

Key Features of Knowledge Culture in Riau Society From The 17th – 19th Centuries

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Abstract

The Malay world and scholarly activities are inseparable. Therefore this study attempts to identify some of the essential values and characteristics of the prevailing knowledge culture in Riau society around the 17th century and peaked in the 19th century. By using the content analysis approach to some texts produced by the 19th century Riau scholar, namely Raja Ali Haji, the study will focus analysing *Tuhfat Al-Nafis*, *Bustan al-Katibin li Al-Sibyan al-Muta'allimin*, *Thammarat al-Muhimmah Diyafat li Al-Umara' wa Al-Kubara' li Ahl al-Mahkamah* and the letter of Raja Ali Haji to Von De Wall. The result of the study has shown that the knowledge culture of Riau was first, supported and enriched by religious activities and the practices of tariqah among leaders and nobles. Second, is the attitude of its leaders who love knowledge, and respect scholars and scholarly efforts that occur everywhere. Third, the presence of prominent scholars and essential works of Islamic studies. Fourth, efforts to strengthen the language among the community, particularly the Malay and Arabic languages. These features and values can serve as a guide for society in nurturing a positive intellectual culture today.

Keywords: Knowledge Culture, Riau, Malay Archipelago, Raja Ali Haji, Sufism

Introduction

The knowledge culture is a scientific activity that exists within society, and it involves every layer of society at every opportunity. Hence, the actions of a knowledge-cultured society must be based on knowledge rather than desires and various life interests because actions rooted in knowledge will create justice in all aspects of life (Daud, 1997). To nurture it, intellectual activities sown must not separate spirituality and divinity elements, but rather, they should be considered essential as the foundation that sustains the culture and tradition of knowledge (Rosli & Alias, 2022).

Daud (1997) also highlighted several important values that a culture of knowledge should possess. Among these important values are the prioritization of knowledge, the permanence

of scientific knowledge, continuous scholarly efforts, an attitude of respect and courage to seek truth by drawing from and improving upon the thoughts of previous humans, continuous intellectual tradition; authoritative leadership; the practice of consultation (shura); and recognition of the role of women.

In today's context, a knowledge culture encompasses not only the above-mentioned important values but also considers the mastery of various fields of knowledge and skills. However, according to Daud (2011), it should also consider the beneficial tasks of personal, national, and global progress, whether short-term or long-term, focusing on a single goal. That goal is to produce educated and cultured individuals who understand the boundaries of truth and the utility of everything, act appropriately, remember responsibilities, and not go beyond the limits.

The Malay World and The Knowledge Culture

It is clear that the Malay world and the knowledge activities and culture are inseparable. Al-Attas (1972) through his scholarly insight, emphasizes that intellectual activities in the Malay world are marked by the presence of Islam and the Malay language as its medium, leading up to the 16th and 17th centuries witnessing the flourishing of literary works in philosophy, metaphysics, and rational theology. This period later became the catalyst for the development of rationalism and intellectualism that had never occurred in the Malay world before.

A more specific study conducted by Denisova (2011) on Islamic Malay literary sources from the 13th to the 19th century, especially works like *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, *Hikayat Aceh*, *Hikayat Siak*, *Peringatan Sejarah Negri Johor*, and *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, also demonstrates that intellectual life in the Malay world developed in parallel with the spread of Islam in the region. Moreover, the research findings indicate that Islam has influenced and developed all areas of intellectual life, including knowledge and philosophy.

Therefore, it cannot be denied that the centres of Islamic dissemination, especially during the era of Islamic Malay sultanates such as Pasai, Aceh, Melaka, Patani, and Riau, served as hubs for the development and dissemination of scholarly activities and the study of Islamic tradition. It is believed that Pasai was one of the earliest centres of Islamic education, with the Pasai Mosque serving as a focal point for Islamic education. The rulers of Pasai in the 13th and 14th centuries, such as Malik al-Salih and Malik al-Zahir, were known as patrons of scholars and knowledge. These rulers emulated the caliphs of the Abbasid Empire, such as al-Ma'mun and Harun al-Rashid, who encouraged scholarly activities during their reigns. Some researchers even suggest that Asia's oldest Islamic religious school (*Pondok*) system began in Patani due to the vigorous spread of Islamic knowledge there since the 12th century (Ismail, 1994).

The knowledge culture in the Malay world is also marked by the emergence of early Malay scholars' works, driven by the spread of the Malay language as the medium of instruction. The use of the Malay language as the language of Islamic philosophical literature in the Malay Archipelago contributed to the enrichment and elevation of its vocabulary and terminology (Al-Attas, 1972). The oldest known Malay text is the translation of *'Aqaid al-Nasafi* by Umar bin Muhammad al-Nasafi, written in 1590 AD. Among the early scholars in the Malay world who expressed their scientific thoughts in Malay are Hamzah Fansuri with his poetic works

entitled *Syair Si Burung Pingai*, *Syair Perahu* and his prose work *Asrar al-'Arifin*. Other famous scholars and their works include Sheikh Nuruddin al-Raniri with his work *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*, Abdul Rauf Singkel with his work *Mir'at al-Tullab fi Sahl Ma'rifat Ahkam al-Shar'iyah*, and many more.

Hence, this writing focuses on identifying the characteristics and important factors of the knowledge culture applied in society, especially in Riau. This qualitative study uses a content analysis approach involving historical analysis methods. The research process is aided by specialized text analysis and concordancing software, Concordance, text analysis, and concordancing software version 3.3, to establish a correlation between different content elements. According to Long (2009), historical analysis is an interpretive analysis of documents and printed texts, such as books that report or record specific events. The primary texts or materials involved in this analysis are the historical genre of Raja Ali Haji's work, *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (1865 AD / 3 Sha'ban 1282 AH), the language genre *Bustan al-Katibin li al-Sibyan al-Muta'allimin* (1851 AD / 19 Zulkaedah 1267 AH), the political genre *Thammarat al-Muhimmah Diyafat li al-Umara' wa al-Kubara' li Ahl al-Mahkamah* (1858 AD / 10 Sha'ban 1275 AH), and the collection of letters from Raja Ali Haji to his friend Von De Wall (1857-1872 AD). These materials are original and edited editions from reliable research and can serve as a solid foundation. Raja Ali Haji was a thinker and prominent figure in the 19th century who served in the Malay Kingdom of Riau.

Knowledge Culture of Riau Society

The area now known as the Riau Islands has a long and significant history in political, economic, and cultural fields. Particularly during the era of the Riau-Lingga Kingdom, this region developed into one of the economic centres. Unsurprisingly, it became a contested area and fell under colonial rule. However, behind the challenges and trials posed by colonialism, its people successfully nurtured intellectual traditions in Riau, which grew rapidly as a continuation of the Malay intellectual tradition that had developed earlier, especially the one initiated by Hamzah Fansuri in Sumatra in the late 16th or early 17th century.

Like the previous centres of the dissemination of Islam in the Malay world, Riau also emerged as a centre for the study of traditional Islamic knowledge from the 17th to the 19th century. This situation simultaneously fostered scholarly activities among the people of Riau, especially on Penyengat Island. It was initially a stopping point for sailors and fishermen to obtain fresh water. The name "Penyengat" comes from an incident where sailors who stopped there were attacked by stinging insects, which are called "penyengat" in Malay. Before it was developed into a state (in 1803), the island served as a primary defence centre for the Riau Sultanate, which was centred in Hulu Sungai Riau (*Riau Lama*), and it was the site of several battles. The island was developed by Sultan Mahmud Shah III (Marhum Masjid Lingga), who ruled from 1761 to 1812. According to oral tradition, it was gifted by Sultan Mahmud to Engku Puteri (Raja Hamidah) as their wedding dowry. When it became the centre of the Riau Kingdom, it was officially called "Pulau Penyengat Indera Sakti." The island also earned the nickname Writing Garden or *Taman Para Penulis* by the Dutch (Junus, 2002; Yunus, 2003).

Penyengat Island also served as a centre for education, particularly the study of Sufism. Sufism had been present in the Malay world since as early as 1488 CE in Melaka (Al-Attas, 1963). In the early 19th century, Penyengat Island proved to be a centre for the teaching and learning

of Sufi knowledge (mysticism). It gave rise to a manuscript dating back to 1809 titled *Sabil al-Hidayah wa'r-Rishad fi Zikr Nubdhah min Fada'il al-Kutb al-Haddad*, which is a translation of Sufi teachings by Ahmad ibn Hassan ibn 'Abdillah Haddad ibn Sayid 'Aluwi Ba'aluwi from Terim Hadramaut. Another manuscript dating back to 1836 from the book *al-Hikam* by Tajuddin Abu'l-Fadl Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn 'Abdil Karim ibn 'Ata'ullah was also produced on the island (Winstedt, 1969). Sufism is considered a primary branch of Islamic knowledge with a genuine Islamic philosophy. It has rational value and a noble religious spirit rich in intellectual treasures (Al-Attas, 1972).

It is clear that scholarly activities in Riau were supported by religious activities and the practice of Sufi orders, especially among leaders and nobles. Yang Dipertuan Muda (YTM) Riau V, Raja Ali marhum Pulau Bayan, practised the *Khalwatiyyah* Sufi order along with his teacher Syeikh Abd al-Ghafur. Raja Abdullah, YTM IX, is said to have adopted the *Naqshbandiyyah* Sufi order and practiced it to the extent of becoming a spiritual guide (mursyid) of the order in Riau (Ali, 1991). The Sufi orders practiced in Riau included branches of the *Khalwatiyyah* order, such as the *Sammaniyyah* branch, and the *Naqshbandiyyah* order. The *Naqshbandiyyah* order was introduced to Riau during the reign of YTM VIII, Raja Ali Raja Jaafar, through Singapore by Syeikh Ismail. Syeikh Ismail was a prominent scholar from Java who was invited to settle in Singapore by Temenggung Ibrahim (Ali, 1991). Syeikh *Sammaniyyah* was Muhammad 'Abdul al-Karim al-Sammān, a scholar from Madinah. Syeikh Abdul Samad al-Falimbani (1704-1789/1828) was a Nusantara scholar who was said to have received the *Sammaniyyah* order directly from Syeikh Sammān, and he mentioned this in his works, *Hidayatus Salikin* and *Siyarus Salikin* (Abdullah, 2001). The *Naqshbandiyyah* order is one of the two well-known Sufi orders among the Malay community, alongside the *Qādiriyyah* order. The practice of Sufi orders and the study of Sufi knowledge emphasized in Riau played a crucial role in the spiritual development, reinforcement, and understanding of Islam (faith, worship, ethics) among the local population. It also acted as a shield against foreign cultural influences and pressure from the Dutch colonial authorities.

Another factor contributing to the flourishing of scholarly activities in Riau was the attitude of its leaders, who had a deep love for knowledge, respected scholars, and supported intellectual endeavors wherever they occurred. The atmosphere of scholarship under the leadership of the Yang Dipertuan Muda (YTM) in Riau is described in Raja Ali Haji's book *Tuhfat al-Nafis*. Through *Tuhfat*, Raja Ali Haji illustrates that during the rule of YTM Raja Haji, Riau prospered greatly. Merchants came to trade, and noble Sayyids from Arab lands and learned scholars from Java arrived. Their presence invigorated religious activities in mosques and surau to the extent that boarding houses, mosques, and surau were always full and well-received (Ali, 1991). YTM Raja Ali bin Daeng Kemboja, who succeeded Raja Haji, is described as a lover of knowledge who lived his life and governance in an atmosphere of scholarship, as described by Ali (1991)

As for the state of Riau, it was ruled by Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ali in accordance with the tradition of Yang Dipertuan Muda governance. He built a palace on Pulau Bayan and resided there, continuing his rule within his kingdom. He sought knowledge and worshipped. His teacher was a person from Mandura named Syeikh Abd al-Ghafur, and his Sufi order was *Khalwatiyyah* (*Sammaniyyah*). Together with Syeikh Abd al-Ghafur, he engaged in worship and enriched the land of Riau with trade.

Adapun negeri Riau itu iaitu Yang Dipertuan Muda Raja Ali lah memerintahkannya sebagaimana adat pemerintahan Yang Dipertuan Muda. Maka membuatlah ia istana di Pulau Bayan dan dudukiah ia /di Pulau Bayan dan/ tetap ia di dalam kerajaannya), serta ia menuntut ilmu berbuat ibadat. Adalah gurunya itu satu orang Mandura namanya Syeikh Abd al-Ghafur, adalah tarikatnya itu Khalwatiyyah (iaitu Sammaniyyah). Maka bersama ((sama)) ia membuat ibadat dengan Syeikh Abd al-Ghafur itu serta meramaikan negeri Riau (itu) dengan perdagangan adanya.

Similarly, YTM Raja Jaafar is described as having a good personality, showing affection for scholars and virtuous people, actively seeking knowledge, studying under great scholars, and being diligent in asking about matters related to Islamic law, jurisprudence, legality, ethics, and the lawful and the prohibited. He also delved into improving his Quranic recitation. He encouraged his children and officials to study, and they were rewarded when they successfully completed the recitation of the Quran's 30 chapters (Ali, 1991).

During the reign of YTM Raja Ali bin Raja Jaafar whom also known as Raja Ali II, Riau became renowned and prosperous, and its people held steadfast to their religion. He showed great love for religious scholars and highlighted qualities of modesty and respect towards them to the extent that he would often walk behind the haj (pilgrims) and religious scholars when going for Friday prayers. Due to YTM Raja Ali II's character and behavior, many religious scholars came to Pulau Penyengat, and some were invited to teach religion, Islamic texts, and become Quran reading instructors. They were rewarded upon their return.

One important characteristic of the scholarly culture emphasized among the people of Riau, especially their leaders, was the practice of *musyawarah* or consultation. *Musyawarah*, also known as *shura*, is one of the important principles of Islamic governance (Surah al-Shura, 42:38). Its practice signifies an action that is considered virtuous for someone who believes in Allah SWT. *Tuhfat al-Nafis* records approximately 162 instances of *musyawarah* taking place among the Malay and Bugis communities and their leaders. It was a demanded practice to ensure that decisions made regarding various matters, including political and governance-related issues, were just, reasonable, and avoided harm to the community. In the Kingdom of Riau, leaders like YTM Raja Ali Daeng Kemboja, YTM Raja Jaafar, and Raja Abd al-Rahman were among those who placed a strong emphasis on the practice of *musyawarah* in making important government decisions. Raja Ali Daeng Kemboja is said to have sought opinions and advice from those more knowledgeable in specific matters, such as the elders and prominent figures. He also liked to listen to the counsel and teachings of scholars and knowledgeable individuals like Syed Abdullah Bahrain, Haji Hamim, and Raja Ali Haji himself, as described in *Tuhfat*:

He was very fond of consulting with others when it came to government work (and sought the opinions and strategies of the elders and prominent figures). He himself would visit the homes of elders and prominent individuals to seek advice and guidance. He would consult with them, including people like Syahbandar Abdullah and Punggawa Ahmad, and even visit the house of his own father and mother for advice. Before becoming a ruler, he was instructed by Marhum Raja Muda Abd al-Rahman to travel extensively to rectify the affairs of the region. He visited the homes of elders

and prominent figures to seek advice and guidance. He also demonstrated great respect and admiration for the learned individuals, showing humility and deference towards them. He even appointed Haji Hamin from Banjar, a scholar, as his representative and paid him an allowance based on the *ijtihad* of his brother Raja Ali Haji (Ali, 1991).

Demikian lagi ia sangat suka bermusyawarah beramai-ramai apabila datang sesuatu pekerjaan kerajaan (dan suka bertanya kepada orang tua-tua dan orang besar-besar daripada fikiran dan ikhtiar. Dan ia sendiri berangkat ke rumah orang tua-tua dan orang besar-besar bertanyakan ikhtiar, iaitu seperti Syahbandar Abdullah dan Punggawa Ahmad apalagi ke rumah paduka ayahanda bondanya. Maka adalah pada masa ia belum menjadi raja dititahkan oleh Marhum Raja Muda Abd al-Rahman menjadi kelana membetulkan teluk rantau. Maka ratalah segala rumah orang tua-tua dan orang besar-besar dipergikannya kerana minta nasihat serta pengajaran. Kemudian /daripada itu/ baharulah ia pergi dan lagi adalah ia suka mengasihi orang yang alim-alim, serta malu dan hormat kepada mereka itu, sehingga satu Haji Hamin orang Banjar yang alim waktu ia di dalam /negeri Lingga di dalam/ menjadi wakil maka diambilnya tuan haji itu dibayarnya dengan *ijtihad* saudaranya Raja Ali Haji (Ali, 1991).

In connection with this, Raja Ali Haji outlined the categories of individuals who should not be allowed to participate in *musyawarah* (consultation). These categories included those who were ignorant, enemies, envious, hypocritical, cowardly, miserly, involved in illicit relationships with women, and those who followed their base desires. This was done to prevent these individuals from potentially disrupting the consultation process. Raja Ali Haji also identified four essential matters that a leader should subject to *musyawarah* in their governance: the delegation and transfer of authority to someone, initiating warfare, bestowing names and titles, and issuing seals and signatures (Ali, 1999).

Another noteworthy aspect of the knowledge culture that can be observed based on the atmosphere and scholarly activities described in the excerpts from *Tuhfat* above is Riau's emergence as a centre of Islamic education and scholarship. This was further supported and enriched by the presence of learned scholars and significant works of Islamic studies within its community. The presence of these scholars in the community was driven by the leaders' and the community's eagerness to strengthen their spirituality and enhance their religious knowledge.

An even more important value was the presence of knowledgeable scholars (*alim ulama*) in Riau, whether invited or engaged in trade, who played a significant role as teachers due to their exceptional knowledge. The tradition of learning from scholars is not unfamiliar in the history of Islamic civilization. History has witnessed that the tradition of learning from scholars, especially in religious matters, thrived from the Umayyad period to the Ottoman era. The tradition of learning from scholars was a vibrant culture, especially among the children of caliphs, sultans, ministers, military leaders, scholars, and wealthy families (Daud, 1998). This practice aligns with the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which states: "*Verily, the scholars are the heirs of the prophets, and the prophets do not leave as inheritance*

dinars and dirhams but rather, they leave knowledge. So whoever takes hold of it, he has taken a bountiful share" (Sunan al-Tirmidhi no. 2681).

Therefore, in the context of the Malay World, the tradition of learning from scholars and the close relationship between leaders and scholars (as advisors) can be observed not only in Riau but also in the governance and administration of Islamic sultanates in Kedah, Pasai, Melaka, Aceh, and Banten. Intimate relationships are depicted between figures like Syeikh Abdullah al-Yamani and Sultan Muzaffar in Kedah, Syeikh Ismail and Sultan Malikul Adil in Pasai, Syed Abdul Aziz, Maulana Abu Bakar, and Kadi Yusuf with Sultan Muhammad Syah and Sultan Mansur Syah in Melaka, Syeikh Sahamsudin Sumatrani with Sultan Iskandar Muda (d. 1637 CE) in Aceh, and Syeikh Yusuf Makasari with Sultan Agung Tirtayasa (d. 1692 CE) in Banten (Daud, 2006). In addition to the appreciation of teachers and the attitude of always wanting to improve knowledge in the community of Riau highlighted by the Yang Dipertuan Muda Riau, it can also be seen through the personality of Raja Ahmad Engku Haji Tua, the father of Raja Ali Haji who consistently sought opportunities to approach scholars and teachers. For instance, he visited Syeikh Abd al-Rahman Misri to learn about astronomy when he when he served as YTM Riau's representative in Batavia. He also studied with Tuan Haji Abd Wahab who specialized in Persian language (Ali, 1991).

Ibn Khaldun, through his *Muqaddimah*, emphasizes that the tradition of learning from scholars is a necessity because it ensures the continuity of civilization and the preservation of the tradition of imparting knowledge itself. The educational process, according to him, also includes good conduct in teaching and expertise in the field of knowledge. In this regard he compares the conditions of society in the Maghribi and the East (Baghdad, Basrah, Kufah). In his observation, the Maghribi society faced difficulties in deepening knowledge and failed to establish a good teaching process due to the lack of a continuous tradition of teaching. On the other hand, the East, which maintained an unbroken tradition of knowledge transmission, produced a more knowledgeable society because their souls were influenced by scholarly activities. The education they received had a profound impact on their souls (Ibn Khaldun, 2006).

Another important aspect that flourished alongside with the growth of scholarly activities in Riau was the strengthening of languages among its people, especially the Malay and Arabic languages. Therefore, in addition to the study of jurisprudence, religious principles, and Sufism, the study of language, including vocabulary, letter writing, morphology, and syntax, became a priority for the community to learn. Efforts to strengthen language indirectly gave rise to a line of writers, authors, poets, scribes, scholars, and ulama in Riau who were authoritative and experts in the Malay language, alongside the production of works in various genres in the Malay language (Ali, 2005). There were also efforts to produce dictionaries to preserve the meanings of Malay words (terms) from being corrupted, misused, and misunderstood (Putten & Al-Azhar, 2007).

The scholarly activities and the emphasis on strengthening the Malay language have not only made Riau a centre for education and learning but have also elevated Riau

as a prominent centre of culture and literature. It played a crucial role in upholding and promoting the dignity of the Malay language as a language of knowledge in the Malay Archipelago during the 19th century. This made the works and contributions from Riau stand out among other centres throughout the Malay Archipelago during that era. One of the widely recognized Malay/Jawi texts that spread across the Malay world is the book *Daqaiqul Akbar fi dhikri al Jannati wa annar*, translated by Sheikh Ahmad bin Muhammad Yunus Lingga, a great scholar who taught at the Masjidil Haram in Mecca and hailed from Pulau Lingga in the Riau Islands. He was born during the reign of YTM Riau IX, Raja Abdullah, and received his foundational education in the open and comprehensive educational system of Riau-Lingga. In the early stages of his education, he delved into the Malay language and history (Abdullah, 2002; Abdullah, 2005).

The impact of scholarly activities and the strengthening of the Malay language extended beyond the Golden Age of Riau itself. This is evident in the case of the renowned 20th-century Malay language scholar, Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad (Za`aba), who was a product of early education under his father, Ahmad bin Ibrahim. Ahmad was exposed to the scholarly traditions of Riau-Lingga. He was born and raised in Linggi, a village inhabited by people of Bugis descent. He belonged to a lineage of prominent Bugis figures (Omar, 2014).

Conclusion

Riau, as one of the centres of intellectual development and the study of traditional Islamic knowledge from the early 17th century to the late 19th century, successfully nurtured a culture of positive and high-level scholarship within its society, even in the face of colonial challenges. Several key features and factors that contributed to the flourishing of scholarly activities and the study of traditional Islamic knowledge in Riau can be identified. These include strong support from religious activities and the practice of Sufism, especially among leaders and nobility; the love for knowledge among its leaders and their respect for scholars and scholarly efforts wherever they occurred; the practice of consultation, especially among its leaders; the presence of knowledgeable scholars as mentors and spiritual guides, as well as important works of Islamic studies; and efforts to strengthen language, particularly the Malay and Arabic languages. Such a scholarly culture gave rise to outstanding figures like Raja Haji, rulers like Raja Ahmad, scholars and thinkers like Raja Ali Haji, as well as many writers and authors like Haji Ibrahim Datuk Kaya Muda Riau and Aisyah Sulaiman Riau. Today's society, especially its leaders, should examine these characteristics and strive to adapt them, especially in the face of the challenging and globalized circumstances of today. This will help preserve and promote a culture of knowledge and intellectualism within the Muslim community.

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