Analysis of the Arabic Orthography of Pegon Nusantara in Sumatra: Text, Characteristics, and Meaning

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Abstract: This study examines the orthography of Arabic Pegon in Sumatra as a form of linguistic and cultural adaptation that reflects the process of Islamization in the Malay world. The research aims to describe the distinctive orthographic features of Pegon in Sumatra and to reveal its cultural and religious implications in shaping the identity of Islamic literacy in Indonesia. Using a descriptive-qualitative method with a library research approach, this study analyses several Pegon manuscripts, such as Hikayat Prang Sabi from Aceh, Sullam al-Mubtadi from Minangkabau, and Jawi manuscripts from Palembang. The results show that Arabic Pegon in Sumatra demonstrates unique orthographic innovations through the addition of letters such as ڤ (pa), چ (ca), ݢ (ga), and ڠ (nga), which represent local phonemes not found in classical Arabic. Pegon not only serves as a linguistic medium but also functions as a symbol of Islamic identity, religious education, and cultural expression. Therefore, Arabic Pegon in Sumatra represents the indigenisation of Islam in the archipelago and serves as an intellectual heritage that bridges Arabic literacy with local language and culture.

Keywords: Arabic Pegon, Orthography, Islamization of the Archipelago.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji ortografi Arab Pegon di Sumatera sebagai bentuk adaptasi linguistik dan budaya yang merefleksikan proses Islamisasi di dunia Melayu. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mendeskripsikan karakteristik ortografis Pegon di Sumatera serta mengungkap implikasi kultural dan religiusnya dalam pembentukan identitas literasi Islam di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dan pendekatan studi pustaka, penelitian ini menganalisis beberapa naskah Pegon seperti Hikayat Prang Sabi dari Aceh, Sullam al-Mubtadi dari Minangkabau, dan naskah Jawi dari Palembang. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Arab Pegon di Sumatera memiliki inovasi ortografis khas melalui penambahan huruf seperti ڤ (pa), چ (ca), ݢ (ga), dan ڠ (nga) yang merepresentasikan fonem lokal yang tidak terdapat dalam bahasa Arab klasik. Pegon tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai media linguistik, tetapi juga sebagai simbol identitas keislaman, sarana pendidikan agama, dan ekspresi budaya lokal. Dengan demikian, Arab Pegon di Sumatera merupakan bentuk indigenisasi Islam di Nusantara dan menjadi warisan intelektual yang menghubungkan tradisi tulis Arab dengan bahasa serta kebudayaan lokal.

Kata Kunci : Pegon Arab, Ortografi, Islamisasi Nusantara.

INTRODUCTION

Pegon Arabic writing is a typical archipelago script system that was born from a long process of interaction between Arab and local cultures since the sixteenth century, along with the entry of Islam into the Indonesian archipelago.[1], [2] Islamic scholars and teachers from the Middle East and India introduced the Arabic script not only as a means of reading the

Qur'an, but also as a medium of written communication for the local community, who began to learn Islamic teachings in Islamic boarding schools. Over time, the Arabic script was modified to fit the sound system of the regional language, thus forming a writing system known as Pegon Arabic.[3] In historical and cultural perspectives, this writing functions not only as an orthography but also as an instrument of artistic, intellectual, and religious expression of the Islamic community of the archipelago.

Academic studies on Pegon are still dominated by research that focuses on the scientific tradition in Java, while the Sumatra region, although it has an important role in the history of Islamic literacy, has not received a proportionate portion of studies. Several Pegon and Jawi manuscripts originating from Aceh, Minangkabau, and Malay areas show distinctive orthographic variations in consonantal and vowel aspects that represent the process of adaptation of Arabic letters to local phonology.[4] This phenomenon shows that Pegon in Sumatra is not just an adoption of Javanese traditions, but the result of linguistic creativity that integrates Arabic with the structure of regional languages so as to produce a written form that has its own identity. In the context of pesantren education, Pegon is also used as a pedagogical tool in the practice of ngabsahi to help students understand the grammatical structure and content of the yellow book contextually.[5] This also strengthens Pegon's position as an intellectual instrument of Islam in the archipelago.[6], [7], [8], [9]

Etymologically, the term Pegon comes from the word pego, which means deviated, to describe a form of writing that differs from the standard Arabic rules.[4] The term reflects the linguistic innovation of the local people in adapting the Arabic writing system to their phonological needs. Since the process of Islamization in the sixteenth century, the Arabic script was introduced by scholars and merchants from the Middle East and Gujarat as part of the practice of reading and writing the Qur'an.[10] The need for da'wah and Islamic education then encouraged the adaptation of Arabic letters into a writing medium of regional languages, so that Pegon orthography was born with various graphemic modifications to accommodate local sounds.[3] This tradition developed into an important means of the dissemination of Islamic literacy through various texts of interpretation, jurisprudence, Sufism, and religious literature written in regional languages.[11]

Socio-culturally, the use of Pegon reflects the process of internalising Islamic values, as well as a symbol of the scientific identity of the people of the archipelago.[12] Local communities not only passively accepted the influence of Islamic Arabs but also creatively adapted the Arabic writing system to their phonetic and cultural needs, resulting in a distinctive form of literacy that reflected the dialogue of civilisations.[13] The regional diversity of Pegon can be seen in the Javanese, Sundanese, Madura, Aceh, Malay, and Minangkabau variants, which each have their own graphemic adaptations.[11], [14], [15], [16], [17] In the context of Sumatra, the variety of Pegon appears more diverse because it is influenced by different trade networks, da'wah, and socio-religious dynamics between regions.

From an orthographic point of view, the Pegon script serves as a sound representation system that combines Arabic symbols with local phonology. Orthography is a bridge between spoken and written languages that allows for graphemic adaptation through the creation of letters for regional sounds such as pa, ca, ga, and nga that are not found in classical Arabic [18]. The concept of graphemic adaptation, as described by Howell and Gallop, affirms that when a language adopts a foreign script, there is a creative process to adjust the graphic symbol to be able to represent the phoneme of the receiving language. In modern developments, orthographic studies are increasingly relevant in the study of phonetics-based learning and character recognition technologies such as OCR, which are beginning to be able to read non-Latin scripts, including Pegon [19], [20], [21]. In addition, the variation of Pegon handwriting is also related to the social identity of the author and is closely associated with local Islamic literacy traditions such as Jawi. [22], [23]

The study of the Pegon manuscript focuses not only on linguistic aspects but also on cultural, historical, and material dimensions. The philological approach views the manuscript as an entity that reflects the intellectual and spiritual identity of its people through textual, semantic, and socio-historical analysis.[24] Modern philological research encourages the integration of various aspects of syntax, semantics, and materials to produce a more comprehensive understanding.[25] Meanwhile, the codicological approach focuses on the physical aspects of the manuscript, such as the type of paper, ink, binding, and calligraphy style, that can reveal the copying network and intellectual history of the spread of the archipelago's Islamic manuscripts.[26] In the modern context, Pegon faces challenges due to the dominance of the Latin script and digital technology, so revitalisation efforts through technology-based learning and curriculum integration are needed to remain relevant.[4], [13]

Based on this study, it can be seen that there is a research gap in the study of Arabic Pegon orthography in Sumatra. Previous studies have focused more on Javanese traditions and have not provided a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of graphemic in Sumatran manuscripts. This study focuses on three main manuscripts, namely the Jawi manuscript from Ogan Komering Ilir, the Hikayat Prang Sabi manuscript from Aceh, and the manuscript of the Palembang War Poem written in Malay Arabic.[27], [28], [29] These three manuscripts represent the diversity of Sumatran Islamic literacy traditions that have not been studied comparatively from an orthographic perspective.

The formulation of the problem in this study includes three things. First, what are the orthographic characteristics of Pegon and Jawi in the three Sumatran manuscripts? Second, what are the forms of phonological and graphemic adaptations that appear in the manuscript writing process? Third, how the cultural, religious, and social meaning is reflected in the use of Pegon in the context of the history of Islamic literacy in Sumatra.[30], [31], [32]

This study aims to describe the orthographic characteristics of Pegon and Jawi Arabic in the three manuscripts, analyse the form of their graphemic adaptations, and reveal the cultural meanings contained in them. The urgency of the research lies in its contribution to enriching the study of historical linguistics, philology, and Islamic studies of the archipelago, especially in the Sumatran literacy tradition, which is still underexplored. Socially, this research contributes to efforts to preserve the local Islamic written heritage, which is an important part of the cultural identity of the local community.[1], [33]

The systematics of writing this article are arranged as follows. The first part presents an introduction that explains the context, formulation of the problem, objectives, and urgency of the research. The second part outlines a methodology that includes a philological approach and orthographic analysis. The third part presents the results of the study of the characteristics of the Pegon and Jawi graphemic systems in three Sumatran manuscripts. The fourth part contains a discussion of its linguistic and cultural meaning. The final section summarises the main findings while providing recommendations for further research development.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach with a library research design to examine the Arabic Pegon orthographic system in Sumatra. A study was conducted on Pegon and Jawi scripts from the regions of Aceh, Minangkabau, and Palembang, such as Hikayat Prang Sabi, Sullam al-Mubtadi, and the manuscripts of the sultanate of Palembang. The data was obtained from verified digital repositories, including HMML/DREAMSEA, Leiden University Libraries, and Khastara Perpusnas RI, and supported by secondary literature in the form of books and scientific articles. The analysis was carried out through two main stages: (1) orthographic analysis, namely the observation of letter forms, vowel marks, and modification of Arabic characters for local phonemes, following the theory of adaptation of Howell and Gallop's graphemes, and (2) content analysis, to interpret the social, religious, and

cultural meaning of the text based on the Krippendorff framework. The validity of the data is maintained through verification of manuscript catalogues and triangulation of theories to ensure interpretive accuracy. With these measures, research can be replicated by other researchers accessing similar sources and analysis procedures.[34], [35], [36]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Orthographic Characteristics of the Arabic Pegon in Sumatra: Graphemic Analysis

Analysis of the three primary manuscripts of the Jawi Ogan Komering Ilir, Hikayat Prang Sabi, and Syair Guerra Palembang revealed a pattern of orthographic innovation that indicated the existence of a typical graphemic system in the Pegon Arabic tradition in Sumatra. This difference is especially evident in the adaptation of Arabic letters to represent the phonemes of Austronesian languages that are not found in the Classical Arabic phonological system. This adaptation of graphemic is not just a sporadic phenomenon, but shows the systemic consistency that has been internalised by writers and readers in their respective cultural environments.[37], [38], [39]

Table 1. Graphemic Innovation in Sumatra Pegon Manuscripts

Letters	Phoneme	Examples in the Manuscript	Transliteration	Meaning
ڤ	/p/	ڤـرڠ (Inspired by Prang Says)	prang	war
چ	/c/	چينتا (Manuscripts Jawi)	cinta	love
ݢ	/g/	ݢورو (Manuscripts Jawi)	guru	teacher
ڠ	/ŋ/	ڠاجي (Jawi & Hikayat Manuscripts)	ngaji	Learn Religion

This innovation shows that the people of Sumatra developed an orthographic system that combines Arabic and local elements in a balanced manner. The absorption of the new letters reflects a high level of phonological awareness and structured literacy efforts to ensure the readability and accuracy of sound representation in Malay and the regional languages of Sumatra.

2. Analysis of Text and Meaning: The Sociocultural Function of Pegon

a. Jawi Ogan Komering Ilir Manuscript: Pegon as a Medium of Scientific Transmission

The Jawi Ogan Komering Ilir manuscript shows the function of Pegon as a means of conveying Islamic knowledge. The content of the manuscript includes fiqh, tafsir, and hadith delivered in Malay for the benefit of education in Surau and Islamic boarding schools.

Figure 1. A snippet of Ogan Komering Ilir's Jawi manuscript which discusses the concept of 'ilm nāfi' (useful knowledge).

Text Quotes:

دغن ايتو كامي انق داالم علم فقه دان تفسير دان حديث دان منغاد كرك اكان يتو علم نافع...

"With that, we are children in the science of fiqh and tafsir and hadith and the karak of the knowledge of nafi'..."

Analysis:

The phrase "child in knowledge" describes a Malay metaphor that refers to the status of a novice learner. The presence of the letters غ in the words دغن (with) and غاجي (ngaji) indicates that local graphemes have been firmly integrated into religious writing practices. This manuscript serves as a pedagogical tool that strengthens the role of Pegon in transmitting Islamic teachings in a format that is easily accessible to the local community.

b. The Story of Prang Sabi: Pegon as a Symbol of Resistance and Collective Identity

Different from the educational text, Hikayat Prang Sabi positions Pegon as a medium of spiritual and political mobilisation during the colonial period. This text emphasises the relationship between religious teachings and Acehnese identity in the context of struggle.
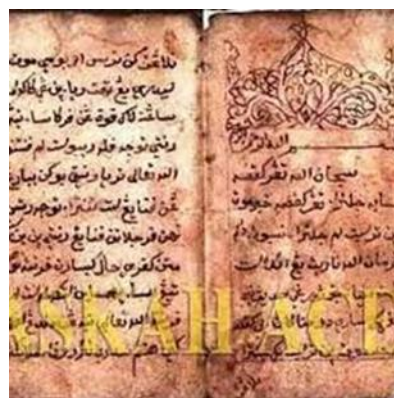

Figure 2. The manuscript page of Hikayat Prang Sabi, which contains the call for jihad.

Text Quotes:

وٱغب جيه برجهاد دلام فرڠ سبي...

"It is obligatory for jihad to wage jihad in the war of sabi..."

Analysis:

The use of the letter ڤ in the word فرڠ (prang) reflects the typical orthographic features of Aceh. The term Sabi War forms a semantic of resistance that combines theological and cultural elements. Pegon in this context serves not only as a medium of communication, but also as a symbol of collective identity as well as a means of religious legitimacy against resistance movements.

c. Syair Perang Palembang: Pegon dalam Tradisi Sastra dan Tasawuf

The Palembang War Poem shows another aspect of the use of Pegon, namely in the realm of religious literature and reflection on Sufism. Although it contains many Arabic quotations, the context of its writing in the form of Malay poetry places this text in the Jawi tradition.

Gambar 3. Cuplikan Syair Perang Palembang beraksara Arab-Melayu

Text Quotes:

فإن الذكر نور للقلوب وسبب لدوام الرحمة

"Indeed, dhikr is a light for the heart and the cause of the descent of grace."

Analysis:

The quotation is written in standard Arabic, but its presence in Malay Poetry indicates the mechanism of selection, compilation, and adaptation of Sufistic teachings into local media. Pegon serves as a channel that connects the intellectual treasures of global Islam with the spiritual practices of the Malay community of Palembang.

3. Pegon Orthography as a Representation of Islamic Indigenisation in Sumatra

Comparative analysis of the three manuscripts shows that the orthography of Pegon in Sumatra is a product of the process of Islamic indigenisation that takes place creatively and dialogically. Some of the synthesis findings can be summarised as follows:

a. Transformation from Foreign to Local Systems

The Arabic script, which was originally associated with sacred texts, underwent phonological adaptations so that it could be used to write the local language. This process affirms the ability of the Sumatran Muslim community to internalise the script into daily literacy practices.

b. Expansion of Functions from Linguistics to Socio-Cultural

Pegon not only solves the problem of sound representation, but also performs a social function:
1. as an educational medium,
2. as a symbol of identity and resistance,
3. as well as a vehicle for literary expression and spirituality.

c. Orthographic Diversification as an Expression of Local Diversity

The differences in graphemes between regions, for example, the use of چ in Komering and ڤ in Aceh, confirm that Islam Nusantara is not homogeneous. This diversity enriches the treasures of Pegon literacy and demonstrates cultural flexibility in integrating Islamic traditions with local linguistic practices.

Pegon Arabic orthography in Sumatra is a hybrid form of literacy that combines Arab-Islamic heritage with local linguistic creativity. This system not only facilitates the writing of Austronesian languages but also serves as a forum for the articulation of knowledge, identity, and spirituality. Thus, Pegon becomes a visual representation of the encounter between religious texts and the cultural context of the archipelago, as well as evidence that the Muslim community of Sumatra plays an active role in shaping an adaptive and sustainable literacy tradition.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of orthographic analysis of Pegon Arabic manuscripts in various regions of Sumatra, it can be seen that each text not only displays variations in letter forms and sound systems but also reflects the social, religious, and cultural functions behind its use. This phenomenon shows that Pegon Arabic writing is not just a writing system adapted from Arabic letters, but is the result of the creativity of the Muslim community in Islamizing the local language and making it a medium of religious and cultural expression. Thus, this discussion focuses on tracing the meaning and implications of Pegon cultural-linguistics as a representation of the archipelago's Islamic identity.

The Pegon Arabic writing in Sumatra represents a complex linguistic and cultural phenomenon, which has to do not only with the orthographic system, but also with the socio-religious processes in the formation of local Islamic identity. Pegon in Sumatra cannot be seen solely as a form of technical adaptation of Arabic letters to regional languages, but rather as the result of the innovation of the Muslim community in integrating Islamic values with the context of the local language and culture. Through the process of adapting graphemes, the people of Aceh, Minangkabau, and Palembang succeeded in adapting Arabic letters to their regional phonology, making them a means of da'wah, education, and scientific communication in the religious and government environment.

In the cultural-linguistic context, Pegon writing has a strategic role as a symbol of the religious and social identity of the Sumatran people. In Aceh, Pegon functions as a medium of struggle and da'wah, as reflected in Hikayat Prang Sabi, which ignites the spirit of jihad fi

sabilillah. In Minangkabau, Pegon is used as a medium of sophisticated education and basic fiqh teaching, as in the text of Sullam al-Mubtadi, which shows its role in the transmission of religious knowledge and the formation of Islamic morality. Meanwhile, in Palembang, Pegon developed in the sultanate as part of the administrative system and tradition of Islamic scientific writing. These three contexts show that Pegon not only functions as a means of written communication but also as a spiritual, intellectual, and cultural symbol that strengthens the Islamic character of the Sumatran people.

Furthermore, the orthography of Pegon in Sumatra has profound implications for the formation of the archipelago's Islamic identity. The adaptation of Arabic letters to the local language shows a dynamic, contextual, and inclusive form of Islam, an Islam that lives in culture, but still holds its universal values. Pegon is concrete evidence of the process of Islamic indigenisation in the archipelago, where the script not only plays a role as a linguistic tool, but also as a symbol of integration between the text of revelation and the reality of local culture. This proves that the people of Sumatra are not passive recipients of Arab-Islamic influence, but active actors who interpret, adapt, and transform the Islamic written tradition according to their own needs, characters, and identities.

Thus, Pegon Arabic writing in Sumatra has an important position as the intellectual and cultural heritage of the archipelago's Islam. It is a tangible manifestation of the dialogue of civilisation between Arab traditions and local culture that gave birth to a form of Islam typical of the archipelago, Islam that is rooted in culture, has a regional spirit, but remains universal in its values and teachings. The study of Pegon not only enriches the study of linguistics and philology, but also opens up new reflection space for strengthening Indonesia's Islamic identity that is moderate, adaptive, and based on the nation's cultural values.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Pegon Arabic writing in Sumatra is the result of a creative adaptation of Arabic letters to the phonology of local languages such as Malay, Aceh, and Minangkabau, which reflects the combination of Islamic values and regional culture. Through the addition of new letters such as ڤ (pa), چ (ca), ب (ga), and ڠ (nga), the Muslim community of Sumatra succeeded in developing a distinctive, functional, and symbolic orthographic system. Pegon not only serves as a means of writing about religion and education, but also as a medium for da'wah, intellectual, and local Islamic cultural identity. Thus, Pegon Arabs in Sumatra are tangible evidence of the indigenisation of Islam in the archipelago and the heritage of literacy that needs to be preserved through research, education, and digitalisation to remain relevant in the modern era.

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