

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i9.3338>

## Trans-regional Influences and the Modern-Traditional Character of Nahdlatul Ulama in Contemporary Indonesia

Muhammad Fakhry Ghafur<sup>1</sup>, Dhururudin Mashad<sup>2</sup>, M. Hamdan Basyar<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

*Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia, historically has been associated with rural-based traditionalism. Nevertheless, recent developments indicate a discernible ideological shift towards a modern-traditional synthesis. The article employs a critical juncture framework to investigate the trans-regional dynamics that have shaped NU's evolving identity. The study resulted in three key findings. Firstly, it is evident that NU's traditionalist foundations have, since its inception, been influenced by trans-regional Islamic thought. This has served to challenge the static view of its traditionalism. Secondly, the process of globalization, which has been accelerated by technological advancements and cross-border exchanges, has intensified the impact of these external influences. Thirdly, the increasing prevalence of nationally educated NU cadres, many of whom have pursued their studies at international institutions, has led to the integration of trans-regional discourses within the leadership and intellectual framework of the NU. These individuals have played a pivotal role in redefining the organisation's ideological trajectory, forging a modern-traditional character that reflects both continuity and transformation within Indonesian Islam.*

**Keywords:** Nahdlatul Ulama; Trans-Regionalism; Islamic Traditionalism; Religious Modernity; Indonesia; Global Islamic Networks.

### Introduction

The dynamic evolution of Islam in Indonesia should be understood in the context of the persistent tension between inherited tradition and the impulses of modernity. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic mass organisation in the country, historically embodies a traditionalist strand of Indonesian Islam, being deeply rooted in the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) tradition and rural religiosity. This typology, developed by Clifford Geertz, categorises Javanese Islam into three distinct groups: abangan, santri, and priyayi. Scholarly consensus has long positioned the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) within Geertz's "traditionalist santri" category (Geertz, 2014). The NU's reliance on classical Islamic texts, its adherence to Shafi'i jurisprudence, and its openness to accommodating local customs ('urf) have collectively contributed to its identity as the steward of Islam Nusantara (Bruinessen, 1999; Feener, 2014).

While NU has often been characterised by its cultural conservatism and scriptural fidelity, emerging scholarship has begun to observe a significant ideological and epistemological transformation within the organisation. This transformation, which has unfolded over the last two decades, has been influenced by trans-regional trends, including the global circulation of Islamic knowledge, increased access to Western and Middle Eastern higher education among

<sup>1</sup> Research Centre for Politics, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) Indonesia, Email: [fachryghafur@gmail.com](mailto:fachryghafur@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Research Centre for Politics, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) Indonesia, Email: [dhururudin@brin.go.id](mailto:dhururudin@brin.go.id)

<sup>3</sup> Research Centre for Politics, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) Indonesia, Email: [m.hamdan.basyar@brin.go.id](mailto:m.hamdan.basyar@brin.go.id)



NU cadres, and the digital dissemination of religious discourse (Buehler, 2016; Hasan, 2021; Wahid, 2022). NU currently occupies a complex position, characterised by an ongoing commitment to its traditional roots whilst simultaneously engaging with contemporary global thought. This dynamic relationship has resulted in the manifestation of a distinctive "modern-traditional" character, which is the subject of further discussion.

The article explores the trans-regional influences that have contributed to NU's ideological shift in the context of the post-reform era. The study proposes that the current identity of NU neither fully embraces modernism or retreats into scriptural traditionalism, but rather exhibits a hybrid epistemology forged through global-local interactions. Whilst earlier studies have examined NU's traditional base (Dhofier, 1982; van Bruinessen, 2018) or its political engagement (Fealy, G. & Barton, 1996), few studies have explored in depth how trans-regional Islamic discourses – mediated through education, networks, and digital flows – are restructuring NU's theological production, institutional behaviour, and cultural capital.

This study makes a significant contribution to the expanding body of literature on Islamic knowledge creation in the Global South (Khattak et al., 2024). Specifically, it highlights the manner in which Indonesian religious actors selectively appropriate, reinterpret, and negotiate foreign Islamic epistemes. The present study also offers a framework for the analysis of both continuity and change within traditional Islamic movements in the age of globalisation. The article posits that the modern-traditional character of NU is not an ideological compromise, but rather a strategic rearticulation of tradition in response to transnational pressures and epistemological pluralism (Eickelman, D. F. & Piscatori, 2004; Mandaville, 2010).

Ultimately, this article responds to a gap in the scholarship on Indonesian Islam by focusing on more than just the organisational politics of NU. In addition, it looks at the cognitive and ideological transformations triggered by trans-regional engagement. This approach provides insight into one of the most influential Islamic organisations in the world navigating its centennial moment. Rather than undergoing a rupture, the organisation has undergone an adaptive reimagining of tradition.

## **Literature Review**

### **Traditionalism and Pesantren-Based Islam**

Classical conceptions of NU frequently position it within the binary framework of traditionalism versus modernism, a framework that was popularised by Clifford Geertz (1960) in *The Religion of Java*. Geertz's typology of *abangan*, *santri* and *priyayi* provided a sociocultural model that correlated NU with the traditionalist *santri* class, characterised by *pesantren*, rural religiosity and syncretic Islam. Further studies have served to reinforce this perspective, depicting NU as the custodian of classical Islamic texts (*turāth*) and Javanese traditions. The following essay will provide a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature on the subject (Wahid, 2022).

Nevertheless, this essentialist reading of traditionalism has been the subject of increasing critique. It is evident that scholars such as Bruinessen (1994, 2013) and Zulkifli (2013) have underscored the heterogeneity and internal discord within NU, particularly the discord between *pesantren* orthodoxy and reformist impulses. The extant literature suggests that traditionalism within NU has never been static, but rather has always been subject to negotiation with broader theological, political and social changes (Zulkifli, 2013).

## **Islam Nusantara and the Localization of Religious Authority**

In contemporary academic discourse, particular attention has been directed towards the rise of the Islam Nusantara paradigm, which has been defined as both a discursive and ideological agenda. This paradigm has emerged as a means to affirm NU's cultural heritage whilst engaging meaningfully with global Islam. Evidently, scholars such as Fealy (2016) and Arifianto (2019) have analysed the manner in which Islam Nusantara functions as both a theological framework and a political strategy. This has resulted in NU countering Salafi-Wahhabi influence while asserting an inclusive, pluralistic vision of Islam (Arifianto, 2020).

This study shows the discursive flexibility of NU, though it remains descriptive, focusing on institutional narratives and elite statements without conducting a thorough analysis of how trans-regional experiences and epistemological pluralism shape NU's evolving traditionalism on the ground.

## **Transnational Islamic Flows and Knowledge Networks**

The emerging corpus of literature on transnational Islam has explored the impact of global religious exchanges on local Islamic institutions. It is evident that scholars such as Mandaville (2007) and Bano (2012) have highlighted the role of transnational education, migration, and digital platforms in transforming religious authority and piety. In Indonesia, this trend becoming increasingly evident among intellectuals affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) who have studied abroad and returned with a blend of global perspectives. Wahid (2022) presents the argument that the emergence of "cosmopolitan ulama" within NU signals a shift in the locus of authority from senior kiai to younger intellectual elites who combine pesantren legitimacy with global academic capital.

Despite the extensive analyses conducted, a significant gap remains in terms of establishing a correlation between the trans-regional educational trajectories of NU cadres and the internal transformation of NU's traditionalism. The majority of extant studies have focused either on institutional-political dynamics or on localised religious practices. However, there has been a dearth of research exploring how transnational epistemologies are negotiated within the modern-traditional character of NU (Muchsith, 2006).

This article contributes to filling this gap. Firstly, the investigation will be conducted into how global educational experiences shape NU's epistemic orientations. Secondly, the focus will be on the analysis of trans-regional ideational flows and their influence on the construction of modern-traditionalism within NU. Thirdly, the conceptualisation of NU not merely as a traditionalist institution, but as an epistemic community in transition, situated at the intersection of local heritage and global Islamic discourses.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Hybrid Islamic Epistemologies: Between Continuity and Adaptation**

The concept of epistemological hybridity, which emphasises the manner in which Islamic actors function within the context of converging domains of inherited tradition (turāth) and contemporary global discourses, occupies a pivotal position within this theoretical framework. It is evident that scholars such as Mandaville (2007) and Eickelman & Piscatori (2004) have emphasised the concept of "deterritorialisation" in relation to Islamic authority. This concept refers to the transition whereby the sources of religious legitimacy transcend traditional local or national boundaries. Instead, these phenomena are shaped by transnational flows of ideas,

Within the context of NU, this hybridity is manifested in the capacity of pesantren-based scholars to uphold classical Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh, taṣawwuf, 'aqīdah) while concurrently engaging with contemporary concepts such as democracy, pluralism, and human rights. Contrary to the notion of tradition being displaced, this engagement results in its enrichment, giving rise to a novel mode of religious thought that is characterised by a blend of modernity and tradition, as opposed to adhering strictly to either modernist or traditionalist ideologies (Niam, 2017).

### **Transnational Religious Capital and the Making of Cosmopolitan Ulama**

The study employs the concept of transnational religious capital (Levitt, 2001; Masooda, 2012) to analyse how educational and ideological mobility affects religious leadership, building upon the notion of hybrid epistemologies. NU cadres who have pursued higher education in foreign institutions, notably in Middle Eastern or Western universities, function not merely as recipients of foreign knowledge but also as cultural brokers who reinterpret global Islamic thought within the idiom of Islam Nusantara.

These actors accumulate not only degrees but also symbolic capital, which they subsequently reinvest into local religious contexts upon their return. The influence of these actors is particularly evident in the context of reformist discourses within NU's youth organisations, publications, and policy positions. These individuals embody a distinctive form of traditionalism that combines a deep commitment to pesantren tradition with a capacity to respond to global trends (Fadeli, 2007).

### **Islam Nusantara as a Dynamic Cultural Negotiation**

The third axis of the framework situates the analysis within the discourse of Islam Nusantara, a term that encapsulates NU's commitment to a culturally grounded, theologically valid expression of Islam. The concept of Islam Nusantara is not merely a traditional or religious expression; within this discourse, it is positioned as a space of cultural negotiation in response to both internal contestations, such as Salafi purism, and external pressures, including globalisation and secularism.

This perspective is further elaborated upon by scholars such as Feener (2007) and Bruinessen (2013), who argue that Indonesian Islam, particularly as institutionalised within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), historically has embodied a "vernacular cosmopolitanism." This concept posits that the local and global dimensions should not be regarded as mutually exclusive entities, but rather as inherently interconnected components of a unified whole. The concept of Islam Nusantara functions as both a boundary and a bridge, thus maintaining continuity with the archipelago's Islamic heritage while simultaneously opening pathways for ethical innovation and social reform, including on issues such as gender, interfaith coexistence, and democratic participation.

### **Methods**

The study adopts a qualitative case approach within the interpretive-constructivist paradigm with the aim of exploring the lived experiences and intellectual engagements of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) actors as they mediate trans-regional Islamic influences. The case study design facilitates in-depth exploration of social meanings, institutional practices, and individual interpretations situated in historical and contemporary contexts (Stake, 2005). Adhering to the interpretive tradition, this methodology underscores the collaborative construction of meaning between

researchers and informants, aligning with the epistemological assumptions of qualitative inquiry in Islamic studies (Salvatore, A. & Eickelman, 2004).

In order to ensure triangulation, depth and contextual reliability, two primary data collection methods were employed: documentary research and in-depth interviews. This process entailed a meticulous examination of both primary and secondary sources, encompassing organisational archives of NU, historical records, fatwas (legal opinions), official NU publications, speeches, and public statements of prominent NU leaders. It also included previous academic studies on NU's theological development and political engagement. These documents provided essential insights into the genealogy of NU's traditionalism, its historical encounters with reformist and transnational Islamic movements, and its evolving discourse in response to globalisation (Bruinessen, 1999; Fealy, G. & Barton, 1996; Kersten, 2015). Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted to provide additional insights. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 informants, including senior kiai, Islamic intellectuals, globally trained NU cadres, and researchers affiliated with NU institutions such as the Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), PBNU, and affiliated universities. The interviews explored the participants' interpretive frameworks, experiences abroad, educational trajectories, and perceptions of institutional change. This methodological approach facilitated the unpacking of subjective meanings and internal contestations surrounding NU's identity and role within both national and global Islamic contexts (Ritchie, J. & Lewis, 2003). In addition, the interviews demonstrated how actors balance fidelity to tradition and openness to modern epistemologies, thereby embodying Asad's (2003) concept of the "discursive tradition."

### **Analytical Framework**

The analysis of the data was conducted through a thematic approach, employing an inductive-deductive coding process. This process was guided by the following analytical categories: Firstly, the discourse of Traditionalism, examining the continuity of classical Sunni thought and the role of pesantren epistemology. Secondly, Trans-regional Exposure, it is imperative to analyse the influence of international Islamic education and transnational networks on non-state actors. Thirdly, the Modernist Tendencies should be considered. In order to identify shifts in intellectual orientation, methodological reasoning, and institutional reform, this study will utilise a range of relevant research methodologies. Fourthly, Institutional Transformation to analyse how NU adapts its organisational structure and discourse in response to evolving socio-political and religious environments.

A methodological approach involving thematic triangulation of documents and interviews was adopted to ensure internal validity. Additionally, prolonged engagement and iterative data review were employed to enhance credibility and transferability. The approach under discussion aligns with the calls for context-sensitive methodologies in Islamic studies that foreground actor agency and institutional hybridity (Bayat & Herrera, 2010; Mandaville, 2010). This methodology combines documentary and ethnographic data to provide a robust framework for analysis. It explores how NU, a traditionally Islamic movement, rearticulates its identity and authority in the context of global Islamic movements. The analysis examines the movement's ability to navigate the tension between traditional values and the demands of modernity.

## **Finding and Discussion**

### **The Theological Foundations of NU's Traditionalism: Upholding Transregional Orthodoxy**

According to analysts, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an organisation originating from a conventional Islamic tradition, has undergone a gradual transformation into a modernist institution. Nevertheless, such assertions are founded upon perilously unstable analytical foundations. A thorough investigation encompassing historical, sociological and empirical factors indicates that NU has consistently maintained its traditionalist identity. This renders the continued classification of NU as a traditionalist Islamic organisation both methodologically and conceptually sound.

In order to achieve a more profound comprehension of the identity of NU, it is essential to engage with its foundational sources, which include the organisation's Statutes, bylaws, emblem, and the historical rationale for its establishment. The statutes thus embody the core organisational decisions of the institution, while the symbol serves as a visual distillation of its mission and values. The historical context of NU's formation provides a compelling justification for its sustained existence and offers essential insights into its ideology (Staquf, Yahya Cholil, 2022).

The establishment of NU was shaped by both national and transregional developments, especially tensions between Islamic modernists and traditionalists. Firstly, prior to the establishment of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Islamic world experienced a widespread wave of reformist fervour, which was spearheaded by Muhammad Abduh. The dissemination of his ideas across the Hijaz is particularly significant, as it was in this region that many Indonesian santri pursued religious education (Peacock, 1975). Abduh's reformist agenda comprised the following elements: The objective of this study is to purify Islam from non-Islamic theological and ritual practices. The third issue pertains to the necessity of implementing reforms in Islamic education, with a particular focus on its implementation at the university level. The reinterpretation of Islamic doctrine in the context of modernity, with a focus on addressing the challenges posed by contemporary challenges. A fundamental aspect of Abduh mission was the call to transcend conventional madhhab affiliations and to critically re-evaluate Sufi (tarīqa) practices (Noer, 1980; Tanja, 1991). While his ideas found a resonance with certain segments of the Muslim intelligentsia, they also resulted in a considerable level of alienation among many traditionalists.

Secondly, the capture of the Hijaz by Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in late 1924 introduced two transformative policies: (1). The proposal entails the revitalisation of the Islamic Caliphate, which is to be realised through the orchestration of the Caliphate Congress in Mecca. The imposition of Wahhabism as the sole Islamic orthodoxy, thereby threatening to outlaw other madhhab traditions and various long-established religious practices under the premise of eradicating *bid'ah* and *shirk*.

These changes elicited concern from traditionalist scholars across the Muslim world, including in the Indonesian archipelago. While some returning scholars from Hijaz, such as K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, founded Muhammadiyah reformist movements in 1912, another scholar, K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari, adopted a more selective approach. While they endorsed the reformist spirit, they also rejected the modernist repudiation of madhhab adherence and Sufi traditions. According Hasyim Asy'ari and his contemporaries, the classical madhhab framework was indispensable for the interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Furthermore, they acknowledged the spiritual value of

specific *ṭarīqa* practices, though with a degree of caution (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020).

The divergence between the traditionalists and the modernists was most pronounced during two major international conferences in 1925 and 1926, namely the Fourth and Fifth Al-Islam Congresses. These conferences were held in the cities of Yogyakarta and Bandung, respectively. Delegates such as K.H. Mas Mansur (Muhammadiyah) and K.H. Abdul Wahab Hasbullah (representing *pesantren* interests) were nominated. Nevertheless, Wahab's removal on procedural grounds — ostensibly due to his apparent lack of organisational affiliation — served to obscure more profound ideological rifts, particularly with regard to responses to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi policies. While modernists exhibited a predominantly affirmative stance, the *pesantren* camp exhibited staunch opposition (Zarkasyi, 2008).

In response, traditionalist leaders convened independently on January 31, 1926, formulating two critical resolutions: (1). The dispatch of a delegation to the Saudi monarch is hereby proposed, with the objective of urging the preservation of *madhhab* diversity and the facilitation of pilgrimage. The establishment of the *Jam'iyyah Ulama*, which would subsequently become known as the *Komite Hijaz*, represented the immediate precursor to *Nahdlatul Ulama*. This fundamental episode highlights that NU's emergence was a direct response to global Islamic transformations and a defence of the *madhhab*-based, traditionalist doctrine (Pengurus Wilayah NU Jawa Timur, n.d.).

The foundational dynamics of NU exerted a profound influence on both its theological framework and its social commitments. NU explicitly identifies with the doctrinal orientation of *Ahlussunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (Aswaja), a term that became prominent among *khalaf* scholars.

It is evident that scholars of the *Khalaf* school participated proactively in the contemporary philosophical and theological discourses of their era. They sought to interpret *mutashābih* verses (ambiguous Qur'anic passages) through rational means in order to maintain the doctrine of divine transcendence, especially in debates with adherents of other faiths and rationalist movements. *Aswaja* emerged as a middle way, defined in opposition to both *Shi'ism* (in its general sense) and *Mu'tazilism* (in its more specific theological articulation).

The theological doctrine of the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) is predominantly influenced by the teachings of the *Ash'arite* and *Māturīdī madhhabs*. These traditions reject the doctrine of *Mu'tazilism*, which exalted reason above divine revelation, and affirm the doctrine of divine omnipotence while maintaining a role for human agency. In contradistinction to the *Jabariyyah* (who deny human free will) and the *Qadariyyah* (who deny divine control), *Ash'arism* posits a middle ground: human actions result from a synthesis of divine decree (*qadar*) and human effort (*kasb*). (2). The *Ash'arites*, in opposition to the *Mu'tazilite* assertion that God is "obligated" to act in a manner consistent with human justice, uphold the notion that His justice is not constrained by human rationality. (3). The notion of reason is acknowledged as a means to comprehend divine revelation. However, it is invariably subordinated to the authority of such revelations.

Although *Ash'arism* is closely associated with the *Shafi'i* and *Maliki madhhabs*, *Māturīdism* aligns more closely with the *Hanafi* school. These theological legacies, which are deeply rooted in transregional Islamic discourse, have been appropriated and adapted by NU scholars for the Indonesian context (Subhani, 1997).

In the context of *ubūdiyyah* (ritual practice), the NU follows one of the four Sunni *madhhabs*—*Shafi'i*, *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, or *Hanbali*—depending on the prevailing local context and historical

lineage. This commitment is rooted in the belief that legal reasoning (ijtihād) constitutes a specialised task, necessitating profound expertise. For the general public, taqlīd—the adherence to the pronouncements of qualified mujtahid scholars—remains both valid and necessary.

In the context of tasawwuf, NU is distinguished by its adherence to the traditions of al-Junayd al-Baghdādī and al-Ghazālī, thereby exemplifying a harmonious balance between mystical spirituality and Sharia-based orthodoxy. In this context, NU's has been observed to resist both the antinomian excesses frequently associated with esoteric sects and the modernist dismissal of Sufism as bid'ah (Assyaukanie, 2013).

The religious vision of the organisation is grounded in the traditional Sunni synthesis, as outlined in the doctrinal triad of 'aqīdah, ubūdiyyah, and ṭarīqah. Accordingly, its foundational character is not a residual artefact of the past, but rather an actively maintained identity that serves to reconcile local Islamic culture with enduring transregional traditions.

The organisation has experienced significant growth in its membership, increasing from approximately 40 million in 2013 to over 95 million by 2021 (Fealy, G & Bush, 2022). This growth has led to its emergence as the largest Islamic organisation globally. A substantial proportion of NU's constituents – 42.2%, to be precise – have only completed primary schooling, while a meagre 11.8% have attained tertiary education. This is all the more significant when one considers that the university is historically rooted in rural communities, where access to formal education is limited. In response, NU has intensified its commitment to human resource development through educational institutions such as Ma'arif NU and higher education initiatives, reflecting a broader transformation towards intellectual and organisational modernity (van Bruinessen, 2013).

A significant development occurred at the 29th NU Congress in Cipasung in 1994, where scholars placed emphasis on the imperative of strengthening scholarly leadership within NU while preserving cultural continuity. This development subsequently led to the establishment of ISNU (Ikatan Sarjana Nahdlatul Ulama), an organisation that initiated various programmes, including leadership training, academic advancement (particularly in postgraduate studies), and capacity building. These efforts have resulted in the cultivation of a new generation of intellectually trained NU cadres, who demonstrate an integration of traditional Islamic values with contemporary academic methodologies and digital fluency (Ismail, 2011).

This modernisation is particularly evident in NU's use of digital da'wah, utilising platforms such as NU Online, Aswaja TV, and social media to disseminate Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah teachings. Rather than discarding tradition altogether, NU reframes it as a living manhaj (methodology) as opposed to a static legal code (Mahfudz, 1994). This methodological flexibility is reflected in NU's epistemological stance, which employs both naqli (revealed text) and 'aqli (rational inquiry), balancing taqlid and ijtihad, and preserving local culture while welcoming progressive values.

A hallmark of this dynamic engagement is Bahtsul Masail, NU's institutional forum for collective legal reasoning. Since the establishment of NU, these forums – frequently held at national congresses – have deliberated on contemporary issues, including in vitro fertilisation (1981), genetic engineering (1997), and national health insurance (Mudzhar, 2000). These discourses showcase NU's capacity to engage theologically with technological and ethical dilemmas, thereby reinforcing its identity as an institution that combines traditionalist values with modernist sensibilities.

At times, this transformation has sparked tensions between generational interpretations, particularly the emergence of liberal Islamic discourses among younger NU scholars, which challenge but also enrich the pluralistic character of NU's religious reasoning (Azra, 2022). Rather than a linear shift from traditionalism to modernism, NU represents a hybrid epistemology, where classical jurisprudence and contextual responsiveness co-exist in productive tension.

### **Local Religious Tradition and Symbolic Continuity in NU: Wali Sanga Da'wah**

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is an organisation that embodies the traditionalist madhhab orientation of global Islam. In addition, it is involved with the indigenous religious culture of the Indonesian archipelago. This synthesis is most evident in NU's appropriation of the da'wah model pioneered by the Wali Sanga, the revered nine saints who played a foundational role in Islamizing Java during the 15th century. The approach adopted was evolutionary rather than revolutionary in nature. Rather than dismantling existing cultural forms, Islamic values were infused into local traditions, facilitating a painless yet enduring transformation of the religious landscape (Azra, 2004; Woodward, 2011).

This inclusive and adaptive form of da'wah gave rise to an archipelagic Islamic civilisation marked by rich communal practices. Within the context of the Nahdliyyin, practices including dzibaan, berjanjen, manaqiban, yasinan, and tahlilan coalesce to constitute a living religious tradition, melding devotional ritual with local custom. These ceremonies, including the pitonan, wetonan, talqinan, and commemorative events such as haul, nyekar, and nyadran, have been identified as crucial elements in the reinforcement of social cohesion and spiritual memory (Bruinessen, 1999; Howell, 2001). These practices, frequently disdained as syncretic by modernists, are esteemed by NU as conduits of divine remembrance, moral instruction, and cultural continuity. NU's model is predicated on a doctrine of da'wah. It is an invitation extended without derision, an offer of nurturance without condemnation, and a seeking of healing rather than wounding – a philosophy that is rooted in compassion (rahmah) and contextual sensitivity (Feener, 2014).

This commitment to tradition, both theological and cultural, is further encoded in NU's organisational symbol. The globe at the centre of the symbol is indicative of NU's embeddedness in global Islamic discourse, while the map of the Indonesian archipelago serves to affirm its national rootedness. The representation of the Asmaul Husna and the unity of believers under divine attributes is symbolised by the knotted rope surrounding the globe, which comprises 99 strands. The presence of nine stars, which represent the Prophet Muhammad, the four Khulafā' al-Rāshidīn, and the four Sunni madhhabs, also serves to pay homage to the Wali Sanga, thus creating a link between cosmological, theological, and local-symbolic layers (Sitompul, 1989). The symbol's inscription, "Nahdlatul Ulama", translating to "revival of the scholars", encapsulates the organisation's mission, which is to reinvigorate Islamic scholarship that is firmly anchored in the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah (Aswaja) traditions, whilst demonstrating unwavering commitment to the preservation and enrichment of the local cultural heritage. Through this emblematic theology, NU asserts a threefold identity: as inheritor of prophetic legacy, adherent of transregional orthodoxy (via adherence to the four madhhabs), and preserver of local Islamic heritage.

This unique synthesis of traditionalist theology, which is simultaneously transregional and hyperlocal, is the foundation of NU's enduring popularity across Indonesia. By maintaining a moderate (tawassuth), inclusive, and contextual religious posture, NU has successfully

cultivated the largest Islamic support base in Southeast Asia. During a period of increasing religious rigidity, the approach adopted by NU provides a compelling model of continuity through cultural negotiation and theological pluralism (van Bruinessen, 2013).

### **Rethinking Traditionalism: Trans-regional Roots in NU's Early Foundations.**

The prevailing narrative that positions Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a parochial and locally grounded traditionalist movement is challenged by this study, which affirms that NU's ideological genealogy has always been trans-regional. An examination of historical records indicates that numerous NU founders, including Hasyim Asy'ari, were profoundly involved in a comprehensive epistemic network that encompassed the Hijaz, Hadhramaut, India, and Egypt (Bruinessen, 1999; Feener, 2014). The intellectual legacy of the ulama of the Haramayn and the translocal networks of santri mobility formed the early doctrinal and methodological contours of NU, suggesting that its "traditionalism" was never isolated but dialogically constituted within a broader Muslim cosmopolis (Azra, 2004; van Bruinessen, 2013).

This finding calls into question the binary framework that dichotomises "traditional" and "modern" Islam in Indonesia. Rather than representing a fixed traditionalist bloc, NU emerged as a hybrid formation, rooted in turats (Islamic heritage) yet responsive to transregional currents of reform and adaptation. In accordance with the assertions put forth by scholars such as Mandaville (2013) and Bayat (2007), Islamic movements on a global scale frequently exhibit a "post-traditional" character. This post-traditional orientation pertains to a reinterpretation of traditional sources through the lens of contemporary idioms, a pattern that is manifestly evident in NU's nascent institutional logic.

### **Globalization and Technological Mediation of Trans-regional Islamic Discourses.**

The second finding emphasises the intensification of trans-regional influence through globalisation and digital connectivity. The expansion of digital Islamic public spheres has enabled NU scholars and activists to engage more robustly with global discourses on Islam, democracy, pluralism, and human rights (Abaza, 2004; Eickelman, D. F. & Anderson, 2003). The facilitation of such interactions is enabled by a variety of digital platforms, including prominent content aggregation sites such as YouTube, specialized online databases of fatwas, and webinars that transcend national boundaries. These digital conduits permit an unparalleled exchange of ideas between the global Islamic intellectual centers and the constituencies of the North-Western United States.

This discursive mobility has also generated selective adaptations of global Islamic reformist and revivalist themes, often reframed through NU's epistemic idioms. For instance, discourses pertaining to maqasid al-shariah, gender justice, and Islamic constitutionalism have garnered significant traction within the NU milieu, articulated by both traditionalist and progressive NU cadres (Bush, 2008; Kloos, 2019). This recontextualisation process serves as an illustration of Appadurai (1996) terms "vernacular globalization," whereby global ideational flows are domesticated and transformed within the confines of local religious frameworks.

Furthermore, the organisational structure of NU has responded by institutionalising new platforms such as institutions such as LBM (Lembaga Bahtsul Masail) and RMI (Rabithah Ma'ahid Islamiyah) to mediate between global Islamic scholarship and pesantren-based authority. This observation signposts a dynamic negotiation process as opposed to a rupture between tradition and modernity; a notion that is in alignment with Giddens' (1990) conceptualization of modernity as a reflexive, as opposed to linear, phenomenon.

## **The Role of Globally Educated Cadres in Shaping Ideological Transformation**

The most significant dimension that has been identified is the emergence of a globally educated elite within NU who function as intermediaries between the traditional pesantren epistemologies and global Islamic thought. A significant proportion of these individuals have obtained advanced academic qualifications from prestigious institutions such as Al-Azhar, McGill, Leiden, and SOAS, thereby acquiring the capacity to internalise and reinterpret a wide array of Islamic discourses (Kersten, 2015; Müller, 2022).

These actors are not merely transmitters but active producers of hybrid Islamic knowledge. The aforementioned scholars are engaged in *ijtihad jadid*, or new reasoning, and they apply post-colonial critiques to Islamic jurisprudence. In addition, they advocate a pluralist *maqasid*-based approach to the subject, often using NU platforms to promote these ideas. Their positioning within both religious and academic authority structures affords them the capacity to influence NU's ideological orientation while preserving legitimacy within its traditionalist base.

This finding is consistent with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital, suggesting that these cadres possess both the *habitus* of pesantren and the credentials of global scholarship, thereby enabling them to navigate and reshape the ideological terrain of NU. The result is a nuanced ideological synthesis that simultaneously affirms classical *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* doctrines and articulates a vision of Islam compatible with democratic citizenship and global pluralism (Hasan, 2021; Othman, 2006).

The synthesis between modern and traditional elements within NU is not a rupture but an organic evolution – a form of "continuity through change." The findings confirm that trans-regional influences do not erode NU's traditionalism, but rather reconfigure it to meet new historical exigencies. This lends support to the hypothesis that the identity of NU should be understood not through static labels but through a dynamic framework of ideological hybridity and reflexive adaptation (Hefner, 2011).

In the context of Indonesia's ongoing ideological polarisation in the post-2012 political climate, the NU's hybrid character has the potential to act as a stabilising force, offering a model of religious authority that is both rooted and responsive. It is recommended that future research examine the impact of this hybridisation on grassroots religious practices and the political engagement of NU constituencies.

### **Conclusion**

The present study seeks to challenge the conventional depiction of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a static bastion of rural traditionalism. Employing a critical juncture framework in conjunction with an analysis of trans-regional dynamics, the research reveals that NU's ideological evolution is inextricably linked to global Islamic thought.

Three significant findings emphasise this transformation. Firstly, it is evident that NU's foundational traditionalism is not insular but is rooted in trans-regional Islamic scholarship, reflecting a historical openness to diverse intellectual currents. Secondly, the acceleration of globalisation and technological advancements has facilitated the infusion of external influences, enabling NU to engage with and adapt global Islamic discourses. Thirdly, the presence of nationally educated NU cadres has been instrumental in the embedding of trans-regional perspectives within the organisation's leadership and intellectual frameworks, thereby fostering a synthesis that harmonises tradition with modernity.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on Islamic movements by illustrating how traditionalist organisations such as NU can undergo ideological reconfiguration through trans-regional engagements. It offers a nuanced understanding of how Islamic organisations navigate the interplay between preserving traditional values and embracing modern influences, providing insights into the dynamic nature of religious identity in a globalised context.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors record appreciation to colleagues at the Research Centre for Politics - National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia who provided constructive input and suggestions for improving this manuscript. We also gratefully appreciate to everyone who participated in the interview.

### **References**

- Abaza, M. (2004). *The Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping*. Brill.
- Arifianto, A. R. (2020). Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia. *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 8(1), 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2019.10>
- Assyaukanie, L. (2013). Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the 'Conservative Turn.' *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 49(3), 394–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2013.850644>
- Azra, A. (2004). *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern "Ulama" in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. University of Hawai Press. <https://pips.fkip.ulm.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/THE-ORIGINS-OF-ISLAMIC-REFORMISMCover.pdf>
- Azra, A. (2022). *Islamic Reformism in Indonesia*. Routledge.
- Bayat, A., & Herrera, L. (2010). *Being Young and Muslim*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195369212.001.0001>
- Bruinessen, M. van. (1999). *NU: Tradisi, Relasi-relasi Kuasa, dan Pencarian Wacana Baru*. LKiS.
- Buehler, M. (2016). *The Politics of Shari'a Law*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316417843>
- Bush, R. (2008). Regional sharia regulations in Indonesia: Anomaly or symptom? *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, 1(March 2008), 174–191. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812308528-014>
- Dhofier, Z. (1982). *The Pesantren Tradition: The Role of the Kyai in the Maintenance of Traditional Islam in Java*. Arizona State University.
- Eickelman, D. F. & Anderson, J. W. (2003). *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*. Indiana University Press.
- Eickelman, D. F. & Piscatori, J. (2004). *Muslim Politics*. Princeton University Press.
- Fadeli, S. & M. S. (2007). *Antologi NU : Sejarah Istilah Amalah Uswah*. Khalista.
- Fealy, G. & Barton, G. (Eds. . (1996). *Nahdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia*. Monash Asia Institute.
- Fealy, G & Bush, R. (2022). Nahdlatul Ulama in the 21st Century: Between Traditionalism and Modernity. *The Muslim World*, 112(3), 311–322.
- Feener, R. M. (2014). Official Religions, State Secularisms, and the Structures of Religious Pluralism. In *Proselytizing and the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Asia* (pp. 1–16). Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4451-18-5\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4451-18-5_1)
- Geertz, C. (2014). *Agama Jawa : Abangan, Santri, Priyayi dalam Kebudayaan Jawa*. Komunitas Bambu.

- Hasan, N. (2021). *Reformasi, Islam, and the Future of Indonesia*. In *Indonesia: The Political Economy of Democracy*. Routledge.
- Hefner, R. W. (2011). *Civil Islam*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400823871>
- Howell, J. D. (2001). Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 60(3), 701–729. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700107>
- Ismail, F. (2011). The Nahdlatul Ulama: Its Early History and Contribution to The Establishment of Indonesian State. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 5(2), 247–282. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2011.5.2.247-282>
- Kersten, C. (2015). *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values*. Hurst & Company.
- Kloos, D. (2019). *Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia*. Princeton University Press.
- Levitt, P. (2001). *Transnational Villagers*. University of California Press.
- Mahfudz, M. A. S. (1994). *Islam dalam Bingkai Keindonesiaan dan Kemanusiaan*. LP3ES.
- Mandaville, P. (2010). *Global Political Islam*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203358511>
- Masooda, B. (2012). *The Rational Believer: Choices and Decisions in the Madrasas of Pakistan*. Cornell University Press.
- Mietzner, M., & Muhtadi, B. (2020). The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 42(1), 58–84. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs42-1c>
- Muchsith, M. A. (2006). *Mengenal Nahdlatul Ulama*. Khalista.
- Mudzhar, M. A. (2000). *Fatwas of the Council of Indonesian Ulama: A Study of Islamic Legal Thought in Indonesia, 1975–1988*. INIS.
- Müller, A. S. (2022). *Islamic Education in Indonesia and the Search for National Identity*. Routledge.
- Niam, K. (2017). Nahdlatul Ulama And The Production of Muslim Intellectuals In The Beginning of 21st Century Indonesia. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 11(2), 351. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2017.11.2.351-388>
- Nisar Khattak, M., Al-Taie, M. Z., Ahmed, I., & Muhammad, N. (2024). Interplay between servant leadership, leader-member-exchange and perceived organizational support: a moderated mediation model. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, 11(2), 237-261.
- Noer, D. (1980). *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia 1900-1942*. LP3ES.
- Othman, N. (2006). Muslim women and the challenge of Islamic fundamentalism/extremism: An overview of Southeast Asian Muslim women's struggle for human rights and gender equality. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29(4), 339–353. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2006.05.008>
- Peacock, J. L. (1975). *Gerakan Muhammadiyah Memurnikan Ajaran Islam di Indonesia*. Cipta Kreatif. Pengurus Wilayah NU Jawa Timur. (n.d.). *Khittah Nahdhatul Ulama*.
- Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Salvatore, A. & Eickelman, D. F. (2004). *Public Islam and the Common Good*. Brill.
- Sitompul, E. M. (1989). *NU dan Pancasila*. Sinar Harapan.
- Staquf, Yahya Cholil, C. H. T. (2022). The Civilizational Origins of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama and its Humanitarian Islam Movement. *Hudson.Org*. <https://www.hudson.org/node/44724>
- Subhani, J. (1997). *Al-Milal Wan-Nihal : Studi Tematis Mazhab Kalam*. Penerbit Alhadi.
- Tanja, V. (1991). *Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam: Sejarah dan Kedudukannya di Tengah Gerakan-gerakan MusliminPembaharu di Indonesia*. Sinar Harapan.
- van Bruinessen, M. (2013). *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- van Bruinessen, M. (2018). *Indonesian Muslims in a Globalising World: Westernisation, Arabisation and*

- Indigenising Responses. The RSIS Working Paper Series, 311, 1–23.
- Wahid, Z. (2022). Hybrid Religious Authority in the Digital Age: NU and Online Islamic Platforms in Indonesia. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 13(3), 417–439.
- Woodward, M. (2011). Reflections on Java and Islam 1979-2010. *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 49(2), 281–294. <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2011.492.281-294>
- Zarkasyi, H. F. (2008). The Rise of Islamic Religious-Political Movement in Indonesia : The Background, Present Situation and Future. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 2(2), 336. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2008.2.2.336-378>
- Zulkifli. (2013). *The Struggle of the Shi'is in Indonesia*. ANU Press.