

## Research Article

# Nusantara Islam and the Legitimacy of the Qur'an: Reading the Principle of al-'Urf in Ibn 'Āsyūr's Tafsir and Abdurrahman Wahid's Indigenization of Islam

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## Abstract

Islam Nusantara is an Islamic discourse that has generated diverse responses, ranging from support to rejection. Previous studies have tended to position Islam Nusantara primarily as a cultural or sociological phenomenon. This article aims to demonstrate that Islam Nusantara, from the perspective of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), possesses normative legitimacy rooted in the Qur'an. Employing a qualitative library-based approach, this study examines Gus Dur's concept of the indigenization of Islam alongside the interpretation of the principle of al-'urf in Q. al-A'rāf (7): 199 as presented in Ibn 'Āshūr's *al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr*. The findings reveal that al-'urf constitutes a normative Qur'anic principle that acknowledges social customs as long as they fall within the framework of al-ma'rūf and do not contradict the substantive values of Islam. Within this framework, the indigenization of Islam can be understood as an operationalization of Qur'anic principles in the cultural context of the Nusantara. Consequently, Islam Nusantara does not contradict the universality of Islam but represents a contextual and normatively legitimate actualization of Qur'anic teachings.

**Keywords:** Gus Dur, Islam Nusantara, Legimation.

## INTRODUCTION

Abdurrahman Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur, is a highly influential figure in the history of Islamic thought and practice in Indonesia (Ritonga et al., 2024).



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Although he passed away on December 30, 2009, his name continues to be remembered today, as his ideas remain relevant and meaningful. This enduring relevance has drawn the interest of many—both Muslims and non-Muslims—to study and analyze his thoughts. Following Gus Dur's ideas is both fascinating and challenging, as his concepts appear simple yet offer profound perspectives for understanding various social, cultural, and religious issues in Indonesia and beyond (Rusli, 2015).

Gus Dur is known as an Islamic scholar, intellectual, and former president who held modern views and was deeply committed to the principles of humanity, democracy, and pluralism. One of his most significant legacies is the concept of Islam Nusantara—a form of Islam that grows out of local traditions and emphasizes peace, tolerance, and inclusivity. However, it is important to note that Gus Dur was not the originator of this idea. Rather, he was a successor in a long historical process initiated by the Wali Songo (the Nine Saints), who successfully spread Islam throughout Java through a process of cultural indigenization (pribumisasi) that avoided conflict between Islam and local traditions (Rafi'i, 2019).

Thus, within the discourse of Islam Nusantara, Gus Dur's role is best understood as that of a proponent and developer of the concept rather than its originator. Organizationally, he played a crucial role in reshaping the direction of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and maintained strong connections with figures who later became key proponents of Islam Nusantara.

Many previous studies and articles have examined Islam Nusantara from Gus Dur's perspective. However, most of these discussions have focused only on topics such as the indigenization of Islam, Arabization, and the dialogue between religion and culture. As a broad and dynamic idea—subject to both support and criticism—Islam Nusantara should not be understood merely as a socio-cultural concept; it must also be grounded in a strong epistemological foundation, particularly one rooted in the Qur'an as the primary source of Islamic law.

Therefore, examining Gus Dur's epistemology and its relationship to the Islam Nusantara concept is both relevant and essential. This article seeks to analyze Gus Dur's epistemological framework in formulating and developing the idea of Islam Nusantara, focusing on three main aspects: his biography, his perspective on Islam Nusantara, the epistemology underpinning his thought, and the Qur'anic legitimacy of the Islam Nusantara concept from Gus Dur's perspective.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research design, which involves critical analysis of written sources relevant to the theme of Gus Dur and the concept of Islam Nusantara. Data collection was conducted through documentation by gathering all reading materials related to the topic and processing them according to research needs. This approach was chosen because the study of Islam Nusantara is conceptual, epistemological, and historical in nature, thus requiring an in-depth exploration of both primary and secondary literature, including Gus Dur's writings and thoughts.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Biography of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)**

Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur, was born in Jombang, East Java, on September 7, 1940 (Asripa et al., 2021). Some sources, however, mention August 4 as his birth date since he often celebrated his birthday on that day. His father, KH A. Wahid Hasyim Asy'ari, was the son of the founder of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Hadratus Syaikh Hasyim Asy'ari. His father also served as Indonesia's first Minister of Religious Affairs and was an active member of the Committee of Nine (Panitia Sembilan), which drafted the Jakarta Charter (Piagam Jakarta) (Pikri, 2013). His mother, Hj. Sholehah, was the daughter of KH. Bisri Syansuri, the founder of the Denanyar Islamic Boarding School (Pondok Pesantren Denanyar) in Jombang. Thus, Gus Dur came from a family with a distinguished social and religious background on both his paternal and maternal sides.

Gus Dur's early years were dedicated to education, during which he studied in various regions such as Yogyakarta and Magelang. It was there that he began his intellectual journey before continuing his studies in Egypt (Zainuri & Al-Hakim, 2021). While studying at Al-Azhar University, he felt that the academic environment was somewhat restrictive, prompting him to spend more time in the library of the American University in Cairo, attending seminars, discussion forums, and even enjoying football matches and French films.

In 1966, he transferred to the Department of Arabic Literature at the Faculty of Arts, University of Baghdad. His experience in Baghdad was markedly different from

that in Egypt, as it provided a more stimulating intellectual environment. After completing his master's degree, he planned to pursue doctoral studies in Europe but faced language barriers. Consequently, between 1970 and 1971, he traveled across Europe to study French, English, and German. He eventually settled in the Netherlands for six months, where he helped establish the Association of Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim Students in Europe. He also spent time at McGill University in Canada to deepen his understanding of Islamic studies.

In 1971, Gus Dur returned to Indonesia and became actively involved in the world of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), holding various positions. From 1972 to 1974, he served as Dean of the Faculty of Ushuluddin (Theology) at Hasyim Asy'ari University in Tebuireng, Jombang. Between 1974 and 1980, he was the Secretary-General of the Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School, and since 1978, he had led the Ciganjur Islamic Boarding School in South Jakarta. In 1979, he was appointed Katib Awal Syuriah (First Secretary of the Executive Council) of NU. At the 27th NU Congress in December 1984, Gus Dur was elected as Chairman of the Executive Board (Ketua Umum Tanfidziyah). He was re-elected at the 28th Congress in December 1989 and the 29th in December 1994. His leadership in NU eventually culminated in his election as the 4th President of the Republic of Indonesia.

Gus Dur's life journey brought him into contact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, interests, ideologies, social classes, and schools of thought. Culturally, he experienced the transition from Eastern traditions—known for their politeness, modesty, and hospitality—to Western civilization, which is characterized by openness, modernity, and liberalism. In the realm of religion and ideology, he explored various perspectives, including traditionalism, ideology, fundamentalism, modernism, and secularism. He interacted with conservative, orthodox, liberal, and even radical thinkers, which made his personality dynamic and multifaceted. His intellectual freedom and broad worldview transcended the traditional boundaries of his community. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid passed away on December 30, 2009, in Jakarta, at the age of 69.

### **Islam Nusantara from the Perspective of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)**

Islam Nusantara is a concept that emerges from religious practices that reflect the distinctive characteristics of the Indonesian archipelago. The term represents the

result of a dialectical process between the principles of Islamic law (sharia) and the diversity of local cultures, in which Islamic teachings are practiced through internalization and adaptation to local traditions without diminishing the essence of Islam itself. Thus, Islam Nusantara is understood as a model of Islamic practice that is harmonious, contextual, and deeply rooted in the socio-cultural realities of the Nusantara (Indonesian archipelago) (Siregar, 2019).

The emergence of the term Islam Nusantara has sparked public debate and received a variety of responses. Opponents of the concept argue that Islam should not be associated with a particular geographic or cultural identity. For them, Islamic teachings must be practiced purely as they were transmitted by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and adding local elements is seen as potentially obscuring the purity of the religion. Conversely, supporters of Islam Nusantara assert that the term is not intended to create a new form of Islam but to emphasize a mode of Islamic expression that promotes peace, politeness, and accommodation toward local culture. In this view, the interaction between Islam and Nusantara traditions is seen as a form of cultural dialogue that enriches religious practice without compromising the essential teachings of Islam.

One of the strongest advocates of the Islam Nusantara concept was Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). He emphasized that Islam is not a static doctrine but one that has the capacity to engage in dialogue and adapt to local cultures without losing its core principles. Based on this idea, Islam Nusantara can be understood as a distinctive form of religious praxis within the Nusantara context—an embodiment of Islamic teachings that blend harmoniously with local traditions while preserving the universal values and essence of Islam.

Gus Dur supported the concept of Islam Nusantara through his idea of Pribumisasi Islam (the indigenization of Islam). He introduced this term as a critical response to the phenomenon of Arabization, the tendency to adopt Middle Eastern religious practices disproportionately, which could erode or even replace local Nusantara cultures. Gus Dur observed that those who reject Islam Nusantara are often less open to cultural diversity and assume that ideal religious practice must mirror Middle Eastern traditions. However, according to him, Islam can and should engage creatively with local cultures as long as such engagement does not contradict the fundamental principles of Islamic teachings (Rafi'i, 2019).

Gus Dur clarified that the process of indigenization concerns only the forms of religious expression, not the fundamental aspects such as faith (aqidah) or formal acts of worship (ibadah). Therefore, Islam Nusantara remains firmly grounded in the Qur'an, Hadith, and other foundational sources of Islamic law. Nonetheless, this concept explicitly rejects attempts to homogenize the socio-cultural patterns of Nusantara societies to conform to Arab culture, even though the Arabian Peninsula was the birthplace of Islam. According to Gus Dur, Arab culture should not be the sole model for practicing Islam across diverse cultural contexts.

Gus Dur's support for Islam Nusantara through the idea of Pribumisasi Islam can also be seen as a form of resistance to the tendency of Arabization, which is often misunderstood as Islamization. For Gus Dur, the two terms must be clearly distinguished, as they refer to different domains. Arabization relates to Arab cultural expressions, which are dynamic and contextual—each society has its own cultural expressions that may not be relevant or applicable elsewhere. Islamization, on the other hand, refers to the substance of Islamic teachings, which are universal, timeless, and unchanging.

Thus, Islamization represents the core essence of Islamic teachings that serve as universal guidance, while Arabization is merely one cultural expression accompanying religious practice in its original context. Gus Dur argued that when Arabization is conflated with Islamization, it breeds excessive attachment to Arab cultural symbols, which may erode or even threaten the preservation of local cultures. Through the idea of Pribumisasi Islam, Gus Dur sought to assert that Islamic teachings can be practiced without adopting all forms of Arab cultural expression, allowing societies to maintain their cultural identities while preserving the essence of their Islamic faith.

From this perspective, Islam Nusantara, according to Gus Dur, can be understood as a mode of religious life that remains rooted in the teachings of Islam as passed down by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and classical scholars, yet expressed through the local cultural forms of the Nusantara. Therefore, Islam Nusantara is not a new form of Islam but rather a cultural framework that accommodates a distinct way of practicing Islam—symbolically and practically unique to the region. However, these differences do not touch the fundamental aspects of Islamic doctrine; they exist only in the cultural dimension that accompanies the process of religious dissemination and the realization of Islamic life in society.

## **The Legitimacy of the Qur'an and the Epistemology of Islam Nusantara from the Perspective of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)**

Epistemologically, Islam Nusantara has a solid foundation both in terms of argumentation and historical development. Gus Dur did not regard Islam Nusantara as an ahistorical form of religiosity but rather as an expression of Islam that evolved through the internalization of religious teachings within the local socio-cultural reality. Thus, Islamic practice in the Indonesian archipelago is understood as a manifestation of Islamic values expressed through local culture, without being bound to Arab cultural forms. This understanding emphasizes that while the essence of Islamic teachings remains preserved, their cultural expressions may adapt to the context of Nusantara society.

Gus Dur's epistemological view of Islam Nusantara is reinforced by several scholars, one of whom is Aksin Wijaya. He asserts that the Pribumisasi Islam (Indigenization of Islam) itself represents an epistemological framework, while the religious expressions of society are the products of this indigenization process—later known as Islam Nusantara. Within this framework, Islam Nusantara recognizes that normative, fixed, and theoretical aspects of Islam can be implemented and actualized through dynamic and evolving local cultures. Hence, Islam Nusantara functions as an epistemological bridge that connects the foundational principles of Islam with the lived religious practices within the cultural context of the Nusantara (Suaedy, 2018).

In formulating the epistemology of Islam Nusantara, Gus Dur proposed two main steps. First, he encouraged a constructive dialogue between fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and adat (customary traditions). This dialogue necessitates a dynamic interaction between Islamic law and the cultural traditions of Nusantara society. This step is essential because fiqh directly relates to religious practice and social behavior. Therefore, the sustainability of fiqh in the Nusantara context requires the capacity to engage dynamically with local cultures without disregarding the fundamental principles of Islam.

The second step formulated by Gus Dur in developing the epistemology of Islam Nusantara involves reinterpreting religious texts—both the Qur'an and Hadith—so that they align with the social and cultural dynamics of the Nusantara, without abandoning their core teachings. Gus Dur viewed this as an epistemological necessity, since religious

texts are fixed and finite, while social realities are fluid and ever-changing. From this principle, it can be understood that the interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith should not stop at a purely textual level but must also take into account the social contexts that surround human life. Through this approach, the static nature of Qur'anic texts remains alive through an evolving process of understanding. This process of reinterpretation allows Islamic teachings to remain relevant and applicable within the diverse cultural environment of the Nusantara.

Before elaborating on the Qur'anic legitimacy of the Islam Nusantara concept through exegetical sources, this study refers to *al-Tahīr wa al-Tanwīr* by Imam Ibn 'Āshūr as a key interpretive framework, particularly in exploring the concept of 'urf (custom) in relation to local Nusantara culture. This tafsir is chosen because *al-Tahīr wa al-Tanwīr* provides comprehensive linguistic explanations and reflects strong social and cultural dimensions.

More specifically, the concept of Islam Nusantara, which emphasizes dialogue with culture, also finds support in the Qur'an. This is reflected, among others, in Surah al-A'rāf (7:199), which serves as a basis for the idea of localizing certain aspects of Islamic law (syari'ah) to harmonize with local contexts.

١٩٩ *لَا تُحِقُّوْ وَأْمِرُ بِالْعَرْفِ وَأَعْرِضُ عَنِ الْجَهَنَّمِ*

Its meaning is: *"Be forgiving, enjoin what is right, and turn away from the ignorant."* (Qur'an, Surah Al-A'rāf [7]: 199)

In *al-Tahīr wa al-Tanwīr*, it is explained that the term 'urf is synonymous with *ma'rūf*, which means goodness (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019). Ibn 'Āshūr further clarifies that *ma'rūf* refers to all forms of actions that are considered good and do not lead to conflict or contradiction (Ibn' Ashur, 1984). In this sense, Islam Nusantara can be understood as a cultural framework that accommodates various expressions of Islamic practice uniquely suited to the socio-cultural context of the Nusantara, without altering the essence of Islamic teachings themselves.

When differences or tensions arise among various groups, such dynamics are considered natural. This is because Islam Nusantara functions as a flexible and dynamic space for cultural expression, while Islamic teachings maintain their normative dimension, which is fixed and unchangeable.

This interpretation is also supported by the exegesis of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (Kementerian Agama RI), which explains that 'urf refers to good customs within society that do not contradict the essential and substantive teachings of Islam (Kementerian Agama RI, 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

This article affirms that Islam Nusantara, from the perspective of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), cannot be reduced merely to a cultural phenomenon; rather, it possesses normative legitimacy rooted in the Qur'an. Through his concept of Pribumisasi Islam (the indigenization of Islam), Gus Dur positions Islam Nusantara as a form of contextual actualization of Islamic teachings—one that remains faithful to the fundamental principles of faith (aqidah) and worship (ibadah). Thus, Islam Nusantara is understood as the product of an ongoing dialogue between religious texts and the socio-cultural realities of the Nusantara society.

The Qur'anic legitimacy of Islam Nusantara can be traced through the principle of al-'urf as stated in Surah al-A'rāf (7:199) and interpreted by Ibn 'Āshūr in *al-Tahārīr wa al-Tanwīr*. This interpretation indicates that al-'urf refers to socially recognized customs characterized by goodness (al-ma'rūf), which possess a normative foundation in the Qur'an. Therefore, Islam Nusantara does not contradict the universality of Islam; rather, it reinforces the flexibility of Islamic teachings in legitimately and normatively responding to the diversity of local cultures.

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