

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH IN ISLAMIC STUDIES

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Abstrak

Keywords:

*Anthropological
 Approach,
 Islamic Studies*

Anthropology is the science of humans, particularly their origins, physical forms, customs, and beliefs in the past. Epistemologically, anthropology empirically studies various aspects of humans, both as biological and social beings (meaning living in society). Theoretically, anthropology is the observational study of humans, both as biological beings and as beings inextricably linked to others. A more effective approach to anthropology is the holistic method. This method examines the phenomenon under study in a more universal and comprehensive manner, reflecting the culture of the society being studied. This study employed library research, utilizing literature from previous researchers and employing content analysis and constant comparative techniques. The anthropological approach to Islamic studies is the result of research that examines the unique characteristics of Muslims in various regions of the world and how they live while practicing Islam

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INTRODUCTION

Religion is a form of divine revelation that provides guidance to humanity in addressing the various challenges and complexities of human life. It offers individuals a new perspective on existence and serves as a pathway toward a meaningful future. However, in contemporary society, religion is often perceived and treated as a source of conflict and division rather than as a means of guidance and reconciliation (Hamdi, 2023). Today, many people are preoccupied with safeguarding religion from distortion and contamination in the realm of praxis, as not all religious teachings are properly implemented by their adherents. In addition, religious values are frequently influenced by external practices and ideologies that become intertwined with religious traditions. Recent phenomena also demonstrate that many individuals and groups have become excessively engaged in debating religious matters, causing them to lose sight of the essential purpose of religion. Consequently, numerous divisions have emerged among communities due to differing interpretations and understandings of religious teachings (Leni, 2018).

An anthropological approach to understanding religion may be defined as an effort to comprehend religion by examining the forms of religious practice that emerge, develop, and are



sustained within society (Akmal Ridho1, 2026). Through this approach, religion appears more accessible and closely connected to human concerns, while simultaneously seeking to explain and provide solutions to the issues faced by individuals and communities. Accordingly, this paper aims to explore and illustrate the anthropological approach in Islamic studies.

The primary challenge in understanding Islam lies in understanding human beings themselves. Fundamentally, the struggles encountered by human beings are religious in nature. The true meaning of human religiosity is embedded in the interpretation and practice of the faith traditions they embrace. Therefore, anthropology becomes an essential analytical framework for the study of Islam, serving as a means of understanding both human reality and religious diversity.

Through an anthropological approach to Islamic studies, religion as manifested at the empirical level becomes more comprehensible, including the historical and social contexts that contribute to its emergence and development. Anthropology seeks to examine the relationship between religion and the various social institutions that evolve within society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article was conducted using a library research approach, drawing upon scholarly literature derived from previous studies. The research employed both content analysis and constant comparative analysis techniques. Content analysis was carried out through an in-depth examination of information obtained from written sources, including both mass media and printed publications.

Content analysis may also be understood as a research technique used to identify, interpret, and adapt references by considering the context in which they are presented. In contrast, the constant comparative analysis technique focuses on examining how a particular phenomenon occurs and continuously comparing it with similar events or cases throughout the research process. The implementation of this technique involves comparing incidents within each category, integrating categories along with their defining characteristics, and identifying patterns and relationships among them.

Through these analytical procedures, relevant studies and concepts were systematically reviewed and examined to identify their connections with the central issues discussed in this research. Consequently, both primary and secondary scientific sources were utilized to generate comprehensive and reliable academic information that supports the objectives of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Anthropology

The term anthropology is derived from two Greek words: *anthropos*, meaning “human being,” and *logos*, meaning “knowledge” or “study.” Accordingly, anthropology may be defined as the scientific study of human beings, particularly concerning their origins, physical characteristics, customs, traditions, and belief systems throughout history. From an epistemological perspective, anthropology examines various dimensions of human life empirically, both as biological organisms and as social beings living within communities. Biologically, human beings exhibit diversity in skin color, body structure, and other physical attributes. Nevertheless, despite these physical differences, individuals are born into social groups and develop within broader societal environments. Each social group possesses distinctive ways of life, commonly referred to as culture. Culture encompasses the systems of values, knowledge, and practices that characterize and distinguish particular communities (M. Amin Abdullah, 2007).

The primary objective of anthropology is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of human beings, both in the past and in the present. Anthropology seeks to explore the totality of human social experience and the diverse ways in which people interact with one another and with their environments. Consequently, one of the significant contributions of anthropological inquiry is its capacity to illuminate phenomena that lead to a deeper understanding of the

concept of God and religious consciousness. As an academic discipline, anthropology is generally divided into two major branches: physical anthropology and cultural anthropology, the latter of which also encompasses studies related to ethnology and linguistics (Aulia Akbar, 2022).

In its simplest sense, anthropology is the study of society and culture. Culture itself includes all products of human creativity and social activity, whether material or non-material in nature. Material culture comprises tangible objects such as houses, clothing, footwear, tools, and other physical artifacts created and utilized by members of a society. In contrast, non-material culture encompasses artistic expressions, religion, belief systems, worldviews, norms, regulations, and values that are accepted, practiced, and upheld within a particular social group. Together, these cultural elements shape human behavior, social organization, and collective identity, making culture one of the central concerns of anthropological inquiry.

Anthropology of Religion

The interrelationship between religion and cultural reality is both inevitable and intrinsic, as religion does not exist within a cultural vacuum or remain perpetually untouched by human experience. To deny the connection between religion and culture is, in effect, to deny the reality of religion itself, which is always mediated through human beings and therefore inevitably embedded within cultural contexts. This perspective suggests that the development of religion within a society—both at the level of discourse and social practice—reflects an element of human construction. However, this assertion does not imply that religion is merely a human creation. Rather, it highlights the inseparable relationship between divine construction, as manifested in sacred scriptures, and human construction, which emerges through the interpretation and contextualization of sacred religious values as expressed in ritual and religious practices.

When individuals interpret religious teachings, their understanding is inevitably influenced by the primordial cultural environment in which they have been socialized. This phenomenon helps explain why interpretations of religious doctrines differ from one society to another. For example, the comparative study of Islam in Indonesia and Morocco conducted by Clifford Geertz demonstrates the significant influence of culture on the understanding and expression of Islam. In Indonesia, Islam developed into a more syncretic religious tradition, whereas in Morocco it assumed a more assertive and passionate character. These differing manifestations of the same religion illustrate the extent to which religious realities are shaped by their cultural environments. Consequently, anthropology, as the scientific study of human beings, plays a crucial role in fostering a deeper understanding of religion.

Anthony F. C. Wallace defines religion as “a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing changes in the human condition or in nature.” This definition acknowledges that when human beings are unable to resolve serious problems that generate anxiety and uncertainty, they seek solutions through supernatural forces. Religious rituals therefore become the principal means through which such efforts are expressed. According to Wallace, ritual constitutes the primary manifestation of religion, or “religion as action.” In this sense, religion is understood as a system of beliefs and behavioral patterns employed by human beings to regulate aspects of nature and existence that they are unable to control independently. Consequently, religion may be regarded as an integral component of culture itself (William A. Haviland, 2004).

Fundamentally, every culture is unique and distinct from all others. Each society possesses its own cultural system, and every religion, in order to take root, flourish, and endure within a particular social setting, must become meaningful within that cultural framework (Parsudi Suparlan, 2001). Religion must function as a guide whose truth is accepted and trusted by members of society. At the same time, it must possess the transformative capacity to direct society toward the social ideals and aspirations envisioned within its doctrinal teachings.

For religion to survive, develop, and remain sustainable within society, it must become

integrated into the cultural life of the community. This necessity arises because every society possesses a culture that serves as a framework for interacting with and utilizing its environment to fulfill biological, social, and integrative moral needs. Through this process, religion becomes embedded within the broader cultural system and contributes to the maintenance of social order and collective identity.

Broadly speaking, anthropological studies of religion may be classified into four major theoretical frameworks: the intellectualist, structuralist, functionalist, and symbolist approaches. The latter three perspectives—structuralism, functionalism, and symbolism—are largely rooted in the work of Émile Durkheim. Durkheim's seminal work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, has profoundly influenced scholarly understandings of religion and continues to serve as a foundational text in the anthropology and sociology of religion. From this perspective, when religion is viewed and analyzed as a cultural phenomenon—that is, as part of the cultural values of a particular society—it is understood as a system of guidance whose truth is accepted by members of that society. Furthermore, religion is perceived as sacred, endowed with supernatural sanctions, and governed by religious norms and regulations that believers regard as authoritative and binding.

Anthropological Approach and Its Application in Islamic Studies

In the realm of scientific inquiry, according to Parsudi Suparlan, the term *approach* bears the same meaning as *methodology*, namely a perspective or way of viewing and treating a particular object of attention or problem under investigation (Akhyat, 2010). In this context, an approach refers to the perspective or paradigm embedded within a particular discipline that is subsequently employed to understand religion.

In this regard, Jalaluddin Rahmat, as cited by Abuddin Nata, argues that religion can be studied through a variety of paradigms. Religious realities that are examined and interpreted possess their own forms of validity within the framework of the paradigm through which they are understood (Nata Abuddin, 2021). Accordingly, the anthropological approach referred to in this paper is a perspective or paradigm through which a phenomenon is observed, interpreted, and analyzed by using the cultural context surrounding that phenomenon as the primary frame of reference. Such an approach seeks to understand, investigate, and explain religious phenomena through the lens of culture and human experience.

An anthropological approach to the study of religion may be understood as an effort to comprehend religion by examining the forms of religious practice that emerge, evolve, and are sustained within society. Through this approach, religion appears more accessible and intimately connected to the problems and challenges faced by human beings, while simultaneously offering explanations and responses to those challenges. In other words, the analytical tools and perspectives employed within anthropology to examine social phenomena are likewise utilized to understand religious life and religious experience (Nata Abuddin, 2021).

As a discipline devoted to the study of human beings, anthropology occupies a crucial position in the understanding of religion. Anthropology investigates human beings and the entirety of their behavior in order to explain cultural diversity and social variation. Equipped with a holistic perspective and a commitment to understanding humanity in its broadest sense, anthropology provides a valuable framework for studying religion and its interactions with diverse cultural traditions. Nurcholish Madjid emphasized the importance of an anthropological approach in understanding Islam, arguing that the Islamic concept of humanity as *khalifah* (God's vicegerent or representative) on earth symbolizes the central and indispensable position of human beings within the Islamic worldview.

Since religion is ultimately intended for the benefit of humankind, human concerns are, in essence, also religious concerns. In Islam, human beings are portrayed as the *khalifah* of Allah on earth. From an anthropological perspective, this expression suggests that human reality constitutes an integral dimension of divine reality. This understanding illustrates the extent to which the study of human beings—anthropology's central concern—becomes essential for a

deeper comprehension of religion.

According to Dawam Rahardjo, anthropological research primarily relies on direct observation and often adopts a participatory character. Such an approach gives rise to inductive conclusions that complement the deductive methods commonly employed in sociological inquiry. Rahardjo further argues that anthropological research is fundamentally inductive and grounded in nature, requiring researchers to engage directly with the field while attempting to free themselves from the constraints of formal theories, which are often highly abstract. This characteristic distinguishes anthropology from disciplines such as sociology and, even more markedly, economics, which frequently employ mathematical models and theoretical abstractions. Moreover, anthropological research has made significant contributions to historical studies by providing empirically grounded insights into human societies and cultures (Salimatus Sa' et al., 2023).

In practice, numerous anthropological studies of religion have demonstrated a positive relationship between religious beliefs and socioeconomic as well as political conditions. Economically disadvantaged groups and impoverished communities are generally more attracted to religious movements that promise social transformation and the restructuring of existing social arrangements. Conversely, affluent groups tend to support and preserve established social systems because such systems often serve their economic interests and reinforce their social position (H.M. Amin Abdullah, 2007).

Anthropological research in the field of religion was also conducted by Clifford Geertz, whose findings were published in his influential work *The Religion of Java*. The significance of Geertz's contribution lies in his analysis of symbols and symbolic systems, particularly in explaining the relationship between social structures within a society and the organization and manifestation of symbolic forms. Furthermore, his work demonstrates how members of society create both integration and disintegration through the construction, interpretation, and utilization of particular symbols (Subair, 2015).

In conducting his research, Geertz employed a qualitative research approach. His study was based on data collected through interviews, observations (surveys), and grounded research, a method in which the researcher becomes actively involved in the life of the community being studied. Consequently, the researcher does not begin with a predetermined theory or hypothesis to be tested in the field. Rather, the researcher enters the field without prior assumptions regarding the religious phenomena under investigation. These phenomena are subsequently analyzed and interpreted through an appropriate theoretical framework after the data have been collected and examined (Nata Abuddin, 2021).

Major Authors and Foundational Works in the Anthropological Study of Islam

The anthropological study of Islam has been enriched by the contributions of numerous scholars, both Western researchers and Muslim intellectuals. Among the most influential figures is Clifford Geertz, whose seminal work, *The Religion of Java*, was published in the early 1960s. This work made an extraordinary contribution to the anthropological understanding of Islam, particularly through its methodological innovations and analytical framework. In addition to *The Religion of Java*, Geertz produced several other influential works, including *The Interpretation of Cultures*, *After the Fact, Islam Observed*, and numerous other publications that have significantly shaped contemporary anthropological discourse on religion and culture.

According to Akbar S. Ahmed, prominent intellectual traditions within the Muslim world had already flourished long before the emergence of Western anthropology. One notable example is Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni, who was born in Khwarazm (present-day Turkmenistan) in Dhu al-Hijjah 362 AH (September 973 CE) and died in 1048 CE. Al-Biruni possessed extensive expertise in history, mathematics, physics, astronomy, medicine, linguistics, geography, and philosophy. He became particularly renowned for writing and translating numerous works concerning Indian culture into Arabic, thereby facilitating cross-cultural intellectual exchange between civilizations (Akbar S. Ahmed, 2000).

Al-Biruni is often regarded as one of the earliest anthropologists, largely due to his celebrated work, *Kitab al-Hind*. He conducted his research over a period of approximately thirteen years (1017–1031 CE). His methodology relied extensively on primary Hindu sources, and he acquired proficiency in Sanskrit in order to engage directly with indigenous texts and traditions. In addition, he consulted secondary sources, including translated works produced by Arab and Persian scholars. Al-Biruni presented Indian civilization from the perspective of the Indians themselves, enabling his work to meet exceptionally high scholarly standards for its time. Consequently, *Kitab al-Hind* is widely regarded as one of the finest medieval studies of Hinduism, science, and Indian customs and traditions (Badri Yatim, 2013).

Other notable Muslim scholars include Ibn Battuta (1304–1377), whose famous work, *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Ghara'ib al-Amsar wa 'Aja'ib al-Asfar*, provides valuable ethnographic observations of numerous societies and cultures. Likewise, Al-Masudi made important contributions to historical and cultural studies. Another towering figure is Ibn Khaldun, formally known as Waliyuddin Abd al-Rahman Ibn Muhammad Ibn Abi Bakr Ibn al-Hasan Ibn Khaldun, whose monumental work, *Muqaddimah*, remains one of the most influential texts in the study of society, history, and civilization.

Among contemporary Muslim anthropologists, Akbar S. Ahmed occupies a prominent position. In addition to being an anthropologist, he is a distinguished media scholar and commentator on Islamic affairs. His publications include *Toward Islamic Anthropology: Definition, Dogma, and Direction* (1988), a work that later inspired the television series *Living Islam*, as well as *The Future of Anthropology* (1990), co-authored with Chris Searle. Ahmed became the first Pakistani to be elected to the Council of the Royal Anthropological Institute and was awarded the *Star of Excellence* by the Government of Pakistan in recognition of his academic achievements.

The Idea of Islamizing Anthropology

Efforts to develop an Islamic framework for anthropology have long attracted the attention of Muslim scholars and social theorists. One of the leading proponents of this endeavor is Dawam Rahardjo. According to Rahardjo, the Islamization of anthropology may be pursued through three principal stages (Abdullah & Karim, 2003).

First, anthropological theories should be developed on the basis of Islamic teachings themselves. Such theories may take the form of foundational or grand theories, from which middle-range theories can subsequently be formulated and various hypotheses generated. The Qur'an states that Allah SWT expects the emergence of a community that serves as "*syuhada' ala al-nas*" (witnesses over humankind). This function may, among other ways, be realized through empirical research. Consequently, anthropological studies should be developed around Islamic concepts such as justice (*adl*), consultation (*shura*), piety (*taqwa*), mutual assistance (*ta'awun*), righteous deeds (*amal salih*), and other related values.

Second, the formulation of such foundational theories requires a high degree of intellectual acuity and critical insight. Critical theory should not merely function as an instrument of social engineering or as a means of legitimizing existing social systems. Rather, critical analysis serves as a pathway toward the discovery and construction of comprehensive theoretical frameworks capable of explaining social reality from an Islamic perspective.

Third, it is necessary to construct a coherent body of knowledge grounded in both theoretical reflection and practical experience. Such a body of knowledge can be developed through the creative appropriation and application of the social and intellectual heritage inherited from existing social sciences. Through this process, anthropology can evolve into a discipline that remains scientifically rigorous while simultaneously reflecting the ethical and epistemological foundations of the Islamic worldview.

Significance and Contribution of the Anthropological Approach in Islamic Studies

The anthropological approach in Islamic studies is particularly valuable as a methodological tool for understanding the religious characteristics of a society and its members. Its continuing significance lies in its capacity to guide and strengthen the religious convictions held by members of a community in accordance with authentic religious teachings, without generating social tensions or conflicts among them. Furthermore, through the application of an anthropological approach, it is expected that Muslims will develop a greater degree of tolerance toward various aspects of local cultures while maintaining fidelity to religious teachings. Such an approach clearly demonstrates the relationship between religion and the diverse realities of human life, thereby making religion appear more relevant, accessible, and functional in addressing various human experiences and social phenomena.

An anthropological approach is particularly necessary because many aspects of religion can only be fully explained through anthropological inquiry. For example, the Qur'an, as the primary source of Islamic teachings, contains references to Noah's Ark resting upon Mount Ararat and the story of the Companions of the Cave (*Ashab al-Kahf*), who remained alive in a cave for more than three hundred years. Questions concerning the location of Noah's Ark, the whereabouts of the cave, and the circumstances that made such extraordinary events possible cannot be adequately addressed through theological analysis alone. Rather, they require the assistance of disciplines such as geography, archaeology, and anthropology. Numerous other examples similarly illustrate how anthropological and related scientific approaches can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of religious narratives.

Consequently, anthropology plays a crucial role in understanding religious teachings, since religious texts contain descriptions and information that can be clarified through anthropological inquiry and its related branches of knowledge. Returning to the question of anthropology's contribution to Islamic studies, its significance may be examined from two principal perspectives.

First, anthropological explanations are highly beneficial for facilitating the empirical study of religion. In this sense, the study of religion must be directed toward understanding the social contexts that surround and shape religious life. Empirical investigations of religion may focus on two central dimensions: human beings and culture. Fundamentally, religion exists to assist human beings in fulfilling their existential needs and aspirations while guiding them toward a better way of life. This clearly indicates that the primary object of empirical religious inquiry is humanity itself. Without an adequate understanding of human beings, any understanding of religion will remain incomplete. As a consequence of the centrality of human beings, the study of culture and society also becomes indispensable. Culture, as a *system of meaning* that gives significance to human life and behavior, constitutes an essential aspect of humanity that cannot be separated from the effort to understand human existence.

Drawing upon the insights of Max Weber, human beings may be understood as creatures suspended within webs of significance that they themselves have woven; culture constitutes those very webs. Clifford Geertz subsequently elaborated this understanding by defining culture as historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols through which human beings communicate, behave, and interpret life. Consequently, anthropological analysis of culture and humanity does not seek to discover universal laws in the manner of the natural sciences. Rather, it constitutes an interpretive endeavor aimed at uncovering meaning.

Viewed from this perspective, religion itself may be understood as a system of meaning embedded within sacred symbols. These symbolic systems constitute inherited patterns of meaning that shape both the *ethos* and the *worldview* of human beings. Clifford Geertz defined *ethos* as "the tone, character, and quality of life, including its moral and aesthetic dimensions." For Geertz, religion provides human beings with a distinctive character that subsequently influences their everyday conduct. At the same time, religion offers a conception of the reality that human beings seek to attain. Thus, as an *ethos*, religion shapes particular human characteristics that enable individuals to pursue and realize the worldview they aspire to

achieve.

Second, anthropological studies provide Islamic scholarship with the means to better appreciate the diversity of cultural influences manifested in Islamic practice. A deeper understanding of social realities within different communities leads to a more empirical and nuanced understanding of Islam. Cross-cultural studies of religion offer diverse perspectives on the relationship between religion and culture. A broad appreciation of existing cultural traditions enables constructive dialogue and may even contribute to the emergence of a global ethical framework, similar to what Tibbi refers to as “international morality,” grounded in the richness and diversity of the world’s cultures.

Accordingly, understanding Islam as it has evolved through history and culture cannot be achieved without understanding human beings themselves, because religious reality is fundamentally a human reality manifested in everyday life. More importantly, the true meaning of religiosity lies in the interpretation and practice of religion. Anthropology is therefore indispensable for understanding Islam, as it serves as a tool for comprehending human realities and for examining *Islam as practiced*—the concrete manifestation of human religiosity.

By directly observing the relationship between religion and society at the grassroots level, anthropology provides valuable insights into the realities of religious life as they are actually experienced within communities. For anthropologists, studying religion within society means examining how religion is practiced, interpreted, and believed by its adherents. Consequently, discussions concerning the relationship between religion and culture are essential for understanding lived religion. The importance of examining religion within its social context becomes even more apparent when considered alongside contemporary debates surrounding postmodernism. Although anthropologists continue to debate whether postmodernism should be regarded as a social phenomenon or as a framework of “deconstruction theory,” they generally agree on one important development: the renewed recognition of local knowledge as a legitimate form of cultural truth within an increasingly globalized world.

CONCLUSION

The anthropological approach in Islamic studies constitutes one of the most important methods for understanding Islam and for examining the forms of religious practice that emerge and develop within society. A comprehensive (*kaffah*) understanding of Islam requires a holistic, contemporary, and integrated approach that draws upon multiple academic disciplines. Consequently, Muslims are encouraged to deepen their knowledge of various scientific fields in order to actualize Islamic teachings within the empirical world. This includes mastering both scientific theories and methodologies, not only at the theoretical level but also in practical application, so that Islam may genuinely serve as a guide and source of direction for human life.

Ultimately, learners should be nurtured into faithful individuals who bear responsibility for cultivating themselves through the knowledge they acquire, enabling them to live productively within the world and utilize their God-given potential to secure a dignified livelihood. They should also be capable of understanding, mastering, and managing the natural world for noble purposes that are pleasing to Allah SWT. Nevertheless, the physical world should not be regarded as the ultimate goal of human existence; rather, it serves as a means for developing a harmonious balance between material and spiritual life. Such balance enables human beings to attain a higher and more honorable level of existence, both in the eyes of humanity and before God.

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