

## **The Role of the Sultan in Upholding the Dignity of Religion and Race in the Riau Islands, Indonesia: A Case Study**

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**Abstract---** Islam, which is based in the Riau Islands, Indonesia, has a very unique history. Each entity and figure plays a role regardless of the acceptance, spread and practice of Islam. The role of the sultanate institution and its contribution cannot be denied in defending and spreading this noble religion. This case study aims to explore the role of the Bentan Sultanate in maintaining the harmonious of Islam and his contribution to help the unfortunate Muslim of the Riau Islands. This study used a qualitative methodology with a case study design. The key subject was the Sultan of Bentan of Riau Islands, Indonesia. There were also six groups of informants comprising a governor, an Islamic scholar, an officer for the association, a royal staff, a village headman and a resident of Riau Islands. Data was collected through interviews, observations and analysis of relevant documents and reports and analyzed through several stages of coding, categorizing, cross-case analysis and interpretation using N-VIVO12. The findings of the study showed the Sultan of Bentan played very important role in spreading the religion of Islam and also, contributing to the harmony and well-being of the people in the Riau Islands.

**Keywords---** Bentan Sultanate, Spread and Practice of Islam.

### **I. Introduction**

The original name of Bentan Island is Pulau Besar because it is the largest island in the Malay Archipelago (formerly Pulau Kampe). There are three phases of Bentan's development to become a Sovereign Government. In the first phase, Bentan Island became a kingdom in 250 A.D. by Aji Shaka (Kingdom of *Dendam Berahi* or *Karmapuradvipa*). Aji Shaka is a descendant of King Shaka who fled India. He ruled for 60 years and made Kampe the center of his rule, while Segilin became a trading port. After him, the king was replaced by Dandan Setia (310 - 370 A.D.), then Empuan Intan Terpilih in 370-377 A.D. and then led by Empuan Bayintan in 377-415 A.D. Empuan Bayintan disappeared and believed to be moved to the Bunian Realm. Then, the kingdom of Dendam Berahi ended.

The second phase was in 635 AD, Maharaja Malem Dewa became king of Bentan Island and ruler of the sea. After a few years later, the Umayyad fleet came and conquered Sri Wijaya. Malem Dewa died in the battle of 715 AD. As a result of the Da'wah of Caliph Umar Abu Aziz, the second King of Sri Wijaya, Sri Indravarman declared submission and embraced Islam. To uphold the power of the Umayyads in the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, the prince of Maharaja Malem Dewa was appointed Caliph in Bentan and Kampar. Maharaja Malim Deman or Abdul Muluk made Islam the official religion of the government with the government center in Kampar. Over time the power of the Umayyads weakened. With the help from China, Sri Wijaya was revived. It has become the center of Buddhism in the archipelago. Abdul Muluk died in 745 AD, thus completing the Islamic Khilafah Kampar - Bintan.

Phase Three, after almost four centuries of Bentan Island without a government. Raja Reindra Cola of the Indian Coromander assisted by his brother Raja Suran of Amdan Negara had conquered the coastal kingdoms of the Malay Peninsula (Kedah, Gangga Negara, Perak and Klang Kio, Johor). Raja Suran married Puteri Gangga Negara and was blessed with three sons. His son, Bicitram Shah became the King of the kingdom of Bentan Tua, after his death he was succeeded by his son-in-law, Maharaja Laksamana Andak. After Laksamana Andak's death, he was succeeded by his wife, Ratu Iskandarsyah. After that, Demang Daun Lebar's son was sworn in as the Raja of Bentan with the title Tun Telanai/Telanai Bentan. When Singapore was attacked by Majapahit. Telanai Bentan transferred the government to Siak Gassib. After his death, the King Permaisura, who was still a Hindu-Buddhist, became king. The Sultan of Melaka violated Siak and the Raja Permaisura died. Sultan Mansyursyah married the daughter of Raja Mahadewi to Megat Kudu, the son of Permaisura. After embracing Islam, he returned to Siak with the title of Sultan Ibrahim, after his death, was replaced by his son Sultan Abdullah. In 1526, the Sultan of Melaka in Bentan was proclaimed by the Portuguese and retreated to Kampar, Sultan Abdullah who recognized Sultan Machmud moved to Kampar, immediately returned to the homeland of Bentan, and declared his descendants as Sultan and returned as regent in Bentan, so since then Bentan led by the *Penghulu Adat*, then the descendants of the Kings of Bentan continue to be the leaders of the people in Bentan. The journey of leadership and religious teachings are very unique in the Riau Islands.

The government or *ulil al-amr* are the caliphs of Allah on earth and they are entrusted by Allah to govern the people, manage nature and take care of the sources of *tabii*. The power obtained by the sultan is a mandate from Allah to humans which needs to be used properly in line with the will demanded by the *shari'ah*. Sultan in the archipelago refers to the king or the ruler (Bharuddin, 2016) in the archipelago. According to Arabic, Sultan means government and guardian, strength and power as well as evidence. The sultan is a government who has power and authority in the country (Rafiuddin & Siti, 2014). He governs and the decisions made are one statement and a proof. The role of maintaining religion and protecting Muslims is a difficult task for someone. Because of that, the position of the sultan and the government has been admired and respected since ancient times.

There are approximately 30 million poor people in Indonesia, if the indicator used was income below US\$ 2 a day, as used by the United Nations Organization, this figure would probably be more than 100 million people. The unemployment rate is around 5-6%, or approximately 8 million people (Lilik, Rudi, Minguel, Ari, 2022). The level of poverty in Tanjungpinang and Bintan from the data reported by the media seems to be increasing (Amri, 2016; Mulya & Faizal, 2018). There are a few poor Muslim people looking for a way to get help from non-Islamic associations for living. Many people have lost their source of sustenance because of the massive wave due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation is also getting worse with the flow of foreign tourists who are suspected of being illegal workers for foreign investment projects in Indonesia. As a leader or Sultan, it is important to propose a different perspective in viewing the suffering of the people and the cause of the problem, namely from the point of view of customs and culture. Of course, as a Malay country, customs must be based on *sharia* and *sharia* based on Al Qur'an and Sunnah. What is the role of sultan in maintaining Islam and defending the misfortune and welfare of their people?

## II. Methodology

This case study aimed to explore the role of the Bentan Sultanate in maintaining the harmonious of Islam and his contribution to help the unfortunate people of the Riau Islands. This study used a qualitative methodology with a case study design. The key subject was the Sultan of Bentan of Riau Islands, Indonesia. There were also six groups of informants comprising a governor, an Islamic scholar, an officer for the association, a royal staff, a village headman and a resident of Riau Islands. Data was collected through interviews, observations and analysis of relevant documents and reports. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain clear information and opinions from the participants of the study (Tenny, Brannan & Sharts-Hopko, 2020). All interviews were recorded using tape recorders and written, and then analyzed through several stages of coding, categorization, cross-analysis and interpretation using N-VIVO12.

## III. Findings

### *The Role of the Bentan Sultanate in Maintaining the Harmonious of Islam*

The Sultan as a government that is considered as '*zill Allah fi al-ard*' is responsible for maintaining the harmony and safety of the Islamic religion. However, this case is not something new to the Sultan of Bentan, as well as religious institutions under his auspices. From the interview, observation and document analysis showed Sultan of Bentan supported every aspects in solving problems that arise. The problems that challenge the welfare of Islam in Riau Islands, such as the issue of apostasy, heretical teachings, adultery, marriage problems, *syarak* laws can all be solved through related institutions. The institutions involved were the Mufti, the Office of Islamic Religion, the Sharia Court and others. Among other forms of the sultan's role in maintaining the harmony of the Islamic religion was the development of *tahfiz* and religious centers, *muallaf* centres and developing Islamic-related activities.

### ***The Bentan Sultanate's Contribution to help the Unfortunate People of the Riau Islands***

In addition to being affected by the Covid 19 pandemic, among the causes of the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer is because they are too dependent on a life model based on the paper money system, interest-bearing debt or the usury system which is controlled by the bank. Rasulullah (SAW) has warned people who are in debt to be restless at night and ashamed during the day. From an interview with Sultan Bentan, what must be enforced is trade, not usury. For this reason, all communities, scholars, businessmen, kings and sultans need to actively play a role in reviving this model of trade. Their reference must be to the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet SAW, as well as the traditions and customs of the Indonesian nation that have existed. They just need to restore, revitalize and re-nurture. According to the Sultan of Bentan, several tasks need to be carried out by leaders to strengthen this noble endeavor and uphold the pride of the Malays and the archipelago:

The first task is to return to the customary life based on Islamic law, adhere to the commands of Allah SWT and the Sunnah of the Prophet SAW, so that we are blessed with an abundance of prosperity and dignity. The archipelago tradition based on sharia is a model of life that guarantees prosperity. The Islamic way of life is "Daula" which means to circulate, to take turns, to change, in the context of the circulation of wealth. With it there is an equal distribution of wealth and prosperity. Allah's words in Surah Al Hasyr verse 7, "Do not let wealth revolve only among the rich among you." The best way is trade, 'zakat', alms, and 'waqaf'.

The second task is to strive for wealth to rotate and become a source of equity, because Allah SWT forbids hoarding of wealth, meaning that wealth must be produced through trade and business. So that assets are not kept in the bank, interest and invested in things that are not productive. The task of the leaders is to guide the people to be productive, and to provide the facilities and infrastructure.

The third task, related to the circulation of assets above, as previously mentioned, Allah SWT asserts "justifies trade and forbids usury" (Al Baqarah verse 275), then the leaders' task is to narrow the space for usury which is currently rampant in all levels of society. The system of interest-bearing debts has trapped people in an unhealthy lifestyle that undermines their physical and mental well-being.

The fourth task is to ensure that wealth is shared because in one's wealth, there are the rights of the poor and the needy. The obligation to pay zakat on property, agricultural produce, plantation, mining produce, livestock produce, commercial produce and savings of individuals who have reached the calculation and haul should not be underestimated.

The fifth task is to revive the model of the social welfare program. After trade was encouraged, usury was eradicated, wealth was circulated, and zakat was withdrawn and distributed, there was still a fundamental mechanism for equal distribution of welfare in Islam namely waqf, which is also a sadaqah jariah.

The sixth task, in addition to running the muamalah program, requires a program, namely the Diniyat Program which teaches the basic material of the Qur'an, hadith, aqidah fiqh, Islamic education and Arabic. This program is in the form of a syllabus which is also a teaching system that is taught to students for several hours each day for the required number of years. The scholars and Sultans in the past were very concerned about this Islamic education.

The seventh task is the development of sharia-based treatment programs that are oriented to the basic needs of health, not based on the commercial interests of the health and pharmaceutical industries. This program is more directing the community to be oriented towards maintaining health (preventive) and if they are sick, organic, herbal treatment based on proven prophetic knowledge is carried out.

The various tasks and programs described above are not just concepts and wishful thinking. The Sultan of Bentan has carried out all the programs, although it is still in the early stages. The important thing is that the model is already available, and it is still a matter of development and expansion into the future. The following activities have been planned and some of them have been implemented:

#### ***1. Establishment of Baitul Mal Sultanate of Bentan Darul Masyhur***

Baitul Mal is the "House of Treasure", where the leaders distribute wealth and give welfare to the poor people. Baitul Mal Sultanate of Bentan was established in 2015. Routinely withdraw and distribute zakat following the pillars and shari'a. To date, thousands of silver dirhams have been withdrawn and distributed. Sultanate of Bentan also organizes education program on usury and muamalah, develops the Sultan's Market and Thibun Nabawi clinic. It also develops the Tembeling Waqaf Village as a residential facility without usury.

#### ***2. Development of the Sultan Market***

Markets, in Islamic teachings, apart from being open to everyone, cannot be owned and controlled by certain people. The market is not rented out, no tax applied and no usury. Pasar Sultan has been pioneered since 2013, and now stands in Sei jang, Tanjung Pinang, and Batam. Sultan's market is an open land, with a roof, as well as trading facilities provided by the sultan, namely tables, chairs, parking lots, public toilets and others.

#### ***3. Strengthening the Trade Union***

Trade is a part of the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) that must be strengthened. Trade is different from the ribawi capitalist system which is based on banknotes created by banks which means interest-bearing debt. According to the Sultan of Bentan, this effort continues to be strengthened and disseminated. Few companies starting to grow on specific ventures and will continue to be developed. At a higher level, the Nusantara Business Council (NBC) has been formed. NBC is a trade forum between the entrepreneurs of Riau Islands, Malaysia and Singapore that is oriented to develop trade at the Southeast Asian level.

#### **4. Development of Wakaf Imarat Toa Paya, Bintan Kepri**

Imarah is a waqaf village which is an integrated area that conducts worship, social and general welfare activities. It is supported by various sources of funds. With the construction of this imarah, several goals can be achieved, among them, the community can practice daily muamalat for the welfare of the people and to uphold justice and social peace. To date, a productive and functional waqf institution has been developed at Jalan Lintas Barat Km 17.5 Toa Paya, Bintan on an area of 5000 m<sup>2</sup>. Hopefully it can be a model that can be emulated elsewhere.

#### **5. Tembeling Waqaf Village**

Kampung Waqaf Tembeling which is located in an area of 4.5 hectares is a 'ribawi' independent settlement plan being developed. Part of the land is from waqf and the other part is private property. The principles of tauhid, amr and 'gotong-royong' are used as the basis for the construction of housing, wakaf villages without usury.

#### **6. Pioneering Thibun Nabawi Medical Center**

Thibbun nabawi is a method of treatment believed to have been practiced by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to treat diseases of body, spirit and senses. This method should be continued as part of the application of the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) and reduce reliance on modern medical methods, which involve too many chemicals. The program at the Sultanate of Bentan consists of training and outreach for Thibun nabawi and al Fasduh Therapy which is reliable, safe, and at an affordable price.

### **IV. Conclusion**

The role of the Bentan Sultanate institution and its contribution cannot be denied in defending and spreading Islam and also helping the unfortunate Muslims in the Riau Islands. Sultan of Bentan has taken a proactive approach in ensuring the harmony of Islam and implemented great strategies to help Muslims in the Riau Islands. The implementation strategy has been carried out successfully and should be emulated by other leaders and especially by other Sultans in Indonesia, to uphold the dignity of the religion and welfare of their people.

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