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Sultanate of Bilah: Cultural Heritage and Its Impact on Local Identity in Labuhanbatu

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A B S T R A C T

The aim of this research is to determine the impact of the legacy of the Bilah Sultanate on local identity in Labuhanbatu today. The Bilah Sultanate was an Islamic kingdom that was founded in the 17th century and played an important role in the spread of religion, culture and political influence in the region. However, over time, traces of the history and cultural heritage of the Bilah Sultanate have experienced significant fading. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through observation and in-depth interviews with descendants of the sultanate, traditional leaders and local communities. The research results show that although physical heritage such as mosques and royal artifacts still exist, the preservation of intangible cultural heritage such as the Pilando dance, Malay humming, and culinary specialties such as raja pudding and labar-buas are starting to be forgotten. The lack of documentation, weak involvement of local governments, and lack of understanding by the younger generation have resulted in a disconnection in the collective memory of local identity that is rooted in the Sultanate of Bilah.

1. Introduction

Sumatra Island is a region rich in the history of kingdoms and sultanates, yet it has received relatively little attention from historians particularly North Sumatra, which holds numerous traces of the Malay kingdoms (Dora, 2022). One such region is Labuhanbatu Regency, once home to three sultanates: the Sultanate of Kota Pinang, the Sultanate of Panai, and the Sultanate of Bilah (Umi Kalsum, 2023). Among the three, the Sultanate of Bilah is the least known to the wider public due to the scarcity of historical documentation and the near extinction of its physical and cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage reflects the history, values, and local wisdom of a community (Sertiawan & Dora, 2024). It serves not only as a symbol of pride but also as a

unifying force for collective identity, shaping a community's worldview, way of life, and social practices (Azizah & Khakim, 2024). Amid the powerful currents of globalization and modernization, the role of cultural heritage has become increasingly crucial in safeguarding the authenticity of local identity, ensuring it remains rooted in its historical foundation (Mariani & Akbar, 2024).

Labuhanbatu, as one of the regencies in North Sumatra, possesses a rich cultural heritage born from ethnic diversity and a long history of local kingdoms, such as the Sultanates of Bilah and Panai (Fatmawati & Muktarruddin, 2022). The region's cultural heritage encompasses various forms, including traditional architectural structures, customary law systems, performing arts, languages, religious rituals, and traditional ceremonies (Khasanah & Nuria, 2021). However, these cultural assets are increasingly under threat due to a lack of awareness among younger generations, the repurposing of cultural spaces, and weak policies on preservation and protection at the local government level (Rayana & Grahita, 2024).

The Sultanate of Bilah, established in 1630, played a significant role in the spread of Islam and the development of culture, governance, and the economy in Labuhanbatu. Over time, however, its cultural and historical legacy has faded. This deterioration has been exacerbated by the lack of historical documentation, natural disasters such as floods that damaged archives, and the minimal attention given by both the younger generation and local authorities to the preservation of this cultural heritage.

The historical legacy of the Sultanate of Bilah has, in fact, had a profound influence on the local identity of the Labuhanbatu community, as reflected in the use of the Malay language, traditional customs, and local cuisine. Unfortunately, much of this heritage is now forgotten and no longer clearly recognized by the current generation leaving behind only the ruins of a neglected palace amid palm oil plantations. This phenomenon reveals a disconnect between cultural heritage and the community's understanding of its own identity.

Previous studies, such as that of (Rambe & Batubara, 2022), have explored the history of the Sultanate of Bilah during the Dutch colonial era, focusing on political, social, and economic interactions between the sultanate and the colonial administration. Their findings show that, despite colonial pressure, the Sultanate of Bilah managed to preserve certain cultural elements and traditions.

This research offers a different approach by highlighting the influence of the Sultanate of Bilah's cultural heritage on the local identity of the Labuhanbatu community in the modern era. Unlike earlier studies that were historical and document-based, this study employs a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews to explore the surviving cultural practices and their meanings in everyday life. Thus, this study fills a gap in the scholarship regarding the relationship between cultural heritage and contemporary local identity, and it aims to contribute to cultural preservation and the strengthening of historical identity awareness in the Labuhanbatu community.

The objective is to trace the community's understanding of the Sultanate of Bilah's heritage and to examine how they maintain or have forgotten this legacy in their daily lives. It is hoped that the findings of this research will offer both academic and social contributions toward the preservation of local culture and help rebuild collective awareness of the importance of safeguarding inherited historical identity.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the social, cultural, and historical phenomena related to the legacy of the Bilah Sultanate and its impact on the local identity of the Labuhanbatu community. This approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of meanings, perceptions, and experiences of informants in a detailed and contextual manner. In line with (Creswell, 2020), the qualitative approach is naturalistic, meaning that it is conducted in a natural setting without manipulation or interference from the researcher. In this approach, the researcher acts as the main instrument (human instrument) in the data collection and analysis process.

The data sources in this study consist of both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through field observations and in-depth interviews with informants who possess knowledge about the Bilah Sultanate. Observations were conducted at historical sites such as the former palace, royal tombs, and areas that once served as centers of sultanate activity. Meanwhile, interviews were conducted to gather the perspectives and experiences of informants regarding cultural heritage and its influence on local identity.

Informants were selected purposively based on their direct relevance to the research topic. They were categorized into three groups: key informants (direct descendants of the Bilah Sultanate), main informants (community figures such as village heads or traditional leaders), and additional informants (local residents who continue to practice Malay traditions). The number of informants was not predetermined, but followed the principle of data saturation when the information obtained began to repeat and no new significant data emerged. In total, this study involved approximately 14 informants, consisting of 2 key informants, 5 main informants, and 7 additional informants.

Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained through document analysis of various sources such as historical documents, archives, photographs, notes, journals, and other relevant academic literature. This documentation study served to strengthen and complement the findings from observations and interviews. For data analysis, the study employed the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Moleong, 2000). The analytical process was conducted interactively and continuously from the beginning of data collection through to the final stages of writing.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study applied four commonly used evaluation criteria in qualitative research: credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity). Data

and source triangulation techniques were also used to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the information obtained. Theoretically, this study is grounded in Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory. According to Tajfel, an individual's identity is largely formed through their membership in particular social groups in this case, the Labuhanbatu community with historical and cultural ties to the Bilah Sultanate (Sugiyono, 2022). This theory is used to analyze how cultural heritage influences the construction of local identity within the context of contemporary social life.

3. Results and Discussion

Cultural Heritage from the Sultanate of Bilah

Field observations revealed that the cultural heritage of the Bilah Sultanate continues to leave a strong imprint on the lives of the people of Labuhanbatu, both in tangible and intangible forms. This heritage encompasses historical documents, physical sites, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, traditional cuisine, and symbolic markers of Malay identity.

Tangible remnants of the Bilah Sultanate include historical documents such as the book *Selayang Pandang Sejarah Labuhanbatu* by Raja Azman Syarif, historic mosques, the tombs of the sultan's descendants, ruins of the former palace, and various household items and traditional weapons now held by royal descendants. Although these sites and artifacts are still recognized, many are poorly maintained and at risk of disappearing due to a lack of preservation efforts.

On the other hand, intangible cultural heritage reflects a vibrant array of living traditions, such as the *Pilando* dance, ritual offerings at the Bilah River, the coronation ceremony of the sultan, as well as traditional wedding and healing ceremonies. Some spiritual practices, such as bathing in the Bilah River for healing or to improve one's fortune, are still believed and performed by segments of the community. Culinary traditions like *labar buas-buas* and *puding jahudi*, once exclusively served within the royal court, have now become local cultural identifiers passed down through generations.

Additionally, traditional clothing, symbolic colors (yellow, red, green), and the emblem of the Bilah Sultanate remain recognized, although their meanings are not fully understood by the younger generation. This heritage indicates that the Bilah Sultanate is not merely a historical entity, but a living source of cultural identity for the people of Labuhanbatu.

However, the findings also highlight a degradation in the understanding and practice of these traditions, making preservation and cultural education urgent needs to sustain the local identity rooted in the legacy of the Bilah Sultanate. These observational findings are consistent with the results of in-depth interviews, and the researcher has summarized the cultural heritage findings from the Bilah Sultanate in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Interview Regarding the Cultural Heritage of the Bilah Sultanate

No.	Informant	Summary of Response
1	AH	Traditional dances are taught at Bilah Hilir Dance Studio. A local dish is often served to welcome guests, though unnamed.
2	AR	Knowledge of the Sultanate is limited. Revival efforts failed due to lack of regional government support.
3	RMA	Artifacts are with certain individuals. Traditions like *melangkahi* and *merisik* still exist. Local dish: *anyang*.
4	RH	*Tari Pilando* dance and chants are unique. Dishes include *puding raja*, *botok-botok*, *labar anyang buas-buas*, and *terubuk fish*.
5	R	*Tari Pilando* is for welcoming officials. Traditional foods like *ikan gamak* and *puding raja* are served during Ramadan.
6	RPA	Rituals at river and palace still practiced. Artifacts include cannon, kris, round table. Attire: *teluk belanga*.
7	TUH	No knowledge; suggested asking Mr. Dodi for more information.
8	AM	Remaining legacy includes palace ruins and mosques. Traditional customs are no longer practiced.
9	AK	Only the grave of the last Sultan remains. Other traditions have faded.
10	U	Legacy includes mosques: Al Abbas, Sultan Adil's Mosque, and the Grand Mosque in Rantau.
11	J	Artifacts: palace terrace, cannon. Folk healing with “cannon stone.” Dishes: *anyang ayam*, *labar buas-buas*, *rasidah*.
12	D	Mosques and cannons remain. Palace and office no longer exist. Attire: *teluk belanga*. Dishes: *gule masam*, *puding jahudi*.
13	DR	Limited knowledge; still practices wedding customs and *nasi ulam-ulam*.
14	ZL	Grand Mosque built in 1933 by Sultan Adil Bidar Alamsyah, funded through local tax revenue.

Findings from field observations and interviews reveal that the cultural heritage of the Bilah Sultanate continues to leave a strong imprint on the lives of the people of Labuhanbatu, both in tangible and intangible forms. Tangible heritage includes historical documents, mosques, royal tombs, cannons, household items, and remnants of the palace, though many are now poorly maintained and at risk of disappearing. Some of these artifacts are currently held by descendants of the royal family or respected community figures.

Meanwhile, the intangible heritage is reflected in surviving cultural traditions and practices such as the *Tari Pilando* dance, traditional wedding ceremonies, spiritual rituals at the Bilah River, and royal culinary specialties like *labar buas-buas*, *anyang*, *puding raja*, *terubuk fish*, and *botok-botok*. These traditions function not only as markers of cultural identity but also as instruments for preserving the core values of Malay heritage.

Cultural symbols such as traditional attire (*teluk belanga*, *songket* cloth), signature colors (yellow, green, and red), and the emblem of the Sultanate remain recognizable, though understanding of their significance has diminished among the younger generation. Several informants expressed limited knowledge or awareness

of the history and values of this heritage, while others continue to preserve it within family or small community contexts.

In general, the cultural legacy of the Bilah Sultanate remains alive but has undergone significant degradation due to a lack of preservation efforts, minimal government support, and weak cultural education. Therefore, revitalization, documentation, and educational initiatives are urgently needed to sustain the local cultural identity rooted in the legacy of the Bilah Sultanate. The field observations and in-depth interviews in this study are further supported by visual documentation, particularly a photograph capturing a magnificent building constructed in traditional Malay architectural style. This image represents a physical manifestation of the Bilah Sultanate's cultural heritage, which still holds high historical and symbolic value for the people of Labuhanbatu.

The building in the photo features hallmark characteristics of Malay architecture, most notably the multi-tiered pyramidal roof (*atap tumpang*), commonly found in royal palaces or religious sites in Malay kingdoms. This architectural style not only provides functional protection against the tropical climate but also reflects social hierarchy and status. The symmetrical and monumental structure captured in the documentation further suggests its role as a center of power or religious activity, such as a royal palace or grand mosque.

This visual documentation serves as an essential element in validating field data and reinforces the narrative of the existence and condition of the Bilah Sultanate's physical heritage. The architectural beauty and historical significance recorded in the image symbolize a glorious past that still resonates today. These findings emphasize the urgent need to preserve historical buildings not only as witnesses to local civilization but also as guardians of the cultural identity of the Labuhanbatu community, which continues to evolve amid the currents of modernity. Supporting documentation in the form of the photograph of the Bilah Sultanate Palace is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. The Bilah Sultanate Palace

The Impact of the Cultural Heritage of the Bilah Sultanate on Local Identity in Labuhanbatu

Observational findings reveal that the cultural heritage of the Bilah Sultanate remains alive in various aspects of daily life in Labuhanbatu and significantly contributes to the formation of local identity. This heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible elements, such as historical documents, religious sites, traditional cuisine, household tools, traditional weapons, rituals, spiritual beliefs, as well as traditional clothing and cultural symbols.

Historical records, such as the book *Selayang Pandang Sejarah Labuhanbatu*, serve as important sources of knowledge that document the history of the Bilah Sultanate and the values of Malay culture. However, limited access and a lack of attention to these documents reflect weak awareness regarding the preservation of local historical literature. Culinary heritage, such as *labar buas-buas* and *puding jahudi*, not only represents the richness of local resources but also carries deep social and symbolic meaning. These dishes often appear during important occasions and have become part of the community's collective cultural expression.

Religious sites such as the *Grand Mosque of Rantauprapat* and the *Sultan Adil Bidar Alamsyah Mosque* are still actively used and maintained today. In addition, palace ruins, royal tombs, and surviving artifacts such as stone tables and traditional weapons serve as tangible reminders of the sultanate's history, although they are not yet managed in a centralized or systematic way. Traditions such as the *Tari Pilando* dance, ritual offerings at the Bilah River, and sultan coronation ceremonies reflect the continued relevance of spiritual and customary values in everyday life. Malay customs are still practiced in wedding ceremonies and traditional river bathing rituals, indicating the community's ongoing connection to ancestral traditions.

Belief in the spiritual healing abilities of the descendants of the Bilah Sultanate highlights the enduring role of spirituality in the community's worldview. Traditional attire and signature colors such as yellow, green, and red remain symbols of status and cultural identity, though their deeper symbolic meanings are gradually fading among the younger generation. Overall, the observations indicate that the cultural heritage of the Bilah Sultanate continues to play an important role in shaping the local identity of the Labuhanbatu community. However, revitalization, documentation, and educational efforts are still needed to ensure the sustainability of these values for future generations.

The Sultanate of Bilah in Labuhanbatu left behind two important legacies: historical documentation and the remains of the palace building. The documentation includes historical books, the Bilah Malay language, and colonial records that capture the role of the Sultanate in the local socio-political dynamics. These observational findings are consistent with interview results regarding the impact of the Bilah Sultanate's cultural legacy on local identity, which the researcher has summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Interviews Regarding the Impact of the Cultural Heritage of the Bilah Sultanate on Local Identity in Labuhanbatu

No	Informant	Simplified and Translated Response
1	AH	It's unfortunate that the heritage is not preserved. If it were, it could become a cultural tourism site. Some people still maintain the royal burial sites and former palace grounds. Graves are marked with yellow cloth tied to the tombstones.
2	AR	As a village head, I try to preserve local heritage by involving youth in Malay dance performances during village events. But the local government has not supported larger cultural programs, especially those related to the Sultanate. The last support was in 2020.
3	RMA	Interest in cultural heritage is fading. During big events like MTQ, dramas are performed, but they usually tell stories of other kingdoms, not Bilah. People are starting to forget local history and are more influenced by outside cultures.
4	RH	The influence of Bilah's heritage is fading. Malay elements are sometimes included in events, but only as decoration. The culture should be integrated into the arts or school curriculum to make it more meaningful.
5	R	I think Bilah's cultural heritage no longer shapes local identity. For example, a monument once had a Tepak Melayu symbol, but now it has been replaced by something unknown, showing that even the government is slowly erasing our identity.
6	RPA	We want to preserve our culture, but without government support, it's hard. We've tried several initiatives, but none have been realized. Surprisingly, other regions like Kota Pinang have succeeded.
7	TUH	There are no remains left from the Sultanate. Everything was destroyed during the revolution. Now, people don't know the history, especially the younger generation. Without physical heritage, identity slowly fades.
8	AM	The mosques are still used and the field where children play was part of the Sultanate's land. Some people still care, but many don't. Preserving these places could help the younger generation understand their roots.
9	AK	I don't think there's much influence left. Only a few mosques from that time remain.
10	U	There is still some influence. People still come to visit the royal graves, and the mosques are still used by the community.
11	J	Bilah's traditions are still part of our identity. I still follow some customs, even if not all of them fit me personally.
12	D	Our identity is half-traditional, half-modern. My grandfather used to work in the palace, so we still follow some traditions. But overall, only the mosques and one open field remain. Other cultural practices are almost gone.
13	DR	I don't know much about the Sultanate's heritage. My grandmother was always working in the fields and didn't share much. I only remember some wedding customs and traditional food like *nasi ulam-ulam*.
14	ZL	The old mosques from the Sultanate are still used and well-maintained. Their original architecture is mostly preserved, with only a few extensions added.

Meanwhile, the remnants of the palace, such as the palace kitchen, still appear as evidence of past grandeur, although in an incomplete condition. Additionally, customs and cultures that are still practiced today by the local residents play a significant role in shaping the local identity of the Labuhanbatu community. These legacies serve as symbols of pride in the Islamic Malay cultural heritage and form the foundation for the preservation of customary values and the historical

consciousness of the local society. The supporting data below is presented by the researcher as supporting documentation in image 2 below.

Figure 2. Documentation of the Impact of the Cultural Heritage of the Bilah Sultanate on Local Identity in Labuhanbatu

The findings of this study reveal that the cultural heritage of the Bilah Sultanate is not merely a relic of the past but continues to live on and shape the daily lives of the people in Labuhanbatu through various forms artifacts, cultural practices, and belief systems. These findings align with the views of (Murtono & Wahyudi, 2024) on *cultural memory*, in which local identity is constructed through an ongoing dialogue between the past and the present.

In the context of preserving historical documents such as *Selayang Pandang Sejarah Labuhanbatu* by Raja Azman Syarif, this study finds a significant gap between the document's value as a source of identity and the limited access and attention it currently receives. This is supported by (Ahmad & Rahayu, 2024), who emphasize the importance of local historical documentation as a foundation for building collective consciousness. Without preserving local literature, communities risk losing historical traces that underpin their identity.

The culinary aspects of Bilah Sultanate culture, such as *labar buas-buas* and *puding jahudi*, serve not only as food but also as social symbols within community interactions. As (Evanty & Simon, 2025) suggest, traditional cuisine represents group identity and acts as a medium for transmitting cultural values. In this context, the people of Labuhanbatu use food as a means to reinforce their cultural identity and foster social solidarity.

Findings regarding religious sites and physical remnants of the Sultanate further strengthen the argument for the importance of symbolic spaces in the formation of identity. Sites such as the Grand Mosque of Rantauprapat, Saba Mosque, and palace ruins function not only as physical structures but also as monuments of collective memory. This aligns with (Bayu Aulia, 2024) concept of *lieux de mémoire*—places of memory that link historical narratives with contemporary cultural existence.

Traditional practices such as *Tari Pilando*, river rituals, and the coronation of sultans reflect the role of culture as a tool of social continuity. Research by (Ika Purnamasari, 2024) shows that traditional rituals are not merely symbolic acts but also strategies of resistance against cultural homogenization brought by modernization. Through these traditions, the people of Labuhanbatu demonstrate how cultural heritage can serve as a means of preserving authenticity in an ever-changing world.

Spirituality also emerges as a crucial dimension in this study's findings. Beliefs in the healing abilities of the Sultan's descendants and the practice of ritual bathing in the Bilah River show that spiritual traditions remain relevant and alive in the modern community. This is supported by the study of (Ineru & Kusdiwanggo, 2024), which asserts that local spiritual beliefs can coexist with formal religious practices and form part of the community's spiritual identity.

However, alongside this cultural continuity, the study also identifies signs of decline: the fading symbolic meanings of traditional clothing, inconsistent documentation efforts, and a lack of cultural education among younger generations. These concerns echo the warning of (Ilham & Tobing, 2025), who argue that the preservation of local culture is only possible when communities are empowered through education and inclusive cultural policies.

In conclusion, this research reinforces the argument that cultural heritage is not a passive entity but a dynamic and living force within society. The culture of the Bilah Sultanate functions as a *cultural compass*, offering direction and meaning to the people of Labuhanbatu in shaping their identity amidst the pressures of globalization. Therefore, preservation efforts must go beyond the physical conservation of heritage sites and engage in educational, documentary, and participatory strategies to ensure that this culture remains a shared legacy across generations.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that the Bilah Sultanate once served as a center of political, cultural, and social power in the Labuhanbatu region of East Sumatra. Its legacy can still be traced through physical remains such as mosques, former palace sites, and cultural artifacts, as well as intangible heritage including traditional dance, cuisine, and oral traditions. Unfortunately, existing preservation efforts remain sporadic, individual in nature, and lack institutional support from government authorities. The absence of formal policies, the lack of a dedicated museum, and the minimal integration of local culture within the education system have accelerated the erosion of Malay Bilah identity especially among the younger generation. This situation is further worsened by the diminishing socio-political role of the Sultanate's descendants, internal conflicts, and the dominance of external cultures brought about by modernization. Today, the cultural heritage of Bilah faces the threat of extinction both physically and symbolically. Therefore, this study underscores the urgent need for cultural revitalization through collaboration among

royal descendants, local government, educational institutions, and the wider community. The Bilah Sultanate is not merely a historical entity but a foundational component of local identity that must be valued and preserved sustainably.

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