



Tradition, Transition, and Identity: The Malay Literature in North Sumatra

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the historical evolution and cultural significance of Malay literature in North Sumatra, with particular attention to its development under the influence of regional sultanates including Deli, Langkat, Asahan, Serdang, Siak, and Aceh. Malay functioned as both a literary medium and a cultural lingua franca, facilitating the emergence of a diverse corpus encompassing oral and written forms such as *pantun*, *sinandong*, *gurindam*, *hikayat*, and *syair*. The analysis traces the transition from court-centred literary production to more popular and urban expressions, notably the emergence of the so-called “Medan novel” during the colonial period. The study also considers the preservation and reinterpretation of traditional forms in the post-independence era. Figures such as Tengku Amir Hamzah illustrate the convergence of classical Malay aesthetics with modern nationalist sentiment. Drawing on established scholarly literature, this study argues that Malay literature in North Sumatra reflects a dynamic interplay between Islamic intellectual heritage, regional identity, and cultural continuity. Despite shifts in language use and sociopolitical context, these literary traditions remain enduring expressions of Malay cultural identity in contemporary Indonesia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Malay literature in North Sumatra forms a significant component of the wider Malay literary tradition, shaped by distinctive regional dynamics and historical processes. Historically concentrated along the eastern coast and parts of Aceh, Malay-speaking communities in this region developed a corpus of literature that both contributed to and was influenced by the broader canon of classical Malay writing. Malay served as a literary medium and a regional lingua franca across the archipelago, facilitating the transmission of ideas, genres, and cultural values between courts and communities (Iskandar, 2011).

In North Sumatra, this literary heritage evolved within the political, religious, and cultural contexts of several Malay sultanates, notably those of Aceh, Deli, Langkat, Serdang, Asahan, and Siak. These courts acted as patrons of literary activity and custodians of oral traditions, enabling the growth of a rich literary culture that synthesised local narrative forms with Islamic scholarship and courtly aesthetics.

This paper traces the historical development of Malay literature in North Sumatra, from early chronicles and oral poetry to colonial-era popular fiction and post-independence expressions. By examining the evolution of major genres and their shifting functions, it explores the enduring role of Malay literature as a repository of cultural memory and a marker of regional identity.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and historical approach, combining literary interpretation with a critical review of secondary scholarship to examine the development of Malay literature in North Sumatra. The analysis draws upon academic studies, peer-reviewed articles, monographs, and anthologies that address both the broader Malay literary tradition and its regional manifestations. The focus is placed on key literary genres—such as *pantun*, *sinandong*, *syair*, and *hikayat*—and their evolution within specific historical, religious, and sociocultural contexts. Rather than relying on direct engagement with manuscript sources, the study refers to existing academic analyses of these genres, drawing on representative examples to illustrate broader patterns of continuity, adaptation, and regional identity.

Given the limited accessibility of primary manuscripts and transcribed oral texts from the region, the research is grounded in established interpretations and comparative frameworks. The objective is to trace the literary trajectory of North Sumatran Malay traditions while situating them within the wider landscape of Malay literary history and cultural expression.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The development of Malay literature in North Sumatra is deeply embedded in the region's complex socio-political history. Central to its literary flourishing were the Malay sultanates that arose along Sumatra's eastern coast and in the northern reaches of Aceh. These polities functioned not only as political entities but also as cultural centres, facilitating the production and dissemination of literary works in the Malay language.

The earliest significant developments may be traced to the Islamisation of northern Sumatra in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Sultanate of Samudera Pasai, located in present-day Aceh, is among the earliest known Malay-Muslim kingdoms and is credited with producing *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, one of the oldest extant Malay texts. This chronicle illustrates the interweaving of Islamic narratives with political legitimisation in early Malay literary expression (Iskandar, 2011). By this period, Malay had become well established as a literary language, capable of conveying both spiritual and historical knowledge.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Aceh Sultanate emerged as a prominent centre of Islamic scholarship and literary activity. Under Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–1636), Aceh attracted scholars from across the archipelago and beyond. Writers such as Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri epitomise the intellectual vitality of this period. Their writings, particularly in the forms of *syair* and religious treatises, fused Sufi metaphysics with Malay literary conventions, setting a precedent for subsequent Islamic literature in the region (Braginsky, 2004). Works such as *Bustanus Salatin* and *Hikayat Aceh* provided guidance on Islamic governance, moral conduct, and dynastic continuity, underscoring the role of literature in supporting royal authority and religious ideology.

As Aceh's influence waned during the eighteenth century, other Malay sultanates in eastern Sumatra assumed greater cultural prominence. The Siak Sultanate, though geographically situated in the Riau region, maintained close ties with North Sumatran courts and formed part of a shared Malay cultural sphere. Its court-sponsored text, *Hikayat Siak*, composed in the nineteenth century, exemplifies the continuity of the *hikayat* tradition as a medium for dynastic history and Malay-Muslim identity (Barnard, 2001).

Within North Sumatra itself, the sultanates of Deli, Langkat, Serdang, and Asahan emerged as significant centres of cultural production from the eighteenth century onwards. Although they did not attain the scholarly renown of Aceh, these polities played a vital role in maintaining and adapting Malay literary traditions. Their court cultures supported the transcription and recitation of local chronicles, adaptations of pan-Malay texts such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, and the preservation of oral literature. These works, disseminated through manuscript copying and public recitation, reinforced notions of genealogy, legitimacy, and local identity (Takari & Fadlin, 2018).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a further transformation with the expansion of colonial infrastructure and the introduction of print culture. Medan, as the centre of the Deli Sultanate and a hub of the colonial plantation economy, became an important site for literary production. Malay-language newspapers such as *Pewartu Deli* (established in 1910) created new platforms for literary expression. Alongside traditional forms, new prose genres began to emerge, including the so-called *Roman Medan*—popular novels and short stories reflecting urban life, modern anxieties, and incipient nationalist sentiment (Suryadi, 2019).

Across these successive phases, Malay literature in North Sumatra adapted to shifting political structures and cultural influences. From Islamic chronicles and courtly epics to mass-produced urban fiction, literature functioned as both a mirror of social change and a vehicle for articulating evolving forms of regional and cultural identity.

4. LITERARY TRADITIONS AND GENRES

Malay literature in North Sumatra encompasses a diverse array of oral and written forms. While many of these genres are shared with the wider Malay world, they often reflect distinctive regional characteristics. Broadly, these traditions may be categorised into two principal streams: oral literature—such as *pantun*, *gurindam*, *seloka*, and *sinandong*—and classical written literature—including *hikayat*, *syair*, and *nazam*. These categories frequently intersect; oral narratives were often transcribed, and written texts were regularly performed aloud. Thematically, North Sumatran Malay literature embraces didactic, historical, romantic, and devotional content, serving both aesthetic and social purposes.

Among the most enduring oral forms is the *pantun*, a rhymed quatrain with an ABAB structure, noted for its metaphorical richness and expressive concision. In North Sumatran Malay communities, *pantun* have long featured in ceremonial exchanges, courtship rituals, and everyday speech. They are commonly used at weddings, in verbal contests, and to convey proverbial wisdom. Their adaptability and brevity have contributed to their continued relevance across generations. Closely related are *gurindam*—two-line aphoristic poems that convey ethical or philosophical insights—and *seloka*, typically humorous or satirical quatrains derived

from proverbial sources. These forms have historically facilitated the transmission of moral instruction, social commentary, and humour within both aristocratic and village settings (Takari & Fadlin, 2018).

A particularly significant genre in the North Sumatran context is the *sinandong*, an oral tradition that integrates song, poetic structure, and melodic performance. Typically sung in stylised rhythms, *sinandong* holds a special place in the oral culture of Malay communities in regions such as Asahan, Langkat, and Tanjungbalai. Fariani (2018) identifies several thematic subtypes, including *sinandong nasib* (songs of fate), *sinandong anak* (children's songs or lullabies), *sinandong nelayan* (fishermen's chants), and *sinandong muda-mudi* (youth songs). Each variant serves a distinct social or ritual function, from soothing children to conveying emotional reflection or communal values. Certain forms, such as *sinandong pengobatan*, are used in traditional healing rituals, underscoring the genre's integration into spiritual life. Officially recognised as part of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage, *sinandong* continues to be performed at cultural events and remains a marker of Malay identity in the region (Fariani, 2018).

In the written tradition, the *hikayat* genre—narrative prose that merges legend, history, and moral instruction—has long occupied a central role. Texts such as *Hikayat Raja Pasai* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, though originating beyond North Sumatra, were widely disseminated through manuscript culture and became embedded in local literary repertoires (Iskandar, 2011; Braginsky, 2004). These works were often performed in royal courts or village gatherings, fulfilling both didactic and entertainment functions. Regionally rooted examples such as *Hikayat Deli* or *Hikayat Asahan*, though less widely circulated, played a key role in constructing dynastic genealogies and reinforcing political legitimacy (Takari & Fadlin, 2018). Such texts frequently trace noble lineages to Islamic or mytho-historical figures, embedding local history within a broader sacred narrative framework.

The *syair*, a narrative poetic form composed in monorhyming quatrains, was introduced through Persian and Arabic influence and became a dominant literary mode from the seventeenth century onwards. Employed to express religious themes, moral allegories, romantic tales, and historical episodes, *syair* enjoyed widespread popularity in both manuscript and oral performance. In North Sumatra, one of the most locally resonant examples is *Syair Puteri Hijau*, a poetic retelling of the Deli legend of the Green Princess, who defends her kingdom through supernatural transformation. The tale survives in both prose and verse and functions as a symbol of regional heritage (Takari & Fadlin, 2018; Rahman et al., 2009). Its variations across Karo, Acehese, and Simalungun traditions attest to its deep cultural resonance and adaptability.

The *nazam*, another didactic poetic form often used in religious education, typically consists of rhymed couplets. While less elaborate than *syair*, *nazam* played a key role in disseminating Islamic teachings, recounting the lives of prophets, and conveying ethical guidance. Commonly used in surau (Islamic schools or prayer halls), *nazam* facilitated the internalisation of religious knowledge, particularly among children and rural populations (Braginsky, 2004).

In addition to these formal genres, North Sumatran Malay literature is rich in oral tales, legends, and fables. These narratives—ranging from animal fables such as *Kucing dengan Harimau* to local legends linked to geographic features—have been transmitted orally across generations and are often preserved in regional storytelling traditions and cultural memory. These stories serve not only as entertainment but also as vehicles for ecological awareness, moral education, and cultural memory (Takari & Fadlin, 2018). They reflect a syncretic blend of Islamic, indigenous, and cross-cultural motifs, often embedding local wisdom in metaphorical or allegorical form.

Collectively, the literary traditions of North Sumatra reveal a dynamic interplay between orality and textuality, the sacred and the secular, and the local and the transregional. They illustrate a literary culture rooted in classical Malay aesthetics yet responsive to local experience and context. Their longevity and adaptability underscore their central role in the articulation and preservation of Malay cultural identity across time.

5. MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

The early to mid-twentieth century marked a pivotal transition in the literary landscape of North Sumatra. This period witnessed the transformation of Malay literature from a court-based and predominantly oral tradition into a more urban, diversified, and increasingly printed body of work. Several factors contributed to this shift, including colonial infrastructural development, the growth of Medan as a commercial and administrative hub, and the emergence of a literate middle class. These dynamics facilitated the diffusion of new literary genres and reconfigured the role of literature in Malay society.

One of the most influential figures of this transitional period was Tengku Amir Hamzah (1911–1946), a prince of the Langkat Sultanate and a central contributor to the *Poedjangga Baroe* literary movement. Educated in both traditional and Western institutions, Amir Hamzah brought classical Malay poetic sensibilities into dialogue with modernist and nationalist thought. His poetry, exemplified in the collection *Nyanyi Sunyi* (1937), reflects a synthesis of Malay literary aesthetics, Islamic spirituality, and personal introspection. Though writing in what was becoming standardised Indonesian, Amir retained the melodic structures, imagery, and diction of classical Malay literature, rendering his work emblematic of continuity within change. He is often regarded as a figure who bridged the classical and the modern, the regional and the national (Sweeney, 1987).

During the 1920s and 1930s, Medan emerged as a dynamic literary centre, second only to Batavia in terms of print activity. The rise of local publishers and newspapers fostered the development of popular Malay-language fiction, including a prolific body of work now referred to as *Roman Medan*. These urban novels and serialised stories, often printed in inexpensive booklets or

newspapers, reflected contemporary themes such as romance, social mobility, and moral conflict. They diverged from earlier court literature in style and tone, favouring colloquial language, urban settings, and a brisk narrative pace suited to mass readership. Though generally classified as popular literature, *Roman Medan* texts served as a medium through which urban Malays articulated their experience of modernity, colonialism, and cultural change (Suryadi, 2019).

The popularity of these works coincided with a broadening of literary participation. Writing was no longer the exclusive domain of palace poets or religious scholars; teachers, journalists, civil servants, and members of the emerging middle class entered the literary sphere. Medan's multi-ethnic environment further enriched its literary culture, with Malay-language texts engaging not only Malay authors and audiences, but also writers from Minangkabau, Batak, Chinese Peranakan, and Javanese backgrounds. This cosmopolitanism blurred ethnic boundaries and fostered a shared literary space in which Malay served as a cultural lingua franca.

The achievement of Indonesian independence in 1945 introduced a new dynamic. Malay, in its standardised form as Bahasa Indonesia, became the national language, and with this development, literary production in regional Malay dialects—including those of North Sumatra—gradually declined. Nevertheless, the cultural foundations laid by earlier Malay literature in the region continued to inform national literary identity. Writers such as Amir Hamzah were incorporated into the canon of Indonesian literature, while motifs and narrative forms rooted in Malay tradition persisted, albeit often rearticulated in the national language.

The decline of the traditional sultanates, particularly following the social upheaval of the 1946 *revolusi sosial* in East Sumatra, marked the end of royal patronage as a dominant force in literary production. Yet oral traditions remained resilient, especially in rural and semi-urban communities. Forms such as the *pantun*, *sinandong*, and other performative genres retained their social and ceremonial functions. At weddings, *adat* ceremonies, and communal gatherings, these forms continued to mediate social relations, convey wisdom, and affirm identity.

In the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, efforts to preserve and revitalise traditional Malay literature in North Sumatra have gained momentum. Cultural organisations such as the *Majelis Adat Budaya Melayu Indonesia* (MABMI) and academic institutions, including the University of North Sumatra, have played a central role in documenting oral literature, republishing classical texts, and sponsoring public performances. Scholars such as Takari and Fadlin (2018) have made substantial contributions to the recovery and analysis of the region's literary heritage. Their work has helped integrate local literary forms into broader discourses on Indonesian cultural history.

Particularly notable is the institutional recognition of *Sinandong Asahan* as a form of intangible cultural heritage. As documented by Fariani (2018), the *sinandong* tradition—especially in Asahan Regency—remains vibrant, performed at cultural festivals and community events, and transmitted across generations. Its inclusion in the national inventory of cultural heritage reflects a broader commitment to acknowledging regional diversity within Indonesian identity. The *sinandong*'s melodic and poetic features continue to resonate with audiences, exemplifying the expressive capacity of Malay oral tradition.

Simultaneously, there have been creative adaptations and hybridisations. Contemporary writers and performers occasionally incorporate *pantun* or *syair* structures into modern Indonesian-language poetry and theatre. Local legends, such as that of *Puteri Hijau*, have been reimagined in novels, schoolbooks, and multimedia formats, thereby ensuring their preservation in public memory. In popular music, particularly *pop Melayu*, echoes of traditional poetic forms and motifs remain discernible, indicating the continuing influence of classical genres even within commercial entertainment.

Nonetheless, significant challenges persist. The predominance of Indonesian in education, media, and formal discourse has marginalised regional Malay dialects. In urban areas, younger generations are often unfamiliar with traditional forms, and the settings in which oral literature thrives are narrowing. The survival of these traditions depends on both grassroots cultural practice and institutional support.

In sum, the modern and contemporary trajectory of Malay literature in North Sumatra is marked by adaptation and resilience. While the royal courts that once nurtured literary activity have disappeared, the genres they cultivated have persisted—transformed, reinterpreted, and, in some cases, revitalised. The incorporation of Malay literary heritage into the national narrative of Indonesian literature has ensured its continued relevance, while local efforts to preserve traditional forms attest to their enduring cultural significance.

6. CONCLUSION

The historical and literary development of Malay literature in North Sumatra reveals a complex process of continuity, adaptation, and cultural resilience. Rooted in Islamic intellectual traditions and shaped by the political authority of regional sultanates such as Aceh, Deli, Langkat, Serdang, Asahan, and Siak, this literary heritage encompasses a broad spectrum of genres—oral and written, sacred and secular, courtly and communal. While closely aligned with the wider Malay literary tradition, the corpus that emerged in North Sumatra developed in response to distinct regional dynamics, including the spread of Islam, colonial transformations, urbanisation, and postcolonial nation-building.

From early Islamic chronicles and Sufi-inspired *syair* produced in Aceh, to genealogical *hikayat* in Deli and the melodic *sinandong* traditions of Asahan, the region's literary forms have served both aesthetic and functional purposes. They have preserved local histories, transmitted ethical teachings, fulfilled ceremonial roles, and articulated communal identity. As sultanates declined in

the twentieth century, literary activity gradually shifted to urban contexts, particularly Medan, where popular prose genres such as the *Roman Medan* emerged. These new forms reflected modern themes while retaining traces of traditional narrative conventions.

Figures such as Tengku Amir Hamzah epitomise the evolution of North Sumatran Malay literature, bridging classical idioms and modern expression. His oeuvre exemplifies how regional literary aesthetics could be integrated into broader currents of Indonesian nationalism and modernism. The continued resonance of traditional genres and themes in his poetry illustrates the enduring cultural relevance of the classical Malay canon.

Despite contemporary challenges—including the marginalisation of regional dialects and the weakening of oral transmission—Malay literary traditions in North Sumatra remain resilient. Cultural institutions, academic researchers, and local communities have played key roles in documenting and revitalising forms such as the *pantun* and *sinandong*. These efforts have contributed to the preservation of literary heritage while reinforcing regional identity within the framework of a diverse Indonesian nation-state.

In sum, Malay literature in North Sumatra stands not only as a reflection of the region's historical and cultural experience, but also as a living tradition. It continues to serve as a medium through which local identity is expressed, history is remembered, and the past remains meaningfully engaged with the present.

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