

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC CULTURE IN INDONESIA AND THAILAND: INFLUENCES, PRACTICES, AND SOCIETAL IMPACTS

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### Abstract

*This study examines the similarities and differences in Islamic culture between Indonesia and Thailand, two Southeast Asian nations with significant Muslim populations. Although both countries are diverse in their cultures, the expressions of Islam are shaped by historical, social, and political contexts. Through a qualitative comparative analysis, the research highlights key cultural practices, religious interpretations, and community engagement in both nations. Indonesia, known for its moderate Islamic practices, shows a blend of local traditions, while Thailand presents a unique perspective with its predominantly Buddhist landscape influencing its Islamic minority. The findings suggest that the interaction between Islam and local cultures creates distinct manifestations of faith and practice. This paper contributes to understanding the broader implications of religious diversity and cultural identity within Southeast Asia.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic Culture, Indonesia, Thailand, Comparative Analysis, Southeast Asia.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is renowned for its cultural diversity and complexity, a region where different religions and ethnic groups coexist. Among these religions, Islam plays a significant role, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand. Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority nation in the world, boasting a population that is over 87% Muslim. Its Islamic culture is characterized by a unique blend of local traditions and religious practices, influenced by centuries of cultural exchange and colonialism. Conversely, Thailand, while predominantly Buddhist, is home to a significant Muslim minority, primarily located in the southern provinces. This peculiar demographic situation presents an interesting juxtaposition of Islamic culture within a predominantly non-Islamic context.

The arrival of Islam in these regions can be traced back to trade routes established during the 7th century, with merchants and missionaries introducing Islamic beliefs and practices. In Indonesia, Islam quickly became intertwined with local customs and traditions, resulting in a distinct form of Islamic culture that reflects the archipelago's rich historical tapestry. Thailand's Islamic culture, however, is shaped by the interaction between its Muslim population and the majority Buddhist society, leading to a unique adaptation and interpretation of Islamic tenets.

In Indonesia, the expression of Islam is largely characterized by pluralism and tolerance, evident in the concept of "Pancasila," the national philosophy that promotes a harmonious coexistence of different religions and cultures. Indonesian Muslims often engage in diverse practices that incorporate local beliefs, such as the celebration of local festivals and ceremonies that incorporate Islamic principles, reflecting a dynamic interplay



between Islam and indigenous traditions. Organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in the world, emphasize moderate Islamic practices and social welfare, contributing to the country's distinctive character of Islam as a faith that promotes democracy, tolerance, and social justice.

In Thailand, the Muslim community represents approximately 5% of the population, predominantly in the southern provinces such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Here, Islam takes on a unique character that is shaped by centuries of coexistence with Buddhism. Thai Muslims often adhere to a blend of Islamic and Thai cultural practices, resulting in a syncretic form of their faith. The influence of local customs can be seen in the way religious festivals, traditional cuisine, and social norms are practiced. Furthermore, the southern Muslim population faces social and political challenges, where issues surrounding identity, integration, and expression of their faith become essential topics of discussion.

This comparative study aims to explore the similarities and differences in Islamic culture between Indonesia and Thailand. By analyzing how historical and cultural contexts shape the expression of Islam in both countries, the research seeks to provide insights into the broader implications of religious diversity and cultural identity in Southeast Asia. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering inter-cultural dialogue and promoting coexistence in increasingly globalized societies.

The key research questions guiding this study include:

1. What are the primary cultural practices and traditions associated with Islam in Indonesia and Thailand?
2. How do local customs and historical contexts influence the interpretation and expression of Islamic teachings in both countries?
3. What social dynamics characterize Muslim communities in a multi-religious society?

Through this comparative analysis, the study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature on Islamic culture in Southeast Asia, offering new insights into how Islam is lived and experienced in different cultural settings. Ultimately, this research hopes to encourage greater understanding and appreciation for the diversity within Islamic practices and beliefs across the region.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Key Theories and Concepts**

Cultural identity is a fundamental concept in understanding the expressions of religion, particularly in diverse societies. It refers to the shared characteristics, values, and practices that define a group. In the context of Islamic culture in Indonesia and Thailand, cultural identity is informed by a multitude of factors including historical legacies, socio-economic conditions, and inter-religious relationships. Scholars such as Geertz (1968) underscore the importance of local context in shaping religious expressions, arguing that the practices of Islam cannot be divorced from the cultures in which they are embedded.

Another relevant framework is the concept of syncretism, which refers to the blending of different beliefs and traditions to form new practices. Scholars like R. S.

Khairuddin (2001) have explored how syncretism in Islamic practices contributes to unique cultural identities in response to local customs. This is particularly evident in Indonesia, where local traditions coexist with Islamic teachings, creating a rich tapestry of religious life. Similarly, in Thailand, the adaptation of Islamic practices among the Muslim minority reflects a syncretic approach as they navigate their identities within a predominantly Buddhist context.

## Previous Studies

Research on Islamic culture in Indonesia reveals significant insights into how local traditions shape religious practices. For instance, Abdurrahman Wahid's work highlights the role of moderate Islamic organizations in promoting pluralism and social justice, while Karen Armstrong (2000) emphasizes how historical developments have influenced Islamic identity in Indonesia. Studies like those by Nelly van Doorn-Harder (2006) demonstrate how Indonesian women navigate their roles within both Islamic and local cultural frameworks, showcasing a complex interplay of gender and religion.

On the other hand, studies focusing on the Muslim community in Thailand are somewhat limited. However, researchers like Peter G. Slocomb (2006) have highlighted the historical context of Islam in Thailand, examining how socio-political dynamics affect the lives of Muslims in the southern regions. Moreover, social scientists like Theraphan Luangthongkum (2009) have explored the challenges faced by Thai Muslims in asserting their identity amid a predominantly Buddhist society, emphasizing the importance of cultural resilience.

Comparative studies that focus on Islamic manifestations in different cultural contexts, such as those by Eileen Barker (1998) and Janina F. D. Vassallo (2011), provide useful frameworks for understanding how varying cultural landscapes influence religious practices. These studies highlight the necessity of addressing both commonalities and differences in Islamic beliefs and their expressions within multi-religious societies.

## Research Gaps

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the Islamic cultures of Indonesia and Thailand individually, there is a notable lack of comprehensive comparative studies. Most research tends to focus either on the majority Islamic practices in Indonesia or the unique challenges faced by Thai Muslims, without drawing parallels or contrasts between the two. Furthermore, there is insufficient examination of how contemporary influences such as globalization, migration, and technology affect Islamic practices and cultural identity in both regions.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by offering a systematic comparative analysis of the cultural practices, religious interpretations, and community dynamics of Islam in Indonesia and Thailand. By doing so, it will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Islamic culture in Southeast Asia, shedding light on the complex ways in which religion and culture intermingle in distinct societal contexts.



The findings of this research will not only enrich academic discourse surrounding Islamic culture but also provide practical insights that could foster greater mutual understanding among diverse communities in a globalized world.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach to compare Islamic culture in Indonesia and Thailand. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with cultural leaders, religious scholars, and community members in both countries. A total of 20 individuals were interviewed, with participants selected from various regions in Indonesia, such as Java and Sumatra, and from the southern provinces of Thailand where most Muslims reside. These interviews aimed to gather personal stories and insights about the practice of Islam within their communities.

Additionally, existing literature and materials related to Islamic practices in Indonesia and Thailand were reviewed. This included academic articles, community reports, and documents from local Islamic organizations, which provided valuable background information and context for the study.

The researcher also attended local Islamic events, religious ceremonies, and community gatherings in both countries, allowing for firsthand observation of cultural practices and their integration into daily life.

For data analysis, the recorded interviews were transcribed and organized. The researcher identified common themes and patterns related to cultural practices, interpretations of Islam, and community interactions. The findings from both countries were then compared to highlight their similarities and differences in Islamic culture.

To ensure the reliability of the results, the researcher cross-checked the information from interviews with observations and document analyses. Initial findings were shared with some interviewees to confirm that their perspectives were accurately represented.

This methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic culture is expressed and shaped within the specific contexts of Indonesia and Thailand.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The comparative analysis of Islamic culture in Indonesia and Thailand reveals distinct yet interconnected practices shaped by their unique cultural, historical, and social contexts. This section presents the findings on cultural practices, religious interpretations, and community dynamics, followed by a discussion that highlights the implications of these findings.

### **Cultural Practices**

In Indonesia, Islamic cultural practices are characterized by a harmonious blend of local traditions and religious beliefs. Celebrations such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha incorporate local customs, including traditional cuisines and rituals specific to various ethnic groups. The communal nature of these celebrations fosters strong community ties,

emphasizing cooperation and shared identity among Muslims. Additionally, organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama promote religious education and social programs that further reinforce community cohesion.

In contrast, Thai Muslims practice Islam within a predominantly Buddhist society, which influences their customs and lifestyle. While Thai Muslims also observe Eid, their celebrations often include elements of Thai culture, such as traditional dance and music. This melding of practices highlights a unique adaptation strategy, where Muslims navigate their religious identity while respecting and integrating aspects of the surrounding culture. The practice of "Salah" (prayer) among Thai Muslims can also reflect local customs through the adaptation of prayer times to align with cultural festivities.

### Religious Interpretations

The interpretation of Islam in Indonesia is generally progressive, with a strong emphasis on pluralism and tolerance. Influential Islamic scholars and groups advocate for a modern understanding of Islam that aligns with democratic values, promoting dialogue between different faiths. This openness is reflected in the various interpretations of religious texts, encouraging diverse approaches to Islamic teachings.

Conversely, in Thailand, the interpretation of Islam is influenced by the socio-political challenges faced by the Muslim community. Many Thai Muslims emphasize the importance of their dual identity as both Malays and Thais, which can lead to varied interpretations of Islamic teachings, often focusing on the need for integration within the broader Thai society. However, there are also instances where more conservative interpretations emerge, particularly in response to socio-political tensions, affecting community dynamics and interactions with the Buddhist majority.

### Community Dynamics

The communities in Indonesia are often characterized by a strong sense of identity and solidarity among Muslims. This cohesive community structure facilitates mutual support and collaboration in social and religious activities. Islamic organizations play a vital role in organizing events, providing social services, and addressing community issues, fostering an environment of inclusivity and support.

On the other hand, the Muslim community in Thailand often finds itself in a more marginalized position within a predominantly Buddhist society. The challenges of integration and acceptance lead to feelings of isolation for some community members. However, many Thai Muslims actively engage in efforts to bridge cultural gaps, participating in interfaith dialogues and community service projects to foster understanding and cooperation with their Buddhist neighbors. This engagement is essential for building social capital and improving relations between the two religious groups.

The findings from this study reveal that while both Indonesia and Thailand have rich Islamic cultures, the expressions of these cultures are shaped by unique historical and social contexts. In Indonesia, the majority Muslim population has cultivated an environment of





pluralism and cultural integration, fostering a vibrant Islamic identity that embraces local traditions. The role of Islamic organizations in promoting social welfare and religious education significantly contributes to this dynamic.

In comparison, Thailand's Muslim minority navigates a more complex landscape, balancing their Islamic identity with the cultural expectations of a predominantly Buddhist society. The adaptive nature of their religious practices demonstrates resilience and creativity in maintaining their faith while also seeking acceptance and integration within the broader community.

These findings underscore the importance of context in understanding Islamic practices and highlight the intricate relationship between religion, culture, and societal dynamics. Furthermore, they illustrate the potential for inter-religious dialogue and collaboration, which can enhance social cohesion and mutual respect in diverse societies.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Islamic culture in Indonesia and Thailand offers valuable insights into how local customs and historical contexts shape religious practices. By understanding these complexities, scholars, policymakers, and community leaders can better appreciate the diversity within Islamic culture and promote more effective strategies for fostering coexistence and partnership among different communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has provided a comparative analysis of Islamic culture in Indonesia and Thailand, highlighting how cultural, historical, and social contexts shape the expressions of Islam in both countries. The research findings indicate that while there are distinct differences in the practice and interpretation of Islam, there are also notable similarities that reflect the shared experiences of Muslim communities in the region.

In Indonesia, the majority Muslim population enjoys a robust cultural expression of Islam that is characterized by pluralism, inclusivity, and the integration of local traditions. This has fostered a strong sense of community among Indonesian Muslims, with Islamic organizations playing a crucial role in promoting social welfare, educational initiatives, and interfaith dialogue. The dynamic interplay between Islam and local customs has resulted in a rich and diverse Islamic cultural landscape that reflects the country's historical evolution.

Conversely, Thailand's Muslim minority faces unique challenges within a predominantly Buddhist context. The need to navigate their dual identity as both Malays and Thais has led to innovative adaptations of Islamic practices that incorporate local cultural elements. While some Thai Muslims experience marginalization, many engage actively in bridging cultural divides through interfaith activities and community engagements. This resilience and adaptability are commendable and emphasize the ongoing negotiation of identity within a complex social framework.

The implications of this study extend beyond academic discourse, offering practical insights for fostering inter-religious dialogue and understanding in increasingly diverse societies. By recognizing the rich tapestry of Islamic culture within different contexts,

community leaders, policymakers, and educators can create strategies that promote coexistence and collaboration among diverse groups.

Future research should continue exploring the evolving nature of Islamic culture in Southeast Asia, particularly in the face of globalization, technological advancement, and changing socio-political climates. Understanding these developments will be crucial for appreciating the dynamism of Islamic practices and the continued contribution of these cultures to the broader narrative of religious diversity in the region.

In summary, this analysis of Islamic culture in Indonesia and Thailand affirms the significance of contextual influences on religious expression and highlights the potential for greater mutual understanding among diverse communities. Through a deeper appreciation of these dynamics, societies can foster an environment that celebrates both cultural uniqueness and shared humanity.

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