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ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS GUIDANCE AND MORAL TRANSFORMATION A STUDY OF PRISON REHABILITATION IN NORTH SUMATERA

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ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Bimbingan agama bagi narapidana dapat membantu proses rehabilitasi, terutama di negara-negara dengan mayoritas penduduk Muslim seperti Indonesia. **Tujuan:** Namun, tujuan dan efektivitas program-program ini, terutama dalam perubahan moral dan reintegrasi sosial, jarang dievaluasi. **Metode:** Studi kasus kualitatif multisite ini menggunakan wawancara mendalam, analisis dokumen, dan pengamatan lapangan untuk menganalisis tujuan dan implementasi bimbingan agama Islam bagi narapidana di penjara Labuhan Ruku, Tebing Tinggi, dan Tanjung Balai di Sumatera Utara. Studi ini menemukan bahwa bimbingan agama Islam dapat membantu narapidana bertobat, mendisiplinkan diri, dan meningkatkan kesadaran diri serta mempersiapkan diri untuk reintegrasi. **Hasil:** Narapidana melaporkan penurunan kekerasan dan identitas yang lebih positif. Konselor agama yang terlatih, dukungan institusional, dan program tindak lanjut yang direncanakan setelah pembebasan sangat penting untuk keberlanjutan transformasi ini. Rehabilitasi berbasis agama tanpa program reintegrasi yang terkoordinasi mungkin bersifat sementara karena kurangnya dukungan eksternal setelah pembebasan. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa bimbingan agama Islam dapat digunakan sebagai alat spiritual dan metode rehabilitasi ketika didukung oleh inisiatif lintas sektor. **Kesimpulan:** Oleh karena itu, untuk menginstitutionalkan pertumbuhan spiritual dalam reformasi koreksi holistik Indonesia, pemimpin agama, otoritas koreksi, dan pembuat kebijakan harus bekerja sama.

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ABSTRACTS

Background: Religious guidance in prisoners can aid rehabilitation, especially in Muslim-majority nations like Indonesia. **Purpose:** However, these programs' objectives and effectiveness, especially in moral change and social reintegration, have rarely been evaluated. **Method:** This multisite qualitative case study uses in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field observations to analyze the goals and implementation of Islamic religious guidance for convicts in Labuhan Ruku, Tebing Tinggi, and Tanjung Balai prisons in North Sumatra. **Result:** The study found that Islamic religious guidance can help convicts repent, discipline, and self-aware and prepare for reintegration. Prisoners reported less violence and a more positive identity. Trained religious counselors, institutional support, and planned follow-up following release are crucial to this transformation's persistence. Religion-based rehabilitation without coordinated reintegration programs may be temporary due to a lack of external support after incarceration. These findings show that Islamic religious instruction can be used as a spiritual tool and a rehabilitation method when supported by cross-sectoral initiatives. **Conclusion:** Therefore, to institutionalize spiritual growth in Indonesia's holistic correctional reform, religious leaders, correctional authorities, and policymakers must collaborate.

A. INTRODUCTION

The correctional system is essential not only for the incarceration of offenders but also for their rehabilitation into productive and socially responsible citizens (Wulandari, 2015). In Indonesia, rehabilitation in correctional facilities is required to meet the comprehensive requirements of offenders, with spiritual development seen as a core element of reform (Troxell, 2018). A notable method of rehabilitation is Islamic religious advice, especially for Muslim prisoners (Zakaria, 2020). This instruction extends beyond religious ritualization to encompass the cultivation of attitudes, values, and behaviors that conform to religious precepts (Makmun & Faizal, 2021). The aim is to foster contrition, ethical enhancement, and societal reintegration. In North Sumatera, an area characterized by a significant Muslim demographic and a dense presence of correctional institutions, Islamic religious guidance programs have been incorporated within the penal development framework. However, despite increasing academic interest in religious guidance within prisons, research regarding its particular function and efficacy in Indonesia—particularly in North Sumatra's correctional institutions—remains scarce (Tarigan & Warih, 2024; Wulandari, 2015).

Islamic religious instruction in penal facilities in North Sumatera functions as a spiritual and moral intervention. It aims to transform convicts' thoughts from antisocial behaviors to positive religious principles (Troxell, 2018). These programs encompass regular religious studies (*pengajian*), Islamic counseling, Quran recitation, and prayer activities facilitated by jail clerics or invited religious educators (Makmun & Faizal, 2021). In addition to ritual instruction, these sessions provide a rehabilitative function: to cultivate self-awareness, ethical contemplation, and accountability (Ardiana et al., 2020). Religious guidance seeks to enhance convicts' own spirituality while also promoting internal reform. The objective is for inmates to exit the facility not just with rehabilitated conduct but also with a religious foundation that underpins constructive life choices following their release (Jang & Johnson, 2024). The establishment of such programs corresponds with the overarching objectives of correctional rehabilitation in Indonesia, which prioritizes the spiritual and moral rejuvenation of offenders as essential for effective social reintegration (Irfan & Isnarmi, 2019).

However, the application of spiritual direction within correctional facilities encounters a multitude of obstacles (Syihabudin et al., 2023). A significant number of incarcerated individuals originate from socio-psychological environments marked by poverty, trauma, and restricted exposure to religious education, factors that further complicate the rehabilitation process (Bailey, 2025). Furthermore, it is essential for religious programs within correctional institutions to effectively navigate the dynamics of authority, voluntary engagement, and genuinely transformative educational experiences (Harahap & Siregar, 2023). If not handled with care, these programs may devolve into mere symbols, thereby forfeiting their essential significance (Green, 2020). Although the examination of religious guidance within prison systems has garnered growing scholarly interest, there remains a notable scarcity of research regarding its function and efficacy in Indonesia, particularly concerning correctional facilities in North Sumatra (Tarigan & Warih, 2024; Munadi & Sunggara, 2024). Beyond the realm of spiritual growth, individuals who have previously been incarcerated frequently encounter significant obstacles upon their reintegration, such as societal stigma, financial impediments, and insufficient institutional assistance (Versey et al., 2009). The

challenges presented highlight the pressing need to ascertain whether Islamic religious guidance can genuinely facilitate moral transformation and aid in sustainable reintegration.

This study aims to examine the objectives, perceptions, and outcomes of Islamic religious guidance programs in correctional institutions in North Sumatera. This research employs a multisite qualitative case study methodology to explore the interpretations and experiences of prison administrators, religious instructors, and inmates regarding the implementation of these programs. This study aims to demonstrate that the religious development of inmates functions not merely as a corrective measure but also as a spiritual endeavor rooted in Islamic principles and rehabilitation policies within the Indonesian correctional system.

B. METHOD

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the perceived objectives of Islamic religious instruction for inmates in correctional facilities in North Sumatera (Moleong, 2018). The qualitative technique was chosen for its capacity to capture intricate, contextual, and subjective experiences of those engaged in the rehabilitation process (Moleong, 2018). The case study method facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the conceptualization, delivery, and interpretation of Islamic religious programs by primary stakeholders, including inmates, prison officials, and religious facilitators (Yin, 2018). This design is especially apt for examining institutional phenomena that encompass multifaceted interpretations, such as the convergence of religion, power, and rehabilitation. Furthermore, qualitative inquiry allows the investigation to transcend superficial observations and examine how individuals assimilate or oppose religious discourse within the limitations of incarceration (Moleong, 2018).

Research Participants

This study was performed in three correctional facilities in North Sumatra: Lapas Kelas IIA Labuhan Ruku in Batu Bara Regency, Lapas Kelas IIB Tebing Tinggi, and Lapas Kelas IIB Tanjung Balai. These locations were intentionally selected because of their active Islamic religious guidance programs, substantial Muslim inmate populations, and shown institutional preparedness for academic research facilitation. Participants were chosen by purposive sampling, consisting of 10 detainees, 3 Islamic religious instructors (ustadz), and 4 correctional guards directly overseeing religious activities. This methodology facilitated the incorporation of many viewpoints from administrators, facilitators, and recipients of Islamic religious guidance, thereby guaranteeing data richness and pertinence to the research inquiries. Before data collection, participants were apprised of the study's objectives and provided verbal consent, strictly adhering to ethical norms of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Data Collection

Data were gathered by participant observation, documentation analysis, and comprehensive semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including prison administrators, rehabilitation officers (Kasi Binadik), personnel, religious instructors (*ustadz*), and inmates engaged in Islamic religious programs. Direct observations were performed in correctional facilities to document activities, behaviors, and interactions during religious guidance sessions, while documentary analysis scrutinized schedules of religious activities, attendance records, inmate participation reports, and pertinent government policy documents. The semi-structured interviews, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes, were directed by themes that examined participants' comprehension of Islamic religious advice, its intended aims, implementation obstacles, and its impact on inmates' spiritual and personal growth. Field notes were meticulously documented to supplement observational and interview data, and the triangulation of these three methodologies increased the dataset and bolstered the validity of the research conclusions (Carter et al., 2014).

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study adhered to Miles and Huberman's interactive methodology, comprising three simultaneous stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction involved transcribing, coding, and categorizing interview findings, observational notes, and documentary materials to emphasize pertinent themes. The condensed data were further structured and displayed in matrices and thematic charts to enhance comprehension and comparison, both within each correctional facility (intra-case analysis) and among the three facilities (inter-case analysis). Conclusions were derived by recognizing recurring patterns, formulating explanations, and validating them against the dataset to guarantee internal coherence. To enhance the credibility of the conclusions, triangulation was utilized by corroborating evidence from interviews, observations, and document analysis. This approach was additionally reinforced by member verification and peer debriefing, while compliance with Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—was ensured by systematic documentation and methodological transparency.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to assure the reliability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was augmented through extended involvement, triangulation of data sources, and member-checking with several respondents. Thick description was employed to enhance transferability, enabling readers to evaluate applicability to alternative circumstances (Luhrmann, 2015). An audit trail was preserved during the research process, recording analytical decisions, coding frameworks, and thoughts to improve reliability. Ethical approval was obtained via institutional procedures, with particular attention given to preventing any

psychological distress to detained subjects. All identities were concealed through pseudonyms, and interview transcripts were securely archived. Recognizing the power disparity intrinsic to jail research, the researcher intentionally fostered rapport, guaranteed voluntary participation, and highlighted the non-evaluative aspect of the study.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Strengthening the Spiritual and Religious Foundations of Incarcerated Individuals

This study's principal finding indicates that Islamic religious advice in correctional facilities primarily seeks to fortify the spiritual and religious foundations of detainees. This purpose is consistently evident throughout all three correctional facilities analyzed—Labuhan Ruku, Tebing Tinggi, and Tanjung Balai. The guiding programs emphasize fostering offenders' relationship with God via systematic instruction in faith (*aqidah*), worship (*ibadah*), and ethical behavior (*akhlak*). These initiatives include regular congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, Islamic study circles, and spiritual counseling. The curriculum fosters a reflective mindset among offenders, enabling them to perceive their confinement as a pivotal moment for spiritual improvement. The method is grounded in Islamic tenets of repentance and divine kindness, advocating that all individuals possess the potential for reform irrespective of their past transgressions.

The efficacy of these initiatives is additionally corroborated by inmate testimonies obtained via interviews. Inmates sometimes recounted their spiritual revival within prison, adopting religious practices they had hitherto overlooked. For example, one inmate from Tebing Tinggi confessed that he had never engaged in regular prayers prior to his detention, yet now derives peace and discipline from worship. Others indicated acquiring a more profound understanding of the repercussions of their actions and cultivating an increased sense of accountability. The experience of communal worship and collective learning cultivates a sense of connection and solidarity among the convicts, thereby alleviating emotions of isolation and despair.

Additionally, correctional personnel routinely saw discernible enhancements in convict conduct subsequent to prolonged engagement in religious programming. Inmates who consistently participated in daily prayers, Qur'anic recitation, Islamic study circles, and counselling exhibited significant improvements in discipline, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships. Religious teachers assert that these behavioural changes signify spiritual development and moral enlightenment. Table 1 provides a description of significant religious activities conducted at the three sites, along with the consequences recorded by inmates and staff, thereby corroborating these qualitative observations. This evidence not only corroborates the previously presented testimonials

but also establishes a pattern of spiritual recovery grounded in regular religious participation.

Table 1. Principal Islamic Religious Activities in Correctional Institutions and Their Observed Impact

Program	Observed Outcome	Impact Seen (Spiritual and Behavioural)
Daily Prayers (Sholat Berjamaah)	Conducted five times daily in assembly at all three points	Enhanced self-discipline, establishment of routines, emotional equilibrium
Qur'anic Recitation (Tahsin And Tafsir)	Held 2 to 3 times weekly; concentrated on reading fluency and comprehension	Augmented introspection, perseverance, and consciousness of individual accountability
Islamic Study Circles (Majelis Ta'lim)	Weekly group meetings conducted by religious leaders or guest scholars	Enhanced moral consciousness and peer discourse on ethical conduct
Spiritual Counseling Sessions	Individual or small group mentorship once or twice weekly	Delivered emotional support, enhanced motivation for reform, decreased aggression

As shown in Table 1, which illustrates that the methodical implementation of religious activities in all three correctional facilities fosters noticeable behavioural changes, especially in discipline, emotional regulation, and social cohesiveness. Nevertheless, although these findings correspond with the accounts of personnel and inmates, they require careful interpretation. Participation is voluntary and may draw persons already inclined towards change, prompting queries regarding causality. Nonetheless, the framework of daily prayer, Qur'anic study, and counselling cultivates habits of introspection that, when maintained, are associated with enhanced behaviour. These rituals provide spiritual solace and establish a predictable routine, promote moral narratives, and foster peer-supported environments that facilitate contemplation and reform. Future research might benefit from incorporating behavioural data and longitudinal tracking to validate the scope of this transformation beyond jail confines.

Restoring Conduct with Internalized Principles and Religious Ethics

The second crucial element is the importance of Islamic education in transforming inmate conduct through the internalization of ethical principles. Values such as honesty, humility, accountability, patience, and forgiveness are not solely imparted conceptually but are embedded in the everyday religious rituals and human interactions within the prison setting. Inmates are encouraged to evaluate their own choices and adopt ethical principles aligned with Islamic teachings through ongoing religious education, lectures, and mentorship. Correctional staff consider this moral development essential for alleviating disciplinary issues and preparing inmates for post-incarceration life.

At Lapas Tanjung Balai, religious education is delivered through a tiered approach, catering to varying levels of religious literacy. This stratification ensures that every inmate, regardless of background, has access to meaningful religious engagement. Attendees of these workshops indicated that the lectures compelled them to reassess their self-esteem and responsibility. An inmate expressed that religious guidance enhanced his understanding of the importance of honesty and the harmful consequences of deceit. Another noted that his commitment to regular prayer inspired him to engage in courteous communication and uphold integrity, even in little situations. This study demonstrates that the internalization of moral values surpasses formal schooling and affects the daily behavior of offenders.

The role of religious mentors is particularly vital in this transformation. These mentors function as instructors and moral exemplars, often gaining the trust of inmates via their unwavering guidance and empathy. They provide a safe space for emotional expression and spiritual inquiry, allowing inmates to reflect on the moral dilemmas they face. This mentorship fosters peer accountability, prompting offenders to adopt higher moral standards within their social circles. The result is a complex but important shift in prison culture towards mutual respect and ethical awareness.

These behavioral changes, while not necessarily immediate, are considered indicators of successful recovery. Correctional staff repeatedly reported that inmates participating in religious programs exhibit improved emotional regulation and problem-solving abilities. They are less likely to engage in conflict and more inclined to support others, especially those struggling with adaptation. Behavioral changes, rooted in internalized religious values, provide a strong foundation for lasting personal growth and social reintegration.

Preparation for Social Reintegration and Life Following Release

Empirical evidence indicates that detainees regard Islamic religious education as essential for their societal reintegration. The programs cultivate spiritual development while also promoting resilience, accountability, and adaptive living skills post-release. As one inmate articulated, *"I believe the past does not dictate my future." "Through repentance, I can return to my family and community in a better state"* (Inmate 1). Another participant highlighted the personal transformation he experienced through religious counseling; *"Religious study has made me more tranquil and patient. I have become courageous enough to apologize to the family I have distanced myself from for a long time."* (Inmate 2). These stories demonstrate that the instruction transcends ritual practice, assisting offenders in reconstructing familial relationships and cultivating inner resilience.

Field observations indicate that religious activities constantly emphasize the values of perseverance, thankfulness, and self-reliance. In numerous instances, inmates were noted assuming leadership positions in religious assemblies, such as delivering brief sermons or providing mentorship to peers, thereby enhancing their self-confidence and communication skills. An inmate stated, *"When I was asked to lead the prayer, I felt more confident and valued by my peers"* (Inmate 3). Correctional personnel saw the favorable

behavioral influence, with one officer remarking, *"Inmates who diligently participate in religious study are typically more disciplined and infrequently violate regulations"* (Officer 1). This statement emphasizes the correlation between religious engagement and enhanced discipline, as well as increased preparedness for reintegration.

Despite the limited systematic tracking of post-release outcomes, anecdotal evidence suggests that numerous former convicts persist in their religious practices and maintain active community involvement. The coherence of interview statements and observational data substantiates the notion that Islamic religious instruction functions as both moral education and practical preparation, facilitating detainees' reintegration into society.

Discussion

The results of this study show that Islamic religious advice is an important part of the rehabilitation process in correctional facilities. Structured religious activities, including group prayers, Qur'anic recitation, spiritual counselling, and study circles, allow prisoners to rethink their beliefs, actions, and sense of self (Jang & Johnson, 2024). These activities aren't just for show; they are structured ways to help people develop self-control, emotional equilibrium, and moral self-reflection (Gul & Asad, 2018). We can understand these rituals from a psychological point of view by looking at how they help people acquire habits and change the way they think (Troxell, 2018). Daily religious activities give inmates a sense of discipline and purpose, which are known to help with the confusion and stagnation that sometimes come with being in prison (Zakaria, 2020). Some researchers in the field of rehabilitation call this organised involvement "identity transformation." This is the process by which criminals start to see themselves not only as criminals but also as spiritual beings who can change and grow (Versey et al., 2009). These results are in line with research from South Africa, Pakistan, and Colombia that demonstrates how prison religious programming can reinforce inmate religious identities while promoting moral awareness (Jang & Johnson, 2024; Tariq, 2023).

But we need to question the ideas behind these kinds of changes. The research shows that many offenders do benefit from religious direction, but it's also possible that some people participate for practical reasons, including wanting to get a break or get along better with prison staff (Jang & Johnson, 2024). This brings up an important topic about being real versus following the rules. Do inmates really believe in these teachings, or do they just act morally when they know they're being watched? Correctional officers may say that behaviour has gotten better, but behaviour that becomes better in a highly controlled setting may not mean that the person has changed on the inside (Williamson et al., 2025). For instance, research conducted in Saudi Arabia indicates that without an outside support network, gains in positive behavior while incarcerated may not always carry over after release (Al-Anzi, 2023). Thus, additional studies employing a longitudinal methodology are required to investigate the degree to which these changes based on religion continue beyond the institution (Versey et al., 2009).

The impact of religious mentors is another significant factor to think about (Gojković, 2024). These people do more than just teach. They are moral role models and provide

stability for convicts in emotionally unstable settings (Arifa, 2022). The process of moral internalisation depends on their capacity to build trust, model good behaviour, and help people have hard talks (Rocque, 2024). Religious mentorship is different from transactional or discipline-based therapies because it builds relationships, which is something that is often missing in secular rehabilitation methods (Juariah, 2023). But this dependence on relationships also has its risks: prisoners may not follow their own values but rather those of others. A close relationship with a mentor may help offenders behave well in jail, but it may not be enough when they are back in an unsupervised setting (Syihabudin et al., 2023). This emphasizes the necessity of continuous support systems to guarantee the sustainability of moral transformation.

The function of religious programs in getting offenders ready to re-enter society is another example of how spiritual education may have many effects (Aday et al., 2014). The emphasis on qualities like *taubah nasuha* (sincere repentance), patience, gratitude, and self-reliance shows a desire to connect internal improvement with exterior preparation (Abdullah, 2022). This paradigm recognises that moral rehabilitation alone is not enough; to re-enter society, people need to be mentally strong, have job skills, and be accepted back into society (Wulandari, 2015). Religious programs combined with family assistance and job training are more successful in lowering recidivism, according to comparative research conducted in Pakistan (Gojković, 2024; Tariq, 2023). The results of the study support the notion that reintegration initiatives will only partially succeed in the absence of institutional coordination. Former inmates continue to experience stigma, a lack of support, and restricted employment opportunities even after experiencing spiritual transformation (Troxell, 2018). It follows that for rehabilitation to be thorough, Indonesian correctional policies must incorporate community support, independence initiatives, and religious instruction (Zakaria, 2020).

Lastly, these results add to the expanding body of research that supports holistic rehabilitation strategies that include spiritual, moral, and practical aspects. The use of Islamic religious instruction in prisons shows that faith-based programs may do more than only help people change their behaviour, they can also help them heal socially and personally (Rocque, 2024). But the model shouldn't be seen as perfect. It should be carefully looked at for both its ability to change things and its limits. Future studies should look into how religious instruction compares to or works with other types of rehabilitation (Jang & Johnson, 2024). In practical terms, these findings are pertinent for policymakers, correctional officials, and religious leaders in Indonesia in developing rehabilitation measures that mitigate recidivism, enhance social cohesion, and facilitate the reintegration of inmates as productive members of society.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that Islamic religious instruction in correctional facilities in North Sumatra significantly contributes to the moral and spiritual rehabilitation of inmates. Organized activities, including congregational prayers, Quranic studies, religious lectures, and spiritual counseling, have demonstrated efficacy in assisting prisoners in reconstructing their religious identity, regulating their emotions, and cultivating moral discipline. Interviews and observations indicate behavioral modifications, an improved prison atmosphere, and heightened self-assurance resulting from convicts' active participation in religious activities, including peer mentoring. Nonetheless, the efficacy of these modifications remains contingent upon constrained resources, a deficiency of qualified religious mentors, and insufficient post-release care for offenders. Consequently, Islamic religious teaching may be deemed useful as a rehabilitative instrument; yet, its long-term efficacy is contingent upon integration with support from families, communities, and other institutions involved in the social reintegration process.

The overarching significance of these findings underscores the necessity of integrating religious guidance into a comprehensive rehabilitation strategy in Indonesia. This methodology aligns with the aims of criminal justice reform, focusing on diminishing recidivism and equipping incarcerated individuals for reintegration into society as contributing members. However, the efficacy of the program hinges on the integration of various sectors and sustained support following release. Additional investigation is essential to examine the enduring effects of Islamic religious guidance on the lives of ex-prisoners following their release, to assess the efficacy of various programs across different regions of Indonesia, and to analyze the amalgamation of religious guidance with skills training and social support, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness and sustainability of rehabilitation efforts.

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