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## ISLAM NUSANTARA: A SEMANTIC AND SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

*This paper presents semantic and symbolic analyzes of the concept of Islam Nusantara and how it evokes meaning and emotion to counter extremist and violent transnational movements, including al-Qaeda and ISIS, based on the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology. The paper is based on a religious, cultural, and political theme framework in two films produced by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU): The Blessing of Islam Nation (Oceans of Revelation: Islam as a Blessing for All Creation) and Launching the Film The Blessing Islam Nusantara. The first is based on elements of Sufism, Javanese and some other Indonesian cultures to build a vision of Islam which directly opposes the hard and non-violent Salafi- Wahhabi extremist. The latter promoted the film and the potential of the Ansor (NU) youth organization to combat extremism and terrorism. Theoretically, I rely on the insight by Goffman's observations of "framing" and "reframing" and Sperber's demonstration that symbolization is one of the cognitive processes that awaken and simultaneously communicate meaning and emotion.*

**Keywords:** *Islam Nusantara, Transnational Movement, Religious and Cultural Movement, Nahdlatul Ulama, Islamic Vision.*

## Abstrak

*Makalah ini menyajikan analisis semantik dan simbolis tentang konsep Islam Nusantara dan cara-cara di mana ia membangkitkan makna dan emosi untuk melawan gerakan ekstrem dan keras transnasional termasuk al-Qaeda dan ISIS, berdasarkan ideologi Salafi-Wahhabi. Makalah ini berdasarkan kerangka tema agama, budaya dan politik dalam dua film yang diproduksi oleh Nahdlatul Ulama (NU): *The Blessing of Islam Nusantara* (*Oceans of Revelation: Islam as a Blessing for All Creation*) dan *Launching the Film The Blessing Islam Nusantara*. Yang pertama didasarkan pada unsur-unsur tasawuf, Jawa dan sebagian lagi budaya Indonesia lainnya untuk membangun visi Islam yang secara langsung melawan ekstremis Salafi-Wahhabi yang keras dan tanpa kekerasan. Yang kedua mempromosikan film tersebut dan potensi organisasi pemuda Ansor (NU untuk memerangi ekstremisme dan terorisme. Secara teoritis, saya mengandalkan wawasan oleh pengamatan Goffman mengenai “farming” dan “reframing” dan demonstrasi Sperber bahwa simbolisasi adalah salah satu proses kognitif yang membangkitkan sekaligus mengkomunikasikan makna dan emosi.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Islam Nusantara, Gerakan Transnational, Gerakan Agama dan Budaya, Nahdlatul Ulama, Visi Islam.*

## Introduction

It has often been asserted that Muslim leaders have not adequately addressed the challenge of violent extremist movements (VEM) including al-Qaeda (AQ) and ISIS. This suggest that they are acquiescent with the goals, if not the methods of VME. In Indonesia, at least, such is not the case. In this paper, I present a frame based semantic and symbolic ideology and program known as Islam Nusantara (Archipelagic Islam) designed to counter the violent form of Salafi-Wahhabism that AQ, ISIS and related groups are based on. Since 2015 his ideology has been developed by the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of the Ulama).

This paper presents a semantic and symbolic analysis of the concept and presentation of the concept of Islam Nusantara and the ways in which it evokes meaning and emotion to counter trans-national violent extremist movements including al-Qaeda and ISIS, based on Salafi-Wahhabi ideologies. It is based on a frame based content analysis of religious and political themes of Islam Nusantara. I focus primarily on two films produced by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) to promote this concept: the near feature length (83 minutes) *The Blessing of Islam Nusantara* (*Oceans of*

*Revelation: Islam as a Blessing for All Creation*)<sup>1</sup> and the much shorter (8 minutes) *Launching the Film The Blessing Islam Nusantara*<sup>2</sup> The first draws on elements of Sufism, Javanese and to a lesser extent other Indonesian cultures to construct a vision of Islam directly countering that of both violent and non-violent Salafi-Wahhabi extremists. The second promotes the film and Ansor's (the NU youth organization) potential for combatting violent extremism. Theoretically, I rely on insights by Goffman's observations concerning the ways in which semantic frames, and more specifically reframing, can alter dominance hierarchies in discourse systems and Sperber's demonstration that symbolization is a cognitive process that evokes as well as communicates meaning and emotion. (Sperber, D, 1975; Fairhurst, G. & Sarr, R, 1996; Goffman, E, 1974).

Both films are intended for both Indonesian and more specifically Javanese and international audiences as is evident from the titles and the English subtitles. They are quadra-lingual, including narrative and/or performance segments in Arabic, English, Indonesian and Javanese. Narrative, visual and performance segments of *The Blessing* construct an image on Islam Nusantara as authentic Islam based on the history of Javanese Islam as recounted in legends and texts concerning the *Wali Songo* (Nine Saints) who established Islam as the religion of Java. *Launching the Film* is more of a call to arms in the struggle against violent extremism.

This paper includes four sections: 1) A discussion of the concept of Islam Nusantara; 2) Theoretical Perspectives; 3) Cultural, political and religious themes in the two films and 4) Analysis, commentary and critique.

### **Islam Nusantara: Analytic and Ideological Perspectives**

Islam Nusantara means "Islam of the Southeast Asian Archipelago." It refers primarily to Islam as practiced by traditionalists in what is now Indonesia, though it can be applied equally to Muslims with similar religious orientations in other Southeast Asian nations: Brunei

Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Southern Thailand and Singapore. It is vitally important to distinguish between analytic and ideological uses of the term.

Many Indonesian scholars and *ulama* have noted that in a strictly religious sense the term Islam Nusantara is rather vacuous for two reasons. The first is that identifying regional Islams contradicts the more basic notion that Islam is a universal religion whose basic principles are constant across geographic and ethnological space. The second and related point is that most, if not all, of the features commonly attributed to Islam Nusantara including Sufism, tolerance of other faiths and a symbiotic relationship with local culture can be found in Muslim societies far removed from Southeast Asia. (Fata, A. and Ichwan, M, 2017).

These problems are easily resolved if we view Islam Nusantara, not as a distinctive form of Islam but rather as what Hodgson calls an “Islamicate Civilization.” Hodgson used this term in reference to features of Muslim “high” or elite cultures - literature, palace based performance traditions, science, philosophy, monumental architecture and to institutions including *Syari’a* courts and Sufi orders that developed in societies in which Islam is the dominant religion. In these contexts, Islam provides a framework within which other elements of culture develop or are interpreted. (Hodgson, M, 1975). I take a more egalitarian and anthropological view and consider “popular” ritual and performance traditions, kinship and marriage practices and food to be elements of these same civilisations.

In Southeast Asia performance traditions including *wayang* (shadow plays) and dance rooted in the Hindu Epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *gamelan* (percussion orchestra), matrilineal and bilateral kinship and marriage customs, educational institutions *pondok/pesantren* and *nasi tumpeng*, the rice cones used for ceremonial purposes are all elements of Southeast Asian Islamicate civilization.

Proponents of the ideological formulation of Islam Nusantara are aware of these difficulties and insistent on the point that it is not a new

*mazhab* (legal school) and that it remains firmly rooted in doctrinal and legal traditions of Sunni Islam especially Sufism. “*Peradaban Islamiyah Nusantara*” (a rough translation of Nusantara Islamicate Civilization) does not, however, make a good catch phrase. It is far too academic to be used effectively for political purposes. Ideologically, Islam Nusantara is what Liu and his colleagues call a “symbolology.” By this they mean coherent sets of narratives, myths, rituals, symbols, and associated meanings used to establish and maintain the legitimacy of and mobilize support for political actors including states, political parties and mass organizations. (Fisher-Onar, N. and Woodward, M, 2014). In highly competitive political arenas they are rhetorical tools used in attempts to dominate discursive systems and to capture states and other political arenas.

Islam Nusantara is a symbolology created by leading NU *ulama* and academics that combines aspects of traditional Sunni Islam, including Sufism, Javanese and to a much lesser degree other Indonesian cultures in an explicit attempt to counter Salafi-Wahhabi efforts to transform Indonesian Islam and cultures as well as violent extremist movements including ISIS. It emerged through what (Levi-Strauss, 1966). calls *bricolage* a constructive process in which abstract principles, or what Sperber would later call “symbolic knowledge,” are used to construct meaningful orders from what, at first glance, appear to be random phenomena. The NU scholars who constructed Islam Nusantara are masters of the craft.

### **Theoretical Perspectives: Framing and Symbolization**

Framing is a key concept in Communications Theory developed by Goffman in the 1970s and elaborated and refined in subsequent scholarship. It is a rhetorical/symbolic process through which what I refer to here as symbolologies are established as dominant means for understanding and interpreting ongoing events. In the case examined here visual and auditory as well as verbal symbols are used in the framing process. In competitive arenas framing is nearly always a contested process. (Entman, R, 1993). This is what (Chong and Druckman, 2009).

call adversarial framing, which “typically competitive, fought between parties or ideological factions, and [where issues] are debated and framed in opposing terms.” Goffman also points to the importance of “frame disputes” and “frame shifts” in contested discourse system. Frame disputes arise when there is no immediate potential for agreement and contesting parties use opposing frames to interpret a single set of events. Frame disputes are especially common when groups with radically opposing religious views seek to establish social and political hegemony. Frame Shifts occur when one symbology displaces another as the dominant interpretive strategy within a discourse field. Proponents of the ideological form of Islam Nusantara see themselves as being locked in a frame dispute concerning Islamic authenticity. They seek to accomplish a frame shift by falsifying Salafi-Wahhabi claims that theirs is the only authentic Islam.

Framing is one mode of what Sperber terms symbolization through which events are linked to deeply seated, subconscious meanings. Goffman and most others have described it as a semantic process through which meanings are created and altered. Symbolization and framing can, however, also be emotive processes. It is possible, though in the absence of research that is beyond the scope of this paper, impossible to state with certainty that emotions ranging including fear, love and defiance may be as much, if not more important than meanings as determinants of action. These films mix appeals to rationality and meaning and the evocation of strong emotions in complex, interacting, mutually reinforcing ways.

### **Cultural, Political and Religious Themes**

*The Blessing of Islam Nusantara (Oceans of Revelation: Islam as a Blessing for All Creation)* and *Launching the Film: The Blessing Islam Nusantara* share a common set of themes that are used to frame national and global conflict that contrast sharply with those used by Salafi-Wahhabis. There are, however, subtle differences. *The Blessing* is a complex multi-layered text that weaves threads of Sufism and Javanese culture into a seamless fabric. The emotions it evokes are



sadness about the ways in which Islam has been put to evil uses by violent extremists and quiet determination to use Islam Nusantara as a tool to come to the aid of not just the Indonesian people and the Muslim community, but of humanity as a whole. Launching the Film is a simpler call to action and perhaps arms in the struggle against violent extremism. It is more overtly political. To understand this package of meaning and emotion it is necessary to consider each separately and then move towards the analysis of the two as a totality. Particular themes and motifs include:

- The symbiosis of Islam and Javanese culture and their inherently peaceful nature.
- The contrast between Islam Nusantara and Salafi-Wahhabism.
- The struggle between good and evil.
- Indonesian nationalism.
- Islam Nusantara as a model for the global Muslim community.

Support for these positions is garnered from:

- Quotations for the *Qur'an* and Hadis.
- Quotes from internationally recognized historical Sufi masters.
- Statements by leading NU *kyai*.
- *Qur'an* recitation set in Javanese context.
- Images of peaceful Islam Nusantara and violent Salafi-Wahhabism (especially ISIS).

These themes and proofs are intertwined throughout the films.

### **The Blessing of Islam Nusantara**

This film centers on narratives and rituals concerning the Wali Songo to convey large religious and political messages. The *wali* are described as have spread Islam in ways that established inter-relations with, rather than displacing local culture. This interaction resulted in the construction of what is now known as Islam Nusantara. This is contrasted with the conquest based spread of Islam in the Middle East and the intolerance and violence of Wahhabism. The fact that this contrast is, at times, over



drawn and does not entirely correspond with historical reality does not matter when Islam Nusantara is viewed from an ideological rather than analytic perspective. Nor does this diminish its rhetorical and persuasive power.

The most important voices in the film are those of K.H. Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus) and K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). Gus Mus (born 1944) is the Kyai at Pondok Pesantren Raudlatuth Thalibin in Rembang, Central Java. He was formerly head of the NU advisory council (*Rais Am Syuriah*), a prolific author, poet, song writer and artist. Gus Dur (1940-2009) was General Chairman of NU and subsequently President of Indonesia. Both are greatly revered. Gus Dur is widely believed to be a saint and is often described as the tenth *wali*. A many as ten thousand people visit his grave every day. Video clips of pilgrims are included in the film.

Gus Mus describes the purpose of the film as follows:

*The Prophet want to make things easy for people. Recently Dakwah has been violating the principles advocated by the noble Prophet Muhammad who urged proselytizers to make it easy for people, not to make them flee in terror. Today dakwah makes people horrified and appalled by Islam.*

*Genuine Islam, Islam Nusantara, Indonesian Islam, the Islam taught by the messenger of God has been challenged by Saudi Arabian Islam, a grasping and capitalistic Islam, coarse, cruel and savage. I am absolutely certain that our understanding of Islam is shared by Muslims throughout the world and that the Wahhabi view is just a ghoulish nightmare that keeps the world awake at night trembling in horror. By reviving the teachings of the Wali Songo we invite you to join us in a mental revolution to re-conceptualize our understanding of the world.*

While it is not stated explicitly the messages are clear. The first is that by resorting to intolerance and violence Salafi-Wahhabis have departed from Islam as preached by the Prophet Muhammad. This is ironic because it is tantamount to stating that they have fallen into *bid'ah* (religious innovation) that they consider to be a heinous sin that they accuse their opponents, especially Sufis, of. The second is that Islam Nusantara, not Wahhabism, is the vehicle for returning to the pristine Islam of the Prophet's time.

Images and video clips of Gus Dur are featured throughout the film. His recitation of the Javanese *Syi'ir Tanpo Waton* composed by Gus Nizam (born 1973) of Pesantren Darul Shofa in East Java is audio background at several points. The text is as follows:

*I begin this recitation with the name of the Lord (Pangeran = Allah).  
 Praising that which gives us blessing (rahmat) and pleasure day and  
 night without end.  
 Oh, my fellow men and women  
 Do not study only bits of Syari'a.  
 In this you become adept at reading, writing and speaking.  
 In the end, you have naught but regret.  
 In the end, you have naught but regret.  
 Many who memorize the Qur'an and Hadis  
 Are glad to call others kafir.  
 Their own unbelief does not concern them.  
 Their hearts and minds are filled with filth.  
 Their hearts and minds are filled with filth.  
 They are easily seduced by the passion of pride (nafsu angkoro),  
 The sparkling gleam of worldly desire,  
 Envious and jealous of others wealth.  
 That is why their hearts are filled with darkness.  
 Oh my brothers, we are obligated (wajib) to learn  
 And deepen the faith (iman) and (knowledge of) the oneness of Allah  
 (tauheed).  
 This is the best preparation for a noble death.  
 This is the best preparation for a noble death.  
 The best people are the most kind hearted  
 Because their knowledge is firm.  
 They practice Thariqa,  
 Reaching the state of Marifa,  
 Finally passing into Haqiqa.  
 The eternal Qur'an, is a noble revelation  
 Unwritten and yet it can be recited.*

*This is the teaching of one with clear vision.  
Implant this deeply in your chest.  
Implant this deeply in your chest.  
When it fills your body, heart and mind,  
The miracle of the Messenger (Rosul) (The Qur'an) will guide you  
In entering the door of faith.  
We must approach Allah day and night  
And not neglect zikr.  
Our lives will be calm and peaceful,  
Bearing the unbearable.  
This is a sign of our faith and belief  
With consciousness of the beneficence of the Lord (Pangeran = Allah).  
Friends, brothers and neighbors,  
Live in harmony free from conflict.  
This is the Sunna (practice) of the noble messenger (Rosul)  
The Prophet Muhammad, our guide.  
Allah will raise our stations  
Even though we are physically weak  
Our spiritual stations will be high and noble.  
When death comes our souls will not wander and be lost.  
Allah will reward us with paradise.  
Our bodies will be preserved and our burial shrouds unblemished.*

This song is enormously popular. It has become something of an anthem for young people who describe themselves as “Gusdurians.” There are several hundred versions of Gus Dur and others reciting it on YouTube. It endorses much that Salafi-Wahhabis condemn (Sufism, *zikir*) and condemns the textual criticism that is at the heart of their belief system. It also condemns the Salafi-Wahhabi practice of *takfiri* (condemning professed Muslims as non-believers) in the strongest possible terms, stating that their hearts are filled with “filth” while those of the saints are filled with love of Allah and their fellow creatures.

Gus Dur is also quoted as saying: “No one knows who is a saint other than another saint. We must learn about human perfection. We must become saints”.

Together these statements summarize and frame the remainder of the film. The frame is that that Sufi oriented Islam Nusantara leads to personal and social peace and tranquility and that Salafi-Wahhabism leads to their opposites.

The film begins with a song attributed to Sunan Kalijaga who, of all the *wali*, most explicitly embodies the symbiosis of Islam and Javanese culture. The song is stated to be instrumental as well as evocative affording protection from evil.

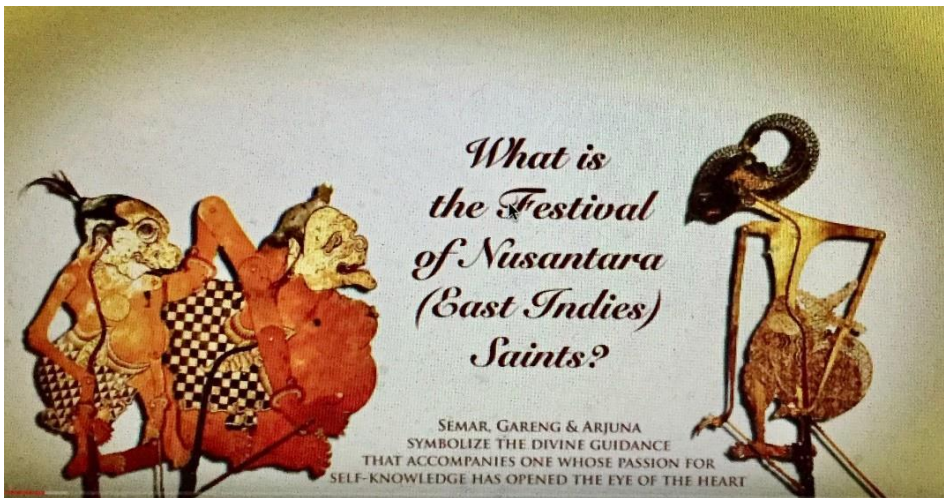
*This is a sacred melody  
Whose vibrations shield us in the dark of night,  
Invincible, surrounded with beauty, harmony and wellbeing,  
Far from every horrifying threat and disaster.  
Evil spirits and setan instinctively recoil.  
Sorcerers fear to hurl their evil spells.  
This sacred melody disrupts evil plans and maneuvers,  
Causing sorcery to fail and rebound on its sender.*

It is not clear who the sorcerers are and it is logical to suggest that in the context of the larger political themes of the film that they are the violent extremists who reject Islam Nusantara teachings.

### **The Symbiosis of Islam and Javanese Culture and the Struggle Between Good and Evil**

This is one of the central themes in *The Blessing*. The film makes extensive use of imagery and quotations from the Javanese *wayang* shadow play tradition to make the point that Sufi mystical truths can be expressed in local linguistic and cultural forms. These claims are not in any sense unique. They are common in Southeast Asian Muslim interpretations of the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that are

the foundation of literary, theatrical and dance traditions throughout the region. Southeast Asian Salafis have long considered these traditions to be remnants of the Hindu past and to be reprehensible, if not forbidden by Islamic Law. Here, *The Blessing* brings a message to local and regional viewers as well as a trans-national audience that this denigratory is incorrect. The message is that this symbiosis of global religion and local culture is something to be treasured and that cultural performances are appropriate vehicles for *dakwah*.



**Figure One**  
**Wayang, Sufism and Saints**  
**Screen Capture from *The Blessing of Islam Nusantara***

There are several instances in which people dressed in traditional Javanese clothing are shown praying or reciting the *Qur'an*. This is especially significant in light of the fact that some Indonesian Muslims now claim that to be a truly pious Muslim it is necessary to wear Saudi Arabian style clothing. This theme is amplified in Launching the Film in which young women without hair coverings (*jilbab*) are shown singing (both of which are anathema to Salafi-Wahhabis) and cheering on Islam Nusantara and the struggle against violent extremism. There are also images of Javanese Muslim rituals such as the *slametan* (prayer) meal that Salafi-Wahhabis consider to be *bid'ah* and, as such, prohibited. There are occasional images depicting other Indonesian cultures.





**Figure Two**  
**Praying in Traditional Javanese Clothing**  
Screen Capture from *The Blessing of Islam Nusantara*



**Figure Three**  
**Young Women at the Launching of The Blessing**  
Screen Capture from *Launching the Film*

The struggle between good and evil that is a central theme in the Javanese *wayang* is used as a metaphor for describing the struggle against violent extremist groups including ISIS. The central image from the

*wayang* used in the blessing is the struggle between the *Padawa* and the *Kurawa* in the *Bharatayuda*. The *Padawa* are linked to Islam Nusantara and the *Kurawa* and their leader Duryodana the “the egotistical, power-hungry savage lord” of the *wayang* with Salafi-Wahhabis and ISIS. Here the film alternates between images of the *wayang* and ISIS fighters.

### Saints (Wali)

*The Blessing* describes Islam Nusantara as having been shaped by the *Qur'an*, Hadis and by devotional and philosophical aspects of early Middle Eastern Sufism. Sufism is described as having developed to recapture the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad from Muslim monarchs and conquerors. There are quotes from Middle Eastern saints including Ibn al-Arabi, Rabia and Rumi, but the primary emphasis is on Javanese saints, especially the *Wali Songo*. Their teachings and methods as being the foundation approaches adopted by contemporary Javanese *kyai*, some of whom are widely regarded as being saints, or at least having saintly qualities.

The *Wali Songo* are described as models for personal piety. Their culturally sensitive approach to *dakwah* is held up as an ideal and held in stark contrast with the harsh, accusatory methods used by many contemporary preachers. Some of these threaten hell fire for those who do not follow their lead. Others promise worldly prosperity in return for piety. ISIS is depicted as the extreme case – killing those who do not conform.

*The Blessing* also includes numerous images and an extensive discussion of *ziyarah* (pilgrimage) to the tombs of the *Wali Songo*. Salafi-Wahhabis condemn this mode of ritual practice as *bid'ah*, and as such forbidden. This film reasserts the traditional Sunni Muslim view that it can be both a step of the journey to Allah and a source of blessing (*berkah*).

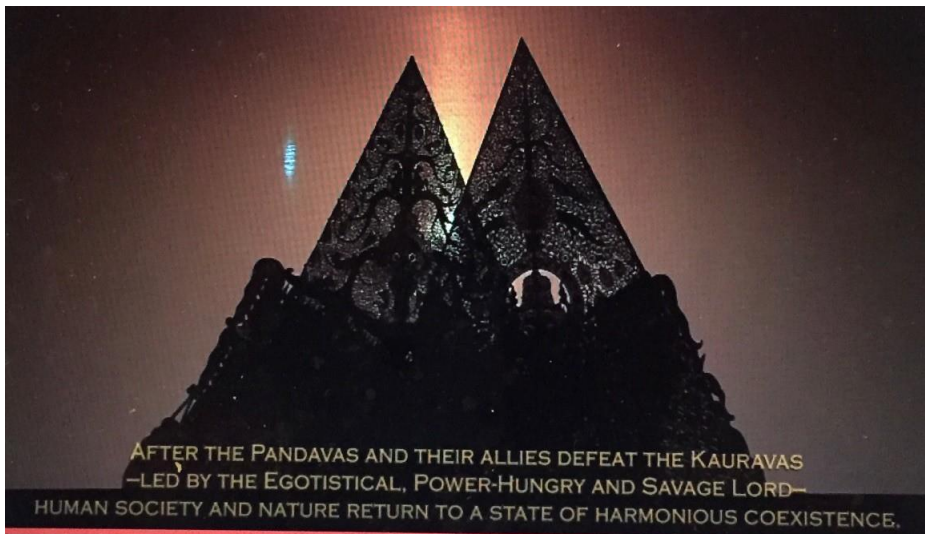
### Conclusion

*The Blessing* concludes by urging people to learn from the *Wali Songo*. Habib Muhammad Luthfi bin Ali bin Yahya (born 1947), who is



known both as an *ulama* and a Sufi suggests that their style of *dakwah* and the more general contours of Islam Nusantara can be a model for other Muslim societies. Another speaker suggests that spreading knowledge of Islam Nusantara can help to overcome both violent extremism and Western Islamophobia. He also strongly condemns the Saudi Arabian government for destroying graves and other holy and historical places.

The film then turns to emotional appeals evoking anger and outrage about and resistance to the ISIS project of brutality and “butchery,” and ascertain that Indonesian nationalism is rooted in the values of the Wali Sango and the following image from the *wayang*.



**Figure Four**  
**And Metaphor for ISIS?**  
**Screen Capture from *The Blessing of Islam Nusantara***

### Launching the Film

This much shorter film documents the ceremony rolling out *The Blessing*. Within the brief space of eight minutes it is not possible to even summarize the theological complexities of *The Blessing*. The producers did not attempt this. Rather it consists of endorsements from leading political and religious figures and a demonstration of support for combatting ISIS. It features images of Banser (The militia of the

NU youth organization Ansor) brigades, sometimes accompanied by what appears to be an armored personnel carrier singing the following anthem:

*Father, Mother  
Please give me your blessings,  
So that I may leave for jihad beneath the streaming NU banner.  
Onwards, together to the attack.  
We will not come home until we are victorious.  
We are ready to sacrifice for religion  
Although blood may flow on the battlefield.  
Onward, onward, onward!  
Ever onward!  
Drive out the enemy!  
Vanquish those who desecrate religion and attack the ulama (Muslim scholars)!<sup>3</sup>  
Onward ANSOR militia where ever you may be!  
O fellow citizens  
Love of country is an element of faith.  
Do not become rebels.  
Oh, fellow citizens  
Wake up and recognize your duty to God and country.  
Indonesia is my nation and my homeland,  
My sacred heirloom (pusaka) and source of pride.  
Whoever comes to threaten you will surely be destroyed.*

K.H. Nurson Wahid, who at the time was the General Chairman of Ansor made the following statement:

*Just recently we have seen horrific acts of violence carried out in the name of Islam by a small group of religious extremists. Muslims, and especially NU and Ansor have a religious obligation (wajib) to marginalize and defeat this extremist movement. ISIS is responsible for (violent) events in the Middle East and Europe, such as those that happened a few days ago in Paris. This must not be allowed to happen here in Indonesia. Such actions bring no benefit to Islam. ANSOR and its militia BANSER are duty*

*bound to stand in the forefront, defending pluralism and the unity of the Republic of Indonesia.*

## **Analysis, Commentary and Critique**

The Islam Nusantara project is an effort by the NU leadership to construct a coherent a coherent historical and theological narrative opposing violent extremist Salafi-Wahhabism movements and the type of Wahhabism that the Saudi Government sponsors in Indonesia and many other Muslim countries. The fact that this narrative is not always historically accurate or complete does not matter, because this is an ideological and religious, and not an academic project. Ideologically driven narratives rarely correspond with historical fact in any country. Indonesia is no exception.

Similarly, the seamless symbiosis of *wayang* and NU style Islam is an exercise in the imagination and social construction of reality. I know this from experience having participated in organizing the Sunan Kalijaga Wayang Festival in Yogyakarta some years ago. *Dalang* (puppeteers) and *Kyai* participating in this festival shared a commitment to using Javanese culture to combat Salafi-Wahhabi violent extremism. They often had difficulties working together and understanding their respective religious terminology.

Islam Nusantara speaks to a large, but still limited portion of the Indonesian population. It is perhaps too Java-centric for many non-Javanese Indonesians to appreciate or find convincing. For example, in Lombok, the Wali Songo have limited appeal even though traditional Islam there shares much with NU. Muslims in Lombok revere saints as much as traditional Javanese Muslims do, but they have their own saints.

There are two additional points regarding Salafis. Many, probably most, Indonesian Salafis find violent extremist groups to be disgusting. They despise them as much as the proponents of Islam Nusantara do. They are however, not likely to be convinced by appeals to religious teachings and practices they do not share or approve of. For them reframing the struggle against violent extremism in terms of a religious conflict between their understanding of Islam and NU's is unlikely to evoke feelings of unity.

## Conclusion

The Islam Nusantara project is an effort by the NU leadership to construct a coherent historical and theological narrative opposing violent extremist Salafi-Wahhabism movements and the type of Wahhabism that the Saudi Government sponsors in Indonesia and many other Muslim countries. The fact that this narrative is not always historically accurate or complete does not matter, because this is an ideological and religious project, not an academic one. Ideologically driven narratives rarely correspond with historical facts in any country. Indonesia is no exception. Similarly, the seamless symbiosis of wayang and NU style Islam is an exercise in the imagination and social construction of reality. I know this from experience having participated in organizing the Sunan Kalijaga Wayang Festival in Yogyakarta some years ago. Dalang (puppeteers) and Kyai participating in this festival shared a commitment to using Javanese culture to combat Salafi-Wahhabi violent extremism. They often had difficulties working together and understanding their respective religious terminology.

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## EndNotes

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLqajITjA5Y>
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-OZ4fkuXds>
- 3 The imagery in this video contrasts Indonesian political, religious, military and cultural leaders and young Indonesians, young men in military style uniforms and young women in traditional attire without *hijab* with images of ISIS leaders and a rag tag band of fighters blowing up vehicles and a mosque. ISIS Caliph Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is depicted at the point where NU youth mention “those who desecrate religion” in their anthem.

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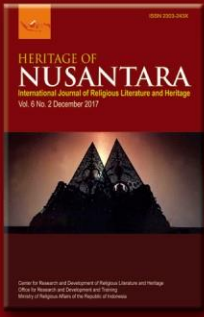


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