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GENEALOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONFIGURATION OF MALAY ISLAM AND NUSANTARA ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC STUDIES

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Abstract: *This study analyses the conceptual genealogy of Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam and examines the similarities and differences between them in contemporary scientific discourse. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably in academic and public discourse, systematic studies comparing their historical foundations, epistemic actors, and conceptualisation processes are still limited. This gap is the main focus of this study. This study uses a library method with a historical-critical approach and conceptual analysis, which is operationalised through discourse tracing of historical and academic sources, as well as conceptual mapping of the construction of meaning of the two terms. The research data includes classical Malay manuscripts, works of Islamic philology and historiography, religious anthropology literature, and recent scientific publications in Islamic and Southeast Asian studies. The results of the analysis show that Malay Islam is rooted in a pre-modern Islamisation process that was institutionalised through a network of scholars, kingdoms, and classical literacy traditions, while Islam Nusantara is a modern discursive construction that has developed in an academic and religious organisational context since the early 21st century. This study identifies three main findings: similarities between the two in their accommodative and moderate orientation towards Islam; differences in their historical basis, cultural space, and discourse-forming actors; and the strategic role of both in formulating a contextual Islamic paradigm. Theoretically, this research contributes to strengthening the study of Islamic epistemology and Southeast Asian studies by offering a more precise comparative framework for understanding local Islam as a historical and discursive construct.*

Keywords: *Formation of Islamic Identity; Discursive Genealogy of Islam; Malay Islam; Islam in the Archipelago; History of Islamic Thought in Southeast Asia.*

INTRODUCTION

Islam, as a religion with claims of normative universality, continues to demonstrate its adaptive capacity in responding to the diversity of cultures, politics, and social structures in which it is rooted. In Southeast Asia, particularly in the Malay world and the Nusantara archipelago, Islam developed mainly through da'wah (proselytising), trade, and networks of scholars, rather than through military expansion. This process gave rise to a historical synthesis between the universal principles of Islam (al-kulliyyāt) and particular local traditions (al-juz'iyyāt). From this dynamic emerged two categories of intellectuals who now occupy important positions in the discourse on Islam in Southeast Asia, namely Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam, which are often used to explain the characteristics of religiosity, collective identity, and the intellectual history of Muslims in this region.

However, the use of these two terms in contemporary academic and public discourse does not occur in a vacuum. In the last two decades, the Malay-Archipelago world has faced increasingly apparent socio-religious tensions, such as conflicting claims over religious authority, the politicisation of the labels "moderate Islam" versus "puritan Islam", and the growing influence of transnational scripturalist movements that often challenge the legitimacy of local Islamic practices. In this context, the terms Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam do not merely function as cultural descriptions, but also as discursive instruments contested by the state, religious organisations, and intellectual actors to define Islam as legitimate, authentic, and normative. Unfortunately, many studies still treat these two concepts descriptively and historically, without directly linking them to the contestation of power and the production of knowledge that shapes them.

Theoretically, the genealogical approach as formulated by Michel Foucault, (2012; 1972) Through The Archaeology of Knowledge and subsequent works, he provides an important analytical framework for interpreting this phenomenon. Genealogy asserts that scientific discourse is not born neutral, but is shaped by the power relations, institutions, and social practices that govern it. From this perspective, Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam can be understood as the result of discursive formations produced by specific historical configurations, ranging from the Malay sultanates, traditional networks of religious scholars, Islamic educational institutions, to modern nation-states and contemporary religious authorities.

The existing literature can be classified into at least three main clusters. First, studies on historical Islamisation emphasise the role of networks of scholars and the circulation of intellectual ideas across regions. Contributions Azyumardi Azra, (2004; 2013) Through The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia and The Network of Middle Eastern and Indonesian Ulama, it is evident that Islam in this region was formed through a cosmopolitan network connecting Southeast Asia with centres of learning in Mecca, Medina, and Yemen. This finding confirms that the local Shafi'i-Sunni form of Islam with its Sufi tendencies is not a deviation, but rather the result of a creative dialogue between global orthodoxy and the local context.

Second, the study of identity construction that views Islam as a key element in the formation of social and political categories Anthony Milner, (2011) shows that "Malay" is

not a static ethnic identity, but rather a historical-political construct formed through the relationship between custom, power, and religion. Within this framework, Islam serves as the primary marker of Malay identity, particularly from the era of the Malacca Sultanate to the colonial and post-colonial periods, such that the term Malay Islam cannot be separated from the context of political and ethno-cultural legitimacy.

Third, a discursive and cultural approach that emphasises the role of language, texts, and authority in the formation of Islamic traditions. Talal Asad, (2003) through the concept of discursive tradition, highlights how Islamic practices are shaped by the interaction between normative texts and socio-historical conditions. Ricci, (2011), in Islam Translated shows the crucial role of Malay-Jawi, Javanese, and Tamil languages in the transmission and localisation of Islamic teachings. Meanwhile, Anthony Reid, (2015) places Islamisation in the context of maritime trade and population mobility in Southeast Asia, which explains the diversity of Islamic expression in the region.

Although these three clusters of literature provide a strong foundation, there are still significant blind spots. Previous studies have rarely conducted comparative genealogical analyses that systematically compare Malay Islam and Islam Nusantara as conceptual constructs born out of different configurations of power and knowledge. Malay Islam is generally understood as a product of sultanate political culture and Malay ethno-religious identity, while Nusantara Islam is often treated as a contemporary normative discourse born out of a response to global scripturalism and the need for the articulation of moderate Islam in Indonesia. However, the historical, epistemological, and discursive relations between the two have yet to be studied in depth and in an integrated manner.

In fact, the different contexts in which the two terms emerged are crucial to their meaning. Malay Islam developed within the framework of sultanate legitimacy and traditional ulama authority, while Islam Nusantara emerged in the context of the modern nation-state, Islamic boarding schools, and Islamic organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, which sought to define Indonesian Islam as a tolerant, pluralistic tradition rooted in local culture. Genealogy shows that this difference is not merely a terminological variation, but rather the result of discursive mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion that shape the boundaries of "legitimate" Islam.

Thus, this study is important to explicitly fill this gap by analysing the genealogy, intersections, and divergences between Malay Islam and Islam Nusantara from historical, epistemological, and socio-cultural perspectives. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines Foucault's genealogical theory, Azra's intellectual history, and Milner's identity analysis, this study seeks to provide a more precise understanding of how these two concepts are formed, contested, and used in contemporary scientific and social discourse in Southeast Asia.

Based on this background, this study focuses on answering two main questions: (1) how the genealogy and conceptual construction of Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam were formed and developed in contemporary scientific discourse, particularly in relation to historical dynamics, the politics of knowledge, and religious authority in Southeast Asia; and (2) how the configuration of similarities and differences between Malay Islam

and Nusantara Islam is viewed from historical, epistemological, and socio-cultural aspects, as well as its conceptual implications for the development of Islamic studies in the modern era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was designed as a systematic and in-depth library research study with a historical-critical approach and conceptual analysis (Gosebrink, 2023). This approach was chosen because the object of study is not a direct empirical phenomenon, but rather an intellectual and discursive construction of "Malay Islam" and "Islam Nusantara" that was formed through historical processes, text production, and the dynamics of Islamic scientific discourse in Southeast Asia. Thus, text- and literature-based studies are the most relevant methodological strategy for tracing the historical genealogy and mapping the conceptual configuration of these two terms in contemporary scientific discourse.

The unit of analysis in this study is explicitly defined as the formation and transformation of Islamic discourse as manifested in historical and academic texts. More specifically, the unit of analysis includes: (1) conceptual constructions in classical and modern text corpora, (2) epistemic actors who produce and disseminate ideas of Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam, and (3) ideological structures and religious values attached to these two terms. The establishment of these units of analysis is intended to avoid uncontrolled expansion of the analysis, while maintaining consistency of interpretation across data segments within a coherent historical and conceptual framework.

Methodologically, this study uses a historical-critical approach (Bistoletti, 2018), to trace the process of Islamisation, the development of intellectual civilisation, and socio-cultural transformation in the Malay world and the Archipelago from the classical to the modern period. This approach enables analysis of the socio-political context of text writing, the power relations of knowledge, and the dynamics of interaction between Malay kingdoms, scholars, and classical Islamic literacy networks. This historical-critical approach is combined with conceptual analysis (Mordecai & Crawley, 2021), namely, a systematic process of deconstructing and reconstructing the concepts of "Malay Islam" and "Islam Nusantara" by examining the meanings, conceptual structures, ideological pillars, and epistemological bases that shape them. Through a combination of these two approaches, the study can identify the similarities, differences, and conceptual implications of the two terms within the framework of modern Islamic scholarship.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Genealogy and Conceptual Construction of Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam in Contemporary Scientific Discourse

1. Historical Genealogy from an Interdisciplinary Perspective

This discussion confirms that "Malay Islam" and "Islam Nusantara" are historical-discursive constructs formed through a long process of interaction between religion,

culture, power, and knowledge production in Southeast Asia. A historical-critical analysis of primary and secondary sources shows that these two concepts did not emerge as ahistorical or essentialist Islamic entities, but rather as the result of a continuous process of negotiation between global Islamic traditions and local contexts. Since the early phase of Islamisation, the character of Islam in the Malay-Archipelago region has developed through creative adaptation to local traditions, cross-regional transmission of knowledge, and institutionalisation through trade networks, the mobility of scholars, and traditional Islamic educational institutions such as surau, pesantren, dayah, and langgar (Syafrizal, 2015).

This finding is in line with recent studies emphasising that Islam in Southeast Asia did not develop through passive imitation of the Middle Eastern model, but rather through what is known as the localisation and vernacularisation of Islam. Ricklefs' (2012) study in the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies shows that Islamisation in the Malay Archipelago took place through a dialogical process that allowed for the integration of Islamic teachings with local social structures and cosmology, without eliminating the normative authority of Islam itself. This pattern explains why the Islamic scholarly tradition in this region exhibits a high degree of epistemic flexibility as well as orthodox continuity.

Data from contemporary literature also confirms that traditional Islamic educational institutions functioned as the main agents in the process of adapting and recontextualising Islamic values to remain relevant to the local social environment. (Enhas, Zahara, & Basri, 2023). The process of knowledge transmission is not merely textual and dogmatic in nature, but also cultural and practical, enabling the integration of Islamic teachings with local values and responses to socio-political dynamics (Mardika & Ramli, 2024). This finding is reinforced by Feener, (2017) in Studia Islamica, who emphasises that Islamic authority in Southeast Asia is formed through complex interactions between texts, social practices, and political contexts, rather than through the singular dominance of formal fiqh discourse.

Thus, the genealogical framework shows that "Malay Islam" and "Islam Nusantara" are discursive entities that continue to be reproduced in accordance with the social needs, political demands, and cultural strategies of Muslim communities in this region (Islami, Rusli, & Sani, 2023). This Islamic identity is dynamic and historical in nature, shaped by power relations, religious actors, and state and civil society institutions. This perspective emphasises that neither can be understood as static categories, but rather as flexible and contextual socio-historical constructs.

a. The Genealogy of Malay Islam

Research into classical manuscripts, colonial archives, and modern historiographical literature shows that Malay Islam has strong roots in the cosmopolitan network of scholars of the 13th-17th centuries, as analysed by Azra, (2013) in relation to the network of scholars in the Middle East and the archipelago. However, using a Foucauldian genealogical approach, this study finds that the articulation of "Malay Islam" as a religious-political identity took on its

most hegemonic form during the colonial and post-colonial periods, when knowledge about "Malay" was institutionalised through the apparatus of power.

1) During the Colonial Period

During the colonial period, the British and Dutch instituted the category of "Malay" as part of an administrative-racial classification project aimed at organising and controlling the colonial population. Through censuses, customary laws and population regulations, the previously fluid and situational Malay identity was solidified into a standardised administrative category (Huda, 2017; Milner, 2002). Burhanudin, 2017) shows that this process reflects colonial knowledge production oriented towards bureaucratic interests and political control, rather than authentic representations of local social realities.

This categorisation served as an instrument of power that created a new social hierarchy, regulated access to resources, and reconfigured relations between the traditional elite, the sultanate, and the community. (Andaya, 2001; Shamsul, 2001). Andaya's study (2008) in Indonesia and the Malay World asserts that colonialism not only engineered the Malay political structure, but also standardised narratives of identity that continue to be reproduced in postcolonial discourse.

Furthermore, colonialism reinforced the structural correlation between Malay ethnicity and Islam. Colonial documents and Orientalist works systematically assumed that "Malay" was synonymous with "Muslim", thereby attaching religious identity to the official ethnic category (Milner, 2011; Gomez Jr, 2020). This resulted in a discursive foundation that explains why Malay Islam subsequently emerged as the normative-dominant identity in contemporary political and academic discourse.

2) The era of the nation states of Malaysia and Brunei

In the era of nation states, the construction of Malay Islam was institutionalised more systematically through state apparatus. In Malaysia and Brunei, Islam was positioned as a national identity integrated with Malay ethnicity and monarchy, as reflected in public policy, religious legislation and the education system. (Muslim & Buang, 2012; Effendi, 2022). The Malay Islamic Beraja (MIB) ideology in Brunei, for example, functions as a hegemonic framework that formally integrates religion, culture and power.

This phenomenon is in line with the concept of state-embedded Islam, which is a form of Islam that is structurally embedded in state institutions and used as an instrument of political legitimacy (Royyani & Shobaruddin, 2020). A recent study in Pacific Affairs shows that this kind of pattern has the potential to homogenise religious identities and reduce the diversity of local Islamic practices for the sake of the country's political stability (Liow, 2016).

Anthony Milner, (2011) In this context, Anthony Milner's theory (2011) is highly relevant. He asserts that "Malay" is a political category that has been

reshaped through language, literature, and traditional institutions. Thus, Malay Islam is more accurately understood as a dominant construct legitimised by the state and official discourse, rather than a homogeneous representation of the entire Islamic experience of the Malay community (Abdillah, 2021).

b. Genealogy of Islam in the Archipelago

Unlike Malay Islam, which was largely produced in a top-down manner, Islam Nusantara developed mainly after the Reformation through public discourse and grassroots initiatives. The literature shows that this term emerged as a response to social plurality, political democratisation, and increasing tensions between transnational purification movements and local Islamic traditions (Aminuddin & Ulfah, 2021). Islam Nusantara is constructed through an epistemology that emphasises maqāṣid al-syarīʿah, ʾurf, and the scholarly tradition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah. Reid (2015b) notes that Islam Nusantara functions as a discursive strategy of NU to assert a moderate Islam that is compatible with democracy and local culture, as well as a critique of the homogenisation of global Islam.

Various studies also show that Islam Nusantara developed through networks of Islamic boarding schools, PTKIN academics, and civil society, making it dynamic and participatory (Salapudin et al., 2021). In Modern Asian Studies, Hefner (2023) asserts that this form of Islam reflects a process of vernacularisation, namely the creative adaptation of Islam to the local context without losing its normative legitimacy. However, critical literature also highlights the potential for the political instrumentalisation of Islam Nusantara. Some researchers argue that this discourse can be reduced to a slogan of a particular state or elite if it is not accompanied by a strong social praxis basis. This criticism is important to show that Islam Nusantara is not a concept free from contestation, but rather an arena of ongoing ideological debate.

Thus, Islam Nusantara represents a reconstruction of Indonesian Islamic identity that emphasises moderation, inclusiveness, and cultural contextuality. It has become a symbol of negotiation between the universal teachings of Islam and the social realities of the archipelago, while also demonstrating Islam's capacity to adapt creatively to the challenges of the times.

2. Knowledge Politics as a Constructive Factor

According to the conceptual analytical framework adopted in this study, the main focus is on how knowledge about Malay Islam and Islam Nusantara is produced, legitimised, and disseminated through different socio-political relations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. The analysis shows that the politics of knowledge is not merely a reflection of social structures, but part of a process of symbolic and institutional power that is continuously negotiated by various social actors. This is in line with Berger & Luckmann, (2022) study of social construction, which states that social reality is shaped historically and through continuous social interaction; this reality is then institutionalised so that it appears "taken for granted" in everyday social practice.

Table 1. Political Configuration of Malay Islamic Knowledge and Nusantara Islam

Aspects	Indonesia (Islam Nusantara)	Malaysia (Malay Islam)	Brunei Darussalam (Malay Islamic Monarchy – MIB)	Overlapping Zones / Contestation
Discourse production model	Bottom-up and community ulama networks, civil society; inclusive pluralism	Top-down through state religious bureaucracy, official Malay-Islamic identity	Top-down absolute monarchy, state ideology (MIB)	Negotiations between the state and intellectual communities; dialogue between religious education and the state
Islamic orientation	Contextual, pluralistic, moderate	Normative, legally-religiously homogeneous	Organic conservatism with monarchical legitimacy	Interaction between local pluralism and the imposition of homogenisation
Knowledge instruments	Islamic boarding schools, PTKIN, mass organisations, civil Islamic media	JAKIM, Sharia law, state-based educational institutions	MIB ideology, monarchical national education structure	Religious curriculum vs national policy; networks of religious scholars in the local diaspora
Legitimacy basis	Social-charismatic, local sociocultural	Bureaucratic-legal, constitutional	Theocratic state, monarchy	Contestation between sociocultural legitimacy and formal state legitimacy

This revision shows that the political configuration of knowledge is more nuanced than a simple dichotomy. For example, in Indonesia there is an overlap between the state (Ministry of Religious Affairs, formal educational institutions) and epistemic communities (traditional scholars, Islamic mass organisations) in shaping the discourse of Islam Nusantara; whereas in Malaysia and Brunei, although the state

strongly holds the official narrative, civil society continues to play a role through the media, education and community organisations in pushing for policies that are more responsive to the pluralistic local context.

In Indonesia, the identity of Islam Nusantara emerged as a result of negotiations between local and global traditions, in which Islamic boarding schools, Islamic universities such as PTKIN, and Islamic mass organisations played an important role in the production of religious knowledge that was inclusive and responsive to sociocultural plurality. This shows that the production of religious knowledge in Indonesia is not dictated solely by the state, but through a network of local scholars and academics who are active in civil society. The article emphasises how the Islamic intellectual community mediates religious identity through cultural dialogue, contextual ijtihad, and adaptation to social diversity (Jubba, Suprianto, Prasojo, & Darmadi, 2023; Mardika & Ramli, 2024).

Fatimah Husein (2025) also highlights the significant contribution of local intellectual traditions such as the Hadrami network of scholars and Islamic boarding schools in preserving a pluralistic and reflective scientific tradition, which differs from the narrative of formal religious homogeneity. Fatimah Husein (2025) findings underline the contribution of female scholars in the dissemination of dynamic religious knowledge, a clear example of the hybridity of local-global knowledge production that is often marginalised in monolithic narratives.

Unlike Indonesia, Malaysia centres the legitimacy of Malay Islamic discourse on strong state institutions such as JAKIM and sharia enforcers at the state level. The state plays a dominant role in standardising Islamic discourse through regulations on education, religious law, and national identity attached to the concept of the Malay Islamic nation. This is consistent with studies describing the model of Islam bureaucratisation in Malaysia as centralised legal-bureaucratic, a variant of political knowledge controlled through state mechanisms (Badar, Jamil, & Khambali, 2025).

State power reinforces the narrative of Malay Islam as the identity of the majority through nationally standardised religious education policies (e.g. the National Islamic Education Curriculum Standard) and the role of formally appointed state clerics, giving rise to internal variations such as debates about more inclusive curriculum content in ethnic minority communities.

In Brunei, the Malay Islamic Beraja (MIB) doctrine formally became the state's ideological structure, integrating Islam, Malay, and monarchy as the national identity. Studies on MIB show how this ideology is used to solidify the Sultan's legitimacy as a religious and state leader, as well as a moral and political basis for national stability (Kalyla, Damayanti, & Nurlia, 2025).

Brunei's education policy and curriculum explicitly incorporate MIB values as part of social identity formation; this is also evident in school development documentation and learning materials that emphasise loyalty to the monarchy and the integration of Islam into state practices.

Empirical analysis shows that knowledge production is not entirely monolithic in one dimension; even in countries with strong states such as Malaysia and Brunei, there are still hybrid mechanisms in which non-state actors (educational institutions, community Islamic media, transnational networks of scholars) contribute to shaping religious narratives. A concrete example is the international academic conference on Islamic manuscripts held in Brunei in 2025, which featured global and local perspectives in Islamic studies.

Comparative studies show that although religious identity tends to be institutionalised in Malaysia/Brunei, there are significant internal variations. For example, in Malaysia itself, the discourse on Malay Islam is contested between moderate groups demanding religious education reform and conservative groups supporting the status quo; in Brunei, the debate over the role of MIB in youth society shows that there is room for interpretation at the civil society level that does not always align with the official narrative. In Indonesia, although Islam Nusantara is dominant, there is a dramatic contestation between traditional inclusive views and groups that see the concept as "confusing the original Islamic identity", evidence of internal variation in the legitimacy of religious knowledge (Sholihin & Rahmaniah, 2024).

The discourse on Islamic knowledge in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei shows different configurations but are historically and structurally interrelated. This reality is not monolithic, but rather the result of dynamic social constructions influenced by state actors, epistemic communities, educational institutions, and the political history of each country. Understanding this complexity opens up opportunities for richer analysis to explain how religious identity is formed, maintained, and contested in the socio-political context of Southeast Asia.

3. Religious Authority and Legitimacy

An analysis of the concepts of religious authority and legitimacy shows that the relationship between political power and religious institutions is a determining variable in the construction of religious identity in the Malay region. Various institutional forms, ranging from strong state bureaucracies to non-bureaucratic religious authority networks, shape the production and distribution of religious discourse in different ways between countries. This approach emphasises that the terms "Malay Islam" or "Islam Nusantara" should be understood as products of contemporary institutional contexts and power relations, rather than purely as legacies of religious texts (Ahmad, Rahman, Othman, & Abidin, 2017).

In Malaysia, the state positions itself as the main actor in regulating religious life, both as the producer of official policy and as the determinant of the framework of legitimacy for formal religious authority. Institutions such as the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), the State Islamic Religious Council, and the fatwa system, which are directly linked to the state structure, mark the dominance of bureaucratic authority in religious life. This authority is not only administrative (e.g. halal certification and religious education policy) but also epistemic: state institutions

are the main reference for what is considered "valid" or officially recognised religious practice at the national level (Ahmad et al., 2017).

This awareness is reflected in Malaysian Islamic political literature, which views the state-religion relationship as a constantly negotiated configuration, particularly in the context of federalism and the duality of state law (shariah vs. constitutional) that creates tension between state authorities and local political actors such as the Islamic Party PAS. For example, the repeal of Shariah laws in the state of Kelantan due to their overlap with federal law demonstrates a jurisdictional conflict that affects the legitimacy of religious authorities at the local and national levels, as well as revealing internal competition within the state over the determination of legal and religious authority. Academic studies confirm that state-led Islamisation in Malaysia must be viewed as a historical and contemporary process in which state authorities seek to consolidate the position of Islam in political discourse and public policy, while at the same time experiencing internal competition with non-bureaucratic actors such as Islamic student groups or civil society organisations that have different agendas in the representation and practice of Islam in the public sphere (Abdullah, 2021).

Unlike Malaysia's bureaucratic model, Brunei integrates religious authority into its absolute monarchy through the doctrine of "Melayu Islam Beraja" (MIB). This ideology combines elements of Malay ethnicity, monarchical legitimacy, and Islam as the state religion, making religious practices and symbols part of the official national identity narrative. In this context, religious legitimacy is produced not only by the religious bureaucracy but also by state symbols and the historical legitimacy of the monarchy itself. Brunei demonstrates a model of centralised authority in which the highest religious institutions and positions are under the direct control of the state, and state religious institutions have a monopoly on public communication related to Islam. In this model, there is no significant space for organised opposition to state authority in religious policy, so that the discourse of Malay Islam in Brunei tends to be read through a strong state and monarchical lens (Müller, 2018).

The most striking contrast is evident in Indonesia. Religious authority in Indonesia is pluralistic and fragmented, involving Islamic mass organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, networks of Islamic boarding schools, independent clerics, and a combination of institutional negotiations with the state and social mobilisation in the public sphere. The Indonesian state does not monopolise the production of religious knowledge; rather, it interacts with a heterogeneous network of socio-religious authorities, creating a dynamic arena of contestation and negotiation.

Studies on Indonesia show that the authority of the ulama has been fragmented by the currents of digitalisation and globalisation, giving rise to "digital ulama" and new religious figures who influence the legitimacy of fatwas and religious discourse directly to the public without going through state institutions or traditional religious organisations (Reconfiguring Islamic Authority in Indonesia). This reveals competition between bureaucratic authorities, official organisations, and non-

bureaucratic actors who utilise digital platforms as alternative channels of legitimacy (Besari, Rith, & Dara, 2025).

Comparative literature in Studia Islamika emphasises that NU and Muhammadiyah have different ways of managing their internal authority: NU tends to maintain traditional and cultural structures, while Muhammadiyah emphasises rationality, collegiality, and egalitarian principles in determining leadership authority, which has an impact on their legitimacy in the eyes of their respective followers (Kim, 2023).

Unlike Malaysia and Brunei, in Indonesia there are ongoing negotiations between the state and non-state actors in forming religious authorities. For example, in matters of determining the beginning of the Islamic month (rukyah) or fatwas, the government's position often clashes with the attitudes of community members and Islamic organisations that have their own moral authority (Government Position in Religious Authority Contestation in Indonesia) (Musonnif, Mahardika, Maratus, & Muttaqin, 2024). This tension reveals the dimension of internal competition within the state: the state seeks to maintain its legitimacy as the formal authority, but non-state authorities, ranging from traditional networks of clerics to digital preachers, continue to create alternative spaces of legitimacy that influence public religious behaviour.

The construction of Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam can only be comprehensively understood through the lens of each country's religious authority configuration and how this authority is contested both internally and across state and non-state actors. Malaysia exhibits a bureaucratic-state model with a strong religious bureaucracy and internal federal-state competition; Brunei exemplifies a monarchical model that unifies religious legitimacy with state symbols; while Indonesia displays a pluralism of authority involving state bureaucracy, traditional religious organisations, independent clerics, and digital figures, resulting in a more decentralised and diverse religious legitimacy space.

This comparative approach provides a more dynamic understanding of the religious authority landscape in Southeast Asia, which is not only related to formal state institutions but also to social actors, digital practices, and ever-changing religious networks. Further research utilising sources from reputable journals such as the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies or Modern Asian Studies could deepen our understanding of how state and non-state authority mechanisms interact and evolve in the context of globalisation and domestic policy (Pakpahan, 2023).

Conceptual Similarities and Differences and Their Epistemological Implications

1. Conceptual Equivalence

Through a thematic synthesis of historical, sociocultural, and theological studies, it was found that the construction of Islam in Southeast Asia has fundamental conceptual similarities. This approach allows for the identification of common patterns in various Muslim communities in the archipelago and Southeast Asia, while also revealing internal tensions that are historical and negotiated in nature, rather than monolithic.

One of the conceptual similarities is the transregional intellectual and historical network. Studies of the history of Islam in Southeast Asia confirm that Islam did not arrive in isolation. The network of scholars from these islands was closely connected to centres of learning in the Middle East, India, and other Islamic valleys, which had a significant impact on religious discourse in Southeast Asia. This goes beyond the phase of mere invasion or conquest, but is the result of complex interactions between trade, proselytising, and Islamic scholarly networks. For example, the process of Islamisation since the Middle Ages through trade routes and scholars shows how regional Islam is the result of the exchange of ideas across geographies (Razaq, 2025).

An international study published in the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies shows that the movement of Islamic ideas across regions not only strengthens local associations with Islam, but also the way local Muslim communities contextualise legal and spiritual theories in dialectic with global forces (Joll & Aree, 2020).

The second similarity is consistent cultural adaptation. Contrary to the narrative of homogeneity, there is strong evidence that Islam in Southeast Asia adapted to local customs through processes of acculturation and cultural syncretism. Islamic values were synthesised with local traditions, languages, and cultural symbols such as Malay, Jawi, and Pegon, although this was often in tension with more puritanical reformist demands.

This process is evident when local customs (adat) and Sharia law do not always go hand in hand. In some historical cases, such as the conflict between reformists and traditionalists in Minangkabau in the 19th century (the Padri Movement), demands to purify Islamic practices of customary elements triggered sharp socio-religious reconfiguration and internal conflict at the local community level. The Padri Movement itself was rooted in puritanism, claiming inspiration from Wahhabi thought, and sought to eliminate customary practices that were considered contrary to sharia (Ansori, Muhammad Afif, Roviamah, 2025).

The third aspect is the strong historical moderation in Southeast Asian Islamic practices. Islamic traditions dominated by the Shafi'i school of thought and Sufi practices (such as the influence of Al-Ghazali's thinking and local Sufi traditions) reflect a moderate, tolerant, and contextual approach to religious practice. This narrative is reinforced by empirical findings in recent studies on Islam in the archipelago, which show that religious moderation in this region is the result of a long accumulation of intellectual traditions, not merely a contemporary phenomenon (Wantini et al., 2025).

Another related study published in the Scopus-indexed journal Studia Islamica discusses the historical dynamics between local traditions and more puritanical or transnational global trends, as well as how Southeast Asian Muslim communities negotiate these pressures.

In addition to similarities, the findings also highlight local divisions and a set of oppositions to cultural norms and interpretations of Sharia law. Conflicts between

puritanical groups (e.g. those influenced by Wahhabi ideology) and local traditions (adat) have resulted in historical debates over how Islam is practised. In the context of 19th-century Minangkabau (the Padri Movement), puritanical pressure on local customs not only revealed differences in practice but also had structural implications for local cultural values that had been integrated with Islam Nusantara for centuries (Ansori, Muhammad Afif , Roviamah, 2025).

The debate between customary law and formal Sharia law is not unique to Aceh. The implementation of formal Sharia law is often understood differently by local groups compared to national or international legal structures. Historical studies reviewing the implementation of Sharia law in Aceh show that the interpretation of Islamic law often becomes an arena for local politics and the identity of the Acehnese people themselves, which sometimes emerges as opposition to new instruments of power that impose certain rules (Bustamam-Ahmad, 2007).

Similarly, in the context of Pattani (Southern Thailand), how Siamese mandala relations and power ended the local Islamic social structure, resulting in a renegotiation between Islamic identity and formal Sharia law under central political domination. (Joll & Aree, 2020).

The existence of a shared epistemic substructure (historical networks, cultural acculturation, and moderation) is not merely an academic construct but has real implications for Islamic education practices, community development, and religious education policy. Recognition of this adaptive and moderate tradition is important when designing a religious education curriculum rooted in the local context without neglecting global connectivity.

For example, when discussing locally-based religious education curricula, recognition of cultural acculturation and historical tolerance provides a solid normative foundation for a contextual and inclusive curriculum approach. Thus, this synthesis of literature provides a strong historical and theoretical basis for research in the fields of Islamic education, sociolinguistics, and religious anthropology (Mukri, 2019).

2. Historical, Epistemological, and Socio-Political Differences

Conceptual analysis shows that the construction of Malay Islamic and Nusantara Islamic identities is shaped by substantially different historical-cultural and political trajectories. Malay Islam is generally constructed within the framework of Malay ethno-nationalism, where the category of "Malay" identity functions as a dominant political and cultural symbol in the structure of modern Malay states (e.g. Malaysia and Brunei), with the use of customs, the Malay language, and royal history as parameters for the legitimacy of the Malay Muslim community. This is in line with studies that place Malay Islam as a collective expression of Malay cultural values that are politically networked in the post-colonial context of Southeast Asia (Suaedy, 2010).

In this context, identity can be hybrid or liminal when it is not only based on a "pure" Malay identity but also in a form that is mixed with other elements, for

example in border communities such as Batam, which are exposed to cross-border dynamics, where Indonesian national identity is combined with "transnational Malay" identity. Studies of such border communities reveal that identity is not merely binary (Malay/Indonesian) but exists as a continuum of cultural and political negotiation at the practical level of society (Fauzi, 2023).

Conversely, Islam Nusantara emerged from a more pluralistic contextual experience: it grew in a multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural social space mediated by Indonesian as the lingua franca. Thus, Islam Nusantara is not limited to a single ethnic reference, but accommodates local practices throughout the archipelago. The contextualisation of Islam to local conditions is precisely the main characteristic of Islam Nusantara (Otoman, Ibrahim, & Rochmiatun, 2024). This difference in identity construction has a direct impact on epistemic actors, namely those who are the source of legitimacy for Islamic knowledge and interpretation.

Malay Islam in monarchical states (Malaysia/Brunei) tends to exhibit official Islam, where the state and monarchy play a dominant role in the production of Islamic discourse through legal, educational, and religious bureaucratic institutions. In Malaysia, institutions such as JAKIM represent the state's role as an epistemic authority that defines official Islam in public discourse and Muslim-Malay identity policies (Nordin & Ruslan, 2025).

Meanwhile, Islam Nusantara in Indonesia has a more pluralistic configuration. Islamic boarding school scholars, academics, and civil society organisations (such as religious organisations and local community networks) are the main producers of everyday Islam. This reflects the way religious knowledge is formed outside the direct domination of the state, but rather through community practices that combine local traditions and universal Islamic orientations (Otoman et al., 2024).

The theory of hybridity is adequate to explain the phenomenon in which Islamic identity is not only found in the rigid binary of "official vs. everyday" but is a spectrum of cultural and religious negotiation. Liminal examples emerge when local communities integrate formal Islamic norms with local customary practices, for example in customary law that absorbs fiqh terminology without losing local contextuality, such as studies on the integration of Islamic law and customary law in Malay communities that demonstrate dynamic identity negotiations, not merely the adoption of one dominant system (Nordin & Ruslan, 2025).

In Malaysia and Brunei, Islam is institutionalised through legal-bureaucratic mechanisms: Sharia law is codified and made a formal part of the state system, often correlating with the official status of the state religion. This model presents Islam as the core of national identity in the post-colonial political configuration. (Pakpahan, 2023).

In Indonesia, despite the existence of state institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and religious courts, Islam Nusantara is more often formulated through social practices at the community level, Islamic boarding schools, and

networks of scholars and academics who mediate the relationship between religious texts and local culture. This structure places the state as one of the actors, not as the sole epistemic authority (Otoman et al., 2024).

Table 2. Analytical Gradation of the Role of Epistemic Actors of Islamic Identity

Dimensions of Identity	State / Official Bureaucracy	Local communities / scholars	Mixed Epistemic Authority (Hybrid/Liminal)
Official Definition of Islam	Dominant (Malaysia/Brunei) (Pakpahan, 2023)	Limited	Negotiation between state policy and local traditions
Dissemination of Knowledge	Formal curriculum, state mosque lectures	Islamic boarding schools, community religious gatherings	Digital media, cross-cultural dialogue & communities
Role of Local Culture	Regulated by state norms	Integral to local practices	Continuous interaction between Islamic culture & customs
Case Studies	Institutionalised Sharia law	Traditional Islam in the Indonesian archipelago	Integration of Islamic law and customs in Boyan (local capacity) (Nordin & Ruslan, 2025)

The above model shows that Islamic identity cannot be understood in simple binary terms. Rather than being a sharp contrast, Islamic identity in Southeast Asia developed as a continuum of institutionally bounded actors, local communities, and hybrid spaces whose negotiations are ongoing and changing.

Analysis shows that the differences between Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam are more than just terminological: they reflect constellations of power, distributions of epistemic legitimacy, and the ways in which Islam is institutionalised and lived in society. Hybrid and liminal approaches help to understand Islamic identity as a continuous process involving various actors, rather than as a fixed or static category. This understanding is important for contextual studies of Islam in Southeast Asia, especially in dealing with plurality, interpretative conflicts, and new paths in cultural and religious diplomacy.

3. Conceptual Implications for Southeast Asian Islamic Studies

The reconfiguration of regional Islamic epistemology affirms that the development of Islam in Southeast Asia cannot be understood merely as a variation of Middle

Eastern Islam, but rather as an epistemic entity with its own history, internal dynamics, and relatively autonomous knowledge authority, while also interacting intensely with transnational Islamic knowledge currents. Islam in this region is not only an independent local phenomenon; it is also shaped through historical contact with networks of scholars, traders, and transnational movements that introduce new ideas, practices, and interpretations, both harmonious and confrontational, which are then adapted, reinterpreted, or rejected by local communities. Studies of transnational Islamic networks show that Southeast Asian Muslims do not live in epistemic isolation, but are connected through the mobility of scholars, overseas studies, and global media, so that the form and meaning of Islam in this region are produced in relation to the outside world, not outside of it (Mandaville et al., 2009).

A historical approach to the Islamisation of the archipelago shows, for example, that the process of Islam's entry and development in Southeast Asia occurred peacefully through traders, Sufi scholars, and cultural interactions, rather than through militant violence alone (Fadhil, 2024). This pattern, familiar in the literature on the history of Islam in Southeast Asia, reflects the early interaction between local traditions and the wider Islamic network, which reinforced the region's Islamic epistemology as local and open to global dialectics (Amin & Ananda, 2018).

Southeast Asia's position as a new epistemic centre is increasingly evident through its distinctive traditions of religious literacy and Islamic education, including forms of contextual interpretation and adaptation to the local environment. Contemporary studies show the evolution of Qur'anic interpretation in the socio-cultural context of Southeast Asia, which takes into account local conditions without neglecting classical traditions, resulting in a style of interpretation that is responsive to a pluralistic and dynamic society. This facilitates the production of Islamic knowledge that not only borrows from global trends but also modifies them according to the local context, which in contemporary exegesis studies is referred to as a contextual maqasid approach (Saefulloh, 2024).

From a historical epistemological perspective, Islamic identity in this region is shaped through dynamic and contestable social, cultural, economic and political processes, rather than being something final or essential. The identity of Southeast Asian Muslims differs from that of Muslims in the Middle East not only because of geographical context and missionary routes, but also because transnational networks have enriched and challenged local religious ideas. Further research shows that the dominant narrative of "peripheral Islam" is in fact a product of external assessments that ignore the intellectual contributions and scholarly traditions of Islam in the region itself, including the involvement of Nusantara scholars in scholarly networks that transcend national borders (Hanafi & Maulana, 2024).

A genealogical approach to Islamic identity reveals that the singular narrative of identity, which asserts that there is one "original" or "authentic" model of Islam, should be questioned. The diversity of interpretations, schools of thought, social practices, and local histories demonstrates that Islam in Southeast Asia has always

been in a process of reinterpretation, influenced by transnational knowledge flows from the Middle East, South Asia, and the global Muslim community through diaspora, scholarly studies, and digital media. This relationship shows that the epistemology of Islam in the archipelago is the result of a contest between local knowledge and global currents, not an absolute claim to authority over one another.

In the context of the study of Islamic moderation, it is important to understand that moderation is not merely a project of the modern state or the result of contemporary policies; rather, it is rooted in the epistemic tradition of Islam, which has long interacted with local cultures, fiqh practices, Nusantara social norms, and global currents that are sometimes conservative. The results of a study by Faiz & Nida'Fadlan (2022) confirm that the tradition of wasaṭīyah (the middle way) in Southeast Asian Islam reflects a form of moderation rooted in the pluralistic practices of local communities, as well as a response to harsh transnational ideological pressures.

This historical trajectory is evident in how Muslim communities in Southeast Asia have adapted Islamic teachings to the local context through traditional Islamic education, the adaptation of Islamic law to local customs, and religious practices that are inclusive of cultural plurality. Research shows that wasathiyyah values are an important part of strategies to maintain social diversity and tolerant religious life in Indonesia, reflecting a form of epistemology that critically integrates the local and the global (Faiz & Nida'Fadlan, 2022).

By combining the reconfiguration of regional Islamic epistemology, the deconstruction of single identity narratives, and the affirmation of the historical foundations of Islamic moderation, we conclude that Southeast Asian Islam and, more broadly, Islam Nusantara are models of religiosity shaped by historical complexity, power relations, local culture, and transnational knowledge interactions. This understanding not only enriches contemporary Islamic studies but also provides a more accurate and relational theoretical framework for analysing religious dynamics in the region, especially in research on Islamic education curricula, character education, and moderation in education.

Through a historical-critical approach and systematic conceptual analysis, this study shows that Malay Islam and Islam Nusantara are not only locally distinct historical constructions, but also active producers of knowledge that negotiate with global epistemic centres. The genealogy of Malay Islam is often tied to state projects in Malaysia and Brunei, while Nusantara Islam developed through the production of communitarian, plural, and dialogical discourse in the Indonesian context, reflecting the dynamics of local-global epistemic interactions. This approach emphasises that the epistemological autonomy of Southeast Asian Islam is relational and is produced through dialogue and debate with global currents, rather than as an absolute claim detached from external influences.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam are not merely cultural variations of Islam in Southeast Asia, but rather two regional epistemological formations that emerged from different historical configurations, power relations, and knowledge production regimes. Theoretically, these findings sharpen the genealogy of regional Islam by showing that the formation of Islamic identity is not only determined by shared theological traditions, but also by mechanisms of knowledge institutionalisation through the state, official religious authorities, and non-state epistemic communities. Thus, this study goes beyond a descriptive-comparative approach and offers an analytical framework for reading Southeast Asian Islam as a layered field of discursive contestation. The genealogy of Malay Islam shows how Islam functions as a state ideology (official Islam) that has been consolidated top-down through the monarchy, sharia bureaucracy, and official legal discourse from the colonial era to post-independence Malaysia and Brunei. In contrast, Islam Nusantara represents everyday Islam that grew bottom-up in Indonesia's democratic space through networks of Islamic boarding schools, local scholars, academics, and civil society. This difference is not merely a difference in political context, but reflects two different models of Islamic authority: Islam as an instrument of state legitimacy versus Islam as a social practice that is continuously negotiated in the public sphere. The main conceptual contribution of this research lies in offering a model of epistemological pluralism in Southeast Asian Islam, which rejects the centre-periphery dichotomy in Islamic studies. Malay Islam and Nusantara Islam are understood as equally valid expressions of scholarship, but operating within different regimes of knowledge. This model shows that Islamic plurality is not only present at the level of practice and culture, but also at the level of how Islamic knowledge is produced, legitimised, and transmitted. Thus, this study affirms that Southeast Asian Islam is an autonomous, dynamic intellectual tradition that actively contributes to the global discourse on Islam, thereby requiring an interdisciplinary approach that is sensitive to history, power, and the ever-changing regional context.

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