



Acculturation of Hindu–Buddhist culture in the formation of cultural identity of Medan City

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Hindu–Buddhist cultural acculturation in the formation of the cultural identity of the city of Medan. Using a descriptive–historical qualitative approach, data was obtained through field observations, in–depth interviews with traditional and cultural figures, and documentation studies of artifacts and historical sources. The results of the study show that Hindu–Buddhist culture left a strong imprint in the form of archaeological artifacts, traditional symbols, social structures, cosmology, and the art and architecture of the Karo and Malay Deli communities. The process of cultural acculturation is integrative, where Hindu–Buddhist elements do not replace local culture, but are absorbed, reinterpreted, and merged into the value system of the local community. This finding confirms that Hindu–Buddhist culture is an early historical layer that contributes significantly to the formation of the cultural identity of the city of Medan to the present day.

Keywords: Cultural acculturation, Hindu–Buddhist, cultural identity, Medan City, Karo, Malay Deli

Introduction

The city of Medan is one of the largest multicultural cities in Indonesia whose cultural identity is formed through a long and complex historical process. The ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity that exists today does not appear suddenly, but is the result of intercultural interactions that take place across the ages. One of the early layers of culturers who played an important role in this process was Hindu–Buddhist culturers. (Harahap *et al.*, 2022)^[5]

Before the entry of Islam and European colonialism, the North Sumatra region had been part of an international trade route connecting India, Southeast Asia, and China. This trade activity opened a space for cultural interaction between the local community and traders and religious leaders from India who brought the influence of Hindu–Buddhist cultures. The interaction developed into a process of cultural acculturation that affected various aspects of the life of the local community (Shaleha, 2025)^[17]. This interaction process then develops into acculturation that affects various aspects of culture.

The acculturation of Hindu–Buddhist cultural leaders in the area now known as the city of Medan is not only reflected in religious aspects, but also in social systems, traditional political structures, cosmology, art, and architecture. This shows that Hindu–Buddhist culturers function as a source of values and symbols that are then adapted by the local community according to the context of their culture (Takari, 2005)^[20]. This shows that the influence is widespread and sustainable.

The existence of archaeological sites such as the Padanglawas temple complex is strong material evidence of the influence of Hindu–Buddhist cultural leaders in North Sumatra. Although geographically not in the center of Medan City, the influence of cultural influences from the area extended to the Deli and Karo areas which later became an important part of the development of the city of Medan (Tanjung & Ali, 2024)^[22]. Although the location of the site is not right in the center of the city of Medan today, its cultural influence extended to the area which later

developed into the administrative and economic center of North Sumatra.

This cultural interaction then formed the social structure of the local community, including the Malay Deli community and the Karo community who had long inhabited the Medan area. Their cultural identity contains Hindu–Buddhist elements that are absorbed in traditions and customs (Wijaya *et al.*, 2024)^[24]. For example, in the tradition of the Karo people, the concept of three–world cosmology known as the "trinity" bears similarities to Hindu–Buddhist cosmology (Situmorang, 2022)^[19]. This similarity shows that this influence has taken root since before the formation of the Deli Sultanate.

In the Karo community, the influence of Hindu–Buddhist culturers can be seen in the concept of cosmology, social structure, and traditional symbols that reflect a three–layered worldview. Meanwhile, the Deli Malay community shows traces of acculturation through royal terminology, symbols of power, and traditional values that have similarities with classical Hindu traditions (Rahman & Ahmad, 2017)^[11]. In addition, the use of vocabulary absorbed from Sanskrit in regional languages shows the existence of intensive cultural interaction from the earliest times (Lalira, 2025)^[7].

The acculturation process shows that the cultural identity of the city of Medan is not only the internal result of the local community, but is a combination of foreign elements that are accepted, adjusted, and fused into a new culture (Muhammad Ricky Hardiyansyah, Pulung Sumantri, Surya Aymanda Nababan, Aditya Darma, 2025)^[10]. This is what it is called (Geertz, 1973)^[3]. This cultural acculturation process emphasizes that the cultural identity of the city of Medan is not solely formed by local cultural figures, but also by elements of outside cultural experts who are accepted and processed creatively. In the perspective of cultural anthropology, identity is understood as a social construct that continues to evolve through symbolic and historical interactions. In fact, these layers of culture form the foundation for the collective identity of their people (Reid, 2015)^[13].

In this context, cultural acculturation is understood as a process in which different cultural elements meet each other and produce new forms of culture without losing their original characteristics (Roszi & Mutia, 2018)^[15]. This is in accordance with the cultural conditions of Medan which have been inclusive and open since ancient times. The formation of Medan's cultural identity through Hindu-Buddhist acculturation is important to study because it plays a role in shaping the values of the local community, such as respect for ancestors, communal social structures, and patterns of relationships between individuals that reflect classical cultural heritage (Arianti *et al.*, 2025)^[1].

The cultural identity formed from this process then interacts again with other cultures that enter Medan, such as Islam, Chinese culture, European culture, and other immigrant ethnic cultures. Medan is a meeting point for various cultures but still has traces of historical identity. In the study of urban anthropology, Medan is often described as a "layered cultural space" that shows an overlap between local culture and global and classical cultural influences. The Hindu-Buddhist layers of culture are the strongest starting layers.

This influence can be seen in several traditional rites, traditional symbols, and traditional power relations patterns that are still maintained. For example, the concept of king and kingdom attached to the Sultanate of Deli bears similarities to the structure of Hindu kingdoms (Takari *et al.*, 2012)^[21]. In addition, Hindu-Buddhist elements are also seen in traditional arts, such as carving motifs, architectural patterns of Karo traditional houses, and symbols used in traditional ceremonies (Ginting, 2020). Certain flora and fauna motifs bear a resemblance to classical Hindu-Buddhist ornaments.

This influence shows that local culture is able to absorb foreign elements without losing its original identity. In fact, the acculturation process enriches local culture and forms the distinctive character that characterizes the city of Medan today. Thus, the study of Hindu-Buddhist cultural acculturation in the formation of the cultural identity of the city of Medan is important as an effort to understand the historical roots of this city. This understanding can help people interpret cultural diversity as part of a collective identity, not just a legacy of the past.

Furthermore, understanding the cultural identity of Medan contributes to efforts to preserve culture and strengthen the character of the community. A strong identity is the foundation for sustainable urban development based on local cultural values. Based on this description, research on the acculturation of Hindu-Buddhist culture in the city of Medan is not only relevant from a historical perspective, but also important to understand the dynamics of the development of the cultural identity of its people today. Thus, this study seeks to trace the traces of acculturation and explain its role in the formation of the cultural identity of the city of Medan comprehensively.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-historical research design to examine the process of Hindu-Buddhist cultural acculturation and its contribution to the formation of cultural identity in the city of Medan. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of meanings, values, and cultural expressions

that emerge from historical interactions between Hindu-Buddhist traditions and local societies. As emphasized by Creswell and Creswell (2018)^[2], qualitative research focuses on understanding how individuals and social groups construct meaning within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. In line with this perspective, a historical approach is applied to trace past events and cultural influences through written sources, artifacts, and other historical records relevant to the development of Medan.

The research was conducted in the city of Medan, particularly in locations that have strong historical links to Hindu-Buddhist cultural practices and their interaction with local traditions. These locations include central areas of Medan, Maimun Field, Medan Labuhan, and several cultural sites and museums, such as the North Sumatra State Museum. These sites were selected because they represent important centers of cultural development for the Deli Malay and Karo communities, both of which historically experienced interaction with Hindu-Buddhist influences through trade, political relations, and cultural exchange.

The subjects of this study consist of individuals and sources that possess relevant knowledge of Medan's cultural history. They include traditional leaders from the Deli Malay and Karo communities who understand customs and cultural values shaped by earlier Hindu-Buddhist influences, as well as local cultural experts and historians who specialize in the historical development of Medan. In addition, museum managers and caretakers of cultural sites were involved as informants due to their direct engagement with Hindu-Buddhist artifacts and historical collections. Historical documents—such as colonial records, archaeological reports, and scholarly literature on Hindu-Buddhist influence in North Sumatra—also function as important research subjects. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that participation was based on expertise, experience, and relevance to the research focus.

The data collected in this study consist of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, cultural practitioners, and academics, as well as through direct observation of cultural sites, museums, traditional symbols, and cultural practices that exhibit Hindu-Buddhist elements. Secondary data were gathered from books, academic journals, scientific articles, colonial historical documents, archaeological research reports, museum archives, ethnographic records, and photographic documentation of artifacts. These secondary sources serve to contextualize and strengthen the interpretation of primary data within a broader historical and cultural framework.

Data collection was carried out using several complementary techniques. Observations were conducted directly at cultural sites, during traditional Deli Malay and Karo ceremonies, and within museum spaces that house Hindu-Buddhist artifacts. Observation sheets were used to systematically record visual, symbolic, and contextual findings. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing flexibility in exploring informants' perspectives while maintaining alignment with the research objectives. As noted by Sugiyono (2019), this interview model enables researchers to obtain rich and nuanced data. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate thorough analysis. Documentation techniques were also employed, including the collection of photographs of artifacts, historical records, old manuscripts, and maps of

historically significant areas, which function as supporting evidence for data interpretation.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction stage, researchers selected and focused on information relevant to the theme of Hindu–Buddhist acculturation, systematically organizing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. The reduced data were then presented in the form of descriptive narratives, selected interview excerpts, and visual representations such as tables and photographs, enabling clearer identification of patterns and relationships. Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing primary and secondary data to identify patterns of Hindu–Buddhist acculturation and to explain their contribution to the cultural identity of the city of Medan.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, several validity strategies were applied. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different informants, field observations, and written documents. Technique triangulation was also employed by cross-checking data derived from interviews, observations, and documentation. In addition, member checking was

carried out by confirming interview results with informants to ensure accuracy and credibility. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, including detailed field notes, interview transcripts, and documentation records, thereby ensuring dependability and confirmability of the study.

Results and Discussion

1. Artifact Traces of Hindu–Buddhist Influence in Medan City

The results of observations at the North Sumatra State Museum and cultural areas show that Hindu-Buddhist traces are still very strong through the existence of archaeological artifacts. The artifacts found were statues, fragments of Hindu-Buddhist buildings, and traditional carving motifs that bore similarities to classical Hindu iconography.

The artifacts show that before it developed into a colonial city, the area now called Medan had experienced cultural contact with Hindu-Buddhist traders and leaders from the 9th to the 13th centuries.

Artifact data were obtained from museum documentation and field observations, which are summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Hindu–Buddhist Artifacts in the Medan Area

Yes	Artifact Types	Location of Findings	Hindu–Buddhist characteristics	Remarks
1	Ganesha Ark	North Sumatra State Museum	Elephant's head, sitting position	It is suspected that it came from Padanglawas and was transferred to the museum
2	Relief Fragments	Medan Labuhan	Typical flora motifs of South India	Indicates a trade relationship
3	Dwarapala Statue	Museum Collection	Doorman pose, fierce face	Symbol of Hindu–Buddhist protection
4	Fragment of Lingga-Yoni	Medan City	Fertility symbols	Evidence of ancient Hindu rituals
5	Kala Motif Engraving	Karo and Malay Deli Customs	The face of the guardian giant	Acculturation in local architecture

The results of the analysis show that *the* motifs of Kala, Ganesha, and fertility symbols remain alive in local art and architecture, especially in Karo traditional houses and some Malay ornaments.

The results of the study show that Hindu-Buddhist artifacts, such as Ganesha statues, Dwarapala, Lingga-Yoni fragments, and Kala motifs, can still be found in the Medan area through museum collections and historical documentation. This finding reinforces the view of archaeologists that the North Sumatra region, especially the Deli and Karo areas, has been a cultural contact space from the 9th to the 13th centuries. Research (Shaleha, 2025) [17] states that the migration of Indian traders to North Sumatra left a strong imprint on local artifacts and iconography. This is in line with the theory of cultural contact put forward by Redfield, (Redfield *et al.*, 1936) [12], that contact between groups results in the exchange of cultural values and symbols through material and non-material objects.

The existence of these artifacts also shows that Hindu-Buddhist influences are not only religious, but more broadly penetrate the art, symbolism, and cosmological structure of society. The symbolic function of the Ganesha or Kala statue in Karo and Malay societies is no longer understood as a religious object, but has become part of the local visual

identity. This is in accordance with the thinking (Geertz, 1973) [3] which states that cultural symbols can shift their meaning according to the social context of the recipient society. Thus, the existence of Hindu–Buddhist artifacts shows the early stages of the formation of Medan's cultural identity through the integration of historical symbols into local culture.

2. Acculturation in Social Structures and Indigenous Traditions

The results of interviews with Karo and Deli Malay traditional leaders revealed that the social and cosmological systems of local communities show strong Hindu-Buddhist influences. For example, in the Karo society there are concepts of "Telu Siwaluh" and "local Trimurti", which describe the cosmological structure of the three worlds similar to the Hindu concept.

The Malay Deli tradition also still retains some royal terminology and symbols derived from Hindu influences, such as the use of the term's "gods", "kings", and customary hierarchical structures that resemble ancient kingdoms.

The results of the analysis are presented in the following table:

Table 2: Elements of Hindu–Buddhist Influence in Local Traditions

Yes	Local Communities	Tradition	Hindu–Buddhist elements	Forms of Acculturation
1	Dodge	The Structure of the Three Siwaluh	The concept of three realms	Traditional cosmological systems
2	Dodge	Traditional houses	Kala and Flora Motifs	Ornaments on doors and walls
3	Malay Deli	Traditional Ceremonies	The Term "God", "King"	Languages and symbols of the kingdom

4	Malay Deli	Coat of arms of the kingdom	Mountains and dragon motifs	Influence of Javanese–Hindu iconography
5	Malay Deli & Karo	Kinship system	Caste-like hierarchy	Non-religious social adaptation

These findings show that acculturation occurs not only in physical objects, but also in social values and societal structures.

The results of the interviews revealed that the social structure of the Karo and Malay Deli communities contains elements of cosmology and hierarchy that have similarities with the Hindu-Buddhist concept, such as the structure of the three realms (upper world–middle world–underworld) and the royal hierarchy. This similarity illustrates the occurrence of cultural acculturation, not assimilation. The acculturation theory of (Mead, 1963) ^[9] It states that acculturation occurs when elements of foreign culture are accepted without eliminating the identity of the original culture. This can be seen from how the Karo people adapt the concept of Hindu cosmology into a local concept, such as "Telu Siwaluh" or the symbolization of the three worlds. Research (Hutama, 2021) ^[6] suggests that the traditional structure of the Karo bears a resemblance to the Hindu cosmological structure found in South India. The findings are reinforced by research (Ridwan, 2024) ^[14] which states that terms in the Malay Deli language such as raja, degod, dewata are the adoption of Sanskrit which undergoes an adjustment of meaning to the local context. Thus, the social structure and traditional traditions of Medan are the result of

the integration of two cultural experts that produce a new structure.

This acculturation did not change the main beliefs of the people, especially after the entry of Islam, but Hindu–Buddhist elements remained as a symbolic legacy. This is in accordance with the theory of cultural layering put forward by (Umanailo *et al.*, 2016) ^[23], which explains that people's culture is formed through historical layers that complement each other, not eliminate each other.

3. Acculturation in Art, Architecture, and Cultural Symbols

Observations of the Karo traditional house, Malay traditional hall, and historical documentation show that the local art and architecture in Medan has a typical Hindu-Buddhist ornamental pattern. The dragon, kala, lotus, and geometrically symmetrical motifs depict the strong influence of ancient Indian culture.

Karo traditional houses, for example, display kala ornaments on the door, as well as carvings of plant motifs that symbolize fertility as a Hindu concept. In Malay royal buildings, the symbol "Gunungan" resembles iconography in Hindu-Javanese puppetry.

The following table summarizes the findings:

Table 3: Hindu–Buddhist Influence on Art and Architecture

Yes	Types of Culture	Local Examples	Hindu–Buddhist elements	Acculturation Explained
1	Architecture	A Traditional House with	Motif Kala	Guardian symbol of the house
2	Architecture	Maimun Palace (ornaments)	Dragon & Lotus Motif	Symbols of Hindu cosmology
3	Art	Malay carving motifs	Hindu Flora & Fauna	Wall and door decoration
4	Art	Squirting With	Mandala Geometry	Symbol of perfection
5	Symbols	Traditional emblems	Mountains	The influence of Hindu puppetry

These results show that local culture not only imitates, but processes and adapts foreign elements into regional identity. The results of the study prove that local traditional art and architecture, such as Karo traditional houses and Deli Malay ornaments, contain typical Hindu-Buddhist elements. The motifs of Kala, dragons, mandalas, and lotuses are visual features that originate from ancient Hindu art. However, the local community no longer associates the symbol with Hinduism, but rather as part of the aesthetics and cultural philosophy of the region.

That Karo traditional house ornaments, especially Kala motifs, are used as a symbol of home protection and not as a religious icon. This shows that there is a process of reinterpretation of cultural symbols. According to the theory of cultural reinterpretation of the (Lévi-Strauss, 1963) ^[8], people often adjust the meaning of foreign symbols to fit their cultural structure.

In addition, it shows that Deli Malay ornaments such as dragon and mountain motifs are the result of the influence of Hindu-Javanese art which was introduced through political and trade relations in the pre-Islamic period. This strengthens the view (Sachari, 2007) ^[16] that acculturation in art occurs through the adoption of visual forms that are considered relevant without bringing changes to people's belief systems.

These findings show that art and architecture are the most clearly visible spaces of the acculturation process, because

visual values are more easily survived and more flexible to changes in meaning.

4. The Role of Hindu-Buddhist Acculturation in the Formation of the Cultural Identity of the City of Medan

Based on the analysis of the data obtained, Hindu-Buddhist acculturation proved to be one of the initial foundations of the cultural identity of the city of Medan. This acculturation appears in three main aspects:

a. Visual Identity

It can be seen from the motifs, symbols, ornaments, and traditional architecture that are still preserved.

b. Social Identity

Customary structures, social hierarchies, cultural terminology, and patterns of communal relations show continuity with Hindu-Buddhist values.

c. Philosophical Identity

Values such as respect for ancestors, harmony of the cosmos, and harmonious structure of life are reflected in Karo and Malay Deli customs.

The results of the interviews show that local people understand this acculturation not as an "outside influence", but as part of their self-identity, which has been intertwined for hundreds of years.

The results of the study show that Hindu-Buddhist acculturation plays a role as the initial layer of the cultural identity of the city of Medan. This identity is formed through the integration of visual, social, and philosophical elements of Hindu–Buddhist culture with local culture. Thoughts (Hall, 2015) ^[4] Cultural Identity Theory states that cultural identity is the result of a historical construction that is constantly changing and is not static. Medan's cultural identity reflects this, where Hindu-Buddhist culture became the initial foundation before the entry of Islam, Dutch colonialism, and modern migration flows.

These findings are also in line with research (Sinaga & Simangunsong, 2020) ^[18] which confirms that Medan is a multicultural city formed from the accumulation of various cultures, where Hindu-Buddhist culture is the oldest heritage and most influenced the early structure of its society. This acculturation not only shapes visual identities such as ornament and architecture, but also influences social values, such as respect for ancestors, harmony of the cosmos, and harsh but harmonious communal structures.

Thus, Hindu-Buddhist acculturation has a significant role in the formation of the cultural identity of the city of Medan, both in symbolic form and in the social structure of the community.

Conclusion and Suggestion

The results of the study show that the acculturation of Hindu-Buddhist culture has an important role in the formation of the cultural identity of the city of Medan. Traces of artifacts such as statues, building fragments, and Kala motifs prove the existence of cultural contacts since the 9th century. This influence is not only reflected in material objects, but also in the social structure and traditional traditions of the Karo and Malay Deli communities who adapt the concepts of cosmology, hierarchy, and Hindu-Buddhist symbols. This acculturation is evident in traditional art and architecture that blends Hindu–Buddhist ornaments with local aesthetics. All findings confirm that Medan's cultural identity was formed through a layered historical process, where Hindu-Buddhist elements became the initial foundation before the entry of Islamic and colonial influences. Thus, the acculturation is not only a historical heritage, but also an integral part of the cultural identity of Medan today.

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