

A Local Qur'anic Scholar and His Critique on Religious Practices of the Javanese Muslims

Aunillah Reza Pratama^{1*} Masruchin²

¹Post Graduate Program, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

²Faculty of Ushuluddin and Religious Study, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Intan Lampung, Bandar Lampung, Indonesia

*Corresponding author. Email: aunillahreza@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article delves into the Islamic thoughts of Misbah Mustofa, a Qur'anic Muslim scholar living in coastal area of Java, Indonesia. Generally speaking, Mustofa belongs to a circle of traditionalist ulama (Muslim scholars), yet his thoughts have a purifying nature in character. Considering the widespread dichotomy between traditionalism and puritanism, the putative contradictory in his thought is worthy of a further study. In doing so, I focus on his two works of tafsir of the Qur'an (Qur'anic exegesis), and further analyze them using Gadamerian hermeneutics. I focus on his interpretation of Q. 2:134 in which he criticizes a ritual tradition known as *tahlilan*. His critique to this ritual reflects a puritanist stance, but at the same time, he did not reject it all together. This paradox belongs to the neo-traditionalism school, according to Jasser Auda's classification of Islamic thought. Some factors make this possible. First, the ideology typical to santri of Javanese coastal area, taking sharia as the core of Islamic religiosity and life. This ideology based its arguments on the statements of scholars of *maẓāhib al-fiqh* (schools of Islamic law). This traps them into a sort of romanticism. It thus tends to be very critical to the putative syncretic tradition of the Javanese society. Second, his interpretations are mostly based on general meaning of the verses. His 'textualist' method pays more attention to the internal dimension of the text than to the socio-religious context of the society in which this text has its life. Mustofa's stance reflects the importance of critical thinking in taking religious stances and, on the other hand, of being inclusive and conservative in a proportional way.

Keywords: *Misbah Mustofa, neo-traditionalism school, Javanese Tafsir of the Qur'an, religious tradition*

1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamic interaction between religion and tradition in the lives of Indonesian Muslims engenders diverse religious and religio-cultural practices.[1] *Tafsir* (Quran exegesis), from 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkilī (17th CE) to M Quraish Shihab (21st CE), undergoes quite the same story.[2, p. 4], [3] To a significant extent, the vast stock of tafsir takes part in shaping and reshaping the traditions.

Islam *kejawan* (Javanese Islam), one particular type of Indonesian Islam identical to syncretic practices, constitutes the result of the dialectic interaction between Qur'anic principles and Javanese culture. Its religious rituals subside with local's cultural traditions and beliefs.[5] This face of Javanese Islam results from the inclusiveness of the *walisongo* (nine saints of Java) towards Hindu-Buddha tradition that had earlier been part of the Javanese culture.[2, p. 4], [6] It is noteworthy that Islam *kejawan* (or later turns into the so-called traditionalist Islam) is quite well-grounded in many parts of Java.

Some periods later, yet, a Muslim intellectual from within the traditional Javanese Muslim community made a difference. Writing a *tafsir* of his own, Mustofa criticized religious practices and rituals of Islam *kejawan* in his society. He often labeled them *bid'a* (heresy). His interpretation of Q 2:134, for instance, contends that the common practice called *tawassul*[7] (reciting a Qur'anic spell of prayer to God through the soul of the dead), is of a *bid'a*. [8]

Another critique of Mustofa is related to a ritual called *tahlilan*. Mustofa considers that today's practices of *tahlilan* has shied away from its main goal, that is, praying for the dead. He even argued that recitation of a prayer formula after the five time prayer routine is enough, be it done in a group or by individual.[9] Mustofa is known as a controversial figure at his time. His controversy has many to do with his thoughts and *fatwa* which prohibited conventional banking, state's imposed family planning program, and competition of the Quranic recitation. This has made his thoughts close to those of the right wing Muslim intellectuals,[10] or the puritanist groups, who desire to purify Islam from any form of syncretism.

On the other hand, however, Mustofa remains strictly following the thoughts of the *imāms* of four *fiqh* schools

(*maẓāhib al-fiqh*) for his interpretation of the Qur'an.[11] It is this point that makes Mustofa different from the other puritanists. Mustofa uniquely stands in between two poles: traditional and puritan Islam. Considering his social background as a member of the traditionalist Muslim society, we may see this as a 'paradox'.

In this article, I will analyze this paradox further by delving into Mustofa's interpretation of Q 2:134. I will observe the production of his legal opinion based on this verse, and further situate his critique within his hermeneutical landscape. Generally speaking, this research is a historical in nature, taking Mustofa's interpretation as its subject. It tries to grasp Mustofa's main arguments comprehensively, by putting it, firstly, within the hermeneutical contexts which have become the background for his ideas and thoughts, and relating it within today's situations.

2. A SHORT BIOGRAPH OF MISBAH MUSTOFA

Misbah Zainal Mustofa, or Masruh (his childhood nickname), the son of Zainal Mustofa and Khadijah, was born in 1917 in Sawahan, Rembang, Central Java.[12] He was a *kiai* (spiritual leader) in *Pondok Pesantren* al-Balagh, an Islamic traditional boarding school, located in Bangilan, Tuban, Jawa Timur. He used to be an active member of Nahdlatul Ulama, the biggest socio-religious organization for traditionalist Muslims in Indonesia. Yet, because of his puritanist-lenient thoughts, within the organization, Mustofa often categorized within a different (even opposite) position with most of the NU *ulama*. Mustofa, thus, was then dubbed as a member of NU *fikrah pinggir* (NU of the marginal groups), a circle for NU *ulama* with uncommon thoughts.[13]

Mustofa is a prolific scholar, having publishing many works on Islam. Example of his works is the two books of *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* and *Tāj al-Muslimīn min Kalām Rabb al-'Ālamīn*, both are similarly of a Qur'anic exegesis work. The publication of *al-Iklīl* in 1987 has disappointed him because the book publisher cut many parts of the book without Mustofa's permission. Because of this, two years later, Mustofa published his second *tafsīr* book, *Tāj al-Muslimīn*, in his own publishing house.[14] Both are written in *pegon*, Javanese language written in Arabic script. The use of Javanese is intended to ease the reader (targeted mainly to Javanese Muslim) in understanding the materials.

Mustofa read a wide spectrum of Islamic knowledge, including *Tafsīr al-Manār* by Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā.[15] Because of his wide knowledge about Islam, he became a well-known *muballig* (preacher) in his society. His good voice and knowledge in Qur'anic recitation theories, had turned him into a *qāri'* (a professional Quran recitation performer).[16] More importantly, he was well-known for his *iḥtiyāt* (careful behaviour), as he was carefully observed his decisions according to the Quran, hadith, and pronouncements of the

salaf (classical) *ulama*[17] As such had provided him a sound sense of authority among his people. Mustofa passed away in Monday, 7 Žulqā'da 1414/18 April 1994.[18]

3. MUSTOFA'S INTERPRETAON OF Q. 2:134

“That was a people that hath passed away. They shall reap the fruit of what they did, and ye of what ye do! Of their merits there is no question in your case!” (Q. 2:134)

In his interpretation of this verse, Mustofa discusses *tahlilan*. He relates this ritual with *ruwatan*, a Javanese ritual practice for gaining salvation, conducted by sending prayers to their ancestors. This practice resembles ancestor veneration rituals in China and other local traditions. *Ruwatan* had existed before Islam came into what is now called Indonesia. The ritual was adopted by the local Muslims, by adding some Islamic characters into it, thus later called *tahlilan*. The ritual is now comprising of Islamic prayers (mostly in Arabic) and parts of the Quran (the chapters of *Yāsīn*, *al-Ikhlās*, *al-Falaq*, and *al-Nās* are among the most common parts to recite). Rewards of God's grace, expected from this rituals, are then 'sent out' for the salvation of their ancestors.

Justifying his argument by referring to the above verse, Mustofa argues that a Muslim will not be rewarded nor punished because of others' worships and wrongdoings. This also means that God's rewards of *tahlilan* cannot not be sent out to other people, including the dead. Mustofa clearly points out his stance:

“One will not get a reward for what other has done. A son/daughter will not get any reward for what his/her parents or ancestors have done. They will only get a reward for what they themselves have done. This also applies to our life in the hereafter. The exception only goes for those who guide the other to goodness, for the prophet Muhammad had said “*man dalla 'alā khair fa lahū mithlu ajri fā'ilihī* (whoever guides someone to goodness will have a similar reward).” The Hadith and the Qur'anic verses mentioned above clearly say that one will not get any benefit from the deeds of other's”.[19]

To Mustofa, the dead will never give or get benefit to the living. Accordingly, *tawassul* and *tahlilan* will be wasted away and give nothing. In order to put more strength to his argument, Mustofa cited other verses; Q 4:123, 6:164, 53:39, and 80:34-37.

Nevertheless, Mustofa highlights some exceptional conditions, justified by a Hadith, under which a person will get a reward from other's good deeds. He gives an example of a person who gives guidance to another person for achieving goodness. In this situation, the latter will get similar rewards as the former has, even when the latter has passed away. Mustofa also mentions that *ṣadaqa* (alms-giving to the poor) and *du'ā'* (prayer) as a work ('*amal*) that can be included into this exceptional conditions. The basis of his argument comes from the Hadith. He situates Q 2:134 as a general ('*āmm*) rule which is specified

(*takhṣīṣ*) by the prophetic hadith.[20] In other words, Mustofa accepts the argument that a transfer of God's rewards from one person's work to the other is possible under particular conditions.

Citing al-Suyūṭī, Mustofa specifies the number of *a'māl* that fall within these conditions:

- Teaching the Qur'an,
- Teaching sciences related to the Qur'an,
- A prayer send by a child for her/his parents,
- Growing a plant the fruit of which is to the benefit of other people,
- *ṣadaqa jāriya* (alms-giving to the poor) and *waqaf* (charity), even if it is in a form of the *muṣḥaf* (printed book of the Qur'an),
- Defending the land from an enemy,
- Digging well for public service,
- Making water irrigation fro the benefit of public people consumption.
- Building a shelter for the needy (a foreigner, literally), and
- Building a house for worship (*ẓikr* and *ṣalāt*) or education.

Al-Suyūṭī makes a *shi'ir* (poetry) to compile these ten *'amal*.

The verse of Q. 2:141 restates the full statement of Q. 2:134. In interpreting this verse, Mustofa reiterates the importance of knowing that in terms of *'ibāda* (worship), Muslim must not count on the other. An extreme concern of Mustofa is that one will undermine his/her *'ibāda*, believing that his/her family and society will send him/her reward by conducting *tahlilan*. [21]

Mustofa highlights in *Tāj al-Muslimīn* that *tahlilan* is not prohibited by Islam: but as long as its goal is for chanting the *ẓikr* and *du'ā'*, it is allowed and even encouraged. Despite the absence of such ritual during the era of the prophet and the *ṣaḥabī* (his companions), Mustofa still considers it permissible by *sharī'a* (Islamic law), on the basis of a Hadith, which reads, “*izā marartum bi riyāḍ al-janna fa (i)rtafi 'ū,*” *'wa mā riyāḍ al-janna?*” *Qāl 'ḥalq al-ẓikr* (“When you pass by the Gardens of Paradise, avail yourselves of them.” The Companions asked: ‘What are the Gardens of Paradise, O Messenger of Allah?’ He replied: ‘The circles of *dhikr*’”).[22]

Yet, according to him, other rules that characteristically come with *tahlilan* are invalid (*baṭal*), including the rules of *telung ndino* (three days), *mitung ndino* (seven days), *nyatus* (100 days), and *haul* (a single Javanese-year cycle following the ancestor's death), a Javanese calculation system of when a ritual of *tahlilan* is supposed to conducted. To him, these rules are in contradiction with

Islamic teachings, since they have no relation with the main goal of *tahlilan*, i.e. *ẓikr* and *du'ā'* for the dead.[23] All in all, the verse of Q. 2:134 is used by Mustofa for justifying his argument against the traditional practice of *tahlilan*. This verse, generally speaking, asserts that no one will either get a reward for what others have done, or will not able to transfer his/her reward to the other. However, he translates the Q 2:134 as an general rule which is specified (*takhṣīṣ*) by a prophetic Hadith, mentioning ten exceptional works or *a'māl*, rewards of their practice of which can be transferred to other people.

4. READING MUSTOFA'S INTERPRETATION OF THE QUR'AN WITH HERMENEUTICS

Hans-George Gadamer offers a hermeneutical concept which defines reading and comprehending a text as a dialogue and a synthesis between three worlds: the world of the text, the author, and the reader. These aspects are instrumental in the process of understanding.[24] Gadamer further points out four things to keep in mind: “historically effected/ effective consciousness” (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), prejudice, the fusion of horizon, and application. This paper will use Gadamer's concept of hermeneutics as the starting point to analyse the historicity of Mustofa's interpretation of the Qur'an, which in turn help us understand his interpretation comprehensively.

4.1. The Genealogy of Mustofa's Thought

Mustofa's thought is deeply influenced by the traditional scholarship of pesantren. It is a Javanese traditional Islamic boarding school, that develops a method that requires the exploration of *kitab kuning* (classical books) written by Middle East and Andalusia Muslim scholars of the classical period of Islam (9th-13th century). Furthermore, pesantren has established certain criteria of what later termed *al-kutub al-mu'tabara* (reliable scholarly works).[25]

Generally speaking, religious books read by majority of Javanese pesantren are written by the Shafi'ites. They come from different disciplines like Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), Islamic law (*fiqh*), Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsīr*), and hadith. It is noteworthy that the first two disciplines are dominating the percentage in most cases. It is due to a common assumption among the pewantren people that Arabic grammar is the very basic skills enabling them to comprehend the *kitab kuning*—assuming that Arabic remains the *lingua franca* of Islamic discourse. The second reason is more practical, saying that *fiqh* is the first basic need of society. Shaped in this way, pesantren is often considered *fiqh*-oriented or *naḥw*-oriented.[26]

Growing up as a member of family of traditional pesantren, Mustofa internalized sort of basic rule that the production of Islamic law must have strong basic literature

review on the pronouncements of former leader of *fiqh* schools. Mustofa here and there mentions a great number of classic scholars' statements mostly for justifying his argument. Furthermore, he mentions very few weak (*da'if*) hadith in his argument. The rest belong to sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) and good (*ḥasan*) category.[27] Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that Mustofa asserts premises more suitable to classical period rather than today's context. Although he says that *maṣlaḥa* (public good) is of important considerations, his *fatwas* seem highly rigid and strict.[28]

4.2. Mustofa's Traditionalism

This section will exhibit additional data on Mustofa's logic in deriving Islamic law and interpreting the Qur'an. It will help situate Mustofa's position amid the landscape of Islamic traditionalism.[29] For reasons explained in the following pages, Mustofa's thought belongs to scholastic neo-traditionalism. His agenda of purifying Islam from any innovation and heresy might seem similar to puritanist ideology. Yet his method of exploring the rich classical literature (not limited to one particular school) keeps him in traditionalism circle. I argue that his adherence to the *aṣl* (core) and *ijmā'* (consensus) is the factor that underlies his stance.

4.2.1. Bid'a in Mustofa's Perspective

Mustofa initially classify *bid'a* (heresy) into three basic categories: *i'tiqādiyya* (relating to belief and theology), *'ibādiyya* (relating to rituals and worshipping), and *'ādiyya* (relating to tradition and actions oriented to gain worldly things/benefit).[30] Another classification he offers divides *bid'a* into general and particular. The former refers to anything that did not exist in the era of the Prophet and the *Ṣaḥābī* (his disciples), for example, motorcycle and spoon.[31] He goes further in classifying this general *bid'a* on the account of its level of lawfulness; *mubāḥ* (allowed), *makrūh* (avoided), *muḥarrama* (unlawful), *mandūba* (encouraged), and *wājiba* (lawful and even obligatory).[32]

Mustofa defines particular *bid'a* as "generating additional or deletion of religious things, appearing only after the *Ṣaḥābī* era, without the permission of *sharī'a* (the Qur'an and hadith), be it *fi'lī* (action), *qawlī* (oral), *ṣāriḥ* (clear), *ishāra* (alluded)." According to Mustofa, this kind of *bid'a* does not apply to *bid'a 'ādiyya*. [33]

These conceptions of *bid'a* in turn serve as prejudice in Mustofa's interpretation of the Qur'an, particularly Q. 2:134. Within this theoretical map, the practice of *tahlilan* belongs to *makrūha* or even *muḥarrama*, for it specifically deals with *'ibāda*. His main reason is because its calculation system such as *mitung ndino*, *nyatus*, and *haul*, has no basic argument in *sharī'a*. On the other hand, realizing that parts of it is a ritual, that is *zikr* and *du'ā'*, which has its legitimate basis in the Islamic texts, Mustofa then offers to reconstruct the composition of *tahlilan* or to

replace it at all with simply reciting a prayer together after the daily *ṣalāt*.

Mustofa's exploration of classical *fiqh* literature on *zikr*, *du'ā'*, and *bid'a*, also leads him to Ḥanafite's opinion regarding *bid'a*, in any form and classification, as unlawful/*muḥarrama*, and Shafi'ites. The latter sees *bid'a* as *mandūba* (allowed) as long as it accords with the principles of *sharī'a*. This in turn brings to the surface the argument of Q. 2:134 as *'āmm* rule, later to be *takḥṣīs* (specified) by a number of hadith. Parts of the ritual that he considers its core, i.e. *zikr* and *du'ā'*, when conducted collectively, might be strong reason to make this *bid'a* encouraged (*mandūba*).

It is thus important to uncover that Mustofa has such prejudice in understanding Mustofa's critique of *tahlilan*, for someone's prejudice plays a decisive role in his/her understanding.[34] However, we might ask further as to why Mustofa tends to such a stricter way of living Islam. The interrogation on his socio-religio-cultural and geographical background might lend a hand.

4.2.2. Santri Ideology For Coastal Javanese Muslim

Clifford Geertz, in his *The Religion of Java*, points out the very famous tri-chotomy of Javanese Muslim; *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*. Although Geertz' classification gets some sharp critiques.[35] *santri* and *abangan* more precisely, enjoy wide usage in cultural, social, or religious studies. The former refers to the devout Muslim, while the latter refers to those outside that border.[36] There are plenty of theories discussing the origins of both words.[37] However, most of the theories argue that *santri* and *abangan* hold positive relation towards each other.[38] The *abangan* sees *santri* as the ideal Muslim, and *santri* sees *abangan* as those striving to reach that idealism.

Theorists of the origins of Indonesian Islam contend, among other alternative arguments, that the initial interaction of Islam and Javanese society occur in the coastal area.[39] The intense and long-last interaction of coastal area with Islam and long period of serving as the center of Islamic missionary results in the proliferation of type of Muslims identical to Geertz' *santri* criteria in the area.[40] This devout character of Muslims is maintained for centuries up to the nearly end of colonial period that Mustofa lives in.

Mustofa, who grew up in the *pesantren* environment and roughly spent most of his lifetime in the same locus, has strongly internalized such definition of being Muslim and living the *sharī'a*. The intensive teaching of *pesantren* has succeeded in establishing the identity in Mustofa's personality and way of thinking. The *santri* nuance of coastal Javanese Muslim constitutes the hermeneutical situation for Mustofa. The traditional, cultural, ideological, and experimental aspects surrounding Mustofa, have contributed to establishing such situation. The great effect this situation gives to Mustofa's epistemology is what Gadamer terms as affective history.[41] It even directs the

subjectivity of Mustofa. In turn, it turns on a red signal when Mustofa has to deal with local traditional rituals that represent a non-devout Muslims' life.

5. BEING CONSERVATIVE AND INCLUSIVE

There are two important concepts that every religion must have within their body: fanaticism and tolerance. It will bring great effect on the followers and thus must be executed in precise measure. The imbalance portion of treating the two will result in the instability of the religious followers and in turn leads to chaos.[42] The domination of fanaticism generates the hostility towards other group. To let the tolerance dominates, otherwise, might weaken the very existence of religion.[43] Mustofa's interpretation and strict stance towards *tahlilan* can be seen as part of his concern on the assumed imbalance of the two aspects. He might see other ulama to be too permissive towards tradition that Qur'anic teachings become marginalized, probably unintentionally. This too much permissiveness, to Mustofa, will only make Islam subsided and diminished.[44] However, Mustofa still shows the tolerance, particularly in his negotiation to the concept of rituals he is highly criticizing.

6. CONCLUSION

Misbah Mustofa, a traditional Muslim scholar from coastal area of Java, criticizes the ritual named *tahlilan* as he interprets Q 2:134 in his *tafsir* book. He contends that one will not gain any reward from the deed(s) of other. Accordingly, the living will never make it to 'send' reward to the dead. His main critique is on the rule of timing (*mitung ndino*, *nyatus*, *nyewu*, and *haul*) of the ritual which to him has no basis in *shari'a*. However, it is noteworthy that he accepts some parts of the ritual with notes. Taking some *naṣṣ* (Islamic foundational texts) as the basis, he even offers reconstruction of the ritual.

In this sense, his thought belongs to the scholastic neo-traditionalism. Situated in his hermeneutical landscape, we can see reasons for him being in this position. *First*, his background as a person living in pesantren of coastal area of Java almost throughout his lifetime assigns him such a strong *santri* (devout Muslim) identity. This leads him to be very critical towards forms of syncretism of Islam and Javanese tradition. *Second*, his basic conception of *bid'a* (also inherited from his *santri* environment) demands him to carefully observe new things (*bid'a*) coming to his religion. New things are not allowed to enter the *'ubūdiyya* (worship) and *i'tiqādiyya* (theology) area. *Third*, his method of basing arguments on general meaning of the verse puts the social aspects of his life on the marginal side. On the other words, he lacks in seeing *maṣlaḥa* (public good) when interpreting the Qur'an. Observing all these dynamics, we can learn how to give our religiosity a right portion of conservativeness (fanaticism) and

permissiveness (tolerance). Only then will we not be hostile towards other groups and at the same time able to sustain the existence of our religion.

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