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## Efforts of Arab and Chinese Ethnic Groups in Maintaining Their Cultural Identity in a Malay-Muslim Environment in Palembang

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### Abstract

This study explores the strategies employed by the Arab and Chinese ethnic groups to preserve their cultural identity within the predominantly Malay-Muslim environment of Palembang. Challenging the common assumption that minority groups are inherently powerless compared to the majority, this research reveals that both the Arab and Chinese communities possess significant influence in the socio-cultural landscape of Palembang. Employing a qualitative approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, the study examines how these communities navigate cultural assimilation pressures while maintaining distinct ethnic traditions. The findings indicate that both groups have successfully leveraged their social capital—Arabs through religion and Chinese through economic activities—to sustain their cultural identities and exert influence over the majority Malay population. Notably, this influence is reflected in the organization of significant social rituals, such as the Cap Go Meh Ritual by the Chinese and Ziarah Kubro by the Arabs. The study concludes that inter-ethnic adaptation in Palembang involves not only maintaining harmony but also contestation and negotiation among different groups. This dynamic interaction underscores the complexity of multiculturalism, where harmony is maintained through a pragmatic approach to mutual dependence. The implications of this research extend to policymakers and cultural organizations aiming to support ethnic diversity in a multicultural context.

**Keywords:** *Adaptation Cultural identity, Arab ethnicity, Chinese ethnicity, Malay-Muslim environment, Palembang, social capital, multiculturalism.*

### Introduction

In the context of multicultural societies, the issue of preserving the cultural identity of minority groups has become a prominent and evolving area of study.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, minority groups have often been perceived as lacking significant power compared to the majority.<sup>2</sup> However,

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Roland Johansson, “In defence of multiculturalism – theoretical challenges,” *International Review of Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2 Januari 2024): 75–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2022.2045141>.

<sup>2</sup> Mathieu Lizotte, “A Diverse Minority of Intolerance: Ethnic Relations in a Multicultural Society,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 29, no. 4 (2 Oktober 2023): 441–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2023.2270826>.

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recent studies have challenged this assumption, indicating that this view may not be entirely accurate. Research, such as that conducted by Zaki and Mardiyah,<sup>3</sup> reveals that the Arab and Chinese ethnic minorities in Palembang exert considerable influence within the Malay-Muslim society, leveraging social capital rooted in religion (in the case of Arabs) and economics (in the case of the Chinese). The current academic debate centers on how these minority groups not only survive but also effectively maintain their cultural identities through sophisticated adaptation strategies.<sup>4</sup> This study contributes to this ongoing debate by delving deeper into the dynamics of interaction between the Arab and Chinese ethnic groups and the Malay-Muslim majority in Palembang—a topic that remains underexplored in existing literature.<sup>5</sup>

Indonesia has religious and ethnic diversity, which often leads to conflicts between ethnic groups. Inter-ethnic conflict in Indonesia is the second largest intergroup violence in Indonesia between 1990-2003.<sup>6</sup> The primary cause of conflict is religious issues. Cases of interethnic violence during that period included anti-Chinese sentiment. Therefore, the context of this study is inter-ethnic relations, which we believe is still significant, considering that Indonesia in general and Palembang in particular remain very vulnerable to interethnic violence. However, historically, conflicts, particularly involving the Chinese community, have occurred several times. The first incident was in 1947, during a five-day battle starting January 1, 1947, between KNIL and TKR soldiers. This battle sparked public anger and led to attacks on those suspected of being pro-Allies, heavily impacting the Chinese community. Approximately 2,050 Chinese people died, 1,000 were injured, 600 went missing, and 900 homes were burned down. The Indian community in Palembang also suffered, with about 50 of their shops being set on fire.<sup>7</sup>

The second incident occurred during the May 1998 riots. Protest against Suharto regime unfortunately escalated into communal conflicts. Again, the Chinese community was affected. In Palembang, many Chinese-owned shops were burned, and Chinese people were subjected to violence. Nanda Julian noted that many Chinese shops were looted, particularly in markets along the Musi River, such as Pasar 16 Ilir, Pasar 7 Ulu, Pasar 10 Ulu, Pasar Plaju, and Pasar Lemabang.<sup>8</sup> Resolution of several conflicts in Palembang was carried out through negotiations. In May 1931, there was an anti-Chinese demonstration led by the Syarekat Islam movement protesting the Chinese publisher Hoa Kiao newspaper's alleged insult to the Prophet Muhammad. The conflict was resolved through the approach taken by Chinese businessmen who were part of Cina Tjong Sang by immediately supporting financially and showing sympathy for the activities of the Islamic organization led by Arabs and native Muslims at that time. Similarly, when many Chinese people became victims during the 5-day and 5-night battle, instead of demanding compensation for their

<sup>3</sup> Zaki Faddad Syarif Zain and Anisatul Mardiah, “The Dynamic of Malay-Muslim Chinese Relation in Contemporary Palembang,” *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 5, no. 1 (2019): 28–41.

<sup>4</sup> Okamoto Masaaki dan Jafar Suryomenggolo, *Indonesia at The Crossroads: Transformation and Challenges* (UGM PRESS, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> David Eko Setiawan dan Kalis Stevanus, “Significance of Islam Nusantara Values in an Indonesian Multicultural Society,” *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 18, no. 1 (19 Juni 2023): 203–14, <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol18no1.17>.

<sup>6</sup> Samsu Rizal Panggabean, Rudi Harisyah Alam, and Ihsan Ali-Fauzi, “The Patterns of Religious Conflict in Indonesia (1990-2008),” *Studia Islamika* 17, no. 2 (2010); Ashutosh Varshney, Mohammad Zulfan Tadjoeddin, and Rizal Panggabean, “2 Patterns of Collective Violence in Indonesia,” in *Collective Violence in Indonesia*, ed. Ashutosh Varshney (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010), 19–50, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781626373099-004>.

<sup>7</sup> Mestika Zed and Audrey Kahin, “Kepialangan, Politik, dan Revolusi: Palembang, 1900-1950,” (*No Title*), 2003, 158, <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130282271235612160>.

<sup>8</sup> Nanda Julian, “Kriminalitas di Palembang: Kerusuhan dan Penjarahan di Kota Palembang pada Bulan Mei 1998,” *Criksetra: Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah* 4, no. 2 (2015), <https://ejournal.unsri.ac.id/index.php/criksetra/article/view/4784>.

losses, they declared loyalty to the republic and demonstrated their loyalty by providing financial support to the Indonesian republic's soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond these prominent conflicts, there are latent potential conflicts in the form of stereotypes and biases based on ethnicity. Hardi, in his ethnographic research on communication patterns between the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups in Palembang, found that Malays view Chinese people as unwilling to integrate and controlling, while the Chinese view Malays as lazy, untrustworthy, and showy.<sup>10</sup> Even though Palembang has experienced interethnic conflict, Palembang is a cosmopolitan city. Many ethnic groups such as Malays, Arabs, Chinese, Javanese, Bugis, Batak, Minangkabau, and others reside in Palembang. Similarly, all six major religions coexist peacefully in Palembang. Notably, for over two decades, inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony has been well maintained.

The study of inter-ethnic relations cannot be separated from the relationship between the majority and minority.<sup>11</sup> This is because the contestation between ethnic groups occurs among these identities. These identities are formed due to self-positioning towards a group. This construction is based on similarities such as lineage, religious affiliation, politics, and so on. The relationship between minorities and the majority actually has a common perception, namely perceiving each other as being in opposition and facing threats. The majority feels threatened by the lack of access to the economy, resources, and political power, while the minority feels threatened by the deprivation of their rights. This is what creates the potential for conflict.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, in conflict resolution, the minority usually tries to avoid conflict or by accommodating the interests of the majority. In other words, there has been a tendency that the minority is powerless and has to adjust to the majority.<sup>13</sup> However, this study finds that in adapting, the Arab and Chinese minorities in Palembang are not only able to be accepted by the majority but also able to reproduce their social status to have considerable influence among the majority. The Cap Go Meh (Chinese) and Ziarah Kubro (Arabic) rituals have proven capable of mobilizing large crowds, even promoted by the government to attract tourists.

This study attempts to elucidate how the Arab and Chinese ethnic groups in Palembang leverage their social capital not only to preserve but also to strengthen their cultural identities within a predominantly Malay-Muslim environment. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this research delves deeper into the adaptive strategies employed by these two ethnic groups to navigate the challenges of assimilation, focusing on their ability to integrate into the majority society while simultaneously reproducing and reinforcing their social status. Furthermore, the study examines how these minority groups effectively engage the Malay majority in various social activities and cultural rituals, thereby maintaining their influence and cultural presence. The findings of this study are expected to contribute new insights into the discourse on multiculturalism and cultural identity in Indonesia. Additionally, they are anticipated to provide valuable contributions to public policies aimed at fostering cultural diversity and supporting harmonious coexistence in multiethnic societies.

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<sup>9</sup> Zain and Mardiah, "The Dynamic of Malay-Muslim Chinese Relation in Contemporary Palembang."

<sup>10</sup> Nora Meilinda Hardi, "Komunikasi Antarbudaya Etnis Tionghoa dan Pribumi di Kota Palembang," *Jurnal RASI* 1, no. 1 (2019): 74–90.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Westin, "Identity and inter-ethnic relations," *Identity processes and dynamics in multi-ethnic Europe*, 2010, 9–51.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Hartsock, "Rethinking modernism: Minority vs. majority theories," *Cultural critique*, no. 7 (1987): 187–206.

<sup>13</sup> Itesh Sachdev dan Richard Y. Bourhis, "Power and Status Differentials in Minority and Majority Group Relations," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 21, no. 1 (Januari 1991): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420210102>.

## Method

The research investigates the intercultural adaptation of the Arab and Chinese communities in Palembang, with a specific focus on how cultural artifacts and materials facilitate interethnic interactions.<sup>14</sup> To explore this phenomenon in depth, the study adopts an ethnographic approach, allowing for an immersive and detailed observation of the communities' daily lives and cultural practices.<sup>15</sup> Data collection is carried out through participant observation, where the researcher spends approximately two months embedded within the Arab and Chinese communities. During this period, the researcher conducts 20 in-depth interviews with key informants, including community leaders, cultural practitioners, event organizers, and ordinary community members.<sup>16</sup> These interviews are strategically selected to ensure a diverse range of perspectives, covering different social strata and roles within each ethnic group. Participant observations are conducted during key cultural events, such as the *Ziarah Kubro* festival for the Arab community and the *Cap Go Meh* festival for the Chinese community. In addition to these events, the researcher also attends daily religious practices, market interactions, and community gatherings, resulting in a total of 15 observational sessions.<sup>17</sup>

The qualitative data collected through observations and interviews is analyzed using NVivo software, which allows for a systematic and detailed examination of the data. The interview transcripts, field notes, and observational records are first transcribed and then imported into NVivo.<sup>18</sup> Here, the data is coded based on recurring themes related to interethnic interaction, adaptation strategies, and the role of cultural artifacts. The coding process is iterative, involving multiple rounds of refinement to ensure that all relevant themes are captured.<sup>19</sup> The analysis focuses on identifying patterns of interethnic interaction across several domains: education, economy, religion, and the arts. For instance, the interactions at schools, markets, and places of worship are categorized and compared to understand how cultural integration or separation occurs in these spaces.<sup>20</sup> The findings from NVivo are then synthesized into thematic categories that reflect the complex dynamics of intercultural adaptation. These themes are presented in a narrative form, supplemented with direct quotes from interviewees and detailed descriptions of the observed events, to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the processes under study.<sup>21</sup>

The final presentation of the data includes a combination of thematic analysis and case studies that highlight specific instances of cultural adaptation. The results are contextualized within the broader literature on multiculturalism and minority identity preservation, offering insights that

<sup>14</sup> Helene Joffe, "Thematic analysis," *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy* 1 (2012): 210–23.

<sup>15</sup> Stefan Huber, "Are Religious Beliefs Relevant In Daily Life?" (Brill, 2007), [https://brill.com/display/book/9789047419716/Bej.9789004157927.i-322\\_012.xml](https://brill.com/display/book/9789047419716/Bej.9789004157927.i-322_012.xml).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Huberman dan Matthew B. Miles, *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion* (SAGE, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Małgorzata Ciesielska, Katarzyna W. Boström, dan Magnus Öhlander, "Observation Methods," dalam *Qualitative Methodologies in Organization Studies: Volume II: Methods and Possibilities*, ed. oleh Małgorzata Ciesielska dan Dariusz Jemielniak (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 33–52, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65442-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65442-3_2).

<sup>18</sup> David B. Allsop dkk., "Qualitative Methods with Nvivo Software: A Practical Guide for Analyzing Qualitative Data," *Psych* 4, no. 2 (Juni 2022): 142–59, <https://doi.org/10.3390/psych4020013>.

<sup>19</sup> Carmel Maher dkk., "Ensuring Rigor in Qualitative Data Analysis: A Design Research Approach to Coding Combining NVivo With Traditional Material Methods," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (1 Desember 2018): 1609406918786362, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918786362>.

<sup>20</sup> Fiona Wiltshire, "Researching With NVivo," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (30 Januari 2011), <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1628>.

<sup>21</sup> Dimitri Mortelmans, "Analyzing Qualitative Data Using NVivo," dalam *The Palgrave Handbook of Methods for Media Policy Research*, ed. oleh Hilde Van den Bulek dkk. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 435–50, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16065-4\\_25](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16065-4_25).

are both specific to Palembang and relevant to other multiethnic contexts. This methodological approach ensures that the study provides a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of how the Arab and Chinese communities in Palembang navigate their cultural identities in a predominantly Malay-Muslim environment.

## Result and Discussion

### **Result**

Palembang has long been known as a cosmopolitan city. This city is not only a place where various ethnic groups reside but also a place where each ethnic group contributes significantly to shaping the city's culture. The Arab, although they are a minority with numbers of around 6,000 people have a strong influence of religiosity in Palembang.<sup>22</sup> This group has a considerable influence on Palembang's social structure, both culturally and economically, as well as politically. Arabs and Malays share a common identity through Islam, which facilitates the integration of Arabs into the community, granting them a special status in Palembang's society. This privileged position dates back to the Palembang Darussalam Sultanate (1659-1823), where Arabs served as intellectual advisors to the kingdom, introducing the Arabic script adopted in the Malay language as Arab Jawi, which became the official script for the Sultanate's legal documents.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, the Chinese community, with around 70,000 people, is the second largest ethnic group after the Malays in this city. The Chinese are an ethnic group that has lived in this city for a very long time; it is said that they have been here since the time of Sriwijaya. However, according to history, the Chinese in times of Sriwijaya have fully assimilated with the Malay people. The Chinese currently present are those who migrated in the 19th century. They were brought in both as tin miners and traders. During the Dutch colonial period, they, along with the Arabs, occupied a higher position than the natives or were considered the second ethnic group in the Dutch racial political structure. They also played an important role in trade at that time. To this day, trade remains their main livelihood.

These two ethnic groups significantly influence the culture in Palembang. The diverse local cuisine is evidence of the roles played by Chinese and Arab groups, such as pempek, a culinary blend of Chinese influences, and Martabak telor with curry sauce, a combination of Indian and Arab influences. Additionally, other artifacts in Palembang, ranging from architectural styles to the art of songket clothes, reflect various cultural mixtures of Malay, Arab and Chinese. However, this process did not happen quickly; it took a long time to form the acculturation process. Acculturation is a process of merging values, practices, and cultural identifications from two or more different cultures.

In its process, acculturation is always preceded by a respectful attitude from the host culture towards the incoming culture. It is also facilitated when the newcomers have a significant culture (great tradition) interacting with a minor tradition (little tradition). In Palembang, it is evident that no single culture dominates or is dominated. This is because the visible cultural products are actually a form of mutual influence (shared) and respect for each culture, thus enriching Palembang's cultural heritage. The integration process involves a long period, at least a brief historical review is used. On one hand, there is a potential for conflict in the form of stereotypes or prejudices at the individual level. The question then arises, how can social integration occur

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<sup>22</sup> "BPS Product Search - Result Site," diakses 9 Maret 2022, <https://www.bps.go.id/searchengine/result.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Zed dan Kahin, "Kepialangan, politik, dan revolusi," 69.

effectively, ultimately preventing conflict and fostering harmony in Palembang? More precisely, what creative methods do the minority Arab and Chinese ethnic groups use to integrate with the majority Malay ethnic group to survive and thrive in Palembang?

Therefore, this article discusses the efforts of Arab and Chinese in Palembang to adapt and gaining influence from the majority malay in the perspective of interethnic symbiosis. Interethnic symbiosis is the occurrence of inter-ethnic relationships in which one another needs each other. Some benefits can be taken from each group in interacting by maximizing their respective resources to achieve their goals.<sup>24,25</sup> We use this perspective based on the subjective assumption that Palembang has a long history as a trading city. Zed said that historically many political goals in Palembang were carried out on a transactional basis, especially during the revolutionary period.<sup>26</sup>

So far, theories about inter-ethnic relations have mostly had a functional perspective, such as assimilation, acculturation, and integration. According to Berry, there are several stages in the cultural acculturation process. The first is the adjustment stage, where an adjustment process occurs between the incoming culture and the host culture, with each newcomer striving to understand the host culture and adapt to other ethnic groups. This is the initial phase where intercultural interaction begins. The next stage is the reaction stage, where the interaction results in an individual either accepting or resisting the other culture. Finally, the continuation of the reaction process is the withdrawal stage, where cultural exchanges occur, involving values, practices, and cultural identification that either continue previous cultures or change them.<sup>27</sup>

We believe these stages only present two options for the incoming culture: to maintain and continue the previous culture or to change it. We argue that the adaptation process, starting from the first stage, has no end, as interaction and adaptation are never-ending process. The differentiation of society is politically constructed by actors who claim and differentiate their group identity as distinct from others. This is a way to maintain a sense of origin as a way of life and to have a sense of security and self-realization, ensuring survival in their ever-changing environment.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, this article argues that interethnic interaction is essentially an adaptation process to maintain identity in the face of different cultures. If there is cultural acculturation, it is likely the result of shared cultural exchanges or interactions, rather than a part of the process of adaptation as essentially, adaptation is an effort to survive.

This adaptation can be understood through Bourdieu's concept of the field, which serves as the analysis in this study. Field or arena refers to the formal and informal norms governing a particular social sphere of activity such as school (education), market (economy), and places of worship (religion).<sup>29</sup> The arena is organized around specific forms of capital and combinations of capitals. Arenas are relational and characterized by particular regulative principles, which are the subject of power struggles among different interests seeking control over capital. Here, the arena becomes a social sphere where they mobilize their capital and habits to achieve specific interests. Meanwhile, capital can take the form of material, competence, or knowledge. Habitus refers to a

<sup>24</sup> Susan Kent, "Interethnic Encounters," *Ethnicity, Hunter-Gatherers, and the "Other": Association or Assimilation in Africa*, 2002, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Richard C. Fidler, "Chinese-Iban Economic Symbiosis," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 6, no. 1/2 (1978): 56–77.

<sup>26</sup> Zed dan Kahin, "Kepialangan, politik, dan revolusi."

<sup>27</sup> John W. Berry, "Acculturation: A conceptual overview," *Acculturation and parent-child relationships*, 2006, 13–32.

<sup>28</sup> John W. Berry, "Acculturation and adaptation in a new society," *International migration* 30 (1992): 69–69.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The forms of capital* (Routledge, 2018), 54.

worldview, how people perceive the world, which can include values and beliefs that guide human expectations in their social world.<sup>30</sup>

### ***History of Interaction among Arabs, Chinese, and Malays in Palembang***

Palembang's geographical conditions have long made it a bustling center of trade. The city boasts natural transportation routes through rivers, serving as a hub between the interior regions and the coast of the Strait of Malacca. From the sea, Palembang provided a safe stopover from pirates, with its riverbanks stretching 100 to 3000 meters, acting as a natural fortress against pirate attacks. From the interior, people can easily bring their agricultural products to Palembang via the river routes.<sup>31</sup> As a result, Palembang became an ideal market frequented by foreigners such as the Chinese, Arabs, Indians, and Europeans, as well as native people from all over South Sumatra. According to Anthony Reid, Palembang was a significant city during the Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia from 1450 to 1680, with waves of Arab and Chinese arrivals gradually occurring during this period.<sup>32</sup>

Arabs and Chinese in Palembang managed to occupy social strata and, in their own ways, established cooperation with the Sultanate. The Chinese presence in Palembang predates the Sultanate, with their arrival dating back to the 16th century. By the 17th and 18th centuries, the Chinese had seamlessly integrated with the native population through marriage and religious conversion. Some individuals within the royal court were of Chinese descent, including some from the Hui ethnic group, who were Muslims before arriving in Palembang. One notable figure was Yu-Chien (1670-1750), appointed as the royal treasurer with the title Teuku Susuhunan, commonly referred to as Cat Merchant due to the local difficulty in pronouncing his original name. His great-grandfather, Captain Belo, was believed to be the son of Tuo Pek Kong, worshiped by the Chinese as the sea god, according to Baba Azim, a Muslim Chinese descendant of Baba Yu Chien.<sup>33</sup>

The Chinese played a significant role in Palembang's economy, primarily as traders. In the 19th century, they worked as retail and intermediary traders, especially for commodities like pepper and tin. Tin, a crucial commodity for the Palembang Sultanate, was abundant in Bangka, under the Sultan's control. The Chinese became partners of the Sultan for this commodity, importing laborers from mainland China in large numbers by the late 19th century. Despite the VOC's trade monopoly, which gradually marginalized the Chinese intermediaries, they adapted well by shifting their role to intermediary traders for goods from the interior to the city, beyond the Dutch trade monopoly's reach. During the Dutch East Indies colonial administration, the Chinese remained trusted as intermediary traders for native agricultural products, especially rubber, from the interior.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the Arabs in Palembang held a special position upon their arrival. Besides their trading activities, their primary capital was their expertise in religion and knowledge, earning them high respect from the Palembang kings. During the Sultanate era, they were

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Structures and the habitus*, 1977.

<sup>31</sup> Wela Celsi Anggela, "Peranan Etnis Tionghoa Muslim Pada Masa Kolonial Belanda, Abad Ke-19 Di Palembang: The Role of Chinese Muslim Ethnicity in the Dutch Colonial Period, 19th Century in Palembang," *Journal of Islamic History* 1, no. 1 (15 Juni 2021): 66–77, <https://doi.org/10.53088/jih.v1i1.101>.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680* (Yale University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300159455>.

<sup>33</sup> Nor Huda Ali, "Orang-Orang Cina Dan Perkembangan Islam Di Palembang 1803-2000," *Khazanah: Jurnal Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Islam* 10, no. 1 (2020): 69–90.

<sup>34</sup> Zed dan Kahin, "Kepialangan, politik, dan revolusi," 38–40.

considered literati, or scholars, due to their high literacy and literary skills, alongside their religious knowledge.

It is well known that the Palembang Sultanate served as an enclave for Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago. Every Islamic Sultanate required prophetic legitimacy, often derived from Arabic. This tradition continued the caste system of social class grouping, where Sayyids perpetuated the Brahmin social class of intellectuals or religious priests. In the Palembang Sultanate, the role of Sayyid Arabs became increasingly important, evidenced by the adoption of Arabic script or Malay Jawi to replace the rencong script in writing bureaucratic regulations. Examples of Malay Jawi script usage can be seen in the Simboer Cahaya Laws and the Palembang State Regulations.<sup>35</sup> From their position, the Arabs played a significant role in the ongoing Islamization process, not only through religious scholarship and their schools or madrasas but also through the printing of the Koran and Islamic books. For example, Palembang housed Indonesia's oldest Quran printing company, which thrived in the early 20th century as religious awareness among Palembang's population grew.

### ***Adaptation of Arabs and Chinese in the Economic Sector: Maximizing Value and Charisma***

During the Palembang Sultanate period, the Arab population engaged in different types of commerce compared to the Chinese. Arabs traded in commodities such as fabrics, textiles, and operated ships between Palembang, Java, and the Malay Peninsula. Like the Chinese, Arabs also had trade networks in the interior. With the introduction of coffee plantations by the Dutch, some Arabs became intermediaries. Palembang's business market is largely dominated by the Chinese and native population, with Arab businesses being less prominent due to their smaller population, estimated at around 6,000 in Palembang. Nevertheless, Arabs are still involved in specific trades. In Pasar 16, for example, Arabs primarily sell religious items like prayer mats, sarongs, religious books, and hajj souvenirs such as dates, zamzam water, and raisins. Additionally, Arabs are well-known for trading perfumes. Arabs own many perfume shops scattered across Palembang. Although the Arab business presence is not as significant as during the Sultanate era, their influence on Palembang's socio-religious landscape remains substantial.

On the contrary, the Chinese play a crucial role in Palembang's economy, dominating sectors ranging from small retail shops to large malls and shopping centers. This relationship involves traders and customers, as well as employers and employees. The Chinese adhere to the principle of maintaining balance in business, whether between traders and customers or between business owners and workers. This principle is known as Guanxi. Guanxi, influenced by Confucian philosophy, emphasizes the individual's position as part of family and society, with relational connections in both hierarchical and friendly forms. This principle underpins the business patterns of both mainland China and the Chinese diaspora, particularly in Southeast Asia, known as the bamboo network.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Muhammad Adil, "Simbur Cahaya," *Studi Tentang Pergumulan Hukum Islam Dan Hukum Adat Dalam Kesultanan Palembang Darussalam'*(UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2009), 2011, <https://repository.radenfatah.ac.id/26773/2/lengkap.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Alan Smart, "Expressions of interest: Friendship and guanxi in Chinese societies," dalam *The anthropology of friendship* (Routledge, 2020), 119–36, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003135821-7/expressions-interest-friendship-guanxi-chinese-societies-alan-smart>.

In a personal context, Guanxi is a relationship between two individuals where each can influence and trust the other. In business, Guanxi has two domains: social ties within the business scope, including suppliers, buyers, brokers, and even competitors; and social ties with the government at both national and local levels. Business success often hinges on one's ability to navigate these hierarchical relationships, making Guanxi a form of social capital and a strategic instrument.<sup>37</sup> With Guanxi, a company can gain confidential information, enhance its understanding of regulations, navigate bureaucratic processes more smoothly, such as obtaining permits, and access other capital sources. Therefore, in business, interpersonal relationships often precede bureaucratic relationships.

This value system is clearly adhered to by the Chinese community in Palembang, enabling their businesses to adapt and thrive. A practical example of the Guanxi principle can be seen in the experience of Alam, a Malay resident of Plaju. Before being hired at a Chinese-owned ship equipment store in Palembang, he applied to several Arab-owned stores but was only accepted if well-known or affiliated with a majlis member. It seems that Arab store owner only hires people who can be trusted and religious. In contrast, Chinese-owned stores are readily accepted by anyone needing work.

This pattern of relationships showcases the integration of the three ethnic groups in Palembang's socio-economic landscape. While the Arab community remains influential in social and religious matters, the Chinese play a significant role in the economic sphere. Despite being minorities, both groups have demonstrated adaptability, enabling them to survive and thrive, contributing to Palembang's distinctive cultural identity. Economic integration among the Arab, Chinese, and Malay communities can be observed in various markets across Palembang, such as Pasar 16, Pasar Kuto, and Pasar Lemabang. These markets serve as meeting points where sellers from all three ethnic groups coexist, and there is little evidence of competition; instead, they complement each other with the types of goods they sell.

### ***Education: Preserving Identity***

In education, the Arab community in Palembang has established several Islamic-based schools, such as Pondok Pesantren Arab Arriyad and Sekolah Adabiyah. These schools are open to anyone interested in an Islamic education, not limited to Arabs alone.<sup>38</sup> Although led by Arab scholars, many of the teachers and students in these institutions are Malay. For example, an alumnus of Arriyadh Islamic boarding school, a Malay, displayed photographs of Habaib scholars, such as Habib Umar, in his home as a sign of respect. This alumnus, along with his classmates, actively participates in Maspuro (Majelis Sholawat Rasulullah), a shalawat study forum organized by Habaib in 13 Ulu Palembang. This indicates an effort by the Arab community to instill their influence within the broader Malay society, although it remains in its early stages.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, the Chinese community has also established schools open to the public. Some Chinese-run schools are religion-based but accept Muslim students, with some having a majority

<sup>37</sup> Charles A. Coppel, "Diaspora and hybridity: Peranakan Chinese culture in Indonesia," dalam *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora* (Routledge, 2013), 361–74.

<sup>38</sup> Henny Yusalia, "Arab Communities Adaptation Patterns In Palembang Socio-Historical Study Of The People In Kampung Al Munawar," *Journal of Malay Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (30 Juni 2017): 25–38, <https://doi.org/10.19109/jmis.v1i1.3789>.

<sup>39</sup> Dewi Fatonah, "Hadith Practices in Ziarah Kubrā Tradition in Palembang Arabian Village," *Jurnal Living Hadis* 6, no. 1 (2 Maret 2021): 135–51, <https://doi.org/10.14421/livinghadis.2021.2354>.

of Muslim attendees. For example, the Dharma Kirti Foundation, which manages the Vihara Budhayana Dharmakirti, runs a school where the majority of students are Muslim, and Buddhism is not taught to Muslim students. There are also general schools established by the Chinese, such as Kusuma Bangsa School, which caters to a diverse ethnic mix. This school operates like any other public school, offering Islamic religious lessons to its Muslim students. Despite its Chinese origins, Kusuma Bangsa is perceived as an elite institution for the upper middle class rather than a Chinese-specific school.

Moreover, some schools emphasize Chinese culture, particularly through Mandarin language education, such as Maitreya School Palembang. Owned by the Maitreya Buddhist Foundation, this school primarily serves Chinese students but packages itself as an elite international school. This trend of establishing schools is partly driven by the desire to preserve Chinese identity and provide a safe environment for Chinese students. During the New Order era, schools with strong Chinese elements were prohibited. Before the establishment of these schools, Chinese students often attended Christian schools or public schools due to cost considerations, as private schools tended to be more expensive. Their attendance at Christian schools was not to avoid integration with the Muslim Malay community but rather to avoid discrimination. Public schools, on the other hand, serve as melting pots for various ethnic groups. In areas like Seberang Ulu and Pasar Kuto, these schools do not advertise multicultural understanding. Students from different ethnic backgrounds share responsibilities such as cleaning duties and classroom tasks and are equally entitled to education. These settings foster tolerance and respect for different religions and beliefs among children.

In summary, the Arab and Chinese communities in Palembang use education not only to integrate into the broader society but also to preserve and transmit their cultural and religious identities. These educational institutions play a crucial role in fostering inter-ethnic understanding and respect, contributing to the city's social harmony. The difference is that schools established by the Chinese in Palembang tend to be inclusive, accepting students, teachers, and employees regardless of their religion, even though the schools were founded by a Buddhist foundation. On the other hand, Arab schools place more emphasis on Islamic religious education, where all members of the school are, of course, Muslims, even though not all are Arabs. We believe that the market segmentation of these schools is to ensure that they can grow and continue to attract students. Chinese schools promote educational modernization to remain in response to industrial development, while Arab schools are consistent as Islamic schools.

### ***Religious Sphere: Continuity and Intercultural Accommodation***

From a religious perspective, Arabs have had a significant influence in the religious structure of Malay Muslim society. Since the Sultanate of Palembang, they have held strategically important positions, especially as religious leaders. Even today, the charisma of the Habib group has not diminished; they possess considerable social capital and are respected as religious figures among the Malay community.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in the realm of religion, Arabs in Palembang actively lead various religious gatherings, such as the Majlis Maspuro (Praise Gathering of the Prophet), which encourages the community to perform prayers accompanied by Rabana art. Due to their charisma, especially among the Habib, every Maspuro event attracts thousands of attendees, mostly

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<sup>40</sup> Helen Susanti, "Trade Constellation of Ethnic Groups of Bumiputera, Arab, Chinese, India, and European in Palembang City of 1945–1950" (Fifth Sriwijaya University Learning and Education International Conference (SULE-IC 2022), Atlantis Press, 2023), 308–27, [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-010-7\\_33](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-010-7_33).

from the Malay community. This demonstrates the Arab community's efforts to continue and perpetuate their cultural influence within society. Additionally, in terms of religion, the Arab community in Palembang, particularly among the Habib, has quite well-known scholars. Among the famous ones is Habib Muhammad bin Hamid and currently, notable scholars such as Said Aqil Munawwar (former Minister of Religious Affairs) and well-known young preachers such as Habib Ahmad al Habsyi and Habib Mahdi, the charismatic scholar who initiated the Ziarah Kubro.

On the other hand, the Chinese in Palembang predominantly follow Buddhism, with some practicing Christianity and Islam. Rather, they have adapted well and some Tri Dharma temples among them even house Muslim shrines, respected by both Chinese and Malay communities in Palembang. Two notable temples are the Chandra Nadhi Temple in 10 Ulu and the Hok Tjing Rio Temple on Kemaro Island. This serves as evidence that despite religious differences, they accommodate intercultural interactions by allowing space for other religions within their beliefs. Additionally, at every important event such as Cap Go Meh and Chinese New Year, they often hold events that are open to attendance across religious boundaries and ethnicities. According to Herman, Chinese New Year has nothing to do with religion; it is an ancestral tradition of the Chinese ethnic group. Therefore, it is perfectly acceptable for everyone to celebrate it, as its essence is fostering relationships and respecting our parents and ancestors. From this, it is evident that there is a sense of secularization of the tradition. It seems as if tradition and religion should be separated to avoid claims by any particular religion, even though the purpose and intention of this tradition are good and present in all religions.

Additionally, a significant number of Chinese individuals in Palembang have converted to Islam, integrating into the Palembang Malay community. It is estimated that there are approximately 3,500 Chinese Muslims in Palembang (interview with H. Didi). Through conversion, many Chinese individuals have gradually assimilated into the majority culture while maintaining certain Chinese traditions. For instance, they continue to celebrate Cap Go Meh with their families and occasionally observe Ceng Beng. This continuity is partly due to shared values between Chinese culture and Islam, particularly regarding respect for ancestors and elders. Chinese Muslims often act as a cultural bridge between the non-Muslim Chinese community and the predominantly Muslim Malay and Arab communities. This bridging role was evident during the 2016 212 demonstration in Jakarta, which called for the imprisonment of then-Governor Ahok for alleged blasphemy. A similar demonstration took place in Palembang, with significant involvement from the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), an organization led by Habib in Palembang.<sup>41</sup> Notably, many Chinese Muslims participated in the demonstration and even delivered speeches (interview with Herwansyah). Their participation is seen as a factor that helped mitigate anti-Chinese sentiment. Despite their conversion to Islam, Chinese Muslims in Palembang continue to preserve their ethnic identity, reflecting their commitment to maintaining their cultural heritage and values.

The Arab and Chinese communities exhibit distinct differences in the values associated with their ethnic and religious identities. Arab identity is closely intertwined with Islam, with religious affiliation playing a central role in their cultural expression. In contrast, the Chinese ethnic group demonstrates greater openness towards multiple religious beliefs. Notably, the values of filial piety, which are deeply embedded in Chinese culture and are prominently displayed during celebrations such as Cap Go Meh and Chinese New Year (Imlek), are presented in a manner that

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas P. Power, "Jokowi's Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia's Democratic Decline," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 54, no. 3 (2 September 2018): 307–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2018.1549918>.

transcends specific religious affiliations. Although these values originally held significant importance within the traditional Chinese religious system, they are now shared publicly and embraced by the broader community, reflecting a cultural expression that is not strictly bound by any particular belief system.

### ***Arts: Arts as an Instrument of Cultural Dissemination***

In the field of art, both Arab and Chinese ethnic groups have their own distinctive artistic traditions. Among the Arabs in Palembang, gambus music, marawis, and Sufi dances have developed significantly. These arts have also gained popularity among the Malay community in Palembang. Many Arab arts are closely tied to religious themes. For example, during Majlis Maspuroh, initiated by Arabs, gambus and marawis music often accompany the chanting of Shalawat Nabi. However, some of these arts, particularly gambus music and Sufi dances, have been embraced by the Malay community for wedding celebrations.

These arts originated in the Arab peninsula, but many performers are now Malay Palembang residents. Gambus and marawis music is no longer exclusive to Arabs but has become a popular music genre in the community. Mass media and social media have played a significant role in popularizing these arts, as seen with the widely popular Gambus Sabyan music group. In Palembang, gambus music groups are not only found within the Arab community but have spread among local residents, such as mosque youth groups, Islamic boarding schools, and students.

Chinese arts, on the other hand, are often performed specifically for the Chinese community, such as Hokkien puppetry or opera. In Palembang, the Sam Khau Bun Gei group represents this tradition. These arts are struggling to maintain their existence, as they are not very popular even among the Chinese community, being showcased only during Cap Go Meh and temple anniversary celebrations. Conversely, the Barongsai (Lion Dance) is a popular art form that includes Malay Palembang members. Open Chinese arts, such as Kungfu and Wushu martial arts, are also popular, evidenced by the numerous martial arts schools in Palembang.

Art clearly serves as an instrument for disseminating the identity or culture of minority ethnic groups to the majority. Art fulfills a universal need for entertainment, even if it is not always inclusive. For example, the distinctive percussion art of the Arab community can be inclusive, as anyone can play it regardless of religion, although it is often associated with religious songs and known as hadrah. In Palembang, this art form frequently accompanies Shalawat Nabi. Marawis could potentially accompany Middle Eastern love songs, but performers typically wear Islamic attire. The inclusivity of Arab art is demonstrated by its performance at various events. Meanwhile, Barongsai is more inclusive and not closely tied to religion, with many Muslim performers participating.

### ***Social Rituals: Spaces for Interethnic and Interreligious Encounters***

Awareness of pluralism among communities can be fostered by creating spaces for interethnic and interreligious encounters. As previously mentioned, there are several spaces for interethnic encounters, such as schools, social activities, art studios, or clubs. However, most of these spaces do not involve religion. The spaces for interethnic and interreligious encounters take the form of rituals that, in their process, involve a pluralistic society. Social rituals refer to religious rituals that have a social impact or, in other words, rituals that involve more than one religion or ethnicity and can impact the socio-economic life of other ethnicities and religions.

In Palembang, social rituals include the Cap Go Meh celebration on Kemaro Island for the Chinese community and the Ziarah Kubro for the Arab community. These rituals, although initiated by one ethnic group, have a broad impact on the social life of Palembang society and become spaces for interethnic and interreligious encounters. These meeting spaces can foster mutual recognition and understanding among different ethnicities and religions, ultimately leading to tolerance, appreciation of differences, and the prevention of radicalism. Although this discourse is relatively new in conflict resolution studies, the social rituals in Palembang have at least generated public enthusiasm, are eagerly awaited each year, and involve all layers of society from various classes and religions, either directly or indirectly. At the very least, there is a collective awareness that ethnic and religious diversity in the city can bring benefits and become a source of shared pride as pluralistic residents of Palembang.

The term "benefit" here is understood pragmatically, based on humans as social actors who act rationally according to the structure they face. In interethnic and interreligious relations, three possible benefits can be imagined from these social rituals. First, from the perspective of the organizing ethnic and religious group, these rituals can showcase their existence, identity, or status compared to others, besides providing spiritual fulfilment. Second, from the perspective of other ethnicities and religions, material benefits can be gained through the economic activities generated, or social relations can be strengthened, such as through silaturahmi (social visits), as these activities help strengthen or expand networks, which can be beneficial for business or politics. Since these events involve large masses, they offer potential gains in these areas. For the government, these rituals become beneficial as tourism potential, boosting the local economy. As a result, the government usually actively promotes and supports these events, considering them regional assets to be preserved.

### ***Chinese New Year and Cap Go Meh Celebrations***

Chinese New Year, or Imlek, is a national holiday in Indonesia commemorating the Chinese New Year. The pinnacle and grandest celebration of Chinese New Year is Cap Go Meh, which takes place on the 15th day after Chinese New Year. In Palembang, Cap Go Meh is celebrated with a major event on Kemaro Island, specifically at the Hok Tjing Rio Temple. The most notable aspect of this celebration is the distribution of Angpao, which are red envelopes containing money. The Chinese community gives Angpao to people of all ages and ethnicities or religions.<sup>42</sup> During Cap Go Meh, people from various ethnic backgrounds flock to Kemaro Island to receive Angpao.

Interestingly, the Chinese community provides free boats for anyone wanting to cross to Kemaro Island during this celebration. These boats, owned by Malay and Arab ethnic groups, are rented by the Chinese to facilitate the journey for all attendees. The streets around the dock beneath the Ampera Bridge become crowded with parked vehicles, allowing local residents to profit from parking fees. The event attracts people not only for Angpao but also for various performances, such as Barongsai (Lion Dance), Chinese opera, and lantern festivals, making it a highly anticipated event for both local and international tourists. As a result, people of all ethnicities sell goods to

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<sup>42</sup> Hermina Sutami dan Assa Rahmawati Kabul, "Culinary for The Spirits: The Reality of Cultural Acculturation of The Chinese Peranakan of Palembang," *MANDARINABLE : Journal of Chinese Studies* 3, no. 1 (9 Februari 2024): 88–103, <https://doi.org/10.20961/mandarinable.v3i1.1091>.

visitors<sup>43</sup>. The Palembang city government promotes this festival as a regional tourism event and a major attraction.

During Suharto's regime, Chinese New Year and Cap Go Meh celebrations were banned. Suharto's administration was highly anti-Chinese, issuing Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967, prohibiting the public display of Chinese customs and culture.<sup>44</sup> The rationale was that these practices disturbed the public and hindered the assimilation of Chinese people with indigenous Indonesians. The Reform Era marked a period of openness to pluralism and tolerance. President Gus Dur revoked the ban, officially recognizing Confucianism as a legitimate religion in Indonesia. President Megawati later declared Chinese New Year a national holiday. This era encouraged the Chinese community to reclaim their identity and revive previously banned rituals. Rather than impeding assimilation, Chinese cultural practices, as seen in Cap Go Meh celebrations on Kemaro Island, fostered interaction and integration with the local community. This event brings joy not only to the Chinese but also to the broader Palembang community.

Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island is celebrated on the 15th day of the Chinese New Year. The ritual honors ancestors, reflecting filial piety in Chinese culture. While its primary purpose is for the Chinese community to maintain their traditions, it has become a significant annual event in Palembang. Kemaro Island is a notable tourist destination in Palembang, featuring the majestic Hok Tjing Rio Pagoda. There is a captivating legend about the island's origin, involving the love story of Tan Bun An, a noble Chinese youth, and Siti Fatimah, a Muslim noblewoman from Malay Palembang.<sup>45</sup> They tragically drowned together, leading to the formation of the island. The story teaches the values of not pursuing wealth excessively and encouraging charity, fostering relations between the Chinese and Malay communities.

Their tombs are located within the temple and are treated as sacred by the Chinese, featuring altars and various offerings. Remarkably, many Malays also visit the tombs, seeking blessings and fortune. According to interviews with local pilgrims, they visit the tombs for blessings and prosperity. Another legend suggests that Tan Bun An's bodyguard, who also drowned, is buried at the Chandra Nadi Temple in 10 Ulu. The bodyguard, Ju Sin Kong, is considered a protector of Palembang by the Chinese and was believed to be a devout Muslim. According to Harun, the temple's caretaker, Ju Sin Kong performed the five daily prayers and died in Palembang. An altar was established to honor his virtues, and visitors are advised not to offer food or drinks forbidden in Islam. Kemaro Island serves as both a sacred site and a tourist destination, driving the local economy by involving indigenous residents in boat rentals and vending food and drinks. The presence of Kemaro Island illustrates a pattern of acculturation and multicultural interaction. Despite the temple, the site's significance transcends ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries.

### **Ziarah Kubro**

Ziarah Kubro is a mass pilgrimage tradition where people visit graves, organized to involve a large number of participants. It is a major event in Palembang held every Sya'ban month or just

<sup>43</sup> Henny Yusalia dkk., "Acculturation Through Non-Verbal Communication In People Of Chinese Descendants In Kampung Kapitan Palembang, Indonesia," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 7 (16 September 2022): 2896–2911.

<sup>44</sup> Leo Suryadinata, "STATE AND 'CHINESE RELIGIONS' IN INDONESIA: CONFUCIANISM, TRIDHARMA AND BUDDHISM DURING THE SUHARTO RULE AND AFTER," dalam *After Migration and Religious Affiliation*, oleh Chee-Beng Tan (WORLD SCIENTIFIC, 2014), 19–42, [https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814590006\\_0002](https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814590006_0002).

<sup>45</sup> Darmanto Darmanto, Meita Istianda, dan Heri Wahyudi, "Collaboration on the Development of Kemaro Island as a Leading Tourist Destination for the City of Palembang," *ASTONJADRO* 13, no. 1 (28 Oktober 2023): 315–25, <https://doi.org/10.32832/astonjadro.v13i1.15382>.

before Ramadan, spanning three days from Friday to Sunday. According to organizers, more than 10,000 people participate annually, including Muslims from Palembang and visitors from various regions of Indonesia and abroad.<sup>46</sup> The itinerary of the event includes:<sup>47</sup>

1. Pilgrimage to the grave of Al-Habib Ahmad bin Syech Shahab: Located at Jalan Dr. M. Isa Lr. Gubah 8 Ilir Palembang, known as Gubah Duku. He was a respected scholar and advisor to the Palembang Sultanate.
2. Islamic lectures (Recitation or Raudah) at Ar-Riyadh Islamic Boarding School on Jalan K.H.A. Azhari, Subdistrict 13 Ulu Palembang.
3. Pilgrimage to the graves of Ulama and Auliya at Telaga Sewidak and Babussalam/As-Seggaf: Located at 14 Ulu.
4. Haul of Imam Al-Faqihil Muqaddam Tsani Al-Habib Abdurrahman As-Seggaf: He is considered a great Waliyullah, born in 739 H in Tarim.
5. Haul of Al-Habib Abdullah bin Idrus Shahab and Al-Habib Abdurrahman bin Ahmad AlBin Hamid: Al-Habib Abdullah bin Idrus was born in Tarim in 1265 H and is a respected figure in Palembang.
6. Main event at Seberang Ilir Palembang, visiting the graves of Al-Habib Pangeran Syarif Ali, the royal graves of the Palembang Sultanate Darussalam in Kawah Tengkurep, and Kambang Koci Cemetery.
7. Maritime Tourism at Kemaro Island: apparently, tourists visiting Ziarah Kubro are invited to visit Kemaro Island, primarily for tourism rather than pilgrimage, where they often visit Hok Tjing Rio Temple.
8. Ziarah Kubro is primarily a tradition observed by the Arab community within family circles, conducted every Sya'ban or Ruwah month. The practice of visiting family graves during Sya'ban or Ruwah is a common tradition among Muslims in the Malay Archipelago.

In Palembang, the Malay community also observes this tradition during the same month. For example, the Sultanate of Palembang Darussalam regularly visits the graves of their kings, a practice adopted by the royal family since the 1970s. The difference is that these events did not involve the wider community, only family members. This event was later adopted by the Arab community in 2009, turning it into a festival that attracted a larger crowd.<sup>48</sup>

The convergence of these traditions, coupled with the respect shown by the Malay Muslim community in Palembang, facilitates the mass observation of Ziarah Kubro. It illustrates not only social interaction among ethnic groups but also serves as a status symbol for Arabs within the public Islamic sphere in Palembang. This can be observed in the event's program, focusing on visiting the graves of Habaib and Aulia, culminating in visits to the graves of Palembang kings within the same complex. Conversely, for many Malays in Palembang, this tradition reflects their affection for this community. The high turnout at this event has led the government to promote it as an annual tourism event in Palembang. The rationale behind this is to attract both local and

<sup>46</sup> Siti Robiatul Fatimah dan Herwansyah, "Ziara Kubro Tradition of the Palembang Community Before Welcoming the Holy Month of Ramadan," *Proceeding International Conference on Tradition and Religious Studies* 2, no. 1 (1 Agustus 2023): 334–40.

<sup>47</sup> Ahmad Syukri, "Relasi Sosiologis Politis Sayyid Hadrami Dengan Kesultanan Palembang" (INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR "The Dinamics of Malay Islamic World in Responding to Contemporary Global Issues" Palembang, December 2-3, 2016, Palembang, 2016), 592–605, <http://eprints.radenfatah.ac.id/1472/>.

<sup>48</sup> M. Adhim Rajasyah, "Integrasi Agama, Masyarakat Dan Budaya: Kajian Tentang Tradisi Haul Dan Ziarah Dalam Masyarakat Palembang," *Jurnal Riset Agama* 3, no. 1 (25 Januari 2023): 236–48, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jra.v3i1.23521>.

international tourists, thereby invigorating the city's economy and benefiting the wider community, including various ethnic and religious groups in Palembang.

## Discussion

Discussing the interaction between ethnic groups in Palembang—Arabs, Malays, and Chinese—is quite unique. Despite their contributions and acculturation into Malay culture, both Arab and Chinese ethnicities still maintain their distinct cultures. For example, firstly, the Chinese ethnicity retains their language, whereas some Arabs no longer maintain it, although others still study Arabic as a scholarly pursuit within Islamic studies. Second, a significant number of Arabs and Chinese uphold family traditions through kinship ties or marriages within their own ethnic groups, even the Arabs documented their family lineage records. Thirdly, many of them steadfastly maintain their religions and rituals related to their ethnic traditions, such as the recitation of Ratib among Arabs and ancestor worship among the Chinese. Various distinct characteristics of these ethnicities are perpetuated through family institutions, schools, and ethnic organizations that they establish.

From the functionalist point of view, it can be said that the interaction model between the Chinese and Arab ethnic groups with the Malay society in Palembang is one of integration.<sup>49</sup> It is termed integration because both ethnic groups strive to maintain their original identities, although there are certainly changes and adjustments in response to contemporary developments. If it is argued that converting religions allows for total assimilation between ethnicities, then this is not entirely the case. Assimilation permits total merging and does not require the preservation of the original identity. Even Chinese Muslims in Palembang feel they still retain their original identity, evident through the existence of the Chinese Muslim community. The presence of Chinese Muslims does not accelerate assimilation through religion but rather represents how the Chinese ethnicity negotiates strengthening their Islam while retaining their Chinese identity.<sup>50</sup>

The next question is, why did both the Arabs and Chinese maintain their identities and strengthen their influence on the Malay community in Palembang, instead of fully assimilating? This is most likely because their social status was higher compared to the indigenous population since the colonial period.<sup>51</sup> They were politically categorized as the second group after the Europeans. Therefore, the way to maintain their status and connected to their home origins are by preserving their lineage through intra-ethnic marriages and nurturing their traditions. As times have changed, there are efforts needed to reproduce their culture and status amidst the majority. Thus, the appropriate interpretation of how they were able to adapt is from the perspective of agency.

However, from the agency's point of view, agents prefer rational methods by minimizing risks and trying to survive.<sup>52</sup> So it is not surprising that there are differences in the interaction models between Chinese and Arabs towards Malay society in Palembang. Arab communities, due to their habitus. Arabs have a strong habitus, or knowledge, in religious arena. Their status as religious scholars has been recognized since their arrival from Hadramaut, and they have played a

<sup>49</sup> Flip Lindo, "The concept of integration: Theoretical concerns and practical meaning," *Social integration and mobility*, 2005, 7–20.

<sup>50</sup> Eric Mark Kramer, "Cultural fusion: An alternative to assimilation," *The Routledge Companion to Migration, Communication, and Politics*, 2018, 96–120.

<sup>51</sup> Leo Suryadinata, ed., "1. Chinese Indonesians in an Era of Globalization: Some Major Characteristics," in *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia* (ISEAS Publishing, 2008), 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812308368-005>.

<sup>52</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985).

role in religious affairs since the time of the Palembang Sultanate. Thus, the Arabs tend to have a more exclusive interaction model in these religious fields, such as seen in education, where they focus more on Islamic education as they maintain their identity with Islam. Meanwhile, Chinese communities tend to become more inclusive, and aware as double minorities face greater challenges, both in their majority Buddhist religion and as an ethnic group. Inclusivity can be seen in education and economics, such as in employee recruitment, although they also prioritize their own families and even in religious matters.

The existence of Muslim shrines within Chinese temples is evidence of how they accommodate Islam within their places of worship—not just to survive but also to be accepted by Malay Muslim society. Moreover, this inclusivity is their habitus, based on principles or values such as Guanxi, aside from their abilities in the economic and trade sectors, which demand inclusivity to control capital. Indeed, not all Arabs have habitus and access to capital in the field of religion, and not all Chinese have it in the economic field. Perhaps only specific actors possess it, but at the very least, their mastery in these two fields gives them significant influence in Palembang society. This analysis is only about actors who have access to capital, and further research is needed to analyze adaptation involving individual experiences and their variations. We can speculate that at the individual level, it comes down to the principle of rationality, which is to minimize risk by avoiding conflict and doing good to those around them. Similarly, for the majority, if they can gain benefits or depend on and cooperate with minority groups, then small conflicts in the form of prejudice and stereotypes can be ignored.

These are adaptation methods used by both Chinese and Arab actors in interacting with the Malay community in Palembang. It is an effort to reproduce and maintain their social status simultaneously. In fact, these ethnic differences do not pose significant problems because Palembang has long been known as a cosmopolitan city. Arabs and native Malay people have integrated well over centuries due to shared religious factors and values believed by Malays in relation to Arabs from the Alawiyyin community. Meanwhile, Chinese can also integrate themselves by accommodating themselves with Muslims in addition to their ability to maximize their economic capital.

As for interaction patterns among these three ethnic groups, they range from value-based interactions to transactional ones. For example, value-based interactions include Malays considering Arabs as role models in religion due to their lineage from Prophet Muhammad SAW, and reciprocally, knowledgeable Arabs must spread Islamic teachings. The Chinese philosophy of Guanxi, considers maintaining good relations with everyone as a duty to balance life and playing their role in society to achieve their goals. Transactional interaction models, as seen in social ritual traditions such as Cap Go Meh celebrations and Ziarah Kubro rituals, go beyond mere traditions to showcase the existence of these ethnic groups to the Palembang public. These rituals are based on economic (Chinese) and charisma in religious fields (Arabic). Both of these social rituals prove effective in demonstrating harmony among the three ethnic groups in Palembang, besides significantly influencing the social and economic lives of the majority Malay community. Moreover, both Cap Go Meh and Ziarah Kubro rituals can be seen as a cultural contestation between ethnic groups, each imprinting their influence within the Muslim community through their ability to mobilize masses to attend these ritual events.

## Conclusion

This article concludes that minority ethnic groups, such as the Arabs and Chinese in Palembang, successfully adapt by leveraging their social capital to preserve their identities and gain influence within the predominantly Malay Muslim community, facilitating their acceptance. Despite prevailing stereotypes that could potentially lead to ethnic conflicts, these factors do not significantly contribute to discord in Palembang. Social interactions among these groups are predominantly based on shared values and transactional exchanges, reflecting a rational approach where individuals seek to maximize benefits while minimizing conflicts and risks. Social harmony is achieved through a mutual understanding of interdependence, irrespective of ethnic and religious differences. Social rituals play a crucial role in sustaining interethnic interactions, underscoring the importance of integrating these practices into community life. To foster this integration, it is recommended that the government organize events that promote cultural exchange among the three ethnic groups, including celebrations like Cap Go Meh and Ziarah Kubro. Ensuring the continuation of these rituals, particularly during challenges such as the pandemic, is essential for maintaining communal bonds. Additionally, the Musi River ecosystem, a central element in these interactions, highlights the need for cooperative efforts among the ethnic groups to address potential environmental issues. Further research is necessary to explore how the Musi River ecosystem affects the lives of these communities, the impact of environmental degradation, conservation strategies, and models of ethnic cooperation in environmental preservation. Future research should include participatory action research methodologies to effectively tackle these issues and enhance understanding and collaboration among the ethnic groups.

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