EARLY CHARACTER OF ISLAM IN MEDAN:
Challenging the Narrative of Religious Intolerance in an Indonesian City

Azhari Akmal Tarigan, Hasan Matsum, Muhammad Syukri Albani Nasution, Jufri Naldo

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara
Jl. William Iskandar Ps. V, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara 20371, Indonesia
e-mail : azhariakmaltarigan@uinsu.ac.id, hasanmatsum@uinsu.ac.id,
syukrialbaninst@uinsu.ac.id, jufrinaldo@uinsu.ac.id

Syahrial Arif Hutagalung

Politeknik Negeri Medan
Jl. Almamater No.1, Padang Bulan, Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara 20155, Indonesia
e-mail : syahrialarif@polmed.ac.id

Abstract: This study explores the early development of Islam in Medan, challenging claims that the city fosters religious intolerance. Historically, Islam was introduced through peaceful, Sufistic, and adaptive means that encouraged coexistence and cultural integration. Using a qualitative, sociological approach supported by interviews with religious and community leaders and relevant literature, the research highlights Islam's foundational values in Medan—moderation, tolerance, and inclusivity. Although contemporary religious tensions occasionally arise, often driven by political interests, they do not represent the city's Islamic roots. The findings affirm that Medan's interfaith relations remain largely harmonious, and portrayals of the city as intolerant misrepresent its long-standing tradition of pluralism and social harmony.

Keywords: Early Islam, Religious Tolerance, Sufism, Religious Pluralism, Indonesian Islam

Introduction

Medan has been accused of being an intolerant city.[1] This was triggered by anti-Chinese and anti-non-Muslim semiotic violence perpetrated by a group of Muslims against minority groups from 2017 to 2020, especially during the political years and regional head election season. This phenomenon has been there since the Reformation era began.[2] For example, there is social jealousy among Muslim traders towards the economic progress of the Chinese which leads to looking for their bad things. There was a feeling of displeasure with the Chinese incense smoke ritual which seemed to disturb the comfort of the air, and the peak was seen in the burning of the monastery in Tanjung Balai. Even though this latest case did not occur in Medan, if you use Burhanuddin Muhtadi's term, it is a butterfly effect whose blowing originates from the city of Medan. Then, anti-non-Muslim semiotic violence can be seen from the lack of acceptance by some Muslims regarding the development and existence of the Church. Placing excessive suspicion on Christians regarding the mission of Christianization, and always concluding that non-Muslims are those who regularly consume pork.

People in Medan live in harmony even though they have different religions and ethnicities. This is influenced by their good understanding of their religions. Historically, it was proven that different religions have developed in Medan by upholding the values of tolerance and peace since the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century brought by immigrants.[3] The religions brought by Chinese, Tamil, and Javanese immigrants—who at that time were working as contract laborers in Deli tobacco plantations, are the socio-religious wealth in Medan. Then, in 1880, the flow of migration continued to increase, especially immigrants from Minangkabau, Mandailing, and Aceh

who did not work as laborers in Medan, but as traders, teachers, and Islamic scholars.[4] These historical events have made Medan a city with multiple ethnicities and religions. This paper explains the characteristics of Islamic religion in the early days of its existence in Medan. Apart from that, this paper also explains several factors that influence Islam and their implications for the social order of society. Besides historical data, this paper is also supported by the existence of Islamic sites in Medan.

The diversity of society in general can be seen in mosques, religious moderation, and harmony in Medan,[5] and the history of Islamic education development in Ar-Raudlatul Hasanah boarding school in Medan.[6] It can also be seen from the role and contribution of Islamic political parties in realizing compulsory education at Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah Awaliyah (MDTA) in Medan,[7] the sociopolitical influences on the formation of Islamic intellectuals in the 20th century,[8] media management Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar Al Mashun Grand Mosque in Medan,[9] and Multicultural life in Medan.[10] Furthermore, it can also be seen from the harmony of community life in a multicultural Medan city,[11] access and availability of Islamic education in non-Muslim majority areas,[12] recognition of local wisdom in inter-ethnic religion as conflict resolution,[13] and character education patterns through non-academic activities.[14] Then, there is some literature related to the topic of this discussion including comparative studies of the Islamic religion in Java,[15] spiritualization design in Islamic education in higher education,[16] Sufism movement in creating peace and conflict resolution,[17] religious moderation in Islamic boarding school-based universities,[18] and typology of fundamentalist movements in Indonesian higher education.[19]

This study aims to explain the characteristics of the Islamic religion at the beginning of its arrival in Medan. The characteristics are divided into three categories, namely; ritual pattern, traditional

pattern, and interaction pattern among religious communities. The study also aims to explain the factors influencing the characteristics of religious patterns of Muslim communities in Medan. These factors are divided into three, namely political factor, the socio-cultural factor, and the religious factor. Finally, the study explains the implications of Islamic characters in its early arrival in Medan. The implication is divided into three levels, namely individual, social, and cultural levels. The individual level explains the orientation of changes in religious moderate attitudes while the social level explains the changes in tolerant religious social interactions. The implication at the cultural level is a moderate change in society's religious culture.

The argument from this article is that the characteristics of Islam at the beginning of its arrival in the city of Medan were very adaptive, tolerant and spiritual. Firstly, the adaptive character seems dominant because of the condition of Islam which has the same status as an immigrant religion amidst other religions in the city of Medan such as Christianity which is adhered to by the Batak ethnic group, Hinduism and Confucianism which is adhered to by the Chinese ethnic group - so that to survive and be respected requires the ability adaptation to differences in existing traditions. Second, the tolerant character can be seen from the role of religious figures who teach moderate Islam, thereby making the Muslim community in the city of Medan open to different cultures. This is marked by the collaboration between the Deli Sultanate and Christian and Chinese leaders in building infrastructure in the city of Medan.[20] Third, spiritualist, the city of Medan in turn is known as a religious city which is strengthened by the involvement of Tuan Guru-Tuan Guru from various Suluk lodges to develop social society in this area.[21] The area's very strategic location and as an international crossing route makes the city of Medan a city with a modern Sufism character.

Methodology

This study discusses the religious pattern of Muslim communities in Medan a city inhabited by people with different religions, ethnicities, and tribes in Indonesia. This study focuses on worship, religious tradition, and social interaction patterns. The worship pattern is the way the Muslim community does worships while religious tradition is a habit or custom in the religious life and its relation to the relationship among worshipers. The analysis of this study includes Islamic historical sites, religious figures, traditional leaders, academicians, and Muslim residents living in Medan. This is a descriptive study to describe the characteristics of socio-religious phenomena in Muslim communities. This qualitative study is an in-depth understanding of people's religious attitudes, views, and behavior. This study uses primary and secondary data sources, namely informants, respondents, and documents related to the characteristics of the religious patterns of Muslim communities in Medan.

The informants interviewed include Islamic religious leaders and traditional leaders. The respondents were chosen randomly from Muslim residents. Islamic religious figures, traditional leaders, and the Muslim community are parts of religious society that have religious patterns, religious traditions, and interactions among religious communities in Medan. Islamic religious figures interacting with Muslim communities were asked to participate in this study to obtain data related to religion. Meanwhile, traditional figures become a source of traditional knowledge for Muslim communities. Medan was chosen as a location for this study because Medan is one of the most pluralistic cities in Indonesia. Christianity is often represented by Bataknese while Islam is represented by Malaynese in Medan.

This study used in-depth interviews, participant observation, and an analysis of sites related to Islamic heritage and texts.

The interview was carried out with religious and traditional leaders who have authority regarding religion, culture, and traditions developing in the society. The interview was also conducted with Muslim communities who were directly involved in social activities in Medan. A participatory observation of socio-religious phenomena in Muslim communities in Medan was carried out to see patterns of worship, religious traditions, and social interaction. A content analysis of cultural texts and traditions related to Islam and the focus of this study was also conducted. The texts analyzed include the history of Islam in East Sumatra and Medan.

The analysis technique used in this research is history, which is a cultural study approach. An history approach in qualitative research aims to understand culture, values, and socio-interactions – in this case the social context of Muslim communities in Medan. The analysis process starts with collecting interview data, observations, and documents related to the religious patterns of Muslim communities in Medan. Then, the transcripts were coded into groups of concepts in the data. The themes and concepts that emerged from the data were grouped based on the thematic patterns. Then, the relationship and meaning of social concepts, values, and actions were analyzed with relevant literature. Finally, the conclusions were drawn based on in-depth data analysis of worship patterns, cultural tradition patterns, and socio-religious interaction patterns of the Muslim community in Medan.

Figure 1. The concept of religious patterns

No	Concept: Characteristics of the Religious Pattern of Muslim Society	Indicators
1	Variable A: Worship pattern	• Religious teaching • Worship practices • Attendance at worship places
2	Variable B: Patterns of relationship with cultural traditions	• Pro/supporting religious and cultural traditions • Contrast/Not supporting religious cultural traditions
3	Variable C: Pattern of religious social interaction	• Among religious community • Inter-religious community • Intern-religious community

Results and Discussion

Medan was founded in 1590 by the son of King Sisingamangaraja II Guru Patimpus.[22] As a newly founded city at that time, the population growth was very rapid because it was supported by the plantation industry. Many people from North Sumatra migrated to Medan to improve their economic lives. Thus, in 1886, Medan was given a status by the Dutch government as Kotapraja (a municipality).[23] With this new status, in 1887, the Dutch began

to move their government headquarters from Bengkalis in Riau to Medan. It turned out that this movement also influenced immigrants from abroad such as people from India, Pakistan, China, and Europe to go to Medan. The rapid flow of immigrants can be seen in 1909 through the policies of the first mayor of the city in Medan building various infrastructures. These include the construction of city roads, buildings, bridges, hospitals, electrical facilities, and health clinics.[24]

The immigrants who came to Medan did not only have economic enthusiasm, but they also preached their religious beliefs. Indigenous people such as Malays who had embraced Islam widened their perspectives about Islam from Minangkabau, Javanese, and Mandailingnese people coming to Medan.[25] Meanwhile, immigrants from India, Arabia, and Pakistan also brought their unique Islamic understanding.[26] Thus, the basic characteristics of Islam in Medan which were very dynamic at that time left traces that can be seen in archaeological sites. These relics have been studied by historians and archaeologists. Many studies focus on the existence of these archaeological artifacts, both general and Islamic. Following is an excerpt of an interview carried out with the Head of Balai Arkeologi (Archaeological Center) in North Sumatra.[27]

"Artifacts from Islamic sites in Medan indicate that Islam at its early arrival was very adaptive, moderate, and tolerant when interacting with other religions. Mosque ornaments, for example, are very rich with symbols from Arab, Chinese, and Indian ethnicities. This means that people other than Muslims respect the development of Islam in Medan."

This interview proves that religious tolerance is very high in Medan. In other words, people in the early days of the development of Medan helped and respected each other in implementing the teachings of their respective religions. This

can still be seen nowadays with the existence of places of worship of different religions close to each other and people living around them are in harmony and help each other. Based on the observation made, there are no conflicts caused by differences in religious traditions in Medan. People living around the places of worship work in vario us sectors without worrying about leaving their kids at home or being suspicious about negative things that could damage their faith.

Following is an excerpt from an interview carried out with an Islamic leader.[28]

"The level of tolerance among religious communities in Medan is very high, and it is a normal thing for Muslim families to live next to the Church and vice versa. People live side by side in harmony without disturbing each other."

The next in-depth interview was conducted with Irwansyah who mentioned that conflicts might arise because of political differences during the regional election season. Differences in choices trigger the society to be divided, giving rise to social conflicts. Irwansyah explained the events of the regional head election several years ago, for example, when a small number of Muslim communities forced non-Muslim communities to vote for certain candidates, and vice versa. However, cases like this did not last too long and did not cause serious divisions because after the political season went by, the society returned to maintain social harmony. They adapt again to a different social environment. This kind of adaptability of religious communities in Medan is influenced by the strength of the community in upholding local traditions. Following is an excerpt or an interview with Ahmad.[2930]

"The people of Medan still uphold the *Dalihan Na Tolu* tradition rooted in Bataknese culture which has the philosophy that human values must be upheld and prioritized."

Indeed the Dalihan Na Tolu has been studied by scholars and generally agreed on its important roles in promoting and maintaining peace and harmony.[31]

Meanwhile, according to another informant, the pattern of worship of the Islamic community in Medan was initially Sufistic in nature influenced by the preaching of Islam emphasizing faith and belief. Then, the Islamic pattern was influenced by traders from Minangkabau, Mandailing, and Aceh causing the society's practice to appear to be more rational and dynamic in the sense that worshiping remains by religious teachings, but the teachings related to *muamalah* or interactions among religious communities are influenced by people's interactions every day[32]. Interactions in public spaces (schools, markets, and public facilities) do not differentiate among religions. According to Mustapa Khamal Rokan, an academic and community figure in Medan, the Sufi pattern in Islamic society at that time was none other than the influence of the Tarekat brought by immigrants who later became traders in Medan.

Researchers' observations of several Islamic boarding schools in the city of Medan show that all the boarding schools visited have a vision and mission to maintain Sufistic and moderate Islamic values so that Islam is not lost because demographically the city of Medan is a very plural area. These lodges prepare preachers to be sent to various regions and become examples for society in general. According to Mustapa Khamal Rokan;

"*Suluk* in North Sumatra teaches a moderate and Sufistic understanding of religion. Thus far, it can be seen how *Tuan Guru* (teachers) of *Suluk* have become icons and always become a source of information for people of all social and religious backgrounds"

According to Mustapa Khamal Rokan, the current socio-religious problem is that there is a small number of Islamic

communities who rigidly understand Islamic literary texts, making it difficult to compromise on matters of Islamic law and tradition. This is due to the traditional Islamic education background which does not open for new ideas. As in the case of selecting regional leaders, people in Medan prioritize assessing aspects of the religious factor of prospective leaders rather than looking at aspects of leadership itself. However, in other cases, the heterogeneous conditions of society make religious patterns moderate and tolerant among religious adherents. The Islamic education that is developing in Medan seems to combine religious, general, and national curricula. Interactions among religions are very harmonious, taking care of each other without interfering with each other. Religious leaders work together with the government to create harmony among religious communities.

Other evidence that Islam was very moderate at the beginning of its arrival in Medan, for example, can be seen from various archaeological artifact remains in the form of mosque buildings. In Medan, many historical buildings have Islamic nuances and can be developed and utilized according to their function. These historic buildings are hundreds of years old, some of which are relics from the colonial era and the reign of the Deli Sultanate. Among the historical buildings with Islamic nuances in the city of Medan, of them is the Maimoon Palace. The construction of the Palace began on 26 August 1888 during the leadership of Sultan Makmun Al Rasyid. The Palace building was completed three years after his leadership and then inaugurated on May 18, 1891. This building has Islamic, Malay, and European styles. The uniqueness of this palace is that it is dominated by the typical Malay yellow colour with 82 stone pillars and 43 wooden pillars as supports to strengthen the building. Next is the Al Mashun Grand Mosque which is also a legacy of the Sultan of Deli. This building is next to a protected site but is still used by the community for religious activities. Al Mashun Mosque is

approximately 200 M from Maimoon Palace, founded in 1906 by Sultan Ma'moen Al Rasyid Perkasa Alamsyah and first used on September 19, 1909. The symbols attached to this mosque prove the tolerance and openness of the Muslim community to non-Muslim communities in the early days of its development in the city of Medan with a combination of Middle Eastern, Asian, and European architectural styles around the building.[33]

The Relationship Pattern between Religion and Politics

The characteristics of the religious pattern of the Islamic community at the beginning of its arrival in Medan were very dynamic because they were influenced by local government policies.[34] There was rationality regarding religious political policies to strengthen equality in the city of Medan.[35] There is patronage of religious authorities in moderate religious discourse in Medan.[36] There was a socio-political influence of religion in the 21st century on the thinking of religious leaders in the people of Medan.[37] Religious and traditional leaders build a moderate religious culture through religious public spaces.[38] Policies in Medan and North Sumatra Province can be used as a multicultural model to create social harmony.[39]

The Relationship Pattern between Religion and Socio-Culture

The city of Medan has a pluralistic and strong culture and religion, making it easier for moderate and peaceful understanding to develop.[40] Access and availability of religious education in every region city of Medan.[41] The existence of collaboration between the community and government officials in socializing religious harmony through FKUB facilitates social control of symptoms of conflict.[42] The development of religious and cultural traditions is influenced by economic, linguistic, and social factors.[43] Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the recognition of local

wisdom in inter-ethnic religion as conflict resolution in Medan and North Sumatra Province.[44] There is a need for moderate religious character education through non-formal and informal activities.[45] Apart from that, improving the community's economy and education can prevent social and religious conflicts in Medan which has a multicultural and multireligious character.[46]

The Relationship Pattern between Religion and Religious Preaching

The role of religious figures in moderate and tolerant religious socialization is important in preventing socio-religious conflict.[47] Religious public spaces such as FKUB, Majlis Taklim, and Religious Sermons are places to spread discourse on religious moderation.[48] Spirituality education, in this case Sufism, also forms the character of a Muslim society that is religious and tolerant of differences.[49] The Sufism movement that developed in Medan and North Sumatra Province in general contributed to spreading peaceful religious teachings and shunning all forms of violence and anarchism.[50] Thus, there is a form of religious moderation in Medan[51] in that, the typology of religious moderation in Medan and North Sumatra Province tends to adapt, to tolerance, and spirituality.

Conclusion

A very important thing revealed from this research is that the characteristics of the pattern of diversity of Muslim communities at the beginning of their arrival in the city of Medan were very moderate. The formation of an adaptive, tolerant, and spiritual religious pattern correlates with political, social, and religious doctrine factors. Therefore, to form a moderate pattern of diversity, cooperation between policyholders or government, traditional leaders, academics, and religious leaders is needed. On the other

hand, if there is no cooperation between the three elements above, society will be confused and easily provoked, which will lead to social conflict. The government plays a role as a facilitator in the resolution of all problems that lead to social conflict. Traditional leaders must take part in controlling social dynamics that are vulnerable to friction and conflict by strengthening local wisdom. Academicians must take part in carrying out research and outreach related to current issues based on data and facts. Religious leaders carry out religious education and outreach in the community to anticipate potential religious conflicts caused by extreme, radical, and exclusive understandings.

This study contributes to an explanation of the initial characteristics of the religious pattern of the Muslim community in Medan which can live in harmony and harmony despite differences. Through dialogical efforts between religious communities and strengthening local wisdom, it provides strength in maintaining societal stability from religious conflict. It turns out that the understanding that Medan is an intolerant city in Indonesia is not true. Based on this study, Islam in its early days in the city of Medan was very tolerant and moderate and could function as a stimulant in structuring a harmonious society. This is proven that Medan and North Sumatra Province have been religiously and ethnically plural since the founding of this region, but this heterogeneity has been able to create a spirit of peace. This research uses a sociology of religion approach with the concept of societal religious patterns and attempts to reveal its relationship with the social system. The variables used are worship patterns, religious tradition patterns, and social interaction patterns. Based on this study, it can be said that the adaptive, tolerant, and spiritual character of the Muslim community's religious patterns can prevent socio-religious conflict.

The shortcomings of the study in this research were the

limited number of informants and the short amount of time so a lot of data was not obtained. The informants studied were only a few religious leaders, traditional leaders, government, and limited community members. Apart from that, the limited aspects looked at are only about religious patterns. Meanwhile, problems in complex society are not revealed comprehensively in this research. For example, the relationship between religious patterns and economics and education has not been studied in this research. Thus, further research is needed to deepen the study of the religious patterns of Muslim communities in Medan. This research provides individual and social recommendations for strengthening the character of adaptive, tolerant, and Sufi religious patterns to develop a moderate understanding of religion.

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