

Weighing “Islam Nusantara”: A Lexical and Historical Critique of the Terminology of Islamic Moderation in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the term *Islam Nusantara* as a key concept in Indonesia’s discourse on Islamic moderation. Nahdlatul Ulama popularized the term to articulate a form of Islam that integrates Islam’s universal values with local cultural contexts. This study aims to assess the conceptual precision of *Islam Nusantara* by analyzing its lexical and historical implications, given its expanding use across religious discourse, academic debates, and public policy. The study employs a qualitative approach grounded in lexical-semantic analysis and historical-conceptual inquiry. It draws on library research by conducting a critical reading of religious texts, organizational documents, public speeches, and academic literature that represent the pro-and-con debates surrounding *Islam Nusantara*. First, at the lexical level, the phrase *Islam Nusantara* contains inherent ambiguity because its grammatical structure permits an attributive reading—Islam that is Nusantara— which can prompt audiences to interpret it as a particular variant or typology of Islam rather than as a designation of the geographic and cultural context of Islamic practice. Second, at the historical level, the narratives that sustain the term tend to treat Javanese–Malay Islam as the dominant representation of Islam in the archipelago, thereby obscuring the plurality of routes, agents, and Islamic traditions across Indonesia’s islands. Third, at the discursive level, *Islam Nusantara* functions primarily as a discursive strategy and a project of religious identity through which actors articulate Islamic moderation in the context of nationhood and globalization, rather than as a stable normative theological category. These findings underscore the need for conceptual caution in deploying religious terminology so that it does not generate semantic reduction or symbolic exclusion. The study’s original contribution lies in formulating a framework for terminological critique that positions *Islam Nusantara* as an arena of meaning negotiation between Islam’s universality and cultural locality, while opening space for the development of a concept of Islamic moderation that is more academically precise and historically inclusive.

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji secara kritis terminologi Islam Nusantara sebagai salah satu konsep kunci dalam wacana moderasi Islam di Indonesia. Istilah ini dipopulerkan oleh Nahdlatul Ulama untuk menegaskan bentuk keberislaman yang mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai universal Islam dengan konteks budaya lokal. Penelitian ini bertujuan menilai ketepatan konseptual istilah Islam Nusantara melalui analisis implikasi leksikal dan historis yang menyertainya, mengingat penggunaannya yang kian meluas dalam diskursus keagamaan, akademik, dan kebijakan publik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis analisis leksikal-semantik dan kajian historis-konseptual. Data dikumpulkan melalui library research yakni telaah kritis terhadap teks keagamaan, dokumen organisasi, pidato publik, serta literatur akademik yang merepresentasikan perdebatan pro dan kontra seputar Islam Nusantara. Pertama, secara leksikal, frasa Islam Nusantara mengandung ambiguitas inheren karena secara gramatikal memungkinkan pembacaan atributif—yakni Islam yang bersifat Nusantara—yang berpotensi dipahami sebagai varian atau tipologi Islam tertentu, bukan sekadar penunjukan konteks geografis dan kultural praktik keberislaman. Kedua, secara historis, narasi yang menopang istilah ini cenderung menjadikan pengalaman Islam Jawa–Melayu sebagai representasi dominan Islam di Nusantara, sehingga mengaburkan pluralitas jalur, aktor, dan tradisi Islam lain di wilayah kepulauan. Ketiga, pada tingkat wacana, Islam Nusantara berfungsi terutama sebagai strategi diskursif dan proyek identitas keagamaan untuk mengartikulasikan moderasi Islam dalam konteks kebangsaan dan globalisasi, alih-alih sebagai kategori teologis normatif yang stabil. Implikasi penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya kehati-hatian konseptual dalam penggunaan terminologi keagamaan agar tidak menghasilkan reduksi makna atau eksklusi simbolik. Kontribusi orisinal studi ini terletak pada perumusan kerangka kritik terminologis yang menempatkan Islam Nusantara sebagai arena negosiasi makna antara universalitas Islam dan lokalitas budaya, sekaligus membuka ruang bagi pengembangan konsep moderasi Islam yang lebih presisi secara akademik dan inklusif secara historis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, *Islam Nusantara* has emerged as one of the most prominent and contested terms in the landscape of Indonesian Islam. The term gained significant momentum when it was adopted as the overarching theme of the 33rd Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Congress in Jombang on 1–5 August 2015—“Affirming Islam Nusantara for Indonesian and Global Civilization”—before moving beyond the organization’s internal arena into public discourse, academic debates, and policy discussions (Suriyanto, 2015). The controversies surrounding the term indicate that what is at stake is not merely a label, but rather a broader struggle over how to define the relationship between Islam and locality, religious authority, and national identity amid increasingly differentiated socio-political conditions (Dikri, 2018).

These contestations unfold alongside measurable dynamics of tolerance and religious polarization in Indonesia. One frequently cited indicator is the Tolerant City Index (Indeks Kota Toleran, IKT) published by the Setara Institute since 2015. The 2024 IKT report underscores significant variations in tolerance performance at the municipal level, while also demonstrating that tolerance is not an abstract category but a social practice that can be assessed through policy indicators and concrete events (Setara Institute, 2024). Within this context, both proponents and critics often position *Islam Nusantara* as a conceptual response to intolerance, radicalism, and identity-based tensions.

In this broader social framework, Nahdlatul Ulama—widely regarded as the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia—possesses substantial symbolic and institutional weight in the production of mainstream Islamic discourse. Estimates of NU’s membership vary across publications, ranging from tens of millions to figures approaching ninety million (Taufani, 2024). This variation matters not to adjudicate numerical accuracy, but to emphasize that *Islam Nusantara* circulates through extensive networks of authority and social bases, making its resonance beyond NU’s internal debates both expected and consequential (Hasyim & Yew-Foong, 2022).

Conceptually, *Islam Nusantara* commonly denotes an understanding of Islam that engages local cultures through contextualization, indigenization, and modes of *da’wah* that emphasize moderation (*wasatiyyah*), inclusivity, and the acceptance of local traditions insofar as they do not contradict core religious principles (Hasyim & Yew-Foong, 2022). In this sense, the term initially functioned as an articulatory device to assert that “Indonesianness” and “Islam” need not stand in mutually negating relations. From the outset, however, its linguistic form generated interpretive problems: the coupling of the theological noun “Islam” with the geographical-cultural noun “Nusantara” opened space for multiple readings that did not always align with the intentions of its proponents.

Scholarship on Indonesian Islam has developed along several major trajectories. First, historical-sociological studies of Islamization processes, ulama networks, and the formation of religious authority emphasize Islam’s interaction with local socio-cultural structures (Ali, 2025; Azyumardi Azra, 2013; M. Hassan, 2024; Ibrahim, 2022; L. Romli et al., 2025). Within this strand, themes such as indigenization and vernacularization are central to understanding how local traditions and Islamic sources have negotiated meaning over extended historical periods. Second, studies of Indonesian Islamic thought foreground *pribumisasi* and cultural strategies as methodological foundations for readings of Islam that remain attentive to context (Fuadi et al., 2024; Hoesterey, 2022; van Bruinessen, 2018). This body of work provides an important framework for interpreting ideas later encapsulated by the label *Islam Nusantara*, particularly as an approach that resists the absolutization of a single form of Islamic expression.

Third, critical studies of identity politics, contests over religious authority, and the entanglement of religious discourse with socio-political agendas examine how religious terms circulate in the public sphere as ideological symbols (Burhani, 2018; Hidayah et al., 2025; Khamdan & Wiharyani, 2018; Pribadi, 2018; Suryadinata, 2019). Within this perspective, *Islam Nusantara* often appears as a discursive project that not only describes religious practices but also produces identity boundaries—demarcating who belongs to “us” and who constitutes “the other”—amid competing meanings between local Islamic expressions and transnational currents.

Despite their richness, these three strands leave an important gap. Relatively few studies place the terminology of *Islam Nusantara* itself at the center of conceptual analysis through systematic lexical-semantic examination and historical scrutiny of the narratives attached to the term. As a result, debates frequently oscillate between normative defense and theological rejection without first addressing more fundamental questions: what is the precise conceptual status of the term, how do its possible interpretations operate, and which historical traditions does it include—or exclude?

Addressing this gap, the present article advances a systematic conceptual critique of the term *Islam Nusantara* through two analytical pathways. First, it conducts a lexical-semantic analysis to assess the phrase’s structure, meaning implications, and interpretive ambiguities. Second, it undertakes a historical-conceptual inquiry to trace origin narratives, patterns of representation, and tendencies toward centrality—particularly the dominance of Javanese-Malay experiences—in the construction of “Nusantara” implied by the term.

The article advances a two-layered argument. At the lexical level, the phrase *Islam Nusantara* contains an inherent ambiguity because its grammatical and semantic structure readily invites an attributive reading—Islam that is Nusantara—rather than a purely locative one—*Islam in Nusantara*. This ambiguity renders the term vulnerable to being understood as a theological categorization or a specific Islamic typology, an interpretation explicitly unintended by its proponents. At the historical level, narratives commonly associated with *Islam Nusantara* tend to converge on Javanese–Malay Islamic experiences as representational centers, positioning the Wali Songo, Javanese pesantren, and *santri* traditions as archetypes. This tendency risks reducing the very meaning of “Nusantara” and obscuring the plurality of Islamic routes, actors, and traditions across the archipelago, including Bugis, Banjar, Acehese, Malukan, and Papuan Islams. Together, these two layers demonstrate that the principal problem of *Islam Nusantara* does not lie in its normative intent—to affirm a moderate, tolerant, and contextual Islam—but in the conceptual and representational burdens that accompany it. Accordingly, the article argues that *Islam Nusantara* proves more productive when understood as a discursive strategy and a methodological approach for managing the relationship between Islam and locality, rather than as a stable and definitive theological category. The implication is a call for greater conceptual caution in the use of religious terminology in academic and public spheres, alongside the development of formulations of Islamic moderation that are more precise, reflexive, and inclusive of Indonesia’s diverse Islamic experiences.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study positions the term *Islam Nusantara* as its primary unit of analysis, treating it as both a linguistic construct and a discursive category that operates across religious, academic, and political arenas. The analysis focuses on how the term is produced, interpreted, and contested, including the conceptual consequences arising from the combination of the theological noun “Islam” with the geographical–cultural marker “Nusantara.” Accordingly, the study does not examine Islam as a normative doctrine, but rather analyzes *Islam Nusantara* as an act of naming that structures how the relationship between Islam and locality is read and understood.

The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in library research, combined with historical–conceptual inquiry and critical discourse analysis (Maxwell, 2009). This design is appropriate because the research problem centers on shifts in meaning, conceptual logic, and interpretive contestation that cannot be adequately explained through statistical measurement. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to examine not only what texts say, but also how the term gains legitimacy, constructs identity boundaries, and advances particular claims regarding moderation and religious authority.

The data sources consist of both primary and secondary texts. Primary data include official documents and key texts that popularized *Islam Nusantara*, such as organizational publications, speeches, programmatic writings, and statements by figures involved in the term’s early articulation. Secondary data comprise scholarly articles, books, essays, media reports, and polemical writings produced by a range of actors—academics, public intellectuals, and religious groups—representing both affirmative and critical positions. Temporally, the textual corpus is limited to the period from the term’s emergence in public discourse (approximately 2014–2015) to the phase in which it became consolidated and widely debated.

Data collection relied on systematic library research conducted through online academic databases, journal repositories, and digital media archives. Searches employed keywords such as “*Islam Nusantara*,” “critique of *Islam Nusantara*,” “Islamic indigenization,” “local Islam,” and related terms to ensure balanced coverage of the discourse. All collected documents were subsequently verified and classified into analytical categories: (a) affirmative versus critical texts, and (b) recurring argumentative themes, particularly those concerning Islamic universalism, cultural locality, religious authority, and national identity.

Data analysis proceeded along two complementary pathways (Miles & Huberman, 2013; Setia & Haq, 2023). First, a lexical–semantic analysis examined phrase structure, semantic fields, and conceptual ambiguities arising from the attributive relation between “Islam” and “Nusantara,” including the interpretive consequences that allow the term to be read either as a locative description (“Islam in

Nusantara”) or as a typology (“Islam that is Nusantara”). Second, a historical–critical discourse analysis traced the conditions of the term’s emergence, the patterns of historical representation it privileges, and tendencies toward narrative centralization—such as the dominance of Javanese–Malay experiences—in the construction of the imagined “Nusantara.” By combining these two analytical strategies, the study evaluates the principal arguments operating within debates on *Islam Nusantara* while delineating its conceptual limits as a discursive strategy rather than a definitive theological category.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lexical Ambiguity and Conceptual Paradox in the Term *Islam Nusantara*

Since the term *Islam Nusantara* gained wide public currency—particularly after its formal endorsement as the central theme of the 33rd NU Congress in Jombang in 2015—the debate surrounding it has quickly moved beyond internal organizational boundaries (Ahmad, 2019). It has become a nodal point where three domains intersect and often collide at once: language (the way the term is constructed), theology (claims to the universality of Islam), and cultural politics (the negotiation of Indonesian Muslim identity) (Affan, 2015b; Chamami, 2016; N. K. Ridwan, 2017; Rozali, 2018). Within this framework, the ambiguity of *Islam Nusantara* does not merely reflect technical misunderstanding, but rather signals a conceptual problem inherent in the way the term functions as a signifier in contemporary Islamic discourse (Wijayanti, 2022).

The primary ambiguity arises from two linguistically plausible readings that generate markedly different theological implications. The first reads the phrase as “Islam in Nusantara,” positioning “Nusantara” as a contextual marker—a geographical and cultural space in which Islam is practiced, acculturated, and socially grounded. The second reads it as “Nusantaran Islam,” an attributive interpretation that renders “Nusantara” an essential quality attached to “Islam,” thereby semantically opening the possibility of a typology of Islam as a particular kind or variant. The tension between these two readings helps explain why proponents frame *Islam Nusantara* as a legitimate strategy of contextualization, while critics perceive it as an indication of Islamic particularization that threatens the principle of doctrinal unity and universality.

Lexical–semantic analysis shows that the phrase *Islam Nusantara* in Indonesian follows a noun–noun construction that forms an attributive relation, with “Islam” as the head noun and “Nusantara” as its modifier. In Indonesian usage, such N+N constructions frequently generate new conceptual entities—such as “customary law,” “local language,” or “identity politics”—rather than merely indicating location. As a result, *Islam Nusantara* readily appears as a category or type, rather than a place-based description. Burhani notes that this semantic vulnerability situates the term perpetually on the threshold of competing interpretations, from which theological polemics readily emerge (Burhani, 2018).

Within the horizon of Arabic—often invoked as a source of conceptual legitimacy in Islamic debates—a similar relation can be imagined through the *iḍāfah* construction, such as *Islām al-‘Arab* or *Islām al-Nusantara*. The problem, however, does not lie in grammatical permissibility, but in the semantic effect such constructions produce. When “Islam” is coupled with a geographical–cultural marker, the phrase easily reads as an attributive classification—a specific kind of Islam—rather than as a contextual description of Islam’s presence in a given region. At this point, a conceptual paradox becomes visible: a term intended to affirm the flexibility of Islamic expression simultaneously provides linguistic tools that enable Islam to be read as fragmented into seemingly essentialized variants.

This paradox becomes more pronounced when one juxtaposes the intentions of the concept’s proponents with its public denotation. Intentionally, *Islam Nusantara* is closely associated with ideas of indigenization and contextualization: Islam’s socio-cultural expressions adapt to local traditions without altering the substance of doctrine. Within Indonesian Islamic thought, this logic has deep roots, both in discourses of indigenization that emphasize grounding Islam within local cultures without rendering it alien, and in narratives of vernacularization that understand Islamization as a process of translating values through local languages and symbols. Denotatively, however—especially in media circulation and identity politics debates—*Islam Nusantara* often functions as a label that distinguishes “our Islam” from “their Islam.” It is precisely here that anxieties about the emergence of a “new school” or “new sect” acquire social traction (Bagir, 2018; Halim & Hosen, 2021).

The scholarly literature on *Islam Nusantara* further reveals a diversity of definitional frames that, paradoxically, reinforce the term’s multifaceted character. Some studies emphasize cultural integration and local wisdom as its conceptual core, portraying *Islam Nusantara* as a friendly, tolerant form of Islam that embraces traditions not in conflict with fundamental religious principles (Thohir, 2022; Thohir & Lukluk Atsmara Anjaina, 2022). Others interpret its evolution as a shift from traditionalism toward post-traditionalism, marked by greater openness in socio-political thought without projecting an Islamic state as a formal horizon (Supena, 2021). This academic spectrum matters because it demonstrates that even within scholarly discourse, *Islam Nusantara* often functions as an umbrella for multiple emphases—moderation, tradition, culture, and political orientation—that remain legitimate but not always terminologically coherent.

Studies examining regional reception and rejection further confirm that lexical ambiguity intertwines with dynamics of authority and identity. Ridwan et al. (2019) show that debates among ulama in West Sumatra concern not only the substantive content of moderation, but also objections to affixing “Nusantara” to Islam, which many regard as already complete and universal. The debate thus shifts toward questions of who holds the authority to frame Indonesian Islam in the era of social media. Similarly, Musawar and Zuhdi (2019) describe the bifurcated meanings of *Islam Nusantara* as simultaneously “sacred” and “neglected,” indicating that the term operates as a symbol capable of fostering affiliation while also provoking resistance for allegedly blurring the boundary between doctrinal core and cultural expression.

The ambiguity deepens further because “Nusantara” itself is not a neutral geographical term. Historically, the concept carries its own genealogy—from its political-territorial reference in the Majapahit era to its modern revival laden with nationalist connotations and regional imagination (Evers, 2016). When attached to “Islam,” the term imports an ideological charge: it implies the existence of an “authentic” model of Islam rooted in the historical culture of the archipelago. In this sense, *Islam Nusantara* functions as a discursive strategy to strengthen local religious authority in the face of transnational Islamic currents. Yet this strategy also entails the risk of epistemic reduction, whereby locality becomes a criterion of authenticity, and the universality of Islam (*syumūliyyah al-Islām*) appears to require validation through specific cultural markers (R. W. Hefner, 2020; Van Bruinessen, 2013).

This pattern also appears in derivative concepts such as *Fiqh Nusantara*. On the one hand, proponents present it as an affirmation of contextual *ijtihad*, emphasizing that Islamic law can be formulated collectively, remain open to diverse opinions, and respond to Indonesian realities (Harisudin, 2021; Yusuf et al., 2023). On the other hand, such derivative terms reiterate the same structural problem: attaching a regional marker to a normative category risks typological readings, as if there were a distinct “Nusantaran fiqh” set against “other fiqh traditions,” even when the intended meaning concerns methodological localization rather than doctrinal particularization.

Taken together, these lexical findings demonstrate that *Islam Nusantara* is not linguistically neutral. The term proves productive insofar as it consolidates narratives of moderation, culture, and nationhood, yet it remains fragile because its linguistic structure and the historical weight of “Nusantara” invite divergent interpretations. At this juncture, the conceptual paradox becomes explicit: a term designed to affirm Islam’s universality through local context simultaneously enables public interpretations that read locality as an essential variant of Islam. The consequence extends beyond terminological debate to a reconfiguration of boundaries, whereby a descriptive label gradually transforms into an instrument of identity classification.

Table 1. Two Interpretive Models of the Term *Islam Nusantara* and Their Conceptual Implications

Interpretation	Status of “Nusantara”	Semantic Effect	Conceptual Risk
<i>Islam in Nusantara</i>	Context (location/practice)	Descriptive	Minimal (relatively safe)
<i>Nusantaran Islam</i>	Essential attribute	Typological	Theological particularization / “a new type of Islam”

Table 1 demonstrates that the terminological ambiguity of *Islam Nusantara* originates from differing semantic statuses assigned to the term “Nusantara.” When “Nusantara” functions as a contextual marker—namely, the geographical and cultural space in which Islam is practiced—the term *Islam Nusantara* operates descriptively and remains conceptually safe, as it does not challenge Islam’s claim to universality. By contrast, when “Nusantara” is treated as an essential attribute attached to “Islam,” the phrase shifts from description to typology, thereby opening the risk of theological particularization and public interpretations that posit the existence of “a new type of Islam.” The table thus clarifies that the central problem of *Islam Nusantara* does not lie in its intended promotion of moderation, but in its linguistic structure, which allows a semantic shift from contextualizing religious practice to categorizing theological identity.

The Historical Narrative of *Islam Nusantara* and the Bias of Javanese–Malay Representation

In the discourse produced and circulated by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), *Islam Nusantara* almost always rests on a historical narrative that emphasizes a long, relatively peaceful, and adaptive process of Islamization. Islam appears not as a fully imported theological system arriving intact from outside, but as an organic growth that continuously negotiated with local customs, traditions, and the social structures of the archipelago. This narrative highlights the role of traders (Arab–Persian–Gujarat) and Sufi–ulama networks as early nodes of transmission, while foregrounding cultural modes of *da’wah* that avoided confrontation (Wijayanti, 2022). As a result, Islam emerges as an ethical expression that is accommodating, tolerant, and socially relevant. Within NU’s internal articulation, this framework is condensed into the principles of *tawāzun*, *tasāmuḥ*, and *tawassuṭ* as defining characteristics of a supposedly distinctive Islamic disposition. Its normative legitimacy is often anchored in the legal maxim *al-‘ādah muḥakkamah* and the logic of *fiqh al-da’wah*, which prioritizes effective modes of conveying Islam in socio-cultural contexts without altering the domains of creed and ritual worship (*‘aqidah* and *‘ibadah maḥḍah*). At this level, *Islam Nusantara* appears less as a tightly bounded theological concept than as a historical model of how Islam has operated within the societies of the archipelago—a framing that aligns with broader studies of vernacular or indigenized Islam in diverse Muslim regions.

However, when this historical narrative undergoes closer historical–conceptual scrutiny, it becomes evident that the claim of “Nusantara” as a comprehensive representational umbrella frequently operates through a Javanese–Malay archetype. In many popular and academic expositions, the “core history” of *Islam Nusantara* is condensed into three symbolic centers: first, the Wali Songo and Java as the laboratory of cultural *da’wah*; second, pesantren and the *santri* tradition as the primary engines of religious authority; and third, Malay culture as the medium of vernacularization through language and script (Jawi and *pegon*), assumed to bind the region together. Through this logic, *Nusantara* ceases to function as a genuinely plural geographical–cultural concept and instead becomes a broad label narrowed to a Javanese–Malay-centered narrative. The effect is a reductionist one: Islam in the archipelago appears intelligible primarily through Sufi–pesantren pathways and Javanese–Malay political–cultural configurations, while other trajectories are relegated to supplementary fragments. The conceptual problem lies precisely here: *Islam Nusantara* claims archipelagic plurality, yet its narrative foundation tends to generalize one historical pattern as representative of the whole.

Markers of this reduction appear already in the genealogy of *Nusantara* itself, a concept whose meaning has shifted from a geopolitical imagination in the Majapahit era to a symbol of modern nationalism, and later to a contemporary cultural–political identity (Evers, 2016). When NU revitalized the term *Islam Nusantara*, particularly at the Thirty-Third Congress in 2015, this revival did not occur in a vacuum. It intersected with contests over religious authority, the rise of transnational Islamic currents, and post-2010 politics of religious moderation. Consequently, the historical narrative accompanying the term assumed a strategic function: it asserted Indonesian traditional Islam as a moral reference point—indeed, as a contribution to “world civilization”—amid global and domestic polarization. At this stage, history functioned as legitimation rather than mere reconstruction of the past; it became a device for drawing discursive boundaries between Islam deemed “authentic” and “contextually appropriate” and Islam portrayed as “rigid” or “foreign.”

Yet the history of Islam in the archipelago has always been multipolar. Even if one accepts the general thesis of Islamization through trade and scholarly networks, regional pathways of reception differed substantially. Some regions exhibited strong patronage by local Islamic polities; others developed firm syntheses between *adat* and *shari'a*; elsewhere, configurations of court Islam diverged sharply from forms of customary Islam; and in certain contexts, relations between Islam, the state, and violence proved far more complex than the narrative of peaceful adaptation suggests. From a historiographical standpoint, the archipelago demands a multiregional reading—encompassing Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Maluku, and Papua—while accounting for differences in intellectual networks, local political structures, and cultural ecologies that shaped Islamic practice. When these diverse pathways are mapped, it becomes evident that contextual and moderate forms of Islam are not the monopoly of the Javanese–Malay world. Rather, they emerge as products of varied social relations—sometimes mediated through *adat*, sometimes through royal courts, sometimes through local scholarly traditions, and sometimes through migration and port-city networks.

A simple illustration comes from West Sumatra, where the formula *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* articulates a strong synthesis of religious norms and customary law (Aziz, 2020). This form of contextualization cannot be reduced to a derivative of Javanese *pesantren* models. Other examples include the layered intellectual and political traditions of the Aceh Sultanate, the configuration of Bugis Islam in South Sulawesi at the intersection of local ethics, royal structures, and scholarly networks, the authoritative tradition of Banjar Islam in Kalimantan, and the distinctive dynamics of Islam in Maluku's spice islands, shaped by unique histories of power and exchange. Across these cases, adaptive and culturally embedded Islam emerges through different mechanisms, underscoring why the umbrella term *Nusantara* should not rest on a single archetype. When the discourse of *Islam Nusantara* fails to adequately accommodate these diverse trajectories, the issue extends beyond mere data omission; it reflects a bias of historical selection in which certain experiences are positioned as the center while others are relegated to the periphery.

At this juncture, Imam Suprayogo's critique—that *Muslim Nusantara* may be more precise than *Islam Nusantara*—becomes relevant not only lexically but also historiographically. Islam as a normative source grounded in the Qur'an and the Sunnah does not change across spaces, whereas Muslims as historical actors demonstrably vary across regions and contexts. This critique reveals that what is genuinely plural in the history of the archipelago is not Islam as doctrine but the diverse ways of being Muslim within different socio-cultural environments. If the term *Islam Nusantara* is to be retained, it therefore requires greater conceptual discipline: *Nusantara* must function as a socio-cultural category substantiated through multiregional mapping, rather than as an identity label that implicitly elevates one regional history to the status of a master narrative (Suprayogo, 2015).

The Javanese–Malay bias also becomes visible in patterns of citation and omission. Dominant narratives frequently present the Wali Songo–*pesantren*–*santri* complex as the primary evidence of successful acculturation, while non-Javanese cases—such as Bugis, Banjar, Minangkabau, Maluku, or Papuan Islam—appear only as brief illustrations rather than as constitutive pillars of the concept. This imbalance carries significant consequences: a term intended to encompass the archipelago risks negating the archipelago itself. *Nusantara* becomes an inclusive rhetoric that conceals representational asymmetries. If the historical–conceptual aim is to test claims of distinctiveness, then the most crucial data are precisely the variations in Islamization pathways and the multiple forms of contextualization across regions—including those that do not conform neatly to a peaceful, culturally oriented, *pesantren*-centered narrative.

The implications of this finding need not culminate in a wholesale rejection of NU's narrative, which clearly serves an important social function in affirming moderation and providing discursive resources against radicalism. Academically, however, the narrative requires revision through two key steps. First, a multiregional reconstruction is necessary to map the archipelago on an equal footing and demonstrate that moderation and contextuality also materialize through non-Javanese mechanisms. Second, scholars must differentiate levels of analysis by distinguishing *Islam Nusantara* as a contemporary discursive project from the history of Islam in the archipelago as a multipolar reality that cannot be reduced to a single archetype. Through such revisions, the “distinctiveness” of archipelagic

Islam no longer depends on one historical model but on Islam's capacity to operate across multiple cultural and political ecologies simultaneously—a plurality that more faithfully reflects the meaning of *Nusantara* as an archipelago.

Table 2. Multiregional Mapping of Islamization Pathways in the Nusantara Archipelago

Region	Main Pathways of Islamization	Key Actors	Socio-Cultural Media	Dominant Islamic Characteristics	Key References
Java	Cultural and Sufi-oriented <i>da'wah</i>	Wali Songo; <i>pesantren</i> ulama	Performing arts (<i>wayang</i> , <i>gamelan</i>), <i>pesantren</i> , Javanese customs	Syncretic–adaptive; social ethics; <i>santri</i> Islam	(Azra, 1999; Ricklefs, 2005)
Sumatra (Aceh–Minangkabau)	Ulama and Islamic polities; <i>adat</i> – <i>shari'a</i> synthesis	Acehnese <i>ulama</i> ; Minangkabau elites	Customary law, royal courts, Sufi orders	Normative–customary; <i>adat</i> – <i>basandi syarak</i>	(Azra, 2013; Riddell, 2001)
Sulawesi (Bugis–Makassar)	Royal patronage and local ulama	Bugis ruler–ulama; scholarly networks	Local ethics (<i>siri'</i>), court institutions	Ethical–political; <i>adat</i> –Islam integration	(Pelras, 1997; Widiyanto, 2019)
Kalimantan (Banjar)	Ulama networks and <i>pesantren</i>	Banjar ulama	Malay–Jawi texts, Sufi orders	Textual–moderate; ulama authority	(Azra, 1989; Berg, 1955)
Maluku	Trade and maritime sultanates	Sultans of Ternate–Tidore	Port networks, maritime customs	Cosmopolitan Islam; <i>adat</i> –state negotiation	(Andaya, 1993; Michael Laffan, 2016)
Papua	Trade contacts and local missions	Muslim traders; local elites	Trading relations, coastal communities	Minority–adaptive; contextual practice	(Hefner, 1997; Kamma, 2013)

The table demonstrates that Islamization in the Nusantara was multipolar, multi-pathway, and multi-form, and therefore cannot be reduced to a single historical archetype. Although cultural–Sufi *da'wah* in Java and Malay traditions often serve as dominant representations of *Islam Nusantara*, the multiregional data reveal that moderate, adaptive, and contextual forms of Islam also developed through distinct mechanisms—through customary law (Sumatra), local ethics and royal politics (Sulawesi), ulama authority grounded in Malay–Jawi textual traditions (Kalimantan), maritime cosmopolitanism (Maluku), and negotiated minority practices (Papua). Accordingly, claims about the historical distinctiveness of *Islam Nusantara* gain conceptual robustness only if “Nusantara” functions as a genuinely plural archipelagic category rather than as a generalization derived from a single Javanese–Malay historical trajectory. This finding underscores a historiographical selection bias in dominant narratives and points to the need for a more equitable, multiregional reconstruction of the history of Islam in the archipelago.

Building on these historical findings, which reveal a persistent Javanese–Malay representational bias in narratives of *Islam Nusantara*, it becomes evident that the concept does not remain a purely

academic description of Islamization in the archipelago. Instead, it operates as an active discursive device within contemporary socio-political fields. The reduction of “Nusantara” from a plural archipelagic space to a particular cultural archetype enables *Islam Nusantara* to function as a normative identity symbol—marking an Islam deemed moderate, authentic, and nationally legitimate. In this context, history does not merely undergo reconstruction; it undergoes selection and politicization to address contemporary ideological challenges, particularly in response to transnational puritanism and religious radicalism. This shift from historical narrative to normative articulation marks the transformation of *Islam Nusantara* from an analytical category into a discursive strategy—a strategy that frames the boundaries of Indonesian Islam, determines who counts as representative, and produces claims to religious authority in the public sphere. On this basis, the following discussion examines *Islam Nusantara* as a form of symbolic politics and an identity project, analyzing how the term is deployed, negotiated, and contested within discourses of religious moderation and national religious policy.

***Islam Nusantara* as a Discursive Strategy and a Religious Identity Project**

Islam Nusantara cannot be adequately understood if it is treated as a theological category or a fixed normative model of Islam. Rather than functioning as a *madhhab*, sect, or doctrinal system, *Islam Nusantara* operates primarily as a discursive strategy and a religious identity project that emerged from Indonesia’s contemporary socio-political context. Its epistemological status is operational, rhetorical, and contextual, not normative-theological. Accordingly, the concept derives its principal force not from doctrinal coherence but from its capacity to articulate a vision of moderate Islam within the arenas of nationhood, globalization, and ideological contestation in the Muslim world.

Institutionally, the use of the term *Islam Nusantara* gained prominence after the 33rd Congress of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Jombang in 2015, when NU explicitly positioned it as a grand narrative to affirm a form of Indonesian Islam that is amicable, tolerant, and opposed to violence (Suriyanto, 2015). Across official forums—ranging from the National Conference of ‘*Ulamā*’, speeches by NU’s central leadership, to statements by President Joko Widodo—*Islam Nusantara* has functioned as a marker of collective identity that distinguishes Indonesian Islam from representations of Middle Eastern Islam commonly associated with conflict, sectarianism, and radicalism (Affan, 2015a; A Azra, 2017). At this juncture, *Islam Nusantara* does not operate as a purely scholarly concept; it functions as a language of cultural politics that bridges religious discourse with the national project.

Discourse analysis indicates that *Islam Nusantara* works as a counter-narrative to two simultaneous currents. First, it responds to transnational puritanism and Islamism that promote homogenized and scripturalist standards of religiosity. Second, it challenges global narratives that often portray Indonesian Islam as peripheral. In this context, *Islam Nusantara* becomes a symbolic instrument to reclaim representational authority over Indonesian Islam in both domestic and international public spheres (Slama, 2020). In other words, it performs a mechanism of re-centering by imagining Indonesia as a legitimate historical and moral center of the Muslim world.

Power relations surrounding the use of the term reveal that *Islam Nusantara* is primarily articulated by actors endowed with strong symbolic and institutional capital: NU elites, the state, moderate Muslim academics, and civil society networks. Its usage intensifies in moments of crisis—terrorism, radicalism, and polarization driven by identity politics—when public discourse demands an Islamic narrative compatible with democracy, pluralism, and Pancasila. Within deradicalization efforts, *Islam Nusantara* operates as a soft-power discourse that foregrounds the aesthetics of tolerance, local wisdom, and a culture of peace through education, film, and social media (Safitri et al., 2016; Schmidt, 2021). Precisely because of this strategic function, however, the term remains politically charged and never neutral.

Conceptually, *Islam Nusantara* shares functional similarities with other terms such as *pribumisasi* Islam, moderate Islam, or Islam *berkemajuan*. All three operate as articulatory devices for a contextual Islam that negotiates with modernity, the nation-state, and pluralism. *Islam Nusantara*, however, carries a heavier terminological burden because it combines a theological signifier (“Islam”) with a geographical-cultural marker (“Nusantara”). Unlike *pribumisasi* Islam—which Abdurrahman Wahid explicitly framed as a methodology of *da’wah* and social interpretation—*Islam Nusantara* more readily

appears as a substantive identity. Consequently, critics often perceive it as a “new type of Islam” (Suprayogo, 2015).

Several studies emphasize that the efficacy of *Islam Nusantara* lies precisely in its epistemic flexibility. Supena (2021) demonstrates that *Islam Nusantara* does not construct a new epistemology outside the classical Islamic tradition; instead, it mobilizes tools of *uṣūl al-fiqh* such as ‘urf, *maṣlaḥah*, and *istiḥsān* for contextual purposes. Thohir (2022) and Setiawan and Stevanus (2023) further argue that the values associated with *Islam Nusantara*—moderation, balance, and tolerance—are better understood as social ethics rather than normative doctrines. In this sense, *Islam Nusantara* functions as an ethical discourse rather than a theological system.

Yet, as an identity project, *Islam Nusantara* also entails a paradox. Efforts to affirm an inclusive and plural Islam may inadvertently generate a new form of exclusivism, particularly when *Islam Nusantara* becomes positioned as the singular moral standard for “authentic Indonesian Islam,” while other Islamic expressions are marginalized or viewed with suspicion. This tension explains critiques from non-NU circles, including segments of Minangkabau ‘*ulamā*’ and transnational Islamic groups, who do not necessarily reject moderation itself but question the symbolic legitimacy of the term (Musawar; Zuhdi, 2019; B. Ridwan et al., 2019).

Therefore, *Islam Nusantara* is best understood as a discursive formation—a social construct that emerges from the intersection of local Islamic histories, the dynamics of identity politics, and global demands for a moderate Islam. It does not offer a final theological answer; it provides an effective articulatory tool within specific contexts. Its strength lies in its ability to build bridges between Islam, culture, and nationhood, while its weakness appears when this discursive strategy is read as an essentialist normative category. Within these limits, *Islam Nusantara* functions most productively not as “another Islam,” but as a way of speaking about Islam in Indonesia.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings on *Islam Nusantara* by situating them within the historical, social, and ideological landscape of Indonesian Islam. Rather than treating the term as a settled category, the discussion shows how terminological ambiguity and biased historical representation take shape, why *Islam Nusantara* more accurately functions as a discursive strategy, and what conceptual and practical consequences follow when the term circulates widely in Indonesia’s religious and national public spheres.

This study yields three principal findings. First, at the lexical-semantic level, the phrase *Islam Nusantara* contains an inherent ambiguity because it permits two equally plausible readings: a geographic marker (Islam in the archipelago) and an essential attribution (an Islam characterized as “Nusantara”). This ambiguity generates a conceptual paradox between Islam’s claim to universality and the sign of cultural particularity, and it helps explain why public reception often shifts the term from a descriptive expression into an identity label. Second, at the historical level, the narrative that sustains *Islam Nusantara* tends to elevate the Java–Malay experience as an archetype by privileging the Wali Songo, pesantren, and the santri tradition; as a result, “Nusantara” undergoes a geographic-cultural reduction and fails to fully accommodate the plurality of Islamization routes and Islamic traditions across the archipelago. Third, at the level of conceptual synthesis, the findings show that *Islam Nusantara* operates primarily as a discursive strategy and a religious identity project—not as a theological category or a normative madhhab—that articulates Islamic moderation in the contexts of nationhood, globalization, and ideological contestation.

These findings do not arise by accident. They emerge from the intersection of at least three mutually reinforcing factors. First, linguistic structure matters: Indonesian noun–noun constructions readily invite typological readings, so a term designed to describe lived practice can quickly be interpreted as an essential category. Second, historiography shapes what becomes thinkable: knowledge production about Islam in the archipelago has long been mediated by academic and institutional traditions centered on Java and the Malay world, where narratives of the Wali Songo, pesantren, and santri Islam function as historiography’s “main road,” while Islamic traditions in other

regions often appear as supplements rather than as narrative centers. Third, socio-political pressures intensify these tendencies: the rise of radicalism, transnational Islamic currents, and the state's and major religious organizations' demand for a concise and communicative language of moderation encourage *Islam Nusantara* to operate as an effective ideological symbol. At this point, the term no longer functions merely as a historical reference; it becomes a moral-political articulatory device that signals positionality, builds coalitions, and marks distance from "others."

Within this frame, the study's contribution becomes clearer when we locate it among three major currents in the scholarship on Indonesian Islam. First, historical-sociological studies of Islamization and scholarly networks emphasize indigenization and vernacularization as outcomes of long-term negotiation between local traditions and Islamic sources (Ali, 2025; Azyumardi Azra, 2013; F. Hassan, 2022; Romli, 2024). This study aligns with that current but adds a critical point: this plural indigenization later becomes selectively reified through the *Islam Nusantara* label, which does not always represent the archipelago's diversity on equal terms. Second, intellectual studies that foreground pribumisasi as a methodological strategy—read through Abdurrahman Wahid and developed in the works of Hoesterey, Fuadi, and van Bruinessen—provide a foundation for understanding *Islam Nusantara* as a cultural approach. This study affirms that foundation while showing that *Islam Nusantara* carries a heavier terminological burden than pribumisasi Islam because it invites essentialist readings that proponents do not necessarily intend. Third, studies on identity politics and discursive contestation analyze *Islam Nusantara* as a discursive project that produces identity boundaries in the public sphere (Pribadi; Khamdan & Wiharyani; Burhani; Suryadinata). Here, this study strengthens the discussion by making the term *Islam Nusantara* itself the object of conceptual analysis through lexical-semantic reading and historiographical tracing, so debate moves beyond normative defense or theological rejection and reaches the more elementary question of how the term works and what it excludes.

Historically, the findings underscore that *Islam Nusantara* constitutes a modern articulation of a plural and layered Islamization process, not an exhaustive representation of Islam's history across the archipelago. The dominance of a Java–Malay narrative within *Islam Nusantara* reveals a hegemonic tendency in historiography, in which particular experiences become archetypes for "Nusantara" as a whole. In Malay-Indonesian historiography, for example, the story of Pasai's conversion often appears as a key moment that—despite its "miraculous" elements and its problems of realism—still functions effectively as a narrative of religio-political legitimation (Falarti, 2022). Likewise, the Javanese-Sufi narrative that later becomes promoted as a primary Islamization pattern cannot be separated from modern knowledge production shaped by encounters among local traditions, Orientalism, and colonial reading practices of Indonesia's "Sufi past" (Laffan, 2011). In contemporary settings, this hegemonic tendency intersects with Islamic conservatism and identity politics, as public actors reduce Islamic history and identity into representational symbols that are easy to mobilize (Aji & Yunus, 2019; Sebastian et al., 2020). Historiography thus operates not only as a narrative of the past but also as an arena of power that produces boundaries of identity and religious authority in the present, while constraining the possibility of more inclusive multiregional readings (Herath et al., 2020; Ikhwan et al., 2019). For this reason, the study calls for a critical, multiregional rereading of Indonesian Islamic history so that "Nusantara" genuinely refers to the archipelago as a plural space rather than as the symbolic extension of a particular cultural center.

If the historical problem lies in reducing an archipelago to a single narrative center, the social problem lies in how the term operates in intergroup relations. Socially, *Islam Nusantara* functions as a relatively effective moderation narrative for responding to interreligious tensions, radicalism, and social fragmentation, primarily through the language of tolerance, balance, and acceptance of cultural diversity. Yet the findings show that this effectiveness remains ambivalent because *Islam Nusantara* can also operate as a mechanism of religious identity boundary-making, a symbolic process that defines who counts as "authentically Indonesian Islam" and who falls outside the boundary. Studies of religious identification show that political and conflict contexts often harden identity boundaries and increase the salience of "religion" as a category of social differentiation (McCauley & Posner, 2019). In policy and integration arenas, collective identity formation often proceeds through "us" versus "them"

narratives that remain implicit yet effective in organizing cohesion and exclusion (Mattes, 2017). As a result, symbolic boundaries at the majority level can heighten perceived discrimination among minorities and narrow spaces of social encounter (Trittler, 2019), while intergroup encounters designed to bridge differences can become constrained by intensified religious identification that demands demarcation (Leder et al., 2025). *Islam Nusantara*, in other words, can facilitate dialogue, but in certain situations it can also become a line of identity demarcation—an empirical paradox that requires caution in how actors deploy the term (Eickelman, 2015; Wilfred, 2021).

This social ambivalence becomes sharper when the term enters ideological and policy domains. Ideologically, *Islam Nusantara* represents a negotiation between Islamic universality and Indonesian nationalism, especially when it shifts from academic discourse into official rhetoric and deradicalization programs. At this stage, *Islam Nusantara* functions as a religious ideological discourse: it no longer merely describes reality but also regulates boundaries of legitimacy, moral authority, and public perceptions of “true Islam” versus “deviant Islam” (Kettell, 2009). Discourse studies show that religious persuasion often works through emotional strategies and moral packaging that audiences readily internalize (Adam, 2021), while semantic shifts in ideological language can erode descriptive precision and turn terms into instruments for legitimizing conflict. In the public sphere, religion often seeks to assert itself as a source of moral authority that does not always submit to verification standards, so tensions between normative claims and rational critique become difficult to avoid (Bailey & Redden, 2016; Wolterstorff, 2013). *Islam Nusantara* therefore cannot be treated as a neutral label in its ideological position; it operates as a meta-language of power that organizes who counts as representative of Indonesian Islam and thus demands sustained critical reading so that moderation does not slip into standardization (Borup, 2021; Mueller et al., 2024).

From this point, the study can specify the functions and dysfunctions of *Islam Nusantara* more precisely. Its core function lies in its ability to provide a public idiom for a contextual, culture-friendly, and pluralism-compatible moderate Islam, an idiom that supports social cohesion and enriches Indonesian Islamic traditions. Dysfunction emerges, however, when the term undergoes excessive reification and politicization, that is, when a concept that is originally fluid and methodological becomes treated as a fixed and essential entity (Vandenberghe, 2015). Critiques in religious studies show that such reification often freezes categories, simplifies complexity, and turns terms into ideological objects (Goldenberg, 2024). In social contexts, this freezing can intensify “us–them” essentialization and promote homogenizing interpretations of diversity, as studies of homogenizing representations of religious groups illustrate. Moreover, when reification intersects with institutional and political interests, it can reproduce symbolic inequalities across regions because a narrative center becomes a national standard while non-Javanese traditions recede within collective imagination (Gaitanidis & Christopher, 2022; Waldron, 2014). The central problem, then, lies not in the aspiration to moderation but in how the term operates once actors formalize it, contest it, and use it to regulate hierarchies of representation.

On the basis of these dysfunctions, the study proposes a layered action plan. First, at the academic level, scholars need explicit and consistent conceptual clarification by positioning *Islam Nusantara* as a socio-cultural category and an analytical discursive strategy rather than as a normative theological concept; this step aims to prevent semantic freezing that triggers theological misunderstandings and ideological resistance. Second, at the historiographical level, researchers should develop a systematic multiregional approach that corrects Java–Malay bias and reduces symbolic inequality by granting equal representational space to Islamic traditions in Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Maluku, Papua, and other regions. Third, at the policy and social-practice level, actors should accompany the use of *Islam Nusantara* with a reflective and non-exclusive narrative framework that avoids claims of singular representation while opening a dialogical relationship with other terms such as *pribumisasi Islam*, moderate Islam, and *Islam berkembang*; such positioning can prevent the term from becoming an identity boundary marker and instead enable it to function as a medium for cooperation across traditions. Through these steps, *Islam Nusantara* can operate productively as an open and critical interpretive framework while minimizing the conceptual paradoxes and symbolic exclusivities that contradict the very spirit of moderation it seeks to articulate.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Islam Nusantara* cannot be understood simply as a theological concept or as a neutral historical description. The central findings show that the term contains significant lexical ambiguity and conceptual paradoxes, particularly in the tension between Islam's universality and the cultural particularity of the Nusantara. This ambiguity arises not only from the linguistic structure of the term itself but also from historical narratives that tend to elevate the Java–Malay Islamic experience as the primary representation of Islam in the archipelago. At the same time, the study finds that *Islam Nusantara* functions mainly as a discursive strategy and a religious identity project employed to articulate Islamic moderation within the contexts of nationhood, globalization, and ideological contestation. Accordingly, the principal lesson of this research is that the core problem of *Islam Nusantara* lies not in its constructive normative intentions, but in the conceptual and representational burdens that accompany its use in the public sphere.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this study offers a significant addition to the field of Indonesian Islamic studies by proposing a more systematic conceptual reading of the term *Islam Nusantara*. Unlike many previous studies that focus primarily on normative defense or theological critique, this research treats *Islam Nusantara* simultaneously as an object of lexical-semantic, historiographical, and discursive analysis. This approach enriches the literature by demonstrating how religious terminology can operate as an instrument for producing meaning, structuring power relations, and shaping social identity. Moreover, the study advances an analytical framework that clearly distinguishes *Islam Nusantara* as a socio-cultural expression from Islam as a normative religious doctrine, thereby opening space for more productive and less polarizing dialogue on Islamic diversity in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the historical analysis remains a conceptual synthesis and does not yet draw extensively on empirical ethnographic data or local archival sources from non-Javanese regions. Second, the focus on discourse and texts constrains the discussion of how *Islam Nusantara* is practiced and negotiated in the everyday religious lives of Muslim communities across different regions. For these reasons, future research should pursue comparative, field-based studies that examine multiregional religious practices and analyze how communities beyond national discursive centers receive, reject, or reinterpret the term *Islam Nusantara*. Such approaches are expected to deepen our understanding of Indonesian Islam as a plural, dynamic historical and social reality that continues to be produced through ongoing interactions among religion, culture, and power.

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