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Doctrinal Compromise: Flexibility of Conceptual Landscape among Nahdliyin and Muhammadiyah Members in Gorontalo, Indonesia

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Abstract

Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's two largest Islamic organizations, exhibit a flexible conceptual landscape in Gorontalo. This study examines doctrinal compromise between members of Muhammadiyah and NU within religious and intellectual social spaces, addressing three key issues: (a) the forms of doctrinal compromise in religious thought, (b) the factors influencing members to adopt elements of the opposing group's perspectives, and (c) the implications of this compromise for the religious thought of both groups. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study collected primary and secondary data through interviews with Muhammadiyah and NU informants, complemented by document analysis. The data were analysed through classification and thematic coding. The findings reveal three significant results. First, doctrinal flexibility is evident in religious practices, with Muhammadiyah members adopting NU rituals and vice versa without facing stigma. Second, mutual respect and social harmony encourage individuals from both groups to integrate aspects of opposing ideologies, particularly in contexts where one group forms a minority. Third, this compromise has blurred traditionally polarized theological and ideological boundaries, fostering harmony, adaptability, and a sense of brotherhood. The study concludes that the doctrinal compromise between Muhammadiyah and NU members reflects a pragmatic approach to coexistence, prioritizing unity over dogmatic differences. This approach minimizes confrontations and suggests that theological truth transcends numerical majority or popular consensus. Sustaining this harmony requires nurturing mutual understanding and reinforcing the inclusive spirit of Islam within both organizations.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, Doctrinal compromise, Religious thought, Social harmony, Religious tolerance

1 Introduction

The Muhammadiyah group is often referred to as modernist Islam, characterized by a rational-progressive mindset, strong educational traditions, and urban-based communities. In contrast, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is traditionally considered a conservative Islamic organization rooted in *pesantren* culture, with members typically residing in rural areas and maintaining religious traditions (Noer, 1973). However, such typologies have become increasingly flexible in Gorontalo, where the boundaries between Muhammadiyah and NU identities are no longer rigid. This flexibility is especially evident in the practice of doctrinal compromise — a condition in which members of both organizations mutually adopt aspects of one another's religious practices.

In Gorontalo, Muhammadiyah members are often found participating in traditional NU religious activities, such as *mongaruwa* or *tahlilan* (ritual prayers for the deceased). Conversely, NU members have embraced certain Muhammadiyah practices, such as performing eight *rak'ahs* in *tarawih* and three *rak'ahs* in *witr* prayers, especially during Ramadan. These practices reflect not only individual piety but also a socio-religious dynamic that prioritizes harmony over strict organizational boundaries. According to Merton's theory (1938), this phenomenon reflects a balanced and adaptive social structure that promotes integration and cohesion in religious life.

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However, the sense of belonging between the two organizations remains distinct. Muhammadiyah fosters a sense of belonging through structured institutions, modern educational networks, and formal organizational hierarchies. NU, on the other hand, builds its sense of community primarily through *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), local *kiai* (religious leader) authority, and strong family-based religious traditions. Despite these differences, the reality in Gorontalo shows increasing overlap and interaction, suggesting a shift from sectarian rigidity to mutual accommodation.

This phenomenon has not been widely addressed in previous studies. Existing literature on NU and Muhammadiyah mainly focuses on two themes: (1) their traditionalist versus modernist orientations (As'ad, 2019; Biyanto, 2017; Burhani, 2018; Nashir et al., 2019; Niam, 2017; Shabir & Susilo, 2018), and (2) their political tensions and contestations (Harirah, 2021; Hidayat, 2022; Putrie et al., 2020; Ulfiyah, 2021; Wardana & Hidayat, 2019). While these studies are valuable, they overlook the fluid and evolving nature of identity within and between these two major Islamic organizations. More recent studies (Al-Ansi et al., 2023; Arifianto, 2021; Arsadani et al., 2024; Hapsari & Iqbal, 2023; Qodir et al., 2023) have begun to explore social, ideological, and legal dimensions of Muhammadiyah and NU, revealing that the two are capable of convergence, especially in responding to contemporary global and national issues such as Islamic moderation and counter-extremism narratives.

The doctrinal compromise in Gorontalo shows that the differences between NU and Muhammadiyah are more *furuiyah* (instrumental) rather than *ushuliyah* (fundamental). This is evident in how members from both groups mutually accept each other's ritual practices, modes of thought, and theological outlooks without renouncing their original affiliations. The ongoing and sustained encounters in both formal and informal spaces — such as inter-family marriages, community religious events, and local educational institutions — have fostered a shared culture of mutual recognition and religious coexistence.

This study focuses on three key aspects. First, it explores how doctrinal compromise between NU and Muhammadiyah members is manifested in everyday religious practice and theological orientation in Gorontalo. Second, it identifies the sociocultural and historical factors that have contributed to the convergence of traditionalist and modernist thought. Third, it analyses the tangible impacts of this religious hybridization on the broader Islamic discourse in Gorontalo.

In emphasizing the phenomenon of "*ber-Muhammadiyah sekaligus ber-NU*" (being Muhammadiyah while simultaneously being NU), this study argues that religious identity in Gorontalo is not static, but adaptive and integrative. This research contributes to the scholarly understanding of Muslim identity in Indonesia by highlighting a lesser-known reality: the peaceful and organic fusion of traditionalist and modernist elements within grassroots religious life. Rather than being driven by doctrinal conflict or ideological polarization, the NU-Muhammadiyah relationship in Gorontalo is marked by cooperation, accommodation, and shared humanitarian values, particularly respect for religious plurality and community solidarity.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Doctrinal Compromise and Religious Flexibility

Doctrinal compromise refers to the flexibility or pragmatism that believers may adopt when navigating multiple religious norms or ideologies. In the Indonesian Islamic context, this compromise emerges especially when individuals find themselves in socio-religious environments that challenge their organization's doctrinal lines. Muhammadiyah is historically characterized by its puritanical and modernist stance, rooted in its rejection of religious innovations (*bid'ah*), syncretism (*takhayyul*), and local customs deemed un-Islamic (Burhani, 2013; Nakamura, 2012). Conversely, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) maintains a more accommodative theology that values tradition (*turāth*), spiritual heritage, and *fiqh* rooted in classical Sunni jurisprudence (Bizawie, 2016; van Bruinessen, 1996).

Despite these differences, doctrinal compromise often occurs in practice. As observed by Woodward (2010), many Indonesian Muslims, regardless of formal affiliation, participate in hybrid religious practices as a form of cultural belonging. This flexibility is particularly visible in regions like Gorontalo, where Muhammadiyah members engage in NU rituals such as *tahlilan*, *qunut*, or *maulidan*, not out of theological agreement but due to community pressures or social harmony. Mardison (2013) frames this as a form of

"comfort-seeking" behaviour in which individuals prioritize communal acceptance over ideological rigidity.

This study's findings contribute to this discourse by showing that doctrinal compromise is often unconscious or tolerated, reflecting a survival mechanism rather than a theological shift. It affirms that in practice, religion is negotiated through daily social interactions rather than dictated strictly by institutional dogma.

2.2 Religious Landscapes of NU and Muhammadiyah

Historically, NU and Muhammadiyah have embodied two different expressions of Indonesian Islam. Muhammadiyah's foundation in the early 20th century was influenced by global reformist figures such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, emphasizing reason, scripturalism, and educational modernization (Alfian, 1989; Burhani, 2013). It positioned itself against traditionalism, which it associated with uncritical ritualism and mystical practices. In contrast, NU, established in 1926, sought to defend the *ulama* tradition, rooted in *pesantren* education, *taqlid* to the four Sunni schools of law, and the continuation of *amaliyah diniyah* (van Bruinessen, 1994).

However, as scholars have noted, theoretical divisions often do not reflect grassroots realities. Hefner (2011) and Feener (2007) argue that local religiosity in Indonesia is often syncretic and pragmatic, with overlapping religious engagements being more common than strict adherence to organizational norms. This is consistent with the typology presented in this study—three categories of Muhammadiyah members in Gorontalo who variously accommodate NU practices based on social settings and interactions.

This phenomenon also aligns with the idea of "multiple religious belongings" (Cornille, 2010), where individual religious identities are shaped by plural practices and affiliations. Rather than seeing NU and Muhammadiyah as binary opposites, this framework allows for fluid identity construction, especially in regions where social relationships transcend ideological labels.

2.3 Reflection, Interpretation, and Comparison

Reflection on these findings suggests that Muhammadiyah's identity is no longer strictly defined by theological purity but is instead shaped by local sociocultural dynamics. Doctrinal compromise is not necessarily a loss of identity, but a form of adaptive *da'wah*, as members aim to survive in socially dominant NU environments while maintaining their progressive mission. Interpretively, this supports the idea that religious practice is deeply social, as Mardison (2013) notes, and shaped by a need for belonging and recognition. In this sense, belief is not always a rational commitment to ideology, but a negotiation with lived realities. This challenges conventional understandings of Muhammadiyah as a monolithic actor and shows the emergence of hybrid identities.

Comparatively, earlier works such as Mujani and Liddle (2004) emphasized ideological polarization between NU and Muhammadiyah, especially in the political domain. However, the current study aligns more closely with newer literature that emphasizes social Islam, hybridity, and coexistence (Hasan, 2009; Hefner, 2011; Woodward, 2010). This shift reflects broader patterns in Indonesian Islam where institutional affiliation is less important than relational dynamics and social adaptation.

2.4 Implications of the Findings

The implications of this research are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it adds to a growing body of literature that views Islamic organizations not merely as theological entities but as social systems influenced by local wisdom and relational negotiations. Practically, it suggests that inter-group religious harmony can be sustained through social flexibility, open communication, and the prioritization of shared values over dogmatic distinctions.

Furthermore, the study reveals a limitation in traditional binary frameworks that analyse Muhammadiyah and NU as rigidly opposed. This perspective overlooks the internal diversity and adaptability of both organizations in everyday contexts. Future research should therefore pay closer attention to localized expressions of religiosity and the nuanced ways in which religious identity is practiced rather than merely professed.

3 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how identity flexibility unfolds among members of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in Gorontalo. Phenomenology is chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the lived experiences and subjective meanings behind religious interactions and doctrinal compromises. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of human experience concerning a particular phenomenon, which in this case is the negotiation of religious identities between Muhammadiyah and NU members. The approach is particularly relevant for exploring values, perceptions, and meanings that cannot be quantified but are deeply rooted in social and religious practices.

The study was conducted in Gorontalo, one of Indonesia's 19 traditional cultural regions. This area is notable for its integration of local *adat* (customary law) and Islamic practices, which provides a fertile ground for observing how doctrinal boundaries between religious organizations are reinterpreted in everyday life. Muhammadiyah in Gorontalo is often perceived as a modernist-puritanical group, yet it shows accommodation to local traditions. Conversely, NU maintains traditional religious practices but has begun to engage more progressively with global and national issues.

Data collection relied on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through field observations and in-depth interviews, focusing on the forms, driving factors, and practical implications of identity flexibility in religious life. Secondary data included documentation, journal articles, field notes, and photographs related to the religious landscape in Gorontalo.

The research does not use sampling, as qualitative studies emphasize informant selection rather than representative samples. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique where participants are chosen based on their relevance to the research problem (Patton, 2002). The criteria for selection included: (1) being actively involved in either Muhammadiyah or NU organizations; (2) having experience in participating in cross-group religious practices; and (3) possessing influence within their respective communities, such as religious leaders (*ulama*, *ustaz*, or *kiai*), youth figures, or community elders. These individuals were considered capable of providing nuanced insights into the identity negotiation process. In addition to purposively selected informants, casual interviews were also conducted with incidental individuals to enrich the contextual understanding of the research.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, enabling the researcher to follow a set of core questions while allowing room for open-ended exploration. This format facilitated flexible dialogue and allowed informants to express personal views and experiences in their own terms. The interviews were supported by field notes and non-verbal observations.

For data analysis, the study followed the model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which involves three interrelated processes: (1) data reduction, in which raw field data are selected, coded, and organized based on relevant themes; (2) data display, where information is presented in thematic matrices, summaries, and narrative forms; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, wherein patterns and meanings are interpreted and validated against the research objectives. This was followed by an interpretative analysis, which involved three steps: (1) restatement of data collected from the field, (2) description to identify repeated patterns, trends, and divergences in the narratives, and (3) interpretation to uncover the deeper meaning of identity flexibility within the doctrinal landscape of NU and Muhammadiyah.

By using this approach, the study reveals how the lived religious experience in Gorontalo allows for intersecting identities, challenging the rigid dichotomy of modernist versus traditionalist Islam. The methodology facilitates the capture of complex social realities in which formal doctrinal differences are bridged through everyday religious and social interactions.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Forms of Doctrinal Compromise in the Conceptual Landscape of Nahdliyin and Muhammadiyah Members

In practice, many *Nahdliyin* do not strictly adhere to the official rulings of *Bahtsul Masa'il*, just as Muhammadiyah followers often do not rigidly implement the guidance of the *Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid*.

Religious life in both groups is often characterized by flexible identities shaped by local culture and social context. Among Muhammadiyah members, for example, it is not uncommon to encounter practices associated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), such as *tahlilan* (communal prayers for the deceased) being integrated into religious routines. This form of doctrinal compromise is less about ideological alignment and more about community adaptation and shared spiritual values.

Informant 1, a former chairman of a Muhammadiyah student association (*Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah* or IMM) Gorontalo branch and a participant of the *Darul Arqam Madya* (DAM) cadre training, shared in an interview (October 10, 2022):

> *"I participate in and conduct tahlilan because I trust the imam leading the tahlil prayers, believing that the prayers recited and affirmed by the congregation will surely be accepted by Allah, SWT."*

A similar perspective was shared by Informant 2, a Muhammadiyah member (Interview, October 11, 2022):

> *"One day, our extended family deliberated on holding a tahlilan when our grandmother passed away. As a result of the agreement, tahlilan was held due to a belief that the prayers recited during tahlilan would save our grandmother in the grave."*

This belief in the salvific power of communal prayer, even if associated with NU tradition, reflects a more inclusive understanding of ritual significance.

Another example of doctrinal fluidity can be observed in *Tarawih* prayers. Although Muhammadiyah's *Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid* advocates for 11 *rak'ahs* (8 *rak'ahs* of *Tarawih* and 3 *rak'ahs* of *Witr*) based on *Hadith*, many Muhammadiyah members perform 23 *rak'ahs* when praying in NU-affiliated mosques, especially in their hometowns. This is not solely due to doctrinal differences, but also due to practicality and communal considerations, such as shorter duration for the 11-*rak'ah* format or the cultural norms of a given locality. Informant 3, a Muhammadiyah cadre, stated (Interview, October 12, 2022):

> *"For me, performing Tarawih prayers with 23 rak'ahs has become a regular practice, even though I am a Muhammadiyah cadre up to the level of Darul Arqam Madya. The mosque in my hometown, located near my house, follows the 23-rak'ah format. I've even led prayers with 23 rak'ahs there."*

Muhammadiyah members are also found to recite the *qunut* prayer during *Subuh*, a practice typically associated with NU. Informant 4, a Muhammadiyah administrator, shared (Interview, October 13, 2022):

> *"If I am appointed as the imam and the congregation behind me are mostly NU members, I recite the qunut prayer to accommodate them."*

Similarly, Informant 5, a Muhammadiyah cadre, described his experience (Interview, October 13, 2022):

> *"Graduating from a Muhammadiyah pesantren, the congregation asked me to be a permanent imam. As a result, I now lead prayers using practices like reciting qunut."*

These cases reflect five common patterns of doctrinal compromise among Muhammadiyah followers:

1. Participation in *tahlilan* is seen as a moral duty to pray for the deceased.
2. There is a sincere belief that *tahlilan* has salvific value in the afterlife.
3. Practices such as *tahlilan*, 23 *rak'ahs* of *Tarawih*, and *qunut* are perceived as normative by the broader Muslim community.
4. Not all Muhammadiyah members regard *tahlilan* as *bid'ah* (illegitimate innovation).

5. Flexibility in *Tarawih* and *qunut* practices is grounded in the belief that Allah accepts all sincere forms of worship.

Similar flexibility is also observed among NU members. This includes practices such as performing 11 *rak'ahs* for *Tarawih* prayers or omitting the *dua adzan* (double call to prayer) and the *mohudu tungkudu* (symbolic staff handover) before Friday sermons — rituals typically emphasized in NU tradition. Informant 6, a member of NU in a rural district, remarked (Interview, October 14, 2022):

> *"In my area, most mosques — despite being part of NU traditions — perform 11 rak'ahs of Tarawih and do not practice mohudu tungkudu."*

Informant 7, a village head and NU member, added (Interview, October 14, 2022):

> *"All Tarawih prayers in Bone Pesisir are similar to Muhammadiyah's 11-rak'ah practice. That's been the norm here for as long as I can remember."*

Informant 8, a regional NU official, confirmed this tendency (Interview, October 15, 2022):

> *"Bone Pesisir is indeed unique. While it deeply values NU tradition, it does not observe Tarawih with 23 rak'ahs."*

These patterns of divergence are not acts of ideological rebellion, but rather reflect long-standing community habits. Citing Saifullah (2018), these shifts are often pragmatic and unconscious, rather than the result of formal theological rejection. Moreover, there is no attempt by Muhammadiyah elites in Bone Pesisir to control or influence NU religious institutions. The widespread practice of 11-*rak'ah Tarawih* simply reflects the embedded norms of the community.

Pranowo (2009) contextualizes this dynamic by noting that "Islam is a process of becoming, not merely existing." Religious practices are fluid and adaptive to social and cultural contexts. Thus, deviation from 23-*rak'ah Tarawih* or other rituals does not negate one's NU identity. It rather reinforces the pluralistic and contextual nature of religious expression in Indonesia.

Informant 6 supports this by explaining that the preference for 11 *rak'ahs* is based on community habit rather than doctrine. Even though NU leaders like Informant 8 have encouraged returning to 23 *rak'ahs*, the community's attachment to long-standing practices remains resilient — not due to theological opposition, but tradition.

4.2 Factors Driving Muhammadiyah Members to Think Traditionally and NU Members to Think Modernly

There are four factors that drive some Muhammadiyah members to think traditionally and NU members to think modernly, including:

4.2.1 Social Ethical Considerations

Social ethical considerations are demonstrated by Informant 9, a Muhammadiyah member, who explained:

> *"In Muhammadiyah, there is no practice of tahlilan during funerals. However, since the majority of the community carries out tahlilan and we are invited to these events, we cannot help but respect the invitation as a form of tolerance, maintaining harmony, and upholding social ethics. This is because we do not want to sacrifice brotherhood, family ties, and neighbourly relations just to uphold our own beliefs." (Interview, 22 August 2023)*

A similar sentiment was conveyed by Informant 10, who also serves as a Muhammadiyah administrator in Bonebolango:

> *"I am aware that in Muhammadiyah, there is no tradition of tahlilan, but I have been participating in the tahlilan tradition for a long time. As the Head of Sogitia Village, I have no choice but to attend the tahlilan, because the majority of my residents practice it. The tahlilan tradition is*

also initiated with the approval of the Village Head as a government representative." (Interview, 25 August 2023)

These testimonies underscore the concept of doctrinal compromise as a form of social ethics in religiously plural societies. The actions of the informants reflect what Geertz (1973) termed as *abangan-santri* compromise — where the ritual life of Islam adapts to societal norms rather than strictly theological imperatives. The concept of *ta'ayush* (coexistence), as elaborated by Arkoun (2002), further affirms that religion in lived practice often prioritizes social peace and human relationships over doctrinal purity.

This pattern aligns with what Stark and Bainbridge (1985) call "religious economy", where religious actors make practical decisions based on social rewards and costs, thus forming a socially embedded religiosity. In this context, the *tahlilan* ritual transforms from a theological prescription into a symbolic social practice — a vehicle for community cohesion (Woodward, 2010).

Participation, therefore, is not an endorsement of theological belief but an act of ethical pragmatism, signaling conformity to communal values. This echoes what Berger (2011) referred to as the "social construction of reality" in religious life.

4.2.2 Social Adaptation Considerations

Certain situations and local conditions have prompted many Muhammadiyah members to navigate the socio-religious realities shaped by the predominantly NU community. Informant 11, a Muhammadiyah cadre from Gorontalo, shared:

"Several times I have led the tarawih prayer with 20 rak'ahs. I do this to prioritize the well-being of the majority by adapting, rather than forcing my own beliefs and doctrines from the training I received." (Interview, 10 September 2023)

Despite holding significant positions, such as Chair of the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) branch in Gorontalo and Head of the Economic Division in Muhammadiyah Youth Gorontalo, Informant 11 demonstrates pragmatic adaptation. Raised in Jakarta and trained within the formal Muhammadiyah system, his relocation to a predominantly NU area required emotional intelligence and strategic social engagement. His experience echoes Geertz's (1973) concept of "religious syncretism", where symbolic adjustments serve the goal of communal peace rather than religious conversion.

The differentiation between a "member" and a "cadre" is important here. A member may sympathize with Muhammadiyah ideals, while a cadre has internalized the ideology through formal training (e.g., *Darul Arqam*) and carries organizational responsibilities (Burhani, 2013). Yet even among cadres, the realities of social embeddedness and communal expectations often necessitate situational religiosity (Wahid, 2001).

Another relevant perspective comes from Informant 12, a prominent IMM cadre and mosque *ta'mir* in Bongomeme, Gorontalo Regency:

"I chose to become a cadre of IMM and practice Muhammadiyah teachings while in the city. My family had no objection when I became a Muhammadiyah cadre, but they advised me not to impose Muhammadiyah teachings in the village, especially regarding the tarawih prayer with 11 rak'ahs at the mosque, as it might cause a controversy with the congregation who are accustomed to 20 rak'ahs. Even though the entire congregation knows I am a Muhammadiyah cadre, they still appointed me as the head of the mosque management." (Interview, 14 September 2023)

This informant's narrative exemplifies what Azra (2004) calls "*Islam Nusantara*-style pluralism", where religious leadership in rural Indonesia often requires prioritizing communal legitimacy over ideological exclusivism. His adaptive stance reaffirms the findings of Hefner (2011), who noted that Islamic leaders in plural societies often serve dual roles: upholding religious identity, and mediating community cohesion.

The dual alignment, between Muhammadiyah identity and NU practice, illustrates contextual Islam in action, as theorized by Madjid (2008), where *ijtihad* (reasoning) accommodates not only scriptural interpretation but also socio-cultural realities.

4.2.3 Respecting Tradition

Members of Muhammadiyah cannot fully detach themselves from the roots of tradition and the culture of the Gorontalo community. Informant 13, a member of the Muhammadiyah leadership, conveyed:

> *"As a Muhammadiyah member, I understand that Muhammadiyah is accommodative towards traditions. I have demonstrated this by attending tahlilan events, which I have always participated in when organized by my friends, relatives, and family from NU. It's not that I am just accepting the tahlilan tradition now, but rather it has been a familiar part of my life for a long time, especially since many of my family members are from NU." (Interview, 18 September 2023)*

Informant 13 feels that as a Muhammadiyah member, he has the duty to accept the tradition of *tahlilan*, as it is a long-standing practice passed down from generation to generation by ancestors, which cannot simply be ignored. *Tahlilan* has become an integral part of the religious activities of the Muslim community in Gorontalo, particularly for families in mourning after a death. This view aligns with studies emphasizing the role of local traditions in shaping collective religious expression (Huda, 2014; van Bruinessen, 2009).

In contrast, Informant 14, the Chairman of the *Tarjih* Council of Muhammadiyah Gorontalo City, stated:

> *"What I want to emphasize is that the issue is not the tradition, but rather the belief that certain traditions have become regarded as Islamic law that must be followed. The traditions in Gorontalo have positive aspects because our ancestors practiced them based on their experiences. For example, the tradition of hileyiya, which means moheyi or transferring food from our house to the house of mourning. It is not that they prepare the food for us, but when a neighbour or relative passes away, I take the initiative to carry out hileyiya. After gathering the food, we take it to the house of mourning, where we eat together to comfort the grieving family." (Interview, 21 September 2023)*

Informant 14 appears to disagree with the view that the tradition of *tahlilan* should be considered an obligatory religious practice. His presence at the mourning house is not for the purpose of performing *tahlilan*, but rather for practicing *hileyiya* (the act of moving or distributing food) as a form of social sensitivity to the bereaved family. Informant 14 carries out the *hileyiya* tradition in his own style, without diminishing the substance of the tradition. This includes inviting community members to bring food items such as rice, fish, meat, cooking oil, vegetables, spices, and other necessities to the mourning house. Together, they cook the meals to provide comfort and support to the grieving family. Once the meals are ready, the *tahlilan* ceremony begins, with all the community members gathering to pray together. However, Informant 14 does not participate in the *tahlilan*, as for him, the important thing is that the goal of comforting the bereaved family has been achieved.

This form of selective engagement illustrates a syncretic adaptation of religious and cultural identities, commonly seen in Indonesia's pluralistic Islamic practice (Hefner, 2011; Woodward, 2010). The practice of *hileyiya* by Muhammadiyah members without joining the *tahlilan* represents a nuanced respect for cultural heritage while adhering to theological boundaries.

In fact, the *hileyiya* tradition is part of the same sequence as the *tahlilan* ceremony, but Informant 14 chooses not to continue with the *tahlilan* because he considers that this tradition is not an obligatory religious practice. He participates in the *hileyiya* tradition because he views it as a gathering aimed at expressing empathy, a source of comfort and solace for the grieving family. For Informant 14 and other members of Muhammadiyah, the practice of *hileyiya* holds the value of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), with the goal of sharing in times of sorrow. This tradition of *hileyiya* symbolizes togetherness and brotherhood in the community (Geertz, 1960; Madjid, 2008).

In broad terms, the arguments presented by Informant 13 and Informant 14 can be understood in three main points. First, members of Muhammadiyah perform *tahlilan* based on moral responsibility as Gorontalo residents to take part in preserving and nurturing cultural traditions. Second, members of Muhammadiyah view the *tahlilan* tradition as an expression of social sensitivity towards others who are

grieving. This attitude aims to foster solidarity and reduce individualistic behaviours among Muslims from both Muhammadiyah and NU. Third, while not participating in the *tahlilan* ritual, they contribute to the grieving family through local traditions that focus on social support.

4.2.4 Conformity Practices

Informant 15, who was born and raised in a family with NU traditions, has always practiced Muhammadiyah rituals in religious worship. A similar attitude is also shown by Informant 16, a resident of North Gorontalo, who acknowledges participating in NU religious traditions but prefers to perform the *tarawih* prayer with 11 *rak'ahs*. According to him, the 23 *rak'ahs tarawih* prayer feels too long, and he finds it exhausting to follow. This situation reflects a broader trend among Muslims in Gorontalo, where the younger generation and some elderly individuals prefer a more concise form of *tarawih* prayer. The role of the imam is crucial in this practice. The preference for an imam who recites in a calm and swift rhythm influences participation, as expressed by Informant 15:

> *"We, the young people, will check the schedule to see who is assigned to be the imam at the mosque. If the imam we look up to is the one leading, then many young people and even the elders will definitely come to perform the tarawih prayer at the mosque, and we will complete all twenty rak'ahs." (Interview, 20 September 2023)*

This example illustrates the role of leadership charisma and time efficiency in contemporary religious participation (Feener, 2013; Hasan, 2009). Religious observance becomes not only a matter of ritual adherence, but is also shaped by convenience and aesthetic preference. In light of this, Informant 17, a lecturer at IAIN Gorontalo, stated:

> *"The number of Muhammadiyah followers increases during Ramadan because the majority of the Muslim community here are only willing to perform eleven rak'ah of tarawih. In fact, in some mosques in Gorontalo, once the tarawih prayer reaches the eighth rak'ah, about 80 % of the congregation leaves the rows, leaving only the elderly to continue with the twenty-three rak'ahs." (Interview, 23 September 2023)*

Although Informant 17's claim is not entirely accurate, as NU members who perform *tarawih* with 11 *rak'ahs* do not automatically become members of Muhammadiyah, the phenomenon can be explained within the framework of conformity theory (Asch, 2016). It illustrates how individuals can adjust their behaviours and religious expressions to align with group norms or preferences, especially when the environment is accommodating.

Such practices represent a form of adaptive religiosity, where individuals navigate multiple religious norms to suit their needs or contexts (Howell, 2013). For example, individuals might perform 11 *rak'ahs* during *tarawih* to suit physical capacity or follow an admired imam, without shifting institutional loyalties.

A key question remains regarding the practices of both groups during important Islamic holidays such as *Idulfitri*, *Iduladha*, and the start of Ramadan. During these events, Muhammadiyah and NU followers sometimes observe different days for the celebration due to differing methods of moon sighting. This division becomes particularly visible during communal prayers and feasts. Despite these differences, many members of both organizations still practice rituals from both traditions, especially in the context of annual gatherings and rituals, which may create opportunities for conformity. For instance, many Muslims will participate in the *Idulfitri* prayers with the group that aligns with their personal schedule or preference, even if it differs from their formal affiliation. This indicates a pragmatic religiosity that balances doctrine and social harmony (Beatty, 1999; Bubandt & van Beek, 2012).

In summary, the practices observed by Informants 15, 16, and 17 suggest that the adherence to specific rituals within the Muhammadiyah and NU communities is fluid. While religious identity remains important, the opportunity for personal choice and adaptation to communal practices shows the convergence of both groups in everyday worship and during significant religious events.

4.3 Concrete Implications of Doctrinal Compromise in the Conceptual Landscape of Muhammadiyah and NU Members

Members of Muhammadiyah often identify themselves with the organization through specific markers — having a Muhammadiyah membership card, actively participating in the organization's activities, studying in Muhammadiyah-affiliated educational institutions, or being born into a Muhammadiyah household (Azra, 2004; Nakamura, 2012). According to Informant 18 (interviewed on 5 September 2023), a former regional leader of Muhammadiyah in Gorontalo, there is no significant relational distance between Muhammadiyah and NU members. Regular interactions occur in shared public spaces such as workplaces, mosques, and neighbourhood activities, creating a harmonious and familial relationship between these two major Islamic organizations.

Although these interactions are generally informal, they nonetheless foster a structure of cohesion and mutual understanding. Dialogues between organizational elites can function as a unifying force, gradually breaking down entrenched barriers—whether in ritual practices or doctrinal discourse. This shows that the flexibility of religious identities has contributed to the establishment of community-based values and mutual reinforcement (Feener & Sevea, 2009).

At the grassroots level, the interaction between NU and Muhammadiyah adherents in rural Gorontalo manifests through associative and accommodative cultural mechanisms. The associative model is reflected in practices such as *bilohe* (mutual understanding), *depita* (sharing food), and *ambuwa* (communal gathering). Meanwhile, the accommodative model is seen in practices such as *buhuta wawu walama* (unity in togetherness), where embracing differences becomes a strategy to avoid discord (Geertz, 1960; Madjid, 2008). This was emphasized by Informant 19 (interviewed on 12 September 2023), a local Muhammadiyah community figure, who recalled a moment when NU relatives held *tahlilan* in his home after his father's passing. He acknowledged that regardless of the format, any prayer directed sincerely to God is valid, and he himself occasionally participates in preparations for such rituals when NU neighbours pass away.

This view is reinforced by Informant 20 (interviewed on 14 September 2023), a female member of *Aisyiyah* Muhammadiyah, who affirmed that her relationship with NU neighbours is cooperative and harmonious. In her words, distinctions between Muhammadiyah and NU have become irrelevant in daily life, especially when collaborating on community service activities like cleaning the mosque or maintaining public facilities (Burhani, 2014).

On the NU side, these sentiments are confirmed by Informant 21 (interviewed on 20 September 2023), who noted that NU and Muhammadiyah communities prioritize collective interests over organizational agendas. He recalled how NU members helped organize a Muhammadiyah Ramadan event — from stage preparation and food services to daily attendance throughout the week.

These examples indicate that social encounters are not only inevitable but essential to nurturing inter-group dialogue and cultural integration. These grassroots interactions prioritize humanistic values over sectarian boundaries. As emphasized by Informant 22 (interviewed on 26 September 2023), a cadre of NU under the *Ansor* Youth Movement, the people of Gorontalo had already practiced religious moderation and cultural tolerance through indigenous traditions long before formal campaigns on these concepts emerged. This has led to a durable solidarity between the two groups, especially in rural communities (Hasan, 2009; van Bruinessen, 2013).

The data also illustrates the flexibility of Muhammadiyah members in adapting to NU religious traditions. There are three observed typologies of adaptation among Muhammadiyah members:

1. **Accommodative Group**: This group embraces NU religious traditions such as *tahlilan*, *maulid*, and *Isra' Mi'raj* because they believe these practices carry moral and spiritual value aligned with Islamic principles. This group views Muhammadiyah not just as a puritan movement but also as a cultural *da'wah* institution that is responsive to local traditions. Often represented by educated youth, this group has shifted focus from issues like *bid'ah* to more pressing concerns related to community welfare and social engagement (Hefner, 2011).

2. **Selective Social Adaptation Group**: Represented by figures like Informant 23 (interviewed on 29 September 2023), this group adopts cultural traditions such as *hileyiya* (food distribution) without

participating in associated religious rituals like communal prayers or *dhikr*.

3. **Non-Ritual Social Adaptation Group**: This group embraces social customs not tied to worship, including practices like *huyulu* (community labor) and *ti'ayo* (mutual assistance), thus affirming solidarity without theological compromise.

These three typologies converge into what local communities refer to as *MUNU* (Muhammadiyah-NU), describing individuals who navigate and integrate the religious cultures of both organizations. However, this categorization could be further expanded by considering other emerging hybrid identities, such as *MUSA* (Muhammadiyah-Salafi), which leans toward scripturalist purification, and *MUMA* (Muhammadiyah-Marhaen), reflecting a fusion between Islamic reformism and leftist socio-political thought (Latief, 2012; Wildan, 2018).

These hybrid identities reflect the evolving character of Muhammadiyah in Gorontalo, especially among younger generations shaped by higher education, pluralistic experiences, and social engagement. As such, Muhammadiyah's adaptive engagement with NU traditions illustrates a context-sensitive model of religious life that transcends organizational boundaries while reinforcing local wisdom and unity.

This identity flexibility can be categorized into three distinct groups, as outlined in Table 1. The first group comprises those who are accommodative toward the religious traditions of Nahdlatul Ulama. These individuals tend to view Muhammadiyah not only as a reformist religious movement but also as a cultural movement. They participate in traditions such as *tahlilan*, *maulid*, and *Isra' Mi'raj*, and are typically represented by younger, highly educated intellectuals. The second group adapts primarily within social spaces without engaging in religious rituals. Although they participate in traditions like *hileyiya* (food distribution), their involvement does not extend to practices of prayer or *dhikr*. The third group focuses on non-ritualistic community engagement such as *huyulu* (community work) and *ti'ayo* (mutual assistance), and often interacts with both Muhammadiyah and NU traditions, reflecting a more inclusive orientation. These three typologies suggest an emergence of what is locally known as *MUNU* (Muhammadiyah-NU), a sociological blend of organizational identities among Gorontalo Muslims (see Table 1.

Table 1: Implications of identity flexibility.

No	First Group	Second Group	Third Group
1	The group that is accommodative toward the religious traditions of Nahdlatul Ulama	The group that adapts only to social spaces	The group that interacts with Nahdlatul Ulama members but does not engage in religious rituals
2	The group that positions Muhammadiyah as a cultural movement	The group that does not participate in religious rituals	The group that thinks inclusively
3	This group is represented by highly educated young intellectuals	The group that frequently interacts with Nahdlatul Ulama members	The group that interacts with both traditions

There is a dominant factor explaining why conflicts have not been triggered despite the open opportunities and potential for such conflicts, as seen in other regions. This factor lies in the adaptive nature of Gorontalo's Muslim community, which has been immersed in flexible religious practices shaped by their immediate social environment. In many cases, individuals unknowingly shift from the ideological purity of their original organization due to prolonged exposure and participation in hybrid traditions. Others, though aware of these shifts, intentionally follow the prevailing norms to maintain social acceptance and cohesion within the community.

This behaviour aligns with Mardison's (2013) view that social interactions often drive individuals to seek zones of comfort and security, which in turn becomes a strategy for group survival. Consequently, living in a predominantly NU neighbourhood, a Muhammadiyah member is likely to participate in NU traditions,

and vice versa. It is not theological rigidity but communal harmony that dictates religious expressions in these hybrid settings (Hasan, 2009).

5 Conclusion

This study has shown that the flexibility of the conceptual and practical landscape among Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) communities in Gorontalo reflects a unique and context-sensitive model of Islamic life. The most important finding is the emergence of hybrid identities, particularly among younger Muhammadiyah members, who navigate and adapt to NU religious practices, such as *tahlilan*, *tarawih*, *qunut*, and the double *adhan*, without abandoning their ideological commitment to Islamic modernism and puritanism. Unlike NU, where religious identity is often embedded in daily rituals and traditional religious expressions, Muhammadiyah identity tends to be more ideological and structured, making adaptation more conscious and strategic rather than organic.

This article contributes to the discourse on Islamic pluralism by offering a sociological lens into how Muhammadiyah engages in a form of *da'wah kultural* — a strategy of social adaptation that prioritizes communal harmony over theological rigidity. It shows how geographic proximity, social interaction, and shared values among community members foster a lived Islam that is inclusive, fluid, and humanistic. These dynamics challenge the long-held assumptions that Islamic movements must remain in opposition to preserve their ideological boundaries. Instead, Gorontalo presents a model of inter-organizational complementarity rooted in mutual respect, not doctrinal compromise.

However, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses primarily on Muhammadiyah actors and their strategies of adaptation, without deeply exploring the internal perspectives of NU members regarding Muhammadiyah's presence in traditional spaces. Second, the study is limited to one geographic and cultural context, Gorontalo, which may differ significantly from other regions in Indonesia where conflict between Islamic organizations is more pronounced. Third, the study relies heavily on qualitative observation and interviews, which, while rich in nuance, would benefit from being complemented by a broader quantitative approach to generalize the findings.

Ultimately, while the historical dichotomy between Muhammadiyah and NU has often been shaped by rigid religious practices, symbols, and institutional identities, the reality in Gorontalo reveals a more dynamic and humanistic religious life. Belief cannot be reduced to numbers or organizational affiliation; it is rooted in personal conviction and community values. Therefore, an attitude of mutual respect, social engagement, and theological humility must continue to be nurtured within both NU and Muhammadiyah communities, as this is essential for preserving not only the dignity of Islam but also the fabric of Indonesian pluralism.

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