

# Intercultural Da'wah Approach: The Role of The Special Da'wah Unit, The Islamic Da'wah Centre in Reaching Non-Muslim Indigenous Groups in Brunei Darussalam

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## Abstract

Islamic da'wah in multicultural societies such as Brunei Darussalam demands a culturally sensitive and inclusive approach to effectively engage non-Muslim indigenous groups. The Special Da'wah Unit under the Islamic Da'wah Centre plays a pivotal role in delivering intercultural da'wah, especially to communities such as the Dusun, Murut, and Bisaya, who retain distinct ancestral beliefs and often associate Islam with Malay socio-political identity. This association contributes to hesitation toward da'wah outreach. Despite the growing interest in intercultural da'wah, limited empirical research exists on how da'wah approaches are contextualised in Brunei Darussalam. Therefore, this study addressed that gap by exploring the da'wah approach opted by the Special Da'wah Unit through a phenomenological methodology. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with experienced intercultural dā'ī from the unit, alongside document analysis and literature review. Findings revealed the implementation of *da'wah bi al-hāl* rooted in the Qur'anic principles of *al-ta'aruf* (mutual acquaintance), *al-tafāhum* (mutual understanding), and *al-ta'āwun* (mutual assistance). Da'wah approaches are delivered through trust-building, social service, and relational presence. This approach allows non-Muslims to encounter Islam organically within their social and cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Da'wah, Intercultural, Approach, Multiethnic, non-Muslim communities



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## Introduction

The socio-economic marginalisation of ethnic communities necessitates deliberate and sustained support to improve their quality of life while introducing the teachings of Islam in a respectful and context-sensitive manner (Jamilah & Engku Ahmad Zaki, 2017). These ethnic communities, which have longstanding historical roots in a region, may conflate Islam with Malay identity and sociopolitical dominance (Leonaard Andaya, 2002). Furthermore, these communities maintain strong affiliations with animistic or syncretic belief systems that are

deeply embedded in their collective memory and traditional practices (Khalidah, 2022) These belief systems, which are transmitted across generations and reinforced by factors such as geographical isolation, lower literacy levels, and limited exposure to state institutions, place many individuals in a state of existential ambivalence. They find themselves caught between maintaining traditional identities and engaging with Islamic teachings, which are often perceived as external to their cultural worldview. This dynamic introduces a significant challenge for Muslim *du'āt*, who must navigate the delicate task of religious engagement without alienating their sociocultural realities (Paiz & Mohd Anuar, 2020).

Unlike in other Southeast Asian contexts where both state and non-state actors participate in da'wah outreach for indigenous groups, Brunei Darussalam has a uniquely centralised approach. The Special Da'wah Unit (*Unit Da'wah Khas*) under the Islamic Da'wah Centre (*Pusat Da'wah Islamiah*), Ministry of Religious Affairs, is the principal government agency tasked with engaging non-Muslim multiethnic populations. This unit implements strategic programmes that integrate religious education, community development, and socio-economic inclusion to ensure that ethnic communities are included in economic and national development. In general, these programmes are designed for the specific cultural, linguistic, and psychological realities of the ethnic community's level of receptivity, reflecting a pragmatic recognition of the need for intercultural sensitivity in da'wah (1985-2010 Ristaan dan Pencapaian 25 tahun Pusat Da'wah Islamiah).

This need for cultural sensitivity is underscored by the complex interplay between ethnicity, religion, and national identity in Brunei's socio-political landscape. The national philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) positions Malay identity as central to Bruneian nationhood. Officially, seven ethnic groups comprise of Brunei Malay, Belait, Tutong, Kedayan, Bisaya, Dusun, and Murut are classified as Malays under the MIB framework. However, only four groups of Malays are predominantly Muslim and closely associated with the state-endorsed Islamic way of life, namely Brunei Malay, Belait, Tutong, and Kedayan. Bisaya, Dusun, and Murut are generally non-Muslim, maintaining distinct belief systems and ritual practices. This reveals an internal diversity within the Malays in Brunei; thus, challenging the essentialist assumption that Malay identity is inherently synonymous with Islam (Wan Zailan & Ahmad Zuhdi, 2009).

The implications for da'wah are significant. Muhamad Akmal and Cecep (2021) emphasise that da'wah outreach in Brunei must be attuned to the nation's internal cultural and religious diversities to avoid the risk of homogenising distinct ethnic identities. They argue that adopting a one-size-fits-all approach may inadvertently marginalise communities whose beliefs and cultural practices diverge significantly from dominant Malay-Muslim norm. Moreover, processes such as rural-urban migration, interethnic marriage, and exposure to global information networks have further diversified the cultural landscape of Brunei, particularly among younger generations. This underscores the need for *dā'ī* to be both theologically and interculturally literate to be able to engage with diverse worldviews through relational, empathetic, and non-coercive methods.

According to the Population and Housing Census 2021 published by the Department of Economic Planning and Statistics (DEPS), Brunei Darussalam has a total population of 440,715, of whom 82.1% (362,035 individuals) identify as Muslims. Among non-Muslims, Christianity is the largest religious group (6.7%), followed by Buddhism (6.3%). The remaining

4.9% (21,473 individuals) are classified under the ‘other religions’ category, which encompasses religions such as Hinduism, Sikhism, the Bahá’í faith, and Taoism (Banci Penduduk dan Perumahan 2021).

The lack of disaggregated religious demographic data in Brunei Darussalam presents a notable limitation, particularly for academic research and policy development aimed at understanding the religious and cultural diversity of the country’s minority populations. The absence of specific figures for smaller religious communities, especially those non-Muslim ethnic communities, may be attributed to their relatively small population size, national data protection protocols, or categorisation limitations within the national census framework (Jabatan Perancangan Ekonomi dan Perangkaan [DEPS], 2021). This lack of granularity in official data poses additional challenges for tailoring da’wah efforts to meet the spiritual needs of smaller or less-documented communities. While this may not significantly affect general population reporting, it creates a methodological gap for researchers and da’wah institutions seeking to engage with these communities more effectively (Noor Hamid, 2024, Mustopa, 2024, Ratnaria, 2024).

This limitation is particularly relevant in the context of intercultural da’wah. In an intercultural da’wah, the understanding of the minority groups’ belief systems and cultural sensitivities is essential. Although Islam is the official religion of Brunei Darussalam, several ethnic communities continue to practice traditional or syncretic belief systems that are often shaped by their animist heritage. Addressing their religious and social needs, therefore, requires not only cultural competence but also sustained and targeted da’wah efforts.

Therefore, the Special Da’wah Unit has assumed a central coordinating role in implementing da’wah initiatives across the nation. The unit has undertaken strategic programmes designed to educate, train, and support indigenous groups in Brunei Darussalam through a combination of formal and informal religious instructions. These efforts are aimed at introducing Islam in a manner that is respectful, context-sensitive, and focused on gradual spiritual development. Ultimately, such engagement helps foster a deeper appreciation of Islamic teachings and encourages holistic Muslim living. However, to further strengthen these efforts, qualitative fieldwork and institutional documentation are essential to compensate for the statistical gaps and enhance evidence-based da’wah planning.

## The Special Unit Da’Wah, Islamic Da’Wah Centre

The Islamic Da’wah Centre was established on 1 January 1985, the principal institution for coordinating and implementing da’wah programmes in Brunei Darussalam (Ministry of Religious Affairs 2025, Nurul Akmal, 2019, Umami Faizah, 2019). It was officially inaugurated led by His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanali Bolkiah on 16 September 1985 the vision of “Negara Zikr” operates within the Sunni-Shāfi‘ī framework of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah. Its objectives include promoting religious knowledge, strengthening unity among Muslims, supporting new converts (*muallaf*), preserving Islamic heritage, and professionalising da’wah efforts. These objectives are operationalised through various media, community programmes, and educational initiatives aligned with national values and Islamic ethics. (1985-2010 Ristaan dan Pencapaian 25 Tahun Pusat Da’wah Islamiah).

The Special Da'wah Unit was established in 1992 and formed to enhance da'wah delivery among non-Muslim indigenous groups in Brunei Darussalam. This specialised unit adopts strategic approaches to reach communities with distinct cultural and religious identities. It decentralises its outreach by establishing district branches in Tutong, Belait, and Temburong, facilitating localised engagement. The unit aligns its strategies with intercultural communication principles, placing emphasis on gradual engagement, social presence, and welfare-based interaction. Its core responsibilities include spreading Islam through da'wah bi al-ḥāl, handling welfare support, building rapport through regular visits, and coordinating community-based activities. The unit's work reflects a shift from direct proselytization to a relational model of Islamic outreach grounded in Qur'anic values and cultural empathy (Manual Prosedur Kerja, Unit Da'wah Khas & Unit Pengislaman, Bahagian Pengembangan Da'wah)

## Methodology

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the intercultural da'wah strategies used by the Special Da'wah Unit. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight experienced da'wah practitioners from the Islamic Da'wah Centre. Participants were selected based on their extensive experience engaging with non-Muslim ethnic groups such as the Dusun, Murut, Bisaya, and Iban. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analysed thematically using *ATLAS.ti* software. Additional data were obtained through document analysis and review of institutional materials. Ethical clearance was secured, and pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality. Findings were then triangulated with literature to strengthen the analytical depth and contextual accuracy.

## The Role of the Special Da'wah Unit of the Islamic Da'wah Centre: Intercultural Da'wah Outreach

This section presents the empirical findings drawn from semi-structured interviews with da'wah officers from the Special Da'wah Unit, supported by document analysis and literature synthesis. Three major Qur'anic principles emerged as core frameworks for intercultural da'wah in Brunei Darussalam: *al-ta'āruf* (mutual acquaintance), *al-tafāhum* (mutual understanding), and *al-ta'āwun* (mutual assistance). These principles are operationalised through da'wah bi al-ḥāl, the ethical embodiment of da'wah through actions rather than direct Islamic propagation. Each subsection discusses how these principles are practiced on the ground.

### *Al-Ta'āruf*

*Al-ta'āruf* implies the development of trust, familiarity, and cultural empathy, which are essential in initiating and sustaining intercultural da'wah efforts. Islam's civilisational mission involves introducing the ethical worldview of *tawḥīd* through wisdom, not imposition, and *ta'āruf* becomes the first step in that ethical encounter (Akeem 2022). This is especially pertinent in da'wah to Indigenous or non-Muslim communities who maintain strong ties to ancestral beliefs, where premature or direct religious instruction met with suspicion or rejection.

The Special Da'wah Unit reveal the importance of establishing personal relationships and social familiarity prior to delivering religious messages. The unit emphasises *al-ta'aruf* with non-Muslim indigenous groups by encouraging mutual introductions and respectful interactions between cultures. Informants explained that when engaging with non-Muslim communities, *dā'ī* are encouraged to convey the Islamic message rather than through explicit religious teaching, but rather through sincere relationships. This reflects a gradually da'wah approach where the objective is not to convey the Islamic message alone, but to connect and build relationships.

*"Sebelum kitani memulakan dakwah menyentuh keugamaan aa, kitani mesti membina satu persahabatan dengan masyarakat." (IV7)*

*"Biasa yang kami turun, pertama sekali membina kemesraan, kita kena kenal selalu datang." (IV1)*

All the da'wah officers from the Special Da'wah Unit of the Islamic Da'wah Center who were interviewed confirmed the effectiveness of this approach in avoiding resistance or suspicion. IV4 was quoted:

*"kalau berdakwah ke ulu, nda berapa kenalkan orang, macam kurang sikit...cerita kurang." (IV4)*

*Dā'ī* are instructed to prioritise the culture of the ethnic community through relaxed and friendly interactions without explicitly revealing their da'wah aims during the initial level of engagement. This *ta'aruf* approach enables non-Muslims within indigenous groups to open up and understand Islam naturally through character, ethics, and mutual respect.

This outcome is consistent with prior research by Lujeng & Moh Sahlul (2024) and Abd Hadi (2017), who both highlight the importance of intercultural da'wah in transmitting Islamic knowledge. Lujeng & Moh Sahlul (2024) argue that da'wah efforts must be based on mutual respect, emotional intelligence, and sensitivity to the sociocultural reality of the target audience. They emphasize that da'wah is a process of communicating doctrinal information and a process of communication that necessitates empathy and human interaction, especially when engaging with multicultural communities. Similarly, Abd Hadi (2017) emphasizes the necessities of building relational trust through regular social interaction and community involvement. His study emphasizes the need of consistency among intercultural *dā'ī* in their interaction with other ethnic communities through involvement in communal activities. This will help to some extent control extraneous religious influences.

## ***Al-Tafāhum***

The concept of *tafāhum* (mutual understanding) in Islamic da'wah is very relevant in the approach of da'wah to non-Muslim communities. It emphasizes that the preacher must always be sensitive to the emotional perspective, and the cultural context of the *mad'ū*, to foster empathy and meaningful dialogue. *Al-tafāhum* emphasises meaningful dialogue and reciprocal comprehension. The Qur'an implicitly affirms the value of *tafāhum* in several verses, such as

Surah al-Isrā' (17:53), where Allah commands: 'Say to My servants to speak what is best. Indeed, Satan sows' discord among them...' an indication that understanding and careful communication are necessary to preserve harmony. Similarly, Surah al-Nahl (16:125) enjoins da'wah to be conducted 'with wisdom and good instruction and argue with them in a way that is best,' as a standard of ethics for dā'ī to foster the value of empathy in each other.

Twediana and Abdul Halim (2021), the role of cultural expression in conveying the message of Islam focuses on the negotiation of interests and strategic framing. Their study shows that da'wah activities through traditional art performances are more inclined towards conveying Islam by acknowledging the cultures of various ethnicities by displaying understanding. In this view, da'wah is shaped by institutional or ideological priorities rather than relational or dialogical engagement.

This study revealed that the Special Propaganda Unit in Brunei Darussalam uses a proselytizing approach that places a strong emphasis on respecting local customs, cultural practices, and symbolic sensitivities of non-Muslim indigenous groups. This study supports their success by understanding the norms, traditions and everyday socio-cultural behaviours of these communities. The Dā'ī interviewed expressed satisfaction and were more prepared to deliver Islamic teachings in a contextually appropriate manner after successfully detecting the cultural sensitivities and social impacts of each diverse ethnic community. This study concluded that preachers adjust between the content of the sermon in advance and align it with the realities of the community. This is important to ensure that the Islamic message is heard and easily accepted. IV3 shared his 19 years of proselytizing experience with non-Muslim indigenous groups by stating that cultural sensitivity, such as choosing the right time to visit, avoiding taboo times, and understanding the meaning of certain coloured signs on the door, have proven to be important in gaining community acceptance of the da'wah activity.

*"Ani kitani mesti tahu budaya dorang di rumah Panjang, tani mesti tahu apa waktu waktu yang sesuai, apa waktu pantang larang dorang, macam orang meninggal 2 minggu inda boleh kesana. Atu sebagai asas pendakwah mesti tahu tu. Kemudian tani mesti tahu apa warna-warna yang dorang taruh arah pintu dorang. Kalau hitam ada adat kematian ap. Ada macam-macam budaya yang dorang amalkan atu la, mesti kitani pelajari." (IV3)*

Thus, the implementation of *al-ta'āwun* functions as a non-confrontational and socially harmonious gateway into increasing the space for acceptance of da'wah activities in Brunei's diverse society. It emphasizes that da'wah is a combination of delivering religious doctrine orally and creating safe and meaningful encounters that embody inclusive and universal Islamic values.

## Al-Ta'āwun

*Al-Ta'āwun* manifests a strategy that prioritises building partnerships and aiding communities (Nurul Syafiqah & Wan Mohd Khairul Firdaus, 2018). The effectiveness of da'wah through *al-ta'āwun* illustrates a compassionate and context-sensitive approach to Islamic outreach, particularly among non-Muslim communities (Abdul Hamid & Badrah Uyuni, 2023). Al-

ta'āwun shows an effort away from traditional textual methods and towards more contextual approach that address the specific strategies and challenges in propagating Islamic messages to non-Muslims (Amri Syarif Hidayat, 2023). The concept of *al-ta'āwun* is a foundational principle in Islamic teachings, considering its relevance in the context of da'wah. Rooted in the Qur'anic injunction:

وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ

*Ma'fhum*: 'And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is severe in penalty.' (Surah al-Maidah: 5: 2)

Ta'āwun emphasises collaborative efforts towards virtuous and beneficial endeavours. By addressing immediate material needs, these initiatives lay the groundwork for deeper intercultural and interfaith understanding. This approach focuses on tangible support and cooperation to address communal needs.

The Special Da'wah Unit of the Islamic Da'wah Centre carried out their duties to reach out to non-Muslim indigenous groups based on the principle of *al-ta'āwun*. This was manifested in gotong royong activities and the provision of social assistance. This study found that Dā'ī delivered material assistance, such as food supplies, financial aid, and essential household items, as gifts to residents. These da'wah approach was extended to elderly non-Muslim residents by building rapport and introduce the ethical values of Islam through action and presence in da'wah community services. This reflects an integrated approach to da'wah bi al-ḥāl and da'wah bil lisan that is aligned with Islamic teachings on community welfare and ethical engagement.

*"Pusat Da'wah bagi bantuan rumah, generator, makanan asasi sebagai salah satu cara pendekatna Da'wah menarik minat Da'wah atu." (IV4)*

*"Dulu segala bantuan-bantuan dari Kebawah Duli ada, dari Majlis Ugama Islam tu ada, dari dakwah atu ada, misalnya bantuan rumah semua atu dulu ada. Kemudian dari Yayasan pun ada untuk membuat rumah saudara-saudara baru yang belum ada rumah." (IV7)*

*Al-ta'āwun* meets the physical needs of underserved communities while also building trust, strengthening intercultural ties, and creating a conducive environment for the gradual spread of Islamic teachings. The Special Propaganda Unit can demonstrate practical cooperation and community care that works to soften the hearts of non-Muslim communities of various ethnicities to accept propaganda activities peacefully and respectfully.

One of the *al-ta'āwun* approaches of the participants in this study was the *al-Syifā'* method, which is an Islamic healing service implemented because of outreach visits to longhouse communities in remote areas of Brunei, particularly in the Temburong, Belait, and Tutong districts. IV1, IV2 and IV5 reported offering *al-Syifā'* healing services such as Quranic healing recitations and the distribution of *Syifā'* water to non-Muslim individuals suffering from various health conditions. These services were consistently provided free of charge and were

driven by a compassionate and strategic intention to foster openness to Islam through care-oriented interactions. The informants in this study stated that they instilled the belief in the Islamic pillar that Allah is the one who has the power to heal. The informants were very certain that their acceptance of the delivery of Islamic teachings was very high as they observed the joy of non-Muslim communities receiving *syifa* treatment. This da'wah approach functions as a subtle yet powerful foundation for da'wah by meeting the physical and emotional needs of individuals. The *al-Syifā'* method central to *al-taawun* in providing humanitarian services became an effective channel for da'wah outreach towards non-Muslim communities.

*“Kami jua buat kaedah Da’wah ani melalui rawatan Islam. Macam tadi beberapa buah rumah Panjang sudah kami bawa Persatuan ahli-ahlinya Darussyifa dalam 5-10 orang kami bawa ke rumah Panjang. Kami istiharkan rawatan Islam kan ada, ramai ta datang tu Ustazah, samada Muallaf atau non-muslim yang minta air minta jampi. Alhamdulillah dorang boleh terima.” (IV2)*

These findings indicate that da'wah practitioners in Brunei adopt a pragmatic and service-oriented model, known in Islamic discourse as *da'wah bi al-ḥāl*. The model is rooted in exemplary conduct and practical benefit rather than verbal preaching alone.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that effective da'wah to Brunei Darussalam's non-Muslim indigenous communities cannot be reduced to doctrinal precision or institutional programming alone. Rather, it rests upon a component of competency, the mastery of *Fardhu 'Ain*, the application of *Fardhu Kifayah*, and deep sociocultural literacy. Together, these dimensions equip the *dā'ī* to translate the universals of Islam into discourse and practice that are intelligible, relevant, and compelling within the lived realities of the *mad'ū*. The evidence from the Special Da'wah Unit reveals that when the core pillars of faith are conveyed through accessible language, contextual analogies, and moral parallels, they cease to appear foreign or imposed. Likewise, framing *Fardhu Kifayah* obligations resonates strongly with local ethics of gotong-royong and collective care. Furthermore, sociocultural knowledge is not an optional supplement but a foundational prerequisite for intercultural da'wah. Understanding indigenous customs, linguistic nuances, and traditional values enables *da'īs* to engage respectfully, reduce resistance, and foster enduring trust. This culturally embedded approach strengthens Brunei's da'wah efforts, reinforcing the Nation of Zikir's ethos of harmony, inclusivity, and *rahmah* (compassion). Accordingly, the findings call for systematic, context-sensitive training frameworks that integrate theological clarity with practical engagement and cultural empathy. Such a paradigm not only safeguards the credibility of the *dā'ī* but also positions da'wah activities as a transformative force of nurturing social cohesion, deepening mutual understanding, and advancing Brunei's vision of a society.



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