

Epistemological Critique of Islam Nusantara Studies in Indonesia: An Insider's Perspective

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Abstract. *This article critically examines the epistemology of Islam Nusantara studies from an insider perspective. This study is important considering the development of Islamic studies in Indonesia which is increasingly dynamic but often faces epistemological problems in understanding and interpreting Islam in the context of locality. Through a qualitative approach with the method of content analysis and literature study, this research reveals various epistemological challenges faced by insider researchers in studying Islam Nusantara, such as cultural bias, research objectivity, and the dialectic between Islamic universality and cultural locality. The results show that methodological reconstruction is needed in the study of local Islam that considers the complexity of the relationship between normative Islam and the socio-cultural reality of the archipelago, as well as the importance of developing a more integrative and contextual epistemological framework.*

Keywords: *Epistemology, Islamic Studies, Islam Nusantara, Insider Perspective, Locality.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic studies in Indonesia have undergone significant development in recent decades. This is marked by the emergence of various new approaches and methodologies in understanding the complexity of Islam in the context of the locality of the archipelago. As noted by Amin Abdullah, this development does not only involve quantitative aspects in the form of an increasing number of studies, but also qualitative aspects that include the depth of analysis and diversity of methodological perspectives (Abdullah, 2006).

The discourse on the study of Islam Nusantara is becoming increasingly relevant in the midst of complex global dynamics. Mark Woodward observes that on the one hand, there is a need to maintain and develop the local characteristics of Islam as part of the richness of Islamic tradition (Woodward, 1989). On the other hand, as argued by Abdullah Saeed, there is a challenge to face the current of globalization and modernization that tends to encourage the homogenization of religious understanding and practice (Saeed, 2006). In this context, the position of insider researchers becomes very strategic as well as problematic, as analyzed in depth by Kim Knott in his study of the insider-outsider perspective (Kim Knott, 2005).

Epistemological problems in the study of Islam Nusantara can at least be seen from three main aspects. First, the ontological aspect is related to the nature of the object of study, namely Islam in the context of Nusantara locality. Mohammed Arkoun emphasizes the importance of understanding the complexity of the definition and limits of "local Islam" in an academic context (Arkoun, 1994). Second, the epistemological aspect related to the methodology and

approach in studying the object, as critically discussed by Talal Asad in his analysis of the anthropology of religion (Asad, 1993). Third, the axiological aspect related to the value and purpose of the study of local Islam, including its implications for the development of contextual Islamic understanding, as underlined by Fazlur Rahman in his study of the modernization of Islamic thought (Rahman, 1982).

The complexity of Nusantara Islam studies is also related to the long history of Islamization in the archipelago, which involves a dynamic process of acculturation and adaptation. Azyumardi Azra notes that the process of Islamization in the archipelago did not take place monolithically, but through various channels and diverse approaches (Azra, 2004). Martin van Bruinessen reinforces this argument with his research on the dynamics of traditional Islamic learning in Indonesia which shows the complexity of the interaction between Islam and local culture (Bruinessen, 1995).

In the contemporary academic context, the study of Islam Nusantara faces increasingly complex methodological challenges. John R. Bowen identifies the demand to produce studies that meet global scientific standards while maintaining sensitivity to local complexities (J. R. Bowen, 1993). This is in line with Carl W. Ernst's observation about the importance of developing a more sophisticated approach in understanding contemporary Islam (Ernst, 2003).

The position of the insider researcher in this case becomes very crucial. Robert A. Orsi emphasizes that as part of the community under study, insider researchers have the advantage of an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural context (Orsi, 2005). However, as Richard C. Martin argues, this position also presents challenges in the form of potential bias and difficulty in maintaining the critical distance required in academic studies (Martin, 2001).

This article seeks to critically analyze these epistemological problems, with reference to Hasan Hanafi's thoughts on the dialectic of tradition and renewal in Islamic thought (Hanafi, 2000). This study is important for several reasons identified by Muhammad Abid Al Jabiri in his analysis of the structure of Arabic-Islamic reason (Al-Jabiri, 1996). First, to identify and analyze the methodological and epistemological challenges faced by insider researchers. Second, as noted by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, to explore the potential for developing methodological frameworks that are more suited to the complexities of local Islamic studies (Abu Zayd, 2000).

Through critical analysis of these epistemological aspects, following the framework developed by Omid Safi (Safi, 2003), it is hoped that a more comprehensive understanding of the position and role of insider researchers in the study of Islam Nusantara can be formulated. Marshall Hodgson in his analysis of the history of Islamic civilization asserts that a

sophisticated understanding of local complexity is key in the development of a more contextual Islamic study (M. G. S. Hodgson, 1995). This, as emphasized by Abdul Karim Sorous, in turn can contribute to the development of a more sophisticated and contextual methodology in the study of Islam in Indonesia (A. K. Soroush, 2005).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Development of Islamic Studies in Indonesia

The study of Islam in Indonesia has undergone a significant evolution from the early period of Islamization to the contemporary era. Azyumardi Azra in his in-depth study has mapped how the Nusantara ulama network plays an important role in shaping the characteristics of local Islam through a complex transmission of knowledge between the Middle East and the archipelago (Azra, 2004). Azra notes that this transmission process is not linear, but involves an intensive dialog between universal Islamic values and local wisdom.

Martin van Bruinessen strengthens this argument through his research on the pesantren tradition in Indonesia. He argues that pesantren, as traditional Islamic educational institutions, have succeeded in developing a unique learning methodology that integrates the study of the yellowclassical books with an understanding of the local context (Bruinessen, 1995). Furthermore, Bruinessen identifies that the dynamics of Islamic learning in pesantren reflect the complexity of the relationship between textual authority and contextual interpretation (Bruinessen, 1995).

Clifford Geertz, through his monumental study of Javanese Islam, opened a new perspective in understanding the variations of Islamic practices in Indonesia. Although some of his conclusions were criticized, the methodology he developed in studying local Islam made a significant contribution to the development of anthropological studies of religion (Geertz, 1973).

2. Epistemology of Islamic Studies

The epistemological discourse of Islamic studies has developed significantly with the emergence of various new methodological approaches. Mohammed Arkoun offers a deconstructive approach in understanding Islamic texts and traditions, which he argues as a way to open up a wider and contextual space for interpretation (Arkoun, 1994). This approach was later enriched by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd who developed a theory of Qur'anic hermeneutics that considers historical and cultural dimensions (Abu Zayd, 1990).

Fazlur Rahman developed a more systematic methodology through *his double movement* theory. This methodology emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical context

of revelation (*first movement*) before applying it in a contemporary context (*second movement*) (Rahman, 1982). Rahman argues that this approach allows for a more dynamic and responsive understanding of Islam to the challenges of modernity, as explained in his work on contemporary tafsir methodology (Rahman, 1982).

Muhammad Abid Al-Jabiri made an important contribution through his Arabic reason critique project. He identified three fundamental structures in Arab-Islamic thought: *bayani* (textual epistemology), *burhani* (demonstrative epistemology), and *'irfani* (gnostic epistemology) (Al-Jabiri, 1996). Al-Jabiri's analysis opens a new perspective in understanding the complexity of Islamic epistemology, as further explained in his work on the formation of Arabic reason (Al-Jabiri, 1996).

3. Insider-Outsider Perspective

Kim Knott developed a comprehensive theoretical framework on the insider-outsider position in religious studies. She identified that a simple dichotomy between insider and outsider is no longer adequate to understand the complexity of the researcher's position in contemporary religious studies (Kim Knott, 2005). Knott proposes a more *nuanced* approach that considers different levels and dimensions of "insiderhood" and "outsiderhood" (Kim Knott, 2005).

Russell T. McCutcheon deepens this discussion by analyzing the methodological and epistemological implications of the insider-outsider position. He argues that the insider-outsider issue is not simply a methodological problem, but is related to fundamental questions about the *nature of religious experience* and the possibility of an objective understanding of religious phenomena (McCutcheon, 2003).

4. Contemporary Nusantara Islamic Studies

Mark R. Woodward makes an important contribution through his study of Javanese Islam that shows the complexity of the relationship between normative Islam and local practices. He criticizes approaches that overemphasize syncretism and proposes a more sophisticated analytical model in understanding the adaptation of Islam in local contexts (Woodward, 1989).

Robert W. Hefner extends this understanding through his research on civil Islam in Indonesia. He demonstrates how modernity and democratization interact with local Islamic traditions to produce new forms of religious expression (Hefner, 2000). Hefner's approach provides an example of how the study of local Islam can contribute to a broader understanding of the dynamics of global Islam.

3. RESEARCH METHOD(S)

This research uses a qualitative approach with content analysis and literature study methods. Primary data was obtained from academic works on Islamic studies in Indonesia, both written by insider and outsider researchers. The analysis was conducted by considering the epistemological, methodological, and contextual aspects of each work studied.

4. FINDINGS AND DUSCUSSION

Epistemological Problems of Local Islamic Studies

1. Universality-Locality Dialectic

One of the fundamental challenges in the study of local Islam is to bridge the tension between the universal dimensions of Islam and the particularities of local culture. Abdullah Saeed identifies that this complexity arises from the dual characteristics of Islam as a universal religion that constantly adapts to local contexts (Saeed, 2003). In his view, Saeed emphasizes the importance of a contextual approach in understanding Islamic texts, where universal values such as justice and human rights must be integrated with the social and cultural realities of Muslim societies today (Tasmuji, 2011).

In the context of the archipelago, Azyumardi Azra analyzes how this adaptation process produces unique variants of Islam that remain connected to the global Islamic tradition. Azra shows that Indonesia, with its cultural diversity, has given birth to distinctive forms of religious practice, which not only retain Islamic identity, but also accommodate relevant local elements. This creates a rich dynamic in the practice of Islam in Indonesia, where local traditions and Islamic teachings interact and influence each other (Azra, 2006).

Marshall Hodgson provides a useful analytical framework through the concept of "*Islamicate*" which distinguishes between Islam as a religion and civilizations influenced by Islam. This approach helps explain how local elements can be integrated into the framework of Islamic studies without losing its distinctive characteristics. Thus, the study of Islam is not only limited to dogmatic teachings, but also includes the social and cultural practices that develop in Muslim societies (M. Hodgson, 1974).

Robert Hefner, in his research on Islam in Java, provides a concrete example of how this approach can be applied. Hefner shows that despite global influences on religious practice, Muslim communities in Java are able to create new forms of religious expression that reflect local values while remaining rooted in global Islamic traditions. This suggests that the study of local Islam can provide greater insight into the dynamics of Islam as a whole (Hefner, 2000).

Thus, bridging the tension between universal dimensions and local cultural particularities in Islamic studies is an important step towards understanding the complexity and diversity of religious practices in the Muslim world. Contextual approaches such as those proposed by Saeed and supported by the thoughts of Azra, Hodgson and Hefner are highly relevant in facing this challenge.

2. Objectivity and Cultural Bias

The issue of objectivity in local Islamic studies becomes even more complex when the researcher is part of the community under study. Talal Asad reminds us that every attempt to understand religion is always tied to a certain cultural context and power relations. This shows that researchers cannot be completely separated from the social and cultural backgrounds that influence the way they see and analyze religious practices (Asad, 1993). In the Indonesian context, Martin van Bruinessen observes the dynamics between *traditional religious scholarship* and *modern academic studies*. He emphasizes that the shift from traditional to modern academic studies often creates tensions, especially in terms of the authority and validity of the knowledge produced (Bruinessen, 1995).

Kim Knott proposes a "*reflexive positioning*" approach, which recognizes that absolute objectivity may not be achieved. However, researchers can develop a critical awareness of their position in the research context. This approach is important because it invites researchers to reflect on how their personal identities and experiences may influence the interpretation of data (Kim Knott, 2005). Mohammad Arkoun reinforces this argument by emphasizing the importance of "*critical consciousness*" in Islamic studies, which enables researchers to recognize and manage their own biases. With this critical consciousness, researchers are expected to produce more accurate and reflective analyses of the religious phenomena they study (Arkoun, 1994).

Overall, the challenge of objectivity in local Islamic studies requires a more inclusive and reflective approach. Researchers should be able to consider the broader social, cultural and political context, as well as be aware of their own position in the research process. In doing so, Islamic studies can produce a more in-depth and diverse understanding of religious practices in society.

3. Integrative Methodology and Approach

Fazlur Rahman developed a methodology that integrates textual analysis with contextual understanding through his "*double movement*" theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding religious texts in two stages: first, understanding the historical and cultural context in which the text was revealed, and second, applying the values contained in the text

to the contemporary context. With this approach, Rahman sought to bridge the gap between traditional understandings of sacred texts and the challenges of modernity faced by Muslims (Rahman, 1982).

In Indonesia, Amin Abdullah expanded this approach through the integration-interconnection paradigm that links Islamic studies with social sciences and humanities (Abdullah, 2006). Abdullah emphasizes that in order to understand the complexity of human life phenomena, various disciplines must be interconnected and work together. This integration-interconnection approach aims to eliminate the dichotomy between religious and general sciences, thus allowing researchers to utilize multiple perspectives in analyzing religious and social issues. In this way, Abdullah hopes to create a more holistic framework in Islamic studies.

This approach also receives theoretical support from Hasan Hanafi, who emphasizes the importance of understanding the text in its socio-historical context. Hanafi argues that in order to gain a deep understanding of Islamic teachings, researchers must consider the social and cultural factors that influence the interpretation of the text (Nasr, 2005). Thus, the textual-contextual approach not only provides insight into the meaning of the text itself but also into how the text functions in society.

Overall, the integration of textual-contextual approaches in Islamic studies offers a new way to understand the relationship between religious traditions and modern contexts. Through a combination of deep textual analysis and broad contextual understanding, researchers can generate richer insights into religious dynamics in the contemporary world.

4. Multi-level Analysis

Multi-level analysis is one of the effective approaches in understanding Islamic practices, especially in the context of the archipelago. John Bowen proposed an anthropological approach that considers *multiple levels of analysis*, namely the individual, group and structural levels. In this way, research can cover the various social, cultural and historical dimensions that shape Muslim religious practices (J. Bowen, 2007).

In the context of the archipelago, Mark Woodward demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in his study of Javanese Islam. Woodward used multi-level analysis to understand how Islamic practices in Java developed as a result of the interaction between internal factors such as the interpretation of religious texts and external factors such as global influences and socio-political changes (Woodward, 1989). In doing so, he manages to explain the complexity of religious phenomena in Indonesia without neglecting important details from the individual to the structural level.

Overall, multi-level analysis provides a broader and deeper insight into Islamic practice in the modern world. By considering *multiple levels of analysis*, researchers can generate a comprehensive understanding of how religion interacts with social and cultural realities at various levels.

Epistemological Reconstruction

1. Indigenous Methodology Development

The development of a methodology that is more suited to the characteristics of local Islamic studies in Indonesia is crucial to understanding the unique religious dynamics in the country. One significant contribution in this regard comes from Abdolkarim Soroush, who offers a framework of "*theoretical reason and practical reason*" (A. Soroush, 2000). This approach emphasizes the importance of integrating theoretical thinking with actual practice in the daily lives of Muslims. In this way, research can bridge between academic understanding and the spiritual experiences experienced by individuals in their social and cultural contexts.

Richard Martin also contributed to the development of this methodology by proposing an approach that integrates classical methods with *contemporary theoretical frameworks*. This approach allows researchers to use traditional analytical tools while remaining open to modern theoretical developments that can provide new insights (Martin, 2001). By combining classical methods that have proven effective with contemporary theoretical frameworks, researchers can produce analyses that are more comprehensive and relevant to the local context.

In the Indonesian context, the development of indigenous methodologies is necessary to understand the diversity of religious practices in different regions. This approach, which combines theory and practice, not only helps in understanding sacred texts, but also makes room for the voices and experiences of local communities in the research process. Thus, the development of a more adaptive and contextualized methodology will enrich the study of local Islam and make a significant contribution to the understanding of Islam globally.

2. Integration of Emic-Ethic Perspectives

The integration of emic-ethic perspectives in local Islamic studies is an increasingly important approach to understanding religious practices in various contexts. Carl Ernst developed an analytical model that combines an insider (emic) perspective with academic (ethical) analysis (Ernst, 2003). This approach allows researchers to gain deeper insights into how Muslims understand and live their beliefs, while still considering critical analysis from the outside. By combining these two perspectives, researchers can explain religious practices not only from an academic perspective but also from the experience and understanding of the community itself.

In Indonesia, this approach has been applied successfully by Julia Howell in her study of urban Sufism. Howell examines how the practice of Sufism in urban Indonesia has adapted and evolved, creating a space for individuals seeking spirituality amidst complex modern life. In his research, Howell shows that Sufism is not only seen as an isolated cultural heritage, but also as an active response to the social and spiritual challenges faced by urban communities (Howell, 2007). Using an emic-etic approach, Howell manages to portray this dynamic with more nuance and depth.

This integrative approach is particularly relevant in the Indonesian context, where cultural and religious plurality creates unique challenges for Islamic studies. By combining insider and outsider perspectives, researchers can better understand how local values interact with Islamic teachings, as well as how Muslim communities respond to social and political change. This paves the way for research that is more inclusive and representative of the Muslim experience in Indonesia.

3. Revitalizing Local Intellectual Traditions

Revitalizing local intellectual traditions is an important step in the development of Nusantara Islamic studies, which aims to connect local knowledge with a broader understanding of Islam. Ahmad Baso proposes that revitalizing local intellectual traditions can be a strong epistemological basis for Islamic studies in Indonesia. This approach emphasizes the importance of exploring and developing religious thoughts and practices that already exist in society, so that the study of Islam does not only focus on classical texts, but also on the social and cultural contexts that shape these practices.

This idea is in line with Nurcholish Madjid's idea of "*indigenous Islamic scholarship*", which emphasizes the importance of knowledge derived from local contexts. Nurcholish Madjid argues that to understand Islam in Indonesia deeply, there needs to be recognition of local intellectual traditions that have developed over centuries. He believes that these traditions can not only enrich the understanding of Islamic teachings, but also provide solutions to various social and political problems faced by Muslim communities in Indonesia (Tsauro, 2021). Thus, revitalizing local intellectual traditions serves not only as a way to understand cultural heritage, but also as a tool to respond to contemporary challenges.

Overall, the revitalization of local intellectual traditions as proposed by Ahmad Baso and supported by Nurcholish Madjid is crucial to ensure that the study of Islam in Indonesia remains relevant and beneficial to society. By utilizing the richness of local traditions, research on Islam in Indonesia can become more dynamic and responsive to social and cultural changes.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the discussion that has been done, it can be concluded that the study of Islam Nusantara from an insider perspective still faces various epistemological challenges, especially related to the dominance of the orientalist paradigm and methodological limitations in studying local Islamic phenomena. Therefore, epistemological reconstruction is needed that considers local characteristics and wisdom of the archipelago, as well as the development of a dialogical approach between insider and outsider perspectives to understand the complexity of Islam in Indonesia more comprehensively. For this reason, it is recommended that universities and research institutions develop curricula and methodologies that integrate insider perspectives, encourage collaborative research between local and international scholars, and facilitate ongoing dialogue between various perspectives in the study of Nusantara Islam. These steps are expected to contribute to the development of more contextualized and balanced Islamic studies in Indonesia.

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