DECOLONIZATION OF PEGON ARABIC LITERACY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE NGUDI SUSILO POEM

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Abstract

This study examines the use of Pegon Arabic script in the poem Ngudi Susilo by KH. Bisri Mushtofa as a decolonization strategy for literacy and a means of strengthening pesantren epistemology. The preservation of local wisdom through this historical script connects with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly regarding quality education and cultural heritage conservation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis model, the research analyzes three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice. Primary data consisted of the Ngudi Susilo poem text, gathered through library research and examined cyclically via data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing, with triangulation of historical sources and theoretical frameworks. The findings demonstrate that at the textual level, the choice of Pegon script and the poem's rhyme structure function as social acts constructing a religiously rooted local identity. At the discursive practice level, the text operates within the pesantren ecosystem of Java, where the kiai acts as an authoritative mediator between oral and written traditions. At the socio-cultural level, Pegon script embodies a vernacular epistemology that resists both colonial Latin script hegemony and formal Arabic homogenization. This research contributes to developing curricula grounded in local wisdom while advancing the preservation of Southeast Asia's religious literary heritage, positioning Pegon Arabic script as an instrument of epistemic resistance rather than merely a historical curiosity.

Keywords: *Pegon script; Critical Discourse Analysis; decolonization of knowledge; Ngudi Susilo poem; Vernacular epistemology*

INTRODUCTION

Efforts to liberate science from the shackles of colonialism and Western scientific hegemony are one of the most crucial issues in today's global educational landscape. (Hazim et al., 2021). For centuries, secular modernity has established Western standards of knowledge as the sole valid educational paradigm, whilst systematically marginalising the cultural values, customs, ethics and local knowledge systems of post-colonial nations. (Jaka et al., 2023). In Indonesia, the dominance of foreign curricula that disregard *local wisdom* has the great potential to trigger the erosion of cultural identity and deep epistemic dependence amongst the younger generation (Hazim et al., 2021). It is therefore imperative that the movement for the decolonisation of knowledge be revived in order to

reconstruct traditions, filter out the influence of secularism, and restore intellectual sovereignty rooted in the indigenous cultural heritage of communities.

In the context of this quest for epistemic autonomy, traditional Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren in Indonesia have long stood as bastions of cultural identity and, at the same time, centres for the independent production of local knowledge (Anam, 2025) . One of the most vital instruments of this cultural and political resistance is the use of the Pegon Arabic script (Madrah & Aziz, 2019) . Pegon, which adapts the Arabic script to write regional languages such as Javanese, Madurese and Sundanese. (Aziz et al., 2022) . is not merely a technical tool to aid reading and writing in Islamic boarding schools (Anam, 2025) Historically, this script has been an embodiment of vernacular epistemology, which rejects the hegemony of the colonial Latin script whilst negotiating autonomy from the dominance of formal Arabic (fusha) (Anam, 2025) The use of the Pegon script facilitated the independent localisation of Islamic discourse, linking global intellectual networks with the local traditions of the Nusantara without losing its cultural identity.

However, in the contemporary era, the existence of the Pegon script faces serious challenges due to a linguistic and scriptural shift (linguistic and scriptural shift). Modern educational curricula, which prioritise formal Arabic (fusha) and other foreign languages in pursuit of transnational academic legitimacy, often trigger linguistic discontinuity. (Rahmah et al., 2025) As a result, many graduates of modern Islamic boarding schools find it difficult and encounter obstacles when they have to read classical texts written in the Pegon script. Previous research on Pegon has generally focused on the historical aspects of cultural resistance in the 18th and 19th centuries (Madrah & Aziz, 2019) . pedagogical and technical difficulties

A descriptive content analysis of moral values. For example, research into the collection of poems *Ngudi Susilo* by KH. Bisri Mustofa—a monumental work written in Javanese Pegon script comprising nine chapters on everyday ethics—has so far been dominated by literature reviews that examine its educational value in general as a means of addressing the nation's moral crisis. (Muthmainnah, n.d.) There have not yet been many studies that critically analyse the symbolic and sociolinguistic dimensions of *the*

choice to use the Pegon script in these poems as a social act actively decolonising pesantren literacy (Anam, 2025)

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is this research gap that this study seeks to address, by positioning the poem *Ngudi Susilo* not merely as a passive text for teaching moral values, but as an arena for the negotiation of identity, authority and epistemic resistance within the pesantren. The specific aim of this study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the use of the Pegon script in the poem *Ngudi Susilo* by KH. Bisri Mustofa through the three dimensions of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis: text (textual), discursive practices, and socio-cultural practices. (Parta et al., 2025)

Within this framework, the research specifically aims to uncover how:

1. At the textual level, the choice of the Pegon script and the rhyming structure of the verses function as a form of *social action* that constructs a local identity based on religiosity;
2. At the level of discursive practice, the production and distribution of these texts operate within the ecosystem of Javanese pesantren, with the kiai acting as an authoritative mediator between oral and written traditions;
3. At the socio-cultural level, the Pegon script embodies a vernacular epistemology that challenges the hegemony of the colonial Latin script and the homogenisation of Fusha Arabic

As such, this study not only contributes to the preservation of Southeast Asia's religious literary heritage, but also offers a model for curriculum integration based on local wisdom that is relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in supporting quality education and the preservation of cultural heritage. (Menoreh et al., 2026).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach that focuses on exploring and understanding the significance of socio-cultural and humanitarian issues. The research design employed is a pure literature review (*library research*) that examines texts and written documents in depth. The main method of analysis is based on the

framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which integrates micro-level linguistic analysis with macro-level socio-cultural context.(Parta et al., 2025).

The primary data for this study consists of textual units (verses) from the **syi'ir*Ngudi Susilo*** by KH. Bisri Mustofa, written in Javanese using the Arabic Pegon script. Meanwhile, the secondary data was obtained from academic articles, colonial historical documents, and relevant literature on sociolinguistics and the decolonisation of knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Textual Analysis (Micro): Choice of Arabic Pegon Script, Diction and Rhyme Structure

Analysis at the textual level (*micro-level analysis*) within the framework of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis requires an unpacking of the linguistic features, scriptural choices and poetic structures employed by the text's author as a form of social action (*textual choices as social action*). In the poem*Ngudi Susilo*by KH. Bisri Mustofa, this textual dimension functions not only as a medium for conveying a moral message, but also as an arena for the representation of an autonomous linguistic identity.(Anam, 2025).

The Pegon Orthographic and Scriptural System of the Arabic Alphabet

Orthographically, *Ngudi Susilo* is written using the **Javanese Pegon Arabic script**, which is a modification of the original Arabic alphabet (*hijaiyah*) to accommodate the phonetic characteristics and sound system (*phonotactic*) of the Javanese language.(Aziz et al., 2022) In this writing system, KH. Bisri Mustofa uses specially devised characters to represent Javanese-specific consonants that do not exist in pure Arabic.(Pudjiastuti, 2009) According to the rules of Pegon orthography, there are seven newly devised letters that modify the original Arabic alphabet; these include those representing the consonant sound *ca* (ج with three dots below), *pa* (ف with three dots above), *dha* (د with a dot below), *tha* (ط with a dot below), *ga* (ك with a dot below), *nya* (ي with three dots below), and *nga* (ع with three dots above).

Of these seven invented letters, the letters *dha* (ﺩ) and *tha* (ﻁ) are original inventions of the Javanese Pegon script, whilst the other five are adapted from the Jawi (Arabic-Malay) and Parsi scripts.(Pudjiastuti, 2009) The spelling of these letters has been adapted to the 'Javanese pronunciation' so that local people who do not speak Arabic can pronounce and understand religious texts fluently.

In addition to the consonant system, modifications were also made to the vowel marks (*sandhangan swara*). Whilst Standard Arabic recognises only three main vowel marks (fathah, kasrah, dammah), the Pegon orthography in*Ngudi Susilo*employs six vowel marks to ensure the precise pronunciation of the Javanese language. These six diacritics consist of three Arabic-derived vowels (a, i, u) and three native Javanese vowels, namely the*ê pepet*(a wave symbol above the letter),*e taling*(a fathah followed by the 'witness letter'*ya'*), and*o*(a fathah followed by the 'witness letter'*wau*). The use of these 'witness letters' is crucial in pesantren pedagogy to avoid semantic ambiguity and pronunciation errors by novice students.(Pudjiastuti, 2009)

This scriptural choice reflects the cultural autonomy of the pesantren; KH. Bisri Mustofa chose to express Islamic ethics through writings that, visually, are steeped in Arab-Islamic religiosity, yet, in terms of articulation and cognition, are deeply rooted in the local context of the Nusantara.

Lexical Choices (*Lexical Choices*) and Speech Levels (*Speech Levels*)

Judging by the choice of vocabulary, the text of the poem *Ngudi Susilo* is dominated by the *Madya* and *Kromo Lugu* registers of the Javanese language. The use of these linguistic variations is a deliberate discursive choice to ensure that the ethical content conveyed is more accessible and easier to understand for grassroots communities and primary school-aged children. KH. Bisri Mustofa avoids the use of formal Arabic (*fusha*), which is overly elevated, in the main text (Asrori et al., 2026), but rather to weave the complex moral teachings of Islam into the local Javanese concept of courtesy known as *unggah-ungguh*.

For example, in discussing dress codes and attitudes towards nationalism in *the chapter on Attitudes and Behaviour*, KH. Bisri Mustofa wrote a verse with a very strong ideological message:

"Wearing a blangkon, a turban and a sarong is a joke / they say it's not a progressive nationalism" "That one is Prince Diponegoro / Imam Bonjol, Tengku Umar, the shining ones" "All alike, loyal to tribe and nation, wearing a headscarf befitting a nobleman. "The Serban cap is a mockery of Imam Bonjol's; my child, don't be foolish."

Textually, the terms *"gujeng"* (to laugh at) and *"tolol"* (foolish/extremely stupid) are highly incisive and confrontational choices of vocabulary. The author employs this stylistic approach to expose the inferiority complex of the colonised people, who are ashamed to wear local attire (sarong, blangkon, turban) because it is deemed unmodern by the hegemony of Western culture. By presenting historical figures of the national struggle such as Diponegoro, Imam Bonjol and Teuku Umar as intertextual references, this text actively builds its readers' self-esteem, sense of heroism and cultural sovereignty.

Rhyme Structure and Metrical Patterns (*Wazan and Qafiyah*)

The poetic text by *Ngudi Susilo* is composed in the form of traditional poetic stanzas (*nadhom*), bound by the rules of metre (*wazan*) and end-rhyme (*qafiyah*). The use of this literary form serves as a highly effective pedagogical tool (*instructional material*). The rhythmic and musical end-rhymes (such as the repetition of the sounds *ro-ro* or *jol-lol*) make it easier for young students to memorise (*memorising*), recall and internalise these moral rules into their long-term memory. This poetic aesthetic stimulates the students' emotional side, so that the rules of courtesy are no longer experienced as a compulsion, but rather as part of an enjoyable verbal artistic activity.

2. Analysis of Discursive Practices (Meso): Production, Distribution and Consumption within the Pesantren Ecosystem

The meso-dimension in Fairclough's model examines the behind-the-scenes processes of text production, the circulation of texts, and how these texts are read and interpreted by their audience within a social structure.(Parta et al., 2025)

The Process of Text Production: The Codification of the Kiai's Scholarly Authority

The process of producing the Ngudi Susilo poem is rooted in the intellectual capacity of KH. Bisri Mustofa as an exegete, kiai, and figure of traditional religious

authority in Java. This text did not emerge in a vacuum, but was produced as part of the sanad tradition of oral scholarship in Islamic boarding schools, which was subsequently codified into a written format using the Pegon script to serve a more systematic pedagogical purpose. The kiai acted as a cultural broker, translating universal Islamic ethical concepts from classical Arabic texts (turath) into local ethical formulations in the Javanese language, making them compatible with the inner world of the santri. The act of writing these texts in the Pegon script also served as a representational strategy to affirm the continuity of traditional scholarly authority without having to submit to the administrative standardisation of Latin script imposed by colonial secular schools. (Madrah & Aziz, 2019)

Patterns of Text Distribution: From Domestic Islamic Boarding Schools to the Public Sphere

In terms of distribution, the poem *Ngudi Susilo* was widely disseminated through a network of Salafi pesantren, madrasah diniyah and traditional religious publishers in Java.(Asrori et al., 2026) This distribution channel relies on the robust social system of the pesantren, in which senior students or ustadz distribute copies of these texts to new students. Interestingly, in recent times, this distribution model has expanded into the formal institutional sphere.

In the Bojonegoro region, for example, this text is no longer circulated solely within the madrasah diniyah community, but is distributed extensively to state primary schools (SDN) through policies implemented by the education department and the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers' organisation, which organises a special competition known as the Musabaqah Syi'ir Ngudi Susilo.(Asrori et al., 2026)

This formal distribution indirectly broadens the text's readership and reposition it as part of a state-recognised character education curriculum based on local wisdom.

Consumption Patterns and Discursive Contradictions (Literacy Discontinuity)

The text *Ngudi Susilo* is studied collectively at Islamic boarding schools through traditional learning methods such as *syi'iran* (chanting verses together), *bandongan*

(copying the word-for-word meaning as read out by the teacher), and *sorogan* (reading independently to assess accuracy).(Rahmah et al., 2025) However, in the context of the modernisation of Islamic education, there is a discursive contradiction that gives rise to a 'discontinuity in literacy'.

Many contemporary modern pesantren curricula have undergone a drastic shift in linguistic orientation, prioritising proficiency in Modern Standard Arabic (*al-'Arabiyyah al-Fushah*) in order to achieve transnational academic legitimacy. Consequently, graduates of these modern pesantren often face serious linguistic barriers when pursuing further studies at Islamic higher education institutions. The findings of qualitative research indicate that, although they possess good grammatical competence in Arabic, they struggle to read and comprehend classical texts written in the Pegon script because they were never familiarised with this local orthography at their home pesantren.(Rahmah et al., 2025)

This cognitive discontinuity arises because modern santri lack the cognitive schema (*cognitive schema*) to assimilate and accommodate Pegon symbols into their knowledge structure. Consequently, the text*Ngudi Susilo*is now consumed within a dynamic space of contestation: on the one hand, it faces marginalisation due to the dominance of the global academic Arabic language*fusha*, whilst on the other hand, it continues to be steadfastly consumed by traditional circles as a counter-hegemonic instrument to safeguard the cultural sovereignty and local literacy of the Nusantara.

3. Analysis of Socio-Cultural Practices (Macro): Vernacular Epistemology and Epistemic Resistance An analysis of the socio-cultural practice dimension (macro-level analysis)

Within the framework of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis aims to link micro-texts and meso-level discursive practices to broader social structures, the politics of knowledge, ideologies and power relations. (Afandi, 2009) In the context of the poetry collection Ngudi Susilo by KH. Bisri Mustofa, this macro-level analysis reveals how linguistic choices and the use of the Pegon script intersect

directly with the project of decolonising literacy and affirming the cultural autonomy of Islamic boarding schools amidst the tide of globalisation and secular modernity.

The Pegon Script as a Symbol of Cultural Resistance and Historical Confrontation Historically, the Arabic Pegon script originated and developed in Java not merely as a tool for religious literacy, but as a symbol of cultural resistance (cultural resistance) and political confrontation against colonialism. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the colonial government of the Dutch East Indies systematically imposed the standardisation of the Latin script and a secular legal system within the spheres of administration and formal education. (Jaka et al., 2023)

This policy was a strategy of structural and cultural colonialism designed to alienate the indigenous population from their own core values, traditions and religious worldview. In response to this colonial penetration, Islamic boarding school scholars in Java engaged in a counter-hegemonic struggle by popularising the Pegon script as a medium for writing religious and literary works. Charismatic figures such as KH. Ahmad Rifa'i Kalisalak and KH. Sholeh Darat of Semarang used the Pegon script to write treatises on moral guidance and Islamic law. By choosing to write in Arabic script pronounced in the local language (Javanese), the ulama carried out a performative action (performative action) to refuse to submit to the colonisers' administrative standardisation of writing. This orthographic choice underscored a clear boundary of identity: the Latin script was identified with the secular colonial project, whilst the Pegon script was identified with an autonomous and independent indigenous (indigenous) Javanese-Islamic identity. (Madrah & Aziz, 2019)

Manifestations of Vernacular Epistemology (*Vernacular Epistemology*) and Dual Resistance

Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, the poem *Ngudi Susilo* reflects the power of vernacular epistemology (*vernacular epistemology*).(Anam, 2025) The use of Javanese written in the Arabic script in this text indicates the existence of dual resistance (*dual resistance*) practised by traditional pesantren under the leadership of ulama:

a. Resistance to the West (Anti-Latinisation): This text defends the sovereignty of local knowledge against the dominance of secular Western epistemology. Through the medium of the Javanese poetic tradition *nadhom*, *Ngudi Susilo*

safeguards the continuity of the transmission of Islamic values based on the concept of *adab* and divine morality, refuting the claim that civilisational progress and discipline can only be achieved through individualistic Western-style modernisation.

b. Resistance to the Middle East (Absolute Anti-Arabisation): On the other hand, *Ngudi Susilo* also negotiated a form of autonomy against the linguistic homogenisation of pure Arabic (*fusha*) centred in the Middle East. Through the indigenisation (vernacularisation) of the Arabic script into Javanese Pegon, KH. Bisri Mustofa demonstrated discursively that regional languages are entirely compatible, legitimate, and possess equal scholarly authority to convey and articulate the noble values of universal Islamic ethics. This refutes the view that a profound understanding of religion can only be articulated through standard Middle Eastern Arabic.

c. Cultural Hybridity and the Formation of a Multicultural and Inclusive Character

d. The cultural hybridity constructed by KH. Bisri Mustofa in *Ngudi Susilo* has succeeded in forging a robust synthesis of santri identity. On the one hand, santri are taught to adhere to the universal values of Islamic sharia; on the other hand, they remain firmly rooted in the local Javanese values of courtesy (*unggah-ungguh*). This integration facilitates the development of a balanced (*tawazun*), tolerant (*tasamuh*) and moderate (*tawasuth*) character in santri.

In an era of globalisation that often leads to cultural homogenisation and the westernisation of lifestyles, the ethical teachings of *Ngudi Susilo* equip students with intellectual self-confidence (*epistemic confidence*). Through verses that forbid students from feeling inferior about their local identity (such as wearing a sarong, blangkon or turban), KH. Bisri Mustofa teaches that preserving one's ancestral heritage does not prevent one from having progressive ideas and defending one's homeland. The character of the santri that is shaped is that of a morally resilient individual, proud of their national identity, and one who does not experience an identity crisis when faced with the developments of the global age.

Discussion on the Decolonisation of Knowledge *in* The Bigger Picture

When considered within the context of a broader theoretical debate, a critical analysis of the poetry collection *Ngudi Susilo* makes a significant

contribution to the discourse on the *decolonisation of knowledge* in post-colonial countries. (Menoreh et al., 2026)

a. Moving Beyond Passive Romanticism: Local Wisdom as a Valid Subject of Academic Study

In the political landscape of modern knowledge, local wisdom is often sidelined or merely relegated to the margins as a static, exotic romanticism of the past, or simply a tourism commodity discussed in academic circles without any real social function. The decolonisation of knowledge demands the dismantling of this hegemony by repositioning local wisdom (*local wisdom*) and non-Western intellectual traditions as legitimate and functional sources of science and character-building methodologies.

The text *Ngudi Susilo* demonstrates that traditional ethics are neither rigid nor outdated, but can in fact serve as a highly adaptable character-building curriculum. Through an approach that holistically integrates spiritual, moral and social skills, this poem offers an educational model that transcends the Western dichotomous divisions between general (secular) knowledge and religious knowledge.

b. The Integration of Cognitive, Affective and Psychomotor Aspects through Social Capital

Character education based on *Ngudi Susilo* works effectively because it draws on the social capital of the pesantren community, which is underpinned by close kiai–santri relationships and values of togetherness. From the theoretical perspectives of sociolinguistics and sociocultural psychology, the recitation of these verses creates a learning ecosystem that integrates cognitive aspects (understanding ethical rules), affective aspects (refinement of sensibility through the musicalisation of *nadhom*), and psychomotor aspects (the application of physical courtesy in everyday life).

In this era of digital disruption, where the hegemony of Western individualistic values, pragmatism and materialism is encroaching upon the world of education through secular modernisation, local wisdom such as *unggah-ungguh* in *Ngudi Susilo* offers a soothing spiritual alternative. This approach emphasises harmonious interpersonal relationships, social responsibility, mutual cooperation

and spiritual awareness—all of which are essential for mitigating social conflict and maintaining social cohesion within Indonesia's heterogeneous society.

c. Global Relevance and Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The decolonisation of Arab Pegon literacy through the revitalisation of the works of Nusantara's ulama also has a parallel correlation with the global development agenda, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (*Sustainable Development Goals*/SDGs) the fourth pillar concerning quality education and the preservation of *intangible cultural heritage*. Saving the Arabic Pegon script from academic extinction means preserving the diversity of global literacy and ensuring that the national education system does not lose its historical memory and cultural sovereignty.(Asrori et al., 2026)

Developing an inclusive modern Arabic language curriculum that embraces the Pegon tradition will bridge the gap between the demands of global competency standardization and the need for character internalization rooted in local *pesantren* values. By repositioning the Pegon script not merely as a historical relic, but as an active instrument of epistemic resistance, Islamic education in Indonesia can cultivate future leaders who are not only globally competent, but also possess solid moral integrity, noble character, and strong nationalism to build a glorious national civilization.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that through the lens of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the *Ngudi Susilo* poem by KH. Bisri Mustofa is proven to be far more than a passive medium for moral instruction. Instead, it serves as an active instrument for literacy decolonization and dual epistemic resistance.

At the textual level (micro), the choice of the Pegon script which systematically adapts the standard Arabic alphabet to fit Javanese phonotactics through seven specialized modified letters alongside the deliberate use of *Madya* and *Kromo Lugu* Javanese registers, functions as a social act (*textual choices as social action*). This

combination constructs an independent local religious identity while making moral concepts accessible at the grassroots level.

At the discursive practice level (meso), the text's production and distribution rely on the authority of the *kiai* as a cultural mediator bridging classic Islamic heritage (*turath*) with the lived realities of *santri*. Here, collective recitation via *syi'iran*, *bandongan*, and *sorogan* methods acts as cognitive scaffolding for young learners. Nevertheless, contemporary educational shifts have introduced a discursive contradiction a "literacy discontinuity" where modern *pesantren* curricula prioritize formal Arabic (*fusha*) for global academic standing, gradually alienating students from their own Pegon heritage.

Finally, at the socio-cultural level (macro), the Pegon script embodies a powerful vernacular epistemology that exerts a dual resistance: it dismantles the hegemony of Western colonial Latin script while resisting the homogenization of Middle Eastern standard Arabic (*fusha*), demonstrating that local languages are fully capable of articulating universal religious ethics. Ultimately, revitalizing the Pegon literacy tradition plays a vital role in safeguarding cultural sovereignty, fostering epistemic confidence, and supporting an inclusive, high-quality character education system aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs**).**

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