TAFSIR AND SOCIAL POLITICAL CONTEXT IN INDONESIA: A CASE STUDY ON AHMAD SANUSI'S INTERPRETATION AS A MEDIUM OF STRUGGLE IN COLONIAL ERA

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ABSTRACT

Liberation movement in Indonesia has been influenced by a number of factors, one of these factors is often ignored in key debates. The works of the writing on the struggle of Ulama in colonial period in Indonesia has been widely researched. However, one aspect of the Muslim history in Indonesia is still rarely discussed in the Qur’anic exegesis as medium of struggle; their focus is not on the Qur’anic exegesis as one inspiration for Indonesian Independence. The focus of their works is on the intellectual discourse of Ulama and their contribution in the struggle for independence through organization, journal, magazine, and newspapers. This study focuses on Ahmad Sanusi’s Qur’anic interpretation as a medium of struggle in resisting against colonial power. This paper analyses Ahmad Sanusi’s messages on anti-colonial spirit in his works. Hermeneutics would be applied to understand Ahmad Sanusi’s thought by looking at the context of social and political condition in revolutionary era. Ahmad Sanusi contributed to Indonesian liberation in many forms of movement such as building pesantren (Islamic boarding school), organisation, and religious publications. He had two tafsir books, using Sundanese and Indonesian language namely al Mal ja’ al Thalibin, and Tamsiyat al Muslimin fi tafsir Kalami Rabbil Alamin respectively. These works had significant impact on national liberation movement as these two tafsir were written while he was in exile. Due to his contribution to Indonesian liberation, the government of Indonesia rewarded him with Bintang Maha Patra Utama in 1992 and Bintang Maha Patra Adi Pradana in 2009.

Keywords: Tafsir, Ahmad Sanusi, Ulama, Struggle, Indonesia,

INTRODUCTION

During 20th century, Ulama¹ played a significant role in resisting colonial power in Indonesia (Sulasman, 2012). In the beginning of this century, ulama contributed to Indonesian independence through many forms of mobilisation, including organization and religious publications (Boland, 1971; Takashi Shiraishi, 1997). After ethical policy issued in the beginning of 20th century by the Dutch colonial government, many ulama used modern movement, such as organisation and religious publication as a medium of their struggle. Several Islamic organisations, which emerged in this period were Syarekat Islam in 1905, Muhammadiyah in 1912, Al-Ittihad in 1914, Persatuan Islam (PERSIS) in 1917, and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in 1926.

The Islamic press such as magazine and newspapers also became the part of resistance movement against the colonial rule in the beginning of 20th century (Boland, 1971). This can be traced from the existence of Oetoesan Hindia published by Syarekat Islam in 1913, Pantjuran Warta, Sinar Djawa, Al Islam 1925-1926), and Fajar Asia 1927-1930. In Jogjakarta, Muhammadiyah published Soewara Moeohhamadijah, and Bintang Islam, aspiring a rising anti-colonialism. Similarly, NU (Nahdhatul ulama or Ulama Awakening) published three magazines namely the Kemudi (The Rudder), The Berita Nahdlatul Ulama (News of the Nahdlatul Ulama) and Suara Nahdlatul Ulama (Voice of the Nahdlatul Ulama) to spread its ideas and to be a communication media among its members. The Suara Nahdlatul Ulama was published in three languages: Indonesian, Javanese, and Arabic (Yusuf, 1983). However, some of these religious publications had been banned by the colonizer, say, Pembela Islam issued by PERSIS (organisation of Islamic Unity) banned by the Dutch (Iskandar, 2001) and al Munir magazine published in Padang, West Sumatra in 1911 by two renowned Islamic scholars (ulama) Haji Abdullah Ahmad (1878-1933) and Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah (1879-1945) banned by Japanese administrator.

One of ulama who influenced Indonesian independence was Ahmad Sanusi (Sulasman, 2012), a charismatic religious teacher from Sukabumi, West Java. He was involved in political affairs to fight against the Dutch and the Japanese occupation in the period of 1913 to 1950. He also contributed to Indonesian independence through his ideas, writings, organisation, and Islamic education.

Ahmad Sanusi was a prolific writer from West Java (Nurtawwab, 2009) in many fields of Islamic teaching such as theology, Sufism, Islamic jurisprudence and Qur’an commentaries. According to the Research and Development Center of Lektur of the Department of National Religious Affairs in Jakarta, Sanusi left four hundred and eighty (480) pieces of works. However, many of these works are out of circulation and difficult to locate. Matin (2009) said that he found only one hundred and twenty-two (122) pieces of Ahmad Sanusi’s writings.

This research investigates Ahmad Sanusi’s interpretation on anti-colonial issue written in his tafsir called al Malja’ al Thalibin and Tamsiyat al Muallimin fi kalami rabbil alamin through a hermeneutical method to understand both the context of social and

¹ Ulama is the Arabic term indicates the Muslim scholars is regarded as the guardians, transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge.
political condition in which his Qur’anic exegesis was produced and the historical analysis to understand his life, culture and ideas development.

This research paper has conducted hermeneutical analysis of the following works of Ahmad Sanusi.

### SOME WORKS OF AHMAD SANUSI ON POLITICAL ISSUES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>ABOUT/ DETAIL</th>
<th>RELATIONSHIP WITH THE POLITICS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Nahratoe‘ddhargham</td>
<td>This book was written in 1914 in Mecca explaining that Syarekat Islam (Islamic Union) was established to halt any indigenous welfare dependency from any foreign aids.</td>
<td>This book is the evidence of Sanusi’s involvement in political sphere. In this work he defends SI (Islamic Union) on “anonymous letter” case in 1914.</td>
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<td>1928</td>
<td>Qowanin ad-Diniyyah wa Dunyawiyyah fi ‘Umri Zakat wa al-Fitrarah</td>
<td>This book contains Ahmad Sanusi’s fatwa that opposed the collection of zakat and fitrah by religious officials under the regent.</td>
<td>This book was considered as Sanusi’s direct confrontation with the Dutch’s policy on the collection of zakat.</td>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>Malja’ AlThalibin</td>
<td>This tafsir contains the anti-colonial criticism written in Sundanese script, which circulated around 1931-1932</td>
<td>This tafsir was considered a threat to the colonial authority, mainly in the matter of Sansi’s isolation, and placing restriction on People to travel to Makkah for performing pilgrimage and learning to pesantren.</td>
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<td>1934</td>
<td>Tamsiyatul muslimin fi tafsir kalami Rabb Al-‘Alamin</td>
<td>This tafsir contains some messages about the importance of self-esteem, freedom, brotherhood and equality among the Ummah.</td>
<td>This tafsir was considered as a tool of propaganda of AII (Islamic association) by the government to embed anti-colonial sentiment among people.</td>
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<td>1935</td>
<td>Tahzir al Afkah min al-Ightirar bi Dhalalati waftirayati Tasfiyat al Afkar</td>
<td>This book contained Ahmad Sanusi’s response to Pakuiman ulama regarding his tafsir called “Tamsiyat al Muslimin written in Latin that aroused the anger of Pakuiman ulama who supported the Dutch government.</td>
<td>Pakuiman ulama issued the fatwa prohibiting people from reading Ahmad Sanusi’s tafsir called Tamsiyat al Muslimin as this tafsir was written in Latin. They were of the view that it is prohibited in Islam to write tafsir in Latin hence Sanusi responded to their view.</td>
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The following section will provide a brief biography of Ahmad Sanusi and provide the broader context of his life and works including tafsir which is the focus of this research.

### BIOGRAPHY OF AHMAD SANUSI

Ahmad Sanusi was born on September 18, 1888 in Cantayan, a sub-district of Cikembar, Sukabumi, West Java. He studied religion in his father’s Islamic boarding school (pesantren). At the age of around fifteen years, he attended to several Islamic boarding schools located in Sukabumi, Cianjur, Garut, and Tasikmalaya for around 4 years and he had never studied in any formal educational institution. In 1910, he went to Mecca to perform pilgrimage (haji) and continued his religious education for 4.5 years (Hernawan et. al, 2014).

In 1913, when Ahmad Sanusi stayed in Mecca, one of leading figures of Syarikat Islam (SI) Abdul Muluk asked Ahmad Sanusi to join this organisation (Iskandar, 1993). Ahmad Sanusi agreed to join this organisation by considering it to have the equal objective to his struggle. This agreement indicated his involvement in political affairs, and it was shown by defending SI on “anonymous letter” case in 1914 saying that SI was not fighting for Muslim interest. Ahmad Sanusi defended for the organisation on this issue by writing the book entitled Nahratoe‘ddhargham (Iskandar, 1993).

In 1915, Ahmad Sanusi returned from Mecca and assisted his father to teach santri (religious student) in pesantren Cantayan (Mawardi 1985). Ahmad Sanusi was soon known as Kyai Cantayan meaning an Islamic religious leader from Cantayan. In
During revolutionary period, tafsir literatures were more rarely found compared to writings on other areas, such as tasawwuf and fiqh. This was in view of tough and threatened political condition. In colonial period, the contents of tafsir book indicated a raising anti-colonial spirit such as Tafsir Al-Quran Karim, Tafsir Al-Furqan, Tafsir Malja’ Al-Thalibin, and Tamsiyah Al-Muslimin. (Roifah, et al., 2017).

Rahmana (2015) stated that Ahmad Sanusi played a significant role in resisting against colonialism through religious publication. The writing of Ahmad Sanusi was about many fields of Islamic teaching such as tasawwuf, theology, Islamic jurisprudence and tafsir. Rohmana (2015) pointed out that Ahmad Sanusi’s tafsir embedded the sense of anti-colonial spirit and this sentiment influenced the way how he interpreted the Qur’an and it became the reason why Ahmad Sanusi’s tafsir called al Malja’ al Thalibin and Tamsiyatul Muslimin were considered as a propaganda as well as a threat to colonial authority. For this, anyone owning the Sanusi’s works would be in jail (Matin, 2009).

Al Malja’ al Thalibin contains anti-colonial criticism written in Sundanese script and circulated in the period of 1931-1932. The anti-colonial criticism of Sanusi in this tafsir was primarily directed to the issue of his alienation, the prohibition of hajj and learning to the pesantren (Rahmana, 2015). Another Tafsir book of Ahmad Sanusi called Tamsiyat al-Muslimin contains the messages of the importance of justice, integrity of Islamic community and freedom. Iskandar (2001) explained that this Tamsiyat al Muslimin contains some messages about anti-colonialism, spread not only among Sundanese people but also all over Indonesia.

The publication of Tamsiyat al-Muslimin was religiously prohibited by Pakauman Ulama that supported the Dutch colonial government as Ahmad Sanusi wrote Qur’an in Latin (Matin, 2009). Ahmad Sanusi argued that the transliteration of Qur’an in Latin did not counter the Islamic teaching as there was no single verse in the Qur’an forbidding people to do so. Furthermore, he explained about the history of writing of the Qur’an and Arabic alphabet explaining that Arabic letters called Rasm Utsmani were initially written without any diacritics such as putting dots above or under some letters was not compulsory (Shaleh, 2016).

In response to Tamsiyat al Muslimin publication, Pakauman ulama represented by Usman Perak wrote Tasyfiyat al-Afkar and Ahmad Dimyati wrote Tadhirat al-Ikhwan fi Hukm al-Tafsir wa Tarjamah al-Qur’an. Ahmad Sanusi then counter-attacked them by writing two books namely Tahdirul Afkar and Minzarat al-Islam wa al-iman fi Tajnib al- ‘Ain ‘ai Wadhalalali Taekirat al-Ihwan.

AHMAD SANUSI’S ANTI-COLONIAL MESSAGES IN HIS TAFSIR

This section will provide an analysis of Sanusi’s anti-colonial message in his tafsir and is divided in three smaller sections based on specific themes.
A. JUSTICE

Ahmad Sanusi’s criticism on colonialism written in some parts of his tafsir. This could not be separated from his social and political experience particularly related to conflict with Pakauman ulama and the Dutch government. One example of Ahmad Sanusi’s interpretations in Malja’ al Thalibin using Sundanese language in Pegon script regarding his alienation is stated in Chapter 6 (Surah al An’am) of the Qur’an, Verse 52-53:

This interpretation is clearly pointed out that Sanusi equalized ulama with the devil as those ulama in Sukabumi in colonial period cooperated with and supported the Dutch government policy of his isolation. The word ulama originally means the people who has the deep knowledge of Islamic teaching. The ulama occupy a very dignified position in Islam, as the Prophet has clearly said, “After me there will not be Prophets, ulama are the heirs of the prophets”. Based on this saying, ulama has an important responsibility in Islam. However, in the context of Sanusi’s interpretation the term ulama is defined as devil as mentioned in above interpretation. This was because of those ulama expelled him from his home.

The confrontation between Ahmad Sanusi and Pakauman ulama that supported the Dutch government in Sukabumi was caused by some different views in various issues of religious practices, say, in the issue of zakat. Ahmad Sanusi viewed that the process of zakat held by the government was inappropriate. He argued that the administrators of zakat should be appointed by Muslim community and zakat should not be forwarded to the government but to the people who deserve to receive (Sulasman, 2014). In addition, he explained that zakat is not governmental concern as stated in government rule that they would not interfere any religious practices. As a result, many people refused to pay zakat to the government after listening to Sanusi’s preaching. As a consequence of this fatwa, Pakauman ulama got upset and attempted to seek an opportunity to arrest Ahmad Sanusi (Sulasman, 2014).

As the government treated Ahmad Sanusi in an unfair way, including his isolation, he expressed his feelings through his interpretation in Chapter 2 (Al Baqarah) verse number 124 of the Qur’an. He explained that doing injustice to others was inappropriate leadership behaviour and they did not deserve to be leaders and not worthy of dealing with creatures, especially humans. Furthermore, Ahmad Sanusi said that the purpose of the government regulation is to protect people’s rights - not to

2 Hadith transmitted by Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi and Ibn Maja.
oppress. People must be free from any dependence on ulama supporting the colonizer (Sanusi, 1937). He asserted his statements by interpreting Chapter al Mumtahanah verse number 8 which said:

“Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly “

Ahmad Sanusi saw that this verse instructs the Islamic ummah to be fair to all people from any different religions and beliefs as long as they do not fight or expel Muslims from their homes. Thus, Islam is peaceful religion, free from hatred and revenge against non-Muslims living in the Muslim countries and they will not be disturbed in the matter of religious rights and practices. Furthermore, Sanusi said that from the beginning of the century of Islam history to the fourteenth century, there were no Muslims who destroyed or forced other community to embrace Islam. Ahmad Sanusi emphasized that God will destroy a nation if knowledgeable and strong people act unjustly towards the weak and poor (Sanusi, 1937). The word I’dilu in the Qur’an indicates a compulsory to be fair in all testimonies, and people must remain in justice although they hate other people and how difficult it is to carry out justice (Sanusi, 1937).

Ahmad Sanusi attempted to encourage people to fight for the truth and justice and this is what he stated when interpreting Surah al Maidah verse 27-28. He said that this verse teaches about the obligation of those who are oppressed to enjoin them what is right and forbid what is wrong and resist against their oppression. Thus, if someone is killed, he is martyred in the path of God (Sanusi, 1937).

A. SELF-ESTEEM

Sanusi criticized and questioned some Muslim community living under the Dutch rule especially ulama supporting the Dutch authority as shown when he interpreted Surah al Imran verse 154, he said:

“There is no obstacle for Him to give victory and glory to anyone he wants. Muslims who get disasters not because they are bad, so that they know that this world is not a place for fun and life is impermanent, so they don't regret leaving it. The glory of infidels given by god does not mean that they are more noble than Muslim. It is because people who are defeated by dogs, pigs or snakes, they will not say that dogs, pigs and snakes are better than humans (Sanoeisi, 1931)."
When interpreting the verse related to munafiqin (hypocrites) in Surah al Nisa from verse 138 to 139, Ahmad Sanusi stated that God will give glory and nobility to the people whoever He wants, and hypocrisy or insulting his own nation and disrespect their own people are not the way to achieve the glory in the world, but become a path to hell. Although he explicitly did not mention who were called as the munafiqin in his interpretation, it implicitly referred to his experience of hostile act done by other ulama that cooperated with the Dutch that liked to harm him.

In interpreting Surah Al Baqarah verse number 134 Ahmad Sanusi said that happiness and misery would depend on our own attitude - not being dependent upon the opinion of ulama. Hence, Islam forbids the ulama to impose their opinions on people. On the other hand, people must be independent to think in addressing their problems based on the religious teachings (Sanoesi, 1937).

Sanusi suggested that Muslim ummah should not feel inferior as they are the best ummah as Qur’an said so in Chapter 3 (Ali Imron) verse number 110.

You are the best nation produced as an (example) for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah. If only the People of the Scripture had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them are believers, but most of them are defiantly disobedient

Ahmad Sanusi viewed that the condition of Muslims ummah was on the decline as they forgot their obligations and their dependence on other nations, and even Islamic teachers assumed that Muslims do not need to work by believing that a noble Muslim can be achieved only through their obligations such as praying and fasting. In this regard, Ahmad Sanusi motivated people by saying that Mu’min are the best ummah and this status will be achieved in 3 conditions namely unity, knowledgeable people, and working. He said that Islam clearly is a working religion - not a religion without goal. Furthermore, Islam commands its ummah to work both for the life in this world and for hereafter to achieve the glory.

Ahmad Sanusi’s criticism to the government is shown in some issues such as the prohibition of learning in pesantren and performing pilgrimage or hajj to Mecca. Regarding this issue, Ahmad Sanusi interpreted Surah al A’raf verse 16 using prophet saying namely:
Sanusi attempted to translate and interpret the meaning of the Koran verses and the Prophet's Hadith about several entrances to Satan to seduce humans. This is related to the explanation of devil's attempt to obstruct and prevent humans from learning to Mecca or to pesantren. This is considered as a devil's way to prevent humans from worshiping God and studying. Ahmad Sanusi mocked the government policy limiting Muslim community to have pilgrimage and to learn in pesantren. This policy was taken by government by consideration that when the people returned from mecca, their spirit of patriotism increased as the result of their close relation with Muslim around the world (Laffan, 2003).

A. UNITY

Ahmad Sanusi also concerned with the unity of Muslim in Indonesia and banned any dependency to live under the Dutch rule as it would lead the Muslim ummah separated. Related to this issue, Ahmad Sanusi interpreted Chapter 3 (Ali Imran) verse number 103 saying that Muslims must hold fast to the Qur'an and do not fight each other, Muslims must unite, and mutually reinforce to each other for the strong unity of Moslem people. Sanusi believed that Islam ummah in Indonesia had been separated and for this he encouraged Muslim people to unite and cooperate to each other in all life aspects. If Moslem people were separated, they would be insulted as occurred today and would get the torment of the Hell fire for not obeying the god's command. In addition, he stated that ulama who never got along with other Muslims and even hate to each other were losers, despicable and wretched (Sanoesi, 1937).

In interpreting Surah 3 (al Imran) verse number 26, Ahmad Sanusi pointed out that the main reason of the separation of Islam ummah was because they no longer considered consultation as an obligation and they use their authority to gain their personal interest. Hence, Muslim ummah have been separated and become inferior. Ahmad Sanusi believed that the perfectness and progress of the religion would be dependent upon its people (Sanoesi, 1937). Sanusi also showed a misperception among Islamic teacher regarding the meaning of unity in Islam. He stated that many Islamic teachers and their students become the agents of division of Islam ummah and they argued that Islam commands Muslim ummah to unite only in 5 time praying as well as in Jum'ah prayer - not in other life aspects.

CONCLUSION

The history of Indonesian national liberation cannot be separated from the role of ulama in resisting colonial power. During the 1920s and 1930s, Indonesian ulama began to articulate a rising anti-colonialism and a national consciousness. Through socio-religious organizations and religious publications as a medium of their struggle.

Ahmad Sanusi’s tafsir called al Malja’ al Thalibin using Sundanese language in pegon script and Tamsiyat al Muslimin fi Kalam Rabbil ‘Alamin in Indonesian language were written while he was in exile; this experience then influenced the way he interpreted the Qur'an. That is why both works contained the messages of anti-colonial spirit later on influencing people in West Priangan Sukabumi West Java to fight against the Dutch administrators. al Malja’ al Thalibin was considered as a threat to the colonial authority, mainly in the matter of his isolation, restriction of performing pilgrimage and learning to pesantren and Tamsiyat al Muslimin fi Kalam Rabbil ‘Alamin contains some messages about the importance of self-esteem, freedom, brotherhood and equality among the Ummah.

Anti-colonial messages of Ahmad Sanusi focused in this paper on three points namely justice, self-esteem and unity. Ahmad Sanusi articulated the sense of anti-colonialism in his tafsir by encouraging people to fight for justice and he asserted that people doing injustice did not deserve to be leaders. In addition, he said that Muslim have an obligation to fight against the colonial oppression and Muslim community should not feel inferior as they are the best ummah. Ahmad Sanusi also encouraged Muslim
people to unite in Indonesia and discourage them from dependency on the Dutch colonizer as it caused the Muslim ummah separated.

REFERENCES


