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## The Message of Religious Moderation in the Banda Aceh City Murals

Heri Rahmatsyah Putra<sup>(a)</sup>

<sup>(a)</sup>Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh, Meulaboh, Indonesia

Email: [herirahmatsyahputra@staindirundeng.ac.id](mailto:herirahmatsyahputra@staindirundeng.ac.id)

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### A B S T R A C T

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This study aims to determine the relevance of the mural with the message of religious moderation and the public's perception of the message of religious moderation in the mural as a visual communication medium. The object of this research is a mural in the Peunayong area, Banda Aceh, as a visual communication medium that functions as a medium to convey messages of religious moderation. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach. Researchers obtained data through primary and secondary sources using observation, interviews, and documentation techniques. The results of the study show the relevance of the murals in Peunayong to the values of religious moderation based on an analysis of visual communication semiotic theory. This study also found that the public's perception of murals as a visual communication medium in conveying moderation in religion was inappropriate based on the mural's position, which needed to be more strategic to get the public's attention.

## Introduction

Indonesia's diverse life faces many challenges due to differences in religious, ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds. Horizontal conflicts often occur, whether intra, inter, or extra-identity. In the present era, the understanding of religious moderation has a special place as a step to reaching common ground in minimizing differences and even conflicts. The emergence of exclusive and intolerant attitudes can become a massive problem for the resilience of Pancasila ideology. Radicalism is a hard-line ideology that thinks it feels right compared to others, so people who adhere to it will carry out agendas concerned with their group (NS, 1967). Even if you trace the history, Islam has a long journey in meeting with other religions. Islam has an attitude that is open to accepting any differences in culture and religion to make it a reference to living in harmony as a nation and state.

Religious moderation is the key to creating and maintaining harmony and tolerance at the national and global levels. Religious moderation is a middle position in understanding the way of religion, in the sense that there is no bias towards the extreme right and the extreme left. An understanding of religious moderation is expected to be understood by all religious leaders and adherents of their respective beliefs. Several methods of communication can reach the submission of this information—direct communication through messages from the government, religious leaders, academics, and other elements. One of the most exciting ways to convey information about this is through visual communication, both digital and manual, such as mural art.

Mural art is part of visual communication, where it can be assumed that using art as an information medium has an important role. The attractiveness of art becomes an aesthetic value that impacts giving a strong impression and performing an entertaining function in the communication process (Nababan, 2019). Murals also play an essential role as an alternative media in conveying people's aspirations which can contain messages of criticism, information on events, and unifying perceptions of a social phenomenon. Messages in murals are conveyed verbally and visually through symbols, signs, codes, and meanings (Utara, Utara, and Utara, 2018).

There are many perceptions regarding the existence of murals that sometimes need to receive more attention from the public. Some consider murals only as aesthetic values, so sometimes they are only used as spots for self-existence, and

some even consider them to be just ordinary graffiti that seems 'garbage' or does not function. Even though the meaning contained in the mural can be representative of the values that develop in society. The results of the author's observations found that many people passing through the area needed to be made aware of the mural's existence. Some even need to learn what a mural is and why the mural was made in that area (Suwindy, 2022).

The Banda Aceh City Government, improving to become a center of civilization in the western tip of Indonesia, has implemented mural communication media in several locations. One is in the Peunayong area, which is the location of the Chinese community known as Chinese Town. Based on the author's observation, several shop walls have been transformed into a mural visual communication medium that depicts the relationship between the people of Aceh and the Tiong Hoa that has existed for a long time. These murals also prove that mural art can still maintain its existence in today's digital era.

This study aims to determine the relevance of murals to the values of moderation in religion and people's perceptions of messages conveyed through murals in the Peunayong area of Banda Aceh City. This research will provide an understanding of the meaning of messages conveyed through mural art as a visual communication medium in strengthening the values of religious moderation in the city of Banda Aceh so that it can reduce the sensitivity of beliefs between religious communities, especially the city of Banda Aceh as the capital of Aceh Province which carries out special autonomy to implement Islamic law.

Several studies have been conducted to serve as a reference for this research. Syahputra (2018) found that mural art attracts cafe visitors as a spot to take photos. In addition, murals are considered a unique attraction for visitors because they can add to the beauty and comfort of the atmosphere for visitors. Mural visual communication can positively impact cafe business owners in developing their businesses and providing benefits for visitors. Visitors can not only enjoy the food or menu at the cafe but also feel comfortable and get messages through the visual communication of the murals.

Nugraha (2016) emphasized this by saying that the function of murals for the public can give aesthetic nuances and contain valuable meanings as instruments of Islamic moral education. Making a mural also has a clear, communicative, and easy-to-understand concept, has permission from the party concerned, and

involves the authorities to accommodate and facilitate it. Then, the relevance to Islamic education can be seen from the aspects of the objectives and material of Islamic moral education itself. Meanwhile, Nababan (2019) said that technological developments do not affect the existence of murals in society. In their conventional way, Murals are considered to be a medium for conveying expressions and aspirations both for conveying social criticism, political patronage, and ideology, as well as messages that have economic value. Murals are also considered to be able to directly touch people's hearts and minds, as in the work of Young Surakarta, which criticizes technological developments in human life.

The similarity of previous studies with this research is that the writer examines murals as a visual communication medium for conveying the meaning of particular messages. In this study, the authors chose the message of religious moderation as the study object. This is the value of the novelty of the research conducted because no research on murals examines the values of religious moderation. Based on this, the authors are interested in researching murals in the Peunayong area as a visual communication medium for conveying messages of religious moderation.

## **Method**

The research method used in this study is a qualitative descriptive one that presents, describes in detail, and in-depth an overview of the conditions that occur according to what is in the field (Sutopo, 2012). The data collection technique begins with a temporary observation or observation process in which the author directly observes the existence of murals in the Peunayong Banda Aceh area and identifies the values of religious moderation in these murals. Then the author also conducted interviews with the Banda Aceh city government in the field of tourism regarding the reasons and motives for choosing murals as a medium for conveying and strengthening the value of religious moderation, as well as selecting several informants from the community to find out perceptions about the murals using the random sampling method. The final data collection technique was documenting murals in the Peunayong area for analysis based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory regarding the power of visual communication. In this case, murals resemble the subject when the image influences the observing organ of human vision.

This study uses semiotic analysis as a scientific discipline that studies objects, events, and all cultures as signs, aiming to show the signs and rules that shape them (Mudjiono, 2011). Technically, semiotic analysis works by classifying characters according to criteria and making predictions. According to Roland Barthes, semiotics is a science that studies humanity by interpreting objects that carry information and form structural sign systems. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis is also divided into three elements of meaning (1) denotation so that the level of descriptive and literal meaning is at the actual level. (2) Connotation is the meaning derived from the signifier so that it has a broader meaning, such as beliefs, attitudes, social ideology, etc. (3) Myth is a sign that has been naturalized into a form of truth through public belief (Roland and Hanum, 2021).

Semiotics as a science explains the effects or influences in fine art, film, drawing, architecture, and visual communication design (Erlangga, Utomo, and Fitri 2019), Flint Schier (1986) revealed that something represented by an image is based on the recipient's ability to know the object contained in it. This theory asserts that an image represents a phenomenon because visible images can look very similar to the occurring phenomena. Recognition theory emphasizes the iconic relationship between signs and objects and ignores symbolic relationships (Erlangga, Utomo, and Fitri 2019).

From a semiotic point of view, visual communication design is a particular sign system with a precise vocabulary and syntax different from the sign system of art. The function of "communication" is embedded in semiotic visual communication. Namely, the symbolic function in conveying messages from the sender to the signature recipient is based on specific codes. Even though its primary function is communication, it has a significant function: conveying a concept, content, or meaning.

This research will explain whether the symbols used in the murals in Peunayong are by the principle of religious moderation. Religious moderation is a religious perspective, attitude, and behavior that has been adhered to and practiced by the majority of the population of this country from the past until now. The government has also made religious moderation one of the national programs in the National Medium-Term Development Plan (Amin, 2023). Not only examining the construction of meaning, but researchers will also assess whether the mural is effective as a visual communication for the people in the Peunayong environment, Banda Aceh City.

## Findings and Discussion

Visual communication is a special semiotic system with a distinctive vocabulary and syntax (syntagm) and is different from the semiotic system of art. In the semiotics of visual communication, the function of communication is very inherent in it, namely the function of signs in conveying messages from the communicator (sender) to the communicant based on a specific code (Erlangga, Utomo, and Fitri 2019). (Erlangga, Utomo, and Fitri 2019). Barata (2004) defines visual communication as a communication aid that displays writing or images so that the communication process is recorded through the function of the sense of sight. Another understanding of visual communication is the study of a professional regarding design with various approaches regarding communication media, images, signs, and values (Prayogo, 2011).

A mural is a large painting made on a wall with a purpose. Mural is a familiar thing present in society's social life. History records that murals have existed since the stone age as a means of human communication. The mural comes from the word *murus* in Latin, meaning wall (Ayudyawardani, 2018). Along with the development of the era, murals are now starting to receive attention and be accepted as a medium to convey public aspirations through artists.

The mural has a close relationship between painting and visual communication. The mural is said to be a medium of visual communication because it is an image with message values. Unlike the case with graffiti art, which seems to play with colors without any concrete form so that the meaning is easy to understand, sometimes graffiti is just made to fill a space without intending to convey any message. Meaning in a mural can be obtained if it is relevant to society's needs. Sukmadinata (2008) classifies relevance into two, namely internal relevance and external relevance. Internal relevance is the suitability or consistency between the components. At the same time, external relevance is conformity with society's demands, needs, and developments. Relevance is generally interpreted as a match between one thing and another.



Figure 1: Mural in the Peunayong Market area



Figure 2: Mural in the shopping area

### **Denotative, Connotative, and Myths of Murals in Peunayong, Banda Aceh**

Peunayong is a Chinatown area in Banda Aceh City. It is said that the word Peunayong comes from “Peumayong,” or a place that protects. The area might have been filled with large trees like umbrellas in the past, so the Aceh Sultanate often used the area as a shelter. This place is also often used to receive and entertain the sultan’s guests. Even Cheng-Ho, the famous Chinese explorer, stopped in this area and dedicated a large bell to the Aceh Sultanate. The name of the bell is “Cakra Donya Bell.” From the past until now, the Peunayong area has been famous for the diversity of its people. This area has been designated as Chinatown, which has the characteristics of an area dominated by ethnic Chinese descendants, and this area will also become a heritage or cultural heritage area (Faluthi, 2018).

The murals in the Peunayong area have signs depicting the unification of Chinese culture with Aceh in social-religious relations. The sign (representament) is an entity the recipient captures that represents something else. Signs with a relationship with the reference can be categorized into three types: icons, indexes, and symbols. Interpretant is the meaning captured by the receiver. At the same time, an object refers to another entity. The relationship between these three elements produces a semiosis process of endless signification (Habibi, 2021). The sign identified in the mural above through the clothing conveys the message of the Chinese and Acehnese people. This marking is included in the cultural aspect. Then social relations are described through shaking hands and trade relations between the Chinese and Acehnese in the past until now. The mural also signifies the good relations between the two tribes since ancient times. This relationship then reflects an attitude of tolerance between the two ethnicities, cultures, and religions.

The researcher found a relationship between denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings, which are the object of study in Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory. Each of these meanings is related through the signs depicted on the mural.



**Table 1:** Denotative, Connotative, and Myths of Murals in Peunayong, Banda Aceh

<p>Denotative Meaning</p>	<p>The denotative meaning is the meaning that shows the relationship between the concept and the real world. This denotative meaning has a real meaning or, according to what is seen, does not contain hidden meanings (Lustyantie, 2012). The mural depicts the conformity of the Acehnese ethnicity through clothing (appearance) which is depicted wearing Acehnese men's traditional clothes with the <i>kupiah meukeutop</i> (traditional Acehnese hat), then there is a <i>rencong</i> pinned behind the <i>songket</i> cloth worn. Then the Acehnese in the mural also have beards which is a <i>sunnah</i> in Islam because Aceh is an area that is very thick with Islamic values and applies Islamic law. Meanwhile, the Chinese in the mural wear traditional Chinese clothing and sword weapons, which are very identical to the weapons of the Chinese empire in the past. From a physical perspective, the Chinese people in the mural have narrow eyes and a lighter (white) skin color. Another mural (figure 2) shows Chinese people selling jugs or jars identical to Chinese ceramics, the result of the art of making goods out of clay by the Chinese. The history of pottery and ceramics in China is one of the oldest in the world (<a href="http://metmuseum.org">metmuseum.org</a>).</p>
<p>Connotative Meaning</p>	<p>Connotative meaning is a sign whose signifier has an openness of meaning or meaning that is implicit, indirect, and uncertain, meaning that it is open to new interpretations. The connotative meaning of the mural in Peunayong tells about the good relations between the two ethnicities, Aceh and Chinese. The author interprets shaking hands as a sign of intimacy and harmonious relations, as there is no difference between the two ethnicities. The socio-economic life of the Acehnese and Chinese ethnicities is intertwined through trade relations without seeing differences. Illustrate that there is no doubt in building good relations between the Acehnese and the Chinese.</p>

<p>Myths</p>	<p>Myths in semiotics is a process of meaning that is not deep. Myths only represent the meaning of what appears, not what is (Rina, 2019). The mythical meaning of the mural in Peunayong depicted the daily life of Aceh in the past when the Chinese empire gave a gift in the form of a large bell to the Aceh Sultanate as a symbol of good relations and brotherhood between the two ethnicities. The atmosphere of the Peunayong area, which has always been a Chinatown area for the Chinese, has become a public space in the social life of the two ethnicities.</p>
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### **Mural Relevance with Religious Moderation**

The relevance between the mural, a visual communication medium, and the meaning to be conveyed to the public is the value of religious moderation. The murals in this study are located on the walls of shops in the Gampong Peunayong area, a residential Chinese community or what is commonly known by the people of Banda Aceh as Chinese Town. The mural referred to in this study is located in the village of Peunayong, more precisely, in a location that is generally a shopping center for the people of Banda Aceh. Based on the author’s observations, the mural is a Banda Aceh City government program implemented by the Gampong Peunayong Government to become a tourist destination, as has been done in other cities. The capital city of the Republic of Indonesia, Jakarta, now has a tourist site called “Kota Tua” which also uses mural art to convey messages.

Murals in Indonesia are already familiar in big cities like Bandung, Solo, and Yogyakarta. Mural as a channel of inspiration for the community or as the identity of a city. Mural art is an alternative that can be used as a balancer for the environment when the city environment no longer provides complete refreshment for the senses. With the presence of a mural, at least the eye has become a sense organ that can enjoy the city’s beauty, which is decorated with all kinds of images depicted in the mural. In Samarinda, several mural points, such as Jalan Lilin, Jalan Muso Salim, Jalan RE Martadinata, Jalan Tarmidi, and others, are easy to find. The murals artists make still have nuances of criticism, promoting Kalimantan culture and telling something about that place. The mural on the street has a health theme regarding the dangers of smoking. From a verbal and visual perspective,

the mural is fascinating to analyze (Ramadani, Hairunnisa, and Sabaruddin 2018).

“We are trying to make a mural called Kota Tua in Penang, Malaysia. We want to learn from it to attract tourists to visit Banda Aceh. With the Lively theme Colors of Gampong Peunayong Mural in Diversity, this mural aims to revive the history of Aceh, especially Peunayong. Therefore, this mural is painted as it was in history. There are trading ships, cloves, and nutmeg. This is in line with the Banda Aceh City government’s plan to increase the tourism potential for migrants. The Mayor of Banda Aceh is targeting Peunayong or Gampong Peunayong in his plan to boost the economy through the tourism sector by making it a tourist destination for Kota Tua.” (Interview with Denny Syahputra, head of the Peunayong mural committee).

Tracing the history of this area, it was deliberately designed and built with the concept of a Chinese settlement. Even today, several historic buildings are silent witnesses of Aceh’s past. This area symbolizes diversity, with various ethnic groups living here safely, peacefully, and serenely. This mural is one of the destinations projected to become an Acehnese identity besides the Baiturrahman Great Mosque, the Floating Ship PLTD, and the Tsunami Museum.

### **Public Perceptions That Do Not Care About It**

From the point of view of communication science, perception is the essence of communication, while interpretation is the essence of perception, equating with decoding the communication process. This comes from the definition given by John R. Wenburg and William W. Wilmot, who said that perception is defined as the way organisms give meaning or from the definition given by Rudolf F. Verderber. Perception is the process of interpreting sensory information. Etymologically, perception or observation in English comes from the Latin *percipere*, which means to receive or take. Perception, in a narrow sense, is seeing how someone sees something. Meanwhile, in a broader sense, it is understanding, namely how someone perceives or interprets something (Syahputra and Putra 2020).

With its various attributes and projections, many people in Peunayong neither know about its existence nor care about it. Even the people who see it seem indifferent because they cannot understand or interpret the mural. The painted murals are suitable and convey a message. This is based on the mural’s

less strategic location or position, namely in the Peunayong market. Researchers found murals made on the walls of shops far from tourist attractions. This is due to motorbikes parked in front of the mural wall, thus preventing people from enjoying or observing the mural.

When interviewing informants, they said about the message's contents on the mural. *"Only a picture of women selling, but I do not understand the intended message. Not everyone can understand the message in the mural. Only some people can understand the message appropriately conveyed."* (Maisarah interview, student at UIN Ar-Ranairy, Banda Aceh, July 2022).

In addition, other informants who have seen the mural said that the picture looks normal but has a meaningful message. However, the less strategic placement of the location makes it ineffective in conveying the message. *"It was not made right there because the murals in Peunayong are in small alleys that many people rarely pass, while those on walls on the main road cannot attract the attention of local passers-by. Even if passers-by see the mural, they only glance at it but ignore it, so the message is not conveyed. Because people who pass by the mural pass by but ignore the mural. The images in the murals can increase people's understanding of the value of tolerance. However, the placement of the murals in Peunayong is inappropriate, so it is ineffective in understanding moderation."* (Interview with Jauza, Pneunayong wholesaler, July 2022).

However, some people have observed the mural and understand the message being conveyed. *"Yes, I can slightly understand the message of the mural. This picture shows that this is an Acehnese custom. Even though there is no writing, it can be seen as an Acehnese custom and Chinese people"* (Interview with Miska, resident of Banda Aceh City, July 2022).

The public's perception of the message about the value of religious moderation in the murals in Peunayong is also challenging to understand, apart from the mural's location, which could be more suitable for public enjoyment. The researcher found that the community needed to understand the message of religious moderation itself. The community only understands that the message contained in the mural only describes the differences and harmony between the Acehnese and Chinese that have long existed. For example, Jauza said that the mural fits the theme of diversity, where you can see pictures of Chinese and Acehnese ethnic groups because the selection of the pictures matches the message

you want to convey. He also believes that this mural depicts the Acehnese and the Chinese shaking hands, which means they can live side by side.

Regarding the selection of communication media to convey messages of appropriate religious moderation, Miska, as a member of society, said, “*In my opinion, social media is a suitable medium to be used to provide an understanding of the values of moderation because now almost all people have and use social media, starting from children, youth, to adults. Because now, the use of social media is more appropriate to provide an understanding of the value of moderation, which is a government program. I did not even know that this was a government program.*”

Based on the research results above, the researcher analyzes that using murals as a visual communication medium is appropriate and effective. This is because the power of visual communication reaches the communicant faster and directly impacts the formation of perceptions. Perception arises from the communication process, both verbally and virtually. This is because a mural is an art object with aesthetic value, making it enjoyable. However, in this study, it turned out that the choice of location for the mural was an obstacle, so the mural got less attention from the public. This impacts ignorance about the mural's existence and, of course, ignorance of the message contained in the mural. In addition, the community's need for more understanding of the value of religious moderation also impacts the mural's existence. If observed, the Acehnese and Chinese ethnic groups, apart from having different ethnicities and cultures, also have different religions. An attitude of tolerance and accepting the existence of other religions in Aceh also supports and strengthens an attitude of religious moderation. Aceh, with special autonomy to implement Islamic law, is not an obstacle or a problem for other religions to carry out worship. Even though there is no disturbance, the attitude of the interfaith community should be able to accept each other and be far from feelings of sentiment towards one another.

This can be observed from the attitude exemplified by the Prophet when leading the City of Medina. The Prophet used the *Ummah* concept at a practical level. If, at the normative level, the *Ummah* can be equated with the meaning of *Usrah*, *Qaryah*, and *Jama'ah*, then at the practical level, the *Ummah* consists of various social classes that tend to conflict. The concept of the *Ummah* cannot be separated normatively and empirically, but the perspectives of the two must be integrated. The term *Ummah* can be extended not only to Islamic society but also

through the universal understanding of humanity and the socio-historical context that the Prophet Muhammad and the people of Medina experienced through his Medinan Charter, the translation of which established consensus in various countries, guide, situations, and circumstances (Murdan,2019.).

Moderation is needed in order to organize human life towards peace in diversity in Indonesia. Moderation can be defined as a middle way that functions to mediate religious life. In communication science, the term moderator is a person in the middle of a discussion forum. Not taking sides and being moderate means understanding and accepting all differences in religious and cultural attitudes. Do not belittle one party and defend the other (Susi, 2021).

The existence of murals in Peunayong as a visual communication medium in conveying messages containing religious moderation values is not optimal because the community has yet received special attention. Things like this should be one of the references to learn what values are contained in the mural art. The less strategic location is one of the factors causing the need for more public attention to observe the mural art. If the public understands the mural's meaning, it can be used to understand the value of moderation, which is disseminated in different packages or methods. If one looks closely, the presence of the murals in the Peunayong area gives the impression that they are only content to beautify the walls of the shops, which sometimes are often covered with the hustle and bustle of traders because of their location in the Peunayong market area. Some are even located in a small alley in the settlement of Tiong Hoa residents. According to the author's observation, using murals as a medium of visual communication in such situations is inappropriate. A mural, as a work of art that has the meaning of a message, should be made in a special public space, such as a garden wall or a place where you can enjoy the beauty of the mural art (Anis Mubarok, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The mural in Peunayong depicts the message of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity between Aceh and the Chinese. The murals in Peunayong aim to convey to the public and have relevance to the values of moderation in religion, as can be seen from the characteristics of the objects in the mural, which depict good relations between ethnic Acehnese and Chinese. However, the public's perception of the message in the mural needs to reflect the value of religious

moderation. The mural's location could be more strategic, so the public can see it carefully and perceive the message correctly. Through this research, the authors suggest that the Banda Aceh city government reconsider the function of murals as visual communication media by considering their location and providing the right place to be used as tourist attractions and communication media that can educate the public.

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