

# The Kiai's Leadership in Harmonizing Chinese-Muslim Relations through Multicultural Islamic Education

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**ABSTRACT.** This research is essential to address issues of violence in schools, weak parental supervision, and children's psychological problems. The aim is to develop a child-friendly education model that supports character development and children's rights and creates a safer, more inclusive learning environment. This study uses multicultural Islamic education to examine the role of *Kiai* leadership in promoting unity between Chinese and Muslim populations in Lenteng Timur, Sumenep. Employing a qualitative methodology and case study framework, data were gathered via observation, interviews, and document analysis. The results indicate two principal conclusions. The *Kiai* utilize various strategies, such as reinterpreting religious texts within a multicultural context, differentiating between exclusive theological doctrines and inclusive social interactions, adopting a cultural perspective rooted in Madurese values, and implementing personalized approaches through interpersonal engagement. The influence of this leadership is apparent in various aspects: socially and culturally, it has promoted harmonious integration among ethnic groups; economically, it has enabled mutually advantageous relationships based on Islamic business ethics; and religiously, it has resulted in the establishment of inclusive practices characterized by distinct "boundary awareness." This research enhances comprehension of the transformative function of religious leadership in fostering intercultural harmony using contextually relevant, faith-based educational approaches.

**Keywords:** *Kiai leadership, Multicultural Islamic education, Chinese-Muslim harmony, Madura.*



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## INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of relations between Chinese and other ethnicities in Indonesia are often marked by tensions and conflicts (Hoon, 2016; Juditha, 2015; Rahayu & Sodiq, 2016; Said, 2019). The May 1998 incident was an ethnic Chinese conflict that caused deep trauma, leading many to leave and settle abroad (Andryanto, 2021; Ling, 2016; Rugaiyah & Ma'arif, 2025; Zha, 2000). However, amidst the prevailing narrative of conflict, the relationship between the Chinese community and the Muslim community in Madura is harmonious (Abadi, 2007; Adomatussa, 2017; Hamsati, 2025; Rahmatina & Hidayat, 2021), particularly in Lenteng Timur Village, Lenteng Subdistrict, Sumenep District, Madura, despite significant differences in cultural, religious, and ethnic identities. This harmony does not occur naturally but results from a process of cultural negotiation and intensive social interaction (Adeoye et al., 2025; Hidayat & Farid, 2021) facilitated by the leadership of *Kiai*, a traditional authority respected by both groups. The location of this research showcases tolerant and inclusive socio-religious practices through multicultural Islamic education. The uniqueness of this research lies in the role of local *Kiai* leadership in strengthening

peaceful coexistence in a multicultural society, especially the relationship and interaction between the Chinese and Muslim communities.

The Kiai has developed a unique leadership model by integrating inclusive Islamic values (Balqis et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2021; Ma'arif et al., 2025), Madurese local wisdom, and a dialogic approach that fosters intercultural knowledge transfer and the formation of a collective identity that respects diversity (Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022). The Kiai are actively involved in efforts to build peace between the Chinese and Muslim communities by going beyond the symbolic boundaries of religious exclusivity and viewing ethnic diversity as an asset to be guarded rather than the leadership of the Kiai in other regions. This phenomenon is intriguing to study because it challenges conventional assumptions about socio-religious segregation and offers valuable insights into how religious leadership can catalyze peace and social cohesion through the praxis of multicultural Islamic education that occurs within the context of daily community interactions.

Research on Kiai leadership, multicultural education, and ethnic Chinese relations has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Studies on Kiai leadership have predominantly focused on educational institutions such as pesantren and madrasah (A. Abdullah, 2011; Faisal et al., 2022; Futaqi & Mashuri, 2022; Hasyim, 2020; Karim et al., 2023; Ma'arif et al., 2025), concentrating primarily on administrative, pedagogical, and organizational dimensions within these formal settings. While this institutional focus has yielded valuable insights into traditional educational leadership, it leaves a significant gap regarding how Kiai exercise leadership in broader community contexts, particularly in negotiating interethnic and interreligious relations. Although (Arif, 2023) examines Kiai leadership in society, his work centers on countering religious radicalism rather than exploring the Kiai's role in facilitating intercultural dialogue and harmony through educational approaches, a dimension that our study specifically addresses.

Similarly, research on multicultural education have primarily focused on formal education settings, such as schools (Kartiko et al., 2025; Saihu et al., 2022), pesantren (Fadli, 2022; Saihu et al., 2022) and universities (Djamaluddin, Bahri, Halim, & Chabibi, 2024; Fajar, 2024; Rahadi et al., 2024). These studies have primarily examined curricular adaptation and pedagogical innovations within institutional frameworks, yet they have insufficiently explored how multicultural principles are transmitted through informal educational processes embedded in daily community interactions—a critical area where our research makes a distinctive contribution by examining the educational role of Kiai beyond traditional classroom settings.

Research on Chinese-Muslim relations in Indonesia has typically examined these interactions through socio-economic and political lenses (Malik et al., 2022; Putri et al., 2022; Said, 2019) highlighting the structural dimensions of these relationships. While some studies have addressed community-level interactions (Atmaja et al., 2023; Srimulyani et al., 2018), they have generally focused on urban contexts and have not adequately investigated the educational mechanisms that shape intercommunal relations in rural settings such as Madura, where different socio-cultural dynamics prevail. Another study examines the understanding and practice of religious tolerance among Muslims in relation to non-Muslim communities in Pamekasan Madura (Takdir & Sumbulah, 2024). Moreover, existing research has paid insufficient attention to the specific role of religious leadership in facilitating positive interethnic relations through educational approaches, particularly in contexts where historical tensions between Chinese and indigenous communities have been documented elsewhere in Indonesia.

This study examines the leadership strategies of Kiai in fostering intercommunal harmony between Chinese and Muslim communities in Lenteng Timur, Sumenep Regency, through multicultural Islamic education. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) analyze the strategic leadership approaches Kiai employ to cultivate harmonious Chinese-Muslim relations through multicultural Islamic education, and (2) impact the socio-cultural, religious, and economic implications of Kiai leadership on intercommunal dynamics when mediated through multicultural Islamic pedagogical practices. The significance of this investigation extends beyond its immediate

empirical context, offering theoretical insights into how religious leadership can serve as an effective mechanism for managing cultural diversity through the strategic integration of theological principles with multicultural values in social interactions. This study addresses a critical gap in understanding the intersection between religious leadership, educational praxis, and intercommunal relations in pluralistic societies.

## **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative approach utilizing a case study design, methodological choices specifically tailored to investigate the complex dimensions of Kiai leadership in multicultural Islamic education contexts. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to uncover the intricacies of socio-cultural phenomena within their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The case study design aimed to explore the broader issue of religious leadership in a multicultural context through a detailed examination of a specific case (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted in Lenteng Timur Village, Lenteng Sub-district, Sumenep District, Madura, from October 2024 to March 2025. This site was selected based on three principal criteria: (1) the presence of harmonious Chinese and Muslim communities, (2) the active facilitation of intercultural dialogue by Kiai leadership, and (3) the implementation of multicultural Islamic educational practices within daily social interactions. Lenteng Timur is a rural community with a population of roughly 6,657 individuals, predominantly consisting of native Madurese Muslims, alongside a minority of Chinese-Indonesian families historically involved in trade and local commerce. This village exemplifies inclusivity in real-world relationships between religious leadership and multicultural harmony, stemming from its history of peaceful coexistence, bolstered by shared economic interests, local religious authority, and culturally ingrained education.

Data collection involved three main methods. First, participatory observation was conducted in various settings relevant to Kiai leadership, including (a) non-formal Islamic education forums led by Kiai; (b) rituals and celebrations involving both communities; and (c) daily interactions in public spaces. A total of 20 observation sessions were documented through field notes, focusing on communication patterns, value transmission, and leadership dynamics. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 informants selected through purposive sampling, considering their representativeness, the relevance of knowledge, and the diversity of perspectives. Inclusion criteria included: (1) individuals who have had sustained interethnic interactions (particularly between Chinese and Muslim communities) for a minimum of five years; (2) active participation in intercommunal religious or social activities; and (3) recognized local credibility, such as community leaders, educators, or religious figures familiar with multicultural Islamic educational practices. The informants included (a) three Kiai and one nyai; (b) four Chinese community leaders; (c) six Muslim community leaders; and (d) ten community members from both communities, representing a range of ages (25-70 years), genders (18 male, 6 female), education levels, and socio-economic statuses. Third, document analysis was assessed on various written materials and pertinent cultural artifacts.

Data analysis employed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, comprising three components: data condensation through systematic coding to identify key themes; data presentation via thematic matrices, relational charts, and structured narratives; and conclusion drawing and verification through triangulation. Data validity was secured through various ways consistent with qualitative research norms. Data triangulation was utilized to augment trustworthiness. The issue of transferability was tackled by offering comprehensive, contextual descriptions of the study environment and subjects. Confirmability was ensured by maintaining transparent documentation of the research process and conducting reflective analysis to reduce researcher bias.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### Implementation Strategy of Multicultural Islamic Education in Building Chinese-Muslim Harmony

This study aims to investigate how the leadership role of a Kiai, as a central figure in a Muslim community, contributes to fostering harmony between groups, particularly in the Lenteng Timur area, Sumenep, Madura-an area known for having a Chinese-Muslim population living side by side. Through comprehensive interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, numerous significant conclusions emerged concerning the leadership strategy of Kiai in fostering social harmony between the Chinese community and the Muslim community in Sumenep. Multicultural Islamic education is consistently conducted by Kiai through *kompolan* activities and routine recitations organized by the community. Kiai employs several key strategies in developing multicultural Islamic education aimed at fostering harmony between Chinese and Muslim communities. These strategies are applied simultaneously and integrated, creating an effective educational system for imparting multicultural values to the community.

#### Reinterpretation of Religious Texts to Foster Multicultural Harmony

The first strategy implemented by Kiai is to reinterpret religious texts (Al-Qur'an, hadith, and classical books) within a multicultural framework that is relevant to the local context. Kiai Saullah explained that multicultural values, such as tolerance, inclusiveness, and fairness, already have a foundation in the Al-Qur'an, specifically in QS Al-Hujurat verse 13.

“Al-Quran letter Al-Hujurat verse 13 identifies that we consist of several ethnicities and groups, and we are required to know each other. This indicates that we must live in harmony with one another. Furthermore, within the same verse, Allah teaches humans to lead egalitarian and equal lives. According to Allah, *inna akramakum 'indallahi atqaakum*. What distinguishes humans from one another is their piety. This also confirms that Islam glorifies moral integrity, not social status. In other verses, we find numerous commands to do good, which implies that we should act benevolently towards everyone.” (Saullah, 2025).

In addition to the verses of the Qur'an, Kiai Arso suggests that we can also refer to the hadith and sunnah of the Prophet as guidelines in social life, particularly within a multicultural society.

“Prophet Muhammad was not indiscriminate towards non-Muslims. We still remember the incident in Taif, where the Prophet was bleeding from being stoned by the polytheists of Bani Thaif. But what was the Prophet's response when the angel offered to help destroy them, the Banu Thaif? The Prophet said they acted that way because they did not know. Even if they could not convert to Islam, he hoped that their descendants might become Muslims in the future. Therefore, this event can serve as a foundation for the principle that we must do good. Another example from the Prophet is the Medina Charter. In the Medina Charter, the Prophet coexisted with and even protected the rights of non-Muslims, provided they did not interfere or betray.” (Arso, 2025)

Observations of the recitations led by the three Kiai demonstrate consistency their application of this reinterpretation strategy. They actively contextualize the classic texts studied by linking them to the multicultural reality of life in Lenteng Timur. This inclusive and contextual interpretation approach helps the congregation understand that the values of tolerance and respect for diversity are firmly rooted in Islam.

The interviewees' statements reflect a deep understanding of the fundamental principles of Islam that underpin the context of pluralism, egalitarianism, and universal ethics in multicultural-based social interactions. As a foundation for understanding one another, rather than animosity or superiority based on identity, this verse acknowledges and celebrates social and cultural differences. This strategy becomes highly pertinent in the context of Muslim-non-Muslim relations, particularly in Chinese and Muslim community relations, to foster societal peace and reduce discrimination based on ethnicity or religion.

### **Separating Issues of Faith ('*aqidah*') and *Muamalah***

The second strategy is to establish a clear distinction between the exclusive issue of faith and the inclusive muamalah (social interaction) area. The Kiai emphasize that while Muslims must uphold the principle of faith regarding religious beliefs and rituals, they should be inclusive in social interactions and community relations, respecting differences.

According to the caregiver of PP Miftahul Ulum Lenteng Timur, Muslims in Lenteng Timur are mature and not fanatical about religion or ethnicity. Therefore, in terms of social interaction within the community, people do not use religious differences as criteria for engaging with one another or for conducting economic transactions. Nyai Siti Aminah Hasyim, the caregiver of five regular *kompolan* for women in Lenteng Timur, also emphasized the importance of separating the issues of faith ('*aqidah*') and muamalah.

"I also always remind him of his limits regarding tolerance. In Surat Al-Kafirun, it is clear, '*Lakum diinukum wa liya diin*' (For you your religion, and for me my religion). This means that in matters of faith and worship, we stick to our respective stances, not to be mixed up. For instance, we do not celebrate Chinese New Year or Christmas, but we still respect those who do and do not interfere with their worship. Conversely, they do not need to participate in our prayers, *shalawatan*, *tahlilan*, and other religious activities, but they respect us in our celebrations." (Siti Amaniyah, 2025).

Kiai Saullah also emphasizes the same principle:

"I always teach people not to mix matters of faith and muamalah. That is, in muamalah, we are not limited. But in matters of faith, we must limit it so as not to mix these matters of faith. This is based on Surah Al-Kafirun, verse 6, '*Lakum diinukum wa liya diin*' (For you your religion, and for me my religion)." (Saullah, 2025)

Observation of social activities involving the two communities demonstrates the practical implementation of this strategy. In the neighborhood gathering held at the home of Herman Hidayat (Oei Swan Khing) and his son, Andreas Heru Herdianto, there was no reading of *tahlil*, as is customary. The *tahlil* recitation was replaced with friendly conversation and deliberation. Meanwhile, during the *kompolan* at the house of Mr. Iskandar (the head of the RT) or with other Muslim members, Mr. Andreas Heru Herdianto and other Chinese participants chose to remain silent during the *tahlil* recitation. This distinction between the realms of belief and muamalah establishes a balance between the firmness of religious principles and social openness, serving as an important foundation for intergroup harmony.

The results of interviews with informants indicate a clear comprehension of the distinction between belief and social interactions as complementary elements. Kiai Saullah asserts that religious belief should not be conflated with issues of social ties or the distinction between ritual worship and social worship. The Kiai has continuously upheld this distinction by preserving religious limits while engaging in social activities. Views were analyzed through the perspectives of inter-religious relations and leadership strategies.

### **Cultural Approach Based on Madurese Values**

The cultural approach taken and taught by Kiai involves applying the local values of Madurese society when interacting with Chinese descendants. One such value is politeness, as encapsulated in the concept of *andhap asor*. Madurese people are taught from childhood to be polite and courteous in their interactions with others and to avoid arrogance. According to Nyai Siti Amaniyah, *andhap asor* is not just taught but is also modeled by parents in their interactions with

others, especially with elders. In the pesantren tradition, *andhap asor* is integrated with the values of Islamic teachings through the materials of *akhlak lil banin* and *ta'lim muta'alim*, which are the two most popular moral handbooks for santri. Therefore, Madurese also call *tak tao ka battonna langgar* (never go to the *langgar*/study) to refer to people who are not polite in social interactions.

“In several kompolan that I foster, I always say that whoever is here lives with us, never disturbs us, including the ethnic Chinese in Lenteng Timur, who are *taretan dibi*. They are our brothers. I really exemplify this in my daily activities. When Mr. Karyadi needs help, I help as much as I can. For example, if he needs someone to work in his warehouse or in his house, I help as much as I can. Conversely, when the NU office needs construction, he immediately offers to contribute to the construction.” (Saullah, 2025).

This assertion was corroborated by other sources, including members of the Chinese Indonesian community, who confirmed consistent reciprocal support and engagement in community events. Chinese inhabitants engage in the maintenance of mosques, while Muslim youngsters have been recorded participating in joint clean-up efforts at Chinese-owned enterprises during local festivals. These examples demonstrate that the reciprocity defined by Saullah is evident in concrete and observable actions of collaboration.

Kiai Saullah's views represent inclusive and reconciliatory leadership rooted in the local cultural values of Madurese society, where every individual, including those of Chinese descent, called *'taretan dib'i'* (brothers), has the right to coexist equally. This approach is not merely symbolic but manifests in concrete actions such as helping each other regardless of religious or ethnic background, which creates a network of trust and solidarity between groups. Saullah's leadership emphasizes the exemplary strengthening of the values of brotherhood and inclusivity through language and social practices familiar to the community, forming relationships based on mutual respect and support, and being a tangible manifestation of peace that grows from local cultural roots.

## Interpersonal Relationships

The fourth strategy is to use an individualized approach through interpersonal relationships to build trust and understanding between groups. The Kiai build personal relationships with individuals from the Chinese community, who then become bridges between groups. Kiai Arso explains:

“In the past, there was a Chinese descendant close to my grandmother. I no longer know his name. He was close to me, and in fact, he followed the traditions of the Muslim community. Once, someone wanted to open a shop and asked my grandmother for advice. Finally, she suggested that they organize a celebration and invite people to recite the Quran. They were willing to do that, even though the motive was only economic. However, the point is not that. My point is that my grandfather, as a Kiai, was close to the Chinese, so he formed a trusting relationship. This trust extended to aspects that were not in line with their religion and beliefs” (Arso, 2025).

According to Kiai Arso, this personal approach is even an effective means of showing Islamic values, showing the behavior of Muslims by Islamic teachings through Kiai. The interview excerpt offers a detailed description of the micro-social level of interethnic and interreligious connections in Indonesia, especially in rural and semi-rural areas where religious boundaries are often less rigid and cultural hybridity is more prevalent. A pleasant coexistence can be built around proximity, trust, and shared socio-cultural practices rather than doctrinal conformity, as shown in Kiai Arso's memory of his family's friendship with a person of Chinese descent.

Furthermore, the interview implies that social practices and interpersonal ethics can maintain respect and recognition across religious boundaries even when fundamental views differ. This is relevant to the ideas put forth by proponents of daily multiculturalism, who argue that commonalities in routine activities, chance meetings, and public places have a significant impact on the development of harmonious communities. Interviewees emphasized the importance of

grassroots contacts, based on family, tradition, and community leadership, as key methods for promoting intergroup harmony in heterogeneous countries like Indonesia, as opposed to depending solely on institutional dialogue or legal frameworks.

“In fact, by building interpersonal relationships with the Chinese, we can introduce Islam to them. You know Bungso (real name: Xu Xian Bue), right? It was my uncle, H. Nor Asik, who Islamized him. The process began with a close relationship with my uncle. At first, I asked questions about life, then I became curious about Islam, and finally, she decided to convert to Islam.” (Arso, 2025)

This personal approach by Kiai has proven effective in building trusting relationships. The Kiai's closeness to non-Muslim ethnic Chinese causes them to feel considered part of Madurese society. The Madurese respect for Kiai, which is reflected in the philosophy of *buppak*, *babbu*, *guru*, and *rato*, causes Chinese people to also be respected, thus minimizing friction with the community. In addition, the closeness of Kiai to ethnic Chinese who are already Muslims gives them a reference for learning Islam so that they can be more devout in religion. Interactions between Kiai and residents of Chinese descent in a variety of informal settings indicate a close and trusting interpersonal relationship.

The four strategies for implementing multicultural Islamic education complement each other and synergize to form a comprehensive education system for building intergroup harmony. Although non-formal and not rigidly structured, this education system has proven effective in transmitting multicultural values and facilitating the formation of harmonious relationships between Chinese and Muslim communities in Lenteng Timur.

**Table 1: Kiai's Leadership Strategy in Building Harmony**

No	Aspect of Strategy	Strategy Explanation
1	Reinterpretation of Religious Texts in a Multicultural Framework	Kiai reinterprets religious scriptures via a contextual lens, highlighting the principles of inclusion, tolerance, and universal kindness.
2	Separating Issues of Faith ('aqidah) and Muamalah	Kiai differentiates between exclusive domains of belief and inclusive social practices, facilitating intergroup cooperation.
3	Cultural Aproach Based on Madurese Values	Kiai employs a methodology that prioritizes Indigenous wisdom, exemplified by the concept of <i>taretan dibi'</i> (brotherhood) in Madura, serving as a conduit for communication among groups.
4	Interpersonal Relationships	Kiai cultivates personal relationships with cross-ethnic inhabitants through informal discourse, social visits, and engagement in collaborative activities.

### **The Impact of Kiai Leadership in Building Chinese-Muslim Harmony through Multicultural Islamic Education**

The dynamic interplay between religious leadership and social harmony has long been a central theme in studies of multicultural societies. Kiai plays an outsized role in Indonesian society, especially in pesantren-based communities, due to the country's ethnic and religious diversity. This research draws on interviews and field observations to emphasize how religious leadership can foster intercultural trust and maintain social cohesiveness in diverse settings. Analysis of the research data indicates that Kiai leadership through multicultural Islamic education has had a significant impact on three main impacts: the socio-cultural impact, the economic impact, and the religious impact.

## **Socio-Cultural Impact**

The leadership of Kiai in fostering Chinese-Muslim harmony through multicultural Islamic education generates profound social and cultural impacts, particularly in rural or semi-urban Indonesian settings where religious authority shapes communal life. Socially, Kiai act as mediators and moral exemplars, fostering mutual trust, reducing intergroup prejudice, and encouraging inclusive social norms that transcend ethnic and religious boundaries. Culturally, their teachings and daily interactions promote a reinterpretation of Islamic values in ways that emphasize coexistence, respect for diversity, and shared communal rituals. In the socio-cultural dimension, the most prominent impact is the formation of harmonious social integration between the Chinese and Muslim communities. The Chinese community is no longer considered “the other” but as an integral part of the Lenteng Timur community.

Rudi Gunawan (Tan Peng Haw), a Chinese descent, expresses the feeling of being integrated into the Lenteng Timur community:

“Even though I am a minority, I have lived here since childhood and don’t feel like I am someone else. I am not Chinese. I am a Madurese.” (Rudi Gunawan, 2025)

One proof of integration is the absence of barriers in social interaction, as stated by Paulus Suryadi (Ong Song Hwa):

“The relationship between Muslims and us is fine. We tolerate each other. If invited to community activities, I attend. I participate in Maulid, weddings, and other community events. When it’s time to read the prayer, I remain silent.” “In May 1998, there were riots in Jakarta and other big cities that harmed ethnic Chinese. However, in this location, the riots had no effect at all. There is no problem here”. (Paulus Suryadi, 2024)

The interview exemplifies a type of quotidian tolerance that signifies essential and harmonious cooperation between Chinese and Muslim communities. Engagement in communal social and religious occasions, such as Maulid and weddings, exemplifies significant cultural integration, although religious boundaries are properly upheld, as evidenced by being silent during Islamic prayers. This corresponds with the principle of civic pluralism, wherein varied groups participate in communal life without the necessity of adopting religious ideas, promoting concord without compromising identity. Observations of various social community activities show natural and harmonious interactions between the two communities. Residents of Chinese descent actively participate in gotong royong activities, neighborhood associations, and national holiday celebrations. These social interactions run without barriers and prejudice. Another important impact is the formation of a cultural adaptation mechanism that allows the two communities to coexist while respecting differences.

## **Economic Impact**

In the economic impact, Kiai leadership via multicultural Islamic education has been instrumental in cultivating advantageous links between the Chinese and Muslim communities. Kiai continually advocates for Islamic business ethics that prioritize honesty (*ṣidq*), justice (*‘adl*), and non-discrimination, thereby fostering a moral economic environment that surpasses ethnic and religious divisions. Consequently, economic interdependence serves as a stabilizing influence for social cohesiveness, bolstering the overarching structure of intercultural harmony that the Kiai has fostered through continuous educational and relational initiatives.

Mohammad Iskandar, Head of RT 1, Kembang Jepun Timur Hamlet confirmed:

“As long as I have been here, I have never heard of conflicts with residents over religion and ethnicity. In the economic field, they healthily do business and do not associate it with ethnicity or religion. Everyone is free to compete according to consumer needs. Consumers also buy goods not based on ethnicity and religion but based on competitive prices.” (Muhammad Iskandar, 2024)



The owner of the materials store, Muhammad Prayitno (Chua Tsiang Han), a Chinese Muslim in Lenteng Timur also emphasized that ethnic or religious issues should not influence business competition:

“For community life in Lenteng Timur, between Chinese and Muslims, there is almost no friction; the key is to blend in and be willing to give in. What happens is sometimes the Chinese descendants don’t want to give in, so that causes problems in the local community. Alhamdulillah, in Lenteng, there are no problems that cause crashes between the local Muslim community and Chinese descendants. Now it is not only the Chinese who control the business. Many local Muslims also have businesses and are successful.” (Muhammad Prayitno, 2025).

This advantageous economic relationship is further demonstrated by the development of economic interdependence between the two communities, especially in the interactions between individuals of Chinese descent-primarily involved in trade-and members of the Muslim community engaged in agriculture, services, or other labor sectors. This connection illustrates a cohesive local economy in which each group plays unique but complementary functions, promoting collaboration over competition. This interconnected economic structure maintains livelihoods and fortifies social bonds, rendering harmony not just an aspiration but a practical imperative grounded in mutual economic interests and cooperative survival.

“There are Chinese people here who are warehouse entrepreneurs like me, entrepreneurs who build shops, grocery stores, and motorcycle spare parts, and there are also those who work informally. The local people here also have various professions. All complement each other. My employees are all Madurese, from the local community. Those who sell krusuk to me are farmers.” (Karyadi, 2025).

Observations of economic activities in the traditional market of Lenteng Timur reveal healthy and dynamic interactions between Chinese-descended traders and Muslim buyers, as well as the reverse. These interactions are marked by mutual respect, cooperation, and the absence of ethnic or religious discrimination in commercial transactions. The ability of different communities to engage in fair and respectful economic exchanges reflects how deeply these values have been internalized, contributing not only to economic stability but also to the broader social harmony that defines the Lenteng Timur community.

### **Religious Impact**

In the religious impact, the influence of Kiai leadership through multicultural Islamic education is manifested in the development of inclusive religious practices within Muslim communities and the cultivation of mutual respect toward the beliefs and rituals of others. By consistently promoting an understanding of Islam, the Kiai instill a theological framework that honors diversity as part of God’s divine will, as reflected in Qur’anic verses such as Al-Hujurat:13. Through sermons, recitation, *majelis taklim*, and social interactions, the Kiai model respectful engagement with religious differences, thereby fostering a spiritually grounded atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance that strengthens interfaith relations within the Lenteng Timur community.

“I emphasized several Islamic principles that support diversity. First, the concept of rahmatan lil ‘alamin, signifies that Islam is a mercy for all of creation, not just for Muslims. Second, the principle of ta’aruf, or getting to know one another, is grounded in QS. Al-Hujurat verse 13, which states that Allah created humans from different tribes and nations to foster understanding, not enmity. Third, the principle of doing good to everyone, especially to neighbors.” (Muzammil, 2025)

Interestingly, one of the Chinese descendants, Eko Ariesdianto, received approval from his Catholic mother, Ratna Indraswati (I’joa Ek Tjiong), to build a *musala* in his yard. This was intended to help market traders who find it difficult to pray dhuhr and asr.

“I just feel sorry for the stallholders who find it difficult to pray dhuhr and asr because there is no proper musala. They sometimes must close their stalls to pray at home, which makes my mom and me concerned. Even though we didn’t have any money, we built the musala little by little. And we don’t use this musala to make money.” (Eko Ariesdianto, 2025)

The formation of a distinct “boundary awareness” in religious relations, where every community knows and respects the limitations of involvement, especially in matters of worship and ritual, is another important effect of the Kiai’s leadership through multicultural Islamic education. Respect for one another’s theological diversity is the foundation of this understanding, not exclusivism or division. Such limits allow for mutual engagement in social and cultural activities without allowing religious intolerance, paving the way for harmonious cohabitation.

“We respect and tolerate each other. Tolerance, in my opinion, does not mean forcing others. In our community, we are good neighbors. Sometimes, we are invited when the Chinese have a meal. However, lately they have been delivering food to our house and rarely inviting us over. We often receive and share food with them. Nevertheless, when it comes to food for religious celebrations, they do not share it with us, as we have an understanding.” (Munjie, 2025)

This understanding of boundaries does not impede social harmony; instead, it provides a robust basis that fosters intercommunal trust and guarantees a sense of security in the practice of one’s faith. By distinctly outlining the social commonalities and theological differences, members of both the Chinese and Muslim communities can foster meaningful relationships without the apprehension of undermining their religious identity. This distinction aids in preventing the syncretism of religious beliefs, enabling each group to preserve authenticity while coexisting together. This approach, under Kiai’s direction, cultivates a sophisticated pluralism that appreciates polite detachment in worship while promoting closeness in daily interactions, thereby establishing a resilient and lasting culture of religious cohabitation.

**Table 2 The Impact of Kiai Leadership in Building Chinese-Muslim Harmony**

No	Aspect of Impact	Impact Explanation
1	Socio-Cultural Impact	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.Enhanced social cohesion between Chinese and Muslim groups.</li> <li>2.Enhanced interpersonal trust and mutual respect via daily encounters and inclusive community forums.</li> <li>3.Mitigation of racial bias and stereotypes through collaborative cultural practices and dialogic methodologies.</li> </ol>
2	Economic Impact	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.Establishment of mutual economic collaboration, including labor exchange and reciprocal business support.</li> <li>2.Advancement of inclusive corporate ethics founded on Islamic principles of fairness, integrity, and non-discrimination.</li> <li>3.Involvement of the Chinese community in financing community initiatives, such as the construction of the NU office.</li> </ol>
3	Religious Impact	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.Establishment of inclusive religious practices with distinct delineations between faith and social collaboration.</li> <li>2.Dynamic reworking of Islamic doctrines to incorporate plurality while maintaining religious integrity.</li> <li>3.Prioritization of akhlak (morality) and muamalah (social interactions) over inflexible identity-based demarcations</li> </ol>

## Discussion

This section examines the research findings about leadership strategy in fostering harmony between Chinese-Muslim communities and their implications for social interaction within the communities of Lenteng, Sumenep, Madura. The findings demonstrate that religious leaders, especially Kiai, are crucial in both the spiritual life of the society and in promoting inclusive social relations among many ethnic and religious groups. The Kiai’s leadership is not solely doctrinal but

integrative, combining religious ideals, local wisdom, and educational methods to cultivate a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. Kiai serves as moral entrepreneurs through religious instruction, community forums, and daily interaction, establishing the framework for peaceful coexistence and social resilience in a multiethnic context (Ma'arif et al., 2025).

The study reveals that one of the key strategies used by the Kiai in building harmony between the Chinese and Muslim communities in Lenteng, Sumenep, is the reinterpretation of religious texts through a multicultural framework that distinguishes between 'aqidah (core beliefs) and social relations. These approaches align with James A. Banks' theory of multiculturalism, particularly his notion of transformative curriculum and knowledge construction, where dominant interpretations are critically examined to promote inclusion and social justice (Banks, 2019; Sleeter & Grant, 2008). By reinterpreting religious texts to emphasize ethical values over exclusivist dogma, the Kiai constructs a more inclusive Islamic narrative that supports coexistence. Instead of emphasizing rigid dogmas that might alienate minority groups, the Kiai reframes Islamic teachings to highlight ethical principles such as justice, compassion, and neighborly respect, which are compatible with shared civic life (Azmi, 2024; Hariadi et al., 2024; Hastasari et al., 2022). This reinterpretation enables Muslims to maintain their theological integrity while engaging respectfully and cooperatively with the non-Muslim Chinese community in daily interactions.

From Will Kymlicka's perspective, the Kiai's leadership approach reflects the principles of multicultural citizenship, where the recognition of minority cultures and the provision of cultural space are essential to democratic inclusion. Furthermore, the incorporation of Madurese cultural values, such as *andhap asor*, *akanca ataretan*, *taretan dibi*, *estoh*, and *sopan santun*, into religious discourse supports a localized form of inclusive leadership that resonates with both Muslim and Chinese residents. Kymlicka's framework, multiculturalism should move beyond mere passive tolerance toward an active recognition and institutional accommodation of cultural differences (Kymlicka, 1996). In Lenteng Timur, the Kiai does not merely promote peaceful coexistence but proactively cultivates positive, reciprocal relationships between Chinese and Muslim communities through inclusive Islamic education, interfaith-friendly social forums, and culturally sensitive economic cooperation. Another that, the individualized approach through interpersonal relations demonstrates the application of the contact theory developed (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Bhikhu Parekh's multicultural theory deepens the interpretation of Kiai's strategy by emphasizing the need for ethical dialogue across cultures within a framework of mutual recognition and shared norms. The Kiai functions as a moral intermediary that fosters intergroup trust through sustained interpersonal relationships, community events, and cultural rituals that highlight common human values rather than differences. In this context, the Kiai's leadership becomes a living embodiment of multicultural ethics, balancing religious commitment with cultural sensitivity, moral authority with dialogical humility, and unity with diversity (Asmendri et al., 2024; Deng et al., 2023). The results suggest that such a strategy is not only effective for conflict prevention but also for building a socially cohesive and ethically engaged multicultural society. This research supports Bikkhu Parekh's multiculturalism about "negotiating diversity" (Parekh, 2000). Parekh claims that multicultural civilizations do not favor variation over uniformity or have separate cultural blocs. They are sentient beings in which cultural communities deliberate about coexisting within a shared political and ethical framework.

The findings indicate that Kiai leadership in Lenteng, Sumenep, exerts a considerable socio-cultural impact in fostering harmony between the Chinese and Muslim communities, which may be elucidated through Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership (Weber, 1963). Kiai, as religious figures, are perceived not just as spiritual leaders but also as charismatic individuals possessing significant moral and social influence within the society. In this setting, Kiai serve as agents of peace capable of transcending ethnic and cultural boundaries, motivating individuals to foster conversation and social collaboration, and upholding the principles of unity amidst diversity.

The study also reveals that Kiai's charismatic leadership has a tangible economic impact in fostering harmony between Chinese-Muslim communities in Lenteng, Sumenep, aligning with Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority. The Kiai's moral credibility, rooted in religious teachings and spiritual authority, enables him to shape economic behavior and norms across ethnic lines. By promoting Islamic business principles such as honesty, fairness, and non-discrimination, the Kiai cultivates a sense of mutual trust that supports inclusive commerce and reduces suspicion in trade relationships. In Weberian terms, charisma legitimizes the Kiai's informal, powerful influence over economic, and social practices. The Kiai's role exemplifies ethical discourse grounded in religion, open to pluralism, transforming economic life into a shared space of cooperation, cultural diversity recognized, actively integrated into daily exchanges, and intercommunal trust-building (M. A. Abdullah, 2024; Djamaluddin, Bahri, Halim, Nurlailah, et al., 2024).

Another that, the findings indicate that religion is essential in enhancing the charismatic leadership of Kiai in fostering unity between the Chinese and Muslim communities in Lenteng, Sumenep. According to Max Weber's charismatic leadership theory, Kiai authority arises not from formal structures but from the community's recognition of exceptional spiritual and religious attributes. The Kiai's piety, demonstrated via a profound comprehension of Islamic doctrines and moral integrity, renders him a trusted and esteemed peacemaker among diverse ethnic groups. Consequently, religion serves as both a moral authority for Kiai and a cultural tool that facilitates interfaith conversation, social collaboration, and a sense of community among Chinese-Muslim populations in societal contexts.

The Kiai's transformational leadership in Lenteng Timur has effectively promoted Chinese-Muslim harmony; nevertheless, replicating this approach in other contexts necessitates an awareness of local socio-religious dynamics and trust frameworks (Azizah & Mardiana, 2024). In pluralistic settings, reduced religious authority and ideological fragmentation may provide obstacles, underscoring the necessity of collaborative approaches that connect religious leadership with civic and interfaith organizations. To enhance these initiatives, it is imperative to provide policy support for culturally relevant religious education and to formally incorporate informal religious players into civic engagement frameworks to maintain peace and social cohesion in varied cultures. Thus, strengthening multicultural approaches in religious leadership is essential to ensure an inclusive and cohesive community. The findings have argued that the institutionalization of multicultural values should not only be internalized in education but also in social relations between groups to maintain harmony in a multicultural society.

## CONCLUSION

The results and findings of the study are as follows: first, the strategies implemented by Kiai in building harmony between Chinese-Muslim communities through multicultural Islamic education include four main approaches: a reinterpretation of religious texts; a clear distinction between exclusive areas of belief and inclusive areas of *muamalah*; integration of multicultural values; and individual approaches through interpersonal relationships to build trust and understanding between groups. Second, the impact of Kiai leadership through multicultural Islamic education is seen in three main dimensions: the socio-cultural dimension, involving the formation of harmonious social integration and cultural adaptation mechanisms that enable the two communities to coexist while respecting differences; the economic dimension, with the establishment of mutually beneficial economic relations and fair and inclusive business ethics; the religious dimension, with the formation of inclusive religious practices in Muslim communities and clear "boundary awareness" in terms of religious beliefs and rituals, which guarantees a sense of security in practicing their respective beliefs without worrying about syncretism that blurs religious

identity. This finding confirms that Kiai leadership through multicultural Islamic education is an important force in maintaining inter-religious harmony among community diversity.

This study provides theoretical contributions by strengthening the multiculturalism theory of James A. Banks, Bhikhu Parekh, and Will Kymlicka, and expanding the application of Max Weber's charismatic leadership theory and Pettigrew & Tropp's contact theory through the role of Kiai as agents of social integration in multiethnic societies. Practically, these findings offer an inclusive religious leadership model based on local Madurese values, a multicultural Islamic education strategy, and strengthening equitable cross-ethnic economic ethics. In addition, the results of this study can be used as a reference for educational institutions, economic actors, and policy makers to encourage harmony between religious communities and build social cohesion in diverse societies.

The limitations of this study lie in the limited coverage area in Lenteng, Sumenep, so that the results cannot be generalized to other multicultural contexts with different dynamics, and the qualitative approach used is highly dependent on the researcher's interpretation and has not involved other actors outside the Kiai, such as Chinese figures or local government. Therefore, it is recommended for further researchers to expand the study location, use a mixed approach so that the data is more comprehensive, and explore the role of interfaith actors and public policy in order to enrich the understanding of the development of social harmony in a multicultural society.

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