



Traditional Local Dress and the Promotion of “Malayness” in the Southern Border Provinces of Thailand

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Article Info

Research Article

Article History:

Received 26 August 2025

Revised 13 December 2025

Accepted 18 December 2025

Keywords :

Thai-Malay,
Malay Muslims,
Busana Melayu,
traditionnel dress,
Southern Thailand

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Abstract

Traditional dress is an important part of the heritage and culture of a nation, as it is symbolic of history, pride, and customs. Likewise, the ethnic Thai Malay takes pride in *Busana Melayu*, a traditional Malay dress that symbolizes modesty, honor, and identity. Wearing this costume during occasions shows respect to one's own traditions and heritage. Today, the traditional Malay dress is relevant to Thai Malay people in the southern border provinces in Thailand. This paper, therefore, explores and seeks to understand the symbolic perspectives of costumes in *Busana Melayu* of the Thai Malays and its contribution to the preservation and reinforcement of ethnic identity of Thai Malays in the broader social and cultural dynamics in the majority Thai society. The study adopted qualitative methods that include interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. The study found out that *Busana Melayu* is normally worn by the Thai Malays, particularly, at religious functions such as *Hari Raya* and other cultural events. It is compatible with Islam because of its function as a modest dress that coincides with Islamic rules on dress code. Basically, it is a way to honor cultural heritage while adhering to Islamic customs. However, the community encountered both obstacles and opportunities while dealing with the demands of modernization and holding onto their heritage. Studying its impact on cultural preservation provides valuable insights for future research.

1. Introduction

Each community has its own cultural heritage that has existed since ancient times and been inherited until now. Dress is one of the cultural symbols that marks the development and specialization of a particular culture. Dressing also becoming a symbol of the thinking of the community means that the way people dress and choose what to dress represents how they see the world, their values and how they express their cultural identity. For the Thai Malay, in addition to its function of covering the body, their traditional dress also signifies meanings and symbols. These symbolic meanings spell out very noble values, highly esteemed by Thai Malay people. Yet as globalization is expanding rapidly and foreign cultural influences are continuously changing, the role of traditional dress is being increasingly challenged. Traditional dress has lost its significance when people's perception and lifestyle started to change. It is not seen as a common usage in everyday life. But still, traditional dress is one of the most patent symbols of cultural or social continuity. It serves as a bridge between the past and the present and might really help communities stand out, preserve their heritage, and build up pride in an increasingly open world. Furthermore, traditional dress conveys social status, marital status, and religious background related to a specific location or period of time. While modern fashion dominates everyday life, traditional dress occupies a special niche during important events, by which it is represented as a heritage celebration, faith, national pride, or regional self-identification. For instance, *Busana Melayu* is considered to be one of a number of the traditional Malay clothing symbolizing Malay identity and pride. It reflects deep respect for tradition and cultural heritage and helps in reaffirming their ethnic identity and resisting the process of cultural assimilation.

Traditional dress helps mark the boundaries of each community as ethnically different from others. It is a way for people to stay connected with their culture while interacting with people from different cultures. It also strengthens one's social ties beyond reflecting cultural values. Studies show that ethnic identity and ethnic dress are closely interconnected: dress reflects a community's identity, while identity itself is expressed and reinforced through dress. When communities wear the traditional dress, this creates ethnic pride. Moreover, it leads to a strong connection with one's heritage (Eriksen, 2007). The southern border provinces of Thailand namely Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat (see Figure 1), are home to a large ethnic Thai Malay Muslim community with a unique cultural identity that is distinct from the Thai majority group. Traditional Malay dress known as *Busana Melayu* plays a vital role in visualizing and preserving this identity. This study intends to shed light on the symbolic meaning of traditional dress such as *Busana Melayu*, and how it helps the Thai Malay people to be known with who they are and stay strong as Malay ethnic group of southern Thailand. This study also looks at how the wearing of traditional Malay dress helps the Thai Malay community adapt and face social and cultural change but still hold on to their cultural heritage roots in today's Thailand.

Figure 1

The Three Southern Border Provinces of Thailand: Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat



Note. From *Conflict in Southern Thailand: Islamism, violence and the state in the Patani insurgency*, by N. J. Melvin, 2007, <https://patricklepetit.jalbum.net/PATTANI/LIBRARY/Conflict%20in%20Southern%20Thailand.pdf>

Baju Melayu in southern Thailand is closely attached with various religious events such as *Hari Raya*, *Maulidul Rassul*, and Friday prayer. It is widely worn in cultural events as well. However, many Thai Malay nowadays wear this dress without even knowing its origin and background. Historically, *Busana Melayu* was introduced by Sultan Muhammad Shah, the Sultan of Melaka empire 600 years ago. He used *Busana Melayu* for unification of the Malay people and as a form to differentiate them from the Indians and Arabs traders who traveled through the Malay peninsula. At first, the dress was short, tight and simple, looking similar to *silat* performers attire (see Figure 2), but later the dress was modified with royal acceptance and approval to be looser and longer as it is worn today (see Figure 3). This indicates that changes in traditional Malay dress reflect its transformation from being mere functional wear to being a cultural emblem of identity, history, and cultural oneness.

Figure 2

The traditional Malay dress in the past



Figure 3

The Baju Melayu today



Note. Adapted from *Perkembangan dan evolusi pakaian Alam Melayu*, by A. Aman, R. M. A. Zakaria, Z. Ramli, & N. Ismail, 2023, in *Proceedings of the Seminar Antarabangsa Susastera, Bahasa dan Budaya Nusantara (SUTERA 2023)* (pp. 723–737), Thaksin University.

Despite these changes, the purpose of the traditional Malay dress remained the same: for men, it symbolized ethnic identity and was not merely a means of covering the body. Furthermore, the way this traditional dress is worn is not arbitrary but is grounded in a unique cultural meanings. As with many aspects of Malay culture, the manner of speech and behavior is characterized by grace and propriety, and this is also reflected in the way the dress is worn (Hassan, 2016). In this way, the traditional Malay dress style subtly educates the younger generation of Malay people, promoting values of respect and refinement through the way they dress. For Thai Malay men, traditional male dress “*Baju Melayu*,” (see Figure 4) includes a long-sleeved shirt paired with long trousers, often accompanied by a “*sampin*” (a piece of cloth wrapped around the waist) and a “*songkok*” or “*kopiah*” (cap). The traditional Malay dress for Thai Malay women called “*Baju Kurung*,” (see Figure 5) consists of a long, loose-fitting tunic worn over a sarong or skirt, and the “*tudung*” or “*hijab*” to cover the head.

Figure 4

Baju Melayu



Figure 5

Baju Kurug



Note. Adapted from *Perkembangan dan evolusi pakaian Alam Melayu*, by A. Aman, R. M. A. Zakaria, Z. Ramli, & N. Ismail, 2023, in *Proceedings of the Seminar Antarabangsa Susastera, Bahasa dan Budaya Nusantara (SUTERA 2023)* (pp. 723–737), Thaksin University.

1.1 The Underlying Values of *Baju Melayu*

The *Baju Melayu* represent the wearer’s origin, embedded meanings, and contributes to the development of cultural values within the Malay community. There are two main styles for the *Baju Melayu*: one is *cekak musang*, and the other one is *teluk belanga*. They each look different. They can be differentiated from the way their buttons are placed and in their three pockets. These parts stand for key things in Malay life and culture. The *teluk belanga* (Figure 6) has just one button at the neck. This button symbolizes the One God (Allah). It represents the oneness of Allah, a core principle in Islam, emphasizing that there is no God but Allah. This is the most important belief in

Islam. The other style, the *cekak musang* has different features (see Figure 7) with five small buttons. Each stand for one rule in Islam: The *Shahada* (faith), *Salat* (prayer), *Zakat* (charity), *Sawm* (fasting), and *Hajj* (pilgrimage). There are two more buttons on the neck, split from the group of three lower buttons. These two at the top symbolize the two *shahada*hs (the declaration of faith) and the obligation of performing five daily prayers. This underlying value shows that putting on the *Baju Melayu cekak musang* helps one to keep in mind to follow all the ways of Islam. If a person only uses the three buttons at the base, it does not show all five pillars of Islam. The three buttons stand for only some parts of the faith, and not the full way. Additionally, both designs of *Baju Melayu* share a common feature in the number of three pockets: one at the top and two at the bottom. These three pockets symbolize *Iman* (faith), *Ihsan* (goodness), and *Islam* (the religion), three essential foundations in Islamic teachings that shape a Thai Malay life. Therefore, *Baju Melayu* is not just a simple piece of cloth but in fact carries deep symbols that reflect the teachings of Islam and Malay culture (Meerangani et al., 2025, p. 1610).

Figure 6

Teluk Belanga



Figure 7

Cekak Musang



Note. Adapted from “Islamic aesthetics and local wisdom in Malay traditional attire: A study on *Baju Melayu*,” by K. A. Meerangani, S. M. Kaulan, M. F. Abdul Hamid, S. N. I. Hashim, & Dawami, 2025, *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, 9(7), pp. 1608–1614.

1.2 Sampin

Sampin (see Figure 8) is a piece of clothing worn around the waist by Malay men, over the *Baju Melayu*. It is usually worn during special and formal occasions like weddings, religious events and official ceremonies. The *sampin* is an additional and important part of traditional Malay men’s dress, reflecting cultural pride, respect, and elegance. According to Malay tradition, married men are required to wear the *sampin* below the knee (see Figure 9), while those who are unmarried should wear it above the knee (see Figure 10). If a married man wears the *sampin* above the knee, it is seen as a sign that he intends to take another wife. *Sampin* also functions as a marker of

social hierarchy within Malay society. For instance, it is traditionally tied in specific ways: relatives on the right side, noblemen on the left, and common folk in the center. Each position symbolizes an individual's social role and status (Mohd Yusof, 2015).

Figure 8

Sampin



Figure 9

wearing Sampin **below** the knee
means the wearer already married



Figure 10

wearing Sampin **above** the knee
means the wearer is single



Note. Adapted from *Perkembangan dan evolusi pakaian Alam Melayu*, by A. Aman, R. M. A. Zakaria, Z. Ramli, & N. Ismail, 2023, in *Proceedings of the Seminar Antarabangsa Susastera, Bahasa dan Budaya Nusantara (SUTERA 2023)* (pp. 723–737), Thaksin University.

However, the value system of Malay traditional way of dressing is fading bit by bit with today's generation. Many of them do not know what *Baju Melayu* stands for (Mohd Yusof, 2015). They do not see the special worth of these clothes. At the same time, old traditional ways of wearing it are changed a lot today. People want it to look modern or wear it in ways that are easy for them. These changes are stripping the dress of its symbolic identity and diminishing its role as a cultural signifier of *Malayness*. When this goes on, *Baju Melayu* may lose its worth and turn into a simple icon from the past. It may not anymore show who Malay people are or tell their rich story and way of life.

2. Literature Review and Related Concepts

Traditional dress has always been considered critical as a clue to cultural image, as an essential visual form of the self we put forth for social inspection. An examination of the relationship between what people wear and culture is explored and appear in studies across various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. This dress not only serves practical functions but it also embodies symbolic meanings that are associated with individual and collective constructions of identity. Historical context in many societies show that people continue to use older forms of

dress to retain a sense of tradition and as an expression of historical experience, customs, and beliefs, often in contrast with the contemporary fashions of globalized culture. In this context, traditional dress can be seen as a tool for cultural preservation and a symbol of resistance to cultural assimilation (Turner, 2003). It gives individuals an opportunity to show their ethnicity, express group support and maintain cultural continuity in a rapidly changing world. In addition identity relates to one's sense of self as it pertains to others and society at large. It tends to bubble up as an issue at a time of crisis, when some aspects of it are being challenged or destabilized. Many changes occur due to cultural elements such as social knowledge, technology and economy.

One of the main aspects reviewed in the literature related to this study is how traditional dress functions as a form of social representation and ethnic identity preservation. Traditional dress is often observed during specific cultural events and gatherings, which help to reinforce ethnic bonds and the transmission of cultural knowledge to future generations (Arnold, 2009). Such examples as the wearing of the kimono in Japan, the sari in India, or the *Busana Melayu* in Malaysia is deeply tied to the expression of cultural values and the socialization of individuals within their communities. Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992) in their studies explain that traditional dress is an important tool in expressing personal and group identity. It reflects a one's sociocultural background, social status and ethnic origin. It helps as well distinguish one ethnic group from another, acting as a visual marker that reinforces ethnic unity among its members. In pluralistic societies, traditional dress plays an important role in holding and maintaining cultural boundaries and fostering a sense of belonging within a community.

With the development of modern trends and fashion styles, the important role of traditional dress in reflecting cultural identity of a community has attracted scholars' attention. Attention was paid to traditional dress not merely as an aesthetic or historical artifact but rather as a main marker of cultural survival and adaptation, in which it is always seen as a major way to preserve one's own ethnic identity in a modern changing era, that introduce various uniforms and Westernized styles. With exploring and investigating how and why the traditional dress continues to be revived, adapted and worn, researchers can easily understand and have a clear vision on how cultural identity is preserved, expressed and negotiated in a changing contemporary world. Even though there are many communities facing various challenges and obstacles to preserve, retain and practice their traditional dress, many others have found and utilized ways to adapt and suit the dress to modern fashion style while maintaining some of its cultural features and concepts. This kind of combination between traditional and modern styling dress is mentioned in work written by Hassan (2016), who emphasizes how young people in urban areas may adjust and transform their traditional dress to

symbolize modern global influences and local customs. In this regard, traditional dress is not a static cultural artifact, but a dynamic component of identity that evolves in line with social, political, and economic changes. The perspective of traditional dress as a form of social representation and ethnic identity preservation can be analyzed from various theoretical perspectives, including semiotics, cultural anthropology, and social identity theory. As social representation, traditional dress serves as a medium of non-verbal communication, conveying messages about one's social status, group affiliation, age and role within a society.

According to Barthes (1983), dress is a system of signs that communicates social codes and norms. It is a symbolic language that transmits important social information and can be an indicator for a particular life stage marital status and even level of religious and spiritual beliefs. In some cultures for instance, the bright colorful dress worn by the propel of Maasai in East Africa showed both cultural identity and group membership (Taylor, 2002). In the same way. the Japanese traditional dress of *Kimono* represents the main aspects of respect and formality within Japanese social interactions that holds the Japanese people together (Tansman, 2012). These types of traditional dress are thus socially coded, allowing individuals to express their belonging to a specific community and represent while communicating cultural norms without words.

In some cultures, traditional dress is important when it comes to the matter of ceremonial and ritualistic contexts, in which it signifies social cohesion, ancestral ties, and continuity. For native American communities, the wearing of traditional dress is central to rites of passage such as birth, marriage and death. They wear it during ceremonial dances to recall for their ancestors (Young & Oldham, 1995). Similarly, *Busana Melayu* dress of the Thai Malay worn on various specific cultural and religious occasion makes it function as a symbolic resource for the reinforcement and construction of ethic group identity, creating a sense of unity and shared meaning among members of the community that can be seen in southern Thailand today.

Kroskrity (2000) notes that by wearing traditional dress, individuals assert their cultural uniqueness and safeguard heritage, ensuring identity elements are retained. This can be seen clearly among the indigenous dress in Latin America, notably in Mexico, reflecting efforts to celebrate roots and resist Westernization, acting as political and cultural resistance (López, 2016). But traditional clothing is also related to group memory and ancestral culture. Specific to design, color and fabric can be associated with some historical references, migration, survival, resilience (Fornas, 1995). Traditional dress is a living connection to the past for some indigenous groups, maintaining historical traditions and cultural stories. Inuit culture exemplifies this connection. A parka with a hood, the "*amauti*" is both useful for survival in the Arctic and symbolic of Inuit heritage. Through

generations, we are transmitting the design and making methods in our acculturation process that contribute to cultural continuity and connection (Barthes, 1983).

One theoretical approach to understand traditional dress as social representation and cultural preservation is semiotics. This approach stresses how meaning is created via signs and symbols. Barthes (1983), stated that dress is as a “text” that can be read based on social context in which it is worn. The main analysis will focus on the symbolic meanings attached to the traditional dress, such as color, pattern, and adornment. Likewise, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from their membership in social groups. For many societies, traditional dress represents group identity and belonging, by apparently signaling membership in a particular ethnic, religious, or cultural group. As such, it becomes an essential tool for the negotiation and maintenance of social boundaries. While wearing traditional dress reinforces group unity and marks distinctions between different cultural groups, it also serves as indicator for self-presentation, as individuals choose to accept or reject traditional dress based on the social context and the identity they wish to represent. In the field of cultural anthropology, the main concern is that traditional dress is often seen as an important marker of ethnicity. Geertz (1973) asserts the significant role of symbols in shaping an ethnic identity, emphasizing that many ethnic groups use their traditional dress as dominant symbols to assert their distinctness.

Traditional dress continues to be significant for maintaining and displaying ethnic identity within the present-day interdependent society. In the face of increased global interaction and the resulting cultural exchange; traditional dress can serve as a mechanism by which individuals demonstrate their heritage and resist cultural homogenization (Eriksen, 2007). Minority groups in diverse communities use traditional clothing at cultural celebrations and public gatherings to maintain an association with their past and to display pride in their heritage. The revival of ethnic clothing signifies cultural durability and empowerment (Miller, 2011) and is considered an effective method of non-verbal communication where social information about an individual's personality, status, and affiliations are communicated via traditional dress. Furthermore, traditional dress is seen as an ethnic identifier, providing a means of preserving cultural heritage, and resisting cultural eradication within the contemporary globalized environment. As a result of analyzing traditional dress using semiotic analysis, social identity theory, and cultural anthropological theories, it has become evident that traditional clothing is not simply clothing. It is an indicator of both collective and individual identity, as well as an indicator of continuity.

3. Methodology

This study is designed to introduce a contextual and contemporary approach for understanding *Busana Melayu* from the standpoint of both globalization and social interaction; it differs from other previous studies by integrating semiotic, functionalist and social identity approaches to understand how individual and collective experiences generate meanings of *Busana Melayu* and as a result preserve and reinforce the cultural identity of the Thai Malay living in the southern border provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani. Methodologically, this study used qualitative field research methods such as observations, interviews, and focus group discussions, supplemented with an analysis of texts and documents to support the research findings in order to capture the local context of the daily life and community practices associated with *Busana Melayu* in each of the three southern border provinces.

3.1 In-depth Interviews

A total of 45 Thai Malays (15 participants from each province) had been interviewed. The interviews were conducted with individuals from diverse backgrounds, including students, teachers, members of the general public, and community leaders from Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces, where traditional Malay dress is more visible in daily life and special occasions. Sampling was purposive based to include those with direct experience and reflections regarding traditional Malay dress; however, some were selected opportunistically during their attendance at cultural/religious related functions like wedding, festival(s) and Friday prayers. The questions of the interview were structured based on main concepts named in this study, that is: functionalism, semiotics and social identity theory.

Most sparked questions by functionalism focused on the social and cultural role of traditional dress in the community. For example, how does wearing *Baju Melayu* impact social harmony or cultural norms in the Thai Malay community? When and why do people typically wear *Baju Melayu* for social or religious events? And in what ways does *Baju Melayu* showcase values like modesty, respect, and a sense of belonging within the community?

Questions related to semiotic theory mostly exposed the symbolic meanings attached to particular aspects of *Baju Melayu*, *Baju Kurung*, *ampin*, or *tudung*. For example, what meanings and values do certain styles, pattern, or accessories in your *Busana Melayu* convey about your self-identity or status? How do colors, fabrics, or embroidery patterns in *Baju Melayu* reflect social

status or regional identity? Are there any specific symbols or motifs in your dress that mark religious or cultural significance?

Questions drawn from social identity theory usually setup to understand how traditional Malay dress reflects and reinforces both individual and collective identity. For example, in what ways does wearing *Busana Melayu* strengthen your sense of belonging as a Thai Malay Muslim? Do you think traditional dress helps distinguish the Malay community from other ethnic groups in Thailand? How does the younger generation express their Malay identity through clothing today?

The key issues highlighted during the interviews were focused upon the cultural and religious significance of traditional Malay dress in defining personal as well communal identity, particularly in relation to Islamic values and local Malay practices. The interviews in general indicated that *Busana Melayu* does indeed represent modesty and faith, whilst concurrently reinforcing the sense of cultural pride, continuity and unity among the Thai Malay community in southern Thailand.

3.2 Observations

Examining when and why Thai Malay people wear *Baju Melayu* and *Baju Kurung*, such as in religious contexts, daily life, and cultural festivities enable one to identify how this traditional Malay dress embodies and reinforces cultural practices and norms. Of course, it's also fascinating to see how younger generations perceive *Baju Melayu* – whether they take them in or let go of this tradition. This approach has really enabled the study to get a hold of how traditional Malay attire works in everyday life and even cultural occasions.

3.3 Focus Groups

The main approach in organizing focus group discussions (FGDs) is to dive into how the Thai Malay community views, talks about, and deals with *Busana Melayu* in various settings. These FGDs aimed to uncover personal views, as well as to see how common understandings, group attitudes, and shared norms develop through conversations. This method added to the interviews by looking at how groups interact, find common ground, and discuss traditional attire and cultural heritage.

Three FGDs were conducted separately, one in each province with a total of fifteen participants, five persons per group. They were purposively selected based on their relevance to the study such as students, academicians, and members of the public who are actively involved in cultural or religious community activities. Holding the FGD separately allowed for a comparative

understanding of local variations in cultural expression, values, and social expectations related to *Busana Melayu*. While interviews focused on personal experiences, symbolic interpretations, and individual reflections on the meaning of traditional dress, the focus group sessions aimed to capture the interactive and collective dimension of cultural identity. In other words, interviews investigated what traditional dress means to individuals, whereas FGDs examined how people discuss, negotiate, and collectively construct these meanings within their communities. The questions in the FGDs were mainly designed to stimulate discussion, comparison, and debate among participants, dealing with questions such as: How do Thai Malay perceive the significance of *Busana Melayu* in expressing their identity today? In what ways do group norms or social expectations influence individuals' choice to wear or adapt traditional dress? How do generational differences shape collective attitudes toward traditional dress?

The FGDs contributed several functions that the individual interviews could not fully capture. First, they provided insight into social consensus and diversity of opinion, showing how cultural identity is collectively shaped through dialogue. Second, they revealed peer influence and communal negotiation, illustrating how attitudes toward traditional dress are maintained or challenged within group settings. Finally, they highlighted regional and generational nuances, offering a broader social context to complement the depth of individual narratives obtained from interviews. Overall, the focus group findings enriched the qualitative data by uncovering the shared beliefs, tensions, and evolving meanings associated with *Busana Melayu* among Thai Malay Muslims, thus providing a more holistic understanding of how traditional dress operates as a marker of cultural continuity, religious identity, and social unity across southern Thailand.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interview and focus group data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy. The analysis process was as follows: (1) familiarization, frequent transcripts reading in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the data; (2) designing codes, in which significant statements and recurring ideas were systematically noted; (3) theme generation, where related codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected key concepts such as cultural identity, religious influence, adaptation to modernity and community cohesion; (4) ensuring each theme accurately represented participants' perspectives; and (5) interpretation, linking the identified themes to existing literature on traditional dress, culture, and identity. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed triangulation by comparing data from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

4. Findings and Discussions

The Malays are an ethnic group that lives in the Malay Archipelago within South East Asia (Alatas, 2003). They inhabit the archipelago of Southern Thailand, Malay Peninsula, Singapore, Brunei, West Kalimantan, Teaming, the east coast of Northern Sumatera, Riau, Jambi and Palembang in Indonesia. Etymologically, the Malays are known through their way of living such as clothing, eating, speaking traditions or language. All of these are considered as the sense of the Malays (Che Man, 1990). Accordingly, when non-Thai Malay settlers from the upper region came and settled in the southern border provinces, they not only introduced their foods, attitudes, and lifestyle but also their clothing to the local people through a long process of integration and socialization. Over time, the local people began to feel comfortable and familiar when dressing in the modern style. Meanwhile, wearing Malay dress - especially among young generation - was considered old-fashioned, rustic, outdated, and associated with resisting modernity. Clearly, over time, the traditional Malay dress began to be sidelined and was no longer worn daily. Eventually, traditional Malay dress was only worn during certain events or ceremonies. People began to forget that the traditional Malay dress was a part of the Malay identity. If people from all over the world gathered at an event, the world would quickly recognize that those wearing ties, jackets, and coats represented Western identity, those in robes were from the Middle East, those wearing kimonos were Japanese, and those dressed in *Busana Melayu* with *sampin* were Malays. In other words, the clothing of a nation symbolizes its identity.

In recent years, the new generation in Thailand's southern provinces has shown a renewed interest in cultural and ethnic identity, particularly in preserving local language and traditional dress. Nowadays, traditional Malay dress functions as a powerful symbol of heritage, cultural pride, and resistance to cultural assimilation. There is a growing effort among Thai Malay, especially the new generation, to reconnect with their roots, exemplified by the *Busana Melayu* campaign, which seeks to reinforce ties to the Malay speaking world and to Islamic traditions. In the three southern provinces, *Busana Melayu* indicates values such as respect, modesty, and tradition, reinforcing cultural and ethnic identity in a diverse nation. For young Thai Malays, wearing traditional Malay dress is an act of maintaining ties to their heritage and origin within the broad context of Thai society. Remarkably, *Baju Melayu* nowadays is worn for official events; reimagining it as a symbol of identity in everyday life and social interactions. Students in higher institutions, have a significant role in this revival. They customize the *Busana Melayu* to modern fashion trends, emphasizing its relevance while promoting resilience and unity. Patimoh Kasa, a university student from Pattani,

reacts to this shift by indicating how the traditional Malay dress integrates into daily life and strengthens the connection to her cultural background. In an interview conducted on March 12th 2022, regarding the growing awareness of *Busana Melayu* among Thai Malay youth, Patimoh's sentiments emphasized a broader move among young Thai Malay, who are restoring the *Busana Melayu* as a significant part of their cultural identity. This generational shift reflected a deeper connection to their origin, especially in the era of modern forces and pressures to conform to a more homogeneous nation. By embracing *the Busana Melayu*, young generations are reaffirming their pride in their heritage and asserting that the Malay culture is an integral part of Thailand's national unity.

Social media has a no less important role to play in the growing awareness and specializations among Thai Malay. Various platforms like Facebook, Tik-tok and Instagram pave the way to demonstrate and promote their culture and tradition easily by creating contents and clips that features their heritage. With these media channels, the *Busana Melayu* is acknowledged as traditional dress with a symbol of empowerment and pride. Such an example is the "*Busana Melayu* Challenge" on Tik-tok, where young Thai Malays upload clips of themselves dressed in traditional Malay clothing, with added modern styling accessories. This trend has gained attraction among influencers and ordinary people to represent the modern touch of their traditional Malay dress. According to a hijab presenter, Rohayu:

"The *Busana Melayu* is not just for the elders or for religious ceremonies. It's part of who we are, and we want the world to see that Malay culture, especially in southern Thailand, is dynamic and vibrant."

(Rohayu, personal communication, July 5, 2022)

Rohayu highlights that the young Thai Malay try to restore the *Busana Melayu* and enhance cultural preservation as well as to reshape its role in society. By mixing traditional classical style with a modern contemporary twist, they connect the gap between the past and present, resulting in a vibrant cultural statement that mirrors the lifestyle of Thai Malay youth today. On the other hand, Tuan Aishah, 23 years old from Yala, and an employee at a private company in Bangkok remarked on the significance of social media:

Through social media, we can promote our traditional Malay fashions as well as highlighting the importance of our culture and traditions. I support the wearing of *Baju Kuruang*. It's a way for me to stay in touch with my origin and community, while living in Bangkok so far from home. It's a way of closing the distance that makes us feel like we still have something to belong to and promotes our culture with authenticity.

(Tuan Aishah, personal communication, July 11, 2022)

Tuan explained the important role of social media in reviving cultural traditions, particularly for those who do not practice their traditional way of dressing while living in urban areas or abroad. Via social media, Thai Malay youth initiate a virtual community that reinforces cultural pride and facilitates the exchange of ideas on how to incorporate traditional dress into contemporary life. Even though the popularity of wearing *Busana Melayu* among the young Thai Malay is increasing nowadays, there still are lots of challenges in integrating this cultural symbol into the broader Thailand national identity that is dominated by the majority Thai Buddhists. The *Busana Melayu*, as a marker of religion and ethnic identity has sometimes been perceived as separate from the mainstream Thai culture. An interview with Dr. Ku Majdi Yamirudeng, a former lecturer and director of University Business Incubation Center (UBI) at Yala Rajabhat University and also a chairman of Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam-Thailand (DMDI), provides insight into the ongoing challenges. He stated:

Traditional local dress symbolizes the civilization of a nation, including the Thai Malay community who consider traditional Malay dress to play an important, valuable and highly regarded role. But when it comes to the context of three southern border provinces the situation is different, it is often seen as a symbol of 'otherness,' which can result in misunderstandings and tensions. Therefore, it is time for the new generation to value traditional dress and study its historical background simply through reading materials. Who else wants to defend traditional Malay dress if not the Malays themselves and I hope that the knowledge of this traditional local dress can be passed down from one generation to the next and continue to survive through time.

(Y. Ku Majdi, personal communication, March 5, 2022)

He also added that traditional Malay dress needs to be maintained, especially in official ceremonies such as award receptions and programs because it helps create visibility for the Thai Malay community. However, for it to truly become part of the national conversation, there should be a great recognition and understanding of its cultural significance. Dr. Ku Majdi highlights the various social challenges faced by the Thai Malay new generation in asserting their ethnic identity through traditional Malay dress. He insists that, if the new generation proudly and eagerly wear the *Baju Melayu* to demonstrate their ethnicity and identity then, the larger society must also make strides toward inclusivity and respect for the multicultural atmosphere in the southern border provinces. To achieve this, a greater understanding is needed between the different ethnic and religious groups in the deep south. Its acceptance in the wider Thai society will depend on ongoing efforts to honor cultural diversity and promote inclusion.

In the southern border provinces, traditional Malay dress has both cultural and religious significance. It represents their close relations with the other Malay speaking neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. By wearing *Baju Melayu* especially during *Hari Raya*, the legacy of Islam and Malay are maintained and preserved. The Thai Malay today, in particular university students, are wearing traditional dress more frequently in an attempt to reclaim their heritage. An interview with 20 years old university student, Ahmad Zaki, from Narathiwat, provides a remarkable moment into this shift. Ahmad explains:

“As a child, I always wore *Baju Melayu* during family gatherings or school special occasions. But over time, I began to understand how It is important to wear it as to show of who I am. Wearing *Baju Melayu* is definitely a statement of pride. It's a way of connecting to my origin and to announce that *Busana Melayu* is still worn in southern Thailand”.

(Ahmad Zaki, personal communication, November 11, 2021)

Ahmad's feelings constitute the growing trend of young Thai Malay, who reinstate and reinterpret traditional dress. The youth of today wear the *Baju Kurung* and *Baju Melayu* as casual clothes and even in their daily lives but with modern twists, whereas the older generation had been using this only for very specific cultural and religious purposes. These modifications reflect the need of the new generation to respect heritage while embracing modernity. Modernity with its various technology platforms has provided easier and convenient access to fashion trends and more inclusive

cultural exchanges, especially with Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. It has altered the uniqueness of Malay identity, making traditional dress more globally uniform. However, this does not mean they have forgotten their originality. Many still wear traditional dress during Islamic ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and formal occasions to highlight their Malay identity and ethnicity.

On April 25, 2023, at Wasukri Beach in Sai Buri District, Pattani Province, there was a big gathering by thousands of young Thai Malay, referred to as '*Pemuda*', who wore colorful *Busana Melayu*. The gathering was part of a continuation campaign of wearing Malay cultural dress during the celebration of *Hari Raya Aidil Fitri*. The event was organized by the Civil Assembly for Peace (CAP) and its affiliated network, with youth groups from various villages in the three southern border provinces participating in the occasion. The campaign was carried out to promote traditional Malay dress, calling for this significant branch of culture to present itself and to show the customs of a nation based on the beliefs it adheres to. The gathering in traditional Malay dress was indeed a positive initiative aimed at preserving Malay culture, a valuable heritage inherited from previous generations. The gathering showed the significance of young people's enthusiasm in adopting traditional dress during *Hari Raya*, a step of encouragement towards believing that diversity and cultural pluralism with respect and appreciation of local customs is something to be embraced. Wan Muhammad-Noor Matha of Prachachat, a local political party that advocates multiculturalism, supports the idea of cultural diversity, and upholds constitutional rights and freedoms of every citizen, expressed his initial further pride of the government that supports Thai Malay youth to wear their cultural clothes to implement their cultural identity, and ensured that citizens of his party would also be willing to take part in such activities, regardless of local differences in culture ("Pattani youth delighted! 'Wan Nor'," 2023).

Regarding the security department's actions from the previous year, Matha characterized the concerns raised as a misunderstanding and unnecessary paranoia. He clarified that there was no actual threat and commended the security forces for their current understanding that cultural expression should be encouraged as it fosters unity, love, and mutual respect. He emphasized that the gathering of young people today symbolized their unity and should be regarded as an event worth promoting.

4.1 Symbolic Perspectives of The Traditional Malay Dress

The symbolic meaning of costume in traditional Malay dress relates to cultural identity and social values. The Thai Malay consider this as a symbol of their ancestry, social status, identification and cultural togetherness. Members of the same ethnic group often share the same features. It connects

the wearer to other Malay people of a larger community, which suggests that he or she belongs to a larger context within greater ASEAN regions. This means that is not only ethnic pride but regional pride as well. As Zulfah, a 22 years old 4th year student from Yala Rajabhat University, claimed that the Malay outfit (*Baju Melayu*) is a symbol of the heritage and identity of the Malay culture and is often worn at events and important occasions. This outfit is elegant and unique from Western attire:

It embodies both traditional values and ethnicity, with diverse patterns and colors representing creativity and inspiration. Further, it also plays an important role in strengthening unity within society. Nowadays. It is very clear why many Thai Malay families wear *Baju Melayu* made from similar fabrics or matching colors and design during *Hari Raya*, It is all about demonstrating family unity and cohesiveness. When one wears the Malay dress, they are preserving a tradition both as Muslim and Malay respecting one's elders and of conservatism, a reminder of the cultural heritage of Malays. Overall, the opinion on *Busana Melayu* is positive, with many appreciating the beauty and history behind its wearing. As a Malay, it is our responsibility to continue appreciating, honoring and preserving our traditional attire, which has become an important part of our identity.

(Zulfah Mamat, personal communication, April 11, 2021)

Zulfah emphasized that Thai Malay must determine in dignifying their own traditional dress that has withstood the test of time and continues to stand tall. In doing so, they would be able to preserve their ethnic identity as well as sustaining the uniqueness of Malay culture. She called on the youth in particular to embrace the heritage of their own ancestors with love and pride.

4.2 Social Status, Religious Significance and Community Bonding

In southern Thailand, traditional Malay dress is perceived as significant cultural and symbolic meaning for the Thai Malay community, symbolizing their identity and social status. It's role to show respect, honor, and societal hierarchy are embedded deeply in the social structure of Malay culture, particularly during important religious ceremonies and cultural celebrations. In these contexts, the Malay dress is worn to show respect to elders, guests, and the community. For instance, during

Hari Raya Puasa in particular, it is normal to see Thai Malay families wearing the *Baju Kurung* and *Baju Melayu* when visiting their relatives. This is because this Malay dress is regarded as a symbol of Malay customs and wearing the dress during visits is seen as showing respect for one's elders.

Similarly, in the context of social status, *Busana Melayu* functions as an indicator of an individual's position within the social hierarchy. During a Malay traditional wedding ceremony, the style, fabric quality, and accessories attaching to *Busana Melayu* can indicate one's social standing. For example, higher-ranking individuals or community leaders are often seen wearing *Busana Melayu* made from luxurious fabrics such as silk materials, *songket* or embroidered with gold thread. Color also plays an important indicator, for example, yellow is usually associated with nobility or royalty, while other colors such as green or red symbolize joy. These subtle details indicate their social standing and wealth. However, these symbolic colors of *Baju Melayu*, whether worn by the *Sultan* (King) or the commoner, share the same identity. In other words, it connects the gap between social ranking while at the same time maintaining differences in status and respect. In Malay culture, *Busana Melayu* are used to show respect and function as a status symbol.

In addition, *Busana Melayu* also reflects respect for religious traditions. It is designed to be loose, reflecting the values of modesty in Malay culture which places great emphasis on manners and etiquette. Its modest design also reflects the influence of Islam in the lives of Malay society. It emphasizes spiritual values and responsibility towards God and society. During the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, most Malay men would wear *baju Melayu* to honor religious, family, and community events because it represents both religion and culture. In interviews with some local religious leaders, they stressed the importance of this dress as it is a deeply cherished symbol of Malay Muslim identity in southern Thailand. Hajj Osman Norawi, a 66-year-old from Yala, stated that donning a traditional Malay dress to render a *Hari Raya* prayer would preserve a cultural heritage while evoking nostalgia among the community (personal communication, July 15, 2022). He explained that traditional dress could enhance the spirit of unity and solidarity among a community. Further, this will create a sense of belonging and relationship with people during festive seasons. In this case, wearing traditional Malay clothing will go beyond mere utilitarian use. Wearing *Baju Melayu* is one way of expressing, through action, the effort that is made to maintain one's traditions, religion and costumes and somehow to reject the western trends and fashions. As a timeless costume that links the past and the present, the *Baju Melayu* facilitates perceptions of continuity in collective identity. This is no less true among the Thai Malay. The *Busana Melayu* reflects a unifying factor and pride, which remains an important aspect of cultural and religious heritage.

4.3 Preserving Ethnic Identity Through Traditional Malay Dress

Today's youth show a deeper appreciation for the aesthetics of *Baju Melayu*, which embodies the essence of Malay identity and respect, deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions. However, during a focus group discussion conducted in Yala Province (April 20th 2022), participants emphasized that recent modifications to the *Baju Melayu*, especially during *Aidilfitri* celebrations, have drawn attention, with some of the current designs and styles considered quite 'extreme,' sparking conversation and trends within society. Ustazah Ruqaiah, a Malay language and culture teacher, explained that:

Socialization is the process where an individual learns, is shaped by, and acts in accordance with the expectations or demands of the community. Through this process, he or she slowly internalizes the behaviors, actions, and attitudes that are commonly accepted as social norms. However, when the dominant trends within society are influenced by foreign cultures, members of the community tend to adopt external styles and values, which may lead to modifications or deviations in traditional attire. This helps explain why younger generations of Thai Malays sometimes reinterpret or alter the *Busana Melayu* in ways that reflect global fashion influences rather than traditional modesty norms. In contrast, when community leaders, educators, and religious figures emphasize the importance of preserving the Thai Malay Islamic identity, they create a counterbalance that encourages adherence to traditional dress values.

(Ustazah Ruqaiah, personal communication, April 20, 2022)

This suggests that the degree of deviation or modification in *Busana Melayu* is closely linked to the nature of socialization, whether it is guided more by global cultural exposure or by community-based efforts to preserve Malay Islamic heritage. The psychology of those who have been "modernized" will always feel that what the West brings or embodies is something good and modern, while anything from their own heritage or culture is viewed as negative and outdated. When Malay Muslims become weak in embracing the symbols of Malay Islamic identity, the attire of their culture is no longer appreciated and ceases to be a source of pride for the Thai Malay community itself. Ustazah Ruqaiah also mentioned that the Malay mind (*Akal Budi Melayu*), which

refers to the attitudes and thinking of the Malay people, has clear values embedded in Malay culture, based on three main elements: history, belief systems, and the philosophy of the Malays. Among the values found in *Akal Budi Melayu* are to be accommodative, assimilative, flexible, and respectful of others. These values are deeply ingrained in the Malay people, making them open to giving space and opportunities for foreign cultures to “live together” within the Malay world. The Chinese and Thais can live in Malay villages and successfully do business within the Malay community, but the reverse is not true. Malays can accept western, Chinese and Thai food in their menus as long as it complies with *Shariah*. Malays can incorporate pizza, *yong tau fu*, and *tomyam* into their diet. Similarly, western clothing and attire from other cultures have been absorbed into the fashion and daily wear of Thai Malays, as long as they comply with *Shariah*.

These values in *Akal Budi Melayu* to Ustazah Ruqaiah are good, but they must remain steadfast, and there must be a strong adherence to the symbols of Malay Islamic identity in the attire of the people, including Malay dress. A strong awareness of the preservation, dignification, and sustainability of Malay dress in daily life is essential to ensure the strength of the Malay people. Japan, China, and Korea have become advanced and strong nations because they have maintained the symbols or elements of their national identity. They have preserved their language, writing system, clothing, martial arts, traditional food, customs, and manners in their respective cultures. If they abandoned all these, they would become like the Western world, weak and unable to compete with the West. As a result, awareness regarding the preservation, dignification, and sustainability of Malay attire in the daily lives of Thai Malay community began to be taken more seriously in the mid-2000s. This occurred as information literacy about Malay clothing increased, access to Malay dress became more readily available, and there was a positive reception from Malay NGOs in promoting the wearing of traditional attire at their events. Additionally, there were combined efforts of individuals and NGOs to wear Malay clothing on certain days and occasions.

Furthermore, the concern of public educational institutions began to promote the wearing of Malay attire at academic events, such as seminars, discussions, conventions, and national and international conferences, which sparked greater interest among many people in adopting Malay clothing. Media coverage also played a key role in enhancing knowledge and awareness about Malay attire. Malay clothing would be more appreciated and respected if worn every Friday for the weekly Friday prayers. Interestingly, *Baju Kurung* and tudung are also considered Malay attire. These outfits are symbols of the Thai Malay identity in private religious schools. They are suitable

as school uniforms in terms of design and uniformity of color. Traditional Malay attire, however, was not adopted as school uniforms because it could lead to inconsistencies and create discomfort among people from different socio-economic backgrounds. The wearing of long pants by male students in schools after the 1990s was accepted as part of the school uniform, regardless of religion or ethnicity. Similarly, the phenomenon of Thai Malay Muslim female students starting to abandon the “pinafore” that exposed their *aurat* (modesty) has also emerged.

Busana Melayu is the identity of the Thai Malay community. The Thai Malay continues to wear the traditional dress in showing their ethnic pride and sense of belonging. In addition, they want to show their ethnic difference from the Thai majority. This way, they reaffirm their identity as a member of the Malay speaking, Muslim community. People in the local community use it for ethnic solidarity. It is also useful in the main cultural events and religious events which serve a big significance. In the broader sociopolitical context of southern Thailand, the *Busana Melayu* has become a symbol of resistance to the dominant Thai culture. It is a way to ensure that the Thai Malay ethnic group is unique. In the last few decades, southern Thailand has experienced an unprecedented political unrest as the Thai Malay Muslim people call for more recognition of their cultural and religious rights. The *Busana Melayu* and other cultural practices have acted as a claim of resistance.

Interviews demonstrated that the traditional Malay dress of Southern Thailand is both a cultural and a religious garment. Wearing *Baju Melayu* in prayers and festivals are expressions of personal piety and ethnic pride, participants noted. As a male interviewee from Pattani remarked; “I feel that when I wear *Baju Melayu* to the mosque, I am showing both my religion and my people”, Ahmad Affendi (personal communication, June 21, 2022. Narathiwat province). Some of the younger respondents verbalized how the dress connects them with their community’s culture as well as Islam. Multiple respondents characterized the practice as a subtle form of cultural resistance. A student of Princess of Naradhiwas University explained; “I still wear it regardless of the trend changing because it is our costume and identity, not just something fashionable”, Suhala Mamat (2022, July 5). According to these narratives, the continued use of traditional Malay dress has a vital role in the preservation of Thai Malay identity. Wearing *Baju Melayu* serves not only as a spiritual expression but also as a means of resisting cultural homogenization, reinforcing their place within both the global Muslim ummah and the local Malay community (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Observing *Busana Melayu* in various cultural and religious events held in the three southern border provinces



Note. Personal documentation, January 2021–December 2023.

In summary, the interviews and focus group discussions revealed a wide spectrum of views on the meaning and function of *Busana Melayu* among Thai Malay Muslims. Many younger respondents, especially university students from Pattani and Yala, described *Busana Melayu* as a modern-day expression of faith and identity. Many noted that they reinterpret this traditional wear through the lens of contemporary styles but remain within the bounds of modesty required by Islam. In contrast, older respondents and religious teachers asserted the traditional dress's important symbolic role. In this case, it preserves moral values and community discipline. Moreover, they view the traditional Malay dress as a moral reminder of the Malay Islamic identity. In the interview, the female participants often used the words self-respect and dignity with the *Baju Kurung* whereas some of the male participants said that there is unity in *Baju Melayu* during religious festivals and public gatherings. The community leaders such as *Imams* stressed the dress's political and cultural importance in safeguarding Malay identity within a predominantly Thai culture. The various collective programs like *Melayu Day*, *Pintu Gerbang Competition*, *Busana Melayu Fashion* festival and social marketing strategy have built youth participation and help cultural practice continuities. On the other hand, a few participants, especially those working in urban setups, acknowledged the difficulty in wearing traditional Malay dress to the workplace due to modernity but expressed pride to wear it on formal cultural or religious occasions. The various viewpoints show that *Busana Melayu* is not just simply a piece of clothing, but rather vehicle of negotiation between tradition and modernity,

the individual and the collective. The diverse ages, sexes and occupations of the individuals indicate that traditional attire is significant to the Thai Malay culture.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to understand the significance of the *Busana Melayu*, especially the *Baju Melayu* and *Baju Kurung* to the Thai Malay living in the border provinces of Southern Thailand, where modernization, religious identities, and political marginalization influence their cultural identity. Based on Clifford Geertz's symbolic framework, where symbols play a crucial role in defining identity, the *Busana Melayu* among the Thai Malay is much more than a mere piece of cloth; it is a deeply rooted cultural symbol. For Geertz, a symbol is much more than a mere reflection of culture; a symbol is a tool that actively helps to construct meaning and boundaries of belonging.

Therefore, this study found that the traditional Malay dress of the Thai Malays is much more than a religious or cultural artifact. Instead, the traditional dress acts as a 'living symbol of ethnic defiance and identity. It makes it different from the mainstream Thai culture of the country, besides being a 'religious expression' of their heritage and faith. It makes them different from a country that is grappling to assert its 'homogeneous' culture. Instead, this is a 'silent assertion' of 'this is who we are.' In this sense, the *Busana Melayu* is an ongoing process of identity formation and cultural preservation. The wearing of *Baju Melayu* and *Baju Kurung* within public domains, cultural gatherings, the workplace and official functions, verifies active participation in cultural continuity. In this respect, as identified through the symbolic anthropology of Clifford Geertz, *Busana Melayu* is a defining marker of ethnic identity that is strategically utilized as a cultural tool for the Thai Malay to make sense of their place and meaning within the larger socio-cultural setting of Thailand. *Busana Melayu* is, through its wearing, a marker of collective memory, as evidently reflected through qualitative research, a deliberate expression of cultural continuity that verifies participation in the protection of such cultural heritage, encompassing, of course, Islamization as well. The study reveals that among the younger populations of the Thai Malay, the attempt to don cultural heritage is a deliberate expression of cultural continuity that verifies participation in the protection of cultural heritage encompassing, of course, Islamization.

The novelty of this study is centered on how *Busana Melayu* is being used as a medium of identity expression among Thai Malay through various social community-based initiatives. Results show that Thai Malay, especially youth, are not only conserving traditional Malay dress but are reinterpreting it as a symbol of cultural pride and in defiance of modernization. This process

goes closely with the study's conceptual framework, that merges functionalism, semiotics, and social identity theory. According to functionalism, *Busana Melayu* helps support unity, maintain values, transmit traditions and bridge the generation gap within the Thai Malay community. In addition, the semiotic approach focuses on the visual and material aspects of *Busana Melayu* which includes color, fabric quality, *Sampin*, and *Hijab* that are symbols of religious belief, ethnic identity, and culture. On the other hand, social identity perspective focus on how the Thai Malay tend to employ *Busana Melayu* to express group membership, their minority status, and assert a collective identity in a multicultural and assimilative national context. These theoretical perspectives illustrate how *Busana Melayu* became a symbolic and practical tool for cultural resilience of the minority. It enabled the Thai Malay to strike a balance between cultural heritage and modernity. Hence, the *Baju Melayu* and *Baju Kurung* can be interpreted as cultural icons that have a considerable capacity for social cohesion to express belonging, pride, and resistance to sustain Thai Malay cultural heritage in the face of globalization and state-driven assimilation.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the Research and Excellence Strategy Division, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, Thailand/HUM6304128S-0 for their generous research grant. Without their financial support, this project would not have been possible.

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