

Islam and Local Wisdom in ASEAN: From *Pesantren* Tradition to Modern Cultural Expression

Ahlidin Jamaluddin^{1*}

¹ UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: ahlidinjamal@gmail.com

Abstract: This research investigates the relationship between Islam and local wisdom in the ASEAN region, tracing its development from the traditional Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) to contemporary forms of cultural expression. Using a qualitative, library-based method underpinned by historical and sociological analysis, the research argues that Islam in the Malay-Nusantara world has historically flourished through a process of "indigenization" (*pribumisasi Islam*), where universal religious values are contextualized within local cultural idioms. The *pesantren* is identified as the primary institution for this acculturation, utilizing its five core elements --the dormitory (pondok), mosque, students (*santri*), teacher (*kyai*), and classical texts (*kitab kuning*)- to preserve scholarly traditions while remaining rooted in local society. The study further explores how these expressions have transitioned into the modern public sphere through popular culture, including Islamic film, music (nasheed), and fashion, which circulate across national borders, particularly between Indonesia and Malaysia. The article concludes that this continuity from tradition to modern expression constitutes a shared Malay-Islamic cultural capital that can strengthen regional integration through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, provided that local culture is substantively accommodated rather than merely commodified.

Keywords: Indigenization of Islam; *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding Schools); Malay-Nusantara Culture; Islamic Popular Culture; ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

Introduction

Since its early development, Islam in the Malay-Nusantara region has flourished through close interaction with local cultures. Similarly, in the era of globalization and international integration, international relations have become an inseparable part of a nation's foreign policy. To ensure that foreign policy is executed effectively, every country must employ diplomacy. In this context, cultural diplomacy is not only understood as an effort to leverage and develop cultural elements to strengthen diplomatic practices but also as a means to respect, protect, and preserve cultural heritage (Ha, 2016). Clifford Geertz's seminal study on Javanese religiosity demonstrates how Islam is intricately interwoven with local traditions, giving rise to a distinct religious character (Geertz, 1960, pp. 5–15). This process is not merely a form of mixing but rather an adaptive and dialogical acculturation, as exemplified by the network of scholars (*ulama*) from the Archipelago and the Middle East who propagated Islam while respecting local cultural contexts (Azra, 1994, pp. 27–35).

Throughout this long-standing process, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) have occupied a central position as institutions that preserve and cultivate the relationship between Islamic teachings and local wisdom (Dhofier, 1994, pp. 18–25). Concurrently, Southeast Asia is forging a shared identity through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, which positions cultural heritage and pluralism as key assets for integration (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016, pp. 1–7). The intersection between local religious heritage and the regional integration agenda serves as the backdrop for this paper.

Building upon this context, the article poses three central questions. First, how do Islam and local wisdom undergo acculturation within the Malay-Nusantara world? Second, how does the *pesantren* tradition preserve and cultivate this local wisdom? Third, how does the repertoire of Islamic expressions evolve from the *pesantren* toward modern cultural expressions, and what is its relevance to ASEAN socio-cultural integration? The central argument presented is that there exists a continuity—from *pesantren* traditions to modern cultural expressions—that constitutes shared Malay-Islamic cultural capital for the region.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research, underpinned by historical and sociological analysis. Primary data consist of key academic works regarding local religiosity, *pesantren* traditions, and Islamic popular culture in Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as relevant regional policy documents. These sources are critically scrutinized to reconstruct the trajectory from tradition to modern expression.

Secondary data are utilized to enrich the historical and comparative contexts. The analysis is conducted through the framework of acculturation and cultural continuity, allowing the relationship between Islam, local wisdom, and cultural expression to be presented as a cohesive argument linked to the ASEAN socio-cultural integration agenda. Given its nature as a library-based study, the findings are analytical-conceptual.

Results and Discussion

1. Islam and Local Wisdom: Acculturation in the Malay-Nusantara World

Islam Nusantara is a unique phenomenon, often described as a social, cultural, and religious phenomenon within the Indonesian context. This concept refers to a form of Islam that has evolved in the Indonesian archipelago (Nusantara) through a process of acculturation with local cultures (Astuti, 2017).

The character of *Islam Nusantara* lies in its ability to contextualize universal Islamic values within local cultural idioms a process referred to in contemporary discourse as the "indigenization of Islam" (*pribumisasi Islam*) (Sahal & Aziz, 2015, pp. 16–20). The scholarly networks connecting the Archipelago with global Islamic centers facilitated the transmission of teachings without uprooting the community from its cultural foundations (Azra, 1994, pp. 50–58). This accommodative stance toward local culture has recently been promoted as a key indicator of religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*), asserting that Islamic identity and local culture need not be positioned in opposition to one another (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019, p. 43).

The long history of the development of Islam in the archipelago demonstrates that Islamic teachings have evolved alongside the acceptance of cultural diversity and local traditions. According to Martin van Bruinessen, Islam Nusantara is not merely the result of a fusion between Islam and local culture, but emerged through a dynamic process of accommodation, assimilation, and socio-cultural transformation within the Nusantara society (as cited in Khaer, 2022).

The arrival of Islam in the archipelago occurred through various channels, including trade, missionary work (*al-da'wah*), and political relations that developed during that period. These interactions established a strong foundation for the cultivation of tolerance, harmony, and an appreciation for diversity. However, in recent decades, the cultural diversity and traditions that characterize Islam Nusantara have faced various challenges that impact the sustainability of these values (Ansari, 2024). Globalization, modernization, and the rapid flow of information have brought significant changes to the mindsets and lifestyles of people in the archipelago. These conditions have also impacted the local cultural values and traditions that have long been an integral part of the identity of Islam Nusantara. Consequently, concerns have emerged that this cultural richness will be increasingly eroded by the dynamics of changing times. Greg Barton asserts that the primary challenge facing Islam Nusantara is maintaining a balance between the preservation of local wisdom and Islamic values amidst the intensifying influence of globalization (Qomar, 2021, p. 98).

2. The Pesantren Tradition as the Guardian and Cultivator of Local Wisdom

Pesantren is the most distinctive institution in maintaining the relationship between Islamic sciences and local culture (Arifin, 2012). Its five core elements (characteristics) --the dormitory (*pondok*), the mosque, the students (*santri*), the teacher (*kyai*), and the classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*)-- form an educational ecosystem that simultaneously preserves scholarly traditions and bridges them with the lives of the surrounding community (Dhofier, 1994, pp. 44–60). These five characteristics are not fully possessed by mainstream public schools. The *kitab kuning*, serving as a classical intellectual corpus, alongside the *tarekat* (Sufi order) traditions, acts as the backbone of knowledge transmission connecting the scholars of the Archipelago with the broader Islamic intellectual heritage (van Bruinessen, 1995, pp. 17–30). These classical texts are studied through the *sorogan* method (where students interact individually with the *kyai*) and the *bandongan* method (studying the books collectively by listening directly to the *kyai*) (Mahdi, 2013). The *pesantren* educational system emphasizes values such as sincerity (*al-ikhlas*), self-reliance (*i'timad ala al-nafs*), and simplicity (*al-suhulah*), all of which have emerged from long-standing interactions with local culture (Mastuhu, 1994, pp. 55–62).

Due to its deep-seated roots within society, the *pesantren* is frequently regarded as an indigenous educational institution of the Archipelago with its own distinct subculture, while remaining capable of adapting to modern demands (Madjid, 1997, pp. 3–12). Thus, the *pesantren* is not merely a guardian of tradition, but also a space for creative synthesis between Islamic teachings and local wisdom.

3. From Pesantren to the Public Sphere: The Transformation of Islamic Expressions

Entering the modern era, the repertoire of Islamic expressions has expanded far beyond the walls of the pesantren. Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia have undergone a transformation with wide-ranging implications for both religious and cultural life (Hefner, 2009, pp. 1–14). In Indonesia, religiosity is now expressed through various new forms --ranging from celebrity preachers and online fatwa services to the consumption of Islamic-themed products-- which interact with, and occasionally displace, traditional expressions (Fealy & White, 2008, pp. 1–11). Furthermore, screen culture and the entertainment industry have become pivotal arenas for the construction of contemporary Islamic identity (Heryanto, 2014, pp. 1–20).

4. Modern Islamic Cultural Expressions in Indonesia and Malaysia

Modern Islamic cultural expressions are flourishing and transcending national boundaries, particularly between Indonesia and Malaysia, which share common Malay-Islamic civilizational roots. Comparative studies demonstrate how Islamic popular culture --including film, music, and fashion-- serves as a medium for religious expression in both nations (Weintraub, 2011, pp. 1–17). Genres such as *nasheed*, religious-themed *dangdut*, and Muslim fashion, alongside screen culture, circulate across borders to shape the shared sensibilities of the young Malay-Muslim generation (Weintraub, 2011, pp. 60–82, 235–256). This phenomenon signifies a form of “Islamic consumption” that reflects the aspirational piety of the urban middle class (Fealy, 2008).

Weintraub explains that although Indonesia and Malaysia share the same cultural roots, both exhibit distinct characteristics in their expressions of Islam. In Malaysia, Islam is deeply intertwined with Malay ethnic identity and maintains a consistent presence across various media throughout the year. Conversely, in Indonesia, Islamic expression tends to be more prominent in public spaces during specific periods, most notably during the month of Ramadan (Weintraub, 2011, p. 25).

5. Local Wisdom, Cultural Expression, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Integration

The continuity of Islamic traditions in the Archipelago, ranging from *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) to various modern Islamic cultural expressions, reflects a form of cultural capital that can strengthen societal ties across Southeast Asia. Beyond their role as religious educational institutions, *pesantren* also instill values of tolerance, mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), religious moderation, and respect for local culture. These values are subsequently manifested in various forms of contemporary culture --such as art, religious festivals, music, film, and digital media-- which expand the influence of Nusantara Islam on both regional and global scales (van Bruinessen, 1995, pp. 17–35; Azra, 2013, pp. 109–126).

The model of Nusantara Islam, which accommodates local culture, offers a way to manage plurality without enforcing uniformity. Developing through a dialogue between Islamic teachings and local traditions, it provides a constructive approach to governing diverse societies. The moderate, inclusive, and adaptive character of Nusantara Islam demonstrates that cultural diversity is not perceived as a threat to religious teachings, but rather as a social reality that can be accommodated as long as it does not conflict with the fundamental principles of Islam (Sahal & Aziz, 2015, pp. 45–52). Furthermore, the experience of Islamic education in Southeast Asia reveals similar transformations that can serve as mutual references between countries (Hefner, 2009, pp. 25–33).

This perspective serves as a vital model for strengthening social cohesion within ASEAN's multicultural societies, which currently face challenges of intolerance and identity polarization (Wahid, 2006, pp. 121–134; van Bruinessen, 2013, pp. 1–20). The development of Islamic education in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Southern Thailand, and the Southern Philippines demonstrates a process of adaptation to modern changes without abandoning religious values. This opens avenues for the exchange of best practices in strengthening religious moderation, educational curricula, and cultural diplomacy. Consequently, the local wisdom of Nusantara Islam not only reinforces national identity but also acts as cultural capital for ASEAN integration that honors diversity and cross-cultural collaboration (Hefner, 2009, pp. 1–28; Tan, 2011, pp. 24–47).

6. Challenges: Commodification and Authenticity

The development of Islamic expression in the public sphere and popular culture is inseparable from various challenges, one of which is the commodification of religion. The rising consumption of Islamic symbols, products, and lifestyles has created new spaces for religious expression, ranging from the Muslim fashion industry and halal tourism to religious music and Islamic-themed digital content. However, at the same time, this phenomenon raises concerns that religious values may undergo a shift when religious symbols are positioned more as market trends rather than representations of spiritual and social internalization (Fealy & White, 2008, pp. 15–20).

In the context of Nusantara Islam, commodification presents a dilemma between preserving cultural values and keeping pace with the popular culture industry. Islamic expressions that formerly flourished through communities, local traditions, and institutions like *pesantren* may undergo transformations upon entering the sphere of mass consumption. Consequently, the relationship between piety and pleasure, and between spiritual values and economic interests, becomes increasingly complex in shaping the face of contemporary Islam (Heryanto, 2014, pp. 49–55). This phenomenon is not inherently negative, as popular culture can serve as a medium for the broader dissemination of Islamic values; however, a critical stance is necessary to ensure that religion is not reduced to a mere lifestyle symbol (van Bruinessen, 2013, pp. 1–20).

Therefore, the reinforcement of local wisdom within Nusantara Islam must be directed toward ensuring it remains a source of social values and meaning, rather than merely a commercialized cultural product. The accommodation of local culture must continue to be grounded in substantive Islamic principles, such as justice, tolerance, respect for diversity, and public welfare (*maslahah*). This approach aligns with the concept of religious moderation, which emphasizes a balance between honoring local traditions and maintaining a commitment to

fundamental religious values (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019, pp. 17–32). Consequently, the sustainability of Nusantara Islam depends not only on the ability to preserve cultural forms but also on its capacity to safeguard the substantive values that underpin the formation of social identity and intercultural relations within the ASEAN region.

Conclusion

This research concludes that Islam in the Malay-Nusantara region has flourished through a sophisticated process of "indigenization" (*pribumisasi Islam*), where universal religious principles are seamlessly integrated with local cultural wisdom. Central to this development is the pesantren institution, which acts as the primary guardian of this synthesis through its unique educational ecosystem and scholarly traditions. The study demonstrates a clear trajectory of continuity as these traditional foundations have evolved into modern forms of cultural expression within the public sphere --specifically through Islamic film, music, and fashion--. This transition highlights a dynamic religious identity that remains deeply rooted in local sensibilities while successfully adapting to contemporary global and regional flows.

Ultimately, the article argues that this shared Malay-Islamic cultural capital serves as a vital asset for strengthening regional integration within the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. By providing a model of religious moderation that prioritizes pluralism and cross-cultural collaboration, the Nusantara model of Islam offers a constructive framework for managing diversity in multicultural societies. However, for this cultural capital to remain effective, the region must ensure that local wisdom is substantively accommodated rather than merely reduced to a commercialized trend. Future research should prioritize cross-country empirical studies to more rigorously examine how these modern expressions can foster genuine regional cohesion and preserve authentic spiritual values in an era of rapid globalization.

References

- Ansari, A. (2024). Islam Nusantara: Keanekaragaman budaya dan tradisi. *LISAN AL-HAL: Jurnal Pengembangan Pemikiran dan Kebudayaan*, 18(2), 226–247.
- Arifin, Z. (2012). Perkembangan pesantren di Indonesia. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 9(1), 40–53.
- ASEAN Secretariat. (2016). *ASEAN socio-cultural community blueprint 2025*. ASEAN Secretariat.
- Astuti, H. J. P. (2017). Islam Nusantara: Sebuah argumentasi beragama dalam bingkai kultural. *INJECT (Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication)*, 2(1), 27–52.
- Azra, A. (1994). *Jaringan ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara abad XVII dan XVIII*. Mizan.
- Azra, A. (2013). *Jaringan ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara abad XVII dan XVIII* (Edisi diperbarui). Kencana.
- Dhofier, Z. (1994). *Tradisi pesantren: Studi tentang pandangan hidup kyai*. LP3ES.
- Fealy, G. (2008). Consuming Islam: Commodified religion and aspirational pietism in contemporary Indonesia. Dalam G. Fealy & S. White (Eds.), *Expressing Islam: Religious life and politics in Indonesia* (hlm. 15–39). ISEAS Publishing.
- Fealy, G., & White, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Expressing Islam: Religious life and politics in Indonesia*. ISEAS Publishing.
- Geertz, C. (1960). *The religion of Java*. The Free Press.
- Ha, V. K. H. (2016). Peran diplomasi budaya dalam mewujudkan komunitas sosial budaya ASEAN: Kasus Vietnam. *Jurnal Khazanah Pendidikan*, 10(1).
- Hefner, R. W. (Ed.). (2009). *Making modern Muslims: The politics of Islamic education in Southeast Asia*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Heryanto, A. (2014). *Identity and pleasure: The politics of Indonesian screen culture*. NUS Press.
- Khaer, M. (2022). Kebersinggungan tarekat dengan dunia luar dalam pandangan Martin Van Bruinessen. *Spiritualita*, 6(1), 27–38.
- Kementerian Agama RI. (2019). *Moderasi beragama*. Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI.
- Madjid, N. (1997). *Bilik-bilik pesantren: Sebuah potret perjalanan*. Paramadina.
- Mahdi, A. (2013). Sejarah dan peran pesantren dalam pendidikan di Indonesia. *Islamic Review: Jurnal Riset dan Kajian Keislaman*, 2(1), 1–20.
- Mastuhu. (1994). *Dinamika sistem pendidikan pesantren*. INIS.
- Qomar, M. (2021). *Moderasi Islam Indonesia*. IRCiSoD.
- Sahal, A., & Aziz, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Islam Nusantara: Dari ushul fiqh hingga paham kebangsaan*. Mizan.
- Tan, C. (2011). *Islamic education and indoctrination: The case in Indonesia*. Routledge.
- Van Bruinessen, M. (1995). *Kitab kuning, pesantren dan tarekat: Tradisi-tradisi Islam di Indonesia*. Mizan.
- Van Bruinessen, M. (Ed.). (2013). *Contemporary developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the 'conservative*

- turn*'. ISEAS Publishing.
- Van Bruinessen, M. (2013). Introduction: Contemporary developments in Indonesian Islam. Dalam M. van Bruinessen (Ed.), *Contemporary developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the 'conservative turn'* (hlm. 1–20). ISEAS Publishing.
- Wahid, A. (2006). *Islamku, Islam anda, Islam kita*. The Wahid Institute.
- Weintraub, A. N. (Ed.). (2011). *Islam and popular culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*. Routledge.

This page is intentionally left blank.