

Negotiating Universality: Islam and Local Culture

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi hubungan antara teori Islam yang bersifat universal dan ekspresi budaya lokal melalui kasus Islam Nusantara. Melalui analisis tematik kualitatif terhadap wacana keagamaan dan narasi para partisipan, artikel ini berargumen bahwa persoalan utamanya bukanlah mengenai sebuah jargon khas Indonesia, melainkan tentang bagaimana umat Islam memahami Islam yang autentik dalam berbagai konteks sosial dan historis. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan adanya dua perspektif utama: pertama, pendekatan universalis yang menekankan adanya satu Islam normatif yang bersumber dari wahyu dan fikih klasik; dan kedua, pendekatan kontekstualis yang memberikan ruang bagi adaptasi lokal selama tidak bertentangan dengan syariat Islam. Esai ini juga mengungkapkan bahwa banyak argumentasi dari kedua kubu sama-sama bertumpu pada sumber-sumber yang serupa, seperti Al-Qur'an, Sunnah Nabi, kaidah-kaidah fikih, serta berbagai pernyataan mengenai sejarah Islam. Oleh karena itu, Islam Nusantara paling tepat dipahami sebagai salah satu manifestasi dari perdebatan yang lebih luas di tingkat umat Islam global mengenai ortodoksi, pluralitas, otoritas, dan mediasi budaya.

Kata Kunci: Islam Universal; Mediasi Budaya; Otoritas Keagamaan

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the relationship between the universal Islamic theory and local cultural expression through the case of Islam Nusantara. The article, through qualitative thematic analysis of religious discourse and participant narratives, argues that the main argument is not about a particular Indonesian jargon but about how Muslims interpret authentic Islam in different social and historical contexts. The findings support two main perspectives: a universalist approach that stresses a single normative Islam derived from revelation and classical jurisprudence; and a contextualist one that allows for local adaptation provided that it does not contravene Sharia. This essay also reveals that many arguments on both sides draw from similar sources such as the Qur'an, prophetic tradition, legal maxims, and statements concerning Islamic history. Islam Nusantara is best understood as one instance in a larger ummah-level debate on orthodoxy, plurality, authority and cultural mediation.

Keywords: Universal Islam; Cultural Mediation; religious authority

INTRODUCTION

Debates about Islam often move between two poles: a universal claim that Islam is one, and a lived experience where Muslims practise their faith through different cultural forms. Southeast Asia is a particularly strong demonstration of this tension, where Islam arrived in societies that had already been formed by their cultures, political histories and customs. In Indonesia, the label Islam Nusantara has become a prominent marker of this debate. However, the issue is bigger than one political or organisational slogan (Kato, 2018; Damayanti, 2025; Bowen, 1998).

The article argues that Islam Nusantara should not be the object of primary analysis but rather a case that reveals a larger Muslim struggle over the relation between revelation and locality. The central problem is the interpretation, translation, and negotiation of the universal teachings of Islam in diverse cultural contexts. The study is relevant given that contemporary discussions about Islam are increasingly about questions of authority, authenticity and social belonging. Some Muslims emphasise the need to protect Islam from being diluted by culture, while others argue that it is the universal nature of Islam that allows it to adapt to different societies. This debate is nothing new, but it is particularly visible in Indonesia given the country's religious diversity, historical pluralism, and the public prominence of Nahdlatul Ulama and other Islamic organisations (Hefner, 2000; Azra, 2004; Kato, 2018).

This way the article reframes the debate at the level of the wider ummah, and does not reduce the subject to Indonesian political branding but situates it within a long-standing Islamic intellectual conversation about orthodoxy, custom and adaptation (Asad, 1986). Scholarship on Islam and locality has often shown that Muslim communities do not live religion in a uniform way. Some authors emphasise the multiplicity of Islams, others prefer terms such as discursive tradition, Islamdom or Islamicate to define the cultural expanse of Muslim life.

These approaches challenge the idea that there is one form of Islam that is socially recognised, emphasising the diversity that geography, history, language,

and social structure produce (El-Zein, 1977; Asad, 1986; Hodgson, 1974; Bowen, 2012). Related scholarship has addressed the tension between universalism and local adaptation. Bowen's question "What is universal and local in Islam?" is still useful because it moves the focus away from the question of whether local practice is "authentic" in some abstract sense, to the question of how Muslims themselves define validity, continuity and difference (Bowen, 1998). This perspective is important because it allows scholars to analyze the lived negotiation between scripture and custom rather than assuming that one always cancels the other.

Studies of Islam Nusantara usually present it as a model of acculturated or moderate Islam that emerged in Indonesia's plural society. Supportive scholarship argues that Indonesian Islam developed through gradual cultural negotiation rather than coercive replacement, making local custom an important resource for religious life (Kato, 2018; Damayanti, 2025; Supena, 2002). Critical scholarship, however, warns that local labels can be used to weaken universal religious standards or blur the distinction between Islamic law and cultural habit. The present article builds on both strands but relocates the discussion within a broader framework of Muslim authority (Ichwan, 2013; Ahmed, 2016; Kato, 2018).

It is necessary to emphasize some key points of this general theory, because all problems related with Islam Nusantara do not only occur within the borders of Indonesia. On contrary, these problems appear in every country of the Muslim World, when certain historical conditions force Muslims to think about their own customs and re-examine certain dogmas and norms. Therefore, there are different aspects – such as language, rites, clothing, etc. – where Muslims reinterpret universal truths according to their locality. Hence, it becomes possible to study the mutual influence of universalism and locality in modern Islam through the example of Islam Nusantara (Bowen, 2003; Bowen, 2012; Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996; Kato, 2018).

The concept of 'Islam' proposed by Talal Asad as a discursive tradition seems very helpful in studying the problem of interaction of universality and particularity in the context of Islam. According to the author's opinion, the idea of 'discourse tradition' makes it possible to avoid using the term 'essence' in explaining the phenomenon and focus attention on actual discourse processes and discussion

(Asad, 1986; Asad, 1993; Marsden, 2005). In other words, instead of trying to find out what 'true' Islam really means, one should analyze how various authoritative texts, institutions, groups negotiate meanings of right practice throughout history. One of the most interesting ideas offered by Marshall Hodgson was distinguishing the notions of "Islam", "Islamdom" and "Islamicate". In his works, the scholar suggests analyzing the difference among the religion of Islam, the societies living under the domination of Muslim civilization and the cultural products affected by the existence of Islam outside its purely religious aspect (Hodgson, 1974). Thus, it is clear why it is acceptable to regard local culture as belonging to Muslim civilization and at the same time consider it separate from doctrines. Other authors write about the necessity of making similar distinctions while considering Islamic law (Hooker, 2003; Feener, 2007; Ali, 2011).

RESEARCH METHOD

The research adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology using a combination of thematic analyses of religious argumentation as well as interview narratives of participants' experience and existing scholarship about Islam Nusantara and Muslim Universality. It has been considered that qualitative inquiries have been designed specifically for interpreting meanings, experiences and social construction in a given context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A total number of thirty participants from diverse organisational/institutional backgrounds were purposively sampled for participation in the interviews. They represented all possible views regarding the relationship between universal Islam and local expressions in culture. Their inclusion ensured heterogeneity in responses and hence provided sufficient data to explore the topic under consideration adequately.

These consisted of members/leaders belonging to different groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, University Rectors, Salafists and the members of Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI). These groups have adopted differing stances ranging from those who support Islam Nusantara, to those who maintain an indifferent stance and even some who criticise Islam Nusantara. The diversity within the sample ensures that the analysis captures varying perspectives

which would be necessary when discussing issues relating to religion particularly those that pertain to Islamic theology, jurisprudence, dogma and practice.

The researcher do not include actual quotes from participants, though the researcher did synthesize and summarize their comments for this report. It's important to note that my goal with this project wasn't merely to provide a descriptive account of some people's experiences or attitudes towards issues surrounding universality/locality relations in Islam, nor am I seeking to highlight specific individuals more than others based upon their responses.

Rather, the researcher sought to develop a broad picture of underlying trends and tendencies in how different stakeholders perceive these relationships, including the ways in which they draw support for particular positions from scripture, legal maxims, histories, etc. Creswell notes that one key characteristic of qualitative inquiry such as ours is its focus on providing descriptions and interpretations over statistical analysis.

Damayanti observes further that "thematic analyses should be organized around 'analytically significant themes' and should allow readers to trace connections among topics..." (p. 2). With those principles in mind, we have undertaken the process of identifying such themes emerging out of our data set, analyzing them critically, and presenting the results in a manner accessible to interested researchers.

We've attempted throughout this section to maintain an objective stance toward all parties involved—both sides of the dispute regarding Islam Nusantara—and seek only to illuminate salient aspects relevant to understanding the nature of controversies related generally to Islam/universalism issues worldwide today (see also Asad (1986), Eickelman & Piscatori (1996), Feener (2007), and Ahmed (2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings show there is a strong universalist opinion from participants who argue that Islam is just one religion having a single-normative centre, even though they agree there might be variations on certain norms due to different local customs; however, the core of their belief and the basics of its law have been preserved. Such people usually focus much on the universality of Quranic teachings and try to

highlight the importance of the traditional juristic approaches to Islamic texts. Moreover, they warn against treating local expressions as new forms of religious identity since it would distort what is essentially a unitary concept. From such an interpretation, Islam Nusantara seems very controversial if viewed as a particular form of Islam instead of a unique cultural style of Muslim life (Bowen, 1998; Ahmed, 2016; Ichwan, 2013; Kato, 2018).

Universalists assume the central point of the normativity of Islam has always been in the revelation part and legal tradition. Therefore, all other elements should be considered supportive. On the whole, such individuals understand Islam as being universal and transcendental concerning regions, ethnicity, and history. Local expressions may differ but cannot replace the common ideas underlying Islamic doctrines (Bowen, 1998; Asad, 1986; Hodgson, 1974).

Consequently, the attempt to create some name for a culturally specific approach representing another kind of Islam looks quite inappropriate since it introduces an innovative element alienating from the main Islamic idea. Universalism here reflects the widespread concern regarding the risk of losing sight of the unity of Revelation because of local identification tags (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996; Hefner, 2000; Woodward, 1996).

This view seems consistent with other criticisms made against labeling based on locality. It reflects concerns about how revealing the uniqueness of Islam through a local label threatens its unity of revelation (Bowen, 1998; Asad, 1993; Hodgson, 1974).

Participants with this belief generally do not accept ideas of cultural specificity as indicators for Islam. After all, Islam is universal by definition, therefore no need to qualify Islam with geographic qualifiers. Hence, the usage of the term Islam Nusantara may make sense from a cultural point of view but cannot serve as theological categories.

A second group accepts the principle of universality but maintains that one needs to consider the local context when engaging in religious practices. A common argument among them refers to 'urf – general customs – or *maslahah* – public interest as necessary frameworks for understanding what God requires in different places and times. For these participants, there is nothing wrong in considering

cultural-specificity as long as foundational tenets of religion remain constant. This approach allows embracing both universality of the revelations and adaptability of interpretations to specific localities (Feener, 2007; Hooker, 2003; Ahmed, 2016; Duderija, 2012).

The difference between proponents of contextualization versus those rejecting localization lies in interpretation of the universality concept. Contextualists argue that since Islam arrived at many communities, each having their own history, language, and culture, naturally different forms of expressions emerged (Kato, 2018; Damayanti, 2025; Azra, 2004; Azra, 2006). Thus, they see no reason to lament diversity and regard localization efforts as an advantage, highlighting the ability of Islam to embrace and reflect different identities.

The most relevant conclusion drawn from the analysis is the fact that both disputing parties usually hold more foundational assumptions than their discourse admits. Even the opponents of the Islam Nusantara idea do not object to local custom if it clearly does not violate Sharia rules. Likewise, those who support the concept do not say that any local custom becomes obligatory, arguing that it can be included into Islam only as long as it stays inside of Islamic boundaries. Thus, the fundamental opposition in this case is not about the existence of locality but about the right to define its limits (Bowen, 2003; Hooker, 2003; Feener, 2007; Kato, 2018).

It is crucial for understanding of the debate within the context of ummah. This conflict cannot be seen as the confrontation between "traditional" and "modern" Muslims or even between "Arab" and "Indonesian" varieties of Islam. It is rather a continuous struggle for interpretive dominance: whose voices of Islam become definitive, what sources can be considered authoritative, and how much latitude can be allowed to the local custom. It is relevant to many other Muslim communities, which is why the particular case of Indonesia should be viewed as a part of the general trend (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996; Asad, 1986; Bowen, 2012; Kato, 2018).

In the broader context of ummah, this dispute is an illustration of the recurring pattern in Islamic history. Muslims have constantly reconsidered the relation between universal revelation and local customs by means of legal, theological, pedagogical and political discourses. The case of Indonesia should be interpreted as the specific example of this larger process, and not the unique occurrence (Hefner,

2000; Azra, 2004; Woodward, 1996; Woodward, 2010).

Scholarly research on the phenomenon of local adaptation in the context of Islam provides the grounds for the explanation of its viability. It has been found that religion usually is never reproduced intact; instead, religious forms are incorporated into an already established moral universe and articulated anew through new linguistic forms. Such an approach explains why it is common to observe such a combination as local ritual forms, clothing styles, local sermons, and regional forms of devotion with the claim of universal orthodoxy. Islam is not made local unintentionally; it becomes local through regular procedures of social reception and religious education (Geertz, 1976; Beatty, 1996; Smith-Hefner, 2000; Woodward, 1996).

On the other hand, it is also important to take into account the criticism regarding the possibility of ideological implications of local adaptation. In the case when local practice becomes the marker of universal orthodoxy, it may meet resistance of those who understand it as a challenge to the boundaries of their religion. Such an observation can explain the reason for which the notion of Islam Nusantara became a subject of discussion: not because of the inherent illegitimacy of local culture but because it was understood as one particular variant of Islam (Damayanti, 2025; Kato, 2018; Ichwan, 2013).

It is also important to emphasize that the discourse in Islam implies hierarchical distinctions. Participants of debate and scholars distinguish between the core beliefs, laws, non-legislative prophetic practice, customary practices, and stylistic history of Islam. The significance of the distinction is obvious because otherwise, any analysis would reduce everything to an absolute dichotomy of "Islamic" and "non-Islamic". However, there may be some practices which are not related to religion at all, some practices which are desirable and practices which are questionable but still do not threaten the unity of faith (Ahmed, 2016; Feener, 2007; Hooker, 2003; Lukens-Bull, 1999).

This nuanced interpretation explains why one can support the concept of Islam Nusantara without giving up on universalism. Its proponents do not assert that every local practice is sacred. They argue that the universality of Islam allows various forms of expression as long as they are within the confines of the ethical and

legal codes of the tradition. It reflects the jurisprudential tradition according to which local customs can be used as long as they do not conflict with the explicit revelation. Thus, the matter here is not the importance of culture itself but rather the standards of its assessment from the religious perspective (Feener, 2007; Hooker, 2003; Ali, 2011).

The general value of this case study for Islamic studies research is the way it helps to approach the problem of Islam. If Islam is considered in purely abstract terms of doctrine, the local practices can be seen as deviations. If viewed in purely cultural terms, the revelation can be considered secondary. The most comprehensive approach includes both perspectives. Islam Nusantara is a good case study as it pushes scholars to consider how the universal religion manifests in local communities (Asad, 1986; Bowen, 2012; Hodgson, 1974; Kato, 2018).

In this regard, the article represents a moderate position between orthodoxy and relativism. The universal claims of Islam are relevant, but they are interpreted within particular human societies. The relevant issue is not whether Islam is universal or local, but rather the way in which its universality acquires meaning within the local context. This is the lesson learned from Indonesian discourse (Bowen, 1998; Asad, 1993; Duderija, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The local-universal tension inherent in Islam must be seen as a structural feature of Muslim existence, rather than as a temporary conflict around one phrase only. Islam Nusantara offers a valuable case to study since it highlights the question of the authentic, adaptable, and authoritative in an unusually explicit manner. But the core question goes beyond: how Muslims around the world define the universal core of Islam and what can be properly mediated by the local culture (Bowen, 1998; Kato, 2018; Damayanti, 2025).

The research describes two main viewpoints. Universalists emphasize the need for a single Islam based on revelation and legal orthodoxy, while contextualists highlight the right of local mediation by way of custom, common interest, and adaptation throughout history. At the same time, the conflict is not binary because both parties accept a certain amount of local mediation if it does not violate Sharia

rules. In this way, the conflict reveals not a clear split but the process of negotiating interpretive boundaries (Asad, 1986; Feener, 2007; Hooker, 2003; Ahmed, 2016).

This paper argues that the best way of understanding Islam Nusantara is in seeing it neither as a new religion nor as a mere political slogan but as a case illustrating a wider issue of how Islam is incarnated in different societies. The issue is essential for understanding the ummah because Muslim communities constantly look for ways of embodying their faith to remain true to revelations yet relevant to their own society (Hefner, 2000; Azra, 2004; Woodward, 2010; Kato, 2018).

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