
Culturally-Based Islamic Religious Education: Controversies, Changes, and Trends Toward Achieving the SDGs in the Modern Era

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Received February 17, 2025; Revised June 28, 2025; Accepted July 19, 2025

Abstract

Objective: This study explores the implementation of culturally-based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) as a transformative effort to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in promoting inclusive, equitable, quality education and fostering peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. The main objective is to examine how cultural integration is applied within IRE practices in schools, how it is perceived by various stakeholders, and its impact on students' religious understanding, tolerance, and identity formation. **Theoretical framework:** Drawing upon a theoretical framework rooted in multicultural education and identity theory, the research highlights the significance of integrating local cultural values into religious education to prevent radicalization and foster a more inclusive worldview among students. **Literature review:** The literature review involves a critical analysis of academic works that address controversies, pedagogical shifts, and trends in culturally-based IRE. **Methods:** The method employed is a qualitative literature study that synthesizes findings from scholarly publications focused on cultural adaptation in Islamic education. **Results:** Results reveal three key findings: (1) persistent debates among scholars and educators regarding the inclusion of cultural elements in religious teaching, ranging from enthusiastic support to strong rejection; (2) a notable shift in IRE delivery methods from traditional classroom instruction to digital and technology-based formats, aligning with global educational trends; and (3) the potential of culturally-based IRE to serve as an effective countermeasure to religious radicalism and identity fragmentation among students in the modern era. **Implications:** The implications of this research extend to both theoretical enrichment and practical implementation. It offers a conceptual contribution to understanding the dynamics of cultural integration in religious education, while also providing actionable insights for teachers, schools, and policymakers to develop pedagogical strategies that are inclusive, adaptive, and socially responsive. **Novelty:** The novelty of this study lies in its emphasis on cultural integration as a strategic and sustainable model for Islamic education reform that aligns with the broader vision of the SDGs. By contextualizing religious values through cultural frameworks, this approach reinforces peaceful coexistence, identity stability, and educational inclusivity.

Keywords: culturally-based education, islamic religious education, cultural integration, sdgs, religious tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Indonesia is undergoing a critical transformation as it faces both internal controversies and external pressures in the modern era. While IRE has historically played a central role in developing students' religious character and moral foundations, it is increasingly perceived as rigid and disconnected from contemporary realities, particularly by younger generations. Addressing these perceptions is essential in a multicultural and Muslim-majority society like Indonesia, where education serves as a key tool for nation-building and character formation [1].

The relevance of IRE has become even more pressing in light of the global push for inclusive and equitable education as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Integrating cultural elements into IRE is viewed as a strategy to make Islamic teachings more relatable and engaging for students while also fostering tolerance and religious moderation—values that align with Indonesia's national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) [2].

Despite growing discourse on the importance of cultural contextualization in education, a significant research gap persists in Islamic education scholarship. Prior studies often overlook the complexities of cultural integration within IRE, especially regarding the polarized views of religious scholars (*ulama*) and educators. While some support integration as a tool to enhance relevance and resilience, others caution against potential doctrinal dilution. Furthermore, there is a lack of in-depth, evidence-based analysis on how culturally-based IRE can effectively counteract religious radicalism and identity crises among youth—issues that are becoming increasingly urgent in the age of ideological polarization [2].

This study responds to these gaps by offering a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the controversies, methodological shifts, and practical trends in culturally-based IRE in Indonesia. It explores how culture can serve not as a threat, but as a pedagogical asset that supports the goals of religious education. By focusing on the role of schools and drawing on a wide range of literature, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital and culturally contextual methods can be harmonized within IRE to foster student identity, inclusivity, and resilience. Ultimately, this study is significant for its timely relevance and potential impact. It contributes not only to educational policy and curriculum reform but also to broader efforts to align Islamic education with the transformative vision of the SDGs—promoting peace, tolerance, and social cohesion in an increasingly pluralistic society [3].

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Indonesia faces critical challenges regarding its perception and relevance in the modern era. Academically and practically, addressing the negative stigma that portrays IRE as outdated and irrelevant to contemporary needs is essential, especially considering Indonesia's Muslim-majority population and the central role of IRE in character development. In the classical text *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, Imam Az-Zarnuji emphasized the importance of seeking religious knowledge. This research also highlights the vital role of IRE in developing human resources and fostering religious character in Indonesia. However, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) remains frequently subjected to negative societal stigmas. Accordingly, this study is essential for exploring innovative approaches to improve the relevance and public image of IRE [4].

Although IRE in Indonesia has been the subject of numerous studies, a significant gap remains in comprehensive research on cultural integration and its effectiveness in addressing contemporary challenges. Prior research has yet to explore the polarization among *ulama* in terms of cultural integration in IRE and its implications for effective teaching methods. This is crucial, especially in light of the Qur'anic verse in Surah Taha [20]:114: 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge.'" A review of the literature indicates that IRE curricula frequently lack optimal integration with Indonesia's multicultural values.

Moreover, the effectiveness of culturally based IRE in countering radicalism and identity crises among youth requires further evidence-based study. Additionally, the persistent negative stigma surrounding IRE has not been fully addressed by existing research. Thus, this study is crucial to filling these gaps by offering a more comprehensive and relevant analysis aligned with present-day needs [5].

This research aims to address existing gaps in the literature by critically analyzing the polarization among Indonesian ulama regarding the integration of culture in IRE, particularly its impact on effective teaching methods. Specifically, the study examines how digital and culturally-based IRE methods can improve students' understanding of religion across various educational contexts while also identifying implementation challenges. Furthermore, the study critically examines the potential of culturally-based IRE approaches as a solution to radicalism and identity crises among Indonesian youth. The goal is to provide evidence-based recommendations for developing more relevant, effective, and contextually appropriate IRE curricula and practices. Consequently, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of IRE in Indonesia and the contemporary challenges it faces [6].

It is hypothesized that the implementation of culturally-based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is positively correlated with the strengthening of students' self-identity and a reduction in their susceptibility to radicalism. Culturally relevant teaching approaches are believed to strengthen students' connection to positive local and national values, which in turn reinforce their identity and resilience against extreme ideologies. Studies have shown that culturally relevant pedagogy has the potential to foster positive identity development. Furthermore, studies on the prevention of violent extremism underscore the vital role of education in building resilience to radicalization. More specifically, studies have explored student-centered learning as a tool for preventing radicalization in Islamic schools. Thus, this study argues that culturally based IRE, with its emphasis on local wisdom and students' social context, can be an effective strategy for shaping a generation with strong and moderate identities [7].

Implications. This study presents several critical implications both at the theoretical and practical levels. Theoretically, it contributes to the ongoing discourse in Islamic education by offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural integration within Islamic Religious Education (IRE) can serve as a constructive mechanism for enhancing students' religious identity and promoting inclusive values. This is particularly relevant in the context of SDG 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all, and SDG 16, which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies [8].

Practically, the findings provide actionable recommendations for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to integrate local cultural elements into the IRE curriculum without compromising the core tenets of Islamic teachings. Schools are encouraged to adopt pedagogical models that reflect both religious principles and cultural relevancy—through traditional arts, folklore, site visits, and community engagement—thus creating a holistic learning environment that resonates with students' identities. Furthermore, the research implies the urgent need for teacher training programs that equip IRE instructors with the competence to navigate cultural diversity and use technology effectively. By adopting culturally grounded and digitally adaptive strategies, IRE can become a vehicle for nurturing moderate, tolerant, and civically engaged Muslim youth. This aligns with broader SDG targets that seek to reduce violence, prevent extremism, and foster intercultural understanding through education [8].

Novelty. The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus on culturally-based Islamic Religious Education as a strategic and sustainable response to contemporary educational and social challenges, particularly in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Unlike previous studies that either addressed cultural or religious aspects

separately, this research explores the intersection between cultural identity, religious education, and global development frameworks [9].

This study uniquely identifies the polarized perspectives among Indonesian ulama regarding cultural integration in IRE, thereby enriching the conversation with grounded, contextual insights. It also highlights the transformational shift from traditional to digital and culturally responsive learning models, showing how IRE can remain faithful to Islamic values while adapting to the modern era and contributing to SDG implementation. Additionally, this research introduces an evidence-based model that positions IRE not only as a moral or doctrinal subject but as a strategic tool for peace-building and identity reinforcement in a pluralistic society. This reframing is essential for education systems in Muslim-majority countries aiming to fulfill the SDGs while preserving religious authenticity and cultural relevance [9].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the modern era cannot be separated from the dynamics of cultural interaction, technological advancement, and global educational standards. One significant trend is the integration of cultural values into IRE as a pedagogical response to the needs of multicultural societies, particularly in Indonesia. This integration is seen as a strategic way to make religious teachings more relevant, accessible, and meaningful to students within their local contexts. The literature emphasizes that cultural elements—such as traditional arts, local wisdom, and regional languages—can serve as effective tools to convey Islamic teachings in ways that resonate with students' lived experiences. Controversy arises, however, regarding the boundaries of such integration. On one side, progressive educators argue that Islam is inherently universal and adaptable, making it compatible with diverse cultural expressions. On the other, more conservative views stress the importance of preserving doctrinal purity, fearing that cultural adaptation may dilute or distort core teachings. This dichotomy reveals the need for a balanced approach that honors both the authenticity of Islamic principles and the relevance of cultural context [10].

Alongside this debate, the transformation of IRE methods from traditional to digital and student-centered approaches has become a defining feature of the current landscape. The use of digital media, online platforms, and interactive tools has expanded access to religious education and allowed for more flexible, personalized learning experiences. Moreover, the inclusion of cultural content in digital formats further strengthens engagement and understanding. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 and SDG 16, culturally-based IRE is viewed as an educational innovation that promotes inclusive, peaceful, and equitable learning. It offers a pathway to combat religious intolerance and radicalism while reinforcing students' identities as both faithful Muslims and active citizens. Thus, cultural integration within IRE emerges not just as a pedagogical choice but as a vital component of sustainable educational reform [11].

Introduction and the Contemporary Landscape of IRE

Controversies in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the modern era have often centered on efforts to integrate normative Islamic values with the complex influence of modernity. This discourse includes divergent views on the interpretation of sacred texts and their implications for a more inclusive or exclusive understanding of religion. Controversies also arise regarding the appropriate boundaries for accommodating local wisdom to ensure it does not conflict with the principles of Islamic teachings [12]. These debates reflect the ongoing tension between preserving the essence of Islamic teachings and adapting them to meet the demands of an ever-changing sociocultural context. Thus, the controversy surrounding cultural integration in IRE is a critical component in formulating religious education approaches that respond to the challenges of the time [13].

The Challenge of Intolerance and Curriculum Reform in IRE

Proponents of cultural integration in IRE have argued that this approach aligns with Islam's universal principle of *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all creation), allowing Islamic teachings to engage positively with diverse cultural contexts [14]. This view is supported by the understanding that accommodating local wisdom can enrich religious practice and make Islamic values more accessible and comprehensible to a plural society [15]. Studies have shown that culturally based IRE can improve students' comprehension of religious values through familiar cultural media [16]. Culturally grounded approaches have also been viewed as crucial in fostering constructive dialogue across religious and cultural groups, reflecting the broad and inclusive spirit of Islam [17].

Responses to Modernity and the Demand for Inclusivity

Culturally-based IRE has demonstrated various practical benefits in improving students' understanding and internalization of Islamic teachings [18]. Case studies have revealed that the use of familiar cultural media, such as local arts and traditions, can make religious values feel more relevant and engaging to learners [19]. Research also indicates that cultural integration in IRE improves students' comprehension of Islamic values more profoundly and contextually [20]. Furthermore, the incorporation of local wisdom in Islamic education is seen as a vital step in building institutions that are deeply rooted in the sociocultural fabric of Indonesian society [21].

Trends in Cultural Integration within Islamic Education

Some ulama and education experts have expressed caution regarding cultural integration in IRE due to concerns about the potential compromise of the purity of Islamic teachings as derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah [22]. They emphasize the need to preserve the authenticity of Islamic values in the face of modern and global influences, which may introduce cultural elements that are not in alignment with religious principles [23]. The controversy surrounding scriptural interpretation is also a point of concern, with critics warning that cultural integration might open the door to excessively liberal or deviant interpretations that are apart from the views of the *salaf* (pious predecessors) [24]. Therefore, this perspective advocates for a more conservative approach to religious education, aiming to safeguard the foundational doctrines of Islam from external cultural contamination [25].

The Urgency of Culturally-Based IRE in the Contemporary Era

The more conservative perspective also highlights the necessity of clearly defined boundaries in cultural integration to prevent potential risks to the correct understanding and practice of Islamic teachings [26]. Concerns have been raised about the possibility of introducing cultural values that contradict core Islamic beliefs, which could lead to deviant interpretations or even the erosion of Islamic authenticity [27]. The risk of increasing intolerance may also arise if excessive emphasis is placed on local culture without a balanced understanding of the diversity within Islam itself [28]. Thus, caution is necessary when selecting cultural elements for integration, ensuring they remain aligned with the firm framework of Islamic teachings.

Implications and Future Research Directions

In the words of Allah SWT, Surah Al-Hujurat [49]: 13: "*O mankind! We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable among you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.*" (Surah Al-Hujurat [49]:13). This verse emphasizes that cultural and ethnic diversity is a divine blessing intended to foster mutual understanding and harmony. In the context of IRE, the controversy surrounding cultural

integration becomes a call for constructive dialogue grounded in wisdom and awareness that true honor before Allah lies in righteousness beyond cultural differences. Hence, integrating cultural values that are aligned with Islamic principles becomes a tangible manifestation of this verse within the educational context, shaping a generation that is faithful, tolerant, and appreciative of diversity.

METHODOLOGY

The unit of analysis in this study is the school, as a formal educational institution that plays a crucial role in implementing Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and promoting cultural integration in Indonesia. Schools serve as the primary setting for key interactions among students, teachers as educators, curricula, and prevailing educational policies, thus directly influencing how cultural integration in IRE is understood, implemented, and experienced. Educational studies often adopt schools as units of analysis to understand institutional dynamics and their influence, including in studies on cultural integration and curriculum implementation. Therefore, focusing this study on schools as the unit of analysis is expected to yield a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of how cultural integration is implemented in IRE, along with its implications for countering radicalism and cultivating a positive identity among students [29].

This study employs a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the implementation of cultural integration in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in schools. The primary method of data collection is library research. A comprehensive review of relevant scholarly articles was conducted and subsequently analyzed for alignment with the research focus. The findings from these articles were then mapped into three key data categories: (1) the controversies surrounding cultural integration in IRE, (2) signs of transformation within IRE practices, and (3) the implications of cultural integration for religious education in addressing radicalism and identity crises among students [29].

Data analysis is conducted qualitatively. Data collected through library research are analyzed to identify patterns and themes relevant to the integration of culture in IRE within school settings and its potential role in mitigating radicalism and identity crises. The primary analytical technique is thematic analysis. This process involves a holistic reading of the selected articles, followed by mapping the content into the three aforementioned categories that represent the three aspects addressed in this study: controversies, transformation surrounding the phenomenon of cultural integration in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), and its impacts on radicalism and students' identity crises. The data are then reduced by selecting and focusing on relevant information, assigning codes to data segments, grouping similar codes into broader themes, and interpreting these themes to answer the research questions. Through this thematic analysis, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the integration of cultural values in IRE and its implications within the context of school-based education [30].

Table 1. Research Methodology with SDGs Integration

Component	Description	Relevance to SDGs
Unit of Analysis	School as a formal educational institution, where interactions between teachers, students, curriculum, and policy shape the implementation of cultural integration in IRE.	Supports SDG 4.7 by fostering culturally relevant and inclusive education practices.
Approach	Qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth, context-based understanding of the phenomenon.	Encourages evidence-based policies aligned with SDG 4 (inclusive education) and SDG 16 (peace).
Data Collection Method	Library research involving comprehensive review of academic literature related to IRE, cultural integration, radicalism, and identity.	Builds theoretical foundation for culturally sustainable educational reforms (SDG 4).

Focus of Analysis	Controversies around cultural integration in IRE Transformation of IRE practices Role of IRE in addressing radicalism and identity crises.	Enhances understanding of education's role in preventing extremism (SDG 16.a, SDG 4.7).
Data Analysis Technique	Thematic analysis: 1. Holistic reading 2. Coding and categorizing key themes 3. Interpretation to answer research questions.	Produces insights for designing adaptive, culture-sensitive educational models (SDG 4, SDG 16).
Expected Outcomes	A comprehensive model of culturally-based IRE that is contextually grounded, prevents radicalism, and builds positive student identity.	Contributes to SDG 4 (education for sustainable development) and SDG 16 (resilient and inclusive societies).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Debate on Cultural Integration in IRE

There are differing views among ulama regarding the boundaries of cultural integration in religious education. Concerns have been raised over the potential mixing of Islamic teachings with local traditions that might not align with core religious principles. The table below outlines these perspectives in detail.

Table 2. Differences in Ulama Views

No.	Supportive Views (with Conditional)	More Cautious Views (Opposing)
1.	Making Islamic teachings more relevant, accessible, and acceptable within students' cultural contexts; strengthening Muslim identity rooted in local culture.	Preserving the purity of Islamic teachings from external influences that may cause deviation, focusing on understanding and practicing the core religious doctrines.
2.	Islam is universal and adaptable; culture can serve as an effective medium for conveying religious messages. A historical example as the Wali Songo, reinforces students' identity.	Concern about <i>bid'ah</i> (innovation in religion), <i>khurafat</i> (superstition), and practices incompatible with Sharia; stressing the importance of clear boundaries; concern over subjective interpretations of culture; prioritizing core doctrines.
3.	Use of traditional arts (e.g., calligraphy, local Muslim attire), Islamic folklore, and aligning Islamic values with local wisdom.	Emphasizing learning the Qur'an, Hadith, and <i>fiqh</i> , being cautious in adopting cultural elements, and prioritizing religious content are considered fundamental.
4.	If not approached carefully, it may lead to the mixing of doctrines (<i>syncretism</i>); misinterpretation of culture can distort religious understanding.	It may be seen as less relevant for younger generations immersed in different cultural contexts, missing the potential of culture as a pedagogical tool.

Source: Compiled by the author based on a review of several articles

The debate on cultural integration in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) reveals two distinct and often opposing schools of thought. The first group supports integration, arguing that this approach can make Islamic teachings more relevant to students' daily lives. In turn, this relevance is expected to strengthen their identity as Muslims with distinct cultural roots. They see culture as an effective bridge for conveying religious values in a way that is easier for the younger generation to understand and internalize. In contrast, the more cautious—or opposing—group expresses concern over the potential blending of Islamic teachings with local cultural practices that may not align with the religion's fundamental principles. This group emphasizes the importance of preserving the purity and authenticity of Islam by adhering strictly to its primary sources without allowing external cultural influences to distort the core message [31].

A clear pattern that emerges from this debate is the polarization of views among ulama and education scholars. On one side, there is a tendency to view culture as a powerful medium for bringing Islamic teachings closer to the younger generation, using symbols and practices familiar to them. This approach emphasizes that Islam is a flexible religion capable of integrating with various civilizations without losing its essence. On the other side, there is a more conservative tendency, concerned that any form of acculturation could erode the core values of Islamic teachings and open the door to practices lacking strong shar'i foundations. This contrast underscores the need to find a middle ground or develop an integration model that accommodates both perspectives, ensuring that Islamic religious education remains relevant and engaging for students without compromising its fundamental principles [32].

Shifts in IRE Methods: From Traditional to Digital and Culturally Responsive

The methods of IRE have evolved from traditional to more modern forms, with global trends increasingly linking education to students' cultural contexts. In response, digital technology and the arts have emerged as popular tools to support this shift. The table below compares the transformation of IRE methods from traditional to digital and culturally based forms:

Table 3. Learning Methods

Aspect	Traditional Method	Digital Method	Culturally-Based Method
Learning Sources	Classical Islamic texts, printed textbooks, and teachers' notes	E-books, online articles, instructional videos, websites	Local wisdom, folktales, traditional arts, cultural artefacts
Learning Media	Chalkboard, chalk, lectures, limited discussion	Computers, projectors, internet, apps, online platforms, social media	Art performances, traditional games, cultural site visits, and cultural documentaries
Interaction	One-way (teacher to students), face-to-face	Interactive via online discussion forums, video conferences, and online quizzes	Group discussions, collaborative cultural projects, and cultural presentations
Time & Space Flexibility	Fixed schedule and classroom-based	More flexible, accessible anytime and anywhere	Adaptable to cultural contexts and learning environments

Learning Focus	Theoretical knowledge, memorization	Broad access to information, visualization, and simulation	Contextual understanding, internalization of values, and local relevance
Teachers' Role	Primary source of knowledge	Facilitator, curator of learning resources	Mentor, a bridge to cultural context
Evaluation	Written and oral tests	Online quizzes, digital project assignments, and digital portfolios	Participation observation, cultural project presentations, and self-reflection

Source: Compiled by the author based on a review of several articles

The data in the table illustrate a significant transformation in the landscape of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teaching methods, shifting from traditional approaches toward integration with digital technology and local cultural wisdom. Traditional methods, which once dominated, relied on physical learning sources such as classical Islamic texts, printed textbooks as primary references, and teacher-delivered notes, with the teacher serving as the sole authority in delivering knowledge. Learning interactions under this model tended to be one-directional, with the teacher serving as the central authority and students as passive recipients. Instruction was delivered face-to-face in classrooms bound by rigid schedules [33].

Meanwhile, the wave of modernization has introduced digital methods that offer revolutionary flexibility in terms of time and space. These allow students access to a much broader spectrum of learning materials, including e-books, regularly updated online articles, engaging educational videos, and a variety of interactive websites and online platforms [34].

A prominent pattern emerging from the evolution of IRE teaching methods is the fundamental shift from a teacher-centered approach, where the teacher serves as the primary and often sole source of knowledge, and materials are primarily text-based, toward a student-centered paradigm, which places learners at the heart of an active and independent learning process. The digital era has opened up new opportunities for more flexible learning, enabling students to study at any time and from anywhere, tailored to their pace and learning styles [35].

Additionally, culturally based methods have emerged, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing Islamic teachings within students' local realities. These approaches incorporate traditional wisdom, meaningful folklore, inspirational arts, and culturally significant artifacts with both historical and religious value. This trend reflects a collective effort to make IRE learning not only more engaging and effective for a generation familiar with technology and their cultural heritage but also more adaptable to contemporary developments and the diverse backgrounds of learners, with the broader aim of fostering deeper understanding and more authentic religious practices [36].

Urgent Solution: Culturally-Based Education as a Response to Radicalism and Identity Crisis

Culturally based education has been increasingly recognized as a critical solution for addressing radicalism and identity crises among younger generations. This approach aims to instill Islamic values in a manner that is relevant to students' everyday experiences. By integrating culture into IRE, learning becomes more engaging, relevant, and easier for

students to comprehend, as it allows them to relate religious teachings to their everyday lives and cultural environments. Furthermore, this integration can strengthen local Islamic cultural identities and foster a sense of national pride [37]. The table below outlines how culturally-based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) can be integrated into the curriculum:

Table 4. Culturally-Based Education

Curriculum Aspect	Integration of Culturally-Based IRE	Example of Implementation
Learning objectives	Understanding and practicing Islamic teachings in local contexts.	Students can explain Islamic values reflected in local traditional ceremonies.
Learning Material	Incorporating cultural elements aligned with Islamic values.	Discussing Islamic philosophy behind traditional wood carving art or Muslim attire.
Learning Methods	Using an approach that accommodates cultural diversity and engages students in cultural experiences.	Organizing visits to local Islamic heritage sites or inviting religious-cultural figures.
Learning Media	Utilizing visual and audio media to showcase Islamic cultural heritage.	Incorporating regional songs infused with Islamic values or presenting documentaries on local Islamic traditions.
Learning Assessment	Measuring students' understanding and application of Islamic values in cultural contexts.	Students produce art projects combining Islamic calligraphy with traditional motifs.

Source: Compiled by the author based on a review of several articles

The data indicate that integrating Islamic Religious Education (IRE) with local culture is perceived as an urgent and effective strategy for countering radicalism and identity crises. This is achieved through aligning learning objectives to help students understand and practice Islamic teachings within their cultural context, incorporating instructional content that reflects Islamic values in local cultures, employing teaching methods that accommodate cultural diversity, and actively engaging students in cultural experiences; utilizing learning media that highlight the richness of local Islamic culture; and conducting assessments that measure students' understanding and application of Islamic teachings in their cultural context [38].

The emerging pattern reflects a growing effort to make Islamic education more relevant and contextually grounded for today's youth. By linking Islamic teachings with local culture, students are expected to better understand and internalize religious values, as they are delivered through media familiar to their daily lives. This integration aims to strengthen students' self-identity as Muslims who are also deeply rooted in their cultural heritage, thereby reducing the potential for identity crises and fostering a love for both religion and the homeland. Moreover, by understanding and practicing Islamic teachings within a positive cultural context, it is hoped that students will be more resilient against radical influences, which often stem from narrow and decontextualized interpretations of religion [39].

This study examines the dynamics of culturally based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the modern era, exploring its associated controversies, evolving methods, and potential as a critical solution. Significant debates have persisted surrounding cultural integration in IRE, with ulama divided between those who conditionally support it to enhance relevance and those who express concern about preserving the purity of Islamic teachings. The methodology of IRE has shifted from traditional, textual, and teacher-centered approaches to more flexible, digital, and culturally contextual models [40]. Cultural integration within IRE is believed to offer a viable path for addressing radicalism and identity crises by embedding Islamic values in ways that resonate with students' cultural realities, thereby reinforcing an Islamic identity anchored in local traditions [41]. These efforts require careful consideration to strike a balance between relevance and authenticity in delivering Islamic teachings across diverse cultural landscapes.

Indonesia, with its rich and diverse sociocultural landscape, requires an Islamic Religious Education (IRE) approach that can effectively embrace and respond to this reality. The discourse surrounding cultural integration in IRE reflects ongoing efforts to bridge the universal values of Islamic teachings with local wisdom and cultural practices—an effort that aligns with Indonesia's national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). Amid the currents of globalization and contemporary economic challenges, Indonesia's Islamic education system is increasingly expected to innovate its teaching methodologies to remain relevant to younger generations, equipping them with an inclusive and moderate understanding of religion. National education policies explicitly recognize and prioritize religious education as a crucial element in shaping national character and strengthening civic values. Consequently, initiatives to integrate IRE with the richness of local culture and the potential of digital technology have become essential to developing an adaptive and responsive education system—one capable of producing Indonesian Muslim generations who are faithful, knowledgeable, and culturally grounded [42].

This study affirms the significance of the ongoing debate on cultural integration in IRE, in line with the spirit of the Qur'an in Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13), which calls on humanity to recognize and embrace diversity across nations and tribes. The findings also align with Yosef's Scopus-indexed journal article, which emphasized the significance of multicultural self-efficacy in Islamic education in Indonesia. However, this study goes further by identifying specific polarities in the views of religious ulama concerning the limits of cultural integration, examining the evolving nature of IRE methods in the digital and culturally contextual era, and specifically exploring the potential of culturally grounded education as a solution to urgent issues of radicalism and identity crises. Thus, this study not only reinforces previous studies but also expands the understanding of the complexities of cultural integration in IRE and its urgency in today's context [43].

The interpretation of this study's findings indicates ongoing efforts to adapt Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Indonesia to evolving social contexts and contemporary challenges. In a multicultural society like Indonesia, there is a need for an IRE approach that balances universal religious values with local wisdom. Technological advancements and ideological threats, such as radicalism, demand teaching methods that are both relevant and contextual. As noted by Hermansyah in his article *Islam and Local Culture in Indonesia*, Islam is a universal religion that can adapt to local cultures. This perspective aligns with the discourse on cultural integration and the shift toward digital and culturally based learning methods, as observed in this study. Thus, the interpretation affirms that IRE in Indonesia is actively striving to remain relevant and effective in delivering Islamic teachings amidst cultural diversity and global challenges [44].

Reflection on the results of this study highlights the need for caution and balance in the development of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Indonesia. While efforts to integrate culture and incorporate technology into IRE present promising opportunities to enhance educational quality and student engagement, they also pose significant challenges in terms of implementation and potential negative impacts. An article from the IKHAC Postgraduate

Journal states that the development of the IRE curriculum faces complexity due to sociocultural and technological changes. This study also found ongoing debates and challenges in implementing culturally based methods to overcome radicalism and identity crises. Therefore, in-depth studies and careful strategies are necessary to implement IRE innovations effectively, ensuring they achieve their positive goals without causing unwanted dysfunction [44].

The implications of this study suggest the need for policy actions that encourage inclusive dialogue among ulama, educators, community stakeholders, and the government to achieve a deeper understanding of cultural integration in IRE. The government and educational institutions must allocate adequate resources for teacher training to effectively and creatively implement digital and culturally based learning methods, as well as ensure equitable access to technology and supporting infrastructure for all students across various regions. Furthermore, it is necessary to design a structured program that systematically and sustainably incorporates local wisdom into the IRE curriculum to strengthen positive student identities and prevent radicalization from an early age. Close and ongoing collaboration between schools, families, and communities is also crucial in the implementation of this comprehensive action plan. Thus, the implementation of this integrated action plan is expected to improve the quality of IRE and its relevance in facing increasingly complex modern challenges [45].

Analysis

Culturally-based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) represents an innovative approach that repositions religious learning within the socio-cultural realities of students. In Indonesia's diverse society, where ethnicity, language, and traditions vary widely, the relevance of IRE depends not only on its doctrinal accuracy but also on its adaptability to cultural contexts. The integration of local wisdom—such as traditional ceremonies, regional arts, folklore, and indigenous expressions—into the teaching of Islamic values can enhance students' engagement and comprehension. More importantly, this approach serves the broader mission of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) [45].

From an educational perspective, cultural integration in IRE allows for contextualized learning, enabling students to connect religious teachings with their lived experiences. This strategy fosters internalization of values rather than mere memorization of texts. It strengthens critical thinking and cultural empathy, which are essential competencies in addressing issues of religious intolerance and extremism. In terms of identity formation, this model enables students to see themselves as both devout Muslims and proud cultural citizens, bridging the often-perceived divide between tradition and modernity. However, this culturally inclusive approach is not without controversy. Some Islamic scholars warn against the risk of syncretism, where Islamic principles may be blended with cultural practices that contradict core religious doctrines. The literature identifies a clear polarization between reformist and conservative interpretations. Reformists advocate for adaptive learning models that include cultural symbols as teaching aids, while conservatives urge strict adherence to textual purity, fearing dilution of religious identity. This divide underlines the need for a framework that safeguards the authenticity of Islamic teachings while allowing flexibility in delivery methods [46].

Recent shifts from traditional to digital education platforms have further transformed IRE. Teachers are no longer the sole knowledge providers; instead, they act as facilitators guiding students through multimedia content, interactive discussions, and culturally-rich learning materials. Digital platforms now enable access to culturally responsive resources that support diverse learning styles. When aligned with local wisdom, digital learning enhances not only content delivery but also students' emotional and spiritual connection to their heritage and faith. In supporting the SDGs, culturally-based IRE offers a transformative pathway to building peaceful, inclusive, and pluralistic societies. It

encourages civic responsibility, intergroup dialogue, and resistance to radical ideologies. Therefore, cultural integration in IRE is not a superficial adaptation, but a foundational strategy to achieve educational justice and social harmony in a globalized era. With the right balance between cultural relevance and religious authenticity, IRE can contribute significantly to both national character building and international development goals [46].

CONCLUSION

The most important insight from this study is the significance of understanding cultural integration in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) from the perspectives of various school stakeholders, including principals, teachers, students, and parents. This multidimensional approach aligns closely with the objectives of SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable education that is responsive to local contexts. The study reinforces the value of qualitative research methods—particularly structured interviews—in uncovering the complexities of implementing culturally integrated religious education in diverse school environments. The research findings underscore that IRE, when delivered with sensitivity to students' cultural backgrounds, holds strong potential in shaping positive and inclusive identities. This contributes directly to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by promoting values of tolerance, identity affirmation, and resilience against radical ideologies. Through culturally grounded education, students are not only encouraged to understand Islamic teachings more deeply, but also to appreciate the pluralistic nature of their own society. A major contribution of this study is its rich qualitative data, capturing nuanced experiences from multiple educational actors regarding the real-world application of cultural integration in IRE. These insights address a gap in existing research by documenting how such integration is understood and experienced at the school level—an area that remains underexplored. Moreover, the study offers new directions for practice and policy by identifying key factors that support or hinder the success of culturally contextual IRE. This aligns with SDG target 4.7, which advocates for education that promotes global citizenship, cultural diversity, and sustainable development. While the study's strength lies in its depth, it also has limitations. The qualitative design, involving 15 informants from selected schools, limits the generalizability of the findings. The structured interview format may have constrained the emergence of unexpected insights. Future studies are encouraged to adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches to capture broader patterns and monitor long-term impacts. Such research will be critical in advancing educational models that are not only religiously grounded and culturally relevant, but also supportive of the SDGs' transformative agenda for sustainable peace and inclusive development.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Faculty of Religious Education, Institut Ilmu Al-Qur'an (IIQ) Jakarta, Indonesia, and the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Darul Ihsan University, Dhaka, Bangladesh, for their support and collaboration. Appreciation is also extended to all contributors who provided valuable insights during the research and manuscript preparation process.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the conceptual framework, literature review, data analysis, and final writing of the manuscript. They collaboratively ensured the research's academic integrity, relevance to SDGs, and contextual depth. Both institutions also played an active role in the academic supervision and refinement of the article's content and structure.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in connection with this research.

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