirit of values but as an instrument of demarcation. Local wisdoms such as woodcarving, traditional dance, *hikayat*, and even Sufi religiosity are increasingly regarded as signs of "deviation" or "polytheism." Ironically, these purification efforts have eroded the cosmopolitan and spiritual vitality of Malay Islam that once bridged differences and served as a nexus of intercultural encounter across eras.

What we are witnessing is not merely a conflict between *adat* and religion, but a deeper struggle: a contestation over the meaning of Malayness itself—who has the authority to represent it, and how Islam ought to be interpreted (Muhammad Hanif & Dian Dwi OkPutra, 2021). In this context, the politics of Malay identity—rather than resisting colonial impositions of meaning—has become ensnared in a new power game that strips away the original values that once animated Malay culture: harmony, tolerance, and a humanistic spirituality (Hanif & Dwi, 2021).

This paper emerges from a growing concern over the narrowing trajectory of Malay cultural politics. Drawing from the perspective of the political sociology of culture, it seeks to critically reassess whether Malay culture can still be nurtured as a fluid and inclusive network of identity. Can Malay Islam be disentangled from the state's identity project and reconnected to its original ethos—as a maritime civilization grounded in dialogue, diversity, and spirituality?

As an argumentative framework, this study develops three key propositions. First, that Malayness must be understood as a *borderless cultural identity*, continuously shaped by encounters and negotiations. Second, that Islam in the Malay context is a cultural expression rather than a mere legal apparatus—it is a lived spirituality, not a state ideology. Third, that the future direction of Malay cultural politics should be grounded from below, from grassroots forces that sustain local wisdom, art, and customary knowledge, rather than dictated solely by state elites or formal dakwah institutions.

With this approach, the paper aims to offer an alternative discourse on the future of Malay culture—not by returning to an exclusive myth of past glory, but by opening new interpretive horizons that are contextual, inclusive, and rooted in the lived realities of contemporary Malay society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In re-reading the trajectory of Malay cultural politics, this article draws on three key theoretical

frameworks. These three approaches help to view the issue not merely as a matter of history or policy, but as a contested arena of meaning, power, and identity. *First*, the theory of identity politics and culture by Stuart Hall (2013). Stuart Hall, a prominent thinker in cultural studies, rejects the notion that cultural identity is fixed, pure, and essential. In his framework, identity must be understood as a social construction formed through representation, discourse, and power relations that are constantly being negotiated (Leenhardt, 2017). Identity is not something "discovered" from the past, but "created" within specific social, political, and historical contexts. Hence, in the Malay context, "Malayness" is not an ancient, static legacy, but an ongoing project—produced by who speaks, in what context, and for whose interests.

Hall argues that identity is formed in rupture—in moments of tension, displacement, and even conflict. Therefore, throughout Malay history, "Malayness" may carry different meanings across royal court narratives, the voice of common people, traditional ulama interpretations, or modern political projects (Lanigan, 1978). The state may define Malay as a national identity rooted in formal Islam; Islamic political parties may interpret it as a religious entity that must be pure from "cultural innovations"; while indigenous communities may live it as an integrated way of life encompassing tradition, Islam, and the homeland (Dolphin, 1988).

When the state or certain political elites claim a singular meaning of "Malayness" and "Islam"—and use it as the basis for cultural policy, education, or national symbolism—what takes place is not simply “identity strengthening,” but a practice of hegemony. They are managing discourse, determining what counts as Malay and Islamic, and what is deviant, incorrect, or “not yet pure.” In Hall’s framework, this is a form of control through representation—where the state and hegemonic forces attempt to lock the meaning of identity for political purposes.

In fact, it is precisely in the diversity of interpretations and expressions that Malay identity finds its strength. Identity cannot and should not be monopolized by a single institution or interpretation. Cultural representation projects should open up spaces, not close them. By understanding Malay identity as a discursive-social construction in flux, we gain the courage not to accept the standardized official version, but to question, revise, and even reclaim the meaning of “Malay” from below—from the voices of the people, from indigenous communities, from the guardians of spiritual values embedded in art and tradition.

Second, the theory of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci, 2013), the Italian Marxist thinker who developed the theory of cultural hegemony, provides an essential framework for understanding how power does not always operate repressively or coercively. For Gramsci, power is most effective when it works through consent—that is, when the worldview of dominant groups is voluntarily accepted by society as something “natural,” “normal,” or even “true.” This process creates a cultural order that appears organic, though it is in fact the result of highly strategic and subtle power tactics (Gramsci, 1995).

In the context of Malay culture, hegemony appears when the state's version of Islam—through official religious institutions, educational curricula, and mass media—is positioned as the only legitimate form of Islam. The Islam that appears in the public sphere is sterilized from local traditions, adopts Arabism, and speaks through a singular language of law and morality. Meanwhile, Malay-Islamic expressions that grew from local historical roots—such as Sufi-inspired wood carvings, mystical *hikayat* literature, the poetry of Raja Ali Haji, and spiritual-laden customary practices—are gradually deemed outdated, deviant, or even theologically dangerous (Siswati, 2018).

This is how hegemony works: not by overt prohibition, but by creating an atmosphere in which people themselves feel uncomfortable, or even guilty, for practicing their own cultural heritage. Through formal education, religious sermons, and da'wah media content, people are trained to view Islam in a singular form—"pure," "standardized," and "universal"—which too often ends in symbolic Arabization and the negation of local diversity (Vegliò, 2024).

Gramsci emphasized that dominant groups cannot maintain their hegemony without controlling ideological apparatuses such as education, media, and religion (Dal Maso, 2021). In Malaysia, this is evident in state policies that actively shaped an official Islamization project since the 1970s, complete with arts regulation and standardized da'wah. In Indonesia, although the state is less rigid, the hegemony of "standard" Islam persists through conservative civil society groups, religious education institutions, and Islamic television programs.

With Gramsci's framework, it becomes clear that the struggle for Malay culture is not just about preserving arts and customs, but a battle against discursive domination. It is a confrontation between pluralistic and spiritual worldviews versus singular and normative religious interpretations. Thus, the liberation of Malay culture can only begin when society dares to reclaim interpretive space and cultural authority long monopolized by hegemonic elites—whether draped in state power or religious legitimacy.

Third, James Clifford's cultural anthropology approach on "diasporic identity and cultural routes." James Clifford, whose work is deeply influenced by poststructuralism and diaspora studies, shifts our way of understanding culture. He rejects the idea that culture is something rooted permanently in one land, one nation, or one singular origin (Silverman, 2023). Instead, Clifford introduces the concept of culture as route—as a path of crossings, journeys, encounters, and ongoing transformations. In this view, culture is not settled, but migratory, processual, and constantly negotiated within fluid transcultural spaces (Song, 2017).

Applied to the Malay context, this means Malay identity cannot be understood merely as a product of "soil and blood"—a biological descent of a certain ethnic group tied to a specific geography. In Clifford's lens, Malay is better understood as a circulatory space of values, religious practices, language, arts, and social expressions involving Chinese, Arabs, Indians, and various maritime localities in Southeast Asia. Historically, Malay has been a port of ideas and civilization, not a fortress of exclusive identity. It is more a bridge than a wall (Martins, 1998).

Thus, contemporary projects seeking to purify Malayness by referring to a single source—such as standardizing Malay Islam based on Middle Eastern norms or eliminating local elements deemed "un-Islamic"—constitute symbolic violence against the essence of culture itself. Clifford explicitly rejects the understanding of culture as a sacred and immutable origin. Instead, he affirms culture as a legitimate mixture, a mosaic rather than a monolith.

This thinking is highly relevant in critiquing the current direction of Malay cultural politics, which tends toward essentialization. In Malaysia, state cultural policy often defines "Malayness" exclusively as "Sunni-Muslim-Malay," which then becomes the basis for education, art, and national identity policies. In Indonesia, particularly in Riau and surrounding regions, the Malay narrative is often rigidly bound to specific Islamic symbols, obscuring the fact that Malay once embraced religious pluralism, flexible Sufism, and adaptive customs.

Clifford's perspective invites us to celebrate this diversity, not to suspect or eliminate it. Malay culture is not a final product to be merely inherited, but a field constantly in motion and evolution—thus, it must remain open to new negotiations. Malay cultural politics should not aim for the conservation of a frozen identity, but for the nurturing of spaces of encounter: between religion and custom, local and global, heritage and new possibilities.

These three theoretical approaches open up critical space to understand that the contest over the direction of Malay culture is not just about policy, but about who has the power to define what it means to be Malay and how Islam should be practiced within that culture. It is not merely a discussion of history or custom, but a struggle over meaning and the future.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative-interpretative approach, grounded in historical analysis and cultural discourse studies (Arifin, 2012). This approach is chosen for its relevance in exploring meaning construction, power relations, and the dynamic nature of Malay cultural identity—dimensions that cannot be reduced to numerical data, statistical measures, or fixed classifications. Rather than focusing on objective measurement, the core concern of this methodology lies in interpretation—examining how Malay culture is constructed, contested, and negotiated within social, political, and spiritual arenas.

The data utilized in this study are **qualitative** in nature, comprising historical texts, cultural archives, literary works, Malay artistic expressions, policy documents, and scholarly articles. Secondary sources are also drawn upon, including academic writings by influential thinkers such as Stuart Hall, Antonio Gramsci, and James Clifford, as well as local and regional scholars like Azyumardi Azra (2003, 2004), Barbara and Leonard Andaya (2000, 2001; Andaya & Andaya, 1995), Farish A. Noor (2021; Noor & Hedges, 2023), and several contemporary researchers (Fadhly, 2018; Khairiyah & Abdillah, 2023; Mas'oed, 1991). These references serve as the conceptual foundation for a reflective reading of Malay cultural politics.

Data collection is carried out through **library research**, involving the critical review and analysis of literature related to the history of Islam-Malay relations, the development of cultural politics in Malaysia and Indonesia, and the dynamics of transnational Islamic discourses (Creswell, 2020).

The data analysis employs a **hermeneutic-critical approach**, aimed at deconstructing cultural meanings embedded within texts and narratives, and relating them to the structures of power, hegemonic practices, and the broader socio-political configurations of contemporary Malay societies (Gazi, 2013). This analytical framework enables a flexible, reflective, and dialogical reading of symbols, representations, and articulations of identity within the Malay cultural field.

Thus, rather than seeking generalizations or universal conclusions, this study intends to open a space for **critical reflection** on the current trajectories of Malay cultural politics. The methodology allows for an **interconnected and pluralistic reading**, one that affirms the diversity of local expressions in resisting the dominance of singular cultural narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Malay as a Transcultural Network: From Roots to Routes

Malay identity is not a closed or monolithic cultural construct; rather, it constitutes an open-ended network of transcultural interactions forged through centuries of maritime exchange in the global trading routes of the pre-modern world (Hasbullah, 2007). Since the 7th century CE, the Strait of Malacca has served as one of the key nodes in international commerce, bringing together merchants, scholars, and travelers from India, the Arab world, China, and the diverse localities of the archipelago. In this context, Malay culture evolved not through isolation but through dialogue, exchange, and intense processes of acculturation (Porath, 2018).

Historical records highlight the Srivijaya Kingdom (7th–13th century) as a major hub of Mahayana Buddhist learning and maritime commerce, with networks extending to India and China (Mumuh Muhsin Z., 2011). During this period, Old Malay had already emerged as a lingua franca that facilitated interethnic communication. This language later developed into Classical Malay, which was not only spoken by ethnic Malays but also adopted by Gujarati, Hadhrami, Persian, and Chinese traders (Askacita, 2023).

As noted by Anthony Reid in *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* (2017), port cities such as

Melaka in the 15th century became cultural "melting pots", hosting over 84 foreign trading communities. In these urban centers, Malay culture coexisted and intermingled with diverse traditions, as evidenced in architecture, textiles, cuisine, and vocabulary—drawing elements from Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Chinese sources.

Classical Malay literary works such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, and *Sejarah Melayu* further reveal a cosmopolitan and trans-cultural worldview. In *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, for example, the protagonist's dream encounter with the Prophet Muhammad and his subsequent conversion to Islam represents a cultural narrative that synthesizes local mysticism with Islamic spiritual symbolism. Islam, in this narrative, emerges not as a force that erases indigenous customs, but rather as a spiritual layer delicately woven into the fabric of local cultural expressions (Manaf & Abu, 2011; Sahril, 2020).

These historical realities demonstrate that "Malayness" is not an ethnically exclusive heritage born of a homogeneous past. Instead, it is the product of long-term historical crossings involving sailors, merchants, scholars, artists, and nobles from diverse global origins. Any effort to "purify" Malay identity by erasing its so-called foreign elements—be they Chinese, Indian, or pre-Islamic—is, in effect, a denial of the very history that shaped it.

Such purification narratives, which attempt to redefine "Malay" as an exclusive ethno-religious identity, represent a politicized narrowing of history. These are not merely academic misreadings of cultural origins; they are deliberate cultural strategies designed to reshape collective identity in line with state-driven hegemonic agendas. When the state—as seen in Malaysia's cultural politics—endorses a singular version of "Malayness" as the national standard, plural and hybrid forms of being Malay are simultaneously marginalized. The legal definition of "Malay" in Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution—as "a person who professes Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay customs"—effectively excludes historically Malay-speaking, culturally Malay communities who do not meet its formal religious criteria.

Behind this constitutional definition lies a dangerous logic of homogenization. Muslim Indians, Peranakan Chinese, and even non-Muslim coastal communities who historically practiced Malay customs and spoke the Malay language are now often excluded from the Malay category. Similarly, local cultural expressions that historically formed part of Islamic-Malay tradition—such as Hindu-Buddhist-inflected traditional dances, Persian-style Sufi poetry, and folk theatrical performances—are increasingly labeled as un-Islamic or inauthentically Malay.

This situation illustrates how identity becomes an instrument of governance and exclusion. In James Clifford's terms (Silverman, 2023), such an approach is rooted in the logic of "roots", which assumes that cultures are legitimate only when they have a single origin, lineage, and authoritative interpretation. Clifford critiques this essentialist view and instead proposes the concept of "routes"—understanding cultures as products of ongoing intersections, movements, and historical transformations. For Clifford, culture is not static but always in motion.

Thus, envisioning the future of Malay culture cannot be achieved through efforts to freeze identity into a singular, purified form. On the contrary, it must begin with an acknowledgment that Malayness is inherently open, border-crossing, and dialogical. It is a site of negotiation between the local and the global, tradition and religion, the past and the future. Any cultural-political project that ignores this complexity of Malay trajectories and routes does not preserve the culture—it impoverishes it.

Islam as the Spirit of Culture, Not a State Ideology

History shows that Islam entered the Malay world not through military conquest or forced dogma, but through peaceful, cultural means—via trade routes, literature, Sufism, and spiritual interactions. Muslim scholars and merchants from Gujarat, Yemen, and Persia did not bring swords;

they brought books, epic tales, and Islamic ethics in business conduct. Islam was spread not by top-down decrees, but through gentle interactions—in markets, ports, messages, and poems. Thus, Islam did not arrive as a threat to local culture, but as a new soul that merged with the pulse of Malay society.

The Islam that developed in this region bore a strong Sufi character, rooted in values of aesthetics, compassion, wisdom, and cosmopolitanism. It did not reject tradition but embraced it; it did not sever ties with the past but gave it renewed meaning. This is reflected in the works of scholar-poets such as Hamzah Fansuri, Nuruddin al-Raniri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, and Raja Ali Haji. Their writings are not only religious texts addressing creed or jurisprudence but also cultural texts that intertwine literature, philosophy, history, and spirituality.

Hamzah Fansuri, for example, is known as a pioneer of Malay Sufi poetry in the 16th century. In his verses, he explored *wahdatul wujud* (unity of being) (Drewes G., 1986), a philosophical concept from Ibn 'Arabi, expressed in captivating poetic language. In one of his lines:

Seek God within yourself / Not in the Kaaba made of stone

Hamzah invites readers to reflect, to seek the Divine within the depths of the soul rather than merely through formal rituals. This reveals the depth of Sufism rendered into a soft and personal Malay idiom. Similarly, Nuruddin al-Raniri, a scholar from Gujarat who became a key figure in the 17th-century Sultanate of Aceh, authored dozens of works in the Malay language—such as *Bustan al-Salatin* and *Asrar al-'Arifin*—covering world history, philosophy, political ethics, and Sufi teachings. These works not only introduced Islamic teachings but also articulated Islam within a cosmopolitan Malay cultural framework (Djamaris & Saksono, 1996). In the 19th century, Raja Ali Haji continued this tradition with his renowned work *Gurindam Dua Belas*, harmonizing Islamic moral teachings and Malay *adab* (ethics) through *gurindam* and poetic verse. He emphasized the importance of knowledge, character, and wisdom-based leadership over mere power. In his works, Islam is a guide to life interwoven with social norms and local wisdom—not a law that segregates and judges (Haji et al., 2017; Palawa, 2017).

All of this shows that in the Malay world, Islam was not only a religion to be believed in, but also an art to be felt, literature to be read, and a value to be lived. It was not a state ideology but the spirituality of a civilization. Therefore, when contemporary waves of Islamic purification emerge that reject Sufi expressions, discredit *adat* (custom), or homogenize symbols, what actually occurs is not a return to the roots of Islam but a severance of Islam from the cultural history that birthed it in the Malay world.

However, since the early 20th century, the face of Islam in the Malay world has undergone significant transformation. The wave of Islamic purification gradually emerged alongside the rise of Islamic modernism and the entry of transnational ideologies such as Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt. These movements shared a similar mission: purification of *aqidah* (creed), rejection of religious practices deemed "innovations," and the assertion of Islam as a comprehensive legal and socio-political ideology.

In the Malay world, this wave gained momentum as traditional political powers such as the sultanates declined, and colonial powers—namely the Dutch in Indonesia and the British in the Malay Peninsula—grew stronger. Amid this crisis, many Muslim intellectuals shifted their orientation from Sufi tradition and local culture toward a more rational, scriptural, and systematic form of modernist Islam. Figures like Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida were frequently cited in Islamic magazines in the Dutch East Indies such as *Al-Imam* and *Al-Munir*, which began to propagate Islamic reform ideas focusing on the Qur'an and Sunnah while criticizing local religious practices deemed syncretic or impure.

Wahhabism, which gained traction after the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in

1932, introduced an even more puritanical and anti-traditionalist influence. This influence spread widely in the decades that followed through scholarships to the Middle East, networks of Saudi-trained scholars, and the distribution of Islamic literature funded by da'wah organizations such as the *Rabithah 'Alam Islami*. In Malaysia and Indonesia, this influence gradually replaced traditional forms of Islam that had long been integrated with local customs and cultures (Algar, 2008).

The result of this process was a dislocation between Islam and its cultural roots in the Malay world. Islam, once living as the soul of *adat*—embedded in social etiquette, artistic symbols, proverbs, and *pantun*—began to be positioned exclusively as a normative-legal system. Islam was no longer seen as a spiritual path or a way of life grounded in ethics but as a set of rigid laws and rules to be imposed literally.

In this climate, the Sufi cultural heritage that once formed the backbone of Malay Islam began to be viewed with suspicion: communal *dhikr* was labeled as innovation, religious poetry dismissed as vain entertainment, and traditions like *maulid* and *tahlil* were branded as remnants of ignorance. In many cases, religious purification led to cultural erasure—denying the very historical dynamics that shaped Islam as a refined, open, and aesthetically rich civilization in the Malay world.

What is often called "pure Islam" in contemporary discourse is frequently an ideological construction born outside the local context. And when it is imposed on Malay society, it is not only local customs that are marginalized, but also the very spirituality that once formed the essence of Malay Islam. This shift marks an important transition: from Islam grounded in experience and tradition to Islam rooted in text and formalism.

This is where Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony becomes strikingly relevant. Gramsci argued that effective cultural domination is not carried out through direct coercion but through the creation of "social consent" reproduced through ideological institutions such as education, media, religion, and state policy. Within this framework, power is not seen as overt enforcement, but as a manufactured agreement—where the values of the dominant group are accepted as common norms by society, even though they are actually engineered by power structures (Vegliò, 2024).

The dominant interpretation of Islam in the contemporary Malay world—both in Malaysia and Indonesia—is not the result of an open discursive process within society but the product of a power alliance between the state, political parties, and networks of modern Islamic movements. In Malaysia, for example, since the 1980s, the state has reinforced its Islamization project through institutions like JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia), a national education system that integrates specific Islamic doctrines, and strict regulation of cultural content deemed "un-Islamic." Through this project, the state standardized a version of Islam that is jurisprudential, puritanical, and disconnected from local cultural roots.

In Indonesia, a similar phenomenon has occurred through the penetration of modernist and Salafi da'wah movements into universities, schools, da'wah organizations, and social media. Although the state does not officially endorse one Islamic school of thought, the religious public sphere remains dominated by narrow, normatively rigid interpretations, often hostile to culture. Religious TV shows, digital content, and mosque sermons frequently reproduce the narrative that "true" Islam must be free from *adat*, local culture, music, or other aesthetic expressions. Here, we see how a hegemonic project operates culturally—not through overt repression but by creeping in through the language of morality and "creedal purification."

As a result of this hegemony, local Islamic expressions—which for centuries coexisted harmoniously with Malay culture—have gradually been marginalized, weakened, and displaced. Traditions of religious poetry, communal *dhikr*, death commemoration feasts, Sufi-inspired wood carvings, and cultural values such as *musyawarah* (deliberation) and *marwah* (honor) are now suspected as *bid'ah*, superstition, or remnants of "local jahiliyyah." The Sufi interpretation that once

served as the spiritual backbone of coastal and inland Malay communities is now deemed invalid—even "deviant."

Yet, from a historical-cultural perspective, it is precisely these local Islamic expressions that formed the foundation of Islamization in this region. What is being eliminated by the modern hegemonic project is not just cultural form, but a spiritual way of life—one that has proven to be flexible, peaceful, and capable of engaging with the realities of society. Therefore, the domination of a single interpretation must be understood not merely as a difference of school or opinion, but as a form of symbolic power that strips communities of their right to interpret their own religion.

Grassroots Cultural Politics: The Silent Resistance of the Malay Community

While formal and institutional discourses about Malayness and Islam are dominated by the state and elites—through regulations, education, and mass media—there continues to exist, at the grassroots level, a silent movement that nurtures an inclusive, gentle, and spiritual expression of Islam-Malay identity. This movement carries no slogans, does not appear on television screens, and does not speak loudly in public spaces. Yet, it lives on in rituals, in poetry, in customary gatherings, and in the everyday lives of coastal Malay communities, passed down through generations.

In Malay villages along the eastern coast of Sumatra—such as Rokan Hilir, Siak Sri Indrapura, Tanjungpinang, Pulau Penyengat, Meranti, and Natuna—people continue to maintain cultural practices deeply intertwined with Islamic values. Wood carvings rich in the symbolism of *tawhid* (monotheism), zapin performances that serve not just as entertainment but also as a medium of social da'wah, the chanting of *gurindam* verses during traditional ceremonies, and *kenduri arwah* (ritual feasts for the dead) and *marhaban* (celebratory recitations) that are still practiced despite being labeled "un-Islamic" by some—all these are extraordinary forms of cultural resilience (Abdillah, 2023; Hasanuddin, 2017; Hidayat, 2008).

In these small spaces thrives a form of Islam that does not judge but gives life. Islam is present not as an external system of rules but as an inner feeling. It manifests in courteous speech, in the principle of consultation (*musyawarah*), in respect for elders and teachers, and in literary expressions filled with wisdom and spiritual depth. In such communities, *adat* (custom) is not merely tradition—it is a spiritual domain where Islam finds its most human and contextual expression.

This silent movement acts as a counterbalance to the dominance of formal religious interpretations that are often rigid and legalistic. It resists not through confrontation, but through perseverance. It safeguards the legacy of Islam-Malay culture that once formed the foundation of civilization, refusing to submit entirely to the demands of top-down purification. In Gramscian terms, this may be read as a form of cultural counter-hegemony—a symbolic resistance to dominant narratives, enacted not with weapons but through fidelity to inherited values.

Unfortunately, such movements are often not recognized as part of "Islam" by modern da'wah projects. Yet this is where the authentic pulse of Islam-Malay identity beats: as an Islam that is not preoccupied with judging who is right or wrong, but one that offers a sense of harmony, meaning, and continuity. In this context, preserving woodcarving, zapin music, oral literature, and ritual feasts is not merely cultural preservation, but a struggle to sustain the spiritual soul of Islam that has long been embedded in the Malay world.

However, these grassroots cultural expressions are increasingly squeezed by the pressure of a singular standard of Islam, imposed by both the state and puritan Islamic groups promoting the agenda of "purifying faith and culture." This standard demands that all religious expressions conform to a uniform form—stripped of local traditions and aligned with narrowly defined interpretations of *shari'a*. In this logic, culture is no longer seen as a medium of da'wah or spiritual expression, but as a potential source of deviation to be monitored, corrected, or eliminated.

In Malaysia, Islamic parties such as PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) have openly campaigned

against traditional arts considered un-Islamic, including woodcarving featuring flora-geometric motifs rich in Sufi symbolism, zapin dancing which once served as a form of cultural da'wah, and the recitation of Malay classical poetry and epics filled with mysticism and divine metaphors. In certain years, there were even bans on Wayang Kulit performances in Kelantan for being deemed "Hindu" and incompatible with *shari'a*. The Malay culture that for centuries served as a medium of local Islamic expression is now suspected of being a "corrupted heritage," irrelevant to the more Arab-centric and legalistic contemporary Islamic project.

In Indonesia, similar trends occur in subtler but systemic ways. Religious soap operas and *da'wah* content on television and YouTube almost exclusively depict Islam as a normative-legalistic entity: Islam is about veils, rules, prohibitions, and punishments. Rarely is Islam portrayed as a feeling, as *adab*, or as art. In Ramadan soap operas, the ideal Muslim characters are those who obey external symbols (clothing, rules), not those who exhibit deep moral or spiritual sensibility. Media *da'wah* contributes to a growing suspicion of local traditions: grave visitation, *kenduri*, frame drums (*rebana*), and praise songs for the Prophet Muhammad are increasingly labeled as *bid'ah* (innovation) or even *shirk* (polytheism).

Educational policies also reproduce this purist spirit. In many Islamic education curricula, Islam-Malay legacies such as local Sufism, Sufi literature, and custom through an Islamic lens are marginalized. Religious textbooks in schools and *madrasah*s focus more on law and ritual, while arts and culture are either separated from religion or treated as unimportant. As a result, young Malays lose spiritual connection to their cultural heritage—they are taught that to be a good Muslim means abandoning custom and culture, not integrating them.

Under such conditions, the cultural space of Islam, once vibrant with diversity, has become increasingly narrow. What remains is a cultural arena dominated by a single interpretation: one voice, one style, one mode of expression. And when cultural expression is homogenized in the name of religion, what is lost is not just artistic richness but also the deepest meaning of Islam itself—diversity as mercy, and beauty as a spiritual path.

Therefore, the future of Malay cultural politics does not lie in reinforcing official top-down interpretations—which often alienate culture from its people—but in affirming grassroots expressions. Here lies the true authenticity of culture: in how people live, feel, remember, and reinterpret their ancestral heritage within the changing context of time. What is needed today is not more *fatwas* about "what is permissible and what is forbidden," but more space for dialogue, creativity, and the articulation of meaning from the people themselves.

Cultural articulation must be returned to the people—to the woodcarvers on the coast, the *gurindam* chanters in old *suraus*, the zapin dancers at the harbor's edge, and the mothers who recite prayers in classical Malay before cooking rice for a *kenduri*. They are not mere "objects of preservation," but active cultural subjects who, in their own ways, have safeguarded the heartbeat of Islam-Malay identity long before the state, political parties, or universities began speaking about it.

In this context, *Melayu* is not merely a historical subject to be commemorated in textbooks or national ceremonies, but a living cultural actor—with a powerful vitality still intact. What is needed is the courage to dismantle centralized cultural structures, to cast off singular interpretations that suppress diversity, and to restore trust in communities as the rightful owners of their culture.

If the political project of Malay culture is to be meaningful, it must become a cultural movement that revitalizes the spiritual relationship between people and their heritage—not reduce it to a symbolic tool in the competition of identity politics. While the powers above are busy determining who is "most Malay," the people have long lived out their *Malayness* in the most human of ways—in the language they preserve, in the customs they uphold, and in the Islam they embody with feeling, not merely with rules.

CONCLUTION

This study demonstrates that, since the 2000s, the political thinking of Muslim minorities in the Asia-Pacific region has undergone a significant paradigmatic transformation. Amid a global context marked by rising Islamophobia, nationalist populism, and the consolidation of secular nation-states, Muslim minority communities no longer frame Islam as a project of state domination or the formalization of sharia. Instead, Islam is increasingly embraced as a source of ethical and moral values to advocate for just and equitable citizenship.

In various national contexts studied—India, the Philippines, Southern Thailand, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand—Muslim minorities exhibit a growing tendency to move away from the idea of an Islamic state as a political goal. Rather, they emphasize the importance of social integration, the recognition of collective identity, and active participation in existing political systems. Sharia is interpreted more as an ethical framework that inspires social action and the cultivation of public ethics, rather than a legal system to be institutionalized by the state.

Strategies such as constitutional advocacy, multicultural negotiation, engagement in civil society, and the formation of cross-identity coalitions represent concrete efforts by Muslim minority communities to build a contextual and constructive model of Islamic citizenship. In doing so, they appear not merely as victims of exclusion, but as transformative agents within democratic and pluralistic spaces.

Theoretically, this research contributes to discourses on the relationship between Islam and the state by introducing a perspective from the margins—that of Muslim minorities—whose voices have often been marginalized in Islamic political studies. These findings affirm that Muslims are not only able to survive in minority contexts but can also creatively and progressively reinterpret the role of Islam within modern nation-state constructions.

Practically, the study offers important implications for public policy and political education: countries in the Asia-Pacific region need to develop more inclusive approaches to citizenship, recognizing identity pluralism and ensuring equal participation for all groups, including Muslims. For Muslim communities themselves, it is crucial to continue developing an Islamic discourse rooted in social justice, civic responsibility, and a commitment to peaceful coexistence within diversity.

Thus, the relationship between sharia and the state among Muslim minorities should not be understood as antagonistic or dualistic, but rather as a space of ongoing dialectics—between religious identity and political reality, between faith and citizenship, between particularism and universalism. It is within this dialectical space that the relevance and urgency of minority Islamic political thought lies in imagining a more ethical and humane future for plural societies.

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