DIAKRONIKA
ISSN: 2620-9446
DOI doi.org/10.24036/diakronika/vol26-iss1/514

Arabization Without Arabness: Cultural Hybridization and Islamic Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia

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Received 2 January 2026
Revised 6 April 2026
Accepted 12 May 2026
pp. 48-62

Abstract

Since 1998, puritanical transnational Islamic movements have promoted "Arabized" practices in Indonesia, including Arab-style clothing, beards, veils, and Arabic greetings. These developments have prompted resistance from *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), which champions *Islam Nusantara* to preserve local cultural expressions of Islam. Existing studies remain focused on elite-level ideological oppositions, framing Arabization primarily as a homogenising threat to be countered by "local Islam" or on discursive constructions of "Arabness." This article examines how "Arab" religious markers have infiltrated and become naturalised in local contexts during the *Reformasi* era, even in NU strongholds, despite opposition. It adopts a historical sociological approach that analyses long-term religious change, paying particular attention to everyday practices, power relations, and identity negotiation at the grassroots level. The study argues that Arab culture enriches local identities through selective indigenisation, thereby challenging binary threat-resistance narratives. Additionally, this research contributes to the historiography of Indonesian Islam beyond hegemonic binary discourses that contrast *Islam Nusantara* with Arabization or puritanical transnational influences. Instead, it traces how religious change and identity formation unfold through selective indigenisation and everyday hybridisation.

Keywords

Arabization, Cultural Syncretism, Local Islamic Culture, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Transnational Islamic Movements

To cite this article

Mujib, A., Aziz, A. (2026). Arabization Without Arabness: Cultural Hybridization and Islamic Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia. *Diakronika* 26(1), 48-62. http://doi.org/10.24036/diakronika/vol26- iss1/514.

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Introduction

The collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 marked a significant turning point for Islamic movements in Indonesia. Under President Soeharto's authoritarian rule, political expressions of Islam experienced substantial suppression during the early and middle periods, through measures such as the forced merger of Islamic parties into the *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP) in 1973 and the imposition of *Pancasila* as the sole ideological foundation (*asas tunggal*) in the 1980s. This period saw the resurgence and expansion of puritanical *Salafi-Wahhabi* influences often transmitted through transnational networks linked to Saudi Arabia, such as the *Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia* (DDII) and *Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab* (LIPIA) which promoted a literalist interpretation of Islam and sought to purify religious practices deemed as innovations *(bid'ah)*, deviations, or polytheistic accretions *(shirk)* from local Indonesian traditions. From the viewpoint of these movements, practices such as saint veneration, grave visitation *(ziarah)*, *tahlilan* and syncretic rituals were considered impure or heretical accretions that had to be purged in order to return to the "pure" Islam of the *salaf al-salih* (pious ancestors). These influences promoted a more literal interpretation of Islamic teachings. This, in turn, resulted in the extensive practice of rituals and symbols perceived as distinctively "Arabized" such as wearing long robes *(jubah or gamis)*, growing thick beards, donning veils, and replacing everyday local greetings (for example, the casual "I-you") with Arabic-derived expressions such as "*ana-antum*." Traditionalist groups, especially those associated with *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), have largely viewed this trend as posing a threat to Indonesia's distinctive local religious customs. Prominent NU figures, such as KH A. Mustafa Bisri (Gus Mus), have critiqued Arabization by emphasizing that Islam in Indonesian is distinct from Saudi Arabian Islam and that the absence of Arab attire does not invalidate local practices (Muyassaroh, 2013). While NU's central leadership and many prominent *kiai* have actively resisted Arabization through the promotion of "*Islam Nusantara*", responses within the organization are not monolithic. In addition to institutional opposition, some NU-affiliated *pesantren*, *kiai* and younger generations have selectively adopted some Arab-influenced markers (such as *gamis* or Arabic greetings) in everyday religious practice, revealing internal diversity and pragmatic adaptation. In general, although it lacks a clearly defined epistemological foundation, the concept of Islam Nusantara refers to "an interpretation of Islam that takes into account local Indonesian customs and traditions in the formulation of its jurisprudence" (Muyassaroh, 2013).

This debate centers on the legitimacy of "local" versus "Arab" Islamic practices: what defines authentic Islam in Indonesian contexts, and where does cultural borrowing end and unwelcome foreign imposition begin? Various interpretations of Arabization exist. As Ahmad Najib Burhani (2010) articulates, in Indonesia, "Arab" was not a geographical reference but rather indicative of the authenticity and origin of Islam, frequently associated with "true" Islam. Over time, however, perceptions have evolved; Rodemeier (2009) differentiates between the "Arabness" of traditional *santri* Islam (as described by Clifford Geertz, 1960) and a "new Arab influence" connected to Wahhabism. Martin van Bruinessen offers a nuanced historical distinction between two strands of "Arabness": a reformist variant influenced by Egyptian thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, which has been predominantly embraced by modernist groups like Muhammadiyah, and a contested variant linked to Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia, which has faced strong opposition from traditionalist organizations such as NU (Miichi & Farouk, 2013).

Yet despite these scholarly insights into the historical and ideological distinctions between reformist "Arabness" and puritanical Wahhabi-Salafi influences, a notable gap persists. Most existing studies (Bruinessen, 2009; Burhani, 2010; Ghoshal, 2010; Lucking, 2016; Rodemeier, 2009). Continue to focus on elite-level ideological oppositions, primarily depicting Arabization as a homogenizing threat to be opposed by "local Islam" or on discursive constructions of "Arabness." Consequently, they have largely overlooked the dynamic, quotidian processes through which "Arab"-associated elements are

contested, selectively embraced, adapted, and naturalised within local contexts, including NU strongholds, thereby obscuring the practical boundaries between "Arab" and "local".

Paradoxically, elements labelled as "Arab" reflect deliberate processes of selective indigenisation and cultural capitalisation rather than unconscious assimilation. Notably, in Madura Island an archetypal NU stronghold detailed ethnographic research indicates that Arab-influenced markers in attire, language, cosmetics, and customs are actively localized and valorised as resources for piety, social prestige, and economic capital (Lucking, 2016). Similar patterns are observable elsewhere, for instance, in the widespread adoption of *gamis* among *kiai* and *santri* in many *pesantren*, including those affiliated with traditionalist networks.

This article addresses this research gap by examining how certain religious traditions and cultural elements, once perceived as foreign or "Arab," undergo selective transformation and indigenisation in the post-1998 *Reformasi* era. "Transformation" here refers to conscious processes of adaptation, in which "Arab" markers are not adopted per se but recontextualized, repurposed, and incorporated into local social structures. The mechanisms of this incorporation, and the resulting ambiguity of distinguishing "Arab" from "non-Arab" in practice, are explored.

This article's originality resides in its transition from binary ideological contestations (*Islam Nusantara* versus puritanism/Arabization) to a processual approach to cultural hybridization and identity construction. By analyzing how Arab religious culture infiltrates and enriches local traditions despite explicit resistance it complicates simplistic narratives of resistance and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of religious transformation in Indonesia. This approach shows that boundaries between global influences and local authenticity are fluid, offering fresh perspectives on how local Indonesian Islam persists amid global Islamic trends.

The primary research inquiry of this study is: How do traditions formerly categorized as "Arab" become assimilated into the local Indonesian Islamic identities through mechanisms of selective indigenization? Additionally, what sociological determinants such as economic opportunities (e.g., pilgrimage enterprise), social prestige, political influence, enhanced transnational connectivity, and local power structures facilitate this integration despite overt ideological opposition from organizations such as NU? Moreover, what insights does this seemingly paradoxical process provide regarding the contested and permeable boundaries between Arabization and indigenization in contemporary Indonesia?

Research Methods

This study adopts a historical method with sociological approach that analyse of long-term religious change with sociological attention to everyday practices, power relations, and identity negotiation at the grassroots level. The research draws on the stages of historical inquiry heuristics (source collection), verification (source criticism), interpretation (analysis), and narrative synthesis while incorporating contemporary practices in historical sociology. These include the analysis of long-term social processes, the embedding of religious change within broader political and economic transformations, and the examination of how global influences are localized through everyday agency and power relations. These four stages of historical method are applied specifically and systematically to address the central research question of this study: In the post-New Order *(Reformasi)* era, particularly within NU strongholds and traditionalist *pesantren* communities, how have religious traditions and cultural elements previously classified as "Arab" been selectively integrated and naturalized into local Indonesian Islamic identities (Madura, Cirebon, Urban Muslim Middle Class (Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya), and what does this process of everyday hybridization reveal about the contested and porous boundaries between Arabization and indigenization?

Primary sources include materials collected through purposive sampling based on three main criteria: (1) direct relevance to Arabization, *Islam Nusantara*, and the integration of "Arab" religious markers during the post-1998 *Reformasi* period; (2) representation of various actor perspectives to reduce

institutional bias; and (3) accessibility of verifiable public or archival records from 1998 to 2024. All sources were subjected to source criticism regarding authorship, context, potential bias, and triangulation with multiple accounts. Specifically, the secondary sources comprise analyses of the evolving perceptions of "Arabness" and Arabization (Bruinessen, 2018; Bruinessen, 2009; Burhani, 2010; Rodemeier, 2009), studies conceptualizing *Islam Nusantara* as a tolerant, indigenizing counter-narrative promoted by NU (e.g., works associated with NU scholars and the formalization at the 33rd NU Congress in 2015), ethnographic accounts of local integration and "capitalizing Arabness" (Lucking, 2016), as well as broader historical overviews of *Reformasi*-era religious dynamics, transnational networks, and adaptive processes (Hasan, 2010; Hefner, 1997). Sources were further evaluated through triangulation cross-verification of claims across multiple document types (archival, media, and ethnographic) and actor perspectives (NU leadership, local *kiai*, and ordinary believers) to enhance reliability and reduce bias from single perspectives.

The findings are synthesized into a coherent historical narrative that is structured both chronologically and thematically. To provide necessary historical depth and to establish a clear baseline against which post-1998 changes can be meaningfully assessed, the narrative begins with the pre-*Reformasi* indigenous religious landscape, including key influences from the early 20th century (such as the emergence of modernist reformism through Muhammadiyah and traditionalist responses by NU). This baseline serves as a methodological anchor for tracing continuity and change. The subsequent structure follows the temporal progression of the *Reformasi* era: second, the post-1998 influx of puritanical transnational currents amid democratization; third, societal and institutional responses, particularly NU's formal promotion of *Islam Nusantara*; and fourth, the emergent hybrid cultural forms that reflect selective integration and the blurring of boundaries between "Arab" and "local" elements. This methodological framework ensures a rigorous, evidence-based exploration of religious change, separating empirical historical analysis from the theoretical arguments (e.g., the blurring of Arab/non-Arab identities) presented in the introduction.

Result

Indigenous Religious Landscape in Indonesia Prior to Arabization

The processes of Arabization and Islamization have been extensively examined by both statesmen and religious authorities to clarify the religious dynamics within Indonesian society from the advent of Islam to the present day. The transformation of a nation, previously predominantly committed to animism and dynamism, into a society with substantial adherence to Islam including the integration of its legal and ritual frameworks by the majority of the population has further complicated scholarly and public discourse. This complexity primarily stems from the difficulty in distinctly differentiating between genuine Islamization (the internalization of Islamic theological and ethical principles) and Arabization (the adoption of cultural symbols, language, attire, and customs associated with the Arabian Peninsula). Consequently, Indonesian Muslim identity is often perceived not merely as compliance with Islam, but as an embodiment of Arab cultural elements that many consider inseparable from "authentic" Islamic practice (Wahid, 2014). This indistinct boundary has engendered ongoing debates concerning cultural authenticity, local agency, and the extent to which foreign markers can or ought to be indigenized within *Nusantara* traditions.

This phenomenon arises from the increasing perception among Indonesian Muslims that their practice of Islam encompasses not only adherence to its foundational teachings but also the incorporation of numerous elements associated with Arab customs, language, attire, and symbols. Many consider these elements to be intrinsic or even indispensable to authentic Islamic practice. Such perceptions are predominantly modern, retroactively ascribed, rather than reflective of the historical processes involved in the initial Islamization of the archipelago. Historically, Islam was introduced mainly through Indian and Sufi-mediated pathways that were inherently syncretic and tolerant of indigenous customs,

facilitating the development of unique local manifestations such as Javanese Islam and Acehnese Islam during the initial spread of the religion, approximately between the 13th and 16th centuries. Conversely, the current trend to equate Arab cultural markers with religious authenticity has intensified in recent decades, notably under the influence of transnational puritanical movements and increased global interconnectedness (Wahid, 2014).

Prior to the onset of Arabization and long before the advent of Islam in the archipelago, indigenous belief systems of animism and dynamism had been firmly established. These systems were subsequently influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism, whose cultural and religious elements began to reach the Indonesian archipelago through trade networks as early as the first to fourth centuries CE, gradually shaping social and communal traditions across various regions (Coedes, 1975; Hall, 2010; Nata, 2001). The local culture of the community, which was well established and deeply rooted at that time, did not inhibit the influence of Islam, which ultimately became the most widely practiced religion (Al-Amri & Haramain, 2017; Taufik, 2013). This phenomenon is linked to Islam's original presentation, distinguished by an open and adaptable approach to local traditions (Abidin, 2009).

Islam spread to Southeast Asia not from one source but through various maritime trade networks. Major influences were from the Indian subcontinent, especially Gujarat and southern India, where Islam had already been through an extensive cultural adaptation, leading to a more tolerant and syncretic interpretation (Azra, 2006; Ghoshal, 2010; Kersten, 2017). Other important channels were traders and scholars from the Arabian Peninsula (particularly the Hadramaut region in Yemen) and, to a lesser extent, Persia. The diverse routes contributed differently: the Indian route often resulted in a more flexible integration with local traditions whereas direct or indirect contacts with Arab heartlands introduced stricter elements associated with the original Arabian context of Islam (Ghoshal, 2010). Islam arrived in the Indonesian archipelago through complex maritime trade networks across the Indian Ocean. Although many historians have highlighted the important role of Muslim traders and Sufi networks from the Indian subcontinent in fostering a syncretic and inclusive form of Islam that readily integrated with local customs, the exact origins and mechanisms of this early Islamization process continue to be debated among scholars, with alternative theories pointing to direct Arabian, Persian, or other influences.

The dissemination of Islamic teachings is intrinsically linked to the specific geographical and cultural contexts in which it occurs. This situation is analogous to the circumstance that arose when Islam engaged directly with numerous indigenous cultures upon its initial arrival in Indonesia. The dynamic interaction between Islam and local cultures markedly facilitated the acceptance of Islam by indigenous populations without necessitating the wholesale displacement or eradication of pre-existing cultural practices. Nonetheless, this process was occasionally accompanied by tensions and localized conflicts, such as power struggles between Muslim coastal polities and Hindu-Buddhist inland kingdoms on Java, or initial resistance from communities adhering to established customs. These frictions were typically addressed through gradual negotiations, cultural adaptations, and the flexible approaches of Sufi missionaries, which contributed to the formation of diverse regional expressions of Islam practiced across the studied contexts. Through this dialectical engagement with indigenous cultures, Islam ultimately evolved into numerous variants, including Javanese Islam, Acehnese Islam, Padang Islam, Sundanese Islam, Sasak Islam, and Bugis Islam, among others (Al-Amri & Haramain, 2017). Consequently, in many regions of the archipelago, Islam was able to transmit its core doctrines while simultaneously accommodating and being accommodated by local traditions, thereby enabling significant elements of indigenous customs to coexist alongside Islamic practices. However, this process of mutual adaptation was not devoid of tensions; during certain periods and in specific contexts, conflicts arose when Islamic reformist movements challenged local rituals perceived as syncretic or diverging from orthodox interpretations (Al-Amri & Haramain, 2017; Taufik, 2013).

In Indonesia, the acculturation of Islam with local cultures, influenced significantly by indigenous beliefs, has progressively advanced into a phase characterized by cultural Islamization, although this

process has not been uniform across all local cultures. Currently, some Islamic teachings are incorporated into local traditions, while certain traditions are beginning to integrate with Islamic doctrines. The fusion of Islam with indigenous culture has consequently fostered a novel understanding of regional customs among specific Muslim communities, while maintaining an objective interpretation of Islam (Taufik, 2013). As a result, remnants of earlier beliefs are not entirely eradicated but rather continue to influence the distinctiveness of their Islamic identity.

The Onset of the Arabization Wave

The term "Arabization" within the Indonesian context is utilised in two interconnected yet analytically distinguishable senses. As a cultural process, it relates to the selective transnational flow accelerated by historical, political, economic, and migratory channels (such as *hajj/umroh* networks, Saudi-funded institutions, and returning graduates) through which practices, aesthetics, and interpretations originating from the Arabian Peninsula, particularly those associated with puritanical reformism, attain prominence. This phenomenon frequently occurs at the expense of, or in tension with, syncretic local traditions, thus leading to increased literalism and standardisation among regions such as Madura, Cirebon, and the urban Muslim middle class of Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya (Bruinessen, 2018; Bruinessen, 2009; Ghoshal, 2010). Conversely, as a discursive construct, "Arabization" functions as a contested label often invoked by traditionalist actors, notably within Nahdlatul Ulama circles, to depict puritanical influences as a homogenising threat or cultural invasion *(ghazwul fikri)* that undermines Indonesia's distinctive Islam *Nusantara*. This discourse operates as a strategic device for asserting local identity and legitimacy (Bruinessen, 2018; Burhani, 2010; Lucking, 2016).

Early puritanical currents were suppressed in the nineteenth century through colonial suppression (Dobbin, 2016). Modernist reformism emerged in the early twentieth century within the context of the Dutch colonial regime and the socio-religious challenges confronting Muslim communities, including educational backwardness, widespread syncretism between Islam and local traditions, and the proliferation of Christian missionary activities. Muhammadiyah was founded in Yogyakarta in 1912 by KH Ahmad Dahlan (Hamka, 2020). Influenced by Egyptian reformers such as Muhammad Abduh, Muhammadiyah promoted *tajdid* (purification and renewal) of Islamic teachings through *ijtihad*, modern education, and social welfare, seeking to address colonial marginalization and what it perceived as religious deviations in traditional practices. Muhammadiyah advocated for purification *(tajdid)* from syncretic practices while promoting rational education and social welfare, reflecting broader reformist influences from Egypt rather than strict Wahhabism (Bruinessen, 2009). Traditionalist groups like NU countered such reforms by defending local customs.

A more direct conduit for puritanical (specifically Wahhabi/Salafi) influence emerged during the late New Order period. The Dewan *Dakwah* Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII), established in 1967 by Mohammad Natsir, functioned as the primary recipient of Saudi funding and served as Indonesia's representative for the Muslim World League. During this time, DDII not only facilitated the translation of Islamist texts and developed networks with the Middle East, but also actively disseminated puritanical literature, sponsored the construction of mosques and Islamic schools, and provided training for *da'i* (preachers) through scholarships and study programs (Bruinessen, 2009; Hasan, 2006; Hefner, 1997).

These activities yielded tangible impacts on local religious practices. At the grassroots level, DDII's initiatives prompted certain Indonesian Muslims, particularly within urban and academic environments, to adopt a more literalist interpretation of Islam. Many commenced critiquing and rejecting syncretic local traditions perceived as *bid'ah* (prohibited innovations), such as extreme grave visitation *(ziarah kubur)*, *tahlilan*, *yasinan*, and other rituals rooted in Javanese mysticism or animism. Instead, they promoted a more orthodox adherence to the Quran and Sunnah, manifesting in distinctive symbols of piety, including unique Arab-style attire and Arabic salutations. This process contributed to a gradual

"pietization" of daily religious practice and the establishment of study circles (*halqah*) and *pengajian* that reinforced a puritanical identity within the community.

In 1980–1981, Saudi Arabia established the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab (LIPIA) in Jakarta, a branch of Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. LIPIA further amplified this influence by providing free education in Arabic and Salafi-oriented theology, producing hundreds of returnee preachers and educators who disseminated these ideas through local mosques, madrasas, and *dakwah* campus activities (Hasan, 2006, 2010). During the New Order era, LIPIA sponsored hundreds of Indonesian students to study in Saudi Arabia, providing free education in Arabic and Salafi-oriented theology (Hasan, 2010). Returnees disseminated Wahhabi/Salafi ideas through mosques, madrasas, and *dakwah* campus.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) established Wahhabism, a movement that advocates for strict tawhid (the oneness of God), rejects *bid'ah (innovations)*, and emphasizes a literal interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah. This movement draws inspiration from Ibn Taymiyyah and actively opposes taqlid (uncritical imitation) of medieval schools or local traditions (Kinsey, 2004). Throughout history, Wahhabism has been closely allied with the Saudi state, fostering a union of religious and political authority while actively opposing *Sufism, Shi'ism*, and what it perceives as deviations from orthodox practice. Saudi Arabia has invested substantial resources in global da'wah efforts estimated at between US$70 and US$100 billion in total with over US$1 billion allocated between 1982 and 2005 for the establishment of mosques, educational institutions, and scholarships worldwide (Ghoshal, 2010; Kepel, 2002). In the context of Indonesia, these financial resources have directly supported institutions such as LIPIA and DDII, which have trained successive generations of returnees. These individuals have promoted "Arabized" cultural identifiers such as *gamis*, beards, veils, and Arabic greetings as visible markers of religious authenticity. Consequently, this has contributed to a gradual transformation in everyday Islamic practices, even within communities traditionally characterized by syncretic traditions.

Salafism, while sharing Wahhabism's emphasis on emulating the *salaf al-salih* (pious ancestors) and purifying Islam, is broader. Scholars distinguish them: Wahhabism is a specific 18th-century movement tied to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Saudi state ideology; Salafism encompasses diverse strands (quietist, reformist, jihadist) focused on scriptural purity and anti-innovation, with the label increasingly adopted by Wahhabis from the 1970s onward (Ali & Sudiman, 2016; Hasan, 2006). In Indonesia, the terms overlap in practice, denoting puritanical rejection of local syncretism (e.g., *tahlilan*, *yasinan*, *maulid*) and secular ideologies like democracy/liberalism (Wahib, 2017). Both foster pietization and identity demarcation between "true" believers and others (Berger, 1999; Esposito, 2003; Turner, 2008).

The democratization following the post-New Order period (1998–present) intensified these developments. The Forum *Komunikasi Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah* (FKAWJ), established between 1998 and 2000, was instrumental in the emergence of Laskar Jihad under the leadership of Ja'far Umar Thalib. During the years 2000 to 2002, Laskar Jihad mobilized thousands of individuals to participate in "jihad" in Ambon (Maluku) and Poso (Sulawesi), framing these communal conflicts as acts of defense against Christian aggression and immorality, and employing militias dressed in Arabic-style attire (Hasan, 2006). This period marked a militant phase of Salafi activism, characterized by the mobilization of thousands clad in Arabic-style garments during the communal conflicts in Maluku and Poso. Although the group was formally disbanded in 2002 amidst a decline in communal violence and increasing pressure from the state, this dissolution paradoxically contributed to the broader process of naturalization of "Arab" religious markers within Indonesian society. Once separated from direct association with armed militancy, visible symbols such as *gamis*, thick beards, turbans, and Arabic greetings gradually lost their earlier connotations of radicalism. Instead, these symbols were reinterpreted as neutral or even desirable markers of personal piety and cosmopolitan Islamic identity, facilitating a broader adoption and selective indigenization of these elements even in traditionalist NU strongholds. This transformation converted

what was previously regarded as a militant "foreign import" into an everyday feature of local religious practice.

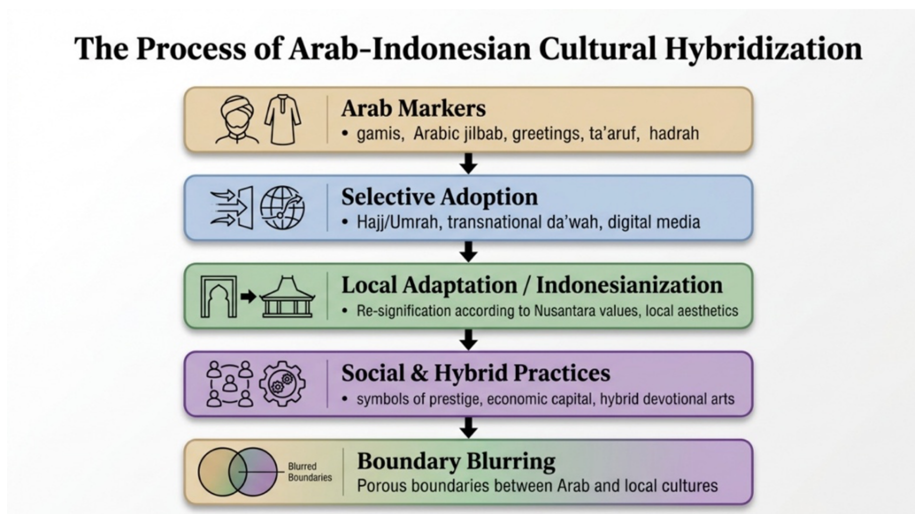

Figure 1. The Process of Arab-Indonesian Cultural Hybridization: From Arab Markers to Boundary Blurring
Source(s): Author's own elaboration

These developments fostered a process of re-Islamization characterized by heightened religious sentiment, observable indicators of "authentic" Islam often associated with Arab Islamic practices and a shift away from syncretic traditions towards a more puritanical identity. While not all individuals adopting these practices became militants, the post-1998 wave was notably marked by widespread emulation of Arabian norms encompassing language (such as greetings like "*ana-antum*"), attire (including *gamis*, thick beards, and *niqabs*), and rituals as outward expressions of personal devotion. Significantly, this emulation extended beyond Salafi or puritanical circles to include the emerging urban Muslim middle class. For many educated, cosmopolitan young professionals residing in cities such as Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya, adopting these Arab-influenced markers represented a form of "modern religious aesthetics", a stylish, globally-oriented mode of expressing piety that simultaneously signalled Islamic authenticity and modernity, distinguishing them from what they perceived to be either outdated traditional practices or overly Westernised lifestyles. This reframing, amplified through globalisation, social media, and a burgeoning pious consumer economy, contributed to the broader acceptance and naturalisation of these elements across various segments of Indonesian society.

Table 1. Factors and Mechanisms of Hybridization in the Integration of Arab Religious Elements into Local Indonesian Islamic Practices

Factor	Description in Context	Mechanism of Hybridization	Examples/Indications from the Text
Religious Prestige	The perception that Arab practices, symbols, and styles represent a more "authentic" or "pure" form of Islam	Encourages the adoption of Arab symbols as markers of piety; internalization of these symbols into religious identity	Use of *gamis*, beards, veils, and Arabic expressions; the assumption that "Arab = authentic Islam"
Hajj Economy	Hajj and umrah networks as channels of religious and	Facilitates the transfer of religious practices,	Reference to "*hajj/umrah* networks" as key

	social mobility connecting Indonesia to the Middle East	lifestyles, and orientations through direct experience and transnational networks	channels of Arabization; intensified interaction with Saudi religious norms
Da'wah Networks	Religious institutions and organizations linked to the Middle East, especially those supported by Saudi Arabia	Institutionalization and dissemination of puritanical ideology through education, scholarships, and preacher training	Role of DDII, LIPIA, and Saudi-funded programs; spread of Salafi/Wahhabi teachings through mosques, campuses, and study circles
Digital Media & Globalization	Expansion of global connectivity and digital platforms accelerating the circulation of transnational Islamic ideas and lifestyles	Normalization and popularization of Arab-influenced religious aesthetics as part of modern, cosmopolitan Muslim identity	References to "global connectivity" and "social media"; adoption of Arab styles among the urban Muslim middle class

Source(s): Author's own elaboration

Discussion

As a manifestation of the cultural imitation of an appealing 'foreign' culture within a nation rich in diverse local traditions, such as Indonesia, community reactions to this phenomenon are inherently varied. Numerous scholarly sources indicate that responses to Arabization in Indonesia are far from homogeneous. While many ordinary Muslims actively embrace and incorporate certain visible aspects of Arabization such as Arab-style attire, greetings, and aesthetics into their daily religious and social practices, segments of the Muslim intellectual and organizational elite, particularly within *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), frequently perceive these trends as potential threats to the distinctiveness and cultural rootedness of Islam in Indonesia, as evidenced in the cases examined in this research (Lucking, 2016; Bruinessen, 2018).

Nevertheless, this apparent division does not reflect a simple binary distinction between the "masses" and "elites." In reality, attitudes toward Arabization constitute a complex spectrum: some grassroots communities selectively adopt and localize Arab-associated elements as symbols of heightened piety, social prestige, or economic capital (for instance, through *Hajj/Umrah* rituals and pilgrimage-related enterprises), while others within the same communities continue to uphold indigenous traditions. Even among scholars and activists, opinions vary considerably, ranging from outright rejection of perceived "Arabization" to pragmatic acceptance or re-appropriation of these elements within the framework of *Islam Nusantara*. This complexity highlights the fluid and negotiable nature of the boundaries between "Arab" and "local" in the lives of contemporary Muslims, particularly among the Muslim middle-class informants in urban fieldwork settings, rather than a straightforward opposition that undermines national or communal cohesion.

This perception often originates from apprehensions regarding the more rigorous interpretations of Islam endorsed by certain transnational organizations. The re-Islamization process in post-New Order Indonesia has indeed prompted segments of the Muslim community to adopt more stringent and literalist viewpoints concerning religious practice, frequently accompanied by a sense of doctrinal superiority over indigenous syncretic traditions or other religious communities (Bruinessen, 2018; Hasan, 2006).

However, this dynamic must be qualified. Certain groups, such as the short-lived Laskar Jihad during the communal conflicts in Maluku and Poso, demonstrated militant activism that intensified tensions between different groups. Nonetheless, the broader wave of re-Islamization has predominantly manifested in non-violent forms: an increase in personal piety, the dissemination of study circles (*halaqah*

and *pengajian*), and the selective adoption of visible religious markers. Not all expressions of puritanical reform result in radical or disruptive behaviors; many remain centered on individual moral reform and community-based *dakwah* initiatives without repudiating Indonesia's pluralistic framework. This range of outcomes highlights the contested and hybrid nature of religious change, where exclusive tendencies coexist with processes of localization and pragmatic accommodation, even within NU strongholds.

Since the advent of the post-New Order *(Reformasi)* era in 1998, the rapid proliferation of transnational puritanical influences has resulted in the widespread adoption of practices designated as "Arabized" including distinctive Arab-style attire (*gamis, jubah*), prominent beards, veils, and Arabic greetings such as "*ana-antum*" while concurrently eliciting organized resistance from traditionalist institutions. The *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), as Indonesia's premier Muslim organization, has taken a leading role in this opposition by officially endorsing *Islam Nusantara* at its 33rd National Congress held in Jombang (August 2015). The concept of *Islam Nusantara*, as advocated by NU, delineates Islam in Indonesia as inherently tolerant and culturally rooted in indigenous traditions, positioning it as a distinct alternative to the "Arab" model associated with Wahhabism and related transnational puritanical movements.

This discursive framing, while influential within traditionalist circles, underscores an analytical paradox that constitutes a central theme of this study: despite organized institutional opposition to perceived Arabization at the ideological level, detailed regional evidence reveals ongoing processes of integration and selective indigenization of Arab-associated religious elements into local practices. Selective indigenization draws on Kim Kyong-Dong's selective-adaptive theory of modernization (Kim, 2017). According to Kim (2017), late-modernizing societies do not passively adopt Western models; rather, they engage in political and cultural selectivity, choosing specific modern features such as technology and institutions, and actively indigenizing them into local cultural and social contexts. This process gives rise to distinct hybrid forms of modernity. Within the historical-sociological framework employed here, this "paradox" refers to the coexistence of explicit resistance in elite discourse with the everyday hybridization and naturalization of contested markers (such as attire, aesthetics, and rituals) at the grassroots level, thereby rendering rigid binaries between "Arab" and "local" increasingly porous.

The process extends beyond elites to ordinary believers. This is illustrated through detailed ethnographic evidence from Madura, an NU stronghold. Lucking (2016) four-month anthropological fieldwork in the region, which included participant observation and in-depth interactions with local families, provides vivid accounts of everyday indigenization. A notable case is that of Ibu and Pak Sukis, a senior couple from rural Pamekasan who performed the hajj in 2014. Weeks before their departure, they hosted nightly farewell gatherings attended by relatives, neighbors, and colleagues, who offered prayers, written wishes, and requests for supplications in Mecca. Upon their return, the couple organized elaborate feasts featuring *hadrah* music, sharing of *zamzam* water, dates, and souvenirs, followed by the Madurese custom of asajère communal visits to receive blessings. During these events, the pilgrims exchanged their Indonesian batik hajj attire for white Arab-style clothing, visually marking their elevated spiritual and social status.

These patterns, documented across Madura and extending to other regions influenced by NU, illustrate that the post-1998 era of openness, characterised by political liberalisation, enhanced connectivity with the Middle East, and the emergence of a devout consumer economy, has facilitated selective assimilation rather than outright rejection. Elements previously criticized nationally as manifestations of 'Arabization" threats (such as the wearing of *gamis* by kiai and the use of Arabic greetings in pesantren) have become normalized components of local religious practice. This transformation occurs because, once integrated into private and localized contexts, these symbols undergo strategic re-signification and functional incorporation: they are reinterpreted as indicators of local prestige, *berkah*, and social reciprocity instead of ideological threats. Consequently, they diminish their national-level association with foreign danger, despite ongoing NU elite discourse warning against

puritanical homogenization (Lucking, 2016). Institutional responses further reinforce this dynamic: the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*'s 2005 fatwa condemning liberalism, secularism, and pluralism faced counter-mobilization from progressive networks such as *Jaringan Islam Liberal* (JIL) and moderate NU factions, while organizations like Muhammadiyah and NGOs like RAHIMA promoted pluralism, gender-equitable reinterpretations, and *ijtihad*.

Based on extensive ethnographic data from Lucking (2016), this historical-sociological study synthesizes primary organizational documents, media discourse, and regional accounts to elucidate the mechanisms of boundary blurring. According to Wimmer (2008), boundary blurring is viewed as a strategic process that minimizes or erodes ethnic and categorical boundaries by endorsing non-ethnic principles of social organization, such as universal values, class solidarity, or cosmopolitan identities. In everyday interactions, boundaries tend to become more permeable and less conspicuous. These mechanisms are not fully comprehended through ideological or discursive analysis alone (Wimmer, 2008). Arab-associated religious culture has not been rejected; rather, it has been absorbed, adapted, and enriched via processes of selective indigenization rendering rigid distinctions between "Arab" and "local" increasingly unsustainable. Far from representing a unidirectional threat or mere resistance, the *Reformasi* era has engendered hybrid Islamic identities that are simultaneously rooted in *Nusantara* traditions and receptive to global influences.

Table 2. Comparative Forms of Selective Indigenization of Arab Religious Elements Across Three Contexts: Madura, Cirebon, and Urban Muslim Middle Class

Aspect	Madura (NU Stronghold)	Cirebon	Urban Muslim Middle Class (Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya)
Main Arab Markers	*Gamis*, white Arab-style clothing after hajj, Arabic greetings	Hadrah instruments, Arab-style *sholawat* and devotional songs	*Gamis*, stylish hijab, Arab aesthetics, *ta'aruf* courtship model
Channels of Adoption	*Hajj/umrah* journeys and village kinship networks	Long-established Sufi networks and local artistic traditions	Campus *dakwah*, social media, influencers, and post-1998 transnational networks
Local Adaptation Process	Re-signification as symbols of *berkah*, social prestige, and spiritual status	Fusion with Javanese-*Sufi* arts (*Genjring*, *Barong Sae*, local music & dance)	Indonesization through digital aesthetics and consumer culture ("*Syari'i* but aesthetic")
Social & Hybrid Practices	Hajj farewell and welcome feasts, *asajère* (communal visits), umrah business	Hybrid devotional arts in *Maulid Nabi* and local tomb pilgrimages	*Ta'aruf* via dating apps and Instagram, modern halal weddings, urban pious lifestyle
Functions / Capital Generated	Social, economic, and symbolic capital within village reciprocity networks (Lucking, 2016)	Enrichment of local devotional and artistic traditions without erasing Javanese identity	Modern religious identity, middle-class social status, cosmopolitan lifestyle
Boundary Blurring Outcome	"Arabness" becomes an integral part of local Madurese prestige and identity	Hybrid Javanese-Arab devotional arts where origins are increasingly blurred	*Ta'aruf* and Arab-style clothing become expressions of contemporary urban piety

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Lucking (2016) and Bruinessen (2018)

Hybridization Outcomes: Selective Indigenization of "Arab" Elements in Local and Urban Contexts

The post-1998 *Reformasi* era has not engendered a zero-sum contest wherein "Arabization" displaces indigenous traditions. Instead, empirical data derived from varied regional and urban contexts demonstrate dynamic processes of selective indigenization, in which Arab-associated religious elements are contested, adapted, and incorporated into local Islamic practices within the Muslim communities analyzed in this study. In Madura, as previously noted, Arab cultural markers such as attire, aesthetics, and pilgrimage-related rituals are actively localized and transformed into economic, social, and symbolic capital within village reciprocity networks (Lucking, 2016). Similarly, in Cirebon, a historic site of Javanese syncretism, transnational influences have been assimilated into local artistic and devotional practices without diminishing indigenous forms (Bruinessen, 2018). These patterns visible in ritual, everyday aesthetics, and life-cycle events support this study's central argument: that the boundaries between "Arab" and "local" are fluid and continuously renegotiated through cultural exchange, making rigid ideological oppositions difficult to sustain. Rather than eradicating indigenous expressions, Arab-influenced elements such as Middle Eastern percussion instruments and devotional songs (*sholawat*) honoring the Prophet during *maulid* Nabi celebrations have been actively adapted and integrated into Cirebon's long-standing musical, dance, and theatrical traditions. Instead of replacing local forms, these elements are incorporated into indigenous Cirebonese rhythms, choreography, and performance structures, such as the *Genjring* (tambourine-like drum) ensembles or *Barong Sae* dance, resulting in hybrid devotional arts that maintain robust Javanese-Sufi aesthetics while infusing Arab stylistic features (Bruinessen, 2018; Muhaimin, 2006).

This concrete process of adaptation facilitates the enrichment of local expressions of piety through transnational influences, without displacing the region's distinctive syncretic heritage. As Bruinessen (2018) notes, this region exemplifies "indigenising responses" to globalising Islam: vibrant local adaptations of Islamic practice deeply rooted in centuries of *Sufi*-influenced mysticism and royal court culture continue to thrive, converting potential homogenization into a hybrid vitality. Pilgrimages to lesser-known sacred tombs further reinforce these events in the local sacred geography, illustrating how communities actively reconcile global Islamic currents with Nusantara heritage without cultural eradication. Far from passive resistance, this represents active re-appropriation that bolsters local identity while selectively integrating Arab stylistic markers.

The Cirebon phenomenon can be situated within the broader discourse of cultural hybridity, which considers local-global interactions not as unidirectional impositions but as dynamic processes of selective appropriation and creative synthesis (Bhabha, 2012; Canclini, 2005). Hybridity theory underscores that when cultural elements cross borders, they are not simply adopted or entirely rejected; instead, they are reinterpreted and reformed in dialogue with existing practices, values, and aesthetic sensibilities. In the Islamic context, this framework facilitates understanding how "Arab" forms, ranging from ritual repertoires to devotional instruments, are not passively absorbed but are actively negotiated, resulting in new forms that are both recognizable as part of a transnational Islamic repertoire and profoundly embedded within local socio-cultural frameworks. This perspective highlights the agency of local actors, illustrating how hybridity functions as a creative strategy for maintaining continuity, asserting identity, and managing the tension between global religious ideals and indigenous cultural logics.

This hybridization extends beyond rural areas into urban life, particularly in marriage practices. The dissemination is propelled by transnational *dakwah* networks, campus-based Islamic study groups (*halaqah*), and the digital sphere that became more prominent after 1998, transmitting puritanical ideals of Sharia-compliant courtship from the *pesantren* and *Salafi*-influenced milieus into middle-class urban youth culture (Nisa & Brenner, 2021; Pambudi, 2024; Qodri, 2024). Such paradigms are also observable within urban middle-class environments, where practices such as the *ta'aruf* model of courtship and marriage, previously regarded as an "Arab" import, have been redefined through Indonesian digital culture and consumer aesthetics as emblematic of contemporary, Sharia-aligned piety (Pambudi, n.d.;

Qodri, 2024). *Ta'aruf* is no longer a rigid doctrinal transplantation; it has been reinterpreted via Indonesian social media platforms as a modern, stylish, and distinctly local route to pious marriage: curated Instagram feeds showcasing modest yet fashionable couples, halal wedding planners offering "*Shari'i* but aesthetic" packages, locally tailored dating applications incorporating Indonesian cultural nuances, and endorsements by prominent artists and influencers who integrate global Sharia ideals with *Nusantara* consumer culture.

The *ta'aruf* model structured Islamic acquaintance leading to gender-segregated weddings aligned with Sharia norms has attained considerable popularity among young, educated, middle-class Muslims, often promoted by artists, influencers, and social-media *dakwah* networks. Initially perceived as an import from the Arab world, it has undergone a distinct process of Indonesization, becoming intricately woven into contemporary digital lifestyles and consumer aesthetics. This hybridization redefines *ta'aruf* from a foreign marker into a hybrid expression of youthful religiosity cosmopolitan yet rooted in Indonesian digital consumerism further blurring the boundaries between "Arab" origins and local identity formation.

Collectively, these outcomes elucidate the mechanisms underlying boundary blurring. In Cirebon and Madura, Arab elements neither displace nor diminish local culture; rather, they serve to enrich it and are, in turn, enriched by it. This interaction results in hybrid forms that maintain both continuity and transformation. Contrary to the binary threat versus resistance narrative often promulgated within elite *Islam Nusantara* discourse, these lived realities exemplify the adaptive capacity of local Islam. Specifically, "Arab" religious culture permeates local contexts, undergoes selective indigenization, and ultimately integrates into the evolving fabric of local identities. This process-oriented perspective challenges historiographical oversimplifications and highlights the resilience of *Nusantara* traditions amidst global currents. In summary, these cases demonstrate that local actors exercise agency in their negotiations with global influences, thereby generating hybrid forms that tend to blur rather than reinforce rigid distinctions between "Arab" and "local."

Furthermore, these findings reveal a fundamental irony: in practice, *Islam Nusantara* proves to be far more inclusive of Arab elements whether in ritual, religious knowledge, or cultural symbols than is often portrayed or even rejected within its own elite discourse. Rather than constituting a threat of homogenization, this selective infiltration instead enriches and reinforces an ever-evolving local identity, underscoring that the diversity of Islam in the archipelago is not the product of absolute resistance, but of continuous and creative negotiation.

Conclusion

This study has shown that selective indigenization and boundary blurring are not abstract theoretical positions but concrete, observable processes in the communities examined here. In Madura, Arab cultural markers, attire, aesthetics, and pilgrimage rituals, are not rejected but actively taken up and converted into economic, social, and symbolic capital within village reciprocity networks and local authority structures. In Cirebon, transnational Arab-influenced devotional elements have been absorbed into indigenous musical, dance, and theatrical traditions, producing hybrid forms that enrich rather than displace Javanese-Sufi heritage. Among urban middle-class Muslims, the *ta'aruf* model, once read as an Arab import, has been recast through Indonesian digital culture and consumer aesthetics as a marker of modern, Sharia-conscious piety. Taken together, these cases push back against the threat-versus-resistance framing that dominates elite Islam Nusantara discourse: global influences in these communities are not repelled but selectively absorbed, theologically reinterpreted, and woven into local systems of reciprocity, social hierarchy, and everyday modernity. In such contexts, "Arabness" works less as a vehicle for ideological radicalization than as a local resource, a marker of piety, proximity to the Holy Land, and *berkah*, put to practical use for economic, social, and symbolic ends. What these cases demonstrate is not passive adoption or wholesale rejection but something more nuanced: communities

actively negotiate with global currents, taking in what is useful and remaking it on their own terms. The selective incorporation of Arab elements thus enriches rather than erodes local identity, demonstrating that the diversity of Islam in the archipelago is the product not of absolute resistance but of continuous, creative negotiation. By shifting attention away from ideological contestation and toward the everyday processes of religious hybridization since 1998, this article argues that rigid distinctions between "Arab" and "Nusantara" are increasingly difficult to sustain in practice, and that this blurring is not a symptom of cultural loss but evidence of the ongoing creativity and adaptability of one of the world's most diverse Muslim societies. Future research could productively extend this lens to other regions in Indonesia and to digital *dakwah* spaces, where Arab and local religious elements circulate and take on new meanings at an accelerating pace.

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