

# **THE REINVIGORATION OF PESANTREN: The Social and Political Role of *Kyai* and *Ulama* in the Dutch Colonial Era**

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## *Abstrak*

*Dalam sejarah Indonesia, pesantren sebagai suatu institusi lembaga pendidikan tradisional Islam, tidak diragukan lagi, telah memainkan peranan yang signifikan dalam membentuk karakter budaya perlawanan terhadap kaum penjajah yang bercokol di negeri ini. Banyak kajian telah dilakukan untuk itu, dan paper ini merupakan salah satu yang berupaya menguji signifikansi peranan pesantren di Indonesia pada masa kolonial, khususnya pada inspirasi keagamaan, jaringan dan motivasi politis, yang digunakan oleh para pemimpin keagamaan (kyai) dalam menghadapi kebijakan politik pemerintahan Belanda. Berdasarkan berbagai deskripsi, penulis akhirnya menyepakati bahwa pesantren, dengan segenap struktur yang ada di dalamnya seperti kyai, santri, dan kitab kuning, telah memberikan inspirasi yang banyak dalam perlawanan terhadap kebijakan kultural dan politis penjajah Belanda.*

## خلاصة

إن التاريخ الإندونيسي قد سجل صفحات حافلة حول المدارس الدينية الإسلامية غير الرسمية والتي تعتبر أحد المؤسسات التربوية والتي يعود تأسيسها أصلاً إلى التراث الإسلامي، قد لعبت دوراً مهماً في تشكيل رمز التضامن من أجل مجابهة الاحتلال الذي قد عانته هذه الدولة، إن الكثير من الدراسات قد قامت ببحث هذا الدور البارز و الدراسة التي نحاول عملها هي إحدى تلك الحالات التي تسعى من أجل إختيار أهمية الدور الذي قامت به هذه المؤسسات الدينية في إندونيسيا خلال فترة الإحتلال وخاصة في مسألة الإلهام الديني، التنظيمات، و الحوافز السياسية والدينية والتي تستعمل من قبل العلماء في سبيل مواجهة الخطط السياسية للإحتلال الهولندي، وبالإعتماد على الكثير من المنظورات التحليلية الكاتب في آخر الأمر قد اتفق مع الآخريين حول أن المؤسسات التعليمية غير الرسمية مع كل الهيئات التي توجد داخلها، العلماء، الأساتذة، المدرسين، قد أعطت الدعم والإلهام الديني من أجل تحدي الإحتلال الهولندي.

*Keywords: Pesantren, Tarekat, Kyai, Colonial Era.*

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### A. Introduction

In the history of traditional Islam in Indonesia, *pesantren* (Islamic traditional school), which is called by Martin van Bruinessen as ‘the great tradition,’<sup>1</sup> has a significant role in changing and influencing strongly the social, economic, and political circumstances through the cultural struggle. Some protest movements held by farmer society in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were commonly initiated and led by *kyais*,<sup>2</sup> the charismatic person from *pesantren* or who held *tarekat*’s network.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Pegeaud and de Graaf explained that *pesantren* was the second number of Islamic center after mosque (*masjid*), in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The strategic position of *kyai* in such movement has been supported by dyadic structure between teacher and student (*guru-murid*), *kyai* and *santri*, or, in general, between *patron* and *client*. Linked to this role, Robert W. Hefner states that in the colonial-era *pesantren* were also important because they provided the trans-local network for native authority apart from state. In Java and Sumatra, graduates of these schools led many of the movements of pre-nationalist anti-colonialism.<sup>4</sup>

This paper, therefore, attempts to examine the role of Indonesian Islamic traditional schools at the colonial era, especially the religious inspiration, network and political motivation, which were tremendously used by religious leader (*kyai*) for facing some Dutch’s political policies. In this context, the examination would historically be supported by few cases indicating the reinvigoration of Islamic traditional education, whether by the role of *pesantren* in Java or other religious institutions in the Malay Peninsula.

### B. *Pesantren* and *Tarekat*

*Pesantren*, originally is from the word ‘*pesantrian*’, the place for *santri*. *Santri* or student commonly received the Islamic teaching from the *pesantren*’s leader (*kyai*) or Islamic teacher (*ulama* or *ustadz*). Its materials consist of number Islamic knowledge. Other opinions state that such

<sup>1</sup>Martin van Bruinessen, 1999, *Kitab Kuning: Pesantren dan Tarekat*, Bandung: Mizan, third edition, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Fur further discussion about the social and political mobility of *Kyai* in Indonesia, see Abdul Djamil, 2001, *Perlawanan Kiai Desa: Pemikiran dan Gerakan Islam* K.H. Ahmad Rifai Kalisalak Yogyakarta: LKIS; Iik Arifin Mansurnoor, 1990, *Islam in an Indonesia World: Ulama of Madura*, Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press.

<sup>3</sup>See Muhaimin AG. “*Pesantren* and *Tarekat* in the Modern Era: A Account on the Transimission of Traditional Islam in Java,” *Studia Islamika: Journal for Islamic Studies*, Volume 4, Number 1, 1997, hal. 1-28; Azyumardi Azra, 1994, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII-XVIII*, Bandung: Mizan.

<sup>4</sup>Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 34.

educational system roots to the pre-Islamic era, and has the similar form to the Buddha and Hinduism tradition in the sense of *asrama*<sup>5</sup> and *mandala*.<sup>6</sup> The term '*pesantren*' was well known in Java. It was called *jawiyah* or *dayah* and *meunasah* in Aceh,<sup>7</sup> *surau* in Minangkabau, or *pondok* in Malay land.<sup>8</sup>

Several scholars commonly associated *pesantren* with the *tarekat*. Therefore, *pesantren*, with the *kyai* as a leader or organizer, mainly prepares the young to cope with their immediate future in social life. It enables them to undertake active and acceptable participation in various societal roles without neglecting the more distance future, the hereafter. *Tarekat* (*thariqah*; Sufi order), on the other hand, prepares the ages to cope with that immediate future. It attempts to secure for followers, safety and well being in the hereafter, once they feel that their worldly life is close to its end. In addition, the *tarekat* attempts to open heavens to the public. It is a way to ensure equity of opportunity for entry the paradise between religiously knowledgeable individuals and laymen, and between the rich and the poor.<sup>9</sup> *Tarekat* is usually associated with the *tasawwuf*. The objective of joining a *tarekat* comes after a commitment to the *sufi* ways (*tasawwuf*) is taken by means of cleansing the heart (*tasyfiyat al-qalb*). In practice, *tasawwuf* is a strict adoption of the Islamic precept through observant of both obligatory and recommended religious work for attaining God's favor.<sup>10</sup>

The statements above supported by Bruinessen, who said that the main reason of the arisen of *pesantren* was transmitting Islamic tradition, as the same as covered and written for long centuries in the number of classical books which had been learned in *pesantren* as an orthodoxy (*al-kutub al-mu'tabarat*).<sup>11</sup> These Islamic classical books prominently are known as 'yellow books' (*kitab kuning*). In connection to the classical books, there were few paradoxes of *pesantren* tradition. On the one side, its characteristic was special Indonesian culture, because the *pondok pesantren* can be classified as the certain Indonesian Islamic education. Although, it was a traditional Islamic educational, but in some aspects, distinguished from various traditional Islamic educational institutions in other Islamic countries.

<sup>5</sup>See Manfred Ziemek, 1986, *Pesantren dan Perubahan Sosial*, translated by Butche B. Soendjojo, Jakarta: P3M, 1986, p. 16-17.

<sup>6</sup>Martin van Bruinessen, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>For further discussion about the development of various Islamic traditional schools, see Abuddin Nata (ed.), 2001, *Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan Lembaga-lembaga Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia*, Jakarta: Grasindo.

<sup>8</sup>Syed Muhammad Dawilah Al-Edrus, "Pengaruh dan Peranan Kitab Jawi di dalam Pembangunan Pemikiran Islam di Asia Tenggara," Kertas kerja yang disampaikan dalam *International Seminar on Islamic Studies in South East Asia (ISIS)*, 20-23 November 1995.

<sup>9</sup>Muhaimin AG., *op.cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>Martin van Bruinessen, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

On the other side, at the same time, it had international oriented, with Mecca as the center, not Indonesia. Of course, the 'yellow books' tradition was not from Indonesia. All of classical books were in Arabic and part of them written before the spreading of Islam in Indonesia.

From religious perspective, *pesantren* is a kind of place for studying and learning Islamic classical books, and, some how, as a place in which intensification of religious worship could be practiced. Another important point of the Islamic development in Indonesia is its role as the center of religious thought.<sup>12</sup> There were several books should be examined in *pesantren* such as *nahw-sharf* (Arabic grammatical), *fiqh* (Islamic law), *aqâ'id* (Islamic theology), *tasawwuf* (Sufism), *tafsîr* (Quranic exegesis), *hadîts* (Islamic tradition), and Arabic.<sup>13</sup>

As an Islamic traditional school, according to Taufik Abdullah, *pesantren* and its internal activities and theological commitment, should appropriately be understood from three interconnected aspects: firstly, of course, internal aspect of *pesantren*, in which *kyai* had a significant position. In seeing this aspect, we will face several matters such as the biography of the founder (*kyai*), educational system, special skill, and the social and political engage of *pesantren*. Secondly, *pesantren*'s networks, between the 'major' (*pesantren induk*) and the 'minor' (*pesantren cabang*), which was established by ex students or graduations of the 'major' *pesantren*. Such networking, however, could not vertically be explained, because before establishing *pesantren*, the students predominantly had learned and studied in some *pesantren* with the various *kyais*. One thing, above all, to be considered is the horizontal relation among ex-students (graduations) and their theological orientation. Thirdly, the cultural and theological connection between *pesantren* and the community around certain regions are significantly influencing the dynamic of socio-political environment of *pesantren*.

In the Javanese *pesantren*, one of the prominent *pesantren* that linked to the *tarekat* was *pesantren* Buntet. According to A. G. Muhaimin, *pesantren* Buntet gives homage to two, the *Shattariyyah*, which came earlier and the *Tijâniyyah*, which came later. Both belong to *tarekat Mu'tabarah* (accepted *tarekat*). This *pesantren* is acclaimed as one of the oldest in Java. It was firstly established in 1750 by *Kyai* Muqayyim, and known as *Mbah* Muqayyim, formerly Court Religious Official (*Penghulu*) of Cirebon Royal House (*Kraton Cirebon*).

<sup>12</sup>See Taufik Abdullah, 1987, *Islam dan Masyarakat*, Jakarta: LP3ES, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup>See Nurcholish Madjid, 1997, *Bilik-Bilik Pesantren: Sebuah Potret Perjalanan*, Jakarta: Paramadina, p. 7-13.

In addition, Syekh Burhanuddin, one of the famous Islamic leaders in Minangkabau, certainly in Ulakan Pariaman, used the *surau* as a place for praying and, at the same time, spreading *tarekat (suluk)*, certainly *tarekat Shattariah*. This institution had productively resulted several Minangkabau's *ulamas*. Some of them went to Mecca for studying Islam, and then, after coming back, they made new *surau* facilitating their religious and theological orientation, or practicing *tarekat*. The great *ulama*, for instance, which had ever studied at *Surau* Ulakan was Tuanku Mansiang Nan Tuo (*Surau* Paninjauan), Tuanku Nan Kacik (*Surau* Koto Gedang). Both, later on, resulted new *ulama*. One of the prominent *ulama* in Minangkabau was Tuanku Nan Tuo from Koto Tuo.<sup>14</sup>

Related to the description above, in the Colonial era, which produced some political and social policies in the sense of Christian or West culture, the *kyai* or *ulama* had highly given critical responses. Such responses are expressed by the *kyai* of *pesantren* in Java or *ulama* of *surau* in Minangkabau based on their attitudes, behavior, and ideological or theological orientation in the sense of implementing the Islamic values. Thus, the situation, somehow, resulted the tension between *kyai/ulama* and the Colonial officers.

### *C. Kyai/Ulama and Dutch Colonial: A Tension*

As well as explained before that the *kyai/ulama* placed the highest level in the structure of the traditional Islamic educational institution, or, using Hiroko Horikoshi term,<sup>15</sup> *kyai/ulama* has been placed by their followers as the first hierarchy of the believe system. Almost the tensions occurred between Muslim community and Dutch officers in the colonial era, whether in political, cultural, or social field, were led by *kyai*.

In addition, the Dutch officers had identified some reasons to successfully colonize Java and Malay Peninsula, especially to marginalize the role of religious institution and organize the political and social sources systematically against *pesantren*'s cultural-political responses. The famous Dutch scholars, Snouck Hurgronje, categorized and, at the same time, distinguished between 'worship', social activities, and politics among Muslim society, as tools to conceptualize his Islam polity. In relation to his duty as Dutch officers, he gave consideration for the Dutch officers to understand a religious life model of Indonesia Muslim. Firstly, the religious worship and other system of believe of Muslim should strongly be supported by Dutch policies. Secondly, the social life of Muslim should not be

<sup>14</sup>For further elaboration, see Azyumardi Azra, 1988, *The Rise and the Decline of the Minangkabau: A Traditional Islamic Educational Institution in West Sumatra During the Dutch Colonial Government*, Colombia: Colombia University.

<sup>15</sup>Hiroko Horikoshi, 1987, *Kyai dan Perubahan Sosial* Jakarta: P3M.

marginalized. But, thirdly, the political dimension of Islam had to be abolished. Although these notions strategically inspired the Dutch officers on the one hand, but on the other hand such perception was not in accordance with the fact. Because the Muslim community had no distinguished between religion and politics.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the position of religious and educational institution, including *pesantren*, and their role as an independent community, had opportunities to make social reform based on their teaching. As well as describe before that *pesantren* enables *santri* to undertake active and acceptable participation in various societal roles without neglecting the more distant future, the hereafter. The political dimension, which was strategically making them survive, neglected by *kyai* to be intervened.<sup>17</sup> Such situations have increasingly been continued by *kyai* or *ulama* from *pesantren* at the present time in engaging the political interest with their own religious mission. So, the connection between religion and politics could not be separated by Muslim community, or using Collins terms, the relation between religion and its follower is very complex by means religion is really economics, politics is really religion, and economics is really religion.<sup>18</sup> Besides, such circumstance arises as a problem only in nations, which are not religiously homogenous,<sup>19</sup> like Indonesia. Therefore, it would be elaborated by some cases of the description below.

In the sense of Dutch's political and social policies, the important role of *kyai* was proved by the case of Cimareme 'tragedy', in Priangan.<sup>20</sup> Haji Hasan, as a religious leader, was the son of *Kyai* Tubagus Alpani, the head of *pesantren* in Cimareme. Hasan's early education was a *Santri* (student of the *pesantren*) at his father's own *pesantren*. Later on, Haji Hasan had expressed his hatred of the Dutch colonial government since he was young. His father was always insistent on avoiding any kind of cooperation with the colonials. Hasan himself became involved in a conflict with a Dutch controller. When the Cimareme people were forced to work for the government, building a road between Sindanglaon and Cibudug. He was irritated by the rude attitude of the controller toward the indigenous citizens. On another occasion, he also

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<sup>16</sup>For further information about his suggestion, see *Nasihah-nasihah C. Snouck Hurgronje Semasa Kependawaiannya Kepada Pemerintah Hindia Belanda 1889-1936*, jilid I-IX Jakarta: INIS, 1990-1994; Juga *Kumpulan Karangan Snouck Hurgronje*, Jakarta: INIS, 1993-1994.

<sup>17</sup>Muhaimin A.G., *op.cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup>Randall Collins, 1986, *Weberian Sociological Theory*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>R.R. Alford, "Religion and Politics", in Roland Robertson (ed.), *Sociology*, England: Penguin Books, p. 321.

<sup>20</sup>See Chusnul Hajati, The Tragedy of Cimareme: "The Resistance of Haji Hasan to the Colonial Power in 1919," in *Studia Islamika* Volume 3, Number 2, 1996.

rejected the government's offer of a position as a formal religious leader in the local office. Such a rude response was very unlike from lay propel. Those who were economically and politically dependent upon the government would at least have made certain compromises. However, Hasan, with the social support that he had, whether on the basis of his traditional status of his leadership capability, could state his rejection and resistance toward the powerful colonial government. Of course Hasan's through line against the government was also sustained by other factors. As a religious leader, he had good communication with his people trough religious language. The idea of *Perang Sabil*, which then became the main ideology of the movement, strengthened the pervasive influence of Hasan's leadership and, at the same time, affirmed his self reliance. His position as traditional elite member also enables him able to lead the people and to face local officers as well as the colonial officers.

Besides, in critical response to the Dutch western and Christian cultural behavior could be seen in the case of *Kyai Muqayim* of *Pesantren Buntet*. Opposing the Dutch intrusion into the internal affairs of the *kraton*, and seeing the some *kraton* dignitaries subserviently fall into the embrace of Dutch role (some of them even exhibited behavior which was against the *syari'ah* such as dancing and drinking alcohol). *Mbah Muqayim* left his position in the *kraton* and went to a village in favor of living outside the *kraton* wall.

In addition, the most well-known and patriotic large-scale rebellion launched by the Muslim against Dutch colonial authorities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the Padri War (1821-1837) in West Sumatra, the Diponegoro War (1825-1930) in Central Java, and Aceh War (1873-1912) in northern part of Sumatra.<sup>21</sup> Commonly, all such movements were supported morally by religious inspiration and politically by traditional Islamic educational institution.<sup>22</sup> Peter Carey, for example, in his speech, "*Kaum Santri dan Perang Jawa*", at 10<sup>th</sup> April 1979 in the Oxford University, stated that he found about 108 *kyai*, 31 haji, 15 syekh, 12 Court Religious Officials (*Penghulu*) of Yogyakarta, and 4 Religious Teachers (*ustadz*) who participated and accompanied in the Diponegoro War.<sup>23</sup> Besides, Diponegoro actually had been supported by *priyayi* and *santri* together. The famous *ulama* at the time was *Kyai Maja*, from Surakarta.

<sup>21</sup>See Ahmad Syaff'i Maarif, "Indonesian Islam and Its Relation with Nationalism and the Netherlands in the Early Decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Some Important Notes," in *Al-Jamiah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, No. 65/VI/2000, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup>See Taufik Abdullah, 1987, *Islam dan Masyarakat*, Jakarta: LP3ES, p. 112.

<sup>23</sup>See Karel A. Steenbrink, 1984, *Beberapa Aspek Tentang Islam di Indonesia abad ke 19*, Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, p. 30.

This phenomena is not surprising us, with the reason that—borrowing Iik Arifin Mansurnoor—the religious figures, especially those directly involved in organizing village religion and education, seem to have won the villagers' sympathy as potential independent leaders.<sup>24</sup> Although the *ulama* generally never independently raised arms, they succeeded in making themselves the covert internal critics of the unwelcome propagators of the enforced change.

#### D. Concluding Remark

From the description above, we can say that the traditional Islamic educational institutions, including the internal structure of them (*pesantren*, *surau*, *pondok*, *jawiyah*, *meunasah*, etc.) that consist of *kyai*, *santri*, and the classical Islamic books (*kitab kuning*) had given more inspiration for struggling the Dutch policies culturally and politically. The reinvigoration of *pesantren/surau* could be seen in the case of a tension between *kyai/ulama* with the Dutch officers. Through their religious views, *kyai/ulama* campaigned strictly the social and political consciousness of Indonesian people, especially in appreciating the indigenous right's of Indonesian people. Some of them, attempted to counter the Dutch policy using weapon (war), and another part using cultural awareness of Islamic society as the tools for facing Dutch colonial. So, the *kyai/ulama* had covered several cases relating to the existence of traditional Islamic education institution and political anomaly, during the colonial period and afterwards.

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<sup>24</sup>Iik Arifin Mansurnoor, 1990, *Islam in an Indonesia World: Ulama of Madura*, Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press.; see also Abdul Djamil, 2001, *Perlawanan Kiai Desa*, *op.cit.*

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