

Coexisting in Faith: The Role of Local Traditions in Muslim-Christian Relations in South Tapanuli

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Abstract

Religious diversity in Indonesia is often associated with tension and conflict; however, South Tapanuli presents a contrasting example of sustainable interreligious coexistence. This study examines how the Batak-Angkola kinship system, *Dalihan Na Tolu*, functions as a cultural mechanism that sustains harmony between Muslims and Christians. This study employed an ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with 25 informants—including religious leaders, customary elders, community figures, local residents, youth, and students—as well as document analysis and archival research. The findings showed that *Dalihan Na Tolu* operates through the flexible roles of *Mora*, *Kahanggi*, and *Anak Boru*, which transcend religious boundaries and facilitate inclusive participation in communal events such as weddings (*horja siriaon*), funerals (*horja siluluton*), and socio-economic activities. Interreligious harmony is manifested in everyday practices where both Muslim and Christian adherents provide mutual support, including the exchange of food (*marjambar*), reciprocal support in rituals, and the avoidance of exclusive religious rhetoric—reinforce social solidarity. This study contributes to the broader discourse on social capital by demonstrating that *Dalihan Na Tolu* generates hybrid forms of bonding and bridging capital, producing what may be termed “embedded pluralism.” Practically, the findings suggest that kinship systems can serve as effective models for peacebuilding in plural societies beyond South Tapanuli.

Keywords: coexisting, local traditions, interfaith harmony, muslim-christian, South Tapanuli

Introduction

In an era of rapid globalization and heightened socio-political polarization, religious diversity has emerged as both a resource for intercultural dialogue and a potential fault line for communal conflict (Hossain, 2024; Widiyanto, 2023). Numerous studies demonstrate that plural societies across the globe are increasingly confronted with tensions that stem not merely from theological disagreements, but from identity politics, resource competition, and the manipulation of religion for partisan interests (Esmailzadeh, 2023; Iftikhar et al., 2025). In regions as diverse as the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, religious plurality has been tested by the rise of exclusivist ideologies and radical movements that challenge national integration (Hafez, 2023; Malik, 2025; Nurdiansyah, 2024). The persistence of such tensions underscores the urgency of examining locally grounded models of peaceful coexistence, particularly those that are not imposed from above but nurtured organically within communities.

Indonesia as the world’s largest Muslim-majority country, home to more than 280 million people, and constitutionally recognizing six official religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism,

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Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism), Indonesia is often considered a laboratory of interfaith relations (Chalid, 2018; Maulana et al., 2024). Although the national ideology of *Pancasila* and constitutional guarantees of religious freedom provide a basic framework for tolerance, the lived realities of interfaith relations across different provinces and localities are far more complex. Several scholars have noted that tensions at the grassroots level—ranging from disputes over the establishment of houses of worship (Anam et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2024) to sporadic outbreaks of communal violence (Tohawi & Ambodo, 2024)—continue to challenge the state’s narrative of harmony. At the same time, however, there are also other regions that showcase concrete examples of interfaith coexistence that can serve as inspiration for sustainable peacebuilding (Corpuz, 2025).

Previous research has explored both the fragility and resilience of interfaith relations in Indonesia. Studies on areas such as Maluku (Al Qurtuby, 2023), Poso (Kambo & Yani, 2021), Aceh (Permana, 2021) have documented how interreligious tensions often escalate into violence when fueled by political manipulation or resource competition. However, the implementation of religious moderation is often carried out through a top-down approach and remains overly general, lacking concrete strategies for implementation—particularly in culturally diverse regions.

Conversely, other studies highlighted cases of successful interfaith coexistence. Amin & Ritonga (2024) examined interfaith relations in North Sumatra and found that local cultural practices often play a stronger role than state policy in sustaining harmony. Similarly, Muda & Suharyanto (2020) explored interfaith practices in multiethnic communities and observed that social trust and kinship relations mediate religious differences more effectively than formal dialogue forums. These findings suggest that while religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*) is vital as a state policy (Kemenag RI, 2019), its success is contingent upon embedding the principle within local socio-cultural frameworks.

The research problem that emerges from these earlier works is the tendency to treat religious harmony either as a product of theological discourse or state-led moderation policies. What remains underexplored is the extent to which indigenous traditions and kinship systems—deeply rooted in local contexts—function as practical mechanisms for mediating interfaith relations in everyday life. This gap becomes particularly significant in regions such as South Tapanuli, where Muslims and Christians have coexisted peacefully for generations under the shared framework of Batak-Angkola traditions.

In South Tapanuli, local wisdom plays a crucial role in mediating religious differences (Muda et al., 2022). One of the most distinctive elements of Batak-Angkola society is the *Dalihan Na Tolu*, a kinship system that structures social relations around three roles: *Mora* (family-in-law), *Kahanggi* (sister’s family in a patrilineal relationship), and *Anak Boru* (daughter-in-law’s family). Erawadi & Setiadi (2024) have explained that this system not only organizes familial obligations but also extends into broader communal interactions. Its underlying philosophy emphasizes reciprocity, respect, and solidarity, regardless of religious identity.

Among the various regions in South Tapanuli, Sipirok occupies a significant position as a cultural area shaped strongly by Batak Angkola and Mandailing traditions, with an economy predominantly rooted in agriculture supported by mountain-fed water sources (Muda & Suharyanto, 2020). Sipirok is a semi-rural district inhabited by Batak Angkola communities who uphold a deeply embedded customary kinship system based on *Dalihan Na Tolu*, within which people of different religious backgrounds coexist amid gradual urban influences. Although its town center exhibits the characteristics of an emerging local urban hub, the surrounding villages continue to preserve customary practices and maintain strong communal networks. This hybrid character enables Sipirok to sustain its deeply rooted kinship structures while simultaneously engaging with increasing mobility, expanding educational opportunities, and harmonious interreligious life. Such a socio-geographical configuration establishes a localized framework that continually supports the cultivation of interreligious harmony through the interplay of

tradition and contemporary dynamics.

Conversely, there are also several studies that highlight the success of interfaith harmony practices. For example, Hutabarat (2023) examined kinship-based practices in Batak communities and noted their contribution to reducing intergroup tensions, but his study was limited to intra-Batak relations without explicitly addressing interfaith dynamics. Likewise, Hati et al. (2023) studied religious moderation in North Sumatra but did not sufficiently connect it to the functioning of customary kinship systems. Thus, while the potential of *Dalihan Na Tolu* as a bridge for interfaith coexistence has been acknowledged, its specific role in sustaining harmony between Muslims and Christians remains insufficiently theorized and empirically documented.

In practice, however, the system's relevance is undeniable. During *horja siriaon* (weddings) or *horja siluluton* (funerals), members of the community—both Muslims and Christians—are obliged to contribute resources, labor, and emotional support according to their kinship roles. These obligations transcend religious boundaries, reinforcing the sense of shared identity and mutual dependence (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). The persistence of such practices suggests that *Dalihan Na Tolu* is not a cultural relic but a living institution that actively sustains social integration.

From the literature discussed, several research gaps become apparent. First, much of the scholarship on interfaith relations in Indonesia focuses on conflict-prone regions, emphasizing factors that lead to violence rather than conditions that foster peace. As a result, successful models of coexistence such as Sipirok remain understudied. Second, while the concept of religious moderation has been widely examined, few studies have analyzed how indigenous social structures operationalize moderation at the grassroots level. Third, the role of kinship systems such as *Dalihan Na Tolu* has been acknowledged in cultural studies but rarely integrated into discussions of interfaith harmony.

The novelty of this research lies in its culturally embedded approach to understanding interreligious harmony. Unlike prior works that analyze coexistence primarily through legal, institutional, or theological frameworks, this study foregrounds indigenous kinship systems as active mediators of interfaith relations. By focusing on the lived practices of *Mora*, *Kahanggi*, and *Anak Boru*, the study demonstrates how cultural traditions can generate forms of “bridging social capital” (Putnam, 2000) and “associational engagement” (Varshney, 2002) that transcend religious boundaries.

Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on religious harmony by integrating anthropological perspectives of kinship with political theories of social capital and civic engagement. Practically, it provides a model of culturally responsive peacebuilding that can be adapted in other plural societies facing interfaith tensions. By documenting the Sipirok experience, the study aims to enrich both scholarly debates and policy discussions on how to cultivate sustainable interreligious harmony in diverse contexts.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach, drawing on (Creswell, 2014) and (Spradley, 1979), to examine how interreligious harmony is nurtured and sustained through local traditions in South Tapanuli. Ethnography was chosen because of its strength in capturing the lived experiences, practices, and symbolic meanings embedded within community life—particularly relevant to the study of interfaith relations that are deeply intertwined with local kinship traditions. This methodological choice allows the researcher to explore interreligious dynamics not merely at the level of abstract discourse, but as they are practiced and negotiated in everyday life. The research focused particularly on the roles of *Mora*, *Kahanggi*, and *Anak Boru*—key kinship structures in Batak-Angkola tradition—as integrative mechanisms between Muslim and Christian communities. South Tapanuli was chosen purposively due to its long-standing reputation for peaceful coexistence, making it a valuable site for studying positive models of

interfaith integration.

In analyzing the data, we used a theoretical frameworks of social capital Putnam (2000) and civic engagement Dushkin & Varshney (2003). Although Putnam's concept of social capital and Dushkin & Varshney's theory of civic engagement are often treated as distinct analytical approaches, the two frameworks can be integrated to elucidate how the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship system operates as a cultural mechanism for transcending boundaries between religious communities, particularly between Muslims and Christians. In the Sipirok region, lineage-based obligations reinforce intra-group solidarity as a form of bonding capital, while collaborative ritual practices and reciprocal kinship relations generate inter-group networks that function as bridging capital between the two communities. The integration of these frameworks demonstrates that *Dalihan Na Tolu* is not merely a local tradition but also a culturally embedded form of social capital that has been transmitted across generations, enabling the sustained accommodation of interreligious relations and contributing to the preservation of social harmony amid religious diversity.

The research locus was Sipirok, South Tapanuli, a district historically known for its peaceful coexistence between Muslim and Christian communities. Fieldwork was conducted between January and June 2025, during which the researcher engaged directly with local traditions and community interactions. Sipirok was purposively selected as the site because of its reputation as a positive model of interreligious harmony in contrast to other Indonesian regions that have experienced interfaith tension. This contrast strengthens the study's contribution to peacebuilding literature by emphasizing successful grassroots practices.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. A total of 25 informants were involved, comprising *hatobangun* (customary leaders), *tokoh agama* (religious figures from both Islam and Christianity), respected community elders, youth, students, and ordinary residents actively engaged in traditional or religious events. This diversity of participants ensured a holistic representation of the community's lived experiences and perspectives on interfaith harmony.

Data collection employed a triangulated method:

1. *Participant Observation* – The researcher participated in community rituals, interfaith gatherings, and kinship-based ceremonies such as *horja pabuat boru* (weddings) and *horja siluluton* (death ceremonies). Detailed fieldnotes were maintained to record gestures, interactions, and symbolic practices that reflected the roles of *Mora*, *Kahanggi*, and *Anak Boru*.
2. *In-depth Interviews* – Conducted with 25 informants to explore their perceptions of kinship systems as mechanisms for fostering interreligious harmony. Interviews lasted between 60–90 minutes and were conducted in both Indonesian and local dialects where appropriate.
3. *Document Analysis* – Included examination of local archives, historical manuscripts, church and mosque records, and ceremonial documentation to provide contextual and historical validation of field data.

Data were analyzed using the Miles & Huberman (2019) interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. As researchers, we recognize our positionality insofar as, being members of the local Muslim community, we had comparatively easier access to Muslim informants than to those from the Christian community. This insider position carries the potential for interpretive bias, particularly in comprehending the meanings of rituals and the nuances of interreligious dynamics. To mitigate these limitations, we conducted cross-check interviews with Christian leaders, maintained reflective and objective field notes, and employed triangulation across observations, documents, and interviews. Such critical reflexivity is essential to ensure that the findings proportionally reflect both Muslim and Christian perspectives, thereby enabling the researchers to address any potential biases inherent in the research process.

Results and Discussion

Social Coexistence and Mutual Respect between Muslims and Christians in South Tapanuli

South Tapanuli, a regency in North Sumatra, offers a clear example of how religious diversity can coexist harmoniously in one community. With a majority Muslim population (91.71%) and a Christian minority (8.05%), South Tapanuli has long been known as an area with minimal religious-based social friction. Unlike some other regions in Indonesia that have experienced inter-religious conflicts, such as Poso or Ambon (Al Qurtuby, 2023; Kambo & Yani, 2021). South Tapanuli actually displays a pattern of close social interaction and full of mutual respect, even though the differences in religious identity are quite striking.

Table 1 Total Number of Religious Adherents in South Tapanuli

Religion	Total	
	Number of People	Percentage (%)
Islam	255.339	80,53
Protestant	60.422	19,06
Catholic	4.219	1,33
Buddhism	6	0,02
Hindu	0	0
Confucian	0	0
Total	319.986	100,00

Source: databoks (Darmawan, 2024)

Table 2 Total Number of Worship's House in South Tapanuli

Name of Worship's House	Total	
	Number of Worship's House	Percentage (%)
Mosque	489	65,2
Mushalla	6	0,8
Protestant Church	210	28,0
Catholic Church	45	6,0
Total	750	100,00

Source: BPS Provinsi Sumatera Utara (2022)

The table above demonstrated that South Tapanuli represents a distinctive case of interreligious coexistence in Indonesia, where Muslims (80.53%) live side by side with Protestant (19.06%) and smaller Catholic and Buddhist minorities without significant tension (Darmawan, 2024). Despite the numerical dominance of Islam, Christians are not marginalized but actively participate in the social, cultural, and even economic life of the region. Worship facilities illustrate this balance: while 489 mosques dominate, there are also 210 Protestant churches and 45 Catholic churches across the regency (BPS Provinsi Sumatera Utara, 2022). The distribution of religious adherents and places of worship highlights both plurality and spatial integration (Sumaktoyo, 2025), distinguishing South Tapanuli from conflict-prone regions such as Poso, Ambon, and Aceh Singkil, where religious communities are often segregated.

Field observations confirmed that spatial proximity fosters intensive daily interactions. In villages such as Bunga Bondar, Muara Upu, and Sorimadingin Pintu Padang, mosques and

churches stand within walking distance of each other, creating overlapping spheres of life. As one Christian resident testified:

“Our church is very close to the mosque, just across the road. When the adzan is heard, we stop our church rehearsal for a while to respect them. And during our Christmas service, Muslims nearby lower the volume of their loudspeakers so we can celebrate peacefully.” (AS, Interview, April 12, 2025)

This statement reveals how proximity does not generate friction but rather nurtures mutual adjustment and respect. Such patterns resonate with Putnam’s (2000) concept of bridging social capital, where cross-cutting interactions create bonds across identity lines. Unlike segregated communities that cultivate suspicion, open and shared spaces encourage empathy and cooperative behavior. Beyond spatial factors, indigenous cultural systems—particularly the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship structure—emerged as the strongest foundation for interfaith harmony. According to Harahap et al. (2023), the system requires individuals to fulfill roles as *Mora* (respected elder), *Kahanggi* (clan equal), and *Anak Boru* (service provider), irrespective of religious affiliation. As one customary leader stated:

“Dalihan Na Tolu is above religion. If you are Mora, you must be respected, whether you are Muslim or Christian. If you are Anak Boru, you must serve, regardless of your belief. That is what binds us together.” (DN, Interview, March 28, 2025)

This insight illustrates how kinship obligations override religious divisions, ensuring cooperation in life-cycle ceremonies such as weddings (*horja siriaon*) and funerals (*horja siluluton*). Here, harmony is not abstract but institutionalized in cultural practices. These findings expand upon Sianipar (2011), who noted the importance of Batak kinship in communal life, but did not explore its cross-religious implications. By showing how the kinship system serves as a bridge between Muslims and Christians, this study fills a critical gap in the literature.

Another significant tradition, *marjambar*—the exchange of food during religious holidays—symbolizes interfaith reciprocity. A Muslim informant explained:

“When Eid comes, we share halal cakes with our Christian neighbors, making sure they are safe for them to eat too. At Christmas, they bring us food and gifts. It is not about food but about acknowledging each other’s holy days.” (HL, Interview, April 2, 2025)

This practice reinforces interreligious bonds from an early age, transmitting values of respect and solidarity across generations. Prior studies on religious moderation in Indonesia (Aflahah et al., 2023; Bahri et al., 2025; Mahmudah et al., 2025; Zaluchu et al., 2025) often emphasize state-led programs of tolerance education, yet they rarely capture such grassroots traditions that sustain harmony organically. The *marjambar* tradition demonstrates that cultural rituals can function as powerful vehicles of religious moderation without external intervention.

The government of South Tapanuli plays a supportive, rather than dominant, role in this harmony. Local authorities promote the slogan *“Damai itu Indah”* (Peace is Beautiful) through community outreach, yet they rely heavily on customary institutions like *marsialapari* to mediate disputes. A Muslim elder stated:

“If there is tension, the village elders from both sides come together first. They listen, deliberate, and solve the problem. That is why issues here never escalate into conflict.” (HPS, Interview, April 7, 2025)

This reliance on local wisdom contrasts with more formal state interventions elsewhere, which often lack contextual sensitivity. For example, while the Ministry of Religious Affairs has introduced *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation) as a policy framework (Qoumas et al., 2024), its implementation tends to be top-down and generic (Jati & Bachtar, 2024). In South Tapanuli, moderation is not a state project but an everyday practice embedded in kinship and culture. This suggests that sustainable models of interreligious harmony may be more effective when rooted in local traditions rather than imposed externally.

The testimonies of residents also highlight how religion itself is often subordinated to broader

values of humanity and kinship. As one Christian elder noted:

“Religion is important, but here it is part of something bigger—our humanity, our family. We are Batak first, then Muslim or Christian. That is why we cannot allow religion to divide us.” (IW, Interview, March 25, 2025)

This perspective echoes Robert Bellah’s (1992) notion of civil religion, where communal identity transcends individual creeds, though here it is expressed through local cultural categories. By prioritizing kinship over doctrinal differences, the community builds resilience against sectarianism.

Nevertheless, the findings also revealed limitations and challenges. Interfaith marriage, while accepted in some cases, still generates negotiation, particularly regarding patrilineal traditions that require adherence to the husband’s faith (Maula & Muhsin, 2024; Nasir, 2022). Furthermore, modernization and migration may gradually erode traditional practices, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of harmony if cultural institutions weaken.

The data above demonstrates that South Tapanuli provides a sharp contrast to regions like Aceh, Ambon or Poso, where spatial segregation and historical grievances fostered cycles of violence (Al Qurtuby, 2023; Ansori et al., 2015). The openness of social spaces in South Tapanuli, coupled with the cultural imperative of kinship obligations, prevents the escalation of minor disputes into broader conflicts. These insights underline the critical role of local context in shaping interreligious outcomes.

Although the *Dalihan na Tolu* kinship system has long served as a crucial cultural mechanism for maintaining social harmony, emerging dynamics have begun to reveal potential tensions that may challenge these traditional patterns. One example is the increasing public access to digital religious content, which is often detached from local cultural contexts and has consequently shaped new interpretations of interreligious boundaries. While these developments have not yet resulted in overt conflict, they signal an early ideological shift that warrants careful attention, as such changes may, over time, erode the local framework of *Dalihan na Tolu* a kinship system that has historically sustained interreligious coexistence in Sipirok.

Moderation in Religious Practice and Discourse in South Tapanuli

In South Tapanuli, Islamic religious practices develop with a moderate style that prioritizes local wisdom and social ethics (S. M. Harahap et al., 2023). Findings from South Tapanuli showed how religious moderation is embodied in everyday practices and discourses rather than being imposed from above. Preaching activities conducted by local religious leaders adopt an educative and adaptive approach that resonates with local wisdom. For instance, Ustad Anwar Pohan, a preacher in Pengkolan Hamlet, deliberately uses Batak-Angkola dialect to build rapport and emphasize inclusivity in his sermons. As he explained:

“If I use only Arabic or formal Indonesian, people might feel distant. But when I speak in our local language, they listen more attentively. Religion must be delivered in a way that strengthens our unity, not divides us.” (PS, Interview, March 22, 2025)

This indicates that *da’wah* in South Tapanuli prioritizes accessibility and relational closeness, fostering both religious understanding and interfaith harmony. Such practices align with Musthofa & Prihananto (2023), who argue that contextual preaching enhances trust and prevents exclusivist interpretations.

Another practice of tolerance that emerged from the fieldwork is the deliberate avoidance of exclusivist religious rhetoric. At the *Syahrur Nur* Grand Mosque, for example, sermons consistently stress universal values—honesty, cooperation, and empathy—rather than polemical issues. As one mosque administrator emphasized:

“We never allow preachers to speak against other religions. The message must be about kindness, honesty,

and helping one another. That is how Islam should be taught here." (KBN, Interview, March 25, 2025)

This resonates with Zuriet & Lyausheva (2019), who conceptualizes religion as a medium for humanist values rather than rigid identity markers. Muslim identity is defined not solely in terms of religious practices but also through a range of other attributes (Ab Rashid et al., 2020). The inclusive style of religious discourse observed in South Tapanuli directly contributes to interfaith trust, contrasting with other regions where exclusivist narratives have triggered suspicion and polarization.

Religious moderation is not only sustained by grassroots religious leaders but also institutionalized through organizations such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (*MUI*). Unlike in some other areas where *MUI* is dominated by one group, in South Tapanuli its membership is plural, incorporating diverse Islamic organizations. This inclusivity ensures that decisions and fatwas reflect a broad spectrum of Muslim voices and remain sensitive to interfaith relations. As one local *MUI* leader noted:

"Our task is not only to guide Muslims but also to ensure that our decisions never harm our Christian neighbors. We want Islam here to be a blessing for everyone." (AAN, Interview, March 28, 2025)

Parallel to this, universities such as UIN Syahada Padangsidimpuan actively contribute to moderation through the *Rumah Moderasi Beragama* program (Rasyid, 2022). Field observations revealed that these programs facilitate interfaith dialogues between imams, pastors, and adat leaders, reinforcing inclusive discourse at the grassroots level. These findings echo Aderibigbe et al. (2023), who emphasize the importance of academic engagement in strengthening tolerance in marginalized areas.

From a theoretical standpoint, these practices illustrate Dushkin & Varshney's (2003) concept of quotidian engagement, where peace is cultivated not in extraordinary events but in daily routines—markets, schools, and neighborhood gatherings. A Christian shop owner in Padangsidimpuan explained:

"Most of my customers are Muslims. They trust me because I am honest with prices, and I respect their religious practices. For example, I never sell non-halal items here. That's how we live together." (DHS, Interview, April 1, 2025)

This testimony underlines how moderation is not abstract but embedded in everyday economic and social transactions. In line with Liu et al. (2025), this everyday engagement between religious adherents can strengthen bridging social capital, transforming religious differences into opportunities for cooperation.

The internalization of *Pancasila* values also plays a significant role. Many informants explicitly referred to *Pancasila* when explaining why moderation is essential. A local government official remarked:

"We always remind people that Pancasila is our foundation. Respecting differences is not just about religion, it is about being Indonesian. If we abandon Pancasila, we risk conflict." (DS, Interview, April 5, 2025)

This aligns with Subaidi (2020), who highlight the role of *Pancasila* in fostering inclusive nationalism. By rooting religious moderation in constitutional values, South Tapanuli creates a dual legitimacy—cultural and political—for sustaining harmony.

These findings expand on earlier studies of religious moderation in Indonesia, which often highlight educational institution or urban contexts (Burhanuddin & Ilmi, 2022; Ipgrave, 2019). Unlike top-down programs that sometimes lack cultural grounding (Turhamun, 2024), South Tapanuli demonstrates a bottom-up, culturally embedded model of moderation. Similar to studies in Java (Mustakim et al., 2021; Nugroho et al., 2023), the findings here confirmed that inclusive discourses prevent radicalization. However, this research goes further by showing how moderation

is operationalized in a rural, multi-religious setting through kinship system and rituals.

However, limitations remain. The study is region-specific, and while the South Tapanuli model is inspiring, its applicability in areas with weaker kinship systems or histories of interreligious conflict (e.g., Poso, Ambon) requires further comparative research. Additionally, modernization and urban migration may challenge the sustainability of traditions like localized preaching and ritual exchange.

Inter-Religious Participation in Socio-Economic Life in South Tapanuli

In South Tapanuli, interfaith collaboration is not limited to the religious sphere, but extends to economics, customs and civic life. Muslim and Christian communities are actively involved in various mutually beneficial economic transactions, such as trading agricultural products, leasing land, and informal microfinance practices. These economic relationships are strengthened by local value systems that emphasize the principles of reciprocity and solidarity, so that economic interactions are not just material transactions, but also a means of strengthening social relations and building trust between communities.

One of the most consistent findings is the role of interfaith economic collaboration in sustaining harmony. Muslims and Christians engage actively in trading agricultural products, land leasing, and informal microfinance networks, where trust becomes the binding element. As a Muslim farmer explained:

“I sell my coffee beans to a Christian trader in the next village. We have worked together for years. For us, business is about honesty and trust, not about religion.” (KN, Interview, March 26, 2025)

Such testimonies demonstrate how economic interactions operate as more than mere transactions; they embody Putnam’s (2000) concept of bridging social capital, where repeated cross-identity cooperation builds networks of reliability. This resonates with Visave & Aldrich (2025), who argue that community resilience in diverse societies depends on transforming difference into shared capital. Compared to conflict-prone regions like Poso or Ambon (Al Qurtuby, 2023; Kambo & Yani, 2021), South Tapanuli shows that economic interdependence reduces suspicion and transforms religious plurality into functional solidarity.

Customary traditions such as *horja pabuat boru* (weddings) and *horja siluluton* (funerals) serve as inclusive arenas where interfaith interaction is normalized. In these events, kinship roles—*Mora*, *Kahanggi*, and *Anak Boru*—determine social duties, regardless of religious identity. A customary leader stated:

“When there is a horja, everyone must contribute—Mora, Kahanggi, Anak Boru. Religion does not matter. Your role in the kinship system is what defines your responsibility.” (IHS, Interview, April 3, 2025)

This finding highlights the functional role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* in transcending sectarian boundaries, a dimension largely underexplored in previous studies of Batak social structures (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024; A. Harahap et al., 2023; S. M. Harahap & Hamka, 2023). By anchoring obligations in kinship rather than theology, the system creates a stable framework for cooperation, echoing Rohmadi et al. (2025) argument that inclusive traditions reduce polarization by embedding diversity into everyday life.

The *marjambar* tradition—mutual food exchanges during religious holidays—emerges as a powerful symbol of interfaith solidarity (Aulia et al., 2024). Muslims share *halal* cakes during Eid, while Christians reciprocate during Christmas and New Year. A Muslim resident explained:

“When we bring food to our Christian neighbors, it means we recognize their holy day, and they do the same for us. My children see this and learn that we are all one community.” (WS, Interview, April 10, 2025)

This ritual of exchange illustrates how tolerance is not abstract but embedded in everyday

practices. Small adjustments, such as Christians avoiding pork when hosting Muslims, or Muslim stall owners staying open during Ramadan to serve Christian neighbors, reinforce mutual respect. These findings support Touseef & Ali (2024), who argue that micro-practices of hospitality and mutual respect between religious adherents are crucial for long-term social cohesion.

Mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) also further illustrates how interfaith collaboration extends into daily life (Agung et al., 2024). Both Muslims and Christians contribute to public works such as road repairs, environmental cleaning, and even the construction of houses of worship. A Christian youth recalled:

"I helped build the mosque in our village. Later, when our church needed repairs, Muslim friends helped us. This is how we prove that faith is not a barrier." (CSP, Interview, March 30, 2025)

Such practices reflect what Muda & Suharyanto (2020) describe as "organic moderation," where interfaith cooperation arises not from state instruction but from lived practices. This challenges critiques of Indonesia's *moderasi beragama* policy as overly top-down and abstract (Turhamun, 2024). In South Tapanuli, moderation is realized through daily interactions and practical solidarity.

Traditional and religious leaders play a key role in conflict mediation and social reinforcement. An imam noted:

"When there is a misunderstanding, we do not wait for the government. The imam, the pastor, and the adat leaders come together to talk, usually the problem is solved before it becomes serious." (FM, Interview, April 6, 2025)

This grassroots conflict resolution mechanism shows how *Dalihan Na Tolu* and interfaith leadership complement institutional structures like the Forum for Religious Harmony (*FKUB*). The findings suggest that harmony is effective when state policies align with and empower local wisdom, rather than impose external models.

Taken together, these findings demonstrated that interfaith harmony in South Tapanuli is sustained through the convergence of economic interdependence, kinship obligations, ritual exchanges, and civic cooperation. This aligns with theories of bridging social capital while expanding them by highlighting the cultural dimension of kinship as a stabilizing force.

South Tapanuli showed that religious plurality can function as a source of social strength when mediated through inclusive traditions and everyday cooperation. Interfaith harmony here is not state-imposed but socially constructed, rooted in trust, reciprocity, and local wisdom. This integrated model offers both scholarly and policy lessons: for scholars, it underscores the importance of culturally embedded approaches to religious studies; for policymakers, it provides a blueprint for fostering sustainable harmony through support for grassroots practices rather than top-down interventions.

Kinship System as a Structural Foundation of Religious Harmony in South Tapanuli

Within the social fabric of South Tapanuli society, the Batak-Angkola kinship system known as *Dalihan Na Tolu* serves as a foundational philosophical framework that shapes social harmony and regulates ethical roles among community members (Pulungan, 2018). This system is comprised of three principal elements: *Mora* (family-in-law), *Kahanggi* (the sister's family in a patrilineal context), and *Anak Boru* (daughter-in-law's family). As Lubis (2019) explains, the distinguishing feature of *Dalihan Na Tolu* is its positional flexibility, allowing individuals to occupy varying social roles depending on the specific event or relational context. This fluidity challenges rigid religious identities by emphasizing traditional kinship-based roles over fixed faith-based affiliations, thereby fostering cohesion grounded in shared customs and social obligations rather than doctrinal differences.

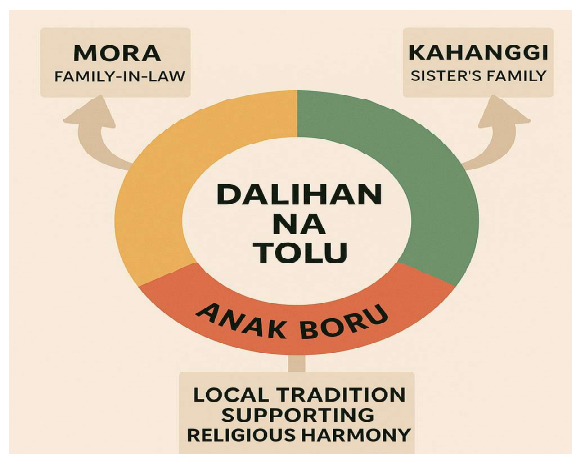


Figure 1. the role of local tradition in supporting religious coexistence in South Tapanuli

The figure above illustrates the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship system as a structural framework that supports religious harmony in South Tapanuli. The three main elements—*Mora* (in-laws), *Kahanggi* (clan family), and *Anak Boru* (son-in-law's family)—are depicted in a cycle of mutually supportive roles. Together, they form a flexible and dynamic social system in which each individual can take on different roles depending on the customary context in which they live.

The kinship system of *Dalihan Na Tolu* operates as a structural foundation for maintaining inter-religious harmony in South Tapanuli (Taufika et al., 2025). Unlike formal government programs, this kinship framework is embedded in everyday social practices, functioning as a lived cultural mechanism that transcends religious boundaries. As one informant, a Muslim elder in Sipirok, explained:

“Here, before we are Muslims or Christians, we are part of Dalihan Na Tolu. Our position as Mora, Kahanggi, or Anak Boru obliges us to respect one another. Religion comes later; kinship comes first.” (DN, Interview, March 18, 2025)

This testimony highlights that social interaction in South Tapanuli is mediated more strongly by kinship roles than by religious identities. Samosir & Pandian's (2023) findings indicated that *Dalihan Na Tolu* is both a cultural philosophy and a regulatory system shaping everyday life.

A distinctive feature of *Dalihan Na Tolu* is the flexibility of positions. Individuals may occupy different roles—*Mora*, *Kahanggi*, or *Anak Boru*—depending on the event or social relationship. This fluidity ensures that no single group monopolizes authority, thereby weakening rigid religious boundaries. A Christian informant stated:

“When I attend a Muslim wedding, I may act as Anak Boru, helping with logistics. During a funeral in my wife's Muslim family, I may become Mora, giving advice and blessings. Religion does not prevent me from fulfilling these roles.” (IW, Interview, March 21, 2025)

This confirms of finding A. Harahap et al. (2023), who stated that the adaptability of roles within *Dalihan Na Tolu* functions as a mechanism for inclusivity. By obligating everyone to participate according to kinship duties, the system dissolves potential religious segregation in ritual and communal life.

Empirical observations demonstrate how kinship duties manifest in customary ceremonies. At weddings (*horja siriaon*), *Mora* families preside over decision-making, while *Anak Boru* execute practical arrangements. At funerals (*horja siluluton*), *Kahanggi* relatives provide symbolic solidarity. In both contexts, these roles are distributed regardless of religious affiliation. A Muslim woman from Bunga Bondar village noted:

“In our village, if a Christian family holds a funeral, Muslim neighbors still act as Anak Boru, preparing

food or arranging tents. We respect their rituals but our duty as kinship members is the same.” (SAN, Interview, March 24, 2025)

Such practices align with findings by Erawadi & Setiadi (2024), that *Dalihan Na Tolu* functions as a mediating institution that normalizes pluralism. Rather than reinforcing exclusivity, kinship duties oblige cross-religious cooperation.

From a theoretical perspective, *Dalihan Na Tolu* represents what Koul & Deshpande (2025) call “associational engagement” — a traditional institution that sustains peace by embedding norms of reciprocity. Unlike bonding social capital that deepens intra-group ties but risks exclusion, *Dalihan Na Tolu* generates hybrid capital that is simultaneously bonding (through clan solidarity) and bridging (through interfaith obligations).

A Protestant pastor in Sipirok explained:

“Even when we debate theology in church, when it comes to adat, we are united. Dalihan Na Tolu tells us: Mora must be respected, Anak Boru must serve, Kahanggi must stand together. These duties never ask whether you are Muslim or Christian.” (JS, Interview, March 27, 2025)

The pastor’s emphasis that “adat unites us” despite theological differences illustrates how this system operates as a form of hybrid social capital — reinforcing intra-clan solidarity (bonding) while simultaneously fostering interfaith cooperation (bridging). The normative roles of *Mora*, *Anak Boru*, and *Kahanggi* are not contingent on religious affiliation but rather on kinship and customary law, which ensures that both Muslims and Christians in Sipirok remain embedded within a shared moral order. This is, as Ridho & Sa’ad (2025) explains, how local wisdom transforms potential religious cleavages into opportunities for coexistence, making *Dalihan Na Tolu* not only a cultural tradition but also a peace-sustaining institution.

Practically, *Dalihan Na Tolu* contributes to reducing inter-religious suspicion by transforming potentially divisive moments into opportunities for cooperation. Ritual participation fosters empathy, while shared kinship roles ensure that every member of the community has both rights and responsibilities (Supardi & Jauharudin, 2025). This echoes Kirby (2025), who argue that resilience in plural societies depends on mutual trust networks. One young Muslim informant stated:

“During Christmas, my Christian uncle asked me to help as Anak Boru. I did it gladly, just as they help us during Eid. We don’t think of it as helping another religion—we think of it as helping family.” (MB, Interview, April 2, 2025)

Despite its strengths, the kinship system is not immune to challenges. Modernization, urban migration, and declining adherence to adat rituals risk weakening the binding force of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. Younger generations sometimes perceive kinship duties as burdensome, particularly when economic pressures clash with traditional obligations. A student noted:

“Sometimes it is hard to follow all adat duties. I live in Mandailing Natal for my studies, but my family still asks me to come back for Anak Boru responsibilities. Our generation feels the weight differently.” (SRN, Interview, April 5, 2025)

Although these findings underscored the pivotal role of the *Dalihan Na Tolu* system as a cultural framework that effectively fosters Muslim–Christian harmony in South Tapanuli, its application in other regions requires careful consideration. This is because the system is deeply rooted in the Batak kinship structure, which may differ substantially from kinship systems in other parts of Indonesia. Accordingly, the present study doesn’t seek to generalize this framework to other regional contexts; rather, it aims to demonstrate that the core principles of reciprocity, shared obligations, and clan-based cooperation may serve as inspiration for developing context-sensitive models of interreligious engagement in other Indonesian settings.

Overall, the findings revealed that *Dalihan Na Tolu* serves as both a cultural philosophy and a structural mechanism for inter-religious harmony in South Tapanuli. By obligating Muslims and

Christians alike to fulfill kinship duties in weddings, funerals, and communal rituals, the system embeds pluralism into the moral fabric of society. Unlike top-down state initiatives, this bottom-up mechanism creates inclusive social capital that transcends religious boundaries.

Conclusion

This study concludes that interreligious harmony in South Tapanuli is not primarily a product of formal state intervention or top-down religious policies, but rather emerges organically through a long-standing and dynamic social process rooted in local traditions. Central to this process is the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship system, which operates as a cultural mechanism that integrates Muslims and Christians into a shared framework of reciprocal obligations, respect, and cooperation. Through the roles of *Mora*, *Kahanggi*, and *Anak Boru*, religious boundaries are transcended by culturally mandated obligations that require individuals to participate in one another's religious and social rites—whether in weddings (*horja siriaon*), funerals (*horja siluluton*), or communal gatherings—regardless of their religious affiliation. The findings highlight that peaceful coexistence is strengthened not only by cultural traditions but also by spatial proximity, moderation in religious practice, and cross-religious collaboration in economic and social affairs. Theoretically, this study contributes to the scholarship on interreligious relations by illustrating how customary kinship structures of *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship can be functioned as a platform for cultivating “bridging social capital,” thereby fostering solidarity and mitigating the risk of sectarian fragmentation.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this study offers important practical implications. For policymakers, it suggests that sustainable interfaith harmony cannot rely solely on abstract notions of religious moderation or top-down regulation, but must be anchored in the reinforcement of local cultural institutions that already mediate diversity in daily life. Strengthening community-based traditions such as *Dalihan Na Tolu* can provide more context-sensitive and effective models of peacebuilding, particularly in rural or semi-urban settings where indigenous practices remain influential. For scholars, this research underscores the need to further investigate the intersection between religion and local culture, moving beyond theological or institutional approaches toward more grounded socio-anthropological perspectives. While the study is limited by its regional focus and qualitative scope, it opens the way for comparative research across different ethnoreligious contexts in Indonesia and beyond. Such studies could test the transferability of the model of *Dalihan Na Tolu* and explore variations in how local traditions are mobilized for interfaith integration. Ultimately, the experience of South Tapanuli demonstrates that religious plurality should not be perceived as a latent threat, but as a potential social resource—one that, if managed inclusively through local wisdom and cross-identity cooperation, can become the foundation of a resilient and pluralistic society.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that generative AI and AI-assisted tools were used only for language editing and improving the clarity of the manuscript's writing. All research data, conceptual frameworks, data analysis, and interpretation of results presented in this article are entirely the work and responsibility of the authors.

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