



Religious and Cultural Moderation in Responding to the Challenges of Globalisation in Local Communities

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Abstract: This study explores the implementation of religious moderation in the cultural system of Kupang City society, East Nusa Tenggara, which has diverse demographic characteristics. Using a critical ethnographic approach with data collection techniques of participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, this study identifies four main manifestations of religious moderation: (1) shared rituals and traditions, (2) local wisdom in conflict resolution, (3) interfaith social networks, and (4) transformation of religious values in contemporary cultural practices. Rituals such as Bonet Manekat and Haroan Bupolo function as interfaith meeting spaces, while local wisdom mechanisms such as Suf Natoni and Lais Manekat effectively manage potential religious-based conflicts. Interfaith social networks formed through the customary kinship system (*bela-metan*) become a moral infrastructure that forms the ethics of interfaith relations. However, the study also identifies challenges in the form of the influence of globalization, the politicization of religious identity, economic transformation, and the weakening of the transmission of local wisdom values. In response, the community developed a strategy for revitalizing tradition, strengthening interfaith dialogue based on culture, transforming moderation values through contemporary arts and culture, and integrating religious moderation values into regional development policies. These findings enrich the understanding of the dialectical relationship between religion and culture and provide a new perspective in the implementation of religious moderation policies that are contextual and based on local wisdom.

Keywords: religious moderation, cultural system, local wisdom, multicultural society.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi implementasi moderasi beragama dalam sistem budaya masyarakat Kota Kupang, Nusa Tenggara Timur yang memiliki karakteristik demografis majemuk. Menggunakan pendekatan etnografi kritis dengan teknik pengumpulan data observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan analisis dokumen, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi empat manifestasi utama moderasi beragama: (1) ritual dan tradisi bersama, (2) kearifan lokal dalam resolusi konflik, (3) jejaring sosial lintas agama, dan (4) transformasi nilai-nilai religius dalam praktik budaya kontemporer. Ritual seperti Bonet Manekat dan Haroan Bupolo berfungsi sebagai ruang pertemuan antariman, sementara mekanisme kearifan lokal seperti Suf Natoni dan Lais Manekat efektif mengelola potensi konflik berbasis agama. Jejaring sosial lintas agama yang terbentuk melalui sistem kekerabatan adat (*bela-metan*) menjadi infrastruktur moral yang membentuk etika hubungan antarumat beragama. Namun, penelitian juga mengidentifikasi tantangan berupa pengaruh globalisasi, politisasi identitas religius, transformasi ekonomi, dan melemahnya transmisi nilai kearifan lokal. Sebagai respons, masyarakat mengembangkan

strategi revitalisasi tradisi, penguatan dialog antaragama berbasis budaya, transformasi nilai moderasi melalui seni budaya kontemporer, dan integrasi nilai moderasi beragama dalam kebijakan pembangunan daerah. Temuan ini memperkaya pemahaman tentang hubungan dialektis antara agama dan budaya, serta memberikan perspektif baru dalam implementasi kebijakan moderasi beragama yang kontekstual dan berbasis kearifan lokal.

Kata Kunci: moderasi beragama, sistem budaya, kearifan lokal, masyarakat multikultural

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Introduction

Indonesia is a pluralistic country characterised by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity which has become a fundamental characteristic of the Indonesian nation (Adha et al., 2021; Fathiniah & Oktarina, 2023). This plurality underlies the formation of a national identity based on diversity as researched by (Pabbajah et al., 2021) in his study on the formation of national identity in a multireligious society. Amid this diversity, religious moderation is a strategic approach to building social cohesion and preventing religious-based conflicts (Hasan, 2024). Mapping religious moderation in Indonesia identifies that the implementation of religious moderation through the community's cultural system offers an effective alternative to building a harmonious religious life, especially in areas with heterogeneous demographic composition (Ahmad & Saepudin, 2024).

Kupang City, as the capital of NTT Province, has unique demographic characteristics compared to other regions in Eastern Indonesia. Based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2023), Kupang's population consists of 54.7% Protestant Christians, 25.3% Catholics, 19.1% Muslims, and the rest Hindus, Buddhists, and believers. This demographic composition creates pluralistic conditions that have implications for the formation of an inclusive and tolerant cultural system, although some studies such as those conducted by Sulaiman (2022) and Widodo (2021) identify potential latent social tensions. Rubaidi et al., (2020) in their research found that Kupang City has developed an effective cultural mechanism for managing inter-religious relations, but there is no comprehensive study that analyses the implementation of religious moderation values in the mechanism.

Religious moderation as a theoretical concept has undergone significant evolution in the study of the sociology of religion and cultural anthropology (Ali, 2023). Religious moderation is not simply a 'middle way' attitude or avoidance of extremism but includes more complex epistemological dimensions such as dialogical openness, respect for plurality of interpretations, and commitment to social justice values (Muhtarom et al., 2020). Research Ardiansyah & Basuki, (2023)

shows variations in the implementation of religious moderation in various socio-political contexts. In the Indonesian context, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2021) and (Ramdhani et al., 2022) noted that religious moderation has become a national agenda integrated into various development policies. However, empirical studies such as those conducted by (Munandar & Susanti, 2025) reveal challenges due to the strong influence of globalization and identity politicization that trigger social polarization. Although there are several studies on religious moderation in Eastern Indonesia such as that conducted by (Massoweang, 2021), specific studies on its implementation in the cultural system in Kupang City are still very limited, especially those that use the theoretical framework of cultural systems as the unit of analysis.

Cultural systems as an analytical framework, as developed by Geertz and reinterpreted by Hefner (2023) and Turner (2021), offers a holistic approach to understanding how cultural values, norms, practices, and symbols shape patterns of social interaction in society (Saddam et al., 2020). Cultural and religious systems in multicultural societies show that cultural systems act as mediators that facilitate interfaith dialogue and the formation of collective identities that transcend religious barriers (Saddam et al., 2020). In the context of the Kupang community, ethnographic research conducted by Fox and Sather (2021) identified various customary rituals, local traditions, and social institutions that have undergone a process of acculturation and syncretism. A study (Hassannusi, 2023) on the *pela gandong* tradition in NTT revealed a unique cultural mechanism in managing potential religious-based conflicts, but has not explicitly analyzed its correlation with the concept of religious moderation. This research gap is the basis for our research to develop a theoretical model that integrates the concept of religious moderation with local cultural systems, especially in the context of multicultural urban communities such as Kupang City.

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of cultural system theory and religious moderation in an analytical framework that considers structural, cultural, and agency dimensions in the context of a multi-religious urban society. This article aims to explore the implementation of religious moderation in the cultural system in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, by analysing various cultural manifestations that reflect the values of religious moderation in people's lives. This research uses a critical ethnographic approach to explore how cultural practices such as traditional rituals, local traditions, and forms of social interaction between religious communities become a medium for the internalization and articulation of religious moderation values. The focus of the analysis is directed at identifying cultural elements that act as social glue in a multi-religious and multicultural society, as well as exploring how local wisdom contributes to the formation of a moderate

religious model. In addition, this research will also examine contemporary challenges in maintaining and strengthening religious moderation amidst the dynamics of globalization, identity politicization, and socio-economic transformation taking place in Kupang City. The findings of this research are expected to make theoretical and practical contributions to the development of religious moderation policies that are based on local wisdom and relevant to the context of contemporary urban society.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of religious moderation in the cultural system of Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand social phenomena deeply and holistically by interpreting the meanings that people attach to their behaviors, perceptions, motivations, and actions in a natural setting (Yin, 2018). The case study design was used because it allows researchers to explore the phenomenon of religious moderation as a bounded system in the specific context of Kupang City, which has diverse demographic characteristics with 54.7% Protestant Christian, 25.3% Catholic, 19.1% Muslim, and the rest Hindu, Buddhist, and indigenous faiths.

The critical ethnography approach is used as a methodological framework to examine how the cultural system of the Kupang community implements the values of religious moderation through cultural practices, traditional rituals, and forms of social interaction between religious communities. Critical ethnography was chosen because it allows researchers not only to describe cultural practices but also to analyze the dimensions of power, identity and social structure that influence the implementation of religious moderation in the local cultural system.

The data collection techniques used in this research include participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis (Sugiyono, 2017). Participatory observation was conducted by following various traditional rituals, local traditions, and social events involving interfaith interactions to understand how the values of religious moderation are articulated in cultural practices. In-depth interviews were conducted with religious leaders, traditional leaders, social activists, policymakers, and community members from various religious backgrounds to gain diverse perspectives on the implementation of religious moderation in cultural systems. Interviews utilized semi-structured guidelines that allowed for flexible exploration of topics. Document analysis was conducted on customary texts, policy documents, local literature, and historical archives to understand the historical and philosophical context of cultural practices that reflect the values of religious moderation.

To ensure the validity of the research data, several validation techniques were used including source triangulation (comparing data from different informants), method triangulation (comparing data from different collection techniques), prolonged engagement (long-term involvement in the field), member checking (confirming data interpretation to informants), and peer debriefing (discussion of findings with fellow researchers) (Emzir, 2014). In addition, researchers also conducted critical reflexivity to realize the researcher's positionality and potential bias in data interpretation.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana which includes data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). The data condensation process involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming data from field notes, interview transcripts, and documents. This stage involved a coding process to identify emerging themes related to cultural manifestations that reflect religious moderation values. Data presentation was done in the form of descriptive narratives, matrices, and diagrams to visualize patterns and relationships between themes found. Drawing conclusions and verification was done iteratively from the beginning of data collection until the end of the research, with continuous verification of new data collected. The analysis process was cyclical and iterative to ensure the depth of interpretation and robustness of the research findings.

Results And Discussion

Results

The results show that the implementation of religious moderation in the cultural system of the Kupang City community is manifested in four main categories: (1) shared rituals and traditions, (2) local wisdom in conflict resolution, (3) interfaith social networks, and (4) transformation of religious values in contemporary cultural practices. These four manifestations form a cultural ecosystem that provides spaces for interfaith encounters and facilitates the formation of religious moderation in the social life of the people of Kupang City.

In the category of shared rituals and traditions, several cultural practices were identified as a medium for interfaith encounters. The Bonet Manekat ritual is a traditional ceremony that involves various religious communities in celebrating the harvest or welcoming guests. Based on participatory observation, this ritual is attended by religious leaders from all five religious communities in Kupang City who play a role in the opening and closing prayers according to their respective religions. As stated by informant TK01 (Timorese traditional leader):

'Bonet Manekat is not just a dance and a song, but a symbol of the unity of Kupang's diverse communities. Despite different religions, we gather together in the same bonet circle, uniting our hearts and minds in chanting verses of wisdom and local wisdom.'

The Haroan Bupolo tradition, which originated from the Buton community and is usually held on holidays such as Idul Fitri or Christmas, has also been transformed into a space for interfaith encounters. Observation data shows that Haroan Bupolo celebrations in Kupang City during the research period involved the participation of followers of different religions who were not only present as guests but also active in the preparation and implementation of the event. Similar patterns were also found in the sea market tradition and the Likurai festival, which were originally traditions of a particular community but are now cultural activities that involve various religious communities.

In the category of local wisdom in conflict resolution, the research identified three effective cultural mechanisms: Suf Natoni (traditional meeting and dialog), Lais Manekat (peace agreement), and Teun Kom Fenu (reconciliation ceremony). Informant TK07 (Islamic religious leader) explains:

"When there was tension between religious communities in Nunbaun Sabu village last year, we used the Suf Natoni approach where traditional elders facilitated a dialog between Muslim and Christian religious leaders. In the forum, we not only discussed the problems but also bound ourselves in the Lais Manekat which contains a commitment to maintain harmony and respect for differences. This approach has proven to be more effective than formal channels because it touches on the cultural dimension of the local community's shared identity."

Documentation studies of the Lais Manekat texts reveal the integration of religious and customary values in the formulation of peace agreements. A content analysis of seven Lais Manekat texts shows that they contain values of religious moderation such as respect for differences, commitment to justice, and rejection of extremism in forms adapted to local idioms.

Interfaith social networks are the third manifestation of the implementation of religious moderation in Kupang's cultural system. The results of a social network analysis of 235 community activities show an intensive pattern of interaction between members of different religious communities. The Timor Indigenous Peoples Network (Jaringan Masyarakat Adat, JMA), which consists of individuals from different religious backgrounds, shows a high level of cohesiveness. The Forum for Religious Communication (FKUB) in Kupang, which was formally established by the government, has developed a cultural approach in running its program, with various activities utilizing local cultural practices as a medium for interfaith dialogue.

In addition to formal networks, the research also found informal networks formed through traditional economic institutions such as markets, the intermarriage system (*amaf-atoni*) and customary kinship (*bela-metan*). Data from 30 informants showed that 83% of them have kinship ties with individuals from different religious communities through customary marriage or adoption. This social network rooted

in kinship ties is the foundation for the implementation of religious moderation in daily life, as informant PM05 (community leader) expressed:

“In our village, bela-metan (kinship ties) are stronger than religious identity. When there are family members of different religions, we still visit and help each other, even in celebrating religious holidays. I am Catholic, but I always attend Eid at the house of my Muslim bela (relative), and they also come to my house for Christmas. This is not just a formality, but part of our cultural identity that considers kinship ties to transcend religious barriers.”

The transformation of religious values in contemporary cultural practices is the fourth manifestation of the implementation of religious moderation in Kupang City. An analysis of the development of contemporary cultural arts such as music, theater, and visual arts shows the integration of religious moderation values in cultural expressions. The music group Nada Kasih, which consists of musicians from various religions, produces songs with the theme of interfaith brotherhood in the local language. The Nusantara Timur theater group regularly performs dramas that raise the narrative of religious moderation based on local wisdom.

Murals with themes of diversity and inter-religious harmony have become an increasingly popular urban phenomenon in Kupang City, especially in the Lalamentik and Oebobo areas. Analysis of 27 murals in strategic locations in Kupang City shows that 82% of them contain visual narratives about the values of religious moderation expressed through local cultural symbols. This phenomenon shows how the values of religious moderation are transforming and adapting to contemporary forms of cultural expression.

Despite the positive manifestations of the implementation of religious moderation in Kupang's cultural system, the research also identified some significant challenges. First, the influence of globalization and information technology, which bring transnational values and ideologies that have the potential to undermine local wisdom. Second, the politicization of religious identity has strengthened post-Reformasi, especially in local political contestation. A study of four local elections in Kupang City shows the tendency of religious identity mobilization in political campaigns. Third, economic transformation has shifted the traditional livelihood base of local communities and resulted in the weakening of cultural ties. Fourth, the weakening of intergenerational transmission of local wisdom values due to changes in the education system and parenting patterns.

Faced with these challenges, the Kupang community has developed various strategies to strengthen the implementation of religious moderation in the cultural system. The first strategy is the revitalization of local traditions and wisdom through cultural festivals, documentation and publication of traditional texts, and the integration of local wisdom values in the local content curriculum in schools.

Various schools in Kupang City have adopted a local content curriculum that integrates the values of local wisdom and religious moderation.

The second strategy is to strengthen culture-based interfaith dialog through interfaith meeting forums that use a cultural approach. FKUB Kupang City in collaboration with JMA Timor organized a Local Wisdom-Based Interfaith Dialogue program involving various religious leaders and traditional leaders. This program has succeeded in producing the Bonet Manekat Declaration which contains a joint commitment to practice religious moderation in social life.

The third strategy is the transformation of religious moderation values through media and contemporary cultural arts that are closer to the younger generation. The Timor Voice Radio program broadcasts interfaith dialogues in a format that appeals to the younger generation. The Bhinneka Short Film Festival, which features the works of young filmmakers with the theme of religious moderation, has reached thousands of viewers. The fourth strategy is the integration of religious moderation values in regional development policies. The Kupang City Government has adopted a cultural approach in its diversity management policy through Local Regulation No. 7/2021 on the Preservation of Local Wisdom and Social Harmony, which explicitly recognizes the role of cultural systems in strengthening religious moderation and social cohesion.

Discussion

The research on the implementation of religious moderation in the cultural system in Kupang City shows an interesting and complex pattern of how the values of religious moderation are internalized, transformed, and actualized in the cultural practices of the community. The findings provide a new perspective in understanding the relationship between religion and culture, as well as the cultural mechanisms that facilitate the formation of religious moderation in the context of a multicultural society.

The manifestation of religious moderation in shared rituals and traditions such as Bonet Manekat and Haroan Bupolo in Kupang City shows how the cultural system functions as a social infrastructure that facilitates interfaith encounters. This finding is in line with Kokot & Suyadnya, (2018), who see rituals as a medium of community building that transcends the boundaries of primordial identity. However, unlike the context of Western societies, in Kupang, these rituals are not merely incidental events but are integrated into the cycle of social life and form what (Okyere-Manu et al., (2022) calls an “ethical ecosystem” that allows various religious identities to coexist harmoniously.

Local wisdom-based conflict resolution through mechanisms such as Suf Natoni and Lais Manekat reflects what Mekonnen, (2016) calls an “indigenous conflict resolution mechanism” that has high cultural legitimacy and social

effectiveness. The successful resolution of 75% of religious-based conflict cases in Kupang City through this mechanism confirms Lamidi, (2024)'s argument about the superiority of cultural approaches over legal-formal approaches in managing conflict in communities with strong primordial ties. However, the findings of this study also show a dimension that has not been explored much by Lamidi, namely how traditional conflict resolution mechanisms undergo adaptation and transformation when dealing with religious-based conflicts that have a theological dimension.

The integration of religious values in Lais Manekat's formulation that includes the content of religious moderation indicates the occurrence of a process of "religious bricolage" as conceptualized by Saroglou, (2006), in which elements from various religious traditions are rearranged in a cultural framework that allows the coexistence of diverse values. The findings expand the understanding of religious bricolage by showing that the process does not only occur at the individual level as assumed by theories of post-secularism but also at the communal level through shared cultural practices.

The high density of interfaith social networks in Kupang identified in this study is an important indicator of what Leonard, (2004) calls "bridging social capital", which is the foundation for the formation of a moderate society. This finding is in line with Imran, (2023)'s thesis of a positive correlation between the density of social networks and the level of tolerance in society. However, in contrast to the context of Western societies where social networks are based on voluntary associations, in Kupang City social networks are mostly formed through customary kinship ties (*bela-metan*) that have an ascriptive and primordial dimension.

The phenomenon of 83% of informants having kinship ties with individuals from different religious communities is a form of "cross-cutting cleavages" which according to Selway, (2011)'s theory plays an important role in preventing social polarization. This finding enriches the understanding of cross-cutting cleavages in the context of non-Western societies by showing that traditional kinship ties can serve as social glue that transcends religious identity. Customary kinship systems such as *bela-metan* in Kupang City function not only as resource exchange networks as assumed by social exchange theory but also as moral infrastructure that shapes the ethics of inter-religious relations.

The transformation of FKUB Kupang City, which adopts a cultural approach with its various activities utilizing local cultural practices, shows the process of "cultural embeddedness" of formal institutions established by the state. This phenomenon reflects what Michelutti, (2013) calls the "vernacularization of state policy" in which state policies are translated and adapted into local idioms that are more relevant to the socio-cultural context of the community. This finding provides

a new perspective on the theory of state-society relations by showing that state penetration into the social sphere does not always result in homogenization, but can also trigger a process of cultural creativity that enriches the expression of public policy.

The transformation of religious moderation values in contemporary cultural practices such as music, theatre, and visual arts in Kupang City reflects what Molnar, (2010), calls the “cultural production of locality” amid globalization. The phenomenon of 82% of murals in strategic locations in Kupang that contain visual narratives about the values of religious moderation shows how young urban generations reconfigure tradition and modernity in cultural expressions that are relevant to the contemporary context. This finding expands the understanding of “cultural production of locality” by showing that the process is not only a resistance to globalization but also a form of creative adaptation that allows traditional values to remain relevant in the contemporary era.

The findings of this study have several important theoretical implications. First, this study contributes to the development of a theoretical model of the relationship between religion and culture that goes beyond the traditional dichotomy between essentialist and constructivist approaches. Empirical data show that the cultural and religious systems in Kupang City are not in an oppositional or hierarchical relationship, but rather in a dialectical relationship where both shape and are transformed through everyday social practices. This theoretical model offers a new perspective in the study of the sociology of religion and cultural anthropology which have so far tended to view religion and culture as separate domains. Second, this study provides an empirical nuance to the concept of religious moderation which has so far tended to be defined normatively and theologically.

The findings of the study show that religious moderation is not always articulated through formal religious dictions, but is often expressed through cultural practices that have deeper social meanings for local communities. This redefinition of religious moderation through an anthropological perspective enriches conceptual understanding and opens up the possibility of more contextual operationalization. In practical terms, this study shows that the cultural approach in implementing religious moderation policies has high effectiveness, especially in areas with strong primordial ties such as Kupang City. The integration of religious moderation values in Regional Regulation No. 7/2021 which recognizes the role of the cultural system in strengthening social cohesion is a policy model that bridges the formal-legal domain and the cultural domain which are often separated in governance practices in Indonesia. This policy model can be a reference for other regions in developing a more contextual and local wisdom-based approach to diversity management.

Conclusion

Research on the implementation of religious moderation in Kupang City shows that religious moderation has been internalized in the local cultural system. Rituals and traditions such as Bonet Manekat and Haroan Bupolo become a medium for expressing inclusive values, while local wisdom such as Suf Natoni, Lais Manekat, and Teun Kom Fenu have proven effective in managing religious-based conflicts. Interfaith social networks, both through formal institutions such as FKUB and customary kinship relationships such as bela-metan, become the structural foundation for the implementation of religious moderation.

The transformation of religious moderation values into contemporary cultural practices such as music, theater, and fine arts shows the resilience of the local cultural system amidst the current modernization. The strategy of revitalizing tradition through cultural festivals, integration into the education curriculum, and transformation in the form of contemporary cultural expressions is an adaptive response for the Kupang City community. However, significant challenges were also found, including the influence of transnational religious content, politicization of religious identity, economic transformation, and weakening of the transmission of local wisdom values between generations.

Based on these findings, several things are recommended: a cultural approach in implementing religious moderation policies; documentation, revitalization, and transformation of local wisdom into forms that are relevant to the contemporary context; strengthening the capacity of cultural institutions such as the Indigenous Peoples Network; development of an educational curriculum that integrates the values of local wisdom and religious moderation; and further research that explores the dynamics of implementing religious moderation in various socio-political contexts to enrich understanding of the relationship between religion and culture in a multicultural society.

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