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Cultivating Harmony: Strengthening Religious Inclusivity Through Interfaith Dialogue in Rural South Tapanuli

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Puji Kurniawan
Universitas Islam Negeri Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidimpuan, Indonesia

Liah Rosdiani Nasution*
Universitas Islam Negeri Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidimpuan, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: liahnasution@uinsyahada.ac.id

Ahmatnijar
Universitas Islam Negeri Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidimpuan, Indonesia

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Abstract

Interfaith dialogue in rural contexts remains underexplored, despite the unique dynamics of social and religious coexistence in such areas. This study aims to answer two central research questions: (1) How is interfaith dialogue practiced in a multireligious rural community? and (2) How does such dialogue shape or hinder religious inclusivity? The research was conducted in Tantom Angkola, North Sumatra, a village inhabited by Muslim and Christian communities with a long history of coexistence. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 participants from diverse generational, religious, and social backgrounds. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: (1) Perceptions of Religious Harmony, (2) Barriers to Deeper Interfaith Engagement, (3) Everyday Interactions between Faith Communities, and (4) Aspirations for Future Inclusivity. Findings showed that interfaith dialogue mostly occured informally and through social structures rather than theological exchanges, reflecting superficial tolerance but not yet full inclusivity. Key barriers include religious stereotypes, cultural conservatism, and lack of institutional support. The discussion draws on Swidler's Decalogue of Interfaith Dialogue and is contextualized within Islamic pedagogical traditions such as halaqah (study circles) and the ethical principle of wasathiyah (moderation). The study concluded that revitalizing Islamic principles of justice for minorities and fostering locally grounded interfaith education are essential for advancing deeper inclusivity in rural contexts.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue, Inclusivity, Islamic Moderation, Rural Society, Tolerance.

Introduction

As the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia is founded upon an explicit constitutional and philosophical commitment to religious religious pluralism.[1] Pancasila, the state ideology, enshrines belief in "the One and Only God" while affirming the equality of all officially recognized

[1] A. Naufal, M. A., & Ryshakti, 'Pancasila Sebagai Ideologi Bangsa Dalam Perspektif Islam', *ALADALAH: Jurnal Politik, Sosial, Hukum Dan Humaniora*, 1.4 (2023), pp. 204–14.

religions.[2] In line with this, Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution guarantees the freedom of every citizen to worship according to their religion and belief system.[3] These provisions reflect a foundational national vision—that diversity should be tolerated and embraced as an ethical and spiritual mandate. From an Islamic perspective, this inclusive ethos is consistent with the national ideology and deeply embedded within the Qur'anic paradigm. Islam's universalist values of ta'āruf (mutual understanding), ukhuwah insaniyah (universal human brotherhood), and wasathiyah (moderation) serve as pillars for interreligious engagement.[4] Surah al-Ḥujurāt [49:13] affirms:

> "O mankind! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another (li-taʿārafū). Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you."

This verse provides a universal moral imperative that frames diversity as a divine plan rather than a sociopolitical accident. As such, *taʿāruf* is not simply a cultural courtesy but an ontological obligation with spiritual stakes.[5] Moreover, the Qur'anic principle of *lā ikrāha fī al-dīn* (there is no compulsion in religion) (QS 2:256) reinforces the ethical foundations of religious freedom and mutual respect.

Historically, the Prophet Muhammad's leadership in Medina offers an early precedent for interfaith coexistence. The Constitution of Medina *(Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīnah)* recognized Jews, Christians, and pagans as part of a shared polity *(umma wāḥidah)*, with collective responsibility for security, justice, and cooperation.[6] This pluralistic contract has been widely interpreted as the first documented example of interreligious civic governance, and offers a prophetic model for Muslims navigating religious diversity.[7] These theological and historical frameworks are reinforced by the objectives of Islamic law *(maqāṣid al-sharīʿah)*, which prioritize the preservation of life *(ḥifẓ al-nafs)*, religion *(ḥifẓ al-dīn)*, intellect *(ḥifẓ al-ʿaql)*, lineage *(ḥifẓ al-nasl)*, and property *(ḥifẓ al-māl)* .[8] These five universals demand the protection of Muslims and the collective welfare *(maṣlaḥah mushtarakah)* of all community members, regardless of religious background. Therefore, promoting inclusive interfaith relations aligns with the state's constitutional ethos and Islam's highest ethical imperatives.

Despite these theological and philosophical ideals, the empirical reality—particularly in rural or peri-urban regions—often falls short of true dialogic coexistence. In regions like Tantom Angkola, a dual-faith village in South Tapanuli, North Sumatra, interreligious tolerance is passive rather than active. Christians form the majority, while Muslims constitute a significant minority. For decades, there has been a relative absence of violent conflict, yet this "peace" is maintained through avoidance, not engagement. Interactions between religious communities are often limited to marketplace transactions or superficial greetings, with few if any structured interfaith initiatives. The result is what

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[2] Z. Fuad, 'Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: Muslim-Christian Discourse (Doctoral Dissertation, Staats-Und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky).', 2007.
[3] (Undang-Undang Dasar Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 1945)
[4] H. Ibrahim, 'The Principle of Wasaṭiyyah (Moderation) and the Social Concept of Islam: Countering Extremism in Religion', *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies*, 2.1 (2018), pp. 39–48.
[5] A. M. R. Maulana, 'Ta 'āruf and Its Relevance to Interreligious Dialogue', *Islamic Studies*, 63.1 (2024), pp. 93–107.
[6] M. Khan, 'Islamic Governance and Democracy', *Islam and Democratization in Asia*, 2009, pp. 13–27.
[7] H. Turabi, 'Principles of Governance, Freedom, and Responsibility in Islam', *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 4.1 (1987), pp. 1–11.
[8] M. A. Baharuddin ASB, A. S., Wan Ismail WAFWI, W. A. F., Abdul Mutalib LAM, L., Ahmad MHA, M. H., Razak RR, R., Saharudin NSS, N. S., & Abdull Rahim MAAR, 'An Appraisal of Maqāsid Al-Shariʿah Classic and Recent Literature: Systematic Analysis.', 2019; M. Mili, 'A Structural Model for Human Development, Does Maqāṣid Al-Sharīʿah Matter!', *Islamic Economic Studies*, 22.2 (2014).

scholars refer "negative peace" model: peace as the absence of direct violence rather than the presence of justice, empathy, and collaboration.[9]

Local narratives and oral traditions in Tantom reveal long-standing communal memory shaped by religious identity. There is pride in "living peacefully," yet discomfort in directly addressing religious differences. For instance, interfaith marriages are rare and socially discouraged. Religious holidays are acknowledged, but not jointly celebrated. While the village administrative structure nominally includes both Muslims and Christians, religious segregation remains the default social configuration, especially among youth. Historical and political legacies further compound this condition. During regional election seasons, identity politics flare up, with candidates often appealing to religious blocs. During the New Order period, Christian communities in the region reported underrepresentation in government posts, while Muslims occasionally felt culturally marginalized in Christian-majority villages. These unresolved historical sentiments continue to shape intergroup attitudes.

From a structural standpoint, the disparity between urban and rural religious dynamics in Indonesia is stark.[10] In cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta, interfaith initiatives are sustained by a web of institutions,[11] universities,[12] youth forums,[13] local government support,[14] NGOs,[15] and digital platforms.[16] These urban spaces provide access to religious literacy, diversity education, and opportunities for cross-religious leadership. By contrast, rural villages like Tantom lack these enabling infrastructures in many rural areas of South Tapanuli, limited access to quality education and civic engagement opportunities. Further compounding this issue is the absence of formal peace education or civic dialogue modules within local madrasahs and churches, limiting critical engagement with one's religious tradition and restricting the cognitive and cultural capacity for understanding other worldviews.

Empirical studies on interfaith youth programs have shown that deliberate, dialogic interventions—such as joint storytelling, text-sharing, and problem-solving—significantly improve empathy, reduce stereotyping, and build long-term friendships across faith lines.[17] These programs are most successful when embedded within community-based participatory frameworks, where local religious leaders and youth co-own the process. However, such efforts remain absent in most rural and semi-rural areas, where religious education is often defensive and exclusivist, and pluralism is viewed as a threat rather than an opportunity. The result is a structural vacuum—a "dialogue desert"—

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[9] Galtung, J. 'Peace, positive and negative. In *The encyclopedia of peace psychology'*. (2011); Kolk, A., & Lenfant, F 'Partnerships for peace and development in fragile states: Identifying missing links. *Academy of Management Perspectives*', *29*(4), 422–437 (2015); Lederach, J. P, '*Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*'. USIP. (1997)

[10] S. Mulya, T. W., & Schäfer, 'Who Belongs Where? Geographies of (Inter) Religion and Urban Segregation in Surabaya, Indonesia', *Cities*, 141 (2023), p. 104476; A. N. Jamaludin, 'Cities and Villages in the Religious Conflict Circle: Socio-Demographic Factors of Communal and Sectarian Conflict in West Java, Indonesia', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 77.4 (2021).

[11] B. Anoraga, 'Crowdfunding for Inter-Faith Peace: Youth, Networked Social Movement, and Muslim Philanthropy NGOs in Contemporary Indonesia', *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 13.2 (2023), pp. 307–37.

[12] (Michael, R., & Woldemariam, 2024; Rusmiati, et.al., 2023)

[13] A. E. P. Kusmayani, 'Youth Interfaith Dialogue in Everyday Citizenship in Indonesia: Bridging Religious Diversity and Citizenship Challenges', *Focus*, 4.2 (2023), pp. 159–68.

[14] B. Riswanda, M., Ramadhan, G., & Nurrohman, 'Making Sense of the Politics of Recognition: Indicators of Religious Tolerance in Banten, Indonesia', *Malay*, 6 (2020).

[15] N. Muhammad, M., & Nurlaila, 'Arus Top-down Dan Bottom-up Pada Gerakan Dialog Antar Agama Di Indonesia', *Abrahamic Religions: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama*, 1.2 (2021), pp. 159–71.

[16] T. Sulvinajayanti, S., Nisa, A. K., & Bahfiarti, 'Interfaith Harmony: Optimizing Digital Media and Stakeholder Collaboration in Communicating the Message of Moderation', *International Journal of Religion*, 5.10 (2024), pp. 4757–65; M. A. Juhri, *The Rise of Interfaith Dialogue: Social Media, Youth, and Religious Inclusivity in Indonesia.*, 2024.

[17] F. Jonathan, A., Widjaja, P., & Husein, 'Fostering Religious Exclusivism and Political Pluralism in Indonesia through Interfaith-Based Student Community', *KnE Social Sciences*, 2018, pp. 53–70; Kusmayani.

where community members, particularly youth, have no vocabulary or institutional mechanism for articulating or practicing interfaith ethics. It makes communities like Tantom vulnerable not only to stagnation but to manipulation by political or religious elites who capitalize on religious division.

This study responds directly to the above conditions by developing a community-based interfaith peace education program in Tantom Angkola. The program is designed to be dialogic, participatory, and theologically grounded in both Islamic ethics and universal human values. Its methodology combines the Dialogical Decalogue of Leonard Swidler,[18] a foundational ethical framework for interfaith encounters, with Islamic principles of *ta'āruf,*[19] *wasathiyah,*[20] and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah,*[21] thus bridging global interfaith norms with local religious sensibilities. Crucially, this initiative will use action research methodology, positioning local Muslim and Christian residents as recipients of knowledge and co-creators of a new communal narrative. It will document attitudes before and after the intervention, track qualitative changes in trust, and analyze long-term sustainability. The broader goal is to transform the latent peace of Tantom into a proactive, dialogic peace that is resilient, inclusive, and grounded in faith and citizenship. In doing so, this model can serve as a prototype for similar religiously diverse, structurally underserved villages across Indonesia. It also offers a test case for applying Islamic ethical frameworks in contemporary grassroots peacebuilding, enriching both civic discourse and Islamic praxis.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of interfaith dialogue participants in Tantom, South Tapanuli, and how these interactions contribute to religious inclusivity. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for this inquiry as it seeks to uncover the essence of participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes in the context of religious diversity and dialogue.[22] By focusing on how individuals experience and interpret interfaith engagement, the study aims to understand how inclusivity is felt, practiced, and challenged in everyday life. Tantom was selected as the research site due to its distinctive socio-religious composition: a predominantly Christian population coexisting with a significant Muslim minority in a rural North Sumatra setting. The village's tight-knit social structure, history of peaceful coexistence, and emerging interfaith initiatives provide a rich context for examining the phenomenology of dialogue within traditional community dynamics.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who had direct experience with interfaith engagement in Tantom and were willing to participate. A total of 10 participants were involved, including Christian and Muslim religious leaders, youth representatives, women, and lay community members actively involved in interfaith activities. While the small sample size may limit generalizability, this is acceptable in phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth over breadth. Triangulation was employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by combining semi-structured interviews with participant observation, allowing for the cross-verification of emerging insights.

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[18] L, Swidler, 'The dialogue decalogue: Ground rules for interreligious dialogue', *Horizons*, *10*(2), (1983) 348–351.

[19] A. M. R. Maulana, 'Ta 'āruf and Its Relevance to Interreligious Dialogue', *Islamic Studies*, 63.1 (2024), pp. 93–107.

[20] I. Hefni, W., Ahmadi, R., & Mustofa, 'Reinventing the Human Dignity in Islamic Law Discourse: The Wasatiyah Approaches from Khaled Abou El-Fadl to the Interreligious Relation', *Al-Manahij: Jurnal Kajian Hukum Islam*, 239–254, 2022.

[21] M. Fuad, 'Integration of Islamic Jurisprudence Principles within the UN Global Human Security Framework'. *Khazanah Hukum*, *6*(3), (2024), 251–268.

[22] F. R. Struckmeyer, 'Phenomenology and Religion: Some Comments', *Religious Studies*, 16.3 (1980), pp. 253–62.

Data collection consisted of two main techniques:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit participants' narratives about their experiences with interfaith dialogue, perceptions of religious coexistence, and feelings of inclusivity or exclusion. Interviews were guided by a flexible protocol and adapted to accommodate local language and cultural sensitivities. Each session lasted between 45–90 minutes.
2. Participant observation was conducted during communal and religious gatherings to understand how dialogue manifests (or fails to) in social practice. Observational data enriched the interpretation of interview responses and helped identify informal dynamics such as body language, group clustering, or symbolic gestures of inclusion/exclusion.

The instruments included an interview guide and an observation checklist to align with the study's theoretical frameworks to ensure construct validity.

This study draws on two intersecting frameworks to interpret the data:

1. Leonard Swidler's *Dialogue Decalogue*,[23] a foundational interreligious study model, outlines ten guiding principles for ethical and transformative interfaith dialogue. These include: (1) entering dialogue with total honesty and humility, (2) commitment to learning from others, (3) speaking for oneself, not as a representative of an entire tradition, (4) comparison at the deepest levels of faith, (5) self-awareness of one's own tradition's internal diversity, (6) avoiding generalizations, (7) dialogue as a process of mutual transformation, (8) openness to change, (9) seeking the truth together, and (10) commitment to building community. These principles served as an analytic lens to assess how interfaith interactions in Tantom embody—or fall short of—dialogical ideals.
2. The Islamic concept of *wasathiyah* (religious moderation) was also employed to interpret data through a local Islamic lens. In analysis, *wasathiyah* was operationalized into specific codes such as *tawāzun* (balance), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *ta'āruf* (mutual understanding, QS 49:13), *ukhuwah insāniyah* (human brotherhood), and *rahmah* (compassion). These themes were especially useful for examining participants' expressions of empathy, restraint, and openness in dialogue, particularly from Muslim perspectives grounded in scriptural and ethical sources.

Data analysis followed the six-step thematic analysis model Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed, with modifications to accommodate phenomenological depth. The process was as follows:

1. Data familiarization in which all interviews being transcribed verbatim, and field notes were collated and reviewed to gain an immersive understanding of participants' voices and contexts.
2. Initial coding in which the data were coded manually using a combination of inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (based on *Dialogue Decalogue* and *wasathiyah*) strategies. Initial codes included "surface tolerance," "empathy in prayer," "shared rituals," "fear of religious offense," and "youth-led dialogue."
3. Theme development where similar codes were grouped into larger themes such as "levels of interfaith engagement," "religious emotional literacy," and "barriers to deeper understanding."
4. Theme review and refinement, in which themes were critically examined for internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Redundant or weak themes were merged or discarded.
5. Theoretical mapping in which each theme was mapped onto the theoretical frameworks: for instance, the theme *"surface-level tolerance"* was interpreted in light of Swidler's Principle 4

[23] L, Swidler, 'The dialogue decalogue: Ground rules for interreligious dialogue', *Horizons*, *10*(2), (1983) 348–351.

(deep-level comparison), while *"empathy in prayer"* was mapped to *rahmah* and *ukhuwah insaniyah* in *wasathiyah*.

6. The final themes were related to the research questions, allowing each finding to address a core inquiry directly. For instance, the theme "educational gaps" was linked to *how interfaith dialogue affects religious competency*, revealing how a lack of shared knowledge can limit the depth of engagement.

Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained through memo writing and peer debriefing to reduce researcher bias and ensure interpretative integrity.

Data Interpretation

To provide a comprehensive understanding of how interfaith dialogue is perceived and practiced in the village of Tantom Angkola, we conducted a thematic analysis based on in-depth interviews with community members from both Muslim and Christian backgrounds. The findings were organized into four major themes, each with several subthemes illuminating the strengths and challenges of interfaith interaction in the rural context. The table 1 summarizes the key themes and subthemes derived from the data. These categories emerged through iterative coding and reflect both the lived experiences of the participants and the broader sociocultural and religious dynamics shaping interfaith relations in the village.

Table 1. Key Themes and Subthemes of Interfaith Dialogue Practices in Tantom Angkola Village

Themes	Subthemes	Description	Quotes
1. Religious Harmony Perception	Mutual Respect and Peaceful Coexistence	Most participants emphasized the village's long-standing peaceful relationship between Muslims and Christians.	*Selama saya tinggal di sini, kami tidak pernah punya masalah besar antarumat beragama. Masyarakat saling menghormati. Kalau ada acara, semua diundang, tak peduli agama apa. Bahkan waktu kami punya acara Natal, tetangga Muslim juga ikut bantu dekorasi."* [Since I've lived here, we've never had any major issues between religious groups. People respect one another. Everyone's invited—regardless of religion- whenever an event occurs. Even during our Christmas celebration, our Muslim neighbors helped with the decorations.] P1 *"Hubungan kami sudah seperti saudara. Kami saling bantu, terutama saat ada yang sakit, meninggal, atau hajatan. Itu sudah biasa di sini."* [Our relationship is like that of siblings. We help each other, especially when someone is sick, has passed away, or is hosting a celebration. That's very normal here. Religion isn't a barrier to showing care.] P2
	Personal Understanding of Inclusivity	Inclusivity was understood as openness, non-discrimination, and equality in social roles.	*"Bagi saya inklusivitas itu ya tidak membedakan. Kalau saya orang Kristen, saya bisa ikut gotong royong, bisa datang ke pengajian kalau diundang. Saya tidak merasa dikucilkan. Justru saya merasa dihargai sebagai bagian dari desa ini."*

Themes	Subthemes	Description	Quotes
			[To me, inclusivity means not making distinctions. As a Christian, I can join in community clean-ups, and I even attend Muslim religious gatherings when invited. I don't feel excluded. I feel respected as part of this village.] P3
	Role of Religious Leaders	Religious leaders play a pivotal role in maintaining peaceful relations.	*"Kalau ada isu atau kabar miring, saya dan pendeta langsung ngobrol, klarifikasi. Kami tidak ingin ada salah paham yang bisa merusak hubungan yang sudah baik. Bahkan kadang kami koordinasi untuk menyampaikan pesan bersama di acara warga."* [If there's a rumor or tension, the pastor and I speak directly and clarify things. We don't want misunderstandings to damage our relationship. Sometimes we even coordinate to deliver joint messages at community gatherings.] P7 *"Saya dan ustadz sering hadir bersama di undangan warga. Kami berdua kasih sambutan dari sisi agama masing-masing tapi dengan pesan yang sama: damai dan saling menghargai. Biasanya warga sangat senang karena mereka melihat bahwa pemimpinnya akur dan bisa duduk bersama."* [The ustadz and I often attend community invitations together. We each give a short speech from our respective religious perspectives, but always with the same message: peace and mutual respect. People usually appreciate it because they see that their leaders get along and can sit together in harmony.] P9
	Fair Treatment Across Faiths	Participants generally perceived fair treatment of all religious groups.	*"Pemerintah desa juga adil. Kalau ada bantuan atau undangan, semua disertakan. Tidak ada perlakuan beda. Saya lihat sendiri waktu pembagian sembako, umat Kristen dan Islam sama-sama dapat, tanpa dibedakan."* The village government is fair. If there's an aid or an event, everyone is included. There's no discrimination. I saw it myself during a food donation, Christians and Muslims received the same help without any differences.] P4
	Religion as Community Strength	Some community members saw religious diversity as a source of strength.	*"Waktu itu ada kebakaran rumah salah satu warga Kristen. Saya lihat sendiri, umat Muslim langsung datang bantu—ada yang ambil air, ada yang bantu selamatkan barang-barang, semua bergerak cepat, tanpa diminta. Tidak ada yang melihat agamanya siapa, semua fokus menolong. Di situ saya benar-benar merasa bahwa*

Themes	Subthemes	Description	Quotes
			perbedaan agama bukan penghalang, justru jadi kekuatan kita sebagai satu kampung." [There was a time when a fire broke out at the house of a Christian neighbor. I saw with my own eyes how the Muslim community immediately came to help—some fetched water, others rushed to save belongings. Everyone acted quickly, without being asked. No one cared about the person's religion; the focus was on helping. At that moment, I truly felt that religious differences are not a barrier—they are the source of our strength as a united village.] P5
2. Barriers to Deeper Interfaith Engagement	Lingering Prejudices and Stereotypes	Despite overall harmony, participants noted that stereotypes and prejudice still linger.	*"Kadang masih ada yang beranggapan kalau berbeda agama berarti tidak boleh terlalu dekat dalam pergaulan. Misalnya, tidak boleh makan bersama, tidak boleh ikut kegiatan sosial tertentu. Biasanya pandangan seperti ini datang dari generasi yang lebih tua, yang masih memegang kuat ajaran atau pemahaman konservatif yang mereka yakini sejak lama. Meskipun kami yang muda lebih terbuka, pengaruh dari orang tua itu masih terasa di masyarakat."* [Sometimes, some still believe that having a different religion means you shouldn't be too close socially. For example, they think eating together or joining certain communal events is inappropriate. This mindset usually comes from the older generation, who still strongly adhere to conservative teachings or understandings they've followed for years. Even though we younger people are more open, the influence of the elders is still felt in the community.] P10
	Cultural and Religious Conservatism	Cultural norms and conservative teachings can inhibit deeper dialogue.	*"Ada ustadz dari luar yang bilang jangan terlalu akrab sama non-Muslim. Tapi kami tahu, itu bukan budaya kita di sini. Tapi tetap ada pengaruhnya ke anak-anak muda."* [There was a preacher from outside who told us not to get too close to non-Muslims. But we know—that's not our local culture here. Still, his words do influence some of the younger generation.] P1
	Structural Challenges (Economic/Education)	Lack of education and poverty were perceived to limit broader interaction.	*"Karena pendidikan masih rendah, banyak yang belum bisa membedakan ajaran agama dengan sikap sosial. Mereka takut bergaul karena belum paham kalau itu bukan dosa."* [Because education is still limited, many people can't distinguish between religious teachings and social manners. They're

Themes	Subthemes	Description	Quotes
			afraid to socialize, thinking it's sinful, when it's not.] P3
	Discomfort in Religious Settings	Some participants described moments of discomfort in mixed religious settings.	*"Pernah saya diundang ke acara buka puasa bersama, tapi saya tidak tahu harus bagaimana. Saya takut salah bersikap."* [I was once invited to a breaking-the-fast event, but didn't know what to do. I was afraid I'd behave inappropriately.] P2
	Exclusive Religious Groups	Participants identified some groups as resistant to interfaith interaction.	*"Ada kelompok yang menutup diri. Biasanya yang bukan asli sini, atau yang datang dari luar bawa ajaran keras. Mereka tidak mau ikut kegiatan bersama."* [Some groups isolate themselves. Usually, they're not originally from here or come with rigid teachings. They don't want to join communal events.] P3
3. Everyday Interfaith Interactions	Cooperation in Traditional and Social Events	Many positive interfaith interactions occurred during community events.	*"Kalau ada pesta adat, semua ikut. Umat Islam bantu masak, Kristen bantu dekorasi. Tidak ada sekat."* [When there's a traditional party, everyone joins. Muslims help with cooking, Christians with decorating. No barriers at all.] P2
	Interfaith Friendship in Informal Spaces	Friendships among children and youth cut across religious lines.	*"Anak-anak main bola bareng, belajar bareng. Mereka tidak peduli agama. Kadang mereka main di rumah saya, saya senang."* [The kids play football together, study together. They don't care about religion. Sometimes they play at my house—I am happy with it.] P5
	Shared Celebrations and Mutual Visits	Interfaith holiday visits were common.	*"Natal kami datang ke rumah tetangga, Idul Fitri mereka ke rumah kami. Sudah jadi kebiasaan."* [At Christmas, we visit our neighbors' homes. During Eid, they come to ours. It's become a tradition.] P9
	Informal Dialogues and Humor	Informal chats helped strengthen mutual understanding.	*"Kadang di warung kopi kami saling lempar candaan soal puasa atau gereja. Tapi itu candaan sehat, bukan menghina."* [Sometimes we joke about fasting or church stuff over coffee. But it's friendly humor, not mocking.] P4
	Limited Institutional Support	Participants noted a lack of formal structures to sustain these interactions.	*"Sayangnya belum ada forum resmi dari desa yang wadahi kegiatan lintas agama secara rutin. Padahal itu penting."* [Unfortunately, we don't yet have any official village forum that regularly facilitates interfaith activities. Even though I think it is very important.] P10
4. Future Aspirations for Inclusivity	Structured Interfaith Dialogue Platforms	Participants hoped for regular interfaith dialogue forums.	*"Kalau bisa ada forum bulanan di balai desa, di situ bisa saling kenal lebih dalam. Sekarang interaksi masih spontan saja."* [It would be great to have a monthly forum at the village hall—somewhere we can get to

Themes	Subthemes	Description	Quotes
			know each other. Right now, the interactions are still mostly spontaneous.] P2
	Youth-Centered Peace Education	Calls were made for youth education on tolerance.	*"Anak-anak muda harus dibekali pemahaman lintas agama. Bisa lewat sekolah atau pelatihan karang taruna."* [Young people need to be equipped with interfaith understanding. It could be through schools or a youth organization training.] P9
	Inclusive Government Programs	Community members requested inclusive development programs.	*"Pengennya sih pemerintah desa bisa adakan pelatihan atau kerja bakti rutin yang melibatkan semua agama."* [We hope the village government can organize regular workshops or community service projects involving all religions.] P7
	Women's Role in Building Bridges	Women's role in peacebuilding was acknowledged.	*"Kami ibu-ibu sering arisan, masak bareng. Tapi belum pernah ada kegiatan khusus yang melibatkan lintas agama dari perempuan. Padahal bisa jadi kekuatan besar."* [We mothers often have *arisan* (rotating savings group), or cook together. But there's never been a specific interfaith women's activity. That could be a strong force.] P8
	Long-term Vision of Peaceful Coexistence	There was a collective hope for sustained peace.	*"Harapan saya, anak cucu kami bisa hidup damai seperti kami sekarang, bahkan lebih baik. Jangan ada yang memecah belah."* [I hope our children and grandchildren can live in peace as we do now—or even better. May no one ever divide us.] P9

The thematic analysis yielded four overarching themes, each comprising several subthemes that provide nuanced insights into the dynamics of interfaith dialogue and inclusivity in Tantom Angkola village. These themes do not stand in isolation but intersect and interact in meaningful ways, reflecting the community's collective aspirations and underlying tensions:

Theme 1: Religious Harmony Perception captures the dominant narrative of peace and coexistence, which is rooted in shared values of mutual respect, communal solidarity, and the proactive role of religious leaders. Subthemes such as *mutual respect*, *personal understanding of inclusivity*, and *fair treatment across faiths* indicate that daily life is marked more by cooperation than conflict. The emphasis on *religion as a source of community strength* reflects a local cultural frame where difference is normalized and valorized.

Theme 2: Barriers to Deeper Interfaith Engagement introduces a more critical layer. While surface-level tolerance is widely practiced, participants also voiced concerns about lingering prejudices, structural limitations (like poverty and low education), and discomfort in navigating religious differences in formal settings. These findings suggest that inclusivity, while valued, remains limited by social, cultural, and sometimes theological boundaries.

Theme 3: Everyday Interfaith Interactions provides rich examples of *spontaneous inclusivity*, especially in informal and traditional spaces. Interfaith friendships, mutual visits during religious holidays, and cooperation in local events highlight how dialogue often occurs outside institutional frameworks. Yet, the subtheme of *limited institutional support* underscores a missed opportunity: the lack of formal forums or policy mechanisms that could further cultivate interfaith engagement.

Theme 4: Future Aspirations for Inclusivity reflects a forward-looking orientation within the community. Participants desired more *structured interfaith platforms*, *youth-focused peace education*, and more *inclusive roles for women*. These aspirations demonstrate a communal awareness of current gaps and a willingness to deepen dialogue through formal and educational means.

Together, these themes illustrate a community navigating between surface-level harmony and deeper inclusivity, constrained by certain cultural and structural barriers yet animated by strong moral and spiritual commitments to peaceful coexistence. The following sections will explore each theme in greater detail, supported by direct interview excerpts and relevant theoretical frameworks, including Western interfaith dialogue models and Islamic perspectives on pluralism and justice.

Discussions

Research Question 1: How is interfaith dialogue practiced in a multireligious rural community?

In Tantom Angkola, interfaith dialogue takes the form of lived interaction rooted in shared customs rather than formal theological conversation. This informal dialogical mode reflects a *cultural dialogue* model, expressing dialogue through communal rituals, mutual aid, and respectful silence. Swidler's[24] first principle in the Dialogue Decalogue, *dialogue begins when people meet as human beings*, is present in the everyday practices of Tantom residents, where dialogue is embodied in hospitality and cooperation.

> "When Christians have a death in their family, we Muslims go and help dig the grave, for example. They do the same for us during Maulid or Eid. We don't talk about religion directly, but we live peacefully." (P1)

This quote shows how *relational ethics* shape interfaith interactions. It also parallels Islamic ethics of *ukhuwah insaniyah* (universal brotherhood), where acts of service and solidarity constitute dialogical behavior. The Qur'anic imperative in Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13)—*"O mankind, We created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another"*—is indirectly fulfilled in these daily exchanges.

> "Our grandparents taught us that when your neighbor is hungry, you feed them—Muslim or Christian. That's our adat." (P2)

The influence of *adat* (customary law) reinforces Swidler's principle of approaching dialogue with humility and learning. Yet this kind of dialogue is constrained by unwritten rules against religious discussion:

> "We never speak of theology. It would be seen as provocation, not education." (P5)

> "I once asked a Muslim friend about fasting and she was uncomfortable. Since then, I avoid asking anything religious." (P3)

These responses point to a form of *non-dialogue*, or what Abu-Nimer[25] calls "safe coexistence," where religion is a private domain shielded from public discourse. It reflects a partial implementation of dialogue—present in action, absent in thought. Yet young participants reflect potential for transformation:

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[24] L, Swidler, 'The dialogue decalogue: Ground rules for interreligious dialogue', *Horizons*, *10*(2), (1983) 348–351.
[25] M. Abu-Nimer, M, *Nonviolence and peace building in Islam: Theory and practice*. University Press of Florida. (2003)

"We are more open-minded now. In university, we study together and share ideas—even about religion. But our parents still fear disagreement." (P5)

This generational shift opens avenues for intentional dialogical pedagogy. Structured dialogues can draw on *halaqah*—an Islamic tradition of participatory learning circles—to foster safe theological conversations that combine Swidler's dialogical ethics with Islamic epistemology.

Research Question 2: How does such dialogue shape or hinder religious inclusivity?

The informal and culturally bounded dialogue in Tantom has dual effects: it enables peaceful coexistence but simultaneously reinforces unequal participation in public life. It corresponds to what Swidler describes as *"politeness over truth"*—dialogue that maintains harmony without confronting injustice.[26]

"There are no open conflicts, but in village meetings, it's mostly Muslims who speak. Christians just listen or stay quiet." (P4)

"We feel safe, but not fully included. The majority makes decisions and we follow." (P6)

"The village leaders are mostly Christians. It's not written anywhere, but that's just how it is." (P7)

"You can join activities, but there are silent limits. You know when to stop talking." (P10)

These quotes reveal that *social harmony masks structural exclusion*. It contradicts the Islamic principle of *'adl* (justice), as expressed in Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:8): *"Be just: that is nearer to piety"*. Islam Wasathiyah, the Indonesian Islamic moderation framework, stresses *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *musawah* (equality). The current state in Tantom aligns with *tasamuh* but lacks *musawah*, creating a superficial pluralism. Academic studies confirm this pattern. Susanto[27] found that in rural Java, interfaith harmony often disguises asymmetric power structures, while Huda & Fauzi[28] emphasize the need for institutional support for religious minorities in village governance. Tantom's informal dialogue fosters *coexistence*, but does not promote *civic inclusion*. Still, aspirations for deeper inclusivity exist:

"We want to be involved not just as helpers, but as decision-makers too." (P6, Christian woman)

"Why not create a youth dialogue circle where all religions are present? That way we learn from each other." (P8, Muslim youth)

These statements show a latent desire for transformation. If nurtured, they can support dialogical models grounded in both Swidler's principles and the *maqasid al-shari'ah*—the Islamic higher objectives of law that include dignity (*karamah*), justice (*'adl*), and harmony (*sulh*).

Tantom requires intentional spaces of structured dialogue—youth forums, interfaith *halaqah*, and inclusive civic mechanisms to advance from tolerance to inclusion. These would align with Islamic ethics and realize Swidler's highest principle of dialogue as a means for *transformation through mutual*

[26] L, Swidler, 'The dialogue decalogue: Ground rules for interreligious dialogue', *Horizons*, *10*(2), (1983) 348–351.
[27] T. Susanto, 'Ethnography of harmony: local traditions and dynamics of interfaith tolerance in Nglinggi Village, Indonesia'. *Asian Anthropology*. (2024)
[28] Huda, N. M., & Fauzani, M. A, 'Transformation model of institutional arrangements of indigenous people to become customary villages: experiences from Indonesia'. *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development*, *12*(1), (2024) e2765–e2765.

understanding. Tantom can evolve toward a more participatory and spiritually grounded pluralism through such synthesis.

Conclusion

This study has explored the lived experiences of interfaith dialogue in the rural context of Tantom Angkola, revealing the nuanced ways in which tolerance and inclusivity are negotiated in everyday life. Through in-depth thematic analysis of interviews with Muslim and Christian villagers, four central themes emerged: perceptions of religious harmony, structural and cultural barriers to deeper engagement, patterns of daily interaction, and aspirations for future inclusivity. The findings highlight that interfaith dialogue in Tantom is primarily informal, embedded in structured social interactions rather than theological exchanges. While this form of engagement fosters a peaceful coexistence and a sense of shared community, it remains at *superficial tolerance*. Stereotypes, exclusionary cultural traditions, and conservative religious boundaries inhibit the development of deeper inclusivity. These barriers reflect a disconnect between the community's historical harmony and its current limitations in embracing diversity at a more ethical and theological level.

By situating the findings within Swidler's *Decalogue of Interfaith Dialogue* and contrasting it with Islamic traditions such as the ethics of *wasathiyah* (moderation), this study reveals both points of tension and potential synergy. Islamic values, which emphasize justice, dialogue, and the protection of minority rights, offer a powerful ethical foundation to reimagine interfaith relationships in rural communities. In particular, the Quranic call to "know one another" can inspire more intentional, inclusive encounters between faith communities.

Furthermore, the study contributes to a more localized understanding of interfaith dialogue by revealing how socio-religious dynamics are deeply shaped by local history, memory, and informal pedagogies. The structured-yet-non-theological dialogues observed in Tantom reflect a rural modality of interfaith practice distinct from urban or institutionalized models. However, without critical reflection and proactive educational efforts, these practices risk perpetuating the status quo and leaving underlying tensions unaddressed. Therefore, this research concludes that rural interfaith engagement must move beyond surface harmony and be supported by contextualized dialogue models rooted in Islamic ethical traditions and lived communal experience. Through this dual framework—honoring theology and daily life—rural communities like Tantom can build more inclusive futures. Future initiatives might focus on interfaith youth forums, culturally-sensitive religious education, and local policy support to institutionalize meaningful dialogue. In doing so, interfaith understanding in rural Indonesia can evolve from coexistence toward true inclusion.

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