

REVITALIZING CRITICAL THINKING IN ACEHNESE SOCIETY: A CULTURAL AND ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Critical thinking is a vital skill for developing adaptive societies capable of addressing the complexities of globalization and digitalization. In Aceh, however, critical thinking has significantly declined, as evidenced by the uncritical acceptance of unverified information, the prevalence of stereotypes, and decisions driven by conformity and egocentrism. This study investigates the root causes of this stagnation and proposes strategies for revitalization by integrating Islamic epistemology and Acehese cultural values. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis involving 15 informants, including educators, community leaders, and youth in Neusu Aceh. The findings highlight five key barriers to critical thinking: egocentrism, self-interested thinking, conformity, unfounded assumptions, and stereotypes. These challenges are exacerbated by low digital literacy and cultural norms that prioritize group harmony over individual reflection. Drawing on Al-Ghazali's *tazkiyyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) and Kant's *sapere aude* (dare to think independently), this study emphasizes the need for intellectual humility, courage, empathy, integrity, and rationality to combat these issues. The proposed strategies include integrating reflective practices into formal and non-formal education, promoting digital literacy programs tailored to local needs, and leveraging Acehese Islamic traditions to foster a culture of critical thinking.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Islamic Epistemology, Acehese Culture

Abstrak

Berpikir kritis merupakan keterampilan vital untuk membangun masyarakat yang adaptif dalam menghadapi kompleksitas globalisasi dan digitalisasi. Namun, di Aceh, kemampuan berpikir kritis mengalami penurunan signifikan, yang ditandai dengan penerimaan informasi tanpa verifikasi, stereotip yang meluas, dan pengambilan keputusan yang dipengaruhi oleh konformitas serta egosentrisme. Penelitian ini mengkaji penyebab utama stagnasi tersebut dan mengusulkan strategi revitalisasi melalui integrasi epistemologi Islam dan nilai-nilai budaya Aceh. Dengan pendekatan fenomenologi, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan 15 informan, termasuk pendidik, tokoh masyarakat, dan generasi muda di Neusu Aceh. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi lima hambatan utama berpikir kritis: egosentrisme, pemikiran yang berorientasi pada kepentingan pribadi, konformitas, asumsi yang tidak berdasar, dan stereotip. Hambatan ini diperburuk oleh literasi digital yang rendah dan norma budaya yang lebih mengutamakan harmoni kelompok daripada refleksi individu. Dengan menggunakan konsep *tazkiyyat al-nafs* (penyucian jiwa) dari Al-Ghazali dan *sapere aude* (berani berpikir sendiri) dari Kant, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya kerendahan hati intelektual, keberanian, empati, integritas, dan rasionalitas untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut. Strategi yang diusulkan

meliputi integrasi praktik reflektif dalam pendidikan formal dan nonformal, promosi literasi digital yang disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan lokal, serta pemanfaatan tradisi Islam di Aceh untuk membangun budaya berpikir kritis.

Kata Kunci: Berpikir Kritis, Epistemologi Islam, Budaya Aceh

A. Introduction

Critical thinking is essential for building adaptive societies capable of addressing the challenges posed by globalization and digitalization. As a cognitive skill, critical thinking enables individuals to evaluate information, make reasoned decisions, and respond effectively to complex social, economic, and technological issues. However, in Aceh, a decline in critical thinking has become a pressing concern. This is evidenced by the widespread acceptance of unverified information, decisions influenced by stereotypes and conformity, and an overreliance on social media for knowledge acquisition. These challenges are particularly acute in collectivist cultures such as Aceh, where group harmony often takes precedence over individual reflection.

Globally, the need for critical thinking has become increasingly urgent. According to UNESCO's (2023) Global Report on Digital Literacy, societies with lower levels of digital literacy are particularly vulnerable to misinformation and cognitive biases. Indonesia, ranked 77th out of 79 countries in the 2023 PISA assessment for reading literacy, reflects these challenges on a national scale. Aceh, as a region deeply rooted in Islamic traditions and local customs, faces unique barriers that further complicate the cultivation of critical thinking. For example, data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2024) indicate that only 15% of Acehnese residents actively verify information obtained from social media. This lack of digital literacy, combined with cultural norms that discourage dissent, creates an environment where critical thinking is underdeveloped.

Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of critical thinking for navigating the complexities of the digital era (Halpern, 2014; Paul & Elder, 2009), few have examined the interplay between culture, religion, and cognitive skills in specific contexts like Aceh. Research in collectivist societies, such as Malaysia and Thailand, suggests that approaches tailored to local cultural norms are more effective in fostering critical thinking (UNESCO, 2023). However, in Aceh, existing literature often overlooks

the potential role of Islamic epistemology and cultural values in addressing these challenges. This oversight presents a significant gap in understanding how critical thinking can be revitalized in deeply traditional and religious communities.

This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the root causes of critical thinking stagnation in Aceh and proposing strategies grounded in both Islamic philosophy and local cultural values. Drawing on Immanuel Kant's *sapere aude* (dare to think for yourself) and Al-Ghazali's *tazkiyyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul), the study integrates global intellectual frameworks with Acehese traditions to develop a holistic approach. By aligning reflective practices with religious and cultural principles, the proposed strategies seek to foster intellectual humility, courage, and rationality, enabling Acehese society to navigate the complexities of the digital era while preserving its cultural identity.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the stagnation of critical thinking in Acehese society, focusing specifically on Neusu Aceh as the research site. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to uncover subjective experiences and provide a deeper understanding of complex socio-cultural phenomena. Neusu Aceh, a semi-urban area known for its blend of traditional and modern influences, represents a microcosm of Acehese society where cultural values intersect with the challenges of digital literacy. This site was purposefully selected to examine how social and cultural norms influence critical thinking in a dynamic yet tradition-bound setting.

Data were collected from 15 informants representing diverse perspectives, including educators, community leaders, and youth. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study's objectives. Selection criteria included a minimum residency of five years in Neusu Aceh, active involvement in community or educational activities, and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over 45 to 60 minutes, recorded with the informants' consent, and supplemented by field notes. Participatory observation was used to analyze social interactions and media usage patterns, while document analysis provided additional context through statistical data and reports from the Central Bureau of Statistics, government publications, and relevant academic literature.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman framework, encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Key themes such as egocentrism, conformity, and digital illiteracy were identified during the data reduction phase. These themes were then organized into descriptive narratives to uncover patterns and relationships. For instance, conformity was observed as a recurring factor in participants' reluctance to challenge majority opinions. To ensure validity, methodological triangulation was applied, cross-checking findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Critical Thinking and Its Barriers

Critical thinking, as a disciplined process of evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing information, is fundamental for navigating modern complexities (Paul & Elder, 2009). Halpern (2014) underscores its importance in an age dominated by rapid information flows, where the ability to discern facts from misinformation determines societal resilience. However, critical thinking is rarely an innate skill; it is shaped by cognitive, social, and structural factors that can either foster or inhibit its development. In regions like Aceh, where collectivist culture, religious traditions, and limited digital literacy intersect, critical thinking faces distinct barriers. These barriers, rooted in individual biases, cultural norms, and technological dynamics, create a multifaceted challenge.

At the individual level, egocentrism and self-interested thinking pose significant obstacles. Egocentrism, as defined by Bassham et al. (2011), involves a narrow focus on one's own perspectives, often at the expense of broader, more inclusive viewpoints. This cognitive distortion fosters decision-making that prioritizes personal gain over communal well-being. For example, an educator noted, "Decisions are frequently guided by self-interest, ignoring their wider implications for the community" (Interview with Yaqub, April 2024). Nickerson (1998) expands on this, highlighting the role of confirmation bias, where individuals selectively process information that supports their pre-existing beliefs while dismissing contradictory evidence. Such biases limit analytical reasoning, particularly in societies where traditional authority and unquestioned norms dominate.

Cultural norms, particularly those prevalent in collectivist societies, further compound these individual tendencies. Triandis (2001) observes that collectivist cultures prioritize group harmony over individual reflection, discouraging dissent and fostering conformity. In Aceh, informants described this dynamic as a pervasive fear of being ostracized for challenging majority opinions. A youth participant remarked, “It is easier to agree with the majority than to face criticism for thinking differently” (Interview with Wildan, April 2024). This cultural emphasis on harmony stifles critical inquiry and creates an environment where stereotypes and unfounded assumptions flourish. For instance, deeply entrenched gender roles in Aceh often reinforce rigid societal norms, as noted by Utomo (2020), limiting the scope of reflective discourse on inclusivity and equality.

The digital era introduces a new dimension to these challenges, amplifying cognitive and cultural barriers. The proliferation of misinformation and emotionally charged content on social media platforms creates an ecosystem of disinformation, as described by Wardle and Derakhshan (2018). In this environment, individuals are inundated with unverified information, which is often accepted without scrutiny due to low levels of digital literacy. Hasanah (2023) emphasizes that in regions like Aceh, where formal education rarely incorporates digital literacy skills, individuals are particularly vulnerable to misinformation. This vulnerability was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as reliance on digital platforms increased while critical evaluation skills remained underdeveloped. Informants from this study corroborated these findings, noting that “viral content is trusted, especially when it comes from influential figures or aligns with cultural narratives” (Interview with Haikal, Mei 2024).

These barriers—egocentrism, conformity, and the influence of digital misinformation—are not isolated phenomena but are deeply interrelated. Egocentrism drives selective information processing, while conformity discourages questioning majority opinions, and digital platforms amplify these tendencies by reinforcing biases through algorithm-driven content. Collectively, these dynamics create a systematic impediment to critical thinking, necessitating strategies that address not only individual cognitive limitations but also broader societal and structural influences. Such strategies must be rooted in both global theoretical insights and localized cultural contexts, providing a robust framework for addressing the stagnation of critical thinking in Aceh.

2. The Stagnation of Critical Thinking in Acehese Society

The stagnation of critical thinking in Acehese society manifests as an intricate interplay of cultural traditions, historical legacies, and digital influences. Historically, Aceh's prolonged conflict (1989–1998) has left a profound social impact, fostering a culture of unquestioned authority and prioritizing stability over intellectual autonomy. A community leader explained, "After decades of conflict, people became more focused on preserving order than questioning decisions" (Interview with Yaqub, April 2024). This historical context resonates with Utomo's (2020) findings on post-conflict societies, where stability often supersedes critical engagement.

In addition to cultural influences, digital factors further aggravate this stagnation. Informants consistently highlighted the ease with which misinformation spreads on social media, exacerbating cognitive biases such as confirmation bias. A youth informant observed, "The problem is not just the lack of information, but that people don't question the information they receive" (Interview with Wildan, April 2024). Hasanah (2023) supports this, arguing that inadequate digital literacy exacerbates the uncritical acceptance of online content. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics, as increased reliance on digital platforms during isolation exposed more individuals to unverified information.

Finally, structural factors within Aceh's educational system also contribute to the stagnation of critical thinking. Informants pointed to a prevalence of rote learning, which prioritizes memorization over analytical skills. An educator shared, "Students are taught to memorize rather than analyze, which limits their ability to think critically" (Interview with Haikal, Mei 2024). This finding aligns with Fikram's (2023) critique of traditional education systems, where pedagogical methods fail to cultivate reflective capacities. Together, these cultural, digital, and educational factors highlight the complexity of addressing critical thinking stagnation in Aceh.

3. Root Causes of Critical Thinking Stagnation in Acehese Society

The stagnation of critical thinking in Acehese society is the result of complex interactions between individual, societal, and structural factors. At the individual level, egocentrism and self-interested thinking emerged as significant barriers. Egocentrism, defined as an overemphasis on personal perspectives (Bassham et al., 2011), often leads

to decision-making that disregards broader community impacts. A local leader explained, “Many individuals prioritize personal gain, even when it negatively affects their surroundings” (Interview with Yaqub, April 2024). This behavior reflects the prevalence of confirmation bias, where people selectively process information that aligns with their beliefs while ignoring contradictory evidence (Nickerson, 1998).

At the societal level, Aceh’s collectivist culture prioritizes group harmony over individual reflection. This cultural tendency discourages dissent and independent reasoning, as questioning the majority is often viewed as disrespectful. A youth participant observed, “It’s common for people to agree with the majority just to avoid conflict or being seen as disruptive” (Interview with Wildan, April 2024). Such conformity is consistent with findings from Triandis (2001), who noted that collectivist societies often suppress critical thinking to maintain social cohesion. Stereotypes and unfounded assumptions further compound these challenges, creating rigid thought patterns that resist analytical engagement. For instance, gender-based stereotypes in Aceh discourage critical discourse on equality and inclusion, reflecting broader patterns observed in other collectivist societies (Utomo, 2020).

Structurally, Aceh’s educational system exacerbates these issues by prioritizing rote memorization over analytical skills. An educator commented, “Students are evaluated based on how well they memorize, not how well they analyze or apply concepts” (Interview with Haikal, Mei 2024). This approach limits opportunities for reflective learning and critical engagement with complex issues. Fikram (2023) argues that such traditional systems hinder intellectual development, leaving individuals unprepared to navigate the complexities of modern challenges. Furthermore, the region’s low levels of digital literacy amplify these structural weaknesses, as misinformation often circulates uncritically on social media platforms (Hasanah, 2023). Together, these individual, societal, and structural factors create a multidimensional barrier to critical thinking.

4. Strategies for Revitalizing Critical Thinking in Acehnese Society

Revitalizing critical thinking in Acehnese society requires a holistic approach that integrates cultural, educational, and technological strategies. Drawing on Islamic epistemology and modern critical thinking frameworks, this study identifies five core

principles as foundational to overcoming stagnation: intellectual humility, courage, empathy, integrity, and rationality. These principles are deeply rooted in both Al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) and Kant's *sapere aude* (dare to think independently).

Intellectual humility is essential for addressing egocentrism and self-interested thinking. As Whitcomb et al. (2017) note, intellectual humility fosters openness to diverse perspectives and encourages individuals to acknowledge their cognitive limitations. In Aceh, integrating reflective practices into formal and non-formal education can cultivate this value. For instance, discussion-based learning models, as proposed by Lubis (2021), encourage students to analyze opposing viewpoints in a structured and respectful manner.

Intellectual courage is equally important for challenging conformity. Kant's philosophy underscores the necessity of courage in questioning societal norms and established authorities. Community-based workshops can create safe spaces for dialogue, enabling individuals to express dissenting opinions without fear of social repercussions (Hasanah, 2023). These workshops can also incorporate case studies that highlight the value of independent reasoning in solving real-world problems.

Empathy and integrity further strengthen critical thinking capacities. Empathy, particularly intellectual empathy, fosters the ability to understand diverse perspectives without compromising analytical rigor (Paul & Elder, 2009). Integrity ensures that individuals remain consistent in applying critical thinking principles, prioritizing truth over convenience or group consensus. A participant emphasized, "Integrity means being committed to truth, even when it challenges personal or societal beliefs" (Interview with Jamal, Mei 2024). Collaborative problem-solving exercises, such as group discussions or role-playing scenarios, can embed these values into educational programs.

Finally, improving digital literacy is crucial for empowering Acehnese society to critically evaluate online information. Workshops on identifying misinformation, verifying sources, and recognizing bias should be integrated into both formal curricula and community outreach initiatives (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). These programs should emphasize ethical considerations, such as verifying information before sharing, in alignment with Islamic teachings (Hosen, 2019). By combining these strategies, Aceh can develop a culture of critical thinking that is both contextually relevant and globally informed.

D. Conclusion

This study has identified critical thinking stagnation in Acehese society as a multifaceted issue rooted in individual, societal, and structural dimensions. Egocentrism, self-interested thinking, conformity, unfounded assumptions, and stereotypes were found to be key barriers, exacerbated by low digital literacy and cultural norms that discourage dissent and individual reflection. These challenges are further complicated by the influence of social media, where misinformation is readily accepted due to inadequate critical evaluation skills. The findings highlight the urgent need for tailored strategies to address these barriers while respecting Aceh's unique cultural and religious context.

To address these challenges, this study proposes a comprehensive framework grounded in Islamic epistemology and modern educational theories. Five core principles—intellectual humility, courage, empathy, integrity, and rationality—serve as the foundation for revitalizing critical thinking. Strategies include integrating reflective practices into formal and non-formal education, promoting digital literacy programs that align with Islamic values, and fostering community-based dialogues to encourage intellectual courage and dissent. These approaches leverage Acehese cultural values and religious traditions, offering a localized yet globally relevant solution to critical thinking stagnation.

This research contributes to the global discourse by demonstrating how cultural and religious frameworks can be integrated into strategies for fostering critical thinking in collectivist societies. The findings provide practical recommendations for educators, policymakers, and community leaders in Aceh and similar contexts. Specifically, they underscore the importance of addressing digital literacy gaps, transforming pedagogical approaches, and promoting ethical information-sharing practices. Future studies should further explore the role of economic and political factors in shaping critical thinking capacities and assess the long-term impact of integrating Islamic epistemology into educational initiatives. Additionally, quantitative research could validate the proposed strategies across broader populations, enhancing their applicability. By implementing these recommendations, Acehese society can navigate the complexities of the digital era while preserving its cultural and spiritual identity, fostering a community that is both intellectually resilient and culturally grounded.

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