

# The Perspective of Tok Kenali on Iman, Islam, and Ihsan in Majalah Pengasuh

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the perspective of Tok Kenali, a renowned Malaysian Islamic scholar, on the concepts of Iman, Islam, and Ihsan as articulated in Majalah Pengasuh. The study focuses on his explanation about Iman, the five pillars of Islam, and the significance of Ihsan as the embodiment of perfect worship. Tok Kenali's interpretation is rooted in classical Islamic theology, closely aligned with the teachings of the Quran and Hadith. The article emphasizes his call for Muslims not only to fulfill outward religious practices but also to strengthen inner faith and pursue excellence in worship. This study adopts the documentation method, analyzing primary sources such as articles published in Majalah Pengasuh and related works on Tok Kenali. The findings reveal Tok Kenali's substantial contribution to shaping Islamic thought and religious practice among the Malay community in the early 20th century, highlighting the importance of balancing belief, verbal affirmation, and righteous action.

**Keywords:** Tok Kenali, Iman, Islam, Ihsan, Majalah Pengasuh, Islamic thought, Malaysia, documentation method.

## INTRODUCTION

Tok Kenali, as known as Tuan Guru Haji Muhammad Yusoff bin Ahmad, was one of the most prominent Islamic scholars and intellectuals from Kelantan, Malaysia. He was widely recognized for his profound knowledge in Islamic sciences and for his significant contributions to the development of Islamic thought in the Malay Peninsula. As a religious scholar, Tok Kenali introduced a holistic approach to Islamic education and exerted a substantial influence on the Malay Muslim community, particularly in the areas of religious instruction and understanding. One of his most valuable contributions was his use of written media particularly Majalah Pengasuh as a platform for disseminating religious knowledge.

Majalah Pengasuh, first published in the early 20th century, served as an important medium through which Tok Kenali communicated his ideas to the broader society. Through this publication, he was able to articulate Islamic teachings in a manner that was both accessible and relevant to the social context of the time. The magazine not only functioned as a tool for educating the public on the fundamentals of religion but also played a critical role in deepening their understanding of Islamic creed (‘aqidah) and practice.

This article aims to analyze Tok Kenali's views on three core elements of the Islamic faith that frequently appeared in his writings: Iman (faith), Islam (submission), and Ihsan (spiritual excellence). These three elements are considered foundational in shaping the character of a true Muslim and were central themes in Tok Kenali's contributions to Majalah Pengasuh. By examining his works published in this magazine, the article explores how Tok Kenali explicated and contextualized these concepts within the lived experiences of the Muslim community.

## **The Relationship Between Majalah Pengasuh and Tok Kenali**

Tok Kenali was the central figure behind the publication of *Majalah Pengasuh*, a religious magazine launched by the Majlis Agama dan Istiadat Melayu Kelantan (MAIK) in 1918. He was not only a contributor of numerous articles but is also widely acknowledged as the founding editor and intellectual pioneer of the magazine—a title ascribed to him by various historians of Islamic literature in Kelantan (Khoo Kay Kim, 1983). According to Faisal (2013), the title was formally conferred by the *Pengasuh* editorial board to capitalise on Tok Kenali's immense popularity and influence within society at the time.

Tok Kenali's deep interest in writing and publishing was cultivated from a young age, and he was entrusted with the responsibility of spearheading Islamic periodicals and journalism in Kelantan. Despite his busy schedule as a teacher and a member of the Kelantan Islamic Council, he remained passionate in leading the *Majalah Pengasuh* editorial efforts. In the first issue of the magazine, Tok Kenali humbly expressed his modesty and sense of duty, writing:

"The writer confesses that he is not among the noble steeds of this arena... yet dares to immerse himself in a sea of ever-blazing fire..." (*Majalah Pengasuh*, 1918).

Nevertheless, due to his growing responsibilities as an educator and MAIK religious council member, Tok Kenali only held the editor's position for a brief period. In October 1919, he handed over the editorial responsibilities to Haji Muhammad bin Tok Khatib Haji Muhammad Said, who continued leading the publication until 1 December 1933 (Faisal, 2012).

As a scholar and Islamic thinker, Tok Kenali utilised *Majalah Pengasuh* as a platform to clarify theological issues, reinforce Islamic understanding based on the principles of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, and confront intellectual challenges posed by colonial influence and deviant teachings. His approach was both balanced and scholarly, combining classical Islamic scholarship with a keen awareness of contemporary social changes, ensuring that the Muslim community remained grounded in authentic teachings. Through his efforts, *Majalah Pengasuh* became a significant platform for the development of Islamic thought and the awakening of Malay-Muslim identity during the colonial era.

## **The Pillars of Islam in Majalah Pengasuh According to Tok Kenali**

The internalisation of Islamic faith begins with a profound understanding of *fard 'ayn* (individual obligatory knowledge), which comprises three principal elements: *Iman* (faith), *Islam* (practice), and *Ihsan* (spiritual excellence). These elements form the foundational framework of *'aqidah* (creed), *'ibadah* (worship), and *akhlak* (ethics) in a Muslim's life. They constitute an inseparable unity, where *Iman* signifies belief and doctrinal certainty, *Islam* represents the outward enactment of that belief, and *Ihsan* reflects the endeavour to execute such practices with sincerity and perfection for the sake of Allah (Zakaria & Azahari, 2022).

This conceptualisation aligns closely with Tok Kenali's perspective, as evidenced in the early edition of *Majalah Pengasuh* dated 8 August 1918. In his writing, Tok Kenali emphasised that the Islamic religion is fundamentally established upon these three pillars, which serve as the core of religious understanding and practice among Muslims. He defined *Iman* as the beginning, *Islam* as the intermediate stage of religious practice, and *Ihsan* as the perfection that embodies the highest level of spiritual excellence. He asserted that the perfection of religion can only be achieved when these three components are harmoniously integrated and mutually reinforcing in a Muslim's life (Tok Kenali, 1918).

The discussion on *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan* also represents one of the earliest theological discourses addressed by Tok Kenali in *Majalah Pengasuh*. This indicates that Tok Kenali regarded these elements as the essential foundation for cultivating doctrinal strength, clarity in practice, and refinement of character among the Muslim community of his time.

## **Faith (Iman) According to Tok Kenali in Majalah Pengasuh**

According to the *Kamus Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (2017), the term *al-īmān* originates from Arabic and denotes belief or conviction, specifically in Allah SWT and the pillars of faith. From a terminological perspective, there

are two distinct scholarly views on the definition of faith (iman). The first view does not separate faith from outward deeds, whereas the second distinguishes between faith and external actions. The proponents of the first view assert that faith comprises three fundamental elements: *taṣdīq bil qalb*, which refers to absolute conviction in the heart regarding the existence and oneness of Allah SWT as well as the truth of His teachings; *iqrār bil lisān*, meaning verbal affirmation of one's faith, such as the recitation of the *shahādah*; and *'amal bil jawāriḥ*, which refers to the manifestation of righteous actions through physical deeds, including obedience to Allah's commands and abstention from His prohibitions (al-Khalili, A. M., 2004).

This perspective is supported by many classical scholars, including Imām Mālik RA, Imām al-Shāfi'ī RA, and Imām Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal RA, who emphasized that faith is not merely verbal acknowledgment but must also be affirmed in the heart and manifested through actions (Ibn Abi al- 'Izz al-Hanafī, 2015). Conversely, the second approach maintains that faith encompasses only two essential components: verbal confession (*al-iqrār*) and internal affirmation (*al-taṣdīq*). This view was advanced by Imām Abū Ḥanīfah RA (1971), who interpreted *al-iqrār* as verbal acknowledgment and *al-taṣdīq* as inner conviction. He argued that outward deeds are not intrinsic components of faith, although they are acknowledged as essential to the practice of Islam. While external acts are not directly included in the definition of faith, the interrelationship between faith and Islam remains recognized. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah RA explicitly stated that faith is incomplete without Islam.

The divergence between these perspectives arises from differing conceptual understandings of faith. The first group adopts a more comprehensive and integrative definition, viewing faith as encompassing internal conviction as well as outward deeds in alignment with Islamic teachings. In this view, one's faith is considered imperfect if it is not demonstrated through actions such as prayer, fasting, and other obligatory acts of worship (Arde, M., & Wan, N. M. S. N., 2015). By contrast, the second group defines faith primarily from a linguistic standpoint, restricting it to internal belief and verbal affirmation. They differentiate between faith as an internal matter and deeds as external acts that do not constitute part of faith itself. Consequently, for this group, faith does not necessarily require validation through action, although deeds are acknowledged as important within the Islamic framework (Arde, M., & Wan, N. M. S. N., 2015).

The definition of iman put forth by Tok Kenali aligns with the first perspective this evidenced is in Qamarul Huda book authored by Tok Kenali, where Tok Kenali incorporates these three elements into the concept of individual faith. He emphasizes that the utterance of the *shahādah* serves as evidence of prior knowledge within the heart regarding Allah SWT before one verbally affirms the declaration. This knowledge must be accompanied by firm conviction (*tasdīq*) in the heart. Furthermore, in the broader context of communal faith, he underscores that every individual is obliged to earnestly seek the path leading to Allah SWT and His Messenger. This emphasis indicates that genuine practice arises from profound understanding and unwavering conviction (Tok Kenali, 2018). He also substantiates faith by referring to a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in which the Prophet responds to Jibril's question regarding the nature of faith. قَالَ: فَأَخْبَرَنِي عَنْ الْإِيمَانِ. قَالَ: أَنْ تُؤْمِنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ، وَتُؤْمِنَ بِالْقَدَرِ خَيْرِهِ وَشَرِّهِ. قَالَ: صَدَقْتَ

Translation: "He said: Then tell me about faith. The Prophet (PBUH) replied: It is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Last Day, and to believe in divine decree, both its good and bad."

(Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 8; Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 50)

Referring to this Hadith, Tok Kenali (1918) explained that Iman signifies a firm conviction of the heart towards all that was brought by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), particularly the six articles of faith: belief in Allah, His angels, His revealed scriptures, His messengers, the Last Day, and divine decree (*qada'* and *qadar*). According to him, faith is not limited to verbal profession alone; it must be affirmed in the heart and reflected in righteous actions. A complete Muslim is therefore not only one who outwardly performs Islamic rituals but also embodies deep faith and sincerity in worship.

This interpretation aligns with the message of Surah al-Nisa' (4:136), which underscores the essentiality of faith in Islam:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا ءَامِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ

Translation: “O you who have believed, believe in Allah and His Messenger and the Book which He has sent down upon His Messenger and the Scripture which He sent down before. And whoever disbelieves in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day has certainly gone far astray.”.

In conclusion, Tok Kenali’s exposition on Iman in *Majalah Pengasuh* portrays faith as a holistic construct that transcends theoretical doctrine. It is a lived reality, encompassing the totality of one’s convictions, speech, and conduct. Drawing from the prophetic tradition and Qur’anic teachings, Tok Kenali reaffirmed that true faith involves inner certainty, verbal affirmation, and practical commitment to the commands of Allah and His Messenger. This understanding resonates with classical Islamic scholarship and remains a foundational tenet in the spiritual and theological formation of Muslims.

### **Islam According to Tok Kenali in *Majalah Pengasuh***

Tok Kenali (1918), in *Majalah Pengasuh*, did not provide a specific or technical definition of Islam. However, he emphasized that Islam is evident through the performance of religious obligations such as the five daily prayers (ṣalāh), the giving of alms (zakāh), fasting during the month of Ramadan (ṣawm), and the pilgrimage to Mecca (ḥajj). These practices reflect the five fundamental pillars of Islam, serving as clear indicators of submission and devotion to Allah (SWT). Tok Kenali’s interpretation is grounded in the well-known ḥadīth of Jibrīl.

“While we were sitting with the Messenger of Allah (SAW) one day, a man appeared with exceedingly white clothes and exceedingly black hair. There were no signs of travel upon him, and none of us recognized him. He sat before the Prophet (SAW), rested his knees against his, and placed his hands on his thighs. He said, ‘O Muḥammad, tell me about Islam.’ The Messenger of Allah replied: ‘Islam is to testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah, to establish prayer, to give zakāh, to fast in Ramadan, and to perform ḥajj to the House if one is able to do so.’ The man said: ‘You have spoken the truth.’”

(Muslim)

Although Tok Kenali did not explicitly define Islam, his understanding aligns with definitions proposed by notable Muslim scholars such as Hamka (1980) and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1985), who described Islam as the submission to Allah (SWT) through the fulfillment of His commandments.

Islam, according to Tok Kenali (1918), may also be metaphorically described as a solid house built upon five main pillars known as the arkān al-Islām (pillars of Islam). This metaphor corresponds with a ḥadīth reported by Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Muslim:

“Islam is built upon five: the testimony that there is no deity but Allah and that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah, the establishment of prayer, the giving of zakāh, the pilgrimage to the House, and fasting during Ramadan.”

(al-Bukhārī, no. 8; Muslim, no. 16)

This ḥadīth illustrates that the five pillars serve as the essential foundations supporting the structure of the Islamic faith. The first pillar, the shahādah, constitutes the basis of one’s belief (īmān) in Islam (Ibn Ḥajar, n.d.).

All five pillars are obligatory for Muslims. However, two of them zakāh and ḥajj are conditional upon an individual’s financial capability and are thus not required of those who lack the means. This leaves three pillars (shahādah, ṣalāh, and ṣawm) as practices that every Muslim is expected to observe, albeit with varying degrees of difficulty. The shahādah is considered the simplest to fulfill, as it merely requires verbal affirmation and belief. In contrast, prayer (ṣalāh) is often perceived as challenging, particularly by non-Muslims or new converts, due to its disciplined nature and requirement of understanding and commitment. This observation by Tok Kenali (1919) illustrates that the acceptance and practice of Islam’s core obligations vary across individuals based on their personal circumstances and level of faith.

According to Tok Kenali (1919), fasting may be burdensome for individuals overly preoccupied with worldly affairs. Nevertheless, if one were to truly reflect upon its significance and rewards, they would not treat this act



of worship lightly. Fasting holds immense value both spiritually and in terms of its promised rewards in the Hereafter.

Tok Kenali also underscored the virtue of fasting by citing a ḥadīth of the Prophet (SAW):

“For the fasting person, there are two joys: the joy at the time of breaking the fast and the joy when he meets his Lord”

(al-Bukhārī, no. 1904; Muslim, no. 1151)

Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī. (1999), interpreted this narration as evidence that fasting carries special rewards, offering both worldly and spiritual happiness. The first joy refers to the physical and emotional satisfaction experienced upon breaking the fast after a day of self-restraint. This moment is also symbolic of Allah’s mercy and blessings upon His servants. The second joy denotes the ultimate delight of meeting Allah in the Hereafter and receiving divine recompense for one’s sincere devotion.

In conclusion, Tok Kenali’s explanation (1919) reaffirms that the five pillars of Islam serve as the foundational structure of a Muslim’s spiritual life, fostering strong faith and piety. He emphasized that all Muslims are obligated to perform these five pillars, though zakāh and ḥajj are conditional upon one’s capability. The remaining three—shahādah, ṣalāh, and ṣawm—are duties that every Muslim must endeavor to uphold. Despite the potential difficulty of some acts, such as fasting, Tok Kenali reiterated its exceptional spiritual merit, as indicated by various prophetic traditions. The ḥadīth referenced, especially those narrated by al-Bukhārī and Muslim, highlight the esteemed position of fasting as a source of both worldly and eternal bliss.

### **Ihsan According to Tok Kenali in Majalah Pengasuh**

The concept of ihsan (excellence in faith and conduct) in Islam can be categorised into three principal dimensions: ihsan in worship (ibadah), ihsan in social dealings (mu‘amalah), and ihsan in character (akhlak). Firstly, ihsan in worship refers to the perfection of servitude to Allah SWT through sincerity, consciousness (taqwa), and deep spiritual presence. A person who attains ihsan in worship performs every act of devotion with the awareness that Allah is constantly observing him. Secondly, ihsan in mu‘amalah involves doing good in interpersonal and inter-creational relationships. Thirdly, ihsan in character reflects the pursuit of the highest standards of moral excellence in all aspects of life. This final form of ihsan is the natural result of the previous two, as spiritual and social excellence ultimately nurture a noble personality (Masitoh, D., 2021).

In the context of discussions on ihsan as presented in Majalah Pengasuh, Tok Kenali emphasized the aspect of ihsan in worship. He defined ihsan as the execution of religious acts with full awareness as though one is seeing Allah; and even if one cannot perceive Him directly, one must remain assured that Allah is always watching. This definition implies that anyone who preserves a sincere and direct relationship with Allah SWT will consequently cultivate virtuous conduct towards others, forming a righteous and refined character (Tok Kenali, 1918).

According to Tsalis, N., Sarjana, L. A., and Fadlurrahman, F. (2023), Tok Kenali’s definition of ihsan aligns with the prophetic narration (hadith) reported by al-Bukhari, in which the Angel Jibril asked the Prophet Muhammad SAW about the meaning of ihsan. The Prophet replied:

"To worship Allah as if you see Him; and if you cannot see Him, then [know that] He sees you."

(al-Bukhari, no. 87)

This understanding implies that every Muslim should continuously feel the presence of Allah in every aspect of life. Belief in Allah’s ever-watchful gaze becomes a spiritual foundation upon which Muslims regulate their lives, aware that every action and decision is under divine surveillance.

Al-Ghazali (2002) similarly interpreted ihsan in a way that is consistent with Tok Kenali’s perspective. In Al-Ghazali’s view, ihsan is synonymous with the concept of muraqabah—a state of constant awareness of Allah’s

supervision. This internal vigilance encourages a believer to behave in accordance with divine commandments and to avoid His prohibitions. Such awareness is foundational to the development of a devout personality who maintains both the integrity of worship and high moral standards in daily life.

The notion of *ihsan* as expounded by Tok Kenali is primarily centered on a person's consciousness of Allah's presence and oversight in all dimensions of life. His definition reflects the Prophetic teaching that worship should be conducted as if one sees Allah—or, at the very least, with the conviction that Allah sees them. This conception is further affirmed by Al-Ghazali's notion of *muraqabah*, which positions *ihsan* as a continual state of spiritual alertness. Possessing *ihsan*, therefore, not only enhances one's relationship with Allah SWT but also improves social conduct, ultimately cultivating a pious, morally upright Muslim who diligently upholds the quality of both worship and ethical behaviour in daily life.

In conclusion, Tok Kenali's articulation of *ihsan* in *Majalah Pengasuh* underscores a believer's deep awareness of Allah's presence and supervision in all aspects of existence. In line with the Prophetic hadith and Al-Ghazali's understanding of *muraqabah*, *ihsan* serves not only to strengthen one's relationship with Allah but also to shape a noble character and God-conscious Muslim identity.

## CONCLUSION

Tok Kenali's perspectives, as articulated in *Majalah Pengasuh*, present a comprehensive understanding of the three fundamental pillars of Islam—*iman* (faith), *Islam* (practice), and *ihsan* (spiritual excellence). He emphasized that faith is not merely a verbal declaration but demands deep conviction in the heart, supported by righteous actions that embody the six articles of faith outlined in the Qur'an and Hadith. Regarding *Islam*, he highlighted the necessity of upholding all five pillars as the structural foundation of a Muslim's life, recognizing that while certain obligations such as *zakat* and *hajj* depend on one's capability, acts like *shahadah*, prayer, and fasting are universally binding. Tok Kenali further underscored the spiritual value of fasting, drawing on prophetic traditions that describe its unique rewards. In his discussion of *ihsan*, he focused on cultivating a continual awareness of Allah's presence, consistent with the prophetic concept of *muraqabah*, linking spiritual consciousness with ethical conduct.

Beyond its historical context, Tok Kenali's framework carries significant implications for contemporary Islamic thought and education. It promotes an integrated model of religious life that balances outward ritual observance with inner spiritual development, discouraging superficial religiosity while encouraging personal transformation. For modern Islamic education, his approach offers a paradigm that connects classical scholarship to present-day challenges: nurturing learners who not only possess doctrinal knowledge but also embody ethical character, critical awareness, and a strong sense of God-consciousness. Thus, his legacy provides both a timeless theological foundation and a practical blueprint for shaping holistic Islamic education and fostering resilient, morally grounded Muslim identities in today's world.

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