ISLAM AND MULTICULTURALISM IN BUILDING HARMONY IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

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Abstract	This article explores the role of Islam in fostering social harmony within the diverse community of Nagajuang Subdistrict, Mandailing Natal Regency, where the population is predominantly non-Muslim. This research employs a qualitative method with a case study design and a descriptive-analytical approach. The study investigates social interactions between Muslims and Christians and identifies key factors that support peaceful coexistence. The research data were collected from the community of Nagajuang Subdistrict, Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, which represents a valuable case of interfaith harmony. The data consist of interview transcripts with religious leaders, traditional leaders, and community members; field notes from participatory observation of daily interactions; and textual data from local archives and reports on interfaith relations. These data were collected through purposive sampling based on the informants' involvement in interreligious and community activities. Thematic analysis was employed, involving data reduction, categorization into themes such as harmony factors, challenges, and the role of Islam, followed by conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that Islamic values of moderation, such as rahmatan lil 'alamin and wasatiyyah, are practiced to promote tolerance and unity. Local cultural traditions emphasizing mutual cooperation (gotong royong) further strengthen social bonds across religious lines. Despite this harmony, challenges like religious intolerance and socio-economic inequality persist. This study highlights the significance of combining Islamic values with local cultural wisdom to support multicultural coexistence. It offers practical recommendations for strengthening multicultural education and promoting collaboration among government bodies, religious institutions, and communities. Nagajuang serves as a model of successful interfaith harmony, contributing valuable insights into social integration in diverse societies.
Keywords	Diversity, Harmony, Islam, Multiculturalism.

INTRODUCTION

Mandailing Natal Regency in North Sumatra, Indonesia, is a region renowned for its ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. This plurality includes communities from different ethnicities, such as Mandailing, Batak, Javanese, and Minangkabau, as well as followers of various religions, predominantly Islam and Christianity (Hadiyanto et al., 2025). In the specific context of Nagajuang Subdistrict, an area where Christians constitute the majority and Muslims are a minority, this diversity presents both a unique social dynamic and a fertile ground for scholarly inquiry into interfaith relations (Atamimi et al., 2024). Although Mandailing Natal is broadly Islamic in demographic terms, the case of Nagajuang challenges the conventional narrative of majority-minority religious interactions in Indonesia. This research addresses the academic gap by critically examining how Islamic values interact with multicultural realities to shape tolerance and harmony in such a pluralistic society. The issue is no longer merely whether communities coexist, but how they do so—what norms, values, and structures sustain this coexistence, and what role Islam plays in facilitating social integration.

Islam, in this context, is not only a personal faith but also a social ethic embedded in communal life. Core Islamic principles such as rahmatan lil 'alamin (mercy to all creation), ta'awun (mutual cooperation), tasamuh (tolerance), and wasatiyyah (moderation) have become essential in shaping attitudes of inclusivity among Muslims in Nagajuang (Musyarrofah & Zulhannan, 2023). Interviews with local religious leaders reveal that these values are often expressed through active participation in interfaith gatherings, joint community development programs, and conflict resolution efforts (S. Harahap et al., 2024). For example, during traditional ceremonies or local disaster responses, Muslims and Christians routinely collaborate in a spirit of mutual respect. This shared civic engagement, rooted in both Islamic ethics and local cultural wisdom like gotong royong (mutual aid), promotes a lived experience of multiculturalism (Wahyu, 2024). The practice of wasatiyyah encourages Muslims to occupy a middle ground respecting their religious identity while embracing the rights and beliefs of others (Helmy et al., 2021). These Islamic values are not imposed doctrinally but are internalized through everyday social interactions, suggesting a model where religion supports rather than hinders pluralism.

However, maintaining this harmony is not without challenges. Interviews and field observations highlight issues such as residual religious prejudices, socio-economic inequality, and occasional political manipulation of religious sentiments, particularly during election periods.

Religious leaders and community figures face the complex task of sustaining interfaith peace in a society where cultural and theological differences persist. Strategies employed include continuous interreligious dialogue, peace education in local schools, and collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations to foster inclusive development (Khoiri et al., 2024). Data from the Mandailing Natal Interfaith Harmony Forum indicate that structured dialogue has significantly reduced intergroup tensions over the past five years. Yet, the need for systemic efforts to strengthen multicultural education and institutional support remains pressing. This study seeks to contribute to the academic understanding of how Islamic values and multicultural practices intertwine to produce social harmony, using Nagajuang as a case study that reflects broader dynamics in Indonesia's diverse societal landscape (FKUB Mandailing Natal, 2022).

In contemporary Indonesia, where multiculturalism is a defining characteristic of national identity, Islam has played a significant role in shaping inclusive and harmonious intergroup relations. Previous studies have examined how Islamic teachings and local cultural values intersect to manage religious diversity. A study by Diantika and Mastini on Hindu-Islamic coexistence in Bali highlights the success of religious moderation practices at the Sacred Temple, where balanced worship traditions across both religions are maintained without conflict (Diantika & Mastini, 2023). Their research shows that shared sacred spaces and inclusive rituals foster interfaith understanding and unity. Meanwhile, Islamy and Amirullah investigated post-conflict religious reconciliation in Papua, revealing that religious moderation efforts, including interfaith collaboration among Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders, contributed significantly to restoring trust and harmony after a period of violent unrest (Islamy & Amirullah, 2022). Both studies emphasize the importance of moderation and local cultural adaptation in sustaining social stability.

Another relevant study is presented by Sayaka et al., which focuses on the concept of wasatiyyah (moderation) in Islam as a guiding principle for peaceful coexistence. Their findings affirm that moderate Islamic values such as rahmatan lil 'alamin promote inclusivity and non-violence in interfaith interactions (Sayaka et al., 2025). However, the research is primarily normative and lacks in-depth empirical analysis at the community level. Furthermore, Helmy et al. explore how Indonesian Islam's flexible and adaptive characteristics help Muslims engage with pluralism without compromising religious identity (Helmy et al., 2021). Their research, though insightful, primarily focuses on urban centers with Muslim majorities and does not address minority-Muslim contexts. Finally, S. M. Harahap & Hamka examine harmony in Huta Padang Village, Mandailing

Natal, showing that Mandailing cultural values such as dalian na tolu complement Islamic teachings in promoting intergroup harmony (S. M. Harahap & Hamka, 2023). Although this study provides a valuable case of cultural-religious synergy, it focuses on a Muslim-majority area, which differs from the religious composition of Nagajuang Subdistrict.

Based on these five studies, several research gaps can be identified. First, while the role of Islamic moderation has been widely discussed, empirical studies in non-Muslim majority settings where Muslims are the minority are still limited. Second, most existing research emphasizes religious leaders or state policies, but fewer explore the active roles of both religious and traditional leaders at the grassroots level. Third, there is a lack of detailed investigation into how Islamic values interact with local cultural practices—such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation)—in sustaining daily interfaith harmony in rural or remote communities. Moreover, existing literature often overlooks how the understanding and daily practice of multiculturalism among ordinary citizens influence social integration.

This study aims to fill these gaps by focusing on the Nagajuang Subdistrict in Mandailing Natal Regency, where Muslims are a religious minority living within a predominantly Christian community. The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of the dual role of Islamic values and local cultural wisdom in fostering interfaith tolerance, especially in a context where the Muslim population is not dominant. By examining how principles such as wasatiyyah, ta'awun, and tasamuh are embodied in daily interactions, and how these are reinforced by local traditions like gotong royong, this study offers a unique perspective on the lived experience of multiculturalism in Indonesia. Furthermore, by incorporating the voices of both religious leaders and community members through qualitative methods, this research provides a grounded, community-based model of harmony that contributes to broader discussions on interfaith coexistence in diverse societies.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method with a case study design and a descriptive-analytical approach. The study focuses on the social interactions between Muslims and Christians as well as the factors that support the creation of interfaith harmony. The research data were collected from the community of Nagajuang Subdistrict, Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, which represents a valuable case of interfaith coexistence. The data consist of interview transcripts with religious leaders, traditional leaders, and community members; field notes from participatory

observation of daily interactions; and textual data obtained from local archives and reports on interfaith relations.

Data analysis was conducted thematically with steps in the form of data reduction, categorization into main themes such as harmony factors, challenges, and the role of religion, and drawing conclusions based on the patterns found (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). To ensure data validity, this study used the source triangulation method by comparing information from various informants and data collection methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the role of Islamic values and local culture in creating harmonious relationships amidst the diversity of the Nagajuang community (Rustamana et al., 2024).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The community of Nagajuang Subdistrict in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, offers a valuable case study of successful interfaith harmony in a diverse society. While the area is predominantly non-Muslim, the presence of a Muslim minority has not led to significant conflict. Instead, the community serves as a model for how diverse groups can coexist peacefully. This harmony is not accidental; it is built upon a foundation of shared values and traditions. The following table provides a clear breakdown of the key aspects of this diversity, outlining the roles and challenges involved.

Table 1. A Portrait of Religious and Cultural Diversity, Roles, and Challenges in Nagajuang, Mandailing Natal, North Sumatra

Aspect of Diversity	Description of Diversity in Nagajuang	Role in Fostering Harmony	Challenges Faced
Religious Diversity	The population is predominantly non-Muslim, with a Muslim minority. There is social interaction between Muslims and Christians.	Islamic values such as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy to all creation) and *wasatiyyah* (moderation) promote tolerance and unity.	**Religious intolerance** is a major challenge that can threaten peaceful coexistence.
Cultural Diversity	There are strong local traditions that emphasize *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation and assistance).	The tradition of *gotong royong* strengthens social bonds and cooperation among different religious groups, creating a sense of community.	**Socio-economic inequality** can create tension and exacerbate existing differences.

Role of Leaders and Community	Religious and traditional leaders, as well as community members, are actively involved in social interactions.	The combination of Islamic values with local wisdom strengthens multicultural coexistence. Nagajuang serves as a model of successful interfaith harmony.	A lack of multicultural education can hinder understanding and acceptance of differences.
Social Dynamics	There is a peaceful daily interaction between people of different faiths.	The existing harmony demonstrates collaboration between government bodies, religious institutions, and communities in promoting peace.	While harmony exists, the ongoing challenges require continuous effort to be addressed.

Source: Research data (field observations, in-depth interviews with religious and traditional leaders as well as community members, and document analysis of local archives and government reports, 2023–2024).

Table 1 highlights that social harmony in diverse societies is a dynamic process. It is not merely the absence of conflict but an active practice of shared values. The successful integration of Islamic principles like wasatiyyah with local cultural wisdom, such as gotong royong, has been crucial in maintaining peace. This synergy creates a resilient social fabric that can withstand challenges. However, the community is not without its issues. The persistent threats of religious intolerance and socio-economic inequality show that continuous effort is needed. The findings from this study suggest that strengthening multicultural education and promoting active collaboration among all sectors, government, religious institutions, and the community are essential steps for ensuring long-term peace and social integration. The Nagajuang model provides valuable lessons for other diverse societies striving for a similar level of coexistence. The demographic composition of Nagajuang District reflects a religiously diverse population, characterized by the coexistence of two major religious groups: Muslims and Christians. Within this demographic structure, the Christian community holds the numerical majority, accounting for around 60% of the total population, while the Muslim community forms the minority. Despite this demographic imbalance, both communities share a long history of living side by side in the same social and cultural space, which has shaped unique patterns of coexistence.

Social interaction in Nagajuang is marked by strong evidence of interfaith cooperation that extends across various spheres of daily life. Collaborative initiatives, such as the construction of public infrastructure, including village roads and clean water facilities, illustrate a shared sense of responsibility toward collective welfare. Likewise, moments of religious celebration and crisis management, such as disaster response, become opportunities for both Muslims and Christians to

reinforce mutual solidarity. This form of cooperation demonstrates that religious difference does not prevent, but rather enhances, the spirit of collective action within the community. Ethnic diversity also plays a significant role in shaping social dynamics. Nagajuang is home to both Mandailing and Batak ethnic groups, whose coexistence remains relatively free from conflict. This peaceful inter-ethnic relationship is a testament to the effectiveness of cultural traditions and shared values in mitigating potential tensions that might otherwise arise from ethnic pluralism.

Leadership emerges as a central pillar in sustaining harmony within the district. Religious figures, both Islamic and Christian, along with traditional leaders, actively engage in fostering dialogue and cooperation. They regularly convene meetings to deliberate on pressing community issues, reinforcing a culture of communication and understanding. This leadership dynamic is further supported by local government initiatives, which provide structural and financial assistance to interfaith programs, thereby institutionalizing practices of tolerance and coexistence. Local cultural values are deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life in Nagajuang, acting as the moral compass that strengthens community resilience. Practices such as deliberation (shura), mutual cooperation (gotong royong), and respect for elders and traditional leaders underpin social order and solidarity. In particular, the Islamic teaching of ukhuwah basyariyah—the notion of universal human brotherhood functions as a moral bridge that transcends religious boundaries, reinforcing compassion, mutual respect, and cooperation among different groups.

Analysis and Interpretation

The presence of Islam, despite being a minority religion in Nagajuang, holds profound significance in shaping intercommunal relations. Islamic principles such as rahmatan lil 'alamin (mercy to all creation) and wasatiyyah (moderation) provide an ethical framework that promotes inclusivity, tolerance, and respect for diversity. These values help Muslims act as a catalyst for peacebuilding, showing that minority groups can exert influence not through numbers but through the power of moral and ethical contributions to society. The social harmony in Nagajuang is not solely the outcome of religious values but rather the result of a productive synergy between religion and local culture. Traditional practices such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation) and the respect accorded to traditional leaders serve as strong cultural foundations that align seamlessly with Islamic principles of tolerance and solidarity. This interplay between religious teachings and cultural traditions produces a distinctive model of coexistence that is both practical and deeply rooted in local identity.

One of the most remarkable features of the Nagajuang community is its resilience against external threats, particularly those emanating from provocative narratives on social media or divisive external actors. This resilience is built upon robust social bonds and a collective adherence to shared values, which act as a protective shield against attempts to sow discord. The community's capacity to prioritize local traditions and ethical principles ensures that external provocations find little ground to disrupt established harmony. Nevertheless, challenges to maintaining this harmony remain. One pressing challenge lies in the influx of intolerant narratives from outside the community, particularly via digital platforms. Such narratives pose a risk of influencing younger generations who may not yet possess the same depth of attachment to local wisdom. In addition, socio-economic inequality—manifested in uneven access to resources and services presents another potential source of tension, as disparities can foster jealousy and division. Finally, the lack of comprehensive multicultural education, especially in rural settings, represents a structural weakness. Without proper educational frameworks that equip younger generations to navigate diversity, the sustainability of the current model of coexistence may be undermined in the future.

Discussion

Multiculturalism as a Framework for Integration

The case of Nagajuang District provides a compelling empirical example of successful multicultural coexistence, where different religious and ethnic groups maintain their distinct identities while actively participating in a shared civic life. The collaboration between the predominantly Christian and minority Muslim communities in building public infrastructure and responding to disasters exemplifies a practical, lived form of pluralism (Belhaj, 2024). This dynamic contrasts sharply with assimilationist models, where a minority is expected to abandon its unique identity to fit into the majority culture (Cleveland, 2025; Miharja & Mulyana, 2019).

This model aligns with the core principles of pluralistic multiculturalism, a concept championed by theorists such as Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor (Nisa, 2023). Kymlicka, in his seminal work Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights (1995), argues that individual rights alone are insufficient to ensure the equality of minority groups (Rodrigues, 2020). He proposes a framework of group-differentiated rights to protect cultural minorities from the pressure to assimilate. Similarly, Iris Marion Young's theory of differentiated citizenship in Justice and the Politics of Difference (1990) advocates for the recognition of group-specific rights to address systemic disadvantages and ensure that marginalized groups are not excluded from public life

(Qureshi et al., 2025). The harmony in Nagajuang, where the Christian majority and Muslim minority respect each other's distinctiveness while collaborating on shared projects, is a practical manifestation of these theories (Zain et al., 2019). The Nagajuang model can be compared with other research on multicultural societies. For instance, studies on the "Dutch pillarization" system in the 20th century showed a similar, albeit more formal, model where different religious and ideological groups lived in parallel "pillars" with their own schools, media, and political organizations (Hellemans, 2020). However, this model often led to limited inter-group interaction. In contrast, the Nagajuang case, with its emphasis on intergroup civic engagement, as documented by Robert Putnam in Bowling Alone (2000), demonstrates a more integrated form of social cohesion. Research on interfaith relations in places like Ambon, Indonesia, after the post-1999 conflicts, shows how grassroots initiatives and local wisdom similar to Nagajuang's are crucial for rebuilding trust and fostering reconciliation (Mayulita, 2025).

While the pluralistic model in Nagajuang is effective, a potential antithesis lies in its long-term sustainability. The strength of this model rests heavily on the charisma and goodwill of current community leaders and local customs.(Miharja & Mulyana, 2019) Without institutionalizing these values through formal education and robust local policies, this harmony could be vulnerable to future demographic shifts or the loss of key leadership. Relying solely on informal social capital may be insufficient to withstand future challenges.

The Role of Religion as Social Capital

In Nagajuang, Islam, though a minority religion, serves as a powerful source of social capital. The principles of wasatiyyah (moderation) and rahmatan lil 'alamin (mercy for all) are not just abstract beliefs but are actively translated into social actions that build trust and cooperation with non-Muslims (Nugroho et al., 2025). The proactive role of religious leaders in organizing interfaith dialogue and collaborative community events proves that Islam can be a unifying force in a pluralistic society (Zhu, 2025; Faqih, 2021).

This observation aligns perfectly with Robert Putnam's theory of social capital as outlined in Bowling Alone (2000). Putnam distinguishes between bonding social capital (connections within a group) and bridging social capital (connections between groups) (Kopren & Westlund, 2021). In Nagajuang, Islamic values and the actions of Muslim leaders generate bridging social capital by fostering networks of trust and reciprocity that span religious divides. This is also supported by Christian Smith's work on the "civic religious" role of faith communities, where religious

organizations contribute to the public good by mobilizing people for social action and providing moral guidance beyond their own congregations. The function of Islam as social capital in Nagajuang is mirrored in various studies globally. For example, research on faith-based organizations in the United States and Europe shows their critical role in providing social services and promoting civic engagement, often across religious lines. Conversely, the rise of extremist interpretations of religion in other parts of the world, which promote a form of exclusive bonding social capital that leads to insularity and conflict, provides a stark contrast. The Nagajuang case demonstrates that the specific interpretation and practice of a religion are crucial in determining its social impact (Wang et al., 2024; Nuriah & Prihatini, 2022).

A key antithesis here is the potential for hijacking. While Islam in Nagajuang is practiced moderately, external extremist ideologies can exploit its principles to promote intolerance. The same concept of social capital that fosters harmony can be twisted to create exclusionary networks. Therefore, the ongoing vigilance and proactive efforts of local leaders to counter such narratives are not just beneficial but are essential for the long-term survival of this peaceful coexistence.

The Significance of Local Wisdom and Communalism

The harmony in Nagajuang is deeply embedded in its local culture, particularly the tradition of gotong royong (mutual cooperation). This practice transcends religious and ethnic lines, providing a practical, daily mechanism for social cohesion. The respect for traditional leaders and the practice of shura (deliberation) for conflict resolution further highlight how indigenous governance mechanisms are crucial for maintaining stability.

This communal spirit resonates with Émile Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity, which describes social cohesion in complex societies based on the interdependence of specialized individuals (Fathoni, 2024). In Nagajuang, the shared need for communal services and the tradition of mutual help create a sense of interdependence that binds diverse groups together. The reliance on local leaders and consensus-based decision-making also aligns with James C. Scott's ideas in Seeing Like a State (1998) about the importance of informal, decentralized, and context-specific "metis" or local knowledge in contrast to rigid, top-down bureaucratic systems. The role of local wisdom in Nagajuang is consistent with research on "resilient communities" in post-conflict settings (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). For instance, studies on indigenous peacebuilding in countries like Rwanda and Sierra Leone show that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and communal rituals often prove more effective and sustainable than external interventions (OLUYEMI &

AKINWUNMI, 2025). In Indonesia, similar community-based approaches have been observed in regions like Bali and East Nusa Tenggara, where local wisdom (Tri Hita Karana in Bali) is instrumental in managing religious and social diversity.

A critical antithesis to this reliance on local wisdom is its potential to be an impediment to progress. While traditional values like gotong royong are valuable for social cohesion, they can also hinder individual innovation or economic modernization if not balanced. The challenge for Nagajuang is to preserve its communal values while simultaneously integrating with the global economy and adapting to modern challenges without undermining its unique social fabric (Widodo, 2019).

Challenges to Social Cohesion and the Need for Sustained Effort

Despite its success, Nagajuang's harmony is not immune to challenges. The primary threats come from external influences like intolerant narratives on social media and internal issues such as socio-economic inequality (Shafer et al., 2020). These factors can erode the trust and shared values that have been carefully built. The community's resilience in the face of these threats highlights the need for continuous, proactive efforts to maintain peace (Affandi et al., 2025).

This challenge can be analyzed through Manuel Castells's theory on the "network society", where information flows rapidly and can bypass traditional gatekeepers like local leaders (Gioltzidou et al., 2024), as discussed in The Rise of the Network Society (1996). The threat of digital misinformation underscores the critical need for digital literacy, a new form of social capital (Tomassi et al., 2025). The issue of socio-economic inequality, as highlighted by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of forms of capital, suggests that disparities in economic and social resources can create friction and undermine the bonds of trust (Cattaneo et al., 2022). According to Bourdieu, economic, social, and cultural capital are interconnected, and a lack of one can negatively impact the others (Darko & Halseth, 2025). The challenges faced by Nagajuang are not unique. Studies on social fragmentation in other parts of Indonesia and globally show similar patterns (Sun et al., 2023). For example, research on online radicalization in Western countries and the spread of sectarian propaganda in the Middle East demonstrate how digital platforms can be used to spread divisive ideologies (Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2024). Similarly, findings on urban poverty and social unrest in cities worldwide consistently link economic inequality to social conflict (Hakiki et al., 2024).

The main antithesis to the current approach is that a reactive strategy simply responding to external threats is insufficient. A more proactive, institutionalized approach is needed. This includes not just strengthening digital literacy but also embedding multicultural education into formal curricula and implementing equitable development policies that address socio-economic disparities. True sustainability of harmony in Nagajuang will require a shift from a reliance on informal social capital to a more robust, institutionally-backed framework for managing diversity.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that the Nagajuang District provides a clear example of how Islamic values and local multicultural practices can work together to foster social harmony in a diverse society. Interfaith trust is built through principles of moderation, compassion, and inclusivity, supported by local traditions such as *gotong royong* and consensus-based decision-making (*shura*), which are embedded in daily life. These values and practices demonstrate that peaceful coexistence is possible when differences are respected and valued. However, challenges such as the spread of intolerant ideologies and socio-economic inequality highlight the need for long-term institutional support through education, policy, and development. Thus, this research achieves its aim by explaining how religion, culture, and community engagement interact to create harmony, while also stressing the importance of structural efforts to sustain it for the future.

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