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EVERYDAY TOLERANCE IN GAMPONG KEUDE SIBLAH: SOCIAL PRACTICES AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE CHINESE-INDONESIAN AND MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This study explores religious tolerance between the Chinese-Indonesian and Muslim communities in Keude Siblah Village, Southwest Aceh. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The findings reveal that religious tolerance in this village is a lived reality, visible in shared participation in village activities, mutual respect for religious holidays, and inclusive social solidarity. Rather than stemming from formal regulations, this tolerance has evolved through long-standing symbolic interactions rooted in local history and culture. Local institutions—including the village government, customary councils, religious leaders, and women's groups—play essential roles in sustaining social harmony. However, minority religious expressions remain culturally constrained, often practiced in private. The main challenges include limited structural representation for the Chinese community and increasing intolerance among youth influenced by digital media. The study concludes that local religious tolerance is a negotiated social construct that requires structural support to be sustained. The findings highlight the need to integrate multicultural values into village policies and local education.

Keywords: *Religious Tolerance, Chinese-Indonesian, Symbolic Interaction, Aceh, Social Cohesion*

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A. Introduction

Indonesia is known for its remarkable diversity in ethnicity, religion, culture, and language. Within this complex social landscape, maintaining harmonious relations between religious communities is essential for national stability and integration (Barakah, 2012). Religious tolerance is not merely an ideal; it is a practical necessity for peaceful and civilized coexistence (Wahid, 2011). Yet, in an era of globalization and intensifying identity politics, tolerance is often tested by the rise of exclusivism and rigid religious identities.

Aceh is a region that presents its own unique challenges regarding religious tolerance. With its special autonomy and the formal implementation of Islamic law, Aceh is often seen as religiously homogeneous. However, in reality, minority groups such as the Chinese-Indonesians, many of whom practice non-Muslim religions, have long been

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integrated into local communities. Their presence challenges assumptions of exclusivity and prompts reflection on how tolerance is actually practiced in everyday social life (Fadlia & Ramadani, 2020; Riza & Mulasi, 2024).

Keude Siblah Village, located in Blang Pidie District, Southwest Aceh, is a compelling example of a multicultural community. Here, local Muslims and Chinese-Indonesians have lived side by side for generations. The Chinese-Indonesian community dates back to the Dutch colonial era and has been active mainly as traders and entrepreneurs. Tolerance in this village is evident not only in formal respects, such as the recognition of religious practices and holidays, but also in social interactions like mutual assistance, village events, and solidarity in times of crisis. What makes Keude Siblah remarkable is that tolerance is based on daily social relations, not just legal or formal agreements.

It is important to recognize that tolerance here is not passive acceptance of differences, but a social construct developed through ongoing interaction and negotiation. Symbolic interactionism, as developed by Herbert Blumer (1969), provides a useful framework for understanding this process. The theory suggests that social meanings—including attitudes of tolerance—are created through symbolic communication, shared experiences, and perceptions shaped in interaction. Tolerance is thus not a static quality but a dynamic outcome of dialogue between values, norms, and religious symbols exchanged in daily life.

Historically, the identity of Chinese-Indonesians in Indonesia is complex. While often essential to the local economy, they have also experienced political and social marginalization (Hoon, 2012). In Aceh, this position is particularly interesting, as it brings together two dominant narratives: Islamic exclusivity and social pluralism.

While many studies have discussed interfaith tolerance at the national level, showing that it is shaped more by social interaction than formal regulation, research in Aceh highlights its complexity under Islamic law. For example, Pane (2024) found that in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), tolerance is fostered through daily practices, cross-background interaction, and teachers' example, rather than curriculum alone. Nasution (2017) noted that while interfaith relations in Aceh Tamiang are peaceful, building non-Muslim houses of worship remains a sensitive issue due to majority norms. Fauzi (2020) emphasized the role of customary institutions in creating spaces for interfaith interaction, though symbolic boundaries remain. Ozzay (2022) observed that in Meulaboh, tolerance is reflected in economic cooperation and daily market interactions. Basri et al. (2021) highlighted the ambivalent acceptance of Chinese-Indonesians in Banda Aceh—welcomed economically but limited in religious representation.

Despite these insights, few studies have explored Muslim-Chinese tolerance in rural Aceh communities under Islamic law, such as Keude Siblah. This study aims to fill that gap by deeply investigating the processes of interaction, symbolism, and social acceptance that shape everyday life in this multicultural village. The goal is to understand how tolerance is built between the Muslim and Chinese-Indonesian communities in Keude Siblah and to explore its impact on social cohesion. It is hoped that this research

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will contribute to the literature on symbolic interactionism and enrich our understanding of multicultural dynamics in regions governed by formal religious regulations.

B. Method

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, allowing for a deep understanding of social realities—particularly the meanings, interactions, and social construction of interfaith tolerance in everyday life (Barakah et al., 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted in Keude Siblah Village, Blang Pidie District, Southwest Aceh, a diverse community where Muslims and Chinese-Indonesians live together. Informants were selected purposively and expanded through snowball sampling, including the village head, members of the customary council (Tuha Peut), religious leaders, youth leaders, women leaders, and both Chinese-Indonesian and Muslim residents. Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews explored perspectives and lived experiences of tolerance, while observation involved the researcher directly in community activities. Documentation included photographs, village records, and other relevant materials. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2012), with three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction filtered for relevance, while thematic narrative presentation allowed systematic identification of social interaction patterns.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Practice of Everyday Religious Tolerance in Keude Siblah

Religious tolerance in Keude Siblah has not emerged from formal policies or institutional projects, but from the daily interactions of communities who have lived together for decades. The Chinese-Indonesian community has been present since colonial times, mainly as shopkeepers, food vendors, and service providers. Their social acceptance is rooted not only in economic contribution but in sustained social engagement.

Field observations show that interfaith tolerance is visible in many aspects of daily life. Rather than merely avoiding conflict, both communities demonstrate genuine respect for each other's religious values through tangible actions. For instance, Chinese shopkeepers voluntarily close their stores during Friday prayers as a sign of respect for Muslim worship.

> "The Chinese close their shops every Friday at noon. It's been like that for a long time—not because anyone forces them, but because they know it's an important time for us." (Informant A, 21 August 2024)

Conversely, during Chinese New Year, Muslims help clean the neighborhood and even sample traditional Chinese cakes distributed by their neighbors. This mutual cultural exchange is not imposed, but stems from mutual respect:

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> "We see it as charity. They also help us during Eid." (Informant B, 22 August 2024)

Such practices show that tolerance in Keude Siblah is deeply rooted in collective consciousness and continuous symbolic communication between groups. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), these actions only make sense within the context of interaction. Closing shops during Friday prayers is more than an economic decision—it is a symbolic gesture of respect for others' faith. Likewise, Chinese participation in Muslim ceremonies is a recognition of what matters in Muslim social life.

Chinese-Indonesians also actively participate in village rituals, cleaning cemeteries before Ramadan, and contributing to the construction of community facilities, such as the mosque (meunasah). Religious identity does not limit their involvement in village life, and they often serve on organizing committees for national or local events.

Tolerance is also evident in economic cooperation. There is no economic segregation; Muslims shop at Chinese-owned stores without prejudice, and shop owners serve all customers equally. During crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese residents have taken the initiative to donate masks and rice to the mosque:

> "During COVID-19, they donated masks and rice to the mosque. No one asked—they did it on their own." (Informant C, 23 August 2024)

These acts illustrate that interfaith solidarity is not limited to ritual events but extends to economic and humanitarian matters, strengthening social cohesion. At the same time, the Chinese-Indonesian community is keenly aware of the strong Islamic cultural context. They respect symbolic boundaries—for example, refraining from public religious rituals or constructing non-Muslim places of worship. As one informant explained:

> "We know the social rules, so we hold religious ceremonies at home. What matters is being respected." (Informant D, 24 August 2024)

This reflects what can be called "silent tolerance"—mutual respect within the limits set by the majority, not enforced by law but negotiated through culture. Tolerance here does not imply full equality in public expression but rather the ability of minorities to adapt symbolically without feeling oppressed, while the majority does not demand assimilation. This exemplifies Berger's (1999) concept of "coexistence with symbolic boundaries": peaceful living together, even as some symbolic lines remain.

Compared to places like Singkawang (West Kalimantan) or Medan (North Sumatra), tolerance in Keude Siblah is less about grand celebrations and more about consistent daily interaction. The endurance of tolerance here is rooted in collective memory—stories of harmony, friendship during conflict, and honest traders are retold and keep the spirit alive. As Ricoeur (2004) noted, narrative is key to building collective identity and social memory.

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2. The Role of Social Institutions in Sustaining Tolerance

The relationship between the Muslim and Chinese-Indonesian communities is shaped through multiple layers of interaction, involving individuals, groups, and institutions. Local institutions, such as the village government, customary bodies, and religious leaders, are crucial for fostering and maintaining tolerance. Daily social connections are woven not only in formal forums, like village meetings, but also in informal settings, from shared gardening to communal home repairs:

> "Here, if a neighbor is building a house, it's not just Muslims who help. The Chinese community also comes—carrying bricks, cooking, helping set up tents. We don't look at religion." (Informant E, 25 August 2024)

This reflects strong social capital—both internal bonding and external bridging (Putnam, 2000). In Keude Siblah, close family ties are complemented by inter-group bridges built through shared activities. The village head and officials mediate disputes through family-oriented approaches rather than legal means:

> "We don't go to court first. We sit together and talk it out. Thankfully, we solve things peacefully." (Informant F, 26 August 2024)

Customary bodies like Tuha Peut serve as social control and community representatives, and while Chinese-Indonesians are not yet formally represented, they are included in discussions and traditional events. Religious leaders promote tolerance in their sermons, emphasizing good character, tolerance, and humanity as part of faith. Informal systems, such as the "peusijuek" (blessing ritual), are also inclusive—performed for both Muslims and Chinese-Indonesians. However, limitations remain. Formal structures still reflect majority bias, with Chinese-Indonesians lacking permanent representation in village planning. This gap could become problematic with leadership changes:

> "Right now, things are fine because the village head is close to everyone. But if that changes, we may not have the same voice." (Informant G, 27 August 2024)

Thus, formal institutions must be strengthened for equality—ensuring minority representation in village forums and documenting community diversity to inform policy (Melayu et al., 2021). Despite dominant majority symbols, there is room for negotiation—Muslims accept Chinese practices such as burning incense at home or wearing red during the New Year, while Chinese-Indonesians respect Muslim norms in public. This implicit mutual understanding, described by Goffman (1959) as a "moral career," enables peaceful adjustment and coexistence. The social and institutional interactions in Keude Siblah demonstrate that tolerance can flourish even in villages governed by Islamic law, as long as dialogue and openness persist. The challenge is to ensure that tolerance becomes embedded in social and regulatory systems, not just dependent on key figures.

3. Social Cohesion, Challenges, and the Future of Tolerance

Social cohesion in Keude Siblah reflects how deeply tolerance is embedded in daily life. This cohesion is seen in harmonious personal relationships, active participation in social structures, and shared narratives about the importance of harmony. Both Muslim

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and Chinese-Indonesian residents share space, responsibility, and solidarity—membership in the community is based not on faith, but on social closeness and shared roles.

There have been no significant incidents of discrimination or religious conflict in the last two decades. There is no residential segregation, and Chinese-Indonesians enjoy equal access to village assistance, health, education, and security. They also participate in government programs, showing that minority status does not hinder social or economic integration.

Yet, latent challenges remain. As younger generations become more connected to the wider world through digital media, they encounter religious, political, and cultural content that sometimes conflicts with local values. Some young Muslims are adopting more exclusive views influenced by online preachers, while some young Chinese-Indonesians are practicing self-exclusion—distancing themselves from community life.

> "The younger ones are quieter now. They're more comfortable outside the village than joining village activities." (Informant H, 27 August 2024)

This suggests that inherited tolerance cannot be taken for granted—it must be continually nurtured through education, example, and shared stories.

Education is vital, yet the local curriculum contains little relevant content. There are no lessons about the history or contributions of the Chinese-Indonesian community, nor about Aceh's inclusive traditions. Teachers mainly follow national textbooks, missing opportunities to build local multicultural awareness. Strengthening tolerance requires: (1) developing local curriculum content involving community leaders from both groups, (2) training teachers in peace and multicultural education, and (3) integrating tolerance values into extracurricular activities.

Legal and policy vulnerabilities must also be addressed. Currently, protection for minorities is informal and dependent on the goodwill of majority leaders. Without explicit provisions in village regulations, tolerance is fragile and vulnerable to change. A policy approach based on equity is needed—giving minorities not just nominal rights, but affirmative space in village decision-making and community celebrations. Women's groups are also key to sustaining tolerance. Muslim and Chinese-Indonesian women regularly interact in household, social, and religious activities, forming strong informal networks of support and solidarity:

> "In the kitchen, we don't talk about religion—we talk about our kids' schools, chili prices, and who needs help. That's what brings us together." (Informant I, 28 August 2024)

These interactions create a web of everyday tolerance stronger than formal structures. Keude Siblah demonstrates that tolerance is not just a moral project or a slogan, but a lived, continually interpreted social product. It survives because of everyday awareness of boundaries, mutual adjustment, and commitment to shared life. Its strength is in being organic, but its weakness is in lacking structural foundation. The future of

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tolerance in Keude Siblah depends on whether it becomes not just a cultural value but also a formal institutional and public ethic.

D. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that tolerance between the Chinese-Indonesian and Muslim communities in Keude Siblah is built through participatory and ongoing social relationships. Tolerance here is practical—manifested in interfaith cooperation, solidarity during crises, and involvement in village life—and is shaped by collective experience and shared symbolic meanings. It is not driven by formal policy, but by mutual respect within unwritten symbolic boundaries. Minority identities are accepted as long as they do not contradict majority norms. This tolerance is sustained by active roles of local institutions and enriched by Acehnese values of harmony. However, significant challenges remain: exposure to intolerant narratives through social media and the lack of formal structural representation for minorities. Tolerance still relies heavily on inclusive leadership and social stability. These findings are context-specific, and further comparative studies are needed for broader generalization. Theoretical and practical implications include reinforcing the idea that tolerance is the result of ongoing social negotiation, and offering Keude Siblah as a model for local social development. For sustainability, formal recognition of minorities, integration of multicultural values in education, and the documentation and promotion of local narratives are essential

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