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## **Table of Contents**

An Analysis of Hamka's Selected Historical Works	
Hafiz Zakariya	6-19
HAMKA's Discourse on Sufism in the "Verse of Light"	20-38
Abdul Salam Muhamad Shukri	
HAMKA's Approach in Dealing with the Orphans in Tafsir al-Azhar: A Comparative Study with the Current Issues and Implementations in Malaysia	39-64
Raudlotul Firdaus Fatah Yasin Diki Dermawan	
Hamka on Chastity and Its Importance in Preserving Muslim Identity: An	65-79
Analysis  Noor Amali Mohd Daud	
Hamka's Contribution to the Field of Anthropology: Another Perspective on Hamka's Work	81-95
Alexander Stark Khairul Hisyam Baharuddin	
Hamka on His Concept of Healthy Soul in Muhammadiyah Organization: A Study Towards the Book Of "Pedoman Hidup Islami Warga Muhammadiyah"	97-108
Muhamad Nurrosyid Huda Setiawan Kholid Karomi	
Role of the National <i>Shūrā</i> Council (NSC) in Establishing Religious Coexistence in Sri Lanka	100 120
MR Fathima Afra Thameem Ushama	109-130
Al-Faruqi's Concept of <i>Tawḥād</i> and Its Relevance to <i>Madani's</i> Idea in Addressing the Issue of Racism in Malaysia  Ruqayya Azhari  Che Amnah Bahari	
	131-156
Buddhist's <i>Kalyāṇamitta</i> and Ṣūfi's Shaykh-Murid: A Comparative Exploration of Spiritual Mentorship in Buddhism and Islam	
Nur Suriya Mohd Nor Mohamed Ashath	157-169

Zeenath Kausar's Views on Women's Empowerment from an Islamic Perspective

Shehzadi Madiha Nadzrah Ahmad 171-185

An Insight into Al-Qaraḍāwī's Approach to Methodology of Da'wah

187-204

Khalid Ishola Bello

HAMKA'S Concept of Islamic Literature

205-214

Muhammad Anwar Ahmad

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## Hamka's Contribution to the Field of Anthropology: Another Perspective on Hamka's Work

## Alexander Stark\* Khairul Hisyam Baharuddin\*\*

#### **Abstract**

Hamka (Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah) was one of the most prominent Islamic scholars. His work is widespread in Malay-speaking countries. In this paper, the researchers examine a different perspective, namely, on how far Hamka contributed to the field of anthropology. Hamka spent more than four months travelling in the United States and some Arab nations in the 1950s. He published his observations and came to some thought-provoking conclusions. Furthermore, he expressed his views about the people of Nusantara in many of his works. The researchers followed an approach of the sociology of knowledge in the sense of Karl Mannheim. The social position or the passage of time are two circumstances that may cause knowledge and perceptions to shift. It was discovered that some of Hamka's views concern anthropological questions. Additionally, it was detected that he considered traditional anthropological concepts and participated in discussions. He gave an impression of the history of ideas within a society. Hamka used precise methods to communicate his knowledge, including realistic case studies and descriptions of his own experiences. He made a variety of contributions to anthropological knowledge and emphasised emic understanding.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, Ethnography, Hamka, Minangkabau, Sociology of Knowledge

#### Introduction

If we come to a country, we will lose if we only see the skin (surface). At a cursory glance, the first impression is very superficial. (Hamka, 2022, p. 48) [Translation by the authors] The man who wrote these words was Hamka (Haji Malik Karim Amrullah). He was a well-known and respected scholar in the Malay-speaking world. His major work comprises fictional and non-fictional works. Both types of publications got good reviews from academics. In general, scientists look at Hamka's work from two perspectives, namely, from the perspective of Islamic science or from the perspective of literature. However, in this paper, the

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researchers want to offer another view. It is intended to look at the contributions that Hamka has made in the field of anthropology.

The researchers had to distinguish between two ways to approach the subject: First, it must be determined whether Hamka has made any remarks or contributions in areas connected to anthropological theory. Second, the researchers looked at whether he had offered any ethnographic observations that helped to shed light on a particular culture. It is well-known that he published some books about the Minangkabau culture. He grew up in the village of Sungai Batang, which is located at the Maninjau Lake in the homeland of the Minangkabau. The culture is quite unique, as it is a matrilineal society. The mother and the children belong to a different matrilineage than the father. Hamka got the traditional title Datuk Indomo. Therefore, it can be assumed that he was well-versed in traditional Minangkabau knowledge.

Hamka was knowledgeable in a variety of fields. In many of his books, he refers to anthropology. A good example is the book Antara Fakta dan Khayal Tuanku Rao (Hamka, 2017). In this book, he refers to the subject of anthropology and makes the following remarks when he discusses the Arab world:

The study of Arab ethnology and anthropology, coupled with its geography, states that the Arabs are divided into two [groups]. Arabs who live in cities are called Hadhar Arabs. And those who are still nomads in the desert looking for grass for livestock and water for drinking are called Badawi Arabs. (Hamka, 2017, p. 81) [Translation by the authors]. Hamka frequently makes use of anthropological understanding in some of his other works. However, he also adds to certain anthropological discourse, which is the subject of this essay.

## Literature

It is crucial to distinguish between literature produced by academics and books authored by Hamka himself in the literature review. Regarding the books of Hamka, he wrote about his travels. However, he tried to understand the 'others' even though they might have another worldview.

Hamka published travel books about different world regions. The following books describe parts of the Arabic world (in brackets the original year of publication:

- Di Tengah Sungai Dajlah (1950)
- Menyusuri Lembah Sungai Nil (1950)

However, in addition to studying the Arabic culture, he spent some time in North America, and his descriptions are included in the following book:

## - Bulan di Amerika (1952)

It is remarkable that his travels happened after the independence of Indonesia. Hamka was involved in politics in Indonesia and was welcomed by the Indonesian embassy.

In addition to being a skilled observer, Hamka also wrote historical works that addressed anthropological issues, such as the history of Malay speakers and the evolution of the Malay language. His work Sejarah Umat Islam (Hamka, 2018), in particular, is extremely thorough and consists of four books. The fourth book discusses Islamic history in the Malay-speaking world. This book is intriguing because it provides information that many people might not be familiar with. He states, for instance, that there was some sort of Arabic settlement on Sumatra's West Coast in the early history of Islam (Hamka, 2018). He actively engaged in anthropological themes in several of his significant works, such as Falsafah Ketuhanan (Hamka, 2009). There is scholarly discussion on the history of religious belief in the discipline of anthropology of religion. Hamka contributed to anthropological discussions regarding the beginning of belief in God by explaining the development of various belief systems.

Some researchers looked at the way Hamka analysed society, particularly his own society, the Minangkabau. Hadler (1998) wrote about Hamka's family background and the extent to which it affected his views. Stark et al. (2022) described that the matrilineal social structure of the Minangkabau is a widespread topic that appears in Hamka's fictional and non- fictional books. As a consequence, Hamka gives a fascinating illustration of the way of life in such a society. An intriguing piece by Widia Fithri (2013) describes Hamka's perspective on traditional values. She showed an intersubjective perspective that has to consider diversity in a modern state.

## **Research Method**

This research focuses on a biographical approach in the sense that it considers the biographical background of Hamka. The major theoretical frame was taken from the field of sociology of knowledge, particularly the ideas of Karl Mannheim (1954), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991). The social position of an individual has an important influence on how he or she interprets the surroundings. Hamka was

affected by his father and his mamak (the sister's brother) when he was a small boy living in his village. Hamka, however, left his community and gained a new perspective on the Minangkabau way of life. For example, when he travelled to the United States, he could compare the different lifestyles. Often, he made comparisons, which should inspire his readership.

In this paper, the researchers collected the different ideas of Hamka that were related to anthropological discussions. The following research objectives were formulated:

- To detect in which anthropological fields Hamka contributed
- To illustrate Hamka's anthropological knowledge.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In this chapter, the results of this research will be analysed. There are two major differentiations: First, Hamka made some ethnographic observations and described the lifestyle in foreign places like the United States or the Arab World. He also gave a good overview of the way of life in the Minangkabau village society. The second major part is to look at how far he contributed to existing anthropological discussions.

## Hamka's Ethnographic Observations and Descriptions

In this part, Hamka's observations will be illustrated briefly. He travelled to some Arab nations and the United States. However, he also observed his own society (the Minangkabau) and gave an interesting view.

## Hamka and Ethnography

The term 'ethnography' is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the study and systematic recording of human cultures" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethnography, retrieved 20/09/2023.

In general, most anthropologists use an approach that can be subsumed as participant observation (Spradley, 1980). The term already mentions two ways, namely, to participate and to observe. In the classical anthropological literature, this ideal is described (Malinowski, 2002). Bronislaw Malinowski gives a good impression of an anthropologist in the field:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do but to start at once on your ethnographic work. (Malinowski, 2002, p. 3)

The classical anthropologists emphasise the importance of spending a significant amount of time in the village in order to be able to describe the local perspective. It must be stressed, nevertheless, that not all anthropologists have adopted this strategy. Others went on research expeditions. A Dutch-German study team visited the interior of Sumatra at the beginning of the 20th century. This research expedition will be the only one mentioned as an example. Their findings were based on casual conversations and observations. Alfred Maas published a two-volume account of his findings on the Minangkabau society in 1912 (Maas, 1912)

Hamka did not have the time to stay in one place for a long period of time and to learn the traditions and language. His approach could be categorised as non-participant observation while moving through a particular region. His approach resembles so-called research expeditions in certain ways.

Hamka is a unique observer. He uses two perspectives. He looks at the foreign cultures of American and Arabic society, but he also observes Minangkabau society (his own society) from the perspective of an observer. According to the sociology of knowledge, knowledge depends on the position of the person. Karl Mannheim refers to a peasant boy who moved to a city:

What has already been said should hardly leave any doubt as to what is meant when the procedure of the sociology of knowledge is designated as 'relational'. When the urbanized peasant boy, who characterized certain political, philosophical, or social opinions to be found among his relatives as 'rustic', he no longer discusses these opinions as a homogenous participant, or social opinions to be found among his relatives, that is, by dealing directly with the specific content of what is said. Rather he relates them to a certain mode of interpreting the world which, in turn, is ultimately related to a certain social structure which constitutes its situation. (Mannheim, 1954, p. 253). What Mannheim describes in this citation can be applied to the biography of Hamka (Hamka, 2009). He left his village when he was a young boy and got the distance that was mentioned in the citation. Hamka gained a unique and temporal remoteness from his prior circumstances. As a result, he was able to think critically about his society.

Hamka gets an understanding of other cultures by looking at the ideas and thoughts of famous representatives of the culture that he visited. In all his travel books, he outlines the thinking of these intellectuals. These outstanding persons and the comparisons of their thinking show the history of ideas in the country. Hamka's approach is very modern and ahead of its time. Hamka met the intellectuals and described their ideas.

Another important element of Hamka's research method is that he often refers to traditional texts like Hikavat Merong Mahawangsa (Othman, 2021). Hamka significantly contributes to the understanding of local societies in this way.

## Hamka's Reflections on the Minangkabau Society

Hamka grew up in a small village community at Lake Maninjau. His father was a well-known Islamic scholar. Therefore, it is not surprising that his father took care of the education of his son. Hamka was fascinated not only by religious knowledge but by literature, too. During his lifetime, he published many novels, like Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck (Hamka, 2019) and Di Bawah Lindungan Ka'bah (Hamka, 2015). These books were widely read and gave Hamka the opportunity to criticise certain aspects of the matrilineal way of life (Stark et al., 2022)

However, he was also respected as a person who could express his views about traditional customs (adat). He even got the traditional title Datuk Indomo. In Minangkabau society, the head of a matriclan or lineage gets the title Datuk.

Hamka provides a fascinating picture of Minangkabau culture. Some of his descriptions are well-known to the anthropologist, like the fact that there were three kings in the Minangkabau heartlands (Hamka, 2006). He offers the Minangkabau (or Malay) terminology to illustrate the unique features: The three kings (raja tigo selo) were the raja adat (who was responsible for matters referring to the adat), the raja alam (who took care of things that were not part of the adat or Islam), and the raja ibadat (responsible for matters pertaining to religion).

Being an insider, Hamka was able to observe aspects of Minangkabau society that were difficult for anthropologists from other nations to 'detect.' For example, he mentions that the Minangkabau could not express their opinion explicitly. Hamka also knows the situation of men and husbands. In the traditional Minangkabau society

and its understanding, the husbands visit the traditional houses (rumah gadang) only at nighttime and have to spend the day outside during the day. Even though they do not have to pay for the livelihood of the people, the situation of the men is quite challenging. When they are young, the boys must vacate the home and live at the surau (prayer house). After some years, they become teenagers, and soon they can marry. The spouse must relocate to his wife's home. However, if there is a divorce, the man has to move out (Hamka, 2006). Hamka believes the challenging situation will persist. It might be possible that the man is already old and the wife has passed away. He must thus relocate to the surau and reside there.

In the scientific field, the researchers typically employ neutral language. However, Hamka is very emotional. He offers another perspective that describes the conditions of the men by using drastic words. For example, he mentions that the traditional houses look very beautiful from the outside. However, from inside, it is 'hell' (neraka) (Hamka, 2006, p. 42). If a man marries more than one wife, then the whole situation is even more complex.

Hamka gives an interesting view of the way of life in a traditional house. Each woman in the house has a separate room, and Hamka provides an ethnographic account:

The husband of the oldest is the penghulu (head of a matrilineage); he married three times, and he rarely comes home. The second one's husband is a merchant of forest products; his expenses are big, his rice is white, and his gulai (curry) is fat. The husband of number three is an inhabitant of the village, but she has changed her husband three times because he is also poor. There is no one to pay tribute to the merchant husband of number two. The (daughter) number four is rarely in the village; she has moved away. (Hamka, 2006, p. 42) [Translation by the authors]

In recent decades, the way of life has changed. A student of social science can witness that by observing the few existing traditional houses: Therefore, for students who [want to] deepen their knowledge of sociology, anthropology and psychology, of the Minangkabau people in this modern era, then one of the best materials is to conduct a study of the 'remnants' of the traditional houses that still exist. (Hamka, 2006, 86-87)[Translation by the author] Hamka's observations on Minangkabau society are intriguing since they go beyond the surface by illustrating how life is actually lived in the community.

## Hamka's View on the Arabic Society

Hamka spoke Arabic fluently. He read many books that were written by Arabic scholars, and he mentioned these books in his publications. A good example is the book Muqadimmah, which was written by Ibn Khaldun. Hamka continued his distinction between the Arabic population living in urban areas and those in rural areas. He goes into more detail in his book Sejarah Umat Islam (Hamka, 2018): Nomads (badwi) are some of the inhabitants of the desert. They value freedom and are courageous. Even the women are brave and sometimes join their husbands in raids. However, not all the people who live in the countryside are nomads. Farmers have a significant role in some rural communities as well. On the other side, there are the residents of the cities. They are honest, hospitable, and their culture seems to be more refined. There are specialised professions.

Some significant features play an important role in both styles of living. According to Hamka, Arabs are exceptionally versed in both the art of poetry writing and genealogy.

Hamka was captivated by the histories of Egypt and Iraq, two significant Arab nations, and he wrote in-depth descriptions of them. Furthermore, Egypt was a popular destination for many Indonesians to further their studies.

Hamka looked at the cultural elements that differed mostly from Indonesian society. Indonesian society was dominated by the Shafii school of law (madhab). However, in Iraq, there were many followers of Shiite Islam. Therefore, he gave a kind of 'introduction' in his travel books so that his readers could get a better understanding of their views.

## Hamka's Observations of the American Society

Hamka travelled with a group of Indonesian officials through the United States of America. His observations were published in two volumes. His travelogues are included in the first book, while more 'theoretical' issues are covered in the second.

Being a religious scholar, Hamka was interested in religious-related topics. Some of his reflections were quite detailed, like the description of a kind of cult with the name "Father Divine". Father Divine saw himself as a God. Hamka wanted to know more and asked the wife of Father Divine some questions:

...then his wife said, "We believe that he is God!" "The incarnation of Jesus Christ?" I asked.

"No! But the incarnation of the Father of Jesus Christ"! "Repent! I said it in my heart!" (Hamka, 2022b, p. 162) [Translation by the authors[

Hamka also observed many important cultural traits of American culture. He noticed many elements of the etiquette. For example, he stressed that the ladies are treated in a very special way. They can enter the lift or the car first (Hamka, 2022c). Hamka observed how the men treated the women. On the other side, there is the assumption that the genders behave quite freely without limits. Hamka, however, questioned whether this was indeed the case. He noticed that there are refined rules (aturan halus) (Hamka, 2022c, p. 42). There is a kind of gender segregation in different spheres. For example, the hostels look carefully so that the female and male students cannot mix freely. Interestingly, in other spheres of daily life, there is an unregulated kind of interaction between the two genders.

During his travels, Hamka observed the etiquette and way of life of families of the middle class. He could feel that there was a segregation between blacks and whites, and he described that some of his counterparts were confused about his status. Hamka's travelogue is fascinating and gives a good overview of the American way of life in the 1950s.

## Hamka and Anthropological Theory

Hamka was aware that he had the easiest access to his own culture. Nonetheless, he also participated in some anthropological discussions. Probably, he was not always aware that he contributed to some anthropological discourses, but in fact, he did.

## **Ethnohistory**

Eric Wolf (2010) wrote a book with an ironic title (Europe and the People Without History). He intended to demonstrate the Eurocentrism of many European researchers with this title. Actually, every society has a fascinating past. Many scientists have recently recorded the histories of numerous locations. There are a number of publications that discuss the history of the Minangkabau in Sumatra (such as Dobbin, 1983; Drakard, 1993).

Hamka had a keen interest in historical topics. He had extensive knowledge of Islamic history. Civilization wasn't static to him.

Sometimes, anthropologists tend to describe a society in such a way as if there were no historical developments. He described the Minangkabau society as dynamic. The living conditions changed. Particularly, the emergence of a more orthodox Islamic understanding led to changes. The Padri movement is a good example. Three Hajis (pilgrims) from Mecca returned at the beginning of the 19th century. Hamka provided a thorough account of their history (Hamka, 2006). He had a good understanding and contributed to the local history of West Sumatra. Hamka visited numerous locations around Indonesia. For example, in the year 1959, he visited the island of Madura (Hamka, 2020), and he wrote about its Islamic history. He believed that a book's analysis alone was insufficient, and he enjoyed seeing the things he was writing about (Fitri, 2020). Interestingly, he mentioned the discrepancy between the coastal areas and the interior, which also became a topic in the field of Southeast Asian anthropology (King & Wilder, 2003). For Hamka, it was important to note that the first Islamic settlements were at the coast, and therefore, their Islamic history is older.

## Hamka's Contribution to the Santri/ Abangan Discussion

When Clifford Geertz published the influential work The Religion of Java (Gertz, 1976) in the year 1960, he made a remarkable scientific differentiation when he conducted fieldwork in Modjokuto:

Comparing the abangan and santri of the Modjokuto religious pattern, two very striking general differences, other than their differential evaluation of Islamic orthodoxy, are immediately apparent. In the first place, abangans are fairly indifferent to doctrine but fascinated with ritual detail, while among the santris the concern with doctrine almost entirely overshadows the already attenuated ritualistic aspects of Islam. (Geertz, 1976, pp. 126-127) What Geertz describes is that there is a differentiation in Javanese society between orthodox Muslims (santris) and Muslims who stress Javanese values (called abangan). In the field of anthropology, this differentiation became well known. Other scientists referred to this differentiation (like Mulder, 1996). Hamka was aware of this distinction. However, he was critical. The reason was that the unity of the Indonesian Muslim community was threatened.

Hamka criticised such 'artificial' attributions. He said: "All that was created by the colonialists to divide the Islamic community. Islam is one" (R. Hamka, 2010, p. 207). Hamka's position was sceptical, and he warned about the influence of ideas from orientalists that were also

widespread in anthropology. His position was ahead of his time. It is comparable to the work of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, who also warned of the writings of orientalists (Aljunied, 2013: Hamka and Diffusionism)

The travel descriptions of Hamka frequently compared other aspects with his own culture. Sometimes, he emphasises that some cultural elements spread to other places. He even describes how a cultural aspect became part of the local culture. For example, he describes the event of Tabut in the Minangkabau culture, which has Shiite elements. When he travelled to Iraq, he described the way of life of the Shia Muslims. Indonesia is a country with a majority of Sunnite Muslims who are adherents of the Shafiite School of law (madhab). Differences could help to understand cultural features.

The idea that elements spread from one culture to another was formulated by diffusionism. A short definition of diffusionism is as follows: "Diffusionism as an anthropological school of thought, was an attempt to understand the distribution of culture in terms of the origin of culture traits and their spread from one society to another" (King et al., w.y., https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/diffusionism-and-acculturation/, retrieved 4/1/2023). As already mentioned, Hamka describes cultural elements that originate from another society. These elements found their way into the local cultures.

Hamka also provided further examples. For instance, he wrote that the sarung is widespread in South and Southeast Asia. He depicted a traditional Burmese man's attire in one of his writings (Hamka, 2019b). He wears a sarung and a traditional headpiece. Hamka views the traditional attire as a form of identification that supports the maintenance of the tradition.

## The emic/etic Discussion

Hamka was aware that he had the easiest access to his own culture. Moreover, he even got a traditional title. In his case, he was an expert in the local culture. The description of the own culture reveals characteristics that could not easily be detected by anthropologists from the outside. Hamka employs the viewpoint of a local Minangkabau representative in his portrayal of the Minangkabau way of life. This viewpoint is called emic. Hamka can recognise elements that are difficult to detect by a foreign researcher. The foreigner might see the surface. For example, in the case of the Minangkabau, they might see that some old men reside in the prayer room (surau), but the scientists

cannot see that their living conditions are sometimes precarious. Therefore, the impressions of Hamka are fascinating and show the feelings of an insider.

Hamka used an etic approach when he travelled through the Arabic and American World. This means he looked at these societies from the outside as an observer. The reason was that he could only get some impressions when he met famous representatives of the culture. Nevertheless, his insights are crucial because they help us comprehend the many ideologies and viewpoints that exist in those cultures. The work of Hamka can be used as an example to understand the distinction between the etic and emic dimensions. Both points of view are valuable and add to the body of knowledge.

Due to his language knowledge and his stay in different places in Indonesia (Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Java), he became interested in the local culture and history.

## Contributions in the Field of Anthropology of Religion

In his role as a religious scholar, religion was one of his main interests. Hamka pondered on the origin of religion as well as on its function. For the reader, it is impressive to see Hamka's vast knowledge. He even knew the ideas of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. In his book Teguran Suci dan Jujur Terhadap Mufti Johor, he looks into Freud's ideas and rejects them vehemently. Freud assumes that the son is in a kind of competition with the father to get the attention of the mother. Hamka summarised his ideas:

Freud's theory is that human life and thinking are based solely on lust. Freud named it libido and, according to Freud's theory as well, that religion is only a human invention. Once upon a time, a humans (the son) fell in love with his own mother. Because he wanted to sleep with his mother, he killed his father. Then, he regretted it and invented religion. (Hamka, 2010, p. 88) (Translation by the authors).

For some anthropologists, the ideas of Freud were quite fascinating. However, Hamka interfered and rejected them. Many anthropologists pondered over the origin of religion. Hamka focused on the Malayspeaking world and could contribute to the general discussion. The first inhabitants of the Indonesian archipelago believed that there were places that should be avoided. He does not explain the exact reason. It can be

assumed that there were areas that were considered to be dangerous due to swamps or wild animals.

The elements of death and life led to a growing religious consciousness. Hamka mentions that the people used to look for their food during the daylight (Hamka, 2018). The sun was associated with safety. Hamka also mentioned that the idea of a vital force (semangat) is an old belief in the area. A good example is paddy. The people had the idea of Dewi Sri (the rice goddess) and other natural elements.

Hamka's writings about the development of religion in Nusantara are a valuable contribution to the anthropological discussion about the origin of religion.

## **Conclusion**

In this research paper, it was shown that Hamka was interested in the field of anthropology. Often, he referred to the subjects of ethnology or anthropology in his books. In this paper, the researchers stressed that there is a differentiation in Hamka's work that is related to anthropology. There are ethnographic descriptions that describe in detail elements of the way of life in one area. He specifically criticises some components of the Minangkabau society. Additionally, he demonstrates how local history has an impact because historical occurrences have altered perceptions. The Padri War led to a society in which Islamic elements became more important and were integrated into local customs.

Hamka was well-versed in a variety of subjects. Therefore, it is not surprising that he shared his views about matters that are of interest in the field of anthropology. His specialised knowledge of the Malay-speaking world led to a contribution to greater anthropological discussion. The abangan / santri topic is a good example. Hamka took a stand that wanted to protect Islamic unity, and so he rejected a pure etic interpretation that was too static. Hamka's contribution to the anthropological discussion is influential to this day.

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