

Revisiting Malayness II: Post-Colonial Arabization and the Semantic Evolution Of “Hijrah” in Malay Language – A Preliminary Study

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Standing at the intersection of Islamic, Southeast Asian, and Western traditions, I speak as both scholar and subaltern voice. This paper emerges from ancestral knowledge and academic rigor, seeking relational dialogue with existing frameworks to foster an inclusive Islamic Studies discourse where critique becomes collaboration and questioning demonstrates intellectual care.

INTRODUCTION

“The daily tone in my family's WhatsApp chats now end with *Jazakallah khair* instead of *Terima kasih*, and my social media feeds brim with hashtags like *#fisabilillah* and *#berhijrah*. Greetings of *Selamat Hari Lahir* becomes *Sanah Helwa* and *Eid Milad* and *Mari buka puasa bersama* demonstrates current shifts into *Let's iftar together*. In my observation, these language shifts are more than mere glossary choices — they reflect current trending Arabic lexicals adopted by the Malay Muslim speakers that signals deeper semantic drifts. In fact, across Singapore, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur, the term *hijrah* has evolved from its Qur'anic origins into a semantic shift illustrating metamorphosis transformation, being the impetus of '*hijab capitalism*', modest fashion industries, and acting as markers of gendered piety. Meanwhile, the term *tudung*, my childhood vernacular, is increasingly sounding like the speech of elders, akin to a linguistic relic in rapid transformation.”¹

This linguistic transformation stands in contrast to what I observed during my ethnographic field study in Pariangan, where indigenous Malay terminology not only survives but thrives. In this Malay ancestral heartland, elders consistently use '*mendiang*'² when referring to the deceased, rather than the Arabic '*almarhum*' or '*almarhumah*' that dominates current discourse in Malay speaking communities, especially so in the eastern side of the Malaccan Straits or also known as the Semenanjung Tanah Melayu. Throughout Pariangan in Ranah Minang, West Sumatra—revered as the cradle of Minangkabau civilization, the relationship between *adat* (customary law) and Islam exists in a harmonious balance, wherein traditional Malay customary law is finely interwoven with Islam. Pariangan community articulates their Islamic practices with remarkable clarity, where though practicing Islamic faith is a huge part of their daily life, there is a conspicuous absence of Arabic cultural hegemonic elements. This is unlike in the big cosmopolitan cities of the Malayophone speaking world.

This is in stark contrast to the increasingly Arabized expressions of religiosity observed in the big cosmopolitan cities of the Malayophone speaking world. Trending now, the term “*hijrah*” no longer merely refers to the original meaning of physical migration from the teachings of Quranic essence but has undergone a semantic shift to spiritual awakening and transformation.

¹ This study draws on auto-ethnographic observation, where the researcher's own cultural positioning provides insider access to linguistic transformation processes within Malay-speaking communities. Author's ethnographic observation from family WhatsApp group communications, 2024.

² Conversations with local villagers in Pariangan, West Sumatra, conducted by the author during fieldwork, January 2025.

This current and contemporary term “*hijrah*” has evolved into expressions of piety, lifestyle branding, and even gendered power moves. In fact, what is currently trending now, is how “*hijrah*” has been used to morally legitimize “*sunnah* relationships”.³ In this context, “*hijrah*” has been used as an ideology in gendered power dynamics and a rhetorical tool that empowers patriarchal voices under the guise of religious reform.

The term “*hijrah*” has also been recontextualized as a rhetorical tool in marketing religious performative or aesthetic packages to women, thereby selling the idea of modesty through capitalism. “*Hijab capitalism*” links the contemporary concept of “*hijrah*” with commodifying modesty, is exemplified by influential fashion celebrities like Neelofa, Fazura, and Vivvy Yusof. These celebrity Muslim women influencers have leveraged their personal “*hijrah journeys*” to build lucrative modest fashion empires, transforming what was once a deeply personal spiritual transformation into a marketable lifestyle brand. Their businesses capitalize on the aspirational nature of *hijrah*, offering followers tangible products—from designer headscarves to modest clothing lines. By framing modest fashion as an essential component of “*hijrah*”, these influencers effectively monetize religious identity, blurring the boundaries between sincere spiritual transformation and commercial enterprise, akin to a concept of performative religiosity. The success of these celebrity fashion moguls demonstrates how the concept of “*hijrah*” has evolved beyond its original religious meaning to become a powerful marketing narrative that resonates with Muslim women who are seeking both piety and stylish self-expression.

This contemporary Arabized linguistic transformation across the Malayophone speaking communities prompts several critical questions at the intersection of language, identity and power politics in a post-colonial Malay world. The key questions are as such:

1. What is the triggering factor that is driving the accelerated usage of Arabic lexical in the current Malay language usage?
2. Is this lexical shift merely a result of linguistic preference or does it signal a more profound cultural shift based on ideological transformation taking place in the Malay speaking society? If it is the latter, what is the triggering factor?
3. What happens to the indigenous linguistic heritage of the Malay language if the acceleration of Arabized lexical continue to replace equivalent native Malay words? Does this signify cultural enrichment or a sign of erosion of the Malay linguistic heritage?

The main factor that distinguishes the current pattern of Malay linguistic transformation and shifts with the adoption of Arabic lexical is the active replacement of Malay terms and linking them to socio-political phenomenon rather than an introduction of new terminologies for niche or novel concepts. In short, the lexical adoption has resulted in semantic shifts from the original definition of the term in Arabic.

What is causing this semantic shift and acceleration in the adoption of Arabic lexical in the current Malay language? Is this a mark of changing paradigm in the identity construction of the Malays? Is Islam now a predominant marker in revisiting Malayness?

³ Author's analysis of YouTube content showing trending usage of hashtags #*hijrah* and #*sunnah* across multiple videos, observed [April 2025].

FROM HIDAYAH TO HIJRAH: TRADITION, CONVERSION AND COMMODIFICATION

This section shall look into the traditional usage of "*hijrah*" in classical Malay texts and the semantic evolution of the term "*hijrah*" in its current and contemporary context. As a summary, this section shall simply describe about the change and how it is currently used by contemporary Malay speaking communities across the Malayophone speaking nations.

Traditional Understanding of Hijrah and Indigenous Terms

Fundamentally, the term "*hijrah*" has evolved and transformed semantically from its origins to the current contemporary meaning as a lexical usage by the Malay-Muslim communities. Originally referring to Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, this physical journey marked the beginning of the Islamic calendar and established the first Muslim community (Ramadan, 2007).⁴

The terminology "*hijrah*" was commonly used as a simple dating reference in classical Malay texts such as *Sejarah Melayu*, also known as the Malay Annals. This contrasts sharply with the current meaning of "*hijrah*" as a spiritual journey and personal transformation. In historical texts, authors employed "*hijrah*" to indicate when an event or historical incident occurred, followed by the corresponding Islamic calendar year. This particular usage persisted well into the 1900s across various genres of Malay literature.

Notably, Malay-speaking communities expressed spiritual awakening through different terminology altogether. Terms such as "*hidayah*" (divine guidance), "*taubat*" (repentance), and "*insaf*" (realization or awakening) constituted the common vocabulary for describing religious transformation and spiritual journeys. These locally adopted terms formed the foundation of religious discourse in earlier periods, while "*hijrah*" remained primarily a historical and calendrical reference. This semantic distinction is crucial as it demonstrates how dramatically the Malay-speaking community's understanding of "*hijrah*" has shifted in contemporary contexts, illustrating a significant semantic evolution of the term.

The Semantic Shift: A Contemporary Usage

The term "*hijrah*" has shifted significantly from its traditional meaning in Malay discourse. Historically it was used primarily to indicate reference to dates in classical texts. Contemporary newspaper analysis reveals that '*hijrah*' began gaining prominence in Malaysian discourse during the 1980s, with scholars like Alatas⁵ contributing to its semantic expansion. The term's visibility increased significantly in publications like *Berita Harian* during the late 1990s and early 2000s, marking a shift from its traditional calendrical usage toward contemporary spiritual transformation narratives.⁶

Currently, "*hijrah*" is commonly used to refer to personal and spiritual transformation, as well as an individual's religious awakening. This semantic change is visible across social media where *#hijrah* hashtags with 6.2 million posts⁷ reflecting the pervasive presence of this terminology used to indicate individual journeys illustrating an increased sense of piety and lifestyle changes that reflect one's religious transformation into a more pious outlook. The contemporary usage demonstrates a meaning focusing on personal transformation rather than historical references, thereby reflecting how Malay-speaking Muslims now articulate religious identity in the

⁴ Ramadan, Tariq. *The Messenger: The Meanings of the Life of Muhammad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁵ Syed Hussein Alatas, "Apakah pengertiannya yang sebenar?" *Berita Harian*, 8 February 1988, 4.

⁶ Newspaper analysis indicates that '*hijrah*' discourse gained prominence in Singapore press media during the 1980s and expanded significantly in the late 1990s (*Berita Harian*, 1995-2005), suggesting a documented timeline for the term's semantic evolution from calendrical reference to contemporary spiritual concept.

⁷ Facebook hashtag search results for *#hijrah*, accessed [May 2025], showing 6.2 million posts.

contemporary context. This semantic evolution provides the fundamental understanding of how the term “*hijrah*” has been commodified and linked to commercial and social phenomenon like “*hijab capitalism*” and the legitimization of “*sunnah relationships*.”

The Rise of “Hijab Capitalism”: Intersection Between Performative Religiosity and Commodification of Piety

“*Hijrah*” as a terminology used in the contemporary context has illustrated semantic transformation to reflect new opportunities for the commercialization of religious identity, particularly through what can be termed as “*hijab capitalism*”. This social phenomenon notably demonstrated the intersection between performative religiosity and the commodification of piety, signifying spiritual transformation commodified as a lifestyle brand. In my observation, this social phenomenon predominantly seen among the upper middle-class strata of the Malay-Muslim speaking demographic in more urban centered areas across the Malayophone speaking countries.⁸

Performative religiosity in this context refers to the public display of religious identity seen through visible markers and how this display influences consumption choices rather than purely carried out in private spiritual practice. In contemporary “*hijrah*” discourse, this is rampantly illustrated especially through social media narratives where individuals document spiritual journeys through aesthetic choices and lifestyle transformations. The performance of piety becomes both authentic personal expression and commercial opportunity.

Malaysian celebrities and fashion influencers such as Neelofa, Fazura, and Vivy Yusof exemplify this intersection and positionality by leveraging personal “*hijrah journeys*” to build modest fashion empires targeting at the upper middle class Muslim women. Their modest fashion empires capitalize on the aspirational nature of spiritual transformation, offering their followers products such as designer hijabs, modest clothing and halal beauty items promising to facilitate religious awakening through consumption. By framing the narrative that modest fashion is essential to “*hijrah*,” these celebrity fashion entrepreneurs monetize religious identity through narratives that emphasize enhanced femininity and beauty by wearing this modest wear. The marketing discourse promotes the narrative that wearing their exorbitantly priced modest fashion products makes Muslim women more “*anggun*” (graceful) and “*manis*” (sweet/beautiful) when donning the hijab, effectively positioning religious covering as a pathway to aesthetic enhancement rather than spiritual obligation. This commercialization strategy transforms the hijab from a religious practice into a fashion statement that promises both piety and attractiveness, blurring boundaries between sincere spiritual transformation and commercial enterprise. Notably, this positionality capitalizes on idealized notions of Muslim feminine beauty at incredibly expensive prices.

⁸ Based on my field observations, “hijabi capitalism”—the commodification of modest fashion and religious identity—appears to be more visibly prevalent in urban contexts such as Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, where boutique modest wear brands and influencer culture are highly active. Interestingly, this trend was less pronounced in Jakarta, where religious expression appears to be shaped by different economic and cultural dynamics. Also in Abdullah, Najwa. “2025/7 “the Hijrah Phenomenon: Shifting Urban Muslim Identities in Indonesia” by Najwa Abdullah.” Iseas.edu.sg, vol. 2025, no. No. 7, 24 Jan. 2025, www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2025-7-the-hijrah-phenomenon-shifting-urban-muslim-identities-in-indonesia-by-najwa-abdullah/. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.

This commodification transforms "*hijrah*" from a personal spiritual concept into a consumer identity category. *Hijab capitalism* demonstrates how semantic evolution enables new forms of religious commodification, where spiritual concepts become products to be consumed rather than practiced, representing a significant departure from traditional understandings of religious transformation as internal and non-commercial processes. Nadia Jeldtoft (2011) had also distinguished between "performed" religious identity (visible markers that signal belonging) and "lived" religion (personal experience and practice).⁹ This is particularly relevant when examining how Malay speakers navigate between indigenous religious vocabulary and imported Arabic terminology. As an example, the choice to use Arabic terms like "*hijrah*" instead of Malay "*mendapat hidayah*" can represent a performative function of authentic Islamic identity rather than simply a lexical preference.

Hijrah as a Rhetoric to a Sunnah Lifestyle

The concept of "*hijrah*" in the contemporary context now also functions as a social identity shift, wherein it highlights and claims moral and religious superiority. In the Indonesian contemporary, the concept of "*hijrah*" also refers to seeking "*sunnah relationships*", as can be seen in the context of "*nikah muda*" or "*nikah siri*" or polygamous activities. The contemporary usage of these terms is evident in their viral status as hashtags on YouTube, indicating widespread adoption in digital Islamic discourse.¹⁰

The branding of "*sunnah masculinity*" can be observed on YouTube and TikTok, where male preachers and influencers frame "*hijrah*" as an act of reclaiming Islamic masculinity. Polygamy is framed as "*sunnah lelaki sejati*" — a badge of male religious authority. Women are encouraged to "*ikhlas, sabar, qanaah*" and "*taat suami*" as part of their own *hijrah* journey. The deployment of "*hijrah*" as a vector in "*sunnah relationships*" demonstrates how semantic evolution enables new forms of patriarchal authority. By appropriating terminology associated with spiritual awakening and personal transformation, the term "*hijrah*" has been recontextualized as evidence of religious advancement in justifying expressions of male privilege.

This gendered application of "*hijrah*" rhetoric illustrates how semantic shifts in religious terminology can be co-opted to legitimize practices that might otherwise face social or religious scrutiny, revealing the political dimensions of linguistic transformation in contemporary Muslim discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interdisciplinary, multi-method approach combining anthropological, linguistic, and digital humanities methodologies to examine the contemporary Arabization of Malay language and its cultural implications in the current context of Malay society.

Ethnographic Observation and Phenomenological Analysis

The research began with ethnographic fieldwork grounded in phenomenological analysis to understand both historical and contemporary manifestations of Islam in the Malay-Nusantara world. This anthropological foundation enabled examination of the pre-colonial inclusive nature of Malay Islamic practice, contrasted with contemporary post-colonial Arabization phenomena.

⁹ Performative religiosity refers to religious practices and expressions enacted primarily for social recognition rather than personal spiritual connection. The concept draws from Goffman's work on "impression management" (1959) and has been applied to Islamic contexts by scholars like Jeldtoft (2011), who distinguishes between "performed" religious identity visible to others versus "lived" religion as personal experience. In linguistic contexts such as this, it can be demonstrated as using particular terminology to signal religious authenticity to an audience.

¹⁰ Author's analysis of viral hashtags on YouTube platform, observed [May 2025]

The inclusive nature of Islam Nusantara practice can be framed in the theoretical framework as indicated in Figure 1 where this research study applies Saeed's¹¹ framework distinguishing theological inclusivism/exclusivism from social inclusivism/exclusivism, thereby helping to analyze how communities maintain their belief in theological convictions while accepting differences and fostering open social practices in pluralistic societies. This framework not only helps to analyze present-day Islamic discourse but also highlights how pre-colonial Islamic narratives in Nusantara were historically and organically aligned with both theological and social inclusivism.

Saeed presents this distinction in the following matrix:

Theological Exclusivism	Theological Inclusivism	Social Inclusivism	Social Exclusivism
All religions other than Islam are false/invalid.	All/most religions are true/valid.	All people have the same dignity and are therefore equal.	Only Muslims have the proper dignity; non-Muslims are lower than Muslims in terms of dignity.
Salvation is possible only through Islam after the Prophet Muhammad.	Salvation is also possible for all/many who do not follow Islam.	Muslims are required to maintain good social relations with all people regardless of their religious affiliation.	Muslims must not maintain good social relations with non-Muslims.
Scriptures of religions other than Islam, in their current forms, are invalid/corrupted.	All/most scriptures or fundamental sacred texts of other religions are valid.	Muslims should respect all people regardless of the choices they make with regard to religion/belief and should not denigrate them.	Muslims should openly denigrate the choices other people make regarding religion; anyone who does not follow Islam should be seen as unworthy of respect.
There is no theological basis whatsoever for working with non-Muslims.	The Islamic tradition theologically justifies working with non-Muslims.	Muslims should respect everyone's right to follow whatever religion they choose.	Muslims should believe that everyone must convert to Islam.

Figure 1. Abdullah Saeed’s Framework on Inclusivism and Exclusivism: Theological & Social Examples.

Primary ethnographic observation was also conducted in Pariangan, Ranah Minang, West Sumatra—recognized as the cradle of Minangkabau civilization. This site was selected for its preservation of traditional Malay Islamic practice, where *adat* (customary law) and Islam coexist harmoniously with minimal Arabic cultural hegemonic elements in daily life.

The fundamental on-site observatory study was also conducted across the Wali Songo complexes and insightful on-site study of the architecture at Langgar Ky. Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta. This field observation at the historic Langgar of Kyai Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta revealed the architectural and spatial considerations underlying his *qiblah* recalibration efforts, demonstrating early reformist approaches to Islamic practice that contrast with contemporary Arabization trends.¹² Field observations also documented linguistic patterns, religious practices, and cultural expressions to establish baseline comparisons with contemporary urban Malay-Nusantara communities.

¹¹ Abdullah Saeed. (2020). *Interreligious Relations : Inclusivism and Exclusivism among Muslims Today between Theological and Social dimensions*. RSIS Publications, 21. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/srp/interreligious-relations-irr-issue-21-inclusivism-and-exclusivism-among-muslims-today-between-theological-and-social-dimensions-by-abdullah-saeed/>

¹² Author's fieldwork observation, Langgar Kyai Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, June 2024.

Digital Ethnography and Online Survey

To capture contemporary phenomena, the study incorporated digital ethnographic methods including anonymous online surveys to assess public perception of post-colonial Arabization trends among Malay-speaking populations. This preliminary study provided quantitative baseline data on community awareness and attitudes toward linguistic and cultural changes.

Contemporary linguistic Arabization often posits Arabic-influenced Malay as more religiously 'authentic' or 'correct' than vernacular Malay forms. This perception is confirmed by my preliminary survey data (Fig.2, 2025),¹³ which found that 41.9% of respondents agreed that 'using Arabic origin terminologies makes my speech sound more religiously authentic,' while only 25.6% disagreed with this statement. Though preliminary in nature, this survey data gathered from respondents across Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia highlights the perceived connection between Arabic terminology and religious authenticity in contemporary Malay usage.

a. "Using Arabic origin terminologies makes my speech sound more religiously authentic."
43 responses

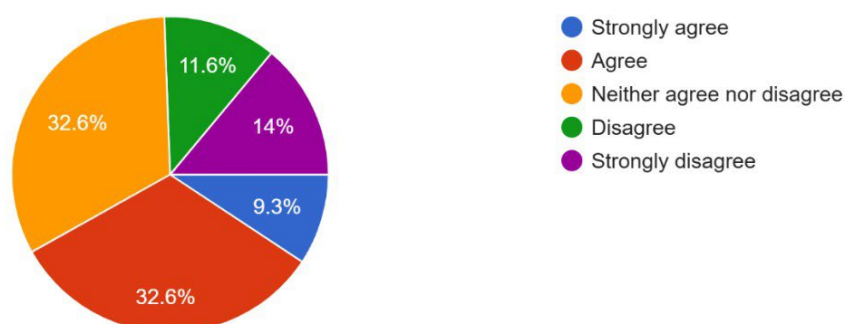


Figure 2. Preliminary survey responses to the statement 'Using Arabic origin terminologies makes my speech sound more religiously authentic' (n=43, respondents from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia).

22. Where do you most commonly encounter new Arabic origin terms entering Malay language?
43 responses

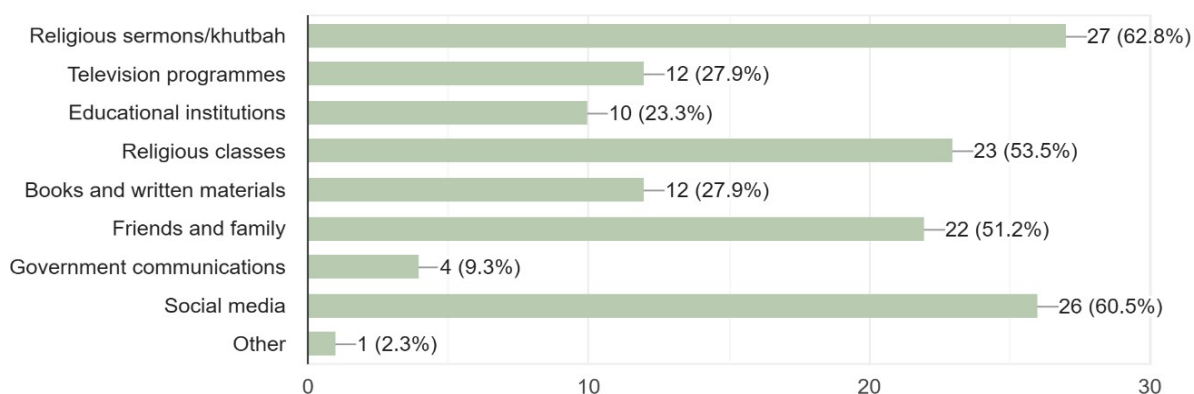


Figure 3. Survey responses to 'Where do you most commonly encounter new Arabic origin terms entering Malay language?' (n=43, respondents from Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia).

¹³ Author's preliminary survey of 43 Malay speakers, conducted 2025. Unpublished data.

This preliminary survey revealed the primary mediums through which such terminology adoption enters contemporary Malay language (Figure 3). Religious contexts emerge as the main paths, with 62.8% of respondents encountering Arabic terms in sermons/khutbah and 53.5% in religious classes. Not much of a surprise though that the role of social media (60.5%) in disseminating Arabic terminology highlights how digital communication has become an instrumental medium for language shifts. While respondents reported less frequent encounters with Arabic terminology in government communications (9.3%), this finding should be contextualized within each nation state’s official language policies. In the case of Malaysia, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature) has played a particularly significant role in standardizing Arabic-influenced terminology in formal Malay.¹⁴ This suggests that official policies in language planning, language policies and implementation may have a more indirect but nonetheless substantial impact that might not be immediately reflected in respondents’ perceptions.

Computational Text Analysis

The research employed text mining techniques to analyze social media discourse, focusing on trending hashtags including *#hijrah*, *#sunnah*, *#istiqomah*, *#sanahhelwa*, *#milad*, and *#fisabilillah*. This computational approach enabled systematic analysis of semantic evolution and frequency patterns in contemporary Malay-Muslim digital discourse, providing empirical evidence for observed linguistic shifts and their cultural implications.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

A central finding is that Islam has emerged as the predominant marker of what defines Malayness in the post-colonial era, often eclipsing other dimensions such as language, *adat* (custom), and shared historical memory. This identification has also been shaped and intensified by colonial classifications, post-colonial state ideologies, and transnational contemporary Arabization, particularly through digital religiosity. This research also reveals that linguistic Arabization is not just pertaining to religious expressions but also in metaphorical semantic and lexical adoption—exemplified by the widespread use of terms like *hijrah*, *sanah helwa*, and *Fisabilillah*—signals not only theological but also cultural shifts. This is particularly visible in urban centers like Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, where “*hijabi capitalism*” thrives, often popularized by social media influencers and modest fashion industries. Yet, such shifts risk sidelining indigenous expressions of Islam that have historically embraced local languages, metaphors, and oral traditions.

CONCLUSION: DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This preliminary study has uncovered several key insights that indicate urgent areas for future exploration:

First, the increasing use of Arabic lexical terms in Malay is not merely linguistic adoption but closely tied to religious identity construction. The trend is shaped by transnational Islamic media, digital influencers, and the perception of Arabic as a marker of religious authenticity, particularly visible in urban centers and online spaces.

¹⁴ Asmah Haji Omar, “Language Planning and Image Building: The Case of Malay in Malaysia,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 130 (1998): 49-65.

Second, this lexical shift reflects a broader ideological transformation, where Arab-centric expressions of Islam are becoming dominant. This shift signals what is seen as “authentic” Islamic identity in the Malay-speaking world, often at the expense of indigenous theological and cultural vocabularies.

Third, this shift on Malay linguistic and cultural heritage raises important questions. While some see this as Malay language and cultural enrichment, others view it as a form of linguistic and heritage erosion. There is a pressing need to investigate how local Islamic expressions—rich in poetic, symbolic, and philosophical meaning, can be preserved and revived within contemporary discourse.

Thus, decolonizing Islamic narratives must go in tandem with preserving linguistic diversity and cultural memory. Reclaiming words and poetic metaphors in Malay, Javanese, Minangkabau, and other local languages is not only about heritage—it is about sustaining ancestral epistemological diversity in a global Islamic discourse increasingly dominated by monolingual authority and global cultural hegemony.

As cited from Surah Al-Hujurat 49: 13:

“O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may ‘get to’ know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware.”

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