

# Jurnal Sosiologi Agama

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### RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND MULTICULTURAL INTERACTIONS AMONG ARABIC, CHINESE, AND MALAY ETHNICITIES IN PALEMBANG: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON HARMONY AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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#### Abstract

This study explores the patterns of accommodative social interaction among Arab, Chinese, and Malay communities in Palembang, one of Indonesia's most historically multicultural cities. While modernization and social change have introduced new dynamics, interethnic cooperation in Palembang remains sustained through various cultural, economic, and religious mechanisms. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach with ethnographic elements, utilizing interviews, observation, and document analysis to explore how diverse communities maintain social harmony in everyday life. Findings indicate that accommodative interaction is evident in trade, language use, education, and religious coexistence. Strategies including deliberation, legal adherence, tolerance, and interethnic marriages support these interactions. Rather than relying solely on formal policies, local wisdom and lived social practices are central to sustaining interethnic peace. The study contributes to the discourse on multiculturalism in urban Indonesia by providing context-specific insights into how diverse communities manage differences without conflict. It also suggests the importance of recognizing informal cultural mechanisms in promoting inclusivity. This research offers a valuable foundation for future studies in the sociology of religion, ethnic relations, and multicultural education, especially within Southeast Asian urban settings.

**Keywords:** interethnic interaction, multicultural society, social accommodation, Palembang, coexistence

#### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pola interaksi sosial akomodatif di antara komunitas Arab, Tionghoa, dan Melayu di Palembang, salah satu kota paling multikultural secara historis di Indonesia. Meskipun modernisasi dan perubahan sosial telah menghadirkan dinamika baru, kerja sama antar-etnis di Palembang tetap terjaga melalui berbagai mekanisme budaya, ekonomi, dan keagamaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan unsur etnografi,

melalui teknik wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen untuk menggambarkan bagaimana masyarakat yang beragam membangun harmoni sosial dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa interaksi akomodatif tampak nyata dalam sektor perdagangan, penggunaan bahasa, pendidikan, dan keberagaman agama. Interaksi ini didukung oleh strategi seperti musyawarah, kepatuhan terhadap hukum, toleransi, dan pernikahan antar-etnis. Bukan hanya kebijakan formal, namun kearifan lokal dan praktik sosial sehari-hari menjadi kunci dalam menjaga perdamaian antar kelompok etnis. Studi ini berkontribusi pada diskursus multikulturalisme di kawasan urban Indonesia dengan menyajikan wawasan kontekstual tentang bagaimana komunitas yang beragam mengelola perbedaan tanpa konflik. Penelitian ini juga menekankan pentingnya mekanisme budaya informal dalam mendorong inklusivitas, serta menjadi dasar yang berguna bagi kajian lanjutan di bidang sosiologi agama, relasi etnis, dan pendidikan multikultural, khususnya di wilayah perkotaan Asia Tenggara.

Kata kunci: interaksi antar-etnis, masyarakat multikultural, akomodasi sosial, Palembang, koeksistensi

## **INTRODUCTION**

Palembang, one of Indonesia's oldest cities, has long been recognized as a meeting point for diverse ethnic groups, including Arabs, Chinese, and Malays. These groups have played a significant role in shaping the city's cultural, social, and economic identity. At the same time, they have historically coexisted, modernization and increasingly complex social dynamics often present challenges to maintaining harmonious relationships. In this context, multicultural education emerges as a potential approach to fostering accommodating interactions among these groups. However, its application in Palembang requires further exploration, particularly in understanding the specifics of inter-ethnic social interactions (Tanzila et al., 2018).

Multicultural education has proven to be a practical approach to fostering social harmony in various contexts. A study suggests that well-designed education can help reduce social and cultural gaps while fostering tolerance in diverse communities (Mariyono, 2024). In Indonesia, challenges in implementing multicultural education often stem from unequal access, cultural stereotypes, and a lack of awareness regarding diversity (Fadilah, 2024). Therefore, it is crucial to develop strategies that align with local contexts, such as in Palembang, to ensure that multicultural education can function as a bridge among different ethnic groups (Nurlita, 2024).

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore inter-ethnic cooperation. The descriptive method provides a comprehensive picture of the existing social dynamics. Data collection techniques include interviews, observations, and documentation, enabling the researcher to understand how multicultural education can facilitate inter-ethnic interactions (DEMİR, 2024; Dźwigol & Barosz, 2020). This study also emphasizes the importance of integrating inclusive values into the educational curriculum, which can help reduce social tensions and enhance mutual respect among different communities (Cathrin & Wikandaru, 2023; Nabilah, 2024).

Focusing on inter-ethnic cooperation, this study aims to make a significant contribution to the understanding of inter-ethnic cooperation and multicultural interaction in promoting social harmony in Palembang. Through an in-depth analysis of existing challenges and opportunities, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for stakeholders on creating an educational environment that supports diversity and inclusivity. Thus, this research is not only sociologically relevant but also provides

valuable insights into the sociology of Religion, highlighting how cultural and religious identities can be managed within the framework of multicultural education.

The setting of this research is Palembang, a city in South Sumatra, Indonesia, known for its cultural diversity and historical significance. Palembang has long been home to a diverse mix of ethnic groups, including Arab, Chinese, and Malay communities, which contribute to its rich social and cultural landscape. The city serves as a microcosm of Indonesia's multicultural society, making it an ideal location for studying inter-ethnic relations and implementing multicultural education.

This research explores various public and community institutions in Palembang, both formal and informal, where interethnic interactions among the Arabic, Chinese, and Malay communities are prominently displayed. These institutions include schools, universities, community centers, and religious organizations, which serve as vital spaces for daily engagement, dialogue, and cultural exchange. By examining these environments, the study aims to understand how interethnic cooperation, religious tolerance, and social harmony are cultivated through continuous multicultural interactions in everyday social contexts.

Additionally, the research will consider the broader social context of Palembang, including public spaces, markets, and cultural events, where inter-ethnic interactions frequently occur. These settings provide a valuable opportunity to observe the dynamics of social accommodation and identify how the broader community engages with issues of diversity and inclusion outside the educational environment.

This research examines various public and community institutions in Palembang, encompassing both formal and informal settings, where interethnic interactions among the Arabic, Chinese, and Malay communities are particularly prominent. These institutions, including schools, universities, community centers, and religious organizations, serve as essential spaces for daily engagement, dialogue, and cultural exchange. By exploring these environments, the study aims to gain insights into how interethnic cooperation, religious tolerance, and social harmony are fostered through ongoing multicultural interactions in everyday social contexts.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Understanding Multicultural Dynamics in Indonesia: The Case of Palembang**

Multiculturalism is a significant theme in contemporary Indonesian society, as the country is home to hundreds of ethnic groups that coexist within a single national framework. In this context, studying cities that reflect such diversity becomes essential for understanding how interethnic relations are built and maintained. One such city is Palembang, the capital of South Sumatra, which stands out as a multicultural urban center with a rich historical and cultural heritage.

### **Accommodative Social Interaction in the Economic Sector**

Palembang has long been home to various ethnic groups, including the Chinese, Arab, Indian, and indigenous Palembang Malay communities. These groups have coexisted for centuries, living side by side in harmony. The city's multicultural character is visibly reflected in its architectural and spatial features, such as places of worship and ethnic-based neighborhoods (Yusuf et al., 2020). Historically, Palembang was a key node in the international trade networks of the Malacca Strait, especially during the Palembang Sultanate (17th–19th centuries), positioning it as a hub of economic and cultural exchange (Wargadalem et al., 2023, p. 258).

As a former center of trade from the time of Srivijaya to the Dutch colonial era, Palembang's identity has been closely tied to commerce. Its river-based geography shaped the way of life of its

inhabitants; unlike the agrarian cultures of Java, Palembang's people developed a trading orientation, utilizing the rivers as their primary means of transportation and trade routes (Melisa, 2017). This geography facilitated economic transactions, cultural contact, migration, and interethnic interaction. Urban development and modernization have further altered migration and settlement patterns, influencing how communities adapt and interact within the city's evolving spatial and social structure (Zulhidayati & Sudarwanto, 2024).

Among the ethnic groups, the Arab community in Palembang has maintained a strong orientation toward trade. Many Arabs are engaged in various business sectors, such as building materials, automotive services, household goods, bookstores, clothing boutiques, perfume shops, and restaurants (Apriana, 2021). While initially concentrated in maritime trade and ship ownership, a more balanced economic relationship has developed over time between the Arab and Malay communities of Palembang.

Cultural blending between the Arab, Chinese, and Malay communities has created a deeply rooted hybrid identity in Palembang. Trade relations, religious diffusion, and intermarriage have led to acculturation and mutual influence in various domains of language, tradition, and spiritual practice. These three communities have formed a shared cultural space that contributes not only to Palembang's unique local identity but also to the broader cultural landscape of Southeast Asia. The result is a new, localized civilization distinct from the cultures originally brought from China and Arabia, demonstrating the unifying power of cultural integration (Hamidah, 2022).

Palembang is a vibrant multicultural city in Indonesia, renowned for its rich tapestry of ethnic diversity, which includes Chinese, Arabic, Indian, and native Palembang communities. These groups coexist harmoniously, with historical landmarks such as places of worship and ethnic villages showcasing this multicultural heritage. Throughout history, Palembang has been a significant player in international trade via the Malacca Strait, particularly during the era of the Palembang Sultanate from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

The city has long been recognized for its strong trading heritage, which flourished from the Srivijaya period through the Dutch colonial era. The geographical feature of rivers in Palembang greatly influenced the development of its society, as the rivers served as trade routes, fostering a strong trading culture distinct from the agricultural nature of Javanese society.

The majority of Arabs in Palembang are engaged in trade, operating businesses in various sectors, including building materials, motorcycle repairs, household furniture, photocopy and stationery services, clothing boutiques, bookstores, and restaurants. Over time, a balance of work has developed between the Arab community and the Palembang Malay community, despite initial exclusivity in trade and maritime activities.

Arab, Chinese, and Malay cultures have interwoven over the centuries, creating a cohesive cultural blend that impacts not only the economy but also traditions, religion, and social life. These ethnic groups, while maintaining elements of their ancestral heritages, have collectively shaped the broader cultural landscape of Southeast Asia, each playing a role in the emergence of a unique and unified identity in Palembang.

### **Accommodative Social Interaction in Language and Communication**

Language functions as a significant medium for interethnic communication and the expression of identity, extending beyond economic dimensions. In Palembang, linguistic interaction indicates cultural heritage and the adaptation dynamics among different communities.

Ethnicity is a basic classification of a social organization whose membership is based on similarities of origin, history, culture, religion, and language. It maintains its identity through distinctive ways and traditions that are preserved, for example, by the ethnic Chinese, Arab, and Tamil-Indian communities (Samiha et al., 2023).

One cause of language transition or shift is population movement (migration or immigration), which brings different communities into contact. It leads to cultural and language exchange between immigrant and local populations (Simanjuntak, 2023, p. 113). The people of Palembang primarily speak the Palembang language, a variant of Malay, locally referred to as "Baso Palembang." This language has evolved unique patterns that distinguish it from other Malay dialects. It also serves as the lingua franca across South Sumatra, bridging communication among the region's diverse ethnic groups (Yusalia et al., 2023).

The Palembang people primarily communicate in the Palembang language, which belongs to the broader Malay language family. They refer to their language as baso Palembang, where "baso" implies "language" and "Palembang" denotes their city of origin. The emergence of unique linguistic patterns that distinguish Palembang from standard Malay has contributed to the widespread recognition of Palembang as more than just a dialect, highlighting its individuality within the Malay language family. In addition, the Palembang language has also become the lingua franca for the people of South Sumatra. It is due to the position of South Sumatra Province, which has six major language groups and 12 indigenous tribes, resulting in a homogeneous society with a shared culture and language (Izzati et al., 2022).

Ethnic identity, closely tied to language, culture, religion, and heritage, has a significant influence on the coexistence of different groups. Ethnic communities recognize their unity through shared ancestry and common characteristics, such as language and cultural practices. In Palembang, the predominant language spoken is Palembang, a variant of Malay, which serves as the region's lingua franca. This language not only embodies the unique identity of the area but also enhances communication among various ethnic groups.

This linguistic integration reflects deeper social interactions and fosters interethnic understanding. Language in Palembang not only facilitates daily communication but also symbolizes a shared identity, reinforcing unity in diversity.

### **Accommodative Social Interaction in the Education Sector**

In addition to language, education plays a crucial role in fostering interethnic understanding. Educational institutions in Palembang—both community-based and government-run—serve as platforms for daily interaction among students from diverse backgrounds. The Arab community has established Islamic educational institutions such as Adabiyah, Munawariyah, and Ar-Riyadh, which are open to students of all ethnicities. These schools promote Islamic values while encouraging intercultural dialogue.

The Chinese community, historically excluded from educational access during colonial rule, has increasingly participated in Indonesia's educational landscape, especially after the New Order period. Many Chinese families now send their children to both public and private schools, contributing to broader multicultural engagement in education (Isnaeni, 2012). State schools, in particular, function as multicultural spaces where students learn to coexist and appreciate diversity. These educational interactions promote early exposure to tolerance and values of shared citizenship.

In Palembang, education plays a crucial role in bridging cultural and ethnic divides. Institutions with Islamic foundations established by the Arab community exemplify this inclusive spirit, as they are open to individuals from all ethnic backgrounds. These schools make a significant contribution to the city's multicultural educational landscape.

Despite facing early challenges, the Chinese community in Palembang has made remarkable progress in the field of education. In the 19th century, access to education for Chinese children was severely restricted under Dutch colonial rule. However, following the end of the New Order, educational opportunities became more accessible. Today, the Chinese community continues to play a vital role in promoting education in Palembang and across Indonesia. Both community-based and state-run institutions now serve as important platforms for interethnic interaction, enriching the multicultural educational experience for students from diverse backgrounds.

### **Accommodative Social Interaction in Religious Life**

The religious landscape of Palembang reflects the city's ethnic diversity. The predominant religion is Islam, primarily practiced by the Malay and Arab communities. In addition to Islam, Palembang is home to notable populations of Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, contributing to the vibrant tapestry of faith in the region. Arab traders historically played a central role in spreading Islam throughout the region, blending religious mission with economic activity (Rusdiana et al., 2023).

Unlike Hindu-Buddhist practices, limited to priests and Brahmins, Islamic propagation was more inclusive, allowing laypersons to disseminate the faith. Despite differences, the city's religious communities coexist peacefully. Mutual respect, interfaith dialogue, and participation in shared public events have fostered a culture of tolerance. These values have ensured that religious diversity enhances rather than divides the social fabric of Palembang (Hamidah, 2022). With its diverse array of tribes, nations, and religions, Palembang is a city where various ethnicities coexist and respect one another. Thus, the long-standing relationship between tribes, beliefs, and cultures in Palembang is more harmonious, and a prosperous society can be realized.

Palembang's religious landscape is as diverse as its ethnic makeup. While Islam is the predominant religion among the Malay population, the city is also home to Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists. The spread of Islam in Palembang can be traced back to the arrival of Arab traders, who not only engaged in commerce but also introduced and spread the Islamic faith. Despite the religious diversity, Palembang has long maintained a spirit of tolerance, with different religious communities coexisting peacefully.

The peaceful cohabitation of these religious groups reflects the broader societal values of respect and mutual understanding. The harmonious relationship between these groups is a testament to the power of religious tolerance and the shared commitment to maintaining social harmony.



### **Accommodative Social Interaction in Religious and Social Community Life**

Social life in Palembang further exemplifies interethnic accommodation. The Chinese and Arab communities have been part of Palembang since the Srivijaya kingdom, and their interactions with the indigenous Malay population have shaped the city's cultural identity. The Chinese and Arab communities existed during the Srivijaya kingdom, and they communicated with each other upon their arrival and settlement in Palembang. Currently, ethnic communities live alongside Malay communities and other indigenous communities. In supporting the economy, the Chinese and Arab communities continue to maintain trade. In social life, ethnic Chinese and Arabs can mingle with the Palembang Malay community. Cultural acculturation through cultural marriage also often occurs in Palembang. The existence of ethnic Chinese and Arab community life in Palembang continues to develop today (Susilo et al., 2023, p. 7).

Historically, the Chinese and Arab communities were already present in Palembang during the Srivijaya kingdom. These communities, along with the native Malay population, have coexisted for centuries, fostering strong trade ties and social interactions. Cultural acculturation, including through intermarriage, has helped build lasting social connections between these groups.

Currently, the Chinese and Arab communities in Palembang continue to flourish, preserving their cultural traditions while adapting to the evolving social landscape. Their capacity to navigate the intricate multicultural environment of Palembang highlights the enduring nature of ethnic cooperation and the significance of social interaction in promoting community cohesion.

### **Strategies for Inter-Ethnic Accommodative Social Interaction**

From a sociological perspective, several types of accommodation exist, but research has identified that only a few utilize viable accommodation strategies. The key strategies identified in this research include deliberation, positive law enforcement, tolerance, and mixed marriages. These strategies are employed to maintain social harmony among different ethnic groups.

#### **Deliberation Strategy (Consensus)**

The strongest basic foundation for accommodation is the recognition and respect for human feelings and values. Accommodation at this level occurs because norms are cooperated to maintain and implement the social structure (Noh, 2015). During the 1998 tragedy, towards the end of the New Order's rule and the era of reform, relations between the indigenous people of Palembang and the Chinese and Arab communities were not good. As a result, the community recognized the importance of preserving local wisdom to address problems through deliberation and achieve a satisfactory solution (Susilo et al., 2023). Deliberation is important because it is the first step in creating a consensus (Sahar, 2015).

In the face of challenges, such as the 1998 tragedy during the New Order era, deliberation became an essential tool for resolving conflicts and fostering understanding between the indigenous Malay community and the Chinese and Arab populations. Consensus-building, based on local wisdom, played a pivotal role in maintaining peace and harmony.

#### **Law Enforcement Strategy**

One indication of the progress of human civilization is the development of a legal system. The law contains mutual provisions that must be accepted to maintain freedom and equality. Every member

of society needs to have a legal attitude so that an orderly life can run well. Violations and non-compliance with the law can be a trigger for conflict. On the other hand, upholding justice will strengthen social integration. (Noh, 2015, p. 80)

Law, as a form of social control, social engineering, and social welfare, plays an active role in shaping human behavior that deviates from legal rules, allowing the law to impose sanctions or take action against violators. The process of change in society everywhere is always ongoing, especially in conditions of progress that require relatively rapid changes and facilitate social interaction, allowing for a harmonious, safe, and prosperous society to be realized (L. Diab, 2014, p. 53).

The legal framework is essential for fostering social order and equity. By upholding laws that guarantee justice and fairness, society can avert disputes and foster unity among various ethnic communities.

### **Tolerance Strategy**

Tolerance, often referred to as mutual respect, involves not only accepting differences but also recognizing and being open to one another. It means understanding each other's uniqueness and refraining from questioning these differences, even when disagreements arise. Tolerance among religious communities serves as a social mechanism that helps people respond to religious diversity and plurality. In everyday life, tolerance can be observed through social activities carried out daily in the community, which involve cooperation between public and individual interests (Syahri et al., 2024, p. 279).

The beauty of religious harmony can be created if society fosters an attitude of tolerance. Tolerance is a humane and spiritual attitude that respects differences and upholds each individual's freedom to determine their way of life, as long as it does not violate social norms. In this concept of tolerance, acceptance is understood as respecting and accommodating the fact that differences become a positive force for creating harmony (Hemafitria, 2019, p. 9).

Tolerance is essential for recognizing and respecting differences, promoting open-mindedness, and fostering cooperation. In Palembang, this principle is crucial for the harmonious coexistence of various religions and cultures. Tolerance not only promotes mutual respect but also empowers different ethnic groups to live together in harmony, fully embracing the richness of diversity.

In Palembang, tolerance is not just an abstract principle but is actively practiced in daily interactions. Evidence of this can be seen in how communities participate in each other's cultural and religious events, such as Chinese New Year, Eid al-Fitr, and Cap Go Meh, which people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds often attend. During public events, such as community clean-ups (*gotong royong*), weddings, and funerals, members from various communities, including Malay, Arab, Chinese, and Indian, come together and support one another regardless of their ethnic identity.

Furthermore, in neighbourhoods where ethnic groups live side by side, local leaders often facilitate interethnic dialogues and promote community regulations that emphasize respect for prayer times, dietary practices, and religious holidays. Schools and religious institutions also play a crucial role in cultivating tolerance by organizing interfaith activities and charity drives that involve students and residents from diverse backgrounds.



In Palembang, tolerance serves as both a social practice and a cultural habitus, integrated into everyday cooperation and civic engagement. It is a lived expression of tolerance that alters differences from a potential source of conflict into a basis for unity and coexistence.

### Mixed Marriage Strategy

Mixed Marriage Strategy Changes in religion or ethnic beliefs are often caused by mixed marriages, whether between native ethnicities or those from other ethnicities, as these mixed marriages make a significant contribution to cultural aspects that have helped change the perspective between ethnic groups. For example, the choice of religion is influenced by the prevalence of Islam and Christianity among indigenous people in South Sumatra and the city of Palembang. By increasing the frequency of communication, the understanding of inter-ethnic cultural values in Palembang will increase, broadening the worldview of each ethnic group, as evident in the attitudes and behaviors observed by researchers (Nora Meilinda Hardi, 2021, p. 89).

Mixed marriage assimilation occurs when inter-ethnic or racial marriages give rise to new ethnicities or races. In such cases, several groups have distinct cultures, and there is intensive interaction between individuals and groups over a prolonged period. They interact directly, so that each culture becomes a mixed culture. The interactions carried out are in the form of accommodation as an effort to participate as a social community toward social integration (Lumban Gaol et al., 2019, p. 135).

Mixed marriages between various ethnic and religious groups have played a pivotal role in fostering assimilation and cultural integration in Palembang. These unions blend diverse traditions and perspectives, thereby enriching the city's cultural fabric and promoting greater understanding among its distinct communities. The increase in mixed marriages signifies a shift in attitudes and a growing openness to embracing diversity.



Fig. 1 Inter-Ethnic Inter-ethnic Cooperation Strategies

### CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that interethnic accommodative interactions in Palembang are sustained through daily practices grounded in cultural familiarity, mutual respect, and social cooperation. The active

collaboration among the Arab, Chinese, and Malay communities across various sectors—including the economy, education, language, and religion—affirms that peaceful coexistence is not only possible but is already an integral part of the city's social fabric. These findings address the initial research question regarding how diverse communities maintain harmony amidst social and cultural differences.

However, this study is limited in its temporal scope and relies significantly on qualitative data derived from historical and cultural narratives. It does not fully account for recent developments or tensions that may emerge in digital or political realms. Future research could be enhanced by incorporating more contemporary data, media discourses, or comparative analyses in other urban multicultural contexts to evaluate how modern dynamics influence interethnic interactions. Additionally, integrating the perspectives of youth and aspects of digital culture may provide deeper insights into the evolving nature of pluralism in Indonesia's urban environments.

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