

Profile and Contributions of Arab-Descended Ulama in Terengganu

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ABSTRACT

The historical narrative of Islam in Terengganu often fails to thoroughly explore the significant role of Arab-descended ulama in shaping the state's socio-religious landscape. This deficiency creates a gap in understanding the true dynamics of local Islamic dissemination and institutionalization, leaving many unanswered questions about the origins and consolidation of religious authority. Ironically, no comprehensive conceptual framework has been developed to systematically explain their networks, profiles, and the impact of their contributions. This study employs a conceptual analysis approach, examining historical texts, old manuscripts, and existing academic works to build a more cohesive understanding. The findings reveal three main themes: First, Arab-descended ulama established educational centers that served as primary intellectual hubs, transcending geographical boundaries; Second, they played significant diplomatic and advisory roles to the state administration, indirectly shaping socio-political policies; Third, their legacy persists through scholarly traditions and religious practices that remain to this day, even though their original identity is often obscured. These findings necessitate a more critical re-evaluation of the construction of local Islamic history, to ensure a fairer and more complete narrative.

Keywords: Arab Ulama, Terengganu, Intellectual History, Scholarly Networks, Sayyid Descent

INTRODUCTION

Beneath Terengganu's image as the 'Abode of Faith' (Darul Iman), lies a layer of religious history that is sometimes overlooked ironically, in the sole pursuit of glorifying 'local' narratives. The presence of Arabdescended ulama, whose traces can be found since the 17th century, is often accepted as fact, yet their contributions are rarely analyzed in depth. It becomes an irritating irony: we know they existed, but we do not truly understand how they influenced the pulse of society. Why does such a gap exist in local historiography, especially when early evidence, such as inscriptions and manuscripts, clearly indicates connections with the outside world? Indeed, most previous studies have been more comfortable outlining chronological timelines or focusing solely on local Malay figures, as if isolating external influences from the genealogy of Islamic scholarship in the region, a worrying form of reductionism. Such an approach, unwittingly, has narrowed our understanding of how Islamic knowledge was disseminated, not only through the role of rulers or renowned "local" ulama, but also through intellectual migration and complex networks, a phenomenon often underestimated. This void must be filled; otherwise, we will continue to adhere to an incomplete history and fail to capture the diversity of sources and the dynamism of Islamic identity formation in Terengganu. We need to look beyond ethnic boundaries, understand the networks of these Arab-descended ulama and how they brought scholarly traditions from Hadramaut, Egypt, or Hijaz, then adapted them into the unique local context, a process of assimilation and acculturation far more complex than often portrayed. This study attempts to unravel that complexity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussions about Islamization in the Malay Archipelago are fraught with debate. Disputes often revolve around the origins, period, and parties responsible for bringing and disseminating these sacred teachings. For a long

time, historians like Fatimi (1963) have put forth strong arguments about the role of merchants and preachers from the Middle East, particularly Hadramaut, in introducing Islam to the Malay Archipelago. However, this argument is often contested by several other scholars who emphasize the role of traders from India or China (Drewes, 1968), seemingly diminishing the significance of direct ties with the birthplace of Islam. It is surprising how some parties tend to overlook the direct impact from the Arabian Peninsula, choosing instead to view the process of knowledge dissemination as a more circuitous and indirect chain.

In the context of Terengganu, writings by Abdullah Zawawi (1975) and Abdullah Al-Qari (1987) do touch upon Arab-descended ulama, but tend to be bibliographical in nature, merely listing names and basic contributions without deeply exploring the power structures or intellectual networks they established. This is a significant shortcoming. This is because only lists of names are provided, but there is no in-depth analysis of how these names interacted, how they formed "madrasahs" or schools of thought, or how they influenced broader political and social structures. Recent works by Mohd Rosli (2019) and Abdul Rahman (2021) attempt to fill this gap, more boldly examining the role of Arab-descended ulama in politics and education, particularly in resisting British colonialism and the formation of modern educational institutions. They, at the very least, attempted to view these ulama not merely as religious preachers, but as agents of social change.

However, there are disagreements regarding the level of "integration" of these ulama into Malay society. Did they remain influential "outsiders," or did they truly assimilate, bringing their Arab identity into the mold of Malay culture? Syed Naquib Al-Attas (1972), in his renowned work, asserted that Islam itself brought a civilization that intrinsically transformed local culture, thus the original identity of the "bearers" of Islam might be less relevant compared to the "content" brought. This view, while weighty, might underestimate personal influence and lineage networks. Conversely, Al-Jufri's (2020) study on Hadrami ulama in Southeast Asia shows that despite assimilation, ancestral identity and "nasab" (lineage) networks remained a strong form of social capital, often used to consolidate their religious and social authority, a point often overlooked in local studies. There is also an argument that the role of Arab-descended ulama was merely an extension of local ulama who had been "Arabized" (Ariffin & Mansor, 2022), a view that might too easily encapsulate the complexity of cultural and intellectual interactions. This seems to deny the unique contributions of the Arab ulama themselves, instead reducing their role to mere "transmitters" or "reinforcers" of existing traditions. Nevertheless, a growing consensus is that Arab-descended ulama, through familial and marital networks, successfully integrated into the local elite, but did not necessarily lose their original identity entirely (Wan Mohd Saghri, 2005; Ibrahim, 2018).

Ironically, much academic writing still fails to elaborate in detail how this "integration" mechanism functioned, or how these networks operated in more specific aspects such as the formulation of fatwas, the establishment of sharia courts, or even in the customary legal system. This literature review reveals that while the contributions of Arab-descended ulama are acknowledged, their full profile and impact in Terengganu remain vague, insufficiently analyzed with a critical perspective emphasizing power dynamics, intellectual conflicts, and complex identity formation. We still need a better narrative, one that goes beyond mere fact-gathering, to fully understand their contributions.

METHODOLOGY

This study is fundamentally shaped by the method of conceptual analysis. It requires high intellectual rigor and sharp critical ability. It is not merely about data collection, but also about how existing data, often scattered and sometimes contradictory, is shaped into a coherent intellectual framework. Therefore, this method does not involve any field surveys or interviews, but instead focuses on an in-depth examination of relevant library and archival sources.

This process begins with the identification and collection of primary and secondary materials. This includes old manuscripts preserved in national or state archives and university libraries, local historical records, and academic journals publishing studies on the history of Islam in Terengganu and the Malay Archipelago in general. Each source is meticulously examined, not just for surface facts, but for "subtexts", deeper implications about power, influence, and social networks often hidden behind more direct narratives. For instance, a family genealogy might merely list names, but with a critical lens, it can reveal marriage patterns, power affiliations, and the dissemination of scholarly institutions.

The next step involves the process of "deconstruction" and "reconstruction" of existing narratives. We separate the main claims from each source, identify potential biases, as no historical writing is truly neutral, every author has a specific agenda or perspective, and then attempt to reconstruct a more objective, or at least, more comprehensive picture. For example, official narratives often praise the role of the palace in Islamic development, but the role of ulama from migrant backgrounds might be deliberately sidelined or minimized.

This study attempts to highlight these overlooked roles. Sources are selected from diverse perspectives, including works that might be "marginal" or less known, as it is often here that important nuances not found in dominant narratives are hidden. Outdated theories that merely repeat old stereotypes without solid evidence will be rejected. Instead, the study focuses on fresher interpretations driven by new evidence.

The analysis then moves towards the development of conceptual themes. This involves condensing information from various sources into broader categories, for instance, roles in educational institutions, influence in legal administration, or contributions to religious literature. Each of these themes is cross-referenced against other evidence, refined, and supported by robust arguments. The goal is to produce a conceptual framework that not only compiles information but also offers new interpretations, connecting previously disparate points, to paint a richer canvas of the contributions of Arab-descended ulama in Terengganu. This process is not easy. It is a continuous cycle of reading, analyzing, hypothesizing, and revising, until a logical and persuasive framework can be presented.

FINDINGS

The contributions of Arab-descended ulama in Terengganu, when critically examined, extend far beyond merely serving as religious teachers. They were architects. They built the intellectual foundation of the state, a framework that remains etched to this day. First, the scholarly networks they established formed the backbone of the early Islamic education system. Ulama such as Syeikh Abdul Malik bin Abdullah, Tok Ku Tuan Besar, Tok Ku Paloh, Tok Ku Melaka and the like were not only skilled in teaching religious texts, but they also established educational centers or utilized mosques that served as hubs for the exchange of ideas and attracted students from across the region. They successfully created a comprehensive and conducive ecosystem of knowledge. These networks were not limited to the physical spaces of mosques or madrasahs, but also extended through intermarriages and familial ties, binding the religious and social elite communities in a strong bond, making the dissemination of knowledge a family and lineage affair.

Second, their role in state administration and politics cannot be overlooked. Many of these Arab-descended ulama became advisors to the Sultan, and some even held positions such as *Syeikhul Islam*, *Syeikhul Ulama* or mufti. They sat alongside power, offering views that shaped government policies on justice, religious law, and morality. Important decisions often depended on their advice. This provided them with a highly strategic platform to influence not only spiritual aspects but also the legal and social aspects of community life, further strengthening Islamic institutions within the state's governance structure.

Third, they did not merely bring "Islam," but "cultured Islam." They did not only teach law; they also introduced literature, calligraphy, and manners inherited from their homeland. Through the writing of books, poetry, and sermons, they stimulated intellectualism. Their works, often written in Arabic or Jawi, became important references. This was an extraordinary cultural enrichment, bringing new dimensions to local arts and thought, which in turn shaped Terengganu's unique Islamic identity.

Fourth, their ability to adapt to the local context without sacrificing original principles is an achievement worthy of attention. While maintaining their ancestral identity and Hadrami traditions, for example, they mastered the Malay language, understood local customs, and integrated themselves into the social structure. This was not merely integration; it was a wise inculturation, allowing Islamic teachings to be disseminated more effectively to a diverse society. They became bridges. They connected universal traditions with local realities, narrowing the gap between the foreign and the indigenous, making Islam relevant to all strata of society.

Finally, their legacy remains eternal, though often not explicitly named. The scholarly traditions, Sufi practices, and even the structure of today's religious institutions largely stem from the seeds sown by these ulama. Islamic

higher education institutions, pondok schools, tahfiz centers, community religious schools, and the continuity of scholarly gatherings today are direct or indirect manifestations of the diligent efforts of Arab-descended ulama. They have shaped a legacy far greater than just the names etched on tombstones. It is the intellectual soul of Terengganu itself (Ismail Che Daud, 2021; Tengku Yusuff, 2020; Wan Husin, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The implications of these findings indeed necessitate a re-evaluation of many old assumptions about the history of Islam in Terengganu, and perhaps even the entire Malay Archipelago. If Arab-descended ulama played such a significant role, not merely as teachers, but as social and political architects, then overly simplistic local narratives need to be re-examined. This means that Terengganu's Islamic identity is not a homogeneous entity that grew solely from within, but a complex synthesis, a result of encounters and exchanges with other civilizations, especially from the Arabian Peninsula. Is it not ironic if we glorify local uniqueness while neglecting the very sources that shaped that uniqueness? Moreover, their role in shaping the religious education system and the state's administrative structure is a crucial point often overlooked, demonstrating that power did not solely reside with kings or political elites.

The intellectual power, moral authority, and lineage networks of these ulama were equally potent instruments, sometimes even more influential in shaping the direction of society. They were not palace puppets, but rather thinkers who shaped the palace's thinking or at least influenced its agenda. This suggests that theories of nationbuilding and national identity need to incorporate the factor of these assimilated "external agents" more seriously, not merely as historical footnotes.

The concept of identity itself becomes more blurred and intriguing. These Arab-descended ulama, while maintaining their lineage and perhaps some original cultural characteristics, successfully integrated into Malay society. They became Malay in many aspects, without entirely forgetting their origins. This challenges narrow definitions of Malayness, questioning whether it is about genetics, or about language and culture. It appears that, in this context, Malayness is a cultural vessel capable of absorbing and assimilating external elements, thereby enriching itself. This offers a very different perspective on cultural integration compared to what is often propagated in contemporary national identity debates, which tend to be exclusive. Perhaps this process of acculturation was not one-sided, but a complex reciprocal dance, where both parties, migrants and indigenous people, mutually shaped and were shaped.

The role of these ulama in popularizing the Shafi'i school of thought and adhering to the Aqidah of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah, specifically the Ash'arite and Maturidite schools, in Terengganu was also very prominent. They were not only disseminators of teachings but also a bulwark of faith. When various other schools of thought emerged, they became a consistent voice in preserving authenticity. This is a contribution that transcends the spiritual dimension, as well as an effort to maintain social stability and ideological unity, especially in a society constantly facing external threats, both political and intellectual. Indeed, their influence in the drafting of fatwas and the formulation of Islamic laws is undeniable, a legacy still felt in sharia courts and religious institutions today (Wan Husin, 2023).

We need to acknowledge that what we consider local Islamic tradition is often the result of innovations and adaptations brought by these Arab-descended ulama, which were then inherited and adapted by subsequent generations. This means that tradition is not something static, but a living entity that is constantly evolving, shaped by various hands and minds. If we fail to understand this, we will continue to view history as a straight line, rather than a tangled yet fascinating web.

Finally, the recognition of the often-marginalized contributions of these ulama is not just about correcting history. It is also about understanding the roots of our Islamic identity today. When we understand the diversity and depth of these roots, perhaps we will better appreciate pluralism within Islam and within our own society. This can lead to healthier dialogue about the role of religion in modern society, and perhaps, prevent attempts to narrow the definitions of Islam or Malayness for specific agendas. Understanding the past more honestly is key to building a more inclusive and mature future (Hasanulddin, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The journey of unraveling the contributions of Arab-descended ulama in Terengganu opens a new chapter in understanding local Islamic intellectual history, which may have been overly simplistic until now. Clearly, their presence and impact were far more complex and profound than brief biographical notes suggest. They were active agents of change, not merely passive recipients of tradition. The scholarly networks established by these ulama, their significant role in state administration and politics, and their cultural inculturation capabilities clearly demonstrate that they were pillars in the formation of Terengganu's socio-religious identity. Without a critical analysis of their role, the historical narrative of Islam in the state will remain incomplete, perhaps even distorted, failing to capture the true dynamics of assimilation and acculturation that shaped Islamic Malayness. The failure to acknowledge these contributions is not only detrimental from a historical perspective but can also lead to a superficial understanding of the roots of today's religious institutions and practices. If we deny the sources that shaped our civilization, we will lose the depth and richness of our own intellectual heritage. Therefore, it is important not just to list facts, but to interrogate those facts, seeking deeper meaning behind them.

This study asserts that the process of Islamization and the formation of Islamic identity is not a simple straight line, but a "tapestry" woven from various threads, including those brought from Hadramaut and other centers of knowledge. We need to be bolder in investigating these transnational interactions. For future research, it is crucial to specifically examine how the fatwas issued by these Arab-descended ulama, particularly in the pre-colonial era, influenced the development of sharia legislation in Terengganu and whether there are long-term effects on today's Islamic judicial system. A comparative study of their impact in Terengganu versus other states on the East Coast of the Peninsula is also needed. Failure to investigate these questions will leave a significant gap in our understanding of how religious authority was constructed, maintained, and transmitted. If we continue to ignore this complexity, we risk constructing a false narrative, eroding historical credibility, and hindering opportunities for more meaningful dialogue about national identity and heritage.

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