



## **The strategy of Mudir in Reducing Religious Intergroup Bias in Lhoksukon, Aceh, Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

Intergroup relations, especially between religiously affiliated groups, have always been a discussion that attracts the attention of scholars. However, research that highlights the efforts and processes of harmonisation between groups is still very limited to study, especially with regard to educational settings. By providing a different perspective on the discussion of most scholars, this article photographs the success of mudir (leader of Islamic educational institutions) in maintaining the existence of modern pesantren amid in-group favouritism biased traditional Islamic society in Lhoksukon, Aceh, Indonesia. By using a case-study approach, this study traced and collected data through in-depth interviews with several informants such as mudir, pesantren teachers, Imum Chik (religious leaders), and residents around Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon, Aceh, Indonesia. The results of this study show that the conformity initiated by mudir, especially in symbols owned by the surrounding community, is able to reduce conflict between groups. In addition, mudir also involves figures with religious authority to be catalysts for harmony. The

study also argues that intergroup biases in religious segmentation can be minimised by re-evaluating to find similarities in social identities between groups.

**Keywords:** *dayah*, in-group favouritism, intergroup bias, *mudir*, out-group hatred

## A. Introduction

Since its establishment in the early 1990s, *Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon*, Aceh, continues to show its existence in the world of education (Nasir et al., 2016). The innovations carried out to continue to make this institution perched to be one of the best educational destinations in North Aceh. The achievements can also be seen in the people who want to continue their education in this institution. To date, at least more than 1,500 people have been recorded as students in the *dayah* (Syahputra et al., 2021).

However, the rapid institution progress and the improvement of achievements achieved indirectly make the acceptance of the surrounding community to the existence of this *dayah* is accepted. Although using the nomenclature "*dayah*", a term used as a characteristic of traditional indigenous pesantren in Aceh (Marzuki, 2011; Suyanta, 2012), slowly the identity of this institution was questioned by the public. This big question is even more heightened when the entry of young teachers is dominated by graduates from universities in the Middle East with the appearance of a bearded faces and wearing "*cingkrang*" (trousers above the ankles). This physical appearance is often associated with the Salafi-Wahabi tradition's identity by the surrounding community.

Suspicion and rejection of the group allegedly as part of Salafi-Wahabi are not born in a vacuum. Similar forms of rejection have occurred several times. In Banda Aceh, on September 10, 2015, a sea of people calling themselves the Aswaja Movement held a demonstration with a directive to ban all forms of activities of Salafi-Wahabi groups because they were considered misleading to the community's beliefs. This group is dominated by *dayah* circles and supported by several religious organisations, including Himpunan Ulama *Dayah* Aceh (the *dayah* ulama association), Front Pembela Islam (the Islamic Defenders Front), Majelis Ulama Nanggroe Aceh (The Aceh's ulama council), and Inshafuddin (Yusmadi, 2015).

People's rejection of the existence of this institution is increasingly rolling. This resistance has initially been in the reluctance of the surrounding community to include their children in the *dayah*. However, over time, rejection leads to physical conflict. Not infrequently, school residents get terror and threats through communication tools (Jafar, the *mudir*, personal interview, August 15, 2019). The conflict peaked when the *dayah* party erected a fence around the school grounds. This decision received resistance from the surrounding community, at least motivated by two reasons. First, the disconnection of the community's path to the rice field area right behind the *dayah* building a. Secondly, the establishment of this fence symbolises that *dayah* wants to separate from the surrounding community (AM, the resident, personal interview, August 16, 2019).

If explored more deeply, the conflict between the above groups arises due to differences in social identity between the warring parties; in this case, it is a religious sect. When an individual identifies himself or herself with a group, he will perceive other individuals who are in one group with him as an in-group and while individuals who are outside the group as an out-group. The phenomenon that arises in intergroup behaviour is intergroup bias, which is the tendency of individuals to judge and treat their group more positively than other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). In this case, the group considered to be Salafi-Wahabi identity is in a subordinate position from among the *dayah* as a religious identity group of the majority of the Acehnese population.

This article does not raise the conflict between *dayah* and society with groups associated with Salafi-Wahhabi traditions that have been reviewed based on various aspects (Idris & Sahlan, 2018; Juwaini et al., 2021; Karim, 2020; Yunanda & Subhani, 2019), but in the form of exploring the efforts made by Mudir (pesantren leader) to reduce the community's bias intergroup as a form of resistance to the existence of Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon, Aceh. Regarding the statements above, the researchers proposed the research question as follows: "What is the strategy of Mudir in reducing religious intergroup bias in Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon, Aceh, Indonesia?"

## **B. Literature Review**

Tajfel and Turner (1979) mentioned that intergroup bias or also often known as in-group bias or in-group favouritism is a behaviour that always appears in each relationship between groups, even if only in a minimal state. In simple terms, bias is interpreted as a form of cognitive response, affective, or unfair behavior by presenting a response that harms other groups and/or privileges the group itself (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). This is reinforced by experimental studies conducted by Tajfel (1970) is known as the "minimal group experiment." Tajfel attempts to identify the influence of intergroup categorisation on intergroup behaviour in a minimal group state, i.e. a condition when a group has no prior group purpose, interaction, or experience. In the study, participants were asked to give the number of points to in-group and out-group members. This study proves that individuals tend to give more significant points to in-groups. These results indicate an individual's tendency to be more concerned with their own group. This minimal group paradigm proves the influence of social categorization on intergroup relations (Otten, 2016). Simply by only being a member of a particular group, discriminatory behavior will arise, without the need for similarities from aspects of ideology, ethnicity, or other social classes (Spears & Otten, 2012). This paradigm attracted the attention of researchers in the social field, although many intellectuals criticized it (Brown, 2020).

Although intergroup bias behaviour is very likely to be inherent in intergroup interactions, Tajfel dan Turner (1979) underlined that this could only occur when individuals inhale their membership in the group as part of their self-concept or identify themselves subjectively with the group. The biased intergroup depends mainly on how the individual considers himself part of the group. Hogg dan Abrams (2001) commented that new intergroup discrimination behaviour would occur when the individual's social identity

is part of the individual's prominent self-concept. All forms of intergroup behaviour, such as conformity, stereotypes, group cohesiveness, and discrimination between groups, will occur when the individual's social identity is part of the individual's prominent self-concept. This means that intergroup bias occurs when an individual identifies strongly with his or her social group. This statement is also in line with Wann and Branscombe (1995) dan Caricati dan Monacelli (2010) that found that in-group favouritism and stereotypes were only found in those with high and intermediate identified groups

Intergroup biases can appear in a variety of behavioural forms. Taylor dan Jaggi (1974) introduced the term intergroup attribution bias to describe the behaviour of individuals who tend to attach internal attribution to positive in-group behaviour and external attribution to negative behaviour performed in-group. Instead, attach external attribution to the positive behaviour of the out-group and internal attribution to the negative behaviour that the out-group performs. Pettigrew (1979) found that when looking at negative behaviours performed by out-groups, individuals tended to judge those behaviours as traits or traits genetically attached to the person. On the other hand, when witnessing negative behaviour by in-groups, individuals will judge it as luck or coincidence, a case of exclusion (the exceptional case), or even manipulation. This finding became known as the ultimate attribution error.

Another bias intergroup occurs in the form of an intergroup sensitivity effect, which is the tendency of individuals to be more accepting of criticism given by members of their group than a criticism given by other group members (Hornsey & Imani, 2004). An intergroup bias is also called the black sheep effect (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988). Unlike in-group bias in general, in the black sheep effect, individuals tend to give a more pessimistic assessment of deviant behaviour carried out in-group than deviant behaviour carried out by the out-group. Uniquely, the new members who are considered deviant from the old members in the ingroup will be evaluated more negatively than members in the outgroup (Abrams et al., 2014; Lewis & Sherman, 2010; Pinto et al., 2010). Although paradoxical, the black sheep effect has the same basis as other intergroup biases, which are done to maintain the positive self-concept of the individual. It is just that, in the black sheep effect, individuals maintain their positive self-concept at the expense of fellow group members who are considered to have tarnished the group's good name (Khan & Lambert, 1998)

According to Tajfel dan Turner (1979), intergroup bias is an individual's tendency to judge and treat his group more positively than other groups. Basically, efforts to sacrifice this positive self-concept start from the individual's self-level, but when individuals enter a group, they will attract this effort to the social or group level (Reed II & Aquino, 2003). This is a logical consequence because social identity is part of an individual's self-concept. Tajfel dan Turner (1979) also emphasised that such efforts can only occur if individuals internalise their membership as part of their self-concept or identify themselves subjectively in the group. Self-concept orientation and identification motive affect group identification (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). In other words, the individual has not been said to have identified himself or herself as belonging to a group if he or she is only considered a

member of that group by others without the individual feeling that he or she is part of the group.

### **C. Research Methodology**

The research conducted throughout 2019 was carried out qualitatively with a religious phenomenology approach. This approach was chosen so that researchers can understand the meaning and religious events experienced by actors subjectively (Dhavamony, 2010), both in the form of thoughts, feelings, ideas, emotions, and experiences expressed through words and behaviours. To obtain a thorough understanding, the data is collected through documentation, observation, and in-depth interviews involving purposively selected informants such as *mudir*, *pesantren* teachers, *Imum Chik* (religious leaders), and communities around *Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon*, North Aceh, Aceh, Indonesia.

Once the data is collected, the data is then analysed based on the steps proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) which start from data condensation, data display, and conclusion withdrawal initiated by the process of checking the validity of data through source triangulation, which is comparing between data obtained from different sources (Moleong, 2018). This analysis was carried out to get a complete picture of the *mudir* strategy to reduce the intergroup of religious bias in the community.

### **D. Findings and Discussion**

#### **1. The History *Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon***

Since its establishment in 1991, *Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon*, Aceh, has undergone various changes in conditions and leadership. Rusli Puteh initiated the presence of this institution, a local figure who saw a lifestyle change of the people from an agrarian lifestyle to an industrialist due to the influence of the progress of several companies in North Aceh and Lhokseumawe. With an area of 13 hectares of land, the construction of this *dayah* building was also carried out. After the construction was completed, the first new student admission was carried out in 1991. Launching this *dayah* received a welcome from the community. This positive response can be seen from the public's interest in registering as students to be able to glue as many as 500 people, a number that is quite fantastic for a newly established institution. The policies issued by *dayah* owners also stimulate this positive response. The students were only obliged to pay for meals, while Rusli Puteh directly subsidised other education expenses.

In 1994 it became a new chapter for this power. The business and economic downturn experienced by Rusli Puteh led to a decrease in subsidies for educational activities. The number of students was getting less and less until in the 1996-1997 school year only 116 people. To improve the management system, in 1998, the foundation was established to be responsible for managing assets and resources. Until now, *Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon* has experienced 10 periods of leadership. Currently, Arif Rahmatillah Ja'far has served as *mudir* since 2010.

During Arif's leadership, this *dayah* made very rapid progress. The existence of this institution attracted the attention of prospective students from several districts outside Aceh. There are five students from neighbouring Malaysia, with a total number of students as many as 1,280 people. By carrying the motto "Toward the best quality of young education", improving the quality of education and institutional management continues to be carried out, both by the foundation and *dayah* parties.

## 2. The Mudir's Strategy in Reducing Intergroup Bias

The leadership of Arif Rahmatillah Ja'far is the most extended period of leadership in the institutional history of Dayah Terpadu Al-Muslimun Lhoksukon. During Arif's leadership, the resistance of the surrounding community appeared. Community prejudice began with Arif's presence as a Middle Eastern graduate later appointed as a *mudir* in this *dayah*. The physical appearance of the *mudir* with a thick beard by some people is used as a character to associate it with Salafi-Wahabi groups (AM, personal interview, August 16, 2019), although the *mudir* never mentioned himself as part of the group. The appearance of a long beard is still considered unusual among the surrounding community and gives rise to perceptions and labelling behaviour.

In his efforts to improve the quality of education, the *mudir* made several regulatory adjustments. The adjustment that provoked conflict was the appointment of several new teaching staff graduates from the Middle East and the laying off of several senior teachers who were considered unproductive. By the public, this policy is considered one of the efforts to eliminate traces of traditional *dayah* from senior founding figures of this institution and any attempt to turn it into a Salafi-Wahabi style. "*Ka dipeu Wahabi nyan ka pesantren nyan*" (This institution has been a Wahabi style), said one of the people who became the source. This information suggests that out-group hatred has implications for excessive identification and prejudice. In addition, the policy that is considered the most public against the community is the construction of a wall fence around the *dayah* building. This development impacts the closure of community access to rice fields. If observed, the activity of building a fence in a particular area, including the education area, is natural. However, the local community considers this decision part of a form of resistance and an attempt to separate themselves from the social environment (SR, local community, personal interview August 16, 2019). This dislike slowly but surely leads to a form of terror and threats against teachers and *mudir*. Some teachers have gotten physical disturbances, such as calls to fight, stone-throwing toward buildings, and terror through communication channels. What is worse is the emergence of a structured effort to disperse and close this power. The crystallisation of resistance that increasingly leads to physical resistance must inevitably get serious attention from *mudir* as an institutional leader. Several efforts and strategies were pursued by *mudir* to neutralise in-group favouritism that has led to acts of anarchy.

*Mudir's* attempt to lower tensions is to establish a relationship with *Imum Chik* (community religious leader), who is around. The initial meeting between *mudir* and *Imum Chik* has not produced familiarity. *Mudir* believes that the issues that develop in the

surrounding community affect his perception. This can be seen from Imum Chik's welcome not warm. However, the mudir seems to assume that the Imum Chik must remain involved to lower the temperature of tensions that arise from community groups. Self-exploration continues to be done through several activities and events. Eventually, after several meetings and communication that are well built, slowly, the negative image that appears on the mudir and dayah is erased (Arif, the mudir, personal interview, August 15, 2019).

Furthermore, the *Imum Chik*, as a representation of the majority group, is also involved in religious celebrations carried out by dayah, such as the slaughter of the *qurban* animals and the celebration of mawlid. The Imum Chik was made a central figure in the activity. In *qurban* activities, the Imum Chik is positioned as the main actor in the process of slaughtering these cattle. While in the mawlid activities, in addition to being positioned as an honorary invitation, several times the Imum Chik was involved as a speaker. By the mudir, this method is termed with "*jak beutroh, kaloen beudeuh*" (meet in person and take a close look) So as not to appear negative speculation. In addition, the mudir hopes that through this closeness, the Imum Chik can neutralize and ward off attacks that arise from groups that hate him, both physically and verbally.

The different appearance of the mudir and its members is a trigger for the emergence of categorization. Hefner (2011) explained the appearance of a long beard to be one associated with Salafi-Wahabi groups and widely opposed because it is considered different from local traditions. Labelling Salafi-Wahabi to this new group is considered a deviation from the new members. This deviation gave rise to frontal criticism from the dominant group. These findings reaffirm previous studies related to the black sheep effect (Abrams, 2013; Chen & Zhang, 2021; Pinto et al., 2010; Zouhri & Rateau, 2015).

The differences raised by groups identified as outside groups give rise to hatred and rejection, shown from the behavior of the surrounding residents trying to carry out attacks both physically and psychologically. This is reinforced by Aviram (2017), that explains that in-group favouritism will move into out-group hatred through prejudice and overidentification.

Furthermore, the results showed that the information milling around also greatly influenced social behavior. This notion of hostility is a form of social cognition formed due to existing information biases. These findings confirm Aboud's study (2003), which found that intergroup bias is influenced by the condition of social cognition of individuals and groups. Information is the predictor that most affects the formation of a person's perception (Cutting, 1987; Huang et al., 2010; Michaels, 2000; Niedenthal, 1990), but disclosure and rapport building can change behaviour due to disinformation (Dianiska et al., 2021). The involvement of Imum Chik as a representation of community leaders and religious leaders is also a strategic election because religious leaders proved to be an effective instrument for lowering the temperature of conflict (Deutsch, 2014).

The mawlid celebration is used as a symbol to deny that mudir and *dayah* citizens are not part of Salafi-Wahabi as alleged, given that mawlid is one of the religious celebrations that is strongly opposed to its implementation (Baso, 2022; Farid, 2016; Waskito, 2014;

Yunus, 2019). This behaviour can also be categorised as a form of social conformity that aims to maintain relations between the two groups, in accordance with the arguments built by Nord (1969) and Cialdini & Trost (1998). In addition, the adoption of the ritual is also a form of identity negotiation conducted by subordinate groups with the majority group. This is in accordance with the study conducted by Hidayat and Farid (2021), who found a similar pattern in the relationship between ethnic Chinese and Madura.

From another perspective, the efforts made by mudir by using religious authority figures and religious practices that are very thick with the identity of the surrounding community groups are a way to change the perspective of members to the boundaries between "us" and "them", so that exclusivity will slowly fade (Gaertner et al., 1989, 1993). This recategorisation step has been proven to be able to improve the quality of intergroup relations in various studies. (Crisp et al., 2006; Gaertner et al., 2000; Ray et al., 2008).

## E. Conclusion

From the findings and discussions above, it can be concluded that the intergroup bias that arises in intergroup relations is reduced through the involvement and role of Imum Chik as a central religious figure who has authority in society. In addition, efforts to re-categorise and negotiate identity with religious rituals and symbols believed by the dominant group can be an effective medium in realising harmonious relations between groups. This research involves figures who have religious authority to be catalysts for harmony. The study also argues that intergroup biases in religious segmentation can be minimised by re-militarising to find similarities in social identities between groups. The research also confirms the vital role of religious leaders as peace agents between warring groups.

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