

Pesantren Alam as a Transformative Da'wa Strategy in the Phases of Islamization of the Kaili Da'a Ethnic Community in Central Sulawesi

**Eka Firmansyah*¹, Abdelmajid Idris Mohammed Khalil², Nizar Zaky Zakin³,
Mohammed Alghiffar Alwalid⁴**

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia, ekafirmansyah689@gmail.com

²University: Sub-Saharan University College, Sudan, majidcc2000@gmail.com

³Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt, nizarbahanan62@gmail.com

⁴ International Islamic University of Malaysia, a.alghiffar@live.iium.edu.my

* ekafirmansyah689@gmail.com

Received: 2026-April-15

Rev. Req: 2026-May-09

Accepted: 2026-June-20

ABSTRACT: This research aims to examine the phases of Islamic development in the Kaili Da'a ethnic community in Central Sulawesi through the pesantren alam approach and to analyze the acculturation process between Islamic values and local culture as a sustainable new cultural identity. This study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic research design, utilizing participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary studies as data collection techniques, analyzed through the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, with validity established through source and technique triangulation. The findings reveal that Islamization in the Kaili Da'a community unfolded through five sequential phases, namely rejection, combat, indifference, growing interest, and acceptance, all navigated through a nature-based, culturally respectful, and relationally authentic da'wa strategy. The acculturation process produced a sustainable new cultural identity in which Islamic values inhabit local cultural forms without erasing ethnic identity, sustained over fifteen years through continuity and change. These findings challenge conventional theoretical assumptions that successful religious transformation in resistant indigenous communities requires formal institutional support and extensive resources, and contribute meaningfully to SDG 4, SDG 10, and SDG 16 by offering a replicable model of inclusive, community-based transformative da'wa.

Keywords: *Pesantren Alam, Islamization Phases, Cultural Acculturation*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kaili Da'a ethnic community is one of the indigenous groups inhabiting the interior regions of Central Sulawesi, carrying a belief system and cultural traditions deeply rooted over centuries. Their lives are intimately bound to nature, and their cultural identity is strictly guarded by a customary leadership structure that holds full authority over every aspect of community life. The community's closed and suspicious character toward outsiders makes them exceptionally difficult to reach by external influences, including Islamic da'wa. The process of Islam's entry into the Kaili Da'a ethnic community was neither instant nor easy. The da'i who came to the area faced a series of rejections that were physical, social, and even spiritual in nature. These ranged from verbal expulsion by the customary chief, cutting off access to clean water, attacks using traditional weapons such as blowpipes, spears, and ancient swords, to the use of black magic practices locally known as doti. All forms of resistance were met by the da'i with extraordinary perseverance, strategic intelligence, and spiritual steadfastness, without abandoning the da'wa site even when their lives were at stake. Despite facing tremendous obstacles, the da'wa process carried out through the pesantren alam approach ultimately yielded significant results. The da'i were eventually accepted socially by the community, culminating in an intercultural marriage that became a symbol of the Kaili Da'a community's sincere acceptance of Islam. The acculturation between Islamic values and local culture unfolded organically, producing a new culture that fused both without erasing the community's original identity. This success demonstrates that a nature-based and locally-grounded da'wa approach is capable of penetrating even the most deeply entrenched resistance.

Ideally, da'wa directed at closed indigenous communities with strong belief systems should require an extended period of time, substantial resources, and systematic institutional support. Scholars of da'wa and cross-cultural communication affirm that the success of da'wa among resistant communities depends heavily on methodological maturity, supporting infrastructure, and well-planned cultural adaptation. According to Afandi (2023), the effectiveness of da'wa in indigenous communities requires a multidimensional approach encompassing linguistic, social, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously to avoid triggering destructive resistance. In line with this, Ali (2023) argues that the Islamization process among communities with strong local belief traditions tends to encounter layered obstacles that cannot be overcome through conventional approaches alone. Furthermore, Alamyar and Halwati (2023) assert that successful religious transformation in ethnic communities requires a prolonged

phase of cultural adaptation that cannot be forced within a short timeframe. From the perspective of da'wa communication, Annabila et al. (2024) emphasize that indigenous communities' resistance to new values constitutes an identity defense mechanism that is extremely difficult to penetrate without social trust built gradually and sustainably. Consistent with this view, Butiras (2025) affirms that da'wa approaches unsupported by formal institutions and adequate resources are unlikely to produce significant and lasting change in communities with high levels of social cohesion.

There exists a strikingly visible gap between the factual conditions observed in the Kaili Da'a ethnic community and the ideal framework constructed by da'wa scholars and cross-cultural communication experts. On the ground, the success of Islamization occurred through a simple, personal, and nature-based approach, without adequate formal institutional support, without sophisticated infrastructure, and under conditions of extreme social pressure. This phenomenon directly challenges the theoretical assumptions long held in contemporary da'wa studies, particularly regarding the minimum prerequisites for successful religious transformation in indigenous communities. This gap raises a fundamental question yet unanswered in existing literature, namely what factors truly constitute the key to the success of pesantren alam as a da'wa strategy in the Kaili Da'a ethnic community, and how the phases of Islamization that occurred can be scientifically explained within the context of transformative da'wa. These questions form the starting point and core of this research.

Previous studies sharing an intersection with this research have been conducted in considerable number, yet they generally focus on partial aspects of the da'wa phenomenon in indigenous communities. Some studies examine da'wa strategies broadly among minority communities (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Dale, 2024), others discuss the acculturation of Islam and local culture across various regions of Indonesia (Hasbullah & Hamdani, 2022; Karimullah, 2023; Khasanah, 2022), and some investigate cross-cultural communication in the context of religious dissemination (Miles et al., 2014; Roibin et al., 2023). Additionally, several studies address indigenous community resistance to external influence (Snoopy, 2023; Spradley, 2016), as well as the role of religious figures in the social transformation of interior communities (Uyuni et al., 2024; Tobroni & Firmansyah, 2022). While these studies collectively offer important contributions, none has specifically examined the phases of Islamization in chronological depth within the Kaili Da'a ethnic community as a unified and complete da'wa phenomenon. The most significant academic gap lies in the absence of research that integrates the

pesantren alam approach, the dynamics of indigenous community resistance, and the cultural acculturation process within a single comprehensive analytical framework (Firmansyah, 2023; Tobroni et al., 2023; Firmansyah et al., 2023; Bakar et al., 2024; Firmansyah & Idris, 2024; Syah et al., 2023). Existing studies tend to separate the methodological aspects of da'wa from the socio-cultural transformation it produces, and therefore have not been able to explain why and how an apparently simple da'wa approach can generate profound and lasting change even in the most resistant communities. This research is positioned to fill that gap systematically and comprehensively.

The novelty of this research lies in the construction of an empirical and contextual model of Islamization phases within the Kaili Da'a ethnic community, which has never previously been mapped scientifically in Indonesian da'wa literature. This research goes beyond merely documenting the da'wa process; it constructs a new analytical framework explaining how the pesantren alam approach can serve as a bridge between universal Islamic values and particular local wisdom, thereby producing a transformative da'wa model relevant to indigenous communities across Indonesia. These findings have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, and Goal 10 on reducing social inequality through inclusive approaches grounded in local culture. The urgency of this research is considerable given that many indigenous communities in Indonesia remain effectively unreached by da'wa, while conventional approaches have proven insufficient to meet that challenge. Scientific documentation and analysis of the pesantren alam success in the Kaili Da'a ethnic community can serve as a strategic reference for da'i, da'wa institutions, and policymakers in designing more inclusive, sustainable, and far-reaching da'wa programs. In the context of SDG Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 17 on global partnerships, this research offers a community-based learning model adaptable across cultural contexts to foster social transformation that is dignified and just.

Based on the background outlined above, this research focuses on two central questions. First, how do the phases of Islamic development unfold chronologically and transformatively in the Kaili Da'a ethnic community through the pesantren alam approach, from the phase of rejection to acceptance. Second, how does the acculturation process between Islamic values and the local culture of the Kaili Da'a ethnic community form and sustain itself as a new and enduring cultural identity within the framework of transformative da'wa.

II. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach as proposed by Creswell (2023), which regards social reality as contextual in nature and best understood through an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of the subjects being studied. The research type selected is ethnography based on the framework of Spradley (2022), which allows the researcher to immerse directly into the daily life of the Kaili Da'a ethnic community, observing cultural patterns, belief systems, and social dynamics as they occur naturally in the field. Data collection was conducted through three primary channels, namely participatory observation carried out intensively within the Kaili Da'a community settlement, in-depth interviews with da'i, customary leaders, and community members who directly experienced the Islamization process, as well as documentary studies of da'wa records and relevant local cultural artifacts.

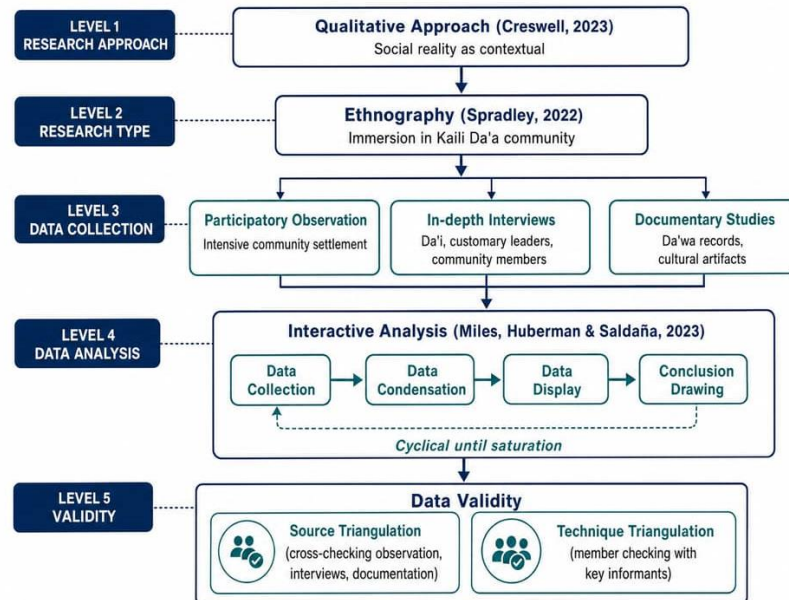


Figure 1. research method framework

The collected data were subsequently analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2023), encompassing four stages of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing in a continuous and cyclical manner until data saturation was reached. This analytical process was consistently applied to map the phases of Islamization and cultural acculturation patterns occurring within the Kaili Da'a ethnic community in a chronological and systematic manner. Data validity was established through source triangulation and technique triangulation, by cross-checking data

obtained from observation, interviews, and documentation to ensure the consistency and credibility of findings. Member checking was additionally conducted with key informants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations of field data, ensuring that the findings of this research are scientifically and ethically accountable.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Phases of Islamic Development in the Kaili Da'a Ethnic Community through the Pesantren Alam Approach

Based on field findings obtained through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, the process of Islamic development in the Kaili Da'a ethnic community unfolded through five interrelated and inseparable phases. These phases did not occur in a strictly linear or precisely measurable timeframe, but rather evolved dynamically, shaped by the social, cultural, and spiritual conditions of the community at each stage. The entire process took place within the framework of the pesantren alam approach, a da'wa method conducted in a traditional manner, closely connected to nature, and flowing organically in accordance with the rhythms of the target community's daily life.

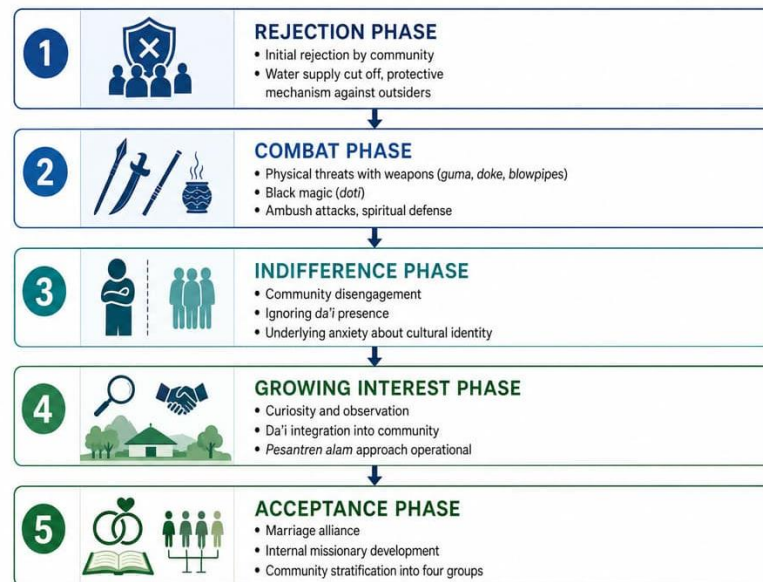


Figure 2. The Phases of Islamic Development in the Kaili Da'a Ethnic Community through the Pesantren Alam Approach

The first phase was the rejection phase. Upon the initial arrival of the da'i in the Kaili Da'a settlement, the community responded with firm and unambiguous

rejection. The closed and deeply suspicious character of this community toward outsiders was immediately apparent, as the customary chief directly instructed the da'i to leave the area as a condition for their personal safety. This rejection was not merely expressed verbally; it was followed by concrete action in the form of cutting off the clean water supply that flowed from a reservoir constructed at the mountain summit, which was strictly controlled by the customary chief. The intention was clear, namely to create conditions so difficult that the da'i would have no choice but to abandon the settlement. This phase reflects what scholars describe as the natural protective mechanism of indigenous communities against external cultural threats, where the instinct to preserve identity manifests as collective resistance against any form of outside intervention.

The second phase was the combat phase, which proved to be the most dangerous and psychologically demanding stage throughout the entire da'wa process. During this phase, the da'i faced direct physical threats from the community. The Kaili Da'a ethnic community maintained a strong tradition of using customary weapons, including the guma, an ancient sword, the doke, a type of spear, and blowpipes, which were employed not only as tools of daily life and hunting but also as instruments of intimidation directed at the da'i. Beyond physical weapons, the community also deployed doti, a form of black magic deeply embedded in their local cultural belief system, with the explicit purpose of harming or driving away the da'i who persisted in remaining in their settlement. The culmination of this phase came when the da'i were ambushed by blowpipe attacks launched from the bushes by unidentified individuals. Rather than retreating, the da'i responded by reciting Quranic verses as spiritual defense against the black magic, and by using martial arts skills and rattan as physical protection. This resilience ultimately led to a direct confrontation with the customary chief, which the da'i navigated successfully, earning the lead missionary the community nickname of Habib Rotan, a name that reflected both the tool he used and the respect that gradually began to form.

The third phase was the indifference phase, in which the Kaili Da'a community shifted from active hostility to deliberate disengagement. Members of the community began ignoring the presence of the da'i, choosing neither to engage nor to oppose. The da'i continued performing their religious practices openly in the natural surroundings, including congregational prayers, dhikr sessions in open fields, and displaying the behavioral markers of Islamic morality in their daily interactions. Islamic symbols such as Middle Eastern attire, prayer beads, and head coverings remained visible in the settlement. While the community

appeared indifferent on the surface, an underlying anxiety persisted, specifically the fear that accepting the new culture brought by the da'i might threaten the continuity of their ancestral traditions and erode their cultural identity. This phase, though seemingly stagnant, was in fact a critical transitional period in which the seeds of curiosity were quietly beginning to take root.

The fourth phase was the phase of growing interest, during which members of the Kaili Da'a community began observing the da'i's practices with increasing curiosity and quiet admiration. What they witnessed in the behavior of the da'i contradicted the assumptions and fears they had previously held about Islam. A pivotal turning point in this phase was the gradual transformation in the da'i's approach; they began integrating themselves more naturally into community life, setting aside external Islamic symbols, learning to speak the Kaili Da'a language with genuine effort, and positioning themselves not as outsiders bringing a foreign religion but as members of the community committed to its collective wellbeing. The *pesantren alam* approach became fully operational at this stage, as the da'i deliberately utilized local cultural practices and natural settings as vehicles for introducing Islamic values. The community no longer perceived the da'i as strangers to be feared or resisted, but increasingly as individuals who shared their world and cared for their future.

The fifth and final phase was the acceptance phase, which reached its most powerful symbolic expression when one of the da'i offered his daughter in marriage to a man from the Kaili Da'a ethnic community. This act carried profound significance within the community's cultural framework, as it demonstrated a level of trust, kinship, and mutual belonging that transcended all previous boundaries. The man who married into the da'i's family underwent a process of Islamization and was subsequently equipped with substantive Islamic knowledge and da'wa skills, transforming him into an internal missionary capable of reaching his own people with cultural authenticity and relational depth. From this point, Islam began to be accepted gradually and sincerely by the Kaili Da'a community, particularly among those living in areas closer to the city of Palu. The community currently comprises four distinct groups, namely the da'i themselves, the *ummah al-ijabah* who have accepted Islam, the *ummah al-mad'u* who are still in the process of being reached by da'wa, and the *ummah al-ma'zulyunah* who have not yet been touched by da'wa at all. This stratification reflects the ongoing and unfinished nature of the Islamization process, while simultaneously affirming that meaningful progress has been achieved through the *pesantren alam* approach.

The Acculturation Process between Islamic Values and the Local Culture of the Kaili Da'a Ethnic Community as a Sustainable New Cultural Identity

The acculturation process between Islamic values and the local culture of the Kaili Da'a ethnic community did not unfold as a process of cultural replacement or elimination, but rather as an organic synthesis in which both systems of value found a mutually enriching coexistence. This finding is consistent with the classical understanding of acculturation as a process by which two cultural systems come into sustained contact and produce new cultural forms without the complete disappearance of either. In the context of the Kaili Da'a community, Islam was not introduced as an antagonist to local culture but was carefully positioned as a value system that could inhabit and animate the existing cultural forms already familiar and meaningful to the community.

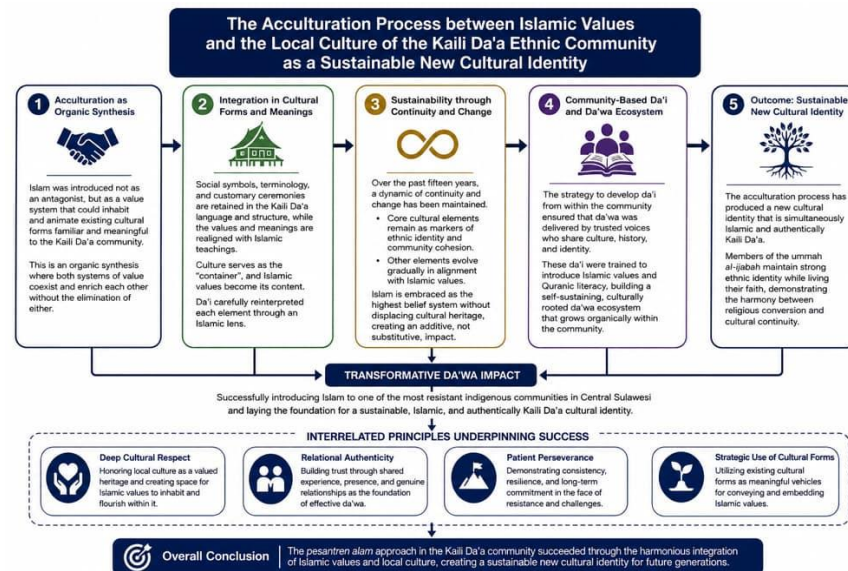


Figure 3. The Acculturation Process between Islamic Values and the Local Culture of the Kaili Da'a Ethnic Community as a Sustainable New Cultural Identity

The most visible manifestation of this acculturation is found in the way social symbols and terminology within the community's social system have been retained in the Kaili Da'a language, while the values embedded within them have been realigned with Islamic teachings. Customary ceremonies continue to be practiced with their original structural stages intact, yet the spiritual and moral content of those ceremonies has been reoriented toward Islamic principles. This approach reflects what researchers in this field describe as the model of culture as a container and Islamic values as its content, a framework that proved highly effective in preserving the community's sense of identity while simultaneously

introducing a transformative religious worldview. The da'i were deliberate and consistent in ensuring that no local cultural practice was hastily declared forbidden; instead, each element was carefully evaluated and, where possible, reinterpreted through an Islamic lens.

The sustainability of this new cultural identity has been maintained over the past fifteen years through a process best described as continuity and change. Within this process, certain cultural elements have remained constant as markers of ethnic identity and community cohesion, while others have undergone gradual transformation in alignment with Islamic values. The community's acceptance of Islam as the highest belief system has not displaced their cultural heritage but has instead provided it with a new moral foundation. Members of the ummah al-ijabah who have embraced Islam continue to identify strongly as Kaili Da'a people, demonstrating that religious conversion in this context has been additive rather than substitutive in its cultural impact.

This process of acculturation was further reinforced by the strategic decision to develop internal da'i from within the community itself. Individuals from the Kaili Da'a ethnic group who had accepted Islam were guided and trained to become missionaries for their own people, conducting da'wa that centered on introducing Islamic values and developing Quranic literacy skills. The significance of this strategy cannot be overstated, as it ensured that the message of Islam was delivered by voices that carried the full weight of cultural familiarity, shared history, and communal trust. The result is a da'wa ecosystem that is self-sustaining, culturally rooted, and capable of expanding organically within the community's own social fabric, representing one of the most significant achievements of the pesantren alam approach in the Kaili Da'a context.

The overall findings of this research affirm that the success of the pesantren alam approach in the Kaili Da'a ethnic community rests on a set of interrelated principles, namely deep cultural respect, relational authenticity, patient perseverance in the face of resistance, and the strategic use of the community's own cultural forms as vehicles for Islamic values. These principles collectively produced a model of transformative da'wa that not only succeeded in introducing Islam to one of the most resistant indigenous communities in Central Sulawesi but also laid the foundation for a new cultural identity that is simultaneously Islamic and authentically Kaili Da'a.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the process of Islamic development in the Kaili Da'a ethnic community unfolded through five chronological phases, namely rejection, combat, indifference, growing interest, and acceptance, all of which were navigated successfully through the pesantren alam approach. The key to this success lay not in institutional resources or formal infrastructure, but in the da'i's unwavering perseverance, deep cultural respect, relational authenticity, and the strategic use of nature and local cultural forms as vehicles for Islamic values. The acculturation between Islam and Kaili Da'a local culture produced a sustainable new cultural identity in which Islamic values inhabit local cultural forms without erasing ethnic identity, maintained over fifteen years through a continuous process of continuity and change.

The findings of this research carry significant implications for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, as the pesantren alam approach demonstrated that lasting social transformation in resistant indigenous communities can be achieved through dialogue, cultural respect, and non-coercive engagement rather than conflict. Furthermore, this research contributes to SDG 10 on reduced inequalities by offering a replicable model of inclusive da'wa that empowers marginalized indigenous communities from within their own cultural framework, and to SDG 4 on quality education through the development of internal community missionaries equipped with both religious knowledge and cultural competence. Collectively, these contributions position the pesantren alam model as a meaningful and strategic instrument for advancing human dignity, social cohesion, and sustainable community transformation across Indonesia and beyond.

V. REFERENCES

- [1] M Ozaki, Y. Adachi, Y. Iwahori, and N. Ishii, Application of fuzzy theory to writer recognition of Chinese characters, *International Journal of Modelling and Simulation*, 18(2), 1998, 112-116.
- [2] Afandi, A. J. (2023). Islam and local culture: The acculturation formed by Walisongo in Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(1), 103–124. <https://doi.org/10.33367/ijhass.v4i1.4135>
- [3] Alamyar, I. H., & Halwati, U. (2023). The theory of communicative action in da'wah. *Indonesian Community Development Journal*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.24090/icodev.v4i2.9904>

- [4] Ali, J. A. (2023). Introduction to special issue: Islamic revivalism and social transformation in the modern world. *Religions*, 14(7), 899. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070899>
- [5] Annabila, N., Ghozi, A., Putri, T., & Ramadani, E. (2024). Akulturasi budaya Islam Nusantara. *Maliki Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2(6), 767–777. <https://doi.org/10.18860/mij.v2i6.9749>
- [6] Bakar, M. Y. A., Firmansyah, E., & Abdeljelil, M. B. (2024). Legal framework analysis of Islamic religious education policy implementation. *International Journal of Law and Society (IJLS)*, 3(3), 217-237.
- [7] Butiras, F. (2025). Acculturation of Islam and culture in Indonesia. *Al-Mujtama': Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(2), 62–73. <https://doi.org/10.30829/al-mujtama.v1i2.21841>
- [8] Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2022). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed., pp. 179–213). SAGE Publications.
- [9] Dale, C. J. P. (2024). 'Becoming stronger': Christianity, indigenous politics of self-determination, and endogenous transformation in West Papua. *Oceania*, 94, 160–183. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ocae.5416>
- [10] Firmansyah, E. (2023). Various Paradigms in Islamic Educational Thought: Fundamentalism, Modernism, and Liberalism. *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences (IJHESS)*, 5(2), 139-145.
- [11] Firmansyah, E., & Idris, A. (2024). Moderation as a Solution to Religious Harmony in Poso Central Sulawesi. *International Journal of Law and Society*, 3(1), 1-9.
- [12] Firmansyah, E., Anwar, S., & Khozin, K. (2023). Anthropological Approach to Islamic Education: Establishing Noble Spirituality in Overcoming Social Conflict. *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education*, 7(1), 163-172.
- [13] Hasbullah, A. S., & Hamdani, S. M. (2022). The practice of dakwah communication towards indigenous community in Selangor. *Jurnal Ushuluddin Adab dan Dakwah*, 5(1), 41–52. <https://doi.org/10.30863/juad.v5i1.2467>
- [14] Karimullah, S. S. (2023). The influence of humanist da'wah in social transformation and social change in Muslim societies. *Syiar: Jurnal*

Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam, 3(2), 51–70.
<https://doi.org/10.29300/syiar.v3i2.4021>

- [15] Khasanah, L. (2022). Akulturasi agama dan budaya lokal. *At-Thariq: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Budaya*, 2(02). <https://doi.org/10.57210/trq.v2i02.171>
- [16] Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed., pp. 10–14). SAGE Publications.
- [17] Roibin, R., Hanafi, I., & Mukhid, A. (2023). Model of Islam Nusantara da'wah based on multiculturalism. *Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah*, 43(1). <https://doi.org/10.21580/jid.v43.1.15412>
- [18] Snoopy, N. (2023). Integration of da'wah communication and disaster mitigation through disaster monitoring. *Communicator: Journal of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.33603/comm.v4i2.133>
- [19] Spradley, J. P. (2016). *The ethnographic interview* (Reissued ed., pp. 55–68). Waveland Press.
- [20] Syah, E. F., Khozin, K., & Haris, A. (2023). Merenda The History of Sheik Sya'ban in The Framework of Banggai Ethnic Islamic Educational Anthropology 8th Century Ad. *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 12(03).
- [21] Tobroni, T., & Firmansyah, E. (2022). Tipologi Manajemen Tradisional Dan Modern Dalam Perkembangan Pendidikan Pesantren. *Research and Development Journal of Education*, 8(1), 333-338.
- [22] Tobroni, T., Firmansyah, E., Rajindra, R., & Fadli, N. (2023). Spirituality as a paradigm of peace education. *Multicultural Islamic Education Review*, 1(1), 23-32.
- [23] Uyuni, B., Adnan, M., Rodhiyana, M., et al. (2024). Urban Islamic sisterhood: An anthropological study of women's Majelis Taklim as agents of social and religious change in Jakarta. *Global Journal of Archeology and Anthropology*, 14(3), 555887. <https://doi.org/10.19080/GJAA.2024.14.555887>

