

INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON EARLY MALAY SOCIETY: CULTURAL TRANSMISSION, ADAPTATION AND CIVILIZATION EXCHANGE

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Abstract: Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) played a significant role in shaping early Malay society through sustained maritime interactions across the Indian Ocean, facilitating extensive cultural, intellectual, and institutional exchanges. These interactions enabled the transmission of religious philosophies, political frameworks, linguistic traditions, and artistic expressions that profoundly influenced the socio-cultural evolution of the Malay world. This study aims to examine the processes of cultural transmission, adaptation, and civilizational exchange between India and early Malay societies. The study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology based on the analysis and synthesis of historical, literary, epigraphic, and secondary scholarly sources. Relevant sources were selected through thematic relevance to India–Malay interactions and critically examined using historical-analytical and comparative approaches to understand patterns of cultural adaptation and localization. The findings reveal that elements such as Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, Sanskrit-derived vocabulary, concepts of divine kingship, legal-administrative systems, and aesthetic traditions were selectively incorporated into Malay socio-political and cultural structures. However, these influences were not passively adopted; rather, they were actively reinterpreted and localized in accordance with indigenous belief systems and regional contexts. The study concludes that IKS functioned as a dynamic and interactive knowledge network rather than a unidirectional cultural imposition, contributing to the emergence of a distinctive and hybrid Malay civilizational identity shaped by transregional connectivity and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Indian knowledge systems; cultural transmission; malay civilization; maritime exchange; sanskritization; civilizational interaction

INTRODUCTION

The initial maritime contacts between India and the Malay world began during the 1st–3rd centuries CE through Indian Ocean trade networks. Between the 4th and 7th centuries CE, Hindu-Buddhist philosophies, Sanskrit language, and Indian cultural traditions gradually spread across Southeast Asia. From the 7th to 13th centuries CE, the Srivijaya Empire emerged as an important center of Buddhist learning and maritime commerce. During the 13th–15th centuries CE, the rise of Malay Sultanates and the spread of Islam contributed to processes of cultural synthesis and localization. From

the 15th century onward, a distinct Malay-

indigenous traditions, Indian influences, and broader intercultural exchanges. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a comprehensive body of intellectual traditions encompassing philosophy, science, medicine, linguistics, governance, and cultural practices developed over centuries in the Indian subcontinent. Rooted in classical sources such as the Vedas, Upanishads, epics, and other traditional treatises, IKS integrates ethical, spiritual, social, and material dimensions of knowledge (Kapoor, 2007). Owing to the expansion of maritime trade and intercultural interactions across the Indian Ocean, these knowledge systems gradually extended beyond the geographical boundaries of India and interacted with diverse societies of Southeast Asia. Their adaptive and dialogic nature enabled processes of cultural exchange, localization, and reinterpretation rather than unilateral cultural transmission (Sen, 2005).

Early Malay society, located strategically within Southeast Asia, was characterized by maritime connectivity, indigenous belief systems, and evolving socio-political institutions. Before the arrival of external influences, Malay communities largely practiced animistic traditions and ancestor worship, while social organization revolved around kinship structures and local chieftaincies (Andaya & Andaya, 2015). The region's position along major maritime trade routes encouraged continuous interaction with foreign traders, religious scholars, and travelers, contributing to economic prosperity and cultural openness. Over time, these interactions facilitated the emergence of advanced Malay polities such as Srivijaya, which developed sophisticated administrative, religious, and cultural systems shaped by both indigenous traditions and external intellectual influences (Hall, 2011).

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology based on the critical analysis and synthesis of historical, literary, archaeological, epigraphic, and secondary scholarly sources. Sources were selected on the basis of their relevance to India–Malay cultural interactions and examined through historical-analytical and comparative approaches. The methodology focuses on identifying patterns of cultural transmission, adaptation, and localization within the Malay world. In addition, the study critically engages with both Orientalist interpretations and contemporary perspectives of Malay Muslim scholars in order to develop a balanced understanding of Indo–Malay civilizational exchanges.

Historical interactions between India and the Malay world can be traced back to the early centuries of the Common Era, primarily through maritime trade networks across the Indian Ocean. Indian merchants, scholars, and religious figures traveled extensively to Southeast Asia, facilitating not only commercial exchange but also the movement of ideas, languages, religious philosophies, and cultural practices (Manguin, 2010). These interactions contributed to the diffusion of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, Sanskrit vocabulary, legal-administrative concepts, and artistic traditions within Malay society.

Archaeological evidence, including inscriptions, demonstrates the depth of these connections (Coedès, 1968). However, the study argues that such influences were not merely imposed upon Malay society; rather, they were selectively adapted and reinterpreted according to local cultural contexts and indigenous traditions. The emergence of major Malay polities such as Srivijaya and Majapahit thus reflects a dynamic process of intercultural dialogue and civilizational synthesis rather than a simple model of “Indianization.”

DEFINITION OF INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) refer to the cumulative body of indigenous knowledge developed in the Indian subcontinent, encompassing philosophical, scientific, linguistic, and cultural traditions. Rooted in classical texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Shastras, IKS integrates empirical observation with metaphysical inquiry, emphasizing harmony between human life and the cosmos (Kapoor, 2007). These systems are inherently dynamic and adaptive, enabling their transmission across regions and cultures through trade, migration, and intellectual exchange (Sen, 2005). Indian philosophy (Darshana) encompasses diverse schools such as Vedanta, Nyaya, and Samkhya, addressing fundamental questions of existence, knowledge, and ethics. These philosophical traditions influenced concepts of cosmology, moral order, and governance beyond India (Radhakrishnan, 1999). Religious traditions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, played a central role in disseminating Indian cultural values. Concepts such as dharma, karma, and rebirth shaped social norms and ritual practices in regions influenced by Indian thought (Flood, 1996). IKS includes significant contributions to astronomy, mathematics, and medicine, notably Ayurveda. These scientific traditions were practical and observational, aiding navigation, health practices, and calendrical systems in maritime societies (Subbarayappa, 2013). Sanskrit served as a major vehicle of cultural transmission, influencing languages and literary traditions across Asia. Epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata were adapted into local contexts, shaping literary and cultural expressions (Pollock, 2006).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF INDO-MALAY INTERACTIONS

Maritime trade networks across the Indian Ocean played a foundational role in facilitating early Indo-Malay interactions. From the early centuries of the Common Era, monsoon wind patterns enabled regular navigation between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, linking ports in South India with those in the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago (Hall, 2011). These routes were not merely conduits for the exchange of commodities such as spices, textiles, and precious metals, but also for the circulation of ideas, beliefs, and cultural practices. Strategic entrepôts in the Malay region emerged as key

nodes in this network, fostering sustained into socio-cultural transformation (Manguin, 2010). Indian merchants and scholars were central agents in the transmission of cultural and intellectual traditions to the Malay world. Traders established settlements in port cities, where they interacted closely with local communities and elites, facilitating the exchange of goods as well as knowledge systems (Coedès, 1968). Religious scholars, including Brahmins and Buddhist monks, played a significant role in disseminating philosophical and ritual practices. These individuals often served as advisors to local rulers, contributing to the adoption of Indian political and religious models. Their presence ensured that cultural transmission occurred through both economic and intellectual channels (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010). The spread of Hinduism and Buddhism in the Malay world was a gradual and selective process influenced by trade, migration, and elite patronage. Hindu religious concepts, including dharma and divine kingship, were adopted by ruling elites to legitimize political authority, while Buddhist teachings gained prominence through monastic networks and scholarly exchanges (Flood, 1996). These religions were not imposed but integrated into existing belief systems, resulting in syncretic practices. The establishment of temples, monasteries, and ritual centers further institutionalized these traditions. Over time, Hindu-Buddhist cosmology became embedded in the cultural and political fabric of early Malay societies, shaping their worldview and social organization (Hall, 2011). The emergence of Indianized kingdoms in Southeast Asia reflects the depth of Indo-Malay interactions. Polities such as Srivijaya and Majapahit adopted Indian models of governance, religion, and culture while maintaining indigenous characteristics (Coedès, 1968). These kingdoms utilized Sanskrit inscriptions, Hindu-Buddhist symbolism, and administrative frameworks influenced by Indian traditions. Srivijaya, in particular, became a major center of Buddhist learning and maritime power. However, the process of Indianization was not uniform; local rulers selectively adapted external elements to suit their socio-political contexts, demonstrating a high degree of cultural agency (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010). Archaeological and epigraphic evidence provides crucial insights into Indo-Malay interactions. Inscriptions in Sanskrit and Old Malay, temple remains, and artifacts such as statues and ritual objects indicate strong Indian cultural influence (Manguin, 2010). Sites like Kedah and Palembang reveal material traces of trade and religious activity, supporting historical accounts of sustained cross-cultural exchange.

Mechanisms of Cultural Transmission

Trade networks across the Indian Ocean served as primary channels for the transmission of Indian cultural and intellectual traditions to the Malay world. Regular maritime exchanges facilitated not only the movement of goods such as spices, textiles, and metals but also the circulation of ideas, languages, and belief systems. Port cities functioned as cosmopolitan hubs where diverse communities interacted,

creating environments conducive to cultural ex

Indian traders and local populations, leading to the gradual diffusion and adaptation of Indian Knowledge Systems within Malay society (Hall, 2011; Manguin, 2010). Religious missions played a crucial role in disseminating Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions. Hindu Brahmins and Buddhist monks traveled extensively across Southeast Asia, establishing temples, monasteries, and centers of learning. These religious figures not only introduced doctrinal teachings but also influenced ritual practices and social norms. Their engagement with local elites facilitated the institutionalization of religious traditions, while their adaptability allowed for the integration of indigenous beliefs, resulting in syncretic religious systems (Flood, 1996; Kulke & Rothermund, 2010). Migration and the establishment of Indian settlements in the Malay region significantly contributed to cultural transmission. Indian traders and artisans often settled in port towns, forming communities that maintained their cultural practices while interacting with local populations. These settlements acted as cultural bridges, enabling the exchange of language, customs, and technologies. Over time, intermarriage and social integration led to the blending of Indian and indigenous traditions, reinforcing processes of acculturation and localization within early Malay society (Coedès, 1968). Royal patronage was instrumental in legitimizing and institutionalizing Indian cultural elements in Malay polities. Local rulers adopted Hindu-Buddhist religious concepts and political models, often inviting Brahmins and scholars to their courts as advisors. This patronage facilitated the construction of temples, the use of Sanskrit in inscriptions, and the implementation of administrative practices influenced by Indian traditions. By endorsing these elements, ruling elites played a key role in integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into state structures and cultural life (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010). Oral and literary traditions further enabled the spread of Indian cultural narratives and knowledge systems. Epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata were transmitted through storytelling, performance, and written texts, often adapted into local languages and contexts. These narratives influenced moral values, artistic expressions, and social norms, becoming embedded in Malay cultural life. The use of Sanskrit and its derivatives in inscriptions and literature also facilitated linguistic and intellectual exchange (Pollock, 2006).

Influence of Indian Knowledge Systems on Malay Society

Hinduism and Buddhism profoundly shaped the religious and cultural landscape of early Malay society through sustained interactions with Indian traders, monks, and scholars. These traditions introduced structured cosmologies, ethical doctrines, philosophical systems, and ritual practices that complemented indigenous animistic beliefs. Rather than displacing local traditions, Indian religious and philosophical influences were gradually integrated into existing socio-cultural frameworks, resulting in a syncretic religious culture that combined Indian metaphysical ideas with local spiritual practices (Flood,

1996; Hall, 2011). Concepts such as *dharma* (liberation) significantly influenced ethical values, political thought, and social organization in the Malay world. These ideas provided a framework for understanding justice, social responsibility, kingship, and spiritual aspirations, while their adaptability enabled integration into indigenous belief systems (Radhakrishnan, 1999).

At the same time, discussions concerning the influence of Indian Knowledge Systems on Malay society should also adequately engage with the contributions and perspectives of Malay Muslim scholars. Historical narratives often become imbalanced when the role of Islam and the intellectual traditions of the Malay Sultanates are insufficiently represented. The rise and flourishing of Malay civilization are intimately linked to the era of the Malay Sultanates, wherein Islam played a central role in governance, intellectual traditions, law, education, literature, culture, and the broader construction of civilization. Sultanates such as the Malacca Sultanate institutionalized Islamic administration, jurisprudence, and scholarly traditions, thereby establishing Islam as a fundamental component of Malay identity and socio-political organization (Milner, 1981; Reid, 1993).

The rise and flourishing of Malay civilization, particularly during the era of the Malay Sultanates such as the Malacca Sultanate, witnessed Islam becoming a foundational force in governance, intellectual development, legal systems, culture, and the broader process of civilization-building. The arrival of Islam in the Malay world from the 12th century onward transformed Malay society by introducing new religious values, administrative structures, and intellectual traditions that were gradually integrated with existing local customs and traditions (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). Islam not only provided spiritual guidance but also became the ideological basis for kingship and political legitimacy, where Malay rulers adopted Islamic titles such as “Sultan” to reinforce their authority and connection with the wider Muslim world (Milner, 2008).

In governance, Islamic principles influenced the administration of Malay Sultanates through the implementation of laws inspired by the Qur'an and Islamic jurisprudence. Texts such as the *Undang-Undang Melaka* (Laws of Malacca) reflected a synthesis of Islamic legal concepts and customary Malay law, demonstrating the adaptability of Islam within the local socio-political environment (Liaw, 1976). Islamic scholars and religious officials also played important roles in advising rulers and shaping state policies, thereby strengthening the relationship between religion and governance.

Islam further contributed to the growth of intellectual traditions in Malay society. The spread of Islamic education encouraged the study of theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, literature, and mysticism.

Mosques, madrasas, and royal courts emerged

Jawi script facilitated the production and dissemination of Malay-Islamic literature (Al-Attas, 1969). Renowned scholars such as Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri enriched Malay intellectual culture through their writings on Sufism, ethics, and theology, which shaped the philosophical outlook of the Malay world.

Culturally, Islam influenced Malay customs, literature, architecture, language, and social values. Islamic teachings became embedded within adat (customary practices), creating a distinctive Malay-Muslim identity that emphasized morality, communal harmony, and respect for authority. Literary works such as *Hikayat* and religious texts incorporated Islamic themes and narratives, while mosque architecture and calligraphy reflected artistic influences from the broader Islamic civilization (Hooker, 2003). Consequently, Islam became a unifying element that connected the Malay world with wider networks of trade, scholarship, and diplomacy across the Indian Ocean and the Middle East.

The Islamization of the Malay world did not entirely replace earlier Hindu-Buddhist influences; rather, it reinterpreted and incorporated many pre-existing cultural and philosophical elements within an Islamic framework. This process contributed to the emergence of a distinctive Malay-Islamic civilization that reflected the interaction of indigenous traditions, Indian intellectual influences, and Islamic thought. The spread of Islam further stimulated the development of Malay literary traditions, the adaptation of the Jawi script, and the establishment of extensive intellectual and commercial networks linking the Malay Archipelago with the wider Islamic world (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Mamat, 2018). Consequently, Malay civilization evolved through a dynamic synthesis of indigenous, Indian, and Islamic knowledge systems, each contributing significantly to the region's historical, cultural, and intellectual identity.

FIGURES AND MAPS: INFLUENCE OF INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS ON MALAY SOCIETY

Figure 1

Cultural Transmission of Indian Knowledge Systems to the Malay World

Indian Traders, Monks & Scholars

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Arrival in the Malay Archipelago

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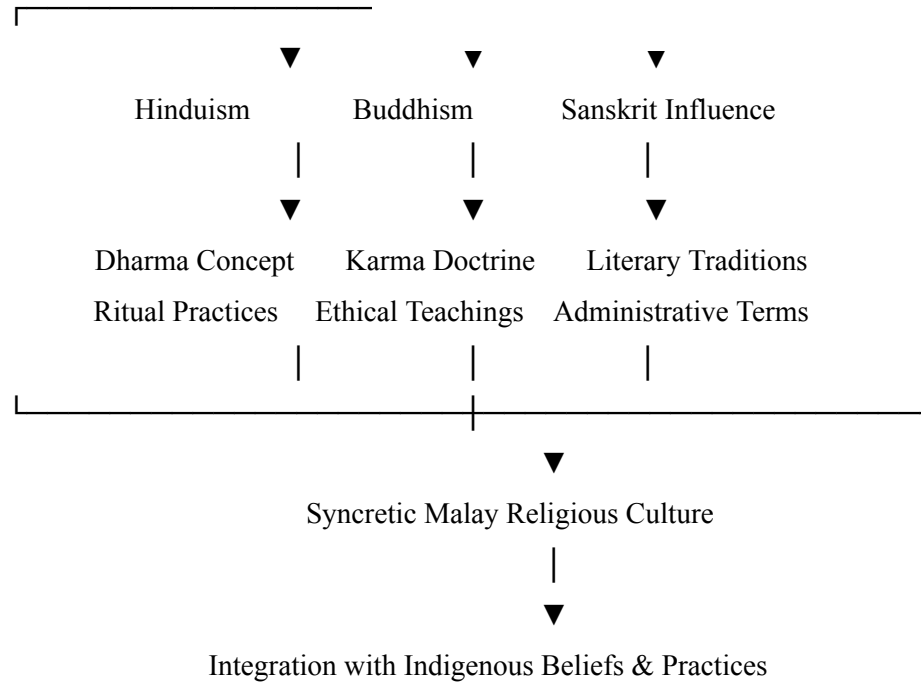
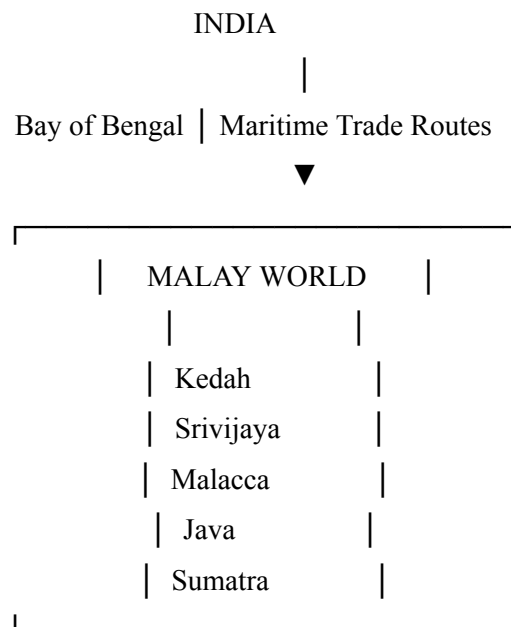


Figure Caption: Figure 1 illustrates the transmission of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into the Malay world through trade, religion, and scholarship. Hindu and Buddhist ideas blended with indigenous traditions, forming a syncretic Malay culture.

Map 1: Indian Cultural Influence in the Malay World



▼
Spread of Hindu-Buddhist Ideas

Map Caption: Map 1 shows the maritime trade connections between India and the Malay Archipelago through which Hinduism, Buddhism, Sanskrit language, and Indian philosophical ideas spread into Southeast Asia.

Figure 2

Syncretism between Indian and Indigenous Beliefs

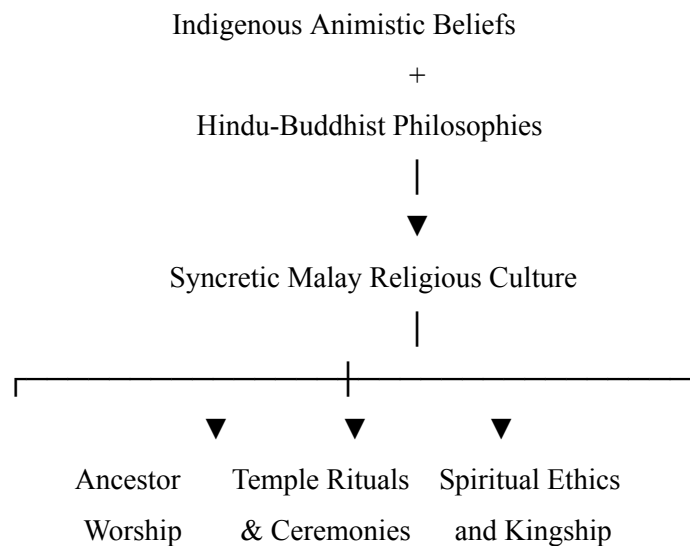


Figure Caption: Figure 3 demonstrates the blending of indigenous Malay animistic traditions with Hindu-Buddhist philosophies, resulting in a unique syncretic religious culture.

Rituals and Temples

Ritual practices and temple construction illustrate the institutionalization of Indian religious traditions in early Malay societies. Temples functioned as centers of worship, political legitimacy, and cultural activity. Rituals derived from Hindu and Buddhist traditions were localized by incorporating indigenous elements. Archaeological remains of temple complexes and sacred sites demonstrate the integration of Indian religious practices into Malay socio-political life (Coedès, 1968; Kulke & Rothermund, 2010).

Political and Administrative Systems

The concept of divine kingship, often referred to as the *Devaraja* tradition, was adopted by Malay rulers to legitimize their authority. Kings were viewed as embodiments or representatives of divine power, linking political authority with religious ideology. This concept strengthened centralized governance and reinforced hierarchical social structures (Coedès, 1968).

Governance Models

Indian models of governance influenced administrative organization in early Malay polities. Systems of court hierarchy, taxation, and statecraft reflected principles found in Indian political treatises. Rulers adapted these frameworks to local conditions, creating hybrid administrative systems that combined Indian ideas with indigenous governance traditions (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010).

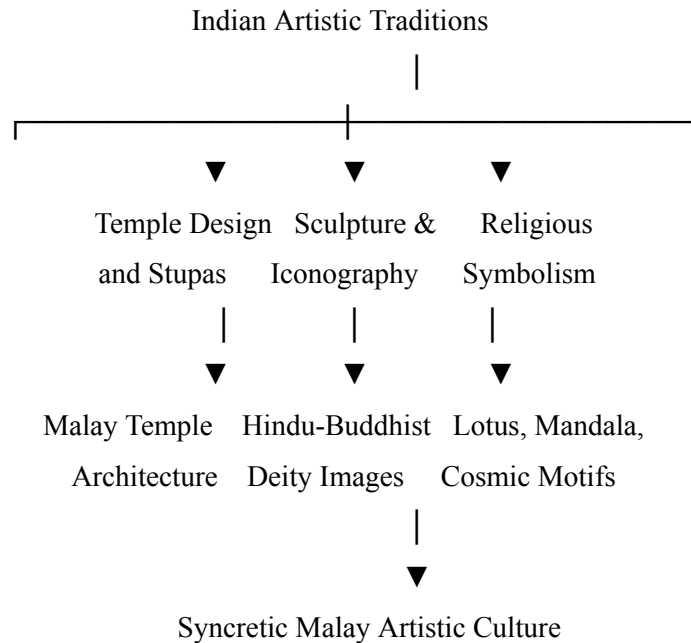
Language and Literature

Sanskrit played a crucial role in the cultural and intellectual transformation of early Malay society. It functioned as a language of administration, religion, and high culture, influencing the development of Old Malay vocabulary. Numerous inscriptions and texts contain Sanskrit terms, reflecting its prestige and role as a medium of cultural transmission (Pollock, 2006). Indian scripts, particularly the Pallava and Kawi scripts, influenced the development of writing systems in the Malay region. These scripts facilitated record-keeping, religious expression, and literary production. Their adoption enabled the documentation of political authority and cultural practices, contributing to the intellectual growth of early Malay societies (Coedès, 1968). Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata were adapted into local languages and performance traditions. These narratives were reinterpreted to reflect local values and contexts, influencing literature, moral teachings, and cultural identity in the Malay world (Pollock, 2006).

Figure Caption: Figure 3 illustrates the influence of Indian artistic and architectural traditions on Malay temple design, sculpture, and religious symbolism.

Figure 4

Indian Influence on Malay Art and Architecture



Temple architecture in the Malay region reflects strong Indian influence, particularly in structural design, symbolism, and spatial organization. Monumental structures such as Borobudur and Prambanan demonstrate the integration of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology into architectural forms. These temples served not only as religious centers but also as representations of political power and cultural identity. Their design incorporated local materials and techniques, illustrating a synthesis of Indian and indigenous traditions (Hall, 2011). Sculptural traditions in early Malay societies were heavily influenced by Indian iconography, including representations of Hindu deities and Buddhist figures. These artistic forms conveyed religious meanings and reinforced cosmological beliefs. However, local adaptations introduced unique stylistic elements, reflecting regional aesthetics and cultural interpretations (Coedès, 1968). Performing arts, including dance, theatre, and shadow puppetry, were significantly shaped by Indian cultural traditions. Stories from Indian epics were incorporated into local performances, blending narrative elements with indigenous artistic styles. (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010).

Science and Knowledge Systems

Indian astronomical knowledge significantly influenced calendrical systems in the Malay world. Concepts related to planetary movements, time calculation, and ritual calendars were adopted and adapted

for local use. These systems were essential for the integration of Indian astronomical principles reflects the practical application of scientific knowledge in early Malay societies (Subbarayappa, 2013). Ayurvedic medical knowledge contributed to the development of traditional healing practices in the Malay region. Concepts of balance, herbal medicine, and holistic treatment influenced local medicinal systems. While these ideas were adapted to indigenous contexts, they provided a structured approach to health and well-being, demonstrating the transmission of scientific knowledge alongside cultural practices (Zysk, 2001). Indian contributions to mathematics and navigation played a vital role in maritime societies of Southeast Asia. Numerical systems, measurement techniques, and navigational knowledge facilitated trade and sea travel. These skills were essential for sustaining long-distance maritime networks. The integration of such knowledge into local practices highlights the practical importance of Indian scientific traditions in shaping economic and cultural interactions (Joseph, 2011).

Adaptation and Localization

The interaction between Indian Knowledge Systems and indigenous Malay traditions resulted in significant religious and cultural syncretism. Rather than a direct imposition of Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, local communities selectively integrated these elements into pre-existing animistic and ancestor-based practices. Deities, cosmological concepts, and ritual forms were reinterpreted to align with local spiritual frameworks. This blending produced a unique religious landscape in which Indian and indigenous elements coexisted harmoniously. Syncretism thus reflects a dynamic process of cultural negotiation, demonstrating that early Malay societies actively reshaped external influences to fit their socio-cultural realities (Hall, 2011; Coedès, 1968). Indian cultural practices underwent significant modification when introduced into the Malay context. Rituals, social customs, and religious ceremonies were adapted to local environmental conditions and cultural norms. For instance, temple rituals and ceremonial practices were simplified or altered to suit indigenous traditions. These modifications ensured that imported cultural elements remained relevant and meaningful within local contexts, highlighting the flexibility of Indian Knowledge Systems and their capacity to evolve through intercultural interaction (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010).

Localization of Epics

Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata were localized within the Malay world through translation, reinterpretation, and performance. These narratives were adapted to reflect local values, geography, and social structures. Characters and storylines were modified to resonate with

indigenous audiences, resulting in distinct regional themes of the epics but also embedded them within the cultural fabric of Malay society, demonstrating the adaptability of literary traditions (Pollock, 2006). The interaction between Indian and Malay cultures led to the emergence of hybrid cultural forms across various domains, including art, architecture, and social organization. Architectural styles combined Indian structural designs with local materials and techniques, while artistic expressions reflected blended iconography. Similarly, social practices and governance systems incorporated both Indian and indigenous elements. These hybrid forms illustrate the creative outcomes of cultural exchange, highlighting the synthesis of diverse traditions into new, localized expressions (Hall, 2011). Indigenous agency played a central role in shaping the process of cultural adaptation. Malay societies were not passive recipients of Indian influence; rather, they actively selected, modified, and integrated external elements according to their needs and values. This agency ensured the preservation of local identity while facilitating cultural transformation, resulting in a distinctive and resilient civilizational framework (Coedès, 1968).

CIVILIZATION EXCHANGE: A TWO-WAY PROCESS

Civilizational exchange between India and the Malay world was not a unidirectional process but a dynamic interaction characterized by mutual influence. While Indian Knowledge Systems significantly shaped religious, political, and cultural aspects of Malay society, Southeast Asian regions also contributed to broader Indian Ocean exchanges through their own traditions, resources, and maritime expertise. This reciprocal interaction fostered a shared cultural space in which ideas were continuously negotiated and transformed, reflecting a process of intercultural dialogue rather than cultural dominance (Hall, 2011; Sen, 2005). Maritime knowledge exchange played a crucial role in facilitating sustained Indo-Malay interactions. Navigational techniques, shipbuilding methods, and knowledge of monsoon winds were shared and refined through continuous contact between Indian and Malay seafarers. This exchange enhanced long-distance trade and strengthened regional connectivity. The transfer of such practical knowledge underscores the importance of maritime expertise as a key component of cultural and economic interaction in the Indian Ocean world (Manguin, 2010). Economic interaction formed the foundation of Indo-Malay relations, with trade serving as a primary driver of cultural exchange. The exchange of commodities such as spices, textiles, and precious goods facilitated sustained contact between regions. These economic ties not only contributed to prosperity but also created avenues for the transmission of ideas and practices. Trade networks thus functioned as catalysts for both material and cultural integration across the Indian Ocean (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010). The Indian Ocean functioned as a vast cultural network linking diverse societies through trade, migration, and intellectual exchange. This network enabled the circulation of religious ideas, languages, artistic forms, and technological

knowledge across regions. Within this intercultural intermediary, facilitating interactions between India and other parts of Southeast Asia. The concept of a shared Indian Ocean cultural sphere highlights the interconnected nature of early civilizations and the role of transregional networks in shaping cultural identities (Hall, 2011)..

CASE STUDIES

Srivijaya Empire

The Srivijaya Empire (7th–13th centuries CE), centered in Sumatra, was a major maritime and Buddhist center that exemplified Indo-Malay cultural exchange. It functioned as a hub for trade and religious scholarship, attracting Buddhist monks from India and China. Sanskrit inscriptions and the use of Indian administrative models highlight the influence of Indian Knowledge Systems. Srivijaya's role in promoting Mahayana Buddhism and facilitating intellectual exchange underscores its significance as a conduit of Indian cultural and religious traditions (Coedès, 1968; Hall, 2011).

Majapahit Kingdom

The Majapahit Kingdom (13th–16th centuries CE) in Java represents a mature phase of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia. It adopted Hindu-Buddhist religious frameworks, Sanskrit terminology, and Indian-inspired governance systems. Literary works such as the *Nagarakretagama* reflect the integration of Indian cosmology and political ideology. However, Majapahit also demonstrated strong local adaptation, blending Indian elements with indigenous traditions to create a distinctive cultural identity that influenced later Southeast Asian polities (Kulke & Rothermund, 2010; Hall, 2011).

Kedah and Langkasuka

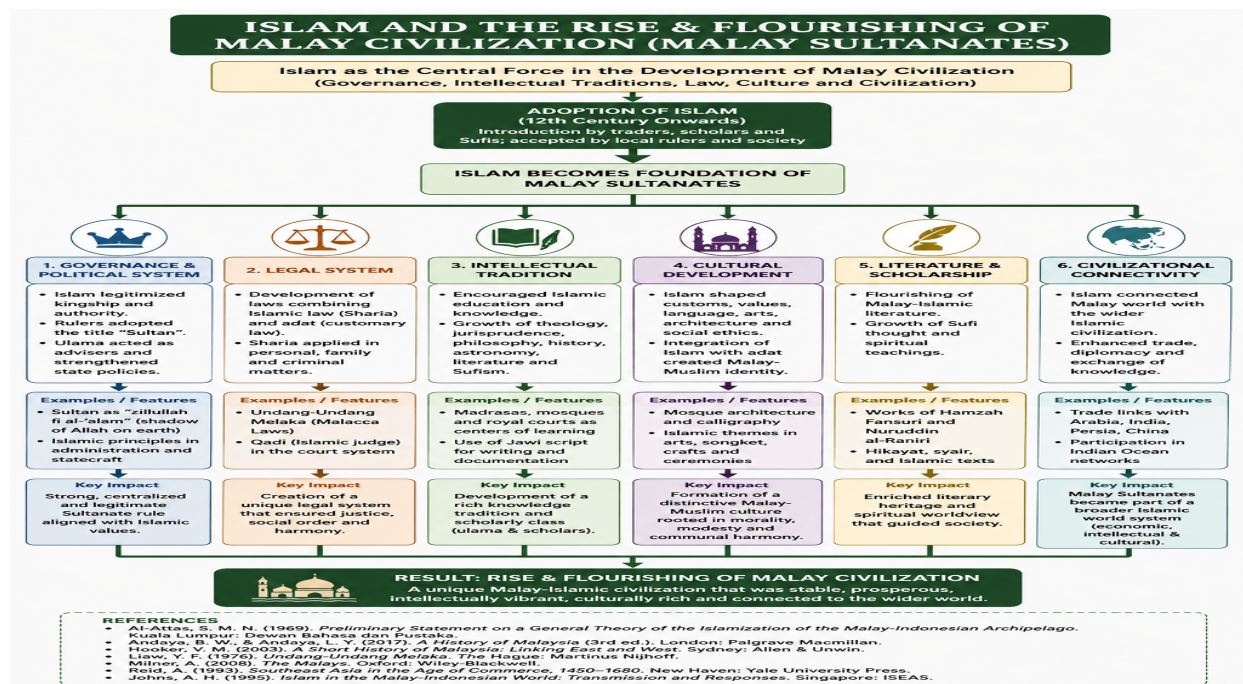
Kedah and Langkasuka, located on the Malay Peninsula, were among the earliest centers of Indo-Malay interaction. Archaeological findings, including inscriptions and trade artifacts, indicate strong Indian influence in religion, language, and governance. These regions served as key entry points for Indian traders and cultural elements, facilitating early processes of cultural transmission and adaptation within Malay society (Manguin, 2010; Coedès, 1968).

Borob

The temple complexes of Borobudur (Buddhist) and Prambanan (Hindu) in Java illustrate the architectural and religious influence of Indian traditions. Borobudur reflects Mahayana Buddhist cosmology through its structure and reliefs, while Prambanan embodies Hindu mythology and temple design. Both sites demonstrate the localization of Indian architectural principles, integrating indigenous artistic styles and regional symbolism (Hall, 2011).

Decline and Transformation

RISE OF ISLAM



The rise of Islam in the Malay world between the 13th and 15th centuries marked a significant transformation in the region's cultural and religious landscape. Facilitated by Arab, Persian, and Indian Muslim traders, Islam spread through established maritime trade networks and gradually gained acceptance among local rulers and communities. The conversion of ruling elites played a crucial role in legitimizing Islamic authority and accelerating its expansion. Islamic teachings, institutions, and legal systems increasingly replaced earlier Hindu-Buddhist frameworks. However, this transition was gradual and adaptive, allowing elements of pre-existing traditions to persist within the evolving Islamic cultural context (Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Hall, 2011). The spread of Islam led to profound cultural transformations in Malay society, including changes in religious practices, social norms, and political

structures. Islamic values influenced governan institutions such as mosques and madrasas. Despite these changes, the transtormation was not abrupt; instead, it involved a gradual process of integration in which older traditions were reinterpreted within an Islamic framework, reflecting continuity alongside change (Andaya & Andaya, 2015). Despite the decline of Hindu-Buddhist dominance, many Indian cultural elements persisted within Malay society. Linguistic influences, particularly Sanskrit-derived vocabulary, remained embedded in the Malay language. Artistic traditions, architectural forms, and aspects of social organization also continued to reflect earlier Indian influences. This continuity highlights the deep-rooted impact of Indian Knowledge Systems and their ability to coexist with new religious and cultural paradigms (Hall, 2011).

DISCUSSION

The influence of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) on early Malay society remains one of the most debated themes in Southeast Asian historiography. Earlier scholarship frequently portrayed the Malay world as a passive recipient of Indian civilization, emphasizing concepts such as “Greater India” and “Indianization” to explain the emergence of political authority, religion, literature, and artistic traditions in Southeast Asia. Scholars such as George Coedès argued that Indian traders, Brahmins, and Buddhist monks transmitted sophisticated systems of kingship, Sanskrit learning, Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, and legal traditions that profoundly shaped early Malay polities (Coedès, 1968). Archaeological evidence from Kedah, Srivijaya, and other maritime centers demonstrates the presence of Sanskrit inscriptions, Indian iconography, and Hindu-Buddhist ritual practices, indicating sustained interaction with the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund (2010) note that Indian political concepts provided symbolic legitimacy to emerging Malay rulers by associating kingship with divine cosmology and universal sovereignty. However, a deeper historical analysis demonstrates that the older Indianization framework suffers from significant methodological and ideological limitations. Much of the earlier literature emerged during colonial and Eurocentric academic traditions that tended to interpret Southeast Asian achievements as derivative of “higher” external civilizations rather than products of indigenous historical development. The assumption that political organization, literacy, religion, or state formation could only emerge through Indian stimulus reflects a diffusionist bias that underestimates local agency. O. W. Wolters strongly criticized this approach by arguing that Southeast Asian societies localized foreign ideas according to indigenous cultural logics rather than merely copying Indian institutions (Wolters, 1999). His concept of “localization” demonstrates that imported symbols were selectively transformed to suit local political and social realities.

A critical examination also reveals that the act often overstated. Hinduism and Buddhism certainly influenced court culture, royal ceremonies, cosmological symbolism, literary traditions, and elite education; nevertheless, these traditions rarely displaced indigenous belief systems completely. In many Malay regions, local animistic practices, ancestor worship, sacred landscape traditions, and customary laws continued to dominate everyday life. Indian religious traditions remained heavily concentrated within royal courts, port-polities, and commercial centers linked to long-distance maritime trade. Even where Sanskrit inscriptions or Hindu-Buddhist monuments existed, the social penetration of Indian theology among rural populations appears limited. Therefore, it is historically inaccurate to argue that Indian civilization fundamentally replaced the religious foundations of Malay society.

Moreover, archaeological and historical evidence suggests that Southeast Asian rulers actively appropriated Indian ideas because such ideas enhanced political prestige and diplomatic legitimacy within expanding transregional trade networks. This was not passive cultural dependency but strategic adaptation. Sheldon Pollock argues that Sanskrit functioned as a “cosmopolitan language” associated with power and elite culture across Asia rather than as evidence of direct Indian political domination (Pollock, 2006). Malay rulers adopted Sanskrit titles, epics, and ceremonial forms not because they lost indigenous identity, but because these symbols strengthened authority in a competitive maritime world.

At the same time, it is equally problematic to completely minimize Indian influence in reaction to earlier exaggerations. Revisionist scholarship sometimes overcorrects by portraying localization as so dominant that external influences appear secondary. Such interpretations risk ignoring the transformative impact of transregional exchanges on state formation, literacy, religious art, maritime commerce, and intellectual culture. Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata deeply influenced Malay literature and performance traditions, while Buddhist centers such as Srivijaya became internationally connected institutions of learning. Chinese pilgrim Yijing recorded that Srivijaya functioned as a major Buddhist intellectual center where monks studied Sanskrit grammar and Buddhist philosophy before traveling to India. This indicates that Indian intellectual traditions were not merely superficial decorative elements but formed part of wider scholarly and commercial networks.

Therefore, a balanced historical interpretation must move beyond the binary opposition between “Indianization” and “localization.” Early Malay society was neither a passive extension of Indian civilization nor an isolated indigenous culture unaffected by external contact. Instead, cultural interaction operated through negotiation, adaptation, and selective appropriation. Indian Knowledge Systems significantly contributed to elite political culture, artistic expression, literary development, and maritime

connectivity, but their influence was uneven,

Indigenous traditions remained resilient and continuously reshaped imported ideas according to Malay social realities. Consequently, the development of Malay civilization should be understood as a hybrid historical process produced through both external interaction and internal cultural agency.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) played a transformative role in shaping early Malay society through sustained maritime interactions and cultural exchange. Elements such as Hindu-Buddhist religious frameworks, Sanskrit linguistic influence, political concepts like divine kingship, and artistic traditions were selectively integrated into Malay socio-cultural systems. However, these influences were not passively adopted; rather, they were actively adapted and localized, resulting in a unique synthesis that reflected both Indian and indigenous traditions within a dynamic intercultural environment. The study confirms that IKS were transmitted through trade, migration, and religious networks. Malay societies selectively adopted and adapted these elements, demonstrating strong indigenous agency. Cultural exchange was reciprocal and interactive, rather than unidirectional, leading to the formation of hybrid socio-cultural and political structures. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of Indo-Malay interactions by emphasizing localization and indigenous agency. It challenges earlier diffusion perspectives and highlights the importance of intercultural dialogue in shaping early Southeast Asian civilizations.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author(s) hereby declare that this research work titled “*Indian Knowledge Systems and Their Influence on Early Malay Society: Cultural Transmission, Adaptation and Civilization Exchange*” is an original piece of scholarship. This study has been prepared independently and does not involve any form

of plagiarism. All sources of information have academic standards. The data and materials used in this research are based on credible secondary sources. While these sources have contributed to the development of the study, they have had no influence over the analysis, interpretation, or conclusions presented herein. The intellectual framework, arguments, and findings are solely the work of the author(s). The author(s) further affirm that no external agency, institution, or individual has exerted any undue influence on the research process or its outcomes. All views expressed in this study are entirely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the perspectives or positions of any affiliated organization or institution. The author(s) also declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this publication.

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