

LIVING WITH A RELIGIOUS MAJORITY: Historical Dynamics of Christianity in Madura's Muslim Society

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to describe the history of Christianity in Madura, Indonesia, and its relations with Islam as the religion of the Muslim majority. The data has been collected through observation and interviews, as well as documentation of academic references and the booklets of the local churches. This research found that Christianity has persisted in Madura for centuries through cultural routes such as migration, marriage, and personal choice. Despite its exclusivity as a European faith in the era of the Dutch, Christianity was consciously accepted by the Chinese community in Madura and even by some Madurese themselves. The history of Christianity in Madura is one of long acculturation and interfaith encounters based on social interaction. It has survived the historical flames since the beginning of the VOC period. It continues to be a significant factor in the construction of the current social life of the Madurese people. The implications of this research lie in its contribution to the study of interreligious coexistence and minority–majority relations in Indonesia. The originality and value of this study rest in its focus on Madura—an area largely neglected in Indonesian church history—thereby filling a gap in scholarship and providing new perspectives on the dynamics of Christianity within a predominantly Muslim cultural context. Christianity and Christians have become essential elements within the cultural, political, and economic social relations of contemporary Madura.

Keywords: Christianity; Islam; Interreligious Encounter; Madura Majority and Minority.

INTRODUCTION

To learn, understand, and explore varieties of Christian communities is to show the richness, vitality, and creativity of the different churches as it moves through history, adjusting to new times, places, and cultures (Haight 2005, p. vii; Jenkins, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2018). Christianity is not a monolithic tradition

but a dynamic and diverse movement that has taken root in vastly different cultural, social, and political settings across the world. This adaptability has allowed Christianity not only to survive but to thrive across centuries and continents.

Christianity in Indonesia manifests itself in diverse forms, from the Batak Protestant churches of North Sumatra to the charismatic and Pentecostal movements flourishing in urban centers like Jakarta and Surabaya. These communities reflect the broader adaptability of Christianity, which in Indonesia has not only coexisted with dominant religious traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, and indigenous beliefs but has also engaged creatively with them to develop localized expressions of worship, theology, and community life (Kadenun & Abdurrohman, 2024). This contextualization is essential for the survival and growth of Christian communities in a predominantly Muslim nation. Indonesian Christianity has historically grown through processes of inculturation and negotiation, especially during the colonial and post-independence periods, resulting in a Christianity that is both authentically Indonesian and deeply rooted in the universal Christian tradition (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008).

This integration reflects a deeper theological and cultural engagement in which Christianity has been interpreted through the lens of local wisdom and social values (Agung et al., 2024; Syihabuddin & Alfani, 2024). The inculturation of Christianity in Indonesia demonstrates how religion can serve as a space for cultural continuity rather than displacement, allowing communities to maintain their cultural identity while embracing a new faith tradition (Widyawati et al., 2025). From this perspective, it is interesting to note the history of Christianity in Madura, where the majority of the people on the Island are Muslim.

The presence of Christianity in Madura is unknown to many people, including other Christians living outside Madura. To some degree, people believe that it is difficult for Christianity to grow and develop on the island since Islamic values are comprehensively embedded within every aspect of the culture of the Muslim Madurese. However, it is worth noting that there are more than 20 churches across Madura Island that have survived despite the situation faced by each church. This reality signifies that Christianity, from its presence in the 18th century, has adapted and become acculturated within Madurese culture. It is significant that, although they are tiny in the Muslim-majority island, Christians in Madura hold some strategic locations for their churches. In Pamekasan, for instance, the Catholic Church is located in the main square of the city, alongside other churches of Protestant and Pentecostal churches. In

Sumenep, a Pentecostal church was built on the main street of the city, as was the Catholic church in Bangkalan.

In Madura, the history of Christianity is indebted to Chinese Christians who have long supported evangelism across the island, from Bangkalan in the west to Sumenep in the east. Christian networks in Madura, especially those of Pentecostal churches established after 1945, are based on kinship. ZF, a Pentecostal pastor in Bangkalan, for instance, is a brother of AN, who leads the Pentecostal church in Sampang. They continued the Christian effort that was introduced by their father beforehand. SML, a Pentecostal priest in Sumenep, said that his church today was a continuity of his father's work in the past and his devout colleagues from Surabaya (interview with SML, 2017). In the Dutch period history of Christianity in Indonesia was in general influenced by colonialism as one of the significant factors in spreading Christianity. In this regard, Christianity has also arrived at Madura and the Madurese through Europeans in the context of Dutch colonialism.

This research aims to describe the history of Christianity in Madura, which has been unintentionally omitted from historical writings on Christianity in Indonesia. In their book, *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, Aritonang and Steenbrink (2008) mention the history of Christianity in Madura very concisely among other local histories of Indonesian Christianity. Similarly, Van den End (1993) in his book *Ragi Carita: Sejarah Gereja di Indonesia*, also refers to the history of Christianity in Madura slightly. It employs a qualitative approach, emphasizing the interconnected processes of data collection and analysis. The study is based on 18 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2017 and 2018 with Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, Pentecostal leaders, church elders, and Christian lay members across Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep. In addition, archival materials, church booklets, government statistics, and field observations were utilized.

Rather than following a linear trajectory, the research design is reflexive and evolves continuously, where each phase can influence the others. The findings from field-based observations and interviews serve as the foundation for analytical reflection and theoretical elaboration. As Hammersley and Atkinson posit, the design of research should function as a reflexive process throughout every stage of inquiry (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In this spirit, the study also draws on Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of "thick description", aiming to provide a deep, contextual understanding of the historical and social dynamics of Christianity in Madura. To ensure the continued relevance of the findings, the authors revisited key documentary sources, church records, and demographic statistics in 2024–2025. Follow-up

communications with selected church leaders were also conducted to verify institutional developments described in this article.

Beyond reconstructing the historical presence of Christianity in Madura, this study seeks to answer two broader questions: (1) why Christianity has remained a minority religion despite its centuries-long presence, and (2) how processes of conversion and religious adaptation have occurred among the Madurese within a predominantly Muslim social environment.

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN MADURA

Frank L. Cooley (1968) classified the history of Christianity in Indonesia into four major periods. First, the period of the Portuguese (1520–1615). Second, the Dutch East India Company (1615-1815). Third, the period of foreign missionary societies (1815-1930). Fourth, the period of autonomous Indonesian churches since 1930. Regarding Christianity in Madura, it reached the island in the eighteenth century when the Company (VOC: the Dutch East India Company) could officially control Madura Island. This is plausible for several reasons, e.g., aridity and the economic disadvantages of the island. After 1748, Madura was governed under the area of the Northeast Coast of Java (Soleiman, 2012, p. 63). From this period, Christianity arrived in Madura in the hands of the Company. In 1758, it was reported that approximately 1,767 Christians were living along the Northeast Coast, covering the region from Pekalongan to Madura (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008, p. 126).

Although the Company's intrusion into Madura Island in the eighteenth century remained a significant period in terms of the history of Christianity, it could not be acknowledged as the first encounter between the Christian community and Madurese Muslim society. In 1671, the Madurese army—commanded by Pangeran Trunajaya—was involved in a war against the Dutch colonial forces (Rifa'i, 1993, p. 35). The war exploded when the King of Mataram, Sultan Agung, asked for military aid from the Madurese army to fight against the VOC (Abdurrachman, 1971, pp. 18-24; Rifa'i, 1993, pp. 30-38). There is no evidence to say that the Madurese Kingdom, at the time, represented the common perspective of Muslim society. However, the Madurese's revolt against the Company was to some extent inspired and triggered by local Muslim leaders: Islam was culturally involved in Madurese culture in the sixteenth century (Rifa'i, 1993, p. 22).

In general, the history of Christianity in Madura follows three phases of governmental change. First is the period of the Company (VOC) (Soleiman, 2012, p. 3). Second is the era of missionaries (NZG, *Nederlandsch Zendeling*

Genootschap, 1797–1946). In this period, the missionary movement has been well-arranged independently without any political provision from the government, even from the church institutions in Indonesia. Third is the era of Indonesian independence and after. Each historical phase of Christianity in Madura has its own situation, culture, and authority. Most of the Christian churches in Madura were established after the independence of Indonesia. It means that there is a prompt progress of Christianity in Madura after the independence era. The progress relates to the discourse of acceptance and resistance of Madurese society to the presence of Christianity. Just to mention missionary struggles of Christianity in Madura, it was Paulus Tosari who failed in appealing and calling Madurese people into Christianity—although he was a Madurese and despite his prodigious victory in building Javanese Christianity (Mardja, 1967, p. 22).

It is important to distinguish between the presence of Christianity as a religion and the existence of an indigenous Christian community. During the VOC period, Christianity in Madura was largely confined to European administrators, soldiers, and church workers. Evidence of a local Madurese Christian community remains extremely limited during this period. Therefore, the early Christian presence in Madura should be understood primarily as a colonial religious presence rather than a locally rooted Christian community.

For some of the Madurese people, to accept Christianity does not only mean to acknowledge its teachings but also to welcome its members—who commonly come from different ethnicities and cultures. Both acceptance and resistance could symbolize theological and cultural flexibility to dwell and share the same place with “the other”. Seeing Christians as the other is not only because of the different beliefs they embrace but also because of the different ethnicity they have, where the majority of Christians in Madura are ethnically non-Madurese (Sumartono, 2009, pp. 74-79). They are people coming to Madura for a job assignment or other economic reasons. They could be Chinese, Javanese, or Moluccan. Eventually, they need a religious community to enhance their religious experience, they need churches to exist, and they need an identity to survive (interview with HRMW and SMD, 2017). In this context, the history of Christianity in Madura and beyond cannot be separated from religiosity, ethnicity, and minority-majority discourse. The Progress of Christian existence in Madura could be seen through the development and growth of the churches and the number of believers.

The origin of Christian existence in Madura could be observed within the life of the VOC officer and tenant in Madura, especially in Bangkalan and Sumenep. They were representing themselves as the Company administrators,

living in the Company outpost and keeping each other as a Christian community. Some of the most important local VOC administrators are the governor (the head and director of the Company's trade in the area), a chief administrator (usually a merchant), the commander (responsible for the Company's military forces), two other merchants, a secretary (usually a junior merchant), a warehouse mater/cashier, a port master/*shabandar*, and a bookkeeper (Soleiman, 2012, p. 63). Every outpost was protected by military personnel, comprised of forty to fifty percent of the population. The VOC report of March 1775 stated that there were 28 military personnel in Bangkalan and 15 in Sumenep. To conduct Christian liturgy, the Company maintained church workers called *ziekentroosters* in every big administrative city. Soelaiman describes *ziekentroosters* as "lower-ranking church workers who were, in effect, the strategic agents of the church's mission, i.e., the maintainers of Christian lifestyles" (Soleiman, 2012, p.129). Soleiman refers to van Dubbleddam's writing:

"In the old days in the Netherlands, particularly in big cities, the *ziekentrooster* was a well-known office.... They were helpers who visited sick people and prisoners, stood by persons condemned to death, wrote last wills, etc. On the ships, they led daily prayers and read sermons on Sundays, and did not forget to visit the sick and the dying to assist them spiritually. Their services, in any case, were indispensable on the ships.... And in the Indies, when there was still a shortage of ministers in the early years, numbers of *ziekentroosters* for short or long periods of time worked among the Company personnel on land" (van Dubbleddam, 1947).

Disposition of *ziekentroosters* in the Company era in Java was classified into four groups. First, the city of Semarang, where there was one Dutch *ziekentrooster*. Second, it was called the Northwestern part, comprised of Pekalongan and Tegal. Third, the Northeastern part of Semarang consisted of more than nine towns, including Bangkalan and Sumenep. Fourth, Solo (Surakarta) and Mataram (Yogyakarta).

The beginning of *Ziekentrooster's* presence in Madura is in 1768 when C. Rijter passed the examination by the minister and was sent to Sumenep. Before that year, Sumenep and other cities in Madura had been considered too small to host *ziekentrooster*. The second *ziekentrooster* in the city (eight years after C. Rijter) was Johannes Reinier, a former *ziekentrooster* from Semarang. In June 1780, when the minister and deacon visited Surabaya, they continued visiting Sumenep and found 100 Christians (Soleiman, 2012, pp. 118-140). Even though there was no report about Madurese people who converted

to Christianity, this report signified that Christianity in Sumenep has been quantitatively increasing.

From this phenomenon, it is obvious that Christianity in Madura was previously cultivated within European culture in the era of colonialism. In the next period, Chinese Christians working and living in Madura continued that effort to keep and spread Christianity in Madura. However, it was not easy to introduce Christianity to the Madurese people. Paulus Tosari, an evangelist of Madurese origins who followed Coolen's teaching and converted to Christianity, found such difficulty when he attempted to spread Christianity to Madurese people in his hometown in the 1840s. He encountered criticism and social resistance from the Madurese people. After that, Tosari spread Christianity into the Southern area of Surabaya, called Modjowarno, and built a Christian community which was called the "East Java Christian Church" (GKJW) later (Mardja, 1967, pp. 22-23). The spread and growth of Christianity in Madura has been culturally influenced more by the migration process than the missionary movement. This phenomenon was approved by several Christian priests who suggested that migration and urbanization have influenced the growth of the church in Madura (interview with SMD and FNS, 2017).

Unlike regions where Christianity spread through organized missionary institutions, conversion in Madura generally occurred through personal and relational pathways. Available historical evidence suggests that conversion was rarely the result of public evangelistic campaigns. Instead, it emerged through long-term social interactions involving family relations, marriage, friendship networks, education, migration, and economic mobility.

The documented attempts to convert Madurese Muslims through direct missionary activities achieved only limited success. Consequently, Christian communities gradually adopted more relational approaches, emphasizing personal trust and social engagement rather than formal proselytization. Several church leaders interviewed in this research indicated that individuals who eventually embraced Christianity often had prolonged contact with Christian families, educational institutions, or workplace environments.

This pattern reflects a broader characteristic of religious conversion in Madura, where communal belonging remains highly significant. Conversion is often preceded by a lengthy process of social adaptation and negotiation with family and community expectations. In this regard, becoming Christian in Madura is not merely a theological decision but also a social and cultural transformation requiring the reconstruction of personal identity and communal relationships.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN MADURA

Most of the Madurese people assumed that all Christians are the same. They used the Madurese term *Oréng Krésten* (Christian people) to identify both Protestant and Catholic. They imagined all Protestants and Catholics as one religious' group, regardless of their differences. Madurese Muslims tend to ignore theological diversity inside Christianity. In fact, there are approximately 24 churches in today's Madura: 7 in Sumenep, 7 in Pamekasan, 3 (officially unregistered) in Sampang, and 7 in Bangkalan (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). These churches represented at least 6 Christian affiliations: Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Protestant Church in Western Indonesia, and East Java Christian Church. All of these churches were established after the Indonesian independence era, except for the Catholic churches and some Protestant Reformed Churches (GPIB), which had existed since the era of the Dutch. In general, the geographical spread of the Christian church in Madura had been centered in the town, but several churches were also established in rural areas.

Catholicism

The history of Catholicism in Madura begins with the story of Linus Henckens, O.Carm, the first Catholic priest to enter Madura, crossing the Madura Strait from Probolinggo to Sumenep. In 1923, Madura was managed under the supervision of the Kayutangan-Malang Parish. From this period, Henckens regularly visited Sumenep once every two months. He served and performed Catholic services in Sumenep until 1925. It is worth noting that the ritual of baptism in Sumenep was performed and recorded in the chapel of Probolinggo from 1924 to 1935. Unfortunately, the record was demolished during the Independence War. In 1930, an evangelical visit to Madura was arranged once a month. Priests and Catholic members conducted rituals and services in the offices and houses because they had no chapel or church yet. There are several families in Pamekasan (van Dam family), Sumenep (van Burch family) and Bangkalan (Snelder family), who helped to establish Catholicism.

In the beginning, it was not easy for Catholicism to grow within Madurese society, which practiced Islam through their daily activism and tradition. They built a social approach with the Madurese people through educational and medical action. The traces of this approach could be observed until today, where almost all Catholic churches in Madura have sustained Catholic schools, especially at the elementary level. Such an educational approach remained trivial compared with Islamic boarding schools, which were embodied for a long time within Madurese culture. However, they were meaningful in

sustaining Catholicism and Christianity in Madura.

In 1933, the Carmelites based in Malang tried to build an HCS (Catholic School) in Pamekasan. It was placed in one of the Christian residences, which eventually became a Catholic church. In the same year, there were Catholic nuns working on Madura Island. In 1936, the same school of HCS was also directed in Sumenep, under the supervision of a Catholic nun. Although there was no Madurese individual who embraced Christianity at the time, Catholicism in Madura was increasing in 1938.

According to the historical report of the Catholic Church in Sumenep, until 1932, there was no resident (Madurese) who converted to Catholicism. Christian community consisted only of the Dutch and European individuals working in the Company. Beginning from this year (1932), several Chinese embraced Catholicism. In 1938, the number of Catholics in Sumenep was around 273 persons. In 1941, all individuals baptized in the Sumenep church were Chinese: Kwee Tiong Tjwan, Khoe Tik Hoo, Ong Hien San, Ong Siau Hian, Kwee Tjian Hwie, Kwee Tjing Tjiat, Tan Hiau Kiem, and Kwee Tjien Thiam (Tim Penulis, 2012, pp. 14-18). The growth of Catholicism in Sumenep and Madura in general decreased for several years when the Japanese colonial government took over the Indonesian archipelago from the Dutch.

In other regions of Madura Island, Catholicism had reserved its own official church within a couple of years of Indonesian independence. Catholics in Pamekasan, for instance, revealed their own church (Gereja Maria Ratu Para Rasul) in 1948, while Catholics in Bangkalan established their own church in 1956. In Sampang, there is only a chapel for practicing and conducting Christian sacraments until today. In the process of building the church of Maria Ratu Para Rasul in Pamekasan, the committee obtained assistance from a Madurese Muslim named Pak Mat Bakri. Furthermore, the official Church in Pamekasan played a role to develop Christian community in Sampang from 1955. The progress of the Christian mission in Sampang has grown slowly, with only 7 persons attending Christmas in 1977. Pamekasan and Bangkalan interchangeably became the supervisor church for the Christian community in Sampang.

In today's Madura, Catholicism is the largest church in the Christian community. They represent more than 50% of the Christian population in Madura, with the majority of Chinese Catholics inside. Although some Catholic priests and members we met in Madura often underlined the variability of the numbers of Catholic congregation in the island, particularly because of urbanization, we can find that the existence of Catholics is consistent. The buildings of the Catholic Churches, schools, and medical clinics denote that

the Catholic community in Madura preserved their cultural, economic, and religious heritage.

GKJW: East Java Christian Church

GKJW (*Gereja Kristen Jawi Wetan*) in Bangkalan was established in 1956 when a few Christians—working in the city as police, medical staff, government employees, or social workers—initiated their own church. It was Rev. Pinodjo who organized fundraising and managed the building of the Javanese Christian church in Bangkalan. Within the city, GKJW has three interconnected zones: Bangkalan Kota, Batu Poron, and Kamal. A Christian congregation in the church has been illustratively volatile, depending on migration, urbanization, birth rate, job transfer, and marriage. *Otonomi Daerah* (the Local Autonomy) has influenced the increase of the Christian congregation and has become one of the principal elements of member affiliation. In 2006, it was reported that GKJW has 269 members, but recently the members reach no more than 170 persons. In this church, we found two Madurese persons who followed and practiced GKJW service (Tim penulis, 2012, pp. 8–19).

Ecumenical initiation to build GKJW in Bangkalan achieved a good response from the director of the Local Development Treasury (Mohammad Noer), who eventually would become the regent of Bangkalan and the governor of East Java (Tim penulis, 2012, pp. 8-9). He offered land and house development for the committee of the building project to deal with. In 1956, the committee released the land, and in 1963, it was officially paid by the GKJW congregation. Although in 1976 the church was supervised by the Gubeng Community in East Java, it uses the Indonesian language as a common platform rather than the Javanese language. This church has become the main congregation for the East Java Christian Church in Bangkalan, located near the city center of Bangkalan.

In 1973, when several Christians were living in Batu Poron Residence, Winoto Naftali, a Christian leader in the residence, began encoding names and affiliations. Furthermore, he encouraged Christian families to attend Sunday service in Bangkalan using the marine bus until they could conduct their own religious services in the residence. In accordance with this initiative, in 1978, some individuals in the Kamal Residence attempted to count Christian families and found a big number of citizens: more than 400 individuals are Christians. From that time, they organized a social association called *Ikatan Warga Kristen* (Christian Citizen Association). In 1981, the association became *Forum Ikatan Persaudaraan Sesama Umat Tuhan* (Christian Brotherhood Forum). Along with the population and migration growth, in 1982 GKJW

congregation in Kamal Residence initiated to build their own church, but this idea was not approved by Pdt. Lumadyo Marmer, who regularly leads Christian liturgy among the Javanese Christian community. In 1986, the idea of the church building was reconstructed and endorsed by all community members and revealed in 1987.

In Madura, GKJW has only hosted their church in Bangkalan. Three other cities in Madura have no institutional affiliation with the East Java Christian Church. Rev. SMD said that a few GKJW members living outside Bangkalan prefer to conduct religious services in other Christian churches. He underlined that the emphasis of GKJW's teaching is not to increase the number of members but to intensify the way Christian people implement and practice the spirit of Christianity (interview with SMD, 2017). The GKJW church is located on the Bangkalan ring road, surrounded by Muslim residences and an Islamic environment. The nearest church to GKJW is the Pentecostal Church. Interestingly, Muslim people around the church have different responses and perspectives toward them.

GKJW has no memorable tension with Madurese Muslims around the church, only some small accidents driven by unknown persons to provoke the Christian board. According to SMD, GKJW members could easily adapt to Madurese tradition and involve within social activities in their neighborhood. He was regularly invited to attend Islamic ceremonies in his village and recognized as part of the community regardless of his religious distinction. His wife gives regular handicraft training to Muslim and Christian teenagers hosted in the official house, which is located side by side with the church. This reality differs from the Pentecostal church, which faced historical tension with the Muslim neighbors. TF, the pastor, said that the restoration project of his church was rejected by Muslim neighbors. She questioned the social disagreement of the Muslim neighbors that blocked her project to reconstruct the church (interview with TF, 2018). Someone who visits the two churches will find different superficial appearances: the first is located near the main street and is naturally visible. At the same time, the second is placed in the narrow path of the village with no remarkable board. The phenomenon shows that reception or resistance to the church among Madurese people varies from and another.

Pentecostal Churches

Christian mission of the Pentecostal church in Madura was introduced in 1934 when many Christian missionaries (mostly Dutch) came to Bangkalan to practice Christianity and call the local people to Christianity. At the time,

the Christian mission was organized under *De Pinksterkerk in Nederlands Oost Indie* (Pentecostal Church in the Nederland East India). In Bangkalan, there was a strong Christian network that extended Christian teaching among citizens through practicing religious doctrine. TF, a pastor of the Pentecostal Church in Bangkalan, told the story of his grandfather who struggled on expanding Christian mission from 1934. He succeeded to establish Pentecostal Church of Indonesia (GPDI) in Bangkalan in 1956. This initiation was continued by Pak Waluyo, who established another Pentecostal Church of Indonesia in Bangkalan in 1959. This historical attempt continued until today, when GPDI has successfully hosted five churches in the city with approximately 250 members.

In 1965, TF's father established Gereja Pentakosta Pusat Surabaya (GPPS: Surabaya Centre Pentecostal Church) as a continuity of his grandfather's mission. Currently, the church is led by TF as the third generation in its ancestral Christian network. The establishment of GPPS in Bangkalan was in time with the establishment of GPPS in Pamekasan, initiated by Peter. At the first time, Peter and his congregation had no permanent church to conduct church services and used houses as a holy place to worship. In this period, Peter and his companion attempted to build a strong network among Christians and good communication with the Madurese Muslim. In 2002, when Peter passed away, YSK, his son, was ordained to lead the church. YSK had no cultural barriers to heading the church because he was born in Madurese culture and was ingrained with the local citizens from his childhood (interview with YSK, 2017). Today, GPPS in Pamekasan has more than 100 congregants.

During its progress, Pentecostal members in Pamekasan have established two different Christian churches. Some of the Pentecostal congregants initiated to build the Prophetic-Apostolic Bethel Church (GBAP). They built a new church near the GPPS church. More than 30 members of the church left. They attempted to build a new way of worshipping Jesus under the authority of Apostolic Bethel Church. In its progress, the latter was divided again into new institutions called GBI Rock (Bethel Church of Indonesia). This last division caused Prophetic-Apostolic Bethel Church to suffer many losses of members. Currently, the Rock involves more than 80 Christians practicing and worshipping Christianity in its own way, while GBAP still exists with a small number of congregants (interview with KBG, 2017). Because GBI still has no permanent church, they conduct church service in the hotel owned by a member every Sunday. KBG said that the decision to worship in a hotel is a strategic action because conducting Christian service among the Madurese Muslim neighborhood is challenging.

The presence of GBI Rock in Pamekasan faced internal resistance from the Christian community. The Inter-Church Deliberation Network (BAMAG: *Badan Musyawarah Antar Gereja*) at the beginning questioned the presence of GBI Rock. According to EK, head of BAMAG Pamekasan, it was a matter of cultural miscommunication and internal conflict within Christian congregations (interview with EK, 2017). However, GBI Rock has been registered today and officially acknowledged as a member of FKUB of Pamekasan.

Pentecostal Church of Indonesia (GPdI) Sumenep was founded in 1948, three years after the independence of the Republic of Indonesia. The church is the oldest Pentecostal church in Madura. It was indebted to the father of SML, who came from Surabaya to spread Pentecostal Christianity in the late 1940s. He succeeded to invite a few Chinese people in Sumenep to embrace Christianity, converting their old Chinese tradition. SML said that his father's effort in making a Christian community was challenging (interview with SML, 2017). At the first time, church service was conducted in the members' houses, moving from one house to another, which were centrally placed in the salt-industrial area of Pabean. In 1967 Pentecostal Christian community built a permanent church in the center of the city, where Christian services and activities are performed until today.

“At the first time, my father called my mother and her family to learn and embrace Christianity. From this family, my father intensified his Christian mission to reach other Chinese individuals and families in Sumenep. They are Madurese-born Chinese who have been living in Sumenep for decades. Finally, the father and the mother-in-law, uncles, aunties, nephews, and other family members converted to Christianity... They were Chinese who upheld and practiced old Chinese traditions before. They do not know much about religion.” (SML, 2017).

In 1989, SML continued his father's role in leading the Pentecostal church. He has ever founded a division church in Lenteng, a sub-district of Sumenep, to accommodate non-Madurese Christian immigrants, although it did not last for a long time. Recently, this church has become the biggest Pentecostal church in Madura with more than 300 members.

Stories about Christian mission among the Pentecostal church have also been experienced by its congregants in Sampang. Rev. Peter is the first person who prepared himself to be sent to Sampang as a leader and a messenger for Christianity. For him, being a Christian and a Chinese living within Madurese Muslim society was not an easy choice. They had to begin their life

through local adaptation and cultural alteration. Understood that Sampang—compared to other cities in Madura and East Java in general—remained an undeveloped city and the lowest range of its Human-Development Index (HDI): the index of the city holds around 59,09 in the first quarter of 2017 (BPS, 2025). Sampang residents have suffered until today from the essential problems of health, economy, and illiteracy (Mediamadura, 2017).

Peter used various approaches to be involved in Madurese society and to deepen a relationship with them. Since social relations are one of the keys to success, Peter attempted to create a close friendship with all Madurese people around him in order to finally introduce Christianity. He approached people through business conversation, cultural discussion, and social activities. His efforts gained social recognition when he could build his own church, the Pentecostal Church, as the first (and the only) Pentecostal church in Sampang. AN, Peter's wife, said that this church was culturally recognized by people around before the social riot in 1997 occurred (interview with AN, 2017). The number of congregants remained stagnant, but they still exist until today with little attention from the local people and the government. However, what is interesting to note from the Pentecostal spirit of mission is its endless and energetic exertion to spread Christianity to the people of the world.

From the very beginning, the Pentecostal movement in Madura has been driven by certain missionaries from certain families. Every Pentecostal church in Madura is mostly devoted to a similar lineage and kinfolk. From Bangkalan to Sumenep, someone could find that the leaders of the Pentecostal church are bounded with the related kinship. It shows to some degree how privatization marks the present and existence of the Pentecostal movement. The reality describes how what they called *Gereja Keluarga* (a church belonging to a certain family or individual) survives and builds Christian community in Madura through a passionate network of relatives-affiliation. On the one hand, such an organization strengthens the structure of the network; on the other hand, it may produce clandestine questions in terms of public donation and financial transparency (Koan, 2008).

GPIB: Protestant Church in Western Indonesia

Protestant Church in Western Indonesia is found across all cities, from Bangkalan to Sumenep, excluding Sampang. The progress of GPIB in Madura to some extent follows the bureaucratic movement of the Dutch government, which maintained its state-church called *De Protestantse Kerk in Westelijk Indonesia*. The church was a continuity of *Indische Kerk*, that is, developed in Ambon since the 1600s. Historical traces about this endurance could be

observed through literature archives and architectural legacies: someone could find that the Protestant Church in Pamekasan and Sumenep are recognized as cultural heritage.

Located on the main street that connects two cities, Pamekasan and Sumenep, the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia represents classical architecture that signifies historical traces of the Dutch. According to FNS, the pastor of the church, this strategic location allows him to intensively interact with Madurese people from various backgrounds. The location gives him more social space to conduct daily conversations with Muslim Madurese people. In Ramadan, for instance, it is easy for FNS and his Christian companion to give *takjil* (light snack for breaking the fast) to every Muslim walking, shopping or working around the church (interview with FNS, 2017). Recently, the church involves more than 70 family members who are mostly non-Madurese. Compared with Catholics or other churches, this number was very small. FNS said that the essential teaching of his church is not to convert others into Christianity but to persuade Christians to practice their belief. It is not a quantitative concern but a qualitative matter of being good Christians.

The Protestant Church in Pamekasan was established in the colonial period, years before its counterpart in Bangkalan. Historically, there was no social tension during its appearance because the Dutch government officially supported it. In contrast, the presence of the Protestant church in Kamal Bangkalan was a result of long-lasting effort from its congregation since 1978. In the beginning, many Christians from various Christian institutions initiated to organize church service called *Persekutuan Jemaat* (Christians Union). When some of the Christian members had their own church and left the union, the Protestant congregation had no choice but to conduct their own service from one member's house to another. In 1982, Christian Protestants got legal permission from the local government to build their own church, but in the middle of the process, it must be cancelled because of unreliable reasons. In 1998, the protestant congregation attempted to build an impermanent church on the land they bought in 1980, in order to facilitate church service in an easier way. In 2011, they finally had their own permanent church, which survives until today.

“Frankly speaking, in the past we faced a difficult time conducting church service because of the building permit and social resistance. We were often disturbed, thrown, and attacked by firecrackers... Today, everything is good. Since 2011, we have had a permanent church, even with many restrictions. We have good communication and interaction with Muslim neighbours and help each other. When we need an extra

car park for a religious celebration, for instance, we use the car-park belongs to the mosque and vice versa.” (interview with MN, 2018).

Unlike GPIB in Pamekasan, the Protestant church in Bangkalan is located in a secluded area in a Madurese Muslim neighborhood. The church is on the private land owned by a Christian member and bordered by huge fences from its surrounding areas, the Madurese Muslim houses. Through its isolated appearance, someone may discern the notion of community struggle for having religious recognition. When the Protestant church in Sumenep has been struggling to survive with its remnant members, the church in Bangkalan is struggling to survive with new hope of Christian resurgence in the future. The members, according to MN, are strong in their faith in Christianity and their determination to build inter-religious harmony with their Muslim neighbors.

SOCIAL RECOGNITION

During our research, we noticed that several churches in Madura have been wrestling with social recognition in terms of their presence and existence among Madurese Muslim society. It is not to say that there are always social worries or communal fears among Christians living in Madura. However, the phenomenon of several churches existing *silently*—without a nameboard to mark their existence—discloses questions relating to social resistance and acceptance. Three churches located in Sampang, for instance, were not yet registered officially in the Department of Religious Affairs of the local government. They are not publicly inscribed in the statistics, although their existence has been acknowledged by the surrounding people. In Bangkalan, some of the registered churches decided to have no name board placed in front of the churches, such as the Pentecostal and Bethel churches, for several reasons.

AN, the Pentecostal pastor in Sampang, said that in the past her church had placed a name board to mark its presence, but after social riots in 1997, there emerged communal fear to reconstruct (interview with AN, 2017). The social riot successfully implanted a historical traumatic memory of inter-religious relations, especially Christian-Muslim relations, although the reason behind the riot was definitely political. Today, the church was built in the same location but without any sign of its presence. This Pentecostal church was built in the area of a warehouse belonging to the church's member, protected by a huge screen of iron. The members of this church are approximately 70 people. Next door to this church, there exists the Catholic chapel, which is covered by a high iron fence and separated by the shopping areas and warehouses. There

are more than 30 Catholic members in this chapel. These two holy places were only separated by big walls as a physical partition within shopping areas, but they share the same silence of religious existence.

In Bangkalan, the Bethel church was also located behind shopping zones separated by two-layered iron gates. To reach the church, someone must walk in a long and empty corridor, like a long tunnel, between the dividing walls of the markets and houses. From its front side, someone will not propose that there is a huge church behind the gate. Only people who are familiar with the location could identify the church, such as the pedicab driver who works daily near the location. In line with this reality, we can also refer to the story of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) in Kamal. The church actually granted an official permit from the local government in 1982, but only in 2011 was it successfully built as a permanent church with various requirements: one of them is that the church building must be transparent, which could be seen and observed from outside. This church was located in the middle of a Muslim village, near the mosque, and surrounded by a big fence. There is no single sign indicating the presence of the church. It looks like a garden with many mango trees inside.

Such a phenomenon brings out some critical questions on the inter-religious relations between Muslims and Christians in Madura. Christian community seems to adopt a tactical approach for retaining the existence of the church, preserving their faith as religious defenders (Grim & Finke, 2011). To some extent, they practiced such a self-persistence to make it the weapon of the weak in a different way Scott describes the concept (Scott, 1985). There is always a discourse between what appears in public and what is criticized offstage: many Christian's living in Madura questioned the social structure of Muslim Madurese domination and minority-majority interaction.

When we texted BS (2018), a Pentecostal pastor in Ketapang Sampang, to meet him for an interview, he gave a hesitant response and asked me to talk with another Christian person in Sampang. He used the term "non-Christian" in his message to identify me as a Muslim. It was understandable, because in 2012, when the Pentecostal church in Ketapang Sampang was renovated and reconstructed, several Muslim groups around the church submitted social complaints and accusations. They questioned the environmental permit and renovation plan of the church. They threatened to burn the church. Coordinating Board of Social Belief Supervisor (BAKORPAKEM) and the police succeeded in mediating and solving the problem. The case had been escalating because the church was located in the middle of a Muslim settlement. This tension implanted a traumatic memory for Christian of the

church, especially BS. Eventually, he seemingly tends to limit and reduce encounters with non-Christians for discussing Christianity and his church. He was afraid to uncover such a memory and worry of re-escalating religious tension.

In a different context, ZF, a Pentecostal pastor in Bangkalan, has consciously used external religious identification to recognize Madurese Muslims as *orang seberang* (the other person). He compared how the inter-religious relation style between Muslims and Christians that occurred in his childhood in Bangkalan differs from the current Muslim-Christian encounter. According to him, it is not easy to find Muslim children studying at the Catholic School in Bangkalan today, while in the past he could notice many Madurese Muslim children studying at that school (interview with ZF, 2018). The term *orang seberang* used by ZF implies social categorization based on in-group and out-group division. In this regard, it is reasonable to look at the physical estrangement of Christian churches in Madura as self-prevention and symbolic fears of being a religious minority in Madura. When asked about inter-religious conflict and prospective feelings of worries and fears of being a religious minority Christian in Madura, Rev. FJR said:

“I don’t have such feelings or be afraid of being threatened, because I used to be like this (building inter-religious relations). But I don’t know what the feeling of Chinese Christians here is. Perhaps they felt so.” (Interview with FJR, 2017).

FJR expressed his self-criticism toward exclusive Christian that tends to close themselves among a limited ethnic circle. According to him, Catholic and Christians in the situation of being minority must be open-minded and inclusive to build an inter-religious relationship. In this context, inter-religious encounter becomes a necessity (Baybado, 2025). FJR suggests that building social interaction is also part of Catholic theology. He mentioned a Catholic way of religious calling: *dari altar ke pasar* (from altar to the market), from text to the context.

In Christianity, the word “church” refers to both the building and the community (Livingstone, 2013, p. 114). However, in the Muslim perception, the *church* has been commonly understood as a building, as well as the mosque, which is understood as a holy place, not a Muslim community. The presence of the church symbolizes the existence of the Christian community. The bigger the church is built, the stronger the religious symbol is marked. In the late 1990s, when the Catholic Church in Pamekasan was enormously renovated, there were massive threats to destroy the church based on social

jealousy and suspicion. The issue propagated among the Muslims was that the great mosque, which is directly located opposite the church, was not yet restored. It was triggered by political tension close to the Reformation Era and Soeharto Fall which, caused social instability.

At the time when the Pentecostal church in Pamekasan started its building renovation, certain Muslim NGOs questioned its building permit. The board of the church answered all the questions by showing land ownership and a certificate (interview with YSK, 2017). In this context, the church becomes a zone of symbolic encounter where contestation and conflict could be easily exploited between Madurese Muslims and Christians. The existence of Christian churches in Madura could be a mirror to look at the dynamic of Muslim-Christian relations; churches without signs implicitly denote dialectical spaces for Muslim and Christians to create a peaceful social space.

INTERRELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE

The Christian community has survived and coexisted with Madurese Muslim society in Madura for centuries. This reality could be seen within everyday social interaction, regardless of the rise and fall of religious tension that appeared during the historical presence of Christianity in Madura. This research illustrated that many influencing factors made Christianity persistent and adaptable in Madura, such as good communication and persistent effort to hold (and call for) Christianity. These factors also created an undemanding path for both the Madurese Muslim and Christian communities in Madura to build inter-religious relations.

Interactional forms of Christian-Muslim relations revealed that the spread of Christianity in Madura was, to some extent, developed through organizational practices and migration. However, face-to-face interaction between Christian and Muslims must be taken into consideration to see the inter-religious relation. Goffman believes that systematic examination of “small behaviors” of individuals can describe and define the natural unit of social interaction. Interaction, according to him, is important to scrutinize social occasions (Goffman, 1967, pp. 1-2). In this regard, social identity becomes fluid and contextually reliable to change. In line with this, Goebel also sees identity as fluid and constantly emerging within a chain of communicative events (Goebel, 2010, p. 2; Ernas, 2015, pp. 242-245).

In the process of adapting local culture, Christians in Madura contextualize both religion and ethnicity as contingent and conditional detachment. To cite Goebel, they perform the practice of adequation, where people situationally

practice social or political similarities through everyday routines of linguistic signs which are rarely associated with a membership of their ethnicity (Goebel, 2010, p. 4). In practice, Madurese Christian culturally involved with local Islamized-tradition to keep the inter-religious relations, and officially engage with the inter-religious council, such as FKUB (Inter-religious Forum for Harmony). This council was established in 2006, based on the Common Role of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs, number 8 and 9, 2006 (Supriatno, 2009, p. 180).

The establishment of Christian missions in Madura did not occur effortlessly. It began, for a certain period in the Christian past of Madura, with the story of Paulus Tosari, who attempted to teach and spread Christianity for Madurese people. Some stories concerning physical refusal and cultural denial also happened to other missionaries. In 1864, around twenty years after Tosari's journey, Harthoorn came to Madura. With his family, he lived in Pamekasan and deliberately taught Christianity to the Madurese people around him. He tried to build good communication with the Madurese people, but the tragedy happened four years later. When he left the city, the Madurese mob ruined his house and killed his wife. In 1880, the Dutch missionary named J. P. Esser came to Madura, but he did not achieve meaningful results. In his effort, Esser translated the Bible into the Madurese language. Following Esser, the Madurese origin called Ebing tried to teach Christianity in Madura, and he also reached no better achievement.

In the eighteenth century, the Company merchants living in Madura practiced Christianity in particular outposts and detached their religious conviction from social activities. Disposition of *ziekentroosters* at the time was also located inside the outpost. Making a religious distance, to some extent, is a strategic effort to exist and survive (Bell, 2018). This phenomenon could be perceived as an acculturative and adaptive headway of Christian history. James Scott wrote that "relations of domination are, at the same time, relations of resistance." He explains that domination could be perceived as a public transcript, and dissident subculture could be positioned as a hidden transcript. Scott upholds that dominated people tend to act through political disguise for constructing their social life (Scott, 1990, pp. 136-182), and that is what Christian people experienced in the contemporary life of Madura.

Currently, Christians represent themselves as an unseparated element within Madurese society. The presence and existence of Christianity in Madura exemplify an inclusive paradigm of the Madurese to accept the religious other. There is a profound interaction between Christian and Muslim almost in every aspect of Madurese life, politically, socially, and economically. In the

business area of tobacco, for instance, Christians and Muslims in Madura share their economic role in having their own trade. Some Christians become the shareholders, and Muslims become their brokers; farmers are Muslims, and factory owners are Christians (Santoso, 2001, pp. 96-105). However, it is rare to find inter-religious dialogue and discussion held in Madura.

One of the most important questions emerging from the history of Christianity in Madura is why Christianity, despite its presence since the eighteenth century, has remained a small minority religion. Unlike in several regions in Eastern Indonesia, North Sumatra, or parts of Central Java, Christianity in Madura never experienced large-scale conversion or institutional expansion. This phenomenon cannot be explained merely by missionary limitations. Rather, it is closely related to the strong integration of Islam into Madurese social and cultural life.

For centuries, Islam has functioned not only as a religious system but also as a cultural marker of Madurese identity. Being Madurese is often socially associated with being Muslim. Religious affiliation is embedded in family networks, village structures, pesantren traditions, and the authority of local religious leaders. Consequently, conversion to Christianity may be perceived not merely as a change of faith but also as a departure from communal identity and social belonging.

Historical evidence from the experience of Tosari, Harthoorn, J. P. Esser, and other missionaries demonstrates that missionary efforts frequently encountered social resistance. Such resistance was not always expressed through theological debate but often through cultural and social mechanisms that maintained community cohesion. The limited success of missionary activities in Madura contrasts sharply with their achievements in other regions, suggesting that the cultural embeddedness of Islam in Madurese society constituted a significant factor shaping religious boundaries.

Moreover, the majority of Christian communities in Madura historically originated from migration rather than mass conversion. Europeans, Chinese Indonesians, Javanese, Ambonese, and other migrants formed the backbone of Christian congregations. Consequently, the growth of Christianity depended more on demographic mobility, interethnic marriage, and urban economic networks than on direct evangelization among the Madurese population. Therefore, the persistence of Christianity in Madura should not be measured by numerical expansion. Its significance lies in its ability to survive, adapt, and negotiate social space within one of Indonesia's strongest Muslim cultural regions. Christianity in Madura represents a case of religious endurance rather than religious expansion.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Christianity in Madura has persisted for centuries through cultural paths such as migration, marriage, and personal choice, rather than through bureaucratic or confrontational missions. The long history of Christianity demonstrated processes of acculturation and interreligious encounters that have allowed Christians to coexist within a predominantly Muslim society. Despite its exclusive character during the Dutch colonial period, Christianity was accepted by the Chinese community in Madura and even by some Madurese themselves. Today, Christianity and Christians continue to play a role in the cultural, political, and economic life of the island.

The strength of this research lies in its contribution to the broader study of interreligious relations in Indonesia by focusing on Madura, a region often overlooked in historical writings on Christianity. It provides new perspectives on how minority religions adapt, persist, and negotiate space in Muslim-majority contexts. At the same time, the study acknowledges its limitations: the reliance on oral histories and church booklets due to the scarcity of formal archives, and the need for further comparative studies across different regions of Indonesia. These limitations, however, also open pathways for future research on the dynamics of minority-majority religious interactions in Indonesia and beyond.

The Madurese case demonstrates that the success of a religion cannot be measured solely through numerical growth. Christianity remained a minority not because it completely failed to engage Madurese society, but because it encountered a social environment in which Islam had become deeply intertwined with ethnic identity, communal solidarity, and local authority structures. As a result, Christian growth occurred primarily through migration, kinship, and interpersonal relationships rather than through large-scale conversion. This finding contributes to broader discussions on religious minorities, showing how minority religions can survive and become socially meaningful even without substantial demographic expansion.

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