

Governance, Culture, and Legacy of Melaka on Shaping Malaysia's Nation Building

Zawiah Mat^{1*}, Faridah Che Husain², Harliana Halim³, Waqar Muhammad Akbar⁴, Mohd Syariefudin Abdullah⁵

^{1,4}Institut Pengurusan Teknologi dan Keusahawanan, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka

²Akademi Pengajian Melayu, Universiti Malaya

³Jabatan Sains Sosial, Pusat Pengajian Umum dan Kokurikulum, Universiti Tun Hussien Onn Malaysia

⁵Fakulti Sains Kemanusiaan, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100323>

Received: 27 November 2025; Accepted: 08 December 2025; Published: 09 December 2025

ABSTRACT

The Malay Sultanate of Melaka represents a pivotal foundation in Malaysia's historical trajectory of nation-building. This study examines the political, cultural, and economic legacies of the Sultanate and their enduring influence on the development of national identity, governance structures, and socio-cultural integration in modern Malaysia. The method used for this research is qualitative descriptive by analysis of existing historical manuscripts, government archives, scholarly books, academic journals, and reputable online databases. Document analysis involves a systematic review of written records to identify key themes related to nation-building. This study highlights how Melaka's history, cultural assimilation, political system, trade, religious values, and language have shaped Malaysia's pluralistic society. The analysis emphasizes the Sultanate's role as a catalyst for regional unity and a governance model that influenced later political traditions. Ultimately, Melaka's legacy is essential for understanding Malaysia's contemporary nation-building framework.

Keywords: Malay Sultanate of Melaka, shaping, governance, culture, nation building

INTRODUCTION

The Malacca Malay Sultanate played a significant role in the history of Southeast Asia. It was not only famous as an entrepôt trade center in the 15th century, but also for its strategic position on the Silk Road between the East and the West, allowing for close cooperation with Chinese, Arab, and Indian countries. The interaction of diverse Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other ethnic communities in a harmonious atmosphere made the Malacca Malay Sultanate a model for building the Malaysian nation (Ibrahim, Bas, Zakariya, 2023).

The development of the Malay Sultanate of Malacca as a nation-state, especially Malaysia, was shaped by several important factors. These include historical events, a stable political system, economic and trade activities, cultural fusion, and religious and linguistic diversity (Ibrahim, Bas, Zakariya, 2023). Together, these elements form the basis for the creation of Malaysia as a nation. All Malaysians should recognize and appreciate how, over the past century, the Malay Sultanate of Melaka not only built a stable political and economic foundation but also played a major role in social change and education within Malaysia through its model rooted in religious values and culture.

Shamsul (2012) identified three situations that describe a nation-state: a nation representing a nation, a nation without a nation, and a nation without a state. In the case of Malaysia, it is a country made up of various ethnicities and races, where each ethnic group maintains its own cultural identity. Khairul Ghufran et al. (2024)

also support this, stating that Malaysia, as an independent nation-state, is known for the diversity of its community, encompassing various languages, cultures, and religions.

Zulhilmi and Rohani (2003) emphasize the importance of three components for the formation of nation-states: the state, the individual, and the nation. They advocate for a unified society that transcends differences in belief, ethnicity, culture, occupation, and place of residence. Moreover, they emphasize the need for the community to adopt a shared ideology, trust the government system, and uphold the country's laws. The Melaka Law of the Sea's effectiveness factor facilitates trade transactions. The law emphasizes important topics such as business rules, purchasing and selling procedures, punishments for crimes committed on ships, and the prohibitions and duties of captains and crew (Rahman, 2018). In order to effectively support Malaysia's long-term nation-building initiatives, it is crucial to acknowledge and integrate the historical governance, rich cultural heritage, and enduring legacy of Melaka. This study aims to delve into the intricate ways in which various elements, such as historical events, cultural practices, political systems, religious beliefs, and linguistic diversity, have come together to shape and define the Malaysian nation. By examining these interconnected factors, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how they contribute to the national identity and unity of Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive methodology using library research and document analysis to examine the governance, culture, and legacy of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka in shaping Malaysia's nation-building. Data are gathered from a wide range of secondary sources, including historical manuscripts, government archives, scholarly books, academic journals, and reputable online databases. The library research provides a comprehensive understanding of Melaka's administrative system, cultural values, and socio-political influence, while document analysis systematically reviews and interprets written records to identify themes and patterns relevant to nation-building elements. This approach enables the researcher to contextualize Melaka's contributions to Malaysia's political evolution, cultural identity, and governance framework through a descriptive and interpretive lens, ensuring depth, accuracy, and historical continuity in the analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia, a vibrant tapestry of cultures, traces its roots back to the Malay Sultanates. These pre-colonial kingdoms, though not a unified nation themselves, laid the groundwork for Malaysia's nation-building through a rich cultural legacy. This essay explores how Malay Sultanate culture, encompassing religion, language, political systems, and exposure to diverse customs, served as a foundation for the Malaysian national identity.

History

Malaysia has long embraced the concept of nation-state building, which began during the reign of the Malay king and continued to develop under British administration with the introduction of the modern nation-state concept. This process persisted over time through traditional concepts and continued until Malaya gained independence (Khairul Ghifran et al, 2024; Peng, 2006).

The concept of nation-state or nation-building originated in European history and is extremely relevant for all countries, including Malaysia. The government has implemented several policies to transform Malaysia into a nation-state based on its unique model. The emphasis is on building a united Malaysian nation by celebrating shared culture and cultivating patriotism (Peng, 2006).

Culture

The sultanates were centers of artistic expression. Malay literature, music, and dance flourished under their patronage. These cultural elements continue to be nurtured and celebrated in Malaysia, fostering a sense of national identity. The national language, *Bahasa Malaysia*, is also rooted in Malay spoken during the sultanate era.

Beyond these internal aspects, the Malay Sultanates thrived as trading hubs, particularly Malacca. This exposure to diverse cultures from across Asia and beyond led to a dynamic exchange of customs, art, and ideas. From cuisine incorporating Indian spices to intricate textiles influenced by Chinese motifs, this cultural exchange formed the bedrock of Malaysia's multicultural society. The openness to external influences fostered by the sultanates continues to shape Malaysia's character as a nation welcoming of diverse ethnicities and religions.

Political System

Melaka was the first major centralized Malay state to consolidate power over a large portion of the Malay peninsula. This concept of a unified Malay polity served as a historical precedent for the idea of a unified Malaysia. The sultanates established a centralized form of government with a Sultan at the helm. This centralized structure influenced the development of a federal system in modern Malaysia, where power is divided between the federal government and individual states. Interestingly, many of the Malay states retained their Sultans, who play a symbolic and ceremonial role in the current system.

The Malay Sultanate's political structure also left its mark. The hereditary sultanate system, with a revered ruler at the helm, became a model for the modern Malaysian monarchy. It established concepts of loyalty, hierarchy, and centralized authority that resonated in the formation of the Malaysian government.

It is widely recognized that political stability and positive ethnic relations are fundamental for developing a nation-state. Given Malaysia's rich diversity in ethnicity, religion, and culture, the importance of a well-managed, stable political system cannot be overstated. Effectively handling the diversity of ethnicity, religion, language, and culture is a vital aspect of nation-building in Malaysia (Muslim and Rosadi, 2021). Therefore, political leaders must uphold religious values, tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect to foster social harmony and contribute to the nation-building efforts of Malaysia.

Trade

Melaka flourished as a major trading hub, attracting traders from China, India, and the Arab world. This fostered a spirit of multiculturalism and tolerance that is reflected in modern Malaysia's diverse population. Melaka thrived as an international trade center and gained renown as an entrepot. This historical fact is substantiated by Shellabear (1978) in *Sejarah Malaya*.

“Maka segala dagang atas angin dan bawah angin sekaliannya datang ke Melaka, terlalu ramai bandar Melaka pada zaman itu. Maka oleh segala orang Arab dinamainya Malakat, ertinya perhimpunan segala dagang, kerana banyak jenis dagangan ada di sana. Dan segala orang besar-besaran pun sangat saksama”.

The strategic location of Melaka Port, on the trade route connecting the East and West, provides an excellent opportunity for traders. It is an important transit point for foreign traders from Western regions such as India and the Middle East, as well as Eastern regions such as China. Furthermore, the port offers a range of facilities, including accommodation, warehouse storage, transportation options such as ships, boats, jetties, and a skilled workforce. These factors collectively enhance the appeal of the port for conducting trade activities. Thus, Melaka quickly became an international maritime trading centre, and Malay merchants carried their products near and far. Up to the beginning of the 16th century, the maritime trading business at Malacca's entrepot was always bubbling (Yaapar, 2019).

Religious Values

Islam arrived in the Malay world during the sultanate period and became deeply ingrained in society. Islamic law (Shariah) forms the basis for Malaysia's legal system in specific areas like family law. Additionally, Islamic values and practices are evident in daily life and national holidays.

Melaka became a center for Islamic scholarship and Malay culture. The sultanate's emphasis on Islam and Malay customs helped shape the cultural and religious identity of the region, which continues to be a cornerstone of Malaysian national identity. Islam, embraced by most sultanates, played a pivotal role. It transcended ethnicities, fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging. Islamic principles permeated society, shaping social norms

and values. Adat, a system of Islamic law integrated with local customs, formed the basis of legal systems, creating a common framework that transcended individual sultanates. The Malay language, used in the courts and administration, facilitated communication and a sense of unity amongst the diverse populations within each sultanate.

Language

The history of human civilization reveals that no nation in the world was created using a borrowed or foreign language. The history of the Malacca Malay Sultanate demonstrates how the Malay language became the primary means of communication among diverse ethnicities and cultures. Traders from China, India, and Arab countries, who visited the Straits of Malacca for trade, began using the Malay language to interact with the local population. This interaction gave rise to various forms of the Malay language, known as 'Bazar Malay' or 'market language' to Westerners. Eventually, this variant became the common language for trade and social interactions in the region (Ahmad, 2001).

In his book "The Suma Oriental," Tome Pires mentioned that there are 84 different languages spoken in the port of Malacca, used by various visiting races and tribes for trade. However, Malay serves as the lingua franca. According to Deraman (2001), in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Farncois Valentyn wrote a book called "Oud en Nieuw Oostindien II Del V" about the Malay language. He stated that the Malay language has been proven to be a means of communication and a lingua franca, which is important in Melaka

“Bahasa mereka, iaitu bahasa Melayu...bukan sahaja digunakan di pantai-pantai Tanah Melayu bahkan juga di seluruh India dan di negeri-negeri sebelah Timur. Barang di mana-mana pun bahasa ini difahami oleh tiap-tiap orang. Oleh kerana banyaknya bahasa ini digunakan maka seseorang yang boleh bertutur dalam bahasa Melayu akan difahami orang baik pun dalam negeri Parsi (Persia) ataupun Filipina”. Selain itu, bahasa Melayu dikenali dalam kalangan masyarakat Cina sebagai bahasa Kin Lun, manakala dalam kalangan orang Hindu dikenali sebagai bahawa Dwipantara sejak abad pertama masih lagi.

Sariyan (2001) emphasized the significant growth and recognition of the Malay language, which has been officially established as the national language, official language, and language of instruction since Malaysia gained independence in 1957. This recognition was further solidified through the National Language Act of 1967 and in the Federal Constitution (Deraman, 2010). The Malay language plays a vital role in the nation-building process of Malaysia, forming the basis of local identity and unity among its diverse population. It serves as a unifying element in creating a collective Malaysian identity across all ethnic groups. Additionally, the Malay language acts as a common language among all communities and traders in the port of Malacca, facilitating seamless communication for everyone, including foreign traders.

FINDING AND SUMMARY

There are various perspectives on the formation of the Malaysian nation-state. However, the history of the Malay Sultanate of Malacca can serve as a valuable model in the context of Malaysian society, which comprises diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures coexisting in harmony with mutual respect. The harmonious interaction of Melaka's multi-ethnic community has contributed to a beautiful process of cultural assimilation among various ethnic groups, including Chinese, Chetti, Arab, Portuguese, and Baba Nyonya. This has resulted in a rich, distinct cultural tapestry that can be seen in a variety of ways, including cuisine, language, clothing, and architecture. Notably, architectural marvels such as the Tengkera and Selat mosques brilliantly demonstrate the fusion of various cultural influences. Similarly, the Baba Nyonya's traditional attire, such as the baju kebaya, reflects this wonderful cultural amalgamation. Furthermore, the local cuisine exemplifies this diverse and inclusive cultural blend. The state government safeguards heritage through designated villages like Kampung Morten, Kampung Chetti, and Kampung Portugis.

The positive values upheld by the Muslim community serve as a model for other communities, exemplifying the significance of mutual assistance, integrity, respect for others, and the maintenance of amicable relations across diverse ethnic groups. Analogously, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Paganism, and other faith traditions also prioritize universal values that can be embraced by all communities, irrespective of religious or ethnic

affiliations. For instance, the Chetty community in Melaka extends support to the Malay community during celebratory and matrimonial occasions, fostering a congenial environment. Similarly, the Indigenous Peoples in Malacca seamlessly integrate with and display esteem for other communities, including the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. These manifestations of positive values are attributable to the teachings of each religion, advocating for the exercise of commendable attributes toward all individuals, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. Thus, fostering mutual acquaintance, social interaction, and participation in communal gatherings, such as open houses, weddings, and bereavement ceremonies, carries significance.

Language is one of the factors in shaping the nation-state of Malaysia. It is not only seen as an identity of the nation but also as a force that can unite the people. Language also denotes the people's identification with the country and their acceptance of the country's interests and aspirations. Language has proven to be a powerful force throughout the history of humanity (Kok Seong, 2020). Melaka was the first major Malay state to consolidate power over most of the Malay Peninsula. This concept of central Malay authority became a foundation for the future unified nation. Besides that, the Sultanate established a hierarchy of officials and a code of laws, which provided a framework for governing a larger state. These ideas on administration were adopted and adapted in later Malay polities. Moreover, the idea of "*daulat*" a Malay concept of divinely ordained kingship and rightful rule, emerged during the Melaka Sultanate. This concept of a legitimate ruler continues to influence the role of Sultans in Malaysia today. Melaka provided a model for a centralized Malay state with a structured administration and a legitimized ruler. This model, though evolved, became a cornerstone for the development of Malaysia.

In summary, the Malay Sultanates, though not a unified nation themselves, significantly influenced Malaysia's nation-building process. Their cultural legacy a shared Islamic identity, the Malay language, political structures, and openness to diverse cultures continues to resonate in modern Malaysia. This rich tapestry woven from the threads of the past is what makes Malaysia a unique and vibrant nation today.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia, a Southeast Asian nation known for its ethnic and cultural diversity, has its roots in the historical legacy of Malay sultanates. These sultanates, established centuries ago, laid the foundation for many aspects of modern Malaysia's identity. This introduction will explore how the political structures, cultural practices, and social hierarchies of the Malay sultanates continue to influence Malaysia's nation-building efforts.

The Malay Sultanate of Melaka holds a special place in Malaysia's history, having made significant contributions to the country's cultural, religious, and political development. Despite not being a nation-state itself, Melaka's impact on Malaysia's origin story is undeniable, and its influence continues to shape the nation's identity. Melaka's adoption of Islam as the state religion served as a unifying force, transcending ethnic differences and laying the groundwork for the significant role of religious values in shaping Malaysia's future. Moreover, the sultanate's emphasis on the Malay language in administration and courts fostered a sense of belonging among the diverse populations, eventually becoming a cornerstone of Malaysian national identity.

The political structure of Melaka, with its hereditary sultanate system, provided a blueprint for the modern Malaysian monarchy and established concepts of loyalty, hierarchy, and centralized authority that continue to resonate in the formation of the Malaysian government. In addition to its internal influence, Melaka's position as a prosperous trade hub facilitated vibrant cultural exchange. This openness to external influences laid the foundation for Malaysia's multicultural society, as evidenced by the enduring impact of Indian spices on local cuisine and Chinese motifs on textiles. In summary, the Malay Sultanate of Melaka has left an indelible mark on Malaysia's cultural, religious, and political landscape. Its legacy reminds us of the significant role that cultural exchange plays in shaping a nation's identity, and it continues to be woven into the fabric of Malaysian nationhood.

Malaysia's nation-building initiatives can be significantly improved by utilizing the legacy of the Malay sultanates. This improvement can be achieved by establishing clear constitutional roles for hereditary rulers, positioning them as unifying and non-partisan symbols within the nation. Additionally, it is essential to modernize adat (customary practices) and Islamic cultural traditions to foster inclusive multicultural policies.

Reforming traditional social hierarchies, such as patronage systems and ethnicity-based privileges, is also crucial for transitioning towards more transparent frameworks based on meritocracy and needs-based criteria. Furthermore, integrating Malay heritage into national narratives, promoting intercultural understanding, and enhancing social mobility will help balance historical influences with contemporary objectives related to unity, equity, and a shared national identity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Institut Pengurusan Teknologi dan Keusahawanan, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), for all the support.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, H. (2001). Bahasa Melayu Sebagai Teras Peradaban Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
2. Deraman, A.A. (2010). Wacana Peradaban Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka
3. Ibrahim, I, Bas, A., Zakariya, K. (2023). Cultural Heritage and Urban Tourism in Historic Cities: Case Study of Melaka, Malaysia, and Istanbul, Türkiye. *Journal of Architecture, Planning & Construction Management*. 13(2), 69-81.
4. Kaspin, K.G., Samsudin, M., Mat Enh, A. (2024). Pembinaan Negara-bangsa di Malaysia: Sorotan dari Segi Sejarah dan Cabarannya. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*. 21(1), 481-491.
5. Kok Seong, T. (2020). Nation Building in Malaysia at <https://news.umpsa.edu.my/general/nation-building-malaysia>
6. Ladin, C.A., Omar, I.M., Ilias, K. (2019). Hubungan Pembinaan Negara Bangsa Terhadap Self-Esteem dan Tingkah Laku Akademik. *Jurnal Kepimpinan Pendidikan*. 6(1), 27-37.
7. Musa, H., Che Rodi, R., Noor Muhammad, S.J. (2014). Pelestarian Bahasa Melayu sebagai Bahasa Utama dalam Persuratan dan Pembudayaan Ilmu, Sains dan Teknologi di Rantau ini. *International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation*. 2(2), 3-19.
8. Muslim, N., Rosadi, O. (2021). Peranan Bahasa dalam Pembinaan Negara Bangsa di Malaysia dan Indonesia. *International Journal of the Malay World and Civilization*, 9(2), 79-89.
9. Peng, C.F. (2006). Pembentukan Negara Bangsa Melalui Pendidikan Sastera. *Jurnal Pengajian Melayu*, Jilid 17, 136-168.
10. Rahman, M.N. (2018). Kerajaan Melayu Melaka: Peradaban Maritim. *Jurnal Sejarah Melaka*. Jilid 1, 24-45.
11. Sariyan, A. (2001). Pendidikan Bahasa Melayu Di Malaysia: Pemenuhan Suatu Idealisme. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
12. Shellabear, W.G. (1978). *Sejarah Melayu*. Singapura: Malaya Publishing House Limited.
13. Yaapar, M.S. (2019). Malay Navigation and Maritime Trade: A Journey Through Anthropology and History. *Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies (IJECS)*. 2(1), 53-72.
14. Zulhilmi P., Z., and Rohani, A.G. (2003). Pendidikan Negara Bangsa. Kuantan: PTS Publications and Distributor Sdn. Bhd.
15. <https://www.jkom.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/BOOKLET-SEJARAH-PEMBINAAN-NEGARA.pdf>