

## PERIPHERAL ISLAM: *A Critique of the Epistemic Marginalization of Southeast Asian Islam*

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KEYWORD	ABSTRACT
Islam Southeast-Asian, Islam Peripheral, Epistemic Marginalization, Postcolonial	<p>This paper examines the phenomenon of "peripheral Islam," often attributed to Southeast Asian Muslim societies within global Islamic historiography. Using a qualitative and literature-based approach, supported by center-periphery theory, epistemic marginalization, and postcolonial theory, the article reveals how hegemonic narratives—shaped by Orientalists and Arab-centric standards—have reduced Southeast Asian Islam to a secondary and inauthentic form. The study finds that the Malay-Nusantara region possesses a strong intellectual heritage, transnational scholarly networks, and local religious practices rich in epistemic and cultural resistance. By highlighting the role of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), Malay Islamic literature, and local Islamic models such as Islam Kejawen and Islam Hadhari, this paper asserts that Southeast Asian Islam is an integral and contributive part of global Islamic civilization. The article calls for a reconstruction of perspectives on Southeast Asian Islam, viewing it not as a periphery, but as an alternative center within a plural, contextual, and transformative Islam.</p>

### INTRODUCTION

For centuries, grand narratives about the history and development of Islam have been predominantly constructed from the vantage point of the Arab or Middle Eastern world (B. A. Putra, 2016). Within this framework, regions such as Southeast Asia—home to hundreds of millions of Muslims—have routinely been relegated to the "periphery" of the Islamic world. This marginal positioning has not only shaped Orientalist perspectives on Islam in the Malay-Nusantara region, but also influenced internal discourses among Muslims themselves, who often perceive local Islamic expressions as secondary, syncretic, or even "impure" (Azra, 2004).

Such marginalization operates not merely on geographic or political grounds, but more insidiously on the epistemic level. The intellectual, social, and cultural heritage of Southeast Asian Islam has long been excluded from the dominant global Islamic discourse, which remains overwhelmingly Arab-centric. This hegemonic construction of a "centered" Islam has rendered Southeast Asian expressions of the faith as inauthentic or derivative (Bano Masooda et al., 2016). Yet, this region harbors a rich legacy of Islamic intellectualism and cultural ingenuity. For instance, Indonesia's pesantren system—traditional Islamic boarding schools—has, for centuries, functioned as a pivotal institution for the transmission of classical Islamic sciences. These schools integrate the

teaching of tafsir, hadith, fiqh, and Sufism using classical texts (*kitab kuning*) authored by both Middle Eastern and local scholars, adapted thoughtfully to the sociocultural realities of their communities. As of 2023, Indonesia boasts more than 36,000 active pesantren, educating over 5 million students, making it one of the largest traditional Islamic educational networks in the world (Al-Khairot, 2023).

Moreover, the region's intellectual tradition is deeply embedded in the works of prominent local scholars such as Hamzah Fansuri, Nuruddin ar-Raniri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, and Syekh Yusuf al-Makassari (Khobir et al., 2019; Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim & Faizuri bin Abd. Latif, 2008). These figures were not mere transmitters of global Islamic knowledge but active contributors who engaged critically with their local contexts. Hamzah Fansuri, for instance, developed a distinctive Malay articulation of the philosophy of *wahdat al-wujūd* through spiritual poetry (Hasan, 2022; Suyanta et al., 2023; W et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Syekh Yusuf al-Makassari has been honored by UNESCO as part of the Memory of the World Programme for his transregional influence, spanning from Gowa and Banten to South Africa and the Middle East (Kurniawan et al., 2023).

Despite these contributions, classical Orientalist literature has often portrayed Southeast Asian Islam as superficial and fragile. In *Southeast Asia: Crossroad of Religion* (Landon & Briggs, 1951), K. P. Landon famously described Islam in the region as a "thin veneer" overlaying a more dominant Hindu-Buddhist substratum. This view was echoed by J. C. van Leur (1955), who argued that Islam failed to bring meaningful transformation to Southeast Asia's social, economic, or political landscapes, likening its spread to that of Catholic missionary activity—doctrinal rather than revolutionary.

Similarly, Snouck Hurgronje's *The Achehnese* (1906) rigidly separated adat (custom) from agama (religion), suggesting that local institutions in places like Aceh were shaped more by tradition than by Islamic law. This dichotomy grossly oversimplified the complex interplay between Islam and indigenous culture, negating the historical reality that Southeast Asian Islam was not merely adopted but creatively indigenized.

Such reductive narratives have contributed to a global paradigm that undermines Southeast Asia's position within the broader Islamic world. They have also led to the underrepresentation of the region in international Islamic scholarly forums, limiting its visibility in terms of publication, intellectual influence, and recognition of key figures. A 2024 survey revealed that academic output on Islam from Southeast Asian institutions (e.g., Malaysia and Indonesia) still lags significantly behind those of Middle Eastern universities such as Al-Azhar and the Islamic University of Madinah—despite Southeast Asia being home to the largest Muslim populations and some of the most vibrant Islamic practices in the world (Evans, 2024).

This disparity prompts fundamental questions: Why is Southeast Asian Islam continually cast as peripheral? Who constructs and sustains this narrative? And in whose interest is this epistemic order maintained?

The notion of a "central" versus "peripheral" Islam is far from a neutral observation—it is a deeply historical construct shaped by unequal power relations between the West, the Arab world, and non-Arab Muslim communities. Orientalist scholars such as Snouck Hurgronje, J. C. van Leur, and Clifford Geertz have framed Islam in this region through reductionist lenses—describing it as syncretic, half-formed, and subordinate to local culture. Geertz, through his influential tripartite typology of Javanese Muslims—*santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*—presented a fractured and impure picture of Islam in Java. His sociological approach, while illuminating for its time, reinforced a binary that marginalized localized expressions of Islam as somehow deficient.

These discourses were not confined to the academic realm; they were internalized by Muslim elites in Southeast Asia who continued to adopt Arab norms as the measure of Islamic authenticity. Thus, the project of *ta'rib* (Arabization) became entangled with Islamic reform and modernization,

often at the expense of indigenous Islamic traditions. In this sense, Southeast Asia has been doubly marginalized—geopolitically sidelined and symbolically disempowered. It has been written about, spoken of, and situated as insufficiently Islamic or ambiguously Muslim.

Yet, this narrative has begun to shift due to the interventions of critical scholars from the Malay-Nusantara region itself. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, for example, rejected the notion that Islam in Southeast Asia was a superficial overlay on pre-existing Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. In his groundbreaking *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (1968), he argues that Islam brought a radical intellectual and spiritual transformation. Islam, for al-Attas, did not merely arrive—it reshaped worldviews, languages, literature, social structures, and epistemologies.

Likewise, Azyumardi Azra, in *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* (2022), dismantles the myth of Southeast Asian isolation from global Islamic currents. Through his concept of the transnational ulama network, Azra traces how scholars like Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili and Yusuf al-Makassari studied in the Hijaz and contributed to broader intellectual movements in the Muslim world during the 17th and 18th centuries. Southeast Asia, he argues, was not a receiver but a co-creator of Islamic thought—a vital node in the global circulation of Islamic knowledge.

William R. Roff adds further nuance in his essay *Islam Obscured?* (1985), where he critiques Western scholarship for obscuring the depth and complexity of Islam in the region. Rather than treating Southeast Asia as an object of Islamization, Roff calls for recognizing it as an active subject in shaping global Islamic configurations (Daniels, 2008).

These interventions—by both Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals—have opened the door to a more just and balanced historiography that challenges centuries of epistemic injustice. By critically interrogating the ideological constructs of Islamic centralism and epistemic hierarchy, these scholars advocate for a more inclusive, dialogical, and historically nuanced understanding of the Islamic world. Their work not only restores the visibility of Southeast Asian Islamic contributions but also calls into question the very categories of 'center' and 'periphery' that have dominated global Islamic studies.

In recognizing the epistemic integrity of Islam in the Malay-Nusantara world, these interventions push the boundaries of what counts as 'authentic' Islamic knowledge. They argue for an epistemological pluralism that values the lived experiences, local theologies, and spiritual literatures of Southeast Asia as equal contributors to the global Islamic tradition. This repositioning entails more than symbolic recognition; it demands structural inclusion in curricula, conferences, publishing venues, and intellectual networks where Southeast Asian voices have long been excluded or tokenized.

This paper thus aims to critique the epistemic marginalization of Southeast Asian Islam and offer a rereading of the region's strategic role within global Islamic knowledge. Through the application of historical analysis and discourse critique, it challenges reductionist and hegemonic narratives that have confined Southeast Asian Islam to the margins. It asserts that "peripheral Islam" is not a diluted or deviant form, but rather a legitimate, vibrant, and intellectually generative expression of the Islamic tradition—rooted in its own historical trajectories, local wisdoms, and cultural negotiations. In this light, Southeast Asia emerges not as a passive recipient of Islamic knowledge but as a vital and autonomous epistemic center in its own right.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To critically understand the phenomenon of marginalization toward Southeast Asian Islam, this paper employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the center-periphery theory, the concept of epistemic marginalization, and postcolonial theory. These three frameworks complement one

another in revealing how the position of Islam in the Malay-Nusantara region has been constructed, categorized, and represented in a subordinated manner within global Islamic discourse.

*First, the **Center-Periphery Theory**.* This theory explains the asymmetric relationships between entities perceived as the "center" and those viewed as the "periphery" within social, political, economic, and epistemic systems. In this context, the Arab world—particularly the Middle East—is regarded as the epicenter of Islamic authority, whereas regions like Southeast Asia are positioned as peripheral spaces that merely receive, imitate, or adapt doctrines originating from the center.

This idea is heavily influenced by the logic of modern global systems rooted in colonial structures, where power and authority are centralized not only geographically but also epistemologically. Antonio Gramsci referred to this form of dominance as **hegemony**—a power that operates not merely through coercion but also through ideological influence accepted as "natural."

In the study of Islamic history, such a paradigm has led to the assumption that "pure Islam" is that which developed in the center (i.e., the Arab world), while local expressions of Islam in Southeast Asia are viewed as mere adaptations or even deviations. This pattern has not only influenced historiography but also shaped Islamic educational systems, curricula, and the valuation of scholarly authority and intellectual production originating from non-Arab regions.

*Second, the Concept of Epistemic Marginalization.* Epistemic marginalization refers to the process by which certain forms of knowledge, experience, and intellectual traditions are excluded or devalued because they are deemed illegitimate or incompatible with dominant epistemologies. In the case of Southeast Asian Islam, epistemic marginalization occurs when the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural contributions of local ulama and Muslim communities are not recognized as part of the core corpus of global Islamic thought.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2004), in her notion of *epistemic violence*, argues that colonial power and dominant knowledge structures often impose specific epistemic norms while simultaneously silencing indigenous voices. In this light, the marginalization of Southeast Asian Islam is not simply a consequence of geographic distance, but also of its perceived failure to conform to Arab standards of Islamic orthodoxy and practice.

This epistemic exclusion is not a mere academic oversight; it is embedded within a global structure of power that determines who gets to speak and whose knowledge is deemed valid. This is evident in the limited representation of Southeast Asian scholars, texts, and institutions within international Islamic discourse—be it in academic publications, global conferences, or mainstream Islamic curricula.

*Third, Postcolonial Theory and the Subaltern Perspective.* Postcolonial theory helps us understand how colonial legacies persist in contemporary discourse, representation, and knowledge structures. In this framework, Southeast Asian Islam occupies a **subaltern** position—a term popularized by Spivak to describe groups that are denied agency and voice within hegemonic discursive systems.

Colonialism not only usurped political and economic control but also disrupted local epistemologies. As Edward Said elaborates in *Orientalism* (2004, 2021), the West's representation of the East was consistently shaped by reduction, exoticization, and the projection of inferiority. Within Islamic studies, Orientalism played a crucial role in producing the narrative that only Islam originating from the Arab heartlands is authentic, while local forms are deemed incomplete or deviant.

In this context, the study of Southeast Asian Islam demands a critical deconstruction of dominant narratives and a reaffirmation of the legitimacy and authority of localized Islamic expressions. This includes acknowledging the scholarly traditions of pesantren, the literary heritage of Malay Islamic thought, and the religious practices of Southeast Asian Muslims—rich in symbolic,

ethical, and universal Islamic values. By reclaiming these voices, the intellectual map of the Islamic world can become more plural, just, and inclusive.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative-critical methodology through comprehensive library research, focusing on both primary and secondary literature relevant to the theme of epistemic marginalization in Southeast Asian Islam (Arikunto, 2016). This approach was chosen because the primary objective of the study is not empirical data collection but the examination and interpretation of discursive constructions, representational patterns, and historiographical dynamics regarding the position of Islam in the Malay-Nusantara world within the broader landscape of Islamic civilization (Prastowo, 2011).

The primary sources analyzed include classical Orientalist works such as *Southeast Asia: Crossroad of Religion* by K. P. Landon, *Indonesia: Trade and Society* by J. C. van Leur, *The Achehnese* by Snouck Hurgronje, and *The Religion of Java* by Clifford Geertz. These texts were selected due to their historical and methodological influence in shaping the dominant image of Southeast Asian Islam as weak, syncretic, and marginalized. Additionally, other historical records and academic commentaries were reviewed to explore how these narratives developed and gained traction in the fields of Islamic history and anthropology.

Simultaneously, this paper draws on critical and counter-hegemonic literature that seeks to reconstruct a more just and proportionate understanding of Southeast Asian Islam. These include the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Azyumardi Azra, William R. Roff, and contemporary analyses by scholars such as Nikki R. Keddie. These texts are instrumental in demonstrating the intellectual efforts—both from within and outside the Muslim world—to deconstruct the reductive narratives that have historically sidelined local Islamic expressions.

The research employs a systematic textual analysis focused on the narrative structures, argumentative strategies, and representational choices employed by these authors in their depiction of Islam in Southeast Asia. Historical discourse analysis is applied to uncover the power-knowledge structures operating behind the binary of "central" and "peripheral" Islam, particularly through examining the use of concepts like "purity," "syncretism," and "tradition" in evaluating Islamic authenticity.

As a critical study, this paper also employs reflective and deconstructive theoretical frameworks, including center-periphery theory, epistemic marginalization, and postcolonial approaches to interpret the relationship between local and global Islams. Through this method, the paper not only captures the state of discourse but also challenges and reconstructs dominant perspectives on Southeast Asian Islam (Herdiansyah, 2018).

Ultimately, the methodological approach aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the historical and epistemological dynamics of Malay-Nusantara Islam, and to reposition it as a vital component of the global Islamic civilization—one that is inherently plural, decentralized, and epistemically rich (Bungin, 2012; Susilo, 2017).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Discursive Construction of "Peripheral Islam" by Orientalists and Western Scholars

One of the key findings of this study is that the marginalization of Southeast Asian Islam is not merely a matter of geopolitics, but a discursive construction shaped by Orientalists and Western scholars since the 19th century. Islam in the Malay-Nusantara region has been systematically portrayed as a superficial, impure, and syncretic form of Islam blended with local beliefs and

traditions. This perception is evident in works such as *Southeast Asia: Crossroad of Religion* by Landon & Briggs (1951), which characterizes Islam in the archipelago as merely a "thin veneer" over a deeply rooted Hindu-Buddhist cultural substratum. According to Landon, Islam failed to take deep root and was easily diluted or displaced under the pressures of globalization and cultural hybridization.

This view was further reinforced by J. C. van Leur (1955), who argued even more sharply that Islam brought no significant social or economic development to Indonesia. In *Indonesia: Trade and Society*, van Leur likened the spread of Islam to that of Catholic missionary activity—doctrinal and dogmatic rather than transformative. He claimed that the real driving forces behind trade, governance, and cultural development in the archipelago were local, indigenous traditions, not Islam (Wertheim, 1954).

A similar reading appears in Snouck Hurgronje's *The Achehnese* (1906), where he posited a strict separation between *adat* (custom) and *agama* (religion). Although Islam was recognized as a formal identity, Hurgronje argued that *adat* remained dominant in Acehnese social practice. This dichotomy implied that Islam was not the foundational framework of local social systems but merely an ornamental or symbolic layer. Consequently, local Islam was seen as lacking full religious authority and susceptible to being judged as inferior to the so-called "authentic" Arab Islam (Widodo, 2020).

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in *The Religion of Java* (2014), further amplified this discourse through his tripartite classification of Javanese Muslims into *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*. Geertz identified religious orthodoxy only within the *santri* group, while portraying the *abangan* and *priyayi* as syncretic and culturally diluted. This typology has had a profound impact on how Western academia perceives Javanese Islam—as fragmented, impure, and doctrinally weak.

Collectively, these works reflect an epistemic tendency to construct Southeast Asia as a space of incomplete, subordinate, and derivative Islamic expression. As M. C. Ricklefs (2008) notes, Geertz's framework has deeply shaped Western academic interpretations of Javanese Islam, even though it remains reductionist and neglects the complex history of Islamization in the region.

The implications of this Orientalist discourse are far-reaching: first, local Islam loses its authority as a source of legitimate knowledge; second, Southeast Asian ulama and scholars are excluded from the global intellectual stage of Islam; and third, Southeast Asian Muslims themselves begin to doubt the authenticity and validity of their own inherited Islamic tradition. From a center-periphery perspective, this reveals that not only political and economic power but also the power to define what constitutes "pure Islam" has been monopolized by Arab-centric frameworks.

Therefore, the label of "peripheral Islam" attributed to Southeast Asia is not the result of objective observation but a product of discursive power, legitimized through academic and colonial texts. These constructions continue to shape how the history and identity of Islam in the region are perceived to this day.

### **Affirming Southeast Asian Islam as a Global Epistemic Subject**

Amid prevailing discourses that tend to marginalize Southeast Asian Islam, a number of scholars have emerged to reaffirm that Islam in this region is not a passive object in global Islamic history, but an active epistemic subject—contributing significantly to Islamic scholarship, religious thought, and socio-spiritual practices that are both dynamic and moderate. This assertion has been advanced by intellectuals such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Azyumardi Azra, William R. Roff, and Nikki R. Keddie, whose works have challenged the hegemony of Arab-centric narratives.

In *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (1969), Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas strongly rejected the notion that Islamization in Southeast Asia was superficial or lacking in depth. He demonstrated that the arrival of Islam ushered in a

profound cosmological revolution—a fundamental shift in the Malay worldview (*weltanschauung*) from Hindu-Buddhist metaphysics to a tawhidic paradigm. This transformation affected not only systems of belief but also language, literature, education, sociopolitical structures, and even architectural aesthetics.

Al-Attas notably pointed out that the Malay language underwent significant transformation following Islamization, absorbing Arabic theological terms such as *iman* (faith), *takdir* (divine decree), *zalim* (injustice), and *syurga* (paradise) in ways that were both functional and epistemically significant. This lexical shift was not merely linguistic but indicative of a broader epistemological reorientation. In this way, classical Malay became a vehicle for the dissemination of Islamic theology, Sufism, jurisprudence, and literary tradition across the archipelago.

A similar affirmation is found in the work of Azyumardi Azra, particularly in his magnum opus *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay–Indonesian and Middle Eastern Ulama in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (2004). Through meticulous historical research, Azra dismantled the myth of Southeast Asia’s intellectual isolation by documenting transnational scholarly networks that connected the region with Islamic centers such as Mecca, Medina, and Cairo as early as the 17th century. Key figures in these networks include Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili, Syekh Yusuf al-Makassari, and Daud al-Fatani.

Azra further argued that reformist Islamic thought in Southeast Asia emerged even before the rise of modernist-Salafi movements in the Middle East. This indicates that Southeast Asian Islam was not merely receptive but also generative—actively shaping global Islamic discourse. These networks underscore that Islamization in the region was not just a cultural process, but a deeply intellectual and theological engagement.

Support for the legitimacy and depth of Southeast Asian Islam also comes from Scottish historian William R. Roff. In his essay *Islam Obscured?* (1985), Roff critiqued how Southeast Asian Islamic studies were often filtered through secular-sociological lenses that obscured the theological and scholarly contributions of Muslim communities in Indonesia and Malaysia. He noted that the complexity of Islamic life in these countries rivals that of the Middle East, yet is frequently overlooked in global academia.

Similarly, Middle East historian Nikki R. Keddie, in her article *Islam and Society in Minangkabau and in the Middle East* (1987), challenged the assumption that Minangkabau Islam was merely syncretic. She observed that Minangkabau Muslims were, in fact, highly diligent in practicing Islamic obligations—often more so than communities in Iran prior to the 1979 revolution. Keddie’s findings suggest that religious commitment and authenticity cannot be gauged by proximity to so-called Islamic centers but must be assessed within each community’s own sociocultural and spiritual context (Ricklefs, 2008).

Additionally, data from Indonesia’s Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2022 shows that approximately 87% of Indonesia’s population identifies as Muslim (Nurhadi, 2021), making it the largest Muslim-majority country in the world. Indonesia also sends the largest annual contingent of pilgrims to Mecca and has become a global proponent of *Islam Wasathiyah* (moderate Islam), frequently taking leadership roles in international forums such as the OIC and the G20 Interfaith Forum (A. E. Putra, 2020).

Altogether, these indicators demonstrate that Southeast Asian Islam is far from marginal—it is a vital component of global Islamic civilization, rooted in scholarship, spirituality, and meaningful social contributions. Its pluralistic, culturally grounded, and tolerant character is increasingly viewed as a model for the future of global Islam, especially in an era marked by rising extremism and ideological polarization.

## Local Islam as a Form of Cultural and Epistemic Resistance

Amid the dominance of Arab-centric narratives in Islamic historiography, local expressions of Islam in Southeast Asia—particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia—not only persist but flourish as subtle yet powerful forms of cultural and epistemic resistance. This resistance does not necessarily manifest through overt ideological opposition to the Arab world but through the affirmation of local cultures as integral dimensions of Islamic identity and practice.

One of the most compelling expressions of this resistance is evident in Indonesia's *pesantren* tradition. *Pesantren*, as traditional Islamic boarding schools, do not merely transmit classical Islamic texts authored by Middle Eastern scholars, but actively reinterpret and contextualize them for local realities. With over 36,000 active *pesantren* and more than five million students as of 2023 (Ministry of Religious Affairs, Indonesia), the *pesantren* network functions as both a major transmitter of Islamic knowledge and a cultural bulwark against imposed Arabization. For example, while many *pesantren* teach Arabic texts such as *Fath al-Mu'in* or *Taqrib*, the instruction often occurs in Javanese, Sundanese, or Malay, utilizing traditional teaching systems like *bandongan* and *sorogan* that are unique to the region.

Epistemic resistance is also vividly expressed in the corpus of Malay Islamic literature, which served as a primary medium for conveying Islamic values in localized forms. Works such as *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain*, and the mystical poetry of Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani (Abdul Rahman & Salmah Jan, 2020; Akhtar, 2022) exemplify how Islamic theology—particularly Sufism—was indigenized through literary forms. Hamzah Fansuri's poems, for instance, articulate the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) using rich symbolic language embedded in Malay cultural aesthetics, demonstrating an advanced integration of local idioms with Islamic metaphysics.

In Minangkabau culture, the well-known maxim "*Adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*" (custom is founded on Islamic law, and Islamic law is founded on the Qur'an) exemplifies substantive integration between Islamic norms and cultural practices. Here, *adat* (custom) is not seen as antithetical to Islam but as a vehicle for Islamic values. This directly challenges the rigid dichotomy proposed by Orientalists such as Hurgronje and Geertz, who separated *adat* from *agama* (religion) as mutually exclusive spheres.

The phenomenon of *Islam Kejawen* also reflects a culturally rooted resistance to normative frameworks that label local practices as deviant. Rituals such as *slametan*, *tahlilan*, *selamatan desa*, and ancestral veneration (within Islamic prayer contexts) embody the Javanese Muslim community's efforts to preserve spiritual integrity while maintaining deep cultural roots. Scholars like Mark R. Woodward (Amrozi, 2021) and Martin van Bruinessen (1994) argue that these practices represent rational, spiritually resonant local Islams—not deviations but legitimate cultural articulations of the faith.

In Malaysia, the emergence of the "Islam Hadhari" movement under former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi marked a deliberate articulation of a localized Islamic vision responsive to contemporary challenges. Islam Hadhari emphasized a balanced integration of spiritual and material development while rejecting rigid fundamentalism (Siti Fatimah Ahmad & Maimun Aqsha Lubis, 2014; Yusof et al., 2017). Despite criticism from salafi factions, Islam Hadhari successfully repositioned local Islam as a state-level discourse that was both progressive and inclusive.

Across these diverse expressions, it becomes clear that local Islam in Southeast Asia is neither silent nor submissive to dominant narratives. Rather, it constitutes an organized, subtle, and deeply rooted cultural and epistemic resistance. These forms of resistance deconstruct the binary between "pure Islam" and "local Islam," demonstrating that Islamic authenticity cannot be measured by symbolic uniformity but must be grounded in spiritual depth, social utility, and the ethical



embodiment of universal Islamic values within pluralistic contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the label of "peripheral Islam" attached to Southeast Asian Muslim communities is a product of historically constructed discourse, driven by Orientalist dominance, colonial legacies, and overly Arab-centric standards of Islamic authenticity. Using the analytical frameworks of center-periphery theory, epistemic marginalization, and postcolonial critique, it is evident that Southeast Asian Islam has often been reduced to a secondary, syncretic, and inauthentic form within global Islamic narratives.

However, the findings of this research show that Islam in the Malay-Nusantara region possesses epistemic integrity, a rich intellectual heritage, and a historically significant role in shaping Islamic civilization. The contributions of local ulama, the networks of transnational Islamic scholarship, the enduring pesantren tradition, and the vibrancy of Malay Islamic literature provide concrete evidence that Southeast Asian Islam is not a passive recipient but an active producer, adapter, and interpreter of Islamic teachings in accordance with its sociocultural contexts.

Moreover, resistance to marginalization also emerges through localized Islamic praxis that affirms culture as a medium for spiritual and social empowerment. Whether through the Minangkabau philosophy of *adat basandi syarak*, the culturally embedded practices of *Islam Kejawan*, or the progressive discourse of Islam Hadhari in Malaysia, these expressions reflect an Islam that is culturally inclusive, tolerant, and socially constructive.

Therefore, this paper asserts the urgent need to deconstruct the hegemonic narratives surrounding global Islam and to promote recognition of Southeast Asian Islam as an alternative center within the diverse expressions of the global Muslim community. Moving forward, expanding the epistemic space for local Islam is essential—not so it remains on the margins of Islamic discourse, but so it becomes a new center of civilizational renewal that embodies an Islam that is contextual, dynamic, and universal.

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