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ADAT, ISLAM, AND IDENTITY POLITICS: Negotiating Malayness in Postcolonial Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This article explores the role of adat in relation to Islam and identity politics in shaping Malay identity in postcolonial Southeast Asia. Moving beyond the tension between the concepts of "Melayu Beradat" and "Adat Bermelayu," it presents adat not just as cultural heritage but as an epistemological space where authority, authenticity, and social legitimacy are debated. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that combines anthropological, sociological, and political perspectives on Islam, the article examines the dynamics of Malay identity in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. It focuses on two key areas: first, how definitions of ethnicity and race have evolved within the formation of modern nation-states; second, how capitalist modernity influences the values of egalitarianism and social solidarity traditionally linked to adat and Islamic teachings. The article contends that, amid urbanization, Islamization, and global economic pressures, adat has experienced symbolic diminishment and politicization, often serving as a tool for identity exclusion. Therefore, reinterpreting adat through the perspective of progressive Islamic humanism is necessary to enable it to serve as a source of social ethics that is inclusive, relevant, and meaningful in a multicultural society. In this way, Malayness is seen not as a fixed ethnic category but as a dynamic, evolving construct continuously negotiated through the relationship of religion, culture, and power.

[Artikel ini mengkaji peran adat dalam kaitannya dengan Islam dan politik identitas dalam membentuk identitas Melayu di Asia Tenggara pascakolonial. Melampaui ketegangan antara konsep "Melayu Beradat" dan "Adat Bermelayu," artikel ini memaparkan adat tidak hanya sebagai warisan budaya, tetapi juga sebagai ruang epistemologis di mana otoritas, keaslian, dan legitimasi sosial diperdebatkan. Dengan pendekatan interdisipliner yang menggabungkan perspektif antropologi, sosiologi, dan politik terhadap Islam, artikel ini menganalisis dinamika identitas Melayu di Malaysia, Singapura, dan Indonesia. Fokusnya pada dua area utama: pertama, bagaimana definisi etnisitas dan ras telah berkembang dalam pembentukan negara-bangsa modern; kedua, bagaimana modernitas kapitalis mempengaruhi nilai-nilai egalitarianisme dan solidaritas sosial yang secara tradisional terkait dengan adat dan ajaran Islam. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa, di tengah urbanisasi, Islamisasi, dan tekanan ekonomi global, adat mengalami devaluasi simbolis dan politisasi, sering kali berfungsi sebagai alat untuk eksklusi identitas. Oleh karena itu, menafsirkan ulang adat melalui perspektif humanisme Islam progresif diperlukan agar dapat berfungsi sebagai sumber etika sosial yang inklusif, relevan, dan bermakna dalam masyarakat multikultural. Dengan cara ini, ke-Melayu-an dipandang bukan sebagai kategori etnis yang statis, melainkan sebagai konstruksi dinamis yang terus berkembang dan dinegosiasikan melalui hubungan antara agama, budaya, dan kekuasaan.]

Keywords: *Adat, Islam, Identity politics, Southeast Asia*

Introduction

Malay communities in the archipelago continue to be caught up in various identity polemics, one of which relates to the position of *adat* in social, cultural, and religious life. The expression *hidup dikandung adat* (living according to tradition) not only represents a system of customs and social norms, but also reflects the complex relationship between culture, ethnicity, religion, and power. In Islamic discourse in the Malay world, *adat* is often positioned ambivalently. On the one hand, it is understood as a cultural medium for the internalization of Islamic values. On the other hand, it is seen as a residue of pre-Islamic practices that need to be reorganized. This tension makes *adat* not merely an anthropological phenomenon, but an epistemological issue in Islamic studies, as it

concerns the way religious knowledge, authority, and normativity are produced and legitimized.[1]

In the history of Islam in the archipelago, *adat* and Islam developed through a long and continuous process of negotiation. Normative principles such as *adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah* (custom is based on sharia, sharia is based on the Quran) reflect the efforts of the Malay Muslim community to synthesize revelation, Islamic law, and local cultural realities. However, as shown by Bowen and Hefner, Islam in Southeast Asia is better understood as a lived religion—a religion experienced and practiced through a specific social context—rather than as a normative system detached from the historical and cultural experiences of its followers.[2] Within this framework, *adat* functions as a vehicle for ethical praxis where Islamic values are translated into everyday life.

The issue becomes even more complex when Malay identity is formed within the pluralistic configuration of postcolonial nation-states. In Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, the categories of "Malay" and "Islam" have undergone different institutionalizations through law, public policy, and religious authority. These differences highlight that Malay and Islamic identities are not monolithic categories, but rather social constructions that are constantly negotiated in power relations.[3] In this context, *adat* is often used as a ground of contestation between

[1] Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 180, no. 4 (2017), https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.29724; John R. Bowen, *Islam, Law, and Equality in Indonesia*, in *Islam, Law, and Equality in Indonesia* (2003), https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511615122.

[2] John R. Bowen, "On the Political Construction of Tradition: Gotong Royong in Indonesia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (1986), https://doi.org/10.2307/2056530; Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, in *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton University Press, 2000), https://doi.org/10.2307/3557788.

[3] Judith A. Nagata, "Adat in the City: Some Perceptions and Practices among Urban Malays," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 130, no. 1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002708; Anthony Crothers. Milner, *The Malays* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

various actors—the state, religious scholars, and the community—who seek to claim authority over the definition of authenticity and legitimacy of identity.

Modernity and global capitalism have further complicated the position of *adat* in Malay Muslim society. Economic rationality, urbanization, and market efficiency logic have encouraged the simplification of cultural and religious meanings, often reducing *adat* to mere performative symbols or ceremonial rituals. In line with Bauman's analysis of culture as praxis, this process reveals how traditions lose their depth of meaning when separated from their ethical and social contexts.[4] At the same time, the wave of Islamic revitalization in Southeast Asia over the past two decades has given rise to a tendency toward purification, in which *adat* is judged through the dichotomy of "compatible" or "incompatible" with normative Islam, often without considering its historical and social dimensions.[5]

Departing from these issues, this article aims to reflect on the position of *adat* to form Malay identity through two main lines of analysis. First, this article examines how ethnicity, Malayness, and Islam are formed and negotiated in the layered Malay society in the postcolonial archipelago. Second, this article examines how the pressures of modern capitalism influence the values of egalitarianism, social solidarity, and human ethics that have long been attached to both customs and Islamic teachings. With a reflective and interdisciplinary approach within the framework of Islamic studies, this article argues that *adat* needs to be reformulated through the lens of progressive Islamic humanism—not as a remnant of tradition, but as a source of living and contextual social ethics.

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[4] Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis* (1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom : SAGE Publications Ltd, 1999), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218433.

[5] Zuly Qodir, Haedar Nashir, and Robert W. Hefner, "Muhammadiyah Making Indonesia's Islamic Moderation Based on Maqāsid Sharī'ah," *Ijtihad: Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan* 23, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.18326/IJTIHAD.V23I1.77-92.

This article proposes a reinterpretation of the epistemological function of custom as a link between culture, identity, and Islamic meaning. An inclusive reinterpretation of custom is expected to expose a more dynamic, contextual, and relevant understanding of Malayness and Islam in the reality of contemporary, pluralistic Southeast Asian societies.

Adat, Islam, and Malay Identity

Studies on Islam and Malay identity in Southeast Asia have seen significant developments in recent years. Recent research locates Malay identity at the intersection of religion, culture, and politics, highlighting how the concept of Malayness continues to be negotiated in the context of social change, modernity, and globalization. In contemporary literature, Malay identity is no longer understood as a static ethnic category, but rather as a historic and cultural entity formed through interactions between local traditions, Islamic teachings, and power structures within society.[6]

One of the main currents in this study highlights the historical process of integration between Islam and Malay culture. Several studies indicate that Islamization in the Malay region did not occur through the total replacement of local traditions, but rather through a process of adaptation and integration that resulted in a distinctive form of religiosity. Islamic values were gradually integrated into the symbolic systems, social practices, and cultural norms of Malay society, resulting in a mutually reinforcing relationship between religion and culture.[7] In this context, the concept of *adat* became one of the main media that bridged the relationship between religious norms and social practices in Malay society.

[6] Robert W. Hefner, "Where Have All the Abangan Gone? Religionization and the Decline of Non-Standard Islam in Contemporary Indonesia," in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*, ed. Michel Picard and Rémy Medinier (New York: Routledge, 2011), 21; Milner, *The Malays*.

[7] M. Samsul Hady et al., "Cultural Transformation: Religious Moderation from Manuscripts Heritage to Living Tradition in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2556891.

In addition to historical and cultural approaches, some recent studies also highlight the political dimension of Malay identity. In the context of modern nation-states such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, Malay identity is often constructed through the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and state institutions. Several studies show that the narrative "Malay is Muslim, and Muslim is Malay" has become a strong ideological framework in shaping the boundaries of the collective identity of the Malay community.[8] This narrative not only functions as a symbol of social solidarity, but can also serve as a mechanism of exclusion against groups that do not fully conform to the normative definition of Malayness.

Other studies highlight the dynamics of Malay identity transformation in the context of modernity and globalization. In contemporary Southeast Asian Muslim societies, religious identity is no longer solely determined by local traditions but is also influenced by transnational intellectual networks, Islamic revival movements, and social changes triggered by urbanization and economic development.[9] These processes have given rise to new forms of articulation of Malay identity that often reveal tensions between local traditions and global Islamic discourse.

Recent research also highlights the diversity of religious practices in Malay societies, especially in border areas or multi-ethnic communities. Studies of Muslim communities in the Indonesia–Malaysia border region, for example, show that Islamic identity is often negotiated through daily interactions with local cultural traditions and the dynamics of intergroup social relations.[10] This shows that Muslim identity in Malay society is plural

[8] Imam Hanafi and Wan Zahari Bin Wan Yusoff, "BEYOND ISLAM-MALAY: Hegemony, Exclusion, and Decolonial Resistance in Riau," *Asia-Pacific Journal on Religion and Society* 7, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.24014/apjrs.v7i2.37511.

[9] Norshahril Saat, *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity.*, in *Islam in Southeast Asia* (2018).

[10] David R. Kolzow et al., "Unit 5 Theories of Leadership," *International Journal of Organizational Leadership* 1, no. 1 (2021).

and continues to be reinterpreted in different social contexts.

Although existing literature has made important contributions to understanding the relationship between Islam and Malay identity, most studies still tend to view *adat* primarily as a cultural tradition or customary legal system in local communities. This approach often places *adat* as an object of anthropological or historical description, thus paying less attention to its role as a discursive arena where various interpretations of Islam, culture, and social authority are negotiated.

Based on this gap, this article proposes a different approach by viewing *adat* not merely as a residue of cultural tradition, but as an epistemic space that allows for the negotiation of Islamic norms, ethnic identity, and social power in postcolonial Malay society. By positioning *adat* as an epistemic interface between religion and culture, this article seeks to contribute to the broader debate in Islamic studies and Southeast Asian studies on how local traditions can be a source of ethical knowledge production in contemporary Muslim societies.

In Malay society, the concept of adat holds a very important position as a system of social norms that governs collective life. Historically, *adat* refers not only to local customs or traditions, but also reflects a set of moral values and social rules that have been passed down from generation to generation. In many Malay communities, the relationship between adat and Islam is often expressed through the famous phrase *adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah*, which emphasizes the connection between cultural norms and religious teachings in shaping the social order of society.

Anthropological and historical studies show that the process of Islamization in the Malay region did not eradicate local traditions, but rather resulted in a form of integration between Islamic values and pre-existing cultural practices. In this context, *adat* functions as an important medium that enables the process of negotiation between

religious norms and social practices in Malay society.[11] Therefore, *adat* cannot be understood solely as a residue of pre-Islamic traditions, but as a normative system that continues to evolve in interaction with Islamic teachings and social change.

However, in the context of modern nation-states, the meaning of *adat* often transforms. In several Southeast Asian countries, the concept of Malayness is often institutionalized through the relationship between ethnicity and religion, so that Malay identity is often perceived as an identity that is inherently related to Islam. This condition shows that *adat* not only functions as a cultural tradition, but also as an arena in which collective identity and social authority are negotiated.

Malay identity in contemporary studies is no longer understood as a fixed and homogeneous ethnic category. A number of studies show that Malayness is a historical construct formed through the interaction between language, religion, culture, and political structures.[12] From this perspective, Malay identity is understood as a dynamic identity that continues to undergo reinterpretation in line with social, economic, and political changes in the Southeast Asian region.

In the modern context, Malay identity is often influenced by the process of nation-building and political policies related to religion and ethnicity. Narratives linking Malayness to Islam are often used to build social solidarity, but in some cases, they can also produce exclusive boundaries that distinguish between "Malay" and "non-Malay" groups in a multi-ethnic society.[13] Therefore, Malay identity is not only a cultural category but also a discursive space influenced by power relations, religious discourse, and broader social dynamics.

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[11] Milner, *The Malays*.

[12] Milner, *The Malays*.

[13] Majid Daneshgar, Ervan Nurtawab, and Peter G. Riddell, "Peter G. Riddell's Contribution to Malay-Indonesian Islamic Studies," in *Malay-Indonesian Islamic Studies* (2022).

To understand the dynamics of the relationship between customs, Islam, and Malay identity, this article uses a progressive Islamic humanism approach. This perspective emphasizes that Islamic values have universal ethical dimensions, such as justice, equality, and respect for human dignity. Within this framework, local traditions such as adat are not seen as obstacles to the development of Islamic thought, but as sources of ethical reflection that can enrich the understanding of Islamic values in different social contexts.

Progressive Islamic humanism also opens up space for the reinterpretation of traditions in facing the challenges of modernity and globalization. In contemporary Muslim societies, the process of reinterpreting local traditions is often an important part of efforts to negotiate the relationship between cultural identity and universal Islamic values. This approach allows for a more inclusive understanding of religious identity, while avoiding essentialist tendencies that view cultural traditions as immutable.

Based on this theoretical framework, this article views *adat* as an epistemic interface that connects Islamic norms with social practices in Malay society. This concept emphasizes that *adat* is not merely a cultural tradition that is passively inherited, but rather a discursive space where various interpretations of religion, culture, and identity are negotiated.

By viewing *adat* as an epistemic interface, this article seeks to show that the process of Malay identity formation is not only determined by religious doctrine or political structures, but also by social and cultural practices that develop in the daily life of society. This approach permits a more comprehensive analysis of how Malay identity continues to transform the context of postcolonial Southeast Asian society.

Negotiating Malayness in Postcolonial Southeast Asia

One important finding in this study is that adat is no longer understood statically as a local tradition passed down from generation

to generation, but is undergoing a process of reinterpretation in contemporary Islamic discourse. In some Malay communities, adat functions as a medium that enables the integration of local cultural values and Islamic ethical principles. This shows that the relationship between Islam and local traditions is not always antagonistic, as is often assumed in narratives of religious purification.

This finding is in line with a number of studies showing that Islam in Southeast Asia developed through a complex process of cultural negotiation, in which local religious practices often became a space for the articulation of Islamic values in a contextual form. Thus, the reinterpretation of *adat* can be understood as a cultural strategy that allows Malay Muslim communities to maintain the continuity of tradition while responding to social change. Furthermore, this reinterpretation shows that *adat* not only functions as cultural heritage, but also as a normative framework that is continuously reproduced through religious discourse. In this context, *adat* can be understood as an epistemic space that brings together traditional authority and religious authority in the formation of social norms.

Postcolonial Nation-Building and Malay Identity

Analysis of the relationship between customs and Malay identity shows that this identity is neither essential nor homogeneous. Instead, Malay identity is formed through a historical process involving interactions between religion, culture, and political structures. In many contexts of Malay societies in Southeast Asia, customs play an important role in framing how collective identity is understood and practiced. However, in the context of modern nation-states, Malay identity is often institutionalized through close links between ethnicity and religion.

Narratives linking Malayness to Islam can strengthen social solidarity within Malay communities, but at the same time also have the potential to create exclusive boundaries against other groups. In this framework, adat functions as an arena where various interpretations of

Malayness are negotiated. On the one hand, adat can be used to maintain forms of cultural identity that are inclusive and pluralistic. On the other hand, it can also be mobilized to reinforce more normative and exclusive definitions of identity. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of adat is important for explaining how Malay identity continues to transform contemporary society.

Following the end of the Second World War, the process of decolonization produced new nation-states across Southeast Asia. In the Malay world, the formation of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia established formal boundaries—geographical, economic, social, and political. The construction of national identity has been a continuing project to unite diverse communities under one flag. Shared identity markers such as language were institutionalized: each state adopted Malay (with its own adaptations) as the national language. Yet the Malay identity itself was not adopted as a national identity; non-Malays were not required to "become Malay." This structural compromise ensured stability but also produced multiple, layered identities.

Within this plural landscape, the notion of "Malayness" opened to reinterpretation. Two outcomes followed: the creation of new boundaries within boundaries, and the emergence of a more inclusive social fabric. How, then, should we understand "race" when Malay society itself is internally diverse? Are values once exclusive to the Malays still meaningful in Hidup dikandung adat, or a life contained within adat?

Life in the cities of the archipelago, particularly Pekanbaru, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur are defined by social, economic, and political pressures. Urban centers attract migrants of varied backgrounds seeking better livelihoods, yet these interactions often generate conflicts that produce symbolic boundaries safeguarding group privileges. Such boundaries serve as instruments for asserting entitlements and consolidating group power. Increasingly, they are justified not by language, race, or religion alone, but by claims to authenticity: the more authentic

one is, the greater one's perceived right to privilege.

This continued interaction between people of different ethnicities, cultures, and religions has resulted in the necessity of asserting identity and culture as symbolic markers to ensure authenticity. In the case of Malaysia, this is necessary to reinforce Malay rights as well as to legitimize the claims to power and privilege from being a native population. This is in response to the influx of migrants from India and China as a product of British administration. In Singapore, where the impact of colonial migration was just as drastic, the rights of the Malays as natives were enshrined by the constitution, but due to the different ethnic composition, which placed Malays as a minority population, it was essential for a set of governing institutions that were outside of the influence of the Malay ethnicity to be established. This was meant to strike the delicate balance between the interests of the natives and the majority population.

As Singapore and, particularly, Kuala Lumpur became urban centers, these institutions were necessary to ensure order and compliance from the population. These institutions also served to weaken the more formal functions of *adat*, such as with inheritance and marriage, as they were complemented or, in some cases, superseded by secular institutions such as the courts. Additionally, the growth of Islam in the region also served to pivot the adoption of laws and practices towards Sharia laws. At the same time, to ensure that Malay identity was not weakened by the threats to formal forms of adat, it served to reinforce and ritualize significant milestones in a person's life. Therefore, embedding adat in the life course. Rituals surrounding weddings, births, and funerals were retained, albeit with some adaptations. "Adat, as defined by urban Malays, is less a body of fixed ideas and behaviors rooted in the historical past but rather reflects the varying situations and needs of the modern urban environment". While Nagata identifies four definitions of *adat*, the definition as a symbolic-traditional feature has become a key component of reinforced authenticity as being part of the Malay identity. This is

especially so in urban environments where a cosmopolitan nature ensures constant interaction between various groups of people.

The continued urbanization of the cities around the archipelago has brought competition not just for authenticity, but has also led to the development of intersectional identities, such as the national identity. These further challenge the role and specificity of adat, given the many competing interests for authenticity. This precarity that adat is situated in further requires the examination of adat from these two strands.

Customs and Negotiation of Malay Identity

Authenticity is sustained through reinterpretations of race, culture, adat, and religion. These enable certain groups to proclaim themselves the truest bearers of identity. Shifts in meaning follow political and cultural tides. The 1980s and 1990s brought urban secularism and new gender roles as women entered the workforce, reshaping household economics. The past two decades, however, have witnessed renewed Islamization in Malaysia and Indonesia, influencing neighboring Singapore at the same time. Such changes in daily life and power relations foster new claims of purity and legitimacy. Adat's definition as generic-descriptive,[14] is essential to mark special and social occasions.

These are infused with Islamic influences and used to reinforce norms and social expectations of that life stage. Marriage is one of the more dramatic examples of this. The social expectations and celebrations associated with marriage, often additional to religious requirements, are a socially expected celebration. The outcome of this celebration is the public knowledge that the man and woman are no longer available for courtship or external relations. Thereby creating social expectations of their behaviors as it relates to interacting with members of the opposite gender. Furthermore, at times, *adat* is the gateway to reinforcing gender roles and structures within the family institutions.

[14] Nagata, "Adat in the City: Some Perceptions and Practices among Urban Malays."

These social expectations are sometimes used together with the institution of religion to ensure that power dynamics in a marriage are structured and maintained. It is not unusual for a more patriarchal system to be adopted, which maintains the male authority even in cases of financial parity between the husband and wife. At times, *adat* has been used to reinforce patriarchal interpretations of gender roles and power relationships. From the meeting of social expectations, the combination of *adat,* religion, and ethnicity reinforces one's identity.

In macro institutions, ethnicity becomes pragmatic: an instrument for securing access to economic and political opportunity. Individuals must display authenticity through performative traits—language, dress, ritual. This is especially the case in Malaysia, where the description of *Bangsa* explicitly includes these components. If ethnicity is mutable, so too is *adat:* a performative tool that can reinforce authenticity when aligned with prevailing social currents. *Hidup dikandung adat,* or "Living contained in *adat,*" is thus socially complex.

In Malaysia and Singapore, ethnicity is entwined with religion, itself shaped by both local and transnational influences such as the concept of the Ummah. Yet Pan-Islamic aspirations remain constrained by nationalism and citizenship boundaries. These layers complicate Malay identity, making consensus on "who is Malay" elusive. Nevertheless, the boundaries of Malayness continue to be debated and contested, both politically and culturally. Adat, at the intersection of ethnicity, culture, and ritual, are often at the forefront of this. While *adat* continues to change and evolve, with various influences incorporated in it, *adat* remains highly relevant in the identification of authenticity and, by extension, access and claims to institutional power. Globalization further disrupts this landscape, introducing new cultural forms, languages, and values. While often embraced as progress, such influences inevitably reshape local identities and hierarchies.

Adat as an Epistemic Interface between Tradition and Islamic Humanism

The findings of this study also show that adat can be understood as an epistemic interface that connects local traditions with Islamic humanist values. From this perspective, adat is not merely viewed as a particular cultural practice, but as an interpretive space that allows for the articulation of universal Islamic values such as justice, social solidarity, and respect for human dignity. This approach opens up the possibility of understanding local traditions as a source of ethical reflection in the development of contemporary Islamic thought. In other words, customs are not only the object of anthropological study, but can also contribute to the enrichment of a more contextual discourse on Islamic humanism. Through this perspective, this article argues that the relationship between Islam and local traditions in Southeast Asia should not be understood in the framework of opposition between orthodoxy and local culture. Instead, both can be seen as part of a dialogical process that continues to shape religious practices and social identity in Malay Muslim societies.

Capitalism has become the defining motor of modern life. It has driven development across Southeast Asia, and contemporary standards of living would be impossible without participation in the global capitalist economy. This paper does not condemn capitalism per se but recognizes that its logic produces inequality. This creates new calculations for members of the ethnicity or culture to increase their viability and potential in the marketplace. As workers are valued for economic contributions, knowledge, and skills become embedded with economic value.

Therefore, some types of knowledge are valued more than others. Language, for instance, has become a pragmatic arena of practice, where the acquisition of language is dependent on its perceived economic value. This has been a topic of discussion in Malaysia, Riau, and especially Singapore. This has led to lower interest in the acquisition of the Malay language. To keep the language relevant, practitioners have adopted creative ways to increase its appeal.

This has come at the cost of the complexity of the language or focusing on its performative and cultural aspects. This has led to a watered-down effect of the richness of the language and has ultimately resulted in the stripping away of complex layers of meaning and symbolism that a language is rich with. In the case of Singapore, the teaching of language is more of an obligation as part of the national syllabus, with popular or economic use of the language rather limited. It is clear that English is the language with a higher economic value and should therefore be a focus. Language's importance is not merely restricted to practical forms of communication but also in the acquisition of a system of meaning which allows for the comprehension and use of symbols as well as a deeper understanding of culture, belonging, and identity. Therefore, adat is impacted by the pressures of the struggles within the capitalist system. Stripping away at parts of adat that would require a deeper appreciation of meaning, in favor of performative elements as culture becomes reduced.

The struggle for survival where individuals acquire price tags visible in consumption—houses, cars, clothing. Requires the use of any tools necessary to advance economically, socially or symbolically through the acquisition of status symbols. The competition this inspires should inspire greater productivity and progress, but at the same time, this form of rationality would result in society drifting away from egalitarian ideals.

In volatile urban economies, symbolic humanist values are overshadowed by financial pressure. Rising living costs intensify competition, and while protests such as Indonesia's student movements or Malaysia's cost-of-living demonstrations express discontent, they rarely alter systemic realities.

At such moments, societies often turn inward, prioritizing survival. Yet the moral question persists: can humanist values endure when economic ascents grow ever steeper? Perhaps now is the time to reaffirm egalitarian ideals through a re-examination of adat.

The discussion thus far has attempted to highlight the precarious nature of *adat* as it relates to various intersectionalities that form the foundation of its definition and meaning. *Adat* is a crucial element in the management of relationships between ethnicity, culture, and identity. These intersectionalities are further complicated by the multiethnic and multicultural realities of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. *Adat*'s survival thus far, albeit in different forms, is a testament to its value in reinforcing symbols and meaning in the embrace of identity. The struggle for identity becomes more charged when belonging to certain groups enables access to opportunities and rewards.

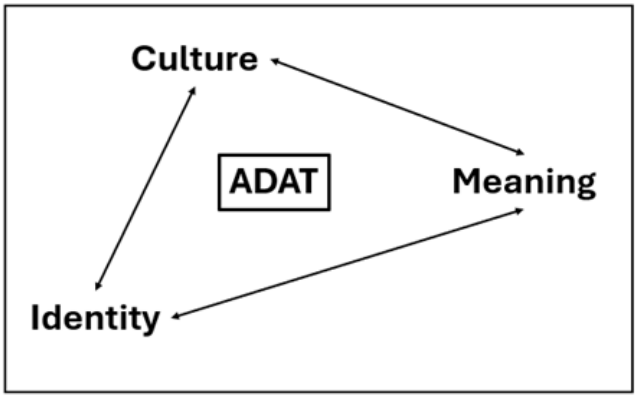

Figure 1: *Adat* at the centre of Culture, identity and meaning

Therefore, as a tool for identity reinforcement, *adat* is an important performative element that displays and visualizes culture and identity. Nevertheless, the nature of *adat* does lead to contestation in its reflection of culture and meaning, as part of the struggle for identity. This has seen *adat* used to differentiate or create boundaries between groups belonging to the same ethnicity and culture, leading to varying claims of authenticity. Coupled with the demands of the capitalist economy, this effectively weaponizes *adat*. With such precarious terrain, where is *adat*

in relation to culture? And how important is it in reinforcing identity?

Adat is an essential source of solidarity and a reinforcement for culture and identity (See figure 1). The diagram illustrates the center of a triangle involving culture, identity, and meaning. *Adat* is crucial in the reinforcement of culture and identity in its reinforcement of meaning through being a source of solidarity.

As demonstrated, ethnicity is fluid, reshaped by economic, political, and cultural forces. The question "who is Malay" must evolve to remain relevant to those whose histories and values draw upon Malay *adat*. Without progressive reinterpretation, Malayness risks irrelevance.

Should adat and Malayness be inseparable? As a system of norms guiding effective social conduct, adat can be re-imagined incorporating non-Malay or secular elements, rather than remaining confined to ethnic archives. As the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer once warned, "Custom makes people stupid. Custom forbids villagers to learn to read, to write, to draw."[15] In defending *adat*, we may inadvertently obstruct modernization. The issue lies not in adat itself, but in its function in acting as a link between culture, identity, and meaning. More importantly, is the resource it provides individuals in society with its service to society.

Given the context in which Malay society is currently situated, the discussion surrounding *adat* and authenticity of Malayness has inspired cycles of exclusivity and inclusivity depending on the political and symbolic gains of that period. This often leads to division not just within the peoples of the archipelago, such as the Malays in Singapore, Malays in Riau, and Malays in Malaysia, but can also present situations of discord between other ethnicities or cultures that are deemed to fall outside the boundaries of Malayness. This includes different adoption of *adat* in relation to Islamic practices or cultural influence. Within the nation-state context of multiculturalism, this is counterproductive to the economic

[15] Pramoedya Ananta. Toer, *Perawan Remaja dalam Cengkeraman Militer* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2001).

and nation-building process, leading to elements of ethno-nationalism or religious dogmatism becoming a key factor in political discourse.

Right-wing populism has been on the rise globally. There are variances in the reasons in which the elements of right-wing populism have been embraced by various populations, it can be observed that there is a consistency in terms of the effect of inequality, economic opportunity, and access to resources.[16] In Malaysia and in Indonesia, this form of religious of ethnic based populism is more evident in the political narratives, especially during the election cycle.[17] Even in Singapore, with its strict laws policing racial and religious harmony, these narratives are evident.[18] This form of politics is exclusionary and encourages division between communities in order to justify access to resources. Authenticity through adat, culture, and identity being the key tools.

Therefore, reform is thus necessary: redefining Malay identity and its relation to adat, guided by humanist and universal values that elevate all people regardless of race or faith. Such movement would render Malay identity more inclusive and harmonious with both Islamic and national identities, transforming Malayness into a meaningful, forward-looking ethos for the peoples of the Archipelago.

Poetic Reflection: "The New Malay"

The contestation over the meaning of Malayness is not only articulated in political discourse or academic scholarship but also reflected in Malay literary traditions. The Singaporean Malay poet Mohamed Latiff Mohamed captures this critical reflection in his poem Melayu Baru, which

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[16] Burhanuddin Muhtadi and Kennedy Muslim, "Populism, Islamism, and Democratic Decline in Indonesia," *The Middle East Institute*, no. August (2020).

[17] Arlina Arshad and Stania Puspawardhani, "Indonesia's Student Protests Continue in Jakarta, Testing Prabowo's Leadership. The Straits Times," *Https://Www.Straitstimes.Com/Asia/Se-Asia/Indonesias-Student-Protests-Continue-in-Jakarta-Testing-Prabowos-Leadership*, February 26, 2026.

[18] Natasha Ganesan, "Singapore Came 'Dangerously Close' to Racial Politics in GE2025, Says Ong Ye Kung," *Https://Www.Channelnewsasia.Com/Singapore/Ong-Ye-Kung-Workers-Party-Ge2025-Racial-Politics-5363956*, September 23, 2025.

challenges superficial definitions of Malay identity and calls for a morally grounded and intellectually engaged vision of Malayness.

Melayu Baru
Melayu baru itu mengkeramatkan maruah sejarah
tahu takrif iman dan mencintai sulaman akidah
menentang khurafat menjunjung syuhada
meremukkan tahyul dan menentang tengkarah.

Melayu baru bukan hanya segak bertali leher
tapi akan gagap berbahasa ibunda
pelat Inggerisnya amat mempesona
pandai berdansa dan pandai bermukah
pandai bermuka-muka dan penjilat maruah.

Melayu baru itu sebenarnya intelektual bangsa
berkeris bertanjak tapi berijazah sempurna
lembut budinya tapi tegas membela
apabila ibunda dicela atau ditindas takdirnya.

Melayu baru itu kenal derita bangsa
tidak sombong dan tidak serakah
rela berkorban darah dan airmata
demi bangsa dan anak manusia.

Melayu baru itu bukan hanya pada lagak dan rupa
rumah istana dan berkereta dari tujuh benua
tapi membuang jauh budaya bangsanya
dan malu mengaku asal usulnya.

Melayu baru itu sebenarnya seorang peguam yang berani
seorang jurutera yang berbudi
seorang doktor yang tinggi pekerti
seorang wakil rakyat yang bistari.

Melayu baru itu seorang ulama penentang hipokrasi

seorang wira pejuang tulen nafas demokrasi
seorang mukmin yang bersih hati dan nurani
mengenali erti wanginya takdir keramatnya mimpi
menggaulu sosok sejarah dengan bertatihkan budi

Melayu baru itu bukanlah hanya lagak dan gaya
sombong dan bangsat pada wajah leluhurnya
menghina mimpi dan duka para bonda
tidak berakar umbi, tidak bertiang seri
tidak kenal airmata duka dan Sejarah sendiri.

Melayu baru itu sebenarnya pendobrak budaya tua
merentangkan sutera silatulrahim buat anak manusia
menolak wangi cendana istana, darjat dan harta
menentang pemadat dan budaya durjana
menolak menyerah pada takdir semata

Melayu baru itu sebenarnya bukan pada nama
berlagak sombong penghina linangan airmata bangsa
Melayu baru it wujud atas bulan purnama
atas ketangkasan roh dan kejantanan manusia
atas sinar keimanan syahadat di pelangi senja
Atas hakikat kenenaran di sembilan purnama

Mohamed Latiff Mohamed (2004) *Bangsaku di Hari Lahirku*. Editor Mohamed Pitchay Gani. Angkatan Sasterawan 50. Singapura

The new Malay
The New Malay sanctifies the dignity of history,
knows the meaning of faith and loves the weaving of creed,
opposes superstition and upholds the martyrs,
shattering myths and resisting false disputes.

The New Malay is not merely dashing in a necktie,
yet stumbling in the mother tongue,
his accented English dazzling,
skilled at dancing and skilled at flattery,

adept at putting on faces and licking away honour.

The New Malay is, in truth, the nation's intellectual:
bearing a keris and a tanjak, yet fully credentialed,
gentle in character but firm in defence
when the motherland is insulted or its fate oppressed.

The New Malay knows the suffering of the people,
neither arrogant nor greedy,
willing to sacrifice blood and tears
for the nation and for humankind.

The New Malay is not only in show and appearance—
palatial homes and cars from seven continents—
while casting far away the culture of his people
and ashamed to admit his origins.

The New Malay is, in truth, a brave lawyer,
an engineer of virtue,
a doctor of high moral standing,
a wise representative of the people.

The New Malay is a scholar who resists hypocrisy,
a true warrior breathing the spirit of democracy,
a believer pure of heart and conscience,
who knows the fragrance of destiny and the sanctity of dreams,
kneading history's form and inlaying it with virtue.

The New Malay is not merely style and pose,
arrogant and vile toward ancestral faces,
mocking the dreams and sorrows of mothers,
rootless, without a central pillar,
unfamiliar with tears of grief and with history itself.

The New Malay is, in truth, a breaker of old cultures,
spreading silken bonds of fellowship for humankind,

rejecting the scent of palace sandalwood—rank and wealth,
opposing addiction and depraved cultures,
refusing to surrender to fate alone.

The New Malay is not merely in a name,
posturing arrogance that insults the nation's tears;
the New Malay exists beneath the full moon,
in the agility of spirit and the manliness of humanity,
in the light of faith and the shahada at the twilight rainbow,
in the reality of truth across nine full moons.

Translated from Melayu Baru, Mohamed Latiff Mohamed (2004)[19]

This poetic call reimagines Malayness as intellectual, egalitarian, and humane - a vision of identity both grounded in history and open to the world. The poem illustrates how the idea of a "new Malay" is framed not through ethnic essentialism but through ethical responsibility, intellectual courage, and social commitment.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that understanding *adat* is not only important for Malay cultural studies, but also for the development of an epistemological framework in contemporary Islamic studies. This article argues that the relationship between adat, Islam, and Malay identity in Southeast Asia cannot be understood through a simple framework of opposition between local traditions and religious orthodoxy.

Instead, the findings of this study show that adat functions as an interpretive space in which Islamic values and local cultural practices continue to be negotiated in the social life of Malay communities. Through an analysis of the discourse and social practices related to adat, this article shows that this concept does not merely represent traditional

[19] Mohamed Latiff Mohamed, Bangsaku Di Hari Lahirku (https://www.poetry.sg/mohamed-latiff-mohamed-bangsaku-di-hari-lahirku, 2004).

heritage but also serves as a normative framework that allows for the reinterpretation of Islamic values in a changing social context. In this process, adat acts as a medium that connects religious authority, cultural practices, and the formation of collective identity. Thus, Malay identity is neither static nor essentialist, but rather formed through a historical and discursive process involving interactions between religion, culture, and political dynamics in the Southeast Asian region.

Theoretically, this article offers an approach that views *adat* as an epistemic interface connecting local traditions with Islamic humanist values. This perspective allows for a more dialogical understanding of the relationship between Islam and local culture, while challenging narratives that position the two as conflicting entities. By viewing *adat* as an epistemic space, this article asserts that local traditions can serve as a source of ethical reflection in the development of a more contextual and inclusive Islamic thought. These findings have important implications for the study of Islam in Southeast Asia, particularly in understanding how religious and cultural identities are negotiated in multicultural societies.

An approach that positions *adat* as a space for dialogue between tradition and universal Islamic values can open up possibilities for the development of an Islamic humanism discourse that is more responsive to the social and historical contexts of Muslim communities in the region. Further research could explore how the reinterpretation of adat operates at the level of everyday religious practice as well as in the structures of local government in various Malay communities. Such studies would enrich our understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between local traditions, religious authority, and identity formation in contemporary Muslim societies.

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