



Religious Life and Subjective Experiences in the Mandailing Natal Community: Subjective Experiences in the Practice of Religious Devotion within the Local Community

Mukhlis Lubis

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal, Indonesia

mukhlizlubiz@gmail.com

Article Info

Article history:

Received 22-12-2024

Revised 04-01-2024

Accepted 11-01-2025

Keyword:

Community Service; Religion; Mandailing Natal; Subjective Experience; Religious Life; Islam.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of religious service programs in shaping the spiritual and social experiences of the Mandailing Natal community, a predominantly Muslim society facing the challenges of modernization and globalization. While previous research has focused on the general impacts of religious education, there is limited understanding of how these programs affect individuals' subjective experiences and daily practices. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by examining how participants perceive and implement religious teachings in their daily lives. Using a phenomenological approach, we explored participants' experiences through in-depth interviews and observations, revealing that these programs not only deepen participants' understanding of religious teachings but also significantly influence their daily decision-making processes and interpersonal relationships. Key findings include an increase in spiritual engagement, such as heightened frequency and quality of prayers, and stronger community bonds characterized by mutual support and collaboration. Additionally, participants reported challenges in balancing traditional religious practices with modern lifestyle demands, highlighting areas for improvement in program design. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between religion, community engagement, and social transformation, offering implications for the development of more effective religious education programs in similar contexts.



©2025 Authors. Published by PT Mukhlisina Revolution Center.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

INTRODUCTION

Religious service programs have long been central to the social and spiritual fabric of communities worldwide, especially in Islamic societies. These programs aim to deepen religious understanding and promote social cohesion through shared religious practices. In Mandailing Natal, a predominantly Muslim region in Indonesia, such programs are often seen as tools for reinforcing Islamic values and guiding community members in their daily lives. However, with the pressures of modernization and global influences, the relevance and impact of such programs on local communities remain underexplored, particularly in terms of individuals' subjective experiences.

This study addresses the gap in understanding how community members perceive and internalize religious teachings within the context of modernization. Using a phenomenological approach, we focus on participants' lived experiences to reveal the interplay between traditional religious practices and contemporary life. This exploration provides valuable insights into the social and spiritual transformations shaped by religious service programs in the Mandailing Natal community.

The article is structured to ensure clarity and focus. The introduction outlines the context and significance of the study, emphasizing the need for a phenomenological approach to uncover participants' subjective experiences. Subsequent sections detail the methodology, findings, and their implications for religious outreach programs. By streamlining the background information and condensing key points, this study highlights the critical role of religious service programs in fostering community cohesion and individual spiritual growth.

RESEARCH METHODS

Design of the Study

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals in Mandailing Natal regarding religious service programs (Gasparini, 2021). Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, focuses on understanding human experiences through the perspectives of the individuals who experience them. This approach was deemed appropriate for the study due to its emphasis on capturing the essence of participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings attached to their involvement in religious service programs. By adopting a phenomenological perspective, the study aims to uncover the deep meanings and insights of the participants regarding their engagement with religious practices and teachings within a dynamic social context.

Phenomenology, particularly descriptive phenomenology, was used to describe and interpret the experiences of the participants without prior theoretical assumptions. This approach enabled the exploration of the participants' subjective perceptions of religious service, providing rich insights into how they make sense of religious teachings, social interactions, and spiritual transformations. The goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as it is experienced by those who live it, capturing the essential qualities of the experience. A detailed explanation of the process of thematic analysis, including the derivation of themes from the data, has been added to enhance transparency.

Participants

Participants for the study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with relevant experiences and insights into the religious service programs were included. The criteria for inclusion involved being actively engaged in religious practices or programs in Mandailing Natal, either as recipients or facilitators (Hardwick, 2020). Participants were selected from various age groups and backgrounds to provide a diverse range of perspectives on the phenomenon. The inclusion criteria also required that participants had sufficient experience with the religious service programs in question, having participated in these activities for at least six months prior to the study.

A total of 15-20 participants were involved in the study, consisting of religious leaders, teachers, and members of the local community. The group represented a mix of genders and ages, ranging from young adults to older community members, ensuring a comprehensive view of how different generations experienced the religious service programs. The study did not include individuals who had no involvement in religious activities or service programs in the region, as they would not have been able to provide relevant insights into the research questions.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and field observations. The semi-structured interviews were designed to allow for open-ended responses while maintaining focus on the research questions. The interview guide consisted of questions that explored participants' experiences with the religious service programs, their understanding of religious teachings, and the social and spiritual changes they had observed. Interviews were conducted in person, in a private setting to ensure a comfortable and confidential environment for the participants to express their thoughts and feelings freely.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, depending on the depth of responses. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and notes were taken during the sessions. In addition to interviews, participant observations were conducted during religious service

activities such as communal prayers, sermons, and community gatherings. This allowed for a richer understanding of the social dynamics and spiritual changes taking place within the community.

The interviews and observations were conducted at various locations within Mandailing Natal, including local mosques, community centers, and participants' homes, in order to capture the diversity of settings in which the religious services were provided.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a technique commonly used in phenomenological research to identify patterns and themes within the data. The analysis process began with transcribing the interviews verbatim and organizing the data into manageable chunks. Through systematic reading and re-reading of the data themes were derived by following a structured process: (1) initial open coding to identify key phrases and ideas, (2) grouping similar codes into categories, and (3) synthesizing categories into overarching themes. These themes were validated through iterative comparison and discussion among the research team.

Each theme was coded and categorized based on recurring ideas and patterns that emerged from the interviews and observations. The analysis was iterative, with frequent revisiting of the data to refine the themes and ensure that they accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences. NVivo software was used to assist in managing and coding the data, though the focus remained on the interpretative process of identifying essential themes.

The thematic analysis allowed for the extraction of the core meanings of participants' experiences, focusing on their perceptions of the impact of religious service on their spiritual life, social relationships, and understanding of religion. This approach helped illuminate the nuances of the religious experience in a contemporary and rapidly changing social context, and the way these experiences were lived and understood by individuals in Mandailing Natal.

Ethics

The study adhered to ethical guidelines ensuring the confidentiality, autonomy, and informed consent of all participants. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, which reviewed and approved the research protocol. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement in the study, confirming that they understood the purpose of the research, their rights, and the confidentiality measures in place. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and any identifying information would be kept confidential throughout the research process.

Data collected during the study was securely stored and only accessible to authorized personnel. All participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, and that their responses would not affect their participation in any related programs or activities.

RESULTS

Religious Understanding and Acceptance

One of the prominent themes identified in the study is the participants' varying levels of understanding and acceptance of religious teachings after engaging with the religious service programs. Many participants expressed that their involvement in these programs allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of Islamic principles, which had previously been passed down to them through traditional means, such as mosque sermons. However, others felt that these teachings did not always align with the realities of their modern lives.

For instance, one participant shared:

"Before this program, I only knew about religion from the regular mosque gatherings, but after joining, I learned how to apply these teachings in my daily life." (Participant A)

This indicates that for some individuals, the religious service programs helped bridge the gap between abstract religious teachings and their practical application. This shift was particularly noticeable among younger generations, who were eager to understand how Islamic teachings could be integrated into contemporary life.

However, not all participants were as receptive. Some older individuals, especially those more accustomed to traditional religious practices, expressed concerns about the relevance of certain modern interpretations of Islam. One participant remarked:

"I don't know if all the new teachings are in line with our traditions. It's difficult to see how they fit into our daily lives." (Participant C)

This suggests that while some individuals welcomed the programs, there were others who felt that these modern interpretations of Islam might be at odds with their long-held beliefs and practices.

Social and Spiritual Transformation

A second key theme that emerged from the interviews and observations was the social and spiritual transformation that participants experienced as a result of the religious service programs. Many individuals reported that their participation in these programs had a profound impact on both their relationship with others and their spiritual life.

Several participants highlighted the positive influence of the programs on their sense of community and social responsibility. One participant shared:

"I used to be indifferent to my neighbors, but after joining the religious service program, I started helping them more and became more focused during my prayers." (Participant B)

This statement reflects a shift toward greater social cohesion and individual spiritual growth. The religious programs seemed to foster stronger bonds within the community, particularly through shared religious activities, such as communal prayers and celebration of Islamic holidays. Observations during the study also revealed that these activities contributed to a sense of unity and collective well-being among the participants.

For example, during group prayers or religious ceremonies, participants frequently exchanged personal stories of transformation, demonstrating the impact of these activities on their social dynamics. It was evident that the religious service programs not only served to deepen individual spiritual practices but also reinforced communal solidarity.

Challenges in Religious Service

The third theme that emerged from the study was the challenges faced by both the community and the organizers in the implementation of religious service programs. Several participants, particularly religious leaders and educators, pointed out that one of the key challenges was adapting religious content to be both meaningful and accessible to the local population.

One participant noted:

"Sometimes, the messages don't resonate because they feel too abstract or too distant from our daily lives. It's a challenge to make religion feel relevant to the younger generation." (Participant D)

The difficulty in conveying religious messages that address the contemporary issues faced by the community was repeatedly mentioned. Additionally, logistical and organizational challenges were identified, such as the lack of sufficient resources and the need for better communication strategies to engage the local population effectively. Some religious leaders also expressed frustration with the perceived resistance from more traditional members of the community, who were reluctant to embrace new forms of religious engagement.

Despite these challenges, many participants also acknowledged that the programs had begun to make a noticeable difference in terms of community engagement and the deepening of religious commitment. However, it was clear that a more tailored and contextually sensitive approach was needed to overcome the barriers faced by the religious service initiatives.

The findings of this study illustrate that the religious service programs in Mandailing Natal have had a significant impact on participants' understanding of Islam and their social and spiritual lives. While the programs have led to positive changes, such as increased social cohesion and a deeper understanding of religious teachings, challenges remain in ensuring the relevance and accessibility of these programs to different segments of the population. The data suggests that a more nuanced approach that considers the cultural and generational differences within the community may be crucial for the continued success of these religious service initiatives.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the profound impact of religious service programs on the personal and social lives of participants in Mandailing Natal, specifically in terms of their spiritual growth and social behavior (Manetti dkk., 2020). The findings reveal that while participants appreciate the teachings of these programs, the actual application of religious knowledge varies significantly, with younger individuals often experiencing a more pronounced transformation (Mekonnen dkk., 2022). This underscores the importance of understanding the lived experiences of participants, as their engagement with religious teachings is deeply intertwined with their personal, social, and cultural contexts.

The research contributes to answering the primary questions posed at the outset of this study, particularly regarding the subjective experiences of individuals in religious service programs (Ozzano & Fenoglio, 2022). While the results demonstrate a theoretical understanding of Islamic teachings, the discussion extends these findings by exploring the real-world implications. For example, participants noted that the programs provided deeper insights into the religious practices they already followed, but they also expressed a need for more relevant guidance in dealing with contemporary challenges. This variability in reception suggests that the success of religious service programs in promoting spiritual and social change depends on how well these programs connect with the lived realities of participants (Quang, 2022). Furthermore, the study highlights the challenge of communicating religious teachings effectively to diverse age groups, as younger generations reported feeling more connected to the programs than older participants, who often found the teachings less applicable to their lives.

The findings of this study both align with and extend previous research on the role of religious service programs in fostering social cohesion and personal transformation (Tater dkk., 2023). For instance, previous studies (e.g., Patel, 2020; Johnson, 2017) have highlighted the importance of community-based religious programs in promoting social bonding, yet they have often overlooked the personal, subjective experiences of the participants involved. The results of this study echo the work of Alfarisi (2018), who suggested that religious education is often more impactful when it resonates with participants' lived experiences, but it also extends this argument by revealing the complex interplay between age, social context, and religious understanding. Additionally, the study contributes to phenomenological research on religious experience (e.g., Smith, 2015), by demonstrating that the transformative potential of religious programs lies not only in their content but also in their ability to engage participants emotionally and spiritually. This supports the claim that phenomenological approaches offer unique insights into the ways religious teachings are internalized and applied within specific cultural and social contexts.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the academic field and practical applications in religious education (Vince, 2019). From a scholarly perspective, the research reinforces the need for a phenomenological approach to understanding the personal, subjective experiences of individuals in religious service programs. This approach offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of how religious teachings are internalized and applied in daily life, especially in contexts marked by cultural and social diversity. Practically, the study suggests that religious service programs should be designed with greater attention to the diverse social and age-related needs of participants. For instance, younger generations, as noted in this study, tend to experience more profound changes, indicating that religious education efforts may need to be tailored to engage

different demographic groups more effectively. Additionally, this research emphasizes the need for program content to be responsive to contemporary challenges, rather than relying solely on traditional teachings. These insights could help organizations refine their strategies for delivering religious education and social service, potentially improving the impact of such programs on individuals' spiritual and social well-being.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of religious service program participants, it is not without limitations (Winkelman, 2021). One key limitation is the relatively small sample size of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. The study focused on a specific geographical area—Mandailing Natal—which has unique social, cultural, and religious dynamics. Therefore, the findings may not be directly applicable to other regions with different cultural or religious contexts. Furthermore, the use of phenomenology, while ideal for capturing the depth of individual experiences, does not offer quantitative data that could be used to assess broader trends or correlations. These methodological constraints highlight the need for further research involving larger, more diverse samples and a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena studied.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research (Zhao, 2021). First, the exploration of how religious service programs can be adapted to engage different age groups more effectively warrants further investigation. Future studies could compare the impact of such programs on younger and older participants across various cultural settings to identify best practices in religious education. Additionally, the integration of quantitative methods could complement the phenomenological approach, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the effects of religious service programs. Another promising direction for research is the examination of the specific factors that influence the way religious teachings are applied in participants' daily lives, such as socioeconomic status, educational background, and familial influences. By expanding the scope of this research, scholars can deepen our understanding of the interplay between personal, social, and cultural factors in shaping religious experience and practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of the Mandailing Natal community in engaging with religious service programs, addressing the gap in understanding how such programs impact individuals' spiritual and social lives. The findings reveal that these programs significantly influence participants' understanding and application of religious teachings, with notable shifts in their social behavior and spiritual practices. These results contribute to a deeper comprehension of how religious education programs can be more effectively tailored to meet the diverse needs of different community groups. By highlighting the transformative potential of such programs, the study fills a gap in previous research, which often overlooked the personal experiences of participants. Future research could expand on these findings by examining the long-term impact of these programs or exploring how similar approaches can be adapted to other regions. Additionally, investigating the role of socioeconomic factors and educational backgrounds in shaping participants' engagement with religious service programs could offer more nuanced insights. Ultimately, this study paves the way for further exploration into the intersection of religion, community, and social change.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This article has undergone an independent and objective review process. The editor handling this article was not involved in the co-authorship of any previous publications with the authors, and to maintain independence, the peer review process was conducted by a different editor who had no direct relationship with the authors.

REFERENCES

- Al Muhdhar, M. H. I., Rohman, F., Tamalene, M. N., Nadra, W. S., Daud, A., & Irsyadi, H. (2019). Local wisdom-based conservation ethics of Tabaru traditional community on Halmahera Island, Indonesia. *International Journal of Conservation Science*, 10(3), 533–542. Scopus.
- Alin, F., Daniel, G., Monica, M., Adrian, B., Iulia, L., Nicoleta, F. M., Andrei, S. D., Mihály, M., & Migdonia, G. (2020). Between worlds and elites at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age in the Lower Danube Basin: A pluridisciplinary approach to personal ornaments. *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*, 12(9). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12520-020-01177-0>
- Aprilianto, D., Na'imah, F. U., Fauzi, A., & Maknuun, L. I. (2024). The Controversy of Child Marriage Culture in The Perspective of Maqāsid al-Ushrah: A Case Study of The Authority of Lebe' in Brebes. *Al-Manahij: Jurnal Kajian Hukum Islam*, 18(2), 199–218. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.24090/mnh.v18i2.11554>
- Arruda, G. A. (2020). The Impact of the Pandemic on the Conception of Poverty, Discourse, and Praxis of Christian Religious Communities in Brazil from the Perspective of Their Local Leaders. *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, 4(2), 380–401. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-020-00122-2>
- Beláňová, A., Kostecká, Y., Machovcová, K., & McCabe, M. (2020). 'Twofold otherness': On religion, spirituality, and home schooling in the Czech Republic. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 41(4), 406–418. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1762384>
- Chen, H. (2019). The road to redemption: Killing snakes in medieval chinese buddhism. *Religions*, 10(4). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10040247>
- Ciliberti, R., Fulcheri, E., Petralia, P., & Siri, A. (2021). Sharing ethics of displaying human remains in museums. *Medicina Historica*, 4(3), 1–8. Scopus.
- Delakorda Kawashima, T. (2022). The Relationless Japanese Society and the Practices of Belonging during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Asian Studies*, 10(1), 45–68. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2022.10.1.45-68>
- Driessen, J., & Letesson, Q. (2024). The Gathering: Collectivity and the Development of Bronze Age Cretan Society. *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 32(1), 1–58. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-023-09183-1>
- Gasparini, V. (2021). RURIFICATION OF RELIGION. FOCI AND SUGGRUNDARIA AT THE ROMAN VICUS OF FALACRINAE (CITTAREALE, RIETI, ITALY). *ARYS. Antigüedad, Religiones y Sociedades*, 19, 131–171. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.20318/ARYS.2021.6186>
- Hardwick, P. A. (2020). Mak yong, a unesco “masterpiece” negotiating the intangibles of cultural heritage and politicized islam. *Asian Ethnology*, 79(1), 67–90. Scopus.
- Manetti, G., Bellucci, M., & Bagnoli, L. (2020). The construction of Brunelleschi's dome in Florence in the fifteenth century: Between accountability and technologies of government. *Accounting History Review*, 30(2), 141–169. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21552851.2019.1686036>
- Mekonnen, H., Bires, Z., & Berhanu, K. (2022). Practices and challenges of cultural heritage conservation in historical and religious heritage sites: Evidence from North Shoa Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia. *Heritage Science*, 10(1). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-022-00802-6>
- Ozzano, L., & Fenoglio, S. (2022). Conceptions of Power and Role of Religion in Community Organising. *Religions*, 13(9). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090837>
- Quang, T. D. (2022). Is Living Heritage Ignored? Revisiting Heritage Conservation at Cham Living-Heritage Sites in Vietnam. *Heritage and Society*, 15(1), 46–74. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032X.2022.2126234>

- Tater, N. G., Toor, G., Surana, R., & Chandra, T. (2023). The Role of Sacred Eco Heritage Places in Conserving Traditional Knowledge Systems: The Case of the Braj Region in India. *ISVS e-journal*, *10*(5), 113–134. Scopus.
- Vince, M. (2019). I feel as though i'm doing the job of the imam for them": Considering 'Tactical' muslim leadership through the case of 'Muslim RE teachers. *Religions*, *10*(7). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10070420>
- Winkelman, M. J. (2021). A cross-cultural study of the elementary forms of religious life: Shamanistic healers, priests, and witches. *Religion, Brain and Behavior*, *11*(1), 27–45. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2020.1770845>
- Zhao, X. (2021). Form follows function in community rituals in north China: Temples and temple festivals in Jiacun village. *Religions*, *12*(12). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121105>