



Refuting the Narrative of Intolerance: A Historical and Empirical Analysis of Religious Harmony in Aceh

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Abstract

This study aims to refute the prevailing narrative of intolerance in Aceh by presenting a comprehensive historical and empirical analysis of religious harmony in the region. Aceh, widely known as the “Veranda of Mecca,” has often been portrayed in national and international discourse as an area with low levels of religious tolerance, particularly due to its implementation of Islamic law. However, this perception frequently overlooks the broader socio-historical and cultural context of Acehnese society. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach that integrates historical, sociological, and literature-based methods, this research examines patterns of interreligious relations from the era of the Samudra Pasai Sultanate to contemporary Aceh. The findings reveal that values of tolerance, openness, and coexistence have long been embedded in Acehnese society, reflected in historical records of cross-cultural trade, the acceptance of foreign leaders, and the preservation of non-Muslim religious sites. Empirical evidence further demonstrates that interfaith harmony continues to be practiced in everyday life, supported by local wisdom such as *peumulia jamee* (honoring guests) and communal solidarity traditions. Case studies from various regions in Aceh, along with testimonies from community leaders and minority groups, indicate a high level of social cohesion and mutual respect among religious communities. This study argues that the narrative of intolerance in Aceh is largely shaped by external perspectives that tend to generalize isolated incidents without considering the region’s complex social realities. By integrating historical insights and contemporary empirical data, this research offers a more balanced understanding of Aceh as a society where Islamic values coexist with pluralism and universal human principles.

Keywords: *Aceh, Religious Tolerance, Islamic Law, Interfaith Harmony, Social Cohesion*

A. Introduction

Aceh is one of Indonesia’s provinces with a long history, rich cultural heritage, and a strong Islamic identity. As a region where the majority of the population adheres to Islam and the only province that has officially implemented Islamic Sharia law since 2001, Aceh holds a strategic position in both national and global discussions on tolerance and social harmony (Peraturan Perundang-

undangan, 2001). The epithet “Veranda of Mecca” not only reflects its role as an early gateway for the spread of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago but also signifies the deeply rooted religious values and local wisdom embedded in the daily lives of its people (Azyumardi Azra, 2002). In this context, it is important to examine the social realities of Aceh from an academic perspective, particularly regarding interreligious tolerance, given the gap between external perceptions and empirical social conditions on the ground. Such analysis is crucial to ensure that understandings of Aceh are not shaped by generalizations or incomplete narratives.

Over the past two decades, Aceh has frequently been the subject of media coverage that tends to generate negative perceptions regarding the implementation of Islamic Sharia. Reports from national and international institutions, such as the Setara Institute through the 2023 Tolerant City Index (IKT), have placed cities like Banda Aceh, Sabang, and Lhokseumawe among areas with low levels of tolerance in Indonesia (Setara Institute, 2023). In addition, reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch often highlight issues of human rights violations without fully explaining the broader social and cultural context (Laporan Amnesty International 2022/2023 Situasi Hak Asasi Manusia Secara Global, n.d.). However, these findings do not entirely align with empirical realities within local communities.

Testimonies from local figures such as SA in Sabang indicate that interreligious harmony has long been established, even before Indonesia’s independence, with peaceful and inclusive social practices (Wawancara dengan SA, tokoh masyarakat Sabang, 2025). Similarly, PG, a church leader in Sabang, observes that Acehnese society is generally friendly, open, and respectful of differences, including the coexistence of religious practices without conflict (Wawancara dengan PG, pemimpin gereja di Sabang, 2025).

On the other hand, data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) and the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB) suggest that the level of social harmony in Aceh is relatively high (Pikahulan, 2023). Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its effort to integrate local empirical data, testimonies of social actors, and contextual analysis to challenge dominant narratives that tend to oversimplify the social complexity of Aceh.

Based on this background, this study aims to critically examine narratives of intolerance in Aceh by presenting empirical evidence grounded in the social, historical, and cultural realities of its people. It seeks to answer several key questions: (1) how are tolerance and interreligious harmony practiced in everyday life in Aceh? (2) to what extent does the implementation of Islamic Sharia influence the religious freedom of minority groups? and (3) why is there a gap between external perceptions shaped by media and institutional reports and the social realities experienced by Acehnese communities? By formulating these questions,

the study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of religious and social life in Aceh.

This research argues that narratives of intolerance in Aceh are often constructed from external perspectives that do not sufficiently consider the region's historical, cultural, and local value systems. Empirically, Acehnese society has long practiced values of tolerance through local wisdom such as *meusyuhu* (social harmony), *peumulia jamee* (honoring guests), and traditions of mutual cooperation that emphasize solidarity and respect for others (Irwan Abdullah, 2006). Therefore, the main contribution of this study is to offer a more balanced and data-driven perspective in understanding Aceh's social realities. Furthermore, this research contributes to enriching academic discussions on tolerance and religious moderation at both national and international levels, while also strengthening Indonesia's image as a pluralistic and civilized nation that upholds universal human values (M. Quraish Shihab, 2007).

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach, combined with a library research method and a historical-sociological analysis. This approach is chosen because it enables the researcher to deeply understand the phenomenon of interreligious tolerance in Aceh through the interpretation of social meanings, cultural practices, and the historical dynamics underlying it. Qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of meaning rather than mere quantitative measurement, making it relevant for examining complex social realities such as interfaith relations in Aceh (Lexy, 2019). The historical approach is used to trace the trajectory of interreligious relations from the era of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate to the contemporary period, while the sociological approach is applied to understand the practice of tolerance in present-day social life. The combination of these two approaches provides a comprehensive picture that connects past contexts with current realities (Sugiyono, 2019).

The analysis in this study focuses on social practices, policies, and narratives related to tolerance and interreligious relations in Aceh. The scope of analysis includes interactions among different religious communities, the role of social and religious institutions, as well as regional government regulations such as Aceh's Qanun in governing religious life. In addition, this research examines the construction of the meaning of tolerance within Acehnese society, both in the normative domain (rules and values) and in everyday empirical practices (Agusta, 2003).

The data in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data are obtained indirectly through official documents, institutional reports, and

testimonies of community leaders documented in various written sources. Meanwhile, secondary data include academic books, scientific journals, research reports, news from credible media, and official government documents such as Law Number 11 of 2006 on the Governance of Aceh and various Aceh Qanun related to the implementation of Islamic law. Furthermore, this study utilizes historical data in the form of archives, records from the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate period, colonial reports, and academic studies on relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Aceh. Contemporary data are derived from survey reports by institutions such as the Setara Institute, the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), and recent studies discussing the level of interreligious harmony in Aceh.

Data collection techniques in this study are conducted through library research and documentation. Library research is carried out by reviewing various written sources relevant to the research topic, including books, journal articles, and research reports. Documentation techniques are used to collect historical and policy data, including archives, government documents, and publications from related institutions. Data collection is also conducted by exploring credible digital sources to obtain up-to-date information on the condition of tolerance in Aceh. In this process, the researcher critically selects sources to ensure the validity and reliability of the data used.

Data analysis is conducted through three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction is carried out by selecting and focusing on data relevant to the issue of tolerance and interreligious relations. Data presentation is conducted in the form of narrative descriptions and thematic mapping to facilitate understanding of the social patterns identified. The final stage is conclusion drawing, which involves interpreting the analyzed data to answer the research questions. In this process, the researcher also validates the data through source triangulation techniques, namely by comparing data from various sources such as academic literature, institutional reports, and media coverage. This technique aims to ensure that the research findings possess a high level of validity and objectivity.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Historical Traces of Tolerance in Aceh: From Samudra Pasai to the Aceh Sultanate

Aceh is known as one of the provinces with a long history of integrating Islamic values with an open attitude toward diversity. Since the era of the Samudra Pasai Sultanate in the 13th century, Aceh has practiced a social life that reflects tolerance and wisdom (Miswari, 2022). Historical records show that the spirit of openness and respect for differences has been an integral part of Acehnese society since the early spread of Islam.

In the book *Membedah Sejarah Aceh*, it is narrated that the Venetian explorer Marco Polo stopped in Samudra Pasai in 1292 AD on his return journey from China. At that time, Aceh was ruled by Sultan Malikussaleh, a leader known for his wisdom and broad insight. Marco Polo wrote that Sultan Malikussaleh and his people were devout Muslims, yet remained friendly and open to foreign visitors. He also noted that the Acehnese maintained trade and cultural relations with peoples from India, Persia, and China without prejudice (M. Adli Abdullah, 2011, pp. 43–46).

One interesting story from Marco Polo's account describes how his group ran out of wine to warm themselves. Sultan Malikussaleh then ordered his people to provide an alternative drink called *ie jok masam*, a refreshing traditional Acehnese beverage. This action reflects the wisdom of an Islamic leader who was not rigid, but rather capable of applying Islamic values in harmony with local wisdom (Ajis, 2021). From these accounts, it can be concluded that since the early period of Islamization, Aceh has demonstrated a tolerant, open, and respectful attitude toward differences. This is evident in several key aspects, including:

- a) Openness toward foreign visitors, where the Sultan received guests with great respect.
- b) Cross-cultural and interreligious relations, where trade and diplomacy were conducted without regard to religious differences.
- c) Wise leadership, which applied Islamic values peacefully while respecting others.

This legacy became the foundation of Aceh's later civilization, known as a center for the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, as well as a region that upholds humanity and openness among nations.

2. The Practice of Tolerance in the Social and Cultural Life of Acehnese Society

Historical evidence of tolerance in Aceh does not end with the era of the sultanates but continues to live on in social practices into the modern period. A number of facts demonstrate that Aceh is a region open to differences in ethnicity, religion, and culture (Zalmita et al., 2020). First, Aceh functioned as an international trade center from the 13th to the 17th centuries. Its ports were frequented by traders from Arabia, Persia, Turkey, China, the Netherlands, England, and France. This ethnic and religious diversity in economic interactions shaped a cosmopolitan and adaptive society. Second, the acceptance of leaders from outside Aceh also serves as evidence of ethnic tolerance. Several sultans who ruled, such as Sultan Iskandar Tsani from Pahang, Sultan Badrul Alam Syarif Hasyim Jamaluddin from Arabia, and Sultan Alaidin Ahmad Syah from Bugis descent, were well received by the Acehnese people. This indicates the presence of social inclusivity within the structure of power.

Third, the existence of non-Muslim places of worship since the Dutch colonial period reflects religious tolerance. The Sacred Heart Catholic Church (known as Gereja Ayam), GPIB (Gereja Protestan Indonesia Bagian Barat), and HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan) were established in Banda Aceh in the late 19th century and still stand today (Noer Abijono, 1977). The Acehnese community has never engaged in acts of destruction against these houses of worship; instead, they have preserved them as part of the city's historical heritage.

Fourth, the intellectual tradition and religious dialogue during the Aceh Sultanate demonstrate remarkable academic tolerance. Religious discussions involving scholars from Persia and the Middle East were regularly held in the royal court. This reflects Aceh's openness to intellectual exchange across regions, both within and beyond the Islamic world. In the contemporary context, the spirit of tolerance is also evident in the aftermath of the tsunami on December 26, 2004 (Marzuki, 2016). One example is the restoration of the Palani Andawer Temple in Gampong Keudah, Banda Aceh the oldest Hindu temple in Aceh which was severely damaged by the tsunami. Its reconstruction was carried out through collaboration between the Tamil Hindu community, the Banda Aceh municipal government, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the surrounding Muslim community. The rebuilding of the temple stands as a tangible symbol of tolerance and respect for religious diversity in Aceh.

Furthermore, post-tsunami social assistance was distributed without discrimination regarding recipients' backgrounds, reflecting values of humanity and social justice embedded within Acehnese society. Another example is the Kerkhof Peucut (Dutch Cemetery) in Banda Aceh, which has been well maintained and preserved by the local community (Dinas Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata Aceh, 2021). Although it is a burial site for non-Muslim colonial soldiers, the Acehnese people have never attempted to close or destroy it. Instead, the site has been designated as a cultural heritage landmark and a historical tourism destination. This attitude illustrates the wisdom of the Acehnese people in respecting the past and embracing differences with openness.

3. Contemporary Harmony: Empirical Evidence and Social Testimonies

Various recent findings further reinforce that Aceh is a region that upholds the values of tolerance and interreligious harmony. One important study is the work of Hasan Basri M. Nur, Ph.D (2025) entitled *"Relasi Islam-Kristen-Katolik di Aceh Singkil."* In his research, Hasan Basri found that by 2015 there were 24 churches in Aceh Singkil, consisting of 20 Protestant churches and 4 Catholic churches. In some villages, there is even more than one house of worship. This fact challenges the assumption that churches are difficult to find in Aceh, while also strengthening the

narrative that Acehnese society lives peacefully alongside non-Muslim communities (Hasan Basri M. Nur, 2011, pp. 43–46).

Another study by Yusrizal Hasbi in his work *“Toleransi di Ujung Barat: Pelajaran dari Pusong Lama Lhokseumawe”* demonstrates a similar phenomenon. In the Pusong Lama area, there are the HKBP Church, the Indonesian Methodist Church (GMI), the Buddha Tirta Vihara, and the Islamic Center Mosque of Lhokseumawe located in close proximity. The surrounding community maintains a harmonious way of life; during Eid al-Fitr, non-Muslims visit Muslim neighbors, while during Christmas, Muslims respect their worship by refraining from activities that might disturb it.

In addition to academic findings, social testimonies also strengthen field-based evidence of tolerance in Aceh. A student from the Department of Religious Studies, identified as NF, conducted an interview with IP:

“A non-Muslim trader in Lambaro Market, Banda Aceh. IP stated that he has been well accepted by the local community and has never experienced discriminatory treatment while conducting his business. He described Acehnese people as friendly, open, and highly respectful of humanitarian values in everyday interactions.”

These testimonies show that the value of tolerance in Aceh is not merely a slogan, but is concretely manifested in social life, commerce, and intercommunity relations. Therefore, accusations of intolerance toward Aceh often arise from a lack of understanding of the region’s unique social, cultural, and historical context, which is deeply rooted in the Islamic values of *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*.

4. Analysis

a) Negative Narratives about Aceh

Negative narratives about Aceh often stem from external perspectives that tend to oversimplify the region’s complex social and cultural realities. Some national and international media portray the implementation of Islamic law (*sharia*) in Aceh as a form of restriction on religious freedom and human rights. Reports such as the *Indeks Kota Toleran (IKT) 2023* issued by the Setara Institute ranked three cities in Aceh Banda Aceh, Sabang, and Lhokseumawe as having low levels of tolerance. This narrative is reinforced by media coverage highlighting cases such as restrictions on the construction of non-Muslim houses of worship or the enforcement of *sharia* law perceived as discriminatory toward minority groups.

- 1) External viewpoints often equate the implementation of *sharia* with exclusivism, patriarchy, and intolerance. Such narratives develop due to: Limited understanding of the social and historical context of *sharia* implementation in Aceh.

- 2) The tendency of external media to highlight isolated cases without considering the broader social conditions.
- 3) Ideological bias, where devout Muslim societies are frequently associated with extremism.

In reality, these narratives often fail to consider empirical facts showing that Acehnese society has historically and culturally lived within a pluralistic and peaceful environment.

b) Positive Narratives about Aceh

- 1) Conversely, positive narratives depict Aceh as a religious, open, and humane society that upholds values of solidarity and coexistence. Historical records, such as the accounts of Marco Polo (1292 M) and documents from the Samudera Pasai kingdom, describe Aceh as an international trading hub that welcomed people from Arab, Indian, Persian, and European backgrounds. Interactions among different religions and ethnicities were peaceful and even became the foundation of an inclusive Islamic civilization in Southeast Asia. These values of tolerance continue to exist in modern Acehnese society. Examples include: Interfaith life in Sabang and Peunayong, where churches, temples, and mosques stand side by side without conflict.
- 2) The reconstruction of the Palani Andawer Temple after the 2004 tsunami, supported by the surrounding Muslim community.
- 3) The existence of Kerkhof Peucut in Banda Aceh, a cemetery of non-Muslim Dutch soldiers that is preserved and maintained as a historical tourism site.
- 4) Social relations in Aceh Singkil and Lhokseumawe, where Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists coexist harmoniously with active social interaction.

These positive narratives demonstrate that the implementation of *sharia* in Aceh does not eliminate space for harmony and religious freedom. Rather, *sharia* functions as a moral and social framework that promotes justice, peace, and solidarity among citizens.

c) Rebuttal of Negative Narratives

Based on historical, social, and empirical evidence, claims portraying Aceh as intolerant lack strong factual grounding. Key rebuttals include:

1) Historical Rebuttal

Since the 13th century, Aceh has been recognized as an international trade center open to foreign communities. Records by Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta describe Acehnese society as hospitable, respectful toward guests, and appreciative of diversity. If Aceh were inherently intolerant, such long-

standing cross-cultural and interreligious harmony would not have been possible.

2) Juridical Rebuttal

The implementation of *sharia* in Aceh is based on Law No. 11 of 2006, which applies only to Muslims. Non-Muslims remain free to practice their religion. This indicates that *sharia* is not coercive for all citizens but operates within a specific religious framework, consistent with national legal principles.

3) Empirical Rebuttal

First, field data show high levels of social harmony in various Acehese cities such as Sabang, Peunayong, and Lhokseumawe. Second, research by Syahrudin Zen (STIT Al-Washliyah Aceh Tengah) records a tolerance index of 4.26 in Aceh Tengah the highest category in the region. Third, research by Nurlaila (UIN Ar-Raniry) confirms that Aceh possesses a strong historical tradition of tolerance despite ongoing socio-political dynamics.

4) Social and Cultural Rebuttal

Acehnese society upholds the principles of *peumulia jamee* (honoring guests) and *meuripeh syedara* (respecting others). These local values serve as social capital for fostering interreligious harmony. Therefore, labeling Aceh as “intolerant” is inconsistent with its social reality. Instead, Aceh demonstrates that Islamic values can coexist with pluralism and humanity.

Aceh’s long history illustrates how Islam spread through cultural and peaceful approaches. Sultan Malikussaleh and his successors not only implemented *sharia* but also promoted openness toward different peoples and religions. Tolerance has been institutionalized since the early development of Islamic civilization in the archipelago. The social structure of Acehese society is built upon a synthesis of customary law (*adat*) and Islamic law, reflected in the principle *adat bak Po Teumeureuhom, hukom bak Syiah Kuala*, which emphasizes a balance between local tradition and religious law.

Interreligious relations in Aceh are cooperative, with social solidarity transcending religious and ethnic boundaries. The post-tsunami period serves as a clear example of how Acehese society revitalized universal humanitarian values through practical expressions of tolerance. The implementation of *sharia* in Aceh represents a form of special autonomy rather than religious exclusivism. The legal framework remains grounded in Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, both of which guarantee freedom of religion. Therefore, the application of *sharia* does not contradict national principles but instead enriches Indonesia’s pluralistic identity.

D. Conclusion

Aceh, as a special autonomous region that implements Islamic law (*sharia*), is often misunderstood by some external observers as an intolerant area. However, historical, social, and empirical studies demonstrate the opposite: Aceh has been and continues to be a clear example of harmonious and inclusive religious life. Since the time of Sultan Malikussaleh in the Samudera Pasai Kingdom, values of openness and tolerance have been embedded in Acehnese culture. Traditions of welcoming foreign visitors, fostering interethnic relations, and building international diplomacy indicate that Islam in Aceh developed within a moderate and civilized environment.

Historical evidence, such as the existence of Kerkhof Peucut and well-maintained non-Muslim houses of worship, reflects the community's respect for religious differences. The reconstruction of the Palani Andawer Temple after the tsunami also stands as a powerful symbol that humanitarian values and interfaith solidarity remain strong within the framework of Islamic law.

In the modern era, academic research conducted in various regions such as Aceh Singkil, Lhokseumawe, and Banda Aceh further reinforces the view that Acehnese society lives in a spirit of togetherness. Relations among Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Hindus, and Buddhists are generally harmonious, characterized by mutual respect, healthy social interactions, and cooperation in public life. Therefore, narratives portraying Aceh as intolerant lack a strong factual basis. On the contrary, Aceh reflects a form of Islam that is tolerant, moderate, and oriented toward the common good. The implementation of Islamic law in Aceh is not a form of restriction, but rather a value system that organizes social life in a just and civilized manner, in line with the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a mercy to all creation).

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