KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT BORDERS: EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES, DIALOGICALLY ENGAGED DISCURSIVE TRADITION, AND THE TRANSMISSION OF ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP IN THE EASTERN INDIAN OCEAN WORLD: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOUTHEAST AND WESTERN ASIA[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the dynamics of epistemic communities across the Eastern Indian Ocean, whose *raison d'être* is the cultivation and communication of Islamic scholarship. This body of Islamic knowledge, the formal basis for this epistemic community, is represented in a set of discourses that are the communicative medium transacted among its members. This transaction creates the shared discursive space that situates their relationships over the vast disjointed physical area of the Indian Ocean. After this theoretical discussion, the essay documents the transformation in the contemporary character of the historical relationships between the shared epistemic communities in the Indian Ocean basins of Southeast Asia and Western Asia. This transformation is illustrated by examining how the dissemination process of Islamic knowledge has changed in modern times. This study is based on ethnographic research in Indonesia, where students/scholars from this region were interviewed regarding their experiences of pursuing Islamic knowledge in the Middle East. The study will show that there was a shift in the structural relations of these epistemic communities, where the basis of interactions in colonial and pre-

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colonial times revolved around individual relationships and distinctive knowledge networks. In contrast, in the postcolonial period, the interactions centered more around knowledge institutions and amorphous associations.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I explore one of the processes of Islamization in the Indian Ocean world. Several factors facilitated the spread of Islam in this context, including trade, in which Muslim traders carried their religious practices with them and exposed local populations to new beliefs and ways of life that left an imprint on them.[2] In addition, the travel of Muslim mystics and missionaries in this space disseminated Islamic ideas and practices.[3] The focus of my essay is on another such factor: what I am calling the growth of 'epistemic communities.' An epistemic community exists when a group possesses a shared tradition of knowledge and its transmission across space and time. This article examines the dynamics of epistemic communities across the Indian Ocean, whose *raison d'être* is the cultivation and communication of Islamic scholarship. The body of Islamic knowledge, the formal basis for this epistemic community, is represented in a set of discourses and in how they are communicated. This exchange creates the shared discursive space that situates their relationships across the vast and separated territories of the Indian Ocean.

More particularly, I document the transformation in the contemporary character of historical relationships between the shared epistemic communities in the Indian Ocean basins of Southeast Asia (Indonesia) and Western Asia (Arabian Gulf and Yemen), extending to the coastal Red Sea states in North Africa (Egypt and Sudan). I do this to examine how the dissemination of Islamic knowledge has changed over time and up to the present. The study shows a shift in the structural relations of these epistemic

[2] For more on trade in the Indian Ocean see: Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The world system A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Andre Gunder Frank, *Reorient: Global economy in the Asian age* (Los Angeles: University of California Press,1998); Philippe Beaujard, *The Worlds of the Indian Ocean: A global history*, 2 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[3] For more on Muslim mystics and missionaries in the Eastern Indian Ocean see: Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulamā' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); Muhammad Naguib al-Attas Syed, "The mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri" (Unpublished PhD diss.: University of London, 1966); Muhammad Naguib al-Attas Syed, *A Commentary on the Hjjat al-siddīq of Nūr Al-Dīn al-Rānīrī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, Malaysia, 1986). The works of Anne Bang, Fahad Bishara, Ulrika Freitag, Gwyn Campbell, Kia Kresse, Enseng Ho, Michael Pearson, Andrea Wink, and others deal with cultural aspects of the Indian Ocean World.

communities. During the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the basis of interactions revolved around individual relationships and distinctive knowledge networks. By contrast, during the postcolonial period, interactions have become increasingly centered around knowledge institutions and unstructured associations. Even so, despite this structural shift, Islamic communities still share the same discursive space that acts as the cultural basis for maintaining their ties across the Indian Ocean.

The assertions made in this article are based partly on ethnographic work I carried out in Indonesia in July and August of 2007, in which I interviewed Indonesians about their experiences of studying Islam in the Middle East, and how their studies affected their life and career trajectories. All five interlocutors (four males: Alfi, Mifdhal, Muhammad Sadiq, Riza; one female, Ima) were either born in or residents of the central Indonesian Island of Java, and I conducted all the interviews in Java's historical capital, Yogyakarta. Most of the participants were between 25 and 35 years of age and had returned from their study sojourns in the Middle East during the seven years leading up to the interviews. All my interlocutors had journeyed to one or more of Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen.

Before embarking on their knowledge journey, most of my interlocutors had been religiously educated at the primary and/or secondary school level in Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, known as *pesenterans*. By charting this experience, I understood their Islamic academic preparation and engagement with Islamic discursive traditions before undertaking their educational journey abroad. In most cases, my interlocutors also experienced a modern secular education, either in Indonesian public schools or as part of their curriculum in the *pesenteran*. As such, my interlocutors had been educationally in step with the wider Indonesian society, which had not undergone intensive religious education, and they were familiar with the secular nation-state's new public mandates for national education.

Before discussing the contemporary dynamics of these knowledge flows, this essay contextualizes these dynamics within a theoretical framework. This framework is employed to define the nature of the interactions and relationships at play to highlight the past complexities of Muslim scholarly networks and their transformations over time. This examination also reveals that it is not only an engagement with a set of distinct discourses that constitutes the Islamic scholarly tradition, but also the dialogical way these discourses are engaged.

Epistemic Communities and the Dialogically Engaged Discursive Tradition

Often, when we think of the term community, we think of an affective relationship among individuals who constitute a group that shares a common purpose and practice, and also a spatial and temporal context.[4] The notion of an 'epistemic community' imparts specificity to the particular type of community whose association is based on the pursuit and transmission of knowledge between its members.[5] Epistemic communities may not be bound by spatial and temporal considerations. Instead, they share the discursive space of the canonical texts they study and transmit. Epistemic communities are linked by shared discourse and discursive practices.

But what is the precise nature of this discursive formation that defines and gives unity to the Islamic epistemic community pursued in this article? Talal Asad asserted that the Islamic scholarly tradition is a discursive tradition because it relates to specific foundational texts, such as the Quran and *ḥadīth* (prophetic traditions).[6] In a similar vein, Saba Mahmood identified "a mode of discursive engagement of sacred text" to illustrate these core ideas. [7] Because of the textual authority of the Quran and *ḥadīth*, Islamic scholarly thought can be described as a discursive tradition, as these texts served to legitimize its statements or practices in the vast body of Muslim foundational texts. For example, when an Islamic legal opinion (fatwa) is pronounced by a Muslim jurist, it explicitly or implicitly references these foundational texts to legitimate their position. Charles Hirschkind argues that Asad's notion of Islamic discursive tradition should be understood as a "historically evolving set of discourses, embodied in the practices and institutions of Islamic societies."[8] It is this evolving set of discourses that characterizes the Islamic scholarly tradition under review here.

But there are also dialogical dimensions of Islamic scholarly tradition's formation and dissemination. Historically speaking, the transmission of Islamic knowledge is often

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[4] Ferdinand Tönnies calls this type "community of place, which is expressed first of all as living in close proximity to one another…….[which] hold life together on a physical level." Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.

[5] This type of community fits into what Tonnies called "community of spirit, working together for the same end and purpose…. [Which] is the binding link on the level of conscious thought." Ibid.

[6] Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14. See also: Omer Awass, *Fatwa and the Making and Renewal of Islamic Law: From the classical period to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[7] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 115. See also: Awass, *Fatwa and the Making and Renewal of Islamic Law*.

[8] As quoted in: Ovamir Anjum, "Islam as a discursive tradition: Talal Asad and his interlocutors," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27, 3 (2007), 662.

centered more on personal and communicative relationships between student and teacher than through a formal degree offered by educational institutions. Here, the student reads and listens to a selected text and discusses its content with their teacher as a form of dialogical engagement with knowledge. This practice culminated in granting the formalized scholarly "license," known as *ijaza*, once the student mastered that text or discipline. Moreover, this type of teacher-student relationship created a certain fluidity, allowing the student to be taught by many different teachers because they were not bound to a particular educational institution. For those pursuing knowledge, this facilitated travel to various regions in the Islamic and Indian Ocean worlds to known centers of Islamic scholarship, enabling them to connect with the major Muslim scholars of the age. This process created a broad network of scholars that linked peoples from various parts of the Muslim world.

The dialogical nature of knowledge transmission that was integral to this scholarly tradition's discursive practice was critical to this engagement. This kind of dialogical engagement represented a distinct form of discursive practice for how Muslim scholars formed fundamental discourses and how a learning tradition emerged. These interactions between scholars and students were the particular modality of communicative engagement with texts that determined their authority and this tradition's distinction. This is why I call the enterprise of Islamic scholarly tradition a "dialogically negotiated" discursive tradition that arose from this social and transactional approach to knowledge.[9]

The Islamic tradition historically documented these networks by compiling Muslim biographical dictionaries, which highlighted the prominent Muslim scholars of a particular time and place and their connections to others locally and abroad. An example of these biographical dictionaries is *Mizan al-'Itidal* by Shamsuddin al-Dhahabi (1274–1348),[10] which documents the biographies and connections of specialists of the discipline of prophetic tradition (*hadith*). These connections illustrate the distinctive character of Islamic epistemic communities. Thus, knowledge production, preservation, and transmission make the community epistemic and integral to delineating the practices that construct the identities of these communities.

While the commodities of exchange within these epistemic communities were discourses, they took a particular form of the book, especially such books that textually embodied the Islamic discursive tradition. These books were diverse in their subject

[9] For more on the notion of a dialogically negotiated discursive tradition, see: Awass, *Fatwa and the Making and Renewal of Islamic Law*, 10, 116-121.
[10] A Syrian hadith scholar and historian.

matter, ranging from language and law to philosophy and mysticism. The circulation of specific books varied from region to region, depending on the subset of the Islamic tradition promoted in those areas. The notion of the book lies at the heart of the Islamic discursive tradition and its epistemic community because of its scriptural and cosmological significance in the larger Islamic community. The Quran epitomizes this connection through the phrase 'People of the Book.'

This notion is used in the Quran as a descriptor for Jews and Christians to show what they have in common with Muslims, which was the possession of a revealed scripture that was the authoritative basis of the community. Moreover, this descriptor encapsulated an ideal for the foundation of these communities, primarily based on knowledge and discursive learning as opposed to ethnic solidarity or political motivations. The fact that the Quran distinguished people by reference to books meant that these communities were modeled on a framework of textual authority. This conceptual framework played a significant role in guiding the actions of those pietistic groups who tried to create an alternative model of religious purpose and unity amid political illegitimacy and the prevailing cultural heterogeneity.[11]

Moreover, by linking the community to textuality, this model affirmed that the primary mode of rationality displayed by this society was hermeneutical—a type of rationality that is bounded by an established body of knowledge in which the primary function of this (scriptural) rationality is to interpret this knowledge in such a way that links it to people's social worlds. This type of reasoning was not only based on pure reason or social convention, but it also illuminated the importance of hermeneutics in its mediating role of interpreting the ethical, legal, religious, social, and political ramifications.[12] The precise function of those who had such hermeneutical authority was to act as custodians of these textual authoritative sources by preserving and explaining these texts. Because of the hermeneutical function played by specialists within this epistemic community, students, who were themselves aspiring scholars, sought out such specialists to gain mastery of these texts. Mastery was achieved through dialogical study of such works that would forge a special relationship between master and student.

The dialogical engagement of these canonized texts ensured that their content was negotiated by those possessing hermeneutical authority (that is, the epistemic community) to make it relevant to the necessities of the period and place in which the texts were

[11] For more on the notion of "People of the Book" and its relation to community formation, see: Awass, *Fatwa and the Making and Renewal of Islamic Law*.
[12] Ibid., 120.

transmitted. As a distinctive discursive practice, this modality of engagement expanded the limits of the discursive space that bound these epistemic communities. Such negotiated interactions spawned commentaries and super commentaries that continually situated these texts in their historical moment. This discursive practice ensured that what was being transmitted was not ossified texts but rather a body of knowledge and a living tradition**.** With this in mind, I now turn to the scholarly interrelations between Southeast and Western Asia as a gateway to address changes in the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Pre-Colonial Scholarly Networks and Transmission of Knowledge Between Southeast Asia and the Arabian Peninsula

Hajj was a vehicle to establish specific social and scholarly networks that perpetuated Islam's dissemination across Asia. This dissemination occurred because many people who went on Hajj stayed for many years to study with scholars in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and they later returned to their homelands to reform and propagate Islam.[13] A large group of scholars and students, such as Murteza al-Zabidi (1732-1790)[14] and Shah Waliullah (1703-1762),[15] from across the Muslim world with various traditions of Islamic learning had gathered in these holy sites with a similar mindset of reforming the Islamic tradition.[16] Hajj naturally attracted pilgrims from Southeast Asia to Mecca and Medina, which, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were centers of Islamic learning and religious revivalism.[17]

In the late sixteenth century, the growth of Muslim kingdoms in the Malay Archipelago helped grow the relations between Muslims of the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The intensification of trade in the Indian Ocean brought the archipelago more intensely in touch with Muslim traders. This intensification of economic relations and contact contributed to the growth of Malay pilgrims to the holy sites, which put them in

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[13] Michael N. Pearson, *Pilgrimage to Mecca: The Indian experience, 1500-1800* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996), 67-69; John Obert Voll, *Islam: Continuity and change in the modern world* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1982), 69.

[14] A prominent scholar of Indian origin, who after his initial studies in India, went on to study in Yemen (from where he gets his surname al-Zabidi) and Hijaz (western Arabia), before finally settling in Cairo, Egypt. He authored many religious works, including a commentary on Ghazali's (d. 1111) magnum opus *Ihyah Ulum al Din* (Revival of the Religious Sciences) and the massive Arabic Lexicon, *Taj al Arus*.

[15] A prominent Mughal Indian theologian and hadith scholar who spent part of his youth studying in Mecca and Medina who was influenced by the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century internal reform movement that was centered in Mecca and Medina. Upon his return to India, he engaged in Islamic reform partly by popularizing the study of the hadith. His most prominent work is the theological track *Hujjat Allah al-Baliqah*.

[16] For examples of the cosmopolitan background of these scholars, seeL Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 1, 13, 31; Pearson, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, 69-70.

[17] Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 1; Pearson, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, 68-69.

greater contact with these reformist scholarly circles.[18] This point is illustrated in the career of a seventeenth-century Southeast Asian Muslim scholar named Abdul Rauf al-Sinkili (1615-1693), who spent two decades in Mecca and Medina, where he connected with the most outstanding scholars of that period. He later returned to the Indonesian Island of Sumatra to become a scholar and teacher in that region, all the while keeping in touch with his teacher Ibrahim al-Kurani (1615-1690), among others.[19]

In al-Sinkili's nearly two-decade sojourn in West Asia, he integrated with the existing epistemic communities of the Muslim holy lands. He learned many religious sciences, such as Islamic law, mysticism, and theology. He returned to his homeland, where he taught and wrote about those same subjects as well as qur'anic exegesis and the Prophet Muhammad's traditions in the Malay language.[20] From the Arabic texts that he taught or authored/translated, we get a glimpse of the canonical works that he studied during his sojourn in Arabia. For example, when he returned to Sumatra, al-Sinkili wrote a Malay commentary on a universally known and espoused text of prophetic tradition known as *al-Arba'in* by Yaha al-Nawawi (1233-1277).[21] This work is fundamental to the exposure of early seekers of knowledge into the prophetic traditions. One can surmise that he would have studied this foundational text as part of his educational curriculum in Arabia, which gave him the authority to write a commentary. Moreover, his Malay commentary on the Quran *Tarjuman al Mustafid* follows another Arabic canonical text on Quranic commentary titled *Al-Jalalayn*,[22] which is another elementary text in exegesis that is foundational in the Islamic curriculum for those beginning their studies. It was authored about one century before al-Sinkili's time and was unlikely to have been a part of his milieu growing up in the Malay Archipelago. Instead, he was probably exposed to this work in Arabia, and he then transmitted and translated its content into Malay when he returned.

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[18] Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 9. See also: Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the narration of a Sufi past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 18.

[19] Ibrahim al-Kurani was a Kurdish Sufi-scholar and one of the leading figures of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Islamic reform movement that was centered among scholars residing in Mecca and Medina. See: Voll, *Islam: Continuity and change*, 69; Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 75; Pearson, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, 69; P. Riddle, "Abdurrauf Singkili," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. G.K. Fleet (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 27-28.

[20] Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 77-82; Peter G. Riddle, "`Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili's Tarjuman alMustafid: A critical study of his treatment of Juz`" (Unpublished PhD diss.: Australian National University, 1984), 22-23. See also: Pearson, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, 69; Voll, *Islam: Continuity and change*, 69.

[21] Riddell, "Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili's Tarjuman alMustafid," 23. Al-Nawawi was a prominent hadith scholar and a premier jurist in the Shafi school of law. He is also the author of *Minhaj al Talibin* (see below).

[22] Riddell, "Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili's Tarjuman alMustafid," 79. See also: Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 81.

Similarly, his authorship in the Malay language of a legal work titled *Mira'at al Tulab* upon the request of the Queen of Aceh relies heavily on its content on Zakariyya Ansari's (1430-1520)[23] commentary on al-Nawawi's canonical legal work in the Shafi'i school of law titled *Al-Minhaj*.[24] The Shafi'i school is the predominant legal school that is practiced in the Malay Archipelago.[25] *Al-Minhaj* of al-Nawawi remains one of the canonical legal works studied in Arabic in contemporary Indonesian Islamic schools. This shows that the various works of the Islamic canon are directly accessed in their original languages and no longer mediated through their simplification and condensation into the Malay language, like al-Sinkili was doing. This indicates that the Islamic discursive tradition has become rooted in the Malay Archipelago since al-Sinkili's time.

These examples of texts from the disciplines of prophetic tradition, Quranic commentary, and Islamic law that al-Sinikili authored and taught based on earlier works within the Islamic canon illustrates how this canon was transmitted across the Indian Ocean during the earlier phases of Islamization of the Malay Archipelago. This transmission represented the discursive space that was shared by the scholars of the Archipelago with those in Arabia. It was this shared space and commitment that defined Islamic epistemic communities in the Indian Ocean. The shared set of texts and discursive practices linked epistemic communities and defined networks of knowledge transmission between scholars in formally structured relationships.

To elaborate on the special characteristics of these relationships and the shared discursive space and practices that defined epistemic communities, aspiring scholars who studied with their masters and gained expertise in a book/subject had their competence and legitimacy verified by the chains of transmission (*isnad*). This gave them license (*ijaza*) to transmit particular books that linked the current master with a past author, or which linked them to previous masters on the subjects they were teaching. Thus, these aspiring scholars were not only establishing networks across space through their travels, but also becoming linked with scholars across time.

However, not all books circulated through these dialogical exchanges. Only books that entered the canon as the material embodiment of the Islamic discursive tradition were

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[23] A prominent Egyptian jurist and Sufi. Among his many writings, he authored legal works, such as a commentary on Al-Juwani's text on the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, *Al-Waraqat*.

[24] Mahiudin Abu Zakaria Yahya Ibn Sharif En Nawani, *Minhaj ET Talibin – A Manual of Muhammadan Law: According to the School of Shafii* (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1914).

[25] Mohammad Hassan, "Islamic legal thought and practices of seventeenth century Aceh: Treating the others" (Unpublished PhD diss.: McGill University, 2014), 158. See also: Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 78; Riddle, "Abdurrauf Singkili," 28.

incorporated in this context. Certain works were elevated above the rest as quintessentially representing the scholarly tradition. They were selected by these epistemic communities according to the various schools of thought they espoused. Once such books comprised the Islamic canon and were committed to their preservation, they served as the shared discursive space that bonded these epistemic communities in the absence of spatial contiguity. Simultaneously, the canon served as the boundary for the Islamic discursive tradition, limiting the discourses that the upholders of that tradition would actively and repeatedly engage in.

The fact that al-Sinkili was formally part of these West Asian scholarly networks is evidenced by the existence of his name being listed in one of the Sufi brotherhood's chains of transmission (*isnad*/*silsilah*). This indicates that he studied with and was granted a license (*ijaza*) by his spiritual master from Medina, Ahmed al-Qushashi (1583-1660), to act as his spiritual deputy (*khalifa*) in Sumatra.[26] Moreover, as part of the reformist trend of his West Asian scholarly predecessors, he attempted to amend some of the prevalent Sufi emanationist doctrines, such as those of Hamza Fansuri (d.1590), prevalent in Southeast Asia at the time, towards a theology of divine transcendence and the harmonization of mysticism and Islamic law.[27]

Al-Sinkili's story is but one of many proto-typical illustrations of Southeast Asian scholars throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who undertook similar journeys to Arabia, establishing formal connections to the epistemic communities there. In a similar fashion, Yusuf al Maqasari (1627-1699)[28] and Abdul-Samad al-Palimbani (1704-1789)[29] returned to the Malay Archipelago to engage in Islamization and Islamic reform.[30] These histories represent the discursive nature of these social networks and the establishment of epistemic communities of people who traversed the Indian Ocean.

This kind of epistemic community comes into being from the very nature of its dialogical discursive practices of transmitting knowledge. This formation is a result of the

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[26] Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 74-75; Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam*, 18; Riddell, "Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili's Tarjuman alMustafid," 21; Voll, *Islam: Continuity and change*, 69.

[27] Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 83; Riddle, "Abdurrauf Singkili," 29; Voll, *Islam: Continuity and change*, 69. See also Hassan, "Islamic legal thought and practices," 156.

[28] A Southeast Asian reformer from the southern Sulawesi region of the Malay world who traveled to India and Arabia in pursuit of Islamic knowledge. When he returned to Southeast Asia, he led rebellions against the Dutch colonization of Malaya, where he was captured and eventually banished to South Africa, where he died. For more on al-Maqassiri, see: Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*.

[29] The most prominent Malay Islamic scholar in the eighteenth century. He traveled to Arabia and undertook a broad Islamic education across many disciplines, including hadith, Islamic law, and mysticism, as well as theology. Later, he authored many influential Islamic works in the Malay language including *Sayr al Salikin*. See: Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*, 117.

[30] See their stories in: Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism*; Voll, *Islam: continuity and change*, 69.

character of the Islamic educational practice because of its insistence on the interface between masters and their disciples when subjects/books are transmitted. This type of interaction is what Messick designates with the Arabic term *muwajaha* (face-to-face communication),[31] as such collaboration was typical of knowledge transmission in Islamic civilization. It would not have sufficed for al-Sinkili to merely master the subjects he learned and taught through self-study or through scholars who were not specialists. Pursuing this learning approach, he travelled to other shores to engage with others for legitimate knowledge transmission. Thus, this engagement with discourse is the relational infrastructure constituting such an epistemic community, whose *raison d'être* is the production, preservation, and transmission of Islamic knowledge.

Transformation of the Character of Southeast Asian Scholarly Engagement and Networks in the Modern Period

As we track this process of epistemic journeys into the contemporary era, there have been profound transformations in the 'modern' economic, social, and political structuring in the world. Especially in the societies that make up the context of my investigation, the transformations of modernity did not have the same development trajectory as they did in the birthplace of this phenomenon. This is because the transformations that occurred in non-European regions were in large part impositions that were result of their European colonial experience. For Southeast Asia, colonization began in the seventeenth century, earlier than most of the colonized world, first with the Portuguese and then Dutch colonization. This 'modernizing' transition continued into the postcolonial period, whose beginnings for most African and Asian colonized nations was in the 1950 and 1960s.[32]

In this study, the most relevant aspect of modernity/coloniality is the 'crisis of authority' and the loss of tradition. Hannah Arendt asserts that the modern crisis of authority is a crisis of meaning with loss of transcendental values which endowed life with a collectively shared meaning and acted as the foundation of legitimate authority.[33] What

[31] Brinkley M. Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual domination and history in a Muslim society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 167-170.

[32] For more on the history and dynamics of modernity, colonization, postcoloniality in Africa and Asia, see Omer Awass' forthcoming work: *Imposing Modernity in the Global South: Studies in Coloniality and Decoloniality of Muslim Societies and States* (2026).

[33] For more on Arendt, see: Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic fundamentalism and the limits of modern rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 130. However, though there was a loss of premodern authority, modernity/coloniality erected new forms of authority, such as the primacy of the nation-state, which have subverted the primacy of traditional loyalties. For more on the formation and authority of nation-states, see: Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence: Volume 2 of a contemporary critique of historical materialism* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1985).

will become apparent from the subsequent discussion is how the authority of elements of that Islamic discursive tradition and the canonical works that helped define it have become increasingly questioned over time. The rise of Muslim modern reformist towards the end of nineteenth century, like Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817–1898) in India[34] and Muhammad Abdu (1849-1905) in Egypt,[35] challenged the established Islamic tradition, particularly the assumed authority of historical Islamic institutions, such as schools of law and theology and the canonical works that represented them. This developed further with the formation of postcolonial nation-states, which instituted revised curriculums for Islamic education. This new curriculum incorporated elements of Muslim modernists' critiques of existing Islamic practices and institutions, and it did not defer to the kind of classical educational curriculum that people like al-Sinkili strived hard to learn and disseminate.[36] Nevertheless, Islamic scholarly pursuits and interactions between the peoples of Indian Ocean societies have continued despite the less permeable borders of nation-states that pervade our postcolonial world order. Modern communication and transportation have created greater connectivity between these societies, which hitherto had not been possible. Nevertheless, the nature of the relationships that have emerged from these new modes of interaction and the character of these discourses have changed over time. In the discussion that follows, I trace this transformation in interactions between Southeast Asian and West Asian societies.

Drawing from the ethnographic interviews conducted in Indonesia, one theme that emerges from my interlocutors' primary and secondary education is that almost all of them except one (Alfi) had significant exposure to a traditional Islamic curriculum. This included Arabic language training in their educational experiences before undertaking study abroad. Mifhdal and Riza spent their primary and secondary education in Islamic schools, while Ima and Muhammad Sadiq started attending the *pesenteran* in middle and high school, respectively. Alfi is the only one who did not attend a religious school before college because there was no *pesenteran* in his village. However, he came from a religiously educated family who taught him the basics of Arabic and Islamic knowledge at home. Such patterns are in some ways consistent with those of past scholars coming

[34] An Indian Muslim reformist who established Aligarh University in India to modernize Islamic education.
[35] An Egyptian Muslim reformist scholar whose ideas were influential on Muslim modernist movements during the twentieth century in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. For more on Abdu's influence, see: Voll, *Islam: Continuity and change*, 231.
[36] For more on Muslim modernism and its clash with Muslim traditionalism, see: Awass, *Fatwa and the Making and Renewal of Islamic Law*, 209-212; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in the Radical Age: Religious authority and internal criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

from the Malay Archipelago, such as al-Sinkili, who had prior Islamic education in their homelands before embarking on their educational journey abroad.

My interlocuters told me that the subjects they were exposed to in these schools were the same as the subjects in the traditional curriculum that al-Sinkili studied abroad and taught at home. Subjects included *aqidah* (creedal beliefs), *fiqh* (Islamic law), *hadith* (prophetic traditions), *tafseer* (Quranic commentary), and Arabic grammar and morphology (*nahw* and *sarf*).[37] When examining the textbooks used in these courses, we begin to see some departures from textbooks used in the curriculum studies by al-Sinkili and his contemporaries. For example, both Ima and Muhammad Sadiq reported that one of their Islamic law textbooks in middle and high school was *Fiqh al -Sunnah* by Sayyid Sabiq (1915-2000).[38] This is a twentieth-century work that attempted to reformulate Islamic law away from the influence of the legal doctrines of the classical Islamic legal schools. This textbook represents a departure from the canonically established works on Islamic law of the Islamic legal schools that were taught in primary Islamic education of the past. [39] This divergence may be an indication that the Islamic schools they were attending had more of a modernist bent in attempting to loosen the grip of traditional legal texts on Islamic education.

They further supported this conclusion by reporting that other legal works studied in their curriculum. Both Ima and Mifdhal said that in their middle school education, which was at the beginning of their Islamic education, they had studied Ibn Rushd's *Biddayyat al Mujtahid*, a work in comparative Islamic law. While this work is classical, it was never taught formally in the older Islamic curriculums for students aspiring to be scholars, especially in their early education. Such absence of this work in the pre-colonial

[37] See also: Martin van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. G.K. Fleet (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 104; Martin van Bruinessen, "Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and continuation of a tradition of religious learning," in *Texts from the Islands: Oral and written traditions of Indonesia and the Malay world: Proceedings of the 7th European Colloquium on Indonesia and Malay Studies, Berne, June 1989*, ed. Wolfgang Marschall (Berne: University of Berne, Institute of Ethnology, 1994).

[38] A twentieth-century Egyptian modern reformist scholar whose most famous work, *Fiqh al -Sunnahπ,* attempted to present Islamic law and practice in a simplified form by removing the complexity and differences in rulings between the various schools of Islamic law and directly appealing to the scriptural evidence that supports its legal positions while disregarding the opinions of classical jurists. His work sought to challenge the authority of Islamic legal schools on Muslim for nearly a millennium before the arrival of European colonization, which spawned the conditions for the questioning of pre-colonial Islamic institutions. *Fiqh al -Sunnah* became a popular substitute to pre-colonial texts on Islamic practice among twentieth century Muslim reformist circles.

[39] Bruinessen shows that the traditional education in Indonesia in the field of Islamic law consisted of studying classical works in the Shafi school of law like *al-Minhaj* by al-Nawawi: van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning," 104. See also: Mark Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative piety and mysticism in the sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1989). In the former reference, van Bruinessen also shows that this work was also a part of the primary legal education in Indonesian history.

foundational level curriculum is because the traditional Islamic education system would have expected the student to start their legal studies with an introductory legal text representing the specific doctrine their community espouses. For example, historically speaking, Indonesians have been adherents to the Shafi'i School of Islam. So, an early student would start learning, for instance, *Matn Ibn Shuja* (AKA *al-Ghaya wa al-Tagrib*) as an introductory text into that particular school and would progressively take on intermediate and advanced-level texts as their studies continued.[40] Moreover, beginning their legal education with comparative legal work, such as *Biddayyat al Mujtahid*, would be an unorthodox method of education from the traditional sense, since it exposes the early student to complex legal issues that would be beyond their capacity to comprehend. From a traditional point of view, such a work would only be read by aspiring scholars who have already immersed themselves in the legal doctrines of a particular school, which would act as a reference point for them to understand the comparative legal precepts found in this work.

This effort of having students begin their legal studies with such legal texts is a trend within some Islamic educational circles and institutions in Indonesia. This shows that Islamic reformists, like the influential Egyptian reformer Mohammad Abdu have influenced Islamic education starting in the early twentieth century. These modern reform movements attempted to achieve one aim: lessening the influence of the classical legal doctrines on the behavior and practice of contemporary Muslims, as they saw these legal precepts as ossified and unfit for modern life.[41] Integrating these texts, which would otherwise have been considered unconventional, into the Islamic legal curriculum could be interpreted as an attempt by some educational institutions to act on these reformist ideas to challenge the preponderance of the Islamic legal schools on the religious practice of Muslims.

This pattern is by no means universal in Indonesian Islam, as some groups remain faithfully committed to "traditionalist" interpretations of Islam and, in their educational settings, would maintain the classical curriculum. This conservative attitude is the case of Riza's Islamic educational institution, which is affiliated with Nahadhatul Ulema (NU), the representative group of the traditionalist streak in Indonesian society. *Pesenterans* affiliated with NU are more likely to teach the Islamic law portion of the curriculum using texts, like the one mentioned above, that reinforce the Shafi'i school of law, which most

[41] For more on Muslim modernist movements and thought, see: Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in the Radical Age*; Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2007); Voll's *Islam: Continuity and change*.

Indonesians historically adhered to.[42] Despite the textual divergence in the curriculum between different Islamic educational institutions, my interlocuters' testimonies indicated that most schools are seemingly united in the Islamic subjects they see as essential to teaching, such Arabic grammar and morphology, Islamic creed, Prophetic tradition, Quranic commentary, and Islamic legal theory. These subjects show a continuity in Islamic learning tradition as these subjects were taught in past Islamic educational institutions and circles. These are some of the same topics that al-Sinkili learnt in his study sojourn in Arabia and what he later taught in Indonesia.

Another theme marking these contemporary scholarly interactions between Indian Ocean societies is how much of this educational activity is initially mediated and circumscribed through institutions of the nation-state. Institutions in this context include the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and various foreign embassies representing the destinations of these students. This mediation is a notable departure from the historical lines of connection pursued by direct contact between scholars unmediated by state political institutions. For example, Ima stated that the agreement between the Indonesian government and Al-Azhar University in Egypt that Al-Azhar would take in a certain number of students from Indonesia every year. The intake of these students would take place as the Indonesian Ministry of Religion conducted exams and rewarded scholarships to Indonesian citizens based on their performance. Likewise, Alfi applied for admission and scholarships to various educational institutions in the Arab world through their foreign embassies in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. Eventually, he got a scholarship to study in Sudan, where he pursued his Islamic education at the African International University (AIU)

These examples illustrate how the protocols of nation-states have now conditioned the establishment of scholarly engagements across the Indian Ocean. Nation-state boundaries have in some ways complicated the connections between societies in ways that had not existed in the past. Previously, government institutions did not mediate the connection between the traveling students and their education institutions abroad. Yet this connectivity, despite such complications, remains vibrant. The means of transportation across this space have shifted from sea to air to some extent because of the restrictions on seaports due to the new political climate in the Indian Ocean nation-states. An example of such newly imposed limits exists in the port city of Aden, Yemen. This port city has

[42] See: Martin van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic script used in the Pesantren milieu: Comments on a new collection in the KITLV Library," *Bijdragen tot de Tassl-, Land- en Volekenkunde,* 146, 2-3 (1990).

historically been a hub for people journeying from East Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia to West Asia.[43] Until the 1960s, Aden had been one of the busiest ports in the world. However, with the takeover of the communist regime in South Yemen in the late 1960s, it lost its status as a free port with no customs duties.[44] These changes in its commercial and economic policies, along with other political restrictions brought about by the new regime in Yemen, fomented its decline from the world market and global travel itineraries, whereby the seaborne activity to the port dwindled. Aden continues to struggle to recover its past glory.

Yet the circumstances of the international order have not dimmed the special place that Arabia, West Asia, and North Africa have in the hearts and minds of Indonesian seekers of Islamic knowledge. Riza, pursued his Islamic education in Yemen, reflects this symbolic and material significance. He said he was religiously motivated to study in Yemen by the prophetic *hadith* stating: "Faith is Yemeni and wisdom is Yemeni" and "Oh Allah bless our Levant and our Yemen." Hearing these praises by the Prophet, Riza averred, played a large part in his decision. Like Riza, Ima added that she considered the Middle East as the birthplace of Abrahamic prophets.

But beyond purely religious reasons, many interlocutors acknowledged the deep historical and cultural connections between the Malay Archipelago and Arabia. Ima, Riza, Alfi, and Mifdhal all expressed a version of the popularly understood notion that Islam was introduced to Indonesia by Arab traders, who were followed by the nine legendary (Arabian) saints (*Wali Sangho*) who went on to establish and reform the faith in the Indonesian central Island of Java. Alfi did not comment about the *Wali Sangho* and Ima diverged from this consensus by saying Indian Muslim traders instead of Arabs. But, Indonesian Muslims nevertheless have a particular historical and psychological affinity for that region.[45]

Ultimately, though, the Middle East remains the geographic and epistemic heartland of Islam in the minds of Indonesian Muslims and why they study there. This region is where the Islamic discursive tradition of knowledge first developed and spread

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[43] See: Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 241-242; K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 343; Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 years in the life of a medieval Arabian port* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2; Scott Reese, "The respectable citizens of Shaykh Uthman: Religious discourse, trans-locality and the construction of local contexts in colonial Aden," in *Struggling with History: Islam and cosmopolitanism in the western Indian* Ocean, eds. Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 191.
[44] Fred Halliday, *Revolution and Foreign Policy: The case of South Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 18, 22.
[45] Daromir Rudnyckyj, "Market Islam in Indonesia," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009), S183-S201.

to many Muslim areas. It is here that tradition is most deeply rooted because of its long maturation process, and the core languages that articulate this tradition (Arabic, Persian, and Turkish) are spoken by the people of the region, giving them easier access to its textual sources. The epistemic importance of this region is most clearly expressed by Mifhdhal, who says that the source books of Islamic knowledge are from that part of the world and that Islamic knowledge in Indonesia is only so deep. Thus, people must pursue this knowledge at its geographic center. These are some of the same historical reasons that motivated pre-colonial subjects of the Malay Archipelago like al-Sinkili, al- Palampani, al-Maqasiri and others to travel to Arabia, where they established a connection to its epistemic communities and engaged the Islamic discursive tradition.

The ethnographic accounts here highlight the interlocuters' engagement with the Islamic discursive tradition in a wide array of educational institutions. Ima, Mifhdal, and Muhammad Sadiq all attended Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. Al-Azhar did not restrict itself to teaching the books of the traditional Islamic canon but also used more recently-published books. Ima reported that the teachers who taught their courses wrote many of these books, especially for ancillary subjects. The exception was the core courses in law (given she majored in Islamic law), which used classical works. Mifdhal, who was in prophetic scriptural studies (*hadith*), reported that he preferred many of more 'modern' works because of their accessible method and flow. Alfi attended a younger institution, the African International University (AIU) in Khartoum, Sudan, with a similarly modernist educational approach. The AIU is an established institution, which attracts students from across Africa and the Western Indian Ocean. It is a fully-fledged university that teaches a broad range of sciences including Islamic studies alongside degrees in the humanities and social sciences.

Riza, meanwhile, attended Al-Ahaqaf University in Tarim, Yemen. The education methodology at Al-Ahqaf was similar to the traditional modes of education at the Islamic secondary schools (*pesenteran*) that he attended in Indonesia, but different from secular university education in Indonesia. In Al-Ahqaf, the teaching approach was traditional, involving reading classical books and explaining every statement in the text. This approach to the study of subjects through a dialogical engagement is more akin to what al-Sinkili would have been subject to in his learning in Arabia. Yet, this approach contrasts 'modern' schooling, where the teacher gives a lecture and assigns readings and homework

to the students. Riza did say that Al-Ahqaf also used contemporary works in some subjects, such as comparative law.[46]

The greatest convergence between current institutions and the traditional curricula lies in the subjects being taught, mainly varying in the area of specialty that students pursued. All interlocuters reported that their courses consisted of similar subjects in the classical curriculum, which was also a part of their training in Indonesia. This curriculum included the subjects *nahw* and *sarf* (Arabic linguistics), *aqidah* (creed/theology), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *hadith* (prophetic traditions), *tafsir* (quranic commentary*), usul al fiqh* (Islamic legal methodology), and *ulum al hadith* (historiography of the prophetic tradition). However, *fiqh al-muqaran* (comparative Islamic jurisprudence) was a relatively novel dimension in that curriculum, since this was introduced to the Islamic educational curriculum in the postcolonial nation-state era. Although all these subjects, along with others, were part of the core curriculum for all the interlocuters, the degree to which the students immersed themselves in some subject areas over others depended on their preferred concentration.

Regarding the textbooks for these courses, there was also a level of convergence between these newer curricula and the classical curriculum, including in the areas of Arabic linguistics, historiography of prophetic traditions, and Islamic legal methodology. For example, classical works such *Alfiyyat ibn Malik*[47] in Arabic grammar was taught to Riza, and *Tadreeb al Rawai* in histography of Prophetic traditions was taught to Mifhdal. We should understand that this textual convergence with the classical curriculum resulted from the reformists' approaches to methodological sciences' (*ulum al aalah*), required for Islamic religious knowledge.

The most significant areas of textual curricular divergence were evidenced in *aqidah* (creed/theology) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), governing belief and practice. In these areas, there was the greatest contention between modern Islamic reforms and the traditionalist, which in turn was inflected in the textual curriculum of these schools and universities depending on their religious orientation.[48] Most remarkably was the contrast in religious orientation between Al-Ahqaf University and the reformist African

[46] See: van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning" which outlines the Indonesian traditional Islamic curriculum noting the near absence of subjects like comparative law and works like *Bidayat al-Mujtahid* from that curriculum.
[47] See: van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning" where this work is a primary work in the teaching of Arabic sciences in the traditional curriculum of the pesenteran as well.
[48] For example, where reformist ideas have affected the creed curriculum of Indonesian pesenterans, see: Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Salafi madrasas of Indonesia" in *The Madrasa in Asia: Political activism and transnational linkages*, eds. Farish A. Noor, Yoginder Sikand, and Martin van Bruinessen (New Delhi: Maohar Publishers & Distributors, 2009), 260.

International University (AIU), with Al-Azhar University lying somewhere in between. My interlocutors suggested in ways that were supported by informal conversations I held in Surabaya, Indonesia in 2007 with the founder-rector of this university, Habib Umar al Junayd, that Al-Ahaqaf University represents a strong traditionalist orientation that sticks to a largely traditional curriculum, even in terms of its textbooks. AIU, on the other hand, takes a reformist approach judging from the textbooks it uses in its curriculum. Al-Azhar University represents a more complicated categorization in that modernist, reformist, or traditionalist approaches were subjectively influenced by ideological bent of the instructor.

To illustrate this point, Alfi reported that AIU taught the Hanbali School of Law's legal compendium *Zadd al Mustaqani* and the Shafi'i School of Law's legal compendium *Kiffiyaat al Akhyar*, despite many Sudanese Muslims, which AIU was primarily serving alongside other Africans, historically adhering to the Malaki school of Islamic law. The university also assigned non-canonical twentieth-century reformist works to teach Islamic law and theology, such as *Fiqh al Sunnah* by Sayyid Sabiq and *Al-Aqidah al-Islamiyyah* by Saleh Fauzan (b. 1935).[49] These works depart from the paradigmatic parameters of religious discourse and, in some respects, from the legal and theological conclusions of traditional Islamic institutions (*madhhabs*). Historical practice expected for students studying in a region like Sudan would be that s/he would learn Malaki *fiqh* and Ash'ari *aqidah*, as these were the predominant legal and theological schools in that area.[50] Thus, this change in educational practice indicates that the historically developed Islamic textual canon is shifting.

In contrast to Alfi, Riza's experience at Al-Ahqaf University in Yemen, was that mostly classical texts were assigned, such as *Lub al Wusul fi Ilm al-Usul* by al-Zarkashi in legal methodology and *Minhaj al Talibeen* by al-Nawawi[51] in Shafi'i jurisprudence (the school of law that is adhered to by people in Hadhramawt region of Yemen). Even when modern works were used, like *Usul al Fiqh* by Muhammad Abu Zahra (a twentieth-century Egyptian scholar from Al-Azhar University) in legal methodology, or *Sharh Kitab al Tibyaan* by Muhammad al-Sabuni[52] (a twentieth-century Syrian scholar who taught in

[49] Current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia.
[50] For more on the theological and legal orientation of the people of Sudan and West Africa, see: Voll, *Islam: continuity and change*.
[51] This is the same work that was mentioned in the previous section in reference to al-Sinkili.
[52] My research revealed that the book *Al-Tibyaan* by Muhammad al-Sabuni was not a work in the prophetic tradition but a work in Quranic Sciences. It could be that the informant made a mistake in reporting the topic of this book or misreported the names of the author. Alternatively, he may have been referring to another book with a similar title that I was not able to trace.

Mecca, Saudi Arabia) in prophetic traditions, these works and their authors were very much in line with the traditionalist approach rather than the Salafi reformist orientation of the authors of AIU's textbooks mentioned above.

These changes in the educational curriculum indicate that the Islamic textual canon is being reformulated, and the discursive unity that was dialogically negotiated has experienced a greater dispersal of its consensus. The adherence to the canonical works that represented the accepted legal and theological doctrines is now being challenged and renegotiated. The modern reformist critiques of traditional Islamic doctrines have made their practical mark on the discursive space of Islamic education as evidenced by the adoption of non-canonical works in the educational curriculum that do not reflect traditional theological and legal interpretations of Islam. Some educational institutions across the Muslim world go so far as adopting those reformist views and the works that reflect them. This acceptance of reformist views means that we are in a period of transition where the Islamic textual canon is being renegotiated and revised.

Another arena where a shift has occurred is the discursive practices of knowledge transmission. Both Ima and Mifhdhal expressed concern that Al-Azhar University does not require class attendance, and many students would not attend the class. The educational system at Al-Azhar evaluates students merely on completing examinations/projects. Although this policy of not requiring attendance is not universal among current Islamic educational institutions, Mifhdal attested that friends at the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia told him that this university does require attendance. However, the non-attendance approach to learning at Al-Azhar obviates the traditional requirement of face-to-face interaction (*muwajah*)[53] for knowledge transmission to be valid in formal Islamic education. This learning style indicates a shift in the discursive practices of modern education. However, one would presume that this approach to education is still alive and well at Al-Ahqaf University. For example, as Riza explained, the content in the class texts is transmitted by being read and explained line by line in the class.[54]

This lack of direct connections and relationships with scholars, as reflected in the lack of attendance, required policy changes in the very character of the epistemic community that was historically established between such individuals. Even where attendance was required, there seems to have been no longer that personal connection

[53] See earlier reference defining this concept introduced in: Messick, *The Calligraphic State*.
[54] I also witnessed this method at another traditional and historic Islamic University in Fez Al-Qarawiyyin University in December 2018 while doing field research in Morocco.

between teacher and disciple that was so quintessential to the traditional approach of transmitting knowledge and was reflected in establishing chains of transmission (*isnad*) between teacher and pupil. Instead, this contemporary university education legitimizes itself by institutional affiliation rather than individual relationships.

As far as the social and religious roles that my interlocuters were occupying upon their return to Indonesia, almost all of them were serving in some teaching capacity in Indonesian Islamic primary and secondary schools (*pesenterans*), or they were continuing their graduate education in Indonesian universities (Riza) at the time of interviews. This trend is not unlike the historical pattern where people like al-Sinkili returned the Malay Archipelago to disseminate Islamic teachings after his study sojourn in Arabia. When asked how they can bring their foreign-acquired Islamic knowledge to bear in the Indonesian context, though, few of my interlocuters had any clear plan to socially improve Indonesian society besides teaching. Yet almost all of them implied arenas where reform should take place in matters of Indonesian people's religious beliefs (*aqeedah*) and social ethics (*akhlaq*), and one (Alfi) explicitly articulated a political vision for Islam in Indonesian affairs.

For instance, Riza articulated that Javanese culture, which focused on Islamic beliefs and cultural etiquette/ethics as a matter of identity influenced Indonesian society. Yet their religious situation does not reflect their social reality, as their faith is weak despite the large numbers of Muslims in Indonesia. They do not center their religious identity on their conviction/faith. He said that there is a dichotomy in Indonesians' religious beliefs and behaviour. Some may perform the five pillar rituals of Islam, but they fail to live by Islamic ethics. He also identified two areas where Islamic reform should take place in Indonesia: applying Islamic ethics and striving towards Islamic unity between Muslim groups in Indonesia. He stated that Islamic groups in Indonesia are parochial in their outlook and actions, and that they do what is in the interests of advancing their organization without considering the interests of the larger Muslim population in Indonesia. The way towards unity is for the leaders of these disparate Muslim groups to cooperate in their goals and actions, and the rest of the people will follow.

Riza was asked if he saw a connection between his generation's efforts at propagating and reforming the faith and the role played by historical Islamic missionaries in Indonesia like the legendary *Wali Sangho* and other previous generations who spread Islam. He indicated that there is some historical connection between reform work today and their work. However, the social conditions in Java (Indonesia) are different than in the past. The *Wali Songho* had their way of propagating Islam that was not rigid in terms

of following the rules of religion or imposing cultural norms from another region. This lenient approach, he said, should be followed today in spreading Islam. But as one pursuing a master's degree at Ghadja Mada University, he was aware that modernity has changed the conditions of life in Indonesia. He said that Islamic educators need to understand these realities and to adjust their calls in accordance with these conditions. However, he never specified what this change in approach should look like other than to use modern communication mediums, such as television and the internet.

In contrast to Riza's more religiously and socially oriented message, Alfi struck a more political tone in which he felt the Indonesian state needed to change its man-made (secular) law to *Shariah* (Islamic) law. Nevertheless, he felt this change should occur through dialogue with the authorities rather than coercively. Like others, he articulated that there should also be religious reform at the level of the public to correct people's creedal beliefs that were not consistent with Islam. However, his conception of the proper Islamic creed is more along the Salafiyyist reformist line of his educational background in contrast to the more traditionalist theological beliefs historically preponderant among the learned elite in Indonesian society.

Ima struck a different tone to Alfi and Riza in that she highlighted how her experience abroad led her to personal and intellectual growth and made her understand her society better, giving her better insight into pursuing suitable changes. She said that before studying at Al-Azhar, she thought that Islam spoke only about matters of practice (Shariah), and thus, she did her studies in the Shariah school. She felt that Shariah deals with societal issues and, therefore, needs renewal, while matters of theological doctrine and spirituality do not. But after her studies at Al-Azhar, she understood people should also enact renewal in theological thinking and spiritual practice (*tasawuf*). Before her experience abroad, she understood spirituality as only articulated through traditional spiritual orders (*tariqah*). But after immersing herself in the religious sciences, she understood that one may attain spirituality through intense spiritual devotion without being in such traditional organizations.

Like Riza, though, Ima also believes that teachers and reformers of Islam should know the current socio-historical context of those to whom they are speaking and be able to speak to them at their level. She quotes the prophetic tradition to support this claim: "Speak to people at their levels of intellect." Moreover, she sees her role as a woman in Indonesian society to teach other women that their primary roles should be caretakers and teachers for their children because, if family life is rectified, then the larger life of the society is rectified. But she encourages women to work in society, especially in roles like

teaching or caretaking, because young females have specific questions and problems that only other women can address.

Epistemic Communities Revisited in the Contemporary Context of Eastern Indian Ocean Societies

I have sketched out a theoretical exposition of the relationships between people and knowledge that historically represented a unifying theme within geographically distant Indian Ocean communities. I want to revisit those concepts and relationships to gauge their significance today. What new light does this new data shed on these relationships, and what new concepts did this exposition bring to bear on our understanding of the Indian Ocean world? Suffice it to say that even with the impingement of colonial and neocolonial realities on the peoples of the Indian Ocean World, this study suggests that connectivity between the Eastern and Western littoral regions remains active, especially in knowledge exchange and transmission.

For example, I had the opportunity to observe Murtaza in some of his interactions within his 'epistemic community' when I accompanied him to a gathering of several Sufi groups in Surabaya, with which he was affiliated in August 2007. This large gathering, which was open to the public and may have attracted 10,000 attendees from Indonesian society at large, consisted of several leaders of Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqas*) preaching to the public. The speakers at this event consisted of foreign scholars and spiritual mentors (primarily of Yemeni origin, although they were Saudi residents) and local Indonesian heads of *tariqas*. Among these leaders and preachers were some of Murtaza's teachers and mentors from Yemen's Al-Ahaqaf University, who also gave speeches at this event. The speeches focused on how Muslims can retain their faith and practice considering contemporary challenges to religious observance.

I also observed smaller side gatherings that took place during this period. Among such gatherings was the meeting between the president and founder of Al-Ahaqaf University, Umar al Junaid, and Indonesian graduates from his university, which included Murtaza. During this meeting, he gave them a few directives on how to conduct themselves as religious ambassadors to Indonesian society, representing Al-Ahqaf University's social mission. A part of his charge to these former students is that they must be proactive in carrying the message of Islam to society. For them to do so effectively, they must adorn the outer aspects of the prophetic practice, which has been "hijacked" by the anti-Sufi Salafi movements in Indonesia. He implied that this was the reason for the

growing success of the propagation of Salafi ideas in Indonesian society at the time, as segments of the public perceived them as adhering to prophetic practices. For example, he reproached some of the students for shaving their beards and not adorning clothing that was closer in appearance to the Sunnaic practice.

This episode with the president of Al-Ahqaf University shows that he expected his former students to continue their educational mission in Indonesian society such as how al-Sinkili had done centuries before them. They were expected to play this role by vying with new religious orientations in Indonesia, such as Salafism, to conserve the historically established modalities of religious practice that al-Sinkili had propagated before them (that is, Sufi-based and madhhab-oriented Islam). However, to effectively play this role, they could not appear as if they had abandoned the historically established etiquette of dress and appearance.

Returning to the takeaways from the larger event, this gathering of various Sufi orders in Surabaya reveals that there remains a vibrancy in long-standing iterations of this type of community, where the conventional scholarly networks and cross-regional connections that sustain these communities are still being maintained in some Indonesian religious learning circles. This event demonstrated that spiritual and epistemic ties are still being maintained across the Indian Ocean between Southwest Asia and Southeast Asia through the interactions of scholars and religious specialists. The relationships between scholarly fraternity and the 'civilizing' engagements, as demonstrated by this event, speak to the continuity of epistemic communities that are bridging the natural and political barriers that exist among the peoples of the Indian Ocean.

I also witnessed a similar dynamic when attending one of the religious lectures in a mosque in Yogjakarta, Indonesia, in July of 2007, where an Arab Saudi scholar and professor from the Medina University in Saudi Arabia, came at the behest of his Indonesian students. Saudi Arabia, and Medina University in particular, represent a newer reformist religious orientation of Salafi Islam. What this episode suggests is that other groups of Indonesian seekers of Islamic knowledge are forming epistemic communities with their Southwest Asian mentors, which have an alternative religious orientation than those that have been hitherto present in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, even in such scenarios, epistemic connections remain vibrant in the present context, even though the structural patterns of those connections and engagements may have morphed.

I spoke to the Indonesian student who studied at Medina University and served as the translator for this Saudi professor at the event. He was also a part of the reformist and influential Indonesian organization, the Muhammadiyah, which was established in the

early twentieth century. I asked him about whether his studies in Saudi Arabia inspired him and his colleagues with the spirit of reform within Indonesian Islam, given the historical pattern of religious reform among Southeast Asians who studied abroad. He replied that this spirit of reform in his society is home grown and indigenous to Indonesia and not foreign inspired by his specific education in the Middle East, since the group he belonged to, the Muhammadiyah, was established about a century earlier to invoke reform in Indonesian Islam. This is despite the fact Muhammadiyah was also inspired by early twentieth-century Middle Eastern modern reformists, such as Muhammad Abdu and Rashid Rida.

What events like this demonstrate is that cultural flows across regions of the Indian Ocean World continue to occur, interacting with their indigenous contexts to produce nuanced cultural forms that become rooted in the new environment. Hence, these cultural forms and practices that originate from elsewhere are never merely transplants from the cultural context and historical circumstances that gave birth to them. Yet, do the changes in the discursive practices of dialogical engagement of knowledge transmission and the change in the textual sources indicate a change in the character of the Indian Ocean epistemic communities? Some 'traditional' practices and adherence to canonical sources remain a vibrant modality of learning in some epistemic communities across the Indian Ocean. Much like al-Sinkili's non-institutionally bound education, in which he learned from various teachers who were not necessarily fixed to a formal educational organization such as a particular school or university, so does this independent method of education still exist today, as it always has, side by side with the formalized education in schools and universities.

Nevertheless, the new modalities of educational practice are changing the personal character and individual relationships of knowledge transmission that so constituted the Islamic epistemic communities of the past. The institutional and impersonal character of the new modes of knowledge transmission led me to question whether such epistemic communities can survive in the future without the essentiality of those individual and affective connections and shared aims that made such communities possible. Today's indeterminant and detached contemporary associations between those pursuing knowledge are mediated through modern bureaucratic institutions like formalized universities. In the past, voluntary associations were rooted in formal networks signified by chains of transmission (*isnads*).

Moreover, the dialogical engagement with discourses between interacting parties was the primary driver for epistemic community formation. Those shared discursive

practices of communicative engagement and formalized networks constituted the structural basis for these epistemic communities that traversed space and time. But without establishing these formal yet personal networks through which effective and not merely educational relationships can be found, it is improbable to designate these looser relationships as constituting a community, even while the goals of these new associations are the same.

In addition, the shared discursive space, as represented in the canonical works that these epistemic communities engaged with, has also shifted. This discursive shift is fragmenting the space that previously cemented unity between these physically disparate communities. Yet the loosening of the hold of the traditional Islamic canon over the sort of discourses that are exchanged between the parties of these regions may just mean that there is a shift in the canon that is taking place. Thus, this is a reconstitution of this discursive space of engagement rather than its dissolution. Perhaps what is emerging is the hybrid character of these communities, where some of the historical aspects and practices of the community remain active. At the same time, new types of relationships graft themselves over the existing structures.

Conclusion

Having discussed the social networks and engagements historically manifested in particular civilizations, I want to conclude with a brief discussion of how the geographic backdrop of the Indian Ocean gave these scholarly activities a distinctive quality. Unlike other communities that were localized in their territories, these epistemic communities belonged to localized societies in which they were rooted and maintained communal connections with other groups that straddled this oceanic space. These multi-dimensional relationships gave these territorially loose but collectively tight-knit epistemic communities a cosmopolitanism that they disseminated in their local communities. In addition, these relationships brought about the cross-fertilization of cultures. Societies of the Indian Ocean World are some of the most globally diverse, which is often manifested in the co-existence of multiple ethnic groups and linguistic plurality that is the hallmark of this region. The formation of such epistemic communities is about one manifestation of the unities within the Indian Ocean World.