



Article History
Submitted:
30-10-2025
Reviewed:
06-02-2026
Approved:
13-04-2026



Social Historiography Of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur): Collective Memory, Pesantren, And The Construction Of The Islamic Narrative Of The Nusantara

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Abstract

Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) is widely recognized as an influential Muslim intellectual whose ideas significantly shaped the discourse of Islam in Indonesia. While many studies have examined his thoughts on pluralism, democracy, and Islamic moderation, limited attention has been given to his historiographical perspective in constructing narratives of Islam in the Nusantara context. This article aims to analyze the social historiography of Abdurrahman Wahid and its role in shaping an inclusive narrative of Islam Nusantara through the intellectual tradition of pesantren and collective memory. This research employs a qualitative approach using historiographical and hermeneutic analysis of Gus Dur's writings, speeches, and intellectual discourse. The analysis is framed within the perspectives of social historiography and collective memory to explore how historical narratives are constructed beyond elite-centered historical accounts. The findings indicate that Gus Dur's historiographical perspective emphasizes the role of pesantren communities and marginalized social groups as active subjects in the construction of Islamic history in the Nusantara. By reinterpreting collective memory and local historical experiences, Gus Dur offers an inclusive historical narrative integrating Islamic values with local cultural traditions. This study contributes to the development of Indonesian Islamic historiography by positioning Gus Dur not only as a political and religious thinker but also as a social historian articulating a contextual and pluralistic narrative of Islam Nusantara.

Keywords: KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, Social History, Islamic Historiography of The Nusantara, Pluralism, Privatization of Islam.

URL: <https://e-journal.uingusdur.ac.id/Religia/article/view/12992>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.28918/religia.v29i1.12992>

INTRODUCTION

The study of Islamic historiography in the Nusantara has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, particularly in relation to how historical narratives are constructed, interpreted, and legitimized within specific socio-cultural contexts. Historiography is not merely a neutral reconstruction of past events, but also a process shaped by power, ideology, and narrative strategies. As argued by Hayden White, historical writing is inherently interpretive and constructed through narrative choices, while Peter Burke emphasizes the importance of social and cultural dimensions in understanding historical processes. In this context, the historiography of Islam in Indonesia cannot be separated from the dynamics of society, culture, and local traditions that shape its development (Kartodirdjo, 1992; Wathoni, 2014).

Within Indonesian Islamic discourse, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) occupies a significant position as a Muslim intellectual whose ideas contributed to the development of an inclusive and contextual understanding of Islam. Previous studies have largely focused on Gus Dur's role as a proponent of pluralism, democracy, and Islamic moderation (Barton, 2002; Barton, 2008; Arif, 2013). His concept of "*Pribumisasi Islam*" and his engagement in pesantren traditions have been widely discussed as efforts to harmonize Islamic teachings with local cultural contexts. However, these studies tend to position Gus Dur primarily as a socio-political thinker, with limited attention given to his contribution to historiography, particularly in framing Islamic history through a social perspective (Wahid, 2006).

Gus Dur's interpretations of social problems occurring, and critical exploration of social theories regarding the relationship between religion and change, are relevant to Max Weber's social theory emphasizing that religion is not only a theological belief system but also a social force influencing the value system and social change (society). Gus Dur revealed how dynamic religion is as a driver of change. The change in society was preceded by a change in religious views. Then, religious views shifted in response to the demands for social change. So it can be seen clearly that there is no static and unchanging religious understanding as long as the

aspirations of the people who embrace it continue to develop, and vice versa (K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, 1999). This perspective shows that Gus Dur uses a social history approach to write a narrative as a result of Gus Dur's thoughts on the social dynamics of society.

In historiographical terms, Gus Dur's thought reflects a social history approach placing society as both the subject and object of historical analysis. Social history, as developed in Indonesian historiography by scholars such as Sartono Kartodirdjo, shifts the focus from elite-centered narratives to the experiences of ordinary people, social groups, and marginalized communities. This perspective is also in line with broader historiographical trends challenging dominant narratives and emphasizing the role of collective memory in shaping historical consciousness (Assmann, 2011). Gus Dur's writings demonstrate a similar tendency, as he highlights the role of pesantren communities, traditional Islamic networks, and marginal groups in shaping the historical trajectory of Islam in the Nusantara.

Moreover, Gus Dur's intellectual framework is closely related to the concept of collective memory, as introduced by Maurice Halbwachs suggesting that memory is socially constructed through institutions, traditions, and cultural practices. In this regard, Gus Dur utilizes the historical memory of pesantren and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) communities as a basis for constructing an inclusive narrative of Islam. His approach challenges state-centered and elitist historiographies often marginalizing local actors and grassroots experiences. By integrating religious thought with social theory, particularly in line with Max Weber's perspective on religion as a social force, Gus Dur positions Islam as a dynamic agent of social change rather than a static doctrinal system.

Therefore, the study of Gus 'Dur's thoughts on social history is important. This is done as a form of paradigm exploration in understanding and writing the Islamic history of the Nusantara. Along with the development of contemporary social history studies, it is important to highlight the relevance of Gus 'Dur's thought in the context of digitizing historical writing. Recent research suggests that the use of digital archives and big data analysis in social history can enrich understanding of patterns of social interaction, a method paralleling Gus Dur's spirit of inclusivity that places society as the primary source of historical narratives (Rosidi, 2016) (Nurkidam, Bakri, & Parepare, 2024) narratives.

Despite the growing body of literature on Gus Dur, there remains a significant research gap in understanding his thought within the framework of social historiography. Existing studies have not sufficiently explored how his pesantren background, engagement with collective

memory, and interpretation of social dynamics contribute to the construction of Islamic historical narratives in the Nusantara. In addition, the relevance of his historiographical perspective in contemporary contexts, particularly in the era of globalization and digital knowledge production, has not been adequately examined. This gap indicates the need for a more systematic analysis of Gus Dur's thought as a form of social historiography.

KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) places historiography as a moral-intellectual discourse, prioritizing the plurality of narratives and social justice. He rejects a single narrative that negates the diversity of people's experiences. As a "lay historian" with a pesantren background, Gus Dur combines structural and institutional approaches, paying attention to the role of Islamic boarding schools and marginalized groups in the history of the Nusantara (K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, 1999).

Gus Dur's idea of pluralism emphasizes that Indonesian history cannot be separated from inter-ethnic and religious interactions. This concept of inclusivity is rooted in his thinking about the "Pribumization of Islam (The Indegenization of Islam)" and religious humanism. Recent studies show the implementation of Gus Dur's multiculturalism in pesantren education as a laboratory for social tolerance practices (M Syaifudin, 2025). Gus Dur's neotraditionalist thought emphasized that Islam in the Nusantara developed from two waves: sufism and fiqh, creating a flexible and adaptive Islam. This approach is important in social history because it places pesantren as centers of knowledge production and agents of social transformation in rural areas (Usman, 2019).

The network theory approach analyzes the nodes and relationships between historical actors, such as clerics, merchants, and political structures. Gus Dur often refers to the Aceh-Malacca trade network and the intellectual route of the Middle East-Nusantara to explain the diffusion of Islamic ideas. This theoretical framework facilitates the tracing of social relations crossing territorial and institutional boundaries (A. Wahid, 2015). This article will also highlight aspects of novelty in the methodology, particularly the use of digital oral resources—such as online interviews and virtual community forums—that have not been touched on in previous studies (Afandi, 2024). This approach expectedly not only enriches empirical data but also expands the dimension of ordinary citizens' participation in shaping the collective history of the Nusantara.

This article aims to address this gap by analyzing the social historiography of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) and its role in constructing an inclusive narrative of Islam Nusantara.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How did Gus Dur construct a social historiography of Islam in the Nusantara context? (2) What role do pesantren traditions and collective memory play in shaping his historical narrative? and (3) how does his historiographical perspective contribute to the development of an inclusive and contextual Islamic narrative?

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to position Gus Dur not merely as a political or religious thinker, but as a social historian who actively constructs an alternative historiography of Islam in the Nusantara. Integrating the perspectives of social history and collective memory, this article offers a new analytical framework for understanding Islamic historiography that is inclusive, pluralistic, and rooted in local socio-cultural realities.

This study employs a qualitative research design with a historiographical approach to analyze the thought of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). The qualitative approach is chosen because this study focuses on interpreting texts, ideas, and intellectual discourses rather than measuring variables quantitatively. In particular, this research applies a social historiography perspective, which emphasizes the role of social actors, cultural contexts, and collective experiences in shaping historical narratives.

The methods used in this study are content analysis and discourse analysis. Content analysis is useful for identifying and classifying important themes in Gus Dur's writings related to history, society, and culture. Meanwhile, discourse analysis is used to examine the way Gus Dur frames social reality through language, narrative, and rhetorical strategies in building an inclusive, contextual humanistic historical discourse. This approach is relevant for examining how historical narratives are constructed and reinterpreted within the pesantren's intellectual tradition.

The primary sources in this study are Gus Dur's works, both in the form of articles, essays, and books written by him, such as *My Islam, Your Islam, Our Islam*, *Gus Dur's Prism of Thought*, and Gus Dur's writings in the mass media and journals. These sources are the main material to be examined in order to uncover the structure of social historical thought that it has. Meanwhile, secondary sources include scientific studies discussing Gus Dur's thoughts, both in the religious, social, cultural, and political fields. Among the secondary sources used are the works of Greg Barton, Budhy, and other figures specifically reviewing Gus Dur's intellectual contributions in the context of Nusantara Islam and cultural discourse.

Social history is understood as the study of the interactions, structures, and dynamics of society in the context of time and space, not just a series of political events or biographies of

major figures (Wathoni, 2014). This approach emphasizes the role of social groups, such as classes, religious communities, and patronage networks, in shaping the historical narrative. Thus, the focus of historiography shifts from “major events” to “social meanings” of everyday events and cultural practices of society.

In social history methodology, historians are obliged to apply the principles of objectivity, holistic empiricism, and interpretive analysis. Objectivity is achieved through triangulation of sources; holistic by including economic, political, and cultural factors; empirical through the analysis of primary documents and oral sources; and interpretive by exploring the meaning behind the data. These principles create a systematic framework for social history research (Kartodirdjo, 1992).

The data are analyzed using a combination of social historiography and collective memory frameworks. The concept of social historiography, as developed by scholars such as Peter Burke, is used to study how historical narratives move beyond elite-centered accounts to include the experiences of ordinary people and social groups. Furthermore, the theory of collective memory proposed by Maurice Halbwachs is applied to understand how memory is socially constructed and how it influences the formation of historical narratives. Through this framework, the study explores how Gus Dur utilizes pesantren traditions and communal memory as sources for constructing an inclusive narrative of Islam in the Nusantara. The analytical process involves three stages: (1) data reduction, by selecting relevant texts and themes; (2) data interpretation, by analyzing meanings within their socio-historical context; and (3) synthesis, by connecting findings with broader historiographical debates.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Pesantren as the Social Foundation of Gus Dur’s Historiography

Islam entered Indonesia, or the Nusantara, peacefully. The peace occurred because the spreaders of Islam at that time used precise and wise methods. This method is what Abdul Muhid Muzadi calls a persuasive rather than confrontational method of da’wah. These wise and wise methods and attitudes were formulated by Islamic preachers, particularly Wali Songo, from the verses of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s hadith, then formulated into a distinctive and grounded Islamic teaching of the Nusantara known as the teachings of *teposlirio* (tolerance). This teaching is apparently built on 4 principles of Islamic teachings: the principles of *at-tawasuth* (moderate), *at-*

tawazun (balanced), *al-I'tidal* (fair), and *at-tasamuh* (tolerant) (Hakam, 2015). The teachings built on these four principles are known as the authentic teachings of Islam of the Nusantara.

Gus Dur interprets history as a tool for social change, not just an event that occurred in the past. In some of Gus Dur's thoughts, he emphasized that history must be interpreted actively and reflectively aimed at fostering critical awareness of the community. Like Max Weber's social theory considering religion and social values to have an equally important role in social change. For Gus Dur, understanding history is the same as understanding changes in social dynamics and the factors that affect the process of social change in society (factors from below). This is illustrated by Gus Dur's article entitled "Islam and Militarism in the Trajectory of History" (K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, 1999). In the article, Gus Dur invites readers to examine the power relationship between Islam as a value system and military power in an expansion. Gus Dur criticizes the tendency of some Muslim historians to glorify Islamic power and military expansion as an important part of the glory of religion, but does not criticize its social impact on society. Therefore, an understanding can be taken from the writing, Gus Dur focuses on power relations and social structures, which are part of the social history approach. Gus Dur views history as a space to understand social dynamics and diversity, and not to impose the truth single-handedly (Fikri, 2013).

In his Prism of Thought, Gus Dur writes that true social change begins with a change in people's perspective on their social and religious reality, and history is a collective reflection tool for that. Therefore, history is not neutral, but it is loaded with meaning and must be processed as a material for social liberation (Abdurrahman Wahid, 1999). Gus Dur also stringently criticized official history (state historiography), which tended to be elitist, hegemonic, and aligned only with the ruler's narrative. He realized that the history written by the state often ignored voices from below—such as the Islamic boarding school community, indigenous peoples, and minority groups. This parallels the criticism delivered by historians such as Sartono Kartodirdjo emphasizing the importance of a more inclusive and contextual approach to social history (Kartodirdjo, 1992).

Therefore, he encourages alternative historical writing that favors the oppressed and makes room for multivocality in the narrative of Indonesian history (Fikri, 2013) (Santalia, 2015). Gus Dur emphasized the importance of history as an honest, just, and humane "collective memory" of society. He argues that history is not just an archive of events, but a common memory shaping

the identity and consciousness of a nation. Therefore, history must be written with conscience and social empathy. In his authoritative biography by Greg Barton, it is affirmed that Gus Dur rejected symbolic violence in history, in which certain groups were removed from the national memory (Barton, 2002b).

2. Collective Memory and the Construction of Islamic Historical Narratives

Gus Dur, with his knowledge of extensive religious traditions and his adequate mastery of social sciences, was one of the few people who could understand the dynamics of religion and modernization (A. Wahid, 2010).

Based on the typology presented by Anselm Kyongsuk Min above, the author will analyze the pluralism paradigm of Abdurrahman Wahid. He did not write or speak much about religious plurality from a theological perspective, but from a historical approach. His main concern is with the plurality of (Fikri, 2013) religions as historical reality or the inevitable historical determinism. The pluralist attitude or consciousness of religious plurality, for Abdurrahman, not only stops at the theological realm, but must also enter the socio-political realm. Pluralist consciousness can create tolerance, cooperation, dialogue, solidarity, equality, and a democratic political order (Fikri, 2013)

Gus Dur pioneered the crucial understanding of social history through efforts to restore the rights of minority groups—such as Chinese holidays and Confucian religious recognition—as part of the collective memory of society (Riswandi, 2019)(Zainuri & Al-Hakim, 2021)(Ubaedillah, 2023). This shows the novelty of the social history method: it includes the historical experiences of societies having been forgotten.

Gus Dur's background as the great-great-grandson of the founder of NU gives him a unique position in the social history of Indonesian Islam (Hidayat, 2023). This cultural footprint allows for contextual, rather than static, historical analysis—depicting the continuity and shifting of values in Islamic boarding schools having developed into protagonists of modern social change. Gus Dur consistently prioritizes oral sources—statements of kiai, students, and local communities—as a gap to rewrite Indonesia's social history from the bottom (Abdurrahman Wahid, 1999). This mode presents a novelty: seeing history not only from the official archives, but also from the voice of the village people as true historical actors.

Gus Dur's thoughts on the contextuality of Islam in higher education enrich the discourse of campus social history, both in curriculum transformation and cultural diplomacy of campus-

pesantren (Rahman, Solluhiah, & Pratiwi, 2024) (Pamungkas & Hermanu Joebagio, 2016). This aspect is still rarely discussed in Indonesian social history, despite its high relevance to modern intellectual history.

The network of scholars and intellectual paths in transnational history in Gus Dur's study also looks at how the network of scholars across regions—Egypt, the Middle East, Southeast Asia—supports the diffusion of moderate and plural Islamic discourse (Zainuri & Al-Hakim, 2021). This approach introduces a micro-macro network model in the study of Indonesia's Islamic global social history.

The functionalism of religions and the state in the analysis of structural history, from the perspective of Gus Dur, emphasizes the separation of state and religious functions through the lens of structural history—religion as a moral conditioner, the state as a pragmatic regulator—emphasizing that the study of social history must accommodate institutional functions in a balanced manner (Samud, 2011)

Religious humanism is a framework for analyzing the context of social conflict. In facing the Poso and Maluku riots, Gus Dur prioritized humanism and reconciliation within the framework of the social history of conflict, understanding the socio-religious and cultural roots of inter-community conflict (Sa'diyah & Nurhayati, 2019)(Muhammad Husni & Akh Fahrur Rozi, 2022). This approach is rich in reflective value for the study of social history reconciliation.

Gus Dur's position as president provides an opportunity to see how the narrative of Indonesia's post-New Order political history can be rewritten through the eyes of minority rights, decentralization, and national reconciliation (Barton, 2002a)(Virdika Rizky Utama, 2021). As an idea of recontextualizing post-1998 political documentation, it offers a new discourse on national historiography.

Recent studies refer to Gus Dur as a multidimensional figure—religion, politics, culture, gender, Sufism—so his study must be cross-disciplinary: social history, anthropology, sociology of religion.¹ This approach renews Indonesian historiography, bridging elite traditions and bottom, institutional, and real-life narratives, as an ensemble of historical narratives.

3. Gus Dur's Social Historiography and the Idea of Islam Nusantara

KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur, stands as an important and

¹ <https://gusdur.net/peta-intelektualisme-dan-tema-pokok-pemikiran-gus-dur/>

multidimensional figure in the Islamic historical landscape of the Nusantara. His extensive contributions spanned a wide range of domains, making him a culturalist, intellectual, politician, and scholar, as extensively documented by sources such as (Barton, 2002b) (Santalia, 2015) and (Fikri, 2013). The defining characteristic of Gus Dur's personality is his embodiment of an inclusive Muslim identity passionately fighting for pluralism and acceptance of the social diversity inherent in Indonesia. This commitment is consistently reflected in his active involvement in modern discourse, particularly as an intellectual rooted in pesantren circles, where he consistently focuses his intellectual pursuits and societal struggles on society as the main social actor.

Gus Dur's profound contribution in shaping the historical narrative of Islam in the Nusantara could be seen through the lens of a social history approach. This methodological framework is distinguished by its fundamental emphasis on society as the subject and object of historical investigation. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to the prevailing elitist historiography, often showing a bias against power structures and consequently ignores the vital roles and experiences of marginalized groups and pesantren communities (Ainul Fitriah, 2013). The overarching purpose of this paper is to explore an inclusive and contextual paradigm to understand and document the history of Islam in the Nusantara through Gus Dur's unique perspective. Thus, this paper positions it not only as a subject of historical study but as an active participant in a more humanistic and pluralistic construction of historiography.

Gus Dur's historiographical framework is deeply anchored in the social history approach. In this context, social history is conceptualized as a form of historical analysis informed by a sociological perspective. The goal is to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of historical events by uncovering facts and viewpoints often underrepresented or completely absent in conventional historical narratives. An important characteristic of this approach is the designation of society as the main subject and object of historical investigation. The focus on the broader social order, including local communities, Islamic boarding schools, and various marginalized groups, serves to sharply distinguish it from traditional historical accounts tending to concentrate on elite figures or state-centered developments.

Gus Dur's adoption of this approach to social history was not an arbitrary academic preference but a deliberate and necessary response to the pervasive influence of elitist historiography. Such dominant narratives usually present history solely from the perspective of the ruling class or the state, often ignoring or outright ignoring the contributions and experiences of ordinary citizens, local communities, Islamic boarding schools, and other grassroots social

groups (Imam Suyuti, 2024). The paper highlights that the historical record built by the state often ignores “voices from below”. Therefore, Gus Dur’s embrace of social history represents a conscious and critical ideological attitude toward a biased narrative of power. This position reveals his deep commitment to social justice, extending his principles even to fundamental interpretations and constructions of historical understanding. The choice of historical methodology is not neutral. It is a deliberate act aiming to correct historical injustices and empower those narratives having traditionally been silenced. This is in line with his broader humanist and social justice advocacy, suggesting that his historical thinking is an integral component of his overarching ethical and political philosophy (Chalik, 2016).

Gus Dur conceptualizes history not as a static repository of past events, but as a dynamic, active, and reflective instrument to incite social change. The emphasis lies on fostering critical awareness in society through a nuanced and engaged understanding of historical processes. He argues that history must be actively and reflexively interpreted to achieve this transformative goal.

For Gus Dur, understanding history is synonymous with understanding the complex dynamics of social change and identifying the fundamental factors influencing this process from the grassroots level. This perspective is clearly illustrated in his work, “Islam and Militarism in the Trajectory of History”. In this paper, he invites readers to critically study the power relationship between Islam, as a value system, and military power during the period of expansion (A. Wahid, 1980). He criticized the tendency of some Muslim historians to glorify Islamic power and military expansion as essential to religious victory, without studying their social impact on society. This focus on power relations and social structures is a defining feature of his social history approach.

Gus Dur’s interpretation of social issues and his critical engagement with social theory show strong resonance with Max Weber’s emphasis on religion as a significant social force. Weber argues that religion, outside of its theological belief system, functions as a social force profoundly influencing societal values and drives social change (Putra, 2020). Gus Dur echoed this view, affirming the dynamic role of religion as a catalyst for transformation, where a shift in religious perspective can precede societal transformation, and vice versa. This implies that no understanding of religion remains static as long as the aspirations of the people embracing it evolve continuously. Gus Dur’s integration of Max Weber’s socio-religious theory into his historical thought demonstrates a sophisticated interdisciplinary approach transcending traditional and remote religious scholarship (Rohanah Hidayati, 2023). This positions him as an important bridge builder between the Islamic intellectual tradition and modern sociological

analysis. This intellectual breadth and willingness to cross disciplinary boundaries are significant innovations, offering a robust framework for understanding the complex interactions between faith, society, and history.

Gus Dur argues that true social change comes from a fundamental transformation in society's perspective on its social and religious reality, with history serving as an indispensable instrument for this collective reflection. As a result, he believed that history was not a neutral entity; rather, it is imbued with a deep meaning and must be actively processed as a means of social liberation.

Criticism of Elizabethan Historiography and Advocacy for Inclusive Narratives. A defining characteristic of Gus Dur's social approach is his sharp critique of the "official history" or historiography of the state. He considers this narrative to be inherently elitist, hegemonic, and biased against the perspectives of those in power. This criticism finds parallels with the work of prominent Indonesian historians such as Sartono Kartodirdjo, who also underscores the importance of a more inclusive and contextual approach to social history (Kartodirdjo, 1992). Gus Dur argues that the dominant historical record often presents the face of power without considering the human dimension and the rich tapestry of social diversity.

Gus Dur is acutely aware that state-sanctioned history often ignores or actively suppresses the voices and contributions of "voices from below", including Islamic boarding schools, indigenous peoples, and various minority groups (Imam Suyuti, 2024). Her advocacy is for an alternative historical construction that champions the oppressed and fosters multivocality—the inclusion of multiple voices—in Indonesia's historical narrative. He explicitly rejects "symbolic violence in history in which certain groups are erased from national memory". Gus Dur's insistence on "multivocal" history and "collective memory" represents a direct application of his pluralistic ideals to the discipline of history itself. This shows that for Gus Dur, pluralism is not just a theological or social stance, but a fundamental epistemological principle for understanding reality and building knowledge (Rohanah Hidayati, 2023).

If history is to be truly "honest, just, and humane", it should reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of all groups of society, rather than just those in positions of power. A single, state-controlled historical narrative is fundamentally at odds with pluralism because it suppresses diversity of experience and interpretation. This extends Gus Dur's concept of pluralism beyond social coexistence to the construction of knowledge, implying that a truly just and democratic society requires a pluralistic understanding of its past, in which no single narrative dominates.

At the heart of his vision is the concept of history as a “collective memory” for society—one that must be honest, fair, and humane. He argues that history goes beyond mere archives of events, instead serving as a collective memory that shapes the identity and consciousness of a nation, thus demanding to be written with conscience and social empathy. This concept resonates strongly with Maurice Halbwachs’s idea of collective memory as a social construct shaped by shared experience. Gus Dur further aligns this with humanist Islamic values, emphasizing honesty and fairness in evaluating the past, rather than simply glorifying or delegitimizing.

Religious pluralism through the lens of historical and socio-political aspects determining Gus Dur’s social approach is his distinctive perspective on religious pluralism (Taufani, 2018). Instead of engaging with it from a purely theological point of view, he approaches religious plurality as an indisputable historical reality. He views this historical determinism as inevitable, explicitly stating that he “does not write or speak much about religious plurality from a theological perspective, but from a historical approach”. His main concern is religious plurality as an “inescapable historical reality”.

For Gus Dur, the awareness of religious plurality, or pluralist consciousness, is not limited to the theological realm but must be explicitly expanded into the socio-political sphere. This expanded view is crucial because, in his beliefs, such an awareness can actively foster tolerance, cooperation, dialogue, solidarity, equality, and, ultimately, a democratic political order (Al-Zastrouw Ng, 1999). This pragmatic extension of pluralism into the public sphere is a hallmark of his social thought.

Gus Dur’s reframing of pluralism from theological debate to socio-historical and political imperatives represents a profound intellectual and practical shift. Historically, religious pluralism has often been debated within theological frameworks, leading to questions about claims of truth and the potential for exclusivism (A. Wahid, 2006). By shifting the discourse, Gus Dur overcame this theological obstacle often difficult to resolve. He recognizes the inherent diversity of human experience and religious expression as something given, a divine decree, not something to be doctrinally reconciled but socially and politically managed. This reframing allows pluralism to become a practical and actionable tool, moving it from abstract ideals to blueprints for concrete social and political action.

Gus Dur views pluralism as a positive phenomenon and a national asset that must be understood and celebrated. He rooted this concept in the sunatullah (divine decree), considering it unchanging and transcending human change (Santalia, 2015). He clarified that pluralism does

not require uniformity between religions. But, it is essentially a sociological and social issue, not a religious one, emphasizing the need for an established relationship between different religions. He believes that although each religion has unique beliefs, harmonious interfaith relationships are essential. His concepts of pluralism and tolerance strongly underscore the need for peaceful coexistence in amid diversity (Abdurrahman Wahid, 2015). Gus Dur championed the idea that all religious traditions have the right to coexist peacefully. He also associates pluralism with the values of spirituality and humanism, emphasizing the common core of compassion and interfaith mutual respect.

Pribumizing Islam (indigenizing Islam) is a core manifestation of its social approach. In this case, Gus Dur places significant emphasis on the need to contextualize Islamic teachings. This involves re-evaluating Islamic values in accordance with the prevailing social and cultural dynamics of Indonesian society. His concept of Indigenizing Islam stemmed from his deep understanding and awareness of the phenomenon of Islam in Indonesia, which he observed sometimes diminished local culture and locality by placing too much emphasis on Arabic symbols verbally and physically (Abdurrahman Wahid, 2015).

A very interesting aspect of Gus Dur's social thought is his criticism of Arabization. He underlined the potential implications of the formalization of Islamic law for intercultural dialogue, suggesting that such measures could hinder meaningful dialogue between different cultural and religious groups. His criticism centered on the idea that Muslims should not adopt elements of Arabic culture excessively, emphasizing that their significance lies in the value and meaning inherent in the words themselves, not just the Arab media through which they are expressed. He firmly rejected the idea of a "single Islam" that required all symbols or identities to use Arab cultural expressions.

Gus Dur argues that Islam and culture have their own independence, but they also have overlapping areas. While Islam is based on revelation and has normative tendencies (tend to be permanent), the culture is dynamic. He advocates teaching Islam with historicity, using an indigenous approach to Islamic education, thus showing Islam as an appreciation of the local context while maintaining existing cultural pluralism and multiculturalism.

The privatization of Islam represents Gus Dur's practical application of social history and its pluralistic principles. It is not merely about cultural adaptation but it is also a strategic and proactive step to prevent religious fundamentalism, foster social harmony, and ensure the continued relevance of Islam and peaceful integration in Indonesia's religious social order

(Afandi, 2024). This concept directly embodies its principles by respecting the local cultural expression of Islam. Furthermore, Pribumization Islam directly influenced the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)'s idea of Islam Nusantara, which emerged from 2015 onwards as a comprehensive theological program designed to combat religious radicalism. It establishes a clear and direct link between Gus Dur's intellectual framework and concrete institutional strategies to counter extremism and promote a moderate form of Islam. Therefore, Islam Pribumization is more than just a cultural preference; it is a profound theological-sociological strategy to maintain social harmony, prevent conflict, and ensure the positive and dynamic role of Islam in a multicultural state.

Practical Application Gus Dur's social approach is consistently embodied in his practical actions and policies. He is a staunch opponent of narrow Islamic orthodoxy and regularly emphasizes that dissent is normal and should be engaged in public debate. He firmly rejects discrimination, criminalization, and ideological channelization seeking to impose one ideology, particularly Islam. He treated minority groups, particularly the oppressed, as citizens with equal rights before the law. Her commitment to social justice includes advocating for equal access to resources, education, and employment opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their background, believing that everyone deserves fair and equal treatment.

Gus Dur is one of the most vocal defenders of religious freedom, believing it to be an inviolable human right—the right to choose, believe, and practice one's faith without coercion from any party. He sees religious freedom not only as an individual right but also as a means to achieve social justice, warning that discrimination or violence on the basis of religion not only harms individuals but also undermines human values. He actively encourages interreligious and cultural dialogue and tolerance as a means to build understanding, overcome prejudice, and foster empathy. He believes in constructive discussions where every voice is valued and acknowledged, emphasizing respectful language and avoiding hate speech.

Gus Dur showed an accommodating approach to the separatist movement (e.g., Aceh and Irian Jaya) and quickly established friendly relations with East Timor (Dafindra Ghifary Kresnadi, 2018). He moved to end official discrimination against Indonesians of Chinese descent and those previously associated with the banned Communist Party. During his presidency, he succeeded in drastically reducing the military's political role, separating the military from the police, and pushing them out of parliament. He also attempted national reconciliation after the reform era, including an ideological contestation between nationalism and Islamism.

He established a “rainbow” cabinet to tie leading parties to his government, demonstrating a pragmatic approach to governance amid diversity. Gus Dur’s practical actions, sometimes described as “ad hoc” or “unpredictable”, reveal a pragmatic and often unconventional leadership style remaining consistently driven by his core social philosophy. His willingness to engage with diverse, even hostile groups (such as separatists, former communists, Chinese Indonesians, and the military) demonstrates a deep commitment to his social approach beyond mere rhetoric. Its “ad hoc” nature can be interpreted not as carelessness but as the application of its flexible and context-sensitive principles in complex real-world situations. The appeal of Gus Dur’s social approach lies not only in its intellectual coherence but also in its application shown in complex scenarios, featuring a leader willing to act on his beliefs for a more just and pluralistic society (Fikri, 2013).

In fighting extremism, Gus Dur uses Pancasila as a reflective tool to emphasize the importance of upholding a just and civilized humanity. He believes that extremism, often based on narrow fanaticism, is contrary to the second and fifth precepts of Pancasila emphasizing social justice and respect for human rights. Therefore, he advocates interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue to foster an understanding that every individual has an equal place in society. Education about Pancasila and pluralism is a strategic step for him to grow a young generation valuing diversity as a strength rather than a threat (Rochmat, 2014).

The enduring legacy of Gus Dur’s social thought remains a powerful symbol of peaceful and intellectual Islam, reform, and social justice. His influence on Indonesian political Islam and liberalism is unparalleled (Zuly Qodir, 2002). He pointed out the compatibility of Islam with a pluralistic political culture and underlined the global role of Indonesian Islam. He is also recognized as one of the few mainstream political figures who actively challenged the military and religious hardliners.

His example continuously serves as a basic moral compass for social justice and progressive thinking about pluralism, tolerance, harmony, and interreligious dialogue. His ideas are closely related to Indonesia’s national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity), and the state ideology of Pancasila. He emphasized the need to protect Pancasila and the Unitary State of Indonesia, especially articulated in his last publication, *The Illusion of an Islamic State*, co-authored with Ahmad Syafi’i Ma’arif (Maarif, 2009).

Gus Dur’s legacy is actively immortalized through key institutions such as the Wahid Foundation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and the National Awakening Party (Indonesian: *Partai*

Kebangkitan Bangsa or PKB) (Abdurrahman Wahid, 2023) NU, Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, has expanded the narrative of Indonesia's peaceful Islamization by wali songo (nine saints) to include Gus Dur's contribution, thus integrating it into the socio-religious order of national identity. His contribution was seen as more than just an inheritance in this life, as the continuous benefits to society were believed to bring him religious rewards (rewards) in the hereafter (Franklin, 2024).

His concept of Pribumized Islam significantly influenced the idea of Nusantara Islam, which emerged from 2015 onwards as a comprehensive theological program designed to combat religious radicalism. This doctrine, supported by the jurisprudence debate initially promoted by Gus Dur, is NU's most comprehensive program since its reforms in the 1980s, such as Return to *Kbittah* and Pribumization of Islam (Abdurrahman Wahid, 2023). Fundamentalist and radical groups oppose Islam in the Nusantara, arguing that it represents a deviant sect.

Gus Dur is widely regarded as a "living saint" by millions of Indonesian Muslims, with his tomb becoming a popular pilgrimage site continuously attracting prominent figures (Franklin, 2024). This enduring reverence underscores the belief that his deeds, continuously producing lasting benefits to society, are religiously rewarded in the hereafter. Gus Dur's transformation from a political leader to a "living saint" whose ideas were institutionalized (e.g., the Wahid Foundation, Islam Nusantara NU), signifies the profound and lasting impact of his social approach. This implies that his thinking has reached a level of cultural and spiritual resonance that goes beyond mere political or academic influence, becoming an embedded part of Indonesia's national consciousness and a model for future generations. His social approach is not only remembered but actively lived, practiced, and respected by millions of people and by major socio-religious organizations. This shows that his ideas have become part of the collective identity and moral order of the nation. This profound and diverse legacy demonstrates the immense appeal and enduring novelty of Gus Dur's social thought, showing how his ideas offer a viable and highly resonant path for a modern and pluralistic Muslim society.

Gus Dur's social approach, carefully analyzed in the attached paper, stands as an important intellectual contribution to understanding and shaping Indonesian society. It is characterized by his dynamic view of history as a tool for social change, his stringent critique of elitist historiography, and his unwavering advocacy for inclusive narratives amplifying marginalized voices. His ability to connect historical interpretation with contemporary social dynamics, as well as his interdisciplinary engagement with figures such as Max Weber, highlights the intellectual

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depth and novelty of his framework.

Its unique conceptualization of religious pluralism, seen through a historical and socio-political lens rather than purely theological, provides a powerful framework for fostering tolerance, dialogue, and democratic order in diverse countries. The Pribumization of Islam initiative further exemplifies its commitment to contextualizing religious teachings, ensuring their relevance and harmony in local cultural dynamics while actively countering radicalism. This holistic approach to pluralism, extending from historical analysis to cultural adaptation, underscores its profound appeal and practical usefulness.

The practical application of his social thought, from fighting for religious freedom and social justice to promoting national reconciliation and democratizing institutions, underscores the profound impact of his vision. His legacy, supported by influential organizations such as the Wahid Foundation and Nahdlatul Ulama, and revered by millions as a “living saint”, continuously serve as a moral compass for national consciousness, morality, justice, equality, and pluralism, embedding his ideas in Indonesia’s “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and *Pancasila*”.

Gus Dur is known as a prolific historian—there are more than 493 writings from the 1970s to the early 2000s (Nurhidayah, 2013)(Dandie et al., 2025). More than just writing books, he is popular in writing in magazines, journal columns, and mass media, so that his works penetrate the public and academic realms at the same time (M. Wahid, 2010). This intensity shows his strong commitment to writing history as a form of reflection of society.

The understanding of history as humanities is that it emphasizes that history is a humanities aiming to shape the moral and social maturity of society, not merely the documentation of facts. This approach is important and still relevant to avoid historiography from drought and ideologization.²

For Gus Dur, history becomes a “blessing” when it is conveyed honestly, intact, and educates the community towards maturity. He criticizes historians who are not objective and voices ideological interpretations hurting the multivocality of history (Nurhidayah, 2013)(Al-Zastrouw Ng, 1999).

A meta-historical analysis and historical rhythm, in works such as *Reading the History of the Nusantara* and his essay “*Enemies in the Blanket*”, Gus Dur explores the rhythm of history—the dialectic of structural interaction between tradition and modernization, spirituality and

² <https://nu.or.id/opini/memaknai-sejarah-ala-gus-dur-aeala?>

rationality (A. Wahid, 2010)³. This opens up a new study of continuous and reflective historical patterns.

The use of oral sources as historical sources consistently emphasizes the importance of local history, particularly oral sources from *kiai* and *santri*, as an effort to “rewrite” history from the perspective of the grassroots, not just using official archives (Dandie et al., 2025).

The intersection of history and religious plurality that Gus Dur fought for was an inclusive historical narrative by resurrecting the story of religious minorities, such as Confucianism. The 2000 presidential decree on the recognition of Confucianism was also part of a historical correction (Anjani, 2022)(Fitrian, 2022)(Putri Tania, 2019).

The Ulama Network and Transnational Perspective that Gus Dur’s thought shows the dimension of transnational history, tracing the Middle East-Nusantara interaction as the center of moderate Islamic intellectuals. It anchors local traditions in the study of Islamic global history (Arifin, 2021).

Gus Dur challenges the narrative of the historical elite, the historical narratives marginalizing the lower groups. By placing pesantren, minority communities, and local social dynamics, he reforms the traditional approach of elite historians (Dharwis, n.d.).

The ideological historical contestation he highlights underscores the dangers of using history as an ideological tool—such as claims of a single causality simplifying facts—and affirms the importance of intellectual integrity and holistic in historical writing (A. Wahid, 2010).

History and spirituality—the tandem rationality in Gus Dur’s findings on the “historical ratio”—the combination of rationality and spirituality—marked a new direction in Indonesian historiography. He formulated that history can guide society if it integrates moral values and rational reason (Abdurrahman Wahid, 1999).

In his criticism of history undermining reconciliation in the context of the post-New Order SARA conflict, Gus Dur emphasized that history should not be the subject of emotional retribution. He encourages reconciliation through understanding social roots and peaceful narratives (Rohanah Hidayati, 2023).

The interdisciplinary historical paradigm can give contribution touching sociology, anthropology, and cultural criticism, forming an interdisciplinary study of history, making Gus Dur a bridge between the textual historical model and the social life of society (Dandie et al.,

³ <https://nu.or.id/opini/memaknai-sejarah-ala-gus-dur-aeala?>

2025). As a public figure, Gus Dur uses mass media and speeches to convey a humanist historical narrative. It shows the model of public historians actively shaping collective consciousness through mass channels (Imam Suyuti, 2024).

Gus Dur's study is urgent in the era of disinformation and social fragmentation: an atmosphere hurting diversity and hindering reconciliation. His approach offers a method of bringing together religious, historical, and moral aspects in the face of today's social polarization (Muhammad Abdul Karim Mustofa, 2017).

Gus Dur's historical legacy for future research, as Gus Dur's historiographical legacy opens up an important direction: research can generally choose local historical approaches, collective memory, and fact-based reconciliation. This study is relevant for research in the era of globalization, where identity is linked to a fair and inclusive historical narrative.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that Abdurrahman Wahid's historiographical thought constitutes an important contribution to the development of social historiography in the context of Islam in the Nusantara. Gus Dur places history not only as a chronological record of past events, but also as a reflective and emancipatory discourse through which society interprets its collective experiences, social transformations, and cultural continuity. His historiographical perspective shifts the focus from elite-centered narratives toward the lived experiences of pesantren communities, local actors, minority groups, and other marginalized social formations that have often been excluded from official historical writing.

The further findings show that pesantren traditions and collective memory function as central epistemological foundations in Gus Dur's construction of historical narratives. Through the reinterpretation of communal memory, oral traditions, and socio-cultural experiences, Gus Dur articulates an inclusive understanding of Islam Nusantara integrating Islamic values with local wisdom, cultural plurality, and historical realities. This perspective challenges hegemonic state historiography by restoring the voices of "history from below" and emphasizing multivocality in the writing of Indonesian Islamic history.

In addition, Gus Dur's thought offers a significant theoretical contribution by positioning historiography as a moral-intellectual project grounded in pluralism, humanism, and social justice. His approach shows that the historical narrative of Islam in the Nusantara cannot be separated

from the dynamics of pesantren, intercultural interaction, and the broader socio-political context of Indonesian society. Thus, Gus Dur should be understood not only as a religious and political thinker, but also as a social historian whose ideas provide a relevant framework for contemporary historiographical studies. Therefore, this study affirms that Gus Dur's social historiography remains highly relevant for the development of Indonesian Islamic historical studies, particularly in constructing contextual, inclusive, and reconciliatory narratives in the contemporary era marked by identity contestation and social fragmentation.

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