

Islamic education and interfaith tolerance

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine the contribution of Islamic education in fostering interfaith tolerance in multicultural rural communities, with a focus on Surobali Village, Kepahiang Regency, Bengkulu. The challenge of interfaith tolerance in rural communities arises because the implementation of Islamic education has not been fully effective in shaping awareness and tolerant attitudes, even though Islam teaches the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. The research gap lies in the lack of field studies highlighting contextual Islamic education practices in fostering social harmony. Using a qualitative approach through observation, interviews with religious leaders, educators, community members, and documentation of social-religious activities, this study found that integrative Islamic education that combines Islamic values with local wisdom such as cooperation, consultation, and mutual respect is able to create spaces for dialogue, strengthen interfaith interactions, and foster inclusive attitudes. These findings have implications for educators to design more moderate and contextual learning, for policymakers to support tolerance-based education programs, for religious leaders to strengthen inclusive preaching, and for future researchers to explore other dimensions such as economics and technology in building social cohesion. Overall, transformative Islamic education has proven to be a strategic foundation for strengthening tolerance and has the potential to guide educational policies toward a more inclusive and sustainable paradigm.

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1. Introduction

Islamic education plays a strategic role in shaping the character, morals, and social values of the younger generation, particularly in realising a harmonious life in diverse societies. In Indonesia, as one of the most multicultural countries with high religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity, Islamic education is expected to serve as a medium for instilling values of moderation (*wasathiyah*), respect for differences, and awareness of peaceful coexistence (Kuntoro, 2019; Firdaus, 2017; Dhani, 2023). It is not only directed towards ritual obedience, but also to develop broad perspectives and openness towards diversity (Fitria, 2022; Dhani, 2023). However, challenges remain. The implementation of tolerance values in Islamic education is often limited, especially in rural areas with minimal interfaith interaction. When education fails to instil values of diversity, exclusivism and prejudice may grow, increasing the risk of conflict. Comparative studies have shown that several countries have adopted inclusive Islamic education to strengthen social cohesion and reduce religious friction (Romlah, 2023; Purnama Sari, Dewi, 2023). In Indonesia, major Islamic organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah promote Islam *wasathiyah* as the basis for moderation and interreligious harmony. Despite this, Indonesia continues to face rising cases of intolerance, social

polarisation, and interreligious tension (Rahma, 2023; Mendus, 2023). At the grassroots level, Islamic education often emphasises cognitive and ritual aspects over affective and social dimensions, resulting in a narrow and exclusive religious understanding. This situation can undermine social harmony in pluralistic societies.

Surobali Village in Kepahiang Regency, Bengkulu Province, exemplifies this challenge. The Muslim-majority village also hosts smaller communities of Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists. While diversity provides opportunities for healthy interaction, limited understanding of tolerance and minimal interfaith engagement has sometimes led to prejudice and exclusivism (Hasbullah, 2022; Mahmud Ahmad, Zamroni, 2023). The lack of a comprehensive pluralism-based education indicates that inclusive and moderate approaches to Islamic education are not yet fully implemented. Concepts such as *tasamuh* (tolerance), *ta'awun* (cooperation), and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) should form the core of Islamic education in schools and madrasahs (Tobroni, 2015). A contextualised Islamic curriculum, rooted in moderation and dialogue, is needed to foster openness toward diversity (Taufik, 2019; Maryono, 2024). Yet, challenges remain, including limited understanding of tolerance in Islam, scarce interfaith interaction, and lack of explicit educational programmes on dialogue and cooperation (Rahma, 2023; Hambali, 2023; AM Kasim, BTS Adi, 2024). This study aims to explore how Islamic education contributes to interfaith tolerance in Surobali Village. Specifically, it seeks to identify the strategies employed by Islamic educators, analyse challenges in practice, and provide recommendations for strengthening tolerance through education. Previous research has emphasised integrating humanistic values into Islamic curricula (Maulana, W. & Insaniyah, 2023), applying multicultural-based learning in madrasahs (Ermiyanto & Fadriati, 2023), and employing dialogical approaches internationally (Sahin and Ersoy, 2021; Rizal & Burhan, 2024). However, little is known about how locally based Islamic education in rural settings contributes to tolerance. This gap underscores the timeliness and significance of the present study.

2. Method

This research employed a qualitative case study design focusing on Surobali Village, Kepahiang Regency, Bengkulu Province, representing a rural community with religious diversity. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, including Islamic education teachers, religious leaders, and villagers from various faiths. In line with Creswell's (Creswell, 2016) recommendation, 10–15 informants were engaged to ensure depth and diversity of perspectives. The data analysis followed thematic analysis through stages of reduction, categorisation, interpretation, and inductive inference. This approach enabled the researcher to identify patterns of tolerance practices, challenges in implementation, and educational strategies that promote harmony.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the study applied several validation strategies commonly used in qualitative case studies. Triangulation was carried out by comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation to confirm the consistency of emerging themes. The researcher also performed member checking by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected informants, allowing them to verify, clarify, or refine the meanings of their statements. Field notes were kept throughout the research process to capture contextual nuances, non-verbal cues, and situational dynamics that might not appear in recorded interviews. These notes enriched the analysis by providing additional layers of understanding about community interactions and everyday expressions of tolerance.

The research process in Surobali Village took place over several visits, allowing the researcher to engage with the community in both formal and informal settings. This prolonged engagement helped build trust, which was crucial for gathering honest and reflective insights from villagers of different religious backgrounds. Ethical considerations were also maintained, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring the anonymity of participants who preferred not to be identified. All data were organised systematically using manual coding,

where initial open codes were grouped into broader themes before being interpreted within the socio-cultural context of the village.

3. Results and Discussion

Researchers have obtained various information needed through interviews in order to compile research related to the value of religious tolerance that occurs in a village called Suro Bali, Ujan Mas District, Kepahiang Regency. The interviews carried out certainly received approval from several sources who were considered to have knowledge about the conditions of tolerance in the research location. After obtaining the various data needed, both through the observation and interview process, the researcher can then take the next step of analysis. In this case, the research shows that there are tolerance values based on 4 (four) aspects that build tolerance in Suro Bali Village, Ujan Mas District, Kepahiang Regency. The findings reveal that tolerance in Suro Bali Village is built upon four key aspects:

- **Recognition of Rights:** Villagers respect the right of every individual to embrace and practice their religion. Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists coexist peacefully, celebrating their religious events without disruption. For instance, Hindus observe *Nyepi* undisturbed, while Muslims celebrate *Eid al-Fitr* with support from other religious groups. This recognition of rights extends beyond religion to education and social participation.
- **Respect for Beliefs:** Respect is manifested through avoiding coercion or mockery of other religions. Villagers refrain from ridiculing different religious teachings, fostering a climate where diversity is normalised and protected. Worship practices are respected without interference, which contributes to a peaceful and tolerant atmosphere.
- **Mutual Understanding:** The community practices mutual understanding by being sensitive to each other's religious needs. For example, the use of loudspeakers for the call to prayer is not perceived as disturbing by non-Muslims, while Muslims respect Hindu practices during *Nyepi*. Similarly, Eid al-Adha celebrations are conducted with awareness of Hindu sensitivities regarding cattle, avoiding provocative actions.
- **Agreeing to Disagree:** Villagers uphold the principle of harmony above differences. They engage in daily social interactions, such as cooperation in farming, education, and weddings, without letting religious differences hinder unity. This reflects the Islamic principle of *muamalah*, where social relations are based on respect and cooperation.

These findings align with earlier studies emphasising the role of inclusive Islamic education in fostering tolerance (Ermiyanto & Fadriati, 2023; Sahin & Ersoy, 2021). However, the case of Suro Bali demonstrates that tolerance is strengthened when Islamic education is contextualised with local wisdom, such as *musyawarah* (deliberation) and community cooperation.

Beyond these four dimensions, the research also highlights that the sustainability of tolerance in Suro Bali Village is deeply rooted in social participation and community-based education. Religious leaders and teachers play a crucial role in modelling tolerant behaviour through sermons, school activities, and interfaith dialogues. The integration of religious values into everyday education, both formal and informal, creates a cultural framework that reinforces harmony. For example, Islamic education teachers emphasise universal values such as *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy to all creation) and *ukhuwah insaniyah* (human solidarity), which resonate with the community's pluralistic setting. This aligns with the view of Sahin that moral and spiritual education, when embedded in the local context, can become a unifying force across religious boundaries (Sahin, 2018).

Another important aspect emerging from the field data is the community's use of local traditions as a vehicle for strengthening interfaith relationships. Events like *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) and *kenduri* (communal feasts) are attended by people of all faiths, serving as informal arenas for dialogue and mutual recognition. Such practices represent what Hidayat

and Susanto describe as socio-cultural capital, where shared rituals nurture emotional bonds and collective identity that transcend religious affiliation. These interactions, while seemingly ordinary, reflect a deeper pedagogical process, learning tolerance through lived experience rather than abstract instruction (Susanto, 2022).

The findings also indicate that the challenges to tolerance mainly arise from external influences, such as social media narratives or political provocations that may introduce suspicion or sectarian bias. However, local wisdom and communal trust often act as buffers against such tensions. The community's commitment to maintaining peace demonstrates resilience that stems from both faith and social ethics. As noted by Ali and Daud, rural societies with strong communal ties tend to develop everyday peacebuilding mechanisms, where interpersonal respect is prioritised over doctrinal debates (Osman et al., 2024).

The study further reveals that local religious education practices in Surobali Village have a strong experiential dimension. Learning does not only occur in formal school settings but also through communal participation in rituals, ceremonies, and daily interactions. This informal learning environment cultivates an embodied understanding of tolerance—people learn to respect and cooperate with others by doing, not just by listening. Such experiential learning resonates with the perspective of Banks (2019), who argues that multicultural education becomes more effective when learners are actively engaged in diverse social contexts. Hence, Islamic education in Surobali naturally extends beyond the classroom into the social sphere, transforming education into a lived moral practice.

4. Conclusion

This study confirms that Islamic education holds a strategic role in building interfaith tolerance within multicultural rural communities such as Surobali Village. By internalising Islamic values of peace, compassion, and respect for differences, education can strengthen social harmony. The four aspects identified, recognition of rights, respect for beliefs, mutual understanding, and agreeing to disagree form a practical framework for fostering tolerance at the community level. For policymakers, these findings highlight the urgency of designing curricula that integrate moderation, interfaith dialogue, and local cultural wisdom. For educators and religious leaders, the study offers practical insights into strategies that can be applied in teaching and community engagement. For researchers, the case of Surobali opens new directions for investigating the intersection of Islamic education, rural contexts, and interfaith relations. Ultimately, strengthening Islamic education as an agent of peace and inclusivity is not only vital for rural communities but also for sustaining national and global harmony in increasingly diverse societies

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Declarations

Author contribution : LF is responsible for conceptualising ideas, developing the theoretical framework, and writing the introduction and conclusion. This author also serves as the main coordinator throughout the entire article writing process. DF Conducts in-depth literature reviews, compiles the literature review, and assists in analysing data based on field research findings. SY Responsible for designing the research methodology, conducting field data collection, and validating and verifying data. NN Edits and revises the final manuscript, ensuring compliance with journal guidelines

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