

**MOHAMMED ARKOUN'S THOUGHT
ON METHODOLOGY OF INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Arkoun's thoughts on the Qur'an and its Methodology of Interpretation. In Arkoun's view, revelation as a guide for humankind must not only be treated as something sacred, but it appears for the benefit of humanity as well. For Arkoun, a revelation manifested into *mushāf* must be studied with a modern approach using multidisciplinary sciences. So, we can reveal the substance of the message to the fullest. But the most important thing is that the meaning of revelation should not be followed or framed by ideological and political interests or other profane interests, which will reduce revelation to a kind of justification or legitimacy. Arkoun put forward in his interpretation methodology the following approach: first, Linguistic-Semiotic and Literary Interpretation. He wanted to explore the meaning of the Qur'an by explaining each word and the syntactic structure of the Qur'an. The Qur'an consists of signs and symbols which can be analyzed semiotically to reach the most profound meaning and far from an ideological point of view.

Second, Historical-Anthropological Interpretation. This approach introduces the Koran as part of the history of life. Then, to understand the Qur'an well, the exegete must realize that the Qur'an contains many stories behind the process of its revelation. Arkoun realized that this method was clear to challenge all sacred and transcendental interpretations produced by traditional theological reasoning. Third, Theological-Religious Interpretation. It is used as a last resort for reading the Qur'an. Arkoun points to two essential characteristics of this approach. First, all kinds of faith-oriented reading come under a "dogmatic cage." Second, early monumental commentaries contributed to the historical development of "living traditions."

Keywords: Quran, Interpretation, Arkoun

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi pemikiran Arkoun tentang Al-Qur'an dan Metodologi Tafsirnya. Dalam pandangan Arkoun, wahyu sebagai sumber petunjuk bagi umat manusia harus diperlakukan tidak hanya sebagai sesuatu yang sakral, tetapi juga harus diperhatikan bahwa ia muncul untuk kemaslahatan umat manusia. Wahyu yang diwujudkan menjadi *mushāf*, bagi Arkoun, harus dikaji dengan pendekatan modern dengan menggunakan ilmu-ilmu multidisiplin. Sehingga, kita dapat mengungkap substansi pesan wahyu secara maksimal. Namun yang terpenting adalah pengungkapan makna wahyu tidak boleh diikuti atau dibingkai oleh kepentingan ideologis dan politik atau kepentingan profan lainnya, yang akan mereduksi wahyu menjadi semacam pembenaran atau legitimasi. Apa yang dikemukakan Arkoun dalam metodologi interpretasinya meliputi pendekatan sebagai berikut: pertama, Interpretasi Linguistik-Semiotik dan Sastra. Dengan pendekatan-

pendekatan tersebut, ia ingin mendalami makna Al-Qur'an dengan menjelaskan setiap kata dan susunan sintaksis Al-Qur'an. Al-Qur'an terdiri dari tanda dan simbol yang dapat dianalisis secara semiotik untuk mencapai makna yang terdalam, dan jauh dari sudut pandang ideologis. Kedua, Interpretasi Historis-Antropologis. Pendekatan ini memperkenalkan Quran sebagai bagian dari sejarah kehidupan. Kemudian, untuk memahami Al-Qur'an dengan baik, penafsir harus memahami bahwa Al-Qur'an memuat banyak cerita di balik proses turunnya. Arkoun menyadari bahwa metode ini jelas untuk menantang semua interpretasi sakralisasi dan transendentalisasi yang dihasilkan oleh penalaran teologis tradisional. Ketiga, Tafsir Teologis-Religius. Ini digunakan sebagai alternatif terakhir untuk membaca Al-Qur'an. Arkoun menunjukkan dua karakteristik penting dari pendekatan ini. Pertama, semua jenis bacaan yang berorientasi pada keyakinan berada di bawah "kandang dogmatis". Kedua, karya-karya tafsir monumental awal berkontribusi pada perkembangan historis "tradisi yang hidup".

Kata Kunci: Al-Qur'an, Penafsiran, Arkoun

Background of The Study

The Quran always becomes exciting object of study to explored in every time. It has been giving many inspirations to human being (either muslim or non-muslim) to create new idea. Various approaches and methodologies are used to understand and to study it which subsequently bear Quranic and interpretation sciences in the same time.

What makes Quran looks very extraordinary is its language arrangement enchant and bear understandable meanings as well for every one although the understanding will be different based on all sort of factors.¹ Therefore, the interpretation of Quranic verses brings out not in single understanding. Exegesis books, consequently, emerge from the hands of scholars since olden till today have variety of interpretation colors, in accordance with methodology or approach they used.

Quranic study and interpretation methodology actually undergo significant enough of development, along with development acceleration of social-culture

condition and human civilization since descending of Quran until this time. This is logical consequence of the existence of human wish to create any dialogue between Quran as limited text and the development of humanity social problem as unlimited context.² So, the limited Quranic text is not truth claim justification for an understanding in theology as well as jurisprudence, because as Ali Harb remarks that text is not a mirror of reality, but it revolves between what is happening and what will probably happen.³

Quran as a text does not change, but the interpretation of the text may change in accordance with time and space context of human. It brings scholars to analyze, to understand, and to interpret by different methodologies and approaches for the sake of unfastening its real substance. These tools are submitted as way to unravel deepest meaning of the Quran.⁴

It has been familiar in the sight of Quranic learner about adage that says Quranic text is like a *bedug*.⁵ The interpreters make "*bedug*" sounded and reverberate. Thus, each approach

¹ Quraish Shihab, "*Membumikan*" *Alquran: Fungsi dan Peran Wahyu dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat* (Bandung: Mizan Media Utama, 2013), p. 112

² Abdul Mustaqim, *Studi Alquran Kontemporer: Wacana Baru Berbagai Metodologi Tafsir*, (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana Yogya, 2002), p. ix

³ Ali Harb, *Kritik Nalar Alquran*, trans. M. Faisol Fatawi, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003), p. 9

⁴ Umar Shihab, *Kontekstualitas Alquran: Kajian Tematik atas Ayat-ayat Hukum dalam Alquran*, (Jakarta: Penamadani, 1998), p. 3

⁵ *Bedug* is a tool hit as a sign of calling prayer.

and methodology are used “to hit the *bedug*” here. Such attempt has no purpose but to understand the holy Quran and to actualize it into daily life. To realize the attempt, one holds on textual understanding in the early appearance of that holy text while others attempt to adjust the understanding to the exchanging context of the time, and to form unpopular method in the past.⁶ It is almost similar to Munzir Hatami, Abdullah Saeed classify among Muslims in the modern period in relation to the interpretation to the Quran into three approaches: Textualist, Semi-textualist and Contextualist.⁷

Those approaches to Quran reflect serious attention of moslem scholars to understand the Holy Book well. The existence of these different ways cause many problems but those differences make different interpretations which bear different understanding as well as actualization of Quranic text. That is why moslems from past to present do not stand on one word in performing their religious teaching.

So, it is not surprised if Abdullah Darraz, an Egyptian scholar, recognized that when we read the Quran, we probably textually understand the meaning clearly. But when we read it again, we may find the different meaning of a word or a sentence which all can be probably right. This is, Darraz continues, because of Quranic verses are like diamond. Every angle of it reflects different light from other angles. So, it is not impossible if one who sees from an angel will have different light reflection from other people in different angle.⁸ Therefore, there can be as many reading as the number of readers or even more reading than the number of the readers as they can deploy

different points of views, approaches and methods in one object.⁹

In Islamic and Quranic study, there is a well-known group named as *post-traditionalism*. This attempts to criticize and to deconstruct view and credo coming from traditionalism and applies a postmodern methodology. This group is signed by emerging of Islamic reformer figures from Indian such as Iqbal, Amir Ali, and Ahmad Khan. Other intellectuals group appear then like Hasan Hanafi, Muhammad Imarah, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Mohammed Arkoun, and the others who continue and develop the previous criticism thinking.¹⁰

The rigid traditional dimensions could be liquefied only by doconstructing attempt of what has been established. This does “direct jabbing” to religious entity in totality, especially to holy book as a source of systematization of faith. This group efforts to use linguistic approach of *pascamodernism* in relation with history, historical psychology, sociology, and antropology which are not well known by previous scholars.¹¹

Application of modern linguistic approach in interpreting the Quran, which is harmonized to the last advancement of this subject, is used by outstanding Algerian, Mohammed Arkoun, a proffesor of Sorbonne University in Paris. Although he did not write a specific book of interpreting, in his numerous articles, he applied semiotic approach or the very lastest semiology – which analyze the object of study as a collection or a system of a number of signs that interrelate according to

⁶ Munzir Hitami, *Pengantar Studi Alquran: Teori dan Pendekatan*, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2012), p. 1

⁷ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran: Towards a Contemporary Aproach*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 3

⁸ Abdullah Darraz, *Annaba' Al-Azim*, (Mesir: Darul Urubah, 1996), p. 111, in Quraish Shihab, “Membumikan” *Alquran: Fungsi dan Peran Wahyu dalam*

Kehidupan Masyarakat (Bandung: Mizan Media Utama, 2013), p. 213

⁹ Kusmana, “Some Implications of Hermeneutical Readings for the Study of te Quran”, in *Journal of Quran and Hadith Studies*, 2, No.2 (Januari-Juni 2013), p. 267

¹⁰ Munzir Hitami, *Pengantar Studi Alquran: Teori dan Pendekatan*, p. 14

¹¹ Munzir Hitami, *Pengantar Studi Alquran: Teori dan Pendekatan*, p. 151

certain rules – in interpreting certain verses and terms of the Quran.¹²

Reading the Quran in contemporary era requires a new more relevant interpretation to nowadays situation. For Arkoun, therefore, the primordial problem must be solved by actual representation of Quran is to know how do we read this Book today? Should we collect every great opus to revive all sort of meanings which not appear in our daily life? Is it possible for someone to reach the one of conceptual analysis framework and narrow Word of God as a plain document read by philologist and interesting in thinking hirstorian? Has it to be considered that the Quran is only for Muslims, at least non-Muslims will open it in simpatico and tolerantly without caring any terms mentioned poignantly about them?¹³ Those several questions submitted by Arkoun in one of his articiel, *Comment Lire du Coran*, compiled in his book, *Lectures du Coran*.

Arkoun's thought about Quran is related to his thought about the relationship between *turats* (tradition) and modernity. Reading *turats* means reading texts, all kind of texts. According to him, one of the objective in reading a text, particularly holy text, is to appreciate that text in the middle of eternity of change. In other word, religious teachings that come from the Holy Text must conform in all conditions. That is one of core message of Islamic teaching; *al-Islam yashluh li kulli zaman wa makan*. The harmonization, therefore, between tradition and modernity must be committed through newest method.

By this view, Arkoun is subsumed to reformistic typology, in contemporary arabic thought discourse, who has reformation project in new more alive and more compatible

interpretations to the contemporary era. So, this typology has tendency to believe that both *turats* and modernity are good.¹⁴

To know Arkoun's thought much deeper about Quran and its interpretation, it requires special study. The writer, therefore, is interested in studying the Quran and its interpretation on perspective of Mohammed Arkoun. This study is exited because as contemporary thinker who wanted to batter down what has been established in the past, Arkoun will not free from critics and blasphemy, either from his admiror or his opposite.

Biography of Mohammed Arkoun

Mohammed Arkoun was one of the most prominent and influential figures in Islamic Studies. He was born on 1 February 1928 in Taourirt-Mimoun, Kabilia, a mountain range of Berber territory in East Aljir. This situation leads him since his childhood to three languages; Kabilia language, one of Berber language inherited by North Africa since pre-Islam and pre-Roman time; Arabic brought by Islamic expansion since the first century of Hijri; French, brought by colonial which conquer Algeria between 1830 and 1962.¹⁵ Kabilia teritory consits of Big Kabilia and Small Kabilia. Inhabitant lives from agriculture (Fig and olive fruit), livestock and handicraft trade. Berber is labelled to inhabitant spread in North Africa, from Libya to Atlanctic ocean.¹⁶

According to Historical note, Algeria was conquered by Arabs in 682 under the comander of Uqbah bin Nafi' in the period of caliph Yazid bin Mu'awiyah. Most of Berberian embraced Islam and then together with Arabic shouldiers follow in several Islamic conquest, primarily the conquest of Spain under comander

¹² Taufik Adnan Kamal, *Rekonstuksi Sejarah Alquran*, (Yogyakarta: Forum Kajian Budaya dan Agama, 2001) p. 364

¹³ Mohammed Arkoun, *Kajian Kontemporer Alquran*, trans. Hidayatullah, (Bandung: Pustaka, 1998), p. 45

¹⁴ A. Luthfi Assyaukanie, "Tipologi dan Wacana Pemikiran Arab Kontemporer", in *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam Paramadina*, v.I, no. 1, July-December 1998, p. 63

¹⁵ Meuleman, "Introduction", in Arkoun, *Nalar Islami*, p. 1

¹⁶ Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam dan Modernitas*, (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1998), p. 11

of Tariq bin Ziyad. In later development –like Khawarij– they rebelled against Bani Abbas. Because of this rebellion, Bani Abbas was divided into several dynasties, like Aglabid Dynasti, Moravit, and Almohad. These dynasties underwent power degradation in the last of 13th century and subsequently shattered thoroughly.¹⁷

In Social-cultural point of view, Kabilian people actually are illiterate. They knew nothing but oral language. Algeria –when Arkoun was born and grown up– was under France dominance.¹⁸ In this subjugated territory, France promoted agriculture settlement specially dedicated for French. They lived in districts –on their views– have belonged to them legally. The district they live in usually is was taken from the hands of land owners who rebel, or a district from reclamation result.¹⁹ French in general, did want to destroy moslem people. Moslem people even were given special rights in line with French them self. But this happened if they were ready to accept kinship law of French as well as ready to leave kinship law of Islam which based on *syariah* rule. For French, this regulation was small sacrifice of Moslems against worn out believe, which will be rejected by blind prejudice. But, Moslems, even they who were educated in french school, seldom choose be a French –in mean leave kinship law of Islam,- Although culturally they were really “French”.²⁰ In this condition, Arkoun's position, that was educated in culture and education system of French, can be placed proportionally.²¹

As a Kabilian born-child, Arkoun recognized well the illiteracy of Kabilia. As Algerian, Arkoun knew Arabic well as well as

French as educated people. In other words, those languages represented three traditions and different culture orientation. Kabilia language was a tool to convey all kinds of traditions and guide value related to social and economic life which exist since thousands years ago. Arabic was expression tool and perpetuation of tradition in religioun which linked Algeria to other regions and nations in North Africa and Middle East. French was goverment language and medium for western values and traditions delivered throught French schools which established by colonialist in quite big number in Kabilia.²²

Because Arkoun lived among these three languages, he got awareness that language was more than technical medium to express self, that can be changed to another language without any problems. Each language has own valuable background. As ilustration, in Arkoun's view, arabic is religious language, while French is administration and education language.²³

He passed away in Paris on 14 September 2010. In a career of more than 30 years, he was an outstanding research scholar, a searching critic of the theoretical tensions embedded in the field of Islamic Studies, and a courageous public intellectual, carrying the banner of an often embattled Islamic modernism and humanism.

Arkoun's education will lead his intercourse to many languages and thought tradition, primarily Islamic tradition, mostly expressed in arabic, and Western tradition, which specially devoloped in French and France. He took his primary school in his native

¹⁷ Louis Ma'luf (ed), *Al-Munīd fī al-A'lām*, (Beirut: Dar al-Mashreq Publisher, 1976), p. 544

¹⁸ Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam dan Modernitas*, p. 13

¹⁹ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) vol. II, p. 299

²⁰ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, p. 299

²¹ Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam dan Modernitas*, p. 14

²² Kamdani, “introduction” in Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam Kontemporer Menuju Dialog Antar Agama*, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2001) p.vi

²³ Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam dan Modernitas*, p. 14

village, Kabilia, and his high school in Oran. Since 1950-1954, he studied Arabic literary in University of Aljir, while he was teaching Arabic on one of high school in outskirt of Capital of Algeria,²⁴ namely in Al-Harrach High School.²⁵

In the middle of liberation war of Algeria from France (1954-1962), he registered as student of university in Paris. Since that time, he lived in France. But he never changed his prime field of study and research: Arabic language and literary and more islamic thinking.²⁶ In further development, he focus his attention intencity on islamic thinking much more than before. Prominent characteristic of Arkoun's thought, therefore, is special combining between western and Islam. Incorporation effort of both substances is extremely his dream and be a baground of his works and programs.²⁷

Arkoun took his last formal education and reached doctoral degree in Literary field in 1969 from Sorbonne University in Paris under disertation about humanism according to ethical thinking of Miskawaih, a Moslem Persian thinker since the last 10 century till 11 century (d. 1030).²⁸ As he began to consider how one might rethink Islam in the contemporary world, his sophisticated questioning provided a welcome counterpoint to the highly ideological interpretations that dominated debate in both the Muslim world and the non-Muslim West. This prompted Arkoun to consider ways to adapt modern scientific and scholarly thought to Islam in the twentieth-century. He promoted this critical approach as

editor of the journal Arabica, serving also as its science editor. He influenced the way English-language scholars viewed Islam, urging them to depart from the dichotomy of Orientalism versus Occidentalism to adopt an epistemological approach to the study of cultures.

As scholar who focuses on language field, Arkoun's view about language, in the early phase comes from self experience, but then supported by several contemporary studies on language through the opus of western scientist, philosophers, anthropologist, and teologist. We can understand, therefore, why most prime term of Arkoun's study related to language. Nevertheless, various terms that Arkoun explicates, finally, bring us to one purpose, that is how to combine diverse different thinking ways.²⁹

When he was a student of university in Paris, Arkoun ever worked as a member of Arabic language and literary. He was also a teacher in an high school in Strasbourg, a dicstrict located in east of France. Beside that, he was also asked to give a lecture at Literary faculty of Strasbourg University (1956-1959).³⁰ In 1961, he was installed as a lecturer at University of Sorbonne, Paris. But in 1970, he moved and started to teach at University of Lyon till 1972.³¹ In the same year, he came back to Paris and became professor of the history of Islamic thought at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University.³²

Retired in 1992, Arkoun was a senior research fellow and member of the Board of

²⁴ Meuleman, "Introduction", in Arkoun, Nalar Islami, p. 2

²⁵ Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam dan Modernitas*, p. 15

²⁶ Meuleman, "Introduction", in Arkoun, Nalar Islami, p. 2

²⁷ Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam dan Modernitas*, p. 15 cited by Meuleman, "Nalar Islami" in UQ, No. 4/IV/1993, p. 99

²⁸ Kamdani, "introduction" in Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam Kontemporer menuju dialog antar agama*, p. vii

²⁹ Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam dan Modernitas*, p. 17

³⁰ Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam dan Modernitas*, p. 17

³¹ Meuleman, "Introduction", in Arkoun, Nalar Islami, p. 2

³² <http://www.giffordlectures.org/Author.asp?AuthorID=198>, accessed on Sept 23, 2020

Governors of The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. He was a visiting professor at many schools: The University of California, Los Angeles; Louvain-La-Neuve University, Belgium; Pontifical Institute of Arabic Studies in Rome; Princeton University; Temple University, Philadelphia; and the University of Amsterdam. He was a fellow at Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin and Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton.³³

He joined several academic and public policy initiatives in Europe to rethink relations between Europe, Islam, and the Mediterranean. France decorated him as an Officer of the French Legion of Honour in July 1996. He also received UCLA's Seventeenth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Award for contributions to Islamic Studies. Other centers of Islamic research, such as the University of Exeter's Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies in England, awarded Arkoun honorary doctorates. During the Exeter award in 2001, he gave a keynote to the international conference "Orientalism Reconsidered."³⁴

Mohammed Arkoun's Thought on Quranic Exegesis

a. The Concept of *Wahy*

Wahy literally has various meanings such as concealing talk, sign or giving signal, fast informing, giving written information, writing for something and giving inspiration.³⁵ The revelation that means inspiration, Nuruddin 'Itr quotes Quran Sura Qasas verse 7 which means disturbance, he gives an example of Quran Sura al-An'am verse 121. From this definition, that is to say, that giving of revelation can be delivered through three kinds of shape: oral

communication, five senses signal, and through sound and writing.³⁶ Etimologically, revelation is defined "saying something or written thing (*al-maktūb*)."³⁷ And in syariah point of view, *wahy* is delivering information from Allah to the selected '*ibād* (servants) in hidden and fast.³⁸

In several verses, revelation has all sort of meanings in accordance with the context. In Quran, the word *wahy* and its derivation mentioned in sixty one places. From such sixty one places, Quran gives different meanings. As it means giving inspiration to human in Q.S. Qasas: 7 mentioned above, giving sign or code in Q.S. Maryam: 11, writing something down mentioned in Q.S. al-An'am:112, and even nature meaning of revelation means giving bad information, as written in Q.S. al-An'am: 121. In its verses, Quran uses the word *wahy* (revelation), consistently, as giving inspiration, code, whisper, or common information, if the object is not a prophet. Conversely, *wahy* means the sacred words of Allah the Almighty delivered in hidden via an angel as sign of prophethood, if the object is a messenger, as mentioned in Q.S. al-Anbiya: 25, Q.S. Yunus: 109, and so forth.³⁹

From previous explanation, we can say that the meaning of revelation cannot be seen in one side of coin, because literal meaning cannot give real sense of that word yet. All we can do is to understand its etymology and *contextual* sense. Understanding both of them will ¹ 23 whole comprehension and not dichotomy. This can be looked, for instance, from the basic meaning of revelation, that means giving information in hidden and writing something down. This both meanings, in fact, adhere in

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<http://www.giffordlectures.org/Author.asp?AuthorID=198>, accessed on Sept 23, 2020

³⁴

<http://www.giffordlectures.org/Author.asp?AuthorID=198>, accessed on Sept 23, 2020

³⁵ Ibnu Mandhūr, *Lisān al-'Arāb* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārif), p. 4787

³⁶ Muhammad Fuād 'Abdul Baqi, *Mu'jām al-Mufradāt Li al-Fāḥ al-Qur'ān al-Kaīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1401 H/1981 M), p. 747

³⁷ M.M. Al-A'zami, *The History the Qur'anic text From Revelation to Compilation, Sejarah Teks al-Qur'an dari Wahyu sampai Kompilasi*, (Jakarta: GIP, 2005), p. 71

³⁸ Nuruddin 'Itr, *Ulūmul Qur'ān*, p. 15

³⁹ Mannā' Khalīl al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥiṭ Fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, (Bogor: Litera Antar Nusa, 2009), p. 36

syar'i sense of Quranic revelation. So, it means that Quran is recitation, but it does not mean there no same meaning with Quran as a text. It also means something written, so that Quran named as *al-Kitāb*. Therefore, according to Malik Ben Ali, *wahy* (revelation) should be taken to mean a spontaneous and absolute knowledge of an object not conceived or even conceivable.⁴⁰

When receiving the revelation, Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. did not receive it in a written form or a book, but he received verses by recitation. Conforming to its literal meaning, after the Messenger grasped the revelation and taught it to the companions and they memorized it, the memorized revelation then written down on stem of dates and bone. Although the revelation delivered orally, Quran, consistently, named it as *al-Kitāb* (the written Book). The care of Quranic revelation, therefore, used two media, memorizing and assisted by writing, as it will be explained later. It means, there is no different content between revelation delivered orally during the prophethood from revelation written down in text.

Many verses refer to the revelation as a *qawl*, which may be translated as 'saying', 'word' or 'words' that are 'said', 'communicated' and then 'heard'. These and similar verses indicate that the Quran is primarily spoken word coming from God. There are also several verses that indicate that, during the time of the Prophet, the Quran came to be conceived of as 'scripture', not just spoken word. It thus became a book a scripture much like the earlier scriptures given to prophets before Muhammad.⁴¹

The descent (*tanzīl*) process of revelation has three kinds of ways. The first,

Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. was visited by An Angel (Gabriel), then it hears like sound of bell and Prophet listened and understood that it was revelation.⁴² According to several transmissions, the descent of revelation such this way is about threat.⁴³ Second, an angel came and then he conveyed like whispering Prophet S.A.W. Third, Gabriel came by common human face, and delivered revelation directly (*talaqqiyān*) to Prophet S.A.W. fourth, Prophet S.A.W. was visited in his dream by Gabriel. Fifth, Allah S.W.T delivered His word directly, either in aware of Prophet as he receive the command of salah (prayer) at *Isrā'* night, or Allah S.W.T. came to Prophet in his sleep. Every time the Prophet received a revelation, he taught the companions orally, encourage them to memorize, besides he commanded them to write it down.⁴⁴

The first thing we have to pay attention more in understanding Arkoun's thought is his standpoint or notion of revelation. This is important because the concept of revelation that Arkoun proposes has strictly difference from other thinkers and scholars' opinion. That is why, Arkoun got many responses and critiques.

The Islamic conception of revelation is called *tanzīl* ("descent"), a fundamental metaphor for the vertical gaze human beings are invited to cast toward God, transcendence.⁴⁵ Arkoun said that revelation has three levels. First, revelation is transcendence and unlimited word of Allah which usually called as *umm al-Kitāb*. Second, the unlimited revelation transformed in history and revealed to several languages. The last is revelation written in the *Muṣḥaf*.

⁴⁰ Malik Ben Nabi, *The Quranic Phenomenon: An Attempt at A Theory of Understanding the Holy Quran*, (Kuala Lumpur: American Trust Publications, 1983), p. 69

⁴¹ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran: Toward a Contemporary Approach*, p. 35

⁴² See Al-Bukhari, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 2009), p. 5, hadith no. 2

⁴³ Jalaluddin al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut-Lebanon: Dār al-Fikr, 1429 H/2008 M), p. 64

⁴⁴ Jalaluddin al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, p. 64

⁴⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, trans. Robert D. Lee, (Westview Press, 1994), p. 31

Revelation in Quran, firstly is the result of linguistic verification. Syntax structure, in Quranic discourse semiotic supplies a communication space which articulated totally to express the notion and the content of the revelation.⁴⁶ Arkoun views the covabulary of revelation used by the Quran itself is difficult to translate into our desacralized languages, cut off from the system of coontations relcant to religious discourse in the semitic languages.⁴⁷ Therefore, when Arkoun quoted about revelation in Quran, he did not want to translate the term of “*wahy*”. Like sura 42: 51:

وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَنْ يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ
وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ بَأْذَنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّهُ
عَلِيُّ حَكِيمٌ

“Man is not of a dignity such that God speaks to him other than by means of wahy or from behind a veil or by sending him a messenger who, with the permission of God, communicates the wahy that God wants to give him. God is Transcendent and Wise.”

Acording to Izutsu, revelation means that God ‘spoke’, that He revealed Himself through language, and that not in some mysterious non-human language but in a clear, humanly understandable language. This is the initial and most decisive fact. Without act on the part of God, there would have been no true religion on earth according to Islamic understanding of the word religion.⁴⁸

Arkoun remarks that analysis of the levels of revelation as mentioned above is not careless and vilification deed which done only by “unbeliever”. But “the believer” is really hoped to do this effort because he has to develop

the honour with full of morality consideration on word of Allah more than “unbeliever”.⁴⁹ Such classification, for Arkoun, implies the contradiction between who knows and does not know.

On the first level of revelation, word of Allah is “kept” in Archtype of the Book, transcendent, replete with wisdom, and kept in the presence of God.⁵⁰ In this meaning, revelation written in Quran, New and Old Testament or revealed to other apostles are piece or part of that unlimited word of Allah.⁵¹ As it is presupposed in Sura Lukman (31): 27:

وَلَوْ أَنَّ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَامٌ وَالْبَحْرُ
يَمْدُهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةُ أَبْحُرٍ مَا نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ -

“And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink), with seven oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the words of Allah be exhausted (in the writing): for Allah is Exalted in power, full of wisdom.”

On second level of revelation, it happened only once, cannot be repeated, and we cannot undergo it again. More than it, according to Arkoun, the utterance of the revelation cannot be known again whether it is exactly as same as today or not. But, the revelation obviously has been framed in history that is not separated from factors which accompany it, ideology, culture, and so forth.⁵² On this level, pieces of word of Allah, linguistically, are articulated in Hebrew (AlKitāb), Aramec (Isa’s

⁴⁶ Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam Kontemporer: Menuju Dialog antar Agama*, p. 108

⁴⁷ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 31

⁴⁸ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in The Koran*, (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), p. 154

⁴⁹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, trans. Machasin, (Jakarta: INIS, 1990), p. 4

⁵⁰ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 31

⁵¹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, trans. Machasin, (Jakarta: INIS, 1990), p. 4

⁵² Waryono Abdul Ghafur, “Quran and interpretation on Perspective of Arkoun”, in Abdul Mustaqim, *Studi Alquran Kontemporer: Wacana Baru Berbagai Metodologi Tafsir*, (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana Yogya, 2002), p. 184

teachings, nevertheless, reported in Greek) and Arabic (Quran).⁵³

As for second level, Arkoun tries toward a comparative theology of revelation. Whereas Jews and Muslims concur comfortably that God reveals his will to human beings via the mediation of prophets (with the difference that Muslim recognize all the prophets of Israel, while the Jews have always refused to accord Muhammad this status), Christians stake claim irreducibly different from the Judeo-Islamic position: Jesus Christ, they say, is the Word of God become flesh. He is the incarnation of God, the son of God to live among men in order to communicate directly, without the mediation of an angel or a prophet, the Divine Word. In this conception, the New Testament is only an account of what the disciples heard and remembered of the teaching of the Son of God, speaking in the name of the Father.⁵⁴

Related to Quran indicates to *muṣḥaf*, Arkoun prefer to use term of Closed Official Corpus according to procedures developed and supervised by scholars: *official* because they resulted from a set of decisions taken by “authorities” recognized by the community; *closed* because nobody was permitted any longer to add or subtract a word, to modify a reading in the Corpus now declared authentic.⁵⁵ The expression of closed official corpus illustrates generally researchs and methods of philology and linguistics. Corpus defined as a great unit of texts compiled in one volume of book; linguistic testing on these texts exposes a various discourses.⁵⁶

The expression of closed official corpus that Arkoun refers to *muṣḥaf uṭmani* is not

without any risks to misunderstand. By saying as such, Arkoun likely wants to question that canon. Whereas, according to Sunardi, is not like that. By this expression, Arkoun wants to underline the historical aspect of *muṣḥaf*. To understand the substance of Quran deeply, and to waive the understanding of rigid ideology and theology, we cannot ignore historical aspect.⁵⁷

After Quranic discourse transformed into form of closed official corpus, so, according to Arkoun, this corpus factually has three fundamental implications: a) Quranic discourse, which in its first time pronounced and used as an oral discourse, now becomes a text. This transformation will lead to amount of radical change that linguistic and semiotic science must take into account; b) the characteristic of sacred of the text expanded to the Book as material medium and tool for “revelation”; and c) that Book as cultural instrument will be basic for another fundamental change in societies of Book, namely the developing of role and, finally, cultural domination of educated-written on people-oral. This domination related to state which will develop a need on official archives and historiography.⁵⁸

Because of Quranic discourse, linguistically, has become a text, so it turns to be final, limited, and open corpus of Arabic utterance that we cannot have any entrance to it except through a text which its written form standardised after 4th/10th century. All such standardised texts are treated as an opus.⁵⁹ In other words, the text exist among us is result of enunciation action. We, consequently, cannot have an access to word of Allah in the first level but via this text.⁶⁰ Arkoun explains further that

⁵³ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, trans. Machasin, (Jakarta: INIS, 1990), p. 5

⁵⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 32

⁵⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 34

⁵⁶ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, trans. Machasin, (Jakarta: INIS, 1990), p. 6

⁵⁷ St. Sunardi, “Reading Quran with Arkoun”, in J.H. Meuleman (ed.), *Reading Quran with Arkoun*, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2012), p. 92

⁵⁸ Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam Kontemporer: Menuju Dialog antar Agama*, p. 121

⁵⁹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, trans. Machasin, (Jakarta: INIS, 1990), p. 91

⁶⁰ Waryono Abdul Ghafur, Quran and interpretation on Perspective of Arkoun, in Abdul

closed official corpus becomes "holy Book", which means that it is purified through a set of ritual, strategies, and interpretation methods related to many real political, social, and cultural situations and known or unknowable.⁶¹

b. Quran and Exegesis

After simple explanation above about levels of revelation, in this discussion we will talk the third level of revelation much deeper, that is closed official corpus known well as Quran manifested in *muṣḥaf uṭmānī*. Although in fact, between one level and another one has relation cannot be separated one and another. This is due to vividly all levels are revelation, word of God.

The Quran strongly denies that it is the speech or ideas of the Prophet or, indeed, of any other human. It also asserts that the revelation came directly from God and in Arabic so that it could be without human induced errors or inaccuracies.⁶² Therefore, for the Quran itself, and consequently for the Muslim, the Quran is the word of God. Not only does the word Quran, meaning 'recitation', clearly indicate this, but the text of the Quran itself states in several places that the Quran is verbally revealed and not merely in its meaning and ideas.⁶³

The Quran was revealed in Arabic because of Muhammad is arabian. Many references in the Quran indicate that it was revealed in arabic, not in a mysterious code or in a tongue unknown to the Prophet: "*We have sent it down as an Arabic Quran*".⁶⁴ Zamakhshari commented on this verse, as Gatje quoted, that we have sent it down to you as something that is composed in your own

language or can be recited in your own language, so that you will be able to understand it and grasp its meanings; or, that you will employ your intellect and (through it) discover that the account, out of the mouth of a man like this who could not produce a (comparable) account (previously), is a matchless miracle which one can conceive only as having been revealed.⁶⁵

As an observer and scholar of Arabic literary, Arkoun exactly knows well arabic. To understand Quran, knowing well the arabic is absolutely important for everyone who studies Quran and its interpretation. This is because, Islam has taken Quran as prime and first guidance in its teachings.

In latin, Quran named *Alcoranus*. In old English called "al-Coran", and Germany is "Koran", while French looks prefer "Coran". This name is for whole content of the Book, not just a part of revealed text.⁶⁶ In origin this word is a generic noun which is applicable to the whole as well as to a part of it. It then became predominant as a proper name referring to the whole.⁶⁷

Literally, the word Quran either from the word *qara'a* or *qarana*, all mean "collection". As it is narrated in Q.S. al-Qiyamah: 17.⁶⁸ Therefore, the naming of "Quran" as revelation sent down to Prophet Muhammad because the collection commandment and prohibition, promise and threat, story, verse (*ayah*), chapter (*surah*)

Mustaqim, *Studi Alquran Kontemporer: Wacana Baru Berbagai Metodologi Tafsir*, (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana Yoga, 2002), p. 184

⁶¹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam Kontemporer: Menuju Dialog antar Agama*, p. 108

⁶² Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran: Toward a Contemporary Approach*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 34

⁶³ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 30

⁶⁴ Q.S. 12:2. See also Q.S. 20: 113, Q.S. 39: 28, Q.S. 42:7, Q.S. 43: 3 Q.S. 46:12

⁶⁵ Helmut Gatje, *The Quran And Its Exegesis*, p. 53

⁶⁶ W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to The Quran*, trans. Lillian D. Tedjasudhana, (Jakarta: INIS, 1998), p. 51

⁶⁷ Helmut Gatje, *The Quran And Its Exegesis*, trans. Alford T. Welch, (England: Routledge, 1997) p. 53

⁶⁸ "It is for Us to collect it and to recite it."

which interrelated.⁶⁹ The Quran refers to itself also by other titles: *Furqan* (Criterion), *Balag* (Message), *Tanzil* (Revelation, literally sending down), *Zikr* (Reminder, literally remembrance), but its essence, of which these terms are tokens, is wahy or revelation.⁷⁰

Like other scholars, Arkoun remarks that Quran is a participle of the word *qara'a*, "to read". In the word "Qur'an" itself, the root *q-r-'* has the sense of reciting more than of reading, for it does not presuppose the existence of a written text when Muhammad first enunciated his revelation. Thus verses 16 and 19 of Sura 75 say:

لَا تُحَرِّكْ بِهِ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا جَمْعَهُ
وَقُرْآنَهُ قَدًا قَرَأْنَهُ فَاتَّبِعْ قُرْآنَهُ ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا بَيَانَهُ⁷¹

"Don't move your tongue to recite (the Qur'an) as if you wanted to hurry with the enunciation. It falls to us to put it together and proclaim it (qura'anahu); and when we have proclaimed it, to recite it faithfully; then it is our task to make it clear."

Orientalist philologists suggest that the word *Quran* has Syriac or Hebraic origins, but this observation does not modify the meaning required by the Quranic context itself. The principal idea, according to Arkoun, is that of a recitation conforming to a discourse that is heard, not read. That is why he prefer to speak of Quranic *discourse* and not of *text* in the initial phase of enunciation by the prophet.⁷¹

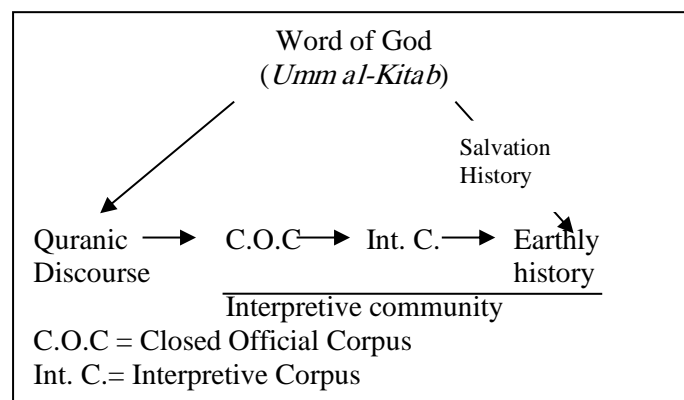
Quran is the word of Allah and retains its pristine purity without the least change, alteration, distortion, division, amendment or annulment since it was revealed to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W).⁷² in general there is no doubt about the genuineness of the

revelations that have been handed down, even if many details concerning the exact wording are problematic.⁷³

Arkoun offers the philosophical critique of sacred texts –which has been applied to the Hebrew Bible and to the New Testament without thereby engendering negative consequences for the notion of revelation –, although it has been rejected by Muslim scholarly opinion.⁷⁴

What appears for the next problem is Quran has become text. And there is no anyway to understand word of God except through this text. Therefore, the text is final, it means really limited in amount of utterance form it. Final in enunciation form and its content, as well. But, on another hand, the text is opened to various contexts brought and carried by every reading.

To show the trip of Quran as text or *muṣḥaf*, Arkoun makes a following figure:⁷⁵



In this figure, Arkoun portrayed the movement by which God revealed a part of the Heavenly Book to human beings on the vertical axis, symbolic of the "descent" of revelation and the climb back toward transcendence. On the horizontal axis, that of earthly history, the

⁶⁹ Ahmad Imran, *al-Qirāh al-Mu'āṣirah Li al-Qurān Fi al-Mīzān*, (Beirut: Dar an-Nafais, 1995), p.127

⁷⁰ Faruq Sherif, *A Guide To The Content of The Quran*, (Lebanon: Garnet Publishing, 1995), p. 40

⁷¹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 30

⁷² Hafiz Muhammad Adil, *Introduction to Quran*, (Delhi: Adam Publisher, 1990), p. 5

⁷³ Helmut Gatje, *The Quran And Its Exegesis*, p. 23

⁷⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 35

⁷⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 38

human operations lead from the Quranic discourse (oral pronouncements by the Prophet at moments of opportunity, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, not all of which were faithfully reported) to the Closed Official Corpus and then on to the Corpus of Interpretation, that is to say, the numerous commentaries written revealed truths to illuminate the conduct of human beings through the course of earthly history in the world down here (*al-dunya*). This earthly history is thus entirely lived as a passage toward the other World (*al-akhira*) after the test of Resurrection and Last Judgment.⁷⁶

By this reason, Arkoun then makes work hypothesis stating that:

1. Quran is a set of potential meaning introduced to all mankind, conform to emphasis of doctrin building as various as situation of its emerging history.
2. On the level of potential meaning, Quran refers to trans-history religion, or on another word, to trancedency. On the level of doctrinal actualization of teology, jurisprudence, philosophy, politic, ethic, and so forth, Quran becomes mythology and ideology influenced by transcendental meaning.
3. Quran is a opened text. no any interpretation can close it absolutely and orthodoxy. Conversely, all muslim schools are ideological movement that support and validate the wish of strenght of diverse social group compete to gain the power.
4. *De jure*, Quranic text is impossible narrowed to ideology because the text explores, particularly, the situation of human condition limit, existence, love, life, and death.⁷⁷

From the such hypothesis, the problem faced by moslem community for the sake of understanding Quran does not just really exist

in interpretable and vage verses, but also in the verses regarded as final and absolute meaning. It seems the last mentioned is more questionable by Arkoun on the treasure of the existing Quranic interpretation. Remeaning of Quranic discourse through many kinds of science disciplines is what Arkoun tries, some of it through semiotical and anthropological study.⁷⁸

When Arkoun offered readings of Quran, what he wanted to do is study on theoretical requisites for the possibility of an ideal reading purposed for the original meaning of Quran on discourse level and not on text level.⁷⁹ Although those requisites can be recognized, defined, but impossible fulfilled primarily because in fact that, as said before, the situations of the first discourse has been lost and cannot be repeated again. What we can do now is outspan the hands asytmotically to an approach which so far so close to it. But today, we must stop, spiritually and intellectually, the pretension of jurists-teologs who have built dogmatic systems to hold jurisprudence and political rule, and even the semantical rule of societies which the strong symptom of the Book force its existence.⁸⁰

Therefore, when someone reads Quran , there is really a prime destination to reach, that is to understand and to grasp text meaning. It means that reading purpose is not just to understand the meaning of text narrowly, but also gain maximally the meaning of text. This kind of Arkoun's reading cannot be separated from the method he proposes, that is linguistics or exactly semiotics.⁸¹ Because Quran is the divine messages come from Allah, so an interpreter tries to grasp the meaning what Allah wants to from the verses. Therefore,

⁷⁶ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 37

⁷⁷ Mohammed Arkoun, *Nalar Islami dan Nalar Modern: Berbagai Tantangan dan Jalan Baru*, (Jakarta: INIS, 1994), p. 194-195

⁷⁸ Baidhowi, *Antropologi Al-Quran*, (Yogyakarta: LkiS, 2013), cct. II, p. xii

⁷⁹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 7

⁸⁰ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 7

⁸¹ Baidhowi, *Antropologi Al-Quran*, p. 108

according to Yusuf, an interpreter finds the meaning, not produce it.⁸²

According to Arkoun, Quranic exegesis developed by moslem community since 1st/7th century just honour the history in rare and separate case which the influence is not big enough for a critical teology of revelation; interpreters lead Quranic text to various meanings, questions, interpretation related to thinking, culture and ideological need corforming to each time, social environment, and political situation.⁸³ This kind of interpretation still goes forward to moslem community until this time, primarily because influenced by social system and political condition, self indentity searching (nasionalism), and economical problem demand. This kind of interpretation, for Arkoun, slow but sure will impact to the force of religion as ideolical stick of leaders, hiding place of *opposan*, moral sanctuary of religous leader, promotion tool for new cadres of societies.⁸⁴

Bringing the Quran on the same footing as the rest of world scriputrers, Arkoun reiteratess that historicity aplies equally to the hertage of all humankind and that there is no alternative ways to interpret any type or any level of revelation except by relating it to its historical context. Thus, he is determined to explicate the historicity of the Quran .⁸⁵

c. Arkoun's Methodology of Interpreting The Quran

The development of thought, social situation, culture, science, and human civilization, indirectly, inspired moslem scholars to andvance new methodology in

comprehending the Holy Quran. The emergence of contemporary methodology of interpretation is absolutely needed and unavoided in history. Moreover in thinking map of islamic sciences, problem of interpretation methodology, that is a set of concept and theory, process and procedure to develops interpration, is kind of immature science, so that, it always open to renew and advance. It is not excessive to say that contemporary methodology of interpretation can be viewed as an effort of interpretation advancing in contemporary era for the sake of responding period challenges.⁸⁶

Talking interpretation methodology means talking about teoritical concepts of process and procedure used by interpreter in doing interpretation activity. It is also a part of epystemology that studies about steps taken up to make achieved knowledge fulfills scientific characteristis.⁸⁷ Besides that, methodology also seen as part of logic which studies the exact reasoning principle, as well as studies assumption background the emergence of method.⁸⁸

As contemporary thinker, Arkoun shows his care by contributing his thought in methodology of Quranic interpretation. For Arkoun, modern literature of Quran has lower value compared to clasical literature. This is caused the recently opus of moslems is just repeated statement and more defensive apology than searching a way to understand.⁸⁹ The impact then, Arkoun adds, word of Allah opposed and foiled by our practices of our societies today; hounored but in fact hampered by moslem community, and reduced by

⁸² Kadar M. Yusuf, *Studi Alquran*, (Jakarta: Amzah, 2012), p. 122

⁸³ Mohammed Arkoun, *Nalar Islami dan Nalar Modern: Berbagai Tantangan dan Jalan Baru*, p. 40

⁸⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 9

⁸⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, (London: Saqi Book, 2002), p. 89, in Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, "Mohammad

Arkoun's Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique", *Intellectual Discourse*, 2006, vol. 14, No 1, p. 20

⁸⁶ Abdul Mustaqim, *Studi Alquran Kontemporer: Wacana Baru Berbagai Metodologi Tafsir*, p.x

⁸⁷ Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer*, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2010), p. 133-134

⁸⁸ Rizal Mustansir dan Misnal Munir, *Filsafat Ilmu*, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2001), p. 107

⁸⁹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 48

orientalist knowledge becomes nothing other than culture.⁹⁰

To study Quran, Arkoun offers three approaches. Those are:

1. Linguistic-Semiotic and Literary Interpretation

By taking the conception of de Saussure which according to him, language is not substance but form, L. Hjemslev proposes the change of traditional method of language study with its inductive characteristic to analysis method and special searching applied to the Quran with good result and bringing hope.⁹¹ Text must be taken into account in all of it as internal connection system. Meaning exists in this connection and not in separate partial level made careless in whole. By refinding all internal connections which form Quranic text, we do not just take into account special arrangement and dynamism of arabic; we grasp a thinking and feeling way, which will really play important role in real history of islamic consciousness. It means too that the analysis only done in arabic to indicate how physiology, acoustics, psychology, sociology, history, and so forth build each other and succeed in forming meaning network which is inseparable.⁹²

Text, besides writer and reader, is the most important factor to produce meaning. For Arkoun, modern linguistics and semiotics have developed a theory of text. what is text? How is

meaning generated by a text? in a composition canon –such as the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Quran - how can we define a typology of discourse, each one using particular tools or rhetorical devices to generate meaning? What are the roles of the ‘author’ and the ‘reader’, and what is their interacting impact on the text?⁹³

In linguistics, text is a language in work to express social function or meaning in situation context and cultural context. The used language (Fonology, graphology, lexicogramatics, and semantics of the discourse) is linguistic choice of the speaker for the sake of realisation text social function.⁹⁴ Arkoun explains that language in general and the Quranic language in particular consists of signs and symbols. These signs and symbols, when analysed semiotically, refer to the objects by arbitrary and conventional decisions within a society, they have no natural connection with what they signify (the objects).⁹⁵ Therefore, he described the Quran as a composition of signs and symbols that affords all meanings and opens to everyone, and that no interpretation can exhaust its text.⁹⁶

Semiotical analysis of Quran, basically, has two purposes: first, to show historical fact of language of Quran; second, to show how new meaning can be achieved from Quranic text without any restriction by traditional study. Beside that, the usage of semiotics to study

⁹⁰ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 48

⁹¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and man In the Koran: a Semantical Analysis of The Koranic Weltanschauung*, (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964). Cited by Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 51

⁹² Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 51

⁹³ Mohammed Arkoun, “Exploration and Responses: New Perspektif for a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue”, *Jounal of Ecumenical Studies*, 26, 3, (Summer 1989), p. 526, cited by St. Sunardi in J.H. Meuleman (ed.), *Reading Quran with Arkoun*, (Yogyakarta: LkiS, 2012), p. 93

⁹⁴ Riyadi Santoso, *Semiotika Sosial Pandangan Terhadap Bahasa*, (Surabaya: Pustaka Eureka, 2003), p. 17-18, cited by Musoffa Basyir, “Teori Semiotika dalam

Penafsiran Al-Quran: Studi Pemikiran Mohammed Arkoun”, (unprinted thesis : UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2008), p. 82

⁹⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, “Religion and Society”, in *Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths*, ed. Dan Cohn—Sherbok (London: Macmillan, 1991), p 176, cited by Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, “Mohammed Arkoun’s Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique”, *Intellectual Discourse*, 2006, vol. 14, No. 1, p. 26

⁹⁶ Mohammed Arkoun, *Ta’khiyah al-Fikr al-Islami*. Trans. Hashim Salih, ed. 2 (Beirut: Markaz al-Inma’ al-Qawmi, 1996), p. 145, cited by Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, “Mohammed Arkoun’s Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique”, *Intellectual Discourse*, 2006, vol. 14, No. 1, p. 27

Quran due to the expressions in the sacred text which is full of symbolism is fertile field for semiotic.⁹⁷

The application of this semiotical analysis, Arkoun used it, as an example, when he read *surah* al-Fatihah. In the first phase of his reading, Arkoun explicated about discourse modality including: determinant (*ism ma'rifah*), pronoun, verb, noun, syntax arrangement and rhyme.⁹⁸

2. Historical-Antropological Interpretation

The main objective of this reading is to relate the Quran to its environment in the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula.⁹⁹ This reading, according to him starts with a new history of the Quran. The Quran was first delivered orally and then written down on the available materials, though in scratch form, during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (SAS). Less than three decades after his death, the *surahs* (chapters) of the Quran were codified into the *muṣṣhaf*. This *muṣṣhaf* remains, as it was, to the present.¹⁰⁰

Historical approach is used by Arkoun to deconstruct Islamic thought. Historicity method means a text interpretation must be viewed on its history, must be in there when it was born. So, it was impossible to separate any text from its history.¹⁰¹ For Arkoun, historicity is not only an intellectual game invented by westerners for westerners, but also to concern the human condition since the emergence of

man on this earth. There is no other ways of interpreting any types, any levels of what we call revelation outside the historicity of its emergence, its development through history and its changing functions under the pressures of history as we have already shown.¹⁰²

Arkoun recognizes that this method is obviously to challenge all sacralizing and transcendentalizing interpretations produced by traditional theological reasoning.¹⁰³ For him, although orthodox Muslims regard that approach is unthinkable, but he extremely believe that this approach will give good impact for Quran. That methodology is an *ijtihad*, though in many things shakes conventional way of thinking.¹⁰⁴

Linguistic approach lead us to contradict the concept (that is logical knowledge basic) and symbol (a source enlightens many definitions moved by the connection of contradiction, implication, correlation, and symmetry). The elevation of word-sign to word-symbol ensures the elevation of concrete and harmonious language style to mythical language style.¹⁰⁵ Quran is provided so much in mythical language, namely related to *qaṣās* (stories). Story in Arabic may mean a piece of news, followed, and trail tracer, as well.¹⁰⁶

In Arkoun's view, stories in mythical meaning is anthropological concept which change time by time. For stories about prophets, figures, old communities told in Quran, are

⁹⁷ Baidhowi, *Antropologi Al-Quran*, p. 184

⁹⁸ See more detailly in Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 98-106

⁹⁹ Mohammed Arkoun, *al-Fikr al-Uṣulī wa-Iṣṭihālāt al-Ta'ṣīl: Nahwa Tarīkhin Akhār li al-Fikr al-Islāmī*, tras. Hashim Salih (London: Dar al-Saqi, 1999), p. 202, cited by Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, "Mohammed Arkoun's Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique", *Intellectual Discourse*, 2006, vol. 14, No. 1, p. 24

¹⁰⁰ Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, "Mohammed Arkoun's Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique", *Intellectual Discourse*, 2006, vol. 14, No. 1, p. 24

¹⁰¹ Fahmi Salim, *Kritik Terhadap Studi Al-Quran Kaum Liberal*, (Jakarta: Perspektif, 2010), p. 116

¹⁰² Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, p. 89

¹⁰³ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p. 36-37

¹⁰⁴ Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, *Historicist Approach to the Quran: Impact of Nineteenth-Century Western Hermeneutics in the Writings of Two Muslim Scholars*, (Kuala Lumpur: Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation at IIUM, 2003), p. 189, quoted by Adnin Armas, *Metodologi Bibel dalam Studi Al-Quran: Kajian Kritis*, (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2005), p. 66

¹⁰⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 57

¹⁰⁶ Baidhowi, *Antropologi Al-Quran*, p. 202

religious advice that can lead readers and Quranic studier toward universal religious teaching.¹⁰⁷ To explore anthropology concept, Arkoun offers back the concept of "sign" as symbol word ensures logically and concretely of myth language. In Quran, this kind of literary indicates to: (a) "Truth" because it is very useful for human conscience and in same perspective, there is no any myth language can be equal to it; (b) "meaningful" because it ties on primordial time of creation and authomatically opens prime time, that is revealing time, Prophet Muhammad era, and the prior pious (*salāf aṣ-ṣalīh*) time; (c) "spontaneity" ancient enlightenment of undemonstrative illustration, but really based on deeply spirit of mankind; (d) "symbolic", e.g. "realistic" illustration of Paradise and Hell direct to same destination, that is story about history of the sacred like prophet, companions, and the example of the saved and the accurst.¹⁰⁸ This kind of reading can be seen vividly in his reading of *surāḥ al-Kahfi*.¹⁰⁹

3. Theological-Religious Interpretation

Arkoun insists that this reading must come as the last step, after the first two readings, and that the type of theology sought must be based on the findings of the first two readings, especially the historical-anthropological reading. This is because if one continues to regard the Quran as a divine text of the transcendental and imminent God, one will simply end up with more theological problems.¹¹⁰ A type of theology required here then is a 'rational belief' based on the confrontation between the prevailing episteme at a certain point and the problems posited by a

religious text, that, is between heritage and history.¹¹¹

Arkoun points out two essential characteristics of this approach. First, any type of belief-oriented reading falls under the "dogmatic enclosure". Second, the early monumental works of exegesis contributed to the historical development of "the living tradition".¹¹² Arkoun has already branded this reading as "ritual reading", and the first two reading as more "academic and more complex". No type of theological reading is recognized here except what might be referred to as "a secular theology", of which Arkoun is very passionately fond of. Rejecting the mainstream belief that "Islam does not separate the spiritual from the profane", he assured his readers that secularism is ingrained in Islam.¹¹³

According to Salihu, just as Harvey Cox has derived justifications for secularization from the Bible, Arkoun too states that secularism is included in the Quran and Medinan experience. This is not a logical conclusion based on historical facts, but a preconceived idea. He did declacre his ultimate aim in an essay on "Islam and Secularism" where he states that it is necessary for us to deconstruct the closed orthodoxy from within. This cannot be possible until we search for a free history which alone could lead us to the entrance of secularization in Islam.¹¹⁴

Secularism is then a preconceived dogma that needs to be promoted and substantiated at all costs, even if it requires that historical facts be twisted. If Arkoun succeeded in avoiding a belief-oriented reading in order to evade the 'dogmas' of Sunnites or Shiites,

¹⁰⁷ Baidhowi, *Antropologi Al-Quran*, p. 203

¹⁰⁸ Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 57-58

¹⁰⁹ See more in Mohammed Arkoun, *Readings of Quran*, p. 115-137

¹¹⁰ Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, "Mohammad Arkoun's Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique", *Intellectual Discourse*, 2006, vol. 14, No 1, p. 27

¹¹¹ Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, "Mohammad Arkoun's Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique", p. 27

¹¹² Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, p. 61

¹¹³ Salihu, "Mohammad Arkoun's Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique", p. 27

¹¹⁴ Salihu, "Mohammad Arkoun's Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique", p. 27-28

definitely, Salihu proclaims, Arkoun has fallen prey to a secular theology with its own dogmas.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

The revelation simply plays an important role in forming societies which have integrity of piety, either individually or even socially. Arkoun sees revelation as Word of God (*Parole de Dieu*) that can guide human being to the path for meeting Him. The transcendental revelation cannot be monopolized by certain group of people for profane interest. Revelation in each level has its own features. In *Umm al-Kitāb* level, revelation is the prominent source for each *ummah* by sending messengers to each of them. The second level that is prophetic discourse or quranic discourse has great role to shape strong character for initial moslems by which they will be example for moslems come after them. Meanwhile, the last level of revelation manifested into a corpus become prime medium and first way to understand the guidance of God for mankind, after the death of the last Messenger.

Quran and *tafsīr* (exegesis) are two different things. The first is absolute and indisputable, while the last mentioned is contemplative and relative. The result of interpretation of quranic text is not Quran its self. Sacralizing to Quran, therefore, cannot be labelled to its interpretation too. Thus, any interpretation subsequently is not final result and conforming to what God wants through His words in Quran. Every interpretation has its own *episteme* in accordance with the place, social-cultural situation and the intellectualism of the interpreter.

Arkoun's methodology of interpreting the Quran is still neglected in both western and eastern intellectual due to his method he proposes is not grasped well. Nevertheless, the influence of his thought has impact in Middle East as well as in South East Asia, like Malaysia

and Indonesia which many scholars criticize, appreciate, praise, or even reject his thought.

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¹¹⁵ Salihu, "Mohammad Arkoun's Theory of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique", p. 28

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