

**THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY OF SHEIKH NAWAWI AL-BANTANI AND
SHEIKH MAHFUDZ AT-TARMASI: CONTRIBUTIONS TO ISLAMIC
EDUCATION AND MODERN CONTEXTS IN INDONESIA**

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Abstract

This study explores the intellectual contributions of two prominent Nusantara scholars, Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani (1813–1897) and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi (1868–1919), to the advancement of Islamic intellectualism in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative approach and a descriptive-analytical method rooted in library research, the study examines the primary works of these scholars alongside relevant secondary sources. The findings reveal that both scholars made significant contributions to various fields of Islamic studies, including Quranic exegesis, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, and mysticism. Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani is renowned for his systematic and practical approach, while Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi is recognized for his focus on methodological and theoretical dimensions. Their works have become essential references in Islamic boarding school education and have shaped the distinctive character of Islamic learning in Indonesia. Furthermore, this study highlights the enduring relevance of their intellectual legacies in addressing contemporary challenges and fostering the development of Islamic education. Their contributions have established a foundation for the cultivation of moderate and adaptive Islamic traditions in Indonesia, while providing a robust methodological basis for Islamic studies.

Keywords: Islamic Intellectualism, Thought, Nusantara Scholars

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji kontribusi intelektual dua ulama besar Nusantara, Syekh Nawawi al-Bantani (1813–1897) dan Syekh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi (1868–1919), dalam perkembangan intelektual Islam di Indonesia. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode deskriptif-analitis berbasis penelitian kepustakaan, penelitian ini menelaah karya-karya primer kedua ulama serta literatur sekunder yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Syekh Nawawi dikenal dengan pendekatan yang sistematis dan praktis, sementara Syekh Mahfudz menonjol dalam aspek metodologis dan teoretis. Karya-karya mereka menjadi rujukan utama dalam pendidikan pesantren dan membentuk karakter pembelajaran Islam yang khas di Indonesia. Penelitian ini juga mengungkap relevansi warisan intelektual mereka dalam menghadapi tantangan modernitas dan pengembangan pendidikan Islam kontemporer. Kontribusi mereka telah membangun fondasi bagi tradisi Islam moderat dan adaptif di Nusantara serta memperkuat dasar metodologis untuk studi Islam.

Kata Kunci: Intelektual Islam, Pemikiran, Ulama Nusantara

A. Introduction

The development of Islamic thought in Indonesia is inseparable from the contributions of scholars who have laid the groundwork for Islamic sciences over centuries. Among those who have significantly shaped the intellectual tradition of Islam in the Nusantara region are Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani (1813–1897) and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi (1868–1919). These figures not only contributed to the advancement of classical Islamic scholarship but also left intellectual legacies that remain relevant in contemporary contexts (Imawan, 2021, pp. 45–47).

Although numerous studies have examined their contributions individually, there remains a lack of comparative analyses exploring the collective impact of their intellectual legacies on the development of contemporary Islamic thought in Indonesia. Recent research, such as that conducted by Hidayat and Fasa (2019, pp. 297–317) and Ratnasari (2019, pp. 95–119), has explored the educational aspects of their ideas, yet comprehensive assessments of their relevance to modern challenges remain limited.

In the current era, where Indonesian Islam faces challenges such as radicalism, secularism, and identity crises, the moderate and inclusive perspectives of Sheikh Nawawi and Sheikh Mahfudz hold significant relevance. Studies conducted by Santosa and Aiman (2022, pp. 234–245) demonstrate how Sheikh Nawawi's ideas can be applied in addressing the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, while research by Azizah and Istianah (2022, pp. 72–87) reveals Sheikh Mahfudz's contributions to the development of contemporary hadith studies in Indonesia.

This study seeks to address these gaps by aiming to: (1) analyze the intellectual contributions of Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi to the development of Islamic thought in Indonesia, (2) assess the relevance of their ideas in contemporary Islamic contexts, and (3) propose an applicable framework for addressing modern challenges through their intellectual contributions. By adopting a comparative-analytical approach, this study intends to fill the void in academic scholarship concerning the contributions of Nusantara scholars and their significance for contemporary Islamic development in Indonesia (Syafaat et al., 2024, pp. 80–98). The significance of this research lies in its endeavor to provide a novel perspective on the intellectual heritage of Nusantara scholars and their contributions to contemporary Islamic progress.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical method, focusing on library research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 183–184). This approach enables an in-depth exploration of primary and secondary texts related to the thoughts of Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi (Miles et al., 2019, pp. 225–226). The data collection process utilized a literature review, with selected sources categorized into two main groups. First, primary sources consist of the original works of both scholars across various fields, including Quranic exegesis, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, and mysticism, published between 1800 and 1920. Second, secondary sources include academic studies on these scholars, published in the last ten years (2014–2024) in the form of books, journal articles, and dissertations (Wildemuth, 2017, pp. 165–167).

The data analysis process followed systematic stages, including preliminary reading to identify key themes, coding to categorize data based on thematic patterns, comparative analysis to examine the intellectual contributions of both scholars, and synthesis to integrate the findings (Krippendorff, 2018, pp. 355–357). Content analysis techniques were applied, which included identifying analysis units, developing coding categories, coding texts, counting theme frequencies, and interpreting patterns and relationships between themes (Saldana, 2021, pp. 73–75). To ensure research validity, several strategies were implemented, including source triangulation by comparing various data sources to verify information, peer debriefing through discussions with experts in Islamic studies to validate interpretations, and an audit trail through systematic documentation of data collection and analysis processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 242–244). Research reliability was enhanced through consistent coding protocols, detailed documentation of the analytical process, and cross-checking interpretations with other researchers with expertise in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, pp. 457–459).

This study limits its scope to analyzing the primary works of the two scholars concerning the development of Islamic thought in Indonesia, focusing on their intellectual influence from their lifetimes to their impact on contemporary contexts (Yin, n.d., pp. 156–158). By employing this systematic and comprehensive methodology, the research aims to produce a rigorous and academically accountable analysis of the contributions and relevance of these scholars' intellectual legacies in current contexts.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Biography and Intellectual Works of Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani

Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani, a prominent scholar from Banten, Indonesia, was born in 1815 in Tanara Village, Serang, Banten (K. Amin & Siregar, 2022, p. 45). From an early age, he demonstrated a strong interest in religious sciences, which encouraged him to pursue knowledge in local Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). His talent and passion for studying Islamic sciences motivated him to further his education in Mecca, a leading center of Islamic education at that time.

Upon arriving in Mecca, Sheikh Nawawi studied under the guidance of renowned scholars, where he delved into various fields such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*), hadith, exegesis (*tafsir*), and mysticism (*tasawuf*) (Raffi'u et al., 2023, p. 23). These intensive studies enhanced his foundational knowledge and broadened his intellectual horizon. His deep mastery of Islamic sciences earned him respect among scholars and enabled him to develop influential academic works widely recognized in the Islamic world.

After completing his studies in Mecca, Sheikh Nawawi returned to Indonesia and began teaching in various *pesantren*. His skill in teaching and writing made him a highly respected scholar. Many of his works, written in Arabic, were widely used by students and scholars across the archipelago, reflecting his significant influence on the development of Islamic education in Nusantara (Cahyo et al., 2022, p. 65; Satria & Qomaruzzaman, 2023, p. 89).

Sheikh Nawawi contributed significantly to the development of Islamic thought in Indonesia. One of his most well-known works is *Mirah Labid li Kasyf Ma'na al-Qur'an al-Majid*, a Quranic exegesis written in Arabic (Imawan, 2021, p. 290). This text is not only valued for its depth but also for its ability to convey the teachings of the Quran in an accessible manner for a diverse audience. Through this work, Sheikh Nawawi demonstrated his expertise in combining academic rigor with spiritual insights (Muhammad et al., 2023, p. 45).

Beyond his contributions to Quranic exegesis, Sheikh Nawawi authored several texts in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), such as *Qut al-Habib al-Gharib*, *Nihayah al-Zain*, and *Kasyifat al-Saja*. His *Qut al-Habib al-Gharib Tausyih 'Ala Fathu al-Qarib al-Mujib* serves as an explanation of *Fathu al-Qarib*, a work by a Syafi'i scholar from Palestine,

Sheikh Muhammad bin Qasim al-Ghazzi, written in the 16th century. This commentary highlights Sheikh Nawawi's expertise in Syafi'i jurisprudence and his role as a bridge between Middle Eastern and Nusantara intellectual traditions (Imawan, 2021, pp. 292–293).

In mysticism (*tasawuf*), Sheikh Nawawi made substantial contributions, as seen in his work *Maraqi al-'Ubudiyah*. This book elaborates on the teachings of mysticism with an emphasis on the importance of spiritual life and devotion to Allah. His mysticism teachings have been widely studied by Muslims, not only in Indonesia but also worldwide. Sheikh Nawawi was known for his tolerance, inclusivity, and deep concern for the Indonesian Muslim community (Ihsan et al., 2024, p. 50; War'i & Mushodiq, 2022, p. 12).

Furthermore, Sheikh Nawawi's contributions to education are noteworthy. He stressed the importance of character education that builds personality, identity, and national character. His ideas regarding an independent curriculum for sustainable education highlight his vision for adaptive learning models in line with contemporary needs. Through this perspective, Sheikh Nawawi addressed modern challenges such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and globalization, while maintaining relevance in modern educational contexts (Cahyo et al., 2022, p. 85). Overall, Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani's contributions encompass various critical areas in Islam, including Quranic exegesis, jurisprudence, hadith, mysticism, and education. His works serve as vital references for Islamic education in Indonesia and globally, continuing to be relevant in addressing the challenges of modern times. His intellectual legacy underscores his significant role as one of the great scholars in the history of Nusantara Islam.

2. Biography and Intellectual Works of Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi

Sheikh Mahfudz al-Tarmasi, a distinguished scholar from East Java, Indonesia, was born in 1868 in Termas Village, Pacitan Regency. From a young age, Sheikh Mahfudz exhibited exceptional intelligence and diligence in studying Islamic sciences. He began his education in local Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in East Java, where he acquired a foundational understanding of Islamic teachings. His diligence and intelligence earned him great respect among local scholars (Ratnasari, 2019, p. 97).

After completing his education in Indonesia, Sheikh Mahfudz continued his studies in Mecca, where he lived for more than 20 years. In Mecca, he studied under prominent scholars of his time, including Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani, who became one of his primary mentors and significantly influenced his intellectual development. Under Sheikh Nawawi's tutelage, Sheikh Mahfudz honed his expertise in various Islamic disciplines (Hasibuan & Imawan, 2024, p. 45).

Sheikh Mahfudz al-Tarmasi was a prolific scholar who authored numerous works in Quranic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and mysticism (*tasawuf*). Among his most notable works is *Kifayat al-Atqiya'*, which addresses the teachings of mysticism. This work is a key reference in the study of Islamic spirituality in Indonesia and internationally, reflecting Sheikh Mahfudz's profound understanding of Islamic mysticism (Fauzan, 2018, p. 87).

In the field of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sheikh Mahfudz's most renowned work is *Hasyiyah al-Tarmasi*. This text, recognized as the most significant contribution of a Nusantara scholar to Syafi'i jurisprudence, is known for its detailed analysis, in-depth explanations, and meticulous structure. *Hasyiyah al-Tarmasi* is a comprehensive commentary that facilitates understanding of complex concepts in Islamic law. Beyond legal discussions, the text also enriches Arabic linguistic studies by citing renowned scholars and including *nazham* (poetic verses) on Arabic grammar, morphology, and rhetoric (Imawan, 2021, p. 300).

In hadith studies, Sheikh Mahfudz made significant contributions through works such as *Manhaj Dhawi al-Nazar*, which discusses the methodologies of hadith sciences. This text serves as a primary reference in the study of hadith in Indonesia, highlighting Sheikh Mahfudz's role in advancing the methodologies and understanding of hadith among scholars and students in the region. His contributions in this area are highly regarded and form an integral part of the development of hadith sciences in the archipelago (Muhammad & Imawan, 2023, p. 52).

Furthermore, Sheikh Mahfudz played a pivotal role in educating the Javanese ulama, particularly from the *Jawi* community. Although he spent much of his life in Mecca, his influence on the next generation of Indonesian scholars was substantial. Many of his students later became influential leaders in *pesantren* across Indonesia, reflecting

the wide-reaching impact of his teachings and guidance (“Mengenal Kitab Pesantren,” 2020, p. 815).

Sheikh Mahfudz al-Tarmasi was also known for his contributions to the study of Quranic readings (*qira'ah*) and sanad (chains of transmission). His work on sanad and the methodologies of hadith research provided a valuable foundation for the development of hadith studies in Indonesia. His writings remain a crucial reference in *qira'ah* and hadith studies at various educational and research institutions in the country, underscoring his importance as a scholar in these fields (Maknun et al., 2022, p. 123). Sheikh Mahfudz al-Tarmasi's intellectual legacy spans numerous fields, including jurisprudence, hadith, mysticism, and education. His works, particularly *Hasyiyah al-Tarmasi* and *Manhaj Dhawi al-Nazar*, reflect his profound mastery and meticulous approach to Islamic sciences. As an educator and scholar, he left an indelible mark on the development of Islamic scholarship in Indonesia, inspiring generations of scholars and students through his teachings and writings.

3. Intellectual Contributions of Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi

Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi made substantial contributions to the development of Islamic thought in Nusantara through various fields of study.

Quranic Exegesis

In the field of Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*), Sheikh Nawawi demonstrated his intellectual excellence through his monumental work *Marah Labid li Kasyf Ma'na Quran Majid*, also known as *Tafsir Munir*. This work reflects a unique approach by integrating textual and contextual methods of exegesis, taking into account linguistic, theological, and socio-cultural aspects in his interpretations (Sanusi, 2016, pp. 249–288). Meanwhile, Sheikh Mahfudz contributed to the methodological aspects of Quranic education through his work *Kifayat al-Mustafid*, which emphasizes systematic transmission and teaching methods for Quranic learning (at-Tarmasi, 1987, pp. 15–20).

Hadith Studies

Both scholars also made distinct contributions to the field of hadith studies. Sheikh Mahfudz is renowned as a leading hadith scholar from Nusantara, particularly

through his influential work *Manhaj Dzawi al-Nazhar*. This text serves as a principal reference in hadith methodology and has formed the foundation of hadith education in various Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia (Muhajirin, 2018, pp. 277–296). On the other hand, Sheikh Nawawi incorporated hadith into various works on jurisprudence and mysticism, showcasing a more comprehensive approach in connecting hadith with other aspects of Islamic teachings (S. M. Amin, 2017, pp. 189–208).

Islamic Jurisprudence

In the field of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), their contributions are equally significant, particularly in the context of the Shafi'i school of thought in Nusantara. One of Sheikh Nawawi's renowned works in this area is *Qut al-Habib al-Gharib*, a commentary on foundational jurisprudence texts. This work not only serves as a bridge for beginner-level jurisprudence students but also highlights his role in connecting Shafi'i jurisprudence scholarship between the Middle East and Nusantara (Imawan, 2021, p. 294). Meanwhile, Sheikh Mahfudz's *Hasyiyah al-Tarmasi* stands out as one of the largest and most comprehensive works authored by a Nusantara scholar in Shafi'i jurisprudence. Known for its meticulous structure, in-depth analysis, and clarity, this work is a cornerstone of Islamic legal studies and has become a standard reference in advanced *pesantren* curricula (Imawan, 2021, pp. 300–305).

Sheikh Nawawi also contributed through his work *Nihayat al-Zain*, which offers an accessible explanation of Shafi'i jurisprudence, making it suitable for various levels of learners. Conversely, Sheikh Mahfudz's *Mauhibah Dzi al-Fadl* presents an adaptive jurisprudential methodology tailored to the local Indonesian context (Dhofier, 2011, pp. 178–195). Both scholars successfully balanced the rigidity of Shafi'i legal principles with the flexibility needed to address the socio-cultural conditions of Nusantara.

Educational Methodology

The distinctive approaches of these two scholars are also evident in their educational methodologies. Sheikh Nawawi developed a systematic and comprehensive *syarah* (commentary) method, which became a standard model in writing commentaries on classical texts in *pesantren* (Muhtador, 2019, pp. 133–152). Meanwhile, Sheikh Mahfudz emphasized the importance of *sanad* (chains of knowledge transmission) and methodological rigor in the study of Islamic sciences (Nur, 2021, pp. 45–67). Their

methodological contributions have shaped the traditional Islamic education system in Indonesia, which remains relevant and enduring to this day.

The significance of their intellectual contributions lies not only in the substantive knowledge they developed but also in the methodologies and approaches they employed in transmitting knowledge. This ensures that their intellectual legacies continue to influence the development of Islamic education in Indonesia, fostering an educational system that integrates practical and theoretical aspects.

4. Social-Historical Context and Its Impact

The educational background in Haramain (Mecca and Medina) had a profound influence on the intellectual perspectives and contributions of Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi. Sheikh Nawawi, who spent a longer period in Mecca, developed a more universal and cosmopolitan approach in his works. This is reflected in his ability to integrate various perspectives of classical Islamic thought with broader social contexts (Azra, 2013, pp. 47–48). His interactions with scholars and students from diverse parts of the Islamic world in Mecca shaped his inclusive and widely accepted writing style (Muhammad et al., 2023, p. 45).

In contrast, Sheikh Mahfudz, who received much of his education in Medina, adopted a methodological approach that emphasized meticulousness and precision in the transmission of knowledge. The strong academic tradition in Medina, particularly in hadith studies and Islamic methodologies, is evident in his works (Fauzan, 2018, pp. 124–126). This distinction shaped Sheikh Mahfudz's significant contributions to the development of structured methodologies in Islamic learning within the Nusantara.

The impact of these scholars' thoughts on the tradition of *pesantren* in Indonesia is both foundational and enduring. Their works have become integral components of the *pesantren* curriculum, shaping its distinctive educational methodology. The teaching systems they developed, such as the *bandongan* and *sorogan* methods, are still preserved in *pesantren* to this day (Dhofier, 2011, pp. 178–195). Sheikh Mahfudz's emphasis on *sanad* as a standard for knowledge transmission and Sheikh Nawawi's systematic *syarah* method have become defining characteristics of *pesantren* education (Suryadilaga, 2023, pp. 89–106).

Their intellectual contributions also played a pivotal role in forming the moderate and adaptive characteristics of Islam in Nusantara. Through their works, Islamic teachings were contextualized in harmony with local cultures, resulting in a uniquely Indonesian model of Islam. This approach fostered a form of Islamic practice that respects local traditions while adhering to fundamental Islamic principles (Azra, n.d., pp. 445–470).

Beyond traditional *pesantren*, their influence extends to modern Islamic education in Indonesia, including the development of curricula for madrasahs and Islamic universities. The methodologies they established have provided a solid foundation for the growth of contemporary Islamic studies in the country (Dhofier, 2011, p. 180). The historical significance of their contributions continues to resonate in the modern era. Their works remain subjects of study and reinterpretation to address contemporary challenges, demonstrating that their intellectual legacies are not only historically significant but also continually relevant in today's context.

The intellectual approaches of Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi reveal significant differences and similarities in their methodologies and scholarly orientations. In terms of writing methodology, Sheikh Nawawi tended to use a systematic and comprehensive approach, emphasizing practical and applicative aspects. This is evident in his work *Nihayat al-Zain*, which presents Shafi'i jurisprudence in a manner that is relatively easy to understand and oriented towards the practical needs of society (Dhofier, 2011, pp. 178–195).

In contrast, Sheikh Mahfudz placed greater emphasis on methodological and theoretical aspects, particularly in the fields of hadith and jurisprudential principles (*usul al-fiqh*). His work *Manhaj Dzawi al-Nazhar* reflects a deep methodological analysis of hadith sciences, with a special focus on *sanad* (chains of transmission) and the precision of knowledge transmission (Asif & Muhid, 2019, pp. 77–98). These differences in approach can be attributed to their educational backgrounds, with Sheikh Mahfudz being more influenced by the strong academic tradition in Medina, especially in hadith studies.

In terms of intellectual orientation, both scholars shared a commitment to integrating classical Islamic traditions with the local context of Nusantara. However, Sheikh Nawawi was more flexible in adapting classical thought to contemporary realities, as reflected in his Quranic exegesis *Marah Labid*, which considers socio-cultural aspects

in its interpretations (Tahir, 2011, pp. 141–162). Meanwhile, Sheikh Mahfudz adhered more strictly to classical methodologies, particularly in the meticulous study of hadith and *sanad* systems (Suryadilaga, 2023, pp. 89–106).

Another significant distinction lies in their writing styles. Sheikh Nawawi is known for his accessible and expressive language, often using analogies and practical examples to explain complex concepts (Bisri, 2022, pp. 156–175). In contrast, Sheikh Mahfudz employed a more technical and academic style, emphasizing precise terminology and methodological rigor (Mustaqim, 2023, pp. 1–22).

Despite their methodological differences, both scholars made remarkable contributions to the development of Islamic education in Nusantara. Sheikh Nawawi's systematic *syarah* method became a standard model for writing commentaries on classical texts in *pesantren* (Muhtador, 2019, pp. 133–152). Meanwhile, Sheikh Mahfudz emphasized the importance of *sanad* and methodological rigor in Islamic sciences, which has become a hallmark of traditional *pesantren* education (Nur, 2021, pp. 45–67).

These differences in intellectual approaches have had a lasting impact on the traditions of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Sheikh Nawawi's works are more commonly used at the basic and intermediate levels of education due to their practical orientation, while Sheikh Mahfudz's works are primarily studied at advanced levels and in academic contexts (Syafaat et al., 2024, pp. 80–98). This combination of approaches has created an ideal balance in the *pesantren* education system, where practical and theoretical aspects complement each other.

D. Conclusion

Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani and Sheikh Mahfudz at-Tarmasi have significantly influenced the intellectual landscape of Islamic scholarship in Indonesia. Through their works in Quranic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, mysticism, and education, they have laid a strong foundation for the development of Islamic intellectual traditions in Nusantara. Sheikh Nawawi's systematic and practical methodologies and Sheikh Mahfudz's rigorous and theoretical approaches complement each other, creating a balanced educational framework. Their intellectual legacies remain highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges, particularly in fostering moderate and adaptive Islamic traditions that integrate classical Islamic teachings with local cultural contexts.

These contributions have not only shaped the distinctive character of *pesantren* education but also provide valuable insights for the advancement of Islamic studies in modern Indonesia.

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