



# Vernacular Qur'an and the Construction of Qur'anic Cultures in Southeast Asia: Translation, Local Language, and Cultural Transmission

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the construction of Qur'anic *cultures* in Southeast Asia through the process of vernacularization, translation, and cultural transmission by taking comparative studies in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. The research uses a qualitative approach based on library *research* through analysis of scientific literature, books, journal articles, official documents, and relevant research results. The analysis was carried out with a comparative approach to identify similarities, differences, and patterns of the formation of Qur'anic culture in the three countries. The results show that the vernacularization of the Qur'an is a process of language adaptation that allows the messages of the Qur'an to be understood in the context of local culture without eliminating the authority of the Arabic text as the main source of revelation. Indonesia shows a pluralistic and community-based model of vernacularization, Malaysia develops an institutionalized model through state policies, while Brunei Darussalam builds a Qur'anic culture that is integrated with the ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB). This study also found that translation functions as a process of negotiating meaning between sacred texts and local cultures, while cultural transmission through education, rituals, media, and religious institutions is the main mechanism for inheriting Qur'anic values. The main contribution of this research is the development of a conceptual model that integrates Vernacularization Theory, Translation Studies, and Cultural Transmission Theory to explain the process of cultural construction of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia. The model shows that Qur'anic culture is formed through a continuous relationship between language adaptation, translation, cultural transmission, and the formation of religious identity and social practices of Muslim societies.

**Keyword:** *Vernacularization; Translation Studies; Cultural Transmission; Qur'anic Cultures; Southeast Asia.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic as the language of revelation which has a central position in the teachings of Islam. Arabic not only serves as a divine medium of communication, but also becomes an integral part of the authority and authenticity of the sacred text. However, as Islam spreads to various non-Arab regions, including Southeast Asia, the interaction of the Muslim community with the Qur'an no longer takes place solely through the Arabic language. The process of spreading Islam encouraged the birth of various forms of translation, interpretation, and language adaptation that allowed local people to understand the messages of the Qur'an according to their social and cultural context. In this context, local languages are no longer seen as mere linguistic tools, but as a medium that plays a role in shaping the way people understand, appreciate, and practice the teachings of the Qur'an. Thus, the development of Qur'anic cultures in various Muslim regions cannot be separated from the process of vernacularization that has



taken place throughout Islamic history.<sup>1</sup>

Southeast Asia is one of the regions with the largest Muslim population in the world and has a very high diversity of languages and cultures. Islam developed in the region through a peaceful process involving trade, networks of scholars, education, literature, and cultural da'wah, resulting in a form of religion that was different from the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, the Malay language along with various regional languages developed into the main media in the dissemination of Islamic teachings. The tradition of translating the Qur'an into Malay, Javanese, Sundanese, Bugis, Aceh, Banjar, and various other local languages shows that language is an important instrument in transforming Islamic teachings into people's lives.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the practice of reading, teaching, understanding, and practicing the Qur'an developed following the characteristics of local culture without eliminating the authority of Arabic texts as the main source of Islamic teachings.

This phenomenon shows that the relationship between language and the Qur'an is much more complex than just the question of translation. The local language serves as a space for negotiation between the text of revelation and the social reality of society. Through language, Islamic concepts are translated, explained, and reinterpreted according to the historical experiences and cultural traditions of the local community. Therefore, the process of translating the Qur'an is essentially a process of producing meaning that involves linguistic, social, political, and cultural aspects simultaneously. In this perspective, language is a medium that allows the Qur'an to be present as *a living scripture* in various Muslim communities in Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of *vernacularization* introduced by Sheldon Pollock provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the process. Pollock explained that vernacular is a transformation when local languages begin to take over the function of cosmopolitan languages in the production of knowledge, literature, and culture. This concept was then developed by Ronit Ricci in his study of Islamic literacy networks in South and Southeast Asia. Ricci points out that the translation of Islamic texts into Malay, Javanese, Tamil, and other local languages is not just a linguistic activity, but a process of forming a new cultural space that brings together universal Islamic traditions with local identities. Thus, the vernacularization of the Qur'an can be understood as a cultural process that produces diverse forms of Qur'anic culture according to the dynamics of the recipient society.<sup>5</sup>

In Indonesia, the development of Qur'anic culture takes place through a very dynamic process because it is influenced by ethnic and linguistic diversity. Since the 16th century, Nusantara scholars have produced various works of interpretation, translation, and religious poetry in Malay and regional languages. The tradition of *pesantren* then strengthens the process through the teaching of *tafsir* books and the Qur'an by using local language as a learning medium. In contrast to Indonesia, Malaysia has developed the translation of the Qur'an through a more centralized state policy that results in the standardization of religious languages in the public sphere. Meanwhile, Brunei Darussalam integrated the translation of the Qur'an into the framework of the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) ideology, which made the Malay language the main instrument in strengthening the country's national identity and religious legitimacy. These differences in socio-political configurations show that local languages have a different role in shaping Qur'anic culture in each country.<sup>6</sup>

In the perspective of *Translation Studies*, translation is no longer understood as the

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<sup>1</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Amerika Serikat: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *Ulama Network: Middle East and Nusantara Islands* (Jakarta: Logos Discourse of Science, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Fakhil Fadhilah Muttaqin et al., 'Cultural Diplomacy in Global Governance: Reimagining Indonesia's Soft Power Through Nahdlatul Ulama's Islam Nusantara Paradigm', *JOURNAL INDO-ISLAMIKA* 15, no. 1 (June 2025): 77–92, <https://doi.org/10.15408/jii.v15i1.47006>.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Third edition, Routledge Translation Classics (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315098746>.

<sup>5</sup> Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

process of literally transferring meaning from one language to another. Eugene Nida through the concept of *dynamic equivalence* explained that the main goal of translation is to produce an equal understanding impact for the target language readers. Meanwhile, Lawrence Venuti emphasized that translation always involves the process of domestication and foreignization which is influenced by cultural contexts, ideologies, and power relations. Thus, each translation of the Qur'an actually represents the result of a negotiation between loyalty to the source text and the cultural needs of the recipient society. Therefore, the variations in translations of the Qur'an in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei not only reflect differences in language, but also show differences in cultural orientation, education, and religious authority in each country.

In addition to the aspect of translation, the formation of Qur'anic culture is also closely related to the process of cultural *transmission*. Jan Assmann explains that cultural memory is inherited through texts, symbols, rituals, and social practices that are continuously reproduced by a community from generation to generation. In the context of Islam, the Qur'an is not only inherited through the reading of Arabic texts, but also through translation, education, recitation, memorization traditions, Islamic arts, as well as various religious practices that use the local language<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, language functions as a medium of cultural transmission that allows the values of the Qur'an to remain alive while undergoing an adaptation process in accordance with social changes in society. This perspective shows that Qur'anic culture is the result of a dynamic interaction between revelatory texts, local languages, and the social practices of Muslim society.<sup>8</sup>

Although the study of Qur'an translation and local interpretation has developed quite rapidly, most research still focuses on the history of translation, linguistic analysis, or the study of a particular country. Research on the vernacularization of the Qur'an in Indonesia generally focuses on the history of the interpretation of the archipelago, while research in Malaysia and Brunei discusses language policy or institutionalization of Qur'an translation.<sup>9</sup> Until now, there has been very little research linking vernacularization theory, *translation studies*, and *cultural transmission* within a framework of comparative analysis to explain how local languages shaped Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia. These limitations have led to the absence of a conceptual model capable of comprehensively explaining the relationship between translation, local language, cultural transmission, and the construction of Qur'anic identity.

Based on this description, this study aims to analyze how local languages shape the culture of the Qur'an in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam through the process of vernacularization, translation, and cultural transmission. In contrast to previous research that tends to separate these three aspects, this study offers an interdisciplinary approach by integrating Vernacularization Theory, Translation Studies, and Cultural Transmission Theory into a single conceptual framework. The novelty of this research lies in the development of an analytical model that explains that Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia is the result of continuous interaction between Qur'anic texts, local languages, translation practices, and cultural transmission processes that shape the religious identity of Muslim communities. Thus, this research is expected to make a new contribution to the development of Qur'an studies, Southeast Asian Islamic studies, and contemporary translation studies.

## METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of library research. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research is to analyze the process of vernacularization of the Qur'an, translation, and formation of Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia through the study of various written sources. Literature research allows researchers to systematically examine the development of thought, translation practices, and the relationship between the local language

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<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Daud Lintang, Kombang Tua Siregar, and Randy Putra Alamsyah, 'Circulation of the Book of Al-Tuhfah Al-Mursalah Ila Ruh Al-Nabi: Translocality Study and Its Impact on Aceh's Muslim Community', *Hayula: Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Islamic Studies* 9, no. 1 (January 2025): 81-98, <https://doi.org/10.21009/hayula.009.01.05>.

and the culture of the Qur'an based on data that has been documented in books, scientific articles, manuscripts, official documents, and previous research results.<sup>10</sup>

The analysis approach used is comparative historical analysis. This approach aims to compare the development of Qur'anic culture in three Southeast Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, taking into account the historical background, language policy, religious traditions, and socio-cultural dynamics that influence the process of vernacularization of the Qur'an. Through a comparative approach, this study seeks to identify similarities, differences, and distinctive characteristics of the formation of Qur'anic culture in each country so as to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between local languages and the transmission of Qur'anic values.

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data includes various official translations of the Qur'an in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, language and religious policy documents, and works of interpretation that represent the development of the Qur'anic tradition in each country. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from academic books, internationally reputable journal articles, conference proceedings, and previous research that discussed the vernacularization of the Qur'an, *translation studies*, *Qur'anic cultures*, and *cultural transmission*). The selection of sources is carried out purposively by considering their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the focus of the research.

Data collection techniques are carried out through documentation studies, namely identifying, inventorying, classifying, and reviewing various literature related to the research theme. All documents were analyzed based on their suitability with the research focus, namely the relationship between local languages, Qur'an translation, and the formation of Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the data were grouped into several categories of analysis, including the vernacularization process, translation strategies, forms of cultural transmission, and characteristics of Qur'anic culture in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam.<sup>11</sup>

Data analysis uses qualitative content analysis combined with comparative analysis techniques. The analysis stage begins with reading and understanding the entire document thoroughly, then conducting a *coding* process on the main themes related to the local language, translation, and Qur'anic culture. Furthermore, data were compared between countries to find patterns, tendencies, and characteristics that distinguish and unite the practice of vernacularization of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia. The results of the analysis were then interpreted using three theoretical perspectives, namely Vernacularization Theory, Translation Studies, and Cultural Transmission Theory. The integration of these three perspectives is used to explain how local languages function as a medium of translation as well as an agent of the formation of Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asian Muslim societies.

To ensure the validity of the research, the researcher applied source triangulation, which is comparing information obtained from various types of literature, including academic books, international journal articles, official government documents, and the results of previous research. In addition, the interpretation of the data is carried out critically by paying attention to the historical, social, and cultural context of each country so that the results of the study not only describe the process of translating the Qur'an, but also are able to explain how the local language contributes to the construction of Qur'anic culture in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Vernacularization of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia: From Sacred Text to Local Religious Culture.

The vernacularization of the Qur'an is one of the most important processes in the development of Islam outside the Arab world. This process not only shows the change in language

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<sup>10</sup> J. W. Creswell, *Qualitative , Quantitative Research Design, and Blended Approaches*, ed. 8 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469237-3>.

<sup>11</sup> Glenn A. Bowen, 'Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method', *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>.

from Arabic to the local language, but also reflects the transformation of the way Muslims understand, internalize, and internalize the teachings of the Qur'an in their daily lives. In Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, vernacular is the foundation for the formation of distinctive Qur'anic *cultures* because it takes place through the interaction between sacred texts, local languages, scientific traditions, and the socio-cultural context of each country. Thus, the Qur'an is not only present as a holy book that is read in Arabic, but also as a source of value that is interpreted through local languages so as to be able to shape the religious identity of the Muslim community.<sup>12</sup>

In the study of language history, Sheldon Pollock (2006) explained that *vernacularization* is a process when local languages begin to take over the function of cosmopolitan languages as a medium of knowledge and cultural production. Initially, this concept was used to explain the shift from Sanskrit to various regional languages in South Asia. However, the concept later developed and was applied in Islamic studies through the work of Ronit Ricci, who showed that the spread of Islam in South and Southeast Asia was also marked by the transformation of Arabic into various local languages through translations, interpretations, tales, verses, and religious manuscripts.<sup>13</sup> In this perspective, vernacular not only changed the language of the presentation of Islamic teachings, but also created a new space for the birth of religious practices rooted in local culture.

Southeast Asia is a very important region in the development of the vernacularization of the Qur'an because it has an extraordinary diversity of languages. Indonesia itself has more than 700 regional languages, while Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam developed Islamic traditions through Malay as the national language. This condition makes it impossible for the process of delivering the teachings of the Qur'an to rely solely on Arabic as a liturgical language. The scholars then carried out various translation and interpretation strategies so that the messages of the Qur'an could be understood by the wider community. This tradition gave birth to various works of interpretation and translation in Malay, Javanese, Sundanese, Aceh, Bugis, Banjar, Madura, and other local languages that became the main media of Islamic education in Southeast Asia.<sup>14</sup>

In Indonesia, the process of vernacularization has been going on since the early days of the Islamization of the archipelago. The scholars not only translated the verses of the Qur'an into Malay, but also developed interpretation methods using regional languages through the recitation system of Islamic boarding schools, suraus, and dayah. The use of Jawi, Pegon, and Arabic-Malay scripts shows that the process of accepting the Qur'an takes place through a very dynamic cultural adaptation. The local language serves as a bridge that connects Arabic texts with people's social experiences. Therefore, people do not just read the Qur'an as a ritual text, but also understand its content within the framework of their culture. This tradition strengthens the development of Qur'anic culture with a local pattern without eliminating its attachment to the global Islamic scientific tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Malaysia shows a distinct vernacular character. After independence, the Malaysian government placed the Malay language as the national language as well as the main language in Islamic education. This policy encourages the birth of various Qur'an translation projects that are officially carried out by state institutions. The standardization of religious languages makes the vernacularization process more centralized than in Indonesia. The

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<sup>12</sup> Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*.

<sup>13</sup> Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Amerika Serikat: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Azra, *Ulama Network: The Middle East and the Archipelago*.

<sup>15</sup> Mursalim Mursalim et al., 'The Vernacularization of Quran Interpretation in Bugis Land', *Mashdar: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 6, no. 1 (2024): 75–92, <https://doi.org/10.15548/mashdar.v6i1.7826>.

translation of the Qur'an in Malaysia not only serves as a means of understanding revelation, but also as an instrument of the development of Malay-Muslim national identity. In this context, the Malay language becomes a medium that connects the teachings of the Qur'an with the national project so as to form a Qur'anic culture that has an institutional and nationalistic character.

In Brunei Darussalam, the process of vernacularization took place within the framework of the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) ideology. The Malay language is used as the official language in religious education, state administration, and the spread of Islamic teachings. In contrast to the plural Indonesia or the more institutionalized Malaysia, the Qur'anic culture in Brunei developed through a strong integration between religion, language, and monarchy. The translation of the Qur'an is part of the state's policy in strengthening the kingdom's national identity and political legitimacy. Therefore, the local language not only serves as a tool of religious communication, but also as a symbol of unity between Malay identity, Islam, and the state.

When compared, the three countries show the same pattern of vernacularization in one fundamental aspect, namely making local languages the main means of bringing people closer to the Qur'an. However, there are differences in the mechanism and orientation of its development. Indonesia shows a plural, community-based vernacularization model influenced by ethnic diversity and *pesantren* traditions. Malaysia is developing a more centralized model through state institutions and national language policies.<sup>16</sup> Brunei Darussalam has built a vernacularization model that is integrated with the state ideology and Islamic monarchy system. These differences show that the process of vernacularization is always influenced by the social, political, and cultural configurations that surround the recipient society.

In the perspective of Translation Studies, this phenomenon shows that the translation of the Qur'an cannot be understood only as a process of language transfer. On the contrary, translation is a process of cultural negotiation that produces new forms of meaning according to the needs of the local community. Eugene Nida calls this process dynamic *equivalence*, which is an attempt to present a meaning that can be effectively understood by the target reader, while Lawrence Venuti emphasizes that each translation is always influenced by the translator's ideological choices and the cultural context in which the translation is produced. Therefore, the variations in translations of the Qur'an in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei do not reflect differences in the text of revelation, but rather show the diversity of cultural strategies in presenting the message of the Qur'an to Muslim communities.

These findings show that vernacular was the initial stage in the formation of Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia. Local languages serve as a medium that transforms sacred texts into social knowledge, religious practices, and cultural identities that are passed down from one generation to the next. Thus, the culture of the Qur'an was not born solely because of translation, but is the result of a continuous interaction between the text of revelation, local languages, religious institutions, and the social practices of the community.<sup>17</sup> This process shaped the different configurations of Qur'anic culture in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, while showing that language has a central role in transmitting Qur'anic values into the lives of Southeast Asian Muslims.

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<sup>16</sup> Dedi Masri, Randy Putra Alamsyah, and Muhammad Azizan Sabjan, 'Vernacularization of The Interpretation of The Qur'an Al-Karim by The Ulama Tiga Serangkai (Abdul Halim Hasan, Abdurrahim al-Haitami, and Zainul Arifin Abbas)', *ZAD Al-Mufasssirin* 8, no. 1 (June 2026): 621-47, <https://doi.org/10.55759/zam.v8i1.409>.

<sup>17</sup> Hanifah Amini et al., 'Rethinking the Qur'an's Literary Evolution: Nicolai Sinai's Approach to Inner-Qur'anic Chronology', *Mutawatir: Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith* 14, no. 2 (December 2024): 368-91, <https://doi.org/10.15642/mutawatir.2024.14.2.368-391>.

### Translation as Cultural Negotiation: How Local Languages Shape Qur'anic Interpretation in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei

The translation of the Qur'an cannot be understood as a linguistic process that simply shifts the meaning from Arabic to the target language. In the development of modern translation studies, translation is seen as a process of cultural *negotiation* that involves interaction between the source text, the translator, the target language, and the social context of the recipient community. Therefore, every translation of the Qur'an always reflects the cultural dynamics, ideology, and horizon of understanding of the society in which the translation is produced. In the context of Southeast Asia, this process takes place intensively because Muslim societies live in a multilingual environment that has a different value system and cultural traditions than the Arab world. As a result, the translation of the Qur'an developed into the main instrument in transmitting Islamic teachings while forming a distinctive Qur'anic culture in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam.<sup>18</sup>

In Eugene Nida's perspective, the main goal of translation is not to maintain the literal form of the source language, but to produce an equivalent impact of meaning (*dynamic equivalence*) for the target language reader. This concept is very relevant in the translation of the Qur'an because many Arabic terms have theological, historical, and cultural dimensions that do not always have a direct equivalent in the local language. Therefore, translators are required to make linguistic adaptations without eliminating the main message of the verse. This strategy is evident in the various official translations of the Qur'an in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei that seek to maintain the normative meaning of Arabic texts while using vocabulary that is easy for local people to understand. Thus, the success of translation is measured not only by lexical suitability, but also by its ability to present an acceptable understanding in the cultural context of the reader's society.

This view is expanded by Lawrence Venuti who asserts that translation has always been a cultural practice influenced by power relations, ideologies, and translators' choices. According to Venuti, every translator faces two main strategies, namely *domestication* and *foreignization*. The *domestication strategy* seeks to bring the text closer to the reader's culture through the use of terms that are familiar in the local language, while *foreignization* maintains the cultural elements of the source language so that the reader remains aware of the origin of the text. In the translation of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia, the two strategies are often used simultaneously. Terms such as *salat*, *zakat*, *hajj*, and *piety* are generally retained in Arabic because they are considered to have a distinctive theological meaning, while other terms are translated using local equivalents to be more communicative. This condition shows that the translation of the Qur'an is a negotiation process between maintaining the sacredness of the text of revelation and meeting the understanding needs of the local community.<sup>19</sup>

Indonesia provides a very interesting example of the process of cultural negotiation in the translation of the Qur'an. Ethnic and linguistic diversity caused the tradition of translation to develop plurally. In addition to the official translation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the public also knows various interpretations and translations in Javanese, Sundanese, Aceh, Bugis, Madura, Banjar, and other regional languages. The tradition of Islamic boarding schools even developed an interlinear translation method (*gandul meaning*) using the Pegon script as a means of learning books of interpretation. The practice not only moves the meaning word for word, but

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<sup>18</sup> Eugene Albert Nida and Charles Russell Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Brill Archive, 1982).

<sup>19</sup> Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*.

also builds a religious way of thinking that is in accordance with local intellectual traditions. Regional languages eventually became a medium that allowed people to understand the Qur'an through the cultural framework that they had known for a long time.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to Indonesia, Malaysia has developed a more centralized translation system through state institutions such as the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM). The standardization of the Malay language in the translation of the Qur'an aims to maintain the consistency of religious terms as well as strengthen the function of the Malay language as a national language. As a result, the translation of the Qur'an in Malaysia is not only a means of spreading Islamic teachings, but also part of the development of Malay-Muslim national identity. In this context, the Malay language serves as a symbol of integration between religion, nationality, and state policies. This shows that the translation of the Qur'an has a linguistic political dimension that contributes to the formation of Qur'anic culture at the national level.<sup>21</sup>

In Brunei Darussalam, the translation of the Qur'an developed within the framework of the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) ideology. The Malay language is used as the main language in religious education, government administration, and the spread of Islamic values. Unlike Indonesia, which is multicultural, and Malaysia, which is oriented towards national standardization, Brunei places the translation of the Qur'an as part of the country's ideological legitimacy. Therefore, the Malay language not only functions as a medium of religious communication, but also as an instrument for the formation of the kingdom's political and cultural identity. The integration between languages, religions, and countries resulted in a more homogeneous Qur'anic cultural character than the other two countries.

When the three countries are compared, it appears that the translation of the Qur'an is always influenced by the social, cultural, and political configuration of each country. Indonesia shows a translation model that is decentralistic and multilingual. Malaysia is developing a more institutional model through national language policies. Meanwhile, Brunei shows a model that is integrated with the country's ideology. Although they have different characteristics, the three show the same pattern, namely making the local language the main medium in transmitting the values of the Qur'an to the community. These findings corroborate Ronit Ricci's argument that the translation of Islamic texts in Southeast Asia is part of an intellectual and cultural network that connects local communities with global Islamic traditions through the process of language and literary adaptation.

Furthermore, the process of translating the Qur'an also shaped the way people understood fundamental concepts in Islam. Terms such as *taqwa*, *rahmah*, *ummah*, *fitrah*, *'adl*, and *ihsan* often get additional explanations in local languages to make them easier to understand according to the social experience of the community. The addition of this explanation shows that the translation of the Qur'an not only results in language translation, but also produces a process of cultural reinterpretation. Thus, the local language becomes a space where dialogue takes place between the text of revelation and the life experiences of the Southeast Asian Muslim community. The dialogue allows the Qur'an to remain relevant in the midst of social change without losing its authority as a holy book.

In the perspective of Cultural Transmission Theory, this phenomenon shows that translation is one of the main mechanisms of cultural transmission. Jan Assmann explains that cultural memory is inherited through texts, symbols, language, and social practices that are constantly reproduced by a community. In Southeast Asia, the transmission process takes place

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<sup>20</sup> Azra, *Ulama Network: The Middle East and the Archipelago*.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

through Islamic educational institutions, Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, mosques, recitation traditions, and digital media that use local languages as a means of disseminating the teachings of the Qur'an. Therefore, translation is part of the process of reproducing the collective memory of Muslims that connects the current generation with the Islamic scientific tradition that has developed over the centuries.

Based on this description, this study found that the translation of the Qur'an in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam cannot be separated from the process of cultural negotiation that takes place in society. Local language is not just a medium of communication, but a cultural agent that transforms the messages of the Qur'an into a community's value system, social practices, and religious identity. Thus, Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia is the result of a dynamic interaction between revelatory texts, translation strategies, language policies, and local traditions that continue to be inherited through the process of cultural transmission across generations. These findings reinforce the thesis that vernacular and translation are two interrelated processes in shaping the cultural construction of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia, so both need to be understood as cultural phenomena, not just linguistic phenomena.<sup>22</sup>

### **Cultural Transmission and the Formation of Qur'anic Cultures in Southeast Asia**

After the process of vernacularization and translation, the next stage in the formation of the culture of the Qur'an is *cultural transmission*. In this context, the Qur'an is understood not only as a religious text translated into the local language, but also as a source of value that is continuously inherited through various institutions, social practices, and cultural traditions of the community. This transmission process allows the values of the Qur'an to experience reproduction, reinterpretation, and internalization across generations so as to form what in this study is called Qur'anic cultures, which are cultures that make the Qur'an the center of the orientation of social life, education, and religious identity of the Muslim community. Therefore, the relationship between the local language and the culture of the Qur'an does not stop at translation activities, but continues on how language becomes a medium of inheritance of Qur'anic values in daily life.<sup>23</sup>

Jan Assmann explained that cultural transmission takes place through the process of cultural memory, which is the mechanism by which a society maintains its collective identity through texts, symbols, rituals, education, and traditions that are inherited continuously. In this perspective, the Qur'an is one of the most important forms of cultural memory in Islamic civilization. However, this memory is not only maintained through the reading of Arabic texts, but also through translation, interpretation, religious education, Islamic art, and social practices that use local languages as a medium of communication. Thus, the local language became the main space for the reproduction of Qur'anic memory in Southeast Asia.

This view is reinforced by Clifford Geertz who places religion as *a cultural system*. According to Geertz, religion is not only made up of doctrines and beliefs, but is also embodied in symbols, practices, and meanings that live in society. In the context of Southeast Asia, the Qur'an becomes part of the cultural system because its values are presented through language, local traditions, education, and social practices. Therefore, Qur'anic culture in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei cannot be understood only from the existence of the Qur'anic text, but must be seen

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<sup>22</sup> Dedi Masri and Randy Putra Alamsyah, 'Force Majeure in Abortion: A Review of Ulama Fatwas and Indonesian Health Law', *Malaysian Journal of Syariah and Law* 14, no. 1 (April 2026): 61–76, <https://doi.org/10.33102/mjssl.vol14no1.1179>.

<sup>23</sup> Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

through the way people bring the text to life in social activities, rituals, and daily life.<sup>24</sup>

In Indonesia, the transmission of Qur'anic culture takes place through a very wide network of Islamic educational institutions, ranging from Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, suraus, taklim councils, to families. Islamic boarding schools have a very strategic position because they not only teach the reading of the Qur'an, but also transmit the traditions of tafsir, tajweed, qira'at, morals, and classical books that use Arabic, Malay, and regional languages. The use of Javanese through the Pegon script, Sundanese, Madura, Bugis, Aceh, Banjar, and various other local languages allows the learning process to take place more communicatively while strengthening people's attachment to the teachings of the Qur'an. Local language in this context becomes a pedagogical medium that bridges the complexity of Arabic with the social experience of Indonesian society.

In addition to educational institutions, the transmission of Qur'anic culture in Indonesia also takes place through various religious traditions that develop in the community. The tradition of tadarus Al-Qur'an during the month of Ramadan, khataman Al-Qur'an, recitation of tafsir, Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ), recitation of Surah Yasin, manaqib, to the tradition of learning the Qur'an at the Al-Qur'an Education Park (TPQ) show that the Qur'an has become part of the social life of the community. Interestingly, almost all of these activities use local language as a medium of explanation so that people not only read the Qur'an, but also understand its meaning and relevance in daily life. This condition shows that the local language strengthens the process of internalizing Qur'anic values through cultural practices that live in the community.<sup>25</sup>

Malaysia shows a different pattern of transmission of Qur'anic culture. The state plays a dominant role in building the culture of the Qur'an through the national education system, mass media, da'wah institutions, and the Malay language policy as the official language of the state. Institutions such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) and various Islamic universities play an important role in compiling the Qur'an education curriculum that uses Malay as the main language of instruction. As a result, the process of cultural transmission takes place in a more structured and standardized manner than Indonesia. The Malay language became an instrument that united national identity with Islamic identity so that Qur'anic culture developed within the framework of Malay-Muslim nationalism.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, Brunei Darussalam developed a model of Qur'anic cultural transmission that is integrated with the ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB). Religious education has become a mandatory part of the national education system, while various state programs place the Qur'an as the foundation for the formation of the character of society. The Malay language is used as the main medium in education, da'wah, government administration, and the spread of Islamic values. This integration makes Qur'anic culture not only function as a religious practice, but also as part of political legitimacy and national identity. In this context, cultural transmission takes place through collaboration between families, schools, religious institutions, and the state resulting in a relatively homogeneous Qur'anic culture.

The development of digital technology in the last two decades has also changed the pattern of Qur'anic cultural transmission in Southeast Asia. If previously the process of inheriting Qur'anic values took place through educational institutions and taklim assemblies, now digital media has become a new space in the spread of Qur'anic culture. Various platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and digital Qur'an applications provide translations,

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<sup>24</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

<sup>25</sup> R. W. Hefner, *Islam and Citizenship in Indonesia (Politics in Asia)* (Routledge, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Milner, *The Malays* (2011).

interpretations, lectures, and learning the Qur'an in Indonesian, Malay, and other regional languages. This phenomenon expands public access to Qur'anic knowledge while accelerating the process of vernacularization through digital media. Local languages remain the primary medium because they allow religious content to be understood by different groups of people with different educational backgrounds.

In Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, language is a form of symbolic capital that has the power to form social authority and legitimacy. The language used in the delivery of religious teachings not only serves as a means of communication, but also determines who has authority in interpreting sacred texts. In Southeast Asia, the use of local languages expands public access to the Qur'an while distributing religious authority to scholars, religious teachers, and educational institutions that are able to explain the Qur'an in a language that is understood by the community. Thus, the transmission of Qur'anic culture is also a process of distributing religious knowledge and authority through local languages.<sup>27</sup>

The results of the comparative analysis show that Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei have different patterns of transmission of Qur'anic culture according to their respective socio-political configurations. Indonesia developed a transmission model that is plural, community-based, and supported by regional language diversity. Malaysia has an institutional model that relies on state policy and the standardization of the Malay language. Meanwhile, Brunei built a transmission model that was integrated with the monarchical system and the ideology of the Malay Islamic Monarchy. Although they have different characteristics, the three show one fundamental similarity, namely making the local language the main medium in transmitting the values of the Qur'an from one generation to the next.

The findings of this study show that Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia is not a product born spontaneously from the translation of the Qur'an, but rather is the result of a process of cultural transmission that takes place continuously through education, rituals, language, social institutions, media, and the religious practices of the community. Vernacular provides a linguistic medium, translation produces understanding, while cultural transmission ensures that Qur'anic values are continuously reproduced in social life. Thus, the cultural construction of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia can be understood as the result of a dynamic interaction between the text of revelation, the local language, religious institutions, and the collective cultural memory of Muslim societies. This model strengthens the argument that vernacularization, translation, and cultural transmission are three interrelated processes in shaping Qur'anic cultures in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam.

### **Comparative Analysis: Language, Locality, and the Construction of Qur'anic Cultures in Southeast Asia**

The results of the analysis of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam show that the formation of Qur'anic *cultures* in Southeast Asia did not take place through a uniform process. Although all three countries have the same textual source, the Arabic Qur'an, the cultural construction of the Qur'an develops according to the dynamics of each country's language, history, political system, and religious institutions. These findings show that local languages are not just a communication tool, but a key variable that determines how the Qur'an is understood, taught, translated, and internalized into the social life of the community. Thus, Qur'anic culture is the result of an interaction between revelatory texts, local languages, religious authorities, and social

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<sup>27</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

contexts that shape the character of Islam in Southeast Asia.<sup>28</sup>

Comparatively, the three countries show similarities in one fundamental aspect, namely making the local language the main bridge between the Qur'an and Muslim society. Arabic is still maintained as a liturgical language and an authoritative source of revelation, but the process of understanding the Qur'an takes place through Indonesian, Malaysian Malay, Brunei Malay, and various other regional languages. This phenomenon shows that vernacular does not diminish the authority of the Qur'an as a holy book, but rather expands public access to the messages of revelation. In Ronit Ricci's perspective, the practice of reading, translating, adapting, and transmitting Islamic texts forms an intellectual network that connects Southeast Asian Muslim communities with global Islamic traditions without losing their local identity. In other words, language becomes a space where the universal dimensions of Islam and the reality of local culture meet.<sup>29</sup>

Although they have the same foundation, the pattern of vernacularization in all three countries is developing through different mechanisms. Indonesia shows a pluralistic and community-based model. The diversity of regional languages causes the process of translating and interpreting the Qur'an to develop in a decentralized manner through Islamic boarding schools, religious organizations, local scholars, and Muslim communities. The tradition of tafsir in Javanese, Sundanese, Bugis, Aceh, Banjar, and other regional languages shows that religious authority is spread across various centers of knowledge production. As a result, Qur'anic culture in Indonesia has a very diverse character, reflecting the cultural plurality of the archipelago while maintaining its connection to the global Islamic intellectual tradition.<sup>30</sup>

Instead, Malaysia developed a more institutionalized model of vernacularization. The Malay language is not only the language of communication of the community, but also the official instrument of the state in Islamic education, religious administration, and translation of the Qur'an. The standardization of religious terms through official institutions results in a relatively higher uniformity of understanding than in Indonesia. In this context, the Malay language not only functions as a medium for conveying Islamic teachings, but also becomes a symbol of Malay-Muslim national identity. Therefore, the construction of Qur'anic culture in Malaysia takes place through close relationships between languages, countries, and religious institutions.

Brunei Darussalam shows a different configuration again. The vernacularization process takes place within the framework of the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) ideology which integrates religion, language, and monarchy as a unified national identity. The Malay language gained legitimacy not only because it is the majority language, but also because it is part of the state ideology. As a result, the translation and learning of the Qur'an takes place in a highly centralized system so that Qur'anic culture develops in a more homogeneous manner. This condition shows that the political system has a significant influence on the direction of the cultural development of the Qur'an through language policies and religious education.

The comparison shows that local languages always interact with power structures. In Indonesia, language develops through civil society and networks of scholars; in Malaysia through national institutions; while in Brunei through the integration of the state and the monarchy. Thus, language is not only a linguistic issue, but also reflects the distribution of religious authority in

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<sup>28</sup> Randy Putra Alamsyah and Daud Lintang, 'Cultural Integration and Political Consciousness in Qur'anic Exegesis: A Study of the Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Karim by Binjai's Ulama Tiga Serangkai', *Fikri: Journal of Religious, Social and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 355–67, <https://journal.iaimnumetrolampung.ac.id/index.php/jf/article/view/6161>.

<sup>29</sup> Ricci, *Islam Translated*.

<sup>30</sup> Azra, *Ulama Network: The Middle East and the Archipelago*.

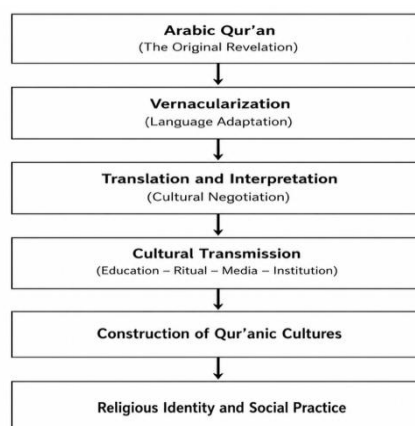
society. These findings expand on Pierre Bourdieu's argument that language is a form of symbolic *capital* that determines the legitimacy of knowledge and social authority. In the context of the Qur'an, local language serves as a symbolic capital that determines who has the authority to explain, teach, and transmit the meaning of revelation to the public.<sup>31</sup>

Comparative analysis also shows that the translation of the Qur'an has different functions in each country. In Indonesia, translation is oriented towards expanding public access to the Qur'an through the diversity of regional languages. In Malaysia, translation is part of the development of a Malay-based national identity. Meanwhile, in Brunei, translation is an instrument to strengthen the ideology of the Malay Islamic Monarchy. These differences in orientation show that the translation of the Qur'an is always influenced by the political, social, and cultural context in which the translation is carried out. Thus, translation is never neutral, but always a cultural practice that reflects the interests, identity, and vision of the recipient society.

The findings of this study also show a close relationship between vernacularization, translation, and cultural transmission. The three concepts do not work separately, but form a continuous process. Vernacular provides a language medium that allows the Qur'an to be understood by the local community. Translation then transforms the messages of the Qur'an into the language and cultural structure of the recipient society. Furthermore, through education, rituals, recitation, media, and social practices, the results of the translation are transmitted continuously until they form a Qur'anic culture that is inherited across generations. In other words, the culture of the Qur'an is the product of the simultaneous interaction between language, translation, and cultural transmission, not the result of a single process.

Based on this analysis, this study proposes a new conceptual model regarding the construction of Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia. This model shows that the Qur'an does not directly shape the culture of society. Instead, there are three main stages that connect the text of revelation with local culture. The first stage is vernacularization, which is the process when the local language becomes the medium of receiving the Qur'an. The second stage is translation and interpretation, which is the process of negotiating meaning that connects the message of the Qur'an with the cultural experience of the community. The third stage is cultural transmission, which is the inheritance of Qur'anic values through educational institutions, rituals, media, family, and social practices. These three processes together produce Qur'anic cultures, which are community cultures shaped by the interaction between revelation, language, and local experiences.

The model can be described as follows.



<sup>31</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*.

This conceptual model is the main theoretical contribution of the research because it integrates three perspectives that have tended to be studied separately. Pollock explains the change in language through the concept of vernacularization; Venuti and Nida explain the translation process as a negotiation of meaning; while Assmann explains the mechanism of cultural transmission through the reproduction of cultural memory. This research shows that the three concepts actually form a series of processes that explain how Qur'anic culture developed in Southeast Asia. Thus, local languages are not only a medium of translation, but also a major mechanism in the formation of the religious identity of Muslim communities. These findings also expand the study of the Vernacular Qur'an from a linguistic approach to a socio-cultural approach that places language as a major actor in the construction of Qur'anic culture in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that the formation of Qur'anic *cultures* in Southeast Asia is the result of a dynamic interaction between local languages, translation processes, and cultural transmission. The vernacularization of the Qur'an not only serves as an effort to transfer the meaning from Arabic to the local language, but also becomes an important mechanism that allows Muslim communities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam to understand, appreciate, and actualize the teachings of the Qur'an in accordance with their social and cultural context. Although all three countries have the same source of revelation, the construction of Qur'anic culture develops through different patterns. Indonesia shows a plural and community-based model through the diversity of regional languages and pesantren traditions, Malaysia develops a more institutionalized model through national language policies and state religious institutions, while Brunei Darussalam builds a Qur'anic culture that is integrated with the ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB). These differences affirm that local languages are not only a medium of communication, but also act as agents that shape the religious identity, interpretive authority, and social practices of Muslim communities.

The main contribution of this research lies in the development of a conceptual model that integrates Vernacularization Theory, Translation Studies, and Cultural Transmission Theory in explaining the process of forming Qur'anic culture in Southeast Asia. This research shows that Qur'anic culture is formed through three interrelated stages, namely vernacular as a process of language adaptation, translation as a negotiation of meaning between texts and local culture, and cultural transmission as a mechanism for inheriting Qur'anic values through education, rituals, media, and social practices. This integrative model expands the *study of the Vernacular Qur'an* which has been focusing more on linguistic aspects towards a socio-cultural perspective that places local languages as a central element in the construction of Qur'anic culture. Thus, this research not only makes a theoretical contribution to the development of Qur'anic studies, translation studies, and Islamic studies in Southeast Asia, but also opens up opportunities for further research to examine the process of vernacularization of the Qur'an in other Muslim regions, including through the dynamics of digital media, minority languages, and changes in religious authority in the era of globalization.

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