



Islam as Discursive Tradition: Synthesizing the Thought of Sahal Mahfudz and Talal Asad's Theoretical Framework in the Pesantren Context

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the integration of Talal Asad's conceptual framework and KH Sahal Mahfudz's thought in understanding pesantren as a space for articulating Islam as a discursive tradition. The research adopts a qualitative approach through textual study and non-participant observation of kitab kuning, KH Sahal's works, and scholarly practices in several pesantren in East Java, such as Lirboyo, Tambakberas Jombang, and various pesantren in Madura. The analysis combines content analysis and discourse analysis to examine the structure of knowledge, social dynamics, and the construction of Islamic meaning within pesantren practices. The findings reveal that pesantren not only preserve the classical Islamic tradition but also actively reproduce Islamic meaning through bahtsul masail forums and the application of social fiqh. KH Sahal Mahfudz plays a pivotal role in shaping a contextual and reflective tradition of ijtihad that responds to social realities. These findings indicate that pesantren function as discursive spaces where Islam is historically and socially produced, and that integrating Asad's and KH Sahal's frameworks enriches the understanding of a dynamic Islam in the Indonesian context.

A. INTRODUCTION

Pesantren in Indonesia have long served as Islamic educational institutions that play a central role in the formation and transmission of Islamic knowledge (Setiawan, 2024). In the context of modernity and globalization, the function of pesantren extends beyond normative education to become a dynamic and transformative space for articulating Islamic discourses

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(Astuti et al., 2021; Mansyuri et al., 2023). The pesantren tradition—with its legacy of classical texts (*kitab kuning*) and the *bahtsul masāil* forums—functions as a site of knowledge production that actively engages with local social and cultural changes (Fauzi et al., 2022; Kuswandi et al., 2021).

Within this transformative framework, pesantren can be viewed as social spaces that represent a living Islamic tradition, where classical texts and religious practices are not only preserved but also reinterpreted in response to changing times (Halimah et al., 2024; Purwanti et al., 2023). This process illustrates that pesantren do not merely conserve Islamic scholarly heritage but also act as active agents in responding to and redefining Islamic values within evolving social contexts. In line with this view, Martin van Bruinessen emphasizes that pesantren are not rigid institutions trapped in tradition but rather flexible and adaptive entities capable of change—whether through curriculum restructuring or through the rearticulation of scholarly authority via classical texts (*kitab kuning*) (van Bruinessen, 1994). In this regard, pesantren function as arenas of negotiation between continuity and transformation, supporting the notion that Islam is a discursive tradition constantly constructed within the social sphere.

Talal Asad, a prominent anthropologist, introduced the concept of Islam as a discursive tradition, which asserts that Islam is not a static or transhistorical entity, but a tradition continuously reproduced, interpreted, and negotiated through discursive practices embedded in specific power relations and social structures (Asad, 2017). This approach shifts Islamic studies away from normative theological paradigms toward anthropological-historical perspectives, in which Islamic meanings are seen as the outcomes of complex social and political processes (Harahap & Kahpi, 2021; Nazar & Hamid, 2022). This perspective resonates with Greg Barton's analysis of how pesantren serve as a dialectical field between Islamic traditionalism and modern thought (Barton, 1997). Through figures such as Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid, Barton highlights how pesantren can become a foundation for progressive Islamic thought that remains rooted in tradition while remaining open to contemporary value reform (Barton, 1997).

Talal Asad's conception of Islam as a discursive tradition has made significant contributions to contemporary anthropological studies of Islam, particularly in framing religious practices as historical, social, and political constructs. In this context, several studies have adopted Asad's framework to explore Muslim religiosity in more contextual and reflective ways (Allès & Seeth, 2021). An influential study by Anjum (1997) critically examines Asad's role in shifting Islamic studies from essentialist approaches to discursive ones (Anjum, 1997). Anjum argues that Islam must be understood as a historical tradition shaped through power relations, institutional frameworks, and social practices. Orthodoxy, in Asad's view, is not fixed but is the result of debate and institutionalized authority (Anjum, 1997).

Subsequently, a study conducted by Sari et al. (2024) on the Sasak Muslim community in Lombok demonstrates the direct application of Asad's framework in a local context. The research reveals that the religiosity of the Sasak community—manifested in both Islam Wetu Telu and Waktu Lima traditions—is the outcome of discursive practices embedded within customary law (*adat*), historical narratives, and local power relations (Sari et al., 2024). Tradition such as *perang topat*, *mulud*, and other indigenous ceremonies are understood as plural articulations of Islam, constantly negotiated rather than fixed. These findings reinforce Asad's assertion that Islam is not merely a universal theological system but a discourse shaped by specific socio-cultural conditions (Sari et al., 2024).

On the other hand, KH Sahal Mahfudz developed the concept of social *fiqh*, which emphasizes the importance of Islamic scholarly engagement with evolving social dynamics. Through a *manhaji* (methodological) approach that integrates *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and the principle of *maṣlaḥah* (public benefit) (Ainiyah, 2015; Rohmah, 2017). KH Sahal positions the pesantren as an agent of social transformation, actively addressing issues such as social justice,

people-centered economic development, and community empowerment (Latif, 2023; Muhammad, 2023). His ideas are embodied in various practical initiatives, ranging from the establishment of sharia-based microfinance institutions like BPR and BPPM, to the strategic use of zakat as a tool for economic empowerment (Zaenurrosyid & Sulikhah, 2017).

Taufiqur Rohman emphasizes that KH Sahal's social fiqh is not confined to a normative framework, but rather serves as a concrete strategy to address economic disparities within families by systematically and transformatively mobilizing local community potential (Rohman, 2022). Ahmad Ali Riyadi further adds that KH Sahal advocated for the revitalization of pesantren epistemology rooted in classical texts (*kitab kuning*) through an emancipatory spirit—one that is not merely conservative, but also progressive in responding to the challenges of modernity and social change (Taufiq & Tsauro, 2024). In this sense, social fiqh functions not only as a religious ethic but also as a paradigm for social transformation integrated within pesantren praxis.

However, to date, there has been limited research that directly integrates Talal Asad's theoretical framework with KH Sahal Mahfudz's thought in analyzing the discursive dynamics of Islam within pesantren. Yet, both offer significant epistemological convergence: a shared perspective that views Islam as a responsive entity shaped by socio-historical and cultural transformations. This study aims to explore how the integration of Talal Asad's framework and KH Sahal Mahfudz's thought can be employed to understand pesantren as a discursive space for articulating Islam as a living tradition. It is expected that this research will contribute to a broader understanding of pesantren as a dynamic, contextual, and transformative field of Islamic discourse.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on textual analysis and non-participant observation to explore the integration of Talal Asad's theoretical framework with the thought of KH Sahal Mahfudz in the context of the pesantren as a discursive space for articulating Islam as a living tradition. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the social dynamics and religious practices within pesantren, particularly how Islamic traditions are preserved, reproduced, and reinterpreted in light of contemporary cultural and social realities.

Data collection was conducted using two main strategies. First, textual analysis of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) and the writings of KH Sahal Mahfudz served as primary references for examining normative and practical constructions of Islamic thought. Second, document analysis and non-participant observation were carried out in various scholarly activities at pesantren in East Java, such as Lirboyo, Tambak Beras Jombang, and several pesantren in Madura. These sites represent discursive arenas in which Islamic discourse is enacted in everyday practice.

Data analysis combines content analysis and discourse analysis. Content analysis was employed to systematically identify key themes, conceptual patterns, and intellectual structures embedded in classical texts and the works of KH Sahal Mahfudz, following the methodological framework outlined by (Krippendorff, 1985). And discourse analysis was used to examine how Islamic meanings are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized through social interactions within the discursive spaces of pesantren. This analytical framework draws on Michel Foucault's perspective, which emphasizes that religious practices are always situated within relations of knowledge, power, and history (Foucault, 1969).

Through the combination of these two analytical methods, this research aims to present a comprehensive and contextual understanding of pesantren epistemology and to reaffirm the role of pesantren as religious institutions that represent Islam as a discursive tradition within the contemporary Indonesian context.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Pesantren as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, function not only as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge but also as social spaces where active and dynamic Islamic discourses take place. This function is evident in the pesantren's ability to accommodate the diverse social realities of the Muslim community while maintaining continuity with the classical Islamic scholarly tradition. Educational practices such as the study of kitab kuning (classical Islamic texts), bahtsul masā'il forums, and habitual religious discussions serve as collective and contextual mechanisms for reproducing meaning (Hasan & Anshory, 2024; Kawakip & Sulanam, 2023). Within this framework, pesantren do not merely transmit normative doctrines but also transform Islamic values to remain relevant amidst changing times. The discourse emerging within pesantren is shaped through interactions between classical texts and the lived experiences of the Muslim community, positioning pesantren as cultural and intellectual actors that are adaptive to their surrounding societal realities (Astuti et al., 2021; Lukens-Bull, 2019).

The epistemic character of pesantren makes them closely aligned with the concept of Islam as a discursive tradition as developed by Talal Asad. Asad argues that Islamic tradition should not be understood as a monolithic and ahistorical system, but as a discourse continually shaped and negotiated within specific social structures (Asad, 2015). In this light, pesantren—where authoritative texts are interpreted in environments influenced by power relations, social needs, and local values—become concrete representations of how Islam is discursively constructed. Within this context, pesantren leaders such as KH Sahal Mahfudz play a vital transformational role by upholding traditional values while promoting social innovation (Halimah et al., 2024; Thoha, 2024). Thus, pesantren are not merely preservers of the past, but active producers of contextual and evolving Islamic meanings. In this way, pesantren can be seen as playing a vital role in shaping Islam as a living discursive tradition negotiated between textual authority and social reality.

The thought of KH Sahal Mahfudz on social fiqh emerges as a methodological response to the limitations of classical fiqh in addressing the complexities of modern social realities. In his book *Nuansa Fiqih Sosial*, KH Sahal argues that fiqh cannot rely solely on normative-formal dimensions, but must be grounded in a manhaji (methodological) approach that accounts for the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts of the Muslim community. By employing *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and the principle of *maṣlaḥah* as the foundations of *ijtihād*, social fiqh is designed not only to address legal issues but also to position Islam as an ethical force that engages with the dynamics of society (Mahfudh, 2011; Rohmah, 2017). This perspective marks a significant shift from a textualist approach to a more reflective and solution-oriented fiqh, opening space for socially grounded interpretations of Islamic teachings.

In practice, social fiqh is not merely a conceptual construct but a practical approach applied in various aspects of pesantren and community life. KH Sahal actively promoted the development of Islamic economic institutions, productive zakat management, and community empowerment through pesantren-based networks (Latif, 2023; Muhammad, 2023). For instance, his establishment of Islamic rural banks (BPR) represents a concrete implementation of social fiqh aimed at addressing economic inequality and marginalization. These efforts are aligned with broader movements toward transforming social systems based on inclusive Islamic values that are responsive to contemporary challenges (Chasannudin & Asmani, 2020). As such, pesantren under KH Sahal's leadership not only teach fiqh but also actively engage in shaping religious social discourse and actions rooted in responses to real-world issues.

Furthermore, social fiqh as practiced by KH Sahal can be read as an articulative effort to reproduce Islam as a discourse inseparable from the dynamics of power and social structures. This idea resonates with the broader efforts of Nahdlatul Ulama to reconstruct fiqh paradigms from social fiqh to fiqh al-ḥaḍārah (civilizational fiqh), which emphasizes Islam's role in shaping a just and sustainable social order (Nazar & Hamid, 2022; Taufiq & Tsauo,

2024). Within this framework, social fiqh functions not merely as an alternative to normative fiqh, but as a field of social *ijtihād* that allows for new interpretations of Islamic texts and traditions. Equipped with its own epistemological instruments and social praxis, the *pesantren* has evolved into an institution capable of preserving tradition while simultaneously reproducing Islamic meanings in contemporary contexts. In this regard, the *bahtsul masāil* forums that have developed within *pesantren* and have been institutionalized by Nahdlatul Ulama serve as key mediums for articulating social fiqh and for bridging Islamic scholarship with contemporary issues in a collective and reflective manner.

Bahtsul Masāil, within the institutional structure of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), functions as a forum for collective *ijtihād* designed to respond to contemporary religious problems while remaining rooted in the classical fiqh tradition (Mahfuddin, 2021). This institution serves not merely as a structural complement to NU but as a manifestation of *pesantren* scholarly authority in addressing the concerns of the Muslim community. The mechanisms of the NU Bahtsul Masāil adhere to strict principles of *tarjīḥ* and *qawā'id uṣūliyyah*, integrating social context as a legitimate parameter in the process of *ijtihād*. Its outcomes are formalized into official decisions with collective legitimacy, often serving as references for NU's national socio-religious policies (Mahfuddin, 2021). This practice reflects that Islamic discourse in NU is not essentialist but is deliberately formed through forums that balance textual authority with the social dynamics of the Muslim community (Nazar & Hamid, 2022; Taufiq & Tsauru, 2024).

In practice, *bahtsul masāil* conducted across *pesantren* represents a dynamic and participatory process of meaning production. These forums serve as arenas where classical texts, particularly *kitab kuning*, are reinterpreted to address contemporary issues. Rather than simply reproducing historical legal opinions, *bahtsul masāil* provides a space for negotiating meaning between tradition and present-day realities. Guided by *kiai* and *ustadz*, students (*santri*) engage in a collective process that fosters a scholarly culture, critical thinking, and hermeneutical skills (Mustofa et al., 2024). Each *pesantren* applies distinct approaches to the forum, reflecting epistemological diversity and sensitivity to local context. Within this framework, *bahtsul masāil* functions as a discursive device for reproducing Islam as a tradition that is continually alive and socially reconstructed (Dreßler, 2019; Islam & Aziz, 2020).

The Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School exemplifies a systematic and formal practice of *bahtsul masāil*. This forum operates within an organized structure, with designated problem formulators and solution teams, drawing upon authoritative classical sources such as *Al-Mahalli*, *I'ānat al-Ṭālibīn*, and *Bughyat al-Mustarsyidin* (Munawir et al., 2022). Nonetheless the forum demonstrates flexibility in addressing contemporary issues such as productive zakat, digital transactions, and the legal status of sharia-based financial technology (fintech). This evidences Lirboyo's ability to maintain classical authority while embracing the adaptive demands of the modern era (Irfana et al., 2023). As such, *bahtsul masāil* at Lirboyo becomes both an authoritative and reflective forum where tradition and modernity are not in conflict but intertwined through a hermeneutic relationship.

Meanwhile, the Tambakberas Islamic Boarding School in Jombang displays an integrative tendency by combining *bahtsul masāil* with the Contextual Teaching and Learning approach (Hidayatulloh, 2018). According to Hidayatulloh's research, this forum serves as part of a contextual learning strategy where students are encouraged to link fiqh rulings to current social issues such as community-based economics, family education, and gender relations (Hidayatulloh, 2018). This reality-based learning strengthens textual cognition while cultivating students' social analytical capacities. It further supports the view that *kitab kuning* are not merely read textually but serve as authoritative sources continually revitalized within concrete local contexts (Halimah et al., 2024; Hasan & Anshory, 2024).

Pesantren in Madura present distinctive cultural and historical dimensions in their practice of *bahtsul masāil*. Research by Abdillah et al. reveals that *bahtsul masāil* has been practiced in Madura since the late 1980s, using various terms such as *musyawarah kutub*,

kajian kitab, or majelis diniyah (Abdillah et al., 2019). Although the methodologies and references align with other NU pesantren, implementation is strongly influenced by local social structures and cultural relations. The collective *ijtihad* process in these forums illustrates how Madurese pesantren utilize texts as instruments to formulate responses to localized social problems—ranging from online marriages and interfaith inheritance disputes to the ethics of digital *da'wah* (Sarhindi, 2020; Siregar & Prasetyo, 2023). This uniqueness underscores the role of *bahtsul masail* as an evolving site of socio-religious negotiation in response to societal transformations.

In his article *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Talal Asad rejects essentialist conceptions of Islam and emphasizes that it must be understood as a discursive tradition—a historically formed tradition shaped through discursive practices bound by specific social, political, and power relations (Asad, 2015). Within this framework, orthodoxy is not a fixed entity but a socially constructed outcome of institutionalized authority. This approach shifts Islamic studies away from viewing texts as normative objects toward an analysis of religious social practices as ongoing historical processes. Consequently, Islam is understood as a discourse continually reproduced through symbolic and institutional practices with social currency (Asad, 2017).

Asad's conception finds resonance in the thought and praxis of KH Sahal Mahfudz, particularly in his development of *fiqh sosial* (social jurisprudence). In *Nuansa Fiqih Sosial*, KH Sahal proposes a methodological approach that challenges literalist readings of scripture, emphasizing instead the importance of reinterpreting *fiqh* in light of contemporary social realities (Mahfudz, 2011). By grounding *ijtihad* in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and *maṣlaḥah 'āmmah*, KH Sahal opens the way for *fiqh* to actively shape a more just social structure responsive to the needs of the time (Rohmah, 2017). His perspective demonstrates that *fiqh* is a discursive product, not a neutral one, and is always interacting with the values, interests, and power dynamics present in society.

The integration of Asad's theoretical insights with KH Sahal's practical vision reveals that Islamic discourse can only be fully understood through attention to the interaction between text, social actors, and historical conditions. While Asad offers a framework for interpreting religious practices as social constructs, KH Sahal provides a practical foundation through his reinterpretation of *fiqh* that is responsive to the lived realities of the Muslim community. Within this framework, the pesantren tradition is not merely a site for doctrinal preservation, but a social arena actively engaged in reconstructing Islamic meaning in a contextual and reflective manner (Allès & Seeth, 2021). Through its scholarly instruments and the leadership of figures such as KH Sahal, the pesantren becomes a discursive site that represents a living, evolving, and socially responsible expression of Islam.

Based on the analysis of KH Sahal Mahfudz's thought and the intellectual practices within pesantren, particularly through the instruments of social *fiqh* and the *bahtsul masail* forums, pesantren actively participate in shaping and reproducing Islam as a discursive tradition as conceptualized by Talal Asad. KH Sahal not only proposed a contextual approach to *fiqh* that is responsive to social dynamics, but also positioned the pesantren as an articulative space that facilitates the active negotiation of Islamic meanings. The *bahtsul masail* forums, which thrive in various pesantren, illustrate that the Islamic scholarly tradition within pesantren is not stagnant; rather, it is continuously constructed through interactions among texts, religious authority, and societal realities. This demonstrates that pesantren function as effective discursive sites for reflecting upon, responding to, and constructing contemporary Islamic meanings—thus reinforcing the thesis that Islam, within the Indonesian pesantren context, is a living tradition that is socially and historically negotiated and reproduced.

D. CONCLUSION

This study affirms that pesantren are institutions that not only preserve the continuity

of the Islamic scholarly tradition but also play an active role in shaping and reproducing Islam as a discursive tradition. Through the figure of KH Sahal Mahfudz and his social fiqh paradigm, pesantren are encouraged to reinterpret the fiqh heritage within a social framework that is both contextual and transformative. This approach positions fiqh not merely as a normative legal system but as an ethical instrument capable of engaging with the challenges of communal life in a reflective and participatory manner.

The bahtsul masail forums, the teaching of kitab kuning, and the practice of collective ijtihād in pesantren such as Lirboyo, Tambakberas, and several Madurese pesantren represent concrete manifestations of a living Islamic discourse that is open to social change. This process aligns with Talal Asad's framework of Islam as a discursive tradition, in which Islamic meanings are not fixed but are continuously constructed within social spaces embedded with power dynamics, authority, and communal needs.

Therefore, this article concludes that pesantren—through the integration of traditional authority and social consciousness—serve as arenas for a progressive and contextual articulation of Islam. KH Sahal Mahfudz's contributions not only strengthen the relevance of pesantren amid modern challenges but also expand the epistemological scope of Islam as a discourse that is continuously shaped and negotiated within the historical experience of the Muslim community. This research opens further space for studies that integrate social-anthropological theory with localized Islamic praxis as part of the broader global discourse on contemporary Islam.

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