COMMUNITIES OF THE QUR'AN

DIALOGUE, DEBATE AND DIVERSITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

EDITED BY EMRAN EL-BADAWI AND PAULA SANDERS
WITH A FOREWORD BY REZA ASLAN

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Dialogue, debate and diversity in the twenty-first century

Edited by Emran El-Badawi
and Paula Sanders

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Chapter 3

The Reception of the Qur'an in Popular Sufism in Indonesia: *tadabbur* among the *Ma'iyah* Community

Lien Iffah Naf'atu Fina and Ahmad Rafiq, Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

This chapter concerns the reception of the Qur'an[1] in a popular Sufi community in Indonesia – Ma'iyah. Its reception of the Qur'an manifests in their activity called *tadabbur*.[2] In principle, *tadabbur* is learning from the Qur'an, not learning the Qur'an – the latter is an act of *tafsir*. In addition, *tadabbur* emphasizes the spiritual consciousness manifested in daily life (affective), not pure knowledge (cognitive), resulting from interaction with the Qur'an. The goal of *tadabbur* is that one becomes a better person and closer to God. *Tadabbur* is also a counter-discourse to a popular perception that grasping the meaning of the Qur'an is limited to scholars who are formally trained in Qur'anic sciences. Thus, it also aims to make the Qur'an meaningful for, and accessible by, everyone.

Ma'iyah, founded in 1993, attracts thousands to its events. Since its founding, the Qur'an has been an intimate part of the gatherings. The Qur'an provides a way to address Ma'iyah's main concerns – secularism

[1] On the theory of reception of the Qur'an, see Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 64, and Rafiq, 'Reception of the Qur'an in Indonesia,' pp. 144–56.

[2] It literally means 'reflection, meditation, thinking about, consideration, contemplation.' See Wehr, *Arabic–English Dictionary*, p. 271.

and materialism – which eventually lead to narrow-mindedness in religious thinking. Ma'iyah actively addresses and criticizes political and social situations in Indonesia, in which leaders and non-leaders alike are seen as detached from intimate connection with God.

Here we describe Ma'iyah as a Sufi community,[3] how *tadabbur* is used as an approach to interpret the Qur'an, and how it is practiced by Emha Ainun Nadjib, known as *Cak* Nun,[4] the main teacher in the Ma'iyah community[5] and thus the mediator between the Qur'an and the community.[6] We shed light on how Ma'iyah, as a Sufi religious and social

[3] Note that the Ma'iyah community never calls itself a Sufi community. This attitude is not unique to the Ma'iyah context, but is rather part of the character of Sufi communities. See Sands, *Sufi Commentaries*, p. 4. In fact, Ma'iyah consistently avoids any form of strict labeling. However, in an interview with Nadjib on December 29, 2016, he did not disagree with our opinion that Ma'iyah is, in a way, a Sufi community: elements of Sufism permeate its principles and rituals. Another primary character of Ma'iyah is that, unlike several Sufi communities, its goal is not spiritual ecstasy but social action and service. See Daniels, *Islamic Spectrum*, p. 143; Knauth, 'Performing Islam,' p. 151.

[4] *Cak* is a Javanese term meaning 'older brother,' and it implies a sense of respect and friendliness. In academic work, he is referred to as Nadjib; in other contexts, including daily life, he is referred to as *Cak* Nun. Nadjib was born on 27 May 1953, in Jombang, East Java. He started his career as a poet and cultural expert in the 1970s. He obtained religious education from Pondok Pesantran (*madrasa* in the Indonesian setting). It is difficult to define his role. He himself refuses any categorical definition, but he is known as a poet, playwright, essayist, composer, singer, religious leader, political critic and visionary, all at the same time. He has published eighty-two books, which are anthologies of his essays, poems and scripts. See Betts, *Jalan Sunyi Emha*, p. 25; Rasmussen, *Women*, p. 34; and Knauth, 'Performing Islam,' p. 152. Nadjib is known as *kyai mbeling* ('the naughty cleric') and an out-of-the-box thinker. See Rasmussen, 'Performing Religious Politics,' p. 170.

[5] Ma'iyah has three teachers, who are called *marja'* (meaning 'reference'). They are Nadjib himself; Ahmad Fuad Effendy (known as *Cak* Fuad), Nadjib's older brother and a professor of Arabic literature; and Muhammad Nursamad Kamba, a professor of Sufism. Nadjib is highly influenced by these two figures. (Interview with an editor of www.caknun.com, January 30, 2017.)

[6] The sources used here were gathered from observation (participating in Ma'iyah gatherings), interviewing key people, and documentation. We thank Ma'iyah management for providing us with videos and voice recordings of the gatherings across Java. Nadjib's essays, mainly published on Ma'iyah's official site (www.caknun.com) are also important sources. Since February 2016, Nadjib had written two series of essays (called Daur – 'cycle') published daily on his official website, which heavily relate to the topic of the Qur'an. Daur-I was published on the website from February 3–December 7, 2016 (309 essays); Daur-II was started from January 1, 2017–March 3, 2018 (319 essays). The subtitle of Daur-II is *Membaca Iqra'* (meaning 'reading *Iqra'*'). *Iqra'* is believed to be the first passage of the Qur'an revealed by God to Muhammad, which shows Nadjib's attempt to invite the reader to reflect on Qur'anic instruction to read not only

movement, tackles the challenges of the twenty-first century. We also focus on how Nadjib proposes a unique approach to understanding the Qur'an to tackle narrow-mindedness in religious thinking, which leads to intolerance, violence and sectarianism[7] in the name of Islam. The study of *tadabbur* provides a method to make the Qur'an down to earth and practical for Muslims everywhere in the twenty-first century.

MA'IYAH: A COMMUNITY WITHOUT A BOUNDARY

Ma'iyah covers various religio-cultural gatherings in different regions in Indonesia, particularly Java. The embryo of Ma'iyah was a monthly gathering called Padhangmbulan (literally, 'full moon'), founded in 1993 in Nadjib's hometown, Jombang, East Java. Ma'iyah is open to all people, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, or piety, and without any requirement to convert or adhere to new beliefs.[8] Ma'iyah even has a loyal audience of non-Muslims. The idea of openness inspires people from all walks of life to participate in the events arranged by the Jamaah Ma'iyah[9] because they feel at home and welcomed. As an expression of Nadjib's concern about – not to mention protest against – the Indonesian New Order regime's social problems, injustice and pragmatism, this movement sought broader changes in Indonesian society. Adopting a socio-religious approach and an existentialist theme – a door to Sufism – and creatively combining Sufism/mysticism and politics, the movement attracted people in East Java, and soon expanded its influence throughout Indonesia.[10]

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the Qur'an, but also the universe and daily phenomena. Daur's nature remains reflective and intellectual, sometimes sarcastic and satirical. In 2017, the first *Daur* series was published in four edited volumes by Bentang Pustaka (Yogyakarta, Indonesia).

[7] We intentionally avoid using common terms here like *conservatism*, *fundamentalism*, *radicalism*, and *extremism* to refer to rigid and violent Islamic understanding and practices, just as Nadjib and the Ma'iyah community deliberately avoid labeling and generalization.

[8] See Rasmussen, 'Performing Religious Politics,' p. 156.

[9] From the Arabic *jama'a*, meaning group or community. See Wehr, *Arabic–English Dictionary*, p. 160.

[10] This approach was expected because Nadjib's concern for justice and spirituality, and his advocacy for the lower classes, had developed early in his career in the 1970s and 1980s, as reflected in his literature. See Daniels, *Islamic Spectrum*, p. 134.

Ma'iyah gatherings are conducted monthly in at least five cities on the island of Java, and each has its respective name (Padhangmbulan in Jombang (since 1993), Mocopat Syafaat in Yogyakarta (1999), Gambang Syafaat in Semarang (2001), Kenduri Cinta in Jakarta (2001) and Bangbang Wetan in Subaraya (2008). Besides the monthly gatherings, Nadjib and his group, KiaiKanjeng,[11] are also invited to hold gatherings in different cities across Indonesia.[12] He was disappointed with the direction of the Reformation Era, the period after the fall of the Soeharto regime in 1998. Instead of working together for a better Indonesia, religious figures fought for political positions and created friction. Nadjib decided to walk the 'silent road',[13] detaching himself from any religious or political groups. As a result, Ma'iyah is not attached to any existing religious or Sufi group; in fact, it has intentionally avoided an attachment as well as a formalized structure.[14] The Ma'iyah community is self-consciously a Muslim community, but its very character is inclusive, beyond the boundaries of traditional–modern, rural–urban, younger–older, male–female, and intellectual–layperson, even though it attracts mainly young adults. Consequently, its community is very fluid, and its members are not bound by an oath of allegiance (*bay'a*). Nonetheless, loyal audiences attend Ma'iyah in neighboring areas. By February 10, 2018, there had been 3,882 Ma'iyah gatherings throughout Indonesia and beyond.[15]

Ma'iyah gatherings have several elements. First, there is the ritual

[11] KiaiKanjeng was founded in the 1990s, but the musicians involved in this group had accompanied Nadjib's theatrical performances since the 1980s. In fact, the name KiaiKanjeng was from one of his plays, *Pak Kanjeng* (*Mr. Respected*), which talks about political tyranny and a figure who protested against it. See Knauth, 'Performing Islam,' pp. 148–60. Nadjib and his group is known as CNKK (*Cak* Nun and KiaiKanjeng).

[12] Nadjib and KiaiKanjeng have also been invited to European countries, and to South Korea, Malaysia and Australia. See Betts, *Jalan Sunyi Emha*; Daniels, *Islamic Spectrum*, pp. 134–9. The community is aware of the need to cope with the digital era, so they actively post materials via their official website, YouTube channel, Facebook page, Twitter account, and Instagram account, so that Jamaah Ma'iyah who are not able to physically attend the gatherings can keep up. This expands the significance of Ma'iyah to virtual audiences.

[13] See Betts, *Jalan Sunyi Emha*.

[14] Daniels, *Islamic Spectrum*, p. 154.

[15] Interview with the editor of www.caknun.com (May 12, 2017).

– conducted together by Nadjib, as the leader, and the audience – of Qur'anic recitation and prayers, followed by the recitation of praise for the Prophet (*salawat al-nabi*) and remembrance of or praise for God (*dhikr*). Music played by KiaiKanjeng on *gamelan* (a Javanese set of musical instruments) and modern musical instruments accompanies the singing and chanting, creating a moving state of mutual love and togetherness. Second, there is dialogue or discussion on a variety of topics, including politics, religion and spirituality, delivered with a great amount of humor, that often invites the audience into sustained laughter. The jokes create intimacy and a sense of community. The exegetical delivery of the Qur'an takes place randomly, either to respond to contemporary problems or to seek answers to foundational questions. The structural presentation of these elements is random. Nadjib decides the flow of the gathering on the basis of his observation of its atmosphere and audience.

The name Ma'iyah as a reference to the gatherings began in July 2001. The word is from the Arabic *ma'a*, meaning 'together with,' 'in the company of,' 'accompanied by,' 'connected' and 'along with.'[16] The name is inspired by Moses' prayer (Q 26:62), *qala inna ma'iya rabbi sayahdin*,[17] and Muhammad's purported words of consolation to Abu Bakr during the *hijra* (migration from Mecca to Medina), *la tahzan inna-llah ma'ana* (Q 9:40).[18] This term evokes a sense of connectedness, togetherness and communion between human beings and with God and His messenger. Thus, there is a triangular dimension: God–Muhammad–human beings.[19] Furthermore, Nadjib or the teachers of Ma'iyah are not the only source of 'truth.' The truth is sought together.[20] Scholars and important figures are invited to the stage, low by design, which symbolizes that everyone involved in Ma'iyah gatherings is equal, and the audience is welcome to ask questions or make comments.

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[16] Wehr, *Arabic–English Dictionary*, p. 1073.

[17] 'No, my Lord is with me: He will guide me.' See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 234.

[18] 'Do not worry, God is with us.' See ibid., p. 120.

[19] On the Qur'anic concept of Ma'iyah, see Ahmad Fuad Effendy, *Ma'iyah dalam al-Qur'an*, published in 2009 by Progess (Nadjib and KiaiKanjeng's management team) for internal circulation among the Ma'iyah community.

[20] Thus, other names for Ma'iyah gatherings are *Sinau Bareng* and *Ngaji Bareng*, Javanese phrases that literally mean 'learning together.' *Ngaji* also means 'reciting the Qur'an.'

Before presenting an argument, usually one that is Qur'an-related, Nadjib starts by saying that what he is going to deliver is only his opinion and that the audience is encouraged to actively and independently seek their own understanding. For example, in a Suluk Maleman gathering,[21] just before he explained his *tadabbur* of Q 24:35, Nadjib stated: 'This is my opinion. You do not need to use it as guidance. I am not your teacher, your *murshid* (spiritual leader), nor your prophet. Your position and mine are the same [meaning that both are seekers of truth].'[22] In an interview, he also emphasized that acknowledging ignorance, and constantly seeking God's guidance as the beholder of the absolute truth, is a necessity.[23]

TADABBUR AS AN APPROACH TO THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an has been the backbone of the community since the beginning. The concept of Padhangmbulan gathering is a *pengajian tafsir* (a religious gathering that discusses the meaning of the Qur'an) led by both Nadjib and Effendy. The latter provides 'textual *tafsir*'; he reads certain verses and their translation, explains the meaning of key words, delivers an interpretation by referring to hadith literature and commentaries of the Qur'an, and then offers his own interpretation. Nadjib, in contrast, delivers a 'contextual *tafsir*.' He links the verses with contemporary political, social, cultural and religious situations, using the Qur'an as the perspective from which to analyze them.[24] This has become the pattern of other Ma'iyah gatherings.

The Ma'iyah views the Qur'an as the ultimate source of guidance. Because humans are far from grasping truth, God kindly sent a perfect human being to follow (Muhammad) and the book from which to seek guidance (the Qur'an).[25] In the Ma'iyah community, there is no

[21] A monthly Ma'iyah gathering in Pati, a town in Central Java. Nadjib attends the gathering only once in a while.
[22] Suluk Maleman, July 20, 2013.
[23] 'Cak Nun: "Kun!" Maka Berlangsunglah Islam' (video).
[24] Mustofa, 'Al-Qur'an, Pengajian *Maiyah*, dan Masyarakat (1)' and 'Mbok Dimaafkan Jangan Dendam Terus.'
[25] Nadjib, 'Min Adab-idDunya ilaa Fuad-ilJannah.'

intercession: God and Muhammad are the direct teachers, and the Qur'an is a means to communicate with them. Muhammad is an important figure in Ma'iyah, and love for him is manifested in the *salawat* chanting during the rituals. Nadjib affectionately wrote about the Qur'an and Muhammad:

> I am learning *iqra'*. As we live in a separate time from the revelation of the Qur'an, that I cannot ask and express my love to him (Muhammad), the Qur'an becomes the main interlocutor that I can feel and touch him. Every time I look at the *mushaf*, I imagine his face. Every time I read its letters, I imagine that I listen to him reciting.[26]

He continues: 'I am reading the Qur'an while embracing my longing for Muhammad.'[27]

Nadjib believes that the Qur'an is the solution to all questions and problems. Because the Qur'an comes from God, it is the only source of guidance about which humans can be completely sure of its truth and absoluteness. Nadjib once said that 'we are swimming in the pool of untruthfulness' and illusions.[28] Other sources might be *mutanajjis* ('impure') because they come from humans, but the Qur'an is the only *mutahhar* ('pure') source.

TADABBUR

Even though the discussion of the Qur'an has been the foundational element of Ma'iyah, the term *tadabbur* was popularized only in 2016. The word, from the root *d-b-r*, means 'reflection, meditation, thinking, consideration, contemplation, and deliberation.'[29] *Tadabbur* is Nadjib's strategic term to make the Qur'an meaningful for wider audiences. There are at least two aspects that can explain his preference for the term. First, the term

[26] Nadjib, 'Membayangkan Wajahnya,' Daur-II.087.
[27] Nadjib, 'Al-Qur'an Sembarang Orang,' Daur-II.088.
[28] Kenduri Cinta, January 9, 2015.
[29] Wehr, *Arabic–English Dictionary*, p. 313.

tafsir is an elite one; to qualify as a *mufassir* (meaning 'an interpreter of the Qur'an'), one has to master the Qur'anic sciences. Second, the Qur'an itself uses the term *tadabbur* instead of *tafsir* as an approach to interact with it (Q 4:82; 47:24; 38:29). *Tadabbur*'s ultimate goal is spiritual consciousness manifested in daily life – namely, to be closer to God and to be a good human being – rather than pure knowledge.

The aim of *tadabbur* to make the Qur'an meaningful and accessible to everyone is completely in line with Nadjib's concern and advocacy for the neglected, as well as with his continuous effort 'to encourage individual pride and agency.'[30] Nadjib avers that the Qur'an belongs to those who believe in it, not just to those who are traditionally trained to interpret it. If the Qur'an is untouchable by lay Muslims, then it is as if they do not have the right to be true Muslims.[31] He is against the idea that to grasp the meaning of the Qur'an one has to study with *'ulama'* (Islamic clerics) instead of studying the Qur'an itself.[32] He advocates for the right of Muslims, even those who are seen as the most vulnerable religiously, to directly interact with the Qur'an:

> You have the right to recite, perform and enjoy *bism-llah al-rahman al-rahim* (in the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy), *hasbuna-llah wa ni'm al-wakil, ni'm al-mawla wa ni'm al-nasir* (God is enough for us: He is the best protector, an excellent protector and an excellent helper),[33] the whole of alFatiha (the first chapter of the Qur'an), any verse in any chapter, without the need to know the occasion of the revelation, the etymology of the words, hadiths and the wisdom of *'ulama.'* The parameter is what comes out from the *dubur* of your life . . . You, pedicab drivers and traditional market coolies, do not know Arabic . . . the occasion of revelation of a certain verse, Meccan and Medinan suras, any Qur'anic commentaries that provide the interpretation of that verse, have never seen and heard what is written

[30] Rasmussen, 'Performing Religious Politics,' p. 161.
[31] Nadjib, 'Qarunumania,' Daur-II.133; Nadjib, 'Tabi'it Tabi'in Pangkat Seribu,' Daur-II.113.
[32] Nadjib, 'Al-Qur'an Hak Para Ulama,' Daur-II.091.
[33] These are Qur'anic passages often recited in Ma'iyah gatherings as a form of *dhikr*. The first part is Q 3:173, and the second Q 8:40 and 22:78.

> and spoken by the *mufassirs*. But God's revelation is for all of you, not only for the Prophet and the *'ulama'*, the heirs of the Prophet . . . [The Qur'an] must be able to be utilized in the details of your life in the workplace, home, street, sentry post . . . anywhere.[34]

Many times he also speaks about whether it is possible for him, who is not an *'alim* (the singular form of *'ulama'*) or *mufassir*, to directly interact with the Qur'an.[35]

Nadjib's encouragement for the people to independently conduct *tadabbur* also bolsters the idea that all people have the responsibility to educate themselves. The people are encouraged not to follow, especially not blindly, an *'alim*, but instead to interact with the Qur'an on the basis of the capacity and knowledge they acquire. Such a personal approach of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning, interpretation, judgment) is also encouraged in the Sufi tradition. Sam D. Gail describes this typical Sufi approach to the Qur'an as performative, in which the meaning of the text is referring not solely to its linguistic structure but also to personal reflection by the reader.[36]

To religiously legitimize his concept of *tadabbur*, in addition to the Qur'anic instruction to conduct *tadabbur* mentioned earlier, Nadjib also challenges the use of a popular hadith narrated by Ibn 'Abbas – 'He who says (something) concerning the Qur'an without knowledge (*bi ra'yihi*), he has taken his seat of fire' – to discourage the role of *'aql* ('intellect or reason') in reading the Qur'an. He argues that *ra'y* in this hadith means baseless personal opinion mingled with carnal desire, and that it is clearly not to be confused with *'aql*.[37] In Nadjib's epistemology, *'aql* occupies a sacred place. It is the sparkle of God's light, the tip of God's finger that touches and transfers His love to human beings; thus, it has divine potential.[38] Owing to its sacred source and its distinguishing potential between humans and

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[34] Nadjib, 'Tadabbur, Dubur, Knalpot Akhlaq,' Daur-I.61.
[35] Nadjib, 'Eksplorasi Manfaat,' Daur-II.111.
[36] Gail, 'Nonliterate Traditions.'
[37] Nadjib, 'Tafsir Bebas Nafsu,' Daur-II.090, May 1, 2017.
[38] Hadi, *Semesta Emha Ainun Nadjib*, 37, and Ma'iyah gathering in Petrokimia Gresik, May 20, 2016.

other creatures, *'aql* is indeed the primary tool for reading the Qur'an. However, the common misunderstanding of the role of logic in understanding the Qur'an results from an imprecise understanding of the hadith mentioned earlier. This hadith is meant only to eliminate carelessness in grasping the meaning of the Qur'an, because it is human nature to err.[39]

Apart from the wise use of *'aql*, creativity in discovering the possibilities of the Qur'an's meaning is made possible by spiritual qualities: gratitude to God, and love of the Prophet and the Qur'an.[40] Pure intention is ultimately significant in the process. Nadjib says, 'When you learn *from* the Qur'an, empty yourselves from the world. Close your eyes, and open the Qur'an. Each dot in the Qur'an is the center.'[41]

Nadjib discusses the importance of spiritual purification in his *tadabbur* of Q 56:77–80.[42] The group of verses is commonly understood to mean that people are required to perform ablutions prior to touching the Qur'an. However, to him it means that humans can touch the truth of Qur'anic information, or grasp its meaning and wisdom, only if the soul, heart, *'aql*, and life are purified (*mutahharun*) by God.[43] A state of being purified is required for *iqra'* (reading), or grasping the meaning of the Qur'an. Otherwise, its meaning, let alone its wisdom, will not be understood. To Nadjib, purification of the outward and, mainly, inward are both achieved and granted; purification is a matter of perfect cooperation between humans and God (Q 13:11). Thus, this verse encourages people to actively seek spiritual purification. However, God decides to whom He grants his guidance (Q 5:17).[44] In sum, both *'aql* and spiritual purification are requirements of *tadabbur*. Thus, *tadabbur* is not a lightly undertaken reading of the Qur'an. Even though Nadjib does not offer a detailed procedure for conducting *tadabbur*, he asserts these principles, which might be perfectly called *'aql sahih wa qalb salim* ('truthful intellect and sound heart').[45]

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[39] Nadjib, 'Menakut-nakuti Tafsir,' Daur-II.100.
[40] Nadjib, 'Logika Mencenderungi Kesucian,' Daur-II.099.
[41] Padhangmbulan, November 27, 2015.
[42] 'That this is truly a noble Qur'an, in a protected Record . . . that only the purified can touch, sent down from the Lord of all being.' See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 357.
[43] Nadjib, 'Berdetak dan Mengalir,' Daur-II.085.
[44] Nadjib, 'Menyentuh dan Disentuh,' Daur-II.086.
[45] Nadjib, 'TKI-1,' Daur-I.69; Nadjib, 'Al-Qur'an Sembarang Orang,' Daur-II.088.

After all, the most important aspect of *tadabbur* is an outcome (*dubur*) in which spiritual consciousness is manifested in daily life. Here, method is less important than outcome. Any understanding is correct as long as the outcome is the increase of goodness and *iman* ('belief' or 'faith'); a closer relationship with God; love of God, the Prophet, and friends of God (*awliya'*); and being a better person socially.[46] Interaction with the Qur'an might not even need to be intellectual. Nadjib once outlined an extreme example: if only by looking at the Qur'an, a person is already inspired to be closer to God and be a better person, that is already a form of *tadabbur*.[47] There is no judge besides God and the individual; each person has an ability to honestly judge whether his or her religious attempt leads to what it should be.[48]

THE PRACTICE OF *TADABBUR*

Nadjib does not claim to be a traditional expert when it comes to interpreting the Qur'an.[49] Although he speaks about the Qur'an, he never regards himself as a *mufassir* of it.[50] He knows he is not a *mufassir*, but his love for the Qur'an cannot keep him from wondering what it means for him to approach the Qur'an authentically. He posits a rhetorical question:

> Can I interact with the Qur'an authentically? Because the Qur'an is not only words, but [also] meaning, is there any possibility that I grasp its meaning? In order to grasp its meaning, I need to understand it. May I do so? Because in order to understand it, I need to interpret it. Am I allowed to do so? . . . It is said that only certain people have the right to interpret the Qur'an . . . while I do not belong to these people. Do I still have the right to interpret it?[51]

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[46] Nadjib, Daur-I.60–2.
[47] Ma'iyah gathering in Magelang, Central Java, April 28, 2016.
[48] Kenduri Cinta, March 22, 2016.
[49] On the conditions of a *mufassir*, see al-Suyuti, *al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an*, pp. 763–82.
[50] Nadjib, 'Wewenang Ahli Tafsir,' Daur-II.004.
[51] Nadjib, 'Al-Qur'an Sembarang Orang,' Daur-II.088.

Nadjib does not have formal rigorous training in the Qur'anic sciences, but he is not unfamiliar with Arabic and Islamic tradition. If to be regarded as a *mufassir* one needs to master the details of Qur'anic sciences, which is a traditional standard, then his understanding of the Qur'an belongs to what Andreas Görke calls 'lay exegesis', an interpretation by those who do not traditionally meet the requirements of a *mufassir*.[52]

Unlike Effendy, Nadjib never outlines his method of *tadabbur*, apart from basic principles mentioned here earlier. However, there are at least several characteristics apparent in his reading of the Qur'an. Nadjib proposes to read the Qur'an as *methodology*, by finding its wisdom for the current context (learning *from* the Qur'an, not learning the Qur'an). He pays attention to the basic meaning of the words and to the structure of a verse, a group of verses, or a chapter (*Sura*), and afterward, he appropriates the Qur'an to the current situation – not the current situation to the Qur'an. Speaking about this aspect, Nadjib does not require himself to find the historical context of the Qur'an. His *tadabbur* of the Qur'an is taken straight from its basic meaning to the contemporary context. Finally, his *tadabbur* is delivered in a way that is contextual to the audience and easy to relate to.

In the following section, we present his *tadabbur* of several passages in the Qur'an, particularly on the topic of living in a pluralistic society. In previous sections, we stated that he sees a fundamental crisis in humans' way of life and thinking, which can be summed up as the problems of secularism, materialism and narrow-mindedness, which endanger pluralism as *sunnatu-llah* ('God's law of nature'). The strategic and foundational solution is to go back to the very root of humanity, which brings one to the spiritual approach of Ma'iyah. Here, the Qur'an becomes the ultimate source of wisdom and guidance.

[52] Görke, 'Redefining the Borders of *Tafsir*,' p. 365.

LIVING IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

Nadjib's view is that what endangers good social interaction with others – mainly with those who have differing outlooks – is religious narrow-mindedness. This rigidity is characterized by a claim to truth and by anti-plurality. Conversely, he sees plurality or diversity as part of *sunnatu-lLah*, which allows peaceful engagement. In 2002, Nadjib wrote these Ma'iyah greetings:

> The country-wise language of the Ma'iyah is nationalism. The international language of Ma'iyah is universalism. The civil language of Ma'iyah is pluralism. The cultural language of Ma'iyah is heterogeneity, or diversity that is allowed, understood, and managed. The method or administrative management is called democracy.[53]

Nadjib highly values the plurality and diversity of Indonesia, and the Ma'iyah community is actively and consistently promoting peace and harmonious society. They conduct this mission in different ways. Ma'iyah welcomes and invites people from different faith backgrounds to sit on the stage. Inclusivity is also encouraged through music and cultural jokes. For example, Nadjib and KiaiKanjeng (known together as CNKK) engage in *salawat al-nabi* using the melody of the Christian song 'O Holy Night'. Predictably, this invites religious debates. Indeed, in Ma'iyah, the audience is encouraged to distinguish between form and matter. The content of *salawat al-nabi* is the essence, and music is only a vehicle for it. This principle also works in attempts to understand religious expressions.

CNKK's reputation for promoting peace is known beyond Indonesia. They have performed in non-Muslim majority countries and in other religions' places of worship. For example, just after the movie *Fitna* became popular in 2008, CNKK was invited by Protestantse Kerk in the Netherlands to foster mutual understanding among religious groups and to help combat Islamophobia.[54] CNKK also performed at the Vatican

[53] Nadjib, 'Salam Maiyah,' in Daniels, *Islamic Spectrum*, p. 144.
[54] See Betts, *Jalan Sunyi Emha*.

only a few days after the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005. Nadjib himself is an advocate for intrareligious and interreligious pluralism. He stands on the side of persecuted communities, like the Shias and the Ahmadis. Also, Nadjib's practice of not representing any religious group makes it easy for him to engage in dialogue with groups considered exclusive, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and figures like Abu Bakar Ba'asyir.[55]

In the gatherings, Nadjib offers Qur'anic readings that creatively challenge narrow-mindedness, and he invites the audience to rethink popular belief. First, he proposes to reread verses on several key Islamic concepts, such as *din* (religion), *islam*, *jihad* (striving in the path of God), *al-amr bi l-ma'ruf wa lnahy 'an almunkar* ('commanding good and forbidding evil'), *takfir* ('declaring another Muslim an unbeliever'), and *da'wa* ('the essence and strategy of disseminating Islamic faith'). These terms are frequently used in the daily life, and their meanings are understood to be fixed. An attempt to be *radical* by going back to the original meaning of certain terms is apparent in Nadjib's method, which is a deconstruction of the concepts usually attached to the terms.

For example, since 2016 Nadjib has repeatedly discussed the terms and concepts of *islam* (Q 3:19, 83). Just like *din*, he asserts that *islam* is not an institution or a social identity,[56] even though its adherents may form institutions, groups and schools, which is inevitable to manifest *islam* for the need of a certain context. *Islam* is submission to God, which is a 'salvific program' allowing humans and the universe to be able to return to God (*ilayhi raji'un*).[57] Recently, Nadjib has popularized the idea that *islam* did not begin in the time of Muhammad. The Qur'an itself calls previous prophets Muslims (Q 2:130–3; 3:52, 67). *Islam*, in his theory, has existed

[55] The spokesman of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Ismail Yusanto, showed his appreciation of Nadjib by stating that '[Nadjib] speaks of politics but without politicizing; of the dilapidated bureaucracy, but not as a bureaucrat; of deceitful business, but neither is he a businessman, of Islam and caring, yet he is not an Ulama.' See Widiyanto, 'Religious Pluralism,' p. 171. Since the fall of the Soeharto regime and the allowance of freedom of speech, Indonesia has witnessed the growth of the so-called radical Muslim groups. See ibid., pp. 162–3.

[56] Nadjib, 'Fithri Seribu Tahun Lagi,' Daur-II.069.

[57] Nadjib, 'Tak Kunjung Lulus Iqra,' Daur-II.055, p. 55; 'Cak Nun: "Kun!" Maka Berlangsunglah Islam' (video).

since God said, '*Kun, fayakun*' (Q 36:82) during the process of creation.[58] *Islam* literally means 'total submission and surrender.' In Nadjib's mind, it is impossible that all creation is not essentially in total submission to God (that is, to God's law of nature). In short, *islam* in his concept was born at the time of creation. The universalization of the term *islam* encourages one to go beyond identity to universal values.[59]

Nadjib also discusses the Qur'anic terms *iman* and *kafir*. He observes that Muslims mainly interpret the Qur'anic passage *ya ayyuha l-ladhina amanu* ('Oh you who believe', or 'believers') as referring only to Muslims. In fact, Nadjib believes that we should ask whether God means here all people believing in Him, or only Muslims. *Kafir* refers not to a religious identity but rather to a nonbeliever in a generic sense – one who denies God's decree, or law of nature, and anyone may hold this attitude regardless of his or her religious identity.[60] He also explains a popular verse on how to treat a *kafir* (Q 5:54).[61] The common understanding of this verse is to be gentle to the Muslims and to be harsh (*a'izza*) to a *kafir*. Nadjib explains, however, that he has a different understanding of this term. He links *a'izza* to a term God uses to denote Muhammad's character towards his community, *'azizun 'alayhi ma 'anittum* (Q 9:128).[62] Thus, he prefers to define the term *a'izza* as distress or worry about *kafirs*, creating a sense of caring and mercy (in Indonesian: *tidak tega*; in Javanese: *mesakne*) instead of harshness. This becomes a basis for living harmoniously with others.[63]

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[58] 'Cak Nun: "Kun!" Maka Berlangsunglah Islam' (video); Nadjib, 'Islam Belum Lahir Padanya,' Daur-I.299, and Ma'iyah gathering in Pondok Pesantran al-Huda Boyolali, August 20, 2016. The whole verse reads, 'When He wills something to be, His way is to say, "Be" – and it is!' See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 284.

[59] Ma'iyah gathering in Semarang City Hall, April 25, 2017.

[60] 'Cak Nun: "Kun!" Maka Berlangsunglah Islam' (video).

[61] 'You who believe, if any of you go back on your faith, God will soon replace you with people He loves and who love Him, people who are humble towards the believers, hard on the disbelievers, and who strive in God's way without fearing anyone's reproach. Such is God's favour. He grants it to whoever He will. God has endless bounty and knowledge.' See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 73.

[62] 'A Messenger has come to you from among yourselves. Your suffering distresses him: He is deeply concerned for you and full of kindness and mercy towards the believers.' See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 127.

[63] Nadjib, 'Berat Hati dan Tidak Tegaan,' June 3, 2017.

Similarly, Nadjib suggests that the term *murtadd* (Q 5:54), which is typically understood as referring to apostates, should instead be interpreted as 'one who does not apply the principles that should be applied.' *Din*, commonly translated as 'religion', is 'consciousness and loyalty in the service [Javanese: *bebektii*] of God.'[64] Nadjib proceeds to the next passage of the verse, which says that 'God will soon replace you (the *murtadd*) with people He loves and who love Him.' When he reads this passage, he imagines an Indonesian context, where, in general, people have essentially become *murtadd*. He highlights God's promise that He will replace them with a better generation. He states that the young generation – including, but not limited to, those who are the most loyal audience of Ma'iyah gatherings – mirror the character of the people mentioned in the passage, thus giving hope to this generation regarding the future of Indonesia.[65]

Deconstructing a concept's original meaning in the Qur'an, rather than just accepting its conventional meaning, not only brings clarity but also fosters humility. Nadjib emphasizes that even though he and his audience are Muslims, that does not mean they are automatically excluded from groups the Qur'an criticizes: 'Let alone declaring another person as a *kafir* or deviant, we might not be qualified to call ourselves Muslims.'[66] He always invites audience members to reflect upon themselves – to be humble – before pointing a finger at others. Problems among Indonesian Muslims and other groups in the world arise when people force their opinions on others and claim that they are the only possessors of truth.

In addition to offering an essential reading of key terms, Nadjib also conducts *tadabbur* of Qur'anic verses that support pluralism. He points out that the ultimate outcome of every religion is noble character (*akhlaq*). Thus, people do not have to be Muslims for their good deeds to be accepted by God.[67] In fact, in some Indonesian Muslim contexts or beyond, a key idea is that possessing a true creed (*'aqidah*) – in a limited sense of belonging to a religion called Islam – is the requirement for a person's deeds to be accepted and counted by God. He bases his argument

[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid, and Ma'iyah gathering in Malang, East Java, June 2, 2017.
[66] Kenduri Cinta, March 22, 2017.
[67] Ma'iyah gathering in Solo, Central Java, July 26, 2016.

on two verses in the Qur'an. The first is Qur'an 3:110,[68] in which the words 'believing in God' are placed in the third row after 'ordering what is right and forbid what is wrong', showing that good deeds are not a prerequisite for believing in God. Deeds are counted, not one's identity. The second is Qur'an 2:62.[69] The injunction in this verse is clear: rewards (*ajr*) are granted to the doers of good deeds, no matter what religion they belong to.

Nadjib also explains religious tolerance and the plurality of religions with analogies to ease understanding. His teaching about the ultimate goal of religion, particularly in relation to living with others, is best illustrated in an analogy involving a kitchen. The ultimate goal of each religion is noble character (*akhlaq*). Noble character is analogous to food ready for serving; rituals and doctrinal beliefs are the cooking process, which belongs to the kitchen. In the Javanese tradition, the kitchen is situated in the back of the home, hidden, just as rituals are not to be shown in public. What is to be displayed is the food – a noble character.

In addition, Nadjib uses an analogy from marriage to promote religious tolerance. He explains that one's own religion is like one's wife. A husband would regard his wife as the best, the most beautiful of all women. But to see her in that manner, the husband does not need to proclaim that another man's wife is ugly.

Furthermore, he uses an analogy about the growth of coconuts to explain the development of Qur'anic religions: the Torah corresponds to a *bluluk* (a seed). The Zabur represents a *cengkir* (the seed that has grown a leaf, such as a coconut sprout). The Gospels represent a *degan* (a young coconut). The Qur'an represents the last stage of development – the coconut itself. Nadjib asserts that many people are mistaken by regarding the four as four separate things when they are essentially one.[70]

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[68] '[Believers], you are the best community singled out for people: you order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in God. If the People of the Book had also believed, it would have been better for them. For although some of them do believe, most of them are lawbreakers.' See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 42.

[69] 'The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do goodwill have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve.' See Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 9.

[70] Nadjib, 'Agama Bluluk,' Daur-II.127; Nadjib, 'Rasa Agama Nusantara.'

Finally, Nadjib explains the plurality of religions by using an analogy involving cassavas. Different religions are just like the variety of food or snacks made of cassavas. (In Javanese, they are called *gethuk*, *thiwul*, *gatot*, *cimplung*, etc.) The difference lies in form and appearance, but in essence, they are cassavas. The different religions are essentially from one substance. Cassava plantations are common in Indonesia, which makes it easy for people to relate to the analogy.

In sum, Nadjib regards the plurality of religions as part of God's design; that God creates different paths to belief in Him is purely His prerogative.[71] He believes that all religions possess truth, even though he views Islam as the perfected version of truth, as seen in the coconut analogy.[72] His approach is to strengthen people's pride in tradition while teaching them to be humble in the midst of plurality, because to God, the perfect expression of humans' love is to love all His creatures.

CONCLUSION

Tadabbur as a process of grasping the meaning of the Qur'an exemplifies an actual practice of a popular Sufi group in Indonesia dealing with contemporary issues. Studying how the Qur'an is perceived in a community sheds light on how that community copes with the challenges of the twenty-first century. *Ma'iyah* tackles the issues of intolerance, violence and sectarianism in the name of Islam and widely embraces the pluralistic nature of all of God's people. The community highly values Indonesia's pluralism, and it actively and consistently promotes peace and a harmonious society through interpreting the Qur'an's teachings.

Muslims interact with the Qur'an in at least three modes of reception: exegetical, aesthetic and functional. The activities of exegetical reception are usually conducted within a community. It is transferred orally by the teacher as the mediator between the Qur'an and the community. Despite

[71] 'Cak Nun: "Kun!" Maka Berlangsunglah Islam' (video).

[72] Widiyanto distinguishes between religious pluralism as a theological concept and as a civic-political concept. See Widiyanto, 'Religious Pluralism,' pp. 165–6.

its widespread use, 'oral exegesis' and its 'regional particularities' still need more attention in the field of Qur'anic studies.[73] Most works on Qur'anic exegesis are dedicated to the written *tafsir*s, mainly from the older centers of the Muslim world, rather than from the far-reaching regions, including Indonesia. The study of Qur'anic exegesis beyond its written works, and beyond that produced in the older Muslim world, is necessary to untangle how the Qur'an is understood and approached by Muslims in wider Muslim regions. The description in this chapter of practices in a Javanese Sufi community is an attempt to fill this gap.

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