

MAIMOON PALACE IN THE MIDST OF SOCIAL REVOLUTION: ITS ROLE IN MAINTAINING MALAY IDENTITY IN POST-INDEPENDENCE MEDAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the post-1946 role of Maimun Palace in sustaining Malay cultural identity in Medan following the Social Revolution that dismantled the traditional Malay sultanates. Although previous studies have highlighted the architectural and historical significance of the palace, limited research has explored its function as a cultural identity anchor in the aftermath of political upheaval. This research aims to (1) describe the condition of Maimun Palace after the Social Revolution, and (2) analyze its cultural role in reinforcing Malay identity during the post-independence period. Using a qualitative historical method through heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, data were collected via semi-structured interviews, field observations, archival materials, and supporting literature. The findings reveal that Maimun Palace despite structural degradation, political turmoil, and limited state support continues to operate as a cultural preservation hub through its hybrid architecture, socio-cultural activities, and symbolic function in the collective memory of the Malay community. The study contributes to the discourse on heritage resilience by demonstrating how cultural landmarks can remain identity-forming agents within rapidly urbanizing and multicultural environments. These results highlight the need for strengthened heritage governance and collaborative conservation efforts to secure the palace's cultural role in the future.

Keywords: Maimun Palace, Social Revolution 1946, Malay Identity, Historical Preservation, Cultural Heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1946 Social Revolution in East Sumatra was one of the most dramatic events in the region's political history, directly ending the dominance of Malay sultanates such as Deli, Serdang, Langkat, and Asahan. This revolution was fueled by economic inequality, popular dissatisfaction with feudal structures, and demands for social reform after Indonesian independence. Waves of palace raids, assassinations of nobles, and seizures of royal assets led to the collapse of the traditional social order that had shaped Malay identity for centuries (Reid, 2014; Wibowo et al., 2024). This political collapse left a symbolic void, as

most palaces, centers of government, custom, and culture, were severely damaged or completely destroyed.

Amidst the destruction, Maimun Palace remained the only major palace to physically survive. Built in 1888, this palace is not simply a royal building, but a visual representation of the acculturation of Malay, Islamic, Indian, and European cultures (Nasution et al., 2023). Previous studies have emphasized its aesthetic and architectural value, as well as its significance as a cultural heritage site in Medan (Sitorus & Fitri, 2020; Ginting & Rahman, 2016). However, these studies have not fully explained how Maimun Palace played a role in shaping, maintaining, and revitalizing Malay identity after the collapse of traditional power structures during the 1946 Social Revolution. In other words, there is a research gap: the palace has been understood as an architectural artifact, but has not been studied as an agent of cultural identity following the collapse of the feudal system.

In a socio-cultural context, Malay identity has experienced significant pressure due to urbanization, migration, modernization, and the shift in Medan's social structure into a multi-ethnic city (Panjaitan et al., 2025; Loebis et al., 2018). Many Malay cultural symbols have disappeared, traditional villages have changed morphologically, and much historical documentation has been destroyed during the conflict (Wibowo et al., 2024). This situation has left the Malay community facing an identity crisis, particularly due to the reduced space for cultural representation in public spaces. Amidst this situation, Maimun Palace serves as a remaining reference point for identity, serving as a memory keeper and center of cultural activities for the urban Malay community (Tanjung et al., 2022; Simamora et al., 2023).

Furthermore, cultural identity theory emphasizes that physical symbols such as buildings, community spaces, and historical artifacts play a crucial role in sustaining collective memory and a sense of belonging to a group (Smith et al., 2023). Maimun Palace, with its status as a cultural heritage site, can be understood as an anchor of cultural continuity, connecting the past and present of the Malay community. Through traditional rituals, cultural festivals, and cultural tourism activities, the palace not only maintains traditional values but also adapts to the needs of the modern city. This concept aligns with cultural heritage protection theory, which emphasizes the importance of social function and identity, rather than simply physical preservation (Saputra, 2024; Brosché et al., 2017).

Based on this background, this study examines two main focuses: (1) the condition of Maimun Palace after the 1946 Social Revolution, and (2) how this palace played a strategic role in maintaining Malay identity in the post-independence era. A historical approach is used to trace the dynamics of physical, social, and symbolic changes in the palace, while interviews and field observations are used to understand how the Malay community interprets this palace in a contemporary context. This research is expected to contribute to the study of local history, cultural identity studies, and discourse on cultural heritage resilience in a multicultural urban environment.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with historical methods to explore the dynamics of physical, social, and symbolic changes at Maimun Palace after the 1946 Social Revolution. The historical method was chosen because it allows researchers to

reconstruct past events through a systematic process of tracing, critiquing sources, interpreting, and writing history (Hami & Madjid, 2011). This approach is relevant in understanding how the palace transformed from a center of feudal power into a symbol of Malay cultural identity in the modern era, and how this meaning is reinterpreted by contemporary society.

The historical method is applied through four classic stages: (1) heuristics, namely the collection of primary and secondary sources related to the conditions of Maimun Palace and the events of the Social Revolution; (2) verification or source criticism, conducted to assess the authenticity, credibility, and reliability of data, whether derived from archival documents, old newspapers, or historical records (Hami & Madjid, 2011); (3) interpretation, namely the interpretation of historical, social, and cultural meanings based on the relationships between sources and field findings; and (4) historiography, namely the preparation of an analytical and argumentative historical narrative based on all verified data.

To enrich the historical data, this study also combined field research techniques such as interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three main categories of informants: (1) local historians familiar with the history of the Deli Sultanate, (2) Malay cultural figures involved in cultural preservation activities, and (3) community representatives around the palace with empirical knowledge of post-revolutionary social change. The informants were selected using a purposive sampling approach, taking into account their experience, competence, and involvement in Malay cultural issues (Tanjung et al., 2022; Raharja & Puspitawati, 2024). This approach ensured that the information obtained was relevant and accurate in explaining the palace's role as a symbol of identity.

In addition to interviews, field observations were conducted to assess the physical condition of the building, architectural changes, cultural activities, and social interactions within the Maimun Palace environment. Observations were conducted non-participatory so that researchers could record phenomena as they were without direct intervention. Observational findings were compared with visual documentation in the form of archival photos, old maps, and government documents to ensure data consistency and chronology (Smith et al., 2023; Saputra, 2024).

Archival data was obtained from historical documents, government reports, old newspapers, and previous research on architecture, cultural landscapes, and Malay identity (Nasution et al., 2023; Ginting & Rahman, 2016; Sitorus & Fitri, 2020). Data were analyzed using a descriptive-qualitative model through data reduction, data presentation, and thematic conclusion drawing. The analysis followed the Miles and Huberman approach to establishing patterns between historical and social findings although not explicitly stated in the sources, this approach was used to systematically organize the data and maintain coherence of interpretation.

To ensure validity and reliability, this study employed source and method triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from interviews, historical archives, and field observations (Brosché et al., 2017; Saputra, 2024). Method triangulation was used to assess the consistency of findings from the historical document approach and empirical field data. Internal and external critique of the sources was conducted to avoid narrative bias, particularly since many documents

were written in the context of post-revolutionary political tensions. The validation process was iterative to ensure that the reconstruction of events and the analysis of Malay identity had a strong empirical basis.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The Condition of Maimun Palace Post-Social Revolution

The 1946 Social Revolution was a turning point that shook the political and cultural structure of the Malay Sultanate in East Sumatra. Most of the Malay palaces were destroyed, but Maimun Palace was one of the few sites that survived due to tight security by British forces (Saputra, 2024). Although not completely destroyed physically, the palace did suffer significant degradation, including interior damage, the loss of valuable artifacts, and changes in the function of the rooms. Field observations revealed that some wooden beams, ceiling ornaments, and carvings in the main room had decayed due to age, vandalism, and lack of adequate maintenance (Smith et al., 2023).

Interviews with informants revealed that after the revolution, some of the palace rooms were used as residences for residents affected by the conflict. This accelerated the building's physical deterioration and shifted the use of the rooms from royal to communal functions. These findings align with cultural heritage studies that explain that changes in the function of cultural heritage buildings often occur due to social conflict and power transitions (Brosché et al., 2017).

Overall, the post-1946 condition of Maimun Palace can be categorized as a heritage site experiencing structural stress, with physical degradation, loss of artifacts, and changes in function being the main challenges. However, restoration began in the 1970s–1980s when the sultanate and local government initiated limited restoration efforts (Ginting & Rahman, 2016). This restoration pattern reflects the concept of heritage resilience, namely the ability of cultural sites to survive and adapt after experiencing historical trauma (Saputra, 2024).

Previous research confirms that the change in function of Maimun Palace from a center of government to a cultural tourism destination has a dual impact—on the one hand, it helps maintain the building's physical existence, but on the other, it poses the risk of cultural commodification (Saputra, 2024; Smith et al., 2023; Brosché et al., 2017). In this context, local community involvement is crucial to ensure Malay cultural values remain alive and not become merely a tourism symbol.

Furthermore, the issue of physical preservation is also inseparable from policy challenges. The Cultural Heritage Law provides a strong legal basis, but its implementation at the regional level often faces challenges in coordination and funding (Saputra, 2024; Ariwibowo & Fibiona, 2025). Therefore, collaboration between the government, academics, and local communities is key to maintaining the palace's sustainability. Efforts to digitize documentation and promote it through social media are also considered effective in drawing the younger generation's attention to the importance of cultural heritage (Helal et al., 2018; Hilbert, 2020; Saputra, 2024).

The condition of Maimun Palace after the Social Revolution can be understood as a reflection of the social and political dynamics of East Sumatra following the collapse of the feudal system. The palace, once a symbol of the power of the Malay nobility, has now transformed into a symbol of the revival and pride of Malay culture amidst the

modernization of Medan. Despite extensive damage and changes in function, Maimun Palace remains a witness to history and a timeless center for preserving Malay identity (Saputra, 2024; Smith et al., 2023; Brosché et al., 2017; Ariwibowo & Fibiona, 2025; Helal et al., 2018; Hilbert, 2020).

The Impact of the 1946 Social Revolution in Medan on Malay Identity

The 1946 Social Revolution in East Sumatra was a crucial turning point for the transformation of Malay ethnic identity in Medan. This event marked the end of the traditional power of the Deli Sultanate and other Malay kingdoms, which had for centuries been the center of Malay identity and pride (Reid, 2014; Wibowo et al., 2024; Panjaitan et al., 2025). The violence and overthrow of the traditional elite led to the loss of many symbols, artifacts, and social structures that supported Malay collective identity. Consequently, the Malay community experienced an identity crisis and lost its dominant position in the city's social structure (Reid, 2014; Wibowo et al., 2024; Panjaitan et al., 2025).

"After the revolution, the Malays here were no longer masters of their land. Many palaces were destroyed, manuscripts were lost, and many nobles fled or were banished. Since then, the Malays in Medan have changed—from being respected to being like spectators in their own city." (Ir. T. Reizan Ivansyah, Medan, 2025)

The morphological changes in the Malay villages in Medan are clear evidence of this shift. The once orderly areas surrounding the palaces have now transformed into dense settlements and no longer display the distinctive characteristics of Malay architecture. Increased urbanization and migration after the revolution have accelerated the loss of spatial identity among Malay communities (Panjaitan et al., 2025; Loebis et al., 2018). Social spaces, once organized based on customary hierarchies, are now dominated by economic interests and land commercialization (Panjaitan et al., 2025; Loebis et al., 2018). Socially, these changes have had profound consequences. The Malay community, previously elite, has had to adapt as a minority group in Medan's increasingly multicultural society (Raharja & Puspitawati, 2024; Siagian, 2018; Izharsyah et al., 2023). The once exclusive Malay identity has now transformed into a more fluid and adaptive identity, along with the emergence of more open social and economic interactions between ethnicities.

Modernization and globalization have accelerated this transformation process. The modernization that had developed before the revolution was halted due to social conflict and power struggles, while afterward, Malay communities struggled to adapt to the modern economy and urban bureaucracy (Ichsan, 2020; Panjaitan et al., 2025; Loebis et al., 2018). As a result, many Malays have returned to an agrarian lifestyle or the informal sector, which has limited their social and economic roles in the city (Ichsan, 2020; Panjaitan et al., 2025).

Culturally, much of Malay architectural and artistic heritage has been lost or repurposed. Typical Malay ornaments, once visible in buildings and houses, have been replaced by modern styles. Traditional buildings and mosques are now being replaced by modern styles. Traditional Malay symbols are increasingly used in public spaces, while external cultural influences

are increasingly dominant (Loebis et al., 2018; Panjaitan et al., 2025). Nevertheless, Islam remains a key element of Malay identity, a spiritual foundation that persists to this day.

Efforts to preserve Malay identity continue through organizations such as the Indonesian Malay Cultural Council (MABMI). However, the challenges faced are significant, ranging from minimal attention from the younger generation to weak government support (Raharja & Puspitawati, 2024; Izharsyah et al., 2023; Panjaitan et al., 2025).

Interethnic interactions also shape a new Malay identity. In areas like Pekan Labuhan, Malays and Chinese build dynamic social relationships, where cultural identity is a product of compromise and adaptation (Siagian, 2018; Loebis et al., 2018; Izharsyah et al., 2023).

Younger Malays face identity challenges in the digital age. Studies show that a large portion of Gen Z Malays are beginning to lose their attachment to language and traditions, although they still value the moral and religious values of Malay culture (Fital et al., 2021; Salleh & Sualman, 2024; Izharsyah et al., 2023). This situation demands new strategies in cultural education, particularly through digitalization, to ensure Malay traditions remain alive amidst globalization.

Historically, the loss of power by the Malay nobility after the revolution left many historical sites in disrepair. Only a few remain, such as ancient mosques and tombs, while many palace artifacts and historical documents were destroyed or scattered abroad (Wibowo et al., 2024; Panjaitan et al., 2025; Reid, 2014).

The 1946 Social Revolution had a profound impact on the deconstruction and transformation of Malay identity in Medan. Today, Malay identity is more adaptive and open to external influences, while still striving to maintain core values through customary organizations, cultural communities, and the revitalization of traditional arts (Panjaitan et al., 2025; Raharja & Puspitawati, 2024; Izharsyah et al., 2023). The challenge going forward is how to maintain a balance between modernity and the preservation of local identity amidst rapid urbanization and globalization (Panjaitan et al., 2025; Raharja & Puspitawati, 2024; Izharsyah et al., 2023).

The Role of Maimun Palace in Maintaining Malay Identity Post-Independence

Maimun Palace plays a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of Malay identity and culture in Medan after Indonesian independence. As the principal legacy of the Deli Sultanate, the palace not only symbolizes past greatness but also serves as a guardian of Malay cultural values amidst the social dynamics and modernization that occurred after the social revolution and independence. Maimun Palace represents the existence and dignity of the Malay community which has survived amidst social change and multiculturalism in the city of Medan (Nasution et al., 2023; Tanjung et al., 2022).

Symbols of Malay Culture and History

The architecture and ornamentation of Maimun Palace convey profound visual messages about the identity and philosophy of Malay life. Each element of the building has a symbolic meaning that reflects the outlook on life, local wisdom, and the values of harmony and balance inherent in Malay culture. For example, the use of geometric motifs and certain symbolic numbers signifies the fusion of Malay aesthetics and spirituality. Through its physical form and spatial layout, Maimun Palace depicts the splendor,

leadership, and majesty of Malay culture, rooted in the Deli Sultanate (Nasution et al., 2023; Mailani et al., 2024; Tianda et al., 2024). The palace's existence serves as concrete evidence of a cultural heritage that remains alive and continues to be preserved today (Nasution et al., 2023; Mailani et al., 2024).

Acculturation and Multicultural Identity

One of the unique features of Maimun Palace lies in its architecture, which reflects the acculturation of various Malay, Islamic, Indian, and European cultures—without losing its local character. The shape of the building's pillars and arches demonstrates the influence of Moorish and European architectural styles, yet remains integrated with typical Malay ornamentation and spatial planning. This reflects the openness of Malay culture to accept external elements while maintaining its identity and traditional values passed down through generations (Mailani et al., 2024; Lumban-Tobing, 2020). This acculturation process makes Maimun Palace a symbol of dynamic cultural adaptation and a testament to the Malay people's ability to face changing times without losing their roots (Mailani et al., 2024; Lumban-Tobing, 2020).

Social and Tourism Functions

Post-independence, Maimun Palace served not only as the residence of the sultanate but also as a social, cultural, and tourism center. Its presence as an icon of Medan makes the palace a crucial platform for introducing and promoting Malay culture to the wider public and international tourists. Support from the local government and management by a foundation contribute to the preservation of the palace's historical and cultural value (Simamora et al., 2023; Maharani & Kamajaya, 2020). Various activities, such as cultural festivals, art performances, and educational activities, are frequently held within the palace grounds. These activities strengthen the Malay community's sense of pride in their ancestral heritage and solidify Maimun Palace's position as the center of Malay culture in Medan (Simamora et al., 2023; Tanjung et al., 2022).

Challenges and Preservation Strategies

In maintaining its role as guardian of cultural identity, Maimun Palace faces various challenges, such as urbanization, migration, and economic pressures. Rapid modernization has the potential to shift the traditional Malay values that underpin Medan's social life. However, the designation of the Maimun Palace area as a cultural heritage site and landmark of Medan is a strategic step in protecting the existence and authenticity of Malay identity (Medan et al., 2019; Nasution et al., 2023). This preservation effort is not only carried out by the government but also involves indigenous communities, the royal family, academics, and the tourism sector in ongoing collaboration (Medan et al., 2019; Simamora et al., 2023). This synergy demonstrates that preserving Malay identity through the Maimun Palace is not only based on the physical structure but also touches on the social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of its community.

4. CONCLUSION

Maimun Palace is a symbol of the resilience and continuity of Malay identity in Medan after the 1946 Social Revolution. As a legacy of the Deli Sultanate, the palace serves not only as a historical building but also as a guardian of Malay cultural values amidst social change and modernization. The palace's meaningful architecture and ornaments demonstrate a blend of Malay, Islamic, Indian, and European cultures, reflecting the openness and ability of the Malay people to adapt without losing their identity (Mailani et al., 2024; Lumban-Tobing, 2020). Through arts, customs, and tourism activities, Maimun Palace continues to serve as a center for preserving Malay culture. Despite facing the challenges of urbanization and weak government support, Maimun Palace's role as a symbol of Malay pride remains enduring and serves as an important legacy in preserving cultural identity in Medan.

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