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LOCAL HISTORIOGRAPHY STUDY OF DATUK AHIM'S BAJU RAJAH: THE SYMBOLIC MEANING AND SOCIAL VALUES OF THE JAMBI MALAY COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Jambi is one of the regions in Indonesia with a unique collection of local historiographies, one of which is the Baju Rajah—a clothes that blends the cultural traditions of the Jambi Malay people with the spiritual beliefs of the community during the struggle for independence. This clothes belongs to Ibrahim Abdul Gani, a Red Sash Commander from Parit Deli, Kuala Tungkal, who contributed to defending Indonesia's independence from 1948 to 1949. It is believed that the Baju Rajah possesses protective powers through the Rajah inscriptions and prayers embroidered on its fabric, making it a spiritual shield against enemy attacks, particularly from Dutch troops. This study aims to analyse the symbolic meaning of the Baju Rajah as a cultural artifact, the context of the Jambi Malay community's beliefs regarding the power of Rajah, and the role of this artifact in strengthening local identity and narratives of struggle. The method used in this study is a qualitative paradigm through descriptive analysis to explore the relationship between the historical value of the Baju Rajah and its symbolic and social meanings within the Jambi Malay community. The results of the study indicate that, within a historical context, the Baju Rajah functions as a symbol of courage and collective protection. Meanwhile, the social values that can be identified reveal that the Baju Rajah is not merely a sacred text to be recited, but also a cultural artifact that can be seen, touched, and integrated into the spiritual identity of the Jambi Malay community.

I. INTRODUCTION

Local historiography in Jambi refers to the writing of history focused on the Jambi region, whether authored by local historians or based on local community traditions. This makes it unique due to its distinctive character, which blends written and oral sources with cultural traditions. Local historiography of Jambi is a blend of tradition and modern scholarship. This aspect is crucial to examine for understanding the cultural identity and history of the Jambi community, while also enriching Indonesia's national historiography with a local perspective. One form of cultural expression with historiographical value is the Baju Rajah, which in Malay tradition is often associated with magical elements, self-protection, and social legitimacy. The Baju Rajah serves not only as clothing but also as a symbol representing the relationship between humans and supernatural forces, as well as the social structures surrounding them (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Within the context of the Malay community in Jambi, the Baju Rajah associated with the local freedom fighter Datuk Ahim has become an integral part of the living local historiographical narrative embedded in the collective memory of the community.

The Baju Rajah owned by Ibrahim Abdul Gani (better known as Datuk Ahim) became a symbol of the resilience of the people of West Tanjung Jabung Regency, Jambi, in facing the second Dutch attack in 1949. This artifact is one of the important collections currently housed at the Jambi People's Struggle Museum, which aims to document various historical objects from the era of Indonesia's physical revolution (Jambi People's Struggle Museum, 2014). Datuk Ahim was a Red Sash Commander who led the struggle to defend the independence of the Republic of Indonesia in Parit Deli Village, Kuala Tungkal, West Tanjung Jabung. In that battle, Datuk Ahim's forces succeeded in defeating the Dutch army. It is said that Datuk Ahim survived the gunfire despite being armed only with traditional Malay weapons. He wore the Baju Rajah, which is believed to provide protection and magical knowledge that grants strength and physical endurance to the wearer (Helmiyati, 2014). Physically, this Baju Rajah resembles a vest adorned with Arabic script across the entire surface of the fabric. On the front, the word "Allah" appears on the left side of the chest and the word "Muhammad" on the right side of the chest. According to Helmiyati (2014), Head of Collections at the Jambi People's Struggle Museum, Datuk Ahim's Baju Rajah served as a "protector against Dutch colonial rule" and was believed to deflect bullets so they would not hit their target. She emphasized that the clothes is an authentic artifact received by the museum from Datuk Ahim's heirs in 2014. Several inscriptions on the Baju Rajah remain untranslated to this day. Additionally, museum officials explained that some segments of the Rajah's inscriptions appear faint and require further investigation before they can be accurately understood.

Furthermore, Nurmansyah (2025) states that the Baju Rajah, within Malay tradition, can be associated with religious spiritual power, self-protection, and an individual's social legitimacy within the societal structure. In the case of Datuk Ahim, the Baju Rajah serves as a crucial element

of the local narrative linking this figure to values of leadership, authority, and a connection to the spiritual realm. Therefore, any study of the Baju Rajah cannot be separated from the local historiographical context that shapes how the community understands the past and interprets their identity. The social values embodied in the Baju Rajah symbol reflect the norms and belief systems of the Jambi Malay community, such as courage, protection, honour, and harmonious relationships between humans and the supernatural realm. These values are passed down through local historiography, which serves not only as a record of the past but also as a vehicle for cultural education for future generations (Abdullah, 1985). In other words, local historiography serves a normative function in preserving the community's identity and social cohesion.

However, studies on the local historiography of Jambi—particularly those examining the Baju Rajah and the figure of Datuk Ahim from the perspective of symbolic meaning and social value—remain relatively limited. In fact, research on local heroes should be published to ensure widespread public acceptance, especially regarding the distinctive characteristics of these figures from various regions (Kurniawan et al., 2021). Most research focuses more on the chronological and descriptive aspects of history, without delving deeply into the symbolic dimensions contained within it. Yet, an understanding of these symbols and social values is crucial for uncovering how the Malay community of Jambi constructs meaning regarding their past and cultural identity.

Therefore, this study is important to conduct with the aim of examining the local historiography of Jambi through an approach that considers the symbolic meanings and social values of the Malay community. By focusing on the Baju Rajah and the figure of Datuk Ahim, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the development of local historical studies and enrich our understanding of the cultural dynamics of the Malay community in Jambi from a more holistic perspective.

II. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method with descriptive analysis to explore the symbolic meaning of the Baju Rajah as part of the culture and beliefs of the Malay community in Jambi. The research design is a single-case study focusing on Datuk Ahim's Baju Rajah, examining its symbolic meaning and the social values it embodies. Qualitative research is an approach that emphasizes understanding the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of research subjects. Descriptive analysis, meanwhile, is a technique used to describe or depict data as it is (Safarudin et al., 2023). Data collection was conducted through field studies or observations of the Baju Rajah at the Jambi People's Struggle Museum, as well as through the analysis of various sources related to the history and symbolic meaning of the Baju Rajah, the social values of the Baju Rajah embedded in Jambi Malay society, and the context of the struggle for Indonesian independence. Observation was used to directly observe phenomena or behaviours occurring in the field. This method allows researchers to obtain data naturally without any intervention that could influence

the research results (Putri and Murhayati, 2025). The aim is to understand the physical aspects, the Rajah inscriptions, and the symbolism contained within the artifact, while the analysis of articles and journals provides an academic perspective on the social values embedded in Datuk Alim's Baju Rajah. Next, data analysis is conducted interactively based on the Miles and Huberman (1992) model, which encompasses three main stages. First, data reduction, which involves filtering, focusing, and simplifying the data to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Second, data presentation, which involves presenting research findings in the form of descriptive narratives to make patterns and meanings easily understandable. Third, drawing conclusions and verification, which is the process of interpreting the patterns and meanings emerging from the data as well as double-checking to ensure the consistency of the findings. Thus, this research method allows for an in-depth exploration of the symbolic meanings and social values of Datuk Alim's Baju Rajah.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Baju Rajah as a Local Historiographic Artifact

The Baju Rajah, known in the Jambi Malay tradition as a vest with Rajah inscriptions, represents a fusion of physical and spiritual aspects within the culture; physically, it is a cloth vest adorned with Rajah inscriptions consisting of Arabic script, mantras, or magical symbols believed to confer power and protection. According to Meyanti & Andhifani (2021), the Rajah tradition in Sumatra indicates that rajah serves as a tool for protection and spiritual recognition within Malay culture. The Baju Rajah serves as a spiritual protector, a symbol of courage, and a marker of cultural identity, consistent with the findings of Serli et al. (2020) that artifacts inscribed with magical writings in Jambi Malay society function to reinforce beliefs, serve as status symbols, and act as vehicles for the transmission of traditional values; furthermore, they constitute a historical legacy now regarded as objects of cultural education and local identity.



Picture 1. Baju Rajah at the Jambi People's Struggle Museum

Rajah is not only manifested through words but is also applied to various cultural objects believed to possess protective power. One of the key mediums is the baju rajah—clothes inscribed with rajah texts or symbols using ink, embroidery thread, or special stamps. These clothes are typically worn by warriors, traditional leaders, or individuals performing specific rituals. Yusuf (2018) explains that the Baju Rajah functions as a spiritual shield, where the symbols and inscriptions on the fabric are believed to repel both physical attacks and supernatural disturbances. These clothes are often adorned with short verses, prayer phrases, or distinctive motifs such as tigers, birds, and plants that hold magical significance. In addition to clothing, rajah is also widely applied to traditional weapons, particularly keris, swords, spears, and daggers. Carvings of rajah or sacred symbols are often found on the blades of these weapons. Rajah on weapons is not merely ornamentation but serves as a form of spiritual reinforcement for the owner. Mahyuni (2015) states that weapons with rajah carvings are regarded as possessing guardian spirits, so the rajah carvings serve to bolster courage and protect the wearer from unseen dangers. Rajah-inscribed weapons are typically used in traditional ceremonies, traditional Silat performances, or when entering areas considered haunted. Rajah motifs are also commonly found on ritual accessories, such as rajah bracelets, necklaces inscribed with specific symbols, small amulets, rajah belts, and small pieces of cloth imbued with prayers. These accessories are used for protection when traveling long distances, going to sea, or participating in special rituals. Harun (2017) explains that the use of rajah on small objects demonstrates how the Jambi Malay community internalizes spiritual values through simple objects that are always present in daily life.

In some cases, rajah is also found on natural objects such as specific types of wood or small stones used as talismans against misfortune. The presence of rajah on clothing, weapons, and accessories demonstrates that the Malay community of Jambi integrates belief, art, and symbolism into their lives. Rajah is not merely a sacred text recited aloud but also a cultural artifact that can be seen, touched, and incorporated into one's spiritual identity.

Datuk Ahim in the Historical Context of the Baju Rajah

Datuk Ahim is known as one of the local leaders who played a significant role in the dynamics of the Jambi Malay community's struggle during the colonial era. As a respected figure within the traditional social structure, Datuk Ahim not only held social authority but also served as a central coordinator in various acts of resistance against Dutch political pressure. Such local leadership has been cited by historians as a crucial foundation for preserving community identity and autonomy at the village level. According to Poesponegoro and Notosusanto (2016), traditional leaders often served as both guardians of social structures and catalysts for collective solidarity in confronting colonialism. Datuk Ahim's Baju Rajah serves as historical evidence of how traditional leaders integrated cultural, spiritual, and resistance strategies. In the Jambi Malay tradition, the rajah is understood as a symbol of protection and spiritual power believed to provide calmness and courage

in facing both physical and non-physical threats. Thus, Datuk Ahim's use of the Baju Rajah demonstrates how cultural dimensions became an integral part of the Jambi Malay community's resistance strategy. In the context of this research, the existence of the Baju Rajah reveals that Datuk Ahim's struggle was not merely a military action but also a manifestation of cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and the communal identity of the Jambi Malay community.

Datuk Ahim can be understood as a representation of a local figure embodying the fusion of traditional leadership, spiritual strength, and patriotic spirit. His role in the people's struggle is significant not only locally but also as part of the broader mosaic of Indonesia's resistance history. Its historical value lies in how it underscores that the struggle for independence was not solely the domain of national figures but also relied on the vital contributions of local leaders who defended their communities using all the cultural resources at their disposal.

The use of the baju rajah is a widespread self-defence tradition in the Sumatra region, linked to the people's struggle against Dutch colonial rule. The baju rajah consists of cloth or clothes adorned with specific verses, mystical symbols, and prayers from spiritual teachers. In Malay culture, this attire serves as protection believed to enhance the courage and resilience of warriors. Malay cultural historians note that the writings or Rajah of the king function as a means of protection believed to strengthen the spirit in battle (Sweeney, 2011). During the colonial era, this practice became part of mental and spiritual strategies, supporting physical tactics and traditional weaponry. In West Tanjung Jabung and the Jambi region in general, the use of the Baju Rajah is documented in numerous oral histories and museum records. The Jambi People's Struggle Museum notes that local leaders and warriors often combined martial arts skills with spiritual practices. One exhibition panel states that Jambi fighters believed the rajah to be a spiritual protector that made them fearless in the face of the colonizers' gunfire (Jambi People's Struggle Museum, 2018). This belief bolstered the troops' morale, especially when they encountered the modern firearms possessed by the Dutch.

Beyond its spiritual value, the Baju Rajah also holds significant meaning in culture and identity. Its use affirms the connection between the fighters and the traditions of their ancestors, while also demonstrating that resistance was not merely a physical clash but also a recognition of religious and customary values. A local anthropologist described that "*the rajah is a symbol of courage and self-confidence that fuelled the Malay people's struggle against oppression*" (Hasan, 2016). Thus, the baju Rajah is not merely viewed as a physical object but as a symbol of cultural and spiritual resistance. In colonial-era records, the use of the baju rajah was often seen as an irrational act. However, Indonesian historians have clarified this perspective by demonstrating that the rajah is part of a psychological strategy. Research from the Malay Cultural Documentation Centre reveals that "*the rajah exerts a suggestive influence that enhances the mental readiness of fighters in confronting modern weapons*" (PDBM, 2019). Therefore, the baju rajah serves as a

cultural technology that helps individuals resisting colonialism to strengthen mental resilience and group solidarity.

The Symbolic Meaning of the Baju Rajah Datuk Ahim

Rajah not only symbolize protection, courage, and spirituality on a personal level, but also possess a collective dimension that reinforces community identity. In traditional societies, Rajah symbols serve as markers of social status, community affiliation, and connection to customs or ancestors. Rajah can illustrate the relationship between the individual and the group, affirm social roles, and communicate the community's philosophy of life to future generations. Rajah not only protect the wearer personally but also reflect community values and collective memory passed down through rituals and cultural practices (Pamungkas et al., 2022). Beyond their social aspects, Rajah also possesses a significant aesthetic dimension. The motifs and symbols that are carved or printed are not merely decorations but also convey cultural and spiritual messages. Every line, shape, or inscription holds a specific meaning understood by the community. Smara, et al., (2024) explain that the visual beauty of a rajah is symbolic, where each motif carries spiritual, moral, and social meanings internalized by the owner and their community.

Rajah serves as a symbolic medium of communication that simultaneously connects aesthetics, spirituality, and social values. It also plays a role in reinforcing cultural identity, particularly when used in traditional ceremonies, artistic performances, or historical events. Datuk Ahim's Baju Rajah, for instance, functions not only as a protective talisman or a symbol of courage but also as a symbol of identity and pride for the West Tanjung Jabung community. Datuk Ahim's Baju Rajah stands as a testament to local struggles and a symbol of community identity that upholds ancestral cultural values (Jambi Update, 2018). This demonstrates that rajah can unify spiritual, social, and historical aspects within a single cultural artifact. Furthermore, rajah serves an important pedagogical function. Through the creation process and accompanying rituals, the younger generation learns about the community's spiritual values, ethics, and social norms. The Rajah serves as an effective medium for cultural education because it combines symbols, rituals, and daily life practices.

Thus, the rajah not only protects individuals physically or metaphysically, but also serves as a means of instilling moral, spiritual, and social values in future generations, while simultaneously strengthening collective identity and cultural continuity. By broadening our understanding of the symbolic meaning of the rajah, it becomes clear that this artifact is not merely a means of protection or a spiritual medium, but also a tool for cultural communication, a symbol of courage, aesthetics, education, and the reinforcement of community identity. The rajah reflects a harmonious relationship between humans, the community, nature, and the spiritual world, while also serving as a medium for preserving, transmitting, and sustaining ancestral values within society.

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that the presence of the Baju Rajah in local historiography functions as a medium for transmitting cultural values. Stories about Datuk Ahim and his Baju Rajah have been passed down through generations via oral tradition, thereby shaping the collective memory of the community. This process reinforces the cultural identity of the Jambi Malay community while ensuring the continuity of the social values embedded within it (Azra, 2013). It can be concluded that the symbolic meaning of Datuk Ahim's Baju Rajah is not singular but encompasses various dimensions, namely as a symbol of protection, the legitimization of power, moral values, and cosmic balance. The existence of this symbol demonstrates that local historiography functions not only as a record of the past but also as a system of meaning that shapes the community's perspectives and behaviours in daily life.

The Social Values of the Baju Rajah in the Jambi Malay Community

The Rajah tradition in Jambi is a form of living oral literature within the Malay community of Jambi. Rajah is understood as an expression resembling a pantun, poem, or incantation recited during various traditional ceremonies. In the context of local culture, rajah serves not only as a means of linguistic aesthetics but also as a spiritual medium. According to Syarifuddin (2013), Rajah is a form of cultural expression among the people of Jambi that combines the aesthetic elements of pantun with magical-religious functions. This indicates that rajah possesses a dual dimension: linguistic beauty and symbolic power. Rajah is recited by a Perajah on various occasions, such as weddings, traditional healing rituals, land clearing ceremonies, rituals to ward off misfortune, or other traditional ceremonies. In the life of the Jambi Malay community, rajah plays a vital role as a means of maintaining harmonious relationships between humans, nature, and metaphysical forces.

Rajah not only functions as a symbol of protection, courage, and spirituality on an individual level but also plays a central role in the social and cultural structure of the community. In a socio-cultural context, rajah serves as a unifying tool for the community, reinforcing group identity, and signifying specific social status or traditional affiliations. Rajah serves as a means of reinforcing community identity and strengthening a sense of togetherness among community members through ritual and symbolic practices (Pamungkas et al., 2022). This indicates that rajah is part of a symbolic communication system that helps the community express collective values and strengthen social bonds. In addition to its social role, rajah possesses a strong religious dimension. Rajahs are often used in traditional rituals, religious ceremonies, or traditional healing practices to seek protection, safety, and blessings. The process of creating and using rajahs serves as a vehicle for cultural education, through which moral, spiritual, and social values are transmitted from one generation to the next (Smara, et al., 2024).

In this context, the Rajah serves as both a historical witness and a collective symbol that unites the community through the values of courage and solidarity. Furthermore, the Rajah also functions as a means of cultural education and the preservation of traditions. Through its creation, rituals, and use, the community transmits spiritual values, life philosophies, ethics, and social norms to the younger generation. The rajah serves as an educational tool, a cultural preservatory, and a reinforcer of community identity. Overall, the role of the rajah in Indonesian society is highly complex and multidimensional. It integrates social, religious, aesthetic, educational, and historical aspects. Rajah strengthens community identity, maintains the continuity of traditions, connects individuals with ancestors and spiritual forces, and serves as a symbolic medium that collectively communicates cultural values. This role makes rajah more than just a physical artifact; it becomes the centre of cultural practices that reflect the social structure, beliefs, and history of the community. Rajah attire in the struggle of the Malay-Jambi community holds significant historical meaning, as it reflects how the local community confronted colonial threats by incorporating spiritual traditions into their resistance strategy. This tradition demonstrates that resistance against the Dutch occurred not only in physical battles but also in cultural and spiritual realms. The Jambi People's Struggle Museum notes that traditional items such as the rajah, weapons, and amulets became essential elements of the Jambi fighters' identity during their struggle against colonial forces (Jambi People's Struggle Museum, 2018). This indicates that the Baju Rajah holds a deep connection to history as tangible evidence of how local beliefs played a role in the context of war.

Furthermore, within the social order, the Baju Rajah embodies unity and bonds within the community. The use of this clothes is closely tied to the relationship between spiritual teachers, traditional leaders, and the fighters. The process of creating and presenting the rajah is typically conducted through communal rituals, which strengthen the sense of brotherhood among them. In Hasan's (2016) research, it was revealed that "*the practice of making the Rajah underscores the social relationships and bonds between spiritual leaders and the community fighting for the dignity of the village.*" This social value indicates that the Rajah tradition is not merely protective clothes but also a tool that fosters collective solidarity in resisting colonialism.

Additionally, there is a religious aspect evident in the community's belief that the Baju Rajah is adorned with verses from the Qur'an, prayers for safety, and symbols believed to possess spiritual power. This belief provides a religious foundation for acts of resistance, in line with the view that defending one's homeland is part of a moral responsibility. The Malay Cultural Documentation Centre (2019) notes that the rajah is regarded as a form of *tawakal*—that is, human effort to the utmost accompanied by complete surrender to God's power. This religious element strengthens the fighters' spirit while highlighting the connection between spiritual practices and the community's resistance movement.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Baju Rajah of Datuk Ahim is a form of cultural expression among the Malay community of Jambi that holds distinctive historiographical value. The symbolic meaning of the Baju Rajah reflects a close connection between the individual and the group, affirms social roles, and links a community's philosophical concepts of life to future generations. The motifs and symbols that are carved or printed are not merely decorative; they also convey cultural and spiritual messages. Every line, shape, or inscription holds a specific meaning understood by the community. Furthermore, the Baju Rajah holds significant historical meaning within the social life of the Malay community in Jambi. It can thus be understood that, in the life of the Malay community in Jambi, the Rajah plays a vital role as a means of maintaining the relationship between humans, nature, and metaphysical forces. The combination of all these elements reflects how the local community confronted colonial threats by utilizing spiritual traditions as part of their resistance strategy. The leadership of Datuk Ahim, rooted in the people's trust, along with the role of the Barisan Selempang Merah—comprising diverse ethnic groups and backgrounds—demonstrates the high spirit of unity and sacrifice among the coastal communities of Jambi. The existence of the Baju Rajah as an artifact now housed at the Jambi People's Struggle Museum serves as tangible evidence that enriches the local historical narrative and underscores the importance of preserving cultural artifacts as part of regional identity. In conclusion, this study is expected to contribute further to the local historiography of Jambi, grounded in the culture of the local community and its connections to social and spiritual dimensions.

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