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Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, MALAYSIA



**PROCEEDINGS OF THE 16TH REGIONAL
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SIMPORA XVI: 2025**

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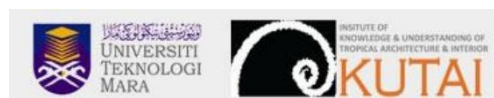
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Arabic grammar (nahwu and sarf), and Sufism (tasawuf) (Dhuhri & Jakfar, 2020). While many Islamic schools elsewhere in Indonesia have increasingly incorporated secular curricula, dayah in Bireuen maintain a strong commitment to classical texts, reinforcing the region's reputation as a Santri City.

Beyond its pedagogical role, the Yellow Book in Bireuen also functions as a cultural symbol that anchors communal identity, social hierarchy, and public religiosity. Mastery of Yellow Book texts strengthens the authority of ulama as community leaders and ensures the intergenerational continuity of Islamic scholarship (Saby, 1999). The transmission of this knowledge through established pedagogical practices—such as bandongan (collective recitation) and sorogan (individual tutoring)—illustrates how identity is constructed through embodied learning and ritualized engagement with religious texts (Irhmani, 2011).

Despite its significance, scholarly discussions of the Yellow Book have largely focused on pesantren traditions in Java or other regions of Indonesia (Madjid, 2010; Hidayah & Arifi, 2017). Relatively few studies have examined its specific role in shaping regional identity in Aceh, and even fewer have addressed Bireuen as a distinctive Santri City. Existing research on Aceh's dayah system tends to emphasize theological synthesis and curriculum structures (Dhuhri & Jakfar, 2020; Mulkan, 2008), leaving a gap in understanding how the Yellow Book itself becomes embedded in Bireuen's symbolic and cultural identity. This study addresses that gap by examining the Yellow Book not only as a pedagogical instrument but also as a cultural marker defining regional reputation and communal belonging.

Accordingly, this study is guided by two questions: (1) how does the Yellow Book function as a marker of cultural–religious identity in Bireuen, and (2) in what ways does its continued use contribute to the construction of Bireuen as a Santri City? To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative approach that combines literature review of Scopus- and Sinta-indexed scholarship with historical analysis of Acehnese Islamic traditions.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it advances Islamic education studies by positioning the Yellow Book as an identity marker rather than merely a curricular component. Second, it enriches Nusantara studies by situating Bireuen within broader discussions of localized Islamic cultures and their role in shaping Southeast Asian Islam (Mujiburrahman, 2012). Third, it offers an academic reflection on the persistence and adaptation of traditional Islamic learning amid pressures of modernization, state policy, and globalization (Akmaliah, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Yellow Book and Pesantren Traditions in Nusantara

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic boarding schools, are historically characterized by their reliance on classical Islamic texts encompassing jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam), Arabic grammar (nahwu and sarf), and Sufism (tasawuf). These texts, collectively known as the Kitab Kuning, have been transmitted across generations as authoritative sources of Islamic knowledge. Azra (2005) situates this tradition within broader transregional scholarly

networks linking Southeast Asia with the Middle East, positioning pesantren as integral nodes in the global circulation of Islamic learning.

While pesantren have demonstrated adaptability in responding to modern educational demands, the Yellow Book remains a key symbol of traditional legitimacy. Asrohah (2011) notes that even as many pesantren incorporate modern curricula, mastery of the Yellow Book continues to define scholarly authority. Similarly, Hidayah and Arifi (2017) emphasize that the legitimacy of pesantren teachers—kyai or teungku in the Acehnese context—is derived not solely from institutional leadership but from demonstrated competence in classical texts. In this sense, textual mastery and religious authority are closely intertwined.

Pedagogical practices further reinforce the cultural significance of the Yellow Book. Irhmani (2011) highlights methods such as *bandongan* (collective recitation) and *jenggotan*, through which teachers orally transmit texts while students annotate them in local languages. These practices transform the Yellow Book from a written source into a lived educational process that shapes identity, discipline, and social status. Within pesantren communities, including those in Aceh, proficiency in the Yellow Book signals both religious scholarship and social prestige.

Recent studies underline the resilience of this tradition in contemporary contexts. Despite the growing availability of digital Islamic resources, pesantren communities continue to prioritize memorization, interpretation, and communal engagement with classical texts (Ulumuna, 2025). This persistence suggests that the Yellow Book functions not only as an educational medium but also as a cultural commitment to preserving tradition as a core element of identity.

2.2 The Dayah System in Aceh and the Case of Bireuen

Aceh has long been recognized as a major center of Islamic learning in Southeast Asia, with dayah institutions predating many pesantren in other regions (Mujiburrahman, 2012). Within Aceh, dayah emphasize mastery of the Yellow Book as the foundation of religious education, alongside the cultivation of Sufi practices and communal discipline. Duhri and Jakfar (2020) describe Acehese dayah as sites of theological synthesis, integrating Ash'arite and Māturīdite traditions into a distinctive intellectual framework that shapes local Islamic identity.

Bireuen occupies a particularly prominent position within this landscape and is widely recognized as a Santri City due to the density of its dayah and the influence of its ulama. Mulkan (2008) observes that in the post-conflict period, dayah in Bireuen played a crucial role in social reconstruction and the re-legitimization of religious authority. This authority is closely linked to expertise in the Yellow Book, which distinguishes ulama as moral guides and community leaders.

From a sociological perspective, Saby (1999) characterizes ulama in Aceh as cultural elites whose legitimacy rests on mastery of classical texts. In Bireuen, such legitimacy extends beyond religious leadership to include mediation of social disputes and participation in public

discourse. Consequently, the Yellow Book operates not merely as a curricular component but as a source of symbolic power that underpins both religious and social authority.

The curricular orientation of *dayah* in Aceh further reinforces this role. Studies of both traditional and modern *dayah* indicate that while some institutions adopt supplementary subjects, the Yellow Book remains the primary intellectual and spiritual anchor (Al-Jami'ah, 2010). In Bireuen, the continued dominance of *dayah* committed to classical texts sustains the city's reputation as a stronghold of traditional Islamic learning.

2.3 Identity, Community, and the Yellow Book

Beyond its educational function, the Yellow Book serves as a cultural marker of identity within the Bireuen community. In Nusantara studies, the notion of "identity through text" emphasizes that religious texts are not merely read but embodied in social practice, discourse, and everyday interaction (Niam, 2014). In this context, the Yellow Book provides a framework through which Bireuen distinguishes itself as authentically *santri*, particularly in contrast to regions where modern Islamic schooling predominates.

Mujiburrahman (2012) notes that Islamic education in Southeast Asia is often shaped by tensions between tradition and reform. In Bireuen, however, sustained commitment to the Yellow Book reflects a conscious identity choice in which tradition is valorized as a marker of authenticity. This process is evident in public rituals, sermons, and political language, where references to Yellow Book authority are used to assert legitimacy and continuity.

Recent scholarship also highlights the interaction between traditional institutions and contemporary media. Akmaliah (2025) shows that while *pesantren* and *dayah* actors increasingly engage digital platforms to negotiate religious authority, classical texts such as the Yellow Book remain their primary epistemic foundation. This suggests that although modes of dissemination evolve, the symbolic capital of the Yellow Book continues to play a defining role in shaping communal identity.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach combining library research and field-based inquiry. Library research draws on Scopus- and Sinta-indexed scholarship on *pesantren*, *dayah*, and Islamic education in Aceh. Field-based inquiry relies on documented accounts of *dayah* in Bireuen and recorded testimonies of *ulama* and community figures available in secondary sources. Given the scope of conference writing, the study does not present full ethnography but synthesizes existing materials into an interpretive analysis.

3.2 Data Sources

The data consist of three main sources. First, primary textual materials include Yellow Book titles commonly used in Aceh, such as Fath al-Qarib, Tafsir Jalalayn, Safinat al-Najah, and Sullam al-Taufiq, which form the core of dayah curricula in Bireuen. Second, secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed journals, monographs, and conference proceedings addressing Acehese Islamic traditions. Third, documented testimonies of teungku, senior santri, and community figures are used as contextual references.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Data are analyzed using discourse analysis and cultural interpretation. Following Niam (2014), identity is understood as constructed through textual engagement, authority relations, and community practices. Analysis therefore focuses on how the Yellow Book is interpreted, transmitted, and invoked as a cultural identity marker in Bireuen.

3.4 Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and the absence of new ethnographic interviews. While this approach is sufficient for the scope of a conference paper, future research may incorporate ethnography and oral history to provide deeper empirical insights.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Yellow Book as Intellectual Foundation and Cultural Capital

Dayah in Bireuen continue to organize their curricula around the Kitab Kuning, with foundational texts in fiqh, kalam, and tasawuf systematically taught through oral–textual pedagogies. Classical works such as Fath al-Qarib, Aqidah al-Nasafiyah, and Ihya’ Ulum al-Din remain central to the formation of santri, who progress gradually under the guidance of teungku interpreting and contextualizing these texts (Dhuhri & Jakfar, 2020). This pedagogical structure positions textual mastery as the core pathway to religious knowledge.

Beyond academic training, mastery of the Kitab Kuning functions as cultural capital. Proficiency in classical texts is equated with piety, moral authority, and intellectual legitimacy, granting santri social recognition as inheritors of ilmu (sacred knowledge). In this context, the intellectual hierarchy within Bireuen is inseparable from the hierarchy of textual mastery, reinforcing the authority of ulama as custodians of religious knowledge. This finding supports earlier observations that classical texts in pesantren traditions serve not only educational but also symbolic functions (Asrohah, 2011; Azra, 2005).

4.2 The Yellow Book as Cultural Symbol and Identity Marker

In Bireuen, the Kitab Kuning symbolizes authenticity and continuity with Aceh's historical identity as the Serambi Mekkah (Veranda of Mecca). Public discourse frequently distinguishes santri kitab (students of the book) from graduates of modern madrasah, reflecting communal pride in the preservation of classical learning. Ritualized practices such as khatan kitab, where students publicly demonstrate mastery of classical texts, further reinforce the cultural prestige attached to Yellow Book scholarship.

The symbolic power of the Kitab Kuning extends beyond educational settings into sermons, Friday khutbah, and public lectures. References to classical texts by ulama authenticate religious interpretations and differentiate traditionalist authority from reformist discourse. As noted by Saby (1999), this textual legitimacy translates into both religious and political influence, positioning the Kitab Kuning as a cultural marker that shapes identity at both individual and communal levels.

4.3 Authority, Community Cohesion, and the Santri City Identity

The integration of the Kitab Kuning into education and public life consolidates Bireuen's reputation as a Santri City. Unlike other districts where modern madrasah dominate, Bireuen maintains a dense network of dayah committed to classical texts. Following the Aceh conflict, these institutions played a significant role in moral reconstruction, with ulama acting as mediators and community leaders (Mulkan, 2008). Their authority, grounded in mastery of the Kitab Kuning, fostered social cohesion and reinforced religious identity.

Bireuen's political and social dynamics remain closely tied to this Santri City identity. Local leaders frequently consult ulama recognized for their expertise in classical texts, elevating the city's religious profile and presenting Bireuen as a model of traditional Islamic resilience. This pattern reflects broader debates on the negotiation between tradition and modernity in Southeast Asian Islamic education (Mujiburrahman, 2012), where Bireuen demonstrates a conscious preference for tradition as a marker of authenticity.

4.4 Nusantara Context and Contemporary Challenges

From a Nusantara perspective, the Kitab Kuning represents continuity within transregional Islamic scholarly networks linking Aceh to the Middle East (Dhuhri & Jakfar, 2020). Bireuen's distinctiveness lies in the extent to which classical texts are integrated into everyday social life, making them inseparable from regional identity. This positions Bireuen as an illustrative case of how local Islamic traditions contribute to the broader mosaic of Nusantara Islam.

Nevertheless, the Yellow Book tradition faces contemporary challenges. Globalization and the proliferation of digital Islamic content introduce alternative sources of authority, particularly for younger generations (Akmaliah, 2025). Rather than displacing classical learning, however, emerging hybrid practices suggest that traditional texts coexist with digital platforms. This

indicates that the Kitab Kuning will likely continue to shape Bireuen's identity, albeit in evolving forms.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the role of the Kitab Kuning as a key identity marker of the Bireuen community, highlighting its dual function as an intellectual foundation and a cultural symbol within the dayah tradition. The findings lead to three main conclusions.

First, the Kitab Kuning sustains intellectual continuity through dayah curricula, where it remains the cornerstone of religious scholarship and the formation of scholarly authority. Second, the Kitab Kuning functions as cultural capital that reinforces Bireuen's reputation as a Santri City and legitimizes the authority of ulama in religious and social life. Third, the Kitab Kuning embodies communal identity by binding Bireuen society through shared practices, rituals, and collective pride in tradition.

The implications of these findings are relevant for both academic and policy discussions. Academically, this study contributes to Islamic education and identity studies by framing the Kitab Kuning not merely as a pedagogical tool but as a cultural identity marker. From a policy and community perspective, sustaining Bireuen's identity as a Santri City requires continued support for dayah institutions alongside adaptive responses to contemporary challenges.

Future research may build on this study through ethnographic investigations of specific dayah in Bireuen to capture the lived experiences of santri and ulama in engaging with the Kitab Kuning. Comparative studies with other regions, such as Java or Madura, could further illuminate how different local contexts negotiate the relationship between tradition and modernity. Overall, the persistence of the Kitab Kuning in Bireuen underscores the resilience of Nusantara Islamic traditions and their enduring role in shaping communal identity.

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