



# Religious Harmony in East Nusa Tenggara: Insights into Local Tradition and Values of Muslim Communities

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## Article History Abstract

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*Kupang City, located in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) province, stands out for its notable success in fostering tolerance among religious communities. Its significance lies in (a) being the largest city in NTT, (b) having a longstanding history of Islamic development, and (c) the proclamation of local leaders demonstrating a firm commitment to preserving Kupang as an exemplar of religious harmony. In light of these aspects, the authors conducted qualitative field research on Muslim village communities in Kupang to explore how harmony is maintained among religious groups. This research is based on the theoretical assumption that understanding the world requires a native point of approach, relying on the researcher's perspective. The findings reveal that a crucial foundation for harmony among religious communities is the residents' highly tolerant attitude, reflecting the active tolerance embedded in local wisdom. This local wisdom is further reinforced by the recognition of diversity as a defining feature of Kupang City's identity. The actualization of this value is evident in religious and cultural traditions, exemplified by the Siripuan tradition in Airmata Village. The dynamic nature of harmony among religious communities is underscored, with one contributing factor being the lower positive feelings experienced by minorities compared to the majority. Addressing this discrepancy is crucial for anticipating and mitigating potential challenges among Muslim minorities.*

**Keywords:** Muslim Village; Local Wisdom; Identity Construction; Harmony; Active Tolerance

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2010, the inaugural World Interfaith Harmony Week was established by the UN General Assembly and is observed annually

during the first week of February. The resolution emphasizes the crucial need to foster mutual understanding, harmony, and collaboration among individuals globally, irrespective of their diverse beliefs and



religions. This essential message remains pertinent, especially in light of the documented impact of religious disparities on numerous global conflicts, including instances in Indonesia (Regus 2020, Thomas 2000). In this context, it is valuable to explore the expression of local wisdom, serving as the social capital for communities to address conflicts and cultivate harmony amidst diversity.

East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) is one of the provinces in eastern Indonesia with various natural and cultural exoticism. In this province, there are many beautiful panoramas of the beach, even "virgin ones," nobody has visited the areas yet, which are ready to be enjoyed with their waves, the beauty of its natural scenery, and the cleanliness of its air. It is not an exaggeration because of its natural exoticism; Rita Harahap (2015) mentioned NTT in the title of her *e-book*, *NTT Hidden Paradise: Kupang, Soe, Rote, Alor*. Meanwhile, its cultural exoticism can be seen through the charm of NTT people, which has successfully built a harmonious life among citizens in diversity (Sanjaya 2012). Similar to other parts of eastern Indonesia, the majority of people in NTT do not practice Islam. According to data from 2010 to 2017 by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in the NTT province, over 85% of the population identifies as Christian, split between Catholicism and Protestantism (BPS NTT Province 2019-2021). However, the Christian majority does not oppress minority groups. This is evidenced by NTT's top national ranking in the Ministry of Religious Affairs' 2021 religious harmony index survey (IKUB), scoring above 81 which indicates "very harmonious" relations" (Uzurasi 2022).

As the capital of the province, Kupang City is important to symbolize the harmony of relations among religious people in NTT. Based on the IKUB data, Kupang is properly considered as one of the cities in NTT that seems to be the most successful in maintaining tolerance among religious groups. The importance of Kupang in the NTT Province is due to the following reasons: (a) Being the

largest city in NTT, Kupang has a diverse population consisting of various ethnic groups and heterogeneous migrants; (b) Islam has a long history of development in Kupang that is intertwined with its progression in other NTT regions, and Muslims actively engage with the non-Muslim majority; and (c) Local governments and religious leaders have strongly committed to upholding Kupang as a model for religious harmony through official declarations.

There are many socio-cultural phenomena and historical sites that are local wisdom values of the natives in articulating religious teachings, caring for plurality, and fostering harmony for religious life amid differences, such as *Kampung Kerukunan* [the Harmony Village] (Jahang 2019b), the Convert (*Mu'allaf*) village, the oldest mosque in NTT, six places of worship in one location, and the Association of Javanese Family Social Harmony (K2S).

Interaction among religious people is dynamic because it undergoes the ups and downs and is never silent from ripples. The statement of Victor Laiskodat, who is currently the Governor of NTT, about the threat of the caliphate state, on the one hand, is considered provocative because it is worried to be a trigger of religious conflicts in NTT (Ibrahim 2017), and on the other hand, is considered an intense alarm of the infiltration of radical Islamic movement into the religious understanding of some NTT Muslims. Elizabeth K. Nottingham (1997), an expert on the Sociology of Religion, argues that religion's social and psychological functions are fundamental. Therefore, it is common when religion is considered one factor that significantly influences people's lives (McGuire 2008) and the formation of cultural traditions (Effendy 2001, Mujiburrahman 2008).

The notion of Kupang as an exemplar of religious harmony in urban setting stems from the presence of harmonious villages and Muslim communities that have cultivated concord in religious life. Fatubesi Village, situated in the Kota Lama subdistrict of

Kupang, NTT, epitomizes this ideal. This village signifies Kupang and NTT as regions with a robust state of interfaith accord within the nation.

Therefore, it is logical for the Mayor of Kupang, Jefrison Riwu Kore, to establish *Fatubesi* Village as one of the pilot villages for strengthening religious harmony in NTT Province (Goti 2019). Such an establishment is a form of acknowledgement that *Fatubesi* Village has long been viewed as having excelled in demonstrating harmonious religious life despite the very diverse makeup of the community. Surrounding *Fatubesi* village are other villages, like *Kampung Air Mata*, which contains historical proof of the arrival of Islam in NTT and, concurrently, plays an active part in exhibiting harmony amongst people of different faiths. The issues raised in this article include: (a) What are the values of local wisdom that endorse the Muslim Village community in Kupang City, NTT for building harmony amid differences? (b) How is the actualization of those values in their interaction among the heterogenous residents in Kupang City to foster the religious harmony? (c) What are the main problems faced by the Muslim communities in Kupang City, for actualizing those values?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on local wisdom and religious harmony of the archipelago people have been carried out before. Some of them that need to be described here are: *First*, Sulanam's article (2018), "Perceptions of Muslim Minorities Towards Models of Harmony in Social Harmony," was originally the result of research on models of harmony in the perception of Muslim minorities in NTT. There are several types of harmony found in the field, namely generic harmony, rhetorical harmony, exotic harmony, and genetic harmony. This study concludes that the harmony model practiced in NTT is the best and can be used as an example for other provinces in Indonesia. Harmony is interpreted as the community's social capital in

building and advancing the region to form a common awareness of harmony for minorities and the majority in NTT (Sulanam 2018).

*Second*, Atasoge and Sihombing (2022), "Gemohing in Lamaholot of East Flores: The Foundation and Pillar of Religious Moderation," discussed the local culture/local wisdom of the Lamaholot community of East Flores, NTT. Like villages in Kupang, Lamaholot is also rich in local culture/wisdom, known as *Gemohing*, which can be perceived as a pillar of strengthening religious moderation. This local culture underlies the establishment of the principle of living together harmoniously, which departs from the community's belief that all Lamaholot residents come from the same ancestor so that they are still one family. Therefore, harmony and brotherhood are things that are paid much attention to by the Lamaholot community amid religious differences (Atasoge and Sihombing 2022).

*Third*, A. Syakur and Muflikhatul Khoiroh (2021), "Local Wisdom for Civil Religious Harmony in Indonesia: An Ethnographic Inverstigation on Mbah Moni's Grave Ritual in babatan Village, Wiyung Sub-district, Surabaya city, East Java Province." This article discusses the meaning of local wisdom of Babatan Village in Surabaya, namely the ritual procession of Mbah Moni's grave as a means of building harmony among religious people of diverse local communities. Through *the earth alms* movement to achieve God's grace, they gather with the principle of *Babatan guyup-rukun* (Babatan get along well), *sepi ing pamrih rame marang gawe* (in sincerity and hard work), carry out the maintenance of Mbah Moni's grave (Syakur and Khoiroh 2021).

*Fourth*, R. Sinaga, F. Tanjung, and Y. Nasution (2019), "Local Wisdom and National Integration in Indonesia: A Case Study of Inter-religious Harmony amid Social and Political Upheaval in Bunga Bondar, South Tapanuli." This article also discusses the local wisdom of the diverse communities in Bunga Bondar, South Tapanuli, namely the tradition of

*marjamban* (giving food during religious holidays). It was concluded that local wisdom was able to become a social glue amid the ups and downs of inter-religious harmony in the region .

The aforementioned studies discuss the importance of local wisdom, especially in maintaining a harmonious life among religious communities. On the one hand, the results of such studies have a meeting point with the problems raised in this article, which both discuss the meaning of local wisdom for plural harmony of coexistence. Local wisdom can be analogous to an anchor that keeps the rotation of social interactions among religious communities which sometimes causes various frictions because differences remain within the frame of mutual harmony. On the other hand, the results of such studies also have differences with the problems discussed in this article. The difference can be viewed from (1) the location and social setting behind the case study conducted, and (2) local wisdom is constructed from the extraction of local culture through the contribution of community leaders so that it is increasingly recognized its significance in dynamizing the harmony of life among religious people.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In terms of terminology, local wisdom is at the heart of community traditions that are seen as communal property, deemed suitable, known for their positive significance, and proven to be effective in sustaining society and protecting it from elements that could be damaging (Arif 2015, Nur, Nurrahmah and Noorbani 2022). This is what is called *al-'urf* in the concept of *Ushul Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), which became one of the foundations of scholars in formulating Islamic law and disseminating Islam. Local wisdom is necessary to foster harmony among community groups and among communities and the natural environment, which has been proven in various religions (Liliweri 2014).

From sociological perspective, each

society has three systems: social, personality, and cultural (Putranto and Hendar 2005, Sutrisno 2014). The social system emerges from recurring patterns of people interacting in a society, which can create either conflict or accord. The personality system consists of each person's inherent inclinations that demand satisfaction, like wants, likings, and yearnings. These fulfillment efforts are shaped by socialization and the value system. Regulation is thus required to uphold social order. A cultural system comprises values and symbols that let people communicate, synchronize, and collaborate. Cultural systems have three spheres of influence: the domain of knowledge symbols, the domain of expressive symbols, and ethical standards. In line with these three systems, the results of empirical research confirm the existence of various models of harmony systems that support the maintenance of harmony among religious people (Sulanam 2018), namely: (a) generic harmony in the form of a harmony model driven by the government with various affirmative policies, regulations, legislation, and concrete programs, (b) rhetorical harmony in the form of the embodiment of generic harmony into the life of community religious praxis, (c) exotic harmony in the form of the realization of social attitudes and behaviors based on the spirit of mutual respect, which often feels unique and transcends the formalism of diversity, (d) genetic harmony in the form of harmony passed down in the family for generations, or a sense of "family" that has encouraged mutually bonding behaviors despite differing beliefs.

In general, there are three models of strategies applied by religions in the face of the current pluralistic situation (Mujiburrahman 2008), namely (a) religious conquest or revolution strategies seek to unite diversity in one view considered correct, (b) self-exile strategies that try to create fortifications and be exclusive so as not to be swept away by the torrent of plurality, and (c) dialogical strategies that open themselves up to *sharing* a variety of ideas and willing to interact with each other. As

a forum for mass mobilization, socio-religious groups in choosing strategies for articulating their understanding and movement in the public sphere are influenced by the values embraced, the surrounding socio-cultural context, and other factors that contribute to the continuity of the group.

Within the dynamics of community life, where people face diverse and complex sociocultural issues, local wisdom is required to serve many functions: (a) as an identifier of the community's identity, (b) as a unifying force connecting citizens, (c) arising internally in a non-coercive manner, (d) providing a sense of shared color and togetherness, (e) facilitating shifts in mindsets and relationships toward common ground, (f) driving processes of appreciation and participation, as well as diminishing factors that undermine social cohesion (Suprpto 2010). Strategic policies are needed to realize harmony and overcome communal conflicts, which can be realized, among others, through (a) functionalization of social institutions, (b) extracting the value of local wisdom, (c) expanding the participation of all levels of society, and (d) developing new institutions that are contributive to efforts to strengthen the harmony of living together.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This article applied quantitative and qualitative field research on the lives of plural communities whose citizens are classified as *active involvement* in building harmony: the Muslim Village community in Kupang NTT. Visiting the field for data collection were carried out between August – December 2022. Accompanied by Kupang Muslim leaders, the researcher visited Muslim communities in that city. Based on the qualitative research mapping of Bodgan and Biklen, in this case, the research was included in Sociocultural Studies since it used a particular framework and is based on the theoretical assumption that the world is not “something that can be known directly” (Potter 1996). Moreover, it requires a native point of view and depends on the researcher's

perspective. As a form of sociocultural studies, this study assumes that (a) all social relations are influenced by certain factors that need to be explained in a specific context and (b) all studies depart from theoretical understanding.

In line with these theoretical assumptions, the harmony among religious communities amid a pluralistic society is dynamic. Therefore, the great efforts are needed to maintain it. In such a context, local wisdom is a manifestation of shared-capital and joint efforts of the Kupang Muslim people, as found in Muslim communities in the villages such as Fatubesî, Airmata, and Solor, which are full of meaning and need to be understood from the perspective of informants and their historical-natural settings in order to produce both descriptive and reflective field notes. Field notes are the collected data that are transcribed and interpreted based on the principle of data description and mutual simultaneous shaping analysis (Moleong 2001). Field data were explored from primary and secondary sources through passive participation observation, semi-structured interviews, and document studies (Moleong 2001, Silverman 1993, Sugiyono 2006).

Informants came from religious leaders, community leaders, and residents of the Muslim village of Kupang City as the subject of research. The collection of primary data was carried out through (a) interviews with relevant informants, namely residents of Muslim villages in Kupang City, community leaders, and local religious leaders, (b) observations, and (c) documentation, with horizontal collaboration, namely internal collaboration among the team of researchers, in the data analysis process which includes stages: recording field data *with contextual sensitivity when in the field*, analyzing field data after the data was collected through the triangulation process, and moving towards results through analytic induction (Sarantakos 2005) including the description, focus, and selection stages. The primary data was enriched with various secondary data explored from websites and literatures on the socio-religious life of

Muslim villages in Kupang City.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Islamization in Kupang NTT Province

NTT is an archipelago area that includes seven large islands, namely Sumba, Timor, Flores, Alor, Lembata, Rote, and Sabu (Harahap 2015). As mentioned in *Human and Culture in Indonesia*, culturally the people of NTT have at least two prevailing cultures, namely Flores culture and Timorese culture (Koentjaraningrat 2004). Flores is not an ethnic group with a completely uniform

culture, since there are differences in physical characteristics and dialects of the language in Flores's culture. There are at least eight sub-ethnic groups in Flores culture, which include (a) *Manggarai* people, (b) *Riung* people, (c) *Ngada* people, (d) *Nage-keo* people, (e) *Ende* people, (f) *Lio* people, (g) *Sikka* people, and (h) *Larantuka* people. In Portuguese, Flores means "flower". S.M. Cabot first introduced the name Flores, which refers to the eastern region of the island of Flores. In 1636, the Governor General of the Dutch East Indies Company, Hendrik Brouwer, officially used that name. As an island region, Flores is divided into eight

**Table 1.** Number of Religious Believers in NTT Province 2019.

No	Regency/City Name	Number of Religion Adherents				
		Islam	Protestant	Catholic	Hinduism	Buddhism
1	West Sumba	10,474	73,704	32,520	275	5
2	East Sumba	19,289	221,075	26,709	589	27
3	Kupang	8,554	335,626	50,123	470	
4	South Central Timor	13,248	448,479	60,708	489	5
5	North Central Timor	5,133	18,173	244,491	314	
6	Belu	9,564	15,390	195,517	186	152
7	Alor	6,688	138,863	6,688	346	
8	Lembata	37,278	1,805	98,587	139	15
9	East Flores	60,146	4,085	229,892	94	
10	Sikka	37,742	4,549	291,599	424	170
11	Ende	65,299	5,954	247,502	227	10
12	Ngada	10,366	3,763	140,222	139	
13	Manggarai	23,390	3,062	380,154	41	
14	Rote Ndao	8,237	142,116	2,651	32	3
15	West Manggarai	57,984	2,162	210,809	159	5
16	Central Sumba	4,719	63,042	14,780	95	
17	Southwest Sumba	7,068	180,266	159,574	158	11
18	Nagekeo	14,891	1,018	138,921	51	
19	East Manggarai	21,147	795	256,201	95	
20	Sabu Rai Jua	663	88,653	2,450	52	
21	Malacca	1,910	15,805	146,673	51	
22	Kupang City	43,025	431,586	89,321	6,621	215
<b>Total</b>		466,815	2,199,971	3,026,092	11,047	618

Source: <https://ntt.kemenag.go.id>

districts administratively: West Manggarai, Manggarai, Ngada, Nageko, Ende, Sikka, East Flores, and Lembata.

Meanwhile, historically, Timorese culture includes ethnic groups that were once Portuguese colonies and Dutch East Indies Company colonies and Portuguese colonies (Windiarti 2006)(Interview, 25 August 2022). After the referendum on East Timor's secession from Indonesia in 1999, which marked the birth of the State of Timor Leste, part of Timor's cultural area became part of the territory of the new state. Part of it is still part of the territory of the NTT province. As a former Portuguese and Dutch colony, most of NTT's population adheres to Protestant and Catholic Christianity. When mapped generally, most Flores cultural communities adhere to the Catholic religion. In contrast, most of the Timorese cultural community adheres to Protestant Christianity, as shown by the data on the number of religious believers in NTT in the following Table 1.

In line with this data, the Directorate General of Population and Civil Registration (*Dukcapil*) of the Ministry of Home Affairs (*Kemendagri*) noted that the total population of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) was approximately 5,740,455 people in June 2021. Of these, as many as 3,026,092 people (52.72%) are Catholic, 2,199,971 people (38.32%) are Protestant, 466,815 people (8.13%) are Muslim. Furthermore, the population of NTT who are Hindus is 11,047 people (0.19 %), 618 people (0.01 %) are Buddhist, and as many as 32 people (0.0005%) in NTT are Confucian. The remaining 35,880 people (0.62%) adhere to the ethnic religion.

As the provincial capital, Kupang City has the largest population spread across 6 sub-districts and 51 urban villages. However, when seen from a comprehensive perspective, Kupang is the smallest city in NTT. Its area, which is only 26.18 km<sup>2</sup>, is divided in detail into *Alak* District covers 12 villages; *Maulafa* District covers 9 villages; *Oebobo* District covers 7 villages; *Kota Raja* District covers 8 villages; *Kelapa Lima* District covers 5 villages,

and *Kota Lama* Subdistrict covers ten villages, means that Kupang City is the most populous city and the most diverse condition of its people socio-culturally. With these conditions, it is understandable if the problems faced by the government and the people of Kupang City are very complex compared to those faced by the other city/regency in NTT Province.

Based on the data from Dukcapil and the Ministry of Religious Affairs above, it can be seen that Islam ranks third in terms of the number of adherents. The development of Islam in Kupang NTT went through a long historical process, as shown by various historical heritage sites, such as the Balido Khalifa tomb near the coast/bay of Kupang, the tomb of Depati Amir, Baitul Qadim Mosque in Airmata Village, and Solor Village Mosque. The name Kupang, the capital city of NTT, comes from the name of a king, namely Nai Kopan or Lai Kopan, who ruled Kupang before the arrival of the Portuguese in NTT (Artanegara 2019). There are different opinions about the beginning of the Islamization process in Kupang. There was a signal that Islam had entered NTT around the end of the tenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century, brought by merchants and proselytizers from the Island Solor, east of Flores. One of his famous figures was the Sultan of Menanga, Sahbudin al-Farisi (Kasim 2018).

Although most experts affirm the Menanga Solor Sultanate as the epicenter of Islamic development in NTT, they differ in opinion regarding the early origins of Islamization there. There are at least three theories about the beginning of Islamization in NTT, namely: (1) the Hadhramaut-Aceh theory, which confirms that the Islam that came, accepted, and developed in NTT is an Islam that originated in such region, brought by traders, preachers (*mubalig*), and Sufism proponents by the route: Hadhramaut-Gujarat-Aceh-Malacca-Gresik-Makassar-Watanpao-Menanga-Solor, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD; (2) the Persian-Palembang theory which states that the Islam that developed in NTT was

Islam brought by traders, preachers, and Sufism proponents through the following channels: Persia-Malabar-Palembang-Banten-Cirebon-Demak-Makassar-Menanga Solor in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD; and (3) the Bengal-Moluccas theory which points out that the Islam that developed in NTT was the Islam that merchants, preachers, and Sufism proponents brought through Path: Bench-Cantonese-Pharang [Vietnam]-Maluku-Makassar-Lamakera Solor, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD (Kasim 2018).

The various theories demonstrate that the process of Islamization in NTT went through several stages and routes prior to the colonial era. These events were confirmed by a prominent Muslim leader in NTT, A. Malik Usman, who explained, "Islam first arrived in NTT through the Solor Archipelago, consisting of the islands of Solor, Adonara, and Lembata. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Islam had reached the village of Solor, the oldest Islamic center there. In this village is an ancient tombstone which the locals believe belongs to the first Islamic preacher, commonly known as the "Father of Pandavas" (Interview, 25 August 2022). In line with the *coming-accepted-developing* theory, Islamic preaching eventually succeeded in giving birth to the Menanga Solor Sultanate.

The penetration of Western colonialism, mainly Portuguese, was increasing. The King of Timor, another source mentions the King of the Helong Kingdom (Artanegara 2019), as the ruler of Kupang at that time, asked the Sultanate of Menanga Solor to help resist the Portuguese colonial attack. Therefore, many troops of the Menanga Solor Sultanate were sent to Kupang to help the King of Timor fight against Portuguese colonialism. Thanks to the support of troops from the Sultanate of Menanga Solor and several other areas, the King of Timor defeated the Portuguese troops. As a reward, Muslim troops from the Menanga Solor Sultanate were given fiefs from the King of Timor. The location of the fief is not far from the center of government of the Kingdom of Timor and is named *Kampung* Solor, after the name of the area of the Muslim troops of the

Menanga Solor Sultanate. Thus, the name Solor refers to two historical places and has significance for Islamization in NTT. *First*, Solor refers to the seat of government of the Menanga Sultanate, namely Solor Island, which is about 200 km from Kupang. *Second*, Solor refers to Solor Muslim Village, about 3 km from Kupang City. Historically, the formation of the Muslim village of Solor began from the fief, which was awarded to the troops of the Menanga Solor Sultanate for successfully helping the King of Timor resist the attacks of the Portuguese army (Interview, 25 August 2022).

The process of Islamization continued until the time of Indonesia's independence. Muslims from various regions make Kupang City livelihood destinations such as Java, Sulawesi, and Sumatera. Their arrival significantly increased the number of Muslim populations in Kupang, helping to move the wheels of the economy and expand the spread of Islam. The chairman of the Kampung Solor Mosque Foundation acknowledged the critical role of migrants in the "wave" of Islamization in recent decades (Interview, 22 October 2022). The important contribution of Muslim immigrants, along with others, is demonstrated by the work of the Taklim Forum of Darul Ulum (Teaching of Islamic materials) in Solor Village. This forum promotes Quran recitation for both children and adults of local Muslims and migrants, with over 260 participants. The Taklim Forum already has a fairly representative permanent building on Kosasih Street in Solor Village, holding regular recitation activities every afternoon and evening. The forum also has Islamic teachers guiding the recitations and teachings (Interview, 23 October 2022). Before having a permanent building, it rented a house and is still moving around.

### **Local Wisdom Values of Muslim Village Communities in Kupang City**

In the past, Fatubesi served as a stopping point for preachers before they engaged in trade and spread Islam in Kupang. This was

due to its proximity to the coastline, which functioned as a port city at that time. Evidence of this includes the tombs of Bapa Balido Khalifa and Atu Laga Namang, who were from the Lamakera Solor Tribe. Their tombs are located on the shores of the Oeba/Fatubesi area. Both figures are said to have successfully fought off the Portuguese army. As a result, they were granted control over the Solor Muslim village in Kupang as a prize (Observation, 22 October 2022). Presumably, due to the movement of the Muslim community from Fatubesi to Solor village, Fatubesi is no longer a "Muslim village," and the tombs of Mr. Balido Khalifa and Atu Laga Namang are not complex Muslim tombs, like the *Kampung* Airmata Muslim graveyard.

Although not a Muslim village, Fatubesi still has an essential meaning for the model of maintaining harmony in life among religious people. Fatubesi Village is plural because diverse residents in tribes, groups, and religions inhabit it. In such context, the Mayor of Kupang, Jefrison Riwu Kore, mentioned Fatubesi village as one of the pilot villages for harmonizing religious harmony in NTT (Jahang 2019c). Its reason is that the population of Fatubesi village is very dense, coming from various tribes, religions, and groups. Nevertheless, their lives remained harmonious and peaceful. Among the essential aspects that underlie the harmony of life are the highly tolerant attitude of the residents and the willingness to help each other. One of the concrete manifestations of tolerant and mutual assistance that is highly appreciated by the Kupang City Government is the establishment of togetherness among religious people in organizing the Choir Party of the National Level of Ecclesiastical Voice (PESPARANI) II in NTT in October 2022, namely the chairman of the committee is from a Muslim and NU of NTT figure, as an example of noble collaboration and diversity work in organizing grand Christian religious events (Makani 2022).

In the life of a plural society, tolerance is very much needed to realize harmony among

citizens. Departing from the empirical reality, residents show two types of tolerant attitudes. *First*, the passive tolerance shown through the attitude of Muslims to respect differences in beliefs, not to question them, and to allow each group to practice the faith that she/he embraced. Some Muslims consider that implementing Pesparani is the right of Christians, especially Catholics, which should be appreciated as a means of selecting regional talented seeds in the field of religious song art and simultaneously as a place to maintain harmony among them. *Second*, active tolerance that does not only appreciate differences but also establish cooperation in the midst of differences. The involvement of NU figures in organizing Pesparani as chairman of the committee is a form of realization of active tolerance. Although Pesparani's activities are full of religious symbols, active involvement in the committee should not necessarily be interpreted as participating in religious ritual activities.

Passive tolerance is necessary to achieve peaceful coexistence despite divergent beliefs, mirroring coexistence. Furthermore, active tolerance demonstrates coexistence and the capacity to collaborate and work together to realize harmony amid differences, commonly referred to as pro-existence. Some Muslims still tend to exhibit coexistence, while others have progressed towards pro-existence. Additionally, two critical components need strengthening to construct a foundation for tolerance: (a) an inclusive value framework comprising religious/cultural principles that are open and prepared to exist alongside other religions/cultures, and (b) cultural systems as an conflict resolution establishment when differences cause discord (Tiran 2019).

In line with tolerance, other values of local wisdom are the recognition of plurality shown by (1) diversity as the identity of Kupang City (Situmorang 2018), (2) affirmative policies of local governments towards increasing harmony in life between religious people, (3) the existence of a pilot model of harmonious life between religious people, and

(4) appreciation of the achievement of the level of harmony of life between religious people. The recognition of plurality is implied in the designation NTT as an abbreviation of "Nusa Terindah Tolerasi" [the Best Island of Tolerance] and the existence of another naming of Flobamora for NTT as an abbreviation of Flores, Sumba, Timor, and Alor, which are the names of the four major islands in the province. In that context, Kupang City is the largest city in NTT Province, located on the Island of Timor, a city inhabited by various ethnic groups. With this fact, the Kupang City Government also pays full attention to the efforts to develop Kupang City into the City of Love, which is a sisterly and brotherly home for all religious people.

From some exciting facts about Kupang, at least two things deserve to be underlined because they are relevant to recognizing the plurality: Kupang as a City of Tolerance and a City of Multiethnic. Related to the City of Tolerance, Kupang City was in the top five out of 94 cities in Indonesia with the highest score in the 2020 Tolerant City Index (IKT). Meanwhile, related to Multiethnic City, Kupang City is recognized as the largest city in NTT Province, whose population comes from various tribes, such as Timor, Rote, Flores, Alor, Java, Bali, and Bugis-Makassar. During the data collection process in the field, the author had the opportunity to visit a night culinary place in Solor Village, Kupang City, where most of the traders came from the Javanese (Interview, 22 October 2022). The author also had the opportunity to visit Kupang's gift of the trip and souvenir shop, "Ibu Soekiran," which was pioneered by a businesswoman from Bantul, Yogyakarta, and visited the Taklim forum of Darul Ulum, Solor village whose caregiver is from Lamongan (East Java small town). From such visits, it was clear that they could work to scavenge fortunes well, and many of them were classified as successful in pursuing their efforts and actively participating in implementing Islamic activities (Observation and interview, 22 October 2022).

Empirically, plurality recognition can be manifested in the existence of harmonious villages in Kupang City, namely Fatubesi Village and Kolhua Village (Makani 2022). On the one hand, a harmonious village indicates a strong commitment with the community, interfaith religious leaders, and the government to present *best practices* in realizing harmony between religious people, which has become an essential icon of Kupang City. It is recognized that the high acceptance of the community, the significant role of the Kupang City Government, Interreligious People Harmony Forum (FKUB), and the Kupang City Ministry of Religious Affairs strongly support such recognition (Iswanto and Hutapea 2020). On the other hand, the existence of the village of harmony is a symbol of religious "inclusivism" because here religion is required to carry out its public role in natural social and interfaith life as a form of recognition of *the visible religious sphere* (Casanova 1994). *Kampung Kerukunan* (Harmony Village) is an identity that is expected to stimulate the process of identifying all residents as tolerant religious adherents following the cultural image of the Kupang people. In that context, identity is a cultural marker/differentiator. At the same time, identification is an attempt to align oneself with identity (Jenkins 2008) and, simultaneously, build an identity to become a positive image known well by the public.

According to Riginaldus Serang, the Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of NTT Province, the people of NTT possess much local wisdom as seen in their expressions and culture. These include (a) Katong Samua Basodara, meaning "We are all brothers and sisters", which promotes prioritizing living together; (b) Nempung and Kulalabong, referring to meeting for discussion and having heartfelt conversations to find solutions and resolve issues; and (c) Lonto Leok culture, which involves talking about the shared interests and benefits of diverse tribes and faiths, placing common ground above differences (Murtado 2022). Such



Source: Personal Documents, 2022

**Figure 1.** The Pulpit of the Sermon and the First Mihrab of the Bayt al-Qadim Mosque

phrase/culture shows that the practice of deliberation, the priority of common interests, a sense of brotherhood, and positive communication across tribes and religions have gone well, not only in Kupang City, but also in various other areas in NTT (Ahmad 2021, Horsan 2020, Satyananda, Sanjaya, Dwikayana et al. 2013). The concept of *culture is integrated* in Anthropology, which implies that *culture is integrated* with various aspects of people's lives and determines a set of core values (Kottak 2008, Kottak 2011), may be relevant to explain that these cultural practices have become the local wisdom of the

institutionalized NTT community and greatly influenced their life patterns so that many of the empirical facts are found in the field (Parera and Marzuki 2020).

### **Actualization of Local Wisdom Values in Muslim Village Communities in Kupang**

The long history of Islamic development in Muslim villages has given birth to various cultural traditions. One of the famous religious and cultural traditions of Muslim villages in Kupang City is the *Siripuan* tradition whose procession is enlivened by carnivals and parades to celebrate the Birthday of the Prophet (*Maulid Nabi*). Implementing that tradition was centered at the *Bayt al-Qadim* Mosque in Airmata Village, which Kupang City Government officials and the wider community, including non-Muslims, attended. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Siripuan* tradition had carried the theme "Unity in Diversity, Diversity in Unity." This theme strengthens the mission of organizing the *Siripuan* tradition to increase the relationship between Muslims and other religious people in Kupang City. According to Jamal A. Talib, Chairman of the Board for Mosque Prosperity (BKM) Masjid Bayt al-Qadim, "The performance of the Prophet's Birthday celebration involves various mosque administrators in Kupang City. Many Muslims out of the city return home so that they can participate in witnessing the performance of the *Siripuan* tradition and at the same time celebrate the Prophet's Birthday" (Interview, 22 October 2022). Naturally, the performance of the *Siripuan* tradition full of excitement and togetherness is highly appreciated by the Mayor of Kupang because it is considered a proud event and shows great unity and togetherness (Jahang 2019c, Kaesmetan 2019).

The Bayt al-Qadim Mosque in Kupang is a key location for performing the *Siripuan* tradition and is one of the oldest mosques in the area. The mosque was originally constructed on land provided by Sya'ban bin Sanga in 1806 in what is now Airmata Village. According to Abdus Syukur, the Chairman of

the Bayt al-Qadim Mosque Administrators, and A. Malik Usman, the name "Airmata" has two potential meanings: (a) it could refer to the area being a water source, since Airmata Village is situated around the Kali Dendeng river, which runs through and supplies water to Kupang City (Wirasanti 2017); and (b) the place where the fighters' tears spilled due to the atrocities of the invaders. Many fighters were captured by the invaders and exiled to this village until their deaths, including Kyai Arsyad from Banten, Dipati Amir Bahrain from Bangka Belitung, and Sultan Dompu M. Sirojuddin from Bima (Interview, 22 October 2022)(Mariyosef 2016). Some sources say that the process of building the mosque for the first time received help from Christians living around Airmata Village.

Given the historical context provided, the Bayt al-Qadim Mosque in Airmata Village holds great significance as it represents the arrival of Islam in NTT, which also served as the hub for the spread of Islam across the NTT region. Furthermore, it stands as a unifying emblem between Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In recent times, the mosque has been utilized as a spiritual tourism destination in Kupang City. As such, it is only fitting that the Bayt al-Qadim Mosque be recognized as one of the historic mosques of Indonesia, considering its storied history and continued cultural importance (Zein 1999). Realizing its historical value, the renovation of the mosque to a two-floor building carried out by residents until now still maintains the artifact (*petilasan*) of the *mihrab* and the pulpit of the sermon located in the first building of the mosque on the ground floor. It is no longer used, but only for historical evidence regarding the existence of the Bayt al-Qadim Mosque, which was established more than two hundred years ago.

The ornamentation of the sermon pulpit and mihrab of the mosque seems simple when compared, for example, to the Muslim Village Mosque of Pegayaman Buleleng of Bali, established more than two hundred years ago. As shown in the following picture, the carving art of the mihrab and pulpit of the Pegayaman

Mosque looks very artistic as a fusion of Balinese carving/sculpture and Islamic calligraphy.

By comparing the two mosques, it is very reasonable to name a mosque as a *living culture*, reminding that it is the result of building art created by its community and continues to develop from generation to



Source: Personal Documents, 2019

**Figure 2.** The Pulpit of Sermon and First Mihrab of Pegayaman Mosque.

generation. As a religious building, the mosque reflects the architectural art of the people who built it to support various socio-religious activities (Syaom Barliana 2008). There are two main aspects in mosque architecture, namely function and form (Hamdani, Suprapti and Rukayah 2022, Wirakusumah, Antariksa and Salura 2021). Judging from the aspect of function, the mihrab and pulpit of the two mosques have something in common, but they are different in shape and ornamentation.

The *Siripuan* tradition, centered in the Bayt al-Qadim Mosque, is a form of religious and cultural interaction. Religion and culture can influence each other because they are values and symbols (Kuntowijoyo 2001). The *Siripuan* tradition is loaded with values and symbols of Muslims' love for the Prophet. The holding of the carnival and celebration and the provision of *ubo rampe* (ritual materials) in the procession of the *Siripuan* tradition so that it seems very lively shows the potent fusion of local cultural values and symbols. Therefore, because of the interaction of religion and culture to recognize the pattern of locality, the commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday in the *Siripuan* tradition is different from the commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday in various other regions, such as *Sekaten* in Yogya, *Endhog-endhogan* in Banyuwangi, *Keresan* tradition in Mojokerto, and *Male* tradition in Balinese Muslim village (Latifah 2019).

Apart from being the culmination of the commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday, the *Siripuan* tradition is also intended as a commemoration of an important milestone in the history of Islamic development in Kupang City, NTT, which cannot be separated from the services of the struggle of Depati Amir Bahrain from Pangkal Pinang Bangka Belitung who was once "exiled" by Dutch colonists to Kupang in 1815 AD. Depati Amir was pivotal in spreading Islam in Kupang and other areas in NTT (Interview, 22 October 2022). He spearheaded the fight against the invaders until his dying day, earning him the title of national hero. As a result, delegates from Pangkal Pinang City and

Bangka Belitung Province were also asked to come to the *Siripuan* festivities so the historical fabric could be tightly woven once more. Therefore, the *Siripuan* custom not only maintains ancestral traditions but also bolsters cultural connections in the growth of Islam in Kupang, the harmony of interfaith life, and modes of institutionalizing identity (Jenkins 2008). *Institutionalizing identification* is an effort to institutionalize self-adjustment to identity or identity constructions within Muslims and among religious people, even with the government and historical roots of Islam in Kupang. Efforts are made by regularly celebrating the *Siripuan* tradition with a "standardized" procession and involving various stakeholders in Kupang, including those outside Kupang (Interview, 13 December 2022). Here, Muslims refresh their cultural identity to affirm their existence, work, and expectations to build harmony in religious life.

The *Siripuan* tradition is a cultural instrument of Muslims to meet emotional, psychological, and religious needs, and to obtain formal and informal support from various parties (Kottak 2011), such as citizens, religious leaders, community leaders, and officials/governments. In the sociological review, religion is a social institution (Glasberg and Silven 2005, Schaefer 2012) with manifest functions and latent functions. Similarly, with the *Siripuan* as part of religious tradition, there is in it a manifest function and a latent function; its manifest function is the role of the Prophet's Birthday, while its latent function is the affirmation of the existence of Islam as part of a pluralistic and culturally diverse society of Kupang. The routine implementation of the *Siripuan* tradition can be interpreted as an agent of socialization (Glasberg and Silven 2005) to the function of the manifest and the latent function so that the image of Islam-Kupang and Islam-harmony is built. In this context, the *Siripuan* tradition as a cultural practice can present a renewal of identity and agency and act as a way of "negotiating" with the dominant identity (Weedon 2004).

In addition to the *Siripuan* tradition,

interfaith cooperation is another actualization of the value of local wisdom, shown through the performance of the *Siripuan* and *Pesparani* traditions at the national level, which has been going well. Interfaith cooperation is also built in various other activities, such as constructing houses of worship (mosques and churches) and helping each other for the smooth running of worship/worship activities (Lodja 2022). The words of wisdom from local tradition Katong Samua Basodara (We are all brothers and sisters) have promoted the necessity to prioritize life in unity. The presence of interfaith cooperation grounded in a spirit of kinship was validated by R. Serang, Head of the Religious Affairs Office of the NTT Province, through his declaration, "In the building of places of worship in NTT, because familial bonds are robust, it is common for the construction of mosques, churches, temples, and more to be undertaken collectively" (Murtado 2022).

Members of the FKUB NTT board, Sisilia Sona and Marhaban, said that in the community itself, a culture of mutual respect and mutual assistance has been built firmly if people from other religions want to establish houses of worship. There is a spirit of cooperation between religious people, as can be seen from the willingness to help each other by sharing parking and taking care of each other during the implementation of religious holidays between Jamaat of al-Muttaqin Mosque and the congregation of Protestant Batak Christian Church (HKBP) Kupang City. When Muslims perform the Ied prayer, the Christians will be in charge of escorting the worship. On the other hand, when Christians carry out Christmas services, young Muslims will change to maintain the smooth implementation of Christmas worship (Amnifu 2022, Lodja 2022). In such a context, religious acculturation takes place, namely religion actualized through the culture of cooperation, and be able to appear as a friendly cultural religion carrying out cooperation based on humanity to solve concrete problems and be able to avoid being trapped in the symptoms of

formalism and religious ritualism (Sutrisno 2014).

It should be acknowledged that not all societies are prepared to participate in mutual assistance regarding "ritual" matters, as this would violate the principle of tolerance limits. The reason is that mutual aid is permitted in the realm of social interests that have no connection to respective religious beliefs or rituals, which represents a form of religious tolerance still within boundaries (Nuryatno 2011). In contrast, the practice of mutual assistance in constructing houses of worship exemplifies a form of religious tolerance that extends beyond boundaries. It is said to be within boundaries because the practice of tolerance is grounded more in shared values deeply ingrained in the culture. It is said to be beyond boundaries because tolerance is based more on the value of brotherhood and interfaith mutual assistance, so religious differences do not erect dividing barriers or exclusive identities that become sources of conflict.

### **The Main Problems of Muslim Village Communities in Kupang City in Preserving Harmony among Religious People**

Theoretically, it is worth assuming that minority citizens generally have less positive feelings, such as feeling less secure and less comfortable, than majority citizens (Simon 2004). When the existing sociocultural system tends to subordinate minority groups, the pattern of relations established between the majority and minority is not equal. The mentioning of minority and majority is determined by the identity used. People of Javanese ethnicity who are Christians can be called the majority residents in Kupang City if the identity used is religion. Otherwise, Kupang natives who are Muslims can also be called minorities. A person's identity is certainly not singular: many identities are related to ethnicity, religion, profession, language, and others. One identity possibly breeds social differentiation, but another

drives social integration (Suyanto and Bagong 2004). Of these various identities, self-identity related to religion in our society is usually quite dominant, although this identity is dynamic. A lack of positivity in the minority is a latent feeling that is ready to prevail when a lighter appears, such as the treatment tends to be "discriminatory" from local governments and majority provocations.

Ethnic, Religious, and Racial sentiment (SARA) nuanced violence that occurred in other areas, namely Ketapang Region in West Jakarta, in the form of the destruction of several Christian churches and schools at the beginning of the Reformation Era on 21-22 November 1998, had also spread to the Kupang City due to provocations that triggered mobs to vandalize mosques and expulsion of Muslims on 30 November 1998 (Klinken 2007) (Interview, 22 October 2022). The events of a few years ago seem to remain imprinted as memories of "traumatic" experiences and the less positive feelings of some Muslim communities there. Therefore, local governments and community leaders have ceaselessly called for strengthening the knots of harmony and preventing all forms of intolerance that could threaten harmony among religious people.

The complete restoration of the mosque in Solor Village, namely the *al-Fattah* Mosque, which has received less attention from the local government, is thought to trigger less satisfied feelings. In this regard, the administrator of the *al-Fattah* Mosque Foundation said, "The *al-Fattah* Mosque has undergone a complete restoration. We don't know when this restoration will be completed. The financial assistance from the city government is just a little that we received. The amount is also much less than the allocation of funds given by the city government for the renovation or restoration of church buildings. We understand as a minority" (Interview, 22 October 2022). Although the expression of less joyful feelings is still passive, if this is neglected, it will slowly encourage *distrust* and *disobedience* of minority citizens towards the

government and will stoke prejudice against the majority citizens.

The relationship between majority and minority is also related to the issue of people's plurality, viewed from religion, ethnicity, race, and culture. Analyzing the political theory of recognition, the plurality of people in this contemporary era differs from the previous era, because each group of communities demands rights, and their identity is recognized (Mujiburrahman 2008). In turn, the politics of recognition causes a paradox, considering that, on the one hand, it presupposes the existence of universal values that underlie respect for anyone as a human being. However, on the other hand, it also supposes that each person or group has an equal standing and right to form, maintain, and develop a particular identity that distinguishes them from other groups. From such a paradox, the occurrence of creative tensions may color the relationship between majority and minority in a plural society, reminding us that the relationships among groups or social processes in a plural society can be associative and dissociative (Suyanto and Bagong 2004).

At least, there are three possible strategies of various social groups in facing the existing plurality (Mujiburrahman 2008), giving rise to possible patterns of associative social relationships/processes or dissociative ones. *First*, the strategy of conquest, that is, the dominant group tends to unite the diversity to fit one view that is considered correct. *Second*, the strategy of self-seclusion through the creation of social barriers to maintain authenticity and counteract the confusing influence of plurality. *Third*, dialogue strategies through opening up to differences, appreciating cross-opinions, and initiating alternative solutions to overcome them. The dialogue strategy develops positive communication and collaboration to realize harmony in diversity and difference.

Of the three strategies, the dialogue strategy is considered the most appropriate for addressing differences in order to realize harmony. However, this strategy faces a

deadlock when the infiltration of religious radicalism is strengthening. A statement by P. Selestinus, General Coordinator of the Indonesian Democracy Defense Team (TPDI), that the Islamization movement in NTT needs to be watched out for because it is increasingly troubling religious people in NTT province, confirms the emergence of widespread unrest among religious people in NTT that has an impact on various dissociative relations in society, such as competition, conflict, and controversial. A similar statement was made by the Head of the Division of Socio-political Issues (Kesbangpolinmas) of NTT province, Sisilia Sona, that three radicalisms are spreading in NTT, namely Gafatar, HTI, and ISIS (Baiduri 2016). Therefore, the Vice Mayor of Kupang City, Hermanus Man, once invited residents to fight against radicalism together because it is suspected that it grows and spread in society (Jahang 2019a). As a form of concrete steps, the Kupang Police conducted the operation of *Bina Waspada Turangga* 2022 to prevent and minimize the spreading of radicalism, anti-Pancasila, and intolerance among religious people.

## CONCLUSION

Fatubesi Village has an important history for the spread of Islam in Kupang and the establishment of several Muslim villages. Although no longer a Muslim village today, Fatubesi was named one of the pilot villages for harmonizing religious life in NTT. The villagers' lives are characterized by harmony, peace, and fellowship. One concrete example of the tolerant and mutually supportive attitude that is highly valued is the weaving together of Muslims and Christians in organizing major religious events. This demonstrates the local wisdom of active tolerance that embraces differences.

The realization of local wisdom values can be viewed in the religious cultural tradition of *Siripuan*, where carnivals and festivals are held to celebrate the Prophet's birthday centered around the Bayt al-Qadim Mosque in

Airmata Village. The *Siripuan* tradition represents religious and cultural interaction. As the pinnacle of the Prophet's birthday commemoration, it marks an important milestone in the development of Islam in Kupang. Thus, it does not only preserve inherited traditions but also strengthens cultural pillars in the spread of Islam in Kupang, religious harmony, and institutionalized identification.

The harmony between religious groups is dynamic. A root cause is that minorities have less positive feelings, like feeling insecure and uncomfortable, compared to the majority. The labels of minority and majority depend on the identity used, whether ethnicity, religion, profession, language or other. One identity may cause social differentiation, but another promotes integration. The less positive sentiment among the Muslim minority is a latent feeling that can surface when sparked, such as by discriminatory policies or provocation from the majority.

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