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To cite this article: Af'idatul Husniyah, Yulianto Yulianto & Millatuz Zakiyah (02 Mar 2026): *Pegon as vernacular heritage literacy: a qualitative study in East Java Pesantren*, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2026.2635642](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2026.2635642)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2026.2635642>



Published online: 02 Mar 2026.



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Pegon as vernacular heritage literacy: a qualitative study in East Java *Pesantren*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the *Pegon* script as a vernacular writing system and heritage literacy practice in Islamic *pesantren* in East Java, Indonesia. *Pegon* – an adaptation of Arabic script used for Javanese, Sundanese, and Madurese – has long been written as diagonal annotations alongside Arabic source texts and has supported the study of core Islamic disciplines since at least the seventeenth century. While prior research has approached *Pegon* historically, philologically, linguistically, and culturally, fewer studies have investigated how it is practiced and valued in everyday *pesantren* life. Drawing on a heritage literacy framework, we conducted a qualitative study using unstructured interviews with eleven participants, informal conversations, and ethnographically informed field observations with three participants across several *pesantren*. The findings show that *Pegon* functions as an interpretive and pedagogical scaffold for reading *kitab kuning*, enabling precise, word-by-word engagement with classical Arabic texts. At the same time, *Pegon* mediates Islamic learning through Javanese linguistic resources, transmitting local cultural knowledge, etiquette, and worldview. *Pegon* is sustained through intergenerational pedagogies and serves as a marker of *pesantren* identity and scholarly legitimacy.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 December 2025
Accepted 16 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Pegon; heritage literacy;
Pesantren; *Kitab kuning*;
Vernacular script

Introduction

This study examines how the *Pegon* script functions as a living heritage literacy practice in East Java *pesantren*. While previous research has focused on historical, philological, linguistic, and cultural aspects of *Pegon*, this study highlights its everyday use, pedagogical roles, and cultural significance in contemporary *pesantren* life. The *Pegon* script holds a unique position in the linguistic and cultural fabric of Islamic education in Indonesia. *Pegon* is more than a technical adaptation of Arabic letters; in many Indonesian *pesantren* it functions as an everyday literacy practice through which students engage with Islamic texts and local scholarly traditions. Conceptually, *Pegon* can be situated alongside other Arabic-script vernacular traditions in Southeast Asia, but it is distinct in both linguistic target and local function. Unlike the Jawi script – an Arabic-script adaptation aligned with Malay phonology and widely used across the Malay world (Abdullah et al. 2020; Coluzzi 2022) – *Pegon* refers to the adaptation of Arabic script for Javanese, Sundanese, Indonesian, and Madurese phonologies (Umam 2011). In practice, *Pegon* frequently appears as diagonal annotations and marginal commentary in classical Islamic texts, enabling learners to navigate complex Arabic materials

through locally meaningful linguistic resources. In this way, *Pegon* has been described as a creative response to the linguistic needs of Indonesian Muslim communities, one that grounds Islamic intellectual traditions in the cultural and linguistic realities of the archipelago (Bhatt 2024; Umam 2011).

The social setting in which *Pegon* is most strongly maintained is the *pesantren*, an indigenous Islamic educational institution found not only across Java but also throughout other regions of Indonesia (Dhofier 2011; Umam 2011). In these boarding schools, *santri* (students) typically live and study within a community organised around instruction and moral formation under the authority of *kyai* (teachers and leaders of *pesantren*), *bu nyai* (female teachers and leaders of *pesantren*), and also *ustadz* (male teachers) and *ustadzah* (female teachers). This pedagogical arrangement supports an intergenerational chain of religious knowledge transmission that shapes both how texts are taught and how literacy practices are reproduced over time (Umam 2011; Zakiyah et al. 2025).

Historically, *Pegon* is often linked to influential figures such as Sunan Ampel and Nawawi al-Bantani, whose teachings and manuscript traditions contributed to the development of localised Islamic scholarship in Java. From at least the seventeenth century, *Pegon* has served as a key medium for studying central Islamic disciplines, including *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), Tawhid (theology), and *Tasawuf* (Sufism) (Umam 2011). Its continuing presence in *pesantren* materials is therefore not merely instrumental; it also indexes a longer process through which Islamic knowledge has been articulated within local linguistic ecologies, reinforcing the embeddedness of religious learning in vernacular forms (Afifah and Sirojudin 2022).

While previous scholarship has explored *Pegon* from historical (Abdullah et al. 2020; Choeroni, Madrah, and Aziz 2019; Umam 2011), philological (van Bruinessen 1990; 1994), linguistic (Hula et al. 2022), and cultural perspectives (Aliyah 2018; Apologia 2023), little research has examined it as a living heritage literacy practiced in everyday *pesantren* life. As *pesantren* continue to navigate modern educational reforms, increased access to digital resources, and shifting language preferences among younger generations, understanding how *Pegon* is learned, used, and valued becomes increasingly important. Exploring these dynamics provides insight not only into the preservation of indigenous literacy practices but also into the evolving multilingual landscape of Islamic education in Indonesia.

Literature review

Pegon, Kitab Kuning, and Pesantren

Until the 1960s, Indonesian Muslims were broadly divided into two major groups: the *traditionalists*, represented by *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), and the *modernists*, represented by *Muhammadiyah* (Bruinessen 1990). This division was reflected not only in their religious interpretations but also in the textual traditions and scripts they embraced. Traditionalists relied heavily on *kitab kuning*, the classical Islamic texts that form the foundation of *pesantren* scholarship (Dhofier 2011). Within the *pesantren* context, the study of *kitab kuning* is not merely an academic requirement but a defining characteristic of the institution, which makes discussions of *Pegon* inseparable from both *pesantren* practices and the centrality of these texts (Afifah and Sirojudin 2022).

Kitab kuning, written in unvowelled Arabic, remains the core instructional materials in traditional *pesantren* (Yusri 2020). The term originated from the yellow paper on which these texts were traditionally printed, chosen for its readability under dim lighting conditions common in earlier rural learning environments (Afifah and Sirojudin 2022). Over time, *kitab kuning* has come to symbolise not merely the physical books but the broader tradition of NU-affiliated Islamic scholarship and pedagogy that they embody (Bruinessen 1990, 1994). Because these texts lack harakat (vowel markings), *santri* must first master *ilmu alat*, the foundational sciences of Arabic grammar, including *nahwu* (syntax) and *sharaf* (morphology) to interpret the texts effectively (Aliyah 2018).

To assist in understanding *kitab kuning*, *pesantren* frequently employ *Pegon*, a modified Arabic script used to write local languages such as Javanese. The term *Pegon* derives from the Javanese word *pego*, meaning ‘to deviate’, referring to the unconventional practice of writing Javanese

with Arabic letters (Afifah and Sirojudin 2022). As a deeply rooted literacy practice, Arab *Pegon* has long been associated with the spread of Islam in the Nusantara, serving as an important medium through which ulama taught, translated, and contextualised Islamic knowledge for local communities (Koentjaraningrat 1984). Within contemporary *pesantren*, *Pegon* functions primarily to translate Arabic texts into Javanese or other local languages, following the right-to-left writing direction of Arabic (Afifah and Sirojudin 2022). This method helps *santri* navigate classical texts more effectively, making *Pegon* a vital tool for accessing and internalising the teachings found in *kitab kuning* (Wahyuni and Ibrahim 2017).

In contrast, modernists preferred *buku putih*, contemporary Islamic works written in Romanised Indonesian, and often rejected much of the classical scholastic tradition in favour of direct engagement with the Qur'an and Hadith. This contrast produced longstanding tensions within *pesantren*, where *buku putih* were commonly viewed with suspicion and sometimes prohibited entirely (Bruinessen 1990; Bruinessen 1994). By the late twentieth century, however, the divide between traditionalists and modernists had begun to blur. Some Muhammadiyah *pesantren* incorporated *kitab kuning* into their curricula, while many traditionalist *kyai* expanded their reading practices and increasingly wrote in Indonesian alongside Arabic script. More recent developments include the emergence of traditional, semi-modern, modern, and hybrid or digital *pesantren*, where distinctions between NU and Muhammadiyah institutions have become less rigid, reflecting changes in teaching methods and the integration of new educational tools (Suresman et al. 2025). While prior work has described *Pegon*'s historical and pedagogical importance in *pesantren*, less is known about how *Pegon* is taught and socially valued in everyday *pesantren* routines.

Pegon as anti-colonial practice

The emergence and continued use of the *Pegon* script in Java can be understood as more than a linguistic adaptation; it represents a culturally grounded form of resistance against colonial domination (Choeroni, Madrah, and Aziz 2019). As Islam spread across Java, the integration of Arabic script with the Javanese language generated a new mode of writing that preserved local identity while connecting Javanese Muslims to the wider Islamic world.

This development, rooted in *pesantren* traditions, offered a literary pathway that remained outside Dutch colonial influence (Fikri 2015). Whereas colonial schools promoted the Roman alphabet and Dutch literacy, *pesantren* maintained *Pegon* and *kitab kuning* as the primary vehicles of religious and intellectual transmission, thereby safeguarding Islamic knowledge within indigenous institutions (Hadi 1995). In this sense, *Pegon* operated as an autonomous literacy system that preserved Javanese Islamic learning and resisted the educational and cultural hierarchy imposed by the colonial government.

Pegon also served as a political and symbolic affirmation of Javanese and Islamic cultural independence. Historically, scripts like Jawi and *Pegon* connected the Malay–Nusantara world to broader Islamic literate traditions such as Persian, Urdu, Turkish, and Central Asian, long before the Dutch sought to reorganise cultural life through European modes of literacy (Fathurahman 2015). Ulama in Java utilised *Pegon* to translate Arabic texts into accessible Javanese forms, enabling wider segments of society to engage with Islamic teachings. Figures such as Sheikh Nuruddin ar-Raniri, Kyai Ahmad Rifa'i, and others wrote extensively in *Pegon*, producing works on theology, fiqh, Sufism, tafsir, grammar, and ethics (Choeroni, Madrah, and Aziz 2019). Their writings demonstrate how *Pegon* facilitated the growth of Islamic discourse outside colonial frameworks and strengthened local religious authority.

Moreover, *Pegon*'s hybrid nature, Arabic script paired with Javanese linguistic structure, embodied a form of cultural agency amid the syncretic religious landscape of Java. Its emergence responded to both primordial and political conditions, as Javanese communities adapted Islamic textual practices to align with existing cultural symbols and beliefs. The persistence of *Pegon* literacy in *pesantren*, madrasah, *diniyyah* (non-formal Islamic institution for religious learning in

pesantren) and *majelis taklim* (grassroots Islamic study group) reflects its enduring role as a vernacular tool of empowerment that enabled Muslims to maintain religious coherence, interpretive authority, and cultural sovereignty in the face of colonial incursions (Huda 2007). As such, *Pegon* stands as a significant example of anti-colonial literacy, embodying the resilience of Javanese Islamic traditions through centuries of political and cultural change. At the same time, less attention has been paid to how such ideological meanings are enacted, reproduced, or contested through everyday pedagogical routines in everyday *pesantren* life.

Pegon as translingual and transmodal literacy practice

Recent work in sociolinguistics and literacy studies has emphasised that meaning-making in educational and religious contexts often unfolds across multiple languages, scripts, and semiotic modes rather than within bounded linguistic systems (Bhatt et al. 2025). Translanguaging theory foregrounds how speakers and writers draw on heterogeneous linguistic resources as part of a unified system of meaning-making rather than alternating between discrete and autonomous languages (Vogel and Garcia 2017; Canagarajah 2013), while transmodality highlights the coordinated movement of meaning across speech, writing, gesture, visual inscription, and embodied practice in literacy events (Rowell 2013).

Within Islamic educational traditions, such practices are neither incidental nor unregulated. Studies of vernacular Islamic literacies demonstrate that translingual and transmodal practices are often stabilised through script ideologies, pedagogical routines, and institutional authority (Bhatt et al. 2025; Bhatt and Li 2024). *Pegon* exemplifies this form of regulated translingual literacy. While Arabic serves as the primary source language of classical texts, *Pegon* enables interpretation through Javanese and other local languages without displacing the authority of Arabic script (Hula et al. 2022). Meaning is constructed through systematic movement between Arabic lexical forms, local-language glosses, and standardised grammatical symbols (*makna*), demonstrating that translingual practice in *pesantren* is governed by established interpretive conventions rather than spontaneous linguistic mixing.

Pegon is also inherently transmodal (Bhatt and Li 2024). Learning takes place through coordinated oral recitation, attentive listening, written annotation, symbolic marking, and embodied participation in pedagogical routines (Hula et al. 2022). Teachers read aloud and elaborate on Arabic texts while students simultaneously inscribe *Pegon* glosses, producing meaning through the interaction of sound, script, space, and bodily discipline. This permeability between oral and literate modes reflects broader patterns observed in Islamic heritage literacies, where knowledge transmission depends on the orchestration of multiple semiotic modes rather than silent reading alone.

Importantly, existing scholarship suggests that the translingual and transmodal character of *Pegon* is inseparable from its ideological grounding. The Arabic visual form of *Pegon* carries emblematic associations with Quranic authority, shaping learners' metalinguistic attachments to Islamic knowledge. As Bhatt and Li argue (2024), such scripts do not merely represent language but index moral, epistemic, and historical continuity. In this sense, translingual and transmodal practices in *Pegon* literacy are sustained not despite regulation, but because of it.

Building on this literature, the present study examines how *Pegon*'s translingual and transmodal dimensions are enacted in everyday *pesantren* pedagogy and how they contribute to the reproduction of *Pegon* as a heritage literacy. By foregrounding lived practice rather than textual form alone, this study extends existing accounts of *Pegon* beyond script description to show how translingual and transmodal meaning-making is stabilised through institutional routine and intergenerational transmission.

Heritage literacy framework

To analyse the use of *Pegon* in East Java *pesantren*, this study adopts the heritage literacy framework proposed by Bhatt and Li (Bhatt and Li 2024) as its theoretical foundation. In contrast to traditional

heritage language research – which often follows a one-language-one-community model and centres on minoritised languages, linguistic practices, language acquisition, and the sociocultural experiences of diasporic or immigrant groups (Bauman and Briggs 2003) – the heritage literacy approach shifts attention to the purposeful literacy practices through which heritage is enacted. These practices are not confined to a single language; rather, they are frequently translingual, embedded in everyday life, and intertwined with material culture.

Within this framework, *Pegon* literacy is therefore understood not merely as a heritage language practice but as part of a broader set of socio-semiotic activities through which heritage is interpreted, negotiated, and sustained. Using the heritage literacy framework enables us to explore how people actively live their heritage through everyday, multi-voiced literacy practices – practices that meaningfully connect texts, bodies, places, and technologies.

Bhatt and Li's (2024) framework is built on seven key principles:

- (1) Heritage literacy practices place heritage at the centre of meaning-making.
- (2) They occur within both institutional settings (e.g. mosques, schools) and informal, everyday contexts.
- (3) They intersect with religion, family life, community history, art, performance, foodways, and ethnic identity.
- (4) They involve engagement with material objects and heritage sites.
- (5) They function as socio-semiotic practices that negotiate language alongside other modes (such as image, movement, and sound).
- (6) They carry both emblematic (symbolic/visual) and hermeneutic (interpretive) significance.
- (7) They are dynamic, evolving across time, space, and generational contexts (Bhatt and Li 2024).

This heritage literacy perspective is crucial because many individuals maintain strong heritage ties without a single identifiable heritage language to encapsulate their practices (Bhatt 2024). In this case, heritage is transmitted through a wide array of semiotic resources; art, ritual, script choices, clothing, food, and digital practices. Studying heritage therefore requires attention to heritage practices themselves, rather than assuming that heritage can be fully captured through language alone.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate how *Pegon* is enacted and sustained as a lived literacy practice in contemporary *pesantren* in East Java. It addresses the following research questions:

(RQ1) How is *Pegon* used pedagogically in kitab kuning learning?

(RQ2) How is *Pegon* learned and transmitted through everyday *pesantren* routines and teacher–student interaction?

(RQ3) What cultural and institutional meanings are attached to *Pegon*?

Drawing on ethnographically informed field observations over a three-month period, alongside unstructured interviews and informal conversations with *santri*, *kyai* and *bu nyai*, and *ustadz/ustadzah*, the study approaches *Pegon* not simply as a writing system but as a socio-semiotic heritage practice – shifting attention from script as form to script as lived practice in everyday *pesantren* life.

Methodology

Research design and settings

This study uses a multi-method qualitative approach that combines unstructured interviews, informal conversations, and ethnographically informed field observations. A multi-method qualitative approach is necessary for this study because *Pegon* operates not only as a writing system but as a

lived, embodied, and culturally embedded literacy practice within the social ecology of *pesantren*. Fieldwork was conducted by three researchers between July 2025 and September 2025 in three prominent *pesantren* in East Java, including *pesantren* Tambakberas, *pesantren* Lirboyo, and *pesantren* Sidogiri while the interview was conducted with 11 participants consisting of *Kyai* and *Bu Nyai*, *Ustadz*, and *Santri* with at least 7 years spent in *pesantren*.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants had deep and sustained engagement with *pesantren* literacy practices, especially *Pegon*. These *pesantren* were intentionally selected because they are among the oldest and most influential *pesantren salaf* in the region, widely recognised for their strong commitment to classical Islamic scholarship and their continued use of *Pegon* in daily teaching. The interview participants themselves come from a wider range of *pesantren* backgrounds, such as Yasinat Jember, An-Najah Malang, and *pesantren* Singosari, in addition to Tambakberas, Lirboyo, and Sidogiri (see Table 1).

Drawing on Palmer’s argument that everyday conversations are a valuable source of social research data and an important methodological tool, this study used unstructured interviews and informal conversations to allow participants to speak openly and naturally (Palmer 2015). These approaches encouraged candid reflections, producing rich insights into their literacy practices and lived experiences. In line with a relational research perspective, unstructured interviews were conducted as a form of ‘controlled conversation’, guided by the researchers’ interests but allowing participants freedom to shape the direction of dialogue (Gray 2009). Although the interviews were researcher-led and audio-recorded, they were intentionally complemented with informal conversations to foster more relaxed and comfortable interactions. Following Swain and King, informal conversations were used to capture spontaneous expressions and perspectives that might not emerge during interviews (Swain and King 2022). These informal conversations took place during observations and also after interviews, in informal post-interview discussions with participants. To maintain authenticity and ease, these conversations were not audio-recorded but were documented in fieldnotes shortly after they occurred.

Ethnographically informed field observations was also used as a key data collection method for learning, understanding, and accurately representing participants and their environments (Atkinson 2016). Observations were conducted during routine *pesantren* learning activities, particularly *bandongan* and *sorogan* sessions, which constitute central daily literacy practices in *salaf pesantren*. In *bandongan* sessions, the *kyai* or *ustadz* reads aloud from classical Arabic texts (*kitab kuning*), while *santri* add *Pegon* glosses (*makna gandul*) in the margins or between lines to stabilise meaning. In *sorogan* sessions, *santri* individually read passages to the teacher and demonstrate comprehension, often relying on their *Pegon* annotations as interpretive guides. These sessions typically take place in the early morning or evening and form a regular part of *pesantren* daily routines.

In addition to formal classroom settings, observations were also conducted during informal literacy-related gatherings, including post-class discussions, casual conversations over coffee (*ngopi*), and *syawir* (collective *musyawarah* among *santri* to debate and clarify textual meanings). These informal contexts were important because *Pegon* was not only inscribed in written form but also

Table 1. Profile and demographic of the participants.

Name (pseudonyms)	Sex	Age	Role	Years spent in <i>pesantren</i>	Name of <i>pesantren</i>
Rozi	Male	66	Kyai	More than 50 years	Tambakberas
Alim	Male	25	Ustadz	More than 10 years	Sidogiri
Husni	Male	38	Santri	More than 30 years	Lirboyo
Toha	Male	43	Kyai	More than 30 years	Singosari
Rosyid	Male	43	Ustadz	More than 30 years	Singosari
Rizal	Male	32	Ustadz	More than 20 years	An Najah Malang
Fatah	Male	27	Ustadz	More than 10 years	Tambakberas
Nisa	Female	35	Nyai	More than 20 years	Yasinat Jember
Hasyim	Male	19	Santri	More than 7 years	Tambakberas
Kholily	Male	19	Santri	More than 7 years	Tambakberas
Alya	Female	36	Ustadzah	More than 20 years	Wajak

discussed, negotiated, and collaboratively interpreted among participants. Observing both formal and informal settings enabled the researchers to capture how *Pegon* literacy operates as a lived pedagogical and semiotic practice within the social ecology of the *pesantren*.

Data collection and analysis

The study began after obtaining written informed consent from all participants. Data collection opened with a series of interviews. As insider researchers, our existing social relationships minimised barriers to trust and facilitated deeper access to participants' everyday practices (Dwyer and Buckle 2022). Some interviews were done online through videocall, and others were done in person. This was because some *pesantren* were located far from the researchers. Each interview lasted 30–60 min and was recorded using a recording device. The interviews were then transcribed in a mix of Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Jawa, which were the languages the participants felt most comfortable using.

To enhance methodological transparency, we provide additional details on how interviews were organised. Unstructured interviews were guided by thematic entry points relevant to participants' roles (e.g. *Kiai*, *Ustadz*, or *Santri*) and by conversational prompts that allowed participants to speak freely. For example, initial questions included personal introduction and experience in *pesantren*, followed by questions about the use of *Pegon* in teaching Islamic subjects. Specific prompts were adapted to participants' roles, such as asking *Kiai* about the significance of *Pegon* in teaching traditions, or asking *Ustadz* about the textbooks and teaching routines they use. This approach maintained the flexibility of unstructured interviews while ensuring coverage of key topics relevant to the research aims.

Following the interviews, we continued the research through field observations conducted in several *pesantren*. Although building rapport is often considered a crucial starting point in qualitative research for establishing trust and demonstrating credibility (Adu-Ampong and Adams 2020), in this study rapport already existed due to our longstanding relationships with participants. This prior familiarity fostered a comfortable atmosphere for collaboration and open discussion, supporting a relational approach in which the researcher-participant relationship is mutually beneficial rather than extractive (Tuhiwai-Smith 2022). Field observations were carried out during daily routines, religious activities, classroom lessons, and informal gatherings. Because *pesantren* strictly separate male and female spaces, fieldwork was divided accordingly: Yulianto conducted observations in male dormitories, while Af'idatul and Millatuz conducted parallel work in female *pesantren*. This arrangement allowed the research to capture both emic perspectives and contextualised literacy practices across gendered environments. This arrangement enabled the research to capture contextualised literacy practices across gendered environments. Although learning activities are typically conducted in gender-segregated settings – either in separate male and female *pesantren*, at different times, or with physical partitions such as fabric curtains or portable wooden dividers when both groups are present – no significant differences were observed in *Pegon* literacy practices. The structure and pedagogical function of *Pegon* in *bandongan* and *sorogan* sessions were comparable across male and female contexts.

Altogether, the dataset consisted of audio recordings, photographs, and written fieldnotes documenting observations, interviews, informal dialogues, and contextual details from the field. The photographs documented examples of *Pegon* marginal annotations in kitab kuning, including inter-linear glosses (*makna gandul*), orthographic symbols, and layered Arabic–Javanese textual arrangements that were later systematised in the analytical tables presented in the findings section. To protect participants' confidentiality, all names used in this article are pseudonyms, and identifying details of individuals and *pesantren* have been anonymized where necessary. Audio recordings, transcripts, and fieldnotes were stored securely in a password-protected repository accessible only to the research team and were used solely for research purposes.

We then transcribed all recorded materials in Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Jawa, preserving the original wording to maintain authenticity and contextual meaning (Aloudah 2022; Van Nes et al. 2010). Data analysis followed Braun et al. (2019) thematic analysis framework. We began by reading and rereading the data to familiarise ourselves with the content and gain an initial sense of emerging patterns. We then conducted an initial round of open coding, identifying meaningful segments and assigning preliminary codes individually. These initial codes were collaboratively discussed and compared, which led to the development of a second, more refined coding structure in which codes became clearer and began to cluster around potential themes.

Through multiple rounds of discussion, we continued to define, refine, and consolidate both codes and themes, ensuring consistency and shared interpretation across the research team. In the final stage, we reviewed and finalised the thematic framework, selecting illustrative data extracts that best represented each theme. This thematic structure then guided the organisation and writing of the final manuscript.

Positionality

In conducting research involving human participants, it is essential to remain aware of our positionality as researchers (Finlay 2002). Such awareness helps us recognise the presence of our own voices in the research process while also ensuring that we responsibly represent and uphold the voices of the participants (Hertz 1996). All three of us have spent more than a decade immersed in the *pesantren* environment. Afidatul studied for approximately ten years at *pesantren* Tambakberas, as did Millatuz. During our time there, we both developed a strong academic interest in Islam, language and culture, which eventually shaped the focus of our current research. Meanwhile, Yulianto spent more than 25 years at *pesantren* Al-Hikam Malang and *pesantren* Singosari and continues to maintain close engagement with *pesantren* traditions by researching and teaching Islamic studies at a public Islamic university.

In addition to our shared educational backgrounds, we are all highly familiar with *Pegon* and are able to read both *Pegon* script and *kitab kuning*. This linguistic competence positions us not only as cultural insiders but also as linguistic insiders (Dwyer and Buckle 2022), enabling us to interpret textual materials, cultural subtleties, and language practices used in *pesantren* communities with greater depth, accuracy, and nuance. Collectively, these experiences place us in a strong insider position for this research.

Results

The findings reveal that *Pegon* functions not merely as a writing system, but as a heritage literacy practice through which Islamic knowledge, indigenous language, and *pesantren* identity are jointly produced and transmitted. Participants described *Pegon* as a central medium for engaging with classical Arabic texts, one that remains consistent in its script and annotation system while accommodating variation in spoken languages. The findings document how *Pegon* is used as a pedagogical tool for word-by-word textual interpretation, how it mediates the localisation of Islamic knowledge through local linguistic and cultural registers, and how it is learned through intergenerational practices. They also show that *Pegon* carries symbolic importance within *pesantren* communities, shaping perceptions of scholarly competence, ethical discipline, and continuity with earlier generations of teachers. The sections that follow present these findings thematically.

Pegon as a translingual semiotic system

Participants consistently emphasised that *Pegon* is not bound to a single spoken language but functions as a stable interpretive system capable of accommodating multiple local languages. Rather than transcending language in an abstract sense, *Pegon* operates translingually by stabilising

interpretation across shifting spoken linguistic resources. While Javanese is most commonly used, *Pegon* is also employed to render Madurese, Sundanese, and, in some contexts, Indonesian. What remains constant is not the language of gloss but the *Pegon* script itself and its system of *makna* (grammatical-symbolic annotation). As one participant explained,

If it is in a Sundanese region, then Sundanese is used. But the script remains *Pegon*. If it is in a Madurese region, it is the same – the language used is Madurese, but the script remains *Pegon*. Most traditional (*salaf*) *pesantren* follow this pattern, adapting to their respective local languages and regions. (Toha)

Similarly, another participant noted that when *santri* lack proficiency in Javanese, meaning may shift to Indonesian while preserving the *Pegon* script and interpretive conventions:

Usually it is mixed with Indonesian. However, in *pesantren* where the environment is entirely Madurese, Madurese is typically used exclusively. (Nisa)

The data show that *Pegon*'s interpretive authority lies in its shared conventions: stable script use, standardised *makna* symbols, and routinised placement of glosses that make Arabic grammatical relations visible and learnable. In this sense, *Pegon* functions as a meta-semiotic interpretive framework, because it organises how meaning is produced through symbols and procedures rather than through any single spoken language.

Materiality and institutional reproduction of *Pegon*

Within *pesantren* in East Java, Javanese *Pegon* is employed as a central pedagogical tool for teaching core Islamic subjects through *kitab kuning*. Participants consistently emphasised that Javanese *Pegon* enables a highly precise, word-by-word engagement with Arabic texts, preserving semantic depth (*ma'ani*) that is often perceived as diminished in Indonesian translations. As explained by Nisa:

Each part of the sentence is adjusted according to its grammatical position in terms of meaning: *utawi* corresponds to (و), (و) indicates مبتدأ (subject); (خ) indicates خبر (predicate). This method is closer to the true intention of the author. Why? Because no لفظ (word) is overlooked. This is different from general translation. When someone translates directly, sometimes certain elements – such as the فيه phrase – may be omitted. In *Pegon*-based interpretation, nothing can be left out, because the reading is done لفظاً بلفظ, word by word. (Nisa)

This precision is achieved through *Pegon*'s established system of grammatical markers which make Arabic syntactic relationships visible and learnable for *santri*. For instance, the subject (مبتدأ) is marked with (و) (*utawi*), the predicate (خبر) with (خ) (*iku*), the verbal subject (فاعل) with (فا) (*sapa/apa*), the object (مفعول به) with (فم) (*ing*), and adverbial or circumstantial elements (حال) with (ح) or *halé*. (see Figure 1).

These conventions position *Pegon* not simply as a translation aid, but as an interpretive scaffold that guides students in understanding Arabic texts by directly displaying grammatical structure and meaning within the text itself. In this sense, *Pegon* functions as an autonomous interpretive infrastructure (see Figure 2) – an internally coherent system of symbols and annotations that supports grammatical and semantic analysis without reliance on external explanatory languages.

This was further explained by Hasyim:

'In a *Pegon*-based learning model, when interpreting or studying *kitab*, there is an underlying learning philosophy: reading carefully, slowly, and translating word by word. This approach helps ensure that *santri* do not rush; each word is taught in terms of its position, grammatical status, meaning, and even its textual reference within the *kitab*, so that accuracy and meticulousness are maintained. (Hasyim)

By encouraging attentiveness to every lexical and grammatical element, *Pegon* sustains traditional modes of textual interpretation that prioritise fidelity to classical Arabic sources. The *makna* system 'works' pedagogically because it is synchronised with oral recitation and guided

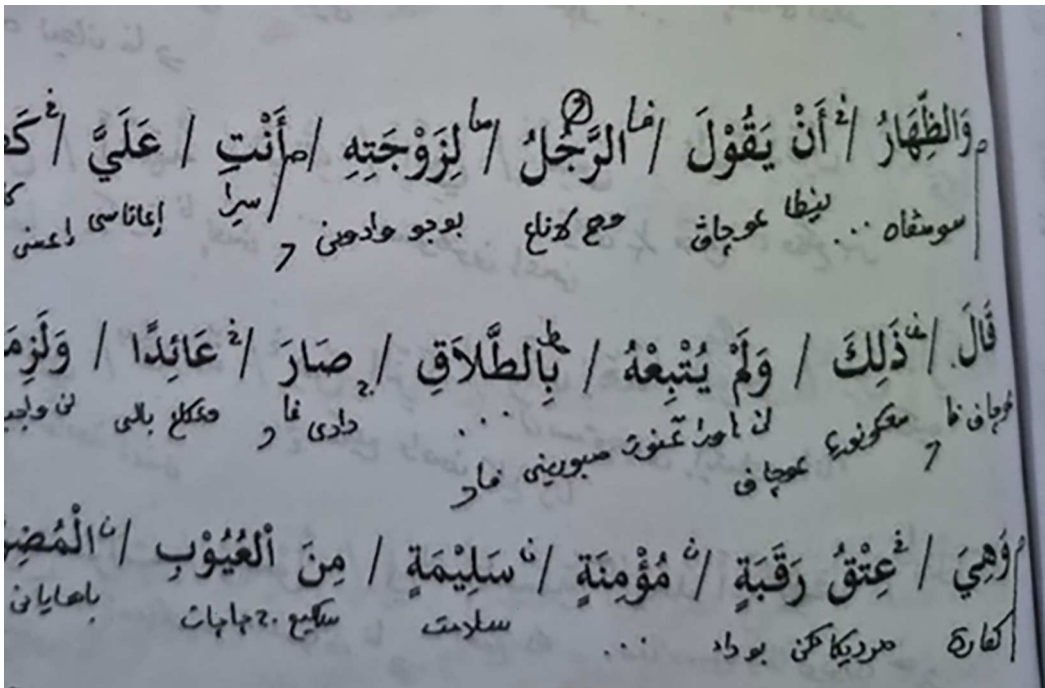


Figure 1. Pegon grammatical structures as shown by Nisa in her *Kitab Kuning*.

٦	٥	٤	٣	٢	١
١٩ ج	ماغکا - ماکا	جواب	ج	ج	١٩ ج
٢٠ س	مسباب	مسبابه	س	س	٢٠ س
٢١ ع	کرنا	تعلیل	ع	ع	٢١ ع
٢٢ غ	سنگان	غایه	غ	غ	٢٢ غ
٢٣ ل	کدی - کفویان	ملک	ل	ل	٢٣ ل
٢٤ ما	ماریع - کندا	اختصاص	ما	ما	٢٤ ما
٢٥ مظ	سادیکی	مدره نظریه	مظ	مظ	٢٥ مظ
٢٦ تم	افان - افایا	تمیز	تم	تم	٢٦ تم
٢٧ مع	تیمباغ	مفضل علیه	مع	مع	٢٧ مع
٢٨ ج	فیرا - بیدا	جمع	ج	ج	٢٨ ج
٢٩ نف	تیداک	نفی	نف	نف	٢٩ نف
٣٠ نه	اجا - جاغان	نهی	نه	نه	٣٠ نه
٣١ خ	ایکو موجود	خبر مطلق	خ	خ	٣١ خ
٣٢ ب	بیدارغ	غیر عاقل	ب	ب	٣٢ ب
٣٣ ه	کادکوان - انو	ضمیر لسان	ه	ه	٣٣ ه
٣٤ ی	تنتو	لامابتداء	ی	ی	٣٤ ی
٣٥ سف	سوفیا - سامتی	لعل تاکید	سف	سف	٣٥ سف
٣٦ سما	سملشان - کنیکا	شرطیه	سما	سما	٣٦ سما
٣٧ مص	اولیهی	مصدر	مص	مص	٣٧ مص

٦	٥	٤	٣	٢	١
١	مبتداء	اتوی - ادافون	١	١	١
٢	خبر	ایکو - اداله	٢	٢	٢
٣	فاعل عاقل	سفا - سیافا	٣	٣	٣
٤	فاعل غیر	افا	٤	٤	٤
٥	نائب الفاعل عاقل	سفا - سیافا	٥	٥	٥
٦	نائب الفاعل غیر	افا	٦	٦	٦
٧	مفعول به	اغ - کفدا	٧	٧	٧
٨	مفعول معه	سرتان - بستی	٨	٨	٨
٩	مفعول لاجله	کرنا اراهی	٩	٩	٩
١٠	مفعول مطلق	کلوان - دغان	١٠	١٠	١٠
١١	ظرف زمان	اغلام - فدا	١١	١١	١١
١٢	ظرف مکان	اغلام - دی	١٢	١٢	١٢
١٣	نعت	کاغ - یاغ	١٣	١٣	١٣
١٤	صلة	کاغ - یاغ	١٤	١٤	١٤
١٥	بیان	پتانی - پتاپا	١٥	١٥	١٥
١٦	بدل	روفانی - روفایا	١٦	١٦	١٦
١٧	حال	حالی - دالم کادان	١٧	١٧	١٧
١٨	شرطیه	لامون - جیکا	١٨	١٨	١٨

Figure 2. A simplified guide of Pegon interpretive infrastructure (taken from *Kaifiyatul Ma'ani bil Iktishar* by Ahmad Hafna Razzaq Al-Manduri).

pacing: the teacher's slow, segmented reading structures when and where *santri* place *Pegon* glosses and grammatical markers. In this way, the interpretive force of makna emerges through the coordination of script, sound, and disciplined tempo rather than through silent reading alone.

Cultural mediation in *Pegon*

Pegon literacy does not merely function as a technical tool for translating Arabic texts; rather, it operates as a site of cultural mediation where Islamic textual knowledge is continuously interpreted through Javanese linguistic, epistemic, and ethical frameworks. This mediation occurs at least at three interrelated levels: linguistic-cultural mediation, epistemic mediation, and identity-based mediation.

First, at the linguistic-cultural level, *Pegon* enables Islamic knowledge to be articulated through the Javanese language, including its hierarchical registers and cultural nuances. The use of *Pegon* reflects a profound intersection between Islamic education and local Javanese linguistic and cultural practices. Through *Pegon*, Arabic religious texts are interpreted using Javanese vocabulary, including hierarchical speech levels (*kromo*), which encode social relations, politeness, and ethical sensitivity. Participants noted that *Pegon* allows theological meanings – particularly those related to *adab* (proper conduct) – to be expressed in ways that resonate with Javanese cultural norms, such as the differentiated use of honorifics when referring to Allah, the Prophet, or human interlocutors.

When Javanese is used, there is depth and emotional resonance. Even in matters of etiquette (آداب), *Pegon* provides guidance: *Anta* (أنتا) → *panjenengan* (for the Prophet), *Anta* (أنتا) (for Allah) → *panjenengan dalem*, not 'you'. Arabic does not have levels of politeness like those found in Javanese. (Alim)

Through this practice, *Pegon* transmits not only doctrinal content but also Javanese norms of respect (*unggah-ungguh basa*), embedding Islamic learning within local ethical sensibilities. Similarly, a female teacher (*Bu Nyai*) emphasised that religious concepts are often explained through culturally familiar references:

'Mengajarkan Islam itu pendekatannya harus lewat sesuatu yang dekat dengan kita, yaitu budaya'. 'Teaching Islam must be approached through something that is close and familiar to us – namely, culture'. (Nisa)

This indicates that *Pegon*-based instruction mediates Islam through culturally proximate examples, allowing abstract theological ideas to be grounded in lived Javanese experience.

As Nisa noted, translation through *Pegon* ensures that '*tidak ada makna yang terlewat*', 'No meaning is left untranslated' since each lexical unit is glossed in alignment with its grammatical position. In this sense, *Pegon* does not simply transfer meaning across languages; it reorganises Arabic textual authority into a Javanese pedagogical system, producing a distinct *pesantren* epistemology.

Third, cultural mediation operates at the level of institutional identity and historical consciousness. Several *kiai* described *Pegon* as '*ruh pesantren*' 'the soul of *pesantren*' and inseparable from *pesantren* identity in East Java. Here, *Pegon* mediates not only between languages but between past and present, serving as a material link to earlier generations of scholars, *sanad* transmission 'chain of transmission', and the *salaf* tradition 'the classical Islamic scholarly tradition'.

The continued requirement that students annotate their kitab using *Pegon* – even when such rules are not formally written but institutionally enforced through correction sessions – demonstrates that *Pegon* functions as a normative cultural practice. Through repeated pedagogical routines such as *bandongan* and kitab correction (*koreksian kitab*), *Pegon* mediates the continuity of *pesantren* authority and discipline.

Importantly, this mediation also shapes dispositions. One *ustadz* reflected that *Pegon*-based reading requires slow, careful attention to each word, preventing students from reading hastily. Thus, *Pegon* mediates not only semantic meaning but also ethical reading practices – cultivating patience, attentiveness, and respect toward sacred texts.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that *Pegon* mediates:

- Islamic textual knowledge and Javanese linguistic etiquette,
- Arabic grammatical authority and pesantren interpretive conventions,
- Institutional heritage and contemporary pedagogical practice.

Rather than being a passive relic of tradition, *Pegon* operates as an active semiotic mechanism through which Islamic learning is localised, embodied, and transmitted across generations. In this way, *Pegon* exemplifies heritage literacy not as static preservation, but as ongoing cultural negotiation and reinterpretation.

Intergenerational transmission of *Pegon*

Pegon literacy is acquired through intergenerational, apprenticeship-based pedagogy embedded in the daily life of *pesantren*. As explained by Alim:

Because from the very beginning everything is set up around *Pegon*. That means the entire *madrasah diniyah* curriculum – from *صفر* (pre-literacy stage), *إعدادية* (preparatory stage), *ابتدائية* (elementary level), up to *عالية* (advanced level) – uses *Pegon*, including *bandongan*. In *bandongan* lessons, the *kyai* reads while the *santri* listen attentively. Everything uses *Pegon* because the text must be given *makna* (glossed). In those study sessions, learning is done through *makna*. All meanings must be rendered in Javanese, and that is done using *Pegon*. (Alim)

Learning occurs through observation, imitation, repetition, and guided participation in *bandongan* and *sorogan* practices. In *bandongan*, the teacher reads and explains Arabic texts while *santri* annotate them in *Pegon*, learning to follow grammatical cues and interpretive patterns through collective listening (see fieldnote excerpt 1).

Fieldnote excerpt 1: The *kyai* read a short part of the Arabic text from *Kitab Fathul Qorib*, then paused. During the pause, many male *santri* immediately wrote the *Pegon* meaning under the word and added a *makna* symbol above it. When the *kyai* repeated the line more slowly, some students stopped, crossed out a gloss, and rewrote it in the correct place. (micro-moment 1, August 29, 2025)

In *sorogan*, students read directly to the teacher, who corrects pronunciation, meaning, and *Pegon* glosses line by line (see fieldnote excerpt 2).

Fieldnote excerpt 2: A female *santri* read aloud a sentence from *Kitab Al Mabadiul Fiqhiyyah* while the *ustadz* listened and watched the page. When the student made a mistake on the *Pegon tarkib* (grammatical structure), the *ustadz* pointed to the exact word and corrected it. The *santri* then fixed the *Pegon* gloss and added the correct *makna* symbol and read the line again. (micro-moment 2, September 3, 2025)

These practices require sustained, reciprocal interaction and embody a pedagogy where literacy is co-constructed through mentorship, imitation, and repetition. Viewed through a transmodal lens, *bandongan* and *sorogan* are not only instructional formats but coordinated literacy routines in which meaning moves across speech, listening, inscription, and embodied participation. In *bandongan*, oral recitation and explanation by the *kyai* are synchronised with *santri*'s real-time *Pegon* glossing and *makna* marking, so interpretation is produced through the interaction of sound, script, and page-space. In *sorogan*, the student's voiced reading, the teacher's immediate correction, and the revision of written annotations operate together as a single meaning-making process.

Although *Pegon* is not explicitly codified within a written curriculum, participants emphasised that its use is nevertheless mandatory, maintained through daily practice, teacher modelling, and mechanisms such as '*koreksian kitab*' (guided correction and validation of *kitab* reading and meaning), demonstrating that literacy authority in *pesantren* flows through tradition and relational obligation rather than bureaucratic regulation – an arrangement that aligns closely with heritage literacy as a practice sustained through customary norms and lived accountability rather than policy (Andarwulan et al. 2026).

Mastery, however, develops unevenly. As Rizal noted:

Some students pick it up quickly, while others need continuous guidance. Sometimes when I look at their books, their *Pegon* glosses are still empty. That means they need more guidance. (Rizal)

The uneven pace of mastery reported by participants explains that *Pegon* literacy is not a discrete technical skill but a situated social practice requiring sustained scaffolding and mentorship. *Kyai*, *Bu Nyai*, *Ustadz*, and *Ustadzah* play a crucial role in monitoring progress and ensuring continuity of interpretive conventions. From a heritage literacy perspective, this mode of transmission highlights how literacy is preserved through communal participation rather than formalised instruction, reinforcing collective responsibility for knowledge continuity.

Emblematic meaning and scholarly authority in *Pegon*

Beyond its pedagogical and linguistic functions, *Pegon* holds powerful symbolic significance within *pesantren* communities. Participants described *Pegon* as a *wasilah* (means or medium) through which Islamic knowledge becomes accessible, and as the *ruh* (soul, core of identity) of the *pesantren* itself. These descriptions emphasise that *Pegon* embodies the values, epistemology, and historical continuity of *pesantren* scholarship. *Pegon* represents the intellectual lineage of ulama, the style of textual interpretation unique to *pesantren*, and the cultural fusion of Arabic scholarship with Javanese (and other local) traditions.

Pegon is an important *wasilah* (وسيلة). Without it, many Javanese people would not be able to engage properly with Arabic texts. *Pegon* preserves the traditional methods of the ulama, preserving the way they understood and transmitted knowledge. (Husni)

Pegon is the *ruh* (روح) of the *pesantren*. The *pesantren* tradition cannot be separated from the use of *Pegon*. *Pegon* has become the identity of *pesantren* in East Java. The two cannot be separated. (Rozi)

Pegon is viewed as a guardian of *pesantren* heritage – an intellectual, spiritual, and historical legacy that carries *sanad* (the chain of transmission of knowledge) and the struggles of past scholars. Continuing to use *Pegon*, even minimally, is seen as an ethical responsibility, because it keeps students connected to Arabic script and its right-to-left logic, the original medium of Islamic knowledge. In *pesantren* tradition, methods matter as much as content: writing, annotating, and learning through *Pegon* are ways of preserving continuity with earlier generations of teachers. As Toha described:

We continue to adhere to it, because its *sunnah* (سنة) is clearly established. From the very beginning, this tradition seems to have originated in the Javanese regions. Islam, which is closely identified with the Arabic language, was naturally something the Javanese could not avoid. This approach was then applied, especially by the Wali Songo ... In essence, from Sunan Ampel and his circle of students, within the *salaf pesantren* tradition, *Pegon* was developed to make it easier for Javanese people to recognize and learn Arabic letters. To facilitate understanding, to ease learning – that is *Pegon*. (Toha)

This practice is also understood as *tabarrukan* (تَبَرُّكًا) – seeking blessing by following the paths, languages, and methods of the scholars who came before. Using *Pegon* and local languages such as Javanese is not resistance to change, but an act of reverence and mindful continuity. Through *tabarrukan*, students do not only learn new concepts; they re-enter a living tradition, reflecting on knowledge through inherited forms rather than replacing them, with purely modern terminologies. In this sense, '*tabarrukan* through *Pegon* is a quiet form of *tafakkur* (تَفَكُّر) (thinking and reflecting deeply), a return to meaning by honouring *sanad*, not merely adopting new academic categories' (Toha)

Mastery of *Pegon* also functions as a marker of scholarly legitimacy. The ability to interpret texts using *Pegon* is regarded as an essential criterion for full participation in *pesantren* intellectual life, even for students proficient in Arabic. This positioning reinforces *Pegon*'s role in preserving the intellectual lineage of Javanese ulama and sustaining a distinct *pesantren* identity rooted in localised Islamic scholarship.

Because *Pegon* is a symbol of scholarship. There is a saying among the ulama that a person is not considered complete in studying the kitab if they cannot interpret it using *Pegon*, even if they are proficient in Arabic. There is historical value and the identity of Javanese ulama embedded in it. (Rizal)

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that *Pegon* operates as a living heritage literacy practice that simultaneously preserves classical Islamic interpretive traditions and indigenous Javanese cultural identity. Its continued use reflects a decolonial mode of literacy that resists linguistic standardisation, affirms local epistemologies, and ensures the intergenerational transmission of both religious knowledge and cultural memory within Indonesian *pesantren*.

Discussion

Drawing on a heritage literacy framework (Bhatt and Li 2024), this study demonstrates that *Pegon* functions as a living heritage literacy practice through which Islamic knowledge, local linguistic resources, and *pesantren* authority are jointly produced, transmitted, and legitimised. Rather than treating *Pegon* primarily as a historical or linguistic artifact (Abdullah et al. 2020; Aliyah 2018; Apologia 2023; Bruinessen 1990, 1994, 2012; Choeroni, Madrah, and Aziz 2019; Hula et al. 2022; Umam 2011), this study foregrounds its role as an everyday literacy practice embedded in pedagogy, ethical routines, and intergenerational relations.

First, *Pegon* operates as a script-based interpretive infrastructure. Consistent with Bhatt and Li's (Bhatt and Li 2024) characterisation of heritage literacy as purposive, socially embedded, and sustained through practice, *Pegon* operates in *pesantren* not as a project of language preservation but as a script-based interpretive infrastructure that structures how knowledge is accessed and validated (through slow, word-by-word reading, systematic grammatical annotation, and disciplined attention to syntactic detail). These practices resonate with established descriptions of *pesantren* pedagogy emphasising precision, repetition, and ethical discipline (Dhofier 2011; Yusri 2020). *Pegon* thus provides the material-semiotic scaffolding that enables these pedagogical ideals to function in practice.

Second, *Pegon* functions as a regulated translingual and transmodal system. A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that *Pegon* functions as an *autonomous interpretive system* whose authority resides in its script and *makna* conventions rather than in any single spoken language. In this sense, *Pegon* has a stable script, a fixed set of grammatical-symbolic markers (ح، فاء، خ، م)، established rules for word-by-word glossing (*makna gandul*), and conventionalised interpretive sequences enforced through *koreksian kitab*. Although Javanese is most commonly used, *Pegon* accommodates Madurese, Sundanese, and Indonesian without disrupting its interpretive logic. This stability amid linguistic variation indicates that *Pegon* operates above individual languages: spoken forms may shift according to regional context or learner competence, but the *Pegon* script and its grammatical-symbolic annotations remain constant. *Santri* do not only 'translate' Arabic into local-language glosses; they synchronise *makna* 'translation' symbols, spacing, and marginal placement with the teacher's paced reading and correction. This combination of translingual adaptation and transmodal coordination – linking speech, sound, writing, and page-space – stabilises interpretation while maintaining pedagogical rigour.

In this sense, *Pegon* can be understood as a regulated translingual and transmodal literacy practice: *santri* draw on heterogeneous linguistic resources as part of meaning-making (Vogel and Garcia 2017; Canagarajah 2013), yet this does not take the form of free or spontaneous 'mixing'. Instead, interpretation is stabilised through the *Pegon* script, the *makna* conventions, and institutional routines that authorise how Arabic lexical forms are glossed into Javanese, Madurese, Sundanese, or Indonesian (Bhatt et al. 2025; Bhatt and Li 2024; Hula et al. 2022). The stability of *Pegon* amid language variation therefore supports the argument that translingual practice in *pesantren* is sustained precisely through established interpretive conventions rather than through the erosion of boundaries. Rather than simply facilitating cross-linguistic translation, *Pegon* operates as a *meta-semiotic interpretive framework* that regulates interpretation through its *makna* symbols and grammatical codes, establishes scholarly authority through demonstrated mastery of *Pegon* annotation, and transmits inherited norms of practice through intergenerational teaching routines and corrective discipline embedded in *pesantren* life.

Third, *Pegon* mediates the localisation of Islamic knowledge and ethical conduct. Through Javanese vocabulary, honorifics, and hierarchical speech levels, *Pegon* embeds theological interpretation within culturally meaningful registers of *adab* and ethical sensitivity. In this way, the script conveys not only semantic content but also ethical and social norms, grounding abstract Islamic knowledge in everyday cultural practices (Koentjaraningrat 1984).

Finally, *Pegon* supports decolonial continuity and heritage transmission. Participants emphasised that continued use of *Pegon* reflects adherence to *sanad*-based authority and *tabarrukan* – respect for inherited methods and scholarly lineage. Rather than being a form of active resistance, this practice sustains epistemic autonomy by maintaining inherited interpretive conventions. Practices such as *bandongan*, *sorogan*, and *koreksian kitab* function not merely as instructional techniques but as mechanisms of validation through which interpretive accuracy and lineage-based legitimacy are maintained. From a heritage literacy perspective, this demonstrates that literacy authority in *pesantren* flows through relational accountability and historical continuity rather than formalised curricula or bureaucratic regulation.

This lineage-oriented orientation also reframes *Pegon*'s decolonial significance. Although earlier scholarship casts *Pegon* as an anti-colonial literacy practice (Choeroni, Madrah, and Aziz 2019; Fikri 2015) the findings suggest its persistence is less explicit resistance than inherited epistemic autonomy. *Pesantren* sustain *Pegon* not against Indonesian or modern educational systems, but through an ethical commitment to methods considered more accurate, legitimate, and blessed. In this sense, *Pegon* reflects decolonial continuity, maintained through everyday practice rather than overt political contestation (Smith 2022), and aligns with participants' framing of *Pegon* as *tabarrukan* that prioritises *sanad* over novelty.

The study's contributions are bounded by its scope. The evidence comes from three months of fieldwork in East Java focused on influential *pesantren* *salaf*, with interviewees from a broader *pesantren* range; therefore, findings may not generalise to semi-modern, modern, hybrid/digital *pesantren* or regions with different language ecologies. Short duration limits insight into long-term acquisition, attrition, and post-*pesantren* change. Purposive sampling strengthens insider accounts but may under-represent novices, struggling learners, or those who disengage from *Pegon*, and fieldnote-based dialogues may not be verbatim.

Future work should compare *pesantren* types (*salaf*, semi-modern, modern, hybrid/digital) across regions beyond East Java, follow *santri* longitudinally through and beyond *pesantren*, and conduct fine-grained interaction analyses of *bandongan*, *sorogan*, and *koreksian kitab*. As texts increasingly circulate via PDFs and messaging platforms, research on 'digital *Pegon*' (typing systems, annotation workflows, and how *makna* conventions are preserved or altered across media) will be crucial for understanding how this interpretive infrastructure is maintained, reconfigured, or challenged.

Taken together, these findings suggest that *Pegon* exemplifies heritage not as static preservation but as lived, practiced continuity. Heritage is expressed materially through annotated manuscripts, marginal glosses, and symbol systems; practiced through pedagogical routines such as *bandongan*, *sorogan*, and correction sessions; and reinterpreted as Arabic textual authority is reframed within Javanese linguistic etiquette, grammatical conventions, and ethical sensibilities. In this way, *Pegon* does not merely safeguard a past tradition but actively reorganises it within contemporary educational contexts.

Pegon thus enables a form of 'heritage future' in which Islamic knowledge remains locally grounded while dynamically engaged with broader linguistic and educational transformations. By mediating rather than replacing Arabic authority, by resisting the hegemonic privileging of national linguistic standardisation, and by sustaining Javanese as a legitimate epistemic medium, *Pegon* sustains plural and multilayered knowledge systems within Islamic scholarship. It supports a localised Islamic pedagogy in which theological meanings are articulated through culturally proximate forms, ensuring that religious learning remains socially embedded rather than abstracted from lived experience (Zakiah et al. 2025).

At the same time, *Pegon* cultivates ethical reading practices. The meticulous word-by-word glossing and grammatical marking system ensures that no meaning is lost in translation, fostering attentiveness, patience, and disciplined engagement with sacred texts. Through these routines, heritage is not only transmitted but embodied as *habitus*.

Finally, as the ‘soul of the *pesantren*’, inseparable from chains of transmission (*sanad*) and the classical scholarly tradition, *Pegon* sustains institutional continuity across generations. Its continued use projects a future in which *pesantren* remain sites of locally grounded yet dialogical Islamic knowledge production. In this sense, *Pegon* demonstrates how decolonial literacy practices do not reject global or canonical traditions but mediate them, enabling heritage to be simultaneously preserved, transformed, and projected forward.

Conclusion

This study has shown that *Pegon* is not merely a writing system or auxiliary translation tool, but a living heritage literacy practice through which Islamic knowledge, local linguistic resources, and *pesantren* identity are jointly produced, transmitted, and legitimised in East Javanese *pesantren*. The findings demonstrate that *Pegon* operates as a *meta-semiotic interpretive framework*: a stable interpretive infrastructure that governs how multiple spoken languages, grammatical knowledge, pedagogical routines, and ethical orientations are mobilised in the process of meaning-making. Beyond its pedagogical function, *Pegon* carries profound symbolic and moral significance. Its transmission through *bandongan*, *sorogan*, and *koreksian kitab* situates literacy learning within intergenerational relationships grounded in *sanad* and reinforced through *tabarrukan*. These practices reveal that literacy authority in *pesantren* is not derived from formal curricula or institutional policy, but from relational accountability, inherited methods, and ethical commitment to established scholarly lineages. Mastery of *Pegon* thus functions as a marker of scholarly legitimacy, signalling full participation in *pesantren* intellectual life.

Taken together, this study contributes to heritage literacy and Islamic education scholarship by demonstrating how a vernacular script can function as an autonomous interpretive system that preserves epistemic precision, cultural localisation, and intergenerational continuity. *Pegon*’s continued use reflects not resistance to change, but a form of *inherited epistemic autonomy* sustained through everyday practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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