The Islam Nusantara Movement in Indonesia

Hisanori Kato

1 Introduction

Indonesia is known as a country of socio-cultural diversity with approximately 300 ethnic groups (*Kewarganegaraan* n.d.).¹ The spiritual life of Indonesians is also rather heterogeneous, as various religious traditions are deeply rooted in the fourth most populous nation in the world today (*World Population Review* 2020).² Despite the fact that 87.2 per cent of the total population embraces the faith of Islam (*Badan Pusat Statistik* 2010), chronology shows that non-Islamic traditions were dominant in the Indonesian archipelago prior to the advent of Islam. The kings of a maritime empire called Srivijaya which flourished in southern Sumatra between the seventh and thirteenth centuries (Legge 1964: 5–6), for instance, adopted Buddhism and contributed to cultural interchanges among Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia (Laffan 2011: 4). We also know that Borobudur, which is one of the oldest and largest single Buddhist monuments in the world, was built by the Sailendra Kingdom, which was dominant in Central Java in the eighth century (Laffan 2011: 28). Prambanan temples in Central Java were built by an ancient Hindu kingdom called Old Mataram in the tenth century, and the eastern island of Bali, a famous tourist destination today, is also known as the homeland of the Indonesian version of Hinduism.

Apart from the organised religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, the local traditions and cultures have also profoundly exerted their influence over the spiritual life of Indonesians. This tendency is most noticeable in Java, which is the most populated island in the country. The customary traditions of Javanese cultures, including communal religious meals, traditional medicine, and the performance of aristocratic rituals in the residence of Sultan, are co-related with Islam (Woodward 2011: 5). Some argue that Islam in Indonesia is syncretic and is by no means monolithic. Clifford Geertz, for example, stated

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2 The Indonesian government officially recognises six religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Confucianism.

that Indonesian Islam is “multi-voiced” and takes “multi-forms” and “not all of them Koranic, and whatever it brought to the sprawling archipelago it was not uniformity” (Geertz 1968: 12).³

Islam has been a primary socio-political force in Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. When drafting a new constitution in the post-World War II era, there was a serious debate in Indonesia over the enforcement of *shari‘a* or *syariah*,⁴ or Islamic law (Ricklefs 1993: 209–211). The country eventually opted for republicanism with the leadership of Sukarno, the first President of the Republic of Indonesia. However, that political choice has created a division among the *umma* or *umat*,⁵ (the Islamic community) between those wishing to realise a more religiously rigid society with the implementation of *syariah* and those upholding secular nationalism wherein faith is an individual matter. The latter group, nonetheless, has never abandoned the commitment to Islam and has emphasised its piousness. This religious stratum tends to be supportive of integrating indigenous Indonesian culture and local tradition into Islam. Nahdlatul Ulama,⁶ the largest Islamic organisation in the country (popularly known as NU), best represents this religious orientation and promotes this way of thinking as ‘Islam Nusantara’. While NU is branded as ‘traditionalist’ and is less hesitant to adopt local religious practices of Indonesia, Muhammadiyah—the second largest Islamic organisation, established by Ahmad Dahlan in 1912—is regarded as ‘modernist’. Muhammadiyah is more religiously rigid, and intends to bring about a more ‘authentic’ version of Islam than the syncretic form which has traditionally proliferated in Indonesia.

The establishment of NU was initiated by several Muslim scholars called *kiai*, such as Hasyim Asy‘ari. It is a common practice for *kiai* to own Islamic boarding schools or *pesantren*, which has contributed to the organisational expansion of NU since its establishment. NU has exerted much political and cultural influence in Indonesian society. For example, Partai Nahdlatul Ulama, a political wing of NU, secured its second position in the parliamentary election in 1971 after President Suharto’s powerful Golkar group. We should also remember that the members of NU played a significant role in the annihilation of the communist party of Indonesia (PKI) after the 1965 aborted *coup d’état*.

Then chairperson of NU in the 1990s, Abdurrahman Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur, was a crucial figure in the process of transforming politically

3 However, there is also an argument that some Javanese cultures such as *selamatan*, which Geertz regarded as animistic, are also linked with authentic Islamic teachings (Woodward 2011: Chapter 3).

4 In Indonesia, *shari‘a* is usually spelled as *syariah*.

5 In Indonesia, *umma* is usually spelled as *umat*.

6 NU was established by some religious scholars, ‘*ulamā*’, in 1926.

oppressed Indonesia into a more democratic society after the fall of Suharto in 1998. Gus Dur was elected as the fourth president of the Republic in 1999 and implemented policies that promoted cultural diversity in the nation. He lifted the prohibition against public displays of Chinese culture such as the dragon dance and Chinese characters after he took office. Religious as well as cultural diversity was promoted by Gus Dur, and he was termed *guru bangsa* or the 'teacher of the country'. NU also has been regarded as a safeguard of *kebinnekaan* (diversity) in Indonesia.

The NU drew widespread attention in August 2015 when it hosted its national congress in the Eastern Javanese town of Jombang with the theme of Islam Nusantara for Indonesia and the World (*International Summit of the Moderate Islamic Leaders* n.d.). NU intended to clarify Islam Nusantara's uniqueness by linking it with the locality found in the archipelago, which differentiates it from Arab-Islamic culture, and to promote tolerant and moderate attitudes for Muslims along with a nationalist message (*International Summit of the Moderate Islamic Leaders* n.d.).

This chapter will explore the nature and characteristics of the Islam Nusantara movement. This work contributes to deepening understanding of how the ideas of authenticity in Islam and local culture mutually interact. An attempt to answer these questions can bring about a better comprehension of the role of religion in Indonesian society.

2 Religion as Organism

As to whether the authenticity of religion remains unchanged regardless of the alteration of the social environment where a religion exists remains a pertinent question; does a religion itself adjust to the newfangled social, economic, political, and historical situation? In relation to this query, we could ask whether the Buddhism taught by Siddhartha Gautama about 2,500 years ago in India can be the same Buddhism in Japan of the present day or whether the Christianity practiced clandestinely by Japanese peasants in the early 1600s can be the same religion as Jesus Christ conveyed to the people of Galilee (Endo 2016)?

By the same token, we are inquisitive about the authenticity of Islam in Indonesia, namely, as to whether it shares the same bearings with Islam in the Middle East. As Clifford Geertz has pointed out, Islam in Indonesia seems to exhibit its noticeable character as a result of socio-cultural encounters with local traditions (Geertz 1971: 12). At minimum, this suggests that Islam has been influenced by its surroundings and has manifested a unique outlook, which is

non-identical with the original form of the religion. However, this is not merely relevant to Islam in Indonesia but is also pertinent to any other religion that spans a significant time period.

For example, Japanese Buddhism, which has flourished with various schools since it was introduced in the sixth century, created its unique syncretic notion with Shinto (Eisenstadt 1996: 224). Shusaku Endo also points out that the long-standing tradition of Japanese ancestor worship contributed to the preservation of the faith of Japanese Christians in the time of the Edo Period when Christianity was forbidden (Endo 2016: 135). These facts suggest that the followers of the same religion recurrently exhibit contending attitudes and practices depending on where and when they exist.

In fact, the homogenisation of indigenous traditional cultures and original religion is ubiquitous, and the locality becomes a part of the religion. Islam in Indonesia is no stranger to this phenomenon. Although egalitarianism is cherished in Islam, the approbation of Muslims towards venerated religious scholars ('*ulamā*' or *kiai*) is habitually observed in Indonesia. This specific attitude of Muslims can be found in Islamic boarding schools called *pesantren*, which are operated by *kiai* and '*ulamā*' who belong to NU. Orthodox Muslim (*santri*) students at *pesantren* pay much respect to their teachers and treat them as touched by the divine. This attitude undoubtedly is derived from the appreciation of seniority in Indonesian society that has existed for a long period of time.

Indonesian Muslims commonly pay a visit to the family grave (*ziarah*, Arab. *ziyārāt*), to recite the Qur'ān jointly (*tahlilan*, Arab. *tahlīl*), and to practice homecoming (*mudik*) in the time of Idul Fitri (Arab. 'Īd al-Fiṭr) following Ramadan. The veneration of saints is another popular religious routine among Indonesian Muslims. The grave of MbK Priok, which is one of the most famous and popular sites for saint worship in Indonesia, is located in the northern part of Jakarta. Habib Ali, the caretaker of the site and the self-claimed descendant of MbK Priok, is popular with visitors and attracts respect from pilgrims. The followers of Habib Ali even believe that he possesses supernatural power to bring about miracles. When Habib Ali recites the Qur'ān, the pilgrims put bottled water in front of him, believing that the water will become holy and be able to cure diseases (Kato 2012: 37–49).

None of these religious practices, in the eyes of Salafist-oriented fundamentalist Muslims, are in accordance with the authentic teachings of Islam. This discrepancy creates a wide division between those who are less hesitant to accept the locally influenced version of Islam and those who are firmly determined to maintain the theological authenticity of Islam, disregarding any non-Islamic element in their behaviours.

There appears to be two dominant approaches within the Islamic community or *umat* in Indonesia, that is, theologically rigid Muslims and theologically moderate Muslims. The primary purpose of the former would be to implement *syariah* and to follow the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*, the collection of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad. In other words, their absolute objective is to bring about a precise similitude between their modern lives and that which was the case in the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, struggling to create a so-called 'Islamic society' which has not yet been realised. The latter, on the other hand, are more heedful to the changes of the socio-cultural situation; thus, they are more able to adjust to local peculiarities. It is possible to say that they reside in a so-called 'Muslim society', where the adjustability of local traditions with human reasoning is more appreciated (Katakura 1991; Kato 2017a).

The essence of Islamic society is theological genuineness or what we can simply call 'religion', while the substance of Muslim society is anything characterised as religious or 'religiosity'. This classification is useful to understand the substance of *Pancasila*, or the five ideological principles of the Republic of Indonesia as stated in the constitution, which all citizens should follow. *Pancasila* is stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia as follows: Belief in One and Only God; just and civilised humanity; the unity of Indonesia; democratic life led by wisdom of thoughts in deliberation amongst representatives of the people; and achieving social justice for all the people of Indonesia.

In the time of the establishment of the Republic, the national leaders set *Yang Maha Esa*, or the One and Only God, as the first principle without alluding to Allāh explicitly on the grounds that Indonesia is a multi-religious nation. At the time of the drafting of the Constitution in 1945, the national leaders decided to take a secular nationalist political formation on religiosity through the principle of *Yang Maha Esa*. Obviously, this rather politically compromised state ideology clashes with the basic principle of Islamic teachings that enforces *syariah* and upholds *tauḥid* (Arab. *tawḥīd*), the singularity of Allāh. It was therefore understandable that those who struggle for realising an 'Islamic society' reject *Pancasila*.

Presumably, Islam *qua* religion itself consists of Islamic society or religion and Muslim society or religiosity. As the latter presents new-fashioned religious practices, influenced by social, historical, geographical, economic, political, and cultural locality, religion itself would alter its shape as an organism (Kato 2012). However, this does not necessarily mean that the residents of Islamic society and Muslim society unequivocally cling to their own domains; rather, they occasionally cross the boundary of each sphere and show complex religious attitudes. The residents of Muslim society, for example, believe that

they are religiously authentic enough to be called devout Muslims and never dream that they are being unorthodox Muslims. Jeremy Menchik (2016: 72) points out this complexity in Muslims:

Godly nationalists feel that belief in God is a civic virtue that accrues both individual and social benefits. For individuals, belief in God brings an enlightened understanding of the world that is preferable to premodern beliefs such as animism, heterodox beliefs, or secular worldviews.

This suggests that the components of religion or Islam are rather complex, and Muslims, especially the people of Muslim society, are by no means single-minded. The object of our study in this chapter, the Islam Nusantara movement, can be categorised as one of the examples of the religiosity of Islam in that the residents of Muslim society adopt local traditions in order to affirm their 'piousness' and commitment to their own faith. At the same time, the Islam Nusantara movement will be rejected by those who value the realisation of a religiously conservative and 'purely' Islamic society.

The substance of religion will be also explored. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown suggested that an efficient means to understand religion is to examine the "social function of religions" (Radcliffe-Brown 1965: 154). With this idea in mind, the substance of the Islam Nusantara movement and the complex mind of the followers of Islam Nusantara will be explored in the following part of the chapter.

3 Overview of Islam Nusantara

'Nusantara' is the combination of two ancient Javanese words, *nusa* and *antara*, which mean 'islands' and 'opposite' or 'across from' respectively (Baso 2017: 2). Nusantara in fact includes Sumatra, Java, the Sunda Islands, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, the Maluku, and West Papua (Irian Jaya) of current Indonesian territory, as well as other parts of Southeast Asian regions, such as Malaysia, Singapore, and the southern Philippines (Baso 2017: 2–3). The defining characteristic of Islam Nusantara is its appreciation of the diversity of local cultures with regional languages and varying customs in these areas.

However, the initiator of Islam Nusantara, NU, obviously emphasises the linkage between Islam and Indonesian native cultures. Azis Anwar Fachrudin explains that NU's traditions are deeply connected with religious rituals, such as joint prayer (*tahlilan*) and communal meals (*selamatan*) (Fachrudin 2015). In addition to the preservation of the local religious rituals, the unity of Indonesia is another key ideological pillar in the movement. The leader of NU, Aqil Siradj,

explicitly stated that “we start from Islam Nusantara and maintain the unity of Republic of Indonesia, the local culture, and the richness of nature” (*Islam Nusantara* n.d.).

This also does not mean that Islam Nusantara is a newly-born Indonesian version of Islamic teachings (Hasyim 2018: 8). The authenticity of Islam is never abandoned by the advocates of the Islam Nusantara movement. Some believe that Indonesian tradition never excluded the orthodoxy of Islam. Azyumardi Azra, for example, lists three major influences in Islam Nusantara: the orthodox Sunnī theology of al-Ash‘arī or *Asy‘ariyah*; the judicature of al-Shāfi‘ī, and other judicial schools of the Sunnī tradition; and the Ṣūfism of the Persian mystic al-Ghazālī (Azra 2015: 170).

Some also argue that the Islam that spread over the archipelago of Indonesia has a profound relation with the Prophet Muḥammad. Ahmad Baso states that the descendants of the Prophet, called *sayyids* or *asyrafs*, directly contributed to the spread of Islam over the Southeast Asian region, including the Indonesian islands (Baso 2017: 10). It is a common understanding that the nine saints known as *wali songo* (*sanga*) played an important role for the Islamisation of Java (Laffan 2011: 8). According to Baso, these *wali songo*, who were the descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad, constructed the foundation of Islam Nusantara (Baso 2017: 27–30). He cited the words of one of the *wali songo* to explain the dialectical development of Islam as “borrowing elements from the old culture to empower and enrich the new; let the old customs become the container and the elements of faith the contents” (Baso 2017: 30). Such statements clearly work to validate Islam Nusantara. This resonates with the view presented by Abudurrahman Wahid, a former leader of NU, who has said that Islam in Indonesia is experiencing an “encounter” with history and “manifests” Islam uniquely, but never forsaking its core teachings (Wahid 2015: 35).

NU hosted an international conference called the International Summit of the Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) to promote Islam Nusantara in May 2016. As the outcome of ISOMIL, NU issued a declaration on Islam Nusantara. In addition to the advocacy of patriotism that was expressed by its leader Aquil Siradj in February 2016, there are several points that should be heeded from the declaration: the affinity with the core teachings of Islam; peaceful coexistence with other religions without overpowering them; the rejection of extremism; and the affirmation of being Sunnī Muslim (*Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama‘ah*) (*International Summit of the Moderate Islamic Leaders* n.d.: 51–52).

With regard to the first, the declaration clearly states that the inherited nature of Islam Nusantara never conflicts with Islamic teachings, such as “*tawassuth* [Arab. *tawassul*, following the middle path, i.e., the path of

moderation], *tawaazun* [*tawāzun*, balance; harmony], *tasaamuh* [*tasāmuḥ*, gentle and loving rather than harsh and violent behaviour, i.e., tolerance rather than compulsion], and *itidaal* [*i'tidāl*, justice]" (*International Summit of the Moderate Islamic Leaders* n.d.: 51), which also corresponds with Indonesian, especially Javanese, cultural tradition. The declaration also vehemently warns against the emergence of extremism, which would potentially bring about terrorist acts. Some even believe that Islam Nusantara is a reaction to the rise of radicalism in Indonesia.⁷

4 Political Support

Not only does the Islam Nusantara movement have religious meaning, but it also has political significance. President Joko Widodo, who was seeking re-election for another term in 2019, ardently joined the campaign of the Islam Nusantara movement in the hope that he would obtain support from the moderate Muslim constituency, especially from a vast number of NU followers.⁸ He has received criticism from more hard-line Muslims, alleging that he and his family are affiliated with communism.⁹ It seems that Joko Widodo was eager to maintain his image as a devout and moderate Muslim by supporting NU's Islam Nusantara.

President Joko Widodo attended the religious gathering held in the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta, which is the largest of its kind in Southeast Asia, at the time of Islamic fasting month of Ramadan in June 2015. He reiterated the validity of Islam Nusantara in his speech in front of approximately 10,000 attendants, saying that "Thank God, we are Islam Nusantara that is filled with *santun* (well-mannered people), *tata karma* (ordered people), and full *toleransi* (tolerance)" (*NU Online* 2015). On another occasion, President Joko Widodo praised NU's effort to promote a peaceful and tolerant Islam in culturally and ethnically diverse Indonesia at the 92nd commemoration ceremony of NU's establishment in February 2018.

President Joko Widodo also showed his commitment to safeguarding religious tolerance characterised by Islam Nusantara by building a monument in the Sumatran town of Barus, where bearers of Islam from the Middle East arrived at the dawn of Islamic history in Indonesia. In addition, he issued a

7 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 22 March 2018.

8 NU itself declares that their membership is 91,200,000, that is, 36.5% of the total population in Indonesia, citing the survey conducted by LSI in 2013.

9 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 9 March 2018.

presidential decree that instituted the day of *Hari Santri Nasional* or the National Day of Devout Muslims.¹⁰ The Islam Nusantara Movement has gained momentum by the political stratagems of President Joko Widodo, who intends to emphasise his devout but moderate leadership to eliminate the Islamic religious fanaticism that potentially threatens the stability of the country.

5 Rejection of Islam Nusantara

While Islam Nusantara has been endorsed by the government of the Republic of Indonesia, some criticism has been directed towards this NU-led Islamic movement. H.A. Fallah, who is active in campaigning for the implementation of *syariah* and was once imprisoned in relation to his involvement in a terrorist scheme, has questioned the legitimacy of Islam Nusantara, saying that Islam Nusantara promotes radicalism as it creates a sectarian sentiment.¹¹ He points out that the substance of the Islam Nusantara movement is merely anti-Wahhābist, and this binary religious setting would widen the division that has already existed in the *umat* in Indonesia.¹²

He in fact has no hesitation to adopt cultural elements in Islamic life, such as wearing Indonesian traditional clothes called *batik*; however, he never accepts any metamorphosis relating to *akidah* [*ʿaqīdah*], or Islamic faith. For example, he believes the rituals in the time of *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) should remain as they have been, referring to some Indonesians who (illegitimately, he thinks) chanted *Pancasila* (the five principles of the Republic of Indonesia) at the time of *hajj*.¹³ By the same token, Fallah believes that *selametan*, which has the aura of the existence of a deity other than Allāh, should never be allowed.

Another high-profile Muslim leader, Abdul Rohim, who serves as one of the executives of the hard-line Islamic organisation Jammah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS), also accuses ‘moderate Muslims’ who advocate Islam Nusantara as forcing fellow Muslims to deviate from the correct path of Islam.¹⁴ Rohim emphasises that the one of the essentials of the Islamic faith is to respect all

10 22 October is set as *Hari Santri*, as NU once declared *jihād* on 22 October 1945 against the Dutch who intended to recolonise Indonesia after World War II. Presidential Decree no. 22/2015 enacted *Hari Santri*, at <https://ketemulagi.com/sejarah-hari-santri-nasional-22-oktober/>, accessed 27/05/2018.

11 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 6 March 2018.

12 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 6 March 2018.

13 See their deeds on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpWH_AfKWhc. Accessed 27/03/2018.

14 Interview with the author, Solo, 18 March 2018.

creatures including non-Muslims, citing the verse 21 of *al-Anbya* in the Qur'ān, which reads "We have sent you forth but as a blessing to mankind." However, the concept of being tolerant to other faiths, for Rohim, is different from that of moderate Muslims who advocate Islam Nusantara. He believes Muslims should never lose the essentials of Islamic faith, such as *tauhid* (the oneness of Allāh), while he firmly maintains they should respect the followers of other faiths. Therefore, he never forces the Islamic faith on non-believers but refuses to utter, for example, 'Merry Christmas' to Christians.¹⁵

Rohim explains that the position of Islam is invariably higher than culture, although cultural expressions in the attitude of Muslims are permissible.¹⁶ Muslim women in Indonesia are still allowed to wear Indonesian *jilbab* rather than Middle Eastern *niqāb*.¹⁷ Nonetheless, any practice relating to rituals and belief, for Rohim, should be based on the orthodoxy of Islam. Thus, *tahlil*, for example, cannot be accepted by Rohim, as it was 'created' by NU followers in Indonesia.¹⁸

Ismail Yusanto, who is a leader of the banned Islamic organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia, also shares similar views with both Fallah and Rohim on Islam Nusantara. According to Yusanto, there should be no "Islam Nusantara" but "Islam in Nusantara," as Islam should be only one.¹⁹ Yusanto also believes that no reconciliation between so-called moderate Muslims and fundamentalist Muslims under the leadership of Joko Widodo is possible, as the social division in the country has been widened by him after the controversial Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017 (Kato 2017b).

The official approval of Islam Nusantara by President Joko Widodo might have created the notion that there exists different Islams: the 'right' Islam, that is, Islam Nusantara, and the 'wrong' Islam, whatever Islam exists outside of Islam Nusantara. Needless to say, no terrorist acts encouraged by fanatical ideology should be justified; however, this does not necessarily mean that all Muslims who reject Islam Nusantara are the perpetrators or advocates of terrorism. While the Islam Nusantara movement has the potential to be an efficient political tool for Joko Widodo, there is the possibility that it will contribute to the creation of more serious ideological conflicts in *umat* in Indonesia in the times to come.

15 Interview with the author, Solo, 18 March 2018.

16 Interview with the author, Solo, 18 March 2018.

17 Both *jilbab* and *niqāb* are headscarfs for Muslim women. *Jilbab* merely covers the head, and *niqāb* covers the head and face.

18 Interview with the author, Solo, 18 March 2018.

19 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 9 March 2018.

6 NU and Modernity

As has been mentioned, NU is an Islamic organisation that is conciliatory to indigenous culture, and it was established “to defend the interests of Traditionalism” (Ricklefs 1993: 19). On the other hand, there was an Islamic reform movement in the early twentieth century in Indonesia, which resulted in the establishment of the modernist organisation Muhammadiyah in 1912 (Ricklefs 1993: 19). The aim of this modernist Muhammadiyah is to bring back the authenticity of Islam, which corresponds with the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* along with the encouragement of utilising *ijtihād*, or human reasoning (Ricklefs 1993: 19). Both NU and Muhammadiyah have played an important role not only in Islamic life but also in political and social life in Indonesia throughout its modern history. In the time of the fall of President Suharto in 1998, the leaders of both organisations, that is, Abdurrahman Wahid of NU and Amien Rais of Muhammadiyah, exercised a tremendous amount of influence over the one of the greatest social changes in Indonesia that took place after the end of Suharto’s era, called *reformasi* or reformation (Aspinall 2005).

These two organisations in some respect have had a rivalry, if not mutual hatred, since their establishment. When NU started to campaign for Islam Nusantara publicly in 2015, Muhammadiyah also launched a similar Islamic movement called ‘Islam Berkemajuan’, which means ‘Progressive Islam’. The substance of Islam Berkemajuan is explained by its leader as “Islam that is adaptive and accommodative to reconcile with [the] dynamic era” (Sahal and Aziz 2015: 26). Some note that the difference between Islam Nusantara and Islam Berkemajuan is that the former emphasises locality with Islam, as if the outfit is Indonesia but the body is Islam, while the latter focuses more on globalisation.²⁰

However, A. Abdullah, a respected Muslim scholar, finds few differences in the motivation of these movements, as he believes that they merely ‘re-brand’ each organisation.²¹ In Abudullah’s reckoning, as social change proceeds, NU is required to be more responsive to modernity, and Muhammadiyah becomes more attentive to local culture. In this regard, the origin of NU’s Islam Nusantara movement could be traced in its vying with Muhammadiyah.

We in fact find NU’s effort to bring more modern approaches into their activities, including the campaign of Islam Nusantara. NU introduced an online information technology (IT) called NU-Online for the first time in 2004.

20 This comment was made by Muhammadiyah’s young intellectual Najib Burhani (cited in Sahal and Aziz 2015: 26).

21 Interview with the author, Yogyakarta, 16 March 2018.

IT-related jargon was so unknown to NU members in rural areas in the early 2000s; even the word 'Internet' was mistaken as *internit*, which means 'plaster-board' in Indonesian.²² However, NU has rapidly developed its cyber system for the last twenty years with the creation of NU-Online, an official website for the propagation division of NU, and Islam Nusantara.com in order to accomplish their religious mission.

Syaifullah Amin, the head of NU's propagation division, explains that NU needs to reach out to members of every social stratum nationwide. Although the major component of NU's constituency reside in rural areas, NU also intends to extend its religious message to urban young people, who, unlike the lower-educated people in rural areas, do not hesitate or face obstacles when employing modern IT for communication.²³ This strategy has become more urgent since 2010 when ultra-religious conservatism has become more apparent in Indonesian society.²⁴ In fact, ideas of extremism that can potentially bring about acts of terrorism have been circulated through the internet globally. In response to this, NU, for example, has created an application for smart phones called *NUTIZEN*, which the users can access not only for watching commercial television or shopping but also for the lectures on Islam Nusantara and moderate Islam delivered by members of the NU '*ulamā*'.

7 Conventional Approach

While NU has adopted modern digital technology for their propagation strategy, a more conventional approach has never been dismissed. NU is consistently active in their missionary work with the conventional verbal method. For example, a local branch of NU in Yogyakarta offers community based religious classes to rural workers every fortnight. On 15 March 2018, Fatya, a women's organisation of NU in Yogyakarta, organised a class for female agricultural workers in the evening. The venue was one of the participants' primitive house, and twenty middle-aged women attended the class.

Khotimatul Husna, a leader of Fatya in Yogyakarta, presided over the class which was about the Islamic faith, emphasising the need of reverence to Allāh and obedience to the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. After the class, they conducted *tahlīl* and had a meal together. According to the participants, the major objective in attending the class was to obtain 'knowledge'. They also explained that there

22 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 8 March 2018.

23 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 8 March 2018.

24 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 8 March 2018.

was one non-Muslim family in the village, and that their communication and socialisation with non-Muslim families remain firmly amicable. They state that the non-Muslim family commonly joins the funerals of fellow villagers, and mutual help takes place without exception in times of natural disaster.²⁵ Khotimatul believes that this type of conventional and direct method is vital in order for the villagers to learn the essentials of Islam, as they hesitate to access modern cyber technology.

NU's conventional approach to their followers is employed not only in rural areas but also in urban areas. The propagation division of NU offers a special course to potential community leaders who convey the religious ideas upheld by NU, including Islam Nusantara to the members of their community. The course is called Pelatian Kadar Dakwa'h (PKD) or Practice for the Followers of the Faith, and it runs twice a week for six months at the headquarters in Jakarta. On 20 March 2018, a PKD session was held and was attended by twenty-two male and eight female members of NU. Their occupation and their stage of life varied: there were university and high school students, teachers, food sellers, community leaders, and mosque staff. The class was led by a religious expert, and he provided the participants with rather practical advice for efficient public speaking and choice of topics. The participants were required to prepare for their speech and conduct their session in front of all the participants and the teacher.

Four participants had a chance to present their own speech during the one-and-a-half-hour session. The theme of their speeches included the issue of self-achievement through religion, the importance of tolerance, polygamy, and general ideas on Islam in life. The atmosphere of the class was amicable, and the participants seemed to be enthusiastic about their activities. The youngest participant was a seventeen-year-old high school male student, and he expressed his impressions on the course as follows.

I was encouraged by my parents who had joined the class before to attend the course. I have no non-Muslim friends and am not sure if I am willing to say 'Merry Christmas' to non-Muslims.²⁶

Another participant, a forty-seven-year old community leader also explained his motivation to join the course.

25 Discussion with the participants in Bantul, 15 March 2018.

26 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 10 March 2018.

I wanted to get the knowledge. Now I know that mutual respect (between Muslim and non-Muslim) is important. We (Muslims) should let non-Muslims be alone. I myself am not really close to non-Muslims. We should not disturb one another. I do not utter 'Merry Christmas' to non-Muslims. I like to say, '*Selamat*' (Happy).²⁷

These comments from the participants of PKD suggest that the essential idea of a harmonious relationship with non-Muslims, for them at least, does not necessarily mean to mingle with non-Muslims; rather, it is to maintain their own community, independent and undisturbed. This attitude echoes with the ideas of Rohim who is regarded as a hard-line, Muslim who vehemently rejects the Islam Nusantara movement. For Rohim, Islam offers no ideology to reject *kuffār* (unbelievers), as long as they do not disturb Muslims, while maintaining the absolute superiority of Islam to other faiths.²⁸

8 Ambivalence in Islam Nusantara

Generally speaking, the word 'tolerance' pertains to manifold concepts. However, as far as Islam Nusantara is concerned, there seems to be two major domains of the concept of tolerance: tolerance towards local culture in terms of religious rituals; and tolerance towards minority groups. In relation to the former tolerance, we find clear statements from the advocates of Islam Nusantara. Muhammadun, one of the executives of the NU branch in Yogyakarta, decidedly asserts that the religious rituals in Java should be accepted as Islam in order to complete Islam in Indonesia, which they call Islam Nusantara.²⁹ He mentioned several rituals as examples, including *kenduren* or *tahlil* (joint prayer), *sekaten* (the procession of the day of Muḥammad's birthday), *sedekah bumi* (offering food to the deity in land and sea), and the tradition in Kudus in Java, where they use buffalo as a sacrifice to Allāh rather than a goat.³⁰

Ahmad Ishomuddin, a high-profile NU leader, also explains that there should be tolerance in relation to *adat*, or custom. For example, he finds no obstacle for shaking hands with women where that specific custom is accepted, and it is also permissible for a Muslim to conduct *ziarah*, or visit a grave, and make

27 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 10 March 2018.

28 Interviews with the author, Solo, 30 December 2017 and 18 March 2018.

29 Interview with the author, Bantul, 15 March 2018.

30 Interview with the author, Bantul, 15 March 2018.

prayers to Allāh through a mediator. He presents more concrete examples of the relationship between Islam and local *adat* in the following:

Islam should accommodate with local culture and custom [*adat*] as we have the concept that Islam should be in accordance with the place and the time [*shalihun li kulli zamanin wa makanin*]. For example, the share of women's inheritance can be greater in a matrilineal society, though Islamic *syariah* acknowledges the greater share for men. It is also fine that Muslims and non-Muslims are buried in the same complex.³¹

Ishomuddin insists that the essential concepts of Islam Nusantara and the authentic teachings of Islam mutually correspond, and he mentions typical characteristics of the common values of both as follows: *tasaamuh* (tolerance); *itidaal* (justice), *tawaazun* (balance), *tawassuth* (moderateness); and *tasyawur* (valuing discussion).³² Ishomuddin emphasises the core idea of Islam, that is, *Islam rahmatan lil alamin* or 'Islam as a blessing for all'. Yet, one of the NU executives in fact objected to a view of Ishomuddin's at a meeting with the author, saying that the burial site of Muslims should be separated from that of non-Muslims, which suggests that Islam Nusantara has not yet offered a unanimous view on 'tolerance'.

Nonetheless, it is true that the concept of tolerance is recurrently emphasised in the movement of Islam Nusantara, while hard-line Muslims, including Rohim, clearly elaborate the Islamic tenet on the concept of tolerance. However, the advocates of the Islam Nusantara movement themselves seem to have exhibited a rather abstract attitude towards tolerance compared to fundamentalists, especially on the issues relating to minorities, including the historically persecuted Ahmadiyya (or Ahmadiyah)³³ movement, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. With regard to the religious minority of Shī'a, NU is invariably clear that Sunnī Islam is their tenet, and Islam Nusantara is for the Sunnī community (*Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah*) worldwide; however, Islam Nusantara proponents almost unanimously agreed that Sunnī and Shī'a Muslims should coexist in a harmonious manner. Nonetheless, the

31 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 7 March 2018.

32 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 7 March 2018. This is also mentioned in *International Summit of the Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) & Deklarasi Nahdlatul Ulama*, 51.

33 Ahmadiyah was established by Punjabi Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad in northern India at the end of nineteenth century. There are two major schools: *Lahore*, which regards Aḥmad as a "renewer" of Islam; and *Qadian*, which takes Aḥmad as the last Prophet (Ricklefs 2012: 48).

degree and extent of tolerance in Islam Nusantara varies depending on individual understandings rather than an institutional definition.

For example, some young NU activists who actively campaign on behalf of Islam Nusantara do believe that the existence of Ahmadiyya can be accepted, and the followers of Ahmadiyya can be regarded as Muslims, although their concept of Muhammad is deemed wrong.³⁴ On the other hand, some NU executives state that Ahmadiyya is theologically wrong, and their false beliefs about Ahmad should be corrected, adding that Ahmadiyya or its members should not be the target of attack.³⁵ We find that the difference of attitudes between the two towards Ahmadiyya is that the former has no intention to alter Ahmadiyya, while the latter intends to bring them back to the 'right path' of Islam. Nonetheless, one of the advisory board members of NU, Ma'ruf Amin, clearly stated that Ahmadiyya was unacceptable on the official website of NU in 2005 (*NU Online* 2005).

The Islam Nusantara movement has also failed to set a clear position on another minority group, LGBT Indonesians. While there is no mention in the official declaration of Islam Nusantara, different opinions on sexual minorities exist among advocates of Islam Nusantara. Khotimatul, a leader of the women's association of NU in Yogyakarta, shows her humane attitude towards the LGBT community by supporting the identities of transgender people, without judging whether they are right or wrong.³⁶ On the other hand, S. Amin, one of the executives of NU, believes that LGBT people are wrong, and they should be taken back to the right path of Islam, though there is no need to abuse or persecute them.³⁷

This discrepancy also suggests that Islam Nusantara has failed to present a solution for the discrimination against the minorities. Islam Nusantara in fact remains ambivalent on certain social issues, such as Ahmadiyya and LGBT people, while it has taken a clear position on the adaptation of local culture in Islamic practice. Azis Fachrudin, a young Muslim intellectual, is right to point out that the urgent need for Islam Nusantara to present its stance on minority groups, lest it be "a new name for old content" (Fachrudin 2015).

34 Anonymous interview with the author.

35 Anonymous interview with the author.

36 Interview with the author, Bantul, 15 March 2018.

37 Interview with the author, Jakarta, 8 March 2018.

9 Conclusion

The ambivalence found in the Islam Nusantara movement seems to have contributed to the avoidance of intricate religious discussions. Almost all advocates of Islam Nusantara vaguely admit the supremacy of Islam over other religions; however, they never explicitly emphasise the ascendancy of Islam. Zastrow, a lecturer at NU University in Jakarta, states using a clever metaphor that “I would say that my wife is best, when I am asked about the supremacy of Islam over other faiths.”³⁸

This ‘pacifist’ attitude shows clear contrast with that of more ‘liberal’-minded Muslims who state that all religions are equal. The liberal Islam movement, such as Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL), was branded as too extreme with overwhelming secularism and was criticised severely in the early 2000s. The Islam Nusantara movement tactfully avoids theological controversies, and this leads us to understand that the movement contains ambivalence on sensitive issues.

The Islam Nusantara movement obviously accepts several metamorphoses in religious practices and rituals. However, the need to retain the authenticity of Islam at the same time seems to have never been abandoned in the movement. For instance, they emphasise the linkage between Nusantara and the Prophet Muḥammad. The residents of ‘Muslim society’ seem to be unwilling to be branded as impious; thus, they emphasise the rightfulness of Islam Nusantara. In this sense, the attitudes of the advocates of Islam Nusantara and fundamentalists occasionally overlap. This is a time when we have difficulties in drawing a clear line between ‘Islamic society’ and ‘Muslim society’.

In other words, the Islam Nusantara movement, which has emerged from Muslim society, necessitates ‘authentic’ Islam as a basic tenet of an Islamic society. These two major components of Islam mutually complement each other: so-called fundamentalists accept cultural elements in their social behaviour including wearing traditional clothes, while Islam Nusantara advocates emphasise their linkage with the Prophet. This suggests that there exist some similarities between these two distinctive elements in Islam. Yet, it is the Islam Nusantara movement’s ambivalence that differentiates it from Salafist-type Islam and the residents of Islamic society.

Importantly, the Islam Nusantara movement is evidently reactive to the emergence of extremism as the official declaration acknowledges. It could be effective in promoting the peaceable aspects of Islam. However, it should be noted that Islam Nusantara contains potential for promoting the idea that

³⁸ Interview with the author, Jakarta, 10 March 2018.

any version of Islam other than Islam Nusantara is belligerent and thus wrong, which could create psychological antagonism among *umat* in Indonesia.

The Islam Nusantara Movement seemingly contributes to a more moderate type of Islam and a less tense relationship with other religions in Indonesia; however, it is yet to truly confront the stricter form of Islam. This relationship will bring about either an organic development of Islam with serious yet productive discussions or a deeper mutual distrust and conflicts. We should also remember that Islam Nusantara has been a useful political tool for President Joko Widodo. In this respect, Islam Nusantara has the potential to bring about changes in a society, including stability, peaceful coexistence with the members of society, or threats to these. As its political potential is ongoing, scholars must consistently engage with the movement to witness how Islam Nusantara, Indonesian society, and the religion of Islam more broadly, influence one another.

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