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Navigating Existence and Community Harmony: A Case Study of Pondok Pesantren in Muslim Minority Ende, Nusa Tenggara Timur

**Sabarudin¹; Muhammad Nurul Mubin²; Amin Maghfuri³;
Muh. Wasith Achadi⁴; Mardeli⁵; Syarnubi⁶; Sembodo Ardi Widodo⁷**

^{1,2,4,7}*Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

³*Monash University, Australia*

^{5,6}*Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia*

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NAVIGATING EXISTENCE AND COMMUNITY HARMONY: A CASE STUDY OF PONDOK PESANTREN IN MUSLIM MINORITY ENDE, NUSA TENGGARA TIMUR

Sabarudin¹; Muhammad Nurul Mubin²; Amin Maghfuri³;
Muh. Wasith Achadi⁴; Mardeli⁵; Syarnubi⁶; Sembodo Ardi Widodo⁷

^{1,2,4,7}Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

³Monash University, Australia

^{5,6}Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia

¹Correspondence Email: sabarudin@uin-suka.ac.id

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Abstract

This study examines Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja's strategies to thrive within a Catholic-majority community in Ende, Nusa Tenggara Timur, emphasizing interfaith harmony and educational resilience. This study employs a qualitative case study approach to delve into the institution's adaptive methods and contributions to communal harmony. It does so through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Results highlight the institution's ability to foster mutual respect and social cohesion through various programs grounded in its foundation of collaboration between Islamic and Catholic figures. The study identifies critical factors for its sustainability: fostering Silaturahmi (communication and friendship), collaboration with the Catholic community, and commitments to social-cultural integration, education, and self-reliance. These elements collectively enhance the Pesantren's role in promoting religious understanding and community harmony. The findings suggest that Pesantren's approach offers a model for navigating religious identity complexities and community integration. Limitations include the study's focus on a single institution and reliance on qualitative data, pointing to the need for broader comparative research to generalize findings. The study underscores the potential of religious education in advancing social harmony, advocating for further exploration across diverse settings.

Keywords: Pondok Pesantren; Minority Muslim Area; Interfaith Collaboration.



A. Introduction

The role of religious educational institutions in shaping societal values, fostering community cohesion, and contributing to the overall well-being of minority communities is critically important in today's increasingly diverse societies (Sahin, 2018). This role is particularly true for *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja*, an Islamic educational institution in the predominantly Catholic area of Ende, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia. The institution serves as a microcosm for understanding the broader dynamics of religious education in minority settings, which has garnered increasing attention in academic circles and policy discussions. Understanding the existential strategies employed by such institutions can offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between religion, education, and community in minority settings. This is especially pertinent given the global focus on multiculturalism, religious diversity, and the role of educational institutions in promoting social cohesion (Aw et al., 2017; Machali et al., 2023; Rohmah & Sulong, 2023; Yahyani et al., 2020).

Previous research has extensively explored the intersection of religion and education. For example, studies have shown that Islamic education in Muslim minority areas in Indonesia successfully integrates with local cultures (Dasopang et al., 2022; Widiyanto et al., 2024). Islamic schools in Southeast Asia have been scrutinized for their potential role in fostering extremism but also reflect the complex interplay of politics, culture, and religious education (Hefner, 2009; Hidayat et al., 2023). Furthermore, research in Thailand has shown that the Malay Muslim community resists government policies aimed at the standardization and secularization of education (Ya'Qub, 2003; Rokhman et al., 2023). These studies provide a foundational understanding of the complexities involved in religious education in various sociocultural contexts.

In Indonesia, the concept of *pesantren*, or Islamic boarding schools, has also been a subject of academic inquiry. Studies indicate that *pesantren* in contemporary Aceh have evolved into multicultural institutions (Rahman & Walid, 2022). Similarly, local culture-based *pesantren* in Soppeng Regency serve as platforms for multicultural education, reinforcing religious moderation



through applying local cultural values (Burga & Damopolii, 2022; Ma`arif et al., 2023). However, despite the decentralization and marketization of education in Indonesia, the role of schools, including *pesantren*, in nurturing multicultural citizens remains complex and contested (Raihani, 2014; Zulfatmi, 2023). Challenges such as teachers' lack of competency and unclear multicultural objectives persist (Raihani, 2012).

The broader landscape of religious education and its intersection with cultural diversity is a growing field of study. For instance, Small & MacDonald-Dennis (2023) argue that addressing the spiritual and religious diversity among college students is crucial for student affairs professionals. Similarly, the need for curriculum renewal in Islamic Education is emphasized, advocating for a culturally responsive approach that considers global and sociocultural contexts (Memon et al., 2021; Sapendi et al., 2023; Syarif et al., 2024). Textbooks often reflect the ideological goals of dominant groups in society, affecting the representation of marginalized communities and shaping national narratives in education (Hildebrandt-Wypych & Wiseman, 2021). These studies highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of how religious and educational institutions adapt and evolve in diverse sociocultural settings.

Despite the wealth of research on religious education and cultural diversity, there exists a gap in the literature concerning the specific strategies employed by Islamic educational institutions in minority settings. This case is particularly true for *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja*, which operates in a predominantly Catholic community. Understanding these strategies is crucial for shedding light on the complexities of religious education in minority contexts. Previous studies have yet to adequately address the unique challenges and opportunities such institutions face in maintaining their existence and ensuring their growth and development. This gap in the literature necessitates a focused investigation into *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja's* existential strategies.

The primary objective of this research is to elucidate the strategies employed to maintain and preserve the existence of *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja*, particularly in the context of its growth and



development within a predominantly Catholic community. This study aims to provide a model for other Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia by employing qualitative research methods, including purposive and snowball sampling, interviews, observations, and document studies, especially in online media. The research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering a nuanced understanding of the existential strategies of religious educational institutions in minority settings. It will also provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders promoting religious and cultural diversity in academic settings. Through this research, we aim to fill the existing gap in the literature and contribute to the broader discourse on religious education in minority contexts.

B. Method

This qualitative study employed a case study approach to examine how *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga*, situated at the base of Mount Meja in South Ende District, Ende Regency, Nusa Tenggara Timur, has sustained its educational presence in an environment where Muslims are in the minority. The case study approach provided a profound and comprehensive understanding of the intricate phenomena within their natural settings. It was particularly beneficial when dynamic relationships, processes, and social contexts significantly influence the subject under investigation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Data collection was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis from November 2022 to January 2023, targeting key figures such as the Foundation's Chairperson, the caretakers of *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga*, the heads of both the *Madrasah Aliyah* and *Tsanawiyah Wali Sanga*, two instructors from the *pesantren*, TOM Friars, and five students residing in the *pesantren*.

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive three-step process: Data Reduction, Data Display, and Conclusion Drawing/ Verification. It involved distilling essential information from interviews, observations, and documents, organizing this reduced data into comprehensible formats such as narratives or charts, and summarizing and coding the narrative data collected



to identify critical patterns and meanings (Miles & Huberman, A. Michael, Saldana, 2018). Coding was performed iteratively during the analysis phase to pinpoint significant themes within the narratives and implications. The methodological approach underscored a commitment to a fair and thorough exploration of the case, reflecting the principles of integrity in qualitative research. Data triangulation was employed to cross-examine information from interviews, observations, and documents, enhancing the study's validity and reliability by confirming findings across multiple data sources (Bengtsson, 2016). The rigorous analytical process focused on the adaptive strategies and sustainability of education at the *pesantren*. It ensures the study's reliability and validity through a meticulous and systematic examination of the data collected. This approach maintained the credibility of the study.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Result

Based on the findings of the research, the existence of the *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga in the Muslim minority area of Ende, East Nusa Tenggara, has been successfully maintained despite being surrounded by a Catholic majority. The substantial contribution of the *pesantren* to the surrounding community has been a critical factor underpinning this sustainability. The *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga has managed to maintain harmonious social relations with the nearby Catholic community. This religious and educational institution promotes mutual respect through various programs and social activities. It fosters good relationships between different religious groups, creating a conducive social ecosystem for sustainability and growth in the region. The strategy is as follows.

a. Sustainability and Impact of Educational Commitment

In maintaining the existence of the *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga in Ende, NTT, the boarding school always prioritizes sustainability and commitment to education. It includes maintaining the quality of the educational process, continuously ensuring the quality of teaching resources, and striving to improve educational facilities and infrastructure.



In the learning process, the *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga* prioritizes the students' comfort and practical application of Islamic teachings in daily life. The focus is on learning prayers and practicing *Sunnah*, rather than studying complex religious texts, to ensure students can integrate spiritual values into their daily actions.

One of the students expressed this.

"The learning in the boarding school is prioritized to make the students feel happy living there. The study of complex religious texts, which is considered quite difficult, has not been implemented as in other Islamic boarding schools in Java. At Wali Sanga, there is a greater emphasis on learning and memorizing prayers for community life, such as prayers after the five daily prayers, after reciting Yasin and Tahlil and practicing the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad" (Student 1, Interview, 2022).

It was also revealed by the Custodian of the *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga*: *"Students who enter the Islamic boarding school usually start with fundamental knowledge of Islam. Therefore, we build their knowledge from the fundamentals. If any religious texts are used, it is only Ta'limul Muta'allim"* (Kyai Abdul Ghani, Interview, 2022).

Regarding educational commitment, the foundation and administrators always strive to maintain the quality of learning and the student's skills. It is achieved by maintaining human resources by recruiting competent teachers from distinguished alumni and graduates from Islamic boarding schools in Java.

It was stated by the Chairman of the Wali Sanga Foundation, who said.

"We are committed to recruiting teachers who are not only competent in their fields but also have high spirit and dedication to education. Many of our teachers are distinguished alumni from renowned educational institutions, including alumni who are graduates of prominent Islamic boarding schools in Java" (Halimah, Interview, 2023).

Regarding the efforts to maintain educational quality by the *pesantren*, the students at Islamic boarding schools not only achieve accolades at the district and county levels for their academic and non-academic fields, as stated by the Chairwoman of the Foundation. She expressed that.

“We are grateful that by participating in various competitions, we have consistently achieved success, which has subsequently led to support. Our principle is to provide the best possible service. Whether it is drum band competitions or sports, we always emerge as champions, which has made the government recognize our high level of achievement” (Halimah, Interview, 2023).



Figure 1. Students are equipped with drum band art skills (documentation and observation, Pondok Wali Sanga, 2022)

The *pesantren* has demonstrated outstanding achievements through participation in competitions, such as drum band and sports, often securing top positions. It not only enhances the reputation of the Islamic boarding school but also attracts support and assistance from the government.

Another factor that sustains the existence of the *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga* is the provision of Free Education in both the school and the boarding facility. It is evidence of the boarding school and its founder's favor towards providing education for marginalized groups, such as orphans and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and how these efforts contribute to social upliftment.

It was articulated by an instructor at the boarding school, who stated, *“The Wali Sanga Foundation Board fully covers all living expenses of students residing at the Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga” (Ustadz 1, Interview, 2022)*. A student's statement further supports this, *“At the Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga in Ende, we are not charged any fees at all; even bathing soap is provided by the boarding school” (Student 2, Interview, 2022)*.



Furthermore, besides academic and religious education, students are taught various practical skills to develop other aspects of their abilities in the Islamic boarding school and its school. It includes but is not limited to, skills in entrepreneurship, arts, and practical crafts such as cooking and sewing. For instance, they may engage in activities like drum band that hone musical skills or learn about sales, which teaches business basics.

It was expressed by an instructor at the boarding school.

"We have several activities such as art performances, muhadarah, and other religious activities that allow the students to mingle and enjoy themselves. Traditional Ende dances, Gaway traditional dance, are also introduced to the students, in addition to hadrah, shalawat, and poetry" (Ustadz 2 Interview, 2022).

Given the less fertile surrounding environment, the institution's management has instilled entrepreneurial skills in its students. Students are educated in religious subjects, independence, and economic empowerment, such as brick making, road hardening, mechanic workshops, and traditional NTT weaving.

An exciting innovation is collaborating with the Village Government to provide a special place for students to practice selling or showcasing their cooking skills. This place serves as a practical learning facility for the students and benefits both the school and the Islamic boarding school. The profits gained from these activities can then be used to support the needs of the school and the Islamic boarding school, providing direct benefits to the students.

"Our madrasah offers a variety of majors to equip students with basic skills, such as sewing, baking, paving, and flower crafting. Although these skills are not yet mastered, our principle is to ensure students have basic abilities that can be further developed in society" (Halimah, Interview, 2023).

From the above interviews, the Chairwoman of the Islamic boarding school foundation underscores the importance of teaching practical skills to students. It reflects the educational institution's commitment to preparing students with theoretical and religious knowledge and the skills needed to succeed in daily life and the workforce.



Figure 2. Students are equipped with bread making skills (Documentation and observation, Pondok Wali Sanga, 2022)

From the various descriptions above, it can be concluded that the *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga* in Gunung Meja Ende, East Nusa Tenggara, emphasizes the importance of sustainability and educational commitment in maintaining its existence. With a focus on the comfort of students and the practical application of Islamic teachings, this Islamic boarding school prioritizes learning prayers and Sunnah practices provides free education for marginalized groups, and offers various practical skills such as entrepreneurship, arts, and traditional crafts. Part of their commitment to maintaining the quality of education and equipping students with the skills necessary for daily life and the workforce involves recruiting competent and dedicated teachers and actively participating in competitions to enhance their reputation.

Students' achievements in academic and non-academic fields, such as drum band and sports competitions, demonstrate the quality of education and training the *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga* provides. These initiatives enhance the institution's reputation and bring government and community support. By providing inclusive and practical education and strengthening entrepreneurial and traditional skills, this Islamic boarding school contributes to the social upliftment of its students. It prepares them to contribute productively to society.

b. Interfaith Collaboration and Social Integration

Based on research findings, *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga* consistently maintains interfaith collaboration, particularly with the Catholic community



in Ende. This paper will discuss the historical context that lays the foundation for such collaboration, including the pivotal roles of figures like Kyai Mahmud EK and Pastor P. Back. Programs initiated by *Pondok Pesantren* aim to foster mutual respect and understanding among different religious groups, thereby contributing to social harmony and integration within Ende's multicultural community. The role of formal and informal education in facilitating this collaboration will be highlighted, and how religious teachings and cultural and social values are integrated into the curriculum to promote a coherent and tolerant society will be explored.

Siti Halimah, the head of the *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga Foundation, also acknowledges that establishing the *Pondok Pesantren* and its educational activities stems from the relationships, communication, and camaraderie between KH. Mahmud Eka with his friends and relatives, regardless of their religion. Founded in 1981, *Pesantren* Walisongo is the result of the late Haji Mahmud Eka's vision. This *Pesantren* is closely associated with various church entities and the Divine Word Congregation (SVD). According to Siti Halimah, the continuity of this *Pesantren* is not only a legacy of its founder but also embodies the values of humanity, friendship, interfaith, and interethnic solidarity. Annually, the *Pesantren* welcomes two TOP Fraters from STFK Ledalero as educators. They live and interact directly with the *Pesantren* students, with part of the *Pesantren*'s infrastructure funded by donations from the Vatican, showcasing the *Pesantren*'s commitment to diversity and mutual respect (*Pondok Pesantren* Archive Documentation, 2022).

Therefore, *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga upholds relationships, Fraterhood, and social solidarity with all parties. This approach stems from the institution's belief that education is not merely an intellectual endeavor but also a humanitarian issue that requires collaboration and support from various stakeholders. Consequently, the formal educational institutions under *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga—MTs and MAS—continuously employ educators from STFK Ledalero. Observations indicate that parts of the Catholic community in Ende that assist include the Divine Word Congregation (SVD), a segment of the Catholic Church headquartered in Vatican City, Rome. SVD,

our highest leadership, resides in the Vatican. Catholic Schools. TOP Fraters (Pastoral Orientation Year) targets Catholic schools and churches, while TOM Fraters (Missionary Orientation Year) targets institutions other than Catholic churches and schools.

An interview with Mr. Mad Eka, the eldest son of Kyai Mahmud EK, the Pesantren founder, corroborates this data.

“Since the early 1990s, nearly every year, the academic community of STFK Ledalero has sent personnel for service at the Ponpos. In their terms, it is called TOM (Missionary Orientation Year). They are prospective priests who spend a year involved in service activities at the Ponpos, usually teaching English, general subjects, music, and sports, and encouraging students to actively participate in Ponpos activities, including study sessions and prayers” (Mad Eka, Interview, 2023).

This cooperation is also manifested in interfaith dialogues and visits between the *Pondok Pesantren* and the Catholic Church during significant Catholic celebrations or special events in the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). Another form of collaboration is providing educational support to MTs students, further validated by an interview with Father Hendrik, a TOM Frater assigned to *Pondok Pesantren Sanga*, *“When I was a TOM Frater, construction was ongoing at Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga, so I lived with the senior residents at the dormitory. I taught subjects like language, civics, sociology, anthropology, etc” (Father Hendrik, 2022).*

According to observations from TOP Fraters assigned as teachers, they also participate in activities beyond formal classroom education. For example, one helps students wake up for *Tahajjud* prayer. Consistent with Father Hendrik’s account, one student mentioned:

“TOM Fraters are involved in many activities. In fact, they participate in all Ponpes activities, including prayer and study sessions, helping to wake students for prayer and urging them to hurry to the mosque. They even join Yasin’s recitation activities, sitting and listening while dressed in traditional attire” (Student Athifah, Interview, 2022).

The involvement and contribution of TOM Fraters in the life of *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga* illustrate deep integration between members of



different religious communities within an Islamic educational environment. Through actions like teaching general subjects and actively participating in religious activities, including waking students for prayer and participating in Yasin recitation, TOM Fraters contributes knowledge and strengthens the values of tolerance and interfaith Fraterhood. This initiative demonstrates how *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga* has successfully created an inclusive and harmonious space where individuals from diverse backgrounds can contribute and grow together in a spirit of mutual respect and learning from one another, enriching the religious and social experience for the entire *pesantren* community.

The role of the TOP/ TOM Fraters is not solely to assist in formal education. Still, the SVD Catholic Church contributes materially, providing financial aid and daily necessities like vegetables, plantation products, and rice. It was revealed by the Chairperson of the Foundation, who stated.

“Our collaboration with the Vatican has continued from the past to the present. The activities of the TOP/TOM Fraters are centered in the Vatican. We have always been sent TOP Fraters to help teach and train skills in the boarding school. Even now, we sometimes receive food supplies from the Monastery. The Fraters occasionally check the remaining food supplies in the boarding school’s kitchen, then report back to the Monastery, for example, eggs and vegetables, and then we are supplied. It is especially so during the month of Ramadan. The Monastery has a large garden. So, they invite us to harvest when it is harvesting time, and then the boarding school gets a share” (Halimah, Interview, 2023).



Figure 3. The students pose together with the Nuns and Missionaries from abroad (Documentation and observation, Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga, 2022)

The harmony of diversity is also demonstrated in the boarding school, such as attending each other's religious activities and respecting religious tolerance. It was highlighted in an interview:

"Back in my day, during Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, I would take my community to the Pondok Pesantren. Similarly, when we Catholics have religious events, we always invite the students. At the ordination ceremonies of priests, the students attend and perform hadrah".



Figure 4. The students attend a photo session event with Frater TOM, who serves at the Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga (Documentation Archive Pondok Wali Sanga, 2022)

The harmony of diversity in the boarding school is reflected through interfaith interactions that respect and support each other, as seen in joint activities between the Catholic community and the students. Inviting and attending each other's religious events, whether the Muslim celebrations of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha at the boarding school or Catholic religious events like priest ordination ceremonies, demonstrates tolerance and respect between religions. The participation of the students in Catholic religious events, including performing *hadrah*, illustrates how the two communities build harmonious and understanding relationships, strengthening the values of tolerance and harmony among different religious communities.

The existence of the boarding school contributes to the Ende district community, particularly by instilling religious and social values. Discussing the reality of the boarding school involves the actions taken by the *Pondok* administrators and all its apparatus. Similar actions were also taken during the time of the first caregiver or founder of the *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja*. Discussing the existence of the boarding school involves the activities carried out by the boarding school administrators and all its



apparatus, such as the intensive teaching of Religious Education with various studies for both students and the community, establishing orphanages, MTs, and MAS, and establishing *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja Ende*.

From the previous discussion, it is evident that the presence of *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja Ende* as an educational (*tarbiyyah*), religious, and social institution is accepted and beneficial in the spiritual life of the Ende community in Eastern Nusa Tenggara, especially to this day. *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja Ende* has successfully maintained its existence in a multicultural society context, where Muslims are a minority, through a series of strategic factors. In addition to committing to Islamic Sharia teachings, this boarding school demonstrates flexibility in adapting to the positive local traditions and customs. The active involvement of students, teachers, and caregivers, along with the support of the surrounding community, keeps this boarding school relevant and responsive to the needs and social changes of the times.

In conclusion, *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja Ende* has played a significant role in facilitating the education and religious understanding of the Ende community. This institution serves as a center for education and religion, as well as a social entity that contributes to the sustainability and cohesion of the community. Its existence is upheld by several important factors, including interfaith and social relations, collaboration with pastoral organizations, and a commitment to social, cultural, national, educational, and self-reliance goals. These findings affirm that *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja Ende* is an effective model for integrating education, religion, and social values within a single institution.

2. Discussion

The intricate tapestry of the existence of the *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja* within the predominantly Catholic community in Ende, East Nusa Tenggara, presents a unique case study on religious education and interfaith harmony. This research aims to uncover the strategic underpinnings that not only facilitate the survival of this Islamic educational institution but also significantly contribute to advancing community

cohesion. The findings highlight the skillful navigation and integration of the *Pondok Pesantren* within a complex socio-religious landscape, emphasizing its role in promoting mutual respect, understanding, and cross-religious cooperation (Hefner, 2009; Kalagy & Braun-Lewensohn, 2023). This role is crucial, given the broader implications for multicultural education and peace promotion in diverse societies (Raihani, 2012, 2018; Nurcholis et al., 2021).

This discussion focuses on analyzing the strategies employed by *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga Gunung Meja to maintain and develop its existence amidst the majority Catholic community in Ende. The study explores how the *pesantren* maintain their Islamic identity while socially and culturally integrating with their surrounding community. The central argument of this paper is that the *Pondok Pesantren* not only successfully maintains its religious identity but also actively promotes coexistence and interfaith harmony through a series of educational, social, and interreligious collaboration initiatives.

The conceptual framework of this research is rooted in theories of adaptability and resilience of educational institutions in minority contexts, as well as the role of education in modernization and social integration (Krešić, 2021; Raya, 2023). The findings indicate that the *pesantren* has adopted an innovative approach by incorporating Catholic educators and focusing on improving education quality for economically disadvantaged students. This approach reflects the *pesantren's* adaptability and resilience in maintaining its religious identity while contributing to the broader community's social development.

This analysis highlights how the *pesantren* uses education to promote interfaith understanding and tolerance, aligning with previous studies that emphasize the importance of education in facilitating social integration and cohesion in plural societies (Hefner, 2009; Mahmud et al., 2024; Prianto et al., 2024; Raihani, 2018). Therefore, these findings expand our understanding of the role of religious education in diverse social contexts and challenge the existing narrative regarding the limited role of institutions like this in the modernization process.



A notable finding is the solid interfaith relationships cultivated by *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga*, particularly with the Catholic Church. Unlike common research emphasizing barriers and tensions characteristic of interfaith collaborations (Eroler, 2023; Jafree et al., 2023), the *pesantren* has broken new ground by actively employing Catholic Fraternity as educators. This distinct approach to religious education disputes existing assumptions and provides a revolutionary model for interfaith dialogue.

Another striking discovery is the religious education institution's ability to adapt to societal needs and changes, contrasting with existing literature that highlights the challenges religious educational institutions often face in modernization and maintaining social relevance (Darakchi, 2018; Golan & Fehl, 2020; Roy et al., 2020). Moreover, the *pesantren* attracts a significant portion of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, a demographic often overlooked in academic studies on religious education and social commitment (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Thakuri et al., 2022). Focusing on economically vulnerable populations adds another layer of uniqueness to this case study.

Delving deeper into the implications of these findings, it becomes clear that the *pesantren's* strategies offer a blueprint for navigating the complexities of religious identity and community integration. The institution's commitment to Islamic education, coupled with its open acceptance of interfaith cooperation and cultural inclusivity, provides a more nuanced narrative about the potential of religious education in advancing social harmony. The delicate balance between religious adherence and open engagement with the broader community underscores the critical role of contextual understanding and adaptability in the success of religious institutions in diverse social landscapes (Dasopang et al., 2022; Hariyanto et al., 2024; Manan et al., 2024; Memon et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the case of *Pondok Pesantren Wali Sanga Gunung Meja Ende* serves as evidence of the power of religious education in bridging social divides and nurturing coherent and harmonious communities. The



strategies and outcomes of this institution present an intriguing narrative about the harmony between religious dedication and social integration, offering a model for similar institutions worldwide. These findings enrich the academic discourse on education, religion, and social cohesion and call for further investigation into the potential for replicating and scaling this model in diverse sociocultural settings.

D. Conclusion

In concluding this research, it is imperative to reaffirm the primary aim of this study, which was to elucidate the strategies employed by *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga Gunung Meja to maintain and enhance its presence within a predominantly Catholic community in Ende, Nusa Tenggara Timur. The findings indicate that the *Pondok Pesantren* has successfully navigated the complexities of religious identity and community integration, attributing its sustained existence to a harmonious blend of educational and spiritual commitments and profound interfaith dialogue and social engagement. These elements have significantly fostered harmony and mutual respect among different religious groups.

The *Pondok Pesantren's* significant contributions towards fostering mutual respect and social harmony among diverse religious groups underscore its pivotal role in the community. It has established a conducive environment for its growth and sustainability through various social programs and activities, showcasing the power of education and religious understanding in bridging community divides. The collaborative efforts initiated by its founders, characterized by a blend of Islamic teachings and positive local traditions, have evolved into a robust institution that not only educates but also instills values of tolerance and mutual respect.

However, the study recognizes certain limitations, including focusing on *Pondok Pesantren* Wali Sanga Gunung Meja, which may not fully encapsulate the diversity of strategies employed by similar institutions in different contexts. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative data may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to broaden the



scope by including multiple *Pondok Pesantren* across various regions to compare strategies for community integration and sustainability. Further studies could also explore the impact of such educational institutions on broader societal attitudes toward religious and cultural diversity.

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