

LILEN SAN JUAN: The Light Of Social Cohesion and Religious Moderation

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ABSTRACT

The rituals and the symbols embedded therein serve as markers of national identity and sources of inspiration for harmony within Indonesia's multi-religious society. The researcher posits that the San Juan ritual and its accompanying symbols function as mediums for fostering social cohesion and hold significant implications for the promotion of religious moderation in Indonesia. This study seeks to explore the spiritual significance of the San Juan ritual as a contribution to the formation of a cohesive society grounded in the principles of religious moderation. The study adopts an anthropological and sociological approach. Data were obtained through field observations and structured interviews with 25 informants, including cultural leaders, religious leaders, government officials, educators, and youth. The data were analyzed in three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and data verification, utilizing two analytical techniques—descriptive analysis and content analysis. The analysis of the rituals, their symbols, and the behavior of ritual participants is key to understanding the social structures and processes, as well as the broader social phenomena at play. This study finds that, in light of Victor Turner's theoretical framework, the San Juan ritual—especially the candle (lilen) as its central symbol—serves both to reinforce the identity of the San Juan community and to act as a conduit for fostering social cohesion that supports religious moderation in Indonesia. This implica-

tional meaning also contributes to the scholarly discourse in the sociology and anthropology of religion.

Keywords: Lilen San Juan; Social Cohesion; Religious Moderation

INTRODUCTION

The San Juan ritual, performed by both indigenous people and Catholics in Lebao Village, Larantuka, East Flores, serves as mediums for fostering social cohesion and hold significant implications for the promotion of religious moderation in Indonesia (Aksa & Nurhayati, 2020; Zahra et al., 2022; Mujahid, 2023; Fuadi et al., 2023; Harahap et al., 2023). North Sumatra requires a long transformation within the framework of religious moderation to build harmony and maturity. This study aims to reveal the dynamic spectrum of religious moderation in the bubble of North Sumatra's local wisdom. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method by involving six subjects who were selected through a purposive sampling technique. Subject criteria are natives of North Sumatra and have sufficient knowledge of religious moderation in the local custom of North Sumatra. In-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to collect the required data. This study reveals a vast spectrum of diversity among the North Sumatrans. In the meantime, religious moderation is evidence of upholding religious ideals integrated with the local culture. Moreover, this research also shows how the people of North Sumatra from the following three regions, (1. Rituals in general—including the San Juan ritual—function as repositories of symbols that Victor Turner identifies as “dominant symbols” imbued with supernatural significance (Turner, 1968; Bull et al., 2015). In this context, rituals play a role in uniting individuals from diverse backgrounds. Among the Ndemu community, which forms the basis of Turner's research, rituals address divisions stemming from traditional political contestation and social conflict. According to Turner, through ritual practice, members of a community experience a profound emotional and spiritual bond, which in turn fortifies social cohesion (Sahar, 2019).

Turner interprets rituals as symbolic vessels that are rich in meaning for both social and religious life. These symbols not only reflect cultural values but also possess the power to connect individuals and communities with the transcendent or supernatural dimension (Bruner et al., 1986; Turner, 2000; Haggar, 2024). In Turner's perspective, ritual symbols generate shared values and norms (Dawsey, 2021), which—within the context of this study—

are understood to contribute to the construction of social cohesion and to support the idea of religious moderation. Participation in such rituals allows individuals and their communities to engage simultaneously in two interconnected dimensions: symbolic action and the internalization of shared values and norms essential to their collective identity (Tawabie & Amin, 2024).

During field observations, researchers found that *lilen* (candles), one of the central elements in the San Juan ritual, embody symbolic dimensions as proposed by Turner (Turner, 2000; Sahar, 2019; Uhrin, 2020; Kapferer & Gold, 2024). In the San Juan ritual, candles—traditionally representing the Divine Light or the presence of God in Christian, particularly Catholic, liturgical practice (Martasudjita, 1998; Martasudjita, 2011) —are accorded a place of special reverence (Ege, 2010; Anikpe et al., 2021). Within the ritual, *lilen* (candles) serve as a medium for the encounter between “the social” and “the divine.” The social dimension pertains to the religious aspects of communal life, including moral norms, interpersonal relationships, and the collective identity of the community. The divine dimension pertains to the connection between individuals and society with the transcendent or the sacred, and its impact on social action (Weber, 1930).

According to the researcher, the encounter between “the social” and “the divine” holds significant implications for the fostering of social cohesion and the internalization of religious moderation—particularly from within the practitioner community itself—and can further serve as social capital in building external social cohesion. This perspective is rooted in the foundational assumption that the San Juan ritual guides its participants from the profane realm—associated with the concerns of everyday life—into the sacred one (Ashkelon, 2020), and then returns them to the profane realm with transformative consequences. This two-dimensional encounter ultimately affects interpersonal relations in the profane realm, as the renewed bond with the divine—strengthened through ritual and symbolic action—shapes subsequent social behavior. For the researcher, analyzing ritual behavior and symbols within the ritual is key to understanding the social structures and processes that characterize a society, as well as the broader social phenomena at play.

Studies on religious and cultural symbols have been carried out by numerous scholars, including those on ritual symbols in relation to community identity and symbols and social harmony (Iswanto & Kawanggung, 2021); religious symbols and consumer brand preferences (Agarwala et al., 2021); the orchestration of the Islamic call to prayer (adhan) and the tolling of church bells as sacred symbols in fostering social harmony (Zahra et al., 2022);

symbols as elements of human life as homo symbolicus (Neacșu, 2024); and wayang as a national symbol of Indonesia and a medium for contextualizing religious teachings (Rumbay et al., 2024).

However, these studies have not deeply explored how the creation and use of such symbols affect social cohesion and religious moderation. This gap is precisely what the present study aims to address, drawing on Victor Turner's theoretical framework (perspective). The researcher posits that rituals and their symbols serve as media or instruments for fostering social cohesion within society (Wirata, 2023; Azka et al., 2024; Atasoge et al., 2022). *Lilen* as the central symbol of ritual practice, communal gathering, and collective participation, holds significant implications for efforts to build a cohesive society. The ideal of building a cohesive society is also part of the promotion of religious moderation in Indonesia (Fuadi et al., 2023; Pajariantanto et al., 2022; Wisnarni, 2023; Gaffar et al., 2022). However, these studies do not specifically examine religious moderation in relation to religious and cultural symbols or social cohesion within a multi-religious context. In this regard, the main point that distinguishes this study from previous studies is the argument that the San Juan ritual, along with the understanding of its accompanying symbols, enables its practitioners to foster social cohesion and ground the ideal of religious moderation within the multi-religious context of Larantuka in particular, and Indonesia in general.

The researcher maintains that the San Juan ritual can serve as both inspiration and guiding spirit in efforts to fortify and strengthen the idea of religious moderation—an ideal that culminates in the preservation and nurturing of social harmony in Indonesia, viewed through the lens of local wisdom (Yusuf 2022; Sunarno et al., 2023). This study supports and enriches the study of religious moderation in a multicultural and multireligious society in Indonesia from a sociological perspective that uses local wisdom as its foundational approach. This is important, as such studies can contribute to strengthening national unity and reducing the potential for discrimination and social conflict among communities, while also harnessing Indonesia's diversity to foster social cohesion (Anggoro, 2022; Regus, 2022; Sunarno et al., 2023).

The study of the San Juan ritual within the framework of social cohesion and religious moderation was conducted using qualitative research methods, aligning with the researcher's objective to explore and analyze the knowledge, experiences, opinions, and sentiments of informants regarding the process, implementation, and implications of the San Juan ritual. The study took place from January to June 2025. The research approach integrated both

anthropological and sociological perspectives. From an anthropological standpoint, with an emphasis on the etic perspective, the researcher examined the relevance, purpose, and benefits of the study, interpreting and treating the field data in accordance with its nature and quality, while also taking into account the emic perspective (Ratna, 2010). Meanwhile, from a sociological perspective, the researcher examined the interaction between the worldview and everyday practices of the San Juan community as the principal custodian of the ritual tradition (Northcott, 2020). Participatory observation was chosen as method to obtain objective data. This dual perspective facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the social structure, interpersonal interactions, and social phenomena present among members of the San Juan ritual community (Northcott, 2020). The community targeted in this study comprises 11 neighborhoods within the San Juan Lebao Parish, Larantuka, East Flores, NTT. These include the neighborhoods of Senhora Lajari Gege, Santa Anna Lebao II, Santu Aloysius Lebao I, Santu Antonius Riag Nyiur, Hati Amat Kudus Yesus Tabali, Tuan Meninu Kota Rowido I, Santu Yoseph Kota Rowido II, Santu Fransiskus Kota Rowido III, Santu Antonius Kota Sau I, and Santu Paulus Kota Sau II.

Data were obtained through field observations and structured interviews with 25 informants, including cultural leaders, religious leaders, government officials, educators (both male and female), and youth (both male and female). Informants were selected using probability sampling based on four criteria: (1) the extensive knowledge held by cultural, religious, and governmental figures regarding the San Juan ritual; (2) gender representation; (3) generational representation, encompassing both elders as tradition custodians and youth as tradition successors; and (4) the potential for dissemination of study findings through educators. To ensure the study's validity and reliability, triangulation techniques were used (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). The data of field analysis proceeded in three main stages: (a) Data reduction, involving the organization of raw data into a more systematic and thematic format; (b) Data display, involving the presentation of study findings in the form of direct quotations from interviews; and (c) Data verification, involving the re-examination and interpretation of the data obtained in line with emerging patterns and trends. The processed data of field were then analyzed through two analytical techniques. First, descriptive analysis was conducted as the basis for contextual interpretation. Second, content analysis was conducted by following the procedures outlined in the research methodology (Sugiyono, 2016). These analytical stages and techniques were utilized to formulate valid and meaningful conclusions.

RITUAL IN VICTOR TURNER'S PERSPECTIVE

Victor Turner closely examined each object, gesture, song or prayer, spatial setting, and temporal moment used in the rituals of the Ndemu community. He understood that the presence of these elements—objects, gestures, songs or prayers, spatial setting, and temporal moment—symbolized something beyond their immediate appearance. For Turner, all of these elements point toward a transcendent or “other” reality that surpasses their literal form: specifically, the creation and maintenance of ordered social relations within the Ndembu community. In his study of the rituals of the Ndemu community, Turner emphasized the role of symbols as a cohesive force binding individuals in the construction of communal life. He thus regarded symbols as integral elements within the broader system that governs social life (Turner, 1977). Furthermore, Turner showed that analyzing ritual behavior and the symbols contained within rituals provides a key to understanding the social structures and processes, as well as the broader social phenomena at play.

According to Turner, rites are formalized behaviors performed at specific times that cannot be reduced to mere technological or utilitarian routines, as they are rooted in beliefs concerning mystical beings and supernatural powers (Turner, 1967). He defined rituals as repositories of authoritative symbols imbued with supernatural potency, manifested in the form of objects, actions, words, relational dynamics, events, bodily movements, or spatial configurations (Turner, 1968). For Turner, symbols operate as catalysts within observable social processes. They are capable of inspiring collective action, strengthening communal norms, and mediating conflict.

Turner views that rituals can assume or compensate for the absence of effective mechanisms of social control—roles that are typically fulfilled by political authorities or kinship systems. Rituals serve to remind participants (families, clans, communities) of the core values upheld by the collective. Even this regulatory and admonitory function is not exempt from emotional dynamics and potential conflicts. In this process, symbols may reflect both natural needs and social desires. Turner asserts that, at this juncture, a symbol unites what is obligatory and what is desired—achieving an intimate synthesis of the material and the moral (Turner, 1967).

According to Turner, such a role is possible because a symbol condenses multiple associations into a single object, expressing seemingly disparate meanings that are interconnected through analogical relationships or associations of facts and ideas (Turner, 1967). The symbol simultaneously encompasses two poles of meaning: the ideological or normative pole, which refers to the moral and social order and to broader principles of social organization; and the sensory or

orectic pole, which refers to natural or physiological phenomena and processes, thereby evoking desires and emotional responses at a more fundamental level. For instance, in the rituals of the Ndemu community known as Nkula—a ‘ritual of suffering’ related to the reproductive or menstrual ailments of female patients—the ritual uses parts of the mukula tree. This tree produces a red sap referred to by the Ndembu as “mukula blood.” Within the ritual context, this ‘blood’ represents the orectic pole (associated with childbirth) and the normative pole (representing the matrilineal structure of society) (Turner, 1968).

Turner argues that ritual symbols are effective not because they possess a singular, fixed meaning or because they can be clearly and consistently articulated. Rather, their significance derives from their multivocality. This multivocality—the capacity of a symbol to convey multiple meanings simultaneously—is especially potent in ritual contexts, and its strength lies in its rich associative potential, particularly when the social order is fragmented or under strain (Coleman, 2013). According to the researcher, one of the factors that gives rise to multivocality is what Duncan refers to as “significant symbols”—signals that simultaneously stimulate and evoke a shared meaning in both the sender and the receiver (Duncan, 1968). When these signals are produced collectively, the symbols that emerge carry dense associative meanings within communal settings. Duncan affirms that symbols are not merely personal or subjective; rather, something is symbolized through something else, and that something else is made publicly accessible and socially meaningful.

Another perspective suggests that rituals and symbols not only serve as means of social order and connection to the transcendent, but also carry subjective meanings that enrich individual experiences. Rituals not only unite groups but also serve as arenas for conflict, relational change, and social transformation, especially in the digital age. Turner argues that symbols in rituals represent social order; however, this approach can be considered reductionist as it neglects the subjective dimension and the diversity of meanings for individuals who experience them.

This is supported by Barrett (2023) who states that symbols are not solely connected to transcendental meanings but also enrich life experiences in a more subjective and personal way. Symbolism functions to clarify existing meanings and serves as a source of emotional strength in religious practices. In this regard, Johannessen & Collins (2024) emphasizes that rituals, as social mechanisms, not only unite groups but also facilitate conflict and the transformation of social relations. Unlike Turner, who associates ritual

with symbol-based order, Johannessen & Collins highlight the significance of direct physical presence, even as rituals continue to evolve in the digital era. Similarly, Tavory & Hoynes (2025) stress that rituals are not exclusively connected to the transcendent but also operate as social mechanisms that shape and transform interpersonal interactions. The theory of interaction rituals underscores that rituals not only reflect social structures but also promote self-transformation and the reshaping of social relationships. Rituals thus open new possibilities for understanding social dynamics and addressing inequalities within interactions.

THE IDEALISM OF A COHESIVE SOCIETY IN THE FRAMEWORK OF RELIGIOUS MODERATION

According to Gough and Olofsson, the concept of social cohesion has emerged and developed through a long and complex history within the realms of social, political, and economic thought. In the 19th century, concerns regarding social order and cohesion became central themes in sociology, as articulated by foundational thinkers such as Karl Marx, with his emphasis on the division of labor; Herbert Spencer, with his theory of social evolution; and Émile Durkheim, with his specific theory of social development. These foundational ideas were later extended by Talcott Parsons, who emphasized societal integration through a normative system rooted in civil and political culture within the framework of the modern nation-state (Gough & Olofsson, 1999).

Marx introduced what is commonly referred to as conflict theory. He maintained that within every social order, regulation of conflicting interests is inevitable. According to Marx (and those following his school of thought), the dynamic of conflict between individuals and social groups is an inherent and important element of all societal structures. Durkheim, conversely, introduced is commonly referred to as harmony theory. He asserted that the defining feature of any society is the cooperative interaction of social actors, especially in small-scale communities that are already well-integrated. Durkheim placed his confidence in the notion that harmony—not conflict—is what defines both the existence and functioning of society. His work was grounded in the analysis of social phenomena that highlight the roles and functions of each member of society in forming and producing what is termed social cohesion.

Andy Green, John Preston, and Jan Germen Janmaat state that the term social cohesion refers to a relatively harmonious social condition characterized by low crime rates and high levels of interpersonal and societal trust (Green et al., 2006). When expanded, this notion of a relatively harmonious social

condition includes a society marked by high levels of tolerance—both among individuals and between cultures and religious traditions. Such a condition is considered a fundamental prerequisite for fostering cooperation between individuals and between individuals and the broader community.

In line with this, Jensen defines social cohesion as the process involving commitment, willingness, and the capacity to live together in harmony. However, Jensen warns that the pursuit of cohesion must be balanced; involving too many social “ties” or insisting on value conformity may lead to stagnation and create a closed, insular community (Jensen, 1998). On the other hand, Maxwell (as cited in Green et al., 2006), emphasizes that social cohesion entails the fostering of shared values and a sense of community. This shared experience generally allows individuals to perceive themselves as participating in a common endeavor, facing shared challenges, and belonging to the same collective identity. (Green et al., 2006).

The desire to commit to harmonious coexistence among diverse community groups—particularly across ethnic and religious lines—is a central ideal of religious moderation in Indonesia. Religious moderation is understood as a perspective, attitude, and behavior, both individual and communal, that consistently seeks a middle path, upholds justice, and avoids religious extremism (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019; Aksa & Nurhayati, 2020; Rohmadi et al., 2022; Mujahid, 2023; Mutawali, 2023). A just and balanced disposition constitutes the foundation of religious moderation, alongside core values such as tolerance, egalitarianism, deliberation, uprightness, and principled firmness (Rahman et al., 2022; Wisnarni, 2023). From this perspective, religious moderation is key to fostering a climate of tolerance and harmony within Indonesia’s multi-religious society (Salim, 2022; Sukrawati et al., 2023; Hakim et al., 2023). It encourages a balanced way of life that integrates devout practice of one’s own religious beliefs with deep respect for the religious practices of others. This perspective represents a *via media* (middle way), preventing adherents from falling into extremism or fanaticism (Kruja, 2021; Bowling, 2021; Hefni & Muna, 2022; Jati et al., 2022). Accordingly, the primary goal of promoting religious moderation in Indonesia is the creation of harmonious interreligious relations—realized through the practice of one’s own religious beliefs in a way that is balanced, inclusive, and respectful of religious diversity (Suhendi & Rahman, 2022; Yanti et al., 2023; Purba et al., 2023).

Religious moderation is also understood as a means of preventing intolerance and radicalism in religious practice. The concept of moderation is viewed as a response to the rise of violence perpetrated in the name of religion by

groups categorized as extremist, fundamentalist, terrorist, and even certain liberal factions (Fuadi et al., 2023). In this context, religious moderation is considered a viable solution to all forms of intolerance that endanger the harmony of religious life.

Moderate religious attitudes are reflected in four main dimensions. First, a commitment to the nation that respects pluralism and cultural-religious diversity. Second, the practice of tolerance, which includes respecting differences in beliefs, doctrines, and religious practices (Ridwan & Abdurrahim, 2022; Manahung et al., 2022). Third, the categorical rejection of all forms of violence carried out in the name of religion (Santos, 2022; Wibowo & Pelupessy, 2022). Fourth, the recognition, acceptance, and accommodation of the richness of culture and tradition that live and develop within society (Sulistiyani et al., 2020) minority groups are embedded in the discourse of nationality and social harmony in Indonesia. The term social harmony signifies that each race, ethnicity, or religion must be placed in an equal standing/position. The research focuses on understanding the identity negotiation strategies, in establishing the social harmony, that are used by adherents of local religions which are considered minorities in a community where the majority of people believe in formal religions. This study uses the Co-Cultural Theory and employs a phenomenology research method to explore the way in which co-cultural groups' members negotiate their cultural differences with the members of dominant groups. The groups that are chosen as the subject of this research are the religious groups that live in a relatively supportive community (Kawruh Jiwa). Thus, religious moderation essentially encompasses teachings, principles, and values regarding how the faithful should embody and live out their religious convictions—especially in fostering respectful and constructive relationships with others, both within their own religious community and across different faith traditions (Rahman et al., 2022).

The encounter between the San Juan ritual and the ideals of religious moderation invites both cultural practitioners and religious adherents to express a spirit of unity, solidarity, and harmony in diversity (Harahap et al., 2023) North Sumatra requires a long transformation within the framework of religious moderation to build harmony and maturity. This study aims to reveal the dynamic spectrum of religious moderation in the bubble of North Sumatra's local wisdom. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method by involving six subjects who were selected through a purposive sampling technique. Subject criteria are natives of North Sumatra and have sufficient knowledge of religious moderation in the local custom of North Sumatra. In-

depth interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to collect the required data. This study reveals a vast spectrum of diversity among the North Sumatrans. In the meantime, religious moderation is evidence of upholding religious ideals integrated with the local culture. Moreover, this research also shows how the people of North Sumatra from the following three regions, (1; Wiguna & Andari, 2023). Therefore, in the context of religious life, the willingness to engage with and accommodate local culture encourages the faithful and broader society to adopt an inclusive and tolerant attitude toward diversity, thereby fostering a religious atmosphere that is peaceful, dynamic, and enthusiastic (Harahap et al., 2023) North Sumatra requires a long transformation within the framework of religious moderation to build harmony and maturity. This study aims to reveal the dynamic spectrum of religious moderation in the bubble of North Sumatra's local wisdom. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method by involving six subjects who were selected through a purposive sampling technique. Subject criteria are natives of North Sumatra and have sufficient knowledge of religious moderation in the local custom of North Sumatra. In-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to collect the required data. This study reveals a vast spectrum of diversity among the North Sumatrans. In the meantime, religious moderation is evidence of upholding religious ideals integrated with the local culture. Moreover, this research also shows how the people of North Sumatra from the following three regions, (1.

THE RITUAL OF SAN JUAN AS A SYMBOL

According to Turner, rituals serve as symbols of broader realities, particularly social order. Social order refers to the condition of a society that lives in harmony, which in this study is interpreted as social cohesion—a consequence of communal adherence to shared rules, norms, and values (Azizah et al., 2021). The San Juan ritual is governed by a series of regulations and stages that are executed based on collective agreements within the community, under the guidance of two main institutions: *adat* (traditional institutions) and the Church. Adherence to these is essential to ensure order throughout each stage of the ritual. This adherence is most visibly manifested in the process of making *lilen* (candles), which follows specific requirements in terms of raw materials, shape, and quantity according to the ritual's needs.

The ethnographic field study of the San Juan ritual examines the ritual as a symbolic action, consistent with Turner's perspective. The San Juan ritual, as a cultural and religious symbol, serves to reproduce and reinforce the shared values and beliefs of the community (Haggar, 2024). These shared

values and beliefs constitute the moral and spiritual principles, worldviews, and convictions held by the people, shaping behavioral norms, interpersonal relations, and the communal understanding of what is good, true, and ideal (Al-Fairusy et al., 2024). The following are excerpts of ideas from informants that affirm this perspective:

“Truly living out faith in Jesus Christ and having the willingness to repent and return to the righteous path.” (I-11).

“The San Juan Procession is an opportunity to foster unity and strength among the seven neighborhoods (villages) without neglecting the celebration of sacred rituals.” (I-16).

“Praising and glorifying the greatness of God through Saint John the Baptist as the patron saint of the parish, while fostering closer brotherhood and togetherness.” (I-20).

“The faithful of San Juan Parish understands this as a symbol of unity—by being fully involved from the Eucharistic devotion to the evening procession.” (I-23)

Turner, as cited by Al-Fairusy, suggested that values and beliefs form a collective identity for the community that observes ritual practices and serve as guiding principles for their actions. These shared values and beliefs also foster the preservation of social order and encourage cooperation among members of the community (Al-Fairusy et al., 2024). In this context, the San Juan ritual affirms Turner’s theoretical ideal, as reflected in the following excerpts of ideas from informants:

“In addition to practicing devotion and reverence toward the sacrament, there is also cooperation, solidarity, and collaboration among the faithful, the government, the Church, and traditional institutions.” (I-6)

“All members of the faithful are called to support one another, to strengthen each other, and to live in the love of brotherhood at all times and in all places, both in joy and in sorrow.” (I-9)

“As a community, this ritual increasingly binds individuals together in a spirit of unity, familial bonds, and neighborly relations, involving both those physically present and those participating morally.” (I-13)

“We respect and appreciate one another—the faithful of San Juan Parish, the faithful from nearby parishes, fellow Catholics, and those of different religious traditions.” (I-17)

“The central message of this ritual is to continually uphold harmony within the family, the community, and the religious diversity that exists within the territory of San Juan Parish in Lebao Tengah.” (I-18)

“The unity fostered through this ritual serves as a foundation of strength within diversity.” (I-22).

When functioning as a moral and spiritual guideline for its participants, the San Juan ritual also creates a framework for regulating their actions. This element of regulation is evident in the structured sequence of ritual stages, such as the registration of *mardomu*, the pouring of candles (*tuang lilen*), the *peresa lilen*, the San Juan Procession (*persisan*), and *serah punto dama*. The roles assumed by traditional leaders and institutions, the *mardomu* and the broader community form an integral part of the social order that serves as a prototype for achieving social cohesion (Kasidi et al., 2023; Akbar et al., 2023). Traditional leader and local institution often serve as mediator in social conflicts, including those involving differences in belief. They possess cultural authority to cultivate a spirit of tolerance and diversity. On the other hand, the role of *mardomu* (which can be understood as figures who nurture or safeguard social values) is vital in fostering harmony. They can serve as models of integrity, preserving religious values that remain inclusive and peaceful. Likewise, the broader community acts as a space for cross-identity interaction. When moderate values are instilled through local culture, society can coexist peacefully despite religious differences. These elements are the very essence of religious moderation.

In the San Juan ritual, candles (*lilen*) are one of the central symbolic elements that attract the focus and devotion of the community. Turner highlights the role of symbols as cohesive agents in human social relationships, contributing to the creation of shared life and mutual understanding. He argues that symbols integrate the obligatory and the desirable—forming an intimate union of the material and the moral (Turner, 1967). In this context, the researcher has identified two underlying aspects of the symbolic role of candles. First, the San Juan ritual and *lilen* (candles) function as symbols that shape and express the collective identity of the participating community. Second, the San Juan ritual and *lilen*, as its central symbol, act as social mechanisms that strengthen the solidarity of community groups. The ideas shared by informants, as previously discussed, affirm these findings.

During the San Juan ritual, thousands of candles are burned (lit) along the path traversed by the image of Saint John the Baptist, represented by a statue, and by Christ, present in the Blessed Sacrament. These candles also accompany the faithful—those who participate in the ritual by carrying candles in their hands, walking in procession with Saint John and the Eucharistic Christ, while praying and singing together (Valdés, 2022). The faithful come bearing countless *permesa* (form or intention: Progress in household economic endeavors, protection from disasters and dangers, abundant harvests, and the restoration of unity among divided families and tribes are highly valued).

Conversely, realities such as family poverty due to crop failure, the collapse of the family economy, and persistent disputes and conflicts within families and tribes are perceived as dark situations that burden this region. The candles in the San Juan ritual serve as a metaphorical unveiling of the darkness that covers the land of San Juan; they bring forth a new spiritual atmosphere in which what was hidden is revealed, what was veiled is interpreted, and what was in darkness is enlightened.

In the Christian tradition, candles symbolize Christ and those who profess faith in Him. “Christ is the light of the world” (John 8:12), and this light is extended to all Christians, as Jesus proclaimed in Matthew 5:14,16: “You are the light of the world.” (Rachman, 2009). When this theological symbolism is inculturated into the context of the San Juan religious tradition, its meaning and significance can be interpreted as follows: the candles in the San Juan ritual symbolize both Christ and the faithful of San Juan Parish. From this, two logical consequences arise, each carrying profound meaning.

First, the candles in the San Juan ritual are Christ. The candles in the San Juan ritual are made collectively: women boil the wax, pour it over a wick, compact it, pour again and compact it repeatedly; the traditional leaders and institutions observe the process attentively; and all participants present are involved in assisting the making of the candles. This process demonstrates the cohesiveness of the San Juan community. In this, Christ—as the symbol of the Light of the World—is being symbolically created in San Juan: He is heated to a boil (discussed, preached, prayed to, sought, worshiped) in the crucible of San Juan communal life; He is poured over the threads of their lives (lives marked by burdens and suffering) (Malbrough, 2016). He is then lined up—set in place along bamboo fences throughout the procession route—as a light that illuminates everything: the faithful and their surroundings (Olaveson, 2001). He who is symbolically “created” becomes the one who brings light (Gamau & Manik, 2023)—the light that frees them from the darkness of oppression, intimidation, conflict, and hardship, including failed harvests, poverty, and the social challenges endured by migrant families.

Second, the candles in the San Juan ritual represent the faithful of San Juan Parish. Just like Christ, the faithful of San Juan Parish are also engaged in their own transformation. They gather, refine themselves, and are “heated” (working, studying, striving to survive) until they are poured into the threads of their lives (family, clan, community). Like Christ, they are ultimately set in place as light on the night of San Juan, June 24th each year. They, too, appear as light illuminating their surroundings (*shedding light on what is hidden, bringing wrongdoing, falsehood, and evil into the open to be confronted and*

resolved). They illuminate a troubled world—confused, impoverished, and suffering—while simultaneously revealing more clearly the face of Christ: Christ who is discussed, preached, prayed to, sought, worshiped; Christ who lies down with an empty stomach; Christ who is evicted from the markets of Larantuka by tax collectors; Christ who hauls boats with empty baskets; Christ who is abandoned by her husband, terrorized, and stripped of her rights. The unity among the faithful reveals their shared social existence—joined hand in hand as they walk together through the struggles of life (Tawabie & Amin, 2024).

Christ and the faithful of San Juan Parish both manifest as *lilen* (candles). These candles share the same mission: to make all things bright, visible, understandable, and meaningful. Though both are candles, Christ is presented as the Main Candle (Main *Lilen*), from whom new light flows to the other candles—the faithful of San Juan Parish. This pilgrimage of light from the Main Candle to the smaller candles evokes the Catholic Church's Easter Vigil liturgy: the lighting of the Paschal Candle (Windhu, 1997; Martasudjita, 1998b). The Paschal Candle is the symbol of the light of the Risen Christ. The faithful bring their own candles and light them from the Paschal Flame. Through this act, they commit themselves to carry the light of Christ into their daily lives. Likewise, by receiving light from the Main Candle in the San Juan ritual, the community steps into its own troubled world carrying the light—seeking to illuminate problems and discover paths toward resolution.

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONSEQUENCES OF PROMOTING RELIGIOUS MODERATION

The faithful' anxiety and hope, together with the testimony and gaze of the candles, reflect their concern for the future, their longing for a life of beauty and dignity, as well as their witness to a prevailing darkness—a gaze that expresses a cry for solidarity. This solidarity is a recurring plea: to be truly enlightened and accompanied. From this phenomenon, several consequences can be analyzed in relation to the dimensions of anxiety, hope, testimony, and expression, particularly within the context of the San Juan Church. As a Church that serves as a sign and instrument of salvation (*sacramentum salutis*), San Juan plays a vital role in offering a space for spiritual reflection, especially for individuals seeking meaning and in responding to various forms of socio-religious distress. This perspective highlights the Church not only as a theological institution but also as a social agent that upholds human dignity and solidarity, contributing to the construction of a more meaningful and just life for the faithful.

First, the faithful who are burdened by personal anxiety and suffering need the comforting outreach of the San Juan Church—a hand that extends the light of peace and hope, fostering assurance, unity, and solidarity. This embodies the Church's preferential option for the poor, the weak, and the suffering. In this context, partisanship refers to an ecclesial solidarity—an intentional and committed choice to embrace the struggles, challenges, and full participation of the marginalized as one's own. This solidarity is essential to building a just and harmonious society. It aligns with the vision aspired by the promotion of religious moderation in Indonesia (Inayatillah et al., 2022; Ma'arif et al., 2023; Wisnarni, 2023; Harahap et al., 2023). North Sumatra requires a long transformation within the framework of religious moderation to build harmony and maturity. This study aims to reveal the dynamic spectrum of religious moderation in the bubble of North Sumatra's local wisdom. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method by involving six subjects who were selected through a purposive sampling technique. Subject criteria are natives of North Sumatra and have sufficient knowledge of religious moderation in the local custom of North Sumatra. In-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to collect the required data. This study reveals a vast spectrum of diversity among the North Sumatrans. In the meantime, religious moderation is evidence of upholding religious ideals integrated with the local culture. Moreover, this research also shows how the people of North Sumatra from the following three regions, (1.

In the context of grounding the ideal of religious moderation, a key step that must be considered is building a San Juan Church that is inclusive of social realities. An inclusive San Juan Church can be recognized through the following expressions of its presence. The Church holds a strategic role in providing spiritual accompaniment to pilgrims who experience anxiety and suffering, through counseling, faith reflection, and pastoral guidance oriented toward psychosocial recovery and spiritual well-being. Religious community-based support can significantly increase individual resilience in facing emotional and social crises (Borualogo et al., 2023). In addition, a pastoral approach that emphasizes the strengthening of hope and a sense of belonging within the faith community aligns with the concept of spiritual well-being developed in the psychology of religion (Bili et al., 2022). In this way, the Church functions not only as a place of worship but also as a space of healing for those seeking meaning and peace on their spiritual journey.

One tangible expression of this vision is the community's economic empowerment through skills development and entrepreneurship programs aimed at promoting the independence of the poor and vulnerable. This

approach is consistent with the concept of a community-based economy that prioritizes solidarity and shared prosperity (Mannahali et al., 2024). Community-based initiatives, such as agricultural or handicraft training, can increase access to economic resources and strengthen social resilience in multicultural and multireligious environments (Kasman, 2024; Sagajoka & Fatima, 2023). In this way, the Church functions not only as a spiritual center but also as an agent of social transformation that contributes to equitable and inclusive economic development.

In more specific contexts, the San Juan Church can function as a facilitator in promoting religious moderation and social solidarity through regular interfaith and intercultural engagements, such as dialogue sessions, social outreach, and religious festivals. These initiatives align with the concept of religious moderation, which emphasizes tolerance, inclusivity, and dialogue (Nurlaili et al., 2024; Munif et al., 2023; Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2023). Moreover, this community-based approach is supported by the theory of social cohesion, which shows that positive intergroup interactions can strengthen solidarity and harmony in a multicultural society (Hellgren & Zapata-Barrero, 2022). In this way, the Church functions not only as a place of worship but also a center of social dialogue that contributes to the fostering of a more peaceful and balanced communal life.

From the perspective of a multireligious society and the principles of religious moderation, the San Juan Church must function as a space of inclusivity and solidarity for communities on pilgrimage and those striving to live a dignified life. As part of the broader communion of the Church, its leaders and faithful are called to move beyond institutional comfort and engage with smaller ecclesial communities and marginalized groups experiencing social, economic, and political distress. The San Juan Church, inspired by the spirit of *Lilen Utama*, must become a beacon of light for a multicultural and multireligious society, embodying the values of religious moderation that prioritize dialogue, tolerance, and a preferential option for the vulnerable (Albahri & Alfauzan, 2023; Nurlaili et al., 2024; Fuadi et al., 2023; Mutawali, 2023). A Church that stands with the poor and suffering is not one confined to grand altars, but one actively present in the social struggles of its people. This vision is aligned with the principles of liberation theology, which emphasize prophetic action and engagement in the pursuit of social justice (Missa, 2024). Therefore, the San Juan Church is called to reflect on how *Lilen Utama* can truly serve as a guiding light in the midst of social darkness—by advocating for the rights of the oppressed and fostering interfaith solidarity as a foundation for building a more just and harmonious society.

Second, in the context of religious moderation, the San Juan Church bears a moral and social responsibility to embrace and support smaller churches facing various challenges, such as poverty, oppression, and social conflict. Indifference to these realities indicates that the San Juan ritual has not yet fully functioned as a transformative force within society. In line with the concept of social cohesion, the Church must act as an agent of solidarity—one that not only strengthens spiritual bonds but also brings tangible improvements to the social welfare of its faithful (Alfiansyah, 2023). Religious rituals that fail to address the needs of vulnerable communities risk becoming mere ceremonial expressions, devoid of the substance necessary for real social transformation (Tawabie & Amin, 2024). Therefore, the Church must take proactive steps to ensure that the spirituality it promotes is not exclusive but actively contributes to social justice and the common good.

The social cohesion fostered through the San Juan ritual holds significant potential to reinforce religious moderation, particularly in multicultural and multireligious contexts. This ritual should serve as a space where diverse groups can engage in positive interaction, cultivate mutual understanding, and strengthen interfaith solidarity (Hasanah, 2023; Hulu et al., 2024). When religious communities unite in shared social commitment and communal life, they can become a powerful force in addressing social and economic disparities (Fakhrudin, 2024). In this regard, religious moderation should not be seen as passive tolerance but as active engagement that affirms the values of justice and the common good. At this level, religious moderation becomes not only a conceptual framework but also a grassroots social movement involving community actors in the pursuit of harmony (Wardi et al., 2023; Wiguna & Andari, 2023; Nurlaili et al., 2024). Thus, the San Juan ritual should be further oriented toward fostering harmonious social relations and cultivating collective awareness of the need for concrete action in building a more inclusive and just society.

CONCLUSION

Rituals and symbols play a vital role as mediating instruments and gateways in fostering social cohesion in Indonesia—a nation characterized by profound religious and cultural diversity. Through various religious rituals, communities experience a sense of togetherness, strengthen the values of tolerance, and foster mutual respect among groups of differing faith traditions. Religious symbols—whether expressed through customs, sacred architecture, or other forms of cultural expression—also function as cohesive elements that bind individuals to their communities, reinforce a shared identity, and promote

harmonious intergroup relations. When embraced as instruments of unity, rituals and symbols serve as effective vehicles for realizing the ideals of religious moderation, in which each individual is nurtured in a deeper understanding of the value of pluralism and a commitment to sustaining a peaceful and respectful religious coexistence. These efforts form a crucial foundation for building an inclusive society grounded in the principle of unity in diversity.

This study affirms and supports various initiatives led by the Indonesian government and local communities that seek to safeguard religious rituals as expressions of local wisdom—which carry deep cultural and theological significance. These efforts aim to preserve traditions that function not only as expressions of religious devotion but also as markers of social identity that reinforce solidarity and harmony within a pluralistic society. By sustaining these rituals, communities are able to deepen their spiritual values, enrich their cultural heritage, and open meaningful spaces for inclusive interreligious and intercultural dialogue. This study highlights the importance of safeguarding ritual practice as an essential component of the social ecosystem—preserving the delicate balance between tradition and progress.

Subsequent studies can be undertaken to explore how religious moderation is implemented within various religious rituals in multicultural societies. They could compare interfaith dialogue strategies in Indonesia with those in other Asian and global contexts to identify effective patterns of interaction in fostering social cohesion. Another important area for exploration is how religious rituals can be transformed to become more inclusive of vulnerable groups, such as religious minorities and individuals with special needs. Such studies are expected to critically assess the role of rituals as instruments of unity that remain relevant amid ongoing social and technological change.

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