




# Spreading the value of inter-faith dialogue through Gus Dur's Haul video



## Authors:

Muhammad Sulthon<sup>1</sup>   
Osman Koroglu<sup>2</sup>   
Adeni Adeni<sup>3</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Islamic Studies, Postgraduate Program, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Business Administration, Epoka University, Tirana, Albania

<sup>3</sup>Department of Islamic Communication and Broadcasting, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

## Corresponding author:

Muhammad Sulthon,  
muhammad.sulthon.uin.walisongo@proton.me

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This article discusses the *haul* stage which is held once a year on the date of death of the fourth former President of the Republic of Indonesia, namely Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), which demonstrates harmonious relations between adherents of different religions in Indonesia. Consequently, the *haul* rituals have become vehicles for affirming understandings of the interfaith dialogue. This study aims to map the use of *haul* rituals to promote interfaith value. Analysing YouTube videos, this study finds that interfaith dialogue forms have been reflected in: (1) declarations of a cross-religious ideology, (2) the involvement of interfaith figures, and (3) the inclusivist discourses themselves. Gus Dur's *haul*, thus, has provided collaborative spaces wherein interfaith dialogue value can be sustainably structured.

**Contribution:** This research contributes to exploration of the *haul* stage, which takes place annually on the death anniversary of former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur).

**Keywords:** *Haul*; spreading; interfaith dialogue; Gus Dur; value.

## Introduction

Meetings of interfaith leaders are always featured on the stage of Gus Dur's *haul* (annual death commemoration) at the end of each year in Indonesia. In fact, *haul* generally does not involve religious leaders, because it commemorates deceased religious leaders, prays for their spirits, and spreads their teachings (Mas'udi 2018; Schmoller 2020). There are several reasons for the importance of presenting interfaith figures on the Gus Dur *Haul* stage, namely: (1) Confirming that through the *Haul*, people of different religions can still interact peacefully. In the socio-political setting of that time, meetings between figures of different religions were expensive and almost impossible. (2) The media has functioned as an environment that represents multiculturalistic reality. (3) In Indonesia there are still figures who fight for multiculturalism. (4) Gus Dur has been known as a figure or father of pluralism (apart from being president and chairman of Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama [PBNU]). The presence of interfaith figures gathering in this *haul* is an effort to refresh the values of religious pluralism inherited by Gus Dur.

The case of Gus Dur's *haul*, however, is unique, as the *haul* rituals held to commemorate him have sought to actualise the interfaith dialogue (Putra, Septanti & Rachmawati 2022). Participation in these rituals, including among non-Muslims, has offered the public – including non-Muslims – a means of commemorating the late leader while simultaneously reaffirming his values of interfaith dialogue.

To date, studies of *haul* (death rituals) have fallen into two categories. Firstly, studies have emphasised the personal aspects of such rituals, as seen in the works of Idil Aksoz-Efe, Ozgur Erdur-Baker, and Heather Servaty-Seib, who write that death rituals are commonly used to help family and friends find meaning in loss and strengthen the bonds between them. Ning Wang and Qian Hu find that, when Chinese parents are grieving the loss of an only child after the end of their fertile years (*shidu*), they can find peace through death rituals and prayer. Other studies in this vein have been conducted by many others (Aksoz-Efe, Erdur-Baker & Servaty-Seib 2018; Black, Santanello & Rubinstein 2014; Makgahlela et al. 2021; Mitima-Verloop, Mooren & Boelen 2021; Romanoff 1998; Said 2018; Sas & Coman 2016).

Secondly, studies have seen death rituals as spaces through which exclusive cultural and/or religious values may be conveyed. Examining the Hindu death rituals practised by the Surinamese community in the Netherlands, Boer and Zock (2004) find that, by participating in such rituals, members of the community can reaffirm their shared identities and overcome the transitional crises created by death. Studying the rituals of the Sekarbela community in West Tenggara Barat, Ahmad (1997) shows that such rituals enable communities to defend against the intrusion of foreign cultures. Other examples are provided by Alatas (2007), Cadaval (1985), Cano and Mysyk

(2004), Hanif (2015), Mas'udi (2018), and Mustolehudin (2014). Based on this review of the literature, it is evident that few have considered the potential for death rituals – let alone Islamic death rituals – to provide public spaces wherein inclusivist discourses may be promoted.

The current article seeks to complement the existing literature by examining how death rituals can be used to spread the value of interfaith dialogue. Specifically, this article seeks to: (1) map the interfaith spaces provided by the *haul* rituals held in commemoration of Gus Dur, and (2) analyse the factors underpinning these rituals' use to spread value of interfaith dialogue.

This article departs from the argument that interfaith dialogue, as promoted by death rituals held in commemoration of Gus Dur, is necessary to counter the rising tide of exclusivism as well as the high levels of religious violence that have accompanied it (Broer et al. 2014; Facal 2020; Menchik 2015; Mietzner & Muhtadi 2020). The diversity of the religious leaders involved in these rituals offers a real example of how Gus Dur's religious teachings have been accepted and revitalised in contemporary Indonesia.

This article explores the forms interfaith dialogue contained within the *haul* ritual. It limits itself to those rituals conducted between 2016 and 2021 to commemorate the anniversary of Gus Dur's death, during a period when Islamic sentiments have become increasingly exclusive and destructive (Ferdinandes 2018). Gus Dur and the *haul* ritual were selected because of the late religious leader's promotion of inclusivity and the inclusion of diverse religious leaders in these activities.

## Methodology

Data for this article were collected from video records of *haul* rituals that were available on the Internet. These included rituals conducted in Ciganjur, Jakarta, and elsewhere. This research covered rituals held to commemorate the 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th anniversaries of Gus Dur's death. These ceremonies were investigated using a qualitative approach.

Research began with the collection of relevant videos and news stories, which were then transcribed and mapped. Data collection involved three stages. *Firstly*, YouTube's collection of videos was searched using the keywords 'haul Gus Dur'. *Secondly*, video records of the *haul* ritual in Ciganjur were identified and consulted. *Thirdly*, further information on the *haul* ritual was collected from the Internet. After transcription, data were classified and displayed through tables and narratives. Analysis, finally, involved the reduction and display of data.

## Results and discussion

### *Haul* as a channel for spreading the inter-faith dialogue value: A conceptual review

*Haul* is one of the Islamic rituals used for spreading Islamic teachings and reproducing the charisma of religious figures. Based on their practice, such rituals fall into two categories.

Islamic rituals must be conducted by Muslims as individuals and must be handled collectively (Othman 2011; Tekke et al. 2015). Individual rituals include, for example, prayer (*shalat*), charity, and scripture recitation (O'Meara 2012), as well as fasting during the month of Ramadhan and (for women) wearing the veil (Stadlbauer 2012). Collective rituals, meanwhile, include providing funeral services and celebrating religious holidays. According to Salafis, ritual practice merges with da'wah, to enhance the qualities of justice, discipline and moderation in the Muslim character (Gauvain 2022; Mufid et al. 2023). Islamic rituals are generally intended to promote closeness, including individuals' relationships with God and individuals' relationships with others. It means that Islamic rituals can provide public space for the implementation of da'wah tasks.

As a channel of da'wah, Islamic rituals take various forms. For example, in Andalusia, Islamic rituals around the dead preserved subjects such as prayers and burial of the dead and the provision of related spaces that were often the subject of fatwas (Serrano-Ruano 2022) and sermons on the example of deceased figures. In Egypt, during the Seljuk dynasty, the Shafiiyah established rituals of visiting Imam Shafii's grave and celebrating the birthdays of the prophet and other Islamic figures including Imam Shafii that incorporated unique stories of the Islamic figures into the content of Friday sermons in Seljuk mosques (Alshaar 2022). In Palembang, Indonesia, certain rituals are used to celebrate the Isra and Mi'raj – the two-part night-time journey to the heavens undertaken by the Prophet Muhammad. Such rituals are celebrated communally and used by Muslims to express thanksgiving (Fitri & Triyadi 2015). Islamic rituals in Indonesia, including those used to celebrate holidays, also frequently involve religious leaders – both Muslim and non-Muslim (Sya'rani 2018). In Saudi Arabia, the pilgrimage tradition has indirectly benefitted the national economy. From this point, it is evident that Islamic rituals are not purely religious; they also have economic, social, and political aspects (Fauzi 2013). Nonetheless, all Islamic rituals and traditions – including *haul* – are channels of spreading Islamic teachings that intended to strengthen the bonds between human beings and between humanity and their Creator (Burdah 2018; Mufid et al. 2022).

Spreading the teachings of Islam is part of the da'wah effort. For M. Canard (1991), da'wah includes two forms: firstly, religious propagation and secondly, politico-religious propaganda. The first form consists of: (1) the call of religious authorities for all people to embrace Islam, (2) the preaching of a false religion from a false prophet to all people, and (3) the internal call of Muslims to maintain and increase their adherence to Islam. While the second form includes: (1) an appeal to everyone to accept the arguments of proselytisers who claim to be political and religious authorities, and (2) propaganda of loyalty to the Fatimid dynasty. This was rejected by Kuiper and Sayyid Qutb. For Kuiper, da'wah includes the propagation of Islam or a particular version of Islamic teachings to encourage the wider application of Islamic norms (Kuiper 2021; Nickel 2019). This was supported

by Sayyid Qutb. As quoted by Egdunas Raciū, he limits da'wah as a Muslim effort in spreading Islamic teachings and carrying out 'the command to do good and the prohibition to do bad' (*amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*) (Raciū 2004). Da'wah is not an attempt to maintain loyalty to a particular regime and does not include the efforts of false figures in spreading their false teachings. Da'wah spreads Islamic teachings and universal values.

Among the values of universal Islamic teachings is the teaching of interreligious dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is a strategy for practising religion to build good relations among people of all religions. Interfaith dialogue refers to constructive, cooperative, and positive interactions between followers of different religions (Haney 2009) to achieve common goals (King 2016) without losing faith. In interfaith dialogue, adherents of religions adhere to and practise their respective beliefs freely in a relationship of mutual understanding, respect (Long, Ismail & Yaakob 2022), and cooperation to build a cohesive community that is conducive, among others, to find meaning in face of difficult situations. Therefore, in addition to encounters to foster a positive attitude towards adherents of other religions, interfaith dialogue includes community-building cooperation (Sunarko-Ofm 2016).

Interfaith dialogue can be demonstrated through various events that span quite a wide range. Marsha Snulligan Haney (2009) identified this range starting from interfaith encounters between lay people in their daily interactions to official meetings of religious authorities. Interfaith dialogue can also occur in encounters of interfaith traditions, especially mystical experiences (Portilla 2022), a collection of various artefacts from various interfaith communities in a peace museum (Gachanga & Mutisya 2015) and encounters of interfaith musicians in musical practice. As identified by Roberta R. King (2016), music practice provides public spaces that generate relational bridges between adherents of different religions. These spaces are: (1) the stage for music performances which is a metaphor for peaceful life, (2) the music produced as a catalyst for interfaith beliefs, (3) the internal space of the musicians which creates a positive attitude towards one another, (4) visualisation of interfaith prayer and worship on the concert stage, (5) direct recitation of scriptures, devotionals and religious poetry in song lyrics and transcendental moments during the performance, (6) pre-concert social action that involves dialogue among people of different religions, and (7) the life cycle that places music as part of ritual content.

### The forms of inter-faith dialogue in Gus Dur's *Haul* video

Rather than serving solely to fulfil the religious needs of Muslims, as with similar rituals held in commemoration of other religious leaders, these ceremonies have been used to promote unity and strengthen interfaith bonds. This reflects Gus Dur's general desire to accommodate others and strengthen unity. This desire has been broadly accepted, even as intolerance has become increasingly problematic in Indonesia (Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that the number of *haul* rituals has increased in recent years. This implies that there has been an increased interest in Gus Dur, his teachings, and his inclusivist discourses. During the *haul* ritual, interfaith dialogue is promoted in four areas: sermon themes, quotations from Gus Dur, testimonials regarding Gus Dur, and the inclusion of diverse religious leaders (both Muslim and non-Muslim) during the ritual. This is evidenced by audio-visual records of the *haul* rituals that have been held over the years.

Each *haul* ritual has a particular theme, or main subject, that is discussed. Although most *haul* rituals are used solely to fulfil Muslims' religious needs, those used to commemorate Gus Dur have become vessels for cultural and nationalistic expressions of inclusivism.

Such quotes and testimonials do not come only from practitioners of certain religions. During the *haul* ritual, sermons, testimonials, and entertainment are all used to convey inclusive values. Even when sermons are delivered by Muslim speakers, they emphasise the values of inclusivism that were promoted by Gus Dur.

### Involvement of interfaith leaders in the *Haul* ritual

*Haul* rituals have been used as public spaces wherein religious leaders of diverse backgrounds may speak together and promote inclusivity, as understood by Gus Dur. According to Gus Dur, the Islamic doctrine of *tauhid* and Islamic law (*sharia*) offer prosperity to all of humanity; as such, they must provide blessings to all of humankind. All who believe in the oneness of God and who observe Islamic law must promote public welfare without discriminating against anyone. Consequently, it is necessary to establish good relations with all – be they Muslim, non-Muslim, or followers of a religious group not recognised by the State – and ensure that all individuals are involved in the creation of mutual togetherness.

At least three factors have driven community and interfaith leaders to participate in *haul* ritual held to commemorate Gus Dur, including its reproduction of inclusivist discourses.

Firstly, the concept of inclusivism overlaps with *muakhat*. Mainstream understandings of inclusivism have emerged as part of a Christian response to the realities of life in a society

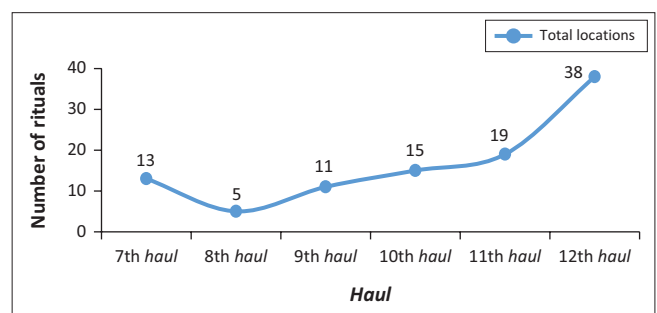


FIGURE 1: The number of *haul* rituals of Gus Dur.

with diverse religious communities, each of which recognises its own path to salvation (Nnorom 2018; Race 1986). Meanwhile, the concept of *muakhat* – similar to *ukhuwah* – means ‘kinship’ and has been part of Islam since the religion was first revealed. For example, according to Islamic history, Prophet Muhammad created kinship between the indigenous people of Medina and the migrants from Mecca (Al-Umari 1983). Inclusivism and *ukhuwah* both refer to solidarity, that is, the unity created between peoples of diverse identities (such as Muslims and Christians). Gus Dur understood inclusivism through the lens of kinship, recognising the need for *ukhuwah Islamiyah* [kinship among Muslims], *ukhuwah wathaniyah* [kinship among citizens], and *ukhuwah insaniyah* [kinship among human beings]. During *haul* rituals, the concept of inclusivism continues to be identified using the term *ukhuwah*.

Secondly, through *Presidential Decision No. 6 of 2000*, Gus Dur revoked Presidential Instruction on Chinese Religion, Beliefs, and Cultural Traditions. As a consequence, Confucianism became formally recognised by the Indonesian government as a religion, and Indonesia’s Chinese community received the same freedoms as China’s Muslim minority (Mustajab 2015). Recognising the value of this decision, people of diverse religious backgrounds – including numerous Confucians – have participated in the *haul* ritual.

Thirdly, Indonesian society has shown a great longing for Gus Dur and his inclusivist teachings. This longing is evident, for example, in the fact that communities of diverse religious backgrounds have held their own rituals to commemorate him (Figure 1). For example, the Interfaith Community of Jombang held ceremonies for the 7th, 8th, and 9th anniversaries of his death (Rakhmawati 2019); Ansor West Sulawesi held a ritual for the 8th *haul* (Nurhadi & Mahyuddin 2017); and the Kader Study Group of Lampung held a ritual for the 10th *haul* (Klasika 2019). For the 11th anniversary of Gus Dur’s death, rituals were held by Ansor in Batam, Nahdliyin in the United Kingdom, Ansor in Tegal, and the Christmas Committee. For the 12th *haul*, Poros Sahabat Nusantara and several interfaith communities in Jakarta commemorated Gus Dur’s life at Saint Paskalis Church in Jakarta. In Batam, an interfaith community held a *haul* ritual at a Catholic church; the Solidarity Party of Indonesia held another ritual in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara; and Nahdlatul Ulama sponsored rituals together with several political parties in Majalengka, Cilacap, and Gorontalo. Further rituals were held in Jombang, Yogyakarta, and even Germany. Such factors have influenced the continued use of *haul* ceremonies to promote inclusivism.

### Interfaith ideologies during Gus Dur’s *Haul*

Gus Dur’s understanding of *muakhat*, which overlapped in many ways with the Christian concept of inclusivism, has been foundational for the discourses conducted during the *haul* rituals held in commemoration of him. Gus Dur held

that Islam must be open to diverse global and local civilisations (Barton 2002) – that is, it must accept the local and the global, everything from human rights and tolerance to Javanese traditions (Masdar 1999). Such an interfaith ideology has been promoted by speakers during the *haul* rituals as part of their efforts to actualise inclusivism.

At the same time, participants have sought to promote inclusivity through action. This can be seen, for example, in the following:

Firstly, the creation of *Gusdurian Cares* during the 10th *haul*. This community consists of people who, though not biologically related to Gus Dur, consider themselves to be his ideological heirs. Located throughout the Indonesian Archipelago, they have established networks and collaborative projects with diverse communities – including interfaith organisations.

Secondly, the promotion of peace and reading of prayers for diverse religious communities. During the 7th *haul*, religious leaders from diverse backgrounds signed the Declaration of Interfaith Peace, which they subsequently delivered to the President. During the 8th *haul*, participants recited an Islamic prayer for the people of Palestine. Both events showed interfaith unity and solidarity. Such togetherness reflects not only the general acceptance of tolerance but also respect for diversity.

Goal religion-based in commemoration of death is not limited to Islamic rituals. For example, both the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) and *haul* facilitate communication between God, the spirits of the departed, and the living. The Day of the Dead is celebrated annually in Mexico, where it is held to be a special day on which spirits and their living family members can communicate and celebrate together. This ritual, which traces its roots to the Aztecs, has been adopted by the Catholic Church (Strickland & Lee 2009) and used in Mexico for tourism purposes. It is also performed elsewhere, including at the Renwick Gallery in the United States of America. In Islam, meanwhile, death rituals – known as *haul* – are used to express sorrow and convey one’s prayers for the departed (Hanif 2015; Mas’udi 2018). Generally speaking, these rituals serve as a form of vertical communication and thus involve expressions such as worship and prayer even as they maintain the collective memory of the faithful (Alatas 2007).

Underpinning these inclusivist discourses is the implicit desire to maintain unity and challenge the religious intolerance that has plagued Indonesia in recent years. David Curry (2021) notes that, around the world, religious minorities have faced increased levels of intolerance. In Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has used physical violence to attack such minorities; in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, meanwhile, such violence has been perpetrated by Boko Haram (Broer et al. 2014). In

Indonesia, members of the Ahmadiyah community continue to face intolerance (Menchik 2014). Such intolerant practices have also been noted by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Islamic organisations, which have been compelled to promote inclusivism among their members (Mietzner & Muhtadi 2020). These are but examples of the religious intolerance that challenges communities today. In this context, *haul* rituals commemorating Gus Dur have provided a public forum wherein the topics of inclusivism and exclusivism can be explored.

*Haul* rituals in commemoration of Gus Dur have made tangible contributions to the dissemination of humanitarian and inclusive values. Previously, Gus Dur had always been willing to provide others with a sounding board; after his death, the Gusdurian Network took that role. Claims that Islam is an intrinsic part of Indonesian identity, such as those voiced by the Action to Defend Islam, have thus been challenged – as shown. The *haul* rituals have even inspired humanitarian action, as seen in the Gusdurian Cares, Philanthropy, and Peaceful Village programmes that have emerged throughout the country. At the same time, *haul* rituals have inspired diverse peoples – from religious and political leaders to government officials and diplomats – to develop their own programmes advancing humanitarianism and interfaith harmony. *Haul* rituals held in commemoration of Gus Dur, thus, have provided decentralised cultural spaces where the seeds of inclusivism may be sown.

Indonesia is known as a multicultural country with various tribes, languages, cultural traditions, and religions. Gus Dur himself was born and raised in the largest Islamic tradition in Indonesia, namely Nahdlatul Ulama, and was once chairman of this mass organisation. Nahdlatul Ulama is famous for its principles of being open and accommodating to various differences and diversity. *Haul* Gus Dur as the largest Islamic mass organisation figure plays a role in efforts to emphasise a peaceful Islamic identity that is in line with the multicultural context of Indonesian society.

Apart from that, the peak commemoration of the *Haul* by Gus Dur's family every year is always followed by similar events which also promote human values, held before and after the peak of the *Haul*. This, which is always imported onto the Internet, has an increasingly widespread informative effect, thus having an impact on the crystallisation process of human values that are increasingly alive in society's collective consciousness. For long-term effects, this crystallisation can form the institutionalisation of these values in the real life of society.

The impact of Gus Dur's *haul* commemoration *haul* on inspiring various humanitarian and interfaith initiatives throughout the country is as follows: (1) Figures and interfaith communities, especially minority groups, feel protected and comfortable. (2) Indonesia dispelled the negative image of the Western world, especially regarding

Islam, with the presence of a peaceful and pluralistic Indonesian Islam through *haul* events that were actually exclusive. (3) Fighters for human values feel more optimistic about getting *bolo* [friends] that comes from Muslim-majority countries which are stereotyped by Western media negatively and anti-human values. (4) *Haul* opens wider channels for building social networks and community empowerment based on human values, as well as organising humanitarian activities, which always receive support from across religions.

## Conclusion

This article has shown the potential for the *haul* ritual, an annual commemoration of a religious leader's death, to contribute to inclusivist discourses and sow the seeds of humanitarian action. In the ritual studied here, inclusivist discourses have been incorporated into death rituals as a means of spreading the values of kinship and harmony. Speakers have referred to the teachings of Gus Dur and his struggles as they have commemorated his life and service. This has strengthened increased cohesion and offered new solutions to contemporary problems.

However, this article is limited in its scope. It has explored only the *haul* rituals performed in Ciganjur, Jakarta, over the course of 6 years (i.e. from the 7th to the 12th rituals). Further research, using more diverse data sources, numerous research locations, and covering a broader temporal scope, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the spatial and temporal dimensions of inclusivism and the dissemination of inclusive values through death rituals such as *haul*.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

M.S., O.K., and A.A. contributed to collection of data, data documenting and analysis, and manuscript preparation. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

Data sharing does not apply to this study because no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this study are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors, and the publisher.

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