

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADER IN TEACHING OF TAFSIR IN INDONESIAN URBAN SOCIETY

Case Study of Pesantren and its Neighborhood in Java¹

FERRY MUHAMMADSYAH SIREGAR

*Indonesia Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS-Yogya)
Gadjab Mada University*

Introduction

Religion has a strong relationship to exegesis, both conceptually and historically. Conceptually, religion is assumed to be an “exegetic community,” therefore, the study of religion is basically the interpretation of exegesis. Historically, religion represents diverse interpretations from human beings closely related to the historical background of each perspective, even though the clash or pressure often rises up among the followers of same religious tradition. For example, the orthodox and the liberal adherents have different interpretation of their own religion (Aliade, 1987: 280; Siregar, 2005: 15). In the context of Quranic interpretation, Tafsir and Quranic studies can be viewed as an effort to develop the Qur’ânic interpretation at the present time in order to respond the challenges of the epoch.

In the Muslim world, the teachings of Islam are based essentially on two fundamental sources, the Quran and Sunnah. For Muslims, the Quran is the revelation of God, the central fact of the Islamic religious experience. It is the very word of God and the presence of the numinous in history (space and time). Quranic revelation is not that of the transcendent God, but rather of his Divine Will, which man is to follow: “This is a declaration for mankind, a guidance and admonition for the God-fearing” (QS.3:138) (Esposito, 2001: 3-5). The Quran for Believing Muslims represents unquestionably the very Word of God.

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It is taken for granted by the conservative 'Ulama (Muslim Doctors of Law and Sacred Literature) just as well as by the most radical modernists (Baljon, 1968: 1).

In the history of Islam and Muslim in Indonesia, According to Martin van Bruinessen, the pesantren (or pondok, surau, dayah, as it is called elsewhere) is not the only institution of Muslim religious education, and the tradition it embodies is only one out of several tendencies within Indonesian Islam. Modernist, reformist and fundamentalist currents emerged partly in opposition to it, and to some extent developed into rigid traditions themselves. One of Indonesia's great traditions is that of Muslim religious learning as embodied in the Javanese pesantren. The main goal of these institutions is the transmission of traditional Islam as laid down in scripture, i.e., classical texts of the various Islamic disciplines, together with commentaries, glosses and super-commentaries on these basic texts written over the ages. These works, including the works of tafsir are collectively known in Indonesia as kitab kuning, "yellow books", a name that they owe to the tinted paper on which the first Middle Eastern editions reaching Indonesia were printed (van Bruinessen in Marschall, 1994: 121-145).

Pesantrens taught Quranic Studies with other branches of Islamic knowledge such fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), hadith (prophetic sayings), tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism), and kalam (Theology) Since the era of Quranic revelation up to now, in fact, the study of the Quran and its interpretative methodology have seen a significant development along with the acceleration of the social and cultural circumstances and the development of human civilization including Pesantrens of Indonesia. In the context of the Pesantrens as the Islamic institution in Indonesia, they have started to introduce and teach the several kinds of interpretive models and literatures.

Pesantrens is to continue to grow and many Indonesian parents support their children to go and study in pesantren. Statistik Pendidikan Agama dan Keagamaan Tahun Pelajaran 2007-2008 published by the Department of Religious Affairs showed that the total number of the students of the pesantrens reached about 3,818,469. The number of santri (male students) is about 2.063.954 (54,1%) and the number of santriwati (female students) is about 1,754,515 (45,9%). Besides, data from the department of Religious Affairs in 2003 shows a quickly growing number of pesantren and the students accepted in the

pesantrens. In 1977, there were 4,195 pesantrens with 677,384 students. Eight years later, In 1985, this number added to 6,239 pesantrens with 1,084,801 students.

Twelve years later, in 1997, it was reported that there are 9,388 pesantrens with 1,770,768 students. Six years later, in 2003, the number reached 14,647 pesantrens. M. Amin Haedari, the Director of diniyyah Schools and Pesantrens of General Directorate for Islamic Education of the Department of Religious Affair of Republic of Indonesia, said that the number of pesantrens is continuing to grow over the years. In 1980, its number is about 4,176 pesantrens and it became 14,000 pesantrens in 2007 (Haedari, 2008: 1-2).

Pesantren in Java

The term “pesantren” come from the words “pe-santri-an”. In Javanese language, the word “santri” means student. The term ‘pondok’ come from Arabic “funduq” meaning places to stay, hostile, hotel, or dorm. In Aceh, it is called “dayah”. Pesantren in common is lead by a kiai. To manage the life of pesantren, kiai usually chooses a senior student as a “lurah pondok” (executive management of pesantren). His main duty is to serve junior students. Since they come into pesantren, they are separated from their parents. This condition is to enable them to stay independently and keep in touch with the kiai. The other opinion states that “pesantren” comes from the word “santri” meaning the place of student. The “santri” comes from the word “cantrik,” a Sanskrit or Javanese language that means a man who always follows and obeys his “guru” (teacher). This is then developed by “Taman Siswa Schools” and called “pawiyatan.” The term “santri” also is in Tamil language that means religious teacher. In addition to that, C.C Berg states that the term come from “shastri,” that means an expert of Hindu scripture. In the other opinion, The term is from “saint” (good pople) and “tra” (happy to help others, so “pesantren” can be meant as a place to educate good people (Fatah dkk, 2005: 11).

In many places, the pesantren is characterized by the existence of (1) Pondok, a dormitory where santri (pesantren students) stay; (2) Mosque where prayer and other Muslim rituals are conducted; (3) Kitab Kuning, Islamic handbook written in the Arabic alphabets teaching; (4) Santri, students of a

pesantren; and (5) Kiai, the owner, leader and teacher of a pesantren. Pesantren as a traditional Islamic Education Institution has specific characteristics, which may be owned by other educational institutions out of Pesantren in general. Whereas term traditional being predicate of educational institution like Pesantren, according to Zamakhsyari Dhofier, is a condition still binding strongly to thoughts of ulama ahli fiqh, hadits, tafsir, kalam and tasawuf, living from 7th century to 13th century. Although it does not mean that traditional Pesantren stands living recently remained to fetter in forms of thoughts and aspirations created by ulama at the time. Because, although, from 13th century to 19th century, traditional formulation rather experienced changes, but, in fact, structure of Pesantren life had widely experienced many changes.

Abdul Wahid Zaini (1994) states that students as objects and subjects of Pesantren education have three main characteristics: (1) relatively having care for ainiah duties as God's servants; (2) keeping good relationship with the God as the Creator and Owner; (3) maintaining good relationship with peers. In addition, there are some other aspects being characteristics of life and Pesantren education, namely: (1) maintenance of specific values, which may be easily to be called Pesantren sub-culture. Sub-culture is emphasis on praying values in each activity done by the students, including adherence and nobility for teachers is instrument to obtain real religious knowledge; (2) teaching with methods, traditional literature and structure, both formal and madrasah educations with stratified education levels, and halaqah, slogan systems, whose main characteristic is emphasis on literal understanding of a certain holy book. It will make low analytic force of students.

Given life attitude created by Pesantren world based on the sub-culture, the students will have own life attitude independent of structural environment out of Pesantren, which, in turn, will be able to make students live autonomously and free from dependence on any social institutions. Ability to implant "pray" principle to each activity is really aspiration of each Moslem, which may only grow fertile around Pesantren. In addition, simple obedient and submissive life pattern and attitude to kyai or teachers are sometimes excessive. Kyai as founder, performer and teachers and students are given lessons by kyai, and living with them for some times in dormitory is a specific characteristic of Pesantren world life.

Historically, the dynamics of pesantren had also been examined through their involvement in the roles of change. Dealing with colonialism with the model of Western education, pesantren with their spirit of resistance had been successful in maintaining its socio-cultural functions. Pesantren is not only an educational institution, but also institution of religious service, practical trainings, social development as well as a symbol of Islamic civilization. To strengthen the dynamical functions of pesantren, it should be recognized that basic role of the pesantren supports the following roles, (1) formal, non-formal and informal education in religious and social fields, (2) social services, through activities, consultation, leadership as well as community development, (3) da'wah (distribution of Islamic values) through islamic councils, recitals and dissemination of information, (4) dedication to the pesantren as an institute of community service and development emphasizes common well-being above individual well-being, (5) the whole system of values of pesantren and its characteristic create and support the ability to be autonomous, independent, and self- sufficient (Wirosardjono, 1987: 84-85; Purwadi and Siregar, 2008: 11).

From the beginning, pesantren emerged as an institution that was deeply rooted in Indonesian society. Pesantren is not only an educational institution. It is a product of the indigenous education system that has socio-cultural-historical roots (Ismail SM dkk, 2002: xiv; Purwadi and Siregar, 2008: 1). Therefore pesantren offers a unique education system combining religious, educational and socio-cultural dimensions. These roots then influence internal and external functions of pesantren. Pesantren emerges as a community based education which is able to involve in creative activities offering alternative education by combining education, learning and community development (Wirosardjono, 1987: 218; Purwadi and Siregar, 2008: 1).

There a lot of Pesantrens in Yogyakarta. One of them is Pesantren Krapyak. Since its beginning, it also became part of the reformist movement in the early 20th century. The dynamics of pesantren had also been tested through actively involvement in the position as agent of change. Dealing with colonialism with the model of Western education, pesantren with the spirit of resistance had been successful in maintaining its socio-cultural functions. Pesantren is not only an educational institution, but also institution of religious service, practical

trainings, social development, symbol of Islamic civilization as well as one of centers of interpretation on Islamic teachings.

Kyai Ali Maksum (1915–89), the founder and the pesantren leader of Krapyak was recognized as a figure with a “modernist spirit.” Like Kyai Wahid Hasyim of Tebuireng, he also combined the madrasah into pesantren systems. This type of pesantren, culturally based on the Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) tradition, has been growing steadily and can be found in almost every city in Java. This NU-based pesantren adopted the madrasah system by opening a six-grade system consisting of a preparatory grade for one year followed by a madrasah grade for six additional years.

The study of the Quran in this Pesantren is only focused on how to memorize the Quran. For years ago, the program of memorization of the Quran also includes the study of Quranic sciences in which the students can learn the meaning and translation of the Quran, verses by verses. It is because many students come from universities around the city of Yogyakarta. The pesantrens record that 80 percent of them are university students studying in campuses. The pesantren perceives that it was difficult if they also are taught the Quranic sciences alongside with other university subjects. To fulfill their interest in the study of the other Quranic sciences, ustadz also teaches them in other informal time in additional need.

The quality achievement of santri/santriwati is usually measured with academic and moral indicators (qualitative), not quantitative indicators in form of number and grade an sich. While the characteristics above show the pesantren’s characters in its traditional and pure characters. The diverse images and performances of pesantren are caused by dynamics and development that continuously influence the pesantren, so pesantren should adopt and adapt with the situations. It is also irrelevant if those characters above are given to other pesantren who face reformation and adoption of other education system.

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The Position of Kiai in the Pesantren

Generally, a pesantren was originated from existence of a kiai in somewhere. Then, the people who want to study with him came. After more students were coming, the initiative then comes into mind to set up a small house or dormitory next to the house of Kiai. The dorm was very small and simple and they stayed there. In the beginning, he did not give enough attention to build places where they can stay. At that time, the kiai in fact did not plan how to build the dorms in his pesantren. What he thought is only how to teach religious lessons understood by the students. The more students were coming, the more buildings and small houses were built for the students. The students then told their family and friends about the existence of the pesantren so the pesantren became famous and were well-known like the pesantrens in the era of Walisongo (nine walis of java, wali is a religious expert like saint) (Wahab, 2004: 153-154).

Kiai is the founder of the pesantren in common. Martin van Bruinessen wrote:

“Highly motivated students went from pesantren to pesantren, studying in each the texts in which its kiai was specialised. After a few pesantrens in Banten, they would go on to pesantrens in Bogor, Cianjur, Cirebon, Central or East Java and finally, if their families could afford it, to Mecca, the most prestigious centre of Islamic learning. The pesantrens were typically (although not uniquely) located in rural districts, away from the major roads. Their geographical isolation symbolised, as it were, their ideological distance from the state. The pangulu, as a state official, and the independent teacher, the kiai, were two contrasting types, in Banten as well as elsewhere in Java.” (van Bruinessen, 1995: 165-200).

Some Indonesians refer to a widely regarded kiai as an ulama. This word is actually the plural form of the Arabic word alim which means knowledgeable person. Through common usage in Indonesia, the word ulama grew to signify

a high-level kiai, even though this is a grammatical misuse of the Arabic word (Dhofier, 1994). A kiai is not a cleric in the same way as a priest in or Buddhism. There is no governing body that ordains or authorizes a kiai. Likewise, no organization can defrock a kiai or remove him from his position. The reason is that a kiai has his position and authority because people will listen to what he says (Lukens-Bull, 2005: 96-7).

In traditional community of Java, one can become a Kiai if he is accepted by the community as Kiai. The people could ask for advices to him, or send their children to get lesson from him. Becoming a Kiai does not need formal criteria such as academic requirements, diploma and others. However, there are some informal requirements must be fulfilled by a Kyai as informal requirements that determine someone could be senior Kiai. According to Abu Bakar Aceh, there are four factors making one become big kiai: (1) knowledge, (2) piousness; (3) descendant and (4) number of students he have (Steenbrink, 1994).

Generally, a kyai has full power to bring Pesantren journey into a specified target. Therefore, implementation of education process occurring in Pesantren is also highly dependent on kyai to regulate. Although operation is usually conducted by teachers or his assistants, but his ideas remain to not separate from kyai's intervention. In addition, Pesantren is value transformation institution having duty to form spiritual mental of students in all aspects of life. Knowledge transfer from caretakers to students is only one part of program systems owned and applied by Pesantren.

Influence of the kiai in learning process in Pesantren is quite dominant. Efforts to transform values of Islam will be disturbed when Pesantren tradition, including obedience to the kyai, is regarded something having negative impact. It was introduced by Wali Songo to Hindu-Buddhist community when they intended to create a Moslem Community by transferring Islamic values in it. When understanding of students for Pesantren tradition is not good, it is difficult for kiai to change and improve systems existing in Pesantren. It will result for weakness of the Pesantren which is recently assumed the provider of Islamic missions. Students assume that kyai as a personified figure, that, in many cases, has superiority, he feels that he is little and less significant, so that such feeling results in adherence, which is sometimes valued as excessive from his self,

kyai inhabits central position in Pesantren world because its existence as one only figure who is extremely well-thought of and respected, kyai is also believed to give blessing to students because kyai is assumed as holy man near to the God.

Attitudes and behaviors to respect and obey the kyai are certainly maintained in the Pesantren community. The respects are due to the excellences of the kiai, not to the individual and private aspects. When the Kiai does not meet requirements and do deviation from religious teachings, the respect and obedience are no longer to do. According to Pesantren education systems, a new change can be made if at least two following requirements have been met. First, values of idea and firmness to hold Pesantren principle in order to achieve Islamic aspiration. Second, behavior self-adapting to the values. Obedience to follow the “standard” rules followed by Pesantren community.

Kiai and the Teaching of Tafsir

According to Pesantren tradition, knowledge is usually measured by number of learnt books and from ulama they have learnt. The standard books which must be learnt and mastered by students have been determined by the Pesantrens. Other books chosen by students to study would be taught by teachers specifically. In fact, the books taught in Pesantren are limited in number. It does not mean that Pesantren learning want to limits ways of thinking by students. Fiqh is one of sciences widely containing religious prudences and arguments. Books on fiqh contain various aspects of life such as behavior, personal relation, society, and human relation to God. Educational systems used in Pesantren widely prioritize to create of students’ personality and morality according to Islamic demands. For some, Teaching of knowledge by the Pesantren is dependent on demands of student. It consists of main subjects of religious sciences such as Arabic languages, nahwu, sharf, and others considered important. The fiqh, hadits, tafsir, and tasawuf are main subjects taught in Pesantren.

Methods of teaching commonly used in Pesantren consist of: (1) sorogan. It is a way how the students attend the lectures of teacher individually by bringing books which would be taught. The term sorogan is derived from word “sorog” (Javanese word), which means to put holy book to read in front of the

kiai or teachers. It is said that this method does not only transfer knowledge for students, but also to give values as cultural process to transfer the knowledge; (2) wetonan. This term, according to the history, is derived from word “wektu” (Java) that mean the embodied. The teaching is done in certain times. This method is also called bandongan or halaqa.

In the pesantren and Moslems, generally, It was mentioned that *buku kuning* has signify meaningful symbol. In Islamic literatures, buku kuning is kind of book having religious authority because the book is associated with writers who were close to the prophet life. Thus, classical or old characteristics of buku kuning are associated with authoritative subjects contained in it. Mentioning of *al-kutub al-muqarrara* (selected books) reflects the authoritative position. Kiai assumes buku kuning like calculator. What is important is how to find or estimate what is needed. kiai and *kitab kuning* are very close. *Kitab kuning* is a tool to find contents of the Quran concerning fiqh, tahwid, and other Islamic sciences. To use the *kitab kuning*, a kiai does not need to discuss it in deep concern. It is necessary to use sayings of salaf to understand contents of the Quran. If it is discussed, one never reaches what he/she will seek. One is impossible to do everything.

Tafsir al-Jalalain is one of the *kitab kuning*. The Kiai has special treatment in how to read and teach tafsir al-Jalalain. This interpretation will be accepted as a tool to study the Quran without questioning whether it is relevant or not. Obligation of a Kiai to obey the specified book is one expression of their full comprehension on spirit of ahl al-sunna wal jama’ah. According to 1926 Basic Budget Year, NU people should “examine the special books, including the selected books of ahl al-sunna wal jama’ah or heresy books. Kiai has determined tafsir al-Jalalain becomes one of the kitab kuning to show presence of certain authority of the kyai in selecting what are true selected books and what are heresy books. Responsibility of a kyai for interpreting al-Quran through classical ulama is not only seen in their activities when they teach tafsir to their students.

This responsibility also appears in their efforts to study other classical tafsir works to support what they teach. Interpretation of the kyai only helps students to understand what is existing in tafsir work. It means that responsibility of a Kiai is to present orthodox opinions as included in tafsir al-Jalalain. Teaching

of al-Qur'an is firstly directed to process formation of Islamic values. Interpretation in Pesantren setting widely intends to get experience than scientific interest. Pesantren does not give diploma to those who graduate. It reflects the spirit of each activity in Pesantren.

The kiais have capability of speaking Arab language. For them, minimal requirements to teach tafsir al-Jalalain is not difficult to get. It means that teaching Tafsir al-Jalalain is like teaching Arab language sciences and its grammatical aspects. To understand a paragraph or a group of paragraphs are first based on logistic analysis conducted by rigorous extract of the Arabic words. According to statements, one reason why writers of Tafsir al-Jalalain chose discussion method is intended to make Arab people consistent to use Arabic it was because that Arabic was threatened to destroy by other cultures.

In the Pesantren, tafsir al-Jalalain is classified into one of buku kuning. In terms of age, this work was written five centuries ago. Tafsir al-Jalalain is well-known by Moslems in Indonesia from period of Demak Kingdom (Yunus, 1960, 192). It was usually taught in basic level as introduction to Quranic interpretation. However, in university level, this work is still frequently used for one of reference books. Buku kuning is kind of book with yellow color. This color reflects age of the book which naturally changes from white color into yellow color. Thus, gradually yellow color is always associated with classical books. Although, technically, one can currently print classical books with white color and more advanced editing techniques. One is able to choose to printed books with old or classical appearances using yellow papers in size and format (Sunardi, 1995: 17).

Deep recitation of a buku kuning (yellow book) in discussion is also intended to help students understand other books individually. Therefore, a student needs to be required to recite buku kuning in analytical discussion. Knowledge on Arab language in recitation of buku kuning is expected to be provisions to recite other buku kunings. These ideas motivate kiai to suggest students to depend on their knowledge on translations of buku kunings increasing day by day. They are not only weak of translations, but also they should be required to trace sources through more authentic ways. However, it does not mean that they are forbidden to read other works of translations provided. They have to return to the original ones. Thus, they are possible to understand details contained in buku kunings.

For a kyai, teaching an al-Jalalain interpretation seems to be easier than other interpretations. In addition to be brief and practical, this interpretation follows logical norms expressed in discussion norms. To widen and sharpen explanation, a kyai usually finds other sources, such as, Baidhawi's interpretation. However, this explanation intends to strengthen and confirm opinion of al-Jalalain and not to give alternatives to interpretation, because al-Jalalain has been found as legal interpretation free from various possibilities of heresies. Until now, al-Jalalain interpretation still becomes the main source to understand the Quran. This interpretation is taught from basic level to advanced level (Ibid, 16).

In Pesantren, tafsir al-Jalalain is a kind of tafsir fulfill the criteria. The process of learning tafsir al-Jalalain is also intended to discipline a Moslem in understanding freedom aspect of the holy texts. it is not surprising if this kind of tafsir is given to students who are still in basic study levels. Even, there was one of Indonesian Islamic institutions that state trivially: "tafsir al-Jalalain is only for senior high school's students." This comment implies that tafsir al-Jalalain is intended for introduction to the quranic tafsir in general.

The goal of interpretation in is recitation of the text in real meaning. Traditionally, recitation is religious activity associated with Moslem. Usually, recitation does not only concern intellectual activities, but also devotional activities. However, early recitation was associated with religious-scientific activities conducted in Pesantren. Recitation or specialization is intended to understand and specialize materials of certain religious sciences. Usually, in Pesantren, recitation is classified into two: recitation of books and recitation of the Quran. Materials of book recitation consist of materials such as sharf, nahwu, fiqh, tafsir, etc.

Materials of recited book are selected under supervision of the Kiai. However, in practice, the kiai's knowledge on Islamic teachings is recited. The goal of tafsir is highly oriented for education and implantation of values which less and does not motivate kyai to write a book containing teaching bases or teaching methods. Even, until now, recitation of the book on tafsir al-Jalalain is not found. Compared to other recitations of buku kunings like work of Imam al-Shafi'is or works by other Muslim thinkers like Imam al-Ghazali's, recitation of al-Jalalain interpretation is not so developed. It looks like something ironic

because the Quranic interpretation is guidance for Muslims and the Pesantren; on the other hand, need kind of alternative interpretation method which has been awaited for long time.

Teaching of tafsir in Pesantren is conducted in a meeting called *halaqa* or study circle. Halaqa is one form of meeting between teachers and students in typical form. In al-Azhar university, halaqa system is also maintained. A Muslim Scholar (ulama) sits down near a pillar of Mosque and students sits around him while listening to the lecture. In halaqa of the Pesantren, Kiai reads the text line by line, then translates and explains it. It was a main activity when the kyai teaches tafsir for the students and people attending the pengajian (Kiai's lecture). In some cases, the space for the pengajian is not so big. There are critics that this system will lead the listeners would not know what is taught by the Kiai. For them, *halaqa* system is unproductive (Ibid, 19).

Halaqa is also a social meeting to discuss a specific topic. However, if viewed from aspect of belief, halaqa has higher position. Halaqa is not only scientific circle. One who enters halaqa has certain expectation of the meeting. Thus, to understand what is halaqah, one has to examine what they discuss and do in it. Speech and talks in halaqah are gestures of faith and expectation by the involved people, both individual and group. This reality makes us not to reduce halaqa in the only action and saying. Halaqa, thus, is not only a medium to deepen knowledge of religion. It was kind of expression or stimulation on how belief of knowledge of religion flows from a kyai as personification of salaf. It means that knowledge must be studied from religious history and experience of Moslems before (Ibid).

In context of education in Pesantren, the purpose of tasir study is for education for life. It means that interaction between santri (students), People surrounding it, and kyai or interaction between students are directed to prepare students and people to face life in society. Main focus of Pesantren education is widely on direction of practical things than theoretical and speculative things. Abdurrahman Wahid said that what was conducted in Pesantren was to process formation of value setting. Without ignoring importance of knowledge, its value gets highest portion in Pesantren. For that reason, education in Pesantren has different focus of point from education in other institutions. Such life orientation will affect how kiai treats students in teaching the Quranic interpretation.

Conclusions

Tafsir al-Jalalain becomes text-book taught in Pesantren. However, Kiai also use other books as far as they do not make conflict against existing text-books. Selection and loyalty to tafsir al-Jalalain cannot be separated from the notion of *Ahl al-sunna wal jama'ah* of Nahdhatul Ulama's (NU) requiring Moslems to comply with what has been conducted by Muslim generation of salaf. This notion also is personified in personality of the kyai. Kiyai is the keeper of Islamic tradition and respected teacher as well. Main goal of education in Pesantren is to develop and cultivate the pesantren values for the students dan people surrounding it. The Kiai teaches tafsir through the halaqa and in the Pesantren. The Kiai recite, reads and translates the text into bahasa and sometimes in Java language (*boso jowo*) through the interpretation activities in the Pengajian.

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