Entangled circulations and decoloniality: Rethinking from southeast Asian Islam

Posted on April 28, 2025 by Ali Kassem
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=””]My personal and academic experiences have been shaped by movement from the Arab region, to Europe and the UK, and then to Southeast Asia. Since relocating to Singapore in 2022 I have been intrigued by the complexity and diversity of Islam in this particular (and surely not exceptional) region. Within this, over the past year I have begun developing a new research project on the intersections of queerness, Arab identity, and Southeast Asian Islam. As part of this project, I have done multiple preliminary fieldwork trips to cities across Malaysia and Indonesia including Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Penang. Reflecting on these experiences, I want to briefly suggest here the need to centre circulations and entanglements as constitutive in understanding the (post-)colonial present and a broader decolonial theorisation.

Arab histories and influences abound across Muslim Southeast Asia. The

Hadhrami Arabs, for instance, have long-established diasporic communities across the region, exerting significant effects. Throughout, Islam is a constitutive force within this as it endows Arab communities with capital of power and authority which enables them (to a limited extent) shape Islamic knowledges as well as practices. These unfold in complex and entangled ways, and have produced a multiplicity of Islamic knowledges across social issues and spheres. Many Javanese communities, for instance, have incorporated the Islamic within specific 'sea rituals', while Bugis culture has developed a social formation with five genders within an Islamic order. Further, Arab histories, circulating within the 'Indian Ocean World', are woven into the social fabric of Southeast Asian Muslim societies in ways that far transcend the strictly religious and extend to politics, art, music, and cuisine. The musical traditions that blend specific Arabic musical pitches, melodies, and motifs (maqams) with Javanese and Malay influences, for instance, speak to centuries of dialogue. Beyond these histories and connections, the interest in contemporary Arab music in the region and the wide familiarity of Arab musicians among Malay and Indonesian communities I've encountered suggests the contemporaneity of these circulations. In many ways, Arab connectivity to Southeast Asia is far deeper, far more complex, and far more pervasive than what exists in hegemonic and standard academic and public discourses – including in the Arab region itself – while persisting into the contemporary moment.

In Surabaya, I encountered another layer of complex connectivity: The role of Chinese figures in the transmission and spread of Islam in the region. As I visited the shrines of Sunan Ampel, for instance, I found complex architecture that blends and presents Arab, Javanese, and Chinese patterns. As I asked, I came to know of Admiral Zheng He—a Chinese Muslim eunuch and diplomat of the Ming Dynasty, who emerged as a key actor in establishing Islamic networks through trade and diplomacy in the contemporary memory of Surabayans. These Chinese figures themselves are oftentimes argued to be of mixed (contested) ancestries, crossing Indigenous Southeast Asian, Arab, and Chinese heritage. Further, alongside centuries old mosques built in the Chinese style, I also encountered contemporary mosques built in such style, with Chinese writing, and, for example, the absence of a dome echoing the architecture of classical Chinese temples in various cities, including in Yogyakarta's

Jalan Malioboro. The connections continue as Islam emerges as constituted through movement and overlapping circuits of entangled exchange.

This makes visible a more complex and relational map of Islamic knowledge and practice, one that is deeply shaped by longstanding complex entangled mobilities of people, goods, and ideas across 'regions'. It reminds us that the history of the present is, at its core, a history of (surely power-laden and oftentimes violent) movements, translations, and circulations. These histories, these circulations, and their depth, as well as their ongoing presence in the contemporary moment need to be acknowledged. In many ways, they persist despite Eurocentric modernity's claim over the real (see Vázquez 2020). Further, these histories and their legacies intersect with the legacies of European colonization and Eurocentric modernity's formation. As Bhambra (2014) makes visible, to make sense of the present, we must centre European colonialism's ongoing structuring force in shaping the global modern condition. While European empires did not create global interconnections sui generis, they did reorder them in specific ways that deeply shape the present – violently. These Eurocentric legacies accordingly intersected with local legacies of power-laden circulation, complexity, and entanglement.

The task of a liberatory decolonial analysis of the present therefore, I suggest, emerges as needing to account for more than only European legacies, and needing to centre longstanding and persisting complex and multiple entangled circulations in doing so.[/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true" css=""]**Date:** 6th November 2024
Title: Knowledge production in the 'Arab-majority' world and unlearning in the field: Toward alternative research politics with Ali Kassem
Speaker: Ali Kassem
Chair: Nadeen Dakkak
Minutes by: Claire French[/vc_toggle][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes" css=""]**Ali:**

> It's pretty invisible, but it is not totalising.
> Consequently, what I'm proposing here is the importance of fieldwork — specifically, a kind of fieldwork that approaches the

field not as a space where we mine knowledge, but as a space where we think reflexively with people: by listening to them, centring their experiences, and valuing the grammars through which they make sense of and inhabit their worlds. From there, we reconfigure ourselves. This is not a groundbreaking argument; it exists in methodological literature, particularly around knowledge production in qualitative and interpretive research.
What I'm trying to argue is that we need to extend this specifically towards reconfiguring Western epistemologies. What matters most — not exclusively, but primarily — is epistemic. If epistemic positionalities are what most shape the knowledge we produce and how we relate to wider decolonial projects, then we need to bring critical methodological literature into clearer conversation with decolonial thought. We need to rethink what research means, what its aims are, how it works as a process, and what horizons it tries to achieve.

I want to share a few things about the paper itself.
I started writing it immediately after I finished my PhD fieldwork, around 2018. It began as a reaction to moments in the field — conversations where people clarified, elaborated, and responded in ways that struck me. As I expanded my fieldwork into semi-rural areas and communities more distant from my own background, this experience became even more acute.
I began writing it down, recognising there was something important there. However, it didn't fit neatly within my PhD, so I decided to develop it as a separate paper.

A few months later, I began writing the history chapter for my PhD while on a visiting fellowship at EHESS in Paris, working with a historian of the Arab world. During that time, I also drafted this paper and shared it with my supervisors. They liked it but pointed out that it didn't fit easily into any one category — it was difficult to classify.
In my mind, it was very clearly a methods paper: a conceptual and theoretical exploration of how we produce knowledge, emphasising the need to rethink our approach to the field and

positionality.
I submitted it to four or five methods journals — all of which rejected it, quickly. Their response was consistent: “This is not a methods paper.”
I was confused. If not a methods paper, what was it?

Later, I submitted the abstract to a workshop on colonial and decolonial knowledge production. The workshop organisers loved it. They saw it as about knowledge making and production, though they suggested it needed less focus on the practicalities of fieldwork and more theorisation about the structures of coloniality.
Taking on their comments, I revised it, adding more theoretical framing and reducing the methodological details. I then submitted it to Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, an area studies journal. They accepted it quickly and the reviewers were extremely positive.

This raised further questions for me:
Comparative Studies is an area studies journal, yet my paper wasn’t about area-specific knowledge production — it was theorising global coloniality from a site (the Arab world) to think more broadly. When I pitched it to sociology journals, I was told it didn’t fit their current debates.
Curiously, it was an area studies journal — typically seen as peripheral — that welcomed this broader theorisation. I’m still reflecting on what this says about disciplinary boundaries, knowledge production, and where certain conversations can happen.

Finally, to conclude, I want to say: the implications of this paper are still something I’m grappling with.
Reflexive listening can help us decolonise certain concepts, binaries, stereotypes — but it also has limits. The big question for me is:
If decoloniality is an epistemic project, who can produce decolonial knowledge?
If we move from identity-based notions to epistemic ones, recognising that no one is purely external to modernity anymore

— that coloniality touches everyone — then concepts like the border, borderlands, and marginality become crucial tools for critique and construction.
However, I am sceptical that fieldwork alone, or even deep listening, can dismantle entrenched structures of knowledge production. It can help individuals work through positionality, but systemic change requires more.
Where, then, does decolonising knowledge happen — especially the knowledge that constructs alternatives to modernity, not just critiques it?
Constructing alternatives is much thornier than simply critiquing coloniality. Taking the epistemic coloniality of the Global South seriously makes the second task — building alternatives — significantly harder.

That's where I'll leave it for now. I hope these reflections are useful. Thank you to everyone who engaged with the paper — even if you just glanced at it, I appreciate it. I really look forward to hearing your thoughts and comments.

Chair:

Thank you so much, Ali.
We'll open up for questions now. Feel free to raise your hand and join the conversation. If you prefer not to turn on your video, you can also use the chat, and I'll read your comments or questions aloud.

Reader:

Thank you very much for your inspiring presentation and paper. I have a couple of comments and questions. Firstly, I thought it was a wonderful piece of decolonial scholarship. It felt genuinely original, especially in how you brought Arab scholarship into conversation with decolonial thought — something that hasn't happened enough.

We often think of decoloniality as something emerging mainly from Latin America, making its way into the Anglophone world, but rarely linked to the Arab world. You did that beautifully.

It also explains your experience of disciplinary boundaries. Before we began, Nadine and I were discussing which disciplines haven't taken a decolonial turn. It's clear now that methodology, as a field, hasn't either.
In the UK, sociology is becoming more decolonial — we teach decolonising methodologies, including those you speak about. To me, your paper read almost like a philosophies of social science module — so I can imagine it fitting into major sociology journals.
For instance, Sociology, the top journal here, is actively welcoming work from the Middle East, where there's been a gap.

Your experience reflects how area studies journals often welcome critical work that disciplinary journals resist. It shows that while people sometimes claim the 'decolonial turn' is a buzzword, your paper shows it clearly is not — it remains marginal, outside the mainstream disciplines.
Your paper would be exactly what I would assign students, undergraduate or postgraduate, to explain what genuine decolonial scholarship looks like.

Now, two questions:
First, regarding that fascinating moment when your interlocutors used the male form of hijab — I think there's something profound here beyond them feeling comfortable enough to forget your gender.
Perhaps this reflects a colonised knowledge that's been repressed. Hijab has been heavily gendered feminine in modern discourses, but older or alternative grammars may tell a different story.
Could this moment reveal an indigenous understanding of hijab that colonial modernity suppressed?

Second, about your conclusions regarding agency:
You wrote that you didn't find resistance in how people

discussed their experiences of wearing the hijab — that it seemed more aligned with a politics of piety rather than agency. I wonder: have you changed your mind since publishing the paper?
Do you see performances of piety differently now — perhaps as forms of agency, especially if we move away from individualistic definitions of resistance?

Ali:

Thank you so much for your very kind and thoughtful comments. I truly appreciate it. I agree with much of what you said. Regarding the broader disciplinary point: yes, absolutely. In fact, the edited book project Nadine mentioned earlier grew from exactly that frustration — of how the Arab region could engage with, and also challenge, the existing canon of decolonial thought, which is mostly Latin American.

When I tried to organise a workshop around this, I had great difficulty getting enough submissions. Even with funding to fly people in, very few scholars were engaging Arab experiences with decolonial theory in a reflexive way.
Many either stayed within classical area studies frames or simply imported Latin American theory without dialogue. So eventually, the edited volume shifted towards a more site-specific approach to studying the colonial today, rather than the broader theoretical project I originally envisioned.

As for the gendering of hijab — I completely agree. It wasn’t just a linguistic slip.
It pointed towards a different epistemology, an alternative understanding that predates or resists the strict gendering imposed through colonial modernity and patriarchy.
The fascinating thing is that had I not been a native Arabic speaker, I would have missed it entirely.
That subtlety would have slipped past me.
This reinforced for me how even though people from the Global

South are deeply epistemically colonised, there are still fragments, residual knowledges, and subtle linguistic traces that can open up decolonial possibilities — but only if we are trained to listen for them.

On agency:
Since publishing the paper, I have indeed been thinking a lot more about refusal rather than resistance.
Instead of asking whether a practice resists power directly, I'm interested in how acts of refusal allow different relations to power — even if they are ambiguous, partial, or contradictory.
Refusal, negotiation, ambiguity — these are all important modes of agency that may not look like classic 'resistance' but are nonetheless meaningful.
I've written further on this in later work, particularly in relation to how refusal can both challenge and reproduce dominant structures simultaneously.

Reader:

Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt — but if it's okay, I'll jump in.
Thank you so much for the presentation and the backstory about the paper.
I found it really valuable, especially as I'm about to start a new project involving interviews. Your discussion about whether this is a methods paper, and the choices you made about how much of the practical side to include, was incredibly helpful.

You reminded me of what it really means to be a reflexive researcher — how reflexivity and listening are intertwined.
It's easy to claim reflexivity as a label, but you showed how it's actually labour — real, time-consuming work that needs to be embodied and sustained.
I appreciated what you said about setting aside actual time in your week for reflection.
Listening well requires listening both to our participants and to ourselves.

My question is:
Do you think anyone can develop this kind of reflexive listening? Or does it require particular identities, experiences, or positionalities to do it effectively?

Ali:

Thank you, that's a wonderful question.
I think you've captured it beautifully — especially the importance of embodied, reflective listening.
When I first wrote this paper, one comment I received was that it wasn't a journal article but rather a creative, reflexive piece better suited for non-academic publication.
At the time, I was under pressure during my PhD to produce journal articles — so I kept working on it for academic outlets, knowing full well that it was shaped by the structures of neoliberal academia.

That also ties into your question:
I do think reflexive listening can be trained. It's not purely an innate skill, although of course certain positionalities might sensitise people differently.
But there's also privilege involved.
During my PhD, I had the time to immerse myself in my fieldwork, take breaks between field visits, and genuinely sit with the discomforts I experienced.
Now, with teaching, administrative responsibilities, and constant pressures to produce, I'm not sure I could have given the same depth of attention.

This is why I see reflexivity not just as a personal ethic, but something that must be institutionalised — it needs to be actively built into our research training and structures.
We must learn to cultivate reflexivity as a craft.

Reader:

A question I often grapple with is:
What if the research questions we bring are not the questions that matter most to the communities we're studying?
What if our participants care about entirely different stories than the ones we want to tell?
How do we balance our own research agendas with the responsibility to be responsive to the priorities of those we work with?

Ali:

Excellent question.
My experience during my PhD fieldwork speaks directly to this.
Initially, my project was about political Islam, identity, and the state. But once in the field, my interlocutors overwhelmingly spoke about gendered experiences of discrimination, Islamophobia, and embodiment.
At first, I tried to fit this into my original framework.
Eventually, I realised I had to completely redesign my project.
I returned home, took two months to rethink everything, and shifted towards a project on Islamophobia, race, and embodiment in the Arab world.
So yes — we must listen not only to what people say, but to the terms on which they are speaking.
This may mean changing not just our focus but even our methods.
Of course, practically this is difficult, especially within institutional constraints like funding and ethics approvals.
Still, I believe a truly ethical and decolonial research practice demands that we remain open to these transformations — even if they complicate our original plans.

Chair:

Thank you, Ali.

The reader says in the chat that was a very helpful reflection.

Reader:

Thanks, Nadeen.
And thank you, Ali.
I just wanted to build on the last question.
I actually think we need to go one step further.
Often in academia, we frame ourselves as ‘listening’ — but by the time we formulate our research questions, it’s already too late. The train has already left the station.
If we’re serious about reflexive listening, we need to start much earlier — when setting the research agenda itself.
And honestly, that’s not something I see happening much in academia. It’s one of the reasons I’ve become a bit disillusioned and now work outside of academia, mainly with NGOs.
In my recent work, we practised something called ‘listening dialogues’ — working with communities without predetermined research questions, shaping the agenda together over time.
This required significant flexibility, months or years of relationship-building, and it was only possible because we had flexible funding.
I wonder whether academia, with its structures and pressures, can ever really allow for that kind of deep, community-centred knowledge production.
What are your thoughts on this?

Ali:

Thank you.
I absolutely agree with you.
Different sectors have different possibilities and constraints, and you’re right that academia — especially under neoliberal pressures — often forecloses the flexibility necessary for true co-creation.

But one point I want to add, building on your important comment:
Even when we listen deeply and co-create knowledge, we have to be careful not to romanticise the communities we work with.
Listening does not always mean agreeing.
Sometimes, genuine reflexivity requires us to think against — not just alongside — communities.
Not everything that emerges from marginalised spaces is necessarily liberatory or ethical. Communities can also reproduce harmful structures — patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, and so on.
So, part of what I'm grappling with is how to engage reflexively, with humility, while maintaining a commitment to liberation and justice.
Sometimes that will mean pushing back — critically but respectfully — against certain dominant ideas within communities too.
This kind of reflexive, critical listening is very difficult — and maybe that's precisely why it's indispensable.

Reader:

Thank you for your talk, Ali.
It was very thought-provoking.
I want to press you a little on this last point you made about reflexive listening.
In your book, you discuss how sometimes your interlocutors reproduced problematic ideas — about science, patriarchy, and so on.
As academics, we still hold power in these dynamics.
I wonder: how is this approach different from typical 'participatory' methodologies, which often claim to 'centre' voices but end up simply gathering data?
Are just falling into a new form of extractivism under the guise of reflexivity?
How do we deal with the fact that some of the most critical thinking may only happen because we are situated within

academia — a space that is, itself, implicated in coloniality?

Ali:

Excellent and very important question.
I would say that my approach differs in that it's not just about 'centring voices' but about transforming the researcher as well. It's about a dialectical process: engaging with communities, being transformed by that engagement, and in turn pushing that transformation further through critical reflection.

It's also about recognising that while academia is complicit in many problematic structures, it still offers certain freedoms — the ability to think critically, to engage across traditions, and to produce alternative knowledges.

So yes, I am writing partly for myself, partly for the communities I work with, and partly for academic audiences.
I'm not pretending to be outside power structures.
Rather, I'm trying to work within them, critically, imperfectly — always aware of the tensions.
There's also the question of translation and language:
I mostly write in English, which creates barriers.
I've been trying to improve my academic writing in Arabic to make my work more accessible to the communities I research.
But again, there are limits — and these limits are part of the structures we have to navigate reflexively and ethically.

Chair:

Thank you.
There's a very lovely comment in the chat from another participant — thanking you for your openness and honesty, Ali.

Reader:

Yes, and just building on that —
You mentioned earlier the idea that the goal of decolonial work is liberation.
It made me think: often the people who are oppressed in one situation can be oppressors in another.
In some contexts, the very people who resist colonial structures might still reproduce racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.
How do we think about liberation when the subjects of decolonial work themselves are entangled in structures of oppression?

Ali:

Absolutely — you're spot on.
Decolonial thought has sometimes been criticised for romanticising indigenous or subaltern communities, assuming their positionality automatically guarantees liberatory knowledge.
But that's not the case. Communities are complex, ambivalent, and implicated in structures of modernity-coloniality too. Thus, our approach needs to be one of careful, critical engagement — thinking both with and against communities when necessary.

This means sometimes we align with community knowledge; sometimes we must critically challenge it — always with humility, and always with a commitment to ethical, liberatory horizons.
One way I've tried to do this is by thinking across multiple communities.
For example, I've been working on queer Islam in Southeast Asia — particularly in Indonesia, where some Muslim communities historically recognised multiple genders and sexualities.
That enables me to think with those traditions to challenge dominant heteronormative Arab-Islamic models I grew up with.
It's messy, it's contradictory, but it's necessary.

Reader:

Yes, I just wanted to say — I did fieldwork there too, with queer Muslim communities.
When I tried to present early findings back in the UK, I faced such Eurocentric reactions:
People focused entirely on how I accessed these ‘exotic’ communities, rather than engaging with the substance of what people were doing and saying.
It was disheartening.
It made me question whether to publish my findings in English at all — or whether doing so would simply reproduce extractivism.

Ali:

Thank you for sharing that.
I completely understand.
And yes, there are moments when choosing not to publish is the most ethical decision.
But I would also say:
If we don’t create and circulate alternative knowledges — however imperfectly — those spaces are left empty, dominated by the same Eurocentric narratives.
So we have to be careful — to publish selectively, ethically, critically.
To choose our audiences wisely.
And to remember that knowledge, once created, can travel and do things we don’t control — sometimes helping to open new possibilities we didn’t anticipate.

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