



Religious Leader and Tafsir in Indonesia: Case Study of Pesantren and its Neighborhood in Java

Ferry Muhammadsyah Siregar^{1*}, Sahrudin², M. Idrus³, Agus Prayitno⁴, Aghuts Muhaimin⁵, Koidah⁶, Taufik Ridwan⁷, Dian Widianari⁸, Pendi Susanto⁹, Ari Setiawan¹⁰ and Maratun Sholihah¹¹

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11}Institut Agama Islam Bunga Bangsa Cirebon

*: ferrymhsiregar@bungabangsacirebon.ac.id

Abstract

This paper examines one particular Muslim school and the community surrounding it in Yogyakarta. Pesantren is an example of a kind of Islamic religious institution in the country. Through an examination of the founding, book of tafsir, and method of teaching tafsir by the kiai of the pesantren, an attempt is made to develop a clearer definition of kiai's tafsir and how he teach tafsir of the Quran in the "pengajian" (Islamic lecture) for urban people living in the pesantren and its neighborhood. Based upon this example, the paper works toward redefining "tafsir" in Indonesia in terms of specific patterns of relationships with interpretation of the kiai as the Muslim interpreter and a critically-selected set of defining characteristics of the Pesantren and including an emphasis on Islamic proselytisation (da'wa).

Key words: religious leader, tafsir, pesantren, Indonesia

Introduction

In the context of Quranic interpretation, Tafsir and Quranic studies can be viewed as an effort to develop the Qur'anic interpretation at the present time in order to respond the challenges of the epoch. Religion has a strong relationship to exegesis, both conceptually and historically. Conceptually, religion is assumed to be an "exegetic community," therefore, the study of religion is basically the interpretation of exegesis. Historically, religion represents diverse interpretations from human beings closely related to the historical background of each perspective, even though the clash or pressure often rises up among the followers of same religious tradition. For example, the orthodox and the liberal adherents have different interpretation of their own religion. (Aliade, 1987: 280; Siregar, 2005: 15).

The Quran for Believing Muslims represents unquestionably the very Word of God. It is taken for granted by the conservative 'Ulama (Muslim Doctors of Law and Sacred Literature) just as well as by the most radical modernists (Baljon, 1968: 1). In the Muslim world, the teachings of Islam are based essentially on two fundamental sources, the Quran and Sunnah. For Muslims, the Quran is the revelation of God, the central fact of the Islamic religious experience. It is the very word of God and the presence of the numinous in history (space and time). Quranic revelation is not that of the transcendent God, but rather of his Divine Will, which man is to follow: "This is a declaration for mankind, a guidance and admonition for the God-fearing" (QS.3:138) (Esposito, 2001: 3-5).

In the history of Islam and Muslim in Indonesia, According to Martin van Bruinessen, the pesantren (or *pondok surau*, *dayah*, as it is called elsewhere) is not the only institution of Muslim religious education, and the tradition it embodies is only one out of several tendencies within Indonesian Islam. Modernist, reformist and fundamentalist currents emerged partly in opposition to it, and to some extent developed into rigid traditions themselves. One of Indonesia's great traditions is that of Muslim religious learning as embodied in the Javanese pesantren. The main goal of these institutions is the transmission of traditional Islam as laid down in scripture, i.e., classical texts of the various Islamic disciplines, together with commentaries, glosses and super-commentaries on these basic texts written over the ages. These works, including the works of tafsir are collectively known in Indonesia as *kitab kuning*, "yellow books", a name that they owe to the tinted paper on which the first Middle Eastern editions reaching Indonesia were printed (van Bruinessen in Marschall, 1994: 121-145).

Pesantrens taught Quranic Studies with other branches of Islamic knowledge such *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *hadith* (prophetic sayings), *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism), and *kalam* (Theology) Since the era of Quranic revelation up to now, in fact, the study of the Quran and its interpretative methodology have seen a significant development along with the acceleration of the social and cultural circumstances and the development of human civilization including Pesantrens of Indonesia. In the context of the Pesantrens as the Islamic institution in Indonesia, they have started to introduce and teach the several kinds of interpretive models and literatures.

Pesantrens is to continue to grow and many Indonesian parents support their children to go and study in pesantren. *Statistik Pendidikan Agama dan Keagamaan Tahun Pelajaran 2007-2008* published by the Department of Religious Affairs showed that the total number of the students of the pesantrens reached about 3,818,469. The number of *santri* (male students) is about 2,063,954 (54,1%) and the number of *santriwati* (female students) is about 1,754,515 (45,9%). Besides, data from the department of Religious Affairs in 2003 shows a quickly growing number of pesantren and the students accepted in the pesantrens. In 1977, there were 4,195 pesantrens with 677,384 students. Eight years later, in 1985, this number added to 6,239 pesantrens with 1,084,801 students. Twelve years later, in 1997, it was reported that there are 9,388 pesantrens with 1,770,768 students. Six years later, in 2003, the number reached 14,647 pesantrens. M. Amin Haedari, the Director of *diniyyah* Schools and Pesantrens of General Directorate for Islamic Education of the Department of Religious Affairs of Republic of Indonesia, said that the number of pesantrens is continuing to grow over the years. In 1980, its number is about 4,176 pesantrens and it became 14,000 pesantrens in 2007 (Haedari, 2008: 1-2).

Pesantren in Java

Generally, a pesantren was originated from existence of a kiai in somewhere. Then, the people who want to study with him came. After more students were coming, the initiative then comes into mind to set up a small house or dormitory next to the house of Kiai. The dorm was very small and simple and they stayed there. In the beginning, he did not give enough attention to build places where they can stay. At that time, the kiai in fact did not plan how to build the dorms in his pesantren. What he thought is only how to teach religious lessons understood by the students. The more students were coming, the more buildings and small houses were built for the students. The students then told their family and friends about the existence of the pesantren so the pesantren became famous and were well-known like the pesantrens in the era of Walisongo (nine walis of java, wali is a religious expert like saint) (Wahab, 2004: 153-154).

Kiai is the founder of the pesantren in common. Martin van Bruinessen wrote:

"Highly motivated students went from pesantren to pesantren, studying in each the texts in which its kiai was specialised. After a few pesantrens in Banten, they would go on to pesantrens in Bogor, Cianjur, Cirebon, Central or East Java and finally, if their families could afford it, to Mecca, the most prestigious centre of Islamic learning. The pesantrens were typically (although not uniquely) located in rural districts, away from the major roads. Their geographical isolation symbolised, as it were, their ideological distance from the state. The pangulu, as a state official, and the independent teacher, the kiai, were two contrasting types, in Banten as well as elsewhere in Java." (van Bruinessen, 1995: 165-200).

Some Indonesians refer to a widely regarded kiai as an *ulama*. This word is actually the plural form of the Arabic word *alim* which means knowledgeable person. Through common usage in Indonesia, the word *ulama* grew to signify a high-level kiai, even though this is a grammatical misuse of the Arabic word (Dhofier, 1994). A kiai is not a cleric in the same way as a priest in or Buddhism. There is no governing body that ordains or authorizes a kiai. Likewise, no organization can defrock a kiai or remove him from his position. The reason is that a kiai has his position and authority because people will listen to what he says (Lukens-Bull, 2005: 96-7).

In traditional community of Java, one can become a Kiai if he is accepted by the community as Kiai. The people could ask for advices to him, or send their children to get lesson from him. Becoming a Kiai does not need formal criteria such as academic requirements, diploma and others. However, there are some informal requirements must be fulfilled by a Kyai as informal requirements that determine someone could be senior Kiai. According to Abu Bakar Aceh, there are four factors making one become big kiai: (1) knowledge, (2) piousness; (3) descendant and (4) number of students he have (Steenbrink, 1994).

Generally, a *kyai* has full power to bring Pesantren journey into a specified target. Therefore, implementation of education process occurring in Pesantren is also highly dependent on *kyai* to regulate. Although operation is usually conducted by teachers or his assistants, but his ideas remain to not separate from *kyai*'s intervention. In addition, Pesantren is value transformation institution having duty to form spiritual mental of students in all aspects of life. Knowledge transfer from caretakers to students is only one part of program systems owned and applied by Pesantren.

Influence of the *kiai* in learning process in Pesantren is quite dominant. Efforts to transform values of Islam will be disturbed when Pesantren tradition, including obedience to the *kyai*, is regarded something having negative impact. It was introduced by Wali Songo to Hindu-Buddhist community when they intended to create a Moslem Community by transferring Islamic values in it. When understanding of students for Pesantren tradition is not good, it is difficult for *kiai* to change and improve systems existing in Pesantren. It will result for weakness of the Pesantren which is recently assumed the provider of Islamic missions. Students assume that *kyai* as a personified figure, that, in many cases, has superiority, he feels that he is little and less significant, so that such feeling results in adherence, which is sometimes valued as excessive from his self, *kyai* inhabits central position in Pesantren world because its existence as one only figure who is extremely well-thought of and respected, *kyai* is also believed to give blessing to students because *kyai* is assumed as holy man near to the God.

Attitudes and behaviors to respect and obey the *kyai* are certainly maintained in the Pesantren community. The respects are due to the excellences of the *kiai*, not to the individual and private aspects. When the *Kiai* does not meet requirements and do deviation from religious teachings, the respect and obedience are no longer to do. According to Pesantren education systems, a new change can be made if at least two following requirements have been met. First, values of idea and firmness to hold Pesantren principle in order to achieve Islamic aspiration. Second, behavior self-adapting to the values. Obedience to follow the "standard" rules followed by Pesantren community.

Kai and the Teaching of Tafsir

According to Pesantren tradition, knowledge is usually measured by number of learnt books and from *ulama* they have learnt. The standard books which must be learnt and mastered by students have been determined by the Pesantrens. Other books chosen by students to study would be taught by teachers specifically. In fact, the books taught in Pesantren are limited in number. It does not mean that Pesantren learning want to limit ways of thinking by students. Fiqh is one of sciences widely containing religious prudences and arguments. Books on fiqh contain various aspects of life such as behavior, personal relation, society, and human relation to God. Educational systems used in Pesantren widely prioritize to create of students' personality and morality according to Islamic demands. For some, Teaching of knowledge by the Pesantren is dependent on demands of student. It consists of main subjects of religious sciences such as Arabic languages, *nahwu*, *sharf*, and others considered important. The *fiqh*, *hadits*, *tafsir*, and *tasawuf* are main subjects taught in Pesantren.

Methods of teaching commonly used in Pesantren consist of: (1) *sorogan*. It is a way how the students attend the lectures of teacher individually by bringing books which would be taught. The term *sorogan* is derived from word "sorog" (Javanese word), which means to put holy book to read in front of the *kiai* or teachers. It is said that this method does not only transfer knowledge for students, but also to give values as cultural process to transfer the knowledge; (2) *wetonan*. This term, according to the history, is derived from word "wektu" (Java) that mean the embodied. The teaching is done in certain times. This method is also called *bandongan* or *halaqa*.

The *kiאים* have capability of speaking Arab language. For them, minimal requirements to teach *tafsir al-Jalalain* is not difficult to get. It means that teaching *Tafsir al-Jalalain* is like teaching Arab language sciences and its grammatical aspects. To understand a paragraph or a group of paragraphs are first based on logistic analysis conducted by rigorous extract of the Arabic words. According to statements, one reason why writers of *Tafsir al-Jalalain* chose discussion method is intended to make Arab people consistent to use Arabic it was because that Arabic was threatened to destroy by other cultures.

In context of education in *Pesantren*, the purpose of *tasir* study is for education for life. It means that interaction between *santri* (students), People surrounding it, and *kyai* or interaction between students are directed to prepare students and people to face life in society. Main focus of *Pesantren* education is widely on direction of practical things than theoretical and speculative things. Abdurrahman Wahid said that what was conducted in *Pesantren* was to process formation of value setting. Without ignoring importance of knowledge, its value gets highest portion in *Pesantren*. For that reason, education in *Pesantren* has different focus of point from education in other institutions. Such life orientation will affect how *kiai* treats students in teaching the Quranic interpretation. Teaching of al-Qur'an is firstly directed to process formation of Islamic values. Interpretation in *Pesantren* setting widely intends to get experience than scientific interest. *Pesantren* does not give diploma to those who graduate. It reflects the spirit of each activity in *Pesantren*.

In forming these values, *fiqh* law is a most important expression of Islamic values. Along with it, the Quranic interpretation is also tried to support understanding of students on fiqh law. In *Pesantren*, *tafsir al-Jalalain* is a kind of *tafsir* fulfill the criteria. The process of learning *tafsir al-Jalalain* is also intended to discipline a Moslem in understanding freedom aspect of the holy texts. it is not surprising if this kind of *tafsir* is given to students who are

still in basic study levels. Even, there was one of Indonesian Islamic institutions that state trivially: “*tafsir al-Jalalain* is only for senior high school’s students.” This comment implies that *tafsir al-Jalalain* is intended for introduction to the quranic tafsir in general.

Deep recitation of a *buku kuning* (yellow book) in discussion is also intended to help students understand other books individually. Therefore, a student needs to be required to recite *buku kuning* in analytical discussion. Knowledge on Arab language in recitation of *buku kuning* is expected to be provisions to recite other *buku kuning*s. These ideas motivate kiai to suggest students to depend on their knowledge on translations of *buku kuning*s increasing day by day. They are not only weak of translations, but also they should be required to trace sources through more authentic ways. However, it does not mean that they are forbidden to read other works of translations provided. They have to return to the original ones. Thus, they are possible to understand details contained in *buku kuning*s.

For a *kyai*, teaching an *al-Jalalain* interpretation seems to be easier than other interpretations. In addition to be brief and practical, this interpretation follows logical norms expressed in discussion norms. To widen and sharpen explanation, a *kyai* usually finds other sources, such as, Baidhawi’s interpretation. However, this explanation intends to strengthen and confirm opinion of *al-Jalalain* and not to give alternatives to interpretation, because *al-Jalalain* has been found as legal interpretation free from various possibilities of heresies. Until now, *al-Jalalain* interpretation still becomes the main source to understand the Quran. This interpretation is taught from basic level to advanced level.

The goal of interpretation in is recitation of the text in real meaning. Traditionally, recitation is religious activity associated with Moslem. Usually, recitation does not only concern intellectual activities, but also devotional activities. However, early recitation was associated with religious-scientific activities conducted in *Pesantren*. Recitation or specialization is intended to understand and specialize materials of certain religious sciences. Usually, in *Pesantren*, recitation is classified into two: recitation of books and recitation of the Quran. Materials of book recitation consist of materials such as *sharf*, *nahwu*, *fiqh*, *tafsir*, etc.

Materials of recited book are selected under supervision of the Kiai. However, in practice, the kiai’s knowledge on Islamic teachings is recited. The goal of tafsir is highly oriented for education and implantation of values which less and does not motivate *kyai* to write a book containing teaching bases or teaching methods. Even, until now, recitation of the book on *tafsir al-Jalalain* is not found. Compared to other recitations of *buku kuning*s like work of Imam al-Shafi’i or works by other Muslim thinkers like Imam al-Ghazali’s, recitation of *al-Jalalain* interpretation is not so developed. It looks like something ironic because the Quranic interpretation is guidance for Muslims and the *Pesantren*; on the other hand, need kind of alternative interpretation method which has been awaited for long time.

In the *Pesantren*, *tafsir al-Jalalain* is classified into one of *buku kuning*. In terms of age, this work was written five centuries ago. *Tafsir al-Jalalain* is well-known by Moslems in Indonesia from period of Demak Kingdom (Yunus, Yunus, 1960, 192). It was usually taught in basic level as introduction to Quranic interpretation. However, in university level, this work is still frequently used for one of reference books. *Buku kuning* is kind of book with yellow color. This color reflects age of the book which naturally changes from white color into yellow color. Thus, gradually yellow color is always associated with classical books. Although, technically, one can currently print classical books with white color and more advanced editing techniques. One is able to choose to printed books with old or classical appearances using yellow papers in size and format.

In the *pesantren* and Moslems, generally, It was mentioned that *buku kuning* has signify meaningful symbol. In Islamic literatures, *buku kuning* is kind of book having religious authority because the book is associated with writers who were close to the prophet life. Thus, classical or old characteristics of *buku kuning* are associated with authoritative subjects contained in it. Mentioning of *al-kutub al-muqarrara* (selected books) reflects the authoritative position. Kiai assumes *buku kuning* like calculator. What is important is how to find or estimate what is needed. kiai and kitab kuning are very close. Kitab kuning is a tool to find contents of the Quran concerning *fiqh*, *tahwid*, and other Islamic sciences. To use the kitab kuning, a kiai does not need to discuss it in deep concern. It is necessary to use sayings of *salaf* to understand contents of the Quran. If it is discussed, one never reaches what he/she will seeks. One is impossible to do everything.

Tafsir al-Jalalain is one of the *kitab kuning*. The Kiai has special treatment in how to read and teach *tafsir al-Jalalain*. This interpretation will be accepted as a tool to study the Quran without questioning whether it is relevant or not. Obligation of a Kiai to obey the specified book is one expression of their full comprehension on spirit of *ahl al-sunna wal jama’ah*. According to 1926 Basic Budget Year, NU people should “examine the special books, including the selected books of *ahl al-sunna wal jama’ah* or heresy books. Kiai has determined *tafsir al-Jalalain* becomes one of the *kitab kuning* to show presence of certain authority of the kiai in selecting what are true selected books and what are heresy books. Responsibility of a *kyai* for interpreting al-Quran through classical *ulama* is not only seen in their activities when they teach *tafsir* to their students. This responsibility also appears in their efforts to study other classical *tafsir* works to support what they teach. Interpretation of the *kyai* only helps students to understand what is existing in tafsir work. It means that responsibility of a Kiai is to present orthodox opinions as included in *tafsir al-Jalalain*.

Teaching of tafsir in *Pesantren* is conducted in a meeting called *halaqa* or study circle. *Halaqa* is one form of meeting between teachers and students in typical form. In al-Azhar university, *halaqa* system is also maintained. A Muslim Scholar (*ulama*) sits down near a pillar of Mosque and students sits around him while listening to the lecture..

In *halaqa* of the Pesantren, Kiai reads the text line by line, then translates and explains it. It was a main activity when the kyai teaches tafsir for the students and people attending the pengajian (Kiai's lecture). In some cases, the space for the pengajian is not so big. There are critics that this system will lead the listeners would not know what is taught by the Kiai. For them, halaqa system is unproductive.

Halaqa is also a social meeting to discuss a specific topic. However, if viewed from aspect of belief, *halaqa* has higher position. *Halaqa* is not only scientific circle. One who enters *halaqa* has certain expectation of the meeting. Thus, to understand what is *halaqah*, one has to examine what they discuss and do in it. Speech and talks in *halaqah* are gestures of faith and expectation by the involved people, both individual and group. This reality makes us not to reduce *halaqa* in the only action and saying. *Halaqa*, thus, is not only a medium to deepen knowledge of religion. It was kind of expression or stimulation on how belief of knowledge of religion flows from a *kyai* as personification of *salaf*. It means that knowledge must be studied from religious history and experience of Moslems before

Conclusion

Tafsir al-Jalalain becomes text-book taught in Pesantren. However, Kiai also use other books as far as they do not make conflict against existing text-books. Selection and loyalty to *tafsir al-Jalalain* cannot be separated from the notion of *ahl al-sunna wal jama'ah* requiring Moslems to comply with what has been conducted by *salaf*. This notion of *ahl al-sunna wal jama'ah* is personified in personality of kyai. System of teachings in Pesantren, developments of reliable and adaptive interpretations seem to be difficult to find. Main goal of education in Pesantren is to develop and cultivate the values for the students dan people surrounding it. If the *kiai* of the pesantren would be involved in developing a kind if tafsir, it was necessary to cooperate with other religious institutions higher than the Pesantren. The special form of Kiai's tafsir did not rise through the halaqa and other system in the Pesantren. The Kiai only re-reciting, re-reading dan translate the text into language through the interpretation activities in the Pengajian.

References

- [1] Aliade, M. (ed.). 1987. *Encyclopedia Britannica of Religion*. London: MacMillan Corp.
- [2] Al-Suyuti, Jalāl al-Dīn. 1998. *Al-Tahbīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- [3] Al-Qattan, Manna' Khalil. 1992. *Studi Ilmu-ilmu Quran*. Bogor: Litera Antar Nusa.
- [4] Al-Zarkashi, Al-Imam Muhammad. 1957. *Al-Burhan fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*.
- [5] Muhammad Abū al-Fadl Ibrahim (ed.). Cairo: Dār 'Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabiyya
- [6] Ali, A. Yusuf. *The Holy Quran and Its Interpretation*. Lahore.
- [7] Baljon, J.M.S. 1968. *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880-1960)*. Leiden: Leiden University.
- [8] Bruinessen, Martin van. 1990. "Kitab Kuning Books in Arabic Script Used in the Pesantren Millieu". *BKI*. 146.
- [9] ——. 1995. *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren and Tarekat*. Bandung: Mizan.
- [10] ——. 1994. "Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance
- [11] and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning", in: Wolfgang Marschall (ed.), *Texts from the Islands. Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World [Ethnologica Bernica, 4]*. Berne: University of Berne.
- [12] ——. 1995. "Sharia Court, Tarekat and Pesantren: Religious Institutions in the Sultanate of Banten. *Archipel* 50: 165-200 in www.let.uu.nl/ taken on Monday, September 7, 2010.
- [13] Depag RI. 1989. *Al-Quran dan Terjemahannya*. Jakarta: Depag RI.
- [14] Departemen Agama R.I. 2008. *Statistik Pendidikan Agama dan Keagamaan Tahun Pelajaran 2007-2008*. Jakarta: Depag RI.
- [15] Dhofier, Zamakhsyari. 1980. *The Pesantren Tradition: A Study of the Role of the Kyai in the Maintenance of the Traditional Ideology of Islam in Java Tempe*. AZ: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies Monograph Series.
- [16] Fatah, Rohadi Abdul, dkk. 2005. *Rekonstruksi Pesantren Masa Depan*. Jakarta: PT. Listafaka Putra

- [17] Haedari, M. Amin. 2008. "Membangun Sinergi Pesantren dan Perguruan Tinggi Islam dalam Menghadapi Tantangan Global" dalam Makalah Stadium General. Fakultas Ushuluddin 27 Agustus. Yogyakarta: UIN Sunan Kalijaga.
- [18] Purwadi, Slamet Yohannes dan Siregar, Ferry Muhammadsyah Siregar. 2008. Pesantren dan Tantangan Modernitas di Indonesia < <http://ern.pendis.kemenag.go.id/DokPdf/ern-v-04.pdf> > diakses 1-11-2021.
- [19] Wirosardjono, Soetjipto. 1987. *The Impact of Pesantren*. Singapore: ISEAS
- [20] Siregar, Ferry Muhammadsyah. 2005. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd on Quranic Hermeneutic Discourse: A Linguistic Perspective. CRCS' Unpublished *M.A Thesis*. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University
- [21] Suyuti, al-Imam Jalaluddin. 1993. *Riwayat Turunnya Ayat-ayat Suci al-Quran*. Semarang: Ash-Syifa fa.
- [22] ———. 1990. *Jalalain's interpretation translation and Asbabun Nuzul*, four Volumes. Bandung: Sinar Baru.
- [23] Welch, Alford T. 1979. "Studies in Quran and Tafsir." JAAR., Vol. (47)
- [24] Zaini, A Wahid. 1994. *Dunia Pemikiran Kaum Santri*. Yogyakarta: LKPSM