

GLOBALIZING NAHDLATUL ULAMA: RELIGION, DIPLOMACY, AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Islamic Studies at the
Faculty of Islamic Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of**

Master of Arts (M.A.)



by:

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ABSTRACT

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This study critically examines the globalization efforts of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), particularly through the narrative of Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam, its role in the Religion 20 (R20) forum, and the transnational activities of its diaspora networks (PCINU). As the world's largest Muslim organisation, NU is frequently portrayed as an actor offering a culturally rooted articulation of Islam that contrasts with more politicised or scripturalist expressions often dominant in global Islamic discourses. However, such claims have yet to be empirically and theoretically examined, particularly in relation to power dynamics, epistemic production, and center-periphery relations within global Islamic networks. Drawing on postcolonial frameworks and representation theories, this study explores whether NU's global project constitutes a genuine epistemic transformation or merely reproduces domestic logics within a symbolic global framework. By analyzing formal narratives, diasporic practices, and the tensions between NU's structural and cultural domains, the article identifies the limitations of NU's epistemic infrastructure, the fragmentation of its global diaspora, and the disarticulation between the institution and its intellectual diaspora. The study argues that NU's globalization cannot be read as a horizontal, grassroots expansion but rather as a project shaped by national interests, elite-driven initiatives, and state-mediated representational logics. In doing so, it offers a critical reading of religious globalization from Indonesia's organizations, revealing how such efforts may become trapped in reproducing power through globally legible, yet epistemically hollow, forms.

Keywords: *Nahdlatul Ulama, Diaspora, Islam Nusantara, Humanitarian Islam, Globalization*

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INTRODUCTION

In 1926, a group of ulama from Java founded the Nahdlatul Ulama, one of the largest Islamic organizations in the world. This organization did not form in isolation but was a response to the prevailing global Islamic dynamics. At that time, the Islamic world was experiencing significant upheaval, the Ottoman Caliphate had disintegrated, Wahhabi forces had taken control of the Hijaz, challenging traditional Islamic practices, and Indonesian Muslims, many of whom had studied and taught in the Haramain, were struggling with epistemic and political disorientation.¹

In response to these developments, the founders of NU established the Hijaz Committee. This diplomatic body sent a delegation of ulama to Mecca to express the hopes of Indonesian Muslims. Their main goal was to ensure that Islamic holy sites remained open to all *madhhabs* and to prevent violence against non-Wahhabi religious practices. One of the key figures behind this effort was Kiai Wahab Hasbullah, who later played a crucial role in building transnational networks of traditional ulama. This event went beyond NU's local history, marking its early involvement with the global Islamic community, even before the founding of the Republic of Indonesia.²

Since its founding, NU has developed into a religious organization deeply connected to the Indonesian Islamic boarding school (*Pesantren*) tradition, while also maintaining links to transnational ulama networks.³ Many NU scholars studied at prestigious institutions, such as the Haramain in Egypt and Yemen, and actively participated in international religious and intellectual forums. In many ways, NU has remained true to its traditional Islamic

¹ Azyumardi Azra, 'Globalization of Indonesian Muslim Discourse: Contemporary Religio-Intellectual Connections Between Indonesia and the Middle East', in *Islam in the Era of Globalization* (Routledge, 2002); Faisal Ismail, 'The Nahdlatul Ulama: Its Early History and Contribution to the Establishment of Indonesian State', *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 5, no. 2 (2011): 257–62, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2011.5.2.247-282>; M. M. van Bruinessen, 'Indonesian Muslims in a Globalising World: Westernisation, Arabisation and Indigenising Responses', *The RSIS Working Paper Series*, no. 311 (2018): 9–15, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/WP311.pdf>.

² Mat Solikhin, 'Gerakan Pemikiran dan Peran Tiga Ulama Nu (K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari, K.H.R. Asnawi Kudus, K. H. Wahhab Hasbullah) dalam Menegakkan Ahl Al-Sunnah Wal-Jama'ah Annahdliyah Di Jawa Tahun 1926 – 1971', *Jurnal Theologia* 27, no. 2 (2017): 333–35, 2, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2016.27.2.1071>.

³ Faried F. Saenong, *Chapter 6 Nahdlatul Ulama (NU): A Grassroots Movement Advocating Moderate Islam* (Brill, 2021), 135, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004435544_009.

identity while also embracing global aspects through its intellectual networks and geopolitical awareness.⁴

On February 7, 2023, Nahdlatul Ulama marked its 100th anniversary with a grand ceremony at the Gelora Delta Sidoarjo Stadium in East Java. “*Merawat Jagat, Membangun Peradaban*”, “*Preserving the Universe, Building Civilization*”, held deep symbolic meaning, representing NU’s goal to take on a global role. The centennial was both a moment of reflection and a declaration of NU’s renewed mission to promote Islam Nusantara, or Moderate Islam, internationally.⁵ But how should we interpret NU’s relationship with the global stage today? Is NU still actively involved globally as it was during the Hijaz Committee era? Or is its current global engagement mainly shaped by government-led, NU elites, and diplomatic narratives?.

In recent years, NU has re-emerged as a prominent symbol of global Islam. Its involvement in international platforms like Religion 20 (R20), the promotion of Islam Nusantara, Humanitarian Islam, and the activities of its diaspora networks (PCINU) have strengthened the image of NU as more than just a national organization, it’s a global Islamic force that is moderate, inclusive, and culturally rooted. The Indonesian government has actively supported this narrative through various state agencies and diplomatic efforts, further portraying NU as a representative of Indonesian Islam abroad.⁶

Several academic works support this view. NU is depicted as a moderate Islamic entity capable of offering an alternative to Middle Eastern extremism and Western secular liberalism.⁷ Islam Nusantara is seen as a model of tolerant, locally grounded Islam that can

⁴ - Nurul Hak, ‘The Islamic Intellectual Network Between Nusantara And Central Asia In The 19th And 20th Century An In-Depth Analysis Of Intellectual Traces, Genealogy And Knowledge Transfer’, *Islamic History And Literature* 2, No. 2 (2024): 92–107, <https://doi.org/10.62476/>.

⁵ ‘1 Abad Nu Dan Kebangkitan Baru Nahdliyin’, Nu Online, Accessed 4 July 2025, <https://Nu.Or.Id/Opini/1-Abad-Nu-Dan-Kebangkitan-Baru-Nahdliyin-Ijkrv>.

⁶ Mulawarman Hannase et al., ‘Nahdlatul Ulamas Concept ff Promoting Global Harmony Through Religion Twenty’, *Al-Qalam* 30, no. 1 (2024): 192, 1, <https://doi.org/10.31969/alq.v30i1.1460>; Ridwan Ridwan et al., ‘Examining New Public Diplomacy and Interfaith Dialogue in Indonesia: Cases of World Peace Forum (WPF) and Religion Twenty (R20)’, *Studia Islamika* 31, no. 3 (2024): 498–99, 3, <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v31i3.38376>.

⁷ Alexander R. Arifianto, ‘Moderate Islamic Organisations And Contestation Over Political Theology: The Responses By Nahdlatul Ulama And Muhammadiyah Towards Islamism In Indonesia’, In *The Palgrave Handbook Of Political Norms In Southeast Asia*, Ed. Gabriel Facal, Elsa Lafaye De Micheaux, And Astrid Norén-Nilsson (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2024), 337–55, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-9655-1_20; Azyumardi Azra, ‘Transregional Islam In The Malay-Indonesian World: Legacies And New Dynamics’, *Trans: Trans-Regional And -National Studies Of Southeast Asia* 9, No. 2 (November 2021): 163–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/Trn.2021.20>; Abdul Basid Et Al., ‘The Role Of Nahdlatul Ulama’ (Nu) Diplomacy In Promoting Islam Rahmatan Lil ‘Alamin Exegesis To Strengthen Indonesian State-Religion Concepts: A Study Of Gus Dur’s Thought’, *Journal Of Islamic Thought And Civilization* 14, No. 2 (24 December 2024): 224–45, <https://doi.org/10.32350/Jitc.142.14>.

be shared in the global marketplace of ideas. NU's diaspora has even been called grassroots, "civilizational ambassadors."⁸ However, a crucial question arises: to what extent are these representations supported by NU's institutional capacity, epistemic infrastructure, and coherent strategies? Is NU truly fulfilling a global role consciously and substantively? Or is it often portrayed by external actors, states, academics, and international institutions as a symbol of moderate Islam, while lacking the structural and epistemic foundation to support such a role?

This is where the issue of integration becomes clear. Many NU diaspora branches (PCINU) operate independently with limited ties to NU's central structure (PBNU). Their activities are often uncoordinated both institutionally and intellectually. As a result, NU's global efforts seem fragmented and lack a unified framework. Even the concept of Islam Nusantara or Humanitarian Islam, which was intended to serve as a central pillar in international forums, often remains symbolic rather than a fully developed intellectual project.⁹

To understand these dynamics, this study draws upon various theoretical frameworks. The theory of representation by Gayatri Spivak (1998) is beneficial for questioning whether NU genuinely speaks in the global arena or is merely spoken for. Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" is re-examined here to consider whether NU, as a civil organization, communicates its vision or is shaped by external forces as a compliant symbol of moderate Islam.¹⁰ Similarly, Stuart Hall's (2012) theory of cultural representation offers tools to analyze how symbols like "Islam Nusantara" or "Humanitarian Islam" are constructed, circulated, and consumed globally. Hall shows us that meaning is not fixed but debated, raising questions about whether NU's global image stems from self-articulation or external factors that frame it.¹¹

⁸ Vyan Tashwirul Afkar and Dwi Ardhanariswari Sundrijo, 'Defining Islamic Transnationalism: A Case Study of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama', *Jurnal Global Strategis* 17, no. 2 (2023): 364, <https://doi.org/10.20473/jgs.17.2.2023.363-380>; Amin Mudzakkir, 'Traditional Islam and Global Religious Connectivity: Nahdlatul Ulama in The Netherlands', *Islam Nusantara: Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2020): 157, 1, <https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v1i1.48>.

⁹ Delphine Allès and Amanda tho Seeth, 'From Consumption to Production: The Extroversion of Indonesian Islamic Education', *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 9, no. 2 (2021): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.6>.

¹⁰ In Her Seminal Essay, Spivak Argues That "The Subaltern Cannot Speak" Because Their Voices Are Often Overwritten or Mediated by Dominant Discourses, Even Those That Claim to Represent Them. She Warns That Such Representation May Reinforce Existing Systems of Power. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and The Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

¹¹ Stuart Hall Argues That Representation Is Not About Reflecting a Fixed or Pre-Given Meaning, But Rather About A Discursive Process Through Which Meaning Is Produced, Contested, And Negotiated. He States:

From another perspective, the conceptual lens offered by Ernesto Laclau (2000) allows us to consider Islam Nusantara or Humanitarian Islam as a potential “empty signifier”, a discursive construct that draws together diverse meanings under a flexible and inclusive label. This semantic openness can be both a strength and a limitation. While it allows for broad resonance across various audiences, its worldwide appeal might rely more on symbolic flexibility than on explicitly defined theological ideas and foundations.¹² Pierre Bourdieu’s (1989) theory of symbolic capital enhances this critique. NU may be gaining symbolic power internationally through diplomatic visibility and branding, but without corresponding cultural or epistemic capital, this symbolic influence might stay superficial.¹³

This study argues that Nahdlatul Ulama’s current global presence is primarily shaped by representational strategies and elite-driven diplomacy, rather than by coherent institutional coordination or grounded epistemic development. Despite its historical legacy of transnational engagement, NU’s contemporary global role often relies on symbolic narratives, such as Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam, that circulate more as flexible political signifiers than as robust intellectual frameworks. The study argues that this form of global engagement, although diplomatically visible, remains fragmented, performative, and heavily reliant on state mediation. Without stronger internal coherence and epistemic continuity, NU’s global claims risk becoming disconnected from its own grassroots and scholarly traditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nahdlatul Ulama in the Global Context

The idea of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a global religious actor is not merely a recent phenomenon but has roots in its historical formation. As historian Choirul Anam highlights in his foundational work *Pertumbuhan dan Perkembangan NU*, the establishment of NU

“The Sender Does Not Simply Fix Meaning; The Receiver Also Interprets It. What The Audience's Take Away’ From A Tv News Broadcast Or A Newspaper Article May Not Be What Was Originally Intended.” See Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations And Signifying Practices*, Repr, Culture, Media And Identities (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

¹² Ernesto Laclau Explains That Empty Signifiers Are Central to Political Articulation Because They Allow for the Temporary Unification of Different Social Demands Under a Common Banner. Their Meaning Is Not Derived from Fixed Content, But from Their Capacity to Represent a Heterogeneous Set of Aspirations. See Ernesto Laclau, “‘Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter In Politics?’”, In *Deconstruction: A Reader* (Routledge, 2000).

¹³ Bourdieu Defines Symbolic Capital as the Recognition and Legitimacy Granted to Individuals or Institutions When Their Cultural, Social, Or Economic Resources Are Perceived as Legitimate Forms of Authority Within A Given Field. He Argues That Symbolic Capital Is “The Power to Make Things with Words,” But This Power Is Only Effective When Backed by Real Capital—Economic, Cultural, Or Social. See Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Social Space And Symbolic Power’, *Sociological Theory* 7, No. 1 (1989): 14–25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/202060>.

in 1926 was not just a reaction to internal Islamic debates in Indonesia, but a strategic move to defend Islam against both colonial interventions and rising reformist movements, particularly Wahhabism in the Middle East. His argue that NU emerged as the continuation of centuries-long efforts by Indonesian ulama to preserve Sunni orthodoxy in the archipelago. Facing new geopolitical and theological threats, these NU scholars shifted from informal, pesantren-based networks to a formalized organization.¹⁴

This foundational vision of NU as a response to global Islamic crises laid the groundwork for its later attempts to assert an international presence. The early formation of the Hijaz Committee and NU's concern with safeguarding pluralism in the holy lands were not isolated gestures, but part of a broader consciousness that Islam in the archipelago was embedded in global religious dynamics. Understanding this historical logic is essential for critically assessing NU's more recent discursive constructions, such as Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam, within the context of global religious diplomacy.

Over the past two decades, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has consistently held a significant position in representing Indonesian Islam on the global stage. NU's active involvement in various international forums such as Religion 20 (R20), the G20 Interfaith Forum, the World Peace Forum, and multiple interfaith dialogues has reinforced its strategic role as the face of Indonesia's moderate Islam. Through these forums, NU appears not only as a national religious organization but also as an actor presenting an alternative narrative of Islam, one that is peaceful, contextual, and rooted in local traditions.

Several studies emphasize that NU has successfully built a strong international image as a representation of Indonesia's inclusive Islam. Haryanto and El Syam (2023) see NU's role in the establishment of the Religion 20 (R20) forum as part of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy strategy. This forum serves not only as a platform for interreligious dialogue but also as a representative tool to introduce the concept of al-Islām raḥmatan li-l-‘ālamīn (a mercy to all creation) within the framework of public diplomacy. In these settings, NU takes a central position as a promoter of tolerance and peace, linking Islamic values with universal principles.¹⁵

¹⁴ Choirul Anam, *Pertumbuhan dan perkembangan Nahdlatul Ulama*, Cet. 1 (Jatayu, 1985), <http://books.google.com/books?id=D9MXAAAIAAJ>.

¹⁵ Sri Haryanto and Robingun Suyud El Syam, 'The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Creating an R20 Forum as Indonesia's Soft Power in the World', *Jurnal Scientia* 12, no. 01 (2023): 973.

A similar view is put forward by Hannase et al. (2024), who argue that NU utilizes multilateral forums as a medium to project Islam as a force for global civilization. This effort is not limited to formal participation but also includes the development of narratives such as Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam, which articulate uniquely Indonesian Islamic values. These narratives form part of a soft power strategy that positions NU as a global symbolic producer, showcasing a version of Islam aligned with democracy, human rights, and pluralism.¹⁶

Islam Nusantara is framed as a form of Islam that is open to local cultures, prioritizing peaceful cultural proselytism (*Dakwah Kultural*), and is historically grounded in the practices of *pesantren* and *Ulama* in the archipelago. In global discourse, the term has become a crucial symbol for NU's differentiation from more scripturalist and conservative Middle Eastern Islamic discourses. As noted by Burhani (2018), Islam Nusantara is a response to the challenges of radicalism and intolerance by offering a culturally embedded version of Islam. This articulation is not only directed inward but also serves as a cultural diplomacy commodity in international forums.¹⁷

Humanitarian Islam, on the other hand, is a more recent initiative developed to expand the reach of Islam Nusantara using a global language more easily understood by international communities. Loo and Suryana (2024) explain that Humanitarian Islam is promoted through international social partnerships and cross-border institutional collaborations. This approach adopts normative idioms such as human rights, pluralism, and global peace, values that resonate with international forums in both interfaith diplomacy and multilateral institutions.¹⁸

NU's representation in these various forums is also reinforced by its diaspora networks worldwide. Mudzakkir (2020), in his study of the NU community in the Netherlands, notes that cultural practices such as *Yasinan*, *Tahlilan*, and regular religious gatherings (*Pengajian*) serve as necessary means for maintaining religious identity while projecting an image of peaceful Islam. Even in global conflict contexts, NU has been active in peace

¹⁶ Mulawarman Hannase Et Al., 'Nahdlatul Ulama's Concept of Promoting Global Harmony Through Religion Twenty', *Al-Qalam* 30, No. 1 (4 June 2024): 187–99, <https://doi.org/10.31969/Alq.V30i1.1460>.

¹⁷ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Islam Nusantara As A Promising Response To Religious Intolerance And Radicalism*, 1st Ed, Trends in Southeast Asia 2018 (S.L.: Iseas Publishing, 2018).

¹⁸ Sara Loo And A'an Suryana, *Prospects and Challenges In Promoting Humanitarian Islam: Nahdlatul Ulama's International Social Partnerships* (Iseas–Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789815203929>.

initiatives, such as its efforts to facilitate intergroup dialogue in Afghanistan (Mu'min et al., 2021).¹⁹

Allès (2016) highlights that the emergence of Indonesian Islamic actors on the global stage marks a new phenomenon in which religious organizations transcend their domestic roles and enter the transnational arena. NU serves as an example of how a community-based entity can reach international forums and shape relevant global narratives. However, this engagement is still framed as part of a cultural representation project within Indonesia's foreign policy landscape.²⁰

Taufiq and Harisudin (2022) add that in the European context, NU employs a multi-track diplomacy strategy, an approach to diplomacy that does not rely solely on state-to-state relations (track one) but also involves civil society organizations in countering Islamophobia. In this context, NU is seen as capable of bridging Islamic discourse with global values through cultural dialogue and direct engagement with local communities.²¹

This analysis can be enriched using Stuart Hall's (2012) theory of cultural representation, which views representation as an active process in the formation of social and cultural meaning. Within this framework, Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam are not merely theological or doctrinal concepts, but also cultural signs produced and circulated in global arenas. NU, as an organization, plays an essential role in shaping these symbolic meanings; yet, such meanings are constantly negotiated by international audiences, the state, and other institutions.²²

Nu's Discursive Narratives

One of the primary instruments in Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) global projection is its construction of Islamic discourse that emphasizes moderation, tolerance, and Indonesian

¹⁹ Amin Mudzakkir, 'Traditional Islam and Global Religious Connectivity: Nahdlatul Ulama in The Netherlands', *Islam Nusantara: Journal For The Study of Islamic History And Culture* 1, No. 1 (30 July 2020): 145–62, <https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.V1i1.48>; Mu'min Mu'min, Dina Yulianti, and Otong Sulaeman, 'Islam Nusantara And Religious Peacemaking: Nahdlatul Ulama's Ideas In Creating Peace In Afghanistan', *Walisongo: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 29, No. 2 (30 November 2021): 181–210, <https://doi.org/10.21580/Ws.29.2.8945>.

²⁰ Delphine Allès, *Transnational Islamic Actors And Indonesia's Foreign Policy: Transcending The State, Rethinking Southeast Asia* 13 (Abingdon, Oxon New York: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315764986>.

²¹ Sudarto Murtaufiq, 'The Nu Concept of Islam Nusantara in Dealing with Radicalism and Terrorism', *Madinah: Jurnal Studi Islam* 5, No. 2 (1 December 2018): 238–49, <https://doi.org/10.58518/Madinah.V5i2.1283>.

²² Stuart Hall., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Repr, Culture, Media and Identities (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

identity. Two of the most prominent concepts in this regard are Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam. These do not merely reflect NU's symbolic position on the international stage but also function as mediums for articulating values claimed to originate from local traditions and the ethos of *rahmatan li-l-'ālamīn* (a mercy to all creation). In this context, recent literature has made significant contributions to understanding how these discourses are constructed, communicated, and positioned within global currents.

Historically, Islam Nusantara gained institutional legitimacy during NU's 33rd National Congress in 2015. In that forum, it was defined as the face of Islam in Indonesia, rooted in peaceful propagation (*Dakwah*), the accommodation of local culture, and a commitment to national unity. Burhani (2018) argues that the concept emerged in response to the rise of transnational ideologies and religious puritanism. He suggests Islam Nusantara is a cultural strategy to present a contextual form of Islam in line with Indonesia's social realities.²³

Meanwhile, Humanitarian Islam was introduced more broadly to international audiences starting in 2017 through a series of documents and declarations, including "The Nusantara Manifesto" and "The Humanitarian Islam Declaration." Loo and Suryana (2024) observe that Humanitarian Islam represents a systematic effort by NU, particularly through GP Ansor and Bayt ar-Rahmah, to align Indonesia's Islamic narrative with global vocabulary such as pluralism, human rights, and world peace. In their view, Humanitarian Islam is part of NU's social diplomacy in building international partnerships.²⁴

In many respects, these two discourses demonstrate NU's efforts to assert itself as a provider of alternative contributions to global Islamic discourse. Haryanto and El Syam (2023) highlight that forums like Religion 20 (R20) serve as strategic platforms to showcase Indonesia's moderate and peaceful Islam. Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam are articulated as normative foundations that reinforce NU's image as a global religious actor. This perspective is also supported by Hannase et al. (2024), who argue that NU actively contributes to shaping a framework for global harmony through its religious practices.²⁵

²³ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism*, 1st Ed, Trends in Southeast Asia 2018 (S.L.: Iseas Publishing, 2018).

²⁴ Sara Loo And A'an Suryana, *Prospects and Challenges in Promoting Humanitarian Islam: Nahdlatul Ulama's International Social Partnerships* (Iseas–Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789815203929>.

²⁵ Mulawarman Hannase Et Al., 'Nahdlatul Ulama's Concept Of Promoting Global Harmony Through Religion Twenty', *Al-Qalam* 30, No. 1 (4 June 2024): 187–99, <https://doi.org/10.31969/Alq.V30i1.1460>.

Afkar and Sundrijo (2023) note that individual actors and local socio-political conditions heavily influence NU's transnational dynamics. The articulation of NU's Islamic discourse abroad tends to be adaptive and does not always follow a standardized narrative pattern. This indicates that while Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam have gained traction in international forums, their application is not consistently implemented within a consistent institutional framework.²⁶

From the perspective of representation analysis, Hall (2012) emphasizes that meaning is not fixed but is the result of contextual discursive practices.²⁷ Thus, discourses such as Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam can be understood as fields of meaning production that remain open to negotiation and interpretation. On the one hand, this allows for flexibility and adaptability; on the other hand, a lack of consistent epistemic grounding can lead to conceptual ambiguity.

Some researchers also highlight the need to distinguish between symbolic branding and epistemic projects. Woodward (2017) argues that Islam Nusantara functions more strongly as a symbol than as a structured theological system. He suggests that the term's use in international forums tends to be performative, projecting a particular image without in-depth elaboration of its normative or scholarly framework.²⁸

However, despite extensive attention to NU's global appearances, a key gap remains in the literature: there is a lack of critical examination of how NU's discursive productions, particularly branding initiatives such as Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam, are developed, articulated, and sustained within global contexts. While most studies emphasize the symbolic outcomes and diplomatic visibility of these narratives, few have analyzed the internal processes by which they are constructed, identified the key actors, and explored how such articulations negotiate between local legitimacy and global legibility. In particular, there is insufficient inquiry into how these narratives are shaped through the interactions between NU's central institutions and its diasporic branches, between elite-driven agendas and grassroots interpretations, and between symbolic branding and epistemic substance. This study, therefore, adopts a critical position: it does not assess the

²⁶ Vyan Tashwirul Afkar and Dwi Ardhanariswari Sundrijo, 'Defining Islamic Transnationalism: A Case Study of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama', *Jurnal Global Strategis* 17, No. 2 (19 August 2023): 363–80, <https://doi.org/10.20473/Jgs.17.2.2023.363-380>.

²⁷ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations And Signifying Practices*, Repr, Culture, Media And Identities (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

²⁸ Mark Woodward, 'Islam Nusantara: a Semantic and Symbolic Analysis', *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 6, No. 2 (27 December 2017): 181–98, <https://doi.org/10.31291/Hn.V6i2.398>.

theological validity of these discourses, but instead explores their representational logic and epistemic performativity. It aims to evaluate whether Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam genuinely enhance NU's epistemic position as a global Islamic actor, or whether they function merely as instruments of symbolic diplomacy aligned with broader state or elite-driven imperatives.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach, combining reflective literature with supporting interview data. The primary focus is to critically analyze Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) narrative of globalization, the relationship between structural and cultural, and the construction of the Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam discourse within the global public sphere. By adopting this approach, I position myself to critically examine the interplay between textual meaning, contextual framing, and the institutional dynamics of representation.

The primary sources of data include official NU documents, such as congress proceedings (*Muktamar*), public statements by the NU central board (PBNU), records of transnational activities, and speeches by NU figures at international forums, including Religion 20 (R20) and the G20 Interfaith Forum. In addition, this study draws upon academic literature, policy reports, media articles, and critical analyses related to NU, Islam Nusantara, Humanitarian Islam, and Indonesia's Islamic diplomacy.

Interviews with several members of PCINU further support this study. These interviews aim to explore their perspectives on their relationship with PBNU, their engagement with the Islam Nusantara, the Humanitarian narrative, and their involvement in NU's global initiatives. While not statistically representative, these interviews offer rich, qualitative insights that illuminate the voices and experiences of diaspora actors, who are often overlooked in official narratives.

The analytical process is grounded in critical textual reading and discourse analysis. The study draws on theoretical frameworks including Stuart Hall's *theory of representation*, Gayatri Spivak's *notion of subalternity*, and Walter Mignolo's *concept of epistemic disobedience*, alongside Pierre Bourdieu's *theory of symbolic capital* and the perspective of *critical institutionalism*. This framework enables a crucial interrogation of how NU is constructed as a global actor, how the Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam narratives

are shaped and disseminated, and to what extent the relationship between PBNU and PCINU reflects coherent institutional and epistemic integration of global NU.

To ensure reflective validity, I engage critically with my dual position as both an academic and a member of the NU diaspora. While this positioning affords insider access to institutional narratives, I adopt an analytical stance to avoid reproducing normative assumptions. My methodological aim is not to generalize, but to examine how representation, authority, and agency operate within the discursive construction of NU's global project.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Global Nahdlatul Ulama: *Quo Vadis?*

Globalization is a process of increasing cross-border interconnectedness, meaning that local events can no longer be fully understood without considering global dynamics. Anthony Giddens (1990) defines it as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” In this framework, globalization is not just about geographic expansion but also about the restructuring of social, political, economic, and cultural systems that cross national borders. It creates a space where ideas, practices, and authority are shared and negotiated on a global level.²⁹

An entity is not considered “global” just because it has an international presence, but also because of its ability to influence cross-border discussions and structures. According to Holton (2005), signs of globality include having international networks, gaining institutional recognition worldwide, spreading universal values, and actively participating in transnational knowledge flows.³⁰ In the religious context, Peter Beyer (1994) highlights that a religion operating globally can assert its claims to universality in international public spheres and build institutional and epistemic frameworks to support this growth.³¹ Therefore, globality is not merely a broadening phenomenon but a constructed concept that depends on recognition, networks, and epistemic continuity.

²⁹ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Repr (Cambridge: Polity Pr, 2015).

³⁰ R. J. Holton, *Making Globalization*, 1 Online Resource (Ix, 213 Pages) Vols (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), <https://search.ebscohost.com/Login.aspx?Direct=True&Scope=Site&Db=Nlebk&Db=Nlabk&An=197570>.

³¹ Peter Beyer, *Religion And Globalization*, Theory, Culture & Society (London: Sage, 1994).

Suppose the benchmarks of globality include networks, recognition, and the articulation of universal values in transnational spaces. In that case, it is exciting to revisit how Nahdlatul Ulama, from its inception, was rooted in dynamics that were inherently global. The moment of NU's establishment did not emerge from a domestic vacuum but rather from the active engagement of Nusantara ulama in responding to religious transformations in the Hijaz, Saudi Arabia, through the initiative known as the Hijaz Committee.

In 1926, the rise of King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud's new regime in the Hijaz, which promoted the Wahhabi doctrine, raised fears about the possible elimination of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, including the Shafi'i school that was predominant in the Nusantara. In response, Kiai Abdul Wahab Chasbullah and other traditionalist ulama formed the Hijaz Committee to send a delegation to King Ibn Saud to advocate for the continued recognition of these schools. The delegation, led by Kiai Wahab and Sheikh Ahmad Ghanaim al-Misri, was received in 1928 and successfully secured assurances that the four schools would remain recognized in the holy lands.³² This mission was not only diplomatically successful but also marked the first moment of NU's global engagement with cross-border religious issues.

However, this success also revealed an important fact: at that time, the community of traditionalist ulama did not yet have a formal organization that could serve as a representative platform in international forums. As a result, there was a strong drive to establish an institution capable of meeting these needs. From this context, Nahdlatul Ulama was founded in response to the collective demand for formal representation in transnational religious arenas. Therefore, from its very beginning, NU cannot be separated from the global context. It did not emerge solely from domestic ideological struggles but as a response to a worldwide Islamic crisis that directly affected the Indonesian Muslim community.³³

Therefore, the Hijaz Committee was not only NU's first milestone in religious diplomacy but also the symbolic and historical foundation of NU's ability to act within the global Islamic arena. From this perspective, NU, from its very beginning, expressed the values of traditional Islam in international forums and aimed to influence religious power structures beyond its borders. Although it did not yet have established institutional infrastructures or

³² Stuart Hall And The Open University, Eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Repr, Culture, Media And Identities (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

³³ Ismail, 'The Nahdlatul Ulama'.

formal international networks, this action already showed the early signs of what is now called “global engagement.”³⁴ The Hijaz Committee can be viewed as an initial form of reactive global involvement undertaken by a cultural community rather than a formal institution.³⁵

With a historical foundation rooted in transnational engagement through the Hijaz Committee, NU as an organization gradually developed the capacity to participate more formally in international Islamic discourse. After a period of domestic consolidation following independence and a phase of national political focus during the 1950s to the 1980s, NU’s claim to a global role began to reemerge in the early 2000s, primarily through religious diplomacy efforts based on moderate Islam values.³⁶

This period was characterized by the organization of the International Conference of Islamic Scholars (ICIS), initiated in 2004 by Kiai Hasyim Muzadi, which gathered ulama from various countries to develop Islamic responses to global issues such as extremism, religious conflict, and Islamophobia.³⁷ This forum was later followed by platforms like the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) and the Global Unity Forum (GUF).³⁸ Most recently, the Religion Twenty (R20), an official forum within the G20 framework, positioned NU not just as a passive participant but as a key initiator of the al-Islām rahmatan li-l-‘ālamīn narrative in global arenas.³⁹ Alongside its participation in these forums, NU also established international networks by setting up PCINU branches in various countries.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the promotion of Indonesia’s version of moderate Islam, as advanced by NU, has also expanded into the Middle East, primarily through cultural and diplomatic efforts led by NU figures like Gus Yahya Cholil Staquf, Chair of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul

³⁴ Hannase Et Al., ‘Nahdlatul Ulama’s Concept of Promoting Global Harmony Through Religion Twenty’, 4 June 2024; ‘Cermin Visi Global Nu’, Nu Online, Accessed 22 June 2025, <https://nu.or.id/opini/cermin-visi-global-nu-yne0a>; ‘Nu Dinilai Mampu Mainkan Peran di Kancah Internasional’, Republika Online, 23 September 2020, <https://republika.co.id/Share/Qh3dga430>.

³⁵ Abdullah, Haris, And Rahman, ‘Gerakan Anti-Ibn Saud Di Hijaz’.

³⁶ Andi Purwono, ‘Islam in Foreign Policy: Promotion of Moderate Islam in Indonesia Foreign Policy 2004-2014’, *Indonesian Journal of International Relations* 1, No. 1 (10 June 2017): 15–30, <https://doi.org/10.32787/Ijir.V1i1.10>.

³⁷ Muhammad Izharuddin, ‘Icis: Sumbangsih Abah Hasyim Muzadi untuk Dunia’, *Walisono Online*, 2022.

³⁸ Imron Rosyadi Hamid, ‘The Role Of Non-State Actors In Combating Islamic Radicalism: The 2016 Isomil Initiative By Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’, *Dialektika: Jurnal Ekonomi Dan Ilmu Sosial* 2, No. 2 (21 September 2017): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.36636/Dialektika.V2i2.242>.

³⁹ Mulawarman Hannase Et Al., ‘Nahdlatul Ulama’s Concept of Promoting Global Harmony Through Religion Twenty’, *Al-Qalam* 30, No. 1 (1 June 2024): 187, <https://doi.org/10.31969/Alq.V30i1.1460>.

⁴⁰ Andi Purwono, ‘Internationalization Of Islam Rahmatan Lil ‘Alamin Through Pengurus Cabang Istimewa Nahdlatul Ulama (Pcinu): Motivation And Contribution’, *Jurnal Politik Profetik* 8, No. 2 (29 December 2020): 240–57, <https://doi.org/10.24252/Profetik.V8i2a3>.

Ulama (PBNU), from 2021 to 2026. This includes his meetings with Al-Azhar scholars and partnerships with the Muslim World League (MWL) based in Saudi Arabia.⁴¹ The narratives of Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam have been used as universal frameworks to present an alternative face of Islam stemming from Indonesia, while also countering the dominance of politicized Islamic discourses from the Middle East.⁴²

Nevertheless, these forms of engagement are still carefully studied. Using Spivak's (1998) framework, it's essential to ask: Who represents NU in these global spaces? Is it the voice of NU's epistemic community, such as *pesantren* networks and the diaspora, or mainly a small group of structural elites or even government representatives who take the stage? This question matters because representation without a strong foundation in community and cultural knowledge risks reducing NU to just a symbol rather than an active participant in the global epistemic sphere. Especially recalling NU's founding through the Hijaz Committee, which originated from a discursive tradition, NU's early global involvement was based on the collective effort of the *ulama* community rather than structural elites or official diplomacy.

Thus, although NU has taken various vital steps toward global engagement, through forums such as ICIS, ISOMIL, GUF, and R20, as well as the creation of PCINU networks in different countries, there remains room for critical reflection: is what is being built a form of strategic and inclusive globality, or is it more of a partial engagement that has yet to become deeply rooted in NU's structures and epistemology? Without addressing these questions, NU's globalization efforts risk relying on specific moments and individual figures rather than on sustainable institutional and epistemic strength.

Therefore, when we ask the question again, '*Quo Vadis?*' regarding the direction and future of NU's global presence, it is vital to revisit how its founding history was rooted in a distinctly global moment of expression. The Hijaz Committee was the earliest form of religious diplomacy, emerging from the collective concerns of the *ulama* about the future of Islamic diversity. It was not created in the name of symbolic representation or as a state project but as an initiative of a living scholarly community grounded in a discursive tradition.

⁴¹ Rosidin Rosidin And Iklil Athroz Arfan, 'Ulama Pesantren dan Upaya Penanggulangan Radikalisme di Indonesia', *Jurnal Smart (Studi Masyarakat, Religi, Dan Tradisi)* 10, No. 2 (31 December 2024): 171–86, <https://doi.org/10.18784/Smart.V10i2.2510>.

⁴² Hannase Et Al., 'Nahdlatul Ulama's Concept of Promoting Global Harmony Through Religion Twenty'.

In answering the question “*Quo Vadis?*”, where is NU’s global engagement heading, this study argues that while Nahdlatul Ulama has made significant symbolic strides in asserting a global identity, its future as a truly global Islamic actor depends on whether it can transform symbolic presence into structural coherence and epistemic continuity. The historical legacy of the Hijaz Committee reminds us that NU’s global relevance once stemmed from its collective religious authority, rooted in *pesantren* knowledge and communal consensus, rather than elite diplomatic representation alone. Suppose NU is to play a substantive role in shaping global Islamic discourse today. In that case, it must re-anchor its international engagement in its epistemic community, integrating the voices of *pesantren* scholars, diaspora intellectuals, and grassroots practitioners, rather than relying solely on state-affiliated diplomacy or charismatic leadership. Without this shift, NU’s global trajectory risks becoming performative, fragmented, and detached from its own intellectual tradition.

From Islam Nusantara to Humanitarian Islam

One of the main features that distinguishes Nahdlatul Ulama from other Islamic groups in Indonesia is its tradition of knowledge based on collective discussion methods. In NU, religious debates, including the development of social norms and responses to modern issues, do not come solely from individual authority or elite statements but are instead formed through an official debate process called the *bahtsul masail* forum.⁴³ This forum serves as a structured space for discussion, where *kiai* and *pesantren* scholars come together to analyze, evaluate, and develop responses to legal, social, and cultural issues, utilizing approaches based on *fiqh*, *usul al-fiqh*, and considerations of public benefit (*maslahah*). This tradition not only ensures that each discussion has epistemic legitimacy recognized by the *pesantren* community but also functions as a vital tool for maintaining NU’s scholarly authority across generations.⁴⁴

⁴³ Agus Mahfudin, ‘Metodologi Istinbath Hukum Lembaga Bahtsul Masail Nahdlatul Ulama’ 6, No. 1 (15 September 2021): 1–17, <https://Journal.Unipdu.Ac.Id/Index.Php/Jhki/Article/View/2573>; Asrizal Saiin Et Al., ‘Islamic Law in Indonesia: Bahtsul Masail Ijtihad and the Production of Knowledge’ (International Conference on Environmental and Energy Policy (Iceep 2021), Atlantis Press, 2021), 26–30, <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.211014.007>.

⁴⁴ Kudrat Abdillah, Maylissabet Maylissabet, And M. Taufiq, ‘Kontribusi Bahtsul Masail Pesantren di Madura Dalam Menghadapi Perkembangan Hukum Islam Kontemporer | Perada’, 15 May 2020, <https://ejournal.stainkepri.ac.id/index.php/perada/article/view/31>; Imam Yahya and Akhmad Arif Junaidi, ‘Authority of Fatwa in Digital Era: Methodology Add Transmission of Nahdlatul Ulama’s Bahtsul Masail In Indonesia.’, *Webology* 18, No. 2 (1 December 2021): 654–74, <https://doi.org/10.14704/web/v18i2/web18345>.

Beyond that, *bahtsul masail* reflects a collective practice consistent with NU's tradition since its founding in 1926, when its founders established NU's stance toward Islamic modernism and the purist influence of Wahhabism through joint deliberations among scholars from different pesantren. The process of collectively forming decisions, both in religious and national areas, has become a fundamental part of how knowledge is created, setting NU apart from more elitist or centralized models. Within *bahtsul masail*, discourse extends beyond just the normative aspect to include expressions of cultural identity, affirmations of moral authority, and the development of a unique national narrative.⁴⁵ Therefore, every discourse construction within NU is always closely linked to this mechanism of collective deliberation as a source of legitimacy, the continuity of tradition, and the organization's ability to adapt to changing times.

a. Islam Nusantara

Islam Nusantara originated as a concept within Nahdlatul Ulama to emphasize that Islam in Indonesia has a unique history, character, and practice compared to other forms of Islam in different regions. The term "Islam Nusantara" gained attention in academic discussions and public debates during the 1990s. Still, it only received official recognition when it was endorsed at NU's 33rd Congress (*Muktamar*) in Jombang in 2015.⁴⁶ At that congress, Islam Nusantara was defined as an ideological and cultural framework emphasizing that Islam in the Indonesian archipelago developed through peaceful proselytization, creative assimilation with local customs, and adaptation to cultural diversity. Nahdlatul Ulama later promoted Islam Nusantara as an effort to show that Islam is a moderate, inclusive, and culturally accommodating religion, aiming to shape a distinctly Indonesian way of practicing faith.⁴⁷

Proponents of Islam Nusantara argue that radical ideologies fundamentally conflict with the nature of Islam Nusantara, which they describe as a peaceful, friendly, tolerant, and moderate form of Islam that embraces local traditions. In NU's official narrative, radicalism and intolerance are seen as being mainly spread by transnational movements such as Hizbut-Tahrir, Salafi-Wahhabi networks, and the influence of Wahhabism promoted by the

⁴⁵ Abdillah, Maylissabet, And Taufiq, 'Kontribusi Bahtsul Masail Pesantren di Madura Dalam Menghadapi Perkembangan Hukum Islam Kontemporer | Perada'; Mahfudin, 'Metodologi Istinbath Hukum Lembaga Bahtsul Masail Nahdlatul Ulama'.

⁴⁶ Cut Linda Muhammad And Adis Duderija, 'Understanding The Context and Concept of Islam Nusantara | Icr Journal', 30 June 2022, <https://www.icrjournal.org/index.php/icr/article/view/912>.

⁴⁷ 'Said Agil Siradj: Islam Nusantara Mencegah Radikalisme', Suara.Com, Accessed 6 July 2025, <https://www.suara.com/wawancara/2015/06/29/070000/Said-Agil-Siradj-Islam-Nusantara-Mencegah-Radikalisme>.

Saudi government in Indonesia and other Muslim-majority countries.⁴⁸ Although these groups are not inherently terrorist organizations, they encourage a form of religious expression that is exclusive and rigid, thereby fostering fertile ground for the rise of violent extremism.

In this context, Islam Nusantara is not only seen as a description of Islamic practice in the Indonesian archipelago. Still, he is more precisely understood as an ideological and symbolic project, an intentional effort to build a narrative of moral authority and cultural identity authenticity. As Woodward (2017) notes, the fact that this narrative is not always historically precise or complete is not the main issue, because its purpose is inherently strategic to strengthen NU's image as a symbol of moderate Islam and to set itself apart from both transnational puritanism and secular nationalism. This project also exemplifies a process of building symbolic capital, where NU aims to gain both cultural legitimacy and political influence at the national level.

However, the success of Islam Nusantara as a widely accepted discourse remains limited, facing significant opposition. Some factions within NU itself, such as the group later known as *NU Garis Lurus*, have criticized this project as a political manipulation of religious identity that could create new divisions within the Indonesian Muslim community.⁴⁹ On the other hand, many non-Javanese Muslims feel that the Islam Nusantara narrative is too focused on Javanese cultural symbols, which makes it hard to see as an inclusive collective identity. Even within Salafi circles, most followers also reject violent extremism. Hence, a simple split between "tolerant Islam Nusantara" and "radical Salafism" is problematic and doesn't reflect the variety of social and religious realities.⁵⁰

These limitations highlight a deeper epistemic challenge. Although Islam Nusantara has gained legitimacy through NU's internal discursive tradition, particularly via the *bahtsul masail* forum, which serves as a space for collective deliberation among *pesantren* scholars, the concept has failed to undergo an adequate process of normative translation (translation proviso) (Habermas, 2006) into a universal language that is understandable to international

⁴⁸ Arthur Aritonang, 'Bangkitnya Islam Radikal dan Nasionalisme: Studi Tentang Gerakan Islam Wahabi', *Jurnal Efata: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pelayanan* 6, No. 2 (23 November 2020): 46–67, <https://doi.org/10.47543/efata.v6i2.29>.

⁴⁹ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Islam Nusantara As A Promising Response To Religious Intolerance And Radicalism*, 1st Ed, Trends In Southeast Asia 2018 (S.L.: Iseas Publishing, 2018).

⁵⁰ Mark Woodward, 'Islam Nusantara: A Semantic and Symbolic Analysis', *Heritage Of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 6, No. 2 (27 December 2017): 181–98, <https://doi.org/10.31291/Hn.v6i2.398>.

audiences.⁵¹ From Spivak's (1988) perspective, Islam Nusantara can be viewed as a subaltern discourse, rich in local historical meaning, which is challenging to translate without losing its context. Therefore, the claim that Islam Nusantara exemplifies a model of global moderate Islam is more aspirational than factual, as its actual global influence remains minimal.

The consequences of this limited translatability are significant. Without a more systematic approach to developing conceptual layers, that is, explaining both the historical aspects of Nusantara and articulating universal norms, Islam Nusantara risks becoming a strong domestic narrative that still fails to gain recognition in global settings. As Woodward (2017) has observed, any effort to create a unifying Islamic story must deal with the fact that Indonesia's Muslim community is very diverse, so no single discourse can completely represent their collective viewpoints and aspirations.

b. Humanitarian Islam

The discourse of Humanitarian Islam became more formally institutionalized with the establishment of the Institute for Humanitarian Islam in 2024, led by Gus Yaquut Cholil Qoumas, former Minister of Religious Affairs and the young brother of NU chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf. The institute was launched to provide a dedicated platform for advancing the vision of Humanitarian Islam on a global scale. While this move signaled a deeper commitment to promoting universal values such as tolerance and human rights and introduced Indonesia's success in framing religious and cultural diversity to the world.⁵²

Humanitarian Islam was first officially introduced by Ansor Youth Movement (Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, GP Ansor) in 2017 through the Nusantara Manifesto, which was later followed by the Humanitarian Islam Declaration. Gus Yahya pursued this vision more actively only after being elected NU chairman in 2021.⁵³ This declaration marked a key shift in Nahdlatul Ulama's strategy to position itself not only as a national religious leader but also as a promoter of universal norms aligned with global agendas, such as human rights, pluralism, and peace. While Islam Nusantara highlights the historical roots of an Indonesian Islam that is culturally inclusive, Humanitarian Islam uses the language of

⁵¹ Jürgen Habermas, 'The Rational Meaning Of A Questionable Inheritance Of Political Theology', *Jürgen Habermas*, N.D.

⁵² 'Perkuat Jaringan, PBNU Luncurkan Institute for Humanitarian Islam', NU Online, accessed 28 July 2025, <https://nu.or.id/nasional/perkuat-jaringan-pbnu-luncurkan-institute-for-humanitarian-islam-aGk66>.

⁵³ 'The Civilizational Origins Of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama And Its Humanitarian Islam Movement | Hudson Institute', 30 May 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/node/44724>.

international normative frameworks to show that Islam can contribute positively to global civilization.

The Humanitarian Islam strategy formulated by the Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, Gus Yahya, demonstrates that this discourse is not merely a theological project, but also a deliberate geopolitical intervention. After being promoted in various international forums such as the R20 summit in Bali and a conference at Princeton University, Humanitarian Islam began to attract the attention of global scholars, including Robert W. Hefner, who initiated a high-level academic conference planned for Jakarta in 2024. However, preliminary research by Hefner's team concluded that Humanitarian Islam remains a highly elitist discourse, relatively unknown among activist circles and not yet widely understood at the grassroots level. Gus Yahya himself acknowledged this reality, explaining that the Humanitarian Islam declaration was intentionally written in English to engage an international audience.

Furthermore, he openly rejects the paradigm of Moderate Islam, which he views as a narrative framework constructed by the West that tends to scapegoat Islam as the root of global disorder. In this perspective, Humanitarian Islam is intended to reverse that narrative, arguing that today's global turmoil is the product of contributions from multiple civilizational powers, not Islam alone. Islam, therefore, must offer a moral and ethical response to the ongoing civilizational crisis. Through this approach, NU positions itself not only as a religious actor but also as a political agent, advancing a vision of a more pluralistic and post-hegemonic world order. This vision converges Islamic ethics and Indonesia's constitutional philosophy to build an international system grounded in equal human dignity and collective responsibility.⁵⁴

The narrative of Humanitarian Islam has been officially connected to Islam Nusantara, as if the two share an epistemic continuity. In official speeches, Humanitarian Islam is often described as an "expansion of the values of Islam Nusantara" into the global arena. However, epistemically, these two projects have fundamental differences. Islam Nusantara emerged through a discursive tradition, a process of collective deliberation within the *bahtsul masail* forum and NU congresses (*Muktamar*), which at least provided internal legitimacy among pesantren communities and religious scholars (*Ulama*).⁵⁵ In contrast,

⁵⁴ Redaksi, 'Strategi Humanitarian Islam', *Menghidupkan Gus Dur*, 14 September 2024, <https://gusyahya.id/strategi-humanitarian-islam/>.

⁵⁵ Mahfudin, *Metodologi Istinbath Hukum Lembaga Bahtsul Masail Nahdlatul Ulama*.

Humanitarian Islam was developed more internally by the organization's elite circles, mainly GP Ansor, through declarations, policy papers, and top-down public diplomacy.⁵⁶ In other words, humanitarian Islam is better described as performative diplomacy, that is, the creation of discourse whose credibility relies on external recognition and international political networks rather than on an established tradition of collective *ijtihad*.

The strength of the Humanitarian Islam model lies in its high level of translatability; international audiences find it easier to accept because it aligns with the universal vocabulary used in multilateral diplomacy, such as discussions on human rights, pluralism, and global peace. However, because its development did not go through the inclusive discursive mechanisms typical of NU's tradition of *bahtsul masail* and scholarly deliberation (*Musyawah Ulama*), Humanitarian Islam faces the challenge of fragile internal epistemic legitimacy. For parts of the *pesantren* community, this discourse seems to be an elite branding effort that focuses on image-building in international forums rather than on solidifying ideological foundations and strengthening values at the grassroots level.

Some observers have argued that Humanitarian Islam is not the result of collective theological deliberation, but a political branding initiative driven by a small group of NU elites. Top-level figures have largely shaped this discourse and are closely aligned with the Indonesian state's foreign policy agenda. It is seen as functioning more as a tool of religious diplomacy than as a genuine epistemic project rooted in NU's traditional institutions. Moreover, critics argue that it often overlooks domestic political issues, including inequality, exclusion, and corruption, thereby raising the risk that it becomes a symbolic moral narrative detached from the actual conditions of humanitarian struggle.⁵⁷

This paradox becomes even clearer when compared to Islam Nusantara. Although Islam Nusantara has relatively stronger legitimacy because it was developed through an established process of collective deliberation and discussed within the organization's official forums, the narrative still faces significant resistance within NU itself. This resistance occurs because it is viewed as too political, overly Javanese-centric, and as oversimplifying the complexity of Indonesia's Islamic history. This shows that even a

⁵⁶ Sara Loo And A'an Suryana, *Prospects And Challenges In Promoting Humanitarian Islam: Nahdlatul Ulama's International Social Partnerships* (Iseas-Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789815203929>.

⁵⁷ Hengki Ferdiansyah, 'Kritik Greg Fealy Atas Humanitarian Islam PBNU', *Islami[Dot]Co*, 14 November 2024, <https://islami.co/kritik-greg-fealy-atas-humanitarian-islam-pbnu/>.

discourse project rooted in a discursive tradition is not immune to delegitimization and internal polarization.

In this context, Humanitarian Islam faces an even greater epistemic challenge: how it can be convincingly internalized by the NU community and Indonesian Muslims more broadly, when its legitimacy depends more on the endorsement of external actors than on the internal consensus that has historically formed the foundation of NU's authority.⁵⁸ Accordingly, Humanitarian Islam can be understood not just as a new theological innovation but as an effort to symbolically reframe NU's longstanding principles, such as tolerance, moderation, and respect for diversity, using a universal language that is easier to communicate to global audiences. However, although it essentially represents an acculturation of longstanding values within NU's tradition, the lack of a collective discursive process in developing and expressing Humanitarian Islam still raises a fundamental issue, its epistemic legitimacy remains vulnerable to scrutiny by internal communities that are used to viewing NU's discursive authority as the result of shared deliberation.

The fact that Islam Nusantara, which is more deeply rooted in the discursive tradition, has nonetheless faced significant domestic opposition shows that the legitimacy of a religious narrative is not only determined by its symbolic presence in the global public sphere but also by the strength of its ties to the epistemic communities that nurture collective authority. In this context, Humanitarian Islam highlights the key dilemma facing NU in the global age: the more a narrative is crafted to be universally adaptable, the more it risks becoming disconnected from the internal consensus that has historically established the organization's cultural and epistemic legitimacy.⁵⁹

Given these epistemic challenges, internal resistance, and conceptual limitations, the effort to present Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam to the global community will not just be a symbolic diplomatic gesture but also a complex conceptual and epistemic challenge. It requires significant effort to ensure that these narratives are genuinely accepted, understood, and substantially recognized by the international audience.

The Fragmentation of NU's Diaspora

The formal institutionalization of Nahdlatul Ulama's diaspora networks began during the 30th NU Congress (*Muktamar*) held at Pesantren Lirboyo, Kediri, in 1999. At this congress,

⁵⁸ Loo And Suryana.

⁵⁹ Loo And Suryana.

NU amended its organizational constitution (Anggaran Dasar/Anggaran Rumah Tangga, AD/ART) to officially recognize the establishment of the Special Branch of Nahdlatul Ulama (PCINU). This legal framework provided the basis for formalizing diaspora communities that had previously operated informally as study circles or cultural associations. Under the leadership of Hasyim Muzadi (2000-2010), NU's global engagement intensified, and the PBNU issued decrees to establish PCINU in various regions, including Europe, America, Asia, and the Middle East.⁶⁰

Based on interviews I conducted with Nahdlatul Ulama's International Network Management Body (Badan Pengelola Jaringan Internasional, BPJI), there are currently more than 30 PCINU branches across different regions of the world. The existence of these branches reflects NU's aspiration to position itself as a globally scaled representative of moderate Islam while also serving as a platform for strengthening the religious identity of the Indonesian diaspora.⁶¹ Nevertheless, it should be noted that this quantitative growth does not automatically translate into substantial institutional consolidation. On the contrary, in practice, each PCINU demonstrates highly varied levels of activity, legitimacy, and relationships, depending on the local socio-political context, the capacity of human resources, and the extent to which their communication with the PBNU leadership can be maintained consistently.

Although all PCINU branches have diverse programs adapted to their local conditions, NU's ritual traditions remain a defining characteristic that is almost always present in every branch. Yasin recitations (*Yasinan*), Tahlil prayers (*Tahlilan*), regular Islamic study gatherings (*Pengajian*), and commemorations of major Islamic holidays are among the most frequently maintained practices as markers of collective identity.⁶² However, upon closer observation, there are evident fundamental differences in how NU discourse, such as Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam, are perceived and interpreted across different global contexts.

⁶⁰ Andi Purwono, 'Internationalization Of Islam Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin Through Pengurus Cabang Istimewa Nahdlatul Ulama (Pcinu): Motivation And Contribution', *Jurnal Politik Profetik* 8, No. 2 (29 December 2020): 240–57, <https://doi.org/10.24252/Profetik.V8i2a3>.

⁶¹ Interview With Safira Rosa Machrusah, 4 July 2025

⁶² Yusnan Hadi Mochtar, Finny Fitria Febrin, And Lusi Prihartanti, 'Transnational Religious Actor And Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Case Study From The Special Branch Of Nahdlatul Ulama (Pcinu) In The United Kingdom', *Jurnal Asia Pacific Studies* 8, No. 2 (22 December 2024): 54–62, <https://doi.org/10.33541/Japs.V8i2.6304>; Yanwar Pribadi, 'Indonesia's Islamic Networks In Germany: The Nahdlatul Ulama In Campaigning Islam Nusantara And Enacting Religious Agency', *Journal Of Muslim Minority Affairs* 42, No. 1 (2 January 2022): 136–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2022.2064056>.

What is particularly notable from the interviews I conducted with several PCINU members is the emergence of divergent views regarding which discourses are considered relevant and should be prioritized. According to Rosyid, the chairperson of PCINU United Kingdom, the Islam Nusantara discourse holds strong appeal because it embodies a distinctive Indonesian identity and can serve as a differentiating feature in international forums.⁶³ Conversely, Habibi, the Chairperson of PCINU Tiongkok, observed that the concept of Islam Nusantara tends to be less relevant when applied literally in Tiongkok, thus requiring a more contextual translation of ideas to fit the local political and cultural situation.⁶⁴

These differences in perspective are primarily influenced by the absence of clear strategic directives from PBNU regarding which narratives or priority programs each PCINU should develop in their respective regions. This ongoing epistemic uncertainty has ultimately made it difficult for NU to consistently acculturate its discourse across diverse international contexts.⁶⁵ Without a robust conceptual framework and structured channels of communication, each diaspora branch tends to adapt, modify, or even disregard the organization's overarching narratives according to their local needs. This situation directly undermines the symbolic consistency of NU as a global actor claiming authoritative ownership of the discourse of moderate and tolerant Islam.

Furthermore, PCINU branches are also often not substantially involved in PBNU's various strategic activities. One example is the international R20 forum, which, in many respects, has been managed in a highly centralized manner by PBNU elites, without creating meaningful space for diaspora participation. According to Izzul, the former chairperson of PCINU Askanada (Amerika-Kanada), NU's overseas special branches tend to be approached intensively only in the lead-up to the NU Congress (*Muktamar*).⁶⁶ This instrumental relationship creates psychological distance and reinforces the impression that the diaspora's presence is more frequently utilized as a symbolic asset rather than acknowledged as an equal epistemic partner. Another significant issue concerns administrative legality: several PCINU branches nowadays have not received official decrees (*Surat Keputusan*, SK), for instance, PCINU UK, from PBNU, despite having been active and organizing programs for years.⁶⁷ Although this claim has been refuted, it is

⁶³ Interview With Rosyid Jazuli, 19 June 2025.

⁶⁴ Interview With Habibi, 17 June 2025.

⁶⁵ Loo And Suryana, *Prospects And Challenges In Promoting Humanitarian Islam*.

⁶⁶ Interview With M. Izzul Haq, 10 June 2025.

⁶⁷ Rosyid Jazuli, 2025.

argued that PCINU was not granted an official decree (SK) because it did not meet the necessary requirements for formal endorsement.⁶⁸

Viewed through Axel Honneth's (1996) theory of recognition,⁶⁹ PBNU's failure to ensure formal acknowledgment and consistent solidarity with its diaspora branches constitutes a manifestation of a recognition crisis. For Honneth, solidarity-based recognition is a form of esteem for collective contributions that enables social actors to build a positive identity and a sense of meaningful belonging within the community. When the diaspora's contributions are regarded merely as an accessory or are selectively mobilized for symbolic purposes, experiences of alienation become an almost unavoidable consequence.

In the NU context, this alienation is evident in two primary symptoms: first, the demoralization of branch administrators who feel their efforts are not equally valued, and second, the emergence of local initiatives that drift further from the central vision due to the absence of effective epistemic bridges. Nevertheless, in the context of limited formal recognition, many PCINU branches have developed a high degree of practical autonomy as Rosyid observed that the absence of strategic guidance for Global NU or facilitation from PBNU has ultimately compelled overseas branches to independently design their program models, funding sources, and patterns of engagement with local communities.⁷⁰

This autonomy indeed demonstrates the adaptive capacity of NU's diaspora, but at the same time, it also reinforces the reality of epistemic fragmentation. Each PCINU has developed its distinct priorities, while PBNU lacks adequate mechanisms to integrate this diversity into a coherent narrative.

A critical question arising from this situation is why PBNU has failed to capitalize on the symbolic capital it has cultivated abroad. With diaspora networks spread across more than thirty countries, a vibrant cultural tradition, and NU's reputation as the representative of Indonesia's moderate Islam, PBNU holds considerable potential to position PCINU as a locus of cultural diplomacy, discourse production, and the strengthening of global

⁶⁸ Rosa, 2025.

⁶⁹ Axel Honneth Identifies Three Forms of Recognition Essential for Personal Integrity and Social Integration: Love (In Intimate Relations), Rights (As Legal Recognition), And Solidarity (In Social Esteem). The Third Solidarity—Refers to The Affirmation of Individuals or Groups Based on Their Unique Contributions to a Shared Community, Which Allows for the Development of Self-Worth and Social Belonging. See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle For Recognition: The Moral Grammar Of Social Conflicts*, 1st Mit Press Ed, Studies In Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass: Mit Press, 1996).

⁷⁰ Rosyid, 2025

influence. Yet this potential remains locked within patterns of fragmented relationships, limited formal recognition, and a lack of consistent institutional investment.

This inability to maximize symbolic capital has ultimately created a paradox: NU appears in international arenas claiming to be the world's largest and most moderate Islamic organization, but falls short of demonstrating the epistemic and institutional capacity necessary to credibly sustain that claim.

Rhetorically, PBNU has positioned the internationalization of NU's discourse as one of the organization's strategic priorities, as reflected in its participation in various global forums and its public narratives on Islam Nusantara or Humanitarian Islam. However, the absence of a robust conceptual framework, the lack of policy instruments, and the failure to establish coordination platforms with the diaspora indicate that this global vision has primarily operated at a symbolic level rather than as a planned and sustainable strategic project.

The State and NU's Globality: Collaboration or Co-optation?

As the agenda of "moderate Islam" has increasingly been promoted as one of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy assets, the relationship between NU and the state has become increasingly complex.⁷¹ For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs have actively facilitated NU's presence in various international forums, including the G20 Interfaith Forum, R20, and numerous interfaith dialogues framed as showcases of Indonesia's pluralism.⁷² This raises a fundamental question: to what extent is NU, in the global context, able to maintain its autonomy as a civil-religious actor with its historical interests, and to what extent does it function as an extension of the state's soft power project?

Talal Asad (2003), in *Formations of the Secular*, emphasizes that modern religion never entirely exists outside the logic of the state. The modern state can produce, regulate, and

⁷¹ Kurniawan Netanyahu, "'Moderate Islam' As Public Diplomacy In Indonesian Foreign Policy During The First Period Of President Joko Widodo" (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2021), <https://Etd.Repository.Ugm.Ac.Id/Penelitian/Detail/198998>; Kemenag, 'Moderasi Beragama: Aset Diplomasi Indonesia', <https://Balitbangdiklat.Kemenag.Go.Id/Berita/Moderasi-Beragama-Aset-Diplomasi-Indonesia>, Accessed 7 July 2025, <https://Balitbangdiklat.Kemenag.Go.Id/Berita/Moderasi-Beragama-Aset-Diplomasi-Indonesia>; Humas, 'Islam Moderat Jadi Aset Politik Luar Negeri Kemenlu', *Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia* (Blog), 4 May 2017, <https://Setkab.Go.Id/Islam-Moderat-Jadi-Aset-Politik-Luar-Negeri-Kemenlu/>; 'Nu Dinilai Mampu Mainkan Peran Di Kancan Internasional'.

⁷² Sri Haryanto And Robingun Suyud El Syam, 'The Role Of Nahdlatul Ulama In Creating An R20 Forum As Indonesia's Soft Power In The World', *Jurnal Scientia* 12, No. 01 (2023): 968–76.

organize forms of “public religion” compatible with national narratives.⁷³ In the case of NU, which functions as a religious organization rather than a religion per se, familiarity with the state is not new; this patronage relationship has been deeply rooted since the New Order period, albeit in a more subordinated format. In the Reformasi era, that relationship has become more fluid: the state not only acts as a regulator but also as a strategic partner. However, this partnership risks shifting NU’s position from a critical civil society organization to a “domesticated” actor serving cultural diplomacy.

In recent years, the theme of “Humanitarian Islam” has consistently been foregrounded by NU in nearly every official speech delivered at international forums as a distinctive expression of Indonesia’s tolerant identity. But is this narrative truly the result of the autonomous articulation of NU’s epistemic community,⁷⁴ or rather a product of state-driven construction aimed at securing international legitimacy? Or, if it is not simply a state project, is NU instead attempting to align itself with global agenda-setting frameworks?. Gayatri Spivak (1988), in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, warns of the trap of representation: when dominant actors (such as the state) claim to speak “on behalf of” a given community, what often occurs is the silencing of alternative voices within that very community.

Spivak’s critique is relevant for examining the global rhetoric of Humanitarian Islam. Frequently, this discourse is articulated by NU’s bureaucratic elites who maintain close ties with state apparatuses. At the same time, critical voices, such as those from *pesantren* circles questioning NU’s political pragmatism, are marginalized. Here, the problem of representation becomes concrete: Who is speaking in the name of NU? Is what appears in international forums an authentic expression of NU’s internal diversity, or merely a selective symbol curated for diplomatic purposes?.

Within this framework, Saba Mahmood (2005) invites us to consider local agency in more complex terms. Mahmood rejects the assumption that religious involvement in state projects automatically amounts to mere co-optation. For Mahmood, agency is often ambivalent: an organization may participate in hegemonic projects while simultaneously attempting to preserve spaces for negotiation or interpretation.⁷⁵ In the context of PCINU as part of NU’s organizational structure, however, this potential for agency appears quite

⁷³ Talal Asad, *Formation Of The Secular, Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804783095>.

⁷⁴ Syafiq Hasyim, ‘Prospects And Weaknesses Of The R20 Forum On Religion Launched At The G20 Summit In Bali’, No. 2023 (2023).

⁷⁵ Saba Mahmood, *Politics Of Piety: The Islamic Revival And The Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005).

limited. Based on interviews with several PCINU administrators, their involvement in state-led diplomacy programs has been largely symbolic and ceremonial, leaving little substantive space to develop alternative or reflective discourses.

Accordingly, what could theoretically be described as productive agency remains more of a normative possibility than an empirical reality. PCINU has often functioned merely as a representational ornament, showcased to reinforce Indonesia's image of pluralism in international forums, yet without the bargaining power necessary to independently articulate a more critical or substantive narrative of Islam Nusantara or Humanitarian Islam.

Accordingly, this patronage relationship carries symbolic consequences. When NU is consistently associated with state diplomacy, the risk arises of eroding the differentiation of the organization's identity: NU is no longer seen solely as a civil-religious actor, but rather as an instrument of Indonesia's foreign policy. In the long term, this may create an internal crisis of trust, particularly among younger cadres who aspire to an epistemic renewal that is more independent from state intervention.

In the context of the rapidly expanding trend of multi-track diplomacy, this dilemma becomes increasingly relevant. Twenty-first-century diplomacy no longer relies solely on negotiations between governments (track one) but also involves a variety of non-state actors, including religious organizations, diaspora networks, and philanthropic institutions. NU possesses significant symbolic capital, enabling it to play a role as an independent civil actor, particularly given its reputation as the world's most prominent moderate Islamic organization. However, without strengthening its internal structures and establishing more autonomous sources of funding, this potential will be challenging to realize consistently.

An overdependence on the state relationship also carries another risk: the transformation of NU into an organization that is responsive only to the priorities of Indonesia's foreign policy diplomacy, rather than a producer of religious discourse rooted in the perspectives of its community. In the long term, this situation will not only create a symbolic distance between the central leadership and the pesantren grassroots base but also undermine the legitimacy of the central leadership. Still, it will also weaken NU's capacity to exercise constructive criticism of the state. Yet one of NU's historical strengths has precisely been

its ability to combine national loyalty with moral autonomy and an internal critical capacity.⁷⁶

The strategic question that must be posed is whether this close relationship with the state an unavoidable consequence of global contestation is or, rather, a reflection of NU's limitations in developing a more independent ecosystem of civil diplomacy. In many other examples, such as Turkey's Diyanet or the Muslim World League in Saudi Arabia, religious organizations have often been absorbed into the logic of the state and have lost the epistemic distinctiveness that once constituted their source of strength.⁷⁷

Within this framework, efforts to sustain epistemic autonomy have become increasingly urgent. NU needs to develop mechanisms that ensure broader participation from organizational elements at the local and diaspora levels, rather than relying solely on the central leadership elite. This is not only relevant for maintaining internal legitimacy but is also essential to ensure that the narratives presented in global forums have a collective basis, rather than merely reflecting the political preferences of a particular group of elites.

In addition, strengthening material self-reliance is equally.⁷⁸ Without more stable sources of funding, such as productive *waqf* schemes, contributions from international communities, or transparent management of economic assets, NU will continue to occupy a weak negotiating position vis-à-vis the state. Financial dependence is almost always directly proportional to narrative dependence. In the context of global diplomacy, this means that NU will more often appear as a follower of pre-established agendas rather than as a formulator of its policy orientations.

If this patronage relationship is allowed to continue without any counterbalance, the risks of delegitimation will not be limited to the internal sphere. The international community will also become increasingly capable of distinguishing between organizations that genuinely embody civil discourse and those that merely serve as extensions of state diplomacy. In an increasingly transparent global era, credibility is no longer determined by

⁷⁶ Ilman Nafi'a, *Dinamika Relasi Nahdlatul Ulama (Nu) Dan Negara* (Cirebon: Cv. Zenius Publisher, 2022), <https://Repository.Syekhnurjati.Ac.Id/7627/>.

⁷⁷ Safran Almakaty, 'Muslim World League (Mwl) As A Soft Power Tool To Serve Muslims Globally: A Descriptive And Analytical Study' (Preprints, 9 September 2024), <https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202409.0650.v1>; Ahmet Erdi Öztürk And Semiha Sözeri, 'Diyanet As A Turkish Foreign Policy Tool: Evidence From The Netherlands And Bulgaria', *Politics And Religion* 11, No. 3 (September 2018): 624–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175504831700075x>.

⁷⁸ Rosa, 2025

the frequency of appearances at international forums, but rather by the consistency of values, the sustainability of commitments, and the integrity of the representation process.

Accordingly, the collaboration between NU and the state in the global context is not simply a matter of partnership or co-optation but rather concerns the extent to which the organization can redefine that relationship in a more balanced way. As emphasized by Asad, Mahmood, and Spivak, spaces for negotiation always exist. Still, the prerequisites are reflective awareness, the equitable distribution of participation, and the courage to maintain a critical distance from the state.

In the long term, the stakes for NU are not merely about its reputation on the international stage but also a more fundamental question: whether the organization will remain a home for ideas and moral authority animated by the critical energy of its community, or whether it will transform into a symbolic entity remembered only when the state requires the legitimacy of pluralism.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) globalization project cannot be separated from the dynamics of symbolic representation, its entanglement with the state, and the epistemic tensions between its central authority and diaspora branches. Through an analysis of the Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam discourses, as well as the transnational activities of NU's diaspora networks (PCINU), the study concludes that NU's global claim still relies more heavily on symbolic capital and elite involvement than on a participatory and sustainable epistemic foundation.

In its official narratives, NU is frequently positioned as a global actor representing Indonesia's brand of moderate Islam. However, as this study has shown, such representations tend to be performative, circulated through international forums, diplomatic cooperation, and media campaigns, rather than emerging from a consistent conceptual articulation rooted in NU's epistemic communities. In other words, NU's presence in global public arenas is not yet accompanied by intellectually reflective or robust narrative strength.

The discourses of Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam serve as two central case studies in assessing NU's epistemic agency in its globalization project. Islam Nusantara, although developed through deliberative processes within NU's traditional forums such as *Bahtsul Masail* and *Musyawarah Ulama, Mukhtamar* faces significant challenges in transforming itself into a translatable and inclusive conceptual framework. It is often perceived as overly culturalist, even Java-centric, thus limiting its reach within both the international community and the broader NU network.

Conversely, Humanitarian Islam has evolved in the opposite direction. Framed in globally normative language, drawing on concepts like pluralism, human rights, and world peace, it has gained traction among international actors. However, it was not constructed through NU's traditional deliberative methods. Instead of being rooted in collective consensus, its legitimacy derives from external recognition and elite performance in diplomatic settings. This reveals a fundamental asymmetry between symbol and substance, between external legitimacy and internal cohesion.

Another important finding of this study is the fragmentation within NU's diaspora networks. Although PCINU branches are formally recognized within the organization's structure, many operate autonomously, with little conceptual or administrative coordination

from the central board (PBNU). Some have not received formal decrees (SK), are excluded from key strategic forums such as R20, and report feeling that their role is more decorative than substantive. Drawing on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, this condition illustrates a recognition deficit that undermines the sense of belonging and active participation in NU's global project.

This study also notes that NU's involvement in international diplomacy is inextricably linked to its relationship with the Indonesian state. In many cases, NU's promotion of moderate Islam runs parallel to or is even derived from the state's cultural diplomacy agenda. This relationship is not necessarily negative, but it carries the risk of symbolic co-optation that could shift NU from being an independent civil-religious actor to functioning as an instrument of state-sponsored pluralism. From the perspectives of Talal Asad and Gayatri Spivak, this issue is not merely technical; it is about who speaks, who is silenced, and to what extent organizations like NU possess representational autonomy within a global landscape saturated with regimes of meaning.

This is where the core tension of NU's globalism lies: NU is frequently "spoken about" by the state, diplomats, international institutions, and even scholars, but it has not yet fully "spoken" as an autonomous and articulate epistemic subject. In Spivak's terms (1988), NU occupies an ambivalent position; it appears as the representative of Indonesian Islam, but what appears is not the collective voice of its community, but rather a construction of identity curated by the elite and the state. NU emerges as a sign, but not yet as a voice.

Thus, this study concludes that NU's current globalism operates primarily within a symbolic framework and has yet to be grounded in participatory and rooted epistemic strength. NU's considerable potential, its *pesantren* networks, intellectual traditions, and global diaspora, have not been strategically mobilized to construct a coherent and durable global narrative. The globalization project remains fragmented, both structurally and discursively.

Nevertheless, this study does not intend to diminish NU's achievements but instead seeks to open space for more honest and strategic reflection. NU possesses all the necessary resources to become a genuine producer of knowledge in global Islamic discourses, not merely a symbolic participant. But to realize this, NU must recalibrate its internal relations, strengthen its epistemic infrastructure, and renegotiate its role concerning the state and

global society. Without such recalibration, NU's globalism will continue to rely on elite-driven narratives rather than on the strength of its community.

I recognize that NU's future as a global actor will be determined by its willingness to move beyond symbolic comfort and to embark on the long road of epistemic formation. That path is undoubtedly complex, but it is only through this path that NU can assert itself not merely as the face of Indonesian Islam but as an intellectual voice equal to others in the global arena.

This study ultimately arrives at a boundary that is, at once, empirical and conceptual: NU's globalism, in its current articulation, cannot be sustained as a coherent epistemic project. What has been critically examined throughout this research is not merely the symbolic presence of NU on global stages, but the fragile foundation beneath that symbolism, fragmented institutional structures, exclusion of diaspora voices, and discourses that are more representational than generative. The study stops here not because the questions have been exhausted, but precisely because they remain open and urgent. At this juncture, I see a crucial turning point: NU's current global claim is not merely debatable; it requires a fundamental redefinition.

The limitations of this study, particularly its textual and reflective character, do not diminish its relevance. Instead, they reveal the extent to which NU's global narrative is still underdeveloped and requires epistemic reconfiguration. If NU is to be more than a symbol, if it is to be a speaking subject in the global Islamic conversation, then the project of globalism must be rebuilt from the ground up: through institutional coherence, epistemic participation, and a reassertion of voice over image.

In this sense, this study does not offer a closure, but a challenge: that the future of NU's globalism depends not on how often it is spoken about, but on how boldly and coherently it chooses to speak.

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