

## Maulid Nabi Tradition as Cultural Da'wah: Constructing Muslim Identity and Social Power in Southeast Asia

Ahmad Zakki

Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia

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### Abstract

Although the Prophet's Birthday (Maulid Nabi) is not explicitly prescribed as a religious observance in Islamic scripture, its widespread practice across Southeast Asia demonstrates how religious traditions are continuously shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts. Existing studies have predominantly examined Maulid as a form of religious devotion, cultural heritage, or local religious expression, while comparative analyses of how Maulid functions as a site of power formation and contestation across different Muslim societies remain limited. This study addresses this gap by examining how Maulid traditions operate within distinct configurations of authority, identity, and social practice in Brunei Darussalam, Pattani (Thailand), and Indonesia. Drawing on Foucault's discourse theory of power and Bourdieu's theory of practice, the study employs a comparative qualitative approach based on the analysis of relevant literature, historical accounts, and documented Maulid practices. The findings demonstrate that Maulid is not merely a ritual commemorating the Prophet's birth but a socially embedded practice through which religious authority, political legitimacy, and collective identity are produced and contested. In Brunei Darussalam, state-sponsored Maulid celebrations contribute to the symbolic reinforcement of the Sultan's sovereign authority. In Pattani, Maulid functions within particular social contexts as a marker of Malay-Muslim identity and, for some groups, as a symbolic expression of resistance to dominant political structures. In Indonesia, the celebration has become an arena of contestation between traditionalist and puritan-oriented interpretations of Islamic practice. By comparing these three contexts, this study advances existing scholarship by demonstrating that Maulid constitutes a dynamic arena in which religious practice intersects with power relations, cultural identity, and political authority. The study therefore contributes a comparative perspective to the sociology of Islamic ritual and da'wah studies by conceptualizing Maulid as a form of cultural da'wah whose social and political meanings are contingent upon the structures within which it is practiced.

### Keywords

Maulid Nabi; Southeast Asia; Social Power, Muslim Identity

### Corresponding Author

Ahmad Zakki

Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia, ahmad\_zakki24@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Essentially, Maulid Nabi is a celebration commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad Saw. In Islamic teachings, Maulid Nabi is not specifically addressed, nor is its observance mentioned.



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Religious texts in Islam only indicate that the Prophet Muhammad Saw. always remembered and gave thanks on the day of his birth. The Prophet expressed this gratitude by observing a sunnah fast, which is known in Islamic law as the Monday sunnah fast, as mentioned in the following hadith:

وحدثني زهير بن حرب. حدثنا عبد الرحمن بن مَهْدِيٍّ. حَدَّثَنَا مَهْدِيُّ بْنُ مَيْمُونٍ عَنْ غَيَّلَانَ، عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ مَعْبَدٍ الزَّمَّانِيِّ، عَنْ أَبِي قَتَادَةَ الْأَنْصَارِيِّ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ؛ إِنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ سُئِلَ عَنْ صَوْمِ الْإِثْنَيْنِ؟ فَقَالَ فِيهِ وُلِدْتُ. وَفِيهِ أُنْزِلَ عَلَيَّ

Meaning:

Zuhayr bin Ḥarb told me, Abd al-Rahmān bin Mahdī told us, Mahdī bin Maymūn told us, from Ghaylān, from Abdullāh bin Mabad al-Zimmāny, from Abī Qatādah al-Anṣārī (may Allah be pleased with him): Indeed, Rasulullah Saw. was asked about fasting on Mondays, and he replied, “On that day (Monday) I was born, and on that day the Quran was revealed to me.” (Narrated by Muslim). (Naysābūrī 1916, 3/168)

In addition to its literal meaning, this hadith has also come to be interpreted by Muslims as an encouragement to rejoice and give thanks on the occasion of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Over time, Muslims have expressed their joy and gratitude in various ways. Not only did Muslims fast voluntarily, but they also began celebrating the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, known as “Maulid Nabi.” According to Schimmel (1985), Maulid Nabi has historically evolved from a dry historical commemoration into a dynamic core of popular Islamic piety and a culture of devotion, manifested through public rituals, charitable acts, and poetry across various cultural spheres. (Schimmel 1985) Katz (2007) explains that the Maulid celebration is based on the principles of devotion and gift-giving. By offering prayers, singing praises, and distributing food to the community, believers seek to build a reciprocal relationship with the Prophet. They express their love for the Prophet, translating their cultural and economic actions into spiritual rewards and hoping for his intercession (shafa’ah) in return. (Katz 2007)

As a relatively recent celebration—and not a canonical observance prescribed by Islamic law in its early days (Kaptein 1993)—the celebration of Maulid Nabi was historically first recorded and officially institutionalized during the Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt before later spreading to various Sunni regions. (Kaptein 1993) Muslims subsequently adapted the celebration of the Prophet’s Birthday to the specific circumstances they faced, incorporating local cultural elements as well. Essentially, the celebrations are similar, involving the recitation of verses from the Qur’an, reflecting on the birth and life story of the Prophet Muhammad Saw., and featuring religious sermons. However, the Maulid Nabi celebration has since taken on a wide variety of forms worldwide.

In Southeast Asia, the celebration of Maulid Nabi itself varies significantly from country to country. In Brunei, for example, Maulid Nabi is celebrated with a large-scale national festival and parade. During this celebration, state figures such as the Sultan, government officials, including ministers, the royal family, and police officers typically attend and participate. In Indonesia, Maulid Nabi has evolved in a modern context. The discourse surrounding Maulid has now become quite complex due to the debate between traditionalists and puritans. In regions where Islam is a minority, such as in Thailand, Maulid Nabi is marked by a spirit of solidarity and shared destiny among fellow Muslims. The event is celebrated on a large scale to unite the Muslim community. There, people gather to read the Prophet’s stories and listen to sermons, while fostering a sense of togetherness with fellow

members of their ethnic and religious communities. (Muzakarah Ustadz Ali Deng 2024)

Thus, Maulid Nabi is celebrated in various ways across different regions. Indeed, in Southeast Asia, Islamic teachings take on distinct characteristics in each area. This is because the arrival of Islam in the past did not erase local cultures. Instead, Islam assimilated with local cultures, resulting in many local elements being incorporated into the practice of Islam in Southeast Asia. (Reid 2024) This applies to the celebration of the Prophet's Birthday as well. Fundamentally, all forms of these celebrations share the same purpose: to serve as an occasion for Muslims to study and emulate the life story and journey of the Prophet Muhammad Saw. (Manullang et al. 2021) Moreover, as a religious ritual that has developed within society, the celebration of the Prophet's Birthday holds a deeper significance. In line with Khan's (2020) perspective, religious rituals are integral to culture. They also play a crucial role in maintaining harmony and fostering a sense of belonging within a community. (Khan 2020)

Upon closer examination, the Maulid Nabi celebrations routinely held by communities in these three regions actually share one commonality: the presence and involvement of the government—whether the central government of a nation or a local government leading an ethnic group—in each celebration. Religion, including its associated rituals, is indeed a compelling tool for those in power to forge bonds with their people. Since ancient times, religious rituals have indeed often been used by rulers to legitimize their power. (Bentzen and Gokmen 2022) The involvement of rulers in facilitating and leading these Maulid celebrations is, in fact, a historical pattern that has persisted since the early institutionalization of Maulid, during which rulers utilized these public celebrations to strengthen political legitimacy, distribute public alms, and reinforce patronage ties with their communities (Kaptein 1993). This subsequently led to many religious values being, as it were, "injected" into the structures and laws of official state institutions.

Most previous studies on the celebration of Maulid Nabi in Southeast Asia have analyzed this ritual separately within national boundaries, with a primary focus on local cultural dimensions or state institutions. In the context of Brunei Darussalam, studies by Muller (2017) demonstrate how state-sponsored Maulid parades function as top-down instruments to reinforce the official ideology of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) and consolidate the Sultan's legitimate authority. Conversely, in Southern Thailand, Sattar and Sahoh (2021) highlight that the revival of Maulid celebrations among the Pattani Muslim-Malay minority operates as a bottom-up mechanism to preserve ethno-religious identity and mount cultural resistance against the central government's assimilation policies. Meanwhile, previous literature on Maulid in Indonesia (e.g., Woodward, 1988) has largely focused on cultural acculturation or local theological contestation between traditionalist and puritan groups. (Woodward 1988; Muller 2017; Sattar and Sahoh 2021)

Although these studies provide valuable empirical insights into their respective contexts, a critical analytical gap remains unaddressed. The existing literature treats these national cases as separate phenomena, without offering a comparative synthesis that explains how differences in state architecture, demographic status, and power dynamics systematically alter the sociopolitical functions of these rituals. Muller successfully captures state hegemony, Sattar and Sahoh document minority resistance, and Woodward analyzes discursive pluralism. However, there is still no integrated framework capable of explaining why the same religious commemoration can transform in function, from a sole instrument of state legitimization to a means of survival for minorities, and ultimately into an arena of internal ideological contestation. Therefore, rather than merely noting the diversity of Maulid practices, this study addresses this critical gap by constructing a multidimensional comparative framework that systematically maps the interrelationships between political regime structures and micro-level ritual agency in Southeast Asia.

This study compares Maulid Nabi celebrations in three regions of Southeast Asia: Pararakan Agung in Brunei Darussalam, the Maulid Nabi celebration in Pattani (Thailand), and the tensions between “traditionalists” and “puritans” in Indonesia. All three demonstrate distinct forms of expression in commemorating the same event—the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Beyond these differences, they share a common element: the government's presence and involvement, which interact with its citizens to celebrate this event. This study is further supported by Michel Foucault's theory of the discourse of power, which holds that power also shapes discourse. (Foucault 1977). This theory is used to examine how the ruling authorities in each region subsequently shape religious discourse within local culture. Furthermore, this study presents an analysis based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, which frames each celebration of the Prophet's Birthday as a “struggle and competition” within a “field.”

## **2. METHODS**

This study was a qualitative research project that employed comparative data analysis, specifically comparing religious traditions (the celebration of the Maulid Nabi) across three different countries in Southeast Asia: Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, and Indonesia. The primary data sources utilized in this study varied across the selected cases. For the Maulid Nabi celebration in Indonesia, primary fieldwork, involving semi-structured interviews and direct observations, was conducted at the celebration venue. Observations took place at the Al-Fachriyah Islamic Boarding School in Tangerang, which served as a representative case of traditionalist Maulid Nabi activities commonly held in Indonesia. These observations aimed to gather comprehensive data on how the ritual sequences were carried out. The same ethnographic approach was applied to Puritan groups who opposed the observance of Maulid Nabi. Direct interviews were conducted with them to understand their subjective perspectives on their love for the Prophet Muhammad Saw., particularly how they expressed this devotion without holding ceremonial celebrations. To understand how the Maulid Nabi was celebrated in Thailand and Brunei Darussalam, direct fieldwork was limited by time, geographic access, and scope. Therefore, this study relied on a digital qualitative methodology, extensively utilizing digital documentation and online observations. To ensure data trustworthiness and validity, the data obtained from digital platforms were cross-referenced and synchronized with peer-reviewed scientific journal articles and official corporate or state websites. Secondary data were also drawn from scholarly books and foundational Islamic religious texts that supported the research findings. Data collection involved the systematic digital archiving of video data from YouTube and of text databases of academic articles. This study acknowledged a fundamental methodological asymmetry: the Indonesian case rested on primary ethnographic fieldwork, whereas the Brunei and Thailand cases relied on secondary literature and mediated digital documentation. Rather than treating these cases as identical in empirical depth, this study positioned the rich Indonesian primary data as the ethnographic baseline, which was then systematically contrasted with the macro-political and structural insights derived from the digital and secondary data of Brunei and Thailand. To justify the use of audiovisual records as ethnographic evidence for the non-Indonesian cases, strict selection criteria were applied during the YouTube video search; 1) Source Authenticity: The videos had to originate from either verified official broadcast channels (e.g., state documentary media in Brunei) or direct unedited community recordings (e.g., live-streamed religious gatherings in Pattani) to minimize computational or performative distortion. 2) Temporal and Contextual Relevance: The videos chosen strictly represented public celebrations captured within the contemporary era (specifically focusing on standard recurring annual processions and localized beach assemblies) to match the timeframe of the Indonesian fieldwork. 3) Data Saturation

and Triangulation: A total of fifteen videos were initially screened, and the final five selected videos were those whose contents demonstrated direct alignment with the socio-political patterns described in peer-reviewed regional literature, thereby ensuring their representativeness as valid markers of community-level practices. This study refers to two theories used, namely:

### 2.1. Michel Foucault's Theory of Discourse of Power

In his theory of the discourse of power, Michel Foucault (d. 1984) argued that power is not merely repressive or oppressive toward those under its control. According to him, power also plays an active role in shaping individuals, creating reality, and generating new discourses and knowledge. He referred to this as "power that is also productive." (Foucault 1977) In this study, Foucault's theory of the discourse of power was used to analyze how the Maulid Nabi tradition was initiated by government or state institutions. This theory was used to examine how the Maulid Nabi tradition grew and developed as a "product" of those in power, ultimately serving to legitimize the rulers' continued rule.

### 2.2. Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Practical theory is a theory in the social sciences formulated by Pierre Felix Bourdieu (d. 2002). This theory was used to examine how the celebration of the Maulid Nabi, as a social action enacted within a field, was shaped by the configuration of habitus and capital embedded within that field—namely, the social community. Simply put, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice was a concept aimed at explaining how a social practice or action was formed through the interaction between internal structures—namely, habitus—and external structures—namely, capital and field. Bourdieu formulated three key concepts in this theory of practice: habitus, capital, and field. The first concept was habitus, a set of habits an individual acquired through socialization within their social environment, which subsequently shaped how they thought, felt, and acted. (Bourdieu 2002) Second, capital, which refers to resources that can be used to gain an advantage within a social field. This capital can take the form of economic capital—such as assets and wealth—cultural capital—such as knowledge, skills, and education—and social capital—such as relationships. (Bourdieu 2002) Third is the field, which is the arena where all social practices take place. These fields can include the artistic, political, educational, and economic fields.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Different Ways of Celebrating the Maulid Nabi: Brunei Darussalam, Thailand and Indonesia

#### *Maulid Nabi in Brunei Darussalam: "Pararakan Agung" as a Forum for Community Interaction with the Sultan*

In Brunei Darussalam, the Maulid Nabi celebrations initiated by the Sultan are centered in the nation's capital, Bandar Seri Begawan. On the evening before the highlight of the celebrations—the night of the 12th of Rabi' al-Awwal—a recitation of the *Maulid Syarāf al-Anām* will be held. (H. Hasyim Official 2024) This Maulid recitation will take place at the Nurul Iman Palace—the Sultan's official residence in the capital, Bandar Sri Begawan—where the public can participate and attend. This is one of the moments of interaction between the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah, and his subjects who attend the Maulid Nabi celebration. This tradition has been passed down through generations by the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam and is held annually. This aligns with research by Karim and Rahman (2022), which indicates that the Sultan of Brunei strives to comprehensively implement Islamic law and values across all sectors—including governance, legislation, the economy, social and cultural affairs, and education. (Karim and Rahman 2022)

The following day, the "Pararakan Agung" event takes place. During this event—often attended by foreign visitors—the people of Brunei hold a parade-like procession. Once again, this event is led

directly by Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah and attended by ministers, police officials, and the entire royal family. During this event, participants don a variety of eye-catching costumes. They are then judged by a panel of judges to determine which contingent wears the most unique and attractive costumes and accessories, and that contingent is crowned the winner. Not only that, but the armed forces also participate in the parade. Here, they serve as the Sultan's guards while also showcasing their skills during the event. (Bentara On Hiatus 2015)

Throughout the parade, participants will march along a predetermined route. This route stretches 4.3 km along the main streets of the capital, Bandar Sri Begawan. Throughout the journey, the parade procession will chant prayers in honor of the Prophet Muhammad Saw. This serves as an expression of their joy at the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The procession is led directly by Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, who accompanies the parade throughout the entire journey. Behind him march government officials, ministers, and members of the royal family. Also joining the Sultan in the procession are members of the public and international tourists.

#### *Maulid Nabi in Thailand: The Struggle of Pattani's Muslim Community as a Minority Group*

In Thailand, the celebration of the Maulid Nabi has sparked considerable debate. Although Muslims constitute a religious minority, they are not of one mind on this issue. Just as in Indonesia—and among Muslim communities in other regions—some people view the Maulid Nabi as a bid'ah, an innovation not taught by the Prophet Muhammad Saw. Consequently, those who hold this view are reluctant to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birth by participating in Maulid celebrations. Similarly, in Thailand, some people celebrate the Prophet's Birthday, while others are reluctant to do so. This prompted a Pattani scholar, Haji Sulong al-Fattani, to seek to reconcile the differing views within the community. He subsequently wrote a book titled "*The Light of Islam: The Essence of the Birthday of Sayyidil Anam*", which refutes the claims of those who view the Maulid Nabi as an innovation. As a result, the Maulid Nabi remains an integral part of religious traditions that are still preserved, particularly in the Pattani region of southern Thailand. (Katih and Hayimasae, n.d.)

Celebrations of the Maulid Nabi in Thailand are conducted in the same manner as such celebrations generally are. Before the event begins, worshippers have already arrived and filled the venue. For instance, at one time, the Maulid Nabi celebration in Pattani was held at Wasukri Beach in the Sai Buri region. This demonstrates the influence of the Muslim community in that region, even though they constitute a minority in Thailand as a whole. The event opens with welcoming remarks from both community leaders and government representatives in attendance. Next, verses from the Maulid are recited; in this case, the *Maulid al-Barzanji*. This is followed by religious lectures delivered by local Islamic figures, including Ustadz Ali Deng, a prominent religious leader in Pattani. After the lectures concluded, the event closed with prayers, socializing, and even a communal meal. One notable aspect is the predominant use of Pattani Malay in the area, indicating that forums like this can also serve as a unifying force for solidarity among Muslim communities, who constitute a minority. (Muzakarah Ustadz Ali Deng 2024)

Although not everyone celebrates it, the atmosphere of the Maulid Nabi celebration remains lively for those who do. As in Indonesia, local madrasahs, or Islamic boarding schools, usually participate in the celebrations. (Himam 2020) In Pattani, there is also a month-long celebration of the Prophet's Birthday. During this celebration, residents take turns hosting gatherings at their homes where the *Maulid al-Barzanji* is recited. (Aisah and Albar 2020) During the Maulid Nabi celebrations they hold, Thai communities usually recite the *Maulid al-Barzanji* text; the version they use is in Malay (Aisah and Albar 2020).

Regarding the recitation of the *Maulid al-Barzanjī*, Thailand has a cultural tradition of regularly reciting Maulid texts, including *al-Barzanjī*. One such example is the practice at the Ben Pa'ramai Islamic Boarding School in Songkhla Province, Thailand. This tradition of reciting the Maulid was studied by Saowadah Hemyeh (2017). In her study, Hemyeh concluded that the recitation of *al-Barzanjī* at the pesantren helps the students understand the tradition in two ways: reciting the Maulid allows them to gain spiritual merit (since it contains verses from the Qur'an, reminders of Allah, and stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad Saw.) and enables them to express and deepen their love for the Prophet, Saw. Consequently, the recitation and celebration of the Maulid Nabi have become deeply rooted in the lives of certain communities in Thailand (Hemyeh 2017).

#### *Maulid Nabi in Indonesia: Contestation and the Pro-Contra Divide Between Traditionalists and Puritans*

In the contemporary era, the dynamics of Maulid Nabi in Indonesia have evolved within intense contestation. Society is divided into two major clusters: those who support (*pro*) and those who oppose (*contra*) holding Maulid Nabi celebrations. The pro-faction grounds its arguments on several hadiths interpreted contextually, such as the hadith regarding the Prophet commemorating his birth by fasting (Naysābūrī 1916) or the hadith concerning the permissibility of establishing good traditions (*sunnah-sunnah yang baik*), which is subsequently deemed to refute the notion that the *maulid* teaching is an innovation (*bid'ah*) (Naysābūrī 1916). Conversely, the contra-faction usually argues by employing hadiths understood literally. They base their arguments on hadiths that state that anything not taught by the Prophet constitutes *bid'ah*, as well as on prohibitions against adding to religious practices (Naysābūrī 1916).

In Indonesia, the sequence of *Maulid Nabi* practices is generally uniform across different assemblies (*majelis*). This includes the observations recorded at the Pondok Pesantren al-Fachriyah on Thursday, June 4, 2026. Typically, popular *maulid* books such as *al-Barzanjī*, *al-Ḍiyā'u al-Lāmī*, *Simṭu al-Durār*, or *al-Dibā'ī* are recited. Between chapters during the recitation of these *maulid* books, panegyric poems (*kasidah*) are usually chanted, praising both Allah Swt. and the Prophet Muhammad Saw. In addition to the maulid recitation, attending figures are also given the opportunity to speak. Religious figures deliver religious advice to the congregation, which may take the form of reinforcing creed (*akidah*), motivation for worship, enhancing love for the Prophet Saw., and other similar themes. Additionally, community figures are also given the opportunity to speak. It is not uncommon for maulid activities, particularly large-scale ones, to be attended by community figures from the local government or the police force. Subsequently, these figures speak, though their remarks are limited to formal welcoming addresses rather than spiritual advice or religious matters.

The congregation members themselves possess diverse motives for attending the *Maulid Nabi* events. They do not attend Maulid Nabi solely out of a desire to "increase love for the Prophet". There are at least four reasons why the congregation participates in Maulid Nabi: education, deeply-rooted tradition, economics, and entertainment. Some congregation members attend Maulid Nabi because they regard it as a platform for seeking knowledge. The lectures delivered by religious figures, particularly the leaders of the assembly, constitute valuable knowledge for them. They feel that their love for Allah and His Messenger is continually strengthened by listening to these lectures. Furthermore, they learn extensively about the morality (*akhlak*) of past generations based on the lectures delivered (Interview with Rozak—pro-Maulid Nabi circle—on June 4, 2026).

In addition to educational motives, other congregation members attend the Maulid Nabi event because it is a deeply-rooted tradition for them. Maulid Nabi is an activity they have practiced for a long time, such that the tradition has become embodied within themselves. Some attend because they

have routinely participated for many years prior. Others attend because they reside near the Islamic boarding school (*pondok pesantren*) or the assembly, feeling it would be a missed opportunity to bypass such a large, regularly held assembly in their immediate vicinity (Interview with Sobari—pro-Maulid Nabi circle—on June 4, 2026).

Another motive driving the congregation to participate in and enliven the Maulid Nabi event is economic. Inevitably, the Maulid Nabi celebration is a moment where a large number of people gather. This signifies the presence of a market capable of generating economic profit. Consequently, at every Maulid Nabi event, numerous vendors set up to sell clothing, prayer gear, perfumes, books, scriptures, food, and beverages, while others use their land for parking. Those who earn their living in this sector routinely attend the Maulid Nabi for economic reasons. They acknowledge that the Maulid Nabi celebration—with its large-scale congregation attendance—yields substantial profits. This is particularly true in assemblies of massive scale or those attended by major figures, such as Habib Syech bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf, Habib ‘Umar bin Ḥafiz, Habib ‘Alī bin ‘Abdurrahmān al-Jufri, and others (Interview with Abdul Ghaffar—pro-Maulid Nabi circle—on June 4, 2026).

An additional motive for attending the Maulid Nabi event is entertainment. For some individuals (commonly referred to as *muhibbin*), the Maulid Nabi event is a form of spiritual entertainment. They can listen to the recitation of the maulid book along with the chanting of *kasidah*, which is usually accompanied by the beating of *hadrah* musical instruments. For certain individuals, this is a comforting entertainment that pacifies their hearts. This is particularly felt during the practice of *maḥallul qiyām*, wherein the Prophet is said to be present in the assembly, executing it. Some congregation members feel they can release their anxieties there. They feel they can complain to Allah Swt. about everything, requesting that their needs be met and their desires granted when *maḥallul qiyām* is performed. Moreover, some of them believe that the soul of the Prophet Saw. is present during the practice, thereby acting as an intermediary for the fulfillment of their needs (Interview with Irham—pro-Maulid Nabi circle—on June 4, 2026).

Meanwhile, the faction opposing the observance of Maulid Nabi generally relies on textual evidence from the Qur’an and Sunnah, in which Maulid Nabi is not explicitly taught. They also argue that the early generation of Muslims (the era of the Prophet, the *Sahabah*, and the *tabi’in*) did not practice it; hence, they feel that Maulid Nabi should not be celebrated as it is today. They hold the view that worship must be grounded in clear teachings originating from Allah Swt. and the Prophet Muhammad Saw. Rather than participating in activities deemed to lack foundational scriptural (*naqli*) guidance, such as the Maulid Nabi, they prefer study circles (*kajian*) that directly reference the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and the explanations of scholars on both.

With the understanding that Maulid is not something taught by the Prophet Saw., how then does this faction express their love for the Prophet Muhammad Saw.? According to this circle, the most appropriate expression of love is to maintain the purity of Islamic teachings brought by the Prophet Saw., neither adding to nor subtracting from them. They argue that the teachings brought by the Prophet Saw. are already comprehensive, encompassing all aspects, so new practices are unnecessary. The implementation of the Sunnah, particularly in minor matters, also constitutes an invaluable expression of love for the Prophet Saw. Examples include perfecting worship day to day, guarding one's tongue from inappropriate speech, cultivating the habit of smiling, and helping others, down to minor Sunnah practices that are frequently overlooked. Regarding remembering the life of the Prophet Saw., they believe this can be achieved by studying the prophetic biography (*sirah nabawiyah*) and deriving lessons for their daily lives. Thus, what the Prophet Saw. enlivened is expressed not merely once a year in a ceremonial manner, but is reflected in their daily lives.

This understanding is also preserved and transmitted to their families and children. They want their families to adhere to the pure teachings of Islam as they believe them. In teaching this, several stages are traversed. First, by explaining the correct (pure) creed (*akidah*)—namely, not adding to or subtracting from the Prophet's teachings. They also explain the true way to love the Prophet Saw. In the second stage, they explain the criteria for sound (*sahih*) deeds (those taught in the Qur'an and Sunnah) and how to habituate oneself to them. These deeds also encompass minor matters, such as smiling frequently and doing good to others. In the third stage, they explain innovation (*bid'ah*) and its consequences. By doing so, they are certain that this understanding will be continuously preserved within their families (Interview with Fachri, Adil, and Nabila—a circle opposing the celebration of Maulid Nabi—on June 16 and 17, 2026).

### 3.2. The Celebration of the Prophet's Birthday from a Sociopolitical Perspective: Between Power and Culture in Religious Traditions

*Brunei's "Pararakan Agung" in the Analysis of Foucault and Bourdieu: The Role of the Monarchy in the Production of Religious Discourse*

Essentially, Brunei Darussalam is a country that seeks to bureaucratize its people's religious life. After gaining independence from British rule in 1984, the Brunei government, led by the Sultan, established itself as a monarchy with an Islamic royal system. Muller explains that the Brunei government subsequently adopted the MIB (Melayu Islam Beraja) ideology as the national Islamic identity. Islam was rooted not only in doctrine and tradition but also in an official identity tied to the state (Muller 2017). In addition to establishing Islam as the official religion, the Brunei government also placed great emphasis on preserving Malay cultural values as part of the MIB ideology. Consequently, the Islamic identity formed there is a blend of Islamic teachings with Malay cultural elements (Talib 2013).

Other studies have revealed that this effort is not merely an attempt to ground Islam or make it an integral part of every aspect of society. Setyadi (2024) views this effort as linked to the government's ongoing efforts to enhance national stability. Whether in economic or political terms, the government regards MIB as a gateway to a more orderly national life. (Setyadi 2024) Furthermore, Muller (2022) also argues that the adoption of MIB as the official ideology is, in essence, an effort to perpetuate the Sultan's power and that of his lineage. Islam has been bureaucratized to such an extent, education has been standardized, and public life has been controlled—all of which are inseparable from the government's efforts to legitimize its authority over society (Muller 2022).

So, how has the public responded? Interestingly, the relationship between the public and the government suggests that the Brunei government's efforts have succeeded in winning the people's hearts. Pratama (2023) argues that this success is inseparable from the Sultan's firm leadership, as evidenced by tangible results felt by all Brunei citizens. Public service policies are designed to be fully Sharia-compliant and free of charge, whether in education, healthcare, or other areas. Additionally, the one-party political system has been a key factor in the success of MIB ideology. Since the Sultan faces virtually no opposition or political rivals, this could foster critical attitudes among the public. (Pratama et al. 2023) While the international community assumes that Brunei's people are "oppressed by the imposition of Islamic law," the people themselves actually defend their country. They do not feel oppressed; rather, there is a reciprocal relationship between the people and the state. When the state provides stability and a sense of security, it is only natural for the people to offer their loyalty and trust (Zada et al. 2023).

Regarding the celebration of the Prophet's Birthday, from a Foucauldian analytical perspective,

this event can essentially be positioned as a manifestation of the bureaucratization of Islam, as explained by Muller. The Maulid Nabi celebration, featuring a procession led directly by the Sultan, demonstrates a process of centralization of power in which the public sphere is constructed as an arena to affirm the identity of “Official Islam” aligned with the Sultan’s lineage. In this context, the power of the Sultan and the royal government subsequently shapes a new identity, embodied in the aforementioned Maulid Nabi procession. Here, the Sultan is present not only as the head of state but also as the central figure in the production of religious discourse in Brunei. A similar case is exemplified by the Brunei government’s celebration of the Sultan’s birthday, which is observed for three consecutive weeks. This demonstrates that, within the MIB ideology, obedience to the state is an inseparable obligation in religious life (Muller 2022).

Viewed through Bourdieu’s lens, the Pararakan Agung in Brunei can be seen as a struggle between capital and habitus that synergize within a social field or community. The government’s efforts—manifested through the Sultan’s openness in opening his palace for the Maulid recitation and his willingness to mingle with the public—can be interpreted as an investment of capital. Consequently, the public, captivated by the Sultan’s treatment, will offer their affection and loyalty, enabling the government to win over that social field. Moreover, various activities carried out during the celebration—such as large-scale parades or the wearing of distinctive, eye-catching costumes—can also be interpreted as habits ingrained by the MIB ideology. The public does not feel coerced but has accepted these practices as part of their culture. Thus, the Maulid Nabi celebration featuring the Pararakan Agung can be viewed as an effort by the Sultan and the Brunei government to affirm and enhance their legitimacy within society.

Based on the explanation above, it is clear how Foucault’s concept of discourse-power and Bourdieu’s theory of practice converge perfectly to demonstrate the state’s total legitimacy. The MIB national ideology functions as a Foucauldian regime of truth produced by the Sultanate. Equally important, this state-imposed discourse dictates the rules of the religious sphere (Bourdieu), transforming unconditional loyalty to the monarchy into the most valuable form of social and symbolic capital. The Pararakan Agung is not merely a display of sovereign power (Foucault), but an arena where the people’s habitus of obedience is performatively demonstrated and rewarded, ensuring that no alternative religious discourse can amass enough capital to challenge the monarchy.

#### *Maulid Nabi in Thailand through the Lens of Foucault and Bourdieu: A Form of Self-Defense by Minority Groups*

When viewed against the backdrop of their social and political context, the Muslim community in Pattani—as well as other Muslim communities in Southern Thailand—constitutes a structurally marginalized group. Their relationship with the central government in Bangkok cannot be reduced to mere cultural “pressure” but is rooted in a complex history of conflict involving an ethno-nationalist armed insurgency, territorial disputes, and massive counterterrorism operations and state repression (Jitpiromsri and Chantornvong 2002). It is this political environment—coerced by structural violence and assimilationist policies—that forms the specific landscape within which the resistance of Pattani’s Muslim community operates, in part through the assertion of a Malay cultural identity and an Islamic religious identity that stand in contrast to the Buddhist-majority Thai-Siamese population.

The people of Pattani subsequently made the preservation of their identity a matter of survival. As explained by Liow (2009), Islamic educational institutions (pondok) and the upholding of religious traditions in Southern Thailand function not merely as spaces for the transmission of knowledge, but as primary bastions of cultural defense in mobilizing resistance against educational reforms and the central government’s integration policies (Liow 2009). Within this framework, Muslim communities in the

Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat regions have consistently upheld the use of the Malay language, which plays a central cultural role and holds deep religious significance (Yamirudeng 2018), and tend to enroll their children in public schools with a religious education curriculum (Maduerawa 2021). This cultural resilience is reinforced by the enforcement of local Islamic law, marriage traditions, the Rayo Enam celebration, and the preparation of distinctive culinary dishes such as Asyura porridge (Puspita Sari 2024). Even at the formal level, Muslim politicians have leveraged identity politics to gain seats in parliament, thereby transforming the physical resistance—which had been suppressed by the military—into a movement of political diplomacy (Sattar and Sahoh 2021). Although they continue to strive for unity to strengthen their resistance against state authorities, the Muslim community in Pattani remains marked by social dynamics and differentiation. Although bound by shared ethnicity and religion, older and younger generations differ in perspectives, social status, and future orientations—shaped by Western modernity and intellectual currents from the Arab world—and respond differently (Tuansiri 2017).

Viewed through Foucault's lens in the context of the Prophet's Birthday celebrations, the phenomenon in Southern Thailand presents a sharp contrast to that in Brunei Darussalam. While in Brunei, the Maulid celebration is monopolized by the state as a top-down hegemonic discourse, in Thailand, the celebration of the Prophet's Birthday has emerged as a counter-discourse from minority communities living under the grip of militarization and a history of armed conflict (Jitpiromsri and Chantornvong 2002). The state is positioned as a ruling structure that indirectly compels the Muslim community to reclaim public space. The holding of Maulid celebrations in large-scale open-air venues—such as at Sai Buri Beach—as well as the use of the Malay-language Maulid al-Barzanjī text serve as visible symbols that this ritual mobilizes the masses and articulates an identity the state seeks to suppress. An analysis through Bourdieu's lens underscores how this ritual arena has become a battleground for power. Amid a history of structural violence and state assimilation policies, the Muslim community of Pattani utilizes the Maulid Nabi as a space to reproduce their ethno-religious habitus and accumulate socio-cultural capital. The use of Pattani Malay in the recitation of the Maulid text and religious sermons functions as vital cultural capital for reclaiming symbolic autonomy from the hegemony of the Thai language. Meanwhile, mass gatherings during the Maulid celebrations serve as a means of converting this into social capital, which reinforces internal solidarity in the face of threats of social disintegration and differences in views among groups (Tuansiri 2017).

Ultimately, the dynamics in Pattani reveal a dialectical tension in which Bourdieu's concept of capital accumulation fuels Foucault's concept of resistance movements. The Thai central government seeks to impose a dominant cultural discourse and exercise security control (Jitpiromsri and Chantornvong 2002), but the Pattani community subverts the Maulid al-Nabi celebration into a field for transforming commemorative rituals into instruments of political and cultural survival. The Maulid al-Barzanjī text and the Malay language function as a counter-discourse that validates Foucault's thesis: where there is state power and structural pressure, resistance will emerge, articulated through practices of social and cultural capital.

#### *Dynamics of the Maulid Nabi in Indonesia: Conflict and Competition Between Two Circles*

From Foucault's perspective, Maulid Nabi in Indonesia can be described as a stage for religious authorities to demonstrate their "power". Those who hold this authority can shape societal discourse on whether Maulid Nabi should be celebrated. At Pondok Pesantren Al-Fachriyah, for instance, Maulid Nabi—initiated by Habib Jindan bin Novel and his family—is celebrated with a distinct *Ḥaḍramī* nuance; reciting the *maulid* book *al-Ḍiyā'u al-Lāmī* composed by Habib 'Umar bin Ḥafīz, chanting *Ḥaḍramī*

panegyrics (*kasidah*), accompanied by minimalist musical instrumentation, and delivering lectures that extensively reference the works or stories of the scholars of Tarim. This is a form of religious discourse production manifested by the “ruler”—in this case, the holders of religious authority—which subsequently takes root in the lives of their community. Habib Jindan bin Novel himself is a figure highly respected by many, with a congregation spread across various regions and even internationally (Interview with Abdul Ghaffar—pro-*Maulid Nabi* circle—on June 4, 2026). If the observation is examined through Bourdieu’s lens, it becomes clear that *Maulid Nabi* has since become a deeply rooted habitus in social life. Individuals independently attach meaning to the sequences of events, ranging from the recited *maulid* book, the chanted *kasidah*, the delivered lectures, and other components. Some interpret *Maulid* as a long-standing tradition that must be continuously preserved. Others perceive *Maulid* as a medium for education, an economic intermediary, or even a venue for entertainment to pacify their hearts and sustain their lives. Alongside its development as an ingrained habitus, *Maulid Nabi* in Bourdieu’s theory also evolves as a field. The individuals involved therein possess their respective interests. The elements emerging within this space subsequently grow into valuable “capital”.

Fundamentally, the implementation of *Maulid Nabi* fosters religious capital. The congregation members gather, and their initial rationale for attending is generally love for the Prophet Muhammad, Saw. From there, this capital is converted into social and economic capital. At this juncture, a more complex struggle ensues. Bourdieu’s theory views the *Maulid Nabi* activity as a field replete with internal dynamics, in which multiple parties “compete” in diverse roles. For the *habibs* or religious figures, for example, the *Maulid Nabi* event serves as a platform to reinforce their religious authority. The congregation regards them with reverence, and their words are heeded and obeyed by the adherents. Additionally, local government or police representatives have an opportunity to project a positive image before the congregation. Furthermore, economic actors secure a “market” to generate their livelihood. From the perspective of Foucault’s power-knowledge discourse, the contestation of religious discourse, such as the *Maulid Nabi* celebration, is not merely viewed as a debate on jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Such a phenomenon constitutes a discursive struggle to produce what is referred to as a regime of truth. The circle that chooses not to celebrate *Maulid Nabi* in Indonesia is frequently constructed as a rigid group or one that lacks affection (*mahabbah*) for the Prophet. However, the gathered data clearly indicate a reversal of discourse executed by this circle to deconstruct that very discourse.

Information obtained from the circle opposing the *Maulid Nabi* celebration demonstrates efforts to deconstruct this discourse. They contend that the worship performed by a Muslim must be *tawqifi*, meaning it conforms strictly to the stipulations of the Qur’an and hadith (Interview with Fachri—circle opposing the celebration of *Maulid Nabi*—on June 16 and 17, 2026). They argue that it is by maintaining this purity that love for the Prophet Saw. can be described. They endeavor to consistently revive and follow the Prophet’s Sunnah in every aspect of daily life, rather than through ceremonial events within a specific timeframe. Based on the power-knowledge theory, Foucault states that power does not merely operate from above by “repressing” what is beneath it. Power—according to Foucault—also operates productively through the smallest social networks, such as the family. This can be observed in how the circle opposing *Maulid Nabi* strives to preserve their understanding within their families. They attempt to instill in their families and children an understanding of the purity of tauhid and worship, of teachings deemed *bid’ah*, and of how love for the Prophet Saw. should ideally be expressed. Unconsciously, this process becomes a form of “disciplining” for adherents of similar ideologies, as they guard their families to keep them within the same understanding. Through this transmission process, conducted from an early age and within the smallest sphere, religious knowledge is subsequently

manifested into stable bodily actions.

In their social life, this opposing circle also realizes that they are "surveilled" by the public eye and subject to a particular stigma. Nonetheless, they do not respond heatedly. They choose to rectify misconceptions by restraining their emotions, maintaining gentleness, and remaining actively engaged in fostering good community social relations. This action is taken as a defensive strategy so that their behavior does not validate the negative stigmas circulating in the public arena. Here, it can be observed how the religious discourse produced by the circle with a differing viewpoint subsequently becomes a mechanism of self-control for the opposing circle (which is smaller in number). They monitor their attitude and behavior, and it is expected that the public's perception will become more open, recognizing that they are not as stigmatized as others. Shifting our perspective to examine the opposition through Bourdieu's theory, it becomes evident that their behavior amounts to the instillation of a habitus, which is then converted into capital amid competition within a particular sphere. The opposition's principle of purification can be viewed as a habitus. It is this habitus that is instilled in those closest to them, particularly their families. Within the competitive arena—namely, the religious sphere—this habitus of purification is used as a form of distinction, specifically to differentiate between social-religious classes. Here, the opposition group positions their model of religiosity as a more authentic, pure expression of faith, in accordance with the texts of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, as well as with the rituals practiced by the early generations of Islam. When competing with other groups—the "pro" groups, which generally constitute the majority—the "contra" group possesses one key advantage. This group's primary strength lies in its methodological mastery of tauqifi arguments, a deep understanding of fiqh legal principles regarding bid'ah, and historical knowledge of the lives of Islam's early generations (the *sahabah* and the *tabiin*). When confronted with ideological clashes from the majority group, they possess the resources to argue in a structured, calm, and scripture-based manner. This can then be leveraged to maintain the legitimacy of their position in the public sphere.

Not only that, but the "contra" group—a minority group that is generally isolated from communal celebrations—also compensates for its position by strengthening its internal networks. Shared religious habits and visions (such as being cautious in seeking halal livelihoods and avoiding usury) foster very close bonds of brotherhood and a high level of mutual trust among fellow study group members. This sense of security and mutual trust, in turn, encourages them to collaborate on social matters. It is not uncommon for business relationships, connections in job searches, and even educational preferences among them to arise from these bonds. While they acknowledge that they remain open to collaboration with those of different beliefs, it cannot be denied that this tendency does exist. This religious-social capital then transforms into social, educational, and even economic capital. With the formation of these forms of capital, this group gains greater strength to compete within the existing field. From the explanation above, it is evident that the dynamics in Indonesia have shifted from a state-versus-society conflict to an internal factional struggle within the religious sphere, where various "regimes of truth" clash. For pro-Maulid traditionalists such as those in Al-Fachriyah, their habitus is rooted in cultural acculturation and Hadrami lineage, which they have successfully converted into immense symbolic and economic capital (through networks of muhibbin and alignment with local government). Conversely, the anti-puritan faction employs a defensive strategy of differentiation. They deconstruct the traditionalist discourse by framing their own anti-Maulid stance not as rigidity, but as an authentic embodiment of tawqifi knowledge. Interestingly, while traditionalists dominate the macro level through social capital alone, the Puritans engage in "disciplining" at the micro level within family structures, creating highly trusted networks of economic and educational capital that ensure their survival in an arena dominated by the majority.

### **3.3. Typologies of the Relationship Between Society and the State in the Celebration of the Prophet's Birthday in Southeast Asia**

Based on the above comparison, the celebration of the Prophet's Birthday in Southeast Asia can be categorized as involving a more complex relationship. This indicates a wide variety of relationships between the ruling authorities and Muslim communities:

#### *Monopolistic Hegemony in Brunei Darussalam*

In this case, the state exercises absolute control over the religious sphere. "Pararakan Agung", which serves as a celebration of the Prophet's Birthday, functions as a manifestation of the bureaucratization of religion under the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) ideology. The direct involvement of the Sultan—and the state government—transforms religious rituals into instruments of absolute political legitimacy, in which religious obedience is fully aligned with loyalty to the Sultanate.

#### *Subversive Resistance in Pattani, Thailand*

At this level, religious rituals operate outside the control of the dominant state. Moreover, these rituals function as a space for self-defense. For the Muslim minority community in Pattani, Southern Thailand, the celebration of Maulid Nabi—integrated with the Malay language and ethnic symbols—becomes a means of fostering communal solidarity in response to structural pressures and marginalization by the central government.

#### *Discursive Contestation and Micro-Disciplining in Indonesia*

Unlike Brunei and Thailand, where the struggle is dominated by the state versus society, what is happening in Indonesia reflects the internal dynamics of the Muslim community within a democratic-pluralistic society. The state positions itself as a neutral facilitator, while the religious arena serves as a stage for competition between pro-Maulid traditionalist groups (which accumulate macro-level socioeconomic capital) and anti-Maulid puritan groups (which implement micro-level disciplinary strategies within the family). Through Foucault's lens, these three cases demonstrate that power never operates in isolation, but rather functions productively across various levels of social networks. In Brunei, power operates top-down at the macro level. The Sultan serves as the central hub for the production of religious discourse. The Pararakan Agung affirms "Official Islam," which eliminates the potential for counter-religious discourse, thereby creating a regime of truth that unites ritual piety with political obedience. In Thailand, power operates in a confrontational and dialectical manner. Pressure from the Thai central government subsequently gave rise to a resistance movement. Maulid celebrations in public spaces such as Sai Buri Beach, as well as the use of Malay-language Maulid texts, serve as a counter-discourse that rejects the hegemony of the dominant Siamese-Buddhist culture. In Indonesia, power operates in a capillary and micro-disciplinary manner. The struggle to determine the "regime of truth" regarding the authenticity of Islamic teachings does not occur between the state and the people, but rather among internal factions. Pro-Maulid groups leverage Hadrami religious authority to construct a discourse of *maḥabbah* (love for the Prophet, peace be upon him), while anti-Maulid groups respond through self-discipline and the transmission of *tauqifi* values at the family level as a form of subtle discursive resistance.

A synthesis of Bourdieu's theory of practice reveals how the Maulid Nabi celebration serves as an arena of struggle for navigating and winning social competition. It is evident how capital accumulates and is converted in each arena. In Brunei, for example, the Sultan's openness toward the Maulid celebration is converted into symbolic capital that perpetuates his political power. In Indonesia, pro-Maulid groups—such as those at the Al-Fachriyah Islamic Boarding School—have successfully

converted religious capital into substantial social and economic capital through networks of muhibbin and the MSME market. Conversely, anti-Maulid groups compensate for their limited macro-level social capital by strengthening their methodological-textual capital (mastery of religious arguments) and their internal social capital, based on bonds of economic or educational trust among fellow congregants. Moreover, the process of instilling habitus is also evident in each of these arenas. In Pattani, the tradition of reciting the Maulid and the use of the Malay language have taken root as an ethno-religious habitus that shields the community from external cultural assimilation. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, differing views on the Maulid are exploited by puritanical groups as a means of distinction (spiritual class differentiation), positioning the purification of worship as a more authentic expression of religiosity than the communal traditions of the majority. Overall, this comparative analysis demonstrates that the celebration of Maulid Nabi in Southeast Asia is not merely a uniform historical commemoration. The form, meaning, and social function of Maulid are largely determined by the structure of the local political arena, the relational position of Muslims vis-à-vis the authorities, and the actors' ability to manage their sociocultural capital.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the celebration of Maulid Nabi in Southeast Asia does not merely serve as a historical commemoration or a static cultural ritual, but functions as a dynamic socio-political instrument. In Brunei Darussalam, the Pararakan Agung is utilized to strengthen the Sultan's legitimacy and authority. In Pattani (Southern Thailand), the celebration has been revived by the Muslim minority community to consolidate ethno-religious identity and resist structural pressures from the central government. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the celebration in the modern era—as represented by the dynamics at the Al-Fachriyah Islamic Boarding School—has evolved into an arena of internal contestation between pro-Maulid traditionalist groups and anti-Maulid puritan groups vying for the "regime of truth." As its primary academic contribution, this study formulates a "Multidimensional Socio-Political Ritual Framework" that maps ritual functions based on three core criteria: (1) the architecture of the political regime, (2) the demographic position of the community, and (3) the direction of power flows. This framework is applicable to studies of other communal religious rituals that meet three conditions: (a) non-canonical or commemorative rituals involving broad public participation, (b) active interaction between authorities and the community, and (c) ongoing dynamics of discourse formation and capital negotiation within local social structures. Theoretically, this study demonstrates that Foucault's discourse-power theory and Bourdieu's theory of practice can be synthesized as complementary analytical lenses to uncover the intersection between structural authority and micro-agency in Muslim societies. Ultimately, this research opens opportunities for future studies to test, refine, and expand this framework across other Muslim regions and communities.

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