



10.35905/entelecheia.vxxix.xxxx



ARTICLE

Title Arabic as Cultural Mediator in Bugis Islamic Identity Formation

Herdah*¹*¹Herdah

IAIN Parepare, Indonesia

Email: email@penulis.com

Keywords: Arabic
Language Learning, Bugis
Cultural Identity, Islamic
Education, Cultural
Mediator, Religious
Socialization

Abstract

Background: Arabic occupies a distinctive position in Bugis Muslim society in South Sulawesi, where Islam has integrated deeply with local cultural structures. Rather than functioning solely as a formal school subject or communicative tool, Arabic operates as the language of sacred scripture, worship, and social identity

Purpose: This study aims to analyze how Arabic language learning operates across formal, non-formal, and informal educational spaces, how it strengthens Islamic cultural identity, and how Arabic-Islamic values are negotiated with Bugis cultural traditions.

Methods: A qualitative case study design with an ethnographic orientation was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis in South Sulawesi, involving Arabic teachers, Qur'anic instructors, religious leaders, learners, parents, and community members. Thematic analysis was applied to examine patterns across learning spaces, identity dimensions, and cultural negotiation.

Results: The findings indicate that Indonesian courts' application of wasiat wajibah to non-Muslim heirs aligns with Maqasid Shari'ah, particularly in preserving life (hifz al-nafs) and property (hifz al-mal). Judicial reasoning often relies on kinship considerations, legal adaptation through ijtihad, and social justice principles. However, the study identifies inconsistencies in how Maqasid Shari'ah is applied, with courts sometimes using it as a justification rather than an active tool for legal development.

Implication: The study emphasizes the necessity of developing culturally responsive Arabic language education that connects formal linguistic instruction with Islamic ethics and local Bugis heritage, transforming language pedagogy into culturally grounded identity education

Originality: Unlike previous research focusing strictly on institutional or pesantren identity, this study introduces a novel perspective conceptualizing Arabic learning as a cultural mediator bridging translocal Islamic universalism and local Bugis cultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

Arabic occupies a distinctive position in Muslim societies because it functions not only as a language of communication but also as the language of the Qur'an, prayer, Islamic scholarship, and numerous religious practices. In Indonesia, this position has enabled Arabic to enter diverse educational and cultural spaces, including madrasahs, pesantren, mosques, Qur'anic learning groups, and family-based religious education. This phenomenon is particularly significant among the Bugis of South Sulawesi, where Islam has become deeply intertwined with social and cultural life. Historically, the Islamization of South Sulawesi since the seventeenth century introduced Arabic religious texts, Islamic educational institutions, pilgrimage networks, and cultural influences from the wider



Muslim world, while Bugis cultural structures continued to maintain their local characteristics (Halim, 2018). Contemporary studies likewise show that Bugis values such as *siri'*, solidarity, dignity, and social responsibility continue to interact with Islamic ethical principles within educational and community settings.

Previous studies have increasingly acknowledged the relationship between Arabic language education and identity. Research in Indonesian madrasahs has shown that Arabic learning contributes to the formation of students' social-religious identity, while studies in pesantren demonstrate that Arabic curricula interact with institutional culture and the reproduction of Islamic educational traditions (Ghufron et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2025). Other recent studies have examined Arabic as a marker of religious identity in particular Muslim communities and have demonstrated how Arabic and English learning may differently shape students' cultural and religious identification in pesantren settings (Jannah & Darmawati, 2026). At the same time, research on Bugis society has extensively discussed the integration of Islamic teachings with local values such as *siri' na pacce*, *sipakatau*, and other elements of Bugis ethical life. However, these two bodies of scholarship largely develop separately. Studies of Arabic education tend to focus on schools, pesantren, curricula, linguistic competence, or institutional religious identity, whereas studies of Bugis identity primarily examine Islamization, local wisdom, character education, and cultural adaptation (Herdah et al., 2026; Jannah et al., 2025). Consequently, limited attention has been given to how Arabic language learning itself operates within the intersection between Islamic identity and Bugis cultural belonging.

Responding to this gap, this study examines the role of Arabic language learning in strengthening Islamic cultural identity among the Bugis by locating language learning within its wider religious and socio-cultural environment. Rather than assessing learners' Arabic proficiency alone, the study investigates how Arabic is learned through formal, non-formal, and informal educational spaces; how Arabic learning contributes to religious understanding, moral formation, symbolic belonging, and intergenerational transmission; and how Arabic-Islamic meanings interact with Bugis cultural values and traditions. Specifically, the study addresses three interconnected issues: Arabic language learning practices among the Bugis, the role of Arabic learning in strengthening Islamic cultural identity, and the negotiation of Arabic-Islamic values with Bugis cultural traditions. By approaching these dimensions together, the study seeks to provide a culturally situated understanding of Arabic education that connects language learning with identity formation and local cultural continuity.

This study is based on the argument that Arabic language learning strengthens Islamic cultural identity not simply because Arabic is associated with Islam, but because the language is embedded in processes of religious socialization, moral education, ritual practice, and intergenerational transmission. Its influence on identity is therefore mediated by the social and cultural environments in which Arabic is learned and interpreted. Among the Bugis, this process is expected to produce neither complete Arabization nor the displacement of local identity. Instead, Arabic learning provides linguistic and symbolic resources through which Islamic values are understood, while Bugis cultural traditions provide the social framework through which those values are contextualized and practiced. The study therefore proposes that Arabic language learning functions as a cultural mediator between Islamic universality and Bugis locality, enabling Islamic cultural identity to be strengthened through adaptation and negotiation rather than cultural replacement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. *Arabic Learning as Religious and Educational Formation*

The first tendency in the literature views Arabic as an integral component of Islamic education and religious formation. In this perspective, Arabic provides learners with direct access to the Qur'an, hadith, classical Islamic literature, religious terminology, and wider Islamic intellectual traditions. Ghufroon et al. (2025) demonstrate that Arabic education in Indonesian madrasahs contributes to social-religious identity formation and should not be reduced to technical linguistic instruction. Similarly, research on multicultural pesantren indicates that Arabic learning operates within complex cultural environments in which religious, linguistic, and social values intersect. This orientation has significantly expanded the understanding of Arabic education beyond grammar and communicative skills. Nevertheless, the primary analytical setting remains the formal educational institution, particularly schools, madrasahs, universities, and pesantren, leaving family, mosque, community, and ethnic-cultural spaces relatively less explored as interconnected environments of Arabic learning.

2. *Arabic as a Resource for Identity Construction*

The second tendency examines Arabic as a crucial resource for constructing, expressing, and reproducing cultural and religious identity. Sociolinguistic perspectives have long demonstrated that language education is deeply embedded in language socialization processes, through which ethnic, social, and religious belonging are transmitted across generations (Nurhadi et al., 2023). From this viewpoint, learning Arabic is not merely a cognitive or technical exercise in acquiring grammar and vocabulary; rather, it serves as a primary mechanism through which learners internalize sacred norms, embody communal traditions, and negotiate their standing within a broader faith community. Through repetitive liturgical practice, oral recitation, and textual engagement, language learning functions as a social practice that connects individual identity to collective religious heritage.

In the Indonesian Islamic educational landscape, recent empirical research underscores the distinct symbolic positions occupied by different languages, particularly Arabic and English. While English is frequently associated with global modernization, secular academic mobility, and economic utility, Arabic commands a sacred, symbolic, and ideological status that directly shapes institutional identity, particularly within pesantren and madrasah environments (Rahman et al., 2025). The usage of Arabic signifies religious authenticity, intellectual authority, and alignment with classical Islamic scholarship. Consequently, competence in Arabic or even symbolic familiarity with its lexicon and script, operates as a key marker of religious devotion and socio-religious identity among Indonesian Muslims.

A comprehensive systematic review by Aditya et al. (2025) further confirms a profound and persistent connection between Arabic language practices and cultural identity across diverse sociolinguistic settings. The review highlights that language learning is never socially neutral, as linguistic choices consistently signal group membership, moral orientation, and ideological alignment. In many Muslim communities, Arabic operates as an essential indicator of religious affiliation and solidarity, enabling individuals to express alignment with translocal Islamic networks while simultaneously reinforcing local communal boundaries. Everyday linguistic interactions, such as using Arabic greetings,

religious invocations, and honorifics, serve as tangible expressions of collective identification and moral solidarity.

Despite these valuable insights, much of the existing literature conceptualizes identity primarily in terms of institutional loyalty, abstract religious ideology, or linguistic competence in isolation. Significantly less attention has been paid to how Arabic language learning interacts with an already established, deeply rooted ethnic-cultural identity, such as that of the Bugis people. Current scholarship often assumes a simple dichotomy where translocal Arabic-Islamic influences either displace local ethnic traditions or remain compartmentalized within formal religious domains. Consequently, there remains a critical research gap in understanding how Arabic functions as a dynamic cultural mediator that actively engages with, reinterprets, and reinforces indigenous ethnic identity within everyday socio-cultural life.

3. *Islam, Education, and Bugis Cultural Identity*

The third tendency focuses on the relationship between Islamic values and Bugis local culture in South Sulawesi. Historical research demonstrates that the Islamization of Bugis-Makassar society was characterized by prolonged processes of cultural adaptation, negotiation, and organic integration rather than the abrupt eradication of indigenous traditions (Halim, 2018; Tol, 2018). Arab-Islamic influences entered the region through maritime trade routes, pilgrimage (hajj), itinerant religious scholars (ulama), and classical manuscript traditions (lontara'). This historical encounter resulted in a unique cultural synthesis where Islamic theological frameworks and legal principles were harmonized with Bugis social structures and customary norms (ada').

Contemporary educational studies similarly reveal that Bugis cultural values remain highly influential within Islamic educational settings across South Sulawesi. Rather than treating indigenous wisdom as incompatible with Islamic orthodoxy, local educational practices frequently draw upon ethnopedagogical frameworks to foster moral character, social cohesion, and community resilience (Ahmad & Suhana, 2023; Subair et al., 2020). In both formal madrasahs and non-formal Qur'anic learning circles (mengkaji), educators actively utilize Bugis cultural narratives and pedagogical tropes to contextualize Islamic teachings, thereby ensuring that character education resonates with the learners' lived socio-cultural realities.

Central to this socio-cultural dynamics is the continuous intersection between core Bugis ethical concepts and Islamic moral principles. Empirical and conceptual research on siri' na pacce (the Bugis ethos of dignity, honor, self-respect, and empathetic solidarity) and sipakatau (mutual human respect) demonstrates that these local values closely align with Islamic teachings regarding human dignity (karamah), moral integrity (adab), and social responsibility (ta'awun) (Mattulada, 2017; Siradj, 2022). Rather than conflicting with Islamic tenets, Bugis ethical concepts are continually reinterpreted and enriched through Islamic moral discourses, providing a robust cultural foundation for community ethics and collective identity.

While these studies firmly establish the ongoing interaction between Islamic faith and Bugis cultural identity, Arabic language learning itself is rarely placed at the analytical center of this cultural encounter. In most existing literature on Bugis Islam, Arabic is treated either as a passive, static medium of liturgical recitation or as an institutional requirement restricted to formal schooling. The active role of Arabic pedagogy as a living cultural

mediator – one that provides the linguistic and conceptual vocabulary through which Bugis Muslims negotiate, reconcile, and sustain their dual commitment to Islamic universalism and local cultural heritage, remains remarkably undertheorized and empirically unexamined.

RESEARCH METHOD

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study was the process through which Arabic language learning contributes to the formation and strengthening of Islamic cultural identity among the Bugis. The study focused on individuals and social settings involved in Arabic and Islamic learning, including learners, Arabic teachers, Qur'anic instructors, religious leaders, parents, and community members who participate in formal, non-formal, and informal educational activities. Rather than treating Arabic proficiency as the sole object of analysis, the study examined the meanings attached to Arabic, its relationship with Islamic practices, and its interaction with Bugis cultural values and traditions.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design with an ethnographic orientation. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand how participants experience, interpret, and give meaning to Arabic language learning within their religious and cultural environments. The case study design enabled an intensive examination of Arabic learning within the specific socio-cultural context of the Bugis, while the ethnographic orientation allowed the study to consider everyday practices, cultural expressions, religious routines, and interactions through which language and identity are reproduced.

Data Sources and Participants

The primary data were obtained from participants who were directly involved in Arabic language learning and Islamic educational practices within Bugis social settings. Participants were selected purposively based on their experience with Arabic education, Qur'anic learning, Islamic teaching, family-based religious education, or community religious activities. Participant selection was continued using a snowball strategy when additional informants were identified. Secondary data consisted of learning materials, religious texts, teaching documents, photographs, and relevant cultural artefacts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Data were analyzed thematically through transcription, coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretation. The data were organized into three major thematic domains: Arabic language learning practices, the strengthening of Islamic cultural identity, and the negotiation of Arabic-Islamic values with Bugis cultural traditions. Credibility was strengthened through data-source triangulation and iterative comparison.

RESULTS

Bagian hasil menyajikan data atau temuan penelitian secara objektif tanpa interpretasi. Data dapat berupa kutipan wawancara (untuk penelitian kualitatif), hasil observasi, statistik (untuk penelitian kuantitatif), atau gabungan keduanya. Penyajian data harus

sistematis, didukung tabel, gambar, atau grafik jika relevan. Setiap temuan yang disampaikan sebaiknya sesuai dengan tujuan dan rumusan masalah yang telah ditetapkan.

RESULTS

1. *Arabic Language Learning Practices among the Bugis Community*

Arabic language learning among the Bugis was found to take place through several interconnected educational spaces rather than through formal schooling alone. Data indicate that Arabic is encountered in schools, madrasahs, pesantren, mosques, Qur'anic learning groups, religious study circles, and family-based religious practices. Four main tendencies characterize these practices: religious embeddedness, multiple learning spaces, ritual repetition, and intergenerational transmission.

Table 1. Arabic Learning Settings and Educational Meaning in Bugis Society

Learning Setting	Main Form of Exposure	Dominant Activity	Educational Meaning
Family	Religious expressions and prayers	Memorization and repetition	Initial religious socialization
Mosque/Qur'anic Group	Qur'anic Arabic	Reading, recitation, memorization	Qur'anic literacy
Madrasah/School	Arabic as a subject	Vocabulary, reading, writing, grammar	Formal language knowledge
Pesantren	Arabic and Islamic texts	Reading classical texts, communication	Intensive linguistic-religious formation
Study Circle (Majlis)	Arabic religious terminology	Listening, interpretation, textual explanation	Understanding Islamic teachings

2. *Arabic Language Learning as a Medium for Strengthening Islamic Cultural Identity*

The findings indicate that Arabic language learning contributes to the strengthening of Islamic cultural identity among the Bugis by connecting linguistic knowledge with religious understanding, symbolic belonging, moral formation, and intergenerational transmission. Rather than being perceived strictly as a foreign language, Arabic provides symbolic markers of Muslim belonging.

Table 2. Dimensions of Identity and the Role of Arabic Language Learning

Dimension of Identity	Role of Arabic Learning	Observable Expression	Identity Function
Religious knowledge	Access to Qur'anic and Islamic terminology	Understanding verses, prayers, concepts	Cognitive identification with Islam
Religious practice	Familiarity with Arabic expressions	Prayer, dhikr, greetings, supplications	Reinforcement of Islamic practice
Symbolic belonging	Use of Islamic-Arabic vocabulary	Religious expressions in daily interaction	Marker of Muslim identity
Moral formation	Understanding ethical concepts in texts	Use of concepts related to adab and akhlaq	Internalization of Islamic values

Intergenerational continuity	Transmission of Arabic religious expressions	Teaching prayers and recitation to children	Reproduction of Islamic cultural identity
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3. *Negotiating Arabic-Islamic Values and Bugis Cultural Traditions*

Arabic language learning does not replace Bugis cultural identity; rather, it participates in an ongoing process of negotiation. Participants described Islamic and Bugis identities as mutually reinforcing when local practices align with religious principles. Four main patterns were observed: selective integration, ethical reinterpretation, cultural adaptation, and layered identity formation.

Table 3. Negotiation Areas between Arabic-Islamic References and Bugis Cultural Expressions

Area of Negotiation	Bugis Cultural Expression	Arabic-Islamic Reference	Resulting Form
Respect and dignity	Respect for elders and social propriety	Adab and akhlaq	Ethical reinforcement
Communal solidarity	Mutual assistance and collective participation	Ta'awun and ukhuwah	Strengthened social solidarity
Religious ceremony	Local communal gatherings	Qur'anic recitation and du'a	Cultural-Islamic integration
Family education	Transmission of customary values	Islamic moral vocabulary	Intergenerational value transmission
Cultural adaptation	Evaluation of inherited practices	Islamic ethical principles	Selective cultural negotiation

DISCUSSION

Arabic language learning among the Bugis community demonstrates that language acquisition is embedded within a broader sociocultural and religious environment. The findings show that Arabic is not confined to formal instructional settings such as schools and madrasahs but is encountered across families, mosques, Qur'anic learning groups, pesantren, and religious study circles. This pattern suggests that Arabic learning in the Bugis context operates as a form of socially distributed learning, in which exposure to Arabic occurs through repeated participation in religious and communal practices. Such learning environments allow Arabic expressions, vocabulary, and textual forms to become familiar even when learners do not explicitly perceive themselves as studying a foreign language. The finding therefore extends the understanding of Arabic learning beyond classroom-based acquisition by demonstrating how religiously embedded language practices can function as informal mechanisms of language socialization.

The four tendencies identified—religious embeddedness, multiple learning spaces, ritual repetition, and intergenerational transmission—also indicate that the process of learning Arabic is strongly connected to repeated social participation. Family and mosque-based activities provide early exposure through prayers, Qur'anic recitation, religious expressions, and memorization, while schools and pesantren provide more systematic linguistic knowledge. The combination of these spaces creates continuity between informal and formal learning experiences. In particular, repetition through ritual practices may contribute to the retention of Arabic expressions because learners encounter the same linguistic forms in meaningful and recurring situations. Arabic thus becomes associated not

only with linguistic competence but also with everyday religious experience, making its acquisition inseparable from the social contexts in which the language is used.

The findings further indicate that Arabic learning contributes to the construction of Islamic cultural identity by providing access to religious knowledge and reinforcing participation in Islamic practices. Participants' exposure to Qur'anic terminology, prayers, dhikr, greetings, and supplications demonstrates that Arabic functions as a symbolic and communicative resource through which Islamic identity is expressed. This supports the view that language can operate as a marker of group belonging because particular linguistic forms acquire social and cultural meanings beyond their literal meanings. In the Bugis context, familiarity with Arabic religious expressions may therefore signal participation in a shared Islamic cultural repertoire. Importantly, the findings do not suggest that Arabic proficiency alone determines Islamic identity; rather, Arabic learning provides one of the linguistic resources through which religious belonging is understood, practiced, and communicated.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between Arabic learning and moral formation. Arabic religious vocabulary provides learners with access to concepts associated with *adab*, *akhlaq*, respect, responsibility, and other ethical principles. However, the significance of this process lies not merely in learning Arabic terms but in connecting linguistic knowledge with behavioral and social practices. When concepts encountered through Arabic religious texts are interpreted and practiced within family and community contexts, language learning may become part of a broader process of value internalization. This finding suggests that Arabic education in culturally situated communities can have functions that extend beyond communicative competence. For Bugis learners, Arabic may serve as a medium through which religious concepts are interpreted and connected to locally meaningful expectations concerning interpersonal conduct and social responsibility.

The findings on negotiation between Arabic-Islamic values and Bugis cultural traditions are particularly significant because they demonstrate that Islamic identity and local cultural identity are not necessarily constructed as competing systems. Participants' experiences point instead to processes of selective integration, ethical reinterpretation, cultural adaptation, and layered identity formation. Bugis values concerning respect for elders, communal solidarity, family responsibility, and collective participation can be reinforced through Islamic concepts such as *adab*, *akhlaq*, *ta'awun*, and *ukhuwah*. In this process, Arabic functions indirectly as a linguistic gateway to Islamic concepts that are subsequently interpreted within local cultural contexts. Consequently, the incorporation of Arabic-Islamic references does not necessarily lead to cultural replacement; it can provide additional conceptual resources through which existing cultural practices are evaluated and given religious meaning.

The process of cultural negotiation also suggests that Arabic language learning should be understood within the principle of contextualized language education. The findings show that learners do not simply receive Arabic-Islamic values passively but encounter them through family practices, religious ceremonies, communal activities, and interpretations of inherited traditions. Some cultural practices may be maintained because they are perceived as compatible with Islamic ethical principles, while others may be reconsidered when perceived as inconsistent with those principles. This indicates that language learning can participate in a dynamic process of cultural interpretation in which linguistic, religious, and local cultural resources interact. For Arabic education in Bugis communities, this finding highlights the importance of instructional approaches that

acknowledge learners' existing cultural backgrounds rather than treating Arabic and Islamic content as culturally detached from their lived experiences.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Arabic language learning among the Bugis community represents more than the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, reading, or religious expressions. It operates across interconnected educational spaces and contributes to religious knowledge, Islamic practice, symbolic belonging, moral formation, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. At the same time, its relationship with Bugis culture is characterized by negotiation and adaptation rather than straightforward cultural replacement. These findings imply that Arabic language education in multicultural and religiously oriented contexts should consider the social and cultural functions of language alongside linguistic competence. By connecting Arabic instruction with learners' religious practices and local cultural experiences, Arabic education can become a context in which linguistic learning, Islamic identity, and local cultural continuity interact in mutually meaningful ways.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Arabic language learning plays a pivotal role in strengthening Islamic cultural identity among the Bugis by acting as an interpretive bridge that connects sacred text, moral values, symbolic belonging, and intergenerational transmission. Arabic is acquired not only through formal educational institutions but across a rich ecosystem comprising families, mosques, Qur'anic study groups, pesantren, and community gatherings. Consequently, language learning is deeply embedded in daily religious rituals and social life. Crucially, Arabic learning does not displace or erase Bugis ethnic identity. Instead, it functions as a cultural mediator through which universal Islamic principles are localized, adapted, and synthesized with Bugis traditional values (such as *siri' na pacce*, *sipakatau*, and communal solidarity). This dynamic interaction results in a layered cultural identity where religious devotion and local cultural heritage coexist harmoniously and reinforce one another. Theoretical and practical implications arise from these findings. Theoretically, this study challenges binary views of Arabization versus local preservation by introducing a cultural mediation model. Practically, educators and policymakers in Islamic education should design culturally responsive Arabic curricula that integrate formal linguistic skills with ethical concepts and local cultural contexts. Future research should examine the longitudinal impact of digital media on Arabic acquisition and identity formation across diverse ethnic communities in Indonesia.

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