The Recognition of Indigenous Religions in the Indonesian Education System

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Abstract: The recognition of indigenous religions within formal education remains a significant challenge in Indonesia despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and belief and recent legal developments affirming the rights of indigenous religion adherents. This study examines how indigenous religions are represented in the Indonesian national education curriculum and explores the challenges experienced by students, teachers, and schools in implementing religious education for indigenous religion adherents. A qualitative research design was employed, combining document analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted in Central Java and involved 16 participants, comprising two school principals, four teachers, and ten students who adhere to indigenous religions. Data were analyzed thematically through stages of data organization, coding, theme development, interpretation, reporting, and validation, with member checking and triangulation used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. The findings identify four interrelated issues: limited recognition of indigenous religions within the national curriculum, inadequacies and ambiguities in the legal and regulatory framework, insufficient social support and a shortage of qualified indigenous religion teachers, and limited awareness of the human rights of indigenous religion adherents. Although Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016 and Ministerial Regulation No. 27/2016 provide a legal basis for recognizing indigenous beliefs in education, implementation remains inconsistent at the school level. Students may experience pressure to participate in religious instruction associated with officially recognized religions, while schools face difficulties in providing appropriate teachers, curricula, and institutional support. These conditions demonstrate a persistent gap between legal recognition and educational practice. The study argues that meaningful inclusion requires a coherent national curriculum framework, accessible teacher education and certification pathways, stronger inter-ministerial coordination, adequate institutional and financial support, and active collaboration with indigenous communities. Such reforms are necessary to promote equitable access to education, protect religious and belief rights, and strengthen an inclusive education system that reflects Indonesia's cultural and religious diversity.

Keywords: Indigenous Religions, National Curriculum, Educational Policy, Religious Inclusion

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a diverse archipelagic country with over 1,300 recognized ethnic groups and more than 700 languages spoken across its islands. This diversity is not only linguistic or ethnic but also deeply religious and spiritual. Beyond the six officially recognized religions—Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—millions of Indonesians identify with indigenous belief systems collectively referred to as "aliran kepercayaan" or "penghayat kepercayaan." These belief systems are rooted in ancestral worship, local cosmologies, and traditional practices that predate the arrival of world religions. While the 1945 Constitution of Indonesia guarantees freedom of religion and belief, the practical implementation of this right remains uneven, particularly within the national education system. Indigenous religions—locally referred to as aliran kepercayaan—have often been marginalized within formal institutions, particularly in the education sector (Schultz, 2019).

The marginalization of indigenous religions in formal education settings is emblematic of broader patterns of institutional neglect and cultural exclusion. This marginalization has practical consequences. Specifically, Indigenous students frequently face difficulties meeting religious education requirements, often having to choose one of the six state religions to fulfill curriculum standards (Nenohai, 2024). This mismatch can cause psychological distress, cultural dislocation, and exclusion. Indigenous religion adherents have long faced legal invisibility, administrative discrimination, and limited access to culturally relevant education. Students are often forced to conform to state-sanctioned religions to meet curriculum requirements, undermining religious freedom, cultural continuity, and psychosocial well-being.

Despite recent legal advances, such as the Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016 and the Ministerial Regulation No. 27 of 2016, which mandate the recognition of indigenous beliefs in schools, implementation has been inconsistent and fraught with challenges. Many schools lack trained instructors, culturally appropriate curricula, and institutional support to accommodate indigenous religious education.

Furthermore, indigenous religions are often relegated to the domain of culture rather than faith, diminishing their status and legitimacy in the eyes of educators, policymakers, and society at large.

Recent academic discourse has begun to challenge these patterns. Scholars argue for including indigenous knowledge in national curricula to promote educational equity and cultural sustainability (Parmin and Trisnowati, 2024). An inclusive curriculum affirms indigenous students' identity and aligns with global educational goals on diversity, human rights, and cultural preservation.

Recognition of minority cultures, identities, and the religious beliefs that embody them is central to a multicultural perspective. Such acceptance is vital for community sustainability, with education playing a key role in addressing the challenges faced by minority groups (Kotzmann, Stonebridge and Morss, 2023). Education fosters intellectual, social, and personal development through equitable and inclusive opportunities (Mukminin *et al.*, 2019) and is affirmed as a fundamental human right by both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This recognition facilitates human dignity and respect for rights, and promotes tolerance and understanding among diverse groups, thereby supporting peace (Garreta-Bochaca, Macia-Bordalba and Llevot-Calvet, 2019).

This study investigates how indigenous religions are represented—or neglected—in the Indonesian national curriculum. It also explores the challenges students and educators face in navigating religious education in a multicultural and multi-belief context. By combining document analysis with in-depth interviews, the research aims to highlight policy-practice gaps, identify structural barriers, and propose actionable recommendations for creating a more inclusive and pluralistic education system that honors Indonesia’s rich religious diversity. The findings aim to contribute to ongoing policy discussions about inclusive education and recognizing cultural and religious diversity within formal schooling in Indonesia.

2. Methodology

2.1 Setting and Participants

A qualitative method design was employed to explore the recognition of indigenous religions in the Indonesian education curriculum, comprising document analysis and interviews. Document analysis was employed to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge of the phenomenon in conjunction with interviews to triangulate data through convergence and collaboration to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). The research was conducted in Central Java, a province where various indigenous religions are practiced.

Informants were purposely selected based on their roles, which could offer insight into their unique perspectives regarding the phenomenon: school principals were included for their crucial role as decision-makers, teachers as classroom leaders responsible for implementing educational practices, and students who adhere to folk religions. A total of 16 participants were involved in the study, including two principals, four teachers, and 10 students. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling, ensuring diverse perspectives from different school settings.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Document analysis was carried out on national and international regulations on religious education and human rights, and the interviews provided complementary insights into participants' lived experiences and highlighted policy-practice gaps. The documents analyzed include the Law on the National Education System, the Human Rights Law, and ministerial regulations concerning the national curriculum. These documents are publicly accessible online through official government websites. The selection criteria were based on the most recent and currently applicable regulations.

The interview data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gain comprehensive information concerning folk religion policy and practice, e.g., exploring challenges educators and students face. Interviews were conducted in-person in school locations and lasted approximately two weeks, 30 minutes each (mean, range). The main topics covered in the interviews included the fulfillment of religious education in the school curriculum. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university ethics board, and informed consent was ensured by providing written consent forms.

Data were analyzed qualitatively in six stages: (1) organizing data, (2) coding, (3) building themes, (4) reporting

findings, (5) interpreting findings, and (6) validating accuracy (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Interview data were stored separately from text data, transcribed, and grouped by common themes. A preliminary analysis was conducted by reviewing the data, which helped in coding and organizing it into categories. Coding followed thematic analysis. Themes were then developed and refined through analysis to address the research questions.

To ensure reliability and validity, member checking was employed. Triangulation was used to validate the findings, ensuring the research process was systematic and trustworthy by cross-checking data from multiple sources (e.g., document analysis and interviews) (Johnson and Christensen, 2024).

3. Results and Discussion

The results and analysis provide comprehensive insights into four key issues: (1) recognizing indigenous religions in the curriculum, (2) inadequate legal framework for indigenous religions, (3) social support and teacher deficit in indigenous religion education, and (4) lack of human rights awareness.

3.1 Recognition of Indigenous Religions in the Curriculum

Indigenous religions face significant challenges within the national education curriculum. While the curriculum recognizes institutional religions as legitimate subjects, it cannot adequately accommodate the diverse range of indigenous religions. As a result, the government generally includes only the six major institutional religions in the educational curriculum. Consequently, students who adhere to folk religions struggle to access lessons that align with their beliefs. This lack of representation in the curriculum creates an educational disparity that hinders progress.

The inclusion of indigenous religions in the Indonesian national curriculum is a relatively recent policy development, grounded in the Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016, which obliges the state to acknowledge indigenous religion adherents (penghayat kepercayaan) as equal citizens. This ruling was implemented through the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 27 of 2016, allowing students who adhere to indigenous religions to receive religious education under their beliefs (Tarigan, 2022). However, despite these legal advances, the curriculum still lacks a systematic and structured framework for indigenous religion education, especially regarding content, pedagogy, and teacher certification.

Recent critical reviews of the 2022 National Education System Bill (RUU Sisdiknas) show a regression in the formal recognition of indigenous religions. The draft bill removed the explicit recognition of indigenous religion education as a distinct category, raising concerns among scholars and civil society groups about the erasure of protections previously gained through court decisions. This omission is viewed not only as a failure to sustain pluralism but also as an institutional neglect of marginalized belief systems that have historically been excluded from Indonesia's formal education landscape (Oktafiana, 2023).

Empirical studies reveal that implementation at the school level remains highly inconsistent. A study in Gunungkidul Regency found that four years after the enactment of Permendikbud No. 27/2016, local education offices had neither socialized the policy adequately nor provided necessary support mechanisms. As a result, students adhering to indigenous religions did not receive any form of in-school religious education, and teachers were unaware of how to address their needs (Noviana, 2023). These findings point to a disconnect between national-level policy and regional execution, indicating that recognition on paper has not yet translated into inclusive educational practices.

Scholars have emphasized incorporating local wisdom and indigenous knowledge into curriculum design. Islam (2024) proposes a model integrating customary schools into formal education systems through community-based partnerships. Such an approach would allow indigenous religions' values, rituals, and cosmologies to be taught meaningfully and respectfully, rather than being marginalized or subsumed under dominant religious paradigms. This culturally responsive model resonates with global theories of inclusive education, which advocate for affirming diverse belief systems to ensure equity and representation.

Despite these challenges, some grassroots initiatives have demonstrated promising models. In Sumba, for instance, the Marapu belief system has begun to be formally taught in several schools since 2022. Eighteen instructors have been trained to deliver Marapu teachings, although their status remains informal as "cultural educators" rather than certified teachers (Ama, 2023). While limited in scale, such programs illustrate that indigenous religion education can be institutionalized effectively with political will and community involvement.

The structural separation between indigenous religion education and the state's religious bureaucracy remains

a central obstacle. Unlike the six official religions, which fall under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, indigenous religion education is managed solely by the Ministry of Education and Culture. As Nenohai (2025) argues, this division reinforces the perception that indigenous religions are cultural rather than spiritual, undermining their legitimacy in both public and educational spheres. Without harmonized inter-ministerial cooperation, the curriculum will continue to reflect a biased hierarchy of belief systems.

In sum, while the legal framework has opened the door for inclusion, the practical realization of indigenous religion recognition in Indonesia's curriculum faces systemic and cultural barriers. Meaningful reform requires a coherent national policy that explicitly safeguards indigenous religious rights within the education system, alongside teacher training, curriculum development, and institutional collaboration.

3.2 Inadequate Legal Framework for Indigenous Religions

The Indonesian Constitution of 1945 provides a strong foundation for guaranteeing citizens' freedom of religion and belief. It ensures everyone can worship according to their chosen religion or belief system. As the highest law of the land, the Constitution distinguishes between "religion" and "belief" while placing both on equal footing. This distinction is reflected in the word "and" in the phrase "religion and belief," affirming that official religions and indigenous religions hold equal status, with folk religions categorized as belief systems. This constitutional provision was reaffirmed in the Constitutional Court's Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016, which acknowledged the civil rights of indigenous religion followers. The phrase "religion and belief" carries legal weight, signaling that folk religions are not merely tolerated but are intended to be protected equally under the law (Lindsey and Pausacker, 2022). However, the implementation of this constitutional ideal remains fragmented across sectors, especially in education and civil registration.

According to the elucidation of Article 1 in Presidential Decree No. 1 (1965) on the Prevention of Abuse and Blasphemy of Religion, the six religions recognized in Indonesia are those mentioned before. Law No. 23 (2006) on Civil Administration further separates religious identity from indigenous religion. This distinction has significant implications for implementing civic regulations and the educational system. A key issue arises in the unequal treatment of students who adhere to folk religions, as they often face disparities in services compared to those who follow official religions. The separation between religion and belief in administrative documents has led to the exclusion of indigenous religion adherents from key public services. For example, for years, they were forced to leave the religion column blank on identity cards, which often triggered discrimination in public institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This structural marginalization has perpetuated inequalities in accessing education, healthcare, and social support.

Inequality in religious education in schools persists despite legal protections. Law No. 23 (2006) recognizes and protects adherents of indigenous religions, while Law No. 20 (2003) ensures every student has the right to religious education according to their beliefs. However, the government officially recognizes only six religions in the educational system. Schools rarely provide teachers or curricula for students outside the six recognized religions. Even where special religious instructors are appointed, their presence is extremely limited and unevenly distributed across regions (Lubis, 2019). Inequality in religious education reflects a lack of political will and budget allocation to support inclusive religious education for all.

The lack of clarity in the law has led to discrimination against adherents of indigenous religions in schools. While the Indonesian government has made some efforts to provide a limited number of special teachers for students who follow folk religions, this remains insufficient to meet their needs. In some cases, students adhering to folk religions are forced to choose one of the six official religions to meet graduation requirements, which directly conflicts with their beliefs. This practice not only undermines freedom of conscience but also subjects these students to psychological stress and identity confusion. A study by Setara Institute (2023) found that many students are reluctant to disclose their true beliefs due to fear of social rejection or academic penalty. This systemic pressure contradicts the very purpose of education as a means of personal and cultural development.

This practice, in contrast to Article 5, paragraph 1, point A of the Convention, contravenes discrimination in education, which stipulates that education should aim to develop the full potential of individuals and promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, Article 5, paragraph 1, point B of the same convention states that no person or group of people should be forced to receive religious instruction that is inconsistent with their beliefs. Despite these protections, policies regarding religious education remain inconsistent, with services primarily offered only to adherents of official religions. As a party to the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education, Indonesia has a legal obligation to ensure inclusive and equitable education. However, the persistence of discriminatory practices against indigenous religion students

indicates a gap between international commitments and domestic implementation (UNESCO, 1962). Bridging this gap requires revising national education policy to institutionalize support for all belief systems, not just official religions.

To complicate the matter further, the government's position on the status of indigenous religions in schools lacks clarity, categorizing them as cultural entities rather than as religions. As a result, the Ministry of Culture and Education has assumed responsibility for their supervision and guidance. This ambiguity has left schools uncertain about addressing students who follow indigenous religions, as there have been no official guidelines, socialization efforts, or governmental explanations.

3.3 Social Support and Teacher Deficit in Indigenous Religion Education

Several students interviewed expressed feelings of embarrassment and fear when asked to declare their religious affiliation. The social pressure to conform to one of the official religions was compounded by the lack of awareness and sensitivity among teachers and peers. One student shared:

> "I always felt uncomfortable when asked about my religion in class. I said 'Islam' because that's what most of my classmates said. But it didn't feel honest." (INR, student)

This identity suppression is not merely a personal struggle; it reflects systemic failure to provide an environment that values diversity. The education system, instead of affirming identity, becomes a site of erasure.

Our analysis revealed that social support for students adhering to indigenous religions remains critically underdeveloped in formal educational settings. Nenohai's (2024) study on indigenous religions demonstrates that state-led religious instruction often fails to meet the actual needs of indigenous students, as its design is centralized and disconnected from community contexts. Consequently, supportive teachers within schools are sporadic and inconsistently distributed, with minimal engagement in fostering culturally grounded learning environments.

Quantitative data from Nenohai (2024) indicate that approximately 2,868 students received state-provided belief education by 2020, yet only about six schools offered structured instruction aligned with indigenous epistemologies. This disparity underscores the limited institutional reach of indigenous religions and suggests that political or budgetary prioritization for indigenous religious education remains insufficient at the policy level.

From the perspective of community-based education, Nenohai's qualitative findings in East Sumba illustrate that Marapu children develop religious identity more robustly through community-led settings, rather than formal schooling. This finding aligns with broader trends in religious pedagogy that favor pluralistic and participatory learning models over state-imposed curricula. The absence of trained local instructors within school systems contributes to this disconnect, perpetuating a reliance on external or majority-religion teachers ill-equipped for inclusive practice.

Additionally, Lubis (2019) highlights that indigenous religious adherents have often been compelled to take mainstream religious classes, reflecting systemic marginalization. Such practices not only undermine students' religious rights but also signal a tacit policy choice that sidelines indigenous beliefs. Despite legal acknowledgment in 2016 and subsequent Constitutional Court rulings, inclusive implementation has lagged, as evidenced by persistent mismatches between policy frameworks and field realities.

> "We do not have indigenous religion educators. Instead, volunteers who receive training in the folk religion community teach students who adhere to the folk religion (HST, School Principal)"

> "Efforts to provide folk religion education lessons face difficulties in providing teachers. Schools are not able to find teachers who fit the qualifications. Eligibilities for indigenous religion teachers are undergraduate criteria. (STH, Teacher)"

The limited appointment of dedicated indigenous religion instructors reveals political ambiguity and inadequate budget support. Nenohai (2024) argues that indigenous religions are managed under the Ministry of Education rather than the Ministry of Religion, a structural oversight that obscures their equivalency to recognized religions and contributes to localized neglect. The framing of indigenous religious education as an auxiliary form ("special education") rather than an integral right signals low political will and insufficient funding commitment.

The Constitution states that official and indigenous religions are equal, yet the curriculum only recognizes formal religious education, leaving indigenous religions largely unacknowledged. As a result, there are no indigenous

religion teachers in schools, although the government is engaged in recruitment. Education officials argue there is no legal basis for hiring indigenous religion teachers and cite difficulties. Schools face challenges in finding teachers with the appropriate qualifications, as all teachers in Indonesia must hold a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, a lack of students hinders establishing university programs for indigenous religion teachers, given the limited career opportunities in this field.

Bridging the gap between national educational mandates and community needs calls for decolonized, indigenized models that legitimize local pedagogical practices. Nenohai's proposed framework—anchored in reconciliation and community collaboration—offers a promising direction by integrating indigenous epistemologies into formal curricula and empowering local educators. Similarly, themes highlighted by Lubis underscore the necessity of structural reforms to ensure that indigenous students receive culturally congruent religious instruction, backed by legal recognition and dedicated resources.

The education curriculum mandates that students attend religious classes, but indigenous religions are not officially recognized as religions despite being recorded in civil documents. As a result, students who follow folk religions are required to choose and attend one of the official religious courses. If they do not, they risk failing or being unable to graduate due to a lack of a religious education score.

3.4 Lack of Human Rights Awareness

In many instances, students practicing indigenous religions are required to join classes affiliated with an official religion. In one case in Semarang City, for instance, a student informant was denied promotion to the next grade for refusing to participate in Muslim prayer practices, a graduation requirement. This example highlights a disregard for religious freedom and human rights.

The understanding of the indigenous religion's position needs further development and clarification. Teachers often experience confusion when working with students from minority religions (Liedgren, 2018). While they are generally familiar with discussing diversity in ethnicity, class, and gender, they often struggle with religious issues. A lack of socialization within local government and community regarding the existence and legality of folk religions further results in, and, in turn, leads to discrimination against students of minority religions (Allgood, 2016).

Moreover, the local government's lack of awareness regarding the legal rights of indigenous religion followers, coupled with the limited tolerance of the dominant social group, makes it difficult for adherents to be recognized and protected, contributing to challenges in accessing religious education and leading to discrimination against students who practice folk religions in public schools.

A conscientious understanding is needed to recognize the regulations regarding acknowledging indigenous religions and related rights. Therefore, even if existing laws do not explicitly mention the right to proper religious education, it would benefit the government and policymakers to consider that religious education may include instruction on indigenous religions. In contrast, national and local governments are encouraged to provide services and facilities that support quality education for all citizens, without discrimination.

Human rights are inherent to human nature, ensuring dignity, liberty, and protection, while awareness involves recognizing and understanding fundamental rights. Addressing the root causes of human rights infringements and proactively preventing such issues is crucial to combating racism, promoting equality, and enhancing citizen engagement in democratic decision-making (Ashifa, 2020). Further, a direct relationship exists between self-esteem and attitudes toward fundamentals, with self-esteem influencing awareness, cognitive attitudes, university-level education, and the role of human rights (Rho and Yang, 2023).

4. Conclusion

According to the 1945 Indonesian Constitution, official and indigenous religions hold equal status, and adherents should receive the same educational services. However, despite legal recognition, folk religion adherents face educational inequality due to unclear regulations, a shortage of qualified teachers, and limited awareness. These findings have practical implications for stakeholders. It is recommended that the government provide qualified indigenous religion teachers and collaborate with indigenous religious communities to ensure their availability. The Ministry of Education may also consider establishing clear guidelines for teaching students who follow indigenous religions. Despite these contributions, this study was limited to a specific region. Future research could explore other areas and assess the impact of policies on student outcomes. With this in mind, it is hoped

that this study will serve as a foundation for policymakers to develop an education system that effectively supports students from diverse religious and belief backgrounds.

The national curriculum should be revised to include indigenous religious knowledge, practices, and histories. This inclusion must be developed in consultation with indigenous communities to ensure authenticity and cultural integrity. The government should establish accredited training programs for indigenous religion educators, possibly in collaboration with local cultural institutions or universities. Certification pathways must be made accessible and recognized within the national teacher registry. Ministries involved in education and religious affairs must coordinate to harmonize policies, ensuring that indigenous religious education is supported both administratively and financially. A national campaign to raise awareness about the constitutional rights of indigenous religion adherents and to combat stigma should be launched, targeting schools, civil society, and local government officials.

Ultimately, recognizing and integrating indigenous religions into the education system is not merely a technical or administrative task; it is a moral and constitutional imperative. A truly inclusive education system in Indonesia must reflect the full spectrum of its spiritual and cultural landscape. Doing so would not only fulfill international human rights obligations but also strengthen the foundations of unity in diversity upon which the Indonesian nation was built.

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Ethics Declaration

This study received ethical approval from the relevant ethics board of Universitas Sebelas Maret. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants prior to data collection. The participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout the research and reporting process.

AI Declaration

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with language editing, grammar checking, and improving the clarity and readability of the text. The authors reviewed, verified, and revised all AI-assisted content and remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript. AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, or make substantive research decisions.

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