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To cite this article: Sri Endah Kinasih, Rachmah Ida, Irfan Wahyudi, Farhana Diana Deris, M. Nilzam Aly, Angga Prawadika Aji & Mochamad Kevin Romadhona (2025) Culture, tourism and migration in bintan borderland – legal anthropology perspective, Cogent Arts & Humanities, 12:1, 2602382, DOI: [10.1080/23311983.2025.2602382](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2602382)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2602382>



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Published online: 19 Dec 2025.



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## Culture, tourism and migration in bintan borderland – legal anthropology perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the intercultural relations and cultural literacy shape and influence the development of cross-border tourism in Bintan. Bintan has maintained a continuous cultural identity from the pre-modern era to the present, with strong social connections across these three neighboring countries. Malay culture continues to face significant challenge, as ethnic group increasing experiencing the impact of diminishing cultural literacy and shifting social value. This study employs a qualitative methodology and adopts a participatory approach. The results show the people of Bintan, particularly in border villages such as Berakit and Pengudang, maintain close kinship, linguistic, and cultural ties with the Malay communities in Johor and Terengganu. However, this strong Malay cultural identity is yet to be strategically integrated into local tourism policies. Furthermore, indigenous communities, such as the *Suku Laut*, remain marginalized in development policies and have not been optimally empowered within the tourism sector. The study highlights that tangible and intangible cultural heritage such as Dangkong dance, Laksa cuisine, and traditional Malay houses remain insufficiently preserved and promoted. Weak institutional management, limited access to digital resources, and lack of infrastructure support also hinder the development of cross-border cultural tourism.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 November  
2024  
Revised 20 November  
2025  
Accepted 28 November  
2025

### KEYWORDS

Intercultural relations;  
Malay culture; migration;  
culture literacy; legal  
anthropology

### SUBJECTS

Asian Studies;  
Communication Ethics;  
Development  
Communication;  
Anthropology - Soc Sci;  
Sociology & Social Policy;  
Tourism; Cultural Studies

## Introduction

Intercultural relations and cultural literacy are significant ties between neighboring tourism regions (Jackson, 2019; Kutor et al., 2021; Purcell-Gates 2020b). Malay culture is rich, diverse, and reflects a long history influenced by various civilizations, such as the Indian, Chinese, and Islamic cultures (Winstedt, 2024). Bintan is situated in Indonesia and surrounded by Singapore and Malaysia. Therefore, to strengthen and promote these relations, there is a need to reconstruct cultural ties and foster people-to-people connections among the three countries. This study examines the stories, memories, and migration footprints of the Malayan people, royal families, preachers, traders, and migrant descendants on Bintan Island by examining the persistence of cultural practices and artifacts as objects of border tourism (Tjitrawati & Romadhona, 2024). Cultural exploration and literacy remain limited, even though cultural practices have great potential to be considered not only as tourism attractions but also to underline and reconstruct the connection between the people of Bintan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

The border areas are increasingly attractive to tourists (Su & Li, 2021). Border tourism refers to cross-border tourism typically undertaken between two or several adjacent and strategic neighboring countries (Sofield, 2006). The purpose of border tourism is short-term visits at relatively affordable costs, driven by recreation, holidays, business, visits to relatives and/or friends, religious and social gatherings, or shopping events for a limited stay (del Río et al., 2017). The opening of border tourism, in addition

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to attracting foreign tourists, can also initiate new plans for the development of infrastructure and economics as well as the promotion and preservation of culture in border areas (Gao et al., 2019; Grundy-Warr & Perry, 2001; Hampton, 2010; Sofield, 2006).

The criteria for border tourism consist of the independent boundaries of a country (state borders), the state border as a geographic space, and the state border as a sociocultural space (Ariadi Subagyono et al., 2024; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2018). Research on border tourism has considerably focused on other countries, such as the Dominican Republic and Haiti border (del Río et al., 2017); (Subagyono et al., 2024), Poland and Russia (Studzieniecki et al., 2016), Turkey-Greece (Kinasih et al., 2024; Kozak & Buhalis, 2019), Spain and Portugal (Liberato et al., 2018; Wahyudi et al., 2024b), the Altai-Sayan Mountains which are located in Russia, China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan (Dunets et al., 2019), Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Sergeyeva et al., 2022; Sunyowati et al., 2023), German and Czech (Stoffelen et al., 2017; Sujatmiko et al., 2024), China and Myanmar (Subagyono et al., 2024; Su & Li, 2021), and Russian-Polish and Russian-Kazakh (Mikhaylova et al., 2022). However, Bintan tourism as a Malay cultural destination has not yet been investigated in previous academic research. This gap presents a timely opportunity to explore intercultural relations and border tourism involving Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. The border tourism area in Indonesia is connected to other areas through land, sea, and mountains with neighboring countries. All eight of these are flagship destinations of the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy Republic Indonesia (*Kemenparekraf*), located in East Nusa Tenggara bordering Timor Leste (Sunyowati et al., 2023), Papua bordering Papua New Guinea, West Kalimantan bordering Malaysia, Riau bordering Singapore and Malaysia, East Kalimantan bordering Sarawak-Malaysia, Kalimantan North bordering Tawau Malaysia, North Sulawesi bordering Davao del Sur-Philippines, and the Riau Islands bordering Singapore and Malaysia.

In multicultural countries, the legal acknowledgement of cultural customs often involves intricate discussions (Macioce, 2016). Legal anthropologists examine how governments tolerate or regulate cultural manifestations, particularly when they seem to contradict the prevailing legal systems (Merry, 2003). For instance, the customary rules of indigenous tribes may diverge markedly from those of the official legal system (Hirtz, 2003). This context examines legal pluralism, in which power dynamics dictate the enforcement or marginalization of laws. Tourism and migration involve exchanges between many cultures that are frequently regulated by legal frameworks. Legal anthropology offers a perspective on how laws regulate and mediate cultural diversity, including immigration law, cultural heritage preservation, and international human rights law. Tourism is a global sector that promotes cultural interchange, economic development, and the commercialization of heritage (Timothy, 2015). It also presents significant legal issues pertaining to land use, cultural heritage, environmental governance, and labor rights. Legal anthropologists have examined the impact of tourism on the legal control of culture by prompting inquiries about authenticity, ownership, and permission. Migration and law are profoundly influenced by legal frameworks and cultural circumstances (Portes, 2010).

The Bintan has a very strategic position and is situated in the Riau Archipelago. The Bintan Regency is one of the four regencies and two cities in the Riau Archipelago province based on Law No. 25/2002 (BPS, 2022). Bintan boasts 61 tourist attractions, 31 tours and travel options, 24 tailored for tour groups, as well as 51 hotels and resorts spread across Sebang Pereh as an ecotourism area (Mangrove Tourism and Tourism Village), Bintan Bunyu as an ecotourism area (Mount Bintan, Village Tourism, and other areas), Bintan Integrated Resort (Beach, Golf, Mall), Trikora Beach (White Sand Beach, Cottages, Water Tourism, Snorkeling, Diving, Fishing Locations, and Fishermen's Villages), and Batu Licin as a New Resort Development. According to reports from Bintan Culture and Tourism (2021), tourism development in Bintan has primarily focused on nature-based tourism, with modern resorts and developing authentic Malay sites that have the potential to be promoted. Darmawan and Van der Putten (2023) added that tourist visits are not only to enjoy the beauty of nature but also to understand the local culture, so that there is a strong bond between the visitors and host communities (Darmawan & Van der Putten, 2023). However, if a tourist visits to explore the local culture, it can help strengthen the local identity while also fostering the growth of the creative industry at the tourist spot. Culture also plays an important role in the competitiveness of tourist locations. Furthermore, border tourism in supporting culture is the main driver of tourism, which may foster a strong and supportive tourism ecosystem (Richards, 2009).

In Indonesia, the concept of 'border tourism' or 'cross border tourism' remains relatively underdeveloped and lacks institutional support from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Amalia et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2024). Cross-border tourism offers valuable opportunities for Indonesia as well as its neighboring countries. For instance, the number of tourists visiting Riau Island in 2019 was 1,337,067 compared to Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, which was 946,509 people. In addition, in 2019, the number of tourists who visited Indonesia through bordered areas was 6,627,248, or 38.94% of the total number of foreigners who visited Indonesia in the whole year. However, policies to support the development of infrastructure and preservation of culture for cross-border tourism remain vague and fragmented. This study is a continuation of an initial study, which was first conducted in 2021 on border tourism on Bintan Island. In 2021, we collected secondary data and identified tourism objects, attractions, and culinary materials that were available but less exposed on Bintan Island. From our initial survey and observations, we concluded that Bintan is a potential tourism destination for an alternative place outside Bali and Yogyakarta in Central Java, which has been well developed and advanced in terms of services and income contributions at the national level, and can foster a relationship with bordering countries.

Although studies on cross-border tourism have been conducted (Anaman & Ismail, 2002; Budianta, 2010; Kim & Sullivan, 2003; Prokkola, 2008; Studzieniecki et al., 2016; Martino et al., 2017), studies on cross-border tourism in Indonesia are rare (Asthu, 2020; Budianta, 2010; Koesbardiati et al., 2025). The present study provides narratives on cross-border tourism and the issues related to bridging memories between people in Bintan, Malaysia, and Singapore as part of Malay bonding cultures. This research focuses on the issues and problems behind the lack of promotion of border tourism, which has not been taken into consideration by the local government or the Ministry of Tourism Republic Indonesia. It also focuses on the identification of Malay culture and available assets for its preservation (Tjitrawati et al., 2023; Wiratama et al., 2023). The present study focuses on the intercultural relations between Malay culture and the people living in the Indonesian territory of Bintan. This research aims to identify how intercultural relations and cultural literacy shape and influence the development of cross-border tourism in Bintan borderland, particularly within the context of Malay cultural heritage and its connections to Malaysia and Singapore, as well as its potential to migrate from the perspective of legal anthropology. Based on the explanation above, our research question is as follows: How does cross-border tourism in Bintan serve as medium for preserving and reconnecting Malay cultural heritage between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore?

## Literature review

Since 1824, the Malay ethnic group has not been a newly formed community but one recognized for centuries (Shamsul, 2001). However, in the mid-20 century, during the Dutch colonial era, the Malay ethnic group was divided, and the Malay world was politically and popularly identified as the Peninsula (Hoogervorst, 2017; Sayu et al., 2023; Sunyowati et al., 2022). The communities in Jambi and Riau, who also identify as ethnically Malay, never heard their stories (Adelita & Romadhona, 2023; Colombijn, 2003; Reid, 2001). The efforts of the communities in Jambi and Riau to affirm their position as the cultural nucleus of the Malay ethnicity reflect similar initiatives undertaken by Malaysia to consolidate its role as the center of Malay identity. For this reason, in all studies on Malay culture, the core always points to Melaka in Malaysia, which is claimed as the center of Malay culture (Hakim, 2017; Lawless, 2015; Reid, 2001; Winstedt, 2024; Worden, 2001). Malay culture is spread over several states of Malaysia as well as in neighboring countries such as Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, Darussalam, and Indonesia. In Indonesia, the eastern and southern parts of Sumatra and the coasts of Kalimantan, Bangka, Belitung, and the Riau Archipelago are highly associated with Malay culture. The formation of Malay includes language, poems (*pantun*), arts, and religion (customs and historical heritage) (Collins, 1989). The importance of Malay culture in District Bintan is highly relevant for the preservation, intercultural relations, and promotion of culture; however, border tourism in District Bintan is not well developed, and limited attention has been given to tourism attractions. Instead, there has been a greater focus on foreign direct investments from Singapore, which is the third largest countries investing in Indonesia (Amalia et al., 2023; Lipsey & Sjöholm, 2011). Tourism greatly support Indonesia's economy, Bintan District located just under an hour

away by boat from Singapore and benefits strongly from this sector (Hamilton-Hart, 2009), from two major countries: Singapore and Malaysia.

### ***Border tourism: Definitions, practices, and Socio-Cultural dimensions***

Border tourism refers to the movement of people between neighboring countries for short visits driven by various motivations, including leisure, business, social ties, and cultural exploration (Coles & Timothy, 2004; Kozak & Buhalis, 2019; Park et al., 2019; Weidenfeld, 2013). Borders themselves often serve as tourism attractions due to their symbolic and geopolitical significance (Gelbman, 2016; 2017; Gelbman & Timothy, 2010; Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019; Shtern, 2022; Su & Li, 2021). The key factors that define border tourism include physical boundaries, geographical demarcations, and sociocultural spaces (Diener & Hagen, 2024; Prokkola, 2010; Sofield, 2006; Sugiarti et al., 2024). Internationally, border tourism has been studied in various contexts, including the Dominican Republic-Haiti, Poland-Russia, Turkey-Greece, and China-Myanmar (Krause, 2024; Taylor, 2018; Dardashti, 2018; Mikhaylova et al., 2022; Dolzblasz et al., 2025; Kropinova, 2020; Kozak & Buhalis, 2019; Çduygu, 2004; Aydın & Ifantis, 2025; J. Gao et al., 2019; J. (Tom) Gao et al., 2022; Su, 2022; Tan et al., 2024; Hu & Konrad, 2018). These studies have emphasized the multifaceted nature of borderlands as zones of both separation and connection. However, research on Indonesia's border tourism, particularly in culturally rich regions such as Bintan, remains sparse. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the cross-border tourism potential of Bintan through the lens of shared Malay heritage and intercultural relationships.

### ***The role of culture in tourism and identity***

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping tourism destinations by influencing their appeal, competitiveness, and sustainability (Hassan, 2000; Zhang et al., 2025). Cultural tourism not only enhances visitor experiences but also reinforces local identity and fosters the growth of creative industries (Alberti & Giusti, 2012; Cooke & De Propriis, 2011; Hall & Rath, 2007; Kastenholz & Gronau, 2022). In the context of Bintan, efforts to blend ecotourism with cultural tourism have already been initiated, with areas such as Trikora Beach and Sebong Pereh promoting both natural beauty and local traditions. True cultural tourism emerges when visitors engage in the cultural narratives and everyday practices of local communities (Darmawan & Van der Putten, 2023). Despite its clear potential, border tourism remains an underdeveloped and underpromoted concept (Zackariya, 2023). Data from 2019 show that a significant portion of foreign visitors entered Indonesia through the border regions, including the Riau Islands, which encompass Bintan (McNevin, 2014; Putri & Afnira, 2024). However, a lack of coherent policies and infrastructure development hinders further progress in this sector.

The development of border areas in Indonesia has historically lagged behind that of urban areas (Grundy-Warr et al., 1999). Infrastructure development in border areas is described as the development gap between the cities and rural areas of Indonesia (Rahim et al., 2024). Moreover, it is not only physical development that shows slow progress, but also the quality of public services and public access that continues to become a hurdle for outsiders to reach or visit the border regions. With a direct flight from Jakarta to Bintan or an hour by ferry or a small boat from Batam Island, Bintan and its capital city, Tanjung Pinang, are easily accessed (Grundy-Warr & Perry, 2001). The two ferry terminals operate twice daily from Bintan to Singapore and return (Bunnell et al., 2016). Under these conditions, Bintan is a potential destination for border tourism (Karim et al., 2024). In Singapore and Malaysia, Bintan Island is popular for different reasons: resorts and beaches are favorite destinations for weekenders from Singapore, and the Ali Haji tomb and the mosque are favorite places for Malaysians (Chang, 2001; Hampton, 2010).

Border tourism also puts a special focus on indigenous communities, such as *Suku laut* or sea people (Chou, 2009). Their floating boats and traditional maritime lifestyles have become cultural assets, attracting both domestic and international tourists. Bintan Island has natural beaches and is rich in Malay cultural practices and food resources. Looking again at the number of tourists who visited Bintan in 2019, this suggests that Bintan is already a popular tourist destination in Indonesia. However, the promotion of Bintan tourism, the attractiveness of its natural beauty, and discussions on the origin of Malay culture in Bintan have not been seriously considered. This can be seen as little consideration being given

to the preservation of Malay Culture, as shown on the official website of the Bintan regional government and the Department of Tourism in Bintan. There are no such hyperlinks to local tourism agents or business portals for those who want to visit Bintan Island. There are several pictures and narratives regarding popular tourism objects in Bintan, but no extended information on how to approach or visit there and other significant content about cross-border tourism has been updated.

### ***Intercultural relations and cultural literacy in bordering tourism area***

Intercultural relations and cultural literacy serve as foundational concepts in discourses on tourism development across border regions (Carrigan, 2011; Jackson, 2019; Reisinger & Dimanche, 2010). These interactions foster mutual understanding, a shared identity, and cultural exchange, particularly in areas with historical and ethnic continuity spanning national boundaries (Eriksen, 2001; Sanders, 2002; Wimmer, 2013). The Malay world, encompassing parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, is an exemplary region in which culture transcends modern political borders (Gunn, 2011; Kahn, 2006; 2020; Mandal, 2016). Winstedt (2024) describes Malay culture as richly layered with historical imprints from Indian, Chinese, and Islamic civilizations, establishing a complex and hybrid identity (Ballantyne, 2006; Braginsky, 2022; Santaella, 2023). The significance of this cultural hybridity is especially evident in regions such as Bintan Island, which geographically maintains cultural ties with Malaysia and Singapore. Understanding and reconstructing these ties through people-to-people connections is essential for promoting intercultural understanding and fostering regional cooperation. This study emphasizes the importance of oral histories, migration narratives, and the material culture of Malayan royal families, religious figures, and traders in preserving and revitalizing cultural memory in border regions (Tjitrawati & Romadhona, 2024).

### ***Legal anthropology: Cultural regulation and migration***

Legal anthropology offers a valuable framework for examining how laws interact with cultural practices, particularly in multicultural and transnational contexts (Moore, 2001; Murshed et al., 2025; Rouland, 1994). Culture, encompassing beliefs, language, rituals, and traditions (Eller, 2021; Geertz, 2013; Griswold, 2012; Shouler, 2010), often intersects and occasionally clashes with formal legal systems. Legal anthropologists explore the tension between official legal codes and customary norms, particularly when national legal frameworks attempt to regulate or marginalize local cultural practices (Hirtz, 2003; Macioce, 2016). In borderland contexts, where people, goods, and ideas flow freely, the role of law becomes particularly complex (Kapur, 2015; Pavlakovich-Kochi & Morehouse, 2017). Migration is a key dimension here as individuals navigate legal categories such as citizenship, asylum, and refugee status (Sajjad, 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2019); (Feller, 2006; Kinasih et al., 2024; Wahyudi et al., 2024a). Legal anthropology investigates how migrants interpret, contest, and reshape these legal classifications through their personal narratives and survival strategies (Beneduce, 2015; Brettell, 2003; Menjivar & Lakhani, 2016). These insights are essential for understanding how Malay descendants and migrant communities in Bintan maintain cultural continuity amid shifts in legal and national boundaries (Bunnell et al., 2016). Moreover, border-control laws, which are often presented as objective and neutral, function as both physical barriers and symbolic expressions of national identity (Haselsberger, 2014; Paasi, 1998; 2009). In such settings, legal pluralism reflects the coexistence of national law, customary practices, and international legal instruments, particularly in the domains of human rights and cultural heritage preservation (Michaels, 2009; Provost & Sheppard, 2013; Quane, 2013; Swenson, 2018).

Despite its strategic location and cultural assets, Bintan has not yet emerged as a prominent site for cross-border Malay tourism (Bunnell et al., 2006; Grundy-Warr & Perry, 2001; Hampton, 2010; Karim et al., 2024). The island is home to over 60 tourist attractions and has considerable infrastructure, including international resorts such as Bintan Resort, a joint project between Singapore and Indonesia established in 1995 (Chang, 1998; Chang & Raguraman, 2001; Henderson, 2015; Litvin & Ng Sok Ling, 2001). The resort, predominantly serving visitors from Singapore, exemplifies a spatial and cultural contrast to the traditional socio-cultural landscape of Bintan, thereby illustrating the disjunction between commercialised tourism development and the preservation of local cultural heritage (Hampton et al., 2024; Juliana et al., 2024; Smith & Siguaw, 2011). The study identifies an evident lack of institutional support for cultural tourism

development in Bintan, highlighting how local governmental bodies and national tourism policies have failed to adequately acknowledge and capitalize on the island's substantial cultural and touristic potential (Grundy-Warr et al., 1999; Polkinghorne et al., 2024; Telfer & Sharpley, 2015; Yusnita & Annabila, 2024). This study argues for the reconceptualization of Bintan not merely as a leisure destination but also as a vital cultural link in the broader Malay world. Promoting cross-border tourism grounded in shared heritage could strengthen regional cooperation and identity while also stimulating economic growth and cultural preservation. This study seeks to fill this gap by analysis the cross-border tourism opportunity in Bintan.

### Theoretical framework

The Table 1 shows that the study adopted an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates concepts from intercultural communication, cultural literacy, tourism studies, legal anthropology, and migration theory. These theoretical perspectives collectively provide the foundation for analyzing intercultural relations and cultural continuity in Bintan, Indonesia, particularly in the context of cross-border tourism involving Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Intercultural Communication Theory serves as a key lens for understanding the interactions among culturally diverse populations inhabiting borderland regions. Drawing on the work of Gudykunst (2003) and Kim (2003), this theory elucidates how individuals from different cultural backgrounds negotiate meaning, manage cultural differences, and establish relational frameworks. In the context of Bintan, which is deeply embedded within the broader Malay world, intercultural communication is essential for analyzing the interpersonal and communal ties that span national boundaries, facilitated by shared historical and cultural legacies. Complementing this is the concept of Cultural Literacy, originally proposed by Hirsch (1987) and recently expanded by Purcell-Gates (2020).

**Table 1.** Mapping research of theoretical framework.

| Core focus area               | Theoretical lens                          | Key scholars                                       |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Intercultural Communication   | Intercultural Communication Theory        | Gudykunst (2003), Kim (2018)                       |
| Cultural Understanding        | Cultural Literacy                         | Purcell-Gates (2020), Hirsch (1987)                |
| Border Tourism & Development  | Cultural Heritage Tourism/ TALC Model     | Timothy & Boyd (2003), Butler (2006)               |
| Legal-Culture Dynamics        | Legal Pluralism & Legal Anthropology      | Engle Merry (1988), Nafziger et al. (2010)         |
| Migration & Cross-Border Ties | Transnationalism                          | Basch et al. (1994), Portes (2010)                 |
| Identity & Shared Memory      | Cultural Memory Theory/ Borderland Theory | Assmann & Czaplicka (1995), Wilson & Donnan (1999) |

Sources: (Y. Y. Kim & Gudykunst, 2005; Gudykunst, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 2020b; Purcell-Gates, 2020a; Hirsch Jr, 1987; Boyd, 2006; Timothy & Boyd, 2015; Boyd, 2020; Timothy, 2017; R. Butler, 2011; R. W. Butler, 2006; Engle Merry, 1988; Merry, 2012; Merry, 1992; Nafziger et al., 2010; Nafziger et al., 2010; Schiller et al., 1995; Schunck & Schunck, 2014; Basch et al., 2020; Portes, 2010; Portes & Yiu, 2013; Portes, 2016; J. Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; J. Assmann, 2011; A. Assmann, 2011; J. Assmann, 2010; Donnan & Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Donnan, 2012; Donnan & Wilson, 2021).

**Table 2.** Malay cultural performances and practices shared between Riau Island and Terengganu Malaysia.

| Name of the performance                                                | Origins                                                                                                                                  | The practice                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mahjong                                                                | Riau Lingga, Mantang Island (near Riau)                                                                                                  | Traditional theatre & play                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Dangkong Dance                                                         | Riau Tambelan                                                                                                                            | Traditional ritual dancing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Zapin Spider Dance                                                     | Bakau Bay, Bintan                                                                                                                        | Traditional dancing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Kenduri Prayer (also known as Bele Village Prayer for evil repelling)  | Bele village & Kampung Sungai Enam, Bintan (but later it has been modified for ages by different villages in the Island and in Malaysia) | Ritual ceremony and feast                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Tembeling Festival (evil/superstitious/spirit-repelling reinforcement) | Tembeling village                                                                                                                        | Activities involved in traditional boatbuilding by the fishing community                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Laksa                                                                  | Lingga Riau (then famous in Terengganu Malaysia slang as 'Lakse')                                                                        | Food: spicy sour soup with coconut milk. Laksa Riau is cooked with red chillies and yellow curry powder. In Terengganu Malaysia, the soup is white (coconut milk only), and served in a more generous portion compared to Riau's, with a greater variety of ingredients.                                                                                                             |
| <i>Baju Kurung</i> (long Malay female dress)                           | Lingga Riau & Malacca                                                                                                                    | The formal Malay female attire is a long straight dress combined with a hand-woven sarong. <i>Baju Kurung</i> is also a formal dress worn by women in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. In Riau Island and Bintan, the attire is only used during special occasions such as wedding parties, while the formal attire is only worn by government civil servants in Bintan every Friday. |

Source: Author (s) created.

Cultural literacy emphasizes the possession of shared knowledge and cultural references that enable effective communication and social participation. In the context of tourism, cultural literacy facilitates meaningful engagement with local heritage, enabling hosts and visitors to connect across cultural divides. This theoretical approach is particularly relevant to exploring the preservation, interpretation, and promotion of Bintan's Malay cultural heritage through tourism narratives and experiences. This study also engages with theories of Cultural Heritage Tourism and the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) Model developed by Butler (2006). These frameworks assist in analyzing the transformation of cultural practices, artifacts, and memories into tourism commodities that can contribute to regional development. Cultural heritage tourism emphasizes the role of identity, authenticity, and cultural preservation in attracting visitors, and the TALC model provides a systematic understanding of tourism growth and its socioeconomic impacts. These perspectives are instrumental in assessing the development of Bintan's tourism sector and its cultural positioning within the regional tourism landscape. Furthermore, this study incorporates insights from Legal Anthropology, offering a critical examination of how cultural practices and legal systems intersect. Legal anthropologists such as Merry (2003) and Nafziger et al. (2010) emphasize the culturally embedded nature of law and the ways in which legal systems interact with social norms, symbols, and local practices. The lens of legal pluralism is particularly salient in border regions, such as Bintan, where customary laws, national legal frameworks, and international regulations coexist and often conflict. This perspective is essential for understanding how cultural practices are supported or constrained by legal and policy environments, particularly in relation to migration and cultural heritage management. Transnationalism is also prominent in this framework, offering a means to understand how people maintain multifaceted connections across nation-states. Building on the works of Basch et al. (1994) and Portes (2010), transnationalism explains the sustained flow of people, ideas, and cultural practices across borders. This perspective is crucial for unpacking the historical and ongoing migration patterns that have shaped Bintan's population and cultural landscape, including the presence of royal families, religious figures, traders, and the descendants of migrants who maintain ties with Malaysia and Singapore. To further contextualize cultural identity and continuity, this study draws on Cultural Memory Theory and Borderland Theory. Assmann's (1995) theory of cultural memory posits that collective memories are preserved and transmitted through symbolic forms such as rituals, narratives, and cultural artifacts. Borderland Theory, as developed by Donnan and Wilson (1999), highlights the dual nature of borders as physical and symbolic spaces of encounter, negotiation, and hybridization. In Bintan, these theories are employed to analyze how memories of migration, shared rituals, and heritage objects contribute to a collective sense of belonging among communities divided by contemporary state borders. Together, these theoretical perspectives form an integrative and comprehensive framework through which this study explored how intercultural relations and cultural literacy shape the development of cross-border tourism in Bintan. The framework supports an understanding of how cultural heritage can serve not only as a tourism asset but also as a means of reinforcing transnational connections and legal-cultural negotiations among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore within the broader discourse of Southeast Asian borderland dynamics.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design and participatory approach. The participatory method emphasizes both understanding and taking concrete action related to the development and preservation of Malay culture, particularly in Indonesia's border regions. Furthermore, the data collection process began with the identification of eight key informants, selected to represent a diverse range of perspectives and expertise aiming to deeply engage stakeholders, community members, and experts in the co-construction of knowledge. These informants included a historian from the Cultural Values Preservation Center, who specializes in the history of Malay cultural development in border regions; one academic from Raja Ali Haji Maritime University; and two other academics from Raja Haji College of Social and Political Sciences, both focused on the cultural relationships between Indonesia and Malaysia. Additionally, two government officials from the Bintan Regency District and Tourism Service provided details on the ongoing cultural development programs in the region. Finally, the research team invited two regional leaders to offer structural and global perspectives on the erosion of Malay culture.

Primary data were collected through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) at Tanjung Pinang. This session facilitated dynamic exchanges among participants, encouraging them to share their experiences, perspectives, and concerns regarding cultural heritage, development initiatives, and cross-border cultural connections. The FGD served as a platform for uncovering collective narratives and identifying recurring themes that reflected the current state and challenges of Malay culture. Beyond FGD, the research also relies on secondary data sources to enrich the analysis and provide a contextual background. These sources included history books, government archives, and legal documents such as Law No. 5 of 1979 on village governance.

The secondary data served to triangulate the findings from the primary data, and offered a broader historical and institutional framework for understanding cultural development. To explore individual perspectives, in-depth interviews were conducted with all eight participants. These interviews were guided by a structured interview protocol that was carefully developed based on extensive literature covering cultural preservation, cultural promotion, border tourism, digital culture, and cultural integration. This procedure ensured that the questions were relevant and comprehensive, while allowing flexibility for the informants to elaborate on their unique experiences and insights. The interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy, and verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview process began.

Qualitative data collected from the FGDs and interviews were subjected to a descriptive analysis. This approach has enabled researchers to interpret and synthesize narratives, identify thematic patterns, and draw meaningful conclusions regarding the dynamics of Malay cultural development. Finally, in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants, the researchers adhered strictly to all ethical protocols. Ethical clearance was formally obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, to ensure that all procedures met the academic and ethical standards for human research.

In sum, A qualitative method of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was used with stakeholders in Bintan and Johor Malaysia, such as the Bintan and Batam cultural and tourism bodies, local non-governmental organizations participants from small industries, Malay culture experts, and potential tourists from Johor Malaysia

## Result and discussions

In addressing the research question, the study confirms that cross-border tourism in Bintan acts as both a medium of preservation and a platform of reconnection for Malay cultural heritage. Through tourism-based encounters, shared traditions are revitalized, historical linkages are remembered, and collective identity is reimagined within a modern transnational context. However, without integrated policy support, these cultural dynamics remain vulnerable to commercialization pressures and geopolitical disparities, underscoring the necessity of harmonized cultural strategies across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

### *Living on a border and sharing the Malay culture*

The Bintan people who live in closed border areas, such as Berakit, Pengudang, and Teluk Sebung, the places that were visited and selected as the samples for this research, are distinctive from the people who live in Tanjung Pinang, the capital of Bintan. The villagers we met and talked to revealed how they felt close to people in Malaysia, such as people who live in Johor and Terengganu, which are closer to these villages than other parts of Malaysia. For some people who belong to the middle class, their family name and first name (e.g. Wan) are believed to be connected to those in the upper middle class of Malaysians. A government officer explained that his extended family lived in Terengganu and used the same first name. He visited his family in Malaysia frequently, and vice versa. His story is similar to those of other residents of Bintan in villages whose extended families live in Johor or Terengganu, and they visit each other once a year.

Tourism is often viewed as a threat to Indigenous groups, but it can also provide an opportunity to empower and develop communities in global arenas (Pereiro, 2019). The indigenous Bintan, locally

known as *Suku laut* or sea people or sea tribe (Suryantini et al., 2022), live on a floating boat, mainly on the bordering sea between Indonesia and Malaysia. Instead, these indigenous communities do not tend to cross Malaysian territory because they do not understand legal laws and regulations due to their low level of literacy, and some of them do not have formal identities. The *Suku Laut* remain fully nomadic and have limited seasonal residence on boats. People who live in Berakit and Pengudang villages speak the same language, and there are many similarities between Malay people and Malaysians (Chou et al., 2024). They also use the same terms, symbols, tools, and ingredients for their meals and foods. Before 2019, villagers in Berakit and Pengudang had access to television and radio channels from Malaysia and liked watching television dramas and songs (Jalli & Setianto, 2020). However, since the Indonesian government prohibited the interference of Malaysian mass media waves on Bintan Island, villagers only have access to programs and content from Indonesia.

The study participants included a historian and academician from a local university in Bintan who told the history of Bintan's leaders, royal families, preachers, and other influential persons who were originally born in Bintan and then migrated to Singapore and Malaysia, leaving their footprints, artifacts, and cultural practices in these two countries. For instance, the Temasek royal in Singapore and its royal families and elites were claimed to have Bintan origins. Therefore, Asians and Bintanese became separated and unfamiliar to each other. According to him, it is a regret that neither Bintanese nor Asians have reconsidered their blood connections. As a result, Singapore's history, in particular, tends to be incorrect or incomplete when describing familial connections. This historian and academician also criticized the fact that both the Bintan local government and the people seemed idle in claiming the originality of Malay culture. People from Malaysia, in particular, speak publicly to claim that Malay culture originated in their place. In further interviews, the participants (historians) claimed that Bintan was special because of the Malay culture born in this place.

Academic participants in the focus group discussions concurred, emphasizing that Bintan should be recognized as a cultural hub a view widely held among Bintanese residents. In examining the Riau Islands Province, the trajectory extending from Bukit Siguntang to Bintan, from Bintan to Singapore, and subsequently to Malacca before returning to Bintan illustrates an enduring continuum of cultural interconnectedness grounded in a shared historical and civilizational orientation. At the end of the Malacca Sultanate era, many people were unaware that the Malacca Sultanate came from Bintan (Andaya Watson, 1997; B. W. Andaya, 2017; Borschberg, 2004; Matheson, 1986; Moore, 2022; Newbold, 1839). However, after the sultanate ascended, the royal families returned to Bintan. The participants (academics) further confirmed that Bintan Island was indeed the center of the early civilization of Malay in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. History shows that, during the regime of Sultan Mansur Shah (1455–1477), Tun Perak extended the power of Malacca to Kedah, Terengganu, and Bintan Islands. The study participants (academics) also implied that if people from other areas needed to discuss the Malay Sultanate, they used to come to Bintan Island to understand the history and civilization of Malay culture. However, the information written in some books does not show the connection between Malacca and Bintan as connected in history. As one of the participants added:

Well, we are not talking about Malacca, because it turns out that the Sultan of Malacca also ended up in Bintan and if that is true, it needs further study by ancient historians, of course it turns out he ended up in Bintan.

Based on the interviews and discussions, this study suggests that the concept of 'Malay tourism linked with the network of border tourism,' with Bintan Island serving as the central point, includes Batam Island, Lingga in Riau, Karimun, Anambas, and Natuna as the outer Islands of Indonesia. These Islands have been connected for a long time, share the same histories and stories about their elders and descendants, and are quite similar to the Malay culture. All the Islands of Indonesia are situated and surrounded by the same sea areas as Singapore and Malaysia. The concept of 'Malay linked with the network of border tourism,' is possible to be implemented and potentially developed as a model for cross-border tourism in Indonesia, with Malay culture at the center (Desi et al., 2025; Novi Handayani et al., 2024; Raharjo & Idris, 2025; Tari & Suhara, 2023).

The spread of Malay language, literature, and material culture from Riau and Bintan to Singapore and Malaysia has long occurred through the mobility of locals and Javanese migrants, particularly those from Berakit Village. As one participant explained, Bintan became a transit point for migrants emigrating to Singapore and Malaysia. These migrants brought furniture and goods to the new places. For instance, in Berakit Village, the style of furniture identified came from the civilization of the Riau-Lingga Sultanate in Daik (a place on the Riau mainland). The migrants who transited from Berakit village brought all their belongings, but some had left them behind because of the overloaded carriage of the boat. They commonly use traditional and small boats from Berakit to Terengganu Malaysia or Singapore as closed-distance places that can be reached by small wooden boats.

Therefore, furniture, kitchen utensils, and other domestic appliances from the Malay ethnic people of Daik, Lingga Riau, became the property of households on Berakit and Bintan islands. All these products have become Malay cultural artifacts, representing an enduring connection between Riau Lingga, Bintan, Malaysia, and Malay Singapore. They should be acknowledged, preserved, and passed down throughout the periods of civilization in Malaysia and Singapore. Another participant believed that the Malay connection was not just limited to Terengganu and Singapore, but it had also spread out to China from the China Sea, as he further added that:

The Terengganu connection was not lost. But, today, maybe because of political factors, it might be cut off. In fact, people used to move from Lingga, and perhaps Bintan, then to Terengganu all the way to the coast of the South China Sea too, I reckon.

However, the issues of migration from Riau Lingga, Berakit, Terengganu, and South China need to be investigated further to prove Malay connections in the historical periods of early Malay civilization.

### ***Bridging memories between neighborhood countries***

It is no longer surprising that Malay culture has become a focal point for people, especially concerning tourism and businesses. Malay culture has become a strong foundation for the implementation of tourism strategies. Additionally, for further implementation, it is not only the intangible aspects we have but also the material ones, such as the architectural forms. For example, when we visited Berakit Village, one of the old houses was well decorated, although it was uninhabited. If a family had been living there, the people outside of Berakit Village could learn about Malay culture, artifacts, and practices. People not only engage in natural tourism, but also explore nostalgia and memories of Malayness itself people from Malaysia, Singapore, surrounding countries, and even far away will be able to recall their memories of Malay culture (Anwar, 2017; Hanif et al., 2015; Hussin, 2018; Naim Misran et al., 2022; Periasamy et al., 2017; Rashid, 2015; Yeoh & Kong, 1996).

The idea of border tourism or cross-border tourism on Bintan Island has not yet been implemented by the regional government. There is no policy regarding the growth of border tourism, either by regional and provincial governments, or even by the regionals. In the Bintan regional government, as in many other regional administrations in Indonesia, the tourism sector is placed under the Department of Education and Culture. This system has had a significant influence on tourism departments to initiate, implement, and budget tourism programs separately from other bodies under the Department of Education and Culture. Bintan's tourism department mainly plans and implements annual routines and programs, such as the annual cultural carnival and ritual ceremonies. The tourism officers who participated in our discussion and interviews explained that they knew and were well aware of the potential factors of tourism in border places such as bordered villages located in the Bintan territory, but due to political and economic constraints, including policy practices, the tourism body could not implement it (See Table 2).

All of these Malay cultural artifacts and practices, which bear similarities to those in Malaysia, are a source of concern for academics, historians, and local leaders. They risk being changed and even lost unless the government recognizes their value and initiates preservation efforts for the culturally rich Riau Island. One of the participants in the discussion suggested:

If we are also concerned with conservation, at least we need our support so that conservation continues.

For instance, the previous cultural practice of evil or superstitious repellents in Tembeling, where we participated in the activities, as well as with other residents was once performed in the popular Berakit Malay Old House, a house of history that was quite memorable. After the practice, the traditional Malay preacher said:

The spirit and superstition lived in that Malay style Old House was not our Malay people. That's the Dabo person who owns it.

Dabo is an indigenous Malay ethnic group from Daik (Swastiwi & Simbolon, 2021), who migrated to Bintan to work as coconut traders during the colonial period. One of the Dabo's merchants, a rich man, built a house that was then known as an old Malay-styled house on Bintan Island. The house was simple, but because his family was left behind, people did not want to occupy it. Bintan Old House has become an object of tourism. Furthermore, descendants and offspring of other indigenous Malay ethnic groups live in Bintan. They are descendants (known as *Dzuriyat*, an Islamic term meaning descendants) of Malay ethnicity from Bintan Buyu village. The *dzuriyat* are historically traced to the Malay ethnic lineage of Johor, Malaysia, reflecting pattern of migration and ancestral descent. Some of these *dzuriyat* migrated to Malacca and Bintan Buyu. Thus, these three places—Johor, Malacca, and Bintan—maintain the blood-root connection of the indigenous Malay ethnicity. However, the histories and stories of Malay *dzuriyat* from the three places do not exist throughout this contemporary era; only the elders of indigenous Malay leaders continue to acknowledge these blood ties. Those who migrated to Johor and Malacca built familial clans and disconnected their ties to those who remained in Bintan. It seems that the descendants' ego is the cause of familial disconnection in this matter (Fauzi, 2025).

The participants confirmed that the descendants of indigenous Malay families argued about their parents' inheritances, especially their family wealth. Among those Malay communities, the inheritance is commonly passes to the male heirs, who assume control of the family businesses. These male heirs hold a more important position than females. Male heirs within the hereditary ruling lineage, and the role of women within the Malay community has been acknowledged. The term '*Walak*' is known as a mother's line. However, *Walak* or mother's line is quite different from the father's line (patrilineal descent) because *Walak* is not inherited in terms of family wealth or businesses. Ascendants (*dzuriyat*) who inherited *Walak*, comprising authority and social standing through the maternal line—were considered stronger and wiser than those who inherited solely material wealth. Those descendants who received *Walak* could usually become the leader or royal king of the Malay Kingdoms, although the heirs and *Walak* descendants most of the time do not match and are in conflict with the power holder.

Some indigenous Malay *dzuriyat* married Chinese migrants in Bintan. In the area of China's village in Bintan, mixed-marriage couples of Malay and Chinese origin, and their descendants, live. The first Chinese people in Bintan were poor people who were forced to work in the Bintan gambier plantations. Gambier is an astringent extract from a tropical Asian plant. During our visits to Bintan and Batam, we saw many Chinese people, symbols, signs, amenities, and food stalls such as Chinese temples, bilingual Chinese-Malay signs, Chinese restaurants, herbal medicine shops, and stalls selling dim sum, noodles, and traditional snacks (*kueh lapis*, *nian gao*, *youtiaou*). Chinese migration to the Riau, Bintan, and Batam Islands occurred during the Dutch colonial era. Chinese Malay ethnic communities have become inhabitants of the islands, and the population is significant such as cross-border tourism in Bintan, supported by Batam Island, should become a potential sector for development on the bordered Islands of Indonesia. This study suggests that the concept of bridging memories to model the cross-border tourism in Bintan is essential for Malay culture. Tourism departments supported by local universities and leaders should be able to conserve, revitalize, and promote the authenticity of Malay culture and practices that can be utilized to attract foreigners and tourists outside Indonesia. With frequent visitors from Singapore and Malaysia and easy access from both ferry terminals, people visiting Bintan Island should not only be directed to stay and enjoy the luxurious resorts of Bintan Resorts, but they should also visit and stay in the center of Bintan, that is, Tanjung Pinang, and other bordered villages. This study underscores the continued commitment of the Bintan Tourism Department and related agencies to support and promote pre-modern histories and narratives. Their efforts aim to preserve stories and traditions from periods preceding modern state formation, ensuring that these cultural heritage assets remain safeguarded

today. The migration histories and stories that occurred in the past and are less forgotten by contemporary generations must be restored through various media, such as digital artifacts and other modern promotional tools and devices. In addition, public facilities and convenient access to other tourism sites in the villages around Bintan must be improved. The road quality from the Tanjung Pinang port to villages and tourism spots is well developed. The small villages are accessible to tourists via black metallic roads. However, these long roads do not have facilities such as rest areas, fuel stations, shops, or cafés. Village development still requires further improvement, as some areas remained unpaved with red earth and flooding continued to affect the main roads leading to the village centers. Moreover, some beaches, still natural and beautiful, are not well maintained and managed by the Department of Tourism and people living nearby.

## Conclusions

Bintan Island, situated near the Indonesia-Malaysia border, offers a distinctive opportunity for the development of cross-border tourism. Bintan's proximity to Singapore and Malaysia, strong cultural connections to Malay culture, and convenient transit links position it as a potential major tourism hotspot, comparable to locations such as Bali and Yogyakarta. The island's indigenous populations, especially those residing in isolated settlements, such as Berakit, Pengudang, and Teluk Sebung, preserve strong cultural and familial connections with adjacent regions in Malaysia. These cultural links, along with Bintan's rich history of Malay customs, food, and historical people, provide a robust foundation for formulating a tourism strategy focused on cultural authenticity. Despite its potential, the tourism industry in Bintan remains underdeveloped. Infrastructural obstacles and limited government engagement have impeded the implementation of border tourism efforts. At present, tourism is governed by the Department of Education and Culture, which detaches itself from comprehensive economic and tourist-oriented development. This disconnection has led to inadequate coordinated policy support and insufficient advocacy for local history.

While tourism may jeopardize indigenous identities, it also presents the potential for community empowerment and cultural preservation. A cooperative strategy between local historians, scholars, and indigenous leaders is crucial for documenting and promoting Bintan's historical and cultural narratives, many of which are endangered. Initiatives to rejuvenate these narratives using digital media and modern marketing strategies may significantly contribute to fostering sustainable tourism that honors and celebrates Bintan's history. To fully realize Bintan's potential as a cross-border tourist destination, the government should prioritize infrastructure improvements, enhance institutional assistance, and advocate for cultural preservation initiatives. Highlighting Malay cultural identity as the foundation of tourism development safeguards local traditions and provides a unique attraction within the Southeast Asian tourist sector.

This study is however limited by its qualitative and exploratory nature, relying primarily on observational and interview-based data from selected indigenous communities. The focus on a few isolated settlements may not fully capture the diverse experiences and perceptions of all Bintan residents. Additionally, the research does not extensively analyze quantitative economic or tourism performance data, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to broader tourism policy and development strategies. Temporal constraints also limit the study's ability to evaluate long-term impacts of tourism initiatives on local communities and cultural preservation. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative data to comprehensively assess the economic, social, and cultural impacts of cross-border tourism in Bintan. Comparative studies between Bintan and other regional border tourism destinations, such as Johor in Malaysia or Batam in Indonesia, could provide valuable lessons for policy formulation and sustainable tourism planning. Further investigation into the role of digital media, modern marketing strategies, and community-based tourism initiatives could enhance the practical applicability of research findings. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of cultural preservation and community empowerment over time would offer deeper insights into the sustainability of Bintan's tourism development. With strategic planning, investment, and collaborative efforts, Bintan has the potential to evolve into a culturally affluent, economically significant, and globally

recognized cross-border tourism destination, highlighting Malay cultural identity as the foundation for sustainable development.

## Ethical approval

This research has been ethically approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee under the number 10715/B/UN3.FISIP/III/PT./2024 dated 25 August 2024.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research project was funded by Universitas Airlangga under decree No. 557/UN3//2023 and the contract No.1058/UN3.LPPM/PT.01.03/2023

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Photo of the Author

This photo was captured by the Team Public Relation of Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga.

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