

RETROSPECTION OF CULTURE IN RELIGION IN THE ISLANDS OF NIAS, BANYAK AND SIMEULEU

Muhajir Al-Fairusy

STAIN Meulaboh, Indonesia

Email: muhajiralfairusy@staindirundeng.ac.id

Jovial Pally Taran

STAIN Meulaboh, Indonesia

Email: jovialtaran@staindirundeng.ac.id

Mowafg Abraham Masuwd

University of Zawia, Libya

Email: masuwd@zu.edu.ly

Reza Idria

UIN Ar-Raniry, Indonesia

Email: rezaidria@ar-raniry.ac.id

Idris Hemay

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Indonesia

Email: idris.hemay@gmail.com

Amiruddin

STAIN Meulaboh, Indonesia

Email: amirudin210320@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study focuses and emphasizes on the religious activities of islanders in Banyak Island, Simeulue and Nias. This research aims to find religious models and coexistence strategies in interfaith between island communities. These three islands are geographically close and inhabited by people with different religious identities. This research uses qualitative research with an ethnographic approach, data collection is done through in-depth interviews with informants who live on the three islands. The results showed that island communities have a collective ability to manage diversity to avoid conflict in the name of religion. Identity as an "island community" becomes social capital in interpreting collective identity. The open character of island communities is also a cultural capital that can suppress suspicion of different groups. However, the three island communities also have different characteristics in the religious moderation policy space. Nias Islands with a majority Christian population composition shows a fairly strong attitude of tolerance. The principle of kinship adopted by the Nias community serves to strengthen relations between religious communities. Simeulue Islands,

whose majority population is Muslim, also shows a high level of tolerance by giving permission to build houses of worship for Christians who have just arrived in Simeulue in the last two decades. In the context of Pulau Banyak, where the majority of the population is Muslim, tolerance is only seen in the economic, market and fishing industry aspects. On the other hand, tolerance does not apply to permits to build houses of worship. This study also discusses the importance of the role of religious and social actors in strengthening community harmony on the three islands under study.

Keywords: Retrospection of Culture; Muslim Islands; Christian Islands; The Islands of Nias; Banyak and Simeuleu

INTRODUCTION

The policy of strengthening religious moderation leads the Ministry of Religious Affairs and its apparatus to work more rigorously in order to strengthen the value of moderation in society. The demand to be the main agent and pioneer in stimulating the discourse of religious moderation echoes in every work agenda of this ministry (*Minister of Religious Affairs Asked Islamic Higher Educational Institutions to Become Centers for Development of Religious Moderation*, n.d.). The campaign of moderation values is deemed necessary in order to strengthen pluralism, while at the same time suppressing the number of intolerance and the potential for radicalism that can erupt in the midst of Indonesian society with plural identities in religious beliefs. The concept of moderation like this is also called the term modern moderation which advocates efforts to maintain inter-belief relations (Hakim et al., 2023).

The existence and function of religion can be seen as a system of action, a value system, and an ideological system. Religion in many cases that have been studied in various places has played its role as an ideological system that gives a pattern to the formation of values and group behavior (Morris, 1989). Pluralistic societies such as in Indonesia, it is important to understand moderation and pluralism. Although, on the one hand, pluralism serves as a shaper of a high spirit of tolerance. However, on the other hand, it is not uncommon to cause friction in a society with multiple identities such as Indonesia. Moreover, in some situations, identity politics that often carry race and religion become a very sensitive condition in social life (Buchari & Astuti, 2014; Kambo, 2009; Kuntowijoyo, 2018). Here, the space and value of religious moderation are considered important as a state policy, as well as a middle way to strengthen pluralism for pluralistic societies (Ministry of Religious Affairs Policy Planning Team, 2019).

The Setara Institute report states that the index of religious harmony and

tolerance in Indonesia is still red (Azhari & Halili, 2020). This means that it takes extra work to see leakage points of intolerance in society. Data from the last three years proves that there are still several regions in Indonesia that have not reached the target of religious harmony as set nationally, namely 73.83. This condition leads the Ministry of Religious Affairs to move faster in knitting the curtain of nationality, especially in the context of the religious life of Indonesian society.

In social religious studies, it seems that the issue of religious harmony can be seen from the character of society. Irwan Abdullah elaborates that religion and culture influence each other in society (Abdullah, 2010). The character of the region is also an influence as the basis of the anthropological community environment (Koentjaraningrat, 1985). Religious endurance as the main indicator of maintaining tolerance relations is strongly influenced by the quality of interactions, reactions, and communication between citizens with different backgrounds from various aspects of life, including the most important aspects of religion (Rosyid M., 2017). This study will focus on how coastal communities build social relations in a religious context.

Nur Syam explains that the social integration of coastal communities is supported by a *culture share* that comes from their daily rites. Coastal communities have a hard and open attitude (Simanjuntak & Antonious, 2010; Syam, 2005). *National Geographic* notes explain the openness of coastal people (*Why Do Coastal Communities Tend to be Hard and Open-Minded?* - *National Geographic*, n.d.). Some previous studies explain that the identity of island communities has the ability to build harmonious religious relations compared to mainland communities (Simanjuntak & Antonious, 2010). Even so in the context of this study, the people of Banyak and Nias Islands tend to show stable conditions in religion (Al-Fairusy, 2019; Al Fairusy, 2020; Anatona, 2000). This condition also answers why Islam can be accepted first by the character of coastal communities with liquid without conflict (Nuriz & Awang, 2018).

In light of the above description, this research will use a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach. The selection of island and coastal communities as the locus of this study was chosen based on the assumptions; *first*, the study of coastal communities living on islands needs to be done as a form of enrichment of information about religious attitudes. *Second*, the study of the identity and religious moderation model of island communities can be part of *social development* in the context of socio-religious studies and the development of religious moderation values by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, including Islamic Religious Higher Education. This study also departs from the lack of socio-religious studies of island communities which are very limited and not

as encouraging as in mainland communities.

RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND COASTAL RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Oman Fathurrahman through one of the youtube content with the theme of strengthening religious moderation explains the importance and strategic importance of the Ministry of Religion's policies for the color of nationality. Oman explains in detail the view of religious moderation as a policy. Conceptually, this policy seeks to avoid an exclusive attitude in religion that has the potential to create friction and conflict between religious communities, and can have an impact on national issues. However, religious moderation is also part of reducing the incidents of intolerance that still often occur in Indonesian society.

In general, religious moderation can be understood as an effort to maintain togetherness by having a tolerant attitude, an effort to understand each other and feel each other who are different from humans (Prologue; Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, 2019). In some studies, religious moderation can be decomposed into three trends; *first, the* model or form of religious moderation. *Second, the* process of religious moderation, and *third, the* implementation of religious moderation (Fernando & Jubba, 2023). As a policy, religious moderation can be understood as a perspective, attitude, and behavior that always takes a position in the middle, always acts fairly, and is not extreme in religion. Extreme itself is the opposite of the policy of religious moderation, which is something that goes beyond and exaggerates.

From the preliminary observation of the people who live in the three islands in this study, at first glance, they show their own model and form of moderation, generally they have tolerance for differences in beliefs. This condition is very different from the mainland and border communities of Aceh (Al-Fairusy et al., 2024; Al Fairusy, 2016; Aritonang, 2020). The character of the three kepulauan communities in the context of religion can be called part of the way of religion of coastal communities. In Nur Syam's study, the religious character of Islam adherents on the coast can be referred to as "Coastal Islam". The identity of coastal Islam has its own character that is different from the character of mountain communities. Local culture on the coast influences the way of religion, this condition is what Nur Syam calls "colloborative Islam" which describes the relationship between religion and local culture (Syam, 2005).

There are three islands that are used as data sources in this study, Two Islands in Aceh; Banyak Islands and Simeulue Islands, the majority of the population

are Muslims, the rest are inhabited by Christian communities affiliated with the Indonesian Gospel Mission Church (GMII). Furthermore, the Nias Islands which are part of North Sumatra, the majority of the people are Christian, and the rest are Muslim communities which are generally scattered in the two major cities on Nias; Gunung Sitoli and Teluk Dalam. These two areas are the easiest to find Muslims.

In Aceh's historical records, these three islands were once under Aceh's control as a spice trading port on the West Coast of Aceh, long before the Dutch entered and annexed the region under Dutch control before attacking Aceh (Al Fairusy MA, 2024). Aceh's footprints on Nias can still be found today (Al-Fairusy, 2019). Simeulue itself is known as the largest clove-producing area in Aceh, according to one clove trader, one of the most excellent types of cloves is sikotok cloves. Likewise, the Banyak Islands were once famous for the production and agriculture of cloves and copra. Plantation practices were initially dominant in these two areas, and then there was a transformation in livelihoods, with most residents choosing to work in the marine and fisheries sectors (Al-Fairusy, 2020).

The Nias Islands are the best example of building religious tolerance and moderation. In the Gunung Sitoli area as the center of the city in the Nias islands, although it is known for its Christian identity and majority, it has the ability to coexist with Muslims. Mosques and Muslim houses of worship can be built anywhere and anytime, without the need for permission. The power of moderation there is forged by kinship networks and local family wisdom termed *talifuse* (Al-Fairusy, 2019). The expression *talifuse* is not just a local term, an expression that shows the strong family values of fellow Nias people is the main social capital for building moderation values on Nias.

As for the Banyak Islands, Aceh Singkil as a sub-district that has experienced religious conflict, the dynamics of religious moderation are a social phenomenon in itself. At first glance, it seems that the community is reconciled with differences, there is almost no conflict like in mainland Singkel. Even so, there are problems regarding the permit for the establishment of houses of worship. When in the Banyak Islands, one of the places to visit is Mata Air Hamlet. This hamlet is young, inhabited by almost fifty households. The majority are Christian. Even so, they are not given access to build a house of prayer or a church by the Pulau Banyak sub-district. Every Sunday, using a boat, the residents take two hours to go to West Pulau Banyak Sub-district, where there is Ujung Sialit village. There, the GMII Church was established, and all Christians living in Pulau Banyak are only allowed to worship there.

However, on the other hand, social relations work quite well between the

Christian and Muslim populations of the Banyak Islands. There is no problem of conflict over beliefs. In the fishing industry, relations between tauke and fishermen of different faiths are common. Even so, in other contexts, in the market, the relationship between the people of Kepulauan Banyak melts. Similar conditions can also be seen in Simeulue, where a house of prayer, a church substitute, can be established in the midst of Muslim houses. This means that in terms of identity and religious moderation models, the people of the three islands have the power and value of tolerance, driven by feelings of compatibility as island people.

The following table compares the model of religious moderation of the coastal communities of the three islands

No	Islands	Religion		Pattern and Dynamics of Moderation
		Islam	Christianity	
1	Nias	Minority	Minority	Family values are strong as the identity of the “Nias people,” and there are no obstacles to the construction of houses of worship. There are no signs of conflict in the name of religion.
2	Kepulauan Banyak	Minority	Minority	Family values are strong as “urang pulo” from Nias descent and the same clan. However, there are rules and obstacles for the construction of houses of worship. There are no signs of conflict in the name of religion.
3	Simeulue	Minority	Minority	Identity as the Simeulue community, there are no obstacles to the construction of houses of worship, only they cannot be named churches, just “houses of prayer.” There are no signs of conflict in the name of religion.

LOCAL WISDOM IN THE DIVERSITY

As a large chain of islands in North Sumatra Province with an area of 5,625 km² and inhabited by nearly one million people, the Nias Islands consist of four districts and one municipality (Simeulue Regency Central Statistics Agency, 2024). The name Nias is not unfamiliar in Aceh's history, the Nias people in many Acehnese historical records are known for their loyalty and hard work (Anatona, 2000). Visiting Nias can be reached by two routes; sea and land. Sea travel starts from the ports of Sibolga and Singkil. As for air travel, you can use an airplane from Kuala Namu airport to Binaka airport, Nias.

In Mestika Zed's notes published in his book *Saudagar Pariaman Menerjang Ombak Membangun Maskapai*, Muhammad Saleh's journey as a merchant who took the sea route from Pariaman once crossed the Nias Islands. Muhammad Saleh through his autobiography explained the economic activities of the Nias population that had developed, especially Tello Island, which is the oldest tsunami trail in Sumatra (Zed, 2017).

Several studies on Nias suggest that the islanders are a plural society. They call themselves "Ono Niha" and their islands are called "Tano Niha". In Nias, customary law is still upheld, known as *fondrakö*, which regulates the circle of human life, from birth to death (Suwartiningsih & Samiyono, 2017). Not only plural in the ethnic context, Nias society is also plural in the dimension of belief (religion). Although, the majority of Nias people adhere to Protestant Christianity. Even so, there has never been violence in the name of religion in Nias society throughout the history of its society.

There are two cities that developed on Nias, namely Gunung Sitoli City and Teluk Dalam. These two cities are the easiest to find mosques and Muslim residents. Although, the majority of the population of Nias is Christian. Even so, the distance between the two cities requires a road trip of almost four hours. The road is flanked by forests and beaches. Gunung Sitoli City itself is the main gateway to the social life and diversity of the Nias population. Here, the Nias Heritage Museum serves as a space for Nias culture and a center of information about the Nias tribe, which is famous for stone carving. Furthermore, there is a bustling economy here. There are also two houses of worship (Church and Mosque) side by side.

Anthropologically, the physique of the Nias people is very easy to mark, generally they have slanted eyes and light yellow skin. In addition, Nias people often use clans behind their names. One of the characteristics and uniqueness of the Nias people is the habit of eating betel, almost every Nias resident met was chewing betel. Betel becomes an important cultural symbol for the Nias people. Not only betel nut, in the context of cultural heritage, Nias people are also closely related to stones. The tradition of carving stones as worship for the King of Nias and the tradition of stone jumping have become one of the national cultural heritages.

In the context of diversity and maintaining the brotherhood of fellow Nias people, they use a principle that is often echoed in the local Nias language, "...*Hulô La'ewa Nidanô, ifuli Fahalô-halô*." This means that the brotherhood of Nias people is like a river that continues to flow, difficult to separate and break. The meaning of being a Nias person is to be one family in the principle of local wisdom. One informant named RAZ who was met on Nias shared a

picture of moderation on Nias. RAZ himself is an employee at the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office in Nias Regency and is a Christian. For RAZ, religious differences do not necessarily separate Nias people, because family identity as Nias people is above religious identity according to RAZ.

“...The phrase “we are like a flowing river” is a building of kinship and kinship among Nias people. Not just an adage, this Nias adage has a strong meaning in the family ties of fellow Nias people who are likened to flowing river water. If there are attempts by others to cut down the flowing river water, it is a futile job, because the water will continue to flow, and will never be cut off.”

(Interview with RAZ, March 21, 2024, Gunung Sitoli City)

Nias people have long been accustomed to coexisting with different beliefs. In Gunung Sitoli and Teluk Dalam, and several areas, houses of worship are often found; churches are located close to and side by side with Surau and Mosques. In fact, Mosques can grow without the need for permits as in Aceh in the majority Christian and Catholic environment on Nias. In Aceh, permits for the construction of houses of worship, especially churches, have indeed reaped dynamics and controversy, especially in Singkil, which is the parent district of Kepulaun Banyak (Aritonang, 2020; TEMPO, 2015).

Diversity and tolerance can be found in every corner of the Nias region. One day, while this study and research was being conducted, a middle-aged woman sat in front of St. Francis Laverna Church in Gunung Sitoli City. She was a devout churchgoer who had just finished a service. She appeared to be waiting for a pick-up not far from the church grounds. From her description, she was over sixty years old. Not long after, a man who was her brother came to pick her up. He explained that his brother is a Muslim, and picks him up at Laverna Church almost every day.

Living in a family of different faiths is common and normal on Nias. There are many families on Nias where family members have different faith identities, but they still uphold family values. The role of the family as a social institution seems to be not limited to supplying values and reinforcing the value of moderation, not only limited to strengthening physical, social and psychological resilience (Suhardiman et al., 2023).

Moreover, when visiting Nias, there is a deep impression of how residents treat visitors. At the Port of Gunung Sitoli City, some first-time visitors to Nias will easily find information regarding identity. Muslims are advised by some non-Muslim residents not to visit any food stalls, with some markers indicating which Muslim food stalls to stop at.

One of the heads of the Islamic religious authority on Nias in the members of the Nias Ulema Consultative Assembly, Abdul Hadi, recounts the history of how moderation and tolerance work on Nias.

“...Since long ago, when migrants from Aceh and Minang who were Muslims traveled to Nias to spread their religion and settled as part of the Nias people, the ancestors of Nias have pledged to protect each other and the people living in the Nias Islands. This pledge became a culture and heritage in the expression “*talifuse*,” where the blood of kinship and kinship as Nias people is more important than the identity that is subsequently attached to the Nias people.”

(Interview with Abdul Hadi, March 23, 2024, Gunung Sitoli City)

The value of kinship based on this ancestral agreement then becomes part of the local wisdom of tolerance on Nias according to the informants. The presence of local wisdom as a culture of strengthening tolerance by upholding identity and family values can be seen as one of the models of culture-based moderation on Nias, and the way “coastal religions” such as the Nias islands display their own diverse identity.

HOUSE OF PRAYER AS AN EXPRESSION OF MODERATION

Data and descriptions of the religious life of the Simeulue community in the context of moderation began with initial information at the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In this state agency that takes care of the religious field, some initial data was collected. FZ and MD, employees of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Simeulue Regency, gave an overview of community life there. In the context of religion, the majority of Simeulue’s population is Muslim, and is claimed by some religious leaders to be affiliated with the Muhammadiyah identity. However, the practice of Islam there tends to be open. From the information of Simeulue community leaders, even though they seem to be Muhammadiyah-affiliated, the people of Simeulue are open to all groups. In fact, some residents who claim to be Muhammadiyah but do not really understand how to distinguish themselves from the Nahdhiyin style of Islam, for example.

As for the Christians who started coming to Simeuleu since the early 2000s, they are generally traders from North Sumatra who then chose to settle in Simeulue. In the past, there were traders of Chinese descent, but the population is now getting smaller, most of them have chosen to become converts. In terms of Islam adherents, the Muhammadiyah style is stronger here. Although, there are also traditional patterns, but the number is very small. Even so, from the

recognition of some residents, in the context of worship tends to be fluid, indistinguishable between the two (Muhammadiyah and Traditionalist, ed).

Non-Muslim residents also exist in Simeulue, even so their numbers are very small. Although the number is very limited, Christians in Simeulue have two houses of prayer instead of churches. Permission to build houses of worship was granted by the Simeulue community as a form of tolerance according to one of the Religious Harmony Forum administrators in Simeulue. The location of the two houses of prayer are far apart. One stands in Sinabang City, and the other is separated on Siumat Island.

From the information of several informants interviewed, the Simeulue community does not object to the existence of a house of prayer located in the middle of a Muslim settlement. However, they refuse if the status of the house of prayer is changed to a church. From the information of Simeulue residents, there used to be a ship from the Navy from Sibolga that stopped at Sinabang. Then, some Navy soldiers who are Christians tried to put church pamphlets in the prayer house. This incident had drawn controversy and criticism. The community refused, then it was taken down after negotiations with the community. According to the Religious Harmony Forum chairman, this incident was quickly handled, so that the potential for social conflict did not occur. So far, there have been no friction issues with the minority population. Moreover, according to the Religious Harmony Forum, Simeulue's non-Muslim population only arrived around the year 2000 to the island in order to trade. So, the provision of two houses of prayer is considered a form of high tolerance from the people of Simeulue.

The house of worship in Simeulue as a substitute for the church is a diakonia of the Indonesian Gospel Mission Church (GMII), just like in Ujung Sialit in the Banyak Islands, and Meulaboh City in West Aceh. When visited, it is located in the middle of the Simeulue Muslim settlement. The prayer house is built of planks, elongated in shape like a typical church. Inside is also equipped with complete facilities.

It was a little difficult to find the House of Prayer because there was no signboard. Moreover, it is located in the middle of several Muslim houses. At the time of this study, the House of Prayer and its congregation were led by Pastor Lukas, a 56-year-old native of Central Java. Lukas has served at the House of Prayer for four years as the head of the congregation or pastor. The House of Prayer is a church replacement house of worship affiliated with the diakonia of the Indonesian Gospel Mission Church. According to Lukas, the house of prayer is used by almost fifty congregations who live in Simeulue, and has been used for worship since 2001. Not only Protestant Christians, the

house of prayer is also used by Catholic Christians in Simeulue.

The diakonia of the GMII House of Prayer is the same as the only church in the West Banyak Islands, precisely in Ujung Sialit, which is used by Christians in Pulau Banyak. However, Simeulue has two houses of prayer compared to only one on Pulau Banyak. Although, if calculated, the number of congregations on Banyak Island is more crowded than Simeulue. Apart from Sinabang, on Siumat Island there is also another house of prayer that was given permission by the community to be established. Sinabang City and Siumat Island are separated by the ocean in the Simeulue islands.

When interviewed, Lukas did not give much information about why the status of the house of prayer still survived and was not renamed as a church, and with a written legal status. Indeed, there was an impression from Lukas that he wished to be converted from the look on his face as he gave an account of the history of the house of prayer. Lukas also understands that the permit to build a house of worship must follow the Qanun in Aceh. Even so, as a migrant and head of a minority congregation, he only follows the wishes of the local community. From Lukas' information, the status of use of the House of Prayer is only given by community consensus to be used as a place of worship. The name may not be changed as a church and a name bar in front of this elongated building. He did not specify the status of the prayer house. Lukas admitted that he was only carrying out his duties as the head of the congregation who was sent. Moreover, his status as head of the congregation can be transferred at any time. Interestingly, Lukas is also part of the Simeulue Regency Religious Harmony Forum in maintaining tolerance on the islands.

On the other hand, the Simelueu Religious Harmony Forum and the Ministry of Religious Affairs only explained that the existence of the status of a prayer house was enough to show the high tolerance attitude of the Simeulue community, so there was no need to change it to a church because it was feared that it could trigger public affection and suspicion.

“...the identity and majority of Simeulue's population is Muslim, and the presence of migrants has never been restricted. Moreover, the house of prayer does not stand apart from the homes of Muslim residents, even so far it has been flanked and surrounded by the homes of Muslim Simeulue residents. This condition shows the high value of tolerance possessed by the people of Simeulue.”
(Interview Rahmanuddin, Simeulue Religious Harmony Forum, March 25, 2024, Sinabang City)

In fact, when compared to the Banyak Islands, the attitude of tolerance and the people of Simeulue towards the existence of non-Muslims who began arriving since the beginning of 2000 is much better. Moreover, the number of non-Muslims is not as many as the people of Pulau Banyak, which only has one house of worship. On the other hand, inter-religious friction has also never occurred in Simeulue, this condition shows the inclusive coastal religious style of the Simeulue community and has its own moderation model in managing interfaith religion.

TOLERANCE AND PERMITS FOR HOUSES OF WORSHIP

The Banyak Islands is part of Aceh Singkil, which is flanked by Nias and Simeulue Islands. There are two sub-districts in Kepulauan Banyak; Pulau Banyak and Pulau Banyak Barat, which are almost two hours apart by sea crossing (Singkil, 2024). Ethnically, the people of Kepulauan Banyak are mostly descendants of Nias with Malay-Minang culture. Not surprisingly, the use of these two languages, Malay-Minang and Nias, is often found in the community of the Banyak Islands. The majority of the population of the Banyak Islands is Muslim, except in Mata Air Hamlet, Pulau Banyak, and Ujung Sialit Village, Pulau Banyak Barat Sub-district, which are inhabited by Christians with the diakonia of the Indonesian Gospel Mission Church congregation, just like the Christians who inhabit Simeulue.

Muslim and Christian settlements in the Banyak Islands sub-district are not united, separated by the sea which has now been built a connecting bridge. However, the road to get to Mata Air Hamlet is not easy, apart from the road being damaged and filled with wild vines that partially cover the path to get there. Some Mata Air residents choose to use the sea route to reach the sub-district center. Their relationship is only bound by the economic industry of fishing and administrative and educational issues.

The distance from the kecamatan center to Mata Air is only 1 kilometer. This hamlet is also adjacent to Teluk Nibung Village, one of the villages in Pulau Banyak Sub-district with Muhammadiyah Islamic identity. According to the people who live in Mata Air, in the 1980s there were only three houses in the hamlet. They came from North Nias as laborers and guardians of clove plantations owned by several Pulau Banyak people. The residents here all have Nias clans, such as one of the residents who settled here for the first time named Sekhizatule'u Zai, a Nias name. Subsequently, the arrival and development of the community here continued to grow. There are now 32 families living in this seaside hamlet. Indeed, the houses here are not as many as the heads of families, because some houses are inhabited by two heads of

families. However, there are no pig farms or pets here, as there are on Nias. Only a few dogs are used for gardening.

The livelihood of the people of Pulau Banyak is fishing. Although, some of them also farm. In Mata Air Hamlet, which is flanked by beaches and community plantations, working as a fisherman is preferred by residents. Daily communication in this hamlet uses the Nias language. This is different from the people of Pulau Banyak in the sub-district center who often use Malay. As is the tradition on Nias, residents of Mata Air also often chew betel. For them, betel is an ancestral tradition and an identity as Nias people. The teeth of older residents who chew betel appear reddish-black, as they have been chewing betel for years.

Although demographically, the hamlet is growing in population. However, they were not given permission by the village and sub-district authorities to build a house of worship or house of prayer like in Simeulue. So, every Sunday they have to cross up to two hours to Ujung Sialit Village in Pulau Banyak Barat for weekly prayer and worship. Only there, the GMII Church is allowed to stand. Not every Sunday they can visit Ujung Sialit. When their finances are tight, they are forced not to go to worship in Ujung Sialit. Crossing the ocean to arrive at Ujung Sialit requires a considerable amount of gasoline.

The head of the hamlet said that he had asked permission from the sub-district head and village officials in Pulau Banyak several times to establish a house of worship, but was always refused and not given permission on the grounds that there must be a permit from the Aceh Province regarding permission to establish a house of worship. This condition does not necessarily make the people in Mata Air Hamlet complain and protest. For them, this is seen as an act of injustice. When asked, the villagers just sighed, while issuing the words “suck” and “difficult.”

From the information of a resident of Mata Air, the church in Ujung Sialit is also getting narrower, and no expansion permit has been granted. In fact, the population is increasing. In the context of the sacred ritual of marriage, Mata Air residents will hold it in the church in Ujung Sialit Village, except for parties, which they can hold in their respective homes in Mata Air Hamlet. At the time of data collection for this study, a family was in mourning; one of the villagers had just died from an illness that had lasted for almost two weeks. He was very young, the younger brother of the Head of Mata Air Hamlet. According to Arianto, they had taken his younger brother to Nias for medical and non-medical treatment, but the long-standing fever could not be saved. Health facilities are only available in the sub-district center.

In Mata Air Hamlet, there are no schools or the most basic education units such as kindergartens. The children of Mata Air Hamlet have to take their education to Pulau Balai - the sub-district center, where they have to walk or take a boat to cross. Paradoxically, according to a teacher on Pulau Banyak, there is no special religious teacher for Christians at the school. So, they are forced to follow the Islamic religious education taught to other students in schools. Many non-Muslim children are able to memorize Muslim prayers and holy verses.

When compared to the mainland Singkil community, the condition of the Banyak island community is much more harmonious in a religious context. There is no friction and conflict that leads to disharmony. Although it must be admitted, suspicion of the Non-Muslim community could be heard everywhere during this study. However, economic relations such as patronage in the world of fisheries, ethnic unity as Nias people, and social relations in one archipelago make religious moderation in the community of Pulau Banyak provide its own model, compared to the mainland community of Singkil, which often has the potential for conflict due to the unsolved issues of permits for houses of worship.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible not to take a closer look at how religious moderation functions in coastal and island communities in Aceh and North Sumatra, given the strict permits for the construction of houses of worship that lead to frictional conflicts on the Aceh mainland-border. Thus, the ability of island communities to live side by side with differences in beliefs also evidence their capability to foresee the emergent issues of religious radicalism and violence. This paper demonstrates how the identity and strength of island societies that are associated with the idea of life and indigenous culture is a kind of religious tolerance in itself. Local values and wisdoms as well as the meaning of family is considered as the main identity compared to the identity of community beliefs in the context of the Nias Islands. Besides, while dynamics of permits for the establishment of houses of worship are so noisy on the Aceh border, the Banyak Island community could at least minimize the turmoil of religious conflict due to socio-economic relation and solidarity feelings as islanders.

Religious moderation as a policy cannot be viewed as one directional and a homogeneous approach. There are forms and models that evolve within society that are greatly impacted by the environment and culture of the society they live in. The three islands examined; the Nias Islands, the Banyak Islands and Simeulue Islands each offer an example of religious moderation policies. On

the one hand, identity as coastal and island people also reveals similarities in the approach to community groups with different beliefs. On the other hand, other political policies are a conflict for the sustainability of inter-religious relations, including in the Islands. The weakness of moderation is true in the Banyak and Simeulue Islands because of the permits for the construction of places of worship. This condition is different from the Nias Islands, which do not have any vulnerability in tolerance, the freedom to establish houses of worship and see other Nias people with different religions as the same identity as one family becomes a buffer for tolerance and moderation in the Nias Islands better than the people in the other two islands in Aceh. However, both are Nias ethnicities though ethnically they are similar to the Banyak Islands. And as Island people who live in one archipelago and are distinct from the mainland, they do consider themselves one nation. Hence, “making peace” and building “tolerance” for the sake of the sustainability of economic and social relations is reasonable. This is the state that makes religious moderation function. However, the local culture in religion is also a factor that contributes to the formation of the face of tolerance of island communities.

Structurally, religious, cultural and Religious Harmony Forum has a very significant role of nurturing local communities so that religious tension and conflict do not develop. In general, this study provides meaning to the policy of religious moderation in the islands and coasts that seem to be better than in the mainland communities particularly on the border of Aceh. In general, the feeling of the unity of the islanders' fate has granted the right to freedom to practice religious worship and rituals and not to discriminate. However, there are other policies (permits to build houses of worship) that have restrained the mobility of religious moderation amid the island societies, particularly Banyak Island.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abdullah, I. (2010). *Konstruksi dan Reproduksi Kebudayaan*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Al-Fairusy, M. (2019). “Ama Aceh” di Pulau Nias : *Reproduksi Identitas dan Adat Istiadat Keacehan Marga Polem di Negeri Tanah Niha*. MAA Aceh.
- Al-Fairusy, M. (2020). Pengaruh Identitas Pesisir Bagi Masyarakat Singkil Dan Barus. *Indonesian Journal of Islamic History and Culture*, 1(1), 32–50. <https://doi.org/10.22373/ijihc.v1i1.584>
- Al-Fairusy, M., Rohana, S., Kurniawan, C. S., Hemay, I., & Budiman, Z. (2024). Community Identity and Resilience as a Psychological Response to

- Converts on the Aceh Border. *International Journal of Islamic Educational Psychology*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.18196/ijiep.v5i1.20715>
- Al Fairusy, M. (2016). *Singkel : Sejarah, Etnisitas dan Dinamika Sosial*.
- Al Fairusy, M. (2020). Pengaruh Identitas Pesisir Bagi Masyarakat Singkil Dan Barus. *Indonesian Journal of Islamic History and Culture*, 1(1), 32–50. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.22373/ijihc.v1i1.584>
- Al Fairusy MA, M. (2024). Kontestasi Kuasa Dalam Perdagangan Rempah Di Pantai Barat Dan Selatan Aceh Abad Ke 18 Hingga 19 M. *Paradigma: Jurnal Kajian Budaya*, 14(1), 77–89. <https://doi.org/10.17510/paradigma.v14i1.1421>
- Anatona. (2000). *Perdagangan Budak di Pulau Nias 1820-1860*. Universitas Gadjah Mada.
- Aritonang, H. D. (2020). *Korban Kekerasan Agama, Memori Kolektif dan Rekonsiliasi Diri (Kontruksi Teologi Rekonsiliasi Diri Pasca Perusakan Gereja-Gereja di Aceh Singkil)*.
- Azhari, S., & Halili. (2020). *Indeks Kota Toleran Tahun 2020*.
- Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Simeulue. (2024). *Kabupaten Simeulue dalam Angka 2024*.
- Buchari, & Astuti, S. (2014). *Kebangkitan Etnis Menuju Politik Identitas*.
- Fernando, H., & Jubba, H. (2023). *Mosaik Indonesia; Transformasi Agama dan Sosial Budaya*. CV. Putra Surya Santosa.
- Hakim, L., Meria, A., & Suryadinata, S. (2023). Religious Moderation in Indonesian Context. *Al-Albab*, 12(1), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.24260/alalbab.v12i1.2619>
- Kambo, G. A. (2009). Memahami Politik Identitas Pemikiran Tentang Pencarian Identitas Kambo, G. A. (2009). Memahami Politik Identitas Pemikiran Tentang Pencarian Identitas Etnik ; Sebuah Kajian dalam Pembentukan Provinsi Sulawesi Barat. Renai, Kajian Politik Lokal & Sosio Humani. *Renai, Kajian Politik Lokal & Sosio Humaniora*. Tahun IX No. 2.
- Koentjaraningrat. (1985). *Kebudayaan, Mentalitet dan Pembangunan*. PT. Gramedia.
- Kuntowijoyo. (2018). *Identitas Politik Umat ISLAM*. Mata Bangsa.
- Menag Minta PTKIN Jadi Pusat Pengembangan Moderasi Beragama. (n.d.).

- Mengapa Masyarakat Pesisir Cenderung Berwatak Keras dan Terbuka? - National Geographic*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 5, 2025, from https://nationalgeographic.grid.id/read/132928895/mengapa-masyarakat-pesisir-cenderung-berwatak-keras-dan-terbuka?lgn_method=google&google_btn=onetap
- Morris, B. (1989). Anthropological Studies of Religion. *Religious Studies*, 25(2), 255–257. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500001888>
- Nuriz, M. A. F., & Awang, J. (2018). Islamic Education in Indonesia: Study of Azyumardi Azra'S Thought. *Ar-Raniry: International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 5(2), 205–224.
- Prolog; Lukman Hakim Saifuddin. (2019). *Moderasi Beragama (I)*. Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI.
- Rosyid M. (2017). Peredam Konflik Agama: Studi Analisis Penyelesaian di Tolikara Papua 2015. *AFKARUNA*, 13(1), 48–81.
- Simanjuntak, & Antonious, B. (2010). *Melayu Pesisir dan Batak Pegunungan; Orientasi Nilai Budaya*. Yayasan Obor Indonesia.
- Singkil, B. P. S. A. (2024). *Kabupaten Aceh Singkil Dalam Angka 2024*.
- Suhardiman, S., Ar., E. H., & Nizar, M. (2023). Kampung Beting: Family Resilience Against Religious Radicalism. *Al-Albab*, 12(1), 53–78. <https://doi.org/10.24260/alalbab.v12i1.2419>
- Suwartiningsih, S., & Samiyono, D. (2017). Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Nias dalam Mempertahankan Harmoni Sosial. *Societas Dei: Jurnal Agama Dan Masyarakat*, 1(1), 235. <https://doi.org/10.33550/sd.v1i1.53>
- Syam, N. (2005). *Islam Pesisir*. LKiS.
- TEMPO. (2015). Ini Sejarah Penyerangan Gereja Aceh Singkil Sejak 1979. 17 Oktober.
- Tim Penyusun Kementerian Agama. (2019). *Tanya Jawab Moderasi Beragama*. Badan Litbang dan Badan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI.
- Zed, M. (2017). *Saudagar Pariaman Menerjang Ombak Membangun Maskapai*. LP3ES.