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From Syncretism to Indigenous Monotheism

Continuity and Change of Islam Langkah Lama among the Talang Mamak People

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Abstract

Studies on local Islamic practices often rely on the colonial terminology of “Syncretic Islam,” assuming indigenous beliefs originated from animism, dynamism, or derivative forms of Buddhism and Hinduism, frameworks that frequently overlook the theological depth of local traditions. This study presents alternative evidence from Islam Langkah Lama, the distinctive Islamic tradition of the Talang Mamak people, arguing that their belief system is better understood as “Indigenous Monotheism,” bearing significant affinity with the Sufi doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* (unity of existence), as evident through theological resonances found in the *Kitab Barencong*. Based on six months of fieldwork in Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park, the article analyses continuity and change within this tradition, showing that despite prolonged Islamisation and Catholicisation, Islam Langkah Lama has become deeply embedded within customary law (*adat*), providing a resilient foundation that enables its persistence even as members shift towards orthodox sharia or convert to Catholicism, highlighting both the enduring strength of local religious identity and the complex negotiations faced by indigenous communities in a changing religious landscape.

Keywords: Islam Langkah Lama, Indigenous monotheism, Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia, *Adat* (Customary Law), religious hybridity



Introduction

The religion of Islam Langkah Lama continues to be popularly considered an animist or polytheistic religion and is viewed as non-Islamic (Muntaza 2022). One of the most notable distinctions between Islam Langkah Lama and mainstream Islam lies in their religious practices. The majority of the Talang Mamak people who still uphold Islam Langkah Lama do not observe the obligatory rituals of prayer, fasting, zakat, or haji (pilgrimage). This divergence invites the stigma that the Talang Mamak have gone astray and committed heretical acts because they believe in spirits and associate them with Allah (Ja'far 2021). Consequently, Islam Langkah Lama has been targeted for Islamisation (Jamaluddin 2014) and Catholicisation (KATOLIK 2024).

The stigmatisation and subsequent external pressures experienced by the Talang Mamak are not isolated incidents; rather, they reflect a broader regional pattern concerning “indigenous Islam” across Southeast Asia. Comparable dynamics can be observed among the Orang Asli Muslim communities in Malaysia (Toshihiro 2009), the Cham Muslims in Vietnam and Cambodia (Nakamura 2008), and various indigenous Muslim groups in the southern Philippines (Pasilan 2011). In these communities, local spiritual frameworks and customary laws are intricately woven with Islamic tenets, often placing them at odds with state-sponsored or orthodox interpretations of religion. By situating Islam Langkah Lama within this wider Southeast Asian context, it becomes evident that the continuous negotiation between indigenous cosmologies and Islamic monotheism represents a resilient and widespread regional phenomenon, rather than a localised or anomalous deviation.

The basis of Islam Langkah Lama is rooted in the belief in ancestral spirits, yet it transcends mere animism. This is illustrated in its three main pillars: “Allah Raib, Muhammad Nyata, and Djibril Lessa”. This statement demonstrates that Allah is unseen (raib), Muhammad is manifest (nyata), and Gabriel, the archangel, bears a distinct sign or mark (lessa) (Tung 2024). Additional insights into the Islam Langkah Lama belief system come from a report by the National Indigenous Peoples Alliance (AMAN) via Radio Aman, which summarises the creed as: Bertuhankan Allah, Bernabikan Muhammad, Berajakan Raja Brail (AMAN 2019). Based on this triadic foundation, I contend that Islam Langkah Lama should not be classified as a form of animism or polytheism. Rather, its early religious orientation tends towards henotheism or even monotheism.

Henotheism derives from the Greek root *henos* (‘one’) and *theos* (‘god’) (Rani 2017). The term was popularised by Max Müller, who used it to describe how traditional religions worshipped one God possessing supreme power among other gods (Heiser 2008). Henotheism is also considered a transitional stage from polytheism to monotheism (Watkins 2013). In other words, it involves the worship of a single deity while simultaneously acknowledging the existence of multiple gods. However, the belief system of the Talang Mamak, although superficially similar, does not fully align with this definition.

The spirits referred to as *roh* (anima) are regarded not as deities, but as intermediaries to the one supreme God, a role particularly evident in their healing rituals. As one adherent of

Islam Langkah Lama expressed, Islam and Langkah Lama in the Talang Mamak tradition are like a piece of white cloth, essentially the same, with no real difference between them (Moenandar 2020). In a Radio Aman report, a female follower of Islam Langkah Lama rejected the label of animist or dynamist belief. She identified herself as an adherent of the Islam Langkah Lama religion, which is also Islam, while simultaneously believing in the supernatural power of ancestral spirits (AMAN 2019).

The three pillars originate from the mythology of the Talang Mamak people, which has been passed down from generation to generation. The meaning of Allah Raib begins with the creation of the first creature, namely Nūr Muḥammad. According to Talang Mamak mythology, upon his creation, Nūr Muḥammad recognised himself as God. This self-recognition arose because no other beings existed at that time besides Nūr Muḥammad. However, after declaring himself divine, a voice was heard challenging him to identify its source. Despite an extended search, Nūr Muḥammad was unable to locate the origin of the voice. This mythological narrative forms the foundation for the interpretation of Allah Raib as “Allah the Most Unseen”. What is visible and tangible, in contrast, is Nūr Muḥammad as a created being, encapsulated in the expression Muhammad Nyata (Tung 2024).

The mythological story of Raja Brail as a malevolent spirit entity is related to the basis of the custom (adat) of the Talang Mamak people. For example, at Gawai Gadang events such as weddings, cockfighting is held, so that malevolent spirits watch the event and do not disturb it. The practice of cockfighting among various ethnic groups in Indonesia is commonly found, with different motives behind it, such as among the Minangkabau, Balinese, and Javanese peoples. For the Talang Mamak, in addition to having spiritual values, cockfighting also contains normative and social functions. The cockfighting festival at certain events is aimed at helping the host who organises the occasion; the losing roosters after the fight are donated to the host. However, cockfighting also contains an element of entertainment and gambling (Andani 2016). It thus reflects a complex interplay of sacred, social, and recreational values.

Radio AMAN recorded the concept of the divinity system of the Talang Mamak people in a traditional proverb:

Surang Hamba, Surang Tuhan, Surang Allah, Surang Muhammad, Cucu-Cicit Rasullullah, Tiada Tuhan Selain Allah, Muhammad Pesuruh Allah, dinama Patihah dalam Patihah, Patihah dalam Patih pasak Tujuh simpa sembilan samad, syah kata Allah, syah kata menjadika, baru turun kata-kata patah taguh di adat, taat ke agama, hampir ke malaikat, lisa ka Tuhan.

This customary maxim conveys the following meaning: one human being, one God, one Allah, one Muhammad, and the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. It affirms the declaration of faith, There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and is followed by the phrase yang dinamakan Patihah dalam Patihah, Patihah dalam Patih pasak Tujuh simpa sembilan samad, a customary expression that refers to ethical and spiritual guidelines for living. It is believed that Allah ordained this truth, which subsequently became a guiding principle for life: to remain steadfast in adat (customary

law) and obedient in religious practice. The phrase *hampir ke malaikat*, another adat term, suggests a state of spiritual proximity to the angels, and culminates in the idea of leaving a mark before God.

Both the findings from my field interviews and the Radio AMAN recording reveal notable similarities in the use of the terms Raja Brail and Djibril (the angel Gabriel), both of which refer to the existence of supernatural beings. However, a contrasting perspective is presented in a report by the Nusantara Institute, which states that Raja Brail is not a spirit but a human figure who predated the Prophet Adam and was responsible for drafting the earliest religious laws. This account, as reported by Muhamad Yazid Fauzi, offers a more structured framework by categorising the religious beliefs of Islam Langkah Lama into six dimensions: first, belief in Allah as the Supreme God; second, belief in Raja Brail as the first human, preceding the Prophet Adam and the compiler of religious law; third, belief in the twenty-five Prophets, from Adam to Muhammad; fourth, belief in Patih Nan Sabatang, regarded as a descendant of Adam's third son who descended in Sungai Limau, the central region of the Talang Mamak (also referred to as Tiga Balai); fifth, belief in customary law, referred to as the law of seven *tahil*, as a form of religious law; and sixth, belief in the existence of supernatural beings, including jinn, ghosts, and spirits (Fauzi 2019).

Across the three versions of the Talang Mamak concept of divinity, a consistent and unchanging element emerges: a monotheistic belief system, rather than a henotheistic one. This monotheism is reflected in a shared perception of the divine, that there is only one God, namely Allah. At its core, this teaching aligns with the fundamental tenet of monotheism in Islam. Despite this, many earlier researchers were hesitant to describe the beliefs of the Talang Mamak using Islamic terminology or to acknowledge them as bearing an Islamic identity. For instance, William Singleton in his PhD thesis *Old Ways, New Ways: Talang Mamak of Tiga Balai, Inderagiri Hulu, Riau Province, Sumatra* (Singleton 1998), Obdeyn in his colonial report *De langkah lama der orang Mamak van Indragiri* (Wetenschappen 1929), and others preferred to call the Talang Mamak beliefs simply “Langkah Lama”.

According to the dominant theory of religious development, religion is believed to have originated in animism, followed by the emergence of polytheism, and eventually culminating in monotheism (Tylor 1871). Anthropologists have often categorised local religious traditions as forms of animism, dynamism, henotheism, or polytheism, even though a new concept of animism has emerged, as seen in previous studies by Maarif, who classified Islam Amatoa in Sulawesi as “New-Animism” (Maarif 2014). Indeed, numerous earlier studies have asserted that the belief system of the Talang Mamak falls within the domains of animism, dynamism, Buddhist variants, or religious syncretism. However, I prefer to describe it as Indigenous Monotheism. This concept is closely aligned with the theory of primitive monotheism proposed by the early twentieth-century anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt. Schmidt argued that many traditional tribal religions are centred around belief in a Primitive High God or Supreme Being, suggesting that monotheism may, in fact, predate other forms of religious expression in human history (Schmidt 1935; Lang 1909).

For Schmidt, monotheism represented an original and foundational form of religious belief. However, his theory of primitive monotheism has attracted significant criticism from modern anthropologists. The use of the term primitive is now widely regarded as problematic due to its ethnocentric and hierarchical implications. Moreover, Schmidt was criticised for the lack of empirical evidence supporting his claims, and for relying on speculative assumptions rather than rigorous ethnographic data. Raffaele Pettazzoni, a contemporary critic, argued that Schmidt's theory was fundamentally flawed, characterising it as misleading and based on methodological and interpretive errors (Pettazzoni 1978).

Proposing the concept of Indigenous Monotheism for the Talang Mamak necessitates a critical engagement with established Southeast Asian scholarship on religious synthesis. Previous scholars have extensively documented the blending of Islamic and local traditions, such as John Bowen's analysis of religious practice among the Gayo (Bowen 2016), Robert Hefner's study of the Tengger (Hefner 1985), Clifford Geertz's *Religion of Java* (Geertz 1960), and Christian Pelras's research on the Bugis (Pelras 1996). While these foundational studies frequently employ the lens of syncretism or cultural accommodation to explain religious overlap, categorising Islam Langkah Lama merely as "syncretic" risks simplifying a profoundly active religious negotiation. Instead of a passive blending or a diluting of orthodoxy, the integration of Islam and Adat by the Talang Mamak is more accurately understood through the paradigm of hybridity (Bhabha 1994). This ongoing process functions as a 'Third Space' of cultural and theological translation, a site where the Talang Mamak actively engage in meaning-making. Through this lens, Indigenous Monotheism refines existing models of syncretism by highlighting how indigenous communities do not merely absorb external influences, but deliberately reconfigure them to articulate their own spiritual agency and maintain cultural sovereignty.

The monotheistic character of Islam Langkah Lama is clearly evident in its belief system, in which the existence of a single God occupies the highest position within the spiritual hierarchy of the Talang Mamak people. They refer to this singular deity as Allah, and no other name is used to denote the divine. The Allah worshipped by the Talang Mamak community is understood to be *Allah Subḥānahu wa Ta'ālā*, the same deity worshipped by the broader Muslim ummah. According to Schmidt, indigenous peoples express monotheism in two primary ways: through intangible and tangible conceptions of the divine. For instance, Australian Aboriginal communities believe in a formless God who can be sensed and heard, while the Pucikwar people of the Andaman Islands conceive of God in anthropomorphic terms, depicting the divine with a male-like form (Schmidt 1935). If Schmidt's theoretical framework is applied, then the belief system of the Talang Mamak may be categorised as a form of intangible monotheism, in which God is conceived as formless yet spiritually present. In order to avoid the delegitimisation often associated with the term primitive, I intentionally employ the term indigenous to describe the religious tradition of the Talang Mamak. This terminology not only respects the cultural integrity of the community but also challenges outdated classifications that marginalise local belief systems.

Why, then, are the Talang Mamak more frequently classified as adherents of animist

belief systems? I argue that this perception largely arises from their customs surrounding ancestral spirits. Prior to conducting significant traditional ceremonies such as Gawai Gadang, the Talang Mamak perform pilgrimages to ancestral graves, offering prayers for the smooth progression of the event and to ward off any disturbances. I verified this practice through consultation with a former dukun (shaman) of the Talang Mamak community, who explained that Allah is regarded as the Most Supernatural, and that their ancestors have become unseen entities. Consequently, only these unseen creations of God are considered sufficiently close to intercede and relay prayers to Allah, the Most Unseen, with greater immediacy. Thus, the practice of praying at ancestral tombs reflects a belief that ancestral spirits and other supernatural beings function as intermediaries in conveying their supplications to Allah.

The sacred indigenous knowledge of spirituality, norms, and values of the Talang Mamak is obtained from the inheritance of knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation. The Talang Mamak also possess their own cosmological knowledge, as expressed in the saying “Belum kandal tanah Mekkah, mengapung Sungai Limau”, which means that before the land of Mecca was formed, the area of Sungai Limau already existed. The full traditional expressions are as follows (AMAN 2019):

*Kandal Tanah Mekkah,
Takilat Ujung Pandan,
Tarantang Pulau Jawa,
Marabana Tiongkok,
Meng-apung-apung Benua Kalim,
Kandal langka antara gahap dengan tarang,*

*Berdiri gunung merapi ganti tubuh,
Kandal Kuala Sungai Limau,
Manjarang Kuala Sungai Tunu,
Kandal Banua hawan,
Marabana tarikan tiang raya,
Malampu-lampu Nagari Aceh,
Barulah Kandal pulau nan lain-lain,*

Formed is the land of Mecca;
seen is Ujung Pandan;
stretched out is the island of Java;
crossing over to China;
afloat is the continent of India;
formed is the passage between darkness
and light;
emerge the volcanoes of Merapi;
formed is the estuary of the Limau River;
meeting the estuary of the Tunu River;
formed is the continent of Hawan;
moving to draw the Great Pillar
(pertaining to the arena pillar in rituals; a
representation of the ‘Arsh tree);
shines the land of Aceh;
only then are the other islands formed,

*Menjadi 25 Kepulauan,
ditunggu 25 Nabi,
Barulah disebut Sami'-Basir,
Alam Takalimun,
Ke bawah kesalaman tujuh,
Ke Atas ke pintu langit,*

*Sampai ke ubun-ubun Langit,
Kemudian diataruk oleh Allah.*

In another versions:

*Kandal (beku) Makah
Takilat ujung pandang
Tarantang pulau Jawa
Marabana teonkok
Maapung apung benua kaling
Kandal langkah antar gabap dengan tarang,
Antara langkah Allah dan Muhammad tadiri
gunung merapi,*

*Ganti Tubuh kuhala sungai limau,
Marabana kuhala sungai tunu,
Kandal benuawan
Kandal tarik an tiang raya
Malampu lampu negari Aceh,*

*Baru Kandal samek basir kalam takalimun
Menjadi dua puluh lima kepulauan
Dalam negri luar negri.*

becoming twenty-five archipelagos, inhabited by twenty-five Prophets. Then those places are named Sami' (the necessary divine attribute of Hearing), Basir (the necessary divine attribute of Seeing), 'Alam (the necessary divine attribute of Knowing), and Takallum (the necessary divine attribute of Speaking) – extending downward to the seven layers of the earth, and upward to the seven heavens,

all the way to the peak of the sky, whereupon they are given their appointed station by Allah

Formed is the land of Mecca;
seen is the far horizon;
stretched out is the island of Java;
crossing over to China;
adrift is the continent of India;
formed is that which lies between
darkness and light,
between the step of Allah and [that of]
Muhammad;
Mount Merapi emerges;

the estuary of the Limau River,
crossing over to the estuary of the Tunu River;
formed is the continent of Hawan;
formed is the drawing of the Great Pillar;
shines the land of Aceh;

only then are formed the attributes of Sami', Basir, Kalam, and Takallum; becoming twenty-five archipelagos, both the inner and the outer lands.

<p><i>Di dalam dua puluh lima kepulauan di beja sekalian alam lima jinis yang mengisi dunia.</i></p> <p><i>Jadi umat yang ada di bumi terkembang ini adalah dari yang beranak.</i></p> <p><i>Kandeal dunia ini dah ada manusia menunggunya.</i></p>	<p>Within these twenty-five archipelagos are comprised five types of realms that fill the universe;</p> <p>the creatures upon the earth grow and multiply;</p> <p>the world is formed and, simultaneously, man is formed as its custodian.</p>
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Based on the mythologies of the Talang Mamak people, their belief system incorporates several key elements: belief in Allah as the singular God (monotheism), faith in the Prophet Muhammad, belief in angels, recognition of the twenty-five prophets, belief in supernatural beings (such as jinn, ancestral spirits, and ghosts), and adherence to customary law (Adat Datuk Patih Nan Sabatang). I hypothesise that prior to the arrival of Islam, the Talang Mamak practised a form of indescribable monotheism. The terms Raib or Ghaib reflect human limitations in comprehending the existence of God. With the advent of Islam among the Talang Mamak, the concept of the one God was explicitly articulated as Allah, forming the foundation of Islam Langkah Lama.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that even today tribal elders are able to articulate the obligatory attributes of Allah, albeit with limited theological precision. During my visit to the Pebidayan hamlet, an elder explained that Allah is All-Hearing, referring to the attribute Kalim. However, this term should properly be understood as the attribute of speech (Kalām), indicating that Allah possesses the capacity for communication. Despite such misinterpretations of Allah’s obligatory attributes, I observed that concepts from Islamic Sufism have been accepted by the Talang Mamak for a long time. This is evidenced by their mythologies, which frequently intersect with Islamic terminology.

The Talang Mamak’s contact with Islam occurred after they had successfully built their civilisation upon the Bodi-Caniago Harmony Custom (Keselarasan Bodi-Caniago), formulated by Datuk Patih Nan Sabatang. This Bodi-Caniago harmony is one of the foundational customary systems of the Minangkabau people. Before the arrival of Islam, this customary system served as the primary guideline for the lives of the Talang Mamak community. The subsequent integration of Adat (custom) and Islam became the foundational basis of their belief system and mythologies.

The timeline of Islamic influence on the Talang Mamak likely coincides with the period when Islam began to influence Minangkabau culture. Although the Talang Mamak voluntarily accepted Islam and played a crucial role in the establishment and continuation of the Indragiri Sultanate, Adat still holds a paramount position in their society. In fact, the Talang Mamak abide by a guiding proverb: “Biar mati anak, asal jangan mati adat” (“Let the child die, as long as the custom does not”). This proverb signifies that if a child dies, their grave can still be seen; but if a custom dies, no traces remain. Consequently, the Talang Mamak continue to preserve and defend their customs to this day, ensuring their continuity.

The Practices of *Islam Langkah Lama*

The Talang Mamak people have a series of rituals and ceremonies that they call the Life Cycle (*Daur Hidup*). The life cycle is the journey of human life from birth to death. It includes birth ceremonies, *Cuci Lantai*, circumcision, weddings (*Gawai Gadang*), traditional healing rituals, asceticism, and death memorial ceremonies (*Tambak Kubur*). The entire series of traditional ceremonies is related to plant totems, which include areca nut, gambier, betel lime, betel leaves, and tobacco. In some rituals, plants produced from the forest are also required, such as areca nut trees, forest frankincense, bamboo, and coconut leaves. In this article, I explain only one of the ritual practices in Islam Langkah Lama that is closely related to the Talang Mamak, namely traditional healing rituals.

I witnessed firsthand how pulung setesemah was carried out, a healing ritual considered to be sourced from the malevolent spirit of the forest guard. They weave young cube-shaped coconut leaves about a metre high. Each corner of the cube has a bamboo pole whose ends are shaped like an open cone. Each pole is then given a kind of candle. They call this structure the Balai.

Each region within the Talang Mamak community has its own distinctive version of healing rituals. In the Talang Kedabu area, specifically Rakit Kulim, the healing ritual is known as Berdukun Balai Terbang. This ritual is intended to expel evil spirits that afflict individuals. At the centre of the ritual is a pole adorned with three fabrics: a white cloth, a black cloth, and a patterned cloth resembling batik. Surrounding the pole are several balai, small, winged structures, numbering between five and seven in total.

The ritual began with the traditional leader opening the treatment centre by saying Bismillah and then greeting “Assalamu’alaikum Warohmatullahi Wabarakatuh”, followed by praises to Allah and prayer to the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. After remarks from the traditional leaders, the ritual ceremony of Berdukun Balai Terbang was carried out (Riau 2018).

In Rantau Langsat, the series of ritual ceremonies for treatment consists of five types of traditional ritual ceremonies. The Talang Mamak are not immediately connected to the interference of evil spirits. The first stage in treatment is carried out by detecting diseases with herbal plants found nearby. Knowledge about plant types and their properties among the Talang Mamak has been passed down from generation to generation. I met a twelve-year-old girl from the Talang Mamak who mastered many types of herbal plants and their uses. This first stage is called Tawar Menawar (which means detecting the disease with traditional herbal medicine). The second stage is called Numas or Huras. When I visited the house of the Traditional Ruler, who was also a kemantan (shaman), there was a mother who brought turmeric to be used as a medicine. The kemantan then peeled the turmeric, about the size of a thumb. After peeling, he recited prayers and mantras. The turmeric was later applied to babies who had fever and were fussy.

The third stage is Pulung Setesemah. This healing ritual is aimed at patients who do not recover through the Tawar Menawar and Numas stages. When I was among the Talang

Mamak, a young man named Ican had seizures after hunting in the forest. Ican had allegedly violated hunting rules: any animal that is successfully hunted must leave a little for the forest guards, such as feathers, nails, or fangs. However, Ican did not obtain the results of his hunt and released something somewhere. After that, Ican had a severe seizure. Pulung Setesemah began by releasing chickens through the balai. Then, the kemantan danced using a cloth, accompanied by a kebayu (shaman assistant). One of the mediators of the ancestral spirit then entered a trance and explained about the disease. After the trance was over, the kemantan recited mantras ending with the words “Bukan aku yang menawar, Allah yang menawar, Muhammad yang menawar” (“It is not I who heals; Allah heals, Muhammad heals”).

After Pulung Setesemah, Ican’s condition improved but was still unstable. The fourth stage was also carried out, namely Berobat Kampung (village treatment). In this village treatment ritual, not only Ican was treated, but also many villagers lined up for treatment.

The last stage in treatment among the Talang Mamak is Belelik. The term Belelik, if traced, refers to a type of Makassar fruit plant, known in Latin as *Brucea javanica* (L.) Merr. However, I am unsure of its connection to the healing ritual. Among the Talang Mamak themselves, Belelik is a ceremony to give offerings to Datuk (the tiger spirit). There are seven types of offerings used in the Belelik tradition. It is hoped that by sending offerings to Datuk and the forest guards, the disease afflicting the patient can soon be cured (Syamsidar 2011).

In every healing ritual, there is a mixture of religion and local medical knowledge. For example, some kemantan open the event first by reciting bismillah and praising Allah. At the end of the treatment, there is a mantra prayer with a nuance of surrender, acknowledging that it is not the ritual itself that can actually heal, but Allah and Muhammad who heal. Not only among the Talang Mamak, but similar traditions can also be found in various regions in Indonesia, such as among the indigenous people in the upper reaches of the Kapuas River in Kalimantan (Yusdiana et al. 2023). Peoples that have accepted Islam for a long time combine traditional medicine with Islamic prayers. As admitted by the Muncak Adat of Rantau Langsat, when someone from outside the community came and asked for treatment, he used the prayer: “Lailahaillah al-Maliku al-Haq al-Mubin, Muhammad ar-Rasulullah, Shodiqul Wādil al-Amin”. This dhikr is commonly found in Islamic traditions, especially in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren).

The *Wahdat al-Wujūd* Nuances in Islam Langkah Lama

After five months of observing the Talang Mamak, one of the tribal elders asked me if there was any other data that had not yet been obtained. I answered the elder’s question using the perspective of epistemological criticism from al-Jabiri’s reasoning. I explained that in Islam there are three types of epistemological reason, namely *bayānī* reason, *burhānī* reason, and *irfānī* reason (Zuhri 2019). I declared myself a follower of *bayānī* reasoning, which is based on text. Therefore, I asked if there were any Islamic religious texts that were

familiar and had reached the Talang Mamak. The traditional elders then replied that there are several books quite familiar among them, including Tajul Muluk, Dar an-Nafis (Muhammad Nafis al-Banjari, 1735–1812), and the Kitab Barencong. Of the three books, the existence of the Kitab Barencong is relatively unknown. Meanwhile, the traditional elders have copies of Tajul Muluk and Dar an-Nafis in their homes. I finally tracked down the Kitab Barencong, which turned out to be sold freely in the online market. I managed to obtain two editions of the Barencong book. The first is titled Bab al-Haq (The Door of Truth) and the second is titled Fayahiqul Laillah. These three books are not directly studied and taught by traditional elders to the community, but their content is related to the understanding of Islam Langkah Lama. Nevertheless, the existence of these three books provides sufficient evidence that traces of Islamic religious texts are quite familiar among the traditional elders.

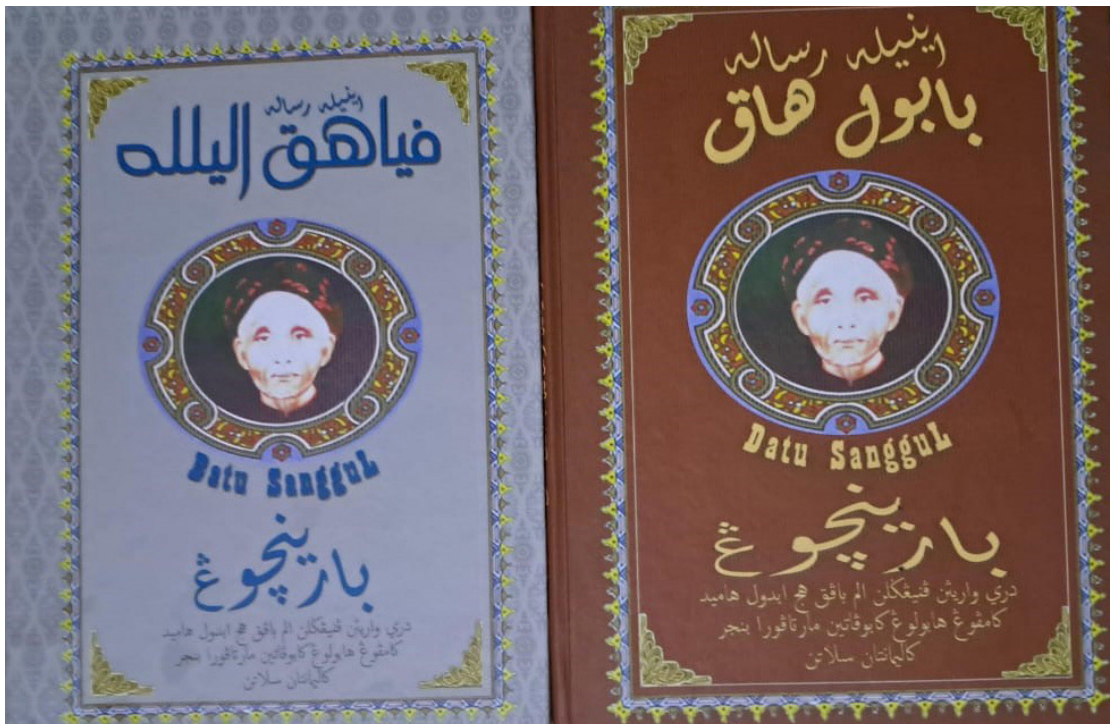


Figure 1. Kitab Barencong

I then brought the two Barencong books to confirm whether they were indeed what the elder had meant. It turned out to be true: some of the teachings of the Kitab Barencong are still taught to certain groups within the Talang Mamak, particularly those who are spiritual activists. In the discussion of the Kitab Barencong, there is a specific section that teaches about self-study or knowing the origin of oneself. I also suspect that the reason why most of the Talang Mamak do not practise Islamic sharia is influenced by the following poem

(Sanggul n.d.):

Tak mau bercampur baur dengan ahli sareat. (Do not associate with sharia experts.)
Memisahkan diri tak mau rapat. (Separate from them.) *Ilmu Jahir membawa mudarat.* (Zahir [sharia] knowledge brings disaster.)

From several discussions with traditional elders, intellectuals, and religious leaders, I suspect that Islam Langkah Lama is actually a manifestation of the interpretation of the teachings of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. My suspicion is based on the traditional and mythological advice that I discovered during my research, such as the expression “Surang Allah, Surang Hamba” (Oneness), which refers to the union between the Creator and His creation. Also evident are poems with *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* nuances that are still used today and can be found in the Kitab Barencong:

Jangan engkau mencari bilah, (Do not seek a blade,) *Bilah ada di dalam buluh,* (The blade is inside the bamboo.) *Jangan engkau mencari Allah,* (Do not seek Allah,) *Allah ada di dalam tubuh.* (Allah is in the body.)

The understanding of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* is estimated to have existed since the eighth century and peaked during the time of *Muḥyī al-Dīn* Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240) in the thirteenth century. Ibn al-‘Arabī was later dubbed Shaykh al-Akbar (the greatest Shaykh) for his contributions to Islamic intellectual thought. On the other hand, he was also nicknamed Shaykh al-Akfar (the most perverted Shaykh) by his opponents (Ebstein 2025). The understanding of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* quickly spread to the archipelago during the golden age of medieval Islam. According to Martin van Bruinessen, the idea of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* of Ibn al-‘Arabī was easily accepted by the people of the archipelago because it blended readily with Indian Sufistic ideas and indigenous Sufistic traditions (Bruinessen 2012).

The strong influence of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* as articulated by Ibn al-‘Arabī in various parts of the Eastern region can be seen from James W. Morris’s statement that the works produced after Ibn al-‘Arabī on *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* up until the eighteenth century were merely footnotes to his thought (Bagir 2006). Ibn al-‘Arabī became one of the most influential Muslim philosophers of his time. There are at least eighty-five works attributed to him (Society n.d.), among his most famous being *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, and *Syajarah al-Kaun* (Bagir 2006).

It is not known exactly when the understanding of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* was transmitted to Indonesia. However, its traces can be identified in figures such as Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin as-Sumatrani in the second half of the sixteenth century. According to Naquib al-Attas, Hamzah Fansuri’s works were not only influenced by Ibn al-‘Arabī but also by the thoughts of ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (1365–1424), al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 874), al-Baghdādī (d. 910), al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 1131), ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1229), Rūmī (d. 1273), ‘Irāqī (d. 1289), Sa‘dī (d. 1291), Shabistarī (d. 1320), Morocco (d. 1406), Shāh Ni‘matullāh (d. 1431), Jāmī (d. 1492), and others (Al-Attas 1966). At the same time, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries various Sufi orders developed in Indonesia.

However, the existence of the Sufi orders was not well organised, so that Sufi practices and rituals were easily assimilated with local cultural practices, such as how to acquire spiritual strength, martial arts, and immunity, even in non-Muslim or anti-Muslim communities (Bruinessen 2007).

Al-Attas divides the period of Islamisation in the archipelago into three phases. The first phase, called “Body Conversion” from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, was marked by a large Muslim population and the establishment of Islamic kingdoms. The second phase, the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, was part of the Islamic *Weltanschauung*; this period was dominated by Sufism and Kalām thought. The third phase, after the eighteenth century, saw Islam become an inseparable part of the archipelago’s society (Al-Attas 1966). Referring to these phases, after the Talang Mamak contributed to the establishment of the Indragiri Sultanate in 1508 and soon became a vassal of the Aceh Sultanate during the time of King Iskandar Muda (1583/1607–1636) (Feener and Daly 2011), they were indirectly influenced by the development of Islamisation occurring at that time, both when Aceh was under the influence of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* thought and during the period of rejection of *Wujūdiyyah* teachings by Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī (d. 1666) during the time of Sultan Iskandar Sani (1637–1641) (Fathurrahman 1999).

However, there are no documents proving that the influence of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* beliefs existed in Talang Mamak at that time, except for the existence of the *Kitab Barencong* and *Dar an-Nafis* that I encountered during fieldwork. I suspect that these books reached the Talang Mamak along with the migration of the Banjar Muslim diaspora in the eighteenth century to the Indragiri area, following the dissolution of the Banjar Sultanate by the Dutch colonialists in 1860. This migration also helped shape the Islamic religious model of Islam Langkah Lama among the Talang Mamak. One indication of this was the appointment of the Mufti of the Kingdom of Indragiri from the Banjar Muslim community in Riau, namely Shaykh Abdurrahman As-Siddiq (1857–1930), who was known as Tuan Guru Sapat. Tuan Guru Sapat was a descendant, through the maternal line, of Shaykh Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari (1710–1812), an important figure in the spread of Islam in South Kalimantan (Azhar and Rasyid 2020). Shaykh Arsyad al-Banjari is also known as Datuk Kalampayan. Both Datuk Kalampayan and Datu Sanggul, the bearer of the *Kitab Barencong* treatise, were close friends (Uzhma 2021).

The *Kitab Barencong* has a close relationship with the teachings of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* Sufism as articulated by Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin as-Sumatrani, as well as the teachings of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī and ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Singkilī (Rahmadi, Husaini Abbas 2012). The *Kitab Barencong* is a compilation of Sufi teachings that circulated among the Acehnese ulama at that time, uniting two contrasting traditions within a single text. Some opinions state that *Barencong* means “teachings” (ba) from the land of Rencong (Aceh), that is, Islamic teachings from Aceh. However, among the Talang Mamak, I found another meaning: that *Barencong* means “divided”.

The *Kitab Barencong* is a book of Sufism following the pattern of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* teachings from Banjar, South Kalimantan. It is a treatise on the legacy of Sufi teachings

from Datuk Sanggul, a Sufi figure from Banjar who lived in the eighteenth century CE. The Kitab Barencong has a mythological story surrounding its emergence, which is still current in the Banjar area. The story begins with Datuk Nuraya meeting Datuk Suban at his teaching place during Eid. Datuk Suban had thirteen pupils, including Datuk Murkat, Datuk Taming Karsa, Datuk Niang Thalib, Datuk Karipis, Datuk Ganun, Datuk Argih, Datuk Ungku, Datuk Labai Duliman, Datuk Harun, Datuk Arsanaya, Datuk Rangga, Datuk Galuh Diang Bulan, and Datuk Sanggul. It is said that Datuk Nuraya had a large body and frightened Datuk Suban's students, who prepared to attack. Datuk Nuraya came with the greeting "Assalamu'alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh". The fear of Datuk Suban's disciples instantly dissipated when Datuk Suban said that the one who uttered the greeting of peace could not harm Muslims. After that, Datuk Suban asked Datuk Nuraya's name and origin. However, Datuk Nuraya only uttered the sentence of *tawhīd*, "*Lailahailallah*", many times, then collapsed and died. All of Datuk Suban's disciples then searched Datuk Nuraya's body and found a book held by Datuk Nuraya. The name Datuk Nuraya itself was a gift from Datuk Suban, referring to his arrival on Eid (*raya*), while *nur* means light. The book held by Datuk Nuraya was the Kitab Barencong, which was inherited by Datuk Sanggul from Datuk Suban.

The story of the emergence of the Kitab Barencong recalls Datuk Suban's teachings, which emphasised that any creature, referring to the figure of Datuk Nuraya, who says the greeting "Assalamu'alaikum" will not harm humans, especially Muslims. At the end of the story, Datuk Nuraya utters the sentence of *tawhīd*, "*Lailaha illallah*", and is buried as a Muslim. This narrative is familiar among the Talang Mamak, who similarly greet others and eloquently pronounce *tawhīd* sentences. At first, I felt uneasy about later being considered to have imposed the term Islam on the religion of the Talang Mamak. However, after living among and researching the Talang Mamak for months, I felt a sense of safety and certainty. This subjective experience led me to discover the secrets of the Islamic teachings contained within Islam Langkah Lama more deeply. My initial assumption lies in the similarity, but this does not mean that there is a direct relationship between Islam Langkah Lama and the *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* tradition of the Kitab Barencong.

Apart from the content of the Kitab Barencong, the Talang Mamak mythology concerning Nūr Muḥammad is also a concern of mine. Nūr Muḥammad is a subject of Sufism closely related to the teachings of philosophical Sufism (Tasawuf Falsafi). The classic manuscript that discusses Nūr Muḥammad is the Hikayat Nur Muhammad by Sheikh Ahmad Syamsuddin al-Banjari (estimated to have lived in the 1600s). The Hikayat Nur Muhammad was a gift to Ratu Aceh Sulthanah Seri Ratu Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Johan Berdaulat (1641–1675 CE). This evidence shows that philosophical Sufism was the pillar of Islamic teachings in both the Sultanate of Aceh and the Sultanate of Banjar (Rahmadi, Husaini Abbas 2012).

In principle, it would be tendentious to claim that Islam Langkah Lama is a local form of the teachings of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. However, based on historical data on how Islam developed in the Indragiri region in general, the existence of Islamic texts in the *Waḥdat*

al-Wujūd tradition among the Talang Mamak, and ethnographic observations about their traditional philosophy and customs, which contain unifying aspects in their teachings and mantras, I argue that Islam Langkah Lama is more or less also influenced by the understanding of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. Although categorising the Islam Langkah Lama religion as a *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* tradition is highly problematic, since *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* itself is a complex understanding, at the very least, the nuances of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* are quite noticeable in the local theosophy of the Talang Mamak.

The Continuity of *Islam Langkah Lama*

The ritual practices of the Talang Mamak are still maintained in several areas, such as the Rakit Kulim and Batang Gansal districts. This remains true even though some traditional chiefs and their descendants have converted to an interpretation of Islam that emphasises practising sharia (Islam Langkah Baru), while others have converted to Catholicism (Langkah Baru). For instance, the Rantau Langsat Traditional Leader admitted that he once tried to abandon the practices of Islam Langkah Lama, which serve as the foundation for a series of customary rituals. What followed was a disaster: diseases struck the village community one after another. Realising the gravity of the situation, the Traditional Leader restored the traditional rituals he had previously attempted to abandon.

I view the Rantau Langsat Traditional Leader as someone who actively practises Islamic law. Every Friday, some members of the community perform Friday prayers, though the majority are inconsistent in their attendance. During my research, I was appointed to serve as the preacher (khatib). I noticed that the Friday prayer congregation consisted of fewer than forty people. The congregation typically included the santri and ustadz of Pondok Lemang, traditional elders, shamans, the Rantau Langsat Traditional Leader, local community members, and mosque administrators.

The situation in Rakit Kulim and Talang Durian Cacar (the Tiga Balai area) is not much different. When I visited the Batin's (traditional leader's) house, it was apparent that his children and sons-in-law had begun practising Islamic sharia. This was evidenced by the girls wearing closed hijab. Furthermore, expressions such as Salam, Subhanallah, and Masha'Allah were frequently used by the Batin's extended family. One of his sons-in-law is a graduate of a university in Yogyakarta; consequently, the family has been familiar with sharia Islam for quite some time. When I performed the Isha prayer at the Batin's house, I faced no objections. In fact, I was provided with a clean, designated prayer space and shown the correct direction of the qibla. This reality stands in stark contrast to the stereotype that the Talang Mamak are alienated and far removed from Islamic teachings.

During my fieldwork, I realised that the sustainability of Islam Langkah Lama stems from the Talang Mamak belief that Islam Langkah Lama and Adat (customs) are two inseparable entities. Adat law covers all aspects of the Talang Mamak's lives, and they recognise Adat law as religious law. The popular adage "*Adat bersandi syarak, Syarak bersandi Kitabullah*" (Custom is based on sharia; sharia is based on the Book of Allah) is adapted

by them as “*Adat bersendi Syarak, Syarak bersendi Kalamullah*” (Custom is based on sharia; sharia is based on the words of the Adat leaders). This interpretation elevates Adat leaders to the highest authority among the Talang Mamak. Vilifying, insulting, or demeaning them is strictly taboo.

The Talang Mamak have thirty-three taboo acts. Examples include visual taboos, such as the prohibition against walking behind girls. Visiting taboos dictate that one is forbidden from visiting a house when the husband is absent. Speech taboos strictly forbid speaking ill of honourable figures, including traditional leaders, elders, clever people, kemantan (shamans), and individuals believed to possess supernatural abilities. Furthermore, it is taboo to walk alone with someone who is not a mahram (a spouse or blood relative). Violating these taboos incurs Sumbang, which refers to the payment of a fine for the transgression. The terms of the Sumbang fine were traditionally determined by the victim.

However, according to traditional elders, modernisation has weakened the enforcement of these thirty-three taboos. The areas that still strictly uphold these guidelines are the Talang Mamak communities in Tiga Balai (Rakit Kulim sub-district) and Ranting Cawa inside the National Park (Rantau Langsat village, Batang Gansal sub-district). In contrast, other areas have undergone significant changes due to an influx of migrants and their transformation into transit routes across eastern Sumatra.

From Sumbang 33, the Adat legal sanctions of the Talang Mamak emerged, known by the term Tahil. The definition of tahil in the KBBI (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia) is a measure of weight equivalent to 37.8 grams (Bahasa 2024). This measure refers to the weight of gold. Tahil was a unit used in the practice of buying and selling in past Sumatran civilisations. I suspect that due to the close relationship between the Talang Mamak and the Malacca Civilisation, since the Kingdom of Indragiri was a vassal of the Malacca Kingdom, the term tahil is still used by the Talang Mamak to this day (Moyer 1982). The measures in the Malacca Law have several terms, among them tahil, kati, and paha. One tahil is equivalent to 16 gold; one kati is equal to 20 tahil; one paha is equal to $\frac{1}{4}$ tahil (Moyer 1982).

Tahil among the Talang Mamak consists of one tahil sepaha, two tahil sepaha, three tahil sepaha, four tahil sepaha, and seven tahil sepaha (Gilung 2012). In interviews with elders and Adat leaders, the punishment for setahil sepaha is one black chicken (ayam kampung) and one gantang of rice (more than one kilogram), complete with spices. Setahil sepaha is reserved for cases of feuding between two individuals. After the punishment is determined, the two parties are mediated to reconcile. The penalty of setahil is then used for a communal meal between the two feuding parties. The sanction of two tahil sepaha is reserved for cases of taking something without asking, where there is no serious intention to steal. In another case, for someone who intentionally or unintentionally cuts down a durian tree in the forest, the punishment is to provide eleven plates, three bowls, and a full cooked meal (rice and side dishes) along with drink.

The sanction of three tahil sepaha consists of eighteen plates of selemak-manis, meaning complete with meat, spices, and rice. An example of its application is a man and woman

being together outside the permitted time until nightfall. The sanction of four tahlil sepaaha consists of twenty-one plates, five bowls, a betel leaf holder, complete with sweet selemak (selemak manis), thirty-six pieces of white cloth, and one silver bracelet. This punishment applies to violators of Adat events, for example, if at an event there is no cockfighting, which is a tradition of the Talang Mamak. Sepaha means 'thigh-width', referring to a place as wide as a talam (large plate). Seven tahlil sepaaha represent the highest Adat law, as experienced by PT SAL palm oil company. The amount of sanctions that must be redeemed is fifteen large plates, three bowls, seventy-six pieces of white cloth, one silver bracelet, and food and drink for all residents. The remaining money is then divided among each resident. The total monetary fine issued by PT SAL amounted to 200 million rupiah due to cutting down a kedondong tree (totem) (Muntaza 2014). Among the Talang Mamak, five tahlil and six tahlil do not exist.

Islam Langkah Lama for the Talang Mamak is not only about beliefs but also about their way of life. This principle results in a blurring between customs (adat) and religion. Are traditional practices also part of religious practices? was the first question that came to my mind, considering that the customs of the Talang Mamak are a hybrid form of foreign customs, such as Minangkabau, with various pieces of evidence. However, when realising that customary law is also religious law, the Islam Langkah Lama religious law as customary law is practised not only by the Talang Mamak who have begun to implement Islamic sharia (Islam Langkah Baru), but also by those who have converted to other religions such as Catholicism. Whatever ritual is held to cover the life cycle of the Talang Mamak is always related to both religion and customs. Politically, the traditional existence of the Talang Mamak has been packaged through the sacred oath of Datuk Patih Nan Sabatang. He asked the Indragiri Sultanate to always protect their customs as a reward for their support in establishing the Indragiri Kingdom. As a result, the sustainability of their customs continues to be maintained to this day, even though over time the traditions of the Talang Mamak have continued to face resistance.

From *Islam Langkah Lama* to *Islam Langkah Baru*: Tracing the Shifts in Religious Discourse and Practice

In his book *The History of Sumatra* (1783), William Marsden (1754–1836) observed that the island of Sumatra was at least divided into two regions: the coastal areas (which were generally Muslim) and the inland areas (non-Muslim) (Marsden 1811). The people of coastal Sumatra who had converted to Islam referred to themselves as Malays (Melayu). The concept of 'being Melayu' was synonymised with 'being Muslim' and thus became a significant identity transformation noted by Marsden. According to his report, the regional ruler of Muko-Muko, now a regency in Bengkulu province, referred to himself and his people as Melayu because they had converted to Islam. However, the Rejang chiefs who had also embraced Islam continued to identify as Rejang, not Melayu (Marsden 1811).

The transformation of identity, 'becoming Melayu', among the Talang Mamak also

occurs to this day, using the same terms, such as Islam Langkah Baru or Melayu. In an interview with Pak Tak Tung, an elder of the Talang Mamak, he recounted an incident that occurred around 1972. A child from the Talang Mamak community who was considered not to have converted to Islam sat in the *surau* (prayer house) to listen to his friends reciting the Qur'an. After the children had not gone too far, the other children were ordered to clean the *surau* floor with forty cans of water. The incident sparked disharmony between them. The Talang Mamak group who had not embraced Islam Langkah Baru did not wish to interact with those who had. Pak Tak Tung recounts:

What is it, for example, looking for sweet potatoes, buying rice, not being loved. They said, 'I'm sorry, we do not sell it, because you are already Malay (Melayu), the religion of Islam (Islam Langkah Baru), our actions are haram, we will be sinned.

Following the incident, the Qur'an teacher who had ordered the cleaning of the *surau*

apologised for his actions. The incident recurred in 2017. In a spirit of cooperation, all community members, whether Muslims or Catholics, gathered for a lunch at a mosque for mediation. However, the majority present opposed the entry of a community member who had been appointed as a deputy pastor (catechist) in the region. Some others planned to clean the mosque using forty cans of water. Following negotiations, the matter was resolved.

The evidence above shows how, since the 1970s, preachers of sharia Islam have preached intensely to the Talang Mamak. However, the presence of these preachers actually caused internal conflicts within the community. When I visited the Batin, he told me how he and his group were accused of heresy and discredited as a deviant Islamic group. I felt the psychic turmoil of the Talang Mamak during my research. In fact, while teaching at Pondok Lemang, I observed the opposite: how the par-



Figure 2. St Antonius Church in Talang Siambul Village is the centre of Catholicism among the Talang Mamak.

ents of the Talang Mamak entrusted their children to be educated at Pondok Lemang.

As a result of the conflicts that occurred in the 1970s, I see that this opportunity was well utilised by Catholic missionary groups. Catholicism was introduced to the Talang Mamak in 1985 by a French priest named Pastor Vitte. On 9 April 1994, ten priests from outside the area baptised 460 members of the Talang Mamak community. The baptism took place in front of the St. Antonius Talang Siambul Pastoral Church. The Catholic Talang Mamak region includes the hamlets of Sialang, Tualang, Siamang, Matunggau, Swit, Datai (Rantau Langsat Village), Talang Tanjung Hamlet, Talang Siambul Village, Usul Village, and Talang Lakat Village (for the Rawa Canting area). The Tiga Balai area includes Talang Jerinjing, Talang Kedabu, Sungai Limau, Durian Cekar, and Sungai Tunu (Katolik 2024).

Talang Siambul village, the Catholic centre of the Talang Mamak, is located before Rantau Langsat village, which is part of the TNBT area. Talang Siambul and Talang Lakat villages are currently inhabited by Batak and Talang Mamak Catholic communities. The Talang Mamak have also converted to Catholicism in Tebo Regency, Jambi Province. However, they continue to follow their ancestors' teachings. The Talang Mamak Simarantihan people's mantras include spells such as Bismillahirrahmanirrohim and Allahummashol-lu'alaih (Muflih 2024). This is where the Talang Mamak's views diverge: some of its members have adopted Catholicism in particular locations, yet they continue to adhere to their ancestors' teachings. The traditional teachings state that God created the universe, which has neither beginning nor end. The creed is an essential component of the people's teachings. Remembering Allah is a responsibility no matter where we are. Furthermore, based on my field observations, the most notable behaviour in daily life is the pronunciation of bismillah, alhamdulillah, masyaallah, and subhanallah. These expressions associated with Islam demonstrate that Islam Langkah Lama is closer to Islam.

I had the opportunity to visit the house of a catechist in Rantau Langsat. As a person seen as a Catholic religious figure by the community, the catechist was open to the existence of Islamisation in his area. He even openly agreed to supervise and reprimand the students of Pondok Lemang if they were caught doing wrong. In Rantau Langsat, the Catholic community is located in the hamlets of Siamang, Bangayowan, and Datai. These three hamlets still practise the original culture of the Talang Mamak, including gambling and cockfighting. Nevertheless, their acceptance of Islam is very open, as evidenced by the many interfaith marriages between Islam and Catholicism. However, Catholics first convert to Islam before marriage.

The similarity between the teachings of Islam and Islam Langkah Lama has made the Talang Mamak the object of Islamisation, both by individuals and groups. Based on Jamaluddin's report, Islamisation among the Talang Mamak has occurred since the early 2000s (Jamaluddin 2014). Since 2018, Islamic groups have been carrying out philanthropic and da'wah activities among the Talang Mamak. One of the target areas used for Islamisation is Rantau Langsat village. Since 2020, the Islamisation movement has become more massive. It is recorded that eight institutions carry out da'wah to the Talang Mamak, among them Dompot Dhuafa, the Indonesian Islamic Da'wah Council (DDII), the Baitul Mal Foundation (YBM) PLN, Riau Province Baznas, the My Trip My Da'wah Community, FPI, the Muara Foundation, and Sahabat UAS (Ustadz Abdus Shomad) (Siaran-Press 2020).



Figure 3. One-door mosque in Rantau Langsat Village

Since the end of 2017, Dompot Dhuafa, through the Cordofa programme focusing on empowering da'i (preachers), established a prayer room in Lemang Hamlet. The Cordofa Mosque was then inaugurated in February 2018. Now, the mosque is a centre for Islamic learning for Pondok Lemang students and the surrounding community. In 2019, Cordofa also established the Mahmud Kanj Mosque in Siambul Village, a Catholic centre among the Talang Mamak (DD-Riau 2019). Since 2021, DDII has assigned its da'i to serve in Air Bomban Hamlet, Rantau Langsat Village ('Dewan Dakwah Kampar Salurkan Bantuan Ke Desa Pedalaman Talang Mamak Dan Bina Para Mualaf' 2021).

The presence of Islamic organisations in the Talang Mamak area, both private and state-affiliated, has also shifted the religious discourse and Islamic practices of the Talang Mamak. In addition to the organisations mentioned above, there is another Islamic organisation called the Markiz Daarul Qur'an Was-Sunnah Foundation, based in Kampar Kiri, Riau. I met directly with its representative while performing the Fajr prayer at the Cordofa Mosque, Lemang. In a report on the YouTube channel of the Markiz Daarul Qur'an Was-Sunnah Foundation, they expressed sadness about the religious situation of the Talang Mamak, which they considered full of polytheism and animism. The traditional practices of the Talang Mamak are allegedly a form of polytheism that must be eradicated immediately. The strategy used is humanitarian assistance and regeneration from within the younger generation of the Talang Mamak (Ja'far 2021).

According to Ustadz Abdus Shomad (UAS), he suspects that Islam Langkah Lama is part of Shia Bāṭiniyyah. Shia Bāṭiniyyah is a Shia school that emphasises the hidden meaning behind the visible. This view is widely found in the development of Shia Isma'ili. One

of the hallmarks of this Shia Bāṭiniyyah view is its teachings on exoteric (*zāhiri*) and esoteric (*bāṭini*) (Daftary 2014). Shia Bāṭiniyyah prioritises hidden meanings in Islamic teachings, including symbolisation in Islamic teachings. In performing *ta'wīl* (interpretation) of the verses of the Qur'an, this applies not only to the verses of *mutashābihāt* (ambiguous) but also to the verses of *muḥkamāt* (law) (Gibb, Kramers, and Lévi-Provençal 1986). UAS thinks that Islam Langkah Lama, with its teachings about the Inner Allah, the Inner Muhammad (Nur Muhammad), and the Inner Qur'an (Kitabullah), is similar to the teachings of the Ismaili Shia. However, interestingly, UAS is well aware that the Talang Mamak are very afraid of losing their customs. Through the “Tolong Talang” programme, UAS convinced the Talang Mamak not to worry about this. Instead, their arrival was to document and not damage the customs of the Talang Mamak (Umat 2021). This differs from the goals of other preachers who consider what the Talang Mamak practise today to be heresy and polytheism. On the other hand, UAS did not explain in detail how the Shia Ismaili variant reached the Talang Mamak.

I have felt this process during research, as evidenced by the regeneration of Islamisation from outside, which continues to target the younger generation of the Talang Mamak. This regeneration is also carried out by providing scholarships to pursue higher education, both in Sumatra and in Java. The most pronounced internal change is the loss of the original traditional traditions of the Talang Mamak in Rantau Langsat, whether in the worship of the Indragiri king or in the reduction of traditional elements in rituals. For example, when I attended a Talang Mamak wedding, it was very much infused with Islamic teachings, with the non-practice of events such as gambling and cockfighting. However, sometimes these practices are still maintained. The main ritual in the wedding ceremony, the guidance of the traditional elders to the bride and groom, is still upheld to this day. Also notable is the Talang Mamak's adaptation to state regulations, such as the obligation to have an ID card for each resident and marriage registration by the KUA (Office of Religious Affairs).

Conclusion

Islam Langkah Lama is a form of Indigenous Monotheism practised by the Talang Mamak people of Riau, a belief system that affirms a single supreme deity while remaining deeply embedded in local custom and cosmology. This argument refutes William Singleton's claim that Islam Langkah Lama is a Hindu-Buddhist variant. The absence of Hindu-Buddhist traces confirms that their religious orientation is rooted in monotheism, not polytheism or syncretism. This tradition has also accommodated Catholicism due to fundamental monotheistic similarities, as occurred in Talang Siambul in 1985, facilitated by conflicts over orthodox dominance that have stigmatised Islam Langkah Lama as un-Islamic.

The endurance of Islam Langkah Lama amid decades of Islamisation and Catholicisation offers critical insights into religious resilience in Southeast Asia. For the Talang Mamak, conversion is rarely a total rupture, but rather an accumulative and adaptive process.

Traditional rituals continue to be performed even by those who have formally embraced Islam Langkah Baru or Catholicism, demonstrating that indigenous frameworks serve as the foundation upon which new religious identities are negotiated. Adat remains the ultimate ontological anchor. Thus, the survival of Islam Langkah Lama is not a symptom of failed conversion, but a testament to the resilience of indigenous cosmologies in domesticating world religions.

During my research, I realised that Islam among the Talang Mamak is not reducible to animism or dynamism. Worship of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad are frequently mentioned in rituals, and the Talang Mamak possess distinctive mythologies incorporating Islamic figures and concepts of Nūr Muhammad and the unification of servant and Creator (surang Allah, surang Muhammad). Traditional elders and kemantan (shamans) informed me of several texts familiar among the community, including the Kitab Barencong and Dar an-Nafis, both containing teachings reflecting *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* (the unity of existence), originating from Banjar, South Kalimantan. I remain open to the possibility of Ismaili Shi'ism influence, but consider *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* a significant force, given historical connections with the Indragiri Kingdom and the Banjar Muslim diaspora, supported by textual analysis and ethnographic observation.

Currently, the Talang Mamak face significant forest loss, economic pressures, migration, and modernity. In response, traditional elders have actively reinterpreted their teachings to remain relevant, demonstrating the community's openness to external influences. Their receptiveness shows that the Talang Mamak possess their own distinct civilisation, customs, religion, and culture. I reject the stigmas directed at them, heretical, alienated, or insular, which arise from incomplete studies. Ultimately, the case of Islam Langkah Lama challenges conventional dichotomies between 'orthodox' and 'local' Islam, urging scholars to take indigenous cosmologies seriously as active agents in religious identity formation, rather than as passive recipients of external influences.

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