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BEYOND COLONIAL ARCHIVES: DECOLONIZING INDONESIAN ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY THROUGH EPISTEMIC PLURALISM

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism in the historiography of Indonesian Islam and the impact they continue to have on contemporary Islamic Studies. Although colonialism and capitalism have been heavily criticized in the past for their bearing on contemporary knowledge production, they have been neglected in knowledge-based research on Indonesian Islamic intellectual traditions, which are regarded as legitimate sources of knowledge. In this research, we applied a qualitative approach that takes into account critical archival analysis of two important British colonial texts, *The History of Java* (1817) and *The History of Sumatra* (1783), and the semi-structured interviews conducted with scholars at SOAS University of London, University of Oxford, and University of Birmingham. We found that colonial epistemic hierarchies still exist in academic institutions, and that the systems of archival authority, publishing practices, citation politics, and the production and validation of theory each have their own mechanisms. Rather than examining colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism as separate historical processes, we thought of them as jointly constitutive structural actors that influence

the production and circulation of knowledge in Islam. As a result, Indonesian Islamic intellectual traditions, including pesantren epistemologies, oral transmission, and local knowledge of intellectual practices, are valuable tools for epistemic pluralism and the decolonization of Islamic historiography. The article argues that decolonizing Islamic historiography, beyond postcolonial critique, is about epistemic reconstruction, in which Indonesian Islamic intellectual practices are seen not only as empirical objects of study but also as legitimate sources of conceptual and theoretical innovation. The study contributes to contemporary Islamic studies by bringing together colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism as interrelated frameworks and by positioning Indonesian Islamic historiography as a plural and generative site of knowledge creation.

Keywords: *Decolonial Historiography, Indonesian Islam, Coloniality of Knowledge, Epistemic Justice, Epistemic Pluralism.*

A. Introduction

For more than two centuries, the historiography of Islam in Indonesia has been shaped by epistemic traditions developed from colonial structures of power. Indonesian Islam was largely produced, spread, and legitimized through interpretive frameworks originating outside the archipelago. It has therefore been seen as an empirical object rather than as a source of Islamic thought. European administrative, missionary, traveler, and scholar accounts have shaped interpretive categories that continue to inform contemporary understanding of Indonesian Islam. To decolonize Indonesian Islamic historiography, it is important to examine how epistemic assumptions embedded in colonial archives continue to inform the creation, validation, and circulation of knowledge in modern Islamic Studies.

This article argues that such epistemic continuity cannot be adequately explained through colonialism alone. Rather, it emerges through the mutually constitutive relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism. Colonialism established the political conditions of rule; capitalism supplied the material logic of imperial expansion; and orientalism provided the epistemic legitimacy through which colonial authority became intelligible and reproducible. Rather than representing separate

historical processes, these dimensions are conceptualized here as components of an enduring epistemic order that continues to organize knowledge production within contemporary Islamic Studies.

Postcolonial scholarship has fundamentally altered the way we understand colonial knowledge by making it clear that representations of the East were inextricably linked to political power. Said (1978) identified orientalism as the discourse through which colonial authority was represented, and non-European peoples were ruled, and Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (1994) showed how colonial discourse marginalized subaltern voices and reproduced unequal power relations. Recent scholarship has extended this critique beyond representation to the institutional organization of knowledge, the construction of intellectual canons, and the question of who possesses epistemic authority within Islamic Studies (Alatas, 2021; Belhaj, 2023; Hallaq, 2018). Such scholarship demonstrates that the authority of knowledge cannot be separated from the structures through which knowledge is produced, authorized, and circulated.

The literature has subsequently shifted attention from colonial representation towards the institutional conditions of knowledge production. Stoler (2009) reconceptualized archives as technologies of governance, while Chakrabarty (2000), Mignolo (2009), and Santos (2015) argued that decolonization requires confronting the epistemic hierarchies through which particular forms of knowledge acquire universal status. Recent work further demonstrates that coloniality continues to shape Islamic Studies by privileging Eurocentric systems of knowledge production and marginalizing analytical traditions developed within the Islamic intellectual tradition (Lumbard, 2022). These perspectives provide the conceptual basis for moving from postcolonial critique towards epistemic reconstruction.

Indonesian Islam, in particular, plays a central role in this longer-term debate, but it is not widely studied in the literature on the decolonization of Islamic historical thinking. Islamic

intellectual traditions evolved in the Indonesian archipelago over centuries through interactions with local cultures, transregional scholarly networks, and religious institutions, producing a variety of knowledge that challenges conventional ideas about the geography of Islamic thought. The *pesantren* tradition, for instance, is a cultural order in which *adab*, interpersonal transmission, scholarly trustworthy chains (*sanad*), and the relationships between teachers and students are at its heart. Its methods of knowledge transmission suggest that intellectual legitimacy can be generated through scholarly ties, recognition within the community, and inherited chains of authority over texts rather than through textual authority or modern academic institutions (Cahyadi et al., 2025; Hidayati, 2025). Indonesian Islam, therefore, should not be treated merely as a case through which theories developed elsewhere are empirically examined, but as a longstanding intellectual tradition whose transregional networks and locally situated forms of Islamic knowledge offer important resources for rethinking the study of Islam (Azra, 2004; Woodward, 2010)

These are important things to know, but there is a significant gap in the literature that needs to be filled. In the case of colonial historiography, the focus remained more on the biases embedded in imperial archives, while postcolonial scholarship has been on deconstructing Orientalist ideas of Islam. Recent decolonial studies have helped broaden the scope of epistemic justice, cognitive pluralism, and the recovery of indigenous knowledge systems. However, little has been done to examine how colonial epistemologies are still prevalent in the current academic institutions that still shape legitimate knowledge about Islam.

As such, the relationship between the historical creation of colonial knowledge and its ongoing institutional reproduction is not well understood, especially in the context of Indonesian Islamic historiography. Although Azra (2004) and Woodward (2010) have shown the richness and range of Indonesian Islamic intellectual traditions, the latter are often seen more as empirical

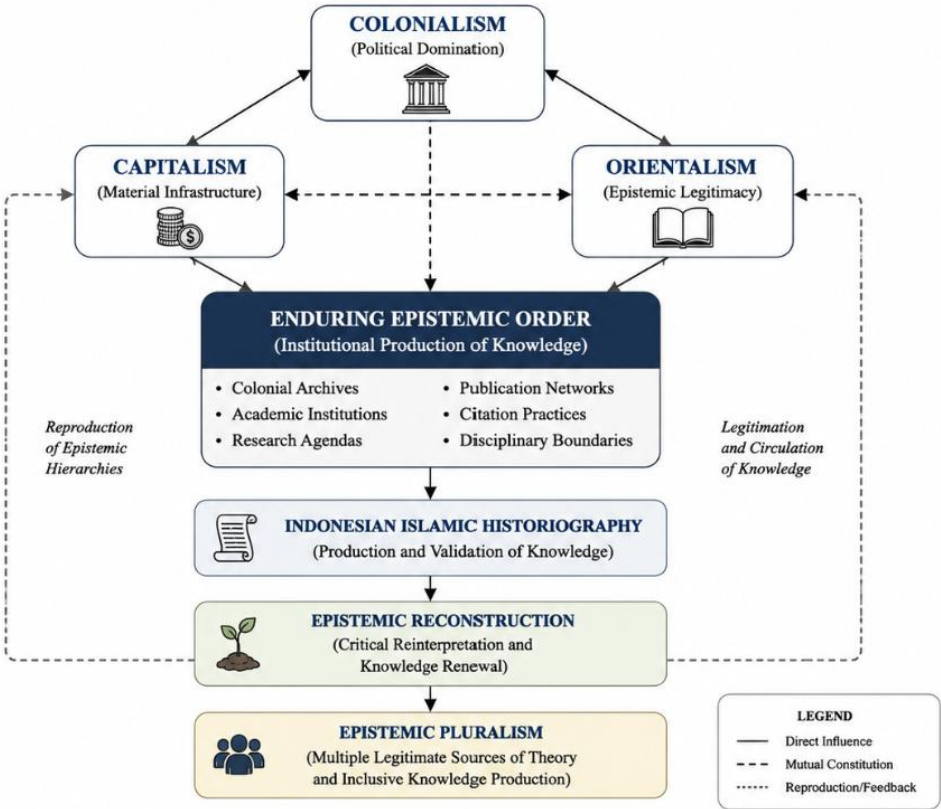
objects of research than as sources for theoretical development. Similarly, Mashud (2024) argues that Islamic Studies still favors Euro-American conceptual structures and that scholars from the Global South are primarily producers of empirical data rather than theorists.

Unlike previous papers that treat colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism as separate analytical frameworks, this paper argues that they should be understood as mutually constitutive components of a single epistemic order. By examining their interaction, one may also understand how knowledge about Indonesian Islam was constructed in the colonial period, and how it is still reproduced in contemporary academic institutions, publication practices, and intellectual authority. By linking critical archival work with empirical evidence from interviews with scholars in the UK, this study goes beyond critiques of colonial discourse to examine the modernization of epistemic authority in Islamic studies. By doing this, the article moves Indonesian Islamic historiography away from a historical subject of study and into the theoretical field, and contributes to wider discussions on epistemic justice, epistemic pluralism, and the decolonization of knowledge.

To fill this gap, this analysis should look not just at colonial archives but also at the structures through which knowledge about Islam is now created and legitimized. This study thus examines British universities as historically important epistemic sites in Islamic Studies, not merely as places where interviews were conducted. Institutions such as SOAS University of London, the University of Oxford, and the University of Birmingham have long shaped scholarship through their archives, research traditions, and international academic networks. Examining scholars working in these institutions offers an opportunity to examine how colonial epistemologies are reproduced, negotiated, and transformed in contemporary Islamic studies by those engaged in them. Drawing together the foregoing discussion, this study makes three contributions to contemporary Islamic Studies. First, it conceptualizes colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism as

mutually constitutive dimensions of an enduring epistemic order, providing a more integrated explanation of how colonial knowledge continues to shape Indonesian Islamic historiography. Second, it demonstrates how this epistemic order is reproduced through contemporary academic institutions rather than remaining confined to colonial archives. Third, it repositions Indonesian Islamic intellectual traditions from empirical objects of investigation to legitimate sources of theoretical innovation. Together, these contributions move the discussion beyond postcolonial critique towards a framework of epistemic reconstruction grounded in epistemic pluralism.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of the Enduring Epistemic Order in Indonesian Islamic Historiography*



Source: Author's synthesis based on Foucault (1980), Said (1978), Chakrabarty (2000), and Azra (2004, 2006)

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, historical research approach to examine the impact of colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism on Indonesian Islamic historiography as an enduring epistemic order. Structured within an interpretivist epistemology, the study assumes that historical knowledge is socially constructed and reproduced through discourse, institutional practices, and scholarship. Rather than presenting colonialism as a final historical event, the study seeks to understand the epistemic structures of colonialism that continue to shape knowledge production in Islamic Studies. A qualitative interpretive perspective is best suited, as it is the meanings, institutional processes, and epistemic assumptions through which historical knowledge is generated, legitimized, and maintained that will guide the analysis, and we do not want to know the cause (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study uses critical archival analysis with expert semi-structured interviews. We are interested in the historical origins and the dissemination of colonial epistemic authority. The archival documents provide evidence of how colonial representations of Indonesian Islam were created, and contemporary scholars interview us and discuss how these epistemic legacies are being worked out in the contemporary academic world. Rather than treating archival documents and interviews as separate pieces of evidence, both are complementary sources that will help in understanding the persistence of colonial knowledge in Islamic Studies.

Data were collected in two stages between 2023 and 2024. A first step was a critical examination of two foundational colonial texts: Thomas Stamford Raffles' *The History of Java* (Raffles, 1830) and William Marsden's *The History of Sumatra* (Marsden, 1784). These are some of the earliest attempts by British colonial scholars to categorize, interpret, and institutionalize knowledge about Indonesian societies and Islam. Rather than thinking of these texts as objective historical records, this study treats them

as epistemic artifacts through which colonial assumptions, classificatory practices, and epistemic authority were embedded in subsequent scholarship. The archival analysis was further contextualized through contemporary literature on colonialism, orientalism, decolonial theory, and Indonesian Islamic historiography.

The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews with four scholars affiliated with British universities whose research focuses on Indonesian Islam, Islamic Studies, colonial history, and Southeast Asian studies. British universities were selected because they have historically been among the main hubs for the production, preservation, and circulation of knowledge about Indonesia through extensive colonial archives, manuscript collections, and long-established academic traditions in Southeast Asian and Islamic studies. The study of scholars working within these institutions thus offers some insight into how colonial epistemic legacies are still being interpreted, challenged, and reproduced in contemporary academic contexts.

Participants were selected based on purposive expert sampling to capture complementary disciplinary perspectives relevant to the research questions. There were three criteria: (1) a well-known scholarly background in Indonesian Islam, Islamic Studies, colonial history, or Southeast Asian studies; (2) membership in British universities that have established research expertise in these disciplines; (3) a long history of publication for which the researcher has a sustained interest in the topics directly related to the study. Semi-structured interviews were used because the questions were well integrated and participants were able to explain their backgrounds to one another (Kallio et al., 2016). Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, with additional interviews yielding no substantially new analytical themes.

Table 1. *Interview Participants*

Participant	Role/Institution	Area of Expertise
Mulaika Hijjas	Reader in Southeast Asian Studies, School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, SOAS University of London	Malay Literature and Islamic Manuscripts, Southeast Asian Studies
Kostas Retsikas	Reader in Social Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS University of London	Anthropology of Islam, Anthropology of Southeast Asia
Paul Salahuddin Armstrong	Muslim Chaplain at the University of Birmingham	Islamic Studies, Multifaith Relations, Counter-Extremism, Human Rights
Aliya Khalid	Senior Lecture at the Department of Comparative and International Education, Department of Education, University of Oxford	Comparative Education, Epistemic Justice in Education, South Asian Studies

Source: Author's interview data

The interview topics covered four interrelated themes: (1) the continuing influence of colonial historiography on Indonesian Islam; (2) colonial knowledge and capitalist systems of power; (3) the persistence and evolution of Orientalist thinking in the context of contemporary Islamic studies; and (4) the possibility of reconstructing Indonesian Islamic historiography using epistemic pluralism. All interviews took place face-to-face and audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for analytic accuracy. Excerpts from the data are presented in the Findings section to illustrate the main themes explored.

Ethical principles for qualitative research were followed in this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before each interview, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their

participation, confidentiality, and the intended scholarly applications of the data, and they provided consent. Interview materials were securely stored, and the participants' views were accurately and responsibly described throughout the analysis process.

Data analysis integrated critical archival analysis and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). First, archival materials were examined to see recurring representations of Indonesian Islam, mechanisms of epistemic authority, and institutional practices embedded in colonial knowledge production. Interview transcripts were coded inductively and then grouped into wider themes for the research framework: colonial knowledge, capitalism, orientalism, epistemic authority, and epistemic pluralism. Rather than considering the two datasets separately, the study presented them as an iterative study, with archival data informing the interpretation of interview data, and the interview results providing contemporary perspectives of colonial texts that could be critically reinterpreted. The concept of the continuing epistemic order served as the primary analytical lens for examining how colonial archives, institutional practices, and contemporary scholarly discourses reproduce and negotiate epistemic authority in Indonesian Islamic historiography.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed methodological triangulation by combining archival data with expert interviews (Patton, 2014). This was done in an effort to develop credibility, as both sources of evidence are continuously compared; reflexivity, as it is recognized that interpretations of colonial archives are influenced by contemporary epistemological perspectives and the researcher's position. Rather than providing a single-objective interpretation, the study offers an empirically grounded explanation of how colonial epistemologies continue to shape knowledge production in contemporary Islamic Studies.

C. Findings

1. Colonial Knowledge as an Epistemic Infrastructure

The interviews consistently indicate that British scholars no longer regard colonial archives as neutral repositories of historical facts. Instead, they viewed colonial records as historical products of political, intellectual, and institutional processes that shaped how Indonesian Islam was recorded, classified, and interpreted. In the interviews, colonialism was perceived not just as territorial domination but also as a form of knowledge production that has had a profound epistemic influence on contemporary Islamic historiography.

Some people who have been involved in these discussions have argued that archival collections should not be viewed simply as documentary evidence but rather as products of historical power relations. Mulaika Hijjas (Personal communication, December 6, 2023) contended that archives are an institutional manifestation of the knowledge preserved, organized, and transmitted within an institution over generations. On the subject of scholarship as power, she said that “the making of science is related to power”, and she believed that knowledge production has always been part of a larger political system rather than a separate intellectual enterprise. That colonial archives need to be interpreted critically, she said, because the way in which they were created, preserved, and circulated is associated with colonial power.

The archival analysis supports this interpretation. Both *The History of Java* by Thomas Stamford Raffles (1830) and *The History of Sumatra* by William Marsden (1784) categorized Indonesian societies according to colonial administrative priorities. Rather than simply describing local religious life, these works structured knowledge in ways that made Indonesian Islam understandable from a colonial perspective. Thus, the archives were not just historical records but epistemic tools that would inform Islam in the Indonesian archipelago.

One of the most interesting findings we have made is the geographical structure of knowledge in Islamic studies. Kostas Retsikas (Personal communication, December 8, 2023) has noticed that British scholarship has long treated the Middle East as the center of the Islamic world, while Southeast Asia has only been sidelined. His conclusion is that this imbalance is not solely due to individual scholarly interests but rather due to the institutional roots of an earlier Orientalist scholarship. Thus, Indonesia, despite having one of the world's largest Muslim populations, has been left out of these dominant narratives of Islamic history.

Participants also distinguished between studying colonial history and reproducing colonial epistemologies. Armstrong (Personal communication, December 11, 2023) argued that British engagement with Islam in Indonesia extended beyond formal colonial administration to commercial exchanges, regional political networks, and intellectual interactions across Southeast Asia. That view suggests colonial relations were, in fact, more complex than mere political domination. However, Armstrong (Personal communication, December 11, 2023) also recognized that colonial categories and historical narratives continue to inform contemporary discussions of Indonesian Islam, even as more critical studies are being undertaken today.

In the interviews, the majority of participants stressed the need to read colonial archives in context rather than within a positivist framework. Historical documents were believed to be useful tools for better understanding Indonesia's Islamic past, but whatever they were, they were shaped by political and intellectual conditions that made them suitable for that purpose. Instead of dismissing colonial archives, they suggested reading them alongside indigenous sources, local historiographies, and contemporary critical scholarship to uncover aspects of Indonesian Islam that had previously been neglected by the academic community. This is part of a wider trend away from viewing archives as objective evidence; rather, they are

representations of history and power that must be constructed in ways that reflect differences in knowledge and power.

Combined, these results show that British scholars agree on the epistemic status of colonial knowledge. The participants were diverse in their fields but agreed that colonial archives remain the primary source of knowledge about Indonesian Islam, shaped by inherited classifications, institutional practices, and historical modes of representation. The empirical evidence suggests that colonial knowledge should not be understood as a legacy of the past but rather as a lasting epistemic infrastructure that continues to shape contemporary Islamic historiography.

2. Colonialism and Capitalism as Interconnected Systems of Power

We find that the interview participants share a general understanding of colonialism as a multifaceted system that extends beyond territorial occupation. Rather than just political domination, they linked colonialism to economic and epistemic structures that allowed for imperial expansion. In the interviews, colonial power was understood as the simultaneous seizure of territories, resources, labor, and knowledge, and political authority and economic interests were related rather than separate.

Aliya Khalid (Personal communication, December 13, 2023) placed colonialism at the center of broader, enduring structures of global inequality. Rather than viewing colonialism as an event in the nineteenth century, she emphasized that its history, capitalism, and other forms of domination still influence contemporary international relations. Her reflections suggest that colonialism remains alive and well not only in memory but also in unequal economic institutions, global governance, and asymmetric modes of knowledge production. From this perspective, colonialism is a dynamic, lived system whose historical foundations continue to influence the contemporary political and economic landscape.

Participants also highlighted that knowledge production was a core component of these interrelated institutions of power. Mulaika Hijjas (Personal communication, December 6, 2023) states that scholarly knowledge is not politically neutral: “the making of science is related to power.” In her view, colonial expansion was based not only on administrative control and economic extraction but also on the production of authoritative knowledge. Archives, historical narratives, and academic institutions were crucial vehicles by which colonial rule was legitimized and reproduced. Thus, knowledge production came to be seen as part of the political economy of colonial powers rather than as a separate scholarly activity.

Despite these enduring historical pillars, such as the one mentioned above, some participants also discussed how Indonesia is changing its international position today. Armstrong (Personal communication, December 11, 2023) argued that Indonesia should no longer be viewed solely through a colonial lens. Rather, Indonesia is expanding its engagement with organizations such as ASEAN and the G20 and is thus becoming increasingly active in regional and global affairs. Nevertheless, Armstrong (Personal communication, December 11, 2023) maintained that many of the structural asymmetries established during the colonial period remain present in international politics and finance. Thus, postcolonial agency and historical structural constraints, as they pertain to Indonesia, are not at odds but interdependent.

The archival research corroborates these interviews by demonstrating that British colonial knowledge was intimately tied to administrative and economic goals. Both Thomas Stamford Raffles (1830) and William Marsden (1784) recorded Indonesian society using classificatory methods that could serve political governance, commercial interests, and resource management at once. Their accounts of local economies, trade networks, agricultural production, and religious communities were not just descriptive records but part of a wider body of knowledge that facilitated colonial administration and advanced imperial economic priorities. The archival evidence, therefore,

demonstrates how political authority, economic interests, and knowledge production were all part of the same colonial rule.

Throughout interviews and archival materials, participants opposed attempts to separate colonial governance from the economic mechanisms that supported it. Instead, colonialism was a collective system of power where the political power structures, capitalist expansion, and knowledge production worked in concert to create and maintain imperial authority. Despite participants having different perspectives on the relationship, they largely agreed that these aspects cannot be understood as separate aspects of colonial governance, because each reinforced the operation of the others during colonial times and remains part of their legacy now.

Overall, we find that the majority of participants agree that colonialism cannot be explained solely by political control. It was indeed an interrelated system of governance, economic accumulation, and knowledge production that was mutually reinforcing. This empirical convergence demonstrates that the production of knowledge about Indonesian Islam was structural in the context of colonial power, whose political and economic policies still influence present-day views of the region.

3. Orientalism as Epistemic Authority

The interviews suggest wide agreement among participants on Orientalism, which extends beyond cultural representations of the East to encompass the institutional system of knowledge in Islamic Studies. Rather than seeing orientalism as a historical discourse, participants were associated with how academic authority is produced, organized, and reproduced through universities, archives, publication practices, and disciplinary traditions. While the interviewees recognized that many things have changed in British academia over the past 10 years, they also said that the intellectual legacy of earlier Orientalist periods still shapes research in Islamic Studies, both its future and its geographic direction.

One of the most salient aspects that emerged in the interviews was the interplay between knowledge production and institutional authority. Mulaika Hijjas (Personal communication, December 6, 2023) argued that scholarly knowledge is not politically neutral and that “the making of science is related to power.” Thus, intellectual authority is not just rooted in scholarly inquiry but also shaped by institutional choices regarding archives, publication, funding, and the recognition of particular forms of knowledge. Her analysis implies that orientalism is not just a historical discourse but also a process by which certain epistemic traditions are accorded greater legitimacy than others.

Participants also stressed the geographical location of Islamic Studies as a continuing feature of knowledge production. Kostas Retsikas (Personal communication, December 8, 2023) noted that Western universities have long focused on the Middle East as the intellectual center of the Muslim world, while Muslim societies in Southeast Asia have been underrepresented in the literature. This geographical orientation has shaped research agendas and broader assumptions about where authoritative knowledge of Islam is generated. As such, Indonesia has been seen as a site for empirical research and not a place to contribute theoretical knowledge in the world of Muslims, despite its importance.

Although acknowledging these historical continuities, participants reported many institutional changes in British academia in recent years. Interviewees did not defend classical Orientalist theories but said universities have increasingly questioned inherited terminologies, archival practices, and disciplinary assumptions. This institutional reflection has enabled us to think more critically about the historical relationship between academic knowledge and colonial power and has opened new territory for incorporating regional perspectives into Islamic Studies.

The archival evidence supports these observations. Thomas Stamford Raffles and William Marsden considered Indonesian

Islam through European intellectual categories and colonial administrative priorities, and they did not merely document Indonesian society; they developed conceptual frameworks that shaped the understanding of Islam in Southeast Asia as a whole. From these archival materials, we know that external interpretive categories were incorporated in the scholarly literature while indigenous intellectual traditions were comparatively neglected.

In interviews and archival materials, participants maintained that reassessing inherited intellectual frameworks does not mean rejecting the historical value of colonial archives. Rather, they suggested a more critical engagement with these materials and that a variety of centers of knowledge production and broader intellectual traditions are essential to their work. This shared perspective is a sign of an increasing willingness to study not only which sources are present and which institutions are establishing scholarly authority, but also how that authority is established.

Overall, the results suggest that participants view orientalism less as a set of explicit cultural stereotypes than as an institutional pattern through which academic authority is still developed and reproduced. The British scholarship, as we know it, is becoming more self-reflective, but it is the inherited assumptions about geography, archives, and scholarly legitimacy that still influence the production of knowledge about Indonesian Islam.

4. Towards Epistemic Pluralism

The interviews show a broad agreement that decolonizing Indonesian Islamic historiography should not be seen simply as denying colonial narratives or substituting one historical interpretation for another. Instead, participants described decolonization as a constant process of re-evaluating how knowledge about Indonesian Islam is produced, validated, and circulated within contemporary Islamic Studies. Although formal colonial rule is over, interviewees argued that many of the

institutional and intellectual structures underwritten by the colonial period persist in historical research and scholarly interpretation.

A recurring theme is the importance of colonial archives. While all agreed that colonial records remain important resources for understanding Indonesia's Islamic history, they stressed that they should not be seen as neutral historical documents. Mulaika Hijjas (Personal communication, December 6, 2023) has argued over the past 10 years that the intellectual legacy of earlier scholars holds that archival collections embody historical power relations, and that our decisions on preservation, classification, and accessibility affect how we know history. Kostas Retsikas (Personal communication, December 8, 2023) also noted that inherited geographic priorities in Islamic studies still privilege certain areas and limit the attention of other regions, such as Southeast Asia. All of these things together suggest that decolonization will not mean the abandonment of colonial archives, but rather that they have a place in our minds.

Participants also questioned the long-standing tendency to view Indonesian Islam primarily as an empirical object in theories developed abroad. Instead, they argued that Indonesian intellectual traditions can contribute to more substantive scholarly debates. Indonesia is now of increasing geopolitical and intellectual relevance, Armstrong (Personal communication, December 11, 2023) said, and Indonesia's growing regional and international presence in the world is creating new opportunities for Indonesian scholarship to take part in global scholarship. Aliya Khalid (Personal communication, December 13, 2023) also noted that the rise of new zones of knowledge in Asia is part of a broader shift in the geography of global scholarship and that historically marginalized societies in Asia are playing a more active role in theoretical and conceptual development.

Another key theme is the degree of scholarly collaboration in the postcolonial context. Rather than arguing that Western scholarship must be replaced by a local perspective, they

supported more collegial intellectual discourse in which different scholarly traditions work in tandem. They felt that such collaboration was critical to growing the diversity of perspectives within Islamic Studies and to avoiding the same hierarchical relationship that had been established in earlier academic practices. In this sense, decolonization was, in fact, the process of increasing intra-scientific dialogue rather than replacing one epistemic authority with another.

Archival evidence confirms these interview results. The writings of Thomas Stamford Raffles (1830) and William Marsden (1784) illustrate how colonial knowledge was organized within classificatory frameworks that favored external interpretations of Indonesian Islam. From the interviews, the evidence also suggests that contemporary efforts to decolonize historiography are less about rejecting colonial archives and more about expanding the range of sources, perspectives, and intellectual traditions incorporated into historical interpretation. Indigenous scholarship, local historiography, and regional intellectual traditions were always regarded as essential complements to colonial records, as they are for a more balanced view of Indonesian Islamic history.

The results indicate that participants understand decolonization as an epistemic rather than a political project. They repeatedly emphasized the importance of critically evaluating inherited intellectual frameworks and a more inclusive form of knowledge production in interviews and archival analysis. Rather than replacing a single center of scholarly authority with another, participants envisioned a more pluralistic intellectual environment in which Indonesian Islamic traditions were recognized as legitimate contributors to knowledge production in Islamic studies.

D. Discussion

1. From Colonialism to Coloniality: Understanding an Enduring Epistemic Order

The findings, however, show that colonialism cannot be understood as a historical event that ended when the empire's government gave up imperial rule. In the interviews, some people also reported that colonial archives, institutional practices, and scholarly traditions continue to influence knowledge about Indonesian Islam in the production of these oral histories. Rather than a purely political manifestation of an era of domination, the evidence shows that colonialism's most enduring legacy lies in the epistemic processes through which history is collected, authorized, and reproduced. This is why the challenge is not just that colonialism is in history, but also in colonial ways of knowing.

This perspective is consistent with decolonial scholarship that distinguishes colonialism from coloniality. While colonialism refers to the historical experience of imperial rule, coloniality refers to the continuation of colonial patterns of power beyond political independence (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000). The interview findings support this distinction. Participants did not argue that colonial governments remain in place; rather, they indicated that institutional arrangements, archival practices, disciplinary traditions, and intellectual hierarchies established during the colonial period continue to influence contemporary Islamic Studies. This persistence of epistemic hierarchy is also reflected in recent scholarship on Islamic knowledge, which argues that contemporary Muslim intellectual traditions continue to negotiate epistemic authority within structures shaped by modern Western epistemology (Lumbard, 2022). Thus, coloniality operates primarily as an epistemic mechanism rather than as a form of direct political administration.

This approach is also closely related to the findings. Most of the literature on coloniality has been in general philosophical or sociological terms. In this study, however, coloniality is visible in the context of Indonesian Islamic historiography. The interviews

demonstrate that colonial archives are still seen as sources of authority, and that the institutional culture of universities and research traditions continue to determine which regions, sources, and intellectual traditions are central to the study of Islam. Coloniality then seems not only abstract but also an observable feature within everyday academic practice.

The archival analysis supports this view. Raffles's (1830) and Marsden's (1784) works were not only stories of Indonesian society; they were also categorized by language and structure, and organized knowledge was organized according to administrative priorities and the intellectual assumptions of colonial administration. These volumes, as the findings show, served as the foundational texts for subsequent historiography and, in this way, contributed to the establishment of particular narrative views of Indonesian Islam. Their continued impact shows how colonial knowledge has survived not only because of its historical significance but also because it was woven into the institutional systems that transmit academic knowledge from generation to generation.

We should also consider how colonial knowledge might be understood in the light of the present findings. Historical colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism are viewed as related but very different phenomena currently. The empirical evidence in this study suggests that we can take this analysis a step further by viewing their relationship in a combined context. The participants linked political authority, economic interest, and scholarly knowledge in common as distinct historical processes. Colonial archives, economic governance, and academic institutions became integral elements of a whole system of epistemic authority from which political authority was created and maintained. This integrated perspective is more able to explain the continued impact of colonial knowledge than any other approach that considers these dimensions individually.

As a result, this study proposes examining these interconnections as an enduring epistemic order, an institutional

structure governing how historical knowledge is created, legitimized, circulated, and reproduced over time. This epistemic order is different from coloniality, which primarily emphasizes colonial power; an enduring epistemic order is what makes the system of institutions and practices that hold power in academic institutions, archives, disciplinary traditions, and research processes so powerful, for example. Thus, it will serve as an analytical tool for understanding why colonial knowledge persists even in the absence of formal colonial rule.

This conceptualization also sheds light on the broader significance of Indonesian Islamic historiography. Thus, historiography is more than just the reconstruction of past events; instead, it is an arena in which different forms of knowledge compete for legitimacy and authority. Decolonizing historiography, then, has to do with more than correcting historical errors; it also entails critically examining the epistemic frameworks through which one narrative becomes dominant while the other is marginalized. This is the basis of the discussion that follows on capitalism, orientalism, and the reconstruction of more pluralistic knowledge production.

2. Capitalism and Orientalism as Mutually Constitutive Dimensions of the Enduring Epistemic Order

The results suggest that colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism should not be viewed as distinct historical phenomena but together as constitutive dimensions of a single epistemic order. But the most recent discourse has focused on studying these three dimensions separately: colonialism as political domination, capitalism as economic expansion, and orientalism as cultural representation. The empirical evidence gathered in the study shows that these dimensions were simultaneously shaped by interconnected institutional processes that influenced knowledge production and political power. Rather than being interlinked processes, they supported each other and helped maintain the historical organization of knowledge about Indonesian Islam.

The interviews demonstrate that participants connected colonial governance to capitalist expansion. Aliya Khalid's analysis of the enduring connection between colonial legacies and global inequality shows that colonialism cannot be divorced from the economic systems that enabled capitalism's global spread (Aliya Khalid, personal communication, December 13, 2023). Such findings are consistent with the historical literature, which indicates that colonialism was an integral feature of European colonialism, that territorial conquest was linked to commercial interests, resource extraction, and the incorporation of colonized societies into expanding world markets (Harvey, 2003; Rodney, 2018). However, the present study also shows that economic domination cannot explain the persistence of colonial influence. Colonial governance required intellectual mechanisms that conferred legitimacy, intelligibility, and institutional reproducibility on imperial authority.

The results also indicate the continuing relevance of orientalism. Said (1978) argued that Orientalism produced authoritative representations through which the West interpreted and ruled the East. These findings generally support this view and imply that the current nature of orientalism as a concept has become more institutionalized rather than merely symbolic. They never reported explicit cultural stereotypes or overt civilizational hierarchies. Instead, they found that structures of academic authority still exist and are evident not only in institutions but also in archives, disciplinary boundaries, publication networks, research funding, and geographical context. Orientalism seems less like a discourse of representation than an institutional framework that governs the production and validation of scholarly knowledge. Recent decolonial scholarship similarly demonstrates that academic disciplines can reproduce Euro-Western epistemic frameworks by treating them as universal while marginalizing alternative modes of knowing (Emmanuel, 2024)

This interpretation expands rather than opposes Said's original formulation. While Said has mainly addressed the politics

of representation, we have seen here that epistemic authority is reproduced within the institutional framework. The ongoing concentration of theoretical production within a few academic centers shows that Orientalism survives not only through ideas but also through institutional structures that produce, circulate, and recognize knowledge. Such asymmetries also reflect the unequal organization of intellectual labor within global academia (Alatas, 2021; Bourdieu, 1988). This is what resonates with later postcolonial and decolonial research that shifted attention away from textual representation and towards the institutional conditions under which knowledge is produced (Mignolo, 2009; Santos, 2015).

As much as this vision is based on coloniality (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000), it is analytically distinct because epistemic authority is not only institutionally reproduced but also serves as the intellectual basis of colonial power. The notion of enduring epistemic order thus represents a meso-level analytical framework connecting macro-historical structures to the everyday institutional practices through which knowledge continues to be produced, validated, and circulated in contemporary Islamic Studies.

The study suggests that capitalism and orientalism played complementary roles in the colonial project. Capitalism provided the material conditions for imperial expansion, including access to resources and the incorporation of colonized peoples into global economic systems. Orientalism was the epistemic basis of these unequal relations, making them intelligible, legitimate, and academically reproducible. Thus, colonial rule was not only based on military or administrative power but also on knowledge. Economic domination produced the need for knowledge, and, at the same time, knowledge production legitimized and stabilized political and economic domination.

The integrated perspective of such analysis is one of the key theoretical contributions of this paper. Rather than treating colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism as distinct variables, the

results suggest that these are interdependent aspects of an ever-developing epistemic order. This perspective is more powerful for explaining why colonial-era knowledge remains prevalent in Indonesian Islamic history even after colonial rule ended. The existence of coloniality cannot be explained solely by political history or economic dependency; it must also be understood in terms of the continued institutionalization of epistemic authority in contemporary Islamic Studies.

3. Indonesian Islam as a Source of Theory

The most crucial insight here is the intellectual position of Indonesian Islam in international Islamic studies. The interviews consistently underscore that Indonesia should not be viewed as a regional case in which existing theories are demonstrated or tested, but rather as an intellectual tradition that can shape broader theoretical discussions of Islam, history, and knowledge production. This is different from simply the empirical position of Indonesian Islam as an academic field to the epistemic perspective of how it can contribute to the conceptual development of this field.

Indonesian Islam has always been a peripheral place in the world of Islamic knowledge. Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population and has a rich set of Islamic intellectual traditions, including civic traditions that have fueled debate on Islam, democracy, and civil society (Hefner, 2000). Yet the theoretical discourse in Islamic Studies has largely been based on experiences in the Middle East, which have been reproduced in scholarship, institutional frameworks, research priorities, and the communication of academic authority. Indonesian Islam has been seen as an empirical object of study rather than as an emerging field of theoretical research.

The results confirm this long-standing asymmetry. The scholars also highlighted the intellectual depth of Indonesian Islamic traditions and questioned the assumption that academic authority is inherited from a central campus. Their reflections also

point to the general diversity of Indonesian Islam (in terms of its influence by local cultures, plural social structures, and democratic political institutions) and to the fertile ground it offers for thinking more generally about religion, society, and history. Indonesia is not a unique or peripheral case in Islam, but it has empirical experience that could offer new theoretical perspectives at the intersection of religion, society, and history. This argument is consistent with recent calls for greater epistemic sovereignty in Muslim intellectual traditions, which challenge the reduction of Islamic knowledge to an object defined primarily through external academic frameworks (Lumbard, 2024).

This interpretation is consistent with Asad (1986), who treats Islam as a discursive tradition, in which Islamic knowledge is understood as evolving through ways of understanding, rather than as a single cultural center, but rather as a set of interpretive communities with different geographical locations. In this sense, to consider Indonesian Islam as a source of theory is to recognize Islamic intellectual traditions as internally distinctive, historically contingent, and constantly re-interpreted. Indonesian Islam, therefore, is not a deviation from a normative center but one of many legitimate intellectual traditions through which Islamic thought is being developed.

This perspective is also in line with scholarship that calls for greater epistemic diversity in the social sciences. Alatas (2006) asserts that global knowledge production is still characterized by a split in intellectual labor, in which theories are most often produced in the Global North, while the Global South produces empirical material. Similarly, Connell (2020) demonstrates that social theory has historically privileged Northern experiences as universal while downplaying intellectual traditions developed elsewhere. Ahmed (2016) suggests that the intellectual geography of Islam does not stop at its typical centers. His concept of a pluralistic and diverse Islamic tradition supports the view that theoretical innovation can genuinely occur both within and beyond Southeast Asia, not only in the Middle East or in Western academia. Together, these perspectives support the present

findings that the asymmetrical organization of knowledge is an important component of Islamic Studies and that there are still many more opportunities for plural theoretical production.

Importantly, knowing Indonesian Islam as a source of theory does not imply replacing one particular intellectual center with another. The interviews always rejected the idea of constructing an epistemic hierarchy in which local perspectives simply replace Western scholarship. Instead, participants sought a more dialogical intellectual landscape in which multiple traditions of knowledge were mutually integrated. Theories in Indonesia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and other regions are seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive contributions to the advancement of Islamic studies.

This perspective also reframes the idea of decolonization. From the perspective of colonialism, if it operates in unequal epistemic relationships, decolonization cannot be achieved only by recalling forgotten histories or by adding new examples of empirical experience. It also requires expanding the range of locations from which theory itself can grow. Indonesian Islamic historiography thus has a dual function: it documents the historical evolution of Islam in the world and provides the conceptual context in which more general questions about religion, coloniality, pluralism, and knowledge production can be considered.

Thus, these authors propose that the future of Indonesian Islamic historiography is not only in producing more inclusive historical stories, but also in developing its research capacity for theoretical invention. Indonesian Islam, as a source of theory, is a step towards an intellectual space where knowledge is not rooted in a single geographical or civilizational center but in continuous dialogue among diverse epistemic traditions. Indonesian Islam is not only about decolonization but also one of the most critical forces shaping the world, according to Islamic studies. Thus, epistemic pluralism should be seen as not only an ethical

aspiration but also as a scientific foundation for a genuinely global field.

4. Towards Epistemic Pluralism: Reconstructing Indonesian Islamic Historiography

The above discussion has argued that the persistence of colonial influence in Indonesian Islamic historiography cannot be explained solely by the legacy of political domination. Instead, our findings suggest that colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism function in intertwined epistemic systems that shape how knowledge is made, legitimized, and disseminated. A better understanding of these historical processes within an epistemic system can explain why colonial patterns of knowledge persist long after formal imperial rule ends.

That interpretation has important implications for the meaning of decolonization. Much of the literature has focused on recovering marginalized voices, exposing colonial biases, or rewriting historical stories. These are all important and necessary scholarly tasks, but the present results suggest that decolonization should also look at the institutional culture through which historical knowledge is sanctioned and reproduced. Decolonizing historiography cannot be achieved without expanding historical evidence - it means examining the assumptions, categories, and institutional structures that hold scholarly authority and the way that they are constructed. In this sense, decolonization is not simply about rethinking historical information but rather about reconstructing the epistemic basis of historical inquiry.

In this context, epistemic pluralism emerges as a constructive response to the persistent epistemic order identified in this study. Contemporary scholarship on epistemic justice emphasizes the importance of recognizing historically marginalized knowers and knowledge traditions as legitimate participants in scholarly inquiry (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013). Rather than functioning merely as a normative aspiration, epistemic pluralism provides an analytical framework through

which diverse intellectual traditions can participate in the production, evaluation, and refinement of historical knowledge without reproducing hierarchies inherited from colonial scholarship.

For the purposes of this work, epistemic pluralism is not epistemological relativism, in which all forms of knowledge are considered to be equally legitimate irrespective of their methodological bases. It is simply the scholarly condition where different traditions are regarded as legitimate actors in producing, appraising, and improving knowledge. Legitimacy comes from the quality of scholarly argument and evidence, not from the geographical location or historical prestige of the institutions that produce or evaluate knowledge. This emphasis on the conditions under which knowledge becomes legitimate also resonates with recent work on decolonizing higher education, which links epistemic injustice to disciplinary conventions and institutional practices that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge (Stopford, 2025). Then, epistemic pluralism will allow the diversity of voices contributing to scholarship to be greater when the standards of critical inquiry are the same.

In this context, Indonesian Islamic historiography is much more relevant than is often assumed. This is because it not only records the history of Muslim peoples in the archipelago but also generates ideas that can help inform the discussions in Islamic studies. Indonesian experiences of religious pluralism, institutional change, local intellectual traditions, and the interaction between Islam and diverse cultures offer opportunities to develop new research perspectives. Thus, Indonesian Islam is valued not only for its empirical representation but also for its conceptual innovations.

Therefore, this study suggests that the reconstruction of Indonesian Islamic historiography should be understood as an epistemic project grounded in plural forms of knowledge production. This does not entail abandoning colonial archives or dismissing established scholarship. Instead, it calls for these

sources to be situated within a broader intellectual framework in which indigenous traditions, regional scholarship, and global academic conversations can engage on more equitable terms. Recent scholarship on decolonizing Islam similarly cautions against treating decolonization as a simple reversal of existing epistemic hierarchies, emphasizing instead critical engagement, dialogue, and the reconstruction of knowledge across different intellectual traditions (Rahemtulla, 2023; Rane et al., 2024). The objective is therefore neither epistemic replacement nor intellectual fragmentation, but the creation of a more inclusive scholarly space in which different traditions can contribute to the reconstruction of historical knowledge.

The decolonization of Indonesian Islamic historiography, in this sense, cannot be seen as the replacement of one intellectual canon with another. Its greater significance lies in expanding the intellectual space of Islamic Studies so that theoretical innovation can be generated through robust dialogue among multiple epistemic traditions rather than from a single intellectual center of authority. By conceptualizing colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism as mutually constitutive parts of an ongoing epistemic order, we provide a framework for understanding how historical inequalities still shape contemporary knowledge production and how epistemic pluralism is a productive tool for overcoming them. Indonesian Islamic historiography is not just an object of decolonization but also an integral part of the reconstruction of authentic global Islamic studies.

E. Conclusion

This study has investigated how British scholars understand colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism in relation to the historiography of Indonesian Islam through interviews with leading Indonesian and Islamic Studies scholars and archival accounts of colonial texts. These phenomena cannot be understood as isolated historical legacies. Rather, they are embedded in the production of knowledge in the interrelated

institutional and epistemic structures that determine how Indonesian Islamic history is interpreted, authorized, and reproduced. The colonial influence also goes beyond political history to the construction of scholarly knowledge itself.

Based on these findings, we argue that colonialism, capitalism, and orientalism are mutually constitutive elements of an enduring epistemic order, which we take to be one of the main theoretical contributions of this paper. Literature on coloniality, capitalist expansion, and orientalism has been examined in the past, but this study makes a significant contribution by showing how they interact across academic systems, archival practices, disciplinary traditions, and research agendas, thereby contributing to unequal epistemic authority. An enduring epistemic order is essential to understanding why colonial knowledge continues to have such a strong influence on Indonesian Islamic historiography even after the end of imperial rule.

In this way, the study also argues that reconstructing Indonesian Islamic historiography requires moving beyond criticisms of colonial knowledge and towards epistemic pluralism. Such reconstruction need not be about rejecting colonial archives or replacing Western scholarship with other centers of authority, but rather more reciprocal knowledge production in which Indonesian Islamic intellectual traditions provide legitimate ground for theoretical and even practical development in Islamic Studies worldwide. Indonesian Islam should no longer be seen only as a laboratory for theoretical works from abroad, but rather as a source of concepts that can be incorporated into broader discussions of religion, history, and knowledge production.

The findings also have broader implications for debates about the decolonization of knowledge. They argue that decolonization should be seen not only as a political or historiographical project but also as an epistemic transformation that reimagines the institutional conditions under which scholarly authority is constructed. Although this study focuses only on

Indonesian Islamic historiography and interviews with British scholars, the analytical framework proposed here may be useful for such a study in other postcolonial contexts where historical knowledge is still shaped by inherited epistemic hierarchies.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The empirical work draws mainly on a small group of scholars working within British academic institutions and selected colonial archival materials. This perspective could be extended to include scholars from other regions of the world, including Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, and to compare the historiographical and historical traditions of postcolonial societies. In addition, such comparisons would help assess the general applicability of the notion of an enduring epistemic order more broadly and advance discussions of epistemic pluralism in Muslim studies.

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