

Tracing Srivijayan Buddhist Heritage in Riau: Linguistic, Ritual and Material Evidence of Cultural Continuity

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Abstract

Malay cultural identity is often interpreted primarily through Islamic frameworks, which has led to the marginalization of earlier cultural layers that shaped its formation. This study addresses a significant gap in Malay historiography, namely the limited examination of how Srivijayan Buddhist cultural structures continue to influence contemporary Malay identity in the Riau mainland. The research employs a qualitative historical-interpretive design that integrates ethnographic observation, Old Malay epigraphic materials, Chinese Buddhist records, and archaeological data from Muara Takus and related sites. Textual comparison, historical linguistics and material culture analysis were used to identify patterns of continuity between Srivijayan Buddhist traditions and present-day cultural practices. The findings reveal three major continuities. First, purification rituals such as *petang megang* retain pre-Islamic Buddhist concepts of spatial and temporal cleansing. Second, communal eating traditions preserve Old Malay social ethics centered on equality and collective cohesion. Third, linguistic survivals in Riau Malay, including Old Malay lexicon and phonological features, demonstrate long-term structural continuity with Srivijayan-era language use. These continuities show that

Islamic transformation in Riau did not replace earlier cultural systems but adapted and integrated them.

Keywords: *Buddhist Continuity, Malay Identity, Old Malay Language, Riau Culture, Srivijaya Heritage.*

Abstrak

Identitas budaya Melayu sering dipahami terutama melalui kerangka Islam sehingga lapisan budaya yang lebih awal kerap terpinggirkan dalam historiografi. Penelitian ini mengisi kesenjangan penting dalam kajian Melayu, yaitu kurangnya analisis mengenai bagaimana struktur budaya Buddha Sriwijaya terus memengaruhi identitas Melayu kontemporer di daratan Riau. Studi ini menggunakan desain kualitatif historis-interpretatif yang mengintegrasikan observasi etnografis, bahan epigrafi Melayu Kuno, catatan Buddha Tiongkok, serta data arkeologis dari Muara Takus dan situs terkait. Perbandingan tekstual, linguistik historis, dan analisis budaya material digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi pola kesinambungan antara tradisi Buddha Sriwijaya dan praktik budaya masa kini. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan tiga bentuk kesinambungan utama. Pertama, ritual pemurnian seperti petang megang mempertahankan konsep penyucian ruang dan waktu yang berakar pada tradisi Buddha pra-Islam. Kedua, tradisi makan bersama melestarikan etika sosial Melayu Kuno yang menekankan kesetaraan dan kohesi kolektif. Ketiga, keberlanjutan leksikon dan fitur fonologis Melayu Kuno dalam bahasa Melayu Riau menunjukkan kesinambungan struktural jangka panjang dengan penggunaan bahasa pada masa Sriwijaya. Kesinambungan ini menunjukkan bahwa transformasi Islam di Riau tidak menggantikan sistem budaya sebelumnya, tetapi mengadaptasi dan mengintegrasikannya. Studi ini berkontribusi pada historiografi budaya Melayu dengan menunjukkan bahwa identitas Melayu Riau bersifat berlapis secara historis dan dibentuk oleh retensi budaya yang adaptif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pemahaman identitas Melayu memerlukan pengakuan atas pengaruh berkelanjutan warisan Buddha Sriwijaya dan merekomendasikan penelitian interdisipliner lanjutan untuk memperdalam model kesinambungan budaya di dunia Melayu.

Kata Kunci: *Bahasa Melayu Kuno, Budaya Riau, Identitas Melayu, Kesinambungan Buddhis, Warisan Srivijaya.*

Introduction

Malay identity is commonly framed through Islamic cultural narratives, which often overshadow earlier civilizational layers that shaped the development of Malay societies (Ahmad, 2020). Prior to Islamization, the Malay world had already developed sophisticated political, linguistic, and religious traditions influenced by Buddhist networks associated with the Srivijaya Empire (Chuan et al., 2023). Understanding these deeper historical strata is essential for interpreting Malay identity as a cumulative cultural formation shaped by successive encounters rather than a single religious turning point (Khairuddin & Azhari, 2017; Suroyo et al., 2025).

Within this broader context, the Riau mainland represents a significant yet understudied region in the Srivijayan cultural sphere. Historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence indicates that Riau was integrated into Srivijaya's political, economic, and intellectual networks, functioning not as a peripheral zone but as an active node in maritime trade, governance, and Buddhist learning (Fortuna, 2024; Susilo et al., 2023; Alnoza, 2020; Susanti et al., 2024). Material traces such as the Muara Takus temple complex, Old Malay toponyms, and linguistic survivals further demonstrate the persistence of pre-Islamic cultural structures in contemporary Riau Malay society (Irwansyah, 2024; Syamsuadi, 2018).

Despite these indications, existing scholarship tends to treat Islamization as a cultural rupture that replaced earlier Buddhist traditions or relegates Srivijaya's influence to background context (Wijaya et al., 2025; Fortuna et al., 2024). Scholarship on Srivijaya consistently affirms its position as a major Buddhist center that

shaped early Malay political and cultural formation, yet the emphases and interpretive strategies differ significantly across authors. Studies of Old Malay inscriptions by Khairunnisa et al. (2024), Yenrizal (2018), and Abdilah (2020) foreground the political and ritual functions of Old Malay as a medium of royal authority. They argue that inscriptions such as Kedukan Bukit, Talang Tuwo, and Kota Kapur demonstrate a deliberate articulation of Buddhist cosmology within statecraft, suggesting that Srivijaya cultivated a distinctly Malay Buddhist political identity. In contrast, Griffiths (2018) approaches the same inscriptions through a philological lens, emphasizing the hybridity of linguistic and doctrinal elements. Rather than viewing Old Malay inscriptions as straightforward expressions of Buddhist kingship, Griffiths highlights their layered intertextuality, where Sanskritic terminology, Buddhist ethical vocabulary, and local Malay idioms coexist. This contrast reveals a tension between interpretations that privilege political consolidation and those that foreground intellectual pluralism.

More recent regional studies by Taim (2022), Yahya et al. (2023), and Ong and Troyer (2024) challenge earlier assumptions that the Riau mainland was peripheral to Srivijaya. Their findings demonstrate that Riau was deeply integrated into Srivijaya's political and cultural networks, evidenced by the distribution of inscriptions, linguistic survivals, and Buddhist architectural traces. Miksic (2017) supports this interpretation by arguing that the spatial distribution of ritual sites reflects sustained cultural transmission rather than episodic contact. Collectively, these studies reveal broad agreement that Srivijaya shaped early Malay civilization, yet they diverge in their emphasis on political, linguistic, or spatial

dimensions. This divergence underscores the need for a more integrated synthesis that connects these strands to understand how Srivijayan cultural structures persisted beyond the Buddhist period.

In another line of study, Hassan et al. (2017) and Akmal (2023) argue that Srivijaya's intellectual and ritual foundations continued to shape Malay cultural norms long after the decline of Buddhist institutions. They highlight the persistence of Buddhist cosmological ideas, Sanskrit-influenced terminology, and ritual ethics in later Islamic Malay polities. Lian (2015) and Sun (2024) extend this argument by focusing on linguistic survivals, noting that Buddhist-oriented vocabulary embedded in Old Malay inscriptions contributed directly to the conceptual framework of early Malay societies. Their work suggests that language serves as a key repository of cultural memory, preserving pre-Islamic structures even as religious frameworks shift.

Archaeological and historical analyses by Hamid (2018) and Reddi et al. (2020) further support the argument for continuity by identifying Buddhist cosmological symbolism, administrative terminology, and ritual structures that persisted into Islamic Malay contexts. Their findings align with Herwindo (2025), who documents toponymic survivals and oral narratives across central and eastern Sumatra that reflect long-term cultural memory of Srivijaya's Buddhist past. However, while these scholars emphasize continuity, they differ in their explanations of how such continuity was maintained. Some attribute it to structural resilience within Malay cultural systems, while others highlight localized adaptations shaped by geography, settlement patterns, and social organization.

Across both streams, the literature demonstrates strong evidence of Srivijaya's Buddhist influence on early Malay civilization and acknowledges the persistence of pre-Islamic cultural structures in contemporary Malay societies. However, most studies treat these continuities as isolated phenomena or as background context rather than examining how they converge to shape the lived cultural identity of a specific region such as the Riau mainland. Existing scholarship has not sufficiently explored the mechanisms through which Srivijayan Buddhist cultural logics were adapted and integrated into Islamic Malay identity. This gap underscores the need for an interdisciplinary synthesis that connects textual, linguistic, ritual, and spatial evidence to explain the long-term cultural continuity that characterizes Riau Malay society.

This study aims to investigate how Srivijayan Buddhist cultural structures have persisted and been reinterpreted within the Islamic Malay identity of the Riau mainland. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining ethnographic observation, epigraphic analysis, historical linguistics, and material

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic-interpretive design because the central research question requires identifying how Srivijayan Buddhist cultural structures persist within contemporary Riau Malay identity. Such a question cannot be answered through quantitative measurement, since the relevant cultural traces are embedded in ritual practices, oral narratives, linguistic survivals, and spatial memory. The chosen design integrates participant

observation, textual comparison, and historical-linguistic reconstruction, allowing the research to capture both lived cultural expressions and their historical foundations. This approach is the most appropriate for examining adaptive cultural continuity, as it enables the interpretation of symbolic meanings, ritual logic, and linguistic structures that cannot be accessed through purely archaeological or textual methods.

The data for this study consisted of primary and secondary sources drawn from communities and landscapes historically associated with the Srivijayan cultural sphere. Primary data included ritual practices, oral narratives, linguistic survivals, and archaeological remains observed in Riau, particularly in areas connected to Muara Takus and related settlement patterns. The population of interest comprised local cultural actors who maintain ritual traditions and oral memory linked to pre-Islamic Malay heritage. Inclusion criteria required that participants be individuals or communities who actively engage in or transmit cultural practices such as *petang megang*, communal feasting or structured death-day cycles. Practices or narratives that could not be traced to Old Malay or Srivijayan cultural structures were excluded from analysis. Secondary data consisted of Old Malay inscriptions, Chinese Buddhist accounts, and established archaeological interpretations, all selected based on historical relevance, academic credibility, and verifiability.

Data analysis proceeded through three interconnected stages. First, textual and epigraphic materials were examined using philological hermeneutics and historical linguistics to identify Buddhist vocabulary, doctrinal references, and structural continuities between

Old Malay inscriptions and contemporary Riau Malay speech. Second, archaeological and spatial data from Muara Takus and related landscapes were analyzed through landscape and ritual archaeology to interpret architectural forms, settlement patterns, and sacred spatial organization. Philological hermeneutics and historical linguistic analysis were applied to these materials to examine Buddhist vocabulary, doctrinal references, and terminological continuities (Holmstedt, 2020). These textual findings were then contextualized within archaeological landscapes and material culture evidence from Muaro Jambi and Muara Takus, drawing on landscape and ritual archaeology to interpret architectural remains and sacred spatial organization (Swenson, 2015). The integration of ethnographic, textual, and material data enabled a comparative analysis of how Buddhist heritage has been historically recorded and contemporarily narrated within the Srivijayan cultural sphere, informed by broader theories of continuity and heritage formation (Cobb et al., 2025).

Third, ethnographic observations and oral narratives were subjected to narrative and interpretive analysis to identify recurring themes, symbolic motifs, and cultural logics that reflect long-term continuity. These analytical strands were then synthesized through historical comparative analysis, aligning textual, spatial, and ethnographic evidence to reconstruct how Srivijayan Buddhist heritage has been retained, adapted, and reinterpreted within the Islamic Malay identity of the Riau mainland. The data sources and the selection criteria are presented on Table 1 below.

Table 1
Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Type of Source	Description
Primary Sources	Primary sources included cultural practices, oral traditions, linguistic survivals, archaeological remains, and contemporary foreign records directly reflecting the continuity of Old Malay and Srivijayan influence in Riau. These materials provided firsthand evidence of ritual structure, linguistic patterns, spatial memory, and long-term cultural retention. The primary sources were treated as historical traces that preserved the transformation of Srivijayan Buddhist culture into the later Malay-Islamic identity.
<i>Linguistic Continuities</i>	Old Malay lexical survivals: <i>hulu, hilir, beliau</i> , numeral terms, kinship vocabulary
<i>Archaeological and Spatial Evidence in Riau</i>	Ritual landscapes reflecting Buddhist-era spatial organization
<i>External Documentary Sources</i>	Yijing’s 7th-century records describing Srivijaya as a Buddhist learning center
Secondary Sources	Epigraphic Studies: Analyses of Old Malay inscriptions

Source	Description	Selection Criteria
<i>Petang Megang</i>	pre-Ramadan purification ritual with pre-Islamic cosmological layers	Ritual, Social, and Intangible Traditions
<i>Lampu Colok</i>	festival of light with symbolic links to older ritual illumination	
<i>Baraan</i>	collective mobility resembling pre-Islamic communal cycles	
Communal eating from one tray	echoes of ancient kinship-based ritual meals	
<i>Ziarah kubur</i>	structured death-cycle ceremonies (10, 40, 100 days)	

Result and Discussion

Early Malay Statehood and Its Spread to Central Sumatra

Scholarly discussions on Srivijaya consistently highlight Old Malay inscriptions as the earliest evidence of its political formation and Buddhist orientation. Studies of the *Kedukan Bukit* (682 CE), *Talang Tuwo* (684 CE), and Kota Kapur (686 CE) inscriptions show that Srivijaya employed Old Malay for royal proclamations while expressing Buddhist ritual concepts, demonstrating a literate Malay polity grounded in Buddhist cosmology (*Sealang*) (Khairunnisa et al, 2024; Yenrizal, 2018; Abdilah, 2020). Research by epigraphers and linguists further argues that the use of Old Malay in these inscriptions indicates both state consolidation and a cultural framework aligned with Buddhist-Sanskritic traditions (Griffiths, 2018). This body of work establishes a widely accepted foundation that Srivijaya was not merely a maritime empire, but a major Malay-Buddhist center in the 7th century (Kumar, 2020).

Complementing the inscriptional record, previous scholarship also draws heavily on external accounts, particularly the writings of the Chinese monk Yijing (Sen and Saussy, 2018), who described Srivijaya as a prominent Buddhist learning hub in the late 7th century. Archaeological studies reinforce these textual claims through evidence from large ritual landscapes such as Muaro Jambi and the Muara Takus complex in Riau, which reflect architectural, religious, and settlement patterns associated with a Buddhist-oriented polity (Fajrin et al., 2021; Sukma and Sunarminto, 2016). Pradhani (2017); Sholeh (2017); Suswandari et al., (2021) consistently interpret these sites as physical manifestations of

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Srivijaya's regional influence and as indicators of sustained monastic activity and ritual practice. Together, these works create a cohesive scholarly narrative that positions Srivijaya within a broader Buddhist intellectual and cultural network across Sumatra.

More studies by Taim (2022) and Yahya et al., (2023) extend this discussion to Srivijaya's influence in central Sumatra, especially the Riau mainland. Ong and Troyer (2024) have shown that the distribution of inscriptions, the persistence of Old Malay linguistic features, and the archaeological presence of Buddhist structures in regions such as Kampar, Siak, and Kuantan Singingi reflect cultural transmission rather than simple trade interaction. These findings suggest that Riau functioned as an integrated part of Srivijaya's cultural sphere, maintaining ritual practices, toponymic patterns, and architectural forms shaped during the Buddhist phase of Malay history (Miksic, 2017). This article positions itself within that scholarly trajectory by emphasizing the need to interpret these traces not only as archaeological or linguistic evidence, but as components of a broader Malay Buddhist heritage that continues to inform cultural identity in Riau (Megianto et al., 2025).

Malay Heritage through Srivijaya Empire

Manguin (2023); Rahman (2016) widely agree that Srivijaya's legacy is documented through a combination of Old Malay inscriptions, Chinese Buddhist accounts, and archaeological evidence across Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula (Andhifani et al., 2025). Previous studies inscriptions consistently highlight the use of Old Malay for state communication and the articulation of royal authority using Buddhist cosmological language (Napitupulu et al.,

2023). Research on Yijing's seventh-century writings further strengthens this interpretation by identifying Srivijaya as a major Buddhist learning center that supported monastic study and scriptural preparation (Acharya, 2025). Archaeological analyses of monumental complexes such as Muaro Jambi and Muara Takus complement these textual interpretations (Putra, 2020), showing architectural forms and ritual landscapes consistent with a cosmopolitan Buddhist polity.

Building on these sources, Hassan et al., (2017) and Akmal (2023) have emphasized that Srivijaya shaped the intellectual and ritual foundations of early Malay culture. Studies by Lian (2015) and Sun (2024) argue that the Buddhist-oriented vocabulary embedded in Old Malay inscriptions contributed directly to the linguistic and conceptual framework of early Malay societies. Archaeologists and historians also interpret the presence of organized monastic communities and ritual infrastructure as evidence of sustained Buddhist influence that persisted despite later political shifts. This body of research collectively portrays Srivijaya as an agent of cultural transmission whose religious symbolism and knowledge systems were integrated into broader Malay cultural practices.

Moreover, Hamid (2018) extends this discussion by tracing how elements of Malay non-Islamic heritage continued into later historical periods. A study by Reddi et al. (2020) focusing on central and eastern Sumatra identifies Buddhist cosmological ideas, Sanskrit-influenced administrative terminology, and ritual traditions that survived into early Islamic Malay polities. Archaeological traces, toponymic survivals, and oral narratives across regions such

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as Riau further indicate a long cultural memory of Srivijaya's Buddhist past (Herwindo, 2025).

Evidence of Srivijayan Cultural Continuities in Riau Malay Traditions

Petang Megang (Figure 1)

The consistency of *petang megang* across central Riau settlements reflects an older ritual purification pattern that can be traced back to pre-Islamic Malay cosmology, profoundly shaped by Srivijayan Buddhist thought. Although no direct textual record from the Srivijaya period explicitly mentions a ritual identical to *petang megang*, the cultural logic behind space-cleansing, harmonizing the household, and preparing a purified environment before entering a sacred temporal phase aligns with purification frameworks documented in early Malay–Buddhist ritual vocabulary and spatial ethics. This worldview, preserved in Old Malay cultural spheres, framed purity as a prerequisite for auspicious cycles, a principle that later adapted seamlessly into Islamic ritual preparation.



Figure 1. Petang Megang in Pekanbaru

Source: Rumah Tuan Khadi, 2023 Photo by Author



Figure 2. Makan Bajamba in Malay Culture
Source: Rumah Tuan Khadi, 2023 Photo by Author

The survival of this ritual logic in Riau suggests that communities maintained older purification concepts even after Islam became dominant. Its endurance mirrors other purification traditions across the broader Malay world, such as *melukat* in older Malay-Hindu-Buddhist communities, which share the same foundational idea of cleansing the self or environment before transitioning into a spiritually significant period. The similarity points not to borrowing but to shared pre-Islamic Malay ritual structures that diversified regionally while keeping the same cosmological foundation. As a result, *petang megang* can be understood as a living cultural continuity from early Malay Buddhist ritual philosophy that was retained, reshaped, and Islamized while preserving its original structure and purpose.

Makan Bajamba (Figure 2)

Communal eating traditions in Kampar (*makan bajamba*), Rokan Hulu (*makan basamo*), and Pelalawan (*makan talam*) show continuity with older Old Malay communal ethics expressed in terms such as *sama rata*, *muafakat*, and *sekutu rasa*, which appear

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in early Malay textual traditions. These practices occur not only in weddings and harvest feasts but also in ritual gatherings such as *kenduri kampung*, *tolak bala*, and *menyambut musim*, all of which emphasize collective harmony rather than individual consumption. In the Srivijayan era, communal meals functioned as social equalizers that reinforced unity among members of a settlement or monastic group, a principle preserved in the way Riau communities still describe these meals as “*menyamakan rasa dan kedudukan*.” When adopted into Islamic contexts, the structure of eating together remained, but the symbolic meaning shifted toward blessing (*berkah*) and charity (*sedekah*), whereas the older Malay layer focused more on cohesion, equality, and shared identity. The persistence of these communal eating forms suggests that the Srivijayan-era communal ethos was absorbed into Islamic life in Riau without losing its pre-Islamic Malay social logic.

Death-Day-Circle

The structured death-day cycles in Riau Malay communities resemble those found in Bali because both traditions descend from older Indic time-reckoning systems, but in Riau the preserved pattern aligns more closely with Buddhist transitional cycles than with Balinese Hindu ritual specialization. Many Muslim Malays label these practices as “Hindu” simply because the public memory of Buddhism in the Malay world faded after Islam, even though the 7-day, 40-day, and 100-day intervals correspond to classical Buddhist mortuary timing found across Southeast Asia. While Srivijaya left no inscription explicitly instructing these rituals in Riau, the *timing structure* itself is the proof: the same day-cycle logic appears in Buddhist communities historically linked to early

Malay culture, and the pattern survived in inland Riau where older cultural layers remained intact. The continuity of these specific time intervals across Riau settlements therefore functions as indirect but strong cultural evidence that death-ritual timing was transmitted through early Malay Buddhist tradition and preserved long after the Srivijayan period ended.

Although many Buddhist regions practiced cremation, early Malay-Buddhist communities under Srivijaya showed mixed funerary customs, including inhumation, cairn-type burials, and secondary offerings, which makes burial with grave visitation fully compatible with the older Malay ritual landscape. Riau Malays likely did not cremate even before Islam, because local ancestor-veneration practices centered on *tanah keramat* and territorial ancestry, meaning the physical grave site itself carried spiritual and communal significance that cremation could not serve. The continued placing of flowers, water, and offerings during grave visits in Riau reflects this older pre-Islamic Malay relationship with the ancestor's resting place, which was later adapted but not erased by Islamic practice.

Riau Malay Linguistic Features Preserve Old Malay Structures With Regional Concentration

Linguistic evidence across Riau shows that many core lexemes and structural features are inherited directly from Old Malay, the language used in Srivijayan inscriptions, rather than borrowed later through Islamic or colonial contact. Districts such as Bengkalis, Siak, Indragiri Hulu, and Kuantan Singingi preserve vocabulary relating to direction (*hulu, hilir*), social respect (*beliau*), kinship (*bonda, ayahanda*), and cosmological categories forms that match

the Old Malay lexicon. These continuities reflect the deep linguistic substrate that developed during the Srivijayan period, when Old Malay functioned as an administrative and cultural lingua franca across central Sumatra, including the region that is now Riau.

Accent and dialect differences arose later due to localized settlement patterns, river-based isolation, migration waves, and the influence of Minangkabau, Orang Laut, and later Islamic networks, which caused phonological divergence while preserving core lexicon. Oral traditions in Riau, such as *pantun*, *gurindam*, and *syair tua* (Sulastris et al, 2022), maintain formulaic phrases and semantic patterns traceable to Old Malay rhetorical structures, indicating cultural-literary transmission over centuries. Taken together, Riau’s modern dialects show a layered linguistic system: Islamic-era vocabulary sits on top, but the foundational layer remains the Old Malay of Srivijaya.

Table 2.
Old Malay Lexemes Preserved in Riau Malay Dialects

Old Malay Word	Meaning (Old Malay)	Modern Riau Malay Form	Examples of Use in Riau Regions	Notes on Continuity
<i>hulu</i>	upper course of a river; upstream	<i>hulu</i>	Siak Hulu, Hulu Sungai in Kampar	Retains original geographic meaning; tied to riverine culture central to Srivijayan settlements.
<i>hilir</i>	downstream, lower course	<i>hilir</i>	Pelalawan Hilir, Hilir Perawang	Exact semantic preservation; reflects long-term continuity of

Old Malay Word	Meaning (Old Malay)	Modern Riau Malay Form	Examples of Use in Riau Regions	Notes on Continuity
<i>beliau</i>	honorific pronoun for a respected person	<i>beliau</i>	Widely used in Bengkalis, Siak	river-based orientation. Same function as in Old Malay inscriptions; indicates continuity in social hierarchy expression.
<i>bonda / ibunda</i>	mother	<i>bonda</i>	Found in rural Indragiri speech	Formal kinship term rooted in Old Malay court culture.
<i>ayahanda</i>	father (formal)	<i>ayahanda</i>	Siak, ceremonial contexts	Maintains classical courtly honorific register.
<i>sekutu / beseckutu</i>	allies, unity	<i>sekutu</i>	Used in adat meetings in Kampar	Reflects Old Malay political-social concepts.
<i>muafakat</i>	consensus, agreement	<i>muafakat</i>	Rokan Hulu adat councils	Central Old Malay socio-political value; survives in adat governance.
<i>rasa / serasa</i>	shared sense, harmony	<i>seraso / seraso bersama</i>	Communal feasts in Pelalawan	Retains classical meaning of emotional-communal harmony.
<i>benua</i>	land, region	<i>benua</i>	Found in oral histories in Indragiri	Ancient geographic classifier used since early

Old Malay Word	Meaning (Old Malay)	Modern Riau Malay Form	Examples of Use in Riau Regions	Notes on Continuity
<i>baharu</i>	new	<i>baru</i>	Widespread	Malay politics. Classical form simplified but preserved.

Although no audio records survive from the seventh century, the phonological and lexical profile of Srivijayan Old Malay can be reconstructed through inscriptions such as Kedukan Bukit, Telaga Batu, and Karang Brahi. These sources indicate that Srivijayan Malay preserved clear final vowels, with endings like *a*, *i*, and *u* pronounced rather than elided, a feature still strongly retained in many conservative Riau dialects. Diphthongs remained relatively stable, as seen in forms like *sungai* which appear consistently without later phonetic drift common in peninsular variants. Nasal endings such as *-m*, *-n*, and *-ng* were also fully retained, suggesting a phonological continuity that is still audible in Riau’s riverine communities.

The vocabulary of the period incorporated a significant layer of Sanskrit and honorific expressions, including terms such as *bhūmi*, *putra*, *punyā*, *hyang*, and *dātu*, indicating a sociopolitical culture shaped by Buddhism and early statecraft. Structurally, Srivijayan Old Malay used a subject–verb–object pattern identical to modern Malay, reinforcing the deep grammatical continuity shared between early Malay polities and present-day Riau speakers. Taken together, these features demonstrate that several key characteristics of Srivijayan Malay survive more faithfully in Riau than in many other regions of the Malay world.

The divergence of modern Riau dialects from their Srivijayan Old Malay base developed gradually through local ecological and historical pressures. River-based settlement patterns created isolated speech communities along the Kampar, Indragiri, Siak, and Rokan river corridors, promoting subtle phonological drift as each community interacted more with its immediate river neighbors than with coastal or inland groups. Over time, the influence of surrounding ethnolinguistic populations reshaped the sound and rhythm of Riau speech: Minangkabau features appeared in Kuantan Singingi, coastal Bengkalis absorbed patterns from the Orang Laut, and several coastal settlements received influences from Acehnese and Javanese mobility.

Islamization added a new lexical layer drawn from Arabic, especially in religious and ethical vocabulary, though this process tended to coexist with, rather than replace, the older Srivijayan-era lexicon. Meanwhile, the rise of the Siak Sultanate introduced a prestige register of court Malay that differed from the more trade-oriented coastal Malay spoken in Bengkalis, further widening dialect boundaries within the province. Despite these successive layers of change, the basic lexicon and syntactic backbone of Riau Malay remain anchored in the Old Malay established during Srivijaya's linguistic expansion.

Riau's oral traditions preserve several elements that point to continuity with Old Malay literary culture, forming a bridge between contemporary Malay identity and earlier pre-Islamic expression. The structure and metaphorical logic of Pantun Riau closely match Old Malay poetic forms, while Siak's *Gurindam Dua Belas* (Sahril, 2020), though composed in a later period, relies on classical

parallelism and didactic rhetoric characteristic of older courtly registers. In Indragiri, *syair tua* contains archaisms not found in peninsular variants, suggesting an older stratum of vocabulary still circulating through local performance. Similarly, oral narratives from Kampar and Rokan especially the *hikayat rantaian lisan* describing the origins of rivers, hills, and ancestral settlements retain cosmological motifs that echo pre-Islamic, Srivijayan-era understandings of landscape and sacred space.

	
<p><i>Riau Songket with Muara Takus Motif</i> Source: Rumah Tenun Kampung Bandar, 2025 Photo by Author</p>	<p><i>Palembang Malay Songket Motif</i> Source: Palembang, South Sumatera, 2025 Photo by Chatarina</p>
	
<p><i>Riau Malay Headpieces</i> Source: Universitas Riau, 2025 Photo by Author</p>	<p><i>Palembang Malay Headpieces</i> Source: SD Frater Xaverius 2, Palembang Photo by Chatarina</p>

Figure 3. Riau Malay Textile Compared to Palembang Malay Textile (which has influenced by Srivijaya Heritages)

Even *mantera* and *jampi* in rural Riau preserve formulaic Old Malay phrases invoking balance, direction, and natural forces, reflecting a worldview that predates the Islamic overlay. Collectively, these oral forms function as “living linguistic fossils,” maintaining deep-time continuity between modern Riau Malay and the literary-ritual culture shaped during the Srivijayan period.

Material and Dress Traditions in Riau with Srivijayan Roots

Textile Heritage: Songket and Gold-Thread Weaving Traditions (figure 3)

Songket traditions in Riau, especially in Siak, Pelalawan, and Indragiri Hilir, preserve weaving techniques that reflect the broader maritime Malay textile culture linked to Srivijaya’s prestige-goods economy. Archaeological and textual evidence from the Srivijaya period indicates that gold-thread cloth (*suvarṇapattra*) circulated as elite regalia in Old Malay courts, and modern Riau songket shows continuity in motif categories such as pucuk rebung, naga berjuang, and bunga bintang, which correspond to Buddhist–cosmological patterning from the 8th–10th centuries. Although no physical textiles survive from Srivijaya, the persistence of these motifs in Riau especially in royal Siak songket demonstrates a direct aesthetic inheritance from earlier courtly textile traditions in Sumatra’s Buddhist-Malay polities.

Court Dress Traditions: Baju Kurung, Tengkuluk, and Malay Female Attire

The *baju kurung* Riau, especially in Siak and Lingga cultural zones, retains pre-Islamic silhouettes associated with Old Malay court attire: long tunics, straight-cut garments, and textile layering patterns typical of Southeast Asian Buddhist states. Before Islam became dominant in the 14th–16th centuries, women in the Malay world including the Riau archipelagic corridor did not wear hijab; instead, women used *tengkuluk*, *selendang*, or *kain kepala*, a form of cloth-wrapping already known in Indic-influenced courts, including Srivijaya. The shift from *tengkuluk* to Islamic hijab only became widespread in Riau after the 19th century, following reforms in Siak led by Syarif Kasim II and increased Middle Eastern influence. This demonstrates that current Malay female dress is an Islamic-era modification layered over an older Srivijayan-Malay textile culture.

Male Ceremonial Dress: Teluk Belanga, Cekak Musang, and Pre-Islamic Court Features

Riau's male ceremonial attire *baju teluk belanga*, *baju cekak musang*, and *kain sampung* retains elements of older Malay court garments, particularly the *ikat pinggang*, *pending*, and *destar*, which have deep roots in Indic-Buddhist statecraft. These accessories mirror regalia traditions documented in Old Malay inscriptions, where rulers wore symbolic waistcloths, gold belts, and headgear associated with cosmic kingship. In regions such as Indragiri Hulu and Rokan Hulu, the *destar*-wrapping styles (such as *tanjak belalai*

gajah) maintain symbolic motifs consistent with Srivijayan cosmology, including naga, gunung, and matahari. Thus, Riau male dress represents a layered cultural survival in which Islamic tailoring overlays a much older aesthetic structure.

Jewelry and Body Ornamentation Linked to Srivijayan Aesthetic Systems

Traditional Riau jewelry especially in Siak and Pelalawan preserves forms of goldwork resembling Sumatra's early Buddhist court ornamentation. Items such as pending (belt buckles), *anting-anting*, *kalung bersusun*, and *cucuk sanggul* mirror ornament types found in Srivijayan-era gold hoards from the broader Sumatran region. While these exact artifacts have not been excavated in Riau, the stylistic continuity indicates the retention of elite Sumatra-wide aesthetics, particularly plant motifs and cosmic symbols associated with Buddhist iconography. This suggests that Riau's traditional jewelry forms an indirect but strong cultural descent from Srivijaya's aristocratic material culture.

Color Symbolism and Textile Cosmology: Gold, Red, and Deep Blue

Riau Malay ceremonial dress makes heavy use of *emas* (gold), *merah hati* (deep red), and *biru tua*, colors that correspond closely to cosmological and royal codes in Srivijayan Buddhist state symbolism. Gold represented merit (*punya*) and royal authority, red denoted vitality and auspiciousness, and deep blue was associated with depth, water, and the maritime cosmos concepts consistent with

Buddhist maritime state cosmology. These color codes appear prominently in Siak court garments, Pelalawan songket, and Kampar ceremonial cloths, showing a sustained semantic continuity between early Malay Buddhist aesthetics and present-day Riau cultural identity.

Surviving Embroidery and Motif Systems With Pre-Islamic Meanings

Embroidery patterns such as *pucuk rebung*, *awan berarak*, *naga berjuang*, and *pohon hayat* remain widely used in Riau textiles, particularly in Bengkalis and Siak. Many of these motifs originate in pre-Islamic cosmological systems linked to Srivijaya (Suroyo et al, 2024): *pucuk rebung* represents growth and Buddhist merit; *pohon hayat* reflects Indic cosmic tree symbolism; *awan* motifs symbolize transitional realms; and *naga* motifs derive from Buddhist protective iconography. The survival of these motifs in modern Riau indicates that Islamic reinterpretation never erased the deeper Srivijayan symbolic grammar embedded in local textile culture.

Headcloth Traditions: Tengkuluk and Tanjak as Survival of Early Malay Court Protocol

The use of *tengkuluk* (female) and *tanjak/destar* (male) in Riau's cultural ceremonies reflects early Malay court protocol that predates Islam and aligns with Srivijaya's Indic-Buddhist court culture. In Pelalawan and Kampar, women still wear *tengkuluk* for *adat*

ceremonies, showing a structural continuity with early medieval Malay headcloth traditions. The survival of these forms—now incorporated into Islamic occasions reveals that Riau’s dress system is essentially a Srivijayan-era court culture that has adapted, rather than disappeared, in the Islamic period.

Petang Megang as Continuity of Pre-Islamic Malay–Non-Islam Purification Logic

The persistence of *petang megang* across Riau aligns with the argument made by scholars who emphasize the endurance of pre-Islamic ritual structures within later Malay Islamization processes (Milner, 2022). Studies on Old Malay ritual vocabulary demonstrate that household purification and spatial harmonization formed essential components of Srivijayan-era cosmology, especially concerning transitions into sacred temporal cycles (Kholid et al., 2017). This is consistent with Bell’s ritual theory, which holds that communities preserve the “logic” of ritual action even when the religious layer changes (Bell and Kreinath, 2021). The alignment of ritual structure rather than identical ritual form supports the interpretation that *petang megang* represents a continuity of early Malay–Buddhist purification ethics adapted into Islamic praxis.

Comparative research on Southeast Asian cleansing rituals notes shared Indic-Buddhist foundations between traditions such as *melukat* in Bali and earlier Malay purification customs (Suroyo et al., 2022). Although no Srivijayan inscription explicitly refers to *petang megang*, theoretical work on cultural survivals argues that continuity is best traced through functional and conceptual

structures rather than literal textual matches (Ronderos et al., 2021). The fact that Riau communities maintain the ritual sequence of cleansing prior to entering a spiritually heightened period mirrors patterns observed in other regions that historically inherited Buddhist ritual logic (Rodríguez et al., 2017). These convergences reinforce the interpretation that *petang megang* reflects a deep pre-Islamic ritual substrate embedded within Riau Malay cultural memory.

Makan Bajamba and the Persistence of Old Malay Communal Ethics

Communal eating traditions in Kampar, Rokan Hulu, and Pelalawan resonate with early Malay sociocultural concepts described in Old Malay inscriptions and epigraphic scholarship (Griffiths, 2018). Researchers note that terms such as *muafakat*, *sekutu*, and *sama rasa* predate Islam and reflect a Srivijayan-era ethos of social cohesion within riverine communities (Yakub, 2017). The ritual gatherings in Riau *kenduri kampung*, *tolak bala*, and *menyambut musim* retain this communal logic by prioritizing collective emotional unity over individual consumption (Fan and Zietsma, 2017). This aligns with anthropological theories of communal identity formation, which argue that food-sharing rituals function as continuity mechanisms for collective identity (Vasconcellos, 2024).

Historical analyses of Srivijayan monastic settlements note frequent references to communal meals as instruments of social equalization within religious and political communities (Chee-Beng, 2015). The continuity between these earlier structures and modern Riau practices is evident in the shared emphasis on leveling status

differences during shared meals, a principle repeatedly documented in early Malay sociopolitical norms (Carruthers, 2018). When Islam arrived, the theological layer changed but the ritual grammar of collectivizing through food-sharing remained intact, demonstrating adaptive continuity rather than rupture (Yadav et al., 2025). This interpretation supports scholars who contend that Islamic Malay rituals often carry an older substratum of pre-Islamic Malay ethics beneath their contemporary forms (Hillenbrand, 2024).

Death-Day Cycles and Indic-Buddhist Temporal Frameworks in Riau

The structured cycles of 7-, 40-, and 100-day commemorations in Riau fit within the broader Southeast Asian Buddhist mortuary timing systems described in regional Buddhist anthropology (Radner, 2015). Although modern Malays often attribute these customs to Hinduism, comparative ritual studies show that such timing schemes were widespread in Buddhist communities during the Srivijayan period (Ramesh, 2025). The absence of explicit Srivijayan inscriptions describing these rituals does not undermine continuity, because mortuary timing is typically transmitted orally and rarely recorded textually (Kulke, 2016). The presence of identical timing structures across multiple Riau districts supports the hypothesis that these practices were inherited from early Malay–Buddhist temporal cosmology (Bin Mohd Zain, 2020).

Historical archaeology has demonstrated that Srivijayan-period funerary customs included both cremation and inhumation, contradicting the assumption that Malays must have cremated their dead prior to Islam (Ibrahim et al., 2018). Studies on early Malay

ancestor veneration indicate that sacred territoriality and *tanah keramat* were central to communal identity, making burial and site visitation culturally coherent even in pre-Islamic times (Sevea, 2024). The continued use of flowers, water offerings, and grave visitation in Riau reflects this pre-Islamic relationship between community, ancestor, and landscape (Ardhana, 2022). Islamic reinterpretation layered over rather than replaced these deeper territorial-ancestral values, resulting in hybrid but continuous Riau mortuary traditions (Manan et al., 2024).

Linguistic Continuity: Old Malay Structures in Modern Riau Dialects

Linguistic research consistently identifies Riau as one of the regions where Old Malay features survive most robustly, particularly in terms of lexicon and phonological stability (Natalia et al., 2024). Words such as *hulu*, *hilir*, *beliau*, and *bonda* are repeatedly cited in linguistic literature as remnants of Srivijayan administrative and cultural vocabulary (Pane, 2024). The geographic distribution of these lexemes corresponds with districts historically integrated into Srivijaya's inland–riverine communication networks (Nugraha et al., 2025). This spatial alignment supports the theory that language continuity in Riau is tied to long-term cultural stability within these riverine corridors (Hafiz, 2022).

The divergence among Riau dialects aligns with settlement-isolation theories, which argue that riverine ecosystems foster micro-variation in phonological development (Yusna et al., 2024). External influences from Minangkabau, Orang Laut, and later Islamic networks further diversified dialect boundaries without displacing

the core Old Malay layer Sidauruk et al., 2024). Oral traditions such as *pantun*, *syair tua*, and *gurindam* preserve rhetorical structures consistent with early Malay literary patterns, reinforcing the argument that linguistic continuity is cultural as well as grammatical (Sardila et al., 2024). Together, these findings confirm that modern Riau Malay dialects are evolutionary branches of the Old Malay used during Srivijaya rather than later imports (Yaapar, 2019; Suroyo et al., 2023).

Srivijayan Features in Riau Material and Dress Traditions

The continuity of *songket* motifs such as *pucuk rebung*, *naga*, and *bunga bintang* mirrors the cosmological patterning documented in early Sumatran Buddhist art, as observed in archaeological syntheses of Srivijayan aesthetics (Cassandra et al., 2023). Scholars argue that although textiles rarely survive archaeologically, motif persistence is a reliable indicator of cultural transmission in Southeast Asia (Berezkin, 2016; Suroyo et al., 2024). The distribution of these motifs in Siak, Pelalawan, and Indragiri aligns with regions historically linked to Srivijaya's prestige-goods economy (Guslinda and Kurniaman, 2020). This correspondence suggests that Riau's textile traditions maintain an aesthetic lineage rooted in early Malay court culture (Purwati et al., 2023).

Research on Malay dress history indicates that baju kurung silhouettes, headcloth forms, and gold ornamentation reflect pre-Islamic court attire associated with Indic-Buddhist polities (Ober et al., 2016). The shift toward Islamic hijab styles in Riau only became dominant in the nineteenth century, a transition documented in Siak historical records and supported by textile historians (Sapitri et al.,

2022). The persistence of *tengkuluk*, *tanjak*, and gold regalia in ceremonial contexts illustrates how Islamic identity layered over, rather than replaced, the older Srivijayan-derived aesthetic system (Milligan, 2020). This synthesis aligns with theories of cultural layering, which describe dress traditions as cumulative rather than substitutive across historical periods (Fülemile, 2020).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Srivijayan Buddhist cultural structures continue to shape contemporary Riau Malay identity through enduring ritual, linguistic, and spatial continuities. The analysis shows that purification practices such as *petang megang*, communal eating traditions, and structured death-day cycles preserve pre-Islamic Malay–Buddhist logics that were later adapted within Islamic frameworks. Linguistic survivals of Old Malay vocabulary and phonological features further confirm long-term cultural retention. These findings directly answer the research question by showing that Riau Malay identity is not the result of cultural rupture but an adaptive continuation of Srivijayan Buddhist heritage embedded within an Islamic cultural matrix.

The study’s methodological limitations stem from its reliance on publicly accessible archaeological interpretations, non-intrusive ethnographic observation, and the absence of direct ritual texts from the Srivijayan period. These constraints require cautious interpretation of spatial and toponymic evidence and limit the ability to establish definitive chronological links. Future research would benefit from deeper archaeological collaboration, expanded linguistic reconstruction across Riau sub-dialects, and comparative

ethnography with other former Srivijayan regions to refine models of cultural continuity and transformation.

Overall, this research contributes a significant reframing of Malay cultural historiography by demonstrating that Riau Malay identity is historically layered and shaped by adaptive cultural retention rather than religious replacement. By foregrounding the persistence of Srivijayan Buddhist structures within Islamic Malay life, the study provides a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding cultural continuity in the Malay world and invites scholars to reconsider the deep civilizational strata that inform contemporary Malay identity.

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