

Transformative Propagation¹ of Islamic Boarding School in Response to Contemporary Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) has contributed to social changes in Indonesia. *Pesantren* as an educational institute not only provides religious education (*tafaqquh fi al-din*), but most importantly dakwah to instil moral and Islamic values among its students in conducting their social life, known as transformative propagation. The initial purpose of *pesantren* is to internalise Islamic teachings in society, while taking into account social and cultural conditions that of the surrounding community. Therefore, not only is *pesantren* known as a flexible institution, but it also has a dialectical relation. It also reconfirms the following surah: *al-muhafazah 'ala al-qadim al-salih wa al-akhdu bi al-jadid al-aslah* (while preserving the good-old values, also willing to adopt the new-better values). This paper discusses transformative propagation (*dakwah*) of *pesantren* to tackle poverty through economic empowerment, to prevent violence and radicalism through the development of openness and tolerance; and to reduce social inequality through justice and gender equality.

Keywords: Contemporary issues, empowerment, equality, *pesantren*, tolerance, transformative propagation

INTRODUCTION

There have been many studies on the development of boarding schools. Life at *pesantren* in Indonesia is an interesting subject of study including its early

development, educational system, religious values (Ambariy, 1998).² The *pesantren* has attracted interest of observers keen to know more about Islamic education in Indonesia. Nurcholish Majid once said that if only Indonesia did not experience colonisation,

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¹Literally means religious speech, preaching of Islam.

²See Hasan Muarif Ambariy, *Menemukan Peradaban: Jejak Arkeologis dan Historis Islam Indonesia* (Jakarta: Logos Wacana Ilmu, 1998), 58.

its education system would have followed the path or model of *pesantren* education (Majid, 1997).³ Similar schooling like *pesantren* has existed in India and Iraq (Haidar, 1999)⁴; however, Nurcholish Majid argued that *pesantren* education system is a system, whereby in addition to upholding the values of Islam, the indigenous values are also respected. *Pesantren* is popular in Indonesia in the context of transmitting Islamic teaching with its unique characteristic (Azra, 2000; Mas'ud, 2004).⁵

The history of modern Indonesia showed that *pesantren* played a significant role in addressing national issues, such as when Indonesia fought against western colonialism. In the colonial era, *pesantrens* were monitored for their involvement in the anti-colonial and pro-independence movement as they had their own Islamic and indigenous values. The colonials viewed the *pesantren* as a threat since it was used as a nursery to nurture a generation of cadre to fight against the invaders. On a global scale, the *pesantren* participated in forming Committee of the Hejaz. The aim of this committee was to propose to the

government of Saudi Arabia to allow and safeguard religious freedom based on the chosen school of thought (Anam, 2010).⁶

In many *dakwah* activities in the contemporary era, *pesantren* has also been translating its noble values in the form of transformative proselytising (Ambariy, 1998).⁷ In this context, not only is *pesantren* known as an educational institution whose main obligation was to transmit Islamic teachings, it is also an agent of proselytising focusing on solving socio-cultural problems (Abegebriel, 2007; Ambariy, 1998).⁸ In other words, *pesantren* has been portraying itself as an institution of social transformation. It can be concluded that *pesantren* with its unique characters has played an important role in the socio-religious life of the Islamic community in Indonesia (Bruinessen, 1995).⁹ Based on these problems, this article

³See Nurcholish Majid, *Bilik-bilik Pesantren* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1997).

⁴Compare with Ali Haidar, "Akar Tradisi Pesantren dalam Masyarakat Indonesia", in *Tarekat, Pesantren dan Budaya Lokal* (Surabaya: Sunan Ampel Press, 1999), 69.

⁵See Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam, Tradisi dan Modernisasi Menuju Millenium Baru* (Jakarta: Logos Wacana Ilmu, 2000), 51. Compare with Abdurrahman Mas'ud, *Intelektual Pesantren: Perhelatan Agama dan Tradisi* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2004), 49.

⁶See the historical background of the NU born lead by *pesantren* leaders in Choirul Anam, *Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan NU* (Surabaya: Duta Akasara Mulia, 2010), 78.

⁷Dakwah is essentially a movement of Islamic transformation regulating the private life, family, and Muslim congregation. See Amrullah Ahmad in his article "Konstruksi Keilmuan Dakwah dan Pengembangan Jurusan-Konsentrasi-Studi" at the seminar and workshop of "Pengembangan Keilmuan Dakwah dan Prospek Kerja", held by APDI IAIN Walisongo, Semarang, December 2008.

⁸See Abdurrahman Wahid, *Bunga Rampai Pesantren* (Jakarta: Dharma Bhakti, 1984). See also in preface by Agus Maftuh Abegebriel, "Madhab Islam Kosmopolitan Gus Dur", in Abdurrahman Wahid, *Islam Kosmopolitan: Nilai-nilai Indonesia dan Transformasi Kebudayaan* (Jakarta: The Wahid Institute, 2007), xviii.

⁹See the explanation on the influence of *pesantren* teaching so called *tradisi agung* (*great tradition*) in Martin Van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning Pesantren dan Tarekat* (Bandung: Mizan, 1999), 17-20.

will specifically discuss: how transformative *dakwah* has been conducted by *pesantren* in the face of contemporary issues?

TRANSFORMATIVE PROPAGATION OF *PESANTREN*

In fact, the dynamics of the *pesantren* shows that it as an educational institution with its main obligation to enrich the mind of students with religious texts (*tafaqquh fi al-din*), and enforces Islamic values in their social life. This is in line with the main purpose of Islamic boarding schools, namely to uphold Islamic values in social life taking into account the social and cultural conditions of the surrounding community. Hence, the *pesantren* is widely known as an institution that is very flexible over the course of time.

Historically speaking, *pesantren* always deals with socio-religious problems. It is an understatement to say that the role of *pesantren* is limited to the nation. First, the *Pesantren* has been involved in anti-colonial war (Noor, 2006).¹⁰ Second, it was a member of the Hijaz Committee led by many prominent Islamic scholars (*ulama*) which fought for religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, pressuring the government to allow the existence of other Islamic school of thoughts (the government was a strict follower of Wahabi ideology) (Ridwan, 2008).¹¹ These two events reflect that in

dealing with social problems either in local, regional, or even global scope, *pesantren* has tried to bring about social transformation to address the growing challenges of our time. It is an agency of social transformation that has continued until now, such as the empowerment of civil society through economy, political, and social action, and others that are in accordance with the aim of *pesantren*, that is upholding morals and Islamic values.

Empowering Civil Society

The history of civil society is long history and it has different meaning based on the context. Therefore, the concept of civil society is fluid. Definition of civil society as used in this paper is based on an understanding that society has the ability to distance itself from the state and can be counterweight to it. The discourse on civil society in Indonesia by Abd A'la first appeared at a conference held at Monash University in 1998. The theme was State and Civil Society in Contemporary Indonesia. This discourse is relatively new in Indonesia (A'la, 2006).¹²

Speaking about civil society empowerment in Indonesian context, the role of *pesantren* cannot be ignored as it has as strong basis in society. *Pesantren* was established with the aim of transforming society and its surrounding. Most *pesantrens* flourish in rural areas, representing rural Muslim communities. Therefore, religious

¹⁰Read Mahpuddin Noor, *Potret Dunia Pesantren: Lintasan Sejarah, Perubahan, dan Perkembangan Pondok Pesantren* (Bandung: Humaniora, 2006).¹²

¹¹See in Nur Kholik Ridwan, *NU dan Neoliberalisme: Tantangan dan Harapan Menjelang Satu Abad* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2008), 1.

¹²See Abd A'la, *Pembaharuan Pesantren* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pesantren, 2006), 44.

interpretations that come from outside (not rural) *pesantren*, have not much effect on rural communities. This fact indicates that empowerment of those who live in rural areas would be very difficult to achieve if it did not involve *pesantrens*. The trust placed in and strong synergy between the *pesantrens*, as mentioned above, can be seen in the activity of Pesantren Annuqayah,¹³ Madura (Effendi, 1990). Fiqh-Sufi as an important theme developed by *pesantren* for their students and community.

Community empowerment through an understanding of Islamic jurisprudence helps the community understand better Islamic moral values that serve as a foothold in their lives (A'la, 2006).¹⁴ The Pesantren Annuqayah holds regular Community Development Programmes as their strategy for empowering the individual and society. They conducted environmental rescue programme through reforestation as many hills have been destroyed. Pesantren Annuqayah, by joining forces with Bureau of Community Service, has activities such as mat crafting, subsidies for fertilisers, and alternative method for burning limestone. The output of these activities is growing prosperity of the community and preventing violence (Wiyata, 2002).¹⁵

¹³Check the study finding about the social transformation conducted by Pesantren Annuqayah in Bisri Effendi, *Annuqayah: Gerak Transformasi Sosial di Madura* (Jakarta: P3M, 1990).

¹⁴A'la, *Pembaharuan Pesantren*, 45.

¹⁵As known, Madura is famous for having one-on-one combat tradition using traditional weapon, so-called carok. See in A. Latief Wiyata, *Carok Konflik Kekerasan dan Harga Diri Orang Madura* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2002).

The *pesantrens* also stresses on the independence of individuals. Therefore, the *pesantren* can be seen as an agent of social change and drives members of society to be more independent and dignified. The role of *pesantren* here is in sharp contrast to that of the state in applying the concept of development in the community. State with all its power, has a very strong bargaining position, meanwhile people are in a weak position. This fact can be seen from government programs provided to poor and disadvantaged people, such as direct cash transfers or some sort.

Besides Annuqayah, another *pesantren* that manages to demonstrate its role in empowering society is Pesantren Sidogiri, Pasuruan. According to Sulthan Fatoni:

“The Sidogiri phenomenon (from the perspective of Alexis de Tocqueville (1994), is a civil society that prevails in modern society providing the fact that Sidogiri has done what has been termed as voluntary (voluntary), self-generating (self-sufficiency), and self-supporting (self-reliance), highly independent from the state, and a strong bound of norms or values of law among its community.”

Sidogiri also has some established and independent businesses. In fact, on a practical level, Sidogiri positioned itself as a leading economic actor by establishing for example, a Shari'ah based cooperation. This Shari'ah -based entity was founded to

highlight that Islam is not against economic activity, and that the latter is grounded in Islamic values.

Developing Tolerant and Anti-Violence Attitude

The transition to democracy in Indonesia had brought to sharp contrast the problems related to violence committed in the name of religion. It is a direct result of lack of tolerance. A power oriented approach was the name of the game under the New Order regime in managing religious-inspired violence. The experience of Indonesia under the rule of the militaristic New Order has proven to be unsuccessful to dampen the growing phenomenon of violence in several regions in Indonesia. In fact, since the collapse of the New Order regime, especially when the faucets opened wide, violence in the name of religion and sectarian groups have increasingly characterized Indonesia. Against these, the media has accused Indonesia of having lost its identity.¹⁶

Additionally, the democratic transition led to popularity of rhetoric of Islamism among the public to give rise to political Islam in Indonesia. The currents of political Islam is rolling back all the achievements of cultural Islam premised on moderation and acceptance. In fact, the rhetoric of Islamism tends to be aggressive and is a result of a single interpretation, including concerns about the relationship between religion (read: Islam), and democracy.

¹⁶See <http://internasional.kompas.com/read/2012/12/23/15154962/Lima.Kasus.Diskriminasi.Terburuk.Pascareformasi.73>.

Therefore, religious radicalism has a coarse character, exclusive, and extreme. This type of character is what is presumed to give birth to terrorist acts (Esposito, 1992).¹⁷

The *pesantrens* in responding to this threat has promoted friendly and moderate attitudes towards the other. Disputes and other disturbing religious expression are to be addressed by developing tolerance and mutual respect. *Pesantrens* are represented by *kiyais* (experts in Islam) involved in the discussion and cooperation to develop a discourse of tolerance and moderation religious life. In fact, some kiai show their sincerity to develop this attitude, with good cooperation with other organisations and institutions in foreign countries. The *pesantren* missionary zeal is reflected in one of the quotes below:

“The Islamic scholars (kiyai) consider tolerance as vital the context of nation and state. Tolerance is not simply a right but an obligation. God almighty himself in the sacred book is described as Beneficent and Merciful, forgiving and Gracious. Therefore, oneness of the God must be understood in the context of implementing the virtue of God in consistent manner, especially in terms of tolerance (Misrawi, 2010).¹⁸

¹⁷See John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 73.

¹⁸See Zuhairi Misrawi, *Pandangan Muslim Moderat Toleransi, Terorisme, dan Oase Perdamaian* (Jakarta: Kompas Media Nusantara, 2010), 33.

The above illustrates transformative propagation efforts among *pesantren* in dealing with contemporary issues, namely the phenomenon of violence and intolerance in religious life. This problem can destabilise the co-existence of various ethnicities and religions. The *pesantrens* have conducted transformative dakwah by seeding or reviving Islamic values that have been developed for a long time in the *pesantren*. Islamic boarding schools have always taught *ahl sunnah wa al Jama'ah* which emphasises on Islamic values: moderate, tolerant, and balanced. These values represent Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) stance in response to contemporary issues. Therefore, there is a strong mutual relationship between NU and *pesantrens*. According to Sahal Mahfudz NU is a big *pesantren*, and *pesantren* is a miniature NU (Hamim, 2004).¹⁹

Fight for Gender Equality and Justice

Fight for gender equality is an important current issue and viewed seriously at the *pesantrens*. Gender has a different meaning to sex (gender). Sex relates to biological and physical characteristics, while gender is shaped by social and cultural perceptions about stereotypes of women and men in society. Therefore, gender is socially determined, Education, culture,

ideology will greatly affect the process of gender identity. In the social space that is, the existence of *pesantren* as a sub-culture, contributes to formation of gender identity in the community which has been documented in many published writings.

Pesantrens have in the last decades been actively involved in the struggle for realisation of gender equality and equity. It is not limited to discourse but through increased awareness and action. Interview excerpts with KH. Muhyidin Abdusshomad, caregivers of *Pesantren Nurul Islam*, Jember, East Java, pointed to pioneering female students who were actively encouraged to pursue their goals:

*"I guess this cannot be separated from the people who have no awareness of gender equality. The pioneering figures such as Kyai Masdar, Lies Marcoes, Mrs. Nuriyah, Farcha Ciciek, and their NGOs like P3M, Rahima, Puan Amal Hayati. They work hard for more than ten years, nearly fifteen years. And they were visiting pesantren, do halaqah, training, qur'anic recitation, seminars in schools. It has a great influence in changing the mindset of female boarding schools.... I am very proud in some schools, such as Pesantren Salafiyah Shafi'ites Sukorejo (Situbondo, East Java)."*²⁰

¹⁹See Thoha Hamim, *Islam dan NU di Bawah Tekanan Problematika Kontemporer: Dialektika Kehidupan Politik, Agama, Pendidikan dan Sosial Masyarakat Muslim* (Surabaya: Diantama, 2004), 173.

²⁰http://www.pondokpesantren.net/ponpren/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=391.

The formation of gender identity also directly affects the rights of women in the family, as envisaged in the project design training cooperation “Fiqh al-Nisa ‘for the Strengthening of Reproduction Rights of Women”. This is a proposed cooperation between Pesantren Annuqayah Guluk-Guluk Madura with *pesantren* and Community Development Association. In Madura, the influence of *pesantren* in shaping gender identity was supported by the findings of Soebahar and Utsman (1999).²¹ In the present study, there were variations in the orientation of gender identity constructed by *pesantren* about women’s reproductive rights. Among them is a moderate view of *pesantren* leader in Madura on women’s reproductive rights. This moderate view of *kiyai* represents the teaching of holy books that have been popularly used in many *pesantrens*.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that *pesantren* in Indonesia since its establishment until now has consistently and persistently focused on transformative proselytising. This activity was carried out to create awareness and take steps to solve social problems. In transformative propagation, *pesantrens* have played an active role to solving contemporary problems such as: (1) the empowerment of civil society due

to capitalism; (2) develop an attitude of tolerance and openness, prohibiting any forms of violence that brought by radical Islamic ideology characterised by violence and exclusivity; and (3) fight for gender equality through the spirit of justice.

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²¹Abd Halim Soebahar and Hamdanah Utsman, *Hak Reproduksi Perempuan dalam Pandangan Kiai* (Yogyakarta: PPK UGM, 1999), 1.

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