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THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS (PONDOK PESANTREN) IN PREDOMINANTLY NON-MUSLIMS AREAS IN EAST KALIMANTAN IN BUILDING RELIGIOUS HARMONY

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Abstrak

Pondok pesantren merupakan salah satu penyangga utama pendidikan di Indonesia, terutama pendidikan keagamaan. Peran pondok pesantren adalah sangat penting dalam menjamin keberlangsungan nilai-nilai agama yang moderat di tengah masyarakat di Indonesia yang bersifat multicultural. Penerapan nilai-nilai Islam yang moderat di bawah bingkai konsep Islam rahmatan lil ‘alamin dapat memberikan jaminan bagi tercipta dan terpeliharanya keharmonisan hubungan antar pemeluk agama yang berebeda-beda di tengah masyarakat, terutama pada masyarakat di wilayah-wilayah dengan mayoritas nonmuslim di Indonesia bagian timur.

Penelitian ini, oleh sebab itu, bertujuan untuk mengetahui peran pondok pesantren di Kabupaten Mahakam Ulu, Provinsi Kalimantan Timur, dalam membentuk hubungan yang harmonis di antara para pemeluk agama yang berbeda di kabupaten Mahakam Ulu. Data dalam penelitian ini dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan pimpinan dan pengurus pondok pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu sebagai satu-satunya pondok pesantren yang terdapat di kabupaten Mahakam Ulu. Teknik analisis data tematik-kualitatif diterapkan untuk menjawab pertanyaan penelitian yang diajukan.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pondok pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu menerapkan strategi dakwah ke dalam (intra-ummaic da’wah) sebagai pendekatan utama dalam menjalankan dakwahnya di kabupaten Mahakam Ulu. Strategi ini dipercaya dapat menghindarkan pondok pesantren dari anggapan bahwa pondok pesantren merupakan aktor aktif dalam mendorong konversi agama di kalangan penduduk asli yang beragama Katolik dan Kristen. Pondok pesantren, dengan demikian, memusatkan perhatian pada upaya menjangkau dan memberikan layanan pendidikan agama kepada komunitas muslim yang telah terdapat di kabupaten Mahakam Ulu.

Kata Kunci: *Dakwah intra-umat, konversi agama, dakwah daerah terpencil, dan Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu.*

Abstract

Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren) are one of the main pillars of education in Indonesia, particularly religious education. Their role is highly important in sustaining the continuity of moderate religious values amid Indonesia’s multicultural society. The implementation of moderate Islamic values under the framework of Islam rahmatan lil ‘alamin can help create and maintain harmonious

relations among adherents of different religions in society, particularly in regions with non-Muslim majorities in eastern Indonesia.

This study, therefore, aims to examine the role of Islamic boarding schools in Mahakam Ulu Regency, East Kalimantan Province, in building harmonious relations among adherents of different religions in the regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the leadership and administrators of Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu Islamic boarding school, the only pondok pesantren in Mahakam Ulu Regency. A qualitative-thematic data analysis technique was applied to answer the research questions posed.

The findings show that Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu Islamic boarding school applies an intra-ummaic da'wah strategy as its primary approach in conducting da'wah in Mahakam Ulu Regency. This strategy is believed to shield the pondok pesantren from being perceived as an active agent pushing for religious conversion among the native Catholic and Christian population. The pondok pesantren thus focuses its attention on reaching out to and providing religious education services for the Muslim community already present in Mahakam Ulu Regency.

Keyword: *Da'wah intra-ummaic, religious conversion, remote da'wah, and Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu.*

Background

Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are important players in the ongoing process of building religious tolerance among people with different religion across the country. The ideology of *ahlussunnah wal jamaah* as a semi-official ideology of most pesantren in Indonesia has been proven to be effective in inciting the spirit of nationalism while at the same time increasing the awareness about the need for rethinking about Islam as a religious and as a socio-historical phenomenon.

The concept of *ahlussunnah wal jamaah*, a basic tenet in Islamic theology and practice, plays a significant role in fostering the prevalent embrace of religious moderation in the Indonesian environment. The aforementioned notion, which is firmly grounded in the principles of Islam, underscores the significance of adopting a harmonious and temperate stance towards the interpretation and implementation of religious doctrines. In the nation of Indonesia, which is primarily characterized by its adherence to the Islamic faith, the prevailing impact of *ahlussunnah wal jamaah* contributes to the cultivation of a religious atmosphere that advocates for the values of tolerance, inclusivity, and comprehension. This alignment with the fundamental tenets of moderation is evident. The dominant perspective has played a crucial role in influencing the structure of society, facilitating peaceful cohabitation and productive exchanges between various religious and cultural groups. This has reinforced the idea that religious moderation is a key cornerstone of Indonesian society.

It has been empirically demonstrated that pesantrens in Indonesia serve as a safeguard to ensure the preservation and flourishing of cultural traditions inside the nation, even in the face of persistent challenges posed by extremism. The traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia serve a crucial function in the preservation of the nation's rich cultural heritage and the reinforcement of Islamic teachings in a nuanced and authentic manner. Through the incorporation of traditional values and the cultivation of a cohesive community, pesantrens not only provide students with religious education but also cultivate a profound reverence for Indonesian customs and traditions. Consequently, this phenomenon strengthens the cultural framework, serving as a safeguard against the impact of extremist beliefs and fostering a more united and robust community.

Pesantrens are viewed as an integral part of the development of Islam in the archipelago, and therefore Indonesian Muslims have a strong connection with them. Pesantrens have historically shaped the Islamic landscape of Indonesia, contributing considerably to the dissemination of Islamic teachings and the growth of religious scholarship. They serve as centers of religious instruction, nurturing among Muslims a strong sense of faith and community. The enduring legacy of pesantrens highlights their significance in not only preserving cultural and religious practices but also fostering a profound spiritual connection among Indonesian Muslims, thereby perpetuating the development and evolution of Islam within the nation.

The history of pesantrens can be traced back to the early wave of mass conversion in the archipelago that began in the thirteenth century. During this pivotal period, Islamic scholars and teachers established pesantrens as centers of Islamic education and religious propagation. These educational institutions played a crucial role in accommodating the increasing number of converts to Islam by providing structured and systematic religious instruction. The establishment of pesantrens marked a significant milestone in the spread of Islam across the Indonesian archipelago, fostering a strong foundation for Islamic teachings and contributing to the growth of a devout Muslim community.

Over the centuries, pesantrens have evolved and diversified, embodying a rich tapestry of Islamic traditions and cultural heritage deeply rooted in the region's history.

When Islam first made contact with the archipelago, it encountered one of the most advanced Hindu-Buddhist civilizations in the Asian peninsula. The Indonesian archipelago was home to a sophisticated and culturally rich society that practiced Hinduism and Buddhism. The established Hindu-Buddhist civilization had developed advanced socio-cultural, economic, and architectural systems, leaving an indelible mark on the region. Islam's arrival brought a new religious and cultural paradigm, introducing a monotheistic faith that gradually gained traction among the diverse communities of the archipelago. The interaction between these distinct belief systems and civilizations laid the foundation for a unique syncretic culture in Indonesia, which has continued to evolve and shape the country's identity over the centuries.[1]

The civilization Islam encountered when it first arrived in the archipelago was known for practicing one of the most tolerant and open cultures, which contributed to Islam being welcomed with open arms. The pre-existing society in the Indonesian archipelago had a rich tradition of tolerance, coexistence, and acceptance of diverse beliefs and practices. This inherent openness facilitated the peaceful integration of Islam into the existing cultural fabric. The Islamic teachings of unity, compassion, and respect for others resonated with the prevailing ethos, resulting in a harmonious coalescence of Islamic principles with the existing societal values. The warm reception of Islam in this tolerant and accepting environment laid the groundwork for the development of a unique, inclusive Indonesian Islam that continues to embrace diversity and pluralism to this day.

In fact, Islamic teaching blended successfully with the Hindu-Buddhist tradition without losing its fundamental principle. The result of this acculturation has been proven to pave ways for religious harmony for the next several centuries. People of different religion in the archipelago manage to live peacefully despite their different religious background. Differences in society, instead of being threat to the peaceful coexistence, make little differences in how people interact with one another. This situation is, in fact, very common in Indonesian traditional village where religion is not the only, or at least, the most important, social marker people use to identify each other.

The onset of colonialization, following the ascendancy of European powers, significantly disrupted the delicate balance of religious harmony. In addition to economic exploitation, the colonial rulers sought to propagate Christianity, introducing it to the indigenous populace. This imposition of a new religious paradigm, distinctively Christianity in this context, laid the foundation for tension and discord between the Muslim and Christian communities within the nation, an uneasiness that endured for several decades. The intrusion of a foreign faith disrupted the existing religious fabric, triggering debates, conflicts, and a struggle for religious identity among the people. This period of colonial influence left an indelible mark on the religious landscape, reshaping the dynamics between religious communities and contributing to the complex social, cultural, and religious realities of the nation in the subsequent years.

Recently, Pesantrens are well known as the birth place of the moderate strand of Islam locally known as Islam Nusantara. However, in the last few years, the burgeoning on new type of pesantrens

[1] Clifford Geertz, 'The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Cultural Broker', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1960), p. 230.

known as pesantren Salafi has been crucial in producing narratives of radical islamism, an antithesis of Islam Nusantara. The strand of Islam Nusantara, being the most common strand of Islam adhered by most Muslims in the country, has been challenged by new paradigm of Islam that offer different way of understanding and practicing the religion. In many occasions, these new variants of Islam provide much simpler way of understanding Islam; it is either wrong or right with no room for grey area.

In eastern part of the country, the way Muslims practice their religious teaching can slightly differs with those who live in the Islam of Java where most Muslims live. In this region, lack of major culture affect the way Islam blends with local tradition. When Islamic teachings met with Javanese culture, it hardly claims superior position in regards with what side speaks from a higher ground. Most people, especially those with strong cultural identity, see Islam, despite containing teaching regulating all aspect of life in quite detail, as equal to the cultural norms existing in society. In many parts of eastern Indonesia, the case is different. Many people see Islam as a yardstick by which local traditions and cultural practices are measured.

This current research will shed some lights on the issue of Muslim-non-Muslim relations where Muslims are minority by exploring how religious education is taught in Traditional Islamic Boarding Schools located in predominantly non-Muslim areas in East Kalimantan and how such teachings shape the overall patterns of inter-religious relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the surrounding communities of those pesantrens.

The main objective of this research is, therefore, (1) to reveal the relations of Pesantren or Traditional Islamic Boarding Schools located in predominantly non-Muslims areas with the local communities in the surrounding areas, and (2) to explain the role of pesantren (including Kyais, Santris -pupils, and other within the pesantren) in building and maintaining religious harmony among people of different religions.

Pesantren in Indonesia

Research about pesantren in Indonesia is as old as the study of Islam in the country. Clifford Gertz stated that the development of Islam in the country, at least in the period of 1960 when he published his article about the changing roles of Kyais in Java, relates closely to two distinctive phenomena in Indonesia; the pilgrimage to Mecca and the traditional Islamic boarding schools known as Pesantren.[2]

In his seminal work, the Pesantren Tradition, Zamakhsyari Dhofier elaborates the elements of pesantren and the way by which pesantren had successfully maintained the traditional ideology of Islam in Indonesia while at the same time managed to keep a strong connection to the mainstream Islamic teaching. Kyais of the pesantren also managed to compromise the tradition of pesantren to the demand of education of the modernizing world. As Dhofier claimed, even though the genealogy of pesantren can be traced back to the time of the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, the Kyai was able to utilize such cultural product and made it a foundation to spread Islam throughout the archipelago.[3]

[2] See, Clifford Geertz, 'The Javanese Kijaji'.

[3] See, Zamakhsyari Dhofier, 'The Pesantren Tradition: A Study of the Role of the Kyai in the Maintenance of the Traditional Ideology of Islam in Java', Ph.D. Dissertation (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1980).

Pesantrens in Indonesia also undergo several transformative periods in which many of the basic tenets of pesantren traditions are modified in order to fits the demand of modernizations. In the process, the role of Kyais as the central element of pesantren also changes. Dihyatun, for example, outline the development of pesantren in modernizing the idea of Islamic education. In her research, Dihyatun argues that the implementation of modern management to run the everyday chores of the schools in the pesantren to some extent lessen the role of the Kyai in the process of decision making thus it could potentially challenge the authority of the Kyai[4] that can eventually reduce the social capital of the Kyais themselves.[5]

However, many pesantrens in the country resisted to the threat brought about by modernization. If the implementation of modern managerial style of education is not an option, then pesantrens could rely on other strategy such as strengthening their role in the local political arenas. In this case, Yon Mahmudi argues that some pesantren resist changes by simply choosing to remain intact.[6] Some pesantrens also have close alliance with local political actors. This kind of relation benefits both parties in which pesantrens give needed religious legitimation to the political actors and in return the political actors give the pesantren needed financial support to keep the pesantren running.[7]

While many studies about pesantren have been conducted in the last several years, the issue of pesantren in the predominantly non-Muslim areas in Indonesia is still an understudied phenomenon. While most of the researches about pesantren revolve around pesantren in Java where Muslims comprise the majority, the issue of the relation between pesantrens and the surrounding communities is usually discussed within the context of the role of pesantren in providing Islamic education for underprivileged students as observed by Noorhaidi Hasan in his work on the emergence of many Salafi Pesantrens in the post Suharto Indonesia.[8]

Pesantren in Eastern Parts of Indonesia

Islam in Eastern Part of Indonesia is an understudied phenomenon.[9] Perhaps, this can answer the question of why the study of pesantren is eastern part of Indonesia is still rare. Warnk argues that many studies on Islam in East Indonesia rely heavily on historical records kept by European writers during the colonial time, very few studies use local materials or historical material written in local languages in writing about Islam in the country. Warnk also stated that sociological and/or anthropological researches about Islam in East Indonesia is still relatively scarce.[10]

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[4] Dihyatun Masqon Ahmad, 'The Dynamics of the Pondok Pesantren: An Islamic Educational Institution in Indonesia', in *Reaching for the Sky*, ed. by Stella El Bouayadi-van de Wetering and Siebren Miedema (Brill | Rodopi, 2012), https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789401207584/B9789401207584-s006.xml, accessed 29 Nov 2019.

[5] Greg Fealy and Robin Bush, 'The Political Decline of Traditional Ulama in Indonesia', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 42, no. 5 (2014), pp. 536–60.

[6] Yon Machmudi, 'Preserving kyai authority in modern society: A case study of Pesantren Cidahu, Pandeglang, Banten', *Wacana*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2014), pp. 336–50.

[7] Muhammad Uhaib As'ad and Edward Aspinall, 'The Patronage Patchwork: Village Brokerage Networks and the Power of the State in an Indonesian Election', *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, vol. 171, nos. 2–3 (2015), p. 181.

[8] Noorhaidi Hasan, 'The Failure of the Wahhabi Campaign: Transnational Islam and the Salafi *Madrasa* in Post-9/11 Indonesia', *South East Asia Research*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2010), pp. 675–705.

[9] See, Holger Warnk, 'INTRODUCTION: Islam in eastern Indonesia', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 38, no. 110 (2010), pp. 1–8.

[10] *Ibid.*

However, the political reformation happened to Indonesia following the collapse of the Suharto's authoritarian regime that brought about freedom of expressions and freedom of assembly affected the establishment of many new pesantren in East Indonesia. Many of such new pesantrens are the extension of pesantren in, mainly, Java. Thus, they serve as a continuation of the pesantren in Java.

In recent years, the rising popularity of Islamist ideology that swept clean the globe, including almost every Muslim country in the world has paved ways for the emergence of pesantren that are different from the mainstream pesantren in the country. Many of such pesantrens are located in predominantly non-Muslim areas in Indonesia. This trend posed challenges for local communities in terms of building new patterns of inter-religious relation with the pesantrens.

Precise number of Salafi pesantren in Indonesia is yet to be available since this type of pesantren does not always make it clear about its strand of political standpoint. However, many studies on Salafi pesantrens suggest that this strand of pesantrens do not always receive warm response from the community where the pesantrens operate. Many fellow Muslims see the Salafi pesantren to be contrary to the moderate strand of Islam practiced widely in the country thus regarded the pesantren with hostility and rejection.[11]

How non-Muslims response to the existence of pesantren in their areas is part of the overall objective of this current research. Political pressure put by the grand narrative of religious tolerance according to the Pancasila or the five principles of the official Indonesian state ideology to some extent drive non-Muslims to act only within the corridor of political correctness line and avoid to address the real question of whether or not such pesantren could build and maintain religious harmony among people with different religion in the surrounding areas of the pesantrens.

Research method

Data for this research will be collected mainly by in-depth interviews with Kyais (leaders) and Santris (pupils) of the pesantren located in predominantly non-Muslim areas in the regency of Mahakam Ulu. Interviews with Kyai will be conducted to obtain information about (1) the history of the pesantren, including the background of its establishment, (2) perceived ideal objectives of the pesantren, including what kind of Santri the pesantren accepts and what kind of training the Santri will undergo, and (3) areas of intersectionality where the pesantren and the surrounding local non-Muslim community interact and to what extent such interaction shape the pattern of inter-religious relations among people with different religion in the surrounding communities.

In-depth interviews also involve Santris from respective pesantrens. Santri is interviewed mainly to obtain deeper and first-hand perspective about the lived experience of being a minority group in predominantly non-Muslim areas. Santri informants, thus, will be asked questions about (1) their involvement in activities involving local Muslim and non-Muslim communities, (2) the meaning the attach to such involvements, and (3) their perspective on ideal pattern of inter-religious relation according to their lived experience.

To have a finer information about the role of pesantren in shaping patterns of inter-religious relation, in-depth interviews will also be conducted with local leaders from the non-Muslim

[11] Din Wahid, 'Nurturing Salafi manhaj: A study of Salafi pesantren in contemporary Indonesia', *Wacana*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2014), p. 370.

communities in the surrounding areas of the pesantrens. Interview with these informants will generate information about how Muslims and non-Muslims alike respond to the pesantrens.

Qualitative analysis is applied to data successfully collected during the research process. Interview transcripts and field notes are coded according to the most frequent themes that appear. Such themes, then, are classified according to their role in answering the main research questions. The data are coded until theoretical connections between codes generated throughout coding process and research questions are made. Thus, this coding strategy can be classified into multilevel thematic coding strategy.

Findings and Discussion

Pesantren and Da'wa in Remote Areas

Pesantrens, deeply ingrained within the sociocultural fabric of Indonesia, have historically assumed a paramount role in shaping interfaith harmony and societal integration. Within predominantly Muslim communities, where adherents of Islam constitute a demographic majority, pesantrens undertake a role distinct from those operating within regions where Muslims are a numerical minority. The nuanced differentiation in the roles that pesantrens adopt fundamentally stems from their strategic maneuvering to harmonize with the contextual nuances and intricacies of the prevailing societal milieu. This strategic alignment is an essential and adaptive response, contributing to the longevity and resilience of pesantrens, fostering their capacity to acclimate to the exigencies of the specific environments in which they are situated.

The adaptability of pesantrens to novel environments is not surprising. Originally, pesantrens represented a relatively new social institution within the majority of Indonesian communities. The establishment of pesantrens, as evidenced in numerous accounts chronicling the foundation of major pesantrens in Indonesia, typically commenced with a process known as 'babat alas', involving the clearing of forested lands to facilitate the construction of the pesantren. This signifies that in the past, the initial emergence of pesantrens was a somewhat unfamiliar development to the populace, elucidating the relative novelty of pesantrens within the historical context.

Historical records providing substantial insight into how pesantrens, during their early establishment in Indonesia, interacted with the surrounding Hindu or Buddhist communities are notably scarce. Apart from legendary narratives imbued with tales of the mystical prowess of Kyai (Islamic scholars and leaders), comprehensive historical accounts regarding the formative periods of pesantrens in the archipelago are generally elusive. This circumstance presents a distinct challenge in elucidating how pesantrens, organically, were able to undertake a role in fostering healthy and productive inter-religious relationships, given the dearth of accessible historical documentation from that era.

In the regions of Java and Madura, where pesantrens were predominantly situated during their early stages, historical accounts pertaining to pesantrens can generally be traced through the works of various anthropologists and Western evangelists who arrived in the archipelago concurrently with the waves of Western colonization. These historical records reflect that by the time of their documentation, the context of pesantrens had undergone significant transformations compared to their earliest conditions. The surrounding communities had embraced Islam, the number of santri (Islamic students)

had notably increased, Kyai (Islamic scholars and leaders) had gained widespread recognition, and other similar developments had taken place. Settings in which pesantrens represented novel entities interfacing with communities unfamiliar with the Islamic faith are thus challenging to ascertain within these historical accounts.

The context in which pesantrens represented novel entities not yet recognized by the general populace can be gleaned from studies focusing on pesantrens in remote regions. However, the modus operandi of these pesantrens may exhibit variations from one another. Furthermore, pesantrens engaged in da'wah activities in remote areas typically operate as extensions of more established institutions. Consequently, the da'wah endeavors undertaken by pesantrens in these hinterland areas often adhere to predefined standard operating procedures (SOPs) stipulated by their parent institutions.

In addition to being initiated by established and structured da'wah organizations, da'wah activities in remote areas are also propelled by the government. This initiative is known as development-oriented da'wah, aiming to align the religious objectives of disseminating Islamic teachings with social and economic development goals. The development-oriented da'wah program, implemented during the presidency of Suharto, has significantly engendered social transformations within the hinterland communities. Nevertheless, several critical inquiries persist concerning whether these social changes transpired while disregarding the existing diversity within the hinterland communities.

The success of a da'wah movement carried out in Indonesia's hinterland regions is contingent upon various factors. One of the most crucial factors is the presence of sustained funding to support the activities undertaken by a da'i (Islamic da'wah). The availability of robust financial support is paramount, given that da'wah activities in remote areas necessitate substantially larger financial investments compared to da'wah activities typically conducted in rural areas.

A da'wah movement in remote areas requires particular attention from both the da'is (Islamic da'wah workers) and the local government where the da'wah activities are conducted. Regardless of how well-organized its implementation is, a da'wah movement inherently carries the risk of instigating conflicts. This is due to the intense nature of da'wah activities, which involve a significant exchange of ideas and religious messages that may be deemed sensitive by the involved parties.

The hinterland communities in Indonesia also possess distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from other communities, particularly those residing in urban areas, and even in comparison to rural communities. The main characteristic of hinterland communities lies in the limited public services provided by the government. This significantly influences their perspective on the government's role and the rights they possess as citizens. The constrained access also plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals in remote areas perceive other societal groups; whether they are seen as threats, opportunities, and the like.

The remote inland areas, characterized by extremely limited accessibility, exert a substantial influence on the economic conditions within these hinterland regions. This circumstance signifies that frequently the cost of living in the inland regions of Indonesia is considerably higher when juxtaposed with the cost of living in rural areas in general. Moreover, even in comparison to the cost of living in urban settings, the cost of living in these remote inland areas is often markedly higher.

The elevated cost of living in inland regions, nonetheless, is circumscribed to the living expenses of newcomers with distinct lifestyles compared to the indigenous populace. For the indigenous community that has acclimatized to the confined hinterland environment, the necessities they must fulfill in their way of life tend to differ significantly from those of the newcomers who are still adjusting to a markedly different new environment from the rural and urban settings. This circumstance also influences the extent to which Da'is (Islamic preachers) in the inland areas can conduct the preaching activities they advocate.

Given the multitude of constraints faced by a preacher in inland areas, it is unsurprising that one of the most pivotal rules to be adhered to by preachers in this context is to act according to a predetermined plan. This signifies that every action taken by a preacher assigned to the inland areas must be based on a well-considered plan devised by the institution that has commissioned them. Consequently, the da'wah activities they are to undertake can proceed in a sustained manner without interruptions due to financial constraints.

Although they are required to operate based on specific predetermined standard operating procedures (SOPs), the Islamic scholars (ustadz) assigned to preach or lead Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in the inland regions generally engage in improvisation to address the challenges and obstacles they encounter in the field. The ability to improvise is essentially determined by the capabilities of the individuals commissioned for the purpose of preaching. In this regard, it is not uncommon for a da'i (Islamic preacher) assigned to an inland area to find difficulty in fulfilling their duties and subsequently return to their originating institution.

For the da'i, the successful execution of disseminating Islamic teachings among the populace residing in the inland regions bestows a distinct sense of pride. Those who have effectively discharged their duties in these hinterland areas receive esteem from their fellow preachers. They become recognized as pioneers and resilient da'is, capable of inspiring subsequent waves of da'is in the future.

Pesantren and Inter-religious relation in predominantly non-muslim areas

The presence of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mahakam Ulu Regency is generally well-received by the local community, encompassing both Muslim newcomers and the indigenous population adhering to different faiths. The inhabitants of Mahakam Ulu Regency, for the most part, do not overly emphasize an individual's religious identity as long as they do not engage in conspicuous activities within the community.

To the inhabitants of Mahakam Ulu Regency, the presence of individuals practicing Islam was initially associated with employees of timber companies operating in the resource-rich forested areas of Mahakam Ulu. The migrant workers, predominantly hailing from Java, typically had to reside within the operational zones of their respective companies for extended periods. These companies usually offered accommodation in the form of employee housing, often located in close proximity to the settlements of the indigenous population.

The initial interactions between Muslim newcomers and the indigenous people of Mahakam Ulu eventually fostered a sense of mutual understanding among them. Consequently, both the indigenous population and the incoming migrants could coexist, practicing their respective ways of life harmoniously and peacefully.

Although the initial interactions between Muslim migrants and the indigenous population in Mahakam Ulu Regency are often perceived to have commenced during the exploration of forest resources in the 1990s, these interactions fundamentally began as early as the 18th century or even earlier. This assertion finds support in historical records citing significant migration of Banjar people following the defeat of Prince Antasari by Dutch forces in 1885. Additionally, historical accounts indicate that trade interactions among the Dayak people residing in the upper Mahakam River region existed prior to the advent of Islam in the Kutai kingdom.

Despite the presence of the Islamic community in the Mahakam Ulu region traceable to several centuries earlier, the progression of Islam in this area can be regarded as slow, if not stagnant. The Muslim populace residing in Mahakam Ulu up to the recent two to three decades primarily consisted of newcomers who entered the hinterland region around 1990 and beyond. This period coincides with the influx of timber, plantation, and mining companies into this area.

In the current era, interactions between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the Mahakam Ulu region fundamentally do not significantly differ from general social interactions. Muslim and non-Muslim populations in Mahakam Ulu generally interact and lead their daily lives without emphasizing the religious aspects practiced by their fellow inhabitants. The residents of Mahakam Ulu, predominantly adhering to Catholicism, tend to be more open and accepting of religious differences. Consequently, religion does not prominently influence day-to-day life or determine how individuals engage in social interactions within the community.

Although religion does not play a prominent role in shaping the forms of social interaction within the community, other identity markers associated with religion still hold significant sway. In this regard, customary practices, or more precisely, ethnic-related customary rules, play the most crucial role in determining the forms of social interaction that take place within the community.

In the community of Mahakam Ulu, interactions among individuals with different ethnic backgrounds are more readily discernible than interactions among those with different religious backgrounds. The Dayak Benuaq people, who constitute the majority in Mahakam Ulu, fundamentally adhere to a set of customary rules, both written and unwritten, regarding the ideal conduct for an upstanding member of their community. These customary rules are often followed with a higher degree of adherence compared to other regulations within the society.

For the Dayak people, reverence for ancestors, for instance, holds immense significance. A significant number of rituals are dedicated to expressing respect for their ancestors. Often, during the enactment of these rituals, various festivities are incorporated to entertain the community. Within these communal festivities, there typically exist traditional alcoholic beverages that are forbidden for consumption by the Muslim populace in that environment.

Another example frequently cited by the informants involved in this research regarding the interethnic relations in Mahakam Ulu Regency pertains to the existence of customary fines applicable to all residents, irrespective of their religious beliefs or ethnic background. One illustrative instance of a minor customary fine is the penalty imposed on individuals who accidentally hit or harm pet dogs that are often allowed to roam outside homes.

For Muslim individuals who do not place significant emphasis on pet dogs, a fine in the form of cash reaching millions of rupiah may seem inappropriate as compensation for an accident involving a pet dog. This is especially true if the pet dog in question is not perceived as a typical household pet that is cared for indoors or within the household premises. Nevertheless, in the event of an accident involving a pet dog, an individual suspected of causing the accident must adhere to customary rules and pay a certain amount of cash as compensation.

Another more serious example frequently cited by the informants involved in this research pertains to customary fines that must be paid by a man found to be in a relationship with a Dayak Benuaq girl without the consent of her parents or guardians. In this context, the relationship between the two individuals is essentially deemed risky if either of the partners is from a non-Dayak ethnic background. In several notable cases, such relationships often culminate in religious conversions.

The Dayak community in Mahakam Ulu, fundamentally, is not overly strict regarding religious conversions. As previously mentioned, the people in Mahakam Ulu generally do not heavily emphasize religious matters. Religion for the community is seen as a private and individual affair. Instead, the community in Mahakam Ulu places greater emphasis on interethnic relations. Therefore, cases of religious conversion resulting from marital relationships are generally uncommon issues for the community.

Interreligious relations within the community of Mahakam Ulu Regency have fundamentally been harmonious, wherein each individual can practice their religious activities without concerns. This amicable relationship has endured for a considerable duration without cases of conflict between religious followers in this region. This state of affairs is attributed to several factors, including the community's awareness of the significance of harmony for progress as a regency, the open-mindedness of the indigenous population regarding the positive roles of newcomers, and the general attitude of the Dayak community towards religious differences.

The harmonious relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Mahakam Ulu Regency is also influenced by the living environment. The Muslim community in Mahakam Ulu Regency generally resides in concentrated areas within town centers and employee housing provided by the companies where they work. This affects the extent to which Muslims engage in intensive interactions with non-Muslim residents in this area.

Although relations among individuals of different religious beliefs in Mahakam Ulu Regency proceed harmoniously, certain degrees of ethnoreligious segregation can still be observed within the community. This segregation is not only based on the Muslim or non-Muslim dichotomy but also extends to the distinction between those residing in employee housing versus those living in local settlements and mingling with the local population. Migrant residents inhabiting company-provided housing typically consist of active employees. On the other hand, Muslims who have resided and integrated with the indigenous Dayak community, which is predominantly non-Muslim, are often entrepreneurs who relocated to Mahakam Ulu Regency and are not associated with any specific company or have already ceased employment with such enterprises.

In the Ujoh Bilang Subdistrict, one of the subdistricts in Mahakam Ulu Regency, Muslim residents generally live in their own blocks, relatively separated from non-Muslim residents. Although residential complexes in subdistrict towns like this are typically artificial, integration between Muslim

and non-Muslim residents still appears to be constrained by religious considerations. Several interviewed residents believe that this separation is quite reasonable. Residents find it easier to conduct their daily activities among fellow Muslims due to certain lifestyle similarities; for instance, not raising pigs in their backyard, not keeping many dogs, and so on.

Although the Muslim community in Mahakam Ulu Regency has gradually come to be recognized as indigenous inhabitants, notably the Banjar and Bugis Muslim ethnic groups who independently migrated as traders, Islamic activities in Mahakam Ulu Regency remain primarily confined to mosques and prayer halls (mushalla). One of the factors contributing to the limited presence of Islamic centers, such as madrasahs and pesantren, is attributable to the inclination of Muslim parents in Mahakam Ulu Regency to send their children to schools located outside the city or regency.

In addition to considerations regarding the perceived quality of education, parents in the subdistricts of Mahakam Ulu Regency generally hold the belief that residing in larger urban centers can impart beneficial effects on their children. Furthermore, for Muslim parents in Mahakam Ulu Regency, opting to enroll their children in schools outside the city often signifies an opportunity for their offspring to experience life not as a Muslim minority.

For children from Muslim families who are still in the primary and early secondary school stages, mosques stand as the sole venues for exclusive socialization with fellow Muslim peers. In this regard, mosques situated within communities boasting a considerable Muslim populace commonly furnish Quranic education services for the children residing in their vicinity. The activities conducted within these mosques typically mirror the conventional functions of mosques, serving as both places of worship and avenues for religious instruction.

Advanced religious learning institutions such as madrasahs and Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren) have yet to be established in Mahakam Ulu Regency. Presently, within Mahakam Ulu regency, only one officially registered pondok pesantren is acknowledged by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. This pondok pesantren, namely Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, is recorded as the sole entity of its kind within the region. Commencing operations in Mahakam Ulu Regency since the year 2016, the pondok currently accommodates a total of 37 male and female students (santri and santriwati).

As the only Islamic boarding school (pondok pesantren) within Mahakam Ulu Regency, the presence of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah offers an invaluable opportunity for researchers to observe the role of such institutions in fostering interfaith relations within a setting where the Muslim community coexists alongside non-Muslim residents. This circumstance allows researchers to examine whether the existence of the pondok pesantren, an Islamic institution synonymous with Islamic religious education and da'wah efforts, exerts additional pressure on the dynamics of interfaith relations within this region.

At present, Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu is engaged in activities directed primarily towards school-age children, encompassing those in the primary and early secondary levels. The activities conducted by the pondok pesantren for this target demographic predominantly revolve around the fundamental aspects of Quranic education, specifically focusing on reading and memorization. For students who have attained proficiency in Quranic recitation, the pondok pesantren assumes the role of refining and enhancing their Quranic fluency and aiding in the memorization

process. Conversely, for students who have yet to achieve smooth Quranic recitation, the religious educational services offered by the pesantren primarily encompass guiding them to read the Quran accurately and proficiently.

The students (santri) enrolled at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu typically hail from the Muslim community residing in the vicinity of the pondok pesantren. The enrollment into the pesantren predominantly occurs due to the encouragement of parents who aspire for their children to receive a sound religious education. Considering that Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu stands as the only Islamic boarding school within this regency, it serves as the primary and, often, the sole choice for those seeking Islamic educational provisions for their children.

The establishment of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu faced several significant challenges. One of these hurdles was the revocation of a land grant intended for the construction of the pesantren. According to an informant closely associated with the pesantren's management, the cancellation of the land grant by a prospective donor during the early stages of establishing Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah was linked to sentiments associated with Islamic religious movements, rather than pressure or opposition from non-Muslim residents. This suggests that the proselytization challenges encountered by Islamic boarding schools in remote areas can emanate from unforeseeable factors related to religious sentiments.

According to the informant interviewed in this study regarding da’wah activities in the remote areas, the perception of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah as a pesantren embodying particular ideologies actually emanates from fellow Muslims. In the context of establishing Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, this perception predominantly arises from Muslims who also have the status of newcomers or migrants within Mahakam Ulu Regency.

For the administrators of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, such circumstances need to be approached with a composed and thoughtful demeanor. In their view, da’wah activities are not merely a competition to amass followers or for worldly gains; rather, they are viewed as a sacred covenant between a preacher and Allah (SWT). Success in da’wah work, within this context, is not to be quantified by the number of new believers or followers acquired, but by how effectively a preacher fulfills the duties of the mission entrusted to them.

The perspective of viewing da’wah work as a covenant with Allah carries significant implications for da'is (missionaries). A da'i holding this viewpoint will adopt a more surrendered approach to their da’wah activities. They no longer need to overly concern themselves with the tangible outcomes stemming from their da’wah endeavors. Instead, they can concentrate on internal self-improvement aspects to ensure that all dimensions of their mission are executed optimally.

A managing religious teacher (ustad) at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu eloquently articulated this perspective. According to him, the Hidayatullah Foundation has consistently emphasized to all assigned da'is engaged in da’wah work in remote regions that the success of their mission is not something that can be solely measured by the da'i themselves. In the case of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, the Hidayatullah Foundation Headquarters in Kota Balikpapan emphasizes that "being able to reside and endure for several months in the Mahakam Ulu region alone" is a success in itself.

The unfamiliar social dynamics and geographically constrained conditions compel da'wah institutions deploying da'is to remote areas to set relatively modest targets. By establishing minimalistic da'wah goals, a da'i assigned to a remote region is not overly burdened, allowing them to think more clearly about the creative steps they can take regarding their da'wah activities within their designated area of responsibility.

For Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, engaging in da'wah activities within the hinterlands of East Kalimantan represents a struggle to fortify the faith of the Muslim community existing as a minority in this region. The da'is assigned to manage Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu view their primary task there as an internal refinement, aiming to enhance the quality of the Muslims already present, rather than actively seeking new followers or attempting to convert non-Muslims in the area.

The viewpoint that the target of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu's da'wah efforts is the Muslim community has implications for the strategies they develop and implement through the establishment of the pesantren. With the primary motto of fortifying the faith of the Muslim community, Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu initiates their da'wah work by focusing on children. This demographic is approached through the provision of Quranic learning institutions accessible to children from Muslim families residing in Mahakam Ulu.

Another activity that serves as a manifestation of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu's vision to fortify the faith of the Muslim community is Quran memorization sessions for children, teenagers, and even adults interested in memorizing the Quran. These activities, aimed at those who have mastered the correct recitation of the Quran with tajweed, reflect the pesantren's efforts to produce Quranic memorizers from the local populace. The hope is that these Quranic memorizers will subsequently motivate Muslim children in the region to deepen their knowledge of Islamic teachings.

The political stance of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu regarding the determination of da'wah targets is essentially intra-ummaic in nature. This means that the pesantren generally does not target non-Muslim communities for conversion to Islam but rather focuses on supporting the minority Muslim community to remain steadfast in their adherence to and practice of Islamic sharia.

The da'wah strategies implemented by Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu have a positive impact on the harmony of relations between the pesantren, the minority Muslim community, and the non-Muslim population in Mahakam Ulu Regency. The indigenous non-Muslim population, in general, does not feel disturbed by the da'wah activities conducted by the pesantren, while the pesantren is able to carry out their planned da'wah activities peacefully.

An Islamic teacher (ustad) and manager of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, interviewed in this research, affirms the findings regarding the role of the pesantren in fostering harmonious relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to him, the choice to restrict da'wah efforts to Muslims only has brought several advantages to the pesantren. Not only do the non-Muslim communities in the vicinity show respect for this decision, but they also become intrigued to learn more about the pesantren. In turn, this curiosity can potentially serve as a source of guidance (hidayah) for the surrounding community.

Although Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah has thus far limited their da'wah efforts to Muslims only, it is not out of the realm of possibility that individuals from different faiths may become intrigued and subsequently embrace Islam. In the natural course of community interactions, this is something that can indeed occur. Therefore, Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu needs to contemplate how they will handle the potential emergence of such situations in the future.

As the only officially registered Islamic boarding school (pondok pesantren) in Mahakam Ulu Regency, the da'wah strategy employed by Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu will set a precedent for potential future pesantren in this region. Hence, it is exceedingly vital for Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah to establish an exceptionally positive first impression upon the predominantly non-Muslim populace of Mahakam Ulu Regency. The aspiration is that this positive impression will persist and be widely associated with other pesantren, ultimately facilitating a greater acceptance of the Muslim community by the general population.

Pesantren and religious harmony

The harmony of interfaith relations in remote areas is determined by several factors, one of which is the intensity of interactions among individuals belonging to different religious communities. The more intensive the interactions among people from diverse religious backgrounds, the greater the potential for interreligious tensions to arise. This implies that in environments where individuals from different faiths interact with one another, the likelihood of misunderstandings among people with varying religious backgrounds also increases.

In Mahakam Ulu Regency, the presence of the Muslim community cannot be definitively classified as a minority. Moreover, considering the increasing number of Muslims year by year, it's plausible that Muslims in Mahakam Ulu may eventually constitute the majority, particularly in urban areas where the majority of the population resides, given the current trend of growth.

At a glance, the increasing number of Muslims in Mahakam Ulu Regency needs to be anticipated as a potential factor that could disrupt harmonious religious coexistence, especially if the growth is primarily due to the influx of local immigrants from various regions in Indonesia into Mahakam Ulu Regency.

Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu acknowledges this and approaches it with great wisdom. An administrator from the pesantren, interviewed in this research, expressed that the increase in the number of Muslims in Mahakam Ulu Regency is a positive development that should be met with an increase in facilities and infrastructure for Muslims to comfortably and peacefully engage in religious activities. For him, Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu should serve as an example of how to manage such social changes effectively.

For Ustad Taufik, an administrator at Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu who was willing to be interviewed for this research, the acceptance of the native residents of Mahakam Ulu towards Muslims in general and Islamic institutions like pesantren in particular is a manifestation of the high level of tolerance in Mahakam Ulu Regency. The heightened awareness of living harmoniously within the framework of the nation is one of the key factors explaining the harmony in interfaith relations in Mahakam Ulu Regency.

According to Ustad Taufik, the native residents of Mahakam Ulu are highly aware of the importance of the role of newcomers in advancing the region. In his view, the native inhabitants of Mahakam Ulu are not indifferent to the changing ethno-religious composition of their area but are confident in their ability to manage these social changes. The indigenous population of Mahakam Ulu Regency has experienced what it's like to live with limited public facilities, and as a result, they strongly desire to progress their region as quickly as possible without sacrificing the interests of future generations.

One of the believed and proven ways to expedite progress in a region is by encouraging investments from outside. This implies that the native population of Mahakam Ulu needs to promote migration to their area. The arrival of local immigrants, particularly professionals and entrepreneurs, is seen as a catalyst for economic growth in the region, ultimately leading to an improvement in the general welfare of the population in Mahakam Ulu Regency.

According to the administrators of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, the role of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and Islamic religious institutions in general in such a situation is to ensure that changes in ethno-religious composition, especially concerning the growth of Islam's followers, act as a catalyst for development rather than the opposite. This is achieved, in part, by maintaining the inward-focused da'wah strategy implemented by Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu.

By implementing a da'wah strategy that supports economic development, Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah aims to be a part of the multidimensional change to make Mahakam Ulu Regency a more advanced region in the future. However, Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu also remains attentive to potential risks that may emerge with the passage of time.

In the view of the administrators of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah, one aspect that needs to be seriously considered regarding the role of pesantren da'wah efforts is the phenomenon of religious conversion occurring among the native population. This phenomenon, though sporadic and infrequent, can potentially trigger tensions as it may give the impression that Islamic institutions are propagating Islam to the native population who have embraced their respective religions, such as Catholicism or Christianity.

The administrator of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, Ustad Yaufik, also explained that the presence of converts or individuals who undergo religious conversion to Islam presents specific challenges to the pesantren. The pesantren is required to provide specialized education to these converts, enabling them to be more consistent in practicing the teachings of their new religion. Consequently, the pesantren needs to allocate their resources accordingly, posing a distinct challenge for the sustainability of the pesantren's resources.

As the only Islamic boarding school (pondok pesantren) in Mahakam Ulu Regency, the presence of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu plays a crucial role in relation to the phenomenon of converts (Muallaf). Religious conversion, although theologically something to be celebrated, poses a serious challenge in terms of community life in Mahakam Ulu Regency.

To address the challenges accompanying the da'wah journey of Pondok Pesantren Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu, the administrators consistently foster good communication with religious leaders and

the local community among the native population in this district. On a more localized level, engagement activities like casual conversations with non-Muslim neighbors around the pesantren are a mandatory agenda consistently carried out by the pesantren, fostering closer community ties.

The engagement in small-scale activities aimed at fostering a common understanding regarding the positioning of Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu Islamic boarding school in relation to the phenomenon of religious conversion is of significant importance. Such endeavors are essential to circumscribe the potential emergence of misconceived perceptions concerning the role of Islamic boarding schools within the community. This undertaking serves as a guarantee that Islamic boarding schools fundamentally align with the social and economic development necessitating political stability.

In Mahakam Ulu, social stability is fundamentally not significantly affected by alterations in the ethno-religious composition amidst the populace. One of the contributing factors to this phenomenon is the dispersion of the population, not solely concentrated within the precincts of urban sub-districts. The indigenous inhabitants of Mahakam Ulu regency are still plentifully distributed across more remote areas where transportation and even information accessibility remain somewhat restricted. This circumstance, encompassing various facets, constrains the interaction between these native population groups and the immigrant communities typically residing within the urban sub-district regions.

In addition to geographical factors, sociological aspects, exemplified by the openness of the predominantly Dayak community towards newcomers, stand as one of the most pivotal factors fostering sustained harmony among diverse religious adherents. The Dayak community, by and large, exhibits a high degree of tolerance towards differences, particularly with regard to religious diversity. For the Dayak populace, religion is construed as a private affair, warranting no contention as long as adherents refrain from engaging in activities contravening prevailing social norms.

Conclusion

The role of Islamic boarding schools in fostering harmonious interfaith relations within the community is of paramount significance. These institutions are required to proficiently undertake various roles, ensuring their acceptance by all segments of the diverse social strata within the populace. The more effectively an Islamic boarding school fulfills its societal role as a religious institution harmoniously embracing local traditions and culture, the higher the level of societal acceptance it garners. Consequently, this positively influences the advancement and sustainability of the Islamic boarding school in future periods.

Within the predominantly Catholic and Christian community of Mahakam Ulu regency, the success in performing the social role that renders the Islamic boarding school acceptable to the society can be observed through the endeavors of Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu Islamic boarding school in conducting da'wah and social activities in the remote regions of East Kalimantan province.

Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu Islamic boarding school assumes a pivotal role in fostering harmonious social relationships among individuals adhering to diverse religious beliefs within Mahakam Ulu regency. This is achieved through active integration with the local populace and a conscientious effort to adopt a noninterference stance in religious affairs of the residents. Essentially, Hidayatullah Mahakam Ulu Islamic boarding school consistently presents itself as a facilitator of

religious outreach services for the Muslim community within Mahakam Ulu regency, refraining from endeavors to convert the native population who adhere to Catholic or Christian faiths.

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