

Local Culture in the Dynamics of Islamic Religious Organizations (Study on Muhammadiyah Branch of Padang Lawas Utara District, North Sumatera, Indonesia)

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Abstract: Muhammadiyah is one of Indonesia's most prominent Islamic religious organizations, growing rapidly as a leading religious organization in health and education. This research examines the challenges faced by the Muhammadiyah branch in the Padang Lawas Utara district. This study explores the dynamics between Muhammadiyah's institutional practices and the cultural frameworks within which they operate. The study utilizes a case study method to provide an in-depth understanding of the interactions between Muhammadiyah's organizational practices and local cultural elements. Data collection involves semi-structured interviews with key informants, participant observation, and document analysis of relevant organizational records and cultural artifacts. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. A triangulation method is employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. The findings indicate that while local traditions can enhance the acceptance of Muhammadiyah's reformist ideals, they can also present challenges when cultural norms conflict with the organization's objectives. They are reluctant to accept the Muhammadiyah ideology due to the incompatibility between local culture and Islamic teachings.

Keywords: local culture, Islamic religious organization, Muhammadiyah

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A. Introduction

The Muhammadiyah was founded by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan on November 18, 1912, coinciding with the 8th Dzulhijjah 1330 Hijriah in Yogyakarta. The principle of Muhammadiyah is Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar (promoting good and preventing vice). The principle also has a meaning: every muslim leader must be able to deal with national issues, both at the national level and the international level (Nashir et al., 2019).

The spread of Muhammadiyah in Indonesia occurred after the Dutch Government granted permission to establish a branch of the Muhammadiyah throughout Dutch colonial territory in Indonesia on September 2, 1921. After permission was issued, K.H. Ahmad Dahlan developed Muhammadiyah outside Java Island so that this organization could spread areas, even the depths of the countryside. The supportive factors in preserving and enriching the existence of Muhammadiyah are philanthropic works underpinned by persecution against the teachings of Islam (Mursyid, 2023).

Muhammadiyah entered North Sumatra around 1927, while the Tapanuli Muhammadiyah area entered from West Sumatra (Minangkabau) at the 19th Muhammadiyah Congress in Bukittinggi in 1930. On October 20, 1930, the Openbare Vergadering Propaganda Muhammadiyah in Padangsidempuan was carried out with the status of a branch headed by Kari Usman Siregar (Elfia, 2022). Openbare Vergadering Propaganda was held in Sipirok with the head H. M. Sultoni in October. Following the 36th Muhammadiyah Muktamar of 1965 in Bandung, the Muhammadiyah structure is dominated by administrative districts of the Republic of Indonesia's government. Their branch member is a member unit divided over branch units; the district is a branch unit in the District Level II (Regency), while the province is a district unit within the District Government Level I.

The campaign also affected the promotion of the leadership of the Muhammadiyah District in each of the areas, such as the establishment of the Padangsidempuan City branch, Mandailing Natal branch, Padang Lawas, and Padang Lawas Utara branch. Among the newly established areas, Padang Lawas Utara District remains the only one where Muhammadiyah has not expanded since its consolidation in 2017.

Muhammadiyah, as one of the most prominent Islamic organizations in Indonesia, plays a crucial role in education and health. In education, Muhammadiyah has established over 18,000 educational institutions, ranging

from kindergartens to universities, serving millions of students across the country (Aji, 2019). According to the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, in 2019, Muhammadiyah's educational network reached approximately 4.5 million students through its schools. This commitment underscores the organization's dedication to enhancing the nation's intellectual capacity, mainly through an education system rooted in Islamic values. As Kurniawati and Junaidi (2024) noted, "Muhammadiyah educational institutions not only focus on academic aspects but also aim to cultivate character and morality among students as integral parts of the educational process".

Muhammadiyah demonstrates a strong commitment to the health sector by establishing thousands of hospitals, clinics, and community health centers. Data from the Central Leadership of Muhammadiyah indicates that by 2019, there were around 125 hospitals and over 3,000 health service units operated by the organization, catering to millions of people in various regions (Nasution & Samosir, 2019; Wekke, 2019). The health services provided encompass treatment, prevention, and health promotion programs to improve communities' overall quality of life. As articulated by Nasution and Samosir (2019), Muhammadiyah's efforts in the health sector reflect a cultural da'wah spirit aimed at enhancing the welfare of society as a whole.

The vastness of geography and diversity in Indonesia means that the development and success of Muhammadiyah do not always apply equally in all regions (Khoirudin, 2020). One of the Muhammadiyah branches that experienced stagnation was the Padang Lawas Utara branch. However, despite its extensive network and historical significance, some areas have experienced stagnation and a lack of progress in these sectors. The challenges Muhammadiyah faces in certain regions can be attributed to local socio-economic factors and limited resources, which hinder the organization's effective implementation of its programs (Saidang et al., 2024). The findings of Warter (2019) confirm that the inability to harmonize organizational initiatives with local cultural values often leads to resistance and a lack of community engagement.

The influence of local culture on community development is profound, as it shapes the social fabric that binds individuals together. Cultural practices often serve as the backbone of community identity, fostering a sense of belonging and collective purpose (Ismail, 2023). Cultural heritage contributes to a community's identity and enhances social cohesion and mutual support among its members (Benedetti, 2021). This cohesion is essential for developing trust

and collaboration, which are vital for addressing local challenges and fostering a participatory environment. In communities where cultural traditions are actively celebrated and preserved, individuals are more likely to engage in civic activities, strengthening the overall social structure (Ismail, 2023).

In the realm of education, the integration of local culture into learning frameworks can further enhance community development. Culturally relevant education that reflects local histories and traditions fosters a sense of identity among learners, encouraging them to take pride in their heritage (Zikri et al., 2023). Incorporating local cultural elements into educational curricula enriches the learning experience and empowers students to engage with their communities more meaningfully (Dasopang, 2022).

This research examines the challenges faced by the Muhammadiyah branch in the Padang Lawas Utara district. While Muhammadiyah has made significant contributions to these sectors, the development of its organizations is often hindered by conflicts with local customs and traditions. This study explores the dynamics between Muhammadiyah's institutional practices and the cultural frameworks within which they operate. By analyzing specific case studies where cultural resistance has impeded the growth of Muhammadiyah's programs, the research will highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of cultural integration strategies that can enhance the effectiveness of its initiatives. Ultimately, this investigation seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on how religious organizations can navigate cultural complexities to achieve their objectives in community development.

B. Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the dynamics of local culture within the Islamic religious organization Muhammadiyah, specifically focusing on its branch in the Padang Lawas Utara District, North Sumatera, Indonesia. The study utilizes a case study method to provide an in-depth understanding of the interactions between Muhammadiyah's organizational practices and local cultural elements. Data collection involves semi-structured interviews with key informants, including Muhammadiyah leaders, community members, and local cultural stakeholders, alongside participant observation and document analysis of relevant organizational records and cultural artifacts.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and patterns related to the influence of local

culture on Muhammadiyah's operations. This iterative process involves coding the data, categorizing it into themes, and interpreting the findings concerning existing literature on Islamic organizations and cultural dynamics. A triangulation method is employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, incorporating multiple data sources and perspectives. Additionally, member checking was conducted by sharing the findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

C. Results and Discussion

The development of Muhammadiyah in the Padang Lawas Utara District

In 1946, the Muhammadiyah Branch Conference was held at Tiangaras, and it was attended by Amir Husin Abdul Mun'im, one of the Mohammedan figures in Tapanuli. This conference's implementation has influenced Muhammadiyah's development from Tiangaras to Parmeraan Village.

Minang traders brought Muhammadiyah to the village of Parmeraan in the 1960s, dedicating themselves to trade and teaching religious studies and Muhammadiyah. The official estimate for the branch's establishment dates back to the 1980s. The existence of Muhammadiyah in Parmeraan owes its existence to the efforts and diligence of the ustadz who dedicated their knowledge (Tridayatna et al., 2024). Geographically, Parmeraan Village is part of the Hulu Sihapas district of Padang Lawas Utara. However, the culture of the people in Parmeerian Village is different from that of the other districts due to the influence of Muhammadiyah.

The existence of the Muhammadiyah in the village of Parmeraan as the only Muhammadiyah branch in the district of Padang Lawas Utara, which is expected to be the future cycle of Muhammadiyah development in the area of Padang Lawas Utara, turns out to go backward. It can be noticed from the low number of members.

In 2017, three new sub-branches were formed, which are the annexation of the Muhammadiyah Sub Branch of Pameraan, specifically Parmeraan Sub Branch, Parmeraan Sub Branch 1, Parmera Sub Branch 2, and Muara Dolok Sub Branch, and Hulu Sihapas Branch. The leaders' attempt to invite the community to join the study by Muhammadiyah is done through a family approach. Also, it involves alumni from various educational institutions, Muhammadiyah colleges, and orthodoxy around Tabagsel, located in the district of Padang Lawas Utara.

Based on interviews with community members, it turns out that there are no more people who express a hatred of Muhammadiyah. Although there are

still some people who say that they are dissatisfied with Muhammadiyah, they are not pleased with Muhammadiyah because they are too fanatical in worship. In contrast, many people also welcomed the presence of Muhammadiyah, even though they could not join him because all his families were in denial.

The process of recognizing and developing Muhammadiyah among the people of Padang Lawas Utara district did not go as expected. This effort was stopped when the COVID-19 pandemic struck Indonesia in 2019. The impact of this pandemic is not simply on health and the economy but also social changes in unplanned societies, sporadic and undesirable changes, and disruption of direct contact in societies (Budi et al., 2021). The government's strict regulations relating to the COVID-19 pandemic require all communities to stay at home. The rise in the number of COVID-19 patients has led the government to impose the Great Scale Social Restriction to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This policy led to routine studies of the leader and members of the Muhammadiyah.

After the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Muhammadiyah building was sold and no longer a place to implement leadership activities and studies. The coordination and communication among the members are decreasing in the spirit of the development of Muhammadiyah in the Padang Lawas Utara district. On November 8, 2022, the Muhammadiyah activities are located at the Al-Amanah Mosque in the village of Sigama, district of Padang Lawas Utara. Since the inauguration of the Al-Amanah Mosque, the education activities of the leaders and members of the Muhammadiyah in the Padang Lawas Utara district have been awakening.

Muhammadiyah vs Local Culture in Padang Lawas Utara District

Muhammadiyah is significant in Indonesia and various countries worldwide, promoting Islamic teachings and community development. Its global influence is reflected in the establishment of branches and educational institutions in regions such as Cairo, Egypt, Iran, Sudan, the Netherlands, Germany, Britain, Libya, Malaysia, France, the United States, Japan, Pakistan, Australia, Russia, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, South Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, India, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, Spain, Hungary, Thailand, Kuwait, and New Zealand (Hamami, 2021; Mursyid, 2023).

However, the greatness of the Muhammadiyah worldwide does not necessarily facilitate the development of Muhammadiyah in some regions of the homeland. Muhammadiyah faces many internal and external challenges.

Muhammadiyah branch in Padang Lawas Utara District is characterized by a complex interplay where cultural traditions influence and shape the organization's practices and outreach efforts. Local customs and beliefs often intersect with Muhammadiyah's reformist ideals, creating a unique environment where the organization must navigate traditional values while promoting modern Islamic teachings. This dynamic can lead to opportunities and challenges. At the same time, local culture can enhance community engagement and acceptance of Muhammadiyah's initiatives, but it can also pose obstacles when cultural practices conflict with the organization's objectives.

The tradition of the people of Padang Lawas Utara remains deeply rooted in their lineage. The people of Padang Lawas Utara, also known as Padang Bolak. The Indigenous Padang Bolak community is famous for *Mangupa*, *Margondang*, and *Manortor* events. The custom existed long before Islam arrived in Padang Bolak. Non-Islamic religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, influence this custom. It is proven by several temples or monasteries around the Padang Lawas and Padang Lawas Utara.

In the *Mangupa* tradition, the exclusive animals that can be slaughtered are cows, so slaughtering except cows is not considered a *mangupa* ceremony. This ceremony will increase the honor due to its high cost. Besides, the cost is prohibitive because it is held for seven days. In this tradition, the host will provide alcoholic drinks to enliven the party. This kind of tradition and habit is contrary to Islamic teachings, so the presence of Muhammadiyah is considered to bother the customs of society. Muhammadiyah has principles, teachings, and values contrary to these hereditary customs, making it difficult for society to accept.

The people of the Padang Lawas Utara have strong principles for preserving such traditions, which causes them to have difficulty accepting and comprehending Muhammadiyah. Some traditional ceremonies or values are contrary to what Muhammadiyah taught. For example, *margondang* is contrary to the teachings of Islam due to its being considered as flexing (*riya*). The alcoholic drink is a core of the ceremony, but on the other hand, it is forbidden in Islam. The use of symbols for cults or animals is contrary to Islamic values, but it has become a tradition that cannot be abandoned by society. Various rituals in traditional ceremonies are also considered to be disassociated with God. This fundamental difference in understanding makes Muhammadiyah's teachings unacceptable to society.

Muhammadiyah, a movement of Islamic organizations, rejects actions containing hypocrisy, *bida'ah*, and *khurafat*, a concept many people in the Padang Lawas Utara are intolerable. The firm holding of this tradition comes from the influence of the traditional ideology instilled by parents on their children and their offspring. People oblige their children to participate in every customary activity carried out. They are doing their utmost to preserve the customs that have descended from the meeting. Even when there is a marginal event, they do not prohibit their children from participating in alcoholic drinks because it is considered a tradition. The child can follow the development of the times or study in other areas, but the child must not leave the traditions and customs when he returns to his hometown.

The Padang Lawas Utara community prioritizes children's education, as evidenced by the high number of students pursuing science both within and beyond their territory. Children can go to schools run by other Islamic organizations than NU, such as Al-Wasliyah and Muhammadiyah, and they do not mind if Muhammadiyah sets up schools in their area because they know that the education pattern in Muhammadiyah is good and not necessarily all the teachers of Muhammadiyah.

In many regions, traditional rituals and practices may conflict with the reformist ideals promoted by Muhammadiyah, which emphasizes a puritanical interpretation of Islam. This cultural resistance can manifest in community reluctance to adopt Muhammadiyah's teachings, as many individuals may prioritize their local customs over the organization's reformist agenda. Consequently, this creates a barrier to the organization's efforts to promote modern Islamic values and educational initiatives, as community members may perceive these efforts as a threat to their cultural identity.

The interplay between local beliefs and Muhammadiyah's objectives can lead to misunderstandings and mistrust. For instance, in areas where animistic beliefs are prevalent, the introduction of Muhammadiyah's teachings may be viewed as an attempt to undermine or erase local traditions. This perception can hinder collaboration between the organization and local communities, making it difficult for Muhammadiyah to establish a strong foothold in certain regions.

The deeply rooted local cultural practices often hinder the organization's growth and influence in various Indonesian communities. These practices, which may include animistic rituals and traditional ceremonies, are integral to the identity of many individuals. Consequently, when Muhammadiyah attempts

to introduce reformist teachings, it can be perceived as encroaching on these cultural identities. This tension creates a scenario where the community may resist adopting new practices, viewing them as an erosion of their heritage rather than a pathway to spiritual enlightenment.

The resistance can be exacerbated by a lack of understanding or awareness of Muhammadiyah's objectives. Many local communities may not fully grasp the organization's emphasis on educational advancement and social welfare, interpreting its initiatives as challenging their established ways of life. This misunderstanding can lead to mistrust, where community members may feel their traditions devalued or dismissed.

Muhammadiyah faces notable challenges regarding public interaction and engagement. One of the primary issues is the limited visibility of its activities within the broader community. Many individuals remain unaware of the various programs and initiatives that Muhammadiyah offers, which can lead to a disconnect between the organization and the public. The recent study notes that the lack of effective communication strategies has resulted in a significant gap between Muhammadiyah's initiatives and the community's awareness of them (Susilo, 2019). This disconnect is particularly pronounced among younger generations, who are increasingly engaged with digital platforms and social media, making it difficult for traditional organizations to capture their attention (Qodir, 2018).

The perception of Muhammadiyah as an elite organization can further alienate the general public. Many may view it as a group primarily focused on the educated or affluent segments of society, leading to exclusion among those from different socio-economic backgrounds. This perception can hinder grassroots participation and limit the organization's ability to connect with a diverse audience. As highlighted in recent research, the image of Muhammadiyah as an organization catering to the elite has created barriers to broader community engagement (Ahmad, 2019). Consequently, the potential for community involvement in Muhammadiyah's initiatives is diminished, and the organization struggles to build a broad base of support essential for its growth and sustainability.

The internal dynamics within Muhammadiyah can contribute to the lack of public interaction. The organization is characterized by a hierarchical structure, which may discourage its members and the wider community's open dialogue and participation. It can create an environment where decisions are made

without adequate input from those who are most affected by them. The hierarchical nature of Muhammadiyah can lead to a disconnect between leadership and grassroots members, resulting in diminished enthusiasm for organizational initiatives (Pohl, 2012). Consequently, this disconnect can lead to a lack of engagement among the public, further exacerbating the challenges faced by Muhammadiyah in its outreach efforts.

D. Conclusion

Muhammadiyah's presence in Padang Lawas Utara Regency originated in the 1960s with the arrival of Minang traders, leading to establishing a formal branch in the 1980s. Despite initial efforts to develop the organization following the inauguration of the Muhammadiyah Regional Leadership in 2017, activities have faced significant interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent logistical challenges, such as the sale of the Muhammadiyah office and the collapse of a vital bridge. As a result, the development of Muhammadiyah in the region has become stagnant and passive, with little progress observed by 2024, particularly among members primarily from Parmeraan Village.

Several factors cause the lack of development of Muhammadiyah in Padang Lawas Utara. Besides internal organizational factors, the most influential factor is the Padang Lawas Utara community's traditional values, which still firmly adhere to customs passed down through generations. The traditional ideology instilled by parents in their children and descendants obliges them to participate in every customary activity conducted. They are reluctant to accept the Muhammadiyah ideology because there are several aspects of the tradition that are not permitted in Muhammadiyah, as they are considered contrary to Islamic teachings, such as in the *margondang* event where there is social grouping, the emergence of flexing (*riya*), the consumption of alcoholic beverages, the use of symbols that are considered to idolize particular objects or animals in the *margondang* event.

The findings indicate that while local traditions can enhance the acceptance of Muhammadiyah's reformist ideals, they can also present challenges when cultural norms conflict with the organization's objectives. Effective engagement with local culture is essential for Muhammadiyah to foster trust and collaboration within the community. By recognizing and integrating local cultural elements into its initiatives, Muhammadiyah can strengthen its impact

and ensure that its mission resonates more deeply with the diverse populations it serves, ultimately promoting a more inclusive approach to Islamic practice.

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