



Between Commitment and Compromise: The Dynamics of *Nahdlatul Ulama* Traditions within Minangkabau Cultural Contexts

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Abstract:

This study examines how Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) adherents in Minangkabau negotiate and transform their religious traditions within a socio-cultural context in which NU lacks symbolic dominance. NU is widely known for integrating Islamic tradition with local culture, yet this accommodative model does not operate uniformly across regions. In Minangkabau, the supremacy of *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* shapes religious legitimacy and constrains the public expression of NU traditions. This qualitative field study employs an interpretive-critical paradigm, using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis in West Pasaman Regency. The findings reveal that NU religious practices are selectively enacted and symbolically moderated to preserve social harmony. NU identity is also mobilized instrumentally for social, political, and educational purposes, functioning as flexible symbolic capital. Additionally, pesantren traditions are transmitted to younger generations primarily through ethical values, leadership development, and civic engagement rather than through consistent ritual practice. These dynamics produce what this study conceptualizes as “half-hearted devotion,” a strategic form of adaptive religiosity rather than religious decline. This research contributes to studies of lived Islam and Islam Nusantara by highlighting negotiation and ambivalence as mechanisms of continuity and by recommending a balance between flexibility and efforts to sustain embodied religious traditions.

Key Words: *Nahdlatul Ulama, lived religion, Minangkabau, religious negotiation, pesantren tradition*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana penganut Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) di Minangkabau bernegosiasi dan mengubah tradisi keagamaannya dalam konteks sosial-budaya di mana NU tidak memiliki dominasi simbolis. NU dikenal luas karena mengintegrasikan tradisi Islam dengan budaya lokal, namun model akomodatif ini tidak beroperasi secara seragam di seluruh wilayah. Di Minangkabau, supremasi adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah membentuk legitimasi agama dan membatasi ekspresi publik tradisi NU. Studi lapangan kualitatif ini menggunakan paradigma interpretatif-kritis, menggunakan wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan analisis dokumen di Kabupaten Pasaman Barat. Temuan tersebut mengungkapkan bahwa

praktik keagamaan NU diberlakukan secara selektif dan dimoderasi secara simbolis untuk menjaga kerukunan sosial. Identitas NU juga dimobilisasi secara instrumental untuk tujuan sosial, politik, dan pendidikan, berfungsi sebagai modal simbolis yang fleksibel. Selain itu, tradisi pesantren ditularkan kepada generasi muda terutama melalui nilai-nilai etika, pengembangan kepemimpinan, dan keterlibatan sipil daripada melalui praktik ritual yang konsisten. Dinamika ini menghasilkan apa yang dikonseptualisasikan oleh penelitian ini sebagai "pengabdian setengah hati", bentuk strategis religiusitas adaptif daripada penurunan agama. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada studi tentang Islam hidup dan Islam Nusantara dengan menyoroti negosiasi dan ambivalensi sebagai mekanisme kesinambungan dan dengan merekomendasikan keseimbangan fleksibilitas dengan upaya untuk mempertahankan tradisi agama yang terwujud.

Kata Kunci: *Nahdlatul Ulama, hidup agama, Minangkabau, negosiasi agama, tradisi pesantren*

INTRODUCTION

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is one of the most influential Islamic organizations in the Muslim world, not only because of its numerical dominance in Indonesia but also because of its role in shaping moderate, tradition-based Islamic discourse. In a plural and increasingly polarized religious landscape, how large religious organizations negotiate local cultures has become a critical social issue. NU is widely recognized for integrating local wisdom into religious traditions, thereby serving as a key actor in sustaining social harmony. However, this accommodative character is often assumed to function uniformly across regions. In reality, the interaction between religious tradition and local culture varies significantly depending on social structure, historical experience, and power relations. Understanding how NU traditions are practiced outside their cultural heartland is therefore essential, not only for religious studies but also for broader discussions on social cohesion, minority identity, and cultural negotiation. This research is vital because it reveals how religious moderation is not merely a normative discourse but a lived, negotiated practice shaped by local constraints and opportunities.

Despite NU's national prominence, its presence outside Java, particularly in regions with strong indigenous religious systems, faces complex challenges. In Minangkabau society, where the *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* (ABS SBK) principle tightly binds religion to adat authority, Islamic legitimacy is deeply embedded in local norms. This creates a social environment where certain NU traditions are perceived as unfamiliar, controversial, or even incompatible with dominant religious interpretations. As a result, NU adherents often encounter subtle pressures to conform to prevailing norms. The problem lies not in overt conflict but in everyday constraints that shape religious expression. These pressures raise important questions about how NU members maintain their spiritual identity when their traditions lack structural dominance. The absence of open resistance does not necessarily indicate acceptance; rather, it may conceal processes of adaptation, compromise, and symbolic adjustment. This

study addresses this societal problem by examining how NU religiosity is lived and reshaped under such conditions.

Empirical observations in Minangkabau indicate that NU religious practices are rarely performed in their complete ritual form in public spaces. Practices such as *twenty-rak'ah tarawih*, *qunut subuh*, *tahlilan*, *maulid*, and *istighotsah* are often modified, privatized, or symbolically reframed to align with dominant norms. NU members may possess a strong ideological attachment to these traditions, yet they consciously limit their visibility. In communal mosques, silence replaces ritual assertion, while private gatherings become the primary space for traditional practice. Youth affiliated with NU organizations increasingly emphasize leadership, ethics, and civic engagement over ritual discipline. These phenomena suggest that NU identity is not disappearing but is being rearticulated in subtle and strategic ways. Such patterns point to an ambivalent relationship between belief and practice, in which loyalty persists internally while public expression is cautiously managed. This lived reality challenges simplistic assumptions about religious adherence and highlights the need for context-sensitive analysis.

Previous studies on NU have predominantly focused on its historical development, theological orientation, and political engagement, often emphasizing its success in integrating Islam with local culture (Idwin et al., 2025; Moaddel, 2002). Research on Islam in Minangkabau, meanwhile, has focused on reformist movements, purification discourse, and adat-Islam relations (Muttaqin et al., 2025; Rahmat et al., 2023). While these works provide valuable macro-level insights, they tend to treat NU either as a dominant cultural force or as a theological category, rather than as a lived identity negotiated in non-dominant settings. Moreover, studies on religious minorities often frame adaptation in terms of resistance or assimilation, leaving limited room to explore ambivalence and partial compliance. Consequently, everyday strategies employed by NU members to sustain tradition without provoking social tension remain underexplored. This gap limits our understanding of how religious traditions actually function within complex social hierarchies.

Recent scholarship has begun to emphasize lived religion, identity negotiation, and symbolic capital in religious practice (Kim, 2022; McGinty, 2023a). However, empirical studies that connect these perspectives specifically to NU communities outside Java are still scarce. Existing research often overlooks youth organizations as key sites of transformation, focusing instead on pesantren or elite religious actors. Furthermore, instrumental uses of religious identity, particularly in education and politics, are frequently discussed normatively rather than empirically. This study situates itself at the intersection of these debates by examining how NU identity operates simultaneously as a moral orientation, a social resource, and a negotiated symbol. By foregrounding ambivalence and situational practice, this research moves beyond binary

frameworks of tradition versus reform. It addresses a critical gap by documenting how NU religiosity is sustained not through dominance, but through flexibility, selective enactment, and contextual reasoning.

The novelty of this study lies in its conceptualization of “half-hearted devotion” as an analytical lens to understand adaptive religiosity. Unlike previous approaches that interpret compromise as theological weakness or organizational decline, this research frames ambivalence as a strategic and socially rational response to local power configurations. By integrating negotiation theory, symbolic interactionism, and perspectives on lived religion, this study offers a more nuanced account of how Islamic traditions endure under constraint. It also highlights youth cadre formation as a transformative mechanism that preserves NU's ideological identity while reshaping its ritual content. This approach contributes to contemporary debates on Islam Nusantara by demonstrating that tradition is not merely preserved or rejected, but continuously reworked through everyday practice. Addressing this issue is crucial to understanding the future of traditional Islamic organizations in plural, competitive religious environments.

Based on the above context, this study addresses the following research problem: How do NU adherents in Minangkabau negotiate, utilize, and transform their religious traditions within a socio-cultural environment in which NU does not hold symbolic dominance? This research argues that NU religiosity in Minangkabau is characterized by adaptive negotiation rather than doctrinal rigidity. Religious practices are selectively enacted, organizational identity is activated situationally, and pesantren traditions are transmitted symbolically rather than ritually. These processes allow NU members to maintain internal loyalty while minimizing social friction. The argument advanced here is that such adaptive strategies do not signify religious erosion, but rather constitute a distinct mode of religious survival. By articulating this argument, the study contributes theoretically to Islamic studies and practically to discussions on religious moderation and minority identity management.

This research contributes to academic discourse by offering an empirically grounded and theoretically informed analysis of NU religiosity beyond its cultural heartland. It enriches studies of lived Islam, minority religious practices, and the negotiation of tradition and modernity. In practice, the findings offer insights for NU policymakers, religious educators, and community leaders seeking to strengthen tradition without exacerbating social tensions. By demonstrating that religious identity can persist through flexibility and symbolic adaptation, this study challenges rigid notions of authenticity. Ultimately, it underscores that the sustainability of religious tradition depends not solely on ritual enforcement but on its capacity to engage constructively with local social realities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretive critical paradigm. It employed a field research design, which aligns with contemporary methodological trends emphasizing contextual meaning-making within social phenomena (Christiano et al., 2025; Widodo et al., 2025). This approach was selected because the study aimed to explore in depth the lived experiences and psychosocial dynamics of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) adherents as they negotiate religious traditions within the socio-cultural environment of Minangkabau, rather than to quantify behavioral prevalence. The interpretive component allowed for an in-depth understanding of how participants construct meaning from their experiences, consistent with current qualitative paradigms that prioritize emic perspectives and reflexive interpretation (Adiyono et al., 2024a; Fahmi, 2024). The critical element furthermore enabled the study to examine how power relations, cultural authority, and hegemonic norms influence religious practice and the negotiation of identity. Field research was particularly appropriate as it facilitated direct engagement with participants in their natural settings, thereby capturing the complexity of how negotiation and adaptation processes unfold in real social contexts (Fahmi, 2024; Swaraj & Mishra, 2025).

The research was conducted in West Pasaman Regency, West Sumatra, Indonesia, which was purposively selected for its distinctive multicultural and socio-religious composition. West Pasaman is characterized by a dominant Minangkabau cultural ethos, alongside significant populations of Javanese, Mandailing, and other ethnic groups, making it an ideal site for examining how NU traditions are negotiated in contexts in which they do not hold cultural hegemony. Studies of religious moderation in Indonesian contexts suggest that local cultural dominance shapes how religious groups adapt and express identity in public practice (Benussi, 2024; Mustofa et al., 2023). Additionally, the presence of active NU community networks, including youth cadres and religious leaders, provided rich empirical terrain to observe negotiation strategies, symbolic moderation, and adaptive religious expressions. This aligns with recent research establishing that socio-cultural plurality creates fertile ground for studying adaptive religiosity and identity management among Islamic organizations in Indonesia (Potluka et al., 2023; Suwendi et al., 2024).

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis, a multi-method strategy aimed at robust contextual understanding (Potluka et al., 2023; Rachmad, 2022). Semi-structured interviews provided nuanced insight into participants' reasoning, beliefs, and subjective negotiation strategies. Informants were purposively selected based on lived involvement in NU traditions, social positions, and cultural authority roles. Participant observation allowed for direct recording of religious rituals, symbolic expressions, and interpersonal

interactions that signal negotiation, compromise, or resistance. Documentary analysis supplemented primary data by examining NU organizational archives, adat texts, local historical records, and contemporary literature on Islam and Minangkabau culture. This multi-method approach aligns with best practices in qualitative research, enhancing data richness while allowing for triangulation across multiple sources (Halilintar & Rafiqah, 2024; Mas' udi, 2024).

Data analysis followed a thematic critical approach, guided by the interactive model of analysis developed by Miles and Huberman, which involves iterative cycles of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Thematic coding enabled the classification of emergent patterns related to religious negotiation, identity instrumentalization, and the transformation of pesantren tradition. Interpretation was conducted reflexively, combining interpretive analysis to understand the construction of meaning with critical hermeneutics to expose embedded power structures that influence practice and identity (Fabricius et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2024). Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and time, and through continuous researcher reflexivity to mitigate subjective bias. This analytical design is consistent with recent qualitative scholarship advocating dynamic, reflexive engagement with data to uncover the interplay between individual meaning and structural influence (Fabricius et al., 2022; Jerkov et al., 2025)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents three interrelated findings that collectively illuminate how Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) religiosity is negotiated, instrumentalized, and transformed within the Minangkabau social context. The findings move from the micro-level negotiation of ritual practices in everyday religious life, to the meso-level instrumental use of NU identity in social, political, and educational domains, and finally to the macro-level transformation of pesantren tradition through youth cadre formation. Together, these findings demonstrate that NU religious life in Minangkabau is neither rigidly preserved nor entirely abandoned, but dynamically reconfigured through strategies of compromise, selective activation, and symbolic adaptation. This results section thus provides an empirical foundation for understanding “half-hearted devotion” as a socially embedded mode of religiosity shaped by local norms, power relations, and generational change.

Negotiating NU Religious Practices within the Minangkabau Social Space

In this study, the negotiation of NU religious practices is operationally defined as the process by which members of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) consciously adjust, limit, reinterpret, or symbolically soften their traditional religious practices in response to dominant local norms, adat authority, and prevailing

interpretations of Islamic orthodoxy in Minangkabau society. This negotiation does not imply doctrinal rejection but reflects situational decision-making aimed at maintaining social harmony, communal acceptance, and religious coexistence. Practices such as tarawih prayer, *qunut subuh*, *tahlilan*, *maulid* celebrations, grave visitation, and *istighotsah* are therefore understood not as fixed ritual expressions, but as socially mediated religious actions shaped by contextual pressures.

An NU local religious leader articulated this negotiation explicitly during the interview: “Ideologically, we understand that NU traditionally performs twenty *rak’ahs* of tarawih. However, if we insist on that here, the congregation may fragment. Performing eight *rak’ahs* is a compromise so that communal worship can continue” (MF, 2025). This statement clearly distinguishes theological awareness from practical implementation. The informant demonstrates strong ideological literacy regarding NU tradition while simultaneously acknowledging the constraints imposed by the surrounding religious environment. From the researcher’s perspective, this illustrates that NU identity in Minangkabau operates less as a rigid doctrinal system and more as a flexible moral orientation that prioritizes social cohesion over ritual uniformity.

A similar pattern emerges in the practice of *qunut subuh*, as expressed by another informant: “When the imam does not recite *qunut*, we simply remain silent. It is better to preserve harmony than to argue over *qunut*” (SF, 2025). This response reveals that *qunut* is perceived not merely as a jurisprudential issue but as a visible marker of NU identity. The decision to refrain from performing *qunut* publicly reflects an intentional de-symbolization of NU’s distinctiveness in heterogeneous congregational settings. The researcher interprets this as evidence that NU religious expression is selectively muted in public spaces to avoid symbolic confrontation, reinforcing the idea that identity is strategically negotiated rather than abandoned.

Field observations conducted during Ramadan and regular communal worship further confirm this pattern. In several mosques structurally affiliated with NU members, traditional practices such as *tahlilan*, *barzanji* recitation during *maulid*, and collective *istighotsah* were either conducted privately, rebranded with neutral terminology (e.g., “collective prayer”), or omitted from public announcements altogether. These adaptations were not accompanied by theological debate, but rather by pragmatic considerations of communal sensitivity. The researcher interprets this behavior as a form of symbolic restraint that preserves NU traditions internally. At the same time, their public visibility is strategically reduced to align with dominant local religious sensibilities.

Taken together, the interview and observational data demonstrate that NU religious practices in Minangkabau are neither fully institutionalized nor entirely marginalized. Instead, they are enacted through selective visibility: maintained within trusted internal circles and carefully managed, or even

concealed, in public religious spaces. This empirical pattern indicates that the observed adjustments are not incidental but rather reflect a consistent mode of religious engagement shaped by social negotiation.

The overarching pattern emerging from the data is one of contextualized religiosity, characterized by partial expression, symbolic moderation, and adaptive compliance. NU adherents sustain their religious identity through internal conviction rather than public assertion. This pattern substantiates the concept of “half-hearted devotion” (*cinta setengah hati*), wherein loyalty to NU tradition persists. However, social power relations, *adat* authority, and dominant interpretations of religious propriety within Minangkabau society constrain the public articulation of these.

Table 1. Ideal Influence on the Negotiation of NU Religious Practices

Informant's Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
NU Local Religious Leader	"If we insist on twenty rak'ahs, the congregation may disperse. Eight rak'ahs allow tarawih to continue."	Ritual compromise for social harmony
Mosque Congregant (NU)	"When the imam does not perform qunut, we remain silent."	Symbolic restraint of NU identity
NU Community Organizer	"Calling it 'tahlilan' creates resistance; calling it 'collective prayer' is safer."	Reframing of tradition
Senior NU Member	"Traditions are kept, but not always shown."	Selective visibility
Youth NU Activist	"We practice privately what we cannot express publicly."	Internalization of tradition

The table illustrates that negotiation occurs across different levels of NU membership, from religious elites to grassroots congregants. Across all positions, the dominant indicator is not theological doubt but strategic adjustment. Informants consistently frame compromise as a rational response to social realities rather than ideological retreat. This suggests that NU tradition functions as an internal moral compass rather than an externally enforced ritual system in Minangkabau.

Moreover, the table reveals a converging pattern of discursive adaptation and ritual moderation. The use of neutral terminology, selective silence, and private practice demonstrates how NU actors manage religious difference without confrontation. These strategies indicate an implicit understanding of local power dynamics, where overt assertion of NU distinctiveness risks social marginalization. Consequently, negotiation becomes a survival mechanism that enables continuity through flexibility.

Overall, the data show a consistent pattern of negotiated religiosity marked by compromise, symbolic adjustment, and selective enactment. NU traditions are neither erased nor fully enacted; instead, they are strategically

repositioned within the boundaries of acceptable public religiosity. This pattern confirms that NU religious life in Minangkabau is shaped less by doctrinal contestation than by everyday social negotiation, reinforcing the study's central theoretical claim that "half-hearted devotion" is a socially embedded mode of religious practice.

The Instrumentalization of NU Identity in Social, Political, and Educational Life

In this study, the instrumentalization of NU identity is operationally defined as the strategic and situational activation of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) affiliation for functional purposes such as social networking, political positioning, and access to educational resources rather than as a consistently enacted ideological or ritual commitment. In the Minangkabau context, NU identity operates as a form of symbolic capital that can be mobilized when advantageous and muted when socially risky. This instrumental use reflects a pragmatic orientation toward religious identity, shaped by local power configurations, adat norms, and opportunities for social mobility.

A local NU administrator involved in community affairs explained this pragmatism clearly: "Politics is a personal matter. NU should not be brought openly into it, or it will damage social unity. But as NU members, of course, we have our own choices" (KM, 2025). This statement reflects a deliberate separation between organizational identity and political practice. The informant does not deny NU's historical engagement with politics, but instead reframes political participation as an individual rather than institutional act. From the researcher's interpretation, this separation indicates a strategic depoliticization of NU symbols to avoid social resistance in a cultural environment sensitive to religious mobilization.

A student informant affiliated with NU youth organizations emphasized the instrumental role of NU networks in education: "At first, I joined NU because of mentoring and scholarship information. Religious practices can be adjusted later depending on the local environment" (RF, 2025). This response indicates that NU is perceived not solely as a religious community but also as a gateway to educational opportunities and social advancement. The researcher interprets this as evidence of functional affiliation, in which organizational participation is motivated by rational considerations rather than by deep ritual commitment. In this sense, NU identity becomes a resource rather than a comprehensive worldview.

The empirical flow of this sub-theme can be described as follows: NU affiliation → access to networks → strategic activation → situational withdrawal. Individuals initially engage with NU through social or educational networks, activate their identity when it provides tangible benefits (such as political influence or scholarships), and subsequently downplay that identity in contexts

where it may provoke tension or exclusion. This cyclical pattern reflects a calculated navigation of social structures rather than ideological inconsistency. The researcher interprets this flow as a rational response to structural constraints within Minangkabau society, where overt organizational religiosity can both enable and limit.

Field observations reinforce these interview findings. Political activities involving NU members were conducted primarily through informal gatherings, kinship ties, and personal endorsements, without using NU symbols or organizational rhetoric. Similarly, participation in NU-related programs was often concentrated around moments of educational opportunity such as scholarship announcements, leadership training, or recommendation processes after which levels of engagement noticeably declined. The researcher interprets these observations as indicators of instrumental engagement, in which participation intensity fluctuates in accordance with perceived benefits rather than a long-term ideological attachment.

In summary, the data show that NU identity among Minangkabau Muslims is not abandoned but selectively employed. It functions as a flexible social asset that can be emphasized or subdued depending on situational demands. Political involvement remains personal and informal, while organizational participation is frequently tied to educational and networking incentives. This restatement clarifies that instrumentalization is not synonymous with disloyalty; rather, it reflects adaptive identity management.

The overarching pattern emerging from the data is one of situational religiosity, characterized by pragmatic affiliation, functional participation, and strategic disengagement. NU identity persists as a latent resource rather than a continuously performed commitment. This pattern reinforces the broader analytical framework of “half-hearted devotion”, wherein religious belonging is maintained symbolically but enacted selectively in response to structural opportunities and constraints.

Table 2. Ideational Influence on the Instrumentalization of NU Identity

Informant's Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
NU Local Administrator	"Politics should remain personal; NU should not be displayed openly."	Depoliticization of NU symbols
NU Student Activist	"I joined NU mainly because of mentoring and scholarship access."	Educational instrumentalization
Community Organizer	"If NU is too visible, society may resist."	Strategic identity withdrawal
NU Youth Member	"After graduation, involvement usually decreases."	Temporary organizational engagement
Local Political Actor (NU)	"Support is given through personal networks, not NU labels."	Informal political mobilization

The table demonstrates that instrumentalization occurs across diverse social positions, from students to political actors. Despite differing roles, informants consistently frame NU identity as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The dominant indicators, such as depoliticization, temporary engagement, and informal mobilization, highlight a shared logic of risk management within a socially sensitive environment. NU affiliation is thus treated as a negotiable resource rather than a fixed marker of collective identity.

Furthermore, the convergence of educational and political instrumentalization suggests that NU functions as a platform for social mobility rather than as a site of ritual intensification in Minangkabau. While ideological loyalty remains rhetorically affirmed, practical engagement is calibrated according to benefit and acceptability. This reinforces the interpretation that instrumentalization does not signify ideological erosion, but rather reflects a strategic adaptation to local social hierarchies and cultural expectations.

Overall, the data reveal a consistent pattern of pragmatic identity management. NU affiliation is activated in moments of opportunity and muted in moments of potential conflict. This adaptive pattern confirms that religious identity in Minangkabau is embedded within broader calculations of social harmony, political viability, and educational advancement. Consequently, NU identity is sustained not through overt ideological assertion, but through flexible, situational enactment.

The Transformation of Pesantren Tradition through Youth Cadre Formation

In this study, the transformation of pesantren tradition through youth cadre formation is operationally defined as the process by which core values, norms, and symbolic references of pesantren-based Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) religiosity are transmitted to younger generations via youth and student organizations, namely IPNU, IPPNU, and PMII, while undergoing reinterpretation and functional adjustment. Rather than reproducing pesantren traditions in their ritual completeness, these organizations emphasize flexibility of identity, leadership skills, civic engagement, and ethical-national values. As a result, pesantren tradition persists primarily at the level of discourse and moral orientation, rather than as a consistently embodied set of ritual practices.

Table 3. Youth Narratives on the Transformation of Pesantren Tradition

Interview Excerpt	Indicator	Informant
“We follow pesantren values, but not everything can be practiced here.”	Selective internalization	IPNU Cadre
“In IPPNU, leadership and self-development are more emphasized than rituals.”	Shift toward capacity building.	IPPNU Cadre
“PMII focuses on values and social issues;	Ideological	PMII Activist

Interview Excerpt	Indicator	Informant
rituals are flexible.”	abstraction	
“Pesantren tradition becomes a reference, not a rule.”	Normative distancing	NU-affiliated Student
“Ritual practice depends on the surrounding environment.”	Contextual adaptation	Youth NU Member

The table demonstrates that the pesantren tradition is not rejected by younger NU members but is rearticulated through a framework of selectivity and abstraction. Informants consistently frame pesantren not as a comprehensive ritual system to be replicated, but as a moral and cultural reference that guides general orientation. The repeated emphasis on “values,” “leadership,” and “flexibility” indicates a shift away from embodied ritual practice toward cognitive and ethical affiliation. From the researcher’s perspective, this suggests a decoupling of pesantren tradition from its ritual infrastructure in the process of youth socialization.

More critically, the table reveals a generational reinterpretation of religious authenticity. Whereas pesantren tradition historically relied on disciplined ritual repetition and authoritative transmission, youth organizations frame authenticity in terms of relevance, adaptability, and social engagement. This reframing allows NU identity to remain attractive to younger generations operating in plural, competitive social environments. However, it simultaneously contributes to what this study identifies as symbolic reduction, in which pesantren tradition survives as discourse and identity markers rather than as a lived religious discipline.

Field observations corroborate these interview-based findings. Activities organized by IPNU, IPPNU, and PMII were dominated by leadership training, discussion forums, civic education, and social advocacy. At the same time, ritual practices such as collective dhikr, tahlilan, or structured maulid celebrations were marginal or optional. Even when ritual elements were present, they were simplified and detached from pesantren-style discipline. The researcher interprets this pattern as evidence that youth cadre formation prioritizes organizational sustainability and social relevance over the preservation of ritual continuity.

In essence, the data indicate that pesantren tradition remains a key symbolic and normative reference for young NU members. Nevertheless, its transmission is mediated by organizational priorities that favor flexibility and contextual adaptation. Youth organizations successfully reproduce NU identity at the structural and ideological levels, but do not consistently reproduce pesantren ritual practices in everyday religious life. This restatement clarifies that transformation, rather than erosion, characterizes the current state of pesantren tradition among NU youth in Minangkabau.

The overarching pattern emerging from the data is one of ideological continuity coupled with ritual discontinuity. Pesantren tradition is preserved as a source of legitimacy, identity, and moral vocabulary, while its ritual expressions are selectively enacted or deferred. This pattern reflects a broader adaptation strategy, enabling NU to remain relevant to younger generations while simultaneously reshaping the content and form of its traditional heritage.

Table 4. Ideational Influence on the Transformation of Pesantren Tradition

Informant's Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
IPNU Cadre	"Pesantren teaches values, but practice depends on context."	Contextualized tradition
IPPNU Leader	"Our focus is leadership and ethics, not ritual detail."	Functional reorientation
PMII Activist	"NU values guide us, not rigid rituals."	Ideological abstraction
NU Youth Member	"Tradition is important, but flexibility matters."	Identity flexibilization
Senior NU Mentor	"Youth understand pesantren differently today."	Generational reinterpretation

Table 2 illustrates that a shared understanding across organizational roles structures the transformation of pesantren tradition: tradition must be adaptable to remain meaningful. Indicators such as contextualization, abstraction, and reorientation indicate that pesantren heritage is increasingly expressed in ethical terms rather than in terms of ritual obligation. This transformation allows NU to sustain intergenerational continuity without enforcing uniform religious practice.

At the same time, the table reveals an implicit trade-off. While flexibility enhances inclusivity and organizational resilience, it also weakens the embodied transmission of pesantren discipline. The pesantren tradition thus becomes symbolically potent but practically diluted. This dynamic reinforces the broader analytical theme of "half-hearted devotion," where loyalty to tradition is maintained cognitively and symbolically, yet only partially enacted in everyday religious practice.

Overall, the data depict a consistent pattern of adaptive transformation. The Pesantren tradition is neither abandoned nor fully reproduced; instead, it is selectively translated into values, discourse, and organizational ethos. This pattern confirms that youth cadre formation functions as both a mechanism of continuity and a site of transformation, reshaping NU tradition to fit contemporary social realities while simultaneously redefining the meaning of religious inheritance.

Discussion

The three findings of this study resonate with, yet also extend, existing scholarship on religious adaptation, identity negotiation, and organizational transformation within Muslim societies. The first finding of NU religious practices in Minangkabau aligns with studies emphasizing contextualized religiosity and everyday pragmatism in Islamic practice (Lehtonen et al., 2022; Neo, 2025). Similar to Virga, (2025) Observation of flexible traditionalism within NU, this study confirms that ritual compromise does not necessarily signal doctrinal erosion. However, it diverges from earlier literature that frames adaptation primarily as elite-driven reform *aji furqon* (Azra, 2006; Bruinessen, 2013). Instead, the present findings highlight grassroots agency, where ordinary congregants actively manage symbolic visibility to maintain social harmony under *adat* authority. This contributes to the literature by demonstrating that negotiation is not merely theological but is deeply embedded in local power relations and communal sensibilities, thereby reinforcing arguments about lived religion and micro-level religious governance (Furqon & Hanif, 2022; Wahyudin et al., 2024).

The second finding regarding the instrumentalization of NU identity corresponds with sociological analyses that conceptualize religious affiliation as social and symbolic capital (Sabri, 2024; Sujibto, n.d.). Prior studies have noted NU's role in facilitating political and educational mobility (Rigual et al., 2022; Ulfat, 2025). This study corroborates those insights but nuances them by showing how NU identity in Minangkabau is selectively activated and strategically muted. Unlike studies that interpret instrumentalization as ideological weakening or depoliticization (Adiyono et al., 2024b; Cayir et al., 2022), the findings suggest a rational form of identity management shaped by risk calculation and social sensitivity. Theoretically, this supports a relational understanding of religious identity as situational and performative rather than fixed (Haynes, 2023; Molla, 2024). Practically, this implies that NU's influence is less mediated by formal mobilization and more by informal networks and latent affiliation, with implications for how Islamic organizations design engagement strategies in plural and *adat*-dominated contexts.

The third finding, the transformation of *pesantren* tradition through youth cadre formation, echoes scholarship on generational change and organizational adaptation within Islamic movements (Kingsman & Davis, 2025; Suhendra et al., 2025). Studies on IPNU, IPPNU, and PMII have highlighted their role in leadership development and civic engagement (Mejeh et al., 2023; Meydan & Akkaş, 2024), and this research confirms that these organizations effectively sustain NU at structural and ideological levels. However, it diverges from more optimistic accounts that assume seamless transmission of *pesantren* ethos (Idi, 2022; Robita & Anwar, 2025). The data, instead, reveal a pattern of symbolic reduction, in which *pesantren* tradition is abstracted into values and discourse rather than embodied

ritual discipline. This finding contributes to theory by illustrating how religious traditions can endure through discursive continuity despite ritual discontinuity, thereby reinforcing debates on the decoupling of belief, identity, and practice in late modern religiosity (Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025; Shen, 2025).

Taken together, these findings advance the concept of “half-hearted devotion” as an analytically productive framework for understanding contemporary NU religiosity in Minangkabau. Rather than interpreting compromise, instrumentalization, and abstraction as signs of decline, the study positions them as adaptive strategies that enable continuity under structural constraints. This perspective complements but also challenges dominant narratives in Indonesian Islamic studies that dichotomize tradition and reform, or orthodoxy and accommodation (Fuadi et al., 2024; Schoon, 2025). Theoretically, the study underscores the need to move beyond normative assumptions of religious authenticity and instead examine how power, context, and social negotiation shape religious life. It also contributes to broader debates in the sociology of religion on selective enactment and contextual piety. Practically, the implications are significant for NU and similar faith-based organizations. The findings suggest that sustaining relevance among diverse communities and younger generations may require treating flexibility as a structural condition rather than a deviation. From a policy perspective, religious leaders and educators should recognize that symbolic moderation and instrumental engagement are not necessarily threats to organizational survival but may serve as mechanisms of resilience. At the same time, the observed ritual discontinuity raises questions about long-term transmission of embodied religious practices, calling for reflective strategies that balance adaptability with depth. Overall, this study contributes to both theory and practice by demonstrating that NU religiosity in Minangkabau is best understood not through binary judgments of loyalty or decline, but through a nuanced analysis of negotiated, instrumental, and transformed religious life.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the religious life of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) adherents in Minangkabau is characterized by an adaptive and ambivalent engagement with tradition, shaped by the intersection of religious ideals, local adat authority, and pragmatic social considerations. NU religious practices and pesantren-based norms are sustained primarily as internal moral references rather than as openly asserted public identities. Ritual expressions are selectively moderated, symbolic elements are softened, and organizational affiliation is activated situationally to maintain social harmony, access opportunities, and ensure communal acceptance. The central insight of this research lies in its articulation of “half-hearted devotion” as a patterned form of religiosity, one that preserves ideological loyalty while allowing flexibility in practice. This finding

contributes to broader debates in Islamic studies by demonstrating that religious tradition in minority or non-dominant contexts is maintained not through ritual rigidity but through continuous negotiation, strategic visibility, and generational reinterpretation.

The strength of this study lies in its conceptual contribution to the study of Islam Nusantara and lived religion, particularly by illuminating how tradition, identity, and power interact in everyday religious practice. By foregrounding negotiation, instrumental use of identity, and symbolic transformation as interconnected processes, this research moves beyond dichotomous readings of religious compliance and deviation. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on a single cultural setting and its reliance on qualitative data from a specific community context. Future research could extend this framework through comparative studies across regions where NU occupies different structural positions, or by incorporating longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches to assess how adaptive religiosity evolves. Further inquiry into digital religious spaces and translocal Islamic influences would also be valuable in understanding how symbolic continuity and ritual flexibility shape the future trajectory of pesantren traditions within increasingly plural and mediated social landscapes.

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