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## **Islam and Cultural Diversity: A Study of Harmony Multiculturalism in Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the role of Islam in fostering multicultural harmony in Indonesia, a nation characterized by its cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. As the majority religion, Islam has made a significant contribution to shaping inclusive and tolerant patterns of social interaction. Islamic values such as justice, respect for differences (ikhtilaf), and the principle of tasamuh serve as ethical foundations that encourage harmonious relations among diverse groups. This study explores how these values are implemented within Indonesian society through religious practices, pesantren education, the roles of ulama, and Islamic organizations that actively promote moderation and dialogue. Using a qualitative approach supported by literature analysis and case studies in several multicultural communities, the findings indicate that Islam functions as an integrative force capable of bridging differences and strengthening social cohesion. Nevertheless, challenges such as stereotypes, the politicization of religion, and the influence of intolerant ideologies remain threats that require serious attention. This study underscores the importance of strengthening multicultural education based on moderate Islamic values to ensure the sustainability of social harmony amid the dynamic changes occurring in Indonesian society.*

**Keywords:** Islam; Multiculturalism; Cultural Diversity; Tolerance; Social Harmony; Religious Moderation; Indonesia.

### **Abstrak**

*Penelitian ini membahas peran Islam dalam membangun harmoni multikultural di Indonesia, sebuah negara yang dikenal dengan keragaman budaya, etnis, dan agama. Sebagai agama mayoritas, Islam memiliki kontribusi signifikan dalam membentuk pola interaksi sosial yang inklusif dan toleran. Nilai-nilai Islam seperti keadilan, penghormatan terhadap perbedaan (ikhtilaf), serta prinsip tasamuh menjadi landasan etis yang mendorong terciptanya hubungan harmonis antarkelompok. Studi ini menelusuri bagaimana nilai-nilai tersebut diterapkan dalam konteks masyarakat Indonesia melalui praktik-praktik keagamaan, pendidikan pesantren, peran ulama, serta organisasi Islam yang aktif mempromosikan moderasi dan dialog. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis literatur dan studi kasus di beberapa komunitas multikultural. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Islam berperan sebagai kekuatan integratif yang mampu menjembatani perbedaan dan memperkuat kohesi sosial. Namun demikian, tantangan seperti stereotip, politisasi agama, dan pengaruh paham intoleran tetap menjadi ancaman yang perlu diantisipasi. Studi ini menegaskan pentingnya penguatan pendidikan multikultural berbasis nilai-nilai Islam moderat agar harmoni sosial dapat terus terjaga di tengah dinamika perubahan masyarakat Indonesia.*

**Kata kunci:** Islam; Multikulturalisme; Keragaman Budaya; Toleransi; Harmoni Sosial; Moderasi Beragama; Indonesia.



## Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelagic nation with a high level of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. This diversity is both a national characteristic and a social asset that can enrich the dynamics of community life. However, this diversity also carries the potential to create social friction if not managed properly. In this context, the presence of Islam as the majority religion has a significant influence on the formation of social relations between individuals and groups. Islam exists not only as a belief system but also as an ethical guideline that teaches the values of tolerance, justice, and peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society. Therefore, studying Islam's contribution to strengthening multicultural harmony is highly relevant amidst the challenges of Indonesia's diversity.(Laso, Rahayu, & Nadiya, 2022).

Since its inception, Islam in the Indonesian archipelago has developed through a peaceful, dialogical, and accommodating approach to local culture. This is evident in the way early Islamic scholars and preachers taught Islam through cultural approaches, such as art, traditions, and local customs. Islam did not come to eliminate culture, but rather sought to align it with the values of monotheism and morality. This approach has contributed to the development of an inclusive, welcoming, and respectful style of Indonesian Islam. This style has become the foundation for harmonious multicultural living practices in various regions.(Amnan, 2022).

In modern social developments, Islam continues to play a strategic role in strengthening social cohesion. For example, traditional Islamic educational institutions, such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), foster the values of tolerance, ethical social interaction, and respect for diversity. The pesantren curriculum not only teaches religious knowledge but also shapes the character of students, enabling them to live side by side with the wider community, which comes from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, ulama (Islamic scholars) and religious leaders play a crucial role as social mediators, able to mitigate potential conflicts through sermons, fatwas (religious decrees), and by example in daily life. At the organizational level, several Islamic organizations play a role in promoting moderation and interfaith dialogue, thus creating a space for healthy and constructive interaction.

However, efforts to maintain multicultural harmony are not without challenges. The rise of intolerant movements, the misuse of religious identity in politics, and biased information on social media are factors that can trigger social disharmony. These challenges require a comprehensive response through strengthening multicultural

education, empowering moderate religious leaders, and strengthening the narrative of diversity in line with the Islamic values of rahmatan lil 'alamin.(Arroisi, 2020).

Thus, research on the role of Islam in building multicultural harmony in Indonesia is crucial for providing a deeper understanding of how Islamic values can function as an integrative force in a pluralistic society. This study is expected to make academic contributions and serve as a reference in efforts to strengthen tolerance, dialogue, and social harmony amidst Indonesia's diversity.

## **Research Methods**

This research uses a qualitative approach with the aim of in-depth understanding of Islam's role in building multicultural harmony in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because it can holistically describe social phenomena, particularly those related to values, culture, and religious practices in community life. The primary methods employed are literature review and case studies. The literature review was conducted by examining various sources, such as books, journal articles, research reports, and official documents, that discuss multiculturalism, religious moderation, Islamic education, and social dynamics in Indonesia. This approach helps build a theoretical framework and strengthen the analysis.(Anistiyani, 2022).

Furthermore, case studies were conducted in several multicultural communities that represent Indonesia's diversity. Data collection was conducted through non-participatory observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with religious leaders, Islamic boarding school administrators, and members of Islamic organizations involved in moderation and dialogue programs. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, with coding, categorization, and conclusion-drawing steps to identify patterns and themes related to Islamic values, tolerance practices, and factors that support and hinder multicultural harmony. This method allows researchers to comprehensively understand the role of Islam from a social, cultural, and religious perspective within the context of pluralistic Indonesian society.(MA, 2020).

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Islamic Values as the Foundation of Multicultural Harmony***

Islam, as a religion that carries the mission of rahmatan lil 'alamin (blessing for all the universe), provides a very strong ethical foundation for creating harmony in a diverse society. The fundamental values in Islam not only regulate the relationship between humans and God but also regulate social relations among fellow human beings. In the context of a multicultural society like Indonesia, these values play a crucial role in shaping patterns of interaction that are inclusive, tolerant, and respectful of differences. One of these core values is justice (al-'adl), which is a fundamental principle in all social actions. Islam emphasizes that no group or individual should be treated discriminatory simply because of ethnic, cultural, or religious differences. Justice is the foundation that allows all groups to feel valued and recognized.(Daniel & Anwar, 2014).

Furthermore, the value of ikhtilaf, or respect for differences, is also an important pillar of multicultural life. Islam recognizes that diversity is part of the sunnatullah (the law of God), as stated in the Qur'an that humans were created into tribes and nations so that they could get to know each other (ta'aruf). This value encourages Muslims to view differences not as threats, but as social riches that must be nurtured. This principle is particularly relevant in the context of Indonesia, which has hundreds of ethnicities and cultures living side by side. Through an understanding of ikhtilaf, society can build mutual respect and avoid negative prejudices against other groups.

The principle of tolerance, or tasamuh, is also crucial for creating multicultural harmony. In Islamic teachings, tolerance does not mean abandoning one's beliefs, but rather respecting the beliefs of others and allowing them space to practice their own religion and traditions. This tolerant attitude is often manifested in everyday practices, such as interfaith cooperation, mutual cooperation, and mutual assistance in social activities. In many regions of Indonesia, the value of Islamic tolerance is evident in communities living side by side with adherents of other faiths without significant conflict.(et.al, 2021).

Furthermore, the concept of ukhuwah or brotherhood strengthens social

ties in a multicultural society. Islam teaches three forms of brotherhood: ukhuwah Islamiyah, ukhuwah wathaniyah, and ukhuwah insaniyah. The latter two concepts emphasize that brotherhood is not limited by faith but also encompasses national and humanitarian ties. This affirms that every human being has equal dignity before God. This value encourages the creation of equal and harmonious social relations among citizens.(Harahap, 2021).

Thus, these Islamic values form a solid foundation for building multicultural harmony in Indonesia. By internalizing the values of justice, respect for differences, tolerance, and brotherhood, society can create a peaceful and respectful social environment amidst existing diversity.

### ***The Role of Ulama and Religious Figures***

Ulema and religious leaders play a central role in maintaining multicultural harmony in Indonesia. As respected figures and references for the community, ulema serve not only as transmitters of religious teachings but also as guardians of morality, unifiers of society, and mediators in various social issues. In the context of multiculturalism, their role becomes even more significant because the values they teach and the examples they set can directly impact societal attitudes and behaviors regarding differences in culture, religion, and other social identities.

One of the primary roles of religious scholars is to provide a moderate and inclusive understanding of religion. Through lectures, religious studies, sermons, and fatwas, religious scholars can instill values of tolerance, respect for differences, and the importance of maintaining harmony among people. They are often the ones explaining that Islam does not teach violence or hostility towards different groups, but rather encourages the creation and creation of dialogue. A correct understanding of Islamic teachings is crucial, especially in the modern era when religious information is easily misused or disseminated unfiltered through social media.(Iqbal, Izzatushobikhah, & Sari, 2023).

Furthermore, religious scholars also play a role as mediators in mitigating social conflict. In a pluralistic society, friction or misunderstandings between groups can arise. Respected religious scholars have the ability to mediate and provide calming explanations, allowing conflicts to be resolved peacefully. Many

cases in Indonesia demonstrate that the presence of wise local religious scholars can prevent identity conflicts from escalating and becoming destructive. Their presence in the community provides a source of calm and social stability.

Another equally important role is role modelling. The inclusive attitude, openness, and ability of clerics to interact with diverse groups serve as concrete examples for society. When clerics demonstrate a welcoming attitude toward followers of other faiths, participate in cross-community social activities, or support local traditions that do not conflict with Islamic teachings, the community will be encouraged to follow suit. This kind of exemplary behavior is powerful because Indonesian society highly values charismatic and courteous figures.(Iqbal et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Islamic scholars play a role in both formal and informal education, particularly in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), madrasas (Islamic schools), and religious study groups (Majelis Taklim). Through these institutions, they instill the values of multiculturalism in the younger generation from an early age. Teaching morals, etiquette, and peaceful Islamic history helps shape the character of students, enabling them to become individuals capable of coexisting with diversity.(M.Pd.I & MSI, nd).

Thus, the role of ulama and religious leaders is vital in maintaining multicultural stability and harmony. Through moderate preaching, conflict mediation, moral example, and character education, ulama are at the forefront of affirming Islamic values as a unifying force in Indonesia's diverse society.

### ***Islam as a Source of Social Ethics in a Pluralistic Society***

Islam exists not only as a belief system but also as a moral guideline governing human social behavior in everyday life. In Indonesia's diverse society, ethical values derived from Islamic teachings are a crucial instrument in fostering a harmonious and civilized social life. Islamic social ethics encompass principles emphasizing honesty, justice, respect for others, and mutual assistance. These values serve as guidelines for both individuals and Muslim communities in establishing social relations with groups of different cultures, languages, and religions.(Ramadhan, Syafrizal, & Oktapani, 2024).

One of the core ethical values in Islam is al-'adl, or justice. Justice in a social context means granting equal rights to all parties regardless of their identity. This teaching rejects all forms of discrimination and injustice, which often become sources of conflict in multicultural societies. By upholding the principle of justice, Muslim communities can play an active role in creating a safe and conducive social environment for all citizens, both Muslims and non-Muslims.

In addition to justice, Islam also teaches the importance of ihsan, which means doing good with sincerity. This value encourages Muslims to treat others not only fairly but also in a manner that goes beyond what is required. Ihsan serves as a moral foundation that fosters mutual respect, care, and empathy for others. In a pluralistic society, this value can be realized through cooperation in social activities, mutual assistance (gotong royong), and active involvement in maintaining environmental order and the common good.(Ramadhani & Musyrapah, 2024).

The concept of ukhuwah insaniyah, or human brotherhood, is also an essential part of Islamic social ethics. This teaching emphasizes the equal dignity of all human beings before God. Thus, Muslims are taught to respect and honor every individual regardless of religious, ethnic, or cultural differences. This ethic of brotherhood is particularly relevant in the context of Indonesia, which boasts significant ethnic and religious diversity, as it fosters peaceful social relations and mutual respect.

Furthermore, Islam also emphasizes the importance of ta'aruf, or getting to know and understand each other. This concept demonstrates that differences are inevitable, planned by God so that humans can learn from one another. This ethic fosters open, dialogical, and anti-prejudice interaction patterns.(Suladi, nd)

Thus, Islamic social ethical values serve as a crucial foundation for Indonesia's pluralistic society. By internalizing the values of justice, ihsan (goodness), brotherhood, and mutual understanding, Muslims are able to actively contribute to creating a harmonious and inclusive social order amidst the nation's diversity.

### ***Islamic Cultural Practices that Promote Social Integration***

Islamic cultural practices play a crucial role in strengthening social integration amidst the diversity of Indonesian society. Islam, as it developed in the archipelago, demonstrated an adaptive character to local cultures, giving rise to religious traditions that function not only as spiritual rituals but also as social tools that strengthen intergroup relations. These practices provide a space for all elements of society, both Muslims and non-Muslims, to engage in various joint activities that foster a sense of togetherness and social solidarity.

One of the most prominent cultural practices is the tradition of religious celebrations such as the Prophet's birthday, tahlilan (religious recitation), and communal dhikr (remembrance of God). These activities are usually held openly and involve people of all ages, ethnicities, and social classes. In some regions, the maulid celebration even becomes a public festival accompanied by local arts, food feasts, and social activities. These moments truly become spaces for social interaction that strengthen communication and closeness among residents. The presence of these traditions demonstrates that Islam does not act as a dividing force, but rather as a unifying force in the social life of the community.(Wijaya, 2024).

Furthermore, the practice of gotong royong (community service), which holds religious value in Islam, is also an effective means of fostering social integration. Working together to clean mosques, repair roads, or assist residents in disasters provides a platform for collaboration between Muslims and other communities. By helping each other regardless of identity, social integration grows naturally and sustainably. Islam teaches the importance of ta'awun (mutual assistance in good deeds), and this value is clearly reflected in the culture of gotong royong (mutual cooperation) across Indonesia.(Iqbal et al., 2023).

The acculturation of local culture and Islamic teachings also strengthens social cohesion. Many traditional traditions, such as the earth almsgiving (sedekah bumi), kenduri (a traditional feast), or traditional wedding ceremonies, integrate Islamic values without eliminating local cultural elements. These traditions create an inclusive social space, where religious and cultural values collaborate to strengthen a shared identity. People from diverse backgrounds can participate in

Islamic-themed traditional activities, thereby strengthening social bonds.

Another cultural practice is cultural da'wah, an approach to conveying Islamic teachings through arts and culture such as wayang (wayang), hadrah (traditional Javanese musical instruments), marawis (traditional Javanese musical instruments), and calligraphy. This approach is more easily accepted by multicultural communities because it uses familiar local cultural languages. This inclusive da'wah avoids cultural clashes and fosters mutual understanding.(Aminudin & Ediyono, 2025).

Thus, Islamic cultural practices not only maintain religious traditions but also serve as an effective medium for social integration. Through religious traditions, mutual cooperation, cultural acculturation, and cultural preaching, Islam strengthens the social fabric of Indonesia's diverse society, creating a harmonious and shared life.

### ***The Role of Muslim Families in Developing Tolerant Attitudes***

The family is the primary environment in which an individual's character is formed, including instilling tolerance. From an Islamic perspective, the family holds a crucial position as the center of moral, ethical, and spiritual education for children. Therefore, Muslim families play a strategic role in shaping children's understanding and behavior toward the diversity within their environment. Islamic values, which teach peace, mutual respect, and justice, can be introduced from an early age through concrete examples in everyday life.

One way Muslim families foster a tolerant attitude is through moral education. Parents teach their children to respect others, to be mindful of their language, to be kind to their neighbors, and to avoid prejudice. These values are reinforced by direct role models from family members, for example, through polite speech, respect for others' opinions, and building good relationships with neighbors of different religions or ethnicities. In many cases, children who are accustomed to a friendly and open family environment tend to grow up to be more tolerant and inclusive individuals.(Dian Fitria Tanjung & Mm, 2024).

Furthermore, families play a role in introducing a moderate understanding of Islam. Parents can explain the teachings of rahmatan lil 'alamin (mercy for the

universe), ta'aruf (conversation with others), and human brotherhood, so that children understand that Islam respects differences as part of God's creation. This understanding helps children avoid excessive exclusivity or fanaticism. In the digital age, when children are easily exposed to intolerant content, the family's role as an information filter is crucial. Parents who actively discuss and accompany their children in using social media can prevent the spread of deviant beliefs.

Families can also build direct experiences in living with tolerance by involving children in social activities, such as community service, social visits, or cross-community activities. Positive interactions with diverse communities help children understand that differences are not threats, but rather a part of living together and should be valued. In this context, families act as facilitators of social experiences that shape children's perspectives on diversity.(Riadi, 2024).

Equally important, warm and open communication within the family forms the foundation for developing healthy character. Children accustomed to polite dialogue are more likely to appreciate differences of opinion outside the home. Therefore, Muslim families are the initial foundation for fostering tolerance within society. Through moral education, role models, an understanding of moderate Islam, and positive social experiences, families contribute significantly to creating a generation capable of living harmoniously amidst diversity.(Siregar, 2013).

### ***The Impact of Multicultural Harmony on National Stability***

Multicultural harmony contributes significantly to national stability, especially in the context of a country as large and diverse as Indonesia. When various ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups can coexist peacefully, social spaces become more conducive to national development and integration.(Arifin, Nurhidayat, & Panji, 2021).

Islam, as the majority religion, plays a central role in maintaining this harmony, as values such as brotherhood (ukhuwwah), tolerance (tasamuh), and 'adl (adl) encourage humane interactions, mutual respect, and justice. When these values are practiced in daily life, the potential for social friction can be minimized, thereby enhancing public security. This stable social environment is a crucial prerequisite for effective economic development, education, and governance.

Thus, multicultural harmony is not only a moral and cultural aspect but also a strategic foundation for a strong nation.

Furthermore, multicultural harmony strengthens national resilience by fostering a sense of belonging among all citizens, regardless of identity background. Collective awareness that diversity is a national strength makes society more prepared to face provocation, radicalism, and the politicization of identity, which often trigger social conflict. When society has a high level of tolerance and interfaith dialogue is active, the potential for infiltration of extremist ideologies can be reduced.(Permatasari & Aulia, 2021).

Furthermore, educational institutions, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), and Islamic organizations that promote the values of moderation contribute to creating an inclusive and open-minded generation. The long-term impact is the formation of an empowered, harmonious society that is resilient to various threats of disintegration. Thus, multicultural harmony is a key element in strengthening national unity, accelerating development, and maintaining the long-term sustainability of Indonesian unity.

## **Conclusion**

Islam, as a religion that upholds the values of humanity, justice, and tolerance, has provided an important foundation for the realization of a harmonious multicultural life in Indonesia. Basic values such as tasamuh (tolerance), ta'aruf (mutual understanding), and 'adl (justice) serve as guidelines for Muslims in building peaceful social relations amidst ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. The role of ulama, religious leaders, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), and Islamic organizations is also crucial in mainstreaming moderation, expanding spaces for dialogue, and shaping an inclusive society. All of these elements contribute to the creation of a conducive social order and strengthen social integration at the local and national levels.

On the other hand, challenges such as intolerance, identity politics, the spread of misinformation, and the emergence of extremist groups continue to threaten the sustainability of multicultural harmony. Therefore, strategies to

strengthen tolerance based on Islamic values must continue to be developed through education, increasing socio-religious literacy, and strengthening the role of religious institutions. With synergy between elements of society and a continued commitment to preserving diversity, Islam can become a major force in strengthening national stability. A harmonious multicultural life is not only a social necessity but also a strategic asset for realizing a peaceful, advanced, and civilized nation.

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