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Theological and Cultural Construction: Resilience Strategies of the *To Sallang* Minority in A Multicultural Society

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Abstract

To Sallang is a term addressed to minority Muslims who live in Toraja. Even though they are a minority, they can live side by side, without losing their Islamic identity. This research aims to find out *To Sallang*'s resilience strategy to survive among the mainstream religions and customs of the Toraja people who are predominantly Christian. In addition, it also aims to explore religious aspects that can strengthen *To Sallang* community to survive and adapt to a multicultural society. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The research results show that *To Sallang* manages to maintain their social identity as a native of Toraja descent, as well as negotiate personal identity as a Muslim community by adapting their genius and creative assimilation to universal religious values and local wisdom (indigenous knowledge). Through theological concepts such as *fitrah-sunnatullah* (natural law), *hablum min al-nas* (social interaction), *hurmatu al-takrim* (respect and honor), and *al-ma'ruf* (values of goodness and wisdom that are rooted in the traditions of society) synchronized with local wisdom values such as *sikamali* (love-miss each other), *siangga'* (mutual respect), and *siangkaran* (help each other), *To Sallang* can present a comprehensive picture of religiosity that accommodates religious aspirations with cultural characteristics. *To Sallang* strategy could be the best practice and reference to build religious and cultural co-existence since they can survive with their Islamic identity and local wisdom to live together in a multicultural society. It can also be a blueprint for religious and cultural harmony in overcoming potential conflicts caused by ethnic and religious differences.

Keywords: Cultural Construction, Minority, Resilience Strategy, Theological Construction, *To Sallang*.

Abstrak

To Sallang adalah istilah yang merujuk pada minoritas Muslim Toraja. Meskipun merupakan kelompok minoritas, mereka dapat hidup berdampingan dengan liyan tanpa kehilangan identitas keislaman mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menemukan strategi resiliensi *To Sallang* untuk bertahan hidup di tengah arus utama agama dan adat istiadat masyarakat Toraja yang didominasi penganut Kristen. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga

bertujuan untuk menemukan aspek religius yang dapat menopang *To Sallang* untuk bertahan dan beradaptasi dengan masyarakat multikultural. Melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *To Sallang* mampu mempertahankan identitas sosial mereka sebagai warga etnis Toraja sekaligus menegosiasikan identitas personalnya sebagai komunitas Muslim dengan melakukan adaptasi jenius dan akomodasi kreatif terhadap nilai-nilai universal agama dan kearifan lokal (indigenous knowledge). Melalui konsep-konsep teologis seperti *fitrah-sunnatullah*, *hablum min al-nas*, *hurmatu al-takrim*, dan *al-ma'ruf* dan nilai-nilai kearifan seperti *siangga'*, *siangkaran*, dan *sikamali*, *To Sallang* berhasil menampilkan potret keberagaman inklusif yang mewedahi aspirasi agama berwatak budaya.

Kata Kunci: *Konstruksi Kultural, Minoritas, Strategi Bertahan, Konstruksi Teologis, To Sallang.*

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the issue of discrimination against minorities has received international attention. Concerns about the involvement of religious motives in various acts of discrimination and violence against minorities permeated security debates at the national level (United Nations Human Office of The High Commissioner, 2023). Observing the frequency of religiously motivated violence and discrimination in a multicultural society, the assumption emerges that religion is loaded with antagonistic potential (OHCHR and Minorities, 2022). Religious practitioners and researchers have begun to question whether or not intolerance and discrimination have a causal relationship to religion, and then how religious extremism and discrimination against minorities can be prevented (Petersen & Marshall, 2019). In 2001, representatives of United Nations member states drafted the Durban Declaration Program of Action (DDPA) through the World Conference against Racism. The Durban Declaration and Program of Action takes a clear policy stance on combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and other acts of intolerance (Bielefeld, 2019).

Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, an Indonesia-based research and advocacy group, has released survey results showing conditions of tolerance most worrying from 2015 to 2022. Setara declared that acts of intolerance were the most common type of violation of freedom of religion and belief and belief (Setara Institute, 2022).

Interestingly, among several conflicts and violence with a religious background against minorities in Indonesia, none of the minority violence involved the *To Sallang* community. This group can survive amid the plurality and mainstream of the customs and diversity of the Toraja people. There was almost no tension between *To Sallang* and other religious groups, especially those that resulted in physical violence.

Topics related to the Toraja Muslim minority were widely discussed, but most focused only on the context of Muslims' initial encounter with the customs and culture of the Toraja people (Christian Pelras, 1985; Needham, 1981; Waterson, 2009). In addition, there is also research related to the picture of the dynamics of missionary communication of the Toraja Muslim minority (Paisal, 2019; Tahir et al., 2020).

Previous research on the Toraja community has often framed religion as an under-considered component of social processes. Religion is seen as an identity that does not make an important contribution to the resilience of minorities, including religious groups, in supporting the coexistence and future survival of each component of Toraja society. This differs from the results of this study which not only reveal the cultural values that are the basis of the wisdom of the Toraja people but also reveal the theological concepts that support flexibility and shape the comprehensive diversity of *To Sallang* so that it succeeds in presenting a complete picture of religiosity that accommodates religious aspirations with a cultural character.

Based on the theoretical framework of the encounter between Islam and Toraja society, this article aims to identify the resilience Strategy of *To Sallang* in maintaining their social identity as well as negotiating their religious identity, and to know the factors that made them able to maintain their social identity as members of the Toraja tribe through negotiating their personal identity as Muslims by exploring universal religious values that are in harmony with local wisdom (indigenous knowledge).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted in Sesean District, Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia from January to September 2022. The selection of the

site for **this research** was based on consideration of the existence of deeply rooted ancestral beliefs among the Toraja people who struggle with the adherents of Islam and Christianity. In addition, the presence of Muslims as a minority group can live within the grand structure of Aluk Tudolo customs and culture which is the local wisdom of the Toraja people without obscuring their religious identity.

This research was conducted through an in-depth exploration of the values that underpin *To Sallang's* religious resilience based on the primary source in the form of community-diffused field data and supporting data in the form of. Data were collected through observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews (L. J. Thompson et al., 2019). To support the data, written sources such as books, articles, and other literature particularly related to the study were also used. The data collection process for this research is triangular and circular (data collection, coding, and note writing) (Uwe Flick, Ines Steinke, 2022). The researcher collected several data by recording each event in the search site and then interrogated continuously (coding) by expanding the database to intensify the relationships between concepts for further analysis as potential indicators related to the flexibility of minority religion *To Sallang* as a unit of analysis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To Sallang's Co-Existence Among Cultural and Theological Construction

Sesean Community, North Toraja is a pluralistic community. The majority of Toraja population adheres to Protestant Christianity. The rest, adhere to Catholic Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. As is common in Toraja and North Toraja, Muslims in Sesean Province are considered a minority. Out of a total of 11,543 people, only 462 converted to Islam, and there are 26 houses of worship, 25 of which are churches and only one mosque in the village of Palawa' (Andi Baly (Ed.), 2019).

The cultural heritage in Sesean is very strong and rooted. The existence of customs and traditions which are still strictly adhered to by the Sesean people cannot be separated from the ancestral teachings of the Toraja people called Aluk Todolo since the 9th century (Idaman, 2012). Aluk Todolo in the life of the Toraja people is a source of culture and life philosophy because the Aluk Todolo contains two important values that are a source of lifestyle as well as an order

that guides the behavior patterns of the Toraja ethnic community. These two values are the values of the norms contained in the vertical dimension (the divine aspect) and the values in the horizontal dimension (the social aspect) (Jones, 2005; Thompson, 1998).

Many of the rituals are based on the teachings of Alok Tudolo. In these rituals, the concept of pairing, binary opposition, and hierarchy as in the ritual *Rambu Tuka* (ceremonies of happiness) is reflected in the symbol of smoke, light, and rising light, constitutes the meaning contained in the word *Rambu Tuka* since the ceremony of happiness is carried out in the east of the Tongkonan house when the sun begins to rise (raising light). Meanwhile, smoke indicates the meaning of preparing for consumptive needs (preparing food). On the other hand, in *Rambu Solo* (grief ritual) it is symbolized by the decreasing light since it is carried out for the burial ceremony of the corpse when the sun starts to go down/set (Ismail, 2019; Moris & Rahman, 2022).

Regarding the strong cultural currents in this area, Said Ibrahim revealed that long before the acquaintance with Christianity and Islam, the existence of the customs and culture of the Toraja people was deeply rooted in the structure of consciousness of the Toraja people (Puang Haji Said, Community Leader and Former Head of the Religious Affairs Office, Sesean District, 2022).

The practice of local traditions is seen in *To Sallang* consciousness as something to be preserved (Sabaruddin, Former Religious Counselor, Sesean District, 2022). Regarding this, Rahman, one of the religious teachers, said, "Alok Tudolo has been implemented so far, as it teaches respect for fellow believers." Moreover, he also related, "I still remember, when I came there (a non-Muslim home) there was already a special cupboard made for storing dishes and other kitchen items. It is used later when a Muslim comes. They predicted that one day a Muslim would come to their house" (Abdurrahman, Religious Affairs Office Officer in Sesean District, 2022).

Muabid revealed that religion and tradition cannot be separated, and most importantly, *To Sallang* in Sesean continue to practice customs and religion together as long as it does not diminish the value of monotheism (Muabid, Head of the Religious Affairs Office of Sesean District, 2022). Traditions that are not in line with faith, for example, when a Christian (religious) family dies are

abandoned nor is it buried immediately, at a later time after the ceremony (according to custom). On the other hand, if a Muslim family dies, though (tradition has been assimilated) by keeping the condolence (*ta'ziah*), it is still necessary to expedite the burial (ceremonially). The position of traditional values and religious values in many aspects of society, including unity and harmony in Sesean" (Muabid, Head of the Religious Affairs Office of Sesean District, 2022). *To Sallang* sees religion and customs as a source of standards that maintain environmental sustainability and harmony (Sabaruddin, Former Religious Counselor, Sesean District, 2022).

It is undeniable that there was resistance from several parties. Fadli Said, the rejection by some parties was due to ignorance. He told that once upon a time there was a controversy that forced him to have a dialogue with the family when a member of his family who was a Muslim died, and his body was still in the house. After having a dialogue with his family and giving them an understanding that in Islam burials must be hastened, they finally understood (Muhammad Fadli, Religious Affairs Office Officer in Sesean District, 2022).

To Sallang in Sesean is a family as well as part of the indigenous people who adopted and adapted in a genius way. This smart adaptation is supported by the fact that *To Sallang's* versatility can be described as an 'elite picture' of Islam's clash with Toraja tradition and culture. This is because *To Sallang* has a genealogy that crosses the royal lineage (*Kapuangan* tradition). Like the initial acceptance of Islam in Toraja, the acceptance of Islam in Sesean was first initiated by the *Puang* (noble elite) and then spread through family networks to the wider Sesean community. (Tandilulu, Rahman, Religious Counselor and Director of the Hussain Mominin Mosque, 2022) revealed, "It can be said that Islam can spread in Sesean because from the beginning the people who converted to Islam were nobles, which affected the family and the surrounding society".

Religion can coexist in the life of the Toraja people with customs passed down from their ancestors. R. Andilolo, a Christian religious leader - as mentioned by Nuruddin Baturante - said that Muslim Toraja people are Toraja Muslims, Christian Toraja are Toraja Christians, as well as Catholic Toraja are Toraja Catholics (Nurdin Baturante, 2019). Toraja customs and culture are a manifestation of the entire way of life, thinking, and feeling of the Toraja people.

Therefore, regardless of their religious beliefs, the people of Toraja, including *To Sallang* have a uniqueness that distinguishes them from adherents from other regions. *To Sallang* in Sesean, consider religion and custom as a source of norms that maintain environmental sustainability and harmony. In this respect, (Tandilulu, Rahman, Religious Counselor and Director of the Hussain Mominin Mosque, 2022) added "no one feels a minority. They are Toraja people and a family related to Tongkonan (the traditional stilt house of the Toraja people which is rectangular)".

Resilience Strategy of *To Sallang* in Theological and Cultural Construction

The existence of *To Sallang* as a minority group amid the mainstream customs, culture, and religion of the Toraja people does not necessarily make them lose self-confidence. The social relations that are built among the Toraja people are a process of adjusting to accept other people's conditions, views, and actions in the community. This awareness cannot certainly be separated from the understanding of committed religious values and cultural values rooted in people's lives (Bennett, 1998).

Religion and local wisdom play an important role in supporting *To Sallang's* resilience as a minority group. The importance of religion and local wisdom lies in their ability to provide standards that enable them to make new adjustments to their living conditions (Gadeng et al., 2018; Pudjiastuti et al., 2021; Rozi et al., 2021). Aspects related to religion may be referred to as theological construction since their existence is closely related to the religious understanding that is adhered to. Meanwhile, aspects related to local wisdom are referred to as cultural installations since their existence stems from the values of wisdom inherited from the ancestors of the Toraja people namely *Aluk Todolo*.

The religious construction and cultural installations presented in this section are concrete, have an empirical basis, and therefore can be directly observed, and some are abstract and have no empirical basis and therefore cannot be observed directly. The latter is stored only in the system of knowledge and consciousness of the Toraja people, and thus can only be known through language expressions.

In this case, the theological construction supporting *To Sallang's* flexibility includes the concept of *fitrah-sunnatullah*. The concept of *fitrah-sunnatullah* has a solid foundation in Islamic teachings. Religion teaches that differences are a human phenomenon that cannot be avoided (Quran 49:13). In Islam, there are lots of differences and diversity, including religion which are not in question. For this reason, Islam tells the reality of differences as the Sunnah of God, humans are intentionally allowed to be different (Quran 11:18). This understanding encourages the growth of awareness of equal worth and dignity before God and before people. In this context, *To Sallang* and Toraja people are primarily people who highly respect and appreciate diversity as an inescapable reality. With the *To Sallang's* understanding *fitrah-sunnatullah*, they do not question their status as a minority group.

In the consciousness structure of *To Sallang* and Toraja society in general, majority and minority groups are not encountered, also aren't placed in a dichotomous manner. Based on the understanding of the Quran verse al-Hujurat: 13, the Toraja culture can be called the means of "*lita'arafu*" (to know and understand each other). (Tandilulu, Rahman, Religious Counselor and Director of the Hussain Mominin Mosque, 2022) said, "They see religious differences as something that should never be an issue, and what is most important is how we continue to uphold noble values". The same thing was also mentioned by (Sabaruddin, Former Religious Counselor, Sesean District, 2022), "We see that differences are unavoidable, thus they become a beautiful color in our society".

Culturally, *To Sallang* are indeed bound by Toraja culture, but they are still able to evaluate and abandon the Toraja values and customs that shape their identity. It is in this context that *To Sallang* can exist because they are still allowed to rethink their customs and culture. *To Sallang* still views their culture as reflecting a good system of meaning, as they also recognize that the same thing applies to other communities, thus enabling acceptance of differences and diversity of ways of life. They believe that Toraja culture is something valuable or at least not entirely worthless.

In given context, *To Sallang* recognizes that cultural extension cannot amount to the totality of its existence, and at that time the existence of religion is necessary. This is what supports the creation of a harmonious and tolerant life in

the Sesean community. Thus, *To Sallang* grows in the culture and is shaped by its interaction with others. *To Sallang* as a cultural entity brings and shares with other cultures. However, this does not mean that *To Sallang* as a religious community has no identity, but rather that *To Sallang's* identity is multiple and open.

It can be said that Toraja's religious and cultural encounter initiated the presence of Islam with a comprehensive religious "image and taste" amid Toraja society, to create an atmosphere of harmonious social life. *To Sallang's* struggles as a family, and as part of the indigenous Toraja community can be seen in his attitude towards traditions and customs. The traditions and customs that shaped their identity as the Toraja people are still being adapted by linking them to their religious values. In this case, *To Sallang* was present and constituted his identity.

To Sallang is fully aware that they are part of the Toraja community as well as a religious community that also has the responsibility of spreading "al-ma'ruf", which is the good that comes from mutually agreed values (Quran 3: 110). With this awareness, *To Sallang* believe that the values of wisdom bequeathed by their ancestors contain values of virtue or are not wholly inconsistent with the values of the religion they adhere to. (Abdurrahman, Religious Affairs Office Officer in Sesean District, 2022) also stated, "Alok Tudolo is guiding and practicing even now because it teaches respect for fellow believers".

To Sallang's participation in the various local traditions of the Toraja people, such as *Rambu Solo* and *Rambu Tuka'* is essentially a moment of vindication or expression of his noble religious values regarding human responsibility (*hablum minannas-hurmat al-takrim*). *To Sallang* can still believe in and practice the teachings of the religion they adhered to, but their identity and atmosphere of religious social life always have characteristics that set them apart from Muslims who come or live in other areas, especially in respect of the values of the wisdom of the Toraja people.

As a minority, *To Sallang* still survived among multicultural and theological construction in Toraja. There have never been conflicts with religious background in the Sesean area. Rahman revealed, "I often tell our Muslim brothers and sisters not to be afraid of the Toraja natives due to their different

beliefs, if the problem is fear of sin, then they fear sin more than us". Toraja people are very mature and wise in dealing with differences or diversity. (Abdurrahman, Religious Affairs Office Officer in Sesean District, 2022) added, "Here in Toraja, there are house in which there are three religions; Islam, Catholic, and Protestant".

To Sallang can still live with the traditions inherited from their ancestors. They realized that in the past Islam was not widely adhered to by the people of Toraja. (Tandilulu, Rahman, Religious Counselor and Director of the Hussain Mominin Mosque, 2022) said, "They (minorities) are still part of the Toraja tribal community even though they are surrounded by Christianity and the tribal religion (Aluk Tudolo)". Rahman also revealed "No one feels that they are in a minority, *To Sallang* consider themselves as part of the Toraja people and family who are related to Tongkonan. The good thing about Sesean is that there is one family, one grandmother".

In addition to the above values, *To Sallang* also have a religious tradition that underpins their existence. For example, assembly recitation (*majlis taklim*), sermons, analyses, and visits of hospitality. These religious activities became part of *To Sallang's* routine agenda to motivate each other. After the study group activities, they engaged in a short conversation. Such religious forums are the bonding ground of Islamic brotherhood. (Tandilulu, Rahman, Religious Counselor and Director of the Hussain Mominin Mosque, 2022) said, "We (*To Sallang*) often hold meetings as a gathering place, provide a promotion of religious understanding, and facilitate it so that they stay motivated, and not feel lonely. Even here, there is a program from the Friends of North Toraja Muslim Youth such as a delivery service for pilgrims (for religious activities) who live away and they don't have a car". A part from that, religious training activities for children are also one of the programs implemented by extension workers in sub-districts. Rahman also said that the religious activities in the Sesean area were active. The religious activities are running well such as the activities of recitation, thanksgiving, and congratulations. These all play an important role in supporting the resilience of *To Sallang* minority. With religious activities run by extension workers, the psychological burden that may arise can be slowly overcome through assimilating religious values. In addition, the presence of these religious

gatherings can be a place to share stories and share daily experiences in their interactions with "others".

The Toraja cultural constructions that play a role in supporting *To Sallang's* resilience are the values of local wisdom such as *sikamali* (love-miss each other), *siangga'* (mutual respect), and *siangkaran* (help each other), which have been deeply rooted and have become key elements in the lives of the people of Toraja (Sabaruddin, Former Religious Counselor, Sesean District, 2022).

To Sallang maintains relationships with relatives or other people of different religions. Their presence manifests itself in everyday life; friendly relations, mutual assistance in agricultural activities, and even active participation in building houses of worship for other religions (Sabaruddin, Former Religious Counselor, Sesean District, 2022). Rahman said that there is already a special cupboard set up to store dishes and other kitchen utensils. It will be used later when a Muslim comes. They expected that one day a Muslim would come to their house" (Abdurrahman, Religious Affairs Office Officer in Sesean District, 2022).

The Toraja Ancestral Philosophy is a fundamental principle that binds the Toraja people regardless of all forms of differences within them, including differences in religious beliefs and teachings (Paisal, 2019). These noble values also become the spirit that encourages a pro-coexistence attitude among the Toraja people, including *To Sallang* which is characterized by the participation of every member of the community in traditional ceremonies, be it *Rambu Solo* or *Rambu Tuka'*.

These values, which are cultural buildings, have succeeded in encouraging the creation of a society open to difference and diversity and filled with human messages. Based on this *sikamali* (we love each other), every member of the community attends and participates in *Rambu Solo* ceremony (grief). Based on *siangga'* (mutual respect), *To Sallang* is highly valued as a member of the community and especially as a member of the family, so the slaughter of buffaloes so that Muslims can eat together is also welcome. Similarly, based on *siangkaran* (help each other), the participation and contribution of Muslims in each *Rambu Solo* ceremony are apart from being a form of a joint effort to

maintain the atmosphere of social life and the continuation of the spirit of kinship.

As part of *To Sallang's* cultural resilience strategy, the practice of the *Rambu Solo* ceremony is still done through adaptation, creativity, and adaptation ingeniously. Based on the *siangga'* principle, the buffalo slaughter technique (*ma'tinggoro tedong*) is not fully implemented. In honor of the Muslim families (*To Sallang*), the Muslims slaughtered some buffaloes by uttering 'basmallah' (pronounced *bismillah*) (Abdurrahman, Religious Affairs Office Officer in Sesean District, 2022).

In addition, *To Sallang's* ingenious adaptation of the traditions of the Toraja people is that of the *ma'tambun*. The *ma'tambun* is an activity aimed at arranging the graves of deceased relatives. In the Tradition of the *ma'tambun*, *To Sallang* frames this tradition with religious activities namely completion of the Qur'an as well as religious lectures. In this context, the tradition of *ma'tambun* is creatively adapted by introducing Islamic values, because it can be a means of da'wah.

Thus, the ingenious adaptation and creative adaptation practiced by *To Sallang* seems to occur not only at the level of translation but also at the level of practice. All this shows a picture of the overall diversity of *To Sallang* who has succeeded in bringing together religious values, traditions, and customs of the Toraja people as well as accommodating religious aspirations with a cultural character.

CONCLUSION

Since the encounter between religion and local traditions has a very long and intense history, including in Indonesia, the presence of *To Sallang* as a new element in the culture of the Toraja people explains the strong connection between Islam as a universal, cultural, and local teaching. Aspects that live and are rooted in society. *To Sallang's* resilience is supported by the theological and cultural construction. *To Sallang's* theological strategy is seen in the interpretation and practice of universal religious values. Meanwhile, the cultural strategy developed by *To Sallang* is their respect for the customs and traditions of the local community. *To Sallang* religious phenomenon does not completely override the

values and practices of traditions and customs that are alive and deeply ingrained in the lives of the Toraja people. The formation of To Sallang identity is not preceded by the loss of value of some entities, whether it be the traditions and customs of the Toraja on the one hand or Islam as its religion on the other. It is this process of struggle that determines the entities that survive and the elements that are eliminated from religion and their traditions and customs, as seen in *To Sallang's* genius adaptation and creative accommodation in organizing traditional ceremonies, both *Rambu Solo* (mourning ceremonies) and *Rambu Tuka'* (joy ceremonies). *To Sallang* strategy could be the best practice and reference to build religious and cultural co-existence since they can survive with their Islamic identity and local wisdom to live together in a multicultural society. It can also be a blueprint for religious and cultural harmony in overcoming potential conflicts caused by ethnic and religious differences.



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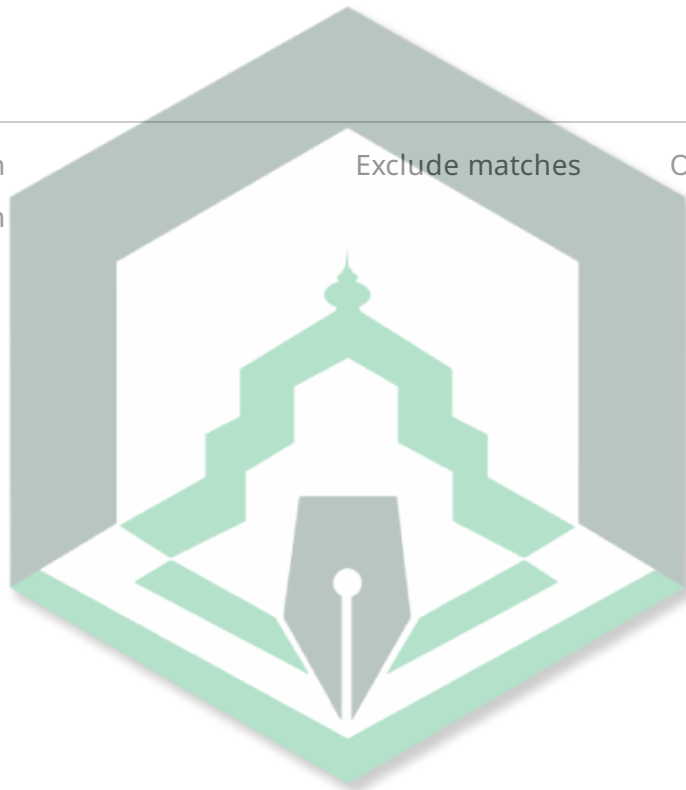
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