

Understanding the Strengthening Cultural-Cosmopolitanism Spirit of Nahdlatul Ulama

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Abstract

The foundations of Islamic philosophy and faith, which go beyond the two primary sources of the Qur'an and Hadith and emphasize the value of Sunni tradition and ijma (ulama consensus), are fundamental to traditional-cultural identity of Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU). In addition, NU is renowned for having adapted the ideas of Abu Al-Hasan Al-Asy'ari, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, and Junayd Al-Baghdadi, as well as in terms of fiqh, or legal practice, mainly referring to Imam al-Shafi'i, representing Islamic conservatism and cultural traditionalism. This cultural traditionalism initially appears to run counter to the notion of NU's cosmopolitanism advanced by a number of its key figures, in particular Gus Dur. This cosmopolitan notion assumes a contemporary, inclusive belief structure and the segregation of religion from public life. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how the traditionalist-cultural movement founded by NU can coexist with a discourse on world beliefs that is becoming more cosmopolitan and assumes a space that is more open to all peoples. This article focuses on the discourse of cosmopolitanism and how NU, as one of the largest mass organizations in Indonesia, responds to this discourse with its approach and cultural background.

Keywords: *Cosmopolitanism, Culture, Nahdlatul Ulama, Traditionalism*

INTRODUCTION: NU AND INDONESIAN ISLAM'S CULTURAL-TRADITIONALISM SPIRIT

Islam in Indonesia is always fascinating to study. Not merely because Islam is the majority religion adhered to in the country with the largest Muslim population in the world (Pew Research Center, 2022), but also because of the dynamic history and discourse of Islam in Indonesia. The main issue, which is the dynamics of Muslims in Indonesia, is considered by many parties to still not be able to completely escape the contestation between traditionalism and the modernist Islamic movement. Otherwise, the typology of Islam popularized by an American anthropologist Clifford Geertz through *The Religion of Java* (1960) also shaped this discourse. In the 1960s, he categorized Muslim religious patterns in Indonesia, in particular of Javanese, into three categories: *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*, although the latter was not very specifically related to the religiosity of Javanese society.

Santri are defined as followers of Islam with spiritual piety and strict adherence to Islamic rites and traditionalism. During his journey, the identity of *santri* belonged to Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) with all the traditionalism that exists in them. Seyyed Hossen Nasr also explained at length about the traditionalism of the *pesantren*. Meanwhile, the *abangan* represent a society with stigmatized practices that do not pay much attention to the rites of worship and Islamic spiritualism. The *abangan* represent a people who live up to the beliefs of their ancestors. The map of Islamic characteristics in Indonesia used by many researchers departs from these three typologies.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), in Geertz's typology, belongs to the Muslim *Santri* category. Apart from being the largest independent Islamic mass organization in the world, NU is also synonymous with its resistance to modernism and puritanism. The traditional-cultural identity attached to NU is also inseparable from the roots of Islamic thought and creeds, which do not solely stop at the two main sources of the Qur'an and Hadith like other Islamic organizations. NU has a view of the importance of tradition and consensus of ulama (*ijma'*), which is

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an important frame and foundation for the management of its thoughts and rites of practice. In addition, NU is also known for its Sufi approach to its religious activities. According to Karel Steenbrink, the religious spirit was also behind the arrival of Islam in Indonesia. These last two are important fundamentals of NU's work to fill the space between nation-state and religion in Indonesia, even on a global scale. For this reason, stigmatization as a traditional-cultural organization is attached to NU.

In a theological context, NU is a Sunni Muslim organization, or *Ahlusunnah wal Jamaah* (Aswaja). In terms of thought, NU is a middle way or moderate *wasathiyah*. What is meant by *wasathiyah*, or moderate, is between extreme rationalism and hardline scripturalism. The idea of a middle path taken by NU was inspired by the conceptualization of *kalam* (theology) scholars Abu Al-Hasan Al-Asy'ari (84-936) and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (853-944). Meanwhile, in the context of *fiqh* or legal practice, the majority of NU follows the Imam al-Shafi'i Madzhab even though it also recognizes three other madzhab (Maliki, Hanafi and Hanbali). Meanwhile, Sufism follows the path of Sufism, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Junayd Al-Baghdadi. The NU's religious beliefs, legal practices, *kalam* and theology above represent Islamic conservatism and traditionalism. It seems this would clash with the idea of cosmopolitanism which presupposes a modern and inclusive belief system.

In fact, not all aspects of *Nahdlatul Ulama* represent everything related to cultural traditionalism. Beche Bt Mamma's research found that NU has a big role in the development framework of Indonesia in the modern era. NU takes on this role in various fields such as education, politics, and *ijtihad* discourse. The dynamics of the development of *pesantren* discourse make an important and significant contribution to the idea of Indonesia in the modern era. In the political field, NU's acceptance of Pancasila as the ideological pillar of the Indonesian state and its acceptance of the Jakarta charter are considered by Beche to be important contributions to the dynamics of Indonesian politics in the modern era. What is no less important is that the ideas and concept of *ijtihad* developed by NU are one aspect of this organization's inclusiveness towards change and modern. The important question to ask is: how can the future of cultural-traditionalism built by NU be compatible and aligned with global discourse, which is increasingly cosmopolitan and tends to lead to secularism and the privatization of religion?

Cosmopolitanism as the New Order of the Modern World

There are at least three alternative conceptions of the global world order model that are specifically related to religions, as explained by Jose Casanova. The first is the concept of cosmopolitanism, which is built on development theory and based on the idea of modernization. This concept is considered a global expansion of western modernity and is believed by many observers to be a universal process of human development. In the context of western modernity, which is based on science, religion is experiencing a process of privatization. Religions that reject privatization are seen as dangerous fundamentalisms that threaten the distinct structure of secular modernity.

Second, the clash of civilizations described by Huntington maintained the analytical components of western modernity but, at the same time, was separated from universalist normative claims. In the context of this clash of civilizations, what is meant by modernity are the special achievements of western civilization, which are based on the Judeo-Christian tradition. World religions are the fact of human belief and are civilizations that are incompatible and destined to clash with each other for the sake of global hegemony. The third is the multiple modernities model. This model is presented as an alternative analytical framework that combines some of the claims of universalist cosmopolitanism, despite its secularist assumptions, with recognition of the continuing relevance of world religions for the emerging global order. In the context of multiple modernities, cosmopolitanism is believed to be a way to avoid the clash of civilizations predicted by Huntington above.

Cosmopolitanism is the idea that all humans are members of a global community. This idea believes that humans must become world citizens in a universal community. However, it is necessary to emphasize the difference between cosmopolitanism as an ideology and cosmopolitanity as a cosmopolitan reality. Cosmopolitanism, as an ideology, presupposes belief in universal values and morals. Cosmopolitanism as an ideology, for instance, also take the form of a certain person's or group's acceptance of the concept of a universal declaration of human rights. Meanwhile, cosmopolitanity as a cosmopolitan reality means that differences

between individuals are not determined by ethnicity or the geographical boundaries of a particular region but are based on their contribution to global values and universalism. The idea of cosmopolitanity practically seeks universal moral standards in the form of a platform for cultural expression and mutual tolerance.

The notion of tribal superiority or majority-minority politics is rejected by this cosmopolitan viewpoint. When a person perceives themselves as citizens of the world and participates actively in conversation and the advancement of discourse in the international society, they are said to be cosmopolitan. Being cosmopolitan, does not include giving up one's own identity in order to accept other cultures; rather by upholding this self-identification, a cosmopolitan helps to bringing diversity to the global society by being accepting and receptive to other distinct identities or beliefs.

With an emphasis on civilization as a whole, which is more comprehensive and universal, rather than on specific entities, cosmopolitanism can also be seen as attitudes, knowledge, or interactions that are global in scope and inclusive. His interactions and knowledge range will expose him to several global discourses. Islam also discusses cosmopolitan notions. An article by Abdurrahman Wahid about global Islam. In this book, cosmopolitan Islam refers to Islam that upholds and embraces universal principles. Islamic law must be applied in accordance with *maqashid sharia*, which is a global concept and thought pertaining to the protection of the soul (life), reason, belief (religion), heredity, and wealth. This is necessary to uphold these universal principles. The five universal principles described above must be safeguarded regardless of a person's group background, belief, race, ethnicity, or nationality.

NU Transformation: Rooted in Cultural-Traditionalism Towards Cosmopolitan Islamic Ideas

Cosmopolitanism is an issue and an idea that have recently emerged. This is inseparable from the massive development of the digital world, which increasingly blurs the geographic distance between people in all corners of the world. Digitalization connects different human civilizations. This condition presupposes the idea of cosmopolitanism, with the aim of living together as world citizens without barriers between various races, ethnicities, groups, religions, and beliefs. NU itself does not explicitly discuss this idea, but Gus Dur, who is considered a representative of NU intellectuals, discusses cosmopolitanism in a broader discourse regarding Islam in a book edited by Ahmad Suaedy entitled "*Islam Kosmopolitan; Nilai Nilai Indonesia dan Transformasi Kebudayaan*".

Nevertheless, the movement created by NU impliedly did not entirely reject the concept of cosmopolitanism. Ahmad Baso stated that NU has a foundation of modern thought concepts that in fact also lead to cosmopolitan views in his work "*Historiografi Khittah dan Politik Nabdlatul Ulama*". He asserts that Khittah NU can be interpreted in two different ways. The first is the Nahdlatul Ulama khittah text, which was created by the khittah commission and approved in the Situbondo congress, which explains the precise and special meaning of khittah (*far'i-juz'i*). The second is global or holistic khittah (*'am-kuully*), which has evolved into the ideal and endpoint of NU's endeavour for nation and religion from its birth to the present. The khittah of NU must be interpreted in light of both domestic politics and the cosmopolitan international scene. Baso claims that the phrase "returning to the 1926 NU sermon" refers to a return to NU's values and political stances, both locally and globally.

The idea of cosmopolitanism contributed to the dynamics of the founding of NU as an organization as well as an Islamic traditionalist-cultural movement. In the course of Indonesian history, NU also appears in this dynamic with its traditionalist cultural identity but, at the same time, inclusively networking with a global Islamic discourse that could tolerate variety and differences in a moderate way. By criticizing the religious practices that made up the nahdliyyin's religious culture, the traditionalist and moderate beliefs represented by NU posed a significant threat to the modernist movement that had emerged from Egypt and was beginning to spread throughout Indonesia. Additionally, NU has emerged as a rival to Wahhabi doctrine, which, since 1925, has shared rule of the Hijaz with its two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, with the Ibn Sa'ud family. As is well known, Hijaz changed its name to Al Mamlakah Al Arabiyah Al-Sa'udiyah in 1932, with Riyadh as its capital.

As well known, many things were greatly impacted when the Hijaz fell under the control of Wahhabism and the Ibn Sa'ud clan, including the banning of *Ablussunnah wal Jamaah* ideology and the subsequent conversion to Wahhabi ideology. Additionally, the Saudi government forbids its nationals from engaging in madzhab, including making pilgrimages to loved ones' graves. The plot to remove the Prophet and his companions' graves because they were seen to be a source of polytheism was the plot's climax.

The *Ablussunnah wal Jama'ah ulama* in Indonesia, among other Muslim communities around the world, experienced tremendous instability as a result of changes in the Arab world's political landscape, particularly the debate over the removal of the Prophet Muhammad's tomb. The Hijaz Committee was established as a result of this occurrence, with the primary goal of encouraging the Saudi government to reevaluate its plans to remove the Prophet and his companions' graves. A group called *Nahdlatul Ulama* was established later on in the voyage since the Hijaz committee did not yet have an organizational framework. It cannot be disputed that the *ulama's* response to the discourse configurations and development dynamics in the global Islamic discourse led to the creation of *Nahdlatul Ulama*. It is hardly an exaggeration to argue that NU was born with the gene for global perspective given the dynamics of its foundation history.

The Hijaz Committee's proposal, which sent KH. Wahab Hasbullah to persuade King Ibnu Saud regarding the removal of the Prophet Muhammad's grave, is one of the key points where NU's cosmopolitanism gene is evident. The key demand was for King Ibn Saud to maintain the freedom of religious institutions in Saudi Arabia, including the Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanafi, and Hanbali schools. Despite the fact that the majority of NU members follow the Syafi'i madzhab, NU demonstrates its inclusivity and tolerance to followers of different madzahbs. The suggestion from the Hijaz Committee demonstrates once more how, despite its firmly ingrained cultural traditionalism, NU maintains a cosmopolitan appearance on the international stage through enriching global Islamic speech and discourse.

We found that this group had a significant epistemic and ideological presence long before NU was established in 1926. It is important to discuss about KH Hasyim Asyari and Kyai Wahab Chasbullah contributed to the formation of NU in particular. The two of them are in a teacher-student relationship. KH. Wahab Chasbullah was advised by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari to pursue his education in Mecca after completing his coursework in Tebuireng Jombang in 1908. KH Wahab Chasbullah co-founded the Mecca branch of the Syarikat Islam with other modern Muslim intellectuals such Abdul Halim, Ahmad Sanusi, and Mas Mansur.

At the same time and earlier, the modernist Islamic organization Muhammadiyah was founded in Yogyakarta. KH Ahmad Dahlan founded this organization in 1912. In contrast to NU, which was more cultural, Muhammadiyah was founded as a puritanical, reformist, and modernist religious organization. The goal is to purify Islam from superstition, *bid'ah*, and *keburafat*. Muhammadiyah is named reformist because it was inspired by the reformer Muhammad Abduh, who considered Islamic reform a basic principle. Meanwhile, NU has asserted itself from the start as a cultural Islamic organization movement, so both NU and Muhammadiyah have opposing movement lines.

When he returned to Surabaya in 1914 KH. Wahab Chasbullah founded Nahdlatul Wathan which was declared the first religious institution with a moderate nationalist character in the Indonesia. Within two years, Nahdlatul Wathan had a madrasa with a two-story building in Surabaya. Its branches are spread across East Java and Central Java such as Malang, Gresik, Jombang, Semarang and other places. The *Tashwirul Afkar* intellectual education development institution was also founded at that time. A network of ulama and intellectuals on a global scale is led by KH Wahab Chasbullah movement. From Mecca, KH. Wahab Chasbullah launched the movement, which later spread to Nusantara.

This was the beginning of NU being considered an organization that since its founding had cosmopolitan genes. The movement of KH. Wahab Chasbullah cannot be denied as the earliest epistemological and ideological trace of the endeavour he made with KH. Hasyim Asy'ari in founding NU in the following years. The NU Special Branch (PCI-NU) administrators, who are scattered throughout numerous nations, might be seen as both cosmopolitans on the rise and propagators of world moderation. For instance, the existence of PCINU has become a distinctive feature for this country, which also has Muslim residents from Morocco and Turkey, in the Netherlands, where the author (DM) currently resides. More than one million Muslims live in a nation with

"only" 18 million citizens and roughly seven million atheists or at least non-believers (Pew Research Center, 2022).

The Muslim population, whether they are third- or fourth-generation migrant workers from Morocco and Turkey or from Indonesia and other countries, has a variety of religious patterns. There are Sunni Muslims who belong to the Maliki (Moroccan) or Hanafi (Turkish) *madhab*, even Shia or Ahmadi (like several acquaintances from Pakistan), plus the presence of Muslims from Indonesia with distinctive *madzhab* and cultural backgrounds. Even though the number of Muslims from Indonesia is small and the PCINU and other organizations and communities are still small, especially when compared to the Moroccan or Turkish diaspora, which have mosques in almost all cities in the Netherlands, their activities have been well appreciated by many people and the local government.

There are at least five areas that PCINU Netherlands is working on, either independently or with cooperation or collaboration with other parties, namely (1) the religious sector, by actively organizing Al-Qur'an reading education (TPA) and regular recitation of *turats* every week, as well as private religious assistance and counseling by Kyai and other administrators. This activity was attended by diaspora Muslims from Indonesia, as well as converts to Islam or descendants of mixed Dutch couples, in collaboration with the European Muslim Youth Association (PPME) or other organizations or communities; (2) the scientific/academic field, by holding scientific seminars and conferences that aim to amplify the spread of moderate Islamic preaching through the scientific stage. To organize this scientific activity, PCINU collaborates with several universities in the Netherlands as well as NICMCR (the Netherlands-Indonesia Consortium for Muslim and Christian Relations); (3) the social and advocacy sector, one of which is collaborating with the *Tombo Ati* Community in regular meetings and recitations, as well as IMWU (the Indonesian Migrant Worker Union) to provide assistance to Indonesian migrant workers in the Netherlands; (4) the cultural sector, not merely by holding ceremonial activities that show the characteristics of Indonesian culture, such as recitation of the Qur'an, *takebiran*, and the like, but also by establishing cooperation with the "physical barn" of Indonesian culture, which began to be filled during the colonial period, namely museums and libraries in the Netherlands. In particular, postcolonialist themes are quite popular in the Netherlands, and PCINU is actively involved in several seminars and discussions about them; and (5) the environmental field, which cannot be denied because the Netherlands has several favorite study options in this field, so that many PCINU administrators who are also students in this theme then also contribute to PCINU's role. These include seminars or discussions on the environmental theme from a contextual practitioner's perspective and even studies of the book of *turats*, which also has an environmental theme from a religious perspective. And fascinatingly, from all the things done by the Netherland PCINU, as well as by the PCINU in many other countries: the character of being a cosmopolitan always emerges by being open and sensitive to various dynamics, both differences and changes or developments. Furthermore, this character is also expressed by showing a moderate ideology, which is the spirit of NU.

Finally, the huge challenge of being a cosmopolitan for NU is majority-minority politics. Considering that the majority of Indonesian Muslims are NU members, if NU remains consistently an Islamic organization that is cosmopolitan, then NU must be inclusively and openly avoid views of exclusivism towards other groups, and prioritize humanitarian ideas in the global arena.

Closing

The dynamics of NU's formation as an organization and movement for Islamic cultural traditionalism were influenced by the inception of the concept of cultural cosmopolitanism. The roots of NU's cosmopolitan thinking can be seen in several things; First, the NU movement's fundamental tenet on all fronts was the middle path, or *wasathiyah*-moderate *manhaj* thinking, which stood between extreme rationalism and strict scripturalism. Second, NU's traditionalist-cultural viewpoints have influenced the way that people speak and think about Islam around the world, particularly through the Hijaz Committee and the discussion over the removal of the Prophet Muhammad's burial. The Hijaz Committee, the forerunner of NU, gave Ibnu Saud advice on how to protect religious sect independence through the development of conservatism, which became its doctrinal foundation.

Third, the roots of NU's cosmopolitan ideas are reflected in NU's universal or holistic *khittah* ('am-kulliy). This sermon must be understood in the context of national politics and the cosmopolitan global stage. The slogan

returning to the 1926 NU sermon means returning to the ideals and political views of NU both in the national and global context. These three points are the roots of NU's idea of cultural cosmopolitanism because they presuppose a space for shared expression that is more universal and inclusive.

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