



Traditionalism and Modernism in Indonesian Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Identity Construction

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of Muslim identity in Indonesian Islam by analyzing the historical and socioreligious dynamics between traditionalist and modernist Islamic orientations. The research employs a qualitative method with content analysis, drawing on classical and contemporary scholarly works, historical documents, and religious discourses related to Islamic movements in Indonesia. Data were analyzed through thematic and discourse analysis to identify patterns of religious authority, interpretation, and social practice. The findings indicate that traditionalist Islam in Indonesia is characterized by strong adherence to local traditions, Sufistic practices, Shafi'i jurisprudence, and reliance on religious authority figures, particularly within rural communities. In contrast, modernist Islam emphasizes rational interpretation, scriptural purification (*tajdid*), rejection of blind taqlid, and the integration of Islamic values with modern education, social institutions, and organizational activism, as represented by movements such as Muhammadiyah, Persis, and Al-Irsyad. These orientations produce distinct yet interacting forms of Muslim identity shaped by historical experiences of colonialism, modernization, and global Islamic reformism. This study implies that the coexistence and contestation between traditionalist and modernist Islam constitute a foundational element of Indonesian Muslim identity. Understanding this dynamic contributes to the discourse on religious moderation, social transformation, and the sociology of Islam in plural societies.

INTRODUCTION

Nations with predominantly Muslim populations are generally situated within developing country contexts that face various social, cultural, and political challenges, including issues related to modernity and the construction of religious identity (Ismail, 2022). In Indonesia, these dynamics are further enriched by a long historical encounter between Islam and diverse local traditions, resulting in distinctive Islamic practices shaped through processes of acculturation between Islamic teachings and Nusantara cultures (Pusvisasari et al., 2022). From this interaction emerged the concept of Islam Nusantara, which emphasizes the indigenization of Islam through moderate, tolerant, and inclusive local values as defining characteristics of Indonesian Islam (Griffith & Duderija, 2025). This concept is also understood as a form of

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Islamic identity construction rooted in an awareness of cultural plurality and a strong commitment to social harmony and interreligious tolerance (Damayanti, 2025).

In sustaining and transmitting this Islamic identity, ulama and traditional institutions such as *pesantren* play a crucial role. *Pesantren* function not only as centers of religious education but also as spaces for spiritual formation, ritual practice, and the strengthening of ulama social networks that support the continuity of Indonesian Islamic traditions (Mubarak & Rahman, 2024). At the organizational level, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah emerge as two major forces representing the traditionalist and modernist poles within Indonesian Muslim society. Both organizations have made significant contributions to the development of Islamic thought and the dynamics of national socio-religious life (Aslinda et al., 2024). Historically, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) represents an Islamic orientation that emphasizes local wisdom and ritual continuity, whereas Muhammadiyah is widely recognized for its modernist approach, which prioritizes rationality, doctrinal purification, and social reform through education and charitable enterprises as forms of collective *ijtihad* (Muhammadiyah Society, 2025).

Studies on the relationship between modernism and traditionalism indicate that although this dichotomy is frequently employed as an analytical framework in studies of Indonesian Islam, the socio-religious reality is far more complex and dynamic. Religious identities and practices continue to shift in response to historical developments and changing social contexts (Aminuddin, 2018). In the post-Reformasi era, both traditionalist and modernist groups have not only maintained their respective characteristics but have also adapted to globalization, democratization, and rapid social change (Yaqin, 2022). Consequently, Indonesian Islamic identity can no longer be understood solely through a traditional–modern dichotomy but must also be viewed through the integration of *wasathiyah* values that emphasize balance, moderation, and social harmony (Amin et al., 2022). This phenomenon demonstrates that the dialectic between tradition and modernity within Indonesian Islam continues to evolve alongside the emergence of various new Islamic groups and movements that enrich the national religious landscape (Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, 2025).

Furthermore, the dynamics of contemporary Islamic thought in Indonesia reveal that national Islamic concepts continuously undergo transformation in response to the pressures of modernity and global challenges. Various intellectual currents such as Islam Nusantara, Progressive Islam, and Progressive Islam have developed through dialogue between local traditions and the demands of modern rationality, actively interacting within contemporary Indonesian Muslim society. Several studies emphasize that Islam Nusantara functions as a moderate discourse that embraces cultural plurality and social tolerance while simultaneously confronting more textualist and puritanical tendencies in Islamic interpretation (Islam Nusantara: The Nature of Islam in Indonesia and Its Role in Confronting Puritan Groups, 2025). Conversely, Islam Progressives underscores the importance of rationality, work ethics, and social transformation, suggesting that both paradigms possess synergistic potential in fostering a harmonious and progressive Muslim society (Ritonga & Rababah, 2025).

Moreover, the construction of Muslim identity in Indonesia is not merely historical but also involves ongoing reinterpretation of Islamic teachings in accordance with evolving local and global contexts. The intellectual approaches of contemporary Islamic thinkers such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who emphasizes interpretive flexibility in Islamic law and thought provide an important framework for understanding how religious identity can remain dynamic and adaptive to social and cultural change (Otoman et al., 2024). This process reflects that the indigenization of Islam in Indonesia produces forms of religiosity that are not static

but continuously shaped through internal and external negotiations within a plural and complex Muslim society (Identity of the Malay and Nusantara Islam Society, 2024).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a content analysis design to examine the construction of traditionalist and modernist Muslim identities within the context of Indonesian Islam. The research subjects consist of texts and documents that represent traditionalist and modernist Islamic discourses, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, documents from Islamic organizations, as well as writings and speeches of relevant Islamic figures. The data sources are secondary in nature; therefore, this study does not involve informants or respondents directly. Data sources were selected purposively based on the following criteria: i) relevance to the theme of traditionalist and modernist Islam in Indonesia, ii) the academic or institutional authority of the authors and publishers, and iii) representation of both historical and contemporary perspectives. The primary research instrument is the researcher as a human instrument, supported by data categorization sheets and coding guidelines to identify themes, concepts, and patterns of meaning within the analyzed texts (Abishev et al., 2025; Aryasutha et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2023, 2024; Khairunisa et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2025).

Data analysis was conducted through several systematic stages, including data collection, data reduction, categorization, and conclusion drawing. The analytical techniques employed were thematic content analysis and discourse analysis, focusing on the identification of narratives, key concepts, and meaning relations that shape traditionalist and modernist Muslim identities (Albshkar et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2025). The coding process was carried out through open and axial coding to uncover dominant themes such as religious authority, ritual practices, rationality, doctrinal purification, and the relationship between Islam and modernity. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and analytical consistency by comparing texts from different periods and backgrounds. The entire analytical process was conducted in a reflective and interpretative manner to ensure that the findings comprehensively and contextually represent the dynamics of Islamic discourse in Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Islamic Traditionalism in Indonesia

Islam has played a central role in shaping Indonesia's social and political identity, particularly since the period of the independence struggle. Religious scholars and leaders such as KH Hasyim Asy'ari and KH Ahmad Dahlan not only provided moral and spiritual legitimacy but also actively participated in mobilizing Muslims against colonialism (Azra, 2019; Ricklefs, 2018). Following the proclamation of independence in 1945, Islam was recognized as one of the official religions of the state, reaffirming its position as a crucial element in the construction of national identity. During this period, Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah continued to play strategic roles in religious, educational, social, and political spheres, while simultaneously responding to the challenges of modernization, urbanization, and globalization (Burhani, 2020).

Historically, from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Islam was embraced by nearly all segments of Indonesian society, both in urban and rural areas. Islam in the Nusantara region underwent an intensive process of adaptation with local traditions, including Hindu-Buddhist cultural legacies. This process of acculturation produced a distinctive form of Islam characterized by mystical and Sufi elements, differentiating it from Islam in the Arabian Peninsula (Hefner, 2020). The accommodative nature of Islam Nusantara facilitated the widespread acceptance of

Islam, particularly because Islamic teachings did not automatically negate local traditions as long as they did not contradict fundamental Islamic principles (Bruinessen, 2019).

Within the social context of agrarian and rural communities, Islam developed in the form of strong traditionalism. The significant attention given to Islamic jurisprudential schools, particularly the Shafi'i mahzab, shaped patterns of religiosity that emphasized loyalty to religious authorities and established ritual practices (Zuhri, 2021). The attitude of taqlid toward religious scholars became widespread and, in certain cases, resulted in unconditional obedience. The tolerant tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* further reinforced the continuity of traditional religious practices, even though some of these practices were less responsive to changing social conditions (Fauzi, 2020).

Several scholars, including Deliar Noer and Clifford Geertz, have identified traditional Muslim groups as communities deeply rooted in rural settings with Sufi-oriented and ritualistic religious expressions. The compatibility between Islamic Sufism and local mysticism enabled traditional Islam to establish a broad social base (Geertz, 2019). Zamakhsyari Dhofier defines traditional Islam as a pattern of Islamic thought that remains strongly bound to the intellectual heritage of classical scholars in the fields of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), mysticism (*tasawuf*), Quranic exegesis, and theology, developed between the seventh and thirteenth centuries (Dhofier, 2018). Within this framework, tradition is viewed as an integral component of religiosity, even when certain traditional elements no longer fully align with the demands of modernity.

Modern Islam in Indonesia

The emergence of modern Islam in Indonesia cannot be separated from the global context of Islamic civilizational decline, Western colonial domination, and the stagnation of religious thought marked by intellectual rigidity and excessive mysticism. These conditions stimulated the rise of international Islamic reform movements led by figures such as Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, Jamaluddin al-Afghani, and Muhammad Abduh (Kersten, 2018). Through intellectual and educational networks, these reformist ideas influenced Indonesian Muslims, particularly educated urban groups who were more directly exposed to modern ideas (Azra, 2019).

The modern Islamic movement in Indonesia focused on reforming religious thought, education, social life, and politics. Modernists sought to eliminate religious practices perceived as inconsistent with tawhid, such as *bid'ah*, superstition, and passive Sufi orders (*tarekat*) (Burhani, 2020). Reform efforts were also directed toward improving educational quality and strengthening social welfare initiatives as means of empowering the Muslim community. Reformist figures from West Sumatra, such as Haji Rasul and Abdullah Ahmad, emerged as pioneers of the purification and rationalization of Islamic teachings (Hadiz, 2021).

According to Kuntowijoyo, modern Islamic ideas gained broad influence because they were institutionalized within modern Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Al-Irsyad, Persatuan Islam (Persis), and Sarekat Dagang Islam. These organizations emphasized rationality, text-based religious literacy, and the integration of faith and social action (Nashir et al., 2021). Aboebakar Atjeh identified three main factors behind the emergence of modern Islamic organizations: the decline of religious understanding, structural poverty among Muslims, and the backwardness of Islamic educational institutions factors that motivated a strong orientation toward social and educational reform (Ricklefs, 2018).

Conceptually, modern Islam in Indonesia is characterized by an emphasis on rationality, *tajdid* (renewal), and doctrinal purification through direct reference to the Quran and Hadith. Modernists reject blind taqlid and view Islam as compatible with

universal values such as justice, equality, and humanity (Hefner, 2020). Their adaptive attitude toward social change is reflected in their acceptance of modern education, efficient organizational systems, and the utilization of science and technology, while maintaining Islam's moral foundations.

Muhammadiyah stands as the most prominent representation of modern Islam in Indonesia through its extensive social services in education, healthcare, and welfare. These initiatives reflect a rational and disciplined work ethic aligned with Weber's concept of worldly asceticism, although their orientation is not toward capital accumulation but toward the welfare of the Muslim community (*maslahah*) (Nashir et al., 2021). Muhammadiyah's social theology, rooted in Surah al-Ma'un, emphasizes that religious piety must be manifested through concrete actions aimed at empowering the marginalized (Burhani, 2020).

Differences in Religious Understanding

Differences between traditional and modernist Muslims are reflected in their approaches to understanding Islamic teachings and responding to modernity. Traditional Muslims tend to preserve inherited religious practices and regard local traditions as integral to religious identity. In contrast, modernist Muslims are more open to reinterpreting Islamic teachings in accordance with contemporary contexts, emphasizing rationality and universal principles (Subhan, 2022).

In responding to modernity, traditional Muslims demonstrate diverse attitudes ranging from resistance to selective adaptation in order to maintain religious and cultural continuity. Meanwhile, modernist Muslims generally view modernity as an opportunity to actualize Islamic teachings in contemporary social, political, and cultural life. This demonstrates that the traditionalist-modernist dichotomy is dynamic and continuously negotiated within the context of ongoing social change (Hefner, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the construction of Islamic identity in Indonesia is shaped through a dynamic dialectic between traditionalism and modernism as two major currents within Muslim religious life. Traditional Islam has developed through processes of acculturation with local cultures, the reinforcement of religious authority, and the continuity of religious traditions deeply rooted in rural communities. In contrast, modern Islam emerged as a critical response to the stagnation of religious thought and to the challenges of colonialism and modernity by emphasizing rationality, doctrinal purification, and the institutionalization of social welfare. The differences between these two orientations are not merely dichotomous but rather reflect a spectrum of Islamic understandings and practices that continuously negotiate meaning amid social, political, and global transformations. Consequently, Indonesian Islamic identity cannot be understood as static; instead, it represents an adaptive and contextual socio-religious construction that contributes significantly to social cohesion and the sustainability of religious and national life in Indonesia.

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