

The National Imlek Celebration in the perspective of Nusantara Quranic exegesis

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Abstract. *Irbah Z. 2025. The National Imlek Celebration in the perspective of Nusantara Quranic exegesis. Dakwah & Islamic Outreach 26: 50-56.* This paper originates from reflections on the interpretation of cultural diversity, one of which is the National Imlek Celebration—commonly known as the Chinese New Year—which is considered to be intertwined with myths and beliefs that are treated as sacred elements within rituals, enriched with various cultural symbols. At the 2023 National Imlek Celebration, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, was accompanied by the Minister of Religious Affairs, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, and other cabinet members in attending the event. The values embedded in the Imlek celebration are often perceived to be in contrast with Islamic traditions. This paper discusses how *Nusantara* mufassirs understand Quranic verses related to this phenomenon. The tafsir texts examined include one from the classical period—*Tafsir Marrah Labid* by Nawawi al-Bantani—and two from the modern period: *Tafsir Al-Misbah* by Quraish Shihab and *Tafsir Juz 'Ammah* by Firanda Andirja. To uncover their views on the National Imlek Celebration within the framework of *Tafsir Nusantara*, this study employs a historical-sociological approach and library research methods to collect and analyze relevant data. The findings of this study show that, according to the classical mufassir, Islam does not compel anyone to believe in Allah. Thus, the promotion of mutual tolerance serves as evidence that Shaykh Nawawi recognized the existence of cultural and religious plurality within society and the state. This tolerance, however, is categorized into three domains: the theological (*aqidah*) domain, the social domain, and the political domain. According to the modern mufassir Quraish Shihab, Muslims are encouraged to return the respect shown by followers of other religions with even greater respect, regardless of ethnicity, race, or religion. Three fundamental aspects must be considered in such interactions: creed (*aqidah*), Islamic law (*sharia*), and ethics (*akhlaq*). In contrast, Firanda Andirja asserts that genuine tolerance is demonstrated when each religious group maintains its distinct status and identity, while allowing others to carry out their worship freely without interference. Such tolerance does not imply participating in or celebrating their acts of worship. True tolerance, according to him, lies in showing respect while upholding theological boundaries.

Keywords: Qur'an, Chinese New Year, nusantara interpretation

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a multicultural nation composed of diverse ethnic groups, communities, and religions. Each ethnic group maintains its own cultural identity, and these cultural expressions are constructed into collective systems of meaning—referred to as *culture*—that are upheld by the respective communities as legitimate and valuable (Suharjianto et al. 2020). Various practices are performed to ensure the preservation and continuity of these cultural traditions. Such cultural practices are often encapsulated in the concept of *tradition*, which refers to customs passed down across generations within a community.

Traditions are maintained because they are perceived to bring about moral order and well-being for the community. Often, these traditions are interwoven with religious elements, reflecting the deep spiritual values of each ethnic group. In this regard, religion and culture are often likened to two inseparable entities—mutually reinforcing each other as guiding forces for a better life (Brier and Jayanti 2020).

Although modernization and globalization continue to reshape many aspects of social life, the persistence of traditional values and rituals remains strong among various

ethnic communities in Indonesia. These traditions are maintained in a structured manner to ensure intergenerational transmission. In anthropology, such ethnic groupings are referred to as *ethnicities*, and Indonesia—being a nation composed of many such groups—is considered multiethnic.

Among these ethnic groups, the Chinese Indonesian community (also referred to as Tionghoa) represents one of the largest ethnic minorities in the country. Historically, the Chinese community is known for its strong commitment to preserving its ancestral traditions. The Tionghoa community is religiously diverse, with adherents of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. One of the most important cultural and religious events for this group is the *Imlek* celebration, which marks the beginning of the Chinese New Year. In Confucianism, *Imlek* is embedded within religious teachings and is considered a sacred observance. It includes rituals such as *prayers and offerings performed in temples* (Sanjaya 2016). In Taoist tradition, *Imlek* is rooted in ancestral worship and reverence, making the celebration a shared ritual among both Confucians and Taoists.

For Confucian adherents, *Imlek* is considered a religious holiday commemorating the birth of Confucius,

also known as *Kong Sang Guru*. The festive celebration of *Imlek* is accompanied by various traditional symbols and spiritual beliefs. One of the most iconic is the Barongsai (lion dance), which holds religious and symbolic significance. This tradition is based on a legend about a lion-dragon creature that would demand offerings during *Imlek*, and to drive it away, people created loud sounds using drums, gongs, and cymbals. Another symbolic practice is the giving of *ang pao*—red envelopes containing money—often with numerological considerations such as multiples of four, believed to ward off bad luck (Wijayanti et al. 2020).

At the 2023 National *Imlek* Celebration, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, was accompanied by the Minister of Religious Affairs, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, and several other ministers in attending the national event. This celebration was held publicly and festively across various regions, featuring sacred rituals, mythological elements, and cultural symbols that express collective memory and identity (Fauzi 2023). Interestingly, some Muslims—including Chinese Indonesian Muslims—also participated in these *Imlek* celebrations. However, such involvement raises theological and cultural tensions, as the symbolism and rituals associated with *Imlek* may diverge from Islamic teachings.

As interactions between the Tionghoa community and indigenous Indonesians continue to deepen, syncretic processes have emerged—including in the domain of religion. Islam, as a global faith, does not prohibit cultural diversity; in fact, its expansion across regions has enabled interactions with local customs and belief systems. This dynamic encounter between Islam and tradition calls for thoughtful interpretation and contextual understanding.

In light of this cultural-religious interaction, this study seeks to analyze how selected *Nusantara* exegetes (*mufasssirs*) interpret Quranic verses related to such phenomena. Several previous studies have explored similar themes. One such study is by Tri Yuliana Wijayanti, titled “*Perayaan Imlek Muslim Tionghoa Dalam Perspektif Al-Qur’an dan Muslim Tionghoa di Surakarta*”, which concluded that from the perspective of the Qur’an, cultural practices—when undertaken by Muslim Tionghoa—remain acceptable as long as they do not violate Islamic principles (Kurnianto and Iswari 2019). Another relevant study by Rahardhion Dwi Kurnianto, titled “*Bentuk Toleransi Beragama Islam dan Konghucu di Desa Karangturi, Kecamatan Lasem, Kabupaten Rembang*”, found that interfaith tolerance in Karangturi Village has been sustained across generations, rooted in shared values and moral teachings that preserve social harmony (Kurnianto and Iswari 2019).

Building on these prior studies, the present research aims to contribute a complementary perspective by focusing on how *Nusantara* scholars interpret Quranic verses in relation to the *Imlek* phenomenon. The exegetes selected include one from the classical era—Shaykh Nawawi al-Bantani, author of *Tafsir Marrah Labid*—whose work represents the traditional approach to pluralism in a pre-modern context. Two contemporary interpreters are also examined: Quraish Shihab, with his

Tafsir Al-Misbah, and Firanda Andirja, with *Tafsir Juz ‘Amma*. Quraish Shihab is a renowned Indonesian scholar known for his balanced and contextual approach, while Firanda Andirja is recognized for his emphasis on *tauhid* and his critiques of syncretic practices.

This study employs a historical-sociological approach and utilizes library research methods, collecting textual data from the selected tafsir works in order to analyze how each exegete engages with the cultural and religious dimensions of the *Imlek* celebration.

By exploring the *Imlek* celebration through the lens of *Tafsir Nusantara*, this research intends to contribute to a nuanced understanding of Islamic engagement with cultural diversity in Indonesia. Such interpretations are crucial in fostering religious literacy, tolerance, and intercultural dialogue in an increasingly pluralistic society.

ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL IMLEK CELEBRATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TAFSIR MARRAH LABID, TAFSIR AL-MISBAH, AND TAFSIR JUZ ‘AMMA BY FIRANDA ANDIRJA

Understanding Tafsir Nusantara: A Brief Profile of Tafsir Marrah Labid, Tafsir Al-Misbah, and Tafsir Juz ‘Amma

The term *tafsir* linguistically means to clarify or explain. In technical terms, *tafsir* refers to the discipline of interpreting the Qur’an, exploring its meanings, and deriving legal and spiritual insights from its verses. The effort to understand the messages of the Qur’an in local languages, including Bahasa Indonesia and regional dialects, began from the earliest periods of Islam’s spread in the archipelago. Historical evidence indicates that Qur’anic exegesis in the Indonesian context has existed since the 16th century, as seen in the discovery of a tafsir manuscript of Surah Al-Kahf: verse 9 written during that time (Nafisah 2022).

Tafsir Marrah Labid emerged during the classical period in the 19th century and was authored by Shaykh Nawawi al-Bantani, an Indonesian scholar who resided in Saudi Arabia. The work was completed on Wednesday, 5 Rabiul Akhir 1305 AH. The manuscript was reviewed by leading scholars in Mecca and Medina and later printed in Saudi Arabia. It gained recognition from Egyptian scholars and was adopted as a core text at Al-Azhar University. Shaykh Nawawi was honored with the title “Sayyid ‘Ulamā’ al-Hijāz” (Leader of the Scholars of the Hijaz) (Nafisah 2022). The tafsir was written at the request of his students and contemporaries who sought a comprehensive explanation of the Qur’an. *Tafsir Marrah Labid* follows the *ijmālī* method, providing concise yet meaningful interpretations. According to Rif’at Hasan, the tafsir is also characterized by a strong focus on linguistic analysis (*lughawi*) (Mufidah and Hasyim 2021).

In the modern period, several contemporary exegetes have emerged, including Quraish Shihab, whose seminal work is *Tafsir Al-Misbah*. This tafsir places strong emphasis on socio-cultural and contemporary issues. Written in Bahasa Indonesia, it aims to facilitate

understanding among Indonesian readers and to serve as a source of guidance and enlightenment. *Tafsir Al-Misbah* is a major *Nusantara* tafsir that contextualizes the Qur'an for practical application in daily life. It is modern and contextual in approach, yet remains faithful to the textual integrity of the Qur'anic verses. First published in 2000, the work was warmly received by the Indonesian public (Lufaefi 2019). Quraish Shihab composed this tafsir to aid Muslims in grasping the messages of the Qur'an in a modern Indonesian context. The methodology employed is *tahlīlī* (analytical), with a literary and thematic orientation (*al-adabi al-ijtimā'ī*) (Mufidah and Hasyim 2021).

Another notable modern tafsir is *Tafsir Juz 'Ammā* by Firanda Andirja, which was published in 2008. Firanda is a contemporary preacher known for his Salafi orientation. His tafsir was motivated by several factors, including the observation that while many Muslims are enthusiastic about studying *tajwīd* (rules of recitation) and pronunciation, relatively few delve into the thematic and doctrinal contents of the Qur'an. According to Firanda, the primary purpose of the Qur'an is to be practiced, not merely recited. His tafsir employs a semi-*tahlīlī* method, providing detailed interpretation where necessary while maintaining accessibility for a general audience (Annisa and Idris 2021).

Interpretive Analysis of Selected Verses

The verses relevant to this study are drawn from *Tafsir Marrah Labid* on Surah Al-Baqarah (2:256), *Tafsir Al-Misbah* on Surah An-Nisa (4:86), and *Tafsir Juz 'Ammā* by Firanda Andirja on Surah Al-Kafirun (109:1–6). The following is an explanation of each verse and its interpretation by the respective scholars.

Tafsir Marrah Labid – Surah Al-Baqarah (2:256)

Islam advocates universal social interaction based on the principles of equality and brotherhood, aiming to foster mutual understanding across religious boundaries. One of the core meanings of tolerance, as conveyed by Shaykh Nawawi al-Bantani, is the principle of religious freedom, which is reflected in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:256):

“There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing.”

Shaykh Nawawi explains that this verse confirms that faith must arise from individual conviction, not coercion. The distinction between belief and disbelief is already made clear through rational evidence and divine revelation. He emphasizes that freedom of religion is a foundational principle of Islamic teachings (Al-Jawi 1980).

According to him, faith entails inner submission, and as such, cannot be imposed externally. Belief in God is a matter of personal awareness and willingness, not compulsion. Thus, true belief is a result of conscious acceptance and spiritual surrender to the teachings of Allah (Fatcholli 2019).

To maintain harmony among religious communities, Shaykh Nawawi also underscores another form of

tolerance—respecting the beliefs of others by refraining from insults or mockery directed at their objects of worship, whether those of Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, or others. As he states in *Marrah Labid*:

“Believers should not mock idol worshippers in terms of how they perform their worship. For example, saying ‘Woe to you! Why do you worship idols?’ would only provoke them to retaliate by mocking the Prophet in ways that deviate from the truth. In the past, whenever the Companions insulted them, they responded by mocking the Prophet Muhammad.” (Al-Jawi 1980)

Therefore, Muslims are strongly advised to protect the sanctity of their own faith, create a secure and peaceful environment, and uphold interreligious harmony. Disparaging other religions can damage social relationships and potentially ignite conflict (Fatcholli 2019).

Islam does not restrict interfaith communication. In fact, the values of brotherhood and justice in Islam extend to all of humanity, provided that mutual respect and recognition of religious differences are maintained. However, according to Shaykh Nawawi, there are three boundaries to tolerance in Islam that must be observed when interacting with non-Muslims (Al-Jawi 1980):

Theological Boundaries (*Aqidah*). While Islam encourages tolerance and prohibits the denigration of other faiths, it sets clear limits regarding doctrinal acceptance. Respecting other religions does not imply affirming the truth of their theological claims. Thus, there can be no theological compromise or religious syncretism in matters of worship. Muslims are to believe only in the prophets from Adam to Muhammad and the scriptures revealed by Allah.

Social Boundaries. In the social realm, interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims is permitted and even encouraged, as long as such interactions do not involve acts of disobedience to Allah. Muslims are free to build good relations with non-Muslims as long as the latter do not display hostility or declare war against Islam.

Political Boundaries. In political matters, Islam prohibits Muslims from appointing non-Muslims as leaders, whether in households or governance. Shaykh Nawawi warns that non-Muslim leadership could potentially result in policies that conflict with Islamic values or force Muslims to deviate from Islamic teachings.

The *Imlek* celebration is a form of religious and cultural expression for its adherents. From an Islamic standpoint, Muslims cannot force others to believe in Allah or abandon their traditions. However, mutual respect, peaceful communication, and social harmony should be maintained—provided that Muslims uphold the doctrinal, social, and political boundaries of tolerance as outlined above.

Tafsir Al-Misbah on Surah An-Nisa (4:86)

As social beings, humans are naturally inclined to do good to one another in order to establish harmonious relationships. These actions are manifested through mutual assistance, greetings, and expressions of respect. One of the divine guidelines concerning social interaction is found in Surah An-Nisa (4:86), which reads:

“When you are greeted with a greeting, respond with one better than it or return it with an equal one. Indeed, Allah is ever an Accountant over all things.”

In the context of social relations, both Allah and His Messenger encourage the dissemination of peace and goodwill among all levels of society, regardless of age, status, or familiarity. Prophet Muhammad once prohibited Muslims from initiating greetings to Jews and Christians during periods of open hostility, especially when it was common for some Jews to mock Muslims by altering the greeting “Assalamu ‘alaikum” into “As-samu ‘alaikum” (may death be upon you). In such cases, Muslims were instructed to respond only with “wa ‘alaikum”, which means, “and upon you [be the same]”, without further elaboration.

However, beyond the specific context of hostility during the Prophet’s time, many scholars—including Ibn Abbas—permit Muslims to initiate greetings with non-Muslims, interpreting the prophetic prohibition as context-dependent and not universally binding (Shihab 2002).

This verse teaches that Muslims are encouraged to return greetings—regardless of the sender’s background—with equal or better responses. It makes no distinction based on ethnicity, race, or religion. If one cannot offer a superior response, one should at least match the initial greeting with equal respect (Shihab 2002). This illustrates the importance of building positive social relations, as ignoring or refusing greetings can damage bonds of humanity and create division (Niamullah 2021).

According to Quraish Shihab, interreligious relations in Islam must be grounded in three foundational elements: creed (*aqidah*), law (*shari’ah*), and ethics (*akhlaq*). *Aqidah* represents the core beliefs of Islam and must be upheld without compromise, particularly against practices that conflict with Islamic monotheism. *Shari’ah* encompasses legal norms that govern human behavior, while *akhlaq* refers to the ethical principles that shape daily interactions (Faldiansyah 2019).

In relation to the interpretation of this verse and the contemporary celebration of *Imlek*, offering respectful greetings or responding to invitations to *Imlek* celebrations can be seen as a form of maintaining social harmony, as long as it is done without compromising Islamic beliefs. Extending such respect does not equate to endorsing rituals or cultural practices that contradict Islamic teachings.

Tafsir Juz ‘Amma by Firanda Andirja on Surah Al-Kafirun (Verses 1–6)

The verses read:

“Say: O disbelievers! I do not worship what you worship. Nor are you worshippers of what I worship. Nor will I ever worship what you worship. Nor will you ever worship what I worship. To you be your religion, and to me, mine.”

Firanda Andirja begins his interpretation by noting that Surah Al-Kafirun is sometimes referred to as Surah Al-Ikhlās, due to the strong emphasis it places on sincere and exclusive devotion to Allah. He explains that the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (context of revelation) of this surah relates to a situation in which the Quraysh disbelievers, frustrated by

the Prophet’s continuous da‘wah efforts, attempted to halt his preaching. They offered the Prophet worldly incentives such as power and women. When these offers were rejected, they proposed a form of “compromise in worship”—they would worship Allah for one year, provided that the Prophet and his followers would worship their deities the following year (Andirja 2018). In response to this offer of false compromise, Surah Al-Kafirun was revealed as a decisive rejection of syncretic worship (Syarif 2021).

The term *kāfir* in the first verse is strongly associated with rejection, defiance, and denial of truth. According to Firanda, the use of this term here is not merely descriptive but serves as a strong rebuke against a proposed form of “false tolerance”—a mutual blending of worship that contradicts the core tenet of Islamic monotheism (Andirja 2018).

Verses 4 and 5 repeat the message of the earlier verses, and according to Firanda, this repetition serves two purposes. First, it functions as a rhetorical emphasis, and second, it distinguishes between the past and future dimensions of worship. It is as though the Prophet is saying, “In the past, I never worshipped your idols, and I will never worship them in the future” (Muafiah 2019).

Verse 6 serves as a declaration of *barā’ah*, or disassociation from polytheistic practices. Firanda emphasizes that true tolerance lies not in merging religious rituals, but in respectfully maintaining religious boundaries. For example, he explains: “*I allow you to go to the vihāra, and I go to the mosque*”—each practicing their respective worship independently and without interference (Andirja 2018; Syarif 2021). In this view, interfaith tolerance means allowing others to perform their worship freely, while firmly maintaining one’s own religious identity.

In a similar context, Firanda strongly prohibits Muslims from extending Christmas greetings or attending Christian religious celebrations. While Islam encourages Muslims to display kindness and civility toward non-Muslims in their own spheres of worship, such tolerance does not include participating in or endorsing non-Islamic religious rituals. According to Firanda, true tolerance is best demonstrated by offering respect without compromising one’s beliefs and while maintaining clear theological distinctions (Muafiah 2019).

CONTEXTUALIZING THE NATIONAL IMLEK (CHINESE NEW YEAR) CELEBRATION IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF TAFSIR NUSANTARA

Human beings are endowed by Allah with the innate disposition (*fitrah*) to differ—in time, place, and personality. This divine instinct drives creativity and adaptation in facing the realities of life. It is from this *fitrah* that humans are expected to act as responsible stewards (*khalifah*) over the earth. One manifestation of cultural creativity is the celebration of the *Imlek* (Chinese New Year) (Cheristien and Susanto 2019).

The Chinese ethnic community—commonly referred to as *Tionghoa* or *Tionggok*—possesses a rich array of

traditions and cultural practices that have been preserved and passed down through generations. During Indonesia's New Order era, the Imlek holiday was banned from public celebration due to concerns that it might disrupt the government's assimilation programs. However, under President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), these restrictions were lifted, allowing the Chinese community to reclaim and express their cultural identity more openly.

Historically, Chinese traders were among the earliest foreign groups to arrive in Indonesia, particularly through maritime trade routes. Over time, these communities established themselves and integrated into Indonesian society, bringing with them cultural practices that were eventually adapted to local traditions (Sanjaya 2016). The Imlek celebration represents not only a cultural tradition but also a civilizational expression rooted in agrarian life. According to Chinese cultural expert Dali Santun Naga, the festival was originally a spring celebration, marking the transition from winter to spring—a period deemed favorable for farming. It thus served as a ritual of gratitude for agricultural abundance, eventually evolving into an annual cultural and spiritual celebration (Cheristien and Susanto 2019).

Among Confucians, Imlek is often regarded as a religious holiday commemorating the birth of Confucius, while among secular Chinese-Indonesians, it is viewed more as a cultural event. Cultural scholar Soeria Disastra traces the origins of the Imlek tradition back to circa 2000 BCE, when a king from the Sun dynasty initiated a calendar system based on the agrarian cycle. The term *Nungli*, referring to the lunar-agricultural calendar, underscores Imlek's agrarian roots and calendrical significance (Wijayanti et al. 2020).

Imlek is also known by various names such as *Yuan Chen*, *Yuan Ri*, *Yuan Shuo*, and *Yuan Zeng*. In modern times, it is widely recognized as the Spring Festival. It is traditionally marked by family gatherings, spiritual renewal, and introspection, alongside myths and legends embodied in symbols and rituals.

With time, the meaning and practices of Imlek have shifted, especially among younger generations of *Tionghoa* Indonesians. Certain rituals—such as wearing new clothes or cleaning the house—are no longer considered obligatory. In the early 20th century, the emergence of *Tionghoa Hwe Koan* contributed to further transformation of the Chinese-Indonesian identity. Inter-marriages between ethnic Chinese and native Indonesians facilitated intergenerational transmission of culture, including the celebration of Imlek, often adapted through the family unit (Sanjaya 2016).

Islam, as a universal religion, applies across all times and places. When it comes to culture, the primary Islamic criterion is whether or not a practice contradicts Islamic teachings. In the case of Imlek, if the celebration involves the worship of beings other than Allah, it is prohibited for Muslims to participate. However, if it is merely a form of expressing gratitude for blessings from God, participation may be deemed permissible (Putri et al. 2022).

Today, Imlek is celebrated openly and festively, having been designated a national public holiday. The Supreme

Council for Confucian Religion in Indonesia (MATAKIN) defines Imlek as the peak of spiritual rituals for Confucians, though many others consider it a cultural tradition belonging to the broader Chinese-Indonesian community. For many, Imlek is simply a seasonal new year celebration. Symbols such as the lion (naga) and barongsai are no longer viewed with mystical reverence, but rather as cultural performances expressing joy and heritage.

For Muslims, the choice to celebrate Imlek depends on whether the practice is seen as part of cultural diversity. Unlike non-Muslim *Tionghoa* who may observe Imlek with rituals in temples, Muslim Chinese communities often celebrate in ways that have undergone religious and cultural acculturation. First, Islamic acculturation occurs by eliminating rituals that contradict *tawhid* (Islamic monotheism). Second, there is further integration with local Indonesian customs. For some, Imlek is celebrated simply by gathering with family to strengthen kinship and social harmony (Alfaini 2021).

Based on interpretations by both classical and modern Muslim exegetes (*mufassir*), matters of *aqidah* (Islamic creed) are non-negotiable. However, their approaches differ when addressing religious and cultural diversity—particularly regarding participation in events such as the Chinese New Year (Imlek) celebration. According to the classical scholar Shaykh Nawawi al-Bantani, there is no compulsion in embracing Islam, as outlined in his interpretation of Surah al-Baqarah verse 256. Thus, one way to preserve religious harmony is through mutual tolerance, respect, and open communication. He even prohibited Muslims from mocking the deities or sacred symbols of non-Muslims. Fostering peaceful coexistence with people of other faiths, therefore, is not only a social good but also a way to protect the purity of Islam itself.

Given that the meaning of Imlek has shifted over time, Muslims may participate in its celebration—as long as they maintain their creed and do not blend Islamic beliefs with other religious doctrines. From a modern perspective, Quraish Shihab emphasizes that harmony can be preserved by exchanging respectful greetings with people of other faiths. Showing respect, he argues, does not imply approval of cultural rituals that contradict Islamic teachings.

In contrast, modern *mufassir* Firanda Andirja adopts a more cautious stance, especially regarding matters of *aqidah* and *tawhid* (Islamic monotheism). He contends that since the Imlek celebration still involves certain rituals and beliefs incompatible with Islam for some of its adherents, Muslims must avoid participation in any way that compromises their faith. True tolerance, he asserts, is to show respect while maintaining a clear distinction—not by joining the celebration, but by allowing others the freedom to celebrate according to their traditions.

Indonesia is a multicultural nation with diverse ethnic and religious groups, though the majority of its population is Muslim. Despite the transformation in how Imlek is perceived, it continues to be celebrated annually and is officially recognized as a national holiday. As such, it has become a form of *local wisdom* that reflects Indonesia's pluralistic heritage.

From the author's perspective, the interpretations found in *Tafsir Marrah Labid*, *Tafsir Al-Misbah*, and *Tafsir Juz 'Amma* by Firanda Andirja can be synthesized. All three exegetes promote a spirit of tolerance in the face of religious and cultural difference. However, in the current Indonesian context, Firanda Andirja's interpretation appears too rigid and less suitable for application, especially when compared to the more adaptable views expressed in *Tafsir Marrah Labid* and *Tafsir Al-Misbah*. Indonesia, as a democratic nation with a Muslim majority, upholds culture as an important inheritance. This contributes to its reputation as a country rich in cultural diversity.

Although *Tafsir Marrah Labid* was written by Nawawi al-Bantani while residing in Makkah, his views on tolerance are highly relevant to the Indonesian setting. Many Muslims who participate in Imlek celebrations remain steadfast in their *aqidah*; the event is understood merely as a cultural tradition, not a religious act. In contrast, for non-Muslim Chinese communities, Imlek may retain its spiritual and ritual elements, which is where Islamic doctrine draws a clear boundary.

Nawawi's tafsir strongly emphasizes interfaith harmony, which aligns well with the pluralistic reality of Indonesian society (Andirja 2023). While there are varying views regarding interfaith engagement, Islam strongly encourages a tolerant and respectful approach. Such relationships can serve as pathways for *da'wah* (Islamic outreach), enabling Muslims to engage with non-Muslims through dignified and courteous dialogue.

However, if non-Muslims express opposition to Islam, Muslims are not permitted to impose their beliefs by force (Haris 2017). With regard to participation in Imlek celebrations, as explained earlier, the contemporary form of Imlek has become largely cultural and no longer tied strictly to spiritual doctrine. Therefore, attending such events—particularly as an act of social courtesy or to strengthen familial or community bonds—can be viewed as an expression of tolerance.

Nevertheless, this tolerance must not be misunderstood as approval or acceptance of beliefs or rituals that contradict Islamic teachings. If the celebration includes worship of entities other than Allah, then Muslim participation becomes unequivocally prohibited (*haram*).

CONCLUSION

Over time, the meaning and practices associated with the Chinese New Year (*Imlek*) have evolved. Many traditional customs—such as wearing new clothes, cleaning the house, or lion and barongsai dances—are no longer regarded as obligatory or imbued with the same symbolic meaning as in the past. Islam, as a universal and timeless religion, provides clear guidance regarding engagement with cultural practices. The fundamental criterion for whether a Muslim may preserve or participate in a cultural tradition is whether that tradition contains elements that contradict Islamic teachings.

In the case of Imlek, if the celebration involves acts of worship directed to entities other than Allah, then participation is clearly prohibited (*haram*) for Muslims. However, if the celebration is interpreted as an expression of gratitude to God for blessings received, without involving religious rituals that contradict *tawhid*, then it may be permissible for Muslims to participate.

For Muslims, the decision to participate in Imlek should be based on the understanding that it is a cultural expression of diversity, in contrast to the non-Muslim Chinese community, for whom the event often includes ritual worship at temples. Based on the interpretation of classical exegete Shaykh Nawawi al-Bantani, since the current form of Imlek has experienced a shift in meaning, Muslims may take part in the celebration—so long as they maintain their *aqidah* (creed) and avoid blending it with other religious beliefs.

In line with this view, modern exegete Quraish Shihab emphasizes that interfaith harmony can be maintained through acts of mutual respect. Offering such respect does not equate to endorsing cultural or religious practices that are inconsistent with Islamic principles. If elements of *shirk* (associating partners with Allah) are present, then participation is not permissible.

By contrast, modern exegete Firanda Andirja adopts a more cautious approach regarding matters of *aqidah* and *tawhid*. He notes that some Imlek traditions still involve beliefs and rituals that contain elements of *shirk*, which clearly conflict with Islamic teachings. As such, Muslims are advised to adopt an attitude of tolerance—not by joining in religious practices, but by respecting others' rights to celebrate while maintaining clear boundaries. True tolerance, according to this perspective, means upholding mutual respect while clearly expressing the distinction in beliefs. In other words, Muslims should refrain from participating in the celebration but allow others the freedom to observe Imlek according to their own traditions.

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