



Religious Dynamics in Sekoto: Adaptation, Resistance, and Ritual Traditions

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Abstract. This study explores the dynamic role of religion in the Sokoto region, focusing on how the local religious community has responded to the forces of Islamization and its impact on cultural and spiritual practices. Using an ethnohistorical research approach, this study delves into the sociocultural fabric of the Sokoto community, shedding light on the adaptive strategies and resistance mechanisms that have shaped their religious identity over time. The findings highlight how different Islamic groups, such as the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have navigated the tension between modernization and tradition. The Muhammadiyah group represents an adaptive approach, integrating modern Islamic rituals into daily life, while the NU maintains a conservative stance, championing the preservation of regional customs and ancestral practices (resistance). This divergence has led to tensions, but also to locally-driven resolutions, where Sokoto's village leaders have played a pivotal role in restoring harmony. The study underscores the potential of community-led conflict resolution to sustain social cohesion, even in the face of ideological differences. Ultimately, this research provides valuable insights into how local communities balance resistance and adaptation in the face of religious transformation.

Keywords: Sekoto, adaptation, resistance, ritual traditions.

1 Introduction

The Sekoto region of Kediri of Indonesia has been a source for the religious cultural dynamics from time immemorial. It has also resulted in an assimilation of both pantheistic animistic beliefs of the local population and theative hindu-buddhistic influences and the spread of Islam at a slow progress [1]. Thus, with time, the local populace has been learning to maneuver in the processes of shift, acceptance or rejection of new religions, and retaining the traditional forms of worship.

As the investigation of religious life in Sekoto has demonstrated, the dynamics of religious growth have been determined by various factors that include the interpenetration of local wisdom society and the exportation of world religions. When Islam started spreading in the region, its evangelists and followers could not close their eyes from the pre-existing culture and religion of the community. They wanted to bring Islamic teachings into compliance with the existing indigenous knowledge they knew were a

right fit as they are inseparable [2]. This awareness and approach, which was integration rather than imposition, helped in the gradual process of Islamization of the populace.

Concurrently, it allowed for preventing some form of Islamization and rationality that helped in sustaining the pre-Islamic pantheistic modes of thinking [3]. And some part of the community continued to practice the traditions that were typical of their ancestors, although arranging them in parallel with the new religions. This syncretism is proved by certain persistence of some rites and amalgamation of components belonging to two mentioned systems. The religious practices in Sekoto have also incorporated the Hindu-Buddhist influence which forms a part of a religious syncretism that has evolved between the continuing interaction between Islam and indigenous religious beliefs. Therefore, the religious culture conveys a narrative of accommodation, defiance and ceremonial pragmatism that suggest that different religious systems have existed side by side, have interpenetrated one another and have evolved in response to changes over time [4].

This religious dynamic is as same as other part of Indonesia where Muslim community has not fully abandoned their pantheistic or ancestral faith. Nonetheless, this interaction between indigenous and world religions is not unique to Sekoto as is the case with many other areas of the archipelago [5].

It is worth pointing out that some of the previous researches has focused on cultural sensitivity and the absorption of local culture in the process of Islamization in Indonesia [6]. Furthermore, other research reveals a response to the rejection of culture (adaptation to Islam) from Muhammadiyah in Sekoto Village [7]. These findings are particularly useful in the case of Sekoto Kediri because the tension between indigenous religion and the introduction of Islam has been a key concern in the area's religious narrative.

To this end, in this paper, we will analyze the religious processes in Sekoto Kediri with focus on adaptation, resistance and rituals. the relevance of this research is evident as it explores how local wisdom and world religions interact and interrelate in the modern society especially in the Indonesian context where religious diversity is a current issue. This research also adds to the existing literature concerning the approaches that can be employed in the endeavor to contain religious conflict and enhance social cohesion.

2 Methodology

This research uses ethnohistory research technique with a qualitative research paradigm. Ethnohistory is knowledge that is investigated with the help of anthropological and historical methods [8]. Thus, this work aimed at presenting and explaining the socio-cultural features of the Sekoto community from prehistoric times to the present days. The first step in the study is the identification of sources that are available and easily accessible. Subsequently, field observations were carried out by studying traditional ceremonies at local sacred places or *Punden*. The *Punden* that we visited is found in almost all the hamlets in Sekoto village, such as *Punden* Mbah Sangu in Sekoto, *Punden* Mbok Rondo in Gondang, *Punden* Mbah Kromosono in Sukosari, *Punden*

Mbah Tanjang in Puhrejo, while for Kemendung and Genukwatu the *Punden* has disappeared because the community people around don't care for it. We also studied available literature such as a book by Robert R. Jay entitled *Religion and Politics in Rural Central Java*. Data completeness is also achieved through an interview with the local ruler including Suprayitno who is the leader of the village, *Carik* who is the secretary of the village, and some of the local people. Vansina says that if oral tradition is passed from one generation to the other it can act as a source of oral history [9]. The following process is data analysis, which entails reduction, presentation and inference [10].

3 Result

3.1 Adaptations and Resistance

Being an archipelagic country with a particularly diverse religious demography, Indonesia has seen a dynamic relationship between the two biggest Islamic organizations in the country, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (hereinafter referred to as “NU”) [11]. These organizations have significantly influenced religious and social processes in the country; Muhammadiyah has promoted a puritanism and orthodox view of Islam, while NU has tried to adhere to a conservative view of Islam [12].

Muhammadiyah established in 1912 is one of the earliest organizations that push for Islamic moderatism ideology inside Indonesia [13]. It has shifted focus to education and social initiatives, as well as its promotion of more rational interpretations of Islamic teachings [14]. The organization has been shaped in this approach due to the idea that Islam is by far acceptable for public life and can necessarily fit around every epoch changes. NU, on the other hand, was founded in 1926 and tends to be more conservative by nature, which traditionally has not been open towards avant-garde Islamic practices or values such as those promoted under Muhammadiyah [12].

Both organizations have opposing ideological principles that sparks a hostile relationship between two giants competing for ultimate representation among the Indonesian Muslim community [15]. While Muhammadiyah had modernization and social welfare emphasis that were resisted by NU which wanted to maintain the status quo with traditional roles of Ulamas in Indonesian society.

Even this tension has also been seen in Sekoto Village Kediri. These efforts by Muhammadiyah have however been seen as a threat to some of the constituency in the local NU community who were resistant to changes [16]. Thus the contest between the two organizations has gone on unabated for decades over reaching out to Sekoto Muslims and defining what they consider Islamic teachings to be, hence shaping social configurations of the village as well as its religious landscape.

The household to hamlet scale conflict establishes a compelling scenario of this process as well, since the mechanisms for adaptation and resistance remained diverged from one hamlet to another responding differently against customary religious practices. First, in each hamlet -Sekoto; Kemendung; Genukwatu; Sukosari; Puhrejo; and Gondang had sacred sites called 'Punden', which were the most crucial matters that as a focal point of ceremonial event between their community. These are rituals which

built their social and spiritual lives, a mirror to the local wisdom inherited throughout generations.

However, significant changes occurred with the emergence of different religious views among the hamlets. Kemendung and Genukwatu hamlets, the majority of whose residents are Muhammadiyah followers, began to show adaptation to more moderate and rational Islamic teachings. For the Muhammadiyah community, the rituals performed at the Punden are considered Bid'ah or additions that are not by the pure teachings of Islam. As a result, these practices are slowly being abandoned, and the Punden in these hamlets are no longer well maintained. This condition poses a threat to the survival of local traditions and cultural heritage that were previously an important part of their lives.

Conversely, other hamlets in Sekoto Village — including Sukosari, Puhrejo, and Gondang with the majority of NU communities demonstrate resistance to these changes. The fact that the aforementioned mosques still exist in NU and are inscribed as “NU” mosques shows they have supported maintaining the Punden tradition of ritual, at least as it is part of their spiritual identity. For the NU community, Punden with its associated rituals is still considered a legitimate and essential practice in actualizing their religious teachings. This resistance not only illustrates alternatives in religious readings but signifies institutional diversity—ways of reading the cultural heritage and heritage spiritual practices.

This difference underlines how religious interpretation and adaptation to new teachings can affect local cultural practices and the management of traditional heritage. While the hamlets of Kemendung and Genukwatu are orienting themselves towards modernization within the framework of the Muhammadiyah's Islamic teachings, other hamlets retain their traditional practices as part of their beliefs and identity. These dynamics reflect the challenges and changes that communities face in the face of shifting values and adaptation to different sects within their religion.

Another conflict that has also occurred is the struggle over the oldest mosque in the area (located on the border of Kemendung and Genukawatu). The mosque at the center of this dispute was originally built by people who cleared the forest in the area [16]. However, over time, the ownership and management of the mosque became a source of conflict between the two organizations NU and Muhammadiyah followers, who also have a base of followers in the same village.

The dispute began when members of that one group objected to a tradition being conducted at the NU mosque (NU using Bedhug). And the religious group Muhammadiyah, most of its people live in protruding and Genukwatu hamlet, rejected several jobs because they were not compatible with their teachings. The dispute reached its peak when Muhammadiyah-affiliated parties prohibited NU from conducting many of the rites in that mosque. This led to even larger conflict with all its attendant direct impacts on the surrounding communities and much-soured relations amongst hamlets in Sekoto Village.

The Sekoto Village Welfare Staff testified that the prohibition of some religious practices by NU followers at the mosque at the center of the conflict has added to the difficulty of maintaining inter-religious harmony in the village. The conflict has not only disrupted the peace of worship but has also affected social interactions between

residents from different hamlets. Tensions escalated when some hamlets started to show a rigid attitude towards each other. The staff also recounted his childhood experience when he did not dare to worship at the mosque.

One of the villagers, who gave an interview under the condition of anonymity (Pak Dari), said the confrontation was escalating and NU finally agreed to build another mosque for Muslims. This step was taken to secure their activities without being hampered by other third parties. Even so, the construction of this new mosque both preaches to calm nerves and reveals there's some way yet to go before any lasting peace is found. At its core, this is a struggle to navigate the disparate ways that religious practice makes itself present in a pluralistic Society.

A careful diplomatic effort has succeeded in reconciling a conflict that had divided the community between NU and Muhammadiyah over the village's oldest mosque. The conflict, which initially involved a dispute over the ownership and management of the mosque, raised tensions among villagers. However, with a thoughtful approach, Sekoto village officials managed to find a middle ground that satisfied both parties.

The first step in the reconciliation process was to restructure the entire mosque Takmir (Mosque maintenance staff). Village officials proposed that all members of the Takmir, from the chairman to the lowest position, be equally filled by figures from NU and Muhammadiyah. This decision was taken to ensure that neither side felt more dominant in the management of the mosque and to create a fair balance in decision-making.

In addition, to avoid misunderstandings related to identity symbols, the paint on the mosque was decided to be white. This color choice was a strategic move to avoid interpretations that could be considered biased - for example, green is often associated with NU and blue is associated with Muhammadiyah. With the neutral white color, the hope is to emphasize that the mosque belongs to all and is not a symbol of any one group.

This will only then be finalized after the Eid al-Fitr 2024 celebrations, thus ending a period of uncertainty and beginning anew in inter-group relationships. The mosque is now at ease today. One of the signs of that success is the agreement on a system for Friday prayers to be led in rotation. In the same way, if Muhammadiyah takes over for Friday prayers this week then it is time for NU to take turns leading next Friday. This has not only allowed greater religious participation for both sides but also continued a shared resolve for unity and harmony in the Sekoto village community.

4 Discussion

4.1 Religious Dynamics

What local culture gave way to Islam is an elaborate process and has various factors that appear very well [18]. The key reason lies with the ulama or Muslim scholars. Ulama is sometimes the river amongst Islamic morality in addition to native civilization [18]. They do not only in any way distribute Islamic teachings, but also they adjust those with the already available values and ways of life. In some instances, ulama serves as mediation on Islamic local wisdom culture integration [20]. This transitive strategy

is expected to break the opposition and accelerate the assimilation of local Islam adoption [21]. In the case of Sekoto village, Muhammadiyyah clerics tended not to talk with local cultural practitioners, while NU clerics were more tolerant.

Traditional values also play an important role in the process of adaptation and resistance to Islam [22]. Long-established local cultures often have strong value systems and practices, which can pose challenges to the introduction of new teachings [15]. In many communities, values such as long-standing customs, rituals and social norms can conflict with Islamic principles. Therefore, adaptation often requires careful compromise and adjustment so that traditional values can be maintained while integrating Islamic teachings. This process can be an arena of conflict or harmony, depending on how the two sides - local culture and Islamic teachings - interact. The case of Sekoto Village reflects the existence of two parties, each representing two different sides, NU on the resistant side and Muhammadiyyah on the Adaptive to Islam side. NU holds the view that local cultural practices should be embraced, while Muhammadiyyah takes the opposite stance.

Social interaction is also a important factor in the localization as well as on resistance to Islam [5]. The interaction and communication among people with varied background typically shape the way religion gets approval or resistant [23]. In other instance an intense and positive interaction of the Muslim community with local people will generate syncretism or acculturation, in which Islam is accepted but somehow modified to mesh a seemingly more palatable fit within native customs; as how NU has done. On the contrary, experiences where much of one interaction are based on misunderstanding or conflict might inspire a further alienation from local culture as is seen in Muhammadiyyah. Thus, we need an ongoing dialogue and mutually supportive social relationships that help us to adapt well together in both spirit and meaning.

These are the seeds of tension in rural society, Sekoto village represents a deep rift between modern and traditional spirits. The modern stream of the Muhammadiyyah faction, who see their orientation as being more ortodhox than that of NU members sought to perserve *Punden* in his hamlet. The concept of this practice is considered to be *Bid'ah*, innovation in religous matters that we know are against their Muhammadiyyah principles. At the same time, the NU champions practices branded as cultural performances of Islam, one that collides with and thus brings NU into a face-off position against ortodhox elements in these practices.

After all diplomatic routes failed, village leaders decided to restructure the mosque's *Takmir* board in a bid to put an end to the conflict. By way of example, this extended to even having an equal number of representatives within factions or alternating the day on which a Friday prayer leader would give his sermon from either party. This was done in order to ensure justice and honor the desires of both groups while also allowing them each a turn managing leadership positions within mosques.

The purpose of these mediation efforts is not just to prevent the escalation of current conflicts but also for the establishment and maintenance long-term, sustainable social harmony. Sekoto village was able to deal properly with modernity vis-à-vis tradition by promoting dialogue and compromise. It implies that constructive mediation within religious communities can also help to control the tensions and bring a sense of equilibrium in set up.

4.2 Cultural and Social Implications

As observed above, Muhammadiyah's concerns for community identity, override the cultural challenge, therefore reviewing them to a more rational and systematic practice call for coherence between Islam and modernity. This may enhance solidarity of the Muhammadiyah community as the group that supports renewal and rationality more fit to contemporary social and global challenges [24]. But the lack of emphasis on local cultures also leads to a disregard of certain cultural features which may have always formed a part of the community.

However, NU which still involves in *Punden* maintenance strengthens its role as guardian of tradition and customs as in [25]. Apart from sustaining traditions that have accustom to the village, this approach also declare opposition towards changes regarded as disrupting traditions. It opens up an identity that is closely ingrained with, local culture and this in many cases is not associated with the high rates of modernization.

More importantly, the meaning of sustainability of ritual traditions in the current processes of adaptation and forms of resistance in Sekoto village raises fundamental questions in this regard. On the one hand, Muhammadiyah may consider such traditions as unnecessary additions that have to be dismissed in order to keep religion interesting for the young generation. If traditions for example in tending a *Punden* are not carried out or seen as relevant then it is possible that subsequent generations will see a break in continuity of cultural and community practices in their life.

On the other hand, NU pays emphasis to traditions as a principle adhering to history and immediate conventional laws and norms. Thus, the continuation of ritual traditions is reinforced by this approach; Nevertheless, there are issues to do with the manner in which the continuation of traditions is possible within the context of change. If the NU fails to adapt to meet changing modern aspects, it may have ramifications by meaning that the societies' rituals are losing popularity among the youth in contemporary society.

5 Conclusion

Indonesia's religious landscape is influenced by the two largest Islamic organizations, Muhammadiyah and NU. Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912, promotes Islamic modernism and focuses on education and social initiatives, while NU, founded in 1926, is more conservative. This rivalry has led to tension in Sekoto Village Kediri, where Muhammadiyah's modernization and social welfare emphasis threatens the local NU community. The conflict has been ongoing for decades, with hamlets responding differently to customary religious practices. The dispute over the oldest mosque in the area has also sparked tensions. A diplomatic effort has reconciled the conflict, allowing greater religious participation and promoting unity in the community. In the face of cultural challenge Muhammadiyah' concerns over the community identity paralyze their effort to develop a coherent Islam and modernity paradigm. This may increase the sense of togetherness of the community, but this may overlook or neglect certain features of the culture of the particular place. The conservative group, NU stays relevant with tradition

and cultures, making a stand that resist anything termed as change of culture. This approach reveals an identity which is in tune with the native traditions, seldom characterized by high rates of modernization. As much as concern the sustainability of the rituals practiced in the Sekoto village one gets to wonder as to their pertinence and sustainability. If traditions are discarded then it may ruin the successive generations' link. One of the principles that NU accentuates is tradition, which basically supports tradition's persistence. The findings enrich the understanding of religious dynamics in Indonesia by illustrating how the two largest Islamic organizations, Muhammadiyah and NU, play a role in shaping the complex religious landscape of Sekoto Kediri village. Differences in approach between the moderate, education-focused Muhammadiyah and the conservative NU created tensions, which were exacerbated by a dispute over the oldest mosque and an emphasis on adat religious practices. This conflict, which lasted for decades, demonstrates how internal and external dynamics within communities can affect religious and social interactions. The relevance of ethnohistory as a method in this context is seen in its ability to investigate and understand conflict and social change relating to ethnic, historical, and religious backgrounds, thus offering deep insights into how local identities and forces interact with broader movements and policies.

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