

Islamic Scholarly Traditions in Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam: A Meta-Conceptual Study

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Abstract: The tradition of Islamic scholarship in the Malay Archipelago, particularly in Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam, reflects a rich and dynamic intellectual heritage that has not yet been systematically and contextually formulated. This study seeks to develop a meta-conceptual model of Islamic scholarly tradition in both countries through a synthesis of literature across classical, modern, and contemporary periods. The research employs a systematic literature review combined with meta-conceptual synthesis, engaging the works of classical thinkers such as Al-Ghazali, Al-Attas, and Al-Faruqi; modern reformers such as Natsir, Madjid, and Rahman; and contemporary empirical scholars including Azra, Dhofer, Bowen, Ooi Keat Gin, and Pehin Abdul Aziz. The synthesis identifies six core meta-concepts: (1) epistemic drivers of knowledge, (2) ethical and spiritual dispositions (*adab al-ilm*), (3) institutional and communal learning structures, (4) experiential and transmissive learning (*ta'lim*, *tarbiyah*, and *tazkiyah*), (5) dialectical balance between revelation and reason, and (6) intellectual outcomes and cultural transformation. These findings demonstrate that Islamic scholarship operates as an integrated system linking spirituality, ethics, and social transformation—manifesting a plural-reflective character in Indonesia and a normative-integrative character in Brunei Darussalam. The novelty of this research lies in constructing a meta-conceptual framework that bridges theological, ethical, and institutional dimensions within the paradigm of Islamic epistemology. This framework contributes to enriching Islamic epistemological discourse and offers a theoretical foundation for contextualizing Islamic education in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: islamic scholarship tradition, meta-conceptual, islam nusantara, malay islamic monarchy, islamic epistemology, brunei darussalam



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Introduction

The tradition of Islamic scholarship in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam, reflects a dynamic interaction between classical Islamic teachings, Malay culture, and the demands of modern civilization. These two regions have a long history of developing knowledge based on revelatory values and spirituality as their epistemological foundation. Since the 17th century, networks of scholars and educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, prayer rooms, and madrasas in Indonesia have played a strategic role in preserving the transmission of Islamic knowledge while fostering a civilized and moral social character (Azra, 2013; Dhofier, 1999). On the other hand, Brunei institutionalized religious values through the Malay Islam Beraja (MIB) ideology, which made Islamic education the main instrument in shaping people who are faithful, knowledgeable, and loyal to the king and the state (Ooi Keat Gin, 2016; Pehin Abdul Aziz, 2015).

Although both originated from the same Islamic scientific roots, their epistemological orientation and institutional practices show significant variations. The scientific tradition in Indonesia developed in a pluralistic and reflective atmosphere, with intense openness to dialogue between religious sciences and modern sciences (Madjid, 1992; Rahman, 1982). In contrast, Brunei displays a more normative and structured pattern of scholarship, integrating revelation, reason, and political authority within the framework of MIB ideology. These differences confirm that the Islamic scholarly tradition in the Malay-Nusantara region is not a single entity, but rather a system that adapts to the diverse social, cultural, and political contexts of each country.

Several previous studies have partially examined the history and sociology of Islamic scholarship in Southeast Asia. Azra (2013) describes the network of scholars and the transmission of knowledge between islands, which contributed significantly to the continuity of Islamic teaching; Dhofier (1999) focuses on the worldview of *kyai* and the role of Islamic boarding schools in shaping morals and perceptions of scholarship; while Bowen (2003) and Ooi Keat Gin (2016) examine the relationship between Islam, law, and modern socio-political structures in the region. However, these studies have not yet offered an integrated and systematic conceptual framework capable of connecting the theological, ethical, institutional, and social praxis dimensions in the context of Islamic scholarship in both countries.

Therefore, this study attempts to formulate a meta-conceptual model of Islamic scholarship and thought in Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. The model was developed through a synthesis of literature across periods, ranging from classical texts such as Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, the philosophical thoughts of Al-Attas and Al-Faruqi, to contemporary works that reflect the local contexts of both countries. This meta-conceptual approach aims to identify recurring and interrelated themes in the process of scientific development, including epistemic drives, *adab* ethics (scientific ethics), institutional conditions and learning communities, learning experiences in both transmission and experiential learning, the dialectical relationship between revelation and rationality, and the intellectual impact on cultural and social transformation.

This study assumes that Islamic scholarship is not merely an intellectual activity, but rather a contextual multidimensional system, in which knowledge is a spiritual, moral, and social process designed to shape *insan kamil* (perfect and civilized human beings). Through a meta-conceptual approach, this study aims to produce a model that maps the integration of theological, epistemological, institutional, and practical aspects in Islamic scholarship in the two countries. Thus, this research not only contributes to the enrichment of Islamic epistemology discourse in Southeast Asia, but can also be used as a basis for the development of a more contextual, reflective, and balanced paradigm and practice of Islamic education between knowledge, faith, and action.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with the paradigm of Islamization of Knowledge as developed by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. This paradigm places the values of *tawhid* and revelatory ethics as the main epistemological foundation in all scientific activities. With this epistemological framework of Islamic knowledge, the study analyzes Islamic law, politics, and economics in the context of civil society in a normative and contextual manner, without

abandoning revelation as the primary source of truth and reason as an instrument of reasoning. The type of data used in this study is qualitative data collected using literature study techniques from primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained from classical Islamic texts such as Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah (Al-Mawardi), Muqaddimah (Ibn Khaldun), Ihya' Ulum al-Din (Al-Ghazali), and Al-Madinah al-Fadhilah (Al-Farabi). Secondary data was obtained from contemporary academic literature by Chapra (2000), An-Na'im (2008), Esposito (2011), Hussin (2024), and Fitriani (2025), as well as articles, journals, and proceedings relevant to the development of an Islamic-based civil society in Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. The data obtained was then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which includes: (1) data reduction, namely the selection and filtering of relevant concepts and theories; (2) data presentation, in the form of a thematic synthesis of classical and modern literature; and (3) drawing conclusions using the maqashid al-syari'ah framework and the values of Tamadun Islam Nusantara as well as an Islamic hermeneutic perspective to interpret texts holistically in accordance with the current context.

Results and Discussion

This study produced six main meta-concepts that form the conceptual framework of scientific tradition and Islamic thought in Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. These six meta-concepts are interrelated and reflect a living epistemological system, in which theological, ethical, social, and institutional dimensions are integrated into a single process of scientific development.

First, *epistemic drivers of knowledge*. The first meta-concept describes the theological and spiritual drivers that underpin the scientific process in Islam. In classical Islamic thought, knowledge is not merely the result of rational activity, but part of worship and devotion to Allah. Al-Ghazali (2005) asserts that seeking knowledge is fardhu 'ain for every Muslim, while Al-Attas (1980) explains knowledge as a means of taqarrub ilallah and the formation of civilized human beings. In the context of Indonesia and Brunei, this epistemic drive is manifested through religious motivation to seek knowledge in order to improve oneself and society. Indonesia emphasizes the social dimension of knowledge, while Brunei places it within the framework of loyalty and obedience to the Malay Islamic Beraja system. Thus, epistemic drivers become the foundation for all scientific activities, confirming that the source of motivation for knowledge is spiritual and transcendental.

Second, *ethical and spiritual dispositions (adab al-'ilm)*. The second meta-concept relates to the formation of the moral and spiritual character of learners. Islamic tradition emphasizes that knowledge will not be useful without adab. KH. Hasyim Asy'ari (1940), through his work Adabul 'Alim wal-Muta'allim, explains the importance of purity of intention, humility, and respect for teachers as conditions for the blessings of knowledge. This view is in line with the concept of adab al-'ilm put forward by Al-Attas (1991), that true knowledge is born from spiritual order and respect for the cosmic order. In the context of Brunei, these values of adab are institutionalized through a national education system that emphasizes politeness, discipline, and respect for religious authority. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the values of adab have developed through the pesantren culture, which fosters an ethos of scholarship based on sincerity and modesty. This meta-concept emphasizes that ethical and spiritual dimensions are internal controllers for the development of knowledge.

Third, *institutional and communal learning conditions*. The third meta-concept highlights the importance of institutions and communities in maintaining the continuity of scientific traditions. In Islamic history, science has always developed in well-organized social spaces, whether through halaqah, madrasah, or universities. In Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) serve as centers for the transmission and reproduction of religious knowledge and moral values (Dhofier, 1999). Pesantren function as learning communities that combine intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions. In Brunei, a similar function is carried out by Islamic educational institutions under the state structure, such as Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali and Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei, which play a role in maintaining the integrity of teachings within the framework of MIB ideology. Thus, educational institutions serve as a link between the knowledge of the " " and society, ensuring that Islamic scholarship is always relevant and oriented towards the common good.

Fourth, experiential and transmissive learning (ta'lim, tarbiyah, and tazkiyah). The fourth meta-concept emphasizes that learning in Islam is transformative and experience-based. The processes of ta'lim (teaching), tarbiyah (nurturing), and tazkiyah (purification) are inseparable. In classical works such as *Mir'at al-Tullab* by Abdurrauf as-Singkili, the learning process is understood as a spiritual encounter between teacher and student that gives rise to deep understanding, not merely the transfer of information. In Indonesia, this pattern is evident in the b and organ and sorogan traditions in Islamic boarding schools, which emphasize direct involvement between students and teachers. Meanwhile, in Brunei, this approach is formalized through an Islamic education curriculum that balances memorization, reflection, and social practice. Such a holistic learning experience develops the mind, heart, and behavior simultaneously.

Fifth, Dialectic Continuum between Revelation and Reason

The fifth meta-concept explains the dialectical relationship between revelation (naql) and reason ('aql). In Islamic epistemology, the two are not contradictory entities, but rather complementary. Al-Faruqi (1982) emphasizes the importance of integrating revelation and rationality as the basis for the Islamization of science, while Fazlur Rahman (1982) highlights the need for a historical-critical approach to texts in order for Islamic science to be relevant to the times. Indonesia shows a tendency to develop a new synthesis between religious and modern science, which is evident in the idea of Islam Nusantara and the interdisciplinary approach in Islamic universities. Brunei, on the other hand, emphasizes the harmonious integration of revelation and reason within the framework of the MIB ideology, where rationality is directed towards strengthening faith and social stability. This meta-concept serves as an epistemological bridge that maintains a balance between spiritual belief and intellectual innovation.

Sixth, Intellectual Outcomes and Cultural Transformation

The last meta-concept focuses on the end results of the scientific process, namely the formation of civilized humans (insan kamil) and a society with a culture of science. In Al-Attas' (1995) view, the goal of Islamic education is not merely to produce experts, but to shape individuals who have moral and metaphysical awareness. In Indonesia, this result can be seen in the emergence of the idea of Islam Nusantara, which promotes tolerance, humanity, and nationalism. In Brunei, the scientific tradition gave birth to the concept of Melayu Islam Beraja, which combines loyalty, morality, and spirituality in a single national value system. The resulting cultural transformation shows that science functions as a means of civilization and a creator of social harmony. These meta-concepts close the cycle of the Islamic scientific system, in which knowledge returns to its original purpose: to strengthen faith, manners, and the welfare of the people.

Overall, these six meta-concepts interact with each other to form a complete system. *Epistemic drivers* become the source of motivation; *ethical dispositions* guide attitudes; *institutional conditions* provide a social framework; *experiential learning* shapes the *transformation process*; *the revelation-reason dialectic* maintains epistemological balance; and *intellectual outcomes* become a reflection of spiritual and cultural success. Thus, the Islamic scientific traditions in Indonesia and Brunei can be understood as dynamic systems that continuously integrate faith, science, and practice.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the scientific tradition and Islamic thought in Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam constitute a living and dynamic epistemological system, deeply rooted in Islamic spiritual values. Through a meta-conceptual approach, this study successfully identified six main components that form the Islamic scientific ecosystem in the Malay-Archipelago region, namely spiritually-based epistemic drive, ethical disposition and scientific manners, institutional conditions and learning communities, experience-based learning and transmission, dialectics between revelation and reason, as well as intellectual output and cultural transformation. These six components show that the Islamic scientific tradition is not only rational, but also a spiritual and social process that connects individuals with God and society. Theoretically, this research makes an important contribution to the development of Islamic epistemology in Southeast Asia through a conceptual model that maps the interrelationships between the spiritual, ethical, institutional, and social dimensions in the formation of science. This

model broadens the horizon of Islamic epistemology studies from normative discourse towards a contextual approach that explains scientific practices in a concrete manner. From a practical perspective, the results of this study can be used as a basis for developing a more integrative Islamic education curriculum that balances *ta'lim* (knowledge transfer), *tarbiyah* (character building), and *tazkiyah* (purification of the soul). This approach has the potential to strengthen the role of Islamic educational institutions—such as Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, and universities—in shaping well-rounded individuals who are civilized, knowledgeable, and able to face global challenges without losing their spiritual roots. The limitations of this study lie in its scope, which is still limited to two countries, namely Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam, so it is not yet able to represent the entire Islamic scholarly tradition in the Southeast Asian region. In addition, this study focuses on conceptual analysis without empirical depth into scholarly practices in the field. For further research, it is recommended that this meta-conceptual model be empirically tested through case studies in various Islamic educational institutions in the Malay-Nusantara region, and developed in the context of Islamic higher education policies that are adaptive to global challenges. Thus, this study is expected to be the first step towards renewing the Islamic scientific paradigm and strengthening the scientific identity of Southeast Asia in the global arena.

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