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## **‘Ulama’ Tiga Serangkai’ and Their Contribution towards Reviving Islamic Education in the Early Post-Colonial Indonesia**

### **Sumbangan Ulama’ Tiga Serangkai dalam Menghidupkan Semula Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia pada Awal Pasca-Kolonial**

Nadzrah Ahmad\*

#### **Abstract**

*Ulama’ Tiga Serangkai* of North Sumatera was a name coined for three distinguished scholars of the Malay World for their many contributions in the area of Islamic Studies. Abdul Halim Hasan, Zainal Arifin Abbas and Abdul Rahim Haitami received the title of *Ulama’ Tiga Serangkai* for their collective work of *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-Karim*. They envisioned towards reviving Islamic understanding among the Malays of post-colonial era. Apart from the Qur’anic commentary, these three figures offered their Malay Muslim readers a collection of knowledge on Islam in Malay language. Their writings were on faith (*’imān*), practices (*’ibādah*), theology (*tawhīd*) as well as on reformation and modernisation. This paper attempts to highlight works done by the *Ulama’ Tiga Serangkai* and examine their nature of contribution towards reviving Islamic knowledge and education among the Muslims of the era. The finding shows that the three had numerous contributions in terms of published and written works in the area of Islamic studies. Among the three, Abdul Halim Hasan was known to have significantly contributed in restructuring Islamic schools and education in the attempt to prevent unwelcomed interventions from the colonial authority.

**Keywords:** *Ulama’ Tiga Serangkai*, Contributions towards Islamic Education, Dutch Policy towards Education, Islamic Reformism.

#### **Abstrak**

*Ulama’ Tiga Serangkai* adalah gelaran bagi tiga tokoh terkemuka dari Sumatera Utara atas sumbangan mereka dalam bidang Pendidikan Islam. Abdul Halim Hasan, Zainal Arifin Abbas dan Abdul Rahim Haitami mendapat gelaran ini untuk karya kolektif mereka iaitu *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-Karim*. Aspirasi mereka adalah menghidupkan kembali kefahaman Islam di kalangan orang-orang Melayu pada era

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pasca-penjajahan. Selain daripada tafsiran Al-Qur'an, ketiga-tiga tokoh ini juga mengenengahkan koleksi pengetahuan Islam dalam bahasa Melayu kepada pembaca rantau ini. Tulisan-tulisan mereka berkisar tentang isu iman, ibadah, teologi (tawhid) serta isu reformasi dan modenisasi. Artikel ini memberi tumpuan kepada karya-karya hasil Ulama' Tiga Serangkai dan mengkaji nilai sumbangan mereka dalam menghidupkan kembali pengetahuan dan pendidikan Islam di kalangan umat Islam pada zaman itu. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa ketiga tokoh ini menghasilkan sumbangan yang tinggi nilainya dari segi karya terbitan dan tulisan dalam bidang pendidikan Islam. Di antara ketiga mereka, Abdul Halim Hasan merupakan tokoh yang banyak memberikan sumbangan besar dalam menyusun semula sekolah dan pendidikan Islam dalam usaha membendung campur tangan pihak berkuasa penjajah.

**Kata Kunci:** *Ulama' Tiga Serangkai*, Sumbangan terhadap Pendidikan Islam, Polisi Kerajaan Belanda terhadap Pendidikan Islam, Reformasi Islam.

### Introduction

Although there is no exact date for the entry of Islam into the archipelago, its arrival was agreed to occur way earlier than the European colonial.<sup>1</sup> Islam entered Indonesia through long-established trade relations between the Indonesian archipelago and countries in the Middle East such as Arabia, India, and Persia.<sup>2</sup> The influence of Islam began to permeate into the Indonesian society, and slowly the Islamic teaching moulds their ways of life. The Hindu-Buddhist religious system gradually changed to the Islamic religious system, and Islam begins to colour education, governance and social life of the society.<sup>3</sup> Islam later gained a foothold among Indonesians with the establishment of several Islamic kingdoms known to this day such as the Samudera-Pasai kingdom in Aceh, the Demak Islamic kingdom in Java, and the Banjar Masin Islamic government in Kalimantan.<sup>4</sup> When Islam was first established in the Indonesian archipelago, Islamic religious education was still not based on a formal system.<sup>5</sup> Religious studies are usually held in the form of

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<sup>1</sup> Badlihisam Mohd. Nasir, "Islam Dan Dakwah Dalam Zaman Kebangkitan Awal Islam Dan Era Penjajahan Barat Di Tanah Melayu," *Islamiyyat: International Journal of Islamic Studies* 34 (2012): 5–12, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Hasnida, "Sejarah Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia Pada Masa Pra Kolonialisme Dan Masa Kolonialisme (Belanda, Jepang, Sekutu)," *Kordinat Jurnal Komunikasi Antar Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam* 16, no.2 (2017): 237–56, 238.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-239; Badlihisam, "Islam Dan Dakwah," 5.

<sup>4</sup> Hasnida, "Sejarah Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia," 239-244.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 239, 246; Zaini Dahlan, "Syeikh Abdul Halim Hasan, 1901-1969: Akar Tradisi Intelektual Di Sumatera Timur Awal Abad XX," *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 2, no.1 (2018): 128-155, 129, doi:10.30821/jcims.v2i1.1738.

*halaqah* in *suraus* and the houses of the *ulama*'. As the number of Muslims increase, *pesantrens* and *madrasahs* began to be established.

The development of Islam in Indonesia, especially in the field of education was not free from external threats. The arrival of the colonial who brought with them the mission of Christianization has posed a new threat to the spread of *da'wah* among the people.<sup>6</sup> Eroding the position of Islam in the colonies was one of the main purposes of the European colonial. This is because they are of the view that by spreading Christian teachings, they will be able to influence the local people to obey and continue to be under their control so that they can sustain their authority in the colony.<sup>7</sup> This is evidence by the existence of a mission to Christianize the locals and the construction of churches in the colonised area. The Portuguese, for example, brought with them a priest named Francis Xavier to carry out the process of Christianization in the Malays community.<sup>8</sup>

While the Dutch, at the dawn of their colonisation, did not see Islam as a threat due to their focus which was on trade and exploitation of natural resources. Besides, they also did not have enough resources on Islam.<sup>9</sup> However, by times, they realised that Islam was capable of interfering with their colonial mission. This is because the Islamic belief that is ingrained in the local community did not exist only as a religious belief, but also as a mainstay of their political movement. Consequently, it makes it difficult for the Dutch to control them as a government due to their policies and ruling methods as the Christian colonial that are not in line with Islamic teaching.<sup>10</sup> Apart from that, it is the awareness that Islam is a source of the spiritual and intellectual strength of the Muslims in the colony that caused the Dutch to prevent the development of Islamic

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<sup>6</sup> Duriana, "Islam Di Indonesia Sebelum Kemerdekaan," *Dialektika* 9 (2015): 57–70, 59; Mohd Nizho Abdul Rahman and Solahuddin Bin Ismail, "Impak Kolonialisme Ke Atas Sistem Pendidikan Di Malaysia Satu Tinjauan Dari Perspektif Perubahan Sosialisasi Masyarakat," in *Seminar Dasar Malaysia Peringkat Antarabangsa* (Kota Kinabalu, 2009), 1–12, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Effendi, "Politik Kolonial Belanda Terhadap Islam Di Indonesia Dalam Perspektif Sejarah (Studi Pemikiran Snouck Hurgronje)," *Jurnal Teropong Aspirasi Politik Islam* 8, Jan-Jun (2012): 91–112, 94–95, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Hasnida, "Sejarah Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia," 240; Mohd Nizho and Solahuddin, "Impak Kolonialisme Ke Atas Sistem Pendidikan Di Malaysia," 5.

<sup>9</sup> H. Aqib Suminto, *Politik Islam Hindia Belanda* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1985) in Effendi, "Politik Kolonial Belanda, 96"; Mohd Nizho and Solahuddin, "Impak Kolonialisme Ke Atas Sistem Pendidikan Di Malaysia," 5.

<sup>10</sup> Siti Nur Latifah, "Kebijakan Politik Islam Hindia-Belanda: Ordonansi Perkawinan Di Jawa-Madura Tahun 1929-1931" (UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2016), 17, 21.

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education and *da'wah*. When the Dutch realised that Islam could be a threat to their colonisation process, they began to set some policies and intensify the Christianization mission in Indonesia. However, efforts to erode the value of Islam in the local community were not made openly but in stages in order to avoid opposition.<sup>11</sup>

At certain stage of the colonial ruling, the Dutch's consciousness and realization of Islam becoming a great threat to the government, resulted into the implementation of reducing Islamic influence in education. Thus, several policies were introduced into the system. One of these policies was introducing the Western education into the educational system. Obligatory public schools with Christian education in it was subsidized by the government and the formulation of such idea was made on misjudgement that the Muslims wouldn't be able to fend off this new system due to the stagnancy and anti-progress character of the religion as perceived by the Dutch. Rather than being receptive to the new system, the Muslims of Indonesia initiated an entirely new Islamic based educational system which marked the spread of *pesantren* (Islamic school) in Indonesia and commemorated the Indonesian history of struggles and fight against the (non-Islamic) system of education.<sup>12</sup>

In order to curb the further development of Islamic and private schools in Indonesia, the Dutch government introduced the Teachers Ordinance policy which main objective was to regulate the existence and operation of teachers around the country. As a result of the embarkation of Islamic education in Indonesia, the colonial government faced problems in controlling the movement of teachers and their teaching syllabus. The Dutch saw the need to ensure agreeable teaching syllabus with the government's policy in order to minimize opposition against the government. Therefore, the Teachers Ordinance was introduced in 1905 obliging all teachers to submit their particulars to the authority when applying for a teaching license. Those who were found in opposition to the government would be banned from the task and would be denied a license.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to that, the Dutch also introduced specific policies and ordinances to curb the growth of Islamic educational institutions as well

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<sup>11</sup> Rahimin Affandi et al., "Ilmu Kolonial Dan Impaknya Pada Pengajian Islam," *'Ulwan* 1 (2017): 97-124, p100; Hasnida, "Sejarah Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia," 249-250.

<sup>12</sup> H. Aqib Suminto, *Politik Islam Hindia Belanda*, 49-63.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

as its dissemination movement. These include the Wild School Ordinance (*Wilde Scholen Ordonnantie*) introduced by the Dutch in 1927, which was passed to impede the development of *pesantrens* and private *madrasahs* which sprang up like mushrooms.<sup>14</sup> The Wild School Ordinance was introduced after the Surveillance Ordinance of 1923, which carried the task of controlling the existence of indigenous private schools. Since 1880, the Dutch government officially gave permission for Indonesians to be educated. However, this permission was then cancelled by the Surveillance Ordinance due to the economic crisis in 1930s. The repression on educational allocation resulted in the decrease of colonial activities including the educational activities. The contrivance set by the colonial government was apparent when all other educational activities were reduced; the Christian education became the only choice available to the Indonesians who later found it acceptable. Thus, Christian education spread and flourished around the country. Still neglected of allocation, some Indonesians managed to find their own schooling system and this marked the growth of the so called “*Sekolah Liar*” or wild school. The system and method of teaching, particularly the syllabus, which was Islamic and parallel to the idea of Pan Islamism, alarmed the Dutch and thus the Wild School Ordinance was founded but only to find itself implemented for a year before being opposed and obliterated in the end.<sup>15</sup>

The changes in the educational system that took place during the Dutch occupation had raised the awareness of the intellectuals and religious people in Indonesia to take the initiative to preserve Islamic education in the society.<sup>16</sup> The *ulama'* (Muslim scholars) in particular, play a very important role in the mission of preserving Islamic education in Indonesia and *Ulama' Tiga Serangkai* were among those individuals involved. This article traces their biography and works, analysing the form of contribution that they have made at reviving the Islamic teaching within Indonesian society.

### *Ulama' Tiga Serangkai*

The term '*Ulama' Tiga Serangkai*' was coined to denote the three individuals – Abdul Halim Hasan, Zainal Arifin Abbas and Abdul Rahim

<sup>14</sup> Hasnida, “Sejarah Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia,” 251; Siti Nur Latifah, “Kebijakan Politik Islam Hindia-Belanda: Ordonansi Perkawinan Di Jawa-Madura Tahun 1929-1931,” 26-27.

<sup>15</sup> H. Aqib Suminto, *Politik Islam Hindia Belanda*, 49-63.

<sup>16</sup> Hasnida, “Sejarah Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia,” 250.

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Haitami – who involved collectively in the production of their *magnum opus*; *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*. Apart from themselves having connection as teacher (Abdul Halim), and students (Zainal Arifin and Abdul Rahim) they shared common aspiration towards reviving correct and pure understanding of Islamic faith and practice in educating the society.

**Abdul Halim Hasan**

His name is Haji Abdul Halim Hasan (1901-1969) the son of Haji Hasan. He was born on 15th May 1901 in Binjai. Haji Hasan, the father of Abdul Halim was attributable to Dawlay the great grandfather of the tribe Manaming of Mandailing, an area situated south west of North Sumatra near the border of West Sumatra and was called at the present time as Directorate of Mandailing Natal with its capital, call Madina.<sup>17</sup> In 1908, when he was seven, he started his education by learning from a number of religious teachers in Binjai. Abdul Halim received his influence on Islamic as well as modern knowledge understanding from these figures who were among prominent ‘*ulamā*’ of their time. Most of them were teachers of their own schools or *pesantren*. Among them were Faqih Saidi Haris was an Islamic scholar of Binjai, while Haji Abdullah Umar was well-known scholar and judge (*qāḍī*) of Binjai. Abdul Halim also received his initial education from was Haji Muhammad Nur Ismail (1879-1943) and Sheikh Hasan Ma’sum (1837-1884) who were both known to be teacher-mentors to many Malay Muslim scholars during the time. Abdul Halim was also to have learned from Sheikh Haji Muhammad Samah, a *ṭarīqāt* (*tarekat*) or Sufi leader in Binjai and also from Sheikh Mukhtar Attarid in the year 1926 when Abdul Halim was in Mecca for *ḥajj*.<sup>18</sup> Abdul Halim was also greatly influenced by Haji Rasul in the year 1917 to 1950.

**Academic Activities**

In 1920, Abdul Halim became an assistant teacher at Madrasah Jami’atul Khairiyah in Binjai which name was later changed into Madrasah al-‘Arabiyah in 1927.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, it was his long acquaintance with the school – from 1920 to 1947 – that moulded his ideology into

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<sup>17</sup> Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama Terkemuka Di Sumatera Utara* (Sumatera Utara, 1983), 253.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Hafiz Zakariya, “Islamic Reform in Malaya: The Contribution of Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin,” *Intellectual Discourse* 13, no.1 (2005): 49–72, 51-52.



embracing the Modernist ideas and methods in teaching and writing. The school which was founded by Abdul Karim Amrullah, a prominent figure who introduced the Reformist ideology in Indonesia, was also propagated for its emancipation through the school syllabus and curriculum. Apparently, as a student teacher, the school's philosophy and concept had to be understood by its members.

During this period, the religious community of Binjai was heavily influenced by the *tarekat*. As a result, studies on *fiqh*, science and history gained far less interest compared to debates on *tawhīd* ('ilm kalām). Initially, honouring his father's wish, Abdul Halim studied the knowledge of debates in the *tarekat*. However, due to his interest in science, history and *fiqh*, he went to study the knowledge from Kiyai Abdul Karim Amrullah. This, raised disagreement from his father.<sup>20</sup>

The year 1927 was the period of transition in educational mode. The move was towards dynamism in religious education from the formerly static form of learning and teaching. The transition worked as a mean to prevent private religious schools or *pesantren* from being labelled as 'Wild Schools'. In this occasion, Kiyai Abdul Karim Amrullah who was also the Principal of Madrasah Khairiyah together with the people of Kedai Panjang entrusted Abdul Halim Hasan with the position of the new Principal to the school. During the times he worked as a principal, many changes to the school system and administration had been made. These changes to the school system and administration were part of Abdul Halim's efforts towards helping the society develop the Muslims together with the changes and challenges of developing a country and nation.

In the year 1947, the political situation in Binjai worsened due to the war between the people of Indonesia and the reoccupying Dutch. This forced Abdul Halim to migrate to Kota Raja (Kutaraja) and once there, he resumed a teaching profession for two years (1947-1948). Then he moved to Langsa, where he stayed to teach for another two years (1948-1950). Here, he established an elementary school. Then, he went back to teach in Binjai and a few surrounding areas of Binjai and cities of North Sumatra until he passed away in 1969.

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<sup>20</sup> Hafiz Zakariya, "Islamic Reform in Malaya," 254.

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**Abdul Halim's Works**<sup>21</sup>

1. Interpretation of the Qur'ān, co-authored by Zainal Arifin Abbas and Abdul Rahim Haitami. The publication is entitled *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*.
2. *Bingkisan Adab dan Hikmah* (The Gift of Conduct and Wisdom)
3. *Sejarah Fiqh* (History of Jurisprudence)
4. *Wanita dan Islam* (Women and Islam)
5. *Hikmah Puasa* (The Wisdom of Fasting)
6. *Lailatul Qadar* (The *Lailat al-Qadr*)
7. *Cara Memandikan Mayat* (Method of Cleaning the Demised)
8. *Tarikh Tamadun Islam* (The History of Islamic Civilization)
9. *Sejarah Literatur Islam* (The History of Islamic Literature)
10. *Sejarah Kejadian Syara'* (The History of Islamic Law Commencement)
11. *Tarikh Abi Hasan Ash'ari* (The Biography of Abū Ḥasan Ash'ārī)
12. *Poligami Dalam Islam* (Polygamy in Islam)
13. *Tafsīr al-Aḥkām* (Legislative Exegesis), first published in April 2006.<sup>22</sup>

Abdul Halim adhered to the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* by faith and belief. This is obvious from his works, especially his interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses. Accordingly, he wrote a book on Abū Ḥasan Ash'ārī's life and biography. Concerning juristic adoption of *madhhab*, he did not confine himself to a single denomination; rather, he gave details and proofs from each and every opinion – of the *ulama'* – and left the argument open without submitting to a single view. This was to ensure the unity of the ummah where the Muslims of East Sumatra adhered to two denominations of jurisprudence; Wasliyah and Muhammadiyah.<sup>23</sup> Abdul Halim holds to the view of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* in matters pertaining to *'aqīdah* while in the matter of *fiqh* he was known not to bind himself with any *madhhab*. He depended on the Majlis Tarjih Muhammadiyah where he himself and Abdul Rahim were members. Abdul

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<sup>21</sup> Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama*, 257.

<sup>22</sup> Abdul Qadir Umar al-Hamidy, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm li 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥassan wa Akharayn: Dirāsah Manhajiyah wa Ta'rīban li al-Juz'i al-Awwal Minhu*, Ph.D dissertation submitted to al-Azhar University, Cairo, 2006, 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Halim passed away on Saturday, November 15, 1969 and was buried at the cemetery ground of Limau Sundai Village.<sup>24</sup>

### Zainal Arifin Abbas

Haji Zainal Arifin Abbas is the son of Haji Muhammad Abbas and Rajiah binti Abdullah Lubis. He was born on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1911 in Kampung Lalang, Serbanyaman, Deli Hilir, East Sumatera, now known as Desa Lalang Kecamatan Sunggal Kabupaten Deli Serdang, North Sumatera.<sup>25</sup> In 1919, when he was seven, he started his education at Binjai Methodist Boy School but for only a year before he transferred to Anglo Chinese School Medan. In 1922, when he was in standard IV at Anglo Chinese School Medan, his father was hunted by the Dutch due to his lead in the Deli *Spoorweg Mastschappij* train strike. As a consequence, he was sacked from his job and Zainal Arifin was also terminated from school. With help from his grandfather, Lebai Adam, he continued his education at Madrasah al-Ibtidā'iyah al-'Arabiyah (Arabic Primary School) which was led by Kiyai Abdul Karim Yamin and Abdul Halim Hasan. In the evening, he studied at Madrasah Islam Bandar Senembah, Binjai, a small school lead by Abdul Wahhab bin Musa. After four years of study in Arabic School, Zainal Arifin was granted with an *ibtidā'iyah* (lower) degree. After receiving the degree, he was hired as a teacher at the school by Binjai Syariah Court, on 16th June 1927.

Zainal Arifin became an assistant teacher or at Madrasah al-Ibtidā'iyah al-'Arabiyah, while studying in Standard VII. He continued studying in the morning and afternoon from the school principal and a number of well-known religious teacher in Binjai. He took lesson from Abdul Halim Hasan on the *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid* and *al-Ashbāh wa al-Nazā'ir*, from Kiyai Haji Abdul Karim Yamin, Mufti of Langkat Government, he took lesson on the *Shabbān al-Mulāwij*, while from Haji Muhammad Nur Ismail, *qāḍī* of Langkat Hulu, his lesson was on *Tafsīr al-Jawāhir* and *Itmām al-Waḥf*.<sup>26</sup> He also learned from few other individuals such as Djamaluddin Adinegoro on politics and journalism, and Mr. Ridwan of Binjai, where he took up his English lesson.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama*, 260.

<sup>25</sup> Mhd. Asaad Zainal Arifin Abbas, *Riwayat Hidup Almarhum H. Zainal Arifin 'Abbas'* In *Memorium Bersama Alm, Zainal Arifin Abbas*, ed. H.M. Hasballah Thaib (Medan: Perdana Publishing, 2011), 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Dewan Harian Cabang Angkatan 45, "Al-Ustazd. H. Zainal Arifin 'Abbas Wakil Ketua Majelis Islam Tinggi (MIT) Binjai, Pelaku Sejarah Pengibar Bendera Merah

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In 1931, Zainal Arifin Abbas received a teaching degree for *nahwu*, *şaraf*, *fiqh* and other *ibtidā’iyyah* subjects from Sheikh Hasan Ma’sum. During this time, Madrasah Ibtida’iyyah was recognised as a top institution for religious study by the Government of Deli in Medan.<sup>28</sup> Since 1931 till 1936, Zainal Arifin together with some friends who were teachers and *qāḍī* (judge) of Binjai, went for a *ḥalaqah* lesson from Sheikh Hasan Ma’sum, who was the most prominent scholar in the Government of Deli at that time. Their lessons with Sheikh Hassan Ma’sum were interrupted in the middle of 1935 due to the scholar’s illness which led to his demise. Zainal Arifin continued studying from the *ulama*’ around Binjai. At the same time, he started with the translating and editing *Tārīkh Tasyrī’ al-Islāmī*, a book written by Sheikh Muḥammad Khudōrī Bey.<sup>29</sup>

**Academic Activities**

Zainal Arifin started to write between 1932 until 1936 in various newspapers and magazines such as *Sinar Deli Medan*, *Pedoman Masyarakat* (Medan), *Dewan Islam* (Medan), *Aliran Islam* (Bandung), *Pedoman Islam* (Medan) and others. Since March 1936 until March 1942, he began to write on the history of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in twelve volumes. The publication only reached Volume IX before all the rest were burnt by the publisher and other copies taken by the Dutch authority during Agresi I (Aggression One) in Binjai together with all other books which belonged to Zainal Arifin. From November 1938 until November 1939, Zainal Arifin edited the *Tārīkh Tasyrī’ al-Islāmī* by M. Khudōrī Bey and this was published by Toko Buku Mohd. Ali bin Muhammad al-Rawiy, Penang, Malaya in 500 pages. In the beginning of March 1937 until March 12, 1942 or the beginning of Japanese occupation, Zainal Arifin together with Abdul Halim Hasan and Abdul Rahim Haitami started the task of compiling *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* until it reached six and a half sections (*juz’*) of the Qur’ān with 2,140 pages. The compilation of the *tafsīr* resumed in May 1950. Among the book written by Zainal Arifin Abbas and published in Indonesia were:

1. *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (*juz’* I until IXA)

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*Putih Pertama di Binjai*”, Kotamadya, Binjai: Badan Penggerak Pembina Potensi Angkatan 45, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Mhd. Asaad Zainal Arifin Abbas, *Riwayat Hidup Almarhum H. Zainal Arifin ‘Abbas*,” 2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 3.

2. *Peri Hidup Muhammad SAW* (Vol. 1 until VII)
3. *Kayfiat Salat* (Vol. I and II)
4. *Kitabushalat* (Vol. I and II)
5. *Perkembangan Pemikiran terhadap Agama* (Vol. 1 and II)
6. *Ilmu Tasauf* published by Penerbit Islamiyah Medan
7. *Sejarah Puasa dan Hikmahnya*
8. *Buku Pelajaran Agama Islam* for SLTP (Vol. I until III)
9. *Buku Pelajaran Agama Islam* for SLTA (Vol. I until III)<sup>30</sup>

Among those published in Malaysia are:

1. Translated copies of *Tārīkh Tasyrī' al-Islāmī* by M. Khuḍorī Bey published by Toko Buku Mohd. Ali bin Muhammad al-Rawiy, Penang.

2. *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Juz' I and II) published by Pustaka Antara, Kuala Lumpur in 1969.

3. *Sejarah dan Perjuangan Nabi Muhammad* (Vol. I until X) published by Pustaka Antara, Kuala Lumpur in 1991.

4. *Ensiklopedia Sejarah dan Perjuangan Nabi Muhammad* (Vol. I until vol. X) published by Pustaka Antara in 1991.

5. *Ilmu Tasauf* published by Pustaka Aman Press, Kelantan, Malaysia.<sup>31</sup>

The writing of *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* continued with the assistance of his students especially when he was active in Masyumi (Majlis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia), Parmusi (Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia) and PPP (Partai Parsatuan Pembangunan). Zainal Arifin adhered to *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* by faith and was bound to the view of *Shāfi'ī madhhab* by Islamic practice.<sup>32</sup> Zainal Arifin passed away on September 16, 1979 at the age of 68 and was buried at Batu Ginting Road, Medan Sumatera.<sup>33</sup>

### Abdul Rahim Haitami

Abdul Rahim Haitami was born in 1910 in Kebun Lada, Binjai. His father Haitami was a Muslim scholar (*'ālim*) of Binjai.<sup>34</sup> In 1917,

<sup>30</sup> Mhd. Asaad, *Riwayat Hidup Almarhum H. Zainal Arifin 'Abbas'*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Hamidy, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Dewan Harian Cabang Angkatan 45, "Al-Ustazd. Abdul Rahim Haitami, Wakil Ketua Majelis Islam Tinggi (MIT) Binjai, Pelaku Sejarah Pengibar Bendera Merah Putih Pertama di Tanggal 6 September 1945," Kotamadya, Binjai: Badan Penggerak Pembina Potensi Angkatan 45, 7. Al-Hamidy, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, 14.

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when he was seven, he started his education in Binjai by learning from a number of well-known religious teachers, such as Faqih Saidi Haris, Haji Abdullah Umar, Syeikh Haji Muhammad Nur Ismail, Syeikh Haji Muhammad Samah, Kiayai Haji Abdul Karim Tamin and Syeikh Haji Hasan Ma’sum.<sup>35</sup> Apart from religious knowledge of *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *tārīkh* and *fiqh*, which he learned from said figures, Abdul Rahim Haitami also learned Journalism and Politics from Jamaluddin Adinegoro in 1930 in Medan, and English from Muhammad Ridwan in 1930 in Binjai, which was as same as Zainal Arifin Abbas.<sup>36</sup> In 1922, he attended Madrasah Ibtida’iyyah together with Zainal Arifin Abbas and Bustami Ibrahim. Here, he learned the knowledge of *naḥwu*, *balāghah*, *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *taṣawwuf* and *tārīkh*. He was appointed as an assistant teacher at Madrasah Ibtida’iyyah while continuing with his studies at Madrasah al-Khairiyah al-Thanawiyah. He also attended *ḥalaqah* or group learning at many different mosques and homes around Binjai on *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth* and *fiqh*.<sup>37</sup>

**Academic Activities**

Abdul Rahim was appointed as an assistant teacher at Madrasah ‘Arabiyyah School, which during the time was under the principalship of Abdul Halim Hasan. Then he became a full-fledged teacher in 1930 together with Zainal Arifin Abbas. He also appointed as Head of Madrasah ‘Arabiyyah Kebun Lada Branch, Binjai.<sup>38</sup> Together with Abdul Halim Hasan and Zainal Arifin Abbas, he interpreted *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*. Apart from that, he also wrote in several magazines and newspapers published in Medan including Pedoman Masyarakat, Panji Islam, Menara, and Pewarta Deli. Pewarta Deli was a newspaper headed by Djamaluddin Adinegoro, focusing on Islam and independence in Medan. Similar to the other two, Abdul Rahim also adhered to the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā’ah* by faith. While in *fiqh*, he did not bind himself to any *madhhab* similar to Abdul Halim Hasan. They depended on Majlis Tarjih Muhammadiyah where he was one of the members.<sup>39</sup> He passed away on July 13, 1948 in Langsa.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Dewan Harian Cabang Angkatan 45, “Al-Ustazd. Abdul Rahim Haitami,” 7.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Hamidy, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Hamidy, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

## Contribution of *Ulama' Tiga Serangkai* towards Islamic Reformism in the Malay World

### A. *Significance of authoring their Magnum Opus Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim and other Individual Works*

The *tafsir* was written in the era of development and progress where there's a need to educate the growing nation – those are of Muslims primarily – with the Qur'an, its basic background and most importantly its content. By doing so, the exegetes hope to encourage the learning of Qur'an within the Malay Muslim society which were facing threats from the adoption of Western education and culture, prior to colonisation.<sup>41</sup> According to the authors, their motivation to write was due to the changes and transition of the nation due to political and social events following the colonial ruling and Japanese occupation, which struck the country. In the introductory section, the writers mentioned that these transitions to a great extent had changed the perspective and practice of the Muslims towards Islamic belief and practice. They attended less to Islamic practice and the learning of Islamic knowledge. This encouraged the spread of blind following (*taqlid*), animism, black magic and so forth, resulting in many kinds of social problems.<sup>42</sup> The initiation was further due to requests of the Muslim society – in both Indonesia and Malaysia – to gain knowledge of the Qur'an through a Malay *tafsir*. Majority of Muslims in the archipelago depends a lot on Malay interpretation of the Qur'an in order to have insight on its glorious meaning and content. Arabic was indeed, and still a language understood by the minority of the learned. Therefore, according to the writers, they found themselves responsible to undertake the task of writing an exegesis in Malay language for the mass who did not comprehend Arabic.<sup>43</sup>

Besides the *tafsir*, the three *ulama'* also worked hard to disseminate Islamic teaching through writing religious books and delivering their ideas in local magazines. The books and articles written were on various topics on '*aqidah*, *sirah* and *fiqh*, as well as on history and recent issues happening in the society. Many of these books especially those printed in Malaysia were no longer available except in the form of archive.

<sup>41</sup> Nadzrah Ahmad, Abdul Halim Hasan and His Methodological Approach in Tafsir Al-Quran Al-Karim (Abdul Halim Hasan Dan Metodologinya Dalam Tafsir Al-Quran Al-Karim), *Journal of Islam in Asia* 14, no.2 (2017): 376–96, 314.

<sup>42</sup> Abdul Halim Hasan et.al., *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-Karim*, (Penang: Persama Press, 1952), v.1, 2. Abdul Halim Hasan et.al., *Tafsir Al-Qur'an al-Karim* (Medan: Firma Islamiyah, 1955), v.1, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

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***B. Establishment of Madrasah Arabiyah Binjai***

Mostly, his contributions involved many of his efforts towards building schools and social works. Among these contributions mainly involved the establishment of Madrasah ‘Arabiyyah in the courtyard of Masjid Raya, Binjai in 1927. The school is still standing today with the name Madrasah Salahiyah under management and led by M. Ishak Akini from 1950 to 1988, one of Abdul Halim’s students and then continued by Kiyai Haji Zamakhsyari from the year 1988 until today. He also contributed in the establishment of the Islamic High School in Langsa in 1947. The school continues to exist until today under the name “*Madrasah Islam Moderen*” or Modern Islamic School. The principal in charge is Tengku Ismail Thaib Payabuyuh, one of Abdul Halim’s students.<sup>44</sup>

***C. Renewal of Schooling System due to Wild School Ordinance (Wilde Scholen Ordonnantie)***

During the Dutch colonial, they had imposed some educational ordinance to curb the development of Islamic schools. Among the ordinance was the Wild School Ordinance (*Wilde Scholen Ordonnantie*) which was issued in October 1932. According to this ordinance, any private school to be established must require permit from the government.<sup>45</sup> In order to avoid the *pesantren* from being labelled as wild schools, Abdul Halim Hassan, who was entrusted by Haji Rasul as Principal of Madrasah Jami’atul Khairiyah, had made some changes to the school system and administration.<sup>46</sup> With this task at hand, he observed certain amendments to the school according to the condition and situation of that time. Among those amendments involved changing the name of Madrasah Jami’atul Khairiyah to Madrasah ‘Arabiyyah or ‘Arabiyyah School. He also structured the line-up of the teachers to include a variety of background.<sup>47</sup> Apart from that, as a principal, Abdul Halim encouraged the formation of student organisations inside and outside the school in order to cater the needs of the Muslim community. He strategized numerous outreach programs aimed for the benefit of the society such as publishing

<sup>44</sup> Abdul Halim Hasan et.al., *Tafsir Al-Qur’an al-Karim* (Medan: Firma Islamiyah, 1955), v.1, 257.

<sup>45</sup> Siti Nur Latifah, “Kebijakan Politik Islam Hindia-Belanda,” 26-27; Hasnida, “Sejarah Perkembangan Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia.” 251-252.

<sup>46</sup> Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama*, 254.

<sup>47</sup> Zaini Dahlan, “Syeikh Abdul Halim Hasan, 1901-1969,” 135.



daily news and magazine, religious books and translating the history of Islam.<sup>48</sup>

Abdul Halim's efforts show that the colonial policy introduced did not become a hindrance for the Muslim scholars to spread Islamic teaching and *da'wah*. In fact, the *ulamā'* did took advantage of the new system introduced by the colonial especially in terms of modernisation and reformation and proactively made changes to the existed Islamic school system in order to meet the modern standard.

#### ***D. Participation in a Religious Organisation and Political Movement***

The three *ulamā'* were not only active in an academic field but also engaged with religious and political movements.<sup>49</sup> They hold some important positions during their involvement in the organisations. Abdul Halim Hassan, for example, was among the top leader of Ikhwan al-Safa and Hizbullah-Sabilillah-Mujahidin groups and held a position as Lieutenant Col. Titulir under Aceh Governor.<sup>50</sup> While Zainal Ariffin Abbas had served Masyumi as Ketua Umum Sumatera Utara and much more important position in both religious and political organisations.<sup>51</sup> Abdul Rahim Haitami held a position of Wakil Ketua Majelis Islam Tinggi and Ketua Muhammadiyah in Binjai.<sup>52</sup> Their involvement in those organisations is crucial for Islamic education in Indonesia as the organisations endeavours towards restoring Islamic teaching in the society and ensure its continuity. Among the important organisation in which both Abdul Halim Hasan and Abdul Rahim Haitami were members was Muhammadiyah.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama*, 254-255.

<sup>49</sup> Zaini Dahlan, "Syeikh Abdul Halim Hasan, 1901-1969," p137; H. M. Yakub, "Sejarah Sosial Intelektual Islam Zainal Arifin Abbas (1912-1979 M) Perspektif Sosio-Kultural," *Jurnal Kajian Dakwah Dan Kemasyarakatan* 22, no.1 (2018), 100, <https://doi.org/10.15408/dakwah.v22i1.12048>.

<sup>50</sup> Zaini Dahlan, "Syeikh Abdul Halim Hasan, 1901-1969," 137, 139.

<sup>51</sup> H. M. Yakub, "Sejarah Sosial Intelektual Islam Zainal Arifin Abbas," 93.

<sup>52</sup> Abadi Barus, "Al Ustaz Abd. Rahim Haitami," in M. Jamil and Ja'far, "Pemimpin Perempuan Dan Non-Muslim Perspektif Ulama' Tiga Serangkai," *Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 8, no.1 (2018), 151, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2018.8.1.31-54>.

<sup>53</sup> HAMKA, *Kenang-Kenangan Hidup* (Gema Insani, 2020), 317.

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Muhammadiyah and Dutch policies of Adat law and Islamic  
law

During the Dutch colonisation, the colonial had applied the divide and rule (*divide et impera*) concept aimed at perpetuating their power and imperialism over Indonesia. One of their strategies in implementing the concept was by contrasting the customary law, the Islamic law and the Dutch law. They had prioritised the Dutch law and customary law or *adat* law (*hukum adat*) and neglected the Islamic law.<sup>54</sup> With this policy implemented, the colonial had created alienation between the society and their own religion, Islam, which previously able to go hand in hand with the customs of the Indonesian society.<sup>55</sup> This, undeniably had impacted the society even after the colonisation period had ended.<sup>56</sup>

This situation had called the Muslim scholars to seriously address the problems. One of their solutions was through disseminating the right Islamic teaching and purify the misunderstandings created by the Dutch towards the religion and its practice. They answered the call for modernisation introduced by the colonial but later reintroduce it to the society with its Islamic features. Among the active organisations worked on the reformation of the Indonesian society was Muhammadiyah. Muhammadiyah was the most significant and successful reformist organisation of Indonesia. It was established in Yogyakarta by Kiyai Ahmad Dahlan (1868-1923) in 1912.<sup>57</sup> The association aimed at reforming Islamic teach-

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<sup>54</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, “Politik Hukum Hindia Belanda Dan Pengaruhnya Terhadap Legislasi Hukum Islam Di Indonesia,” *Ahkam* XII, no.2 (2012), 117, 121.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 123; Sidi Gazalba, “Konflik Penyesuaian Antara Adat, Agama Dan Pengaruh Barat,” in Yelia Nathassa Winstar, “Pelaksanaan Dua Sistem Kewarisan Pada Masyarakat Adat Minangkabau,” *Jurnal Hukum Dan Pembangunan* 37, no.2 (2007), 155.

<sup>56</sup> M. B. Hooker, *Adat Law in Modern Indonesia* (Kuala Lumpur: East Asian Historical Monograph, Oxford University Press, 1978). Muhammad Iqbal, “Politik Hukum Hindia Belanda,” 123.

<sup>57</sup> In 1890, he went to Mecca and became a student of Syeikh Ahmad Khatib and others. Upon returning home, he was determined to reform Islam and resist Christianization by the Western missionaries. He managed to join Budi Utomo in 1909 but only temporarily that due to the urge by his supporters, he then established Muhammadiyah. Budi Utomo was a movement participated by mainly Javanese *priyayi* or aristocrats whom underwent Dutch education and found post in the government service. M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1300*, (London: Palgrave, 1993), 208. Ahmad Khatib was a forerunner of the reformists in the Minangkabau area who spread his ideas from Mecca. Born in 1855 from a family with both religious and *adat* background, he went to Mecca in 1876 and achieved the highest-ranking position as Imam for the *madhhab* Shāfi’ī in Masjid al-Haram. Ahmad Khatib was known for his opposition

ing and resisting the advance of Christianity as well as superstitious beliefs among the locals.<sup>58</sup>

In 1917, a women's section called Aisyiyah was also established to assist in the modernisation of Indonesian women.<sup>59</sup> When Muhammadiyah was introduced into the dynamic Islamic world of Minangkabau by Haji Rasul in 1925, Muhammadiyah grew rapidly. From previously 4,000 members in Java, the number increased into 24,000 within 5 years of activity in Minangkabau. By 1938, the organisation spread throughout the main islands and ran 834 mosques, 31 public libraries, and 1774 schools.<sup>60</sup> Abdul Halim was one of those students affected by this idea and see through to its implementation in vernacular system later on. The idea of Islamic reformism, which was evident in Muhammadiyah was found to bear resemblances with the Reformist ideology initially popularized by both Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida of Egypt. Ahmad Dahlan himself was thought to have come across Abduh's idea prior to the formation of Muhammadiyah. This was apparent in Dahlan's perspective over certain issues pertaining to Muslim life.<sup>61</sup>

Muhammadiyah was indeed a modernist observation of Islam where life was introduced to new paradigm and perspective, thus changed the traditional age-old of perceiving matters of daily life. The organisation also sought for better opinion and viewpoint regarding Islamic fundamentals of *hukm* (law) and related issues to enable a broader conceivable space for Muslim life.<sup>62</sup> This ideology as a whole modified the perspective and paradigms of the Muslims in Indonesia to seek and gain correct knowledge and understanding of the religion. It drawn upon

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against the Tariqat Naqsyabandiyah as well as *adat* regulations of inheritance. Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900-1942* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1973), 31-33.

<sup>58</sup> Umar Hasyim, *Muhammadiyah Jalan Lurus Dalam Tajdid, Dakwah, Kaderisasi Dan Pendidikan: Kritik Dan Terapinya* (Surabaya: Bina Ilmu, 1990), 1.

<sup>59</sup> Harry Jindrich Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun : Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation, 1942-1945* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1958), 21. M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1300*, 171.

<sup>60</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1300*, 171.

<sup>61</sup> Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900-1942*, 76. Zaim Rais, *Against Islamic Modernism: The Minangkabau Traditionalists Responses to the Modernists Movement* (Jakarta: Logos, 2001), 32.

<sup>62</sup> Dja'far Siddik, "Dinamika Organisasi Muhammadiyah Di Sumatera Utara," *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 1, no.1 (2017): 1-40, 9-10, 13, doi:10.30821/jcims.v1i1.322. AminullahElhady, "Islamic Reform Movement in Indonesia : Role of Muhammadiyah in Social Empowerment," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7, no.8 (2017): 340-50, 340-341.

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them the correct understanding of Islam and opened up avenues for further development of Islamic knowledge. Finding solutions when *ijtihād* was made as an option, offering better space for interpretations, perspectives and way of life. Abdul Halim's involvement in Muhammadiyah may have considerably moulded his perspective on Islamic teaching and education. In many occasions, his efforts toward educating the Muslim ummah was to draw close to the current trend revolving the society at large. Traditional approach was not one he undertook in this regard.

**Conclusion**

The call for Reformism in the Middle East has indeed influenced many young scholars returning from either their educational endeavor or spiritual journey of performing *hajj* to introduce and spread further the idea of Modernism among the Malay society. Driven by the motivation to not only purify Islamic belief and practice of the community, these young reformists envisaged a modern society equipped with necessary knowledge of both worlds with correct understanding of Islam. *Ulama Tiga Serangkai* were among those individuals whom by far had marked their steps through the history of Islamic Reformism in the Malay region. Their involvement in such activities proves their seriousness in realizing the spirit of Islam.

*Ulama' Tiga Serangkai* inspire the spirit of reform and modernity in ensuring the continuity of Islamic education in the Indonesian society. They perceived the policies and systems introduced by the colonials positively by adopting and adapting them to the concept of Islam. This is apparent through their involvement in the improvement of the traditional Islamic education system and curriculum that is in line with modernity without neglecting the important element of Islamic education. They also took lessons from the turmoil and fall of Islam that took place in the Middle East and emulated what the reformists did there and applied it in the context of the Indonesian society. As they were inspired by figures such as Jamal al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh, their writings and teaching, therefore, can be seen as loaded with ideas of reform and modernisation and most especially reflected in their *magnum opus*; *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*.

Their effort of writing *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* which was written in Malay language, and other religious books, and their focus on teaching the community right belief and practices, as well as their involvement in the Islamic religious and political movements indicate their

utmost concern at sustaining Islamic education within the society which was then affected by the secular elements of colonisation.

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