

# Farming as an Act of Gratitude: Norms and Practices of Sustainability among Organic Muslim Farmers in Blora, Central Java

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**ABSTRACT** The body of literature on environmental studies suggests that sustainability in the agricultural sector is not only a matter of technical agricultural management but also the ideas, norms, and values that farmers hold, including those influenced by religion. Indonesia, an agricultural as well as a Muslim-majority country, promises to give insights on the issue. This article is based on an empirical qualitative study of Muslim Nahdliyin organic farming community in Blora, Central Java, using lived religion approach and religious creativity theory. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 individuals, including religious leaders, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) administrators, and individual organic farmers, along with participant observation over three months. This article presents several main findings on the motivations, norms, and practices of organic farming by Nahdliyin farmers and the roles of Nahdlatul Ulama Agriculture Development Institute (LPPNU) Blora. While the primary motivations for farmers to switch to organic methods were personal health, soil quality, and pest management, institutional religious authority played important roles, combined with the aspiration to become independent farmers, free from industrially produced chemical fertilizers. Norms based on farmers' religiosity, expressed in Islamic religious language as well as Javanese ethics, were further built into the farmers' agricultural practices to strengthen their resolution to address challenges of organic farming and give religious significance to agricultural practices. Such religious norms include the principles of farming as a form of worship, farmers as stewards of the earth, compassion for nature, self-reliance, and sustainability.

**KEYWORDS** Religious creativity; lived religion; Nahdlatul Ulama; organic farming; agriculture; environment.

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is an agricultural country with the majority of the population relying on the agricultural sector as their main livelihood. In the main food sector, namely rice, data from the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics show that rice production for population consumption in 2022 reached 31.54 million tons per year. This number has increased by 184.50 thousand tons or 0.59 percent compared to the previous year's production, which was recorded at 31.36 million tons (BPS, 2023).

Looking at history, in the period of 1970-2000, Indonesia continuously modernized agriculture through the Green Revolution program. This program aimed to increase agricultural productivity, including commodities such as rice, corn, vegetables, and others (Mardianah, 2022). In 1971, the development was known as the Bimbingan Massal or Bimas (Mass Guidance) program, *Panca Usaha Tani*, in the New Order era. As a result, the development of agriculture was more advanced and productive until it

reached food self-sufficiency. Notably, the agricultural sector, in particular, experienced an increase. In 1974, rice commodities increased by 6%, and secondary and horticultural crops increased by 15% (Nugroho, 2018). The latest evidence is from David Dawe, an economist from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), who says the new technology doubles crop yields with irrigation and non-irrigation systems (Fanslow, 2007).

Nonetheless, the improvement of farming productivity has resulted in the deterioration of the soil ecosystem. The quality and structure of the soil depended on the season, it dried up quickly, and the soil moisture decreased. This is partly evident from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry data. The data shows that from the 2015–2019 period, the total land area for dry and dry mixed bush agriculture decreased by 1,354.5 Ha, with details of 36,450.8 Ha in 2015 to 35,096.3 Ha in 2019 (Nurbaya, 2020).

In general, the global community is increasingly aware of environmental damage and the dangers of agriculture using external inputs to promote agricultural sustainability (Willer, 2023). Thus, organic farming has become an attractive method for farmers. Data from the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and IFOAM shows that, specifically in Indonesia, since 2021, the Indonesian Organic Farmers Alliance has been promoting the Participatory Assurance System, often called “PAMOR” (Willer, 2023). This system has covered 96 hectares of organic land and has been developed through seven local regulations (Willer, 2023, p. 202). This is done to maintain more

natural and sustainable agricultural land and environmental sustainability, as well as improve the welfare of both the land and the farmers themselves.

The choice between organic or non-organic farming is not only a technical issue of agricultural management, but also concerns the farmers' ideas, norms, or values, including those influenced by religion. In the case of Indonesia, this is relevant to discuss, given that religion plays important roles in the lives of most Indonesians, including farmers. Following a Pew Research survey on religious practice, of the six countries surveyed, Indonesia had the highest rate of people (98%) stating that religion is significant, compared with Sri Lanka (92%), Malaysia (85%), Cambodia and Thailand (around 65%), and Singapore (35%) (Jonathan Evans, 2023).

We may ask how the state of environment relates to farmers' religiosity; does religiosity play roles in how people conceive and treat the land; does environmental damage and farmers' dependence on inorganic fertilizers affect their religiosity? Questions like these emerged when farmers' religiosity is juxtaposed with their agricultural practice. The relation between religion and environment, or agriculture more specifically, may run in both directions—one may affect the other. For Finnegan, beyond attempting to create ethics based on interpretations of the Islamic tradition, scholars of Islam and ecology should not overlook how religious ideas or practices may be shaped by experiences with nature, including agriculture (Finnegan 2011, 241).

Four previous studies are notable for providing a basis for this article. The first is

a research about the history of the organic farming and communal environmentalism in South Korea (Kim, 2023). The main topic of discussion focuses on the response to the government Green Revolution program in South Korea in 1960, which made chemical agriculture dominate the agricultural sector, and later resulted in environmental and health problems.

The second is the study on the Brotherhood of the Sun and Sunburst Farms, a religious movement that operated an organic farm from 1969 to 1970, contributing the most significant organic products in America. The third study is about conversion from conventional modern agriculture to organic agriculture in Indonesia (Winarsih et al, 2024). The study discussed the participation of Catholic farmers who regard land and seeds as sacred. They see the earth as a nurturing mother and seeds as the source of life.

The fourth study is about the many meanings of organic farming, food security and food sovereignty in Indonesia (Padmanabhan, 2020). This study specifically describes the development of organic farming in Indonesia. A civil society group called *Bina Sarana Bhakti* were founded in 1984, and *Serikat Petani Indonesia* was founded in 1998, followed by state actors in 2001. The main results of this study show significant differences in the understanding of organic farming between civil society and state actors. The above two groups interpreted organic farming as a socio-cultural spiritual practice and as a political means to escape capitalism. Meanwhile, state actors interpret it as a market opportunity for

organic agriculture for export activities that focus on organic product certification. To this end, this article highlights that a narrow government approach to the definition of organic agriculture may exclude important traditional and innovative practices and suggests the need for regulatory flexibility to encourage innovation and cooperation in the organic sector. Previous studies have mostly focused on the conflict between the state and civil society in defining organic farming. The development of organic agriculture and its benefits in various sectors have been neglected.

One aspect that has not been widely discussed is how organic farming contributes to sustainable agriculture, government policies, and the health of people who choose organic food. There are still a few studies that deeply connect agriculture with healthy food consumption.

The relationship between religion and agriculture in Indonesia, in Islam or other religions, have also rarely been studied. This study contributes to address the knowledge gap by highlighting the perspectives of Muslim farmers in Blora in developing organic farming as part of the collective ecological awareness, and the awareness of the importance of healthy food.

## Methodology

This research aims to explain the development of the religious value-based efforts made by the Nahdlatul Ulama Agricultural Development Institute (Lembaga Pengembangan Pertanian Nahdlatul Ulama, or LPPNU) of Blora Regency. This article argues that organic farming carried out by LPPNU

Blora is at least partially based on the value of religiosity and spirituality of human relations with nature. This study also enhances understanding of the motivations for healthy food culture from the perspective of the NU Muslim community, thus encouraging wider awareness of the importance of organic farming in achieving food security, public health, and environmental sustainability.

The researcher's approach was informed by Nancy Ammerman's (2021) theory of lived religion. The approach of lived religion was increasingly used by researchers in his work the field, and as a tool for processing and presenting data. According to Ammerman, lived religion is a concept oriented toward a person's actions, individually and in groups, based on a religious point of view (Ammerman, 2021). Lived religion is not limited to formal religious actions but applies to broader spectrum of actions such as education, work, politics, economics, etc. This theory guided the researcher to look for manifestations of religion,

Religious creativity is a dynamic process of adapting cultural and religious beliefs to create new thoughts and practices to respond to new social problems, "by making those beliefs support new capacities of action" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 12). With regard to environmental issues, religious creativity invents "new ways of living by re-framing and adapting beliefs to address environmental challenges" (Smith et.al., 2023, p. 3). This theory is used as an analytical tool to see the religious creativity of the research subject, namely organic farmers in Blora.

The elements of this analysis are divided into three aspects: 1) a toolkit

of religious cosmologies and culture, including symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews that people can use in various configurations to solve different types of problems (Smith et al., 2023, p. 3; Jenkins, 2009, p. 10); 2) contextual imagination is an attempt to make environmental problems matter "within a particular community's background beliefs in such a way that the [environmental] problems begin to unsettle, challenge and change those beliefs". (Smith et al., 2023, p. 3; cf. Jenkins, 2009, p. 10); and 3) "joint improvisation between movements and local communities as they skillfully co-create new capacities of experience and new possibilities for practical engagement with environmental problems" (Smith et al., 2023, p. 3; cf. Jenkins, 2009, p. 11).

The methods of the study were qualitative research using interviews and participant observation. In this case, the author conducted research in the Blora Regency area, in the organic farming area under the auspices of LPPNU Blora. This research was conducted intensively for three months using semi-structured interviews and participant observation as data collection methods. The researcher interviewed 13 informants, including organic farmers, Kiais, and NU administrators. The researcher has obtained permission from all informants to participate in this research, from the pre-research stage to the final results. For participant observation, the researcher attended several activities related to organic farming, such as the monthly meeting of the farmer group *Kadang Tani Sarwa Tulus*, surveying farmers' land and LPPNU organic fertilizer warehouse.

To analyze the data, the author uses thematic analysis which is a method for analyzing qualitative data which requires searching through the entire data set to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns (Varpio, 2020). This means that not only presenting data in the form of descriptions, but the researcher undertook interpretation in the process of selecting codes and themes about the norms and practices of LPPNU organic farmers' relationships with religiosity, spirituality and environmental values.

The first stage of this analysis refers to the theory of lived religion which includes lived religious emotion, narratives in religious practice, and morality in religious practice (Ammerman 2021). From these three components, researchers analyzed aspects of special findings related to the research theme. The thematic analysis of data follows Varpio's (2020) six steps: familiarize oneself with the data, generate initial codes, look for themes, review the themes, define and name the themes, and produce reports. In this stage the author uses NVivo as a tool in thematic coding. This means the lived religion approach was used to obtain data from the field, then the data is processed by researchers using thematic analysis method, and, in the second stage related to the presentation of research results or research reports, researchers focus on Jenkins' religious creativity as applied to the organic farmers in Blora. As this research focuses on the religious dimension of farming, there is not much discussion of the technicalities of farm management.

## DISCUSSION

### LPPNU and the History of Organic Farming in Nahdlatul Ulama Tradition

Muslims in Indonesia, a country with the largest Muslim majority population in the world, are represented by a number of Muslim organizations, the largest two of which are Nahdlatul Ulama (with around 45 million members) and Muhammadiyah (around 29 million members). The two organizations are the most influential in Indonesia (Schmidt, 2021). As the largest organization in Indonesia and even the world, NU does not only focus on the religious, educational, economic, and social sectors. It also pays attention to the agricultural development sector, on which the livelihood of the majority of NU members is based.

The LPPNU's bylaws (2021) mandates it as an institution tasked with implementing Nahdlatul Ulama's policies in the field of development and management of agriculture, forestry and the environment (PBNU, 2021, p. 100). For this research, the author examines the district level, namely the LPP PCNU Blora Regency. According to Alwi Abbas, the chairman, LPPNU is an official institution under the structural auspices of PCNU Blora that focuses on agricultural development at the district level, focusing on organic farming (Abbas, Personal Interview, November 4, 2023).

Historically, the earliest embryo of this organic farming program was the Wednesday *wage* recitation activities at the Pesantren Sabilu ar-Rasyad, Banjarejo, Blora District, under the leadership of Gus Subhan, namely "ngaji tani" (literally: "religious discussion on

farming"). According to Muhammad Fatah, the elected chairman of PCNU Blora in 2018, this program was previously called "Sorban", namely "Ansor Banser Bertani Organik," specifically referring to organic farming, which was then included in the strategic program of PCNU Blora with the permission of Blora's elder Kiai (M. Fatah, Personal Interview, January 21, 2024). Through the role of LPPNU, the execution of organic farming was started by the old management Ghofur and Muldiyanto. However, a year later, internal factors changed the management with Alwi Abbas as chairman and Imam Safrudi as secretary. Thus, the initial step taken by PCNU through LPPNU was to create a forum called Pendidikan Kader Petani Nahdliyin Organik (Education of Organic Nahdliyin Farmer, or PKPNO)<sup>1</sup>, whose program was called "organic agriculture as Rahmatan Lil Alamin" with a product called Sehati Rice (healthy, halalan, toyyibah).

Then, at the end of 2020, the regional NU management also launched an organic farming program, which was supervised by the Central Java NU regional management under the leadership of Kiai Ubaidullah Shadaqah as Syuriah and Dr. H Muhammad Muzammil as Tanfidziyah PWNU Central Java, while the PWNU LPP field was chaired by Lutfi Aris Sasongko (PWNU Jateng, 2024).

The organic farming program tried to address the decline of natural resources, which impacts farmers' welfare. For NU administrators and farmers, the main cause of the problem is the continuous use in

<sup>1</sup> "Nahdliyin" means NU member; yet membership in NU is not always defined formally so Nahdliyin also refers to those educated or living in the NU tradition.

conventional agriculture of chemicals as fertilizers, to exterminate pests, insects, and weeds, but then the chemicals decreased the soil nutrients ((M. Fatah, Personal Interview, January 21, 2024). Syafaat, as an organic farmer, explained that pesticides' negative impact is very clear because the nature of pesticides cannot choose which pests need to be eradicated and which organisms that fertilize the soil are beneficial (Syafaat, Personal Interview, November 25, 2023). This is in line with Shiva's opinion (2018) about "military agriculture", which exhibits patriarchal, aggressive, and competitive attitudes of green revolution programs, which resulted in the decline of genetic diversity of traditional farming systems. The NU farmers in Blora chose organic farming as a solution to overcome such environmental impacts. As defined by IFOAM, organic farming prioritizes tradition, innovation, and science to promote fair use of the environment and improve the quality of life for all involved (IFOAM, 2005).

### **Motivations to switch to organic farming and its challenges**

This section explores the Muslim farmers' motivations to switch to organic farming and their experience afterwards; the farmers interviewed were members of a farmer group called Kadang Tani Sarwa Tulus (KTST). Most of the reasons mentioned by the farmers are rational, scientific reasons, but there are also reasons related to religion, either in terms of trust in religious authority (*kyai*) or their own religious self-understanding.

First, the dominant reason for informants in Blora to switch to the organic system is personal health. In Imam Safrudi's testimony,

the most important way to avoid diseases starts with healthy food. “Why are many people now get easily sick? Why are farmers not prosperous? It turns out that it all starts with unhealthy food and the transnational capitalist system” (Safrudi, Personal Interview, November 4, 2023). Another informant, Arif Zaini, who started switching to organic farming and creating a KTST group in 2021, said that organic rice has many nutrients, as he himself experienced after consuming it, and he felt he did not become tired easily, and he rarely got sick (Zaini, Personal Interview, November 16, 2023).

The second reason is soil quality. Slamet Riyadi and Nani, husband and wife, have been practicing organic farming since 2019. They wanted to change the pattern of healthy planting so that the food that enters their body is not contaminated with substances that contain chemicals. In the beginning, they only used fertilizer from their neighbor's animal manure, which was directly sown into the fields without a fermentation process. This required a one-year process to loosen the animal manure (Slamet & Nani, Personal Interview, November 15, 2023).

Another informant, Alwi Abbas, who started organic farming in 2013, said that he wanted to care for the earth. He wanted to shift the orientation of agriculture from business-oriented agriculture to an orientation of caring for the earth, which, according to him, had been done by the ancestors (Abbas, Personal Interview, November 4, 2023). Caring for the earth, for him, is utilizing what God has provided on earth, such as manure from livestock, green leaves of plants, rabbit urine, and so on, to be

used in an integrated farming system (IFS), which integrates agricultural sub-sectors, plants, livestock, and plants to improve the quality of natural resources (Abbas, Personal Interview, November 4, 2023).

The third reason is related to pest management. Humans have been battling agricultural pests for thousands of years. Some pests include insects, weeds, and plant pathogens, which are estimated to reduce one-third of total agricultural production (K. Walker, 2011). For Syafaat, going organic means learning to be friends with pests (Syafaat, Personal Interview, November 25, 2023). Syafaat gave an example of worms, fish, grass, and rats that have a function to fertilize the soil. However, if fertilized with synthetic chemicals, the natural fertilizing function will die because chemical fertilizers is not selective. This method has been able to reduce pest populations resulting in increased yields for 3 years. According to Syafaat's records, the land area per 1000 m<sup>2</sup> produces 300, 500, and 700 kg for three years (Syafaat, Personal Interview, November 25, 2023). Just like Abbas, when attacked, rat pests will attack back by eating plants if given chemical drugs (Abbas, Personal Interview, November 4, 2023).

Fourth, beyond the technical issue of farming, Arif Zaini, the chairman of KTST Purwosari, stated that one of the reasons why he was convinced to move to organic farming by directly establishing the KTST farmer group was “because of it is NU's program” (Zaini, Personal Interview, November 16, 2023). Arif Zaini believes that NU's support means the program has been carefully considered by the *kyais* and agricultural

experts. As such, for him, it has an element of blessing (*barakah*). On the other hand, by joining the NU farmer group, he gained new knowledge and experiences, ranging from religious values about agriculture, the environment, and future health to modern agricultural tools introduced to him, such as soil analysis before farming, the benefits of nutrient-rich fertilizers, more intimate attention to plants, and so on.

An additional important factor mentioned by the farmers relates to independence or self-reliance. Imam Safrudi explains:

*As a result of the chemical intensification system in agriculture in the past, the most felt impact is farmers' dependence on chemical fertilizers produced by the private sector, creating a system of capitalism, as if the private sector controls farmers, rice products, and fertilizers (Safrudi, Personal Interview, November 10, 2023).*

In his explanation, conventional/modern farming resulted in the disconnection of agricultural knowledge from the time of his grandfather, his father, to himself now. For him, organic farming becomes a new paradigm for farmers themselves, because the value obtained is independence (Safrudi, Personal Interview, November 10, 2023).

An element of independence is indicated in the farmers' slogan in Javanese, "ora tuku, ora utang, gawe dewe", which means "do not buy, do not owe, make your own." This slogan is applied in organic farming in LPPNU Blora to create independence and solidarity among *nahdliyin* farmers. Some of the work done to put the slogan into practice in agriculture includes a mutual commitment not to buy

non-local seeds, not to go into debt to banks, and to make organic fertilizer independently.

All informants of this research were committed to making organic fertilizer independently to restore soil fertility and repel pests from their rice fields. Yunus Bachtiar emphasized that the activities of making fertilizers and medicines are farmers' worship activities (Y. Bachtiar, Personal Interview, December 22, 2023).

Yest, despite advantages promised by organic farming and the above motivations, there are real challenges, which partly explains why there are not more farmers converted to organic farming. Slamet and Nani, for example, said that in terms of crop yields organic farming usually has to undergo a phase of significant yield decrease in the beginning of the transition from conventional farming. Slamet notes that when switching to organic, his 1770 m<sup>2</sup> land, which was originally a chemical system that could produce a harvest of around 1300 kilograms, experienced a significant decrease in yield (Slamet & Nani, Personal Interview, November 15, 2023). According to him, organic farming can be successful when it has entered the fourth planting season.

Other informants, such as Mugiono, Muslih, and Khasan Arif, as well as representatives from the Nglangitan and Keser villages, experience psychological pressure almost daily. This pressure comes from fellow farmers who use chemical systems and consider their farms "kere" (poor) farms, too poor to buy fertilizers (KTST Siketan, 2023).

Additional motivations based on Islamic values strengthen the farmers' resolve in

facing those challenges. The next section discusses some of the values that accompany farmers' change to organic farming.

### **Islamic norms and practices for organic farming**

Mary Evelyn Tucker argues that religion is central to how humans relate to nature and has the institutional capacity to influence people's world (Tucker, 2006). In the case of LPPNU, an official religious institution that manages and develops agriculture, today's agriculture also needs a religious approach.

From the interviews with the informants, a few Islamic norms related to organic farming emerged. They partly explain the farmers' religious and other motivations, as well as show the religious significance of organic farming. Among them are farming as an act of worship, *memayu hayuning buwono*, hope only in God, farmer as steward of the earth, and agriculture as a blessing for the whole world.

#### ***Organic farming as an act of worship.***

Kiai Ubaidullah Shadaqah is Rais Syuriah of the Central Java Nahdlatul Ulama Regional Board (PWNU), who was re-elected for the third time in the 2024-2029 period in the XVI Regional Conference (Konferwil) of the Central Java PWNU in Pekalongan, Kiai Ubaid is the eleventh of 14 children of KH Shadaqah Hasan and Nyai Hikmah, both parents are religious school teachers and farmers from Demak, Central Java (Amaliyah, 2024). Since being elected Rais Syuriah in 2013, Kiai Ubaid has been in charge of NU at the regional level for about ten years. He is also the caretaker of Al-Itqon Islamic Boarding School, founded by his grandfather, KH Abdurrosyid Wetan Bugen, Pedurungan, Semarang City.

While leading the Central Java PWNU, Kiai Ubaid actively advocated for environmental conservation. One of his most famous ideas is advocating for organic farming programs as a way to return to nature and avoid the consumption of unhealthy food (Amaliyah, 2024). According to him, society will not be able to keep up with the development of science and information technology if the intelligence of the nation's children decreases due to the consumption of unhealthy food.

Kiai Ubaid conveyed that NU's core is the ulama movement. Ulama do not move for themselves but move for the people. Therefore, NU must be independent so as not to be influenced by politicians and conglomerates (Tifani, 2022). Specifically related to agricultural management, Kiai Ubaid firmly emphasized the ideology of independence of NU farmers. According to him, no matter how many millions of rice imports of this country, whatever the price of rice, growing rice with organic treatment without poisoning food and land with synthetic chemicals is an act of worship for NU farmers (Shadaqah, 2022).

Regarding why rice is the focus the NU program, Kiai Ubaidullah said:

*Why rice was chosen to be an NU program because rice is our staple food; besides that, in the book Bugyatul Mustarsyidin by Sayyid Abdurrahman Ba'lawi, it is explained that rice was created from the light of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. ... Therefore, what must we do to treat this special entity? Do not poison, do not contaminate rice with materials unsuitable for it; how to return to the planting patterns of our*

ancestors in the past without chemical things (Shadaqah, 2021).

In Kiai Ubaid's view, there are five main points that form the basis of NU's organic farming program. First, rice has the privilege of being created from the light of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), so farmers should avoid as much as possible using materials that contain poisonous chemicals and damage the land. Second, due to health factors, Kiai Ubaidullah takes a theological basis from Surah Ar-Ra'ad verse 11, which says: "Verily Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change their condition" (Kemenag RI, 2019). In Kiai Ubaidullah's explanation, Allah would not create all kinds of diseases if humans do not change what is natural into unnatural, so Allah brings calamities.

Third, farmers must prosper so the community will thrive, the government will grow, and the clergy will prosper. Fourth, NU was not created for the development of companies, instead it aims to grow the community. In his analogy, kiai Ubaid said "NU *kok memiliki perusahaan, titenono lak bangkrut*". This means that if there are NU administrators who have the intention of making a profit by creating a company, it will soon fail. Fifth, being a farmer is the most blessed (*barakah*) job. Even though the land is getting narrower yearly, NU residents must still focus on working on rice fields for human survival with organic method (Huda, 2023). For Kiai Ubaid, from a theological point of view, especially from Islam, it is explained that every halal job is a noble job. However, in the context of the noblest work, Islam gives prominence to agriculture, service, and trade workers, which in turn depends on a

productive agricultural industry. Following Sayyid Bakri bin Sayyid M. Syatha Ad-Dimyathi (2005), the most critical source of livelihood is agriculture, because it is closer to the attribute of *tawakkal* (surrender to God), and it produces the most crucial food to be eaten by humans, animals, and other creatures.

### ***Memayu Hayuning Bawono by the principle of Ahlusunnah Wal Jama'ah***

Another norm promoted by LPPNU draws from the Javanese philosophy, known as *memayu hayuning bawono* (literally: to beautify the beauty/harmony of the world), which is often used to symbolize the aspiration for living in harmony with nature. LPPNU Blora promoted the importance of this value in the framework of *Ahlusunnah Wal-Jamaah an-Nahdliyah*. This is described by Yunus Bachtiar in explaining the relationship between NU teachings and agriculture:

*"In NU agricultural practices, nahdliyin citizens are taught memayu haying bawono, which is an effort to improve the condition of damaged land using organic farming, because humans and living things relate to God and both need to improve themselves (Y. Bachtiar, Personal Interview, November 4, 2023)."*

The above explanation indicates that the organic farming sector practiced by the Nahdliyin Muslim community is understood as closely related to religious values, non-human creatures, and environmental health. The Islamic conception constructed in organic farming thus creates a relationship between religion and nature, or ecological cosmology (Jenkins, 2017). For Jenkins,

ecological cosmology is a principle that can help to resolve ecological issues. What he means by ecology, following the opinion of ecologist Aldo Leopold, is that something is right if it tends to maintain the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.

Thus, the relationship between religion and nature has a broader and more complex meaning, not just abstract theological propositions, which only some understand. Instead, the theological propositions are understood as the basis for transforming cosmology in the form of symbols, rituals, traditions, ethical norms, history, and institutional practices as an effort to present God in the view of humans and nature. In this way, following Jenkins, religion is necessarily ecological. (Jenkins, 2017)

### **Hope only in God**

According to Yunus Bachtiar, theological unrest is felt when farmers depend on chemical fertilizers and medicines. Even though it is not stated explicitly, he alluded to its danger to the faith of Muslim farmers: "The belief that if you do not use chemical fertilizers and synthetic drugs, the pests will not disappear, and even the harvest will not be harvested seems to eliminate God's power." (Y. Bachtiar, Personal Interview, December 22, 2023). Similarly, Kiai Ubaidullah is respectful of farmers who want to adopt organic, as he sees the organic method as an effort to reduce dependence on chemicals (Hadi, 2020).

The use of chemical fertilizers has caused problems with agricultural sustainability both in terms of cost and soil fertility, as revealed by farmer Syafaat. Another consequence is that, as the soil hardens, the need for

chemical fertilizers will continue to increase year after year (Syafaat, Personal Interview, November 25, 2023). This means that in terms of agricultural costs, it will burden farmers. In this context, following Shiva's argument in Francisca Yohana Sri Winarsih et al. (2024), it is explained that topsoil erosion is the core of environmental degradation. Furthermore, chemical agriculture destroys 75% of arable land worldwide and impacts the climate by 40%. Topsoil is a basic component of agriculture that takes 300 to 1000 years to restore to its natural state.

### ***Farmer as steward of the earth***

The next view, according to Yunus Bachtiar, is found in Surah al-Baqarah verse 30, which means, "Indeed I (Allah) want to make a caliph on earth" (Kemenag RI, 2019). Kiai Ubaidullah also conveyed the same notion in the LPPNU Blora's first harvest event in 2020 with PKPNO cadre participants. Kiai Ubaid (2020) said:

*"Organic farming will not only nourish the soil, but it is also a manifestation of the attitude of affirming human beings as khalifatullah fil ard."*

This concept is one of the most central notions in the discourse of Islam and ecology.

### ***Agriculture as a blessing for the whole world***

Rahmatan Lil Alamin means compassion for all of the world. Like other religions, Islam also comes to give love not only to Muslims but also to non-Muslims, as well as to the plants and animals on earth. This is an important goal in the central vision of LPPNU Blora. This vision reads:

*"The realization of a resilient farming community, capable to manage*

*and control resources and all their potential by the principles of justice and environmental sustainability towards the achievement of Rahmatan lil' Alamiin (Safrudi, 2020)".*

The explanation is that the effort to improve agricultural land with organic treatment implies the teachings of Rahmatan Lil Alamin, which essentially shows a shared commitment to human values, social sensitivity, and empathy for humans and the land and its ecosystem. In short, the Muslim community in Blora has valued compassion for all nature through reflection and appreciation to be transformed into reality in agricultural business through organic systems.

#### ***Reliance on or submission to God***

For Arif Mukhlisin, an independent farmer from Dringo Village, Todanan, is one of the strongest reasons for switching to organic farming due to religion. In particular, Arif Mukhlisin calls organic farming Sufi farming. According to his confession, when running an organic farming system, he feels the tranquility of life. Arif reflects:

*Organic farming is my tariqah. Honestly, I feel more at peace doing anything. Why do humans want to see and pay attention to the plants in the forest that are not treated successfully, live, develop, and even benefit the surrounding people. Moreover, we take care of plants daily, such as organic rice (Mukhlisin, Personal Interview, December 7, 2023).*

Essentially, according to Arif Mukhlisin, if humans are willing and able to reflect on the whole of life, the Creator has provided and cared for the world and its contents, both in

terms of benefits and uses. Even untreated plants have their position according to their portion. Arif gave an example of a forest that is overgrown with grass for animal food, even teak trees can have an economic impact if sold, and can also be used as shelter for humans, both used naturally and for building houses. Likewise, in organic farming, farmers are only required to try, the rest, related to the results, belongs to the Creator's providence (Mukhlisin, Personal Interview, December 7, 2023). In this context, Sufi agriculture is a type of worship based on the environment. The environment is used as a medium to get to God, building spiritualism through the relationship between humans, nature, and God (Wirajaya, 2021). This means that destroying and destroying the environment can be said to be as destructive as destroying itself and the sustainability provided by God.

#### ***Organic farming rituals***

In addition to the above Islamic norms, in practice the religiosity of organic farming is shown in how rituals are performed during farming. The rituals were part of the NU tradition, developed in the framework of organic farming. Imam Safrudi explains that every time he visits the rice fields, he reads surah al-Fatihah, which will be sent to Prophet Idris. He believes the Prophet Idris is an intermediary to guard the crop yields against pests, and for health (Safrudi, Personal Interview, November 10, 2023). He also practices Javanese rituals of *kawit* (in the beginning of planting, to hope for good harvest) and *wiwit* (cutting one stalk of rice that is ready to be harvested, followed by looking for a day to cut the harvest) (Mujadi, 1978).

Slamet Riyadi and Nani perform their ritual by reciting the prophet Muhammad's *shalawat* when pulling grass (*matun*) and sowing fertilizer, in order to ask for blessings for the plants. Another ritual is reading the Qur'anic Chapter *Surah al-Fiil* from the left to the right of the rice field to avoid pests like rats, leafhoppers, and the like, instead of installing electrified rat traps like their neighbors do. The trap can hurt the rats and kill them, or even hurt humans if they neglect to turn off the electricity (Slamet & Nani, Personal Interview, November 15, 2023) In the case of Blora, deaths due to rat sting negligence are rampant, especially in the South Blora area. It is recorded that almost every year from 2022 to 2024 in Kedungtuban Subdistrict, there are fatalities. Even in two months, two farmers died in rice fields due to rat stings (Jamil, 2023).

A different ritual is performed by Arif Zaini, a farmer who owns 3000 m<sup>2</sup> of land. He always conveys *salam* and *shalawat* when leaving and going around the rice fields. He said:

*At least when we are in the field as much as possible, we interact in conversation with the plants because plants also have feelings, but cannot express them. If the plants are visited often, they are happy, and the pests are rare because they are uncomfortable. Likewise, they will not pay attention to their owners if the plants are not visited often (Zaini, Personal Interview, November 16, 2023).*

Almost all NU organic farmers in Blora also believe in and practice the ritual of talking to the land and plants.

This practice is not unknown in other parts of the world. Karen Houle (2018) argues that

intellectual awareness is needed to establish the relationship between plants and the living philosophy of the plant body. In order to listen and teach plants to communicate, one must learn to listen to silence, leaving a space that cannot be translated intellectually so as not to be reached by human voices and discursive categories into the plant world (Marder, 2017).

### **Religious Creativity of Organic NU Farmers in Blora**

"Religious creativity often uses new social problems to confirm their most important beliefs, and revise their function by making those beliefs support new capacities of action." (Jenkins, 2009, p. 12). Jenkins (2010) argues that problem-based approaches can benefit by considering faith communities' efforts to undertake cultural reform. By using this approach, the researcher uncovers background worldviews and ontological assumptions related to sustainability issues (Jenkins, 2010, p. 1).

In this research, the community of Muslim farmers faced crucial challenges, which they then addressed by their religious creativity. The findings of this study reveal several factors that underlie the agricultural problem: 1) socio-cultural problems resulting in declining local wisdom, 2) dependence on new technology which was feared to degrade *fatih*, 3) environmental issues caused by the dangers of chemicals resulting in land degradation, 4) health issues that result from unhealthy consumption, and 5) political-economic issues caused by capitalism in agriculture that affect farmers' independence.

Contextual imagination is needed to address the problems the farmers face.

According to Roger King (1999), effective environmental work relies on moral agents with a contextual imagination who can see problems as crucial so that they feel challenging, troubling, and even stimulating beliefs change. Moral agents in this context include the Kyais, NU institutional administrators, and farmers. In our data, the above problems created socio-cultural, economic and health impacts, as well as impacts on religiosity and spirituality. If these are not addressed, they will affect environmental sustainability and farmers' welfare.

Finally, joint improvisation is a strategy of collaborating various elements to create new ways. Some new practices and concepts introduced by the Muslim movement collaboration include: 1) institution building by KTST and LPPNU, 2) self-reliance by making their fertilizers and medicines, summarized in the slogan "*ora utang, ora tuku, gave dewe*", 3) farming norms and practices to create farmers' religiosity and spirituality, 4) sustainability and increased welfare of farmers, and 5) collective ethical work to achieve a comfortable and peaceful life.

## CONCLUSION

Awareness of the degradation of natural resources and health, as well as cultural, social, economic, and political problems are at the heart of agricultural problems among the Muslim community in Blora. The collaborative movement between LPPNU Blora and Nahdliyin farmers built a link between religion and organic farming practices as a new way to respond to those problems.

What takes place in the Nahdliyin farming community in Blora may be described as the enactment of two stages: first, "agricultural practices becoming norms," and, second, "norms are modified into new agricultural practices". This process involved both NU administrators and NU farmers.

With regard to "agricultural practices becoming new norms", we have shown how the NU board of the Blora branch mobilized LPPNU as a socio-religious organization to address what they see as the increasingly problematic agricultural practices of Nahdliyin residents in Blora. For example, the belief that if they do not use chemicals, crop yields will decline or even fail. This motivated the NU kyais to create norms that address the problem by referring to Islamic reasoning, using the standard NU Islamic canon.

This was the first stage of agricultural practices motivating the creation of (new) norms, where religious creativity was in operation, deployed by institutional authorities (kiai, agricultural practitioners, and policymakers). This was followed by a campaign for organic farming system oriented towards the value of worship, *ahlusunnah wal jamaah*, care for the earth, compassion for all nature, health, independence, and welfare. These values were socialized, and institutionalized. All these were part of the typical legal basis of NU fiqh, manifested in the agricultural community. Eventually, this became everyday religious manifestation of the farmers.

LPPNU did not stop at promoting the religious values of organic farming, but also facilitates the transfer of knowledge and

mentoring about the principles of sustainable agriculture, pre-planting, planting and post-planting maintenance practices, and training in the production of organic fertilizer. This is part of the second stage, where new norms generate new agricultural practices.

There was a variety of motivations, reasons, and backgrounds behind farmers' transition to organic farming. Some were influenced by natural or health factors, while others were motivated by institutional factors. The farmers in Blora carried out the ethical mission of organic farming by living on the land in accordance with their religious values, bringing God's presence into their farming activities. They incorporate religious ideas and practices in activities such as making organic fertilizer, planting rice, and interacting with plants. They were also motivated by the moral imperative of preserving their ancestors' heritage.

In these ways, religion plays multiple roles in the practices of NU farmers in Blora through collective innovations in their religious understanding of their own selves and the environment, as well as their agricultural practices. Institutional religion or authority is instrumental in this process, but does not fully determine the transformation. Farmers' own experiences and religious creativity contribute to sustaining and further developing their religious understanding and agricultural practices. In this process, religion becomes a social unifier through farmers' collaboration with religious actors, practitioners, and policymakers, based on the aspiration for a better relationship between humans and nature, as well as improved lives in terms of both their faith and welfare.

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