

The Legacy of the Pondok Institution and the Turath Educational System in Sustaining the Manuscript Heritage of the Islamic Civilization in the Malay Archipelago

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Abstract

Malay manuscripts contain tasawwur (worldview) related to the belief system, values, philosophy, statecraft, law, traditional medicine, art, weaponry, architecture, and other aspects of the nation's civilization. The institution of lodges and the Turath Islamic study system was very influential in the heyday between the middle of the 18th century and the end of the 19th century and contributed significantly to producing very valuable manuscripts in the Malay Civilization. The pondok institute and the Turath system of study have played a very important role in shaping the Islamic tasawwur (worldview) of the Malay community and ensuring an authentic understanding and practice of Islam. The institution of pondok has also significantly produced Muslim Malay intellectuals who produce religious manuscripts in various fields and have enriched the knowledge treasures of Malay civilization. The sustainability of the institution of pondok and the Turath study system in the mainstream education system needs to be refined so that the wealth of manuscript writing knowledge continues to be relevant in contributing to the Malay civilization of the archipelago. Therefore, the institution of pondok and the turath study system also need to be ready to make changes in the 21st century so that the legacy of the contribution of the pondok institution and the turath study system to preserving the treasures of manuscript knowledge continues to be relevant in dealing with contemporary challenges.

Key Words: tasawwur, worldview, Turath, pondok, manuscript



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Introduction

Malay-Jawi manuscripts are the intellectual creations of the Malay-Muslim community, rooted in Shariah law, the Arabic language, and Islamic art. The writing of these manuscripts began with the arrival of Islam, introducing a belief system, values, and practices embodied in the

knowledge of *Aqidah*, *Shariah*, *Tasawwuf* (or ethics), as well as the Arabic language and calligraphy. The *pondok* institutions and the *turath* educational system served as foundational pillars in the dissemination of Islamic knowledge, education, and a way of life, firmly grounded in their traditional content and unwavering commitment to safeguarding the Islamic faith. These institutions played a crucial role in the religious, intellectual, and moral development of society. The system adopted combined *umumi* (public/traditional) and *nizami* (structured) modes of learning. The scholars leading the *turath* education system devoted themselves sincerely to delivering Islamic knowledge to local communities. They taught students a wide range of religious disciplines, including *Aqidah*, *Shariah*, *Tasawwuf*, logic, *Fiqh*, *Tafsir*, *Hadith*, and the Arabic language. Their creed was firmly rooted in the *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama'ah* tradition, following the Ash'ari and Maturidi theological schools, based on manuscripts authored by scholars and thinkers of the Islamic Malay Archipelago. The excellence of the Islamic *turath* education system has been proven to contribute as a self-sustaining social organism capable of shaping its environment, attracting interest, and influencing the growth and embodiment of true Islamic values.

Pondok Institutions and the Development of Malay Civilization in the Archipelago

Pondok education was established through the efforts of religious scholars and local communities. According to historical records, by the 18th century and into the 19th century, *pondok* learning centers had been established in the Malay states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah. The emergence of these institutions was influenced by the *turath* education system centered in Aceh, Indonesia, and Patani. This development was in line with the spread of Islam in the region, beginning with the Islamization of Perlak in the 8th century, which led to the formation of Islamic learning centers known as *dayah* (notably Dayah Ce Breek, built by the second Sultan of Perlak). These efforts were continued by the Sultanate of Samudera-Pasai and later the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate. In its mission to spread Islam, the Pasai Kingdom established various educational institutions, including *pondok* schools.

By the 14th century, Pasai had become a prominent center for Islamic education. However, the fall of Samudera-Pasai to Majapahit and subsequently to the Portuguese shifted Islamic activities to Melaka. The Melaka Sultanate was then regarded as the leading Islamic center in the Malay Peninsula, with traditional Islamic education taking place in homes, palaces, mosques, and prayer halls. After Melaka's fall, Aceh rose as a prominent center of Malay-Islamic culture in the Malay Archipelago. Its golden age as a hub of Islamic scholarship declined in the 17th century due to internal conflict and Dutch colonization, which caused the shift of Islamic education to Patani. Despite this, the people of Aceh continued to uphold the tradition of *turath* learning. Patani then assumed Aceh's role, and its scholars were instrumental in continuing the Islamic tradition in the region through *turath* education, particularly in the northern Malay Peninsula and east coast states like Kelantan and Terengganu, into the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The implementation of Islamic education can be observed in the historical development of Southeast Asian Islamic learning, especially through the concept of the *madrasah*. For

example, during the time of the Melaka Sultanate, Islamic education conducted in teachers' homes focused on Qur'anic reading as well as religious sciences such as *Tawhid*, *Fiqh*, *Tasawwuf*, Islamic history, and moral teachings (Abdullah, 1995). In addition to home-based learning, the second type of education was the *turath* institution, also known as traditional Islamic education, which is considered the oldest and most influential legacy in producing knowledgeable, pious students capable of guiding their communities (Ghazali Basri, 1991).

The term *pondok education* itself derives from the Arabic word *funduq*, meaning small houses or shelters, typically accommodating four to five students each. The teacher-student relationship in *turath* learning was deeply rooted in obedience, respect, humility, and absolute adherence to the teacher's guidance. Teachers were regarded as scholars and role models—sources of inspiration, pride, confidence, guidance, and spiritual assurance. They also served as *mau'izah hasanah* (providers of wise counsel) and *qudwah hasanah* (exemplary figures). Scholars of the *turath* tradition led very modest lives, characterized by spiritual discipline, asceticism, and a constant awareness of the afterlife, Allah's presence, and piety in their daily lives.

These scholars did not merely focus on moral, religious, and social development but also influenced the political climate of their time. They often served as religious advisors to Malay rulers, and their religious efforts received strong support from the monarchy. This close relationship with the ruling class is likely one of the reasons they refrained from political interference, believing that Islam was already well protected under the leadership of the Malay sultans.

The Turath Education System and the History of Manuscript Writing

The arrival of Islam in the Malay Archipelago greatly reinforced the region's literary civilization, which had earlier been shaped by Indian cultural influence. With the introduction of Islamic influences, particularly from the Arab world, a new writing tradition developed using modified Arabic script. This gave rise to the Jawi script, used for writing Malay and other local languages, and the Pegon script, used for writing Javanese and Sundanese. From this period onward, the literary civilization of the region flourished, as Islam is essentially a "religion of the text." The emergence of a new script based on Arabic stimulated the production of manuscripts and texts grounded in Islamic teachings in the Malay language. However, the works of Nusantara scholars have often been overlooked and underappreciated in terms of their contribution to global Islamic civilization. Therefore, studies on Islamic manuscripts in the Malay world must be continued and intensified, especially among scholars in the Malay-Nusantara region, so that the knowledge embedded in these classical texts can be effectively transmitted to future generations. This effort is also crucial to ensuring the sustainability of the Malay-Islamic manuscript tradition.

After the arrival of Islam in the Malay world—especially during the reign of the Peureulak Sultanate (840–1292) in East Aceh in the 9th century—Malay communities began learning from Muslim *da'is* and missionaries. During this period, manuscript-based learning became increasingly active, with texts serving as key sources of knowledge. However, early manuscripts were not locally produced but brought in by missionaries from Arab regions, such

as *Izhar al-Haqq* and *Tadhkirat Tabaqat Jumu' al-Salatin* (Hasjmy, 1981). Only one known local manuscript, *Bahr al-Lahut*, written between 1165–1177 in Peureulak in Arabic by 'Abd Allah 'Arif, a missionary of Arab descent, has been recorded.

Over time, Aceh became a major center of Islamic learning in Southeast Asia. Mosques such as Jami' Bayt al-Rahman and Jami' Bayt al-Mushahadah in Banda Aceh became hubs of scholarly activity during the 14th and 15th centuries. Teachers from countries such as Arabia, Persia, Turkey, and India taught a wide range of disciplines, with institutions resembling faculties in modern universities (Abdullah, 1990). This led to the increased reproduction of manuscripts by students, many of whom, trained in a system akin to Cairo's Al-Azhar University, began writing original works in Jawi-Malay script in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Key figures during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1606–1636) include Hamzah al-Fansuri (d. 1607), Shamsuddin al-Sumatra'i (d. 1630), Nuruddin al-Raniri (d. 1658), and Abdul Rauf Singkel (d. 1693). One of the most important periods in the development of Malay-Islamic scholarly tradition was the 16th century when Hamzah Fansuri produced influential Sufi works in both prose and poetry. His writings—*Asrar al-'Arifin*, *Sharb al-'Ashiqin*, *al-Muntahi*, and his *rubā' iyyāt*—were highly regarded for their spiritual and literary depth (al-Attas, 1970; Drewes & Brakel, 1986; Hadi, 1995). His concepts of *wujūdiyyah* were later elaborated by scholars such as Shamsuddin al-Sumatra'i (Johns, 2013).

It was during this phase that original Malay manuscripts (not translations of Arabic works) began to flourish. Over two centuries, numerous religious works were produced, especially in the fields of mysticism and *tasawwuf*, often with royal patronage. Examples include the relationships between Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah Sayyid al-Mukammil (1596–1604) and Hamzah al-Fansuri, Sultan Iskandar Muda and Shamsuddin al-Sumatra'i, and Sultan Iskandar Thani (1636–1641) and Nuruddin al-Raniri (Shah Rul Anuar & Nik Kamal, 2014). As literacy was not widespread at the time, Malay scholars such as Nuruddin al-Raniri, Muhammad Arshad al-Banjari (d. 1812), and Daud bin Abdullah al-Fatani (d. 1847) not only authored their own works but also copied manuscripts by other scholars, often fulfilling special commissions (Wan Mohd Shaghir, 1993).

The presence of Islam sparked a prolific output of religious and literary works in languages such as Arabic, Malay, Javanese, Sundanese, Acehnese, and Bugis-Makassar, among others. However, in the context of global Islamic scholarship, the intellectual tradition of the Malay-Nusantara Islamic world is still marginalized, particularly in manuscript studies. Research on the works of Nusantara scholars remains limited compared to the attention given to scholars from Iran, Turkey, Egypt, or the Arab world. In other words, the Islamic written civilization in the Malay Archipelago is still seen as peripheral and has yet to be recognized as a significant part of global Islamic scholarly discourse.

The Contributions and Legacy of the Pondok Institution and the Turath Education System

Turath manuscripts, often written in Arabic or classical Malay Jawi script, are key sources in this educational system. These manuscripts not only document religious texts but also serve as a medium to preserve and disseminate knowledge, including in the fields of *tafsir* (Quranic

exegesis), *hadith* (Prophetic traditions), ethics (*akhlaq*), theology (*aqidah*), and grammar (*nahu*). The history of Malay civilization has proven that Jawi writing, as one form of manuscript tradition, successfully contributed to the development of Malay scholarship and stands as evidence of local wisdom in various fields. Jawi script also laid the foundation for the formation of identity and intellectual expression in the Malay world, signifying its important contribution to the region's intellectual development.

In the modern context, there are still religious study classes that use *turath* texts as the primary medium of instruction, reflecting the continued relevance and appreciation of manuscript-based learning as part of the Islamic education system in the Malay Archipelago. The *turath* education system and manuscript writing refer to traditional approaches to learning and teaching classical Islamic texts, commonly known as *kitab turath*. In Malaysia, this system involves using texts in Arabic or classical Malay Jawi script as the primary medium for teaching Islamic sciences, particularly *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). These manuscripts are still widely used in educational institutions such as *pondok* schools, madrasahs, mosques, prayer halls (*surau*), and Islamic schools. One notable example is *Hidayat al-Sibyan fi Ma'rifat al-Islam wa al-Iman* by Abu Abdullah Husein bin Muhammad Nasir bin Muhammad Thayyib al-Mas'udi al-Banjari, a key text for *fardu 'ain* (individual obligations) education in Malaysia.

The methodology of *turath* manuscript writing generally follows a simple yet comprehensive style, enabling local scholars to use them as foundational texts for the general public to learn and practice Islamic law. This highlights the importance of *turath* works in shaping religious knowledge and practice among the Malay community throughout the ages. *Turath* manuscripts and the *pondok* education system play a vital role in Islamic education in Malaysia. These classical texts are used as primary sources in *pondok* schools—traditional Islamic learning institutions. The *pondok* system emphasizes the *talaqqi* method, where students learn directly and interactively from their teachers. This method is not limited to traditional *pondok* schools but is also practiced in modern institutions such as Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), indicating its acceptance and integration into the contemporary education system.

Pondok learning emphasizes in-depth understanding of *turath* texts in areas such as *tafsir*, *hadith*, *akhlaq*, *aqidah*, and *nahu*, forming the foundation for the development of Islamic religious knowledge. Studies have shown that *pondok* institutions employ unique methods of instruction, including *talaqqi*, *tafaqquh* (deep understanding), *itqan* (mastery), *munazarah* (debate), and *mujadalah* (argumentation). These methods are considered essential and should be adopted by contemporary educational institutions for teaching and learning Quranic *tafsir*, with potential to be further developed using modern technology to enhance engagement.

The *pondok* education system has evolved over time, transitioning from purely traditional learning to modern *pondok* institutions that incorporate syllabi and examinations as part of the assessment process. This evolution demonstrates how *pondok* education has adapted to contemporary demands while preserving its traditional values.

Conclusion

The challenges posed by crises in thought and the infiltration of secularism, liberalism, pluralism, and hedonism into the education system must be addressed and corrected in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, by empowering the *pondok* institutions and the *turath* education system. Strengthening these institutions will enhance society's understanding of the vast knowledge heritage found in the manuscripts of Malay-Nusantara scholars. *Pondok* institutions and *turath* education centers can organize special programs during school and university holidays for students, aiming to foster interest among the younger generation in Malay-Islamic manuscripts. Additionally, *tafaqquh* (in-depth religious learning) classes can be conducted in various locations by *turath* scholars to train and empower preachers with classical Islamic knowledge.

In summary, the *turath* education system has historically contributed significantly to the development of Islam and Islamic education in a holistic manner, especially through large-scale engagement with manuscripts. It is time for the *turath* education system—though currently not part of the mainstream, 21st-century education stream (PA21)—to be revived and reintroduced as a vital contributor to the well-being of the Muslim ummah. Despite not being in the educational mainstream, its contribution as an Islamic knowledge and *dakwah* institution is still felt. With the attention and support of relevant stakeholders, *turath* education can be revitalized with a renewed spirit to face modern challenges. At the same time, there must be a genuine willingness from within the *turath* community to embrace change within the framework of its philosophy and values.

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