Is Arabic a Sacred Language or a Foreign Language?
A Survey of Muslim Student's Belief in non-Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between Muslim identity and the belief in the Arabic language among students at non-Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia. This study uses a qualitative case study approach, and data were collected using a simple random sample survey technique. The respondents were Muslim students at non-Islamic higher education in Jakarta, Makassar, Bogor, and Bandung who enrolled in non-Islamic and non-Arabic language study programs. The results show that the respondents considered Arabic a sacred language more than a foreign language. It is known based on most respondents studying the Qur'an at the elementary school level and some at the kindergarten level. In addition, even though their native language is not Arabic, they state that they have a high fluency in reading the Qu'ran and regularly read the Qu'ran at least once a week. However, they needed to be more convinced and interested in learning Arabic for communication skills like other foreign languages because most stated that learning Arabic is urgent to understand Islam.

Keywords: Arabic language, Arabic as a foreign language, sacred language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a symbol for communicating and transferring information from the speaker to the message recipient. It is a function of language as a language of communication. In addition, language is also a vehicle for religion in transferring values or ideology. Some claim it to be a sacred Language because of its function as a medium for expressing divine power and conveying religious teachings (Rosowsky, 2019; Sinnemäki & Saarikivi, 2019).

Arabic has special features because Arabic is a medium for religious texts and the Al-Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims. Linguistically, Arabic is divided into Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and Colloquial Arabic (Al-Huri, 2015). Haeri (2003) classifies Muslim countries based on the language used in communication into two categories: First, countries whose official language is not related to Arabic, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Senegal, and Nigeria. Second, Arab countries use dialects (Ammiyah). Fushah (MSA) in these two categories of countries has an essential position in fulfilling the religious obligations of Muslims in these countries.

Several studies have been conducted on learning Arabic in Indonesia and research on Arabic for non-Muslims in public schools and learning Arabic in Islamic universities in Indonesia (Ekawati, 2019; Hidayah & Muyassaroh, 2023; Ritonga, Wahyuni, & Novigator, 2023; Shahrizal, Nurkhamimi, & Sabri, 2017; Warnis, Triana, Kustati, Remiswal, & Nelmawarni, 2019; Yahya, Mahmudah, & Rochma, 2021). Compared to previous research, this study analyzes aspects that have not been studied before regarding students' beliefs in non-Islamic Higher education about Arabic Language. It indicates a need to understand and reveal the various perceptions and beliefs about the Arabic Language among Muslim Students in Indonesia. So, this study focused on how students' beliefs at non-Islamic higher universities in Indonesia relate to Arabic. Do they think Arabic is just a sacred language, or is Arabic a foreign language used in communication? In addition, this research also measures students' Motivation to learn Arabic.

This study is essential to reveal the perspectives or beliefs of students in non-Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia regarding the position of Arabic as a sacred or foreign language. Also, this study is expected to contribute to mapping and conceptualizing Arabic language learning models in Indonesia. Thus, it is hoped that Arabic can compete with other foreign languages. And can increase the interest of the Indonesian people in learning Arabic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Arabic is one of the world's most prominent spoken languages and one of the official languages of the United Nations (United Nations, n.d.). Besides functioning as a language of communication, Arabic is also closely related to Islam. The relationship between the Arabic language and the Islamic religion makes it a unique position. The relationship between language and religion can make a religion a "sacred language."

Varied languages and cultural situations have extremely varied ideas about what is called sacred. Sinnemäki and Saarikivi (2019) state that a language can be declared sacred for various reasons and that classical Arabic is sacred to Muslims. It is based on the belief that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad using Arabic. Arabic as a sacred language is based on the dogma that the content of the Al-Qur'an in classical Arabic is the word of God, and the translations of the Al-Qur'an in other languages are not holy scriptures. Arabic has a vital role in the implementation of Islamic religious rituals. Like prayer, reading the Al-Qur'an in Arabic is a spiritual merit. It is the reason for the spread of Arabic in countries with Muslim populations (Sinnemäki & Saarikivi, 2019).

In Sociology of Language and Religion (SLR) by Omoniyi and Fishman (in Marley, 2009), language and religion have, at different times and in different contexts, affected the way people live, the way they create and perceive their own identity and that of others. This theory is related to the theoretical basis for this study, that language and religion can influence a society's cultural structure.

Haeri (2003) states that linguistically, Muslims use the Classical Arabic Language to read sacred texts, perform prayers, and perform other religious duties. Salleh (2007) said that for Muslims, Arabic words in the Qur'an are sacred languages that contain divine influences that cannot be violated and are absolute to obey. In addition, translations of the Al-Qur'an in languages other than Arabic are not considered holy books but only interpretations of the Al-Qur'an. The Qur'an, for Muslims, is the primary source of law, grammar, and the highest form of linguistic expression whose beauty cannot be beaten. Based on this, reading the Al-Qur'an in Arabic is a must for a Muslim. Haeri's view also corroborates this (Haeri, 2003).

Salleh (2007) stated that Arabic remains a sacred language used as a medium for the Al-Qur'an and religious texts. Salleh (2007) argues that, theoretically, a language can develop from a linguistic aspect, but when a language becomes a sacred language, the language becomes tied to one theme. Yahya et al. (2021) used Yasir Suleiman's Language and religious identity theory. The function of language is as a means of communication and a symbol of identity. Yahya et al. (2021) stated that in Indonesia, there is a stereotype regarding Arabic, which makes the Arabic Language exclusive and closed to non-Muslims in Indonesia. It relates to the view that the Arabic Language has been politically, economically, ideologically, and academically sacred. Yahya et al. (2021) also said that learning Arabic in Indonesia is mainly oriented toward religious goals such as understanding the Qur'an, Hadith, and other Sharia sciences. Furthermore, Yahya et al. (2021) mentioned that non-Muslims in Indonesia are not interested in learning Arabic. It contrasts with the ANNS program at Qatar University, where many non-Muslim participants came from various countries.

Balraj, Singh, and Abd Manan (2020) emphasize that language is a tool for conveying religious messages. Arabic can survive as the language of the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an, unlike Sanskrit in Hinduism or Hebrew in Christianity. In addition, language can be subjective as a medium for expressing thoughts, and language can be social for communicating (Mavrodes, 1964).

Al-Osaimi and Wedell (2014) stated that beliefs have affective, social, and religious dimensions besides cognitive size. Pajares (1992) said that belief is an individual judgment about the truth or falsehood of a proposition, a decision that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what people say, intend, and perform. Furthermore, Rokeach (1972) divides beliefs into three categories: 1) descriptive or existential beliefs, the object of belief is described as true or false; 2) evaluative beliefs, beliefs that can be expressed as good or bad, and 3) prescriptive or exhortatory beliefs: specific actions or situations are recommended as desirable or undesirable.

3. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative case study approach, and data from respondents were collected using a simple random sample survey technique. The respondents were Muslim students at non-Islamic higher education in Jakarta, Makassar, Bogor, and Bandung who enrolled in non-Islamic and non-Arabic language study programs.

The respondents were 88 students in non-Islamic Higher Education, such as Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Universitas Hasanuddin, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Institut Pertanian Bogor, etc, who enrolled in study programs in Psychology, Mathematics, Medical, Social, Economics, and Engineering.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of respondents based on the results of the questionnaire obtained amounted to 88 respondents with details shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents

Criteria	N	%
Gender		
Male	24	27,3
Female	64	72,7
Age (Year)		
17-20	69	78,4
21-30	18	20,5
31-40	1	1,1
University		
Institut Pertanian Bogor	3	3,4
Institut Teknologi B.J. Habibie	1	1,1
STEBANK	8	9,1
UMI	5	5,7
Universitas Hasanuddin	6	6,8
Universitas Jayabaya	1	1,1
Universitas Negeri Jakarta	38	43,2
Universitas Negeri Makassar	23	26,1
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia	2	2,3
Universitas Terbuka	1	1,1
Study Programs		
Economics	14	15,9
Engineering	16	18,2
Mathematics	10	11,4
Medical	13	14,8
Psycology	20	22,7
Social	15	17,0

4.1. Information Obtained by Muslim Students in Non-Islamic Higher Education About Arabic Language

The comparison of survey results on non-Islamic higher education students related to Arabic is shown in Figure 1.
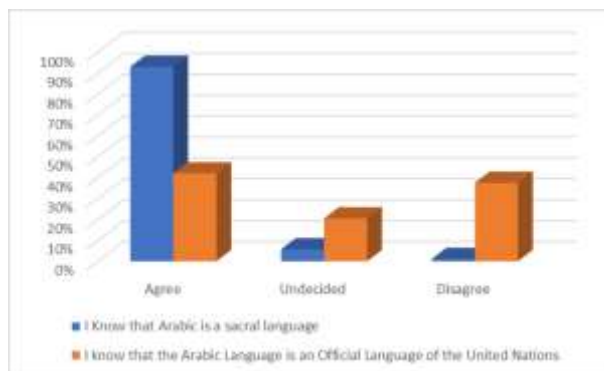
Figure 1 Belief about Arabic Language.

42% of respondents said they knew that Arabic is one of the official languages of the United Nations. In comparison, 37.5% said they did not know that Arabic was one of the official languages of the United Nations, and 20.5% of respondents were undecided. It differs from their belief regarding Arabic as a sacred language, in which 93.2% of respondents said that they know it is a sacred language.

Even though the official Language is Bahasa Indonesia, Indonesian Muslims are deeply concerned about classical Arabic by studying the Al-Qur'an. Even though they are not proficient in Arabic language skills, such as *istima'* (listening), *kalam* (speaking), *qira'ah* (reading), and *kitabah* (writing), not all Indonesian Muslims have mastered it. However, Indonesian Muslims have skills in reading the Al-Qur''an in classical Arabic.

As Naska (2017) expressed, Arabic is considered a sacred language because it is used as the Language of the Qur'an. Based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, it can be seen that the respondents have studied the Qur'an since elementary school and some since kindergarten. It is based on the belief that the Al-Qur'an, which is in Arabic, cannot be replaced by another language.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, studying the sacred language used to fulfill these religious practices is referred to as the role of language as a marker of collective identity, namely language as a symbol of group identification and distinctiveness. It could be argued that although language may not be the aspect of the self that gives rise to collective religious identity, it can reinforce a sense of community and the "oneness" of Language (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010).

As one of the largest Muslim countries in the world, Indonesia has realized the importance of learning Arabic. Arabic is a compulsory subject in *madrasah*s such as *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* (MI) or Islamic elementary schools, *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* (MTs) or Islamic junior high schools, and *Madrasah Aliyah* (MA) or Islamic senior high schools. However, an Arabic issue in schools only guarantees some students good Arabic competencies. In many cases, students who are good at reading Arabic texts/writings like Qur'an and Hadith cannot understand the meaning of those writings (Zurqoni, Retnawati, Rahmatullah, Djidu, & Apino, 2020).

4.2. Indonesian Muslim Identity and Its Impact on the Arabic Language

Indonesia is known as the country with the most significant number of Muslims in the world. With this Muslim identity, Indonesian people have habits related to their obligations as Muslims towards the Islamic religion, affecting their belief in Arabic (Ekawati, 2019; Warnis et al., 2019).

Several respondents stated that they read the Al-Qur'an every day. 26.1% of respondents said they read the Al-Qur'an more than five times weekly. 18.2% said they read the Al-Qur'an 4-3 times a week. 46.6% stated that they read the Al-Qur'an less than three times a week, and some indicated that they did not read the Al-Qur'an regularly and not necessarily. Based on the results of these respondents, it is known that the scheduled time for reading the Al-Qur'an: The majority of respondents have a specially designed time for reading the Al-Qur'an, namely the time after prayers and every free time.

In addition, the family's habit of reading the Al-Qur'an: based on the respondents' answers, it is known that a habit of reading the Al-Qur'an has been formed in their family. As many as 33% stated that the respondent's families

habitually read the Al-Qur'an together. Meanwhile, 13.6% said they were unsure, and 53.4% said they did not have the habit of reciting the Al-Qur'an with their families.

Forms of habits in the family in reading the Al-Qur'an together, as follows: 1) Reading the Al-Qur'an together after the evening prayer, 2) During the month of *Ramadan*, 3) Reading *al-Ma'tsurat* every morning and reading the Al-Qur'an, 4) Every Friday night read *Yasin* with the family. In addition, the habit of reading one particular surah of the Qur'an is as follows: The majority of respondents, as much as 73.9 %, stated that they have a routine for reading one of the *surahs* of the Qur'an, and 26% do not have this routine. Among the many read *surahs* of the Al-Qur'an are: Al-Waqi'ah, Yasin, Al-Fatihah, Al-Kahfi, An Nas, Al-Ikhlas, Al-Insyirah, Al-Qadr, Ar-Rahman, Al-Mulk, Al-Naba, As-Sajadah.

Regarding the level of fluency of respondents in reading the Al-Qur'an, 54.5% of respondents said they could read the Al-Qur'an fluently, and 9.1% said they were very fluent in reading the Al-Qur'an. 23.9% said they were unsure, 11.4% said they were not fluent in reading the Qur'an, and 1.1% said they were destitute.

Based on the respondent's data, it can be seen the habits of Muslim students in Indonesia who study classical Arabic intending to read the Al-Qur'an as a form of their religious obligation. It can explain why one of the spiritual aspects is maintained and preserved as an essential component of religious practice. Based on this psychological basis, it can be stated that when individuals learn their religious identity, they are learning one's native language. For example, when a non-Arabic Muslim studies his spiritual aspects, he needs to learn classical Arabic, the sacred Language of Islam used in the Qur'an and other religious scripts. Based on this, parents have an essential role in nurturing the learning of the sacred language (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010).

4.3. The Future of the Arabic Language in Muslim Students's Perspective in Non-Islamic Higher Education

Ritonga et al. (2020) stated that learning Arabic in Indonesia is related to Islam. However, Islamic higher education, such as Islamic universities, have rules for Arabic courses that all Muslim and non-Muslim students must take in various study programs. Warnis et al. (2019) explain that learning Arabic at UIN Imam Bonjol is mandatory. Warnis et al. (2019) stated that learning Arabic is essential for exploring, understanding, and analyzing Islamic sources and literature, such as *Usul Fiqh, Hadith*, *Ulumul Qur'an*, and *Tauhid*.

This phenomenon becomes different when students are not obligated to take Arabic language courses, such as in Islamic educational institutions (such as Islamic Elementary Schools to Islamic higher education). Based on the respondents' answers, it is known that the opinion of studying the al-Qur'an without learning Arabic has varied answers. Notably, 37% of respondents were undecided about their opinion, 8% stated that they strongly agreed, and 9% agreed (see Figure 2).
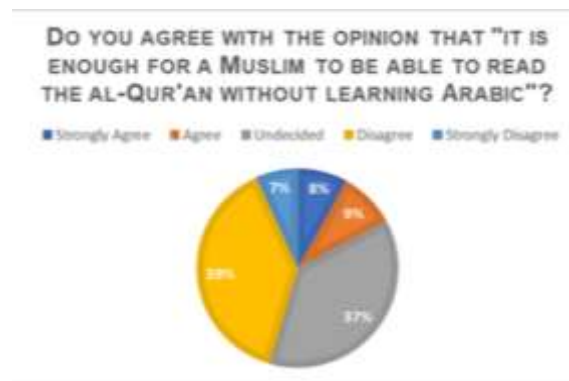

Figure 2 Belief about reading Al-Qur'an without learning Arabic.

Respondents' answers about their experience learning Arabic as a foreign language: 61.4% of respondents said they had studied Arabic, and 38.6% said they had never. Some respondents stated that they studied Arabic at the elementary school level and studied vocabulary. Some respondents also indicated that they learned Arabic while at Islamic boarding schools at the junior high school level, and some explored it at Madrasah Aliyah schools.

About Motivation to learn Arabic. 55.7% said they might follow/learn Arabic if there was an opportunity to learn Arabic, 6.8% said they did not want to learn Arabic, even though there was an opportunity to understand it, and 37.5% said they wanted to learn Arabic if there was an opportunity to learn it.

Respondent's knowledge of information on the availability of online and offline Arabic language course institutions. 38.6% said they did not know, 35.2% said they might, and 26.1% said they understood. Arabic learning institutions are known to respondents, namely Online courses, such as Instagram Arabiyah Talks, Institutions: Pare Kampung Arab, East Java, Al-Akhyar Institute, Markaz Darul, Campa, Polewali Mandar.

The interest in learning Arabic for communication skills is like any other foreign language: 64.8% said they were interested. Meanwhile, 6.8% said they were uninterested, and 28.4% said they needed clarification. Regarding the Motivation to learn Arabic, Mansyur (2021) noted that among UIN Alaudiin Makassar Students, students with a non-Islamic school background had a low interest in learning Arabic. According to respondents, the urgency of mastering Arabic is 1) to understand religious teachings, 2) to fulfill religious obligations, 3) to be able to communicate with the Arab community, and 4) to be able to work in the Middle East.

Based on these findings, Arabic as a sacred language is more prevalent among non-Islamic higher education students. It is due to the cultural form of society in Indonesia, which accustoms Muslim children to learn the Qur'an from an early age. This culture is influenced by their belief that learning Arabic is a must to understand the Qur'an and the teachings of Islam. Likewise, even though they do not study Arabic specifically, they claim to have a high ability to read the al-Qur'an.

In addition, even though students in non-Islamic higher education do not study Arabic or Islamic studies. However, their family's habit of getting used to reading the Al-Qur'an is a family routine, especially at special times such as Ramadan, after prayers, and Friday nights. It is related to the culture that is formed in the community.

Yahya et al. (2021) stated that returning Arabic to its initial function or position does not reduce the sacredness of Arabic but instead makes Arabic its remarkable history as a language of knowledge, culture, and civilization. Thus, Arabic is not only a "Muslim" language.

In Learning Arabic for Non-Muslims Based on Religious Moderation in Public Schools, Hidayah and Muyassaroh (2023) stated that Muslim students in Indonesia generally study Arabic in several public schools. Hidayah and Muyassaroh (2023) conducted research at SMAN 1 Lalan, which provided learning materials for Arabic, like other foreign languages, regardless of the religious differences of the students. In its implementation, SMAN 1 Lalan chooses teaching materials that can be applied to students with different backgrounds, such as non-Muslims who do not understand hijaiyah letters. Thus, the material being studied is contextual teaching material (close to students' lives), not material precisely for studying Islam. Hidayah and Muyassaroh (2023) also emphasized that learning Arabic should be able to accommodate non-Muslim students. So, learning Arabic in Indonesia can also become an international language for all students across religions. Several studies have revealed that non-Muslims have motivations to learn Arabic, such as Motivation to interact with Arab society and work interests and others (Aladdin, 2010; Bakar, Sulaiman, & Rafaai, 2010; Brosh, 2013; Seymour-Jorn, 2004; Wekke & Suhendar, 2016).

This belief in Arabic as a sacred language makes the function of Arabic as a language of communication less developed and less attractive to students in non-Islamic higher education in Indonesia. It has also been conveyed by (Yahya et al., 2020) that there needs to be an effort to "desacralize" the Arabic Language in Indonesia. So that Arabic can return to its position as the language of knowledge, culture, and civilization.

The student's beliefs can influence the learning model applied to an Arabic language institution. When learning Arabic to understand the contents of the Qur'an and Sharia books, the method used is traditional learning methods such as the *qawaid wa al-tarjamah* method. Meanwhile, if learning Arabic is communication, you can use more modern learning methods, such as communicative methods and others. Regarding this, Al-Osaimi and Wedell (2014) stated the importance of knowing students' goals in learning Arabic so that the forms are appropriate and worthwhile.

Al-Osaimi and Wedell (2014) studied beliefs and the influence of Arabic learning goals on participants at the ITANA Arabic Learning Institute in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. This study confirms that even though they learn Arabic in a native Arabic environment, their goal is to learn Arabic to understand the Qur'an and Hadith. Their presence in a native environment does not immediately make them want to know the Ammiyyah to communicate. This study confirms that there is a strong relationship between Arabic and Islam, which affects the purpose of learning Arabic, namely to study religion. The learning method is the traditional method and rejects the communicative learning model. Al-Osami and Wedel (2014) stated that traditional learning methods, such as memorization, translation, and grammar, can be used in learning Arabic if the goal is to understand religion. Because in their context, prioritizing learning goals is more important than trying new approaches and learning methods, such as communicative approaches that do not follow their learning goals.

When a non-Arabic Muslim studies his religious aspects, he needs to learn classical Arabic, the sacred Language of Islam used in the Qur'an and other religious scripts. Based on this, parents have an essential role in nurturing the

learning of the sacred Language (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). The full import of Arabic into Arab-Muslim society can be classified as follows: 1) artistic expression and precision; 2) tools of religion; 3) culture medium; and 4) pillars of contemporary nationalism (Chejne, 1965).

In addition to the role of the Arabic language as a tool of religion, Wargadinata and Maimunah (2021) stated that in the early period of Islam, there were social changes in Arab society. Arab society, initially closed, adhered to a tribal system and then developed to become more open. It led to the development of the Arabic language, making it the unifying language of the Arab tribes. Based on these historical events, in addition to religious purposes, Arabic can develop as a foreign language or a language of communication that the wider world community can learn.

5. CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that in Indonesian Student's belief in non-Islamic higher education, Arabic is considered a sacral language. It is a result of the social culture in the Indonesian Muslim Family, which has a habit of learning classical Arabic to study al-Qur'an and other Religious studies. And the belief that mastering classical Arabic and reading al-Quran is a religious obligation. So, while Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, it cannot yet popularize Arabic as a foreign language or a communication language. This finding has important implications for developing an Arabic learning model that fits the characteristics and needs of Muslim students in non-Islamic Higher Education. Learning Arabic to understand religious teachings is essential, but learning Arabic for communication purposes is urgent. So, Arabic does not stop at its function as a symbol but continues to develop its position as a means of communication.

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