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Shaping the Meaning of Religious Tolerance among Contemporary Ulama in Aceh

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Abstract

This study examines the role of ulama in shaping the meaning of tolerance in contemporary Aceh, a region experiencing increasing religious intolerance. Aceh's ulama, as opinion leaders and symbols of sanctity, have a central role in shaping people's views and attitudes. They socialize Islamic teachings that respect differences, organize educational activities, and build interfaith cooperation networks. Ulama in Aceh are respected as moral role models and have the ability to influence public opinion, maintain inter-religious harmony and spread messages of peace. The role of ulama in articulating the meaning of religious tolerance is crucial to maintaining religious diversity in Aceh, and this research makes a valuable contribution to efforts to reduce religious conflict and improve understanding of tolerance within Aceh's ulama.

Keywords: Meaning Formation, Tolerance, Religious, Ulama, Contemporary.

Introduction

Religious intolerance in Aceh has increased in the last four years (Ansor dan Amri 2020; Grossmann 2016). Banda Aceh is even ranked as the second most intolerant city out of 98 cities in Indonesia, according to research from the Setara Institute (2018). In addition, Aceh as a province is also ranked at the bottom (34th) in terms of tolerance based on the Ministry of Religious Affairs survey in 2019 Sumaktoyo (2018). The phenomenon of intolerance does not only involve inter-religious differences but also occurs in the context of the majority religion (Islam) in Aceh. For example, the burning of the foundation of the Muhammaddiyah mosque in Bireun (Nirzalin dan Febriandi 2022) shows that different views within Islam itself can be the cause of intolerance cases there. Although Acehnese people are known to be tolerant of religious differences, differences in views within Muslims often trigger debates and anarchist actions. This is where the role of ulama as opinion formers and role models is very important, not only to prevent radicalism, but also to foster a harmonious meaning of tolerance in religious harmony in Aceh.

Until now, studies on religious radicalism have adopted a Western perspective (Arifin 2016; Arifuddin dan Faridah 2021; Irawan dan Arifin 2021; Sirry 2020). However, Aceh's different social and cultural conditions indicate that the understanding of radicalism needs

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to be analyzed more deeply in accordance with the local context. This study aims to analyze how Acehnese scholars interpret radicalism based on local social and cultural frameworks, avoiding being trapped in the Western paradigm.

The understanding of the word "tolerance" is strongly influenced by the environment or public space in each region in Indonesia, especially in Aceh (Ibrahim 2015, n. 24). Therefore, Acehnese scholars can interpret tolerance in different ways according to the context. In line with Peter L. Berger's view (Berger 1969, 2011; Berger dan Luckmann 1966) that humans shape society and vice versa, a cleric's experience and environment greatly affect his communication skills (Bungin 2006). Therefore, the meaning of tolerance by ulama may vary, depending on the experience and cultural background of each ulama (Menchik 2014).

This research complements previous research that only views tolerance from a Western perspective without focusing on the role of ulama in interpreting tolerance itself. Tolerance is not just a word without meaning before it is interpreted (Devito 1997, n. 490). The ulama, as the inheritors of the teachings of the prophets in Acehnese society, have a central role in giving meaning to tolerance (Ibrahim 2015:22). Ulama have the ability to shape certain meanings related to religious tolerance in their environment (Ichwan 2016). The clerics' views on religious life have a major influence on the views and attitudes of the surrounding community (Ichwan 2011; Saat 2012). Therefore, the role of ulama is key in shaping religious harmony and harmony or conversely, triggering conflict in society.

Ulama need to be more careful in delivering their messages in public. They should spread more peaceful messages rather than messages that invite conflict or radicalism. Only with peaceful messages conveyed by the clerics through the correct interpretation of tolerance can tolerance in Acehnese society become real. This research is in line with previous research on religious tolerance, but focuses on the role of ulama in shaping the meaning of tolerance in Acehnese society. Thus, this research seeks to contribute ideas for Acehnese society and stakeholders to reduce religious conflicts and improve the proper understanding of tolerance within the scope of ulama. In the context of a pluralistic society like Aceh, the ulama's shared understanding of tolerance is crucial to maintaining harmony and interfaith harmony.

The importance of the role of ulama in shaping the meaning of religious tolerance cannot be underestimated. As spiritual and intellectual leaders, ulama have a great responsibility in delivering messages that are able to shape attitudes of tolerance and reduce the potential for conflict in society. In the context of Aceh, where religious intolerance has been alarming, the presence of ulama as agents of change is indispensable.

When clerics deliver messages in public, they must maintain caution. The messages conveyed must prioritize the spirit of peace rather than inviting conflict or radicalism. In this case, the message of peace passed on by the ulama through the right interpretation of tolerance will be the key to realizing a real attitude of tolerance in Acehnese society.

This research is not only in line with previous studies on religious tolerance, but also provides a special focus on the role of ulama in shaping the meaning of tolerance within Acehnese society. Through this research, it is hoped that there will be a valuable contribution to Acehnese society as well as stakeholders in an effort to reduce the potential for religious conflict and increase an accurate understanding of tolerance, especially within the ulama.

In a pluralistic society like Aceh, a uniform and consistent understanding of tolerance is crucial to maintaining harmony and interfaith harmony. Therefore, building a common understanding among the ulama about the true meaning of religious tolerance will be a strong pillar in creating an environment of peace and mutual respect in the frame of rich diversity.

Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach with the phenomenological method as a data analysis tool (Wahab 2019). The research was conducted in Komunitas Aceh Indonesia, a location that has significance in the context of ethnic and religious diversity. Aceh, a province that has been victimized by radicalism in Indonesia, has several cases of religious intolerance (Ansor 2014b; Burhanudin 2014). Aceh's cultural and religious history and the public's view of religious tolerance have made the province a famous portico of Mecca. Nevertheless, there are also intolerance phenomena that emerge in Aceh, such as the burning of churches in Aceh Singkil in 2015 (Ansor 2014b; Fasya 2015), the forcible removal of Chinese lanterns by unscrupulous clerics in 2017 (Febriandi 2018), and other cases (Ansor 2014a; Ansor, Arrauf, dan Amri 2016).

This research was initiated by Aceh's ranking as an intolerant region based on the results of the tirto.id survey in 2018 and a series of intolerance cases that have surfaced in the media. In order to overcome these problems, researchers wanted to understand the viewpoints of Aceh's ulama regarding religious tolerance, considering that they have an important role in shaping public opinions and views. The phenomenological approach was chosen to analyze this phenomenon from various perspectives, so that the results of the research can provide in-depth understanding (Correa-Cabrera dan Garrett 2014).

This study aims to explore, analyze, and describe the construction of the meaning of religious tolerance among Acehnese scholars. The focus and commitment in this study lies on real-life situations and phenomena, which are directed to understand these phenomena from various perspectives. The inductive analysis method is used in this research, starting from a very specific understanding to reach a more general understanding, so as to be able to contribute to the development or criticism of the paradigm and philosophical views used.

The research phase involved several steps. A preliminary study was first conducted to gain an initial understanding of the research data. Next, data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and structured observations. A purposive sampling technique was used in data collection by interviewing predetermined key informants (Bernard 2006). The main informants in this study are ulama who actively construct the meaning of religious tolerance in Aceh.

Six Acehnese ulama informants were selected to be part of this research based on predetermined criteria. The first is Tengku Nuruzzahri, known as Waled Nu, a charismatic ulama with an important role in integrating religious and general education. Second, Abu Kuta Krueng, a Sufi scholar with a role in education and organization. Third, Hasanoel Bashry HG, known as Abu MUDI, founder of the college and active in promoting formal education. Fourth, Tengku Syamaun is a modern Islamic boarding school leader with expertise in comparative religion. Fifth, Tengku Asnawi a scholar who is also a lecturer at the Malikussaleh Lhokseumawe State Islamic Institute. Sixth, Syech Muhazir is a religious figure and chairman of the Dayah Ulama Association (HUDA) Langsa.

By involving informants who have a depth of experience and views, this research aims to assemble a comprehensive portrait of the meaning of religious tolerance in Aceh from the perspective of ulama. This method will provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the role of the ulama in shaping and promoting religious tolerance amid the dynamics of Acehnese society.

Research findings and discussion

The position of Ulama in Aceh society

In Acehnese society, ulama has an important role in various social, religious, and sometimes political fields(Alfian 1985; Benda 1995; Zaman 2002). People often look to

ulama as a source of questions, consultation, solutions, and advice. In Acehnese society, ulama are respected and considered very holy, so they are honored as a symbol of holiness.

Ulama, in the Islamic context can be defined as a community of educated or knowledgeable people(Saby 2001). They are important in interpreting religious sciences, doctrines, and laws. Ulama also greatly influences the spiritual life of Muslims and plays an important role in carving out the intellectual history of Islamic society. They are the thinkers and keepers of the scholarly tradition and are responsible for producing knowledge(Kjeilen 2005).

The influence of Ulama in Muslim societies can vary depending on the extent of secular or ruling authority in a country. Their relationship with the ruler can affect their role and influence in society. Sometimes, clerics will cooperate with the rulers and adapt to the situation. In some cases, they choose to remain silent and accept the political policies taken by the government. Their influence in society is influenced by political factors and their relationship with the ruler (Kjeilen 2005).

The credibility of the ulama is strongly influenced by their level of independence in making fatwas (Anwar 2005; Burhanudin 2005). If the ulama have too close a relationship with the ruler, people tend to stay away and seek religious teachings from other sources. This results in a decline in the ulama's standing in society. Conversely, if the ulama are less dependent on the government, any fatwa they issue will be regarded as valuable knowledge by the community. In the context of modern Islamic states, the position of the ulama has weakened due to the more modern state structure(An-Naim 2008). If the ulama is under a weak ruler, this can have a negative impact on the stability of the state, especially in terms of the judiciary. In a modern state, there is a boundary and distance between the activities of the ulama and the government. Therefore, the ulama in modern times are more likely to be under the influence of the ruler rather than as spiritual leaders as in the past (Kjeilen 2005).

The position and role of the ulama are very important and can be emphasized in two ways. First, they have the knowledge and expertise in the field of religious sciences that make them "enlighteners" for the minds of the people. Ulama plays an active role in "enlightening" the lives of the people through their religious knowledge and teaching.

The thoughts of the scholars become a source of scientific reference that is held and continues to be developed creatively(Burhanudin 2004). The legal fatwas issued by the ulama become a reference of knowledge, moral guidance, and legal basis for the ummah. This helps the ummah in dealing with the complexity of social and community issues that continue to emerge in this modern era. The thinking of the ulama provides certainty and stability in facing these challenges(Ismail 2004).

Second, Ulama has a central position and strategic role as a role model for the ummah(Zaman 2002, 2006). They demonstrate and provide examples of good moral qualities, which reflect the values and civilization of a nation. Currently, Muslims and the Indonesian nation are undergoing a transformation from a traditional society to a modern society, or from an agrarian society to an industrial society. In this situation, there is a struggle and conflict of values in various aspects of social life. In this context, the role of the ulama as a guide and guardian of moral values is very important (Ismail 2004).

With good, noble and noble moral examples from these Ulama, there will be examples and moral guidance so that the people will not lose direction and control in navigating the ark of life. Yusny(Saby 2001) mentions that there are three functions of Ulama in social life, namely as an ordinary human being (member of society), as the heir of the prophets (warasatul anbiyaa), and as a mother (protector) of society.

Since the time of the Pasai kingdom, Ulama has had an honorable place in the world of government and is valued by the community. Sultan Malikul Saleh and his successors

were very respectful of the Ulama, even though they themselves were pious people. In the golden age of the kingdom of Aceh, the Ulama also had an equally important role as the Sultan, continue to deliberate with the Ulama, listen to their advice, and must be generous with them(Hamka 1963).

The role of Ulama in its function as warasatul anbiyaa, as named in the hierarchy of Acehnese society as follows such as teungku chik, teungku di bale, teungku di rangkang, teungku meuseujid, (imuem meuseujid), teungku seumubeut. This means that they act as heirs of the prophet in teaching their knowledge, be it in dayah, rangkang, bale, meunasah or meuseujid. That way through the existing containers they continue to convey this treatise from generation to generation without knowing fatigue and hard work.

Ulema can be conveyors of soothing messages for the community, Ulama can also be a role model in maintaining religious harmony. The role of ulama is very large in preserving a culture of peace in Acehnese society, where ulama are considered as opinion leaders in Acehnese society. The message conveyed by the ulama for their followers can be considered true and followed.

Ulama as Opinion Leaders

According to Cutlip and Center(Santoso 1988), Opinion is an open response or opinion to an issue or problem. In Acehnese society, ulama have a role as opinion leaders who function as intermediaries in conveying information to the public. The influence of ulama in Aceh is very large on the views and attitudes of the community towards various matters, including in terms of religious tolerance. Therefore, the ulama plays an important role in shaping public opinion regarding the importance of religious tolerance to create peace and harmony in a religiously heterogeneous society.

In the traditional view, word-of-mouth communication occurs when information is conveyed from the source and received by opinion leaders with great influence. Information received by opinion leaders is then conveyed to their followers through direct communication(Priambodo dan Subyanto 2017). Followers do not have the ability to influence opinion leaders, so they only receive information and follow what opinion leaders decide. This concept is closely related to the role of Acehnese ulama who have great influence and are respected by the community, so that the spread of the meaning of religious tolerance conveyed by ulama can significantly impact their followers.



According to the two-stage flow communication model, public opinion is influenced more effectively when opinion leaders act as intermediaries between the audience and the message. These leaders possess views and attitudes that are followed by the general public and assist in conveying messages that have been processed before being delivered to the audience. This model incorporates two communication processes: one from the source of information to the opinion leader and another from the opinion leader to the audience. Paul Lazarfeld, Bernard Berelson, and H. Gudet first introduced the model with the aim of enhancing the limited impact of the media in disseminating messages (Astrid 1977).

Ulama as opinion leaders in Acehnese society have a significant role in society as they are considered to have more knowledge and expertise in religion than the general public. As a result, ulama often serves as role models in terms of good behavior and morals for the people of Aceh. By modeling good behavior, ulama can help build a society of peace, respect and brotherhood. By doing so, the community will be able to create a conducive environment and create people with noble morals. Ulama can be a rule model for the community in interpreting religious tolerance in society. The mature ability of the ulama in understanding a problem is very useful in maintaining religious harmony(Muslem 2023). Ulama as opinion leaders can be information amplifiers from information sources, as the two-stage communication theory developed by Paul Lazarsfeld et al. regarding the effects of mass media in the 1940 election campaign. The magnitude of the role of opinion leaders affects the understanding of information disseminated by opinion leaders and will form a shared truth when opinion leaders convey their information. It is highly expected that ulama have a high level of tolerance so that they can realize religious harmony through various efforts.

Ulama in Articulating the meaning of religious tolerance

Aceh, a province of Indonesia, has a long history of religious diversity (Salim 2004; Simanjuntak 2014). Although the majority of the population is Muslim, there are also religious minorities such as Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists. Interfaith tolerance has been a long- standing custom in Aceh, and has become part of the Acehnese culture and identity (Fikri 2016).

Aceh has been plagued by a long-standing armed conflict (Reid 2006). This conflict not only caused great physical and psychological damage, but also threatened the religious diversity that had been well maintained by the people of Aceh. In this context, Acehnese clerics have an important role in articulating the meaning of religious tolerance to maintain religious diversity in Aceh.

Acehnese clerics are important figures in society who are respected and have great influence in word-of-mouth communication. As opinion leaders in society, ulama have the ability to deliver educative messages and mobilize the community. Therefore, Aceh's ulama are expected to be able to provide the right views and understanding of the meaning of religious tolerance for the people of Aceh (Muslem 2023).

One of the tasks of Aceh's ulama in articulating the meaning of religious tolerance is to socialize Islamic teachings that respect differences and emphasize the importance of maintaining harmony between religious communities. This can be done through lectures, group discussions, or other meetings. In conveying messages of tolerance, Acehnese clerics can also use social media as a means to reach more people.

In addition, Acehnese clerics can also take the initiative to organize activities that educate people about the importance of religious tolerance, such as seminars or trainings. In these activities, Acehnese clerics can invite religious leaders from various religions to participate and discuss together in order to build interfaith harmony.

Not only that, but Aceh's ulama also have an important role to play in building networks of cooperation between religious communities, so as to create harmonious and respectful relationships between them. In this context, Aceh's ulama can work together with religious leaders of other faiths, as well as civil society and government institutions to build mutually beneficial dialog and cooperation.

In conclusion, Aceh's ulama have an important role in articulating the meaning of religious tolerance. Through the socialization of Islamic teachings that respect differences and activities that educate the public about the importance of religious tolerance, Acehnese clerics can help maintain religious diversity in Aceh as the portico of Mecca (Noviandy, Abdullah, dan Ichwan 2022; Syafieh, Noviandy, dan Amin 2022).

Conclusion

In the context of Aceh, which has long maintained religious tolerance, ulama play a central role in shaping the meaning of tolerance amidst the increasing challenges of intolerance. As opinion leaders and moral role models in society, ulama have the ability to

articulate the meaning of religious tolerance intelligently and wisely. Their role in socializing Islamic teachings that respect differences, organizing educational activities, and building interfaith cooperation networks is crucial to maintaining religious diversity in Aceh. Ulama also have the ability to overcome differences in views within Islam itself and promote a message of peace.

However, it should be noted that clerics need to be more careful in how they deliver their messages in public, emphasizing peaceful messages rather than those that could incite conflict or radicalism. They need to work closely with religious leaders of different faiths and participate in the development of interfaith dialog. In this way, Aceh's ulama can play a significant role in maintaining religious harmony and diversity, and help the people of Aceh understand the true meaning of religious tolerance.

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