

Malay Ulama in the Teaching of Islamic Creed in Malaysia: A Field Study in Kedah

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Abstract

This article examines the role of Malay ulama in preserving and transmitting Islamic doctrine (‘aqīdah) in Malaysia, with a particular focus on the state of Kedah. Drawing on historical analysis, curriculum review, and fieldwork data from interviews and document analysis, the study explores how Malay scholars have combined the preservation of classical Sunni–Ash‘arī doctrine with contemporary modes of teaching in both traditional (pondok) and formal educational institutions. The findings indicate that the doctrinal framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah, in its Ash‘arī–Māturīdī form and Shāfi‘ī jurisprudential orientation, remains deeply embedded in the religious identity of Malay Muslims and continues to shape curricula, textbooks, and pedagogical practices in Kedah. At the same time, the study highlights ongoing efforts by the ulama and Islamic educators to address contemporary challenges such as secularism, liberal religious discourse, and digital media, while maintaining doctrinal continuity and social harmony in a multi-religious society.

Keywords: Islamic Doctrine, Malay Ulama, Ash‘ari Creed, Islamic Education

Introduction

Islamic doctrine (‘aqīdah) constitutes the foundational framework upon which the entire edifice of Islamic religious life and intellectual tradition is built (Al-Attas, 1993; Nasr, 2002). It informs the Muslim understanding of God, prophethood, revelation, the unseen realm, and the purpose of human existence, and it provides the normative lens through which moral conduct, worship, and social order are defined (Al-Ghazālī, 2000; Kamali, 2008). In the Malaysian context, doctrine has a particular significance because it underpins the religious identity of the Malay community, which is constitutionally defined as Muslim, and because it has historically been articulated within the Sunni Ash‘arī–Māturīdī theological framework and the Shāfi‘ī school of law (Ibrahim, 1985; Mohd Kamal Hassan, 2003).

Historically, the Islamisation of the Malay world involved not only the adoption of Islam as a new religion, but also a broader civilizational transformation affecting language, culture, law, and political structures (Al-Attas, 1969; Azra, 2004). Islam was introduced to the Malay Peninsula gradually through trade networks, scholarly exchanges, and the patronage of

Malay rulers, with the Melaka Sultanate often cited as a crucial turning point in the institutionalisation of Islam as the state religion (Winstedt, 1961; Roff, 1967). Over time, the Sunni doctrinal package Ash'arī in theology, Shāfi'ī in jurisprudence, and influenced by Ghazālīan Sufism became the dominant framework through which Islamic teaching was transmitted in pondok, madrasah, surau, and, later, state religious schools and universities (Al-Attas, 1969; Abdul Rahman Abdullah, 1997).

In contemporary Malaysia, Islam occupies a special position as the religion of the Federation, while the Constitution simultaneously guarantees freedom of religion for non-Muslims (Faruqi, 2008). This constitutional arrangement places the ulama and Islamic scholars in a strategic position: they are expected to safeguard doctrinal integrity, sustain Sunni orthodoxy, and, at the same time, promote social cohesion in a multi-religious society (Ibrahim, 1985; Shamsul A. B., 2001). In this context, Kedah offers a particularly interesting case because of its strong pondok tradition, dense network of religious institutions, and longstanding reputation as a centre of Islamic learning in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 1998; Azmil Hashim, 2016).

This article therefore focuses on the role of Malay ulama in teaching Islamic creed in Kedah, examining how they negotiate the relationship between preserving classical Sunni doctrine and adopting contemporary pedagogical methods and institutional structures. It investigates how doctrinal content is embedded in curricula, textbooks, and teaching practices at different levels of education, and how ulama respond to new intellectual and social challenges such as globalisation, digital media, and alternative religious discourses (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013). By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the continuity and adaptation of Sunni Ash'arī doctrine in the Malaysian educational and socio-political context.

Literature Review

Islamisation and Malay Identity

Historical studies on Islam in the Malay world emphasise that Islamisation occurred through peaceful processes of trade, marriage, and scholarly exchange rather than through military conquest (Azra, 2004; Winstedt, 1961). Scholars such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas argue that Islamisation in the Malay–Indonesian archipelago represented not merely a change of religion, but a reorientation of worldview, knowledge, and social order based on the principle of tawhīd (Al-Attas, 1969, 1993). This transformation involved the integration of Islamic concepts into Malay language, literature, and political institutions, as seen in the development of Islamic legal codes and the role of the sultan as defender of the faith (Liaw, 1976; Ahmad Ibrahim, 1997).

Other historians, such as Roff (1967) and Abdul Rahman Abdullah (1997, 2000), highlight the emergence of a distinct Malay–Muslim scholarly tradition centred on pondok, madrasah, and later modern religious schools, in which Sunni Ash'arī creed and Shāfi'ī jurisprudence were systematically taught and reproduced across generations (Roff, 1967; Abdul Rahman Abdullah, 1997). This tradition created a strong linkage between Malay identity and Islam, a linkage later reinforced by constitutional definitions that tie Malay ethnicity to adherence to Islam (Ibrahim, 1985; Mohd Kamal Hassan, 2003).

Doktrin Sunni, Ash'arī Creed and the Malaysian State

Legal and constitutional scholars such as Ahmad Ibrahim (1985) and Shad Saleem Faruqi (2008) have examined how Islam's status as the religion of the Federation is reflected in institutional arrangements and legal frameworks. Ahmad Ibrahim argues that Malaysia's Islamic identity is embedded in a traditional doctrinal package combining Shāfi'i jurisprudence, Sunni Sufism, and Ash'arī theology, which has been institutionalised in religious administration, education, and official discourse (Ibrahim, 1985). Faruqi (2008) notes that constitutional provisions concerning Islam, the role of the Malay rulers as heads of religion, and the division of jurisdiction between civil and Syariah courts represent an attempt to balance Islamic identity with the realities of a plural society (Faruqi, 2008).

In the field of Islamic education, Rosnani Hashim (1996) and Hashim and Langgulong (2008) discuss the dual structure of Malaysian education, in which traditional religious institutions such as pondok coexist with national schools and universities. They argue that Islamic doctrine and values are integrated into the national curriculum through the subject of Islamic Education, while pondok and private religious schools continue to emphasise traditional texts and methods (Hashim & Langgulong, 2008; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017). This dual system creates both opportunities and tensions in the transmission of doctrine, particularly regarding the depth of instruction, the language of instruction, and engagement with contemporary issues (Rosnani Hashim, 1996; Azmil Hashim, 2016).

Ulama, Pondok, and the Teaching of Creed

Studies on Malay ulama and pondok education highlight the central role of these institutions in preserving Sunni doctrine and shaping religious life in rural and semi-urban communities (Roff, 1967; Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 1998). Roff (1967) documents the emergence of networks of ulama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of whom had studied in Mecca and other centres of learning and who then established pondok in the Malay Peninsula (Roff, 1967). These institutions relied on talaqqī (face-to-face transmission) of classical texts in creed, law, and Sufism, creating a strong sense of continuity with the broader Sunni tradition (Al-Attas, 1969; Azra, 2004).

More recent works by Mohd Aizam Mas'od (JAKIM, 2013) and Azmil Hashim (2016) examine how the ulama and state religious authorities address contemporary doctrinal challenges, including the spread of deviant teachings, liberal religious interpretations, and the influence of global media (JAKIM, 2013; Azmil Hashim, 2016). These studies show that official fatwa bodies and religious departments seek to preserve a unified doctrinal reference by affirming the Ash'arī–Māturīdī creed and Shāfi'i fiqh as the standard for Malaysian Muslims, while also engaging in public education and enforcement against teachings considered to deviate from this framework (JAKIM, 1996–present; JAKIM, 2013).

Gaps in the Literature

While the existing literature provides rich historical and institutional accounts of Islamisation, Sunni doctrine, and the development of Islamic education in Malaysia, fewer studies have focused specifically on how Malay ulama operationalise the teaching of creed in particular states such as Kedah, especially in the interplay between pondok and formal schooling. There is also a relative lack of empirical work that combines documentary analysis of curricula and policy documents with qualitative fieldwork involving teachers, students, and religious

officials (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 2010). This article seeks to address this gap by offering a focused case study of Kedah that examines doctrinal continuity, pedagogical adaptation, and institutional integration in the teaching of Islamic creed.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates historical-documentary analysis with field-based data collection in order to examine the role of Malay ulama in teaching Islamic creed in Kedah. The choice of a qualitative approach is consistent with the study's aim of understanding meanings, interpretations, and institutional practices rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses quantitatively (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 2010).

Data Sources and Sampling

The research draws on three main types of data: (1) historical and secondary literature on Islamisation in the Malay world, Sunni doctrine, and Islamic education; (2) official curriculum and policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education and religious authorities; and (3) fieldwork data collected through semi-structured interviews and observations in selected institutions in Kedah (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 2010). Historical and secondary sources include works by Al-Attas (1969, 1993), Azra (2004), Roff (1967), Abdul Rahman Abdullah (1997, 2000), and others, which provide the broader context for understanding doctrinal development and educational structures (Al-Attas, 1969; Azra, 2004; Roff, 1967; Abdul Rahman Abdullah, 1997).

Official documents include the Dokumen Standard Kurikulum Pendidikan Islam for primary and secondary schools, state religious education guidelines, and fatwa compilations produced by the National Fatwa Council and JAKIM, which clarify the doctrinal positions adopted in formal education and religious administration (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 1996–present). Fieldwork data were collected from a purposive sample of traditional pondok institutions and formal schools in Kedah, focusing on teachers of creed, students, and selected officials from state religious departments (JAKIM, 2010; Azmil Hashim, 2016).

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students in pondok and formal schools to explore their perceptions of doctrinal content, teaching methods, and contemporary challenges in creed education (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 2010). Interview guides were designed to elicit information on how teachers present key topics such as the pillars of faith, divine attributes, and deviant sects, as well as how they address students' questions arising from exposure to social media, global ideologies, and alternative religious discourses (Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013; Azmil Hashim, 2016). Observations of classes and teaching sessions were also carried out, where possible, to document actual pedagogical practices and the use of textbooks and supplementary materials (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017).

Document analysis was employed to examine curricula, textbooks, and fatwa documents, with particular attention to how doctrinal content is selected, structured, and framed in relation to contemporary issues (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 1996–

present). This method allowed the researcher to trace the alignment between formal curricular objectives and the doctrinal framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, as well as to identify any tensions or gaps between policy and practice (Hashim & Langgulong, 2008; Rosnani Hashim, 1996).

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in several stages. First, historical and secondary sources were reviewed to construct a contextual narrative of Islamisation, doctrinal formation, and educational development in Malaysia, with a particular focus on Kedah (Al-Attas, 1969; Azra, 2004; Roff, 1967). Second, interview transcripts and field notes were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns in respondents' accounts of doctrinal teaching, challenges, and institutional dynamics (JAKIM, 2010; Azmil Hashim, 2016). Third, curricular and policy documents were analysed to map the official articulation of creed and its integration into different levels of education (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 1996–present). Thematic codes from these different data sources were then compared and synthesised to develop a comprehensive picture of how Malay ulama in Kedah negotiate doctrinal continuity and pedagogical adaptation in the teaching of Islamic creed.

Findings

A firmly rooted Sunni doctrinal foundation

The field data indicate that the educational environment in Kedah is clearly grounded in Sunni doctrine, with a strong emphasis on the Ash'arī creed in both traditional pondok institutions and formal government schools (Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017). Interview responses and document analysis show that the official Islamic Education curriculum explicitly adopts the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah framework while rejecting doctrinal trends considered to deviate from this mainstream position (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 1996–present). At the pondok level, the continued use of classical and Jawi-based Ash'arī texts as core references reinforces doctrinal continuity, ensuring that students internalise the attributes of God, the pillars of faith, and the boundaries of orthodoxy according to the local Sunni tradition (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 1998; Azra, 2004).

The findings further reveal that popular religious discourse in Kedah—whether through mosque sermons, religious lectures, or official publications by state religious authorities—is broadly aligned with institutional discourse, thereby strengthening the position of mainstream Sunni teaching (Shamsul A. B., 2004; Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013). This convergence between institutional and popular discourse reduces the space for competing doctrinal narratives and helps maintain a cohesive Sunni identity at the community level (JAKIM, 2013; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017).

Integration of Traditional and Formal Education

A second major finding concerns the relatively harmonious integration between traditional (pondok) and formal government education in the transmission of creed (Roff, 1967; Abdul Rahman Abdullah, 1997). Pondok institutions were found to play a key role in deepening students' spiritual commitment, ethical discipline, and personal relationship with their teachers, often through practices such as regular dhikr, devotional readings, and a lifestyle governed by adab (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 1998; Azmil Hashim, 2016). Formal schools,

by contrast, provide a more structured curriculum, standardised assessment, and exposure to contemporary issues relevant to creed, such as intellectual doubts, the influence of social media, and atheism (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; Azmil Hashim, 2016).

Fieldwork shows that many students in Kedah participate in both systems simultaneously, attending national or state religious schools during the day and pondok classes in the evenings or during school holidays (Rosnani Hashim, 1996; Azmil Hashim, 2016). This dual participation suggests that the Malaysian Islamic education system operates in a dual-track model that combines the strengths of tradition and modern structure without generating significant conflict between them (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017). Respondents generally perceive this arrangement as complementary: pondok education nurtures depth of understanding and practice, while formal education ensures alignment with national standards and contemporary needs (Rosnani Hashim, 1996; Abdul Rahman Abdullah, 2000).

The Role of Ulama in Modern Institutions

The study also finds that Malay ulama play crucial roles within modern institutional frameworks, particularly in universities, religious councils, and federal agencies such as JAKIM (Ibrahim, 1985; Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013). At the university level, scholars contribute to the development of structured creed curricula that combine classical Ash'arī texts with contemporary discussions on atheism, secularism, liberalism, and religious pluralism, thereby equipping students with conceptual tools to address modern intellectual challenges (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; Mohd Kamal Hassan, 2003). In religious councils and JAKIM, ulama participate in drafting and reviewing school curricula on creed, approving official textbooks, issuing doctrinal guidelines, and formulating fatwas that affirm the doctrinal authority of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah (JAKIM, 1996–present; JAKIM, 2013).

These institutional roles demonstrate that ulama are not confined to traditional settings but have adapted to the structures of the modern nation-state, where they act as both guardians of doctrinal continuity and mediators between religious authority and public policy (Faruqi, 2008; Ibrahim, 1985). Their involvement helps ensure that the official articulation of creed in schools and public institutions remains consistent with the Sunni Ash'arī–Shāfi'ī framework while also being responsive to evolving social and intellectual conditions (Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017).

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the resilience of Sunni Ash'arī doctrine in Kedah and, by extension, in Malaysia more broadly, while also revealing how this doctrinal framework is being adapted to contemporary conditions. The strong alignment between pondok education, formal schooling, and official religious discourse suggests that the doctrinal foundations of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah remain deeply embedded in the religious identity and institutional structures of the Malay–Muslim community (Ibrahim, 1985; Shamsul A. B., 2004). This continuity can be interpreted as a strength, insofar as it provides a stable reference point for religious teaching and helps to prevent doctrinal fragmentation (JAKIM, 2013; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017).

At the same time, the integration of traditional and formal educational systems reveals a dynamic adaptation of teaching methods and institutional forms (Roff, 1967; Rosnani Hashim, 1996). While pondok institutions maintain a strong emphasis on classical texts and personal spiritual discipline, formal schools and universities introduce structured curricula, assessment, and engagement with contemporary issues (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Azmil Hashim, 2016). This dual system preserves depth and continuity in doctrinal teaching while ensuring that students are prepared to confront modern intellectual and social challenges (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013).

The prominent role of the ulama in state institutions and federal agencies also indicates that doctrinal authority is increasingly exercised through bureaucratic and legal mechanisms, rather than through informal networks and local authority (Faruqi, 2008; Ibrahim, 1985). This development has both advantages and potential risks. On the one hand, it enables the state to support doctrinal coherence and to respond systematically to deviant teachings and contemporary challenges (JAKIM, 1996–present; JAKIM, 2013). On the other hand, it raises questions about how to balance doctrinal enforcement with academic freedom, intra-Sunni diversity, and the need for critical engagement with new issues (Rosnani Hashim, 1996; Mohd Kamal Hassan, 2003).

Overall, the Kedah case study suggests that the Malay ulama have, to a significant extent, succeeded in preserving the core structure of Sunni Ash'arī doctrine while expressing it through curricula, textbooks, and teaching methods that are responsive to the realities of a modern nation-state and a globalised information environment (Al-Attas, 1993; Azra, 2004). However, ongoing efforts will be required to ensure that creed teaching remains both faithful to its heritage and capable of addressing emerging challenges, such as digital misinformation, ideological polarisation, and the changing religious sensibilities of younger generations (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013).

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of Malay ulama in teaching Islamic creed in Malaysia, with a particular focus on Kedah as a region with a strong tradition of Islamic learning. It has shown that the doctrinal framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, in its Ash'arī–Māturīdī theological and Shāfi'ī legal forms, remains the central reference for creed teaching in both traditional and formal institutions (Ibrahim, 1985; Mohd Aizam Mas'od, 2013). The findings highlight the deep roots of this doctrinal package in Malay history and identity, as well as its institutionalisation in curricula, religious administration, and public discourse (Al-Attas, 1969; Abdul Rahman Abdullah, 1997).

The study also demonstrates that the relationship between traditional and formal education in Kedah is one of complementarity rather than conflict, with pondok and formal schools playing distinct yet mutually supportive roles in the transmission of creed (Roff, 1967; Rosnani Hashim, 1996). Furthermore, the active participation of ulama in universities, religious councils, and federal agencies such as JAKIM shows that doctrinal authority has been effectively integrated into the structures of the modern state (Faruqi, 2008; JAKIM, 2013).

From a broader perspective, the Kedah case suggests that the continued vitality of Sunni Ash'arī doctrine in Malaysia depends not only on the preservation of textual heritage, but

also on the capacity of ulama and educators to engage critically and constructively with contemporary realities (Al-Attas, 1993; Mohd Kamal Hassan, 2003). Future research could build on this study by undertaking comparative case studies of other Malaysian states or by examining in greater depth how specific contemporary issues—such as social media, atheism, or interfaith dialogue—are addressed in creed teaching at different educational levels (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017; JAKIM, 2010).

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