

From Shared Past to Common Future: A Historical Review of Indonesia-Malaysia Relations

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical ties between Indonesia and Malaysia by tracing the European pursuit of spices, which led to colonial domination in the region. Central to this history is the strategic role of the Strait of Malacca as a vital corridor for trade and cultural exchange, and the significance of Ternate's spices as a highly valued commodity. These interactions brought together diverse ethnic groups—including Malay and European traders—forming a foundation of cooperation that can inspire present and future relations. Following the end of colonialism, Indonesia and Malaysia, as part of the broader Malay world, embarked on a quest for national and collective identity. Shared cultural, linguistic, historical, and religious ties offer valuable social capital that can be leveraged to foster deeper regional collaboration. This paper argues that revisiting and revitalizing shared historical narratives—especially through joint academic, civil society, and community-based initiatives—can enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. In an increasingly globalized world, drawing on this common past can contribute to building a more stable and integrated future for Indonesia, Malaysia, and the wider Malay world.

Keywords

Indonesia-Malaysia relations, history, spice trade, shared identity, cooperations, colonialism

Introduction

Indonesia and Malaysia are two prominent nations in Southeast Asia with a significant Islamic cultural influence. Both countries have played important roles not only in shaping the regional dynamics

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of Southeast Asia but also in contributing to broader global developments. This paper seeks to examine the significance of exploring the shared historical experiences between Indonesia and Malaysia and to analyze how these historical connections can inform and shape the future trajectories of both nations. While the bilateral relationship has experienced periods of tension, the overall trend in recent decades indicates a positive and increasingly cooperative dynamic.

In light of this, the central question posed in this paper is: how has the historical relationship between the Malay peoples—particularly those of Indonesia and Malaysia—shaped their contemporary interactions? Academically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on Indonesia–Malaysia relations by offering a historical and cultural perspective. Practically, it aims to foster a deeper mutual understanding that can support enhanced bilateral cooperation and shared prosperity.

To address this question, the paper begins by examining the historical allure of spices that attracted European powers to the East and led to the colonial subjugation of the region, particularly the Maluku Islands. It then analyzes the strategic importance of the Strait of Malacca as a major trade route and explores the foundations of regional connectivity among Malay communities, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. The paper concludes by discussing contemporary forms of cooperation between the two nations and how historical bonds can serve as a foundation for future collaboration.

Maluku Spices as An Attraction for European Colonialism

In 1912, Henry N. Ridley noted that during China’s Han Dynasty (3rd century BCE), court officials were required to hold cloves (*syzygium aromaticum*) in their mouths when meeting the emperor (Hasan 2001). This highlights the early value of cloves, which made Ternate—part of the Maluku Islands—internationally renowned as the “Spice Island.” Ridley, as cited in Amal (2013), also referred to

archaeological findings in Mesopotamia (present-day Syria) dating from the 3rd century BCE, which included clove remains—despite cloves being endemic only to Maluku.

Chinese, Indian, and Roman sources indicate that cloves entered international trade by the first millennium BCE. The Ramayana epic mentions cloves as medicinal, and by 70 BCE, Pliny the Elder documented their presence in Europe, traded primarily by Arab and European merchants. Yet even into the 13th century, the geographical source of cloves remained largely unknown in Europe (Amal 2013).

In Eastern literature, references to Maluku spices appear as early as the Han Dynasty under the name “Chicken Tongue Spice” (*rempah-rempah lidah ayam*), or *ting hiang*, referring to their nail-like shape. Cloves were widely used in medicine, cooking, and perfumery. Pliny’s *Natural History* (77 CE) mentions *caryophylon*, a pungent spice from India, but distinguishes it from cloves, which he correctly identified as exclusive to the Maluku region.

Between 176–180 CE, Egyptian customs records from Alexandria documented clove imports from the East, indicating cloves had entered the Mediterranean trade network by the second century (Amal 2013). Jack Turner (2011), in *The History of Temptation*, described the European obsession with spices as a pursuit of “the taste of the past.” In medieval Europe, cloves were praised as “the taste of paradise,” “the spice of life,” and even “the spice of love.” They were associated with purity, sensuality, and divine offerings—symbolizing both luxury and status due to their rarity and high cost.

Ternate, renowned as one of the “Spice Islands,” was historically known for its primary commodity—cloves. Its strategic location in North Maluku positioned it as a vital center of spice trade and attracted interest from various ethnic and trading groups worldwide. With the opening of Ternate Port as a free port in 1854, the region witnessed increased international trade; between 1854 and 1901, at least 35 foreign vessels docked at the port to export agricultural products to European markets (Hasyim 2013, 77–80).

The lucrative nature of the clove trade was illustrated in 1521 when remnants of Magellan's fleet arrived in Tidore and filled their ships with cloves. Upon encountering Portuguese sailors, the Spanish crew were questioned about the price they had paid. While the Portuguese suspected they had overpaid, the Spanish responded with a smile, stating they had, in fact, acquired the spices at a bargain (Amal 2013). This encounter highlights the immense profit margins that motivated thousands of ships—from Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, England, Arabia, China, and Gujarat—to brave maritime dangers in pursuit of Maluku's spices.

By the 17th century, the Maluku Islands had become a global trading hub, drawing European powers eager to colonize the region for economic gain. Local commodities such as cloves and nutmeg were exchanged for essential goods and luxury items imported from Java, India, China, and the Arabian Peninsula, primarily through the international trade center of Malacca on the Malay Peninsula (Acemoglu and Robinson 2014, 283).

The first direct contact between the indigenous peoples of the Maluku Islands and Europeans occurred in the 16th century, marked by the arrival of Portuguese sailors, soon followed by other European powers. Their interest was sparked by the romanticized allure of the "Spice Islands," as noted by Miller (2011, xxi). Prior to this, spices from the East had reached Europe via Middle Eastern trade routes dominated by the Ottoman Empire. Motivated by both profit and strategic interest, European nations sought alternative maritime routes—around Africa or across the Atlantic—to gain direct access to the source of these valuable commodities.

In 1511, the Portuguese successfully captured the Port of Malacca, recognizing its pivotal role in controlling the spice trade. That same year, Anthonij Albreus was dispatched with three ships to chart a course to Maluku (van Hovevell 2014, 19). The strategic significance of Malacca was emphasized by the Portuguese traveler Tomé Pires, who wrote in 1515: "All trade contacts between nations

and all business affairs must be carried out in the city of Malacca... Whoever controls Malacca can certainly defeat the greatness of Venice” (Acemoglu and Robinson 2014, 284).

According to Andaya (1993 in Miller 2011, xxv), the conquest of Malacca marked the beginning of “a long search for the greatest treasure”—the cloves of Ternate and Tidore. Chinese records document how Maluku’s cloves, nutmeg, and mace were exchanged in Malacca for Indian pearls, gold, jade, horses, pistachios, and glassware (Dick-Read 2008, 77). In Maluku, the Portuguese allied with the Sultanate of Ternate, while Spain supported the Sultanate of Tidore—two local powers engaged in ongoing rivalry. Both islands became critical trading ports where European ships were loaded with high-value spices for export to Europe (Miller 2011, xxv).

By the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Dutch entered the competition with ambitions to dominate the spice trade. They sought to secure influence from the King of Ternate, whose domain included many spice-producing islands (van Hoeyvell 2014, 97). In 1600, the Dutch persuaded the ruler of Ambon to grant them a monopoly over clove exports. Two years later, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) was established and quickly deployed a large fleet to enforce their dominance. In 1605, the VOC successfully seized the main Portuguese stronghold in Malacca. Between 1558 and 1605, the Dutch had already sent 22 ships to the archipelago, led in part by Vice Admiral Wybrand van Warwijck (Amal 2013).

The enforcement of Dutch monopoly policies brought considerable profits to the Netherlands but had devastating effects on the local economy. The Maluku Islands, once prosperous, were reduced to poverty and stagnation as a result of this extractive colonial system (Acemoglu and Robinson 2014, 286–289).

Upon their return to Amsterdam, the Dutch reaped enormous profits from their expedition to Maluku. The voyage led by Cornelis de Houtman reportedly yielded a net profit of approximately 400%, excluding expenses related to shipbuilding, crew wages,

and logistics. This financial success far surpassed the expectations of Dutch investors and ignited enthusiasm for future commercial ventures in the East Indies (Amal 2013).

Despite encountering significant challenges—including Portuguese control over Malacca and its maritime trade routes—de Houtman successfully navigated his fleet through contested waters. At the time, the Portuguese, embroiled in conflict with the Spanish over the Maluku spice trade, had issued a “shoot on sight” directive against unauthorized entrants. Nevertheless, de Houtman, demonstrating considerable navigational skill, managed to reach the port of Banten safely. His expedition, which traveled via the Cape of Good Hope, involved four ships—two of which returned to Amsterdam laden with valuable spices, especially pepper, a highly sought-after commodity in Europe at the time (Amal 2013).

On June 26, 1607, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) formalized a monopoly agreement with the Sultanate of Ternate following their assistance in expelling Spanish forces from the island. Article 4 of the VOC–Ternate agreement stipulated that the Sultanate would exclusively sell its spices to the VOC, effectively ending the centuries-long tradition of free trade. This marked the beginning of VOC control not only over the spice trade but also over aspects of Ternate’s governance. The loss of sovereignty occurred gradually and subtly (Amal 2013).

As part of the agreement, the VOC requested land for a fort, which was ultimately established in Kampung Melayu due to its available space. The construction was carried out by 500 unpaid local workers, mobilized daily under the direction of Jogugu Hidayat, a high-ranking official of the Sultanate. These workers assisted Dutch engineers for a full year to complete the fort, after which additional buildings for administration, storage, and military housing were erected.

Following the fort’s completion and the stationing of 150 Dutch soldiers, the VOC reorganized the surrounding settlements. The Bugis/Makassar community, present since the 14th century,

was relocated to the left side of the fort, now known as Kampung Makassar, and their leader was appointed *Kapitein der Schuttery*, a colonial title signifying responsibility for maintaining order.

To the right of the fort, a settlement for Chinese immigrants was established, whose leader held the title *Kapitein der Chinezen* due to their large population. Further west, the VOC designated an Arab quarter led by a *Luitenant der Arabieren*, reflecting their smaller numbers. All three communities were classified as colonial subjects under VOC jurisdiction. Notably, the leader of the adjacent Malay Village did not receive an official title, highlighting the VOC's selective approach to authority and recognition (Amal 2013).

In Ternate, the VOC delineated the city into three distinct zones. The first was the Sultanate Area, stretching from the present-day Jalan Rambutan northward to Dorpedo. This area was reserved for the subjects of the Ternate Sultanate, where churches were prohibited and European settlement was not allowed. The second was the Government Area (*Gouvernement Gebied*), located in Kampung Makassar, south of Jalan Rambutan to Toboko. This zone housed a mosque and a church, and its multiethnic population included Bugis/Makassar, Chinese, Arabs, Malays, Dutch, Manadonese, Sangirese, and people from Ternate, Halmahera, and Tidore. Residents in this area were classified as government subjects.

The southern part of Ternate was under Spanish control at the time, centered in Gamlamo. The VOC established a demarcation line from Toboko to Ave-Taduma to separate their area from the Spanish-controlled territory. This southern zone was inhabited by native Ternate people who had refused to evacuate during the Spanish attack in 1605, as well as Tidorese who had allied with Spain during its invasion of Ternate. This VOC's spatial division of Ternate was an early manifestation of its political and economic intervention in the Sultanate's internal affairs, aimed primarily at maximizing profits from the spice trade in European markets (Amal 2013).

Malacca: The Spice Trade Route

There were two main spice trade routes: the Nusantara route and the international route (Amal, 2013). The Nusantara route extended as far as Malacca, which, during the Middle Ages, was the largest and most significant port in Southeast Asia. It served as a major trading hub where merchants from Java, Gujarat, Arabia, China, and the Malay Peninsula converged.

Initially, the spice trade in Malacca was dominated by Chinese traders, who were the first to discover that cloves were native exclusively to the Maluku Islands. To maintain their trade advantage, they kept the exact origin of cloves secret, even bringing them to India, where it was widely believed that cloves came from Java. These Chinese traders obtained spices from local merchants—particularly from Ternate, Tidore, and Bacan—who transported cloves and nutmeg to Hitu and Banda in Ambon. From there, the goods were moved to major trade ports such as Gresik, Tuban, Surabaya, Pekalongan, Banten, and ultimately Malacca, which functioned as the primary commercial gateway of the region.

Although Malacca eventually fell to the Portuguese, the spice market there remained active. After a brief downturn, trade resumed and the port regained its prominence. According to Adnan Amal (2013), due to the efforts of Sultan Kumala Putu of Ternate, the center of the spice trade gradually shifted from Hitu to Ternate, Tidore, and Bacan by the 14th century. Inter-island traders who once frequented Hitu began sailing directly to the capitals of these kingdoms. By 1320, merchants from Java, the Malay world, China, and Arabia had begun settling in Ternate, with similar developments occurring in Tidore and Bacan.

The international spice trade was one of the most profitable yet high-risk enterprises in history. As early as 350 BC, Chinese merchants engaged in spice trade with India, Sri Lanka, and the East African coast, dealing in commodities such as pepper from India and cinnamon from China and Burma. For Southeast Asia, Malacca

served as the principal international port and trading hub from which spices were distributed to India and China (Amal 2013).

During the Middle Ages, particularly in the golden age of the Mughals under Kublai Khan, the spice trade also utilized overland routes, most notably the Silk Road, which connected China to the Middle East. From there, spices were shipped by sea to Venetian ports, and then transported overland to cities like Damascus and Aleppo in the Mediterranean. However, when the Ottoman Turks gained control of these regions, the trade routes were redirected through the Red Sea in the mid-15th century, dominated by Muslim traders from Gujarat and Cambay in northwest India, as well as Mamluk traders from Egypt.

Transporting spices overland was fraught with challenges. Merchants had to pay numerous levies to local authorities and communities along the route, significantly cutting into their profits. Despite the difficulties, both the Nusantara and international trade routes made Maluku spices a unifying commodity that connected numerous nations through Malacca.

These trade interactions also fostered cultural and economic exchange. Spices were often bartered for luxury items such as ceramics, silk, and other valuable goods from foreign lands. Moreover, the widespread use of the Malay language as a *lingua franca* among traders facilitated not only economic cooperation but also political and socio-cultural interactions. This included the mingling of diverse communities and the gradual emergence of what would later become Indonesian, rooted in the Malay language.

The Search for a Collective Malay Identity

In the modern era, the emergence of Malay nationalism reflects deep-seated affinities in religion, ethnicity, and language among Malay peoples (Rahardjo 1989, xxv). Although the expressions of nationalism in Malaysia and Indonesia developed along different political trajectories, the sense of shared heritage remains potent.

In 1964, Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal proposed a “MAPILINDO” commonwealth (Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia), setting aside differences of religion—since the Philippines is majority Catholic—language—where English is the official Philippine tongue—and political systems. Indonesia’s President Sukarno, in turn, invoked Malay solidarity when he declared during the 1964 confrontation, “Strengthen the revolution’s resilience and support the revolutionary struggle of the peoples of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, and Brunei against the puppet State of Malaysia” (Rahardjo 1989, xxvi).

M. Dawam Rahardjo argues that the Malay-speaking communities dispersed across Southeast Asia share a fraternal bond severed only by colonial “divide and rule” policies. These arbitrary boundaries compelled Malays to adopt distinct national identities—Indonesian, Malaysian, Thai, Filipino, even Sri Lankan or Surinamese—yet cultural unity endures. Above all, the Malay language and the Islamic faith continue to serve as the strongest ties binding these communities into a single, transnational Malay nation (Rahardjo 1989, xxvi).

The collective identity of the Malay nation—particularly in the contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia—can be understood through shared environmental, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and historical characteristics. Despite the political boundaries that now separate Malay populations across different countries, these commonalities have continued to foster a sense of unity and cultural affinity, enabling regional cooperation and sustaining a transnational Malay identity across Southeast Asia.

Shared Environment

According to Anthony Reid (2014), Southeast Asians have historically shared similar dietary patterns, notably the consumption of rice, fish, and various palm-based products. The region lacks expansive grasslands and herding traditions, resulting in low levels

of animal protein consumption. Rice has been a dietary staple for millennia, often paired with dried fish, which, as Crawford (1820) noted, was a vital commodity in Southeast Asian trade (Reid 2014, 34). Similarly, sago, coconut, and palm sugar are common culinary ingredients throughout the region.

The region's natural environment also shapes its architecture and settlement patterns. Forests and waterways play a central role in daily life, especially in sparsely populated areas. Abundant tropical resources such as wood, palm, and bamboo are widely used in construction. Traditional Southeast Asian dwellings—such as stilt houses—are typically built near coastal areas or rivers, offering safety from wild animals and human threats (Reid 2014, 8).

During the 15th to 17th centuries, Southeast Asia experienced a vibrant era of trade and interaction known as the Age of Commerce. Maritime cities such as Pasai, Malacca, Johor, Patani, Aceh, and Brunei were significant hubs of economic and cultural exchange. During this period, the Malay language emerged as a dominant lingua franca, facilitating communication and integration across the region (Reid 2014, 9–10). Trade networks centered in Malacca, for instance, were driven by the highly sought-after spice trade originating from the Maluku Islands.

Shared Religious Identity

Among the many unifying elements of Malay identity, Islam stands out as one of the most significant (Al-Attas 1977). One of the key contributions of Sufi Muslims in the Islamization of the Malay world was their ability to synthesize Islamic teachings with local religious beliefs and traditions, demonstrating tolerance toward pre-Islamic practices (Osman 1989: 89). As Islam spread throughout the region, it absorbed and adapted various local cultural elements, resulting in new expressions of religious understanding. One such example is the veneration of saints and pilgrimages to their gravesites, a form of Islamic mysticism often referred to as “the worship of sacredness.”

Although such practices are commonly observed in Malay society, they are not officially endorsed by religious scholars or the ulama (Osman 1989, 90).

Persian cultural and religious influence has also been evident among the Malays. Mohd Taib Osman (1989) notes, for instance, that the title “Shah”, used by Malay sultans and kings, reflects Persian influence. This usage continues today in places like Melaka and Ternate, where rulers still bear names such as Sultan Mudaffar Sjah in the Ternate Sultanate.

Although Islam plays a central role in shaping Malay identity, other shared elements—such as common language, historical experiences, and ethnic origin—also contribute to the broader sense of Malay unity. Prior to the introduction of major world religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the early Malay communities practiced animistic and shamanistic traditions, which were closely tied to their natural environment. Over time, acculturation occurred as these communities encountered and integrated new religious and philosophical systems introduced by outside cultures.

A crucial force in the spread and development of Islam in the Malay world has been the role of the ulama (Islamic scholars). This role continues today, especially in the transmission of Islamic knowledge and intellectual development. One contemporary example is Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, who has served as a major intellectual figure in both Indonesia and Malaysia. His ideas inspired the founding of organizations such as the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilizations (INSISTS) in 2003, which promotes the Islamization of knowledge (Bachtiar 2017; Syukur 2019). Al-Attas’ intellectual influence parallels that of earlier scholars like Buya Hamka, the renowned Indonesian cleric and author from Maninjau, West Sumatra. Al-Attas’ seminal works—including *Islam and Secularism*, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, and *Islam: The Covenants Fulfilled*—continue to serve as key references for Muslim intellectual discourse in Indonesia (Husaini 2005).

Ethnic and Linguistic Similarities

Ethnic and linguistic similarities have played a crucial role in shaping a shared Malay identity across Southeast Asia. More than half of the nations in this region—such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—share linguistic roots in a proto-Austronesian language family that dates back approximately five thousand years (Reid 2014, 5–6). Among these languages, Malay emerged as one of the most significant, particularly in facilitating communication and trade across the region. As a result, the Malay language became a cultural and linguistic binder, especially for Malay ethnic communities.

In Indonesia, the Malay language developed into *Bahasa Indonesia*, the national language that—despite its Malay origins—has evolved with distinct vocabulary and expressions compared to Malaysian Malay. However, within Indonesia, the use of Malay is not dominant across all ethnic groups, as many communities speak their own regional languages. Javanese, for instance, is widely spoken but has not served as a national lingua franca due to its limited reach beyond ethnic boundaries (Rahardjo 1989, xxiv).

Because Malay functioned historically as a trade language across the archipelago, it was elevated to official status in Indonesia during the early 20th century. Its adoption as the national language marked a unifying milestone during the nationalist movement, particularly with the *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Pledge) in 1928 and the Indonesian Revolution. In contrast, the development of Malay in Malaysia had to contend with the dominance of English due to British colonial influence, resulting in different trajectories for the language in the two nations.

Historical Similarities

Before the arrival of Islam, the Malay worldview was shaped by animism and dynamism, centered on the veneration of ancestral spirits and objects believed to possess supernatural powers. The

belief in ancestral spirits, known as *hyang* (also referred to as *poyang*, meaning ancestor), played a significant role in pre-Islamic Malay society. Ancestors were thought to coexist with the living, and therefore, needed to be honored through ritual ceremonies and offerings. These offerings—directed to *hyang*, who were considered manifestations of the divine—gave rise to the term *sembahyang* (worship). Worship rituals were typically conducted through a *pawang*, a spiritual intermediary (often a puppeteer), who performed the ceremonies using offerings such as food or animal sacrifices (Musa, Borhan, and Yatim 2004, 169).

The subsequent arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism introduced more structured and formal religious systems. However, the spread of these teachings generally did not penetrate deeply into society, affecting primarily the upper social strata. As noted by Al-Attas (1977, 29), their influence reached only “a thin layer of the structure of society” and did not involve the full doctrinal systems of either religion. One notable impact was the concept of *dewaraja*, which glorified rulers as divine incarnations. This belief elevated the spiritual status of kings, portraying them as noble, sacred, and holy figures who held both political and spiritual authority (Musa, Borhan, and Yatim 2004, 170).

With the arrival of Islam, a new paradigm emerged in Malay society that emphasized a more human-centered worldview. The evolving dynamic between humans and nature introduced the concept of *pengalaman* (experience), reflecting an awareness of coexistence among all living beings. Islam resonated with the existing Malay worldview by integrating anthropocentric and theocentric elements. This synthesis introduced the dual moral principles of maintaining harmonious relationships with both fellow humans (*hablum minannas*) and with God (*hablum minallah*), which became foundational to Malay spiritual and ethical life (Musa, Borhan, and Yatim 2004, 172).

Historically, early Malay kingdoms were predominantly agrarian, with agriculture forming the basis of their economies. Notable examples include the Funan and Angkor kingdoms, as

well as Majapahit in Java. Funan was the earliest Southeast Asian polity to absorb Hindu-Buddhist influences from India (Musa, Borhan, and Yatim 2004, 163). Over time, Funan transitioned into a maritime kingdom, establishing trade routes and port cities that facilitated interaction among diverse ethnic groups. The Srivijaya Kingdom, which rose to prominence in the 7th century, emerged as the leading Malay maritime empire, dominating key coastal areas across Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, and parts of Java. Similarly, the Majapahit Kingdom evolved from an agricultural society in the Brantas River valley into a dominant maritime power between the 13th and 15th centuries.

Despite the region's increasing exposure to world religions, traditional spiritual practices remained embedded in daily life. For instance, as Mungsi Lampe (2003) found in Ternate, local fishing communities continued to perform spiritual ceremonies—such as those associated with *mangoel* fishing—as a way to ensure safety at sea and abundant catches. These enduring traditions highlight the resilience and continuity of indigenous belief systems in Malay maritime culture (Hi. Rajab 2013, 59).

Indonesia-Malaysia Relations

Indonesia and Malaysia are two prominent examples of Malay-type nations that share deep historical and cultural ties. The connection between the Malay populations in these countries extends beyond the shared majority religion of Islam to encompass broader similarities in their social systems. Historically and in contemporary times, both societies have been characterized by pluralism, comprising diverse ethnic and religious groups. These communities have long interacted through trade, supported one another through the tradition of mutual cooperation and contributed collectively to nation-building. The establishment of the modern states of Indonesia and Malaysia was made possible, in part, by the collaborative efforts of these plural groups, which have continued to strengthen social cohesion and national unity.

Today, we are living in the era of modern globalization, which can be understood as a process of increasing interconnection among societies, whereby events occurring in one country can significantly influence other countries and communities. According to John Baylis and Steve Smith, a globalized world is one in which political, economic, cultural, and social developments are increasingly interwoven, with these developments having broader and more profound impacts across borders. In other words, most societies are now affected—both extensively and intensively—by events taking place elsewhere, particularly in areas related to social, economic, and political life (Rais 2008, 11–12). Consequently, political dynamics in one country, such as Indonesia or Malaysia, when widely disseminated through mass media, can have tangible implications for neighboring states and their populations.

From a cultural perspective—traditionally defined by physical boundaries—modern globalization has made these borders increasingly fluid and even ‘borderless.’ According to Featherstone (1991), advances in mobility have integrated societies into broader structures, spanning from the local to the global. Physical boundaries are now permeable due to the intensified flow of people, goods, information, ideas, and values.

The formation of the ASEAN Economic Community exemplifies regional economic integration at a country-to-region scale. Advances in electronic, communication, and transportation technologies have bridged distant locations, enabling business activities to expand beyond national and urban boundaries (Santoso 2014, 28). A notable result is the rise of consumer culture in urban centers (Featherstone 1991), driven by market expansion and shifts in symbolic and value systems (Abdullah 2010, 46).

In this context, consumption plays a central role in transforming societal norms. For example, in 2013, Sultan Mudaffar Sjah of Ternate introduced the use of Dinar and Dirham currencies in collaboration with currency experts from Malaysia. This initiative can be seen as part of the Sultanate’s strategy to adapt and preserve

its relevance in the modern era. Moreover, such cooperation among sultanates reflects a shared aspiration to promote Islamic values as one expression—though not the sole one—of Malay identity.

The adaptation of Malay kinship cannot be separated from the concept of tamadun or Malay civilization. As defined in *Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia*, tamadun refers to a civilization formed by communities broadly classified as Malay, located across Southeast Asia in regions known by various names such as the Malay Archipelago, Nusantara, Alam Melayu, or Tanah Jawi (Musa, Borhan, and Yatim 2004, 163). Within this framework, the Malay language as a *lingua franca* and Islam as the dominant religion are central unifying elements. The spread of Islam in the region was closely tied to the use of Jawi (Malay) script in religious texts authored by local ulama.

In a multi-ethnic society—where diverse ethnic identities and origins coexist—there must be shared, universal symbols that can be recognized and understood by nearly all groups to maintain social cohesion. These symbols of communication are constructed, preserved, and negotiated within public spaces through ongoing interaction. Through interethnic exchanges, cultural symbols are shared and enriched, leading to mutual absorption and adaptation of cultural expressions within specific local contexts (Abdullah 2010, 83).

Indonesia is a culturally diverse nation—a richness that also presents potential vulnerabilities. This diversity, like biodiversity in nature, serves as a fertile ground for the development of a resilient and hybrid culture through cross-cultural exchange. Such exchanges have long existed, notably during the eras of powerful kingdoms like Sriwijaya and Majapahit. However, this same diversity can also weaken cohesion among ethnic groups and regions. As Nurcholish Madjid (2003, 8) observed, Southeast Asia remains inherently vulnerable to external conquest and colonization. In Indonesia's case, the formation of the modern nation-state has been a major achievement in fostering unity amid diversity.

While regional ethnic cultures are constitutionally protected as part of Indonesia's cultural heritage, not all ethnicities hold equal sway in the national structure. Javanese culture remains particularly dominant, especially in politics, to the extent that it is often said, "The Indonesian president will always come from the Javanese ethnic group." Although this is not absolute—as evidenced by the presidency of B.J. Habibie from Sulawesi—it reflects the influence of demographic and political power. Similar dynamics exist at the local level; for instance, in North Maluku, the Makian ethnic group holds more influence in local governance than indigenous groups like the Tobelo or Galela.

Although Indonesia's national culture draws from diverse regional traditions, ethnic dominance—especially by majority groups—remains a reality. Such dominance must be carefully managed through inclusive cultural policies. Without this, there is a risk that perceived inequality could trigger social tensions, particularly at the grassroots level.

Unlike Indonesia, Malaysia officially uses the term "community" or "*kaum*" instead of race or ethnic group, as the latter are considered ambiguous. A *kaum* refers to a group of people unified by shared language, religion, and customs. In Malaysia's population census, the people of Peninsular Malaysia are categorized into four main groups: (1) Malays, which include ethnic Malays, Indonesians, and Indigenous peoples; (2) Chinese, comprising subgroups such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, and Hainanese; (3) Indians, including Tamils, Punjabis, Pakistanis, and Ceylonese; and (4) other communities such as Thais, Europeans, Eurasians, and other Asians (Marzali 2007: 57–58). Malays and Chinese each make up around 45% of Malaysia's population. Ethnic identity continues to play a dominant role in Malaysia's political landscape (Thohir 2000, 350).

Indonesian and Malaysian societies share both points of convergence and divergence. These points can foster integration, but they also hold the potential for conflict. Demographically, one major difference lies in the composition of their populations: Malaysia

has a significant Indian and Chinese minority, while Indonesia has relatively fewer non-indigenous ethnic groups. This contrast has historical roots in colonial policies—British colonial rule in Malaysia facilitated the migration of non-Malay groups, particularly Indians and Chinese, to serve administrative and economic functions. In contrast, Dutch colonial policy in Indonesia was more restrictive in managing population movements. Despite these differences, the deep cultural ties and shared heritage between Indonesia and Malaysia remain a unifying characteristic that both nations continue to uphold (Thohir 2009, 330).

Various conflicts between Indonesia and Malaysia—such as disputes over Sipadan and Ligitan islands, the treatment of Indonesian migrant workers, and cultural claims involving batik, angklung, Reog Ponorogo, and Kuda Lumping—have caused recurring tensions between the two nations. These disputes often lead to negative sentiments, including the use of derogatory terms like “Indon,” which is considered offensive by Indonesians. According to Lili Yulyadi Arnakim (2014), the controversy over Malaysia’s claim to Reog, for example, sparked outrage in Indonesia because such recognition could generate tourism revenue for Malaysia and potentially strip Indonesia of its cultural ownership.

Both Indonesia and Malaysia have cities that can be described as multicultural—urban spaces where diverse cultural groups coexist within the same geographic area. Challenges related to multiculturalism often arise when interactions between majority and minority communities result in gaps, imbalances, asymmetries, or social injustices (Piliang 2011, 230–231). Ternate, for example, is a multicultural city whose structure was shaped during the Dutch colonial period. The arrival of various ethnic groups over time has made Ternate a city open to a range of ideas and cultural influences.

Malay is the most prominent language of the Austronesian language family, whose origins can be traced back approximately ten thousand years to the Proto-Austronesian language formed on its homeland in Taiwan. From there, early Malay-speaking populations

migrated southward through the Philippines, with some continuing eastward to settle the scattered and then-uninhabited Pacific Islands, while others moved south and west to interact with other ancient populations and inhabit the thousands of islands in the Southeast Asian archipelago (Collins 2011, 1). Today, Malay serves as the national language of both Indonesia and Malaysia, functioning as a central unifying force that transcends the geopolitical boundaries of each nation-state.

The Malay language has long played a key role in uniting the ethnic and artistic traditions across the broader Malay region. During and after Dutch and British colonialism, Malay emerged as a critical marker of identity and was eventually adopted as an official language in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam, as well as in parts of the southern Philippines, such as Mindanao (Thohir 2009, 329). The cultural depth of the Malay language is also evident in its vocabulary, which reflects deep historical and ecological relationships. For instance, the expression *mohon diri* in Malay—meaning to ask permission to leave—originates from the idea of returning to one's own tree after visiting another's. In Javanese, the word *pamit* (from the Old Javanese *pamwit*) conveys a similar meaning, derived from *wit* or *uwit* (tree), symbolizing the act of returning to one's own origin (Daldjoeni 1983, 17–18).

Indonesia and Malaysia are both deeply religious societies, and this shared value fosters mutual respect and coexistence among religious communities. The belief in God is expected to encourage not only vertical devotion but also harmonious horizontal relationships among people. Both nations also uphold the principle of mutual cooperation, which reflects a communal spirit of helping, supporting, and uplifting one another—an attitude that contrasts with the more individualistic tendencies often observed in Western societies.

In addition to religious and communal values, the importance of family remains central in both Indonesian and Malaysian cultures. Respect is given not only to the nuclear family but also to the extended family, which continues to play a vital role in social life (Arnakim

2014). The extended family system fosters strong inter-village and even inter-city connections, with familial ties actively maintained across distances. This deeply rooted familial structure contributes to a strong sense of belonging and continuity within both societies.

Sharing the Past Glory for Future Cooperation

Immanuel Kant, the 18th-century German philosopher, introduced the concept of cosmopolitanism through what he called the “law of world citizens.” According to Kant, every individual has the right to hospitality—a newcomer, for instance, should not be treated as an enemy, but rather as someone entitled to stop, stay, and exist on shared land. For Kant, the earth is a common property belonging to all humanity. His vision has gained renewed relevance in the age of globalization, characterized by human diaspora, transnational encounters, and cultural exchanges.

Kant’s views have gained renewed relevance in the era of globalization, which has been marked by the widespread diaspora of people across the world. As Santoso (2014, 34–35) observed, the global movement of people has led to continual interactions, communication, and the formation of transnational networks. This process fosters mutual respect and the blending of cultures, ultimately shaping a new cosmopolitan order. Indonesia and Malaysia, as neighboring nations with shared historical roots, are part of this evolving global society. Despite being shaped by different national trajectories and political boundaries, both countries are world citizens with a responsibility to contribute to a better, more peaceful world in line with their respective constitutional values.

Rather than being confined by narrow nationalism, the peoples of Indonesia and Malaysia can embrace their common cultural and historical heritage—particularly their shared Malay roots—as a foundation for deeper cooperation. Building upon their past glory, they are positioned to foster greater collaboration and mutual respect, advancing a progressive future while preserving long-standing Malay institutions and values.

Regarding the recurring tensions between Indonesia and Malaysia, it is important to reconsider the concept of national self-esteem. Preventing open conflict is a fundamental responsibility of both nations. As Tamsil Linrung (2005, 219) argues, the success of economic development and public welfare reflects true self-esteem more than engaging in war under the guise of patriotism. Open conflict would result in significant losses for both countries.

In the case of Ambalat and similar disputes, Linrung outlines several potential consequences. First, the economies of both nations could collapse or suffer severe setbacks. Second, Indonesian migrant workers (TKI) in Malaysia would face uncertainty and hardship. Third, thousands of Indonesian students studying in Malaysia could be forced to drop out, harming the long-term development of human resources. Fourth, Malaysian investments in Indonesia, as well as Malaysian students pursuing education there, would also be negatively affected. Therefore, leaders of both nations—who share a common Malay heritage—must be capable of curbing destructive emotions for the greater good (Linrung 2005, 227–232).

Lili Yulyadi Arnakim (2014) adds that the root of Indonesia-Malaysia tensions lies in the mismanagement of nation-state relations at the elite level. Among grassroots communities, these conflicts tend to be far less pronounced or significant.

Amid ongoing domestic challenges in both Indonesia and Malaysia during this era of globalization, the two nations must collaborate to advance mutual progress, foster mutual respect, and conduct diplomacy with wisdom and sensitivity. According to Y. Tinbergen (in Amin 2011, 74), a nation striving for advancement must exhibit several key characteristics: a strong appreciation for material development, a high regard for technology, a future-oriented mindset, a willingness to take calculated risks, and the capacity to cooperate with others in a disciplined and responsible manner. Drawing on the perspective of Alex Inkeles (in Suwarsono and So 1994, 31), modern individuals should demonstrate openness to new experiences, increasing independence from traditional authorities

such as parents, tribal leaders, and monarchs; a belief in science and its capacity to master nature; a strong drive for social mobility and ambition; long-term planning; and active participation in politics, community organizations, and civic life.

To achieve these goals, diplomatic communication is essential, both at the state level (elite diplomacy) and through people-to-people contact. Dialogue between governments and citizens must aim to identify and nurture shared values across the two nations. A key part of this process involves building mutual trust, which remains hindered by lingering negative stereotypes.

In Indonesia, Malaysia is often perceived as appropriating Indonesian culture, occupying disputed islands, conducting illegal fishing in Indonesian waters, and treating Indonesian migrant workers (TKI) unfairly. Conversely, many Malaysians view Indonesia as a country that fails to respect Malaysian laws, particularly in relation to the high number of undocumented Indonesian migrant workers. These perceptions, if left unaddressed, risk undermining bilateral relations and regional cooperation.

Conclusion

The historical spice trade between the Ternate Sultanate and European powers highlights the strategic importance of the Malacca Strait as a vital link between present-day Indonesia and Malaysia. This interaction among various ethnic groups through trade illustrates a long-standing tradition of cooperation that transcended regional and cultural boundaries. The Ternate Sultanate's collaboration with both Malay and European traders exemplifies the openness and interconnectedness of the Malay world. This legacy of past glory offers valuable lessons for contemporary relations. Shared elements such as geography, language, ethnicity, religion, and historical experience form a strong social and cultural capital that can be revitalized to foster deeper cooperation—not only at the level of states but also among civil society institutions and grassroots communities.

This article has traced the historical relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia, focusing on the colonial pursuit of spices and the critical role of the Malacca Strait in facilitating exchange between Malay and European societies. After the colonial era, both nations faced the challenge of constructing collective identities within the nation-state framework. Moving forward, it is essential for scholars, cultural institutions, and policy makers in both countries to collaborate in rediscovering shared values and heritage. These commonalities can serve as a foundation for sustainable cooperation and regional stability, allowing Indonesia and Malaysia to strengthen their bonds while contributing to a more inclusive and culturally rooted global order.

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