



EDUCATION IN THE FIVE MALAY PROVINCES: SINGAPORE MALAYSIA BRUNEI PHILIPPINES AND THAILAND

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Abstract :

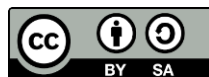
This study examines the development of educational systems in five regions of the Malay World, namely Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, and Thailand, with a focus on the relationship between education, religion, culture, and colonial influence. The purpose of this study is to analyze the characteristics, similarities, and differences of educational systems in each region and their role in preserving cultural and religious identity. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a literature review and historical analysis of relevant sources. The findings reveal that each region's educational system has evolved through different historical dynamics. Singapore emphasizes technological modernization supported by a bilingual education policy. Malaysia has developed an inclusive national education system while strengthening Islamic education through pondok and national schools. Brunei Darussalam places Islamic education at the core of its national curriculum through the philosophy of Malay Islamic Monarchy. The Philippines shows a dual system between secular education and Islamic madrasah in Mindanao. Meanwhile, Thailand maintains the dominance of Buddhist-based education alongside the existence of pondok and madrasah in the southern region. This study concludes that educational modernization in the Malay World continues to progress without abandoning traditional and religious values.

Keywords : Education, Malay World, Islamic Education

Abstrak :

Penelitian ini membahas perkembangan sistem pendidikan di lima wilayah Tanah Melayu, yaitu Singapura, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Filipina, dan Thailand, dengan menitikberatkan pada hubungan antara pendidikan, agama, budaya, dan pengaruh kolonial. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis karakteristik, persamaan, dan perbedaan sistem pendidikan di masing-masing wilayah serta perannya dalam mempertahankan identitas budaya dan keagamaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan metode studi pustaka dan analisis historis terhadap berbagai sumber literatur yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sistem pendidikan di setiap wilayah berkembang melalui dinamika sejarah yang berbeda. Singapura menonjol dalam modernisasi berbasis teknologi dengan kebijakan dwibahasa. Malaysia mengembangkan pendidikan nasional yang inklusif dengan penguatan pendidikan Islam melalui sistem pondok dan sekolah kebangsaan. Brunei Darussalam menempatkan pendidikan Islam sebagai inti kurikulum melalui filosofi Melayu Islam Beraja. Filipina memperlihatkan dualisme antara pendidikan sekuler dan madrasah di Mindanao. Sementara Thailand mempertahankan dominasi pendidikan Buddhisme dengan keberadaan pondok dan madrasah di wilayah selatan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa modernisasi pendidikan di Tanah Melayu terus berlangsung tanpa menghilangkan nilai-nilai tradisi dan agama.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan, Dunia Melayu, Pendidikan Islam



INTRODUCTION

Education in the Malay world region has a central role in shaping the social, religious, and cultural identity of its people. (Dr. Maroof Bin Rauf, 2021) The five major regions of Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, and Thailand display educational developments influenced by long historical trajectories, diverse social structures, and the interaction between local values and external forces. Recent research has underlined that the educational journey in the region has moved from a traditional model based on religious institutions such as suraus, cottages, and madrassas to a modern system influenced by colonialism and globalization. (Nuruliana et al., 2025). shows how British colonialism in the Malay Peninsula caused ethnic-based educational segregation that is still influential today. In Brunei Darussalam, Pitriyati et al., (2023) emphasized that the identity of the Malay Islamic Monarchy forms the national curriculum and strengthens the Islamic character of formal education. Meanwhile, Wekke et al., (2019) serta (Rahman, (2025) explained that in the Philippines and Thailand, traditional Islamic educational institutions continue to play an important role in maintaining the identity of the Muslim community amid the pressure of modernization and state policies

In the last ten years, the literature has also highlighted new issues such as the integration of Islamic education into the national system, the development of language policies, and the adaptation of technology in schools in the Malay world. (Abdul Wahab Syakrani, Abd. Malik, Hasbullah, Muhammad Budi 2022) for example, assessing Singapore's bilingual policy as a strategy to maintain the identity of the Malay community in the midst of the widespread use of English. In Malaysia, studies (Cahyani and Masyithoh 2023) highlighting the significant role of Islamic education in shaping the character of the younger generation. Meanwhile, the study (Supriadi, 2023) shows that Islamic education in the Philippines faces complex challenges, especially regarding access to education and policy integration for Muslim communities in the Mindanao region. These studies show that education, in addition to functioning as a means of transferring knowledge, is also a guardian of cultural and religious identity for the Malay community spread across various countries.

However, the results of the literature review show that there is a fairly clear gap in the study. So far, research on education in the Malay world tends to stand alone per country and is rarely compiled in a cross-regional comparative perspective. Most studies highlight the education systems of Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, or Thailand separately, and do not include them in one overarching analytical framework (Raihani, 2022). In addition to being partial, previous research has also not offered a holistic mapping of how colonial factors, Islamic traditions, ethnic dynamics, and the drive for modernization shape the educational character of each region. In fact, these five regions have strong historical and cultural connections, so they are very relevant when studied in an analytical unit. This research gap opens up space for a comprehensive study that not only describes the conditions of each country, but also traces the general patterns and key differences that emerge in their educational development.

Thus, the novelty of this research lies in the presentation of a comparative analysis of the five main regions of the Malay world that have rarely been studied in an integrated manner. This research combines historical analysis, religious identity, colonial influence, and modernization dynamics as the three main pillars that shape the educational pattern of the Malay region. Such an integrated approach demonstrates the scientific contribution of this article, which produces a broader structural mapping of the development of Malay education and displays the relationship between local traditions and global developments. Since previous research was generally descriptive and focused on one country, this study provides a new perspective that is more complete and can be used for the development of Southeast Asian education studies, especially related to Islamic education and national education.

This study aims to present an in-depth understanding of the history and development of education systems in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, and Thailand by highlighting the interaction between cultural, political, religious, and national policy factors. Given that each region has unique characteristics as well as historical similarities, this study tries to identify the general patterns that shape the direction of education in the Malay world. In addition, this study also assesses the extent to which modernization, bilingual and multilingual policies, integration of learning technologies, and socio-political dynamics affect the structure of education in each country. By looking at these five regions comparatively, this study produces a complete picture of how education contributes to the strengthening of collective identity, social cohesion, and community development in the context of modern Malays.

Therefore, with the presence of this research, it is hoped that it will be able to make a significant contribution to the study of Southeast Asian education by presenting cross-country analysis which so far is still limited. The comparative mapping conducted in this study can be a reference for academics, educators, and policymakers who want to understand the dynamics of cultural- and religious-based education in the Malay region. It is hoped that the results of this study will not only expand the scientific perspective on Malay education, but also provide a new direction for the development of a more adaptive, inclusive, and local identity-based education model in the face of global challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research applies a qualitative approach with the type of literature study research (*library research*) (Sugiyono, 2022). The research design is focused on an in-depth study of the development of the education system in five regions of the Malay world, namely Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, and Thailand. The focus of the study is directed at the education system in each region which includes aspects of Islamic education, language policy, the influence of colonialism, and the dynamics of traditional and modern educational institutions.

Because it is literature, this study does not involve populations, samples, respondents, or direct field observations. The research data is sourced from literature which includes scientific books, national and international journal articles published in the last ten years, government policy documents, and previous research results relevant to the study theme (Devy Habibi Muhammad, 2020). The selection of sources is carried out based on the level of credibility, novelty of the data, and suitability with the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2022).

Data collection was carried out through systematic literature search techniques using a number of keywords, such as Malay education, Islamic education, colonialism, language policy, and traditional educational institutions. The data obtained are then recorded, classified, and grouped based on the predetermined study themes.

Data analysis was carried out using content analysis techniques (*content analysis*) as stated by Miles et al., (2014), which includes the stages of data reduction, data preparation, and drawing conclusions. In addition, a comparative approach is also used to identify similarities and differences in the characteristics of the education system in each region. Through the analysis process, a complete picture was obtained of the relationship between Islamic educational traditions, colonial influences, national policies, and the dynamics of educational modernization in the Malay world.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Historical Background of Malay Education

1. Singapore

The development of modern education in Singapore began with British colonial policies, especially after Sir Stamford Raffles erect *Singapore Institution* at 1823. This institution became the forerunner of the formal and Western-oriented English-language education system (Rakhman & Hidayat, 2021). In the next phase, colonial education reinforced the pattern of segregation of schools based on ethnic groups: English-speaking schools were geared towards administrative and economic functions, while Chinese, Tamil, and Malay schools retained their respective cultural roles (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020). For the Malay Muslim community, madrassas are the main center of religious education and the preservation of Islamic identity. Study (Helmiati, 2021) shows that madrassas operate in a dialectical space between secular state regulation

and the Muslim community's need to maintain a religious curriculum. Research Laila et al., (2025) found through JSTOR also shows how madrassas adjust their curriculum structure to remain in line with national education standards without losing their religious function.

2. Malaysia

Prior to the advent of colonial education, the cottage system in the Malay Peninsula had functioned as a central institution in the inheritance of religious knowledge. When the British introduced the formal school system, the two forms of education coexisted and later formed the educational structure of post-independence Malaysia (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020). The Malaysian government developed a national curriculum that emphasized Bahasa Melayu as the language of unity, but still made room for religious schools and schools to continue their historical role (Zulazizi Mohd Nawawi & Sains Kemanusiaan, 2021). Studies Mohd Haidi & Mohd Kasran, (2021) emphasized that the pondok is an integral part of the tradition of Islamic education in the Malay region and has a historical relationship with the Islamic boarding schools of the archipelago. The results of the research published by *Journal of Quran Sunnah Education & Special Needs* shows that some of the cottages have evolved into semi-formal institutions that combine religious education with general subjects, confirming that the transformation of these traditional institutions is adaptive, not deprived of its authenticity (Syed Hassan et al., 2024).

3. Brunei Darussalam

The roots of Brunei's education originate from the tradition of teaching the Qur'an that has been going on since pre-colonial times (Pitriyati et al., 2023). Brunei's position as a protectorate, rather than a full British colony, allowed the country to retain many elements of traditional education. After gaining independence, Brunei institutionalized the philosophy of Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) as the moral, cultural, and political basis for its education system. Research Fitriani et al., (2025) in the *SYAMIL: Journal of Islamic Education* shows that MIB shaped Brunei's educational orientation by blending modernization and Islamic values. Academic studies indexed in SciSpace also emphasize that the integration of technology in Brunei's education remains guided by the principles of MIB, making religious education a structural element and national identity, not just a subject.

4. Filipina (Mindanao)

The history of Philippine education shows the strong influence of two great colonial powers. In the Spanish period, education functioned as an instrument of Christianization through ecclesiastical institutions. When America took over, the education system was massively reformed by implementing a secular curriculum and English as the national language of instruction. (Syarifah Rahmayani et al., 2024). This policy narrowed the space for Islamic education, so that madrassas in Mindanao developed independently of the state framework. Study by Sali & Marasigan, (2020)

published through *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development* outlines how the Madrasah Education Program (MEP) and ALIVE seek to integrate madrasahs into the formal education system through a standardized curriculum and the improvement of teacher qualifications. Findings A. Sali & Ancho, (2021) in the *Journal of Research, Policy & Practice of Teachers & Teacher Education (JRPPTTE)* shows that madrasahs not only carry out educational functions, but also maintain the cultural and political identity of the Muslim community in Mindanao.

5. Thailand (Selatan/Patani)

Thailand's education system is built through a temple-centered Buddhist tradition, which has been strengthened by the kingdom's modernization project since the time of the King Chulalongkorn (Wekke et al., 2018). Buddhist values and the Thai language are the main pillars of national education. In the southern region, the Malay Muslim community maintains the cottage as the core institution of Islamic education and Malay cultural heritage. Study Salaeh, (2023) *SYAMIL: Journal of Islamic Education* shows that the Patani pondok played an important role in maintaining the identity of the Malay Muslim community despite the pressure of Thai nationalization. Other research by Raihani et al., (2016) in the *Al-Jamiah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, revealed that Islamic education in Patani is in a dynamic between adaptation, cultural resistance, and the impact of ethno-political conflicts, so that the boarding school becomes a safe space for the preservation of traditions and religious education in the midst of limited infrastructure and state policies. Study dari Azizah & Raya, (2021) *Jurnal Tatsqif* strengthening that Islamic education in Patani continues to stand as a symbol of cultural resilience in the midst of structural challenges.

Factors Shaping the Malay Education System

The direction and character of the education system in the Malay region is determined by a pile of historical factors that interact with each other, especially colonial heritage, language policy, and the political orientation of the country. The British colonial legacy in the Malay Peninsula and Singapore resulted in a specialized and tiered educational structure since colonial times; The introduction of vernacular schools (Malay, Chinese, Tamil) side by side with English-speaking schools created a plurality of systems that were then inherited into the era of independence and influenced access patterns and social stratification in contemporary education (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020). A historical study of the development of colonial education in Malaya and Singapore shows how colonial education policies shaped the choice of language of instruction and channels of social mobility to this day.

In the context of Singapore, the traces of colonial policies as well as postcolonial policies on multiculturalism and bilingualism explain the country's choice to retain English as a working language while requiring the teaching of mother tongues (including Malay) as part of social cohesion strategies (Helmiati, 2021). This policy balances the demands of global competence with the need for

the preservation of ethnic identity, a dynamic observed in the literature on multicultural education and ethnic construction in schools (Mandala & Nursikin, 2025). Its influence is especially seen in how Malay madrassas are positioned as spaces for the preservation of religion and language in the midst of a national system that is oriented towards efficiency and technology. (Rakhman & Hidayat, 2021).

Malaysia displays a similar form of colonial heritage but evolved towards a policy of post-independence language nationalism; The Education Law and the policy of Bahasa Melayu as a national language serve to integrate ethnic plurality into the state project. At the same time, traditional Islamic educational institutions (pondok, madrasas) survived and transformed some institutions adopting elements of formal curriculum and science to answer the demands of modernity, while still maintaining the function of religious transmission and community values. Empirical studies on the Malaya/Malaysian education system confirm the sustainability of the boarding school as a social and cultural capital that mediates the relationship between religious traditions and national education reforms. (Zulazizi Mohd Nawi & Sains Kemanusiaan, 2021).

Brunei shows a different path: due to its status as a protectorate (not a full colony) and a relatively stable post-independence political experience, Brunei has been able to internalize the values of the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) into its overall education policy. The MIB philosophy not only influences religious subjects, but also shapes the curriculum objectives, moral orientation, and institutional legitimacy of state education so that Islamic education is at the center (core) of the system, not on the periphery. The literature on MIB and Brunei's education policy illustrates the integration between modernization (e.g. the application of educational technology) and the conservation of traditional values as a state strategy (Fitriani et al., 2025).

The Philippines shows the complexity caused by the two waves of Spanish colonialism and then the Americas that abandoned a broad-based but secular-oriented and English-speaking educational structure. As a result, Islamic education (madrasas) in Mindanao has grown more slowly within the formal framework of the state and has only gained structural recognition through initiatives such as the Madrasah Education Program (MEP) and the recent ALIVE module. The evaluation of MEP/ALIVE implementation recorded practical challenges: synchronization of religious curricula with national standards, teacher capacity building, and limited infrastructure in conflict areas are all factors that limit the equitable distribution of the quality of Islamic education in the Philippines (Pitriyati et al., 2023).

Thailand is a special case because it did not experience Western colonialism; modern educational reforms were carried out by the monarchy itself and emphasized the Thai-Buddhist national identity. The policy of nationalization of language and curriculum encouraged national cultural integration but also created tensions in the Malay Muslim areas of the South, where cottages and madrassas served as centers for the preservation of local languages, religions, and traditions. The literature on Islamic education in Patani highlights the impact

of state policy interventions on the transformation of the cottage towards a more formal institutional form, the pressure of cultural assimilation, and the obstacles due to ethno-political conflicts that affect access and quality of education (Azizah & Raya, 2021).

Contemporaneously, differences in policy orientation give rise to modernization variations: Singapore stands out in technology integration and efficiency orientation; Malaysia and Brunei are trying to synthesize the modernity of science with Islamic education; while the Philippines and Thailand face structural barriers of conflict, marginalization, and infrastructure inequality that slow the adaptation of education systems for Muslim minority communities. A combination of historical, linguistic politics, and security/economic conditions in each country explains why policy responses to the challenges of 21st-century education vary widely in Malay regions.

The Contemporary Relevance of Malay Education

An understanding of the development of education in the Malay region must go beyond mere instructional functions; Education serves as an arena for the formation of collective identity, a field for power negotiation, and a space for cultural adaptation to the pressures of modernity (Yusuf & Ali, 2025). The historical traces and political configuration of each country continue to shape educational practices today, so the relevance of the findings of this study can be seen in the following three main domains.

First, the dimensions of religious and ethnic identity play a central role in determining the orientation of educational institutions. In this area, madrassas in Singapore, boarding boards and madrassas in Malaysia, as well as religious schools in Brunei function as more than just curriculum maintainers; they are centers for the reproduction of religious and linguistic values that nurture the continuity of Malay-Muslim culture in the midst of globalization and the pressure of national homogenization. In the southern context of Thailand and Mindanao (Philippines), Islamic educational institutions also function as spaces for identity protection as well as a form of community resilience against political and cultural marginalization. An empirical study of the transformation of madrassas and cottages shows how these institutions balance the demands of modern academics with the function of preserving tradition (Dimaukom Kulidtod, 2017).

Second, language policy remains a strategic instrument that reflects power relations and efforts to form national identity. The state's choice of the language of instruction, for example, the bilingual policy in Singapore that places English as the working language while retaining the mother tongue or the designation of Bahasa Melayu as the national language in Malay countries, affects not only the teaching aspect but also the symbolic position of Islamic institutions in the public sphere of education. Historical and evaluative studies of bilingual policies show that the design and implementation of language policies determine the institutional maneuvering space for madrassas and religious schools in maintaining their language and cultural heritage. (Rakhman & Hidayat, 2021).

Third, the dynamics of modernization are not uniform between countries and are influenced by state capacity and local socio-political conditions. Singapore stands out in the adoption of learning technologies and orientation on systemic efficiency, while Malaysia and Brunei are seeking to synergize the religious dimension for example through the integration of Islamic values into science learning and the national curriculum in response to development needs. On the other hand, the Philippines and Thailand face serious structural obstacles: the process of modernizing education in Muslim areas is often hampered by conflict, marginalization, and limited infrastructure, so madrasah integration programs (such as the Madrasah Education Program/ALIVE effort) face complex implementation challenges. These differences confirm that the modernization of education in the Malay region is always read through the lens of the political, security, and administrative capacity of the state (Sali, 2023).

In summary, the contemporary relevance of the findings of this study is that effective education policies for the Malay region must be contextual: recognizing the role of traditional institutions in the maintenance of identity, formulating language policies that take into account symbolic and practical aspects, and designing modernization strategies that are responsive to local conditions (e.g. political stability and infrastructure). This kind of understanding is important for the formulation of education policies that not only pursue quantitative indicators, but also respect the socio-cultural sustainability of modern Malay society.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the development of education in the Malay region which includes Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, and Thailand cannot be separated from the influence of long history, cultural dynamics, power structures, and state policies. Each region displays a unique educational evolutionary path, but it still has a connection through Malay cultural roots and the existence of Islamic education which has long been the foundation of community identity. This literature review reveals that education in the region not only functions as a means of teaching, but also as an important instrument in the formation of identity and the process of social adaptation.

Singapore exhibits an advanced and structured pattern of education, influenced by colonial heritage and strategic bilingual policies in maintaining ethnic identity in the midst of modernity. Malaysia features the integration of traditional cottages with formal education systems, where Islamic education plays a significant role in the framework of national development. Brunei Darussalam, with its limited colonial influence, was able to develop an education system that placed Islam at the core of the curriculum through the MIB philosophy. Meanwhile, the Philippines and Thailand present a more complex picture: Muslim communities in both countries must sustain Islamic education independently through madrassas and cottages that serve as spaces of identity protection amid the dominant national education structure.

From a comparative perspective, this study concludes that religious

factors, language policy, and socio-political conditions are the main variables that explain the diversity of educational directions in each Malay region. Although the approaches are different, the entire region shows an effort to maintain local religious and cultural values while keeping up with the demands of modernization. This reinforces the understanding that Malay education today is the result of a meeting between deep-rooted traditions and transformations that are constantly moving. This research makes an important contribution by presenting a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of Malay education and can be used as a basis for formulating culturally responsive education policies and improving equitable access for the Muslim community in the region.

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