

Reframing Museum Epistemology: Sanad as a Counter-Archive in Islamic Curatorial Practice in Pahang, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study critiques the dominance of colonial archival frameworks in museological institutions in the Malay world, which often present historical narratives in a linear manner while marginalizing the intellectual foundations of Islamic civilization in the region. Although decolonization movements are increasingly gaining traction, their approaches are frequently limited to issues of representational inclusivity without fundamentally restructuring the underlying Eurocentric epistemological frameworks. In response, this article advances the concept of *sanad* (the chain of knowledge transmission) as an epistemic counter-archive for reconstructing museum curatorial practices. *Sanad* is demonstrated not merely as a sequence of historical names, but as an integrated intellectual infrastructure that binds together core Islamic disciplines—such as law (*fiqh*), theology (*'aqidah*), and spirituality (*tasawwuf*)—into a coherent, authoritative, and authentic system of knowledge. Employing a qualitative methodology that combines contemporary museological analysis with the Islamic intellectual tradition, this study takes the Pahang State Museum as its primary case study, examining the potential integration of key historical documents such as the *Hukum Kanun Pahang* into a *sanad*-based narrative framework. The findings indicate that the application of *sanad* has the capacity to shift museum storytelling from a colonial-centered administrative chronology toward a relational mapping of knowledge networks, foregrounding the role of scholars (*ulama*) as the principal agents in the construction of civilization. In conclusion, the development of a *sanad*-based curatorial model not only functions as an empirical instrument to challenge distortions in European historiography, but also offers a new paradigm for modern cultural institutions. This model ensures that the historical identity of local communities is understood and appreciated within an autonomous Islamic epistemological framework, free from Western hegemonic influence.

Keywords: Sanad, Islamic Epistemology, Museum Studies, Decolonization, Counter-Archive, Curatorial Practice, Pahang, Malay World

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary scholarship no longer views museums as merely passive repositories of artifacts, but as active discursive institutions that shape identity, memory, and the historical consciousness of a civilization (Zhang & Xu, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022; Zou et al., 2024; Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). However, the presentation of historical narratives in museums across the Malay World is often dominated by colonial archival frameworks (Ahmad Kamal, 2025; Abdullah, 2016; Kalb, 2010).

Such approaches tend to construct linear historical narratives, centering colonial intervention as the primary point of departure, while simultaneously marginalizing the intellectual and spiritual foundations of pre-colonial Islamic civilization in the region (Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Gullick, 1992).

In reality, the development of Malay-Muslim societies has always been closely connected to global centers of Islamic learning (Azra, 2004, 2021; Nugroho & Seng, 2024; Putra et al., 2025). Within this context, the concept of sanad (chains of knowledge transmission) plays a crucial role as a comprehensive epistemological structure (Saleh et al., 2022; Ihsan et al., 2022; Iftikhar et al., 2024).

Sanad is not merely a list of teachers and students; rather, it is a system that ensures the continuity, authenticity, and integration of knowledge rooted in revelation. It functions to bind multiple disciplines—such as legal studies or fiqh (Azra, 2004; Mohamed Ramli & Yama, 2022), theological doctrine or *aqidah* (Frank, 1994; Azra, 2004; Griffel, 2009; Dhuhri & Jakfar, 2020), and spiritual practice or *tasawwuf* (Hidayat & Syahrul, 2017; Yacob & Mamat, 2022; Arnel, 2024)—into a coherent, hierarchical system of knowledge that transcends generations.

The existence of this sanad-based structure demonstrates that Islamic civilization in the Malay World was built upon an authoritative knowledge system, thereby challenging colonial narratives that portray local societies as passive. Given that archival practices are often intertwined with power and the manipulation of historical representation (Foucault, 1972, 1980; Derrida, 1996; Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Stoler, 2009; Said, 1978), sanad may be advanced as a “counter-archive” that offers a localized epistemological framework capable of contesting Western hegemony (Mignolo, 2011).

Through sanad, history is no longer perceived as a rigid chronological sequence of events, but as a living process of knowledge continuity sustained through scholarly relationships (Muntaqo, 2018; Mohamed Ramli & Yama, 2022; Jamil & Khaled, 2022; Khasanah et al., 2024).

In this regard, the Pahang State Museum holds significant potential to pioneer such a curatorial approach. By integrating local legal sources such as the *Hukum Kanun Pahang* alongside their respective sanad chains, the museum can construct a far more holistic historical narrative—one that is deeply rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Overall, this study focuses on analyzing the role of sanad across three principal dimensions: (i) as an epistemological structure of civilization, (ii) as a counter-archive that resists colonial narratives, and (iii) as a foundation for developing a new museum curatorial model. This approach opens up new possibilities for a more self-determined understanding of the history of Pahang and the Malay World, no longer wholly dependent on colonial historiographical frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Museums as Discursive Institutions and the Construction of Power-Laden Narratives

In contemporary museological discourse, museums are no longer conceptualized as passive repositories for the preservation of artifacts; rather, they are recognized as active discursive institutions that function as sites for meaning-making, ideological negotiation, and the construction of historical narratives (Zhang & Wei, 2023; Pastore, 2025; Eckersley, 2026).

Fundamentally, museums operate as instruments of governance and centers of knowledge production that are deeply shaped by prevailing epistemological structures and power relations (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Drawing on Foucault’s (1972) theory of discourse, the historical narratives presented in museums are not objective representations of reality but are instead social constructions determined by dominant epistemological frameworks (Zhang & Wei, 2023; Kosonen, 2024; Pastore, 2025; Shang & Zhang, 2025).

Within the Southeast Asian context in particular, heritage institutions frequently remain embedded within colonial epistemological systems, resulting in linear historical narratives that privilege Western administrative authority and exhibit an overly state-centric orientation (Cai, 2024; Milner, 2024; Kwiecień et al., 2025; Kim, 2025; Zhu, 2025; Prakoso et al., 2025).

Limitations of Decolonization Movements in Museology

In response to the hegemony of European knowledge systems—critically exposed by Said (1978)—decolonial approaches have emerged to dismantle epistemic structures that marginalize alternative knowledge systems. Decolonial theorists advocate for the creation of “pluriversal museums” that embrace epistemic diversity in order to challenge the universalist claims of Western modernity (Mignolo, 2011; Mbembe, 2016; Prianti & Suyadnya, 2022; Menozzi, 2024; Basu, 2024; Cai, 2024).

However, recent scholarship suggests that many decolonization initiatives remain limited in scope, often focusing primarily on inclusion and representation of marginalized communities without fundamentally restructuring the underlying Eurocentric epistemological frameworks (Wali & Collins, 2023; Mendoza, 2024; Sanders et al., 2025; Song et al., 2024).

Consequently, the reconstruction of alternative epistemologies—particularly those rooted in non-Western intellectual traditions—remains a critical gap within contemporary museum studies (Barolsky et al., 2024; Ramos et al., 2024; El Masri, 2025; Gamage et al., 2026).

The Epistemology of Sanad and Global Knowledge Networks in the Malay World

To address the limitations of Western-centric decolonial discourse, the Islamic intellectual tradition offers a robust epistemological framework through the concept of sanad. Historical scholarship demonstrates that premodern Malay societies were not peripheral entities; rather, they constituted active epistemic nodes within a transregional Islamic knowledge network connecting centers of learning in the Hijaz, India, and Central Asia (Haqqi & Yani, 2023; Wardi & Jusoh, 2023; Iswanto et al., 2024; Utami, 2025; Azra, 2004).

Within this ecosystem, sanad is not merely a list of names but functions as a relational epistemological structure that validates the continuity and authenticity of knowledge transmission (Lumbard, 2024; Siregar et al., 2025; Kurdian et al., 2026; Hallaq, 2018). It encompasses chains of authority across multiple disciplines, including law (Kamali, 2019), theology (al-Attas, 1972), and Sufism (Trimingham, 1971; Bruinessen, 1995).

The discovery of ijāzah certificates and religious manuscripts serves as concrete evidence of sustained intellectual mobility and transmission across regions (Haqqi & Yani, 2023; Iswanto et al., 2024; Putra et al., 2025; Siregar et al., 2025; Kharisma & Rozaq, 2026).

One of the most tangible manifestations of the integration of sanad-based knowledge systems into Malay governance structures can be observed in the implementation of the Hukum Kanun Pahang (Hooker, 1988; Ibrahim, 2000; Abd Jalal et al., 2022; Muslim et al., 2024; Sazali, 2025).

Research Gaps and the Proposal of a New Model

Based on the foregoing analysis, three major gaps can be identified in current scholarly discourse. First, existing decolonial approaches tend to emphasize representational inclusion without undertaking a fundamental restructuring of epistemological frameworks. Second, although Islamic intellectual history recognizes the centrality of sanad, its application has yet to be operationalized within modern institutional contexts such as museums. Third, there is a notable lack of conceptual models for integrating Islamic epistemology into curatorial practice.

Accordingly, the digitization and integration of sanad may be advanced as an “epistemic counter-archive”—not merely as a tool for contesting colonial narratives, but as an authoritative structure capable of transforming museum narratives and curatorial practices in a holistic manner.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an integrative epistemological approach that combines contemporary museological analysis with principles derived from the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Rather than treating methodology as a purely technical procedure, this research situates it within a broader epistemological framework in which knowledge is understood as structured, transmitted, and validated through recognized traditions of authority. In this regard, the concept of *sanad* is not merely examined as an object of historical inquiry, but is positioned as a foundational principle that informs the analytical orientation of the study. This approach reflects the Islamic understanding of knowledge as inseparable from its chains of transmission, continuity, and legitimacy (al-Attas, 1972; Hallaq, 2009).

The methodological process begins with a close reading and analysis of primary sources, particularly documented *sanad* materials in the domains of jurisprudence, theology, and Sufism. These documents provide empirical evidence of continuous knowledge transmission linking scholars in the Malay world to major figures in the broader Islamic intellectual tradition. Through this analysis, patterns of epistemic continuity, structures of authority, and relational networks of knowledge are identified and interpreted. The focus is not limited to the content of the *sanad* itself, but extends to its function as a dynamic epistemological structure that preserves both knowledge and its legitimacy across generations.

Building upon this textual analysis, the study engages in a critical comparison between conventional museum narratives and the epistemological model implied by *sanad*. Existing museum practices, particularly in postcolonial contexts, tend to rely on linear and chronological representations of history that foreground political events and colonial interventions (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). While such approaches provide a certain form of historical coherence, they often marginalize alternative forms of knowledge that are not easily accommodated within chronological frameworks. By contrast, *sanad* reveals a network-based structure of knowledge in which relationships between scholars, texts, and institutions form the basis of historical continuity. This comparative analysis enables the identification of epistemological limitations within conventional museology and highlights the potential of *sanad* as an alternative framework.

The study further extends this analysis by translating its findings into a conceptual curatorial model. In doing so, it moves beyond theoretical critique toward practical application, addressing a key gap in existing literature. The proposed model reorganizes museum narratives around epistemological structures rather than chronological sequences, emphasizing the interconnected roles of jurisprudence, theology, and spirituality in shaping Islamic civilization. Such an approach allows for the representation of history as a process of knowledge formation rather than merely a sequence of events, thereby aligning curatorial practice with the underlying epistemology of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

The Pahang State Museum is employed as a case study to ground this analysis within a specific institutional context. The selection of this site is informed by its role in representing the historical and cultural identity of the state, as well as its access to local sources such as the *Hukum Kanun Pahang*, which reflects the application of Islamic jurisprudence within governance and society (Hooker, 1988; Ibrahim, 2000). By situating the study within this context, the research is able to demonstrate how abstract epistemological concepts may be operationalized within actual museum practice.

Throughout the analytical process, the study follows a progression that moves from the identification of epistemic structures within *sanad*, to the critique of existing museum narratives, and ultimately to the reconstruction of an alternative curatorial framework. This progression reflects a shift from descriptive analysis toward epistemological reconstruction, in which the objective is not merely to interpret existing representations of history, but to propose a new mode of understanding grounded in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

In this sense, the methodological contribution of this study lies in its reconfiguration of research practice itself. By integrating *sanad* as both a source of data and a guiding epistemological principle, the study offers a novel framework that bridges the gap between Islamic intellectual heritage and contemporary museology. This approach not only expands the scope of museum studies but also introduces a new direction for interdisciplinary research that foregrounds epistemology as the central axis of analysis (Hallaq, 2018; Kamali, 2019).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of this study reveals that the discourse of *sanad* is not merely a symbolic representation of chains of knowledge transmission; rather, it embodies an integrated epistemological infrastructure capable of sustainably supporting the comprehensive decolonization of museum narratives.

Sanad as an Epistemological Infrastructure of Islamic Civilization

Recent studies demonstrate that *sanad* functions as a foundational epistemological structure within the Islamic intellectual tradition, facilitating the formation of authority, authenticity, and continuity of knowledge across generations (Ayatin & Fadlillah, 2023; Siregar et al., 2025; Nasution et al., 2025; Sofiah et al., 2025; Kharisma & Rozaq, 2026).

Empirical evidence derived from the intellectual networks of local scholars indicates that Islamic civilization in the Malay World was neither passive nor isolated; rather, it operated as an active epistemic node interconnected with global Islamic scholarly networks (Abdul Kadir et al., 2022; Siregar et al., 2025).

The preservation of this integrated knowledge structure is articulated through three systematic intellectual pillars: chains of legal authority grounded in the Shāfiʿī school of law (Abdul Kadir et al., 2022; Siregar et al., 2025), the construction of theological frameworks within the Ashʿarite and Māturīdite traditions (Dhuhri & Jakfar, 2020), and the formation of communal ethical conduct and spiritual institutional lineages through the practice of Sufism (Trimingham, 1971; Bruinessen, 1995; Taher et al., 2025; Prasajo & Athallah, 2025; Fauziah, 2025).

The integration of these three pillars challenges colonial assumptions that characterize Malay Islam as merely syncretic, instead demonstrating the sustained coherence of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah worldview within local societies (Nasrin, 2022; Muslim et al., 2024; Al-Farisi & Shauqii, 2025).

This continuity of knowledge transmission is further evidenced by its institutionalization within governance and legal structures, particularly through foundational state documents such as the *Hukum Kanun Pahang* (Hooker, 1988; Ibrahim, 2000; Abd Jalal et al., 2022; Muslim et al., 2024; Sazali, 2025).

Sanad as a Counter-Archive against Colonial Hegemony

The findings identify the capacity of *sanad* as a “counter-archive,” grounded in a relational system (*relational counter-archive*), in resisting the dominance of colonial archival regimes (Jeurgens & Karabinos, 2020; Gani, 2023; Kharisma & Rozaq, 2026).

Colonial archival historiography typically constructs linear historical narratives structured around state administration, privileging colonial authority as the primary catalyst for the development of local civilizations (Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Gullick, 1992).

In contrast to colonial documentation, which is often static, fixed, and exclusionary (Stoler, 2009; Gupta & Kapoor, 2020; Sherman et al., 2024), *sanad*-based historiography prioritizes a “living archive” that preserves the dynamism of inherited knowledge through direct pedagogical relationships between teachers and students (Luthra et al., 2024; Kamal, 2025b; Azlira, 2025).

This shift from a rigid evidentiary framework toward a transregional intellectual discourse foregrounds the scholarly agency and autonomy of Malay ulama (Haqqi & Yani, 2023; Iswanto et al., 2024; Putra et al., 2025), aligning closely with contemporary postcolonial approaches that advocate for epistemic decoloniality (Mignolo, 2011).

Reconstructing Museum Narratives: From Chronology to Epistemological Networks

At the curatorial level, the findings present a strong critique of linear chronological models, which are shown

to reduce the complexity of spiritual, intellectual, and sociocultural dimensions into a singular, administrative timeline (Heo & Lee, 2025; Yi et al., 2025; Barndt & Jaeger, 2024).

Contemporary exhibitions are increasingly shifting toward network-oriented systems that represent intellectual continuity and the dissemination of knowledge across temporal layers through relational mapping frameworks (Yoshimura et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025).

Current interpretive strategies in museum practice emphasize interactive storytelling that engages visitors cognitively and affectively, structuring discourse in a more immersive and dialogical manner rather than passively (Li, 2024; Yi et al., 2025; Zhang & Zhang, 2026).

As a result, museums are able to reorient narratives of Malay identity—traditionally centered on royal lineages and colonial geopolitical phases—toward a knowledge-centered framework that positions scholars (*ulama*) as the foundational agents in the construction of civilization (Abd Jalal et al., 2025; Kamal, 2025b).

Integrating a *Sanad*-Based Curatorial Model in the Pahang State Museum

In shaping state identity discourse within the Pahang State Museum, the integration of a *sanad*-based framework highlights the institution's potential to transform from a static exhibition space into a dynamic site of knowledge formation that projects indigenous intellectual heritage (Abd Jalal et al., 2025; Zaini et al., 2022).

Exhibitions may be restructured through thematic galleries encompassing disciplines such as *fiqh*, *aqidah*, and *tasawwuf*, supported by visualizations of *sanad* networks (Yoshimura et al., 2024; Su et al., 2024; Chunlan et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the incorporation of key manuscripts such as the *Hukum Kanun Pahang* reinforces representations of how globally rooted Islamic legal philosophies were localized and adapted to the socio-political landscape of the Malay world (Abd Jalal et al., 2022; Hashim, 2023; Muslim et al., 2024; Sazali, 2025; Yusoff et al., 2025). Such an approach enables museums to function as reflective spaces where visitors critically engage with the sources of cultural authority that shape their historical narratives.

This analysis demonstrates that *sanad*-centered structures perform three strategic roles in advancing the decolonization of museum curatorial practices (Pan & Shi, 2025; Todino et al., 2025; Guan et al., 2025). First, *sanad* provides empirical evidence of the integrity and coherence of the Islamic knowledge ecosystem (Siregar et al., 2025; Akib, 2025; Kharisma & Rozaq, 2026; Mahfuzah & Huda, 2026). Second, it advances a robust counter-archival narrative that challenges distortions embedded within Eurocentric historiography (Jeurgens & Karabinos, 2020; Gani, 2023; Kharisma & Rozaq, 2026). Third, it offers a foundational framework for the development of new Islamic cultural institutional models in Malaysia (Pan & Shi, 2025; Todino et al., 2025; Guan et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

Overall, this article has demonstrated the critical need to reconstruct and reconfigure the epistemological framework of museology in the Malay world, which has long been dominated by colonial archival approaches that are linear, static, and marginalize the intellectual foundations of local civilization.

In addressing the limitations of contemporary decolonial movements—which often focus primarily on representational inclusivity—this study advances *sanad* (the chain of knowledge transmission) as an alternative framework functioning as an epistemic counter-archive.

The findings emphasize that *sanad* is not merely a record of historical teacher–student relationships; rather, it constitutes a holistic intellectual infrastructure that integrates core Islamic disciplines such as *fiqh*, *aqidah*, and *tasawwuf* into an authoritative and authentic system of knowledge.

The deployment of *sanad* as a model of historical verification successfully challenges the assumption that Islam in the Malay region is inherently syncretic, while simultaneously demonstrating the active participation of Malay societies in a robust global network of Islamic scholarship.

In the context of curatorial practice, the integration of a *sanad*-based model enables exhibition narratives to shift away from colonial-centered administrative chronologies toward a relational mapping of knowledge networks, positioning scholars (*ulama*) as the primary agents in the construction of civilization.

Particularly in the case of the Pahang State Museum, the ability to synthesize the *sanad* system with key legal documents such as the *Hukum Kanun Pahang* illustrates the practical viability of translating global Islamic philosophical frameworks into the sociopolitical context of the Malay region.

In conclusion, the application of *sanad* within museological discourse not only provides an empirical instrument to counter distortions in Eurocentric historiography, but also offers a framework for reconstituting the operational foundations of modern cultural institutions. This new curatorial model opens space for a more autonomous articulation of identity, ensuring that Islamic history and heritage are preserved and internalized according to their own epistemological paradigm, free from the shadow of Western epistemological hegemony.

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