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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِيَّ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَي	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَي	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

Islamic Influence on Traditional Water Transport and Boat Building in Terengganu from the 13th to 20th Century

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Norazilawati Abd Wahab**

Arbai'yah Mohd Noor***

Mohd Firdaus Abdullah****

Zuliskandar Ramli*****

Ruzaini Sulaiman*****

Abstract: Islam arrived in Terengganu circa the 13th century, and its wide embracement by the local Malay community led to significant changes in economic, political, and social activities, including boat building. This study examines the influence of Islam on traditional boat building in Terengganu through a qualitative research design using a historical approach. Primary data were collected from the National Archives of Malaysia and the Terengganu Branch of the National Archives, including CO 840/1 (Terengganu Administration Report, 1910-1930), CO 840/2 (Terengganu Administration Report 1931-1940), Terengganu State Secretary's Files, and British Adviser's Files for Terengganu. Meanwhile, secondary data were gathered from journals,

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books, book chapters, and magazines to further support the research. It was found that the gradual introduction of Islamic influence, together with the local government's support, had brought about significant changes in boat-making activity, leading to the full incorporation of Islamic elements within the Malay community in Terengganu. This resulted in the expansion of Islamic influence over boat-making activity to other areas along the east coast, such as Pahang and Kelantan.

Keywords: Influence of Islam, Traditional Boat Building, Malays, Terengganu, Water Transport, Malaysia

Abstrak: Islam tiba di Terengganu sekitar abad ke-13 dan penerimaan yang meluas oleh masyarakat Melayu tempatan telah membawa perubahan ketara dalam aktiviti ekonomi, politik, dan sosial, termasuk pembuatan perahu. Kajian ini menelusuri pengaruh Islam terhadap aktiviti pembuatan bot tradisional di Terengganu dengan menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kualitatif secara pendekatan sejarah. Data primer dikumpul daripada Arkib Negara Malaysia dan Arkib Negara Cawangan Terengganu, termasuk CO 840/1 (Laporan Pentadbiran Terengganu, 1910-1930), CO 840/2 (Laporan Pentadbiran Terengganu 1931-1940), Fail Setiausaha Kerajaan Negeri Terengganu, dan Fail Penasihat British untuk Terengganu. Sementara itu, data sekunder turut dikumpulkan daripada jurnal, buku, bab buku, dan majalah untuk menyokong dapatan penyelidikan. Hasil kajian mendapati walaupun pengaruh Islam diperkenalkan secara beransur-ansur dalam aktiviti pembuatan bot, sokongan kerajaan tempatan telah membawa perubahan ketara, yang menyebabkan penggabungan sepenuhnya unsur-unsur Islam dalam masyarakat Melayu di Terengganu. Ini mengakibatkan perluasan pengaruh Islam terhadap aktiviti pembuatan bot ke kawasan-kawasan lain di sepanjang pantai timur, seperti Pahang dan Kelantan.

Kata Kunci: Pengaruh Islam, Pembuatan Perahu Tradisional, Melayu, Terengganu, Pengangkutan Air, Malaysia

Introduction

Boats are among the main means of transportation in Terengganu, especially in the fishery (Abd Wahab et al., 2023; Shamsul Bahri et al., 2024). Before the arrival of Islam, the Malay community considered boats to have their own 'spirit', which was believed to bring luck in fishing activities. This belief was rooted in animism and Hindu-Buddhist influences, where objects, including boats, were thought to possess spiritual forces (Abdul Wahab et al., 2025). When Islam came

to Terengganu, boats continued to be used, but there were changes in beliefs and practices among the Malay community. Islamic elements, such as reciting *du'ā* (prayers) and saying *bismi Llāh* (in the name of Allah) before any action, were incorporated into daily life. Undeniably, religion and beliefs were deeply interwoven in the social and cultural fabrics of the Malays.

Before Islam, the Malay worldview was shaped by Hindu-Buddhist teachings and animistic beliefs, which emerged from their observations of environmental elements like the moon, stars, and sun (Ali & Abdullah). Likewise, nature metaphors were used to express their respect and belief in unseen forces (Md Yatim et al., 2011). The Malay community also relied on shamans to perform rituals that could ward off supernatural forces. For instance, they believed in the existence of water spirits, which could stall a boat or vessel from sailing (Daud, 1993). Even after the introduction of Islam, elements of these pre-Islamic beliefs remained ingrained within the Malay cultural and spiritual systems. However, religious acculturation took place over time, leading to the gradual replacement of these beliefs with Islamic teachings (Ismail & Ismail, 2020).

Since boats were the main means of transportation for the Malay community, there were opportunities to gradually instil Islamic values into the boat-making process. Islam slowly changed the Malays' daily routine through the concept of *tawhīd* and the Islamic way of life. Hugh Clifford once stated that the Malays in Terengganu were "the most zealous Muhammadans in the Peninsula". Subsequently, the Islamisation of the Malay community in Terengganu had a significant impact on their daily routines, including the boat-making activity. Hence, this study aims to investigate the extent of Islamic influence over the community and traditional boat-making industry from the 13th to the 20th century. It also explores the impact and strength of Islamic influence in Terengganu across several aspects, such as politics, economy, and society.

Research Methodology

This study applied the qualitative research design, which was conducted through a historical approach. The historiography method was also used through a critical analytical process of previously occurring events. It involved several heuristic steps like identifying the problems and source of evidence, followed by collecting and criticising the evidence. Another

approach used was source criticism, which enabled the researcher to prove the existence of Islamic influence on traditional boat-making by the Malay community in Terengganu (Shamsul Bahri et al., 2022). Furthermore, secondary sources like books, journal articles, book chapters, magazines, and newspapers were also utilised to support the study. These sources were obtained from several locations, namely the Za'ba Memorial Library and the Resource Room at the Department of History, University Malaya (UM); the Tun Sri Lanang Library and the Department of History, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM); the National Library of Malaysia; the Main Library of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA); the Maritime Department and the Resource Room of Terengganu State Museum; and the Resource Room of Wisma Persekutuan Kuala Terengganu.

Literature Review

Limited studies have explored the influence of Islam on traditional boat-making in Terengganu. However, some literature addresses aspects related to Malay maritime traditions and cultural transformations. Wan Mohammad and Dollah (1999) examined the belief systems, customs, and practices of the Malay community. They highlighted how traditional Malay maritime customs were deeply intertwined with animistic and supernatural beliefs, particularly regarding boat spirits and guardian deities. These customs played a significant role in their daily lives, particularly as boats were the primary means of transport for fishing and trade activities. Despite the presence of animistic elements, Malay beliefs gradually intertwined with Islamic teachings, thus shaping their worldview and practices. However, this study did not investigate how Islamic teachings specifically influenced traditional boat-making techniques and the transition from pre-Islamic maritime customs to Islam-based practices.

Zakaria (2012) explored how Islamic values became deeply embedded in the Malay society and influenced their clothing, hospitality, architecture, and decorative arts. This study demonstrated the integration of Islamic artistic elements with traditional Malay carvings, such as *bangau* (stork). However, while Zakaria (2012) acknowledged the existence of Islamic influence in Malay craftsmanship, his study did not directly address how Islamic values shaped boat-building methods and the transformation of pre-Islamic maritime traditions into an Islamic framework. Additionally, Abdullah (2021) explored the maritime sector

in Terengganu, emphasising how local beliefs influenced boat building and water transport customs. The findings indicated that traditional sea-related rituals were performed to ensure safety and success at sea, such as seeking protection from sea spirits and adhering to boat-making taboos. While Abdullah (2021) noted that these practices gradually declined with the establishment of Islam in Terengganu, his study did not offer an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms behind this transformation, particularly how boatmakers adapted their craft according to Islamic principles.

Despite the extensive investigation on Malay maritime traditions, Islamic cultural integration, and traditional beliefs, limited research has specifically examined how Islamic teachings shaped traditional boat building and water transport in Terengganu. The current literature acknowledges the decline of pre-Islamic animistic beliefs yet provides no detailed analysis of the adaptation process, including how Malay boatmakers modified their craftsmanship to align with Islamic teachings, what role '*ulamā*' (Islamic scholars) played in influencing maritime practices and boat-building traditions, and how the economic and social structures of Terengganu's maritime community evolved as a result of Islamisation. This study seeks to address the gap through a systematic analysis of the Islamic transformation in traditional boat-making and water transport in Terengganu from the 13th to the 20th century. By examining historical sources, oral traditions, and archival materials, this research shall offer a better understanding of how Islamic principles influenced boat-building techniques, craftsmanship, and maritime trade in Terengganu. Specifically, this study explores the extent to which Malay boatmakers modified their craftsmanship to incorporate Islamic teachings, the influence of '*ulamā*' in shaping maritime practices, and how economic and social structures within Terengganu's maritime community evolved under the impact of Islamisation.

Brief History of the Arrival of Islam in Terengganu

Terengganu was one of the early states in Peninsular Malaysia that received Islam circa the 13th century (Abdullah, 2006). It was prompted by the influx of Arab merchants who traded at numerous ports across the state. The arrival of Islam in Terengganu was evidenced by the discovery of the Terengganu Inscription Stone dated 4 Rejab 702 Hijrah or Friday, 22 February 1303 AD at Kampung Buloh, Kuala Berang. Among the contributing factors to the establishment of Islam in Terengganu was

the strong relationship between the rulers and Islamic scholars. This was particularly established during the reign of Raja Mandalika, who utilised his palace as the centre for religious learning to spread and incorporate the teachings of Islam among the Malay community. The Inscription Stone also recorded the declaration of Islam as the official religion in Terengganu. However, scholars believe that Islam might have arrived even earlier at the state before it was officially proclaimed, resulting in wider spread and growth of its rules and regulations. Ten commandments were coded based on the Inscription Stone, including the rules about adultery and conditions to settle debts (Abdullah, 2006). Furthermore, Islamic influence was not limited to the Malay community only; it became part of the religious basis, which was a significant foundation for the rulers in Terengganu, particularly during the reign of Sultan Baginda Omar (1806-1876) and Sultan Zainal Abidin III (1881-1918). These rulers were keen to learn more about Islamic knowledge and advocated the spread of Islam among the Malays.

Islam was ingrained among the rulers of Terengganu, leading to the enactment of Islamic ruling called *Undang-Undang Bagi Diri Kerajaan Terengganu* in 1911 by Sultan Zainal Abidin III, also known as *Itqān al-Muluk bi Ta'dīl al-Suluk* (Abu Bakar, 1989). It prompted more Islamic elements to be absorbed into the social and political aspects of the local society. A good example of this phenomenon was found in *Fasal 51* of *Itqān al-Muluk bi Ta'dīl al-Suluk* regarding Islam:

“Agama negeri Terengganu dan agama lain sesungguhnya telah disifatkan dan disebutkan serta ditetapkan selamanya kerajaan Terengganu ini Kerajaan Islamiyah Melayuwiyah ialah yang dikatakan agama negeri dan agama kerajaan. Maka tiadalah boleh sekali-kali sebarang agama lain dijadikan atau disebut sebagai agama negeri sekalipun banyak segala bangsa dan agama diamankan dan dibenarkan masuk di dalam negeri dan jajahan Terengganu.”

(The religion of the state of Terengganu and other religions have indeed been described, mentioned, and permanently established, with the Terengganu government being an Islamic Malay government, which is recognised as the state religion and the religion of the government. Thus, no other religion may ever be made or referred to as the state religion, even though various races and religions are granted safety and permitted to enter the state and territories of Terengganu.)

Itqān al-Muluk bi Ta'dīl al-Suluk

Islamic elements grew significantly among the Malay community to the extent that Terengganu was called *Islamiyah Melayuwiyah*, with Islam declared as the official religion (Abdul Wahab et al., 2022). The concept proved that Islamic values were deeply rooted among the people and related to their psyche (Nik Abd. Rahman et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the arrival of Islam in Terengganu did not change every aspect of the local culture, and any changes happened gradually (Firth, 1966). For instance, the Malays had embraced Islam, but their traditional beliefs were still practised in politics, economy, and social life.

Furthermore, Islamic values also influenced many aspects of the boat-making process. The changes were apparent because before Islam came to Terengganu, the Malays prioritised their traditional customs in boat building, which had some elements of supernatural and blasphemy. Several taboos were also observed in boat-making to ensure that the boats would not encounter any problems or mishaps, especially at sea. Conversely, Islamic values were not only embraced by the locals but also incorporated into the boat-making process. For example, *du'ā* recital and *ṣalāt al-ḥājat* were done before launching the boat to the sea. Such acculturation proves that there was a combination of tradition and beliefs alongside the practice of Islam in the daily lives of the local community. In fact, traditional beliefs were preserved among the Malay community because they formed the Malay cultural history, which was considered a valuable treasure inherited by the younger generations from their elders (Osman, 1967).

Changes in the Boat-Making Activity after Islam came to Terengganu

Meramu Kayu Ritual

Before Islam, the Malay community began their boat-making activity with a ritual known as *meramu kayu* or *mendarahi kayu* (smearing blood on the pieces of wood), whereby a *peramu* (shaman) would smear chopped wood with chicken blood, followed by another ritual known as *teping tawar* (Aziz et al., 2014). The purpose of such practice was to obtain good-quality wood for the boat. Since the wood was sourced from the forest and exposed to wild animals and supernatural beings, the ritual was considered compulsory to avoid disturbance from the forest's guardian. Furthermore, the *peramu* must strictly observe several rules and taboos, such as gathering wood only at certain times or during the

dark moon phase as the wood was believed to have higher durability at these times. Additionally, the *peramu* would avoid gathering wood from a single tree, believing that it would cause the boat owner to be ostracised by society (Abdullah, 2021).

Upon the arrival of Islam in Terengganu, societal beliefs in *peramu* and wood-gathering rituals gradually diminished, especially at the beginning of the 20th century. The *meramu kayu* ritual was replaced by Islamic trading and transactions that adhered to Shariah principles. This included the prohibition of *khurafāt* (superstitious rituals), the practice of *akad jual beli* (fair trade), and the avoidance of *ribā* (exploitative pricing). Furthermore, modernisation enabled boatmakers to ethically obtain wood from registered suppliers and lawful owners. Islam introduced the concept of *tijārah ‘an tarāḍin* (trade by mutual consent), which entailed transparent business transactions whereby boatmakers would purchase wood from licensed suppliers who complied with Islamic business ethics. Additionally, boatmakers contributed to the local Islamic economy through *zakāt*, ensuring that their trades aligned with religious obligations (Abdullah, 2021).

The transformation in trade practices among boatmakers in Terengganu reflects how Islamic principles reshaped the community’s economic and social practices, steering them away from blasphemous beliefs and superstitious customs towards an Islamic economic system rooted in justice, honesty, and ethical trade. It aligns with the principles outlined in *Sūrah al-Nisā’*, verse 29, which emphasises ethical trade, mutual consent, and fairness in transactions:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَأْكُلُوا أَمْوَالَكُمْ بَيْنَكُمْ بِالْبَاطِلِ إِلَّا أَنْ تَكُونَ تِجَارَةً عَنْ تَرَاضٍ مِّنْكُمْ
وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُمْ رَحِيمًا

Meaning: “O believers! Do not devour one another’s wealth illegally but rather trade by mutual consent. And do not kill ‘each other or’ yourselves. Surely Allah is ever Merciful to you.”

Initiation Ritual (Upacara Pasang Lunas)

Another boat-making ritual practised by the Terengganu Malay community before the arrival of Islam was the initiation ritual. The purpose was to select auspicious days or dates to begin the boat-making

process by consulting a *pawang*, who relied on traditional divination methods. The selection of dates was guided by the knowledge of *raksi* (the twelve stars), which was documented in mystical texts like *Hikmah* and *tibb*. *Hikmah* is a metaphysical and esoteric knowledge system believed to guide fate, protection, and celestial influences, while *tibb* (derived from the Arabic word *tibb*, meaning medicine or healing) is traditional astrological and folk medicinal knowledge. These texts were used to determine the best time to start boat construction, ensuring protection from supernatural disturbances and blessings for a smooth process. However, these mystical practices were gradually abandoned with the spread of Islam. Instead of relying on esoteric calculations, Malay boatmakers began seeking Islamic guidance through *du'ā*, Quranic recitations, and consultations with '*ulamā*' to determine appropriate days for commencing work. This shift reflected the broader influence of Islam in transforming traditional beliefs into practices aligned with Islamic teachings (Maidin, 2003).

Figure 1

The Ceremony of Laying Down the Keel as the Foundation for Boat-making (Terengganu State Museum)



When Islam became more established in Terengganu, the Malay community resorted to the assistance of an *imam* (local Islamic leader) to

determine the best day to start working. The 14th and 15th were generally believed to be the best dates for the Malays, known as *hari rejam ikan* or fish stoning day. Therefore, it was a norm for the Malay community, especially *tukang timbal* (boatman), to choose these dates to begin necessary fishery work, with the hope of catching a huge number of fish using the boat. Other days considered as good to commence boat-making work were Friday, Saturday at 7.30 in the morning, Sunday at 10.00 in the morning, and Monday before noon. Furthermore, the Malay community often commenced boat-making work in the morning, which was perceived as a good time to earn a living. The boatmen would also avoid days on which mishaps (e.g., deaths) or events (e.g., feasts) happened due to the need to fulfil the invitations (Maidin, 2003). After choosing the best day, the initiation ritual would be held to mark the commencement of work by installing the keel (Abdullah, 2006).

It is interesting to note that the Malay Muslim culture had its own way of celebrating success. For instance, they would prepare turmeric rice as a sign of gratitude, and the feast would end with the *imam* reciting *du'ā* to ask for His grace and blessings for better *rizq* (sustenance) (Abdullah, 2021). Symbolically, turmeric rice is a traditional food in Terengganu commonly used to express gratitude over an auspicious event and to thank the neighbours or community who contributed to the process. Before the establishment of Islam in the state, turmeric rice was used for worship; however, the perception later changed, and it was merely prepared to express gratitude and to welcome guests who visited their houses (Mat Noor et al., 2013).

The Custom of Boat Washing (Upacara Membasuh Perahu)

Another unique custom practised by the Malays in Terengganu before and after the arrival of Islam was the boat washing ceremony. It entailed washing a newly completed boat before it was used for fishing. The ceremony was led by a *pawang* using water and mantras. During the ceremony, the *pawang* mentioned the boat's name to ensure the fishermen's safety and protection from unwanted incidents. Some of the mantras are:

Assalamualaikum (Peace be upon you)

Hei lelang (O Lelang)

Aku tahu asalmu lelang (I know your origins, Lelang)

Tanah yang lembap (From the damp earth)

Jika mu berbatang (If you are a trunk)
Seri berdiri namamu (Your name is Seri Berdiri (Seri Standing))
Jika mu berakar (If you are a root)
Seri bersila namamu (Your name is Seri Bersila (Seri Sitting Cross-legged))
Jika mu berdaun (If you are a leaf)
Selayangan angin namamu (Your name is Selayangan Angin (Floating in the Wind))
Jika mu berbunga (If you are a flower)
Seri berkuntum namamu (Your name is Seri Berkuntum (Seri Blooming))
Jika mu berbuah (If you bear fruit)
Kakak yang tua (Your eldest sibling is Lela Tua (The Elder Lela))
Lela yang tua namamu (Your name is Lela Tua (The Elder Lela))
Adik yang tengah (Your middle sibling is Lela Tengah (The Middle Lela))
Lela tengah namamu (Your name is Lela Tengah (The Middle Lela))
Adik bongsu (Your youngest sibling is Lela Bongsu (The Youngest Lela))
Lela bongsu namamu (Your name is Lela Bongsu (The Youngest Lela))
Jika mu tidur (If you slumber)
Gerakan bangun (Awaken and rise)
Bangunlah mu (Stand up)
Mu berdiri saksi (Stand as a witness)
Berdiri wali (Stand as a guardian)
Aku nak Pelepas akan kuwon dan badi (I seek to release what binds and burdens)
Roh dan celaka (Spirits and misfortunes)
Sial dan majal (Curses and ill fate)
Kerana mulah yang menanggung (For you are the one who bears them)
Taksih daripada Tuhan (By the will of the Almighty)
(Wan Mohammad & Dollah, 1999)

After the boat washing ceremony, a feast would be held, and food was offered to the sea admirals mentioned in the mantras. Dishes like turmeric rice, omelette, and beetle leaf deco were among the offerings, which were arranged on the head, middle, and back parts of the boat. Meanwhile, the remaining dishes were distributed among the attendees. During the feast, the *pawang* would summon the sea admirals represented by three male (*Panglima Hitam*, *Panglima Tengah*, and *Panglima Bongsu*) and three female (*Maya Mas*, *Puteri Sekuntum Cempaka*, and *Puteri Bongsu*) shepherds. The boat washing ceremony was usually conducted during Asr prayer since it was believed to be the most suitable time according to the *pawang* (Wan Mohammad & Dollah, 1999).

Nevertheless, the influence of Islam had completely changed this situation, especially in the 20th century, where Islamic elements became part of the daily lives of the Malay community. The boat washing ceremony by a *pawang* was replaced by the recital of Sūrah Yāsīn by an *imām*. The newly constructed boat would also be washed from front to back using Yāsīn-recited water with the addition of calamansi and *Beluru* roots (Abdullah, 2021). This situation proves that Islamic values have eliminated any elements of *khurafāt*, which were once rooted among the Malay community in Terengganu.

The Custom of Boat Launching

Before the assimilation of Islam, the Malays' beliefs mainly influenced how the boat launching custom was done. Fishermen would adhere to animistic rituals, believing that the boat must first be exorcised (*semah*) by a *pawang* or *bomoh*, who would circle it multiple times to eliminate any evil spirits and ensure their safety at sea (Saad, 2022). Other rituals included sprinkling rice and *tepung tawar* (blessing flour) and hanging a garland of *mayang pinang* (mayang tree fruit) before the boat's first voyage (Goring, 1926).

Following the spread of Islam in Terengganu, these rituals were gradually replaced by Islamic prayers and ceremonies, particularly in the 20th century. During this period, Malay fishermen sought blessings by choosing auspicious days for boat launching with guidance from an *imam*. A flag was raised a day before the launch, followed by a feast featuring traditional dishes like *nasi kunyit* (turmeric rice), *belebat*, and *pukat buruk*. Gratitude to Allah SWT was expressed through recitations of *du'ā*, Sūrah Yāsīn, and *ṣalawāt* (blessings upon Prophet Muhammad SAW), symbolising a transition towards Islamic spiritual reliance rather than pre-Islamic rituals. The belief was that *shukr* (gratitude) to Allah SWT would invite His blessings and increase *rizq* (sustenance), as highlighted in the Quran:

وَأِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكُمْ لَئِن شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ ۖ وَلَئِن كَفَرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي لَشَدِيدٌ

Meaning: "And 'remember' when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will certainly give you more. But if you are ungrateful, surely My punishment is severe.'"

(Sūrah Ibrāhīm, verse 7)

Figure 2

Ṣalāt al-Ḥājat Performed before a Boat was Launched (Winstedt, 1961)



On the boat launching day, *ṣalāt al-ḥājat* (the Islamic prayer of need) was performed on the boat and led by an *imām*. The purpose was to seek Allah's blessings and protection for the boat's journey, ensuring safety at sea and an abundance of *rizq* for the fishermen. The ceremony was timed with high tide for ease of movement, and work was meticulously organised, from assembling the keel to stabilising the boat's structure. The practice of performing *ṣalāt al-ḥājat* and *du'ā* demonstrates a significant spiritual shift from animistic traditions to Islamic customs, where success and sustenance were believed to come from faith and divine reliance rather than supernatural rituals. This change underscores the deep influence of Islamic teachings on the social and economic practices of the Malay maritime community (Abdullah, 2021).

Figure 3

Boat Launching Activity in the Malay Community (Pejabat Setiausaha Kerajaan Terengganu, 1999)



The Custom of Setting Out to Sea

The Malay community also strongly believed that safety was paramount in securing their livelihood from the sea. It was customary for Malay fishermen to recite *du'ā* before embarking on a journey as an act of *tawakkul* (trust in Allah). A specific tradition of reciting a Quranic verse was held by the fishermen before embarking on their boats, believing that it would bring divine protection and an abundant catch:

وَقَالَ ارْكَبُوا فِيهَا بِسْمِ اللَّهِ مَجْرَاهَا وَمُرْسَاهَا إِنَّ رَبِّي لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

Meaning: “And He said, “Board it! In the Name of Allah, it will sail and cast anchor. Surely my Lord is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”

(Sūrah Hūd, verse 41)

This practice was well-documented in Malay maritime traditions (Wan Mohammad & Dollah, 1999) and was believed to ensure safety, guidance, and sustenance while at sea. By reciting this verse, fishermen sought Allah’s protection against harsh waters and unforeseen dangers, reaffirming the faith that their *rizq* and success at sea were ultimately determined by divine decree (Wan Mohammad & Dollah, 1999).

Figure 4

Carving of Quranic Verses on the Boat (Terengganu State Museum)



Furthermore, the arrival of Islam also prompted the use of Islamic elements on the boat, including the carving of verse 12 from Sūrah al-Jāthiyah (see Figure 4):

اللَّهُ الَّذِي سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ الْبَحْرَ لِتَجْرِيَ الْفُلُكُ فِيهِ بِأَمْرِهِ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَلِعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

Meaning: “Allah is the One who has subjected the sea for you so that ships may sail upon it by His command, and that you may seek His bounty, and that perhaps you will be grateful.”

Such practice was considered a form of protection for both the fishermen and the boat. Sūrah al-Jāthiyah was used to pray to Allah SWT to subdue the menacing tidal waves so that the boat could safely sail, allowing the fishermen to catch an abundance of fish with ease. It emphasised the concept of being grateful for whatever *rizq* is given by Allah, since one is dependent on His guidance to design a boat to earn a living by relying on resources from the sea. Allah SWT stated in Sūrah al-Isrā', verse 66:

رَبُّكُمُ الَّذِي يُزْجِي لَكُمْ الْفُلُكُ فِي الْبَحْرِ لِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ إِنَّهُ كَانَ بِكُمْ رَحِيمًا

Meaning: “It is your Lord who steers the ships for you through the sea, so that you may seek His bounty. Surely, He is ever Merciful to you.”

This indicates that the arrival of Islam in Terengganu had caused the Malay community to put in extra efforts to get closer to their Creator. They eventually stopped any traditional practices that were inappropriate and applied religious practices in their daily life.

Effects of the Spread of Islam on the Maritime Sector and Ways to Overcome the Belief in Supernatural and *Khurafat* among the Malay Community

The Role of Rulers and 'Ulamā' in Eradicating Khurafat and Bidaah

The arrival of Islam in Terengganu brought significant cultural and religious transformations, a process commonly referred to as Islamisation. It describes the gradual adoption of Islamic beliefs, practices, and values within a society. This phenomenon was not an abrupt change but rather a progressive transition from animistic and Hindu-Buddhist traditions to Islamic teachings. As Islam took root in

Terengganu, many pre-Islamic rituals were gradually abandoned and replaced with practices aligned with Islamic principles. One of the key aspects of Islamisation in Terengganu was the rejection of ritualistic practices that were considered *khurafāt* (superstitious beliefs) and *bid'ah* (religious innovations). Many of these practices were deeply ingrained in the maritime traditions of Malay fishermen, as they believed that supernatural forces influenced their safety and success at sea. For instance, before setting sail, some fishermen performed *semah*, a ritual involving the worship of the sea through offerings. A buffalo would be slaughtered at the riverbank, and its blood would be offered to the sea spirits in the hope of ensuring safe voyages and abundant catches (Ahmad, 1941). Another widespread practice was *membuang ancak*, where fishermen would place an *ancak*, a small wooden platform or shrine, on a rock near the shore. This platform would hold food offerings intended to appease spirits believed to inhabit the waters (Abdullah, 2006).

As Islam became more widespread, *'ulamā'* worked to replace these animistic and Hindu-Buddhist rituals with Islamic teachings. A key figure in this effort was Haji Zainal Abidin (1893–1977), who played a central role in eliminating superstitious practices and reinforcing Islamic beliefs among the Malay community by discouraging rituals like *menyemah pantai* and *membuang ancak* (Abu Bakar, 2023). Another influential religious leader was Syed Yusof Ali Al-Zawawi, who served as the Mufti of Terengganu (1925–1975). During his tenure, superstitious beliefs remained prevalent among the fishing community, and he worked to replace these practices with Islamic teachings. His efforts included promoting Islamic religious education through *surau* (small prayer halls), mosques, and *pondok* (traditional Islamic boarding schools). He also emphasised the importance of *farḍ 'ayn* (personal religious obligations) and *farḍ kifāyah* (communal religious responsibilities), ensuring that Islamic knowledge became an integral part of Malay daily life.

Rules and Taboos in Using the Boat

As Islam spread across the state, its teachings caused the Malays to apply some boat usage taboos, aimed towards preventing damage and ensuring that the boat was well-kept. Among the taboos were the prohibitions of pounding any parts of the boat using hands or planks, hitting the front or head of the boat using daily clothes, and using a broom

to clean the boat since it symbolised rejecting *rizq* (Abdullah, 2021). The Malays regarded these taboos as something serious, believing that their profits and safety depended on the guardians or deities of the sea. They also believed that failure to adhere to these taboos would result in these deities inflicting terrors into their lives, such as bad weather (Ahmad, 1941). Another taboo was the prohibition of wearing slippers or shoes on the boat, which applied to both fishermen and any visitors involved in fishing activities (Abdullah, 2021). Such taboo also ensured that the boat remained clean since many owners perceived their boats as “the second house” and relied on them to earn their living and support their families. Hence, cleanliness was paramount since it aligns with a statement by Rasulullah SAW, whereby cleanliness is part of faith. Allah SWT stated in Sūrah al-Baqarah, verse 222:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ

Meaning: “Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves.”

While boarding the boat, Malay fishermen would refrain from using vulgar and inappropriate words since it would bring misfortune to them. They were advised to be careful with their utterances while earning *halāl rizq* for their families. Another taboo was to refrain from urinating or defecating at the front part of the boat to keep cleanliness at the highest level. Furthermore, fishermen were reminded not to whistle since the Malays believed that it would cause shark attacks on the whistler (Goring, 1926). In truth, whistling was prohibited to avoid unnecessary noise while catching fish. Such prohibition also aligned with the Islamic rule whereby whistling is deemed *makrūh* since it is a negative *akhlāq* and could be traced back to the Jahiliya’s tradition. Moreover, it was advised that two individuals at odds with each other should not go to sea together, as it could cause mishaps for them. This rule indicated that Islamic values had infiltrated the community, as they believed that the concept of living and earning in harmony must be inculcated among them. Allah SWT stated in Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt, verse 10:

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ أَخَوِيكُمْ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

Meaning: “The believers are but one brotherhood, so make peace between your brothers. And be mindful of Allah so you may be shown mercy.”

The Change in Motif and Decoration on the Boat Sides

The religious values brought about by the establishment of Islam in Terengganu also led to changes in motifs and decorations on the boat sides. One of the contributing factors was the Malays' observation of their surroundings before expressing them in their work. Before the arrival of Islam, boat decorations were mainly based on Hinduism, where boatmakers usually carved geometrical motifs on the boats. The Hindu-Buddha influence later saw the use of other motifs like objects and nature. During this era, fishermen used motifs like *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets), animals, and *makara* (elements of wild animals) to decorate their boats. For example, there were traces of motifs based on *wayang kulit* tales and characters, including Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Panji tales, which symbolised the wood carver's creativity. The *wayang kulit* tales also had deep, significant meanings and useful lessons for the community and were considered religious texts before the arrival of Islam. These characters were believed to have magical strength and were invincible at sea (Coatalen, 1982). The Malay community was also creative and innovative in producing items. This was evidenced by the decorative carving on the sides of the boats, encompassing various motifs like egret, *okok*, and *caping*. Each decoration had its respective backstory based on the wood carver's personality (Abdul Wahab et al., 2013).

Figure 5

Decorations based on the Panji Tales (Terengganu State Museum).



Previously, animals were part of the boat decoration themes, mainly represented in the form of snakes or dragons. In India, snakes are highly revered, while dragons are closely connected to water and associated with fertility (Mohd Nasir, 2018). A unique aspect found on boats in northern Terengganu, especially at the borders of Kelantan like Besut and Penarik, was the image of *bangau okok* in the form of a symmetrical screen and carved triangular (Coatalen, 1982).

Figure 6

Decorative Theme of Dragon-Hawk Used a Section of Bangau Okok (National Archive, Malaysia).



Later, the arrival of Islam led to the evolution of decorative motifs in Terengganu boat-making. It significantly influenced the local Malay community and their culture, as evidenced by their adoption of Islamic practices, such as praising Allah SWT and the prophets and reciting Quranic verses. Their boat decorations also gradually changed to floral and nature-based motifs, signifying humans' close relationship with nature. This included the use of *awan larat asli* (original arabesques) and *awan larat jawi* (jawi arabesques) for boat decoration purposes, which contained fewer, further, and larger flower patterns and carried the motifs of leaves, flowers, branches, and fruits (Nik Abd Rahman et

al., 2011). Many wood carvers emphasised leaf carving to portray the intricate art of carving. For instance, the *makara* (wild animal) motif was carved in the shape of leaves and vines, signifying the relationship between Islamic influence and wood carving art. An upward-climbing vine portrayed a close relationship between nature and Allah SWT as the Creator. Such representation indicated that the wood carver prioritised the relationship between humans and Allah SWT, which resonated well with verse 112 of Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān “*ḥablun min ALLāh and ḥablun min al-nās*” (good relationship with Allah and other humans).

Moreover, boat decorations were treated as “motivational spirit”, especially for the fishermen who went to sea to earn a living. The egret was put on the right, believing that it would bring luck to the boat (Mohd Nasir, 2018). From another perspective, the Malays have always prioritised the right side in doing something. For instance, the right hand is used for eating and drinking. Such practice aligns with the sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, who instructed Muslims to prioritise their right when doing most activities.

Figure 7

Bangau Kolek with Makara Theme (Terengganu State Museum)



Conclusion

The Malay community in Terengganu had a close relationship with other people, their natural surroundings, and Allah SWT as the Creator. Such a strong connection served as an inspiration for their boat-making activity, leading to the evolution of their craftsmanship under Islamic influence over time. This study has uncovered new insights into how Islamic teachings gradually replaced animistic and Hindu-Buddhist maritime traditions, transforming the traditional boat-building process, economic structures, and spiritual practices of the Malay community in Terengganu. The key findings indicate that Malay boatmakers actively modified their craftsmanship to align with Islamic teachings. This transition was evident in the shift from superstitious rituals, such as *meramu kayu*, to Shariah-compliant trade practices, the replacement of traditional boat-launching ceremonies with *du‘ā* and *ṣalāt al-ḥājat*, and the incorporation of Quranic inscriptions into boat carvings for spiritual protection. Unlike previous studies that only acknowledged the decline of animistic beliefs, this research demonstrates the specific mechanisms through which Islamisation shaped the maritime industry.

Furthermore, this study highlights the pivotal role of ‘*ulamā*’ in reshaping Terengganu’s maritime traditions. Through their educational outreach, religious sermons, and legal interventions, scholars such as Haji Zainal Abidin and Syed Yusof Ali Al-Zawawi played a crucial role in eradicating *khurafāt* practices, introducing ethical trade principles, and promoting Islamic values in boat-making communities. Their influence led to the institutionalisation of Islamic teachings within the local maritime economy, ensuring that boatmakers conducted their trade in compliance with Shariah law. Additionally, this research provides original contributions by examining how Islamisation influenced the economic and social structures of Terengganu’s maritime community. Unlike existing literature that focuses solely on religious changes, this study reveals that Islamic values reshaped labour organisation, trade ethics, and ownership systems in the boat-building industry. For instance, the transition from unregulated wood procurement to structured trade with registered suppliers ensured economic transparency and compliance with Islamic business ethics, fostering economic stability within Terengganu’s fishing communities.

In conclusion, this study bridges a crucial research gap through a systematic analysis of how Islamic teachings influenced the evolution of traditional boat building and water transport in Terengganu from the 13th to the 20th century. The influence of Islam on traditional boat building in Terengganu began in the 13th century with the arrival of Arab traders. Early practices blended Islamic elements with animistic and Hindu-Buddhist rituals. By the 16th century, syncretic customs, such as initiation rituals, remained prevalent, although gradually infused with Islamic values. The 18th and 19th centuries portrayed stronger religious enforcement through the role of *'ulamā'* and rulers, leading to legal reforms like *Itqān al-Muluk bi Ta'dīl al-Suluk* in Terengganu. By the early 20th century, pre-Islamic rituals were replaced with Islamic practices like *du'ā* and *ṣalāt al-hājat*. Decorative motifs also shifted towards Islamic art forms, and Quranic verses were incorporated into boat design. This situation prompted a complete transformation of maritime traditions with Islamic teachings. These findings offer a broader understanding of Islamic maritime heritage and demonstrate the long-term impact of Islamisation on the technological, economic, and spiritual dimensions of Malay boat-making traditions. The insights provide a foundation for future research regarding Islamic influence in maritime cultures across the Malay Archipelago and highlight the need for further exploration of Islamic maritime traditions beyond Malaysia.

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Journal Article

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In-text:

(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

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The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

The Bible

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The new Oxford annotated Bible. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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