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Religious Interpretation, Education, and Community Cohesion: Diverse Islamic Standpoints among Muslim Residents in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Interpretive diversity is an established feature of Islamic intellectual tradition, yet differences in religious understanding may also influence education and community relations. This qualitative study examines how selected Muslim residents of Tubod, Lanao del Norte, Philippines, understand diverse Islamic standpoints and the factors shaping these interpretations. Thirty-five participants were purposively selected and interviewed using semi-structured questions. Thematic analysis identified differences related to business ethics, dietary rulings, religious-cultural practices, and scholarly authority. Participants associated interpretive diversity with textual interpretation, educational background, cultural context, and differences in scholarly methodology. Despite these variations, participants emphasized the importance of qualified religious authority, mutual respect, and unity. The study highlights the role of religious education in helping communities understand legitimate disagreement and strengthen social cohesion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Interpretive diversity (*ikhtilāf*) has long been part of Islamic intellectual and jurisprudential traditions. Differences may arise from approaches to the Qur'an and Sunnah, methods of legal reasoning, scholarly traditions, and the contexts in which religious knowledge is understood. Rather than necessarily representing doctrinal division, such differences may reflect legitimate scholarly reasoning within Islamic jurisprudence. Contemporary Muslim societies, however, encounter a more complex environment in which religious knowledge is communicated not only by traditional scholars but also through educational institutions, community networks, and digital media (Ali, 2019; Postill, 2008; Lohker and Wahid, 2026).

Religious education is therefore important in shaping how Muslims understand interpretive diversity. Religious education may also shape religious character and the ways learners engage with religious values in everyday contexts (Indra *et al.*, 2026). Knowledge of Islamic sources, jurisprudential principles, and scholarly methodologies may help individuals distinguish legitimate disagreement from unsupported personal interpretation. At the same time, differences in educational exposure and access to religious knowledge may influence how Islamic teachings are understood in everyday life. Religious authority consequently remains important because participants in contemporary religious discourse differ in scholarly training and interpretive competence (Elmahjub, 2021; Lohker and Wahid, 2026).

Interpretation is also embedded within social and cultural contexts. Religious beliefs and practices interact with local traditions, community experiences, economic activities, and changing forms of communication. Consequently, Muslims may share fundamental religious commitments while expressing different understandings of specific matters. Such diversity becomes socially significant when interpretations concern everyday practices such as business transactions, food consumption, religious celebrations, and community traditions.

The relationship among religion, education, and society is particularly relevant at the community level. Limited understanding of the foundations of scholarly disagreement may contribute to confusion, whereas informed religious learning can encourage recognition of legitimate differences. Religious education may therefore serve not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to develop respectful engagement with different interpretations. This is important for maintaining mutual respect, tolerance, and social cohesion within diverse Muslim communities.

The present study examines this relationship among selected Muslim residents of Tubod, Lanao del Norte, Philippines. The original inquiry identified differences involving civil transactions, dietary regulations, beliefs, religious practices, and Islamic leadership, while also indicating the influence of educational background, culture, and scholarly authority. These dimensions provide an opportunity to examine interpretive diversity not only as a jurisprudential issue but also as an educational and social phenomenon.

Although previous studies have discussed Islamic authority, jurisprudential reasoning, and changing access to religious knowledge, less attention has been given to how community members themselves understand interpretive diversity and relate it to religious learning and social cohesion. This community-level perspective is important because interpretations are ultimately encountered and negotiated in everyday religious and social life.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the factors shaping diverse Islamic interpretations among Muslim residents and explore their implications for religious education and

community cohesion. It specifically considers how textual interpretation, educational exposure, cultural context, and scholarly authority influence participants' understandings of Islamic beliefs and practices. The novelty of the study lies in connecting Islamic interpretive diversity with religious education and social cohesion through community-level qualitative evidence from the Philippine context.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to examine how Muslim residents understand diverse Islamic interpretations and how these understandings relate to religious education and community cohesion. A phenomenological approach is appropriate for examining how individuals interpret and make meaning from lived experiences and social realities (Neubauer et al., 2019). The study was conducted in Tubod, Lanao del Norte, Philippines, with 35 purposively selected Muslim residents who were considered knowledgeable about Islamic teachings and actively engaged in community religious affairs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored participants' demographic backgrounds and their perceptions of differences in Islamic beliefs, practices, jurisprudential issues, and religious authority. Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses and obtain deeper explanations of participants' lived religious experiences. We conducted, recorded, transcribed, and interpreted the interviews. Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were coded and grouped into recurring themes. The thematic analysis generated findings related to business transactions, dietary interpretations, theological-cultural practices, and religious authority. These findings were subsequently organized into three broader analytical dimensions: religion, education, and society, as shown in **Table 1**. The study does not evaluate religious correctness or issue Islamic rulings. Instead, it examines participants' perceptions of interpretive diversity and the educational and social factors associated with those perceptions. The study does not claim authority to issue *fatāwā* or provide religious instruction; its purpose is limited to analyzing participants' perceptions and their educational and social implications.

Table 1. Analytical framework linking religion, education, and society.

DIMENSION	ANALYTICAL FOCUS	AJORES RELEVANCE
Religion	Islamic interpretation, fiqh, beliefs, practices, religious authority	Interpretive diversity
Education	Educational exposure, scholarly knowledge, access to Islamic learning	Religious understanding
Society	Culture, community relations, tolerance, unity	Social cohesion

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis revealed that interpretive diversity among the 35 participants was not limited to theological disagreement (**Table 2**). Differences appeared in everyday religious decisions and were associated with textual understanding, religious knowledge, cultural context, and perceptions of scholarly authority. Four interconnected themes emerged: (i) ethical interpretation in business, (ii) diversity in dietary interpretation, (iii) theological-cultural negotiation, and (iv) religious education and scholarly authority. These themes demonstrate how religion is interpreted through both educational and social experiences.

Table 2. Major findings across religion, education, and society.

THEME	RELIGIOUS DIMENSION	EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION	SOCIAL DIMENSION
Business transactions	Sharia principles	Understanding ethical rulings	Fair economic relations
Dietary interpretation	Halal, haram, makruh, shubhah	Knowledge of rulings	Everyday consumption
Religious-cultural practices	Bid'ah and religious observance	Understanding different interpretations	Local traditions
Religious authority	Qur'an, Sunnah, scholarly interpretation	Religious knowledge and training	Guidance and community cohesion

3.1. Religious Interpretation in Everyday Social Life

Participants generally understood Islamic rulings through their application to everyday life. In business transactions, all 35 participants emphasized honesty, fairness, transparency, and avoidance of deception (**Table 3**). Online selling was considered permissible when these ethical requirements were maintained. Participants similarly associated Sharia-compliant financial transactions with the avoidance of *riba* and viewed investment as acceptable when the business itself complied with Islamic principles.

Participants did not understand religion exclusively through ritual practice. Islamic interpretation also informed their perceptions of economic and social responsibility. This is consistent with literature describing Islamic commercial ethics in terms of fairness, mutual consent, transparency, and avoidance of exploitation (Baloch and Chimanya, 2023).

The educational implication is equally important. Participants' judgments required knowledge of religious concepts and their application to contemporary situations. Religious education therefore involves not only transmitting rules but also developing the ability to understand how religious principles relate to everyday decisions. Thus, religion, education, and society intersect even in ordinary economic behavior. Religious knowledge provides an interpretive framework, while social circumstances provide the situations in which that knowledge is applied.

Table 3. Religious interpretation in everyday practices.

ISSUE	PARTICIPANT INTERPRETATION	UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE	EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATION
Online selling	Conditionally permissible	Honesty and transparency	Applying ethics to digital transactions
Financing	Permissible under Sharia principles	Avoidance of <i>riba</i>	Understanding Islamic finance
Investment	Permissible in halal activities	Fairness and lawful enterprise	Ethical economic literacy
Overpricing	Rejected as exploitative	Justice	Social responsibility

3.2. Dietary Interpretation and Religious Knowledge

Dietary practices produced a clearer example of both agreement and interpretive diversity (**Table 4**). All participants agreed that properly slaughtered beef was permissible. Greater variation appeared when participants discussed crabs, tobacco, *balut*, and horse meat. Thirty

of the 35 participants considered *balut* impermissible because of uncertainty, while horse meat tended to be described as *makruh* rather than strictly prohibited.

Religious learning can therefore help clarify concepts such as *makruh* and *shubhah* and explain why scholarly opinions may differ. Participants referred, explicitly or implicitly, to concepts such as *makruh* and *shubhah*. Understanding such distinctions requires familiarity with how religious rulings are derived and why scholarly opinions may differ.

The finding supports an important distinction for the present study: difference does not automatically mean contradiction. Participants could reach different conclusions while continuing to recognize Islamic sources and scholarly reasoning as legitimate foundations of interpretation. This provides an educational basis for teaching *ikhtilāf* as interpretive diversity rather than presenting every disagreement as religious conflict.

Table 4. Dietary diversity and religious learning.

EXAMPLE	PATTERN IN RESPONSES	RELIGIOUS-LEARNING ISSUE
Beef	Strong agreement	Established halal requirements
Crab	General acceptance with some caution	Different scholarly positions
Tobacco	Discouraged because of harm	Relationship between rulings and well-being
<i>Balut</i>	30/35 considered it impermissible	Uncertainty (<i>shubhah</i>)
Horse meat	Often viewed as <i>makruh</i>	Differences in legal classification

3.3. Religion, Culture, and Community Practices

The strongest intersection between religion and society appeared in participants' discussions of culturally embedded practices. Some participants regarded *Duwali* (vigil gatherings) as *bid'ah*, while simultaneously recognizing its social and cultural motivations, particularly prayer and remembrance for deceased family members (**Table 5**). A similar pattern appeared in responses concerning *Maulid al-Nabi*. Twenty-eight of the 35 participants viewed the celebration as lacking explicit support from primary Islamic sources, although participants also acknowledged its cultural and commemorative significance.

Table 5. Interaction between religious interpretation and cultural practice.

PRACTICE	RELIGIOUS ISSUE	SOCIAL-CULTURAL DIMENSION	EDUCATIONAL NEED
<i>Duwali</i>	Interpretation of <i>bid'ah</i>	Prayer, remembrance, family tradition	Distinguishing doctrine and custom
<i>Maulid al-Nabi</i>	Differences over religious precedent	Commemoration and community practice	Understanding interpretive diversity
Local traditions	Compatibility with Islamic teaching	Cultural continuity	Contextual religious literacy

Community members may distinguish between the religious classification of a practice and its social meaning. This distinction is important. Local traditions can carry communal, familial, or commemorative significance even when participants disagree about their religious status. For religious education, this finding suggests that instruction on diversity should not merely identify which opinions differ. Studies integrating religious values and culturally embedded practices into educational materials further illustrate the relevance of local cultural context in religious learning (Bursan et al., 2027). Learners also need to understand why

interpretations differ, including the influence of textual methodology, scholarly reasoning, and cultural context. Such understanding may reduce the tendency to interpret every difference as evidence of religious or social division.

3.4. Religious Education and Scholarly Authority

Religious authority emerged as a central theme connecting the other findings. All 35 participants emphasized the importance of knowledge, formal religious learning, and qualified scholars in interpreting Islamic teachings. Participants repeatedly distinguished scholarly interpretation from personal opinion and expressed concern that individuals without sufficient knowledge could create misunderstanding within the Muslim community.

At the same time, participants recognized that qualified scholars themselves may disagree because of differences in methodology, training, and contextual reasoning. One participant summarized this position by explaining that scholars may differ while still grounding their knowledge in the Qur'an and Hadith.

This finding places religious education at the center of interpretive diversity. Education influences not only what community members know but also how they evaluate religious information and whose interpretations they consider authoritative. Contemporary research similarly shows that Islamic religious authority is changing as religious knowledge circulates through traditional institutions, educational settings, and digital environments (Lohlker and Wahid, 2026).

The relationship can be summarized in **Table 6**. The framework does not imply that education eliminates religious disagreement. Rather, religious education may help community members understand the basis and boundaries of disagreement. This distinction is particularly important because the participants themselves viewed *ikhtilāf* as compatible with Islamic unity when interpretations are grounded in knowledge and recognized scholarly reasoning.

Table 6. Proposed religion-education-society pathway.

RELIGION	EDUCATION	SOCIETY
Qur'an and Sunnah	Access to religious knowledge	Everyday religious practice
Fiqh and <i>ikhtilāf</i>	Understanding scholarly methodology	Recognition of legitimate differences
Scholarly authority	Guidance from qualified scholars	Reduced misunderstanding
Interpretive diversity	Religious literacy	Mutual respect
Unity (<i>ummah</i>)	Learning about differences	Community cohesion

3.5. From Interpretive Diversity to Community Cohesion

The findings ultimately suggest a progression from religious knowledge to informed interpretation and social interaction. Participants did not generally describe interpretive diversity as requiring uniformity. Instead, they emphasized qualified knowledge, respect for scholarly differences, and avoidance of uninformed interpretation. This orientation is consistent with community-based religious approaches that emphasize dialogue and social harmony across differences (Daud, 2025).

This has direct implications for religious education. Educational approaches that promote critical literacy and social integration may help learners engage more constructively with differences and reduce polarization (Artina et al., 2027). In religious education, this principle

can be extended through instruction on *fiqh*, *ikhtilāf*, religious authority, and culturally influenced practices. Educational institutions, *madaris*, scholars, and community learning activities can provide opportunities to explain the foundations of *fiqh*, *ikhtilāf*, religious authority, and culturally influenced practices. The original participants themselves emphasized unity, mutual respect, and tolerance despite differences in interpretation.

Accordingly, the principal contribution of the study can be summarized as: Religious sources → Religious education → Informed interpretation → Recognition of diversity → Mutual respect → Community cohesion

This pathway should be understood as an interpretive framework derived from the qualitative findings, not as a tested causal model. The study did not measure whether religious education directly increases tolerance or community cohesion. Rather, participants' accounts indicate that knowledge, scholarly guidance, and understanding of legitimate interpretive differences are perceived as important for reducing misunderstanding and maintaining unity within their community.

4. CONCLUSION

Diverse Islamic interpretations among Muslim residents of Tubod, Lanao del Norte are shaped by religious knowledge, educational exposure, cultural context, and scholarly authority. Differences were evident in business transactions, dietary rulings, and religious-cultural practices, yet participants generally understood such diversity within recognized Islamic interpretive traditions. Religious education therefore has an important role in helping community members understand *ikhtilāf*, evaluate religious information, and recognize qualified scholarly guidance. Rather than eliminating differences, informed religious learning can encourage mutual respect and understanding. Future studies should examine how religious education influences interpretive literacy and community cohesion across different Muslim communities.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper is free from plagiarism.

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