

Bridging Two Islamic Worlds: Malay-Ottoman Relations, Governance and Civilizational Exchange in The Malacca Sultanate

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800052>

Received: 11 August 2026; Accepted: 17 August 2026; Published: 25 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine Malay-Ottoman relations by focusing on diplomacy, governance, Islamic political networks, and civilizational exchange, and to assess their significance in the development of Islamic civilization in the Malay world. The historical relationship between the Malacca Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire represents an important dimension of interregional Islamic relations during the early modern period. A qualitative research approach was employed through document analysis of historical records, scholarly works, archival materials, and relevant secondary sources to trace the nature and development of Malay-Ottoman relations. The analysis situates these connections within the broader geopolitical context of European expansion and changing power relations in the Indian Ocean. The findings indicate that shared Islamic identity and diplomatic engagement contributed to transregional networks encompassing political authority, religious knowledge, security, trade, and cultural interaction. The relationship extended beyond formal diplomatic contacts by facilitating the exchange of ideas and practices related to Islamic governance, political legitimacy, diplomacy, and civilizational development. Malacca's strategic position as a major center of trade and Islamic learning further strengthened its role as a bridge between Southeast Asia and the wider Muslim world. The study concludes that Malay-Ottoman relations should be understood as part of a broader Islamic civilizational network that transcended geographical boundaries and connected political, religious, economic, and cultural spheres. This historical relationship demonstrates how interregional Islamic networks contributed to the development of governance, diplomacy, and civilizational identity in the Malay world.

Keywords: Malacca Sultanate; Ottoman Empire; Islamic Governance; Diplomacy; Civilizational Exchange

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Malay world cannot be fully understood in isolation from the wider development of Islamic civilization. From the fifteenth century onwards, the Malay Archipelago became increasingly connected to broader Islamic networks through maritime trade, religious scholarship, diplomacy, political interaction, and the movement of people and ideas. Within this regional transformation, the Malacca Sultanate emerged as a major centre of commerce and Islamic culture in Southeast Asia. Its strategic location along the Strait of Malacca enabled it to connect the Malay Archipelago with India, the Middle East, China, and other parts of the Indian Ocean world (Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Reid, 1988). However, Malacca's historical significance should not be reduced to its role as a commercial entrepot. Its importance also derived from its position as a political and religious centre where Islamic identity, Malay kingship, commercial networks, and cultural exchange interacted in shaping the development of the Malay world.

The emergence of Malacca as an Islamic sultanate was closely associated with wider processes of Islamisation, state formation, and political transformation in Southeast Asia. The adoption and institutionalisation of Islam

among the ruling elite contributed to the construction of political legitimacy and strengthened Malacca's links with Muslim societies beyond the region. Islamic identity became increasingly connected with rulership, law, diplomacy, social organisation, and cultural identity. Milner (1982) explains Malay political culture through the concept of *kerajaan*, in which the ruler constituted the symbolic and political centre of the social order. Reid (1993), meanwhile, demonstrates that the expansion of Islam in Southeast Asia was closely intertwined with commercial development, urbanisation, and political change. These perspectives suggest that Islamisation was not simply a religious transformation but also formed part of a broader process of political and socio-economic reorganisation.

This relationship between Islam, political authority, and commerce provides an important foundation for understanding Malacca's connections with the wider Muslim world. Governance in the Malay context developed through the interaction between Islamic political ideas and established traditions of Malay kingship. The Sultan represented not only political authority but also the symbolic centre of *kerajaan*, responsible for maintaining order, legitimacy, and protection. Thus, examining Malacca's external relationships requires attention not only to diplomatic events but also to the political ideas and forms of legitimacy that shaped those relationships. The interaction between Islamic principles and Malay political traditions raises an important historical question: to what extent did Malacca's participation in the wider Islamic world influence the development and expression of political authority?

This question becomes particularly significant when considering the historical relationship between the Malay world and the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire represented one of the most powerful Muslim political formations of the early modern period and played an important role in the wider geopolitical and commercial environment of the Indian Ocean. Ottoman engagement with the Indian Ocean expanded in response to changing patterns of maritime power, particularly the growing presence of the Portuguese and the disruption of established Muslim commercial networks (Casale, 2010). Ottoman activities in the region therefore involved more than military competition. They were also connected to political influence, maritime security, commercial interests, and the broader question of relations among Muslim societies.

The geographical distance separating the Malay world and the Ottoman Empire should not, therefore, be interpreted as evidence of historical isolation. The Indian Ocean operated as a highly interconnected maritime space through which merchants, scholars, pilgrims, religious figures, commodities, political information, and ideas circulated. The Malay world formed an important eastern component of these networks, while the Ottoman Empire represented a major political centre in the western and central Islamic world (Casale, 2010; Reid, 1988). From this perspective, Malay-Ottoman relations are better understood as part of a broader process of transregional Islamic connectivity rather than simply as a bilateral relationship between two geographically distant political entities.

Therefore, this study aims to examine Malay-Ottoman relations by focusing on the interconnected dimensions of governance, diplomacy, and civilizational exchange in the Malacca Sultanate. Through historical interpretation and thematic analysis, the study seeks to identify the nature of Malay-Ottoman connections and examine their significance within the broader Islamic world. The study argues that the relationship between Malacca and the Ottoman Empire should be understood not merely as an episode of historical diplomacy but as part of a wider process of Islamic connectivity that facilitated political, religious, intellectual, and cultural interaction across geographical boundaries. By connecting the history of Malacca with the wider Ottoman and Indian Ocean context, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of governance, diplomacy, and civilizational exchange in the historical.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Governance and Islamic Political Authority

Governance provides an important framework for understanding the historical relationship between the Malacca Sultanate and the wider Islamic world. Recent scholarship increasingly views governance in Muslim societies not simply as the administration of political institutions but as a combination of political legitimacy, religious authority, social order, law, and the responsibilities of rulers. In the historical Malay context, the Sultanate

represented a political institution in which Islamic principles interacted with established Malay traditions of kingship and authority. This combination created a distinctive model of governance in which the ruler's legitimacy was associated with political stability, religious identity, justice, and the protection of society.

Recent studies of Islamic governance emphasise that Islamic political thought has historically incorporated principles of justice, consultation, accountability, public welfare, and legitimate authority. Hallaq (2021) highlights the importance of understanding Islamic governance through the historical relationship between political authority, law, and ethical responsibility rather than interpreting Islamic political institutions solely through the framework of the modern nation-state. This perspective is relevant to the Malacca Sultanate because its political order developed within a pre-modern environment where religious legitimacy and political authority were closely interconnected.

The governance structure of Malacca can also be understood within the broader transformation of Southeast Asian polities following the expansion of Islam. Recent historical scholarship demonstrates that Islamisation did not simply replace existing political institutions; instead, Islamic ideas were incorporated into existing systems of kingship and political authority. Andaya and Andaya (2020) explain that Southeast Asian states developed through complex interactions between indigenous political traditions, commercial networks, and religious transformation. Malacca therefore provides an important case for examining how Islamic political concepts were adapted within a Southeast Asian maritime polity.

The connection with the Ottoman Empire further broadens this discussion. The Ottoman state represented one of the most sophisticated Islamic imperial systems of the early modern period, with political authority supported by institutions of law, administration, military organisation, religious scholarship, and diplomatic practice. Recent Ottoman scholarship stresses that Ottoman governance was flexible and adaptive, incorporating different populations and political traditions while maintaining the authority of the sultan and Islamic legitimacy (Aksin Somel, 2021; Darling, 2021). Although the governance structures of the Ottoman Empire and Malacca were different in scale and institutional complexity, their comparison provides an opportunity to examine common principles of Islamic political legitimacy.

Diplomacy and Transregional Political Relations

Diplomacy between the Malay world and the Ottoman Empire should be understood within the wider transregional political system of the Indian Ocean, rather than as a conventional bilateral relationship between two distant states. Scholarship on the early modern Indian Ocean increasingly challenges Eurocentric interpretations that place European powers at the centre of regional political change. Casale (2010) demonstrates that Ottoman involvement in the Indian Ocean was shaped by interconnected strategic, commercial, religious, and political interests, particularly in response to Portuguese expansion. This interpretation positions the Ottoman Empire as an active participant in a competitive and multi-centred maritime order rather than merely a reactive power confronting European expansion.

However, the literature remains relatively concentrated on Ottoman–Portuguese rivalry, with less attention given to how Southeast Asian Muslim polities participated in or responded to these wider Ottoman strategies. This is particularly significant because diplomacy in the Islamic world was not limited to formal state-to-state exchanges. Merchants, *‘ulamā’*, pilgrims, Sufi networks, and maritime communities functioned as important channels of communication and contributed to the circulation of political information, religious knowledge, and social connections (Azra, 2004; Ho, 2006). Thus, the absence of extensive formal diplomatic documentation should not necessarily be interpreted as an absence of meaningful transregional political connectivity.

Malacca's position as a major maritime entrepot further complicates the conventional understanding of diplomacy. Its commercial networks connected rulers, merchants, and religious communities across Southeast Asia, India, and the Middle East, making economic exchange inseparable from political communication (Pires, 1944; Reid, 1988). Nevertheless, existing scholarship tends to examine trade, diplomacy, and Islamisation as separate historical processes, leaving insufficient explanation of how these dimensions mutually reinforced one another. The political authority of Malacca was partly sustained through its capacity to participate in wider

commercial and diplomatic networks, while these networks were themselves facilitated by Malacca's political and religious position.

The Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511 further transformed this network rather than simply terminating it. The displacement of Malacca's political and commercial centrality contributed to the emergence of alternative Muslim centres, particularly Aceh and Johor (Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Reid, 1993). Ottoman-Aceh relations subsequently became an important manifestation of Ottoman engagement with Southeast Asian Muslim powers, particularly within the context of Portuguese expansion (Casale, 2010). Yet the strong emphasis on Ottoman-Aceh relations creates a historiographical limitation: it can obscure the continuity between Malacca's earlier role and the subsequent restructuring of Malay-Muslim political networks.

A further limitation is the tendency to interpret Ottoman-Southeast Asian relations predominantly through anti-Portuguese strategy. Although resistance to Portuguese maritime dominance was significant, such an explanation alone cannot account for the broader motivations underlying transregional relations. Religious solidarity, Islamic political legitimacy, commercial interests, maritime security, scholarly mobility, and the circulation of information also contributed to these connections (Azra, 2004; Casale, 2010; Ho, 2006). The relationship should therefore be understood as a multidimensional process in which strategic interests and shared Islamic identity interacted rather than as a simple military alliance against European powers.

The critical gap, therefore, is not merely a lack of evidence concerning Malay-Ottoman contact, but the absence of an integrated analytical interpretation of how diplomacy operated through interconnected political, commercial, religious, and intellectual networks. Existing studies have established the importance of Malacca's maritime position, Ottoman Indian Ocean strategy, and Ottoman-Aceh relations, but these bodies of scholarship are rarely brought together to explain the longer trajectory of Malay-Ottoman connectivity. This study addresses the gap by conceptualising Malay-Ottoman relations as dynamic transregional political connectivity, encompassing formal diplomacy where documented and wider network-based interactions involving trade, religious mobility, political legitimacy, and knowledge exchange.

Economy, Maritime Trade and the Indian Ocean Network

Economic interaction provides another essential dimension for understanding the relationship between Malacca and the wider Islamic world. Malacca's importance was fundamentally connected to its geographical location along the Strait of Malacca, one of the major maritime routes linking the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea. Its economic significance attracted merchants from Arabia, Persia, India, Southeast Asia, and China and transformed Malacca into a highly international commercial centre.

Recent scholarship on the Indian Ocean increasingly interprets maritime trade as a multidirectional network rather than a system controlled by a single political power. Vink (2020) and other scholars of early modern maritime Asia demonstrate that commercial networks were sustained by Muslim, Asian, and European merchants who interacted through ports and maritime routes. Within this system, Malacca functioned as an important intermediary connecting western and eastern markets.

The economic significance of Malacca was also closely related to the spread of Islam. Commercial networks provided opportunities for Muslim merchants and religious scholars to establish communities in port cities. Islamisation and commercialisation consequently developed alongside one another in many parts of Southeast Asia. Recent scholarship emphasises that merchants were not simply economic actors but also important carriers of religious knowledge, cultural practices, languages, and social institutions (Fleischer, 2021).

The Ottoman Empire was similarly integrated into extensive commercial networks extending from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and South Asia. Ottoman involvement in the Indian Ocean was partly motivated by the desire to protect commercial interests and Muslim trading routes from Portuguese disruption. The expansion of Portuguese naval power threatened established trading networks, particularly those connected to the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean (Casale, 2020).

The economic relationship between the Malay world and the Ottoman Empire should therefore be understood within this wider Indian Ocean system. Rather than assuming extensive direct trade between Malacca and Istanbul, the more historically appropriate interpretation is that both were connected through intermediary commercial networks. Goods, merchants, information, and ideas could move through multiple ports and trading communities. Malacca was connected to the Indian Ocean through networks involving Gujarat, Arabia, Persia, the Red Sea, and other maritime centres.

Recent research on maritime connectivity also highlights the importance of ports as spaces where economic, political, and cultural relationships intersected. Pearson (2021) argues that Indian Ocean ports should be understood as interconnected social and economic spaces rather than simply locations for commercial exchange. This interpretation is particularly relevant to Malacca because its economic significance contributed directly to its political power and its role as a centre of Islamic civilization.

The economic dimension therefore strengthens the argument that Malay–Ottoman relations should not be examined only through formal political contacts. Commercial networks created the material infrastructure through which diplomatic, religious, and cultural connections could develop.

Civilizational Exchange, Islamic Knowledge and Cultural Connectivity

Civilizational exchange represents the broader dimension of Malay-Ottoman relations. The concept refers to the movement and interaction of knowledge, religious ideas, cultural practices, political concepts, intellectual traditions, and social values between different societies. Recent scholarship increasingly rejects the idea that civilizations developed independently and instead emphasises connectivity, mobility, and interaction.

The Malay world was an important participant in the global Islamic intellectual network. Muslim scholars from Southeast Asia travelled to centres of Islamic learning in the Middle East, particularly Mecca, Medina, and Cairo. These movements created intellectual networks through which religious texts, ideas, scholarly traditions, and interpretations of Islamic law circulated between Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Azra's work, together with more recent scholarship on Southeast Asian Islamic networks, demonstrates that these connections contributed significantly to the development of Islamic intellectual traditions in the Malay world (Azra, 2020; Fathurahman, 2021).

Pilgrimage was particularly significant in strengthening these connections. The Hajj connected Southeast Asian Muslims with Muslims from across the Islamic world and created opportunities for intellectual and cultural interaction. The circulation of scholars and manuscripts helped create what can be understood as a transregional Islamic intellectual community. These networks were not necessarily controlled by a single empire but were sustained by religious institutions, scholars, merchants, and individual mobility. The Ottoman Empire was an important centre within this broader Islamic civilization. Istanbul, Cairo, Mecca, and Medina were connected through Ottoman political and religious institutions and served as major centres of Islamic scholarship and pilgrimage. Ottoman patronage of religious institutions and scholarly networks contributed to the circulation of knowledge across different regions of the Muslim world (Fleischer, 2021).

The civilizational connection between the Malay world and the Ottoman sphere therefore involved more than political relations. It included Islamic scholarship, religious identity, pilgrimage, manuscripts, language, architecture, political thought, and cultural practices. Recent research on Southeast Asian Islamic intellectual history emphasizes the importance of these transregional connections in shaping local Islamic traditions (Fathurahman, 2021).

Civilizational exchange should also be understood as a process of adaptation rather than simple transmission. Malay Muslims did not merely receive ideas from the Middle East; they interpreted and adapted Islamic knowledge within their own social, political, and cultural environments. This produced distinctive forms of Malay Islamic civilization. In this sense, the relationship with the wider Muslim world contributed to the development of a dynamic civilization that combined local Malay traditions with broader Islamic intellectual and cultural influences.

The concept of civilizational exchange is particularly useful for interpreting Malay–Ottoman relations because it moves the analysis beyond the question of whether formal diplomatic relations existed. Even where direct political contact was limited, shared religious networks and mobility created meaningful connections between societies. The Malay world was therefore part of a wider Islamic civilizational space that extended from Southeast Asia to the Middle East.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the historical relationship between the Malacca Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand historical events, political relationships, diplomatic interactions, economic connections, and civilizational exchanges through the interpretation of documentary evidence rather than numerical measurement. Qualitative historical research enables researchers to examine meanings, contexts, patterns, and relationships within complex social and historical phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative historical research approach using systematic document analysis to interpret the political, diplomatic, economic, and civilizational relationship between the Malacca Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tosh, 2015). The research focuses on four interconnected themes: governance and Islamic political authority, diplomacy and transregional political relations, economy and maritime networks, and civilizational exchange and Islamic knowledge. This approach enables the study to move beyond chronological description and critically examine how these dimensions interacted within the broader Islamic world.

Documentary Sources and Selection Criteria

The study uses primary and secondary documentary sources to examine Malay–Ottoman relations, including historical chronicles, travel accounts, and scholarly literature. Key primary sources include *Suma Oriental* by Tomé Pires and the *Malay Annals (Sejarah Melayu)*, which provide evidence on Malacca's political, commercial, diplomatic, and cultural environment (Brown, 1970; Pires, 1944). Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, and academic studies on Malay and Ottoman history, Islamic civilization, maritime trade, and Indian Ocean networks (Azra, 2004; Casale, 2010; Milner, 1982; Reid, 1988, 1993; Andaya & Andaya, 2015). Sources are purposively selected based on historical and thematic relevance, authenticity, scholarly credibility, and contextual value to ensure alignment with the study's research objectives (Bowen, 2009).

Data Gathering and Organisation

Data are gathered through identification, screening, extraction, and organisation of relevant historical documents and scholarly sources. Relevant evidence on governance, diplomacy, trade, maritime networks, Islamic knowledge, and cultural exchange is extracted and organised using a documentary matrix. This process facilitates comparison across sources and identifies patterns, similarities, differences, continuity, and change within the historical evidence (Bowen, 2009).

Historical Source Criticism and Triangulation

The study applies historical source criticism to assess the authenticity, context, authorship, purpose, and potential bias of historical documents (Howell & Prevenier, 2001). Source triangulation is then used to compare evidence from different primary and secondary sources, strengthening the credibility and reliability of the findings (Carter et al., 2014). Conflicting evidence is critically examined within its historical context rather than selectively excluded.

Data Analysis

The study uses both primary and secondary documentary sources. The collected documents are analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis provides a systematic method for identifying, organising, and interpreting recurring patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It is appropriate for this study because the documentary evidence contains diverse historical materials that need to be synthesised according to common themes.

Main Theme	Subthemes	What the Analysis Examines
Theme 1 Governance and Islamic Political Authority	<i>Kerajaan</i> , Sultanate, kingship, Islamic legitimacy, political authority, justice, governance	How Islamic principles and Malay political traditions shaped authority and governance in Malacca and its wider Islamic connections
Theme 2 Diplomacy and Transregional Political Relations	Diplomatic contacts, envoys, political alliances, Muslim solidarity, Portuguese expansion, strategic interests, political communication	How political relationships and diplomatic networks connected Malacca with the Ottoman and wider Muslim world
Theme 3 Economy, Maritime Trade and Indian Ocean Networks	Trade routes, ports, merchants, commodities, maritime mobility, commercial networks, maritime security	How trade and Indian Ocean networks facilitated the movement of people, goods, information, and political connections
Theme 4 Civilizational Exchange, Islamic Knowledge and Cultural Connectivity	Islamic scholarship, ' <i>ulamā</i> ', pilgrimage, religious networks, knowledge circulation, cultural exchange, Islamic identity	How religious, intellectual, and cultural networks contributed to wider Islamic civilizational connectivity

The final analytical stage examines the interrelationship between the four themes. For example, maritime networks facilitated the movement of people and information; diplomatic relations supported political and religious connections; while Islamic knowledge and cultural networks strengthened shared civilizational identities. This integrated analysis allows the study to conceptualise Malay-Ottoman relations as part of a wider transregional Islamic network rather than as an isolated bilateral relationship.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Malay-Ottoman Relations as a Form of Transregional Islamic Connectivity

The document analysis indicates that the relationship between the Malay world and the Ottoman Empire is better understood as part of a wider transregional Islamic network rather than simply as a conventional bilateral relationship between two political entities. Historical evidence concerning maritime routes, religious networks, diplomatic contacts, commercial activities, and scholarly mobility demonstrates that the Malay world was connected to the broader Muslim world through multiple channels. Malacca's strategic position along the Strait of Malacca enabled it to function as an important gateway between Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the wider Islamic world.

This finding is consistent with recent scholarship that conceptualizes the Indian Ocean as a space of connectivity in which political, economic, religious, and cultural networks overlapped (Casale, 2020; Ho, 2021). The significance of the Malacca-Ottoman connection therefore lies not necessarily in the frequency of direct diplomatic exchanges but in the network of relationships through which ideas, people, goods, and political information circulated.

A constructive interpretation is that historical relations between distant Muslim societies should be studied through networked connectivity rather than geographical proximity. This perspective can contribute to contemporary scholarship on global history by demonstrating that Southeast Asian Muslim societies were active participants in wider international and Islamic networks rather than passive recipients of influences from the Middle East.

Governance: Islamic Legitimacy and Political Authority

The findings further indicate that governance represents an important conceptual link between the Malacca Sultanate and the wider Islamic political world. Malacca developed a political system in which the authority of the Sultan was closely associated with Malay traditions of kingship and Islamic legitimacy. The adoption and development of Islamic political concepts contributed to the strengthening of the Sultanate's identity as a Muslim polity.

However, the documentary evidence does not necessarily support the argument that Malacca directly adopted the Ottoman administrative system. Instead, a more defensible interpretation is that both political centers operated within a broader Islamic discourse of legitimate authority, justice, leadership, and protection of society. The Ottoman experience provides a comparative context for understanding how Islamic political legitimacy could be institutionalized differently across geographical settings. This finding is important because it demonstrates that Islamic civilization was characterized by institutional diversity rather than political uniformity. Malacca developed its own form of Malay-Islamic governance while remaining connected intellectually and religiously to the wider Muslim world.

Historical experience suggests that effective governance does not necessarily require the replication of another society's political institutions. Instead, governance principles can be adapted to local historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. This provides a useful lesson for contemporary governance studies: international engagement can involve the exchange of principles and knowledge without requiring institutional imitation.

Diplomacy: From Bilateral Relations to Islamic Strategic Networks

The findings show that diplomacy constituted an important mechanism through which Muslim political communities responded to changing geopolitical circumstances. The expansion of European maritime powers, particularly Portuguese control of Malacca after 1511, transformed the political environment of the Indian Ocean. The Ottoman Empire's response to Portuguese expansion created a broader geopolitical context in which Southeast Asian Muslim polities became increasingly connected to Ottoman strategic interests.

The evidence suggests, however, that the relationship should be treated carefully. Much of the strongest documentary evidence concerning Ottoman involvement in Southeast Asia relates to Aceh and the wider Malay-Muslim world after the Portuguese conquest of Malacca, rather than demonstrating a continuous and direct diplomatic relationship between the Ottoman court and the Malacca Sultanate itself. Casale (2020) demonstrates the importance of Ottoman engagement in the Indian Ocean as part of its response to Portuguese expansion.

This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the argument of the present study. It demonstrates that Malay-Ottoman relations evolved within a changing political environment and were mediated through different political centers and networks.

Historical experience demonstrates the value of strategic diplomacy among geographically distant societies facing common geopolitical challenges. It also highlights the importance of flexible diplomatic networks rather than dependence on a single bilateral relationship. For contemporary international relations, this historical pattern illustrates how cultural and religious affinity can provide a foundation for broader diplomatic engagement while strategic interests provide additional incentives for cooperation.

Economy: Malacca as a Gateway to the Islamic World

The findings demonstrate that economic connectivity formed a fundamental foundation for the relationship between Malacca and the wider Islamic world. Malacca's geographical position enabled it to become a major maritime entrepôt connecting merchants and trading communities from Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, Persia, and other regions. Economic interaction created opportunities for the movement of not only commodities but also people, religious ideas, languages, knowledge, and cultural practices.

The findings therefore challenge a narrow understanding of economic relations as simply the exchange of goods. Maritime commerce functioned as a social and civilizational network. Merchants were also agents of cultural and religious exchange, while ports functioned as spaces where different communities interacted.

This interpretation is consistent with scholarship on Indian Ocean connectivity, which emphasises the importance of maritime networks in linking economic and social communities across geographical boundaries (Ho, 2021). Malacca's economic importance consequently contributed to its political and civilizational significance.

Civilizational Exchange: Knowledge, Religion and Intellectual Networks

Among the four themes, civilizational exchange provides perhaps the strongest explanation for the long-term significance of Malay–Ottoman connectivity. The findings indicate that Islamic civilization developed through networks of scholars, pilgrims, merchants, religious institutions, manuscripts, and centers of learning. Southeast Asian Muslims participated actively in these networks through travel to the Middle East and interaction with scholars and institutions located in major Islamic centers.

Recent research on Muslim mobility demonstrates that pilgrimage and scholarly travel created enduring intellectual connections between Southeast Asia and the Middle East (Ho, 2021). These connections contributed to the circulation of Islamic knowledge and helped shape religious and intellectual traditions in the Malay world.

The significance of this finding is that civilizational exchange was not a one-way process. Malay Muslims did not simply receive knowledge from the Middle East. Islamic ideas were interpreted, adapted, and integrated into local Malay social and political contexts. Consequently, the Malay world developed distinctive forms of Islamic intellectual and cultural expression.

Interrelationship Between Governance, Diplomacy, Economy and Civilization

The historical relationship between the Malacca Sultanate and the wider Ottoman world can be understood as an interconnected system in which governance, diplomacy, economy, and civilization mutually reinforced one another. Governance provided political legitimacy and institutional stability, while diplomacy created channels for communication, strategic engagement, and political cooperation. Malacca's position as an important maritime polity enabled it to participate in wider networks linking Southeast Asia with the Indian Ocean and the Muslim world. Recent scholarship on Islamic political networks and transregional connectivity highlights that political authority in historical Muslim societies was closely connected with commercial mobility, religious identity, and relationships between different centers of power (Darling, 2023; Hathaway, 2024).

Economic connectivity further strengthened these political and diplomatic relationships. Malacca's strategic location facilitated the movement of merchants, commodities, religious scholars, and information between Southeast Asia and the western Indian Ocean. Trade networks consequently functioned not only as economic mechanisms but also as channels for diplomatic communication and cultural interaction. Recent studies of the Indian Ocean emphasize that maritime commerce created interconnected communities in which economic exchange, political interests, and cultural interaction developed simultaneously (Subrahmanyam, 2023; Ho, 2024). According to Ismail et. al., (2023), since the 15th century, these two countries have had early political and economic relations. From this perspective, Malacca's economic importance enhanced its political significance and created opportunities for broader engagement with Muslim societies, including those connected to the Ottoman sphere.

Civilizational exchange represents the broader outcome of these interconnected processes. The movement of scholars, pilgrims, merchants, manuscripts, religious knowledge, and cultural practices contributed to the development of a shared but diverse Islamic intellectual and cultural space. Political and economic connectivity created the conditions through which knowledge and cultural practices. Recent research on global Islamic networks demonstrates that Muslim societies developed through mobility, knowledge circulation, and interaction across geographical boundaries rather than in isolation (Aydin, 2023; Fathi, 2025). Thus, Malay-Ottoman connectivity can be interpreted as a transregional Islamic network in which governance facilitated political order, diplomacy enabled engagement, economy provided channels of connectivity, and civilization provided shared intellectual and cultural foundations. This integrated perspective offers a stronger understanding of the Malacca Sultanate's position within the wider Islamic world.

The findings demonstrate that the historical connection between the Malacca Sultanate and the Ottoman world was multidimensional. Governance provided political identity, diplomacy created channels of strategic interaction, economic networks facilitated connectivity, and civilizational exchange sustained intellectual and cultural relationships. These dimensions interacted within the wider Indian Ocean environment and contributed to the development of a connected Islamic world.

At the same time, the study emphasizes the importance of historical precision. Claims concerning direct Ottoman involvement with Malacca should be distinguished from the better-documented Ottoman relationships with other Malay-Muslim polities, particularly Aceh. Such differentiation is essential to avoid overstating the historical evidence. The contribution of the study therefore lies not in claiming an extensive direct alliance where evidence may be limited, but in demonstrating how Malacca was historically embedded within a wider Islamic network in which Ottoman political, economic, religious, and civilizational influence formed one important component.

This interpretation offers a significant contribution to the study of governance and civilization because it demonstrates that historical Islamic connectivity was created through the interaction of political authority, diplomacy, commerce, knowledge, and culture. The legacy of these connections provides a valuable historical foundation for understanding contemporary possibilities for intercivilizational cooperation.

This study demonstrates that the relationship between the Malacca Sultanate and the Ottoman world should be understood as part of a broader transregional Islamic network rather than merely as a conventional bilateral relationship. The document analysis highlights the interconnected roles of governance, diplomacy, economy, and civilizational exchange in shaping Malay–Ottoman connectivity. Governance provided political legitimacy, diplomacy facilitated strategic engagement, economic networks strengthened maritime connectivity, and civilizational exchange enabled the circulation of Islamic knowledge, culture, and intellectual traditions.

The study further highlights Malacca's important position as a gateway connecting Southeast Asia with the wider Islamic world. Its historical experience demonstrates that political and economic relationships could simultaneously function as channels for religious, intellectual, and cultural exchange. Importantly, the study recognizes that evidence of direct Malacca-Ottoman relations should be distinguished from the wider Ottoman connections with Malay-Muslim polities, particularly after the Portuguese conquest of Malacca.

Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of Islamic governance and civilization by positioning the Malay world as an active participant in global Islamic networks. The historical legacy of Malay-Ottoman connectivity offers valuable insights for contemporary scholarship on intercivilizational dialogue, diplomatic cooperation, cultural exchange, and the strengthening of connections between societies across geographical boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the relationship between the Malacca Sultanate and the Ottoman world should be understood as part of a broader transregional Islamic network rather than merely as a conventional bilateral relationship. The document analysis highlights the interconnected roles of governance, diplomacy, economy,

and civilizational exchange in shaping Malay-Ottoman connectivity. Governance provided political legitimacy, diplomacy facilitated strategic engagement, economic networks strengthened maritime connectivity, and civilizational exchange enabled the circulation of Islamic knowledge, culture, and intellectual traditions.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Institut Pengurusan Teknologi dan Keusahawanan, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), for all the support.

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