


# Islamic Da'wah and the Preservation of the Tamil Language: A Case Study of Singapore's Chulia Mosque


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## Abstract

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*This research reveals the tradition of Islamic preaching and the contribution of the Tamil language at the Chulia Mosque in building Singapore's religious life. The concept of da'wah and the use of the Tamil language can be used as an example for other mosques in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all worshippers. Mosques play a significant role in making Singapore a friendly country for all ethnicities and religions. This research is qualitative in nature with a descriptive qualitative approach through observation and documentation methods. The results of this study focus on two important things; First, the contribution of the mosque in strengthening the tradition of inclusive Islamic da'wah. Second, Singapore's multilingualism through the Tamil language is one of the main factors in*

*building religious harmony in diversity.*

**Keyword :** *Chulia, Tamil, Islam, Multilingualism*

## Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengungkap tradisi dakwah Islam dan kontribusi bahasa Tamil di Masjid Chulia dalam membangun kehidupan beragama di Singapura. Konsep dakwah dan penggunaan bahasa Tamil dapat dijadikan

contoh bagi masjid-masjid lain dalam menciptakan lingkungan yang inklusif dan ramah bagi semua jamaah. Masjid memainkan peran penting dalam menjadikan Singapura sebagai negara yang ramah bagi semua etnis dan agama. Penelitian ini bersifat kualitatif dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif melalui metode observasi dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian ini berfokus pada dua hal penting; Pertama, kontribusi masjid dalam memperkuat tradisi dakwah Islam yang inklusif. Kedua, multilingualisme Singapura melalui bahasa Tamil menjadi salah satu faktor utama dalam membangun kerukunan umat beragama dalam keberagaman.

**Kata kunci:** Chulia, Bahasa Tamil, Islam, Multilingualisme.

## A. INTRODUCTION

Islam is actually a "religion of peace", whatever forms of violence and extremism, are entirely against Islamic teachings (Wahid 2006, 302). This is a fact that cannot be denied, even by those who commit acts of violence in the name of Islam. The reality of this rahmah Islamic teachings is contrary to the religious ideology campaigned by Islamic groups that emphasize formal institutions rather than cultural approaches. (Wahid 2006, 308).

This should not be left alone. Wrong religious understanding creates the perception that Islam as a religion must be abandoned and shunned. Whereas adherents of Islam who speak loudly and preach jihad-jihad image of an angry Islam, not a friendly Islam. For this reason, substantial mainstream Islamic groups in the archipelago have begun to reactively fight back with counter-narratives to what the radical-extremist Islamic groups are discussing.

Of all the efforts, both using the hard power and soft power approaches, education is considered to be a field that plays a very important role in shaping the religious paradigm of the young generation of the Indonesian nation so that it is free from radical-extremist ideology.

Exclusive religious expressions make them less open in receiving input and opinions from outside their group so that they are not infrequently confident in the results of their thoughts and such. Without realizing, they are projected to carry out radical actions in order to achieve certain targets driven by interest groups. This is then referred to as symbolic violence. Violence that occurs gently without being noticed by the object.

Symbolic violence also occurs in the practice of religious education in Indonesia. Through research conducted by Hakim (2016) banned symbolic violence content in books on Islamic Religious Education and High School Characteristics. The results of his research show that there is coercion of the sins of the Salafi-Wahhabi sect in the book's narratives. On the other hand, Hakim (2016) also criticized radical teachings in the book *Islamic Children Like to Read*. Research proves that there is a consistent alignment of the author of the book in campaigning for an exclusive and radical Islam.

In fact, there have been many studies that have attempted to undermine the inculcation of radical notions in educational practice. Some studies that explore radicalism and education include: A study on counter-radicalism education was conducted by Machali (2013: 41) through his concept of peace education that education is able to develop attitudes and behavior to be able to live in mutual respect, tolerance, full of peace, mutual assistance, and non-violence. One of the breakthroughs to counteract this intolerance is through multicultural education. Multicultural education was also conveyed by Arifin (2014: 409) in his research, that it is a central tool in the process of deradicalization. Another study that is relevant to the discussion of counter-radicalism education was carried out by Ma'arif (2006), who found the Islamic Education curriculum conception based on progress as a solution to display the tolerant face of Islam.

The problem of radicalism is not only faced by Indonesia. Singapore as a developed country also feels this way. Leow (2001) describes that Singapore has become a capitalist country which has since separated from Malaysia and became the Republic of Singapore on 9 August 1965. The population of this country consists of four million citizens who come from various ethnicities, including Chinese (78%), Malays (14 %), Indians (7%), and other races.

According to Tan (2008:5) Terrorist attacks under the guise of religion are also felt by Singapore. After Indonesia with the Bali bombing and a series of other terrors. In December 2001 terror carried out by 15 members of Jemaah Islamiah (JI) threatened the centers of Singapore City and foreign embassies. This also happened in August 2002 by 21 JI members with the same concentration.

Jemaah Islamiah (JI) is affiliated with terrorist networks in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Australia. This movement was born inspired by al Qaeda as the initiator of global terrorism. The purpose of its establishment is to form an

Islamic Daulah (Islamic State) in Southeast Asia. Through building religious narratives that are against the ruling government and the notion that Muslims are a community that is always oppressed.

In addition to the above data, researchers found several other things that are also important. Mukhlis (2009: 445) conducted an in-depth study, through a process of field and literary analysis, showing that the radical ideology that developed in Singapore did not only originate from the educational process at Madrasas or study activities at mosques. But due to the consumption of its citizens against radical content found on the internet.

## **B. RESEARCH METHODS**

Qualitative descriptive method used by the authors in this study. This is done to describe the multi-lingual life of Singaporeans and the contribution of madrasas in efforts to counter-radicalism education. Donald (2005: 137) explains that qualitative research aims to describe and clarify human experiences in their lives.

Library analysis (library research) and field research (field research) are the approaches used in this paper. Through literature analysis, the author collects a variety of information relating to the religious life of Singaporeans, multi-lingual life and the concept of madrasah education in counteracting radical-extremist Islamic movements. Through field analysis, the author confirms the reference source with the actual situation. The purpose of this research is to reveal how languages in Singapore contribute to building harmony in the life of its people.

## **C. RESEARCH RESULT**

### **The Diversity of Singaporean Society**

Kamarudin and Zuhri (2017:3) explain that the style of Singaporean Islam actually adheres to the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah ideology. This madzab has received official recognition from the State. As stated in the Administration of Muslim Law Act [AMLA] which states:

“Article 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore guarantees the rights of minority communities to their religious beliefs and practices. This allows Muslims to practice their Islamic faith in Singapore. The Administration of the Muslim Law Act enacted in 1966 outlines the sphere of Muslim activities in the public and legal domain.” “Muslims in Singapore live their

religious life according to the Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah. With regards to the legal school of thought, the Syafie school is followed by the majority of Muslims. Fatwas are also mainly issued according to this school, as mentioned in the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA)<sup>1</sup>

The constitution above shows the active role of the state in regulating Muslim life in Singapore. More explicitly Kamarudin and Zuhri describe that the Abu al-Hasan al-Asy'ari school of belief and the Fiqh school of Muhammad ibn Idris al-Syafi'i are applied in the daily life of the Muslims of this country (2017:4)

The Singapore government holds full authority over regulations relating to the lives of its citizens in all fields, including religion. Tend to be anti-criticism and authoritarian in organizing the life of the state. The instructive and rigid approach is enforced in Singapore.

Stability in Singapore is similar to life during the New Order era in Indonesia. Society is constrained in such a way as to follow the rules of the state by compulsion. Multiculturalism in Singapore is not built on the basis of shared awareness. But because of strict instructions from the state. The top-down approach was chosen by the government to maintain national stability and the lives of its citizens, including religion and belief. Such as MUIS, PERGAS and PERDAUS. (Abdullah, 2013)

Arif Ahmad (2014) describes that the highest form of Islamic institution in Singapore is the MUIS (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura). MUIS is under the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs and has full authority in managing the life of the country's Muslims. This institution is a representation of the state which is considered to represent the kingdom and obey the orders given by the kingdom.

Most of the followers of Islam come from the Malay ethnicity. The rest are from the Indian and Pakistani communities as well as small numbers from China, Arabs and Eurasians. The majority of Singapore's Muslim population are traditionally Sunni Muslims who follow the Shafi'i school of thought, there are also Muslims who follow the Hanafi school of thought and a few Shia Muslims (Kosim, 2011:437).

### **Singapore Chulia Mosque**

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Singapore Chulia Mosque is one of the oldest mosques in Singapore. This mosque was built in 1827 and is located on Jalan Haji Muhammad Salleh, formerly known as Chulia Street. In its development, this mosque has become a center of religious activity for the Tamil and South Indian people who live around Chulia Street. This mosque was built on waqf land donated by a trader named Habib Nuh. (Profile Document of Chulia Mosque).

Singapore Chulia Mosque was originally a simple wooden building, but was later renovated and expanded into a permanent building in 1855. During its history, Chulia Singapore Mosque has undergone several renovations and expansions, including in the 1970s when the roof of the mosque was replaced with ceramic tiles and the main prayer hall was expanded. Until now, Singapore Chulia Mosque remains a center of religious and social activities for Muslims in Singapore, as well as being one of the popular religious tourist attractions in Singapore (Ali, A, 2015).

### **The Da'wah Tradition of the Chulia Mosque**

Singapore Chulia Mosque has a long and rich history of religious activity. One of the religious activities carried out at the Singapore Chulia Mosque is a religious guidance or recitation program which is held every week. The religious guidance program at the Chulia Mosque in Singapore involves studying books such as the Al-Quran and Hadith. Apart from that, commentary books are also frequently discussed in religious guidance programs (Hill, AH, 1949).

In addition to holy books and interpretations, the Chulia Mosque in Singapore also studies various religious books such as fiqh (Islamic law), ushul fiqh (principles of Islamic law), tasawuf (science of Islamic spirituality), and Islamic history. The religious guidance program at Chulia Mosque Singapore is delivered in multiple languages, including Malay, Tamil and English. This is done to facilitate pilgrims who have different language backgrounds.

In addition to the religious guidance program, Singapore's Chulia Mosque also organizes various social and humanitarian activities, such as social services and food distribution to people in need. This is in line with Islamic teachings which emphasize the importance of caring and compassion for others.

Singapore Chulia Mosque examines various holy books and religious studies in its religious guidance program. This religious guidance program is delivered in various languages to facilitate

congregations with different language backgrounds. In addition to religious activities, the Singapore Chulia Mosque also organizes various social and humanitarian activities as a form of concern for others.

The Imam of the Chulis Mosque explained that the Singapore Chulia Mosque had made various efforts in carrying out da'wah. Some of the da'wah activities carried out by the Singapore Chulia Mosque include: First, Islamic Studies. Singapore Chulia Mosque organizes Islamic studies regularly every week. This study was held to introduce Islamic teachings to the public. This study discusses various topics related to Islam, such as morals, aqidah, fiqh, and Islamic history (Interview, 2018).

Second, Friday lecture. Every Friday, Singapore's Chulia Mosque holds Friday lectures. This lecture was held to provide teaching about Islamic teachings to mosque congregations. This lecture discusses various topics related to Islam, such as morals, aqidah, fiqh, and Islamic history.

Third, Social activities. Singapore Chulia Mosque also holds various social activities. This social activity was held to help people in need. Some of the social activities carried out by the Singapore Chulia Mosque include providing assistance to orphans, providing assistance to people in need, and holding activities to clean up the environment around the mosque.

Fourth, Academic Guidance. Singapore Chulia Mosque also provides academic guidance for Muslim students. This guidance aims to help Muslim students understand Islamic teachings and improve their academic achievement. This guidance includes lessons such as Arabic, interpretation of the Koran, hadith, fiqh, and Islamic history.

Fifth, Facilities for Da'wah Activities. Singapore Chulia Mosque also provides facilities for da'wah activities. These facilities include meeting rooms, a library and a recording studio. This facility can be used by the community to hold da'wah activities such as seminars, lectures, and Islamic discussions.

Sixth, Ramadan activities. Every year, Singapore's Chulia Mosque holds various activities during the month of Ramadan. These activities include tarawih, breaking the fast together, and other activities aimed at increasing people's understanding and practice of Islam.

### **Chulia Mosque and Chinatown Harmony**

Jamae Mosque or Chulia Mosque is located in Singapore's Chinatown area. The Chinatown area in Singapore is known as one of the city's famous tourist destinations. This area is famous for the harmony between the various ethnic groups living there, including people of ethnic Chinese, Malay, and Indian.

Since time immemorial, Chinatown in Singapore has been a center of commerce and economic activity, as well as home to various ethnic groups. Despite their cultural and religious differences, the residents of Singapore's Chinatown are known to have high tolerance and respect for one another.

“This harmony in the Chinatown area can be seen in the various activities carried out together, such as the celebration of the Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Deepavali. At such times, the various ethnic groups in the Chinatown area hold joint celebrations attended by all residents of the area.” (Interview, Imam Masjid Chulia, 2018)

In addition, the Chinatown area also has various places of worship that cater to the spiritual needs of each ethnic group, such as Buddhist temples, Hindu temples and Islamic mosques. Residents of the Chinatown area can visit this place of worship to worship and respect different religious beliefs.

The Chinatown area in Singapore is known for its high diversity, including in terms of religion. Although the majority of Chinatown's residents are Chinese, there are also Malay, Indian and other ethnic groups who practice different religions, including Islam.

“In addition, in the Chinatown area there are also places of worship that cater to the spiritual needs of each religion, including mosques for Muslims, temples for Hindus and Buddhists, and churches for Christians. Residents of the Chinatown area can visit the place of worship without experiencing obstacles or discrimination”. (Albert Interview, 2018)

This tolerance and diversity is also reflected in daily life in the Chinatown area, where Muslims and non-Muslims live side by side in peace and respect each other. This shows that in Singapore, despite cultural and religious differences, people can live in harmony and respect the diversity that exists.

### **Use of Tamil at the Chulia Mosque**

The use of Tamil in Singapore's Chulia Mosque is part of the history and tradition of this mosque. Tamil is used as the language of instruction in mosques and also as the language of instruction in religious guidance programs. This is due to the large number of Tamil and South Indian people who lived around Chulia Street in the past (Singh, 2015).

“The use of Tamil in Singapore's Chulia Mosque has also been maintained to this day. Although the majority of the mosque's congregation today are of Malay and Indonesian ethnicity, the use of the Tamil language is still maintained as a form of respect for the history and traditions of the mosque”. (Rahman Interview, 2018)

The use of the Tamil language at Singapore's Chulia Mosque can also be interpreted as an effort to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all worshippers, regardless of their ethnic and linguistic background. This is in line with Islamic values which emphasize the importance of unity and oneness in diversity.

However, the use of Tamil at the Chulia Mosque in Singapore does not exclude the use of Malay or English in religious activities. This mosque still opens opportunities for worshippers who wish to take part in religious guidance programs in Malay or English.

The use of Tamil in Singapore's Chulia Mosque is part of the history and tradition of this mosque. It is also proof that mosques can be inclusive and welcoming places for all worshippers, regardless of their ethnic and linguistic background. The use of Tamil in Singapore's Chulia Mosque can serve as an example for other mosques in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all worshippers.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Through various da'wah activities that have been carried out by the Singapore Chulia Mosque, this mosque has played an active role in spreading Islamic teachings in Singapore. Da'wah activities carried out by the Singapore Chulia Mosque include Islamic studies, Friday lectures, social activities, academic guidance, facilities for da'wah activities, and Ramadan activities. It is hoped that with these various activities, people can understand Islamic teachings and improve their Islamic practices.

Singapore Chulia Mosque can be an example for other mosques in carrying out da'wah. By carrying out various da'wah activities, mosques can play an active role in spreading Islamic teachings and improving

community Islamic practices. In addition, the use of the facilities provided by the mosque can facilitate the community in carrying out da'wah activities. Therefore, mosques must continue to innovate in conducting da'wah in order to attract the attention and participation of the community in understanding and practicing Islamic teachings.

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