

# STUDENTS' MEANING-MAKING OF MERDEKA BELAJAR IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION WITHIN NAHDLATUL ULAMA–AFFILIATED SCHOOLS

<sup>1</sup>Ridwan, <sup>2</sup>Muh. Azkar, <sup>3</sup>Maimun

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, <sup>3</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Madura

<sup>1</sup>[ridwan@uinmataram.ac.id](mailto:ridwan@uinmataram.ac.id), <sup>2</sup>[azkarmuh@uinmataram.ac.id](mailto:azkarmuh@uinmataram.ac.id), <sup>3</sup>[maimun2@iainmadura.ac.id](mailto:maimun2@iainmadura.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine students' meaning-making of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) concept in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), particularly within the context of integrating IRE and *Aswaja* (Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah) in educational institutions under the auspices of LP Ma'arif NU, by comparing the experiences of Ahmadiyah minority students and Nahdlatul Ulama–affiliated majority students. Adopting a constructivist paradigm, this research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving 29 students, teachers, parents, and relevant institutional documents across several schools in Lombok and Madura. Data trustworthiness was ensured through source and methodological triangulation. The findings indicate that students generally perceive IRE–Aswaja learning positively, viewing it as moderate, contextually relevant, and conducive to fostering tolerance and openness of thought. Nevertheless, students' interpretations of *Merdeka Belajar* are inherently relative, as they are shaped by the strong socio-ideological construction of Nahdlatul Ulama manifested through the curriculum, school culture, symbolic representations, and familial environments. Consequently, IRE–Aswaja learning functions not only as a means of transmitting religious knowledge but also as a mechanism for shaping students' religious identity and habitus.

Keywords: meaning-making, merdeka belajar, Islamic religious

## INTRODUCTION

The *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) policy positions learners as the central subjects of the educational process, granting them autonomy to develop their potential, creativity, and critical thinking capacities within learning activities (Suyanto, 2020; Widodo, 2022). In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), the *Merdeka Belajar* framework necessitates a pedagogical transformation from doctrinal to dialogical approaches that enable students to construct religious understanding reflectively and contextually (Huda & Kartanegara, 2020; Fauzi, 2020). Accordingly, IRE is conceived not merely as a vehicle for the transmission of values but as a space for cultivating critical and responsible religious consciousness (Rahman, 2021; Yusuf & Abdullah, 2022).

Within educational institutions affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama, IRE is characterized by the integration of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (Aswaja) values that emphasize moderation, tolerance, and balance in religious life (Azra, 2017; Muhtadi, 2019). IRE instruction in Annahdhiyah schools functions both as a medium for the internalization of religious values and as a mechanism for shaping students' socio-religious identities within the ideological framework

of NU (Barton, 2018; Hasan, 2021). This condition illustrates that students' learning processes are inseparable from the social, cultural, and ideological constructions surrounding educational institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 2018; Karman, 2019).

Examining Annahdhiyah students' meaning-making of *Merdeka Belajar* in IRE is therefore crucial, as educational freedom consistently interacts with established religious traditions and value structures (Tilaar, 2019; Muasomah, 2021). On the one hand, students are encouraged to adopt openness and tolerance toward differences; on the other hand, they operate within an educational system that strongly affirms NU's ideological identity (Althusser, 2014; Beilharz, 2016). This dialectic between students' subjective freedom and the institution's ideological structures ultimately shapes their perspectives on the meaning of freedom in religious learning (Bourdieu, 2017; Prasanti & Indriani, 2016).

Therefore, research on Annahdhiyah students' interpretations of *Merdeka Belajar* in Islamic Religious Education is highly relevant for understanding how national education policies are articulated and negotiated within faith-based, organizational educational contexts (Creswell, 2018; Rahman & Kholid, 2021). This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of a more humanistic and moderate IRE paradigm, as well as practically to strengthening the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar* within Nahdlatul Ulama-affiliated educational institutions (Ma'arif, 2021; Arif & Muttaqin, 2022).

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm with a qualitative phenomenological approach, aiming to comprehensively understand and interpret the lived experiences of the research participants within their natural contexts, particularly regarding Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning among Ahmadiyah minority students and Nahdlatul Ulama-affiliated majority students. The research was conducted in several schools in Lombok that enroll Ahmadiyah minority students, as well as in several schools in Madura dominated by students affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama. The primary data sources consisted of 11 Ahmadiyah minority students and 18 Nahdlatul Ulama-affiliated majority students. At the same time, secondary data were obtained from teachers, parents, and a range of supporting documents, including academic literature, print media, and electronic sources. Data collection employed in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation to generate a comprehensive portrayal of the phenomena under investigation. Data trustworthiness was ensured through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation of sources and methods, supported by systematic field notes, documentation, and rigorous data analysis procedures.

## DISCUSSION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in educational institutions under the auspices of LP Ma'arif NU is structured by integrating core IRE subjects—fiqh, hadith, aqidah, akhlaq, and Islamic civilization history—with *Aswaja* (Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah) as a compulsory local content requirement. This integration aims not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to internalize the values, principles, and ideological foundations of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah that underpin the religious identity of Nahdlatul Ulama communities in Indonesia (Nor Hasan, 2013; Pribadi, 2013). In this context, the curriculum functions as an ideological instrument that consolidates students' religious identities from an early stage.

Students' meaning-making of IRE learning, particularly *Aswaja*, cannot be separated from the socio-ideological context in which they are embedded. NU-affiliated schools operate not merely as pedagogical spaces but also as sites of ideological socialization that shape students' worldviews, attitudes, and religious orientations. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, such educational realities are socially constructed through continuous interactions among individuals, institutions, and dominant societal values (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, 2018). Consequently, students' interpretations of *Merdeka Belajar* are contextual and inherently tied to the surrounding social structures.

Interview findings with senior high school students in NU-affiliated schools in Madura reveal a consistent understanding that IRE encompasses both general Islamic religious instruction and *Aswaja*. This shared understanding underscores that *Aswaja* has become an integral component of the IRE learning system within NU schools. These findings reinforce the view that curricula are not value-neutral but are imbued with specific ideological interests institutionalized through formal education (Althusser, 2014; Muasomah, 2013).

As a compulsory local subject, *Aswaja* is strategically positioned to deepen students' understanding of NU's religious principles, including religious moderation, tolerance, and respect for differences among Islamic legal schools (*madhabib*). This internalization occurs through formal classroom instruction, organizational activities, and routinely practiced collective religious rituals. Within the framework of symbolic interactionism, such symbols, language, and religious practices contribute to the formation of students' "mind" and "self" through sustained social interaction (Mead, 1934; Prasanti & Indriani, 2016).

The majority of students interpret IRE and *Aswaja* learning positively, perceiving it as accessible, moderate, and relevant to everyday life. This perception suggests that the internalization of NU ideology is not necessarily experienced as coercive but rather as a naturalized necessity and accepted truth. This condition resonates with Bourdieu's concept of

*doxa*, wherein dominant values and ideologies are taken for granted and remain largely unquestioned (Muhsin, 2017; Zurmailis & Faruk, 2017).

Nevertheless, students' experiences regarding freedom of organizational affiliation vary. Some students report being granted autonomy in choosing their level of organizational involvement, while others face structural obligations to affiliate with NU due to school and familial influences. These variations illustrate a dialectical relationship between individual subjectivity and social structural determination. In this regard, ideology functions both as a social integrative force and as a structural mechanism of legitimation (Aligica & Tarko, 2014; Usman, 2019).

Despite the strong internalization of NU ideology, students generally demonstrate tolerant attitudes toward differing religious organizations and perspectives. Such attitudes are cultivated through *Aswaja* instruction, which emphasizes *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), and openness of thought. This indicates that NU ideology is not entirely exclusive but encompasses inclusive dimensions that enable dialogue and coexistence with other groups (Hartanto, 2016; Beilharz, 2016).

The pervasive presence of NU symbols within the school environment—such as logos, color schemes, photographs of religious figures, and collective ritual practices—further reinforces the objectification of ideology in students' daily lives. These symbols operate as symbolic realities that frame students' social consciousness and lived experiences. Berger and Luckmann argue that symbolic reality exerts significant influence as a primary medium for the internalization of social values and knowledge (Dharma, 2018; Karman, 2015).

Accordingly, Annahdliyah students' meaning-making of *Merdeka Belajar* within IRE cannot be understood as a purely autonomous individual choice but rather as the product of a sustained and naturalized socio-ideological construction. IRE–Aswaja education in NU schools functions not only as a vehicle for transmitting religious knowledge but also as a mechanism for shaping students' habitus, identities, and religious worldviews within a robust ideological community. This condition underscores that freedom of learning in ideologically grounded educational contexts is inherently relative and inseparable from the social realities in which learners are situated (Freire, 2017; Berger & Luckmann, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in educational institutions under the auspices of LP Ma'arif NU is consistently constructed through the integration of core Islamic disciplines—fiqh, hadith, *aqīdah*, *akblāq*, and Islamic history—with *Aswaja* (Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah) as a compulsory local subject that functions as a medium for internalizing the values, ideology, and religious identity of

Nahdlatul Ulama. The findings demonstrate that students generally interpret IRE, particularly *Aswaja*, positively, perceiving it as moderate, accessible, relevant to everyday religious practices, and conducive to fostering tolerance, openness of thought, and respect for differences among Islamic schools of thought and organizations. Although variations exist in students' experiences of freedom of organizational affiliation—some perceive autonomy while others experience structural obligation—the overall learning process unfolds within a robust NU socio-ideological framework shaped by the curriculum, symbolic representations, school culture, teachers' roles, organizational activities, and familial support. From the perspective of the social construction of reality, students' interpretations of *freedom to learn* do not emerge solely as autonomous individual choices but rather as the outcome of the sustained, natural internalization of ideological values from an early age. Accordingly, IRE–*Aswaja* learning in NU-affiliated schools functions not merely as a vehicle for transmitting religious knowledge, but also as a mechanism for the formation of students' religious identity, habitus, and worldview within a communal and ideologically structured social space.

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