



Beyond the Sacred “Peralihan” Ritual: Local Beliefs and Spiritual Negotiations in Malay-Islamic Culture

This study challenges dominant perspectives that reduce Malay Muslim rites of passage to either residual traditions or fully Islamized practices. Focusing on communities in Siak and Palembang, it conceptualizes ritual as a dynamic arena of negotiation, where Islamic norms and local symbols are continuously reinterpreted rather than simply preserved or purified. Using ethnographic methods, the study demonstrates that practices such as *tepung tawar*, *mandi limau*, and *doa selamat* persist through processes of re-signification. Meanings once associated with magical protection are reframed within a tawhidic logic that shifts efficacy from objects to divine intention. This transformation is not merely theological but also social, as it redistributes authority among religious leaders, customary elites, and participants, producing a negotiated and embodied religiosity. The findings argue that Islamization operates not as a top-down imposition but as a dialogical process in which communities actively recalibrate the boundaries of the sacred. Ritual thus functions as a mediating mechanism that sustains cultural continuity, reinforces social cohesion, and secures religious legitimacy. By foregrounding this process, the study advances the concept of cultural piety, demonstrating that Malay Muslim religiosity is shaped through ongoing negotiation, where meaning remains fluid yet socially grounded.

Keywords: Malay-Islamic culture; ritual negotiation; spiritual adaptation; cultural identity; social cohesion.

Penelitian ini menantang perspektif dominan yang mereduksi ritus peralihan dalam masyarakat Muslim Melayu sebagai sekadar tradisi residual atau praktik yang sepenuhnya telah diislamkan. Berfokus pada komunitas di Siak dan Palembang, kami memposisikan ritual sebagai arena negosiasi yang dinamis, di mana norma Islam dan simbol lokal terus-menerus ditafsirkan ulang, alih-alih sekadar dilestarikan atau dimurnikan. Melalui pendekatan etnografis, kami menunjukkan bahwa praktik seperti *tepung tawar*, *mandi limau*, dan *doa selamat* bertahan melalui proses resignifikasi. Makna yang sebelumnya dikaitkan dengan perlindungan magis direkonstruksi dalam kerangka tauhid yang mengalihkan sumber daya dari objek menuju intensi Ilahi. Transformasi ini tidak semata bersifat teologis, melainkan juga sosial, karena mendistribusikan ulang otoritas di antara tokoh agama, elite adat, dan partisipan, sehingga menghasilkan religiusitas yang dinegosiasikan dan membentuk praktik keseharian. Temuan kami menegaskan bahwa islamisasi tidak berlangsung *top-down*, melainkan sebagai proses dialogis di mana komunitas secara aktif mengkalibrasi ulang batas-batas kesakralan. Dalam konteks ini, ritual berfungsi sebagai medium yang menjaga kontinuitas budaya, memperkuat kohesi sosial, serta mengukuhkan legitimasi keagamaan. Dengan menekankan proses ini, penelitian ini mengajukan konsep kesalehan kultural yang menunjukkan bahwa religiusitas Muslim Melayu dibentuk melalui negosiasi yang berkelanjutan, di mana makna tetap cair namun berakar secara sosial.

Kata Kunci: Budaya Melayu-Islam; negosiasi ritual; adaptasi spiritual; identitas kultural; kohesi sosial.

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Introduction

Rites of passage in Malay Muslim communities represent significant cultural practices where traditional symbolism and Islamic spiritual values continuously intersect. These rituals serve not only as markers of individual social transitions, such as birth, circumcision, or marriage, but also as dynamic spaces where local beliefs and Islamic principles are actively negotiated.¹ While existing literature has broadly addressed the Islamization of culture, relatively few studies have explored how this process unfolds in everyday ritual practice, particularly regarding how communities reinterpret symbolic meanings to remain both religiously meaningful and socially relevant.² This study addresses that gap by focusing on the micro-dynamics of ritual negotiation. By examining rites of passage holistically, it aims to provide a more grounded perspective on the interaction between religion and culture, highlighting a form of spirituality that is lived, flexible, and contextually embedded rather than static or purely dogmatic.

Malay Muslim culture is characterized by a distinctive integration of long-established local customs and deeply rooted religious values. This integration is evident in social practices, rituals,

and symbols that unite the community through shared moral norms and collective ceremonies.³ Core values such as modesty, honor, solidarity, and decorum continue to shape communal life and are preserved within rites of passage. Traditional practices such as *tepung tawar* (ritual blessing), *mandi limau* (citrus purification), *doa selamat* (communal prayer), and *arak-arakan* (processional ceremony) function not merely as cultural performances but as meaningful mediums through which Islamic spirituality is internalized in everyday life.⁴ Within this context, Malay Muslim communities do not simply maintain tradition; they actively reinterpret it in light of the principle of *tawhīd* and Islamic ethical frameworks. This adaptive capacity allows each generation to recalibrate customary practices in response to evolving religious understandings, positioning ritual as a site of ongoing dialogue where religion and tradition coexist and mutually reinforce one another.⁵

Previous studies on rites of passage in Malay Muslim contexts generally follow three main trajectories. First, historically oriented and anthropological works primarily focus on the origins and symbolic meanings of these traditions.⁶ Second, studies on Islamization often adopt a normative perspective, emphasizing

¹ Arba'iyah binti Ab. Aziz et al., 'The Development of Children Attire in Malay Ceremonials in the Context of Malay Socio-Cultural', *International Journal of Engineering and Advanced Technology* 8, no. 5c (September 2019): 1282–1288; Asrizal Saiin et al., 'The Domination If Islamic Law in Customary Matrimonial Ceremonies: Islamic Values within the Malay Marriage Tradition in Kepulauan Riau', *Al-Ahwal: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 16, no. 2 (December 29, 2023): 320–341.

² Rina Rehayati, M. Ridwan Hasbi, and Martius Martius, 'An Exploration of Local Wisdom: Rites of Passage in Malay Culture in Riau and Palembang', *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 6, no. 9 (September 2023): 106–117.

³ Suroyo Suroyo et al., 'Syair Surat Kapal: The Philosophy of Malay Oral Tradition as Islamic Dawah in Rengat, Riau, Indonesia', *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 22, no. 1 (June 2024): 41–68.

⁴ Tajul Shuhaizam Said, Harozila Ramli, and Aneesa Damia Natasha, 'The Adaptation of Malay Philosophy Values through Maritime Education

Preservation and Conservation Wisdom', ed. J. Surif et al., *BIO Web of Conferences* 79 (December 2023): 06001.

⁵ Zaimuariffudin Shukri Nordin et al., 'Integrating Islamic Law and Customary Law: Codification and Religious Identity in the Malay Buyan Community of Kapuas Hulu', *Journal of Islamic Law* 6, no. 1 (February 2025): 89–111; I Gusti Ayu Gde Sosiowati et al., 'The Role of Burdah and Ngelenggang Religious Rituals in Preserving the Loloan Malay Language in West Bali', *Jurnal Kajian Bali (Journal of Bali Studies)* 15, no. 1 (April 2025): 345–376.

⁶ Ibrahim Ibrahim, 'Al-Ṭuqūs Wa 'alāqatuhā Bi Huwīyat Muslimī Ulu Kapuas, Kalimantan Al-Gharbīyah', *Studia Islamika* 25, no. 3 (December 2018): 543–588; Evgeniya Kukushkina, 'Malay Folk Beliefs and Rituals in the Prose Writings by Muslim Reformist Authors in the First Half of 20th Century', *Vostok. Afro-aziatskie obshchestva: istoriia i sovremennost*, no. 5 (2023): 201–211; Haji Ramlee Bin Haji Tinkong and Nur Raihan Mohamad, 'Symbolism in Brunei Malay Wedding Customs', in *Engaging Modern Brunei* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 239–253.





purification or doctrinal alignment with Islamic teachings.⁷ Third, research on everyday Islam and cultural practices has begun to explore lived experiences, though often within limited local contexts.⁸ While these approaches provide valuable insights, they rarely integrate perspectives on symbolic negotiation, spiritual adaptation, and community participation within a single analytical framework. Notably, regions such as Riau and Palembang remain underexplored in this regard. This study addresses this gap by examining how local communities negotiate the meanings of rites of passage as expressions of both spirituality and cultural identity through a more dialogical and practice-oriented lens.

The primary aim of this study is to analyze how Malay Muslim communities negotiate local meanings and spiritual values within rites of passage. It seeks to understand how symbolic adaptation occurs in ways that do not create tension between custom and faith but instead allow both to interact productively. Beyond identifying forms of negotiation, this study also maps the social and religious mechanisms that emerge within ritual practices, including the roles of religious leaders, customary authorities, and community members. In doing so, it highlights how these processes contribute to the formation of collective identity, social cohesion,

and moral consciousness. By emphasizing these dimensions, the study offers a perspective on Islamization that is not merely top-down but dialogical, participatory, and socially embedded, thereby contributing to broader discussions in Islamic Studies on lived and contextual forms of religiosity.

The Malay Muslim communities in Siak and Palembang were selected as the units of analysis because both regions have strong and enduring traditions of rites of passage. They represent the Riau Malay and South Sumatran Malay societies, each with distinct historical backgrounds, allowing for a meaningful comparison of ritual practices and symbolic adaptations.⁹ Both contexts also demonstrate how customary traditions continue to interact with contemporary Islamic influences. The selection was based on data accessibility, the vitality of ritual practices, and the diversity of social actors involved.¹⁰ Data were collected from religious leaders, customary elders, and community members to ensure a multidimensional understanding of ritual life. Religious leaders provide insights into religious legitimacy and symbolic interpretation, while customary elders explain the social and historical functions of rituals. Community members contribute everyday perspectives based on lived experience. Data collection included in-depth interviews,

⁷ Muliadi Muliadi et al., 'The Purity Concept of Al-Falimbāni and Its Correlation with the Islamic Malay Society: The Content Analysis on Sayr Al-Sālikīn Ilā Ibādati Rabb Al-Ālamīn's Script', *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 22, no. 1 (February 25, 2022): 105–126; Haedar Nasir and Mutohharun Jinan, 'Re-Islamisation: The Conversion of Subculture from Abangan Into Santri in Surakarta', *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 1 (July 2018): 1–28; Subhan MA. Rahman and Fuad Rahman, 'The Dynamic of Malay Islamic Law: The Rise and Practices of Adat Bersendi Syarak, Syarak Bersendi Kitabullah in Jambi', *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 11, no. 2 (December 2017): 389–404.

⁸ Abdul Hamid Chan, Muhammad Fazli Taib Saearani, and Salman Alfarisi, 'The Acculturation of Malay-Islamic Elements in the Dabus Dance Ritual in the Malay Community of Perak, Malaysia', *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education* 24, no. 1 (July 2024): 134–148; Nur E'zzati Rasyidah Samad, 'Traditional Malay Marriage Ceremonies in Brunei Darussalam: Between Adat and

Syariah', in *Asia in Transition*, 2023, 15–33; Rubaidi Rubaidi et al., 'Resisting the Surge of Salafism among Malay and Javanese Muslims: The Dynamics of the Tarekat Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya Wa Naqshbandiya in Promoting Peaceful Islam in Riau Sumatera', *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 13, no. 1 (June 2023): 1–31.

⁹ Rehayati, Hasbi, and Martius, 'An Exploration of Local Wisdom: Rites of Passage in Malay Culture in Riau and Palembang', 106–117.

¹⁰ A. Suradi, 'The Social, Political, and Cultural Perspective of Islamic Education in Palembang Malay: A Continuous Evaluation from the Dutch Colonial Period to Today', *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (July 2022): 56–71; Md Nor Mohd Anis, 'Istana, Desa, Tariqah: Inter-Court Relations of Zapin in the Malay Sultanates of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula', in *Performing Arts and the Royal Courts of Southeast Asia, Volume One* (BRILL, 2023), 77–97.





participatory observation, and documentation of rites of passage such as birth rituals, circumcisions, weddings, and *doa selamat kampung*. This approach enables the study to capture the social, symbolic, and spiritual dynamics of ritual practice.

The study is based on the premise that rites of passage in Malay Muslim communities are not merely symbolic or traditional customs but dynamic spaces where local beliefs and Islamic spiritual values are negotiated. This perspective highlights that communities are not passive recipients of Islamization; rather, they actively negotiate the meanings of rituals to maintain their religious and social relevance. Rituals are viewed as arenas where custom, faith, and collective experience interact, reinforcing both cultural identity and spiritual awareness. From this viewpoint, the study emphasizes that spiritual and cultural negotiations shape the sacredness of rituals and support social solidarity, public morality, and cultural continuity. This framework provides the foundation for analyzing symbolic adaptation and the transformation of meaning in everyday practice, demonstrating that Malay Muslim spirituality is reflective, participatory, and contextually grounded. In doing so, the study contributes to contemporary Islamic studies by enhancing the understanding of how religion and local culture interact in dynamic, dialogical, and mutually enriching ways.

Symbolic and Practical Adaptations in Rites of Passage

The rites of passage observed among Malay Muslim communities in Siak and Palembang indicate that Islamization operates through a dialogical engagement with pre-existing cultural practices rather than their displacement. Ethnographic data show that rituals such as

tepung tawar, *mandi limau*, and *doa selamat* are maintained in practice while undergoing shifts in interpretive framing. These rituals continue to structure transitional life-cycle events, but their meanings are increasingly articulated within an Islamic theological vocabulary. As noted by Thimm, symbolic elements previously associated with protective or apotropaic functions are reframed as expressions of supplication, gratitude, and purification directed toward a singular divine authority.¹¹ This suggests that transformation occurs primarily at the level of meaning rather than form, allowing Islamic doctrinal principles to coexist with localized cultural expressions.¹²

“In the past, people believed that tepung tawar could ward off misfortune, but its meaning has changed. We now see it as a prayer for safety, not because the substance itself has power, but as a symbol of supplication for Allah’s protection and blessings upon those who take part in the ritual” (R, 58 years old, Siak).

This account indicates a movement away from attributing efficacy to ritual substances toward emphasizing intentionality and divine mediation. The continuity of the practice is thus accompanied by a redefinition of its epistemological basis.

Statements from local religious authorities further reinforce this pattern. A Malay religious leader in Siak described rituals as mediating structures that connect inherited cultural forms with Islamic teachings without producing semantic conflict. This framing points to an ongoing process of negotiation in which ritual practices are recontextualized to align with the principle of *tawhīd*.¹³ Analytically, this process can be understood through the lens of cultural hybridity, where local symbols are incorporated into an Islamic interpretive framework,

¹¹ Viola Thimm, ““Super-Power” in the Grave: Meaning-Making of Muslim Saints’ Graves in Malaysia”, *TRANS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* (October 2025): 1–15.

¹² Indo Santalia, Muhammad Ilham Thamrin, and Barsihannor Barsihannor, ‘The Syncretic Swing of Faith in

Maddoa: Islamic and Buginese Theological Assimilation in Pinrang’s Harvest Festival of Indonesia’, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 3 (2024): 24–44.

¹³ Asliah Zainal, Heddy Shri Ahimsa-Putra, and Anita Rezki, ‘Hybrid Culture in Katoba Ritual of Muna’, *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 18, no. 1 (June 2024): 155–179.





producing layered meanings rather than mutually exclusive ones. A comparable pattern is evident in Palembang, particularly in circumcision ceremonies. Field data show that elements such as folk songs and *arak-arakan* processions are retained, while being combined with the recitation of *dhikr* and *marḥaban*.¹⁴ A community leader in Palembang explained:

"We still hold arak-arakan processions as our ancestors did, but now they are led by the village imam who recites prayers. In this way, the tradition continues to live on, yet it carries a deeper, more profound religious meaning. Custom and religion walk side by side, not negating each other, but enriching one another's significance." (MZ, 65 years old, Palembang).

This statement indicates that while the structural form of the ritual remains stable, there is a shift in ritual authority and symbolic orientation. The involvement of religious figures introduces a new layer of meaning without eliminating the performative aspects of the tradition.

These findings suggest a negotiated alignment between cultural symbols and religious norms. Within this configuration, Islamic values, particularly those associated with *tawḥīd*, are internalized as a primary source of legitimacy, while customary rituals continue to function as mechanisms for reinforcing social cohesion. In this context, piety is not limited to doctrinal adherence but is also expressed through participation in culturally embedded practices. This pattern resonates with Bourdieu's concept of religious *habitus*, in which social practices serve as sites for the embodiment of religious values.¹⁵

"Since childhood, we have always held a doa selamat whenever there is a circumcision ceremony. It feels incomplete without it, as

though we have not yet received the Creator's blessing. It is more than a tradition; it is a belief that every transition in life must be accompanied by prayer and divine grace" (PJ, 47 years old, Siak).

This perspective highlights how ritual practices are embedded in collective expectations and are perceived as necessary for the completion of social and spiritual processes.

A similar reinterpretation is observed in the *mandi limau* ritual in Palembang.¹⁶ Previously associated with protection against misfortune, the ritual is now framed as a symbolic act of purification preceding marriage. An informant explained:

"Today, air limau (lime water) is no longer seen as a means to ward off misfortune, but as a symbol of purification. We perform the ritual to cleanse our hearts and bodies before marriage, as a sign of inner and outer readiness to enter a new life blessed and approved by Allah." (Ni, 33 years old, Palembang).

This account reflects an ongoing process of resignification, in which inherited symbols are reassigned meanings that are consistent with contemporary religious interpretations.

Overall, Malay Muslim communities in Siak and Palembang demonstrate an ongoing process of negotiation between inherited cultural forms and Islamic interpretive frameworks. This process does not entail the elimination of local traditions; rather, it involves their reinterpretation within a revised semantic structure. In this context, what Efendi conceptualizes as resignification can be observed in the shifting meanings attached to ritual practices¹⁷, while Agung emphasizes how such processes sustain continuity across generational

¹⁴ Chan, Saearani, and Alfarisi, 'The Acculturation of Malay-Islamic Elements in the Dabus Dance Ritual in the Malay Community of Perak, Malaysia', 134–148.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Structures and the Habitus', in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 2013, 72–95.

¹⁶ Jeni Arasyita Tazami and Nurhayati, 'The Symbolic Relation Between Human and Nature in Palembang Traditional Marriage of Suap-Suapan and

Cacap-Cacapan', ed. T.R. Soeprbowati, B. Warsito, and T. Triadi Putranto, *E3S Web of Conferences* 317 (November 2021): 01009.

¹⁷ Efendi et al., 'Mandiu Pasili in the Traditional Wedding Processions of the Kaili Tribe in Pevunu Village, Sigi Regency: Semiotic Studies', *Gramatika STKIP PGRI Sumatera Barat* 9, no. 1 (April 2023): 125–142.





and institutional domains.¹⁸ At the interpretive level, traditional elders tend to position rituals as affirmations of collective identity, whereas religious scholars frame them as instruments of cultural *da'wah*. This dual positioning situates ritual practice at the intersection of *adat* (custom) and *shari'ah* (Islamic law), where both domains are articulated through shared performative forms. Within this configuration, rituals function not only as expressions of cultural heritage but also as sites for the internalization of moral and spiritual values. Participation in these practices contributes to the reproduction of social cohesion while embedding religious meanings within everyday life. Adaptation, therefore, operates as a mechanism through which moral continuity and communal solidarity are maintained, particularly in contexts shaped by shifting socio-religious dynamics.

The observed patterns further indicate that religious expression is shaped through a continuous negotiation between scriptural references and cultural practices. Rather than displacing local rituals, Islamic interpretive frameworks redirect their meanings toward more theologically aligned understandings.¹⁹ Practices such as *tepung tawar* and *doa selamat* exemplify this transformation, where ritual actions are reframed as forms of prayer, purification, and communal supplication. In this sense, spirituality is not confined to doctrinal formulations but is enacted through socially embedded practices that structure collective life. Sacredness, in this context, is not positioned as separate from everyday experience but is mediated through ritual activities that organize

social relations and reinforce shared identity. The convergence of tradition and religious interpretation thus produces a form of lived religiosity in which cultural continuity and spiritual meaning are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional.

The Space of Negotiation as a Social and Religious Mechanism

Rites of passage within Malay Muslim communities serve as symbolic arenas where local traditions and spiritual values are continuously interconnected. Rather than signifying a rupture between custom and religion, practices such as *tepung tawar*, *kenduri khitanan* (circumcision feast), and *doa selamat* illustrate an ongoing process through which the boundaries of sacredness are redefined.²⁰ These rituals are maintained through the participation of customary elders, religious leaders, and community figures, each contributing to the layering of meanings.²¹ Consequently, ritual elements function both as cultural symbols and as vehicles of spiritual expression, enabling continuity without necessitating uniformity of interpretation.

This pattern is evident in accounts from Siak, where ritual transformation is described as a shift in emphasis rather than a structural change. A resident (HA, 63 years old) explained:

"The event is no longer regarded as a ritual to appease spirits, but as a syukuran, a communal thanksgiving. The village imam now leads the prayers, ensuring that the tradition continues while its religious values are preserved. Participants express joy in maintaining the custom with reverence, as the ritual now

¹⁸ Dewa Agung Gede Agung et al., 'Local Wisdom as a Model of Interfaith Communication in Creating Religious Harmony in Indonesia', *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 9 (2024): 100827.

¹⁹ Umi Hanik and Ibnu Hajar Ansori, 'The Study of Living Hadith of the Ancak Tradition in Wedoroklurak Village, Candi, Sidoarjo', *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 20, no. 2 (October 2019): 217–231.

²⁰ Saiin et al., 'The Domination If Islamic Law in Customary Matrimonial Ceremonies: Islamic Values within the Malay Marriage Tradition in Kepulauan Riau'.

²¹ Winda Maulina, Hanif Saputra Aklima, and Dulce M. da Silva, 'Representation of the Tulak Bala Tradition in the South Acehese Community', *IAS Journal of Localities* 3, no. 1 (2025): 47–61; Muhammad Juni Beddu et al., 'Fresh Flour in The Perspective Of Religion, Social, and Culture in The Riau Islands Community', *Al-Risalah: Forum Kajian Hukum dan Sosial Kemasyarakatan* 24, no. 1 (June 2024): 16–27.





embodies both cultural continuity and strong Islamic spirituality" (HA, 63 years old, Siak). Such accounts indicate that rites of passage function as spaces where social and religious dimensions intersect, creating a complementary system of meaning within collective life. As Sagala suggests, this dynamic can be understood as a form of cultural mediation in which religious authority selectively engages with local traditions without erasing their symbolic significance.²² In practice, religious and customary leaders assume overlapping roles: maintaining doctrinal boundaries while facilitating social integration.²³ Rituals thus serve as dialogical mediums through which elements that might appear inconsistent with Islamic teachings are recontextualized through intention, form, and interpretive framing.

A similar articulation emerges in Palembang, where ritual practices are described as retaining their social function while acquiring renewed religious significance. A participant (PB, 52 years old) noted:

"In the past, doa selamat was regarded merely as a social tradition, but now we understand it as a collective prayer for the safety of the village. The practice remains, yet its meaning has been renewed, becoming more spiritual and religious. In this way, the ritual is not abandoned but reinterpreted in harmony with faith and communal solidarity" (PB, 52 years old, Palembang).

These perspectives suggest that rites of passage offer a framework that maintains continuity amid broader social and religious changes. They

also serve as mechanisms of social regulation, especially in contexts where diverse orientations coexist, such as conservative and traditionalist viewpoints. Within community life, social legitimacy is often linked to the ability to navigate both cultural knowledge and religious values, thereby positioning individuals within a shared moral landscape.²⁴

This balancing process is explicitly articulated by a religious leader in Siak:

"If we were to reject our adat entirely, social ties within the community would weaken. Yet, following custom without religious guidance might lead us away from spiritual values. That is why we seek a middle path that balances tradition and Islamic teachings. So that our cultural practices continue to live while remaining in line with our faith" (UM, 60 years old, Siak).

Such reflections illustrate how rites of passage function as mechanisms that regulate the relationship between cultural solidarity and spiritual orientation.²⁵ In line with Geertz, this can be understood as a process of meaning negotiation, in which communities reinterpret inherited symbols to maintain coherence amid changing religious sensibilities.²⁶ The transformation of practices such as *kenduri tujuh bulan* (even-month prenatal feast), once associated with mystical elements and now framed as prayers for maternal and child well-being, demonstrates how reinterpretation occurs through shifts in narrative emphasis rather than ritual elimination.²⁷

²² Irmawati Sagala, 'Extension of Religious Ritual Functions in Development Process: Study of Mandi Safar in Air Hitam Ocean Indonesia', *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 156 (May 2018): 012009.

²³ Hanief Monady, Muhammad Hasan, and Akhmad Sagir, 'Building Hadith Authority: The Pioneering Role of Malay Archipelago Scholars', *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 23, no. 1 (April 2025): 73–100.

²⁴ Azalea Ahmad Kushairi and Zainor Izat Zainal, 'Reimagining Animism: The Ecocritical Psyche In Malay Folklore', *SARE* 62, no. 1 (2025): 32–64.

²⁵ Suradi, 'The Social, Political, and Cultural Perspective of Islamic Education in Palembang Malay: A Continuous Evaluation from the Dutch Colonial Period to Today', 56–71.

²⁶ Clifford Geertz, 'Culture and Social Change: The Indonesian Case', *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 19, no. 4 (1984): 511–532.

²⁷ Muhammad Alifuddin et al., 'Fiqh Kankilo and the Purification System of the Butonese People: A Socio-Legal Historical Perspective of Islamic Law and Legal Pluralism', *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 8, no. 2 (July 2024): 1165–1187.





This interpretive shift is also evident in accounts from Palembang. A community member (MN, 57 years old) explained.

“When some people call the ritual shirk (idolatry), we explain that its meaning has changed. What was once done out of fear of spirits is now understood as an expression of gratitude for life and the divine blessings it brings. The ritual serves as a means to reaffirm our thankfulness to God while keeping the tradition alive within a renewed spiritual framework” (MN, 57 years old, Palembang).

Such statements indicate that reinterpretation is not viewed as a departure from tradition but rather as a means of sustaining it within a different semantic horizon. Rites of passage thus become spaces where religious orthodoxy and everyday practice are aligned through ongoing interpretive work. In this context, piety is expressed not only through doctrinal adherence but also through the ability to embody religious values in culturally meaningful forms.

This configuration illustrates how religiosity emerges through the interaction between textual references and lived experience. As noted by Suroyo, ritual can be understood as a medium of social reflection through which communities reinterpret the relationships among human life, the divine, and the symbolic order.²⁸ The Islamization of Malay cultural practices thus proceeds through accommodation and reinterpretation, allowing tradition to serve as a medium that connects spiritual values with social life.²⁹ Within this framework, ritual meaning is not fixed but is continually reshaped through practice. Its significance is determined

less by external form than by intention and interpretive context, enabling it to remain responsive to changing conditions while sustaining continuity. Through this process, rites of passage contribute to maintaining social cohesion and articulating a shared cultural identity, in which religious and cultural elements are not positioned as oppositional but as mutually constitutive.

Cultural and Spiritual Harmony as the Core of Malay Muslim Identity

In Malay Muslim society, harmony between spirituality and cultural identity is shaped through a long process of negotiation between piety and tradition, rather than as an immediate outcome. Islam emerges as a transformative, rather than destructive, force that sanctifies the meanings embedded in existing cultural symbols, allowing rituals and customary practices to acquire an adaptive religious dimension.³⁰ Malay spirituality evolves within a collective consciousness that regards *adat* as both a reflection of moral values and a medium for expressing transcendental meaning.³¹ Practices such as *tepung tawar* and *doa selamat kampung* illustrate how the community simultaneously negotiates faith and culture, resulting in a form of religious expression that is deeply intertwined with cultural identity. Piety and tradition are no longer perceived as opposing domains but as complementary logics that affirm and sustain one another. This process underscores that ritual serves as a medium of social, moral, and religious integration, reinforcing communal cohesion and shared ethical values. As expressed by the Malay community in Siak, ritual embodies

²⁸ Suroyo Suroyo et al., ‘Bedekeh Ritual and Cultural Belief of Suku Akit in Rupa Island, Bengkalis, Riau’, *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 20, no. 1 (September 2022): 173–202.

²⁹ Khalidah Khalid Ali, ‘A Discourse on the Malay Cultural Identity Within the Malaysian Society’, *Kajian Malaysia* 40, no. 1 (April 2022): 83–107; Hendri Hermawan Adinugraha and Muhammad Zheeva Al-Kasyaf, ‘Islamic Rituals and Spirituality in Southeast Asia: An Ethnographic Study of Coastal Muslim Communities’, *Journal of Asian Wisdom and Islamic Behavior* 3, no. 2 (September 2025): 74–90.

³⁰ Abdul Rahman Al-Kilani, ‘Revisiting Al-Hadyu and Al-Udhiyyah Sacrifice Rituals: Unveiling Their Significance in Relation to the Major Objectives of the Hajj Pilgrimage’, *Malaysian Journal of Syariah and Law* 11, no. 1 (May 2023): 79–90; Noor Cholis Idham, ‘Javanese Islamic Architecture: Adoption and Adaptation of Javanese and Hindu-Buddhist Cultures in Indonesia’, *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 45, no. 1 (February 2021): 9–18.

³¹ Devi Fauziyah Ma’rifat et al., ‘The Construction of Harmonious Life in Riau Manuscript’, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 10, no. 1 (December 2023).





their way of balancing faith with ancestral heritage.

"For the Malay people, to live with adat is also to live with religion. We preserve our traditions not out of social pressure, but because they carry moral and spiritual teachings that guide our lives. Custom becomes a vehicle for internalizing religious values, allowing adat and faith to coexist in shaping the community's collective identity and consciousness" (PK, 59 years old, Siak).

The perspective of the Malay community in Siak reveals that the process of Islamization did not erase local identity but rather adapted cultural values into the community's religious expression and collective historical experience. This negotiation unfolds dynamically, shaped by a cultural habitus that influences modes of thinking, behavior, and social interaction.³² In other words, Malay Muslim spirituality extends beyond formal worship, manifesting through symbolic acts that affirm propriety, dignity, and communal solidarity. Customary rituals serve as a medium through which the abstract values of Islam are grounded and made meaningful in everyday life.³³ This dynamic is also reflected in the practices of the Palembang Malay community, where ceremonies such as *tepung tawar*, *mandi limau*, and *doa selamat* not only preserve tradition but also affirm both cultural identity and spiritual devotion. Such symbolic adaptation demonstrates the capacity of Malay Muslim society to harmonize religion with custom, transforming ritual into a living space of social integration and moral reflection that continues to evolve.

"We understand that religion is lived through daily conduct. When someone disregards or disrespects adat, it shows that their faith is not yet whole. Thus, for the Malay community,

religious devotion is not limited to formal rituals but is reflected in the respect for inherited cultural values and traditions" (HR, 62 years old, Palembang).

The perspectives expressed by the Malay community in Palembang reveal that spirituality is not confined to theology but is also embodied through social relationships and everyday cultural practices. The cultural identity of Malay Muslims has evolved as an ethical unity that integrates faith, morality, and local aesthetics, fostering harmony between religious values and tradition. This process reflects an epistemological negotiation that shifts understanding from mystical belief systems toward a more reflective and contextual religiosity.³⁴ Elements once perceived as magical are now interpreted as symbols of transcendence and expressions of gratitude, reaffirming that adat goes beyond ritual form; it serves as a medium for internalizing spiritual values. Such negotiation does not signify a rejection of tradition but rather a manifestation of cultural and spiritual maturity, guiding the community to seek the divine essence underlying customary practices. As articulated by the Malay community in Siak, rituals serve as a means of affirming moral awareness, cultural identity, and the continuity of religious values within communal life.

"In the past, tepung tawar was believed to ward off misfortune; today, we see it as a prayer for protection from harm. The intention remains the same, seeking safety, but it is now grounded in Islamic teaching. This ritual demonstrates that traditional practices can be internalized religiously without losing their social or symbolic significance" (PY, 55 years old, Siak).

Interpretations from the Malay community in Siak show that negotiating between custom and religious values doesn't just lead to social

³² Pierre Bourdieu, 'Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception', in *Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology*, ed. Randal Johnson, vol. 16 (Polity Press, 1993), 248.

³³ Syamsuni HR et al., 'Integrating the Values of Islamic Religious Education in the Daily Lives of Rural

Families: A Gender Study', *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 15, no. 1 (June 2025): 57–83.

³⁴ Muhyidin Muhyidin and Irhas Badruzaman, 'The Relation of Malaysian Malay Islamic Culture to National Identity and Ideology "Pillar of the Nation"', *Kodifikasia: Jurnal Penelitian Islam* 18, no. 1 (2024): 133–152.





consensus, but also fosters a lived sense of cultural and spiritual harmony as part of their collective identity. As Ismail and Asso argue, such negotiation serves as an integrative mechanism that binds the community through shared understanding and mutual respect.³⁵ Each ritual serves as a site of interaction where differences in interpretation, social position, and religious experience converge, allowing customary practices to be internalized within a spiritual framework rather than being diminished or overlooked. Within Malay Muslim society, religion is sustained not through dogmatization or coercion but through the internalization of values within social structures and everyday habits.³⁶ The transformation of ritual meaning demonstrates the community's capacity to reinterpret tradition in alignment with Islamic principles while maintaining its social function. This dynamic is echoed in the perspectives of the Palembang Malay community, who emphasize that rituals continue to serve as both a marker of identity and a means of strengthening faith and solidarity.

"During doa selamat ceremonies, everyone takes part: youths, elders, religious teachers, and even local officials. In such moments, one can clearly feel how Islam unites the community, strengthens solidarity, and reinforces togetherness. The ritual thus functions not only as a prayer but also as a medium for social and spiritual integration" (MZ, 64 years old, Palembang).

The perspectives of the Malay community in Palembang suggest that spirituality functions as a social force that sustains solidarity and strengthens collective belonging within an

Islamic framework. As Donlic notes, the reimagination of communal identity occurs through a process of renegotiating self-perception, in which custom and religious values are aligned to navigate social change.³⁷ In this context, religion serves not only as a source of moral legitimacy but is also internalized as a means of preserving cultural values while providing a foundation for social renewal. This adaptive process produces a form of reflective harmony less as an endpoint of transformation than the beginning of a renewed awareness that religiosity and Malay identity can coexist. Rituals, customary practices, and spiritual values are no longer viewed as separate domains but as mutually affirming dimensions that sustain balance between God, humanity, and culture. This phenomenon illustrates the capacity of Malay Muslim communities to negotiate between tradition and faith in fostering a cohesive and meaningful social order.

Reflection on the emerging harmony between spirituality and Malay Muslim identity reveals that religion does not merely regulate worship, but also shapes how individuals understand themselves and their relationship with the world.. The Islamization of Malay culture is not a unilateral process of purification, but a conscious journey toward balance between faith, morality, and human values. In everyday life, spirituality serves to affirm identity, while identity, in turn, becomes a medium through which faith is lived and experienced. As Rehayati argue, this process forms a cyclical relationship of meaning, where rituals and cultural practices act as bridges linking local values with Islamic principles.³⁸ Amid the rapid currents of

³⁵ Rudihartono Ismail and Hasan Abdul Rahman Asso, 'Traditions of Jayawijaya Muslim Society: Some Perspectives from Islam and Customs', *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* 23, no. 2 (August 2024): 991–1020.

³⁶ Abdul Rashid Moten and Saodah Wok, 'Religiosity of Malays Living in Malaysian Rural Areas: An Analytical Survey', *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 15, no. 1 (June 2019): 1–16; Elaine F. Fernandez and Adrian Coyle, 'Sensitive Issues, Complex Categories, and Sharing Festivals: Malay Muslim Students' Perspectives on

Interfaith Engagement in Malaysia', *Political Psychology* 40, no. 1 (February 2019): 37–53.

³⁷ Jasmin Donlic, 'New Muslim Generations: Shaping Self-Image, Reshaping Religion: A Theoretical and Empirical Study of Inter-Religiosity with Muslim Youth in the Alps-Adriatic Region', *Religions* 14, no. 8 (August 2023): 993.

³⁸ Rehayati, Hasbi, and Martius, 'An Exploration of Local Wisdom: Rites of Passage in Malay Culture in Riau and Palembang', 106–117.





modernity and globalization, the Malay community embodies a form of religiosity that is both inclusive and reflective, one that honors its ancestral heritage, adapts practices to contemporary realities, and remains firmly grounded in the principle of *tawhīd*. This approach emphasizes that spiritual and cultural harmony can be achieved through ongoing negotiation, adaptation, and the contextual internalization of values.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Malay Muslim communities in Riau and Palembang articulate a form of alignment between Islamic spirituality and local cultural identity through ongoing, context-sensitive processes of negotiation. Islam does not function as a homogenizing force that displaces tradition; rather, it is embedded within customary practices and enacted through everyday social life. Rituals such as *tepung tawar*, *doa selamat kampung*, and related ceremonial forms are not regarded as residual elements of a pre-Islamic past but as active sites where Islamic values are expressed, interpreted, and made socially meaningful. The observed patterns indicate that Islamization unfolds through dialogical engagement rather than rupture, with faith and custom interacting within a shared symbolic framework that sustains both. In this configuration, religiosity emerges as participatory and practice-based, characterized by interpretive flexibility and cultural embeddedness. Spirituality is thus not confined to the individual domain but extends into the public sphere, informing moral orientations, social relations, and communal cohesion.

An important contribution to Islamic Studies lies in foregrounding local culture as a critical epistemic domain for understanding how Islam is lived and articulated. The findings suggest that Islamic practice cannot be fully comprehended through textual or normative frameworks alone but must be situated within the socio-cultural contexts in which meaning is produced and negotiated. By highlighting the role of Malay

communities as active agents in shaping religious expression, the analysis challenges binary constructions that separate "normative" Islam from "local" Islam. Instead, it demonstrates that piety is constituted through ongoing processes of interpretation involving symbols, practices, and cultural language. In this sense, the study advances discussions on everyday Islam and cultural piety by emphasizing that religious life is inherently dynamic, socially grounded, and contextually mediated. It also shows that spirituality operates as a cultural process contributing to the formation of identity, solidarity, and moral consciousness within society.

At the same time, the scope of this study is limited to the contexts of Riau and Palembang, which, while illustrative, do not capture the full diversity of Malay Muslim experiences. Variations in other regions, such as West Kalimantan, Malaysia, or Brunei Darussalam, are shaped by distinct historical trajectories, political structures, and socio-economic conditions that may result in different configurations of negotiation between custom and religion. Future research would benefit from a comparative approach that examines both convergences and divergences across these settings. Additionally, further inquiry could incorporate dimensions such as gender, social stratification, and generational change to deepen the analysis of how ritual and religiosity are experienced and reinterpreted. Expanding both the geographical and analytical scope would enable a more comprehensive understanding of how Islam continues to be lived, adapted, and rearticulated within the plural contexts of Malay societies.

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None of the authors involved in this study have any financial or personal relationships that could improperly influence the study's content.





Authors' Contributions

All listed authors have contributed to this article.

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This study was conducted in accordance with all ethical standards and did not involve direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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