

RELIGION AS A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC STRATEGY: A STUDY OF KH. HASYIM ASY'ARI FROM BILLINGS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the conditions that enabled KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's religiosity to become a strategy of resistance against colonial domination, rather than merely an expression of religious nationalism or a historical event in the struggle for independence. This study also extends the application of Dwight B. Billings' "Religion as Opposition" framework to the context of anti-colonial Islam in Indonesia. The results indicate that KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's success in transforming religion into an instrument of resistance was determined by the fulfillment of three structural prerequisites. First, the position of the kiai as an "Organic Intellectual" who maintained an emotional bond with the santri and peasant classes. Second, the organizational autonomy of the Tebuireng Pesantren and Nahdatul Ulama, achieved through economic self-reliance and the rejection of colonial subsidies, thereby creating a space free from colonial cultural hegemony. Third, the construction of a "Plausibility Structure" through the Jihad Resolution fatwa, which established theology as the basis for the obligation to wage war (fardhu 'ain). In conclusion, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's movement was a manifestation of a well-developed positional warfare strategy, proving that religion can metamorphose into an effective counter-hegemonic ideology when supported by leadership that mobilizes the community, institutional autonomy, and a new plausibility structure.

Keywords: KH. Hasyim Asy'ari; Dwight B. Billings; Jihad fatwa.

INTRODUCTION

KH. Hasyim Asy'ari was a religious scholar who contributed to Indonesia's struggle for independence. Among KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's contributions best known to the Indonesian public is the jihad resolution, which is commemorated as National Santri Day. This jihad resolution served as the religious legitimization for the Indonesian people to fight for their independence (Rifai, 2009; Syahriyah & Mawardi, 2025). In Surabaya, for example, through this jihad fatwa, Bung Tomo succeeded in igniting a spirit of resistance that mobilized thousands of santri and youth without fear (Baso et al., 2019).

However, although KH. Hasyim Asy'ari succeeded in integrating religiosity and nationalism, he viewed Islam solely as an ethical value underpinning nationalism and the state, not as the foundation of a formal Islamic state. Nationalism was understood as part of the religious responsibility to safeguard the welfare of society and uphold the sovereignty of the state (Dwijayanto & Ulya Afif, 2020).

The success of this fatwa was closely tied to the influence of a charismatic religious scholar who had a strong grassroots following, as well as the political momentum of the time (Ahmad, 2022). Royani's research adds that the charismatic authority of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari served as the primary catalyst that transformed Islamic boarding schools from educational institutions into bases for resistance militias (Royani, 2018). This fatwa provided the transcendent legitimacy needed to mobilize thousands of Islamic boarding school students in the Battle of Surabaya in 1945, a phenomenon described as the transformation of spiritual fervor into tangible military strength

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(Juma', 2022; Miftahuddin & Widiyanta, 2023). Indeed, the impact of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's thought extends even to the international context (Fakturmen & Arif, 2020).

Based on previous studies, three main trends can be identified. First, biographical research that positions KH. Hasyim Asy'ari as a figure in the national struggle (Rifai, 2009). Second, studies that focus on the relationship between Islam and nationalism as well as KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's anti-colonial stance (Dwijayanto & Ulya Afif, 2020; Syahriyah & Mawardi, 2025). Third, studies that examine the Jihad Resolution from historical perspectives, its factors of success, and its impact on the struggle for independence (Ahmad, 2022; Juma', 2022; Miftahuddin & Widiyanta, 2023; Royani, 2018). Although these studies have made significant contributions to subsequent research, they still viewed religion as a source of legitimacy for the struggle or merely as an expression of religious nationalism; consequently, research specifically examining the structural conditions that enabled religiosity to transform into a counter-hegemonic strategy against colonialism has not yet received in-depth attention. Thus, this study not only examines KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's anti-colonial stance and the nature of his religious nationalism but also extends the application of Billings' social theory to the context of anti-colonial Islam in Indonesia.

This study seeks to situate KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's resistance within Dwight B. Billings' framework. Billings posits that religiosity can only become a force of opposition if it meets three structural prerequisites. First, the presence of organic intellectuals who lead the resistance from within the oppressed class. Second, the availability of organizational autonomy or free space. Finally, the construction of a framework of legitimacy that provides theological justification for the resistance. This approach is necessary because historical narratives alone are insufficient to explain how religion became the spirit of resistance (Billings, 1990).

Thus, this study will examine the three criteria proposed by Billings as they apply to KH. Hasyim Asy'ari. In accordance with these criteria, the discussion in this study will be organized under a single main subheading, "KH. Hasyim Asy'ari and Counter-Hegemonic Strategies," which is divided into three sections. The first section discusses Hasyim Asy'ari's origins as an organic intellectual of the oppressed class. The second section addresses the autonomy of NU and the *pesantren*, which served as a free space for the indigenous people. Finally, the third section examines the construction of a framework of legitimacy that provides theological justification for resistance.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a historical method with a socio-political approach. The historical method was chosen because this study seeks to reconstruct and interpret the role of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's religiosity in the context of colonialism through an analysis of historical sources. The research was conducted in four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Herlina, 2020).

During the heuristic stage, the author collected primary sources, including the fatwa on the Jihad Resolution, decisions made by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari at the Nahdlatul Ulama Congress, the works of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, archives from the *Kedaulatan Rakjat* newspaper, and documents from the Nahdlatul Ulama organization. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, historical archives, organizational documents, and relevant previous research (Pranoto, 2010).

The next stage involves external and internal source criticism, aimed at assessing the authenticity, credibility, and relevance of each available source. External criticism is conducted by verifying the authenticity of the source through identification of the author, date of publication, origin of the document, and the authority of the publishing institution. This step was applied to the works of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, Nahdlatul Ulama documents, the text of the Jihad Resolution, archives from the *Kedaulatan Rakjat* newspaper, and other sources used in the research. Meanwhile, internal criticism was conducted by comparing the content across sources to assess the consistency of information regarding the activities of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, as well as the development of the Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School and Nahdlatul Ulama (Kuntowijoyo, 2018).

During the interpretation phase, the data were analyzed using Dwight B. Billings' "Religion as Opposition" framework. This framework was applied by grouping the data into three analytical categories: organic intellectual, free space, and plausibility structure. Through these three categories, the study analyzed how KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's leadership, the autonomy of the Tebuireng Islamic boarding school and Nahdlatul Ulama, and the theological legitimacy of the Jihad Resolution shaped a religion-based counter-hegemonic strategy against colonialism (Billings, 1990; Wasino & Hartatik, 2024). Finally, there is historiography, which involves synthesizing the results of the previous stages into a coherent historical narrative (Gottschalk, 1985).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

KH. Hasyim Asy'ari and the Counter-Hegemonic Strategy

In the colonial landscape, the colonial government exercised power not only through military force but also through what Gramsci termed "hegemony." The colonial government exercised its hegemonic power through religious doctrine, educational modernization, and politics. For example, the Dutch government appointed Sayyid Utsman bin Yahya as the mufti of Batavia; indeed, Sayyid Utsman legitimized the Dutch East Indies government and prohibited rebellion (Amiq, 1970; Suneni, 2015).

Amid this configuration, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari took a different stance. Instead of legitimizing the colonial government, he built resistance by strengthening religious authority, pesantren education, and networks of ulama (Bruinessen, 1994; Fadli & Miftahuddin, 2019). This strategy is reflected in his refusal to accept various forms of honor bestowed by the colonial government, the fatwa prohibiting tasyabbuh with colonial symbols, and the call for the Jihad Resolution, which established the defense of the homeland as a religious duty (Imam Ibn Hajar, 2019).

This strategy aligns with Gramsci's concept of the "war of position," which emphasizes the building of moral and intellectual strength prior to open political confrontation (Schwarzmantel, 2015). From this perspective, social change is not determined solely by the struggle for state power, but also by the success in building leadership resources, organizational autonomy, and a plausibility structure. Therefore, to explain the role of religion in KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's struggle as an opponent of colonialism, an examination of these three aspects is necessary. Consequently, these three aspects will be analyzed in the following section to explain how the leadership of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, the Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School, Nahdlatul Ulama, and his fatwas shaped a religion-based strategy of resistance against colonialism (Billings, 1990).

The Kiai as an Organic Intellectual

Essentially, every individual is an intellectual; however, they become an "organic intellectual" when they are able to articulate and organize the interests of the social class they represent in order to confront the domination of other groups. In contrast to organic intellectuals, individuals who tend to uphold the existing social order through their leadership and moral authority are referred to as "traditional intellectuals" (Olsaretti, 2014; Schwarzmantel, 2015).

In the context of colonial Indonesia, the highest ruling class was held by the colonial government, which governed the indigenous population. However, the aristocracy and the ulama of this period held differing attitudes toward the colonial administration. The old aristocracy tended to act as the colonial government's right-hand men toward the indigenous population, whereas the new priyai class tended not to rely on the colonial rulers and even became the forerunners of the anti-colonial resistance movement (Kartodirdjo et al., 1987; Sutherland, 1979). Similarly, among the ulama, some maintained ties with the colonial government and even regarded resistance against the colonizers as rebellion (Amiq, 1970).

Regarding this social class, although KH. Hasyim Asy'ari was born into a Javanese noble and ulama family, he represented the colonized indigenous class (Misrawi, 2010). KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's representation of the indigenous class can be seen in his intellectual efforts to improve the moral

character of the Tebuireng community through the founding of the Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School in 1899. As it developed, the pesantren served not only as a place for the transmission of religious knowledge but also as a means of training social leaders who would later spread his influence to various regions (Baso et al., 2019; Rifai, 2009).

KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's primary base for spreading his influence was the student body and alumni of the Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School. The Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School is known as the cradle of scholars and leaders of Islamic boarding schools throughout Java and Madura. Thousands of students were educated by him, and hundreds of them went on to become religious scholars or kiai who founded their own Islamic boarding schools (Baso et al., 2019). It is through this network of religious leaders and their students that their influence will eventually spread at the grassroots level. From Billings' perspective, this pesantren network served as a leadership resource that enabled KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's ideas to transcend the boundaries of the Tebuireng Pesantren and spread to various regions through the network of students and alumni kiai. The existence of this network ensured that religious ideas did not remain merely individual thoughts but were organized and collectively transmitted to the community (Baso et al., 2019; Billings, 1990; Bruinessen, 1995; Olsaretti, 2014).

In 1913, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's efforts to expand his influence faced challenges from the Dutch. This action by the Dutch government reflected an effort to maintain its dominance by weakening other leadership figures capable of giving rise to rival leadership (Simon, 2024). The effort to weaken KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's influence can be seen in the Dutch government's decision to send a thief to Tebuireng. However, after the thief was captured and killed, the Dutch leveled a murder charge against KH. Hasyim (Hajar, 2019). Although he was later acquitted of the murder charges, the Dutch subsequently sent troops to ransack nearly all the buildings of the Islamic boarding school, even destroying the religious texts on the grounds that the place was a hotbed of Islamic extremism (Syamsuri, 2020).

Nevertheless, the Dutch were well aware of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's influence. Therefore, in an effort to limit his influence, they sought to win him over by bestowing an official honor upon him. In 1937, the Dutch, through Governor Van der Plas, offered him silver and gold medals of honor in an effort to win his sympathy, but he firmly rejected the offer. Because of this refusal, the Tebuireng pesantren eventually came under strict surveillance by Dutch intelligence (Bruinessen, 1995).

KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's rejection of colonial honors demonstrated his commitment to maintaining moral independence as a prerequisite for organic leadership. Had he accepted the awards, his social legitimacy in the eyes of the community risked shifting to become part of the colonial power structure. Therefore, this refusal was a strategy to maintain his position as a leader of the indigenous community, rather than as an elite who compromised with colonial hegemony (Olsaretti, 2014).

In response to this stance, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari trained his students in silat to confront the bandits. Additionally, he encouraged his students to maintain anti-Dutch sentiment, although he advised that open resistance be postponed until the right moment. During this period, the resistance led by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari took the form of a "war of position" through his anti-Dutch fatwas (Hajar, 2019). Eventually, when the Allies sought to reclaim control of the Republic of Indonesia following the Proclamation of Independence, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari issued a fatwa calling for jihad as a form of resistance—a fatwa that legitimized the struggle against colonialism on religious grounds (Shihab, 1971).

Thus, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari can be understood as an organic intellectual because he fulfilled three main functions: representing the interests of the indigenous Muslim community within the colonial structure, articulating Islamic teachings as an ideology of opposition to colonial domination, and organizing social networks through pesantren and Nahdlatul Ulama. Within this framework, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's religiosity served not only as a spiritual identity but also as intellectual and moral leadership that shaped a counter-hegemonic strategy against colonialism (Billings, 1990; Muhlisin & Huda, 2022).

The Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School and Nahdlatul Ulama as Creators of a Free Space

An absolute prerequisite for religiosity to function as a form of opposition is the existence of institutions free from government intervention, thereby creating a social space that allows for the development of identity, values, and strategies of opposition as a counterforce to colonial hegemony. Without this autonomous space, religion tends to remain fragmented and serves only as a source of passive resistance, or even becomes a tool to reinforce the status quo (Billings, 1990).

In this context, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari was a founding figure of the Tebuireng Islamic boarding school and NU who kept a strict distance from the colonial government. In 1906, for example, although the pesantren founded by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari received recognition from the Dutch government, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari remained suspicious of their schemes (Royani, 2018). KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's non-cooperative stance became a source of ongoing concern for the Dutch. In 1905, for instance, KH Hasyim Asy'ari rejected the Dutch "teachers' ordinance" (Hajar, 2019). This policy required every Islamic religious teacher to obtain permission from the regent before teaching religion. Furthermore, he also rejected subsidies offered by the government, even considering salaries from the colonial authorities to be haram (Baso et al., 2019). This rejection of the teacher ordinance and government subsidies demonstrated that KH Hasyim Asy'ari sought to preserve the institutional independence of the pesantren from colonial co-optation mechanisms. From Billings' perspective, state intervention in religious institutions limits their ability to foster a discourse of opposition. Therefore, the autonomy of the Tebuireng Pesantren was a prerequisite for the continuation of leadership development, the dissemination of anti-colonial values, and the formation of collective solidarity outside government control (Billings, 1990; Hajar, 2019).

To finance his pesantren, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari utilized his extensive land for farming. Every week, he consistently set aside about two days to tend to his rice fields and gardens. In addition to agricultural activities, he was also involved in trade, such as selling crops, trading horses, and dealing in metals like iron (Baso et al., 2019). This economic self-sufficiency strengthened the Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School's position as a "free space" independent of reliance on colonial government resources, thereby enabling it to maintain its oppositional function. Consequently, the continuity of education, leadership development, and the dissemination of religious ideas could not be influenced by financial pressure (Billings, 1990).

Similar to the Tebuireng pesantren, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), led by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, served as a space that fostered a resistance movement. Although in its early years, NU tended to be willing to compromise with the colonial authorities, this did not mean it was resigned to the rulers' actions (Hajar, 2019). This is evident in the fatwas issued at NU congresses. At the 10th congress, for example, NU issued a fatwa prohibiting the Hajj pilgrimage via Dutch ships, the 14th NU congress refused to participate in Dutch compulsory military service, and culminating in the issuance of the jihad resolution on 22 October 1945, which became the driving force behind the armed resistance against the Dutch (Achmad Mukafi Niam (ed.), 2021).

Financially, NU also did not accept financial assistance from the government. NU was funded by its members' dues, including those of KH. Hasyim. The funds held in NU's savings accounts were generally invested in business ventures for future purposes (Achmad Mukafi Niam (ed.), 2021).

Thus, the independence of the Tebuireng pesantren and Nahdlatul Ulama, led by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, created a space free from colonial interference. The autonomy built over decades reached its peak toward the end of the colonial era. By the end of the colonial period, Tebuireng and NU were no longer merely places where kyai and santri studied; rather, they had transformed into a resource for resistance, manifested in the jihad resolution that mobilized the Hizbullah and Sabilillah militias—and even other influenced indigenous communities; something that would have been impossible had Tebuireng and NU been under colonial administrative control (Billings, 1990; Royani, 2018).

Plausibility Structure and the Theology of Resistance

In Dwight B. Billings' analysis, organizational autonomy and intellectual leadership alone are not sufficient to mobilize opposition. A third crucial element is required: the Plausibility Structure. This concept, which Billings borrowed from Peter Berger, refers to the social networks, rituals, and theological narratives that make a particular worldview seem reasonable and true to its adherents, even if that worldview contradicts the dominant reality imposed by the ruling powers (Billings, 1990).

During the colonial period, the dominant plausibility structure—constructed by the Dutch East Indies government and supported by bureaucratic ulama such as Sayyid Utsman—was a narrative of obedience. This narrative held that resisting a legitimate government “even if it were infidel” constituted an act of rebellion (*bughat*) that brought harm, and was therefore religiously unjustifiable (Amiq, 1970; Yusuf, 2022). This hegemony fostered a common-sense understanding among the populace that physical resistance was an irrational and foolish act of self-destruction.

In this context, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari deconstructed the old plausibility structure and constructed a new one through his religious understanding. The culmination of this construction of a new plausibility structure was manifested in the fatwa on jihad issued on 17 September 1945. Among other things, this fatwa states: first, it is a *fardu 'ain* for every Muslim to fight the infidels who are currently obstructing our independence; second, those who die in battle against NICA and its accomplices are considered martyrs; third, it is obligatory to kill anyone who divides our unity at this time (Baso et al., 2019; Fahrizal, 2023).



(Published in the daily newspaper Kedaulatan Rakyat, 20 November 1945)

This fatwa succeeded in creating a counter-reality. For the general public, whose thinking was influenced by colonial logic, fighting against the Allied forces was considered rebellion and even a sin. However, within the plausibility structure established by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, such actions became a driving force for the Muslim community to fight without being haunted by the fear of death (Baso et al., 2019; Billings, 1990; Faizah & Baedowi, 2024).

Furthermore, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari also integrated nationalist sentiment into the structure of faith through the famous slogan “Hubbul Wathon Minal Iman” (Love for the Homeland is Part of Faith) (Misrawi, 2010). The concept of the nation-state, which was originally a secular Western concept foreign to the logic of the *pesantren*, was given a theological framework by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, so that defending the homeland is no longer viewed as merely a worldly political activity but rather as a spiritual act worthy of divine reward (Dwijayanto & Ulya Afif, 2020). By making nationalism part of the dogma of faith, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari provided a solid moral foundation for *santri* to reject colonialism—not only because colonialism caused suffering, but because it undermined their faith.

Without religious legitimacy in the Indonesian people's struggle, it is doubtful that the mass mobilization during the Battle of 10 November 1945, would have occurred on such a massive scale.

Thus, in this context, religion served to provide the language and logic necessary to overcome the asymmetry of military power between the santri and Allied forces (Billings, 1990; Lailatus Sa'adah et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that KH. Hasyim Asy'ari's religiosity served as a counter-hegemonic strategy against colonialism through the fulfillment of the three prerequisites outlined by Dwight B. Billings. First, KH. Hasyim Asy'ari served as an organic intellectual who articulated the Muslim community's experiences of oppression in religious terms capable of fostering collective consciousness and organizing resistance. Second, the Tebuireng Islamic boarding school and Nahdlatul Ulama functioned as free spaces, free from colonial intervention, thereby enabling the training of new leaders, the reproduction of anti-colonial discourse, and the consolidation of a network of Islamic scholars. Third, through religious fatwas, particularly the Jihad Resolution, and the reinterpretation of the relationship between religion and nationalism via the slogan "Hubbul Wathan Minal Iman," KH. Hasyim Asy'ari established a framework of plausibility that provided religious legitimacy to the struggle to defend independence. Thus, the religion-based resistance he led was the result of a long process of developing leadership, organization, and collective conviction, rather than merely a spontaneous reaction to colonialism.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates that religiosity does not automatically become a force of opposition to power but requires specific social conditions that enable religion to function as an instrument of counter-hegemony. This finding extends the application of Billings' theory to the context of anti-colonial Islam in Indonesia. Furthermore, this study enriches the analysis of the socio-political history of Indonesian Islam by offering an analytical model that links religious, organizational, and ideological dimensions in explaining the dynamics of resistance movements.

This study still has limitations because it focuses on the socio-religious movement of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari during the colonial period through Billings's perspective. Future studies could use Billings's analytical framework to examine other religious movements in Indonesia, such as the resistance movements during the Paderi War in Minangkabau (1821–1837), the Diponegoro War in Java (1825–1830), and the Aceh War (1873–1904), thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of religiosity as a counter-hegemonic strategy in various historical contexts in Indonesia.

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