RECLAIMING EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY: THE ROLE OF MUSLIM MUSEUM CURATORS IN SHAPING HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This article explores the epistemic authority of museum curators in shaping public understanding of history, culture, and identity. Far from being neutral custodians of artifacts, curators act as powerful agents who construct narratives through selective interpretation, exhibition design, and textual framing. Drawing on critical museological literature, the article examines how colonial and nationalist ideologies have historically influenced curatorial practices, often marginalizing alternative worldviews. It further introduces Islamic perspectives, particularly the tawhid worldview, the ethics of adab, and the maqāṣid al-sharīʿah as frameworks for ethical and spiritually grounded curatorship. The article argues for a decolonial and epistemically just approach to museum practice, urging Muslim curators to reclaim their narrative agency and contribute to intellectually liberating and dignified representations of history and culture.

K**eywords**: epistemic authority, decolonial museology, Islamic curatorship, Tawhid worldview

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INTRODUCTION

Museums have long been perceived as neutral institutions dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of historical and cultural knowledge. However, contemporary critical scholarship challenges this assumption, revealing museums as sites of epistemic power where knowledge is curated, interpreted, and legitimized through selective narratives (Morse, 2013). At the center of this process stands the curator, an individual endowed with the authority to determine which stories are told, which artifacts are displayed, and how these elements are framed for public consumption.
This epistemic authority is not merely technical; it is ideological. Curators operate within broader socio-political contexts shaped by colonial legacies, nationalist agendas, and institutional biases. The selection of artifacts, the language of exhibition texts, and the framing of historical narratives often reflect dominant power structures, marginalizing alternative voices and worldviews. As such, museums become arenas of cultural negotiation, where knowledge is not only preserved but also contested and redefined.

In response to these challenges, this article proposes a reimagining of curatorial practice through an Islamic lens. Drawing on the tawhid worldview, which emphasizes the unity of knowledge and existence, the ethics of adab (proper conduct), and the maqāṣid al-sharīʿah (objectives of Islamic law), it explores how Muslim curators can engage in ethically grounded and spiritually conscious museology. This approach seeks to transcend Western epistemic dominance by constructing narratives that are just, dignified, and intellectually liberating.

By integrating Islamic principles into curatorial frameworks, Muslim curators can reclaim their epistemic agency and contribute to a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of history and culture. This article thus calls for a decolonial shift in museum practice—one that recognizes the curator not only as a custodian of objects but as a moral and intellectual agent shaping the future of public knowledge.

EPISTEMIC POWER AND THE MUSEUM AS A SITE OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The concept of epistemic power is rooted in the Greek term epistēmē, meaning "knowledge." In philosophical discourse, epistemology refers to the study of knowledge, its origins, nature, limitations, and legitimacy. It raises fundamental questions such as: What constitutes valid knowledge? How do we determine the truth of a claim? And who holds the authority to define what is accepted as knowledge within a society?

In this context, epistemic power refers to the ability of individuals or institutions to shape and legitimize what is considered "true" or "official" knowledge. This power is not merely theoretical; it is exercised through mechanisms of selection, authorization, and dissemination. Institutions such as schools, media, and museums play a central role in this process. Schools determine curricula and educational standards, media outlets decide which events are newsworthy and how they are framed, and museums curate historical narratives and cultural memory.

Among these institutions, museums occupy a unique position as custodians of tangible heritage and interpreters of intangible meaning. Far from being neutral repositories of artifacts, museums are active sites of knowledge production. Curators, in particular, function as epistemic gatekeepers. Their decisions regarding which artifacts to display, which historical facts to emphasize or omit, and which perspectives to legitimize have profound implications for public understanding.

Through these curatorial choices, museums shape collective memory and cultural identity, often reinforcing dominant ideologies while marginalizing alternative voices.

The work of Michel Foucault is particularly influential in understanding the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault (1980) argued that knowledge is not independent of power but is produced through power relations embedded in social institutions. Those who control the production and dissemination of knowledge also shape the frameworks through which reality is understood. In the museum context, this means that curators do not merely present facts; they construct narratives that reflect worldviews and political interests.

Recognizing the epistemic power of curators is therefore essential. It opens the door to intellectual and moral accountability, encouraging curators to reflect critically on their role and responsibilities. Moreover, it supports the inclusion of diverse epistemologies, including non-Western, Islamic, and Indigenous perspectives. By acknowledging the ideological dimensions of curatorial practice, museums can move toward more ethical, inclusive, and pluralistic representations of history and culture.

This recognition is particularly urgent in postcolonial contexts, where museums have historically served as instruments of imperial ideology. The privileging of Western narratives and the marginalization of local or spiritual knowledge systems have contributed to epistemic injustice. In response, scholars and practitioners have called for a decolonial turn in museology, one that challenges Eurocentric assumptions and embraces alternative frameworks of knowledge (Smith, 2012; Boast, 2011).

In this light, the role of Muslim curators becomes especially significant. By drawing on Islamic epistemological principles such as the tawhid worldview, the ethics of adab, and the objectives of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, Muslim curators can offer ethically grounded and spiritually conscious alternatives to dominant curatorial paradigms. This approach not only reclaims epistemic agency but also contributes to a more just and dignified representation of human history and cultural diversity.

Islamic epistemology offers a distinct approach to knowledge that contrasts sharply with secular Western museological traditions. Scholars such as Ibn Khaldun, al-Farabi, and al-Ghazali emphasized the integration of reason (ʿaql), revelation (wahy), and ethics (adab) in the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. Ibn Khaldun, for instance, viewed history not merely as a record of events but as a science of civilization (ʿilm al-ʿumrān) that must be interpreted through moral and metaphysical lenses. Al-Farabi advocated for the harmonization of philosophy and prophecy, suggesting that true knowledge must serve both intellectual and spiritual ends. These perspectives challenge the dominant Western museological model, which often isolates artifacts from their theological and ethical contexts, reducing them to aesthetic or anthropological objects. By contrast, an Islamic museology rooted in tawhid seeks to reconnect objects with their divine purpose, encouraging curators to frame exhibitions as acts of remembrance (dhikr) and reflection (tadhakkur), rather than mere displays of cultural capital.

EPISTEMOLOGY AND EPISTEMIC POWER: A COMPARATIVE AND ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON CURATORSHIP

To understand the epistemic authority of museum curators, it is essential to first distinguish between philosophical epistemology and institutional epistemic power. Philosophical epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. It asks foundational questions such as: What is knowledge? How do we know something is true? What are the legitimate sources of knowledge? These inquiries are typically pursued by philosophers, theologians, and intellectuals through conceptual analysis, logical reasoning, and theories of truth.

In contrast, epistemic power within museums refers to the institutional capacity exercised primarily by curators to shape and control public knowledge. This power manifests through decisions about which artifacts are deemed significant, which historical narratives are legitimized, and whose voices are represented. Curators, heritage authorities, and museum institutions collectively act as agents of epistemic authority, influencing collective memory and cultural identity through exhibition design, object selection, and interpretive texts.

While philosophical epistemology seeks to understand the structure of knowledge, epistemic power in museums is concerned with the dissemination and framing of knowledge. The former is theoretical and abstract; the latter is practical and ideological. For example, philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, Kant, al-Ghazali, and Foucault have contributed to epistemological theory, whereas museologists like Tony Bennett, Sharon Macdonald, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Farish Noor have critically examined how museums function as sites of power and narrative control.

This distinction is crucial because it highlights the ethical implications of curatorial practice. Whereas philosophical inquiry aims at truth and understanding, museum curatorship often serves institutional agendas, shaping "official history" and reinforcing dominant ideologies. Critics have noted that museums frequently perpetuate colonial narratives, erase alternative histories, and marginalize non-Western perspectives. In response, contemporary museology advocates for decolonial approaches, community-based exhibitions, and the inclusion of Islamic and Indigenous epistemologies.

From an Islamic perspective, knowledge (ʿilm) is not merely an intellectual pursuit but a sacred trust (amānah) and a form of worship (ʿibādah). The Qur'an and Hadith emphasize the ethical responsibility of those who possess knowledge. For instance, the verse "Indeed, those who fear Allah among His servants are the scholars" (Surah Fāṭir: 28) and the prophetic saying "Do not conceal knowledge" (Ahmad & Tirmidhi) underscore the moral duty to convey truth and avoid distortion.

Applied to the museum context, this means that Muslim curators must approach their epistemic role with integrity, humility, and a sense of divine accountability. The selection of artifacts and historical narratives should be guided by the intention to foster awareness and spiritual reflection, not to serve political or ideological propaganda. Exhibition texts must be truthful and wise, avoiding manipulation or sensationalism. Sacred objects and Islamic heritage must be treated with reverence, and curators should ensure that Islamic voices are represented authentically, rather than filtered through Western paradigms.

Islamic epistemology also challenges the dominance of secular and colonial frameworks that exclude revelation, marginalize religious scholars, and portray Islamic history as stagnant or uncivilized. Muslim curators must critically engage with such narratives, resisting orientalist

representations and promoting a more balanced and dignified portrayal of Islamic civilization. To fulfill this role, curators can draw on key Islamic principles:

- Sidq (truthfulness): Present historical facts honestly and transparently.
- ʿAdl (justice): Avoid bias and ensure fair representation of diverse narratives.
- Amānah (trust): Treat curatorial authority as a responsibility, not a privilege.
- Tawāḍuʿ (humility): Recognize that curators are not the sole arbiters of truth; involve scholars and communities.
- Maṣlaḥah (public benefit): Ensure exhibitions serve the intellectual and spiritual well-being of society.

Finally, the empowerment of Islamic epistemic authority in museums requires structural transformation. This includes developing a curatorial framework rooted in revelation (wahy), classical scholarship (turāth), and the higher objectives of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharīʿah). It also involves engaging religious scholars, cultural historians, and community members in exhibition planning. Narrative construction should incorporate methods such as taḥqīq (critical verification), tadhakkur (remembrance), tazakkur (reflection), and ʿibrah (moral insight), aligning historical interpretation with spiritual purpose. In doing so, Muslim curators can replace dominant Western epistemic models with a tawḥīdic paradigm, one that views history not merely as a sequence of events but as a journey toward divine truth and human dignity.

The Curator as an Agent of Epistemic Power

In contemporary museology, the role of the curator extends far beyond the preservation of artifacts. Curators function as agents of epistemic power, shaping the structure and content of historical and cultural knowledge presented to the public. This authority operates subtly yet significantly through mechanisms of selection, framing, and interpretation. Every curatorial decision, whether to include, exclude, or emphasize a particular object or narrative, carries epistemic consequences that influence collective memory and societal understanding.

Mechanisms of Selection and Filtration

The power of selection is central to curatorial practice. Curators determine which artifacts are deemed “important” or “worthy” of exhibition, which themes are highlighted, and which aspects of history are foregrounded or forgotten. These decisions are not neutral; they reflect ideological frameworks and institutional priorities. In colonial contexts, curatorial choices were often driven by orientalist agendas that sought to reinforce stereotypes and justify imperial domination.

Western curators in the 19th and early 20th centuries frequently selected artworks and artifacts that portrayed Arab-Islamic societies as violent, primitive, and hypersexualized. Paintings such as Jean-Léon Gérôme’s The Snake Charmer (c. 1879), which depicts a naked child before a leering Arab man, and Ingres’ The Grand Odalisque (1814), which exoticizes Eastern women as passive objects of desire, exemplify this trend. Similarly, Eugène Delacroix’s The Women of Algiers in their Apartment (1834) presents a sensualized harem scene, reinforcing orientalist fantasies of Eastern decadence.

These visual narratives served to dehumanize Muslim societies and legitimize colonial interventions under the guise of civilizing missions. The portrayal of Islamic cultures as morally corrupt and intellectually stagnant provided ideological support for imperial claims to moral and cultural superiority.

Colonial Curatorship in The Malay-Islamic Context

Similar patterns of epistemic manipulation occurred in colonial representations of Malay-Islamic societies. British and Dutch colonial artists and ethnographers often depicted Malays as weak, lazy, and unproductive. Malay rulers were portrayed as tyrannical and indulgent, surrounded by harems and luxury. Religious scholars were shown as backward and intimidating, often in dark, ominous settings.

Examples include early 19th-century paintings by Charles Dyce and William Daniell, which depict "Malay Chiefs" accompanied by servants and concubines. Archival photographs from figures like Stamford Raffles and Richard Wilkinson present Malay palaces as exotic spaces of indulgence and sensuality. Museums such as the Tropenmuseum and Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands have historically curated Malay culture through a lens of primitivism and exoticism, emphasizing animistic rituals and magical beliefs over intellectual or political achievements.

Colonial texts further reinforced these stereotypes, claiming that Malays lacked material civilization and lived according to superstition and custom. Consequently, museum exhibitions often prioritized artifacts that highlighted mystical or sensual elements, while ignoring contributions to Islamic scholarship, governance, and moral philosophy.

Epistemic Consequences of Curatorial Bias

These curatorial strategies were not accidental; they constituted deliberate epistemic interventions designed to elevate Western civilization while diminishing the dignity and complexity of Islamic societies. By controlling the visual and textual narratives within museums, colonial curators shaped public perceptions and institutionalized epistemic injustice.

The impact of such curatorship extends beyond aesthetics, it influences how societies understand their past, how identities are constructed, and how cultural legitimacy is assigned. The erasure of Islamic intellectual heritage and the distortion of historical narratives contribute to a broader marginalization of Muslim voices in global discourse.

Islamic Ethical Frameworks for Curatorship

In response to these challenges, Islamic epistemology offers a framework for ethical and spiritually grounded curatorship. Knowledge (ʿilm) in Islam is a divine trust (amānah) and must be conveyed with truthfulness (sidq), justice (ʿadl), and humility (tawāḍuʿ). Curators, as stewards of cultural memory, bear the responsibility to present history with integrity and wisdom.

Islamic principles demand that curators avoid manipulation and bias, respect sacred objects and heritage, and include diverse voices, especially those rooted in Islamic tradition. Exhibitions should serve the public good (maṣlaḥah), foster awareness, and inspire reflection (tadhakkur, ʿibrah). The curatorial process must be guided by a tawḥīdic worldview that sees history as a means of

returning to divine truth and cultivating moral consciousness. By embracing these principles, Muslim curators can challenge dominant epistemic paradigms and contribute to a more just, inclusive, and spiritually resonant museology.

Curatorship and Ideological Narratives: Museums as Sites of Selective History

Curators are not merely custodians of cultural artifacts; they are authors of historical narratives. Every museum exhibition is shaped by ideological frameworks, whether colonial, nationalist, secular, or liberal, that influence the selection of themes, the arrangement of galleries, and the style of storytelling. These frameworks are often embedded subtly within curatorial decisions, yet they wield significant epistemic power. Curators determine whose voices are amplified and whose histories are silenced, thereby shaping public understanding of identity, heritage, and civilization.

Colonial and Eurocentric Ideologies in Museum Narratives

Western museums have historically curated exhibitions through a colonial lens that positions the Islamic world and the East as the "Other." This ideological framing portrays non-Western societies as irrational, mystical, and incapable of producing their own historical narratives. For instance, institutions such as the British Museum often display Islamic artifacts such as astrolabes, manuscripts, and weaponry without contextualizing their spiritual, legal, or philosophical significance. These objects are presented as exotic curiosities rather than as products of a sophisticated epistemological tradition rooted in tawhid and shariah.

Similarly, exhibitions like the "Islamic World" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) emphasize the aesthetic beauty of Islamic art while neglecting its intellectual and devotional dimensions. Islam is reduced to ornamentation, stripped of its philosophical depth and civilizational purpose. This aestheticization reinforces orientalist tropes that disconnect Islamic heritage from its theological and ethical foundations.

Nation-Building Ideologies in Postcolonial Museums

In postcolonial contexts such as Malaysia and Indonesia, museum narratives are often shaped by state-driven nationalism. Curators are tasked with constructing a cohesive national identity, frequently at the expense of Islamic historical narratives. Exhibitions tend to frame colonial history as beginning with Western arrival, thereby erasing the sovereignty and sophistication of precolonial Islamic polities such as the Sultanates of Pahang, Johor, Aceh, and Brunei.

Religious artifacts and scholarly traditions are often marginalized or reclassified as "local customs" rather than expressions of Islamic law and intellectual heritage. National museums prioritize secular heroes, colonial administrators, and bureaucrats while downplaying figures of Islamic resistance such as Dato' Bahaman, whose jihad against British rule is rarely presented within an Islamic framework.

Erasure of Alternative Narratives

Museums frequently exclude or diminish the narratives of scholars, women, grassroots communities, and religious minorities. Artifacts related to Sufism, madrasah education, and Islamic scholarship are displayed only when they fit into folkloric or cultural categories, rather than being recognized as institutions of knowledge and spiritual refinement. For example, exhibitions on Malay history often omit references to the Hukum Kanun Pahang, a classical Islamic legal code, while highlighting secular legal systems such as the Undang-undang 99 Perak. Similarly, exhibitions on women's heritage rarely include female Islamic scholars, instead focusing on contemporary cultural figures. These omissions reflect a broader epistemic strategy that privileges secular and nationalist narratives over Islamic ones.

Narrative Framing Through Labels and Visual Design

Museum labels and visual arrangements are powerful tools of epistemic framing. Short texts and captions may appear neutral, but they carry ideological weight through word choice, tone, and context. A label describing Arab missionaries as "bringing Islam to the archipelago" may inadvertently erase the agency of local scholars and communities. Describing dhikr instruments as "folk mystical objects" diminishes their spiritual significance and misrepresents Sufism as superstition.

Visual layout also shapes interpretation. Islamic artifacts displayed without reference to the Qur'an, madrasah, or shariah suggest that Islam is merely decorative. Placing colonial figures alongside Malay rulers in galleries titled "State Development" implies that progress was achieved through colonial collaboration, obscuring the realities of imperial domination. Examples of visual manipulation include:

- European museums are placing Islamic weapons near exhibits labelled "Eastern barbarism," reinforcing stereotypes of violence.
- Local museums displaying portraits of sultans with British officials under themes of "peaceful cooperation," sanitizing colonial exploitation.
- Subtle Strategies of Epistemic Distortion

Curatorial strategies often involve:

- Absence of Islamic interpretation: Manuscripts are labelled as "beautiful calligraphy" without theological explanation.
- Neutralized language: Terms like "cultural encounter" replace more accurate descriptors such as "colonial invasion" or "heritage theft."
- Contextless objects: Islamic gravestones are presented without reference to maqāṣid al-janāzah or farāʾiḍ, reducing them to mere historical stones.

These practices obscure the ethical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of Islamic heritage, reinforcing secular and orientalist narratives.

MUSEUMS AS SYMBOLIC SITES OF TRUTH

Museums are widely perceived as authoritative sources of knowledge. Exhibitions are assumed to be historically accurate, scientifically objective, and academically valid. This symbolic power grants curators the ability to define "truth" without necessarily engaging in public or scholarly debate. As a result, curatorial decisions carry significant epistemic weight, often without ethical scrutiny.

The Ethical Accountability of Curators

Despite their influence, curators are rarely held accountable for the epistemic implications of their work. Key issues include:

- Lack of review mechanisms by source communities (e.g., Indigenous peoples, Muslim scholars).
- Dominance of Eurocentric or elitist narratives.
- Curators being regarded as "experts" despite lacking cultural or religious ties to the artifacts they curate.

To address these concerns, scholars advocate for:

- Community engagement: Involving source communities in curatorial decisions.
- Collaborative curation: Sharing authority with diverse stakeholders.
- Epistemic pluralism: Embracing multiple knowledge systems, including Islamic, Indigenous, and grassroots perspectives.

Muslim curators must cultivate epistemic awareness and ethical responsibility. By returning to the Islamic worldview and curating with adab, justice, and spiritual purpose, they can reconstruct museum narratives that honor the dignity and depth of Islamic civilization.

Critiquing The Epistemic Power of Curators: Towards Ethical and Inclusive Museology

While curators are often regarded as guardians of cultural heritage, a growing body of postcolonial scholarship and grassroots heritage activism has begun to challenge their role as the sole narrators of history. These critiques highlight the imbalance of power, the injustice of representation, and the erasure of alternative epistemologies, particularly those belonging to Indigenous communities, Muslim societies, and marginalized groups.

DECONSTRUCTING CURATORIAL AUTHORITY: WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO TELL HISTORY?

Central to this critique is the question of authority: Who is granted the power to represent history? Are curatorial narratives inherently valid and truthful? Why are the voices of communities who own the heritage often excluded from the storytelling process?

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), in her seminal work Decolonizing Methodologies, argues that historical narratives constructed by outsiders frequently erase Indigenous knowledge systems. In the museum context, curators function not as neutral custodians but as filters of knowledge, often privileging institutional ideologies over communal values. Smith's assertion "To research is to steal. To curate without context is to colonize" underscores the ethical urgency of rethinking curatorial practice.

Marginalized Narratives and Silenced Voices

Curators frequently exclude or downplay:

- The voices of local Islamic scholars and institutions,
- Narratives of jihad, spiritual resistance, and tawḥīdic knowledge,
- Perspectives of women, rural communities, and traditional custodians.

For example, in exhibitions on colonial history, figures such as Dato' Bahaman or Sheikh Daud al-Fatani are often omitted or portrayed as irrelevant due to their perceived lack of moderation. Communities that possess cultural objects such as heirs of keris or manuscript traditions are rarely consulted in the construction of museum narratives. This exclusion reflects a broader epistemic injustice that privileges institutional authority over lived experience and spiritual heritage.

CALLS FOR DECOLONIZING CURATORIAL PRACTICE

Decolonization in the museum context involves restoring epistemic agency to source communities, embracing alternative narratives rooted in tawhid, Sufism, and grassroots knowledge, and challenging the monopoly of colonial, secular, and elitist institutions. Recent initiatives exemplify this shift:

- Living museums operated by Indigenous communities, such as the Māori in New Zealand, foreground local epistemologies and cultural autonomy.
- Co-curation models in European museums involve collaboration with Islamic and African diasporas, allowing for more inclusive and representative exhibitions.
- The "1001 Inventions" exhibition showcases the scientific contributions of the Islamic world through an Islamic narrative lens, emphasizing the integration of faith and reason.

These models demonstrate the potential for curatorial practice to become more ethical, participatory, and epistemically plural.

ISLAMIC ETHICS AND THE CURATOR'S TRUST

In Islamic tradition, epistemic power is not an absolute right but a sacred trust (amānah) that demands truthfulness (al-ḥaqq), justice (ʿadl), and wisdom (ḥikmah) guided by adab. Imam al-Shāfiʿī's statement "Knowledge is light, and the light of Allah is not given to the treacherous" reminds us that knowledge must be handled with integrity and spiritual consciousness. Muslim curators must

therefore reframe their role not as authoritative narrators but as ethical stewards of knowledge. This involves:

- Applying the principles of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah to ensure exhibitions benefit the community and promote moral awareness.
- Embedding tawhid and ta'dīb al-ʿilm in narrative construction, linking history to divine purpose and human dignity.
- Engaging with scholars, communities, and spiritual traditions to ensure that curatorial decisions reflect the depth and diversity of Islamic civilization.

By embracing these principles, Muslim curators can challenge dominant paradigms and contribute to a museology that is just, inclusive, and spiritually resonant.

MUSEUMS AND THE POWER OF CIVILIZATIONAL FORMATION

Museums are not merely physical spaces for displaying artifacts; they are symbolic arenas for shaping civilization. As agents of epistemic power, curators contribute to the structuring of collective memory and the transmission of values that underpin societal identity. Historically, museums have played a central role in constructing national narratives and legitimizing state ideologies. The British Museum, for instance, served as a repository of imperial identity; the Louvre helped cultivate French cultural pride; and the Smithsonian Institution curated the historical consciousness of the United States.

In each of these cases, curators exercised narrative control to reinforce the civilizational legitimacy of the modern nation-state. Exhibitions were designed to affirm the historical continuity, moral superiority, and cultural sophistication of the dominant power. This model of museology, while effective in nation-building, often excluded alternative epistemologies and marginalized non-Western histories.

For the Islamic world, this curatorial power can be harnessed more transparently and ethically. Muslim curators who construct historical narratives grounded in tawhid, ʿilm, and maqāṣid al-sharīʿah contribute to a civilization rooted in revelation. Exhibitions that highlight Islamic scholarship, social justice, and spiritual resistance (fi sabīlillāh) foster a dignified and conscious ummatic identity. For example, curating the early Islamization of the Malay Archipelago, the role of scholarly centers such as Aceh and Patani, and the anti-colonial struggles of figures like Tok Janggut and Dato' Bahaman, represents a form of curatorship that rebuilds civilization through the power of knowledge. In this paradigm, the curator is no longer a passive exhibitor but an active cultivator of civilizational vision.

COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF MUSEUMS

Colonial discourse in museology extends beyond the forced acquisition of objects; it permeates the ways in which cultures are defined, interpreted, and presented. Colonial museums framed the non-Western world as exotic, backward, and in need of Western salvation. This framing was not incidental; it was a strategic epistemic maneuver to justify imperial domination and cultural hegemony.

Decolonizing the museum is a transformative process that seeks to dismantle entrenched colonial narratives and reconstruct the epistemological foundations of museums to embrace

Indigenous, Islamic, and other non-hegemonic voices. This effort demands a critical reassessment of how artifacts are interpreted, challenging the dominant frameworks that often impose Western meanings onto objects with rich, diverse origins. It also involves confronting the persistent positioning of Western narratives as central, while relegating Eastern and non-Western perspectives to the margins. Furthermore, decolonization calls into question curatorial leadership structures that frequently exclude representatives from source communities, thereby perpetuating a lack of authentic representation and voice.

To achieve meaningful decolonization, museums must adopt strategies that prioritize justice, inclusivity, and cultural integrity. These include the repatriation of artifacts to their countries of origin, acknowledging the rightful ownership and cultural significance of these objects. Collaborative curation with local and source communities is essential, ensuring that exhibitions reflect lived experiences and indigenous knowledge systems. Narrative reconstruction grounded in Islamic worldviews and local heritage offers a powerful counterbalance to dominant Western paradigms, enriching the museum's interpretive scope. Finally, a critical revision of exhibition language and labeling practices is necessary to eliminate stereotypes and foster a more respectful and accurate portrayal of diverse cultures. Through these measures, museums can evolve into spaces of dialogue, healing, and shared authority.

An Islamic curatorial model emphasizes tawhid and adab, viewing objects not as mere material items but as sacred trusts of history and revelation. Exhibitions become acts of worship and education, designed to elevate understanding and spiritual awareness.

THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MUSLIM CURATORS IN CRITICAL THOUGHT

Muslim curators bear a unique responsibility to activate critical thought and ethical reflection in their audiences. Their role is not limited to transferring information but extends to cultivating adab and hikmah in the presentation of knowledge. This involves curating exhibitions that provoke contemplation and foster intellectual and spiritual engagement.

One exemplary model is the British Museum's 2012 exhibition The Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam, which framed the pilgrimage not merely as a ritual but as a profound intellectual and spiritual experience. The exhibition posed critical questions such as: "What does Hajj mean in the modern world?" and "How does collective worship shape the image of Islam?" (MacGregor, 2012).

Similarly, the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha, Qatar, organizes its galleries thematically *Ilm* (knowledge), *Iman* (faith), and *Seni* (art) and integrates Qur'anic verses into its displays. This approach encourages visitors to reflect on the relationship between aesthetics, knowledge, and divine purpose (MIA Exhibition Guidebook).

Muslim curators must also challenge dominant Western narratives by constructing alternative histories rooted in justice and truth. The British Museum's Hidden Histories of Exploration (2009) offers a model for this, presenting colonial exploration through the voices of local communities and documents that expose exploitation (Thomas, 2009). The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM) similarly resists orientalist framing by showcasing Islamic contributions to architecture and spatial knowledge, countering the myth that Islamic civilization is merely decorative. Through these efforts, Muslim curators can become agents of epistemic justice, restoring dignity to Islamic history and offering spiritually resonant alternatives to secular museology.

CONCLUSION

The museum curator is far more than a caretaker of artifacts; they are a powerful epistemic agent who shapes historical discourse, cultural identity, and civilizational consciousness. In postcolonial and Islamic contexts, this role demands critical reflection and ethical responsibility. Curators must interrogate their positionality and the ideological frameworks that inform their narratives. They must ask not only what is being displayed, but also why, for whom, and with what consequences. The epistemic power of curators must be balanced with the amānah of knowledge, an Islamic principle that demands truthfulness, justice, and humility. This includes openness to community voices, respect for alternative narratives, and a commitment to curatorial practices that are inclusive, reflective, and spiritually conscious. An Islamic approach to curatorship integrates ʿilm (knowledge), adab (ethics), and maqāṣid al-sharīʿah (higher objectives of Islamic law), ensuring that exhibitions are not only informative but also morally and intellectually transformative. In this light, the curator is not merely a narrator of the past but a builder of the future. Through just and truthful storytelling, grounded in revelation and ethical responsibility, curators can contribute to the formation of a civilization that is dignified, enlightened, and rooted in divine purpose.

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