

## Malay Deli in North Sumatra: History and Today's Existence

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### Abstract

This study aims to describe the history of the Deli Malay and its current existence as one of the major ethnic groups in Indonesia. During the Dutch colonial period, Deli was famous for its tobacco plantations, even the practice of real contract coolies existed in Deli. Deli Malay is inseparable from other Malay sub-Malays in Indonesia as well as in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. Only the characteristics of the Malay Deli remain and have contributed a lot to the progress of the Indonesian state to date. Like the Deli Malay civilization also produced cultural icons, especially the Maimun Palace and the Al-Mashun Grand Mosque. These two historic buildings are evidence of the greatness and existence of the Deli Malay civilization in North Sumatra. In addition, the most obvious is the Malay language which is used as the national language of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, as well as several other Malay countries. Likewise, the system of royal government originating from Bustanussalatin, became a guide for Islamic Sultanates throughout the archipelago. Including traditional Malay clothing such as the cap, songkok or skullcap, became part of Indonesia's national dress.

**Keywords:** Malay Deli, history, community existence, culture

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## **1. Introduction**

Malay culture as one of the various kinds of culture must first learn what it means to be a culture. Many experts define culture, where culture is part of human life. According to anthropology, culture is the whole system of ideas, actions and human creations in the context of community life which are made into human beings by learning. This means that almost all human actions are cultural because there are very few human actions in the context of people's lives that do not need to be accustomed to learning, namely only some instinctive actions, some reflexes, some actions due to physiological processes, or behavior when he is blind. Malay culture is a culture that has been passed down from generation to generation by the community. Malay culture is one of the pillars supporting Indonesian national culture in particular and world culture in general, in addition to various other cultures. Malay culture thrives and is thick in the midst of Indonesian society.

That Malay is synonymous with religion, language, and customs is a solid integrity (Nagata, 1980; Ishak, 1999; Mawangir, 2021). Malay customs is a concept that describes an entire Malay way of life in the Malay world. The Malays wherever they are will call their cultural phenomenon as "this is the custom of the people." the Malay community regulates their lives with customs so that every member of the adat lives in a traditional way, such as natural customs, customary law, royal customs, national customs, village customs, governing customs, customs of men and women, customs of speech, and so on. The custom is a collective phenomenon that underlies Malay culture. In the past, Malays were kingdoms in the archipelago (Embong et al., 2016; Burhanudin, 2017; Burhanudin, 2018). A king must uphold Malay customs in exercising his power over his people.

Custom is highly respected in Malay culture where the Malay community really respects their customs for life in their world. In addition to customs, language is also a culture that is inherent in Malay culture (Majid, 2008; Djumala, 2018; Hussain et al., 2020). The most important cultural product of the Malay nation is language. Malay language lives on the tongue of the Malays in almost 40 dialects. Among them is the Johor-Riau Malay dialect, which became the forerunner of the Malay language. Malay is widely used as a lingua franca. Indonesia, which is a maritime

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and agrarian country (Pradana et al., 2019; Marnani et al., 2021), uses Malay as the language of inter-regional trade (from Pasai, Minangkabau, Java, to Sulawesi, Halmahera, Papua's Bird's Head, Deli Serdang-North Sumatra). In the early days of independence, it became a unifying tool and formed the nation's consciousness, then after the proclamation it was incarnated, Indonesian became the language of the state and the language of the nation. The Malay language has become an adhesive tool for Indonesian nationality, and has brought the Indonesian nation as a modern nation. In addition to customs, language, which then is religion. The culture inherent in the Malays is the Islamic Malay culture (Siddique, 1981; Kling, 1995; Thimm, 2021). The teachings of Islam that come with subtlety because Islam in preaching is never violent, Islam teaches gentleness to its people. Before Islam entered the Malay culture, it was local culture and Hinduism (Eng, 2016; Nurbaiti et al., 2020; Abd Rahman et al., 2021).

Before Islam entered Malay culture, they thought mythically (Banks, 1982; Noor, 2000; Nowak & Muntil, 2004). After Islam entered the Malays began to think rationally. Malay society is more loose and open to accept new elements coming from outside (Islam). So that Islamic values penetrate into the soul and are actualized in daily actions so as to give birth to an acculturation. Islam has a major influence over customs. Religion is a customary supra system. Provisions in adat may fail if they do not get support from religion. So it can be said that the relationship between Islam and Malay is like two eyes that cannot be separated. In addition, with Islam, Malays who base their culture with an Islamic core always view work as worship, obligation, and responsibility. Therefore, the provisions that exist in the custom of a job they do with full responsibility because all of it is worship.

The phenomenon of globalization is also experienced by Malays. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of Malay globalization, namely: first, Malays spread to various corners of the world. When the Malays spread to various parts of the world (of course with different motives and goals), whether they realize it or not, they will bring their Malay values with them. The Malay values they bring will have a dialectic with the environmental conditions in which they live. The result is a heterogeneous Malay pattern, such as Deli Malay (currently Deli Serdang district, North Sumatra Province), Jambi Malay, Riau Malay, Sambas Malay, Menado

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Malay, Singaporean Malay, Minang Malay, Filipino Malay, Cocos Island-Australian Malay, Cape Town Malay, and so on. Second, the Malay area is a destination for people from outside the Malay area. The arrival of these people to the Malay area, directly or indirectly, has contributed to enriching Malay culture. The arrival of the Arabs, for example, has caused the Malays to know the culture of writing. Based on the introduction above, this study aims to describe the history and existence of the Ethnic Malay-Deli Serdang in North Sumatra Province, Indonesia.

## **2. Methodology**

In this study, the authors used qualitative research methods. The research method uses qualitative methods and descriptive approaches. Qualitative methods are often called naturalistic research methods because the research is carried out in natural conditions (natural settings) (Nassaji, 2015). Qualitative method is defined as a social science research method that collects and analyzes data in the form of words, and human actions and the researcher does not attempt to calculate or quantify the qualitative data that has been obtained and thus does not analyze the numbers (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative descriptive research is aimed at describing and describing existing phenomena, both natural and human engineered, which pays more attention to the characteristics, quality, and interrelationships between activities. In addition, descriptive research does not provide treatment, manipulation or changes to the variables studied, but describes a condition as it is. The only treatment given was the research itself, which was carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation. Collecting data regarding the history of Malay Deli and its current existence, namely observation, literature study, document analysis, and interviews. The technique for examining the data in this study is to use the triangulation method. Triangulation is a technique of checking the validity of data that utilizes something other than the data for checking purposes or as comparison data against the data. There are two strategies, namely (Moleong, 2005): 1) Checking the degree of confidence in the results of research findings on several data collection techniques. 2) Checking the degree of confidence of several data sources with the same method.

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### **3.Results and Discussion**

Deli Malay is one of the sub-groups of the East Sumatran Malay ethnic group which belongs to the original group in North Sumatra. Some of the Deli Malays are addressed to the Malay community who live in the Deli Serdang Regency and around the Medan city (Deli area) which is located not far from the east coast of Sumatra. In Deli Serdang Regency, which covers an area of 6,064 square kilometers, they are located in 33 sub-districts (Taufiq & Kombaitan, 2019). In 1984 the population of the Malay Deli village lived together with various other ethnic groups, for example the Karo Batak, Toba, Acehnese, Minangkabau and so on. In the city of Medan (the capital of North Sumatra Province) (Widiyanarti, 2018; Tampubolon & Nababan, 2018), where they live now includes the sub-districts of Medan Deli, West Medan, Medan Labuhan, Medan Denai, East Medan, Medan Johor, Medan Sunggal, Medan Kota, Medan Tuntungan, Medan Baru, Medan Belawan. The population of the Medan municipality in 11 sub-districts in 1990 was 1,245,725 inhabitants.

The Deli Malay tribe, is one of the Malay tribes who inhabit the Deli Serdang district. The spread includes the city of Medan, old deli, coastal areas, riverside Deli and Labuhan. In the city of Medan, the Deli Malays live in the suburbs. The Malay population is estimated to be more than two million people. The Deli Malays speak Deli Malay. At first glance, Deli Malay is similar to Indonesian with a thick Malay accent and shorter and faster pronunciation. In some places, Deli Malay uses the dialect 'e', similar to Maye-Maye and Malaysian. Deli Serdang Regency is a district in the province of North Sumatra and the capital of this district is in Lubuk Pakam.



**Figure 1. Map of Deli Serdang Regency, Indonesia**

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Deli Serdang Regency has a large diversity of natural resources, making it an area that has promising investment opportunities. In addition to having large natural resources, Deli Serdang also has cultural diversity as a complement to the tribes in the archipelago. The original tribe of the inhabitants of Deli Serdang is the Malays whose naming of this district is also taken from the two sultanates that once triumphed, namely the Deli Malay Sultanate and Serdang Malay. In addition, it is also filled by the Karo Tribe and several dominant immigrant tribes such as Javanese, Batak, Minang, Chinese, Indians, and others.

In the past, these areas were called Deli and Serdang Regencies, while the government was based in Medan City. Historically, before the independence of the Republic of Indonesia, this region consisted of two governments in the form of a kingdom (sultanate), namely the Deli Sultanate based in Medan City, and the Serdang Sultanate based in Perbaungan. Before the independence of the Republic of Indonesia, this area was controlled by the two sultanates, namely the Deli Sultanate which was based in Medan City and the Serdang Sultanate which was based in Perbaungan. In several sub-districts, the Deli Malays constitute the majority of the population, including in Medan Deli District, 20% of the 73,752 inhabitants, Medan Labuhan District 40% of 67,435 inhabitants, Medan Belawan District 40% of 64,690 inhabitants.

When the British first entered the area in 1822, it is estimated that the native population now known as the Malays numbered 7,000. At that time, the system of government in the region was controlled by certain regions (countries). The divisions among the various sultanates occurred when the Dutch began to enter this area. One of the kingdoms that still has its heritage to this day is the Deli Kingdom with its Maimoon (or Maimun) Palace located in the city of Medan.

**The Geographical Situation and Livelihoods of the Deli Malay  
Community**

During the colonial period, East Sumatra was an area on the island of Sumatra which experienced massive exploitation by the private sector, especially in plantation development. The clearing of forests, planting of commodity crops, the flow of large amounts of investment into this region, and the search for labor from abroad to support plantation exploitation resulted in East Sumatra developing rapidly and becoming an important

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region in Sumatra. In the 19th century, the Deli area was known for its fertility. Its crops include pepper, cloves, tobacco, and other crops (Wasino, 2018). Another ethnic group that has long had a relationship with the Malays is the Karo, whose area of residence is closest to Deli. The expertise of the Karo people in growing tobacco invited the Dutch to open large-scale tobacco plantations in this area (Lamb, 2014). The opening of tobacco plantations eventually led to more and more immigrants from other ethnic groups to this area, including the Acehnese through the northern border, the Bugis through the East coast of Sumatra, the Minangkabau from the south, and the Javanese who were deliberately brought in as plantation laborers. Even to meet the workforce, the Dutch government also brought in Chinese workers from the Peninsula (Singapore) and Indians (Breman, 2020).



**Figure 2. Deli Tobacco Plantation**

Source: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal, Land en Volkunde (KITLV), No. 5483 (dalam Yasmis, 2007)

The various ethnic groups of these immigrants then settled in this area, so that the native Malays were increasingly being pushed aside and began to move away to the outskirts. Deli area is one of the areas in East Sumatra which has the most tobacco plantations compared to other areas of East Sumatra. Tobacco plantations in Deli were first attempted by Jacobus Nienhuijs by obtaining a land concession from the Sultan of Deli for 99 years without paying any rent (Darini & Anggraeni, 2021; Rafiqi & Marsella, 2021). For the sake of the implementation of the plantation company and to regulate the workforce, regulations regarding coolies (*Koeli Ordonantie*) were

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issued several times and were equipped with articles (Muhsin Z., 2012). This regulation does not only cover the rights and obligations of coolies but also the rights and obligations of entrepreneurs. The impact of this tobacco plantation is gambling and prostitution. This was intentional with the aim of tying the coolies to keep working longer on the plantations.

The Deli area, both in the lowlands and in the hills, has very fertile soil conditions. This fertility is caused by mud deposits released from volcanic eruptions from *Bukit Barisan* (Iqbal & Juliarka, 2019). The Deli area has never experienced a dry season that is too long and also has never known a rainy season that is too long. The rainy season in Deli begins in August and ends in January. Meanwhile in the dry season there is still rainfall that falls. As the driest month is February and the wettest month occurs in October, November and December. The average annual temperature is 26.7°C.

This situation makes it possible for plants to thrive, even giving rise to the expression that "even if a stick is planted it will grow". The meaning of this expression is that a tree trunk that is planted in the ground will thrive. Because of the fertility of the soil and its climate, it is not surprising that many people open plantations. One of the plantations opened in the Deli area is a tobacco plantation. For the first time tobacco was planted in the Deli area in 1863 by an Arab named Syaid Abdullah Ibn Umar Bilsagih, who claimed to be the King of Deli (Sumarno et al., 2018). Due to lack of capital, he invited Dutch merchants to buy land and then plant tobacco in the Deli area. He believes that if there are merchants who invest in the area, the merchant will benefit greatly and his business will progress.

After the independence of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945, the city of Medan developed into a rapidly trading North Sumatran product, while the immigrants became larger in number than the Malays as the original population. Language like other Malay languages, Deli Malay has a close relationship with Malay Malay. This Malay language has a great contribution to the development of Indonesian (Hoy-Kee, 1971; Oetomo, 1991; Mabruroh & Khoiriyah, 2019). The difference that can be seen between the various Malay people who are separated based on the region where they live is in terms of language dialects.

The dialect of the language that developed among the Deli Malays was influenced by the dialect of the language of other ethnic groups who lived around them. One of the striking features of the Deli Malay dialect



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is the use of the letter e. Although the pronunciation is different, the meaning of the word is not different from other Malay dialects. In the past, among the people of the Deli sultanate, there was a kind of division between the language of the nobles descended from the Sultan and the language of the common people. This distinction is also seen in the art forms found among the palace dwellers with ordinary folk art forms. Now the use of the Deli Malay language among the younger generation is starting to disappear. The Deli Malays, who live in suburban areas, mostly develop their livelihoods as farmers and cultivate fruit plantations. Those who live in urban areas generally become civil servants and develop small industries. Most of the people living in coastal areas are fishermen. The people of the Deli Malay tribe make a living as farmers, they cultivate crops with traditional methods, catch fish, trade and also in the government sector. Many of them work as employees and laborers on plantations owned by the government and foreign private parties which are managed with modern technology.

### **Deli Malay Village Pattern**

In the past, the settlement pattern of the Deli Malays, as with other Malays, was adapted to a pre-existing river channel or road. Between the yard of one house and another house is not limited by a fence. This is related to the belief that the existing land belong to the community together so it cannot be inherited or traded until now, the villages where the Deli Malays live are often flooded by rivers flowing in this area, for example the Deli river, Snake river and Padang river. Traditional leadership in the village is in the hands of a penghulu, an imam, a bilal and a khatib. These leaders mainly consist of people who are experts in the Islamic religion. Their Islam is also shown by the presence of a mosque or *surau* in every village. Another characteristic of a Malay village in the past was the availability of a sports arena, two baths for men and women, and a public waqf land. In addition, in a village there is usually a meeting hall for elders. This hall also serves as a bed for young children. The houses in the past were generally built on poles and had a pit. The goal, apart from saving themselves from the dangers of flooding and wild animal attacks, is so that the occupants are protected from humidity. In building a house, the Malays know their own rules.

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For example, a house is built facing the sun so that it gets enough air and sunlight and invites a lot of luck. The decorations or carvings found in the house are usually patterned with lotus flowers. Malay houses generally do not have many rooms, because usually one house is only occupied by one nuclear family. Each room has its own function. The front porch is a room to receive guests, the middle porch which is made higher serves as a place to receive official or respected guests, a place to eat together, and a bed together, the upper part called *jura* is a place for girls (virgins) to live. The back porch is a place to receive women's guests and to complete daily work. Now the typical Malay columned houses are rarely found in the Deli area. The traditional house of the Deli Malay tribe was built in the form of a house on stilts, with poles as high as two meters. The pattern of family life uses a parental/bilateral divine system, which according to them is in accordance with Islamic teachings. In the family tradition, men and women have the same rights and voices in the family, so that men and women will get the same inheritance.

### **Deli Malay Religion and Beliefs**

The Malays are followers of Islam (Husin & Ibrahim, 2016). It can be said that only Islam is recognized by the Malays (Neo, 2006). Therefore, in society it is often said that if someone has entered Islam, that person has become a Malay. Prior to the entry of Islam into this area, the beliefs of the Malays were animistic. They believe in the existence of gods or jinn who do not come from humans. Because gods, jinn and the supernatural are considered to be able to influence human life, they must be worshiped, including through certain ceremonies.

The traditional ceremonies performed are related to the circle of one's life. These ceremonies include ceremonies from the period of pregnancy and childbirth to marriage ceremonies and death. But now the Deli Malays rarely carry out these ceremonies according to the rules as in the past. Moreover, most Deli Malays live around urban areas which have been heavily influenced by other foreign cultures.

Almost the entire Deli Malay community embraced Sufi Islam (Milner, 1981; Nor, 2009). According to them, Malay is Islam, because

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almost all the customs and culture of the Malays are based on Islam (Solihin, 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2018). It is estimated that the Deli Malays, 99.9% are Muslim. Only 0.1% are Christians. However, in daily practice, there are still many Deli Malays who believe in supernatural things, wandering spirits and sacred places, which are considered to be able to affect their lives.

**Deli Malay kinship and social stratification system**

In the life of the Deli Malays, they apply levels in society, which consist of two groups based on status, namely:

1. Aristocracy
  - a. The king and the king's sons (Tengku)
  - b. Descendants of regional dignitaries (Wan, Rich Man, Young Datuk)
2. People's Group
  - a. Descendants of the village head
  - b. The clergy
  - c. Smart People
  - d. Commoners

The lineage in the Deli Malay community is generally calculated bilaterally but in certain groups it is more likely to be patrilineal, namely through the male line. The withdrawal of lineage through men is especially evident in the aristocratic class who are still trying to maintain their hereditary traditions. The custom of settling after marriage is generally in the wife's family residence until the birth of the first child, and then settles in a new residence (neolocal). But the Deli Malay community is now more free to choose where to live after marriage.

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**Figure 3. Deli Malay Maimoon (Maimun) Palace**  
Source: (Hutajulu, 2019)

Malays also recognize the grouping of extended family members (small clans) who feel that they are descended from one ancestor. In Deli Malay society, members of this kind of group usually feel bound through male lineage (patrileneal). They also recognize other forms of kinship that occur as a result of marriage. The wider kinship group (kindred) usually has no clear boundaries because it is too broad. Such groups of relatives may include cousins of one's father or mother, his wife's siblings, even relatives of one level above a person. In addition to social levels that are differentiated based on lineage, in the Deli Malay community, there is now also a system of social stratification based on other things, such as position, religion, and education.

In the past, the descendants of the nobility were the highest and most powerful group. The nobles who are highly respected in society usually carry honorary titles, for example, king, sultan, tengku, wan etc. Although the title of nobility is still used by descendants of the Malay community, now generally other factors are also considered in determining one's status. Thus, a person who in the past was classified as the "most people" can now also be considered to have a high status in society because of his success in the field of education.

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**Deli Malay Arts**

The arts that developed among the Deli Malays were generally influenced by elements of the Islamic religion. Most of the art forms have similarities with Malay art. The types of Malay arts, including marhabban, kasidah, gambus, dance, and Ronggeng, as well as various dances, such as the Serampang Twelve dance, Tudung Periuk Dance, etc. One of the famous art forms from this area is Ronggeng Deli, which is a dance and singing performance by chanting Malay rhymes. Musical accompaniment is drums, violin, and accordion. But now Ronggeng Deli has included a step art form and is rarely found in the Deli area. In Deli Malay literature, it can be seen that in the past it was influenced by Hindu and Buddhist teachings, which can be seen from the statues that have the script "nagari" or "kawi." The influence of Hindu culture is also seen in "The Tale of Sri Rama", "The Tale of the War of the Pandavas Jaja" and "The Tale of the Boma".



**Figure 4. Deli Malay Ronggeng Dance**

Source: (Akhyar, 2020)

Deli Malay Ronggeng Dance developed during the Deli Sultanate and Serdang Sultanate. Along with the development of this art era is increasingly not known by the public. Even the art of Ronggeng Malay is considered suspended. Ronggeng Deli is thick with Malay nuances, but this dance art is also influenced by Portuguese, as can be seen from the use of accordion and violin instruments. Both types of instruments show the influence of the Portuguese who occupied Malacca in the 16th century. Ronggeng Deli is also the forerunner of the Serampang Twelve Dance.

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Ronggeng art is not only owned by the Deli Malays. The Javanese also have Ronggeng art.

### **Conclusions**

The territory of the Deli Sultanate included the city of Medan today, Langkat, Suka Piring, Buluh Cina, and several other small countries around the east coast of the island of Sumatra. During the Dutch administration, the Deli area was included in East Sumatra. However, after Indonesia's independence, Deli was included in the province of Sumatra, which later developed into the province of North Sumatra. During the sultanate, the supreme power of Deli was in the hands of the sultan. The Empress of the Sultan has the title *Tengku Maha Suri Raja*, or *Tengku Empress*, while the crown prince has the title *Tengku Mahkota*. The other sons and daughters only have the title *tengku*. Other descendants based on patrilineal lines up to the fifth generation also have the title *tengku*. In everyday life, the sultan not only functions as the head of government, but also as the head of Islamic religious affairs and at the same time as the head of Malay customs. To carry out their duties, the king or sultan is assisted by the treasurer, *syahbandar* (trade), and other assistants. The Deli Malay civilization also produced cultural icons, especially the Maimun Palace and the Al-Mashun Grand Mosque. These two historic buildings, he said, are evidence of the greatness and existence of the Deli Malay civilization in North Sumatra. In addition, the most obvious contribution is the Malay language which is used as the national language of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, as well as several other Malay countries. Likewise, the system of royal government originating from *Bustanussalatin*, became a guide for Islamic Sultanates throughout the archipelago. Including traditional Malay clothing such as the cap, *songkok* or skullcap, became part of Indonesia's national dress. Until now, the Malay Deli is highly recognized for its existence as one of the major ethnic groups in the Republic of Indonesia

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