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Implementation of Malay Islamic Social Reform through Azyumardi Azra's Tradition and Modernity at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang

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A B S T R A C T

Azyumardi Azra's thought on the dialectic between tradition and modernity provides a strategic framework for understanding Islamic social reform in the Malay cultural context. He emphasizes that Islam can remain socially relevant only by preserving valuable local traditions while engaging critically with modern challenges. This study aims to analyze the implementation of Azra's ideas in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang and to examine their implications for learning practices and school culture. This research employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of curriculum and learning documents. The findings indicate that Azra's thought is implemented through three main strategies. First, Malay Islamic traditions are integrated into learning as a foundation for students' religious and cultural identity. Second, modern competencies are strengthened through the development of critical thinking, openness to diverse perspectives, and digital literacy in responding to contemporary issues. Third, pedagogical practices are transformed into dialogical learning processes that connect religious texts with students' social realities. Overall, this study demonstrates that PAI functions not merely as doctrinal instruction, but as an effective medium of Islamic social reform that promotes religious moderation, cultural rootedness, and adaptive engagement with modernity.
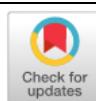
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INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Islamic education in contemporary Indonesia is faced with a crucial crossroads. On the one hand, the flow of globalization brings a wave of modernity that demands rationality, technological efficiency, and global competence. On the other hand, the emergence of religious puritanism often questions the relevance of local traditions, and even tends to clash cultural practices with religious doctrines. In the context of Malay societies that have a long history of Islamic and cultural integration, these tensions are very felt, especially in formal educational institutions such as high schools.

Azyumardi Azra, Indonesia's leading Muslim scholar, provides a highly relevant conceptual framework for unraveling this tangled thread. Through his monumental works, Azra (2004) emphasized that Islam in the archipelago has a distinctive character that he calls "Islam Nusantara" or in a regional context as Malay Islam. The strength of Islam in this region lies in its ability to acculturate with local culture without losing the substance of its creed. For Azra, tradition is not a "burden of history" that hinders progress, but rather a "social capital" that provides identity and social cohesion. However, Azra (2011) also reminds that tradition should not be static; He must constantly dialogue with modernity. This is the essence of social reform: the ability to revitalize old values in a new and relevant context.

Azyumardi Azra views tradition and modernity as two-dimensional entities that are in dialectical relationships, not binary oppositions. Islamic traditions, especially in the context of Nusantara and Malay Islam, are understood as the result of a dynamic historical process

and continue to undergo reinterpretation according to social changes (Azra, 1999; 2013). Tradition is not static, but rather a source of values, identity, and social ethics that sustain the sustainability of the lives of Muslims.

Azra rejects the literal-formalistic approach to religious tradition because it has the potential to hinder the function of Islam as a force for social transformation. He emphasized the importance of preserving noble traditions (*al-turāth al-ṣāliḥ*) that are in line with the principles of justice, humanity, and public welfare (Azra, 2002). Within this framework, tradition serves as a moral and cultural foundation, not as a barrier to change.

Meanwhile, modernity in Azra's thought is understood critically and selectively. Modernity is not synonymous with Western secularization, but includes rationality, scientific development, and renewal of social institutions (Azra, 2005). Therefore, Islam can play a role as an agent of social reform if it is able to build a creative synthesis between traditional values and the demands of modernity. In the context of Islamic education, this dialectic encourages the transformation of religious learning into a reflective process that connects religious texts with contemporary social realities.

In the context of education, Azra's idea demands a paradigm transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI). PAI should no longer be just a subject that teaches memorization of texts and rituals of *mahdhah worship*. PAI must transform into a vehicle for character education that is rooted in local culture while opening students' insights into the dynamics of the modern world (Zuhriansah, 2025). If PAI fails to carry out this integration, the school will only produce graduates who may be intellectually intelligent but alienated from their cultural roots, or conversely, ritually pious but stuttering in the face of the challenges of the times.

SMA Negeri 3 Palembang represents a microcosm of these dynamics. Located in Palembang, a city that was historically the center of the Sultanate of Palembang Darussalam, this school is located in the midst of a community that holds fast to Malay customs. Values such as *upload-ungguh*, respect for parents, mutual cooperation traditions, and communal religious practices are still very thick. However, as a favorite public school, SMA Negeri 3 Palembang is also required to implement a high-standard national curriculum, adopt digital technology in learning, and prepare students to compete in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 (Team An-Najah, 2024).

The fundamental question that arises is: How does this school manage the confluence of these two major currents in PAI learning? Is the Malay Islamic tradition just a ceremonial sticker, or is it really integrated into the curriculum and school culture? To what extent is Azyumardi Azra's thinking about the balance of tradition and modernity implemented in the pedagogical practice of teachers in the classroom?

This research seeks to fill the academic gap with the aim of comprehensively analyzing the implementation of Malay Islamic social renewal through the integration of tradition and modernity in PAI learning at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang. Specifically, this study will explore the strategies of revitalizing traditions, responses to modernity, and transformation of learning methods carried out by PAI educators in the school.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with an *intrinsic case study design*. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on an in-depth exploration of complex socio-religious phenomena, especially the practice of implementing Azyumardi Azra's thought in the context of education, by emphasizing the understanding of meaning, process, and social interaction that takes place naturally (Creswell, 2014). The intrinsic case study design was used because this study aims to understand the uniqueness and peculiarities of the application of traditional dialectics and modernity in the learning of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang, without being oriented towards statistical generalization to a broader context (Yin, 2018).

The research participants consisted of 14 informants, including 3 PAI teachers, 1 principal, and 10 students, who were purposively selected based on their direct involvement
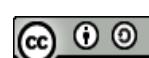
in the learning process and religious education policies in schools. Data were collected through participatory observation over a semester, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation studies of the curriculum, learning tools, and school policies.

Data analysis was carried out inducively using the thematic analysis of the Braun and Clarke (2006) model, which included the stage of data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review and interpretation of the theme, and the preparation of analytical reports. The validity of the data is ensured through triangulation of sources (teachers, students, and principals) and triangulation of methods (observation, interviews, and documentation).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Based on field observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis, this study found that the implementation of Azyumardi Azra's thinking on the dialectic of tradition and modernity at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang took place dynamically and transformatively. The findings are classified into three main dimensions, namely the revitalization of traditions, the response to modernity, and pedagogical transformation.

Revitalization of Traditions: Reviving Malay Islamic Identity

The revitalization of Malay Islamic traditions is positioned as the foundation for the formation of students' religious identity. Tradition is not presented as a purely symbolic heritage, but as living values that are internalized in learning and school culture.

The results of observation of SKI learning in grade XI show that PAI teachers consciously integrate the narrative of local Islamic history of Palembang. In one learning session, the teacher related the material of the archipelago's ulama network with the figure of Sheikh Abdus Samad al-Palimbani and the role of the Sultanate of Palembang Darussalam. The teacher stated:

> "*If children only know the history of Islam from the Middle East, they will feel that Islam is far from them. Even though the Palembang ulama are also part of the great history of Islam.*" *(Good Teacher)*

Strengthening traditions is also institutionalized through routine religious practices in the form of Yasinan and Ratib every Friday morning. Observations showed that students followed dhikr in a typical Malay style solemnly and collectively. One student revealed:

> "*At first it felt ordinary, but over time we felt that it was different, calmer, and like it had its own characteristics as Palembang people.*" *(Grade XI Students)*

In addition, traditional values are transmitted through a hidden curriculum in the form of Malay manners. The habit of using polite language, kissing the teacher's hand, and putting the elders first are understood by students as part of Islamic morality. This shows that tradition functions as a mechanism for internalizing social-religious ethics.

Modernity Response: Building Critical Reasoning and Digital Literacy

In responding to modernity, schools place rationality and digital literacy as key competencies. Observation of Fiqh learning in grade XII shows that teachers raise contemporary fiqh issues such as *paylater*, online game transactions, and crypto assets.

Instead of giving a single normative answer, teachers divide students into groups to explore fatwas and legal arguments from various sources. The teacher affirmed:

> "*The important thing is not to be quick to judge halal-haram, but to understand the legal reasons and the impact on society.*" *(Good Teacher)*

This approach encourages students to think methodologically and contextually. One student stated that the discussion made him more careful in responding to religious content on social media.

Digital literacy is also directed to build a counter-narrative against radicalism. Students are involved in viral religious content analysis projects and the production of digital content with moderation nuances. The documentation shows the uploads of posters and videos of

students with the theme of tolerance and local Islamic history, which were published through the school's social media.

Pedagogical Transformation: From Indoctrination to Dialogue

The third finding shows a shift in pedagogical paradigm towards dialogical learning. PAI teachers consistently apply *Problem Based Learning* by presenting real socio-religious dilemmas, such as the ethics of interfaith neighbors in the society of Palembang.

The class discussion took place openly and egalitarianly. Observations show that teachers play the role of facilitators, while students actively argue. One student said:

> "*In PAI class, we are allowed to have different opinions, as long as we are polite. "Don't be afraid to make mistakes, but to be more understanding."*
> *(Grade XII Students)*

This democratization of the classroom creates *a safe space* for students' intellectual expression, while strengthening a reflective and moderate understanding of religion. This pedagogical transformation reflects the synthesis of tradition and modernity as formulated in the thought of Azyumardi Azra.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang is not only technical-pedagogical, but represents a project of Islamic education reform that is firmly rooted in the dialectic of tradition and modernity as formulated by Azyumardi Azra. The observed learning practices show that schools consciously build a synthesis between the Malay local Islamic heritage and the demands of global modernity. In Azra's frame of thought, this kind of synthesis is a prerequisite for Islam to continue to function as a living, adaptive, and transformative social force, not a religion that is alienated from the reality of the times (Azra, 2002; 2011).

To comprehensively read these findings, discussions were developed in three main analytical domains:

Revitalization of Tradition as an Epistemological Basis and Islamic Identity

Azyumardi Azra emphasized that the strength of Islam in the archipelago does not lie in symbolic purification or imitation of the Middle Eastern Islamic model, but in its ability to contextualize Islamic teachings into local culture without losing its universal orientation (Azra, 2004). The findings of the study show that SMA Negeri 3 Palembang translates this idea concretely through the revitalization of Malay Islamic traditions in PAI learning.

The use of local history in Palembang—such as the Sultanate of Palembang Darussalam, the figure of Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II, and the scholar Sheikh Abdus Samad al-Palimbani—shows efforts to build students' historical consciousness. In Azra's perspective, this historical awareness is important so that Indonesian Muslims understand that Islam in the archipelago is growing through a global scientific network that is equivalent to the world's Islamic centers (Azra, 2005). Thus, local Islam is not understood as a fringe Islam, but rather as an integral part of global Islamic civilization.

This finding is in line with Firdausi (2024) who emphasized that the introduction of the history of local scholars serves as a strengthening of students' cultural capital. When students understand the intellectual genealogy of Palembang Islam, they acquire a solid Islamic identity and are not easily swayed by transnational Islamic narratives that are often ahistorical and exclusive. In this context, the revitalization of tradition is not a romanticization of the past, but an epistemological strategy to build context-aware religiosity.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of the practice of Yasinan and Ratib in the Malay style shows that tradition functions as a medium for internalizing values and forming social solidarity. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, this kind of communal ritual strengthens social cohesion and builds a collective religious experience (Darosan, 2025). This corroborates Azra's argument that local traditions that are in line with substantive Islamic principles do not need to be removed, but rather treated as a source of social ethics.

This finding is also an empirical criticism of the puritan view that often labels local traditions as TB (superstition, heresy, superstition). As Sajidah (2025) emphasizes, local traditions that are managed reflexively are actually effective as a means of character education,
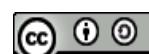
because the values of manners, discipline, and respect for moral authority are practiced embedded in students' daily lives. Thus, the tradition at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang serves as a *cultural filter* that keeps students from identity alienation in the midst of globalization.

Modernity as an Instrument of Rationality and Critical Literacy

In Azra's thought, modernity is not synonymous with secularization or the removal of religion from the public sphere. On the contrary, modernity is understood as a process of rationalization, strengthening science, and reforming social institutions that can strengthen the role of Islam as a moral force (Azra, 2011). The findings of the study show that SMA Negeri 3 Palembang selectively adopts modernity through the development of critical reasoning, digital literacy, and the integration of contemporary issues in PAI learning.

The discussion of fiqh on digital transactions, *paylater*, and crypto assets shows a paradigm shift from textual fiqh to contextual fiqh (*fiqh al-mu'āṣirah*). This practice reflects what Azra calls the revival of the ijtihad tradition in the modern context. Students do not only receive fatwas dogmatically, but are trained to understand the legal ills and socio-economic impacts of a muamalah practice. This approach is in line with the findings of Team An-Najah (2024) which states that contextual jurisprudence is able to foster rational and responsible religiosity.

In addition, the integration of digital literacy in moral learning shows the school's awareness of the challenges of modernity in the form of disinformation, religious hoaxes, and digital radicalism. Nizamuddin et al. (2024) emphasized that in the *post-truth* era, the ability to think critically is a more effective ideological fortress than a repressive approach. By training students to *tabayyun* to digital content and encouraging them to become moderate content creators, schools transform technology from a threat to a da'wah opportunity.

This phenomenon is in line with the *concept of digital piety* put forward by Kamila et al. (2023), where piety is not only expressed in a ritual space, but also in a virtual space. Thus, technological modernity does not negate religion, but expands the field of Islamic praxis. These findings strengthen Azra's thesis that Islam and modernity can synergize productively if managed with rationality and ethics.

PAI as a Social Update Agent

The synthesis between tradition and modernity found at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang places PAI as an agent of social renewal. In Azra's view, Islamic education should ideally not stop at the formation of individual piety, but should give birth to social piety, which has an impact on public life (Azra, 2002). The application of Problem Based Learning and the democratization of the classroom show that PAI learning is directed to foster social awareness and civic ethics.

Case discussions of tolerance, diversity, and social ethics train students to weigh the values of faith with the reality of a pluralistic society. This is in line with the findings of Jannah et al. (2024) who affirm that dialogical Islamic education is able to produce students with high social sensitivity and wasathiyah attitudes. This learning model shifts PAI from an indoctrination space to a critical reflection space.

The resulting graduate profile is close to the concept of "cosmopolitan Muslim" put forward by Wasehudin (2021): Muslims who are firmly rooted in local traditions, but are able to interact openly in the global space. In the context of contemporary Indonesia, this model is the antithesis of two equally problematic extremisms, namely religious radicalism that rejects local culture and secular liberalism that denies the role of religion.

Thus, the practice of PAI at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang can be understood as a middle way of reforming Indonesian Islam. These findings corroborate Rahmadi and Hamdan (2023) who emphasize the importance of integrating Islam, local culture, and modernity in the education system. The renewal that occurs is evolutionary, taking care of good old values (al-muḥāfaẓah 'alā al-qadīm al-ṣāliḥ) and adopting new values that are more beneficial (al-akhdzu bi al-jadīd al-aṣlaḥ).

More broadly, these findings have important implications for the development of the national PAI curriculum. A curriculum that is too uniform and textual has the potential to ignore local contexts and global challenges. The success of SMA Negeri 3 Palembang shows

that when schools are given autonomy space and teachers are supported to innovate, PAI can become a relevant, contextual, and meaningful subject for students' lives. Islamic education, thus, is no longer perceived as a mere normative lesson, but as a strategic medium for the formation of religious, moderate, and competitive citizens in the modern era.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to analyze the implementation of Azyumardi Azra's thoughts on the dialectic of tradition and modernity in the learning of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMA Negeri 3 Palembang. The results of the study show that Azra's thinking is implemented consistently and contextually through three main strategies, namely the revitalization of Malay Islamic traditions as the basis of religious identity, the strengthening of the response to modernity through the development of critical reasoning and digital literacy, and pedagogical transformation that makes PAI learning dialogical and reflective. Theoretically, these findings confirm the relevance of Azyumardi Azra's thinking as an effective analytical framework for understanding the renewal of Islamic education in Indonesia. The dialectic of tradition and modernity is proven to be not mutually affirming relationships, but can be synthesized productively in educational practices, thereby strengthening the function of PAI as a moderate and contextual social reform agent. Practically, this study implies that PAI learning needs to be given a space of autonomy to integrate local history and culture, accommodate contemporary issues, and develop learning methods that encourage active participation and critical thinking of students. School policy support and teacher competence are key factors for the success of the implementation. This research is still limited to one school context with a case study approach. Therefore, further research is recommended to expand the object of study to various regions and levels of education, as well as to use a comparative approach or mixed methods to examine the sustainability and long-term impact of the implementation of traditional dialectics and modernity in Islamic education.

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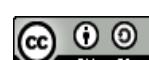
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