PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF ORGANIZATION-BASED MODERATE ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN MADURA

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Abstract

This research aims to understand how Aswaja teachers interpret ikhtilaf in NU-based Aswaja subjects at NU-based Islamic educational institutions in Madura. This research uses a phenomenological approach with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. Phenomenological analysis is used to explore teachers' subjective experiences, then combined with theoretical analysis that refers to Max Weber's theory of social action, specifically the concept of verstehen and the rationality of value (wertrational), to understand the meaning behind their pedagogical actions. The findings of the study show that ikhtilaf has three main meanings. First, as a general and flexible sunnah practice. Second, as mercy, which is seen as a manifestation of Allah's love for His people. Third, as an organizational identity that gains cultural, structural, and theological legitimacy. This meaning is formed through the process of primary socialization in the family and ngaji teachers, as well as secondary socialization in Islamic boarding schools and the social environment of NU-an. From the perspective of social action, this meaning represents the rationality of values based on obedience to scholars and religious postulates. Therefore, when faced with organizations with different views, Aswaja teachers show an open attitude as long as their religious practices are not disturbed or discredited.

Keywords*: Phenomenology; Islamic Education; Moderation; Organization.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana guru Aswaja memaknai ikhtilaf dalam mata pelajaran Aswaja ke-NU-an di lembaga pendidikan Islam berbasis NU di Madura. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi dengan teknik

pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Analisis fenomenologis digunakan untuk menggali pengalaman subjektif guru, kemudian dipadukan dengan analisis teoretis yang merujuk pada teori tindakan sosial Max Weber, khususnya konsep verstehen dan rasionalitas nilai (wertrational), untuk memahami makna di balik tindakan pedagogis mereka. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ikhtilaf memiliki tiga makna utama. Pertama, sebagai amalan sunnah yang bersifat umum dan fleksibel. Kedua, sebagai rahmah, yang dipandang sebagai manifestasi kasih Allah kepada umat-Nya. Ketiga, sebagai identitas organisasi yang memperoleh legitimasi kultural, struktural, dan teologis. Pemaknaan tersebut terbentuk melalui proses sosialisasi primer dalam keluarga dan guru ngaji, serta sosialisasi sekunder di pesantren dan lingkungan sosial ke-NU-an. Dari perspektif tindakan sosial, pemaknaan ini merepresentasikan rasionalitas nilai yang berlandaskan kepatuhan pada ulama dan dalil keagamaan. Oleh karena itu, ketika menghadapi organisasi dengan pandangan berbeda, guru Aswaja menunjukkan sikap terbuka selama praktik keagamaan mereka tidak diganggu atau didiskreditkan.

Kata Kunci*: Fenominologi; Pendidikan Islam; Moderat; Organisasi.*

INTRODUCTION

Questions about ikhtilaf (religious disagreement) in the context of potential intolerance are increasingly relevant in contemporary Muslim societies. The further historical distance from the time of the Prophet, the more interpretive diversity emerges, often accompanied by contestation over religious authority and legitimacy (Abusharif, 2023; Mohiuddin, 2023; Rock-Singer, 2022). In Indonesia, this diversity sometimes manifests in claims of doctrinal superiority among Islamic organizations, even leading to accusations of heresy toward different religious practices (Khanif, 2025; Menchik, 2022; Mulya et al., 2022; Prianto et al., 2024). Such dynamics demonstrate that ikhtilaf is not merely a theological issue, but also a sociological phenomenon closely related to identity construction, institutional authority, and inter-organizational relations.

Within the Indonesian context, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has institutionalized its religious traditions (amaliyah an-nahdliyah) through formal education, including the integration of Aswaja (Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah) subjects into secondary school curricula (Baihaqi & Miskiyah, 2025; Hasanah et al., 2024). This institutionalization aims to strengthen organizational ideology and preserve religious identity. However, it simultaneously raises questions about how ideological reinforcement is negotiated with broader commitments to religious moderation and tolerance, especially in plural educational environments.

Recent international scholarship highlights that religious moderation has become a strategic framework for addressing polarization, radicalization, and

identity-based conflict in educational settings. Empirical studies show that moderation is most effective when internalized through pedagogical processes and institutional culture rather than merely articulated as normative discourse (Afwadzi et al., 2024; Chotimah et al., 2025). Furthermore, bibliometric analyses demonstrate that while research on religious moderation is expanding, there remains a significant gap in examining how moderation is operationalized within organization-based educational systems and how teachers function as key actors in transmitting ideological values (K. Hasan & Juhannis, 2024; Zaluchu et al., 2025).

In this regard, Islamic educational institutions affiliated with major organizations such as NU represent a crucial locus for understanding how moderation is constructed, negotiated, and reproduced. Comparative research on faith-based education emphasizes the importance of analyzing how institutional identity interacts with pluralism and civic cohesion (D'Agostino & Asadullah, 2025). Similarly, recent studies on pesantren show that religious moderation can emerge through dialogical engagement between textual tradition and socio-cultural context, producing a balanced religious ethos rooted in organizational values (Qorib & Umiarso, 2025). These findings suggest that moderation is not simply the absence of extremism, but a socially constructed orientation shaped by institutional structures, cultural practices, and pedagogical interactions.

Previous studies on Aswaja education have primarily focused on value internalization and its impact on students. Recent international research indicates that value internalization in religious education may, in certain contexts, reinforce exclusivist theological boundaries when pedagogical approaches rely heavily on doctrinal affirmation rather than dialogical engagement. For instance, (Husni & Bisri, 2024) demonstrate that prospective Islamic religious teachers may display exclusivist orientations toward differing Islamic sects, suggesting that the internalization of religious values can strengthen group identity while simultaneously limiting openness to intra-religious diversity. Moreover, contemporary research in religious education highlights that tolerance and inclusivity are not automatically produced through curriculum content alone, but depend significantly on how teachers facilitate dialogical engagement and critical reflection in the classroom. Ackroyd & Elton-Chalcraft (2025) show that teachers construct and operationalize concepts such as mutual respect and tolerance through their own interpretive frameworks, which directly shape how students understand religious difference. (Lutfiyani & Ashoumi, 2022) further show that Aswaja learning contributes to anti-radical attitudes among university students, while M. Z. A. Hasan & Ansori (2024) highlight its implications for strengthening moderation through tawassuṭ, tawāzun, tasāmuḥ, and iʿtidāl principles.

However, international scholarship increasingly emphasizes that the effectiveness of religious and values-based education depends not merely on curriculum content or student outcomes, but on how teachers interpret and enact these values in everyday pedagogical practice. Recent studies in religious education demonstrate that teachers construct concepts such as tolerance, respect, and pluralism through their own professional identities, theological commitments, and institutional contexts, which significantly shape classroom culture and students' understanding of difference (Ackroyd & Elton-Chalcraft, 2025; Jarmer, 2025). Similarly, research on faith-based education and social cohesion underscores that organizational identity interacts dynamically with pluralism, and that educators play a decisive role in mediating this relationship (D'Agostino & Asadullah, 2025). These findings suggest that moderation is not automatically embedded in institutional affiliation but is socially constructed through interpretive processes enacted by educational actors.

From a sociological perspective, teachers do not merely deliver curriculum; they interpret, negotiate, and reproduce meaning through pedagogical action. Weber's concept of social action and value rationality (*wertrational*) is particularly relevant, as it explains how individuals act based on internalized value commitments rather than instrumental calculation (Nikolakakis, 2024). In organization-based Islamic education, understanding how teachers interpret *ikhtilaf* is therefore crucial for analyzing whether moderation is practiced as an open recognition of difference or as a conditional tolerance bounded by organizational identity.

This study explicitly aims to analyze and describe the subjective construction of the meaning of *ikhtilaf* among Aswaja teachers in NU-based Islamic educational institutions in Madura. Specifically, this research seeks to: (1) identify the various meanings teachers attribute to the concept of *ikhtilaf*; (2) examine the social, cultural, and institutional processes that shape these meanings; and (3) analyze how such meanings are reproduced in classroom pedagogical practice. By shifting the analytical focus from student outcomes to teacher subjectivity, this study contributes to the growing international discussion on how religious moderation is constructed, negotiated, and institutionalized within faith-based educational settings.

The expected scientific contributions are threefold. First, this study contributes theoretically to the development of organization-based Islamic education studies by applying Weber's social action framework to examine the value rationality underlying teachers' pedagogical behavior. Second, it enriches the study of religious moderation by linking macro-level discourse with micro-level meaning

construction in educational practice (Afwadzi et al., 2024; Zaluchu et al., 2025). Third, it provides practical insight for curriculum development in Aswaja education by highlighting the centrality of teacher subjectivity in shaping students' religious paradigms within plural societies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore the subjective construction of meaning of ikhtilaf among Aswaja teachers in NU-based Islamic educational institutions. A phenomenological approach was chosen because the primary objective of the research is to understand the lived experiences (lived experiences) and interpretive processes through which teachers construct and internalize religious meanings within their socio-institutional context. Contemporary scholarship affirms that phenomenology remains a relevant and rigorous methodological framework for educational research when the focus is on experience, consciousness, and meaning-making processes (Byrne, 2025; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). By adopting this approach, the study seeks to uncover how teachers interpret ikhtilaf not merely as doctrinal content, but as a socially and pedagogically enacted value.

The research was conducted in 2024 at four NU-based Islamic educational institutions in Madura. Informants consisted of five Aswaja teachers selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) actively teaching Aswaja/NU-related subjects; (2) having at least three years of teaching experience; (3) possessing a pesantren educational background or active involvement in NU-related activities; and (4) being willing to participate in in-depth interviews. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, limited participatory observation, and documentation analysis of learning materials. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow participants to articulate their experiences and interpretations freely while still maintaining alignment with the research focus. Such methods are widely recommended in phenomenological educational research because they enable the exploration of participants' interpretive frameworks within their institutional settings (Byrne, 2025).

Data analysis followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes idiographic examination and the double hermeneutic process—where researchers interpret how participants themselves interpret their lived experiences (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). Each interview transcript was analyzed individually to identify emergent themes, followed by cross-case analysis to determine convergences and divergences in meaning construction. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied source and method

triangulation, member checking, and reflexive evaluation throughout the research process. These procedures are consistent with contemporary standards of rigor in qualitative and phenomenological research, particularly when examining value-oriented social action within educational contexts (Byrne, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Result
Ikhtilaf as Rahmah (Blessing)

Based on interview data, several Aswaja teachers interpret *ikhtilaf* as *rahmah* (a blessing). M explicitly stated that differences among the Prophet's community are a blessing for the universe, grounded in the phrase *"ikhtilâfu ummatî rahmatun."* For M, NU's diverse *amaliyah* has clear foundations and thus does not deserve to be questioned. He also affirmed that other organizations may choose practices they consider valid, provided they remain grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah and do not interfere with NU members' religious life:

> *"We leave it alone, the important thing is not to disturb, and we NU people have our own views, after all, the absolute truth belongs to Allah, 'al-haqqu min rabbika fala takunanna minal khasirin'. The practice of amaliyah that brings oneself closer to Allah is permissible as long as there is no evidence that strictly prohibits it. Regarding tahlilan, there are other hadiths, including 40 people praying and dhikr insha allah in istijabah, and so on".*

Similarly, A framed *ikhtilaf* as a blessing and emphasized that differences often arise from divergent viewpoints, particularly regarding *amaliyah* such as qunut, tahlil, maulid, and grave pilgrimage. A also stressed that these differences are not fundamental issues of belief but part of NU tradition that strengthens NU-ness and Aswaja identity:

> *"Ikhtilaf is rahmah, we see that the difference is motivated by different points of view. And we at NU are usually taught with the sentence, ikhtilafu umamti rahmatun, so we are not surprised by the difference. Usually the difference is in the range of qunut, tahlil, maulidan, and grave pilgrimage. We consider it to be not a principle because it is not about beliefs or beliefs. It is a NU tradition, according to the tradition in the community, that's why the material is for the strengthening of NU-an and aswaja-an. If someone heresy or blame us, it doesn't matter, it's up to them to say anything, the important thing is not to disturb, and we are committed to continuing to carry out those amaliyahs, because what we do has its own evidence, this does not violate the teachings of the Prophet even though there are*

those who are not from the Prophet directly, because the Prophet once conveyed alaikum bisunnatî wa sunnati khulafâirrâsyidîn".

Ikhtilaf as Natural Difference (Sunnatullah)

In contrast, Z emphasized that difference is natural and inevitable in all spheres of life. Z viewed *ikhtilaf* as something that occurs "anywhere and anytime," including within families, among scholars, and between organizations. He cited historical examples of disagreements among ulama as evidence that disagreement is part of Islamic intellectual tradition:

> *"In my opinion, ikhtilaf is a difference, and differences are natural. Therefore, wherever and whenever there are differences. In a family between husband and wife, differences are common, especially differences in views of 'amaliyah and so on. Our scholars also often disagree and criticize each other. Imam Shafi'i and his disciples also argued because of differences of opinion, the hadratus of Shaykh KH. Hasyim Asy'ari has also been like that. Moreover, between organizations, there will be differences that will occur. Indeed, in the teachings of aswaja-an there is material that has such content, including the practices of ahlussunnah waljamaah including tahlilan, grave pilgrimage, maulid, shaking hands after greetings in prayer, which exist only in NU, because it is indeed a typical practice of NU".*

Z also acknowledged emotional discomfort when NU practices are labeled bid'ah, yet he emphasized tolerance and non-discrimination:

> *"Of course, as an ordinary human being, I feel disappointed and disagree. But we must still prioritize the common interest over personal interests and we must still foster a sense of tolerance between religious communities and we must not discriminate against those who have different beliefs and cultures. NU's amaliyah is indeed cultural, the result of a combination with the traditions of the past people who were later Islamized, such as tahlil, and grave pilgrimage, the most important thing is that there is a postulate, and what is NU's amaliyah clearly has a postulate".*

MC similarly framed *ikhtilaf* as *sunnatullah* and linked it to NU's fiqh tradition across the four madhhabs, which makes differences inevitable. MC also underlined that Aswaja education helps students deepen NU's *amaliyah* along with its evidences:

> *"Basically, ikhtilaf is sunnatullah because differences show natural diversity and bring grace. NU is synonymous with ikhtilaf because NU has fiqh guidelines in 4 madhhabs that tend to be different, so differences in views are inevitable. NU is very close to the traditions*

> *of the community, that's why the amaliyah is disputed by other organizations, but NU has its foundation so that this understanding continues to be well maintained, including through aswaja education which I consider very good, because students can deepen the amaliyah annahdliyah along with its postulates. Those who disagree are fine, depending on their own choices, the important thing is that they do not interfere, as long as they do not insult… In fact, the Sunnah can also be seen from the companions, 'alaikum bisunnatî wa sunnati khulafâirrâsyidîn'… The mention of bid'ah will not disappear as long as the groups exist…".*

Ikhtilaf as Difference in Furu' Matters

AY described *ikhtilaf* mainly as differences among intellectuals in responding to problems—especially in *far'i* legal matters. AY argued that differences provide solutions and reduce hardship for the ummah, hence they should not lead to conflict:

> *"Ikhtilaf is a difference among intellectuals in responding to various problems that occur, especially in far'i legal issues, but the difference of views is actually not for personal interests alone but for the public interest and in fact the differences provide many solutions for the ummah. Therefore difference is grace. Sharia does not want to impose something that is considered heavy on the ummah, so that it can be used as an option in carrying out religious rules. This difference does not need to be disputed, let alone create a conflict because everything has a postulate of their opinion. This amaliyah is important to be inherited from generation to generation… including through aswaja lessons".*

Observational Findings on NU Amaliyah and Meaning Variation

Observation and interview data show that Aswaja teachers interpret core NU *amaliyah* as religiously grounded and socially meaningful, while also displaying some variation in emphasis:

a. Grave pilgrimage (ziarah kubur): teachers interpret it as praying for the deceased and spiritual reflection. MM stresses introspection for better living; B emphasizes remembering and maintaining relational bonds with parents; SR and MC emphasize devotion to elders and care for relatives who have passed away.

b. Istighasah: interpreted as seeking Allah's help through prayer and dhikr. Socially, it functions to build harmonious relationships and strengthen brotherhood, and teachers perceive it as supporting a moderate religious attitude.

c. Tahlil: understood as dhikr and prayer for the deceased, aligned with NU beliefs and long-established Indonesian tradition. MM, B, AY, and SR stress its role in strengthening social relations and family happiness through communal participation, whereas MC views it as a medium for instilling Islamic teachings through the integration of local tradition with religious principles.

d. Maulid: understood as gratitude for the Prophet's birth and a means to emulate the Prophet and strengthen brotherhood. Teachers follow ulama who permit it, and no major disagreement appears here.

e. Qunut and Tarawih: qunut is considered sunnah practiced by the Prophet; tarawih is understood as 20 rak'ahs in Ramadan. Overall, teachers frame these practices as part of Nahdliyyin identity and peculiarity.

Summary of Empirical Meanings

Based on the data, there are at least three dominant meanings of *ikhtilaf* among Aswaja teachers: (1) *ikhtilaf* as sunnah/sunnatullah (natural and legitimate difference), (2) *ikhtilaf* as rahmah (blessing), and (3) *ikhtilaf* as NU organizational identity, with an additional pattern showing contextual/conditional tolerance when facing accusations such as bid'ah.

Discussion

Teacher Meaning-Making and Moderation as an Institutional–Pedagogical Process

The results confirm a key point in recent international scholarship: moderation and tolerance are not produced automatically by curricular slogans, but by how educators interpret and enact values in everyday pedagogy. Studies in religious education show that teachers operationalize tolerance and respect through their own interpretive frameworks and institutional contexts, shaping classroom culture and how students understand difference (Ackroyd & Elton-Chalcraft, 2025; Jarmer, 2025). Based on the data, teachers consistently frame *ikhtilaf* through interpretive lenses: *rahmah*, *sunnatullah*, and *furu'*, and they translate these meanings into a practical stance of "do not disturb" and "do not insult," which functions as a classroom and community ethic.

This also supports the view that religious moderation is most effective when internalized through institutional culture and learning practices, rather than being merely a normative discourse (Afwadzi et al., 2024; Chotimah et al., 2025). The teachers' repeated emphasis on evidence (*dalil*), scholarly authority, and Aswaja

teaching indicates that moderation is embedded as a lived pedagogical value, not just an abstract ideal.

Weber's Value Rationality and Social Action in the Construction of Ikhtilaf

The empirical meanings expressed by M, A, Z, MC, and AY can be analytically positioned as value-oriented social action in Weberian terms (*wertrational*). Teachers defend and reproduce NU *amaliyah* primarily because they believe these practices are intrinsically valid—grounded in the Qur'an, Sunnah, and scholarly tradition—rather than because of instrumental benefits. This is visible in: (a) M's emphasis that "absolute truth belongs to Allah" and practice is permissible if not prohibited; (b) MC's insistence on madhhab plurality and companion sunnah; and (c) AY's framing of differences as solutions for the ummah. In short, they act based on religious–moral commitments that they consider legitimate, consistent with Weber's view that actions are driven by subjective meanings and internalized values.

At the same time, the findings show that religious meanings become socially durable when institutional structures stabilize them—through Aswaja education, pesantren socialization, and school routines. This helps explain why *ikhtilaf* is not only an abstract theological concept but becomes a reproduced social reality enacted through teaching, ritual routine, and organizational life.

Moderation as "Bounded Openness" and the Role of Organizational Identity

A central contribution of the findings is the form of moderation that emerges: teachers generally promote respect for difference, but their tolerance is contextual and conditional—it holds as long as NU practices are not insulted, prohibited, or delegitimized. This pattern aligns with contemporary discussions that values internalization in religious education can sometimes strengthen identity boundaries even while supporting coexistence (Husni & Bisri, 2024). Z expresses disappointment but chooses tolerance; MC describes bid'ah labeling as "common" yet emphasizes non-interference; A states commitment to continue amaliyah even if blamed, as long as others do not disturb. This suggests moderation operates as negotiated tolerance rather than "unbounded pluralism."

This is especially significant in faith-based education contexts, where institutional identity and civic cohesion must be negotiated simultaneously. Comparative research argues that faith-based education shapes pluralism through institutional identity and the mediating role of educators (D'Agostino & Asadullah, 2025). The result shows exactly this: NU identity is maintained through ritual

distinctiveness (*amaliyah*) while tolerance is expressed as a practical ethic of non-disruption.

Linking Findings to Indonesia's Contemporary Contestations of Authority

Interpretive diversity may be accompanied by contestation over authority and legitimacy, sometimes leading to accusations such as heresy or bid'ah in Indonesian inter-organizational relations (Khanif, 2025; Prianto et al., 2024; Menchik, 2022; Mulya et al., 2022). The Results section provides micro-level confirmation of how such contestation is experienced and managed by teachers: they feel disappointment, but they prioritize social harmony and "common interest," and they rely on theological legitimations (dalil, madhhab tradition, companion sunnah) to preserve identity and prevent conflict escalation. This demonstrates how macro contestations translate into everyday educational and community ethics.

Why This Matters for Aswaja Education and Religious Moderation

Observational findings (ziarah, istighasah, tahlil, maulid, qunut, tarawih) reinforce that moderation is not limited to discourse; it is enacted through ritual interpretation and social functions of religious practice. For example, teachers interpret istighasah and tahlil not only spiritually but also socially—strengthening brotherhood, harmony, and community solidarity. This supports the argument that moderation is cultivated through institutional routines and shared practices, consistent with the broader literature emphasizing internalization through educational culture and lived practice (Afwadzi et al., 2024; Chotimah et al., 2025; Zaluchu et al., 2025).

Overall, this study demonstrates that *ikhtilaf* in NU-based education is constructed as a theological and cultural resource (*rahmah* and *sunnatullah*) while simultaneously functioning as an organizational identity marker. Religious moderation emerges as a teacher-mediated, value-rational, and institutionally reproduced orientation characterized by bounded openness—tolerant coexistence accompanied by the maintenance of identity boundaries.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that Aswaja teachers construct the concept of ikhtilaf within the NU tradition through three interrelated dimensions. First, ikhtilaf is understood as a sunnah-based practice and part of sunnatullah, reflecting the natural and inevitable character of difference within the Muslim community. Second, it is perceived as rahmah (divine grace), enabling flexibility and contextual adaptation in religious practice. Third, ikhtilaf functions as a distinctive

organizational identity of Nahdlatul Ulama, sustained by theological legitimacy and cultural continuity that foster loyalty and institutional commitment. The moderation demonstrated by Aswaja teachers thus represents a form of identity-embedded openness—tolerant toward difference yet bounded when core religious practices are delegitimized or obstructed. This pattern reflects a structured ideological formation grounded in adherence to authoritative scholars and scriptural postulates.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to sociological approaches in Islamic education by demonstrating how religious meaning is constructed through value-oriented social action. By applying Max Weber's concepts of verstehen and value rationality (wertrational), the research shows that teachers' pedagogical practices are not merely instructional acts but are embedded in deeply internalized religious values and organizational commitments. The study therefore extends contemporary discussions on religious moderation by illustrating that moderation in organization-based Islamic education must be understood through the subjective meanings that guide educators' actions, rather than solely at the normative or policy level.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. It involved only five Aswaja teachers from four NU-based institutions in Madura, which limits the transferability of the findings to broader contexts. Moreover, the research focused primarily on teachers' perspectives without incorporating students' viewpoints or comparative data from other Islamic organizations. Future studies are recommended to broaden the empirical scope by including larger and more diverse institutional settings, integrating students as participants, and conducting comparative analyses between NU-based and non-NU-based educational environments. Such research would further enrich understanding of how ikhtilaf and religious moderation are constructed across different socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

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