



Religious Education Model for Indigenous Children in Malaysia: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

Program Pembangunan Tamadun Masyarakat Asli (PETAMA) established by Yayasan Pahang in 1998, was designed to cultivate knowledgeable and capable leaders among Malaysia's Indigenous Peoples, enabling them to achieve parity with other ethnic groups. PETAMA graduates are expected to serve as *da'i* and spiritual guides within their communities. This study investigates the religious and educational approaches applied in PETAMA to enhance the quality of life and spiritual awareness of the Indigenous Children subgroup of Malaysia's Indigenous Peoples. Using a qualitative ethnographic design, data were collected through in-depth individual and group interviews with 30 PETAMA students from the Indigenous Children community. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo12 software. Findings reveal ten key approaches: i) formal religious education, ii) religious activities, iii) training and development of *da'i*, iv) spiritual counseling and mentoring, v) application of Islamic values in daily life, vi) collaboration with religious institutions, vii) formal education, viii) moral and religious education, ix) educational technology and innovation, and x) academic mentoring. These findings provide initial empirical insights into the role of PETAMA in shaping religious education among Indigenous children in Malaysia and serve as a foundation for future research on indigenous education, cultural integration, and spiritual development.

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INTRODUCTION

The indigenous communities of Malaysia have long faced various challenges and strived to achieve social and economic well-being on par with other segments of society (Suradi, 2018; Zamzami, 2016). Despite possessing a rich cultural heritage and traditions, these indigenous communities are often marginalized by the mainstream of national development. In this context, education and religious outreach serve as two key pillars in efforts to empower and integrate the indigenous community into the broader society (Gusmansyah, 2019; Sikmaritim, 2023). Education is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but also a vital tool for enhancing

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the capacity of individuals and communities to face life's challenges (Mahyudin et al., 2022; Prasetiawan, 2019). Meanwhile, religious outreach serves as a moral and spiritual foundation that guides individual and social behavior in accordance with noble values.

In response to this need, the Pahang Foundation established the *Program Pembangunan Tamadun Masyarakat Asli* (PETAMA) on May 3, 1998. This program is specifically designed to transform indigenous communities, including the indigenous community, through a religious and educational outreach approach. PETAMA aims to foster a generation of capable and knowledgeable individuals among indigenous peoples who are not only able to lead their communities toward progress but also serve as effective *da'i* and preachers (Anwar & Salim, 2019; Budiantoro, 2018). Thus, PETAMA graduates are expected to bring about positive and sustainable change in their communities. The PETAMA program receives full support from various institutions, including the Pahang Islamic Religious Department, the Pahang Council of Islamic and Malay Customary Affairs, and the Pahang State Indigenous Peoples' Development Department. Support from these institutions ensures that the program runs smoothly, receives the necessary resources, and achieves its established objectives (Hidayat, 2017; Maujud, 2018).

The *da'wah* approach in the PETAMA Program encompasses various forms of religious and moral education integrated with formal and non-formal education. Religious education includes instruction in the basic teachings of Islam, Quranic exegesis, hadith, and fiqh, aimed at establishing a strong spiritual foundation (Ali et al., 2023; Noor, 2017). Meanwhile, formal and non-formal education includes the provision of school facilities, scholarship programs, night classes, skills courses, and leadership programs. All of these are designed to enhance the knowledge, skills, and capacity of indigenous communities in facing the challenges of daily life (Ridho et al., 2022).

This study aims to explore various forms of religion and education-based outreach approaches implemented in the PETAMA program. It also seeks to identify the challenges and successes encountered in the program's implementation, as well as offer recommendations for improving the program's effectiveness in the future. By gaining a deeper understanding of these approaches, it is hoped that more effective ways can be found to empower indigenous peoples and other indigenous communities in the pursuit of inclusive and sustainable development.

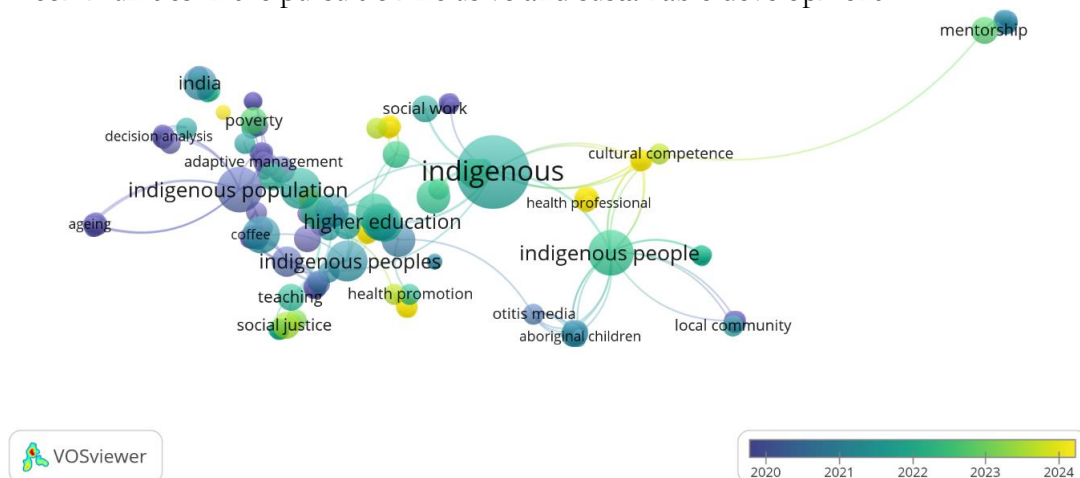


Fig 1. Keywords referring to indigenous peoples used by researchers worldwide (Scopus database)

The author found that research using the keyword “indigenous peoples” remains very limited. Based on a Scopus data analysis conducted on August 20, 2024, at 5:30 PM, it was found that there are 169 research articles related to indigenous communities from various countries around the world; however, not a single document has been found that specifically examines the forms of religion- and education-based outreach approaches implemented in the indigenous communities program. Therefore, more in-depth research on indigenous communities is urgently needed.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the religion-based *da'wah* and educational approaches within the *Program Pembangunan Tamadun Masyarakat Asli (PETAMA)* implemented among the indigenous community. The ethnographic approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the culture, values, and practices within the indigenous community. The research design is exploratory descriptive, aiming to describe and explore the *da'wah* and educational approaches applied in the PETAMA program as well as their impact on the indigenous community (Az-Zahra et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2026; 2021; Fiantika, 2022; Harun et al., 2026; Kaputra et al., 2021; Muktaf, 2016; Widhianningrum & Amah, 2014). This study focuses on social interactions, cultural practices, and individual experiences within the community context. The research was conducted at UCYP University under the auspices of the Pahang Foundation, where the PETAMA program has been implemented.

The informants in this study consisted of thirty members of the indigenous community participating in the PETAMA program, five PETAMA program managers and implementers, and five representatives from supporting institutions, including representatives from Pahang Islamic Religious Department, the Pahang Council of Islamic and Malay Customary Affairs, and the Pahang State Indigenous Peoples' Development Department. Data collection was conducted through participatory observation and in-depth individual and group interviews. After the data were collected, all data were analyzed thematically using the qualitative software NVivo 12 (Fauzi et al., 2024; Hew, 2018; Kustiawan et al., 2023; Muthatahirin et al., 2025; Wekke et al., 2024).

The qualitative method with an ethnographic approach allows researchers to deeply and comprehensively understand how religion and education-based *da'wah* approaches are implemented in the PETAMA program and their impact on the indigenous community. Through the entire research process that has been carried out, it is hoped that this study can provide preliminary data for further research on different issues related to this theme. To facilitate understanding, the author presents the research methodology stages in the following figure.

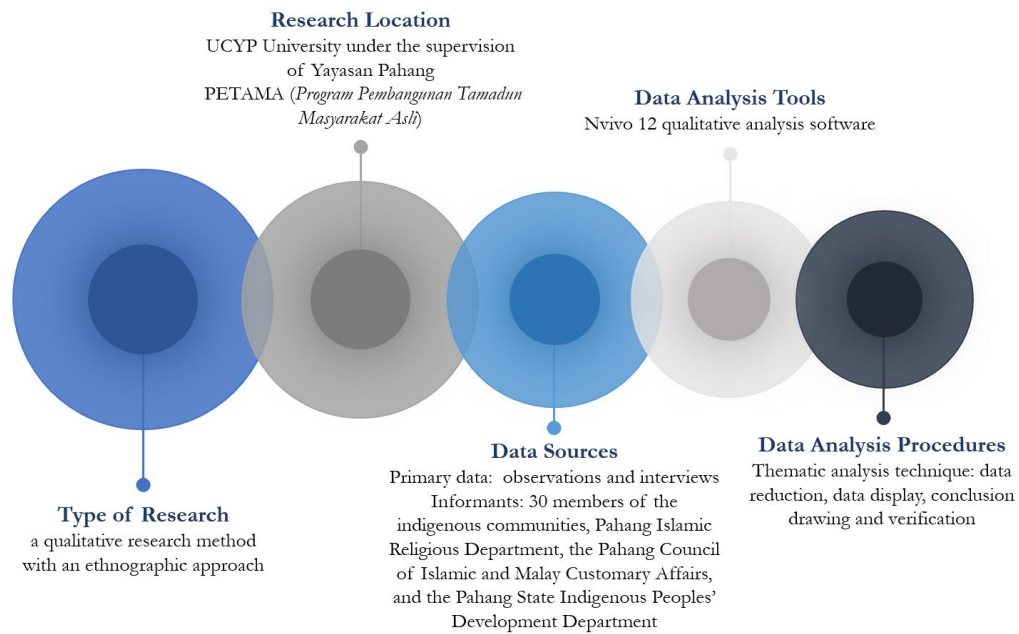


Fig 2. Stages of the research methodology

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study generated several key findings regarding religious and education-based outreach approaches for the indigenous community within the *Program Pembangunan Tamadun Masyarakat Asli (PETAMA)*. These findings are summarized in the figure and under the following themes.

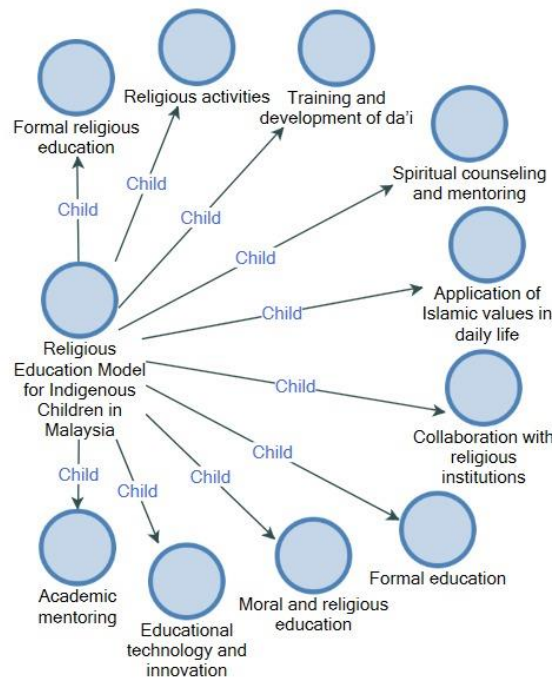


Fig 2. Religious Education Model for Indigenous Children in Malaysia

Formal religious education

Formal religious education is a key element in efforts to build the civilization of indigenous communities, particularly for the indigenous community. Through

formal religious education, religious values can be conveyed in a systematic and structured manner, thereby aiding in the formation of character and morality grounded in faith (Hikmat, 2020; Latief & Nashir, 2020; Solehudin, 2023; Suripto, 2018).

In the context of da'wah, formal religious education functions not only as a means of knowledge transfer but also as a medium for social transformation capable of altering societal patterns of thought and behavior. The PETAMA program integrates formal religious education as part of a *da'wah* approach aimed at enhancing the religious understanding of the indigenous community and strengthening their identity as a religious indigenous community. Formal religious education plays several roles in the PETAMA program, including building a spiritual foundation, empowerment through religious knowledge, increasing awareness of Islamic law, strengthening cultural and religious identity, and addressing the challenges of modernity. Within the overall PETAMA program, formal religious education is a crucial component that aims not only to enhance religious knowledge but also to build a self-reliant, morally upright, and competitive society, in line with the da'wah objectives designed within this program.

Religious Activities

Religious activities are one of the main pillars of the religion and education-based *da'wah* approach implemented in the PETAMA program. These activities serve not only as a means of worship but also as an effective tool for *da'wah* in fostering and strengthening the spiritual relationship between the Anak ethnic community and God (Sucipto et al., 2023; Wijaya & Sari, 2023). There are several roles and forms of religious activities in the PETAMA program, namely religious study sessions, congregational prayers, celebrations of major Islamic holidays, da'wah activities and lectures, and religious social activities. Religious activities in the PETAMA program not only strengthen the spiritual aspects of the indigenous communities but also play a role in fostering solidarity, enhancing collective awareness of the importance of religion in daily life, and disseminating Islamic values relevant to their cultural context (Sari et al., 2024). Through these activities, da'wah becomes more effective and useful in building a civilization that aligns with religious teachings.

Training and Development of *Da'i*

The training and development of *da'i* are key elements in the da'wah strategy of the *Program Pembangunan Tamadun Masyarakat Asli (PETAMA)*. As the vanguard in conveying religious teachings and guiding the community, *da'i* require appropriate training to effectively address the unique challenges of da'wah among the indigenous community. There are several objectives of *da'i* training and development, namely to understand the social and cultural context, adopt inclusive and participatory da'wah approaches, master da'wah materials, develop communication skills and persuasive techniques, foster empathy and sensitivity, and utilize media and technology in *da'wah* (Nur & MG, 2024; Pasaribu & Soiman, 2024; Ulfah, 2016).

Training and development of *da'i* represent a strategic investment in the success of *da'wah* among the indigenous community. Through this training, *da'i* are expected to become agents of change, convey religious messages aligned with local cultural values, and build a society rooted in religious principles (Arifin, 2015; Patoni, 2021). The PETAMA program emphasizes the importance of *da'i* readiness in all aspects, so that the da'wah they conduct can touch the hearts and minds of

the community and bring about sustainable positive change.

Spiritual Guidance and Counseling

Spiritual guidance and counseling are an integral part of the outreach approach implemented in the PETAMA program. This service serves as a bridge to support the spiritual and emotional needs of the indigenous community, who may face various challenges in their daily lives. There are several benefits of spiritual guidance and counseling, including supporting mental and spiritual health, fostering strong personal relationships, addressing life challenges and religious values, facilitating the process of spiritual healing, enhancing self-awareness and connection with God, resolving identity and value crises, and preventing social issues (Arifin, 2015; Bastomi, 2018; Teriasi et al., 2023).

Spiritual guidance and counseling within the PETAMA program play a crucial role in supporting the spiritual and emotional well-being of the indigenous community. Through this approach, *da'wah* becomes more comprehensive, encompassing not only religious instruction but also deep support for the issues faced by the community. Thus, spiritual guidance and counseling help build a stronger, healthier, and more religious community, in line with the *da'wah* objectives sought by the PETAMA Program.

The Application of Islamic Values in Daily Life

The application of Islamic values in daily life is a fundamental aspect of the *da'wah* carried out through the PETAMA Program. These Islamic values serve not only as spiritual guidelines but also as the moral and social foundation that shapes the character and culture of the indigenous community (Ansori, 2019; Rustandi & Sahidin, 2019; Wasngadiredja et al., 2023). The forms of applying Islamic values in daily life include simplicity and humility, mutual cooperation and social solidarity, honesty and trustworthiness, daily worship, and the application of Islamic law in social life.

The application of Islamic values in daily life is the core of the *da'wah* efforts carried out by the PETAMA program among the indigenous community. By integrating these values into various aspects of life, the community is not only guided to become better individuals spiritually but also to become responsible members of the community who contribute to sustainable social and economic development. Through the application of these values, it is hoped that the indigenous community can achieve physical and spiritual well-being in accordance with Islamic teachings.

Collaboration with Religious Institutions

Collaboration with religious institutions is a key strategy in the *da'wah* approach implemented through the PETAMA Program. This partnership aims to strengthen *da'wah* efforts, expand the program's reach, and ensure the sustainability of initiatives undertaken for the indigenous community (Songidan et al., 2020). The benefits of collaboration with religious institutions include access to resources and support, the dissemination and reinforcement of Islamic values, research and development, funding and infrastructure, joint *da'wah* programs, and religious consultation and guidance.

Collaboration with religious institutions is a strategic component of the *da'wah* approach implemented by the PETAMA program. Through this collaboration, the program can leverage the strengths and expertise of religious institutions to support a broader and deeper *da'wah* mission among the indigenous community (Faizin et al., 2023; Sukirman et al., 2023). This collaboration also helps

ensure that the *da'wah* program operates with sufficient support and in accordance with Islamic principles, thereby generating sustainable positive impacts for the community.

Formal Education

Formal education plays a crucial role in the efforts to spread the message of Islam and build the civilization of the indigenous community through the PETAMA Program. Formal education not only provides the basic knowledge needed for individual advancement but also serves as a vital means of instilling religious and moral values consistent with Islamic teachings (Sinta & Isbah, 2019; Staniyah et al., 2024). Some of the roles of formal education in the PETAMA program include integrating religious values into the curriculum, improving access to and equity in education, empowerment through education, and building collective identity and awareness.

Formal education within the PETAMA program is a key element in building a sustainable civilization among the indigenous community. By emphasizing the integration of Islamic values, improving access, and empowerment through education, the PETAMA program aims not only to enhance students' academic abilities but also to shape a generation with Islamic character, broad knowledge, and readiness to face future challenges (Firman et al., 2024). Through comprehensive and inclusive formal education, it is hoped that the indigenous community can achieve progress in line with their religious principles and cultural values.

Religious and Moral Education

Religious and moral education is one of the main components of the PETAMA program. This program aims to integrate Islamic teachings into the daily lives of the indigenous community while instilling strong moral values to shape the character of the younger generation with noble ethics (Agus, 2023; Saeful Anwar & Firdaus, 2023). Some of the roles of religious and moral education in the PETAMA Program include instilling the values of tawhid, fostering noble character, providing education in fiqh and worship, offering Islam-based family education, and fostering an understanding of Islamic history and culture.

Religious and moral education in the PETAMA Program serves as a powerful tool for shaping the character and personality of the indigenous community in accordance with Islamic values. By instilling the teachings of tauhid, moral character, and self-awareness, the PETAMA program also aims to create a society that not only understands religion in theory but also applies it in every aspect of life (Kartini, 2024). This education is expected to produce a generation of noble character, religiously devout, and ready to face future challenges with a strong moral foundation.

Technology and Educational Innovation

In the current digital age, technology and educational innovation play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of outreach and educational programs, including within the context of the PETAMA Program. The application of technology can expand access to education, enrich teaching methods, and facilitate more interactive and relevant learning for indigenous communities (Azzahra et al., 2023; Sembiring et al., 2024). Some of the roles of technology and innovation in the PETAMA Program include the development of interactive learning content, the use of social media for *da'wah*, the provision of devices and technology in schools, and the creation of specialized educational platforms.

Educational technology and innovation are key components in modernizing

da'wah and educational programs among the indigenous community through the PETAMA Program. By leveraging technology, this program can enhance access to education, create more interactive learning experiences, and ensure that religious teachings and moral values are effectively conveyed to the younger generation (Kisno et al., 2023; Nurhayati et al., 2023). This technology also allows for flexibility in learning, so that education can continue even in challenging situations. With the right integration of technology, the PETAMA Program can create a significant impact in efforts to educate and empower the indigenous community.

Tutoring and Academic Guidance

Tutoring and academic guidance are key components of the PETAMA program, which aims to provide ongoing support to the indigenous community throughout their educational journey. Through effective tutoring and guidance, this program not only helps improve academic performance but also strengthens religious and moral understanding among students (Aini et al., 2022; Damanhuri et al., 2013). Some of the roles of academic mentoring and guidance in the PETAMA Program include helping to overcome learning barriers, providing guidance in religious education, and monitoring student progress.

Academic mentoring and guidance in the PETAMA Program play a key role in supporting formal and religious education among the indigenous community. Through a sustainable, collaborative, and technology-based approach, the PETAMA program aims to overcome barriers to learning, strengthen religious understanding, and help students reach their full potential (Afia et al., 2023; Septikasari et al., 2023). With the right support, it is hoped that students from the indigenous community will not only succeed in their academic education but also grow into individuals of faith and noble character.

CONCLUSION

The religion and education-based *da'wah* approach in the *Program Pembangunan Tamadun Masyarakat Asli (PETAMA)* has proven effective in reinforcing Islamic values among the indigenous community. Through structured religious activities, continuous training and development of *da'i*, and intensive spiritual guidance, this program has succeeded in bringing about significant spiritual and social transformation. Furthermore, the implementation of formal education integrated with religious and moral values provides a strong foundation for the younger generation of the indigenous community to develop themselves in accordance with Islamic principles. The educational technologies and innovations implemented have also played a role in enhancing the program's effectiveness, while learning support and collaboration with religious institutions ensure the sustainability and self-reliance of this community's *da'wah* efforts. Overall, this approach serves as a replicable model for the development of other indigenous communities, while still taking into account cultural distinctiveness and local needs.

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DECLARATIONS

Author contribution

Mutathahirin: data curation, writing-original draft preparation, **Sobariah Abu**

Bakar: conceptualization, **Razita:** methodology, **Rashidi Abbas & Nuha Sufina Binti Saidi:** visualization, editing, analysis.

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The authors declare that this research was conducted without any conflict of interest in the research.

Ethical clearance

The research company has agreed to carry out the research and is willing if the results of this research are published.

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