

## INTELLECTUAL ATTITUDES TOWARD ISLAM NUSANTARA AND THEIR RELIGIOUS IDEAS

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**Article history:** Received: February 12, 2023 | Revised: June 27, 2023 | Available online: September 1, 2023

**How to cite this article:** Marheni, Cut Linda. "Intellectual Attitudes Toward Islam Nusantara and Their Religious Ideas." *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 18, no. 1 (2023): 75-98. DOI: [10.15642/islamica.2023.18.1.75-98](https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2023.18.1.75-98)

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**Abstract:** Secondary literature examines the legitimacy of Islam Nusantara, taking into account Islamic legal maxims and institutional rejection, often stemming from religious reasons. This research aims to comprehend participants' attitudes towards Islam Nusantara (IN) and their religious justifications, including their understanding of religious authority and the application of Islamic Law. This is crucial for elucidating the primary factors behind varying IN attitudes, whether driven by religious considerations or other factors. We argue that religious differences are not the primary determinants of IN attitudes, as evidenced by participants' discussions regarding religious authority and the application of Islamic Law. While a minority of conservative participants endorse the formalization of Sharia based on textual religious authority, the majority, including some who express reservations about IN, perceive Sharia as a set of values. They advocate for contextual interpretations that align with IN's values but stop short of full endorsement. In a broader context, this study uncovers the intricate interplay between religious ideas and socio-political attitudes within diverse Muslim groups. It enhances our understanding of the dynamic relationship between religion, society, and diverse interpretations.

**Keywords:** Islam Nusantara; Religious Authority; Islamic Law; Formalisation of Sharī'ah; Substantive Values.

## Introduction

Like other recurring ideas, Islam Nusantara (IN) is contested in nature. In 2015, at the 33<sup>rd</sup> Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Jombang, East Java, under the theme “Affirming Islam Nusantara Idea for the Indonesian and Global Civilisation,” the word “Islam Nusantara” was formally introduced and contested for the first time.<sup>1</sup> Following this declaration, academics have provided numerous definitions of IN. Woodward defined IN as “Islam of [the] Southeast Asian Archipelago, alluding to Indonesian traditionalists’ interpretation of Islam.”<sup>2</sup> After several interpretations of the term emerged, NU defined IN in 2018 as Sunni Islam (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*) practised, preached, and developed in conformity with the features of the archipelago’s society and culture.<sup>3</sup> IN was introduced not to alter the Islamic doctrine but to address how to interpret and implement divine revelations in an evolving society. Moqsith grounds the legitimacy of Islam Nusantara on *maslahah mursalah*, *urf*, and *istilhsān*.<sup>4</sup> It strongly focuses on moderation, tolerance, and adaptability to local culture.<sup>5</sup> However, because it is a relatively new idea, IN sparks much dispute and passionate discussion between its proponents and critics, even between the inner circle of NU,<sup>6</sup> some commentators argue that the phrase IN lacks conceptual clarity, which is one of the causes of

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism,” *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 21 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Woodward, ”Islam Nusantara: A Semantic and Symbolic Analysis,” *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 6, no. 2 (2017), 181-198.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmad Faiz Ibnu Sani, “Munas Alim Ulama NU Sepakati Pengertian Islam Nusantara,” *Tempo*, March, 1 (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Moqsith Ghazali, *Metodologi Islam Nusantara* (Bandung: Mizan, 2015), 106-116.

<sup>5</sup> Okamoto Masaaki, “Anatomy of the Islam Nusantara Program and the Necessity for a ‘Critical’ Islam Nusantara Study,” *Islam Nusantara: Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2020), 13-40.

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Noor Harisudin, “Islām wa Fiqh Nusantara: al-Tanāfus ‘alā al-Huwīyah wa ‘Alāqat al-Sultāh wa al-Ramz al-Dīnī li Jamīyah Nahdlatul Ulama,” *Studia Islamika* 24, no. 3 (2017), 503-554.

these disagreements.<sup>7</sup> For instance, NU advocates continue to disagree about the nature and extent of IN.<sup>8</sup>

This study aims to find participants' justifications for IN from those who support or criticize it, which has not been covered by the existing literature, especially those who criticized it. This study's results will bring into context the dynamic interplay between religious ideas and socio-political attitudes among Indonesian Muslims, which is a diverse, complex and ongoing debate, as suggested by Kersten.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, we argue that although few conservative critical participants supported the formalization of the Sharia based on their textual understanding of religious authority, most participants viewed Sharia as substantive values and suggested a contextual understanding of textual authorities. Both critical, supportive and neutral to IN shared this understanding. It means that different understanding of religious ideas, including the understanding of religious authority and the application of Islamic Law, is not dominant reasons behind different attitudes toward IN.

This article will be classified into introduction, results, discussion, and conclusion. Results and discussion will cover participants' attitudes about IN and religious ideas. The attitudes will be classified into supportive, neutral, and critical, while religious ideas will be classified into participants' understanding of religious authority and their understanding of the application of Islamic Law.

This study utilizes a qualitative research method. Thirty experts from academics, ulemas and Muslim intellectuals were purposely sampled, interviewed in-depth, and analyzed using Braun and Clark's thematic analysis method.<sup>10</sup> The participants came across Islamic organizations with a broad demographic and educational background to realize variations, such as NU, MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council), INSIST (Institutes for Study of Islamic Thought), Salafis, and NUGL (NU Garis Lurus) backgrounds.

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<sup>7</sup> Khabib Muhammad Luthfi, "Islam Nusantara: Relasi Islam dan Budaya Local," *Shahib: Journal of Islamicate Multidisciplinary* 1, no. 1 (2016), 1-12.

<sup>8</sup> Burhani, "Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response."

<sup>9</sup> Carol Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 178.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006).

## Differing Attitudes about Islam Nusantara

Participants' attitudes toward IN varied: more or less supportive, more or less critical and neutral. For short, the attitudes will be classified into three categories: supportive, critical and neutral and when necessary, they will be qualified. It is important to note that this is not a clear division, as many participants shared mixed attitudes between the three categories, where some participants' comments were coded into more than one code for the attitudes. However, the categorization was based on participants' overall justifications.

With no hesitation, participants with a NU background supported IN and other participants with different backgrounds. Commenting on his agreement on IN, Abidin Wakano stated, "from a theological perspective, I have the same perspective as developed by NU."<sup>11</sup> Mujiburrahman defined IN as contextualization and stated, "yes, I agree with contextualization; I think contextualization is necessary."<sup>12</sup> Nasaruddin Umar highlighted, "I cannot entirely agree with those who consider IN a deviant sect. What was wrong? Do not judge IN as heretical just because we do not understand it!"<sup>13</sup>

However, those supportive participants' responses were not without criticisms. They pointed out minor criticisms about IN, such as the concept's bias,<sup>14</sup> the initiative's excessive emphasis on local culture and the promotion's massiveness, and the need for more figures who can provide proper clarifications—besides promoters' linen attitudes towards interfaith relations.<sup>15</sup>

This sentiment was shown by participants who viewed IN from the social sciences perspective. This sentiment is also shared by participants who showed a balance of mixed attitudes between supportive and critical; in a sense, it was challenging to define whether they supported or not.

Due to their approaches to IN from a social perspective, some participants expressed neutral attitudes. The following

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<sup>11</sup> Online interview with Abidin Wakano on September 9, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Online interview with Mujiburrahman on November 3, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Online interview with Nasaruddin Umar on January 27, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Online interview with Mujiburrahman on November 3, 2021. He highlighted the bias of IN as either Model of reality or a model for reality.

<sup>15</sup> Online interview with Aisyah Kara on September 25, 2021.

statements examples respectively evidence Kamaruzzaman Bustaman Ahmad expressed his opinion stating, “It is not like, I do not support it, IN for me, I will take it as the study of Islam as a subject in an academic discipline, rather than Islam as a faith-based religion.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Komaruddin Hidayat, answering interview questions about his support for IN, responded, “it is necessary to distinguish Islam as a normative doctrine contained in the Qur'an from Islam, an expression and cultural articulation, which is remarkably diverse influences and is influenced by the region where Islam enters.”<sup>17</sup>

These extracts highlighted the attitudes of neutral participants that they did not consider whether to support IN or criticize it. This attitude of separating Islamic knowledge from Western social methodologies, termed by Abbas<sup>18</sup> as “intellectual dualism,” which she defined as a system of categorizing knowledge, argues that the Western and Islamic intellectual traditions are two distinct and mainly autonomous discourses. As a result, dualists divide canonical writings, methodological tools, ground principles, and metaphysical assumptions into the Western tradition and the Islamic tradition into entirely separate categories. They also separate assertions about the nature of truth. Modern Western philosophy is considered a “Western academic” body of knowledge.

In contrast, the revelation of the Qur'an and the principles that the Prophet Muhammad upheld are interpreted as “Islamic truths” and “Muslim truths,” respectively. It has influenced some Indonesian Muslim intellectuals in perceiving Islamic issues, as in IN, as a phenomenon within Muslim society, recognizing its intricate connections to the acculturation of religion and culture underlying the study of Islam in Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> It highlighted that different attitudes toward IN are not merely due to religious reasons.

Neutral attitudes were also evident among a few participants who justified IN from a religious perspective. However, most of them also have several criticisms of IN, for instance, its social impacts, the claim and designation of the term “Aswaja” for NU, and

<sup>16</sup> Online interview with Kamaruzzaman Bustamam Ahmad.

<sup>17</sup> Online interview with Komaruddin Hidayat, February 8, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Megan Brankley Abbas, *Whose Islam?: The Western university and modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2021) 4.

<sup>19</sup> Chiara Formichi, “Islamic Studies or Asian Studies? Islam in Southeast Asia,” *The Muslim World* 106, no. 4 (2016), 696-718.

the attitudes of NU figures in defining interfaith tolerance. For instance, Saiful Bahri noted, “I am not entirely a hundred per cent in favour of IN, but also not totally against it... we will find out what IN covers, but if it eliminates original teachings over local culture, I do not think it is right.”<sup>20</sup> Fahmi Salim, who raised several criticisms of IN, provided the following response when asked about his position: “It is not an issue of supporting or opposing IN. The reality is that Islam in Indonesia is indeed distinctive. There are civil organizations and dakwa institutions. There is the power of civil society, which is what drives Islamic *da’wah*. How Islam in Indonesia meets national interests is a blessing.”<sup>21</sup>

Some participants showed criticism of IN to various degrees. These participants had backgrounds with INSIST, MUI, Muhammadiyah, NUGL and Salafist preachers.

Responding to the first interview questions about how he understood IN, Syamsuddin Arif noted, “We are tired of these things.” He added, “My reaction was surprised, but I can understand it.”<sup>22</sup> Luthfi Bashori noted, “Islam Nusantara must be opposed because it arises from mere narrow thinking.”<sup>23</sup> The justifications of those critical participants include that the conceptual framework of IN promotes pluralism, secularism, and Liberalism,<sup>24</sup> opposes the Formalisation of Sharia,<sup>25</sup> and that IN is not clear as a concept. The criticism also covers the lexical meaning suggested by the word “Islam Nusantara”<sup>26</sup> that violates the universality of Islam.<sup>27</sup> They also criticized it based on the promotor’s permissive attitudes regarding interfaith relations and having double standards. They mean by the term that IN promotor were critical of different Muslim ideas while promoting interfaith harmony with

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<sup>20</sup> Online interview with Saiful Bahri, September 24, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Online interview with Fahmi Salim, January 8, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Online interview with Syamsuddin Arif, August 31, 2021

<sup>23</sup> Online interview with Luthfi Bashori, September 15, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Online interview with Hamid Fahmi Zarkasyi, June 8, 2022; Participant 1 (pseudonym) and Syamsuddin Arif, August 31, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Online interview with Fahmi Salim, January 8, 2022 and Luthfi Bashori, September 15, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Participant 1, August 31, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Online interview with Ikhwan Djalil, September 21, 2022; Husnel Anwar, September 17, 2022; Participant 1, August 31, 2021; Hamid Fahmi Zarkasyi, June 8, 2022; Syamsuddin Arif, August 31, 2021.

non-Muslims.<sup>28</sup> The motivation behind the emergence of IN to counterbalance radicalism for those critical participants was also a strawmen argument, which they view as a sort of exaggeration and far from reality.<sup>29</sup>

## Ideas about Authority and its Sources in Islam

Religious authority is an elusive concept and notoriously difficult to define. It can assume several forms and functions: The ability (chance, power, or right) to define correct belief and practice, or orthodoxy and orthopraxy, respectively; to shape and influence the views and conduct of others accordingly; to identify, marginalize, punish or exclude deviance, heresy and apostasy and their agents and advocates. In the monotheistic religions founded on revealed scripture, religious authority further involves the ability (chance, power, or right) to compose and define the canon of “authoritative” texts and the legitimate methods of interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

Within Sunni Islam, to which all of our participants belong, the most authoritative centre is God and the Prophet, represented by the Qur'an and Sunna. It affects that the text is the authoritative centre in Islam.<sup>31</sup> Muslims strive to define this divine will, but no one has the authority to claim its truthfulness (determination of meaning). Every mujtahid (a person who applies original analysis and independent judgement to legal issues) is equal and correct in their *ijtihad*, which leads to doctrinal diversity in Islam.<sup>32</sup>

This section will provide data underlying this doctrinal diversity. Critical Participants with traditional backgrounds provided more conservative legal authority supporting their claim of the illegitimacy of IN. More progressive participants, either with modernist or traditionalist backgrounds, provided a more non-traditional

<sup>28</sup> Online interview with Syamsuddin Arif, August 31, 2021; Luthfi Bashori, September 15, 2021; Ahmad Ubeidi, January 6, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Online interview with Syamsuddin Arif, August 31, 2021; Fahmi Salim, January 08, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, “Introduction: Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies: A Critical Overview,” in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, eds. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 1-14.

<sup>31</sup> Khalid Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2001), 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 10.

analysis method, new to Islamic Intellectual heritage. This sub-theme analyses participants' comments regarding the sources of authority in Islam reflected in the data concerning the following concepts of Sunna.

### *Sunna as a Source of Authority*

Sunna is, alongside the Qur'an, a normative source of Islamic law, ethics and theology for most Muslims. However, the precise definition, nature and scope of the concept of Sunna have been subject to different understandings in the Islamic intellectual tradition, with multiple groups claiming to be following the actual teachings of the Prophet of Islam.<sup>33</sup> Concerning our study, almost all participants defined Sunna as known within Islamic literature in *mustalah hadith* or *uṣul al-fiqh*. They did not discuss the Sunna-Hadīth dichotomy or another non-hadīth-dependent concept of Sunna by progressive Muslim scholars.<sup>34</sup> However, looking further into their justifications, we understood that they stood in different positions regarding how they employed the authoritativeness of the Prophet's traditions and constructed authoritarianism (claim truthfulness) based on their understanding.

### *Definition of Sunna: Classical and Progressive<sup>35</sup>*

Collected data supports the premise that few progressive participants had different perceptions concerning the definition of Sunna. Almost all participants across demographics; Salafists, modernists, traditionalists, and a few more progressive participants

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<sup>33</sup> Adis Duderija, "The Relative Status of Ḥadīth and Sunna as Sources of Legal Authority vis-à-vis the Qur'ān in Muslim Modernist Thought," in *The Sunna and Its Status in Islamic Law: The Search for a Sound Hadith*, ed. Adis Duderija (N.p.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 211-231.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 211-231.

<sup>35</sup> According to Duderija, unlike the ḥadīth-based concept of Sunna found in classical Islam, the concept of Sunna in progressive Islam has strong affinities with how that concept was understood during the formative period of Islamic thought. In this respect, I show that the concept of Sunna in progressive Islam operates within a broad contextualist and rationalist approach to Islamic theology and ethics, that it is a general ethico-behavioural embodied concept. Adis Duderija, "The Concept of Sunna in Progressive Muslim Thought," *ICR Journal* 13, no. 1 (2022), 136-148.

such as Aisyah Kara and Nasaruddin Umar still upheld the mainstream classical definition of Sunna operating within the parameters of classical Islam's *uṣūl al-fiqh* tradition, characterized by the classical conceptualization of Sunna<sup>36</sup> standard definition, as Husnel Anwar defined, "Sunna is Prophet's tradition, his companions and their *tabi'īn*."<sup>37</sup> Muhammad Nur Harisuddin also highlighted that Hadīths are records of the sayings, deeds, and the agreement of the Prophet. Peace be upon him. It never changed." Similarly, Umar also stated that "Sunna is a tradition (utterance); there are differences between *khabar*, ḥadīth, and Sunna, right, but the ḥadīth is [related] more [to] sayings.<sup>38</sup> Bashori noted, "*al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyah* must be widely understood but still within the correct Sharia standards and following the rules of the Koran and its interpretations, ḥadīth and explanations of the ulemas, and the opinions of the Salaf Aswaja scholars."<sup>39</sup>

Very few participants, even with a more progressive background, mentioned the non-hadīth-dependent concept of Sunna. Harisuddin and Kara respectively stated, "in Imām Mālik's terminology, it was called 'amal of the Medinan, means that the 'urf of the Medina people, it was not called Sunna,"<sup>40</sup> "I do not distinguish between ḥadīth and Sunna," explaining their attitudes toward the issue.<sup>41</sup>

However, a few supportive participants' comments mentioned progressive intellectuals' non-hadīth-dependent concept of the Sunna. The participants' examples were Wakano, Ahmad Suaedy, and Hidayat. Defining Sunna as stated in many classical *uṣūl al-Hadīth* at the beginning of his explanation, Wakano viewed Sunna as different from ḥadīth in that the latter only related to the sayings of the Prophet. However, in the context of [NU's] Aswaja, he continued, "the Sunna included the tradition of the ulemas." Distinguishing Sunna as evolving, different from revivalists' understanding, he explained, "Unlike some groups who say it is not pos-

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 136-148.

<sup>37</sup> A generation of Muslims who met the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Online interview with Husnel Anwar, September 17, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Online interview with Nasaruddin Umar, January 27, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Online interview with Luthfi Bashori, September 15, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Online interview with Aisyah Kara, September 25, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Online interview with Muhammad Nur Harisuddin, January 27, 2022.

sible to return to the time of the Prophet, I think we should [follow] the continuity of his Sunna.<sup>42</sup>

A more detailed extract related to Sunna as an evolving process came from Suaedy concerning the theological basis of IN, depicting several other issues related to the authority of the *Sunna*. He started, “the writing of history at the time of the Prophet Muhammad must also be considered Sunna. Historians say that many elements of the era before the Prophet and even the religion before the Prophet became part of Islam certainly did not contradict tawhid.”<sup>43</sup>

Beginning his argument by analogizing IN (the arrival of Islam in Nusantara) with the arrival of Islam in Arabia, he proposed the juncture of pre-Islamic Arabia with Islam during the revolutionary period. Meanwhile, the Prophet did not banish all socio-cultural values and morals of Arabian tribal communalism but rejected, modified, condoned, and accepted what was under the developing Qur’anic ontological and ethical-religious value system and rejected what was against it, as argued by Duderija.<sup>44</sup> He explained his understanding of working with Sunna, which he viewed as non-textual, historical dialectic, and stated, “for us, tradition<sup>45</sup> is a continuity, a transformation from old [states] to new ones; it is a dialectical transformation, and the Prophet made massive reforms in various sectors. However, he did not erase all existing traditions or physically draw a line between Islam and not.”<sup>46</sup>

The above “dialectical transformation” explanation is quite unclear unless we read further into the participants’ comments on the implication of this progressive conceptual approach, suggesting re-examination and re-reading many Islamic concepts related to Islamic law or theology from modern intellectual frameworks based on this understanding of the Sunna. From this perspective,

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<sup>42</sup> Online interview with Abidin Wakano, September 9, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Online interview with Ahmad Suedy, January 7, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Adis Duderija, “Evolution in the Concept of Sunnah During the First Four Generations of Muslims in Relation to the Development of the Concept of an Authentic Hadith as based on Recent Western Scholarship,” *Arab Law Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2012), 393-437.

<sup>45</sup> Translated from *sejarah*, could be lexically inaccurate, however, overall comments lead to this translation.

<sup>46</sup> Online interview with Ahmad Suaedy, January 7, 2022.

Sunna can be reconciled with modern Western values such as human rights and equality, as explained by Duderija.<sup>47</sup>

Suaedy suggested the terms such as *dhimmi* and *jizyah* read as protection for minority, *zakah* as agent for justice, which has the same implication as taxes, and whipping sentence in criminal law as any punishment that provides a deterrent effect based on his understanding of *maqasid al-shari'ah* as evident in these extracts,

Large caravans were needed to protect small caravans. That is the origin of the words *dhimmi* and *jizyah* that we know. They were not related to religion but to trade security. *Ahl al-dhimmah* means a small group that sought protection. So, *jizyah* were trade concepts, not political identity concepts. We want to build an understanding of the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad as a process, not as what we textually understand now.<sup>48</sup>

About the relevance of *zakah* with taxes, he noted:

We can no longer use the text as it is. We have to see what is behind the text, the *maqasid al-shari'ah* (higher objective of Islamic Law). For example, the issue of zakat is a matter of justice, so we can ask [re-examine] whether it has implications for justice or not. Lest zakat is collected at the *'amil* (*zakah* collector), the government itself. If that happens, it will not make Islam a promoter of justice but instead create inequality and authoritarianism (utterance), so that is where our discourse and study are. Suppose you [the interviewer] read “*Agama Keadilan Pajak dan Zakat*” (Religion of Tax and Zakat Justice),<sup>49</sup> for example. In that case, that is how he conducts a sophisticated philosophical study [where he argued] that zakat is the promoter of justice, protecting the community and so on. So the Qur'an's call for zakat must be understood as *maqasid al-shari'ah* to create justice, not how do we make the sentences in the yellow book become articles in [positive] laws.<sup>50</sup>

In theology, the participant suggested reading the Prophet's abrogation of Maccan idols not only as a dakwa to monotheism but also implies equality, as he highlighted,

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<sup>47</sup> Duderija, “The Concept of Sunna in Progressive Muslim Thought.”

<sup>48</sup> Online interview with Ahmad Suaedy, January 7, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Masdar Farid Masudi, *Agama Keadilan: Risalah Zakat (Pajak) dalam Islam* (Pustaka Firdaus, 1991).

<sup>50</sup> Online interview with Ahmad Suaedy, January 7, 2022.

Statues around the Ka'bah reflected domination and power. The biggest one showed that the community that owned it was the ruler of the most powerful group. The concept of one and abstract God [in Islam] is also interpreted as a social revolution. It changed the hegemonic social structure into equality. Our discourse is on such a thing. So, Islam must not only be formulated at the level of the one God and an abstract god who is no longer physical but also has implications for justice and equality for us.<sup>51</sup>

These comments support Duderija's arguments regarding the characteristics of the progressive conceptual approach to Sunna, which he terms an "ethico-behavioral embodied concept." It explains how the participant understood Sunna to work within a wide range of contextualist and rationalist approaches to Islamic theology and ethics. To the author, in progressive Muslim thought, all aspects of Sunna are either ethically based or can be carried on in action. It means that all aspects of Sunna are embodied and independent of textualists' sources in terms of epistemology and method. As such, they are separable from a textualist expression to be known, carried out, or transmitted.<sup>52</sup>

This independent methodology was also evident in the following conversation with Suaedy,

We cannot say Islam is based on the thought of the 19th-century movements, though that was based on text. Once again, we are not based on the text but are behind the text so that we can explore innovation and so on. The absorption of Islamic elements into tradition or law is textual, in yellow books written by the Ulamas. Although that was based on thorough processes and *hadīths*, that is the trend now.

When asked "Do you mean like the Sharia regional regulations?" He said, "Yes, they are. For example, there is a sentence in the yellow book that one has to be whipped at certain times. That was the text like that. According to the era's spirit, it was a very relevant text. However, we can no longer use the text as it is, so we must see what is behind it."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Duderija, "The Concept of Sunna in Progressive Muslim Thought."

<sup>53</sup> Online interview with Ahmad Suaedy, January 7 2022.

The conceptual and epistemological differences between Sunna and “authentic *ḥadīth*” are essential to the approach of progressive Muslim thought. They consider Sunna a living ethico-behavioral framework rooted in the Prophet Muhammad’s personality and the examples of other people and groups known within the formative period.<sup>54</sup> Aiming at reviving the tradition of a formative period in understanding textual authority, Suaedy argued,

So, we see that Sharia is historical. We want to return to the classical Islamic tradition, the debate tradition, and the paradigmatic tradition. The technical term [for those traditions] is *ijtihād muṭlaq*, but the process to get there is a long way off. We have to look at past debates and see if they are relevant to current debates. So, we can re-examine everything and dialectic it, we must bring all the richness of Islam in the text to the current realm. So, we do not take the text as it is in the current situation. For example, in Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, we must create interpretations and encourage an understanding of Islam as we experience it here.

This comment was similar to Fazlur Rahman’s double movements, where he suggested the double movement hermeneutics. This method provides a systematic and contextualist understanding, resulting in an interpretation that is not literalist and textualist but can constructively respond to contemporary problems.<sup>55</sup> In another article, Rahman highlighted that the early generations of Muslims sought to approximate by interpreting his example regarding the new materials at their disposal and the new needs. This continuous and progressive interpretation was also called Sunna, even if it varied according to different regions.<sup>56</sup> This approach is relatively similar to what Suaedy has noted in his comment related to the practical definition of Sunna, which is strongly related to ‘urf, given the meaning that the continuity of Sunna involved “not only the Prophet but also the ulemas throughout their interpretations and *ijtihads*”. The participant’s example of the continuity of Sunna can be seen from the activity of NU’s *bahth al-masa’il*<sup>57</sup> in

<sup>54</sup> Duderija, “Evolution in the Concept of Sunnah”; Duderija, “The Concept of Sunna in Progressive Muslim Thought.”

<sup>55</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Vol. 15 (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>56</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Sunnah and Hadith,” *Islamic Studies* 1, no. 2 (1962), 1-36.

<sup>57</sup> Literally means discussion of the problems focuses on fatwa making.

different Indonesian sub-divisions. Their fatwas were legitimate even though they differed from higher subdivisions or other religious organizations, as long as they were based on accountable methodologies. Even if those fatwas differed from those released by MUI or PNU, according to Suaedy, referring to Ismail Fajrie Alatas, they were part of Sunna. He then continued,

Sunna is the product of thinking and *ijtihad* processes based on [a particular] methodology. According to Ismail Fajrie,<sup>58</sup> the authoritativeness of the Sunna lies in that process because what is produced by *ijtihad* at the sub-district level, or the village level, still refers to it, no matter how simple it is, because he has teachers, literature and so on. The essence of Sunna is what happens in that society, reflecting the understanding of Islam itself. Indeed, there is a difference between Sunna as Prophet's *Hadīth* and that as a living tradition. However, the Sunna as a methodology also included accepting or absorbing tradition. The Sunna in the living tradition is the local practice of '*urf* towards the textual Sunna. For NU people, *tablil* is rewarding because it is '*ibādah*, even though the Prophet did not do this. So, '*urf* can create models of traditions or activities that have implications for rewards, which means part of the Sunna, Sunna *ḥasanah*, so there is *bid'ah ḥasanah*. So, we see that these creations are on the same level as creations at the socio-political level. For example, our acceptance of the nation-state and the ideology of Pancasila is part of religion, just as we carry out the *tablil* ritual, which has implications for rewards because that is part of Islam.<sup>59</sup>

According to progressive conceptions of Sunna, the concept's ethical, moral, and legal tenets are grounded in a contextualist and rationalist methodology. It acknowledges that the ethical, religious, and legal directives in the Qur'an and *Hadīth* constitute an essential component of '*urf*. This acknowledgement of the '*urfī* character of Qur'anic ethical-religious injunctions goes well beyond the confines of classical *uṣūl ul-fiqh* conceptions of '*urf*.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Ismail Fajrie Alatas, *What is Religious Authority?: Cultivating Islamic Communities in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

<sup>59</sup> Online interview with Ahmad Suaedy, January 7, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Duderija, "Evolution in the Concept of Sunnah"; Duderija, "The Concept of Sunna in Progressive Muslim Thought."

Another progressive conceptualization of Sunna is understood from Hidayat's comment, suggesting non-hierarchical authoritarianism across interpretations of the Sunna. He stated,

Sunna of the Prophet was a big lake, and scholars were like rivers that followed the Sunna. So, when you meet another river, do not deny that [their practices] are not Sunna. That is Sunna, too. Habib also claims Sunna, right? there is *Nūriyah* and *Dhurriyah*. There is another Sunna that is scholarly linked through the chains.<sup>61</sup>

### *Interpreting Sunna: Legislative-non-legislative, Contextual-textual, New Method of Interpretation*

This emphasis on Sunna's essence was shared between supportive, neutral, and critical participants, including those with a Salafist background. However, I detected an inclination toward a more textual reading of the Sunna from the data. For example, Bashori noted, "Greeting non-Muslims and saying Mary Christmas is haram."<sup>62</sup> This claim was aimed at criticism of the former chairman of the executive council of NU, Said Aqil, who wished Mary Christmast to promote a moderate and plural Indonesia. He also criticized Wahid's suggestion for Banser (a paramilitary wing of the youth organization Ansor Youth Movement (GP Ansor) affiliated with NU to protect churches and respect Christmas Day. Bashori based his justification on a *hadith* from al-Bukhārī in his *Adab al-Mufrad*, "*Al-salām ism min asmā' Allāh wada'ah fī al-ard...*"

For the participant, a Muslim who wishes a Christian a Mary Christmas at least has broken two rules of Sharia: (1) the prohibition of greeting Jews and Christians and (2) prohibition of conveying (*Salām*) to non-believers.<sup>63</sup>

This view is different from the attitudes of Suaedy, a supportive participant. Although he admitted to having never practised the greeting of non-Muslims (e.g. wishing Marry Chrismas), he understands that those who open their speech with the greetings of five

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<sup>61</sup> Online Interview with Komaruddin Hidayat, February 8, 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Online interview with Luthfi Bashori, September 15, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

religions in Indonesia (*salam lima agama*) do so as an expression of tolerance.<sup>64</sup>

Another issue mentioned by critical participants concerning the authoritativeness of Sunna was *isnād*, as Bashori noted,

Understanding Islam has to be based on authority backed up by *isnād*, the scientific way to understand it. Without it, people will be free to say whatever they want about opinions and beliefs. The ultimate authority in Islam is the Prophet, his companions and the *tabi'in*. Moreover, *ijma'* is essential. Typically, individuals misinterpret Islam because they lack *ijma'* and any knowledge tied to highly authoritative Muslim scholars, notably Salaf scholars.<sup>65</sup>

Differently, some supportive and neutral participants viewed no hierarchy between textual and contextual understanding of Sunna. Both approaches were correct, as shown in the following extracts; the first was from Muchlis Hanafi, “both desires to express their affection for the Prophet differently. One understands it literally, and the other views it in context. One should not claim he is the only one who was right.”<sup>66</sup> Zainul Milal Bizawi expressed, “Some friends believe Sunna is to appear like the Prophet by having a beard or shorter pants, while others express it with prayers or something else, and I believe both are right.”<sup>67</sup>

From the above discussion, we understand that most participants, including critical, have moderate ideas regarding the definitions of Sunna, the significance of classifying it into legislative- and non-legislative, and the importance of contextual understanding of the Sunna. Only a few participants provided a progressive, non-traditional understanding of the Sunnah. Furthermore, very few participants promoted textual interpretation of the Sunna. It means that most participants behold similar ideas concerning the authority of the Sunna.

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<sup>64</sup> Online interview with Ahmad Suaedy, January 7, 2022.

<sup>65</sup> Online interview with Luthfi Bashori, September 15, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Online interview with Muchlis Hanafi, March 13, 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Online interview with Zainul Milal Bizawi.

## Understanding of the Application of Islamic Law

Another religious idea in the data concerning participants' justification was their understanding of Islamic law's application. Between 1999 and 2002, failed attempts to impose the Jakarta Charter led to power transfer to local governments for shariatization of Indonesia's legal system through localized Islamic legislation known as Perda (*Peraturan Daerah*) Shar'i'ah. However, this development faced criticisms and opposition from secular nationalists, non-Muslims, and progressive Muslims, arguing that it contradicts Pancasila's non-sectarian goals and risks renewing the Jakarta Charter.<sup>68</sup> Some observers, such as Din Syamsuddin,<sup>69</sup> argued that this debate classified Islamic political thought in Indonesia into three categories: formalistic, substantive, and fundamentalist. The formalistic current emphasizes the use of strictly followed Islamic forms, emphasizing the symbols of Arab culture as pure Islam. The current Islamic formalism is contrary to the current substantivist approach to Shari'ah. The latter emphasizes substance rather than form and Islamic values rather than formal institutions. The main concern of this group is how Islamic values live and influence political institutions without having to give Islamic labels to these institutions. The priorities are placed more on culture to build a modern Indonesia. Cultural Islam, instead of a political Islam approach, opened up space for the possibility of the indigenization of Islam, which, in its current form, is termed as argued by many of our participants.

Some participants' responses explain contestations between these three different approaches to Sharia. Mujiburrahman, for example, explained his view on why the idea of IN was controversial. The second, for example, is that some groups want to emphasize Islamic symbols that look more like Arab society. It is a common symbol but has become a symbol of an organization or political party. Moreover, in politics, you know yourself. It is this political dimension that makes Islam Nusantara vulnerable.

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<sup>68</sup> Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia*, 178.

<sup>69</sup> Muhammad Din Syamsuddin, "Islamic Political Thought and Cultural Revival in Modern Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 2, no. 4 (1995), 47-68. See Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia*, 179- 220.

### *Islamic Law as Substantive Values*

The debate on the application of Islamic Law was also depicted from participants' justifications of IN, as many participants related their justifications with this Formalist-Substantivist discourse. However, most participants, including those who were supportive, neutral or critical and who responded about the implication of IN on Islamic law, explained their understanding of it as Substantive values. The Formalisation of the Sharia was only evident from one critical participant, where the vast majority of participants' voices coded to Substantive values. One coded to both codes, and only one of the participants coded to Formalisation of the Sharia. The example responses were from Bahri and Hamid Fahmi Zarkasyi, respectively, explained how to apply Prophet's Sunnah: "I do not mean demeaning in any way; for illustration, the Sunnah was understood as beard or isbal, which were not substances,"<sup>70</sup> "some say that toothbrushes are secular miswak, the Sunnah of the Prophet. Those people were consistent with that Sunnah. What about another Sunnah? To be kind to non-Muslims, the Sunnah of giving charity to people experiencing poverty?"<sup>71</sup>

From these extracts, we understand that those participants did not understand Islamic law as symbolic textual understanding.

The assertion of the urgency of understanding Islamic Law as substantive values was common among supportive and critical participants. Nevertheless, Supportive participants, especially the progressive ones with NU backgrounds, spoke about Islamic Law as Substantive values, usually concerning the conformity of Islam with modern values such as human rights, egalitarianism, and justice. It was evident in extracts from Wakano, saying "I believe that the Prophet advocated for equality. I also believe that verse 13 of Surah al-Ḥujurāt [49] stresses the attitude of equality. I consider the Prophet's regular interactions with inter-faith people as his approach towards promoting egalitarianism and equality."

They based the legitimacy of this interpretation on the *maqāsid al-shari'ah*, as understood from Suaedy's response below,

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<sup>70</sup> Online interview with Saiful Bahri, September 24, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Online interview with Hamid Fahmi Zarkasyi, June 08, 2022.

However, we can no longer use the text as it is, so we must see what is behind it. What *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* is behind that? For example, the issue of zakat is a matter of justice, so we can ask whether zakat in this zakat law has implications for justice. Lest zakat is collected at the amil, which is the government itself; if that happens, it will not make Islam an advocate for justice. Instead, it will create inequality and authoritarianism.

This extract aligns with Kersten's<sup>72</sup> arguments about the substantive view of Islamic Law, where they promote a discussion on the shari‘a’s goals as a conceptualization of equity and justice that is even more philosophically foundational. This further abstraction subsumes the entirety of legal reasoning into the philosophical fields of hermeneutics and ethics, also referred to as the “higher purposes of Sharia,” or *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah*. In the same manner, Ahmad Baso<sup>73</sup> explained in terms of the application of Islamic law, to determine the punishment for a thief, for example, following the *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* formula, it does not have to impose cutting off hands, but the essential spirit that brings about such a punishment, for example, is to deter and protect the interests of *al-kulliyāt al-khamṣah*.

For those participants, Islamic law as substantive value is not immune to criticisms; as Suaedy noted, “We cannot oppose the law itself, but we can examine its contents to determine how to criticize it. Therefore, we are attempting to invite colleagues to provide feedback regarding their substance.”

This excerpt is consistent with Mahfuz’s suggestion that contextual perspectives within this substantive interpretation must be retrieved through critical but appreciative re-evaluations of traditional scholarship.

### *Formalization of the Shari‘ah*

One participant who agreed with the Formalisation of the Sharia was Bashori from NUGL, who actively explained his disagreement with IN. Answering an interview question about the implication of IN on Islamic Law, he responded, “One example of

<sup>72</sup> Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia*, 180.

<sup>73</sup> Ahmad Baso, *NU Studies: Pergolakan Pemikiran antara Fundamentalisme Islam & Fundamentalisme Neo-liberal* (Jakarta: Erlangga, 2006), 145-152.

how all Indonesian Muslims violate the Sharia is by only partially carrying out religious commands.”<sup>74</sup>

This partial attitude was explained in his other comments, “Islamic leaders aware of Shari'a admitted that implementing the Jakarta Charter constitutionally was compulsory. The same goes for advocating regional Sharia regulations in several regions, with the belief that Sharia regional regulations resulted from implementing Islamic law in Indonesia.”<sup>75</sup>

From the above discussion, we understand that most participants, regardless of their attitudes toward IN, shared similar attitudes concerning applying Islamic Law as Substantive values. However, they have different attitudes concerning how far this substantivity can be applied. While few progressive participants relate most of the Islamic law to achieving modern values such as human rights and equality, most participants gave practical examples in understanding the substances of legal orders, such as the substance behind the tradition of growing a beard and the substance behind the prohibition of lengthening the garment under the ankles (*isbal*). This discussion emphasizes that the debate on applying Islamic Law substantive values or by formalization was not the dominant reason behind different attitudes toward IN.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding Islam Nusantara (IN) has revealed various attitudes among participants, ranging from supportive to neutral and critical perspectives. These viewpoints reflect the complex nature of IN as a concept, idea and expression of Islam. While Supportive and critical participants dominantly perceive their attitudes toward IN based on their views of IN itself and their religious ideas, a distinct group assumed a neutral stance due to their unique vantage point of view of IN, rooted in the social sciences. These participants approached IN as a phenomenon within Muslim society, recognizing its intricate connections to the acculturation of religion and culture and the dynamics of politics. Their diverse perspectives, shaped by social sciences considerations and intellectual frameworks, underscore the de-

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<sup>74</sup> Online interview with Luthfi Bashori, September 15, 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

bate's complexity and the need for comprehensive engagement with IN from various angles.

What is the relationship between those attitudes and participants' religious ideas underlying their justifications? The preceding discourse concerning religious authority has revealed that the majority of participants, including those with a critical, supportive and neutral attitude toward IN, maintain moderately conventional views regarding the definitions of Sunna, the significance of categorizing it into legislative and non-legislative realms, and the necessity of comprehending the Sunna within its contextual framework. A limited number of participants have introduced progressive, non-traditional interpretations of the Sunnah, and only a tiny minority have actively advocated for textual reinterpretation of the Sunna.

Similarly, concerning the application of Islamic Law, the preceding discourse reveals that most participants, irrespective of their stances toward IN, hold comparable views concerning the application of Islamic Law as substantive values. Nonetheless, disparities emerge about how this substantivity can be effectively applied. While a minority of progressive participants primarily align Islamic law with the pursuit of modern values, such as human rights and equality, the majority of participants tend to elucidate the substance of legal precepts through practical examples, such as the underlying rationale for the practice of growing a beard or the prohibition of lengthening garments beyond the ankles (*isbal*).

In conclusion, based on the findings presented, it is clear that differences in religious ideas concerning topics such as religious authority and the application of Islamic Law do not serve as the primary explanatory factors for the diverse attitudes toward IN. Despite holding mostly similar religious ideas, participants within this context demonstrate varying perspectives on IN.

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