NAVIGATING CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC REASON:
AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MOHAMMED ARKOUN

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Abstract

This research examines the profound epistemological critique and semiotic analysis of Islamic thought by Mohammed Arkoun, focusing on his challenge to traditional paradigms within Islamic scholarship. Arkoun argues that Islamic reason has historically been confined by dogmatic interpretations, which has limited its evolution in the context of modern challenges. Employing a historical-critical methodology and a semiotic approach, Arkoun seeks to uncover layers of meaning that have been obscured by traditionalist readings and to demonstrate the need for a more critical and dynamic interpretation of Islamic texts. Arkoun's critique explores the historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts that shape Islamic thought, advocating for an approach that acknowledges the influence of these factors on religious interpretation. His analysis reveals how Islamic thought, if unchallenged and unchanged, risks stagnation in a rapidly evolving world. Through a detailed examination of Quranic discourse and the application of modern critical theories, Arkoun proposes a deconstruction of the 'thinkable' and challenges the 'unthinkable' within Islamic thought. This study emphasizes the importance of revisiting the epistemological foundations of Islamic knowledge to foster a more inclusive, reflective, and adaptive intellectual tradition. Arkoun's work provides valuable insights into the potential for Islamic thought to engage more profoundly with contemporary issues, urging a reform that embraces critical inquiry and the exploration of diverse interpretative possibilities.

Keywords: Epistemological Critique, Islamic Reason, Mohammed Arkoun.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji kritik epistemologis mendalam dan analisis semiotik pemikiran Islam oleh Mohammed Arkoun, dengan fokus pada tantangannya terhadap paradigma tradisional dalam keilmuan Islam. Arkoun berargumen bahwa nalar Islam telah terbatas secara historis oleh interpretasi dogmatis, yang membatasi evolusinya di konteks tantangan modern. Dengan menggunakan metodologi kritis-historis dan pendekatan semiotik, Arkoun berusaha mengungkap lapisan makna yang telah ditutupi oleh pembacaan tradisionalis dan menunjukkan kebutuhan akan interpretasi teks Islam yang lebih kritis dan dinamis. Kritik Arkoun mengeksplorasi konteks historis, linguistik, dan budaya yang membentuk pemikiran Islam, mendukung pendekatan yang mengakui pengaruh faktor-faktor tersebut terhadap interpretasi keagamaan. Analisisnya mengungkapkan bagaimana pemikiran Islam, jika tidak ditantang dan diubah, berisiko stagnasi dalam dunia yang cepat berubah. Melalui pemeriksaan mendetail terhadap wacana Quran dan aplikasi teori-teori kritis modern, Arkoun mengusulkan dekonstruksi 'thinkable' dan menantang 'unthinkable' dalam pemikiran Islam. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya merevisi fondasi epistemologis pengetahuan Islam untuk mendorong tradisi

intelektual yang lebih inklusif, reflektif, dan adaptif. Karya Arkoun menawarkan wawasan berharga tentang potensi pemikiran Islam untuk terlibat lebih mendalam dengan isu-isu kontemporer, mendesak reformasi yang memeluk penyelidikan kritis dan eksplorasi kemungkinan interpretatif yang beragam.

Kata Kunci: Kritik Epistemologis, Nalar Islam, Mohammed Arkoun.

A. Introduction

In the contemporary era, the challenges faced by Islamic thought have become increasingly complex amid the dynamics of globalization and modernization. Historical experiences from the past continue to have a deep, traumatic impact on Muslims in various regions even after they have gained independence. This often results in the use of religion (Islam) as a political and ideological foundation, especially in affirming exclusive attitudes towards the Western world (Yusuf 2016). Additionally, according to Saumantri (2023b), many Muslims still regard Islam merely as a social and historical mythological force aimed at achieving specific political goals. As a result, there is a view among Muslims that there is no need to consider Islam as a religion that must face challenges from within the Muslim community itself. Furthermore, Islamic thought is still trapped within its traditional paradigms and has not fully integrated modern perspectives. This causes Islam to face difficulties in responding to the complex challenges faced by contemporary Muslims, especially in the context of the development of the times and globalization dynamics. Thus, there is an opportunity to explore how the integration between traditional and modern thinking can create a solid foundation for the development of Islamic reason in facing today's realities.

One of the figures attempting to address these challenges is Mohammed Arkoun, an intellectual known for his contributions in the field of Islamic epistemology. Arkoun's views state that Islamic thought, as previously described, is considered "naïve" because it approaches religion with direct belief and lacks criticism. Arkoun argues that Islamic thought of this nature is too influenced by a logocentric character, focusing on dogmatic truths that are aesthetic and lacking a scientific approach (Nasrullah 2017). In the context of Islamic thought currently experienced by the Muslim community, Arkoun highlights several aspects he considers obstacles in developing a more modern Islamic reason.

Arkoun first emphasizes that Islamic reason often remains closed in dogmatic truths considered eternal, focusing more on aesthetic aspects rather than scientific. Secondly, Arkoun notes that Islamic reason tends to be narrow in scope, only engaging in traditional fields such as metaphysics, theology, morals, and law, whereas it should have the function to uncover truths more broadly. Third, he criticizes the limited methods used in Islamic reason, such as analogy, implication, and opposition, which often neglect empirical data and become tools of legitimization and apology (Putro 2008). Next, Arkoun points out that Islamic thought tends to be closed off and "deliberately" isolates itself from historical, social, cultural, and ethnic aspects. This results in Islamic thought being the only discourse that must be followed uniformly and without allowing room for diverse interpretations and thought. Lastly, Arkoun emphasizes that Islamic thought often overlooks the spiritual aspect that transcends logocentric boundaries, preferring discourse limited within the language space and failing to explore new, richer spiritual dimensions (Fuadi 2016).

Arkoun considers that the logocentric character has dominated contemporary Islamic thought. For example, issues such as dogmatic understanding tend to maintain truth without deep scientific study or limitations in exploring broader truths outside traditional areas such as metaphysics, theology, morals, and law (Randa et al. 2022). Another example is the tendency to use empirical data that seems simplistic to support transcendental religious claims without considering the diversity of views and understandings within the Muslim community. Another issue raised by Arkoun is the closure of Islamic thought towards historical, social, cultural, and ethnic aspects. This is reflected in the reluctance to consider perspectives that may conflict with traditional views and the tendency to follow existing discourse uncritically. A concrete example is the difficulty in accepting interpretations that go beyond traditional boundaries, such as issues related to gender, pluralism, or modernity.

Another problem raised by Arkoun is the repetition of existing thought without providing room for the development of new ideas or more contextual interpretations. This can be seen in the tendency to continue maintaining established ways of thinking without realizing that changing contexts and demands of the times require renewal and innovation in understanding Islam. Arkoun argues that in situations like these, it is crucial for Muslims to reevaluate the epistemological foundations of Islamic knowledge and

recognize the historicity of diversity in Islam (Nurita & Masruhan 2021). With his epistemological criticism, Arkoun highlights the need for a revolution in how Muslims build knowledge and understand their historical diversity.

Research on Arkoun's thought has been extensively conducted, such as the study by Sovia (2021) titled "Islamic Reason Critique: A Study of Mohammed Arkoun's Thought." This study explains that traumatic historical experiences have caused Muslims to use religion as a political and ideological goal, especially to reject and develop exclusive attitudes towards the Western world. The study (Nasrullah 2017) in the journal Alwatzikhoebillah highlights Arkoun's thought for Muslims to break free from the shackles of ancient thinking, view the world realistically, and portray Islam as a mercy to all creatures. The study "Mohammed Arkoun's Thought in Contemporary Interpretation" (Misnawati et al. 2022) in the Journal Mudarrisuna explains that Arkoun sees the Quran as a fusion of oral tradition that is inclusive with a formative writing system, allowing various interpretations from different disciplines. Previous studies have provided a valuable foundation for the framework of thought in this research. This research aims to analyze the criticisms put forth by Arkoun as a step to open up space for discussion and develop more inclusive, scientific, and diverse Islamic thought in facing contemporary challenges.

B. Method

The research method employed in this study is library research, focusing on the analysis of literature relevant to the topic being researched. The type of method adopted in this study is descriptive qualitative, aimed at describing and analyzing in detail concepts, theories, and criticisms proposed by Mohammed Arkoun against contemporary Islamic thought patterns. The sources for this research include various types of literature, comprising books and written works by Mohammed Arkoun such as "Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers" and "The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought," as well as academic journal articles, seminar papers, and other scholarly writings that discuss Arkoun's thought, Islamic epistemology, and related issues.

In this study, the analysis is conducted comprehensively, covering discussions on how Arkoun views traditional Islamic epistemology, especially in the context of dogmatic

reasoning, emphasis on eternal truths that are aesthetic, and the limitations of reasoning methods used. This analysis employs the verstehen technique, a hermeneutic approach to understand the historical and social contexts of the texts analyzed. The verstehen technique assists in revealing deeper meanings of Arkoun's thoughts and in justifying the choice and application of historical methods that support the conclusions drawn. Thus, this research not only portrays Arkoun's critique of contemporary Islamic thought but also demonstrates the relevance and implications of this critique in the broader context of understanding Islamic epistemology.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Intellectual Biography of Mohammed Arkoun

Mohammed Arkoun was born in Algeria on February 1, 1928, in Taourirt-Mimoun, Kabylia, a mountainous region predominantly inhabited by Berbers, in eastern Algeria. From his early childhood, Arkoun was exposed to three main languages: Kabyle (a Berber language inheriting North African traditions from pre-Islamic and pre-Roman times), Arabic (spread through the expansion of Islam since the early Hijri years), and French (introduced by the French colonizers who controlled Algeria from 1830 to 1962). These three languages reflect three different cultural traditions: Kabyle, as an oral language without a script, conveying the heritage of traditions and values related to social and economic life over thousands of years; Arabic as a tool of expression and the guardian of religious tradition through written texts, linking Algeria with other regions in North Africa and the Middle East; and French as the language of governance and the introduction of Western scientific values and traditions through the French educational system during the colonial era (Nurmansyah et al., 2023).

Arkoun grew up in an environment intensely interacting with these three languages; Kabyle was used in daily life, French in schools and administrative matters, while he began learning Arabic when he entered high school in Oran, a major city in western Algeria. Arkoun's awareness of the competition between languages and the differences between oral and written languages, as well as the relationships between language, thought, history, and power, became a focal point of his attention. His efforts to integrate various ways of thinking, especially regarding the religious spirit among

Muslims and the more developed rational and critical approaches in the Western world, became his main goal (Nasrullah, 2017).

From 1950 to 1954, Mohammed Arkoun pursued studies in Arabic language and literature at the University of Algiers. During this period, while teaching Arabic at a secondary school in the suburbs of Algiers, Arkoun was active in academic activities. Amidst the Algerian War of Independence from French colonization (1954-1962), Arkoun enrolled as a student in Paris, where he later settled. In 1961, he was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Sorbonne in Paris, and in 1969, he successfully obtained his Doctorate in Literature. From 1970 to 1972, Arkoun taught at the University of Lyon, then returned to Paris as a professor of the history of Islamic thought. He served as a professor at the Sorbonne from 1961 until 1991, participated in the Wissenschaftkolleg program in Berlin in 1986-87, and took part in the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton in 1992-93. Additionally, Arkoun was a Visiting Professor at various universities in several countries, including UCLA Los Angeles (1969), Princeton (1985), Louvain-La-Neuve (1977-1979), Pontifical Institute of Arab Studies in Rome, Temple University Philadelphia (1988-90), Amsterdam (1991-1993), and New York University in March-April 2001 and 2003. He also delivered the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University in November 2001 (Hidayatulloh, 2024).

Arkoun's research on Islam covered several aspects. First, he examined the Qur'an and the Madinah experience, as well as the contradiction between myth and rationality that spanned between them, which influenced the thoughts, works, and actions of the Muslim generations throughout history. Second, Islamic thought remained loyal to the traditions of past communities. Third, his focus on political issues and polemics within Islam, while political and historical psychological issues outside of political and polemical contexts tended to be overlooked. Fourth, the lack of discussion about the problems of Islamic tradition in anthropological analysis and understanding. Fifth, his criticism of the teaching of usul ad-din and usul al-fiqh in modern theological faculties, which he saw as an accumulation without development from several classic textbooks. Sixth, he highlighted the lack of tracing the socio-cultural elements influencing the success and failure of Islamic philosophy during the period 150-450/768-1058 by Muslims who, up to that time, were more focused on developing pathways for the transmission of Greek texts to Syriac and Arabic and then Arabic to Latin (Sovia, 2021).

The existing reality, according to Arkoun, is not in line with the values contained in the Qur'an, which he referred to as Islam as a fact. Arkoun argued for the necessity to distinguish between the Qur'an as a fact and Islam as a fact. The Qur'an as a fact refers to the emergence of a new historical phenomenon that is constrained by time and space, not limited to text form since its official establishment. This requires a particular strategy of analysis and epistemological caution. Meanwhile, Islam as a fact is not entirely derived from the Qur'an as a fact, differing from traditional views and less emphasizing criticism, often reluctant to undergo educational processes. Research on the relationship between them demands a type of historical, sociological, and linguistic research that has often been neglected until now (Djalal, 2016). Arkoun also noted failures in various attempts to understand Islam in all its dimensions, whether religious, social, political, anthropological, psychological, or cultural. To address these failures, he proposed the development of a field of study called "Applied Islamology" (Arkoun, 2003).

With this foundation, it appears that Arkoun directed his writings towards liberating Islamic thought from stagnation and closure through a historical and critical approach. His approach utilized contributions from various modern Western sciences in criticizing Islamic reason. Although his thought patterns followed the tradition of Islamic studies by referring to classic texts, Arkoun went beyond these traditions. He did not just stop at analyzing the explicit statements of the concerned texts but also involved the analysis of implicit information contained within them. Thus, Arkoun's approach reflected a transdisciplinary review, combining history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy (Ismail, 2019).

2. Epistemological Criticism by Mohammed Arkoun

Arkoun's thought is influenced by two pre-existing intellectual traditions: the ancient Middle Eastern cultural thought tradition, which was strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, and the monotheistic thought tradition introduced by the prophets. Arkoun explicitly states that he employs a historical-critical methodology to address his curiosities in a modern way. According to him, this method allows for the exploration of mystical knowledge without being bound by old mentalities. In Arkoun's view, the current major challenge is to evaluate the characteristics of historical and mystical science systems from a new epistemological perspective, especially in the context of thinking about Islam and other religions (Arkoun, 1994).

The main focus of Arkoun's thought is on the concept of 'epistemological critique'. In Arkoun's perspective, epistemological critique has a deep and sharp meaning because it is directed at the scientific structure of the entire discipline of religious studies. He considers that the scholarly edifice within Islam is largely the result of the history of religious thought that was prevalent only at specific times and places (H. A. Said, 2015).

Furthermore, in the field of thought, Arkoun observes that most Muslims are still bound by Western thought paradigms from the medieval and Enlightenment eras, although he also acknowledges that the intellectual heritage from that era is not always negative. However, such understanding often presents difficulties in facing the challenges of modernity, which links past values with the demands of a materialistic modern civilization (Putro, 2008).

The aforementioned statement explains that Arkoun distinguishes himself from figures like Immanuel Kant and Thomas S. Kuhn because he focuses his criticism directly on the scientific structure within religious thought, particularly in the context of Islam. This is considered a bold and rare step, especially within Muslim cultures where epistemological criticism of religious thought is often underdeveloped (Saumantri, 2023). Arkoun highlights that this phenomenon often results in the sacralization or sanctification of religious thought, which can hinder the development of critical and innovative thinking within the context of religion. This is a rare step particularly among Muslim cultures, because the culture of epistemological criticism in religious thought is often underdeveloped among Muslims. Consequently, there is a process referred to by (Arkoun, 2003) as 'taqdis al-afkar ad-diniyyah' (the sanctification of religious thought).

According to Said (2015), religious thought is often considered as an unquestionable truth that should be accepted without deep examination of the historical background that influenced the emergence of such religious thought. As a result, such religious thought tends to receive self-legitimization and views dissenting opinions as adversaries. Mohammed Arkoun proposes a different critical approach in his epistemological research by calling himself a "historian" before being formally recognized as a "philosopher". This is because his critical analysis is focused on the structure of Islamic thought that has been documented in history, formed within diverse cultural contexts, and manifested in existing Islamic literature (Soekarba, 2006). For

(Arkoun, 1994), Islamic thought is not something that suddenly appeared, but rather the result of a long process influenced by historical challenges of its time.

The thought produced by previous generations is then passed on to the next generation without further research on the historical situations that shaped the current scholarly framework of Islam. This causes Islamic thought to be considered static, so the next generation simply continues without critically evaluating previous thoughts. Consequently, there is no encouragement for later thinkers or writers to critique previously established works. Such a mental attitude can produce a type of literature that is merely repetitive without any creativity or innovation.

Therefore, greater attention should be given to the teaching and study of history as an anthropology of the past, not just as a narration of historical facts. In this context, Arkoun proposes several approaches, namely historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches, which are conducted not to eliminate the importance of theological and philosophical approaches but to enrich them by including historical and social conditions that are always present in Islamic practices. The method proposed by Arkoun in this respect is called the deconstruction method. This deconstruction strategy can only be done with a modern, critical epistemology. In this way, reason must be freed from the constraints of transcendentalism and substantialism that limit it.

Arkoun argues that the teaching of history should be more than just memorizing facts; rather, there should be a deeper and more contextual approach. The historical approach allows us to see the development of events in specific times and spaces (Ramdhani & Said, 2021). The sociological approach helps understand the social dynamics that influence and are influenced by historical events. Meanwhile, the anthropological approach reveals how cultures and daily life practices shape and are shaped by history.

The deconstruction method proposed by Arkoun aims to dismantle dominant narratives that may have limited our understanding of Islamic history and theology. By using a modern, critical epistemology, Arkoun encourages the use of reason free from traditional constraints such as transcendentalism and substantialism. This approach enables us to view Islamic history and thought in a more diverse and dynamic light, opening up space for a more holistic and inclusive understanding.

3. Mohammad Arkoun's Critique of Islamic Reason

Asghar Mohammed Arkoun launched his prestigious project known as the "Critique of Islamic Reason," reflected in his work "Pour une critique de la raison Islamique" (Towards a Critique of Islamic Reason). In its Arabic edition, the work is titled "Tarikhiyat al-Fikr al-Arabi al-Islami" (Historicization of Arab-Islamic Thought). In this project, he introduced three concepts unfamiliar to many Muslim scholars with the goal of analyzing the history of the Arab-Islamic thought system. These concepts are "the thinkable," "the unthinkable," and "the not yet thought." The term "thinkable" refers to matters that have already been considered by Muslims, are clear, and can be contemplated. Meanwhile, "unthinkable" pertains to aspects related to everyday life practices and not linked to religious teachings. "Not yet thought" includes matters that Muslims have not yet considered (Fuadi, 2016).

Arkoun revealed that when the Quran was still in oral form and not yet realized in an official manuscript, everything was considered and responded to as "thinkable." However, the situation changed dramatically when the Quran was materialized into the official, closed corpus or the Uthmani mushaf under the supervision of Caliph Uthman, along with efforts to systematize the concept of Sunnah and strengthen the foundations of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) by Imam Shafi'i according to certain standards. At this time, domains previously considered "thinkable" transformed into "unthinkable" (Arkoun, 1997).

The logical consequence of this shift was a distancing between the Quran and reality. This led to the Quran being like a toothless tiger, struggling to respond to modernity's challenges and address various arising issues. The Quran was only interpreted in tafsir literature, which could explain the world but was unable to change it. The Quran became merely an "antique relic" from the 7th century AD, occasionally remembered, celebrated, sung, and commemorated in ceremonies. According to Arkoun (2004), tragically, the realm of "the unthinkable" continued to expand.

Arkoun's method in this project was Historicism, which served as a tool to reconstruct meaning by removing relevance between the text and its context. Through the historical-critical approach reflected in the "critique of Islamic reason," classical texts were analyzed deconstructively to move towards reconstructing the meanings contained

within their contexts. In the context of religious texts, Arkoun endeavored to find new potential meanings embedded within these texts (Sari, 2019).

Luthfi Assyaukanie classifies Arkoun as a contemporary Arab thinker with a "reformist-deconstructive" typology. This type of thought discourse still maintains tradition as far as it can be reconciled with modernity's demands. Arkoun distinguishes two traditions: Tradition with a capital "T," representing the unchanging, eternal, transcendental tradition; and tradition with a lowercase "t," which is a human historical and cultural product, both as inherited legacies and as interpretations of divine revelation through sacred texts. For Arkoun, only the latter tradition can be critically examined, thus he disregards the former. In his methodology of the "Quran reading method," Arkoun's distinction between these two traditions is also evident (Assyaukanie, 2023). Arkoun considered his project "critique of Islamic reason" as an extension of the meaning of classical ijtihad. The shift from classical ijtihad to critique of Islamic reason was an effort to strengthen and mature the position of ijtihad itself. Because of the importance of this project in Arkoun's thought, his explanations about the meaning of the words "critique" and "reason," as well as their applications, will be elaborated in the following.

Arkoun explained that the term "critique of reason" in his work does not refer to a philosophical concept but to historical criticism. Although this term is often associated with great philosophical works such as Immanuel Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" and "Critique of Practical Reason," and Jean-Paul Sartre's "Critique of Dialectical Reason," Arkoun pointed out that Francois Furet, a historian, later used this term for historical research. Furet sought to critically revise the entire body of historical literature on the French Revolution, a complex and impactful historical event similar to the flood of literature that emerged after the revelation of the Quran. According to Arkoun, linking this situation with the situation of literature and commentary that emerged after the French Revolution, which sparked many interpretations and theories over the last two hundred years (1789-1989), he drew a comparison with the literature produced after the revelation of the Quran, which is also varied and sometimes contradictory (Arkoun, 2003).

Next, the use of the word "reason" refers to the thinking ability inherent in humans. Humans think using tools such as words in language, categories of logic, and hypotheses or postulates about reality. Arkoun emphasized that reason is not an abstract concept floating in the void but a concrete concept that changes along with the

development of thinking tools and revolutionary scientific discoveries. He distinguished between religious reason, used in religious discourses like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and philosophical reason, used by Greek philosophers (Soekarba, 2006).

Arkoun also highlighted that radical changes in reason occurred through the Galileo revolution in astronomy, the Lutheran revolution asserting the autonomy of reason over the scriptures, and the political revolutions in England and France in the 18th century. However, such changes have not occurred in Muslim societies, so the reason of Muslims remains bound to a medieval mentality filled with orthodoxy and dogmatism (Baedhowi, 2017).

In conducting a historical exploration of Islamic thought like an archaeologist, Arkoun excavated the geological layers of Arab-Islamic thought using Michael Foucault's epistemological analysis tools. Arkoun classified the formation of Arab-Islamic thought into three levels: classical, scholastic, and modern. The classical level includes the thought system represented by the pioneers and founders of Islamic civilization. The scholastic phase is the second stage, which is the arena of imitation in the thinking system of the community. Meanwhile, the modern level includes the period of awakening and revolution. By dividing history into these three epistemic ruptures, Arkoun seemed to explain the concepts of "the thinkable," "the unthinkable," and "the not yet thought," to then apply them in the historical analysis of the Arab-Islamic thought system (Thahir, 2012).

Nurita and Masruhan (2021) explained that to explore the deepest layers in the geology of Islamic thought, Arkoun focused on its existential elements: the Quran, Sunnah, and Ushul. For Arkoun, the Quran is subject to history, and the achievements of Ash-Shafi'i in forming the systematic concept of Sunnah and standardizing Ushul to certain standards caused various realms of thought that were previously "thinkable" to become "unthinkable." According to him, in the midst of challenges from modern Western thought, the realm of "unthinkable" thoughts continues to expand. Arkoun saw that the orthodoxy and dogmatism from the scholastic period are still present in contemporary Arab-Islamic thought. With his historical criticism, Arkoun identified common characteristics in Islamic thought. First, the minds obey revelation, which is considered "given" and has a transcendental nature that surpasses humans, history, and society. Second, respect and obedience to the grand authority, where the imam mujtahid

in each school of thought is considered unquestionable and non-debatable. Third, the operation of the mind with a certain view of the universe reflects the characteristics of the Middle Ages before the birth of modern astronomy.

4. Deconstruction of Arkoun's Historical Critique

For Arkoun (2002), a primary condition for achieving openness or enlightenment in Islamic thought in the modern era is to deconstruct the orthodoxies and dogmatisms of the medieval era. Through his historical critique, Arkoun concluded that the accumulation of Quranic exegesis literature could be likened to the sedimentary layers of the earth. With a radical perspective, he viewed the history of exegesis as a history of using the Quran merely as a pretext. According to him, looking at the treasure trove of exegesis with all its schools of thought, the Quran seems only to have become an "instrument" for constructing other texts that fulfill the needs and tastes of a certain period after the Quran's revelation. Exegesis is seen more as an intellectual work and cultural product that is more connected to the cultural and social context or theological background than to the context of the Quran itself (Ulya, 2019).

Arkoun observed that the continuous relationship between the first text (the Quran) and its theological and ideological exploitation varied by different cultural and social backgrounds, making the second text (exegesis) have a history of its own. The history of exegesis is considered a history of statements that repeatedly, with varying degrees of intensity, speak about the nature of truth, eternity, and the perfection of the message received and delivered by Prophet Muhammad. Arkoun concluded that exegesis is more of a "defensive apology" rather than an effort to seek a deeper understanding (Shaumiwaty et al., 2018).

According to Arkoun, the Quran does not actually need an apology to demonstrate the richness contained within it. While exegesis literature can aid understanding of the Quran, on the other hand, the "geologized" history of exegesis can obstruct a more authentic understanding of the Quran. In Arkoun's view, the Quran today might be experiencing more stagnation than enlightenment and progress because it is often resisted, thwarted, obstructed by Muslims themselves, and reduced to merely a cultural event by orientalist scholars (Budi, 2022). In this context, it is important to note that what is considered irrelevant or stagnating is not the Quran itself, but the thought used by theologians and jurists in interpreting the Quran. This clarification is made to avoid the

misunderstanding that Arkoun states the Quran is not relevant. What he conveys is that the thought used by theologians and jurists to interpret the Quran is considered irrelevant, given the emergence of new sciences such as anthropology, linguistics, historical methods, and biology, which are not mastered by them.

The complex and intricate history of exegesis makes the restructuring through writing history clearly and critically important. Facing this challenge, Arkoun formulated critical questions: How can we clarify history as described above? How can we read the Quran in a "new" way? And how can we rethink the historical experience of Islam over fourteen centuries? To explore Arkoun's methodological approach in understanding the Quran, two fundamental questions are posed: (1) what is the nature of the Quranic text; and (2) what is the purpose of reading the Quran. In a methodological context, the way of reading the Quran is influenced by views on the nature of the Quran (ontological postulate) and the purpose of reading it (axiological postulate) (Mustaqim, 2010). Among religious texts, the sacred book certainly occupies a central position because it contains divine revelation to humanity. The revelation process is considered unique, as something that occurs once for all time and cannot be replaced. Various names such as al-Furqan, al-Kitab, Kalam, Nur, Mau'idzah, and al-Shirat al-Mustaqim reflect the Muslim community's view of the highly venerated and sanctified status of the sacred book (Djalal, 2016).

5.   Semiotic Analysis by Mohammad Arkoun

In his semiotic analysis, Mohammad Arkoun emphasizes that the texts before us are the result of enunciation acts. In other words, these texts originated from oral language that was later transformed into written text. This also applies to sacred texts, including the Quran. The Quran is considered the word of Allah, received and conveyed by Prophet Muhammad to humanity over no less than two decades. Arkoun consistently asserts this belief both through his spontaneous expressions as a Muslim and in his statements intended to "prove" the inevitability of the final signifier (Nurita & Masruhan, 2021).

In applying a linguistic process to the revelation (tanzil), Arkoun classified the stages of the word of Allah (Kalam Allah), Quranic Discourse (Wacana Qur'ani), Official Closed Corpus (KRT), and Interpreted Corpus (KT). Kalam Allah refers to the Logos or divine word as described in the Quran (31:27): "If all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean [supplemented] by seven more oceans, the words of Allah would not be exhausted."

Similarly, in the Christian perspective stating that "Jesus is the Word of God," revelations delivered to humans through the prophets are considered fragments of the infinite Kalam Allah, a Word that is unwritten and defined in classical theology as identical with Allah in His eternity. These fragments of Kalam Allah have linguistically been expressed in Hebrew (the Bible), Aramaic (Jesus, although his teachings were reported in Greek), and Arabic (Quran). The oral enunciation stage corresponds to the discourse stage (meaning discourse in a linguistic context that assumes the existence of a speaker and listener, with the speaker's intent to convey a message to the listener and the possibility for the listener to react directly), the Bible, Gospel, and Quran. Communication between God and the Prophet was always related to a discourse situation or semiotic context when the release and capture of the message occurred, which happens only once for all time and cannot be repeated. This is the first semio-linguistic stage (Nurmansyah et al., 2023).

The second semio-linguistic stage involves the process of recording in writing in the Uthmani codex (Official Closed Corpus). By referring to the term Corpus officiel clos or Official Closed Corpus, Arkoun emphasized the historical aspect of the codex which, like it or not, cannot be ignored. Arkoun stated, "This is extremely important: it refers to many historical facts depending on social and political agents, not on God. Let us elaborate it more clearly." The third semio-linguistic stage involves the interpretation of the said Official Closed Corpus. Linguistically, this relates to exploring the meanings of the Quran with the understanding that what is always interpreted is the written text, not the original discourse anymore (Arkoun, 1997).

In semiotic terminology, the language of the Quran text as parole is influenced by the text langue. Regarding langue, the Arabic language as the place of the Quran's revelation, Arkoun stated, "In reality, the Quranic discourse is a musical as well as semantic orchestration of key phrases taken from the ordinary Arabic vocabulary which has undergone radical transformation over centuries" (Arkoun, 1997). Regardless, Arkoun argues that although the Quran now functions as a written text, it remains parole for the believers. Therefore, it is clear that Arkoun associates (draws a positive correlation) the process of freezing the interpretation of the Quran, reflected in various stacks of literature, with the process of establishing the Quran in written form and with the change from prophetic discourse to instructional discourse as previously explained. Arkoun's view is certainly not free from criticism. Van Koningsveld in his critique of

Arkoun stated that Arkoun overemphasized the importance of recording the text of the Quran in writing as a standardizing factor of interpretation (Ramdhani & Said, 2021). Based on Hjemselv, who views a text as a whole and as a system of internal relationships without prior interpretation or assumptions, Arkoun seems to see the Quran as a coherent whole text, interconnected. Therefore, Arkoun wants to understand the Quran according to the way the Quran itself speaks and regards itself.

D. Conclusion

This study deepens the understanding of Mohammed Arkoun's epistemological critique, emphasizing the need for Islamic thought to evolve beyond traditional confines and engage critically with reason to remain relevant in contemporary times. Arkoun's insights reveal that adherence to unchallenged traditional paradigms can stifle the intellectual growth and adaptability of Islamic thought. His work on the semiotics of the Quran and his critique of Islamic reason highlights how historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts influence the interpretation of Islamic texts. By demonstrating how entrenched orthodoxies can obscure deeper meanings and impede progressive thought, Arkoun advocates for a methodological shift towards a more historically aware and critically engaged approach to Islamic scholarship.

This research underscores the significance of reevaluating the foundational epistemological approaches within Islamic studies to foster a more dynamic and inclusive discourse. Arkoun's call for a deconstruction of traditional Islamic epistemology and his application of modern critical methods serve as a catalyst for renewing Islamic thought. Through his historical critique and semiotic analysis, Arkoun not only challenges the status quo but also opens up new pathways for understanding the complexities of Islamic texts in the modern world. These contributions are pivotal in promoting a more critical and reflective engagement with Islamic teachings, addressing contemporary challenges while enriching the intellectual tradition of Islam.

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