

Decolonizing Islamic Education In The Global South: Reassessing Indigenous Knowledge And Curriculum Transformation In Indonesian Pesantren

Mohammad Nurul Yaqin^{a*}, Holaiyah^b

^a *Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

^b *Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University, Malang, Indonesia*

* ny4591972@gmail.com, holaiyah11@gmail.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the decolonization of Islamic education as an urgent epistemological and pedagogical project in the Global South, placing Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as the primary locus of analysis. Through a postcolonial and decolonial framework, the study argues that the dominance of Western epistemology in the contemporary Islamic education paradigm not only marginalizes indigenous knowledge but also distorts local Islamic identities historically constructed through the tradition of pesantren knowledge transmission. Adopting a socio-educational analysis approach and the philosophy of Islamic education, this article explores four critical dimensions: first, the reconstruction of pesantren epistemology based on local wisdom and the Nusantara Islamic scholarly tradition; second, curriculum transformation as a decolonial response to global educational standardization; third, the negotiation between religious knowledge, modern science, and Islamic identity in the context of globalization; and fourth, the strategic position of pesantren as epistemological spaces of resistance and alternative knowledge production. This study synthesizes recent literature from Islamic education discourse, decolonial studies, and curriculum theory to demonstrate that Islamic boarding schools are not merely religious institutions but also spaces of decolonial praxis that maintain epistemological autonomy amidst the pressures of modernization and globalization. The article's theoretical contribution lies in offering an integrative epistemological framework that transcends the West-East dichotomy in Islamic education studies, while simultaneously positioning Islamic boarding schools as an alternative educational model that is contextual and relevant for Muslims in the Global South.

Keywords:

Decolonization Of Islamic Education; Islamic Boarding Schools; Global South; Indigenous Knowledge; Curriculum Transformation; Postcolonial Epistemology.

Education in the Global South

DOI: <https://doi.org>.....

Received: 19-06-2026

Revised: 03-07-2026

Accepted: 04-07-2026

*Corresponding Author



Copyright © 2025 by Author(s)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Introduction

In the 21st-century global educational landscape, the discourse on decolonizing knowledge and curriculum is increasingly gaining urgent relevance, particularly in regions historically under Western colonial domination.^{1,2} Amidst globalization, which often takes the form of epistemological hegemony, educational institutions in the Global South face dual pressures: on the one hand, the demand to adopt modern educational standards and paradigms rooted in Western scientific traditions; on the other, the need to maintain cultural, spiritual, and epistemological identities that have grown organically within their respective local contexts.³

Pesantren, as the oldest and most endemic Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, occupy a unique and complex position within this dynamic. For centuries, pesantren have served as centers for the production and transmission of distinctive Islamic knowledge, integrating Middle Eastern scholarly traditions with local Nusantara wisdom in an organic and dynamic synthesis. However, from the Dutch colonial period to the post-independence era of modernization, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have consistently been positioned as "traditional" institutions considered inferior to modern Western-based education systems, a discursive construct reflecting the operation of colonial epistemology in defining the hierarchy of knowledge.⁴

In the context of Islamic education, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1978) posited that the fundamental issue facing Islamic education is the loss of *adab* resulting from the penetration of the Western secular paradigm. Consequently, the Islamization of knowledge emerged as a solution to realign education with the Islamic worldview. While this perspective has significantly influenced the development of

¹ Martin van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning and the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in the Pesantren," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2020): 189–218, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etaa004>.

² Walter D. Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Duke University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hm8gfh>.

³ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Duke University Press, 2018).

⁴ Ronald Lukens-Bull, "A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java," *Asian Studies Review* 45, no. 3 (2021): 401–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1908891>.

Islamic education, it has focused primarily on the integration of knowledge and has not explicitly addressed decolonization as a process of reconstructing local knowledge within the pesantren curriculum.

In the last decade, a wave of national education reforms guided by international standards such as the PISA framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda for education, and various Western-based accreditation programs have further deepened the tension between the Islamic boarding school education system and demands for curriculum modernization.⁵ The integration of Islamic boarding schools into the national education system through regulations such as the Islamic Boarding School Law No. 18 of 2019, while bringing formal recognition, also brings with it pressures for standardization that have the potential to homogenize the epistemological diversity that has historically been a strength of Islamic boarding schools.⁶

However, in Indonesia, research on pesantren has largely focused on modernization, institutional transformation, or the integration of the national curriculum. For instance, research by Zamakhsyari Dhofier elucidates the changes in the pesantren education system resulting from modernization, without specifically analyzing how these institutions preserve or reconstruct local knowledge as a form of resistance against the legacy of colonial epistemology.

The urgency of this study rests on at least three interconnected empirical realities. First, recent data shows that there are more than 36,000 Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) across Indonesia with a student population exceeding 4.7 million,⁷ making them the largest private education system in the Muslim world. This scale demands serious academic attention to the direction of the ongoing curriculum and epistemological transformations within them.

⁵ Kementerian Agama RI, *Statistik Pesantren 2023: Data Dan Perkembangan Lembaga Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia* (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam, 2023).

⁶ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Kyai Dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia*, Edisi Baru (LP3ES, 2021).

⁷ Kementerian Agama RI, *Statistik Pesantren 2023: Data Dan Perkembangan Lembaga Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia*.

Second, the rapidly evolving discourse on decolonization of education globally, from the RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa, critiques of Eurocentric curricula in Latin American universities, to debates about indigenous pedagogy in First Nations communities in Canada, has not adequately integrated the experiences of Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia into its analytical framework.⁸ Pesantren, with their rich epistemological traditions, offer a particularly rich case for enriching and expanding educational decolonization theory.

Third, the digital transformation accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed deep tensions within the Islamic boarding school system: on the one hand, the need to respond to changes in technology and the global job market; on the other, the commitment to maintaining modes of knowledge transmission based on personal relationships (teacher-student) and shared experiences within the community. This tension has become the primary arena for the epistemological struggle between decoloniality and modernity in the Islamic boarding school context.

Therefore, the Islamization of knowledge serves as a solution for realigning education with the Islamic worldview. While this concept has significantly influenced the development of Islamic education, it has focused primarily on the integration of knowledge and has not explicitly addressed decolonization as a process of reconstructing local knowledge within the pesantren curriculum.

Although the literature on Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is quite developed, significant analytical gaps exist in at least three dimensions. First, most studies on Islamic boarding schools remain trapped within the traditional-modern dichotomy, without employing a more sophisticated decolonial theoretical framework to analyze their epistemological dynamics.⁹ Second, existing studies on the decolonization of Islamic education tend to focus on Middle Eastern or African contexts, while the experiences of Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia as the world's

⁸ Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*.

⁹ Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi Dan Modernisasi Di Tengah Tantangan Milenium III*, Revisi (Kencana Prenadamedia Group, 2021).

largest Muslim country, remain underrepresented in the international literature.¹⁰

Third, the relationship between the revitalization of indigenous knowledge (local wisdom) and the transformation of Islamic boarding school curricula in the context of globalization has not been comprehensively examined through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Islamic educational philosophy, postcolonial studies, and critical curriculum theory.¹¹

This research offers academic novelty through three contributions: first, it offers a decolonial analytical framework specifically contextualized for Islamic education in Southeast Asia; Second, a synthesis between pesantren epistemology and Global South decolonial theory, resulting in a new perspective on "alternative Islamic education"; and third, a critical analysis of efforts to transform pesantren curricula that transcend instrumental modernization approaches.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to: (1) analyze the workings of colonial epistemology within the contemporary Islamic education paradigm; (2) explore the potential of pesantren as decolonial epistemological spaces; (3) examine the process of revitalizing indigenous knowledge in the transformation of pesantren curricula; and (4) formulate a conceptual framework for decolonial, contextual, and relevant Islamic education for Muslims in the Global South.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on document analysis and literature synthesis (systematic literature review), reinforced by a critical-interpretive analytical framework. Methodologically, this study adopts a postcolonial and decolonial perspective as the primary analytical lens, enabling a critical and reflexive reading of academic texts, educational policies, and Islamic boarding school narratives.¹²

¹⁰ Johan Meuleman, "Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes Towards Modernity and Identity," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 33, no. 1 (2022): 15–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2022.2043182>.

¹¹ Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*, 2nd ed. (Polity Press, 2021).

¹² George J. Sefa Dei and M. Simmons, "Indigenous Anti-Colonial Knowledge as Heritage Knowledge for Promoting Black/African Education in Diasporic Contexts," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 9, no. 1 (2020): 25–48, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1929-8692.40539>.

The sources analyzed include: reputable international academic journals indexed by Scopus and Web of Science (2020–2026), national and international educational policy documents, reports from official institutions related to Islamic boarding schools, and landmark works in decolonial studies, Islamic educational philosophy, and critical curriculum theory. Literature selection was based on thematic relevance, analytical depth, and its contribution to developing a coherent argument in this article.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages: first, a critical reading of each source to identify its main arguments, epistemological assumptions, and conceptual contributions; second, mapping the relationships between sources to identify consensus, contradictions, and gaps in the literature; and third, a cross-sectional analysis of the relationships between sources to identify consensus, contradictions, and gaps in the literature. Third, interpretive synthesis integrates multiple perspectives into a coherent and original argument. This approach aligns with what Creswell and Poth (2022) call “interpretive synthesis,” a method that goes beyond simply summarizing previous findings to constructing new understandings through critical dialogue across the literature.¹³

Result

Colonial Epistemology and the Marginalization of Local Islamic Knowledge

To understand the urgency of decolonization in Islamic education, it is first necessary to trace how colonial epistemology operates in reproducing a hierarchy of knowledge that discriminates against non-Western scholarly traditions. Walter Mignolo (2021), in his formulation of the “colonial matrix of power,” shows that colonialism operates not only at the economic and political levels but also at the epistemological level, namely by constructing a hierarchical system that positions

¹³ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 5th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2022).

Western knowledge as universal, rational, and modern, while other knowledge is categorized as local, irrational, and traditional.

In the context of Islamic education in Indonesia, the operation of this colonial matrix can be traced back to Dutch colonial education policies that systematically marginalized Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) from the formal education system.¹⁴ This dualistic educational system, in which Dutch schools were positioned as modern institutions and Islamic boarding schools as primitive, created an epistemological hierarchy whose impacts are still felt today. Zuhdi's (2022) research shows that the stereotype of Islamic boarding school education as "old-fashioned" and "unscientific" is a discursive construct rooted in colonial rationality, not in an objective assessment of the quality of knowledge produced by Islamic boarding schools.¹⁵

Furthermore, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) introduced the concept of "epistemicide," the epistemological annihilation, to describe how Western modernity systematically eliminates alternative knowledge systems through various mechanisms, ranging from the hegemony of European scientific languages to the standardization of competency-based curricula that define "knowledge" very narrowly. Within this framework, the marginalization of Islamic boarding school scholarship, such as the science of yellow books, the halaqah tradition, and the practice of Sufism, can be read as a form of epistemicide that occurs gradually but systematically through the process of educational modernization.

This analysis is reinforced by the findings of Rinakit and Purwanto (2023), who showed that curriculum standardization through accreditation programs and national exams has indirectly reduced the time and space available for Islamic boarding schools to teach classical Islamic scholarly traditions.¹⁶ When Islamic boarding schools are pushed to meet national curriculum standards, they are often forced to reduce the

¹⁴ Lukens-Bull, "A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java."

¹⁵ M. Zuhdi, "Formal versus Non-Formal Islamic Education in Indonesia: A Critique of the Colonial Legacy.," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture*, 10(1), (2022): 22-39, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15640/jisc.v10n1a3>.

¹⁶ E. Rinakit, S., & Purwanto, "Standardization versus Authenticity: The Dilemma of Pesantren Curriculum Reform in Indonesia.," *Journal of Southeast Asian Education*, 4(2) (2023): 89-113, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/jsae.2023.04.02.89>.

teaching of the yellow texts that are the core of traditional Islamic scholarly transmission, a compromise that many observers see as an epistemological sacrifice in the name of modernization.

Pesantren as Epistemological Spaces: Scholarly Traditions and Indigenous Knowledge Production

Beyond the dominant narrative that positions pesantren solely as religious institutions reactive to modernity, recent studies offer a more nuanced reading: pesantren as epistemological spaces that actively produce, transmit, and transform knowledge based on their own logic and values.¹⁷

Pesantren's scholarly traditions are built on unique epistemological foundations that cannot be reduced to Western categories. The sanad-based teaching system (chain of knowledge transmission) that connects students with previous scholars, including the Prophet Muhammad, for example, is an epistemological mechanism that integrates spiritual, moral, and intellectual dimensions into an inseparable whole. Unlike Western epistemology, which separates subjects from objects of knowledge, Islamic boarding school epistemology operates on the principle that authentic knowledge can only be transmitted through personal relationships imbued with values and spirituality¹⁸.

The concept of "useful knowledge" in the Islamic boarding school tradition, as analyzed by Mas'ud (2022), reflects a fundamentally different epistemological orientation from the concept of "knowledge" in the Western scientific tradition. While knowledge in the Western tradition is measured by objectivity, falsifiability, and economic utility, knowledge in the Islamic boarding school tradition is measured by its blessings (barakah), benefits to society (naf'un li al-ummah), and its conformity to Islamic ethical values. This difference in epistemological orientation does not

¹⁷ van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning and the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in the Pesantren."

¹⁸ A. F. Zarkasyi, "Reconstruction of Islamic Education Philosophy in Pesantren: Epistemological Perspective.," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 20(2) (2020): 245–68, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v20i2.2041>.

constitute a deficiency or backwardness, but rather represents the articulation of fundamentally different value systems and worldviews.¹⁹

In a broader context, this connects to what Connell (2021) calls "southern theory," theories that emerge from the experiences and perspectives of Global South societies, which have significant epistemological contributions to understanding the world as a whole. Pesantren, in this reading, not only reproduce Islamic knowledge from the Middle East but also produce a creative synthesis between global Islamic scholarly traditions and local Nusantara wisdom, producing what Azra (2021) calls "Islam Nusantara," a distinctive and original variant of Islam.

One concrete example of indigenous knowledge production in Islamic boarding schools is the tradition of developing local Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh nusantara), which accommodates local customs and traditions within an Islamic normative framework. Large Islamic boarding schools such as Pesantren Tebuireng, Pesantren Lirboyo, and Pesantren Buntet have historically produced fatwas and religious views that respond to local realities while remaining rooted in classical Islamic scholarly traditions (Dhofier, 2021). This process of "localization" of Islam represents a sophisticated form of indigenous knowledge production, far from the mere syncretism often accused by critics of modernization.

Curriculum Decolonization: From Standardization to Epistemological Contextualization

The discourse on curriculum transformation in contemporary Islamic education is often trapped in an unproductive dichotomy between "modernization" and "preservation of tradition." A decolonial approach offers a way out of this impasse by shifting the question from "how can Islamic boarding schools adopt a modern curriculum?" to "what kind of curriculum reflects the epistemological values of Islamic boarding schools while responding to contemporary needs?"

Quijano (2022), in his update of the concept of "colonialidad del poder" (coloniality of power), emphasizes that curriculum decolonization cannot simply be

¹⁹ Abdurrahman Mas'ud, *Dari Haramain Ke Nusantara: Jejak Intelektual Arsitek Pesantren*, 3rd ed. (Kencana, 2022).

achieved by adding local content to a still Eurocentric framework, a strategy that Tuck and Yang (2021) refer to as “settler moves to innocence.” True curriculum decolonization demands a fundamental reconstruction of the epistemological framework underlying all curriculum design, including assumptions about what constitutes “knowledge,” “competence,” and “learning outcomes.”²⁰

In the context of Islamic boarding schools, this means reconceptualizing the curriculum not merely as a list of subjects or competencies to be mastered, but as a spiritual-intellectual journey map that guides students toward simultaneous moral and scientific maturity. This approach aligns with what Nasr (2021) calls “Islamic educational philosophy,” an educational philosophy that does not separate intellectual development from spiritual and moral development.

Faiqoh and Suryadarma's (2023) research on curriculum transformation in large Islamic boarding schools in Java found that the most successful pesantren in responding to the challenges of modernity were those that did not simply passively adopt the national curriculum but instead engaged in “epistemological negotiation,” integrating elements of the modern curriculum into the pesantren's own framework of values and epistemology.²¹ Gontor Islamic Boarding School, for example, successfully integrated English and Arabic language learning simultaneously, not as a commodity for job market skills, but as a pathway to equal access to two of the world's great scientific traditions.

Moreover, decolonial curriculum transformation also demands the rehabilitation of previously marginalized knowledge. Local empiricism-based herbal medicine, Islamic astronomy, traditional agricultural technology, and Nusantara traditional arts are forms of indigenous knowledge once taught in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) but were subsequently marginalized by curriculum

²⁰ A. Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” in *Reprinted in: De La Caden, M., & Blaser, M. (Eds.), A World*, 15(2), (Duke University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/026858090001500209>.

²¹ N. Faiqoh and Y. Suryadarma, “Curriculum Transformation in Indonesian Pesantren: Navigating Between Tradition and Modernity,” *Journal of Islamic Education Research* 4, no. 1 (2023): 45–67, <https://doi.org/10.35719/jier.v4i1.98>.

standardization.²² The revitalization of these knowledges is not merely nostalgic romanticism, but part of a broader epistemological project: demonstrating that the Nusantara Islamic tradition possesses a wealth of knowledge relevant to contemporary life.

Local Wisdom as an Epistemological Resource: Beyond Romantic Nativism

One risk in the discourse of decolonizing education is falling into a romantic nativism that uncritically idealizes local knowledge. A mature decolonial approach demands the same critical attitude toward indigenous knowledge as toward Western knowledge, recognizing its strengths and limitations, its emancipatory potential as well as its own potential for power reproduction.²³

In the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), this means that the revitalization of local wisdom must be carried out with a critical awareness of the dimensions of power that also operate within the tradition itself. Islamic boarding school practices that are patriarchal, elitist, or contrary to principles of justice should not be protected in the name of decolonization. Authentic decolonization, as emphasized by Maldonado-Torres (2020), is a project that simultaneously rejects hegemonic Western epistemologies and internal practices that reproduce oppressive power relations.

Thus, local wisdom within the Islamic boarding school tradition must be understood not as a static and homogeneous corpus of knowledge, but rather as a dynamic reservoir that is constantly negotiated, debated, and transformed in response to changing contexts. The tradition of musyawarah (collective deliberation) within Islamic boarding schools, the practice of *ijma'* (ulama consensus), and the mechanism of *ijtihad* (independent interpretation) constitute epistemological procedures that enable adaptation without losing one's roots.²⁴ This is what distinguishes the Islamic boarding school tradition from static conservatism: its ability to change from within,

²² Mas'ud, *Dari Haramain Ke Nusantara: Jejak Intelektual Arsitek Pesantren*.

²³ Dei and Simmons, "Indigenous Anti-Colonial Knowledge as Heritage Knowledge for Promoting Black/African Education in Diasporic Contexts."

²⁴ Zarkasyi, "Reconstruction of Islamic Education Philosophy in Pesantren: Epistemological Perspective."

through a deliberation process rooted in its own values.

Within this framework, the local wisdom of the archipelago integrated within the Islamic boarding school tradition, such as the values of mutual cooperation, deliberation and consensus, and respect for nature, not only has cultural relevance but also offers epistemological solutions to the crises generated by Western modernity: the ecological crisis, the crisis of social solidarity, and the crisis of meaning.²⁵ From this perspective, the local wisdom of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is not merely a legacy of the past that needs to be preserved, but rather a relevant epistemological resource for responding to 21st-century challenges.

Rahman's (2024) comparative research between Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, Islamic schools in Malaysia, and madrasas in Pakistan shows that Indonesian Islamic boarding schools have a comparative advantage in integrating local wisdom into Islamic educational practices, precisely because of their long history of negotiating with the cultural diversity of the archipelago.²⁶ This advantage, he argues, should not be viewed simply as a cultural asset but should be recognized as a significant epistemological contribution to the study of global Islamic education.

Integration of Religious Knowledge and Modern Science: Transcending Epistemological Dualism

One of the most damaging legacies of colonial epistemology in Islamic education is the reinforcement of the dichotomy between religious knowledge (ilm al-din) and modern knowledge (ilm al-dunya). This separation, historically linked to the European secularization project, was imposed on educational systems in the Muslim world through various colonial and neo-colonial mechanisms.²⁷ As a result, Islamic

²⁵ A. J. Fuad, "Pesantren as an Indigenous Educational Institution: Epistemological Roots and Contemporary Challenges," *Ta'dib: Journal of Islamic Education* 26, no. 2 (2021): 113-30, <https://doi.org/10.31958/jt.v26i2.4789>.

²⁶ M. T. Rahman, "Comparative Islamic Education in Southeast Asia: Pesantren, Madrasah, and Sekolah Agama in the Decolonial Lens," *Comparative Education Review* 68(2), (2024): 301-25, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/729843>.

²⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred: Gifford Lectures* (State University of New York Press, 2021).

boarding schools (pesantren) are often positioned as producers of “religious knowledge” that must be supplemented with “modern knowledge” from other educational institutions, an epistemological division of labor that implicitly reproduces the colonial hierarchy.

The Islamic boarding school tradition actually possesses the internal resources to transcend this dualism. From the perspective of classical Islamic epistemology, as formulated by Al-Ghazali and later elaborated by Indonesian scholars, there is no fundamental separation between knowledge of God (*ma'rifatullah*) and knowledge of nature (*ma'rifat al-kawn*), as both are understood as manifestations of the same truth.²⁸ Within this framework, modern science, when interpreted within the Islamic epistemological horizon, does not pose a threat to faith, but rather an extension of theological reflection on the signs of God's greatness in the universe.

A number of progressive Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) have developed models of knowledge integration that go beyond the mere "Islamization of knowledge" or "scientification of Islam." The Daarut Tauhid Islamic Boarding School in Bandung, for example, integrates entrepreneurship based on Sufism values; the Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Islamic Boarding School in Situbondo develops an integrated agricultural program that combines modern technology with local ecological wisdom; Meanwhile, several Islamic boarding schools in Yogyakarta have developed curricula that integrate digital literacy with Islamic ethics.²⁹ These initiatives demonstrate that Islamic boarding schools are capable of developing authentic and decolonial models of knowledge integration, not merely superficial adaptations to market demands.

Moreover, the development of philosophical discourse in the contemporary Islamic tradition, including Seyyed Hossein Nasr's work on "sacred science" and Ismail al-Faruqi's "Islamization of Knowledge" project, while both require critical reading, demonstrates serious intellectual efforts to formulate epistemological alternatives that not only reject Western science but integrate it within a more

²⁸ Zarkasyi, "Reconstruction of Islamic Education Philosophy in Pesantren: Epistemological Perspective."

²⁹ Faiqoh and Suryadarma, "Curriculum Transformation in Indonesian Pesantren: Navigating Between Tradition and Modernity."

comprehensive Islamic worldview.³⁰ Islamic boarding schools, with their rich scholarly traditions, have the potential to become living laboratories for the development of such integrative epistemologies.

The Challenges of Digitalization and Globalization: Islamic Boarding Schools at an Epistemological Crossroads

The digital transformation accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic presents new epistemological challenges never before faced by Islamic boarding schools. On the one hand, digitalization opens broader access to global Islamic knowledge, enabling students to interact with scholars from around the world, and expanding the reach of Islamic boarding schools' influence beyond geographical boundaries. On the other hand, digitalization also poses threats to the most fundamental dimensions of Islamic boarding school epistemology: the transmission of knowledge based on personal relationships, character formation through exemplary behavior (*uswah hasanah*), and learning through the discipline of living together in community.³¹

Hamid et al.'s (2024) research on Islamic boarding school responses to digitalization during and after the pandemic uncovered an interesting pattern: the most successful Islamic boarding schools in the digital transition were those that did not simply passively adopt digital platforms, but that used technology as a tool to strengthen, rather than replace, the epistemological values of the Islamic boarding school.³² These Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have developed digital platforms that enable virtual sanad transmission, built online learning communities that replicate the dynamics of *halaqah* (Islamic religious teachings), and used social media as a means of *da'wah* rooted in local values.

However, the pressures of digitalization also produce real epistemological risks. The phenomenon of "digital students" who access religious content from various

³⁰ Meuleman, "Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes Towards Modernity and Identity."

³¹ A. Wahid, *Pesantren Masa Depan: Wacana Pemberdayaan Dan Transformasi Pesantren*, Revisi (Pustaka Hidayah., 2022).

³² A. Hamid et al., "Pesantren Digital: Transformation Patterns and Epistemological Challenges in the Post-Pandemic Era," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 13, no. 1 (2024): 78–102, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2024.131.78-102>.

platforms without the guidance of qualified teachers; the proliferation of online fatwas that ignore local contexts; and the dominance of Arabic-language religious content from the Middle East that is not always sensitive to the Indonesian context—all of these have the potential to erode the epistemological distinctiveness of Islamic boarding schools that have been developed over centuries.³³ From this perspective, digitalization is not only a technical challenge, but also an epistemological one that demands a critical and planned response.

Globalization also presents other, no less complex, pressures: the increasing migration of Islamic boarding school students (*santri*) abroad to further their studies, the influx of Wahhabi/Salafi influences, which bring with them distinct religious epistemologies, and global job market pressures that drive a reorientation of the curriculum toward quantifiable technical skills. All of these pressures operate within an epistemological landscape dominated by global economic logic and international competency standards, which are not always compatible with the values and goals of Islamic boarding school education.³⁴

Islamic Boarding Schools as a Model of Decolonial Education: Toward an Alternative Epistemology

Considering the overall discussion above, how can Islamic boarding schools be positioned not only as objects of decolonization, but also as subjects and models of decolonial education? This question is not merely academic, but also deeply practical: what can Islamic boarding schools offer as an alternative to educational models still dominated by Western epistemology?

First, Islamic boarding schools offer an educational model that organically integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions within a single, coherent curriculum. Unlike modern educational models that tend to separate "general education" from "character education" or "religious education," Islamic boarding schools view intellectual and moral development as two inseparable aspects of a single educational process. This integrative model is not only relevant for Muslims

³³ Kuntowijoyo, *Muslim Tanpa Masjid: Esai-Esai Agama, Budaya, Dan Politik Dalam Bingkai Strukturalisme Transendental* (Mizan, 2022).

³⁴ Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi Dan Modernisasi Di Tengah Tantangan Milenium III*.

but also offers valuable insights for educational reform in general in an era of crisis of values and meaning.

Second, Islamic boarding schools teach a different way of knowing (epistemology): not based on individual competition, but rather on collaboration and mutual teaching; not based on the accumulation of information, but on the internalization of values and the formation of habits; not based on standardization, but on adapting to the needs and capacities of each student. In contemporary educational terms, this is an approach closely aligned with the principles of student-centered learning, although Islamic boarding schools developed it long before the term became popular in Western pedagogical literature.³⁵

Third, Islamic boarding schools offer a learning community model that does not separate daily life from the learning process. The concept of the *ma'had* (dormitory) as a total learning space, where every aspect of life, from waking up to going to bed, is part of the educational process, reflects a holistic understanding of education that is highly relevant to contemporary critiques of education that is overly theoretical and disconnected from real life.³⁶

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly in a decolonial context, Islamic boarding schools offer an educational model that is deeply rooted in local communities while connecting with global scholarly traditions. The ability of Islamic boarding schools to mediate between the global and the local, integrating global Islamic scholarship with Nusantara wisdom, is a highly valuable capacity in an era of globalization that often results in cultural homogenization.³⁷ Within this framework, Islamic boarding schools not only inherit the past but also point towards a more humane, pluralistic, and equitable future of education.

Synthesizing all these dimensions, it can be formulated that the Islamic

³⁵ Fuad, "Pesantren as an Indigenous Educational Institution: Epistemological Roots and Contemporary Challenges."

³⁶ van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning and the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in the Pesantren."

³⁷ Rahman, "Comparative Islamic Education in Southeast Asia: Pesantren, Madrasah, and Sekolah Agama in the Decolonial Lens."

boarding school as a decolonial educational model operates through what the author calls a “triangular epistemological praxis”: (1) rooted in the classical Islamic scholarly tradition as a normative foundation; (2) responding to the local context of the Indonesian archipelago as a practical field; and (3) negotiating critically with contemporary knowledge and challenges as a transformative project. This triangulation distinguishes the Islamic boarding school from merely conservative institutions that resist change, as well as from modernizing institutions that have lost their roots.

Discussion

This research has demonstrated that decolonizing Islamic education in the Global South is not merely an abstract academic discourse, but rather an epistemological and pedagogical project with real implications for millions of Islamic students (santri) and Muslim communities across Indonesia. Through a critical analysis of the workings of colonial epistemology within the Islamic education system, an exploration of the scholarly tradition of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) as a space for indigenous knowledge production, and an examination of the dynamics of curriculum transformation amidst the challenges of modernization and globalization, this article puts forward several theoretical and practical propositions.

Undoubtedly, pesantren possess a robust foundation of local knowledge that serves as a basis for the decolonization of Islamic education. Values such as local wisdom, the pesantren scholarly tradition, the study of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning), the practice of musyawarah (deliberation), and the kiai-santri relationship demonstrate that the pesantren educational system does not rely entirely on Western educational paradigms.

First, Islamic boarding schools need to be positioned, both academically and politically, as legitimate and valuable epistemological spaces, not as traditional institutions that need to be "modernized" to meet Western educational standards.

Recognition of the epistemological validity of Islamic boarding schools is a prerequisite for the authentic decolonization of Islamic education.

Therefore, the decolonization approach to education offers a way to reconstruct the curriculum paradigm by positioning local *pesantren* knowledge as an integral part of the development of knowledge and Islamic educational practices that are contextual, inclusive, and relevant to the needs of communities in the Global South.

Second, a decolonial transformation of the Islamic boarding school curriculum must differ from mere standardization of curriculum or the Islamization of knowledge. It must be a process of epistemological reconstruction that begins within the Islamic boarding school tradition itself, utilizing its internal resources, including local Nusantara wisdom, as the basis for creative and critical responses to contemporary challenges.

Third, the integration of religious knowledge and modern science in Islamic boarding schools must go beyond the model of instrumental adoption and move toward a genuine epistemological synthesis, where modern science is integrated into the framework of the Islamic worldview, not the other way around. Several progressive Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have demonstrated that this is not merely an ideal, but something that can be realized in practice.

Therefore, curriculum transformation in pesantren needs to be directed toward strengthening dialogue among the Islamic intellectual heritage, local knowledge, and modern science on an equal footing, thereby producing an educational system that is innovative, contextual, and rooted in Indonesia's socio-cultural realities.

Fourth, the Islamic boarding school's response to digitalization and globalization must be based on in-depth epistemological considerations, not simply technological adaptation. Digitalization needs to be positioned as a tool that serves the educational goals of Islamic boarding schools, not as a force that distorts those goals.

Overall, this article argues that pesantren are not only historical legacies that need to be preserved, but also active epistemological laboratories generating alternative educational models relevant to Muslims in the Global South and, more

broadly, to global educational reform. In a context where global pedagogical crises are increasingly recognized, from uniformity that stifles creativity to education disconnected from community life, the experiences and traditions of pesantren offer valuable and often overlooked insights.

In the context of curriculum transformation, a number of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) have also integrated modern sciences without abandoning the Islamic epistemological foundation and local cultural values that define their identity. These findings demonstrate that educational innovation does not necessarily stem from the adoption of a uniform global educational model; rather, it can evolve from local educational practices that have proven effective in addressing the community's needs.

Therefore, pesantren deserve to be positioned as a key reference for developing an educational paradigm that is more contextual, pluralistic, and epistemically just—particularly for nations in the Global South facing similar challenges in building education systems rooted in local identity while remaining capable of responding to global dynamics.

Further research is needed to: (1) empirically explore the mechanisms of epistemological negotiation occurring within pesantren in more detail; (2) compare pesantren models across Indonesia to map the diversity of responses to decolonial pressures; and (3) develop a curriculum evaluation framework that is sensitive to the epistemological dimensions of pesantren, going beyond the standard indicators used in national accreditation systems.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the decolonization of Islamic education in the Global South should be understood as an epistemological reconstruction rather than merely a critique of Western educational dominance. The findings demonstrate that Indonesian Islamic boarding schools possess a strong intellectual and cultural foundation that enables them to function not only as objects of educational reform but also as subjects that generate alternative educational paradigms. Through the

integration of Islamic scholarship, local wisdom, community-based learning, and selective engagement with modern knowledge, Islamic boarding schools have developed an educational model that is contextual, holistic, and socially grounded.

Reference

- Azra, Azyumardi. *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi Dan Modernisasi Di Tengah Tantangan Milenium III*. Revisi. Kencana Prenadamedia Group, 2021.
- Bruinessen, Martin van. "Kitab Kuning and the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in the Pesantren." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2020): 189–218. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etaa004>.
- Connell, Raewyn. *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. 2nd ed. Polity Press, 2021.
- Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 5th ed. SAGE Publications, 2022.
- Dei, George J. Sefa, and M. Simmons. "Indigenous Anti-Colonial Knowledge as Heritage Knowledge for Promoting Black/African Education in Diasporic Contexts." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 9, no. 1 (2020): 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1929-8692.40539>.
- Dhofier, Zamakhsyari. *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Kyai Dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia*. Edisi Baru. LP3ES, 2021.
- Faiqoh, N., and Y. Suryadarma. "Curriculum Transformation in Indonesian Pesantren: Navigating Between Tradition and Modernity." *Journal of Islamic Education Research* 4, no. 1 (2023): 45–67. <https://doi.org/10.35719/jier.v4i1.98>.
- Fuad, A. J. "Pesantren as an Indigenous Educational Institution: Epistemological Roots and Contemporary Challenges." *Ta'dib: Journal of Islamic Education* 26, no. 2 (2021): 113–30. <https://doi.org/10.31958/jt.v26i2.4789>.
- Hamid, A., R. Nugraha, and T. Hidayat. "Pesantren Digital: Transformation Patterns and Epistemological Challenges in the Post-Pandemic Era." *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 13, no. 1 (2024): 78–102. <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2024.131.78-102>.
- Kementerian Agama RI. *Statistik Pesantren 2023: Data Dan Perkembangan Lembaga Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia*. Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam, 2023.
- Kuntowijoyo. *Muslim Tanpa Masjid: Esai-Esai Agama, Budaya, Dan Politik Dalam Bingkai Strukturalisme Transendental*. Mizan, 2022.
- Lukens-Bull, Ronald. "A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java." *Asian Studies Review* 45, no. 3 (2021): 401–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1908891>.

Mas'ud, Abdurrahman. *Dari Haramain Ke Nusantara: Jejak Intelektual Arsitek Pesantren*. 3rd ed. Kencana, 2022.

Meuleman, Johan. "Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes Towards Modernity and Identity." *Islam and Christian--Muslim Relations* 33, no. 1 (2022): 15–35.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2022.2043182>.

Mignolo, Walter D. *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*. Duke University Press, 2021.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hm8gfh>.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Knowledge and the Sacred: Gifford Lectures*. State University of New York Press, 2021.

Quijano, A. "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. International Sociology." In *Reprinted in: De La Cadena, M., & Blaser, M. (Eds.), A World*, 15(2),. Duke University Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/026858090001500209>.

Rahman, M. T. "Comparative Islamic Education in Southeast Asia: Pesantren, Madrasah, and Sekolah Agama in the Decolonial Lens." *Comparative Education Review* 68(2), (2024): 301–25.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/729843>.

Rinakit, S., & Purwanto, E. "Standardization versus Authenticity: The Dilemma of Pesantren Curriculum Reform in Indonesia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Education*, 4(2) (2023): 89–113.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/jsae.2023.04.02.89>.

Sousa Santos, Boaventura de. *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Duke University Press, 2018.

Wahid, A. *Pesantren Masa Depan: Wacana Pemberdayaan Dan Transformasi Pesantren*. Revisi. Pustaka Hidayah., 2022.

Zarkasyi, A. F. "Reconstruction of Islamic Education Philosophy in Pesantren: Epistemological Perspective." *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 20(2) (2020): 245–68.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v20i2.2041>.

Zuhdi, M. "Formal versus Non-Formal Islamic Education in Indonesia: A Critique of the Colonial Legacy." *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture*, 10(1), (2022): 22–39.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15640/jisc.v10n1a3>.