

Epistemic Contestation in Malay Sufism: Hamzah Fansuri, Nuruddin al-Raniri and the Reconstruction of Islamic Educational Thought

Fahri Hidayat^{*, **}

UIN Profesor Kiai Haji Saifuddin Zuhri, Purwokerto-Indonesia

fahrihidayat@uinsaizu.ac.id

Arif Rahman^{*}**

Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta-Indonesia

arif.rahman@pai.uad.ac.id

Abstract

This article examines the intellectual debate between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri as a form of epistemological contestation within the Malay Sufi tradition. The study aims to explain how these two figures represented different models of Islamic knowledge validation and how their ideas remain relevant to reconstructing contemporary Islamic education. Hamzah Fansuri, in particular, represents an ontological-transformative epistemology. In contrast, Nuruddin al-Raniri represents a normative-theological epistemology. This study employs a qualitative library research approach using intellectual history and epistemological analysis of Hamzah Fansuri's works, al-Raniri's polemics, and contemporary Islamic educational thought. The findings reveal that the debate between Hamzah and al-Raniri constituted a struggle over epistemic authority concerning the sources and validity of Islamic knowledge in the Malay world. Furthermore, the article finds that the crisis of modern Islamic education is characterized by the fragmentation between spirituality, ethics, and

* Corresponding author

** Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan, UIN Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto, Jl. Jenderal Ahmad Yani No. 40A, Purwokerto Utara, Banyumas 53126, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia. Telp. (+62281) 635624.

*** Fakultas Agama Islam, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Jl. Kapas No. 9, Semaki, Umbulharjo, Yogyakarta 55166, Indonesia. Telp. (+62274) 563515.

intellectuality. Therefore, this article proposes the concept of an integrative Islamic epistemology of education as a synthesis of spiritual, ethical, and rational dimensions in the formation of the ideal human being grounded in adab, revelation, and spiritual transformation.

Keywords: *Hamzah Fansuri; Nuruddin al-Raniri; Epistemic Contestation; Malay Sufism; Islamic Educational Epistemology.*

Introduction

The Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri contestation constituted an epistemological struggle within the broader process of Islamization in the Malay world.¹ For several decades, colonial historiography tended to represent Hamzah Fansuri as a Sufi poet who deviated from the mainstream of Sunni Islam. Such interpretations are evident in the tendency to reduce Wujudiyah to a form of metaphysical syncretism without examining its epistemological structure. Van Nieuwenhuijze, for instance, positioned al-Raniri as a defender of Islamic orthodoxy who was obliged to eradicate the deviations of Wujudiyah in Aceh.² Within this framework, Hamzah and his disciples were primarily positioned as threats to the purity of Islamic creed. Such interpretations were subsequently inherited by many studies on Malay Islam that constructed a binary dichotomy between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

However, such an approach is highly problematic in at least three respects. *First*, it places excessive emphasis on the dogmatic dimension while neglecting the ways in which Hamzah's texts functioned as mediums for the production of spiritual knowledge. *Second*, it interprets the Acehnese conflict ahistorically, as though the dispute concerned nothing more than theological deviation.

¹ Abdollah Vakily, "Sufism, Power Politics, and Reform: Al-Rānīrī's Opposition to Hamzah al-Faṣṣūrī's Teachings Reconsidered," *Studia Islamika: Indonesia Journal for Islamic Studies* 4, no. 1 (1997): 113–35, <https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v4i1.788>.

² Van Nieuwenhuijze, "Nur Al-Din Al-Raniri als Bestrijder der Wugudiya," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 104, no. 1 (1948): 337–411, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002528>.

Furthermore, this conflict was deeply intertwined with the consolidation of political authority, the transmission of knowledge, and the legitimacy of the *ulama* within the Aceh Sultanate during the seventeenth century. *Third*, the orthodoxy-heterodoxy dichotomy tends to overlook the fact that both Hamzah and al-Raniri operated within the same intellectual horizon of Islam. Nevertheless, they differed in defining the epistemic boundaries of spiritual knowledge.

Hamzah Fansuri's position in the intellectual history of the Malay world reflects this complexity. Johns describes Hamzah Fansuri as the earliest known Sumatran author whose identity can be clearly established. Moreover, he is also recognized as a major figure in the tradition of Ibn 'Arabi's thought in the Malay world.³ His poems were not merely aesthetic expressions, but also epistemological instruments for articulating the experience of *ma'rifat*. Braginsky demonstrates that the boat symbolism in *Syair Perahu* constitutes a symbolic structure of the spiritual journey toward ultimate truth.⁴ This indicates the existence of a well established intellectual transmission of Wujudiyah in the Malay world.⁵

Previous studies on Hamzah Fansuri have generally remained limited to questions of philology, textual sources, and the influence of Ibn 'Arabi. Even when Syed Naquib Al-Attas succeeded in reconstructing Hamzah's historical context and freeing it from a

³ G. W. J. Drewes et al., "Review: The Poems of Hamzah Fansuri," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 146, no. 2/3 (1990), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27864125>.

⁴ V. Y. Braginsky, "Some Remarks on the Structure of the 'Syair Perahu' by Hamzah Fansuri," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 131, no. 4 (1975): 407–26, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002659>.

⁵ G. W. J. Drewes, "Sjamsuddins onvindbare Sjarh Ruba'i Hamza al-Fansuri," *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 107, no. 1 (1951): 31–41, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002466>.

number of colonial philological assumptions,⁶ readings of Hamzah nevertheless continued to operate largely within the horizon of classical intellectual history. Studies on Hamzah have not yet been fully approached as a model of Islamic epistemology with implications for contemporary theories of Islamic education.

By contrast, al-Raniri is frequently reduced to a rigid symbol of orthodoxy opposed to mysticism. Yet, his own writings demonstrate that he did not reject Sufism entirely; rather, he sought to ground it within a normative epistemological framework defined by the *sharia* and Sunni theology. As Van Nieuwenhuijze points out, al-Raniri continued to accept the speculative and mystical dimensions of Islam while rejecting spiritual practices that transgressed the boundaries of revelation and the *sharia*.⁷ Thus, al-Raniri's intellectual consequently, al-Raniri's intellectual project should not be viewed as an outright rejection of Sufism, but as an effort to regulate mystical knowledge within orthodox boundaries..

Based on this background, this article proposes a new reading of the Hamzah-al-Raniri conflict through the framework of contemporary epistemology. Hamzah is understood as representing an ontological-transformative epistemology, namely a model of knowledge grounded in transformational experience, *kasyf*, symbolism, and existential internalization. Meanwhile, al-Raniri is understood as representing a normative-theological epistemology, that is, a model of knowledge that emphasizes the discipline of the *sharia*, theological verification, and the authority of the community of *ulama*. The contestation between the two was therefore not a conflict between "mysticism" and "religion," but rather a dispute between two models of knowledge validation within Islamic philosophy.

⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, "New Light on the Life of Hamzah Fansuri," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 40, no. 1 (1967), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41419005>.

⁷ Nieuwenhuijze, "Nur Al-Din Al-Raniri als Bestrijder der Wugudiya."

Meanwhile, Beaney and Lai criticize modern epistemology for being excessively centered on Western categories and propose the notion of deep epistemology, namely an approach to knowledge situated within historical and cross-cultural contexts.⁸ This perspective is important because the Hamzah–al-Raniri debate has often been forced into modern categories such as “pantheism,” “heresy,” or “orthodoxy,” without an adequate understanding of the epistemic language of Malay Islam itself.

The urgency of this study becomes increasingly evident in the context of contemporary Islamic education. The crisis of modern Muslim education arises from the disconnection between knowledge and spiritual transformation. Jenuri et al. demonstrate that modern Islamic religious education has become excessively theoretical and has failed to address the spiritual emptiness experienced by students.⁹ Ahmed and Chowdhury even argue that contemporary Islamic educational systems remain trapped within colonial schooling models that are not rooted in the Islamic worldview.¹⁰ In this context, the Hamzah–al-Raniri debate offers an important horizon, namely how Islamic education may balance spiritual experience, intellectual discipline, textual authority, and the cultivation of *adab*.

Therefore, this article views Sufism as a conceptual field that remains relevant to contemporary global debates on Islamic epistemology, the decolonization of knowledge, and contemporary

⁸ Michael Beaney and Karyn Lai, “Towards a Deep Epistemology: Knowing in Historical and Cross-Cultural Context,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 33, no. 6 (2025): 1313–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2025.2578821>.

⁹ Jenuri et al., “Overcoming the Spiritual Emptiness of Students in the Modern Era through the Integration of Al-Ghazali’s Human Concepts in the Islamic Religious Education Learning Model,” *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (2025): 2497147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2497147>.

¹⁰ Farah Ahmed and Safaruk Chowdhury, “Rethinking Contemporary Schooling in Muslim Contexts: An Islamic Conceptual Framework for Reconstructing K-12 Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 57, no. 2 (2025): 152–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2024.2411325>.

Islamic education.¹¹ This article addresses a central question: how did the epistemological contestation between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri shape models of authority within Malay Islamic knowledge, and how can this framework inform the reconstruction of contemporary Islamic education?

This article employs a qualitative approach based on library research, with its methodological positioning situated within Islamic intellectual history and critical epistemological analysis. The approach of intellectual history in this article is used to examine the debate between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri as part of the formation of seventeenth-century Malay Islamic epistemic authority within the contexts of Islamization, transregional networks of ulama, and the politics of the Aceh Sultanate.

The sources of this study consist of works related to Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri, as well as studies on the Wujudiyah tradition and the intellectual Islamization of the Malay world. Meanwhile, the secondary sources include articles within the scope of philological studies, Malay Islamic historiography, contemporary epistemology, and the philosophy of Islamic education. The analysis was conducted through a hermeneutic-dialogical reading of these texts by situating each text within its respective historical and epistemic horizon.

This article consists of four main sections. The first section discusses the formation of epistemic authority in the Malay Sufi tradition and its role in the Islamization of knowledge. The second section analyzes the contestation between Hamzah Fansuri and al-Raniri as a struggle over epistemic authority, particularly concerning *wujūd*, *kasyf*, *ma'rifah*, the sharia, and the authority of the ulama. The third section discusses epistemic fragmentation in contemporary Islamic education through a reconsideration of the Hamzah–al-Raniri paradigm. The fourth section reconstructs an integrative

¹¹ Veli Mitova, “De-Idealising Epistemology Through Collectivising,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 33, no. 2 (2025): 183–205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2025.2482906>.

Islamic epistemology of education as a synthesis of intellectual, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.

Epistemic Authority and the Formation of Malay Sufism

Sufism constituted the primary Intellectual foundation in the formation of Islamic knowledge in the Malay world. If Islamization is understood as the conversion of belief from earlier religions to Islam, then the role of Sufism in this context was that of an accommodative medium of *da'wah*. However, when Islamization is conceptualized as an epistemic transformation, Malay Sufism must be viewed as a vital system of knowledge production—one that provided the interpretive framework for understanding God, humanity, nature, and the social order.¹²

Drewes from the outset rejected the view that the Islamization of Southeast Asia occurred merely through formal religious conversion. In his study, he emphasized that Sufism played a crucial role because it was able to present Islam as a living tradition.¹³ Drewes, meanwhile, criticized the assumption that Islamization took place solely through trade, intermarriage, or political patronage. According to him, it was precisely the mystical dimension of Islam that enabled Islamic teachings to enter the Malay world of meaning without losing their metaphysical depth.¹⁴ Sufism became the bridge between local cosmologies and the Islamic metaphysical tradition rooted in the Arab-Persian world.

Drewes's argument is important because it shifts attention from the question of "how Islam arrived" to that of "how Islam became knowledge." It is at this point that Malay Sufism acquires

¹² Miswari Miswari et al., "Hamzah Fanṣūrī's Contextual Analogies: Wujūdiyya Teaching in Malay 16th Century," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 11, no. 1 (2022): 103–22, <https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v11i1.11243>.

¹³ G. W. J. Drewes, "De herkomst van Nuruddin ar-Raniri," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 111, no. 2 (1955): 137–51, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002351>.

¹⁴ Drewes et al., "Review: The Poems of Hamzah Fansuri."

its philosophical significance. Sufism was not merely a form of piety, but also a mode of knowing. It taught that truth could be attained through *taẓkiyah al-Nafs*, the teacher-disciple relationship, and *kasyf*.¹⁵ Therefore, Sufi networks may also be understood as epistemic networks. Within this framework, the teacher was not merely an instructor of doctrine, but also the guardian of authoritative meaning. Likewise, the disciple was not simply a recipient of information, but a subject formed through spiritual cultivation. The text, in turn, was not merely a document, but a medium of both spiritual and intellectual discipline.

Aceh became a major site of Islamic knowledge production, where ulama, muftis, courts, and Sufi networks interacted. Under the sultanate, the production of Islamic knowledge was closely connected to political institutions and the authority of the ulama. Aceh continued the traditions of Samudera Pasai and Peureulak, while incorporating the ulama into the structure of the kingdom itself. This fact is important because it demonstrates that the production of Islamic knowledge in the Malay world occurred through a close relationship between the court, the ulama, legal institutions, and spiritual networks.

Aceh served as an arena where various forms of epistemic authority contended for dominance, making Hamzah Fansuri a pivotal figure at this juncture. Al-Attas dismisses the historical ambiguity surrounding Hamzah's identity and origins; through a close textual analysis of his poetry, Al-Attas demonstrates that the designation "Fansuri" points to Barus/Fansur—a vital cosmopolitan hub on Sumatra's western coast. For Al-Attas, Hamzah was not merely a local poet, but a Malay intellectual who mastered the tradition of Islamic metaphysics and was capable of

¹⁵ Dzulkifli Hadi Imawan Amnan, "Shaykh Nuruddin Ar-Raniry's Contribution in His *As-Shirath al-Mustaqim* to Popularizing Islamic Law in the Nusantara," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 12, no. 1 (2022): 270–81, <https://doi.org/10.323 50/jitc.121.16>.

articulating it in the Malay language.¹⁶ Here it becomes evident that Hamzah's authority derived not only from his mystical experience, but also from his ability to transform the Malay language into a language of philosophy.

Hamzah's legacy did not end with his own writings; rather, it continued to develop through the commentaries, quotations, and interpretations of Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani. Drewes demonstrates the complexity of Hamzah's intellectual transmission and the philological difficulties involved in determining textual attribution.¹⁷ This is epistemologically significant because authority within the Malay tradition did not depend solely upon the "original author," but also upon networks of commentary and reception.¹⁸ A text became authoritative not merely because it was written by a prominent figure, but because it was read and interpreted by an intellectual community.¹⁹ Thus, Malay Sufism constituted a dynamic epistemic tradition through which Islamic knowledge, authority, and metaphysical understanding were produced, transmitted, and contested within interconnected networks of ulama, texts, spiritual communities, and political institutions.

Hamzah Fansuri and Ontological-Transformative Epistemology

Hamzah Fansuri occupies a central position in the intellectual history of Malay Islam. He was the earliest Malay Sufi poet whose identity can be clearly established. Moreover, he succeeded in

¹⁶ al-Attas, "New Light on the Life of Hamzah Fansuri."

¹⁷ Drewes, "Syamsuddins onvindbare Sjarh Ruba'i Hamza al-Fansuri."

¹⁸ Muzakkir Syahrul and Ziaulhaq Hidayat, "New Face of Contemporary Sufism in Southeast Asia: Experience of Indonesia and Malaysia," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 11, no. 2 (2021): 270–92, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2021.11.2.270-292>.

¹⁹ Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury, "Sufism In Contemporary Contexts: Spirituality, Subjectivity, and the Limits of Modern Rationality," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 50, no. 1 (2026): 1, <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v50i1.1566>.

constructing a new epistemic language within the Malay-Islamic tradition. Through his works, Sufism emerged as a system of knowledge that interconnected metaphysics, language, the body, symbolism, and the existential transformation of the human being. For this reason, Hamzah's significance must be understood in terms of how he formulated an ontological-transformative epistemology, namely a model of knowledge that regarded the transformation of human existence as the necessary condition for attaining true knowledge of Divine reality.²⁰

Hamzah developed within the cosmopolitan intellectual environment of Barus and encountered Islamic intellectual traditions through his travels and transregional networks. Drewes further situates him within the transmission of Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics to the Malay world.²¹ Thus, Hamzah Fansuri's intellectual contribution lies in transforming Sufism into an epistemic framework that connected Malay intellectual expression with the wider metaphysical tradition of Islam.

This transformation is particularly evident in Hamzah's conceptualization of knowledge. Within his framework, true knowledge (*ma'rifa*) entails the ontological transformation of the self through the witness of Divine reality. Consequently, Hamzah's epistemology cannot be reduced to a modern rationalistic model. Knowledge, for him, does not stem from the external observation of objects, but arises from the existential transformation of the knowing subject. Human beings come to know God precisely to the extent that they undergo spiritual transformation on the path toward realizing the unity of being.

It is at this point that the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* emerges in Hamzah's thought. Colonial scholarship often reduced *wahdat al-wujūd* to "pantheism," a reading that obscures its Akbarian

²⁰ Boon Chuan Tee, "The Malay Epistemological Background in the Islamic Writings of Hamzah Fansūri," *Al-Shajarah* 29, no. 1 (2024): 153–79, <https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.v29i1.1833>.

²¹ Drewes et al., "Review: The Poems of Hamzah Fansuri."

metaphysical framework. In Hamzah's intellectual context, *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not imply that God is materially identical with the cosmos; rather, created existence is contingent upon and dependent on Divine Being.

Therefore, within Hamzah's framework, *waḥdat al-wujūd* functions as the ontological foundation of the entire process of knowledge. To know the essence of the self means to realize that the whole of human existence depends upon Divine reality. True knowledge demands an existential transformation that changes the way human beings perceive themselves, the world, and God. It is here that Hamzah's epistemology reveals its ontological-transformative character.

According to Hamzah, this transformation takes place through *kaşyf*, or inner unveiling. In Hamzah's thought, *kaşyf* is the result of prolonged spiritual discipline. For this reason, mystical experience in Hamzah's epistemology is not identical with individual subjectivism in the modern sense. Such experience remains situated within the horizon of tradition, *adab*, and spiritual guidance. At the same time, however, it becomes a source of epistemic legitimacy, because through *kaşyf* human beings encounter Divine reality directly, rather than merely through rational argumentation or external authority.

Within the framework of Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics, the relationship between God and creation is not understood as two completely separate realities. This relationship is evident in his discussion of Adam as a locus that brings together the outward and inward dimensions of reality. When explaining the nature of Adam, Ibn 'Arabī states: *fa-huwa al-ḥaqq al-khalq*, which can be translated as "thus, he is *al-Ḥaqq* and *al-khalq*." Ibn 'Arabī demonstrates the existence of a very close ontological relationship between *al-Ḥaqq* and *al-khalq*. Within this structure, the human being occupies a special position because he is able to encompass the outward and inward dimensions and become a locus of the manifestation of

the relationship between the Divine and the created.²²

This ontological framework was further developed in the Akbarian tradition through al-Jīlī's concept of *al-insān al-kāmil*. Whereas Ibn 'Arabī positioned Adam as a locus connecting the dimensions of *al-Ḥaqq* and *al-khalq*, al-Jīlī conceptualized the Perfect Human as a “mirror of al-Ḥaqq” (*mir'āt al-Ḥaqq*). This framework provides an important conceptual bridge for understanding Hamzah's articulation of the relationship between God, human existence, and knowledge. al-Jīlī places the Perfect Human in a close relationship with Divine reality by stating that “*wa-al-insān al-kāmil ayḍan mir'āt al-Ḥaqq*,” which means “and the Perfect Human is also a mirror of *al-Ḥaqq*.”²³

Hamzah's emphasis on *wahdat al-wujūd* and *kasyf* subsequently became contested because it was perceived by al-Raniri as threatening the ontological distinction between God and creation. The dispute therefore concerned not only metaphysical doctrine but also the epistemic legitimacy of mystical experience. In Hamzah's epistemology, mystical experience constituted the path toward the highest form of knowledge. Consequently, a learner who truly “knows” cannot be separated from the process of self-transformation itself. “Knowledge” emerges from the existential involvement of the human being within the reality that is known.

The ontological-transformative character of Hamzah's epistemology is clearly reflected in the symbolism of his poetry. Braginsky's analysis of the boat symbolism in Hamzah's *Syair Perahu* demonstrates how poetic symbols function as epistemic structures through which religious experience is articulated as knowledge.²⁴ In one of his poems, Hamzah Fansuri writes:

²² Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ Al-Ḥikam* (Intishārāt al-Zahrā', 1987).

²³ 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *Al-Insān al-Kāmil Fī Ma'rīfat al-Awākhir Wa al-Awā'il* (Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1997).

²⁴ Braginsky, “Some Remarks on the Structure of the ‘Syair Perahu’ by Hamzah Fansuri.”

“Wujud Allah nama perahunya
 Ilmu Allah akan kurungnya
 Iman Allah nama kemudinya
yakin akan Allah nama pawangnya”²⁵

Thus, poetry functions as an epistemic medium through which metaphysical experience is articulated, transmitted, and internalized. Hamzah’s use of Malay further transformed the language into a medium of metaphysical reflection capable of expressing complex ontological concepts.²⁶ As al-Attas observes, Hamzah did not merely translate Arabic terminology into Malay but transformed its epistemic horizon.²⁷ Thus, Hamzah’s poetry functioned as an epistemic instrument for articulating metaphysical knowledge.

Hamzah explicitly connects knowledge of *wujūd* with *syuhūd*, stating in *Asrāru’l-‘Ārifīn*:²⁸

“*Jikalau sini kamu tahu akan wujud / Itulah tempat kamu shuhud... Wujud al-makhlukat daripada wujudNya. Apabila wujud al-makhlukat daripada wujudNya, wujud kitapun wujudNya*”

He subsequently connects this process to the attainment of *ma’rifat Allāh*, which indicates that the recognition of *wujūd* becomes the basis for spiritual knowledge. He further describes *kashf* as a mode through which a seeker can come to know the effects, acts, names, and attributes of God. Ontology and epistemology are interconnected in Hamzah’s thought. The nature of *wujūd* determines the possibility and orientation of knowledge, while

²⁵ Hamzah Fansuri, “Naskah Syair Perahu Hamzah Fansuri Pasaman Sumatera Barat,” Pasaman, Sumatera Barat, n.d., Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/NaskahSyairPerahuHamzahFansuriPasamanSumateraBarat/page/n1/mode/2up>.

²⁶ Amir H. Zekrgoo, “The Confused Whale of the China Sea: Water Symbolism in the Works of Hamzah Fansuri,” *Al-Shajarah* 29, no. 1 (2024): 79–98, <https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.v29i1.1828>.

²⁷ al-Attas, “New Light on the Life of Hamzah Fansuri.”

²⁸ Hamzah Fansuri, “*Asrāru’l-‘Ārifīn fī Bayān ‘Ilm al-Sulūk wa’l-Tawḥīd*,” Transcription Cod. Or. 7291 (1), Leiden University Libraries, n.d., Cod. Or. 7291 (1), Leiden University Libraries.

shubūd, *ma'rifah*, and *kasyf* constitute experiential forms through which that ontological reality is understood. Therefore, knowledge involves the transformation of the knowing subject. In this sense, Hamzah's ontological-transformative epistemology offers a significant resource for integrating the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of knowledge.

This discussion demonstrates that Hamzah Fansuri's epistemology is fundamentally ontological and transformative, understanding knowledge as an existential process rather than merely a conceptual activity. Through the interconnected concepts of *wahdat al-wujūd*, *syubūd*, *kasyf*, and *ma'rifah*, Hamzah integrates intellectual inquiry, spiritual experience, and self-transformation into a unified process of knowing. His use of the Malay language and poetic expression further illustrates how metaphysical knowledge was articulated, transmitted, and internalized within the Malay intellectual tradition. Hamzah's epistemological framework therefore provides an important foundation for understanding knowledge as an integrated process in which intellectual, ethical, spiritual, and ontological dimensions converge in the pursuit of genuine knowledge of God.

Nuruddin al-Raniri and Normative-Theological Epistemology

The emergence of Nuruddin al-Raniri in the intellectual landscape of seventeenth-century Aceh marked a critical shift in how spiritual knowledge acquired legitimacy. Al-Raniri sought to anchor spiritual knowledge within the normative boundaries defined by the *sharia*, theology, and the authority of the *ulama*. A central issue in his critique of the *Wujudiyah* was determining which forms of spiritual experience and knowledge could be considered legitimate within Islam. In this regard, Meyer demonstrates that al-Raniri's opposition to certain mystical currents possessed distinct nuances and must be evaluated in light of his broader position and

intellectual agenda in Aceh. In this context, Meyer demonstrates that al-Raniri was involved in a competition for religious authority to obtain court patronage, so that the Wujudiyah contestation also had a political dimension that cannot be separated from the epistemic issue.²⁹

Al-Raniri's Hadrami-Gujarati background situated him within transregional scholarly networks linking India, the Middle East, and the Malay world. His arrival in Aceh around 1637 and subsequent position at the court provided an institutional setting for the articulation of his religious authority.³⁰ Van Nieuwenhuijze emphasizes that the emergence of al-Raniri likely occurred following a shift in the religio-political orientation of the Acehnese court after the reign of Iskandar Muda. During the previous period, the court had provided strong patronage to Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani and to the Wujudiyah thought of Hamzah Fansuri.³¹ Al-Raniri's intellectual authority was shaped by both transregional scholarly networks and the institutional context of the Acehnese court.

This political transformation is highly significant because it demonstrates that orthodoxy became a project of power. Under Iskandar Tsani, al-Raniri was appointed *syaiikh al-Islam* as well as the chief religious authority within the sultanate. This position granted him the legitimacy to undertake intellectual and religious reforms in Aceh. Within this context, his critique of Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin was not merely an intellectual polemic, but also part of the production of state orthodoxy.³² Thus, al-Raniri's critique of

²⁹ Verena Meyer, "History in Motion Nūr Al-Dīn al-Rānirī's Retelling of 'Abbāsīd History in Seventeenth-Century Aceh," *Afkaruna: Indonesian Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Studies* 20, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.18196/afkaruna.v20i2.24794>.

³⁰ G. W. J. Drewes, "De herkomst van Nuruddin ar-Raniri.," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 111, no. 2 (1955): 137–51, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002351>.

³¹ Nieuwenhuijze, "Nur Al-Din Al-Raniri als Bestrijder der Wugudiya."

³² Jajat Burhanudin, "Islamic Turn in Malay Historiography: Bustān al-Salāt in of 17th Century Aceh," *Studia Islamika* 28, no. 3 (2021): 579–605, <https://doi.org/10.15408/studiaislamika.v28i3.12345>.

Wujudiyah was closely intertwined with the political construction of religious orthodoxy in Aceh.

It is important to emphasize here that al-Raniri was not opposed to Sufism. On the contrary, his works demonstrate a profound mastery of Sufi metaphysics and the literature of Ibn ‘Arabi. Voorhoeve shows that al-Raniri repeatedly cited Ibn ‘Arabi positively in his writings and often did so in an affirmative tone.³³ Therefore, describing al-Raniri as “anti-Sufi” constitutes an inaccurate simplification. What he rejected was not Sufism as a spiritual path, but rather forms of metaphysics that, in his view, dissolved the ontological distinction between God and creation.³⁴

Al-Raniri’s principal critique of Wujudiyah was rooted simultaneously in questions of ontology and epistemology. According to him, the teachings of Hamzah Fansuri had exceeded the valid limits of mystical knowledge because they obscured the transcendence of God. Van Nieuwenhuijze explains that, for al-Raniri, there existed two fundamental realities: God as the true Being (*wujūd haqīqī*) and created beings as shadowy or imaginal existence (*wujūd khayālī*). The relationship between the two may be explained through the concept of *analogia entis*, namely an analogical resemblance without ontological identity. In other words, the cosmos indeed reflects God, yet it is never identical with God. In *Hujjat al-Ṣiddīq li-Daf’ al-Zindīq*,³⁵ al-Raniri states that:

Kata wujudiyah yang mulhid: bahawa wujud itu esa, iaitulah wujud Allāh. Maka wujud Allāh yang esa itu tiada ada ia manjud mustaqil sendirinya yang dapat dibezakan melainkan dalam kandungan sekalian makhlukat jua. Maka adalah

org/10.36712/sdi.v28i3.21259.

³³ P. Voorhoeve, “Van en over Nuruddin ar-Raniri,” *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 107, no. 4 (1951): 353–68, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002452>.

³⁴ Mohamad Nasrin Nasir, “A Study of the Reinterpretation of the Qur’an in a Seventeenth-Century Malay Sufi Text Written by al-Rānirī,” *Islamic Studies* 62, no. 4 (2023): 453–69, <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v62i4.2659>.

³⁵ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *A Commentary on the Hujjat Al-Ṣiddīq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānirī* (Ministry of Culture, Malaysia, 1986).

makblūqāt itu wujud Allāh dan wujud Allāh itu wujud makblūqāt. Maka 'ālam itu Allāh dan Allāh itu 'ālam.

Al-Raniri interpreted this position as collapsing the ontological distinction between Creator and creation. Its epistemological consequence, in his view, was equally serious: if mystical experience could erase this distinction, spiritual claims could become detached from the normative authority of sharia.³⁶

For this reason, for al-Raniri, the sharia functioned as an epistemic boundary. Spiritual knowledge had to remain subject to the authority of revelation and the discipline of Sunni orthodoxy. It is at this point that al-Raniri's intellectual project acquired its distinctive form. He sought to reconcile Sufism with Ash'arite theology and Shafi'i jurisprudence. His work *al-ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm* demonstrates a systematic effort to popularize Shafi'i jurisprudence in the Malay-Indonesian world as the normative foundation of Muslim life.³⁷

Wormser demonstrates that the religious debates in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Aceh must be understood as part of a much broader intellectual dialogue between the Islamic traditions of the Middle East, Mughal India, and the Malay world. From this perspective, the Wujudiyah polemic formed part of the global circulation of Sufi ideas and Sunni orthodoxy.³⁸ At that time, Aceh functioned not only as an international trading center but also as a major center of Islamic intellectual life connected to Gujarat, Yemen, the Hijaz, and Persia. Within this context, al-Raniri introduced a form of transregional orthodoxy that was more closely aligned with the Sunni mainstream in the post-Ghazalian period.

³⁶ Arfan Arfan et al., "Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Thought of Nūr Al-Dīn al-Rānirī: Shaṭaḥāt, Takfīr, and the Boundaries of Shariah," *Justicia Islamica* 22, no. 2 (2025): 327–56, <https://doi.org/10.21154/justicia.v22i2.10808>.

³⁷ Amnan, "Shaykh Nuruddin Ar-Raniry's Contribution in His As-Shirath al-Mustaqim to Popularizing Islamic Law in the Nusantara."

³⁸ Wormser, "The Religious Debates of Aceh in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century: An Invisible Cultural Dialogue?"

Al-Raniri did not entirely reject the metaphysics of Ibn ‘Arabi. Voorhoeve rightly demonstrates that al-Raniri in fact distinguished between *Wujūdiyyah muwahhīd* and *Wujūdiyyah mulhīd*.³⁹ What he opposed was not the entire tradition of *wahdat al-wujūd*, but rather the extreme interpretations that, in his view, completely erased ontological distinction. This is important because it demonstrates that al-Raniri was engaged in a process of orthodoxifying mysticism, rather than eliminating mysticism itself. Al-Raniri states that:⁴⁰

Maka adalah i’tiqād segala wujūdiyyah yang muwahid itu pada makna kalimah lā ilāha illā Allāh; tiada maujud hanya Allāh. Ya’ni: lā wujūda li-say’in haqīqatan illā lahu. Ertinya; tiada wujud bagi sesuatu syai’i pada haqiqatnya melainkan tertentu bagi haq Ta’ala. Ya’ni mā fī al-wujūd illā huwa.

This distinction demonstrates that al-Raniri did not reject the doctrine of Divine unity per se, but sought to regulate its interpretation within an ontological distinction between God and creation.

The suppression of Wujūdiyyah and burning of Hamzah’s works can therefore be read not only as theological rejection but also as regulation of the circulation of religious knowledge. In this process, al-Raniri sought to subordinate mystical teaching to sharia and Sunni theology.

In addition, al-Raniri’s criticism of Hamzah also reflects the transformation of the role of the ulama in Malay society. During the time of Hamzah Fansuri, spiritual authority was largely constructed through mystical charisma. In contrast, in al-Raniri’s era, the legitimacy of the ulama became increasingly tied to their ability to control religious interpretation.⁴¹

Al-Raniri’s own position within the Aceh Sultanate was not entirely stable. Takeshi Ito points out that in 1644 al-Raniri left

³⁹ Voorhoeve, “Van en over Nuruddin ar-Raniri.”

⁴⁰ Al-Attas, *A Commentary on the Hujjat Al-Ṣiddīq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānirī*.

⁴¹ Sangidu et al., “Revisiting Wujūdiyyah and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy in the Seventeenth-Century Aceh Sultanate,” *Al-Adabiya: Jurnal Kebudayaan Dan Keagamaan* 21, no. 1 (2026): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.37680/adabiya.v21i1.7949>.

Aceh abruptly following the emergence of a new ulama, Saifurrijal, who gained stronger political support at the royal court.⁴² This fact demonstrates that orthodoxy was a contested arena that continually shifted according to the configuration of political power. Even al-Raniri's own authority was eventually displaced by the dynamics of the royal court.⁴³

Beyond Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: The Hamzah-Raniri Debate as an Epistemic Struggle over Islamic Authority

The contestation between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri has generally been interpreted through the dichotomy of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Hamzah is often represented as a “*pantheistic*” mystic who deviated from Sunni Islam, while al-Raniri is positioned as a defender of orthodoxy who succeeded in restoring the purity of Islamic doctrine in seventeenth-century Aceh. Such a reading, however, is insufficient to explain the deeper intellectual structure underlying the debate. The central issue at stake was not merely whether a particular metaphysical doctrine was right or wrong, but rather how religious knowledge was validated within Malay Muslim society.

Al-Raniri's criticism of the Wujudiyah position was rooted in the ontological distinction between God as *wujūd ḥaqīqī* and creation as *wujūd khayālī*. From an epistemological perspective, he rejected interpretations that collapsed this distinction and thereby allowed mystical experience to generate claims of ontological identity between God and creation. For al-Raniri, mystical experience could provide knowledge of Divine reality, but its interpretation had to preserve the distinction between the Creator and creation.

⁴² Takeshi Ito, “Why Did Nuruddin Ar-Raniri Leave Aceh in 1054 A.H.?,” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 134, no. 4 (1978), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27863207>.

⁴³ Lailiyatul Azizah and Norhayati Hamzah, “Bustān Al-Salāṭīn: Representation of Malay Islamic Civilization (Aceh) in the 17th Century,” *Journal of Islamic Civilization* 4, no. 1 (2022): 24–37, <https://doi.org/10.33086/jic.v4i1.2940>.

Thus, the central issue was not the validity of mystical experience itself, but the epistemic limits and conditions through which such experience could be regarded as legitimate Islamic knowledge.

From an epistemological perspective, al-Raniri’s position does not reject *kasyf*, *dẓamq*, or spiritual experience as a whole. Rather, Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddīq includes *kasyf* and *dẓamq* as means of knowing reality, but such experiences must be placed within the proper epistemic framework. Al-Raniri explains that knowledge can be acquired through reason, which are explained through the Qur’an, hadith, and the consensus of the ulama, as well as through *kasyf* and *dẓamq*. His criticism of the deviant *Wujūdiyyah* is not that “mystical experience is invalid,” but rather when mystical experience produces the ontological claim that human beings and God have the same existence. Al-Attas also shows that *dẓamq* constitutes a form of intuitive knowledge or mystical perception, closely related to *kasyf* and *wajd*. Thus, philosophically, the difference between Hamzah and al-Raniri can be formulated as a question of how spiritual experiences (*syuhūd–kasyf–dẓamq*) are translated into claims about reality (*wujūd*) and how such claims are validated.

Hamzah and al-Raniri both recognized the possibility of spiritual knowledge, including *ma’rifah*, *kasyf*, and related forms of mystical experience. Their disagreement lay not primarily in the possibility of such knowledge, but in its interpretation and epistemic validation. Hamzah connected *ma’rifah* with *syuhūd* and the experiential recognition of Divine reality, whereas al-Raniri accepted mystical knowledge only within a framework that preserved theological and normative boundaries.

Table. 1 Epistemological Differences between Hamzah Fansuri and al-Raniri

Aspect	Hamzah Fansuri	Nuruddin al-Raniri
<i>Ma’rifah</i>	Spiritual recognition of God associated with <i>syuhūd</i> and experiential knowledge.	Spiritual knowledge is possible, but its interpretation must remain within theological and normative boundaries.

Aspect	Hamzah Fansuri	Nuruddin al-Raniri
<i>Kasyf</i>	Connected with shuhūd as a mode of experiencing Divine reality.	Accepted as a means of knowing, together with <i>dẓamq</i> , but subject to epistemic verification.
Validation of knowledge	Emphasis on experiential and transformative knowledge.	Knowledge is validated through mystical experience together with reason, revelation, sharia, and ulama authority.
<i>Wujūd</i>	Ontological knowledge is connected to the experience of Divine reality.	Rejects interpretations that collapse the distinction between God and creation.
Main epistemological issue	Spiritual experience as a means of attaining <i>ma'rifah</i> .	The limits and validation of spiritual experience.

For al-Raniri, *ma'rifah* constitutes spiritual knowledge of *al-H̱ aqq* attained through inner experiences such as *kasyf* and *dẓamq*. Such knowledge is not merely conceptual but constitutes a direct apprehension of reality. However, this experience does not entail the elimination of the distinction between God and creation. Rather, al-Raniri explains that the perfected '*ārīfūn* are capable of witnessing the relationship between unity and multiplicity without identifying God with the world.

The limitation of this orthodoxy–heterodoxy approach primarily lies in its tendency to impose modern Western theological categories onto the Malay Islamic intellectual tradition. The concept of *maḥdat al-wujūd* is often reduced to “pantheism,” as though Hamzah entirely erased the ontological distinction between God and the cosmos. Such a reading is not only ahistorical, but also fails to grasp the metaphysical horizon of Ibn 'Arabi that constitutes the intellectual foundation of the Malay Wujudiyah tradition.⁴⁴ Within

⁴⁴ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (University of Malaya Press, 1970).

the framework of Islamic metaphysics, *wahdat al-wujūd* does not imply a material identity between God and the cosmos; rather, it affirms that all existence derives its being through Divine *tajallī*. Therefore, the essence of Hamzah's thought is fundamentally the transformation of human consciousness regarding its dependence upon the Divine Being.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's critique of this colonial reading is highly significant in this context. According to al-Attas, Hamzah Fansuri was not a local poet who deviated from the mainstream of Islam.⁴⁵ This also explains why the colonial categories of "pantheism" and "heresy" are insufficient for interpreting the debate.⁴⁶

From this, it becomes evident that Hamzah and al-Raniri actually operated within the same Islamic intellectual horizon. Both accepted spiritual reality, acknowledged the importance of the spiritual journey, and employed the language of Islamic metaphysics as the basis of their arguments. Their difference lay in the source and limits of the legitimacy of religious knowledge. Hamzah placed transformational experience, ontological symbolism, and *kasyf* as the path toward the highest form of knowledge. In contrast, al-Raniri maintained that spiritual experience must remain subject to revelation, the syariah, and the authority of the scholarly community.

A social-epistemological perspective further shows that religious knowledge is produced through relations of authority and interpretive communities. Hamzah's authority was sustained through Sufi networks, disciples, poetic symbolism, and spiritual transmission, whereas al-Raniri's authority was institutionalized through the sultanate, Sunni scholarly networks, sharia, and ulama authority.

⁴⁵ al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri*.

⁴⁶ Voorhoeve, "Van en over Nuruddin ar-Raniri."

This difference is clearly reflected in the way both figures understood the relationship between human beings and God. In Hamzah's epistemology, true knowledge is attained through the ontological transformation of the human being toward an awareness of Divine *tajalli*. Knowledge is therefore not representational, but participatory.⁴⁷ In contrast, al-Raniri rejected the possibility that mystical experience could erase the ontological distinction between the Creator (*al-Khāliq*) and creation (*al-Makhlūq*). For al-Raniri, spiritual experience must nevertheless be verified through the framework of the shari'a and Sunni theological discipline.

Therefore, the Hamzah-al-Raniri debate in fact reveals two distinct models of Islamic epistemology. Hamzah developed an ontological-transformative epistemology grounded in the experience of *ma'rifah*, metaphysical symbolism, and self-transformation. Meanwhile, al-Raniri advanced a normative-theological epistemology that positioned orthodoxy, *adab*, and the authority of the ulama as mechanisms for regulating spiritual claims. The contestation between them was thus a contestation between two different modes of validating religious knowledge.

Moreover, the approach of virtue epistemology can help further clarify this issue.⁴⁸ Virtue epistemology further clarifies that both models connect knowledge with the formation of the knowing subject: Hamzah emphasizes spiritual transformation, while al-Raniri emphasizes *adab*, *syariah*, and scholarly discipline.

The perspective of deep epistemology likewise demonstrates that this conflict cannot be understood through modern categories such as "heresy," "pantheism," or "orthodoxy," all of which emerged from the history of Christian theology and European modernity.⁴⁹ The Hamzah-al-Raniri debate constituted an internal

⁴⁷ Amnan, "Shaykh Nuruddin Ar-Raniry's Contribution in His As-Shirath al-Mustaqim to Popularizing Islamic Law in the Nusantara."

⁴⁸ Duncan Pritchard, "Extended Virtue Epistemology," *Inquiry* 61, nos. 5–6 (2018): 632–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2017.1355842>.

⁴⁹ Beaney and Lai, "Towards a Deep Epistemology."

struggle within Malay Islam concerning the relationship between metaphysics, spiritual experience, the *syariah*, and socio-religious authority. Seventeenth-century Aceh itself was a cosmopolitan space in which various Islamic intellectual traditions converged: the metaphysics of Ibn ‘Arabi, Shafi‘i jurisprudence, *tarekat* networks, and Sunni theology. Therefore, the Wujudiyah conflict cannot be reduced to a local deviation corrected by an external orthodoxy; rather, it formed part of the internal dynamics of global Islam within the Malay world.

The burning of Hamzah Fansuri’s works in fact carries a broader epistemological significance. The act constituted a form of regulation over the circulation of knowledge. What was permitted to be read, taught, and transmitted became part of the production of orthodoxy. Here, it becomes evident that orthodoxy operates through the regulation of the epistemic space of society.

Nevertheless, viewing al-Raniri solely as a repressive figure is equally problematic. His critique of the *Wujudiyah* tradition stemmed from the concern that unguided mystical experiences could generate unchecked truth claims lacking proper epistemic boundaries. In this light, al-Raniri sought to preserve a vital balance between inner spirituality and normative responsibility. Conversely, Hamzah reminded his audience that Islamic knowledge cannot be reduced to a rigid legalism devoid of inner transformation.

Therefore, the Hamzah–al-Raniri contestation should not be understood as an absolute opposition between two mutually exclusive camps. Rather, both represented two inherent tendencies within the intellectual tradition of the Islamic world: the need for the spiritual transformation of the human being and the need to preserve the ethical-theological validity of religious knowledge. Hamzah emphasized the ontological dimension of knowledge through *ma‘rifat* and *kasyf*, whereas al-Raniri underscored the importance of the *syariah*, *adab*, and epistemic authority in verifying spiritual experience.

The Hamzah–al-Raniri debate is therefore more appropriately understood as an epistemic contestation. What was at stake was the very structure of the validation of Islamic knowledge itself. The conflict demonstrates that, within the Malay Islamic tradition, knowledge has always been intimately connected to both spiritual transformation and the legitimacy of religious authority. This awareness subsequently becomes crucial for understanding the crisis of contemporary Islamic education, in which knowledge has become increasingly fragmented from the spiritual dimension and from the very formation of the human being itself.

Epistemic Fragmentation in Contemporary Islamic Education: Revisiting the Hamzah-Raniri Paradigm

Contemporary Islamic education faces an epistemic fragmentation in which intellectual achievement is increasingly separated from moral and spiritual formation. This condition reflects a detachment of knowledge from its ontological and spiritual foundations. Ahmed and Chowdhury argue that modern schooling in Muslim contexts remains influenced by educational frameworks that privilege instrumental rationality over holistic human formation.⁵⁰

Within this fragmented framework, knowledge may be reduced to information while its ethical and spiritual dimensions are marginalized. Al-Attas identifies this condition with the loss of *adab* and the fragmentation of revelation, reason, ethics, and civilization.⁵¹ At the opposite extreme, forms of contemporary spirituality may detach mystical experience from epistemic discipline⁵² and

⁵⁰ Ahmed and Chowdhury, “Rethinking Contemporary Schooling in Muslim Contexts.”

⁵¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (ABIM, 1978).

⁵² Ateng Ruhendi et al., “A Spiritual-Cognitive Framework for Islamic Religious Education through the Integration of Al-Ghazali’s Concepts of *Kasbi* and *Laduni* Knowledge,” *EDUKASI: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Agama Dan Keagamaan* 24, no. 1 (2026): 150–62, <https://doi.org/10.32729/edukasi.v24i1.2429>.

ethical responsibility.⁵³

It is within this context that the intellectual encounter between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri acquires profound theoretical relevance. The conflict between Hamzah's metaphysical mysticism and al-Raniri's theological-normative intervention constituted an epistemological struggle concerning the relationship between ontology, authority, spirituality, and the legitimacy of knowledge itself. Hamzah Fansuri represented a model of knowledge rooted in existential realization, metaphysical unity, and inner transformation. His mystical vocabulary integrated ontology, cosmology, psychology, and language within a coherent spiritual epistemology.

Within Hamzah's framework, knowledge constitutes an existential unveiling. The purpose of education is therefore not merely the mastery of doctrine, but the transformation of the self through spiritual witnessing.

Al-Raniri, by contrast, emphasized the normative stabilization of religious knowledge through sharia, theological discipline, and scholarly authority. His approach provides the ethical and normative dimension necessary to prevent spiritual experience from becoming detached from religious responsibility.⁵⁴

The crisis of contemporary Islamic education emerges when these two dimensions are inherited separately: al-Raniri's normative discipline without Hamzah's transformative spirituality produces formalism,⁵⁵ while Hamzah's emphasis on interiority without

⁵³ Abdullah Sahin, "Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education," *Religions* 9, no. 11 (2018): 335, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9110335>.

⁵⁴ Amnan, "Shaykh Nuruddin Ar-Raniry's Contribution in His As-Shirath al-Mustaqim to Popularizing Islamic Law in the Nusantara"; Amnan, "Shaykh Nuruddin Ar-Raniry's Contribution in His As-Shirath al-Mustaqim to Popularizing Islamic Law in the Nusantara."

⁵⁵ Alwazir Abdusshomad et al., "Between Memorization and Critical-Transformative Pedagogy: Translating Islamic Religious Education Reform in Indonesia and Malaysia," *J-PAI: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 12, no. 2 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.30605/jpai.v12i2.12345>.

epistemic and ethical discipline risks undisciplined spirituality.⁵⁶

This condition may be described as epistemic fragmentation, namely the organic disconnection between knowledge, ethics, spirituality, and self-transformation. Epistemic fragmentation occurs when knowing is separated from being; when intellectual mastery no longer necessitates moral purification; and when spirituality becomes detached from a disciplined intellectual process. Modern educational systems ultimately place greater emphasis on cognitive accumulation than on the ontological formation of the human being. Education thus becomes informational rather than transformational.⁵⁷

Modern educational philosophy has become increasingly characterized by disciplinary fragmentation, in which epistemology, ethics, social philosophy, and educational practice are artificially separated.⁵⁸ Interestingly, Hamzah Fansuri and al-Raniri, despite occupying opposing positions, in fact both rejected such fragmentation, albeit through different paths. Hamzah unified ontology and epistemology through mystical metaphysics, whereas al-Raniri integrated spirituality and ethics through normative discipline. Modern Islamic education fails precisely because it is no longer capable of sustaining the integration of both dimensions. What remains are merely fragmented elements devoid of epistemological coherence.⁵⁹

org/10.18860/jpai.v12i2.41966.

⁵⁶ Ikang Fauji and Mulyawan Safwandy Nugraha, "Redefining Epistemology: Exploring a New Paradigma in Islamic Education Research," *Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 4, no. 2 (2024): 485–90, <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijomr.v4i2.80236>.

⁵⁷ Riswadi Riswadi et al., "Beyond Memorization: Transforming Islamic Religious Education through Deep Learning in Indonesian Border-Area Schools," *EDURELIGIA: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 9, no. 3 (2025): 290–306, <https://doi.org/10.33650/edureligia.v9i3.11628>.

⁵⁸ Ahmad Nazar Fakhury et al., "Reconstructing Islamic Religious Education Curriculum through Qur'anic Values and Epistemology," *Al-Fahmu: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 5, no. 1 (2026): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.58363/alfahmu.v5i1.744>.

⁵⁹ Selena Aulia et al., "The Influence of the Islamic Education Curriculum on

This argument carries significant implications for contemporary Islamic pedagogy. If the crisis of Islamic education is fundamentally an epistemic crisis, then educational reform cannot be achieved merely through administrative modernization. What is required is the reconstruction of an integrative epistemology capable of reunifying intellectual inquiry, ethical discipline, spiritual cultivation, and the metaphysical orientation of the human being.⁶⁰ Ahmed and Chowdhury argue that the decolonization of Muslim education requires the reconstruction of educational concepts on the basis of Islamic philosophical anthropology, rather than mere adaptation to the paradigms of modern secular education.⁶¹

Such reconstruction also demands the restoration of the concept of knowledge grounded in *adab*, as formulated by al-Attas, namely an education directed toward the formation of just and civilized human beings, rather than merely individuals who are economically efficient.⁶² At the same time, spirituality must remain connected to intellectual discipline and ethical responsibility. Studies on the moderation of contemporary *tasawuf* likewise demonstrate the importance of integrating spirituality, social ethics, and intellectual rigor so that Sufism does not devolve into anti-intellectualism or a shallow form of emotional spirituality.⁶³

Reducing Epistemological Fragmentation and Synthesizing the Islamic Weltanschauung Amid the Dichotomy of Knowledge,” *Adabuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pemikiran* 5, no. 2 (2026): 144–63, <https://doi.org/10.38073/adabuna.v5i2.4706>; Aulia et al., “The Influence of the Islamic Education Curriculum on Reducing Epistemological Fragmentation and Synthesizing the Islamic Weltanschauung Amid the Dichotomy of Knowledge.”

⁶⁰ Nurzamsinar et al., “Reconstruction of Integrative Islamic Epistemology: Analysis of the Implementation of Yani, Irfani, Burhani, and Illumination,” *Al-Mudarris (Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Islam)* 9, no. 2 (2026): 431–46, <https://doi.org/10.23971/mdr.v9i2.11433>.

⁶¹ Syeda Dur e Nayab and Md. Mahdi Hassan, “The Concept of the Perfect Human (al-Insān al-Kāmil) in Ibn Arabi’s Thought,” *Aqlania: Jurnal Filsafat Dan Teologi Islam* 16, no. 1 (2026), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32678/aqlania.v16i1.21>.

⁶² al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*.

⁶³ Mohammad Kosim et al., “The Dynamics of Islamic Education Policies in Indonesia,” *Cogent Education* 10, no. 1 (2023): 2172930, <https://doi.org/10.1080/233>

Toward an Integrative Islamic Epistemology: Reconstructing Educational Thought beyond Legalism and Mysticism

Contemporary Islamic education today stands between two extremes, namely legalistic conservatism and a form of spirituality detached from social responsibility. This condition is reflected in the findings of Abdullah Sahin's research.⁶⁴ On the one hand, educational systems become excessively normative through their emphasis on memorization. On the other hand, spirituality is transformed into an individual experience isolated from intellectual responsibility. As a consequence, educational institutions fail to cultivate the *insan kamil*, namely individuals capable of integrating reason, morality, and spiritual depth simultaneously. Therefore, the principal challenge is not to choose between Hamzah or al-Raniri, but rather to construct a higher epistemological synthesis capable of reconciling ethical discipline with transformative spirituality.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Hamzah's mystical orientation alone is insufficient to address the problems of education in a comprehensive manner. Spirituality without an ethical structure can give rise to subjectivism. Historically, this concern helps explain al-Raniri's strong critique of the *wujūdiyyah* teachings in Aceh. Although some of al-Raniri's criticisms may have oversimplified Hamzah's metaphysics, his intervention reflected an anxiety regarding social stability and religious orthodoxy. Al-Raniri understood that education also possesses a social function in cultivating moral discipline and legal order. Without a normative framework, spirituality may become trapped in a form of esotericism detached from ethical responsibility.

1186X.2023.2172930.

⁶⁴ Sahin, "Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies."

⁶⁵ Muhammad Rizal et al., "Insan Kamil-Oriented Islamic Higher Education in Society 5.0: A Systematic Literature Review of Digital Transformation, Curriculum Integration, and Value-Based Islamic Leadership," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 14, no. 2 (2025): 357–75, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2025.142.357-20375>.

It is precisely here that al-Raniri's important contribution to Islamic epistemology becomes evident. He emphasized that knowledge must be accompanied by moral authority and intellectual discipline. Education is therefore not sufficient if it merely cultivates inner consciousness; it must also foster social responsibility. A knowledgeable individual must remain bound to ethics and the order of society. For this reason, educational institutions require norms, methodologies, and scholarly traditions that preserve the continuity of knowledge. Al-Raniri thus represents the importance of order, discipline, and the responsibility of orthodoxy within Islamic education.

However, problems arise when orthodoxy becomes detached from intellectual creativity and existential experience. An excessively juridical form of education risks reducing religion to formal compliance. Students may become legally disciplined, yet lose spiritual depth and reflective capacity. This phenomenon remains visible in many contemporary Islamic educational institutions, where memorization is prioritized over critical thought, and formal conformity is valued more highly than the internalization of meaning. At this point, knowledge itself becomes externalized rather than serving as a transformation of inner consciousness.

Therefore, an integrative Islamic epistemology must move beyond these two extremes. Such a synthesis represents an effort to reconstruct Islamic education upon a more comprehensive philosophical foundation. This reconstruction closely resonates with the concept of *ta'dib* developed by al-Attas. Such an integrative approach also possesses profound relevance within the discourse on the decolonization of education. The reconstruction of Islamic education must be capable of transcending the Eurocentric assumptions embedded within modern schooling systems. Nevertheless, decolonization does not imply a total rejection of modernity or a romanticization of the past. What is required instead is the reconstruction of the epistemological categories themselves.

Islamic education must revive its metaphysical foundations while remaining open to intellectual dialogue and contemporary realities.

In this context, Islamic philosophy occupies a highly significant position. Ulfat and Suleiman demonstrate that Islamic philosophy has long been marginalized within modern curricula due to the dominance of Western epistemic hierarchies. Yet the integration of Islamic philosophy into education can strengthen the capacities for reflective thinking, pluralistic competence, and intercivilizational dialogue.⁶⁶ This is important because an integrative Islamic epistemology cannot be constructed through an anti-rational traditionalism. On the contrary, it requires the revival of an Islamic intellectual tradition capable of dynamically reconciling revelation, reason, ethics, and metaphysics.

Pedagogically, this integrative model carries broad implications. Education must not rely solely upon the memorization of doctrine or formal ritual. Yet education likewise cannot be reduced to a form of individual spiritual experience devoid of critical engagement. An integrative pedagogy must cultivate reflective consciousness. The learning process should connect revelation with reason, spirituality with social ethics, and tradition with contemporary problems.

It is important to note that such integration does not imply the rejection of institutional discipline. Discipline remains necessary, but it must be directed toward the formation of meaningful human beings rather than authoritarian control. Learners should experience Islam as a worldview that is both intellectually coherent and spiritually profound. Within this framework, the teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge, but also an ethical and spiritual exemplar who embodies intellectual integrity.

⁶⁶ Fahimah Ulfat and Farid Suleiman, "The Absent Canon: Islamic Philosophy as a Missing Dimension in Religious and Ethics Education – a Perspective from the German School Context," *British Journal of Religious Education*, 2025, 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2025.2610257>.

Table. 2. Conceptual Framework: Integrative Islamic Epistemology of Education

Dimension	Hamzah Fansuri	Nuruddin al-Raniri	Synthesis
Knowledge	Transformative Knowledge	Normative knowledge (<i>shari'ah</i>)	Ethical-transformative knowledge
Subject	Mystical self	Disciplined self	Integrated ethical-spiritual self
Education	Spiritual realization	Moral and doctrinal regulation	Holistic human formation (<i>ta'dib</i>)
Truth	Ontological and experiential	Juridical-theological	Integrated epistemology
Authority	Experiential spirituality	Scholarly orthodoxy	Ethical-spiritual intellectual authority
Pedagogy	Existential transformation	Normative discipline	Integrative pedagogy
Goal of Education	Union with Divine Reality	Preservation of orthodoxy and moral order	Harmonization of intellect, ethics, and spirituality

The concept of an Integrative Islamic Epistemology of Education signifies the construction of a new epistemological horizon that transcends the classical dichotomy between mysticism and orthodoxy. From the perspective of Islamic philosophy of education, this synthesis affirms that knowledge cannot be adequately understood merely as a process of personal spiritual transformation, as emphasized by Hamzah Fansuri, nor can it be reduced solely to normative compliance with the *syariah*, as maintained by al-Raniri. The synthesis of these two epistemologies gives rise to the concept of ethical-transformative knowledge, namely a form of knowledge that must be capable of transforming human existence toward ethical perfection. It is precisely here that its theoretical novelty resides: Islamic epistemology is understood

as an integrative process that unites spiritual experience, intellectual rationality, and moral responsibility within a single ontological framework.

At the level of the subject, the concept of the “integrated ethical-spiritual self” represents an important philosophical advancement within contemporary Islamic educational discourse. If Hamzah Fansuri emphasized the “mystical self” immersed in Divine reality, while al-Raniri emphasized the “disciplinary self” subjected to the structure of the *syariah*, this synthesis instead presents the human being as a multidimensional subject who integrates spiritual consciousness with ethical-historical responsibility. From a phenomenological perspective, the human being is understood as an integral personal subject who simultaneously cultivates transcendental consciousness and social praxis. This approach is highly relevant to the crisis of modernity, which separates spirituality from public ethics.

Within the educational dimension, the idea of holistic human formation (*ta'dib*) demonstrates a highly significant philosophical depth. This concept moves beyond the modern educational paradigm, which tends to be technocratic and utilitarian in orientation. Education is understood as a process of forming the complete human being (*insan adabi / insan kamil*), in which intellect, soul, and action exist in harmony. This synthesis closely resonates with the classical Islamic metaphysical tradition, which views the human being as a multilayered entity that must be perfected through the integration of knowledge, *adab*, and spirituality.

At the level of truth and authority, this synthesis also offers a highly original epistemological reconstruction. Truth is understood through an integrated epistemology that acknowledges the plurality of sources of knowledge in Islam: revelation, reason, spiritual intuition, and existential experience. Likewise, authority must be grounded in ethical-spiritual intellectual authority, namely an authority that derives its legitimacy from spiritual depth as well as

moral-intellectual integrity. This constitutes a critique of the crisis of epistemic authority in the modern era, which is often trapped between subjective relativism and normative dogmatism.

As for the dimension of educational aims, this synthesis reaches the height of its philosophical depth through the concept of the “harmonization of intellect, ethics, and spirituality.” This constitutes an ontological project concerning how the human being becomes a complete and perfected being. If Hamzah Fansuri was oriented toward union with Divine Reality and al-Raniri toward the preservation of socio-religious orthodoxy, then this synthesis introduces a new teleological paradigm: education as a path toward cosmic harmonization between the human being, God, and society. In the language of Islamic philosophy, this represents an effort to restore the human being to its *fitri* structure as a “microcosm” that reflects Divine order.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the debate between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri constituted an epistemic contestation over the sources, validity, and authority of Islamic knowledge in the Malay world. Rather than representing a simple opposition between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, the debate reveals an internal struggle over how religious knowledge was produced, validated, and authorized. The formation of Malay Sufism constituted a negotiation of epistemic authority within the emerging intellectual tradition of Malay Islam.

Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniri represented two distinct models of epistemic validation. Hamzah developed an ontological-transformative epistemology in which *ma'rifat*, *kashf*,

⁶⁷ Ming-Kuo Chen and Yi-Huang Shih, “The Implications of Nel Noddings’ Ethics of Care for Fostering Teacher-Student Relationships in Higher Education,” *Frontiers in Education* 10 (July 2025): 1602786, <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2025.1602786>.

spiritual experience, and existential transformation constituted the principal means of attaining knowledge. Al-Raniri, by contrast, articulated a normative-theological epistemology that placed spiritual claims under the regulative authority of *syariah*, theological discipline, *adab*, and scholarly judgment. Thus, their difference concerned the conditions through which knowledge could acquire religious validity and authority.

Based on this historical contestation, this study proposes Integrative Islamic Epistemology of Education as its principal theoretical contribution. This framework brings together the transformative dimension emphasized by Hamzah with the ethical-normative discipline emphasized by al-Raniri, conceptualizing knowledge as simultaneously intellectual, spiritual, and moral. It positions Islamic education as the formation of the whole human being, in which reason, *adab*, and spiritual consciousness are interconnected. In this sense, the Hamzah–al-Raniri debate provides a historical foundation for reconstructing Islamic educational thought beyond the dichotomy between legalism and mysticism.[]

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