



Muhammadiyah Java And The Cultural Foundation For Progressive Islam

Erizal

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Madrasah Arabiyah Bayang
erizaldsn@gmail.com

Metriadi

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Madrasah Arabiyah Bayang
metriadi79@gmail.com

Zidni Ilman Nafi'an

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Madrasah Arabiyah Bayang
zidniilmannafian968@gmail.com

Mursal

Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Barat
mursalrambe8@gmail.com

Ahmad Lahmi

Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Barat
lahmiaahmad527@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyzes the role of Javanese cultural foundations in shaping Muhammadiyah's concept of Progressive Islam (*Islam Berkemajuan*). As a reformist Islamic movement in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah has consistently emphasized the purification of Islamic teachings alongside efforts toward social transformation through education, health services, and community empowerment. In the Javanese context, however, this reformist orientation encounters a complex cultural environment characterized by strong local traditions, an emphasis on social harmony, and symbolic religious expressions that continue to shape communal life.

This study employs a qualitative literature-based approach by examining relevant scholarly works, Muhammadiyah official documents, and contemporary studies published between 2022 and 2025. The analysis focuses on how Muhammadiyah in Java engages with local culture through rationality, social ethics, and Islamic humanism. The findings demonstrate that Muhammadiyah does not adopt a confrontational stance toward Javanese culture. Instead, it applies a strategy of selective cultural accommodation by integrating cultural elements compatible with Islamic principles while critically reinterpreting practices considered inconsistent with its reformist vision. The study further shows that *Islam Berkemajuan* functions not only as a theological framework but also as a practical cultural paradigm that enables Muhammadiyah to balance doctrinal consistency with social adaptability. Through cultural da'wah, educational institutions, and social service programs, Muhammadiyah in Java promotes a rational, ethical, and humanistic model of Islam that supports religious moderation and social progress. This article contributes to Islamic studies by highlighting the importance of cultural engagement in sustaining moderate Islamic movements within culturally plural societies.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah, Javanese Culture, Progressive Islam, Cultural Foundation, Religious Moderation

INTRODUCTION

Muhammadiyah is one of the largest reformist Islamic organizations in Indonesia, which since its inception has promoted the agenda of purifying Islamic teachings (tajdīd) accompanied by social transformation through education, health, and community service. Muhammadiyah's character of Islamic modernism places rationality, social ethics, and a focus on progress as the main foundations of its movement in responding to social change and the challenges of modernity (Burhani, 2021, pp. 1–5). In the context of multicultural Indonesia, this approach makes Muhammadiyah an important actor in strengthening moderate Islam.

In the Java region, the Muhammadiyah movement interacts with unique cultural realities, such as strong local traditions, values of social harmony, and symbolic religious practices that are deeply rooted in community life. These conditions require Muhammadiyah to develop da'wah and social praxis strategies that are not only normative but also sensitive to the local cultural context (Zuhri, 2023, pp. 214–218). The interaction between the reformist agenda and Javanese culture has given rise to an interesting dynamic in the construction of Islam Berkemajuan.

A number of recent studies show that Muhammadiyah does not take a position of total rejection of local culture, but rather engages in selective accommodation by accepting cultural elements that are in line with Islamic principles and criticizing practices that contradict the values of tawhid (Ritonga & Rababah, 2025, pp. 87–90). This approach shows that Progressive Islam functions not only as a theological concept, but also as a cultural paradigm that allows Muhammadiyah to maintain consistency in its teachings while remaining socially adaptive (Nashir, 2022, pp. 45–48).

Furthermore, Muhammadiyah's cultural approach in Java contributes to strengthening religious moderation through education, cultural da'wah, and inclusive social services. This confirms that Progressive Islam has strategic relevance in maintaining social harmony and community progress amid cultural plurality (Hefner, 2023, pp. 112–115; Arifianto, 2021, pp. 410–412).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research design. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is directed at conceptual and interpretive analysis of Muhammadiyah's Progressive Islam and its relationship with Javanese cultural foundations. Library research allows researchers to thoroughly examine the development of ideas, academic discourse, and theoretical constructs relevant to the research theme (Creswell, 2021, pp. 173–175).

The research data sources consist of secondary data, including reputable national and international scientific journal articles, academic books, and official Muhammadiyah documents published in the last five years (2021–2025). The selection of sources was done purposively by considering the relevance of the theme, academic credibility, and its contribution to the study of Muhammadiyah, Javanese culture, and Progressive Islam (Sugiyono, 2022, pp. 85–87).

Data collection techniques were carried out through systematic literature searches by identifying, classifying, and inventorying sources related to the research object. Furthermore, the data were analyzed using content analysis techniques to find patterns, themes, and trends in

thinking about Muhammadiyah's cultural accommodation strategies in Java (Krippendorff, 2022, pp. 49–52).

Data analysis was conducted descriptively and analytically by interpreting the findings based on the framework of rationality, social ethics, and Islamic humanism. This approach aimed to understand how Progressive Islam functions as a theological and cultural paradigm in Muhammadiyah's praxis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020, pp. 8–10). To maintain data validity, this study applied source triangulation by comparing various relevant academic perspectives (Yin, 2021, pp. 164–166).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Muhammadiyah Java in the Local Socio-Cultural Landscape

A review of the literature shows that the development of Muhammadiyah in the Java region cannot be separated from the local cultural configuration that had been established long before the advent of the modernist Islamic movement. Javanese culture is characterized by values of social harmony (*rukun*), ethics of harmony, respect for social hierarchy, and religious expressions that are often symbolic and ritualistic in nature. In this context, Muhammadiyah emerged as a reformist movement that brought with it a spirit of Islamic purification (*tajdid*) as well as the rationalization of religious practices (Burhani, 2021; Zuhri, 2023).

Contrary to the assumption that Islamic modernism always confronts local culture, the findings of this study show that Muhammadiyah in Java has developed through a dynamic dialectical process. Muhammadiyah does not completely reject Javanese culture, but it also does not accept it uncritically. This attitude reflects Muhammadiyah's distinctive character as a purification movement that continues to consider the social realities of the communities in which it operates (Hefner, 2023; Kersten, 2022).

A number of recent studies confirm that Muhammadiyah's success in Java lies in its ability to separate ethical-social cultural values from cultural practices that are considered contrary to the principles of *tauhid* (Nashir, 2022; Hasan, 2022). Values such as mutual cooperation, social discipline, concern for others, and work ethic are maintained and even strengthened in Muhammadiyah's practices. Conversely, religious practices that are considered to contain elements of syncretism or superstition are critically reinterpreted or abandoned (Syamsuddin et al., 2025).

2. Progressive Islam as a Theological and Cultural Framework

Progressive Islam is a central concept in contemporary Muhammadiyah thought and movement. This concept serves not only as a theological framework, but also as a cultural paradigm that guides Muhammadiyah's attitude towards social change and cultural diversity. The results of the study show that Progressive Islam emphasizes the integration of faith, knowledge, and charity within the framework of universal humanity (Nashir, 2022; Burhani, 2023).

In the Javanese context, Progressive Islam allows Muhammadiyah to maintain the normative consistency of Islamic teachings without becoming trapped in ideological rigidity. Muhammadiyah views culture as a space for social praxis that can be a means of *da'wah* and the formation of public ethics, rather than a source of religious normativity. This approach is

in line with the progressive Islamic view that places religion as a moral force to promote social progress and justice (Ritonga & Rababah, 2025; Arifianto, 2021).

Several international studies also show that the progressive Islam model developed by Muhammadiyah has similarities with moderate Islamic movements in various parts of the Muslim world, especially in terms of its emphasis on rationality, education, and social services (Hefner, 2023; Kersten, 2022). However, Muhammadiyah's Progressive Islam still has local characteristics because it is rooted in the historical and cultural experiences of Indonesian society, especially Java.

3. Muhammadiyah's Cultural Accommodation Strategy in Java

The findings of this study indicate that Muhammadiyah selectively applies a strategy of cultural accommodation in its interactions with Javanese culture. This strategy is not uncompromisingly accommodating, but is based on the principle of filtering between cultures that are compatible with Islamic values and those that require theological correction (Zuhri, 2023; Islahuddin et al., 2024).

This cultural accommodation is reflected in various aspects of Muhammadiyah's practices, ranging from the language of preaching, educational approaches, to forms of social service. In preaching, Muhammadiyah in Java uses a persuasive approach that emphasizes rationality and social ethics, so that religious messages can be accepted without causing cultural resistance (Fahmi & Hidayat, 2023). This approach shows that the purification of teachings does not have to be realized through symbolic confrontation, but can be achieved through education and social exemplary behavior.

In the field of education, Muhammadiyah institutions in Java integrate universal local values, such as discipline, hard work, and social awareness, into the curriculum and school culture (Amrullah et al., 2025; Latief, 2021). This shows that Muhammadiyah education serves as a meeting ground between normative Islamic values and transformative local culture.

4. Cultural Da'wah as an Instrument of Social Transformation

The results of the study show that Muhammadiyah's da'wah in Java has undergone a significant transformation from a normative-doctrinal approach to a cultural and structural da'wah. Dakwah is no longer understood solely as the delivery of verbal messages, but as a process of shaping social awareness through concrete actions in the fields of education, health, and social welfare (Latief, 2021; Amrullah et al., 2025).

This cultural approach to da'wah strengthens Muhammadiyah's position as a social actor that is widely accepted by Javanese society. Various studies show that the presence of Muhammadiyah schools, hospitals, and philanthropic institutions contributes significantly to improving the quality of life of the community while building an image of Islam that is friendly, rational, and humanistic (Hasbullah, 2024; Arifianto, 2021).

Cultural da'wah also plays an important role in strengthening religious moderation. Muhammadiyah in Java is able to bridge the tension between puritanism and traditionalism by offering a model of religiosity that is oriented towards public ethics and the common good (Hefner, 2023; Hasan, 2022). Progressive Islam in this context appears as an alternative to religious extremism and excessive syncretism.

5. Muhammadiyah Java and Religious Moderation

The findings of this study are in line with recent studies that place Muhammadiyah as one of the main pillars of religious moderation in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah's religious moderation is not compromising on the principle of tawhid, but is manifested through an inclusive, tolerant, and socially progressive attitude (Burhani, 2023; Hasbullah, 2024).

In the Javanese context, Muhammadiyah's religious moderation is reflected in its ability to build harmonious relationships with other religious groups without losing its theological identity. This attitude strengthens social cohesion and prevents religious polarization at the local level (Syamsuddin et al., 2025; Islahuddin et al., 2024).

Several international studies have even assessed that Muhammadiyah's model of moderation has global relevance as an example of how Islamic movements can play a constructive role in pluralistic societies (Hefner, 2023; Kersten, 2022). Thus, the experience of Muhammadiyah in Java is not only important for the Indonesian context, but also contributes to the global discourse on Islam and modernity.

6. Significance of Findings and Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the findings of this study reinforce the argument that Muhammadiyah's Progressive Islam cannot be understood solely as a theological project, but also as a cultural construct rooted in a specific social context. This approach challenges the classic dichotomy between normative Islam and local culture, showing that the two can interact productively through a process of selection and reinterpretation (Nashir, 2022; Ritonga & Rababah, 2025).

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7. Progressive Islam of Muhammadiyah Java in a Global Perspective

From a global perspective, Muhammadiyah's Progressive Islam in Java can be seen as a model of progressive Islam that is capable of engaging in dialogue with modernity and local culture without losing its ethical and humanitarian orientation. This model is relevant in the context of the Muslim world, which faces challenges such as extremism, the crisis of religious authority, and social fragmentation (Hefner, 2023; Kersten, 2022).

By placing education, rationality, and social services as its main pillars, Muhammadiyah Java offers a constructive and future-oriented approach to Islam. These findings reinforce Muhammadiyah's position as a successful example of how Islam can be a transformative force in a pluralistic and multicultural society (Burhani, 2023; Ritonga & Rababah, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Muhammadiyah in Java demonstrates a strong capacity to manage the relationship between the agenda of Islamic reformism and local cultural realities in a balanced and constructive manner. Muhammadiyah does not position Javanese culture as an entity that must be rejected entirely, but neither does it accept it without criticism. Through a selective and rational approach, Muhammadiyah is able to maintain the theological consistency of

Islamic teachings while building broad social acceptance in Javanese society, which is characterized by social harmony, religious symbolism, and deep-rooted local traditions.

The main findings of this study indicate that Progressive Islam functions not only as a normative theological framework, but also as an operational cultural paradigm in Muhammadiyah's social praxis. Progressive Islam enables the integration of the values of tawhid, rationality, social ethics, and Islamic humanism in facing the dynamics of Javanese culture. Universal local cultural values, such as mutual cooperation, social concern, and work ethic, are accommodated and strengthened, while cultural practices that contradict the principles of tawhid are criticized and reinterpreted in a rational and educational manner.

The novelty of this research lies in its affirmation of Progressive Islam as a cultural paradigm, not merely a theological concept. Unlike previous studies that tended to place Progressive Islam in the normative-ideological realm, this study shows that Progressive Islam operates in a tangible way in Muhammadiyah's cultural, educational, and social service strategies in Java. Thus, this study broadens the understanding of Progressive Islam as a contextual, adaptive, and socially progressive model of Islamic practice in a multicultural society.

Furthermore, this study also confirms that the success of Muhammadiyah Java is not only determined by the strength of its reformist ideology, but also by its cultural sensitivity and ability to build sustainable social dialogue. This strengthens the theoretical contribution of the study to the study of Indonesian Islam by placing culture as an important variable in the sustainability of moderate and progressive Islamic movements.

Based on these findings, this study recommends several things. First, Muhammadiyah needs to continue strengthening cultural da'wah based on rationality and social ethics so that Progressive Islam becomes more grounded and relevant to the needs of local communities. Second, Muhammadiyah educational institutions in Java are advised to integrate cultural values that are in line with Islamic principles into the curriculum and educational practices in order to strengthen religious moderation from an early age. Third, further research is recommended to examine the implementation of Muhammadiyah's Progressive Islam in non-Java regions or in a global context in order to enrich comparative perspectives on the relationship between Islam, culture, and modernity. Thus, this article affirms that Muhammadiyah Java, through Islam Berkemajuan, offers a progressive model of Islam that is capable of engaging in dialogue with local cultures without losing its normative and humanitarian orientation, and is relevant as a reference for the development of moderate Islamic movements in pluralistic societies.

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