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Harmonizing the religion, arts, and culture: Value of compassion as a conflict resolver in Sumedang

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ABSTRACT

Sumedang Regency faces a sociological challenge in the form of a sharp dichotomy between puritanical religious practices and local cultural arts expressions. This phenomenon hinders the optimization of social capital in building community character. This article aims to deconstruct the roots of this dichotomous conflict and reconstruct a new synergy model based on the Grand Theory of the integration of religion, arts, and culture, with the value of "compassion" (Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim/Silih Asih) as an axiological meeting point. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with seven key informants (clerics, artists, academics, bureaucrats), and extensive literature reviews conducted through Community Service (Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat or PkM) activities. The results show that the dichotomy arises from a paradigmatic misunderstanding of religion, which is understood solely as a formalistic ritual. At the same time, arts and culture are considered profane and distant from God. The main findings demonstrate that compassion can serve as an epistemological bridge, with religion providing the ethical foundation, culture providing a communal symbolic container, and art serving as an expressive medium of divine beauty (Jamal). The synergy of these three dimensions creates strong social cohesion and an inclusive character education model in Sumedang.

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ABSTRAK

Kabupaten Sumedang menghadapi tantangan sosiologis berupa dikotomi tajam antara praktik keagamaan yang puritan dan ekspresi seni budaya lokal. Fenomena ini menghambat optimalisasi modal sosial dalam pembangunan karakter masyarakat. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mendekonstruksi akar konflik dikotomis tersebut dan merekonstruksi model sinergi baru menggunakan Grand Theory integrasi agama, seni, dan budaya dengan nilai "kasih sayang" (Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim/Silih Asih) sebagai titik temu (meeting point) aksiologis. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam terhadap tujuh informan kunci (ulama, seniman, akademisi, birokrat), dan studi literatur ekstensif melalui kegiatan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat (PkM). Hasil menunjukkan bahwa dikotomi terjadi akibat misunderstanding paradigmatis terhadap agama yang dipahami sebatas ritual formalistik, sementara seni budaya dianggap profan dan menjauhkan dari Tuhan. Temuan utama membuktikan bahwa nilai kasih sayang mampu menjadi jembatan epistemologis di mana agama menyediakan landasan etika kasih sayang, budaya menyediakan wadah simbolik komunal, dan seni menjadi media ekspresif keindahan ilahiah (Jamal). Sinergi ketiga dimensi ini menciptakan kohesi sosial yang kuat dan model pendidikan karakter yang inklusif di Sumedang.

Kata Kunci: agama; budaya; nilai kasih sayang; resolusi konflik; seni ekspresif

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INTRODUCTION

Human civilization, as Huntington asserted in 1993 in “The Clash of Civilizations,” is shaped by the interaction and friction among three principal pillars: religious value systems, the aesthetic expressions of art, and socio-cultural practices. The resulting groupings form a civilization at the broadest level of cultural identity, thereby distinguishing it from other species (Klau, 2022). In the region of Sumedang, Indonesia, which is rich in cultural heritage, Sundanese traditional civilization, and religious diversity, such interactions should ideally produce synergy. However, the dynamics of modernity, which continuously grow and evolve alongside persistent global waves, inherently adopt a dichotomous logic as the totality and foundational basis for reproducing modern scientific knowledge, thereby generating tension (Irfan, 2017; Utomo & Sutopo, 2022). Art is often perceived as profane or as contradicting certain religious norms. At the same time, local cultural practices are accused of being syncretic, as they are considered incompatible with the sharia and potentially even threatening to Islam itself (Arfan, 2024).

The integration of arts and culture into Islamic religious education can enhance students’ religious character and social concern (Naima, 2025). Furthermore, arts, culture, and counseling play a significant role in fostering positive character, cooperation, and self-regulation among students (Kusuma et al., 2025). National research conducted by Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik) indicates an increase in the number of arts and cultural communities actively networking with religious institutions in Indonesia, particularly after the 2020 pandemic, reaching a 9.7% growth in joint activities (see: <https://www.bps.go.id/id/publication/2025/05/28/1b5cdf50f49c754c3b581bd2/statistik-sosial-budaya-2024.html>). Meanwhile, the 2020–2024 Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Religious Affairs emphasizes support for the development of culture-based religious education models as part of the priority programs within the 2025 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN).

Other studies highlight the effectiveness of religion-based community empowerment, such as NU Cilacap and communities of female return migrants, which integrate religious social capital with cultural resources to enhance citizens’ welfare and economic resilience (Saleh, 2023). In general, the literature of the past five years recommends transdisciplinary approaches, the integration of local wisdom, and the strengthening of cross-community training to maximize the synergy between religion and culture as drivers of character development and societal quality of life. Studies underscore the role of art in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); however, their focus tends to be pragmatic and economic (Karlan et al., 2022). Meanwhile, research in Madrasah Aliyah demonstrates the effectiveness of art in instructional processes, yet remains confined to classroom pedagogy and does not address the broader sociological context (Naima, 2025). Research on religion-based women’s empowerment reveals the potential of social capital but has not elaborated in depth on the role of art (Saleh, 2023).

Most existing studies are partial, addressing religion from a theological-normative perspective or discussing culture from an anthropological-descriptive standpoint. A significant theoretical gap exists due to the limited body of literature employing an axiological (value-based) approach to reconcile the ontological tension between religion and the arts and culture. Few studies have treated “compassion” as an independent variable or as a grand concept that unifies these three entities. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in the construction of a Triadic Integration Model among religion, art, and culture, with “compassion” serving as the meeting point. This study no longer debates the legal status of art within religion (fiqh of art); rather, it emphasizes how art and culture manifest *Rahmatan lil Alamin* through the framework of symbolic cultural theory. Sumedang Regency, as *Puseur Budaya Sunda* (the Center of Sundanese Culture), possesses a unique characteristic in which Islamic religiosity and ancestral customs coexist. However, over the past decade, a concerning polarization has emerged.

On the one hand, the wave of religious formalism has intensified, promoting narratives that tend to regard traditional arts as *bid'ah* or as residues of the past that are no longer relevant. On the other hand, arts and cultural communities feel alienated, perceiving religious institutions as rigid entities that constrain expressive creativity (Setyowati, 2022). This tension is not merely a discursive conflict; it has implications for the stagnation of human development. The potential of *the ulama as moral educators and artists, as custodians of moral refinement, fails to converge into* a unified orchestration of development. In fact, the sociologist Durkheim asserts that societies that fail to integrate transcendent values (religion) with immanent values (culture) will experience an identity crisis or anomie (Fathoni, 2024). This article constitutes an advanced study based on Community Service (*Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat* or PkM) activities aimed at deconstructing the roots of dichotomous conflict through negotiation-based facilitation between religious and cultural actors in Sumedang by integrating the value of “compassion” (*silih asih*) as an axiological meeting point. This community service initiative was implemented through a participatory approach, involving direct engagement with religious leaders and art practitioners in Sumedang within a dialogical space facilitated through workshop-based interactions.

Literature Review

Sumedang Regency is a religious region in West Java known for strong social capital, arts, and cultural foundations. Figures such as religious counselors, *ustadz*, cultural figures, and artists have served as community mobilizers; however, their potential to improve citizens' quality of life has not been fully realized. Over the past five years, efforts to integrate religious education with the development of arts and culture—particularly models grounded in local wisdom—have gained increasing attention in response to the need for character development and social cohesion. Recent literature highlights the urgency of collaboration between religion and culture to erode the long-standing dichotomy in which religious activities are often ritualistic and devoid of cultural engagement. In contrast, artists and cultural practitioners are often constrained in their expression by rigid religious interpretations. This study argues that compassion (*rahmah*), as a concept that transcends narrow theological boundaries and is deeply rooted in humanitarian ethics, constitutes the necessary axiological meeting point. In Islam, *rahmah*, which signifies love and mercy, is not merely vertical (directed toward God).

Rather, it is fundamentally horizontal (directed toward all creation, *rahmatan lil-'alamin*) (Safitri et al., 2023), serving as the foundational meeting point between religion and culture in this research. In Sumedang, *rahmah* can be translated into an attitude of accepting artistic forms as cultural media, provided that they do not violate fundamental humanitarian principles. By foregrounding compassion, negative perceptions of art and culture as oppositional to religion can be reconstructed into complementary or spiritual expressions, wherein art should inspire and stimulate critical thinking (Wiratno & Sudibyo, 2025), enabling creative freedom in reflecting social realities and integrating them with other elements (Utomo & Hidayatullah, 2024). Compassion in Islam is not limited to ritual observance; rather, it constitutes an ethical and moral framework that fosters tolerance, empathy, and respect for sociocultural realities. In the context of Sumedang, this approach seeks to transform the mindset of community leaders from contradiction to collaboration, optimizing local potential in accordance with the mandate of the 2020–2024 Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which supports the development of culture-based religious education.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach. The qualitative approach is highly effective for gaining an in-depth understanding of social phenomena through direct interaction with research participants, which is relevant to this study's objective of exploring comprehensive insights and describing the social phenomena, perceptions, and experiences of community leaders regarding the

synergy between religion and culture, grounded in the value of compassion. The descriptive-analytical study served as the framework for examining, understanding, and describing the processes embedded within the model at the Community Service (PkM) implementation site. The literature review involved the selection and examination of 20 scientific journals indexed in Sinta and Scopus, both national and international, relevant to the PkM theme. This research was integrated into community service activities through a collaborative workshop. The forum served as an instrument for collecting primary data, involving 40 key stakeholders.

The participants included academics (UPI, UNPAD, UNSAP), bureaucrats (Head of the Sumedang Regency Education Office), and experts in history and religion to formulate a multidisciplinary perspective on the synergy of compassion values. Data were collected through participatory observation during the workshop and focused discussions in Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. All collected data, both primary field data and secondary data from scientific journals, were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's model through the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. This descriptive-analytical process was conducted by integrating empirical data interpretation and a literature review to identify major themes, including perceptions of compassion as a bridge to synergy, encountered obstacles, and programmatic recommendations. To ensure the validity of the findings, data validity was assessed through source and theoretical triangulation by cross-verifying interview results, observations, and literature to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary focus of this community service-based research is to explore the synergy between religion and culture, with compassion as the common ground. In general, the data indicate a complex relational dynamic between these two entities. Based on field findings, the separation between religion and culture in Sumedang is not rooted in the substance of religious teachings, but rather in perception and interpretation.

1. **Formalism vs. Expressionism:** Some religious figures in Sumedang view religion through a legal-formal lens (fiqh-oriented). Within this perspective, truth is singular and textual. Art and culture, which are multi-interpretative and expressive in nature, are perceived as disturbances to the "purity" of creed (*aqidah*). Informant A (Religious Figure) stated:

"Art often leads to negligence; many of its elements are not Islamic."

This statement confirms Durkheim's Sacred and Profane theory, in which the sacred (religion) is strictly guarded from contamination by the profane (secular culture).

2. **Cultural Resistance:** On the other hand, cultural practitioners feel judged. Informant B (Artist) expressed:

"We create art to refine our sensibilities, yet we are often accused of polytheism simply for burning incense or performing dances,"

This situation creates a psychological barrier. Local culture, which inherently contains noble values (local wisdom), becomes marginalized (Andriani & Putri, 2022).

Two principal outputs are resulting from the analysis of this community service research: first, the formulation of a culture-based religious education model integrated with the value of compassion; and second, training and dissemination of the model's outcomes to religious leaders, artists, and cultural practitioners in Sumedang as a follow-up to the PkM initiative. The discussion workshop was conducted on June 28, 2025. The workshop results concerning compassion as the meeting point of synergy among religion, art, and culture were reflected in testimonials from panelists and participants. In the initial

discussion between religious and cultural experts, it was agreed that the meeting point between religion and culture lies in *rasa* (inner sensibility). From the religious perspective, *rasa* emerges from the conviction in the existence of the Divine. Subsequently, the cultural panelist, Luky, explained that the Pajajaran Kingdom entrusted the Binokasih Crown to the Kingdom of Sumedang Larang.

This crown is not merely a symbol of the transfer of royal authority but also embodies noble values that must be preserved as core principles of Sundanese cultural teachings, namely *silih asah* (mutual learning), *silih asih* (mutual compassion), and *silih asuh* (mutual care). These values are reflected in the symbolism of the Binokasih Crown itself. This finding aligns with the author's analysis that the meeting point between religion and culture lies in the value of compassion. The principal root of the problem in the synergy of religion, culture, and art in Sumedang Regency, as reflected in empirical studies and recent literature, is a fundamental misunderstanding among community leaders. Religious counselors and *ustaz* tend to strictly separate religious education from the development of arts and culture, and even regard the two as contradictory (Rahmiati, 2024; Setyowati, 2022).

Theology of Compassion

Islam, which is adhered to by the majority of the people of Sumedang, is fundamentally grounded in the *Basmalah, Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*. The most dominant attributes of God are the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful (Ebin, 2024). In the social context, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sent as *Rahmatan lil Alamin*, a mercy to the universe. Compassion and gentleness are highly esteemed values in Islam (Rambe et al., 2024). If religion is understood from this esoteric dimension (*tasawuf*), then everything that cultivates moral refinement and love constitutes an integral part of religion.

Cultural Dimension

In cultural terms, the Sundanese people of Sumedang firmly uphold the philosophy of *silih asih*, *silih asah*, and *silih asuh*. The concept of *silih asih* (mutual compassion) represents a local manifestation of the universal value of compassion (Alhafizh et al., 2021; Umar et al., 2025). *Silih asih* embodies a form of care characterized by readiness to act, both physical and non-physical (Budiyawan et al., 2024). According to Geertz (1973) in "*The Interpretation of Cultures*," culture is a web of meanings. In Sumedang, this web of meaning is woven with threads of compassion. Cultural practices such as *gotong royong*, *nadran*, or traditional ceremonies are essentially social mechanisms for nurturing compassion among community members.

Artistic Dimension

Expression of Beauty (Jamal) The interpretation of art refers to the honesty of emotion and to a process of self-expression through creativity (Nugraheni & Pamungkas, 2022). Art is a universal element of culture and an object of cultural advancement (Dienaputra et al., 2021). When a Sumedang artist composes *tembang Cianjuran* or performs *Tari Umbul* with the intention of honoring guests or expressing gratitude for nature, it represents a spiritual expression. In Islam, *Innallaha Jamil Yuhibbul Jamal* means that Allah is Beautiful and loves beauty. Art thus becomes a *wasilah* (medium) to express gratitude and love (compassion) toward the Creator and fellow beings, in a manner compatible with the noble values upheld in Islam (Baihaqi et al., 2025; Surizkika, 2024). The understanding of religious counselors who focus primarily on ritual worship routines and regard arts and culture as forbidden has led to religious preaching (*dakwah*) becoming dry and monotonous, thereby failing to provide the added value urgently needed within the social and cultural context of modern society (Naima, 2025; Saleh, 2023). Conversely, artists and cultural practitioners perceive religion as sacred and beyond the purview of the arts and culture, feeling

constrained in expressing their work due to fatwas or conservative religious views that prohibit certain forms of art (Karlan *et al.*, 2022; Putri & Andriani, 2022). The absence of dialogical space and integration prevents these two elements from contributing optimally to social and cultural development. It may even generate social complications and conflicting interests detrimental to the broader community (Kusuma *et al.*, 2025).

Discussion

Theoretical and Empirical Perspective Analysis

The study underscores the importance of interconnections among religious teachings, social life, and culture within Islamic education, so that religion is not perceived as detached from society's cultural realities (Setyowati, 2022). This aligns with the finding that synergy between religious teachers and arts and cultural activities can facilitate the internalization of inclusive and creative religious values, helping to overcome boredom in conventional religious practices (Rahmiati, 2024).

Analysis of post-migrant worker communities further confirms that religion- and culture-based empowerment can strengthen social and economic resilience when implemented through an open and contextual understanding (Saleh, 2023). This implies that liberating rigid perceptions that classify art as *haram* is crucial for opening spaces for creative expression, while simultaneously positioning religion as life-giving rather than merely a dry, ritualistic practice (Naima, 2025).

The literature demonstrates that community empowerment grounded in traditional arts and culture, which embody local spiritual values, has a positive impact on character development and cultural identity. This, in turn, reduces social conflict arising from the disintegration of the relationship between religion and art (Karlan *et al.*, 2022). Such harmony is reinforced through arts- and culture-based character education as an effective pathway to rehabilitate congregational boredom and disinterest toward exclusive and conventional forms of religious preaching (*dakwah*) (Kusuma *et al.*, 2025).

Social Complications and Interests

Tensions arising from these contradictory perspectives may generate social complications, in which conflict between conservative religious interests and artistic and cultural expression hampers collective development potential. Previous findings have examined how exclusivism in religious education and preaching may deepen social segregation and inhibit social innovation (Dirman, 2024). Moreover, such exclusivism can serve as an initial pathway to radicalism (Nafi'a *et al.*, 2022). This analysis affirms the urgent need to establish a cross-sectoral dialogical foundation that enables religious and artistic groups to collaborate within a mutually reinforcing framework of cultural values. In this regard, constructive synergy has been observed among stakeholders, particularly between the Sumedang local government and the Sumedang Larang Palace (*Keraton Sumedang Larang*). In every cultural and religious event, these shared values consistently emerge as guiding principles.

Culture-Based Religious Education Paradigm

As a strategic solution, the literature recommends developing a religious education model that employs an inclusive cultural approach, is oriented toward local wisdom, and is responsive to contemporary social needs. This integrative paradigm not only accommodates religious and artistic-cultural values but also strengthens religious moderation grounded in universal humanitarian principles (Naima, 2025; Setyowati, 2022). The implementation of this model requires processes of dialogue and collaborative training among religious counselors, *ustaz*, cultural figures, and artists, who have thus far been marginalized within their

respective perceptions and practices (Karlan *et al.*, 2022; Rahmiati, 2024). This educational model is expected to transform prevailing mindsets and create spaces for togetherness, thereby enabling the full potential of the Sumedang community to be optimally utilized for character development and collective welfare. The theory of compassion as a value in Islam and culture serves as a bridge to unify perceptions that are often opposed. The value of compassion, recognized in Islamic theology through the divine attributes of Allah as Ar-Rahman (The Most Compassionate) and Ar-Rahim (The Most Merciful), constitutes a fundamental concept that serves as a harmonizing bridge between religion and culture within the context of community development. In Islamic religious education, the essence of religiosity lies in practicing compassion as the foundation of attitudes and social interactions, encompassing tolerance, respect, and empathy (Muvid, 2021).

The Theory of Compassion Values in Islam and Culture

According to Al-Attas (1979), in "Islam and Secularism," within the framework of Islamic tasawuf and moral philosophy (akhlak), the attributes of rahman and rahim express a universal compassion that encompasses all creation, forming the moral and ethical foundation of individual and social life. Compassion as a core value in Islam is not confined to ritual worship; rather, it manifests in attitudes of benevolence, forgiveness, and protection toward fellow human beings as well as the cultural and social environment, consistent with the meaning of *rahmah* in fostering peace, brotherhood, harmony, and tranquility for all creation. This constitutes the responsibility of Muslims in fulfilling the function and purpose of Islam itself.

Religiosity thus becomes the manifestation of compassion applied in daily life. A cultural approach likewise positions compassion as a central value that shapes social bonds and a sense of belonging to tradition and local identity. According to cultural anthropological theory, cultural components, comprising symbols, language, values, and beliefs (Diana, 2022), are not merely practical or symbolic forms, but represent the accumulated outcome of shared beliefs, rituals, norms, and traditions among members of an organization or society as a cohesive force (Husain *et al.*, 2023), including compassion transmitted across generations and forming the basis of social solidarity. A sense of belonging and love toward culture encourages its preservation and development, in alignment with the meaning of compassion.

Compassion as a Meeting Point in the Synergy of Religion and Culture in Sumedang

Within the context of Community Service (PkM) in Sumedang Regency, the synergy among Islamic religious education from the Islamic Religious Education Study Program (IPAI), Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, the Sumedang Regency Government, and the Sumedang Larang Palace is grounded in the value of compassion as the meeting point between religion and culture. Compassion represents the essential commonality that enables harmonious dialogue and collaboration among religious counselors, *ustaz*, artists, and cultural practitioners, eliminating the perceptual contradictions that have long hindered their synergy (Setyowati, 2022; Karlan *et al.*, 2022). The implementation of this value of compassion is expected to shape a model of religious education with an inclusive, culturally contextual approach that promotes religious character development while sustainably preserving and advancing local wisdom. Compassion provides the foundation for creating spaces for dialogue, mutual understanding, and creative collaboration between religious and cultural traditions, thereby strengthening social and cultural bonds oriented toward collective welfare (Naima, 2025; Saleh, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The dichotomy among religion, art, and culture in Sumedang Regency is neither a theological nor a sociological inevitability; rather, it is a consequence of the hegemony of exclusive interpretations and the lack of empathetic dialogical spaces. This study concludes that the value of compassion—referred to as *Silih Asih* in the local context—functions as an omnipresent variable that serves as an effective meeting point. Within this framework, religion provides the ontological foundation concerning the source of compassion (God), culture offers the social value system for nurturing compassion, and art presents the aesthetic instrument for expressing compassion. The integration of these three dimensions thus generates a society that is religious, culturally rooted, and highly civilized. The value of compassion, embodied in the divine attributes *Ar-Rahman* and *Ar-Rahim*, constitutes both a theological and cultural concept that serves as a crucial meeting point in the synergy between religion and culture. The integration of compassion into Islamic religious education in Sumedang, through a cultural approach and cross-institutional collaboration, may serve as an effective model for bridging perceptual differences, strengthening social cohesion, and supporting sustainable development grounded in local wisdom and religious values.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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