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The Role of ‘Melayu Islam Beraja’ (MIB) In Shaping a Resilient and Ethical Society

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ABSTRACT

Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) is the national philosophy of Brunei Darussalam, integrating Malay culture, Islamic values, and the monarchical system as the foundation of society and governance. This paper examines the role of MIB in fostering ethical development and social resilience amid contemporary challenges such as globalization, digital influence, and shifting social norms. It highlights how MIB shapes moral conduct through education, governance, family institutions, and religious guidance, while reinforcing social cohesion through communal solidarity and monarchical leadership. The paper also identifies opportunities to strengthen the relevance of MIB for younger generations through digital engagement, experiential learning, and youth participation. This study applied a qualitative methodology with a document content analysis design. The data was analyzed inductively and deductively to identify themes and constructs related to the study objectives. It concludes that MIB remains a dynamic and relevant framework for sustaining ethical integrity, national identity, and societal resilience in the modern era.

1. INTRODUCTION

Müller (2022) describes Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) as Brunei’s post-independence national ideology, formulated in 1984 to shape the country’s post-colonial identity through the integration of Malay culture, Islamic principles, and monarchical governance. Complementing this historical perspective, Melayong

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(2014) emphasizes MIB as the nation's overarching philosophical framework that guides social norms, state governance, and cultural continuity, ensuring long-term unity and stability within Brunei Darussalam. The concept serves as a revival of Brunei's socio-political heritage, shaped by over 700 years of history, and aims to articulate a unique identity that balances indigenous values with contemporary global influences (Umar, 2013).

MIB plays a central role in shaping identity formation in Brunei by grounding national belonging in Malay cultural heritage intertwined with Islamic values and monarchical loyalty. As Sharbawi and Mabud (2021) highlight, this integration functions as a unifying force that reinforces a shared national identity across Brunei's diverse religious and cultural communities. Beyond identity, MIB establishes a comprehensive value system that promotes respect, community cohesion, and adherence to Islamic teachings. According to Melayong (2014), these values guide the younger generation in upholding traditional principles while adapting to contemporary societal challenges, ensuring the continuity of Bruneian cultural norms. This value system extends into social behavior, where MIB instills a sense of personal responsibility and ethical conduct aligned with Islamic moral standards. Reflecting this influence, Black (2008) notes that Brunei's legal frameworks are shaped by MIB, embedding Malay cultural character and Islamic principles into governance and dispute resolution.

In today's modern world, characterized by boundless globalization, the challenges confronting Islam have become increasingly complex and far-reaching. These pressures are not confined to the wider Muslim world but are also felt within Brunei Darussalam. In response, Brunei relies on its national philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) as a protective framework to safeguard its younger generation. Through the integration of Malay cultural heritage, Islamic values, and monarchical leadership, MIB functions as a guiding mechanism that strengthens societal resilience, preserves moral integrity, and ensures that Brunei's identity remains firmly rooted amid global shifts. This article aims to examine how the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy contributes to the development of a resilient, ethical, and harmonious society in Brunei Darussalam, by integrating both theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using a content analysis design to explore meanings, interpretations, and the social context of an issue in a holistic and comprehensive manner. It is a conceptual paper. Content analysis is used as the primary method to identify, evaluate, and interpret themes embedded within the research materials. Data were obtained from documentary sources such as journal articles, case reports, policy documents, and other relevant materials aligned with the focus of the study. The documents were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance and suitability to the research objectives. The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, repeated readings were carried out to gain an overall understanding of the data. Second, open coding was undertaken to identify significant meaning units. Third, similar codes were grouped into sub-themes and subsequently developed into broader themes. The analysis was primarily inductive to allow themes to emerge from the data, while deductive elements were also incorporated based on the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE CORE COMPONENTS OF MIB

Within the MIB framework, the Malay component highlights the importance of preserving the Malay language and culture, which are deeply rooted in values, etiquette, and a strong sense of identity. These elements not only safeguard Brunei's cultural heritage but also strengthen national identity, ensuring that society remains anchored to its cultural foundations amid the pressures of global change. Islam is the core of the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy, serving as the guiding principle for the nation's governance and societal interactions. It emphasizes the importance of Islamic values in all aspects of life, including politics, economics, and social relations. MIB positions Islam as the protector and guide for both the Sultan and the people of Brunei, ensuring that all developments align with Islamic law and ethics, fostering a harmonious and prosperous society.

In Brunei, Islam is practiced as a comprehensive way of life, influencing all aspects of governance and public administration. It serves as a foundational pillar for national development and is actively embodied in daily life through visible symbols and practices, such as mosques, Islamic festivals, and other religious observances. Institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and the Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei (MUIB) play a central role in upholding and promoting Islamic values across society, ensuring that Islamic teachings guide both personal conduct and state governance. In this context, Islam is fully integrated into Bruneian society, functioning seamlessly as both a spiritual guide and a framework for social and political organization. The Islamic principles upheld in the MIB philosophy function as a central source of moral guidance and emotional resilience. They cultivate key values such as patience, moderation, compassion, justice, and accountability, which collectively guide individuals in navigating personal, social, and spiritual challenges. These virtues not only reinforce ethical behaviour but also contribute to the development of a balanced and resilient society aligned with Islamic teachings (Syafitri et al.,2025).

The monarchical system in Brunei positions the Sultan as both the supreme leader and the guardian of the people, entrusted with the highest authority of the state as a sacred trust (*amanah*) from Allah (Müller, 2015). Under the MIB philosophy, the Sultan is recognized as the *Ulul Amri*, where governance is intertwined with religious duty to ensure justice and the welfare of the nation (Salbrina, S., & Mabud, S. A. (2021) Consequently, citizens demonstrate unwavering loyalty (*taat setia*), a relationship rooted in a traditional social contract that prioritizes national harmony and spiritual alignment over secular political discourse (Hussainmiya, 2010). The Sultan of Brunei plays a central role in promoting national resilience through welfare programs, religious guidance, and policy direction. For instance, His Majesty has initiated comprehensive social welfare schemes, including housing assistance, healthcare services, and educational scholarships, ensuring the well-being of all citizens. Through religious guidance, the Sultan oversees institutions such as the Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei (MUIB), supporting nationwide Islamic education, mosques, and religious festivals. He also consistently emphasizes that the distribution of *zakat* is conducted properly and effectively, ensuring that the needs of the less fortunate are met in accordance with Islamic principles. In terms of policy direction, the Sultan guides national strategies such as *Wawasan Brunei 2035*, focusing on sustainable development, economic stability, and societal harmony. Collectively, these efforts reinforce social cohesion, ethical governance, and the long-term resilience of Brunei's society.

4. MIB AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

MIB, or Malay Islamic Monarchy, was incorporated into Brunei's education system after the country gained independence in 1984. It was added as a subject in the general school curriculum for both primary and secondary students and is now a compulsory module in higher education institutions. This integration aims to preserve and develop the Bruneian national identity, blending MIB identity with Islamic teachings, which have been part of the educational landscape since the fourteenth century. (Muhammad & Baihaqy, 2021) The curriculum is viewed as a potential 'shield' against social issues, promoting a holistic educational approach that benefits the younger generation in Brunei (Abu Bakar et al., 2021).

The main aim of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) in education is to instill Bruneian identity and core values in students by integrating Malay culture, Islamic teachings, and loyalty to the monarchy into the educational experience. This ensures that learners are not only academically capable but also ethically grounded, spiritually guided, and culturally rooted.

In governance, civil servants in Brunei are consistently reminded to uphold their trust and responsibilities by acting honestly, avoiding corruption, and performing their duties with excellence (*ihsan*), thereby providing the best possible service to the public. In addition, they are expected to conduct themselves with moral integrity, guided by Islamic values, ensuring that their professional behavior aligns with the ethical and spiritual principles promoted by the MIB framework.

Furthermore, civil servants, particularly Muslims, are expected to adhere to professional dress codes that ensure modesty (covering the *aurat*), observe punctuality in fulfilling their duties, and actively promote a spiritually conscious workplace by organizing and participating in religious activities during national Islamic celebrations. These practices reinforce the integration of Islamic values into public service and contribute to cultivating a morally upright and disciplined civil service.

Within Bruneian communities, people actively cultivate attitudes of mutual assistance, tolerance, and respect, where the elderly are honoured and the younger members are cared for. These ethical practices align closely with Islamic moral principles, which form a core component of the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy, reinforcing social harmony and communal cohesion throughout the nation.

5. MIB AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE

The family institution in Brunei remains strong and closely knit, supported by the principles of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB). Close proximity of extended family members fosters daily interaction, while family-centered activities and gatherings are common practices that reinforce bonds and a sense of togetherness. Families serve as a primary source of support in navigating life's challenges, and elders who embody and instill MIB values play a crucial role in nurturing resilient younger generations. Such upbringing ensures that future generations internalize MIB principles and continue to uphold them, wherever they may be, contributing to the long-term ethical and social resilience of Bruneian society.

In Brunei, communities demonstrate strong social cohesion through mutual assistance and solidarity in facing various challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many individuals and families faced financial and health difficulties, numerous community organizations, religious institutions, and volunteers provided aid in the form of food packs, medical support, and financial assistance, reflecting a deep-rooted

culture of care and empathy. The spirit of unity and volunteerism, such as neighborhood outreach programs and mosque-led initiatives to support the vulnerable, is widely practiced, aligning with the traditional Malay values of “bekarih, berjariah, beluriah”, which emphasize hard work, diligence, and communal responsibility. These cultural and social mechanisms not only encouraged cooperation and respect during a time of crisis but also helped reduce social tensions, fostering a harmonious and resilient society in accordance with the MIB philosophy.

A critical component of resilience in Brunei is the role of Islam in providing coping mechanisms, mental strength, and hope during challenging times. Institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), Islamic youth groups including mosque youth organizations (*belia-belia masjid*) and volunteer *da'i* groups (*sukarelawan belia daie*) as well as the guidance of *asatiizah* or *da'ie* play a vital role in continuing the propagation of Islamic teachings. Their efforts help convey positive messages to young people and the broader community, fostering ethical behavior and nurturing a morally resilient society aligned with the principles of the MIB philosophy. These efforts are crucial in ensuring that the principles of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) remain relevant and continue to guide Bruneian society across generations.

The Bruneian monarchy plays a pivotal role in sustaining national peace, political stability, and social well-being through a unique model of governance that emphasizes continuity and harmony. Under the leadership of His Majesty the Sultan, this system functions as a resilient foundation for the nation, shielding it from the political volatility often associated with more fragmented systems (Hussainmiya, 2006).

Through various monarchical initiatives, significant emphasis is placed on empowering youth, strengthening education, and enhancing community development. Programs that support character formation, leadership training, and moral education align closely with the values of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), helping to cultivate a generation that is disciplined, ethical, and future-ready. Strong and compassionate governance contributes directly to national resilience. By fostering social cohesion, upholding religious and cultural identity, and ensuring an environment of peace and stability, the monarchy continues to be a unifying force that supports Brunei's long-term progress and resilience.

6. MIB IN THE MODERN ERA

In the modern era shaped by globalization, phenomena such as trending culture, celebrity influence, hedonistic lifestyles, and the normalization of content that contradicts Islamic ethics have the potential to impact the mindset and behavior of younger generations (Alkautsar & Layyinnati, 2025). These often conflict with the principles of Malay identity, Islamic morals, and loyalty to the Monarchy that form the core of Brunei's national character. Urban Muslim youth exhibit mixed attitudes towards modernity, with some embracing it as a means to enhance their quality of life, while others view it as a threat to their cultural identity (Fitriansyah & Sofiyati, 2024).

Muslim identity is increasingly pressured as global narratives attempt to question religious authority, undermine Islamic values, and sideline moral principles in daily life. Young people are increasingly exposed to global cultural trends, digital content, and ideological movements through social media, international entertainment, and cross-cultural interactions. These external influences often promote values such as absolute personal freedom, liberal individualism, and unrestricted self-expression (Halman, 1996). For some youth, MIB is viewed as a concept rooted in tradition and historical identity rather than as a living philosophy applicable to modern contexts. When MIB is presented primarily in formal or theoretical forms,

young people may struggle to see its relevance in a rapidly changing world influenced by globalization and technology (Ahad, 2021).

Modern youth actively engage with international discussions on human rights, democracy, and freedom of expression. Social media platforms normalize open critique, debate, and individual opinion-sharing without traditional boundaries (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024 & Chidiac, M., & Chidiac El Hajj, M. 2019). While MIB promotes courtesy, respect (adab), and communal harmony, tensions arise when youth adopt global notions of “freedom of expression” that lack these moral safeguards, a situation reinforced by the traditional, top-down approach to MIB education (Haji-Othman, 2014). For a generation of "digital natives," these formats appear static and fail to resonate with their preference for interactive, visual, and digitally mediated experiences (Prensky, 2001).

Busier family schedules, less interaction between generations, and more reliance on digital communication have weakened the traditional way values are passed down (Bauman, 2013) creating a gap where MIB principles are replaced by global digital influences. According to reports presented in 2023, divorce cases rose to 593 that year — up from 409 in 2021. Traditionally, MIB values were modelled and reinforced through daily family and community interactions. While MIB is taught in schools and universities, many youth do not see how its values translate into professional life, civic engagement, or modern societal challenges. The philosophical elements may seem abstract if not anchored in real-life relevance.

7. OPPORTUNITIES AND STRENGTHENING MIB

Despite contemporary challenges, significant opportunities exist to revitalise the relevance of the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy for younger generations. By leveraging digital platforms, promoting participatory engagement, and contextualising MIB within modern realities, stakeholders can ensure its continued relevance and sustainability.

(i) Digital Engagement and Youth-Centred Communication

The growing influence of digital platforms presents a strategic opportunity to enhance the visibility and relevance of MIB among younger generations. Social media, multimedia storytelling, and youth-led digital content creation can disseminate MIB values in engaging and contemporary formats. By encouraging youth to produce videos, podcasts, and creative campaigns, MIB can be communicated in ways that align with modern communication styles while fostering a sense of ownership and participation.

(ii) Repositioning MIB as a Contemporary and Dynamic Philosophy

An important way forward is to reframe MIB not merely as a historical or traditional identity, but as a living philosophy that addresses current social realities. Integrating discussions on digital ethics, integrity, leadership, environmental responsibility, and multicultural interactions helps demonstrate how MIB remains relevant in shaping behaviour and decision-making in the modern era. This approach allows youth to perceive MIB as a practical guide embedded in everyday life.

(iii) Strengthening Experiential, Practical, and Community-Based Learning

Experiential learning offers meaningful opportunities for youth to internalise MIB principles beyond classroom theory. Community service initiatives, leadership camps, intergenerational engagement, and cultural workshops help deepen emotional and practical connections to MIB. These activities allow youth to experience the values of cooperation, responsibility, and unity, reinforcing their cultural and national identity through real-world practice.

(iv) Fostering Critical Dialogue on Global Influences and Local Identity

Exposure to global perspectives, particularly through the internet, can shape alternative worldviews among young people. Instead of perceiving these influences as threats, a constructive way forward is to promote open dialogue on the relationship between global values and local identity. Forums, debates, cross-cultural exchanges, and academic discussions help youth critically navigate topics such as freedom of expression, diversity, and civic responsibility while appreciating the role of MIB in ensuring social harmony and ethical conduct.

(v) Enhancing Institutional Support and Role Modelling

The sustainability of MIB also depends on strong institutional support and visible role modelling. When schools, government agencies, and community organizations integrate MIB values into their policies, communications, and leadership practices, young people are more likely to recognize the philosophy as authentic and meaningful. Consistency between institutional messaging and behavior reinforces trust and strengthens the credibility of MIB as a national guiding framework.

(vi) Empowering Youth as Partners in Sustaining MIB

Youth engagement must move beyond passive learning towards active participation. Providing platforms for youth leadership—such as advisory councils, youth-led MIB programs, innovation projects, and mentorship roles—cultivates a sense of ownership and accountability. Involving youth in decision-making processes also ensures that MIB evolves in ways that reflect contemporary challenges while preserving its foundational values.

8. CONCLUSION

The Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy continues to serve as a foundational framework for Brunei Darussalam's societal resilience, integrating Malay cultural heritage, Islamic principles, and monarchical governance. Empirical and historical evidence indicates that MIB provide a foundation of national identity, ethical conduct, social cohesion, and institutional stability, providing a normative and moral framework for both citizens and governance structures.

Contemporary challenges, including digital globalization, shifting youth values, reduced intergenerational interaction, and exposure to external cultural and ideological influences, have created gaps in the transmission of MIB principles. Traditional, top-down pedagogical methods and abstract theoretical presentation appear insufficient for ensuring relevance among “digital-native” populations.

Evidence suggests that integrating digital engagement, participatory learning, experiential activities, and critical dialogue into MIB dissemination can strengthen value internalization and cultural continuity.

Sustaining the relevance of MIB also requires consistent institutional support and active role modeling across educational, governmental, and community contexts. Empirical research into youth perceptions, digital engagement patterns, and the efficacy of applied pedagogical strategies remains limited; such research is necessary to evaluate and refine interventions.

In conclusion, MIB's continued function as a integrated , ethical, and resilient national philosophy depends on adaptive approaches that allign traditional principles with contemporary societal realities. Maintaining this balance is essential for ensuring that Brunei's younger generations internalize MIB values in ways that are meaningful, actionable, and aligned with both national identity and the demands of the modern era.

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