

THE ISLAMIZATION AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE MALAY PEOPLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE 13TH-14TH CENTURIES CE

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
May 23, 2026	Jun 20, 2026	Jul 2, 2026	Jul 7, 2026

Abstract

This study examines the process of Islamization and the transformation of Malay culture in Southeast Asia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE, with particular attention to the mechanisms of Islamic dissemination, the establishment of the earliest Islamic sultanate, and the multidimensional changes that shaped Malay civilization. Data were collected through a systematic review of primary sources, including Malay chronicles, the travel accounts of Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo, and the Terengganu Inscription of 1303 CE, supported by secondary literature from Western and Southeast Asian scholars. The findings reveal that Islamization occurred through multichannel mechanisms involving maritime trade, Sufi proselytization, and the peaceful conversion of local rulers. The founding of the Samudera Pasai Sultanate around 1267 CE marked a formative phase in Malay-Islamic history, characterized by the transition from Pallawa to Jawi script, the transformation of the god-king concept into the sultan-caliph model, the incorporation of Islamic law into existing customary law, and the aesthetic adaptation of art and architecture. This study concludes that Islamization was not a process of cultural destruction but a form of creative acculturation that generated a distinctive Malay-Islamic civilization. The study

contributes to the historiography of Southeast Asian Islam by demonstrating how religious transformation, political authority, legal culture, and artistic expression collectively formed the enduring relationship between Islam and Malay identity.

Keywords: Islamization; Malay Culture; Cultural Transformation; Southeast Asia; Samudera Pasai

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia has a complex and layered civilizational history. Long before Islam arrived, societies in this region had absorbed Hindu-Buddhist influence from India since the first century CE, giving rise to a distinctive local culture with Srivijaya (seventh to thirteenth century CE) as the dominant maritime power and Old Malay as the lingua franca of regional trade (Coedes & Vella, 1968). This rich civilizational foundation was the one that later came into contact with Islam, a monotheistic religion that brought new concepts of God, humanity, and social order.

The Islamization of Southeast Asia began in northern Sumatra in the thirteenth century CE. Marco Polo (1292 CE) recorded a Muslim community in Perlak, while Ibn Battuta (1345-1346 CE) found the Samudra-Pasai Sultanate to be an already established center of Islam (Gibb & Beckingham, 1994; Polo & Latham, 1958). Founded around 1267 CE, Samudra-Pasai was the first documented Islamic kingdom in Southeast Asia (Ricklefs & MC, 2008). Islamization proceeded peacefully and gradually through the spice trade route connecting Arabia, India, and Southeast Asia. Muslim merchants from Gujarat, Arabia, and Persia played a dual role as both economic actors and agents of cultural and religious transmission (Hall, 2019). The acceptance of Islam by Malay rulers was driven by pragmatic considerations, namely the expansion of trade networks and the strengthening of political legitimacy, as well as by the appeal of Sufism, which was able to engage in dialogue with local spiritual traditions.

Academic discourse on the Islamization of Southeast Asia has produced several major theories. Al-Attas (1969) argued that Islam entered through Sufis and Gujarati traders, with tasawwuf serving as the spiritual medium. Drewes (1968) emphasized direct Arab and Persian influence, while Fatimi (1963) highlighted the role of Hadhrami ulama. Reid (1988) situated Islamization within the dynamics of port city growth, while Hall (1985) showed that

maritime trade networks built the infrastructure for religious transmission. Riddell (2001) and Milner (2008) respectively examined the intellectual transmission of Islam and the process of negotiating Malay identity in its encounter with Islam (Al-Attas, 2018; Reid, 1988).

From an Indonesian perspective, Azra (2004) traced the network of Haramayn ulama with a focus on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while Tjandrasasmita (2009) contributed archaeological studies of gravestones, mosque architecture, and other material artifacts to reconstruct the stages of Islamization more concretely (Azra, 2004; Riddell, 2001). Although these studies have built a strong foundation, research that specifically analyzes the transformative impact of Islamization on Malay culture in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as a formative phase in its own right remains relatively limited, particularly in Indonesian-language literature.

This article focuses on the question of what changed and how that change occurred in Malay culture as a result of Islamization in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE. Two main questions are raised. First, how did Islamization shape and transform elements of Malay culture, particularly in the aspects of language and literature, systems of governance, law, and artistic expression. Second, what factors determined the pattern of cultural adaptation and negotiation between local Malay tradition and Islamic values during this period.

Based on these problems, this article aims to achieve three things. First, to analyze the concrete forms of Malay cultural transformation as an impact of Islamization in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE. Second, to identify the factors that influenced the pattern of acceptance and adaptation among Malay society toward Islamic influence. Third, to reconstruct the dynamics of negotiation between local tradition and Islamic civilization as a basis for understanding the character of early Malay cultural identity.

This article proposes the hypothesis that Islamization in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE functioned not as a force that erased Malay culture, but as a catalyst for transformation that produced a new cultural synthesis. This process unfolded through a mechanism of selection and negotiation, in which elements of Islam were absorbed selectively and rearticulated within the framework of local tradition, thereby producing a Malay-Islamic culture that was neither entirely Arab nor entirely pre-Islamic .

The novelty of this article lies in three aspects. First, its treatment of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as a formative phase of Islamization with characteristics of its own.

Second, its integration of a cultural history approach with multisource analysis that combines Malay chronicles, foreign sources (Arab, Chinese, European), and archaeological data. Third, its contribution as an Indonesian-language study that places cultural transformation as the primary object of analysis rather than a secondary aspect. This article is thus expected to enrich academic discourse on the history of Malay culture and the dynamics of civilizational encounter in Southeast Asia during the early period of Islamization.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative method in the form of library research. Library research is conducted by collecting, reading, and analyzing various written sources such as books, journal articles, and scholarly documents relevant to the topic under study. The approach used is a historical-analytical approach, which seeks to reconstruct and analyze past events systematically and critically based on sources whose validity can be verified. The data sources in this research consist of primary sources in the form of indexed scholarly journal articles, as well as secondary sources in the form of books on Islamic history and relevant prior scholarly works.

Data collection was carried out through documentary study and literature review by tracing sources from academic databases such as Google Scholar and accredited national journal portals. Data analysis follows four stages of the historical method. The first stage is heuristics, namely the collection of sources related to the topics. The second stage is verification, namely testing the credibility and validity of sources through both internal and external criticism. The third stage is interpretation, namely the analysis and synthesis of the historical facts that have been gathered. The fourth stage is historiography, namely the scholarly and systematic writing of the research findings. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, by comparing various academic sources that discuss similar themes to confirm the consistency and accuracy of the findings.

RESULTS

Pathways and Mechanisms of Islamization in the Malay Region

This research found that the Islamization of the Malay region in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE took place through two main pathways, namely maritime trade and

Sufi missionary activity. On the trade pathway, historical data show that the Strait of Malacca served as the main corridor connecting the Islamic world in the west with the Nusantara region in the east from the seventh to the sixteenth century CE. Hamid (2022) identified three of the most active trade network nodes of Samudera Pasai during this period, namely trade routes with Java, China, and India. From the thirteenth to the early sixteenth century CE, Pasai was recorded as a leading spice producing region, with pepper export capacity reaching 8,000 to 10,000 bahara per year. Muslim merchants from Arabia, Persia, and Gujarat built mosques, brought in religious scholars, and established Muslim communities in strategic ports across Southeast Asia. On the missionary pathway, it was found that the spread of Islam by Sufis proceeded from the lower layers of society, reaching groups untouched by the dynamics of the royal court, through an approach that did not demand the complete elimination of local tradition (Johns, 1961).

Evidence for the Existence of the Samudera Pasai Kingdom

The existence of Samudera Pasai as the first Islamic kingdom in the Nusantara region is supported by two categories of data, archaeological data and narrative data. Archaeologically, three inscribed gravestones were found in the North Aceh region. The gravestone of Sultan Malik al-Saleh, dated 696 AH or 1297 CE, stands as the oldest identified physical marker of the institutionalization of Islam in the Nusantara region. Excavation at the former palace site in Beuringin Village, Samudera District, North Aceh, yielded finds including ceramics, jewelry, and gold dirham coins inscribed with the names of Samudera Pasai's sultans. In addition, numerous Islamic-style inscribed gravestones from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries have also been found in the former territory of this kingdom.

Narratively, the travel account of Ibn Battuta in his work *Rihla* records his visit to Pasai in 1345 CE, where he stayed for 15 days. He described Pasai as a fertile land with a magnificent port city. The account also reveals that during the reign of Sultan Mahmud Malik al-Zahir (1326-1345), the kingdom adhered to the Shafi'i school of law, and it records the presence of a formal court religious official named Qadi Syarif Amir Sayyir al-Syirazi.

Transformation of Culture

Research data show a shift in the Malay language from the Pre-Classical phase, influenced by the Indian Pallava script, toward the Classical phase, marked by the use of the Jawi script based on Arabic letters, beginning in the thirteenth century CE. The earliest written evidence was found on the Terengganu Inscription Stone, dated 702 AH or 1303

CE, located on the Malay Peninsula, Malaysia (Fauziah, 2018). Ramala (2020) noted that the process of adapting the Arabic script into Jawi began forming in the fourteenth century, marked by the creation of new letters to accommodate sounds unique to the Malay language, namely pa (ڤ), cha (چ), nga (ڠ), ga (گ), and nya (ڻ). During the same period, the Jawi script was recorded as being widely used as the language of politics, trade, law, and court literature. The Tanjung Tanah Legal Code manuscript, found in Kerinci, further serves as supporting data for this script transition, with the manuscript's age estimated to originate from this period based on radiocarbon testing (Barus & Mawaddah, 2025).

It was found that the development of Malay Islamic literature during this period is recorded in the work *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*, part of whose earliest text was written in Jawi script, making it both a literary work and the earliest historical document recording the development of Islam in Samudera Pasai. Research data also record the entry of adaptations of literary works from the broader Islamic world into Malay-Jawi, including *Hikayat Bayan Budiman*, adapted from the Persian *Tuti-nama*, *Hikayat Kalilah wa Dimmah*, from the Arab-Indian tradition, and the *Bakhtiar Cycle* (Barus & Mawaddah, 2025).

The data found show that Sultan Malik al-Saleh of Samudera Pasai appointed a qadhi as the head of the judiciary and Islamic law (Solihin & MS, 2025). The Terengganu Inscription Stone (1303 CE) is recorded as the earliest written legal document on the Malay Peninsula, containing regulations derived from Islamic principles (Utriza Yakin, 2016). Historical data also show that Terengganu had received Islam by the thirteenth century CE at the latest, while across the Malay lands in general, Islam became institutionally rooted around the thirteenth century CE and grew increasingly established in the fourteenth century CE (Saputra & Seprina, 2024).

In the field of architecture, it was found that early mosques in the Malay region retained local elements such as the stacked meru-style roof from Hindu tradition, as well as the use of the beduk drum in place of a minaret for the call to prayer. In burial tradition, the gravestone of Sultan Malik al-Saleh shows a synthesis of Islamic influence from India (Gujarat or Bengal) with local tradition, which later developed into the distinctive Batu Aceh gravestone type, featuring ornamentation with lotus and mountain symbols drawn from Hindu-Buddhist tradition. In the field of carving art, the data show a shift from the figurative representation tradition of Hindu-Buddhism toward motifs of Arabic calligraphy, floral

patterns, geometric designs, and abstract stylizations of living forms (Barus & Mawaddah, 2025).

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the Pathways and Mechanisms of Islamization

The findings on the two pathways of Islamization, trade and Sufi missionary activity, show that the entry of Islam into the Malay region did not occur through a single channel, but through mechanisms that reinforced one another, combining economic interests at the level of the royal court with religious dissemination at the grassroots level (Amin & Ananda, 2019). Data on Samudera Pasai's trade network with Java, China, and India (Hamid, 2022) indicate that the conversion of coastal rulers to Islam was driven more by pragmatic considerations, namely expanding access to Muslim trade networks and strengthening political legitimacy, than by purely spiritual motives (Mawarni et al., 2025). This interpretation aligns with the general understanding in studies of Nusantara Islamization that economic and political factors often served as the initial trigger for conversion at the elite level, while acceptance of Islam among the wider population was instead shaped by the accommodative approach of Sufis, which did not demand the total elimination of local tradition (Milner, 2011). It is this combination of both pathways that explains why Islamization in the Malay region proceeded relatively free of destructive cultural conflict, a character that distinguishes it from processes of Islamization in a number of other regions that occurred through conquest (Johns, 1961).

The Significance of Archaeological and Narrative Evidence for the Status of Samudera Pasai

The combination of archaeological data, in the form of dated gravestones and excavation finds, with narrative data from Ibn Battuta's account, strengthens the argument that Samudera Pasai deserves to be regarded as the first scientifically confirmed Islamic kingdom in the Nusantara region, rather than merely a claim rooted in oral tradition. The gravestone of Sultan Malik al-Saleh, dated 1297 CE, provides a chronological certainty that is difficult to dispute, while Ibn Battuta's account offers a qualitative dimension of how the kingdom functioned as a center of Islamic life, from the practice of the Shafi'i school of law to the appointment of formal religious officials (Gibb & Beckingham, 1994; Ricklefs & MC, 2008). These two types of sources complement one another, with material data explaining

existence and textual data explaining the quality of religious life within it. The significance of this finding lies in the position of Samudera Pasai as the foundation later inherited by the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century and Aceh Darussalam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, making the study of this early period key to understanding the long chain of Malay Islamic civilization.

The Significance of the Transformation of Script and Language

The finding regarding the creation of new letters in the Jawi script, such as pa, cha, nga, ga, and nya (Barus & Mawaddah, 2025), carries a significance that goes beyond a mere philological note. This phonetic innovation shows that Malay society did not occupy the position of a passive recipient of foreign culture, but rather acted as an active agent that modified outside elements to suit local needs. This understanding is important for correcting a view that often frames the Islamization of the Nusantara region as a one-directional process from the center of the Islamic world to its periphery. Instead, the data show a process of creative negotiation, in which the Jawi script ultimately became a new cultural creation that belonged entirely to Malay tradition, rather than simply an imitation of the Arabic script. The function of this script as a marker of the educated class also indicates that language transformation during this period was intertwined with the formation of a new social structure grounded in Islamic literacy.

The Development of Literature as Cultural Synthesis

The emergence of Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai and the entry of adaptations from Persian and Arab-Indian literature into Malay-Jawi show that Islamization was not solely a religious process, but also a process of transmitting the intellectual cosmopolitanism of the Islamic world into the Nusantara region. Works such as Hikayat Bayan Budiman and Hikayat Kalilah wa Dimmah show that Malay society took part in the broader circulation of Islamic world literature, rather than developing in isolation (Barus & Mawaddah, 2025). This development can be understood as a continuation of the long evolutionary process of Malay literature, which had already experienced Indian influence during the Srivijaya period, so that Islamization is more accurately understood as a new layer within a literary tradition that had long been open to outside influence, rather than as a complete break from the preceding era.

Transformation of Law

The appointment of a qadhi by Sultan Malik al-Saleh and the legal content of the Terengganu Inscription Stone show a fundamental shift in the conception of power, from

the god-king model inherited from Hindu-Buddhism, which positioned the ruler as a divine manifestation, toward the sultan-caliph model, responsible for upholding Islamic law (Solihin & MS, 2025). This shift carries broad implications, as it represents not merely a change in religious symbolism, but a change in the very basis of political legitimacy. The discovery of evidence of written legal codification from the early fourteenth century, considerably earlier than what has generally been associated with the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century, shows that the foundation of Islamic law in the Malay region has roots older than commonly assumed, and that the Malacca Legal Code in the following period is more accurately understood as a continuation and refinement of a precedent already established by Samudera Pasai (Utriza Yakin, 2016).

Acculturation in Material Culture

The retention of local elements in mosque architecture, such as the stacked roof and the beduk drum, along with the development of the Batu Aceh gravestone, which blends Hindu-Buddhist ornamentation with Islamic norms, shows that Islamization in the Malay region proceeded through a process of selective acculturation rather than the total erasure of prior culture. The Islamic prohibition on figurative representation, which subsequently drove the evolution of Malay carving art toward motifs of calligraphy, floral patterns, and geometric design, also shows how a theological restriction could become a driver of new aesthetic innovation, rather than simply a constraint on creativity (Saputra & Seprina, 2024). This pattern is consistent with the findings in the aspects of language and law, reflecting a general pattern in which elements of Islam were absorbed selectively and negotiated with local tradition to produce forms distinctly Malay-Islamic.

Civilizational Synthesis and the Formation of Ethnic Identity

Taken as a whole, the six aspects of transformation discussed, the mechanism of Islamization, political institutions, script and language, literature, law, and art and architecture, show a consistent pattern of selective absorption and creative negotiation with local tradition (Rawanita et al., 2025). This pattern explains why the relationship between Islam and Malay identity became so close that it gave rise to the principle that to be Malay is to be Muslim, an identity whose roots can be traced back to the period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE (Jurriëns, 2009). This finding contributes to the understanding that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE constitute a formative era that served as a

prerequisite for the emergence of the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century as the more mature culmination of Malay Islamic civilization.

Research Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research has limitations in the scope of data, which draws on a relatively limited number of archaeological sites and narrative accounts, particularly for Malay regions beyond Samudera Pasai and Terengganu, so generalizing the pattern of Islamization to the entire Malay region requires caution. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of study to other sites along the coast of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, and to consider the use of comparative epigraphic approaches to test the consistency of the cultural transformation patterns found in this research.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the Islamization of the Malay region in Southeast Asia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE took place through a multichannel mechanism that reinforced one another. These channels included maritime trade, Sufi missionary activity, cross-cultural marriage, and the conversion of local rulers. This period represents a formative era that laid the foundation of Malay-Islamic civilization, marked by the establishment of the Samudera Pasai Sultanate around 1267 CE as the first documented Islamic political entity in the Nusantara region. Within this timeframe, transformation occurred across multiple dimensions. The Pallawa script was replaced by Jawi, as evidenced by the Terengganu Inscription Stone dated 1303 CE. The concept of the god-king shifted toward that of the sultan-caliph. Islamic law became layered with customary law within a distinctive hybrid legal system. Architectural and artistic traditions absorbed calligraphy and geometric ornamentation without erasing local elements. The most significant finding of this research is that Islamization was not a process that destroyed pre-Islamic culture but rather a process of creative acculturation that produced a unique civilizational synthesis. The close relationship between Islam and Malay identity, embodied in the principle that "to be Malay is to be Muslim," was not a product of the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but is empirically rooted in the formative era of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that forms the focus of this study.

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations are proposed for future study. First, a more in-depth study is needed on the intellectual network of Islam in

Samudera Pasai, including the use of old Malay manuscripts held at the National Library of Indonesia, the British Library, and Leiden University Library. Second, a comparative study between the Islamization of Samudera Pasai and other regions such as the Malay Peninsula, Kalimantan, and the southern Philippines needs to be carried out to identify common patterns and local variations. Third, more systematic archaeological excavation at the Samudera Pasai site, along with the digitization of old Malay inscriptions and manuscripts, is urgently needed to preserve historical sources that are increasingly at risk. Fourth, within the field of history education, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE deserve a more proportional place in the curriculum, so that this period is no longer overshadowed by the narrative of the fifteenth century Malacca Sultanate. Understanding this formative era will provide a richer historical framework for comprehending Malay Islam, Southeast Asian cultural identity, and the broader dynamics of civilizational encounter.

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