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Negotiating Difference: Sunni–Shia Relations and Grassroots Religious Moderation in Jepara, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of religious moderation between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Jepara City, Central Java, highlighting the unique context of Shia as a minority facing significant challenges in Indonesia. The research addresses four primary questions: the nature of Sunni resistance to Shia, the manifestations of religious moderation in Jepara, the teachings that threaten Sunni-Shia coexistence, and the impact of Sunni understanding on their attitudes towards Shia across Indonesia. Data gathered through interviews, observations, and literature reviews in 2024 reveal a historical backdrop of Sunni resistance to Shia, including political struggles, persecution, and the issuing of fatwas. Despite this, the study underscores a notable absence of conflict in Jepara since the 1980s, when a culture of moderation emerged. However, concerns remain regarding the potential for immoderation due to doctrinal differences. Initial findings indicate that, while Sunni citizens may refrain from attending Shia activities involving internal Shia doctrine, they are open to participating in non-doctrinal events, suggesting a complex interplay of acceptance and resistance within the community.

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INTRODUCTION

The discourse on the Sunni-Shia relation in Indonesia has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent decades. Existing studies commonly focus on ideological contestation, religious intolerance, state policies, sectarian violence, and efforts toward taqrib (rapprochement). Historically, anti-Shia sentiment in Indonesia can be traced to the post-independence period, especially following the establishment of the Indonesian Islamic Da'wah Council (DDII) in 1967 and later the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences (LIPIA) in Jakarta in 1980, both of which were often associated with the promotion of Sunni orthodoxy and resistance toward Shia teachings.

Several regions in Indonesia subsequently became sites of sectarian tensions and anti-Shia mobilization. In Pekalongan, Central Java, organizations such as the Ashabul Kahfi Foundation and the Pekalongan Muslim Gathering Forum openly demanded the closure of Shia-affiliated institutions, including the Al-Hadi Islamic boarding school. Similar anti-Shia campaigns were later reinforced through seminars organized by the Institute for Research and Research of Islam (LPPI) and the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), both of which recommended restrictions on Shia teachings and publications. The escalation of hostility eventually resulted in violent incidents, including the attack on the Al-Hadi boarding school in Batang in 2000, as well as subsequent conflicts in Tegal, Pasuruan, Bondowoso, Lombok, Sampang, and several other regions. Fatwas issued by local religious authorities, particularly the East Java MUI fatwa in 2012, declaring Shia teachings deviant, further intensified sectarian polarization. Furthermore, the Aceh Ulema Consultative Assembly in 2011 enacted a ban on the activities of fourteen sects deemed heretical,

including Shia and Ahmadiyya Qadian . This series of events underscores the complex interplay among state authority, religious sects, and societal perceptions, highlighting significant challenges in managing religious pluralism in Indonesia.

At the same time, efforts to promote dialogue and religious harmony also emerged. One notable example was the establishment of the Indonesian Shia and Sunni Ukhuwah Assembly (Muhsin), which organized inter-sectarian discussions emphasizing peace, brotherhood, and mutual understanding between Sunni and Shia communities, under the theme "Religious Harmony as a Basic Capital for the Preservation and Revival of the Nation" (Kerukunan Umat Beragama sebagai Modal Dasar untuk Kelestarian dan Kebangkitan Bangsa). This assembly serves as a platform for dialogue, community gathering, and social engagement, while maintaining clear distinctions between the teachings and perspectives of the two madhhabs. Notably, the Indonesian Council of Mosques, representing the Sunni perspective, attended the event; however, organizations such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Forum Betawi Rembuk, and the Islamic Defenders Front were not present. The Iranian Ambassador to Indonesia, Mahmoud Farazandeh, remarked on the politicized nature of Sunni-Shia differences within Iran. Participants emphasized the importance of fostering brotherhood and peace among Shia and Sunni communities through mutual understanding, cooperation, and solidarity within the Muslim and inter-religious contexts.

Nevertheless, public discourse on Sunni–Shia relations in Indonesia continues to be dominated by narratives of conflict, heresy, and sectarian rivalry. Media representations frequently contribute to sectarian polarization by framing Shia communities either as ideological threats or marginalized minorities. Additionally, online media platforms have played a role in exacerbating sectarian tensions, with Shia teachings frequently criticized as heretical, particularly concerning practices such as mut'ah marriage and commemorations of Ashura/Karbala. Media outlets such as islam.com and arrahma.id tend to present a pro-Shia perspective, whereas detik.com adopts a more neutral stance .

This research moves beyond dominant macro-level narratives of sectarian conflict by focusing on a micro-level examination of everyday social relations between Sunni and Shia communities in Jepara. Previous studies have largely emphasized violence, fatwas, political mobilization, and ideological resistance toward Shia groups. While these issues remain important, they do not fully capture the complexity of local social realities. In many communities, Sunni–Shia relations are not always shaped by open hostility, but also by negotiation, coexistence, and shared social experiences. In Jepara, for instance, interactions between Shia communities and Nahdliyin society reveal patterns of social adaptation, mutual respect, and communal engagement that allow both groups to coexist within the same social environment. By focusing on these everyday encounters, this study seeks to demonstrate that sectarian relations cannot be reduced solely to conflict.

This study offers a critique of the homogeneous narrative of sectarian conflict that has long dominated Sunni–Shia studies in Indonesia. Much of the previous literature tends to portray Sunni and Shia communities within a rigid binary framework in which Sunnis are positioned as the dominant majority and Shias as marginalized minorities constantly surrounded by conflict and rejection. Such perspectives risk oversimplifying the diverse and contextual realities found across Indonesian society. This research argues that sectarian conflict is neither uniform nor inevitable, since each region possesses distinct historical trajectories, social structures, religious authorities, and cultural dynamics. Jepara, therefore, becomes a significant locus of study because it demonstrates the possibility of more dialogical, negotiative, and culturally grounded Sunni–Shia relations compared to regions commonly associated with violent sectarian tensions. Through this perspective, the study aims to contribute a more balanced understanding of Sunni–Shia relations in Indonesia—not merely as a site of theological contestation, but also as a space for tolerance, identity negotiation, and grassroots religious moderation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted between April and November 2024 through several field visits aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of Sunni–Shia relations and the practice of religious moderation within the local community. The study employed a qualitative case study approach because this method enables researchers to examine social and religious phenomena within their natural setting and to understand participants' experiences in depth . Participants were selected purposively based on their knowledge and involvement in the village's social and religious dynamics . A total of eleven informants participated in this study, consisting of Shia religious leaders, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) figures, local residents from different social backgrounds, the village Modin, and several respected community leaders. During fieldwork, snowball sampling was also used to identify additional participants relevant to the research topic. Data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, and direct observation. FGDs were conducted to encourage collective discussion and identify dominant issues and shared experiences among participants, while in-depth interviews were used to explore individual perspectives in greater depth. Observations were also carried out during religious and social activities to understand patterns of everyday interaction within the community.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, which comprises data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification . In the first stage, interview transcripts, FGD results, and observation notes were organized and coded according to themes related to sectarian relations, religious moderation, and social coexistence. The data were then interpreted descriptively to identify recurring patterns and differences among participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes within participants' narratives, particularly regarding grassroots moderation, local tolerance, and the negotiation of religious identity in everyday life . To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the researchers applied source and method triangulation by comparing information obtained from different participants and across different data-collection techniques. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a contextual understanding of how Sunni and Shia communities in Jepara negotiate religious differences and maintain social harmony within their local setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Expressions of Religious Moderation: Interactions Between Shia and Sunni Communities in Jepara

The Minister of Religious Affairs in Indonesia implements seven primary programs, with the foremost being the promotion of religious moderation. This initiative is recognized as (1) a fundamental component essential for sustaining the integrity and enhancing the quality of life within the nation and state, and (2) a means to position the state as an inclusive home that is equitable and welcoming for all its citizens, thus facilitating a harmonious, peaceful, and prosperous coexistence among different religious communities. The effectiveness of religious moderation is evaluated through various indicators, including (1) national commitment, as evidenced by the collective acceptance of foundational national principles enshrined in the Constitution, Pancasila, UUD '45, the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), and the motto Bhinneka Tunggal Ika; (2) the promotion of tolerance, which encompasses the respect for differences, the freedom for individuals to hold and express their beliefs, and the appreciation of equality and collaborative engagement; (3) non-violence, defined by the rejection of actions from individuals or groups that employ physical or psychological violence; and (4) the acceptance of local traditions and cultures, provided they do not conflict with the core tenets of recognized religions and beliefs.

In a significant development, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, on January 14, 2023, orchestrated an inter-religious peace declaration in Jakarta, emphasizing four key points: (1) reinforcing the nation's commitment to safeguarding diversity; (2) bolstering the religious moderation movement among all citizens to actualize a harmonious social environment; (3) refraining from hate speech, the dissemination of hoaxes, and any actions that might incite conflict; and (4) pledging to abstain from utilizing places of

worship for political campaigning or activities, as mandated by the General Election Law. This declaration was further operationalized through the issuance of Circular Letter No. 11/2023 by the Minister of Religion, which pertains to the use of Ministry of Religion offices as temporary houses of worship. This Circular Letter originates from the Joint Regulation established by the Minister of Religious Affairs, No. 9/2006, and the Minister of Home Affairs, No. 8/2006, which provides guidelines for the responsibilities of regional leaders in fostering religious harmony and establishing places of worship.

Despite these advances, challenges persist, as many religious communities lack designated places of worship and face rejection from local populations. Additionally, such communities often do not receive adequate support from local governments for diverse reasons. It is imperative for the government to ensure that all individuals of all religions can engage in worship practices in a manner that is orderly, comfortable, and safe. The objective of the Circular Letter is to provide direction to Provincial and District/City Heads within the Ministry of Religion regarding the use of their offices as provisional houses of worship. Considering the sociopolitical dynamics of Sunni and Shia communities in Jepara, the indicators of successful religious moderation are particularly illuminating. National commitment, characterized by adherence to the nation's foundational principles, is evident among Jepara's residents, who uniformly uphold these values irrespective of sectarian divisions. A local leader from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) articulates this sentiment by stating: "The term 'NU-Shia' was nonexistent during the era of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); thus, there is no need to accentuate the differences between the two groups. Both Sunni and Shia communities share a common belief in the Prophet (PBUH) and practice the tradition of reciting prayers dedicated to him; their Quranic texts are identical. The community has historically intertwined, as evidenced by mutual support since childhood. For instance, Shia residents are invited to weddings and circumcision ceremonies, and they actively participate in funeral processions. Their burial sites are integrated within the same cemetery area, further underscoring their inherent unity." (M, interview May 23, 2024) This statement exemplifies the commitment to intercommunity solidarity and highlights the effectiveness of religious moderation in fostering a peaceful coexistence in Jepara.

The discourse reflects the commitment to coexistence illustrated by a Shia leader: "We are not viewed with suspicion. Furthermore, the Islamic practices we engage in—whether they align with or diverge from those of the nahdliyin community—are well understood, as we have lived in close proximity since birth. This openness cultivates an awareness that differing beliefs do not equate to mutual condemnation. For instance, in our prayer practices, we do not place our hands on our chests, we use turbah during prostration, and we do not turn our heads to the right during the second greeting to conclude our prayers. Additionally, we participate in various traditions (such as slametan, collective prayers, and tahlil during memorial events) together within a collaborative forum comprising both Shia and NU participants. While we extend invitations to nahdliyin members for our special observances, their absence at particular events—such as the commemoration of the 10th of Ashura—often arises from their recognition of the differences in our rituals. Nonetheless, these variances do not impede our ability to maintain harmonious relations in our daily lives" (NA, interview, July 2025).

The absence of challenges to the principles of nationhood further underscores this commitment to coexistence. The diversity inherent in differing madhhabs (Shia and Sunni) is perceived not as a complication but rather as an accepted reality. Tolerance manifests through the respect of differences and the allowance for individuals to believe and express their convictions freely. Each community—be it Sunni or Shia—is afforded the liberty to worship in their respective mosques and musals without disturbance. Interfaith cooperation is exemplified through mutual participation in routine Shia-Sunni meetings at the local residential units (RT) and collective annual events, such as the recitation of dziba-an during the Prophet's maulid celebration. Moreover, children from the NU community are instructed in Quranic reading by Shia educators. One parent articulates, "Our children learn to read the Quran at the al-Quran Education Park (TPA) established by Shia, with teachers from both Shia and NU. My son has never been indoctrinated into Shia beliefs, as the Shia community recognizes that the purpose of education at the TPA is not to impart Shia

doctrine but to teach the proper method of reading the Quran" (War, interview, May 2025). This narrative highlights the dialogue surrounding inter-sectarian understanding and the pragmatic approaches adopted to foster harmony within a diverse religious landscape.

The Shia community expresses a desire to integrate within broader society, as evidenced by the sentiment that "kami membaur lazimnya hidup bertetangga dan keinginan seseorang menjadi Syiah bukan karena ajakan tapi tumbuh dengan kesadaran dari hatinya," ("we blend with the usual life of neighbors and the desire of a person to become a Shia is not due to invitation but develops from an intrinsic awareness") (N, interview June 2025). This perspective underscores a gradual and personal commitment to the Shia faith rather than one driven by external persuasion. Furthermore, the celebration of the Prophet's birth among the Shia is rooted in Islamic teachings. This practice draws from a hadith reported by Imam Bukhari, wherein it is stated that Abu Lahab, the Prophet's uncle who opposed his preaching, was spared punishment in his grave on Mondays due to his joy at the Prophet's birth. The act of reciting blessings upon the Prophet is articulated in the Qur'an (Surah Yunus: 57) as an expression of love for the Prophet, further reinforced by traditions such as the hadith narrated by Abu Qotadah al-Anshori, in which the Prophet noted, "On Monday, I was born" .

Additionally, communal observances such as Ashura (10 Muharram) are conducted in mosques, fostering an atmosphere of mutual support and remembrance. The practice of visiting one another during times of bereavement and collectively engaging in tahlil ceremonies for three consecutive days post-funeral evidences an intermingling of customs, as leaders from both the Sunni and Shia communities are noted to participate in khoul at public graves. Village leaders articulate the collaborative spirit prevalent in their communities, stating, "… setiap ada acara/kegiatan di desa, kedua tokoh dan warga kami libatkan dan diundang, mereka pun sama-sama aktif hadir," ("every time there is an event/activity in the village, both our leaders and residents are involved and invited; they are both actively present") (R, interview, Sep 2025). This sentiment is echoed by a modin, who voices a shared commitment to service: "kami sebagai perangkat desa bertugas melayani kematian dan membantu warga bila dibutuhkan dalam acara pernikahan (Syiah-NU). Kami melayani keduanya karena kewajiban kami," ("as village officials are tasked with serving the dead and assisting residents during wedding ceremonies (Shia-NU). We serve both because of our obligations") (Modin, interview July 2025). In examining these dynamics, it becomes apparent that non-violence is a core principle, rejecting actions by individuals or groups that resort to physical or psychological violence. Notably, such instances have not manifested despite the existence of differing madhhabs. Furthermore, there exists a constructive acceptance of local traditions and cultural practices, provided they do not contravene religious rules and beliefs. The shared religious traditions between Shia and Sunni communities, such as grave pilgrimage and the recitation of mauled rasul and Yaasiin, facilitate positive interactions and communal harmony.

The Impact of Doctrinal Constructs on the Nahdliyin Perspective of Shi'ism

In the context of Jepara, the absence of overt Shia-Sunni tensions is particularly noteworthy. However, the existence of differing interpretations of Islamic teachings suggests a latent potential for conflict if these differences are not addressed appropriately. To begin with, there are significant distinctions between the pillars of faith and the pillars of Islam as recognized by Sunni and Shia sects. The five pillars of Islam, as defined by Sunni tradition, comprise the declaration of faith (shahada), the practice of prayer (salat), the payment of alms (zakat), fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj). In contrast, Shia Islam articulates five pillars, which encompass the same practices but add the concept of authority (al-wilayah) as a distinct pillar. Moreover, the Sunni tradition espouses six pillars of faith, which include belief in the existence of Allah, the prophets, angels, holy scriptures, the Day of Judgment, and the divine decree (qadla and qadar). Conversely, Shia belief encompasses five pillars, modifying the Sunni framework to encompass belief in Allah, the prophets, the Imamate, divine justice, and al-Ma'ad (the Day of Judgment).

The Shia understanding of faith is deeply rooted in several fundamental principles. Firstly, tauhid (divine unity) posits that God is singular, His essence is absolute, and His existence precedes time and space. This view maintains that God possesses omniscience, authenticity, and free will, and that His oneness is non-composite, independent of His creation, and beyond human perception. Secondly, divine justice (adalat) in Shia thought holds that God's creation is inherently just; any perception of injustice stems from human ignorance. Humans are endowed with the ability to discern right from wrong, utilizing their senses in the process of moral decision-making. Additionally, the concept of Nubuwwah (apostleship) in Shia Islam asserts that every being possesses instincts that necessitate divine guidance, provided through God's messengers. According to Shia belief, God dispatched 124,000 messengers to guide humanity, culminating with the final Prophet, Muhammad (SAW). The belief in the end of times and the authenticity of the Qur'an, free from alterations, is also pivotal. The pillar of Ma'ad (the afterlife) emphasizes accountability before God at the Day of Judgment, with death marking the transition from corporeal existence to the afterlife. Lastly, Imamah outlines a divinely-established institution intended to guide the faithful, affirming that such leaders must stem from the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Shia Itsna Ash'ariah delineates its doctrinal framework through eight branches, known as furu' ad-din, comprising prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, almsgiving, khums (a form of tax), jihad, and the promotion of good and prohibition of evil (amar ma'ruf and nahi munkar).

Historically, Sunni respect for Shia teachings evolved, particularly regarding the understanding of Islam through the lens of the Prophet's family (ahl al-Bayt). However, the socio-political discourse surrounding figures such as the Ba'alawi contributed to a nuanced Sunni perception that equated Shia assertions of lineage with legitimacy. The aftermath of the tragedy at Karbala in 61 AH solidified the status of the ahl al-Bayt, with many surviving descendants seeking political power or establishing diasporas. During the 3rd century AH, Hasan bin Zaed established the Zaydiyah state in Dailam, alongside developments in other regions, including the establishment of the Tabristan state and the Idrisiyah Dynasty in Morocco. The rise of the Buwaihi Dynasty (334-447 AH) and the Fatimid Dynasty (909-1171 AD) marked periods of relative respite for the ahl al-Bayt amid the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate. The establishment of the Shafawiyah Dynasty in Iran further solidified Shia political power. The significance of these historical narratives continues into modernity, notably with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in February 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, which marked a pivotal shift in governance characterized by the principle of wilayat faqih. This concept emphasizes the authority of the leader (rahbar) within the Shia framework. Furthermore, the diaspora of the ahl al-Bayt remains significant, particularly in regions such as Hadramaut, Yemen, exemplified by the historical figure Muhammad bin Ali Ba'alawi, whose teachings laid the foundation for the spread of Shia thought throughout the Nusantara region, including Aceh from the 7th century onwards. This complex interplay between theological, historical, and socio-political factors highlights the intricate tapestry of beliefs and practices within Islam, illustrating both the unity and diversity present among different sects.

The respect accorded by Sunni communities in the Nusantara to their Shia counterparts is fundamentally rooted in the latter's alignment with the esteemed identity of Ahl al-Bayt and their association with the Alawiyyin tarekat of Bani Alawi. According to the scholar Imaduddin, the diaspora of Ahl al-Bayt can be categorized into two principal groups: the sayyids and the sharifs. The sayyids trace their lineage to Husayn ibn Ali and Fatimah, having primarily migrated to regions in North Africa and West Asia, particularly Morocco. In contrast, the sharifs, descending from Hasan ibn Ali, have established their presence in India and the archipelago via maritime routes. A pivotal figure in this lineage is Ahmad ibn Isa ibn Husayn al-Muhajir from Basrah, Iraq, who settled in Tarim City, located in the Hadramaut region of Yemen. Ahmad ibn Isa is recognized for founding a significant generation abroad, which includes prominent descendants such as Ali, Husayn, Muhammad, and Ubaidillah. At that time in Hadramaut, societal structures comprised three primary strata: the sayyid, the masyayikh (scholars), and the qabail (warriors and laborers).

The Habib community, which emerged in two distinct phases, initially consisted of eight clans, whereas the subsequent phase of nasab (lineage) development gave rise to 114 clans across Hadramaut and other regions. In Indonesia, notable clans include al-Attas, al-Haddad, as-Segaf, Alaydrus, Shihab, and al-Habsy, among others. Ubaidillah is considered the progenitor of the Alawi line, which encompasses the Jadid and Basri branches, though the latter two require further validation in terms of their genealogical connections. The current descendants of this lineage are referred to as Alawiyin or Ba'alawi. The designation "Ba'alawi" originates from Alaqi ibn Ubaidillah, as noted in al-Janadi's Kitab al-Suluk (d. 730 AH), within the discourse on ahl al-hadith. Ali Abul Hasan, hailing from a Ba'alawi background in Hadramaut, and Habib Ali al-Sakran (d. 985 AH), who claimed Ba'alawi ancestry, both present familial assertions that lack substantiating evidence. Specifically, there are no primary or secondary sources to authenticate the claims that Alwi is a brother of Jadid or that Bashri is a sibling of Alwi. Moreover, the foundational integrity of the Ba'alawi lineage, particularly in relation to the Banu Bashri, Banu Jadid, or Banu Alawi, appears tenuous. Imam Murtadlo al-Zabidi's work, Kitab al-Raudul Jali, page 31, introduces further complexity by stating that Salim ibn Bashri (d. 604 AH) is a descendant of Bahsri; this raises critical questions regarding the lineage transmission over extended periods. The genealogical entries in Kitab Syamsu adz-Dzahirah, page 69, reiterate the names Bashri and Abdullah, suggesting an effort to establish coherence and rationality in lineages that may otherwise appear ambiguous. The Bani Jadid lineage is identified as mudhtaribah (a term denoting irregularity or change), with varied representations of parental names across different accounts. In certain narrations, Jadid is represented as the son of Abdullah, while in others, the name of Ahmad is presented, as indicated in Imaduddin's analyses regarding "Four Names of Ba'Alawi's Nasab Strongly Indicated Fictitiously." There is notable inconsistency in the number of names attributed to the lineage from Abul Hasan Ali to Abdullah, with discrepancies arising in various manuscripts, as documented in Kitab Syamsudzahirah. Ultimately, the discourse surrounding the twelve Shia Imams suggests a disconnect for some regarding their kinship with Shia figures within the Nusantara. Debates proliferating on social media contribute to the assertion that Ahl al-Bayt should not be confined to descendance from individuals born in Tarim City, Yemen, but rather recognized as originating from Makkah during the era of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Shia community in Jepara is affiliated with the Ahl al-Bayt Indonesia (ABI) organization, distinct from the Association of the Indonesian Ahl al-Bayt Congregation (IJABI). IJABI was officially registered with the Directorate General of National Unity and Community Protection of the Ministry of Home Affairs in Indonesia on August 11, 2000, under registration number 127 Year 2000/D. I, with Jalaluddin Rakhmat as its Chairman of the Shura Council. In contrast, the ABI was founded later, in 2011. IJABI was formally established on July 1, 2000, at the Asia Africa Building in Bandung, with Jalaluddin Rakhmat at the helm. The objectives of IJABI include fostering a collective of individuals united by love for the Prophet's family, irrespective of their respective madhhabs. This organization serves as a paradigm of Shia Islamic representation in Indonesia, promoting an understanding of the Ahl al-Bayt that prioritizes ethical considerations over strict legal interpretations. As articulated by Jalaluddin Rakhmat, IJABI is fundamentally a community of individuals who express affection for the family of the Prophet (Kang Jalal). Notably, IJABI opts to invoke the term Ahl al-Bayt rather than Shia, underscoring its nuanced approach to communal identity.

The formation of IJABI coincided with a broader cultural openness characteristic of the Reformation Era in Indonesia. The political landscape during this period featured figures such as the fourth President of the Republic of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), recognized for his pluralistic stance and who had prior connections with Rakhmat. Indeed, Gus Dur had publicly criticized anti-Shia sentiments, stating postures that could negatively affect the Shi'a community and expressing readiness to defend their rights if threatened. In contrast, on June 15, 2011, the Shia organization Ahl al-Bayt Indonesia (ABI) was inaugurated within the Marine Soldier Hall in Cilandak, Jakarta. This organization is dedicated to advancing principles such as akhlakul karimah (noble character), ukhuwah islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood), and an appreciation

for diversity, with an aim to counteract terrorism. The demographic composition of ABI predominantly features ethnic Arabs of lineage traced back to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) (Habib).

Examination of the organizational dynamics and mission of this group can be further pursued via their website, ahlulbaitindonesia.or.id. Moreover, the recognition of IJABI by ABI remains contentious, primarily on the assertion that Alawiyyin Shia (identified as original Shia) hold a rightful claim to leadership over the ABI, which does not comprise Alawiyin descendants of Ali bin Abi Talib. Additionally, a broader global context can be noted where notable Shia figures such as Ali Hosseini Khamenei (Iran), Ali Hosseini Sistani (Iraq), Issa Ahmed Qassim (Bahrain), and Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah (Lebanon) serve as reference points for Shia movements. Speculatively, IJABI may draw ideological inspiration from Shia representation in Lebanon, while ABI might correlate more with the traditionalist views associated with Iranian Shia.

The contemporary landscape includes the establishment of the National Alliance Against Shia (Annas) on April 20, 2014, with K.H. Athian Ali as its Chairman. He has articulated concerns regarding the growing influence of both IJABI and ABI, attributing it to their respective roles alongside various foundations and institutions, allegedly receiving support from the Iranian Embassy in Jakarta. Consequently, there have been calls for the Indonesian government to close the Cultural Attaché of the Iranian Embassy, contextualized within the broader discourse on preserving national integrity against perceived threats of transnational Iranian Shia ideologies.

The study of hadith literature within Shia Islam reveals the existence of four principal collections, namely Al-Kafi, compiled by Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Ya'qub al-Kulaini ar-Razi; Man la Yahdarul Fiqh, authored by Shaykh Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Ali bin Husain; Tazhibul Ahkam and Al-Istibsyar fima Ikhtilaf minal Akhbar, both by Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Hasan at-Tusi; and Majmu', a collaborative work by al-Kulani, al-Qami, and at-Tusi. The content of these Shia-centric texts often remains obscure to Sunni scholars, and should a broader comprehension of these materials emerge, it risks inciting substantial discord. Additionally, the various sects within Shia Islam, arising from internal doctrinal divisions, may also attract the attention of Sunni scholars, potentially fostering suspicion and critique. In Abu al-Khair al-Baghdadi's al-Farqu baina al-Firaq, four prominent Shia sects are meticulously delineated: Zaidiyah, Ismailiyah, Itsna 'Ashariyah, and Ghulat. These divisions stem from differing interpretations of the concept of Imamah, which involves the question of rightful leadership succession .

The significance of Imamah within Shia thought cannot be overstated; it is perceived as analogous to prophethood, with the Imam charged with clarifying various aspects, including the interpretation of the Qur’an, the principles of Sharia, public education, theological inquiries, justice enforcement, territorial protection, and societal cohesion . In contrast, Sunni Islam (ahlussunah wal jamaah) regards Imamah as a leadership role elected by the community, with the leader being a regular human being capable of error (non-ma'shum). In Shia belief, the Imamah is central to faith, with Imams being seen as infallible (ma'shum) and direct descendants of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. The emergence of Shia sects can be traced back to the leadership of Imam Hussein, which incited divergent perspectives, particularly regarding the identity of the Imam. One faction asserted that the rightful successor should have been Muhammad ibn Hanifah, the son of Ali but not of Fatimah, leading to the formation of the Kaisaniyah group, which ultimately became stagnant. Conversely, the Zaidiyah faction contended that legitimacy lay with Ali Zaenal Abidin bin Hussein, positioning itself as a more moderate group in relation to other Shia factions, showing greater affinity with Sunni beliefs .

In response to the oppressive governance of the Bani Umayyah, the Shia community often resorted to taqiyah, concealing their identity to protect their beliefs, a strategy met with resistance from their adversaries. The Zaidiyah sect maintains that the legitimate Imam must be a descendant of Fatimah bint Muhammad, specifically through Hasan or Hussein bin Ali. The qualifications for an Imam include fairness, knowledge, bravery in confronting injustice, and a willingness to allow multiple Imam leaders in different regions to dilute the power of oppressive regimes. Beyond the Kaisaniyah and Zaidiyah, the Ismailiyah and

Itsna 'Ashariyah sects, both recognized within Shia Imamiyah, also assert that Abu Ja'far Muhammad al-Baqir (the fifth Imam) succeeded Ali Zaenal Abidin (the fourth Imam). The schism within Shia Islam regarding the succession following Ja'far al-Sadiq's (the sixth Imam) death in 148 H resulted in differing beliefs about Ismail bin Ja'far Sadiq (seventh Imam), who is thought to have succeeded his father but died prematurely. Two narratives regarding Ismail's death exist: one maintains he died, while another suggests a messianic return akin to that of Prophet Isa, which underpins the beliefs of Shia Sab'iyah and Batiniyah, who interpret the Qur'an and Sunnah as possessing both apparent and hidden meanings. Following Imam Ja'far's death, the Shia Ismailiyah community fragmented into various branches, including the Druze, Nizary, and Musta'ly . The Imamiyah, also referred to as Ja'faris or Itsna 'Ashariyah, recognizes Musa al-Kadzim as the seventh Imam, thereby contradicting the Ismaili position. The intricate dynamics of internal conflict within Shia Islam concerning Imamah have, over time, been acknowledged and studied by Sunni scholars.

Impact of Sunni Theological Interpretations on Sunni Responses to Shia Islam in the Nusantara

Historical memories, particularly the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala in 680 CE, continue to shape Shia identity as a narrative of suffering, resistance, and loyalty to Ahl al-Bayt. At the same time, contemporary scholars argue that Sunni–Shia tensions today cannot be reduced solely to theological disagreements because sectarian identities are increasingly influenced by politics, social contestation, and struggles over religious authority .

In the Indonesian context, Sunni–Shia relations are strongly influenced by the country's socio-political and religious landscape. Although Shia communities have existed in the archipelago since the early centuries of Islam, particularly in Aceh and Sumatra, their position as a religious minority has frequently exposed them to suspicion, stigmatization, and exclusion. The resurgence of Shia identity after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 further intensified anti-Shia sentiment among conservative Sunni groups in Indonesia. Recent studies show that anti-Shia narratives are often reproduced through radical Islamic movements, religious organizations, and digital media, which frame Shia teachings as deviant and threatening to Sunni orthodoxy . In this context, sectarian discourse functions not only as a theological debate but also as a mechanism for defining the boundaries of "acceptable Islam" within Indonesian public life. The marginalization of Shia communities in Indonesia frequently emerges through institutionalized discourse supported by local political actors and religious authorities.

Within Jepara, theological differences between Sunni and Shia communities remain clearly recognized, particularly concerning the concepts of Imamah, the position of Ahl al-Bayt, and ritual practices such as prayer and adhan. Nahdliyin communities in Jepara generally maintain a cautious distance from Shia religious forums because they perceive fundamental differences in the pillars of faith and the interpretation of Islamic leadership. Differences in worship practices—such as the combining of prayers, the use of turbah during prostration, and additions in the adhan—are often viewed as symbolic markers distinguishing Shia identity from Sunni traditions. Nevertheless, this study's findings reveal that theological disagreement does not automatically lead to open social conflict. Instead, Sunni and Shia communities in Jepara continue to engage in patterns of coexistence shaped by neighborhood relations, shared local traditions, and communal interaction. This finding supports the argument of Jubba et al. that Sunni–Shia relations in Indonesia are highly contextual and influenced more by local social structures than by theology alone.

One of the most important findings of this study is the emergence of community-based religious moderation as a mechanism for maintaining social harmony. Unlike formal state narratives of moderation, which are often institutional and top-down, moderation in Jepara is practiced informally through everyday interaction. Activities such as gotong royong, participation in village gatherings, mutual social assistance, and respect for communal traditions become practical forms of coexistence between Sunni and Shia citizens. This condition reflects what Zuhri et al. describe as "tolerance from below," in which social harmony is maintained through grassroots engagement rather than ideological agreement. Similarly, Nasir emphasizes

that local religious institutions and community networks play a crucial role in strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia. In Jepara, moderation therefore appears not as the elimination of theological difference, but as the community's collective ability to prevent those differences from escalating into social hostility.

At the same time, this study also demonstrates the important role of digital media in intensifying sectarian narratives. While direct interaction between Sunni and Shia communities in Jepara tends to remain relatively peaceful, social media frequently amplifies suspicion and polarization through provocative religious discourse. Online narratives often simplify Sunni–Shia relations into rigid binaries between orthodoxy and deviance, reinforcing sectarian boundaries through selective religious content and ideological campaigns. Faizin et al. argue that language and digital media work together to shape the direction and intensity of religious contestation in Indonesia . The controversy surrounding the participation of local religious leaders in Shia commemorative events illustrates how social media can politicize ordinary acts of social engagement and reinterpret them as symbols of ideological alignment.

Another important aspect emerging from this study concerns the relationship between doctrinal difference and social negotiation. Although Nahdliyin communities in Jepara continue to regard Shia theology as fundamentally different from Sunni teachings, these differences do not necessarily produce exclusionary behavior at the grassroots level. Instead, local communities negotiate religious boundaries through cultural norms emphasizing respect, harmony, and communal stability. This finding challenges essentialist assumptions that sectarian conflict is inevitable whenever doctrinal divergence exists. Rather, the Jepara case demonstrates that sectarian tension becomes more dangerous when theological differences are politicized by external actors, radical organizations, or digital networks seeking to mobilize public fear. As argued by Asror the failure to protect religious minorities in Indonesia is often linked not only to doctrinal disagreement but also to broader political and ideological struggles over religious legitimacy and public authority .

In Jepara, the interplay of these religious distinctions has fostered an environment of suspicion that can be exacerbated by individuals with a limited interpretation of religious doctrines. In many contexts, Sunnis may exercise caution to preempt interfaith conflicts. However, tensions are not universal, primarily because there is no competition over resources or land. Nevertheless, the role of social media has emerged as a critical factor; provocative narratives targeting Shia beliefs can potentially escalate conflicts, especially given the public accessibility of such information. Recent events, such as the participation of figures like Dr. K.H. Masyhudi, Chairman of the MUI Jepara, in the Arbain commemorations, have sparked controversy, particularly as social media serves as a platform to portray these individuals as champions of pluralism. The presence and actions of such leaders can invite scrutiny, as they may inadvertently create divisions within the community. In an environment where the relationship between Nahdliyin (members of the Nahdlatul Ulama) and Shia citizens has traditionally been amicable, the propagation of contentious interpretations of Shia beliefs on social media can increase tensions, particularly over differences in foundational Islamic teachings, including the pillars of Islam and the pillars of faith.

Ultimately, the Jepara experience contributes to a broader critique of the homogenizing narrative of Sunni–Shia conflict in Indonesia. Much of the previous literature has focused heavily on violence, intolerance, and sectarian hostility, creating the impression that Sunni–Shia relations are uniformly conflictual across all regions. While such tensions undeniably exist, this study demonstrates that coexistence, negotiation, and grassroots moderation are equally important dimensions of sectarian relations. This finding supports recent scholarship emphasizing the need to examine local experiences and everyday social interaction in understanding religious diversity in Indonesia . Rather than portraying Sunni–Shia relations solely through a binary framework of domination and victimization, the Jepara case reveals how local communities develop practical social mechanisms to manage religious difference and maintain social harmony despite enduring theological boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Sunni–Shia relations in Jepara are shaped not solely by theological difference, but also by local social interaction, cultural negotiation, and community-based religious moderation. The findings challenge dominant narratives portraying Sunni–Shia relations in Indonesia as uniformly conflictual. Instead, the Jepara case illustrates how grassroots coexistence and shared communal practices function as effective mechanisms for maintaining social harmony despite enduring doctrinal boundaries.

fostering harmonious relations between Shia and Sunni communities in Indonesia is not only essential for social stability but also enriches the nation's cultural fabric. By actively promoting mutual understanding and respect, we can address misconceptions and bridge the gaps created by differing interpretations of religious texts. A national commitment to tolerance, community engagement, and the principles outlined in Indonesia's constitution can lay the groundwork for cooperative efforts that enhance coexistence. It is imperative to remain vigilant against potential conflict triggers, particularly those propagated by social media that may exaggerate differences. A nuanced approach that embraces the complexity of diverse beliefs and practices can facilitate meaningful dialogue. Ultimately, by prioritizing understanding and collaboration, both communities can cultivate a climate of respect and harmony. This collaborative spirit not only benefits Shia and Sunni individuals but also contributes to a more cohesive and resilient Indonesian society, paving the way for a brighter and more inclusive future for all.

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