

Mohammad Sjafei: A Nationalist Educator in West Sumatra

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Abstract

This article discusses Mohammad Sjafei's nationalist thoughts in the fields of politics and education from 1914 to 1958. This research uses historical methods. The article contains a description of how the educational system under the Ethical Policy program provided opportunities for the rise of nationalism among the indigenous people. The expansion of education encouraged openness of mind and knowledge among the indigenous population. This process of nationalist awakening stimulated the emergence of national thinkers who played a role in the struggle during the movement era. The role and contribution of these national thinkers are important to study in order to enhance understanding and knowledge in the field of intellectual history. One such national thinker examined in this article is Mohammad Sjafei. He was a national education figure who had nationalist thoughts in the fields of politics and education. His nationalist thoughts in politics encompassed values of unity, national loyalty, and love for the nation. His nationalist thoughts in education emphasized the importance of forming the nation's identity and promoting education that is Indonesia-centric. Sjafei implemented these two nationalist thoughts in his educational practices at *Indonesisch Nederlandsche School* Kayutanam. The school was used as a medium to disseminate nationalistic awareness, sharpen intellectual intelligence, and develop skills.

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Introduction

This study examines the educational and political thought of Mohammad Sjafei, a prominent nationalist figure in Indonesian history. To provide a theoretical framework, the research first delineates the concepts of educational history and biography. Educational history, emerging in the 19th century, is primarily employed to foster national consciousness, promote professional development in education, and instill institutional pride. Its scope encompasses a wide range of topics, including educational traditions, influential leaders, diverse systems, and critical challenges within the field (Shklar, 1998).

The context of the Indonesian national movement, a period marked by colonial domination. To provide a theoretical framework, it is essential to define colonialism. Colonialism refers to the systematic subjugation of one nation by another, involving political dominance, economic exploitation, and cultural

penetration. Colonial rule often resulted in significant negative consequences for the colonized people, including the loss of independence, political freedom, and economic autonomy. Colonial societies were typically characterized by stark divisions between the colonizer and the colonized, with limited social interaction and pervasive discrimination.

In the early 20th century, the Dutch colonial administration in Indonesia introduced a policy known as Ethical Policy. This policy, which had a profound impact on the national movement, was essentially a concept of "moral obligation." As articulated by C. Th. Van Deventer in his 1899 article, *Een Eereschuld* [A Debt of Honor], the Dutch owed a moral debt to the Indonesian people for exploiting their resources to benefit the Netherlands. Van Deventer argued that the Dutch government should prioritize the interests of the Indonesian people through colonial policies. The three primary pillars of the Ethical Policy were education, irrigation, and migration.

Education not only serves as a catalyst for consciousness and the pursuit of freedom but also nurtures critical thinking about one's surroundings. This critical mindset manifests in ideas, concepts, and creative works. Individual thoughts and ideas can act as agents of change, significantly impacting various aspects of life. This study falls within the realm of intellectual history and thus necessitates a clear understanding of the concept. As Gilbert (1971) asserts in his work, *Intellectual History: Its Aims and Methods*, intellectual history is a recognized field within the broader discipline of history. It stands alongside other historical subfields such as political, economic, and social history. Intellectual history, as a specialized area of historical inquiry, has its unique methods and scope. Its primary focus lies in examining the influential ideas, ideologies, values, beliefs, and intellectual movements of a particular period. In addition, according to Gilbert, intellectual history demonstrates how this reinterpretation of Niccolo Machiavelli was shaped by the historical context of the 1930s, the development of security studies, and the philanthropic support that fostered the growth of international relations theory (Guilhot, 2015, p. 681). Within the context of colonization, education plays a pivotal role in fostering awareness and catalyzing social change. Paulo Freire, in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizes the transformative power of education in liberating oppressed populations (Freire, 2001, p. 22).

Colonial education played a pivotal role in fostering nationalist thought among the colonized. By providing indigenous people with access to knowledge and nationalist ideologies, colonial education inadvertently created agents of change. The ideas and philosophies of these intellectuals influenced society at large, leading to significant transformations. One such nationalist thinker, shaped by Western education, was Mohammad Sjafei. His nationalist sentiments were cultivated in part by his adoptive father, who regularly sent him readings on nationalist ideas. While studying in Bukittinggi from 1908 to 1914, Sjafei was exposed to these materials. Sjafei's nationalist convictions were further strengthened through his involvement in political organizations during the Indonesian nationalist movement. Upon completing his teacher training in 1914, he moved to Jakarta to

deepen his knowledge and gain political experience by joining Budi Utomo in 1914 and the Indische Partij in 1916.

A figure's thoughts are shaped by a complex interplay of influences, often rooted in their personal experiences. These formative factors guide their ideas and perspectives. To effectively analyze a character's mindset, it is crucial to delve into their life story. Understanding their background offers valuable insights for writers. A person's life experiences significantly influence the development of their thoughts and beliefs. These influences are often intangible, as there is no universal standard to measure their exact impact. Based on this understanding, this paper explores several factors that shaped Mohammad Sjafei's nationalist ideology. These factors include his genealogy, education, parental influences, and the impact of political figures, collectively providing the context for the formation of his nationalist thought.

Sjafei, recognizing the emancipatory potential of education, established institutions aimed at cultivating nationalist consciousness among Indonesians. A biography, in essence, is a narrative account of an individual's life. Beyond mere chronological facts, biographies delve into personal experiences, motivations, and the impact of life events. The primary purpose of biography is to share the life story of a particular individual with a wider audience (Sari, 2021, p. 54).

While several studies have explored the educational thought of Mohammad Sjafei, his contributions have often been overshadowed by the more prominent figure of Ki Hadjar Dewantara. Zed (2012) highlights Sjafei's significance as a foundational figure in Indonesian education. This study employs a historical-sociological lens to compare the contemporary Indonesian education system, post-reform era, with the system initiated by Mohammad Sjafei. Zed (2012) argues that the government's educational policies have leaned heavily towards Western models, often misaligned with the unique identity of the Indonesian nation. In contrast, Sjafei's educational philosophy is characterized by its emphasis on "liberating education," which he believed was crucial for fostering national self-esteem and aligning education with the needs of the Indonesian people.

In addition, study from Afdhal et al. (2022) asserts that Sjafei's thought remains relevant to current educational problems, namely the decline in moral, mental, and intellectual values. Sjafei has offered a solution through a holistic developmental approach, encompassing cognitive, affective, psychomotor, and extracurricular aspects. This approach shares similarities with Howard Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences. Therefore, M. Sjafei's educational thought, particularly his concept of developmentalism, is still relevant and can be a solution to current educational problems.

This study explores the nationalist thought of Mohammad Sjafei within the context of Indonesian politics and education from 1914 to 1958. Employing historical methodology, the research examines how the Ethical Policy era facilitated the emergence of nationalism among indigenous Indonesians. The expansion of education during this period fostered intellectual growth and a sense of national identity.

Method

This research is a historical study, meaning it reconstructs past events systematically, accurately, and objectively using an interpretative approach. Historical researchers reconstruct the past by collecting, verifying, and analyzing evidence or facts meticulously, allowing for an accurate depiction of the past, providing context for the present, and offering perspectives for the future (Muri, 2013, p. 351).

This research uses the historical method, which consists of four stages. The first stage is heuristics, which involves searching for and finding data and historical sources (Hartatik & Wasino, 2018, pp. 11-12) relevant to studying Mohammad Sjafei's nationalist thought from 1914 to 1968. This research utilizes literature consisting of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include documents and archives obtained from the West Sumatra Provincial Archives Office and the *Indonesisch Nederlandsche School* (INS) Kayutanam educational institution. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, research results, and other scholarly works. These secondary sources are obtained from the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia in Jakarta, the library of Padang State University in Padang, the INS Kayutanam Library in Padang Pariaman, and the Minangkabau Cultural Documentation and Information Center in Padang Panjang.

The second stage of the research involved source criticism (Hartatik & Wasino, 2018, pp. 11-12). This stage is divided into external criticism (evaluating the authenticity of sources) and internal criticism (assessing the credibility of sources). Given that all sources used in this research were published written documents, external criticism was not necessary. The internal criticism process involved selecting relevant supporting sources and comparing them to draw conclusions that would be analyzed further.

The third stage of the research involved interpretation (Hartatik & Wasino, 2018, pp. 11-12). At this stage, the author synthesized the collected facts and concepts into a coherent narrative. This process required careful interpretation and analysis, guided by a social science approach. By connecting the dots, the author was able to develop a comprehensive analysis that aligned with the research objectives and laid the groundwork for the historiography stage. Historiography, the final step, involved expressing the research findings in well-structured sentences that adhered to standard writing conventions.

The Process of Forming Nationalist Thought 1914-1925

Educational Background

M. Sjafei attended *Volkschool* (People's School) in Pontianak from 1905 to 1908 and continued his education at the teacher training school, *Kweekschool Bukittinggi*, from 1908 to 1914 (Yayasan Ruang Pendidik Indonesisch Nederlandsche School Kayutanam, n.d., p. 1). At *Kweekschool Bukittinggi*, Sjafei's artistic talents began to grow and develop; he learned to play the violin and paint under the guidance of a young teacher named Wakidi. Sjafei also developed an interest in handicrafts, and at this school, he was taught various handicraft skills and agricultural techniques. This

prepared future teachers to provide better agricultural education if they were to teach in rural areas (Afdhal et al., 2022). After six years of teacher training at *Kweekschool Bukittinggi*, Sjafei completed his education in 1914, obtaining his diploma (Navis, 1996, pp. 17-18).

In addition to formal education, Sjafei also pursued non-formal education to support his personal potential. After graduating from teacher training in 1914, he taught at Kartini School in Jakarta. While teaching, Sjafei took a painting course under de Gaaf, a drawing teacher at *Hoogere Burgerschool* (HBS). After 18 months, he received a certificate of completion and the right to teach in secondary schools. He became the first Indonesian to obtain such a certificate. Additionally, he improved his Dutch skills by taking a language course and earned a completed course certificate with excellent grades. He took the Dutch language course with the aim of mastering science and technology (Navis, 1996, p. 18).

Interaction with Several Figures

A significant influence on Sjafei's thinking came from his parents. His interaction with his mother, who consistently provided moral and material support, shaped Sjafei into a gentle yet resilient child who could face challenges and pursue education. His interaction with his father, who frequently sent writings about knowledge and political ideas, helped Sjafei become a young man with broad perspectives and a deep understanding of nationalism. His father was a nationalist educator who wanted to pass on his ideas to his son. This is evidenced by Marah Sutan's determination to advance national education in line with the character of the Indonesian nation. From Marah Sutan's interactions with political figures such as Dr. Wahidin, Tjipto Mangunkusumo, and Ki Hadjar Dewantara, he was convinced that only through education could the dignity of the nation be uplifted (Navis, 1996, p. 10).

The Emergence of M. Sjafei's Nationalist Consciousness

From a young age, Mohammad Sjafei demonstrated artistic talent, evident from his interest in art subjects and his good grades in the arts at school. This talent was further nurtured at *Kweekschool Bukittinggi*, where Sjafei took music (violin) and painting classes. In his free time, he worked on painting projects and aspired to become a painter. However, this ambition did not align with his father's expectations. Sjafei was not interested in becoming an educator, while his father hoped Sjafei would pursue teacher education to educate the nation (Navis, 1996, p. 17). In 1911, Sjafei requested to leave *Kweekschool* five times, intending to pursue painting studies in Jakarta (Department of Archives and Libraries of West Sumatra Province, p. 1).

The school director, J. Lavell, advised Sjafei to complete his teacher education and pursue painting studies after graduating from *Kweekschool*. The director also informed Marah Sutan of Sjafei's intentions. Marah Sutan, upon reading the director's letter, remained silent. He did not want to be harsh with his child, despite their differing hopes and desires. Instead, Marah Sutan employed other methods to open Sjafei's mind and cultivate his interest in education and his father's ideals. Marah

Sutan frequently sent many magazines and newspapers. Important articles were marked in red (Navis, 1996, p. 18), which helped broaden Sjafei's perspectives and instill a sense of nationalism and the spirit of struggle.

Sjafei began his teacher education at *Kweekschool* in 1908 and graduated in 1914, a period marking the early rise of nationalism in Indonesia. Marah Sutan wanted to channel his sense of struggle to his son. By 1912, Sjafei was already studying the writings of the "Three Companions" sent by his father. Sjafei expressed this in his work titled Brief Information.

"Semendjak tahun 1912 waktu masih beladjar pada sekolah guru di Bukittinggi penulis telah mempeladjar tulisan-tulisan saudara dr. Cipto Mangunkusumo, Suwardi Suryaningrat dan Douwes Dekker, pendiri perkumpulan politik *Indische Partij*, dan tulisan-tulisan pentolan-pentolan politik lain2nja. Tulisan-tulisan itu dikirimkan oleh bapak Marah Sutan yang telah menetap di Djakarta, mentjemplungkan diri di bidang politik dan meletakkan djabatan guru kepala pada sekolah rakjat" (Sjafei, 1968, p. 2).

[Since 1912, when he was still studying at a teacher's school in Bukittinggi, the author has studied the writings of Dr. Cipto Mangunkusumo, Suwardi Suryaningrat and Douwes Dekker, the founders of the political association *Indische Partij*, and the writings of other political leaders. The writings were sent by Mr. Marah Sutan who had settled in Jakarta, plunged himself into politics and held the position of head teacher at a people's school.]

From this explanation, it can be seen that 1912 was the beginning of Mohammad Sjafei's nationalist awareness. The writings of the Three Companions helped cultivate his sense of nationalism and spirit of struggle. Sjafei implemented this spirit by becoming an educator at Kartini School in Jakarta and joining the political movement.

"Semendjak tahun 1914 setamat pada sekolah guru, penulis menjemplungkan diri dalam kalangan pendidikan dan politik. Dibidang pertama penulis mengadjar pada sekolah untuk wanita jaitu "Sekolah Kartini" di Djakarta dengan djumlah murid hanja 36 orang pada permulaanja. Sebabnja maka penulis memberikan tenaga disitu sekeluar dari sekolah guru di Bukittinggi, karena kami, keluarga Marah Sutan berpendapat untuk memandjukan Indonesia, kaum ibu tidak dapat ditinggalkan, mesti dibawa serta dalam usaha itu" (Sjafei, 1968, p. 2).

[Since 1914 after graduating from teacher's school, the author plunged himself into educational and political circles. In the first field, the author taught at a school for women, namely "Kartini School" in Jakarta with only 36 students at the beginning. The reason why the author gave his energy there after leaving teacher's school in Bukittinggi, because we, the Marah Sutan family, believed that in order to advance Indonesia, mothers could not be left behind, they had to be brought along in that effort.]

Instilling Nationalist Ideology at INS Kayutanam 1926-1958

On October 31, 1926, Sjafei founded the INS Kayutanam in Kajoetanam, West Sumatra on 31 October 1926 (Sjafei, 1953, p. xviii). Sjafei's *Indonesisch Nederlandsche School Kayutanam* was a manifestation of his resistance to colonial authority. The school's name, boldly incorporating 'Indonesia,' was a statement of defiance. As Audrey Kahin noted, various educational institutions and private schools played a crucial role in

fostering nationalist sentiments among Indonesian youth. At Sjafei's school, nationalism was a central focus. This school is a manifestation of Sjafei's non-cooperative attitude towards the colonial government. It is a private school that boldly uses the name 'Indonesia' first, followed by 'Nederlandsche'. During the colonial period, the name 'Indonesia' was always marginalized, and Sjafei demonstrated his nationalism through this act. The school became a school of struggle because its education system was designed as an antithesis to the Dutch education system. The language of instruction was Malay, and it taught nationalistic values. As a result, graduates of INS Kayutanam had a strong sense of nationalism and loyalty to their own nation rather than to the colonial power.

Sjafei delivered inspiring speeches to ignite students' patriotic fervor, and teachers were encouraged to incorporate nationalist perspectives into their lessons. Additionally, Sjafei composed the song 'Indonesia Subur,' expressing love for the homeland, which students were required to sing daily. Students were asked to practice dance for performance (Figure 1). The school aimed to instill a sense of patriotism in the local community and beyond. Sjafei believed that by spreading the spirit of struggle and nationalism throughout Indonesia, national unity would be more easily achieved. He sought to raise awareness among the people of West Sumatra of and its potential for greatness (Sjafei, Abdurachman & Sutan, 1925, p. 1).



Figure 1. Minang Dance Performance by INS students in 1947.

Source: Pusat Dokumentasi dan Informasi Kebudayaan Minangkabau, 1977.

Sjafei's educational institution aimed to be a breeding ground for nationalism, without neglecting the formal education of its students. The school also developed students' talents and interests. It was a school that combined two components: intellectual intelligence and creative hands, making it a fun place. It was a place for learning and creating, encouraging students to be creative and productive. During the independence war of 1946-1947, Sjafei used the INS Kayutanam school as a medium for cultural diplomacy. It served as proof that the Indonesian nation was knowledgeable, civilized, and cultured (Abdillah, 2018). Every time international guests or peace delegation envoys from the United States, Australia, or England visited

Bukittinggi, they were taken to the INS Kayutanam school. The guests were welcomed with artistic performances by INS Kayutanam students, after which they viewed exhibitions of student artwork and visited the school library, which housed a collection of 8,000 books (Wati, 2023, pp. 98-110).

INS Kayutanam sought to establish a new educational system in Indonesia, one that employed the native language while maintaining the high standards of the *Europeesche Lagere School* (ELS). ELS was a primary school primarily intended for European children, Foreign Orientals, and *priyayi* (Indonesian nobility). Its curriculum spanned seven years and was taught exclusively in Dutch. INS Kayutanam's educational system was founded upon a comprehensive analysis of Indonesia's current conditions, future prospects, and societal needs. The school aimed to equip its students to fulfill their responsibilities to themselves, their families, society, nation, religion, and humanity. Its educational philosophy emphasized its national character, designed to prepare Indonesian children for the challenges and opportunities of the future. The curriculum of INS Kayutanam can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. INS Kayutanam Curriculum 1926

Components	Materials	Educational Goals
1. Brain (Intellectual Knowledge)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. General Knowledge 2. Mathematics 3. Natural Science 4. History 5. Life Science 6. Culture and Language 	To produce individuals with high intellectual knowledge, optimal intelligence. To train the mind to think mathematically, logically, and systematically. To develop memory and reasoning to be more humane and cultured.
2. Hands (Active, creative, and innovative)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Woodworking 2. Mechanical Engineering 3. Metalworking 4. Ceramics 5. Weaving 6. Handicrafts 7. Carving 8. Animal Husbandry 9. Agriculture 	To cultivate individuals who are competent, productive, active, creative, innovative, possess a strong work ethic, are independent, are resourceful, and are capable of creating jobs or becoming entrepreneurs, thereby becoming self-reliant individuals.
3. Heart (Development of artistic soul and noble character)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arts: Music, Drama and theater, Dance, Painting, Literature 2. Religion and noble character: Discipline, cleanliness, 	Active, creative, and appreciative of aesthetics, possessing a sensitive and critical mind. Being communicative and tolerant of diverse viewpoints. To nurture a generation of individuals with strong character, embracing a civilized way of life, and free from

	responsibility, mutual help, mutual respect, worship, fulfilling obligations, justice, community service, honesty, keeping promises.	immoral behaviors.
3. Sports		Physically fit and robust. Courageous and self-assured, resilient and persistent, disciplined and cooperative, competitive yet fair.

Sources: Sjafei, 1926, p. 7.

Through the activities mentioned above, M. Sjafei successfully implemented his educational philosophy in practice. His educational practices aimed at fostering national awareness and achieving change towards freedom. This success is evident from the students who actively participated in the nation's struggle for independence. The students did not only study theory but also applied it directly through action. Below is the curriculum of INS Kayutanam School.

Conclusion

Mohammad Sjafei established an educational institution to awaken national consciousness. How did M. Sjafei utilize education in the national struggle? The answer to this question will be elaborated in the conclusion. Mohammad Sjafei used the educational institution known as INS Kayutanam as a vehicle for his struggle, both in intellectual and diplomatic endeavors. Sjafei did not only teach nationalistic theories to his students; he actively involved them in the struggle. The students and teachers participated in the cultural diplomacy efforts as part of their fight. Additionally, at his institution, Sjafei did not limit his teachings to national awareness and nationalism; he also stimulated his students to develop their skills and creativity, enabling them to be innovative and productive. He emphasized the importance of intellectual development by providing general knowledge. The education system initiated by Sjafei was *Indonesiacentric* and nationally oriented, aimed at shaping students with strong character and an understanding of their national identity.

Sjafei's struggle to sow nationalism in West Sumatra took a more gentle, focused, and independent form. From the beginning of establishing INS Kayutanam, Sjafei and Marah Sutan held the principle of independence, refusing assistance from the government or any other interested party. This principle was to protect INS's objectives from being altered or influenced. After deciding to manage educational institutions in West Sumatra, Sjafei also withdrew from political party membership. This was intended to allow Sjafei to focus on building the school without obstacles and political party influence. As in the cases of Thawalib and Diniyyah institutions, Sjafei also rejected subsidies from the Dutch government to maintain the school's independent principles. Fearing interference from the Dutch, like Rahmah el-Junusiah, Sjafei refused to allow his school to be used for political activities and refused to

affiliate with any political party.

The process of instilling nationalism in West Sumatra was initially carried out gently through approaches to students during or outside of class time. This was done through speeches at official school events or through articles in magazines. Sjafei faced challenges in sowing nationalism in West Sumatra, especially in the early 1930s. This was related to Sjafei's principle of not wanting to be involved or affiliated with any party. Sjafei went against the current movement in West Sumatra, which at that time was dominated by Islamic parties that were affiliated with religious schools. The nature of the youth movement did not suit Sjafei, as he was worried about increasingly firm government action. To ensure the continuity of his education, Sjafei has already tried to avoid government attention by not involving himself in any political parties.

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