

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO THE SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY IN LEDONG TIMUR VILLAGE

\* M. Tondi Namora Siregar<sup>1</sup>, Maulana Andi Surya<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1-2</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan, Indonesia

Email: [tondinamora0103212034@uinsu.ac.id](mailto:tondinamora0103212034@uinsu.ac.id)

### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the contribution of Islamic religious leaders in improving the spiritual and social life of the community in Ledong Timur Village, Aek Ledong District, Asahan Regency. The research employed a qualitative case study approach, using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Twelve informants were selected through purposive sampling, including religious leaders, village officials, non-formal educators, and community members. Data were thematically analyzed through reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing, and validated by triangulation and member-checking. The findings indicate that religious leaders play a crucial role in strengthening community spirituality through regular study sessions, worship guidance, and youth moral development. In the social sphere, they contribute through mutual cooperation, conflict mediation, and fundraising for the poor. These results highlight the role of religious leaders as educators, mediators, and social mobilizers who strengthen cohesion in rural communities.

**Keywords:** *Religious Leaders, Spirituality, Social Life, Muslim Community*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis kontribusi tokoh agama Islam dalam meningkatkan kehidupan spiritual dan sosial masyarakat di Desa Ledong Timur, Kecamatan Aek Ledong, Kabupaten Asahan. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus, melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi. Sebanyak 12 informan dipilih dengan teknik purposive sampling, terdiri dari tokoh agama, aparat desa, pendidik nonformal, dan masyarakat. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui reduksi, penyajian, dan penarikan kesimpulan, serta divalidasi dengan triangulasi dan member-check. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tokoh agama berperan penting dalam memperkuat spiritualitas masyarakat melalui pengajian rutin, bimbingan ibadah, dan pembinaan moral generasi muda. Pada aspek sosial, mereka berkontribusi melalui kegiatan gotong royong, advokasi konflik, serta penggalangan dana bagi fakir miskin. Temuan ini menegaskan peran tokoh agama sebagai pendidik, mediator, dan penggerak sosial yang memperkuat kohesi masyarakat pedesaan.

**Kata Kunci:** *Tokoh Agama, Spiritualitas, Kehidupan Sosial, Masyarakat Islam*

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## **A. Introduction**

Religion serves as the fundamental foundation in shaping the moral values, ethics, and social order of society. Within the Indonesian context, where religiosity is deeply rooted, Islam plays a significant role in directing people's worldview, behavior, and social interactions (Rohman & Rachmah, 2025). This influence is particularly evident in rural communities, where the role of Islamic religious leaders extends beyond spiritual or ritual matters to encompass social, educational, cultural, and even political domains (Mazid dkk., 2021). Religious leaders often serve as central figures who are respected and emulated by local communities, especially in responding to social issues and in shaping a harmonious religious life (Anjarahmi & Alamin, t.t.)

Amid rapid social change that brings various moral and social challenges, the role of religious leaders becomes increasingly vital (Hutabalian dkk., 2025). The advancement of technology, globalization, and shifting lifestyles have produced both positive and negative impacts. (Zuhriah, 2020) On the one hand, communities have become more open to information and progress; on the other hand, issues such as declining morality among youth, (Wibowo, 2016) escalating social conflicts, and the erosion of traditional values are pressing concerns (Muslimin & Fathul Amin, 2020) In this context, religious leaders are required to function as guides, mediators, and motivators in maintaining the stability of spiritual and social life (Djaelani, t.t.).

Ledong Timur Village, located in Aek Ledong Sub-district, Asahan Regency, is one such community with a Muslim-majority population. The village maintains strong traditions of kinship and religiosity, where religious leaders including *ustadz*, mosque imams, and Qur'an teachers play a strategic role in shaping and fostering community life (Khair dkk., 2024) They are actively involved not only in religious activities such as sermons, Qur'anic study groups, and youth mosque development but also in social endeavors such as mediating family conflicts, assisting the community in problem-solving, and mobilizing collective initiatives like gotong royong and humanitarian aid (Neliwati dkk., 2022a)

This role becomes increasingly crucial when the community faces collective challenges such as economic hardship, inter-group conflict, or the threat of radicalism (Izzah, 2018) Religious leaders are expected to provide solutions rooted in moderate and peaceful Islamic teachings that appeal to the moral conscience of the people (Hidayat, 2019). They serve as a bridge connecting religious values with the social realities of daily life. Their presence and contributions impact not only the quality of worship but also the strengthening of social solidarity, tolerance, and public awareness of the importance of living in peace and harmony (Malindra dkk., 2024). Against this backdrop, it is essential to understand their contributions holistically in the process of rural community development (Ramdhani dkk., t.t.). From the perspective of the sociology of religion, religious leaders do not merely perform ritual functions such as leading prayers or delivering sermons; they also carry out socio-cultural functions. They act as agents of change, moral guardians, and conflict mediators.

Their presence often provides comfort and encouragement for community members, particularly during times of economic, social, or psychological hardship (Subasman & Nasyiruddin, 2024). In this regard, religious leaders inspire optimism by integrating spiritual guidance with humanistic values (Uswatun Hasanah & Ainur Rofiq Sofa, 2024). Furthermore, their role in non-formal education is highly significant, as they often initiate community-based religious activities such as *majelis taklim*, Qur'anic Learning Centers (*TPA*), women's study groups, youth mosque organizations, new Muslim guidance, and other socio-religious initiatives. These activities have proven effective in shaping character, strengthening social solidarity, and instilling Islamic values from an early age (Fernando, t.t.). Thus, it is not an exaggeration to assert that religious leaders serve as the frontline of character education in villages, even without formal academic titles (Barutu dkk., 2024)

Nevertheless, contemporary developments and the pressures of globalization demand that religious leaders continuously improve their capacities. They must equip themselves not only with religious knowledge but also with social awareness, communication skills, and community management (Wijaya & Parwanto, t.t.). Complex challenges ranging from early marriage, free association, drug abuse, intolerance, to radicalism require contextual and prudent religious approaches. Hence, it is necessary to identify the patterns of contributions already made by religious leaders so they may be further developed and replicated in other regions (Winata, 2023). Such efforts are not only a form of recognition but also provide a basis for evaluation, reflection, and the enhancement of their role in the future. In academia, this constitutes part of the effort to strengthen social and religious studies rooted in local contexts (Titin Wulandari Malau, 2023)

This study also contributes to local scholarship, which often receives less attention in national academic discourse. Many studies have highlighted the role of religious leaders in urban areas or at the national level, while rural contexts representing the majority demographic structure of Indonesia are frequently overlooked (Umami, 2018). Therefore, this research, focusing on Ledong Timur Village, represents an effort to foreground a local narrative that is no less important than broader-scale studies. By closely examining local realities, it becomes clear that the development of spiritual and social life does not rely solely on structural power but also on cultural strength embodied by informal leaders such as religious figures (Neliwati dkk., 2022b).

Ultimately, this study seeks to provide a clear picture of the forms, strategies, and impacts of the contributions of Islamic religious leaders in Ledong Timur Village. These findings are significant not only for academic development but also for policymakers, religious organizations, educational institutions, and the wider community in designing more effective and contextual community development approaches. The outcomes of this research may serve as a model for empowering religious leaders in other regions with similar characteristics, thereby fostering communities that are not only materially advanced but also spiritually and socially resilient (Dalimunthe, 2023).

## **B. Method**

This study employed a qualitative approach using the case study method. (Roosinda dkk., 2021) A qualitative approach was chosen as the research aimed to explore, understand, and provide an in-depth description of the role and contribution of Islamic religious leaders in enhancing the spiritual and social life of the community in Ledong Timur Village. The case study method allowed the researcher to focus intensively on a single location and subject, thereby obtaining a comprehensive and detailed picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Abdussamad, 2021).

The research was conducted in Ledong Timur Village, Aek Ledong Sub-district, Asahan Regency, North Sumatra Province, over a period of three months, from May to July 2025. This location was selected because the majority of the population is Muslim and because it has religious leaders who actively contribute to fostering the spiritual and social life of the community (Hasan dkk., t.t.).

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with religious leaders, village officials, community members, and non-formal educators, complemented by participant observation of religious and social activities. Secondary data were obtained from village archives, mosque activity reports, and relevant literature. The study involved 12 informants selected through purposive sampling (Tampubolon, 2023), comprising three religious leaders (ustadz, mosque imams, Qur'an teachers), two village officials, five community members representing congregants, youth, and community figures, and two TPQ and madrasah educators. The inclusion criteria included direct involvement in religious and social activities, practical experience, and community recognition.

Data were analyzed thematically following Miles and Huberman's framework: (1) data reduction, by categorizing information into themes of spiritual and social contributions; (2) data display, by organizing findings into themes such as spiritual guidance, moral development of youth, social activities, and strengthening social cohesion; and (3) conclusion drawing, by identifying the role of religious leaders as educators, mediators, motivators, and role models (Mulyana dkk., 2024). To enrich the analysis, several theoretical perspectives were employed: Ralph Linton's role theory, which emphasizes the normative role of religious leaders in shaping community behavior; Mead and Blumer's symbolic interactionism, which highlights the symbolic meaning of worship practices and social activities; and Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism, which underscores the role of religion in maintaining social order through adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and value preservation. The concept of dakwah bil-hal was also relevant, as the religious leaders in this village not only deliver oral sermons but also engage in practical actions such as assisting the poor, guiding orphans, and mobilizing the community in social initiatives (Sugiyono, 2016).

The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation and member-checking. Triangulation was carried out by comparing information from religious leaders, village officials, community members, and non-formal educators, and cross-verifying with

interview results, observations, and documentation. Findings showed consistent recognition of the role of religious leaders in both spiritual and social development, though perceptions of intensity varied across groups. Member-checking was conducted by presenting preliminary findings to informants, most of whom confirmed their accuracy, with only minor corrections regarding activity frequency and program details. After revision, the data were declared valid and reliable.

Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the study. Researchers explained the purpose and benefits of the research to informants and obtained voluntary informed consent prior to interviews. Confidentiality was maintained by using codes or initials instead of real names, and data were used solely for academic purposes. Thus, the study ensured not only data validity but also adherence to ethical principles respecting informants' rights and maintaining scholarly integrity.

In conclusion, the analysis, supported by role theory, symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, and the concept of *dakwah bil-hal*, confirmed that Islamic religious leaders act as educators, motivators, mediators, and role models who sustain the balance between the community's spiritual and social needs. These findings are expected to serve as a valuable reference for strengthening the role of religious leaders in community empowerment based on Islamic values.

## **C. Results and Discussion**

### **1. Geographical Setting**

Ledong Timur Village is one of the villages located in Aek Ledong Sub-district, Asahan Regency, North Sumatra Province. The majority of the population is Muslim, with Javanese and Batak ethnic backgrounds who coexist harmoniously. The community of Ledong Timur is known for its religiosity and strong commitment to Islamic values, as reflected in the active religious activities that take place. Several mosques and prayer halls serve as centers for religious activities such as Qur'anic study circles, congregational prayers, Islamic gatherings (*majelis taklim*), and various socio-religious programs. In the social sphere, the people uphold traditions of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and kinship. Social practices such as communal work, *tahlilan*, and collective support during times of hardship remain vibrant, largely due to the central role of Islamic religious leaders who are regarded as moral exemplars in daily life.

Fieldwork findings show that Islamic religious leaders have a crucial role in enhancing the spiritual life of the community. They regularly organize study circles and *majelis taklim*, which function not only as a means of disseminating Islamic teachings but also as a platform for character formation and strengthening religious understanding. They guide the community to embody Islamic values in everyday life, thus heightening spiritual awareness. Religious leaders also deliver sermons, Friday sermons, and routine Qur'anic studies in mosques. These discussions cover themes of *aqidah* (creed), *akhlaq* (ethics), Islamic jurisprudence of worship, and Qur'anic exegesis. Importantly, such activities are carried out by multiple respected *ustadz* and *imams*.



## 2. Religious Life of the Community

One informant, Ustaz W, stated:

“We routinely hold Qur’anic study sessions after Maghrib every Wednesday and Friday. The aim is to strengthen the community’s understanding of religion, especially concerning prayer, fasting, and daily etiquette.”

The majority of residents affirmed that religious leaders play a pivotal role in raising awareness and improving religious practices. For instance, Ibu S (49 years old), a housewife, said:

“My family and I regularly attend the study circles led by Ustaz H.A. He gives us a lot of religious understanding, so we are more motivated to pray in congregation, and my children have also become more diligent in reciting the Qur’an at the TPQ.”

Similarly, Bapak Hn (58 years old), a farmer, explained:

“In the past, I did not really understand the pillars of prayer or the rules of zakat. But since attending study circles and listening to sermons in the mosque, I have learned, and now I feel more confident in my worship.”

## 3. The Role of Religious Leaders in Spiritual Life

Religious leaders are actively involved in nurturing the younger generation through informal Islamic education such as the Qur’anic Learning Centers (TPQ). In Ledong Timur Village, a TPQ managed by local religious leaders provides Qur’anic recitation and daily prayer lessons for children in the afternoon. Youth are also engaged through mosque-based organizations, where they participate in religious events such as the commemoration of the Prophet’s birthday (Maulid Nabi), Isra’ Mi’raj, and Ramadan programs. The presence of religious leaders at significant life-cycle events such as weddings, funerals, and major Islamic celebrations reinforces their status as role models and sources of spiritual inspiration. They also provide essential guidance in rituals such as funeral rites, marriage sermons, pilgrimage counseling, and general religious consultation. The community acknowledges that their presence is particularly helpful for those with limited knowledge of Islamic law.

Beyond the spiritual dimension, religious leaders make substantial contributions to the village’s social life. They act as mediators in conflicts, initiators of communal programs, and catalysts for philanthropy. During Ramadan, they launch the sedekah berjamaah (collective charity) program, mobilizing food donations and financial aid for orphans, widows, and the needy. As stated by the head of Hamlet II, Mr. Y.S.:

“If it were not for the religious leaders who encouraged it, the community might not have been as active. But because they are respected, their call to give charity and help one another is always well received.”

This demonstrates their ability to strengthen both spiritual quality and social cohesion. Their leadership often initiates mutual aid for the sick, the bereaved, and those

in need, while also resolving interpersonal disputes. As S.R. (37 years old), an active participant in women's study groups, said:

"When someone is sick or in need of help, the ustadz usually mobilizes people to contribute. He even personally delivers assistance collected from the mosque or congregation."

Similarly, R (25 years old), a youth, explained:

"When two young men fought over a personal issue, it was the ustadz at the mosque who mediated. They are more willing to listen when the advice comes from a religious leader."

From these accounts, it is evident that religious leaders do not merely transmit religious teachings but embody complex social functions. Drawing on Linton's role theory, their position as educators and moral exemplars reflects their normative role in sustaining spiritual values. Their mediation in disputes aligns with Parsons' structural functionalism, wherein religion supports social integration and stability. Meanwhile, acts of solidarity such as charity and gotong royong reflect Mead and Blumer's symbolic interactionism, highlighting the shared meanings embedded in collective practice. Furthermore, their dakwah bil-hal (preaching through action) illustrates how religious messages are grounded in lived social realities.

#### **4. The Role of Religious Leaders in Social Life**

In addition to spiritual leadership, religious leaders serve as social and moral agents who cultivate empathy, care, and harmony within the community. Their involvement spans fundraising for orphans, disaster relief, conflict mediation, and cooperative communal work. Through these activities, religious leaders embody moral authority in society, reflecting Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority—where influence stems not from formal office but from personal integrity and exemplary conduct.

As social change agents, they bridge social divides, reinforce ukhuwah Islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood), and strengthen communal bonds. This aligns with the principle of dakwah bil-hal, whereby religious preaching is enacted through tangible acts of service and solidarity. Community support for these initiatives demonstrates reciprocal trust: religious leaders are followed not only because they articulate doctrine but also because they share daily experiences and remain present in both joyous and challenging times.

#### **5. Challenges Faced by Religious Leaders**

Despite their vital role, religious leaders in Ledong Timur face significant challenges. The influx of modern cultural values and digital technology introduces lifestyles among youth that often diverge from Islamic teachings, requiring more creative and context-sensitive approaches to religious guidance. Resource limitations further hinder the sustainability of socio-religious programs, as most initiatives rely heavily on voluntary community support without sufficient institutional backing.

To address these challenges, continuous and integrated capacity-building is essential. Religious leaders need access to training and education adapted to contemporary realities, while collaboration with local government and civil society organizations should be strengthened to ensure more sustainable programming. Moreover, the adoption of digital platforms for *dakwah* offers promising opportunities to engage younger generations who are highly familiar with technology. Through these strategies, religious leaders can continue to serve as pivotal pillars of spiritual and social development in Ledong Timur Village, ensuring resilience, cohesion, and harmony within the community.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Islamic religious leaders in Ledong Timur Village play a pivotal role in shaping the balance between the community's spiritual and social spheres. In the spiritual domain, they reinforce religious commitment through regular study circles, worship guidance, and non-formal education; in the social domain, they act as mediators in conflict resolution, catalysts of communal solidarity, and moral exemplars. These findings resonate with role theory, structural functionalism, and symbolic interactionism, highlighting religious leaders as both agents of social transformation and guardians of communal integration. Although confronted with the challenges of globalization and resource constraints, their contributions can be further enhanced through continuous capacity development, institutional support, and the strategic use of digital media. Accordingly, the role of Islamic religious leaders in Ledong Timur Village constitutes a valuable model of integrated religious and social leadership within the rural Indonesian context.

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