



Islam Nusantara: *Jurnal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture*, 01 (1), 2020: 13-28
E-ISSN: 2722-8975
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v1i1.44>

Anatomy of the Islam Nusantara Program and the Necessity for a “Critical” Islam Nusantara Study

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Article history: Received: February 30, 2020; Accepted: April 01, 2020;
Published: July 01, 2020

Abstract

This paper examines the Islam Nusantara graduate program established by the Islamic Studies Institute of Nahdlatul Ulama (Stainu) in 2013 and later continued by the Nahdlatul Ulama University of Indonesia (Unusia). As the largest Islamic social organization in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has articulated Islam Nusantara as a framework emphasizing moderation, tolerance, and the accommodation of local cultures, particularly as a response to the strengthening conservative turn in Indonesian Islam following the country's democratic transition in 1998. To institutionalize and disseminate this perspective, NU founded a dedicated graduate program focusing on Islam Nusantara. After outlining the rise of Islamic conservatism and the promotion of Islam Nusantara by both NU and the state, this study analyzes graduate theses produced within the program by examining their abstracts and the socio-demographic backgrounds of their authors. The findings show that the majority of thesis authors are young scholars, predominantly male and Java-born, and that many theses focus on harmonious forms of Islamic adaptation to local cultures, often centered on the authors' regions of origin. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for more comparative and critical approaches to local variations of Islam Nusantara in future theses and dissertations, in order to enable the program to engage more reflexively and analytically with the concept of Islam Nusantara itself.

Keywords:

Critical Islam, Islam Nusantara, Nahdlatul Ulama, Stainu Jakarta, Unusia Jakarta



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Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis program Islam Nusantara yang dimulai oleh Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Nahdlatul Ulama (Stainu) pada tahun 2013 dan dikembangkan oleh Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (Unusia). NU adalah organisasi masyarakat Islam yang memiliki jumlah anggota yang paling besar di Indonesia dan menjunjung tinggi pada Islam yang moderat dan toleran sebagai Islam Indonesia dan mengkonseptualisasikan Islam tersebut sebagai Islam Nusantara. NU mengkampanyekan Islam Nusantara baik di Indonesia maupun di luar negeri untuk menantang peningkatan dukungan terhadap Islam yang puritan dan konservatif khususnya sejak demokratisasi pada 1998. Perguruan tinggi yang berafiliasi NU, yaitu Stainu dan Unusia juga mengikuti upaya tersebut dari NU dan mendirikan program pascasarjana tentang Islam Nusantara. Artikel ini menguraikan tesis dan abstraknya tesis dan biodata penulis tesis dan melihat bagaimana program Islam Nusantara berminat untuk mencetuskan kader-kader Islam Nusantara. Hasil analisis adalah bahwa kebanyakan penulis adalah generasi muda dan mereka menganalisis perpaduan Islam dan budaya lokal yang harmoni. Kebanyakan adalah laki-laki dari Jawa dan wilayah analisisnya adalah daerah kelahiran sendiri. Salah satu saran dari analisis adalah perlunya analisis yang lebih komparatif dan lebih kritis terhadap Islam Nusantara sendiri supaya program Islam Nusantara dijadikan program yang bisa menilai konsep Islam Nusantara secara lebih obyektif.

Kata Kunci:

Critical Islam, Islam Nusantara, Nahdlatul Ulama, Stainu Jakarta, Unusia Jakarta

Introduction

Scholars working on Indonesian society and politics often hear and write that Islam in Indonesia is moderate and tolerant, or the majority of Muslims in Indonesia uphold moderate and tolerant Islam. Indonesian Islam is different from Islam in the Middle East and Arabic Islam. Here, tolerance and moderateness imply that Indonesian Islam aims to coexist with different religions; it is understanding toward Islamic minority groups such as Ahmadiyya and Shia; it emphasizes the contextual interpretation of Quran and hadiths rather than the textual interpretation; and positively views the Islamic adaptation to local culture and tradition. Indonesian Islam is considered to be in conformity with the democratic state system, not the Islamic state (negara Islam).

This discourse has recently received criticism from scholars who are reconsidering the historical role of Islam in Indonesian nationalism

(Laffan, 2011; Formichi, 2011; Fogg, 2012) or those who compare the extent of tolerance of Indonesian Muslims with that of other Muslim-majority countries quantitatively (Menchik, 2015). These studies reveal that Indonesian Islam has not been moderate to the extent expressed by well-established Islamic intellectuals such as Abdurrahman Wahid, Nurcholis Majid, and Ahmad Syafii Maarif. The discourse itself, however, has been quite powerful in Indonesia and partly stems from the fact that the two largest Islamic social organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, support the Indonesian state ideology of Pancasila— which recognizes six religions, including Islam, as official religions—and oppose the establishment of the Islamic State.

Recently, especially after the beginning of democratization in the late 1990s in Indonesia, another view has expressed that Indonesian Islam is at a conservative turn (Bruinessen, 2013) and is becoming more puritan or radical. This view emerges from the facts: violent inter-religious conflicts took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as in Poso and Ambon; some minority segments supported and even went to ISIS; Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) openly aimed to establish the Islamic state and has increased membership among young intellectuals and a series of terrorist attacks took place in Bali (2002, 2005), Jakarta (2000, 2003, 2004, 2009, 2016), Surabaya (2018), and other places. Several surveys have been conducted on the perceptions of Indonesian people in order to understand this conservative trend. For example, the IDN research institute with the help of Alvara Research Center conducted a survey of 1,400 millennials (20–35 years old) in August and September 2018 in 12 major cities and found that 19.5% of them supported the caliphate rather than the current republic as the state system (Utomo, et. al., 2019).

Faced with this new challenge of rising Islamist ideology and movements and aggrandizing public support for them, the two largest Islamic social organizations have launched new movements to reassert their own “tolerant and moderate” identities. NU began disseminating the term “Islam Nusantara,” while Muhammadiyah spoke of “Islam Berkemajuan” (progressive Islam). These new terms and ideas are the transformed and refurbished expressions of the organizations’ identities to reclaim the uniquely Indonesian moderate and tolerant Islam. The Joko Widodo government (2014 to present) also began promoting the “tolerant and moderate” Indonesian Islam in order to defy the conservative Islamic wing’s criticism that Jokowi was secular. He adopted the term Islam Nusantara for Indonesian Islam and solicited support from NU.

Academically and practically, therefore, it is important to understand what Islam Nusantara actually means and how it is defined; how

it has been operationalized or actualized as a government program; how it is theologially and intellectually refined or theorized; and how it is socialized and advocated as a uniquely Indonesian way of Islam. Some research on Islam Nusantara has been conducted in the past. An edited volume by Akhmad Sahal dan Munawir Aziz (2015) explores the different views and historical development of Islam Nusantara and its similar terms. Ahmad Najib Burhani ((2018)) explored at length the origin and historical development of the concepts of Islam Indonesia, Syafiq Hasyim (2018) conducted an analysis of the discourse surrounding Islam Nusantara, and van Bruinessen viewed the concept of Islam Nusantara through a long historical perspective (Bruinessen, 2018). Fealy (2018) and Power (2018) analyzed the politicization of Islam Nusantara by Jokowi to counter the political rise of Islamist perceptions and movements, respectively. Hoesterey (2018) described the start of public diplomacy in Indonesia in 2002 under the foreign minister Hasan Wirajuda and the selling of moderate Islam or Islam Nusantara as a part of its strategy under the Jokowi presidency. In contrast to these previous works on Islam Nusantara, this paper aims to analyze a less visible but long-standing academic endeavor to disseminate the concept of Islamic Nusantara intellectually, focusing on the newly established graduate program on Islam Nusantara at the University of Nahdlatul Ulama in Jakarta. As Hefner (2019) explains, it is true that the role of prominent Islamic ulama and scholars is quintessential to dissipate to the public an understanding, view, or perspective on the relationship between Islam, the state, and society. It is also true that arbiters or effective brokers between prominent figures and the general public are required if a concept is to be accepted broadly. The graduates from the Islam Nusantara program are expected to play this role to disseminate the idea of Islam Nusantara. This paper aims to analyze the themes and contents of the theses that these graduate students submitted from 2015 to 2019.

Before focusing on the Islam Nusantara graduate program, we will elucidate the rising influence of Islamism in Indonesia and its countermeasures, both by the state and society, to show how the term Islam Nusantara has emerged politically and socially and why the Islam Nusantara program was created.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research method with a case study design combined with document analysis. It focuses on an academic examination of the "Islam Nusantara" postgraduate program jointly administered by the Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic College (Stainu) and Nahdlatul Ulama University of Indonesia (Unusia) as an institutional representation of the formalization of the "Islam Nusantara" concept within higher education.

The data for this study are derived from a literature-based analysis of master's theses produced by students of the "Islam Nusantara" postgraduate program between 2015 and 2019. The documents analyzed include, among others, research themes, thesis abstracts, and the socio-demographic characteristics of the thesis authors, such as age, regional background, and gender. Additional data are drawn from scholarly literature, publications, and policy reports that discuss the development of "Islam Nusantara", Nahdlatul Ulama, and the dynamics of conservatism in Indonesia.

The analysis is conducted using a qualitative–interpretative approach, namely by categorizing research themes, identifying trends in academic discourse, and mapping the geographical patterns reflected in the theses. This approach is employed to assess the extent to which "Islam Nusantara" is produced and articulated as academic knowledge, while also identifying methodological limitations and the need for more comparative and critical policy-oriented approaches to the concept of "Islam Nusantara".

Result and Discussion

The Conservative Turn and its Countermeasure

During the authoritarian Suharto regime spanning 32 years (1967– 1998), the state itself suppressed the radical and fundamental Islamic groups, and the Muslim discourse compatible with modernity, liberal democracy, gender equality, harmonious inter-religious relations, and rationalism was promoted. This was done especially through the network of the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) that spread to all the provinces and the IAIN graduates in the religious bureaucracy, religious courts, and education (Bruinessen, 2018). Influential Islamic leaders such as Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid were generally the promoters of this Muslim discourse. The two largest Islamic social organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, also joined the same line.

However, the transnational movement from the Middle East has changed the Indonesian Islamic terrain since the 1970s. Saudi Arabia started an ambitious global campaign for the Wahhabization of the Muslim umma with its oil money and intensified it with the rise of Shi'a Iran after the revolution in 1979. Saudi Arabia provided financial and educational support for the Indonesian Council for Islamic Propagation (DDII) and the College for the Study of Islam and Arabic (LIPIA) as the media to spread Salafism in Indonesia. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has reached Indonesia. Consequently, Salafism has become religiously visible since the late 1980s in an apolitical way under the Suharto regime.

With the deteriorating economic situation after the 1997 crisis and the fall of Suharto the following year, Indonesia became socio-politically unstable. Ethnic and religious conflicts broke out in the Maluku, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan areas and separatist movements became active in Aceh, Riau, East Kalimantan, East Timor, and Papua. Democratization and decentralization were the institutional responses of the government to control this situation. The institutional reforms were hurried, immature, and uncoordinated, resulting in the politico-economic survival, resurgence, and re-entrenchment of most Suharto-era oligarchs (Robison, 2004). Corruption, collusion, and nepotism (*korupsi, kolusi dan nepotisme*, KKN) that the anti-Suharto reformist movement aimed to banish have not disappeared but in general, decentralized democracy has been consolidated even though it is significantly less substantial.

The unstable transition to democracy gave birth to different types of Islamic social and political organizations and movements. Radical, fundamental, and conservative Islamist groups strengthened their presence. *Laskar Jihad* sent the members to the religious conflict area under the name of Jihad. *Jemaah Islamiyah* conducted suicide bomb terrorist attacks in Bali and Jakarta. The influence of these violence-oriented groups did not last long due to strong governmental pressures and internal conflicts within the groups. Instead, mass-based conservative Salafi groups and organizations flourished and continue to exert their influence today. Thus, “the conservative turn” or similar terms have become buzzwords in contemporary Indonesia. Politically speaking, Islamic piety does not directly lead to an increased vote for Islamic parties (Pepinsky, 2018). Socially speaking, however, the puritan, conservative and textual understanding of Islam has become widespread. Several analyses have been performed on this Islamization, as mentioned earlier. In the field of education, the conservative view has become dominant as the survey done to 940 Muslim educators in a hundred madrasas and Islamic boarding schools in eight provinces in 2006. 85.9 percent of Muslim educators agree that democracy is the best form of government for Indonesia while 72.2 percent of them believe that the state should be based on the Qur’an and Sunna and guided by religious experts and 82.8 percent of them think the state should work to implement the shari’a (Hefner, 2009). Considering the above point by Pepinsky et al. that the Islamic piety does not directly lead to an increased vote for Islamic parties and the weakening support for staunch Islamic parties, this educators’ commitment for the shari’a is real but also procedurally vague as Hefner wrote, and the shari’a in its social uses is as much or even more a “vocabulary of morality and justice” than it is an entity akin to Western positive law (Hefner, 2009). And this strengthening Islamic morality can be massively and politically mobilized if there is a simple

dichotomic political contestation between the Muslim and non-Muslim as in the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017. This paper focuses instead on the counter movement to stem this conservative trend by the largest Islamic social organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) (Burhani , 2016).

Islam Nusantara

NU chose Islam Nusantara as the main theme of the national congress in 2015, showing a clear motivation to stem the conservative trend among the Indonesian Muslims. The word Nusantara was born in the 14th century during the period of the Majapahit kingdom. In the 20th century, the nationalists used this word for the Netherlands East Indies and subsequently, Nusantara has become a refined expression of Indonesia after independence. Islam Nusantara simply means Indonesian Islam or Indoneisan way of Islam. Akhmad Sahal, a young intellectual from NU, characterizes Islam Nusantara as Islam which is tolerant and open to and adapted to local culture and tradition (Sahal, 2015).

The head of the graduate program of Islamic Studies Institute built by NU (Stainu, Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Nahdlatul Ulama), Dawam Multazam, defines Islam Nusantara as follows: acculturating Indonesian local culture and wisdom to the teaching and understanding of Islam as far as the culture and wisdom are not in violation to basic values of Islamic teaching in principle (Multazam, 2015).

Since its birth, NU has emphasized Islam in conformity with local culture and tradition. The key concepts of Islamic thought espoused by NU, that is Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah (Aswaja), are tolerance, moderateness and inclusiveness. Quran and Sunna are, of course, important, but Aswaja pays due respect to the reality of life (nu.or.id, 2019). In this sense, the acculturation of Islam and locality as emphasized in the concept of Islam Nusantara is not new for NU. This is quite clear from the essay, “Indigenizing Islam” (Pribumisasi Islam), written by one of the most influential NU intellectuals, Abdurrahman Wahid (the chairman of NU in 1984–1999, the third president of the republic of Indonesia in 1999–2001) in 1989. He wrote about the necessity for the whole society to make an effort to indigenize Islam and “to make an effort to create a religious society while providing a firm foundation to our culture” (Wahid, 1989). He emphasized the local adaptation of Islam and this idea is inherited in the concept, Islam Nusantara.

According to Fealy (2018), the term Islam Nusantara itself has been popular- ized by academics such as Azyumardi Azra (2002) in the 1980s. Azyumardi’s understanding of Islam Nusantara is quite simple, suggesting that it means Islam in Southeast Asia. In 2006, a young kyai, M. Jadul Maula article, “Orientation of Islam Nusantara: Producing (Perfect) Nusantara

People” in the journal *Tashwirul Afkar*, issued by a NU think tank, Lakpesdam. Jadul Maula intentionally used the term Islam Nusantara as a field of study to form a creative bridge between local Islam and Indonesian Islam (2006). In 2008, Nor Huda (2008) wrote an intellectual social history of Islam titled *Islam Nusantara: Islam Intellectual Social History in Indonesia*. Following this, the term was increasingly utilized by NU intellectuals in 2007. The Wahid Institute, a think tank that Wahid established in order to allow “the pluralist and peaceful Islam” to take root in society, published *Diverse Expressions of Islam Nusantara* in 2008 (Wahid, et. al., 2015). This book is a compilation of biweekly supplements that the Wahid Institute published in the major journals *Gatra* and *Tempo* from October 2005 to March 2008. It aimed to stop the trend of excluding young progressive Muslim intellectuals from the core membership of NU and the Muhammadiyah because they were dubbed as believers of “Liberal Islam” (Bruinessen, 2013). The editor says, “Islam in the Indonesian society is an Islam that has historically different expressions with mutual understanding” (Wahid, et. al., 2015). The supplements aimed to disseminate this Indonesian Islam to the Indonesian people in general. In the introduction to the book, Abdurrahman Wahid wrote, “the majority of our people are the silent majority who are tolerant to and pay respect to any faith, but don’t say it openly.” The book aimed to show apolitical, cultural and local Islam that is alive among the people (Wahid, 2008).

Along with the publication of the book, Lakpesdam NU published a special issue of the journal *Tashwirul Afkar*, titled “Islam Nusantara” (Bruhani, 2018). Abdul Mun’im DZ (2008) wrote the introductory essay in the issue, “Consolidating Islam Nusantara” (*Mengukuhkan Jangkar Islam Nusantara*). The essay argues that the Islamization process in Nusantara was not one way, but two ways or multiple ways. Islamization process of Nusantara culture actually occurred simultaneously with the Nusantara-ization of Islamic values; therefore, these two (Islam and Nusantara culture) did not only encounter each other, but were merged into a new entity, later called Islam Jawa or Islam Nusantara... Islam Nusantara covered Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and the Philippines, and Islam Nusantara was different from the Middle East Islam or Moroccan Islam and others...The existence of Islam Nusantara gradually waned when the colonial England, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands divided the area to colonize it.

According to Mun’im, a more destructive impact was the penetration of radical and Middle East Islam in the center of Islam Nusantara in this region and that Islam brought conflicts present in the Middle East to this area. Thus, he argued that Islam Nusantara was

reintroduced by reconnecting the network and rooting Islam Nusantara in each locality to enable Islam to emerge again as the source of inspiration and motivation for the development of civilization in this area.

Mun'im's essay vividly shows us the sense of crisis with the increasing influence of radical Islam not only in Indonesia but also in Southeast Asia, which motivated him to urge the dissemination of the Islam Nusantara concept.

In 2013, NU opened a master's program "Islamic civilization history: focus on Islam Nusantara" (Program Studi Sejarah Peradaban Islam Kosentrasi Islam Nusantara) at Stainu. The major theme of this program is tolerance, moderateness, balance, and justice. According to the head of the program, Ishom Yasqi, Stainu decided to establish this program, following the continuous emphasis on the idea "Indonesian Islam = Islam ala Aswaja = NU's Islam" by the NU's chairman, Said Aqil Siradj (NU Online, 2013). This program is the major focus of this paper.

After these developments, the term Islam Nusantara was symbolized as Indonesian Islam, which is different from Arabic Islam; NU viewed Islam Nusantara as the NU way of Islam and chose it as the main message of the 33rd NU national congress in August 1–5, 2015 in Jombang, East Java. The theme of the congress was "Affirming Islam Nusantara for Indonesian and World Civilization" As this theme suggests, NU has an ambitious strategy for disseminating Indonesian Islam as an agent of benevolent Islam not only in Indonesia itself but also in the world (NU Online, 2015).

It is difficult to imagine Arabic countries accepting this message from the periphery of the Islamic world but the president Jokowi himself was quite enthusiastic about Islam Nusantara. He joined the congress to give an opening speech and promoted Islam Nusantara as the officially sanctioned Indonesian Islam. The Jokowi government, with seven ministers from NU, thought it useful to counter the rise of conservative Islam and further emphasized it after his reliable partner, a Chinese Protestant, Basuki Purnama, lost in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election due to the conservative wing's strong pressure and protests (IPAC, 2018). Thereafter, counter-terrorism agencies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have also incorporated aspects of Islam Nusantara into their programs and messaging (Fealy, 2018).

Ten years have passed since NU revived the circulation of the term Islam Nusantara and now, even the government supports it. Thus, this term is now widely known among Indonesians, but the extent to which Islam Nusantara has become intellectually developed, refined, sophisticated and disseminated in this period is not clear. Several NU intellectuals, preachers and government officers have promoted the idea but it does not follow that the core idea of Islam Nusantara is understood by the public in general. Familiarity with this terminology might be restricted to a small segment of the elite and

intellectuals with no public repercussions. If this is the case, one of the motivations for the dissemination of Islam Nusantara—to counter the conservatism movement—will be difficult to realize. For this aim to be achieved, it is necessary to establish an arbiter, disseminator, or bridge between the top intellectuals and the general public. This role can be adopted by the graduates of the Islam Nusantara program. The head of the program, Ishom Yusqi precisely says, “the graduates of the Stainu’s program are expected to be figures who are qualified to strengthen the tolerance of religious life.” (Okezone.com, 2013) At the opening of the program, Said Aqil said that the graduates of the program are expected to fulfill two qualifications: academic and sociologically relevant (Merdeka.com, 2013).

The following sections will discuss the development of the program and analyze the 111 theses of the program submitted in 2015–2019 in order to understand how the knowledge of Islam Nusantara is intellectually produced and what topics are chosen for research in the Islam Nusantara program.

Islam Nusantara Program

The first academic program specialized in Islam Nusantara was the above-mentioned “Islamic civilization history: focus on Islam Nusantara” (Program Studi Sejarah Peradaban Islam Kosentrasi Islam Nusantara) at Stainu. Stainu faculty members were inspired by the NU chairman, Said Aqil Sirodj, who emphasized Indonesian Islam. They received approval from the Ministry of Education and began discussions on the strategy and curriculum of the master’s program in February 2013 (NU Online, 2013). Stainu formally started the program in July 2013 with the keynote speech by Said Aqil Sirodj. In this speech, Said Aqil expressed that the graduates of the program should have both Islamic identity and nationalism. His speech shows what NU aims to achieve with this program. The program gained popularity with the “the education for ulama cadre” scholarship from the Ministry of Religion and others. After Stainu was merged with the Nahdlatul Ulama University of Indonesia (Unusia), the program was developed into the Faculty of Islam Nusantara and became a complete program from undergraduate to master’s and PhD in 2018.

The administrative staff in the program facilitated the gathering of five published theses and 107 out of 111 abstracts of theses that were written and submitted in August 2015 to November 2019. The gender composition was 86 males and 21 females, and the average age of graduation was 33.2 years. Thirty-nine out of 107 students (36.4%) received the master’s degree in the age range of 25 to 29, and 74 students (69.2%) were in the age range of 25 to 34 years. This indicates that the program is producing a younger generation who learns and understands the concept of Islam Nusantara. The regional variation

of the students' birthplace is not significant. Ninety out of 107 students (84.1%) were from Java (4 from Banten, 7 from Jakarta, 27 from West Java, 27 from Central Java, and 25 from East Java). At first, eleven Thai Muslims were planned to be enrolled in the program, but only two of them joined the program and only one student received the degree. Another foreign-born student was from Sarawak, Malaysia.

It is understandable that a majority of students (52 students) are from the NU's stronghold of East and Central Java. The program also recruited 31 students from Banten and West Java areas where Islamic thought in general and Islamic thought among the NU members are more puritan or conservative. Only seven students were from Sumatera and none from Kalimantan and Maluku, possibly suggesting that outside Java, the program has not sufficiently drawn intellectual attention to the concept of Islam Nusantara.

One of the main purposes of the program is to analyze Islam at the local level; therefore, 96 out of 107 theses chose one area and analyzed kyai's thought and/or behavior, pesantren's development and its local role, or the local Islamization process or the Islamic adaptation to local culture. Among those who wrote on one area, 70 out of 96 students chose their birth province as a research site. This is understandable because they have local knowledge about the area and can utilize their existing networks. The remaining 26 students chose research sites different from their birth province; some conducted research in neighboring areas but others studied areas quite different from their birthplace. For example, one student from West Java conducted research on the Dayak people in Kalimantan and a student from the West Nusa Tenggara area focused on Jakarta.

The themes of the theses are diverse but fit well with the purpose of the program. Among them, 43 out of 107 theses (40.2%), broadly speaking, deal with the harmonious relationship between Islam and local culture. They analyze the local acculturation or adaptation of Islam, the contextual interpretation of Islam, Islamized local culture, *adat*, or wisdom. Nine out of 107 theses focus on the historical Islamization process at local levels. These nine theses are also related to local culture, but the focus is on the Islamization process per se. One thesis analyzes the Islamization and Christianization process at different times in East Nusa Tenggara; another is on the ethnic Dayak's movement against Islamization through local Syariah regulations.

Another major research topic in the program is sufism and spirituality. The popularity of this topic is quite natural considering the importance of the Sufi School in the spread of Islam in Nusantara and the strength of sufi influence among the NU ulama and kyai. Of the total 107

theses, 17 analyze the sufi thought of ulama or the development of sufi schools such as Qodiriyyagh wa Naqsyabandiyyah, Syadziliyah, and Khalwatiyah.

There are also 16 theses focusing on Islamic thought and literature. Some students work on the kyai's thought and others conduct a literature analysis of the Quran, fiqh, hadis, or kitab kuning. Four theses focus instead on Islamic boarding schools and their (intellectual) historical development.

Another popular theme is Islam and politics. Six theses address the anti-colonial or anti-Japanese view or struggle by kyai and its followers; five analyze the political thought of kyai or the relationship between Islam and nationalism understood by kyai and political leaders (Sukarno). The concept of Nusantara Islam is strongly supportive of the coexistence of Islam and the nation-state (of Indonesia), as Said Aqil suggested and, therefore, the selection of Islam and politics and the nation-state as a research topic in this program is quite natural. As part of its mission, the program might encourage showing the contribution of Islam to Indonesia in the actual independence movement or in the intellectual struggle.

These are the major themes of theses in the program. Often, one thesis analyzes two or more themes but for the purpose of this study they were categorized based on one theme for each thesis. Six theses do not fall into the above categories. Two of them analyze the role of female ulama and hold potential as studies on Islam and gender two are on the legal history of the Malaka state, and the political history of Surabaya; and the other two broadly discuss the economic role of NU and the NU's identity construction of Islam Nusantara.

Conclusion

There are several points to be discussed in the Nusantara Islam program. As the previous section shows, many students in the program worked on historical and contemporary Islamic practices in a local context (of their birth provinces) and consciously or unconsciously aimed to find a harmonious acculturation process of Islam in a local context or a smooth Islamization process in one locality. Some of these works revealed the coexistence of Islam (or Islamic thought) and the nation-state (concept), for example, by analyzing the contribution of kyai and his followers in the independence struggle. These themes are in strong accordance with the purpose of the program, but almost all the main actors in these thesis are the proponents of Islamization. There seems to be no thesis focusing on local cultural leaders, adat leaders, or dukun (traditional healers) who might have different ideas and views as receivers of the process. One exceptional work is on the ethnic Dayak movement against local Syariah regulations. Further studies can be conducted focusing on the views and movements by local receivers of Aswaja's Islamization process.

There is always a conflict, tension, and negotiation in the encountering process of different values, ideas, and cultures. Analyzing the cultural and mental conflicts of and among receivers of Islamization in the process could enrich the current study of Nusantara Islam.

The program is still Java-centric, both in terms of the students' birth provinces and the research sites. As mentioned earlier, 84.1% of the students were born on Java Island, and of the total, 75 students (68%) chose research sites on Java Island. Considering the higher percentage of population and higher access to education in Java and the location of the university in Jakarta, this Java-centricity is understandable, but the study on Nusantara Islam in the outer islands can be developed further.

Students born in a village or a town in Java do not necessarily have to study their own area and can conduct research in an area outside Java. They could deepen the understanding of the variety and diversity of Islam in Indonesia by comparing Islam in their own areas with Islam in a different region. There are just six students who were born in Java and conducted research outside Java. An institutional effort to dispatch students to conduct research in different regions would enrich the program itself. A renowned Indonesianist, Benedict Anderson, wrote in his autobiography about fieldwork in a foreign area.

It is useless to concentrate exclusively on one's research project'. One has to be endlessly curious about everything, sharpen one's eyes and ears, and take notes about anything. This is the great blessing of this kind of work. The experience of strangeness makes all your senses much more sensitive than normal, and your attachment to comparison grows deeper. This is why fieldwork is also useful when you return home. You will have developed habits of observation and comparison that encourage or force you to start noticing that your own culture is just as strange (Anderson, 2016).

This process of seeing the difference and sensing the strangeness is necessary for the study of Nusantara Islam. In fact, the study area cannot be limited to Indonesia for Indonesian students. Ahmad Suaedy, a lecturer in the program, did a research on Islam in different parts of Southeast Asia (Suaedy, 2018). The students in the program can follow his path.

Finally, there is a concern regarding the (instant) popularization of the concept of Islamic Nusantara. The current Jokowi government is promoting Islam Nusantara as the Indonesian way of Islam nationally and globally, and NU with its ex-chairman as the vice president of Indonesia is strongly supportive of this move and is proud of Islam Nusantara as NU's Islam. This popularization is the reason for the birth of the Islam Nusantara master's program itself as well as the reason for the expansion of the program to undergraduate and PhD courses. However, this government-driven

popularization poses a risk of the program becoming a dogmatic promoter of Islam Nusantara and falling into a less academic and more propagandistic quagmire. Central to retaining the academic objectivity of the program, as Ulil Abshar Abdalla, a lecturer in the program mentioned, is to incessantly show the diversity of the concepts and views of Islam Nusantara itself among the scholars (NU Online, 2015).

It is also important to establish a “critical” study of Islam Nusantara. These studies could critically delve into the actual practices and implementation of the Islamic Nusantara concept, such as Jokowi’s policies under the name of Islam Nusantara. There are cultural and financial conflicts of interest and moral deviations in the process of implementing the Islamic Nusantara policy. The exposure of these aspects might briefly tarnish the image of Islam Nusantara but it would be fruitful in the long term. A critical study of Islam Nusantara will lead to continuous self-retrospect and self-criticism, and help entrench the key aspects of Islam Nusantara, that is, the tolerance and moderateness in Indonesian society.

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