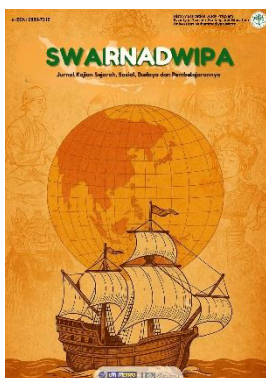


Ethnic Dynamics on the Musi River: A Historical Review and Its Role as a Cultural Connecting Route

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Abstract

The Musi River, as the main artery in South Sumatra, has served as a cultural link between ethnic groups from prehistoric times to the contemporary era. This study explores ethnic dynamics along the river, focusing on the role of the Musi River in connecting cultures that entered through it. Using a qualitative case study approach, the findings show that the river not only facilitates trade, but also the exchange of values, rituals, and ethnic identities. Historical and ethnographic analysis reveals how the Musi River has shaped multiethnic harmony amid modern challenges such as urbanization.

Keywords: *Musi River, Palembang, Ethnic Group.*

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INTRODUCTION

Based on the findings of the Kedukan Bukit inscription, Palembang is recognized as the oldest city in Indonesia (Coedès, 1968; Muljana, 2006). This historical foundation has endowed Palembang with a rich and complex socio-cultural heritage that has evolved over centuries. One of the defining characteristics of Palembang is its close relationship with river systems, as the city was historically surrounded by numerous tributaries. At the center of this riverine network lies the Musi River, the most iconic geographical feature of the city. Flowing through the heart of Palembang, the Musi River divides the city into two major areas known today as Seberang Ilir and Seberang Ulu (Rohmah, 2021).

Historically, the Musi River functioned as a vital transportation artery, particularly for trade and mobility long before the development of modern infrastructure. Rivers in Southeast Asia have long served as the backbone of economic and social life, especially in riverine and maritime societies (Reid, 1993). The strategic location of the Musi River near the estuaries of major rivers positioned Palembang as a key node within regional and international trade networks. This geographical advantage enabled the Kedatuan of Sriwijaya to emerge as a powerful maritime polity with significant influence over trade routes in Southeast Asia, particularly those connected to the Malacca Strait (Hall, 2011).

As is well known, the Musi River has played a crucial role not only in economic activities but also in shaping civilization and social life within the broader context of Southeast Asian maritime history. Since the era of the Sriwijaya polity, the Musi River corridor has served as a meeting point for diverse ethnic groups arriving through trade,

migration, and religious missions (Wolters, 1999). Continuous interactions along the riverbanks facilitated long-term settlement patterns and fostered dynamic relationships among various communities, most notably Arab and Chinese ethnic groups (Anggela, 2021; Novita, 2018).

Over time, these interactions produced processes of acculturation and cultural exchange that significantly influenced Palembang's social and cultural identity. Cultural expressions such as language, settlement patterns, performing arts, and culinary traditions reflect the blending of Malay, Arab, and Chinese influences formed through sustained contact along the Musi River (Reid, 1993; Rohmah, 2021). The Musi River thus functioned not merely as a physical waterway, but as a cultural connecting route that enabled ethnic coexistence, social integration, and the formation of a pluralistic society. In this context, examining the historical dynamics of ethnic groups along the Musi River provides important insights into how geography, trade, and culture intersected to shape the social fabric of Palembang from the past to the present.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design, focusing on ethnic dynamics along the Musi River as a connector of cultures. The qualitative approach is chosen due to the complex and contextual nature of the topic, which requires an in-depth understanding of social interactions, ethnic identities, and the geographical role of the river in shaping inter-ethnic relationships. This case study emphasizes a holistic exploration of the phenomenon, in line with the principles of qualitative research proposed by Creswell (2014), in which the researcher acts as the primary instrument to capture cultural nuances and social dynamics. An interpretive paradigm is employed to interpret the subjective meanings of participants' experiences regarding the role of the Musi River as a cultural connector. The research is conducted in areas surrounding the Musi River, which constitute the main subject of this study. Data collection involves interviews with members of the Arab community who have long been settled in the area, as well as a review of relevant articles and books related to the topic under discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Musi River as a Connecting Route Across Time

During the era of the Sriwijaya polity, Sriwijaya was known for its dominance in navigation and trade with China and western regions through the Musi River by controlling the Malacca Strait route. In addition to serving as a center of navigation and trade, the Musi River also functioned as a channel for the spread of Buddhism within the Sriwijaya polity. During the period of the Palembang Sultanate, the Musi River continued to play a role as a focal point for the development of Islamic civilization in Palembang (Burhanuddin in Rohmah, 2021).

In the era of the Palembang Sultanate, the areas along the banks of the Musi River primarily functioned as transportation routes. Over time, these areas developed into residential settlements that were spatially organized and grouped by ethnic communities. For example, in the 17th century, the Seberang Ulu area was inhabited by Europeans, Indians, Arabs, and Chinese. Some of these settlements still exist today, such as Kampung Arab and Kampung Tionghoa (Rohmah, 2021).

During the Dutch colonial era (17th–20th centuries), the Musi River was utilized for the export of pepper and rubber, accelerating urbanization and ethnic intermixing. Local ethnographic studies indicate that the river facilitated cultural syncretism, as seen in the Palembang Malay language, which adopted Javanese and Chinese vocabulary; in culinary traditions such as pempek (a blend of Malay–Chinese influences); and in the Arab Zapin dance (Arab–Malay).

B. Ethnic Dynamics (Arab and Chinese) Along the Musi River

Article 1 paragraph 3 of Law No. 40 of 2008 defines ethnicity as a community or grouping of people who share similarities based on beliefs, values, customs, language, history, and kinship ties. The concept of ethnicity differs from that of race.

1. Arab Ethnic Group

The Arab ethnic community was permitted to settle on land during the Palembang Sultanate, specifically in the 17th century during the reign of Sultan Abdurrahman, as they were considered to play an important role in the sultanate's economy. Arabs were also regarded as having the closest relationship with the sultanate compared to other ethnic groups. This is evident from archaeological findings of the sultans' tombs in Palembang, which are often found adjacent to the graves of Islamic scholars (ulama) (Novita, 2018).

To this day, many descendants of Arab communities from the era of the Palembang Sultanate can still be found, such as in Kampung Arab, where they live in clustered communities and continue to interact closely with one another. Arab settlements are commonly located along the banks of the Musi River, with houses built on elevated structures similar to stilt houses to avoid river currents. Daily life was highly dependent on the Musi River, serving as a means of transportation, a medium for religious preaching (da'wah), as well as for washing, bathing, and other activities. However, with modernization, daily water needs are now met through the municipal water supply (PDAM), and land transportation has largely replaced river transport (Novita, 2018). Today, several "Arab" villages in Palembang are still inhabited by Arab communities, particularly in the Seberang Ulu area, including the Sungai Lumpur site, Lorong BBC, Al-Munawar, and Assegaf.

One prominent example of cultural acculturation between Arab and Palembang Malay culture is the Arab Zapin dance. This dance became known following the introduction of Arab culture to Palembang and has long been preserved by the Arab community. Over time, it evolved through the acculturation of Arab and Malay cultures in the city. The dance is typically performed at Islamic religious events such as the Islamic New Year (Hijri New Year), the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday (Maulid Nabi), and other religious celebrations. Traditionally, the dance is performed by a pair of male dancers wearing gamis and accompanied by the gambus, a Middle Eastern musical instrument, with Arabic lyrical chants. However, since 1991, changes and developments have occurred, including the replacement of the gambus with keyboard instruments. Initially, public responses were mixed, with some considering the new instruments unsuitable for Islamic-themed events. Over time, these instruments continued to be used, but the function of the Arab Zapin dance shifted toward entertainment, such as performances at wedding receptions and festive evening events.

2. Chinese Ethnic Group

Between the 16th and 20th centuries, Palembang was known as a strategically important trade region, which attracted the migration of Chinese communities to the area. However, it is estimated that Chinese presence had already existed as early as the 1st century, as evidenced by the discovery of Han Dynasty ceramics in Kerinci and the upper reaches of the Musi River. This indicates that interactions between Chinese and Palembang Malay communities had already taken place centuries earlier (Anggela, 2021).

Chinese communities generally settled in clustered residential areas. For example, in Java, Chinese communities were dominated by Hokkien and Cantonese groups. In Palembang, according to I-Tsing, Muslim Chinese communities had already settled during the Sriwijaya period, originating from mainland China (Rahmayani in Anggela, 2021).

During the Palembang Sultanate, Chinese residents were not permitted to own agricultural land. They were allowed to reside in the area but were required to live in rumah rakit (floating houses) on the river. This policy was implemented to protect the

interests of the sultanate by maintaining control over groups considered potentially harmful, as these floating houses could be burned or set adrift if deemed necessary.

One culinary example of Chinese–Palembang cultural acculturation is pempek. There are several accounts regarding the origin of pempek. According to the National Archaeological Research Center and the Palembang Archaeology Office, pempek has existed since the Sriwijaya era, based on the Talang Tuo inscription, which indicates that sago plants were already known in the 7th century (Efrianto in Oktaria, 2022). Another account suggests that the name pempek was not originally documented as such. Instead, it is said to have originated from a Chinese man named Apek, who processed fish caught from the Musi River by mixing it with sago. As he sold the food while traveling around, people often called out “Pek... Apek,” which over time evolved into the term pempek (Hanafiah in Oktaria, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the Musi River has consistently played a central role as a cultural, economic, and social connector in Palembang from the era of the Sriwijaya polity to the present day. Functioning not only as a vital transportation and trade route, the river also served as a medium for the spread of religions, including Buddhism during the Sriwijaya period and Islam during the Palembang Sultanate. Its strategic geographical position strengthened Palembang’s role within regional and international maritime networks, particularly in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the Musi River facilitated sustained interaction among diverse ethnic groups, especially Arab and Chinese communities, whose presence significantly shaped Palembang’s social and cultural landscape. Patterns of settlement along the riverbanks, economic activities, and daily life demonstrate a strong dependence on the river, particularly in earlier periods. These interactions gave rise to cultural acculturation and syncretism, evident in language, architecture, performing arts such as the Arab Zapin dance, and culinary traditions such as pempek, which reflect the blending of Malay, Arab, and Chinese influences. Overall, the Musi River can be understood not merely as a physical waterway, but as a dynamic cultural corridor that enabled ethnic coexistence, cultural exchange, and the formation of a pluralistic identity in Palembang. Despite the impact of modernization and shifts toward land-based infrastructure, the historical significance of the Musi River as a unifying cultural axis remains deeply embedded in the collective memory and cultural heritage of the city.

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