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## Fostering Interreligious Harmony in Thailand: Insight from a Thai Islamic School

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this research is to explore aspects of culture and social structure, the tools used to promote coexistence, and the collaboration between the Muslim and Buddhist communities. In the context of Thailand, pluralism, or religious and cultural diversity, plays a crucial role as it can be a potential source of conflict. One form of conflict that has arisen is the tension between the Pattani Muslim community and the Buddhist population in Thailand. However, the role of Islamic education there has a significant impact on fostering interreligious harmony. Through 26 days of participatory observation at Ar-Rabity Technological College in Thailand, this research successfully revealed that Thai society holds strong nationalistic sentiments, values religious diversity, and places a high importance on social hierarchy. Furthermore, various strategies have been employed to maintain harmony in Thailand, such as multicultural education, instilling tolerance values from an early age, and organizing cross-cultural communication seminars. Through these efforts, it is hoped that a more inclusive and harmonious environment can be cultivated amidst the religious and cultural diversity present in Thailand.*

Keywords:

Harmony; Interreligious; Thai Islamic School

**Abstrak:** *Tujuan penelitian ini untuk menjelajahi aspek budaya dan struktur sosial, alat-alat yang digunakan untuk mempromosikan kerukunan, serta kolaborasi antara komunitas Muslim dan Buddha. Dalam konteks Thailand, pluralitas atau keberagaman agama dan budaya memiliki peran krusial karena dapat menjadi pemicu konflik. Salah satu bentuk konflik yang muncul adalah pertentangan antara umat Muslim Pattani dan umat Buddha Thailand. Namun, peran pendidikan Islam di sana memiliki pengaruh yang signifikan dalam merawat kerukunan antaragama. Melalui partisipasi aktif selama 26 hari di Ar-Rabity Technological College Thailand, penelitian ini berhasil mengungkapkan bahwa masyarakat Thailand memiliki rasa nasionalisme yang kuat, menghargai keragaman agama, dan memperhatikan hierarki sosial yang sangat penting. Selain itu, untuk menjaga kerukunan di Thailand, berbagai strategi telah digunakan, seperti pendidikan multikultural, penanaman nilai-nilai toleransi sejak usia dini, dan penyelenggaraan seminar komunikasi lintas budaya. Melalui upaya-upaya ini, diharapkan dapat membentuk lingkungan yang lebih inklusif dan harmonis di tengah keberagaman agama dan budaya yang ada di Thailand.*

Kata Kunci:

Antar Agama; Kerukunan; Sekolah Islam Thailand

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In multicultural countries, social challenges often revolve around maintaining stability in communal harmony. This arises due to the diverse ethnic, tribal, and religious backgrounds of the population, and Thailand is no exception. Geographically, Thailand is situated between Australia and mainland China. It shares borders with Laos and Myanmar to the north, Malaysia and the Gulf of Thailand to the south, Myanmar and the Andaman Sea to the west, and Laos and Cambodia to the east (Muslim Basrowi, 2019). Thailand is primarily an agrarian nation, with agriculture as the main occupation of its people. It comprises 77 provinces with a population of 71,814,551 individuals (World Bank, 2023).

Thailand operates as a constitutional monarchy, where the monarch or queen serves as the head of state, while the prime minister serves as the head of government. In terms of religion, the majority of Thailand's population adheres to Theravada Buddhism. Muslims constitute a minority, accounting for 15% of the total population. Most Muslims in Thailand reside in the southern regions, such as Yala, Songkhla, Pattani, Narathiwat, and others. Apart from Buddhism and Islam, Thailand is home to adherents of Confucianism, Hinduism, and Catholicism (Wayeekao, 2016).

The ethnic diversity in Thailand is also a result of historical migrations, as people moved between different kingdoms through trade. This diversity was further enriched by the presence of Arab and coastal Indian traders. Social structures in various regions of Thailand, especially in the south, were initially dominated by particular religions but gradually adapted to accommodate newly introduced religions like Islam.

Regarding the introduction of Islam to Southern Thailand (Pattani), there are several theories: First, the belief that Islam entered in the 7th century CE. Second, the notion that Islam's arrival in Thailand is synonymous with its spread to the Indonesian archipelago in the 13th century CE. Third, the view that Islam entered Pattani from Arab, Chinese, and Persian traders in the 10th century CE. Fourth, the Thematic Encyclopedia of Islam suggests that Islam arrived in Pattani in the 10th or 11th century CE through Sufi teachers and merchants from Arabia and the Indian coast. Fifth, the belief that Islam entered Thailand through the Kingdom of Samudra Pasai in Aceh. From these various perspectives, it can be concluded that theories about the entry of Islam into Pattani are not significantly different from those concerning Islam's arrival in the Indonesian archipelago (Rahman, 2020).

The diversity in Thai society appears to have a dual meaning. On one hand, it carries the potential for conflict, particularly conflicts rooted in racial and religious identity tensions. This is exemplified by the conflict between the Kingdom of Pattani and the Kingdom of Thailand in the 14th century. This conflict arose because the Thai King held a low opinion of the Pattani King's conversion to Islam. Based on this difference in religion, the Pattani King launched an attack and successfully conquered the Kingdom of Thailand. However, during the fourth period of the Queen's reign, the Kingdom of Pattani

faced setbacks, leading to a Thai counterattack, resulting in the Kingdom of Thailand retaking control (Aslan and Hifza, 2020).

Since then, the Pattani region has been considered part of Southern Thailand. Over the subsequent centuries, European colonialism affected many countries, including Thailand. However, the Thai King employed political strategies to secure his country's independence from colonial rule, offering tribute to countries like the United States, England, the Netherlands, and others. This political acumen earned Thailand the nickname "The Untouched Colonized Land." This quest for independence ultimately led to Thailand changing its name from Siam (slave) to "Thailand," signifying liberation from colonial rule (Muslim Basrowi, 2019). This is why this research is essential, aiming to deeply understand the culture, social strata, and instruments employed by the people of Thailand to nurture religious harmony. The ultimate goal is to foster appreciation for differences, unite in a spirit of brotherhood, and live peacefully and harmoniously.

Despite these historical events, the Muslim community in Southern Thailand faces challenges due to government policies that require them to abandon their Malay-Muslim traditions. They are asked to wear traditional Thai clothing, change their names to Thai names to enter schools or government institutions, and are forbidden from using the Malay language in official events or studying Malay in schools. Additionally, Muslims in Thailand are referred to as "Khaek," which carries the meaning of guests. This term is not only applied to them but also to immigrants with dark skin and is often associated with the Muslim community in the southern parts of Thailand. These differential treatments have led to resistance against the government (kingdom). Eventually, organizations like PULO (Pattani United Liberation Organization) and BNPP (Barisan Nasional Pembebasan Pattani) were founded to fight for regional autonomy in southern Thailand separate from the central government (Sanurdi, 2018).

Despite efforts by the royal government to integrate Muslim regions into the national political system centered in Bangkok, both groups continue to feel that the imposed regulations are unjust. For example, Muslims in the south are required to wear non-Malay clothing, adopt Thai names to enroll in government schools or work in public services, and are referred to as Jhaek, meaning "guest." These conditions mentioned above can lead to inter-religious tensions in Thailand. To address this issue, the Thai government allows Muslims the freedom to practice their religion, encourages the Malay Muslim community to actively participate in national development, and provides funding for religious activities. These measures are aimed at fostering harmony and integration between the Muslim community and the broader Thai society (Abu Bakar Kabakoran, 2017). The central issue is the persistent struggle of the Muslim minority in Thailand to maintain their cultural and religious identity amidst Thai nationalist policies aimed at assimilation (Razvi, 1979).

Conversely, the Muslim-Malay community in Thailand has a different view of Thai Buddhists, considering them as infidels, atheists who do not believe in

God's existence, and idol worshippers. They are equated with modern-day Jahiliyah, as they view the worship of idols like Latta and Uzza in the same light as past practices. In the context of Islamic law, individuals with such beliefs are considered obligatory to fight against because they pose a threat to the Muslim-Malay community. The consequences of events between the Thai government and the Pattani Malay community have led to ongoing conflicts involving ideological, cultural, and even physical confrontations (Yuniarto, 2005).

Indeed, threats to harmony in Thailand often emerge. However, the Thai government has made various efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully. The principles underlying conflict resolution include dialogue-based approaches, the avoidance of violence, professional management, and consideration of the aspirations of affected communities, based on consensus decisions. The government has sought to listen to and understand the perspectives of various parties involved in conflicts, with the ultimate goal of achieving peace and harmony (Hak, 2022)

The diversity in ethnicity, religion, and other factors, if not handled properly, can potentially lead to ongoing conflicts that contradict the fundamental values of religions that promote peace, mutual assistance, and respect for fellow human beings. Therefore, to genuinely nurture interfaith harmony, a country must adopt principles that guide all religious adherents in social life. Some key principles in this context include: no religion teaches evil, respecting differences in religious teachings, equating positive values among different religions, not forcing individual beliefs, and not demanding proof of the truth of a belief.

These principles, when adopted and applied inclusively and fairly, can contribute to the formation of a social environment based on tolerance, appreciation of differences, and mutual understanding among religious communities (Nazmudin, 2017). The concept of group cohesion is highly relevant to this research context. Group cohesion refers to the extent to which individuals are attracted to and committed to a group and are motivated to remain in that group. This concept is crucial for the success and sustainability of a group (Muna, 2020).

Cohesion is indeed considered a significant strength in a group. This is significant because cohesion can unite and influence various characteristics of group members to come together under a common vision, mission, and shared goals. The concept of group cohesion has a profound impact on the structure and behavior of the group.

The principles of group cohesion provide a strong foundation for achieving shared goals in maintaining interfaith harmony and can help address differences more positively. Groups with high cohesion tend to have strong bonds among their members. This aids the government in building a more effective atmosphere of cooperation, deeper commitment to group goals, and the creation of a peaceful and tolerant social environment (Rasyid, 2021).

However, it's not only the principles of group cohesion that significantly contribute to preserving interfaith harmony in Thailand. The role of Islamic

education in Thailand's Muslim minority regions also plays a crucial role in this regard. Education is a fundamental aspect of human life, affecting both physical and spiritual development. When education is aligned with Islamic teachings, it can produce generations with a high level of tolerance towards people of different faiths (Rusli Malli and Wahdaniya, 2021). Islamic religious education is a systematically planned effort to develop students into individuals who are faithful and consciously and sincerely practice Islamic values in all aspects of life, both now and in the future (Jalaluddin Assayuthi, 2020).

Initially, Islamic religious education in Southern Thailand began with the teaching of the Qur'an in mosques or at the homes of Thok Guru. This later evolved with the establishment of traditional Islamic boarding schools, known as pondok pesantren. Subsequently, modern schools such as Madrasah Al-Ma'arif Al-Wathaniyah Fathani were founded in Pattani (Syakhrani, 2022). Islamic education in Thailand aims not only to provide religious knowledge to the Muslim community but also to preserve Islamic religious and cultural identity, develop academic and professional skills, and promote interfaith harmony (Purwanto, 2022). It is hoped that this Islamic education will reflect a holistic approach, encompassing not only religious aspects but also social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Thus, Islamic education in Thailand can strengthen the identity and active contribution of the Muslim community in societal and national life, fostering interfaith harmony throughout the country.

Previous research with similar themes includes studies on efforts to maintain harmony in society in the era of Industry 4.0 (Ardhani, 2020). This can provide insights into how technology and modern developments can influence interfaith harmony. Research focusing on the harmony between the Arfak tribe and Bugis Muslim residents in Manokwari, West Papua (Sadli Mustafa, 2019) offers perspectives on how harmony can be maintained in specific regional contexts. Another earlier study explores the role of Islam in promoting harmony in community settings through community service activities (Hermansyah, 2018). All these studies have different contexts and focuses, but they provide additional insights into how interfaith harmony can be maintained in various situations and environments, including Thailand. However, this study specifically emphasizes the discussion of Thai culture and social strata and the instruments used to maintain interfaith harmony in the country. History records that the complexities of the Muslim separatist movement in Southern Thailand has been faced by the Muslim community (Suhrike, 1977).

The hope is that this research will help the general public better understand the efforts made by the Thai government to create a conducive environment without interreligious conflict.

The primary data source for this research primarily comes from the researcher's personal experience as a participant observer for 26 days in Thailand, through the Student Mobility goes to Thailand program organized by UINSA International Office. During the stay in Thailand, the researcher was tasked with teaching Islam at Ma'had Ar-Rabity Technological College in Nonthaburi. In addition to teaching duties, the researcher also visited various places, including

the Islamic Center in Nonthaburi, Wat Arun Temple, the Grand Palace, Pattani Beach, and more. From these experiences, the researcher gained valuable insights, including an understanding of local culture, experiences living in districts with their unique characteristics, observations of impressive urban planning, the high hospitality of local residents, and, most importantly, observations of interfaith harmony that can serve as guidance. All this information forms the foundational data for further research on interfaith harmony in Thailand.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research employs the participant observation method. Participant observation is a research approach where the researcher directly engages in field observations. It is also known as field research, field studies, fieldwork, and various other terms. The main objective of this method is to immerse the researcher in ongoing activities and observe various aspects related to individuals and the physical aspects of the situation. By actively participating in the observed situation, the researcher can gain deeper and contextual insights into the observed phenomenon (Zuchri Abdussamad, 2021). The data collected in this research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how the Thai community maintains and nurtures interfaith harmony, particularly considering local values. Data in this study is obtained through observation and interviews (W. Gulo, 2017).

In addition to participant observation, this research also involves the analysis of relevant documents related to the research topic. This complements the understanding of how interfaith harmony can be achieved. The role of the researcher in this research is crucial. The researcher's ability to listen, observe, and analyze data is a primary factor in gaining a profound understanding. The data analysis process is descriptive and occurs interactively during data collection. This approach allows the researcher to comprehend the data comprehensively and present findings in a narrative form. With this qualitative approach, this research has the potential to generate valuable and in-depth insights into how harmony can be maintained and strengthened in the context of a diverse ethnic and religious community (K. Islam, 2016).

This section provides research methods in detail, including types and research methods, research subjects (population and sample), data collection techniques, data collection tools, and data analysis techniques (qualitative). For quantitative research, avoid writing excessive statistical formulas. For theoretical studies, describe the flow of the study briefly. The research method must be described scientifically: rational, empirical, and systematic. It is advisable to state the time and place of the study clearly.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Culture and Social Strata in Thai Society**

In the contemporary era, the currents of globalization have given rise to complex issues, particularly within the context of societal culture. This

phenomenon brings both positive and negative consequences for nations. The influence of Western cultures, emphasizing rationalism and secular materialism, has left its mark on Eastern regions, including Thailand. This reality poses serious challenges for the nation. Thus, the preservation and nurturing of local culture and the unique characteristics of society become a matter of paramount importance (Samrin, 2016).

Thai society exhibits a high tolerance for the concept of individualism, even as they find comfort and security in group participation. The phrase "Mai Pen Rai," translating to "it's okay, no problem," symbolizes the general Thai outlook on life, which leans toward the pursuit of pleasure. Thai people are known for their industriousness and dedication to their work. They find happiness in what they possess, be it material or immaterial.

Moreover, they embody traits of friendliness, humility, patience, and a perpetual smile graces their countenances. They are also pleasant in demeanor, quick to laughter, speak with gentle tones, and maintain composure in any situation. Respect for and the avoidance of embarrassing others are values held in high regard within their culture. The Thai people proudly preserve their cultural heritage. They enthusiastically share facets of their culture with both local and international tourists (eDiplomat, 2023).

Here are some aspects of Thai culture that I have experienced based on my time in the country. Firstly, the culture of respecting others. Fundamentally, the Thai people share a commonality with "Eastern" cultures, characterized by an exceptionally friendly disposition towards all. When interacting with others, whether familiar or unfamiliar, Thai individuals greet with a gesture of respect, bowing as a sign of reverence. This act is a part of Thailand's common culture, emphasizing mutual respect. In the Thai language, this greeting is known as "wai" (ไหว้), a unique way for Thais to welcome and show respect to others. The "wai" involves placing both palms together and positioning them in front of the chest or face, resembling the Sundanese way of greeting (Mod, 2013).

The underlying principle of the "wai" gesture is to demonstrate respect from an individual of lower social status (inferior) to someone of higher social status (superior). Social status, in this context, does not refer to the commonly understood meaning but relates to the social hierarchy in Thai society. The hierarchy of social status in the context of respect in Thai society includes the king, monks, teachers and professors, parents, and older individuals.

For Thai society, the king holds an exceedingly important role in spiritual and cultural contexts. The king is regarded as the earthly representative of Buddha and, in many ways, is considered a semi-divine being. The respect for the king and his family runs deep in Thai culture. This respect extends beyond political power and holds broader dimensions. It's essential to note that within Thai culture, discussing negative aspects about the king is strictly forbidden, both culturally and legally. This is avoided by the people, including tourists or foreigners in Thailand. Respect for the king can be shown through sitting or even prostrating on the floor or ground as a form of respect, unless requested to stand.

The importance of the king and spiritual symbolism in Thai culture reflects the complexity of values and norms in the society, as well as the significance of maintaining social unity and cultural continuity.

Monks, the second social stratum known as "monk," also hold a very high level of respect. They have a special position and are revered in a distinctive manner. This reverence is reflected in various aspects of daily life. For example, in public places like public transportation (trains or buses), monks have designated seats often referred to as "priority seats." In public services, monks are also granted special privileges in some administrative situations and public services. For instance, in offices like immigration or other government services, monks often have a special lane that allows them to bypass queues, unlike the general public. This granting of privileges reflects the high value placed on the spiritual role and contributions made by monks in Thai society. It also demonstrates how religion, culture, and social norms influence the structure and dynamics of daily life in the society (Heri Akhmadi, 2018).

The third social stratum comprises teachers and professors. The role of teachers and professors is highly respected. The respect for teachers and professors is reflected in several aspects. Teachers and professors are not only respected by students but also by the general public. The society views them not only as educators but also as public figures with knowledge and insights deserving of respect. The respect for teachers and professors can help cultivate humility in learning and open minds to new knowledge. Students tend to see themselves as lifelong learners, even after leaving formal educational institutions.

Next in the social stratum is parents. Thai society holds great respect for parents as they are considered individuals who have contributed the most to a person's life. From birth, parents are willing to sacrifice much, even their lives, to ensure the birth, care, upbringing, and realization of their children's dreams. Following that, in the social hierarchy, is the respect for elders. Thai society places great emphasis on respecting elders because they are seen as individuals who have accumulated a wealth of experience and wisdom. Respecting older individuals reflects traditional values that prioritize strong relationships in society, pay homage to age and experience, and value higher knowledge and authority. The way "wai" is given can vary depending on the social and hierarchical relationship between the giver and receiver of respect. The higher the social status of a person, the deeper the respect given (Heri Akhmadi, 2018).

Secondly, the culture of queuing. The importance of queuing culture in Thai society is a reflection of discipline, patience, and respect for others. This culture carries significant benefits in shaping the mindset and behavior of the people and has positive implications in various aspects of daily life. Some benefits of queuing culture in Thailand include good time management, training in patience while waiting for one's turn, respecting the rights of others, and fostering discipline (Celly Beto, 2019).

Thirdly, standing during the National Anthem. Thai society is known for its high sense of nationalism. This is evident when they hear their national



anthem playing; everyone stops their activities and stands as a sign of respect to their country (Syarip Ahmad D, 2023).

Fourthly, Hospitality and Generosity. High levels of hospitality and generosity are distinctive traits of the Thai people. This is underscored by data from the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), which ranks Thailand as one of the top 10 most charitable nations in the world (Andrea Lidwina, 2021). Hospitality and the generosity of the Thai people were also evident in my personal experiences during my time in Thailand. When traveling with my supervisor and her sister, I was often invited to dine without having to pay. This illustrates how they interact in a friendly manner and practice generosity, especially towards guests or visitors. Additionally, the presence of priority seats in public transportation, such as the MRT, also reflects empathy and concern for the collective well-being. All of these aspects reflect positive values in Thai society.

Fifthly, (almost) No Honking on the Roads. The difference in traffic noise levels between Bangkok and Jakarta is striking. Although traffic in both cities can become highly congested and busy, the use of car horns and noise on the road sets them apart. The limited use of car horns reflects social norms and etiquette that prioritize tranquility and politeness on the road to avoid disturbing others. Therefore, the issue of car horns, according to my research, goes beyond mere noise on the road; it also relates to emotional control and consideration for others. Many people at traffic intersections easily honk their horns. However, it's worth noting that even without honking, all vehicles will eventually move, or sometimes, a brief pause may be needed to shift to a lower gear before continuing the journey (Heri Akhmadi, 2018).

Sixthly, Honesty. The level of honesty in Thailand is exceptionally high. People are reluctant to take what does not rightfully belong to them. For example, there have been reports of taxi drivers returning small bags left by their passengers, containing amounts of up to \$10,000 USD or approximately 146 million Indonesian Rupiah (Ervan Hardoko, 2018). Furthermore, based on my personal experience, I once lost 1,000 Baht, equivalent to 440,000 Indonesian Rupiah, at my accommodation in Thailand. However, the homeowner eventually found the money and returned it.

Seventhly, Respect for Nature. One notable characteristic of Thai society is their deep respect for nature. As the majority of Thais follow Buddhism, they hold their religious teachings in high regard. One Buddhist concept that I believe shapes their character is the concept of "Karma." The essence of this teaching is that anyone who sows a seed will reap its fruits, such as sowing the wind and reaping the storm, and so on. This teaching is ingrained in Thai society and is reflected in various aspects of life. One such aspect is their reverence for nature. You can experience this if you've ever visited the Chao Phraya River, the largest river that flows through Bangkok. One example is the abundance of fish in the river. If you bring food and toss it to the riverbank, the fish, especially catfish, pangasius, and climbing perch, will gather as if they were in a home aquarium (Yumetri Abidin, 2020).

Based on my participatory observations in Thailand, the characteristics of Thai society mentioned in the text are indeed evident. The social structure applied there is consistent with this description. This demonstrates that the native culture of Thailand is indeed based on qualities such as friendliness, generosity, a generous smile, and mutual respect. Despite differences of opinion among them, the common approach is to discuss and reach agreements collectively. Respect for the king is also of utmost importance, as reflected in every event they organize. This is strong evidence that Thai society holds a very high level of respect for its royal government.

### **Islamic Education in Thailand**

The process of Islamization in Pattani is intricately linked to the role of education. In its initial stages, informal education played a pivotal role, facilitating the exchange of knowledge between religious scholars (mubaligh) and the local population. This was followed by the development of non-formal education and, ultimately, formal education. During the nascent phases of Islamic education in Southern Thailand, the study of the Quran took center stage. The recitation and study of the Quran were considered obligatory for every Muslim. Subsequently, the emergence of the Pondok education system had a profound impact on Southern Thailand. Pondok served as pivotal educational institutions, and their alumni played crucial roles in society, particularly in religious capacities as imams, preachers (khotib), and mosque caretakers (marbot) (Pendi Susanto, 2015).

Similar to developments in other countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, Thailand also witnessed dynamics and changes in the Pondok education system. These transformations and modernizations were driven by various factors, including the infusion of renewal ideas into the Islamic system in Thailand, especially in Pattani. These changes began to surface after World War II. In 1966, the government mandated that all Pondok educational institutions register under the Rongrian Rat Son Sasna Islam Act (private schools teaching Islamic religion). This policy brought significant changes to the Pondok education system. Initially lacking a clear structure, this regulation streamlined and transformed Pondok education into a structured system, evolving it into the madrasah education system (Yusran, 2019).

The characteristics of the Pondok education system include a medieval-style educational system relying on halaqah (students seated in circles around their teachers), absence of formal class structures, learning guided by recitations from classical texts within open spaces known as balasiah. Learning occurred thrice daily, with students meticulously recording explanations and comments from their teachers. Novice and senior learners studied together without differentiation based on their backgrounds, and there were no specific examinations or assignments. The entire curriculum focused on the study of religious sciences derived from classical texts. There were no stringent time constraints for completing one's studies, allowing students to learn for more than

a decade or as per their individual needs and personal development (Yusran, 2019).

The transition from the Pondok system to the madrasah education system brought significant changes to the Muslim community. Madrasah graduates gained the freedom to choose their educational paths according to their interests and talents. Those inclined towards the sciences pursued further studies in that field, while those more focused on religion and the Arabic language pursued education in those areas. Many madrasah graduates opted to continue their studies at various higher education institutions, such as the College of Islamic Studies at Songkhla University. Additionally, a significant number pursued education abroad, including Malaysia, Indonesia, India, the USA, and elsewhere. These changes not only provided broader opportunities for madrasah graduates to develop their interests and talents but also strengthened Islamic education and intercultural relations in Thailand (Pendi Susanto, 2015).

Madrasahs that have undergone transformation into madrasahs possess distinct characteristics reflecting changes and modernizations in their systems, curricula, and management. Some key features of madrasah education include the use of classical educational systems, structured curricula, expert teaching staff, dual learning streams (morning dedicated to religious studies, while afternoons focus on general education), administrative staff, divided management systems, and diverse facilities (including computer labs, sports facilities, science labs, and more). These changes reflect the adaptation of Islamic education to modern contexts, accommodating various aspects of knowledge and the broader needs of society (Aprin Rodyah, 2023).

One illustrative example of a madrasah that aligns with the researcher's participatory observations is the Ar-Rabity Technological College. Located in Laham District, Bangbuathong District, Nonthaburi Province, Thailand, Ar-Rabity Technological College boasts a rich history. The school was established in 1954 by Imam Hajji Shafee Wanaeloh, with permission from the Thai government. Initially operating as the "Islamsampant School" under the Private Education Committee of the Royal Thai Ministry of Education, the curriculum initially focused on basic schooling and faith recognition. In 1997, the school's name was changed to the Ar-Rabity Institute (Islamsumpant School), expanding its educational levels to Eadadee and Sanawi. The curriculum applied at Ar-Rabity is recognized by international Islamic schools and is also acknowledged by Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt.

Ar-Rabity Technological College follows a unique daily schedule. In the mornings, students delve into religious sciences, including Arabic language, Siroh Nabawiyah (Prophetic Biography), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), Tasawuf (Islamic mysticism), Tauhid (Monotheism), and more. In the afternoons, they explore general subjects such as science, English language, economics, Thai language, and others. Additionally, students engage in synchronized Quranic recitation before commencing their classroom lessons and participate in collective Dhuhr and Asr prayers at the madrasah. These changes underscore the evolution and development of the madrasah in offering more comprehensive and

structured Islamic education to its students, along with international recognition of the quality of education they provide (Aprin Rodiyah, 2023).

The researcher's personal experience in participatory observation paints a highly positive picture of the development of Islamic education in Thailand. The fact that madrasahs in Thailand, including Ar-Rabity, are capable of sending their graduates to pursue further studies abroad, particularly at the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, indicates rapid progress in Islamic education. This is a testament to the ability of Islamic education in Thailand to produce quality, competitive generations, not only at the national level but also on the international stage. This is a noteworthy and significant achievement in the context of Muslim community development in Thailand.

Furthermore, the role of Islamic education in fostering interfaith harmony, involving students in cross-cultural communication seminars, general knowledge competitions, and various interfaith events, demonstrates that Islamic education not only imparts religious knowledge but also serves as a tool to promote tolerance, understanding, and harmony among diverse religious communities in Thailand. This serves as a concrete example of how education can play a pivotal role in maintaining interfaith harmony and shaping a generation with an awareness of the values of tolerance and interfaith cooperation.

### **Instruments for Fostering Interreligious Harmony in Thailand**

From the various characteristics of Thai society that have been elucidated, it becomes evident that Thai society exhibits remarkable positive customs that can serve as an exemplary model for various demographics. This is certainly supportive of the Thai government's efforts to maintain interreligious harmony. However, to achieve this success, it necessitates the employment of instruments that can contribute to its realization. Some of the instruments employed by the Thai government to foster interreligious harmony include multicultural education, tolerance, and cross-cultural communication. The primary focus is on the efforts of the Thai government to integrate the Muslim community through institutional mechanisms (Man, 1990).

The multicultural reality in Thailand is undeniable. However, in practice, there exist complex international multireligious issues, especially between the Muslim and Buddhist communities. This conflict arises from the Southern regions of Thailand, particularly in the Pattani area, where the majority of the population is Muslim-Malay, while the broader Thai population adheres to Buddhism. The presence of the Muslim-Malay community is perceived as a potential threat by the Thai Buddhist community.

This conflict has had significant implications for intergroup interactions. Upon closer examination, a strong interconnection between ethnicity, religion, and power becomes evident. Cases in Thailand often start with ethnic factors, but these ethnic issues are frequently overshadowed by the complexities of religious problems, and religious issues are often narrowed down by elite political agendas. It's crucial to note that this complexity underscores the importance of

deep understanding of history, culture, and social factors within the society. Conflicts of this nature also highlight the necessity for dialogue, tolerance, and collective efforts to achieve peace in diverse societies.

Based on these facts, there is a need for an approach to develop multicultural education to promote interreligious harmony in the region. Multicultural education is essential within an educational framework that values culture and views education as an acculturation process. The realities on the ground require structured and planned efforts to address controversies surrounding interreligious harmony, both among religious communities in Thailand and beyond. Multicultural education serves as a strategy to help establish a stable social framework amidst the diversity and plurality found in these countries. The concept of multicultural education practiced domestically is the result of the local variations in society, including differences in ethnicity, race, religion, national origin, and specific communities. These differences in viewpoints, opinions, and attitudes often result in conflicts that can impact other areas since each party tends to perceive itself as right, virtuous, and progressive. In an educational context, such differences have the potential to create friction and problems in the learning process (Ilyasin, 2020).

Tolerance is a human attitude or behavior that aligns with norms, where an individual can respect and honor the actions of others. In order to respect each other, people from different religions or lifestyles need to know, understand and accept each other as they are. With an educational approach based on respect for humanity, thought, freedom, moral values and cultural heritage, it is possible to aim to raise individuals who have characteristics and qualities such as thinking on their own, critical mentality, selective ability, discovering the meaning of life and integrating their faith with their mind (Selçuk, 1997). In the social, cultural, and religious contexts, tolerance refers to attitudes and actions that oppose discrimination against different groups or categories within a society. For instance, in a religious context, tolerance means creating space for other religious groups to coexist in the same environment as the majority religious group.

However, the term tolerance remains controversial and faces criticism from various perspectives, both liberal and conservative. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that interreligious tolerance is an essential attitude for respecting and honoring diversity. This concept is not at odds with Islamic teachings since Islam is a religion of mercy for all beings, and the principle of respecting and honoring others is emphasized strongly. Tolerance is also a key element with an important role in the history of Islamic civilization. A tolerant attitude has the potential to transform enemies into friends, as described in the Quran (Fushilat: 34).

To maintain harmony in a diverse society like Thailand, the management of communication within the framework of multicultural life needs to be instilled from an early age, even in children. This can be achieved through families, communities, and formal education. Multicultural values should be introduced through everyday communication interactions and integrated into the school curriculum without adding the burden of new subjects. The key challenge is

effectively integrating multicultural education in a way that respects and preserves the cultural identities of various ethnic groups while promoting national unity (Arphattananon, 2018).

Inclusive attitudes do not develop on their own, so tolerance still requires more intensive nurturing. Approaches and methods in religious education processes also need improvement. A doctrinal approach that only reinforces claims of truth without considering other perspectives needs to change, especially with the increasing level of intellectualism in religious communities. In the future, through socially-oriented learning, as described, especially with increased appreciation and tolerance among religious communities, it is expected that a communicative society can be formed. Such a society is transformative and is concerned with social change aimed at developing a more just way of life (Muhtadi, 2019). For this purpose, different religious education models can be considered. For example, in addition to the religious (doctrinal) education model, it is seen that approaches such as learning about religion and learning from religion have been put forward (Hull, 2021). These approaches have been prepared for the needs of multicultural life in different countries and discussions on these models continue. A similar religious education model or models that the Thai society needs can be developed.

Cross-cultural communication refers to direct interaction between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, not everyone possesses the ability to accept cultural differences, often leading to ineffective cross-cultural communication. Therefore, individuals need to have several cross-cultural competencies to achieve effective cross-cultural communication. The concept of cross-cultural competence includes several aspects, such as personality strength, communication skills, psychological adjustment, and cultural awareness (Alfi and Dedi, 2020).

Cross-cultural communication which is held from 2-3 times a year in Thailand often takes the form of interreligious seminars. These activities involve various elements and activities aimed at strengthening interreligious and intercultural relations. Some activities conducted in cross-cultural communication in Thailand include seminar presentations, singing the national anthem together, communal meals, and discussions on current issues. The participation of Madrasah Ar-Rabity in events like the "Nonthaburi Youth Unity," organized by the Nonthaburi Department of Culture, demonstrates their commitment to contributing to the promotion of interreligious and intercultural harmony in their community. Such events are crucial for enriching students' experiences and fostering tolerance and cross-cultural understanding in Thailand.



Figure 1. Pamphlet about interfaith seminars



Figure 2. Ar-Rabity students take part in interfaith dialogue

In relation to the various instruments mentioned above, it is essential to foster collaboration among communities to achieve success. Maintaining interreligious harmony requires active participation from the entire community, as it involves shared responsibility. Therefore, the instruments described earlier play a vital role as supporting factors in achieving interreligious harmony, especially among the minority Muslim community in Thailand.

## CONCLUSION

Pluralism can be a potential source of conflict, Thai society has characteristics that support harmony among different religious and cultural groups, with a strong foundation in respecting, communicating, and working with one another. The role of the Thai government, especially the monarchy, the Department of Religion, the Ministry of Education, and Culture, in maintaining interreligious harmony is crucial. Efforts such as the allocation of social funds to places of

worship in need, the certification of quality places of worship, and the king's participation in major interreligious festivals are concrete expressions of the government's commitment to promoting religious peace. These actions demonstrate the government's awareness of the importance of respecting and supporting diverse religious practices in Thailand. It also creates a conducive atmosphere for tolerance and interreligious harmony in the country. As an important note, these long-standing interreligious peace efforts are valuable assets in maintaining social stability and harmony amidst religious and cultural diversity in Thailand.

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