



ISLAMIC EDUCATION AS CULTURAL RESILIENCE: MALAY IDENTITY AMID RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

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Abstract

This study examines the crucial role of Islamic education for the Malay community in Pattani, Southern Thailand, in safeguarding cultural identity amid the challenges of religious pluralism and national assimilation policies in daily practices. The study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive case study design, collecting data through participatory observation, in-depth interviews and document analysis. The findings reveal that the dynamics of Islamic education are characterized by the implementation of a dual curriculum that combines the national curriculum with religious content, generating identity tensions among Muslim students. Cultural preservation is effectively carried out through traditional educational institutions such as *pondok pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) and "Malay schools," which instill Malay values and use the local language as the medium of instruction. In addition, the values of multiculturalism and tolerance are deeply embedded in the learning process, for example, even though Santiwitya is an Islamic school, the curriculum still adapts the national compulsory curriculum in the form of general subjects which include examples of teachings from Buddhism. The novelty of this research lies in its holistic approach because this approach viewing Islamic education not only as a fortress of cultural preservation but also as an active agent in cultivating tolerance and serving as a bridge for dialogue. Theoretically, the study demonstrates that strong religiosity can coexist with inclusive attitudes, while practically it offers a model of community-based education as an effective strategy for cultural reconciliation and the preservation of minority identities.

Keywords: Cultural Resilience; Islamic Education; Malay Identity; Pattani Thailand; Religious Pluralism.

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Article History	Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
	2025-09-23	2026-04-02	2026-04-28	2026-06-15

INTRODUCTION | مقدمة

Thailand, a constitutional monarchy in Southeast Asia, is renowned for its uniqueness and diversity. Prior to 1939, the country was known as the Kingdom of Siam and served as a major trading hub between India and China. Unlike many of its neighboring countries, Thailand was never colonized by foreign powers (Janudin, 2023). Although it faced pressure from Britain and France, the ruling elites managed to withstand it through costly concessions (Tamba et al., 2024), which earned Thailand the nickname "Land of the Free". Today, Thailand is widely recognized as a predominantly Theravada Buddhist country, with over 90% of its population adhering to Buddhism in their worldview and way of life (Abdoeh, 2025). Despite this Buddhist majority, Thailand is also home to various other faiths, including Islam.

Interfaith interactions generally proceed harmoniously. However, tensions have surfaced, particularly in the southern region where the majority of the population consists of Malay

Muslims (Nuereng, 2016). Historically, Southern Thailand formerly the Pattani Kingdom has maintained strong Malay and Islamic roots (Suharjo et al., 2023). In the four southern provinces, Malay-Islamic culture remains deeply embedded in cultural, social, and educational life, coexisting alongside Buddhist and other ethnic communities (Maulida et al., 2024). Nonetheless, this multicultural society faces multiple challenges, including issues of social and political discrimination (Kadir et al., 2023) and marginalization in government institutions, education, and employment due to ethnic and religious differences (Suharjo et al., 2023). Furthermore, the government's promotion of Thai culture and language as a national identity has triggered an identity crisis among the Malay population, fueling separatist conflict and violence since the early 2000s (Lubis et al., 2024).

Previous studies have explored the issues surrounding Muslim minorities in Southern Thailand. These works highlight peacebuilding efforts through government-society dialogue and development-oriented approaches (Abdoeh, 2025). Another emphasized alternative pathway arguably the most influential in shaping community life is multicultural Islamic education and curriculum reform (Lubis et al., 2024). The integration of Islamic education into the national education system, while maintaining Malay identity, has been a crucial part of these efforts. Research has also underscored the central role of Islamic educational culture in Malay society in Pattani, functioning both as a center of Islamic learning and dissemination and as a means of preserving cultural identity. Traditional educational institutions such as *pondok pesantren* and *madrrasah* are deemed vital in shaping community character and morality, serving simultaneously as cultural bastions.

Although extensive research has addressed conflict, peacebuilding, and the role of Islamic education in Southern Thailand, there remain underexplored areas. Existing studies tend to focus on historical conflicts, issues of discrimination, and Islamic education as a tool of cultural resistance. However, fewer studies have examined how Islamic education dynamically adapts and interacts within the pluralistic religious context of the region. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how Islamic educational institutions such as *pondok pesantren* transmit values of multiculturalism and tolerance not merely as a defensive cultural mechanism, but also as a proactive bridge for dialogue.

This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the dynamics of Islamic education and the role of institutions in preserving Malay culture within the context of religious pluralism. The distinction of this research lies in its holistic approach: rather than viewing Islamic education solely as a response to conflict, it frames Islamic education as a proactive agent in cultivating tolerance and respect for diversity. This study aims to provide a detailed analysis of how Islamic educational culture in Pattani reflects the Malay community's efforts to preserve identity while instilling multicultural values in a plural society. In doing so, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of Islamic education as a vehicle for reconciliation and for the transmission of sustainable Islamic and Malay cultural values.

Theoretically, this study is framed through the lens of Social Identity theory and the Resilience framework to analyze the interaction between state policies and community responses. Social Identity theory serves to explain how the Pattani Malay community maintains its group membership through cultural and religious symbols amid intensive national assimilation efforts. Within this framework, "identity transformation" is defined not as a loss of one's original identity, but rather as an adaptive process in which individuals manage dual identities: as Thai citizens administratively and as Malay Muslims culturally and spiritually.

The concept of cultural resilience is utilized to analyze the capacity of the Islamic education system to absorb external pressures without losing the essence of its values. This resilience is operationalized through “adaptive mechanisms” such as the implementation of a dual curriculum and the use of Malay as the medium of instruction, which ensure the preservation of minority identities amidst challenging pluralism. Thus, Islamic education in Pattani is viewed not merely as a passive defense mechanism, but as a dynamic ecosystem that proactively manages identity transformation to achieve stable social coexistence.

Social identity theory elucidates how Islamic education cultivates a cohesive in-group consciousness (Mu’alimin & Rosady, 2025), reinforcing the Malay-Muslim identity as a distinct, positive reference point in contrast to the external, often assimilationist pressures of the broader Thai state. Simultaneously, the resilience framework underscores how this identity maintenance operates as a protective strategy, allowing the community to navigate the stressors of religious pluralism without sacrificing their cultural integrity (Tobroni et al., 2025). By fostering internal solidarity and a shared sense of belonging, Islamic education does not merely impart religious knowledge; it actively fortifies the community’s capacity to withstand marginalization, transforming their faith-based educational system into a vital buffer that preserves the continuity and vitality of the Malay identity within a pluralistic landscape.

Based on this background, the objectives of this study are threefold: *First*, to analyze the dynamics of Islamic education in Southern Thailand in the context of religious pluralism. *Second*, to describe the efforts undertaken by Islamic educational institutions in preserving Malay culture amid modernization and the promotion of Thai national culture. *Third*, to identify how values of multiculturalism and tolerance are integrated into the educational culture and daily interactions of the Malay Muslim community in Pattani.

METHOD

منهج

This study employs a qualitative approach using an interpretive case study design to analyze the phenomenon of multicultural Islamic education in Pattani, Southern Thailand (Poltak & Widjaja, 2024). This design facilitates an in-depth exploration of participants’ experiences, perceptions, and social interactions in their natural contexts (Manullang et al., 2025). Epistemologically, the researchers grounded their work in the social constructivism paradigm, in which reality is viewed as the result of social construction through daily interactions (Husna & Supriyadi, 2023).

Participant selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure data richness through specific inclusion criteria. The key participants in this study were members of the Malay Muslim community in Pattani who were directly involved in or possessed deep knowledge of Islamic education. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on inclusion criteria, such as being part of the Malay Muslim community and having relevant experience as religious leaders, educators, community leaders, students, or parents.

For this study, two primary informants were selected Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mahamadaree Warno, SE., M.Si, a lecturer at Fatoni University and prominent figure in Pattani and Ustadh Maruding, Lc, Headmaster of Santiwitya Serong School. Although this study relied on two key informants as primary sources, the total number of participants involved in this study reached 12. This group consisted of 2 key informants—a community leader and a religious figure, as explained above—4 teachers from Santiwitya Serong School, 3 students from Santiwitya Serong School, and 3 local residents.

Field data collection was conducted over a one-month period, from January 5, 2025, to February 4, 2025. This timeframe was deemed sufficient because the researcher conducted intensive participatory observation at the research sites (Santiwitya School and Kampung Serong), allowing the researcher to be directly involved in the participants' daily routines.

The research ethics governing this study are centered on the principles of cultural sensitivity and the protection of vulnerable populations within a sensitive socio-political climate. To ensure the integrity of the findings, the researchers must prioritize informed consent, ensuring that participants fully understand the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Given the delicate nature of Malay-Muslim identity in Southern Thailand

RESULT | نتائج

Islamic education plays a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining multicultural identity among the Malay community in Pattani, Thailand, particularly in Kampung Serong and educational institutions such as Santiwitya Serong School or Madrasah Darul Furqon. Observations indicate that local culture significantly influences the practice of Islamic education in this region. The majority of the Serong community identifies as both Muslim and Malay, with strong traditions and cultural values that are naturally integrated into Islamic teachings.



Figure 1. The Hijab as a Symbol of Malay Cultural Identity

The Dynamics of Islamic Education in the Context of Religious Pluralism in Southern Thailand

Based on data collected through observations conducted between January 5, 2025, and February 4, 2025, as well as in-depth interviews with key educational figures, the findings show that Islamic education in Pattani plays a multifaceted role. It functions not only as a medium for transmitting religious knowledge but also as a fortress for preserving Malay culture and as a platform for engaging with religious pluralism in Southern Thailand.

The educational system in Pattani demonstrates a form of dualism: the state-led national curriculum and the community-driven religious curriculum. In Islamic private schools such as Santiwitya Serong School, this dualism is manifested through a dual curriculum, which combines national subjects (such as mathematics and Thai language) with Islamic subjects (such as Arabic, *Fiqh*, and *Jawi* or Arab-Malay script).

This dualism, however, creates complex dynamics. In an interview, Dr. Warno highlighted the influence of Buddhist culture within the national education system. He explained: "In public schools, Buddhist religious education receives a significant amount of instructional hours and practical application. As a result, Muslim students in public schools often become more familiar with Buddhism than with Islam, especially given the minimal Islamic education offered. In Islamic

private schools, Buddhist studies are limited to introductory knowledge to meet government standards, without ritual practices. Conversely, Islamic values are strengthened through programs such as congregational *Duha* prayers, group *wirid*, and daily recitation of *Asmaul Husna*, all of which are mandatory for students.” This reflects how Islamic private schools negotiate identity pressures by adapting the dual curriculum while reinforcing Islamic values through community-based practices.

Efforts of Islamic Educational Institutions in Preserving Malay Culture

Islamic educational institutions, both formal and non-formal, play a central role in sustaining Malay identity and culture. Observations indicate that traditional *pesantren* led by *babo* (Islamic scholar or *kyai*) and local *madrasah* serve as vital institutions in transmitting Malay values to students. Data from interviews reinforce these findings, highlighting two key pillars of cultural preservation:

First, Reintroduction of the *Jawi* or Arab-Malay Script. Islamic private schools and *madrasah* actively reintroduce the *Jawi* script (Arab-Malay) as an additional subject to preserve the literary heritage of Malay-Islamic civilization.

Second, The Central Role of Malay Schools. Community-based religious education for children, known as *Sekolah Melayu* (Malay Schools), under the supervision of mosques, provides consistent cultural foundations. According to Ustadh Dare, these schools nurture children’s religious awareness from an early age, preventing them from drifting away from Islamic values. The system relies heavily on volunteer teachers, reflecting strong community participation.

Furthermore, the medium of instruction in educational institutions across the Muslim-majority south remains Malay, which directly contributes to preserving the mother tongue in academic settings. As Ustadh Maruding emphasized in his interview: “...in schools, particularly in the southern region, the Malay language continues to be used, even though Thai is the official language. This has become part of the effort to preserve the local language.”

This cultural reinforcement demonstrates that Islamic education does not merely preserve religious values but also functions as a custodian of Malay linguistic and cultural identity.

Integration of Multicultural Values and Social Realities

Although external narratives frequently portray Southern Thailand as a “conflict zone,” field data reveal a different social reality. Observations in Kampung Serong show that the community is highly open, tolerant, and capable of living harmoniously with people of different religious backgrounds. This finding is supported by interviews with Ustadh Dare, who firmly rejected the conflict narrative, emphasizing that such tensions have little impact on education or daily life. He explained that social life in Southern Thailand proceeds normally, with ongoing community activities and regular visits from outsiders. His perspective underscores that tolerance and openness are not abstract ideals but are actively practiced in everyday community interactions.

The main challenges identified are internal rather than external: a segment of society tends to undervalue religious education, and modernization has fostered attitudes of individualism and instant gratification. These factors, rather than interreligious hostility, represent the more pressing concerns facing the community. Thus, Islamic education in Pattani demonstrates its role not only as a medium for religious knowledge but also as a foundation for cultivating social harmony, multicultural values, and interfaith coexistence in everyday life.

Table 1. Main Research Findings

Research Aspects	Findings	Data Sources
Curriculum Dynamics	A dual curriculum (national and religious) is implemented in private Islamic schools.	Observation, Interviews
	The national curriculum in public schools has a large portion devoted to Buddhist teachings and practices.	
	Islamic private schools integrate Islamic values through mandatory activities (Duha prayer, etc)	Interview
Cultural Preservation	Teaching Arabic Malay or <i>Pegon</i> script as an additional subject in <i>madrasah</i> and private schools	Interview
	Malay schools under the auspices of mosques have become centers of community-based religious and cultural education from an early age	
	Malay is used as the language of instruction in muslim majority areas	
Social Attitudes	The community shows a high level of tolerance and openness in daily interactions	Interview
	The peaceful social reality challenges external narratives about “conflict zones”	
	The main challenges stem from internal mindsets and the tide of modernization	

This analysis provides a clearer picture of how Islamic education mediates between external pressures such as state assimilation policies and modernization and internal strengths, namely Malay cultural traditions and community participation. The findings confirm that Islamic education in Pattani functions not only as a defensive mechanism against cultural hegemony but also as a proactive mediator, generating both cultural resilience and social cohesion.

Findings Model: Islamic Education as a Mediator of Cultural Resilience and Tolerance

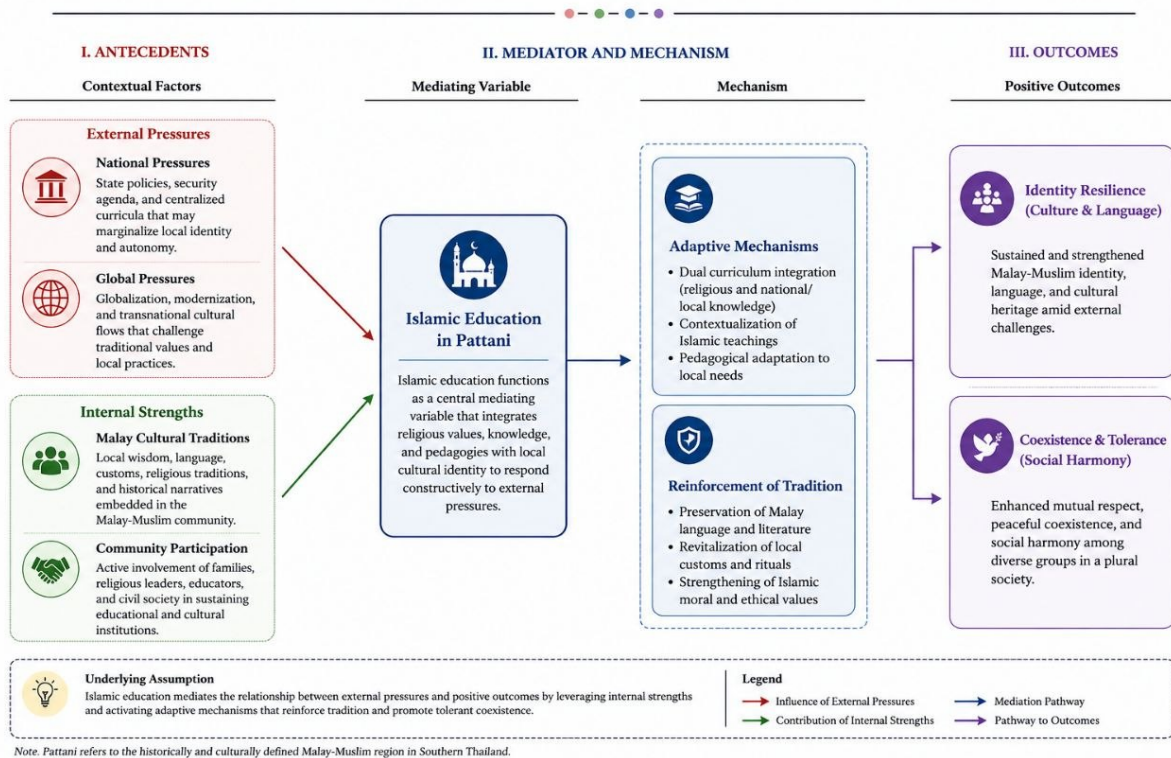


Figure 2. Islamic Education as a Mediator of Cultural Resilience and Social Tolerance in Pattani

The Figure 2 presented in this study illustrates the research model. Islamic education in Pattani is situated at the intersection of External Pressures and Internal Strengths. Rather than being weakened by these pressures, Islamic education actively employs adaptive mechanisms to mediate between them, producing positive outcomes.

Further discussion is explained as follows: *First*, Mediating Policy through the Dual Curriculum. In response to assimilation pressures embedded in the national curriculum, which tends to emphasize Thai-Buddhist culture, Islamic educational institutions have not resorted to outright rejection. Instead, they engage in mediation by adopting a dual curriculum. This adaptive strategy allows them to comply with national requirements while simultaneously strengthening Islamic and Malay identity through locally enriched content, such as *Jawi* or Arab-Malay script and intensive religious programs. Schools thus become spaces of identity negotiation.

Second, Mediating Modernization through the Reinforcement of Tradition. Modernization poses a challenge by threatening communal values and social ethics. Islamic education responds by reinforcing traditional, community-based institutions. The central role of Malay schools, managed voluntarily by the local community, illustrates how internal strengths (community participation) are utilized to moderate the negative impact of modernization. These schools (*tadika*) instill religious and cultural foundations from an early age, functioning as a filter before children are exposed to popular culture marked by individualism and instant gratification.

Third, Resilience and Coexistence. This dynamic mediation process generates two key outcomes: Identity Resilience, in which Malay culture and language are not only preserved but also actively reproduced through educational pathways.

Tolerant Coexistence, where strong religiosity does not foster exclusivity but instead cultivates openness and the ability to live peacefully in a plural society. These findings challenge the thesis that strong religiosity correlates with intolerance and counter the dominant external narrative that associates Southern Thailand with perpetual conflict.

The novelty of this research lies in shifting the paradigm: rather than portraying Islamic education in Pattani as an entity under threat, it demonstrates that Islamic education is a dynamic ecosystem capable of proactively mediating between opposing forces to ensure both cultural sustainability and social harmony.

DISCUSSION

مناقشة

The discussion elaborates on the meaning and implications of the findings regarding the role of multicultural Islamic education among the Malay community in Pattani, Southern Thailand (Suharjo et al., 2023). In depth interpretation of observational data shows that Islamic education functions not only as a means of religious transmission but also as a cultural adaptation mechanism and a tool for identity formation within a plural socio-political landscape (Pudjilianto & Handayani, 2022). This analysis connects the findings with relevant literature while emphasizing their theoretical and practical significance.

The findings of this study on the role of Islamic education as a pillar of cultural resilience in Pattani reveal patterns that are similar yet distinct when compared to Muslim minority communities in other parts of Southeast Asia. In the southern Philippines (Mindanao), madrasahs also serve as tools for preserving identity amid prolonged conflict. Unlike the situation of Muslims in Myanmar (the Rohingya), who have faced systematic marginalization to the point of losing access to formal education, the Muslim community in Pattani demonstrates a higher level of cultural resilience through negotiations with the Thai government.

This study also reveals a striking contrast with Muslim communities in Sri Lanka, where Islamic education tends to be assimilated into the national curriculum for the purpose of political integration. In Pattani, education remains a safe space for identity narratives that reject full assimilation. This comparison underscores the originality of this research: that Islamic education

in Southern Thailand is not merely a response to conflict, but a proactive agent that dynamically manages dual identities. However, the generalizability of these findings remains limited to regions with strong historical sultanate roots, which may differ from minority Muslim communities in urban areas or the diaspora.

Curriculum Dynamics and Identity amid Pluralism

The findings reveal that Islamic private institutions in Southern Thailand, such as Santiwitya Serong School, strategically integrate the Thai national curriculum with Islamic education. This approach serves as an adaptive response to government policies that lean toward secular and Thai-centric orientations. However, it also creates identity tensions. As highlighted by Ustadh Dare, the heavy inclusion of Buddhist teachings and practices in the national curriculum can make Muslim students in public schools more familiar with Buddhism than Islam (Azani et al., 2025).

The implementation of a dual curriculum which integrates Thailand's national education standards with the traditional religious curriculum has proven to be a crucial adaptive strategy. This approach has proven effective because it allows students to remain economically and administratively competitive at the national level without sacrificing their spiritual and cultural roots. Sociologically, this constitutes a form of accommodation without assimilation, in which educational institutions serve as a bridge connecting the state's expectations with the aspirations of local communities.

Additionally, the use of two languages Malay in daily life and Thai in formal education reflects the community's ongoing struggle for identity (Khalda et al., 2024). On one hand, the Malay language symbolizes cultural resilience, while on the other, proficiency in Thai is necessary for national integration and competitiveness. This duality underscores the critical role of Islamic private schools in balancing cultural preservation with modernization.

Nevertheless, this strategy entails significant risks. First, students face heightened cognitive load from reconciling secular-nationalist and religious-traditional knowledge systems. Second, it risks identity fragmentation—particularly when state curricula clash with local or religious histories—potentially pitting Thai citizenship against Malay Muslim devotion. Without an inclusive multicultural approach, the dual curriculum may become mere administrative formalism rather than authentic reconciliation. Ultimately, its success hinges on educators' ability to synthesize these values harmoniously.

The Central Role of Educational Institutions and Religious Leaders

The study underscores the vital role of traditional institutions such as *pondok pesantren*, *madrasah*, and mosque-based Malay schools. These institutions function as both centers of religious education and guardians of Malay culture (Syakhrani, 2022). These places also symbolize the continued existence of Malay culture amidst complex issues in Thailand. The term "Babo" for *pesantren* leader or ustadh indicates a leadership system deeply rooted in local tradition (Srinio et al., 2024). This aligns with expert's view that *pesantren* are centers for Islamic education and dissemination, as well as tools for preserving Malay cultural identity amid various political and social challenges.

Historically, Pattani was a center of Islamic scholarship, producing numerous scholars whose works continue to be studied today. This legacy persists, as religious leaders remain central figures and community mobilizers, safeguarding Islam and Malay culture even under Thai governance (Nasir & Ismail, 2024).

Holistic education in schools and *madrasah* integrating intellectual, moral, and cultural dimensions proves effective (Fauzan et al., 2024). Furthermore, non-formal education such as mosque-based Malay schools held on weekends exemplifies enduring community-driven education, ensuring the continuity of religious and cultural values regardless of formal curricula.

Integration of Multiculturalism and Tolerance in Daily Life

Although narratives of separatist conflict often dominate news about southern Thailand, the findings of this study reveal a very different reality. The community in kampong Serong is very open and upholds the values of tolerance, harmonious living and is very open to the outside world, even to people of different religions (Setiarini, 2021). Observational findings indicate substantial practices of tolerance among the community. The high level of religiosity, manifested in religious devotion and the preservation of religious traditions, does not hinder openness to individuals of different beliefs. Researchers witnessed firsthand the openness of the community despite allegations of extremism in the past. This phenomenon challenges the conventional narrative that often associates religiosity with exclusivity, instead suggesting that a deep understanding of religion can coexist with an inclusive and tolerant attitude (Windari & Arimbawa, 2020).

Daily life in Pattani is peaceful and stable despite occasional issues. As Ustadh Maruding, the principal of Santiwitya Serong School, explained, external portrayals of Pattani as a “conflict zone” are largely based on misinformation, outdated reports, or exaggerated narratives designed to deter outsiders. In reality, life proceeds normally, with a continuous flow of visitors and community activities.

CONCLUSION

خاتمة

Islamic education in Southern Thailand, particularly in Pattani, demonstrates a complex dynamic as both a response to religious pluralism and a challenge to modernization. This study concludes that Islamic education plays a dual role: as a medium of religious transmission and as a bastion for preserving Malay culture. Its dynamics are manifested through the implementation of a dual curriculum, which combines the Thai national curriculum with religious subjects. While Buddhist education in public schools creates identity-related challenges, the dual curriculum in Islamic private schools represents an adaptive strategy to safeguard Islamic and Malay identity.

Cultural preservation is carried out primarily by Islamic educational institutions, both formal and non-formal such as traditional *pesantren* under the leadership of babo, as well as mosque-based Malay schools. These institutions embed Malay values and utilize the Malay language as the medium of instruction, ensuring cultural continuity across generations. Furthermore, multicultural and tolerance values are organically integrated into social interactions and school programs, illustrating that the Malay Muslim community is open and harmonious. This directly challenges external narratives that consistently frame Southern Thailand as a conflict-ridden region.

However, this study also acknowledges its limitations. As a qualitative case study focused on Pattani particularly Kampung Serong and Santiwitya Serong School, the findings may not be generalized to all provinces in Southern Thailand. Moreover, primary data are largely drawn from educators and academic figures, while perspectives from other stakeholders, such as students, parents, or government officials, remain underexplored.

Based on the findings of this study, several concrete strategic steps are recommended for policymakers and educational institutions. The first, development of a *Jawi*-based local

curriculum. Educational authorities should formalize the standardization of local content curricula that emphasize *Jawi* (Malay Arabic) literacy as a required subject, in order to preserve the transmission of history and cultural values amid the wave of modernization. Second, teacher training in multicultural pedagogy. Regular training programs are needed for educators focused on inclusive teaching methods, enabling teachers to bridge identity differences in the classroom and teach the value of tolerance without disregarding students' religious identities. Third, university-community partnerships for cultural documentation. Local universities must establish formal collaborations with traditional educational institutions (*pesantren*) to document ancient manuscripts and Malay oral traditions in digital archive formats, thereby creating relevant learning resources for the younger generation. Fourth, revitalization of Malay community-based schools. The government is encouraged to provide infrastructure support and technical assistance to non-formal community schools so that their role as agents of cultural resilience can be optimized and integrated with the national education vision.

Future research is therefore recommended to Conduct comparative studies across multiple provinces (e.g., Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat) to identify similarities and differences in Islamic education and cultural preservation practices, Explore alternative perspectives, especially students' experiences and perceptions in negotiating dual identities, Employ mixed-methods approaches to provide broader measurements of cultural resilience and tolerance, thereby complementing the qualitative insights presented in this study.

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