

# Float Away Limas: A Melayu Tradition Eroded by the Times

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**Abstract.** The Melayu tribe is one of the largest ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, particularly in northern Sumatra, Indonesia. Renowned for its rich cultural heritage, including customs, languages, and value systems, the tribe faces challenges in preserving its traditions amid modernization. One such tradition, "Float Away Limas," has faded over time and is now largely unknown to younger generations. This study aims to raise awareness about the existence and practice of this tradition in certain areas. The research employs interviews and literature reviews as data collection methods. Findings indicate that many members of the Melayu community are unfamiliar with this tradition due to the passing of older generations who understood its significance and the impact of cultural erosion over time. The study highlights the urgent need for efforts to preserve and revitalize Melayu cultural traditions.

**Keywords:** Float Away Limas, Melayu Culture.

## 1 Introduction

Culture is an intangible heritage that includes various aspects of life that are passed down from generation to generation, such as language, beliefs, values, and customs. Culture is a way of life that develops and is shared by a group of people and passed down from generation to generation. In Indonesia, cultural customs play an important role in shaping people's identity and creating social order. Each tribe and ethnic group has its own culture and customs, which not only display uniqueness but also contain values that influence their mindset, behavior and way of life. This cultural wealth not only reflects the diversity of the nation, but also symbolizes unity amidst differences.

Culture and customs are two important elements in shaping the identity of an ethnic group, including the Melayu community. The Melayu, one of the largest ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, have long been known for their rich culture and diverse customs, ranging from language, art, literature, to traditional rituals that have deep philosophical meanings. The Melayu tribe is also known for its hospitality, politeness, and noble values that are reflected in various aspects of life. For the Melayu, cultural values are deeply held and an important part of their collective identity, both in social and spiritual life.

However, along with the times, rapid modernization has an impact on the existence of Melayu culture, causing some of its traditions and customs to slowly begin to undergo changes. Most Melayu cultural heritage is passed down orally from one generation to the next without

adequate record keeping. Various cultural aspects that were once an integral part of the daily life of the Melayu community are now beginning to erode, along with social transformation, urbanization, and foreign cultural influences. One of the traditions that has experienced a decline is the "tradition of Float Away Limas" a cultural ritual that is rich in meaning and full of spiritual values. This tradition was once considered important, both as a form of respect to ancestors and as a way to maintain harmony between humans and nature.

Unfortunately, today many Melayu communities are no longer familiar with this tradition, mainly due to the influence of social changes that have caused these values to fade. Most of the old people who understand this tradition have also passed away, so the transfer of cultural knowledge is increasingly hampered. This has led to a number of traditions that were previously full of philosophical and spiritual values slowly being forgotten. This research was conducted with the aim of reintroducing the tradition of Float Away Limas to modern society, especially the younger generation, so that the noble values contained in this tradition are preserved. The effort to reintroduce this tradition not only aims to maintain local cultural identity, but also to make it a source of wealth that can benefit the lives of modern people. Through interviews and literature review, this research seeks to explore the meaning and practice of this tradition in certain areas that still preserve it. It is hoped that the results of this research can make a positive contribution to the preservation of Melayu culture in the midst of modernization.

## **2 Research Methods**

This research used interviews and literature review to gain an in-depth understanding of the tradition of "Float Away Limas" in Melayu culture. The purpose of this method is to identify the meaning, value, and challenges in preserving the tradition, as well as to explore the understanding of the younger generation and community leaders regarding the sustainability of the tradition. The interview method was used as the main approach to obtain primary data regarding the tradition of "Float Away Limas". Interviews were conducted with Melayu traditional leaders who have direct knowledge of this tradition.

A literature review was conducted to obtain relevant secondary data on Melayu culture and customs as well as social changes that affect the preservation of the tradition. This method involved searching literature from various sources, including books, scientific journals, articles and local documents that discuss Melayu culture and the impact of modernization on customary practices.

## **3 Literature Review**

Tradition is part of customs, which are magical and religious habits in a society that are passed down from generation to generation (Aminuddi Siregar, 1985). Tradition has a significant role in shaping culture, where the culture of a society is reflected through art. Tradition is not only a marker of a community's identity, but also acts as a life guide that directs the behavior and interactions between community members. Tradition can be considered a form of security, however, when the mind gets too comfortable, it can lose its vitality. Tradition becomes a bridge between the past and the present, where it gives space to the voices of the ancestors-a democracy for those who have passed away and it also strengthens the sense of community, and provides a sense of stability in the midst of changing times. The function of

tradition is to maintain the continuity of noble values passed down by ancestors, while creating social harmony within the community. It also offers an escape from the often confusing dynamics of modern life, giving deep meaning to life through rituals that strengthen relationships between individuals. However, traditions are often seen as rigid and old-fashioned. In fact, tradition is not just an old practice, but a foundation that unites people in a stable and meaningful social framework.

Culture can be defined as a collection of values, beliefs, and social practices that are passed down from one generation to the next, serving as a guide for behavior and social relations in society (Geertz, 1973). Menurut Koentjaraningrat (2015:146) culture is defined as all ideas and human works that must be familiarized with learning, along with the entirety of the results of his mind and work. Culture also plays an important role in the formation of a group's ethnic and collective identity, including the Melayu community which has a unique culture in the form of language, art, and tradition (Kartomi, 2011).

Culture reflects a community's way of life, including the beliefs, norms and customs that shape who they are. Culture becomes a collective portrait of society, which strengthens social relations while creating balance. Culture contains noble values that serve as guidelines in facing the challenges of life. Culture also provides a space for introspection and strengthens the sense of togetherness in a community. When culture is maintained and preserved, it becomes a source of pride as well as a pillar of stability, especially when society faces significant changes. Although often considered old-fashioned and no longer relevant to the modern world, culture is actually an important foundation that sustains social order, ensures the continuity of traditions, and creates harmony in human life.

### **3.1 Melayu Culture and Identity**

History of the Melayu Tribe, has a long and complex history, closely related to the development of culture, language, and civilization in Southeast Asia. Abdul Malik mengutip *Encyclopaedia Britanica* (Micropaedia, 1985:727) which states that Malay or Orang Melayu is a group or ethnicity in the Malay Peninsula and some adjacent islands in Southeast Asia. According to Harry Truman Simanjuntak (Indonesian archaeologist): "Simanjuntak argues that "the Melayu tribe is the result of assimilation from various Austronesian migrations, which then adapted to the local environment". The Melayu tribe comes from the Austronesian people who came to the archipelago around 1500 BC. Their arrival was divided into two waves, namely Proto Melayu (old Melayu) and Deutro Melayu (young Melayu). Proto Melayu are the earliest inhabitants who migrated to Southeast Asia around 2,500-1,500 BC. They are considered to be closely related to the Austronesian people and are known as the ancestors of most tribes in the archipelago. Their cultural characteristics include the ability to farm, hunt, and use simple boats. The Deutro Melayu migrated later (around 500-300 BC). They brought more advanced technology, including iron tools and a more complex agricultural culture. This wave is thought to have brought a more modern Melayu culture and developed into early civilizations such as Sriwijaya and Jambi Malay. And there is one more theory, namely the Out of Taiwan Theory, this theory states that the ancestors of the Melayu people originated from Taiwan, migrated through the Philippines, and then spread to the Southeast Asian region.

The origin of the name Melayu comes from the word Melayu itself, namely from the word "Mala" which means mula and "Yu" which means country. Then the word Melayu in Tamil language which means high land or hill. This is in accordance with the lands of the Melayu

people which were originally located in hilly areas as mentioned in Melayu history. It is very difficult when talking about the origin of the ancient Melayu nation because there is not much accurate data. However, the term Melayu itself is often associated with a kingdom that flourished in the 7th century AD, and has led to many interpretations. The origin of the name Melayu comes from the Melayu kingdom that once stood on the Batang Hari river in Jambi. However, the kingdom was subjugated under the power of Sriwijaya. Along with the rapid development of the Sriwijaya kingdom, it became the center of Southeast Asian trade and then expanded to various regions.

The term Melayu was developed from the toponym Mo-lo-yeu. A Buddhist priest from China named I-tsing sailed to India, in 671 AD stopping at Mo-Lo-Yeu (Muljana, 1981). The Melayu's today are spread across Malaysia, Indonesia (particularly in Sumatra, Kalimantan, and other coastal areas), Brunei, Singapore, and parts of southern Thailand. Modern Melayu identity is often associated with Islamic culture, especially after Islamization in the last century. However, the roots of Melayu culture have actually existed long before the arrival of Islam. Melayu culture includes various elements of customs and traditions that reflect their close relationship with nature as well as spiritual values. According to Kartomi (2011), many Melayu traditional rituals, including traditional ceremonies, show respect for ancestors and nature as principles of harmonious living. One of the traditions such as "Float Away Limas" contains a deep symbolic meaning, showing the hope of the Melayu people to maintain the balance between humans and nature (Zulkifli, 2018).

### **3.2 The Impact of Modernization on Culture and Customs**

If we talk about the ideals of the Melayu hero Hang Tuah, namely in his motto: "*Patah tumbuh hilang berganti; esa hilang dua terbilang, and tak Melayu hilang di bumi/dunia*," then the index is a reference to adat. Tradition is one of the important elements that is often found in the Melayu Realm, with the center of its spread being in the Southeast Asian region. Tradition is considered as the core or center of Melayu civilization. This shows that adat in Melayu culture has existed since the existence of the Melayu people themselves. Tradition is closely related to the way humans organize themselves, manage social groups, establish relationships with nature (both physical and supernatural), and maintain relationships with the Creator. Therefore, adat has a meaning that is often considered commensurate with culture.

According to Husin Embi et al. (2004:85) adat is a rule that is implemented (practiced) from generation to generation in a society, until it becomes a law and regulation that must be obeyed. Meanwhile, istiadat is a rule or way of doing something that is accepted as customary. Adat and istiadat have a close relationship, and are seen as tools that attempt to regulate the life of the community, the purpose of which is to achieve community life, the goal of which is to achieve prosperity and harmony. Customs-form a culture, which then raises the dignity of the people who practice it. The Melayu customs and culture are a set of values of rules and habits that have grown and developed for a long time along with the growth and development of society which has been known, lived and practiced by those concerned repeatedly and continuously throughout history, continuously and from generation to generation throughout history. However, in the midst of rapid globalization and modernization, traditional culture faces great challenges. The influx of foreign cultural influences, urbanization, and modern lifestyle changes often cause local traditions to slowly erode or even disappear. Ritzer (2007) states that

modernization and globalization often shift traditional local elements, replacing them with individualistic and materialistic values.

In the Melayu context, this change is seen in the decline of community participation in traditional ceremonies and rituals (Ali & Hasan, 2020). Especially the younger generation who began to consider traditional practices irrelevant to modern life (Sulaiman, 2019). Abdullah (2016) research also shows that urbanization, technological advances, and globalization have led to a reduced transfer of cultural values from the older generation to the younger generation, so that some Melayu traditions, including "Float Away Limas", are less known and practiced. Sulaiman (2019) asserts that without active preservation efforts, many Melayu traditions are at risk of being lost.

### **3.3 The Tradition of Float Away Limas in a Cultural Perspective**

The tradition of Float Away Limas is a traditional ritual that has high symbolism in Melayu society. The ritual is believed to be a form of respect to ancestors and an expression of hope for salvation, reflecting the Melayu community's worldview of the importance of maintaining balance and harmony with nature (Zulkifli, 2018). The tradition of Float Away Limas is one of the cultural heritages that has deep symbolic and spiritual meaning, especially in communities that still uphold customs and relationships with nature. From a cultural perspective, this tradition is not just a ritual activity, but also represents a deep connection between humans, nature and faith.

Limas, which are usually replicas of houses or small boats, symbolize life's journey, transition, or letting go, both spiritually and emotionally of people. When Float Away, this tradition reflects the release of burdens, purification of self, or hope for a better life. Water as a medium has universal significance as a source of life and a cleansing tool, so the washing away of limas symbolizes the union of humans with nature and the creation of harmony. It also teaches respect for natural cycles and the importance of maintaining a balance between humans, the environment and spirituality. In addition, this tradition is often a social moment that strengthens relationships between community members, while reviving cultural values that have been almost eroded by modernization. With the tradition of float away limas, the community expresses hope to let go of all burdens, start a new chapter, and achieve harmony with nature and the Creator. The tradition of float away limas shows how symbolic elements can be used as a means of reflection and learning in life. It reflects how traditional culture teaches people to surrender and respect the cycle of life. However, in-depth scientific literature on this tradition is still limited, and information about this tradition mostly comes from oral sources or local documentation that has not been academically documented.

## **4 Results and Discussion**

This research revealed some important findings regarding the tradition of "Float Away Limas" in Melayu culture, especially regarding the meaning, practice and challenges in preserving the tradition. Based on interviews with Melayu traditional leaders and literature review, the following points were identified.

#### **4.1 Understanding of the tradition of Float Away Limas**

"Limas" is an areca palm frond that is shaped like a small boat. And inside the Limas is filled with various kinds of cakes, usually 5 kinds of Melayu cakes such as malaka cakes, Rashidah cakes, kekaras cakes, lenggenan and lepat cakes and white porridge, red porridge. And the limas is washed into the river at a certain time, such as evening. The tradition of "Float Away Limas" is considered a form of respect for ancestors as well as a means to communicate with nature and spiritual elements. The tradition of "Float Away Limas" is usually carried out so that people are protected from disasters and incurable diseases. So the previous Melayu community believed that the catastrophe occurred because they did not feed the pets of previous descendants. An example of an ancestor's pet is the puteh crocodile.

According to traditional leaders, the main meaning of this tradition is to ask for protection and blessings for the community, and to maintain the balance between humans and nature. In an interview, a traditional leader stated, "The Float Away Limas is not just a ritual, but it is our way of maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature and ancestors". The earliest descendants of the Melayu people are believed to have descended from puteh crocodiles, twins, one human and one puteh crocodile. So in the beginning, this puteh crocodile was cared for but then the puteh crocodile asked for freedom on the condition that it had to feed him and all his descendants, and if it violated it would bring disaster. The request was approved and the Melayu community continued to carry it out. So one day they didn't do the tradition, then one of them got sick and didn't heal, then the person was taken to an old man / shaman at that time, the old man said, "You have an agreement between the previous ancestors, and you broke the agreement." Therefore, keep your agreement according to the terms if you don't want any more disasters. The puteh crocodile also gave a condition that you must keep a white chicken (all white). So every time you want to do the limas ritual, the white chicken must be cut and after the ritual is complete, the white chicken is cooked and eaten as a family.

#### **4.2 The Practice of Float Away Limas in Some Regions**

The research findings show that the practice of "Float Away Limas" is still carried out in certain areas in Sumatra, especially in villages with strong Melayu communities. Traditional leaders also explained that each stage in this ritual has a strong symbolic meaning, starting from the making of the limas, choosing the right day, to the procession of float away. In some cases, the limas are washed away in the river or sea as a symbol of purification and respect for nature.

#### **4.3 Challenges in Preserving the Limas Carrying Tradition**

The preservation of Melayu traditions faces various challenges influenced by social, economic, technological and cultural changes in the modern era. such as the impact of modernization and practical lifestyles, modernization has changed people's views on traditions. Many younger generations see tradition as something old-fashioned and less relevant. Fast lifestyles, such as washing limas that have many stages, are now often simplified or replaced with more modern processions. Traditions like this are becoming less common. As well as a reduced understanding of the current generation, traditions that are rich in symbolic meaning

are often perceived as mere ceremonial activities without an understanding of their philosophical value.

This research found that one of the biggest challenges in preserving the tradition of "Float Away Limas" is the younger generation's lack of understanding of the meaning and values behind this ritual. The younger generation tends to consider this tradition as something old-fashioned and less relevant to modern life. The formal education system also rarely makes room for the teaching of local traditions and culture. Traditional leaders mentioned that modernization, urbanization and the influence of foreign cultures have caused the younger generation to be less and less involved in the implementation of traditional rituals, including "Float Away Limas".

In addition, limited documentation on the practice of "Float Away Limas" is an obstacle in the process of inheriting this tradition. Much of the information about this tradition still relies on oral knowledge passed on by parents and elders, with little written documentation. Academic studies on Melayu traditions are still limited, making it difficult to develop an in-depth understanding of this culture. Therefore, when the elders who understood the tradition are gone, knowledge of the ritual is diminished.

## **5 Conclusion**

The Melayu have a rich culture and customs, reflecting a deep connection between man, nature and spirituality. Malay culture and customs are the result of a rich blend of local traditions and outside influences, such as Indian, Arab and Chinese. Experts provide deep insights into how this culture developed through migration, trade and Islamization. Rituals such as the float away of limas symbolize the meaningful lives of the Melayu.

This research concludes that the tradition of "Float Away Limas" is an important element of Melayu culture and spirituality, containing values that emphasize the balance between humans, nature and ancestors. This tradition used to play a role in maintaining harmony in community life, but along with the times and modernization, the practice began to be abandoned and rarely known, especially among the younger generation who lacked understanding of its importance. Information on the tradition of "Float Away Limas" is scarce in online search results, but it has strong cultural roots in certain areas.

The results show that social changes, such as urbanization and the influence of foreign cultures, play a role in the decline of community participation in this ritual. Many Malays have migrated to the city to make a living. In an urban environment, traditions are difficult to carry out due to limited time, space, and lack of community support, so these traditions are starting to erode due to modern, practical lifestyles. The absence of adequate documentation also hinders the process of passing on cultural values from the older generation to the younger generation, resulting in the practice of this tradition becoming less common. The tradition of "Float Away Limas", although not specifically revealed, holds the potential to reveal interesting cultural aspects. The symbolic shape of the limas, combined with the practice of washing them away, indicates a deep spiritual, social and philosophical meaning. Overall, the preservation of Melayu culture, including the tradition of "Float Away Limas," requires further research to unravel the mystery of this tradition and understand its role in people's lives as well as continued support through documentation, education, and active involvement of the younger generation so that this cultural heritage can live on in the future. Combining technology with tradition can be a way to introduce Malay culture to the younger generation, while maintaining its sustainability.

These steps are expected to help the Malay tradition survive and thrive in the modern era without losing the noble values inherited from the ancestors.

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