

A PARADIGM SHIFT OF “ASWAJA AN-NAHDLIYYAH” An Institutional Approach to the Internal Dynamics of Nahdlatul Ulama

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Abstract

*Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) constitutes an important link to the genealogy of Islamic thoughts since inheriting intellectual tradition of classical Muslim scholars. This position delivers a unique approach as to which the NU responds to the changes and reformation of Islamic thoughts. This paper discusses the epistemological position of NU in its relation to the Sunni-theology of *Ahlussunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (Aswaja) through examining social relevance and actors-oriented approaches. The article further argues the significant of three cultural fields relevant to better comprehend contemporary dynamics of the NU: namely Pesantrens, Islamic Colleges (PTKI) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). Combining three approaches of Thomas Kuhn's *Shifting Paradigm*, Karl Manheim's *Sociology of Knowledge* and *Abed al-Jabiri's Epistemology*, the article unveils the dynamics of a shifting paradigm of Islamic thought practiced within these three cultural fields of the NU. Pesantren's interpretation of *Aswaja An-Nahdliyyah* is thick, based on *Bayani and Irfani*. However, the scholars of NU and NGO activists are shifting in progress into *Burbani's epistemological model*. In other words, methodologically they aspire to change in understanding *Aswaja* from *qauli to manhaji*, from *Bayani-Irfani* to *Burbani*, and from *monolithic-dichotomic* to *integrative-progressive*.*

[*Nabdlatul Ulama (NU) dan komunitasnya adalah mata rantai geneologi pemikiran Islam penting karena mewarisi dan menghargai khazanah keislaman klasik. Artikel ini mengkaji kedudukan epistemologis NU dan kaitannya dengan Ahlussunnah wa al-Jama'ah (Aswaja) berdasarkan konteks sosial yang menyertai dan para aktor yang terlibat di dalamnya. Ada tiga medan budaya yang memiliki arti penting, karena menjadi sumber wacana, gagasan, dan praktik berma'zhab di kalangan NU kontemporer: pesantren, Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam (PTKI), dan Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Menggabungkan tiga pendekatan sekaligus: Pergeseran Paradigma Thomas Kuhn, Sosiologi Pengetahuan Karl Manheim dan Epistemologi Abed al-Jabiri yang digunakan untuk mengkaji pengetahuan yang tidak hanya hasil teori, tetapi juga bagian dari proses sosiologi dan epistemologi. penulis berupaya menunjukkan dinamika pergeseran paradigam pemikiran Islam pada komunitas dimaksud. Hasilnya menunjukkan adanya perubahan tradisi pemikiran Islam dalam komunitas NU. Memang, mayoritas kelompok Pesantren ketika memahami dan menafsirkan Aswaja An-Nabdhliyyah masih lebih berat dan dominan berbasis Bayani dan Irfani. Namun pada kelompok NU terpelajar dan para aktifis NGO tengah mulai bergeser kepada model epistemologi Burhani. Dengan kata lain, secara metodologis mereka menghendaki adanya perubahan dalam memahami Aswaja dari qauli ke manhaji, Bayani-Irfani ke Burhani, monolitik-dikotomik ke integratif-progresif.]*

Keywords: *Shifting Paradigm, Epistemology, Aswaja An-Nabdhliyyah, NU*

Introduction

There have been terms to describe “worldview” in dealing with the philosophy of science. The word *weltanschauung* and *weltansicht* are in commonly used in Germany. It also called paradigms according to Edwin Hung.¹ Interestingly, we find the terms are variously different in the discipline of Islamic thoughts. Such different terms as *al-tashawwur*

¹ Edwin Hung, *The Nature of Science: Problem and Perspectives* (Belmont, California, Wardsworth, 1997) p. 368; Gary Gutting (ed.), *Paradigm and Revolution: Appraisal and Application of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 1.

al-Islami, *al-Mabda 'al-Islami*, *Islamic Nazariyyat*, and *ru'yat al-Islam lil wujud*, are used interchangeably. Sometimes it is also used the term *nazariyyat al-Islam li al-kawn*. According to Ninian Smart, worldview involves beliefs and feelings It that functions as a driving force for social progress and moral change.² Philosophically, Thomas F. Wall interpreted worldview as a system of principle belief that is integral to our essence, reality, and about the meaning of existence.³ Meanwhile, Alparslan Acikgence defined worldview as the principle for every human behavior, included scientific and technological activities. Eventually, every human activity could be traced back to his view of life, it meant that human activity could be reduced to that view of life.⁴

There were three important points from the three definitions above, namely that worldview was the driving force of social change, the principle for the reality of understanding and the principle of scientific activity. In the context of science, the essence of worldview could be related to the concept of “paradigm change” of Thomas Kuhn’s ideas⁵ which, according to Edwin Hung again, were considered *weltanschauung* revolution. The reason was because paradigm provided the concept of values, standards and methodologies, or in short, it was a worldview and conceptual framework that are needed for the study of science.⁶ The above three definitions actually suggests that worldview is a benchmark to distinguish between one civilization and another. Worldview also involved human epistemological activities, as the last two definitions

² Ninian Smart, *Worldview, Crosscultural Explorations of Human Belief* (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1983), p. 1-2.

³ The origin was an integrated system of basic beliefs about the nature of yourself, reality, and the meaning of existence, Thomas F Wall, *Thinking Critically About Philosophical Problem, A Modern Introduction* (Australia: Thomson Learning, 2001), p. 532.

⁴ Alparslan Acikgence, “The Framework for A history of Islamic Philosophy,” *Al-Shajarah*, Vol.1, No. 1-2, 1996, pp. 6.

⁵ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: Univerity of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 24.

⁶ Edwin Hung, *The Nature of Science: Problem and Perspectives* (Belmont, California: Wardsworth, 1997) p. 340, 355, 368, 370.

showed this clearly, because they were the important factors in human reasoning activities.

The philosophy of science also functions importantly such as to see a scientific design, both in natural and social sciences as well as in humanities sciences, including religious studies. It works to analyze the logical consequences of the underlying mindset.⁷ Discussion of the philosophy of science was often associated with epistemology, although both of them contain differences. According to Muslih, these differences can be found in the material object of each studies. In epistemology, knowledge is the object study, whereas in the philosophy of science, the object study was the science itself. Furthermore, epistemology conceives three main problems to answer: *first*, what were the sources of knowledge? *Second*, where did true knowledge come from and how to know it? *Third*, how was the validity of that knowledge?⁸

This paper focuses on the study of Islamic epistemology, particularly the discourse of contemporary *Aswaja An-Nahdliyyah* currently in progress as reflected from the practices of Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) communities, namely Pesantren community, Islamic college community and non-govermental organization community. The “Islamic” phrase, points to the specific character that Islamic epistemology has, compared to the Western-based study of epistemology. This is preeminently in relation to the source of true knowledge, which according to Islamic epistemology has to be in line with revelation informations. This specific character, admittedly, has to do with analyzing an epistemic building of *kalam* science knowledge. Accordingly, the aim was to disclose the basic building of *kalam* science that constitutes one branch of and affected four such other Islamic sciences as *tafsir*, *fiqh*, *ushul fiqh*, and *tasawuf*. Taking a close look at the practices of the NU circle groups above, this paper want to examine how does Islamic epistemology continue to

⁷ Muhammad Muslih, *Filsafat Ilmu Kajian atas Asumsi Dasar dan Kerangka Teori Ilmu Pengetahuan* (Yogyakarta: Belukar, 2008), p. 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

work and experience changes? To explain the question, the author uses three different approaches, i.e. Thomas Kuhn's shifting paradigm, Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and Abed al-Jabiri's epistemology. Within these approaches knowledge is considered not only the result of scientific theory but also a part of sociological process.

The paper organized into four chapters of discussion. After this introductory remarks, the following discussions will come into two chapters: *first*, Islamic scientific epistemology, describes the issue of epistemology of Islam, by referring to Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri's concept of epistemology. *Second*, reinterpretation of *Aswaja An-Nabdliyyah*, describing the dynamics and friction of *Aswaja An-Nabdliyyah's* and tries to come to terms with its epistemology in the postmodern era. Characterised by an attitude of skepticism or distrust toward-metanarratives, ideologies, the existence of objective reality and absolute truth, postmodernism comes to deconstruct all those elements in the current intellectuals, arts and cultural process.⁹ Finally, after this tiring debate, the rest discussion will come into concluding remarks.

Islamic Scientific Epistemology

A well-known contemporary Islamic scholar is Abed al-Jabiri. He is known for his critical ideas on Islamic thoughts and traditions. So famous is he that he becomes a reference for those who want to discuss contemporary Islamic thoughts. Al-Jabiri distinguished thoughts that developed in Islamic world into the East (*Masyriq*) and the West (*Maghrib*). He criticized the epistemology developed in the former Arab-Islamic region that he characterized it *Bayani-Irfani*. For him, the best epistemology of Islamic thought was one as had been developed in the *Maghrib*—i.e. Morocco and Andalusia. And this is actually the issue, because the latter epistemology had been based on rationality and empirical data bases

⁹ Shirin Akter, "Postmodernism and Its Reflection on Understanding Islam", *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society*, Vol. 31. No. 2, 2018, pp. 217.

(*Burbani*).¹⁰ Al-Jabiri argued that Western advanced in science and thought since the *renaissance* to the present days is due to the contribution of this *Burbani* epistemology conceived by Ibn Rushd together Muslim scholars and philosophers in the medieval era.

Epistemology (*an-nidham al-ma'rifi*), was accordingly, the concern of Al-Jabiri's ideas and studies.¹¹ Epistemology was a collection of concepts, principles and ways of working to find the knowledge that contains historical dimensions in unconscious structures.¹² He divided epistemology into three, *Bayani, Irfani and Burbani*. First, *Bayani* epistemology. *Bayani* is the Arabic word spelled from ب-ي-ن. Lexically, it means distinct/detached (*al-fashh/ infishal*) and clear/emerge *al-zubhur/ al-izhar*. Something is said distinct when it is different from and had features compared to others. Therefore, the second meaning (*al-zubhur/ al-izhar*) was born from the first meaning (*al-fashh/ al-infisal*). According to al-Jabiri, the first meaning fundamentally related to the form of ontologism, whereas the second meaning related to epistemological form.¹³ This is why experts of *ushul fiqh* were simply provided the meaning, for *Bayani* was only an attempt to express the issue of doubt in order to become clear.¹⁴

According to al-Jabiri, historically speaking, the epistemology of *Bayani* was the earliest system of thought emerged in Arabic. *Bayani* was used particularly in linguistic studies, such as *nahwu, balaghah, ushul fiqh* and *kalam* science.¹⁵ This epistemology relied on texts of al-Qur'an and *Hadith, ijma'* and *ijtihad* and considered them as framework of references in reconstructing concepts of life to strengthen Islamic beliefs. In Arab-Islamic civilization, discussions on *Bayani* formed into two

¹⁰ Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, *Bunyah al-'Aql al-'Arabi* (Beirut: Markaz ad-Dirasat Wahdah al-'Arabiyah, 2007), p. 383-377.

¹¹ Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, *Takwin al-'Aql al'Arabi* (Beirut: Markaz Dirast al-Wihdah al-'Arabiyah, t.t.), p. 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁴ Muhammad Muslih, *Filsafat Ilmu...*, p. 181.

¹⁵ Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, *Bunyah al-'Aql...*, p. 1.

different group of studies. *First*, the rules of interpreting discourse, and *second*, the conditions of producing discourse. Tradition of interpreting discourse had emerged since the period of Prophet Muhammad, i.e. precisely at the time when companions asked him for an explanation of particular *lafadz* meanings or expressions that contained in the Qur'an. Alternatively, it began at least since the period of *khulafaurrayidin* when many Muslims asked question to the companion about the clarity of the subsection meanings or words that contained in the Qur'an.¹⁶ At this time, *Bayani* was still in its embrional stage. It was not yet a form of scientific structure equipped with the rules of texts interpretation.¹⁷ Oral traditions were still the main characters of this period, but then it led to the scientific culture.¹⁸ The process of formulating the interpretation rules of discourse in its standard form of linguistic carried out by al-Syafi'i (d. 204 H). Al-Jabiri stated al-Syafi'i as the formulator of Islamic reason, because on his hands that the rules of the Arabic language were used as a reference for interpreting the holy texts, especially *qiyas*, and was created as one of legitimate reasoning sources to interpret religious and social problems.¹⁹ So, reasoning according to him could only be thought in the *nash* framework.

M. Amin Abdullah explained the framework of the *Bayani* epistemology as follows: *Bayani* epistemology remains grounded in the *nash*, which meant that the texts of Qur'an and *Hadith* are sources of meaning and reference. *Bayani*, then, concerned meticulously in the process of transmission of the texts because these are the (only) sources of knowledge. Next to this, accordingly, is adhering to the text redaction, grammatical rules of the Arabic language such *nahwu* and *sharaf* and make them as an analytical tool. Furthermore, using the method of

¹⁶ Muhammad Faisal, "Structure of Arabic-Islamic Reason According to Abed al-Jabiri", *Journal Tsaqafah*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2010, pp. 347.

¹⁷ Muhammad Muslih, *Filsafat Ilmu*..., p. 181-182.

¹⁸ Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, *Bunyab al-'Aql*..., p. 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

qiyas and this is the main principle in *Bayani* epistemology. In the study of *ushul fiqh*, *qiyas* is interpreted as giving a legal decision of some problems based on another problem that has legal certainty in the text, because of the similarity of *'illah*. In the field of theology, *mutakallimun* replace *qiyas* with *Istidlal*. Because *qiyas* is deemed containing likeness meaning.

Second, Irfani epistemology. The word *Irfani* was a *masbdar* form of the word ف-ر-ع which had equivalent to *ma'rifah*. *Irfan* meant *al-ilm*,²⁰ this was in line with Al-Attas which defined *ma'rifah* also meant *al-ilm*.²¹ The word *Irfan* or *ma'rifah* had known in *Sufism* (*al-mutasawwifah al-islamiyyin*) to indicate the type of glorious and the highest knowledge, it presented in the heart through *kasyf* or revelation.²² The *Sufism* divided the knowledge appropriate with their level namely: *Burhaniyah*, *Bayaniyah*, and *Irfaniyah*, as mentioned in the Qur'an where the word *yaqin* was positioned with the words *haq* (al-Waqi'ah: 95), *ilm* (al-Takasur: 5), and *ain* (al-Takatsur: 7).²³ Suhrawardi distinguished clearly between *al-Burhan* and *al-Irfan*: the former was called *al-hikmah al-bahsiyah* which was grounded in argumentation, accuracy and ratios. The latter, was called *al-Hikmah al-Isyraqiyyah* which was grounded on *al-kasyf* and *al-isyraq*.²⁴

Historically there was an assumption that *Irfani* developed in the Hellenis era, since the end of the 4th century BC and the Greek period until the middle of the 7th century AD that coincide with the birth of Islam. It emerged as a resistance to Greek rationalism, this was called by al-Jabiri the emergence of *al-qaul al-mustaqil* or later it was called *Irfani* to answer the challenges of the era. *Irfani's* treasure search of the essence of God had not known the empirical-rational evidence, but it should be through the direct experience. Based on the concept of *Irfan*, God was

²⁰ Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies di Perguruan Tinggi Pendekatan Integratif-Interkonektif* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006), p. 215, 251.

²¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2001), p. 51.

²² Imam Al-Ghazali who believes that *ma'rifah* was the highest knowledge.

²³ Muhammad Faisal, "The Structure of Reason...", p. 352.

²⁴ Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, *Bunyah al-'Aql...*, p. 252.

understood as a reality that was different from nature, while the intellect, senses and everything in this world was part of the nature, so it was impossible to know God by these means. The only means that could be used to find out the essence of God was to use the *nafs*.²⁵

According to M. Amin Abdullah *Irfani* is not only based on the text and power rational like *Bayani-Burbani*, but also on *kashf*, the unraveling of the secret reality by God. *Irfani* knowledge is not obtained by analysis of the text of logic argument, but based on the superabundance knowledge from God directly. Therefore, preparation is necessary before someone is able to receive an abundance of knowledge directly. A person must do a spiritual journey by certain stages (*maqam*) and experiencing certain conditions.²⁶ *Irfani* knowledge was delivered in three ways. *First*, disclosure of what is referred to as *i'tibar* or *qiyas Irfani*, that is spiritual knowledge analogy with outer knowledge or analogy of inner meaning captured in *kashf* at outer meaning in the text. *Second*, *Irfani* knowledge expressed by symbols. These revelations method as practiced by Suhrawardi with the hierarchy or reality. *Third*, *Irfani* knowledge is delivered through what is called *syathabat*. It is more on oral expression about feeling (*al-wijdan*) because of an abundance of knowledge directly from source and coupled with recognition.

Third, Burbani epistemology. In Arabic, *al-Burban* meant a clear argument. In the logic perspective (*al-mantiq*), *Burbani* was the thought activity to determine the truth through the inference method (*al-istintaj*), by connecting the premise which the reason justified. In general meaning, *Burbani* was the activity of reason that established the truth of a premise.²⁷ The term of *Burbani* is based on Aristotle's philosophy. It was used by al-Jabiri to designate a knowledge system (*nidham ma'rifi*) that is separate from the method of thought and does not depend on other knowledge authorities. *Burbani* relied on human's natural power that was the empirical

²⁵ Muhammad Muslih, *Filsafat Ilmu*..., p. 182.

²⁶ M. Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies* ..., p. 216.

²⁷ Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, *Bunyab al-'Aql*..., p. 383.

experience and the judgment of reason that bound the causality. This way of thought could not be separated from the influence of style of Aristotelian.²⁸

Burbani reasoning for the first time was introduced by al-Kindi (185-252 H) in his paper, *al-Falsafah al-Ula*. It was adapted from Aristotle's philosophy. Al-Kindi presented the paper to the al-Makmun Caliph (218 H-227 H). In *al-Falsafah al-ula*, al-Kindi affirmed that philosophy was the science of humanity which occupied the highest and most noble position, because it was the essence of all things can be known. He also dismissed doubts of people who had been rejecting the philosophy: philosophy was the way to know the truth.²⁹ The tradition of *Burbani*, thinking with regard to the search for a cause of something, looking something beyond the exist or searching for a reason why something should be done. Such a concept also shows that the source of knowledge in *Burbani* is reason, not text or intuition. This reason with the arguments or logic gives assessment and decision based on the information coming in through the sense known as *tasamwur* and *tashdiq*. *Tasamwur* is the process of forming a concept based on the data from the sense, while *tashdiq* is the process of proving the truth of the process. The main system of *Burbani* reasoning is the syllogism, but not all syllogisms showed *Burbani*. In Arabic, the syllogism is translated as *qiyas*.³⁰

In deconstructing Islamic Arab epistemology Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri indebted to postmodern philosophers, especially from French, such as Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, Michel Foucault, Derrida.³¹ However, some scholar judged that among his mistakes were the demarcation that he made between philosophical thought of Eastern Arab and Western Arab. The first was represented by Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

²⁹ Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri, *Bunyab al-'Aql...*, p. 416-417.

³⁰ Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies...*, p. 216.

³¹ Thaha 'Abdurrahman, *Tajdid fi Taqwim al-Turats* (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 1994), p. 34.

and Farabi, while the second was represented by philosophers such as Ibn Rushd, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Bajah, Ibn Khaldun.

Al-Jabiri classified the East Arabic thought into *alla-ma'qul al-dini*, and the West Arabic thought into *al-ma'qul al-dini* category. He argued that between the two styles of thought above there was a very significant difference. Al-Jabiri saw that the mindset carried out by Farabi, Ibn Sina, and al-Ghazali, were greatly influenced by the Greek thought model, and therefore it caused a decline by seeing this matter. This was different from the trend of thought that was constructed a part of Western of the Islamic world. The mindset developed here was more rational and less influenced by either Greek thought or Eastern Arabic thought. According to al-Jabiri, the intellectuals here need to accomplish what is mentioned *al-qati'ah al-ibistimiyyah*. It is something required and has to be done if we want to see Islamic thoughts developed. The success of the West in constructing its thinking caused by its success to implement this epistemic rupture, as seen in the categorization of history they made. Western history was usually divided into three periods: classical, medieval, and modern period. Each period had owned epistemological characteristics that were different from before and after. This was very different from the periodization of Islamic history which was usually divided conforming to the government dynasties such as the Umayyad periods, Abbasid, Mamluk, etc. When the period of Islamic civilization experienced decadence, it was changed to the Christian calendar, not Hijriyah. Even though, the period of Islamic decadence was usually described in the 18th century. From this period of Islamic history, Al-Jabiri said that the real history of Islam had never been written, and therefore need to rewrite Islamic history.

Al-Jabiri also criticized Arabic Islamic reasoning which failed to carry out the transformation together with changing of times and social settings. According to him, there had not been much changed in Arabic thoughts since the Jahiliyyah. Therefore, if read we Amr al-Qays, 'Amr ibn

Kalthum, ibn ‘Abbas, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, Shafi’i, Ash’ari, Ibn Taymiyyah, Afghani, and ‘Abduh, actually they lived together with us on the same historical stage.³² Al-Jabiri’s emphasis that the Qur’an which was a source of inspiration in the Islamic belief system, absolutely did not present a significant role in changing the pattern of thought; these ideas have explicitly been denied by most Muslim scholars.

Also need to be questioned of Jabiri’s idea was his eagerness to suggest that Muslims had done the epistemic rupture as the West did. Because this process had been carried out by Ibn Rushd when he succeeded in severing his epistemological relationship with the thought of *mazhab* constructed by Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali. But is it true that Ibn Rushd achieved to escape from the network of thought constructed by Eastern Arabic philosophers with his peripatetic *mazhab*? Because in reality, Ibn Rushd, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina were influenced by Greek thought. His works were known as the best “commentator of Aristotle.” His comments on Aristotle had become a standard of literature in Western universities at the end of the 17th century. Ibn Rushd was very respectful of Aristotle.³³

Al-Jabiri attempted hard to review the process of the formation of the Muslim Arab mind to find out the origin of the construction of the Islamic epistemology thought. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct a comprehensive study by considering all existing dimensions. In this case, a classical scholar could not be read in a fragmentation form. For example, Al-Ghazali could not be read-only as a philosopher. Because he was also a *Faqih*, *Sufi*, etc. Therefore, to read the thoughts of a *Faqih*, were required to have the readiness of the *ushul fiqh*, language, and *balaghah*. Al-Jabiri criticized the Orientalists and some Muslim scholars

³² Muhammad ‘Abd al-Jabiri, *Takwin al-‘Aql...*, p. 38-39.

³³ Armand A. Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy* (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1982), p. 100.

who disposed to be partial.³⁴

Al-Jabiri fell into the same abyss as it could be seen from the epistemological system constructed by him. By including a philosopher in one of three categories, he had made fragmentation in the personality. A figure was like Ibn Sina or Ghazali, for example, they were very difficult to be included in one of the categories above. Both of them were not adherents to the *Irfani*, because Ibn Sina was also scientists whose works in physics and medical were monumental works could not be ignored. While al-Ghazali, is a philosopher and theologian, therefore he was in the *Burhani* category. But he is also a *Sufism Irfani*, and a skilled *fiqh* expert in *Bayani*. For him the three systems of thought were inherent. But al-Jabiri, actually made a fatal mistake by adopting a partial methodology. Its inconsistency was the point of weakness that had been the object of Taha 'Abdurrahman's study in his book *Tajdid al-Manhaj fi Taqwim al-Turats*. He accused al-Jabiri did not have a good understanding of the methodology which he used.³⁵ According to Nirwan Syafrin, many actual books and papers criticized the epistemological studies constructed by Jabiri. Among them were *Nazariyyah al-'Aql* and *Wihdah al-'Aql al-'Arabi al-Islami* which was a series of *Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabi* projects by George Tarabisi, *Naqd al-'Alabi al-'Arabi fi al-Miẓan* by Yahya Muhammad, *Min al-Ishtisbraq al-Gharbi ila al-Istighrab al-Maghribi* by Tayyib Tizini, and *Hal Hunaka 'Aql' Arabi* by Hisham Ghasib.³⁶

Reinterpretation of *Aswaja An-Nahdliyyah*

Referring to the classical Islamic thoughts has traditionally been the practice within NU. This applies in the different fields of knowledge. In Islamic legal thoughts or *fiqh*, NU refers to the four founder schools

³⁴ Muhammad 'Abed al-Jabiri, *Nabnu wa al-Turath Qiraat Mu'ashirah fi Turatsina al-Falsafiy* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Tsaqafi al-'Arabi, 1986), p. 57-58.

³⁵ Thaha 'Abdurrahman, *Tajdid al-Manhaj*..., p. 42.

³⁶ Nirwan Syafrin, 'Kritik terhadap 'Kritik Akal Islam' Al-Jabiri', *Islamia*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2004, pp. 44.

of thought (*Imam Mazhab*): Hanafi, Syafi'i, Maliki, Hambali. The same practice also applies in the field of *akidah* and *Sufism*. In *akidah*, NU adheres to the Ash'ariah and Maturidiah school of theology. Whereas in *Sufism* NU refers to al-Ghazali and Junaid al-Baghdadi. Almost all if not all those references are ideologically of Ahlusunnah wal jamaah. These specific pattern of *mazhab* was chosen by NU because the *Aswaja* in the Muslim world has been large and worldwide. The extraordinary developments within this schools of thoughts has led them became the largest community across the Muslim world, it well known as the Sunni.

For the modernist—those who understood and practiced the pristine Islamic teachings—Muslims must be guided directly by the Qur'an and *Hadith*. However, the traditionalists argued that the works of Muslim scholars' and prominent authorities which contained the explanations and comprehensive understanding of Qur'an and *Hadith*, could be used as intellectual basis for the practice of Islamic teachings.³⁷ Accordingly, NU and its community are part of the genealogy of Islamic thoughts. They have intellectually been linked and greatly appreciated the heritage of Islamic intellectualism that was crystallized in the works of the leading scholars of different shools of thoughts. These sources of understanding, actually, that led NU to have a unique way to respond to the renewal and changes, keeping in harmony with traditions and cultural heritages.

That is approximately what has been working within NU and its *Aswaja's* concept. Nevertheless, such a concept, since the last two decades, has been criticized and responded differently by progressive figures, such as Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), Kiai Masdar Farid Mas'udi, Kiai Said Agil Siraj. This appraisal continues to the next generation which has been no less dynamic, critical and progressive in interpreting of *Aswaja*. Within NU, these developments were marked, among others, by the

³⁷ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kiai* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1994), p. 150-151.

emergence of regular discussions organized by Lakpesdam. It involved young leaders and several leading scholars to discuss social issues, and to developed ideas and thoughts that beyond the discourse of *fiqh* in the sense of classical Islamic thoughts. It was in this context, actually, that Kiai Muhammad Tholhah Hasan deplored the perspective of the majority of Nahdliyin who were only focused on the *qauli*, thus regard *fiqh* as simple as dogma. Alternatively, he emphasized on the importance of the *manhaj*, in order *fiqh* be able to give a solution for the social problems.³⁸

Such a perspective, even though it is in line with social development, is still debatable among NU themselves. These, indeed, constraints toward a progress that may be caused by several things: *first*, the Sunni in the socio-political doctrine continues to be patterned realism. This concept assumes that people's behavior addressed under the principle of anarchism so that social control is needed. *Second*, they rely too much on theocentric, fatalistic, and eschatological doctrine of *Sufism*, so the theme of the social discourse is less down-to-earth and not touches on the human dimension. *Third*, the doctrine of *fiqh* tends to be normative. For example, in Syafi'i's perspective, social reality must be subject to the norms of *fiqh*. As such, the *Aswaja* paradigm reflects a doctrinal construction that is far from social processes that produce an exclusive rationality of dogma.³⁹

The existence of *Aswaja* as a system of dogma, *manhaj al-fiker*, and knowledge system reminded us of the three dialectical moments introduced by Berger and Luckmann, namely: externalization, objection, and internalization in socio-cultural life. It provided an awareness to illustrate *Aswaja* became a subjective world for individuals and collective in the NU. However, it also raised another perception, that *Aswaja* was an object of the world. Clearly both are different entities to perceive.

³⁸ Muhammad Tholhah Hasan, *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah dalam Persepsi dan Tradisi NU* (Jakarta: Lantabora Press, 2005), p. 84-85.

³⁹ M. Lutfi Mustofa, *Etika Pluralisme di Nabdlatul Ulama'* (Surabaya. PPS IAIN Sunan Ampel: 2010), p. 83.

Based on this understanding, *Aswaja* was a subjective and objective world or the externalization moment. It was a moment that bridged the objective world and the subjective world. The rationalization of dogma could also provide an illustration about the understanding of dialectics of individuals or collectives in NU concerning the world of dogma and the world of knowledge, or between the sacred world that was the sourced of beliefs and the profane world that was originated of thought or rationality. Actually, between the sacred and profane world was a closed concept of illustration.⁴⁰

The institution that committed to teaching *Aswaja* is the *Pesantren Salaf*. The material taught here includes, *taubid, ushuluddin, ushul fiqh, fiqh, Sufism, ulum-Qur'an, Hadith, ulum-Hadith, nahwu, sharaf*, etc. Each of these materials cannot be abandoned because they formed the basis of Islamic doctrine.⁴¹ In the relation with the character of traditions, *Aswaja* as a *mazhab* direction was understood rigidly in the most *Pesantren*, as a dogma system. However, intellectuals associated with NU, who had formerly been students of the above salaf pesantren in various regions, continued their studies into universities. Apparently they had experienced intellectual leaps which were meaningful for the dynamics of ideas and thoughts within NU.⁴² Those who used to be *Santri* and became students of a university turned into agent of change, provided significant dynamics and scientific contributions. They dared to give a critical reflection on the religious traditions inherited by the *Pesantren* which previously rigid. They combined the teachings of *Aswaja* Islam obtained from the *Pesantren* with critical discourse in the Middle East and the West. In general, those of Middle Eastern alumni showed a conservative character even though

⁴⁰ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Form of Religious Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1976), p. 37.

⁴¹ M. A. Sahal Mahfudh, *Nuansa Fiqh Sosial* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994), p. 264-265.

⁴² Khamami Zada, *Menggugat Tradisi Pergulatan Pemikiran Anak Muda NU* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2004). p. 36-37; Firdaus Muhammad, "Dinamika Pemikiran dan Gerakan Politik Nahdlatul Ulama", *Kalam: Jurnal Studi Agama dan Pemikiran Islam*, Vol. 9 No. 1, 2015, pp. 64-65.

there are some progressive figures such as Gus Dur (Baghdad), Said Aqiel Siradj (Makkah), and Zuhairi Misrawi (Egypt).

It is important to note, however, that their appearances amid the development of NU with dynamic and progressive character of thought was apparently not solely of universities product or contribution. Rather, these reflected intellectual dynamics provided within NU itself. We can show this by taking a close look at the NU doctrine of *Aswaja*. For example, *Aswaja's* understanding has actually provided a sufficient foundation to develop a tolerant Islam based on the principles of *ukhawah Islamiyah*, *ukhawah wathaniyah*, and *ukhawah bashariyah*. By these principles, NU should be able to build the “social dialectics” of religious community. NU’s religious insights, which are based on humanitarian awareness, citizenship, and nationalism, are very important in the minds of a pluralistic society such as Indonesia. Thus, in order to realize an understanding of religion that is in harmony with the reality of pluralism in Indonesia, *Aswaja* is, inevitably, need to be developed more dynamic and flexible.

The next locus is Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which are also an important factor in the efforts to understand the attitudes of NU and its community on the ideas and practices of religious pluralism. In this field, they continue to struggle with various discourses and associate with other communities in a wider and more diverse social environment. NGOs are an intellectual base for NU scholars because they experience intellectual and social friction. The teachings that have been received from *Pesantren* are enriched with new knowledge and methodology, obtained from their friendship by modernist and even secular Islamists so that they find more modern, dynamic and progressive forms of thoughts. The NGO offices are the headquarters of NU scholars who are busy with various research agendas, discussions, seminars, advocacy and demonstrations to express the aspirations of the people.

NGOs as non-governmental organizations generally have several roles. The first role is as a balancing force for the state rule and power. This role is reflected in efforts to control, prevent, and stem the domination and manipulation of the state against society. In general, this effort was carried out through policy advocacy, political statements, petitions, and demonstrations. The second role, NGOs as a civil society empowerment movement. This role is realized through actions to develop institutional capacity, productivity, and independence of community groups, including the development of social awareness to build independence, and participation as citizens. In general, this role is carried out through the methods of education and training, community organizing and mobilization. While the latter's role is as an intermediary institution. This role is carried out by mediating the relationship between society and government, between the community and NGOs, etc. In general, this role is realized through lobbying, coalition, correspondence, and cooperation between actors.⁴³

In the view of NGO activists, if *Aswaja* placed too long under the framework of dogma, so many social and humanitarian problems would not be solved because the characteristic was dogmatic and the approach was also doctrinal. Practically speaking, in the *fiqh*, how is it possible that the problems raised in the context of present time and here would be resolved, if the reason required to be deferred to the certain *fiqh* norms. For example, how could the Syafi'i *fiqh*, which had clearly been created for his social and historical context, contribute to solve current problems of social welfare?.

Likewise, in the field of theology, the construction of knowledge developed by Ash'ariah and Maturidiah, was an intellectual formulation deliberately structured to answer the problems of the time, which was clearly very much different from the problems faced by the Muslim

⁴³ Adi Suryadi Culla, *Rekonstruksi Civil Society: Wacana dan Aksi Ornop di Indonesia* (Jakarta: LP3ES Indonesia, 2006), p. 14-15.

community today. Therefore, NGOs affiliated with NU generally consider that *Aswaja's* theology is inversely proportional to the social reality that is being faced by Muslim societies today. So, it's the time, for them, to placed *Aswaja* as a knowledge system that is dynamic and open to criticism.

Based on the explanation above, there dynamic relationships, continuity and change or even epistemological paradigm shift among those communities of NU on their attitudes towards *Aswaja*. The majority of *Pesantren* are more dominant to *Bayani* and *Irfani* in understanding and interpreting *Aswaja*. Whereas the NU intellectual-scholars and NGOs activists that were originally *Bayani* and *Irfani* begin to be more inclined to the *Burbani* epistemological model. The analysis is not intended to dichotomize but rather relational. Although it is undeniable that each of the NU socio-cultural backgrounds has implications, tendencies as long as the understanding and interpretation *Aswaja* taken into consideration changes are inevitably needed at the level of epistemic as well as in methodology, from *qauli* to *manhaji*.

Conclusion

The Islamic epistemology of 'Abed Al-Jabiri concludes into three different forms of knowledge, *Bayani*, *Irfani* and *Burbani*. *Bayani* very much relied its knowledge on religious texts (*nash*); *Irfani's* knowledge comes through intuition, and *Burbani* gives emphasis on the potential of the mind and senses (demonstrative) in pursuing knowledge. These epistemologies developed as a method of thinking over the entire Muslim world. Interestingly, the gradation in Al-Jabiri's concept of epistemology seems to be the case in contemporary NU. the practice of *Aswaja An-Nabdliyyah* interpretation and discourse by the different communities within NU suggested this intellectual dynamics. Among the *Pesantren* communities, for reasons of traditions and doctrines, they seems to be more comfortable with and weight on *Bayani* and *Irfani*. Whereas, NU's intellectuals and NGO activists are more inclined towards *Burbani*

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epistemology for the reason of the discourse influence and the needs of the times and spaces which, indeed, requires *Aswaja* to be more compatible in responding to the problems of society. The separation of these groups is not intended to create factions among them, yet to signify that NU is the largest Islamic organization in the world and it never goes into stagnant, but continues to be dynamic. Thus the relationship between the three must support each other as a proof of extraordinary development of human resources.

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