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# Islam Nusantara: The Conceptual Vocabulary of Indonesian Diversity

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**Abstract**

This article examines recent debates surrounding Islam Nusantara within contemporary Islamic discourses in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, and assesses the concept's position as both a descriptive category and a normative agenda. Employing a qualitative approach, the study draws on a literature-based inquiry and discourse analysis of academic narratives as well as public statements that have shaped, criticized, and defended the idea of Islam Nusantara. The analysis yields three main findings. First, although the term Islam Nusantara in its current usage is relatively recent and closely associated with specific intellectual networks within Nahdlatul Ulama, the plurality it invokes is rooted in a much longer historical trajectory. Second, the concept has been transformed into a normative call to renew support for, and pride in, the diversity of Islamic beliefs and practices, particularly within an increasingly competitive landscape in which religion and politics are often positioned as intensely interconnected. Third, Islam Nusantara is constrained by a tendency toward Javanese-centric framing, which may limit the expansion of its meaning and conceptual reach. This study contributes to contemporary scholarship on the history of Islam in Southeast Asia by underscoring the need to reconsider the normative relationship between Islam Nusantara and religious diversity, while also advocating a broader and more inclusive conceptual framework that accommodates historical Islamic experiences beyond Java.

**Keywords:**

Ambiguity, Diversity, Islam Nusantara, Pluralism, Southeast Asia

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**Abstrak**

Artikel ini mengkaji perdebatan terkini seputar Islam Nusantara dalam wacana Islam kontemporer di Asia Tenggara, khususnya di Indonesia, dan menilai posisi konsep tersebut sebagai kategori deskriptif dan agenda normatif. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, studi ini mengacu pada penyelidikan berbasis literatur dan analisis wacana narasi akademis serta pernyataan publik yang telah membentuk, mengkritik, dan membela gagasan Islam Nusantara. Analisis tersebut menghasilkan tiga temuan utama. Pertama, meskipun istilah Islam Nusantara dalam penggunaannya saat ini relatif baru dan terkait erat dengan jaringan intelektual tertentu dalam Nahdlatul Ulama, pluralitas penggunaannya berakar pada lintasan sejarah yang jauh lebih panjang. Kedua, konsep tersebut telah berubah menjadi seruan normatif untuk memperbarui dukungan dan kebanggaan terhadap keragaman kepercayaan dan praktik Islam, khususnya dalam lanskap yang semakin kompetitif di mana agama dan politik sering diposisikan sebagai sangat saling terkait. Ketiga, Islam Nusantara dibatasi oleh kecenderungan terhadap kerangka kerja yang berpusat pada Jawa, yang dapat membatasi perluasan makna dan jangkauan konseptualnya. Studi ini berkontribusi pada kajian kontemporer tentang sejarah Islam di Asia Tenggara dengan menggarisbawahi perlunya mempertimbangkan kembali hubungan normatif antara Islam Nusantara dan keragaman agama, sekaligus menganjurkan kerangka konseptual yang lebih luas dan inklusif yang mengakomodasi pengalaman historis Islam di luar Jawa.

**Kata Kunci:**

Ambiguitas, Asia Tenggara, Islam Nusantara, Perbedaan, Pluralisme

## Introduction

"Islam Nusantara" – Indonesian Islam or Islam in Southeast Asia? The relationship between Islam and the Indonesian nation received a fresh boost after the fall of Suharto. As part of this new arrangment, Islam became more publicly visible and connected to public and political debates in an increasingly open, but also increasingly competitive, political landscape. When a group of Islamic scholars within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) proposed the term in 2015 as a kind of conceptual flag to rally behind for its own members and to serve as a counterpoint to radical interpretations and perceptions of Islam both in Indonesia and on a global level (Hasyim, 2018), there had already been almost two decades of heated debates on the place of Islam in post-Suharto Indonesia.

The term received a further boost of attention when, in July 2018, the West Sumatra provincial branch of the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI Sumatra Barat) issued a fatwa rejecting "Islam Nusantara" as potentially confusing and divisive (Damarjati, 2018). Online debates quickly reduced the arguments put forward by the provincial branch to the issue of novelty and the polemical question of whether the term was promoting "a new religion" (Saubani, 2021). The concept gained further prominence among wider circles when President Joko Widodo chose Ma'ruf Amin, the supreme leader (*rois 'am*) of NU as his running mate for the 2019 presidential election. Jokowi also referred to Islam Nusantara as a template for religious moderation and an antidote to radicalism in international meetings. Counter-terrorism agencies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have since incorporated aspects of Islam Nusantara into their programs and messaging (Fealy, 2018).

Many read the promotion of the term mainly as a reaction against what scholars of Islam in Indonesia have called the "Conservative Turn" (Bruinessen, 2013); the move of right-wing majoritarian Islamists from the margins of society into its center. Majoritarians believe that the governing majority "must act in the interests of the enumerated majority – as might be produced by a census – in society" (Barkey, 20221). If majoritarians win and dominate, the government will compromise minorities' basic interests and privilege members of the enumerated majority. As Stuart Hall long ago noted, this majoritarian impulse is almost irreducible to most of what passes for politics in nominally democratic states: "Politics does not reflect majorities," he famously wrote, "it constructs them" (Hall, 2017) More recently, Arjun Appadurai has examined this dynamic through what he calls "The Fear of Small Numbers:" he argues that the anxieties and uncertainties arising from globalization have latched onto minorities as discursive flashpoints. Many of those belonging to what is perceived as the majority - the product of modern and often colonial efforts to map, classify, and count populations – feel threatened by other social categories and become 'predatory,' seeking to minimize or exterminate perceived minorities.

Majoritarian Islamists in Indonesia do not so much demand privileges for those classified as Muslims by the current state bureaucracy, but rather for those they themselves deem Muslim, thereby excluding controversial Muslim congregations. They claim the right to define and classify who is Muslim and grant certain Muslim rights – such as that to benefitting from zakat money – only to those who fit their own, often nebulous and changing, criteria. Rather than focusing on defining their own core values, for instance through a primary commitment to privileging of disaster relief and the fight against structural poverty, they spend the bulk of their resources to attacking a growing list of people who, in their views, do not belong. Like

other majoritarians such as nationalists, they create a strong sense of *us* versus *them*. In his analysis of the rise of political mobilization framed in Muslim identity in Indonesia and parts of the Middle East, Vedi Hadiz connects his explanations to recent literature on the rise of right-wing parties in the US and Western Europe. Using the term "Islamic populism," he analyzes cross-class alliances that aim at bringing Islamists into the centre of political decision-making after decades of political marginalization in developmentalist military regimes that pushed piety into the private sphere and rigorously regulated religion (Hadiz, 2015). He further argues that socio-economic grievances are increasingly expressed in an Islamic lexicon (Hadiz, 2021). Some public commentators tend to simplify the political fault lines in Indonesia, and to separate Indonesian nationalists and Islamist majoritarians into two different camps. This binary, however, further romanticizes nationalism as a noble civic project of inclusion. More importantly, it ignores the important alliances that right-wing nationalists and right-wing Islamist majoritarians have been forming.

Two social phenomena have come into sharper focus twenty years after the fall of Suharto: the way Islam is discursively connected to nationalism (Badrun, 2019) and the ways in which a growing number of Indonesian Muslims are re-discovering and also openly expressing pride in Indonesia's religious diversity. This rediscovery may sound surprising, given that "Unity in Diversity" has been the national motto since independence. In reality, while the Indonesian Republic endorsed the coexistence of diverse officially recognised religions, the State also marginalised and discouraged the so-called *aliran kepercavaan*. Furthermore, the State monitored and controlled the boundaries and activities and doctrines of the officially recognised religions, through bureaucratic instruments like the Bakor Paken (Badan Koordinasi Pengawasan Aliran Kepercavaan dan Keagamaan) to monitor the boundaries of the officially recognised and approved religions, thereby granting the state the power to rank practices and beliefs and to determine which of them should be deemed tolerable and which needed to assimilate to notions of orthodoxy as defined by state-approved religious authorities (Ramstedt, 2019; Künkler, et. al., 2018).

The monitoring has long suggested that the boundaries between religious practices can be neatly drawn, leaving no room for ambiguities. One question for those promoting the acceptance and even embracing of Indonesia's religious diversity is thus to what degree they will tolerate organizations and believers who challenge claims to orthodoxy.

## Methods

This study employs a qualitative method with a design that combines conceptual analysis and discourse analysis. It is intended to examine the concept of "Islam Nusantara" as both a descriptive and a normative term within broader debates on Islam, religious life, and pluralism in Southeast Asia. The primary focus of the study lies in exploring the meanings, socio-political and religious implications, as well as the conceptual genealogy of "Islam Nusantara" in both historical and contemporary contexts.

The data are obtained through a literature-based study involving the examination of a range of primary and secondary sources, including academic books, scholarly journal articles, theoretical works in the sociology and anthropology of Islam, as well as documents and public statements relevant to the discourse on "Islam Nusantara". The study also draws on literature on Islamic history, analyses of religion–politics relations in post-reform Indonesia, and scholarly works on pluralism.

Data analysis is conducted using an interpretative–comparative technique, namely by placing the concept of "Islam Nusantara" in critical dialogue with theories of pluralism and the history of global Islam. Through this approach, the study makes it possible to trace historical trajectories and continuities in Islamic religious practices, while also critically examining the normative and political challenges faced by the concept. More broadly, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive and contextual understanding of "Islam Nusantara" as a key conceptual vocabulary of religious life in Indonesia.

## Result and Discussion

### *Ambiguity throughout the history of Islam*

Ambiguities have, for hundreds of years, characterized Islam in Southeast Asia. Historians attribute them to Southeast Asia's geographical location and its connectedness to major global trade routes throughout centuries. Southeast Asia absorbed beliefs and religions from various parts of the world, including Arabia. Home to key trading ports, the archipelago received Muslim traders from the Middle East, India, Europe, China - and Muslims brought Islam to Southeast Asia from all those places, resulting in a great diversity of Islamic beliefs and practices. Beyond the mere factual and empirical existence of diversity, historians describe Southeast Asia as being characterized for hundreds of years by pluralism in the sense of accepting and embracing the living together of several principles, social categories, and sources of authority. Pluralism in this sense is a value a society shares and transmits rather than just the description of factual diversity (Connolly, 2005). Diversity in this instance

is acknowledged legitimacy, not merely toleration in the early modern Anglophone sense of the term (Peletz, 2020).

In this reading, Islam in Southeast Asia is often viewed and described as "different" from Islam in the Middle East, which is imagined as more homogenous and stricter. Scholars and observers often describe Islam beyond the Middle East as "syncretic". This reading suggests that there is a "pure" Islamic practice somewhere in the Middle East. The Middle East is imagined as the center, and the further one ventures from it, the more "syncretic" the periphery becomes.

But neither practice nor belief can be "pure" if that means being un-historical. Belief and practice are always embedded, always historical. When Islam first developed in Mecca and Madinah, where the Prophet Muhammad first conveyed God's message to his audience, he did not do so in an empty, timeless space. When he instructed believers in certain practices, he based his instructions on what had been there before him. Thus, "Arab Islam" is not any "purer" than Islam elsewhere, and Muslims outside the Middle East are not any less Muslim than Arab Muslims. One scholar who demonstrated this point with great bravado was Marshall Hodgson, who dedicated the final volume of his three-volume work on the history of Islam to Islam in Iran, Russia, India and Southeast Asia (Hodgson, 1974). Clifford Geertz, a one-time colleague of Hodgson, has also presented a similarly historical and embedded understanding of the definition of Islam, though ultimately less forthrightly than Hodgson (Geertz, 1971). Similarly, Talal Asad, for all his differences from Hodgson and Geertz, stressed the pluralism within Islam (Asad, 20090). A more recent iteration of the point is alluded to in Shahab Ahmed's ambitious "What is Islam?" (Ahmed, 2015). Ahmed underlines the danger of reducing Islam to the shariah (Hodgson) or Islamic orthodoxy to discursive traditions (Asad) and states that nothing can be "un-Islamic" that is given value by Muslims because it is that act of valuation itself that renders something Islamic (Pregill, 2017). He calls those studying and commenting on Islam to raise their gaze above the immediate scriptural sources and even beyond an Islam that Talal Asad described as a discursively negotiated tradition. But despite Ahmed's criticism of (even) Asad and Hodgson as being too reductive in their comparatively already wide spanning definitions of Islamic and "Islamicate" (Hodgson) traditions, Ahmed himself geographically reduces Islam to what he calls the "*Balkans-to-Bengal Complex*" (Pregill, 2017). Although seemingly progressive in scope — Ahmed makes great pains to expand beyond the Middle East — Ahmed nevertheless leaves aside Southeast Asia, home to the largest Muslim majority population. It is therefore not surprising when even the most progressive scholars of Islam continue to cleave to a distinction between core and periphery – be it linguistically, or centering on the Sharia, or

in terms of geography — that many Southeast Asian scholars themselves associate stricter and more literalist interpretations of Islam with the Middle East.

For Indonesia, many observers have traced the influx of these stricter interpretations of Islam back to what they call Arabization or *arabisasi* (Martin, 2008; Bruinessen, 2018). In one way, this term replaces or specifies the term "Islamization" which many used to describe the growing public visibility of practices many modern conservatives consider expressing piety. The more widespread display of religio-identitarian markers such as clothes is thereby imagined to be particularly Islamic or to signal Muslim identity. On the one hand, the term is a useful reminder that Islam was not any less Islamic in the past, when it was less modelled after/inspired by parts of the contemporary Middle East. On the other hand, the term reflects a reductionist and homogenizing image of Islam in the Arab region. The term captures the importance of local variants of Islam, but it risks overlooking that Islam as it is predominantly preached in modern Middle Eastern countries thrives in a particular historical time period of postcolonial authoritarian regimes and is a contemporary phenomenon.

Other historians such as Sumit Mandal have highlighted the plurality among migrants of Arab descent (Mandal, 2017). Focusing on the Arab Middle East itself, historian and scholar of Arab literature, Thomas Bauer, argues that Arab societies for over a thousand years nurtured a "culture of ambiguity": disparate truth claims were permitted to coexist in the interest of peaceful cohabitation. In the fourteenth century, for instance, Arab Muslims considered the existence of different versions of the Qur'an and the multitude of potential interpretations enriching. Over the course of the past 150 years, these societies have become increasingly intolerant of all forms of ambiguity. Bauer locates the source of this end to plurality in the growing influence of Western Enlightenment thinking, which strives toward monosemy: the collapse of meanings into one final meaning. Nineteenth century colonialism exerted pressure to define oneself according to clear, unambiguous values and norms. In its own way, he argues, this is what contemporary Islamism is doing: reducing Islamic belief and practice to only one valid interpretation and claiming that there is a pure origin that Muslims need to return to. Viewed in this light, attempts to reduce plurality and towards defining an essence of Islam are not particularly Arab or Middle Eastern, but the product of the colonial spread of a variant of the Western Enlightenment.

Bauer analyses Arabic literature and scholarly discussions in the period 900–1500 and compares them to modern Islam in the past two centuries. His main argument is that ambiguity in modern Islam has been destroyed and with it a high degree of "tolerance of ambiguity" (*Ambiguitätstoleranz*) in

premodern Muslim societies. Bauer adapts the concept "tolerance of ambiguity" from contemporary psychology, where it describes an individual's ability to accept situations where truth (e.g., of a theorem, a text's meaning, or a person's gender) or a right (e.g., of a person's action or a right of way) cannot be fully established and where a multiplicity of truth-claims and claims of right and wrong remain unresolved (Griffel, 2017). Bauer's book explains distinct features of premodern Islam that illustrate its considerable historical ability to tolerate ambiguity. One example is the text of the Qurʾan itself, whose different variants were not "accidents" but an intrinsic part of the text itself (Bauer, 2011). Muslim scholars agreed to canonize seven different readings of the unvocalized Arabic text that then in the next step allow for a limited number of different vocalized readings (Bauer, 2011). Bauer reads the Uthmanic collection of the Qurʾan as an attempt at disambiguation that led to a crisis of ambiguity. The community responded to it with a collective act of ambiguating (Bauer, 2011) as expressed in the famous saying of Muḥammad that "disagreement within my community is a blessing (or: divine mercy, *raḥma*)." Other examples are the collection of *ḥadīth* (Bauer, 2011), the development of four different schools of law (Bauer, 2011). Bauer also devotes a whole chapter to love poetry that breaks through familiar binary gender categories (Bauer, 2011). Although some poets celebrated ambiguity, Bauer does not deny challenges to the tolerance of ambiguity, but contrasts it sharply with the rationalization, bureaucratization and technocratization of Western modernity (Bauer, 2011). He argues that Western colonialism disseminated hostility towards ambiguity and that this propaganda ("*ambiguitätsfeindliche Propaganda*") (Bauer, 2011), which lead to a sharp decline of tolerance of ambiguity in modernity.

He sees three main reactions to the crisis of ambiguity caused by the influx of Western desires for monosemy: first, among traditionalists a holding on to potentially modified or slightly reduced tolerance of ambiguity, while downplaying the ambiguity. In Bauer's view, this defensive position weakens their cause because it suggests that ambiguity is a thing of the past that needs to be overcome (Bauer, 2011). The second and third reaction turn away from the Islamic past: they are the total embrace of the Western position and the turn to the fundamentalist creation of an ideology free from ambiguity. Both these reactions look at Islam's traditions with contempt (Bauer, 2011).

If we transfer Bauer's insights to Southeast Asia, the inclusiveness and acceptance of diversity within Islam Nusantara is neither particularly Southeast Asian, nor a deviation from a single norm, but instead embodies what constituted the norm of hundreds of years of Islamic history: plurality, perhaps even pluralism.

On a global and international level, "Islam Nusantara" functions as an element of "soft diplomacy" and promotes Islam in ways that counter the anti-Muslim aggressions in many societies and also counter the glossy horror images produced by the Da'esh terrorists. A similar initiative was launched by the then-Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi, when he promoted the concept "Islam Hadhari," usually translated as "civilizational Islam" shortly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Proponents of such terms face the challenge of striking a balance between making Islam as it has been practiced in Southeast Asia for hundreds of years visible to the rest of the world and making Islam in Southeast Asia seem "special" or "different" from an alleged standard or pure version of Islam as discussed above.

When Southeast Asians add specifying word such as "Nusantara" or "Hadhari" to their self-description, they distinguish themselves from other variants of Islam. Strategically, it might be good to create this "brand" to gain visibility, but at the same time, this branding comes with the risk of marking Islam in Southeast Asia as special, even though it is not more special than any other variant of Islam - it is simply Islam.

A way out of the dilemma could be to expect other Muslims worldwide to do the same thing: to mark their practices as local and specific, and to not accept any claims to universality for specific practices and interpretations. This is where I see the highest potential for the concept on a global level: to remind everyone that in addition to its transnational character, Islam lives in its local variants, be it in Australia or in Saudi Arabia. The Prophet Muhammad's message to submit to God always connects to what was there before the message: it is always culturally embedded and historically specific. (If the concept "Islam Nusantara" can make this visible and can encourage scholars and believers to relativize their own approaches to universal claims, then very much would be achieved.)

### *A call for accepting diversity*

Beyond capturing the empirical reality of pluralist Islam, "Islam Nusantara" has become a bid for renewed pride in and support for diversity within Islam in Indonesia and beyond. This call, as with any call, is deeply embedded in a social and political landscape. In post-Suharto Indonesia, this landscape is a highly competitive one. The term "Islam Nusantara" itself does not float in any non-political space, nor does it have only one meaning. It stands for a group of contemporary religious authorities who internally debate its exact meaning and externally take a stance against strict or "radical" interpretations of Islam, but it also stands for a set of values that can be traced back to the foundational vision of the Nahdlatul Ulama which has evolved since the early founding days (Woodward, 2017; Arifianto, 2017). Then as now, one of the aims of the NU

is to counter alliances of modern Islamic conservatists who often favor literal readings of the Islamic sources and are skeptical towards what they perceive as indigenous and perhaps illegitimate variations of Islam. Some of the actors are part of Salafi or other Islamist movements while others are usually categorized as modernists. Against these alliances, upholding the importance of diversity within Islam goes hand in hand with often controversial debates about this very diversity. Debates about plurality and pluralism are part of this. Words are rarely ever neutral, but the terms "plurality" and "pluralism" are particularly contested in post-Suharto Indonesia, partly because of the controversial debates that ensued after the 2005 MUI fatwa against "sekularisme", pluralisme", and "liberalisme." It would be naïve to simply translate these English-inspired words back into English and to summarize the debates by dividing the opinions into pro- and contra-camps. Instead, we need to acknowledge that these terms are genuinely Indonesian terms whose meanings shifted in the aftermath of the 2005 fatwa. Indonesian intellectuals have in much detail discussed the narrow and limited understanding that informed the MUI reasoning. As some Indonesian intellectuals at the time pointed out, it is useful to distinguish between various meanings of these terms. In every discourse, a term has a particular genealogy or baggage. The anthropologist Michael Peletz differentiates between pluralism and plurality (Peletz, 2020). He follows the political theorist William Connolly when he uses "the term 'pluralism' to refer to social fields, cultural domains, and various kinds of systems and assemblages involving humans in which two or more principles, categories, groups, sources of authority, or ways of being in the world are not only present, tolerated, and accommodated, but also accorded legitimacy in a Weberian sense." Diversity here is not simply toleration, but rather ascribed legitimacy. Peletz calls for a clear distinction between diversity, difference, or heterogeneity, on the one hand, and pluralism, defined succinctly as 'difference accorded legitimacy', on the other (Peletz, 2009).

After the colonial export of the concept of the homogenized nation state, post-colonial societies if the 20th century worldwide re-negotiated their relationship to diversity. Thus, the Indonesian discourses about inner-Islamic diversity and pluralism, which the term "Islam Nusantara" and the debates surrounding it are at the heart of, goes hand-in-hand with the discourse of nationalism: Indonesians rejected the Dutch ethnicized model — which hierarchized subjects according to their ancestry and racial categorization — and tried to forge a nation united in diversity. Was this to tolerate or to embrace diversity? And where do Indonesians position themselves in relation to this project, nearly eighty years later? Despite referencing a transnational region – Nusantara – the contemporary debate is very much one held within the frame of the nation state. The discourse of "Islam Nusantara" is also an attempt to re-

gain some strength in the struggle to define Islam in Indonesia, during a period in which right-wing majoritarian Islamists have managed to move to the center of national political debates despite representing only a fraction of society. Debating Islam Nusantara also means debating the foundations of the Indonesian nation. Those who promote this concept face difficult the tasks of separating and combining normative and strategic considerations: some debates are better held internally, others with a larger audience, some phrases have one meaning in one context, and spark other associations in another.

A large set of questions forming the heart of the debates on embracing diversity concerns the limits of what can be accepted and tolerated. Reflecting the breadth of these discussions here is beyond the scope of this article, but two issues crystalize the implications of any reduction of diversity and the need to debate the re-expansion of currently narrowing boundaries: questions of claims to religious orthodoxy, and questions of gender pluralism.

The so-called blasphemy law was squeezed into Indonesia's legal framework by decree by President Sukarno in 1965 without any preluding sophisticated theological debates about how the complex traditions of Islamic law should be translated into the framework of the modern nation state. Rarely used before 1998, its use has since exploded (Crouch, 2012). It has been mainly used to target individuals and congregations whose practices and beliefs their opponents consider "heterodox" or deviant. Sometimes, this concerns controversial groups such as the Ahmadiyya. In other cases, the accusation concerns practitioners of local variants of Islam (Telle, 2018). In a society in which Islam is increasingly bureaucratized and tied to the official administration, debates about "deviance" are necessarily reflective of power relations.

The other controversy reflects like no other the modern reduction of diversity, sped up in the post-Suharto period: the replacement of gender pluralism by stark heteronormativity shifting towards political homophobia. Southeast Asia was for hundreds of years characterized by what Peletz calls "gender pluralism," legitimized diversity rather than the mere existence of diversity. According to him and to other historians, people assigned genders beyond the male/female binary played key roles in rituals, overseeing sacred ceremonies that were of critical importance to local societies and polities (Peletz, 2006; Reid, 1988; Andaya, 2000). As mentioned above, Thomas Bauer made similar arguments about gender diversity for the pre-colonial Middle East. Similarly, the anthropologists Linda Rae Bennett and Sharyn Graham Davies argued that Indonesia was for a long period a heteronormative, but not yet punitively homophobic state (Bennett and Davies, 2014). The anthropologist Tom Boellstorff then in the early 2000s detected a shift from a society "where heterosexism has historically held a dominant cultural position

without homophobia's aid" (Boellstorff, 2004) towards an atmosphere of homophobia that includes aggression and violence. In the early 2000s, he described how neither anger nor aggression were common reactions to gay advances or the sight of gay couples, different from Western societies, where many homosexual couples and transgender people feared for their safety in the public sphere (Luxembourg, 2013).

One could conclude from these observations that rather than teaching the West tolerance and pluralism, many Muslim societies adopted Western aggressions and violence in addition to heteronormativity. One point of discussion among proponents of the concept of "Islam Nusantara" will be to dig deeply into the archipelago's own history to continue informed debates about the limits of tolerance and the value of diversity and its legitimization.

Another crucial point is not only the objects of these debates, but the debates themselves. As the scholar of Islam and public intellectual Syafiq Hasyim has noted, the controversy surrounding the term "Islam Nusantara" concerns not only the issue of religion itself, but also the terms of the debate: how can complex theological reasonings, political arguments, and practices that are hundreds of years old and spanning over the world's fourth most populous nation be constructively and respectfully debated in a highly competitive environment in which many debates are reduced to short tweets and headlines? (Hasyim, 2018) Another aspect here is the degree to which Indonesians continue to bind the concept to the organization of NU (Najib Burhani 2018) (Burhani, 2018). The caution and, at the same time, benevolent curiosity evinced by many religious leaders outside NU suggests that the concept will only fully develop its potential when it no longer exclusively belongs to a particular group of actors.

The previous sections have discussed "Islam Nusantara" focused on transnational and national perspectives. The last section will relate the national perspective to local variations of Islam.

### *Beyond Java, beyond Indonesia*

On the local level, two different main points stand out: religio-political competition and the danger of Java-centrism. The rapid rise of competition in all realms of life has affected the realms of politics and religion to a higher degree than many politicians and religious authorities feel comfortable with. Studies on Indonesian democracy have highlighted the unintended side-effect of enhancing "money politics" (Aspinall and Rohman, 2019) through the initially democratically oriented decentralization of elections. They have also showed that the influence of local religious leaders and leaders of ethnic organizations on election outcomes is high, as they often cooperate with the middle-men involved in organizing electoral support (Aspinall and

Berenschot, 2019). Religious leaders are therefore often pulled into a complicated dynamic of competition that incentivizes them to use more hardline and exclusivist rhetoric (Pelletier, 2021). Put differently: competition in the attention economy accelerates intolerance. This can be observed among right-wing identitarians elsewhere, for instance in Western and Eastern Europe.

Another key issue on the local level is one that Indonesians have been familiar with since the founding of the Republic: the risk of privileging Islam in Java over Islamic practices and beliefs elsewhere in the archipelago, and of thereby delegitimizing the concept and its aims outside Java. This is not first and foremost a question of actual privileging, but also concerns the level of perception: if non-Javanese Southeast Asian Muslims fear that the concept of Islam Nusantara focusses especially on the intertwinement of Javanese practices with Islam, they might feel less included. For the concept to develop its full potential, its defendants will need to be aware of and promote non-Javanese interpretations of Islam that reflect the values of "Islam Nusantara," even beyond the nation state of Indonesia. Research on Islam in Southeast Asia often focusses on Java, but beyond Java, there are many who principally second the values promoted by the term "Islam Nusantara," but who worry about being dominated by Java-centric notions of the concept (Pribadi, 2018).

It is a difficult but important effort to collect empirical material that reflects the archipelago's regional diversity. Indonesia has an impressive and globally unmatched network of research institutions on Islam and on interfaith initiatives, and its researchers combine global, national, and local perspectives with transnational and translocal curiosity. The researchers in these places, in collaborating and in treating "Islam Nusantara" not as a concept owned by a particular group or nation, but by all Muslims in Southeast Asia, have much to teach the world about accepting and embracing diversity and nuances, even beyond Islam.

## Conclusion

In this article, I made three arguments. First, while the concept and term "Islam Nusantara" is new in its current variant, promoted by and tied to a particular group of thinkers within NU, the phenomena and values the term captures are neither new nor as locally specific to Southeast Asia as the term suggests. The term describes a thousand-year-old practice of plurality and ideals of pluralism in Islamicate societies. Modern readings often do not acknowledge this, as Thomas Bauer's work shows in great detail.

Second, while the term describes a lived reality, "Islam Nusantara" has also become a normative call for renewed pride in and support for diversity

of practice and belief. It is a call issued in a deeply competitive landscape in which a variety of actors link religion to politics in new and intense ways, often coupled with increased bureaucratic regulation and punitive measures. It is especially in this realm that debates among the proponents of the term and Indonesians more generally are still heated: how far do acceptance and toleration of diversity stretch?

The third argument I made pertains to the normative ambitions of those promoting the concept: I argued that in order to fully expand and make use of its potential, the concept needs to reach beyond Java-centric notions of Islam. This adds a regional dimension to the question raised above: how much room for deviance from norms is there in this celebration of diversity?

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