

Religion and Belief in Indonesia's Education System: Constitutional Recognition Amid Institutional Marginalization

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Abstract

Changes in Indonesia's educational framework consistently align with shifts in the governing administration. Each variation of these reforms reveals a recurring pattern: Indigenous religious groups, holding minority status, regularly face discrimination due to these policies. Unfortunately, recognizing the indigenous belief system in education as a legitimate form of instruction within Indonesia remains elusive. The primary driver of this discriminatory practice is rooted in the principles of the belief system in education, currently regulated by the guidelines of the Ministry of Education and Culture (KEMENDIKBUD). Critics widely believe that this belief system symbolizes exclusion, deviating from inclusivity and misaligning with the fundamental principles outlined in the 1945 Constitution. Previous scholars have convincingly argued that the marginalization of Indigenous education directly stems from orchestrated religious politics. The prejudicial treatment extends beyond the dominance of world religions and is fundamentally based on religious exclusion. This exclusionary practice involves transforming Indigenous education into a secular and anthropocentric framework. A clear example of this exclusion is visible in the intentional separation of religious education from its indigenous counterpart. This is evident in the current administration, where the Ministry of Education and Culture oversees indigenous education, while the Ministry of Religion recognizes only six religions. Within the existing state paradigm, indigenous education is confined to secularism, stripped of its religious character. Given this reality, this paper argues that marginalization continuously occurs within the context of Indonesia's educational system.

Keywords: Belief, Education, Freedom, Indigenous, Religious



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I. INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian government continues to uphold a policy of discrimination against indigenous education. The government's recognition is limited solely to six religious groups for educational purposes: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This discriminatory practice is particularly evident in the Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 12 of 2023, specifically detailed in Article 5, Paragraph a. This article defines the scope of the Ministry of Religion, including the formulation, determination, and implementation of policies regarding the guidance of Islamic, Christian, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian communities.

Additionally, the ministry is responsible for administering Hajj and Umrah and overseeing religious education and faith-based instruction. A belief system manages religions and belief systems outside these six official religions in the education system supervised by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The administration of education policies for Indigenous Education and other minority religious groups falls under the scope of belief education. Overall, the belief system in education includes all religions and belief systems that lack official recognition as forms of religious education.

The division between religious education and indigenous education within the framework of Belief education, as highlighted by several researchers, is unconstitutional because the Indonesian state has recognized the validity of indigenous religions and beliefs as a religion as stated in the Constitutional Court Decision Number 97/PUU-XIV/2016.¹ In her thesis titled "Belief Education: Towards Inclusive Religious Education," Anna Amalia points out that the Belief system in education has consistently remained marginalized within the discourse on inclusive education in Indonesia. This marginalization can be attributed to the fact that indigenous education and the corresponding communities are excluded from being categorized within the realm of religion as defined by religious politics in the country.² Consequently, due to the restrictive nature of this religious definition, indigenous education has been merged with secular education under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. This merging has resulted in a national education model that lacks inclusivity for the indigenous community.

With this paper, I agree with Maarif and Asfinawati's perspective. Belief education, concerning Indigenous education, noticeably impacts the status of Indigenous groups regarding religious freedom. This is because indigenous religions are

¹ Raihani (2016), Minority Right to Attend Religious Education in Indonesia, *Al-Jami'ah* 53, no. 1, 1–26; Komnas Perempuan, "Forum Kamisan Daring Edisi 32 : Kawal RUU SISDIKNAS : Cerita Dari Bangku Sekolah," retrieved February 17, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpS5xF-bCYk>; Antonius Ferry Timur (2022), "Mengusulkan Pendidikan Belief Pada RUU Sisdiknas," *Kompas.Com*, retrieved October 30, 2022, <https://www.kompas.com/edu/read/2022/09/07/061700571/mengusulkan-pendidikan-kepercayaan-pada-ruu-sisdiknas?page=all>; Jear Nenohai (2023), "Pendidikan Belief Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Nasional Di Indonesia: Antara Alienasi Dan Signifikansi," <https://icir.or.id/1026/Artikel/2023/Pendidikan-Kepercayaan-Dalam-Sistem-Pendidikan-Nasional-Di-Indonesia-Antara-Alienasi-Dan-Signifikansi/>.

² Anna Amalia, *Belief Education: Towards Inclusive Religious Education* (Gadjah Mada University, 2021), 67.

often situated within the cultural domain rather than being recognized as distinct. As a result, they are excluded from the definition of religious freedom and, therefore, do not receive the protective measures from the state afforded to recognized religions.³ Moreover, I hold that this discriminatory stance is not solely due to religious politics; it is also rooted in the failure to acknowledge indigenous education as a legitimate form of religiosity.

In other words, the government has overlooked the complex aspects of religiosity inherent in indigenous education. In an unscientific manner, the Indonesian government has concluded that indigenous education lacks religious characteristics, basing this judgment on the narrow 'religion' paradigm applied to evaluate indigenous education. Consequently, indigenous education has been limited to 'general education.' This decision has led to what I term "religious exclusion." Consequently, indigenous education has been classified as secular and grouped with other educational streams under the Ministry of Education and Culture. This deliberate classification effectively prevents indigenous education from being considered alongside other religious education governed by the Ministry of Religion. Thus, the recognition of religious education is once again restricted solely to six officially endorsed religions, as outlined in the Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 12 of 2023 regarding the Ministry of Religion, which clearly constitutes a discriminatory policy.

Given the previously mentioned concerns, this paper's primary objective is to address two fundamental questions: How do indigenous communities perceive and engage with religiosity in education? How does this religious aspect contribute to realizing freedom of religion and belief for indigenous groups? With these goals in mind, I plan to explore the religious aspects embedded in indigenous education in Indonesia. In my study of Lakoat, Kujawas and *Orang Rimba*, I have found that traditional education carries significant religious importance. Using the framework of the indigenous religion paradigm articulated by Samsul Maarif, I argue that indigenous religious education is present in these two communities. This paradigm of indigenous religious education has two distinct characteristics: contextualization and ecological alignment. Indigenous religious education serves as a compelling alternative to challenge the anthropocentric dominance often found in state-supported religious education policies. By adopting this paradigm, Indigenous religious education becomes a powerful way to counterbalance the hegemony of conventional religious education models, which frequently neglect to capture the diverse contextual and ecological dimensions inherent to the spirituality and learning of Indigenous communities.

Drawing on the foundation of Indigenous religious education, I develop a series of arguments that highlight the unconstitutional nature of *The Belief system in education* and its infringement on the human rights of Indigenous communities. This violation arises directly from the religious exclusion entrenched in Indonesia's religious education framework. This exclusion acts as the underlying catalyst for the ongoing violence faced

³ Samsul Maarif and Asfinawati (2022), Toward a (More) Inclusive FORB: A Framework for the Advocacy for the Rights of Indigenous People, *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 6, no. 2, 206.

by Indigenous communities to this day. Additionally, I utilize the framework of religious empowerment proposed by Kiriaki Topidy to argue that religious education policies should be approached from a community-driven perspective.

This indicates that policy formulation should arise from within the community agency, rather than being predetermined by the government's definition of religion, as is presently the case. Therefore, I assert that the religious aspects of religious education should be defined collectively by the community instead of solely dictated by state authorities. This approach highlights the problematic nature of current religious education and the belief system in education policies. These policies inherently violate the rights of Indigenous education by failing to recognize it as a legitimate form of religious education.

The forthcoming article is organized into distinct sections, each addressing crucial aspects of the discourse. In the initial segment, the author explores the complex dynamics underlying discriminatory policies affecting Indigenous education in Indonesia. This examination investigates how this issue intersects with human rights violations. Then, the following section analyzes the connection between discrimination and the broader themes of education and religiosity. This interplay creates a phenomenon known as "religious exclusion," which effectively marginalizes indigenous education from religious consideration. As the narrative progresses, the focus shifts to presenting indigenous religious education as an innovative model. This model seeks to enhance the importance of religiosity within indigenous education throughout Indonesia. By incorporating this perspective, the paper aims to address the disparities resulting from the religious exclusion of indigenous education. The article concludes with a summary of its key findings and insights, encapsulated in the final section.

II. THE MAKING OF SECULAR EDUCATION: THE STATE'S DISCRIMINATION OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

Since gaining independence, religious education has become distinctive and vital in Indonesian legal frameworks. It is unique as a subject that cultivates individuals who align with Pancasila, particularly its foundational principle of 'Belief in One Almighty God.' In Indonesian society, religious education serves as a "moral gatekeeper."⁴ Zainal Abidin Bagir analyzes that the proponents of shari'a could also incorporate *iman* and *taqwa*, two Islamic terms meaning faith (*iman*) and piety (*taqwa*), into the Fourth Amendment's article on national education.⁵ This indicates that the dominant religion, particularly Islam, has influenced the structure of religious education in Indonesia. This influence is reflected through legislative enactments, establishing religious education

⁴ Mohamad Yusuf, *Religious Education in Indonesia: An Empirical Study of Religious Education Models in Islamic, Christian and Hindu Affiliated Schools* (Zweigniederlassung Zürich: LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien, 2016), 18.

⁵ Zainal Abidin Bagir, "The Politic and Law of Religious Governance," in *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 291.

provisions throughout the educational spectrum, from elementary to senior high school. It is important to note that the push for educational access is framed as a mechanism to uphold human rights.

In the book titled "The Politics of Religious Education: The 2013 Curriculum and the Public Space of the School," authored collaboratively by Suhadi, Mohamad Yusuf, Budi Asyari, and Sudarto, the researchers assert that subsequent to the adoption of the K-13 curriculum, religious education was intentionally reoriented to address the challenge of radicalism and the escalating concerns of religious intolerance within Indonesia. This reorientation underscores two central objectives that students are expected to attain: cultivating noble character and promoting a spirit of tolerance.⁶ Moreover, the researchers posit that the K-13 curriculum's efficacy in fostering religious tolerance is somewhat limited. This is due to the fact that the religious education framework outlined in the curriculum is exclusively tailored to six recognized religions. Consequently, indigenous education remains unacknowledged within Indonesia's overarching design of religious education.

Lyn Parker argues that the K-13 curriculum signifies a squandered chance for advancing environmental education in Indonesia. Within the updated curriculum, there is a mention of fostering pro-environmental behavior as a competency objective. Additionally, values such as environmental care and responsibility for the environment are identified across various subjects⁷. I concur with Parker's perspective. The omission of any substantial discourse regarding environmental concern can be attributed to the overwhelming prominence of character education and personal piety within the design of K-13.

As noted by Suhadi and his colleagues, the K-13 curriculum prioritizes religious doctrine heavily, aiming to instill obedience to the faith and cultivate virtuous character among students. This emphasis might inadvertently sideline other vital aspects, such as environmental consciousness, which deserve equal attention.⁸ K-13 curriculum has adopted a notably anthropocentric stance. The role of religion has been significantly narrowed to focus primarily on the interactions between humans and the Divine, while the broader context of nature has been relegated to a secondary role. This omission prevents nature, which is a crucial facet of life, from being integrated into the factors that contribute to shaping the character and faith of students.

The presence of anthropocentrism in K-13 highlights how the curriculum limits the six officially recognized religions within a framework governed by the concept of world religions. In this paradigm, nature is subordinate to humans, positioning humans

⁶ Sudarto Suhadi, Mohamad Yusuf, Marthen Tahun, Budi Asyari, *The Politics of Religious Education: The 2013 Curriculum, and The Public Space of The School* (Yogyakarta: Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies, 2015), 3.

⁷ Lyn Parker (2017), *Religious Environmental Education? The New School Curriculum in Indonesia*, *Environmental Education Research* 23, no. 9, 19.

⁸ Suhadi, Mohamad Yusuf, Marthen Tahun, Budi Asyari, *The Politics of Religious Education: The 2013 Curriculum, and The Public Space of The School*, 13.

as the primary agents in defining and maintaining religious practices.⁹ The pervasive influence of the world religion paradigm in K-13 significantly restricts religious education to issues strictly related to humanity. This overly anthropocentric approach, as seen in the case of K-13, inadvertently reduces the focus on human interaction with the natural world. As a result, the inherent connection between humans and nature, despite nature's status as a cohabitant of Earth, becomes marginalized within the educational framework. According to Oakley, fostering environmental awareness in education has the potential to cultivate conscientious "citizens of tomorrow." As an educational initiative, concern for nature ensures environmental sustainability in the future.

The prevalence of anthropocentrism within the religious education curriculum serves as a primary rationale for excluding indigenous religious education from the national education system. This anthropocentric paradigm is also evident within the Belief System in Education. The Belief System in Education, as a policy, underscores the government's perspective that indigenous education does not qualify as a 'religion.' The government restricts indigenous practices to the realm of culture, thereby placing indigenous education under the purview of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

This administrative decision accentuates the government's discriminatory stance against indigenous communities. The Belief System in Education reflects the Indonesian government's mindset, which exclusively acknowledges six religions that qualify for the status of religion: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This narrow categorization further perpetuates the marginalization of indigenous communities, reinforcing a discriminatory framework that overlooks the religious significance of indigenous practices.¹⁰

The preceding discriminatory policy serves as a clear indication that the education authorities in Indonesia fail to acknowledge Indigenous education as a form of religious education. This lack of recognition stems from the inherent anthropocentrism bias within the religious education framework. Indigenous communities have not received recognition as distinct religious groups throughout the historical trajectory of religious politics in Indonesia. As elucidated by Samsul Maarif, this phenomenon is rooted in the inherent bias of the world religion paradigm prevalent within religious political policies in the country. The world religion paradigm fundamentally defines religion within a specific framework, emphasizing elements such as belief in one God, a prophet, a holy scripture, established institutions, and international recognition. Since 2001, only six categories have been officially recognized as religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Regrettably, this categorization excludes Indigenous religions from formal recognition within the religious landscape of Indonesia.¹¹

⁹ Samsul Maarif (2019), *Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-Interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People*, *Studies in Philosophy* 44, 1–20.

¹⁰ Maarif, 2019, p. 107; Maarif & Asfinawati, 2022, p. 210.

¹¹ Maarif, "Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-Interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People," 106.

Consequently, indigenous education lacks recognition as religious education because the government exclusively provides religious education services for the six religions it officially acknowledges. As a result, indigenous education is still viewed as non-religious, leading to its oversight by the Ministry of Education and Culture, along with other forms of 'secular' education. Unfortunately, Indonesian education policymakers continue to label indigenous education as "irreligious." This classification is reinforced by certain administrations in Indonesia, which continue to categorize Indigenous communities as secular entities, thereby merging Indigenous education with other non-religious educational pathways within the Ministry of Education and Culture.

III. RELIGIOUS EXCLUSION IN INDONESIAN EDUCATION POLICY

Al Khanif's perspective highlights that Indonesia operates as a theistic secular state, thereby causing all regulations related to freedom of religion to emanate from the government's established definitions and confines of religion. These parameters serve as benchmarks for the state to strike a balance between the role of religion within legal and political spheres. Moreover, this equilibrium significantly influences the safeguarding of religious minorities and the effective implementation of religious freedom. This commitment is aligned with the tenets outlined in the Indonesian Constitution of 1945 and international human rights agreements that Indonesia has ratified. In practice, according to Maarif and Asfinawati, in Indonesia, the religions of indigenous people have been treated as culture and, as such, excluded from FORB discourse.¹²

Indonesian constitutions provide protection only to a select number of groups recognized by the government as official religions. This limitation has resulted in discrimination against Indigenous communities, as only six religions enjoy legal recognition within Indonesia's framework. This political landscape has remained consistent over time, reflecting the religious adherence of the majority of Indonesians. The government categorizes Indigenous religions as cultural practices instead of affording them the status of distinct religions. As a result, they exist outside the scope of religious freedom and do not benefit from the protective measures given to recognized religions within the state's framework.¹³

Much akin to indigenous communities, access to comprehensive religious education stems from the constitutional safeguards of religious freedom in Indonesia. The state's established criteria for religion have evolved into the prevailing standards for assessing all facets of indigenous communities, often leading to their classification as irreligious. Subsequent to the issuance of Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 27 of 2016, indigenous education in Indonesia gained entry to formal education services. The Ministry of Education and Culture extended formal educational services to

¹² Samsul Maarif and Asfinawati (2022), Second Essay Toward a (More) Inclusive FORB: A Framework for the Advocacy for the Rights of Indigenous People, *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 6, no. 2, 205.

¹³ Samsul Maarif and Asfinawati (2022), Second Essay Toward a (More) Inclusive FORB, 206.

cater to the educational beliefs of marginalized religious groups, including Bahais, Jews, and indigenous religions.

Despite this formal recognition of belief in education, discrimination against indigenous communities persists. Anna Amalia's research on inclusive education emphasizes that the aforementioned regulation, No. 27 of 2016, regards the belief system in education as a category of 'special education' or as "local content." Consequently, while formal recognition has been granted to education based on belief, this form of education is not equated with religious education. This dichotomy results in the belief system in education being seen as 'secular education' rather than 'religious education'.¹⁴ In other words, state recognition of the belief system in education through regulation is hardly inclusive.¹⁵

In the context of secular education, religious education is classified as special education. This misclassification has significant pedagogical implications since it indicates that "Belief education" contains religious content but lacks the potential to reshape societal biases against the adherents' faith. This issue is exacerbated by the development of *Belief* education, a system created to meet specific community needs. Consequently, this effectively separates Indigenous education from the public sphere, limiting it to the realm of private education exclusively for Indigenous communities.

In contrast, education related to the six officially recognized religions is considered national (public) education. The educational offerings of these religions are acknowledged as religious education and are directly incorporated into the national curriculum. Religious education is standardized according to the 2013 Curriculum (K-13). Conversely, the government classifies indigenous education as part of secular education. This distinction has led religious education to confront the urgent challenges posed by the rise of radicalism and religious intolerance within Indonesia. The primary goals for students include reinforcing character traits guided by ethical values and promoting a spirit of tolerance.

The government's exclusive interpretation of 'religiosity in religious education' has been a pivotal factor driving ongoing discrimination against indigenous religions. The administration of indigenous education falls under the Ministry of Education and Culture, while the six officially recognized religions are granted distinct status within the Ministry of Religion. This has led to what I argue is the emergence of 'religious exclusion,' a phenomenon arising from the classification of religiosity modeled after the characteristics of the six recognized religions. Consequently, Indigenous communities find themselves unrecognized as religious entities due to the dominance of the anthropocentric paradigm within Indonesia's religious and political landscape. This standardized framework for religiosity in education serves as the foundation for the government's categorization of indigenous education as non-religious. As a result, the K-

¹⁴ Anna Amalia, "Belief Education: Towards Inclusive Religious Education," 14–15.

¹⁵ Asal Wahyuni Erlin Mulyadi (2017), Policy of Inclusive Education for Education for All in Indonesia, *Policy & Governance Review* 1, no. 3, 210.

13 curriculum and various religious education policies currently in place exclusively recognize the six acknowledged religions, which the Ministry of Religion now manages.

Indonesia's pluralistic society necessitates a delicate balance between religious freedom and state intervention in education. While the constitution guarantees both religious recognition and educational autonomy, unregulated religiosity within the educational system poses significant risks to social cohesion, national identity, and democratic values. Without proper oversight, religious instruction in schools can foster sectarian divisions, restrict critical thinking, and reinforce exclusivist ideologies. Consequently, state regulation is not merely a bureaucratic necessity but a strategic imperative to maintain pluralism, ensure inclusivity, and align education with Indonesia's national development goals.

One of the most pressing concerns regarding unregulated religious influence in education is the rise of sectarianism and radicalization. Numerous studies indicate that some religious schools, particularly those operating outside government oversight, promote exclusivist interpretations of faith that challenge pluralism and interfaith harmony. Such environments foster ideological rigidity, discouraging students from engaging with diverse perspectives. Without a structured framework, education risks becoming an ideological battleground rather than a space for critical engagement, ultimately threatening national unity. State control is essential to prevent religious instruction from becoming a vehicle for social division.

Beyond sectarianism, unregulated religiosity in education also poses a challenge to Indonesia's national identity, which is neither strictly secular nor theocratic. The state's commitment to religious values must align with its constitutional mandate to uphold unity in diversity, as encapsulated by the idiom "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*." However, when religious teachings dominate educational institutions without oversight, they can promote exclusive religious dogmatism that marginalizes certain groups and undermines the fabric of national cohesion. Regulation ensures that religious education strengthens rather than fractures Indonesia's diverse identity, positioning religion as a unifying force rather than a divisive one in society.

Educational accessibility and equality are crucial. Excessive religious influence in schools has, in some cases, resulted in discriminatory practices, particularly against students from minority faiths. Reports of systemic exclusion and coercive religious conformity in educational institutions contradict Indonesia's constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination. Without proper regulation, education ceases to be a public good and instead becomes an instrument of religious hegemony. Ensuring that religious education remains inclusive and non-discriminatory is vital for fostering a learning environment where all students, regardless of their faith, can thrive.

State regulation is also essential for safeguarding academic integrity and critical thinking. An educational system dominated by religious dogma risks suppressing intellectual curiosity and independent reasoning. While religious education can contribute to moral and ethical development, it must not come at the expense of scientific inquiry, open debate, and exposure to diverse worldviews. Overemphasis on religious doctrine

without critical engagement can lead to an intellectually rigid society that is ill-equipped to navigate modern economic, technological, and political challenges. A balanced approach ensures that education remains a platform for knowledge production rather than mere doctrinal transmission.

Integrating religious education within a regulated framework is essential for aligning the educational system with Indonesia's long-term development goals. The nation's economic progress depends on a well-educated workforce skilled in critical thinking, innovation, and global competencies. When religious teachings dominate core academic subjects, students risk being unprepared for the demands of an increasingly competitive and knowledge-based economy. By ensuring that religious education supports rather than overshadows secular knowledge, the state can cultivate a generation of morally conscious and intellectually capable individuals.

With this logic, state control over religiosity in education is not an act of repression but a strategic intervention to uphold pluralism, national unity, and academic integrity. If left unchecked, religious influence can fuel sectarianism, erode critical thinking, and reinforce exclusionary practices. Effective regulation ensures that religion remains a constructive force in education rather than a divisive one. By finding a careful balance between religious recognition and educational oversight, Indonesia can create an educational system that is both inclusive and aligned with its constitutional principles, fostering a society that is intellectually vibrant and socially cohesive.

At this juncture, the concept of the belief system in education reflects a stance where the government does not regard indigenous education as religious. This construct of the belief system in education seems tailored to exclude indigenous communities. Within governmental parameters, this education is perceived as pertaining to private and secular education. The characterization of indigenous education as secular infringes upon the indigenous communities' right to freedom of religion and belief in Indonesia. The state does not duly acknowledge the religious aspects of these communities within appropriate regulations.¹⁶

Thus, this discourse effectively addresses the first question regarding how Indigenous communities comprehend and implement religious education from the government's perspective. Align with Kiriaki Topidi's assertion that a successful education policy must prioritize the community's viewpoint as an active participant. Rather than being shaped solely by the government's standpoint, education policy should emerge from the insights and needs of the community itself.¹⁷

Therefore, to create more inclusive education policies and move beyond the limitations of *Belief* education, my approach will involve a thorough examination of practices within Indigenous communities. In particular, I will concentrate on the ongoing practices at Sokola Rimba in Jambi and Ikoat.kujawas in Mollo. This

¹⁶ Nenohai, "Pendidikan Belief Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Nasional di Indonesia: Antara Alienasi Dan Signifikansi."

¹⁷ Kyriaki Topidi, *Law and Religious Diversity in Education; The Right to Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 186.

examination serves as a foundational step, which I plan to build upon using the indigenous religion paradigm. This paradigm will function as a tool to fully understand the complex dimensions of religiosity and its intersection with indigenous education in Indonesia.

IV. INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF SOKOLA RIMBA AND LAKOAT.KUJAWAS

Butet Manurung's firsthand experience living among the jungle communities on the island of Sumatra offers compelling insight into the significance of education for these forest-dwelling people, known as Sokola Rimba. Her account emphasizes that education is crucial for maintaining the sustainability and cleanliness of forests in Riau and Jambi. For the children of the Rimba, education is not merely a personal pursuit but a means to contribute to the greater good—particularly in protecting the forest. The Indigenous understanding of education for the Rimba aligns with their perspective: it represents genuine learning centered on living well and nurturing a harmonious existence. They believe this immersive education embodies the essence of an authentic school—a place where practical knowledge for living and thriving is imparted. Among the jungle children (*orang rimba*), education is valued when it directly supports human survival and the preservation of the natural environment, including vital resources like food and water.

This belief resonates strongly within the Rimba community and the larger populations of Riau and Jambi. The forests and rivers in the regions inhabited by the Orang Rimba are not merely resources for their own use; they are also cherished and shared with the broader community. Therefore, education is crucial in fostering a sense of interconnectedness between humans and nature, underscoring the essential role of education in protecting the environment for the collective well-being.¹⁸

In their research, Rian and Anwar illuminate that jungle school education is a proactive effort to enhance the fundamental right to freedom for jungle-dwelling communities. By providing education in the jungle context, these initiatives empower the inhabitants with essential knowledge and skills, enabling them to navigate their environment, access resources, and make informed decisions. This form of education enriches their lives and strengthens their agency and ability to exercise their freedom effectively within their unique ecological world.¹⁹ The Orang Rimba community integrates the forest into their identity, establishing it as an inseparable aspect of their existence. The forest transcends being merely an educational tool; it embodies a living source of education. In this profound symbiotic relationship, the jungle-dwelling people become stewards of the forest, protecting it to ensure the continuity of the universe's existence. Nyoman and Kadek further assert that jungle school education goes beyond

¹⁸ Musdodi Manalu (2023), *The Forest Is Our Home: Revisiting the Modernization Project of Suku Anak Dalam in Jambi*, retrieved 22 October, 2023, <https://icir.or.id/1183/Indigenous/2023/the-Forest-Is-Our-Home-Revisiting-the-Modernization-Project-of-Suku-Anak-Dalam-in-Jambi/>.

¹⁹ Rian Aji Lestari and M Shoim Anwar (2015), "Pendidikan Antisipatoris Dalam Menghadapi Arus Transformasi Dunia Pada Novel Sokola Rimba Karya Butet Manurung," *Jurnal Buana Bastra Tahun* 2, no. 2, 115.

preserving earthly life and includes a strong character education component. This unique educational approach encompasses a variety of values, such as social responsibility, diligent work ethics, accountability, tolerance, spirituality, environmental awareness, peace advocacy, curiosity, creativity, and camaraderie. The educational style adopted by jungle schools reflects a broader view of holistic development, fostering qualities that sustain the environment and cultivate well-rounded individuals within their societal context.²⁰

The practice of jungle school education resonates with the Lakoat.Kujawas case in Molo. Dicky Senda, in collaboration with the youth of Taiftob village in Kapan, East Nusa Tenggara, illustrates the significance of indigenous education as a response to the adversities of drought and hunger in their area. Through Lakoat.Kujawas, the Indigenous education initiative, the community strives to equip themselves with knowledge and skills deeply rooted in their culture, enabling them to confront the pressing challenges of environmental sustainability and food scarcity in Taiftob.

This practice underscores the strength of Indigenous education as an adaptive mechanism to address complex real-world challenges while maintaining cultural integrity. To protect the land and livelihoods of the Mollo people, Lakoat.Kujawas established a contextual education community known as "the lighthouse." The learning model consists of reading and writing the life stories of the Mollo people, reflecting their history concerning nature and mankind.²¹ Senda and the young people of Mollo actively revitalize their culture's food knowledge and literature as a form of resistance against the consumerism and hedonism fueled by capitalism. Young people in Mollo learn to care for nature and protect the forest, as the forest provides food and drink for their kitchens.

Efforts to restore the lives of the people and the land of Molo are primarily carried out through education and publications. The traditional customs of Molo, which were initially transmitted orally from generation to generation, are transformed into various forms of literacy. Dicky Senda has published numerous literary works that preserve the culture and customs of the Molo people, including *Sai Rai*, the poetry anthology *Tubuhku Batu Rumahku Bulan*, *Kanuku Leon*, *Hau Kamelin & Tuan Kamlasi*, and other pieces. Harriet Crisp, in her thesis on literary activity, Lakoat.Kujawas, noted that the publication movement led by Dicky Senda aimed to create a modern Indigenous literacy model that bridged custom and modernity.²² In summary, Literacy Lakoat.Kujawas serve as the community's educational tool to sustain the survival of both the people and the mother (nature) of Mollo.

Sokola Rimba and Lakoat.Kujawas are exemplary representations of Indonesia's diverse indigenous education landscape. These two initiatives emphasize the ingenuity of grassroots communities in shaping education and establishing schools uniquely

²⁰ Nyoman Payuyasa and Kadek Hengki Primayana (2020), "Meningkatkan Mutu Pendidikan Karakter Melalui Film 'SOKOLA RIMBA,'" *Jurnal Penjamin Mutu Institut Hindu Dharma Negeri Denpasar*, 119, <http://ejournal.ihtn.ac.id/index.php/JPM>.

²¹ Harriet April Crisp, *Writing Indigenous Literature in Indonesia: The Case of Lakoat.Kujawas* (Gadjah Mada University, 2021), 34–35.

²² Crisp, *Writing Indigenous Literature in Indonesia: The Case of Lakoat.Kujawas*, 63.

tailored to their contexts. For both the Rimba communities and the Molo people, the development of Indigenous education stems from a conscientious and deliberate effort to revitalize their cultural heritage and indigenous wisdom specific to each region. Sokola Rimba and Lakoat.Kujawas exemplify innovative educational models grounded in indigenous knowledge. These initiatives highlight the skillful adaptation of traditional practices to create an educational foundation that resonates with their distinct cultural backgrounds. Through these efforts, the jungle communities and the Molo people demonstrate the vital importance of Indigenous education as a robust response to multifaceted societal challenges—most notably, forest conservation—relying on the inherent strength of their cultural values and educational practices.

It is agreed that the educational endeavors undertaken by Lakoat Kujawas and Sokola Rimba align well with the indigenous religion paradigm advanced by Samsul Maarif. According to Maarif, this paradigm revolves around three fundamental principles: responsibility, ethics, and intersubjective reciprocity, all deeply intertwined with religious principles within the indigenous context. Essentially, being religious, as defined by the indigenous religion paradigm, is synonymous with embracing responsibility, ethics, and reciprocity.²³ When they engage in interrelatedness, the concept of adat becomes crucial. Adat grounds followers in a relatedness through which religiosity is exercised.²⁴ Regarding religiosity, the “inter-subjective relationship” is the foundation. Being religious means being engaged in inter-subjective relations.²⁵

In stark contrast to the anthropocentric and hierarchical interpretation of religious categorization endorsed by the government, indigenous communities recognize a profound interconnectedness among themselves, the divine, and the natural world. Within the indigenous framework, spirituality fosters an equitable, intersubjective relationship that harmoniously connects humanity and the universe. This perspective sharply contrasts with the Indonesian government's religious paradigm, which is characterized by its hierarchical and anthropocentric nature and mainly results from the dominance of the world religion paradigm.

The Indigenous understanding of spirituality is both comprehensive and relational. It acknowledges the intricate interplay among humans, the divine, and the environment, leading to a holistic understanding of spirituality and existence. This outlook significantly diverges from the religious paradigm maintained by the Indonesian government, which predominantly follows a hierarchical and anthropocentric approach, primarily shaped by the limitations of the world religion paradigm.

From the explanation above, I believe that the education of Sokola Rimba and Lakoat.Kujawas is religious, which I refer to as indigenous religious education. This term accurately captures the spiritual and cultural dimensions embedded in these practices. The contextual and ecological aspects of religiosity prominently manifest within these educational models. Sokola Rimba's approach exemplifies a profound harmony with

²³ Maarif, *Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-Interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People*, 115.

²⁴ Maarif and Asfinawati, *Toward a (More) Inclusive FORB: A Framework for the Advocacy for the Rights of Indigenous People*, 221.

²⁵ Maarif, *Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-Interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People*, 115.

nature, where the forest serves as the classroom, and the natural world acts as the educator. This symbiotic learning process imparts knowledge and emphasizes the vital connection between the Orang Rimba, their environment, and their survival. Similarly, Lakoat.Kujawas highlights the role of education in revitalizing cultural traditions within the Molo community, fostering a sense of identity and continuity through various mediums such as written records, culinary practices, and musical expressions.

The ecological dimension of these practices highlights the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Instead of viewing nature as static, these initiatives emphasize its preservation and care. This understanding underscores the equal importance of human life and the environment, representing a holistic approach that aligns with the indigenous religious paradigm. It then offers a compelling perspective on how these indigenous education models embody religiosity and ecological consciousness.

In contrast to the conventional approach to religious education, which often aligns with the world religion paradigm, indigenous religious education (IRE) places paramount importance on contextual and ecological considerations. The practical implementation of IRE in Indonesia is exemplified by the initiatives of Sokola Rimba in Sumatra and Lakoat.Kujawas in Mollo, which actively contributes to devising innovative solutions for the country's pressing environmental challenges, such as forest conservation and water management. IRE underscores the intrinsic religious dimension within indigenous traditions, emphasizing its significant role in Indonesian society by advocating for an education that centers on the coexistence of humanity and nature. This profound religiosity is evident in its sensitivity towards addressing social and ecological issues. Sokola Rimba and Lakoat.Kujawas adopt an Indigenous lens to construct a pedagogical framework that resonates with their communities, enhancing their overall well-being and the sustainability of their living environments.

The Orang Rimba's dedication to safeguarding their natural surroundings resonates deeply with their conception of the forest, water, and air as integral components of life. Their stewardship extends to nurturing the vitality of Jambi's Forest, which they view as the "lungs of the world." Similarly, the youth of Lakoat.Kujawas actively engage in cultural revitalization to preserve their land against drought and hunger. They frame the education provided by Sokola Rimba and Lakoat.Kujawas as expressions of religious practice, revealing that this dimension is analogous to the religiosity inherent in all religious traditions across Indonesia, including the six official religions overseen by the Ministry of Religion. These indigenous educational practices transcend established religious boundaries, channeling a common reverence for nature and fostering harmonious coexistence between humanity and the environment.

V. FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF AND INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The Indonesian government reified indigenous education into *Belief* Education through the national education system. Education is a government vehicle that turns indigenous education into secular education. Therefore, the current Indonesian education system is discriminating against indigenous communities. In building advocacy for Indigenous communities, including Indigenous communities, on the one hand, I agree with Maarif and Asfinawati that FORB discussions, in the Indonesian context, must include Indigenous religions in a more ecocentric FORB paradigm.²⁶ On the other hand, FORB advocacy must engage the community (agency) as the foundation for the movement because, as Topidi points out, Indigenous communities have ways of adapting their paradigms to meet public needs.²⁷ The ecocentric and agency paradigm will reinforce Indigenous religious education as a framework for seeking justice for Indigenous students within formal education.

Indigenous religious education can serve as a language of struggle and an alternative to traditional religious and belief education. First, religious education tends to be limited by anthropocentrism, whereas religiosity aspires to embrace multiculturalism. In this context, the multiculturalism referenced pertains to human diversity. Second, Indigenous education is often confined to private and local domains within religious education. In the framework of indigenous religious education, acknowledging indigenous education serves as a reference point to affirm the public and ecological preparedness of such education. Sokola Jungle and Lakoat Kujawas illustrate that the educational practices in their schools are geared towards human life and the environment, encompassing all creation beyond their respective communities. Education is an action aimed at nurturing life. Indigenous communities perceive themselves as religiously connected to education. Thus, to borrow Maria Peterseen's term, the advocacy for indigenous communities and education is inseparable.

To strive for justice for Indigenous communities, Indigenous education must be equated with religious education in Indonesia, as it serves as a contextual and ecological model of education. The Indigenous community will also be recognized as spiritual, equal to, and on par with the six official religions. Classifying Indigenous education as secular is a scientific error that promotes human rights violations against Indigenous communities. Various studies have shown that Indigenous students are often targeted for conversion by the majority of religious groups in Indonesia because the state continues to classify Indigenous education as secular and inter-religious violence occurs.

In developing an education system for indigenous communities in Indonesia, indigenous religious education serves as the primary basis for acknowledging indigenous education and placing it on equal footing with other forms of religious education. Recognizing the spirituality inherent in Indigenous education creates an equitable space

²⁶ Maarif & Asfinawati, 2022a, pp. 206–208.

²⁷ Topidi, *Law and Religious Diversity in Education; The Right to Difference*, 190.

for Indigenous communities to navigate the ecological constraints of religious education and the public limitations of the belief system in education. As a practical recommendation, IRE should be regarded alongside religious education within the Ministry of Religion. IRE plays a crucial role in the national education system. Acknowledging IRE represents the first step toward ending state discrimination against indigenous communities.

VI. CONCLUSION

Indonesia's educational policies systematically marginalize indigenous education by framing it as private and anthropocentric, thereby denying its legitimacy within the formal educational system. This exclusion is reinforced by the state's restrictive religious framework, which recognizes only six official religions while undermining indigenous spiritual traditions. Such policies do not merely reflect administrative classifications but constitute a broader epistemic injustice that erases indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and engaging with the world. By prioritizing state-sanctioned religious instruction over Indigenous belief systems, the education policy actively diminishes Indigenous cosmologies, reducing them to cultural artifacts instead of vibrant knowledge systems. This rigid framework fails to recognize that belief systems are central to education, shaping moral values, worldviews, and epistemologies.

Furthermore, insisting on a rigid distinction between religious education and Indigenous education reflects a colonial legacy that privileges institutionalized religions over localized spiritual traditions. This framework not only undermines the holistic nature of Indigenous education—integrating ecological, spiritual, and communal values—but also restricts Indigenous communities from transmitting their knowledge within formal educational structures. Failing to recognize belief systems as fundamental to education results in policies that perpetuate structural discrimination against Indigenous communities.

An inclusive approach to education must recognize that belief systems—whether religious, spiritual, or indigenous—are inseparable from knowledge production and identity formation. The current exclusion of indigenous education from religious policy not only violates constitutional protections of religious freedom and cultural rights but also sustains an educational hierarchy that favors dominant religious narratives over indigenous epistemologies. Consequently, Indonesia's education policy is not merely inadequate; it is actively exclusionary and unconstitutional, necessitating urgent reform to ensure epistemic justice and protect indigenous religious education as an integral part of the nation's pluralistic identity.

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