

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF SUNDANESE ULAMA IN THE MAINTENANCE OF *PEGON* SCRIPT AS AN ISLAMIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION IN INDONESIA

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## ABSTRACT

Although traditional Muslim scholars in the *Nusantara* (the Malay-Indonesian archipelago) have been widely studied for their roles in religious propagation, politics, and education, their contributions to the development of indigenous writing traditions remain insufficiently explored. Among the most significant yet understudied of these contributions is the Pegon script, an adaptation of Arabic letters systematically modified to transcribe local languages such as Sundanese and Javanese, which served as a primary vehicle for the production and transmission of Islamic knowledge across the region. Existing scholarship on Pegon manuscripts has predominantly concentrated on philological editing and textual criticism, while the role of Muslim scholars in shaping Pegon as a dynamic medium for transmitting Islamic knowledge and constructing cultural identity has received comparatively limited attention. This study employs historical and philological approaches, combined with critical discourse analysis, to examine Sundanese manuscripts written in the Pegon script, drawing on local historical narratives and archival sources. The findings demonstrate that Pegon functioned not merely as a writing system but as a multidimensional intellectual instrument: a pedagogical medium within *ulama* and *pesantren* networks, a cultural bridge connecting local and global Islamic traditions, and a subtle instrument of resistance to colonial authority. Taken together, these findings attest to the remarkable intellectual creativity of Sundanese *ulama* in developing an effective vernacular writing system and underscore the critical importance of manuscript studies in reconstructing the dynamics of Islamic intellectual history in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Islamic Intellectual Tradition, Southeast Asian Manuscript Tradition (*Nusantara*), Pegon Script, Sundanese *Ulama*

### **ABSTRAK**

*Meskipun para ulama di Nusantara telah banyak dipelajari perannya dalam dakwah, politik, dan pendidikan, kontribusi mereka terhadap perkembangan tradisi penulisan lokal, khususnya aksara Pegon, masih kurang dieksplorasi. Salah satu manifestasi penting dari warisan ini adalah pengembangan dan pelestarian aksara Pegon, yang merupakan adaptasi dari huruf Arab yang digunakan untuk menulis bahasa lokal seperti Sunda dan Jawa. Studi yang ada tentang manuskrip Pegon sebagian besar berfokus pada penyuntingan filologis dan kritik tekstual, sementara peran para ulama dalam menulis Pegon sebagai media transmisi pengetahuan Islam dan identitas budaya hanya mendapat sedikit perhatian ilmiah. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan historis dan filologis yang dikombinasikan dengan analisis wacana untuk meneliti manuskrip Sunda yang ditulis dalam aksara Pegon, yang didukung oleh narasi sejarah lokal dan sumber arsip. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa aksara Pegon tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai media untuk mempelajari, melestarikan, dan menyebarkan pengetahuan Islam dalam jaringan ulama dan pesantren di masyarakat Sunda, tetapi juga berfungsi sebagai alat pedagogis, jembatan budaya antara tradisi Islam lokal dan global, serta instrumen perlawanan yang halus terhadap kekuasaan kolonial. Temuan penelitian ini telah menegaskan kreativitas intelektual yang signifikan dari ulama Sunda dalam merancang sistem penulisan yang efektif sekaligus menekankan pentingnya studi manuskrip dalam memahami dinamika sejarah intelektual Islam di kepulauan ini.*

**Kata kunci:** *Aksara Pegon, Manuskrip Nusantara, Tradisi Intelektual Islam, Ulama Sunda*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The tradition of writing has long been an integral dimension of Islamic proselytization and intellectual transmission in the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>1</sup> From the early stages of Islamization to the modern period, the *ulama* of the *Nusantara* developed various strategies to communicate Islamic teachings to local communities whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds differed significantly from those of the Arab-

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<sup>1</sup>Oman Fathurahman, "The Significance of Jawi/Pegon Scripts in the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago.," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (2018): 22–39, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1416719>.

Islamic heartlands.<sup>2</sup> The Pegon script stands as one of the most significant cultural innovations to emerge from this process: an adaptation of the Arabic script into local languages such as Malay, Javanese, and Sundanese that served as a medium for localizing, disseminating, and institutionalizing Islamic knowledge. Through Pegon, scholars effectively transmitted the disciplines of *tafsir* (Qur'anic interpretation), hadith, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and Sufism to communities for whom Arabic was not a native language.<sup>3</sup>

Theoretically, this phenomenon can be understood through the framework of cultural mediation. Ulama have often been positioned, most influentially by Clifford Geertz, as "cultural brokers" mediating between the universalistic great tradition of Islam and the particularistic little traditions of local societies. While Geertz's formulation has proven generative, subsequent scholarship has subjected it to substantial critique, particularly for its tendency to cast indigenous scholars as passive conduits rather than active intellectual agents. In contemporary scholarship, this mediation is reinterpreted not as simple transmission but as active translation and negotiation of knowledge. Recent works emphasize that Islamic knowledge in Southeast Asia was shaped by processes of localization, circulation, and adaptation rather than the straightforward replication of Middle Eastern models.<sup>4</sup> Within this revised framework, the production of Pegon manuscripts can be read as a concrete manifestation of intellectual agency, in which *ulama* reformulated Islamic teachings linguistically and conceptually so that they could be understood, internalized, and practiced by local Muslim communities.

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<sup>2</sup>Moeftich Hasbullah, "I'ādah Al-Tarkīb Li Afkāri Al-'Ulamā' Al-Sundāwīyīn", *Studia Islamika* 3 (2008), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v15i3.527>.

<sup>3</sup>Sidik Fauji et al., "Codicological Study of Dawuhan Islamic Manuscripts As Insights Into Nusantara Religious Literature," *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 23, no. 1 (2025): 109–41, <https://doi.org/10.31291/jlka.v23i1.1261>.

<sup>4</sup>Azyumardi Azra, *Islam in the Indonesian World: An Account of Institutional Formation* (Bandung: Mizan, 2019).

Over the past decade, scholarship on Islamic manuscripts and intellectual networks in Southeast Asia has expanded considerably. Studies published since 2015 highlight the importance of manuscript culture in understanding Islamic authority, educational institutions, and the formation of regional identities.<sup>5</sup> Research has also foregrounded *pesantren*-based literacy traditions and the dynamic role of local scholars in shaping interpretive communities. These studies collectively underscore the need to situate texts within their socio-historical contexts rather than treating them as isolated philological artifacts. Moreover, recent discussions on *Islam Nusantara* stress that local Islamic traditions must be understood through the lenses of mobility, translation, and hybridity, thereby challenging earlier assumptions of peripheral dependency.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these advances, the majority of recent studies on Pegon have focused on Javanese contexts, particularly *pesantren* commentarial traditions, Qur'anic exegesis, and *kitab kuning* pedagogy. Sundanese Pegon manuscripts, by contrast, remain understudied, often limited to cataloguing efforts or linguistic observations without deeper epistemological analysis. Although some recent works acknowledge the existence of Sundanese Pegon texts, few explore their broader intellectual implications within the history of Islamic thought in West Java. Consequently, a significant gap persists between manuscript documentation and the conceptual analysis of Pegon as a system of knowledge production.

Further inconsistencies are evident in the existing literature. Some scholars interpret Pegon primarily as a pedagogical tool confined to *pesantren* environments, while others frame it as a cultural identity marker without sufficiently examining its epistemic functions. There is also debate regarding whether Pegon should be understood as a derivative form of

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<sup>5</sup>Ronit Ricci, *Banishment and Belonging: Exile and Diaspora in Sarandib, Lanka and Java* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup>Azra Azyumardi, "The Transmission of Islamic Reformism to Indonesia: Networks of Middle Eastern and Malay-Indonesian 'Ulama' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Studia Islamika* 2, no. 3 (1995): 1–55, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v2i3.618>.

Arabic-Malay literacy or as an autonomous local achievement reflecting indigenous agency.<sup>7</sup> These tensions reveal the need for a more comprehensive study that moves beyond descriptive accounts and situates Pegon within the broader discourse of Islamic intellectual history and colonial modernity.

This article addresses these gaps by examining the epistemological role of Pegon within the Islamic intellectual history of West Java. It raises three central questions: How did Sundanese *ulama* employ Pegon as a medium for the production and transmission of Islamic knowledge? In what ways did Pegon shape local interpretations of Islamic doctrine? And how did Pegon function within the colonial context, particularly in relation to cultural resistance and the preservation of religious authority?.

The research draws on Sundanese-language manuscripts written in Pegon, including *fiqh* treatises, devotional texts, historical chronicles, and local religious narratives, situated within the socio-historical context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century West Java. Employing heuristic methods for manuscript collection, historical analysis to reconstruct intellectual milieus, and critical discourse analysis to examine textual strategies, this study argues that Pegon was not merely a scriptural adaptation but a dynamic intellectual instrument through which Sundanese *ulama* structured modes of learning, interpretation, and communal identity,<sup>8</sup> and through which the Islamic intellectual heritage of the region continues to be understood.

This article proceeds through four thematically organized sections, moving from theoretical and historical foundations to manuscript analysis and epistemological synthesis, before

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<sup>7</sup>Ronit Ricci, "Islamic Literary Networks in South and Southeast Asia," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 21, no. 1 (2010): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etp084>.

<sup>8</sup>A.G. Muhaimin, "The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims : Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims," *The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims : Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims*, no. July (2006), [https://doi.org/10.26530/oopen\\_459298](https://doi.org/10.26530/oopen_459298).

drawing conclusions on the significance of Pegon as both a writing system and a symbol of creative engagement between universal Islam and local culture.<sup>9</sup>

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates historical, philological, ethnographic, and discourse-analytical approaches to investigate the intellectual role of the Pegon script within the Sundanese Islamic tradition. This integrated framework is appropriate for manuscript studies because it enables texts to be understood not only as linguistic artifacts but also as socio-cultural products embedded in historical processes, educational practices, and religious traditions. By combining textual analysis with ethnographic inquiry, the study situates Pegon manuscripts within broader contexts of knowledge transmission, institutional practice, and regional Islamic authority.<sup>10</sup>

Manuscript collection was conducted from 20 to 27 August 2025 at two purposively selected sites in West Java. The first was Syamsul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Gunung Puyuh, Sukabumi, where two manuscripts by KH. Ahmad Sanusi, *Malja' al-Ṭālibīn* and *Raudhat al-'Irfān*, were examined with the assistance of Baden Badrudin, head of the Syamsul Ulum Foundation. The second was the Mama Sempur manuscript library, Plered, Purwakarta, where the manuscript *Campaka Dilaga* was accessed with the assistance of the librarian, Mrs. Ai Khadijah. Both sites were selected for their intact manuscript holdings, long-standing Pegon literacy traditions, and continued use of Pegon in the transmission of classical Islamic texts. Each manuscript was systematically described according to the following codicological parameters: manuscript number, title, pagination, language, script type, authorship, textual basis,

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<sup>9</sup>Fauji et al., "Codicological Study of Dawuhan Islamic Manuscripts As Insights Into Nusantara Religious Literature."

<sup>10</sup>Ian. Proudfoot, "Lithography and the Development of Jawi/Pegon Printing in Nineteenth-Century Southeast Asia," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 60, no. 2 (1987): 87–102, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41493067>.

physical condition, writing style, storage location, and content summary.<sup>11</sup>

The manuscript corpus spans the nineteenth to early twentieth century, a period marked by intensified textual production among Sundanese *ulama* and the consolidation of Dutch colonial authority in West Java. Primary sources consist of Sundanese-language manuscripts written in Pegon script, encompassing works on *fiqh*, devotional literature, didactic texts, and early printed instructional materials used in *pesantren* education. Manuscript selection followed four criteria: physical condition, legibility, textual completeness, and relevance to Islamic intellectual traditions in West Java.<sup>12</sup>

To complement textual analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with philologists, manuscript custodians, and *pesantren* teachers, selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their demonstrated expertise in Pegon manuscripts and Pegon-based pedagogy. These interviews provided evidence of the contemporary understanding and transmission of Pegon, establishing a connection between historical investigation and present-day religious and educational practices. Participant observation was additionally carried out during Pegon-based learning sessions within *pesantren* settings, enabling the study to examine how texts are read, interpreted, and transmitted in practice. This ethnographic dimension allows manuscripts to be treated not only as static textual objects but as living traditions continuously reproduced within educational communities.

Data collection proceeded through three sequential stages: heuristic identification, philological analysis, and ethnographic inquiry. The heuristic stage involved locating, documenting, and cataloguing manuscripts, with attention to provenance, physical

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<sup>11</sup>Jajat Burhanudin, "The Dutch Colonial Policy on Islamic Education and the Rise of Middle Eastern-Educated 'Ulama' Networks.," *Studia Islamika* 12, no. 1 (2005): 45–78, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v12i1.642>.

<sup>12</sup>Vierry Firdaus Ramdani, Syafii; Muhammad Zarkasyi, and Tatang, "Adaptation Of Arabic Script Into Pegon Sunda In A Kitab Of Tijan Al-Dharari," *Dzihni: Journal on Arabic Education, Linguistics, and Literary Studies* 3, no. 01 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.28944/dzihni.v3i01.1965>.

condition, script style, pagination, and marginal annotations. Philological analysis was subsequently undertaken through transliteration of Pegon into Latin script, translation where necessary, and textual criticism following established principles of Nusantara philology. Particular attention was given to scribal variations and orthographic features, as well as to the relationship between each manuscript's material characteristics and its internal textual coherence.

A methodological consideration specific to this corpus concerns the survival conditions of Pegon manuscripts. Because many texts within this tradition survive in unique or severely limited copies, this study adopts a single-manuscript critical approach, as formulated in Sundanese philological practice. Rather than applying comparative recension methods designed for traditions with multiple witnesses, this approach prioritizes accurate description, full transliteration, and contextually informed interpretation of each manuscript as an independent textual witness. This method preserves the distinctive linguistic and orthographic characteristics of the Sundanese Pegon tradition<sup>13</sup> while remaining methodologically transparent about the absence of comparative textual variants.

The ethnographic stage contextualized manuscript use within *pesantren* settings through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews that explored pedagogical practices, local perceptions of Pegon, and its institutional significance in religious education. Secondary literature on manuscript culture, Islamic intellectual networks, and *pesantren* traditions was also employed to strengthen contextual analysis and situate primary findings within broader scholarly frameworks.

To ensure analytical validity, the study applies methodological triangulation, integrating philological, historical, ethnographic, and discourse-analytical data across all three stages of analysis. Thematic coding was first used to identify recurring patterns related to pedagogy, legal reasoning, devotional practice,

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<sup>13</sup>Yuyun Sri Wahyuni, "Refining Traditional and Modern : A Literary Study of Indonesian Sufism and Neo-Sufism from Pesantren" 2, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.22515/dinika.v2i1.299>.

and local adaptations of Islamic teaching.<sup>14</sup> Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), following Fairclough's three-dimensional model, was then applied systematically across all three of its analytical levels: the description level examined the formal linguistic features of Pegon texts, including lexical choices, script conventions, and the syntactic structuring of religious authority; the interpretation level analyzed how these textual features functioned within *pesantren* pedagogical interactions and the broader transmission of Islamic knowledge; and the explanation level situated the texts within their wider socio-historical context, addressing how colonial power relations, *pesantren* institutional authority, and Islamic scholarly networks shaped the production and reception of Pegon manuscripts. Finally, historical contextualization<sup>15</sup> traced intellectual connections between Sundanese scholars and broader Islamic networks, including ties to Middle Eastern centers of learning and interregional scholarly exchanges within the Indonesian archipelago.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Findings**

#### **Pegon as a Medium for the Vernacularization of Islamic Knowledge**

The Pegon script is an important intellectual medium in the history of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, especially in the Sundanese region. Pegon is a modified form of Arabic script used to write local languages such as Sundanese, Javanese, and Malay by adding letters and signs to represent sounds absent in Arabic. Its emergence demonstrates that Islamization in the archipelago occurred not through the elimination of local culture but through adaptation and localization, enabling Islamic teachings to be understood in local languages. In the Sundanese context, Pegon

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<sup>14</sup>Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>15</sup>J. Noorduyn, "The Sundanese Manuscripts in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Historical and Religious Literature," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 58, no. 2 (1995): 315–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X0001150X>.

served as a bridge between the Arabic-Islamic scholarly tradition and the linguistic realities of Sundanese society. Dedi Supriadi and Khomisah Khomisah, in *Sastra Kitab Pegon Sunda: Jejak Ulama Lokal dan Identitas Islam Nusantara*, argue that Pegon became part of a localized Islamic identity shaped by cultural acculturation and pesantren traditions.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, T. Pudjiastuti viewed Pegon writing as an expression of local Islamic identity in Java and the wider archipelago.

The use of Pegon expanded alongside the growth of Islam and pesantren networks in West Java between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ulama employed Pegon to translate, explain, and disseminate Islamic teachings to communities that lacked proficiency in Arabic. Consequently, Pegon was not merely a technical writing system but also a pedagogical tool that facilitated the transmission of Islamic knowledge in local contexts. Abdul Aziz et al. demonstrated that Pegon learning in pesantren helped students understand religious texts through transliteration and interpretive methods. The tradition also reflected an educational process adapted to local linguistic capacities.<sup>17</sup>

Pegon writing retained the right-to-left structure of Arabic script, yet several letters were modified to accommodate Sundanese phonology, including sounds such as “c,” “ng,” and “ny.” These modifications illustrate the intellectual creativity of Nusantara ulama in developing a writing system suited to local needs. The tradition of Pegon writing was documented as early as the nineteenth century in M. Kromoprawirto's *Kawruh Aksara Pegon*.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Fika Hidayani's paleographic study demonstrates that the evolution of Pegon letter forms reflects the dynamic development of local Islamic literacy traditions across the archipelago. In Sundanese pesantren culture, Pegon was closely associated with the *bandongan* and *sorogan* learning

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<sup>16</sup> Dedi Supriadi and Khomisah Khomisah, *Sastra Kitab Pegon Sunda Jejak Ulama Lokal Dan Identitas Islam Nusantara* (Garut: Yayasan Berkarya, 2025).

<sup>17</sup> Abdul Aziz et al., “Learning Arabic Pegon for Non-Javanese Santri At Pesantren,” *Pendidikan Islam* 8, no. 2 (2022): 113–26, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v8i2.19581>.

<sup>18</sup> M Kromoprawirto, *Kawruh Aksara Pegon* (Madiun, 1867).

methods, through which students studied Islamic texts written or translated into Sundanese Pegon. This tradition enabled local communities to access theology, jurisprudence, Sufism, Qur'anic exegesis, and ethics without advanced mastery of Arabic. Elmubarok notes that Pegon strengthened the relationship between Arabic texts and local explanations within pesantren learning traditions. Pegon, therefore, served as a medium of vernacularization, localizing Islamic knowledge within Sundanese linguistic and cultural experiences.<sup>19</sup>

The function of Pegon extended beyond religious instruction. Pegon manuscripts reveal their use in literary works, correspondence, legal documents, mantras, and traditional medical texts, indicating that Pegon became part of Sundanese Muslim literacy culture. I. Hardini's study of Cirebonese mantras in *Mantra Cirebon Dalam Kitab Tetamba Keraton Kacirebonan* demonstrates the integration of Islamic symbols and local cultural practices through Pegon writing.

The intellectual tradition of Pegon in Sunda is evident in the works of major ulama. Sheikh Abdul Muhyi of Pamijahan, a prominent propagator of the Syattariyah order in Priangan, wrote *Martabat Alam Tujuh* in Sundanese Pegon to explain Sufi teachings influenced by Ibn 'Arabi's concept of *wahdat al-wujud*. The text illustrates how complex Islamic metaphysical ideas were translated into the local language without losing intellectual depth. Dedi Supriadi and Khomisah Khomisah emphasize that the Sundanese Pegon tradition demonstrates the active role of local *ulama* networks in constructing Islamic intellectual identity through regional languages.<sup>20</sup> Moeflich Hasbullah likewise notes the richness of Sundanese ulama intellectual activities, categorizing them into typologies such as

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<sup>19</sup>Agus Suyadi Raharusun, Muhammad Falikh Rifqi, and Ismail Ibrahim, "The Significance Of Sundanese Culture And Hadith Teachings In Wawacan Panganten Tujuh as an Islamic Heritage of Nusantara" 22, no. 2 (2024): 421–54, <https://doi.org/10.31291/jlka.v22i2.1202>.

<sup>20</sup>Supriadi and Khomisah, *Sastra Kitab Pegon Sunda Jejak Ulama Lokal Dan Identitas Islam Nusantara*.

intellectual ulama, thinkers, warriors, and Sufi scholars.<sup>21</sup> Another important figure was KH Ahmad Sanusi of Sukabumi, who produced numerous tafsirs and Islamic works in Pegon, including *Malja' al-Thalibin* and *Raudhat al-'Irfa*.<sup>22</sup> These texts were intended to make Qur'anic teachings accessible to pesantren communities and Sundanese readers. Yani Yuliani argues that Ahmad Sanusi's simultaneous use of Pegon and Latin scripts reflected the adaptability of Sundanese ulama to modernity while maintaining pesantren traditions.

Pegon also played an important social and political role during the colonial period. Dutch colonial authorities viewed pesantren and Pegon literacy traditions as difficult to supervise because they were inaccessible to colonial officials. T. Pudjiastuti notes that Pegon became a marker distinguishing local Islamic identity from colonial Latin-based education systems. Nevertheless, Pegon should not be interpreted solely as a form of anti-colonial resistance, since some ulama, including KH Ahmad Sanusi, also adopted the Latin script in certain contexts.

The large number of surviving Sundanese Pegon manuscripts demonstrates the strength of Islamic literacy traditions in Sunda since the nineteenth century. Recent developments in digital humanities, including the character recognition research of Yova Ruldeviyani et al., show that digitization has become an important strategy for preserving Pegon manuscripts and the intellectual heritage of Islam in the archipelago. Today, many Pegon texts are being translated and studied more widely, confirming the continuing relevance of Pegon within contemporary scholarship and the preservation of Sundanese Islamic intellectual traditions.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Hasbullah, "I'ādah Al-Tarkīb Li Afkāri Al-'Ulamā' Al-Sundāwīyīn."

<sup>22</sup>Jajang A Rohmana, "Polemik Keagamaan Dalam Tafsir *Malja' at-Thalibin* Karya K.H. Ahmad Sanusi," *Suhuf* 10, no. 1 (2017): 25–57.

<sup>23</sup>Mahmudah Ilvina Maulidiyah and Ali. Ma'sum, "Revitalization The Pegon Arabic Script In The Midst Of Globalization : Preserving The Traces Of Arabic Civilization In The Local Writing Culture Of Nusantara," in *Mahrajan Arabi Proceeding International Conference in Arabic Festival* (Malang: Universitas

## **Pegon as a Pedagogical Tool for Islamic Boarding Schools**

The Pegon script played an important role in the history of Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago, particularly within pesantren traditions in Java and Sunda. Since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Pegon has functioned as a pedagogical medium that enabled local Muslim communities to understand Islamic teachings without advanced mastery of Arabic. Through Pegon, pesantren developed a learning system that connected global Islamic scholarship with local languages and cultures. Recent studies on Javanese pesantren traditions even describe Pegon as a *pedagogical scaffold* in learning *kitab kuning* and an important element of pesantren intellectual identity.

The growth of Pegon paralleled the expansion of manuscript production in pesantren across Java, Sunda, Madura, and other regions of the archipelago. Numerous works on tafsir, fiqh, Sufism, hadith, and religious literature were written in Pegon, showing that pesantren served not only as religious schools but also as centers of local Islamic knowledge production. Ahmad Baidowi argues that the Pegon Qur'anic commentaries emerged from pedagogical needs to help ordinary Muslims more easily understand the Qur'an.<sup>24</sup>

In pesantren practice, Pegon was mainly used through the *bandongan* and *sorogan* methods. In *Bandongan*, a Kiai translated and explained Arabic texts in the local language, written in Pegon,<sup>25</sup> while students recorded the explanations as *makna gandul* or interlinear notes. In *Sorogan*, students individually read texts before the teacher for correction. These methods made Pegon central to classical pesantren learning and

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Negeri Malang, 2025), 1–18, <https://proceeding.arab-um.com/index.php/mah/about/editorialMasthead>.

<sup>24</sup>Ahmad Baidowi, "Fenomena Aksara Pegon Dalam Tradisi Penulisan Tafsir Pesantren (Pegon Script Phenomena In The Tradition Of Pesantren Quranic Commentaries Writing)," *Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 21, no. 2 (2020): 469–90, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2020.2102-12>.

<sup>25</sup>R. Ahmad Nur Kholis and Luqman Karom, "Penerjemahan Pegon Dalam Kitab Kuning Pesantren," *Jurnal Penelitian Ilmiah INTAJ* 6, no. 1 (2022): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.35897/intaj.v6i1.730>.

enabled students with limited Arabic skills to gradually understand Islamic sciences. Abdul Aziz et al. demonstrated that Pegon learning among non-Javanese students effectively supported the comprehension of Arabic texts through transliterative and contextual approaches.<sup>26</sup>

The pedagogical significance of Pegon is evident in the works of major Nusantara ulama. Kiai Sholeh Darat wrote most of his works in Javanese Pegon so they could be understood by ordinary people. Through these writings, Islamic teachings were contextualized within local traditions. Abdul Mustaqim explains that the use of the local language and the Pegon script in Sholeh Darat's tafsir represented a recontextualization of Islamic knowledge within Javanese and Nusantara societies.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, KH Ahmad Rifa'i Kalisalak composed works on fiqh, theology, and Sufism in poetic Pegon form, making religious teachings easier to memorize and understand.

In the Sundanese context, Sheikh Abdul Muhyi used Sundanese Pegon in *Martabat Alam Tujuh* to explain Sufi metaphysics, drawing on Ibn' Arabī's concept of *wahdat al-wujud*. Meanwhile, KH Ahmad Sanusi produced tafsir and hadith works in Sundanese Pegon, including *Malja' al-Ṭālibīn* and *Raudhat al-'Irfān*. These works demonstrate that Pegon evolved into a mature pedagogical medium for the systematic explanation of Islamic sciences.

Pegon also had social and political significance during the colonial period. Dutch authorities viewed pesantren and Pegon literacy traditions as difficult to supervise because they were inaccessible to colonial officials. Van den Berg's 1887 colonial education report expressed concern about the use of Pegon in pesantren. Kukuh Subekti similarly argues that Pegon created communication and educational networks outside colonial control, making it a symbol of pesantren intellectual

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<sup>26</sup>Aziz et al., "Learning Arabic Pegon for Non-Javanese Santri At Pesantren."

<sup>27</sup>Abdul Mustaqim, "The Epistemology of Javanese Qur'anic Exegesis: A Study of Sālih Darat's Fayd Al-Rahmān," *Al-Jami'ah* 55, no. 2 (2017): 357–90, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2017.552.357-390>.

independence.<sup>28</sup>

Although the use of Pegon has declined due to the dominance of the Latin script and modern education, many Pegon manuscripts continue to be studied, translated, and republished. Recent studies have even developed Pegon-based teaching materials for beginner students. These developments show that Pegon remains an important intellectual and pedagogical heritage of Islam in the archipelago.

### **Pegon and the Intellectual Tradition of Sundanese Ulama**

The intellectual tradition of Islam in Sunda is closely connected with the use of the Pegon script. Since the growth of pesantren in Priangan, Banten, and Cirebon, Pegon became the main medium through which ulama wrote, taught, and transmitted Islamic knowledge to local communities. Pegon was not merely a modified Arabic script, but part of an intellectual tradition that localized Islamic teachings within the Sundanese language and culture.<sup>29</sup> Through Pegon, ulama connected global Islamic scholarship with the social realities of Sundanese society. Elmubarok describes the Pegon tradition as an adaptation of Islamic education that made religious texts easier for local communities to understand.

The use of Pegon expanded alongside the development of pesantren during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ulama produced works on tafsir, fiqh, theology, Sufism, hadith, morals, and religious literature in Sundanese Pegon, demonstrating a process of *vernacularization* in which Islamic knowledge was translated into local language and culture. Fika Hidayani's paleographic study shows that the development of Pegon script reflected the dynamic growth of Islamic literacy traditions within

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<sup>28</sup>Solid Subekti, *Arab Pegon Khazanah Khas Nusantara Yang Membuat Resah Belanda* (Surabaya: Solid Publishing, 2021).

<sup>29</sup>Jajang A Rohmana, "Sundanese 'Kitāb' Printed in Early-Twentieth-Century Egypt as Evidence of Islamic Transregional Networks," *Wacana, Jurnal of the Humanitis of Indonesia* 26, no. 2 (2025): 191–211, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17510/wacana.v26i2.1779>.

pesantren and Muslim communities in the archipelago.<sup>30</sup>

One important figure was Shaykh Abdul Muhyi Pamijahan, the seventeenth-century propagator of the Syattariyah order in Priangan. In *Martabat Alam Tujuh*, he used Sundanese Pegon to explain Sufi metaphysical concepts influenced by Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*. This demonstrates how Pegon functioned as an intellectual medium for translating complex Islamic ideas into local cultural contexts.<sup>31</sup>

The Pegon tradition developed further through ulama such as KH Ahmad Sanusi of Sukabumi, who produced numerous tafsir and fiqh works including *Malja’ al-Ṭālibīn* and *Raudhat al-‘Irfān*. Abdul Mustaqim’s study of Kiai Shaleh Darat’s tafsir tradition also highlights the deep roots of local-language Islamic interpretation in the intellectual history of Nusantara.<sup>32</sup> By using Sundanese Pegon, KH Ahmad Sanusi made Islamic teachings more accessible to ordinary Sundanese Muslims and strengthened pesantren intellectual traditions.

Other ulama also contributed significantly to this tradition. Juwaeni bin Abdurrahman composed Pegon poetry and *nadzam* on fiqh and ethics, making religious teachings easier for students to memorize. Likewise, KH Tubagus Ahmad Bakri, known as Mama Sempur, produced Islamic works in Sundanese Pegon for pesantren education in Purwakarta, West Java. These traditions demonstrate that Pegon evolved into a flexible intellectual medium capable of accommodating various forms of Islamic expression and education. KH. Tubagus Ahmad Bakri, Sempur, Plered, Purwakarta, the founder of Pesantren Assalafiyah, was the great-grandson of Sunan Gunung Djati and has written more than 17 books. One of them, as an example, is entitled

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<sup>30</sup>Hammi Syafaq et al., “‘Santri without Pesantren’ and the Sectarian Violence on Indonesian Muslim Social Media,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2612046>.

<sup>31</sup>Tommy Christomi, *Signs of The Wali Narratives At The Sacred Sites In Pamijahan, West Java* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2008), [https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN\\_459530](https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_459530).

<sup>32</sup>Mustaqim, “The Epistemology of Javanese Qur’anic Exegesis: A Study of Sālih Darat’s Fayd Al-Rahmān.”

Campakadilaga which is written in Sundanese Pegon Script (see, figure 1).



Source: Dokumen Rumah dan Manuskrip Aksara Pegon Sunda

Figure 1.

Campak Dilaga karya Tubagus Ahmad Bakri Manuscript

It says:

*Cempakadilaga, mertèlakeun perihal wajib usaha pikeun pribadi jeung kaulawarga. Ta'lif syaikhuna al mukarram al 'allahamah al Imam al Humam. Kiyai Tubagus Haji Ahmad Bakri Sempur Plered. Matt'anal ilâhu bihi wa nafa'ana bi 'ulûmihi wa amaddana bi madidihi. Âmin.*

Translation:

Cempakadilaga explains the obligation to do business for himself and his family. *Ta'lif syaikhuna al mukarram al 'allahamah al humam. Kiyai Tubagus Haji Ahmad Bakri Sempur Plered. Matta'anal lâhu bihi wa nafa'na bi u'lûmihi w amadan bi madidihi. Âmin*

Another Sundanese ulama named Juwaeni bin Abdurrahman, who was born in the village of Parkan Salak, Sukabumi, in 1879, has written 4 works in the Sundanese Pegon script, namely Tafsir al-Wajij, Manaqib Syeikh Abdul Qadir Jaelani, Siru Hisan, Nadham Jauhar Tauhid, and Syair Durūsul *Fiqhiyah*. One of Juwaeni bin Abdurrahman's most famous works, still widely used by the community, is *Syair Durūsul Fiqhiyah*. This Pegon book is often read or recited by the community before prayer times. The description of the book is as follows table 2 and Figure 2.

**Table 2.**  
**Manuscript Metadata of *Syair Durūsul Fiqhiyah***

No.	Metadata Element	Description
1	Title	<i>Syair Durūsul Fiqhiyah</i>
2	Storage location	Rumah Aksara dan Manuskrip Pegon Sunda (House of Sundanese Pegon Scripts and Manuscripts)
3	Number of pages	25 pages
4	Condition of the book	The ink and paper are still in very good condition.
5	Size of the book	15 cm × 20 cm
6	Language of the book	Sundanese
7	Script of the book	Pegon
8	Material of the book	Paper
9	Author of the book	Juwaeni bin Abdurrahman
10	Publisher of the book	Ali Idrisiyah Jakarta
11	Summary of contents	Fiqh



Source: *Dokumen Rumah and Manuscript Aksara Pegon Sunda*

**Figure 2.**  
**Karya Litografi Juwaeni bin Abdurrahman**

Juwaeni bin Abdurrahman’s original translation uses Pegon character. If the author copies into Latin, as an example, it becomes:

1. *Sakur cai bijil ti bumi ti langit, meunang dipaké susuci najan pait*
2. *Kaya ibun, cilaut, sumur, wahangan, hujan, buah, ciburial, jeung cihujan.*
3. *Anging lamun éta cai geus dipaké, micuen najis, hadas leutik, hadas gedé,*

Translation:

1. All water that comes out of the earth and sky can be used for purification, even though it is bitter.
2. Such as dew, sea, rivers, rain, fruit, gushing water, and rainwater.
3. Unless the water has been used, removing impurity, minor and major hadas.

Lately, books written by Sundanese scholars in Pegon script and the Sundanese language have been enjoyed by the public because they have begun to be translated into languages including Indonesian, Arabic, and English. Among them is the work of Kiayi Muhyidin, a prolific Sundanese scholar who wrote books in the Sundanese Pegon script, namely *Miftahussa'adah fi Ma`na Kalimatais Syahadah fi Aqaidi Ahlissunah Waljamaah*. To be accessible to and enjoyed by a wider community, around 30 books by Sundanese scholars have been translated into Indonesian and English. The involvement of ulama in this process shows their role as the main agents in maintaining the use of the Pegon script amidst the changing times.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Sundanese ulama not only contribute to the educational aspect, but also in preserving the intellectual medium that is characteristic of Islam Nusantara.

Pegon Sunda manuscripts contain not only normative religious teachings but also reflections on morality, education, social relations, and everyday ethics. This demonstrates that Sundanese ulama integrated Islam into the social and cultural life of the community. Through Pegon, Islamic identity became closely connected with Sundanese identity. The Pegon tradition was strongly rooted in pesantren culture, particularly through the *bandongan* and *sorogan* methods, where students copied, translated, and memorized texts. As a result, Pegon functioned not only as a writing system but also as a symbol of pesantren

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<sup>33</sup>Asep Saefullah, "The Tradition of Religious Books (Kitabs) Printing: Case Study of the Production and Reproduction of Religious Books (Kitabs) in Cianjur and Sukabumi, West Java, Indonesia," *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 17, no. 2 (2020): 291–320, <https://doi.org/10.31291/jlka.v17i2.718>.

intellectual authority and continuity across generations.

During the colonial period, Pegon also had social and political significance. Dutch authorities viewed pesantren as difficult to control because Pegon texts written in local languages were inaccessible to colonial officials. Kukuh Subekti argues that the Pegon tradition created an intellectual and communication space outside colonial control, while Jajat Burhanudin highlights the role of pesantren as centers of Muslim social and political authority.

Despite colonial influence and modernity, Sundanese ulama adapted by occasionally using the Latin script without abandoning the Pegon traditions. The survival of Sundanese Pegon manuscripts demonstrates the richness of local Islamic intellectual heritage. Today, efforts to preserve, translate, and study Pegon manuscripts remain essential for understanding the intellectual history of Islam in Indonesia.<sup>34</sup>

### **Pegon as Cultural and Political Identity**

The Pegon script functioned not only as a medium for Islamic education in the archipelago but also as an important cultural and political symbol, especially in Sundanese society. Pegon reflected how local Islamic identity was constructed through language, literacy traditions, and pesantren networks. Thus, Pegon cannot be understood merely as a modified Arabic writing system, but as part of the cultural identity of Muslim communities in the archipelago. T. Pudjiastuti described Pegon writing as a form of local Islamic identity shaped through cultural acculturation and pesantren traditions. In Sunda, Pegon developed alongside the growth of pesantren as centers of education and religious life. It was used for writing religious books, letters, poems, fatwas, and other socio-religious texts. The use of Sundanese language in Pegon demonstrates that Islamization in the region occurred through cultural adaptation rather than the elimination of local identity. Sundanese remained

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<sup>34</sup>Muhammad Abdullah et al., "The Rambang Manuscript in Javanese Tradition: Sufism, Sectarian Negotiation and the Making of Tolerant Islam in Indonesia," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 20, no. 2 (2025): 319–33, <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol20no2.22>.

the language of daily communication, while Arabic letters were modified to suit local phonology. Dedi Supriadi and Khomisah emphasized that Sundanese Pegon manuscripts represent the success of local ulama in constructing an Islamic identity rooted in regional culture. Pegon also became a marker of pesantren identity in West Java. Mastery of Pegon was associated with religious authority and closeness to the classical Islamic scholarly tradition. Pegon was widely used in Qur'anic recitation, religious poetry, diplomas, and pesantren records, forming a literacy culture distinct from the Latin-based system introduced by Dutch colonialism.

The cultural role of Pegon is evident in the works of Sundanese ulama. Sheikh Abdul Muhyi Pamijahan used Pegon in his Sufi writings to explain Islamic spiritual teachings to local communities. Likewise, KH Ahmad Sanusi wrote numerous works on tafsir and fiqh in Sundanese Pegon to make Islamic teachings accessible to pesantren students and ordinary Muslims. Yani Yuliani argues that the use of Pegon in KH Ahmad Sanusi's works was an important part of the localization of Qur'anic interpretation in Sundanese society.<sup>35</sup>

Pegon also had political significance during the Dutch colonial period. Colonial authorities viewed pesantren and ulama networks with suspicion because Pegon texts were difficult for them to understand. Kukuh Subekti notes that the Pegon tradition created an intellectual and communication space outside colonial control. Colonial reports by Van den Berg also identified Pegon as an obstacle to supervising indigenous education, giving pesantren a degree of intellectual autonomy. Jajat Burhanudin similarly explains that pesantren often became centers of socio-political solidarity among indigenous Muslim communities.

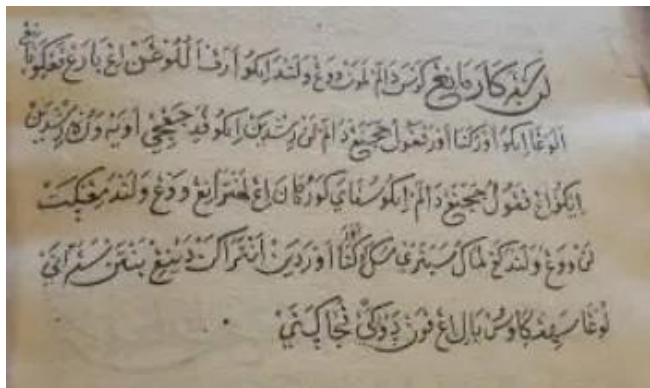
In the Sundanese region, Pegon was even used officially in administrative and royal contexts. Beyond pesantren and

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<sup>35</sup>Yani Yuliani, "Aksara Tafsir Al-Qur'an Di Priangan: Huruf Pegon Dan Aksara Latin Dalam Karya K.H. Ahmad Sanoesi," *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 5, no. 1 (2020): 15–27, <https://doi.org/10.15575/al-bayan.v5i1.8461>.

scholarly circles, Pegon also entered administrative and political domains. The Dutch East Indies government employed Pegon to communicate regulations to indigenous Muslim populations, while the Sultanate of Banten used Pegon alongside Javanese script for official state documents. Ahmad (2018) notes that many royal manuscripts of Banten were written in Pegon, and Pudjiastuti's study *War, Trade, Friendship: The Scripts of the Sultan of Banten* demonstrate the importance of Pegon in the political and cultural history of Sunda.

A manuscript of Pegon in Banten was found stored in a special collection at Leiden University Library, coded LoR. 5598, made of 163 pages of paper. The arrangement of the text is in accordance with Arabic writing, from right to left, with Pegon script and partly Javanese. In the Javanese script section, there are 64 pages arranged from right to left. On pages 109 and 87 there is a colophon dated 1151 AH/1738 AD. This manuscript belonged to Kiai Faqih Najmuddin, a grand judge or kadi in the Sultanate of Banten. Faqih Najmuddin's name appears on the front page of the manuscript. It contains various texts officially issued by the Sultanate of Banten. One of them is the Kitab Undang-undang Kesultanan Banten (on pages 108-163. Even though this text is written in Pegon Javanese script, the Dutch travel rules for the Sundanese area are written in Pegon script (see, figure 3).



Source: <https://alif.id/tarikh/aksara-pegon-dahulu-kini-dan-nanti>

**Figure 3.**

The Agreement on Pegon Script

It says:

*Lan saperkara maning karsa dalem lamun wong walanda iku arep alulungan ing barang panggonaning alunga iku ora kena ora pangulu jejeneng dalem lan risyden iku pada jangji aweh weruh risyden iku ing pangulu jejeneng dalem iku supaya kawaruhana ing lantaraning wong walanda minggat lan wong walanda kang lumaku sabenere maka ora kena ora den anteraken dening Banten saparane lunga sahingga wus bali ing pondoke pajagane.*

Translation:

And another regulation from the king that if a Dutchman wanted to travel from his place of residence, it was obligatory for the "Penghulu Dalem" and the "Resident" to make an agreement that the "Resident" would inform the "Penghulu Dalem" so that the reason for the Dutchman's travel was known. It was also obligatory for any Dutchman who wanted to travel to be accompanied by a delegate of the Sultanate of Banten from the time he left until he returned to his place of residence.

Uniquely, apart from the colonial era, the use of Sundanese Pegon script was also found in the political context during the independence period, which contained Pancasila as the basis of the state. At the beginning of independence, Pancasila faced controversy and opposition among freedom fighters, or founding fathers, over whether to base the state on Islam or on Pancasila. Among rural Muslim community, Pancasila is also used as a *nadhaman* during religious moments to strengthen the support on secular basis state.

An interesting Pegon script found contains the validation about Pancasila that does not contradict the Qur'an and Hadith. This text is anonymous; the content is as follows figure 4.



Source: Dokumen Rumah dan Manuskrip Aksara Pegon Sunda

**Figure 4.**

*Nadham Pancasila* by anonymous

(Anonymous works have been the characteristics of Ulama in Southeast Asia)

Title:

*Nadom Pancasila*

*Ieu nadom nyarioskeun dasar nagara Indonesia anu henteu bertentangan sareng Qur'an-Hadits*

*Bismilahirohmanirohim*

Original text:

<i>Ku bismillāh dikawitan</i>	<i>Alloh anu sipat Rohman</i>
<i>Kuring ieu nyusun nadom</i>	<i>Malah mandar tambah iman</i>
<i>Dulur-dulur sadayana</i>	<i>Wajib toat ka Allohna</i>
<i>Reujeung toat ka Rosulna</i>	<i>Kanjeng Muhammad Nabina</i>
<i>Kitu deui ka nagara</i>	<i>Nu bedasar Pancasila</i>
<i>Kedah toat jeung satia</i>	<i>Salami henteu berbida</i>
<i>Sareng al-Qur'an hadisna</i>	<i>Ulah wani ngabantahna</i>
<i>Sabab dasar Pancasila</i>	<i>Dibenerkeun ku agama</i>
<i>Sasuwey sareung Qur'ana</i>	<i>Nyakitu sareng hadisna</i>
<i>Sareng agama Islamna</i>	<i>Mupakat jeung syariatna</i>

Translation:

*Nadham Pancasila*

This nadham tells the basis of the Indonesian state which does not contradict the Qur'an-Hadith

Starting with Bismillah, Allah the Most Merciful

I compiled this nadham, hopefully it will increase my faith  
Brothers and sisters, it is obligatory to obey Allah  
Also obedient to his Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad is  
his name  
The same goes for the state, which is based on Pancasila  
must be obedient and faithful, as long as it does not  
contradict  
With the Qur'an and Hadith, never oppose them  
because the basis of Pancasila is justified by religion  
in accordance with the Qur'an and its Hadith  
with the religion of Islam, in agreement with its sharia

And another regulation from the king that if a Dutchman  
wanted to travel from his place of residence, it was  
obligatory for the "PENGHULU DALEM" and the "Resident" to  
make an agreement that the "Resident" would inform the  
"PENGHULU DALEM" so that the reason for the Dutchman's  
travel was known. It was also obligatory for any Dutchman  
who wanted to travel to be accompanied by a delegate of  
the Sultanate of Banten from the time he left until he  
returned to his place of residence.

In several regions of the archipelago, including Banten  
and Priangan, Pegon was used not only in religious education but  
also in official sultanate documents and local administrative  
communication. This indicates that Pegon had broader socio-  
political functions and became a symbol of local Islamic  
authority and indigenous Muslim identity during the colonial  
period. Studies of Islamic literacy traditions in the archipelago  
show that the use of Pegon in administration reflected the close  
relationship between religion, culture, and political power in  
traditional Muslim societies.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Dindin Jamaludin et al., "Translation of the Qur ' an in Priangan : Bridging the Gap between Arabic and Sundanese Language," *HTS Theologise Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hts.v78i1.7746>.

However, Pegon was not always associated with open resistance to Dutch colonialism. Some Sundanese ulama adopted adaptive attitudes toward modernity. KH Ahmad Sanusi, for example, used both Pegon and Latin script in different contexts. This demonstrates that pesantren ulama sought to preserve local Islamic traditions while also engaging with modern educational and administrative systems. Pegon therefore represented a form of cultural negotiation between Islamic tradition and colonial modernity.

As a political and cultural identity, Pegon also strengthened solidarity within pesantren communities. Because Pegon literacy was mainly accessible to santri circles, it created a sense of shared identity and continuity. Pegon manuscripts became important media for transmitting Islamic values, ethics, and intellectual traditions across generations. Research on pesantren literacy culture shows that Pegon reinforced the collective identity of santri communities in the face of social change.

Although Pegon declined with the spread of Latin-based modern education in the twentieth century, its intellectual heritage continues to survive. Many pesantren in West Java still use Pegon in classical learning traditions, while manuscripts are increasingly being studied, digitized, and republished. Yova Ruldeviyani et al. demonstrate that digital technology is now being applied to the documentation and preservation of Pegon manuscripts. These efforts confirm that Pegon remains an important part of the cultural and intellectual history of Islam in Indonesia.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Pegon as an Epistemic System: Vernacularization, Scholarly Agency, and Institutional Continuity**

This study set out to analyze the contribution of Sundanese *ulama* in maintaining and developing the Pegon script as an Islamic intellectual tradition in the archipelago. The findings demonstrate that Pegon was not merely a technical orthographic adaptation of Arabic letters but a strategic intellectual medium that enabled the vernacularization of Islamic sciences within

Sundanese society. Critically, this conclusion challenges the assumption that regional Islamic scholarship in Southeast Asia was derivative or secondary to Middle Eastern intellectual production. The manuscripts examined in this study, including *Malja' al-Ṭālibīn*, *Raudhat al-'Irfān*, and *Campaka Dilaga*, provide concrete evidence that Sundanese *ulama* were active agents in the production of Islamic knowledge, reinterpreting, contextualizing, and expanding upon inherited doctrines rather than merely transmitting them. Through manuscript production, *pesantren* pedagogy, and adaptive textual practices, Pegon functioned as an epistemological bridge connecting Arabic-Islamic scholarly traditions with local linguistic and cultural realities.

The modification of Arabic characters to accommodate Sundanese phonology reflects a deliberate process of localization that confirms recent scholarly arguments that Islamization in Indonesia occurred not through cultural replacement but through accommodation and translation into local frameworks. Pegon thus operated as a medium of vernacular Islam, allowing theological, legal, and mystical teachings to be articulated in a language accessible to local communities while maintaining textual continuity with Arabic sources. The *pesantren* system institutionalized this practice through the pedagogical methods of *bandongan* and *sorogan*. In *bandongan*, students listened collectively to a teacher's explanation of classical texts, recording Pegon glosses and interlinear annotations as interpretive aids.<sup>37</sup> In *sorogan*, individual students presented texts directly to their teachers for correction and discussion. These methods established Pegon as an intermediary scholarly language through which students could engage simultaneously with Arabic source texts and Sundanese interpretations, nurturing a scholarly culture that remained rooted in classical Islamic learning while remaining responsive to local linguistic realities. The continuity of this practice across several centuries, evidenced by the manuscript

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<sup>37</sup>Interpretation Al-ibrīz and Al-ibrīz Al-iklīl, "Localizing The Qur' an in Javanese Pesantren : A Socio-Cultural," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 26, no. 2 (2025): 302–26, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v26i2.5842>.

corpus examined in this study, reflects the institutional success of *pesantran* networks in sustaining Pegon as both a pedagogical medium and a vehicle for the intergenerational transmission of religious authority.

The intellectual contributions of Sheikh Abdul Muhyi and KH Ahmad Sanusi provide the clearest evidence of how Pegon functioned as a fully developed epistemic system rather than a supplementary writing tool. Abdul Muhyi's exposition of *Martabat Tujuh* in Sundanese Pegon demonstrates a sophisticated integration of global Sufi cosmology into a vernacular intellectual idiom. The metaphysical framework of *Martabat Tujuh*, which articulates the ontological stages of divine manifestation within the tradition of Ibn 'Arabi, was not a locally invented doctrine but part of a transregional discourse circulating across Malay-Indonesian Sufi networks and Middle Eastern scholarly circles. In Abdul Muhyi's formulation, this doctrine is not simply translated linguistically but reinterpreted through Sundanese conceptual categories and expressive forms,<sup>38</sup> demonstrating that vernacularization operated as a mode of intellectual translation rather than conceptual reduction. In parallel, KH Ahmad Sanusi's extensive body of work in *tafsir* and hadith studies demonstrates the capacity of Pegon to sustain advanced scholarly discourse. His exegetical writings reveal careful engagement with Arabic source texts rendered interpretively in Sundanese through Pegon script, producing a bilingual epistemic structure in which Arabic maintains its authority as the source language while Pegon functions as the medium of explanation and analysis. His works further demonstrate Pegon's capacity to articulate nuanced distinctions in legal reasoning, doctrinal interpretation, and hadith methodology, directly refuting any assumption that vernacular scripts are inherently limited in intellectual scope. Taken together, the writings of Abdul Muhyi and Ahmad Sanusi establish that the Sundanese Pegon tradition was characterized by continuity, institutional support, and intellectual rigor, sustained through

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<sup>38</sup>Yova Ruldeviyani et al., "Character Recognition System for Pegon Typed Manuscript," *Heliyon* 10, no. 16 (2024): e35959, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e35959>.

*pesantren* networks, manuscript transmission practices, and intergenerational chains of scholarly authority spanning mysticism, jurisprudence, theology, and Qur'anic exegesis.

Contemporary philological research further reinforces this conclusion. Studies of Sundanese Pegon manuscript collections indicate that these texts constitute a coherent and extensive archive of regional Islamic intellectual history, preserving not only doctrinal content but also evidence of pedagogical practices, interpretive traditions, and scholarly networks. The patterns of annotation, commentary, and textual transmission observable in these manuscripts reflect active intellectual engagement among teachers, students, and scholarly communities across successive generations.

Recent scholarship by Supriadi underscores that Sundanese Pegon literature constitutes a distinct intellectual corpus through which theological discourse, ethical instruction, and communal memory were preserved and reproduced within Sundanese-speaking Muslim communities. This positions Pegon not as a peripheral adaptation of Arabic literacy but as an original and generative framework of knowledge production in its own right.

### **Pegon between Tradition and Modernity: Socio-Political Dimensions and Adaptive Strategies**

Beyond its function as an epistemic system, Pegon carried significant socio-political implications, particularly in relation to the dynamics of colonial authority and indigenous Muslim identity. Dutch colonial concerns regarding *pesantren*-based Islamic education reflected a broader anxiety about intellectual spaces that remained inaccessible to colonial oversight. Colonial reports, including Van den Berg's 1887 survey of indigenous education, identified Pegon literacy as an obstacle to administrative supervision, which inadvertently granted *pesantren* institutions a degree of intellectual autonomy and communicative independence from the colonial apparatus.

In the Sundanese context, Pegon manuscripts served not only as repositories of religious knowledge but also as instruments through which scholars maintained communal solidarity and preserved religious authority in the face of colonial intervention.

However, the socio-political significance of Pegon should not be reduced to a straightforward narrative of anti-colonial resistance. Recent historiographical approaches suggest that indigenous textual practices are more accurately understood as adaptive strategies operating within, rather than simply against, the conditions of colonial modernity.

The case of KH Ahmad Sanusi illustrates this complexity directly. His simultaneous use of Pegon and Latin script across different audiences and contexts reflects a pragmatic and deliberate negotiation of changing socio-political circumstances rather than ideological rigidity or cultural isolation. Script choice, in his practice, was determined by audience, purpose, and institutional context, demonstrating that Sundanese *ulama* engaged modernity selectively and strategically rather than in uniform opposition to it.

This adaptive dimension has important implications for understanding the relationship between tradition and modernity in Indonesian Islamic scholarship. Rather than positioning Pegon as a relic of pre-modern religious culture, the findings of this study suggest that it functioned as a flexible intellectual medium capable of responding to changing social, political, and educational conditions. The coexistence of Pegon and Latin script within the work of a single scholar demonstrates that the *pesantren* tradition was not a static or enclosed system but one that actively negotiated its position within a transforming society. The recognition of Pegon literature as a coherent intellectual corpus further suggests that local Islamic traditions should not be regarded merely as derivatives of Arabic scholarship but as sites of original intellectual creativity shaped by the specific historical and cultural conditions of West Java.<sup>39</sup>

Philological studies further indicate that Sundanese Pegon manuscripts encompass diverse genres, including Qur'anic exegesis, jurisprudence, theology, Sufism, ethics, poetry, and devotional literature. These manuscripts preserve not only textual

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<sup>39</sup>Nunik Afriliana, Wiranto Herry Utomo, and Genta Sahuri, "Deep Learning Utilization in Sundanese Script Recognition for Cultural Preservation," *Indonesian Journal of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (IJECS)* 36, no. 3 (2024): 1759–68, <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijeecs.v36.i3.pp1759-1768>.

content but also traces of educational practices and scholarly networks. Their continued existence provides important evidence for understanding how Islamic knowledge was produced, circulated, and legitimized in regional societies. Pegon manuscripts should therefore be regarded as intellectual artifacts documenting the historical development of Islam in West Java.

In addition to its religious role, Pegon also carried socio-political implications. Colonial concerns regarding indigenous Islamic education reflect anxiety over intellectual spaces inaccessible to colonial authority. However, recent historiographical approaches suggest that indigenous textual practices should not be interpreted solely as oppositional resistance but also as adaptive strategies within modernity. In the case of KH Ahmad Sanusi, the simultaneous use of Pegon and Latin script indicates pragmatic engagement with changing socio-political contexts rather than rigid cultural isolation.

This perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between tradition and modernity. Rather than rejecting change, Sundanese ulama selectively adopted new media and writing systems while preserving established intellectual traditions. The coexistence of Pegon and Latin script illustrates an adaptive attitude in which script choice depended on audience, purpose, and social circumstances. Such flexibility demonstrates that traditional Islamic scholarship actively negotiated modernity through creative adaptation.<sup>40</sup>

Importantly, recent scholarship by Supriadi emphasizes that Sundanese Pegon literature constitutes a distinct intellectual corpus that shaped religious identity and literary culture in West Java. His study on *Sastra Kitab Pegon Sunda* demonstrates how Pegon texts preserved theological discourse, ethical instruction, and communal memory within Sundanese-speaking Muslim communities. This reinforces the argument that Pegon functioned not only as a script but as a framework of knowledge production.

The recognition of Pegon literature as a coherent intellectual

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<sup>40</sup>Robert Hefner, "Introduction: The Politics and Cultures of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia," in *Making Modern Muslims* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 1–54.

corpus has important implications for the study of Islam Nusantara. It suggests that local Islamic traditions should not be regarded merely as derivatives of Arabic scholarship but as sites of original intellectual creativity. Sundanese ulama actively interpreted and contextualized Islamic teachings according to the needs of their communities, and Pegon provided the medium through which this process of knowledge production could flourish.<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study establishes that the Sundanese Pegon script was not a conventional or auxiliary writing system but a strategic intellectual instrument through which Sundanese Islamic scholars localized, preserved, and transmitted Islamic knowledge across generations. The findings demonstrate that Pegon played a foundational mediating role between the Arabic-Islamic scholarly tradition and the linguistic and cultural realities of Sundanese society. Through Pegon, scholars translated complex theological concepts, legal interpretations, and ethical teachings into forms accessible to local communities, embedding Islamic knowledge within a distinctly Sundanese intellectual framework. This confirms that Pegon was central, rather than peripheral, to the construction of a Sundanese Islamic intellectual identity shaped by the productive interaction between global Islamic scholarship and local cultural adaptation.

This study further elaborates that the function of Pegon extended well beyond the domain of formal religious education. Its deployment across literary works, legal manuscripts, devotional texts, and administrative correspondence demonstrates its adaptability as a medium across multiple dimensions of social and cultural life. The intellectual contributions of Sheikh Abdul Muhyi and KH Ahmad Sanusi offer the most compelling evidence of this range: Abdul Muhyi's vernacularization of Sufi metaphysics and Ahmad Sanusi's sophisticated exegetical and hadith scholarship

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<sup>41</sup>Encep Dulwahab and Asep Saeful Muhtadi, "Communication Patterns of Sundanese Ulama to Maintaining Religious Tolerance in West Java," *Komunika: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi* 19, no. 1 (2025): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.24090.komunika.v18i1.10993>.

together demonstrate that Pegon was capable of sustaining advanced scholarly discourse while simultaneously grounding Islamic teaching in local cultural experience. During the colonial period, this capacity acquired an additional dimension, as the inaccessibility of Pegon to colonial authorities allowed scholars to protect religious discourse from external surveillance, preserve institutional autonomy, and reinforce communal solidarity under conditions of political and cultural pressure.

The principal contribution of this study lies in repositioning Sundanese Pegon from the margins of manuscript studies to a central place within discussions of Islamic intellectual history in Southeast Asia. By conceptualizing script choice as a socio-religious and epistemological act rather than a merely technical decision, this study demonstrates that Pegon functioned as both a medium and a manifestation of scholarly agency and cultural negotiation. The preservation and systematic study of Pegon manuscripts is therefore not only a philological concern but an intellectual imperative, as it expands historical understanding beyond the dominance of Arabic and Latin textual frameworks, restores analytical balance between philological description and epistemological interpretation, and situates local Islamic traditions within a more complete account of transregional knowledge production in the Muslim world.

This study acknowledges certain limitations that define the scope of its claims. The analysis is confined to a selected manuscript corpus and a focused set of scholarly figures within West Java and does not yet encompass comprehensive codicological surveys of Pegon manuscripts across the broader Sundanese region. Systematic archival mapping of the full extent of surviving Pegon texts remains a necessary next step, as does sustained ethnographic investigation of contemporary Pegon usage within living *pesantren* communities. These gaps reflect the boundaries of the present study rather than the boundaries of the field, and they point toward a productive agenda for future research.

Future scholarship should therefore pursue three complementary directions: systematic manuscript cataloguing and codicological documentation across West Java and adjacent regions; comparative studies examining Pegon in relation to other

local Islamic scripts such as *Jawi* and *Cacarakan* to illuminate the broader ecology of Islamic vernacular literacy in Southeast Asia; and field-based ethnographic research into contemporary efforts to preserve, teach, and revitalize Pegon within modern educational contexts. Interdisciplinary approaches combining digital humanities methods, including automated script recognition and corpus analysis, with historical and ethnographic inquiry will be essential to this work. Such research would deepen scholarly understanding of Pegon's evolving role and ensure that the intellectual heritage of Sundanese *ulama* continues to occupy its rightful place within both Indonesian Islamic studies and the global history of Islamic knowledge production.

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