



Comparative Study of Bukhur and Hio in Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

Ritual aroma represents a sensory dimension in religious practice that bridges symbolism, spirituality, and cultural identity. This study examines the comparative use of Bukhur in Islam and Hio in Confucianism, both employing fragrance and smoke yet grounded in distinct theological foundations, ritual functions, and symbolic meanings. The research aims to analyze similarities and differences in their theological basis, ritual position, symbolic interpretation, and relevance to interfaith dialogue in Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive method with comparative and theological approaches, data were collected through literature review of religious texts, hadith compilations, Confucian teachings, and relevant scholarly studies. Findings reveal that Bukhur in Islam functions primarily as fragrance supporting cleanliness, comfort, and devotion, permitted or recommended as long as it avoids associations with superstition or claims of mystical power. Conversely, Hio in Confucianism holds a formal role in worship, symbolizing sincerity, reverence, and harmonious relations among Tian, humanity, ancestors, and the cosmos through ritual order (Li). This research highlights that contextual understanding of ritual symbols fosters interreligious literacy, reduces misinterpretation, and strengthens tolerance within Indonesian society, thereby contributing to constructive interfaith engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and culture are two interrelated elements that shape the way a society understands and practices religious life. Religion provides values, beliefs, and normative guidelines, while culture provides a medium of expression that allows religious teachings to be manifested in social life. This relationship means that religious experiences are not only conveyed through texts and doctrines but are also expressed through movements, objects, sounds, colors, spaces, and scents that hold specific meanings for the community of believers (Maulana et al., 2021; Muzakkir et al., 2020).

Rituals are one way in which the relationship between religious teachings, spiritual experiences, and a community's culture is manifested. The objects and

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spaces used in rituals derive their meaning from theological and historical contexts, as well as the social experiences of the communities that use them. Therefore, an object cannot be interpreted solely based on its physical form, as the meaning of ritual symbols can be reinforced, shifted, or altered in accordance with the social and cultural development of a society (Suryadi & Azeharie, 2020). Studies on Sekaten, for example, show that ritual spaces and objects can fulfill religious functions while simultaneously undergoing a negotiation of meaning in contemporary society (Nugroho et al., 2025).

One of the sensory dimensions used in various religious practices is the aroma produced by burning fragrant wood, resin, frankincense, incense, or other aromatic materials. The smoke and fragrance that arise can help create a sacred atmosphere, inner tranquility, a sense of reverence, and a distinction between ordinary spaces and ritual spaces. Although they share material similarities, the use of scent in each religion does not always serve the same function or hold the same theological significance. Its meaning is determined by the teachings, ritual practices, and beliefs of the religious community that uses it (Imtinan et al., 2025; Widari, 2025).

In Indonesia's multicultural and multireligious society, understanding the symbols and rituals of other religions plays a crucial role in reducing prejudice and fostering constructive social relationships. Interfaith dialogue does not only take place through formal meetings or discussions about doctrine but can also develop through an understanding of the traditions, symbols, and socio-religious practices carried out by different communities (Atasoge et al., 2022; Djainudin, 2022). Shared ritual experiences can even create spaces for interfaith encounters without requiring the dissolution of each group's theological identity. This is evident in the Nyadran tradition in Getas Village, which serves as a space for participation, respect, and interaction among people from different religious backgrounds (Prihantoro, 2025).

The use of bukhur in Islam and hio in Confucianism are two aroma-based practices that are interesting to compare in this context. Both involve burning aromatic materials to produce smoke and fragrance, but they have different theological foundations, ritual functions, and symbolic structures. The physical similarity between the two sometimes leads to conflation, especially when smoke and fragrance are directly associated with mystical practices or communication with the spirit world. Such an understanding risks overlooking the doctrinal systems and theological boundaries that shape the use of each ritual object (Shabah et al., 2023).

Bukhur or bakhur is a fragrant substance that can be made from agarwood, sandalwood, damar, resin, musk, ambergris, essential oils, or a mixture of other aromatic ingredients. These materials are burned over charcoal or in a special device to produce a scent that can perfume homes, mosques, assembly halls, and other social and religious spaces. The development of aromatic materials in community life also demonstrates that fragrances can be used to meet needs related to hygiene, comfort, and room freshening (Fithria et al., 2023). In Muslim tradition, their use has evolved as part of the custom of perfuming spaces, showing respect to guests, and creating a comfortable atmosphere during religious activities.

The acceptance of Bukhur in Islamic tradition is linked to Islam's emphasis on cleanliness, beauty, and fragrances. The Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) love for fragrances serves as the normative foundation for the use of pleasant scents as part of personal etiquette and comfort in worship (Hadzami, 2010). This practice subsequently evolved within Muslim communities through a dynamic interplay between hadith texts, religious

interpretations, and living cultural traditions. Studies on “living hadith” demonstrate that the teachings of the hadith are not confined to textual form but are embodied through social customs and practices that develop within the community (Qudsy et al., 2023).

Although accepted as a fragrance, bukhur is not a determining factor in the validity of worship. Prayer, dhikr, supplication, and other religious activities can still be performed without it. Within this framework, bukhur is more appropriately viewed as a means that supports cleanliness, comfort, and spiritual focus, rather than as an intermediary in the relationship between humans and Allah. Its use is acceptable when intended to produce a pleasant aroma, but it contradicts the principle of tawhid if accompanied by the belief that its smoke possesses an independent power to summon spirits, jinn, or certain supernatural forces (Al Munawarah et al., 2024; Karyadi, 2022).

Previous studies on bukhur have shown that scent can have material, symbolic, and social dimensions. Bukhur smoke can be interpreted as fostering tranquility and a religious atmosphere, while its symbolic meaning is influenced by the context and beliefs of the community that uses it (Shabah et al., 2023). In Indonesian Muslim society, the burning of Bukhur or incense can also serve as a form of symbolic communication that reinforces identity, solidarity, and social bonds in certain religious activities. However, acceptance of this practice still depends on the intentions and beliefs underlying it, not merely on the object used (Imtinan et al., 2025; Muzakkir et al., 2020).

Unlike bukhur, hio or incense holds a more formal place in Confucian worship rituals. The Confucian religion, or Ru Jiao, emphasizes moral development, etiquette, reverence for Tian, respect for the Prophet Kongzi, devotion to ancestors, and harmonious relationships between humans, society, and the universe (Aziz, 2018). In worship practices, incense is not only used to produce a pleasant aroma but also serves as a symbol of sincerity, respect, and devotion to Heaven, Confucius, the saints, and ancestors (Najibbudin, 2020).

The use of incense is linked to the concept of Li, which refers to ritual etiquette that emphasizes order, politeness, respect, and self-control. The fragrance of Hio is interpreted as a symbol of the purity of intention and sincerity in prayer. The expressions “Dao You Xin He” and “Xin Jia Xiang Chuan” describe the relationship between unity of heart, the sacred path, and the fragrance of Hio in the performance of rituals (Kellyn, 2021). These meanings are also connected to the values of cheng (sincerity), xiao (filial piety toward parents and ancestors), and the Dao as the path of virtue and harmony in life (Kuncono, 2025).

Incense also has a more structured set of usage guidelines regarding its type, the number of sticks, how to hold them, and the order in which they are placed. These guidelines demonstrate that incense exists within a symbolic system that connects outward actions with moral cultivation and spiritual awareness. Nevertheless, incense is not understood as an object of worship. The essence of prayer remains sincerity and reverence, while incense serves as a symbolic means to help create an orderly, devout, and sacred atmosphere (Najibbudin, 2020; Sulaiman, 2009).

An initial comparison shows that Bukhur and Hio share similarities as aromatic media involving objects, smoke, space, and sensory experiences. However, these similarities do not indicate theological parallels. In Islam, Bukhur serves as a supplementary fragrance that does not determine the validity of worship and does not act as an intermediary for prayer. In contrast, joss sticks hold a more formal position in Confucian worship rituals as symbols of sincerity, respect, and ritual order. This distinction underscores that

understanding a symbol must be grounded in the framework of the religious teachings that employ it, rather than solely on the similarity of their material forms (Al Munawarah et al., 2024).

Previous research has largely addressed bukhur separately in the contexts of hadith, the use of incense in mosques, semiotics, and Muslim traditions. Studies on joss sticks have also generally focused on their meaning, function, and usage within Confucian contexts. Meanwhile, research on interfaith dialogue more often addresses religious moderation, encounters between communities, and the resolution of differences in general. Productive dialogue requires openness to differences, humility in understanding other beliefs, and a commitment to preserving the theological identity of each religion (Ming & Sahertian, 2025; Tinambunan et al., 2025).

The limitations of these studies indicate that there has not yet been much research directly comparing Bukhur and Hio based on the same theological, ritual, symbolic, and social categories. The material similarities between the two have not been extensively analyzed alongside differences in their ritual status and their relevance to interfaith dialogue. The novelty of this article lies in a systematic comparison across four aspects: material form, ritual status, symbolic meaning, and theological orientation. This comparison situates each practice within its own doctrinal system, thereby avoiding the use of one religion's theological standards to evaluate another.

This article aims to analyze the similarities and differences between Bukhur in Islam and Hio in Confucianism based on theological foundations, ritual functions, symbolic meanings, and their relevance to interfaith dialogue in Indonesia. Theoretically, this article is expected to expand the field of comparative religion by examining the relationship between symbols, rituals, theology, and culture. Practically, the findings of this study can be used to strengthen religious symbolic literacy, reduce prejudice, and foster dialogue that respects differences in religious identity. Strengthening brotherhood, friendship, and respect for human dignity are essential components in building moderation and constructive interfaith relations in Indonesia.

METHODS

This article employs a qualitative method using content analysis. This method was chosen because the study focuses on the systematic interpretation of texts and documents that explain the use of Bukhur in Islam and Hio in Confucianism, rather than on field data collection or statistical measurement. Content analysis is used to identify, categorize, compare, and interpret information regarding the material forms, ritual significance, theological foundations, symbolic meanings, and social relevance of these two aromatic practices. A comparative approach was used to identify similarities and differences, while a theological approach was used to understand each practice based on its respective religious teachings, doctrines, and belief systems (Anidar et al., 2026; Arif & Ikbāl, 2023; Efendi et al., 2026; Engkizar et al., 2026; Kassymova et al., 2025; Numan et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025).

The analytical material consists of normative sources and supporting scientific sources. Islamic normative sources include the Quran, hadith collections, and Islamic literature discussing fragrances, Bukhur, cleanliness, etiquette in worship, and the limits of their use based on the principle of tawhid. Confucian normative sources include documents and literature explaining Tian, Li, sincerity, respect for Confucius and ancestors, as well as the proper use of joss sticks in worship. Supporting sources consist of journal articles, academic books, theses, and institutional documents discussing

Bukhur, frankincense, incense, joss sticks, ritual symbolism, culture, and interfaith dialogue. Journal articles from 2020–2026 are prioritized to strengthen the contemporary context, while classical sources are still used when necessary to explain the normative foundations and history of the teachings.

The selection of materials was based on four criteria: direct relevance to the article's focus, clarity of the source's identity, academic or religious authority, and the source's ability to explain theological, ritual, symbolic, or social aspects. Sources that only discuss the use of incense in other religious traditions without a clear connection to Bukhur or Hio were not used as the primary basis for analysis. The units of analysis consist of statements, concepts, and descriptions that explain the materials and forms of use, ritual purposes, role in worship, the significance of the aroma and smoke, rules of use, and the spiritual orientation of each tradition.

The analysis process was conducted in several stages. First, sources were read and selected based on their relevance to the focus of the study. Second, key information was recorded and coded into four main categories: material form, ritual significance, symbolic meaning, and theological orientation. Third, data on Bukhur and Hio were organized into a comparative table to systematically identify similarities and differences. Fourth, the results of the comparison are interpreted through the framework of each religion's teachings and linked to issues of interfaith literacy and interfaith dialogue in Indonesia. The validity of the interpretations is ensured through cross-referencing normative sources, religious documents, and scientific research so that conclusions do not rely solely on a single source or perspective. The results of the analysis are then presented descriptively and argumentatively in the results and discussion section.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Incense in Islam: Fragrance, Devotion, and the Boundaries of Tawhid

Bukhur, or bakhur, is a fragrance derived from aromatic materials such as agarwood, sandalwood, damar, resin, musk, ambergris, essential oils, or other natural blends. These materials are burned over charcoal or in a special burner, producing fragrant smoke that perfumes the room and creates a comfortable atmosphere. In Islamic tradition, the use of bukhur is inseparable from the concept of *thayyib* that is, something that is good, clean, fragrant, and pleasant. Therefore, bukhur is understood as a means of fostering cleanliness, comfort, and a sense of reverence in both acts of worship and religious social activities (Aziz, 2018; Fithria et al., 2023).

The use of bukhur in Islamic tradition has evolved as both a method of fragrance and a religious symbol, the meaning of which is shaped by the teachings and social context of Muslim communities. Bukhur typically consists of aromatic wood or a mixture of natural ingredients that are burned to produce a pleasant aroma and create a comfortable atmosphere in homes, mosques, zikr gatherings, and other social and religious activities. In Islamic tradition, bukhur can be understood as a means of fostering a religious atmosphere and reinforcing religious identity (Shabah et al., 2023). In the context of Indonesian Muslims, its use is also associated with the values of purity, respect, and comfort, provided it is not accompanied by beliefs that contradict Islamic teachings (Imtinan et al., 2025).

From an Islamic perspective, the use of Bukhur is acceptable as long as it is regarded as a fragrance rather than an object possessing metaphysical powers. Islam places great emphasis on cleanliness and pleasant fragrance, as both are

related to the etiquette of worship. This is in line with a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

إِنَّ هَذَا يَوْمٌ عِيدٌ جَعَلَهُ اللَّهُ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ، فَمَنْ جَاءَ إِلَى الْجُمُعَةِ فَلْيَغْتَسِلْ، وَإِنْ كَانَ طِيبٌ فَلْيَمَسْ مِنْهُ وَعَلَيْكُمْ بِالسِّوَاكِ

Meaning: *“Indeed, today, Friday, is a day of celebration that Allah SWT has bestowed upon Muslims. Everyone who comes to Friday prayer should take a bath; if they have perfume, they should apply it; and you should use the simak.”* (HR. Ibnu Majah)

This hadith indicates that the use of fragrances holds a positive status in Islam, especially when associated with personal hygiene and a Muslim’s readiness to perform acts of worship (Ibn Mājah, 2024). In this context, bukhur can be understood as a type of fragrance that serves to create a pleasant aroma and a comfortable atmosphere. However, the use of Bukhur is not a requirement for the validity of worship. Prayer, dhikr, supplication, and other acts of worship remain valid without Bukhur because the relationship between humans and Allah in Islam is direct and does not require a material intermediary.

The theological boundaries of Bukhur’s use lie in the user’s intention and belief. If Bukhur is used to perfume a room, create a calming atmosphere, or honor guests, then its use falls within the realm of *mubah* (permissible) and can be considered virtuous. However, if Bukhur is believed to be capable of summoning spirits, jinn, or supernatural forces, or to serve as a means of seeking help from anyone other than Allah, then such a practice contradicts the principle of Tawhid. The Quran emphasizes that human prayers and supplications are directed solely to Allah SWT (RI, 2019):

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ ۚ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

Meaning: *And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me - indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided.* (QS. Al-Baqarah: 186)

This verse makes it clear that in Islam, prayer does not require any physical intermediary, such as smoke, scent, or specific material symbols. Therefore, Bukhur can only serve as a means to create a fragrant and comfortable atmosphere for worship, not as a medium that conveys prayers to Allah. This principle is important for distinguishing between permissible cultural practices and religious practices that deviate from tawhid (Al Munawarah et al., 2024).

In addition to worship, the use of fragrances is also found in the context of preparing the deceased. This is evident in a narration from Jabir in which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

إِذَا جُمِعْتُمُ الْمَيِّتَ فَأَوْبُرُوا

Meaning: *“If you anoint or perfume the deceased, use an odd number of applications”* (Narrated by Ibn Hibban and Al-Hakim).

Another narration also states:

أَوْصَى أَبُو سَعِيدٍ وَابْنُ عُمَرَ وَابْنُ عَبَّاسٍ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ أَنْ يُجَمَّرَ أَكْفَاهُمُ بِالْعُودِ

Meaning: *“Abu Sa’id, Ibn ‘Umar, and Ibn ‘Abbas instructed that their shrouds be perfumed with agarwood.”*

This account demonstrates that the use of fragrances in Islam has a strong traditional foundation, particularly as a form of respect, cleanliness, and honor for human beings (Al-Hākim, 1990; Hibbān, 1993). Thus, incense in Islam is not a core element of worship but rather a supporting practice associated with the values of cleanliness, respect, and spiritual comfort.

The Prophet Muhammad's love for fragrances is also emphasized in the following hadith:

حُبِّبَ إِلَيَّ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا النِّسَاءُ وَالطِّيبُ، وَجُعِلَ قُرَّةُ عَيْنِي فِي الصَّلَاةِ

Meaning: *"My pleasures in this world are women and perfume, and my solace is in prayer"* (Narrated by An-Nasa'i, No. 3391, and Ahmad, 3:128).

In addition, a narration from Ibn Umar, may Allah be pleased with him, also describes the use of agarwood as a fragrance:

كَانَ ابْنُ عُمَرَ إِذَا اسْتَجَمَرَ اسْتَجَمَرَ بِالْأَلُوَّةِ غَيْرَ مُطَرَّاةٍ، أَوْ بِكَافُورٍ يَطْرُحُهُ مَعَ الْأَلُوَّةِ، ثُمَّ قَالَ: هَكَذَا كَانَ يَسْتَجْمِرُ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

Meaning: *"When Ibn Umar used perfume, he used pure agarwood or camphor mixed with agarwood, and then he said, 'This is how the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, used perfume'"* (Narrated by An-Nasa'i, No. 5152).

Based on this explanation, research findings indicate that Bukhur in Islam serves primarily as a fragrance and a means of creating a religious atmosphere (Al-Nasā'i, 1986; Hanbal, 2001). Its use is permissible as long as it does not exceed the bounds of tawhid. Thus, the legal assessment of Bukhur does not lie in the object itself or its smoke, but rather in the intention, belief, and manner of its use.

Incense in Confucianism: A Symbol of Sincerity, Li, and Cosmic Harmony

In the Confucian tradition, incense holds an important place in religious rituals. Confucianism, or Ru Jiao, is a doctrine that emphasizes moral development, etiquette, reverence for Heaven, respect for Confucius, devotion to ancestors, and harmony among humans, society, and the universe (Aziz, 2018). Within this framework, incense is understood not merely as a room freshener but also as a symbol of sincerity, respect, and humanity's connection to the spiritual realm. The presence of incense in Confucian rituals demonstrates that religious practice is not limited to spoken prayers but also encompasses symbols, gestures, scents, and rituals that hold profound meaning for the faithful who perform them.

Incense has long been used in Confucian tradition as a means of worshiping Heaven, Confucius, sacred spirits, and ancestors. In practice, the burning of incense is part of the Li system a set of ritual etiquette that emphasizes regularity, politeness, order, and sincerity. Li not only governs the external procedures of worship but also cultivates the human spirit to approach it with a respectful and sincere attitude. Incense, or xiang, means "fragrant," so the fragrance that arises from burning incense is interpreted as a symbol of the purity of intention and the sincerity of prayer. The expressions "Dao You Xin He" and "Xin Jia Xiang Chuan" illustrate that the sacred path originates from the unity of the heart, and the heart is conveyed through the fragrance of incense (Kellyn, 2021; Sulaiman, 2009). Thus, incense is not merely a material object but serves as a symbol connecting inner attitudes with ritual practices.

The function of incense in Confucianism encompasses religious, moral, and symbolic dimensions. Religiously, incense is used in prayer as a symbol of reverence for Heaven, Confucius, the saints, and ancestors. The incense smoke rising upward is understood as a symbol of the sincerity of human prayer and reverence toward the sacred. Morally, incense reminds people to pray with a pure heart, maintain propriety, honor parents and ancestors, and build harmonious relationships with others. Symbolically, incense serves as a marker that rituals are not merely outward actions but inner practices aimed at cultivating ethical awareness. Therefore, the use of incense in Confucianism cannot be separated from the effort to cultivate civilized, orderly individuals who

are capable of properly positioning themselves in their relationships with God, ancestors, family, society, and nature (Najibbudin, 2020; Sulaiman, 2009).

The meaning of Hio is also closely tied to the ethical values in Confucian teachings. The ethic of sincerity (cheng) emphasizes the importance of honest intentions in prayer, speech, and action. The ethic of respect and filial piety (xiao) teaches the duty to honor parents and ancestors as part of the moral continuity of the family. The ethic of propriety (li) guides believers to perform rituals in an orderly, polite, and mindful manner. Meanwhile, the values of moral virtue, harmony, and self-reflection encourage people to improve their behavior and maintain a balanced relationship between humans, Tian, ancestors, and nature. Thus, the Hio serves not only as a ritual tool but also as a medium for moral education that teaches sincerity, respect, order, and harmony in life (Suryadi & Azecharie, 2020).

In addition to having religious and ethical significance, incense sticks also have specific rules regarding their quantity and proper use. Incense sticks with green handles are typically used in the context of mourning or paying respects to the remains of one's own family members, while those with red handles are used for general prayer. A single stick of Hio can signify mental focus and sincerity in prostration. Two sticks are used to honor the spirits of one's parents or a specific funeral altar. Five sticks symbolize the Five Virtues or Wu Chang, while nine sticks are used in prayers to the One True God, the Prophet, and the saints. The procedure for placing Hio also follows specific rules. For example, three sticks of incense are placed in the order of center, left, and right. These rules demonstrate that Confucian rituals are built upon a symbolic order that is not performed haphazardly but follows a system of values passed down through religious tradition (Sulaiman, 2009).

The rules governing the number and manner of using Hio demonstrate that symbols in Confucianism possess a strong semantic structure. Each number and movement is not merely technical but carries moral and spiritual messages. This indicates that Hio serves as a means of fostering ritual awareness. Worshipers are not merely invited to light incense but also to offer sincerity of heart, focus their minds, and become aware of their connection to Tian, their ancestors, and their fellow human beings. Therefore, Hio becomes part of the process of internalizing values that is, instilling attitudes of respect, orderliness, and responsibility in daily life.

Although Hio holds an important place in Confucian rituals, its use is still understood as a symbolic means, not an object of worship. When someone is traveling or does not have Hio, they can still pray without using incense. This demonstrates that the essence of prayer in Confucianism lies in sincerity of heart and reverence, while Hio serves to help create an atmosphere of devotion, order, and sacredness (Hamid et al., 2026; Najibbudin, 2020). Thus, Hio holds a more formal position than Bukhur in Islam, yet it still functions as a symbol and ritual tool, not as the object of worship. Hio serves as a medium that clarifies the relationship between ritual, ethics, and cosmic harmony in Confucian teachings.

A Comparative Study of Bukhur and Hio: Similarities, Differences, and Social Relevance

From a phenomenological perspective, Bukhur and Hio share similarities because both use scent and smoke as a means of creating a spiritual atmosphere. Both provide a sensory experience through the sense of smell, which can calm the mind, enhance concentration, and create a sacred atmosphere. In ritual activities, fragrant aromas often serve to distinguish between ordinary spaces and religious spaces. Therefore, both Bukhur and Hio demonstrate that spiritual experiences occur not only through texts and prayers but also through symbols,

the body, space, and the senses.

However, this material similarity does not imply that they hold the same theological status. In Islam, bukhur serves as a supplementary means that does not determine the validity of worship. It is used to perfume a room, honor guests, create a calming atmosphere, and enhance devotion. In Islam, prayers are still directed directly to Allah without the mediation of objects. In contrast, in Confucianism, incense (Hio) holds a more formal role in the ritual framework because it symbolizes sincerity, respect, and humanity's connection to Tian, Confucius, ancestors, and the universe (Asih & Yudha Triguna, 2022; Mawardi, 2023).

Another difference lies in the structure of meaning and the rules governing its use. In Islam, there are no specific rules regarding the amount of Bukhur that must be burned, as its use places greater emphasis on its fragrance, the intention behind it, and the purpose for which it is used (Al Munawarah et al., 2024; Karyadi, 2022). In contrast, in the Confucian tradition, the number of Hio sticks carries symbolic functions and meanings tailored to the context of worship. One, two, five, eight, and nine Hio sticks are used in different ritual contexts. The regulations regarding the number, procedures for use, and symbolic meanings indicate that Hio is part of the more detailed Li ritual system (Sulaiman, 2009). The main differences between Bukhur in Islam and Hio in Confucianism are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of the Status, Function, and Meaning of Bukhur in Islam and Hio in Confucianism

Aspect	Bukhur in Islam	Hio in Confucianism
Ritual Position	A supporting medium for worship and fragrance in the room	An essential instrument in the order of worship
Main Function	Provides fragrance, cleanliness, comfort, and solemnity	Symbolizes sincerity, respect, and spiritual harmony
Theological Foundation	Tawhid, cleanliness, etiquette, and the Prophet's love for fragrance	Tian, Li, reverence for Confucius, ancestors, and cosmic harmony
Meaning of Smoke	Not a medium of prayer; only creates a religious atmosphere	A symbol of reverence and earnestness in prayer
Quantity Regulation	No specific regulation	The number of incense sticks carries symbolic meaning
Usage Limitation	Must not be accompanied by shirk beliefs or occult practices	Used in ritual order as a symbol of sincerity and respect

From this comparison, it can be understood that Bukhur and Hio both serve spiritual functions but differ in their theological foundations and ritual significance. Bukhur places greater emphasis on cleanliness, fragrance, and the comfort of worship, whereas Hio emphasizes the symbolism of sincerity, respect, and ritual order. This distinction is important to avoid equating the meanings of these two practices, which appear materially similar.

In the Indonesian context, the coexistence of Bukhur and Hio also reflects a space for acculturation and tolerance. Indonesians live in a multicultural and multireligious environment, so the ritual scents emanating from mosques, places of worship, temples, and other cultural spaces have become part of everyday social life. In some places, Muslim communities incorporate the use of Bukhur

or incense into their religious activities, while Confucian communities maintain the use of Hio as part of their prayer rituals. The coexistence of these two traditions demonstrates that ritual differences do not necessarily lead to conflict but can instead create a space for dialogue when understood in a balanced manner.

Thus, the results of this study confirm that Bukhur in Islam and Hio in Confucianism must be understood within the context of their respective belief systems. In Islam, Bukhur must not be regarded as a means of summoning supernatural powers or as an intermediary for prayer, as this contradicts the principle of tawhid. In Confucianism, Hio is not merely an incense but a symbol of moral sincerity and cosmic harmony. This comparison demonstrates that the practice of ritual incense carries layered meanings material, symbolic, spiritual, and social. A proper understanding of these meanings can strengthen interfaith literacy, reduce prejudice toward the ritual practices of other religions, and foster appreciation for the diversity of religious traditions in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the similarity in the use of fragrance and smoke in Bukhur and Hio does not indicate a common theological status or ritual function. In Islam, Bukhur serves as a supplementary means to create a pleasant aroma, comfort, and a sense of devotion without being a determining factor in the validity of worship or a medium for prayer; thus, its use is permissible as long as it is not accompanied by beliefs that contradict the principle of tawhid. In Confucianism, Hio holds a more structured position within the worship system as a symbol of sincerity, respect, and ritual order within the Li system. These findings can be applied in religious education, interfaith literacy, and interfaith dialogue to prevent the conflation of symbols, reduce prejudice, and strengthen respect for differences in religious practices. Further research is recommended to involve Muslim and Confucian leaders and followers through interviews or observations to gain a more empirical understanding of the use and interpretation of Bukhur and Hio in community life.

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