

## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND TOLERANCE IN SIBOLGA: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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### Abstract

Sibolga is a coastal city in Indonesia characterized by high ethnic and religious diversity, shaped by a long history of trade, migration, and cultural exchange. This study aims to examine how religious pluralism is managed and the challenges of tolerance in a multicultural society. Using a qualitative method through literature review and interviews, the research identifies two main realities: the potential for harmony through values of mutual cooperation, deliberation, and the local motto “berbilang kaum, satu tujuan” (“many groups, one goal”), as well as vulnerabilities caused by issues of ethnicity and religion (SARA), radicalism, economic inequality, and the politicization of religion. The findings highlight four strategies for strengthening tolerance: multicultural education, structured interfaith dialogue, the role of local leaders as mediators, and the revitalization of cultural values. The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on solutions grounded in the social practices of Sibolga’s community, making it an adaptive model with potential for replication in other multicultural regions of Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *Sibolga, Religious Pluralism, Tolerance, Multicultural Society, Local Wisdom.*

### Abstrak

Sibolga merupakan salah satu kota pesisir di Indonesia dengan keragaman etnis dan agama yang tinggi, terbentuk dari sejarah panjang perdagangan, migrasi, dan pertukaran budaya. Penelitian ini bertujuan menelaah bagaimana pluralisme agama dikelola serta tantangan toleransi yang muncul dalam masyarakat multikultural. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui studi pustaka dan wawancara, penelitian menemukan dua realitas utama: potensi harmoni melalui nilai gotong royong, musyawarah, dan semboyan lokal “berbilang kaum, satu tujuan”, serta kerentanan akibat isu SARA, radikalisme, kesenjangan ekonomi, dan politisasi agama. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi empat strategi penguatan toleransi, yaitu pendidikan multikultural, dialog lintas iman yang terstruktur, peran tokoh lokal sebagai mediator, dan revitalisasi nilai budaya setempat. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada penekanan solusi berbasis praktik sosial masyarakat Sibolga, sehingga dapat menjadi model yang adaptif dan berpotensi direplikasi di wilayah multikultural lain di Indonesia.

**Kata Kunci:** *Sibolga, Pluralisme Agama, Toleransi, Masyarakat Multikultural, Kearifan Lokal*

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## **A. Introduction**

Religious pluralism represents a further development from inclusivism, acknowledging the existence of truth within the traditions and beliefs of every religion. This paradigm is considered the pinnacle of human diversity, and it is believed to foster harmony and peace among religious communities. (Khairul Fatah, 2018) Sibolga, located on the western coast of North Sumatra, is one of the regions in Indonesia with striking demographic diversity. Its strategic position as a port and gateway to the Nias Islands has made the city a meeting point for various ethnic groups such as Batak (Toba, Mandailing, Angkola), Minangkabau, Nias, Malay, and Chinese. This diversity is reflected in the presence of Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, and other religions. Historically, Sibolga has been a space of cultural encounter that fostered harmony. However, the development of technology, the flow of information, and political dynamics have increasingly posed challenges to tolerance and social cohesion. (Pemerintah Kota Sibolga, 2023)

All religions uphold human dignity. Therefore, every religious community is obliged to respect and honor one another. In social life, cooperation among different faith groups should be fostered to cultivate interreligious tolerance. From such tolerance emerges harmony and peaceful coexistence among believers. Interreligious tolerance does not mean that one religion's teachings will be mixed with another; rather, it acknowledges the distinctiveness of each while emphasizing mutual respect. Religion has historically transcended ethnic, regional, and even national boundaries, demonstrating its potential to unify nations. As a bearer of peace, religion supports development, yet it can also become a source of tension that threatens national unity, stability, and resilience, all of which are vital for sustainable development.

To date, studies on religious pluralism and tolerance remain relatively limited, particularly those addressing the challenges and solutions within multicultural societies at the local level, such as Sibolga. This research focuses on identifying strategies to foster tolerance and build a multicultural society in Sibolga, North Sumatra. Moreover, no prior study has given strong emphasis to the regional dimension of managing diversity based on local wisdom. Thus, this study is expected to fill the gap in existing literature and provide a novel contribution for future research.

Several previous works serve as relevant foundations. For example, the study by Agus Yasin and Muhammad Iksan Rahmadian, *Strategies of Islamic Religious Education in Facing the Challenges of Religious Pluralism in Multicultural Societies*, highlights the crucial role of Islamic education in shaping inclusive and tolerant attitudes within multicultural communities that are prone to conflict. (Yasin & Rahmadian, 2024). Meanwhile, the study conducted by Busro et al., entitled *Islamic Moderation (Washathiyyah) in the Context of Indonesia's Religious Pluralism*, elaborates on the concepts of washathiyyah Islam, such as egalitarian principles that reject discrimination against other religions, as well as moderate approaches that encompass the concept of tasammuh (tolerance). These concepts align with the characteristics of Islamic moderation in Indonesia, where communities have long practiced coexistence,

maintained stability, and nurtured interreligious harmony.(Busro, Aitiya Hari ananda, 2019b)

Another study by Julio Eleazer Nendissa et al., entitled Religious Pluralism: Challenges, Opportunities, and Theological Perspectives in Building Interfaith Harmony in Indonesia, examines the complexity of religious diversity in the country. From a theological perspective, views range from inclusivism, which interprets diversity as part of divine providence, to exclusivism, which claims that only one religion holds the ultimate truth. From a socio-political perspective, pluralism often encounters conflicts arising from misunderstanding, intolerance, and the politicization of religion. Nevertheless, the nation's long-standing tradition of tolerance serves as an important asset for wisely managing religious pluralism.(Eleazer Nendissa et al., 2024)

Previous studies on religious pluralism and tolerance in Indonesia have generally focused on challenges, opportunities, and theological perspectives in fostering interreligious harmony, strategies of Islamic education in addressing the challenges of pluralism within multicultural societies, as well as the concepts of washathiyah Islam. However, to date, no study has provided an in-depth examination of religious pluralism and tolerance that emphasizes both the challenges and solutions within the multicultural society of Sibolga, particularly those grounded in local wisdom.

Earlier research shows that religious pluralism can serve as both a strength and a source of conflict, depending on how differences are managed (Robert W Hefner, 2011) For instance, Yusdani (2019) emphasizes that tolerance requires three essential dimensions: recognition, appreciation, and protection of the identities of other groups. (Yusdani, 2019). Without social mechanisms that support these three dimensions, the potential for identity-based conflict becomes even greater. This is reinforced by Wahyudi's (2020) findings, which highlight the role of social media in accelerating the spread of provocation and hate speech within multicultural societies.(Wahyudi Teguh, 2020)

This study adopts a problem solution oriented approach. In addition to identifying the challenges of religious pluralism in Sibolga, it also seeks to propose solutions that are relevant to the local community context. Such an approach is more practical and oriented toward the implementation of policies or social programs that can strengthen tolerance. In contrast, previous studies have tended to be more descriptive conceptual, focusing primarily on values, concepts, or theories without a strong emphasis on context-based action plans. The uniqueness of this research lies in its attention to local wisdom and the historical interactions among Sibolga's communities. It further examines how historical experiences, local traditions, and coastal community lifestyles have shaped tolerance or, in some cases, triggered potential conflicts. This historical–anthropological perspective distinguishes the study from earlier works, which largely analyzed pluralism at a normative or macro level without exploring the specific socio-cultural characteristics of particular regions in depth. As such, this research not only fills a gap in the literature but

also provides practical contributions for strengthening interreligious harmony at the grassroots level.

This study aims to offer novelty compared to previous works and provide answers regarding the dynamics of pluralism and tolerance. Therefore, it is expected to serve as a recent reference in the field. The research addresses four central questions: (1) What is the reality of religious pluralism in Sibolga's multicultural society, particularly when viewed through the lens of local wisdom? (2) What challenges are faced in fostering tolerance and interreligious harmony in Sibolga? (3) What contextually relevant and applicable solutions can be implemented to strengthen tolerance and manage pluralism in the city? and (4) To what extent have historical experiences, local traditions, and coastal community practices shaped tolerance or, conversely, created potential for conflict?

This study is particularly significant given the rise of intolerance, radicalism, discrimination, and religion-based conflict in various regions of Indonesia. Although Indonesia has long been recognized as a nation that upholds diversity through the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), social realities demonstrate that religious pluralism has not been fully internalized in everyday life. Thus, there is an urgent need for research that not only describes these conditions but also offers strategic solutions to address the challenges at hand.

## **B. Method**

This study employed a qualitative research method with two main approaches: literature review and interviews. The literature review was conducted to examine the concepts, challenges, and solutions of religious pluralism and tolerance in Sibolga through relevant literature, documents, and written sources. Meanwhile, interviews were used to obtain empirical, context-specific data from informants with direct knowledge and experience of Sibolga's diversity. The informants consisted of eight individuals, including religious leaders, traditional leaders, academics, cultural figures, and community representatives. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) direct involvement in interfaith activities, (2) recognition as credible figures within their communities, and (3) understanding of local socio-cultural dynamics (Patton, 2015; Sugiyono, 2000). The interview data were analyzed in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2014). In addition, content analysis was employed to connect interview findings with theories of pluralism, tolerance, and local wisdom.

The data sources included primary materials such as books, journal articles, previous research, and official documents related to religious pluralism, tolerance, and Sibolga's local wisdom. Secondary sources included local media reports, activity reports of the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB), official government websites, and publications from relevant institutions. Data collection was carried out by identifying sources through both physical and digital libraries (Google Scholar, national and international journal portals). To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied by

comparing findings from interviews, literature, and official documents. However, this method has certain limitations: the number of informants was relatively small and may not fully represent all groups in Sibolga, while the interview data were subject to informant bias and time constraints. This approach was chosen to ensure that the study is not only conceptual but also contextual, aligning with the socio-cultural realities of Sibolga's society, thereby making the proposed solutions more applicable.

### **C. Results and Discussion**

#### **1. The Reality of Religious Pluralism in Sibolga**

Sibolga, as a port city on the western coast of North Sumatra, exhibits a high degree of religious pluralism, characterized by the presence of Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, and local belief communities. This pluralism has historically developed through trade interactions, ethnic migration, and cultural exchanges since the colonial period. In practice, tolerance is not only a social value but also a lived experience supported by multiple stakeholders. For instance, during the celebration of Vesak in 2025, around 500 Buddhists in Sibolga took part in a procession to commemorate Vesak 2569 TB/2025. AKP Martua Sinaga, Head of the Community Guidance Unit of the Sibolga Police, emphasized: "We ensured that the entire procession ran smoothly and peacefully without disruption ... this demonstrates that the people of Sibolga uphold tolerance and peace." This reflects how religious communities and law enforcement work together as part of a collective effort to maintain harmony.

Pluralism in Sibolga is not merely a demographic fact but also a central part of its socio-cultural identity. Drs. Rudolf S. Butar Butar, M.Pd., Expert Staff for Economic, Financial, and Development Affairs of Sibolga City, stressed the importance of the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in maintaining social cohesion: "All religious leaders within the FKUB must consistently cultivate unity among the people of Sibolga." This reality reflects two dimensions: the positive potential of harmony rooted in local wisdom such as mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), consensus-building traditions (*musyawarah mufakat*), and respect for religious holidays alongside serious challenges including intergroup tensions triggered by issues of ethnicity and religion (SARA), the influence of radicalism from outside the region, economic inequality, and the politicization of religion.

According to Siti Kholidah Marbun, a Sibolga resident and academic: "Sibolga is a plural society, and diversity has long been part of our culture. Living side by side with differences in religion and ethnicity has shaped traditions of tolerance passed down across generations. Interfaith interactions are unavoidable, whether in trade, marriage, or daily life. For example, during Ramadan, cross-faith communities participate in distributing iftar meals, attend traditional ceremonies together, and cooperate in various activities despite differences in ethnicity or religion." Through literature review, it was found that Sibolga's local philosophy of "*berbilang kaum, satu tujuan*" ("many groups, one goal") has strong potential as a foundation for strengthening tolerance. These values are reflected



in interfaith mutual assistance, shared participation in traditional events, and the involvement of all groups in resolving conflicts peacefully.

## **2. Challenges of Tolerance in a Multicultural Society**

Although pluralism in Sibolga offers the potential for harmony, field realities reveal significant challenges. Tensions often arise from issues of ethnicity and religion (SARA), the spread of radicalism from outside influences, economic disparities among groups, and the politicization of religion in practical politics. Community leader Opung Valentino from Muara Nauli Village, during a public forum on August 13, 2025, reminded: “The differences that have always been our strength should not become a trigger for breaking family ties. In the midst of diversity, we must show that Sibolga and Central Tapanuli remain united, harmonious, and peaceful.” He emphasized that teaching tolerance from an early age within families and schools, as well as strengthening national identity, are key safeguards against social conflict.

A concrete example of these challenges occurred on August 1, 2025, when interfaith youth in Sibolga led by the Chair of GAMKI Tapanuli Tengah, Ericson Maharaja, and the Chair of GAMKI Sibolga, Lucien Sitanggang reported an alleged case of blasphemy to the local police. While filing the report, they also delivered a message of peace to prevent interreligious conflict. This incident demonstrated that inclusive social practices can be quickly mobilized to de-escalate tensions before they escalate further. Local wisdom functions as a conflict-prevention mechanism by building strong social norms and networks of trust (social capital). Practices of mutual cooperation and consensus-building encourage positive interactions, while respected traditional and religious leaders act as mediators, enabling conflicts to be resolved early and informally before they spread. Joint rituals and interfaith traditions further reinforce a shared identity that neutralizes exclusivist claims. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends heavily on the legitimacy of local leaders and the active participation of all groups. If certain groups are marginalized or local leaders lose credibility, these traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution become fragile.

## **3. Strategies and Solutions for Strengthening Tolerance**

To address these challenges, this study identifies several strategies to strengthen tolerance in Sibolga, including:

- a. Strengthening multicultural education based on local wisdom. Rahmet Tanjung, Chair of Nasyiatul Aisyiyah Sibolga, emphasized during the *Sore Bercerita* program on Pro2 RRI Sibolga (August 21, 2025) the importance of instilling tolerance from an early age: “*Tolerance is not just a slogan but a real practice in daily life. Differences in belief should not divide us but enrich us as a nation.*” According to her, this attitude can begin with small actions, such as respecting others’ worship and refraining from insulting different faiths.

- b. Structured interfaith dialogue through the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB). Nurdiswar Jambak, Chair of FKUB Sibolga, highlighted the *Kampung Moderasi Beragama* (Religious Moderation Village) program as a concrete implementation of religious teachings that promote mutual respect: “*Islam teaches us to respect and protect others, even with different beliefs. Lakum diinukum waliyadin, to you your religion, and to me mine.*”
- c. Utilizing local media to spread messages of peace and counter religiously charged hoaxes. Local media are effective in reaching communities but remain vulnerable to misinformation. Therefore, verification mechanisms and collaboration with local communities are needed to reduce the spread of hoaxes.
- d. Collaboration among traditional leaders, religious leaders, and the government to maintain inclusive public spaces. Such cross-institutional collaboration is crucial, but it must be accompanied by accountability and clear roles. Without synergy in policies and resources, these efforts may remain temporary.

These findings reinforce earlier research by Yasin and Rahmadian (2024), who stressed the importance of religious education strategies in fostering tolerance within multicultural societies. However, unlike their nationally oriented study, this research focuses on Sibolga and leverages local wisdom as the foundation for tolerance strategies. Compared with Yasin and Rahmadian, our field findings indicate that culturally rooted religious education tends to be more acceptable in practice because it aligns with people’s lived cultural experiences, although success still requires policy support and resources.

Similarly, when compared with Busro et al. (2019), who discussed Islamic moderation (*wasathiyyah*), this study adds a local dimension, demonstrating that moderate attitudes can be reinforced not only through religious doctrines but also through cultural values. Meanwhile, in contrast to Julio Eleazer Nendissa et al. (2024), who examined pluralism largely from theological perspectives, this research provides a more practical and contextual approach by offering solutions that can be directly applied at the city or district level.

Conceptually, this study fills a gap in the literature by positioning community social practices as the primary instruments for addressing the challenges of pluralism and intolerance in multicultural contexts. Cultural values such as consensus-building (*musyawarah mufakat*), interfaith cooperation (*gotong royong*), and respect for diversity serve as effective social capital in preventing conflict.

However, local wisdom alone cannot resolve structural issues such as economic inequality or the politicization of religion. For example, when the root causes are unequal distribution of resources or external ideological pressures, local norms are insufficient and must be supported by policy interventions such as economic redistribution, law enforcement, and counter-radicalization programs. Moreover, local wisdom may be less inclusive toward newcomers or younger generations less bound by tradition, necessitating specially designed inclusion programs. Local traditions also risk manipulation by political actors as tools of legitimacy, making transparency and social accountability essential.

From a contribution perspective, this study not only provides a comprehensive picture of pluralism and tolerance in Sibolga but also proposes a solution model rooted in traditional values. This model considers the city's social character, historical intergroup interactions, and cultural practices that have long served as social glue. The local-based approach emphasizes values such as interfaith cooperation, consensus-building, respect for religious celebrations, and the role of traditional and religious leaders as key mediators of harmony.

For comparison, Medan a city with a high level of diversity requires collective awareness to maintain stability, where diversity should be seen as strength rather than a threat to national unity. Ambon, on the other hand, experienced a major conflict in 1999, showing that cultural values alone are insufficient and must be complemented with formal reconciliation and economic development programs.

The Sibolga model, while relatively effective, can become stronger if combined with policy interventions, monitoring mechanisms to prevent misuse of authority by local leaders, and programs targeting youth and marginalized groups. The strength of this model lies in its adaptability and replicability in other multicultural regions of Indonesia, with necessary adjustments to local cultural and social contexts. This is highly relevant, as many religion-related conflicts in Indonesia often stem from three main factors: (1) lack of literacy and understanding of different beliefs and cultures, (2) weak cross-group communication that fosters prejudice, and (3) the absence of approaches that leverage local cultural potential as bridges for resolving differences.

By integrating empirical findings and lessons from local wisdom, this study confirms that pluralism and tolerance in Sibolga can be sustained if there is strong synergy among four key pillars:

- a) Multicultural education that instills tolerance values from an early age through inclusive curricula and learning activities.
- b) Structured and regular interfaith dialogue to build mutual understanding and reduce miscommunication.
- c) Active roles of local leaders, both religious and traditional, as mediators with broad social legitimacy.
- d) Utilization of local cultural values as proven social instruments to resolve conflicts and strengthen social cohesion.

These strategies complement one another. While local wisdom is effective as a social foundation, preventing recurrent large-scale conflicts requires institutional reinforcement, economic justice, and systematic educational programs. With such strategies, pluralism in Sibolga is not only a demographic reality but also a collective consciousness internalized in daily life. Moreover, Sibolga's success in maintaining tolerance can serve as both an inspiration and a best-practice model for other regions in Indonesia striving to manage diversity peacefully and productively.



#### **D. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Sibolga, a coastal city in North Sumatra, reflects Indonesia's multicultural identity with its high level of religious pluralism. This diversity, shaped historically through trade, migration, and cultural exchange, positions Sibolga as a small-scale model of national coexistence. However, pluralism in Sibolga also faces persistent challenges, including intergroup tensions driven by religious and ethnic issues, radical ideologies, economic disparities, and the politicization of religion. Findings reveal that the resilience of Sibolga's multicultural society is rooted not only in formal regulations but, more significantly, in local traditions and social practices. Cultural values such as the philosophy of "berbilang kaum, satu tujuan" (many groups, one goal), interfaith cooperation (gotong royong), and consensus-based dialogue (musyawarah mufakat) have functioned as effective mechanisms to sustain social cohesion, prevent conflict, and strengthen tolerance across generations.

The novelty of this research lies in proposing a four-pillar model for sustaining tolerance: (1) multicultural education from an early age, (2) structured and continuous interfaith dialogue, (3) the active role of local leaders as socially legitimate mediators, and (4) the revitalization of local cultural values as instruments of cohesion. The Sibolga model illustrates that harmony in diverse societies is best preserved through the reinforcement of everyday social practices rather than policies alone. Its experience offers practical insights for other multicultural regions in Indonesia, making Sibolga a best-practice example for sustainable pluralism and tolerance at the local level.

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