



Arab–Malay Manuscripts at the North Sumatra State Museum as Evidence of Arab–Malay Cultural Interaction from the Perspectives of Philology and Cultural Historiography

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the presence of Malay manuscripts preserved at the North Sumatra State Museum as historical evidence of cultural interaction between Arabs and Malays. Written predominantly in Jawi script, these manuscripts contain religious, legal, literary, and social texts that demonstrate the influence of Arab-Islamic intellectual traditions in the Malay world. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this research investigates the provenance of the collections, museum acquisition mechanisms, conservation practices, and institutional interpretations of their historiographical significance. The findings indicate that the manuscripts were largely acquired through inter-museum collaboration, particularly with the Aceh Museum, and are preserved using preventive conservation measures to mitigate material degradation. This article argues that Arab–Malay manuscripts constitute not merely literacy artifacts but key sources for reconstructing intellectual networks, Islamic transmission, and cross-cultural exchanges in Sumatra, thereby positioning this study within broader Malay manuscript scholarship and Islamic Nusantara historiography. The study highlights the strategic role of museums in sustaining cultural memory and advancing manuscript-based historical research.

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INTRODUCTION

Malay manuscripts constitute an intellectual and cultural heritage that occupies a strategic position in the history of civilization in the Nusantara region. As a medium for documenting knowledge, religious teachings, law, literature, and social traditions, Malay manuscripts not only reflect the development of societal literacy but also record the historical dynamics of cultural exchange. One of the most significant influences within the Malay manuscript tradition is its interaction with Arab culture, which developed through trade networks, the process of Islamization, scholarly networks, and the evolution of the *Jawi* writing system. Through this historical process, Arabic script underwent adaptation and transformation, eventually becoming the primary medium for writing traditional Malay texts. This adaptation underscores the ability of Malay society to integrate foreign cultural elements into local knowledge systems without erasing its cultural identity (Fitriani & Herawati, [2024](#)).

In the context of North Sumatra, Arab–Malay manuscripts generally display distinctive characteristics, including the use of *Jawi* script with local paleographic variations, the utilization of European and locally produced paper, and textual content dominated by religious teachings, Islamic law, prayers, *hikayat*, and moral advice. These characteristics demonstrate that such manuscripts functioned not only as vehicles for the transmission of Islamic knowledge but also as instruments for shaping social ethics and Malay cultural identity. The diversity of content and form reflects local responses to the religious and social needs of their time. This representation positions Arab–Malay manuscripts in North Sumatra as a synthesis of religious, educational, and cultural functions within Malay society.

The North Sumatra State Museum serves as one of the institutions that preserves and maintains collections of Malay manuscripts, many of which were acquired through collaboration and collection transfers from the Aceh Museum. These collections hold significant value not merely as cultural artifacts but also as primary sources that record the intellectual, religious, and social trajectories of Malay society in Sumatra. The presence of these manuscripts provides insight into patterns of knowledge transmission and religious practice in the region. Efforts in preservation, documentation, and interpretation of the manuscript collections play a direct role in understanding the contribution of Arab–Malay cultural interaction to the formation of regional intellectual and cultural identities (Yusuf et al., [2018](#)).



Cultural interaction between the Arab world and Malay society represents a long-term historical process involving multiple dimensions of life, including trade activities, the spread of Islam, and the exchange of language and intellectual traditions (Batubara et al., [2022](#)). Concrete evidence of this process is found in the continued existence of Arab–Malay manuscripts preserved at the North Sumatra State Museum. These manuscripts function as cultural artifacts that record processes of encounter, adaptation, and assimilation between Arab–Islamic traditions and local Malay culture. North Sumatra’s position as a transit region along the trade and missionary routes of the Indian Ocean further reinforces its role in shaping these dynamics of cultural interaction (Wijaya et al., [2025](#)).

The use of Arabic script to write the Malay language reflects a creative and selective process in Malay society’s reception of Arab culture (Batubara et al., [2020](#)). The modification of Arabic letter forms to align with the phonological system of Malay demonstrates local capacity to adapt external elements without relinquishing cultural identity (Murbarani et al., [2024](#)). This adaptive process is not merely technical in nature but also ideological, as it is closely associated with the acceptance of Islam as a value system. Arab–Malay manuscripts thus represent a synthesis of language, religion, and intellectual tradition. Their existence affirms Islam’s role as the principal medium of Arab–Malay cultural interaction in the Nusantara region (Kahal et al., [2023](#)).

Previous studies indicate that research on Arab–Malay manuscripts has largely focused on the spread of Islam, the development of classical Malay literature, and the role of *Jawi* script as a medium for transmitting knowledge in major centers of Malay tradition such as Aceh, Riau, and West Sumatra. Numerous studies emphasize the function of Arab–Malay manuscripts as instruments of religious education, transmission of Sufism, Islamic law, and *da’wa*, while also reflecting complex processes of acculturation between Arabic writing systems and Malay linguistic structures (Aqila & Mawaddah, [2025](#)). From the perspective of intellectual historiography, Burhanudin ([2022](#)) demonstrates that the *Jawi* manuscript tradition reflects the interconnectedness of local scholarly networks with global centers of Islamic learning, although his study does not address the institutional context of museums. Sulistiyo et al. ([2023](#)) highlight the position of Arab–Malay script as material evidence of Islamic influence through digital manuscript studies, yet their analysis prioritizes inventory and accessibility. Museum-based studies in North Sumatra remain relatively limited and fragmented, as exemplified by Ardhony’s ([2023](#)) research, which focuses on a single manuscript and its philological-edition aspects without a comprehensive analysis of collections as evidence of Arab–Malay cultural interaction.

The originality of this study lies in its positioning of the Arab–Malay manuscript collection at the North Sumatra State Museum as the primary object of analysis within an integrated framework of philology and cultural historiography. Such an approach remains rare in comparable studies, which typically concentrate on established centers of Malay philological tradition or restrict analysis to partial textual examinations. Limited scholarly attention to the North Sumatra State Museum’s collections has resulted in the marginalization of this region’s role in the intellectual history of Islam in the Nusantara. Yet the manuscripts preserved in the museum have the potential to reveal scholarly networks, patterns of knowledge transmission, and local characteristics in the reception of Islamic teachings. By integrating analysis of manuscript characteristics, collection provenance, and institutional interpretation, this study presents a *state of the art* perspective that reads Arab–Malay manuscripts as historiographical sources of Arab–Malay cultural interaction, enriching the study of Islam Nusantara, particularly in Sumatra.

This study aims to comprehensively examine the dynamics of Arab–Malay cultural interaction in North Sumatra that gave rise to the tradition of Arab–Malay manuscript production through cultural encounters, trade, and Islamization processes. It also analyzes the contents of Arab–Malay manuscripts as reflections of Arab–Malay cultural relations through philological examination of religious, legal, literary, and social texts. This analysis seeks to understand processes of adaptation and localization of Arab intellectual traditions within the Malay cultural context. In addition, the study explores the role of the North Sumatra State Museum as a preservation institution that safeguards, interprets, and represents Arab–Malay manuscripts. This approach positions museum collections as crucial historiographical sources in the formation of Malay–Islamic identity at the local level.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to describe, identify, and analyze the presence of Malay manuscripts housed at the North Sumatra State Museum as evidence of Arab–Malay cultural interaction (Rachman et al., [2024](#)). The objects of analysis comprise a selection of Arab–Malay manuscripts from the museum’s collection, including texts on religious teachings, Islamic law, prayers, and *hikayat*. These manuscripts include *Kitab Tauhid*, *Risalah Fikih*, *Doa-doa Harian*, as well as religious advisory texts written in *Jawi* script that are recorded in the museum’s

inventory catalogue. The selection of these objects is based on their relevance in representing processes of knowledge transmission and Arab–Malay cultural interaction in North Sumatra. The analysis focuses on the manuscripts' content, material form, and historical context.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation study. Observation covered the physical condition of the manuscripts, writing materials, scripts, textual content, storage systems, and conservation techniques applied in the museum's storage facilities. Interviews were conducted with three key informants—the manuscript curator, museum documentation staff, and the manager of the manuscript storage unit—who were selected based on their direct involvement in collection management and preservation. Documentation study included the examination of museum catalogues, inventory archives, internal reports, philological literature, and studies on Malay cultural history. The integration of these techniques enabled the collection of comprehensive and context-sensitive data.

Manuscripts were selected using purposive sampling based on several criteria: the use of Arab–Malay (*Jawi*) script, association with the Sumatra region or Malay tradition, the availability of traceable provenance information, and relevance to the theme of Arab–Malay cultural interaction. The collected data were analyzed through stages of data reduction, coding, and thematic categorization to identify patterns of content, social function, and philological characteristics. The analytical results were then interpreted historically to link manuscript characteristics with the broader context of Arab–Malay cultural interaction. This approach allows the manuscripts to be read not merely as textual artifacts but as cultural products embedded within specific spatial and temporal settings.

Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing findings from observation, interviews, and documentation. This process was complemented by follow-up confirmations with informants and cross-referencing with relevant scholarly works on *Jawi* manuscripts and Malay historiography. The application of these validation strategies enhanced the accuracy of interpretation and the consistency of the research findings. Through this methodological framework, the study produces a descriptive mapping of the characteristics and provenance of Arab–Malay manuscript collections. The findings also reveal forms of cultural interaction embedded in the manuscripts and highlight the role of the North Sumatra State Museum in preserving Malay literary heritage and cultural memory.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Historical Context of Arab–Malay Interaction and the Emergence of the Arab–Malay Manuscript Tradition

Arab–Malay script represents a distinctive writing system that combines Arabic characters with the Malay language. This writing system functioned as a primary medium for the dissemination of Islamic teachings in the Nusantara region from approximately the thirteenth century onward. Its function extended beyond communication to serve as a vehicle for shaping the cultural and religious identity of Malay society (Nofrizal, [2020](#)). Within the context of the North Sumatra State Museum collection, Arab–Malay interaction is reflected in a range of Arab–Malay manuscripts that constitute the focus of this study. These manuscripts include *Kitab Tauhid*, *Risalah Fikih*, *Doa-doa Harian*, religious advisory texts, and an Arabic grammar (*nahwu*) manuscript written in Arab–Malay script that is displayed as part of the museum collection (see Figure 1). The presence of the *nahwu* manuscript confirms that the Arab–Malay tradition functioned not only as a medium of da‘wa but also as a channel for transmitting technical and scholarly Islamic knowledge.

The spread of Islam into the Nusantara region brought fundamental changes to local linguistic practices and literacy traditions. Arab scholars and merchants introduced written traditions that were subsequently adopted and adapted by Malay society through the use of Arab–Malay script. This script developed extensively and was employed in religious works, Islamic law, and literary texts, as reflected in the dominant themes of the manuscripts preserved in the museum collection (Hamzah et al., [2024](#)). This phenomenon demonstrates that the transmission of Islamic knowledge occurred in a dialogical and contextual manner. The adaptive process reveals mechanisms of localization through which Islamic teachings were aligned with the cultural structures of Malay society.

The arrival of Islam in the Malay world and the broader Nusantara region occurred through active trade routes connecting the Middle East with Southeast Asia. Arab merchants served as key intermediaries who brought not only economic commodities but also Islamic teachings to strategic port cities. Social interactions forged through trade, intermarriage, and the formation of early Muslim communities strengthened Arab–Malay cultural interaction on a sustained basis (M. J. Nasution et al., [2024](#)). The Arab–Malay manuscripts examined in this study record the dynamics

of this acculturative process. Their existence reflects the integration of Islamic teachings into the social and cultural structures of Malay society.

Arab–Malay interaction also generated significant transformations in patterns of literacy. In the pre-Islamic period, writing skills were limited to particular social groups, whereas Islam introduced a new literacy tradition through *Jawi* script. The adaptation of Arabic script into the Malay language illustrates a creative process of cultural and intellectual acculturation, in which Arab elements were reshaped to meet local needs without erasing Malay identity (Turka & Mawaddah, 2025). The mobility of Malay scholars to the Middle East through pilgrimage (*hajj*) and scholarly journeys (*rihla ‘ilmīyya*) further strengthened Islamic scholarly networks. Traces of this knowledge transmission are clearly visible in the textual content of Arab–Malay manuscripts, including Arabic grammar texts that functioned as pedagogical tools for understanding Islamic texts.

In addition to merchants, Malay historiography records the role of Arab descendants who served as both religious scholars and local rulers in accelerating the acceptance of Islam. These figures contributed to strengthening religious authority and Islamic social structures at the local level. Accounts in *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*, *Sejarah Melayu*, and *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* document the arrival of Arab figures from Mecca, Jeddah, and Baghdad who converted local rulers to Islam. These sources indicate that Islamization unfolded through intensive social and cultural interaction rather than through structural coercion (Taqiyyah & Mawaddah, 2025).

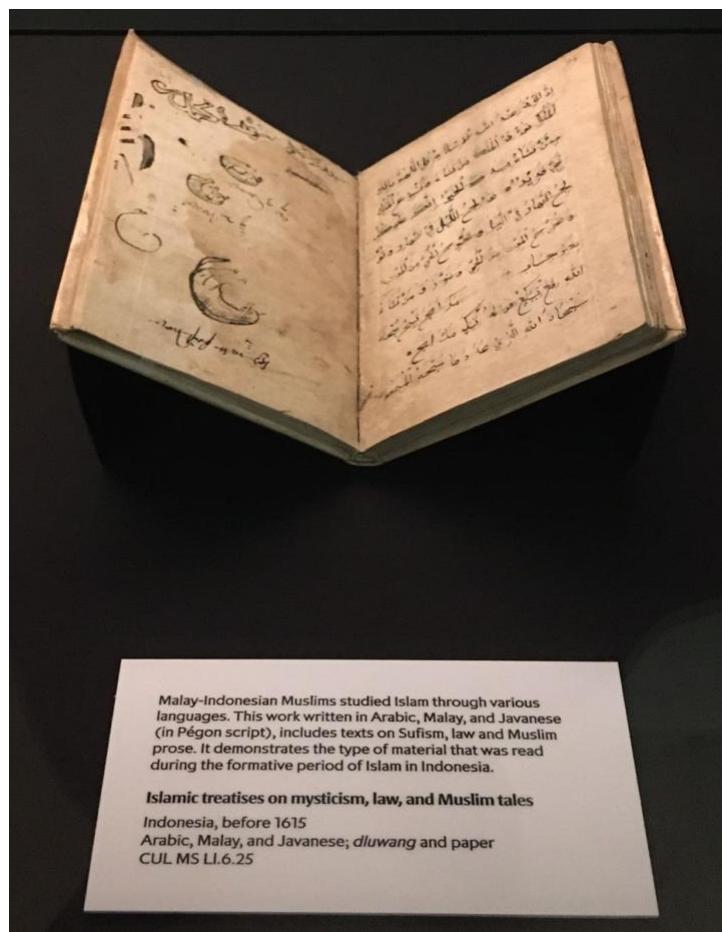


Figure 1. Arabic Grammar (*Nahwu*) Manuscript in Arab–Malay Script
Source: Manuscript Collection of the State Museum of North Sumatra

Arab–Malay writing developed alongside the consolidation of Malay as the regional *lingua franca*. The script was adapted from Arabic *Hijā’iyyah* letters and adjusted to the Malay phonological system, becoming known as *Jawi* in Malay regions and *Arab Pegon* in Java. Its development was closely linked to the Islamization process that replaced earlier belief systems and, according to historical data, had been in use since approximately the thirteenth century CE (Rizkia & Mawaddah, 2025). Some Malaysian Malay historians, such as Datuk Sayid Alwi al-Haddah, have even suggested the possibility that Arab–Malay script was used as early as the period of Caliph ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān. This perspective situates the Arab–Malay written tradition within a longer trajectory of Islamic history along the Malay coastal regions.

From both material and linguistic perspectives, Arab–Malay manuscripts employ Arabic *Hijā’iyyah* letters without the consistent application of diacritical marks (*harakāt*). This characteristic requires readers to possess contextual knowledge of the Malay language and its syntactic structure. Such practices are evident in *Risalah Fikih*, *Doa-doa Harian*, and Arabic grammar (*nahwu*) manuscripts housed in the North Sumatra State Museum collection. These features represent a distinctive Malay–Islamic literacy pattern that functioned as both a medium for transmitting teachings and a symbol of Arab–Malay cultural interaction (Barus & Mawaddah, [2025](#)). In this context, Arab–Malay manuscripts serve as historiographical sources that record processes of acculturation, knowledge transmission, and the formation of Malay–Islamic cultural identity.

The findings of this study on the Arab–Malay manuscript collection of the North Sumatra State Museum indicate that Arab–Malay interaction occurred through active acculturation rather than passive imitation. This process involved selection, adaptation, and localization of Islamic scholarly elements. Cultural acculturation theory in anthropological and historiographical studies of Islam Nusantara emphasizes that the reception of external culture does not eliminate local structures but instead produces new, contextual syntheses. The use of Arabic script to write the Malay language without dismantling its linguistic structure illustrates a dialogical mechanism in the reception of Islam. Islam thus functioned as a transformative force that remained adaptive to local cultural realities.

From the perspective of knowledge transmission, Arab–Malay manuscripts—particularly those on *nahwu*, *fiqh*, and *tawḥīd*—reflect processes of knowledge transfer mediated through the local language. Islamic knowledge transmission theory positions language as a strategic medium that determines the effectiveness of knowledge dissemination. The findings demonstrate that Islamic sciences were not conveyed exclusively in Arabic but were explained and taught through Malay written in Arabic script. This pattern reflects a form of cultural pedagogy that aligns teaching methods with the epistemic horizons of local communities. Such traditions contributed significantly to the development of an inclusive and contextual Islam Nusantara.

The presence of *nahwu* manuscripts written in Arab–Malay script provides compelling evidence that Islamization in North Sumatra encompassed a systematic intellectual dimension. Islamization was oriented not only toward normative and ritual aspects but also toward mastery of Islamic intellectual tools. Malay society emerged as an active agent in the production and reproduction of Islamic knowledge. The teaching of Arabic grammar through the Malay language indicates a literacy strategy aimed at strengthening local intellectual capacity. This practice integrated global Islamic scholarly traditions into the social and cultural structures of Malay society.

From a historiographical perspective, Arab–Malay manuscripts can be positioned as intellectual archives of Islam Nusantara. These manuscripts record pathways of knowledge transmission, networks of scholars, and cultural strategies employed in the spread of Islam. The theory of Islam Nusantara emphasizes that Islam in the region developed through peaceful, inclusive, and culturally grounded approaches. The findings of this study reinforce this framework by demonstrating the role of Arab–Malay manuscripts as a connective medium between universal Islamic teachings and local Malay realities. This integration is evident in language use, textual themes, and the social functions of the manuscripts.

The conceptual synthesis of this study affirms that Arab–Malay manuscripts cannot be reduced to mere philological artifacts or museum collections. They constitute products of acculturation and knowledge transmission that shaped the distinctive character of Islam Nusantara in North Sumatra. A philological approach integrated with theories of acculturation and knowledge transmission positions the North Sumatra State Museum collection as an important historiographical source. This reading reveals creative interaction between Arab–Islamic traditions and local Malay culture. Such contributions enrich the writing of Islamic cultural history in Indonesia in a more comprehensive manner.

The Content of Arab–Malay Manuscripts as Representations of Arab–Malay Cultural Interaction

Ancient manuscripts constitute a form of cultural heritage whose uniqueness is shaped by local contexts, social environments, and specific historical dynamics. Within the multiethnic landscape of the Nusantara region, each area preserves a manuscript tradition that reflects its particular cultural identity and historical experience, including cross-cultural influences that have shaped its development (Ridhollah et al., [2021](#)). In the context of the North Sumatra State Museum, Arab–Malay manuscripts such as *Kitab Tauhid*, *Risalah Fikih*, *Doa-doa Harian*, religious advisory texts, and Arabic grammar (*nahwu*) manuscripts written in *Jawi* script serve as the primary objects of analysis. These collections concretely represent Arab–Malay cultural interaction through their content, language, and modes of inscription. Their

presence demonstrates that North Sumatra forms an integral part of the Malay–Islamic intellectual sphere connected to broader Islamic scholarly networks.

From a linguistic perspective, the use of the Malay language written in Arabic (*Jawi*) script in these manuscripts indicates intensive cultural and intellectual contact between Malay society and the Arab–Islamic world. The modification of Arabic script to accommodate Malay phonology confirms that this interaction occurred through mechanisms of active acculturation rather than passive adoption. Within the framework of Islamic knowledge transmission, the use of local language as a pedagogical medium—particularly in *fiqh*, *tawhīd*, and *nahwu* manuscripts—reflects an effective instructional strategy (Gusteza et al., 2023). This strategy enabled Islamic sciences to be widely understood by local communities. Such adaptation illustrates how Islamic scholarly traditions were absorbed into Malay linguistic structures and cognitive patterns without compromising their doctrinal substance.

Thematically, Arab–Malay manuscripts display a broad spectrum of content, encompassing religious teachings, Islamic law, *taṣawwuf*, local history, and Islamic literature. This thematic diversity indicates that Islamic teachings originating from Arab traditions underwent a process of localization within the social and cultural context of Malay society. Within the theoretical framework of cultural interaction and Islam Nusantara, these texts represent the reception of Islam through dialogue with local values (Khadjah et al., 2021). This process produced a synthesis between universal religious norms and local cultural practices. Such a pattern demonstrates that Islamization in North Sumatra proceeded through adaptive and sustained cultural approaches.

The material and physical aspects of the manuscripts also provide important evidence of pathways of cultural interaction and technological exchange. The use of European paper, specific binding techniques, and distinctive textual layouts indicates the integration of Malay society into transregional trade and intellectual networks. Within the North Sumatra State Museum collection, these material features converge with *Jawi* script and Islamic content, thereby affirming the role of Arab–Malay manuscripts as evidence of sustained Arab–Malay intellectual relations (Gusteza et al., 2023). This is particularly evident in Arabic grammar (*nahwu*) manuscripts written in Malay using Arabic script. Such practices reflect systematic efforts to transmit Arabic linguistic sciences to local readers.



Figure 2. Arab–Malay Manuscript Collection Displayed in the Exhibition Case of the North Sumatra State Museum
Source: Manuscript Collection of the State Museum of North Sumatra

The diversity of content and form in Arab–Malay manuscripts is further illustrated by the display of multiple manuscripts within a single exhibition case, as shown in Figure 2. The placement of manuscripts addressing religious teachings, *fiqh*, and social advice indicates that the Malay–Islamic written tradition developed across a wide intellectual spectrum. This thematic variation demonstrates that the tradition was not monolithic in nature. From the perspective of Islamic knowledge transmission in Islam Nusantara, such genre diversity reflects strategies of disseminating Islamic teachings that were tailored to the social and intellectual needs of local communities.

In contemporary scholarship, Malay manuscripts remain relatively underexplored as comprehensive objects of study compared to other cultural themes. As a result, their contributions are often marginalized within historical and cultural analyses. Yet the use of *Jawi* script, the incorporation of Arabic terms such as *tawhīd*, *sharī‘a*, and *adat*, and the modes of instruction that integrate Islamic values with Malay cognitive frameworks demonstrate the manuscripts' position as points of convergence between Arab–Islamic intellectual traditions and local culture (Anwar, 2023). This phenomenon illustrates how Islamic knowledge was reproduced contextually through language and symbols familiar to Malay communities.

Malay manuscripts generally developed through sustained interaction between religious teachings and local cultural contexts. In various religious and customary texts, Islamic norms are conveyed through proverbs, traditional expressions, and customary practices, reflecting gradual and organic processes of value integration (N. R. Nasution, 2023). This pattern aligns with the concept of Islam Nusantara, which emphasizes culture-based Islamization and social negotiation. Such an approach positions local culture as a crucial medium for the reception and internalization of Islamic teachings.

In addition, genealogical manuscripts, *hikayat*, and trade documents within the Malay tradition record the influence of Arab–Islamic administrative practices. The use of the *basmalah* and epistolary structures resembling Middle Eastern diplomatic styles indicates the adoption of Islamic bureaucratic elements. These elements were consistently adapted to local power structures and societal needs. This synthesis confirms that Arab–Malay manuscripts function not only as historical records of Arab–Malay relations but also as material evidence of cultural negotiation and the formation of Malay–Islamic identity across generations.

Islamic Malay literary manuscripts played a significant social role as media for disseminating Islamic teachings to Southeast Asian societies that used Malay as a *lingua franca*. The presence of universal humanistic values within Islamic Malay literature facilitated the broad acceptance of Islam within the region's multicultural societies (Riswandi et al., 2025). These findings position Arab–Malay manuscripts as central media of knowledge transmission and cultural acculturation. This position simultaneously underscores the importance of the North Sumatra State Museum collection as a historiographical source for writing the cultural history of Islam in Indonesia.

The findings of this study indicate that Arab–Malay cultural interaction occurred through mechanisms of active acculturation rather than passive absorption of external cultural elements. In cultural acculturation theory, intercultural encounters are understood as arenas of negotiation involving processes of selection and adaptation. The use of Arabic script to write the Malay language, accompanied by phonological and orthographic modifications, reflects a creative process of local reinterpretation. This practice demonstrates the capacity of Malay culture to maintain its identity while embracing Islam as a transformative force.

From the perspective of knowledge transmission, Arab–Malay manuscripts reveal strategies for disseminating Islamic knowledge that are grounded in local language and culture. Manuscripts on *fiqh*, *tawhīd*, and especially *nahwu* written in *Jawi* script demonstrate that mastery of Islamic sciences was mediated through language familiar to local communities. Knowledge transmission theory emphasizes the role of communication media in determining the effectiveness of knowledge transfer. In this context, Malay written in Arabic script functioned as an epistemic bridge between global Islamic scholarly traditions and local communities in North Sumatra.

The presence of Arab–Malay *nahwu* manuscripts carries important conceptual implications within the framework of Islam Nusantara. These manuscripts indicate that Islamization encompassed the development of intellectual infrastructure rather than merely the internalization of ritual practices. The teaching of Arabic grammar through the Malay language marks a shift from passive consumption of knowledge toward the active reproduction of Islamic knowledge at the local level. This practice affirms the active role of Malay society within broader Islamic intellectual networks.

From a cultural historiographical perspective, Arab–Malay manuscripts may be understood as intellectual archives of Islam Nusantara. They record pathways of knowledge transmission, networks of scholars, and cultural strategies employed in the dissemination of Islam. The theory of Islam Nusantara emphasizes the development of Islam through peaceful, inclusive, and culturally adaptive approaches. The findings of this study demonstrate the function of Arab–Malay manuscripts as mediating instruments that connect universal Islamic teachings with Malay socio-cultural realities.

The conceptual synthesis of this study positions Arab–Malay manuscripts not merely as philological artifacts or museum collections. Rather, they constitute products of acculturation and knowledge transmission that shaped the distinctive character of Islam Nusantara in North Sumatra. Integrating philological approaches with theories of acculturation and knowledge transmission enables a more comprehensive understanding of Islamic development within the local Malay context. This framework underscores the position of the North Sumatra State Museum collection as a strategic historiographical source in writing the cultural history of Islam in Indonesia.

The North Sumatra State Museum as an Institution of Preservation and a Mediator of Arab–Malay Historiography

A museum is a building used as a permanent exhibition space for objects deemed to merit public attention—such as historical relics, artworks, and scientific materials—while also functioning as a repository for antiquities. This definition foregrounds the museum as a physical structure; however, within cultural and scholarly studies, a museum is understood more broadly as an institution that manages, cares for, and interprets material cultural heritage (Nugraha & Laugu, [2021](#)). Within the framework of national regulation, a museum is defined as an institution responsible for storing, maintaining, securing, and utilizing material evidence of human cultural production in order to support the protection and preservation of the nation’s cultural wealth (PP No. 19 Tahun 1995 Pasal 1 ayat 1). Museums also serve as centers of scientific research because their collections constitute objects of inquiry that can be studied, developed, and disseminated for the advancement of knowledge (Mahdi, [2018](#)). Accordingly, museum functions encompass not only the safeguarding of artifacts but also the production and transmission of knowledge.

The North Sumatra State Museum plays a strategic role in preserving the Arab–Malay manuscripts that serve as the primary sources for this article, including *Kitab Tauhid*, *Risalah Fikih*, *Doa-doa Harian*, religious advisory manuscripts, and an Arabic grammar (*nahwu*) text written in *Jawi* script. Portions of this collection were obtained through purchases and institutional collaborations, including with the Aceh Museum, which developed earlier traditions of Malay manuscript documentation. Once incorporated into the museum’s holdings, the manuscripts are maintained through storage in dedicated cabinets, the regulation of temperature and humidity, and periodic airing to prevent physical deterioration. These conservation practices indicate that the museum treats the manuscripts as material heritage requiring long-term protection. Such maintenance procedures also shape the continuity of scholarly access to these primary sources.

From the perspectives of knowledge transmission and cultural historiography, the museum’s role extends beyond technical-conservation work to include an interpretive function. The museum provides a space in which Arab–Malay manuscripts can be read as material evidence of Arab–Malay intellectual interaction. Museum representatives acknowledge, however, that public and scholarly interest in Malay manuscripts remains relatively limited, with the result that their potential as sources for historical and cultural research has not been fully optimized. This situation reveals a gap between the museum’s function as a custodian of cultural heritage and its capacity to act as a mediator of knowledge in academic contexts. Strengthening this interpretive function requires curatorial strategies that are more responsive to research needs.

As a regional heritage repository, the North Sumatra Provincial State Museum holds approximately 7,000 items, encompassing historical artifacts, ethnic arts, press documentation, Hindu–Buddhist influences, and processes of cultural assimilation and acculturation in North Sumatra. Within the context of regional historiography, the presence of Arab–Malay manuscripts within this collection underscores that Arab–Malay interaction constitutes an integral component in shaping North Sumatra’s social, religious, and intellectual identity. Locating manuscripts within the broader museum landscape expands how regional history can be read—not only through material artifacts but also through texts. The positioning of Arab–Malay manuscripts highlight connections between local history and wider cultural networks. The museum’s holdings therefore provide an opportunity to link North Sumatra’s cultural history with broader dynamics of Islam in the Nusantara region.

Arab–Malay interaction in North Sumatra is deeply rooted in maritime trade routes since the thirteenth century, when Arab merchants introduced not only commodities but also religious teachings, literacy traditions, and Islamic intellectual culture. The North Sumatra State Museum displays traces of this interaction through its collection of Arab–Malay manuscripts, religious texts, and trade-related artifacts that illustrate Islamization as an adaptive and sustained process. Within the framework of Islam Nusantara, these collections can be understood as evidence that Islamization developed through mechanisms of cultural acculturation rather than through a rupture with local traditions (Wijayanti et al., 2025). Artifacts and manuscripts function as complementary historical indicators for reconstructing Arab–Malay relations. The integrated character of these collections strengthens the museum’s position as a narrative node for contextual Islamization.

Beyond preservation and research, the museum also serves as a vehicle for public education by presenting North Sumatra’s historical and cultural information through narrative and visual formats, including dimensions of ethnicity, plantation history, and the struggles of local figures (Alifia & Trilaksana, 2022). From the standpoint of knowledge transmission, this educational function still has room to be strengthened through the development of curatorial narratives that position Arab–Malay manuscripts at the center of discussions on Arab–Malay cultural interaction and Islam Nusantara. Such reinforcement can increase the visibility of manuscripts as historical sources rather than merely exhibition objects. Strong curatorial storytelling can also broaden public access to the intellectual significance of manuscripts. These educational strategies align the imperatives of preservation, research, and public literacy.

The North Sumatra Provincial State Museum also functions as a cultural tourism destination that attracts both local and international visitors. Its presence demonstrates the continuing relevance of museums within tourism and the creative economy, while also opening pathways for disseminating historical and cultural knowledge to wider publics. This role underscores the museum as a guardian of collective memory and an important mediator in understanding the processes of Arab–Malay acculturation that shaped the character of Islam Nusantara in North Sumatra. Well-managed tourism activity can expand the reach of scholarly information through popular approaches that remain accurate. The museum thus has the potential to connect academic interests with broader educational needs. This positioning highlights the museum as an institution operating simultaneously in cultural, educational, and social domains.

The study’s findings regarding the role of the North Sumatra State Museum and its Arab–Malay manuscript collection indicate that Arab–Malay cultural interaction unfolded through institutionalized mechanisms of cultural acculturation. In acculturation theory, culture does not move linearly from a single center to other regions but proceeds through processes of selection, adaptation, and negotiation within specific social spaces. In this context, the museum functions as an institution that represents the outcomes of such processes rather than serving merely as a storage space for artifacts. The presence of Arab–Malay manuscripts such as *Kitab Tauhid*, *Risalah Fikih*, and *nahwu* texts in *Jawi* script demonstrates the internalization of Arab–Islamic elements within Malay intellectual traditions without erasing local identity. These collections provide concrete evidence of Islam’s integration into Malay literacy.

From the perspective of knowledge transmission, Arab–Malay manuscripts preserved and displayed by the museum reflect contextual and pedagogical strategies for disseminating Islamic knowledge. Knowledge transmission theory emphasizes that the success of dissemination is shaped by the medium, language, and the institutions that mediate it. The use of Malay written in Arabic script in *fiqh*, *tawhīd*, and Arabic grammar texts indicates processes of translation and adjustment to local epistemic horizons within the context of Islam Nusantara. The museum acts as a continuing mediator that sustains knowledge transmission across generations, even when manuscripts have been detached from their original instructional settings. This role creates opportunities to reactivate manuscripts as sources for literacy development and scholarly research.

The presence of Arab–Malay *nahwu* manuscripts carries strong theoretical significance within the framework of Islam Nusantara because it demonstrates Islamization oriented toward building local intellectual capacity. These manuscripts show that Islamization did not end with the internalization of religious norms but also required mastery of intellectual tools for engaging primary sources of Islamic teaching. In acculturation theory, this phenomenon represents an advanced stage of integration in which local communities do not merely receive knowledge but are able to produce and reproduce Islamic scholarship independently. The teaching of Arabic grammar through the Malay language serves as an indicator of the systematic adaptation of Arab–Islamic intellectual traditions into Malay educational and literacy structures. This practice strengthens the positioning of Malay society as an active subject within Islamic scholarly networks.

Within the historiography of Islam Nusantara, the museum can be understood as a space of cultural memory that records long-term processes of interaction, acculturation, and knowledge transmission. The theory of Islam Nusantara emphasizes that Islam in Indonesia developed through peaceful, adaptive approaches grounded in local culture. The findings of this study demonstrate that Arab–Malay manuscripts preserved by the museum function as material evidence of dialogical Islamization. The museum not only safeguards artifacts but also maintains historical narratives about how Islam took root through language, texts, and Malay cultural practices. Such narratives provide an empirical basis for understanding Islamization as a layered socio-cultural process.

The conceptual synthesis of these findings positions the North Sumatra State Museum as an important actor within the ecosystem of Islam Nusantara, particularly as a guardian of acculturation outcomes and a mediator of Islamic knowledge transmission. Arab–Malay manuscripts preserved by the museum should be understood as historical products of creative interaction between Arab–Islamic traditions and Malay culture, rather than merely as philological remnants or tourism objects. Integrating acculturation theory and knowledge transmission theory strengthens readings of Islam Nusantara as a historical process that continues to move through institutions and cultural practices. This framework simultaneously affirms the museum’s status as a strategic source for writing the historiography of Islamic culture in Indonesia. The museum thus opens space for reconstructing history based on well-preserved and accessible primary sources.

CONCLUSION

Arab–Malay interaction constitutes a long and multilayered historical process that has shaped the religious identity, cultural formations, and literacy traditions of Malay society in the Nusantara region, including North Sumatra. This study demonstrates that the Arab–Malay (*Jawi*) script and the textual content of the manuscripts—encompassing teachings on *tawḥīd*, *fiqh*, devotional prayers, religious counsel, and introductory Arabic grammar—serve as significant material evidence of adaptive acculturation and the transmission of Islamic knowledge. Arab–Malay manuscripts not only document intellectual exchange between the Arab world and the Malay milieu but also reveal the capacity of local communities to internalize Islamic values within their linguistic structures, epistemic frameworks, and social practices.

The North Sumatra Provincial State Museum functions as a supporting institution that ensures the continuity of Arab–Malay manuscripts as historical and philological sources. The museum provides spaces for preservation, conservation, and access to manuscript collections, thereby enabling these texts to be examined as integral components of the cultural historiography of Islam Nusantara. Nevertheless, this research acknowledges several limitations, particularly those related to restricted physical access to certain manuscripts, conservation conditions that are not yet fully optimal, and an analytical scope that remains focused on preliminary philological and historical description.

Future research should be directed toward more in-depth philological investigations of the manuscript texts, including the analysis of textual variants, the reconstruction of networks of scholars and scribes, and comparative studies with Arab–Malay manuscript collections from other regions of the Nusantara. At the policy level, strengthening preservation strategies through digitalization, the development of research-based curatorial narratives, and sustained collaboration among museums, academics, and local communities constitute essential steps. Such measures will ensure that Arab–Malay manuscripts are not only physically safeguarded but also function as active sources of knowledge for understanding the historical trajectories and cultural identity of Malay–Islamic society in Indonesia.

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