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# Cultural and Social Dynamics In The Development of Qur'an Interpretation In The Malay Area

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### Abstract

This research aims to analyze cultural and social dynamics in the development of Qur'an interpretation in the Malay region and explain the form of acculturation between Islamic traditions and local culture in interpretation practice. This study uses a qualitative method with a library research approach through the study of Malay tafsir works, such as Tarjuman al-Mustafid by Abdurrauf al-Singkili and Tafsir al-Azhar by Hamka, as well as various relevant academic literature. Data analysis techniques are carried out through textual reading, contextual analysis, thematic analysis, and critical synthesis. The results of the study show that local Malay traditions have a significant influence on the development of interpretation, especially in aspects of language, methods, and substance of interpretation. The use of Malay as a medium of interpretation shows that there is an adjustment of the meaning of the Qur'an to the cultural framework of the local community. The interaction between Islam and Malay culture took place dynamically, characterized by harmony and tension, especially in responding to customs, reformism, as well as the intellectual network of scholars with the Middle East. In addition, acculturation is evident in the works of interpretation through contextualization strategies, cultural analogies, and the legitimacy of local values that do not contradict the sharia. This research confirms that Malay interpretation is an intellectual tradition that is adaptive, rich in nuances, and able to bridge the universality of the message of the Qur'an with the local socio-cultural reality.

**Keywords:** *Malay Tafsir, Al-Qur'an, Social Dynamics*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis dinamika kultural dan sosial dalam perkembangan tafsir Al-Qur'an di kawasan Melayu serta menjelaskan bentuk akulturasi antara tradisi Islam dan budaya lokal dalam praktik penafsiran. Kajian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi pustaka (library research) melalui penelaahan terhadap karya-karya tafsir Melayu, seperti Tarjuman al-Mustafid karya Abdurrauf al-Singkili dan Tafsir al-Azhar karya Hamka, serta berbagai literatur akademik yang relevan. Teknik analisis data dilakukan melalui pembacaan tekstual, analisis kontekstual, analisis tematik, dan sintesis kritis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tradisi lokal Melayu memberikan pengaruh signifikan terhadap perkembangan tafsir, terutama pada aspek bahasa, metode, dan substansi penafsiran. Penggunaan bahasa Melayu sebagai medium tafsir memperlihatkan adanya penyesuaian makna Al-Qur'an dengan kerangka budaya masyarakat setempat. Interaksi antara Islam dan budaya Melayu berlangsung secara dinamis, ditandai oleh harmoni dan ketegangan, terutama dalam merespons adat, reformisme, serta jaringan intelektual ulama dengan Timur Tengah. Selain itu, akulturasi tampak nyata dalam karya-karya tafsir melalui strategi kontekstualisasi, analogi budaya, dan legitimasi nilai lokal yang tidak bertentangan dengan syariat. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa tafsir Melayu merupakan tradisi intelektual yang adaptif, kaya nuansa, dan mampu menjembatani universalitas pesan Al-Qur'an dengan realitas sosial budaya lokal.

**Kata Kunci:** *Tafsir Melayu, Al-Qur'an, Dinamika Sosial*

## Introduction

The Malay region includes the Malacca peninsula, the archipelago, and part of the coast of Indochina which has long been known as one of the regions with a rich and diverse Islamic intellectual tradition. The presence of Islam in this region does not only bring theological teachings, but also introduces literacy traditions, writing systems, and scientific tools that then integrate organically with customs, beliefs, and socio-cultural orders that have been rooted long before. The history of the development of tafsir in the Malay area cannot be separated from the geo-cultural context that surrounds it. Malay scholars did not necessarily adopt the Middle Eastern tradition of interpretation unanimously, but filtered it through a distinctive local cultural filter. This process results in a unique genre of interpretation that is able to speak to the local community with the language, metaphors, and values that they understand and live by (G. Riddel (2003).

The dynamics between Islam as a universal religion and Malay culture as a particular heritage have given birth to various forms of cultural negotiation that are interesting to study. On the one hand, the tradition of tafsir carries the spirit of Islamic universalism which emphasizes the unity of the sources of revelation. On the other hand, the plural socio-cultural context requires adjustment and adaptation so that the message of the Qur'an can be felt by the local community. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, tafsir is the product of a complex interaction between sacred texts, the intellect of the mufasssir, and the socio-historical context that surrounds it. A Malay mufasssir never really stands in a vacuum, he always brings with him his cultural background, life experiences, and the needs of the community he serves. This is what makes Malay tafsir have its own color and nuance that distinguishes it from the Middle Eastern or Persian Arabic interpretation tradition (Musatqim, 2014).

Some monumental tafsir works in the Malay region, such as Tarjuman al-Mustafid by Abdurrauf al-Singkili and Tafsir al-Azhar by Hamka, are tangible evidence of how local mufasssirs have managed to combine the depth of Islamic knowledge with sensitivity to the local cultural reality. These works are not only of religious value, but also serve as socio-cultural

documentation that reflects the dynamics of Malay society in their time. The study of the Malay tradition of interpretation has received increasing attention in recent decades, along with the increasing academic interest in Southeast Asian Islam. Scholars from various disciplines ranging from Islamic studies, history, anthropology, to philology have made valuable contributions in mapping the rich intellectual traditions of Malay Muslims. This kind of interdisciplinary study is very necessary to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of Malay interpretation more comprehensively (Syamsudin, 2015).

## Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a library research approach because it aims to understand in depth the cultural and social dynamics in the development of the interpretation of the Qur'an in the Malay region, so that this approach is considered effective in exploring the meaning, context, and complexity of the socio-cultural phenomena being studied (Creswel, 2021). Literature studies were chosen because the object of research is in the form of interpretive texts and academic literature that are part of the intellectual treasure of Malay Islam, as well as allowing an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources relevant in the study of the interpretation and hermeneutics of the Qur'an (Sugiharto & Purwanta, 2021). The primary data sources of this research include works of interpretation of the Qur'an from the Malay region in various historical periods, such as *Tarjuman al-Mustafid* by Abdurrauf al-Singkili in the 17th century, *Tafsir al-Azhar* by Hamka in the 20th century, as well as other works of interpretation and hermeneutics published in 2010–2026 to maintain the up-to-date analysis. Meanwhile, secondary data sources consist of academic journals, scientific books, dissertations, theses, and other papers published in 2021–2026 that discuss the hermeneutics of the Qur'an, the socio-intellectual history of Islam in Southeast Asia, the relationship between local culture and Islam, and the research methodology of Qur'anic interpretation and science (Gusmian, 2021).

The data collection technique in this literature study research is carried out through an in-depth study of various written sources with the stages of identification and inventory of the main works of interpretation from the Malay region through library catalogs, digital academic databases, and relevant collections, especially works that show the interaction between Islamic interpretation traditions and local Malay culture. Furthermore, the researcher collected secondary literature through systematic search using keywords such as "Malay interpretation", "hermeneutics of the Qur'an", "acculturation of Islam and culture", and "Islam of Southeast Asia" through Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and the university's digital library, with a focus on publications in 2021–2026 so that the data remains actual and relevant (Zahro & Abdullah, 2022). The sources obtained were then selected based on the relevance, credibility of the author, and substantive contribution to the research topic. Data analysis uses a hermeneutical approach and critical analysis through close *reading* of the text of interpretation to find nuances of meaning, interpretation patterns, hermeneutical strategies, and forms of interpretive acculturation (Smith & William, 2023). After that, contextual analysis is carried out by placing the text in the historical, social, cultural, and condition of the author and his audience in order to understand the influence of social dynamics on interpretation (Pertiwi & Rahman, 2023). The next stage is thematic analysis to identify the main themes, repetitive interpretation patterns, and acculturation structures in Malay interpretation Suleman & Hassan (2024), then ends with a critical synthesis that integrates all findings comprehensively and academically according to the research focus (Rahman & Chen, 2025).

The validity and reliability of research are maintained through several strategies, namely triangulation of sources by utilizing primary and secondary data from different periods and

contexts so that findings can be cross-tested and conclusions become stronger. In addition, consultations with experts were carried out through reference to the work of leading scholars in the fields of interpretation, hermeneutics, and Islamic studies in Southeast Asia to validate interpretations and enrich analytical perspectives. This research also applies methodological transparency by explaining in detail each stage of analysis and the basis for interpretive decision-making so that the reliability of the findings can be evaluated and retested by the reader (Keesavan, 2023). In addition, researchers apply reflexivity by being aware of possible personal biases and seeking to minimize their influence through critical awareness. In terms of research ethics, this study upholds intellectual honesty through proper citation of all sources and avoidance of plagiarism of any kind. This research also respects the integrity of previous authors' work by carefully interpreting the text, avoiding misrepresentation, and giving due credit for the contributions of previous thinkers, especially in the study of interpretation related to respected religious traditions (Hidayat & Yusof, 2022). In addition, researchers are open to alternative perspectives and acknowledge the limitations of research, considering that cultural studies and interpretations are complex and allow for a variety of interpretations.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **A. Traces of Local Traditions in the Construction of Malay Tafsir**

#### **1. The Historical Foundations of Malay Interpretive Traditions**

The tradition of tafsir in the Malay region has long and winding historical roots. The presence of Islam, which is estimated to have intensified since the 13th century AD, brought with it Islamic scientific traditions, including the science of interpretation, to the heart of the Malay community. However, acceptance of this scientific tradition is not passive or immediate, it goes through a long process of selection, adaptation, and negotiation with pre-existing systems of knowledge and values (Milner, 2008). Milner in his study of the Malay world reveals that Malay identity has a very complex dimension, where religion, customs, and language are integrated to form a unity that is not easily separated. This complexity of identity in turn contributes to shaping the character of the interpretation produced by Malay scholars, a tafsir that always tries to bridge the gap between sacred texts and the reality of community life. In this context, tafsir is not only an explanation of the text of the Qur'an, but also serves as a medium of negotiation between Islamic norms and deep-rooted cultural practices. Malay mufassir often make use of the richness of oral traditions, proverbial expressions, and traditional wisdom in explaining the meaning of Qur'anic verses to their community (Milner, 2008).

#### **2. Malay Language as a Medium of Interpretation**

One of the most significant aspects of the influence of local traditions on Malay interpretation is the use of the Malay language as a medium of interpretation. When Abdurrauf al-Singkili wrote *Tarjuman al-Mustafid* in the 17th century, he made a monumental decision to present the interpretation of the Qur'an in a language understood by the wider public, not just by the educated who were fluent in Arabic. This step is a response to the real needs of the rapidly growing Malay Muslim community (Faizin, 2015). The use of the Malay language in interpretation has consequences that go much deeper than just a technical linguistic affair. Language is a mirror of the perspective and value system of a society. By using the Malay language, the mufassir also indirectly adopted the conceptual framework, metaphors, and cultural references inherent in the language. The choice of diction, figurative expressions, and argument structure in Malay interpretation reflect the way of thinking and cultural sensitivity of the Malay people. Feener and Sevea in their study of Islamic intellectual networks in

Southeast Asia show that Malay scholars have extensive networks with Islamic scholarly centers in the Middle East, especially Haramain. However, the influence of the center is not necessarily accepted, it is always modified and adapted to the typical local context (Feener & Sifa, 2005).

### 3. Customary Systems and Their Influence on Interpretation

The Malay customary system, known for its elaborative concepts of manners, social hierarchy, and balance, gives its own color to the way Malay scholars understand and explain the verses of the Qur'an. Especially in verses related to social governance, the relationship between leaders and the people, and obligations, traces of traditional values are often clearly visible. Azra's study of the archipelago's network of scholars shows how scholars use customary institutions as a vehicle to disseminate Islamic understanding. Institutions such as Islamic boarding schools and recitations not only function as religious educational institutions, but also become spaces where negotiations between Islamic norms and customary values take place in a sustainable manner (Azra, 2006). It is interesting to note that Malay scholars in many ways do not position adat as an antagonist of Islam. On the contrary, they try to find points of compatibility between the two, in accordance with the principle of fiqh which reads *al-'adah muhakkamah* adat which does not contradict the sharia can be used as a legal basis. This principle opens up a wide space for the integration of local cultural values into the framework of Islamic interpretation.

## B. Harmony and Tension: The Interaction of Islamic Traditions and Culture

### 1. Patterns of Historical Interaction

The interaction between Islamic tradition and Malay culture is not a linear and frictionless process. Throughout its history, the relationship between the two has been colored by complex and sometimes even harmonious and mutually reinforcing dynamics, sometimes full of tension and conflict. Understanding these two poles of dynamics is important to get an honest and comprehensive picture of the development of interpretation in the Malay region (Kamil, 2006). In the early phases of Islamization, the spreaders of Islam in the Malay region, who were in many cases traders, Sufis, and scholars from Gujarat, Arabia, and Persia, generally adopted an accommodating approach to local traditions. They use the framework of local cultural reference to explain new Islamic concepts, so that the message of Islam can be more easily accepted by the community. This accommodating approach is reflected in various early writings of Malay Islam, where Hindu Buddhist terminology is often used to explain Islamic theological concepts. The concept of god in the pre-Islamic Malay tradition, for example, was used as a conceptual bridge to introduce monotheism. This process created a distinctive syncretism, which later became the object of debate among Islamic reformers in the later period (Nashir, 2013).

### 2. Reformism and Recalibration of Tafsir Movement

The influx of the influence of the Wahhabi movement and Islamic reformism from the Middle East in the 19th and 20th centuries brought about a significant shift in the way some Malay scholars viewed the existing tradition of tafsir. These reformers strongly criticized what they considered to be the contamination of local culture of the purity of Islamic teachings, including in the realm of interpretation of the Qur'an. Azra in his study of Islam and democracy in Indonesia shows that the tension between traditionalist and reformist groups in understanding the relationship between Islam and local culture is one of the central dynamics in the intellectual history of Islam in the archipelago. Each group has a different approach in responding to the heritage of local interpretation that is full of cultural nuances (Azra, 2005). Nevertheless, this debate also encourages a deeper reflection on the legitimate boundaries

between authentic and syncretic interpretations. The tension between traditionalists and reformists, in a more optimistic perspective, can be seen as the driving force for the development and refinement of the Malay interpretation tradition.

### **3. Ulema Network and Knowledge Transfer**

One of the crucial factors that shaped the interaction between Islamic tradition and Malay culture was the network of scholars who connected the Malay region with Islamic scholarly centers in the Middle East, especially Mecca and Medina. The scholars who studied in Haramain then returned to their homeland with a diverse Islamic scientific tradition, which they then adapted to the local context (Zulkifli, 2010). This network is not one-way. Malay scholars not only received knowledge from the Middle East, but also made their own contribution to the development of global Islamic scholarship. Some Malay scholars even achieved international fame and their works were widely read in various parts of the Islamic world. This two-way interaction creates a dynamic Malay interpretation tradition, yet rooted in the local cultural context. Daud (1998) in his study of Malay Islamic intellectualism noted that Malay scholars consistently sought to bring together universal Islamic scholarship with the specific needs of the Malay community. This effort was not without challenges, but the result was a rich and nuanced intellectual tradition, which became a valuable legacy for future generations.

### **4. The Role of Sufism in Cultural Mediation**

Sufism plays a very important role as a mediator between Islamic traditions and Malay culture. With its emphasis on the inner dimension, direct spiritual experience, and universal wisdom, Sufism provides a language that can bridge the gap between Islam as a formal religion and spiritual belief systems and practices that have been rooted in Malay culture (Suryadilaga, 2016). In the context of interpretation, the influence of Sufism is clearly seen in the tendency of some Malay mufassir to give an innate interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an. They are not satisfied with mere literal explanations of the text, but seek to penetrate into deeper and more universal meanings. This tendency is in line with the deep spiritual orientation in Malay cultural traditions.

## **C. Acculturation in Interpretive Practice: Dialectics of Text and Context**

### **1. Definition and Conceptual Framework of Acculturation of Tafsir**

Acculturation in the context of Qur'an interpretation refers to the process by which elements of two or more cultural systems, in this case Islamic interpretation traditions and Malay culture, interact with each other and produce a new synthesis that is not entirely identical to one of its original sources. This process is different from assimilation (absorption of one culture by another) and syncretism (uncritical mixing), acculturation characterizes a blend that maintains the identity of each element while producing something new (Ichwan, 2010). In the Malay interpretation tradition, acculturation is manifested at various levels, namely at the methodological level (how the mufassir approaches the text), at the hermeneutical level (the framework of interpretation used), at the linguistic level (language choice and metaphors), and at the substantive level (content and certain emphasis in interpretation). An understanding of all these levels is necessary to get a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of acculturation in Malay interpretation.

### **2. Concrete Examples of Acculturation in Interpretive Practice**

To understand acculturation more concretely, here are two representative examples from the Malay interpretation tradition that show how this process takes place in real interpretive practice. For example: Tafsir QS. Al-Hujurat (49): 13 in Hamka's Tafsir al-Azhar

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

"O mankind, verily We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble among you in the sight of Allah is the most pious among you." (QS. Al-Hujurat (49): 13)

Hamka in Tafsir al-Azhar interprets this verse in a way that is typical of the Malay archipelago. It does not just explain the linguistic meaning of the sentence, but delves into the socio-cultural dimensions that are relevant to the pluralistic Malay society. Hamka relates the concepts of *syu'ub* and *qaba'il* (nations and tribes) in the verse to the reality of ethnic pluralism in the archipelago of Java, Malay, Sundanese, Batak, Minangkabau, and others. He emphasized that this diversity is not a source of division, but a wealth that should be grateful (Anshori, 2014). Furthermore, Hamka uses Malay expressions and sayings in explaining the concept of *ta'aruf* (knowing each other) contained in the verse. He referred to the overseas tradition of Minangkabau which is his own cultural background, as a concrete example of the spirit of cross-cultural *ta'aruf*. Thus, Hamka succeeds in presenting an interpretation that is simultaneously faithful to the meaning of the text and responsive to the local cultural context.

Here is another example in Tafsir QS. Al-A'raf (7): 199 in Tarjuman al-Mustafid by Abdurrauf al-Singkili

خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجَاهِلِينَ

"Be forgiving and tell people to do what is right, and turn away from fools." (QS. Al-A'raf (7): 199)

Abdurrauf al-Singkili in Tarjuman al-Mustafid, the first complete tafsir in Malay, interprets the word 'urf in this verse in a very contextual way. Instead of limiting 'urf to the notion of "*yang ma'ruf*" in the Arabic tradition, al-Singkili expands its scope to include Malay customs that are not in conflict with the sharia. Thus, it provides theological legitimacy for the continuation of the deep-rooted Malay customary practices (Riddel, 2008).

This approach reflects al-Singkili's hermeneutical intelligence in utilizing semantic ambiguity in the text to make room for the existence of local traditions. The word 'urf, which literally means "*the known*" or "*good habits*", has a direct resonance with the concept of customary in Malay culture. al-Singkili's interpretation of this verse is not only theological, but also has an important socio-cultural dimension, because it provides the shari'i foundation for the integration of customs into the life of the Malay Muslim community.

### 3. Hermeneutical Strategies in Acculturation of Interpretation

Malay mufassirs developed several hermeneutical strategies that allowed acculturation to take place organically without sacrificing the integrity of the text. Among them is the contextualization strategy, where the meaning of the verse is explained by referring to concrete Malay socio-cultural realities such as the analogy strategy, where the concepts of the Qur'an are linked to similar concepts in local traditions, as well as the legitimacy strategy, where the text of the Qur'an is used to provide theological justification for existing cultural practices (Hosen, 2009). It is important to note that acculturation in Malay interpretation is not a value-free or limitless process. Malay scholars have a high awareness of the need to maintain the integrity of the text and avoid interpretations that deviate too far from its basic meaning. Therefore, their acculturation tends to be selective and careful, maintaining a careful balance between fidelity to the text and responsiveness to context. Islah Gusmian's research on the treasures of Indonesian interpretation reveals that the variation in the acculturation approach among Malay mufassirs reflects the diversity of scientific backgrounds, theological orientations, and socio-historical conditions that surround each author. This diversity is actually a wealth in itself that shows the vitality of the Malay interpretation tradition as a living and developing intellectual tradition (Gusmian, 2013).

## Conclusions

The study of the cultural and social dynamics that influenced the development of tafsir in the Malay area yielded several important interrelated conclusions. *First*, local Malay traditions have had a significant and multidimensional influence on the development of interpretation in this region. This influence can be seen at the level of language, methodology, and substance of interpretation. The use of Malay as a medium of interpretation is not just a linguistic decision, but also brings with it a conceptual framework and cultural sensitivity that colors the way mufassirs understand and explain the text of the Qur'an. *Second*, the interaction between Islamic tradition and Malay culture takes place in complex dynamics, coloured by moments of harmony and alternating tension. The network of scholars who connect the Malay region with Islamic scientific centers in the Middle East is one of the key factors that shape the character of the interaction. Sufism plays a very important mediating role, providing a spiritual language that can bridge Islamic traditions with local belief systems. *Third*, acculturation in interpretive practice is a real phenomenon and can be identified concretely in Malay tafsir works. The work of al-Singkili and Hamka, as analyzed above, provides empirical evidence of how the process of acculturation takes place organically in interpretive practice. Malay mufassirs developed clever hermeneutical strategies to allow acculturation to take place without compromising the integrity of the text.

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