



Islam Nusantara as a Counter-Discourse to Transnational Purification

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ABSTRACT

Islam Nusantara is a reflective project that demands critical thinking, open dialogue, and the courage to remap the dynamics of religion in Indonesia in the era of globalisation and transnationalism. This study aims to describe in detail the discourse of Islam Nusantara in the current Indonesian context, including how the term, ideas, and implementation have developed from the local to the national level. This study focuses on conceptual and theoretical analysis through an in-depth literature review and cross-theory integration. The results confirm that the purity of Islam does not lie in rejecting culture, but in the ability to ignite divine values across diverse human realities. Islam Nusantara is a form of intelligent resistance to transnational purification that imprisons Islam in dogma, as well as a cultural project that affirms the sovereignty of Indonesian Muslims' interpretation of their own religion. In its reflective and open form, Islam Nusantara teaches that true piety is born of dialogue, not uniformity, and of wisdom that grows on one's own soil, not blind imitation of the centre of power. Thus, Islam Nusantara is not only a local discourse but a global offer on how religion can remain sacred without losing its humanity.

A. Introduction

The concept of Islam Nusantara emerged as a strategic discourse that not only redefined the meaning of religious diversity in the archipelago's local context but also served as a counter-response to the dominance and pressure of transnational purification discourses that promoted the idealisation of a uniform global Islam (Schaefer, 2021). The discourse of Islam Nusantara emerged in the context of Indonesia's unique socio-cultural plurality, where religious practices are not merely understood in a textual or formal sense, but are also embedded in local traditions, cultural acculturation, and a long history of dialogue between Islam and the diverse communities of this archipelago. Islam Nusantara is not merely a normative phenomenon or rhetoric, but rather a response to the challenges posed by transnational Islamic movements that often demand doctrinal homogeneity and disregard local plurality, which, in much of the literature, is associated with the project of purifying sects and imposing a single style of pure Islam (Marheni, 2023; Schmidt, 2021).

Transnational Islamic movements that cross national borders and reject the nation-state framework bring with them a spirit of exclusivism, radical ideology and sometimes violence that is contrary to the spirit of moderation in Indonesia (Karimullah & Sugitanata, 2025; Prianto et al., 2024). Transnational Islam in Indonesia is not only about cross-border networks, but also about ideas, institutions, and concepts that transcend the local context and disregard local wisdom (Bazzi, 2025). Meanwhile, large organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) are caught in the vortex of transnational ideologies that challenge the archipelago's unique religious framework. Foreign ideas entering through social movements, education, and publication networks have the potential to shift religious understandings institutionalised in local traditions. This opens up space for the discourse of Islam Nusantara as an alternative that prioritises accommodation between Islamic doctrine and the local Indonesian context.

Islam Nusantara is understood not only as the existence of Islam within the archipelago, but also as a way of thinking that reflectively emphasises an interpretation of Islam in the language of the archipelago, drawing on its cultural values but with authentic Islamic content (Thahir, 2021). Similarly, in methodological studies focusing on responses to khilafatism and radicalism, it was found that Islam Nusantara is driven by two main strategies, namely the contextual adaptation of Islam to local culture while maintaining the classical orthodoxy of *Ahlussunnah wa al-Jamaah*. Islam Nusantara also has the potential to become a counter-narrative to the clash of civilisations because it offers a richer, more pluralistic and locally-based perspective than the often-touted dichotomy between the West and Islam (Setiawan & Stevanus, 2023).

From a theological and interpretative perspective, a study comparing Nusantara scholars and transnational scholars concluded that there is a different theological paradigm between these two groups: local scholars reinforce tradition, cultural wisdom, and the local social context, while transnational scholars place greater emphasis on texts, the globalisation of doctrine, and the purification of teachings (Karimullah, 2022; Machasin, 2017). The study shows the need for integrative efforts to bridge the tension between the two. In a practical context, Parawati's (2024) research in Terban Village (NU community) examines how to strengthen Islam Nusantara from the NU community's cultural perspective in the face of transnational Islamic movements. The results show that NU culture, with its network of religious institutions, autonomous organisations, and external bodies (such as IPNU, Muslimat, Ansor), plays a vital role in maintaining the identity of Islam Nusantara and countering transnational influences.

The discourse of Islam Nusantara actually has significant conceptual and empirical depth. However, although many studies have been conducted, there is still a gap in integrating an understanding of Islam Nusantara as a comprehensive counter-discourse to the phenomenon of transnational purification, and in measuring how this discourse is carried out,

internalised, and practised systematically in the local context. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap with the primary objective of clarifying the essence of Islam Nusantara as a reflective alternative to transnational purification, exploring in depth how this discourse is constructed, how it is applied in local religious practices, and how it functions as a buffer against the tide of doctrinal purification that often negates the local wisdom of the archipelago.

B. Method

This study does not use interview methods or empirical fieldwork; instead, it focuses on conceptual and theoretical analysis through an in-depth literature review and cross-theory integration. This methodological choice is based on the assumption that the discourse of Islam Nusantara as a counterpoint to transnational purification cannot be sufficiently understood through individual experiences or actor testimonies, but must be analysed as a discursive construction operating in the realm of ideas, knowledge, and power. Therefore, this study positions Islam Nusantara not only as a socio-religious phenomenon but also as an epistemic arena in which meanings of purity, orthodoxy, and Islamic identity are contested. This approach allows for an exploration of how Islam Nusantara establishes its religious and cultural legitimacy in the face of transnational discourses that often claim universal authority over the interpretation of Islam.

To explain this comprehensively, this study integrates three main theoretical frameworks, namely Michel Foucault's discourse theory (Bigoni et al., 2024), Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory, and Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory. Through Foucault, Islam Nusantara is understood as a regime of knowledge that negotiates religious truth authority. Through Bourdieu, it is seen as a product of social habitus born from historical interactions between local culture and religious power structures. Through a postcolonial perspective, it is understood as a form of epistemic resistance to the hegemony of purification that places local Islam as inferior.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Islam Nusantara as a Cultural Discourse Against Dogmatic Purification

Islam Nusantara is one of the most interesting intellectual and cultural phenomena in contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse because it functions not only as a theological concept but also as a political discourse of knowledge that consciously positions itself as an antithesis to dogmatic purification driven by transnational Islamic movements, particularly Salafism and Wahhabism (Esfandiar, 2022; Mardika & Ramli, 2024). Both movements are characterised by a spirit of purification that rejects all forms of acculturation and adaptation to local cultures, claiming to represent an authentic and universal Islam.

Islam Nusantara presents itself as a counter-discourse that not only defends the existence of localities, but also rearticulates the relationship between religion and culture within a reflective, historical and contextual Islamic framework (Nursita, 2023). This idea rejects the view that good Islam is Islam that is sterile from cultural influences, and instead asserts that local culture is not a deviation, but rather an instrument that brings Islamic teachings to life in a human way. In this way of thinking, Islam Nusantara presents itself as a form of cultural resistance that is neither ideologically frontal nor subtle, but conceptual, through the rearticulation of the meanings of purity, piety, and religious authority.

Transnational Islam, such as Salafism and Wahhabism, builds religious hegemony by claiming sole authority over Islamic truth, dismissing other forms of Islam that are considered heretical or tainted by syncretism (Sheikh, 2025). Their discourse works with a knowledge mechanism that produces a regime of truth, in which specific interpretations are legitimised as the only valid ones. Within this framework, Islam Nusantara challenges this regime by reproducing an alternative knowledge of Islam rooted in the archipelago's history and local

culture. It does not seek to compete dogmatically, but rather by shifting the locus of truth authority from Arab-centricity to the local context.

If, in the logic of transnational purification, Islam is considered pure when it is stripped of all cultural elements, then in the view of Islam Nusantara, purity is realised in Islam's ability to adapt without losing its universal spirit. Here we see a fundamental epistemological difference. Salafism and Wahhabism assume that Islam has an ideal form that must be restored. At the same time, Islam Nusantara is based on the view that Islam is always historical, constantly living in a particular social context. This view aligns with the principle of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in classical interpretation, which emphasises that the verses of the Qur'an were revealed in a specific social and cultural context.

Islam Nusantara extends this principle to social life, making it the foundation for interpreting Islam culturally. In this logic, rituals such as *tahlilan*, *selamatan*, *maulid*, or *ziarah kubur* are not forms of deviation, but rather manifestations of the internalisation of Islamic values into the cultural structure of the archipelago, which emphasises cooperation, social harmony, and respect for ancestors. From this perspective, Islam Nusantara shows that the local is not the antithesis of the universal, but rather the actualisation of Islam's universal values.

Islam Nusantara was not born in a vacuum, but rather emerged from a long historical process that instilled Islamic values into society's social disposition. The religiosity of the Nusantara community was formed through *pesantren* education, Sufi practices, customs, and social networks that mediated the relationship between religion and daily life. Within this framework, resistance to dogmatic purification was not carried out consciously as political resistance, but rather as a result of a social disposition that had internalised Islam as a friendly, open, and tolerant social praxis (Nurizka, Islami, et al., 2025; Wahyudi et al., 2025).

When the Salafi movement arrived with its demands for purification, communities that already had a local Islamic habitus responded not with confrontation, but with reappropriation. They asserted their own version of Islam as the legitimate Islam. This is where Nusantara Islam functions as a field of symbolic power that counters the ideological dominance of transnational Islam. It creates new cultural capital, legitimising contextual and pluralistic ways of practising religion.

In the global knowledge structure, Arab Islam is often placed at the centre of orthodoxy, while local Islam is considered peripheral, deviant, or impure. This narrative actually reproduces the logic of Orientalism, which views non-Arabs as the other. Transnational Islam, which rejects local elements, actually continues this form of epistemic colonialism by making Arab culture the sole standard of Islamic truth. Islam Nusantara rejects this subordination by asserting that Islam born in Indonesia is no less valid than Islam in the Middle East, as both are the result of human interpretation of divine revelation in different social contexts. Every form of cultural identity is the result of hybridisation, not a pure essence. Islam Nusantara affirms hybridity as an epistemic force in which Islam that interacts with local culture does not lose its purity but rather enriches and expands the vitality of Islam itself.

It is this concept that makes Islam Nusantara more than just a cultural adaptation, as it is a creative process that negotiates the universality of Islamic teachings with the particularities of Nusantara culture. In this regard, new forms of Islam have emerged, namely Islam that is aesthetic in art and literature, Islam that is dialogical in politics, Islam that is social in the culture of cooperation, and Islam that is spiritual in the Sufi tradition. All of this confirms that Islam Nusantara is not a weak or compromising form of Islam, but rather a mature form because it can engage with reality. In this position, Islam Nusantara becomes a symbol of resistance against the homogenisation of religious identity imposed by dogmatic purification.

When purification demands uniformity, Islam Nusantara offers diversity; when purification rejects tradition, Islam Nusantara makes it a source of strength; and when purification glorifies textuality, Islam Nusantara emphasises the importance of contextuality.

However, the resistance of Islam Nusantara cannot be separated from the complex field of power. Every discourse always operates within power relations, and power is not always repressive because it is also productive. Islam Nusantara not only survives under the pressure of transnational purification, but also produces new power through the institutionalisation of these ideas in educational institutions, religious social organisations, and even state policies.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has become a key actor in articulating Islam Nusantara as both a religious ideology and a cultural project. Islamic boarding schools have become the locus where this idea is taught and reproduced, while NU's social network functions as a discourse infrastructure that channels local Islamic values into the national public sphere. This resistance is cultural and epistemological rather than militaristic or ideological, because what is being fought for is not political power but the hegemony of meaning (Wiranti et al., 2025). In this way, Islam Nusantara has succeeded in shifting the battlefield from the realm of doctrine to the realm of knowledge.

Islam Nusantara's resistance does not claim to reject the universalism of Islam, but rather rejects hegemonic forms of universalism. Islam Nusantara actually affirms the universality of Islam by rejecting cultural reduction and the standardisation of religious practices. In this view, Islam is not one colour, but a spectrum of values that can adapt to the social and geographical conditions of its followers. The principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* would be meaningless if Islam only recognised one form of piety originating from a particular region. Therefore, Islam Nusantara places locality as an epistemic force that ensures the sustainability of Islam amid changing times. By being rooted in local culture, Islam Nusantara can withstand the tide of ideological globalisation and maintain its relevance in society. This proves that Islam does not lose its purity because it comes into contact with culture; on the contrary, it loses its meaning when it is separated from the social context in which it lives.

The resistance of Islam Nusantara also operates through symbolic internalisation in society's habits. When local rituals such as *slametan* or *tahlilan* are performed, the community is not violating the principle of *tawhid*, but instead articulating Islamic values within the symbolic structure of their own culture. These rituals strengthen social solidarity, reinforce the value of simplicity, and instil spiritual awareness within a communal framework. This shows that the Islam of the Nusantara community is shaped by collective social practices, not individualistic ones as often emphasised in transnational purification.

Islam Nusantara also resists through symbolic and linguistic strategies. It reclaims the term pure Islam, which is often monopolised by puritanical groups, and interprets purity not as separation from culture, but as steadfastness in values. In this view, Islamic purity does not mean a literal return to the past, but rather upholding universal Islamic values in an ever-changing context. Islam Nusantara shifts the focus from what should be imitated to how Islam should be lived. This is a form of epistemic deconstruction of the discourse of purification: not rejecting the text, but rejecting the absolutisation of interpretation.

Islam Nusantara is a project of decolonising religious knowledge. Historically, colonialism colonised not only land, but also minds. The narrative of pure Islam and tainted Islam actually reflects a colonial structure in a new form, where Arabs are at the centre, and others are on the periphery. Islam Nusantara interrupts this structure by asserting that each space has its own spiritual authority. It refuses to be an object of global Islamisation projects and instead positions itself as an active subject in shaping global Islam.

In the global context, the position of Islam Nusantara is becoming increasingly important because it offers a model of peaceful Islam amid rising extremism and polarisation. While parts of the Islamic world are embroiled in conflicts of identity and ideology, Islam Nusantara shows that Islam can coexist with diversity, respect tradition, and still uphold the principles of *tawhid*. Thus, its resistance is not only to preserve local culture, but also to uphold universal human values. Islam Nusantara is proof that Islam does not have to reject modernity

or culture to remain authentic. Instead, by engaging in dialogue with both, Islam can continue to live and give new meaning to civilisation.

Islam Nusantara can be understood as a form of cultural awareness that functions against dogmatic purification without losing its spiritual roots. It teaches that faithfulness in Islam is not measured by how far a person imitates the outward forms of Arabia, but by how deeply they interpret Islamic values in their social reality. In this cultural resistance, Islam Nusantara not only defends tradition, but also proposes a new way of thinking: that true faith is openness to difference, that purity is not synonymous with rigidity, and that religion finds its beauty precisely when it is rooted in real human life. With this foundation, Islam Nusantara is not merely a local discourse but a global contribution to upholding a moderate, reflective, and civilised Islam in a world that continues to be shaken by narrow claims to truth.

2. Negotiation between Universal Islam and Cultural Islam

Islam, as a universal religion, claims to be the truth that transcends geographical, ethnic, and cultural boundaries (Yamamah, 2022). However, throughout its spread, Islam has always undergone adaptation, translation, and reinterpretation in accordance with the social and cultural contexts of the communities in which it took root. In the archipelago, this process gave birth to a distinctive form of Islam, one that not only adheres to orthodox texts and traditions but also engages in dialogue with local cultures, customs, and value systems. This phenomenon gave rise to what is known as Islam Nusantara. This term acknowledges that Islam in Indonesia grew through a creative dialectic between universal revelation and particular local cultures.

Universal Islam has a normative character rooted in sacred texts, such as the Qur'an and Sunnah. Its values are transhistorical, transcending space and time. However, Islam never exists in a vacuum; it always exists in a specific social context that influences how its teachings are understood and practised. This process makes Islam a contextualised religion, in which each society interprets and adapts Islamic teachings to its own culture. Islam in the Middle East, Africa, or Southeast Asia is not identical, even though it originates from the same revelation (Panakkal, 2024). This is where the epistemological differences between universal Islam and cultural Islam find their space for dialogue.

Universal Islam functions as a horizon of values that provides ethical and normative direction, while cultural Islam actualises these values in concrete social life. In the archipelago, the negotiation between universal Islam and cultural Islam unfolded over a long process of convergence among *da'wah*, local traditions, and social structures. Islam did not arrive as a coercive force, but through a process of accommodation, persuasion, and cultural transformation.

The Walisongo and ulama did not spread Islam by eliminating local traditions, but rather by incorporating Islamic values into society's existing symbolic system (Syam & Ilaihi, 2023). *Slametan* ceremonies, pilgrimage traditions, *tahlilan*, *maulid*, and various other ritual expressions are the result of a creative synthesis of Islam and the archipelago's culture. These practices are often misunderstood as forms of *bid'ah* or deviation, when in fact, in the epistemological logic of Islam Nusantara, these traditions are contextual expressions of religion because they bring Islamic values to life in the language and symbols of local culture.

Localisation is a deviation rooted in puritanical epistemology, which views Islamic texts textually and ahistorically (Sebastian & Othman Alkaff, 2024). In this view, Islam is understood as a closed system that has been perfect since the time of the Prophet, so that any form of adaptation is considered a deviation from the purity of the teachings. This perspective not only denies the history of Islam itself, which is full of cultural dynamics, but also rejects the fact that religious interpretation is always contextual.

Islam Nusantara challenges this paradigm by emphasising that Islam's universality lies precisely in its ability to exist across diverse cultural contexts without losing the substance of

its values. When Islam entered Persia, it assimilated into the Greek philosophical tradition; when it arrived in Africa, it encountered mysticism and community traditions; and when it came to the archipelago, it engaged in dialogue with a social system based on harmony, cooperation, and respect for ancestors. All these processes show that Islam is elastic and open to culture, not a religion that rejects diversity of expression.

Dogmatic purification attempts to establish a regime of truth that places a particular interpretation as the only valid one. Universal Islam is taken over by groups that claim authority over the text, dismissing local interpretations that are considered less pure. This is where cultural Islam, such as Islam Nusantara, functions as a counter-discourse that resists such epistemic domination. Islam Nusantara rejects the hegemony of a single interpretation by proposing a plurality of Islamic knowledge rooted in the social experiences of Muslims in various regions. It returns the authority to interpret to communities living in their own contexts, rather than to religious authorities that claim universality without context.

In this sense, Islam Nusantara is a practice of liberating knowledge, as it rejects the monopoly on meaning and opens up space for diverse interpretations. The negotiation between universal Islam and cultural Islam in the archipelago is not an attempt to relativise religion, but rather an epistemological strategy to maintain the continuity of Islam within a pluralistic society. When Islam encounters local traditions such as respect for ancestors or marriage customs, Islam Nusantara does not immediately reject them; instead, it reinterprets them so that Islamic values can be present without disrupting the established social order. This approach is rooted in the awareness that communities cannot be forced to change their entire value system simply for the sake of theological uniformity.

Politically, this negotiation also becomes a form of resistance against the hegemony of transnational discourse that seeks to standardise Islam. Movements such as Salafism and Wahhabism view local Islam as a threat to the purity of religion, thus undertaking a purification project by rejecting cultural symbols. However, these movements often fail to recognise that Islam's universality does not imply uniformity. It is precisely through the diversity of Islamic expressions that Islam's spiritual and intellectual richness can flourish. In this case, Islam Nusantara offers an alternative model: an Islam not trapped in the dichotomy between modernity and traditionalism, between global and local, but rather a reflective and dialogical Islam. By recognising that culture is a medium for expressing faith, Islam Nusantara reaffirms that religious truth cannot be separated from concrete human life.

This epistemological negotiation also reveals a paradigm shift from the dominance of text to a dialectic between text and context. Universal Islam provides fundamental values such as justice, compassion, and humanity, but these values require a social context to be operationalised (Hasan, 2024). For example, the concept of *ukhuwah islamiyah* (brotherhood among Muslims) in Indonesian society has been expanded to include *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national brotherhood) and *ukhuwah insaniyah* (human brotherhood). This shows that Islam Nusantara does not stop at dogma, but moves towards social praxis. In this case, cultural Islam is not a deviation but a genuine manifestation of universal Islamic values in social life.

Apart from being an epistemic negotiation, the meeting between universal Islam and cultural Islam is also a process of identity formation. The Islamic identity of Indonesian society is built through the integration of faith and culture (Burhani, 2025). Islam Nusantara teaches that being a Muslim does not mean one must be Arab; an Indonesian Muslim can express their faith in a manner appropriate to their culture. This eliminates the cultural inferiority complex that often arises as a result of the hegemony of Arabisation. By emphasising Islam with an Indonesian face, Islam Nusantara provides space for Muslims to be themselves without losing their connection to the global Muslim community. From this perspective, Islam Nusantara is not a form of narrow particularism, but a form of spiritual cosmopolitanism, namely the awareness that religiosity can be both local and universal.

The negotiation between universal Islam and cultural Islam in the archipelago shows that religion never ceases to be a project of interpretation. Each generation of Muslims faces new challenges that require a re-reading of religious texts. Islam Nusantara recognises this and makes it an epistemological foundation that spiritual truth is dynamic and contextual. Rejection of cultural adaptation closes the door to *ijtihad* and renders Islam frozen in formalism. Conversely, recognition of localisation opens space for theological and spiritual creativity, enriching Muslims' understanding of their religion. In a global situation marked by radicalism and polarisation, Islam Nusantara presents a model of peaceful, reflective religiosity that values plurality.

The negotiation between universal Islam and cultural Islam is not a form of compromise that weakens religion, but rather an effort to maintain its vitality. Islam that rejects local culture will lose its ability to speak to its own community, while Islam that is immersed in culture without normative values will lose its moral direction. Islam Nusantara seeks to balance the two by maintaining the principles of *tawhid* and *sharia* as universal foundations, while opening itself to culture as a space for the actualisation of divine values (Nurizka, Jamil, et al., 2025; Rembulan et al., 2025). This is a form of social *ijtihad* that is not only important for the Indonesian context but also relevant to the global Islamic world. Islam Nusantara teaches that the universality of Islam does not lie in uniformity of form, but in its vitality to continue to interact, adapt, and foster goodness in every cultural context.

3. Islam Nusantara as a Project of Identity and Cultural Politics

Islam Nusantara emerged not only as a theological product but also as a social, cultural, and political construct with ideological and strategic dimensions. As a project of identity and cultural politics, Islam Nusantara plays a role in two areas at once: first, as a form of articulation of Indonesian Islam rooted in local history, tradition, and culture; second, as a cultural-political strategy that serves to strengthen Indonesia's position on the global stage as a model of moderate, peaceful, and tolerant Islam.

Islam Nusantara not only affirms local differences from transnational Islam but also claims to be a symbol of national identity, namely a form of Islam rooted in Nusantara, open in nature, and rejecting radicalism (Muhammad & Duderija, 2022). However, behind efforts to strengthen moderation and identity, Islam Nusantara also raises controversy, because for some people, it is seen as an attempt to politicise Islam by exploiting religious symbols for the sake of power and ideological legitimacy of the state.

Historically, the emergence of Islam Nusantara cannot be separated from the socio-political context of post-reform Indonesia, when freedom of expression opened space for various forms of Islamic ideology (Latif et al., 2025; Zulfadli et al., 2024). Transnational Islamic movements such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Salafism, and Wahhabism found momentum to expand their influence, often by promoting the idea of purification and enforcement of an Islamic political system that is considered more in line with the original teachings of the religion. It was in this context that Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's most prominent Islamic organisation, introduced the concept of Islam Nusantara in the early 2010s as an effort to revitalise local Islamic traditions that the purist movement had marginalised. However, the discourse quickly developed beyond the theological realm into the realm of political identity.

Islam Nusantara then became an ideological symbol affirming Indonesian Islam's position as moderate, peaceful, and compatible with democratic values and Pancasila. It appeared as a counter-narrative to radical Islam, which was considered a threat to national unity and Indonesia's image in the eyes of the world. In this sense, Islam Nusantara became a cultural-political project, not merely an effort to preserve tradition but a cultural strategy to redefine national identity through religion (Mahaswa & Syaja, 2025; Riandi et al., 2025).

Islam Nusantara not only conveys religious meaning, but also constructs power relations: who has the right to speak about Islam, who is the legitimate representative of

Indonesian Islam, and how the state and civil society should play a role in maintaining religious stability. The discourse of Islam Nusantara also serves as a mechanism of symbolic power that regulates the diversity of Islam in Indonesia within the framework of religious nationalism (Rifa'i et al., 2025). In practice, it works by affirming Islam as an integral part of national identity. This strategy positions Islam not as a counterforce to the state, but as a partner in building civilisation. However, this kind of power is never neutral because every production of knowledge has the potential to create exclusion.

Islam Nusantara is an arena in which various social actors compete for symbolic capital, including religious authority and moral legitimacy (Rofiah et al., 2025). In this arena, large Islamic organisations such as NU play a dominant role because they have substantial cultural and historical capital in the *pesantren* tradition and extensive religious social networks. When Islam Nusantara is institutionalised in public discourse, it becomes a symbolic instrument that provides cultural advantages for those who can claim to be heirs to local Islamic traditions. However, every arena is always marked by a struggle between domination and resistance.

Transnational or puritanical Islamic groups, who feel they do not have access to this symbolic capital, challenge the hegemony of Islam Nusantara by accusing it of being a project of secularisation of religion, syncretism, and even liberalisation of Islam. This is where the epistemic tension between the two camps arises: one side emphasises the importance of local context and culture. At the same time, the other argues that Islam's universalism must be protected from outside influences that could contaminate its purity. Islam Nusantara can also be understood as a form of decolonial politics against the legacy of epistemic colonialism that placed Arabia at the centre of Islamic orthodoxy.

In the global history of Islam, the non-Arab world has often been considered merely peripheral, a passive absorber of the original teachings. Islam Nusantara reverses this narrative by asserting that Islam, as it emerged in Indonesia, is not inferior but rather the result of theological and cultural creativity capable of interpreting universal teachings in a local context. It has become a project of identity affirmation that seeks to uphold the epistemic sovereignty of the Indonesian people in defining themselves as Muslims without having to become Arabs. Islam Nusantara is a symbolic movement that rejects the hegemony of the Middle East in determining the standards of Islam. In this case, Islam Nusantara also plays a diplomatic role at the global level, presenting a friendly, tolerant, and pluralistic face of Islam as part of Indonesia's soft power strategy in the geopolitical arena of the Islamic world.

The Islam Nusantara model is often promoted in international forums as a moderate form of Islam unique to Indonesia, which has become a diplomatic brand that affirms Indonesia's position as a balancing force between the secular West and the radical Middle East (Hibbatulloh et al., 2025; Kurniawan et al., 2025). However, it is the political dimension of Islam Nusantara that is the most controversial. When this idea was raised to the national discourse level, primarily through religious and state institutions, many parties considered that Islam Nusantara was no longer purely a cultural or theological expression, but had become a political tool. For its critics, the use of this term in state speeches, education curricula, and foreign diplomacy indicates a systematic effort to make Islam Nusantara the official ideology of the state, a new form of "Islam Pancasila" that aims to subjugate Islamic diversity under state control.

This criticism sees that the discourse of Islam Nusantara has the potential to replace the plurality of religious interpretation with a single hegemonic form legitimised by political power (Al Hamid et al., 2025; Nuriskandar et al., 2025; Parhi et al., 2025). In this context, Islam Nusantara becomes paradoxical because it was born to oppose the hegemony of puritanical Islam, but instead risks creating its own domination. This struggle becomes even more complex when the issue of Islam Nusantara is brought into the global public sphere. On the one hand, the Indonesian government uses Islam Nusantara as a cultural diplomacy

instrument to emphasise that Indonesia is the largest Muslim country that is democratic and moderate. Through various international forums, this discourse is promoted as a solution to the crisis of radicalism and intolerance that plagues the Islamic world (Hayatullah, Ikhsan, et al., 2025; Muttaqin et al., 2025).

Indonesia, with its concept of Islam Nusantara, presents itself as a model of Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin that is contextual and civilised (Basid et al., 2024). However, on the other hand, some circles view this promotion as a form of religious branding that exploits Islam to strengthen Indonesia's political position at the global level. In the framework of soft diplomacy, Islam Nusantara is not only a religious symbol but also a geopolitical instrument that serves to build image and cultural influence amid global ideological competition. This is where the line between theology and politics becomes blurred, and Islam Nusantara transforms from a cultural movement into a strategic project involving diplomatic interests and religious nationalism. The tension between Islam rahmatanlil 'alamin and pure universal Islam becomes even more acute when the discourse of Islam Nusantara enters the public debate.

Puritan groups accuse Islam Nusantara of blurring the boundaries between tawhid and tradition, shifting the attention of the ummah from the substance of religion to cultural forms, and weakening Islamic militancy. Meanwhile, its supporters see Islam Nusantara as practising the universal mercy of Islam in its most tangible form, namely by respecting differences, embracing culture, and rejecting violence. In this debate, the main difference appears to lie not in creed but in how Islam is understood in the modern socio-political context. Pure Islam demands obedience to the text and homogeneity of practice, while Islam Nusantara emphasises contextualisation and dialogue.

In recent developments, Islam Nusantara has become a representation of Indonesia's cultural politics in the international arena. Through cultural diplomacy, interfaith conferences, and global Islamic institutional networks, Indonesia projects itself as a beacon of Islamic moderation (Karimullah et al., 2023; Karimullah & Sugitanata, 2023). Islam Nusantara has become a narrative used to reinforce Indonesia's identity as the largest Muslim country that is tolerant, democratic, and anti-radical (Karimullah et al., 2025). This narrative also serves as a form of resistance against Western stereotypes of Islam as a violent religion. In this case, Islam Nusantara functions as a counter-narrative to the global discourse on terrorism and extremism (Ayu et al., 2025). It offers a humanistic, rational, and civilised Islam that rejects radicalism without losing its spiritual commitment.

However, this strategy also opens up opportunities for the commodification of religion, as Islam is used as a national brand that can be marketed diplomatically to improve the nation's image. When religion becomes a global political identity, the line between spirituality and propaganda blurs (Hayatullah, Rohman, et al., 2025). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Islam Nusantara has made an essential contribution to strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia.

It strengthens the spirit of inclusive nationalism and rejects the polarisation of identity that is often exploited in electoral politics. In a global context, it has become an inspiration for many other Muslim countries that are looking for a model of Islam that is compatible with democracy and pluralism. However, to maintain its integrity as an authentic cultural project, Islam Nusantara must continue to be critically reflected upon so that it does not become trapped in the co-optation of power. It must remain a discourse that brings plurality to life, not an instrument of ideological legitimisation. Islam Nusantara will only be meaningful if it functions as a space for dialogue between religion and culture, not as a new dogma that replaces the old.

D. Conclusion

Islam Nusantara is not merely a religious concept born in cultural space, but an epistemic and political strategy that challenges the monopoly over the interpretation of Islam itself. It stands as a counter-discourse to transnational purification efforts that seek to standardise the global face of Islam by removing the cultural and historical dimensions of its followers. Through an artistic approach, Islam Nusantara emphasises that localisation is not a degradation of purity, but rather a form of social *ijtihad* to bring Islamic values to life in human reality. It shows that the universality of Islam finds its strength when it is rooted in context, not when it floats above it. By rejecting rigid dogmatic logic and homogeneous transnational ideology, Islam Nusantara transforms religious interpretation into cultural practices that foster dialogue, empathy, and civilised spirituality, which is a form of religiosity that rejects extremism without losing the depth of faith.

Islam Nusantara also becomes a project of identity and cultural politics that negotiates the position of Indonesian Islam in a world divided between radicalism and secularism. It is not merely an expression of moderation, but also a statement of the epistemic sovereignty of a nation that dares to produce Islamic discourse from the periphery to challenge the centre. In this perspective, Islam Nusantara does not stop at being a symbol of harmony. Still, he becomes a sharp critique of all forms of hegemony that oppress diversity of interpretation and tradition. It restores the dignity of Islam as a religion of mercy by rejecting the reduction of religion to a political tool or ideological weapon. In an era where identity is often traded and religion reduced to propaganda, Islam Nusantara emerges as a narrative of liberation that reminds the world that Islam is not only about doctrine but also about wisdom, humanity, and the courage to continue interpreting oneself amid the tense currents of the times.

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