Negotiating Islamic Ethics in a Majority-Muslim Society: A Psycho Spiritual Study of Muslim Minority Identity Among Thai Students in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explores how Muslim students from Thailand belonging to a religious minority in their home country negotiate and reinterpret Islamic ethics (akhlak) when immersed in Indonesia's majority-Muslim environment. As the sole Thai international student in her program at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, the researcher employs autoethnography and in depth interviews to examine the moral tensions, adaptations, and spiritual reflections that arise from this cultural and religious transition. Grounded in classical Islamic ethical frameworks particularly Al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (soul purification) and *mujahadah al-nafs* (inner struggle) the research investigates whether living among a Muslim majority reinforces ethical commitment or leads to moral complacency due to perceived social conformity. Data were collected through personal reflective journals, semi-structured interviews with fellow international Muslim students, and analysis of Islamic ethical texts published between 2015 and 2025. Preliminary findings suggest that minority identity fosters heightened moral awareness, while the homogeneous Islamic environment in Indonesia presents both opportunities for spiritual growth and challenges related to performative religiosity. The study contributes original insights at the intersection of Ilmu Akhlak, psycho-spirituality, and intercultural ethics offering a nuanced understanding of how context shapes moral agency among Muslim youth. Limitations include the small sample size and reliance on self-reported data; however, the depth of reflective analysis ensures theoretical rigor. This research holds value for educators, counselors, and Islamic scholars seeking to support minority Muslim students in transnational religious settings.

INTRODUCTION

Living as a Muslim minority in a predominantly non-Muslim society often shapes a distinct moral consciousness—one marked by vigilance, resilience, and deep personal accountability.[1] For Thai Muslims, especially those from southern provinces like Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, ethical conduct (*akhlaq*) is not only a religious duty but also a form of identity preservation in a Buddhist-majority nation.[2]

However, what happens when this minority subject relocates to a country where Islam is the dominant religion—where mosques echo the *adhan* five times a day, where halal food is the default, and where religious practice is socially normalized rather than scrutinized? Research suggests that the social and cultural context of a Muslim majority can shape religiosity, work ethic, and moral commitment differently than in non-Muslim settings, indicating that religiosity may align more with social norms than personal vigilante discipline in some contexts.[3] Studies of migrant Muslims also demonstrate that religious practices and identity undergo dynamic reconfiguration when individuals enter new sociocultural environments, showing both reinforcement and adaptation of belief systems.[4] In Southeast Asia, the influence of Islamic hegemony on religious attitudes further underscores how majority contexts can cultivate distinct normative expectations that reshape moral orientations.[5]

This question lies at the heart of the present study, which investigates how Thai Muslim students—particularly those studying in Indonesia—reinterpret, negotiate, and sometimes struggle with Islamic ethics (*akhlaq*) upon entering a majority-Muslim environment. Prior research shows Muslim students often face challenges in maintaining and *interpreting Islamic values* within diverse academic cultures, negotiating identity while engaging with plural social norms.[6] Studies on *culture shock* further indicate that international students, including those from Thailand, experience cultural and value dissonance when adapting to Indonesian

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[1] Maulana Wijaksono et al., "Islamic Education and Social Resilience: A Normative Inquiry into Muslim Minority Empowerment," *ASEAN Journal of Islamic Studies and Civilization (AJISC)* 1, no. 2 (December 16, 2024): 171–201, https://doi.org/10.62976/ajisc.v1i2.1438; R Rudi Alhempi and Sineerat Suasungnern, "COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC CULTURE IN INDONESIA AND THAILAND: INFLUENCES, PRACTICES, AND SOCIETAL IMPACTS," *SIWAYANG Journal: Publikasi Ilmiah Bidang Pariwisata, Kebudayaan, Dan Antropologi* 3, no. 4 (December 31, 2024): 185–92, https://doi.org/10.54443/siwayang.v3i4.2705.

[2] Siti Aisah and Mawi Khusni Albar, "Budaya Melayu Pattani Dalam Kajian Profetik," *IBDA`: Jurnal Kajian Islam Dan Budaya* 18, no. 1 (April 28, 2020): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.24090/ibda.v18i1.3492.

[3] Muhammad Bilal Zafar and Mohd Fauzi Abu-Hussin, "Religiosity and Islamic Work Ethic: A Cross-Cultural Comparison in Majority and Non-Majority Muslim Countries," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 105, no. 1 (2025): 102115, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.102115; Salih Yucel and Shaheen Whyte, "Muslim Identity Formation in Contemporary Societies," *Religions*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101296.

[4] Sayed M Mosawi, "Everyday Lived Islam among Hazara Migrants in Scotland: Intersectionality, Agency, and Individualisation," *Religions*, 2024, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080950.

[5] Moh Bashori Alwi Almanduri, "Islamic Hegemony in Forming Religious Attitudes: Study of Majority and Minority Islam in Southeast Asia," *Jurnal Fuaduna : Jurnal Kajian Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 5, no. 2 (December 31, 2021): 125–40, https://doi.org/10.30983/fuaduna.v5i2.5011.

[6] Alwin Dani, Balhaqi Nukman, and Zaidan Hasan, "Dynamics of Religious Identity of Muslim Students in a Multicultural Environment," *Journal on Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (August 30, 2025): 67–77, https://doi.org/10.35335/k8mjwp37.

academic life.[7] As the sole Thai international student in her program at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, the researcher draws from personal experience as both a reflective lens and a primary data source, positioning lived experience as a legitimate site of ethical inquiry.[8]

This autoethnographic stance is not merely anecdotal; it is methodologically grounded in the recognition that embodied knowledge of minority identity offers unique insights into the dynamics of moral agency across cultural–religious boundaries.[9] In classical *Ilmu Akhlak*, ethics is never reduced to external behavior alone. Al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE), in his seminal work *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, emphasized that true *akhlak* emerges from the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and the constant inner struggle against base desires (*mujahadah al-nafs*), framing ethical perfection as a spiritual journey rather than a social performance.[10] Similarly, Ibn Miskawayh (932–1030 CE) in *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* argued that moral character is cultivated through habituation, rational reflection, and alignment with divine will.[11]

These foundational theories, however, often assume a relatively stable moral environment. What happens when the environment itself shifts dramatically—from religious marginalization to religious hegemony? Contemporary scholarship on Islamic ethics emphasizes the need to understand Islamic moral values (*akhlaq*) not as abstract doctrinal codes but as embedded in social realities, responding to diverse social dynamics and changing moral circumstances.[12] This perspective aligns with recent studies showing that Islamic ethics must be interpreted contextually and adapted to contemporary social environments rather than applied rigidly as static prescriptions. Nevertheless, much of the literature centers on contexts such as Islamic education and plural societies, leaving a gap in literature on ethical recalibration processes experienced by Muslims relocating between contexts such as minority-majority transitions in Southeast Asia.[13]

This gap is significant. Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, presents a unique Islamic environment that is simultaneously diverse, syncretic, and institutionally supported.[14] Research on Islam in Indonesia demonstrates how local Islamic

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[7] Rochman Hadi Mustofa and Agnes Defiana, "Culture Shock Akademik Mahasiswa Asing Di Indonesia (Studi Kasus Di Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta).," *Didaktika: Jurnal Kependidikan* 13, no. 2 (2024): 1641–54.

[8] Faisal Mohammad Ali Abdalla, "Belonging as a Post-Secondary Inter/National Student: Where Do I Belong?," *Journal of International Students* 14, no. 4 (2024): 1047–63, https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v14i4.6438.

[9] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 328–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238.

[10] Waryani Fajar Riyanto. Wiza Atholla Andriansyah, "Pemikiran Al-Ghazali (1058-1111 M) Tentang Etika Dalam Ihya Ulumuddin Dan Implikasi Bagi Masyarakat Modern," *Jurnal Filsafat Indonesia* 6, no. 3 (2023): 394.

[11] Ahmad Busroli, "Pendidikan Akhlak Ibnu Miskawaih Dan Imam Al-Ghazali Dan Relevansinya Dengan Pendidikan Karakter Di Indonesia," *Atthulab: Islamic Religion Teaching and Learning Journal* 4, no. 2 (November 21, 2019): 236–51, https://doi.org/10.15575/ath.v4i2.5583.

[12] Achmad Saifur Rijal et al., "Islamic Education as an Ethical Mechanism in Responding to Social Diversity: A Contextual Analysis of Indonesia and Malaysia," *Edudeena : Journal of Islamic Religious Education* 9, no. 2 (December 29, 2025): 135–49, https://doi.org/10.30762/edudeena.v9i2.7568.

[13] Akmal Nur Hakim and Adhimas Alifian Yuwono, "Ruang Lingkup Etika Islam: Pemetaan Dan Peluang Kajian Akademik," *AL-MIKRAJ Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Humaniora (E-ISSN 2745-4584)* 5, no. 2 SE-Articles (May 11, 2025): 1542–56, https://doi.org/10.37680/almikraj.v5i2.7147.

[14] Jochem W P Van Den Boogert, "How Local Is Islam Nusantara? Questions of Tolerance and Authenticity," *Religions* 17, no. 65 (2026): 1–13; Rizki Damayanti, "Islam Nusantara and Local Traditions: Role and Challenges

practice has been shaped through long historical processes of blending doctrine with indigenous tradition, producing a religious culture that is notably moderate, tolerant, and inclusive.[15] In such socio-cultural contexts, religious norms and everyday Islamic practice cannot be understood apart from local values and traditions that continue to influence individual beliefs and social expectations.

Moreover, the rise of digital religiosity and performative piety on social media further complicates ethical self-hood. Public displays of devotion—such as sharing Qur'anic verses online—may coexist with private moral struggle, creating a dissonance less pronounced in offline contexts. Recent research shows that youth religious practices on social media often involve negotiations between social pressure and sincere piety, where *riya'* and the quest for social validation can distort internal moral struggles. The phenomenon of *faithfluencers* further illustrates how digital piety is constructed and performed, reshaping religious authority and potentially separating visual religiosity from personal commitment.[16] Studies also note that online piety becomes a distinct form of religious expression that does not always map directly onto offline moral commitments, highlighting a shift in the negotiation of Muslim identity in digital spaces. Finally, the mediatization of religious content shows that digital aesthetics and strategic branding of piety can contribute to performative religiosity that may or may not align with personal spiritual discipline.[17]

This study, therefore, addresses the following central problem: How does the transition from a Muslim-minority context (Thailand) to a Muslim-majority context (Indonesia) influence the perception, practice, and internalization of Islamic ethics (*akhlaq*) among Thai students? This research specifically examines:

- the role of minority identity in shaping moral vigilance;[18]
- the impact of social conformity in majority-Muslim settings on ethical authenticity;[19]
- the interplay between Thai-Malay Islamic tradition and local Indonesian Islamic norms;[20]
- and the emergence of what this study terms *contextual akhlak*, an adaptive ethical framework responsive to environmental cues.[21]

in Indonesia's Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations," *Mimbar Agama Budaya* 42, no. 1 (2025): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.15408/mimbar.v42i1.45750.

15 Wahyu Khoeriyah and Aris Saefullah, "ISLAM NUSANTARA SEBAGAI PARADIGMA MODERASI ISLAM DI ERA GLOBALISASI DAN MODERNISASI," *Hujjah: Jurnal Ilmiah Komunikasi Dan Penyiaran Islam* 9, no. 2 (December 31, 2025), https://doi.org/10.52802/hjh.v9i2.1871.

16 Rizkiyah Hasanah and Zohaib Hassan Sain Baharun, "Faithfluencers and Digital Piety: Redefining Religious Authority Among Generation Z," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Religious Education* 3, no. 2 (December 22, 2025): 125–36, https://doi.org/10.63243/Injire.v3i2.01.

17 Johan Faladhin, Destita Mutiara, and Ulmi Marsya, "Branding Piety and the Mediatization of Da'wah through Digital Content," in *Proceeding Jogjakarta Communication Conference*, vol. 3 (Yogyakarta: JCC, 2025), 175–88, https://jcc-indonesia.id/.

18 Wijaksono et al., "Islamic Education and Social Resilience: A Normative Inquiry into Muslim Minority Empowerment."

19 Alwi Almanduri, "Islamic Hegemony in Forming Religious Attitudes: Study of Majority and Minority Islam in Southeast Asia."

20 Aisah and Albar, "Budaya Melayu Pattani Dalam Kajian Profetik"; Alhempi and Suasungnern, "COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC CULTURE IN INDONESIA AND THAILAND: INFLUENCES, PRACTICES, AND SOCIETAL IMPACTS."

The significance of this research is threefold. First, it contributes to Ilmu Akhlak by demonstrating the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of Islamic ethics, challenging static or universalist interpretations.[22] Second, it bridges Islamic ethical theory with psycho-spiritual perspectives, showing how moral identity is intertwined with psychological well-being among transnational Muslim youth.[23] Third, it offers practical implications for Islamic universities in Indonesia that host international students, particularly in designing pastoral care, intercultural orientation, and ethical mentoring programs.[24]

Guided by Al-Ghazali's framework of *tazkiyat al-nafs* and contemporary theories of moral identity—such as Blasi's self-model of moral functioning—this study employs qualitative autoethnography supported by semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling over a six-month period.[25] Data are analyzed thematically using NVivo software, with careful attention to ethical authenticity and spiritual integrity. By centering the voice of a Muslim minority student within a majority-Muslim space, this research does not merely describe ethical adaptation; it reimagines *akhlak* as a living dialogue between faith, culture, and self.[26]

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing autoethnography as its primary methodological framework. Autoethnography is chosen because it allows the researcher to explore the intersection of personal experience, cultural identity, and moral reflection in a systematic and scholarly manner. Unlike conventional ethnography, which positions the researcher as a detached observer, autoethnography acknowledges the researcher as an active participant whose lived experiences constitute a legitimate source of data.[27] This approach is particularly relevant for studies on Islamic ethics (Ilmu Akhlak), where internal moral processes, spiritual struggles, and identity negotiations cannot be fully captured through quantitative instruments or external observation alone.

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[21] Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Qurʾanic Ethics and Islamic Law," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 1, no. 1–2 (2017): 7–28, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/24685542-12340002.

[22] Rijal et al., "Islamic Education as an Ethical Mechanism in Responding to Social Diversity: A Contextual Analysis of Indonesia and Malaysia."

[23] Muzaki Alfikri and Bahril Hidayat, "School Well-Being Pada Mahasiswa Dan Perspektif Keislaman," *Al-Hikmah: Jurnal Agama Dan Ilmu Pengetahuan* 22, no. 1 (April 13, 2025): 74–89, https://doi.org/10.25299/ajaip.2025.vol22(1).20787; Daliman Daliman, "Ethical Conduct-Do and General Well-Being among University Students, Moderated by Religious Internalization: An Islamic Perspective," *Indigenous: Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi* 6, no. 2 (2021): 14–24, https://doi.org/10.23917/indigenous.v6i2.14886.

[24] Abu Bakar Ahmad Mansor and Azman Md Zain, "Islamic Psychospiritual Approach in Forming University Students' Ethics: A Narrative Review," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)* 1, no. 1 (2025): 6186–6201.

[25] Khadijah Kamaruddin et al., "Sufism Approach Through The Blessing of The Quran in Emotional Recovery," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 13, no. 12 (2023): 4714–22, https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i12/20324.

[26] Abou El Fadl, "Qurʾanic Ethics and Islamic Law."

[27] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E Adams, and Arthur P Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (November 24, 2010): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589; Tony E Adams and Andrew F Herrmann, "Expanding Our Autoethnographic Future," *Journal of Autoethnography* 1, no. 1 (January 7, 2020): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.1525/joae.2020.1.1.1.

The methodological orientation of this research is also epistemologically aligned with the Islamic tradition of muhāsabah al-nafs (self-examination). Classical Muslim scholars such as Al-Ghazali emphasize that ethical formation requires continuous reflection on one's intentions, actions, and inner statess.[28] Therefore, employing reflective and narrative inquiry as a research strategy is not only academically appropriate but also conceptually consistent with the very subject being investigated. This convergence between Islamic ethical tradition and qualitative inquiry strengthens the coherence of the research design.

The research was conducted over a six-month period (July–December 2025) while the researcher was studying as an international student at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, Indonesia. Data collection followed a multi-layered process consisting of three main components: (1) self-reflective journaling, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) contextual document analysis. These components were integrated to ensure methodological triangulation and analytical depth.

First, self-reflective data generation served as the core source of empirical material. The researcher maintained a structured reflective journal throughout the research period, recording personal experiences, moral dilemmas, cultural encounters, and observations related to religious life in Indonesia. Reflective journaling is widely recognized in qualitative research as an effective tool for capturing subjective experiences and internal reasoning processes.[29] Entries were written at least three times per week using semi-guided prompts such as: How did today's social environment influence my religious behavior? What ethical tensions did I experience? In what ways did Indonesian Islamic culture differ from Thai-Malay practices? This systematic documentation enabled the researcher to trace patterns of ethical adaptation over time rather than relying on fragmented memory.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the autoethnographic narratives and to reduce the risk of excessive subjectivity. Eight Southeast Asian Muslim students studying in Indonesia were recruited through purposive sampling. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) non-Indonesian nationality, (b) Muslim background, (c) having lived in Indonesia for at least one year, and (d) willingness to discuss experiences of religious and cultural adjustment. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow participants to express personal experiences while providing sufficient flexibility for in-depth exploration.[30] Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was conducted in a mix of Indonesian and Malay languages depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Third, document-based contextual analysis was employed to situate personal and interview data within broader academic discussions. Relevant literature on Islamic ethics, Muslim minority identity, digital religiosity, and transnational student experiences published between 2015 and 2025 was systematically reviewed. This step was necessary to connect

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[28] Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum Al-Din: [Volume 1] The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Completely (Kuala Lumpur: IBT Press, 2019).

[29] Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[30] John W Creswell and C.N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (California: Sage Publications, Inc, 2018).

individual experiences with established theoretical frameworks and to avoid purely anecdotal interpretation. Methodological triangulation through multiple data sources enhances the credibility and confirmability of qualitative findings.[31]

For data analysis, all textual materials—including journal entries and interview transcripts—were processed using NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software. The study followed the thematic analysis procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).[32] The analytical process consisted of six stages: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final narrative report. Coding categories were developed both deductively, based on existing theories of Islamic ethics, and inductively, emerging from participants' lived experiences. This combination allowed the analysis to remain theoretically informed while still open to unexpected insights.

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, several validation strategies were applied. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted with two fellow graduate students familiar with qualitative methods to discuss preliminary interpretations. Member checking was also employed by sharing summarized interview findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of representation. These procedures follow the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).[33]

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. All participants received detailed information about the aims of the study and provided informed consent prior to interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and any potentially identifying details were removed from transcripts. Digital data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Given the autoethnographic nature of the study, the researcher also remained attentive to issues of self-disclosure and the ethical implications of narrating personal experiences.

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations. As an autoethnographic project, findings are necessarily interpretive and context-bound rather than universally generalizable. The relatively small number of interview participants also limits the breadth of perspectives represented. Nevertheless, the depth of qualitative engagement and the combination of multiple data sources provide a rich and nuanced understanding of how Thai Muslim students negotiate Islamic ethics in a Muslim-majority environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Findings
The data collected through autoethnographic journaling, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis reveal four interrelated dimensions of how Thai Muslim students negotiate akhlak in Indonesia's majority-Muslim environment. These dimensions are not

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[31] M Q Patton, "Enhancing the Quality and Credibility of Qualitative Analysis," *Health Services Research* 34, no. 5 Pt 2 (1999): 1189–1208, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10591279%0Ahttp://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?art id=PMC1089059.

[32] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

[33] Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (London: SAGE Publications Inc, 1985).

mutually exclusive but often overlap in complex ways, reflecting the fluidity of moral identity in transnational settings. Below, each finding is presented with illustrative quotes (pseudonyms used) and contextual notes.

Analysis/Discussion

1. The Erosion of External Vigilance, the Rise of Internal Ambiguity

In Thailand particularly southern provinces Thai Muslims often describe their moral life as being "under constant observation." This observation comes not only from fellow Muslims but also from non-Muslim neighbors, authorities, and media. As one participant, Aisha (22, Pattani), explained: "At home, if I missed Fajr prayer, my non-Muslim friend might ask, 'Why didn't you pray this morning?' So I had to be extra careful. My akhlak wasn't just for God it was also my defense against stereotypes." This external moral accountability functioned as a powerful regulator of behavior. However, upon arriving in Pekalongan, many Thai students reported a sudden "release" from this pressure. Farid (20, Yala) noted: "Here, no one asks why I didn't wear tudung properly. No one notices if I skip sunnah prayers. At first, it felt like freedom. But after a while, I started wondering: am I doing things for Allah or just because people are watching?" This shift led to what the researcher terms ethical diffusion a softening of moral boundaries due to the absence of minority-based social scrutiny. Journal entries frequently captured this tension: "Today I lied to my Indonesian friend about finishing my Quran reading. In Thailand, I would never lie about religious matters too risky. Here? It felt... easy. Is this tawakkul or ghaflah (heedlessness)?" (Journal, Sept. 3, 2025) Interestingly, this phenomenon was not universal. Two participants from central Thailand who grew up in more pluralistic urban settings reported no significant change in moral vigilance, suggesting that regional background within Thailand also shapes ethical adaptation.

2. The Performance of Piety: Conformity vs. Authenticity

A striking pattern emerged around religious performance. Many Thai students felt subtle pressure to conform to Javanese or santri norms of religiosity such as wearing specific jilbab styles, using Arabicized speech ("Assalamu'alaikum, ukhti!"), or participating in majelis taklim they didn't fully understand. Nur (21, Narathiwat) shared: "My roommate once said, 'You're Thai, but you don't even know how to recite Wirid al-Athkar like we do.' I felt ashamed. So I started copying her even though I never did this in Thailand. Is this taqlid or riya'?" This led to what the study calls contextual performativity: adopting outward signs of piety not out of conviction, but to "fit in" with the majority-Muslim peer group. One interviewee admitted: "Sometimes I post Quran verses on Instagram just so my Indonesian friends think I'm 'serious' about Islam. Back home, I never did that I was serious without showing it." However, a counter-trend also appeared. Zahra (23, Songkhla), who had studied Sufism in Thailand, actively resisted performative norms: "True akhlak is invisible. In Thailand, no one saw me pray at night but I did. Here, everyone sees me, but my heart feels emptier. I had to remind myself: Allah sees me wherever I am." This reflects Al-Ghazali's warning against riya' (showing off in worship) a core concern in Ilmu Akhlak that becomes especially relevant in socially saturated religious environments.

3. Moral Capital from Minority Identity

Contrary to assumptions that minority status is only a burden, several participants described it as a source of moral capital a reservoir of ethical resilience built through years of navigating religious difference. Rafi (24, Satun) stated: "Living among Buddhists taught me to explain my ethics, not just follow them blindly. Now in Indonesia, when friends say 'Muslims should do X,' I ask: 'Why? What's the dalil?' My minority experience made me more critical and more sincere." This aligns with Ibn Miskawayh's view that akhlak requires reasoned understanding (fahm) alongside habituation. The Thai students' background forced them to intellectualize their morality a skill less developed among peers raised in homogeneous Muslim environments. The researcher's own journal echoes this: "Today in class, everyone agreed that 'music is haram' without discussion. I remembered how in Thailand, we debated this for hours citing scholars, contexts, intentions. That debate was my akhlak training." (Journal, Oct. 17, 2025) Thus, minority identity did not weaken akhlak it transformed it into a reflective, dialogical practice.

4. The Emergence of "Contextual Akhlak"

Perhaps the most significant finding is the development of what participants called "adjustable ethics" a flexible moral framework that responds to environmental cues without abandoning core principles. For example:

In Thailand: Akhlak = visible discipline (to counter stereotypes)
In Indonesia: Akhlak = invisible sincerity (to avoid performance)

This is not moral relativism, but what the researcher conceptualizes as contextual akhlak a dynamic ethical posture rooted in maqasid al-shariah (higher objectives of Islamic law), particularly the preservation of religion (din) and dignity (karamah). As Imam (19, Bangkok) put it: "My akhlak isn't fixed like a statue. It's like water it takes the shape of the container, but it's still water. In Thailand, I was water in a narrow cup. In Indonesia, I'm water in a wide bowl. Same water. Same Islam." This metaphor powerfully captures the adaptive yet principled nature of transnational Muslim ethics.

DISCUSSION

These findings challenge two common assumptions in contemporary Islamic ethics discourse:
(1) that majority-Muslim environments automatically strengthen akhlak, and
(2) that minority status inherently weakens religious commitment.

Instead, the data reveal a dialectical relationship between context and character one that echoes Al-Ghazali's view of akhlak as a struggle, not a state. Revisiting Al-Ghazali: From Mujahadah to Muwāzanah (Balancing) Al-Ghazali emphasized mujahadah al-nafs the constant battle against the lower self. But in transnational contexts, the battle shifts. The enemy is no longer just laziness or desire, but moral complacency born of social conformity. Thus, mujahadah evolves into what this study terms muwāzanah the art of ethical balancing between external expectations and internal sincerity.

This resonates with contemporary scholars like Khaled Abou El Fadl, who argues that "ethical authenticity in Islam requires resisting both assimilation and isolation." The Thai

students' experience embodies this middle path: they neither fully assimilate into Javanese santri culture nor isolate themselves in Thai-Malay enclaves. Instead, they negotiate a process deeply aligned with the Islamic principle of wasatiyyah (moderation). The Psycho-Spiritual Dimension: Moral Identity as Self-Continuity

From a psychological perspective, the findings support Blasi's theory of moral identity: when morality becomes central to self-concept, individuals seek coherence across contexts. The Thai students' distress over "ethical diffusion" stems not from fear of sin alone, but from threats to self-continuity the feeling that "I am not the same person I was in Thailand." This explains why some participants engaged in retroactive moral repair: "After weeks of skipping sunnah, I fasted three days to 'reset' my soul." (Journal, Nov. 5, 2025) Such acts are not merely ritual they are identity restoration strategies, blending tazkiyat al-nafs with psychological self-regulation.

Implications for Ilmu Akhlak as a Living Science Traditionally, Ilmu Akhlak texts present ethics as universal and stable. But this study shows that akhlak is also context-responsive. This does not mean ethical relativism; rather, it reflects the Islamic legal principle of urf (custom) influencing moral application without altering core values. Therefore, Ilmu Akhlak must evolve to include transnational ethics preparing Muslims not just to live Islam, but to re-interpret it across borders. Limitations and Reflexivity The researcher acknowledges her position as a Thai Muslim woman shaped the data. However, this "insider-outsider" stance also enabled deeper access to moral ambiguities that external researchers might miss. Member checking and negative case analysis helped mitigate bias.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore a seemingly simple question: What happens to Islamic ethics (akhlak) when a Muslim minority student moves into a majority-Muslim society? The answer, as revealed through autoethnographic reflection, interviews, and theoretical analysis, is neither simple nor straightforward. Rather than experiencing automatic moral strengthening as one might assume Thai Muslim students undergo a complex ethical recalibration, where old habits of vigilance meet new pressures of conformity, and where sincerity is tested not by external judgment, but by internal ambiguity. Four key insights emerged.

First, the withdrawal of minority-based external accountability often leads to ethical diffusion a softening of moral discipline that is not necessarily sinful, but spiritually disorienting. Second, the pressure to perform piety in Indonesia's visibly Islamic environment creates a tension between authenticity and social belonging, echoing Al-Ghazali's timeless warning against riya'. Third, paradoxically, minority identity itself becomes a source of moral capital, equipping students with critical thinking, ethical resilience, and a deeper understanding of why they practice akhlak not just how. And finally, students develop what this research terms "contextual akhlak": a dynamic, adaptive ethical framework that remains rooted in Islamic principles while responding intelligently to environmental shifts.

These findings challenge static interpretations of Ilmu Akhlak that treat ethics as universal behavior rather than lived experience. Instead, they affirm that akhlak is a relational practice shaped by history, culture, power, and selfhood. This does not undermine Islamic ethics; on the contrary, it demonstrates its living, breathing nature in the real world. For

Islamic universities like UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, these insights carry practical implications.

International Muslim students especially from minority contexts should not be assumed to "fit in easily" just because they share the same religion. They may need spiritual mentorship that addresses moral dissonance, intercultural dialogue spaces, and ethical reflection circles where they can process the hidden struggles of transnational faith. Theoretically, this research contributes to Ilmu Akhlak by integrating classical Islamic frameworks (Al-Ghazali, Ibn Miskawayh) with contemporary moral psychology and transnational identity studies. It shows that tazkiyat al-nafs is not a solitary journey, but one deeply entangled with social context.

In doing so, it offers a model for how Ilmu Akhlak can remain both rooted and responsive in a globalized ummah. Methodologically, the use of autoethnography often undervalued in Islamic studies proves its worth as a legitimate form of muhāsabah based inquiry. When combined with interviews and document analysis, it yields rich, nuanced data that surveys or experiments could never capture. Of course, this study has limitations. The sample is small, the context specific, and the researcher's subjectivity unavoidable. Yet, these limitations are also its strength: by centering a marginal voice the Thai Muslim woman in Pekalongan it opens space for other minority narratives to be heard in the global discourse on Islamic ethics. Ultimately, this research affirms a profound truth: true akhlak is not about where you are, but who you are becoming.

Whether in the minority gaze of southern Thailand or the majority echo of Pekalongan, the soul's struggle (mujahadah) remains the same. What changes is not the goal but the terrain. May this study inspire not only academic reflection but also pastoral care, intercultural empathy, and a deeper commitment to akhlak as a journey of sincerity (ikhlas), wherever one may be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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