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The *Al-Albab* provides a platform for scholars and researchers to exchange ideas and share original research across a broad range of topics in religious studies, addressing both local and global contexts. The journal is dedicated to advancing scholarship by publishing innovative research that engages with contemporary issues in the field. Scholars from all regions and disciplines with an interest in religious studies and their manifestations in human life are encouraged to contribute to this open-access platform. With a strong emphasis on novelty and relevance, The *Al-Albab* invites submissions that adopt multidisciplinary approaches, covering areas such as Islamic studies, Catholic studies, Christian studies, Hindu studies, Buddhist studies, Jewish studies, local traditions, Chinese religion studies, and other pertinent fields within religious studies.

Editorial Office:
AL-ALBAB, Gedung Saifuddin Zuhri
Pascasarjana IAIN Pontianak,
Jalan Letjend Suprapto No. 19, Pontianak Selatan
Pontianak 78122, Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia.
Phone: (62-561) 734170 Fax: (62-561) 734170 ;
Handphone/WA: +6281256738348
E-mail: redaksi.bjrs@gmail.com
Website: http://jurnaliainpontianak.or.id/index.php/alalbab

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RELIGION IN THE DIGITAL SPACE: The Potential of Social Media for Religious Conflict Mediation

Muhammad Arifin
Universitas Mulawarman, Indonesia
Email: muhammad.arifin@fisip.unmul.ac.id

Sukapti
Universitas Mulawarman, Indonesia
Email: sukaptiregis@gmail.com

Ahmad Ridha Mubarak
Universitas Mulawarman, Indonesia
Email: ahmadridha92@fisip.unmul.ac.id

Arun Panrita Arifin
Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, Indonesia
Email: panrita.arun@gmail.com

Sinan Ck Koottilangadi
Darul Huda Islamic University, India
Email: sinancheloor@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Religious conflict remains a complex issue worldwide, including in Indonesia. The rise of digital spaces, particularly social media, has not only expanded the religious public sphere but also offered new opportunities for conflict resolution. This article examines the potential of social media as a medium for mediating religious conflicts by highlighting interfaith dialogue, peace-oriented narratives, and the role of religious actors in managing tensions. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in a literature review, the study uses John Paul Lederach's Conflict Transformation theory as the primary analytical framework to conceptualize digital space as a relational, structural, and narrative environment in which religious conflict is continuously reproduced and potentially transformed. The findings suggest that while social media algorithms tend to amplify hate speech and deepen echo chambers, these same platforms also enable participatory, wide-reaching initiatives for conflict mediation. Thus, digital spaces can be transformed into inclusive arenas for constructive engagement, symbolic rituals, and collaborative practices that foster positive peace and social justice while at the same time facing structural constraints, such as algorithmic polarization, digital inequality, and performative peacebuilding.

Keywords*:* Religion in the Digital Space; Social Media; Religious Conflict Mediation

INTRODUCTION

Religious conflicts in the contemporary era are no longer confined to physical but have expanded into digital space. Social media presents a new arena where expressions of religious identity, theological debates, and hate speech interact intensively (Campbell, 2013). In Indonesia, the escalation of religion-based conflicts is often accelerated by digital media. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, for example, demonstrated how a short video clip could be reproduced, politicized, and disseminated virally, triggering sharp polarization within society (Lim, 2017). This phenomenon illustrates how social media algorithms function as accelerators of conflict by creating echo chambers that reinforce each group's beliefs.

Social media platforms have evolved beyond mere conduits for religious messaging into sites of symbolic interaction where religious identities are negotiated, authorities are contested, and conflicts are reinterpreted. This phenomenon has given rise to what is characterized as "digital religion" or "religion in the digital space" (Campbell, 2013; Evolvi, 2018). While early studies viewed the internet as a mere extension of offline religious life manifested through online rituals and virtual communities, recent developments suggest that digital spaces operate under a distinct logic. Technological and social structures, such as platform algorithms, the attention economy, and participatory culture, create new religious relational structures that are fluid, open, and frequently conflictual.

Within the digital landscape, religious conflict has assumed new forms. Social media enables symbolic, faith-based disputes to propagate rapidly across geographical boundaries, involving a broader spectrum of actors. These conflicts are not limited to verbal violence, hate speech, or religious misinformation; they also encompass discursive contestations, the delegitimization of traditional authorities, and the deepening polarization of religious identities. Consequently, the digital space does not merely replicate conventional religious dynamics but actively reshapes the nature of religious friction.

To establish the position and contribution of this study, it is essential to critically map previous research regarding digital religion and religious conflict. Campbell (2013) provided a foundational framework by asserting that online and offline religious practices are deeply interconnected, allowing communities to adapt to digital tools without forfeiting theological meaning.

However, this early focus remained largely on adaptation rather than the intricacies of conflict. Religion is produced through a complex interplay of media, materiality, and emotion (Meyer, 2009). This perspective is vital as it highlights that digital religious conflict is not solely ideological but also deeply emotional and performative. In the Indonesian context, Rohmawati et al. (2024) demonstrated how mediatization reshapes Muslim practices, leading to the fragmentation of authority and the pluralization of interpretation. However, the conflicts arising from this fragmentation have yet to be fully analyzed through the lens of mediation or structural transformation.

The decentralization of authority and shift in religious identity have further intensified digital contestation. Firdaus and Sidik (2024) observed that digital public spaces allow non-traditional actors to construct religious legitimacy, making truth claims increasingly competitive and contentious. This is echoed by al-Zaman and Alimi (2021), who explicitly examined Islamic conflict in digital spaces, noting that social media accelerates the escalation of narrative confrontations. Similarly, Lim (2017) highlighted how religious sentiment on social media reinforces polarization. Despite these insights, a common thread in existing studies is the positioning of conflict as a negative byproduct of technology rather than a social process capable of being transformed.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study draws upon John Paul Lederach's (1997) theory of Conflict Transformation, which views conflict as a catalyst for social change. Unlike traditional resolution, transformation focuses on evolving relationships, structures, and discourses that underpin conflict narratives, a medium for cross-identity dialogue, and an arena for forming new relationships that transcend geography. This approach allows us to view digital mediation not merely as the cessation of hate speech (negative peace) but as a path toward positive peace (Galtung, 1969; 1990), i.e., the realization of social justice and inclusive relationships.

Based on the literature mapping and theoretical synthesis, this study identifies that not many studies investigate social media as a potential instrument for mediating religious conflict rather than just a source of it. There is a lack of a holistic approach that connects digital conflict dynamics with the process of conflict transformation in religious context through the utilization of social media. This study offers a significant theoretical contribution to the growing body of scholarship on religion in the digital space by repositioning digital media not merely as a communicative arena but as a transformative relational infrastructure within the framework of Lederach's Conflict Transformation theory.

The novelty of this study lies in its development of an integrated conceptual

framework encompassing conflict, religion, and digital space. By repositioning social media as a potential site of mediation and reading digital religious conflict through the lens of transformation rather than mere polarization, this study offers a new paradigm for understanding religious dynamics in the contemporary era. This study adopts a virtual library research approach. This method was selected because the focus of the study is not on collecting empirical field data, but on conducting conceptual and thematic analyses of scholarly sources relevant to religion, social media, and the mediation of religious conflict.

TRANSFORMING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN THE DIGITAL SPACE: RELATIONS, STRUCTURES, NARRATIVES, AND MEDIATION PRACTICES

The Digital Space as a Relational Arena for Religious Conflict Transformation

The transformation of social space facilitated by digital technology has significantly changed how religious conflicts are expressed, negotiated, and mediated. Social media platforms are no longer a mere means of transmitting religious messages. Rather, they have become relational spaces in which identities, emotions, and religious affiliations are continuously being constructed and contested. From the point of view of John Paul Lederach's theory of Conflict Transformation, religious conflicts must be understood not merely as theological conflicts or as failures in communication but as the expression of conflicts in relationships and antagonistic identity narratives (Lederach, 1997). Thus, digital space becomes a critical space for the reproduction and transformation of religious conflicts.

Research on digital religion has indicated that digital religion enhances symbolic interaction. Campbell (2013) and Hjarvard (2016) suggested that online religious activities have given rise to new religious environments that combine traditional authority with media logic. In these environments, religious symbols spread quickly and are often politicized, making them vulnerable to identity-based conflict. Lim (2017) also found that in plural societies, social media use increases religious polarization by facilitating selective exposure and in-group storytelling. But, Lederach's approach suggests a different interpretation of these processes by pointing to the potential of highly polarized interactions to become entry points for transformation if being engaged in ethical ways.

In contrast to the classical approaches to conflict resolution, which focus on short-term results or institutional agreements, conflict transformation focuses

on long-term relational change. In the view of Lederach (2005), peace is not defined by the absence of conflict, but rather by the presence of constructive relations, which are able to manage conflicts in a non-violent way. In the digital space, relations are built and sustained through repeated interactions, visual symbols, and narrative interactions. These micro-level interactions contribute to macro-level perceptions of religious "others". Thus, digital environments should not only be understood as technical environments but as social environments, which directly impact relational quality.

Within the specific context of religious conflict, digital platforms empower religious actors, interfaith activists, and civil institutions to engage in mediation efforts unconstrained by traditional limitations on space and time. This digital evolution is most visible in global campaigns such as #PrayforPeace and various online interfaith forums, which demonstrated the profound potential of the digital space to facilitate rapid interfaith solidarity. These platforms democratize peacebuilding, enabling grassroots voices to gain the same visibility as high-level institutional leaders.

However, the architecture of these platforms presents a significant structural challenge, as social media algorithms often reinforce discursive segregation by creating "algorithmic enclaves" that prioritize content based on existing user biases (Lim, 2017). Algorithms tend to privilege emotionally charged and polarizing content, thereby undermining dialogical engagements (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Fuchs, 2021). This limitation reinforces the relevance of Lederach's approach, which does not rely exclusively on rational deliberation but incorporates emotional healing, trust-building, and moral imagination.

As a result of this digital narrowing, peace messages frequently become confined within specific echo chambers, preaching to the converted while failing to reach or persuade diverse and opposing audiences. To overcome these technological barriers, digital mediation strategies cannot stop merely at creating dialogic spaces; they must be combined with intentional, collaborative, and cross-identity narratives (Garred & Abu-Nimer, 2018). Effective peacebuilding in the digital age, therefore, requires a move toward transversal communication, where content is specifically designed to bridge social silos and disrupt the cycles of polarization that algorithms tend to reward. Accordingly, digital space should be conceptualized as a relational arena characterized by conflict, vulnerability, and transformative potential. Lederach' Conflict Transformation framework provides a holistic analytical lens by integrating relational, structural, and narrative dimensions of conflict. This framework enables a deeper understanding of how religious conflict unfolds in digital contexts and how it might be transformed through

intentional practices.

Interfaith Digital Rituals and the Reconstruction of Social Relationships

One of the most significant findings of this study is that interfaith digital rituals are used as a strategy for promoting religious harmony. Virtual interfaith prayers, which are performed through online platforms such as Zoom and live streaming, have been organized by state institutions, local governments, judicial institutions, and educational institutions. For example, virtual interfaith prayers organized by regional police departments, district governments, and courts in various regions of Indonesia have been reported (Pemalang National Unity and Political Agency, 2021; District Court of Tual, 2024; Sleman Media Center, 2025). This shows that the concept of ritual is not obsolete in the digital age but has simply adjusted to the new technological environment.

According to Lederach's model, rituals are essential for transforming conflicts since they act on the symbolic and emotional levels of human interaction. For Lederach (2005), moral imagination is critical in the transformation of conflicts. Moral imagination refers to the ability to see oneself within a web of relationships that include former enemies. Digital interfaith rituals create symbolic spaces for shared experiences of togetherness among the participants, even when they are not physically together. Such shared experiences are essential for the rehumanization of religious "others", which is the first step to transforming conflict-ridden relationships.

Beyond the analytical and communicative functions of technology, the spiritual dimension of human connection is increasingly finding a home within virtual environments. Rituals play a crucial role in building peace (Schirch, 2015) by providing a structured way for communities to process trauma, celebrate unity, and envision a shared future. In digital spaces, these rituals take the form of solidarity hashtag campaigns, online interfaith prayers, and virtual memorials. Such practices function as "digital rituals" that engage emotional and spiritual dimensions, going beyond rational discussion to touch the core of human identity. This broadens our understanding that digital mediation is not merely about discourse but also about creating collective experiences that strengthen social cohesion through shared action.

These mediation practices have now expanded to include specific digital rituals, such as interfaith prayer sessions via Zoom, which serve as powerful symbols of social cohesion and interfaith solidarity. This phenomenon reflects a significant shift from text-based dialogue, which can often be cold or

confrontational, to collective emotional experiences that reinforce symbolic peace. By moving beyond mere intellectual exchange, these virtual rituals create a shared sacred space that fosters a more profound sense of belonging and mutual empathy among participants, regardless of their physical location. The screen ceases to be a barrier and becomes a communal window through which diverse believers can witness and participate in one another's spiritual expressions.

The effectiveness of these digital gatherings lies in their ability to translate the "liturgy of peace" into a format accessible to a hyper-connected world. While traditional mediation often focuses on resolving specific grievances, these symbolic rituals focus on the restoration of relationships and the humanization of the "other". The visual representation of religious leaders and followers praying together on a single digital screen, for instance, offers a powerful alternative narrative of coexistence and mutual respect. As participants see faces from different backgrounds displayed in a single gallery view, the visual representation of unity provides a counter-image to the narratives of division found elsewhere online. Consequently, digital rituals serve as an emotional anchor, ensuring that the peace achieved in virtual mediation is not just a signed agreement on a screen, but a felt reality in the hearts of the community.

Digital rituals also have significant implications for inclusivity. Persons who are often not included in public rituals in physical spaces, such as women, persons with disabilities, religious minorities, and those living in remote areas, can more easily participate in virtual spaces. Feminist approaches to peacebuilding highlight the significance of inclusivity in participation in order for sustainable peace to be achieved (Pankhurst, 2003; Shepherd, 2008). Digital rituals make it easier for individuals to participate in rituals, thus facilitating a more inclusive relational transformation.

However, this study also underscores the limitations of digital rituals. Unless they are followed up with sustained efforts and integrated into the daily social fabric, the potential for such rituals to be merely performative rather than transformative exists. Lederach (1997) argues that for symbolic acts of peace to be truly effective, they need to be situated within a wider context of relational and structural change, lest they become superficial. Digital interfaith rituals need to be seen as part of a wider ecosystem of conflict transformation.

The Digitalization of Religious Services and the Transformation of Conflict Structures

Another result is that digital technology can greatly affect the structural aspect of religious conflict. The development of interfaith digital service platforms,

such as the "One Minute Service" application developed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Bangka Belitung Province, shows how digitalization can facilitate equal access to religious services (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2025). The application delivers administrative and ritual services for all religious groups in a standardized and transparent way.

According to the Conflict Transformation approach, structural inequalities are the main cause of latent conflict. Lederach (1997) based his argument on Galtung's idea of structural violence, arguing that unequal access to resources and institutions creates conditions for latent conflict. When some religious groups feel they are discriminated against in accessing public services, this creates conflict. Inclusive digital services can be seen as structural interventions to address such inequalities.

Galtung's theory of positive peace supports the above analysis because it suggests that peace is the presence of social justice, not the absence of violence (Galtung, 1990). The digital religious services contribute to positive peace because they remove bureaucratic barriers and provide equal treatment to all religious communities. While the reduction of hate speech or the removal of inflammatory content may be seen as a form of negative peace, the intentional creation of collaborative and just interfaith narratives represents the actual progress toward positive peace. This deeper form of peace requires not just the silencing of hostility, but the active construction of inclusive structures that address the root causes of digital alienation.

Nevertheless, digitalization also creates new challenges, particularly with regards to the digital divide. According to Van Dijk (2020) and Helsper (2021), the issue of access to technology and digital literacy skills may lead to the reproduction of social inequalities. The elders, disadvantaged social groups, and inhabitants of rural areas may not benefit from digitalization without the establishment of adequate support systems. From the point of view of Lederach, structural transformation must go hand in hand with relational engagement in order to avoid the creation of new forms of exclusion.

Hence, the digitalization of religious services must be seen as a social process rather than a technological innovation. Conflict Transformation entails a need for technology to be rooted in community experiences and ethics. Otherwise, technology will simply become another arena for conflicts instead of a tool for peace.

Digital Preaching, Peace Narratives, and Middle-Range Peacebuilding Actors

According to Garred & Abu-Nimer (2018), religion not only serves as a source of violence but also contains rich spiritual resources for peace. With teachings grounded in love, justice, and solidarity, religion can act as a cognitive framework for mobilizing peace narratives. This view aligns with Appleby (2000), who explains that the sacred ambivalence of religion can exacerbate conflict but also provide moral capital for reconciliation. In studies of religious conflict, religion is often positioned ambivalently—on one hand as a source of disintegration, and on the other as a moral reservoir for peace (Appleby, 2000). This approach echoes Philpott's (2007) argument that religious ambivalence is political: it can contribute to violence when mobilized by certain actors, yet it can also serve as a normative foundation for building reconciliation.

Johan Galtung's (1969, 1990) theory of Peacebuilding deepens this understanding by distinguishing between negative peace—the absence of direct violence, such as the cessation of online hate speech—and positive peace, which refers to the creation of more fundamental social justice. Achieving positive peace requires addressing direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence. In the digital context, this involves confronting online hate speech, digital access inequality, and cultural legitimization that normalizes discrimination through religious narratives or symbols.

However, the pursuit of positive peace faces significant structural resistance within the architecture of modern social media. The primary challenge lies in the fact that algorithm-driven polarization often occurs far more rapidly than the organic, labor-intensive process of building cross-communal trust. Influencers or religious figures who courageously promote tolerance frequently find themselves becoming targets of coordinated online attacks, which underscores the urgent need for robust risk management strategies in digital mediation efforts. Without a safety net for these moderate voices, the digital sphere risks becoming a hostile environment where the loudest, most divisive voices drown out the moderate majority.

To counter these systemic risks, practitioners are increasingly turning to narrative-based interventions that prioritize human connection over abstract debate. Counter-narrative initiatives, such as creating creative content on Instagram that highlights stories of interfaith friendship, serve as a practical tool to dismantle polarization from the bottom up. This strategic use of social media mirrors John Paul Lederach's storytelling framework, which posits that sharing personal experiences is vital for cultivating deep human empathy across traditional divides (Lederach, 1997). By humanizing the "other"

through visual narratives, these initiatives transform abstract tolerance into relatable, lived realities that resonate more powerfully with digital audiences. Consequently, storytelling becomes a transformative bridge, turning passive scrolling into an opportunity for genuine emotional and social integration.

In line with this, Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000) view religion as a cognitive framework that shapes how actors interpret conflict. Social media vividly illustrates this dynamic, as exclusive religious narratives can spread rapidly, especially when validated by authoritative figures such as clerics, pastors, or emerging religious influencers who now function as new epistemic authorities. Meanwhile, digital influencers build moral authority through personal connection, charisma, and constant online presence, effectively bypassing traditional hierarchies. This form of authority differs significantly from traditional institutional authority, creating new dynamics of collaboration and competition that can either strengthen or destabilize communal harmony. Research indicates that collaborations between religious scholars and digital influencers have proven effective in disseminating messages of moderation and tolerance, particularly among younger audiences (Faridah & Amir, 2025). Initiatives such as "*Surabaya Mengaji*" utilize Instagram and other platforms to deliver visually engaging and dialogical religious content (Ansyori, 2022).

In the context of conflict mediation, bridging these two worlds through collaboration between traditional religious authorities and digital influencers becomes crucial for a holistic peace strategy. Theologically grounded peace messages from established religious figures gain a modern edge and reach significantly wider audiences when delivered through the creativity and digital fluency of influencers. This partnership allows for a hybrid authority that combines deep doctrinal substance with high-engagement communication. By working together, these actors can translate complex concepts of moderation into digestible content that speaks directly to the aspirations and concerns of a globalized digital public.

Nonetheless, this convergence of traditional and digital power is not without its inherent dangers. Risks such as the oversimplification of complex theological issues, the intrusion of commercial bias, and the rise of performative mediation, where the appearance of peace is prioritized over actual resolution, must be carefully managed. The foundational importance of mediator neutrality, a quality that digital actors may not always possess due to their reliance on engagement and personal branding, needs to be emphasized as a core ethical standard (Lederach, 1997). Therefore, a successful digital mediation framework must establish clear guidelines to ensure that influencers remain accountable to the principles of impartiality and depth while navigating the

fast-paced currents of the internet.

Within Lederach model, these actors function as middle-range leaders, who play a vital role in peacebuilding processes as they possess social legitimacy and relational flexibility, which help them link institutional elites and grassroots communities (Lederach, 1997). Through their digital preaching, they contribute to the transformation of conflict stories by subverting dominant conflict narratives and advancing alternative stories of coexistence. The importance of narrative is further highlighted in the narrative peacebuilding theory. Bar-Tal (2013) stated that conflicts are maintained through collective narratives that support exclusion and hostility. To change these narratives, new counter-narratives need to be developed that promote the humanity of adversaries and challenge identities. Digital preaching is an important tool for counter-narratives since it has the potential for wide dissemination and engagement.

However, digital preaching also has structural limitations. Social media platforms are biased towards sensational and affective content, which may be detrimental to moderate and reflective communication (Lim, 2017; Fuchs, 2021). Peace-loving religious actors may be at risk of marginalization and online violence. Lederach (2005) highlighted the significance of relational resilience and ethical integrity for peacebuilders in hostile contexts.

Critical media studies can further shed light on these issues, particularly in terms of the political economy of digital media. Couldry and Mejias (2019) pointed out that the politics of data extraction and the economies of attention can dominate the discourse on the internet, and this can be very difficult to reconcile with deliberative or peace-oriented communication. Therefore, effective digital preaching requires not only effective communication strategies but also critical media literacy.

Digital Mediation, Access to Justice, and the Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

The final set of findings focuses on the role played by digital mediation in the facilitation of access to justice and the transformation of religious conflicts into relational justice. Online mediation programs that have been put in place by religious courts in regions such as Namlea and Nanga Bulik have helped women and the economically disadvantaged take part in the mediation process without having to physically move from one place to another (Religious Court of Namlea, 2021; Religious Court of Nanga Bulik, 2022). By going beyond the level of intellectual exchange, the process has helped create a shared sacred space that evokes a deeper feeling of belonging and empathy among

participants regardless of their physical location.

In Lederach model, justice and conflict transformation go hand in hand because unresolved injustice leads to further relational harm. In addition to providing conflict resolution, digital mediation can also change the relationship between legal systems and communities. Studies on Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) show that it can be used to improve the fairness and participation of conflict resolution processes, particularly if it is socially sensitive (Menkel-Meadow, 2015; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). Evolvi (2018) expanded this discourse through the concept of hypermediated religious space, contextualized as existing at the interstice of alternative and mainstream, private and public, imaginary and real venues.

The theory of grassroots peace building also supports this perspective as it asserts that for sustainable peace to exist, it must stem from the experiences of the people (Mac Ginty, 2014). With the help of digital mediation, this is possible, as it ensures that peacebuilding is grounded in the realities of the people, rather than being limited to the negotiations of the elite. Moreover, the digital environment also helps in the increased participation of people who may have been excluded in the past, such as women and the youth, who may have been unable to overcome the cultural challenges that may have been present in the physical mediation process. With the help of the digital environment, these people are able to deliver their perspectives, thus ensuring that the process of peacebuilding is more inclusive and representative of the entire community. This is already being achieved through the practical application of the digital mediation process, which helps in bridging the gap between the people in rural areas and the justice system.

Nonetheless, ethical and security issues remain important. Without data protection and confidentiality standards, digital mediation may lead to the erosion of trust. Lederach's model emphasizes that technological innovation must be accompanied by ethical reflection and relational accountability. Overall, digital mediation is an example of how technology can link justice and peace. Digital mediation can improve access, overcome structural inequalities, and promote the transformation of religious conflicts through relationship building.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that religious conflict in the digital era should be addressed and resolved beyond reactive regulation and communication approaches. By applying and developing the theory of Conflict Transformation proposed

by John Paul Lederach to the digital religious space, this study shows that digital environment is deeply rooted in the relational, structural, and narrative dimensions of contemporary religious life. The digital environment, therefore, is not only a place of risk but also a deep opportunity for transformative peacebuilding.

The results also reinforce that the sustainability of religious harmony in the digital space will depend on design, leadership, and participation. The transformation of conflict in the digital space requires patience and imagination because, while technology may speed up polarization, healing relationships is a slow and fragile process. However, precisely because of this, there is a unique potential in the digital space to cultivate moral imagination on a scale previously unimaginable. Digital preaching can be an effective peacebuilding practice with transformative potential, as long as it is rooted in genuine relationships and is long-term-oriented in its vision. As far as conflict transformation is concerned, the effectiveness of digital preaching should be judged not in terms of metrics of viral spread, but in terms of its potential to build long-lasting inter-religious relationships.

This study indeed has limitation. There is an urge for future researchers to include more comparative contexts beyond Indonesia, the longitudinal effects of digital rituals on inter-religious trust, and the potential impact of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality on conflict transformation. By continuing to advance peace theory through digital religion research, scholars and practitioners can contribute to the creation of a more just, inclusive, and peaceful digital public life.

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DECOLONIAL KNOWLEDGE AND EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE IN MOROCCO

Tarik ElFalih
Euromed University of Fez, Morocco
Email: t.elfalih@vac.ueuromed.org

ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a critical examination of the ways in which decolonial thought interrogates and reconfigures the production of knowledge within the Global South. It foregrounds the persistence of colonial structures and their formative influence on intellectual traditions, academic institutions, and dominant epistemological paradigms, as articulated by decolonial theorists. Particular attention is directed toward epistemologies emanating from the Global North, which frequently marginalize or efface local and Indigenous knowledge systems, thereby perpetuating a hierarchical order that privileges Western modes of thought. The analysis further engages with alternative epistemic practices that contest the hegemony of Eurocentric frameworks, drawing upon case studies from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These interventions encompass radical revisions of history and philosophy, the articulation of Indigenous pedagogies, and the preservation of oral traditions. Collectively, they advance perspectives that de-stabilize claims to the universality of Western epistemologies and open conceptual space for plural and situated forms of knowledge. By situating these interventions within the broader discourse of decolonial scholarship, this article demonstrates how knowledge can be reclaimed as an instrument of intellectual and political transformation, as well as a mode of resistance against enduring colonial logics in regions designated as the Global South.

Keywords: Epistemic Resistance; Knowledge Production; Indigenous Knowledges; Epistemic Justice; Intellectual Decolonization.

INTRODUCTION

Anaïs Nin's account of Fes offers a portrayal in which the city's physical environment becomes inseparable from cultural judgment. Observing the intricate, constricted streets of the medina, the visitor from the so-called "center" interprets them as emblematic of the intellectual confinement attributed to the city's inhabitants. The urban form is thus transformed into a metaphorical device, where architectural and spatial features are read as signs of cultural mentality. This interpretive gesture illustrates how external observers often translate the materiality of place into narratives that reinforce

preconceived assumptions about the societies they encounter. This figurative remark implies that the architectural physical restrictions of the city reflect a larger intellectual or cultural restriction judged by the observer. One might see this representation as a statement of a specific perspective that associates mental freedom or openness with physical space. Often connected with the labyrinthine medinas of Fes, the little pathways might be seen as reflecting a certain insensitivity or traditionalism that opposes the flood of fresh ideas or viewpoints.

This view might also be attacked, though, for oversimplifying or for supporting preconceptions about non-Western civilizations. From this vantage point, one may argue that the travelers' observations capture a more general colonial attitude that frequently discounted or misinterpreted the complexity of non-Western civilizations. Rather than suggesting a lack of intellectual or cultural sophistication, the narrowness of the alleys may reflect a rich and complex past whereby the city's architecture is a response to social and natural necessities. Fes's meandering lanes are a living archive of the city's past, reflecting centuries of custom, resiliency, and community life rather than only a physical location.

This criticism aligns with the theories of postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said (1978), who, in Orientalism, argued that Western depictions of the East can reinforce a sense of cultural superiority. The travelers' story runs the danger of simplifying a rich and dynamic civilization to a basic and contemptuous cliché by connecting the architecture of the city with a supposed intellectual narrowness. On the other hand, appreciating the architectural, historical, and cultural relevance of Fes helps one to have a more complex knowledge of the city. With its maze-like streets, the medina depicts a distinct way of life that prioritizes common areas, close-knit communities, and a connection with the past. Rather than markers of narrow-mindedness, the alleys of Fes may be understood as routes through a living past still forming the identity of its residents. Thus, rather than seeing the little alleys as a metaphor for restricted thinking, one could value them as evidence of the city's complex, multifaceted experiences and past. This method questions the visitor's first interpretation and fosters a more sympathetic and educated interaction with Fes' culture.

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in decolonial studies and postcolonial critique. The research is organized as a critical-theoretical investigation that analyzes essential decolonial concepts—including epistemic resistance, epistemic disobedience, border thinking, and decolonial intersectionality—within the Moroccan context, while positioning Morocco within wider discussions originating from the Global South. Instead of approaching decoloniality as an abstract framework, the study examines

theory in direct engagement with historical, cultural, and contemporary social reality. The analysis utilizes a diverse array of sources, encompassing seminal decolonial and postcolonial theoretical works (e.g., Said, Fanon, Quijano, Mignolo, Santos) alongside contributions by Moroccan and Arab intellectuals (e.g., Khatibi, Abdurrahman, Laroui, Al-Jabri, El-Messiri). The article also engages with contextual public discourse and illustrative examples, such as narratives of visa refusal and prominent cases of racialization in European national contexts. These materials are not treated as empirical data within a positivist framework but rather as critical entry points for analyzing the enduring influence of colonial logics on contemporary power relations, mobility regimes, and knowledge hierarchies.

The analytical process consists of three interrelated phases. First, it entails a conceptual mapping of the primary decolonial notions mobilized in the article, including epistemic resistance and disobedience, borders, and pluralism/intersectionality. Second, these concepts are anchored in Moroccan debates concerning language hierarchy, curriculum reform, Amazigh marginalization, and broader dynamics of border externalization. Third, the study advances toward a synthesis oriented to praxis, identifying points where the literature becomes fragmented or overly abstract and emphasizing applied domains explicitly addressed in the article, particularly education, language policy, and cultural production.

The relevance of this research is underscored by recent political and diplomatic developments involving Morocco and several European countries, including Spain, France, Germany, and Italy. Following a series of incidents and disputes, the Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation, and Moroccan Expatriates declared that "Morocco is not the same as it was yesterday." Tensions surrounding the Moroccan-occupied cities of Melilla and Ceuta, where migrants attempted to enter Spain, led Morocco to recall its ambassadors and suspend cooperation in areas such as security, diplomacy, and business. These developments challenge entrenched narratives of Global North superiority and reveal the persistence of unequal power relations between former colonial states and countries of the Global South. Such hierarchies are further manifested in the arbitrary refusal of visas by European states, often justified through opaque administrative reasoning.

Moroccan professionals, including physicians, engineers, teachers, artists, and businesspeople, have been disproportionately affected, with refusals frequently invoking "Motive number 10," officially defined as "*Les informations communiquées pour justifier l'objet et les conditions du séjour envisagé ne sont pas fiables*" (The information provided to justify the purpose and conditions of

the intended stay is not reliable). This rationale implicitly reinforces narratives of mistrust and epistemic inferiority directed at individuals from the Global South. The recurrence of such refusals exposes a troubling paradox in which individuals who have internalized Western representations of the Global South as backward or deficient are marginalized by the very systems they once regarded as models of progress. These dynamics highlight the enduring injustices, biases, and epistemic asymmetries that continue to structure global interactions.

In light of these concerns, the study is guided by the following research questions, which inform both its theoretical orientation and analytical trajectory: How do colonial and Eurocentric modes of representation transform physical spaces such as the medina of Fes into metaphors for intellectual or cultural judgment? In what ways do travel narratives and external observations reproduce epistemic hierarchies that position non-Western societies as intellectually or culturally constrained? How can alternative readings of urban space challenge colonial interpretations and reveal indigenous forms of knowledge, memory, and social organization? To what extent does the reinterpretation of architectural and spatial practices contribute to broader projects of epistemic resistance and decolonial knowledge production?

LOCALIZING THE DECOLONIAL TURN: EPISTEMIC STRUGGLES IN MOROCCAN THOUGHT

This paper provides a summary of decolonial studies together with their theoretical roots, the function of language, intersectionality, and pragmatic applications. Examining decolonization movements will be done as useful models of decolonization in action. Extensive effects of colonialism influence the social, economic, and cultural growth of many different countries all throughout the world. Racial and gender inequalities, as well as ongoing natural resource exploitation, point to the ongoing effects of colonialism. Frantz Fanon's (1963) work remains a cornerstone of decolonial thought, particularly his interventionist declaration that decolonization is a violent and radical rupture with colonial systems. His vision of liberation inspired numerous intellectual projects across the Global South. However, in the Moroccan context, Fanon's universalist claims have often been reconsidered and critiqued. Abdelkébir Khatibi, for example, argued for moving beyond confrontation with colonialism by developing what he termed double critique, a critical stance directed simultaneously at Western colonial legacies and at traditional Arab-Islamic frameworks (Khatibi, 1983).

This approach underscores the importance of epistemic pluralism and hybrid

forms of knowledge, resonating with Morocco's complex cultural and linguistic landscape. Building on this, Taha Abdurrahman (2006) articulated a vision of decolonization rooted in ethics and spirituality. He proposed reconciling Islamic traditions with modern rationality, thereby constructing a model of modernity anchored in local values. Abdurrahman's contribution lies in showing that decolonization is not merely a political or intellectual project but also a moral one that redefines the foundations of knowledge and practice. In contrast, Abdellah Laroui (1976) situated decolonization within a historical and rationalist framework, insisting on a sustained critique of inherited traditions without falling into essentialism or nostalgia. His emphasis on historicism provides Moroccan intellectuals with methodological tools to avoid reductive notions of authenticity and instead ground decolonial projects in critical historical analysis. Other Arab thinkers, including Hassan Hanafi (1991), Nasr Abu Zayd (2004), and Abdelwahab El-Messiri (2006), expanded the scope of decolonial debates by engaging questions of hermeneutics, political ideology, and epistemological bias. Although their work is often referenced only briefly in Moroccan scholarship, it provides valuable frameworks for deepening regional intellectual dialogues on decolonization. Collectively, these contributions show both the ambition and the limitations of existing scholarship. While there is an eagerness to engage with global and regional debates on decoloniality, the literature frequently suffers from structural weaknesses, fragmented presentation of theories, insufficient contextualization, and a lack of connection to praxis.

First, theoretical perspectives are often presented as isolated fragments, producing a descriptive accumulation of ideas rather than a synthesis that clarifies convergences and divergences. Discussions of Fanon, Khatibi, Abdurrahman, and Laroui are frequently juxtaposed without articulation of how their contributions intersect or challenge one another. Second, Moroccan intellectual debates often lack grounding in specific historical, cultural, and linguistic realities. This gap undermines the applicability of theoretical claims to Morocco's plural identities, colonial legacies, and contested linguistic hierarchies. Third, praxis is noticeably absent. The literature often privileges abstract theorization over explorations of how decolonial thought might reshape concrete domains such as education, language policy, and cultural production. Without this applied dimension, the transformative potential of decolonization remains underdeveloped.

Addressing these shortcomings requires synthesizing Moroccan and Arab intellectual contributions into a structured framework that highlights both their tensions and complementarities. Abdurrahman (2006), for instance,

advances the notion of *taṣīliyya* (authenticating), which calls for restoring Arab-Islamic intellectual and moral sovereignty. For him, decolonization does not simply reject Western paradigms but re-centers knowledge production on indigenous traditions capable of generating universal insights. In contrast, Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri (1982) stresses Arab rationality, arguing that colonialism deepened intellectual stagnation in the Arab world. His call for an "Arab modernity" reflects the tension between resisting uncritical imitation of Western models and engaging constructively with modern challenges. Khatibi (1983), meanwhile, insists on dismantling both colonial and indigenous authoritarian structures, particularly through deconstructing the coloniality of language. His critique of bilingualism foregrounds the enduring dominance of French in Morocco's education and administration systems, in contrast to the marginalized status of Arabic and Tamazight. Laroui (1973), by contrast, situates decolonization within broader socio-economic transformations, warning against culturalist reductions and emphasizing structural critique of capitalism and dependency.

Taken together, these frameworks illustrate the richness of Moroccan intellectual engagement with decoloniality while also exposing deep tensions between spiritual, rationalist, linguistic, and materialist approaches. Decolonization in Morocco thus emerges not as a single paradigm but as a multidimensional project requiring dialogue across ethics, rationality, culture, and economics. These debates also align with broader postcolonial critiques, particularly Said's (1978) analysis of Orientalism, which demonstrates how knowledge production historically served imperial domination. By reclaiming epistemic agency, Moroccan intellectuals not only respond to colonial legacies but also contribute original insights to the global project of decoloniality, offering alternatives that challenge both Western universality and local essentialisms. This synthesis points to the theme of border crossing, both literal and metaphorical. The rejection of Western epistemic dominance, the reclamation of indigenous languages, and the reconstruction of intellectual frameworks all represent forms of crossing and reconfiguring boundaries between colonizer and colonized, tradition and modernity, and local and universal.

Decolonization in Morocco cannot be understood solely as the dismantling of inherited structures of domination, such as colonial institutions, Eurocentric knowledge systems, or linguistic hierarchies that continue to privilege French and Western epistemologies over Arabic and Tamazight. While exposing and challenging these structures is essential, critique alone risks leaving an intellectual and social vacuum. Decolonization must therefore also be

a constructive process that reimagines new spaces of thought, identity, and social justice. In the realm of knowledge production, this is evident in Moroccan intellectual projects that seek to generate theory from within local ethical, linguistic, and cultural traditions, such as Taha Abdurrahman's effort to articulate an alternative moral epistemology or Abdelkébir Khatibi's double critique, which calls for a plural dialogue between Western and indigenous frameworks rather than their simple rejection. Reimagining identity is equally crucial, as colonialism enforced simplistic classifications that portrayed Moroccans as either primitive or valuable solely through conformity to European standards; the contemporary acknowledgment of Amazigh language and culture, for instance, signifies an effort to forge a plural national identity that recognizes historical diversity and agency. Lastly, decolonization must deal with social justice by dealing with material inequalities that are still there because of colonial power. These include things like unequal access to education and mobility, and the continued control of Moroccan bodies through strict visa rules. In this context, decolonization in Morocco involves not only dismantling colonial oppression but also proactively conceptualizing alternative futures rooted in epistemic justice, cultural diversity, and fair social relations.

EPISTEMIC DISOBEDIENCE

To speak through this Disobedient voice, *"I am German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose."* Mesut Özil's decision to retire from international football in 2018, after enduring racist attacks and feeling scapegoated for Germany's World Cup failure, can be seen as an act of decolonial disobedience. His statement underscores the racialized perception of his identity, where his German citizenship was questioned due to his Turkish heritage, and the same case can be applied to Afro-French players. This reflects the decolonial critique of how individuals of marginalized backgrounds are often positioned within a hierarchy that aligns their value with their proximity to a dominant, colonial identity. By choosing to walk away from the German national team, Özil resisted the colonial demand for assimilation and loyalty to a system that continually relegated him to the status of the "Other." His act was a form of disobedience against the racial expectations placed upon him, rejecting the symbolic violence of being forced to embody an identity that denied his full humanity and complex cultural background. This act of disobedience can be understood as a refusal to accept the dehumanizing effects of colonial power, a rejection of the colonial logic that seeks to erase or subordinate his multiple identities in favor of a singular, hegemonic one.

Decolonial Choice and Epistemic Disobedience, which questions the supremacy of Western epistemologies and offers a path ahead towards a global order more inviting to diverse groups of people, is a key component of decolonization. Mignolo (2009) defines epistemic disobedience as the rejection of the limits set by conventional knowledge frameworks, to promote "Unconventional, transformative approaches to knowledge generating" (p. 167). In this way, it questions the idea of knowledge that is objective on a worldwide scale since it recognizes that "Knowledge is dependent upon the specific context in which it is situated" (Mignolo, 2009, p. 169). This concept emphasizes the importance of local environments in the process of knowledge generation. It stresses the need for the development of new methods of knowing grounded in the particular context in which they are located. Epistemic disobedience is not only a criticism of the supremacy of Western knowledge systems but also a call to action for the creation of a space in which different epistemologies may thrive. Mignolo (2011) claims that "The decolonial option calls for the promotion of several epistemologies instead of the supremacy of Western frameworks" (p. 62). Emphasizing this is crucial. Epistemic disobedience aims to create space for marginalized points of view and experiences by deconstructing the power structures and prejudices embedded in the production of information and accomplishing these calls for a comprehensive examination of the assumptions driving dominant knowledge systems as well as a prioritization of under-represented voices (Mignolo, 2009).

Quijano and Mignolo's framework of modernity, colonialism, and decoloniality provides a fascinating perspective from which to explore the dynamic interaction between colonialism, modernity, and the continuous struggle for decoloniality. Quijano (2000) argues that "Modernity and coloniality are interdependent, creating enduring structures of subordination and inequality" (p. 548). The interdependence of modernity, which began in Europe in the 15th century, with colonial expansion, helps one to see how both shaped modernity. Mignolo (2007) claims "Modernity brought capitalist modes of production, driven by the pursuit of profit" (p. 45), stressing the need for scientific observation and reason. Accompanying these developments in knowledge was the growth of European colonial powers, whose actions justified the supremacy and dehumanization of people not of European ancestry (Mignolo, 2007, p. 52). So, by questioning the epistemological and social institutions already in place, the decolonial framework aims to handle the long-term consequences of colonial modernity. Mignolo (2013) claims that "Modernity calls for questioning current epistemological frameworks and building new knowledge systems founded on different epistemologies" (p. 80). This is a significant point to highlight. Centered on different points

of view, this paradigm offers a road towards a fairer and more just world (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2007). Its major contribution to the debate on global inequality is also a strong theoretical basis for understanding world inequities.

BORDERS AND BEYOND: DECOLONIAL INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE RECONFIGURATION OF GEOGRAPHIES

The concept of decolonization has become one of the most contested and theoretically rich debates in the field of postcolonial studies. Scholars have approached it from diverse disciplinary perspectives, ranging from philosophy and literary studies to education, history, and anthropology. Despite this growing body of work, much of the scholarship risks falling into abstraction, repetition, or overgeneralization, often neglecting concrete local contexts. This article examines decolonization within the Moroccan intellectual and cultural context, situating it within the broader framework of border crossing. Borders, geographical, cultural, linguistic, and epistemic, function as spaces of negotiation where identities are reshaped, and knowledge is reconfigured. Accordingly, decolonization should not be understood solely as an abstract theoretical discourse but as a practice embedded in these intersecting spaces. The central argument is that decolonization in Morocco must be framed as a "bordered process", one that not only critiques colonial paradigms but also re-examines inherited cultural and intellectual traditions while advancing practical transformations in education, language, and epistemology.

Morocco has seen a notable movement towards decolonization in recent years, driven by academics and activists seeking to solve the long-lasting effects of colonialism and empire. The decolonial trend has evolved as a reaction to the rising interest in the pre-colonial history and cultural legacy of Morocco, as well as ongoing social and political inequalities that have helped sustain systematic inequalities. The awareness of the pervasive inequalities and injustices that still define Moroccan society, especially those maintained by the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, is fundamental to this movement. Among these long-standing problems are the marginalization of minority populations, the repression of indigenous cultures and customs, and continuous foreign power-based resource exploitation. Reclamation of Morocco's historical and cultural legacy by means of challenging dominant narratives imposed by colonial powers is a main goal of this movement. This has caused Morocco's pre-colonial history to be re-examined, including a review of the contributions made by indigenous people and the function of Islam in the evolution of Moroccan civilization (Graiouid, 2009).

Concurrently, the decolonial viewpoint attempts to solve the enduring

ramifications of colonialism in modern Morocco. This advocates for greater participation and inclusion of historically marginalized communities in the governance and development processes of the country and involves a critical study of the political and economic structures built during the colonial period. The emergence of fresh cultural expressions challenging accepted narratives and revitalizing indigenous traditions is a fundamental component of Morocco's decolonization process. This covers the reinvigoration of traditional artisanal practices and the development of fresh musical, literary, and visual art from Morocco's rich cultural legacy. Moreover, the decolonial paradigm has been strongly linked with a rising consciousness of environmental justice and the necessity to oppose the use of natural resources by outside organizations. This part of the movement demands increased recognition of the rights of indigenous communities and a critical assessment of extractive businesses that have traditionally caused environmental damage in Morocco.

Recognizing the ongoing impact of colonialism and imperialism on Moroccan society, the decolonial change in Morocco marks a fundamental change in the political and cultural scene of the nation. Notwithstanding the difficulties, such as the possibility of encouraging exclusive nationalism or ignoring the complexity of Moroccan culture, the decolonization process is a necessary first step towards rectifying historical injustices and fostering a more equitable and inclusive society. Decolonial literature produced in Morocco has been especially important as it provides a potent weapon for "Challenging and subverting dominant narratives and power structures". It helps Morocco to regain its cultural legacy, language, and identity (Graiouid, 2009). With early attempts going back to the early 20th century, when intellectuals like Allal al-Fassi started opposing the colonial narratives imposed by the French, Moroccan authors have long used decolonial literature to challenge dominant narratives. Writers such as Driss Chraibi carried on this legacy in the post-independence era by examining and challenging prevailing narratives, especially those that presented the French as civilizers rather than oppressors. Through their works, modern authors like Laila Lalami and Abdellatif Laâbi carry on this history by delving into issues of identity, displacement, and the enduring effects of colonialism.

Unlike previous studies of decolonizing processes, the multifarious character of decolonizing Morocco calls for a careful analysis of the continuous difficulties caused by colonial legacies as well as initiatives to support the cultural, linguistic, and social variety of the country. Decolonization in Morocco is a process that goes beyond the simple attainment of political freedom to involve the dismantling of the socio-cultural and economic systems built during colonial

control, therefore impacting modern society. The Moroccan educational system is among the most important domains where decolonization is actively sought. Eurocentric ideas dominated the educational system throughout the French colonial era, leading to a curriculum denigrating Moroccan history, language, and culture. As Sadiqi (2014) points out, "The colonial legacy in Moroccan education has perpetuated a Eurocentric bias, which continues to shape the minds of students" (p. 87). Reflecting a larger trend towards inclusiveness and diversity in education, recent attempts to change the educational system seek to embrace Moroccan history, language, and cultural narratives.

These changes mark a vital first in challenging the residual consequences of colonialism and promoting a more complete awareness of Morocco's rich legacy. Being both a symbol and an instrument of cultural identity, language is crucial in the decolonization process. Arabic, especially Moroccan Arabic (*Darija*), was assigned to informal and private domains while French was encouraged as the language of trade, education, and government throughout the colonial era. This language hierarchy captures a larger pattern of cultural marginalization, which still affects Moroccan culture. Ennaji (2005) states, "The dominance of French in postcolonial Morocco has maintained the colonial power dynamics, marginalizing Arabic and Tamazight speakers" (p. 102). Efforts at modern decolonization aim to improve Darija and Tamazight's standing by including them in the educational system and encouraging their use in public conversation and media.

Retaking Morocco's cultural identity and confronting the colonial legacy of linguistic imperialism depend on this language revitalization. Moreover, Morocco's decolonization process entails closely scrutinizing and contesting the social and economic systems that uphold inequality and marginalize particular groups, notably the Amazigh (Berber) population. The colonial era widened these gaps, which fuel the continuous fight of the Amazigh people for autonomy and legitimacy. As Bhabha (1994) contends, "The colonial enterprise has left a lasting impact on the social fabric of postcolonial societies, reinforcing power imbalances and marginalizing indigenous populations" (p. 72). Important elements of the larger decolonization movement, which aims to right past injustices and advance social equality, are efforts to support the Amazigh language, culture, and political representation.

Decolonization in Morocco is an all-encompassing attempt to create a more inclusive and varied society that honors and respects the cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions of every one of its people, not just a political process. This entails challenging colonial past discriminatory policies and attitudes, as well as promoting more understanding and communication among many

spheres of society. As Fanon (1963) notes, "Decolonization is not a mechanical process but a profound transformation of society, requiring a radical rethinking of social relations and cultural values" (p. 36). Decolonizing Morocco is an ongoing, difficult job requiring fighting the traces of colonialism and promoting a more inclusive and varied society. This calls for attempts to solve social and economic disparities, advance indigenous languages and cultures, and change the educational system. Although much progress has been made, much more has to be done to reach actual decolonization and social fairness in Morocco.

The knowledge gained from Morocco's experience might help guide more general debates on the decolonization of Arab academics, where similar possibilities and problems exist. Likewise, the effort of decolonizing Arab academics challenges the predominance of Western-centric viewpoints that have long shaped scholarly debate in the area. Colonialism's historical effects have excluded indigenous knowledge systems, therefore supporting a dependence on Western ideas and structures. Said (1978) emphasizes, "The dominance of Western knowledge systems in the postcolonial world has led to the marginalization of local epistemologies, perpetuating intellectual dependency" (p. 15). Decolonizing Arab academics calls for a critical study of these Western paradigms and supports a more inclusive approach, including local knowledge and epistemologies. The ongoing influence of Western academic institutions and frameworks, created during the colonial era and still influencing educational policies in the area, is a major obstacle in this process. "The colonial legacy in Arab academia is evident in the persistent preference for Western theories, often at the expense of local knowledge," says Ahmed (2017, p. 58).

Dealing with this problem means supporting indigenous languages as teaching languages and translating academic publications into Arabic, therefore lessening the dependency on Western academic models. Furthermore, academic courses' material has to be closely reviewed and changed to represent the several social, linguistic, and cultural realities of the area. As El-messiri (2006) contends, "The decolonization of Arab academia requires a fundamental rethinking of curricula, incorporating multiple perspectives and voices that have been historically marginalized" (p. 44). This strategy will not only extend the field of research but also help to create a more inclusive and fairer intellectual environment. Decolonizing Arab academics also entails questioning the power systems inside academic institutions, which Western institutions and academics have typically shaped. Alatas (2000) notes, "The dominance of Western academia in the global knowledge economy has led

to the marginalization of non-Western scholars, limiting the potential for intellectual autonomy in the Arab world" (p. 19).

A fairer and more representative academic scene depends on Arab researchers and institutions advocating for more autonomy and self-determination. Decolonizing Arab academics is, all things considered, essential for creating a more inclusive and fairer intellectual climate. It entails supporting more autonomy for Arab academics and institutions, thus contesting the dominance of Western institutions and frameworks, and supporting indigenous languages and knowledge. Through tackling these problems, the Arab scholarly community may help to create a more varied and representative worldwide knowledge economy. Like other academic disciplines, geography has long been entwined with colonialism, imperialism, and Eurocentrism. Often ignoring the viewpoints and experiences of underprivileged and oppressed groups, these influences have produced biased and inadequate knowledge about the world. "Geography, as a discipline, has been complicit in the production of colonial knowledge, which has served to legitimate and perpetuate colonial power structures" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 35).

Scholars have demanded the decolonization of geography by means of intersectional theories that consider the many experiences and identities of underprivileged groups. As Quijano (2000) defines decoloniality, it aims to question the Eurocentric and colonial viewpoints that have dominated academic fields like geography. According to Quijano, "Decoloniality involves the deconstruction of colonial knowledge systems and the recognition of the agency and knowledge of colonized peoples" (p. 533). This method calls for a critical review of colonial historical, political, and cultural effects as well as the participation of underprivileged voices in scholarly debate. Developed by Crenshaw, the idea of intersectionality shows that many kinds of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism, shape people's experiences and identities and their interactions. "Intersecting and compounding different forms of discrimination create unique experiences of oppression… Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how different forms of discrimination interact." (p.140).

Scholars may create a more complete knowledge of geographies that takes into account the many and linked experiences of underprivileged populations by combining intersectional analysis with decoloniality. Combining the ideas of decoloniality and intersectionality, the decolonial intersectional framework produces a potent analytical tool for geographies. This concept acknowledges that the power dynamics, historical settings, and personal connections of their makers affect geographies more than they are objective or neutral. It gives

the viewpoints and experiences of underprivileged and oppressed groups top priority, thereby subverting the prevailing narratives and power systems that have molded the discipline of geography. Scholars may transform our knowledge of geographies by using a decolonial intersectional framework, therefore providing a more inclusive and nuanced viewpoint that recognizes the richness and variety of human experience. This method not only questions the colonial heritage in geography but also offers a critical prism through which one may see modern problems of power, identity, and place.

CROSSING BORDERS OF PLURALISM THROUGH DECOLONIAL INTERSECTIONALITY

Scholars and activists have found considerable value in the concept of decolonial intersectionality as a framework for understanding how colonial power continues to shape contemporary social, political, and cultural relations through overlapping forms of domination. Originally articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality highlights how marginalizations such as race, gender, and class are not experienced separately but operate simultaneously and relationally (Crenshaw, 2013). Decoloniality, meanwhile, interrogates the persistence of colonial power structures in the present, particularly in knowledge systems, institutions, and global hierarchies (Mignolo, 2011). When combined, decolonial intersectionality moves beyond symbolic diversity or multicultural inclusion to reveal how historical colonial logics remain embedded in everyday practices and social arrangements.

In Morocco, the practical relevance of decolonial intersectionality is evident in the experiences of Amazigh communities, whose marginalization cannot be reduced to ethnicity alone. Amazigh populations are often positioned at the intersection of linguistic exclusion, economic marginalization, rural underdevelopment, and limited political representation—conditions that are themselves legacies of colonial and postcolonial governance. For example, although Tamazight has been recognized as an official language, its implementation within education and public administration remains uneven. Amazigh students from rural regions frequently encounter structural disadvantages when navigating a school system historically organized around French and Arabic, revealing how language, geography, and class intersect to reproduce epistemic inequality. A decolonial intersectional approach makes visible how these exclusions are mutually reinforcing rather than incidental.

Language policy offers another concrete site where decolonial intersectionality operates in practice. The continued dominance of French in higher education, scientific research, and elite professional spaces intersects with

class stratification and urban privilege. Access to social mobility is often contingent upon mastery of a colonial language, which disproportionately benefits urban, middle- and upper-class populations while marginalizing Arabic- and Tamazight-speaking citizens. From a decolonial intersectional perspective, linguistic hierarchy is not merely a cultural issue but a mechanism through which colonial power, class inequality, and epistemic authority converge. Addressing language injustice, therefore, requires more than formal recognition; it demands structural transformation in how knowledge is produced, taught, and validated. Decolonial intersectionality also illuminates Morocco's position within global mobility regimes. Moroccan migrants and professionals seeking entry into Europe frequently encounter exclusion at the intersection of race, nationality, religion, and class.

The repeated use of vague administrative justifications—such as "Motive number 10" in visa refusals—demonstrates how epistemic distrust toward Global South subjects is racialized and institutionalized. These border practices disproportionately affect individuals whose identities combine Global South citizenship, non-European cultural affiliation, and limited economic capital, illustrating how colonial hierarchies are reproduced through contemporary border governance. Here, borders function not only as territorial limits but as epistemic filters that determine whose knowledge, intentions, and credibility are recognized. Cultural production and activism further demonstrate the applied dimension of decolonial intersectionality in Morocco. Amazigh movements, feminist organizations, and migrant advocacy groups increasingly articulate their struggles in intersectional terms, linking language rights, gender justice, economic inequality, and historical recognition.

Moroccan literature, music, and visual art similarly reflect intersectional concerns by narrating experiences of displacement, linguistic marginalization, gendered exclusion, and postcolonial memory simultaneously. These practices constitute forms of epistemic resistance, challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming spaces for alternative knowledge grounded in lived experience. Taken together, these examples show that decolonial intersectionality in Morocco is not merely a theoretical lens but a practical framework for analyzing and transforming social reality. By centering the voices of those positioned at multiple sites of marginalization, it exposes how colonial power continues to operate across education, language, borders, and cultural representation. At the same time, it opens pathways toward epistemic justice by linking knowledge production to struggles over social equity, cultural recognition, and political inclusion. Realizing this potential, however, requires sustained engagement with local contexts, institutional reform, and an ongoing commitment to

challenging entrenched power relations that continue to shape postcolonial Moroccan society (Santos, 2014).

BORDERS OF KNOWLEDGE: THE MOROCCAN DECOLONIAL TURN AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF ARAB ACADEMIA

A renewed interest has also emerged in Morocco's pre-colonial past, with a special focus on the contributions of indigenous peoples and the formative role of Islam in shaping Moroccan civilization (Graiouid, 2009). This revival reflects the nation's struggle to cope with the continuing effects of the colonial era. Decolonization in Morocco is not only a political concern but also a cultural and educational undertaking. A key dimension of this movement involves challenging the historical narratives imposed by colonial forces. Projects in this area include reclaiming Morocco's cultural heritage, recognizing the rights of indigenous communities, and rethinking the country's historical contributions. Central to these initiatives is the revitalization of traditional cultural expressions, such as painting, literature, clothing, music, and handicrafts, that draw upon Morocco's rich heritage. Education has played a particularly significant role in this process. For decades, Morocco's educational system was shaped by Eurocentric perspectives that continue to influence how students are taught and how knowledge is valued. As Sadiqi (2014) observes, "The legacy of colonialism in Moroccan education has perpetuated a Eurocentric bias, which continues to shape the minds of students" (p. 87).

Recent reforms, however, aim to integrate Moroccan history, culture, and languages into the curriculum, thereby confronting colonial legacies and fostering a more inclusive national identity. Language constitutes another crucial arena of Morocco's decolonial process. Under colonial rule, French was elevated to the status of language of administration, education, and commerce, while Arabic and Tamazight were marginalized. This hierarchy persists today, as Ennaji (2005) argues: "The dominance of French in postcolonial Morocco has maintained the colonial power dynamics, marginalizing Arabic and Tamazight speakers" (p. 102). Current efforts to promote *Darija* (Moroccan Arabic) and Tamazight in education form part of a broader strategy to reclaim cultural identity and resist linguistic imperialism. These initiatives also intersect with broader socio-economic inequalities, particularly those affecting Amazigh communities, as Bhabha (1994) notes, "The colonial enterprise has left a lasting impact on the social fabric of postcolonial societies, reinforcing power imbalances and marginalizing indigenous populations" (p. 72). The decolonial movement in Morocco thus places significant emphasis on advancing Amazigh culture, language, and political representation.

The challenge of decolonization also extends to academic institutions in Morocco and across the Arab world, where colonial legacies continue to shape intellectual life. The struggle for epistemic freedom, the right to produce and value local knowledge on one's own terms, remains ongoing, much like the broader fight for political and economic autonomy. Western knowledge systems remain deeply embedded within academic structures, influencing curricula, research methods, and notions of intellectual authority. As Edward Said (1978) argued, the global marginalization of indigenous epistemologies was not merely a byproduct of colonization but also a deliberate strategy to sustain intellectual dependency. The continued dominance of Western frameworks in Arab academia reflects this systematic imbalance and calls for more than superficial reforms. Genuine decolonization requires a comprehensive reconsideration of academic goals, curricula, and methods of validating knowledge. Thinkers such as Taha Abdurrahman, Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, Abdelkébir Khatibi, and Abdelwahab El-Messiri provide critical insights into this endeavor.

Abdurrahman critiques the uncritical absorption of Western philosophy in the Arab world, often at the expense of local Islamic and Arab intellectual traditions. For him, decolonization entails restoring intellectual and moral sovereignty through *taṣīliyya* (authenticating), which emphasizes the production of knowledge rooted in local traditions while remaining critically engaged with global thought. His call for an epistemic rebirth positions Arab-Islamic intellectual legacies as dynamic sources of creativity rather than relics of the past. Similarly, Al-Jabri highlights the intellectual stagnation reinforced by colonial rule and underscores the need to reinterpret Arab rationality in ways that respond to contemporary challenges while remaining faithful to Arab-Islamic heritage. He advocates for an Arab modernity that is authentically grounded rather than a mere imitation of Western models.

This resonates with Abdurrahman's critique of the uncritical adoption of foreign paradigms, as both stress the importance of reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems. Khatibi adds another layer to this debate through his focus on language, identity, and culture. He argues that colonialism of the mind is as significant as political or economic domination. In his view, language is central to decolonizing knowledge, as the continued marginalization of Arabic and indigenous languages perpetuates colonial hierarchies in Arab academia. For Khatibi, the revival of Arab languages as vehicles of intellectual production is essential to establishing a truly decolonized intellectual space.

El-Messiri (2006) echoes these concerns, calling for a fundamental restructuring of education that reflects the moral frameworks, histories, and lived experiences

of local communities. His work emphasizes the inherently political nature of decolonization, underscoring the need to dismantle the power dynamics that privilege Western knowledge systems. True decolonization, therefore, requires moving beyond rejecting Western ideas wholesale; instead, it calls for fostering an intellectual environment where Arab and Islamic traditions can engage in respectful dialogue with other epistemologies on equal terms.

Together, the contributions of Abdurrahman, Al-Jabri, Khatibi, and El-Messiri provide a theoretical foundation for rethinking academic institutions in Morocco and the Arab world. By affirming the value of indigenous traditions while critically engaging with global thought, their work points toward the possibility of transforming academic spaces into sites of intellectual liberation rather than continued dependence.

CONCLUSION

Decolonization in Morocco, as in the broader Amazigh-Arab academic context, is a complex and multifaceted project that extends far beyond the attainment of political independence in the mid-twentieth century. It represents a sustained effort to dismantle the deeply embedded legacies of colonialism while also confronting the constraints of local authoritarian traditions. This process is not limited to politics; rather, it encompasses education, language, culture, social relations, and knowledge production. Decolonization, therefore, should be understood as a comprehensive and ongoing societal transformation, one that requires collective participation, constant engagement with diverse epistemologies, and sensitivity to the lived realities of underrepresented communities.

Within this framework, Moroccan intellectuals such as Abdelkébir Khatibi, Taha Abdurrahman, Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, and Abdellah Laroui have each advanced distinct approaches to decoloniality, ethical, rationalist, linguistic, and historical that together illustrate the richness of Morocco's intellectual engagement. Their works highlight the need not only to resist colonial domination but also to rethink indigenous traditions, epistemologies, and cultural forms to build more equitable and inclusive futures. At the same time, scholarship on Moroccan decolonization often suffers from fragmentation, insufficient contextualization, and limited attention to praxis. Too often, theories are presented as abstract or disconnected from the everyday realities of Moroccan society. For decolonization to fulfill its transformative promise, it must engage directly with pressing issues such as education reform, language policy, and cultural production.

These domains remain critical spaces for addressing the material and epistemic borders that continue to shape Moroccan identities and social hierarchies. The concept of the border, whether geographic, linguistic, cultural, or epistemic, offers a particularly productive lens through which to view Morocco's decolonial turn. Borders represent sites of negotiation and contestation where colonial paradigms are dismantled, inherited traditions are interrogated, and new identities and knowledges emerge. By situating Moroccan decolonization as a "Bordered process," scholars can better understand it as a dynamic and open-ended project: one that avoids both reductive essentialism and wholesale rejection of the West, while instead fostering critical dialogue across traditions. In this sense, decolonization in Morocco is best conceived not as a finite achievement but as a long-term, evolving process of intellectual and social transformation. It is precisely in its plurality involving cultural revitalization, linguistic justice, epistemic sovereignty, and historical rethinking that Moroccan decolonization demonstrates its strength, situating local struggles within wider global debates on decoloniality.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis is mainly theoretical and interpretive, based on critical engagement with existing research and chosen examples rather than on new empirical fieldwork. Consequently, the discourse may inadequately reflect the diversity of lived experiences across various regions, social strata, and communities in Morocco. Second, while the study emphasizes Amazigh, linguistic, and epistemic marginalization, it does not provide an exhaustive examination of all intersecting factors, such as regional economic disparities or generational differences, which also shape decolonial processes. Third, the focus on Moroccan intellectual traditions and academic debates may limit the applicability of some conclusions to broader social contexts beyond educational and cultural institutions. Lastly, because decolonial struggles are always changing, especially when it comes to language policy and global mobility regimes, some of the changes talked about here are still happening and could change. Future research would benefit from integrating empirical methodologies, such as interviews or ethnographic studies, to further substantiate decolonial theory in quotidian practices and to enhance comprehension of the mechanisms of epistemic resistance at the local level.

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THE RECURSIVE SYMBIOSIS OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND LOCAL WISDOM: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Post-Reservoir Construction Cipeundeuy Community

Engkos Koswara
UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia
Email: engkoskoswara@uinsgd.ac.id

Moh Anif Arifani
UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia
Email: arifanianifmoh@uinsgd.ac.id

Ismail Lamdoh
Ma'had Daarul Falah Pattani, Thailand
Email: fatinhemman935@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The construction of the Cirata Reservoir fundamentally restructured the geographic and socio-economic profile of the Cipeundeuy community, forcing a rapid transition from a terrestrial agrarian society to an aquatic-centered ecosystem. This study investigates the resulting tension and synergy between individual spiritual experiences and collective local wisdom within this transitional landscape. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach grounded in field data, the research applies a theoretical synthesis of Symbolic Interactionism and Bourdieu's concept of Habitus to analyze cultural adaptation. Results indicate a significant "institutionalization of the ineffable," where the majority of respondents reported new transcendental states only after joining local Majlis Taklim (religious assembly), positioning these assemblies as "spiritual incubators" that provide a new semiotic framework for mystical encounters. Simultaneously, the data reveals a state of "normative fragmentation" regarding ancestral taboos (pamali), reflecting a habitus in flux as it encounters modern structural demands. The discussion posits that the community exhibits "Prismatic Resilience," characterized by a recursive symbiosis: spiritual experiences provide the internal vitality to sustain cultural traditions, while local wisdom offers the necessary grammar to articulate these experiences. Ultimately, the survival of Cipeundeuy's identity amidst displacement is contingent upon the mutual preservation of subjective mystical encounters and ancestral symbolic frameworks.

Keywords: *Cipeundeuy Community; Habitus; Prismatic Resilience; Recursive Symbiosis; Spiritual Experience*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary sociological landscape, social change is increasingly conceptualized not merely as an evolutionary shift in values but as a direct byproduct of intensive infrastructure and environmental development. Recent studies underscore that the expansion of physical connectivity—ranging from massive transport networks to digital ecosystems—acts as a primary catalyst for structural transformation (Syam, 2025). According to Waleed et al. (2024), the rapid urbanization and land-use changes necessitated by regional infrastructure projects have fundamentally altered the "environmental carrying capacity," forcing communities to adapt their social organizations to new physical realities. This "infrastructure-led modernization" is no longer viewed as a neutral background for social life; rather, it is an active agent that reshapes human settlement patterns and livelihoods, often creating a tension between the "spatial injustice" of urban expansion and the traditional ecological balances maintained by local populations (Marilele, M. H., & Kubanza, N. S., 2025; Martinez & Masron, 2020).

These material transformations inevitably ripple through all facets of social life, particularly affecting the Human Development Index and the legitimacy of traditional authority. As Syam (2025) observes, infrastructure development in previously isolated regions—such as Papua or rural South Sulawesi—serves as a "social driving factor" that shifts the basis of leadership from customary heritage to professional and educational competence. This transition often manifests as a "generational gap" where the younger demographic aligns with the logistical and digital opportunities provided by new infrastructure, while older generations struggle to maintain the continuity of traditional value systems (Nain et al., 2025). Furthermore, the mediation of social life through "smart technologies" and cultural infrastructure has reconfigured the quality of daily interactions, often prioritizing economic productivity and leisure accessibility over the slower, ritualistic rhythms of pre-industrial social structures (Bornioli & Subiza-Pérez, 2023).

The phenomenon of social change in Cipeundeuy District, West Bandung Regency, provides a robust empirical illustration of how "infrastructure-led modernization" via the Cirata Reservoir (constructed 1983–1988) creates permanent spatial and ecological restructuring. From the perspective of social change sociology, the transition from terrestrial-agrarian land use to a massive artificial water body forced a radical "occupational displacement" upon the local community. Recent longitudinal data indicate that the population, once rooted in a traditional rice-farming culture, has transformed into operators of Keramba Jaring Apung (KJA/Floating Net Cages) or has migrated to non-

formal service sectors (Gunawan et al., 2004; Hidayat et al., 2017). This shift is not merely a change in livelihood but a profound "disruption of living space," in which traditional ecological knowledge of land management has been eroded and replaced by dependence on an artificial aquatic ecosystem that is increasingly environmentally fragile (Wiranegara et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this material transformation has fundamentally altered the social fabric and traditional authority structures in Cipeundeuy. The emergence of the KJA economy has introduced a new form of social stratification based on ownership of capital in aquatic production tools, effectively displacing the traditional dominance of customary elders or land-based elites (Hidayati et al., 2018). This transition has created a gap in which the younger demographic in Cipeundeuy is increasingly oriented toward global fish markets and modern aquaculture technology, often at the expense of communal agrarian values. Consequently, religious and customary practices have undergone a functional shift; rituals historically tied to soil fertility—such as *Hajat Bumi*—are either fading or undergoing "cultural commodification" to serve the reservoir's burgeoning tourism industry (Suharyanto, 2025).

Religious life and customary practices of the Cipeundeuy community have emerged as the social aspects most profoundly affected by these developmental shifts. Findings from the past decade confirm that the Cipeundeuy community currently exists in a state of "cultural entropy," navigating their identity amidst the pressures of water pollution and sedimentation that threaten the very sustainability of their spiritual-economic life (Deviana et al, 2024). Modern scholars have proposed an "infrastructural approach" to religion, viewing faith spaces (mosques, churches, temples) as vital "social infrastructure" that must navigate the "socio-ecological entanglements" of a changing planet (Lang et al., 2025). As physical development encroaches on "sacred spaces," local wisdom is frequently reinterpreted or shortened to align with modern time constraints and economic demands, leading to a "cultural commodification" often seen in religious tourism hubs (Nain et al., 2025). However, this change is not purely subtractive; recent findings suggest a resurgence of "eco-spirituality" and "ecological spirituality," where local wisdom is integrated into environmental management as a moral and spiritual counterweight to the secular, anthropocentric nature of modern infrastructure planning (Rahayu et al, 2025; Lestar & Böhm, 2020). In this context, the relationship between spiritual experiences and local wisdom becomes a critical frontier for understanding how society maintains a sense of "sacred harmony" amidst the relentless pace of structural change.

This study employs a robust qualitative-descriptive design grounded

in sociological inquiry to examine the socio-spiritual landscape of the Cipeundeuy community following the construction of the Cirata Reservoir. Data were meticulously gathered through a methodological triangulation of field observations, in-depth interviews, documentary studies, and structured questionnaires, involving a total of 32 respondents selected via purposive sampling to ensure specialized insights into the community's transformation. The analytical framework is structured into three primary thematic sections following the introduction: the first segment delineates the sociological conditions of post-reservoir Cipeundeuy, utilizing data synthesized from observations, questionnaires collected from 26 followers of five religious' assemblies, and interviews with six key informants—comprising government officials, community leaders, and religious figures—to capture a multi-dimensional perspective on social change. The second and third segments explore the intricacies of the community's spiritual experiences and the local wisdom activities they manifest, respectively, drawing primarily on data collected from 26 respondents via targeted questionnaires. These empirical findings subsequently converge in a comprehensive discussion section that critically interrogates the symbiotic relationship between spiritual resonance and local wisdom practices within the context of a dynamic, post-infrastructure social reality (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Flick, 2022; Yin, 2018).

A scholarly polemic persists regarding the phenomenon of spiritual experience and its relationship with external contextual factors. There are at least two diametrically opposed perspectives, both providing robust philosophical justifications. The first, championed by the perennialists, posits that the spiritual experiences of mystical practitioners are inherently uniform. Transcending differences in religious, ideological, social, or cultural backgrounds, those on the mystical path encounter states of being detached from particularized concepts. This phenomenon is often termed "efficacy" (James, 1902; Otto, 1923) and finds expression through universal interpretations such as existence, consciousness, and oneness (Gäb, 2021). Conversely, the constructivist school rejects this universality, arguing that every spiritual practitioner is fundamentally shaped by the foundational concepts that construct their individual consciousness. These influential frameworks encompass a wide array of contextual factors, including the subject's life trajectory, upbringing, and personal evolution (Blum, 2014).

While these two paradigms appear fundamentally contradictory, they are not irreconcilable. The existence of spiritual experiences that transcend symbolic representation—other than through a universal lexicon—is corroborated by the accounts of many practitioners. Simultaneously, it remains an empirical

reality that interpretations of such experiences are often expressed through symbols deeply embedded in contextual backgrounds (Jones, 2016; Maulana, 2022). By forging a convergence between perennialist and constructivist approaches, this article provides a nuanced phenomenological and epistemological inquiry into how spiritual experiences are negotiated and articulated within the dynamic social landscape of the post-construction Cipeundeuy community.

To frame the nexus between subjective mystical experiences and external dynamics within the context of a transitioning society, the Symbolic Interactionism framework—specifically the version advanced by G.H. Mead (1934) and H. Blumer (1969)—proves exceptionally pertinent. Individuals perpetually engage with and through symbols, such as language, gestures, or objects, which carry specific semiotic weight. This theory posits that meanings are not inherent but are constructed, internalized, and transformed through contextual processes of social interaction. The most decisive external contextual factors shaping spiritual experiences are the dominant discursive powers prevalent within the mystic's local milieu. This argument finds its resonance in the perspective of Michel Foucault, who asserts that individual comprehension and experience are not formed autonomously or independently; rather, they are profoundly conditioned by power relations manifested through discourse. For Foucault, discourse is far more than a mere collection of words or verbal communication; it is a system of knowledge, rules, and practices that dictate how phenomena are articulated, understood, and defined within a given society (Foucault, 2013). In Pierre Bourdieu's lexicon, this surrounding discursive context or dominant local wisdom is conceptualized as habitus. It represents the foundational substrate of an individual's personality—an ensemble of internal dispositions cultivated by life experiences and social trajectory (Bourdieu, 2017).

THE SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF CIPEUNDEUY COMMUNITY

The initial phase of this discussion examines how macro-infrastructure development—specifically the construction of the Cirata Reservoir—has fundamentally restructured the geographic, demographic, and socio-economic profile of the Cipeundeuy District. The empirical data suggest that Cipeundeuy is no longer a static, traditional agrarian entity; rather, it has evolved into a "prismatic" or transitional society, characterized by the coexistence of traditional values and modern structural demands.

Topographically, Cipeundeuy has undergone a radical landscape transformation. The conversion of 2,500 hectares of land into the Cirata

hydroelectric reservoir has shifted the community's spatial orientation from terrestrial-based living to an aquatic-centered ecosystem. This "spatial restructuring" did not merely submerge productive land but effectively erased at least 18 traditional hamlets, such as Kampung Banceuy and Citembong, from the administrative map. From a sociological perspective, this represents a significant disruption of "living space," in which new natural boundaries, such as the Citarum River, which traverses six affected villages, have created a unique paradox of geographic isolation and new connectivity via water-based transportation.

Demographic data reveal a significant upward trend, with the population increasing from 74,749 in 2010 to 88,913 in 2021. The most critical aspect of this shift is the dominance of the productive age group (ages 25–49), which reached 31,643 individuals by 2022 (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Bandung Barat, 2022). In the sociology of population, this "bulge" in the productive demographic reflects an intensified pressure on the local labor market. While the Reservoir construction initially provided land compensation—leading to a "nouveau riche" phenomenon—the data suggests a lack of psychological and financial readiness. This resulted in a high rate of "consumptive behavior" over "productive investment," often leading to the eventual transfer of assets from residents to external investors.

The findings regarding livelihoods illustrate a profound shift from traditional food-crop agriculture to KJA aquaculture and the service sector. Although 13% of the land remains rice fields, the community increasingly resembles Fred W. Riggs' "Prismatic Society" model, in which agrarian lifestyles merge with modern industrial demands (Riggs & MacKean, 1964). The emergence of specialized roles—such as aquaculture suppliers, transport services, and culinary entrepreneurs in Ciroyom Village—signals a maturing social differentiation. However, this transition carries inherent risks; as the capital for KJA operations is increasingly consolidated by external elites, residents face a secondary displacement, often returning to the status of low-tier laborers or "precariat" within their own territory.

Socio-culturally, Cipeundeuy is experiencing a tension between traditional collectivism and modern individualism. Traditional "social capital," such as mutual cooperation and the "celebration arisan" (social rotating credit for rituals), remains a resilient force for social cohesion. Nevertheless, the influx of non-permanent migrants and the pervasive use of digital technology have accelerated value heterogeneity. Interview data confirm deep concerns about the "cultural entropy" of ancestral traditions such as *Hajat Bumi* or *Ngaruwat Lembur*. Furthermore, the spiritual orientation of the youth is shifting from

the mosque to the digital sphere. In this context, wealth and administrative rank are beginning to supersede spiritual piety as the primary metrics of social status.

In summary, Cipeundeuy serves as a prototype for a transitional society adapting to a man-made environment. The physical shift in infrastructure has triggered a chain reaction, altering the social structure and the prevailing value system. While the spirit of mutual coperation persists as a normative "anchor" for social stability, the relentless tide of modernization and land-use change poses a formidable challenge to the continuity of local wisdom and the community's authentic spiritual experiences.

MAPPING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES AMIDST ENVIRONMENTAL DISPLACEMENT

Within the framework of the sociology of religion, religious practices encompass the tangible actions, rites, and forms of worship that adherents perform as an expression of faith. In Cipeundeuy District, religious practices following the construction of the Cirata Reservoir demonstrate a unique pattern: ritual enthusiasm remains high, but interaction and the transmission of values have shifted.

Research findings indicate that the Cipeundeuy community maintains an exceptionally high level of enthusiasm for religious ritual practices. Rituals are not merely perceived as theological obligations but have become "existential routines" that strengthen communal identity. Daily worship practices, such as congregational prayers, *tahlilan* (an Islamic tradition carried out to remember and pray for those who have died), and *manaqiban* (the tradition of reading the biography of a religious figure), are performed with consistent frequency. This phenomenon confirms theories of traditional-transitional societies where religious attributes serve as the primary markers of social membership. Homogeneity in religious affiliation is also evident, as the community tends to follow a single mainstream spiritual leadership guided by charismatic figures such as *kyai* and *ustadz*.

One significant finding is the proliferation of small-scale religious activity groups (*majlis taklim*) at the village level. These practices have gained strong legitimacy and support from village government apparatuses, indicating that religious institutions and local bureaucracy in Cipeundeuy are deeply intertwined. Recitations in residents' homes, held on a rotating basis, serve as the primary spaces for non-formal religious education. The curriculum covers fundamental aspects such as Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*), Hadith studies, and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), aiming to maintain the purity of dogmatic

understanding amidst a disruptive and changing environment.

Religious practice in Cipeundeuy relies heavily on a vertical leadership model. The community positions the ulema at the center of every ritual practice. Compliance with religious instructions from the *kyai* or *ustadz* creates social order in the performance of religious rites. This minimizes internal conflict regarding worship practices, as there is a collective consensus to follow a singular line of religious interpretation. This pattern maintains the stability of the community's religious practices even as they undergo a difficult economic transition due to the presence of the reservoir.

While ritual enthusiasm is generally preserved, there is a visible anomaly among the younger generation. Observational data reveal a declining interest in mosque-based religious practices among youth compared to previous generations. Traditionally, the time between the Maghrib and Isha prayers was filled with collective *puji-pujian* (devotional singing) and Quranic learning; however, these spaces are increasingly occupied by the use of communication technology (gadgets and the internet). This phenomenon of "wandering in digital spaces" poses a serious challenge to the continuity of traditional religious practices, suggesting that while formal rituals persist, the "essence" of these practices is facing stiff competition from modern information flows that are more appealing to the productive age group.

The post-Cirata Reservoir shift in livelihoods has indirectly influenced the nature of religious practice. The increased economic activity in the aquaculture and trade sectors has occasionally shifted the religious focus toward a more materialistic orientation. Religious values that were once ascetic are now adapting to a new economic reality. Although ritual practices such as almsgiving (*sedekah*) and thanksgiving ceremonies (*syukuran*) continue to be observed, their motivations are frequently linked to expectations of economic success in the floating net cage sector or culinary businesses, indicating an instrumentalization of religion within the economic sphere.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN CIPEUNDEUY

The Situational Context of Spiritual Experiences

The first chart explores the temporal and situational dimensions in which the respondents encounter extraordinary or spiritual phenomena.

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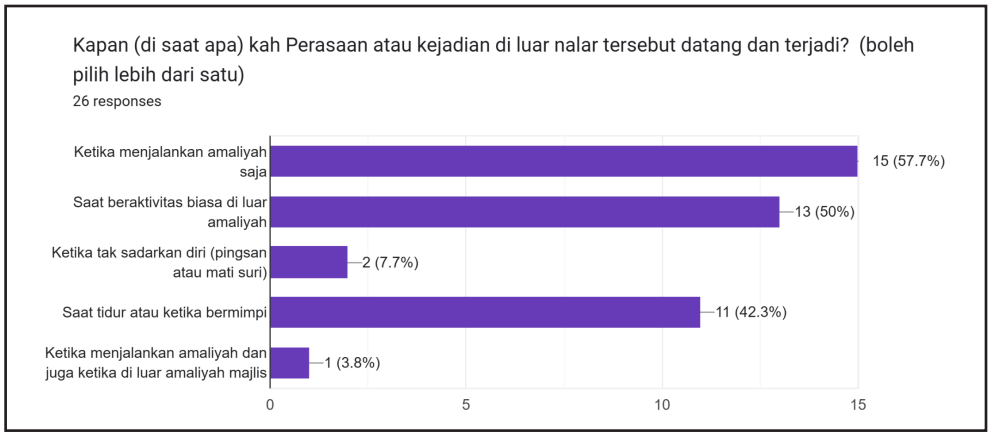
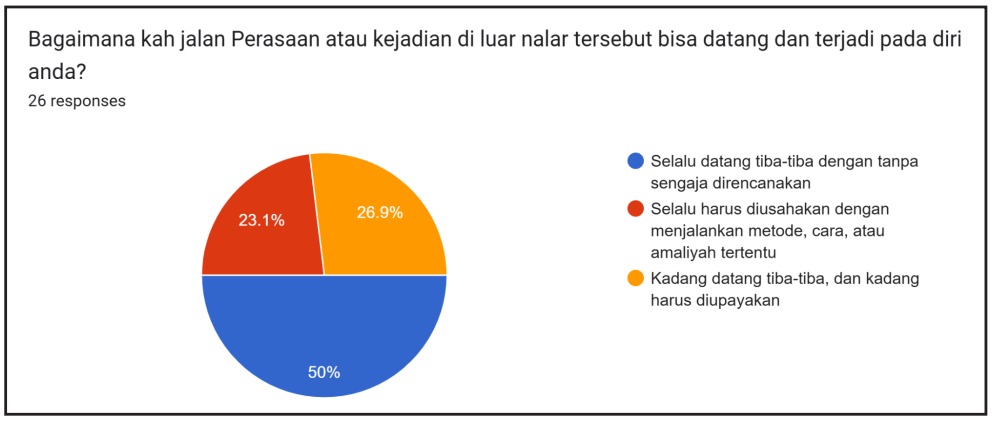


The bar chart reveals that spiritual experiences in the Cipeundeuy society are not confined to a single ritualistic timeframe but are interwoven into the fabric of both sacred and profane life. A majority of respondents (57.7%) reported encountering these feelings specifically while performing *amaliyah* (religious deeds/rituals). However, a significant 50% also experienced them during regular daily activities outside of ritual practice, and 42.3% reported occurrences during sleep or dreams.

From a sociological perspective, these findings suggest that for this community, the "sacred" is not a separate sphere from the "secular." Instead, there is a "sacred-profane continuum" where spiritual consciousness remains heightened even during mundane activities. The high frequency of experiences during *amaliyah* underscores the effectiveness of ritual as a catalyst for transcendental states. At the same time, the dream-state occurrences align with the traditional Sundanese belief in *impian* as a legitimate medium for spiritual communication.

The Mechanism of Spiritual Occurrence

The second chart illustrates the perceived agency and spontaneity behind the onset of these spiritual phenomena.



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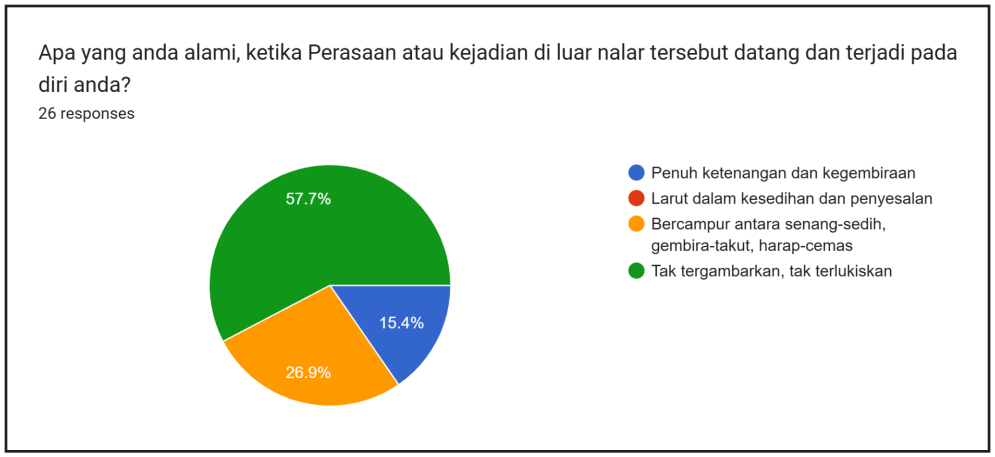
The data indicate a predominantly "spontaneous" nature of spiritual events, with 50% of respondents stating that these experiences always arise suddenly, without intentional planning. In contrast, 23.1% believe that such states must be actively sought through specific methods or rituals, while 26.9% experience a combination of both spontaneity and effort.

In academic terms, this distribution reflects the concept of "unmerited grace", where the spiritual encounter is viewed as a divine intervention rather than a purely human-controlled outcome. The fact that half of the participants experience these events unexpectedly highlights a "passive spiritual receptivity"—a state in which the individual remains open to transcendental experiences without necessarily triggering them through formal mechanisms. This reinforces the "prismatic" nature of their spirituality, where modern religious discipline coexists with an ancient, intuitive openness to the supernatural.

The Qualitative Nature of the Spiritual Affect

The third chart categorizes the emotional and psychological qualities of the feelings experienced during these spiritual events.



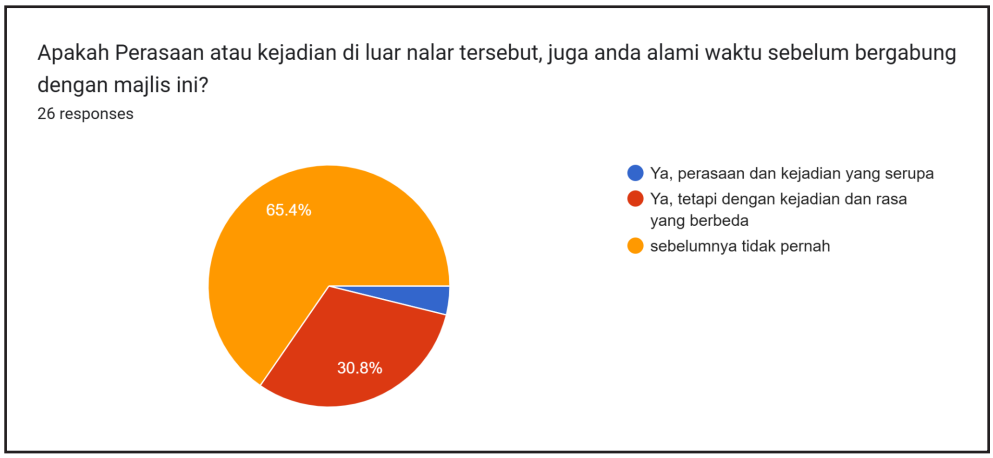
The pie chart demonstrates that the predominant response to spiritual encounters is one of "ineffability," with 57.7% describing their experience as "indescribable" or "unpaintable" (*tak tergambarkan*). Meanwhile, 26.9% reported a complex mixture of contradictory emotions, such as joy and fear, or hope and anxiety, while only 15.4% characterized the experience as purely one of "peace and joy."

Sociologically, the dominance of "indescribable" feelings points to the "numinous" quality of the experience—what Rudolf Otto described as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The spiritual event is so profound that it transcends linguistic boundaries, placing it outside the realm of ordinary

social discourse. The significant portion of respondents experiencing "mixed emotions" further illustrates that spiritual encounters in Cipeundeuy are not merely escapist or blissful but involve a rigorous psychological engagement with the "Other," often invoking a sense of awe or sacred dread.

Comparative Analysis: Pre- and Post-Assembly Experience

The final chart provides a comparative look at the frequency of these spiritual events before and after the respondents joined the current spiritual assembly (*majlis*).



The findings show a clear "institutional effect" on spiritual life; 65.4% of respondents stated they had "never before" experienced such feelings before joining the *majlis*. Conversely, 30.8% had experienced similar feelings but with different qualities, and only 3.8% reported that their experiences remained identical to those before joining.

This data provides strong evidence for the role of the *majlis* as a "spiritual incubator." The assembly does not merely provide a social space for worship but actively facilitates and legitimizes new forms of spiritual consciousness. The high percentage of "new" experiences suggests that the specific *amaliyah* and social support within the assembly have effectively lowered the threshold for transcendental encounters, transforming the collective identity of the Cipeundeuy community from a traditional-passive religious group into a vibrant, spiritually-active community.

THE MANIFESTATION OF LOCAL WISDOM AND ANCESTRAL TRADITIONS IN CIPEUNDEUY

The subsequent component of this discussion analyzes the local wisdom of the Cipeundeuy community as a mechanism for social cohesion and cultural adaptation. Field data illustrate that local wisdom in this region is not merely

an archaic relic but a living value system that fuses organically with Islamic principles, creating a distinct "Sunda-Islam" cultural hybridity.

The Cipeundeuy society maintains a profound connection to symbolic objects that bridge the profane and sacred realms. The use of *kemenyan* (incense), *Sesuguh* (offerings), and *Kohkol* (traditional slit drum) represents a belief system that recognizes supernatural forces as guardians of natural balance. From a sociological perspective, the burning of *kemenyan*—particularly in villages like Nyenang—is not an isolated theological practice but a symbolic link to ancestral spirits (*tatali karuhun*). Similarly, *Sesuguh* serves as a form of "spiritual negotiation" to maintain harmony between humans and the unseen world, especially at sacred sites such as the Gunung Kuda shrine in Ciroyom. These objects reflect a traditional ecological ethic that emphasizes "permission-based" interaction with the environment (*mipit kudu amit, ngala kudu bebeja*).

Two of the most prominent expressions of local wisdom are *Hajat Bumi* (Earth Ritual) and *Ngamandian Ucing* (the Rain-making Cat Ritual). *Hajat Bumi* is an annual fertility rite that transcends formal religious gratitude; it is a communal celebration of nature's bounty. The use of non-verbal symbols, such as the *tumpeng* carried collectively to the accompaniment of traditional music (kendang, gong, and suling), reinforces the agrarian identity of the community. Conversely, the *Ngamandian Ucing* ritual—performed to invoke rain and ward off disaster—demonstrates the society's deep-seated attachment to natural rhythms. Despite the technological modernization brought by the Cirata Reservoir, the community's psychological dependence on rain and soil fertility remains manifest in these rituals, which function as social buffers against environmental uncertainty.

Local wisdom in Cipeundeuy is also reflected in the management of socio-cultural time through the *Papajar* tradition. Observed shortly before the month of Ramadan, *Papajar* is interpreted as welcoming the "light of dawn" (*fajar*) or collective spiritual purification. The ritual involves activities such as *Nakol Kohkol* (beating the drum) and communal dining (*Dahar Papajar*). Sociologically, *Papajar* serves as a synchronization mechanism between the Islamic lunar calendar and local social rhythms. Through communal eating, social class boundaries dissolve, reinforcing the "mechanical solidarity" that remains the foundation of social stability in Cipeundeuy amidst modern shifts.

The veneration of ancestors is institutionalized through the tradition of pilgrimage to various sacred graves, such as the Eyang grave in Cipeundeuy or Mama Gunung Kuda in Ciroyom. These practices act as "identity anchors" for the community. By visiting these historical sites, residents reconstruct

their collective memory regarding the origins of their villages (*lembur*). This is particularly critical as the construction of the Cirata Reservoir submerged numerous physical hamlets; pilgrimage thus becomes a spiritual method for the community to remain connected to a history that is geographically lost beneath the reservoir.

Ultimately, these traditions culminate in the reinforcement of mutual cooperation. During the organization of village anniversaries (*milangkala*) or harvest festivals, community members distribute roles voluntarily. Men and women have clear divisions of labor in preparing these events, which indirectly safeguard socio-cultural resilience against the individualism often introduced by post-reservoir economic transitions. Although some traditional practices, such as field offerings, have declined since the 1990s, the core of local wisdom—the sense of belonging to nature and the community—persists as a vital variable in maintaining the integration of the social system.

The local wisdom of the Cipeundeuy community represents a form of "cultural resilience." Amidst the pressures of transitioning from a purely agrarian society to a prismatic-transitional one, traditions such as *Hajat Bumi* and *Papajar* serve as the final bastions of their "humanity" and "Sundanity." The integration of sacred religious values and noble ancestral customs creates a harmonious social order, ensuring that physical infrastructural progress does not erase the spiritual footprints of their ancestors.

QUANTITATIVE MAPPING OF LOCAL WISDOM AND TRADITIONAL NORMS.

The following sociological analysis interprets the quantitative data regarding the local wisdom and traditional practices of the Cipeundeuy community. These findings are examined through the lens of transitional sociology, focusing on the concepts of cultural entropy and the "formalization" of tradition in a society undergoing structural change.

The Situational Persistence of Local Custom

The first chart evaluates the community's perception of the strength and presence of local traditions within their immediate social environment.

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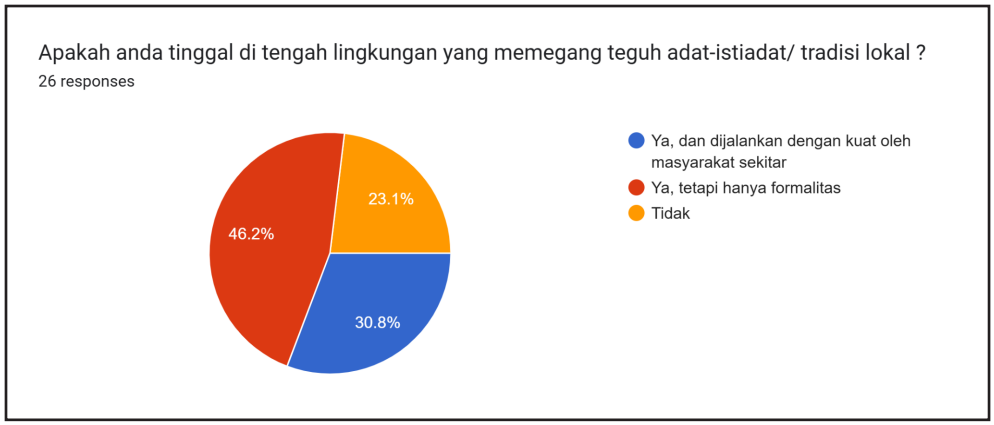
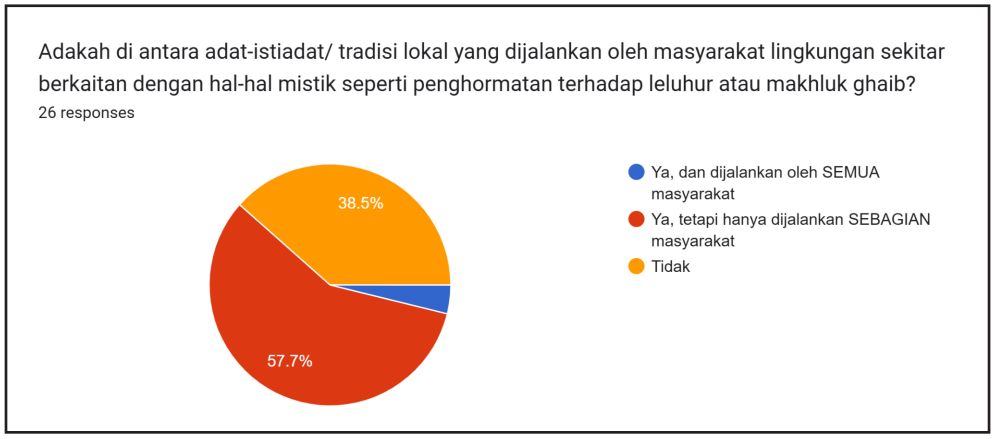


The survey reveals a significant state of "prismatic" transition; while a total of 76.9% of respondents acknowledge the existence of local customs, there is a distinct divergence in the depth of adherence. Only 30.8% perceive these traditions as being "strongly practiced" by the community, whereas a plurality of 46.2% views them merely as "formalities."

Sociologically, this suggests a phenomenon of "ritual hollowization," where the external structures of tradition remain visible, but their internal binding authority is weakening. In a society affected by massive infrastructure projects like the Cirata Reservoir, traditions often shift from being the primary "social regulator" to becoming "symbolic markers" of identity, observed out of habit or social politeness rather than from deep-seated conviction. The 23.1% who report no traditional presence indicate a growing segment of the population that has fully decoupled from ancestral customs in favor of modern-rationalist social frameworks.

The Disenchantment of Mystical Traditions

The second chart examines the prevalence of mystical elements—such as ancestor veneration and beliefs in the supernatural—within the neighborhood's collective practices.

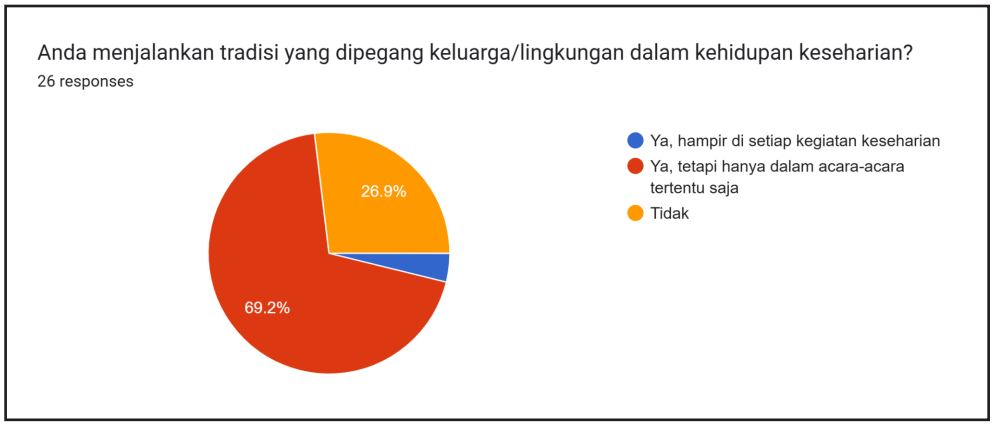


The data underscores a marked "disenchantment" of the social world, as defined by Max Weber (1946). A dominant 57.7% of respondents report that mystical traditions are now practiced only by "certain segments" of the community, while 38.5% state that such practices no longer exist in their environment. Only a marginal 3.8% perceive these mystical elements as a universal communal practice.

This distribution highlights the fragmentation of the traditional Sundanese worldview (*tatali karuhun*). The transition to a "modern-industrial" logic, necessitated by reservoir management and the influx of external technology, has relegated mystical beliefs to the periphery. Mysticism in Cipeundeuy is no longer a "total social fact" that governs the entire community but has become a fragmented subculture practiced by a minority, often the older generation, while the majority moves toward more secular or formally religious interpretations of reality.

The Compartmentalization of Tradition in Daily Life

The third chart analyzes the integration of tradition into the private and daily routines of individuals versus its role in specific communal events.



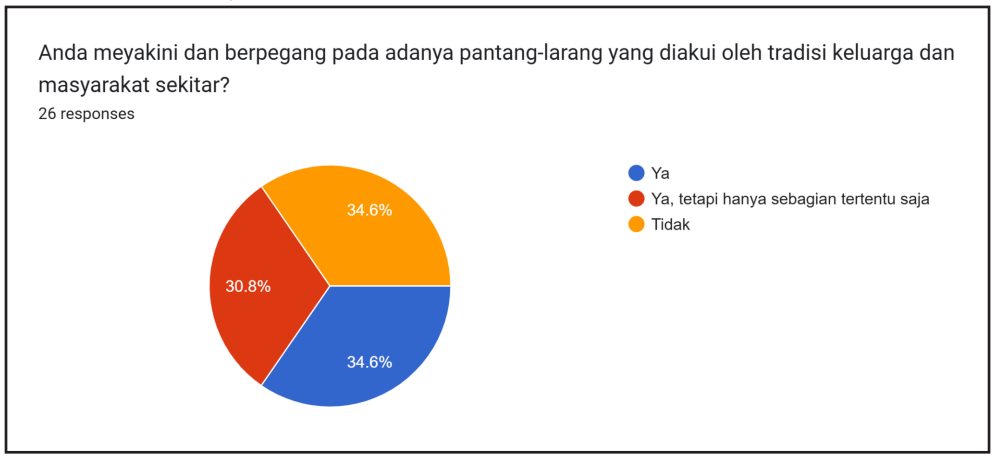
The results demonstrate a clear "compartmentalization" of tradition, where 69.2% of respondents only engage in traditional practices during "specific events" or ceremonies. Only a small fraction (3.8%) integrates tradition into "almost every daily activity," while 26.9% abstain from traditional practices entirely.

This finding reflects the shift from an "organic" traditional life to a "segmented" modern life. In the agrarian past, tradition was the very atmosphere of daily existence; however, in post-reservoir Cipeundeuy, tradition has been moved to the "event" category—something one "attends" rather than "lives." This "event-based spirituality" indicates that local wisdom is being treated as a cultural performance or a seasonal ritual, allowing the community to maintain a sense

of continuity with the past without letting it interfere with the efficiency-driven demands of modern daily life.

Ideological Fragmentation Regarding Traditional Taboos

The final chart measures the level of belief and adherence to traditional prohibitions (*pamali*), which historically served as the moral and ecological code of the society.



The community appears to be in a state of ideological equilibrium or "normative fragmentation." The respondents are almost evenly split between those who still hold firm to traditional taboos (34.6%), those who reject them entirely (34.6%), and a middle group that adheres only to "specific parts" of these prohibitions (30.8%).

This split is a hallmark of a society in the "initial phase" of cultural change. Traditional taboos, which once functioned as invisible fences protecting the social and ecological order, are losing their universal legitimacy. The 34.6% who retain these beliefs represent the "cultural anchors" of the community, while the 34.6% who reject them represent the "agents of modernization." The significant middle group indicates a process of "selective adaptation," where taboos are rationalized—kept if they align with modern logic or formal religion, and discarded if they are perceived as mere superstition. This fragmentation poses a challenge to communal harmony, as the shared "moral vocabulary" of the ancestors is being replaced by diverse, individualistic ethical frameworks.

THE RECURSIVE SYMBIOSIS OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND LOCAL WISDOM IN A TRANSITIONAL CIPEUNDEUY SOCIETY

The sociological landscape of the Cipeundeuy community, following the structural disruptions necessitated by the Cirata Reservoir construction, offers a profound case study in the negotiation of spiritual meaning within a

transitional society. By applying a synthesis of perennialist and constructivist paradigms, it becomes evident that the community's religious practices are not merely static remnants of the past, but are actively reconstructed through what may be termed the "institutionalization of the ineffable." The proliferation of *majlis taklim* serves as a primary site for this reconstruction. Utilizing the Symbolic Interactionism framework of Mead and Blumer, the data suggest that the transcendental encounters reported by a vast majority of the population are profoundly shaped by collective social interaction. The *majlis* acts as a "spiritual incubator" where specific *amaliyah* and rituals are assigned semiotic weight, transforming raw, subjective efficacy into a shared cultural vocabulary. This process is further reinforced by the discursive power described by Foucault; the local religious leadership—the *kyai* and *ustadz*—sets the epistemological boundaries of what constitutes a valid spiritual experience, thereby providing a sense of ontological security in a landscape where physical landmarks have been submerged.

While the institutional framework organizes spiritual life, the community's local wisdom reveals a "habitus in flux," as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu. The traditional "Sunda-Islam" hybridity, characterized by the use of *kemenyan* and the performance of *Hajat Bumi*, represents the foundational substrate of the Cipeundeuy personality—an ensemble of internal dispositions cultivated over generations. However, the current state of "normative fragmentation" regarding ancestral prohibitions, or *pamali*, indicates a significant tension between these ingrained dispositions and the efficiency-driven demands of a modern, post-displacement environment. In this context, ritualistic practices such as *Sesuguh* at sacred sites like Gunung Kuda are not merely archaic relics but active symbolic negotiations. They represent a "permission-based" interaction with a radically altered ecosystem, allowing the community to maintain a thread of continuity with their ancestral "living space" while navigating the precarious realities of a water-based economy.

The relationship between these individual spiritual experiences and collective local wisdom is best understood as a recursive, symbiotic loop that facilitates "Prismatic Resilience." Local wisdom functions as the "grammar of the soul," providing the necessary cultural symbols and rules of translation that allow a subjective mystical encounter to be articulated and integrated into social reality. Conversely, the genuine spiritual experiences reported within the *majlis* provide the "energetic charge" required to prevent tradition from becoming a hollow, mechanical performance. In a society undergoing rapid modernization, these two elements do not exist in isolation; rather, they mutually preserve one another. The spiritual experience provides the internal

motivation to remain connected to the sacred, while local wisdom offers the external social structure to ensure that this connection survives the cultural entropy brought about by technological and demographic shifts.

Ultimately, the Cipeundeuy community demonstrates a sophisticated form of cultural adaptation that transcends the binary of tradition versus modernity. By "spiritualizing" their new environmental and social realities, they utilize the discursive power of religious institutions to protect the perennialist core of their mystical lives, while selectively adapting their ancestral habitus to meet contemporary challenges. This synthesis suggests that in a dynamically changing society, the persistence of local wisdom is contingent upon its ability to frame and legitimize the authentic spiritual yearnings of the individual, creating a resilient identity that is both grounded in ancient history and responsive to the relentless tide of social change.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of the Cipeundeuy community following the construction of the Cirata Reservoir serves as a definitive testament to the resilience of the human spirit when confronted with radical environmental and structural displacement. This research concludes that the shift from a terrestrial to an aquatic-centered ecosystem did not lead to the anticipated cultural erasure; rather, it triggered a "prismatic" adaptation. The proliferation of *majlis taklim* has effectively institutionalized the ineffable, providing a necessary sociological structure for transcendental experiences to be navigated and understood. Simultaneously, the community's local wisdom—the Sunda-Islam habitus—continues to function as a vital semiotic anchor. While certain traditional taboos face fragmentation, rituals like *Hajat Bumi* and *Sesuguh* remain essential tools for symbolic negotiation with a submerged landscape. Ultimately, the survival of Cipeundeuy's identity rests upon a recursive symbiosis: spiritual experiences provide the internal vitality to sustain tradition, while local wisdom offers the linguistic and cultural grammar required to articulate those experiences within a changing social reality.

Despite these insights, several research limitations must be acknowledged. This study focused primarily on the immediate and mid-term socio-cultural adjustments within the Cipeundeuy District, which may not fully capture the long-term generational shifts as the community moves further away from its agrarian roots. Furthermore, while the qualitative and quantitative data provide a robust snapshot of current spiritual and cultural sentiments, the reliance on self-reported transcendental encounters may be subject to the prevailing discursive pressures of the community's religious leadership. The

study's geographic specificity to the villages surrounding the Cirata Reservoir also means that while the findings are deeply nuanced, they may require careful recalibration when applied to different types of industrial or environmental displacement where the "spiritual incubator" of the *majlis* might not be as prevalent.

Moving forward, several avenues for further study are recommended to deepen the understanding of this transitional phenomenon. First, a longitudinal study is necessary to track the "cultural entropy" of the youth population, specifically examining how the shift from mosque-centered to digital-sphere spirituality alters the transmission of local wisdom. Second, a comparative sociological analysis between Cipeundeuy and other reservoir-affected regions in Southeast Asia could reveal whether "Prismatic Resilience" is a universal trait of displaced agrarian societies or a unique byproduct of the Sunda-Islam hybridity. Finally, future research should explore the intersection of economic precarity and ritual enthusiasm, investigating whether the intensification of spiritual practices serves as a coping mechanism for the "secondary displacement" experienced by residents who have become laborers in their own territory. Such inquiries will be vital for developing more holistic and culturally sensitive models for infrastructure development in the Global South.

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

Akhmad Siddiq
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel, Indonesia
Email: a.siddiq@uinsa.ac.id

Karl James E. Villarmea
Silliman University, Philippines
Email: karlevillarmea@su.edu.ph

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 bookkepper (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 Dubbledam'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 Dubbeldam, 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 Siauw Hian, Kwee Tjian Hwie, Kwee Tjing Tjiat, Tan Hiauw 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 worshiping 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 worshiping 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 fours year 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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ISLAM AND BORNEO CULTURE: Strengthening the Scholarly Vision of IAIN Pontianak

Ibrahim
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Pontianak, Indonesia
Email: ibrahim@iainptk.ac.id

Erwin
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Pontianak, Indonesia
Email: erwin@iainptk.ac.id

Sulaiman
University of Dundee, United Kingdom
Email: 2623895@dundee.ac.uk

Liana
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Pontianak, Indonesia
Email: lianajamik@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the aspects of Islam and Borneo culture in the curriculum documents of IAIN Pontianak, as an academic distinctiveness stated in the institution's vision. By combining content analysis with research and development approaches, this study analyzes the current curriculum documents at IAIN Pontianak as the research basis and conceptual refinement as the development basis. This aspect is referred to as the strengthening of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture, which is established as the academic distinctiveness at IAIN Pontianak. The findings of this study conclude: first, the need to clarify the concept and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture in the existing curriculum documents; second, the need to supplement the learning plans for each offered course with a foundation in the study of Islam and Borneo Culture; third, the need for other supporting components to strengthen the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture as an academic distinctiveness at IAIN Pontianak, such as a consortium of lecturers and researchers on Islam and Borneo culture, a Center for the Study of Islam and Borneo Culture, and local to regional partnerships across the island of Borneo, particularly with Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. The study shows that both aspects of Islam and Borneo culture have been influential in the uniqueness of the curriculum of IAIN Pontianak, indicating support for the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as the academic distinctiveness being developed.

Keywords: Islam; Borneo Culture; Academic Vision; IAIN Pontianak Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The recent surge in institutional upgrades and status changes for State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (referred to as PTKIN) under the Ministry of Religious Affairs aligns with efforts to strengthen their respective academic character as a point of distinction. Notable examples include the Tree of Knowledge philosophy developed at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, the Integration-Interconnection framework at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, the Integration of Knowledge at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, and the Twin Towers model at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya.

The affirmation of the scientific philosophy developed by PTKIN campuses not only provides a distinctive character to the knowledge offered by each campus but also provides PTKIN with an identity that will guide the direction and policy of higher education development it conducts. On the other hand, this distinction can also serve as an attraction for PTKIN among stakeholders. This pattern of determining the philosophy seems to be a trend for every PTKIN that has successfully developed its status into a university (UIN or State Islamic University), as well as for several IAIN (State Institute of Islamic Studies) that are currently striving to prepare for the transition to university status, including the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Pontianak.

The position of IAIN Pontianak in the border region serves as a fundamental asset for strengthening the academic distinctiveness that integrates Islam with cross-border culture. This has also been highlighted by Sumar`in and Aslan, who analyzed the importance of formulating an academic distinctiveness at the Private Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIS) Muhammad Syafiuddin Sambas, as a private Islamic higher education institution in the border region that provides opportunities for cross-border scholarship and culture (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam) (Sumar`in & Aslan, 2022). As the only PTKIN in West Kalimantan, IAIN Pontianak holds a strategic role in the development of State Islamic Religious Higher Education. Therefore, the academic distinctiveness it develops must be formulated clearly and properly in the implementation of its education, including the formulation of its vision and mission (Jaenullah, et al., 2021).

"*To be distinguished and open in advancing scholarship, Islamic studies, and Borneo cultural research*" is the wording of the vision statement of IAIN Pontianak as contained in the Statutes of IAIN Pontianak of 2015, Article 3. This vision statement is further reinforced in the two mission statements of IAIN Pontianak in Article 5, particularly statement number 1, that IAIN Pontianak has the mission to organize higher education that is eminent in the study of scholarship, Islam, and Borneo culture (Minister of Religious Affairs

Regulation Number 51 of 2015). This vision and mission affirm that Islam and Borneo culture constitute one of the important aspects serving as a benchmark for the progress and success of IAIN Pontianak. The local distinctiveness of Borneo has been chosen as a distinguishing feature (distinction) of its scholarly study and research within the educational curriculum of IAIN Pontianak. This is what is implicit in the formulation of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture.

As an essential part of the vision and mission formulation, the concept and policies regarding Islam and Borneo Culture must be understood by all members of the academic community of IAIN Pontianak, so that they can be implemented in all activities of the tri dharma (three pillars of higher education), including in the courses within the dharma of education. A similar study can be seen in Moh Soehadha, who affirms that efforts to strengthen the epistemology of sociology, comparative religion, or the study of religions as an academic distinctiveness in the sociology of religion at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta (Soehadha, 2018). It is unsurprising that on various occasions, particularly during institutional and program accreditation assessments, Islam and Borneo Culture have become an interesting and compelling topic discussed by assessors. This is because the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture is indeed the most attractive distinguishing feature (distinctiveness) for IAIN Pontianak, as it is not carried in the vision and mission of any other PTKIN anywhere else besides Pontianak.

Thus, what is actually meant by Islam and Borneo Culture in the vision and mission statement of IAIN Pontianak? How is the policy on the concept of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture articulated in the curriculum documents? How is the implementation of the policy on the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture as a distinguishing feature (distinctiveness) for IAIN Pontianak? Moreover, what efforts can be undertaken to strengthen the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture as an academic distinctiveness for graduates of IAIN Pontianak? These are the important aspects that this paper seeks to discuss in depth. This is a study of the institutional vision and mission formulation policies, and the foundation for realizing further strengthening efforts related to the concept and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture in the curriculum of IAIN Pontianak, as an academic distinctiveness for its graduates.

This research was conducted within a descriptive qualitative framework that combines the method of document content analysis (Ibrahim, 2018) with Research and Development (Sugiyono, 2013). The content analysis method was employed to examine, understand, and analyze written documents, in this

case, the current curriculum of IAIN Pontianak, regarding the content of the concept and implementation of the policy on the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture. As is standard practice in content analysis procedures, the researcher commenced this document study by first establishing the categorization of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture as an important aspect to be analyzed (*unit of analysis*).

Table 1.
Categorization of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture and its elaboration in the curriculum

Vision Statement	Elaboration of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture and its units of analysis
Islam and Borneo Culture	1. Curriculum that contains content on distinctive religious practices of Borneo society 2. Curriculum that contains content on traditional ceremonies of Muslim communities in Borneo 3. Curriculum that contains content on the distinctive and specific ways of life of Muslim communities in Borneo 4. Curriculum that contains local Borneo values, both Islamic values and cultural values 5. Curriculum that positions local Borneo culture as a standard for Islamic and cultural values 6. Curriculum that makes Islam and Borneo culture the object and target of its study

Source: Author's analysis from various sources, 2022.

Based on this categorization, the researcher examined, understood, and analyzed the content of the IAIN Pontianak curriculum documents to discover the substance of the concept and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture.

Furthermore, based on the results of this document analysis, the researcher established a starting point for this study to formulate a new concept, either in the form of adding content or refining content components within the curriculum documents related to the concept and implementation of the policy on the vision of Islam and Borneo culture. This constitutes the developmental aspect of the research conducted using the Research and Development approach. From this, the study formulates new formulations, or new content, within the IAIN Pontianak curriculum documents, which are considered more capable of providing clarity and optimization regarding the concept and implementation of the policy on the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as an academic distinctiveness in the IAIN Pontianak curriculum.

THE SCHOLARLY DISTINCTIVENESS OF ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

The vision of Islam and Borneo Culture, and the efforts to strengthen its concept and implementation as an academic distinctiveness at IAIN Pontianak, may not yet be formulated as well or as systematically as the Tree of Knowledge at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (Aris et al., 2022), The integration-interconnection of the web network at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta (Muslih, 2017), Twin Towers at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya (Syaifuddin, 2013), or the Integration of Knowledge at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (Sururin et al., 2021). However, the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture is essentially part of an effort to provide academic distinctiveness to its graduates by integrating general knowledge within the context of national and global studies with local studies that exist only in the Borneo region.

In addition to serving as an effort to provide academic distinctiveness, the strengthening of Islam and culture within the institutional vision is part of the curriculum development that every educational institution must undertake (Kaimuddin, 2015). IAIN Pontianak is no exception. If UIN Jakarta has its academic brand with the paradigm of Integration of Knowledge, UIN Malang with its Tree of Knowledge, UIN Yogyakarta with its Integration-Interconnection, and UIN Surabaya with its Twin Towers, then IAIN Pontianak has the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture.

The importance of strengthening the academic branding at Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs can also take the form of reinforcing the concept of integrating religious sciences with general knowledge. Through this concept, Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions have the flexibility to develop distinctions for the development of educational programs within the framework of developing integrative Islamic scholarship.

Furthermore, the labeling of the integration of knowledge at State Islamic Religious Universities varies. Some refer to it as the Integration of Knowledge at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, the Tree of Knowledge at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Integration-Interconnection at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, and the Twin Towers at UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya. Although there appear to be differences in the terminology of the integration of knowledge at each institution, the essence of the distinction they make is based on the same foundation, namely, efforts to develop Islamic scholarship integrated with science and technology, as well as socio-cultural sciences and humanities. The integration of knowledge championed by UIN Jakarta represents an effort to build a distinctive academic distinctiveness that

differentiates it from general universities. Therefore, UIN Jakarta prioritizes the idea of the integration of knowledge in the understanding and concept that Islamic sciences and general sciences can proceed side by side and simultaneously as a unified whole (Sururin et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, the Integration of Knowledge with the metaphor of the Tree of Knowledge at UIN Malang formulates an inseparable unity between religious knowledge and the socio-humanities and sciences. There are two paradigms underlying the structure of this integration of knowledge: first, placing the Qur'an and Hadith as the primary sources in the development of knowledge, and their development through experimentation, observation, and logical reasoning; second, as sources of knowledge, the Qur'an and Hadith must be positioned on an equal footing with other sources of knowledge. This is where the concept of the integration of the tree of knowledge is understood as a sturdy trunk (tree), with lush branching, leaves, and abundant fruit, supported by strong roots (Muaz et al., 2022).

Similarly, the integration of knowledge developed at UIN Yogyakarta, as pioneered by Amin Abdullah with the concept of Integration-Interconnection, is often also referred to as the spiderweb concept. This integration paradigm represents a concrete response to the dichotomy between religious sciences and general sciences. With this integration-interconnection paradigm, UIN Yogyakarta seeks to affirm that religious sciences and general sciences (science) are an interconnected unity. At least three aspects must be developed together within the context of this integration-interconnection of knowledge, namely: *hadlarah an-nash* (textual culture), *hadlarah al-`ilm* (scientific culture), and *hadlarah al-falsafah* (philosophical culture). Thus, religion and science maintain a relevant relationship for the higher education (Masyitoh et al., 2020). This Integration-Interconnection serves as the foundation for the emergence of patterns of knowledge development through research, education, and the works of the academic community of UIN Yogyakarta today and in the future (Muslih, 2013). One form of integration-interconnection of knowledge at UIN Yogyakarta can be seen in its implementation in the Lesson Plans for the Qur'an and Hadith, which comprises five levels: the philosophical level, the research method and approach level, the material level, the strategy level, and the evaluation level (Afif et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya champions the Twin Towers paradigm as a form of knowledge integration that serves as a distinctive characteristic (distinction) of its academic identity. As a curriculum and learning framework, the integration of knowledge within the Twin Towers paradigm at UINSA represents a dialectical pattern between general sciences

and religious sciences, thereby generating new and dynamic intellectual outputs (Aris et al., 2022). In essence, the Twin Towers integration paradigm of UINSA does not intend to mix religious and general sciences, each of which already has its own strong fundamental foundation, but rather allows both to proceed separately before being brought together to engage in dialogue, communicate, and synergize with one another (Syaifuddin, 2013).

With such an integration concept, it is expected that the academic distinctiveness of State Islamic Religious Universities graduates will be further strengthened, where these institutions will not only produce scholars who are experts in pure Islamic scholarship (*tafaqqahu fiddi*n) but also experts in the socio-humanities and social sciences. Such a graduate profile is highly needed to address various Islamic issues that must be approached through socio-humanities and social science perspectives, as well as for the contribution of Muslims in filling spaces for development in general. Regarding the importance of efforts to integrate knowledge at Islamic Religious Universities, the Director General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Muhammad Ali Ramdhani, firmly stated: "We need to carry out collaborative scientific activities, one of which concerns the distinction of State Islamic Religious Universities and efforts to harmonize general sciences, scientific knowledge, and religion. Then, how can we build a concept of living in a single breath, how religion and nationhood are realized from societal values?"

ISLAM AND BORNEO CULTURE AS AN ACADEMIC DISTINCTIVENESS

The vision of Islam and Borneo Culture in the curriculum of IAIN Pontianak represents a similar pioneering effort to build academic distinctiveness (distinction) at IAIN Pontianak, particularly in the integration of religious sciences (Islam) with general sciences, in this case, the local culture of Muslim societies in Borneo. The following presents the results of the research on the curriculum documents and a discussion on strengthening the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture as an academic distinctiveness at IAIN Pontianak.

Islam and Borneo Culture: A Conceptual Perspective

Islam and Borneo culture mean placing two inseparable values within Borneo society, namely Borneo Islam and Borneo culture. Borneo Islam is understood as the religious understanding and practices of Muslim communities in Borneo. Meanwhile, Borneo culture is understood as the specific way of life of Borneo society, particularly Muslim communities. Borneo Islam, which describes the local character in the understanding and practice of Islamic

religious life, is not actually a new term. Long before this, we have known the designation "The Religion of Java" written by Clifford Geertz (1964), which classified Islamic religious groups in Java into the *abangan, priyayi,* and *santri* classes. Subsequently, a study by Mark R. Woodward (1989) emerged, which specifically observed Islamic religiosity in Java under the original title of his book *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*. Woodward observed that Islamic religious practice in Java consists of two main groups, which he called normative piety and mysticism (in Sumbulah, 2012), There are many more studies on Javanese Islam beyond those of Geertz and Woodward. One thing is certain: all these studies acknowledge a strong acculturation of local culture into the religious practices of Javanese society, thereby giving rise to the distinctiveness of religion (Islam) in Java. Among the forms of Islamic acculturation into Javanese culture is the tradition of the *slametan*, which Mark R. Woodward also wrote about in his article entitled *The Slametan: Textual Knowledge and Ritual Performance in Central Javanese Islam* (Woodward, 1988).

Meanwhile, regarding Borneo Islam in this paper, it can actually be observed in several studies that have already been produced, for instance, Hermansyah, Erwin, and Rusdi Sulaiman, who examined the character of Islam in Borneo, particularly in Sambas. Based on a study of the manuscript of Muhammad Asad, this research affirms that Islam in Sambas was indeed influenced by Sufi teachings, just as the history of Islam's arrival in the archipelago was also brought by Sufis. Consequently, the character of Islam in Sambas, according to them, more clearly reflects the characteristics of *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah*, in that deeds and prayers are very important, but not because God rewards them (Hermansyah et al., 2017). The results of this study have been published in a book entitled *Islam in Borneo: The Trail of Sufism in the Manuscript of Muhammad As`ad Sambas*, published by IAIN Pontianak Press in 2017.

Furthermore, there is a study by Syarif that examined Islam in Borneo through the pattern of thought that developed between 1990 and 2017. The findings of this study conclude that Islamic thought in Borneo is more characterized by Sufi Tariqa and reformism, with a clear chain of transmission (*sanad*) originating from Arabia, Java, and Madura, leaving behind legacies in the form of texts (manuscripts) and contexts (culture and architectural forms of places of worship), as well as Islamic da'wah movements in the form of educational institutions and Islamic boarding schools or *pondok pesantren* (Syarif, 2018)

Subsequently, a study related to Islam in Borneo is also found in the writing of Hashim Fauzy Yaacob, who concluded that the main character of Borneo Islam is the *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah* doctrine and the Shafi'i school of

thought (*mazhab*). According to Hashim, the results of this study provide a refutation to Orientalists who depict Muslims on the island of Borneo from a very negative perspective (Yaacob, 2021, pp. 64-65)

Meanwhile, Borneo Culture consists of two words: culture and Borneo. The concept of culture can be understood broadly and narrowly. Broadly, culture can be defined as all forms of human intellect, works, and endeavors utilized for the benefit of human life. Given the breadth of this meaning, for analytical purposes, the meaning of culture is broken down based on its elements. Koentjaraningrat (1990), for example, outlines the universal elements of culture as divided into: 1) Religious system and religious ceremonies; 2) Social system and organization; 3) Knowledge system; 4) Language; 5) Arts; 6) Livelihood system; and 7) Technology and equipment system (Koentjaraningrat, 1990).

Edward T. Hall defines culture as the total way of life of a people, or an individual's way of life influenced by various social values, customary values, religious norms, beliefs, and so forth (Ibrahim, 2017). Meanwhile, culture is manifested in three forms: 1) ideas, the complexity of ideas, notions, norms, regulations, and those related to thought; 2) acts, the complexity of patterned behavior of humans in social interaction; and 3) artifacts, objects created by human work.

These three forms of culture are interrelated. The first form of culture consists of ideas, notions, customs, norms, and values that are generally unwritten and thus abstract in nature. The second form of culture, the social system, comprises human actions and relationships in interaction. The traditions and patterns of conduct displayed by humans as members of society are manifestations of this second form. What is displayed from this second form of culture can be observed and is therefore concrete. Furthermore, thoughts, ideas, and actions produce physical objects.

Meanwhile, Borneo is another name for the island of Kalimantan (Veth, 1854). Another opinion states that Borneo is the name most widely used during the Dutch colonial period (King, 1993). Conversely, the name Kalimantan has been more popular nationally and internationally since independence (Lontaan, 1980). In the Indonesian context, the term Borneo refers to the entire island of Kalimantan, including Brunei and East Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah).

Thus, Borneo culture can be understood as the distinctive and specific way of life habits within a sub-section of the archipelago's culture that possesses its own unique knowledge system, beliefs, and values for its community members. Borneo culture is a life system that characterizes the customary practices of

communities in part or all of the Borneo region, which includes Kalimantan (Indonesia), Sarawak and Sabah (Malaysia), and Brunei Darussalam. These systems serve as the foundational source that underpins, inspires, motivates, and standardizes the thinking and behavior of their supporting communities in their efforts to meet needs and address various life challenges.

Islam and Borneo Culture in this study provide an interpretation and meaning of Islamic religious practices that are lived and practiced by communities in the Borneo region. This means that the Islam that exists and is present in the religious practices of Borneo communities is an Islam that has undergone an acculturation process due to its encounter with local culture, as examined in Ibrahim's study on the encounter between Islam and local culture in the interior of West Kalimantan (Ibrahim, 2018b). Borneo Islam is also depicted in a very close relationship with the local traditions of Borneo communities, such that both influence one another, as seen in Ibrahim's article entitled *Islam and Tradition in Nanga Jajang: Social and Religious Practices of the Malay Community* (Ibrahim, 2015), or *Pangil* as a distinctive tradition among Muslim communities in Nanga Jajang (Ibrahim, 2018a), and many other studies that demonstrate the relationship between Islam and local Borneo culture, thereby giving rise to the distinctiveness of Borneo Islam.

Islam and Borneo culture are inseparable entities in the religiosity of the community. Islam influences the community's way of life, and the community's way of life also colors the practice of Islam in Borneo, encapsulated in the conceptual term "Islam and Borneo Culture." This concept has given rise to the fusion of Islam with local Borneo culture in ceremonies such as *Saprahan* (tradisional ceremonies in Malays Sambas) (Wahab et al., 2020), *Pangil Melayu* (tradisional ceremonies and prayers in Malays Ulu Kapuas) (Ibrahim, 2018a)West Kalimantan. is tradition is carried out by inviting the surrounding communities to commemorate the various events that they have been experienced, either joyful or sorrowful experiences. is article reviews the Pangil tradition by using anthropological perspectives to see patterns of cultural communication and their relationship with identities that represent the Muslim-Malay community. is tradition shows that the balance of life - both in the social and divine dimensions - is highly upheld by the Muslim-Malay community in the Ulu Kapuas. is can be seen in the ritual context which is lled with providing meals, recitating the Quran, and praying for their ancestors. In the context of cultural communication, the Pangil ceremony teaches four things; the value of gratitude to God (nyelamat, the TAL (*potion*) eating tradition (Ibrahim, 2016), the *Pantang Larang* (taboo) tradition (Kurniawan, 2019), and even the *Mandi (bathing) Safar* tradition (Nurhayati, 2019), etc.

Islam and Borneo Culture in the Institutional Vision

Every well-established institution or organizational entity certainly possesses a long-term concept to be collectively pursued and realized in the future. This concept is referred to as vision (Taiwo & Lawal, 2016). As a comprehensive concept of future aspirations, the vision always serves as the foundation or guideline for all movements and activities of the institution or organization. IAIN Pontianak, as the sole State Islamic Higher Education institution in West Kalimantan, has chosen Islam and Borneo culture as its starting point and simultaneously as the foundation for its movement, serving as the reference for the institution's long-term work. IAIN Pontianak has firmly incorporated the elements of Islam and Borneo culture into its institutional vision statement. The vision and mission statements of IAIN Pontianak are presented in the following table.

Table: 2
Vision and Mission Statements of IAIN Pontianak

Vision Statement	Mission Statement
To be distinguished and open in scholarship, Islamic studies, and Borneo cultural research.	1. To organize higher education that excels in scholarship, Islamic studies, and research on Borneo culture; 2. To shape academics of noble character, independence, and dignity for the nation and humanity.

Source: IAIN Pontianak Vision and Mission Document, 2022

The table above shows that Islam and Borneo culture constitute an important part of the institutional vision of IAIN Pontianak. This means that one of the great aspirations to be pursued and realized by IAIN Pontianak is to become a center for the study of Islam and Borneo culture, as derived from institutional mission number (1): "To organize higher education that excels in scholarship, Islamic studies, and research on Borneo culture."

It is from this vision and mission that the institution of IAIN Pontianak subsequently establishes its foundational footing and target achievements to be pursued and realized in the future. Moreover, based on this vision and mission, all of the institution's available resources are mobilized to realize the shared hopes and aspirations of IAIN Pontianak moving forward. This includes the curriculum, which must make the vision and mission statements the working reference for organizing higher education at IAIN Pontianak.

The success of IAIN Pontianak in carrying out its institutional duties and mandate lies in the institution's ability to realize the vision and mission it has

formulated. Conversely, failure to realize the great aspirations set forth in the vision and mission would become an indicator of the institution's future work failure. Therefore, a study on the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as an academic distinctiveness at IAIN Pontianak is of paramount importance.

THE CONCEPT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VISION OF ISLAM AND BORNEO CULTURE IN THE CURRICULUM OF IAIN PONTIANAK

In this section, the researcher analyzes the curriculum documents of IAIN Pontianak to identify the concept and implementation of Islam and Borneo culture within them. In accordance with the characteristics of document analysis, this study employs document content analysis techniques, first creating and establishing content categorizations to perform the desired classification. In this case, the categorization and classification pertain to Islam and Borneo culture, as well as its concept and implementation within the IAIN Pontianak curriculum.

Table 3.
Categorization of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture and its elaboration in the curriculum

Vision Statement	Vision Elaboration
Islam and Borneo Culture	1. Curriculum that contains content on distinctive religious/ Islamic practices of Borneo society 2. Curriculum that contains content on traditional ceremonies of Muslim communities in the land of Borneo 3. Curriculum that contains content on the distinctive and specific ways of life of Borneo society 4. Curriculum that contains local values of Borneo society 5. Curriculum that positions Islamic practices and local Borneo culture as its standard 6. Curriculum that makes Islam and Borneo culture the object and target of its study

Source: Author's analysis from various sources, 2022

Based on the categorization above, the researcher further conducted a careful analysis of the current curriculum documents at IAIN Pontianak to identify the mapping of the conceptual vision of Islam and Borneo culture, along with all its derivatives, including the mission, objectives, or graduate profiles, and even its implementation in the courses offered in each study program.

To facilitate the process of examination and understanding, this analysis was conducted based on the Standards for Islamic Religious Higher Education issued by the Directorate General of Islamic Education, while paying attention

to the classification of faculties and study programs existing at IAIN Pontianak. The researcher analyzed the curricula of four faculties and one graduate school, encompassing 20 study programs within IAIN Pontianak at that time. As a sample, the mapping of the concept and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture in the IAIN Pontianak curriculum can be observed in the following sample study programs.

Table: 4
Mapping of the vision of Islam and the Borneo culture in the curriculum

Study Program	Vision	Mission	Implementation
Islamic Guidance Counseling	"To become an eminent and open study program at the national and international levels in the field of Islamic Guidance and Counseling, based on Islamic values and the local wisdom of Borneo Culture."	1. To organize integrated education in Islamic Guidance and Counseling and Borneo Culture 2. 3. To organize community service based on the local wisdom of Borneo Culture 4.	Islam and Borneo Culture, History of Islamic Civilization, History of Da'wah, Sociology of Da'wah, Multicultural Counseling, Counseling for New Muslim Communities, Community Counseling
Mathematics Education	To become a superior study program in producing distinguished and open Mathematics Educators in the development of Scholarship, Islam, and Borneo Culture by the year 2024.	1) ..., 2) ..., 3) To conduct community service based on research outcomes oriented toward improving the quality of Mathematics Education accompanied by Islamic values in accordance with societal developments and needs.	Islam and Borneo Culture, History of Islamic Civilization, History and Science of Islamic Education, Islamic Theology, as well as Islamic Ethics and Sufism.
Sharia Banking	To become an eminent and open Study Program of Islamic Banking in the study and research of scholarship, Islam, and Borneo Culture by the year 2030.	1) ..., 2) ..., 3) To organize community service based on Islamic banking knowledge. 4) To establish cooperation with government institutions, higher education institutions, and Islamic banking industry institutions at home and abroad. 5) ...	Islam and Borneo Culture (institute-level course), and the course on the Economy of Borneo Society

Sharia Economic Law	"A study program that is eminent and open in integrating Sharia Economic Law, Legal Science, and Borneo Culture by the year 2030."	1) To implement Education and Teaching of Sharia Economic Law that integrates sharia economic law, legal science, and Borneo Culture. 2) To apply research in the field of Sharia Economic Law ... and Borneo Culture. 3) To participate in community empowerment through the application of Sharia Economic Law ... Law and Borneo Culture.	Islam and Borneo Culture, History of Islamic Civilization, Islam and Local Culture, Islamic Theology, and Sufism Ethics.
Masters in Islamic Religious Education	To become an eminent and open Study Program of Islamic Religious Education in the study and research of scholarship, Islam, and Borneo Culture by the year 2025.	a. To organize learning and Islamic Religious Education using inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches to develop the study and research of scholarship, Islam, and Borneo Culture. b. To organize the study and research of scholarship, Islam, and Borneo Culture… c. To organize community service based on the study and research of scholarship, Islam, Education, and Borneo Culture.	Borneo Islamic Studies, Islam and Religious Moderation, Multicultural Islamic Education, and the Social History of Islamic Educational Thought.

Source: Curriculum Documents of Study Programs at IAIN Pontianak, 2021.

The table above shows that the vision of Islam and Borneo culture has been translated and derived into the curriculum of all study programs within IAIN Pontianak, starting from the formulation of the study program's vision, mission, and objectives. It is also evident that the vision of Islam and Borneo culture has begun to be implemented in the courses taught in each study program, albeit with various shortcomings in each case.

From the sample above, an initial overview of the concept and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture in the IAIN Pontianak curriculum is obtained. The vision of Islam and Borneo culture, which constitutes one of the institutional vision statements, is subsequently derived into the vision of faculties and study programs, and then serves as the foundation for its

implementation in the mission, objectives, or graduate profiles across all faculties and study programs within IAIN Pontianak. However, the reality reveals numerous ambiguities and discontinuities in the formulation of this vision as an integrated whole within the current curriculum. This implementation pattern resembles what has been set forth in the guidelines for the simultaneous application of the tri dharma in the planning of the Islamic Entrepreneurship (IEE) course at PTKI in Aceh (Lailatussaadah et al., 2023).

A similar issue was also experienced by UIN Jakarta when it began integrating knowledge with the idea of integrating Islamic and general sciences, as acknowledged by Sururin et al. According to them, the concept of knowledge integration itself has not yet achieved uniformity. Many differing interpretations are still found among study programs, among lecturers, and even among leaders, particularly at the Faculty of Islamic Theology and Humanities. This is due, among other reasons, to the lack of adequate socialization (Sururin et al., 2021).

However, as a foundational concept for academic knowledge development, the vision of Islam and Borneo culture needs to be properly and adequately explained within the curriculum, with detailed elaboration of its implementation aspects across all pillars of higher education. A strong paradigmatic framework is essential; we can learn from UIN Yogyakarta with its integration-interconnection academic distinctiveness, which provides adequate explanation and elaboration in all aspects of its curriculum implementation, including at the postgraduate level with its interdisciplinary study approach (Izzudin, 2017).

STRENGTHENING THE VISION OF ISLAM AND BORNEO CULTURE AS AN ACADEMIC DISTINCTIVENESS

In this section, the researcher attempts to further develop the concept and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture within the IAIN Pontianak curriculum, based on the results of the research that has been conducted. It is here that the researcher formulates new findings regarding the concept and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as a form of development of the existing curriculum.

Therefore, this section also seeks to strengthen the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as an academic distinctiveness (differentiating or identifying characteristic) at IAIN Pontianak, as intended in the institutional vision statement. This means that knowledge and insight into Islam and Borneo culture must become an academic strength that continues to be developed as a distinguishing identifier for graduates of IAIN Pontianak.

Table: 5
Development of the Concept and Implementation of the Vision of Islam and Borneo Culture in the Curriculum of IAIN Pontianak

Aspects/ Components of Tri Dharma (Three Pillars of Higher Education)	Research Findings (Current Curriculum Documents)	Development Design
The concept of the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture	Only a vision and mission statement, without an academic-scientific explanation of the concept of the Vision of Islam and Borneo Culture.	In addition to the vision and mission statements, it is also accompanied by an academic-scientific explanation of the concept of the Vision of Islam and Borneo Culture.
Pillar of Education and Instruction	Only one core course, the institute-level course on Islam and Borneo Culture, without an accompanying clear Lesson Plan document. The rest can only be assumed as courses implementing the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture, as their lesson plans cannot be verified.	At least 10 related courses exist, including Islam and Borneo Culture as an institute-level course. Clear Lesson Plans are available to examine the aspects of implementing the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture within the curriculum.
Pillar of Research	Not available in the curriculum	Mapped into 16 components of the implementation of the research pillar.
Pillar of Community Service	Not available in the curriculum	Mapped into 2 components of the implementation of the community service pillar
Other	Not available in the curriculum	Mapped into 2 components of other forms

Source: Analysis of the results of the Development Workshop Team's work, August 25, 2022.

Based on the table above, an overview of the aspects of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture found from the research results on the current curriculum documents at IAIN Pontianak is presented, along with the developmental aspects generated from this research process.

A clearer comparison of the differences between the two can be seen in the following Table:

Table: 6
Comparison of the IAIN Pontianak Curriculum Structure (Original and Development Results)

Content of the Original Curriculum Document	Content of the Developed Curriculum Document	Remark
Rector's Decree on the Implementation of the Curriculum	Similar (to be established by the Implementation Decree)	Old version - Original
Curriculum Appendices: 1. Study Materials 2. Mapping Matrix of Study Materials 3. Institute Learning Outcomes 4. Course Learning Outcomes – Institute Courses 5. Credits and Semester Credit Units of Institute Courses	Curriculum Appendices	
	Contains a conceptual explanation of the institutional vision (the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture) and its implementation in the teaching and learning components (similar to an envisioning of VMTS).	Development
	Same (from Study Materials to Credits and SKS of Institute Courses)	Old version - Original
	The availability of Lesson Plans (at least for courses related to the vision of Islam and Borneo Culture)	Development
	Implementation of the institutional vision in the Research and Community Service components	Development
	1. Translation of the Qur'an into the Dayak language (local community language); 2. Establishment of the Borneo Studies Center at IAIN Pontianak	Development

Source: Analysis of discussion results at the Development Workshop, August 25, 2022.

Furthermore, this research and development also generated several other development aspects as a form of strengthening the policy on the vision of Islam and Borneo culture in the IAIN Pontianak curriculum. In accordance with the recommendations from the workshop results conducted by the researcher as the culmination of the entire research and development process, several forms of further strengthening are required, including; *first*, the importance of establishing a Consortium of Lecturers and Researchers on Islam and Borneo Culture within IAIN Pontianak; *Second*, the importance of establishing a Center for Research on Local Issues, Islam, and Borneo Culture at IAIN Pontianak; *Third*, the importance of building partnership networks with institutions/consortia/researchers on Islam and Borneo Culture at the local, regional, and international levels, particularly within the Borneo Island region, such as Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of field data analysis, ranging from the IAIN Pontianak curriculum documents as the basis for document content analysis research to the conceptual design and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as part of the development aspect, this study finds that the concept and implementation of the policy on the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as an academic distinctiveness at IAIN Pontianak are firmly available at all levels. Therefore, it needs to be strengthened by formulating it comprehensively across all IAIN Pontianak curriculum documents, both at the conceptual level and in its implementation across all aspects of the tri dharma, particularly in the courses.

Specifically, the results of this study affirm four important matters that need to be undertaken to strengthen the vision of Islam and Borneo culture in the IAIN Pontianak curriculum: First, the policy concept of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture derived from the institutional vision statement needs to be supported by an adequate and systematic academic explanation, including the definition of its terminology, characteristics, and scope. This is important to prevent further ambiguity in understanding and translating the vision into the IAIN Pontianak curriculum. Second, the implementation of the policy on the vision of Islam and Borneo culture must also be carried out thoroughly and optimally. A good and systematic conceptual academic explanation needs to be developed in the curriculum documents, including translating the vision into the Tri Dharma aspects. To this end, complete Lesson Plans are required as a reference for the concept and its implementation in courses.

Third, the strengthening of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as an academic distinctiveness at IAIN Pontianak can be achieved through various efforts to develop the concept and implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture by adding more comprehensive curriculum content, including components for developing the narrative of the concept of Islam and Borneo culture, mapping the implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture across the tri dharma aspects, and designing new Lesson Plans for Islam and Borneo Culture. Fourth, several forms of implementation of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as an academic distinctiveness that have been and will continue to be developed at IAIN Pontianak include strengthening the curriculum on Islam and Borneo culture, such as publishing a translation of the Qur'an into the Dayak language; establishing the Borneo Studies Center; forming a Consortium of Lecturers and Researchers on Islam and Borneo Culture; and developing partnership networks with institutions/consortia/researchers on Islam and Borneo Culture at the local and regional Borneo levels.

The results of this study will make an important contribution to efforts to strengthen academic distinctiveness within PTKIN, where the strengthening of the vision of Islam and Borneo culture as an academic distinctiveness at IAIN Pontianak adds a new character to the academic distinctiveness already established within the environment of the PTKIN.

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CULTIVATING SHALOM–SALAAM: Christian–Muslim Peacebuilding and Shared Ethical Values in Mindanao

Jerson Benia Narciso
Central Philippine University, Philippines
Email:jersonarciso@yahoo.com

Nestor Distor Bunda
Center for Research, Ecumenical Endeavor, Evangelization and Development (CREED)
Email: nestorbunda@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The conflict in the Southern Philippines continues to challenge reconciliation and sustainable peace. While earlier studies have affirmed the role of religious communities in justice and peacebuilding, a gap remains in the systematic articulation of shared theological and cultural values as foundations for Christian–Muslim collaboration. This study addresses that gap by asking: (1) What shared values from Christianity and Islam can help build peace? and (2) How can these values be mobilized in cooperative practices? Positioned within liberation theology and Islamic liberation theology, the research employs Boff's (1987) framework of socioanalytical, hermeneutical, and practical mediation to analyze biblical and Qur'anic themes alongside Philippine cultural ethics. Findings highlight compassion (maayong buot), justice (katadlongan), and peace (katawhayan) as common foundations for healing (paghilom) and cooperation (bayanihan). Core values such as kapwa (shared humanity), paggalang (respect), pagtuo (faith), and pagpasaylo (forgiveness) demonstrate the potential for interreligious solidarity. The study contributes to peacebuilding scholarship by proposing a contextual theological framework that integrates religious traditions and Philippine cultural ethics, offering a covenant of Shalom–Salaam as a pathway toward reconciliation and social transformation in Mindanao.

Keywords*:* Shalom–Salaam; Interreligious Peacebuilding; Liberation Theology; Islamic Liberation Theology; Interreligious Ethics

INTRODUCTION

The decades-long armed conflict in the Southern Philippines—described by Tan (2003) as Southeast Asia's most persistent—has claimed over 120,000 lives and displaced millions (South China Morning Post, 2026). It has also

damaged the country's global image, portraying the Philippines as unstable and violent. Rooted in the Moro people's struggle for autonomy since Spanish and American colonial rule, the conflict continues due to neglect, discrimination, and military offensives (Canoy, 1987), while structural injustices and the marginalization of Muslim Filipinos and Indigenous peoples further sustain the violence (Maboloc, 2025). The Moro conflict is not merely a religious war but a struggle for autonomy shaped by colonial legacies and systemic marginalization. Spanish and American colonization disrupted Moro sovereignty, while contemporary challenges such as poverty, clan rivalries, and weak governance continue to hinder durable peace.

Religion has often been instrumentalized as a tool of colonial and political control, from Spanish rule to modern church–state entanglements (Palatino, 2025). Christianity and Islam have at times deepened divides in Mindanao. Yet, both traditions also contain profound resources for peace—compassion, justice, forgiveness, cooperation, respect, and dignity rooted in the Bible and Qur'an. In this study, the term *Christianity* refers inclusively to both Catholic and Protestant traditions. This distinction is important in the Philippine context, where Catholicism has been historically dominant, but Protestant churches likewise play significant roles in interreligious peacebuilding. Clarifying this inclusivity responds to the historical shift noted by scholars: while "Christianity" in its earliest centuries referred simply to followers of Christ, later divisions between Catholic and Protestant traditions require careful usage. This study therefore affirms that both Catholic and Protestant perspectives are included in the covenant of Shalom–Salaam. Likewise, while *Shalom* is often associated with Protestant usage, its biblical roots extend across Christian traditions, including Catholic theology, where it signifies peace as wholeness and justice. Paired with *Salaam*, the framework underscores the convergence of Christian and Islamic values in cultivating reconciliation. Earlier studies, such as Narciso (2012), affirmed the role of religious communities in reconciliation and sustainable peace, and this study builds on that trajectory by highlighting shared theological and cultural values as foundations for interreligious solidarity in Mindanao.

More recent works highlight how interreligious dialogue and shared values can contribute to peacebuilding, but there remains a gap in the systematic articulation of these values within a contextual theological framework that integrates Philippine cultural ethics (Canete & del Castillo, 2022; Corpuz, 2025). Canete and del Castillo (2022) demonstrate how the Philippine value of *pakikipagkapwa* (fellowship) fosters dialogue, social cohesion, and resilience, even amid crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Complementing this,

Corpuz (2025) shows that religious-based movements in Mindanao act as mediators, cultivating mutual understanding, community-led initiatives, and collaboration among religious groups, policymakers, and civil society. Together, these studies suggest that integrating Philippine cultural values and ethics with interreligious theological frameworks can provide a transformative foundation for reconciliation and sustainable peace in Mindanao.

This study addresses that gap by explicitly asking two guiding questions: (1) What shared values from Christianity and Islam can help build peace in Mindanao? and (2) How can these values be mobilized in cooperative practices? In the context of liberation theology, Islamic liberation theology, and Boff's (1987) framework of socio-analytical, hermeneutical, and practical mediation, the study analyzes biblical and Qur'anic themes alongside Philippine cultural values. It highlights the ethical foundations for Christian–Muslim collaboration, including *kapwa/kaupod* (shared humanity), *paggalang/pagtahod* (respect), *pakikipagkapwa-tao/kagandahang loob* (shared humanity/compassion), *bayanihan/dagyaw* (cooperation), *pananampalataya/pagtuo* (faith), *pagpapatawad/pagpasaylo* (forgiveness), and *kapayapaan/katawhayan/salaam* (peace). By situating these values within the broader literature on interreligious peacebuilding, the study contributes to ongoing scholarship by proposing a covenant of Shalom–Salaam as a contextual theological paradigm for reconciliation and social transformation in Mindanao. These guiding questions frame the analysis and ensure that findings are directly connected to both theological reflection and practical peacebuilding. Within interreligious dialogue and Philippine cultural ethics, this study supports the ongoing debates on whether theological values can be systematically mobilized for reconciliation, filling a gap noted by Canete & del Castillo (2022) and Corpuz (2025). This positioning ensures that the covenant of Shalom–Salaam is not only a contextual theological proposal but also a scholarly response to current questions in interreligious peacebuilding.

While Narciso (2012) affirmed the role of religious communities in peacebuilding, this study advances the scholarship by systematically articulating shared theological and Philippine cultural values within a contextual framework. Unlike earlier works that focused primarily on dialogue or institutional roles, this research integrates liberation theology, Islamic liberation theology, and Philippine ethics and values into a covenant of Shalom–Salaam, offering both theoretical clarity and practical pathways for reconciliation. This article contributes to ongoing debates in interreligious peacebuilding by offering a contextual theological framework rooted in Philippine cultural ethics and inclusive of both Catholic and Protestant traditions.

The following sections examine (1) Interreligious peacebuilding, (2) Historical roots and contemporary dynamics of conflict in Mindanao, (3) Christianity and Islam as partners in peacebuilding, (4) Limitations and gaps in religious peacebuilding, (5) Theological perspectives on liberation and peace, and (6) Shared values, cultural ethics, and pathways for peace, before concluding with recommendations for embedding Shalom–Salaam in practice.

INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING

Recent interreligious initiatives, such as the revitalized Mindanao Religious Leaders Conference (MiRLeC) in Cotabato, demonstrate that religion—when reclaimed through liberation theology and grassroots action—can be a force for reconciliation. As the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (2025) reported, the Faith and Peace in Action dialogue convened Christian bishops, Muslim ulama, Indigenous leaders, and civic actors to advance peaceful, inclusive, and valuesdriven participation in the first Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) parliamentary elections. This gathering affirmed that peace based on justice is an obligation, highlighting the growing potential of religionbased unity to counter electoral violence and systemic injustice. The dialogue underscored the importance of moral leadership (*amanah*), truth, and accountability in democratic transition, with leaders committing to nonviolence, dignity, and valuesbased voter education. Philippine cultural values such as *kagandahang loob* (inner goodness), *kapwa* (shared humanity), *bayanihan* (communal cooperation), and *paggalang* (respect) enrich this convergence, offering a common language of healing and hope. Christianity and Islam, therefore, need not be rivals but partners in building lasting peace, as interreligious solidarity and civic collaboration together chart a path toward reconciliation, integrity, and a participatory future for Mindanao.

This trajectory builds on earlier initiatives such as the BishopUlama Conference (BUC) and the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (PEPP). The BUC has long convened bishops and ulama to mediate clan disputes and promote reconciliation. At the same time, PEPP represents a coalition of Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical churches committed to peace advocacy and dialogue in the Philippines. In September 2025, PEPP organized the Day of Prayer for Just Peace at Saint Andrew's Theological Seminary, where church leaders and peace advocates renewed their call for genuine peace talks and emphasized that peace is a presence of justice, dignity, and compassion in all lives (Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform, 2025). These efforts laid the groundwork for MiRLeC by demonstrating that interreligious cooperation

can move beyond symbolic gestures to address concrete issues such as electoral violence, corruption, clan feuds, and community displacement. The continuity of these initiatives shows that interfaith dialogue in Mindanao is not episodic but part of a sustained movement toward reconciliation, rooted in both theological conviction and civic responsibility.

Theologically, liberation theology and Islamic liberation theology provide the intellectual scaffolding for these initiatives. Gustavo Gutiérrez's (1988) emphasis on the preferential option for the poor resonates with Farid Esack's (1997) call for Qur'anic solidarity with the oppressed, creating a shared moral horizon for Christian and Muslim peacebuilders. Both traditions insist that faith must be lived out in justice, compassion, and resistance to structures of exclusion. When applied to Mindanao, these theological insights affirm that interreligious peacebuilding is not merely dialogue but a praxis of liberation—an embodied commitment to dismantling marginalization and cultivating solidarity across communities.

Practically, interreligious peacebuilding has produced tangible outcomes. Communitybased voter education programs, interfaith youth camps, and womenled reconciliation initiatives have translated shared values into lived practices. For example, *kapwa* and *bayanihan* have been mobilized in grassroots mediation efforts to resolve clan disputes (rido), while *paggalang* and *kagandahang loob* have informed civic education modules that promote respect and cooperation across religious divides. These initiatives demonstrate that shared values are not abstract ideals but practical resources for peacebuilding, capable of shaping democratic participation and community resilience.

Since the National Summit of Religious Leaders Toward a Culture of Peace (Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, 2005) affirmed the importance of religious values in peacebuilding, scholars have asked whether Christianity and Islam can provide collaborative frameworks for bridging divides. This study builds on that issue by analyzing the historical roots of conflict, the sociopolitical and religious landscape, and the peacebuilding roles of major religionbased organizations. Drawing from liberation theology and Islamic liberation theology—especially the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988) and Farid Esack (1997)—it identifies shared values that can anchor programs for justice and reconciliation. The convergence of biblical and Qur'anic ethics with Philippine cultural values highlights compassion (*maayong buot*), justice (*katadlongan*), and peace (*katawhayan*) as common foundations for healing (*paghilom*) and cooperation (*bayanihan*). These values, when lived out, can drive economic renewal, social transformation, and a covenant of Shalom–

Salaam. The MiRLeC dialogues affirm that interfaith solidarity is not merely symbolic but can be institutionalized through collaborative programs that address exclusion and inequality (Rocamora, 2025; Lara & Schoofs, 2016).

In sum, these initiatives and theological insights show that shared values are not abstract ideals but practical resources for peacebuilding. When compassion, justice, and peace are articulated within both Christian and Muslim traditions and expressed through Philippine cultural ethics, they create a common moral ground for collaboration. This synthesis demonstrates that interreligious solidarity in Mindanao can move beyond dialogue into concrete practices—educational programs, civic participation, and communityled initiatives—that embody a covenant of Shalom–Salaam. Such a framework not only bridges divides but also offers a transformative pathway toward reconciliation and sustainable peace.

HISTORICAL ROOTS AND CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS OF THE CONFLICT IN MINDANAO

The conflict in Mindanao is deeply complex, rooted in history, culture, and politics, and requires inclusive peacebuilding strategies. Centuries of colonization, poverty, and political injustice continue to shape the Moro people's struggle for dignity and self-determination (Tan, 2003; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2025). In response to marginalization and imposed state structures, the Bangsamoro people have sought autonomy, justice, and cultural recognition through democratic processes and moral governance (Bangsamoro Today, 2025). At the same time, unresolved grievances have fueled separatist tendencies and prolonged instability, prompting 57 Mindanao lawmakers to issue a manifesto affirming national unity and rejecting secessionist calls (Panti, 2024). Recent scholarship underscores that durable peace requires aligning economic, political, and security incentives with credible state commitments, while addressing grievances of self-determination, land dispossession, and exclusion through inclusive political and legal mechanisms (Navarro & Jacinto, 2025). These contrasting developments highlight the tension between movements for self-determination and efforts to preserve constitutional democracy, underscoring the need for inclusive governance that bridges divides and addresses inequality.

Tan (2010) notes that internal wars stem from deepseated historical, cultural, and structural conditions, while immediate events act as triggers that ignite the violence. Applied to Mindanao, this framework shows how deep-rooted grievances and current injustices converge to sustain conflict. The Bangsamoro

struggle is rooted in centuries of political independence through sultanates and resistance against colonization, followed by marginalization within the Philippine state. Lingga's collected writings, Advancing Bangsamoro Aspirations, highlight this trajectory: from the Bangsamoro's historical sovereignty under sultanates, their resistance against Spanish and American colonization, and their opposition to annexation into the Philippine Republic, to their modern pursuit of self-determination through democratic and peaceful means. He underscores that while armed struggle emerged from the impossibility of regaining independence under the Philippine nation-state, civil society has consistently advocated for peaceful avenues such as referenda, inclusive governance, and international mediation. Lingga's analysis situates the Bangsamoro identity as both historically grounded and politically resilient, offering hope that genuine autonomy can be achieved through dialogue, structural reform, and justice-oriented peacebuilding (Lingga, 2025).

These historical preconditions intersect with precipitants such as Manila's recurring intervention in Bangsamoro governance. As Xu (2025) observes, the Marcos administration's unilateral reshuffling of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority reveals how autonomy remains conditional, subject to central patronage politics rather than genuine self-determination. The Philippine government has long upheld integration to preserve territorial integrity, while the Bangsamoro assert their right to self-determination. Constitutional changes may be necessary to meet these demands; however, Lingga (2025) emphasizes grassroots and community-based approaches to peacebuilding. Yet militarized responses have repeatedly displaced communities and entrenched corruption, benefiting powerful actors while deepening instability (UNDP, 2005; ABS-CBN News, 2025). The convergence of historical grievances, structural neglect, and Manila's hidden hand in Bangsamoro politics illustrates how both preconditions and precipitants perpetuate cycles of mistrust and violence, undermining the durability of peace agreements and the promise of genuine autonomy.

Internal divisions between nationalist and Islamist factions, such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), have hindered unified action. Clan rivalries and elite competition further weaken cohesion, while land disputes, violent extremism, and *rido* (clan feuding) continue to destabilize Mindanao. Since 2021, conflict incidents in BARMM have resurged, driven by MILF fragmentation, radical splinter groups, and the persistence of armed clans, with electoral cycles intensifying violence. Recent findings by the Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia (CCAA) confirm this trend, noting that clan feuds—now increasingly political

rather than land-based—remain the primary driver of violence, particularly in Lanao and Maguindanao. The CCAA's 2024 triennial report highlights how election periods sharply escalate conflict, with hundreds of violent incidents recorded in 2022 and 2023, raising fears of unrest in parliamentary polls. Sidney Jones of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict further warns that killings linked to identity conflict are rising in Maguindanao, the MILF heartland, with armed clans and splinter groups exploiting electoral contests. Although government officials emphasize progress in decommissioning MILF combatants and the decline of extremist groups, skepticism persists over incomplete disarmament and the risk of election failure. These dynamics illustrate how unresolved grievances, armed patronage politics, and electoral rivalries converge to perpetuate instability, underscoring the fragility of peace in BARMM despite institutional reforms (Varsitarian Staff, 2024).

Maitem (2025) similarly highlights the fragility of the peace process, noting that of 40,000 MILF combatants pledged for decommissioning, 14,000 remain armed, raising fears of unrest during elections. Government exploitation of leadership fragmentation and uneven disarmament has reinforced old patterns of patronage and exclusion, undermining trust in democratic processes. The Moro conflict thus reflects a clash of nationalisms—Filipino and Bangsamoro—each with distinct narratives and solutions, but both trapped in cycles of mistrust and contested legitimacy (UNDP, 2005; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2025).

Conflict is not a religious war but a struggle of an oppressed minority against elites. Tan (2010) identifies roots of unrest: historical domination, political inferiorization, economic marginalization, and threats to Moro identity. Peace efforts such as the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) and the 2019 Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao have made progress. However, challenges such as clan feuds and rebel fragmentation persist. Religion-based groups like MiRLeC, the Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC), and the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) continue to play active roles in peacebuilding. Cardinal Orlando Quevedo, through initiatives such as the *Titayan* (bridge) *2*: Bridging to Sustain Peace in the Bangsamoro forum, has convened government and MILF peace panels, civil society leaders, and election watchdogs to sustain dialogue during BARMM's transition and ahead of its first parliamentary elections. The forum underscores civil society's conviction that inclusive dialogue and multi-level participation are essential to address lingering challenges in CAB implementation, decommissioning, and trust-building among stakeholders (Arguillas, 2025; Gigje, C., 2024).

This historical and structural analysis shows that religious peacebuilding cannot be separated from broader socio-political realities. The persistence of injustice and marginalization requires that interfaith initiatives address not only symbolic reconciliation but also structural transformation. By situating Christian and Islamic values within this context, the study highlights their potential to contribute to justice-oriented peacebuilding in Mindanao. The convergence of historical grievances, political exclusion, and fragile institutions demonstrates that peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of fairness, dignity, and shared responsibility. While setbacks persist, the active engagement of religion-based leaders, civil society, and reform-minded institutions offers hope that the Bangsamoro can move beyond cycles of mistrust toward a future in which autonomy and national unity coexist within a framework of inclusive governance and moral solidarity.

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM AS PARTNERS IN PEACEBUILDING

Christianity and Islam have both contributed significantly to addressing systemic injustices in Mindanao. Religious organizations—Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic—have responded to political marginalization, social injustice, and economic deprivation through interreligious dialogue and moral leadership. These efforts show that religious traditions, when mobilized for justice, can become powerful agents of reconciliation. The MiRLeC multi-sectoral dialogue in Cotabato City further illustrates this potential as it relates to elections. Religious leaders emphasized voter education, moral accountability, and the inclusion of youth, women, and indigenous peoples as essential to building trust in democratic institutions. Initiatives such as *khutbas* (sermons) on Islamic principles of governance, *fatwas* (rulings) outlining Quran-based criteria for candidates, and interreligious forums to scrutinize political aspirants highlight how moral and spiritual resources can counter vote buying, corruption, and political violence. By anchoring electoral participation in shared ethical values, MiRLeC demonstrates that religion-based leadership can transform dialogue into concrete action, laying the foundation for just and peaceful elections in the Bangsamoro (Rocamora, 2025).

Umel (2024) observes that while religious groups have made progress, uneven outcomes require deeper evaluation. Religion-based initiatives must be assessed for their ability to address structural roots of conflict, including exclusion and inequality. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID), the Ulama League

of the Philippines (ULP), and the Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC) have consistently engaged in peacebuilding. Each brings unique theological and cultural perspectives to dialogue and grassroots engagement, but their effectiveness depends on how well they confront marginalization and disparity (CBCP News, 2024; PeaceGovPH, 2025).

The CBCP has long supported peacebuilding, launching initiatives such as the Year of the Two Hearts for Peacebuilding in 2009–2010, which encouraged lay participation in social change. More recently, Bishop Pablo Virgilio David condemned the Marawi bombing as a horrendous act of violence. At the same time, Archbishop Socrates Villegas praised the peace agreement between the government and the MILF as a courageous breakthrough. These actions underscore the CBCP's commitment to peace rooted in justice, compassion, and human dignity. Similarly, the NCCP promotes *shalom*—holistic peace that includes justice, equality, care for creation, and dignity—through interreligious groups like MiRLeC and the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (NCCP, 2025; NCCP, 2025).

On the Islamic side, ULP has resolved clan and ethnic disputes, preventing escalation into armed conflict, while also contributing to national peace summits and interreligious dialogues (Peace Insight, 2015, December). The ULP emphasized protecting life, dignity, and property—principles in Islamic law that support reconciliation (Umel, 2024). PCID has promoted democratic participation and empowered Muslim communities, especially women and youth, through initiatives like the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and deradicalization forums. Building on these efforts, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU) and Mindanao State University–Maguindanao have pioneered the integration of WPS education into the academic curriculum, launching Southeast Asia's first Diploma in Women, Peace and Security program. This groundbreaking initiative amplifies women's voices in peacebuilding, equips future leaders with ethical and inclusive frameworks, and demonstrates how education can institutionalize reconciliation and justice at the heart of Bangsamoro society (OPAPRU & MSU-Maguindanao, 2025; PCID, 2025; MSU-Maguindanao, 2025).

These organizations demonstrate that Christianity and Islam, despite historical tensions, share ethical commitments to compassion, justice, and reconciliation. Their collaborative programs, though uneven, provide a foundation for building trust among Christians, Muslims, and Indigenous peoples. The challenge remains to deepen grassroots participation and address structural inequalities so that interfaith peacebuilding can move beyond symbolic

gestures toward transformative change. Recent innovations, such as integrating the WPS agenda into academic curricula, demonstrate how education can institutionalize reconciliation and justice. This initiative amplifies women's voices, equips future leaders with inclusive frameworks, and bridges research with practice. It demonstrates that peacebuilding is not only the work of religious leaders and civil society but also of academic institutions that embed ethical values into instruction, research, and community engagement. In this way, Christianity and Islam, alongside state and academic partners, are shaping a holistic peace architecture in the Bangsamoro—one that seeks to transform dialogue into daily practice and ensure that reconciliation is sustained across generations.

LIMITATIONS AND GAPS IN RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING

Despite valuable contributions, religious peacebuilding in Mindanao faces significant limitations. A major concern is sectarianism, where programs remain focused within Christian or Muslim communities rather than fostering genuine interreligious collaboration. Earlier critiques of missionary activity in Mindanao highlighted how education and evangelization often carried conversion-oriented agendas. Gowing (1964), for instance, criticized the educational bias of mission schools, noting that curricula frequently ignored Muslim realities and left youth disconnected from their heritage. Such approaches reinforced perceptions of marginalization and weakened trust between communities. More recent scholarship, however, points to a significant shift. Garcia, De Venecia, and Aliposa (2024) found that religion-based civil society organizations (CSOs) now contribute to conflict mitigation rather than exacerbate it. These CSOs have evolved into inclusive peacebuilding actors, engaging people of different religious convictions and disciplines. While challenges such as mistrust, stereotypes, and unresolved historical grievances remain, their work demonstrates a move away from proselytization toward interreligious dialogue and holistic reconciliation. Kwuelum (2024) emphasizes that sustainable peace requires community-led, emancipatory, and compassionate interreligious approaches that prioritize local ownership and grassroots participation, while Köbrich and Hoffmann (2023) show through a systematic review that religious ideas can both foster and hinder peace depending on context, underscoring the need for conceptual clarity and inclusive frameworks. Together, these insights highlight the importance of moving beyond sectarian boundaries toward adaptive, evidence-based interreligious collaboration in Mindanao.

Another challenge in Mindanao's peacebuilding landscape is the imbalance

in representation and civic engagement. Steven Rood (2005) earlier observed that Christian organizations have historically dominated peace efforts, while Muslim civil society has remained underrepresented due to structural and historical barriers. This imbalance reflects deeper issues of marginalization and exclusion, which continue to hinder the full participation of Muslim communities in shaping sustainable peace initiatives. Islam's decentralized structure contrasts with Christianity's hierarchical systems, creating asymmetry in dialogue. This has led to distrust and skepticism among Muslim communities, weakening credibility and inclusivity. Strengthening Islamic organizations and empowering Muslim civil society are therefore essential for balanced participation. At the same time, testimonies from the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute's 2025 Annual Training highlight ongoing efforts to foster inclusivity and empower diverse communities, showing that peace is possible and practiced in everyday life (Marfa, 2025). Religious leaders at the Mindanao Religious Leaders Conference (MiRLeC) in 2024 reaffirmed their commitment to peace and justice, acknowledging challenges such as marginalization, extremism, and organizational rivalries that obstruct unity (Saludes, 2024).

Exclusion and political influence also hinder progress. Interreligious dialogues often remain elitist, excluding grassroots voices and failing to address everyday concerns (Rocamora, 2025). Clan politics and patronage further complicate the landscape, as political families dominate local governance and often mask private rivalries as civil war violence. The debate over the Reproductive Health Bill revealed deep theological and political divisions, with Protestant and Evangelical churches supporting it, while Catholic and Muslim groups opposed it (Saludes, 2024). Religious voting blocs demonstrated the strong political influence of religious groups in shaping national debates and peace processes. These divisions continue to limit unity in peacebuilding, echoing long-standing patterns of exclusion and elite dominance in Philippine politics. Grievances sustain ideology-driven conflicts in Mindanao and across the Philippines over selfdetermination, land dispossession, political exclusion, and socioeconomic inequality. Peacebuilding initiatives are most effective when economic, political, and security incentives are aligned, but uneven implementation and weak institutional coordination still pose risks to sustaining peace (Navarro & Jacinto, 2025).

Persistent mistrust also affects relationships among religious organizations. Concerns about sincerity and hidden agendas undermine credibility, with critics questioning the neutrality of groups like the BishopUlama Conference because of their ties to government and church institutions. At the same time,

some Muslim organizations face suspicion of extremist links. Theological reflections on dialogue emphasize that genuine peace requires transparency, humility, and a willingness to listen without preconceptions. As the Inter-Seminary Exposure Program in Midsayap, Cotabato highlighted, dialogue is meant to be a stream of meaning flowing among people in conversation, out of which new understanding may emerge. When dialogue is reduced to political maneuvering, its transformative potential is lost. Unless accountability is strengthened and dialogue is practiced with mutual respect and solidarity, genuine collaboration will remain elusive, and the culture of peace envisioned in both biblical and interreligious traditions will continue to be undermined (Bunda, 2023).

Finally, the lack of a unified peace agenda in Mindanao remains a pressing issue. Bunda (2023) notes that many religious peace efforts remain symbolic and reactive, with little impact on the deeper causes of conflict. For peace to last, grassroots communities—especially marginalized Muslims and Christians—must be empowered. Religious groups need to move beyond denominational boundaries and unite around a shared agenda rooted in ethical and theological values. The MiRLeC declaration in 2024, which affirmed that peace based on justice is an obligation, highlights the importance of shared values—love, justice, reconciliation, and respect—in building peace. Corpuz (2025) shows that religionbased movements can serve as crucial mediators in interreligious relations by fostering mutual understanding, facilitating communityled initiatives, and addressing sociopolitical challenges. His study concludes that sustained collaboration among religious communities, policymakers, and civil society actors is essential for transformative peacebuilding in Mindanao. This analysis shows that while religious organizations have made important contributions, their limitations—sectarianism, imbalance, fragmentation, exclusion, mistrust, and lack of unified vision—must be addressed if interreligious peacebuilding is to achieve transformative and lasting impact in Mindanao.

These limitations reveal that religious peacebuilding in Mindanao cannot succeed without structural reform, balanced participation, and genuine interreligious solidarity. Addressing sectarianism, mistrust, and exclusion requires moving beyond symbolic gestures toward institutionalized collaboration rooted in shared values. By confronting fragmentation and political influence, religious organizations can reclaim credibility and foster inclusive dialogue. This synthesis underscores that the covenant of Shalom–Salaam must be grounded not only in theological ideals but also in practical reforms that empower grassroots communities, strengthen

Muslim representation, and build trust across faith traditions. Only then can interreligious peacebuilding achieve its transformative potential in Mindanao.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LIBERATION AND PEACE

The longing for *katawhayan sa kabuhi* (peace in life) is deeply embedded in Philippine culture and resonates with the theological visions of both Christianity and Islam. In religious traditions, this peace is expressed as *shalom* in Hebrew and *salaam* in Arabic. It is more than quiet or safety; it is *kaginhawaan*—a life of abundance and dignity. Both Bathala and Allah (God) desire freedom from injustice for the poor, the orphan, and the widow—the least and forgotten.

Christian theology emphasizes God's kingdom as a peaceful rule that shapes history. Boff (1986) and Gutiérrez (1988) explain that God's kingdom is eternal and present in everyday life, responding to poverty and discrimination. The Exodus story portrays God as a liberator, bringing freedom to the oppressed. The covenant (*berith*) is a promise of lasting peace and justice (Gelim, 1955). Gutiérrez insists that peace cannot exist without justice, and salvation is not only about heaven but also about freedom from inhumane conditions. To follow Jesus means loving the poor and resisting injustice. The church, as a sign of God's kingdom, must stand with the poor in Mindanao and work for liberation. Reading the Bible in context shows God's kingdom as a force for justice in places of inequality. Scholars such as Hoyt Jr. (1977) and Washington (1986) affirm that God stands with the oppressed, while Ivory (1997) adds that resisting oppression is joining God's work in history. King Jr. (1959) reminds us that peace must be made real through social change that reflects God's vision. Recent studies deepen this vision. Christianity and Islam in Mindanao share theological and political values that can be harnessed for peacebuilding, emphasizing economic, cultural, and political transformation as essential for lasting peace. Demalon and Siddiq (2026) compare Muslim–Christian coexistence in the Philippines and Indonesia, showing that durable peace depends on historical justice, shared civic ideology, and sustained institutional dialogue.

Islamic thought also provides a rich framework for peace. Kirazli (2026) reconstructs the Prophet Muḥammad's ethics of war and peace by tracing the Meccan–Medinan trajectory of his life. This framework highlights three interrelated stages: nonviolent endurance under persecution in Mecca; constitutional governance and regulated defensive warfare in Medina; and a culminating ethic of reconciliation exemplified by the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyyah and the Conquest of Mecca. Within this arc, justice (*ʿadl*), mercy (*raḥma*),

proportionality, and the protection of communal life emerge as central principles, showing that force is permitted only under strict ethical constraints and always oriented toward restoring peace and social order. Kirazli demonstrates that Islamic sources contain significant internal resources for limiting violence and prioritizing reconciliation, situating prophetic practice within global debates on just war theory and conflict resolution.

Similarly, Ashafa et al. (2026) emphasize Islam's commitment to social well-being and economic justice as catalytic forces for peaceful coexistence. Through the PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) framework, they demonstrate that Islam's promotion of social welfare and distributive justice contributes positively to harmony across diverse regions. Their findings highlight that these values, when aligned with *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* (objectives of Islamic law) and the Five International Principles of Peaceful Coexistence—mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence—provide a robust ethical foundation for sustainable peace. By bridging Islamic tenets with universal frameworks, Ashafa and colleagues show that Islamic peacemaking is not merely defensive but deeply constructive, integrating restraint, justice, and reconciliation into a coherent moral vision. This vision resonates with contemporary efforts in interreligious dialogue, policy-driven discourse, and global peacebuilding, underscoring Islam's enduring contribution to advancing social harmony.

Mir and Anjum (2025) argue that *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* offer a universal ethical paradigm for peace, justice, and human dignity. Their study highlights how the *Maqasid*, rooted in divine revelation yet adaptable to changing contexts, emphasize justice (*ʿadl*), compassion (*raḥmah*), welfare (*maṣlaḥah*), and human dignity (*karāmah al-insān*) as foundational principles of coexistence. Using a qualitative, analytical–thematic approach, they demonstrate that these objectives provide a flexible and comprehensive framework capable of reconciling individual and collective interests, protecting vulnerable communities, and fostering inclusive global citizenship. The authors situate *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* within global ethical discourse, showing its relevance for interreligious dialogue, minority protection, and conflict resolution. They also connect these principles to modern initiatives such as the Marrakesh Declaration and the Amman Message, illustrating how Islamic ethics can engage contemporary human rights paradigms. Ultimately, Mir and Anjum contend that the universal ethical vision of *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*—grounded in justice, compassion, and human dignity—offers a transformative model for global coexistence and moral renewal, bridging traditional Islamic ethics with

modern frameworks of peacebuilding and pluralism.

Contemporary liberation theology also continues to evolve. Havea's *Stirring Up Liberation Theologies: A Call for Release* (2024) calls for a renewed liberative praxis in response to global crises such as poverty, pandemics, and climate change. He argues that liberation theology must be stirred up and released from its illusions and assumptions in order to remain relevant in a world plagued by disease, ecological collapse, war, and systemic injustice. By gathering diverse voices from across the globe, Havea demonstrates that liberation theology today is not only about resisting oppression but also about reimagining freedom as release—a holistic liberation of both spirit and body from dehumanizing structures. This vision insists that as long as communities are broken by violence, hunger, and exploitation, liberation theology must continue to speak prophetically, confronting systems of domination while offering hope for healing and renewal. In this way, Havea situates liberation theology as a dynamic, global movement that responds to contemporary suffering with creativity, solidarity, and transformative praxis.

Panotto and Martínez Andrade's *Decolonizing Liberation Theologies Past, Present, and Future* (2023) situates liberation theology within postcolonial struggles, affirming its continuing relevance for the Global South. This volume underscores that liberation theology must remain contextual, intercultural, and responsive to structural injustice. The editors highlight how Latin American liberation thought emerged from the underside of history—spaces of marginalization, exclusion, and resistance—and how these de-centered centers of struggle continue to shape theological reflection today. By engaging themes of interculturality, borderlands, and in-betweenness, the book demonstrates that liberation theology is not static but dynamic, constantly interrogating societal projects that exclude vulnerable communities. In doing so, Panotto and Martínez Andrade call for a liberation theology that bridges past and present, confronting colonial legacies while offering transformative possibilities for pluralistic futures. Their work affirms that liberation theology must be decolonized to remain a living, global movement of justice, solidarity, and hope. This resonates with Santiago's (2026) Philippine decolonial feminist theologizing, where indigenous voices, poetic articulations, and embodied practices reclaim theology as both liberating and healing.

In a Philippine context, these insights converge: peace is the absence of violent conflict and the presence of justice, dignity, and shared humanity. Both Christian and Islamic traditions affirm that resisting oppression and working for liberation is joining God's work in history. Demalon and Siddiq (2024) show that in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, durable

peace requires structural redress for historical injustices, political autonomy, and institutional arrangements that protect vulnerable communities. Their comparative study highlights that while interfaith dialogue plays a role, sustainable coexistence in the Philippines depends on aligning justice, shared civic ideology, and institutional support. Thus, *katawhayan sa kabuhi* (peace in life) is a cultural longing and a theological mandate—an invitation to build communities where justice and peace embrace, rooted in both faith traditions and contemporary peacebuilding frameworks.

Islamic perspectives emphasize peace, justice, and freedom. The very word *Islam* derives from the root *s-l-m*, meaning peace and wholeness, reflected in verses such as Qur'an 25:63. The Qur'an also promotes tolerance, respect for prophets, and salvation for those who act justly (Qur'an 2:56; 4:150–151; 2:112). Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that Qurʾānic peace (*salām*) is inseparable from justice (*ʿadl*), mercy (*raḥma*), and social rectification (*islāḥ*), forming a holistic paradigm that underpins interreligious ethics and the protection of human dignity (Akhtar, 2025). Paradise itself is described as a place of peace (Qur'an 33:44; 56:25–26), and the greeting *salām* reflects God's name *Al-Salām* and the believer's desire to share peace. As Bukhari, Memon, and Shoaib (2025) argue, justice and human rights are moral ideals and social requirements. Societies that uphold equality, dignity, and welfare naturally achieve peace, while those marked by oppression, exploitation, and deprivation cannot sustain it. Islam's vision of divine oneness and human unity, therefore, rejects exclusion and values diversity, providing a theological foundation for interreligious collaboration in contexts such as Mindanao, where communities long for reconciliation and dignity (Demalon & Siddiq, 2024).

These theological perspectives reveal that liberation and peace are inseparable from justice, dignity, and solidarity. Christian liberation theology insists that salvation must confront systemic oppression, while Islamic ethics highlight reconciliation, mercy, and social welfare as indispensable to peace. Both traditions converge on the conviction that peace is not passive but active—requiring structural transformation, ethical responsibility, and communal participation. The challenge lies in translating these theological visions into lived realities amid persistent poverty, historical injustices, and political fragmentation. Yet the convergence of Christian and Islamic thought in the Philippine context offers a unique opportunity: interreligious collaboration can become a moral and civic force for building communities where justice and peace embrace. This synthesis points toward a hopeful horizon in which *katawhayan sa kabuhi* (peace in life) is realized not only as a cultural longing

but also as a theological mandate—an enduring call to resist oppression, nurture dignity, and embody reconciliation. Ultimately, *Shalom–Salaam* is a theological covenant and a lived horizon of hope, where peace is experienced as a flourishing reality grounded in justice, compassion, and human dignity.

SHARED VALUES, CULTURAL ETHICS, AND PATHWAYS FOR PEACE

Building on the earlier analysis of historical roots and institutional challenges, this section highlights how shared values and cultural ethics can serve as practical pathways for reconciliation and peace education in Mindanao. Christianity and Islam, together with Philippine cultural ethics, offer powerful values that can help build lasting peace in Mindanao. These values should be integrated into peace education and community practice so that they are lived out daily in homes, schools, churches, mosques, and civic spaces. The convergence of religious conviction and culture provides a holistic foundation for reconciliation.

Kapwa/kaupod (shared humanity) reflects the biblical command to love one's neighbor (Matthew 22:39) and the Qur'anic call to care for the *ummah* (community)(Qur'an 49:10). It is not only a theological principle but also a cultural ethic that can be embedded in peace curricula and community dialogues. *Paggalang/pagtahod* (respect) honors elders, leaders, and sacred traditions in both religious convictions. At the same time, *pakikipagkapwa-tao/kagandahang loob* (compassion and kindness) resonates with Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and Islam's emphasis on *rahma* (mercy) and *ihsan* (excellent conduct). *Bayanihan/dagyaw* (cooperation) reflects shared responsibility in Christian service and Islamic community life (Qur'an 5:2). Faith itself (*pananampalataya/pagtuo*) is central, as Christian's trust in God's promises (Hebrews 11:1) and Muslims submit to Allah's guidance (Qur'an 3:159). Forgiveness (*pagpapatawad/pagpasaylo*) is equally vital, with Christianity emphasizing salvation through forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32) and Islam affirming Allah as the Most Forgiving (Qur'an 24:22).

Justice (*katarungan/katadlongan*) is a cornerstone of both traditions. The Bible calls for justice to roll down like a river (Amos 5:24), while Islam commands believers to uphold fairness (Qur'an 4:135). Peace itself—*shalom, salaam, kapayapaan, katawhayan*—is sacred across traditions, expressing wholeness, healing, and community well-being. These shared values, when embodied, create a covenant of Shalom–Salaam that transcends doctrinal boundaries while respecting religious distinctiveness. The covenant of Shalom–Salaam does not collapse differences but builds bridges through shared ethics, allowing

cooperation without erasure of theological identity.

Leadership also emerges as a shared ethical principle. In Philippine culture, the word *puno* (tree) symbolizes leadership that is humble, rooted, and life-giving. Christianity echoes this in Jesus' metaphor of the vine (John 15:5), while Islam compares a good word to a good tree that bears fruit by God's permission (Qur'an 14:24–25). Leadership, therefore, is not merely political but a sacred trust (*amanah*) requiring wisdom, humility, and service. As Al Naqbi (2024) explains, Islamic leadership is grounded in moral values that shape character and decision-making, with knowledge serving as a catalyst for enlightenment, humility as a unifying force, justice as an ethical compass, and accountability as a means of fostering trust and integrity. This convergence of Philippine, Christian, and Islamic leadership ethics suggests that moral leadership can be institutionalized through civic education, interreligious councils, and community-based governance models.

These shared values form not only a transformative agenda but also a practical roadmap for Mindanao's peace process. They can inform policy frameworks in BARMM, guide interreligious educational programs, and inspire grassroots initiatives that embody reconciliation in everyday life. They call for economic renewal through just systems, cultural affirmation through respect and cooperation, political reform through inclusive governance, and spiritual healing through forgiveness and compassion. Grounding peacebuilding in theological and cultural ethics ensures that reconciliation is not reduced to symbolic gestures but becomes a lived reality. Thus, shared values and cultural ethics are not abstract ideals but actionable resources that can be mobilized through education, governance, and community practice.

Ultimately, the covenant of Shalom–Salaam offers a vision of peace that is both contextual to Mindanao and universal in scope: a horizon where justice flows like a river, compassion heals wounds, and shared humanity flourishes as the enduring foundation of reconciliation. The implications of these findings are significant: they show that shared values can be institutionalized in peace education curricula, embedded in governance structures, and practiced in grassroots initiatives. This means that reconciliation in Mindanao is not limited to symbolic dialogue but can be sustained through concrete policies and community action rooted in theological and cultural ethics.

CONCLUSION

This study advances interreligious peacebuilding by proposing a contextual theological framework of Shalom–Salaam that integrates Christian and Islamic

liberation theology with Philippine cultural ethics. Rooted in the lived realities of Mindanao, it highlights shared values—compassion, justice, forgiveness, cooperation, and respect—as a common moral ground for reconciliation. These values, embodied in practices such as peace education, interreligious dialogue, and civic participation, show that peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of dignity, solidarity, and justice.

By bridging theology and culture, the framework offers both a descriptive analysis of shared convictions and a prescriptive roadmap for embedding reconciliation into daily life. It contributes to scholarship by demonstrating how shared values can be systematically mobilized and by guiding communities toward lasting peace. In this way, the covenant of Shalom–Salaam becomes both a theological paradigm and a practical tool for transformation, ensuring that reconciliation is sustained across homes, schools, churches, mosques, and civic spaces.

The covenant of Shalom–Salaam can be operationalized through curriculum design, interreligious training, grassroots peace zones, and civic education in BARMM. Schools may integrate shared values into peace modules, local governments can establish interreligious spaces, and civil society can promote cooperation and forgiveness through community programs.

Lasting peace requires holistic reforms: 1) Economic renewal through fair resource distribution and livelihood opportunities, 2) Cultural affirmation by respecting diversity, recognizing Bangsamoro identity, and institutionalizing peace education, 3) Political reform through humbleleadership that breaks cycles of corruption and patronage, and 4) Spiritual healing by cultivating forgiveness, compassion, and solidarity. Grounded in Shalom–Salaam, these pathways transform peace from aspiration into lived reality, ensuring reconciliation that is sustainable, inclusive, and just.

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RELIGIOUS MODERATION THROUGH *JOJAO* INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP OF MAT BAT COMMUNITY IN WEST MISOOL

Suparto Iribaram
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Sorong, Indonesia
Email: suparo7500@gmail.com

Muhamad Yusuf
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Fattahul Muluk, Indonesia
Email: joesoef1974@gmail.com

Pahri
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Fattahul Muluk, Indonesia
Email: airahsyachiranafeeza@gmail.com

Sudirman
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Sorong, Indonesia
Email: sudirman@iainsorong.ac.id

Muh. Rusdi Rasyid
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Sorong, Indonesia
Email: rusdirasyid@iainsorong.ac.id

Muhammad Tawalbeh
Mutah University, Jordan
Email: mohammad.tawalbeh84@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Jojao traditional leadership in fostering religious moderation among the Mat Bat indigenous community in West Misool District, Raja Ampat Regency, Southwest Papua. The study is based on the observation that the Mat Bat community comprises Muslim residents in Gamta Village and Protestant Christian residents in Magei Village, who coexist harmoniously within a shared customary system. While previous studies have separately discussed traditional leadership and religious moderation, limited attention has been given to the relationship between indigenous institutions and religious moderation practices in Papua's multi-religious communities. This study aims to analyze how Jojao leadership contributes to maintaining social harmony and strengthening religious moderation among the Mat Bat people. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving customary leaders, religious leaders, village officials, and community members. The findings reveal that Jojao functions not

only as a traditional leader but also as a social mediator who preserves interreligious solidarity, resolves conflicts through deliberation, and maintains inherited communal values. From the perspective of religious moderation, Jojao leadership reflects tolerance, non-violence, commitment to social harmony, and accommodation of local cultural values. This study concludes that the Jojao institution serves as a significant social mechanism for strengthening religious moderation by integrating customary and religious values within the Mat Bat community.

Keywords: Tolerance; Religious Moderation; Jojao Leadership; Custom

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is recognized as one of the most culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse countries in the world (Bowen, 2003; Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). Such diversity represents both a social asset and a potential source of tension if not managed through mechanisms that promote mutual understanding and social cohesion (Menchik, 2016). In recent years, religious moderation has emerged as an important approach for maintaining harmony within plural societies (Kasdi, 2019). Religious moderation refers to a balanced religious attitude characterized by tolerance, respect for differences, rejection of violence, commitment to national unity, and accommodation of local cultural values. While studies on religious moderation have often focused on religious institutions, education, and state policies (Jubba et al., 2022), the contribution of indigenous institutions to fostering religious moderation remains relatively underexplored, particularly in Papua.

Many indigenous traditions in West Papua have gradually declined due to the predominance of oral transmission from one generation to another (Timmer, 2007). The absence of written documentation has caused some customary practices to disappear, as cultural continuity was interrupted across generations. Nevertheless, several indigenous traditions and customary institutions continue to survive and function as important social mechanisms that preserve collective identity and social harmony (Mentansan, 2022). In some communities, customary institutions remain highly respected and continue to regulate social relations despite increasing social change and religious diversity. These institutions often serve as cultural resources that strengthen community resilience against social fragmentation and ideological divisions.

One such example can be found in the Indigenous communities of Gamta and Magei villages in West Misool, Raja Ampat. Despite adhering to different religions, the communities maintain a strong customary structure that is

recognized and respected by all members of society. The most distinctive feature of this structure is the institution of *Jojao*, a traditional leadership system that is not commonly found in other regions of Papua (Yusuf, 2020). The continued relevance of *Jojao* demonstrates how indigenous institutions can function beyond cultural preservation by contributing to social integration among communities with different religious affiliations.

Indigenous leadership in West Papua is generally hereditary, with leadership positions passed down through family lineages and customary clans. However, the appointment of *Jojao* in West Misool represents a unique exception. The traditional leader originates from the Muslim community of Gamta, which is culturally regarded as the elder brother. At the same time, the authority to legitimize and appoint the *Jojao* is shared with the Protestant Christian community of Magei, which is considered the younger brother within the customary kinship system. This arrangement reflects a longstanding tradition of interreligious cooperation embedded within indigenous social structures. Such cooperation demonstrates the existence of social capital that strengthens trust, solidarity, and collective identity among communities despite religious differences (Field, 2016).

The indigenous leadership system of the Mat Bat people provides an important example of how religious moderation is practiced through local cultural institutions. The relationship between Gamta and Magei communities is not merely based on coexistence between Muslims and Christians. However, it is rooted in a shared customary identity that predates the arrival of world religions in the region. Through the institution of *Jojao*, both communities maintain collective responsibility for preserving social harmony, resolving conflicts, and safeguarding customary values. Consequently, religious differences do not function as sources of division but rather coexist within a broader framework of indigenous brotherhood. This condition contrasts with many plural societies where religious identity often becomes a source of tension and social conflict.

Several previous studies have examined indigenous leadership and its role in social organization. Firmando (2020), for example, found that the traditional leadership system of the Toba Batak community remains relevant both theoretically and practically, despite transformations resulting from colonial intervention and changing voter behavior. Similarly, Matsiliza (2024) argued that contemporary traditional leaders face challenges due to constitutional and administrative limitations that restrict their authority in public governance. While these studies provide important insights into indigenous leadership, they primarily focus on leadership structures, governance, and

political legitimacy. Limited attention has been given to the role of indigenous leadership institutions in promoting religious moderation and maintaining interreligious harmony within multicultural communities.

This study fills the existing research gap by examining how the *Jojao* indigenous leadership institution functions as a mechanism for strengthening religious moderation, fostering interreligious tolerance, and maintaining communal harmony among the Mat Bat community in West Misool, Raja Ampat. Previous studies have demonstrated the significant role of indigenous leadership in maintaining social order, preserving cultural values, and strengthening community cohesion. Studies on indigenous communities in Indonesia indicate that customary leaders derive their legitimacy from traditional norms and play a central role in conflict resolution, social integration, and the preservation of local wisdom (Arizona & Cahyadi, 2017). Similarly, studies of Dayak Salako traditional leadership indicate that indigenous leaders continue to play influential roles despite the pressures of modernization and globalization, largely because of their cultural legitimacy and charismatic authority (Musa et al., 2021). In Papua, the position of Ondoafi also demonstrates the importance of customary leadership in regulating community life through hereditary authority combined with personal qualities that are considered essential for leadership (Sudayasa et al., 2021).

Beyond governance and cultural preservation, indigenous leadership has increasingly been recognized as an important mechanism for strengthening social cohesion and collective identity. Indigenous leadership studies argue that leadership practices should be understood within their local cultural contexts because dominant Western leadership theories often fail to capture the complexities of indigenous governance systems (Zhang et al., 2012). In this regard, indigenous leaders are frequently viewed not only as political authorities but also as mediators, facilitators of social integration, and custodians of communal values. Similar findings are evident among Maya-Mam communities, where leadership competencies emphasize leading by example, inclusivity, and community solidarity as foundations for collective well-being (Lamino et al., 2024).

Studies on religious harmony and moderation have likewise emphasized the importance of social interaction, dialogue, and mutual understanding in fostering peaceful interreligious relations. Nazmudin (2018) argues that effective interreligious dialogue is essential for reducing prejudice and preventing conflicts among religious groups. Likewise, Hermawati et al. (2017) found that high levels of religious tolerance are strongly associated with positive social interaction and effective mechanisms for managing differences

within diverse communities. These studies suggest that sustainable religious harmony is often supported not only by religious institutions but also by social and cultural structures that facilitate communication, trust, and cooperation among different groups.

Although previous studies have examined indigenous leadership and religious harmony separately, limited attention has been paid to the relationship between indigenous leadership institutions and religious moderation within multicultural indigenous communities. Existing research has primarily focused on traditional authority, governance structures, cultural preservation, or interreligious relations as distinct themes, leaving a limited understanding of how customary leadership functions as a mechanism for promoting religious moderation and sustaining social cohesion across religious boundaries. This gap is particularly evident in Papua, where indigenous institutions continue to play an important role in regulating social life and resolving communal issues despite increasing social change and religious diversity. Therefore, this study examines the *Jojao* indigenous leadership institution among the Mat Bat people in West Misool, Raja Ampat, to explore how customary leadership contributes to strengthening religious moderation through mechanisms that foster interreligious cooperation, mutual trust, collective identity, and communal harmony between Muslim and Protestant Christian communities. The novelty of this study lies not in the hereditary nature of *Jojao* leadership, which remains rooted in customary succession, but in demonstrating how a customary leadership institution can obtain cross-religious legitimacy and function as an indigenous social mechanism for sustaining religious moderation within a pluralistic society.

The study was conducted in Gamta village and Magei village in West Misool district, Raja Ampat Islands. To analyze the research problem obtained from two sources, specifically, primary data and secondary data. The data is collected through passive participatory observation. In addition, an in-depth interview was also conducted. The interview is conducted as a dialogue to obtain data for research, with informants more freely to elicit more open-ended problems, using unstructured interviews and recording tools and notes to collect data. The data analysis technique used is the flow model developed by analyzing data by describing it in three stages regarding firstly doing data reduction: summarizing data, choosing various core things, focusing on various important things, and removing various things that are not needed, secondly conducting data display (data presentation): make brief descriptions, relationships between categories and the like, and thirdly drawing conclusion/verification: drawing conclusions and verification.

THE EXISTENCE OF *JOJAO* LEADERSHIP IN MAINTAINING INTER-RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN WEST MISOOL, RAJA AMPAT ISLANDS

Jojao Election

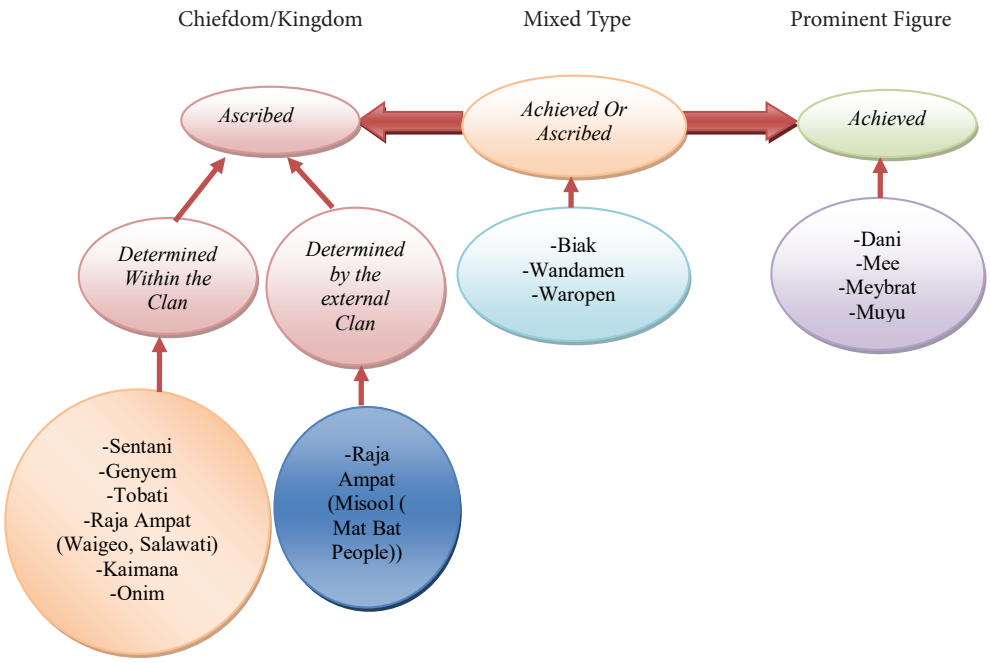
The indigenous Mat Bat community has a unique tradition of electing leaders. *Jojao* chosen came from Gamta Village, related to Muslim people, which in the selection was based on descent from the same clan of Wihel, who have traditionally been *Jojao* in the region. *Jojao* was chosen and appointed by the Mat Bat community, who are Christians inhabiting the Magei Village area. Gamta villagers who are Muslims only agree to the choice of the Magei Village people. The Magei people consider the Gamta people to be their elder brothers, even though the religions adopted by the two villages are different. Their religious differences have been a source of conflict for a long time, especially when the older brother, Wihel, who came down to the beach, adhered to Islam. In comparison, the younger brother who settled in his area adhered to Protestant Christianity. The respect given by the younger brother to his elder brother is reflected in the election of *Jojao* or traditional leaders in the region.

Papuan indigenous communities have long maintained traditional leadership systems that play an important role in regulating customary law, social relations, and communal life. In anthropological studies, leadership is generally understood as being acquired through two principal mechanisms, namely ascription, in which authority is inherited through lineage or customary succession, and achievement, in which leadership is attained through individual abilities, personal qualities, and recognition from the community (Sahlins, 1963; Ramandei et al., 2026). In addition, Kartono explains through the genetic theory of leadership that certain leadership systems are based on hereditary succession, where leadership is transmitted across generations according to established social and cultural norms (Kartono, 2009). These perspectives are relevant to the indigenous leadership system of the Mat Bat community in West Misool, where the *Jojao* institution derives its legitimacy from customary inheritance while simultaneously maintaining its authority through continuous recognition and acceptance by the community in preserving social order and customary values.

The election of *Jojao* indigenous leaders to the Mat Bat indigenous people is more of an inheritance (ascription) nature, a feature of leadership that takes place in Papua and West Papua regions, where choices are made from one generation to the next. As is the case with *Jojao,* traditional leadership, where the *Jojao* traditional leader in the Mat Bat community in West Misool Region has been surnamed Wihel for generations, and is a resident of Muslim Gamta Village, yet the determination of the Wihel clan that will become *Jojao* is very

secret. It depends urgently on the Mat Bat community, who come from other clans in the Magei region and are the original people of Mat Bat, who are adherents of Christianity and have the right to choose and appoint *Jojao,* whose clan, Wihel, is in Gamta village, which is considered an older brother to the Magei community, while those who are Muslim who live in Gamta include the Wihel clan itself, considered an elder brother to Magei villagers, even though they are native to the Mat Bat people and *Jojao* candidates. However, it does not have the authority to participate in determining who will become *Jojao*.

Chart 1. Political System in Melanesia/Land of Papua



The system of selecting a *Jojao* within the Mat Bat customary community reflects a construction of leadership grounded in genealogical legitimacy combined with collective recognition. The position of *Jojao* is consistently attached to the Wihel clan in Gamta Village, thereby situating leadership as an ascriptive inheritance rather than the outcome of open competition. This pattern aligns with leadership typologies, particularly lineage-based leadership models, and with theoretical perspectives that position leadership as a product of socio-cultural determination. Nevertheless, such genealogical authority is not absolute. The determination of the individual to be appointed as *Jojao* lies within the authority of the Mat Bat community in Magei Village. This mechanism indicates the presence of customary checks and balances that ensure traditional authority remains subject to collective consent. Customary leadership operates within a relational framework that balances

the kinship symbolism of "elder sibling-younger sibling" with communal social rationality. Customary institutions thus function as instruments of social integration. Religious differences, Islam in Gamta and Christianity in Magei, do not generate fragmentation; instead, they are negotiated within the framework of kinship and customary norms. This demonstrates that religious identity does not become a source of domination, but is internalized within a stable structure of coexistence. The practice of selecting the *Jojao* not only safeguards the continuity of tradition but also affirms the role of customary institutions as regulatory mechanisms for social cohesion, the legitimacy of authority, and the reproduction of kinship structures.

Jojao's leadership is ascriptive, attached to the Wihel clan as its primary source of legitimacy. Appointment nevertheless requires social legitimacy, as the final decision rests with the Magei community, representing a different clan and functioning as an embodiment of collective authority. The "elder sibling-younger sibling" relationship constitutes the symbolic foundation of power, structuring both respect and mechanisms of social control. Customary law functions as an instrument of integration across religious boundaries, maintaining social harmony amid plural identities.

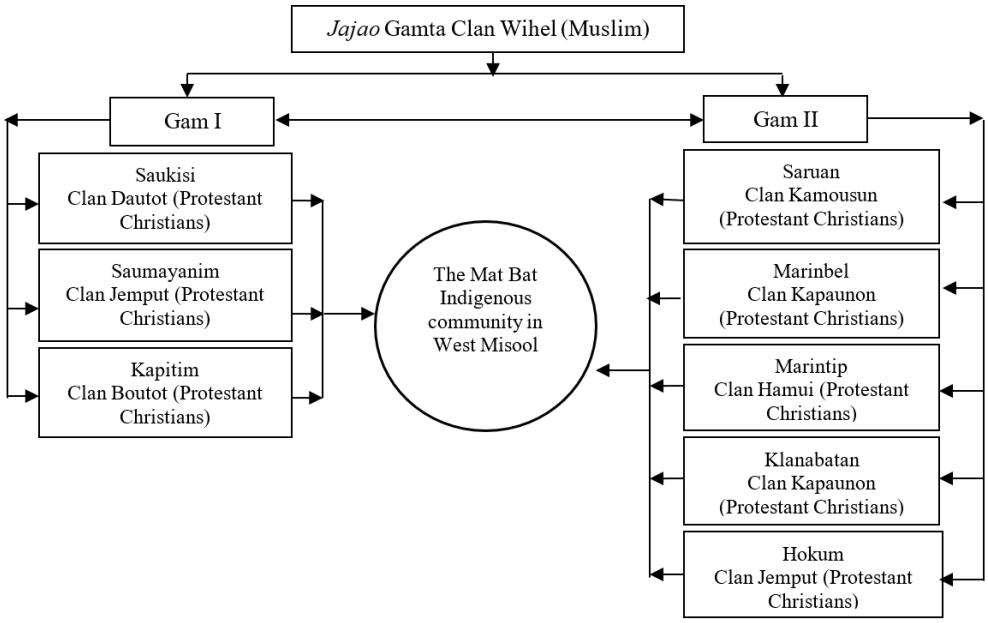
Maintaining the Customary Structures

The formation of the customary structure has been going on for a long time since the ancestors of the Mat Bat people divided the two areas between the elder brother, who was on the coast, and the younger brother, who was in an area somewhat inland in the Misool islands. The indigenous people of Mat Bat believe in taboos that should not be violated, as well as when the customary structure is not implemented properly, where the taboos are contained in the oath that has been pronounced by their ancestors to be obeyed and implemented properly by the next generation. When taboos are violated, there will be disaster for those who violate them. There are also customary sanctions that bind the community to maintain the customary structure so that every activity carried out by the community follows what was desired and mandated by their predecessors.

Radcliffe-Brown stated that social structure is viewed as a network of social relations that includes social groups, social categories, classes, and social roles whose existence is not easily changed or lost (Jenks, 2013). An individual's involvement in intergroup associations is conditioned by identifiable structural circumstances, based on the assumption that people tend to prefer in-group relations (Blau, 1977; Au, 2023).

One of the defining features of the organizational structure of a community is, of course, that it not only influences how the community operates as a whole, but equally importantly, it also shapes the lives and opportunities of the people whose relations it organizes. These structures function to condition all human interactions, providing the essential means through which people act and relate to one another; and, as social beings, human persons themselves are reproduced and transformed over time through these processes (Lawson, 2022). Mintzberg argues that organizational structure constitutes the framework of relationships among jobs, systems, operational processes, individuals, and groups that work collectively toward the achievement of organizational goals. Organizational structure is a set of methods through which tasks are divided into predetermined responsibilities and systematically coordinated (Ahmady et al., 2016). Organizational structure delineates the division of tasks and responsibilities among leaders within an organization, including leadership arrangements in traditional village settings. Differences in power within a village's organizational structure clearly play an important role in shaping processes of decentralization and the democratization of decision-making (Jenks, 2013).

Chart 2. Customary Structure of Magei and Gamta Village



Source: Authors' compilation

The customary structure of the Mat Bat community has been shaped through a long historical process and legitimized by ancestral traditions. The division of territory between the "elder siblings" (coastal communities) and the "younger

siblings" (inland communities) is not merely geographical, but also produces a symbolic hierarchy that organizes social relations, authority, and obligations among members of the community. Taboos and ancestral oaths function as normative mechanisms that bind society together. Beliefs regarding disastrous consequences for offenders reinforce the effectiveness of customary rules. In contrast, customary sanctions operate as forms of social control designed to ensure the continuity of the customary structure across generations. Accordingly, customary law plays a regulatory role in maintaining order and social stability.

Social structure is understood as a relatively stable and institutionalized network of relations. Patterns of interaction within the Mat Bat community exhibit these characteristics: customary institutions, kinship relations, role differentiation, and taboo norms shape a social configuration that is difficult to change because it has become integrated into the collective belief system. Individual involvement in intergroup structures, particularly within the "elder sibling-younger sibling" relationship, demonstrates a tendency toward in-group preference, which simultaneously strengthens internal cohesion. However, this preference is not directed toward exclusion; rather, it functions to maintain balance and clarity of roles within the community. The customary structure is not merely a static framework, but a process that conditions everyday interactions, shapes life opportunities, and reproduces social identities over time. It enables the community to act, interact, and reproduce the same traditions, while also opening space for gradual transformation in response to social dynamics.

The Mat Bat customary structure is historical, hierarchical, and institutionalized, constructed upon ancestral inheritance and the symbolic territorial division between elder and younger siblings. Taboos, ancestral oaths, and customary sanctions function as mechanisms of social control that preserve compliance, stability, and the intergenerational continuity of the customary system. The community's social structure forms a relatively stable web of relations that is difficult to alter because collective values and beliefs legitimize it. In-group preference strengthens internal solidarity and role clarity within the community. The customary structure not only regulates how the community functions but also shapes interaction, life chances, and the reproduction of social identity over time.

Having Customary Power

Jojao, the traditional leader of the Mat Bat community in the Misool region of the Raja Ampat Islands, certainly has indigenous strength in carrying out his

traditional leadership, which is supported by the Mat Bat Indigenous People, both Muslims and Christians. With his customary power, *Jojao* was able to order his community to defend his customary territory from various problems that arose both from his own community and from immigrants who occupied the area. This customary power is also fully supported by other territories that are still the customary territory of the Mat Bat people but are occupied by the Mat Lou people, who have inhabited the area for generations.

Ossip K. Flechtheim stated that social power is the sum of the abilities, relationships, and processes that produce obedience in others for the purposes set by the holder of power (Jenks, 2013). In addition, according to Robert. M. MacIver's social power is the ability to control the behavior of others, either directly by giving orders or indirectly by using all available tools and means (Budiardjo, 2003). Power is conceptualized as the capacity to bring about change and to act in alternative ways. In a general sense, power refers to the "ability" that mediates between the outcomes expected or desired by social actors and the actual realization of those outcomes within their everyday social practices (Avelino, 2021).

Jojao leadership represents a form of customary authority that is deeply rooted in cultural legitimacy. As the traditional leader of the Mat Bat community, the *Jojao* derives authority not only from his inherited position but also from the collective recognition of the community, both Muslim and Christian, who regard customary law as a shared normative framework. This cross-community support indicates that customary authority functions as an instrument of social integration. Power is expressed through the ability of actors to influence and direct the actions of others by mobilizing norms, beliefs, and social instruments. Authority is therefore not merely coercive; it operates through cultural legitimacy and normative compliance.

The power of the *Jojao* may be understood as the capacity to mediate between collective goals, the protection of customary territory, the maintenance of social harmony, and their practical realization in everyday life. This is reflected in his ability to organize the community to respond to both internal and external threats, including social dynamics arising from the influx of migrants. Support from other customary territories demonstrates that the structure of customary power generates networks of solidarity that reinforce social cohesion across groups.

Thus, *Jojao's* customary leadership derives strong legitimacy from cultural foundations and communal recognition. Customary power functions as a regulatory mechanism that maintains order, protects customary land, and prevents the potential for disintegration. Power is exercised relationally

and transformatively, connecting collective aspirations with concrete social action. Inter-territorial solidarity strengthens the sustainability of traditional leadership systems and serves as a form of social capital in navigating social change and population mobility.

Ability to Maintain Interreligious Tolerance through Joint Activities

The people of the Raja Ampat islands maintain an indigenous leadership structure that continues today. The region is known as West Misool. The community still recognizes the existence of *Jojao* as a landlord or leader of the Indigenous People in the Misool region, commonly called the Mat Bat people, who control and govern the area so that conflicts do not arise due to the large number of immigrants who settle in the region. *Jojao's* leadership has a vital role in regulating his customary territories, including the control of community rights, so that there are no territorial disputes or disputes over customary land tenure, and the application of customary law in the community to regulate various community activities. Leadership underscores the importance of portraying leadership practices in a more complex, comprehensive, and nuanced manner that is responsive to cultural contexts (Case et al., 2015). To gain great recognition from the community, *Jojao* sometimes attends various activities carried out together. This shows the existence of leaders in their communities who are known and recognized by their people and who maintain unity and harmony. This, in turn, can generate a "moral ecology," an ecosystem of values that functions by regulating, maintaining equilibrium, and acting as a cohesive force among individuals, religious communities, and state institutions (Glaeser & Teherani-Krönner, 2020).

Figure 1. Implementation of the *Som* Tradition carried out by Magei Village and Gamta Village

Source: Authors' personal collection

Parsons said an essential element of social action is the actor's sensitivity to the meaning of people and things around them. The perception of these meanings, as well as the reactions to the messages that those meanings bring (Yusuf et al., 2021a). Meanwhile, Garfinkel stated that this is emphasized to ensure the continued existence of norms, values, and institutions always exist, and actors need to have complex skills and understanding of their own actions and awareness of what they do (Yusuf et al., 2021b). To tolerate, accept, or endure generally refers to a conditional acceptance or non-interference with beliefs, actions, or practices that are considered wrong yet still "tolerable," and therefore should not be prohibited or restricted (Forst, 2012).

The continuity of customary leadership structures in the Raja Ampat Islands, particularly in West Misool, places the *Jojao* as the central figure holding customary land rights (*hak ulayat*) and traditional authority. The existence of this customary leadership functions as a regulatory instrument for governing territory, preventing conflict, and organizing relations between indigenous residents and migrants. The practice of *Jojao* leadership demonstrates that customary action is not merely normative but is constructed through social meaning. *Jojao's* presence in collective activities articulates leadership as a symbol of recognition, legitimacy, and social solidarity. The sustainability of customary norms and values is only possible when social actors possess reflective awareness of their actions. In this context, both the community and customary leaders jointly practice and interpret customary law so that it remains relevant to everyday life, including in monitoring land rights, territorial boundaries, and social activities.

The growing number of migrants presents potential social frictions; however, customary leadership promotes conditional acceptance that preserves harmony without neglecting normative customary boundaries. Customary leadership not only maintains order but also serves as a mediating mechanism that balances the interests of diverse groups.

The structure of customary leadership in West Misool remains vibrant and functional, with the *Jojao* positioned as the center of social, political, and cultural legitimacy. Customary leadership plays a strategic role in territorial governance, the prevention of territorial conflict, and the protection of customary land rights. The legitimacy of *Jojao* is both performative and symbolic, reinforced through his presence in collective events that reaffirm his existence and authority before the community. Leadership practices resonate with theories of social action and ethnomethodology, as they rest upon shared meanings, awareness, and collective interpretation of customary norms. Tolerance becomes a crucial element in regulating relations between

Indigenous communities and migrants, enabling coexistence without dissolving the normative boundaries that protect the customary social structure.

Maintaining Tradition for Generations

In Eastern Indonesia, traditions develop orally, which is carried out by habituation through practice without written evidence, so that gradually the tradition is lost due to the decreasing number of people who can apply the tradition, as well as due to the development of the times that shift the existence of the tradition. Previous studies have shown that involving younger generations in intergenerational knowledge transfer is often challenging because differences in values, perspectives, and life experiences between younger and older generations can create barriers to meaningful dialogue and knowledge exchange (Lagacé et al., 2023; Scheuer et al., 2023). If culture can be learned (Spencer-Oatey, 2012), it can also be taught to younger generations (Zort et al., 2023). One way to maintain tradition sustainably is to continue to carry it out in routine practices that are not influenced by outside culture. Such is the case with the Mat Bat people in the West Misool region of the Raja Ampat islands, who observe various traditions collectively within their communities, especially since the region has its own uniqueness and still maintains the traditional leadership model, namely the *Jojao* leadership. *Jojao* plays an essential role in upholding various traditions with its citizens. The traditions observed are part of the ancestral heritage of the Mat Bat community and have been observed for generations. Cultural socialization is the most common form of socialization carried out by parents toward their children (Hughes et al., 2009). This practice is undertaken to ensure that the cultural traditions of the Mat Bat community remain preserved across generations.

Michele Lamont says actors create and retain meanings to organize, accept, and reject fellow human beings, transcending and countering the urgency of social structure (Turner, 2012). Gary Fine says small groups develop unique meanings involving beliefs, knowledge, and habits underlying shared understanding and further interactions and actions (Turner, 2012). Local wisdom constitutes an important resource for sustaining social life (Howes, 2022). The values embedded in local wisdom represent noble principles that should be preserved and transmitted to subsequent generations (Martínez & García, 2008). Local wisdom refers to knowledge that emerges from a community's lived experiences and represents an accumulation of locally generated understandings. This form of wisdom is embedded within societies, communities, and even individuals (Kongprasertamorn, 2007).

The dynamics of sustaining tradition in Eastern Indonesia have largely been shaped by oral transmission. Reliance on collective memory without written documentation renders tradition vulnerable to erosion, particularly as modernization and socio-cultural change accelerate shifts in values. In the context of the Mat Bat community in West Misool, the continuity of tradition rests not only on repeated customary practice but also on the existence of the traditional leadership structure, the *Jojao,* who function as guardians of norms, mediators of meaning, and driving forces in the preservation of cultural practices. This role demonstrates that tradition is not merely the repetition of habits, but the result of an ongoing process of social construction and negotiation.

Traditions endure because actors, both leaders and community members, actively create, interpret, and reproduce meaning in everyday interaction. These meanings subsequently become shared references that organize social relations, filter external influences, and serve as sources of legitimacy for the continuity of tradition. Local wisdom emerges as a form of social capital that provides ethical guidance, practical knowledge, and collective identity. It becomes an essential instrument for communities to navigate social change while ensuring the continuity of ancestral values and practices.

Oral traditions are fragile when not supported by documentation and generational regeneration of practice, especially amid rapid social transformation. *Jojao's* leadership functions as a primary pillar of cultural preservation, coordinating, reaffirming meaning, and ensuring that cultural practices remain relevant. Tradition persists not simply because it is repeated, but because it is continually reinterpreted collectively in everyday social life. Local wisdom becomes a social and moral resource enabling the Mat Bat community to maintain identity, harmony, and the sustainability of communal life. The preservation of tradition, therefore, requires a combination of routine practice, the legitimacy of customary leadership, and the community's ability to selectively absorb external influences without losing the core of its cultural values.

Maintaining Solidarity Among Indigenous People

Mat Bat community in Magei and Gamta villages in West Misool District, Raja Ampat islands, still maintains their customs and traditions as guidelines for life in society. Strengthening solidarity values is emphasized based on a sense of community that guarantees each individual is part of the Mat Bat community. This is what *Jojao* did, who tried to maintain solidarity among his citizens in order to strengthen and maintain unity from various divisions

that could arise due to the increasing number of immigrants who inhabit the region.

Durkheim states that social solidarity constitutes the cohesion among individuals within a society that ensures order and social stability. It underscores the interdependence among people in a community, which generates a sense of responsibility and commitment to improving the lives of others (Mishra & Rath, 2020). Furthermore, Durkheim emphasizes that social solidarity refers to feelings of mutual sympathy and reciprocal responsibility among members of a group, which encourage them to support one another (Johnson et al., 2017). Additionally, Durkheim also explains that mechanical solidarity emerges within traditional and homogeneous societies in which individuals share similar types of work, values, lifestyles, and individual rights, and thus exhibit little differentiation from the collective. This form of solidarity is rooted in the collective conscience, binding individuals through shared beliefs and practices, and is made possible insofar as individual personalities can be integrated into the personality of the group (Mabefam et al., 2025).

The Mat Bat communities of Magei and Gamta maintain customary practices and traditions as normative guidelines in social life. Customary law serves as a regulatory framework governing interpersonal relations and preserving social order, particularly as the community encounters new dynamics, such as increasing migration flows. The role of the *Jojao* appears central as an agent of solidarity. He is not only a symbol of customary authority but also an active actor who reinforces communal cohesion, manages potential conflict, and consolidates collective unity. Thus, customary leadership operates simultaneously as a mechanism of social control and a medium of integration.

Solidarity is understood as a moral and emotional bond that makes social stability possible. Within the Mat Bat community, the solidarity that emerges resembles mechanical solidarity, as it is grounded in shared values, practices, and collective consciousness. These commonalities reduce social differentiation and position individuals as inseparable parts of the community, emphasizing mutual dependence, collective responsibility, and reciprocal sympathy. Tradition, customary leadership, and social solidarity together form an interrelated whole that sustains the continuity of the Mat Bat community.

Custom and tradition function as primary guides for social life, providing a value-laden framework that regulates relations among community members. The *Jojao* plays a strategic role in strengthening solidarity, preventing fragmentation, and preserving unity, particularly amid increasing external pressures from migration. The social dynamics of the Mat Bat community display the characteristics of mechanical solidarity: shared values, practices,

and collective awareness bind individuals into strong moral ties. This solidarity becomes an essential form of social capital that ensures stability, order, and the continuity of the community, while simultaneously reducing the potential for social conflict.

Unifying Indigenous Territories

West Misool people of the Raja Ampat islands, which are part of the West Papua region, also use the term "customary land rights" for the determination of their customary territories that regulate the control of land and other natural resources they own, where *Jojao* influence as a traditional head should have the ability to be able to protect his customary territory from various disturbances from outside parties that can affect the stability of community security in the region and can even cause conflict among the people. The use of customary land in the area must be with *Jojao's* knowledge, including the use of islands for tourist attractions that are often rented to immigrants who invest in tourism. In contrast, Raja Ampat attractions are well known abroad. Decision-making related to the customary land rights of the Mat Bat community by *Jojao* is very important in uniting indigenous territories, where the area is an area that has the potential for conflict due to the increasing number of immigrants who come to seek a better livelihood in the area.

Jeffry Week said that belonging is about similarities with several people and what distinguishes one person from others. This opinion emphasizes the importance of identity for individuals and a group or community (Widayanti, 2009). Political identity represents individual participation and is determined more by the culture and psychology of the person. If the formation process is depressed (identity resistance) with the dominance of other parties, then identity will emerge in terms of Calhoun's political identity (Castells, 2010). Moreover, Cressida Heyes posits that political identity is the marking of political activity in a broader and isolated sense to discover experiences of injustice shared by members of certain social groups. This identity is then used as a tool of struggle against other threatening forces (Buchari, 2014). Social identity is grounded in a range of attributes that define a group, creating relevant social categories that emerge through social interaction both within and among various types of social groups (Raskovic, 2021).

Customary land rights function as an instrument for regulating the control of land and natural resources, while simultaneously serving as a mechanism of protection against external intervention, particularly amid the expansion of tourism activities and the arrival of migrants. Within this context, the position of the *Jojao* becomes central. As the customary leader, he performs not only

administrative functions, but also normative and symbolic ones. His authority is essential to supervise the use of customary land, ensure community participation in decision-making, and prevent the penetration of external interests that may generate conflict. Thus, customary leadership operates as a form of local governance that safeguards stability and social cohesion.

A perspective grounded in identity theory deepens understanding of these dynamics. In line with Week, the sense of belonging is rooted in both similarity and differentiation: members of the Mat Bat community construct identity through attachment to customary territory while simultaneously drawing boundaries vis-à-vis "outsiders." When external actors enter (for example, tourism investors), the potential for identity-based resistance increases. Identity then ceases to function merely as a symbol and becomes a political arena, a means of articulating experiences of injustice, and a tool of struggle. Customary attributes, values, and practices shape social categories that organize interaction. In the case of West Misool, customary land rights, *Jojao* leadership, and ritualized decision-making processes become key markers of community membership that distinguish "us" from "them." Accordingly, the governance of customary land is not simply an economic or legal matter, but also encompasses cultural, political, and symbolic dimensions that sustain community continuity.

Customary land rights operate as instruments of social and cultural protection rather than merely mechanisms of land control; they prevent the penetration of external interests that may provoke conflict. The role of the *Jojao* is highly strategic in maintaining the integrity of customary territory, mediating between community interests and outside actors, and ensuring that decisions regarding resources remain grounded in customary principles. Community identity is shaped by a sense of belonging to customary territory while also being constituted through differentiation from external actors; when threatened, identity may become a source of political mobilization. Political and social identity function as collective capital that enables the Mat Bat community to defend socio-cultural sovereignty amid pressures from tourism and migration. The interaction between customary land rights, customary authority, and identity demonstrates that the sustainability of Indigenous communities requires both the strengthening of customary institutions and the recognition of local authority in decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

The leadership of the *Jojao* is ascriptive in nature and grounded in the genealogical legitimacy of the Wihel clan. However, it nevertheless requires

social recognition through the authority of the Magei community. The Mat Bat customary structure is historical, hierarchical, and institutionalized, with taboos, ancestral oaths, and customary sanctions functioning as mechanisms of social control across generations. The *Jojao* thus attains both cultural and communal legitimacy, enabling his leadership to operate as a system of social regulation that maintains order, protects customary territories, and prevents disintegration. In practice, customary leadership in West Misool plays a strategic role in territorial governance, conflict prevention, and the protection of communal land rights, while also serving as a mediating arena between Indigenous communities and outsiders. Oral traditions are preserved through collective reinterpretation, supported by local wisdom and the authority of the *Jojao* as a principal guardian of cultural preservation. Community solidarity, resembling mechanical solidarity, rests on shared values, norms, and collective consciousness, thereby strengthening social cohesion. Customary land rights function not only as an instrument of land control but also as a form of socio-cultural protection against external interests.

The interaction among customary land rights, *Jojao* leadership, and collective identity demonstrates that the sustainability of Indigenous communities requires strengthening customary institutions and recognizing local authority in decision-making processes. Various cultures that exist in the Mat Bat Indigenous community should be maintained as community cultural assets in order to unite the Indigenous People. Support and help are also needed from various parties, both primary stakeholders, referring to the government, and secondary stakeholders, referring to the community, to respect the existence of indigenous leaders in uniting the integrity of indigenous peoples.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted only within the Mat Bat indigenous community in West Misool, Raja Ampat, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other indigenous communities with different cultural and social contexts. Second, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach based on interviews and observations, which emphasizes participants' lived experiences rather than measuring the broader impact of indigenous leadership on religious moderation. Future research could adopt comparative studies across different Indigenous communities in Papua or other regions of Indonesia to examine similarities and differences in customary leadership systems. In addition, mixed-methods or quantitative approaches are recommended to assess the influence of indigenous leadership on indicators of religious moderation, social cohesion, and interreligious trust more comprehensively.

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NOT MUSLIM, NOT ACEHNESE: Digital Counterspaces, Religious Conversion, and Identity Negotiation among Acehnese Christians

Muhammad Ansor
Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia
Email: ansor@uin-suska.ac.id

Fernando Yudistira
Institut Agama Islam Diniyyah Pekanbaru, Indonesia
Email: fernando@diniyah.ac.id

Muslem Ibnu
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Langsa, Indonesia
Email: muslim.ibnu@iain.langsa.ac.id

Abdul Rahim Hakimi
Herat University, Afghanistan
Email: hakimiabdulrahim@yahoo.com

Laila Sari Masyhur
Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia
Email: laila.sari.masyhur@uin-suska.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of digital counterspace as a platform for activism among former Acehnese Muslims who have converted to Christianity. It focuses on how digital spaces contribute to the articulation of narratives that resist the marginalization and discrimination these individuals have encountered. This resistance is expressed through shared testimonies of conversion experiences, the normalization of apostasy, and the redefining of a social identity as Acehnese Christians. Data were gathered through an ethnographic study of 65 videos produced by 5 Christian ex-Muslims, including 3 YouTubers and social media activists, and 2 in-depth interviews with one of them. The findings demonstrate that digital platforms enable Christian ex-Muslims in Aceh to re-negotiate the inseparability of their Acehnese ethnicity with Islam by reformulating their social identity as Acehnese Christians. Ultimately, this study aims to enrich the discourse on political Islam and its implications for the religious practices of subaltern minorities, drawing on experiences from Aceh, the only province in Indonesia that implements Islamic law as a sharia-based special autonomy regional government.

Keywords: *Religious Conversion; Digital Counterspaces; Identity Negotiation; Acehnese Christians*

INTRODUCTION

Although widely recognized as one of the ethnic groups closely associated with Islam, the Indonesian digital space has recently been colored by narratives on Christians who self-identify as Acehnese (Alyuddin, 2021a; Saputra, 2022c; Script, 2023; Usman, 2020a, 2025). They are Acehnese Christians who were born to Acehnese parents, or at least to one of them, converted, and mobilize digital spaces to present themselves as such. While this is not a common trend, these religious conversions signal a shift in religious affiliation among some Acehnese communities, where community members are renegotiating the inseparability of Islam and ethnicity. This is a socio-cultural anomaly because the Acehnese identity has historically been constructed through the integration of Islam with Aceh's culture (Ichwan et al., 2020). Islam is not only a religion and a guiding principle but also a collective identity for the Acehnese people (Ansori, 2012). Therefore, for most Acehnese, narratives of conversion from Islam to Christianity in digital spaces are seen not merely as a change of faith but as resistance to the cultural foundations and collective identity of Aceh. Meanwhile, for former Acehnese Muslims, digital spaces serve as arenas for resistance against religious marginalization and discrimination.

Existing scholarship on the relationship among Islam, ethnicity, and restrictions on religious conversion in contemporary Indonesia offers valuable insights. Based on case studies of communities identified with Islam, such as Minangkabau and Aceh, the writings highlight social changes in which the links between ethnicity and religion are being reconsidered and challenged by community members. Mina Elfira's article discusses the identity negotiations of Minangkabau people outside West Sumatra who convert to another religion due to marriage (Elfira, 2009). Similarly, Jufri Naldo et al. (2026) examine the struggles of Minangkabau people in migration areas who convert to Christianity while trying to maintain their identity as both Minangkabau and Christian. Likewise, Muhammad Ansor's study explores the experiences of Acehnese people who convert to Christianity, challenging the limitations on expressing their identity as both Christians and Acehnese by reproducing counter-narratives in digital spaces (Ansor, 2024). However, the last study is still preliminary and needs to be expanded, including by highlighting the reproduction of digital counter-spaces as expressions of resistance to restrictions on religious freedom following the implementation of shari'ah in Aceh.

In general, for most Muslim communities, apostasy or leaving Islam is considered an act that is not permitted by religion. Around 70 percent of Muslim countries in the Middle East and Africa categorize leaving Islam as an act of defamation (Kutty, 2018), leading these countries to regulate cultural sanctions or even criminal sanctions against such actions. Several countries with Muslim-majority populations, including Egypt (Berger, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2003), Malaysia (Ismail & Awang Mat, 2016; Samuri & Quraishi, 2014), Iran (Darwish, 2018), and Indonesia (Seo, 2013), impose social sanctions and even criminal penalties on individuals who convert from Islam. In Aceh, the only province in Indonesia that applies Islamic law or sharia, there is a regulation on the prohibition for Muslims to leave Islam. According to Aceh Qanun (Islamic-based local regulation) number 8/2015, any Muslim who leaves Islam is subject to *uqubat ta'zir*—a type of discretionary punishment in Islamic criminal law—in the form of public flogging of a maximum of 60 times and a minimum of 30 times, or a maximum prison sentence of 60 months and a minimum of 30 months, or a maximum fine of 600 grams of pure gold and a minimum of 300 grams of gold (article 18 of Aceh Qanun 8/2015). The cultural practices of the Acehnese people also show strong rejection of the act of leaving Islam, whether manifesting through persecution, expulsion, or other intolerant acts (Ansor, 2024).

In certain Acehnese communities, the decision to leave Islam is often followed by migration from Aceh (Ansor, 2024) as a strategy to avoid socio-political and criminal pressures. This article argues that, amid political Islam's control over religious freedom, particularly the marginalization and persecution of those who leave Islam, digital public spaces enable former Acehnese Muslims who have become Christians to express a social identity that counters the dominant narrative of an inseparable Acehnese and Islamic identity. They use digital spaces as an alternative channel for sharing information, reasons, and experiences, and for articulating new identities associated with religious conversion. Digital spaces transform into counterspaces where they express their rejection of marginalization and persecution due to their decision to leave Islam.

This study aims to examine the dynamics of digital counterspace as a platform for activism among former Acehnese Muslims who have converted to Christianity. The article argues that amid the restrictions on religious conversion in Aceh following shariatisme, the digital space not only becomes an arena for negotiating new identities expressed through digital activism but also facilitates the formation of a counterpublic space that serves as a platform for marginalized communities to express resistance. By using

Lefebvre's public space theory (1991, 2003) and Lopez-Leon and Casanova's digital counterspaces concepts (2025), it explores how digital environments contribute to the reproduction of narratives that reject the marginalization they have faced. This is achieved through the mediation of conversion testimonies, the normalization of apostasy, and efforts to redefine a new social identity as Acehnese Christians. As a result, this study enhances the discourse on political Islam and its implications for the religious practices of subaltern minorities (Nieuwkerk, 2006; Starr et al., 2019). This article expands the discussion on how digital space functions as a counterspace, drawing on the experiences of Acehnese Christians who challenge dominant narratives that limit religious conversion and the negotiation of new religious identities.

This study presents a digital ethnography of five Christian former Muslims from Aceh who actively present themselves as subjects in digital spaces. Among them, three individuals manage YouTube channels: @InjilHabaGet, run by Effendi Usman; @Deditersadarkan, run by Dedi Saputra; and @alyudinok, run by Alyuddin bin Zainul Abidin. These channels, at that time, released at least 2,757, 136, and 277 videos, respectively, featuring a range of content, including testimonies, accounts, articulations of social identity, missionary activities, and daily spiritual experiences after religious conversion. The remaining two, Dika Aldinanda and Cut Fitri Handayani, although not managing their own YouTube accounts, actively express themselves through digital channels managed by others, affirming their social identity as Christian ex-Muslims from Aceh. Both regularly appear on TikTok accounts, either managed by themselves or by others, to mobilize their social identity as Christian ex-Muslims from Aceh. We inventoried, watched, and documented information from 65 videos on the three aforementioned YouTube channels. This study used the YouTube video inventory as part of a netnographic study (Marôpo et al., 2021). Then, we transcribed or made netnographic notes from observations of video content relevant to the research theme.

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND DIGITAL COUNTERSPACES

This study employs Lefebvre's concept of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991, 2003, 2009; Janzen, 2002; Shewly, 2025) combined with the concept of digital counterspaces (Lopez-Leon & Casanova, 2025) for analyzing the intersectionality of spatial practices and the religious narratives of Christian former Muslims from Aceh (Chiodelli, 2013). According to Chris Butler (2012), Lefebvre describes the relationship between the state and spatiality as a triadic model of space. Lefebvre's triadic model—consisting of spatial representation (or abstract space), spatial practice (or perceived space),

and representational space (or lived space)—serves as an analytical lens for understanding the relationship between state control, social practices, and physical public space based on a case study of the experiences of Christian ex-Muslim Acehnese.

According to Lefebvre (1991), space is never static, but rather is produced dialectically through contradictions, conflicts, and negotiations between dominant forces and everyday practices. His progressive-regressive dialectical method rejects linear temporality by exploring how historical residues, lived experiences, and emerging spatial strategies collide in the ongoing production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). In the dynamics of protest, this framework explains how space is contested, occupied, and reclaimed. Abstract Space (Metaphysical), for example, can be understood as an organized environment, often controlled by the state, where surveillance and regulation limit public gatherings. Perceived Space (Spatial Practice), in contrast, encompasses the everyday material interactions within these regulated spaces, which enable protest movements to create physical symbols of dissent. Finally, Lived Space (Representational Space) refers to the subjective and experiential dimensions in which individuals and communities create meanings and narratives, often through acts of resistance (al-Nakib, 2014; Cesari, 2013; Fincher, 2007; Galanakis, 2016; Zanotti, 2013; Zillinger, 2014). In addition, protest movements traverse and reconfigure these dimensions not sequentially, but dialectically, engaging in spatial production that is simultaneously symbolic, material, and political (Shewly, 2025). The state endeavors to create abstract spaces that are homogeneous, policed, and regulated. However, these efforts inherently provoke dialectical reactions from society, which seeks to reclaim, subvert, or reconfigure such spaces. In the digital realm, the dialectical dynamics of these elements, as outlined by Lefebvre, continue to evolve and shape models of spatial resistances or counterspaces, a concept that this study will soon explore.

According to Lopez-Leon and Casanova (2025, pp. 336–337), counterspaces are contexts where marginalized individuals with similar social identities can affirm their identities, develop a sense of belonging, and collectively cultivate critical awareness to reject and challenge deficit-oriented narratives. Counterspaces help individuals develop three forms of critical awareness articulated through spatial practices: reproducing social identities through counter-narratives, articulating resistance in spatial practices, and strengthening resources through relational transactions within the community. The work of identity narration is a process in which individuals question existing societal narratives about their social identities and challenge narratives that diminish human dignity

by offering counter-narratives that highlight their strengths and dignity. Articulation of resistance refers to the strategic and deliberate subversion of dominant cultural beliefs and behaviors to critique oppressive conditions and reclaim power. Meanwhile, direct relational transactions emphasize the community's role in providing social support and strengthening resources that help mobilize resistance against marginalization.

Digital space provides an alternative channel for sharing spiritual experiences, expressing identity, or creating new social networks, especially given the strong resistance in Acehnese society to religious conversion. This makes such interactions impossible in traditional public spaces (non-digital). Digital channels also expand the temporal dimensions of protest (Elahi, 2012; Evolvi, 2017; Starr et al., 2019). Unlike physical gatherings, which are limited by proximity, digital spaces preserve and reinforce protest narratives, maintaining continuity (Shewly, 2025). We argue that these digital contexts serve as counterspaces where former Muslim Acehnese Christians engage in crucial processes for developing their intersectional selves. Digital counterspaces foster a sense of belonging by validating their intersectional experiences. Online platforms provide a venue for engaging in critical consciousness to reject dehumanizing narratives and challenge intersectional forms of oppression (Yilmaz, 2026). Notwithstanding the liminality and vulnerability of digital spaces, Acehnese Christians within these digital contexts reimagine and develop a coherent sense of self that embodies their intersectional social identities.

MEDIATIZATION OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION EXPERIENCE TESTIMONIALS

Testimonials about religious conversion experiences have become a means for Acehnese Christians to express resistance to restrictions on religious conversion (Alyuddin, 2021b, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). They counter persecution by sharing unpleasant experiences during their faith transformation through testimonies, generally aimed at a Christian audience. The tendency for Acehnese Christians to create testimonies as a form of resistance to dominant cultural pressures, especially regarding the prohibition on apostasy, is a relatively new phenomenon. Notably, the mediatization of conversion experiences has intensified since early 2020, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted Indonesia.

Several studies have explored the diverse meanings of testimonies and their contribution to enriching discussions of religious conversion (Avance, 2013; Khalil & Bilici, 2007; Pentilla, 2016; Vliek, 2019b). According to Vliek 2019a,

2019b), testimonies about conversion experiences from Islam reflect not only the phase of publicly expressing disbelief in former beliefs and articulating a new identity, but also the phase of publicly expressing disbelief in former beliefs and articulating a new identity. For converts from Islam, testimonies serve as statements of affiliation with the broader Christian community and as efforts to expand the new community's social networks (Vliek, 2019b). Based on a study of Muslims in Sulu facing militarization, Elgin Glenn R. Salomon (2022) states that testimonies serve as a strategy for subaltern communities to express resistance to the oppression they experience. For some individuals, testimonials are a means of exercising their freedom of speech.

According to Rambo (1999), testimonials in the process of faith transformation are individuals' attempts to reconstruct their personal biographies after religious conversion. Furthermore, testimonials are part of articulating commitment to a new religious group or environment (Vliek, 2019b). Similarly, Stromberg (1993, p. 3) states that testimonials function as performative acts of self-transformation to foster one's faith. Thus, conversion narratives are not merely recollections of past events but the creation of specific situations at the time of recounting. Stromberg analyzes this dual process: faith-strengthening and life-transformation when conversion testimonies are spoken. Building on prior studies, particularly based on the experiences of former Muslim Christians in Aceh, we aim to show the use of testimonies by our research subjects as a way of expressing resistance to the dominant culture and dominating structures that persecute religious conversion from Islam (Aldinanda & Darmawati, 2025a, 2025c, 2025b; Saputra, 2022b, 2022d, 2022a).

Testimonials about conversion from Islam in Aceh attract both Christian and Muslim audiences. Testimonials about conversions from Islam in Aceh are received differently by different audiences. For new converts, this interest is fueled, among other things, by public curiosity about how they overcome obstacles, or even persecution, for leaving Islam. For adherents of old religions, conversion is a collective issue that requires synergistic attention from various parties. Conversions from Islam in Aceh consistently make viral news because they are seen as a threat to the religious integration of Acehnese ethnicity. Testimonials about conversion experiences are perceived as a threat to religious authority, both culturally and structurally, in a region that enforces Islamic law.

The COVID-19 pandemic also drove the intense use of digital media by religious converts in early 2020, which limited social interaction among citizens. The Jokowi government's policy of limiting social interaction between individuals shifted religious practices, such as the exchange of knowledge

and spiritual experiences, through digital communication channels (Hilmy & Niam, 2020; Said & Santosa, 2021). For Acehnese religious converts, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a blessing, as digital communication channels have allowed them to express their religious identity and spiritual experiences within their new religion. This is considered a blessing because, as previously mentioned, in Acehnese sharia law, religious converts face strict censorship when sharing their spiritual experiences with a broader audience.

Individuals share their conversion testimonies through digital media, either through other organizations' channels or their own YouTube channels. Diaspora TV is one such channel that actively facilitates former Acehnese Muslims in sharing their experiences of religious transformation, although it is not the only platform of its kind. According to information on the Diaspora TV YouTube channel, the channel is managed by Rahmani Christ Church of Indonesia (GKRI, *Gereja Kristus Rahmani Indonesia*) and Diaspora City Center. It focuses on presenting a variety of Christian spiritual programs that equip believers with faith in today's modern world.

Alyuddin bin Zainul Abidin, Effendi Usman, and Dedi Saputra are among the former Acehnese Muslims who have shared testimonies through Diaspora TV (Alyuddin, 2023, 2024a; Saputra & Usman, 2022b; Usman, 2024). In fact, Effendi Usman and Alyuddin have been featured more than once to share their spiritual experiences related to their conversion from Islam to Christianity. Dedi Saputra made his first appearance on this channel to share the testimony of his faith transformation from Islam to Christianity. In addition, several YouTube channels run by Christian YouTubers, such as Lusy (@lusydaivachannel), have uploaded testimonies from former Acehnese Muslims who have converted to Christianity. One channel uploaded three episodes of Dika Aldinanda's testimony, an apostate (Murtad) from South Aceh. In addition to sharing their conversion experiences on other channels, they also share their personal YouTube channels. Beyond these platforms, they also share personal experiences of their religious conversion on their own YouTube channels and other digital platforms.

In this study, netnographic data shows that the spectrum of themes presented through testimonies extends beyond the need to share spiritual experiences and also includes a sense of resistance to the pressures of the dominant culture that prohibit leaving Islam. The conversion material generally addresses the spiritual and psychological aspects underlying faith transformation, the process of revealing this new faith to the Muslim public in Aceh (both family and the general public), and converts' responses to this decision (Saputra, 2022b). The narrative flow is relatively similar, although with varying emphases

(Alyuddin, 2024b; Saputra & Usman, 2022b; Usman, 2021). Each convert has a spiritual and psychological experience that accompanies the conversion event, whether in the form of a dream about meeting a figure believed to be Jesus, an encounter with a specific figure that then sparks a decision to change their faith, a change of faith due to marriage to a partner of a different faith, or an experience of adversity that then sparks repentance and a change of faith.

It is interesting to focus on how converts narrate their experiences during the coming-out phase (Smuts, 2011), the publication of their new faith, and the impacts they experience as a result of their conversion decision. The majority of the subjects in this study experienced a difficult phase when their decision to leave Islam was made known to those closest to them (Seo, 2013). All subjects discussed in this study experienced family rejection regarding their conversion decisions. At this moment, the difficulty each converter experienced varied significantly. However, none of the converters discussed in this study received support from their families for their conversion decisions. In fact, the majority experienced persecution and traumatic experiences.

We found that the details of traumatic narratives conveyed through conversions convey messages of resistance to the prohibition on conversion. Testimonies delivered by Dedi Syahputra and Dika Aldinanda, for example, emphasize the traumatic experiences they experienced when their conversion decisions met with opposition from their families (Aldinanda & Darmawati, 2025c; Saputra, 2022b). The repetition of these traumatic and unpleasant experiences on several YouTube channels and the intensity of the storytelling indicate that these testimonies not only serve as a means of gaining acceptance within the new religious community but also demonstrate criticism and resistance to the coercion and persecution they experience.

On several YouTube channels, both Diaspora TV and his own channel, Dedi Saputra, shared his testimony about the moment his family learned he had converted to Christianity (Saputra & Usman, 2022b). Dedi is from Aceh and was raised in a devout Muslim environment, taught to recite the Quran and pray five times a day. In 2010, while in the third grade of junior high school, he watched the film "The Vision of Christ." Jesus's closing words, "It is finished," puzzled him and sparked his curiosity. He wondered what "it is finished" meant and why Jesus did not leave another message for his followers. His search continued until 2013. Initially, finding Christian information was difficult because the internet was less advanced than it is today, and Christian articles were scarce. He eventually joined a Christian community forum on Facebook and asked, "Is it finished?" The initial answers were not satisfactory, but he continued searching. He found an article explaining that "it is finished"

meant that Jesus had finished "the debt of human sin." This raised new questions for him about why humans have a debt of sin. Dedi then read that humans inherited the debt of sin from Adam and Eve, a concept not present in previous teachings. He concluded that any issues with God must be resolved according to God's will.

The article he read stated that to become a follower of Jesus and pay off the debt of sin, one must be baptized to be united with Jesus. Dedi, who resides in the interior of Aceh, saw baptism as the only way. He prayed as usual, and during the month of fasting, he prayed fervently, deceiving his parents by telling them he was going out with friends when in fact he was heading to Medan. Through a Facebook forum, he found the address of a pastor in Medan. He discovered the address of a pastor in Medan through a Facebook forum. Setting off on a night bus with no clear destination and without contacting the pastor in advance, he arrived in Medan and, with the assistance of a pedicab driver, found the pastor. Though surprised by Dedi's arrival, the pastor welcomed him. After spending five days at the pastor's home and reading the Bible—where he first encountered Philippians 1:21: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain"—Dedi was determined to be baptized, despite not having received thorough guidance. He clung firmly to the article's assertion that baptism was the path to uniting with Jesus.

After being baptized, Dedi returned to Aceh. Three months later, his family discovered his conversion to Christianity when his cousin found a Bible in his room. Dedi was chased by a mob, pelted with stones, and ran into the forest. Miraculously, he was unharmed and rescued by an evangelist. The incident went viral and was featured in local newspapers, describing him as "the head of apostasy in Aceh." As a result, Dedi was banished from his family and expelled from the Islamic school two weeks before his final exams. In 2013, he was forced to leave Aceh. He tried to return in 2014 to live like an Acehnese, but found no peace because of religious differences, so he left Aceh again. At the time of this study, Dedi claimed to be residing in South Tangerang, Banten.

Dika Aldinanda also shared a testimony about his conversion experience on a YouTube channel run by someone who identifies herself as Lusy Diva. Dika, originally from South Aceh, was a Muslim who was very hostile towards Christians. In 2019, he accidentally heard a Christian hymn on his aunt's (Muslim) phone. The song brought him peace and prompted him to search for and download dozens of hymns. Dika said he dreamed of meeting Jesus shining brightly as the "light of the world," who took him to a beautiful garden like heaven. He posted the dream on Instagram, prompting anger and threats from his mother, which led his family to discover his interest in Christianity.

He also said he dreamed of Christians being persecuted, some apostatizing, before Jesus descended from the clouds and lifted believers to heaven.

Inspired by his dream and the stories of other apostates, such as Cut Fitri, Dika sought counseling through the "Answers Channel": an institution run by someone affiliated with Christians. The counselor explained that he was "the chosen one" of Jesus. On April 28, 2021, Dika was baptized by an evangelist on the coast of Aceh because local churches there did not accept Acehnese individuals for baptism. Although Dika faced challenges finding work in Aceh, he found opportunities in Medan, which he interpreted as God's way of guiding him out of Aceh. After his decision to convert to Christianity reached his family, Dika was interrogated and subjected to violence. Dika was interrogated and forced to confess his faith. He was forced to confess his faith, after which he was beaten and attacked with thrown chairs. To further exert pressure, the family summoned three Ustad (Islamic teachers or preachers) to perform a *ruqyah* (Qur'anic recitation for healing individuals from spiritual disturbances like the evil eye, evil possession, or even black magic) and convert Dika to Islam. Dika, however, refused, invoking Surah Maryam, verse 71 of the Quran, which left the Ustads and his family speechless. They concluded that Dika's path had been "taken away by God." Subsequently, Dika relocated to Medan as a Christian, proudly embracing his Acehnese identity. His social media accounts reflect an enthusiastic connection to both Christianity and his Acehnese heritage (Aldinanda & Darmawati, 2025a, 2025c).

Testimonials in religious conversion literature are analyzed as a means for converts to display and assert a new social identity (Ansor, 2024; Ansor & Masyhur, 2013; Vliek, 2019b). However, in the cases of Dedi and Dika, the important role of testimonies that transcends these boundaries is revealed. For Dika and Dedi, testimonies serve as a space to express new faith, build social networks, and provide a medium to criticize the pressures of Aceh's dominant culture, which imposes sanctions on those who leave Islam. Although this criticism is sometimes not expressed directly, the story's emphasis on the moment of persecution and their disappointment with the treatment they experienced demonstrates Dika and Dedi's opposition to the persecution of converts from Islam.

Furthermore, netnographic evidence can be presented to support the argument that testimony is both a symbolic and creative arena of resistance. For Dedi, the decision to speak in an open forum was a form of resistance to the persecution he experienced after leaving Islam. He expressed his disappointment with Acehnese culture, which prohibits people from choosing a religion that aligns with their beliefs. He believes that every individual has the right to choose a

religion and to practice it in accordance with their beliefs. In a YouTube video posted on his personal channel, he urged Acehnese audiences to embrace Jesus for their salvation, asserting that only the gospel can bring peace to Aceh (Saputra, 2022a). Through digital spaces, individuals like Dedi, along with other former Acehnese Christians, not only contest the constraints on religious freedom but also seek to counter negative stereotypes surrounding apostasy. In doing so, these former Acehnese Christians are working to normalize the term "apostasy" across their respective digital channels and social media.

NORMALIZING APOSTASY AS DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

One form of symbolic resistance by former Muslim Christians in Aceh is the use of digital space to renegotiate the concept of apostasy. The concept of apostasy in Muslim religious literature is portrayed pejoratively. An apostate, or the plural form of the word apostate, is defined as a Muslim who voluntarily abandons or rejects Islam through belief, speech, or action, meaning he or she returns to infidelity after previously embracing Islam. The concept of an apostate has also been used to refer to someone who became Muslim by descent and then abandoned Islam to embrace another religion.

The concept of apostasy in Muslim literature has negative connotations because this act is considered a betrayal of communal ties as a Muslim. Therefore, as previously mentioned, most Muslim countries regulate sanctions for leaving Islam, both structural and cultural sanctions (Kutty, 2018). Aceh imposes sanctions for apostasy, including under Qanun No. 8/2015 on the Protection of Faith. Furthermore, culturally, Acehnese who choose to leave Islam experience persecution and isolation from their social environment. Some of the informants who became the subjects of this study then chose to leave Aceh to avoid social and structural sanctions (Aldinanda & Darmawati, 2025a; Handayani, 2021; Usman, 2022c; Saputra & Usman, 2022b; Usman & Handayani, 2022). In contrast to Christian ex-Muslims who chose to live in Aceh after conversion, who tended to be passive, this study found that the citizenship practices of ex-Muslims assertively criticized the negative stigmatization of the decision to leave Islam by neutralizing the concept of apostasy.

The normalization of the concept of apostasy occurs in various forms. This study found that the normalization of apostasy is carried out through, among other things, (a) self-narration as an apostate from Aceh by connecting it to the experience of liberation; (b) re-signifying the term apostasy as an act of courage in fighting for religious freedom both personally and collectively; (c) reproducing visuals and rhetoric that display emotional and dramatic framing

of the act of leaving Islam; and (d) repeating contrasting narratives between the current faith and the former faith in their various aspects to show that the act of leaving Islam is a logical and humane attitude.

Most of the research subjects' self-narratives, as demonstrated in their testimonies, seek to normalize apostasy, in which faith transformation is part of the experience of seeking religious freedom. The YouTube channels and social media of research subjects such as Effendi Usman, Dedi Saputra, Alyuddin, and Dika Aldinanda recount their spiritual journeys, including their backgrounds, social pressures, and the moment of their first reading of the Bible (Aldinanda & Darmawati, 2025c; Usman, 2021b; Saputra, 2022b), thus leading the audience to perceive apostasy not as a moral crime as constructed in the Acehnese social system, but as a transformation of identity and spiritual liberation. One excerpt from Dedi Saputra's testimony, as quoted in the preface, demonstrates this. In one of his YouTube posts, Dedi stated:

> These past few days, or every day, I've heard people say that Acehnese convert to Christianity because they lack money or because their children lack compassion. I want to respond to these things: that people who convert to Christianity are not, and not only, hungry. And, even if they are hungry, they are hungry for the truth. They are truly hungry for the truth; they are tired and weary of being lied to by teachings that dehumanize humans. Teachings that only claim to be *rahmatan lil alamin* (blessing for the universe) but always cause unrest everywhere. How can we say that it is *rahmatan lil alamin* when church building permits are difficult to obtain, churches can be burned, and for some Christians, their lives are always persecuted? (Saputra & Usman, 2022a)

The YouTube channels participating in this study also used the terms "apostates" or "Murtadin" in their video titles to attract audience attention. Several examples of video titles that use the concept of apostasy were found on the YouTube channels of Effendi Usman, Alyuddin, Dedi Saputra, Dika Aldinanda, and other general channels featuring former Acehnese Muslims leaving Islam. Dedi Saputra, for example, created digital content on his YouTube channel entitled: "*Sang Murtadin Siap Kembali Ke Islam???* [The Apostate is Ready to Return to Islam???]" (Saputra, 2022d). Effendi Usman released content entitled: "*Geger!! Kesaksian 4 Murtaddin Aceh Di Kediaman Cut Fitri, Muslem Aceh Banyak Yang Sudah Percaya Yesus* [Commotion!! Testimony of 4 Acehnese Murtadins at Cut Fitri's Residence, Many Acehnese Muslims Have Believed in Jesus]" (Usman, 2025) or "*Orang Pinter Pasti Murtad* [Smart People Will Definitely Apostate]" (Usman, 2020b). These videos use the concept of apostasy to construct a narrative that presents apostasy as a logical and normal

decision. Normalization is also achieved through the repetition of the concept of apostasy in video content to neutralize the audience's, especially Muslims or Acehnese, interpretation of it (Alyuddin, 2023; Zulkifli, 2020; Usman, 2020a).

Most of the subjects in this study attempted to reinterpret the concept of apostasy by emphasizing the narrative construction that the act is not a punishment, but rather evidence of the discovery of truth and the courage to bear social consequences. Apostate is framed as the self-image of those who undertake the search for truth and find it. The construction of videos using the keyword *Murtadin* also presents narratives of people who possess the courage and strength to face the cultural sanctions of their society (especially those imposed by their former religious community). This study found strong suspicion that the normalization of the concept of *Murtadin* is intended to minimize, or even eliminate, the criminal connotations or negative stigma associated with the term in certain public spheres. The digital space enables most of the subjects in this study to articulate their civic stance without undue anxiety, since they are outside the direct reach of Acehnese audiences or Indonesian Muslims in general.

Furthermore, this study also uncovered digital content that seeks to depict apostasy through emotional and dramatic storytelling. A notable example is the video documenting Cut Fitri's conversion (Handayani, 2021). This timeline highlights the moment when Cut Fitri, a woman from Langsa, Aceh, gained significant attention on social media. In the video, she refutes allegations of kidnapping and coercion surrounding her conversion to Christianity, emphasizing that her decision was entirely her own. Cut Fitri also expressed her sorrow over her children being taken by her family.

In the video, Cut Fitri stated that she was not kidnapped and that all the rumors spread by her family were untrue; her decision to convert to Christianity was purely her own free will, without coercion. She apologized to her mother, brother, sister, and her entire extended family, but asked that they accept her life's path and not blame others or spread slander. The video depicts Cut Fitri's sadness and disappointment over the removal of her children by her biological family and her ex-husband's family. She feels entitled to her children and criticizes her family for separating her from them. An earlier version of the video was uploaded by a local Acehnese newspaper, but on YouTube channels aimed at Christian audiences, it was framed more dramatically to encourage viewers to understand Cut Fitri's decision. Cut Fitri's actions are presented as a human story rather than a violation of religious, moral, or cultural law.

The normalization of the concept of apostasy promoted by former Acehnese Muslims is more than just a presentation of a new social identity; it is also

a form of symbolic and overt resistance to censorship of religious freedom (Halama & Lačná, 2011; Yilmaz, 2026). Some of the subjects in this study used digital channels to launch their critique and resistance, rejecting the negative assessment of leaving Islam. The practice of digital citizenship allows them to act more critically than they could in conventional, non-digital spaces (Boutros, 2015; Davis, 2018; Lopez-Leon & Casanova, 2025). Based on our study, we did not find any statements from the subjects that normalized the concept of apostasy through direct statements to Muslim audiences in Aceh. In several interviews, statements that pointed to efforts to normalize and rationalize their actions of leaving Islam were delivered cautiously. This contrasts with the narrative findings in digital spaces. Digital channels allow a Christian YouTuber, a former Muslim from Aceh, to more assertively articulate his thoughts and attitudes in normalizing the concept of apostasy. Dedi Saputra stated in one of his YouTube videos:

> Previously, everyone was searching for my Facebook and terrorizing me. In the past few days, it's happened again because of my statement about Acehnese apostates and that I follow Jesus. […] If you say I follow Jesus because I'm paid, I'll say this. Anyone who can prove that I follow Jesus because I get paid, let's say someone pays me two million rupiah a month, from the first day I was paid until today, I will give that money to you. That's the first thing. Secondly, if you can prove it, […] I'm ready to be returned to Islam (Saputra, 2022d).

The normalization of apostasy through YouTube channels was also carried out by most research subjects by constructing contrasting narratives or comparing teachings between Islam and Christianity. In videos posted on YouTube channels, these research subjects, for example, presented comparisons between the teachings of Jesus in the Bible and the Islamic narrative as they experienced it during their transition to faith. In several videos posted on his personal YouTube channel, Usman compared his life after coming to know Jesus with his life as a Muslim. He described himself as a messed-up Muslim who brought shame to his family, but after leaving Islam, he became a good person and closer to God. Similarly, Alyuddin, in several testimonies uploaded to various personal YouTube channels and Christian communities, presented himself as a delinquent youth who committed various violations of the law. However, his life changed for the better after he came to know Jesus. These narratives were constructed to rationalize their decisions to become apostates and to normalize them.

The normalization of apostasy in the digital space is furthered by this research

subject's efforts to construct their social identity as both Acehnese and Christian. In the following exposition, we explore the efforts of some research subjects to mobilize their social identities as both Christian and Acehnese. This exposition also aims to expand and strengthen forms of creative and assertive resistance in the digital space against restrictions on religious freedom in Aceh. Efforts to further restrict and prevent citizens from leaving Islam are strengthened by political and structural approaches, as well as by the expansion of resistance strategies, particularly in the digital space.

MOBILIZING IDENTITIES AS ACEHNESE CHRISTIAN

Scholars on Acehnese social identity have consistently identified Acehnese society with Islam (Ansori, 2012; Kloos, 2018; Makin, 2016). The ethno-religious integration of Acehnese as Muslims is a well-established social concept. To date, no studies have explored the Acehnese community's efforts to renegotiate this unification of ethno-religious identity. This contrasts with the ethno-religious unification within Minangkabau society, which began to be negotiated by its members (Elfira, 2009).

The emergence of YouTube channels run by former Acehnese Muslims demonstrates a shift in how individuals articulate their religious identity in the digital space. The netnographic data obtained through this study indicate that these YouTube channels feature testimonies from former Acehnese Muslims, evangelism by Christian figures or pastors of Acehnese ethnicity, or the spiritual experience of an Acehnese encountering Jesus. The presence of narratives of Acehnese socio-religious identity beyond Islam reflects challenges to the integration of Acehnese ethno-religious communities as communities identified with Islam.

This phenomenon is interesting to explore. Aceh's Islamic identity has been firmly institutionalized through *qanuns* (religious laws), local culture, and the social structure of its society (Ansor, 2014a; Febriandi et al., 2021; Feener, 2013; Jauhola, 2020; Kloos, 2018; Otto & Otto, 2016; Salim, 2008, 2021). Therefore, as the first author has demonstrated in his other articles, religious conversion in Acehnese society is not only a spiritual conversion phenomenon but also reflects ethnoreligious dislocation, namely a shift from collective social norms (Ansor, 2024). Acehnese who choose a faith outside of Islam are socially pressured to leave Acehnese territory. Similarly, in the social sphere, Acehnese who renounce Islam are prohibited by the majority of their former community from identifying themselves as Acehnese.

The emergence of several YouTube channels run by Christian ex-Muslims from

Aceh, along with posts from individuals identifying as Acehnese Christians, highlights ongoing efforts to reshape social identities that carry both political and symbolic weight. This phenomenon involves negotiating the identity of 'Aceh'—typically associated with Islam—against that of 'Christian,' which is often viewed as an outsider presence in the region. The digital content produced by these individuals reflects their attempts to renegotiate and challenge the prevailing ethno-religious integration within Acehnese society. Digital platforms now allow Christian ex-Muslims to publicly assert their identities, including within Aceh's online landscape, which was previously unfeasible due to significant security concerns surrounding direct social interactions.

This study identifies at least six patterns of social identity mobilization among the research subjects, Acehnese Christians, within digital spaces. These patterns include identity performances, the reframing of collective memory, the utilization of Acehnese symbols as forms of digital identity capital, narratives centered on trauma and redemption, renegotiations of Acehnese ethno-religious integration, and the establishment of digital counterpublics (counter-publics within digital environments). Drawing on these digital insights, the article posits that this mobilization of social identity constitutes a form of creative resistance to the conflation of Acehnese identity with Islam.

The performance of identity as an Acehnese Christian is a form of symbolic and creative resistance. Christian YouTubers, former Acehnese Muslims, the subjects of this study often incorporate Acehnese cultural symbols into their videos, whether through their accents, clothing, childhood stories from Islamic boarding schools, or nostalgia for their hometowns. Effendi Usman and Dedi Saputra are among those most active in articulating their identity as Acehnese Christians. Based on their testimonial videos, both are Christians of Acehnese ancestry through both their fathers and mothers. Effendi Usman is from Biereun, while Dedi is from Pidie. Effendi Usman and Dedi not only do not intend to erase their Acehnese identity but also intensively maintain their social identity as Acehnese Christians. Usman and Dedi affirmatively counter-narratives to the stereotype that true Acehnese must be Muslim.

The mobilization of counter-social identities also involves reframing Aceh's collective identity. One of Dedi Saputra's YouTube videos depicts Aceh not only as the Veranda of Makkah, but also as a "land thirsting for truth." Effendi Usman named his Acehnese-language YouTube channel @InjilHabaGet. Similarly, Dedi Saputra previously named his YouTube channel @InjilHabaJroh, but later changed it to @Deditersadarkan. In several testimonies and vlogs uploaded to their respective YouTube channels, Usman, Dedi, Alyuddin, and Dika present personal narratives from their time in Aceh. Dedi Saputra, in

one of his YouTube channels, stated:

> I want to respond to some Acehnese who keep telling me: 'Aceh is one hundred percent Muslim, and Acehnese people never leave Islam.' People will never leave the teachings of Islam because they have never studied other teachings. […] This is the first factor that makes all Acehnese Muslims. Because from birth, they have never learned about anything different. I decided to dare to learn things that differ from what has been passed down to me (Saputra, 2022a).

Digital spaces allow research subjects to manage rhetorical strategies to mobilize their social identity as Acehnese Christians. Conversations on YouTube channels generally take the form of monologues, two-way dialogues, or discussions, as in mass communication *(komunikasi massal, Komal)* on TikTok. Through dialogue, research subjects can freely express their life journeys as they discover the truth of Jesus. They also respond to accusations of apostasy with rational arguments or scripture, as a polite counter to such charges. Identity mobilization also occurs through detailed exploration of moments of persecution experienced upon leaving their former faith (Aldinanda & Darmawati, 2025c; Saputra, 2022b). It appears they are attempting to construct a narrative of martyrdom as a strategy to gain acceptance within their new affiliation while maintaining their old identity as Acehnese Christians

YouTube serves as a digital public space where in-group dynamics take shape, allowing former Muslims, as highlighted in this study, to form a new identity as Acehnese Christians. Various video uploads by Alyuddin, Dedi, and Usman showcase gatherings among fellow Acehnese Christians, illustrating that they are not alone in their decision to embrace Christianity. During a visit to Medan, Usman expressed his habit of regularly connecting with other Acehnese Christians. Similarly, Cut Fitri, though she does not manage her own YouTube channel, frequently appears on Usman's channel, reinforcing her social identity as an Acehnese Christian.

As a result, digital channels serve as arenas for religious mediation for converts. Religion is not only practiced but also mediated. YouTube and other social media platforms help transform conversion experiences into visual content for public consumption. The identity narratives constructed through these digital public spaces reflect their confrontation with the dominant narrative of Acehnese Islam. The digital spaces discussed by the converts have enabled them to demonstrate faith practices that transcend the control of the state or local Islamic communities.

NOT MUSLIM, NOT ACEHNESE? DIGITAL COUNTERSPACES

Digital space contributes to the theorization of counterspaces by Acehnese Christians as a subaltern community. The previous exposition demonstrates the intersectionality between authoritarian control over physical and digital space in Aceh, encouraging former Muslims, the research subjects, to adapt and reconfigure their spatial practices. Digital space becomes an arena where they articulate non-mainstream identities and resist political pressure that prohibits self-identification in public spaces as both a Christian and an Acehnese. YouTube channels are one form of digital engagement that can facilitate individual and community communication, connect them to broader spaces, and create alternatives for subaltern communities (Evolvi, 2017). The Acehnese public sphere, dominated by narratives of the inseparability of Islamic and Acehnese identities, is challenged by Aceh's non-Muslim identities. According to Fraser (1990) the counterpublic becomes a parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups find and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

This study finds that the YouTube channels of former Acehnese Muslims who converted to Christianity are an arena for expressing resistance to dominant narratives and political pressure. For example, they use YouTube to convey testimonies of their experiences of religious conversion and the challenges faced (Alyuddin, 2021c; Usman, 2021b; Saputra, 2022b), normalize the concept of apostasy (Usman, 2021a, 2022b; Zulkifli, 2020; Hilda, 2021; Meutia, 2022; Rasyidah, 2021; Saputra, 2022b; Syafriani, 2021), reject the narrative of religious conversion as a wrong decision (Alyuddin, 2020; Usman, 2021b, 2022a), and act as an arena for resistance against the concept of integration of Acehnese and Islamic identity (Usman and Alyuddin, 2020; Saputra, 2022a). Their criticism of various dominant views in Acehnese society on these topics is expressed on YouTube as a form of disagreement and resistance.

For the Acehnese Christians who were the research subjects, testimonies about their religious conversion experiences, their struggles in finding a new faith, and the experiences of the persecutions resulting from their decision to convert could not be freely shared through physical spaces in Aceh. The digital space has enabled them to do this not only with the Christian community but also with the community from their former religion, namely the Acehnese audience. Moreover, through the digital space, they challenge the dominant narrative that discredits the decision to leave Islam. The normalization of apostasy is a strategic agenda that underlies the presence of YouTube channels of former Acehnese Muslims. While in the Acehnese public sphere, and for

Muslims in general, the concept of apostasy is used in a pejorative sense, referring to individuals who are considered to have deviated from Islam (Samuri & Quraishi, 2014; Vliek, 2019a). However, within the narrative framework of these YouTube channels, apostasy is redefined to describe Christians from diverse religious backgrounds, particularly those who have converted from Islam and have found a new path to salvation through Jesus.

YouTube, for the subaltern community of former Muslim converts, represents a renegotiation of the essentialism of the concept of apostasy. Through digital narratives in the public sphere, the public receives counterinformation that presents apostasy in a way that differs entirely from the established, institutionalized meanings within Muslim society. Classical and traditional perspectives on sanctions for apostasy within Islamic legal discourse have been challenged by the presence of several YouTube channels discussed in this study. This study also found that former Muslim YouTubers from Aceh are not alone in mobilizing counter-discourses about the normalization of the concept of apostasy. Former Muslim converts to Christianity from various regions in Indonesia also support the process of normalizing the concept of apostasy in a sense that differs from its basic meaning.

Additionally, former Acehnese Muslims counter the narrative that deems conversion a wrong act. The YouTube videos examined demonstrate the collaboration among foreigners in warmly welcoming new Muslim converts. The YouTube videos present a counter-narrative with the agenda of normalizing the act of leaving Islam. This phenomenon is often found in Islamic culture, where the arrival of new converts from other religions is greeted with great fanfare and special respect (Ariff, 2012; Hass, 2020; King, 2017; Krings, 2008; Roald, 2012; Shanneik, 2011). Former Acehnese Muslim YouTubers also attempt to negotiate this narrative by participating in constructing a counter-narrative that normalizes the concept of riddah. Several studies have shown that Christian audiences respond positively and enthusiastically to narratives of conversion to Christianity (Akcapar, 2006; Boulos, 2010; Chua, 2012; Hamer, 2002; Klaver et al., 2017; Pérez, 2012; Van Klinken, 2012).

Therefore, this study identified another characteristic associated with the presence of former Acehnese Muslim YouTubers: the normalization of the integration of Acehnese and Christian identities. The digital space has enabled them to do this, although these efforts remain fragile and sporadic. The YouTubers typically capitalize on the presence of Acehnese Christians. The non-Muslim Acehnese population is statistically very small (Ansor, 2014b; Ansor & Amri, 2020; Zulkarnaini et al., 2022). However, through the digital public space, YouTubers capitalize on narratives and performances of social

identity, creating a framing that suggests a significant number of Acehnese Christians. In addition, this study finds resistance to the dominant narrative of Acehnese and Islamic integration. The presence of the digital public space provides an alternative not previously available in empirical social public spaces (Ahyar, 2017; Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Lim, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study explores the dynamics of Aceh's digital space by connecting it with the discourse of identity among former Acehnese Muslim Christians. The paper concludes that the digital space of YouTube not only facilitates the identity negotiation of former Acehnese Muslim Christians but also challenges monolithic Islamic stereotypes. YouTube serves as a third space, existing between the personal experiences of Acehnese Christians and public perceptions, thereby intertwining Acehnese and Islamic identities. For them, digital space serves as a counterspace where subjects can express their social identity as Acehnese Christians, a form of resistance to the dominant narrative that Acehnese and Islamic identities are inseparable.

Furthermore, this study also demonstrates that the intersection of physical spatial practices and digital dynamics is not mutually exclusive but rather interdependent. YouTube, as a digital space, serves as an alternative public sphere that can neutralize social conflict arising from differences in religious attitudes and beliefs. The potential for vigilantism and social conflict resulting from religious conversion in Acehnese society is minimized by shifting the debate to the online public sphere. The social conflict resulting from religious conversion is channeled with greater integrity and quality, despite also possessing vulnerabilities and fragility, a topic that can be explored further. This article concludes that narratives surrounding the religious conversion of former Acehnese Muslims expressed through digital public spaces indicate an improvement in the quality of democracy and freedom of expression in Indonesia. Online public spaces serve as arenas for consolidating diverse social elements to improve the quality of democracy in a society dominated by Islamic structures and culture.

Finally, several limitations of this study and opportunities for further study should be noted. These limitations arise from the scope of the data, methodological choices, and inherent constraints of the research design. Although the digital data was relatively abundant and easily accessible to the authors, the majority of participants declined to be interviewed, at least during the research period. This resulted in the study relying largely on digital sources from the subjects' YouTube channels and on two in-depth interviews

with one former Acehnese Muslim subject. As a result, these findings reflect dynamics with a relatively limited scope, given the constantly changing performance of digital spaces. Therefore, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of the digital spaces of Christian former Acehnese Muslims. The digital lives of former Acehnese Muslims are a rich field with many underexplored dimensions. This topic is not only crucial but also provides a lens for understanding broader transformations at the intersection of religion, digital space, and democratic practices in Indonesia, particularly Aceh.

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