

The Role of Kiai and Elder Teachers in the Formation of Islamic Civilization in Indonesia and Brunei

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Abstract: Traditional Islamic education in the Malay–Nusantara region has played a significant historical role in shaping the Islamic civilization (Tamadun Islam) of Southeast Asia. Institutions such as pesantren in Indonesia and surau in Brunei have served not only as centers for religious education but also as social and cultural institutions that instill moral values and shape Muslim identity since the 17th century. This article aims to analyze the roles of the Kiai in Indonesia and the Guru Tua in Brunei in transmitting classical Islamic knowledge and inculcating the values of adab and akhlak through an educational approach based on ta'dib. The study shows that both Kiai and Guru Tua function as cultural and spiritual agents who maintain the continuity of Islamic traditions through a pedagogical system integrating knowledge, practice, and ethics. Traditional Islamic education in these regions emphasizes not only religious cognition but also the formation of civilized individuals in accordance with the concept of ta'dib, which lies at the heart of Islamic civilization. These findings affirm that pesantren and surau are strategic educational institutions in preserving Islamic values and strengthening the social cohesion of Malay–Nusantara Muslim societies in the modern era.

Keywords: Traditional Islamic education, Islamic boarding schools, prayer rooms, religious leaders, elders, Islamic civilization, Malay-Nusantara.



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Introduction

Traditional Islamic education in the Malay-Archipelago region has strong historical roots in the formation of *Islamic civilization* in Southeast Asia. Since the 17th century, institutions such as Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia and surau in Brunei have been centers for the development of Islamic knowledge as well as guardians of moral values in society. These institutions not only function as places of religious learning, but also as social and cultural institutions that shape the character and Islamic identity of Malay society. The existence of pesantren and surau is clear evidence that traditional Islamic education has been able to survive amid dynamic social and political changes and continues to play a strategic role in building Islamic civilization in this region (Azra, 2021).

Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, with their distinctive structure and independent education system, play an important role in transmitting classical Islamic knowledge. The tradition of teaching based on *classical Islamic texts* and the concept of *sanad* (*chain of transmission*) are the main characteristics that affirm the continuity of the Islamic intellectual tradition from generation to generation. The spiritual relationship between *the Kiai* and the *santri* creates an educational model that emphasizes the dimensions of *adab* and *barakah*, two elements that form the main foundation for the moral and spiritual development of Indonesian Muslim society (Bruinessen, 2019). Through this educational system, Islamic boarding schools not only produce scholars and religious teachers, but also social leaders who are deeply rooted in Islamic values and local culture.

Meanwhile, the tradition of *surau* in Brunei Darussalam has a similar function to Islamic boarding schools, although on a smaller institutional scale and community-based. Surau serves as a space for the reproduction of Islamic values and the strengthening of *manners* and *morals* that form the foundation of Malay-Islamic society. It is a place for religious study, *zikir* (remembrance of God), and seeking knowledge under the guidance of *the Guru Tua*—a term for senior religious figures who have high spiritual and scholarly authority (Yusuf, 2020). Surau in Brunei are not only places of learning, but also symbols of the unity between knowledge, charity, and morals that reinforce the identity of the Brunei people as an Islamic civilization.

The role of *Kiai* in Indonesia and *Guru Tua* in Brunei in this context is not limited to formal teaching, but also includes social leadership and the formation of religious identity in society. Kiai in Islamic boarding schools are respected moral figures, mediators of social conflict, and protectors of Islamic traditions that are integrated with local culture. Similarly, *Guru Tua* in Brunei play a role as spiritual leaders who instill Sufi values and foster religious awareness based on *manners* (Salleh & Hamid, 2021). Thus, both Kiai and *Guru Tua* act as guardians of traditional Islamic values based on a balance between knowledge, charity, and morals.

From a historical perspective, the existence of Kiai and *Guru Tua* reflects the continuity of Islamic intellectual tradition in the Malay-Archipelago region. They are not only inheritors of knowledge, but also preservers of Islamic civilization, which is deeply rooted in the social and cultural structure of society. Through education, teaching, and moral guidance, the Kiai and *Guru Tua* have passed on a distinctive *Islamic civilization*—a civilization rooted in the values of tawhid, knowledge, and civility (*ta'dib*) as the basis for the formation of a complete human being (Al-Attas, 2018). These values then became the spiritual and social ethical foundation of Malay society in Indonesia and Brunei.

The presence of Islamic boarding schools and prayer rooms as traditional Islamic educational institutions also demonstrates a process of Islamization that is cultural and non-confrontational. Islam was not spread through political power, but rather through education, exemplary behavior, and moral guidance provided by scholars and religious teachers. This explains why Islamic civilization in the Malay region has a peaceful, inclusive character rooted in local values. Islamic education became the main instrument in instilling the values of *ta'dib*—the formation of civilized human beings who not only master knowledge but also practice it in social life (Haron, 2020).

In the modern context, Islamic boarding schools and surau face major challenges due to technological developments, globalization, and transformations in the education system. Nevertheless, both continue to maintain their distinctive character as centers for moral and spiritual development. Adaptation to the changing times is carried out without abandoning traditional values. Kiai and *Guru Tua* are now beginning to integrate modern educational methods, while still adhering to the principles

of civilized knowledge (). This process shows that traditional Islamic education has a high degree of flexibility in facing social change.

Conceptually, the idea of *Islamic civilization* refers not only to material progress, but also to the moral and spiritual qualities of society. In this regard, Kiai and Guru Tua play an important role in shaping a *knowledgeable and civilized* society. Traditional Islamic education teaches a balance between the rational and spiritual dimensions, between knowledge and righteous deeds. By internalizing these values, Islamic boarding schools and prayer rooms have contributed to the development of an Islamic civilization oriented towards social welfare and religious harmony (Rahim & Rahman, 2022).

In addition, the role of Kiai and Guru Tua is also closely related to strengthening social cohesion and collective identity among Muslims in the Malay region. Through education, preaching, and exemplary behavior, they create a society that has Islamic awareness and a sense of social responsibility. In modern societies that tend to be materialistic, the moral and spiritual values instilled by Kiai and Guru Tua serve as a defense against moral crises and cultural disorientation. Thus, traditional Islamic education remains relevant as a model of humanistic and transformative character education in the contemporary era.

Based on the above description, it is clear that Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia and surau in Brunei are not only educational institutions, but also symbols of the continuity of Islamic civilization in the Malay-Archipelago region. Both are important pillars in preserving the legacy of *Islamic civilization*, which emphasizes a balance between knowledge, faith, and charity. However, systematic comparative studies on the roles of Kiai and Guru Tua in shaping Islamic civilization are still limited. Therefore, this research is important to rediscover the noble values inherited from these traditional Islamic educational figures, while also explaining their relevance in the context of modern Islamic education development in Southeast Asia.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a historical-comparative design, which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of Kiai in Indonesia and Guru Tua in Brunei in the formation of Islamic civilization through traditional Islamic education. The historical approach is used to trace the roots and development of Islamic boarding schools and surau as centers of religious and social guidance for the Malay community since the 17th century. Meanwhile, the comparative approach is used to analyze the similarities and differences between these two traditional figures in transmitting Islamic values and shaping the identity of Islamic civilization in two different but related cultural contexts. Through a combination of these two approaches, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the continuity and transformation of traditional Islamic values in the Malay-Archipelago region.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with religious leaders, Islamic boarding school leaders, and surau teachers who were considered to have an understanding of classical Islamic educational traditions in both countries. In addition, non-participatory observations were conducted at several Islamic boarding schools in East Java and Islamic educational institutions in Bandar Seri Begawan to observe learning practices, teacher-student interaction patterns, and religious activities that reflect ta'dib values. Secondary data was obtained through a literature study of academic works, classical manuscripts, historical archives, and religious documents related to the development of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia and suraus in Brunei, including references from scientific journals such as *Studia Islamika*, *Intellectual Discourse*, and *Journal of Islamic Civilization in Southeast Asia*.

The data collection process was carried out using several techniques, namely semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and in-depth literature review. Semi-structured interviews were used so that researchers could explore informants' views freely but still focused on the research focus, namely the role of Kiai and Guru Tua in transmitting traditional Islamic values. Document analysis included examining classical texts such as classical Islamic texts, historical records of Islamic boarding schools and prayer rooms, and local manuscripts that recorded the moral and Sufi teachings of previous scholars. Meanwhile, the literature review serves as a means of data triangulation by linking field

findings and historical facts () with Islamic education theory and the concept of Islamic civilization (Tamadun Islam) as proposed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (2018).

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. During the analysis process, researchers categorized findings based on main themes such as scientific value, spiritual leadership, manners, and social contribution. Each category was analyzed comparatively between the Indonesian and Brunei contexts to find patterns of similarities and significant differences. Ethical considerations were also an important part of this study. Each informant was given an explanation of the research objectives and asked for their informed consent before the interview was conducted. The informants' identities were kept confidential, and the data was used solely for academic purposes. With these procedures, the research sought to uphold scientific integrity while respecting the human and religious values that form the basis of Islamic education studies.

Results and Discussion

This study found that the roles of Kiai in Indonesia and Guru Tua in Brunei have the same foundation, namely as guardians and inheritors of Islamic scholarly traditions oriented towards the moral and spiritual development of society. Both pesantren and surau function as non-formal educational institutions that produce civilized individuals, not merely knowledgeable ones. The education provided by Kiai and Guru Tua is rooted in *the Islamic worldview*, which places knowledge and manners as two main components in building *Islamic civilization*. This shared paradigm shows that Islamic civilization in the Malay-Nusantara region grew on the principles of knowledge, faith, and manners, not only on ritual or dogmatic aspects.

Observations at a number of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, such as Tebuireng, Gontor, and Sidogiri, show that the Kiai occupies a central position in the traditional Islamic education system. Kiai are not only teachers (*mu'allim*), but also spiritual leaders (*murabbi*) and moral mentors for santri. The relationship between Kiai and santri is personal and paternalistic, where educational success is largely determined by the sincerity of students in respecting their teachers and practicing the knowledge they have acquired. In this context, the existence of the Kiai becomes a symbol of moral authority that transcends institutional boundaries, because the legitimacy of a Kiai does not only come from academic titles, but from the virtue of his character and the depth of his religious knowledge (Rahim & Rahman, 2022).

Meanwhile, in Brunei Darussalam, the role of Guru Tua shows a similar pattern, albeit in a more communitarian context. Guru Tua is a respected elder cleric who is revered for his spiritual steadfastness, mastery of knowledge, and wisdom in guiding the community. Based on field data and literature review, the Guru Tua not only teaches religious knowledge through recitation and majelis ta'lim, but also serves as a place for the community to consult on social, legal, and moral issues. This position makes the Guru Tua a social glue in Brunei society, which is based on the values of *Malay Islam Beraja* (Salleh & Hamid, 2021).

One interesting finding is that both Kiai in Indonesia and Guru Tua in Brunei implement Islamic education oriented towards the principle of *ta'dib*, which is education that combines intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions. The concept of *ta'dib* as stated by Al-Attas (2018) is not only to educate people to be knowledgeable, but also to be civilized. In practice, the educational process in Islamic boarding schools and surau always begins with instilling moral values such as respect for teachers, honesty, and simplicity. These principles form the foundation for shaping the character of students so that they are able to apply their knowledge in real life.

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, the value of *ta'dib* is reflected in an educational model that emphasizes a balance between knowledge and action. Teachers emphasize the importance of internalizing knowledge so that it becomes a source of wisdom, not merely memorization. The study of classical Islamic texts, for example, focuses not only on linguistic aspects and Islamic law, but also on the moral meanings contained within them. Students are taught to understand *maqashid al-syari'ah* (the objectives of Sharia) so that they are able to place religion as a guideline for life that brings benefits. This makes Islamic boarding schools not just institutions for the transmission of knowledge, but also arenas for the formation of an Islamic civilization based on human values.

In Brunei, educational practices in surau guided by Guru Tua show a similar orientation. Religious teaching is always accompanied by moral and spiritual guidance, especially through activities such as dzikir, wirid, and reading classical Sufi texts. In this case, Guru Tua acts as a spiritual guide (*murshid*) who leads the community towards inner awareness of the meaning of religious life. The Sufi values inherent in surau education foster a gentle, loving, and respectful Islamic tradition. Thus, the surau functions as a center for the reproduction of Islamic culture that is integrated with the Malay-Brunei identity (Yusuf, 2020).

From a social perspective, Kiai and Guru Tua both play a role in maintaining moral stability in society. Kiai in Indonesia often act as social mediators in conflicts between citizens, while Guru Tua in Brunei act as traditional and religious advisors to the community. Their presence bridges Islamic values with social realities, so that religion is not only a doctrine but also a guideline for solving life's problems. Amidst the development of modernity, this social function shows that traditional Islamic education still has strong relevance in building moral and social order in contemporary Muslim societies (Haron, 2020).

Comparatively, there are similarities in principle between the two figures in transmitting knowledge. Both consider *sanad* and *barakah* as the core of the relationship between teacher and student. Knowledge is not understood as mere information, but as a trust that must be safeguarded through manners and morals. The tradition of *certifying knowledge*, which is still practiced in Islamic boarding schools and prayer rooms, demonstrates an epistemological continuity that connects generations of scholars from one era to the next. This pattern of transmission is a distinctive feature of Islamic civilization in the Malay world, where scholarship is always linked to spirituality and moral responsibility.

However, this study also found several contextual differences. In Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools have developed into a more structured and formal education system, with many even being integrated into the national education system. Meanwhile, surau in Brunei still maintain their traditional form as more flexible, community-based non-formal institutions. These differences are influenced by the educational policies of each country, with Indonesia placing greater emphasis on the diversification of Islamic educational institutions, while Brunei focuses more on strengthening religious values through a centralized Islamic monarchy system.

In terms of learning methodology, Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia tend to adopt *the bandongan*, *sorogan*, and *halaqah* approaches, which allow for intense interaction between the Kiai and the santri. In Brunei, Guru Tua teaches religious knowledge through lectures, small halaqah, and spiritual guidance oriented towards inner experience. Although the methods used are different, both have the same goal: to shape knowledgeable and civilized individuals. This shows that diversity in methods does not change the substance of traditional Islamic education, which focuses on character development and spiritual depth.

One important aspect in this discussion is the contribution of traditional Islamic education to the formation of *Islamic civilization* in the Malay-Archipelago region. Both Islamic boarding schools and prayer rooms served as centers of Islamic civilization that spread the values of scholarship, tolerance, and social harmony. Kiai and Guru Tua became cultural agents who connected religion with nationality. Through teaching, they not only produced generations of scholars, but also community leaders with a high sense of social awareness. Thus, Islamic civilization in the Malay region was built through a value-based education system, not solely through political power (Azra, 2021).

In addition to being teachers, Kiai and Guru Tua also play a role as developers of Islamic discourse that is adaptive to the changing times. Pesantren in Indonesia, for example, have integrated modern curricula without abandoning their traditional identity. This proves that tradition is not always synonymous with stagnation. On the contrary, pesantren and surau have demonstrated their adaptive capabilities while maintaining the values of *ta'dib* as moral and spiritual foundations. This role is very important in the context of the globalization of Islamic education, which often faces the challenges of modernization of values and secularization of knowledge.

From the comparative analysis, it can be concluded that the essence of traditional Islamic education in Indonesia and Brunei lies in the effort to maintain a balance between knowledge, practice, and morals. Although they differ in institutional structure and management systems, both carry the

same vision: to form a civilized society that makes Islam a comprehensive guideline for life. The Islamic civilization built through this kind of education is *a living civilization*—that is, a civilization that grows from moral values, not merely material achievements. Thus, the Kiai and Guru Tua can be seen as the successors of the chain of scholars who built Islamic society based on love, knowledge, and manners.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that traditional Islamic education in Indonesia and Brunei has made a significant contribution to the formation of *the Malay-Nusantara Islamic civilization*. Kiai and Guru Tua not only serve as religious teachers, but also as social leaders and agents of cultural change. Their existence symbolizes the resilience of Islamic values amid the challenges of globalization and modernization of education. Therefore, revitalizing the role of Kiai and Guru Tua is crucial in strengthening the Islamic education system in Southeast Asia so that it remains rooted in tradition while being open to progress.

Conclusion

This study concludes that traditional Islamic education in the Malay-Nusantara region plays a very significant role in the formation of *a distinctive Islamic civilization*, which is deeply rooted in the values of spirituality, scholarship, and local culture. Pesantren in Indonesia and surau in Brunei have proven to function not only as religious teaching institutions, but also as centers for moral, social, and cultural development that instill the value of *ta'dib*—namely, the formation of civilized human beings who understand the relationship between knowledge, faith, and charity. The education systems developed in these two institutions have made Islam *a way of life* that guides society towards a civilized, religious, and highly cultured society.

The role of Kiai in Indonesia and Guru Tua in Brunei occupies a very strategic position as guardians of the continuity of Islamic scholarly traditions. Both function not only as *mu'allim* (teachers of knowledge), but also as *murabbi* (spiritual mentors) who instill moral values, exemplary behavior, and blessings in social and religious life. The relationship between teachers and students, built on the basis of manners and sincerity, creates an educational process that is oriented towards the wholeness of the human being: intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. In this context, traditional Islamic education demonstrates its resilience against the penetration of modern education systems that tend to be mechanistic and results-oriented, rather than process-oriented.

Historically and sociologically, Islamic boarding schools and surau have proven to be a forum for social transformation that has produced generations of knowledgeable and virtuous individuals. Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have contributed greatly to shaping the leadership of scholars and national figures, while surau in Brunei have played a role in preserving the Malay Islamic identity based on Sufi values. The similarity in value orientation between the two indicates a common thread in Malay-Nusantara Islamic civilization, which is based on harmony between religion and culture. In a historical-comparative framework, the differences between the two are more structural than substantive; Islamic boarding schools have developed into formal institutions with modern administrative systems, while suraus have retained their communal and traditional forms. However, both remain oriented towards one noble goal: to produce civilized individuals who uphold knowledge and morals.

The findings of this study reinforce the relevance of traditional Islamic education amid the rapid pace of globalization, secularization, and digitalization. Educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools and prayer rooms demonstrate their ability to adapt to changing times without losing their original values. Modernization can be implemented without erasing noble traditions, but rather by fostering integration between modern curricula and the principles of *ta'dib*. This educational model serves as a concrete example of how traditional Islamic education can develop human potential holistically: encompassing intellectual intelligence, spiritual sensitivity, and social responsibility. In this perspective, traditional Islamic education is not merely a cultural heritage, but a dynamic and sustainable system of civilization.

Based on the results of this study, several important recommendations can be made. First, there needs to be an affirmative policy from the government and higher education institutions to recognize and support the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools and prayer rooms as the intellectual and spiritual heritage of Muslims in the Malay-Archipelago region. Collaborative programs between traditional educational institutions and modern institutions can strengthen the synergy between

tradition and innovation in the Islamic education system. Second, increasing the capacity of Kiai, Guru Tua, and educators in traditional Islamic institutions needs to be a priority through pedagogical training, mastery of digital technology, and cross-border collaborative research. These efforts will not only improve their academic competence, but also ensure that *ta'dib* values are preserved amid the modernization of education.

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