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Anti-Colonial Interpretation in Indonesia: History, Figures, and Mufassir's Response to Dutch Colonial Occupancy

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Abstract

This article discusses the development of anti-colonial interpretation in Indonesia as a response by intellectual Muslims towards domination and oppression by Dutch colonialism. Through a qualitative approach with literature studies, this research identifies historical events that gave birth to a tradition of interpretation-oriented resistance, identifying key figures such as Ahmad Hassan, KH Ahmad Sanusi, Mahmud Yunus, and HAMKA, as well as analyzing their response to the colonial situation through hermeneutics. Study results show that anti-colonial interpretation appears as an effort to articulate values of justice, freedom, and rejection of injustice through interpretation of verses from the Quran. Mufassirs use a contextual approach to adapt the message of the Quran to the socio-political conditions of Muslims during the colonial period. Interpretation not only functions as a religious text, but also as an instrument of liberation that plays a role in awakening national awareness and strengthening resistance movements. The legacy of this interpretation remains relevant as a basis for developing responsive interpretation of the Quran to contemporary issues of injustice.

Keywords: Contextual Hermeneutics, History, Anti-Colonial Interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

Dutch colonialism, which lasted for more than three centuries, had a profound impact on the social, political, and religious structures of Indonesian society (Halik et al., 2024). The colonizers asserted their power not only through economic exploitation and political domination, but also through the control of religious



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discourse and Islamic education. Strict regulations on Islamic missionary activities, restrictions on Islamic educational institutions, and the implementation of discriminatory laws were part of the colonial strategy to weaken the social power of Muslims. In this stressful situation, an intellectual response emerged from Muslim scholars and scholars who utilized Quranic interpretation as a medium of resistance. Interpretation was no longer understood merely as an effort to explain the contents of the sacred text, but rather as an ideological instrument to advocate for justice, freedom, and the rejection of all forms of oppression (Usan & Tatang, 2021) .

The emergence of anti-colonial interpretations in Indonesia in the early 20th century was a significant phenomenon in the history of Islamic thought in the Indonesian archipelago. Exegetes such as Ahmad Hassan, KH Ahmad Sanusi, Mahmud Yunus, and especially HAMKA, presented interpretations of the Qur'an that focused on liberating the Muslim community from colonial oppression. (Gusmian, 2015) . They interpret verses about oppression (zulm), freedom (hurriyyah), jihad, and social solidarity with strong contextual nuances, so that the interpretation becomes a means to raise the collective awareness of Muslims about the importance of resistance and independence. The interpretations of Al-Furqan , Raudlat al-Irfan , and Al-Azhar illustrate how the interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an cannot be separated from colonial realities and the need to mobilize society towards political and social liberation (Mismubarak, 2019) .

However, research on anti-colonial interpretation in Indonesia remains underdeveloped. Previous studies have focused more on the biographies of figures or the history of resistance movements, while in-depth analysis of the hermeneutical responses of commentators to colonialism has rarely been systematically conducted (Fitriyono, 2025) . Yet, understanding the methods of interpretation, the socio-political context, and the style of their interpretations is crucial to understanding how sacred texts were used as the intellectual foundation for the struggle for independence. Based on this need, this study raises the question of how the colonial historical context shaped the style and motifs of anti-colonial interpretations, who the central figures were who played a role in the development of these interpretations, and what their hermeneutical responses to Qur'anic verses related to resistance and justice were.

Studies on anti-colonial interpretation in Indonesia have been conducted by various researchers, although most still focus on specific figures or historical analysis, rather than on a comprehensive mapping of history, figures, and hermeneutical responses as examined in this study. Lutfi in his writing (Lutfi, 2024) this study shows that Sanusi used his interpretation as a medium to criticize the policies of the colonial government and emphasize the importance of education, especially mastery of secular sciences in addition to religious knowledge, to achieve the glory and independence of Indonesia. This study reveals Sanusi's anti-colonial

criticism of the Teacher Law, the prohibition of studying in Islamic boarding schools, and the prohibition of the Hajj pilgrimage. In addition, Sanusi encouraged the community to master secular sciences in addition to religious knowledge in order to achieve Indonesian independence. This study uses the Hermeneutic method to analyze two books of Sanusi's interpretation, which provides an understanding of the social, political, and cultural context in the process of producing these texts.

Then, in their writing, Lutfi & Dr. Tahmina Rashid (Lutfi & Rashid, 2019) , examines the Indonesian liberation movement influenced by many factors, but the role of Qur'anic interpretation as a medium for the struggle of ulama is still rarely discussed. Most studies only highlight the contributions of ulama through organizations, journals, and publications. This study highlights Ahmad Sanusi's interpretation as a means of resistance against colonialism, by analyzing the anti-colonial messages in two of his exegetical works written while he was exiled: *al-Malja' al-Ṭālibīn* and *Tamsiyat al-Muslimīn* . Through a hermeneutic approach, the study shows how Sanusi utilized the socio-political context to strengthen the spirit of struggle. And an article written by Sonny Permana (Permana & Yunus, 2022) , explains that the interpretation of jihad underwent a process of deradicalization of meaning. Hamka attempted to interpret jihad far beyond his time. The interpretation of jihad, previously contaminated by radical framing, has now become more comprehensive and more touching for the Indonesian people. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine Hamka's interpretation of jihad historically through a hermeneutical perspective, thus providing scientific arguments for Hamka's interpretation of jihad. This study employs a hermeneutical approach to develop a framework for discussion. The research method employed is thematic-conceptual, exploring the concept of jihad in the Qur'an, which is not explained in detail but contains substantial meaning.

To avoid a broad discussion, this study limits itself to a study of several key figures who explicitly displayed resistance to colonialism in their works of interpretation, namely Ahmad Hassan, KH Ahmad Sanusi, Mahmud Yunus, and HAMKA. The analysis is directed at their interpretation of verses containing messages of justice, freedom, jihad, and social criticism relevant to the colonial conditions at that time. With these limitations, the focus of the research becomes more focused on uncovering the characteristics and dynamics of anti-colonial interpretation as a religious and intellectual discourse.

This study examines the historical and socio-political background of the emergence of anti-colonial interpretation, the figures and their works, and the hermeneutical methods used to critique Dutch colonialism. This study highlights the role of interpretation as a medium of liberation that shaped the national identity and fighting spirit of Indonesian Muslims. Theoretically, this research enriches the study of Nusantara interpretation and Islamic hermeneutics, particularly regarding the

relationship of interpretation to power dynamics. Practically, this research is useful for academics and researchers who trace the development of interpretation, the history of colonialism, and religious ideology, and provides inspiration for the development of contemporary interpretation that is responsive to modern injustice.

Human beings are social creatures who cannot live independently of others. The need to interact and coexist encourages individuals to know one another, observe, appreciate, and accept the strengths and weaknesses of others. To establish and maintain social relationships, people employ various forms of interaction, including both verbal and written communication. Through these means, individuals can exchange ideas, convey information, and build mutual understanding within society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The History of the Emergence of Anti- Colonial Interpretation in Indonesia

Discussion about the emergence of anti- colonial interpretations in Indonesia is not can released from understanding to draft colonialism That itself . Etymologically, colonialism comes from the Latin word *colonus* , meaning inhabitant or settler. Colonialism later developed as a term referring to a nation's efforts to control, occupy, and exploit another nation's territory with the aim of expanding its political, economic, cultural, and power influence. In the Indonesian context, Dutch colonialism was a form of domination that lasted for centuries through the expansion of the VOC and later the colonial government of the Dutch East Indies. This colonization gave rise to deep-rooted structural oppression, such as the exploitation of natural resources, the standardization of colonial law, restrictions on Islamic preaching, and strict control over religious education (Usan & Tatang, 2021).

Colonialism not only influenced social and political structures but also reshaped Indonesian society's relationship with religion. The colonial administration often viewed Islam as a political threat due to its power of social mobilization, particularly through Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), Islamic orders (*tarekat*), and Islamic organizations. Consequently, various regulations were implemented: bans on certain sermons, strict supervision of *pesantren* activities, and restrictions on publications deemed likely to foster anti-government sentiment. These repressive conditions ultimately led to the emergence of anti-colonial interpretations as a theological and intellectual response to challenge the legitimacy of Dutch rule (Gusmian, 2015).

The emergence of anti-colonial interpretations began to become apparent in the early 20th century, when ideas of Islamic renewal and resistance to colonialism gained momentum in the Muslim world. The spread of print media, the emergence of modern organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Persis, and the strengthening

of Islamic boarding school education laid the foundation for the development of a new intellectual consciousness among Indonesian Muslims. Interpretations became a space where scholars could express criticism of colonial injustice through a religious approach yet imbued with political courage (Halik et al., 2024). The exegetes utilized Quranic verses as a theological basis for rejecting colonialism, raising national consciousness, and encouraging Muslims to fight for independence.

Thus, the history of the emergence of anti-colonial interpretation is a history of intense interaction between sacred texts, political oppression, and social dynamics. Interpretation became the voice of a people who refused to submit to colonial structures and sought to demonstrate that the struggle against colonialism was part of the Islamic mandate. Since then, interpretation has functioned not merely as an explanation of texts but as an intellectual tool for liberating society from the hegemony of colonialism (Gusmian, 2015).

Characters Anti- Colonial Mufassir in Indonesia

A number of figure interpreters in Indonesia play role important in build anti-colonial interpretive tradition . They came from various background behind Islamic boarding school , movement updates , and organization Islamic masses— however united by the same spirit : using the Koran to confirm principle justice and reject oppression . Some figure stand out in context This including Ahmad Hassan, KH Ahmad Sanusi, Mahmud Yunus, and HAMKA.

- a. Ahmad Hassan, a figure Islamic Union (Persis), known with Tafsir al-Furqan featuring criticism sharp to practice injustice , including that which is committed government colonial . Although the interpretation more rational and scripturalist style its interpretation reflect rejection to Dutch domination through strong arguments , especially related with verses law , leadership , and justice (Setiawan, 2023) .

Example its interpretation is in surah Al-Baqarah verse 42 which reads :

وَلَا تَلْبِسُوا الْحَقَّ بِالْبَاطِلِ وَتَكْتُمُوا الْحَقَّ وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

"And do not mix truth with falsehood and do not hide the truth even though you know it."

In Al-Furqan Tafsir Qur'an , Ahmad Hassan interprets this verse as a warning for Muslims not to mix Islamic values with Western secular values brought by the colonialists. He reject system law and education colonial Because considered instilling an inferior mentality towards nation Alone (Hassan, 1956).

- b. KH Ahmad Sanusi, a prominent Sukabumi cleric, wrote Raudlat al-Irfan fi Ma'rifat al-Qur'an in Sundanese Pegon. His work demonstrates a strong form of cultural resistance, as he rejected colonial languages and chose local languages

to strengthen the understanding of the people. Sanusi was imprisoned for his political and religious activities, which were deemed dangerous to the colonial government. His interpretations contain messages of anti-oppression and criticism of social injustice perpetrated by the authorities. (Zuadah, 2023) .

An example of the interpretation is in surah Al-Baqarah verse 120 which reads:

تَرْضَىٰ عَنْكَ الْمِثْرُودُ وَلَا النَّصْرِيُّ حَتَّىٰ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ يَخْرُجُوا مِنْهَا مَكْرَهًا وَلَا يَكْتُمُونَ إِلَهُ اللَّهِ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَشَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ

جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ مَا لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿١٢٠﴾

"The Jews and Christians will never be willing to let you (Prophet Muhammad) follow their religion. Say, "Indeed, Allah's guidance is the (true) guidance." Indeed, if you follow their desires after the knowledge (truth) has come to you, you will have no protector or helper from Allah's (punishment).

The Jews and Christians will never be willing to let you (Prophet Muhammad) follow their religion. Say, "Indeed Allah's guidance is the (true) guidance." Indeed, if you follow their desires after the knowledge (truth) has come to you, you will have no protector or helper from Allah's (punishment) (Sanusi, 1930).

- c. Mahmud Yunus was a figure who sought to liberate Islamic education from colonial control through a modern approach. His Tafsir Qur'an Karim, written in Indonesian, aimed to open access to understanding the Qur'an for the wider community, so that they would no longer be constrained by colonial education policies that restricted books in local languages. Although not as vocal as Sanusi in his political opposition, Mahmud Yunus inserted a message of liberation and anti-colonial morality into his interpretation (Hikmayanti, 2016) .

An example of the interpretation is in surah Al-Mujadilah verse 11, part of which reads:

يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ عَلَّمُوا بِحَقِّهِمْ

"Allah will elevate those who believe among you and those who are given knowledge by several degrees."

In his Tafsir Qur'an Karim, Mahmud Yunus emphasized that knowledge is a tool for liberating people from colonialism and ignorance. He criticized the colonial education system, which separated religious knowledge from worldly knowledge, as it only produced obedient workers for the colonialists, not faithful and independent leaders.

Mahmud Yunus said in his commentary explaining this verse (Yunus, 1938), "Muslims will not be strong as long as they are lazy in seeking knowledge and only imitate the colonial nation in their system of life."

Among all the figures, HAMKA is perhaps the most well-known in this context. *Tafsir Al-Azhar* is not merely a work of interpretation, but an intellectual manifesto of liberation that connects the value of monotheism with the concept of national independence. HAMKA viewed colonialism as a form of servitude to others than Allah, thus making independence a logical consequence of faith (Jamiluddin, 2019). His thoughts on morality, leadership, and justice became a source of inspiration for Islamic struggles and education in the pre-independence and post-colonial eras. These exegetes, with their diverse backgrounds and methodologies, contributed to creating a style of interpretation that not only educated but also inspired the spirit of resistance among the people. They made interpretation a text of liberation, not merely a religious text.

Response Exegete against colonialism in Indonesia

Response interpreter to colonialism in the archipelago was multi-dimensional, they respond through interpretation that is hermeneutics (reinterpretation) paragraph For context oppression), through legitimacy of political religion (fatwas, sermons, resolutions), education and dissemination of Islamic language interpretations local & print media, to communication strategies mass magazines, pamphlets, now digital. Literature latest (2019–2025) increasingly confirm the role of interpretation as instrument socio - political in context colonialism and its legacy .

a. Hermeneutics of Resistance: Interpreting Texts to Counter Oppression

Anti-colonial commentators practice what can be called a hermeneutics of resistance, namely, places verses about justice, resistance to tyranny, and the obligation to maintain the dignity of the people within the framework of resistance against colonial practices. This reasoning is not merely theological rhetoric; many recent studies have shown that these interpretations link the text to the daily conditions of people affected by colonial policies such as restrictions on Islamic boarding school education, economic monopoly, and administrative discrimination (Tamimi, 2021). This contextual approach is what makes interpretation an effective tool for social criticism. Empirical examples include studies of the works of KH Ahmad Sanusi, which show the use of local language and practical interpretation that foster collective solidarity in coastal or rural communities, an interpretive strategy that facilitates the internalization of anti-colonial messages.

b. Religious-Political Legitimacy: Fatwas, Sermons, Jihad Resolutions

One of the most impactful responses has been the attempt to provide religious legitimacy for political action or self-defense. A classic example is the contribution of Islamic boarding school figure KH Hasyim Asy'ari, whose interpretation of verses on jihad provided the moral basis for the 1945 Jihad Resolution. Modern historical studies have emphasized the crucial role of such interpretations in mass

mobilization and the empowerment of student networks. Contemporary studies have shown that such interpretations are often framed not as mere calls for violence, but as a defense of one's community and homeland (Aisa, 2024).

c. Education, Moral Curriculum, and Formation Identity

Anti-colonial commentators also responded through education, such as interpretations in Malay or Indonesian and local varieties, which became an "alternative curriculum" that instilled values of independence, dignity, and nationalism in broader segments of society (santri, farmers, and traders). Modern literature emphasizes that the dissemination of interpretations in accessible languages, coupled with popular formats, accelerated the penetration of anti-colonial ideas and shaped a religious identity with a national dimension. Mahmud Yunus, Hamka, and other modern commentators played a significant role in this transformation through their books and print media (dkk, 2024).

d. Hermeneutic Strategy: Locality vs. National Narrative

The interpreter employs a dual hermeneutic strategy: (a) strengthening locality, language, customs, and wisdom to reject colonial cultural domination, and (b) formulating a national narrative that transcends ethnicity and territory. This balance allows the interpretation to bridge local and national identities, a crucial element in anti-colonial mobilization. The case studies of Sanusi (local) and Hamka (national) demonstrate how the two approaches complement each other (Setiawan, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Anti-colonial interpretation in Indonesia emerged from the long struggle of Muslims to confront Dutch colonial oppression, which not only touched on political and economic aspects but also influenced religious discourse. In this situation, interpretation of the Quran became a means for scholars to affirm the values of justice, freedom, and rejection of colonial domination. Exegetes such as Ahmad Hassan, KH Ahmad Sanusi, Mahmud Yunus, and HAMKA utilized interpretation as a medium of intellectual resistance by interpreting Quranic verses contextually according to the conditions of the people at that time. This legacy of anti-colonial interpretation remains relevant today, especially as an inspiration for the development of Quranic interpretations that are more sensitive to issues of social injustice, humanity, and contemporary global challenges.

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