

Majelis Taklim as Agents of Community Education and Local Religious Tradition Preservation in Urban Indonesia

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Abstract: Urbanization in Indonesia has reshaped the social landscape and religious practices, creating a growing need for communal spaces that nurture solidarity, emotional closeness, and religious identity. This paper aims to analyze the strategic role of Majelis Taklim (MT) in urban areas as a spiritual platform, a socio-cultural hub, and an arena for expanding women's participation in religious life. Using a narrative-integrative literature review, the study synthesizes scholarly works and policy documents through the lenses of sociology of religion, Islamic anthropology, and gender studies. The findings reveal that: (1) MT revives the collective conscience and builds komunitas through collective worship and religious rituals; (2) MT embodies public religion by addressing social issues such as digital parenting, Islamic financial literacy, family health, microenterprise empowerment, and partnerships with government or community organizations; (3) MT sustains the continuity of Islam Nusantara through rituals like yasinan, tahlilan, and manaqiban, shaping a religious habitus that strengthens social, cultural, and symbolic capital; and (4) women's participation emerges as a form of pious agency, reflected in leadership, philanthropy, and community mediation. The study concludes that MT represents an adaptive and inclusive urban religious ecosystem bridging tradition and modernity, private and public spheres, as well as personal piety and social responsibility. Recommendations include developing modular curricula, empowering female leadership, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and conducting multi-city field studies.

Keywords: Majelis Taklim, urbanization, public religion, women's agency



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Introduction

The accelerating pace of urbanization in Indonesia has not only transformed the physical landscape of cities but has also reshaped social patterns, interpersonal relationships, and religious practices. Migration from rural to urban areas entails a shift in ways of life, where long-established communal values are increasingly replaced by the fast-paced, rational, and often individualistic rhythms of modern urban living. Within such social conditions, there emerges a growing need for spaces that can sustain emotional closeness, social solidarity, and religious values. Nasution (2018) argues that the hectic nature of urban life paradoxically creates opportunities for the growth of community-based religious institutions capable of maintaining spiritual awareness among urban populations. One such institution is the Majelis Taklim (MT), which functions not merely as a forum for religious learning but also as a social meeting point and a space for nurturing Islamic identity in urban settings.

The Majelis Taklim is characterized by its flexibility. It is not bound by a formal curriculum, rigid schedules, or fixed locations, and may be conducted in prayer rooms (*mushala*), private homes, residential halls, or even modern public spaces such as apartment complexes. This adaptability makes MT easily accessible to people from diverse social backgrounds. The majority of participants are women—particularly housewives—who play a crucial role within families as custodians of tradition, educators of children, and transmitters of moral values (Shihab, 2004). Through MT, women not only gain religious knowledge but also build social support networks, strengthen self-confidence, and create safe spaces for discussion. In this sense, Majelis Taklim serves as an important mechanism for sustaining religious values while countering the forces of secularization and social fragmentation in large cities.

From the perspective of the sociology of religion, the presence of MT aligns with Émile Durkheim’s view that religion functions to foster social solidarity and unify collective consciousness. MT becomes a site for the emergence of spiritual togetherness, or *communitas* in Victor Turner’s terms—an emotional bond formed through shared religious experiences, even among individuals without kinship ties or close personal relationships. At the same time, Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” (2006) is also at work, as participants perceive themselves as part of a broader Muslim community without necessarily knowing each other personally.

In dominant modernization narratives, urbanization is often associated with the decline of religious authority. However, Casanova (1994) observes the opposite phenomenon in many societies, including Indonesia, namely the “deprivatization of religion,” where religion re-enters the public sphere through grassroots organizations. Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019) records more than 200,000 active Majelis Taklim across Indonesia, with the majority located in urban and peri-urban areas. Many of these MT collaborate with local governments, women’s organizations such as Aisiyiah or Muslimat NU, and Islamic philanthropic institutions to expand their contributions to social welfare, education, and community economic development.

From a gender perspective, MT holds strategic significance for women. While formal religious institutions such as mosques or Islamic boarding schools are predominantly managed by men, Majelis Taklim provides an alternative space for women’s active participation in religious life. This resonates with Saba Mahmood’s (2005) concept of women’s agency in Islam, which emphasizes that women’s engagement in religious practices is not merely a form of submission but often a conscious and reflective expression of piety. Many female MT activists emerge as moral references within their communities, managers of charitable activities, mediators in family conflicts, and facilitators of social and economic initiatives.

Viewed through Pierre Bourdieu’s framework, MT activities generate social capital (networks of trust and mutual support), cultural capital (religious knowledge), and symbolic capital (moral and religious recognition). These forms of capital frequently exert tangible influence on decision-making processes within families, children’s education, and neighborhood social activities (Suryana, 2020). In this way, Majelis Taklim contributes significantly to family resilience and social cohesion in urban communities.

Majelis Taklim is not merely a spontaneous response to the spiritual needs of urban society. Rather, it represents an adaptive form of religion responding to modern social change—bridging

tradition and modernity, the domestic and public spheres, and individual piety with social responsibility. Its existence demonstrates that religion in Indonesia does not fade amid modernization, but instead strengthens through new, more inclusive, fluid, and community-based forms.

In the era of globalization, Majelis Taklim stands at a critical crossroads. The rapid circulation of information and the emergence of diverse religious interpretations place urban Muslims in a far more complex situation than before. They seek not only spiritual tranquility but also guidance in addressing contemporary life challenges, such as educating children in the digital age, maintaining mental health, managing family finances according to Islamic principles, and coping with the social pressures of fast-paced urban environments. Consequently, MT is required not only to preserve traditional forms of religious instruction but also to function as a learning space that remains relevant to contemporary social issues (Fauzi & Nurdin, 2020). This condition aligns with José Casanova’s (1994) notion of public religion, wherein religion extends beyond the private sphere and actively engages in public and social affairs through more flexible institutional forms.

At the same time, Majelis Taklim continues to play a crucial role in safeguarding local Islamic traditions. Practices such as *yasinan*, *tahlilan*, *manaqiban*, and religious rituals associated with life-cycle events—from *aqiqah* and circumcision ceremonies to commemorative haul—are preserved through MT gatherings. These traditions reflect the distinctive character of Indonesian Islam, which is deeply intertwined with local culture rather than existing in a cultural vacuum (Wahid, 2019). Amid increasingly individualistic and standardized urban life shaped by industrialization, MT serves as a repository of collective memory and a transmitter of locally grounded Islamic values. As Clifford Geertz (1960) emphasized, religion is not merely about texts and doctrines, but also about symbols, rituals, and meanings lived out in everyday life.

The interaction between modernity and tradition within Majelis Taklim can be further explained through Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and cultural capital. Regular participation in religious gatherings, collective Qur’anic recitation, and devotional practices cultivates a religious *habitus*—a deeply internalized pattern of perception, thought, and action among participants (Bourdieu, 1990). From this *habitus* emerge symbolic capital in the form of recognized piety and social capital through networks of trust and solidarity. Notably, these forms of capital are particularly beneficial for women, who constitute the backbone of many MT activities, both within households and broader communities.

From a gender standpoint, Majelis Taklim offers spaces often unavailable in formal religious institutions. Here, women do not merely act as passive listeners but may become organizers, study leaders, and initiators of social and economic programs, ranging from rotating savings groups (*arisan*) and sharia cooperatives to charitable initiatives for the poor. This context strongly aligns with Mahmood’s (2005) concept of pious agency, which views women’s piety as a conscious choice rather than a constraint. Other studies, such as Nurmila (2015), demonstrate that women’s involvement in MT strengthens their roles as moral educators within families and communities.

Despite its significance, how Majelis Taklim in urban contexts balances its dual roles—as a center for Islamic learning responsive to contemporary challenges and as a guardian of local religious traditions—remains underexplored. This gap is particularly noteworthy given that more than 60% of MT are now located in urban and peri-urban areas with social characteristics distinct from rural settings (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019). Therefore, research integrating perspectives from the sociology of religion, Islamic anthropology, and gender studies is urgently needed to achieve a clearer, more holistic, and context-sensitive understanding of MT’s role.

This study aims to analyze and comprehensively describe the strategic role of Majelis Taklim in two primary dimensions: (1) as a platform for community-based education that empowers urban society, and (2) as a key agent in the preservation and transmission of local religious traditions in Indonesian urban environments. By examining the curricula and activities of MT, this research seeks to provide deeper insights into the contribution of this non-formal institution to cultural resilience and the maintenance of a moderate Islamic identity within Indonesia’s plural urban society.

Literature Review

Urbanization and Socio-Religious Change

Urbanization brings profound consequences for social structures, interaction patterns, and religious practices. Nasution (2018) explains that urban life—characterized by high mobility, social heterogeneity, and fast-paced routines—often leads to social and spiritual dislocation. Within such conditions, the need for community-based religious spaces that preserve social cohesion and spirituality becomes increasingly apparent. This phenomenon is supported by data from Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019), which indicate that more than 60% of Majelis Taklim are located in urban and peri-urban areas as a response to the spiritual needs of urban communities.

Majelis Taklim as an Institution in the Sociology of Religion

From Émile Durkheim’s (1912) perspective, religion functions to create social solidarity and maintain a collective conscience. Majelis Taklim serves as a communal space where spiritual togetherness is fostered through collective rituals such as Qur’anic study circles, yasinan, and tahlilan. Victor Turner conceptualizes this form of emotional bonding as *communitas*, referring to a sense of connection generated through shared spiritual experiences, even in the absence of direct kinship ties.

Furthermore, Benedict Anderson’s (2006) concept of imagined communities helps explain how MT enables participants to perceive themselves as part of a broader Muslim ummah, despite lacking personal familiarity with one another. In this sense, Majelis Taklim functions not only as a religious forum but also as a producer of socio-religious identity within urban society.

Majelis Taklim within the Framework of Secularization and the Deprivatization of Religion

Modernization theories often assume that urbanization weakens the role of religion. However, Casanova (1994) challenges this assumption by introducing the concept of the deprivatization of religion, whereby religion re-enters the public sphere. Majelis Taklim exemplifies this process, as religious practice is not confined to private devotion but actively engages with public issues such as social welfare, family economics, and mental health.

The collaboration between MT and Islamic philanthropic institutions, local governments, and women’s organizations such as Aisyiyah and Muslimat NU (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019) further demonstrates that religion in contemporary Indonesia functions as a dynamic social force rather than a mere doctrinal system.

Indonesian Islam and the Preservation of Local Religious Traditions through Majelis Taklim

Wahid (2019) and Geertz (1960) emphasize that Islam in Indonesia possesses a deeply embedded cultural character, closely intertwined with local traditions. Practices such as tahlilan, yasinan, manaqiban, aqiqah, and haul are not merely ritual acts but integral components of cultural Islam transmitted across generations. Majelis Taklim serves as a primary space for this cultural transmission, particularly in urban areas where globalization tends to produce social homogenization.

Majelis Taklim from a Gender Perspective and Women’s Agency

Majelis Taklim constitutes a religious space predominantly occupied by women. Within the framework of women’s agency in Islam, Saba Mahmood (2005) argues that women’s participation in religious rituals does not necessarily signify subordination, but may represent an active and conscious form of spiritual engagement (pious agency). In Indonesia, women involved in MT act not only as participants but also as initiators of socio-economic activities, family conflict mediators, and managers of charitable funds or sharia-based cooperatives (Nurmila, 2015).

Social Capital and Habitus Theory (Pierre Bourdieu) in the Context of Majelis Taklim

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1990), repeated participation in religious practices cultivates a religious habitus—a stable set of internalized values, dispositions, and patterns of action. Through MT activities, three interrelated forms of capital are generated: (a) Social capital: networks of trust, reciprocity, and mutual support among participants, (b) Cultural capital: religious knowledge, Qur’anic literacy skills, and understanding of Islamic traditions, (c) Symbolic capital: social recognition of piety and moral authority.

Empirical findings by Suryana (2020) indicate that these forms of capital significantly strengthen family resilience, influence educational decision-making for children, and enhance women’s roles within urban communities.

Research Method

This study employs a literature review approach. This approach is considered appropriate because the topic under investigation—the role of Majelis Taklim (MT) within urban society—intersects with multiple academic disciplines, including the sociology of religion, Islamic anthropology, gender studies, and urban studies. A literature review enables the systematic collection, critical examination, and integration of diverse scholarly sources to construct a comprehensive and in-depth argument (Hart, 1998; Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). In line with Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003), this process goes beyond simple literature gathering and is conducted in a systematic, well-documented, and replicable manner. The writing model adopted in this study is narrative-integrative, combining theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and academic viewpoints into a coherent and interconnected discussion (Snyder, 2019).

The literature analyzed consists of national and international peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, research reports, and official documents such as reports from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Statistics Indonesia. Literature searches were conducted using academic databases, particularly Google Scholar.

The search process employed combinations of keywords such as “Majelis Taklim,” “pengajian,” “urban Islam,” “Islam Nusantara,” “public religion,” “habitus,” and “women’s agency in Islam,” using Boolean logic operators (AND, OR) to enhance search precision and relevance. The selected literature met the following inclusion criteria:

- (1) relevance to the themes of Majelis Taklim, urbanization, cultural Islam, gender, or the sociology of religion;
- (2) contextual relevance, focusing on Indonesia or Muslim-majority societies with comparable social conditions;
- (3) academic publication status, including peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, or institutional reports; and
- (4) publication in either Indonesian or English.

Sources categorized as opinion pieces, articles lacking clear methodological grounding, or materials that could not be verified were excluded from the analysis (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The rigor and validity of the review were ensured through:

- (1) source triangulation, integrating books, peer-reviewed articles, and official institutional data;
- (2) accurate citation practices to prevent plagiarism; and
- (3) transparency in the literature search and selection process, allowing for traceability and replication.

Nevertheless, this literature-based study has certain limitations, including the absence of primary field data, potential publication bias, and the limited documentation of local Majelis Taklim traditions within academic journals.

Results and Discussion

The development of Majelis Taklim in urban areas demonstrates that urban communities do not merely seek places of worship, but also long for social spaces that foster togetherness, warmth, and religious identity amid the fast-paced and increasingly individualistic nature of city life. According to data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019), more than 200,000 Majelis Taklim exist across Indonesia, with over half located in urban and peri-urban areas. This figure indicates that Majelis Taklim is no longer solely a feature of rural religiosity, but has become an integral component of religious life in major cities. This phenomenon aligns with Nasution's (2018) argument that urbanization often generates social alienation, prompting communities to seek collective spaces capable of reconnecting emotional bonds, spirituality, and social solidarity.

From Émile Durkheim's sociological perspective, religion plays a fundamental role in maintaining social cohesion and fostering collective consciousness. Majelis Taklim fulfills this function by serving as a socio-spiritual meeting space where urban residents reconnect through shared religious practices. Activities such as Islamic studies, religious discussions, collective prayers, the sharing of life experiences, and social initiatives—including charity and communal work—function not only as acts of worship but also as mechanisms for mutual care, emotional restoration, and social interaction. In Victor Turner's terms, Majelis Taklim generates *communitas*—a sense of emotional connection born from egalitarian spiritual experiences. It is within this space that the sense of “we-ness,” often eroded by urban individualism and exhaustion, is revitalized.

The assumption that religion inevitably declines with modernization is not fully supported in the Indonesian context. Casanova (1994) describes this countertrend as the deprivatization of religion, wherein religion re-enters the public sphere. Majelis Taklim represents a tangible manifestation of this process. Beyond teaching jurisprudence or Qur'anic interpretation, urban MT increasingly address contemporary issues such as parenting in the digital era, mental health, Islamic financial literacy, and family entrepreneurship. In cities such as Bandung, Depok, and Surabaya, MT frequently collaborate with zakat institutions, women's organizations, and local governments to implement social, educational, and economic programs. In this way, religion transcends the private sphere and actively contributes to the strengthening of social life.

Despite its engagement with modern issues, Majelis Taklim continues to serve as a vital bastion for the preservation of local Islamic traditions. Activities such as classical text studies, *manaqib* recitations, ancestral commemorative prayers (*haul*), celebrations of Islamic holy days, and communal life-cycle rituals—including *aqiqah* and circumcision ceremonies—persist even within modern residential complexes and apartment settings. These practices function not merely as religious rites but as channels for transmitting values, traditions, and a sense of communal belonging. Rather than being preserved as static cultural relics, these traditions actively reinforce a grounded Islamic identity integrated into everyday life.

As emphasized by Clifford Geertz (1960) and Abdurrahman Wahid (2019), religion does not exist in a cultural vacuum but is deeply intertwined with local traditions. Through Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual lens, the repeated practices within Majelis Taklim cultivate a religious *habitus*—shaping how individuals perceive, think about, and enact religiosity. From this *habitus* emerge various forms of capital: social capital in the form of trust and social networks; symbolic capital through recognition of piety and moral authority; and cultural capital encompassing religious knowledge, traditions, and communal etiquette.

The role of Majelis Taklim is particularly significant from a gender perspective. Unlike mosques or Islamic boarding schools, which are often dominated by male leadership structures, MT is largely organized and sustained by women. Their participation extends beyond passive attendance to include leadership in prayer, financial management, charitable initiatives, and the resolution of family and community conflicts. Saba Mahmood's (2005) concept of pious agency is highly relevant here, illustrating that piety does not necessarily imply passive submission, but can serve as a source of spiritual empowerment, moral authority, and social agency. Within Majelis Taklim, women cultivate spaces of empowerment without relinquishing their religious identities.

Majelis Taklim does not position tradition and modernity as opposing forces. Instead, it weaves them together harmoniously. While maintaining traditions such as tahlilan, yasinan, and maulidan, MT simultaneously addresses contemporary concerns including mental health, technological challenges in childrearing, and sharia-based household economics. It thus becomes a space where religion remains relevant to modern life without abandoning its cultural roots.

These dynamics reveal at least three key dimensions of Majelis Taklim in urban socio-religious life. First, its spiritual-social dimension, providing a space to rebuild emotional closeness and social solidarity. Second, its cultural dimension, serving as a guardian of locally rooted Islamic traditions transmitted across generations. Third, its transformative dimension, particularly for women, offering opportunities for learning, leadership, and social contribution. In essence, Majelis Taklim represents one of the most tangible forms of religious adaptation to modern social change—neither rigidly frozen in tradition nor dissolved by modernization.

Contemporary urban Majelis Taklim demonstrates that city dwellers require more than formal places of worship; they seek communal spaces that foster intimacy, belonging, and spiritual comfort amid the intensity of modern urban life. With more than half of Indonesia’s MT operating in urban and peri-urban areas (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019), these institutions have evolved from rural religious gatherings into central components of the urban socio-religious landscape. This evolution confirms Nasution’s (2018) assertion that urban alienation often drives communities to re-establish collective spaces where spirituality and social solidarity can flourish.

Additional scholarly perspectives further reinforce this understanding. Azyumardi Azra (2012) characterizes Majelis Taklim as part of civil Islam, a form of religious expression driven by community initiative rather than state authority. Martin van Bruinessen (2009) describes MT as an “alternative public sphere” linking religion, women, and the urban middle class. Fachry Ali and Bahtiar Effendy (1998) view MT as an expression of cultural Islam—religion embedded in everyday life rather than institutional abstraction. Nur Syam (2015) highlights MT as a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity, capable of addressing both ritual practices and digital-era challenges. Zamakhsyari Dhofier (1982) emphasizes that women within Majelis Taklim act as heirs to pesantren-based Islamic scholarship operating within broader society.

Collectively, these perspectives affirm that Majelis Taklim is a dynamic socio-religious space that preserves tradition, responds to contemporary challenges, empowers women, fosters solidarity, and sustains the presence of religion in the everyday lives of urban Muslims. Far from being a relic of the past, Majelis Taklim represents a living, adaptive, and culturally rooted expression of Islam in modern Indonesian urban society.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that Majelis Taklim (MT) in urban settings functions as a unifying social institution that integrates three interrelated domains: the strengthening of religious spirituality, the formation of socio-cultural networks, and the expansion of women’s roles. Amid the dynamics of urbanization—which accelerate mobility, loosen social ties, and often generate feelings of alienation—Majelis Taklim provides a space that restores a sense of “we-ness,” or collective conscience, through shared religious practices such as Qur’anic study circles, dhikr, and tahlilan. These collective rituals cultivate a warm and inclusive *communitas*, reinforcing emotional bonds and social solidarity among urban residents.

At the same time, Majelis Taklim embodies religion in the public sphere (public religion). Rather than remaining confined to private devotion, MT actively engages with family and community issues, including digital parenting, Islamic financial literacy, family health, micro- and small-enterprise empowerment, and partnerships with local governments and civil society organizations. Through these activities, religiosity contributes directly to social welfare and community resilience. MT also plays a crucial role in sustaining the continuity of Islam Nusantara through practices such as yasinan, tahlilan, *manaqiban*, haul commemorations, and *aqiqah* or circumcision rituals. The repeated performance of these rites shapes religious *habitus* while simultaneously enriching social capital (trust and networks), cultural capital (religious knowledge and skills), and symbolic capital (moral authority and recognition).

The gender dimension of Majelis Taklim is particularly prominent. Women’s participation extends far beyond attendance; they emerge as initiators, organizers, and leaders—designing programs, leading study sessions, managing social funds, and mediating family and community issues. This reflects a conscious form of pious agency, where piety becomes a source of empowerment rather than passive compliance. In short, Majelis Taklim is not a temporary response to spiritual needs, but a flexible and adaptive form of religious engagement with modernity—stitching together tradition and innovation, bridging the domestic and public spheres, and linking personal piety with social responsibility.

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