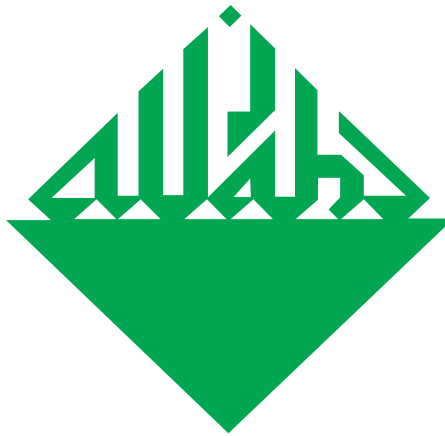


STUDIA ISLAMIKA

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Volume 22, Number 2, 2015



THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF CONTROL
OVER DEVIANT GROUPS IN MALAYSIA:
OFFICIAL *FATWA* AND REGULATION OF INTERPRETATION

Yuki Shiozaki

THE SURAMADU BRIDGE AFFAIR: UN-BRIDGING THE STATE
AND THE *KYAI* IN NEW ORDER MADURA

Yanwar Pribadi

POET IN AN ISLAMIC COMMUNITY:
CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF
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Mikihiro Moriyama

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Mikihiro Moriyama

Poet in an Islamic Community:
Cultural and Social Activities of
Acep Zamzam Noor in Tasikmalaya, West Java

Abstract: *This article brings out the significance of social leader in the time of socio-political change in Indonesia since Soeharto left office in 1998 by describing and analyzing the projects and writings including poems of Acep Zamzam Noor (born in 1960), an activist and poet based in the Pesantren Cipasung (Cipasung Islamic school complex) in Tasikmalaya, West Java. He is respected not by his Islamic knowledge based on learning books, rather by his faith to God and deed based on his own experience. Acep's oppositional stance in relation to political and religious authorities is manifest in various public projects including political parody and cultural activities in the local community. These respective projects constituted bases for the respect and support from which the institution of the social leader derives its significance in Islamic communities in Indonesia. This article adds to the literature by describing and analyzing an important stand of religious authority.*

Keywords: Social Leader, Islamic Community, Sundanese, Poetry, *Kyai*.

Abstrak: *Tulisan ini membahas tentang pentingnya tokoh masyarakat di tengah perubahan sosial dan politik pada waktu reformasi, setelah Soeharto lengser pada tahun 1998. Yang diteliti adalah wacana, termasuk puisi-puisinya, seorang penyair Acep Zamzam Noor (lahir pada tahun 1960) yang tinggal di lingkungan Pesantren Cipasung, Tasikmalaya, Jawa Barat. Acep dihormati oleh masyarakat karena keimanannya dan sikapnya yang berakar, bukan karena pengetahuan Islamnya dari buku-buku. Pemikiran dan sikap yang menantang kebijakan politik dan otoritas agamanya terungkap dalam berbagai kegiatan masyarakat di lingkungan setempat. Kegiatan seperti itu merupakan sumber hormat dan dukungan dari masyarakat setempat yang cukup penting dan perlu dimiliki seorang tokoh masyarakat di lingkungan agama di Indonesia. Artikel ini mencoba mempertajam diskusi dan analisis mengenai otoritas agama sebagai salah satu unsur yang penting dalam studi Islam di Indonesia.*

Kata kunci: Tokoh Masyarakat, Komunitas Islam, Budaya Sunda, Puisi, Kyai.

ملخص: تناولت هذه المقالة أهمية الشخصيات العامة وسط التغيرات الاجتماعية والسياسية في عهد الإصلاح أي بعد سقوط سوهارتو عام ١٩٩٨، بحيث تركزت على الكتابات بما فيها الأشعار التي ألفها أديب يُدعى أتشيف زمزم نور (من مواليد عام ١٩٦٠). وكان يسكن في بيئة بيساترين تشيباسونج، تاسيك مالايا، جاوا الغربية، ويحظى باحترام كبير من قبل المجتمع. ولم يكن السبب في ذلك ما يمتلكه من العلوم الإسلامية التي تعلمها عبر الكتب، وإنما بسبب إيمانه القوي ومواقفه الراسخة. وتجلت أفكاره ومواقفه المعارضة لسياسات الحكومة، وكذلك سلطته الدينية، من خلال أنشطته الاجتماعية داخل بيئته المحلية، والتي أصبحت مصدر الاحترام، والدعم الملحوظ الذي تلقاه من المجتمع المحلي. وهذا النوع من الدعم لا بد أن يتوافر في شخصية عامة تعيش في بيئة دينية بإندونيسيا. وحاولت هذه المقالة مناقشة السلطات الدينية وتحليلها باعتبارها أحد العناصر المهمة في الدراسات الإسلامية بإندونيسيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشخصية العامة، المجتمع الإسلامي، الثقافة السونداوية، الشعر، الشيخ.

Sociopolitical changes in Indonesia since Soeharto left office in 1998 and in the subsequent period of *reformasi* (reformation) have widely affected Indonesian society. In this article, I bring out the significance of the cultural and social activities of a poet in an Islamic community of contemporary Indonesia by describing and analyzing the projects and writings of Acep Zamzam Noor (born 1960), a poet based in the *Pesantren Cipasung* (Cipasung Islamic school complex) in Tasikmalaya, West Java. This district is remarkable for its recent dramatic politicization of religion and the ongoing contests for authority that have taken place.¹ Acep Zamzam Noor appears as a novel figure for his manipulation of contemporary media and leadership through various community projects.

Acep's oppositional stance in relation to political and religious authorities is manifest in ongoing projects of political parody expressed in various public projects and cultural activities in the local community. These projects constitute the basis for the respect and support from which a poet's community derives its significance. Even though his activities do not take place at a nationwide level but are small attempt to defend morality in a marginal society, this is precisely the reason why his activities deserve attention in terms of exploring a people's aspirations for a better society at the local community level.

Firstly, this article tries to demonstrate that such a tiny effort made by a poet in a local community was important at a time of sociopolitical changes in Indonesia. Acep Zamzam Noor has taken his stance against social injustice and acts to alleviate oppression by using a variety of media and engaging in community through cultural activities, particularly around the demise of Soeharto's New Order, which has changed Indonesia socially and politically. It is an example of how cultural and social activities have taken place as well as had an effect on the people living in a local community.

Secondly, the article tries to show that Acep's activities can be interpreted in the context of Islamic culture. He is the son of a well-known *kyai* (Islamic leader) and leader of the Cipasung Islamic school complex, but did not follow his father's path to succeed him as a *kyai*. He is always aware of the difference between a *kyai* and a poet, and it is the reason why he has been trying to make a contribution to society in his own way, as would a *kyai*.

Acep Zamzam Noor as a Poet

Acep Zamzam Noor lives in the Islamic community of *Pesantren Cipasung* (Cipasung Islamic school complex), located in a small village in Tasikmalaya, a 3-hour drive from Bandung, the provincial capital of West Java (Figure 1).² His house is located in the midst of Islamic boarding houses and schools. He received an Islamic education in this *pesantren*, led by his father Moh. Ilyas Ruhiat, a well-known Islamic leader of Nahdathul Ulama, then moved to another *pesantren*, As-Syafi'iyah in Jakarta. Next, he entered the Faculty of Art and Design of the Bandung Institute of Technology in 1980 and graduated in 1987 with a B.A. degree in Arts. He received a grant from the Italian government to pursue further art studies at the Università Italiana per Stranieri in Perugia for two years, from 1991 to 1993. So far he has created a number of surrealist paintings and had exhibitions in Indonesia and overseas, including China (Figure 2). His paintings are sold and he is considered as an artist, *seniman* in Indonesia.

In addition to his fame as an artist, he has been writing poems since the late 1970s.³ One of his collections of poems, *Menjadi Penyair Lagi...* (Become a Poet Again ...), won a literary award in Indonesia (Khatulistiwa Literary Award) in 2007.⁴ In 2005 he also won the Southeast Asian Literary Award with his collected poems, *Jalan Menuju Rumahmu* (The Way to Your House).⁵

His affection for his birthplace Cipasung, where he still lives, has always been an important foundation for his oppositional stance in relation to political authority. His activities are rooted in his local community, the Cipasung Islamic school complex. He is quite conscious of his roots and once expressed it in a poem titled *Cipasung* (1989). This poem is often considered as representative of Noor's creation.⁶ The poem goes as follows:

*Di lengkung alis matamu sawah-sawah menguning
Seperti rambutku padi-padi semakin merundukkan diri
Dengan ketam kupanen terus kesabaran hatimu
Cangkulku iman dan sajadahku lumpur yang kental
Langit yang menguji ibadahku meneteskan cahaya redup
Dan surauku terbakar kesunyian yang dinyalakan rindu*

*Aku semakin mendekat pada kepunahan yang disimpan bumi
Pada lahan-lahan kepedihan masih kutanam bijian hari
Segala tumbuhan dan pohonan membuahkan pabala segar
Bagi pagar-pagar bambu yang dibangun keimananku
Mendekatlah padaku dan dengarkan kasidah ikan-ikan
Kini hatiku kolam yang menyimpan kemurnianmu*

*Hari esok adalah perjalananku sebagai petani
Membuka ladang-ladang amal dalam belantara yang pekat
Pahamilah jalan ketiadaan yang semakin ada ini
Dunia telah lama kutimbang dan berulang kuhancurkan
Tanpa ketam masih ingin kupanen kesabaranmu yang lain
Atas sajadah lumpur aku tersungkur dan terkubur*

On the arc of your eyebrows the rice in the fields is yellowing
Like my hair, the rice stalks bend down to the ground
With a small knife I harvest the patience in your heart
The hoe is my faith and my prayer mat is sticky mud
The sky testing my devotion trickles a hazy light
And my prayer hut is burnt by serenity fanned by longing

I am drawing near extinction stored in the earth
Still I plant seeds of day in the field of pain
Every plant and tree yield fresh rewards from God
Like the bamboo fence my faith has made me
come close and listen to the hymns the fish are chanting
My heart is a pond that preserves your purity

Tomorrow is the day of my journey as a peasant
To cultivate fields of charity in a thick jungle
Grasp this path of absence that becomes present
At length I have ruminated the world and many times destroyed it
I still want to harvest more patience from you without a knife
On my prayer mat of mud I drop and bury myself

(Noor 2004:57)

In this poem his fine depiction of nature is remarkable.⁷ He uses simple words to portray the beauty of nature, rhyming as if we were seeing a piece of painting that he painted in a canvas: rice fields, trees, bamboo fence, pond and fish all remind us of an image of a Sundanese village (Moriyama 2007: xii-xvi). In this poem he expresses his faith in God as well as his affection for his birthplace Cipasung, an environment crucial to his creativity. Acep himself uses the word *suasana* (atmosphere, environment), where he unconsciously obtained the most important attitude, *kekhusyukan* or devotion, as the source of his creativity and activities when he was a young boy (Noor 2011: 265).

It seems that poetry with an Islamic nuance gained more readers since the demise of Soeharto's New Order. Poets like Emha Ainun Nadjib, Ahmadun Yosi Herfanda and Acep Zamzam Noor himself are regarded as part of a younger generation, a new type of poet closely connected with *pesantrén*, according to Aveling (2001: 231). They have produced "a type of verse that was youthful, light, playful, at ease with Qur'anic references as well the names of the prophets and the Persian

mystics, set in the neo-romantic realm of the rural countryside, and deeply mystical” (Aveling 2001: 233). Their Islamic leanings have not declined after the demise of Soeharto’s regime, and other poets have joined in with their Islamic messages, including Zawawi Imron, Afrizal Malna and Mustofa Bisri.⁸

Importantly, this poem enhanced the fame of *Pesantren Cipasung* all over Indonesia; Acep’s father, Moh. Ilyas Ruhiat, appreciated the way in which his son tried to contribute to society, especially the Pesantren Cipasung community (Yahya 2006: 72).

A Riot in Tasikmalaya

The years 1995 and 1996 were the turning point of Acep’s social engagement; he himself remembers the period as important in terms of creativity by calling it *periode bermasyarakat* (socialized period). He says, “I was not comfortable confining myself to the house but wanted to ‘associate’ in the midst of society”.⁹ He came to think at that time that a poet not only writes poems but should act in the midst of society:

For instance, in the middle of situation where everything is uncertain, poetry will offer a cathartic place of comfort and at the same time a fortress to do resistance. However, in the middle of safety and peace, poetry also can become a wave to break firmness. The place of a poet is wherever any situation and condition are, peaceful or uncertain, beautiful or chaotic, good-smelling or bad-smelling. The role of a poet is not only to create writing, but also to act. Not only to publish a book and show up on a stage for a performance, but also to carry out a concrete action in the midst of society.¹⁰

In December 1996 a big riot took place in the city of Tasikmalaya because of a misunderstanding between a *kyai* (Islamic leader) and a police officer (Hadad 1998: 9-29). The police office of Tasikmalaya was attacked, and a shopping area was largely plundered and burned by a mob that included Islamic students. At that time a group had been attacking Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid) and Nahdlatul Ulama because of a conflict dating back to around 1993 between President Soeharto and Wahid, in particular concerning the position of ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia or Indonesian Muslim Intellectual Association) (Ridwan 2010: 302-304). In December 1994 *Muktamar* (The National Congress) of NU was held in Cipasung, so the Pesantren Cipasung and Tasikmalaya attracted much political

attention nationwide. A group of provocateurs stirred up a riot against NU in the city of Tasikmalaya as background to this political conflict.¹¹ Islamic students of Cipasung were also instigated and exploited to attack police stations by a group of provocateurs with the rumor that a policeman had insulted a *kyai*. Acep himself saw the incident with great regret and came to think that he should have more direct commitment and communication with the local community. He states somewhere, “So, when people of certain political persuasions or politicians smear pesantren, poets should clean them out. Or at least, they should remind *kyai* to pay attention and to be conscious of their role”.¹²

The poem *Pernyataan Cinta* (Manifestation of Love) (1998-99), written two years after the incident, shows his concern about the riot and Islamic students:

*Kau yang diselubungi asap
Kau yang mengendap seperti candu
Kau yang terus bersenandung dari balik penjara
Tanganmu buntung karena menyentuh matahari
Sedang kakimu lumpuh*

*Aku mencintaimu
Dengan lambung yang perih
Pikiran yang dikacaukan kenaikan harga
Pemogokan serta kerusuhan yang meletus
Di mana-mana. Darah hitamku tumpah
Seperti timah panas yang dikucurkan ke tanah
Kubayangkan tanganmu yang buntung serta kakimu
Yang lumpuh. Tanpa menunggu seorang pemimpin
Aku mereguk bensin dan menyemburkannya ke udara
Lalu bersama mereka aku melempari toko
Mambakar pasar, gudang dan pabrik
Sebagai pernyataan cinta*

You covered in smoke
You prowling like opium
You singing all the time from behind the prison wall
Your hands cut off because you reached for the sun
While your legs are crippled

I love you
with pain in my stomach
Confused thought because of rising prices
Strikes and riots bursting out
Everywhere. My black blood gushing

like hot tin poured onto the ground
 I imagine your amputated hands and your
 crippled legs. Without waiting for a leader
 I sip gasoline and spray it out into the air
 Then together with them I throw rocks at shops
 and burn markets, warehouses and factories
 as a statement of love

(Noor 2004: 133)

It can be seen from this poem and his words that the riot in Tasikmalaya had a great impact on him and caused changes in his attitude as a poet. He was trying to become engaged in the local community through his social activities with a basis on Islamic traditional authority, i.e. as son of a *kyai*. He has made use of this position to conduct social activities in subsequent years.

In Indonesia a number of writers have expressed their concerns, criticizing social and political injustice and oppression by authorities throughout history. For instance, through his poems the famous Rendra protested political injustice, particularly poverty caused by government development policies. Renowned journalist and poet Goenawan Mohamad and well-known novelist and short-story writer Seno Gumira Ajidarma have shown their firm stance against political injustices, such as the massacres in East Timor and Aceh, in their poems and short stories. Acep Zamzam Noor can be positioned in the same line as these poets and writers, but is different in terms of his Islamic tradition background.

In the same year but before the riot, he wrote a poem titled *Menjadi penyair lagi ...* (Become a poet again ...) (1996). In it we see his stance as a poet of social engagement and reflection, creating poems in reminiscence of his beloved woman Melva. The next phrase is repeated three times in this three-stanza poem: *Kini aku sendirian di hotel ini dan merasa / Menjadi penyair lagi* (Now I am alone in this hotel and feel that / I am going to become a poet again). This can be interpreted as a declaration that he is going to express a protest against ongoing social and political change. He was a poet at that time but should have declared that he would become a different type of poet henceforth by facing the uncertain sociopolitical conditions. The last stanza goes as follows:

Tidak, Melva, penyair tidak sedih karena ditinggalkan
Juga tidak sakit karena akhirnya selalu dikalahkan
Penyair tidak menangis karena dikhianati
Juga tidak pingsan karena mulutnya dibungkam
Penyair akan mati apabila kehilangan tenaga kata-kata
Atau kata-kata saktinya berubah menjadi prosa:
Misalkan peperangan yang tak henti-hentinya
Pembajakan, pesawat jatuh, banjir atau gempa bumi
Misalkan korupsi yang tak habis-habisnya di negeri ini
Kerusuhan, penjarahan, perkosaan atau semacamnya
O, aku sendirian di sini dan merasa menjadi penyair lagi

No, Melva, a poet does not feel sad when left alone
 Also no pain while eventually he is always defeated
 A poet does not cry when he is betrayed
 Nor faint when his voice is silenced
 A poet will die when he loses his word power
 Or his magic words change into prose:
 Such as endless war,
 Hijack, plane crash, flood, or earthquake.
 Such as endless corruption in this country,
 riot, plundering, rape or the like.
 Oh, I am alone here and feel that I am going to
 become a poet again.

(Noor 2004: 66-67)

To become a poet is his way of becoming socially engaged and standing in a local community to protect people against injustice and political confusion. He declares what being a poet (*kepenyairan*) means — “not something that shall corrupt his faith” and “to remain calm in observing a variety of problems and to behave in relaxed manner whatever happens”. One of the key words is *santai* (relaxed manner), which can be seen in an incident with the *Malaikat* (Angel) Poem later. This has always been a common attitude in “a nation whose condition is paradoxical, like Indonesia”. His explanation of being a poet is as follows:

To be a poet, who cannot make a lot of money, is not something that shall corrupt his faith. To be a poet is to devote himself to practice his routine of life every day and to remain calm in observing a variety of problems and to behave in relaxed manner whatever happens. When trained like this you see no difference between remaining relaxed and becoming serious, no difference between joking and creating, no gap between laughing and crying, no difference between falling in love and having one’s heart broken.

In this way, becoming rich and becoming poor come to be something similar and something that one might enjoy and feel grateful for. Every poet should develop such a mentality, especially poets who live in countries with paradoxical situations, like Indonesia.¹³

These thoughts of Acep resonate with his commitment to society and are reflected in his attitude and activities in subsequent years. In fact, he deliberately started devoting himself to social issues around that year by establishing three *komunitas* (groups) to deliver his message and express his protest. The time was just before the fall of President Soeharto's regime, and since then thousands of *komunitas* have sprouted in Jakarta and many cities over the country. We will start the next section by looking at a group called *Sanggar Sastra Tasik* (Literary Community of Tasikmalaya).

Cultural Activities in a Local Community

In 1996 Acep established *Sanggar Sastra Tasik* (SST) in Tasikmalaya, a city located southeast of Bandung, in the province of West Java. Most of this city's population (about half a million) is Sundanese-speaking. In a sense, Tasikmalaya has a unique position in the province. It depends less on the Sundanese cultural center of Bandung and has often had its own initiatives to promote a local culture because geographically it is far enough from Bandung and from the neighboring cultural province of Central Java as well as from the capital of country, Jakarta. This has granted the region an independent cultural and political position for a long time. The Tasikmalayan newspaper *Priangan* has wide circulation in the region, reaching as far as Ciamis, Garut and Majalengka.¹⁴ Culturally speaking, Tasikmalaya has been known as city of the popular music genre *dangdut* because it has produced many *dangdut* singers since the 1970s. Economically, this region is regarded as an enterprising place — for instance, moneylenders and itinerant peddlers from Tasikmalaya have carried on their business over the province of West Java. To the eye of Acep Zamzam Noor, Tasikmalaya seems different than other cities. He says, “In Tasikmalaya cultural activities in general, and artistic activities in particular, are initiated by the local population, which is made up of a variety of social groups, not by the Arts Faculty of a university or by an Arts Council or the Department of Education and Culture. Certainly not by the governor”.¹⁵

The *Sanggar Sastra Tasik* group consists of about 30 individuals, mostly young people who live in and around Tasikmalaya and have a liking for poetry.¹⁶ The group has demonstrated its initiative in literary activities under the supervision of Acep, especially in poetry. It operates its own website, blog and twitter, publishing a bulletin *Puitika* (Poetics) and organizing poetry readings and contests, workshops and discussions on literature. One of the most recent activities is a poetry-reading contest held in December 2014.¹⁷

The origin of this group goes back to radio poetry readings hosted by *Radio Siaran Pemerintah Daerah* (Voice of Local Government) in Tasikmalaya city in 1996.¹⁸ Friends of Acep who lived in the city, Saeful Badar and Nunu Nazaruddin Azhar, operated a program called *Puisi dan Lagu* (Poem and Song) and had been trying to foster an interest for literature among locals. It is symbolic that Acep gave the title *Nafas Gunung: Sajak-sajak dari Udara* (The Breath of Mountain: Poems in the Air) to an anthology of poems sent to that radio program.¹⁹

In this book, published in 1997, he explains the measure of selection for the poems and his findings. He says that many amateur poets in and around Tasikmalaya wrote poetry as a sort of therapy to refresh or release themselves from daily problems and stress (Noor 1997: xiv). They comprise a wide range of people in terms of age, occupations and backgrounds. He adds: "Social or educational background does not matter when determining the quality of a poem" (Noor 1997: xv). He sees literary potential in the local community of Tasikmalaya and judges that these works are not necessarily inferior to ones from big cities or cultural centers in Indonesia, particularly Bandung and Jakarta. Here we see that he tries to encourage people living in the local community to express their thoughts and feelings in a poem. Such a constant effort has promoted regional cultural production, not loud but modest, without support of any authorities and at the same time giving self-confidence and courage to the people. The result of these activities is not necessarily shown to people in the cities because the aim of this cultural production is not for others, but for those living in the local community themselves. Poetry has such a merit of self-content as well as of artistic production. This is deemed as one of Acep's purposes. It is however not necessary to deny that such poems would make a significant contribution to the development of Indonesian literature. Cultural centers and big cities are not the only cores of

cultural production, cultural activities rooted in local communities are no less significant. More importantly, Acep never discriminates against anyone, regardless of their background, and respects everyone in the local community.

This stand is the same as that of a *kyai* (Islamic leader), in a sense, although the difference between a poet and a *kyai* is very clear. A *kyai* is always in his local community and with his people. Acep insists on living in a village and does not leave his local community Cipasung to move to a big city where beautiful yet deceptive cultural activities can be found together with a materialistic life (Noor 2011: 266-267). He chose to live among people to keep his stance like a *kyai* who usually lives in a small village, although Acep does not manage his own *pesantren* or Islamic school complex (Dhofier 2011: 93-99).

It is worthwhile to detect his clear and strong statement as a poet in a preface to another anthology: “A poet constantly has to do corrections and revisions of his own poems and of himself. And he also has to undertake hard and severe criticism of his poems and himself”.²⁰ In the anthology of poems *Poligami* (Polygamy), published in 2003, he makes another interesting note, in his unusual acidic and excited tone, about social problems and the role of artists or poets in the post-Soeharto period of reformation. It was, in fact, a period of political and economic disorder: thousands of political parties tried to gain power, prices rose, Bali was bombed, and so on. He says:

Artists must feel grateful because they are in the middle of this severe national bankruptcy and have an unbearable feeling of shame as a civilized nation, so that they can be said to be “fortunate”. For instance, a poet should be grateful and delighted because there are plenty of materials related to this illogical situation that can be expressed in hundreds of poems. [...] An artist may become an authentic witness of his time through his works, which could constitute a very precious contribution to the future if he committed himself to social problems and the community sincerely. In other words, an artist at least can give pleasure or inspiration to his community and brightness to his neighbors, not as a religious leader or comedian, but as a member of his community, and as a part of his society.²¹

In this note we read his irritation over politics and at the same time his strong commitment to society. More interestingly, he says that an artist can give pleasure or inspiration to his community and brightness to his neighbors “as a member of his community and as a part of his society”. This attitude is the same as that of a *kyai*, as described by Dhofier.

He also explains the reason for giving the anthology the title *Poligami*. First, he says that most poets have a job or profession such as optician, teacher, journalist, tailor, shopkeeper, masseur or student in addition to creating poems. Second, he mocks those who have more than one job, one project, one house, one car and one wife, as he regards this as a kind of “trend” in a time of sociopolitical reformation.²² His sharp criticism of and disgust at politics, especially political leaders and high government officials, led him to more concrete action to organize another two *komunitas* (groups), as we will see in the next section.

Social Activism based on Islamic Community

The two other groups are *Komunitas Azan* (Azan Community), established in 2000, and *Partai Nurul Sembako* (Party of the Light of Nine Necessities of Life),²³ established in 1998, to promote social and political activities. These two groups were a concrete action of his thoughts: *perbuatan atau gerakan* (action or movement) were needed in the midst of social and political change.²⁴

Komunitas Azan focuses on the promotion of cultural activities in the local community, for instance organizing a concert, *wayang golek* (puppet theatre show) or poetry reading. Most activities have never received government or institutional funding. Acep tries to be independent politically and religiously but close to people in the local community.²⁵ Some of these events were held in the town of Tasikmalaya, sometimes in front of Acep’s house in the middle of the Cipasung Islamic community. The core members of this Azan Community mostly overlap with those of the SST (Literary Community of Tasikmalaya).

The latter *Partai Nurul Sembako* or Party of the Light of Nine Necessities of Life was established as a parody of disordered political situations in the time of reformation. Thousands of political parties were established to obtain power; politically incorrect actions and KKN, *Korupsi, Kolusi dan Nepotisme* (Corruption, Collusion and Nepotism) were obvious everywhere. The group is actually not a political party but an organization monitoring political injustice. Its activities mostly consist of putting up banners on the roads or buildings calling people’s attention to social and political issues. Once the group conducted a campaign under Acep’s leadership to collect signatures to protest a plan of the local government to build a shopping mall in a Tasikmalaya public park.

Acep thought that he should act against social problems in the chaotic post-Soeharto period. A symbolic incident arousing his anger was that the polygamist governor of Tasikmalaya issued an instruction in 2003 that all female students and public officials should wear Islamic head scarf. Immediately after the instruction was issued, Acep published the *Poligami* anthology to mock the governor.

His irritation over the disgusting and rotten politics was expressed in the book *Dongeng dari Negeri Sembako* (Tale from the Country of Nine Necessities of Life), also published in 2001. This anthology is a compilation of Malay-*gurindam*-like short poems written with his friends spontaneously on various occasions. They might be read rather as a word play in a series, as follows:

59

*Ada banyak yang mengaku ulama
Tapi lebih mirip komentator sepakbola*

Many claim to be Islamic scholars
But they are more like football commentators

63

*Ada banyak wakil rakyat
Yang tak dikenal oleh rakyat*

There are many representatives of the people
who are unknown to the people

64

*Ada banyak wakil rakyat
Yang sebenarnya hanya mewakili
Dirinya sendiri*

There are many representatives of the people
who in fact represent only
themselves

65

*Menjadi wakil rakyat
Harus rajin-rajin creambath
Serta mengunjungi panti pijat
Agar badan tetap sehat dan kepala
Tidak cepat botak*

To become a representative of the people
he often has to get a hair cream treatment

and visit a massage parlor
so that his body is always healthy and
he will not go bald quickly

66

*Di tengah arus perubahan
Banyak muncul aktivis bayaran*

In this maelstrom of change
many paid activists have appeared

67

*Ada banyak aktivis organisasi
Yang bermental pegawai negeri
Tak pernah berani ikut demonstrasi
Karena takut ada yang menunggangi*

There are many activists in organizations
whose mentality is like that of a civil servant
they never dare to join demonstrations
out of fear someone will exploit them

(Noor 2001: 15-17)

These poems expose social problems and criticize inadequate attitudes of politicians, Islamic leaders, activists, and other notorious persons through humor and satire. In this compilation we see Acep's relaxed (*santai*) attitude in his social commitment. He says that a *tegang* (hard or stiff) attitude does not produce anything good. Hardliners such as Islamic fundamentalists or Sundanese nationalists have been always criticized by Acep on these grounds. His *santai* attitude reminds us of a Sundanese *kyai* called Yusuf Taziri in the district of Garut, which borders on the *kabupaten* (district) of Tasikmalaya (1976: 344-373):²⁶ this *kyai* often wore a plain *silat* (Indonesia martial art) costume — unusual for an Islamic leader — and conducted a variety of activities in the local community (Horikoshi 1987: 215-220).

An Incident with the *Malaikat* (Angel) Poem

An incident with the *Malaikat* poem happened in August 2007, showing Acep's consistent attitude of engagement.²⁷ *Malaikat*, written by the poet Saeful Badar, a core member of the SST, was published in a cultural column of the weekend edition of the Bandung-based newspaper *Pikiran Rakyat*. On the same day several so-called hardliner

Islamic organizations, including *Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII)*, *Cabang Jawa Barat* (Indonesian Islamic Propagation Assembly, West Java Branch), started strong reactions against the poem, claiming it insulted the sacred angel and humiliated the Islamic faith.²⁸ Hundreds of faxes, text messages, e-mails and phone calls went out to *Pikiran Rakyat* demanding three things: cancellation of the poem, an open apology for it, and replacement of the editor of the column. The poem reads as follows:

Malaikat
Mentang-mentang punya sayap
Malaikat begitu nyinyir dan cerewet
Ia berlagak sebagai mahluk baik
Tapi juga galak dan usil
Ia meniup-niupkan wahyu
Dan maut
*Ke saban penjuru*²⁹

The Angel
 Just because he has wings
 The angel nags and has a sharp tongue
 He behaves like a virtuous creature
 But he is also aggressive and annoying
 He blows divine revelation
 and death
 to all corners

The newspaper accepted all the demands immediately because it feared social disorder agitated by those Islamic organizations. These organizations actually threatened the author individually through condemning text messages and phone calls. The SST office in Tasikmalaya, where he lived, was guarded by police in expectation of the worst. Saeful Badar was so afraid of being assaulted that he wrote an open apology letter to the readers' column of the same newspaper on Monday. That same day *Pikiran Rakyat* published the apology on the front page.

By contrast, writers, artists and journalists in Bandung, Tasikmalaya and Cirebon in the province of West Java protested the conduct of the newspaper and stood together to make open statements right away. They condemned the Islamic organizations' intimidation of the author of the poem and tried to protect freedom of artistic expression. Three statements were made by the Group of 21 Organizations of Writers and

Artists, the Santri Writers' Coalition in West Java and the Independent Journalist Alliance of Bandung City. The statements were read in public by a turban-wearing Acep Zamzam Noor (unusual for him) in front of journalists and then brought to the *Pikiran Rakyat* newspaper's office (Figure 3). The representative of the newspaper received about 50 people led by Acep Zamzam Noor, and promised to publish their statements the following day.³⁰ The statements were in fact published and caused discussions among people about the poem. It is most remarkable that Acep stood resolutely against the groundless accusation to protect his friend as well as freedom of art and speech, in this case to protect *kebenaran* (the truth) about this incident. At the same time, he still displayed his motto: that a hardened and stiff attitude does not produce anything good. He read one of the statements publicly and handed them over to the representative of *Pikiran Rakyat* wearing a T-shirt with the printed words *Islam tapi Mesra* (Islam but Intimate) (Figure 4).

The core issue in this incident is artistic expression — here a poem — and Islam. Only Acep Zamzam Noor stood up to solve the problem. He has charisma as a well-known poet and the son of a famous *kyai*. He showed how cultural production in an Islamic context should be, and has promoted this without interruption in the local community and in Indonesia at large.

Conclusion

Acep Zamzam Noor is deemed as a social leader and moral defender through his public projects and cultural activities. He “preaches” on various subjects in public at a time of socio-political change through poems, writings in various media, and social and cultural activities, as we have seen above. His stance is always independent and he distances himself from the center of political, economic and religious authority. He tries to think of *rakyat* or peoples' interests from their point of view and to be among them.

His actions in the above-mentioned activities, for instance the *Malaikat* incident, demonstrate his empirical knowledge of Islam; this has great merit in Indonesian society, where Islam plays an absolutely significant role. He was born a son of a well-known Islamic leader of Nahdathul Ulama, one of the most influential Islamic organizations.³¹ His father, Moh. Ilyas Ruhiat, was the most important person in that

organization in the 1990s. We cannot overlook the influence of his father. When Acep chose the Faculty of Art at the Bandung Institute of Technology, *kyai* Ilyas said to his son that “So far as the art you are pursuing is useful to society, [you may go your own way]”.³² Acep never forgot his father’s message and made it his motto in his social activities.³³

Acep himself is aware that *Pesantren Cipasung* was born among and created by the local community, which gave respect and trust to *kyai* who led *pesantren* (Noor 2010: 14). He describes the relationship between *kyai* and *pesantren*:

In fact, *kyai* and *pesantren* cannot be separated from the community. *Kyai* and *pesantren* are born because they are supported by the community and are part of it. They never exist without the community. In other words, a *kyai* will not be born by himself, yet he is always given birth by the community, which trusts his wisdom and his sincerity about himself.³⁴

In this explanation it seems that he is trying to become a *kyai*-like poet. He has a close relationship with the local community and has earned full trust and respect from the people. From this background he can express his opinion publicly and act against social and political injustice without any hesitation or self-interest. The people, in particular the local Islamic community, respect and trust him not only because he is the son of a *kyai*, but also because of his qualities and behavior.

Interestingly, Acep finds an analogy between his father and himself when remembering that his father had received guests all the time. He says, “if a poet is to be at the same level with a *kyai*, he should be ready to receive guests, whoever and whenever. And also he may not have a job, since a *kyai* does not have a master. As far as he has a master, his *maqom* (level) is still on the level of a *santri* (Islamic student). A real *kyai* keeps a distance from those in power. So should a poet.”³⁵ He used to receive anyone who visited him, not only to ask for his advice on his or her poems, but also to seek advice on all kind of matters including student movements, social and political issues, how to cure disease, narcotic addiction, polygamy and so on. Gradually he came to think that “in the end as a poet, I also feel that I become useful to other people” (*Diam-diam sebagai penyair, saya merasa bermanfaat juga bagi orang lain*), as his father suggested to him long before (Noor 2011: 267).

Lastly, when Acep asks himself “what does poetry mean for me?”, he answers in a book: he feels grateful to be a poet and regards it as

hidāyah or guidance. He thinks that “poetry contains not only beautiful merit but also value of humanity, love and faith, and inspiration for something transcendent, which become the real purpose of life. For me, poetry also becomes a medium to declare and actualize myself constantly, regardless of the situation or conditions”.³⁶ This thought is the source of his charismatic feature and constitutes the foundation for humanitarian action and resistance against authorities.

His social activities haven't tremendously attracted people's attention in Indonesian society as a whole and also haven't had a great impact on it, yet they are worth noticing in a local community and also in the context of Islamic culture. Acep's poems are appreciated because of their merit in terms of local as well as Islamic culture. Cultural production in Indonesia, especially Sundanese society, cannot be viewed separately from the Islamic context. As a poet, Acep Zamzam Noor plays a significant role in the local community of Tasikmalaya and therefore is an important presence in Indonesian society.

Figures



Figure 1: School yard of state elementary school next to the house of Ilyas Ruhiyat in the Cipasung Islamic School complex, Singaparna, Tasikmalaya.



Figure 2: Acep Zamzam Noor and his painting in his house.



Figure 3: Acep Zamzam Noor is reading a statement with his friend at press conference at the office of Sundanalogy in Bandung.



Figure 4: Acep Zamzam Noor handed over the request to the representative of the newspaper *Pikiran Rakyat* at their office.

Endnotes

- This article is based on my presentation titled “Acep Zamzam Noor: Islamic Community and Poetry” at the panel session “Islam at the Centre of Indonesian Cultural Production 1: Islam as a signifier and generative matrix” of the Canadian Council for South East Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, October 15-17, 2009. This research was supported in part by a grant from the Australian Research Council for the project, “Glocalisation and sub-national Islams in Indonesia: neo-traditionalism, local Islam and the commemoration of regional Islamic legacies” commencing in 2010. I am also indebted to valuable comments and discussions on an earlier version of this article presented at a seminar held by *Studia Islamika* & Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM), Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta on 13 March 2015.
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1. Please refer to Mudzakkir (2008) and Barton et al. (2014).
 2. This school complex was established by Acep’s grandfather around 1930, and boys and girls come to learn at this institution from all over the country. The original population of the Cipasung village is about 500, but about 5000 *santri* (Islamic pupils) live there to learn Arabic and Islamic subjects. The village belongs to the *Kecamatan* (district) of Singaparna, *Kabupaten* (district) of Tasikmalaya, and is located in about 15 km northeast from the town of Tasikmalaya.
 3. Most of his poems are in Indonesian, but two collections, *Dayeuh Matapoé* (City of the Sun, 1993) and *Pagunemen* (Dialogue, 2011), were published in Sundanese. A few of his Sundanese poems were translated into English by Wendy Mukherjee (Rosidi 2001: 156-159).
 4. The Khatulistiwa Literary Award granted the largest amount of prize money in Indonesia. It was established in 2000 by Richard Oh, an Indonesian entrepreneur who had operated a new café-bookstore combination, QB Books, in Jakarta and other big cities. “He took a degree in English literature and creative writing at the University of Wisconsin, USA”, according to his self-introduction in his book cover (Oh 2000).
 5. For more on his receiving this award, see Campbell (2011: 139).
 6. Aveling regarded Noor as one of a New Generation of Poets having close connections with *pesantren* (2001: 231). He translated Acep’s 1980’s poems into English for the first time (2001: 260-265). On the basis of Aveling’s contribution, Ian Campbell has conducted detailed research on Acep Zamzam Noor’s poetry. He discusses Acep’s poetry under three features: mysticism, aestheticism and activism, with a special focus on Sufism (2011). He does state however that the central theme of Acep’s poetry and his social activities derive from Islamic mysticism (*tasawwuf*). For instance, he writes, “Such activism, [...] suggests that the idea of retreat from the world that might at first be associated with the mystical and meditative aspects of his Sufistic poetry, is not what Acep has in mind. Clearly he sees room for both styles in his total oeuvre, as satirical references are juxtaposed against meditation, and seems to be able to encompass the

whole range of activities that might be embraced as ‘practical tasawuf’[sic], mentioned in the introduction to this paper.” Campbell also translated the poem *Cipasung* (2011: 132) as well as other Indonesian poems.

7. For example, Sapardi Djoko Damono, a literary critic and poet, and professor at the University of Indonesia, appreciates this poem as “a religious experience expressed through farmer’s life” (*sebuah pengalaman keagamaan yang diungkapkan lewat kehidupan pertanian*) (Noor 2011: 266).
8. Ahmad Tohari designates Abdul hadi WM, Danarto as Islamic writer and Mustofa Bisri, Zawawi Imron and Acep Zamzam Noor as poets from *pesantren* in his article titled *Sastra Pesantren, Sastra Dakwah* (Literature of Pesantren, Literature of Proselytism” (Tohari 1998: 82-83). Widiyanto points out a social engagement aspect of Emha Ainun Nadjib and Mustofa Bisri (2013: 167-172)
9. Original text: *saya tidak lagi asyik mengurung diri di rumah namun mencoba “bergaul” ke tengah-tengah masyarakat* (Noor 2011: 268).
10. Original text: *Di tengah situasi yang serba tak menentu misalnya, puisi akan menjadi tempat kararsis yang nyaman sekaligus kubu untuk melakukan perlawanan. Namun di tengah yang serba aman dan tenteram, puisi juga bisa menjadi gelombang yang mengguncang kemapanan. Tempat penyair adalah berada dalam situasi dan kondisi apa pun, baik yang tenteram maupun tak menentu, baik yang indah maupun yang semrawut, baik yang wangi maupun yang busuk. Tugas penyair bukan hanya melahirkan tulisan, tapi juga perbuatan. Bukan hanya menerbitkan buku dan tampil di panggung-panggung pertunjukan, tapi juga melakukan gerakan nyata di tengah-tengah masyarakat* (Noor 2011: 273).
11. Before and after the Tasikmalaya incident similar riots took place in Situbondo, Rengasdengklok, Banyuwangi and other places in Indonesia (Hadad 1998: 31-36).
12. Original text: *Maka ketika orang-orang partai serta broker-broker politik mengotori pesantren, penyairlah yang harus membersihkannya. Atau paling tidak, bias mengingatkan para kiai agar lebih berhati-hati dan sadar akan posisinya* (Noor 2011: 200).
13. Original text: *Kepenyairan yang tidak bisa menghasilkan banyak uang juga bukan sesuatu yang akan meruntuhkan iman. Kepenyairan adalah kekhayusan dalam menjalani rutinitas kehidupan sehari-hari, kewajaran dalam memandang berbagai persoalan dan bersikap santai terhadap apa pun yang terjadi. Dengan latihan seperti ini, antara santai dan serius menjadi tidak ada batasnya, antara bercanda dan berkarya menjadi tidak ada bedanya, antara tawa dan tangis menjadi tidak jelas jaraknya, antara jatuh cinta dan patah hati menjadi sama saja. Dengan demikian, miskin dan kaya menjadi hal biasa, menjadi sesuatu yang layak dinikmati dan disyukuri. Mental seperti ini penting dimiliki oleh setiap penyair, lebih-lebih penyair yang hidup di nagara yang kondisinya sangat paradoksal seperti Indonesia* (Noor 2011: 238).
14. In West Java the Bandung-based newspaper *Pikiran Rakyat* is dominant, but some cities have their own paper, like *Garut Pos* in Garut next to *Pikiran Rakyat* and national papers. The Tasikmalaya-based paper *Priangan* is thus unique because it is widespread throughout the surrounding region, especially the eastern part of the Province of West Java.
15. Original text: *Di Tasikmalaya gerakan kebudayaan pada umumnya dan kesenian pada khususnya, berawal dari inisiatif anggota masyarakat yang tergabung dalam komunitas-komunitas, bukan dari perguruan tinggi seni, dewan kesenian atau dinas pendidikan dan kebudayaan. Apalagi dari bupati* (Noor 2004: 3).
16. Campbell has conducted research on poetry-writing activities in Tasikmalaya and introduced the activity partly in the above-mentioned article (2011: 118-120).
17. Sanggar Sastra Tasik recently started its own blog, see: <http://sanggarsastrataseik>.

- blogspot.jp/: last accessed 6 May 2015. It seems that blogs are used more actively than home page these days.
18. Sanggar Sastra Tasik, homepage. "Kegiatan" (<http://www.situs-sst.freehosting.net/giatsst.htm>; last accessed 6 December 2005).
 19. SST has published three other poetic anthologies: *Datang dari Masa Depan* (Came from the Future, 1999), *Poligami* (Polygamy, 2003) and *Muktamar* (Islamic Congress, 2003).
 20. Original text: *Seorang penyair harus melakukan koreksi dan revisi yang terus-menerus terhadap puisi maupun dirinya sendiri. Juga melancarkan kritik yang keras dan kejam pada puisi dan dirinya sendiri* (Noor 2003: 5).
 21. Original text: *Seniman harus merasa bersyukur karena di tengah kebangkrutan nasional yang parah ini, di tengah rasa malu sebagai bangsa benadab yang tak tertahankan ini, secara kebetulan senimanlah yang bisa disebut masih "diuntungkan". Seorang penyair misalnya, jelas harus bersyukur dan bergembira karena begitu banyak bahan dari situasi yang sepertinya tak masuk akal ini yang bias diekspresikan menjadi ratusan puisi. [...] Seorang seniman, dengan kreatifitas dan kegembiraannya paling tidak telah melibatkan diri secara tulus pada persoalan bangsanya, pada lingkungannya dan menjadi saksi zaman yang otentik lewat karya-karyanya, yang mungkin kelak akan menjadi sebuah sumbangan yang sangat berharga. Dengan kata lain, seorang seniman paling tidak telah memberikan kegembiraan atau inspirasi kepada lingkungannya, memberikan pencerahan kepada tetangganya. Bukan sebagai begawan atau pelawak, tapi sebagai bagian dari anggota lingkungannya. Sebagai bagian dari masyarakatnya itu sendiri* (Noor 2003: 2).
 22. Original text: *Jika judul "Poligami" ini kemudian seperti menyindir perilaku para pejabat dan wakil rakyat di Tasikmalaya yang tengah berlomba-lomba berpoligami (karena mempunyai aktifitas lain, pekerjaan lain, bisnis lain, proyek lain, rumah lain, mobil lain dan juga istri lain), sungguh itu sebuah kebetulan belaka* (Noor 2003: 3).
 23. The group *Kosidah Nurul Sembako* started singing satirical songs in 1997 around Tasikmalaya city and a year later it was reformed by Acep, to become *Partai Nurul Sembako*. Personal communication with Acep Zamzam Noor, 29 August 2009 in Cipasung.
 24. Original text: *Di tengah kondisi social dan politik yang tidak menentu, menulis puisi rasanya menjadi sulit dan berat. Bukan karena saya merasa kehabisan ide, tapi justru karena terlalu banyak ide, yang sebagian besar sulit diwujudkan dalam bentuk puisi. Ide-ide yang cenderung prosais ini rasanya lebih cocok jika diekspresikan dalam bentuk perbuatan atau gerakan* (Noor 2011: 268).
 25. Personal communication with Acep Zamzam Noor, 25 August 2006 in Cipasung.
 26. Personal communication with Dede Syarif, who spent his childhood in the southern part of *kabupaten* of Garut and acknowledged the figure Horikoshi described in her dissertation.
 27. Millie reported this incident in an article titled "Angel sparks controversy: Journalists strike after West Java's most famous newspaper 'withdraws' poem" in 2008. See more in Millie (2008).
 28. There is an interpretation that the poem criticizes those who exercise their influence over Muslim society indirectly. Because they felt humiliated, influential groups protested strongly against the poem.
 29. Saeful Badar, "Malaikat", *Pikiran Rakyat*, Column "Khazana", 4 August 2007.
 30. I myself witnessed this incident following Acep Zamzam Noor.
 31. See more, e.g. Ridwan (2010).
 32. Original text: *Asal kamu yakin bahwa seni yang akan kamu geluti itu bermanfaat bagi masyarakat* (Yahya 2006: 74).

33. Personal communication with Acep Zamzam Noor, Cipasung, 26 August 2010.
34. His definition of *kyai* fits with Horikoshi's description some 40 years ago as well as Dhofier's. Original text: *Memang kyai dan pesantren tak bias dipisahkan dari masyarakat. Kyai dan pesantren lahir karena didukung dan menjadi bagian dari masyarakat. Tak akan ada tanpa masyarakat. Lain kata, seorang kyai tidak lahir sendiri, namun selalu dilahirkan oleh masyarakat yang memercayai kealiman serta ketulusan pengabdiannya* (Noor 2010: 14).
35. Original text: [...] *kalau seorang penyair ingin setarap dengan kyai maka ia jangan punya pekerjaan tetap. Seorang penyair yang punya pekerjaan tetap – dengan demikian masih punya majikan – maka maqomnya masih pada tarap santri, bukan kyai. Seorang kyai tidak pernah punya majikan, begitu juta seharusnya penyair. Seorang kyai sejati akan berjanak dengan penguasa, begitu juga sejatinya penyair* (Noor 2011: 267).
36. Original text: *Saya percaya dalam puisi hanya terkandung nilai-nilai keindahan, tapi juga nilai-nilai kemanusiaan, nilai-nilai cinta, keimanan dan penghayatan terhadap sesuatu yang transenden, yang menjadi tujuan hakiki kehidupan. Bagi saya, puisi juga menjadi media untuk terus menyatakan dan mengaktualisasikan diri di tengah situasi dan kondisi apa pun* (Noor 2011: 272).

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S*tudia Islamika*, published three times a year since 1994, is a bilingual (English and Arabic), peer-reviewed journal, and specializes in Indonesian Islamic studies in particular and Southeast Asian Islamic studies in general. The aim is to provide readers with a better understanding of Indonesia and Southeast Asia's Muslim history and present developments through the publication of articles, research reports, and book reviews.

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2. Booth, Anne. 1988. "Living Standards and the Distribution of Income in Colonial Indonesia: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(2): 310–34.
3. Feener, Michael R., and Mark E. Cammack, eds. 2007. *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia: Ideas and Institutions*. Cambridge: Islamic Legal Studies Program.
4. Wahid, Din, 2014. *Nurturing Salafi Manhaj: A Study of Salafi Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia*. PhD dissertation. Utrecht University.
5. Utriza, Ayang, 2008. "Mencari Model Kerukunan Antaragama." *Kompas*. March 19: 59.
6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
7. Interview with K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, Kajen, Pati, June 11th, 2007.

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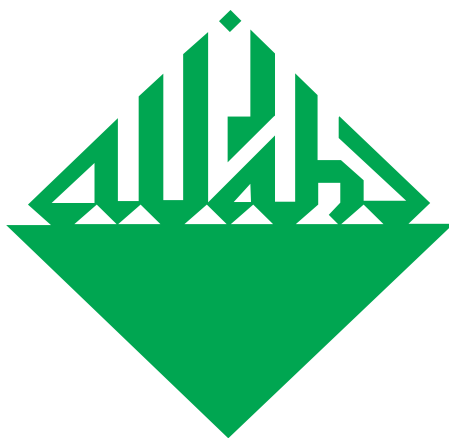
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