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Social Interaction and Religious Harmony: A Cultural Communication Study in Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract: This study examines the dynamics of social interaction and religious harmony between Bugis migrant communities and local residents in Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach through in-depth interviews and participant observation, the research identifies key factors that foster social cohesion amid ethnic and religious diversity. Data analysis draws on Integrative Communication Theory and Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory. The findings reveal that effective cultural adaptation, open intercultural communication, and the practice of inclusive religious values serve as the primary foundations for maintaining social harmony. The adaptation process unfolds through collaborative, two-way communication in which both groups learn from one another and demonstrate respect for cultural differences. In addition, spiritual values promoted by religious leaders function as a shared ethical framework that reinforces interfaith solidarity. The resulting acculturation is reciprocal, leading to the formation of a new social identity grounded in mutual respect and cooperation. This study affirms that empathetic intercultural communication shaped by religious values can support a sustainable model of social harmony in multiethnic societies. The findings contribute to the literature on cross-cultural communication and offer insights for the development of social policies in the pluralistic contexts of Eastern Indonesia.

Keywords: Cultural adaptation, ethnic groups, intercultural communication, religious harmony, social interaction

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dinamika interaksi sosial dan kerukunan beragama antara etnis migran Bugis dan warga lokal di Kabupaten Malaka, Nusa Tenggara Timur. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipatif, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang mendukung harmoni sosial di tengah keberagaman etnis dan agama. Data dianalisis dengan menggunakan Teori Komunikasi Integratif dan Teori Manajemen Kecemasan dan Ketidakpastian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa adaptasi budaya yang efektif, komunikasi antarbudaya yang terbuka, dan penerapan nilai-nilai agama yang inklusif menjadi fondasi utama terciptanya kohesi sosial. Berdasarkan Teori Komunikasi Integratif dan Teori Manajemen Kecemasan dan Ketidakpastian, proses adaptasi berlangsung melalui komunikasi dua arah yang kolaboratif, di mana kedua kelompok saling belajar dan menghargai perbedaan budaya. Selain itu, nilai-nilai spiritual yang dikembangkan oleh tokoh agama berfungsi sebagai etika kolektif dalam memperkuat solidaritas lintas iman. Akulturasi budaya yang terjadi bersifat resiprokal, menghasilkan identitas sosial baru yang berakar pada prinsip saling menghormati dan kerja sama. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa komunikasi antarbudaya yang empatik dan berbasis nilai religius mampu membangun model harmoni sosial yang berkelanjutan di masyarakat multi-etnis. Temuan ini diharapkan dapat memperkaya literatur tentang komunikasi lintas budaya dan menjadi rujukan dalam pengembangan kebijakan sosial di wilayah pluralistik Indonesia Timur.

Kata Kunci: Adaptasi budaya, kelompok etnis, komunikasi antarbudaya, kerukunan beragama, interaksi sosial

Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelagic nation comprising 17,504 islands, approximately 6,000 of which are uninhabited. Each island possesses distinctive cultural traditions, languages, and social structures, forming a complex mosaic of national diversity. The country is home to more than 300 ethnic groups whose cultural heritages have evolved over centuries, shaped by interactions with Indian, Arab, Chinese, European, and Malay civilizations. This rich diversity of ethnicities, languages, religions, and belief systems constitutes an essential component of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.¹

The principle of unity in diversity, Indonesia's defining characteristic, is encapsulated in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, meaning "Unity in Diversity." This motto conveys that despite the existence of numerous ethnic,

¹ Angel Damayanti and Sri Yunanto, "From Evangelization to Worship Restrictions: The Changing Characteristics of Threat Perception between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relation* 33, No. 2 (2022). Made Antara and Made Vairagya Yogantari, "Keragaman Budaya Indonesia: Sumber Inspirasi Inovasi Industri Kreatif," *SENADA (Seminar Nasional Manajemen, Desain dan Aplikasi Bisnis Teknologi)* 1, no. 1 (2018), p. 1–2.

religious, cultural, and linguistic differences, Indonesians remain united in shared purpose and a collective identity. Serving as an ideological foundation for fostering social cohesion, the motto underscores that cultural, religious, and linguistic plurality is a fundamental and inseparable aspect of the nation's identity.²

Globally, Indonesia stands as a prominent example of successful pluralism management rooted in cross-cultural communication and moderate religious values. The practice of religious moderation across Indonesia's six officially recognized religions promotes harmonious interfaith cooperation, thereby reinforcing the national principle of "Unity in Diversity."³ Tahir emphasizes that intercultural communication plays a vital role in mitigating potential conflicts, fostering tolerance, and strengthening social integration within a multireligious society.⁴ Complementing this perspective, studies by Arimatea and Sukarna demonstrate that the application of moderate religiosity serves as an effective strategy for sustaining social unity and harmony while nurturing an inclusive environment for diverse ethnic and religious groups.⁵ Collectively, these studies provide empirical evidence that Indonesia's success in managing pluralism is not merely a result of its inherent diversity, but rather stems from the active implementation of open cross-cultural communication and moderate religious values by both communities and their leaders. Consequently, Indonesia offers a valuable model for other multicultural societies seeking to manage diversity in a harmonious and inclusive manner.

This ethos aligns closely with the concept of unity in diversity, which constitutes a key pillar in scholarship on multiculturalism and social cohesion. As Taylor argues, "multiculturalism is not just about recognizing difference, but the affirmation of equal dignity among cultures." In the Indonesian context, this principle functions not only as a symbol of unity but also as a communicative foundation for navigating cultural plurality. Indonesia's diversity is not merely demographic; it encompasses profound cultural and spiritual dimensions,

² Wasisto Raharjo Jati, et.al., "From Intellectual to Advocacy Movement: Islamic Moderation, the Conservatives and the Shift of Interfaith Dialogue Campaign in Indonesia," *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, No. 2 (2022).

³ Hamzah Hamzah, "The Reflection of Medina Charter As A Basis For Religious Moderation In Indonesia," *Jurnal al-Dustur* 5, No. 1 (2022). Rizky Maulana, et.al., "Religious Moderation and Social Harmony in Indonesia: Insights from Multi-faith Communities." *Journal of Indonesian Social Studies* 5, no. 2 (2024), p. 112–130.

⁴Muhammad Tahir. "Religious Plurality and the Urgency of Intercultural Communication in Indonesia." *Rausyan Fikr: Jurnal Ilmu Studi Ushuluddin dan Filsafat* 19, no. 1 (2024), p. 45–62.

⁵Yusep Arimatea dan Timotius Sukarna. "Realising Social Harmony Through Religious Moderation in Indonesia's Multicultural Era." *International Journal of Christian Education and Philosophical Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2024), p. 33–39.

positioning the country as a rich social laboratory for the study of intercultural communication and interfaith interaction.⁶

Each ethnic group in Indonesia possesses a unique and vibrant cultural heritage, collectively forming an exceptionally diverse and complex national cultural landscape. These varied value systems, norms, and social practices shape how communities communicate, interact, and negotiate differences, reflecting the distinct identities of groups such as the Javanese, Batak, Minangkabau, Acehnese, Dayak, and Balinese. Together, these cultures contribute to the richness and dynamism of Indonesia's pluralistic society.⁷

Furthermore, East Nusa Tenggara is characterized by rich ethnic diversity, including groups from Flores and Timor, who are known for their bold and resilient cultural identities, as well as the Bugis community from South Sulawesi, recognized for their adventurous spirit, strong work ethic, and adherence to the principle of *siri' na pacce*, which emphasizes dignity and solidarity. This cultural diversity not only enriches Indonesia's national identity but also creates a complex and dynamic framework of intercultural communication, within which various ethnic groups interact, adapt, and influence one another in daily social life.

Indonesia's cultural diversity presents both significant opportunities and considerable challenges, particularly in the realm of intercultural communication. Low levels of intercultural sensitivity may lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding, and social conflict, thereby hindering integration within a multicultural society. Conversely, strong intercultural communication skills play a crucial role in sustaining social harmony, promoting interfaith tolerance, and reinforcing national identity. Everyday cross-cultural interactions facilitate acculturation, generate shared understandings, and transform differences into sources of social and cultural enrichment. Thus, developing intercultural communication competencies is essential for preventing conflict, strengthening social cohesion, and fostering solidarity amid Indonesia's cultural plurality.

In anthropology, culture is commonly understood to comprise seven universal elements: language, knowledge, social organization, technology and tools, livelihood systems, religion, and art.⁸ Tylor mendefinisikan budaya sebagai "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."⁹

⁶Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 26. Amiruddin Ketaren, et.al., "Harmonizing Diversity: Reviewing Multicultural Awareness and Political Policy," *Malikussaleh Social and Politic Review* 4, No. 2 (2023).

⁷ Koentjaraningrat, *Kebudayaan, Mentalitas dan Pembangunan* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1993).

⁸ Koentjaraningrat, *Sejarah Teori Antropologi I* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1987).

⁹ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Research into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1874), p. 1.

This definition underscores that culture encompasses not only material artifacts but also the values and knowledge transmitted across generations.

Within this context, intercultural communication serves as a vital mechanism for sustaining social cohesion in multicultural societies. As Gudykunst explains, “intercultural communication involves managing uncertainty and anxiety in interactions between people from different cultures.”¹⁰ When intercultural competence is weak, the likelihood of miscommunication and conflict increases. In Indonesia, this may heighten interreligious or interethnic tensions, potentially compromising social stability. Therefore, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural and religious boundaries constitutes a fundamental social skill for cultivating tolerance and maintaining societal harmony.

Malaka Regency in East Nusa Tenggara represents a compelling context for examining social interactions and religious harmony due to its distinctive multicultural composition. Geographically, it is bordered by Belu Regency to the north, the Timor Sea to the south, Timor-Leste to the east, and the regencies of North Central Timor and South Central Timor to the west. Established as a result of the administrative division of Belu Regency, Malaka had a population of 183,890 in 2021. Its indigenous population comprises various ethnic groups whose traditions and cultural systems have been passed down across generations, with religion and belief systems deeply embedded in their daily lives.

This cultural landscape has been further enriched by the presence of the Bugis community from South Sulawesi, who settled in the region long before Indonesia’s independence. The Bugis have historically been active in the economic sphere, particularly in fishing, trade, and agriculture. Their presence, adhering to Islamic customs and teachings within a population that is predominantly Christian (approximately 98% in 2021, of which 85% are Catholic and 9% Protestant), creates a uniquely multicultural setting.¹¹ The social interactions between Bugis migrants and local communities offer an illuminating example of intercultural communication in practice, reflecting the capacity of both groups to adapt, coexist, and maintain harmonious relations. This case illustrates how ethnic and religious differences can be effectively managed within a broader framework of tolerance and social cohesion.

Intercultural communication refers to the process of exchanging thoughts, ideas, emotions, and messages among individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. This process involves not only verbal communication but also the symbolic systems, norms, values, and meaning

¹⁰ William B. Gudykunst, *Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communication* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), p. 45.

¹¹ Badan Pusat Statistik, *Statistik Indonesia 2021* (Jakarta: Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021).

structures unique to each culture.¹² From a communication science perspective, intercultural communication represents an effort to construct shared meaning despite differences in symbolic systems and worldviews.¹³ Consequently, the effectiveness of intercultural communication depends largely on an individual's ability to understand and adapt to another person's cultural frame of reference.¹⁴

Gudykunst emphasizes that intercultural communication is not merely a process of transmitting messages across different languages, but also a negotiation of meaning that involves social identities, perceptions, and expectations among individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds.¹⁵ Similarly, Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel argue that intercultural communication requires an awareness of differences in values, beliefs, and behavioral norms embedded within cultural systems.¹⁶ Thus, intercultural communication functions not only as a mechanism for information exchange but also as a foundation for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance, and cooperation in multicultural societies.

In the context of Malaka Regency, intercultural communication can be examined through the social interactions between Bugis migrants and local residents across various aspects of daily life, including trade, agriculture, fisheries, arts and culture, and marital relations. Malaka Regency in East Nusa Tenggara presents a particularly compelling setting for such analysis because it serves as a site of interaction between the predominantly Muslim Bugis community and the predominantly Catholic local population. This social dynamic generates a distinctive form of cross-cultural communication in which social interaction and cultural value systems become key instruments for cultivating interreligious harmony. According to Seran, interfaith dialogue serves as an important bridge for reducing prejudice, addressing misunderstandings, and building trust among religious communities. Through open communication and inclusive participation, such dialogue promotes a culture of peace grounded in empathy, respect for diversity, and social cooperation within multicultural contexts.¹⁷ This aligns with the findings of Arimatea and Sukarna, who conclude

¹² Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), p. 23.

¹³ William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim, *Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 47.

¹⁴ Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2021), p. 61.

¹⁵ William B. Gudykunst, "Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication," *Sage Annual Reviews of Communication Research* 27 (2003), p. 7–12.

¹⁶ Larry A. Samovar, et. al., *Communication Between Cultures*, 7th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), p. 16–17.

¹⁷ Yanuaris Seran, "The Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Enhancing Social Tolerance in Multicultural Communities," *Jurnal Konseling dan Pendidikan* 13, no. 2 (2025), p. 326–334. Rina Febriyanti and Nurhadi, Social Interaction Between Muslims and Christians in Karangturi Village, Surakarta, Indonesia, *Jurnal Sosiologi Dialektika Sosial* 11, No. 2 (2025).

that religious communication practices in multicultural environments function as strategic tools for enhancing social cohesion through the promotion of religious moderation.¹⁸

Given these conditions, the present study aims to examine social interaction and religious harmony in Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, from the perspective of cultural communication. This research adopts a post-positivistic paradigm, which acknowledges that social reality is not entirely objective but is shaped by the researcher's subjectivity during processes of in-depth analysis and interpretation.¹⁹ The paradigm highlights the interactional relationship between empirical data and the theoretical constructs and values held by the researcher.²⁰ Consequently, social reality is understood as a product of the dialectical relationship between empirical observations and the researcher's reflective interpretation, with objectivity pursued through systematic processes of critical verification and falsification.²¹

This post-positivistic approach enables researchers to capture the complexity and dynamics of social interactions by accounting for the influence of values, theoretical perspectives, and the broader social context surrounding the research subjects. The study employs qualitative methods with a descriptive orientation, generating data in the form of written and spoken narratives from observed informants.²² This approach conceptualizes individuals as inseparable from their social environments, rather than as isolated variables, thereby allowing for an in-depth exploration of their subjective meanings and lived experiences.²³ Within this framework, intercultural adaptation theories,²⁴ such as *Integrative Communication Theory*, *Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory*, *Uncertainty Reduction Theory*, *Acculturation Theory*, dan *Co-Cultural Communication Theory*, provide the primary conceptual foundation for understanding the

¹⁸ Yusep Arimatea and Timotius Sukarna, "Realising Social Harmony Through Religious Moderation in Indonesia's Multicultural Era," *International Journal of Christian Education and Philosophical Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2024), p. 33-39.

¹⁹ Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln. *Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences*. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed., edited by Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln, 97–128. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2018.

²⁰ Phillips, Denis C., & Nicholas C. Burbules. *Postpositivism and Educational Research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

²¹ Gery W. Ryan, & H. Russell Bernard. "Techniques to Identify Themes." *Field Methods* 15, no. 1 (2003), p. 85–109.

²² John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018.

²³ Norman K. Denzin, & Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2018.

²⁴ Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, & Johnny Saldaña. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2020.

adaptation and communication processes between Bugis migrants and the local community.²⁵

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to systematically portray the facts and characteristics of the population under investigation without making unwarranted generalizations.²⁶ Such an approach enables the researcher to describe how the two ethnic groups interact, construct cross-cultural communication, and cultivate religious harmony through the religious and social values embedded in the community.²⁷ Ultimately, this research aims to offer a contextual and empirically grounded understanding of the dynamics of social interaction and interfaith harmony in Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara.

The Urgency of Intercultural Communication

In cultural anthropology, the term *culture* derives from the Sanskrit word *buddhayah*, the plural form of *buddhi*, meaning reason or intellect. This definition, introduced by Koentjaraningrat, a prominent Indonesian anthropologist, suggests that everything associated with human reasoning and thought can be categorized as culture or civilization; in other words, to possess intellect is to possess culture. In relation to society, culture is understood as a body of ideas, knowledge, and human creations produced through social learning.²⁸

Edward B. Tylor defines culture as a “complex whole” encompassing knowledge, beliefs, values, customary laws, morals, traditions, and the various abilities acquired by individuals as members of society.²⁹ These cultural components form the basis for identifying and shaping a community’s collective identity. Koentjaraningrat further identifies seven universal cultural elements: language, knowledge systems, social organization, technology and tools, economic systems or livelihoods, religion, and the arts. Language serves as a primary means of communication, while knowledge systems provide an understanding of the environment and underpin the traditions and customs transmitted across generations.³⁰

Cultural diversity significantly influences communication patterns, both verbal such as language choice, dialect, and speech styles and nonverbal,

²⁵ Young Yun Kim. *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, 2001.

²⁶ Gudykunst, William B. *Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory: Current Status*. In *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*, edited by William B. Gudykunst, 281–322. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005.

²⁷ John W. Berry, “Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures.” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 29, no. 6 (2005), p. 697–712.

²⁸ Koentjaraningrat, *Kebudayaan, Mentalitas dan Pembangunan* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1993).

²⁹ Koentjaraningrat, *Sejarah Teori Antropologi I* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1987).

³⁰ Koentjaraningrat. *Kebudayaan, Mentalitet, dan Pembangunan*. Jakarta: Gramedia, 1987.

including facial expressions, gestures, and interpersonal spacing. Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel emphasize that cultural differences shape distinctive communication systems, as each cultural group establishes its own rules for speaking, interpreting messages, and understanding meaning.³¹ In contemporary scholarship, studies by Ridho et al. and Thahir highlight that understanding cultural diversity and interfaith communication is essential for fostering social harmony within pluralistic societies such as Indonesia.³² Thus, a comprehensive understanding of cultural elements is a critical prerequisite for developing effective and harmonious communication practices in heterogeneous social contexts.³³

The study of intercultural communication examines how individuals from different cultural backgrounds interpret messages, construct meaning, and adapt their communicative behavior to specific social contexts. Hall describes culture as a “silent language,” an unspoken system that shapes individuals’ perceptions of time, space, and social relationships. In multireligious societies, this silent language influences how differences are perceived and how mutual understanding is negotiated during interfaith encounters.³⁴

Intercultural communication in a multireligious society such as Indonesia requires not only verbal and nonverbal competence but also an ability to understand the values, symbols, and teachings embedded within religious and customary systems. Pamuji’s research demonstrates that interreligious and interethnic interactions in Indonesia’s multicultural environment highlight the importance of dialogue, respect for other faiths, empathy, and effective communication as pathways toward fostering tolerance and social harmony.³⁵ These findings affirm that effective communication in a multireligious context necessitates a deep awareness of the cultural frameworks and religious values upheld by different communities. Consequently, intercultural communication becomes a vital instrument for establishing social cohesion, reducing potential conflict, and strengthening communal harmony in pluralistic societies. Migrants who remain open to feedback and actively learn the cultural norms and language of their host communities tend to experience smoother social integration and lower levels of intercultural anxiety. Thus, openness in cross-cultural

³¹Larry A. Samovar, et.al., *Communication Between Cultures*. 8th ed. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2010.

³²Ali Ridho, et.al., “Synergizing Stakeholders’ Communication for Religious Harmony in Indonesia.” *Islamic Communication Journal* 8, no. 1 (2023), p. 41-64.

³³Muhammad Thahir. “Religious Plurality and the Urgency of Intercultural Communication in Indonesia.” *Rausyan Fikr: Jurnal Ilmu Studi Ushuluddin dan Filsafat* 19, no. 1 (2024).

³⁴Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976).

³⁵Slamet Pamuji, “Interreligious Interaction in a Multicultural Society (Case Study: about Tolerance and Harmony in Indonesia),” *Journal of Noesantara Islamic Studies* 1, no. 6 (2024), p. 346–360,

communication extends beyond verbal and nonverbal abilities to include a willingness to understand and appreciate the value systems that shape local community life.³⁶

Collectively, these studies indicate that intercultural communication functions not only as a vehicle for exchanging information but also as a social mechanism for maintaining integration and cohesion in heterogeneous societies. Within the context of Malaka Regency, these concepts provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing how Bugis migrants and local residents interact and develop communication patterns that support religious harmony.

Social Interactions Between the Bugis and Local Residents in Malaka

Social interactions between the Bugis migrant community and local residents in Malaka Regency reveal dynamic patterns of cultural adaptation and social harmony. This phenomenon can be examined through an intercultural communication lens, which highlights the importance of mutual adjustment among groups with distinct cultural backgrounds. As Kim explains, intercultural adaptation is the outcome of an ongoing communicative process between individuals and their social environment, through which reciprocal influence gradually shapes new social norms and behavioral patterns. Within this framework, the Bugis and local residents of Malaka have successfully constructed an inclusive space for interaction through economic, sociocultural, and educational engagements.

Economically, shared economic activities have become a significant platform for social integration. The Bugis play a strategic role in supporting local trade and the fisheries sector. They actively participate in traditional markets, contribute to the distribution of agricultural commodities, and share expertise in fishing techniques and marine cultivation. Field observations indicate that the Bugis work ethic and economic networks substantially strengthen the coastal economy while simultaneously fostering social cohesion.

This pattern aligns with the perspective offered by De Porres, who argues that social interaction and religious harmony in multicultural settings—such as Malaka Regency can be understood through parallels with his study in Maumere, Flores. In that context, traditional markets served as key arenas for acculturation between Muslim and Christian communities. The research showed that sustained economic interactions between Bajo and Bugis maritime traders and local residents not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also nurtured tolerance that encouraged cultural adaptation and constructive interfaith relations. These everyday economic encounters illustrate how social interaction can function as an effective medium for cross-cultural communication and foster religious harmony.

³⁶ Nigel Mantou Lou and Kimberly A. Noels, "Sensitivity to Language-based Rejection in Intercultural Communication: The Role of Language Mindsets and Implications for Migrants' Cross-cultural Adaptation," *Applied Linguistics* 40, no. 3 (2019), p. 482.

The acculturation process reflects the dynamic through which minority groups adapt to local norms while retaining their cultural identities, and local residents, in turn, develop an appreciation for the newcomers' cultural practices.³⁷ Consequently, social interaction grounded in open communication, shared economic engagement, and respect for religious differences serves as an essential mechanism for building harmony and social integration in multicultural communities such as Malaka Regency.

One informant, Ami, explained, "*We Bugis people here are accustomed to trading with local residents. Sometimes we help each other; they help market the fish, we help market their crops; it's like family.*"³⁸ This statement illustrates an economic interaction that extends beyond material exchange, demonstrating the formation of social capital between migrant and local communities. Beyond economic activities, social and cultural engagements also function as unifying forces within the community. Social interactions are strengthened through participation in shared sociocultural events. The Bugis community actively joins local traditional ceremonies such as *hau ni le'a* (harvest rituals), while local residents likewise participate in Islamic events such as the Prophet's Birthday and Bugis traditional wedding ceremonies. These reciprocal forms of cross-cultural participation serve as important arenas for reinforcing social harmony and negotiating collective identities.

As noted by Rofinus Klau, the Head of Fafoe Village, "*When there is a major event, Bugis residents always help us. We also attend their events. So we are like one village, with no boundaries anymore.*"³⁹ This finding is consistent with the work of Nurdin and Prasajo, who emphasize that cross-cultural participation in social rituals acts as a mediating structure that strengthens social integration in multiethnic settings.⁴⁰

The education sector also plays a pivotal role in fostering cross-ethnic social interaction. Children from Bugis families and local households attend the same schools, creating an environment for intensive and egalitarian interaction from an early age. Within these educational spaces, students not only acquire formal knowledge but also develop values of tolerance and cross-cultural cooperation. Robertus Bria, a teacher in Malaka Regency, stated, "*At our school, Bugis and local children learn together without distinction of origin. Sometimes they even help each other in school religious activities.*"⁴¹ This aligns with studies

³⁷ Martin Elvanyus De Porres, "Berkerabat di Pasar: Kuasa dan Praktik Keberagaman Agama di Maumere, Nusa Tenggara Timur," *Jurnal Studi Agama dan Masyarakat* 19, no. 2 (2024), p. 90–103.

³⁸ Interviewed with Ami, a leadership figure of Bugis in Malaka, 2024.

³⁹ Interviewed with Rofinus Klau, Village head of Fafoe in Malaka, 2024.

⁴⁰ M. Nurdin, M., & Prasajo, "Religious Cohesion and Multicultural Praxis in Eastern Indonesia," *Jurnal Al-Ihkam* 16, no. 1 (2021), p. 45–62.

⁴¹ Interviewed with Robertus Bria, a teacher in Malaka, 2024.

highlighting the importance of multicultural education in Indonesia, a nation characterized by ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Through inclusive educational practices, multicultural education introduces students to diversity while simultaneously promoting cross-ethnic social awareness. Such an approach cultivates an understanding of differences, encourages respect for diversity, and reduces the potential for identity-based conflict, thereby contributing to social harmony and community cohesion.⁴²

Social interactions between the Bugis migrant community and the local residents of Malaka reveal a natural and sustained process of reciprocal adaptation. The economic, sociocultural, and educational dimensions of community life are interwoven, collectively contributing to the formation of a harmonious social structure. These findings indicate that social integration is fostered not only through formal policies but also through everyday interactions characterized by trust, empathy, and intercultural openness. In this regard, Malaka Regency offers a compelling model of social harmony for Indonesia's eastern border regions.

Religious Harmony Between the Bugis and Local Residents in Malaka

Religious harmony between the Bugis migrant community and the local population in Malaka Regency is the outcome of a long-term social process rooted in values of tolerance, the active involvement of religious leaders, and interfaith education embedded in daily life. Consistent with Berger's theory of religious pluralism, such harmony does not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is a social construct formed through communication, value negotiation, and cooperation across community boundaries.⁴³

Interfaith tolerance in Malaka is evident in the everyday interactions between the Bugis Muslim community and local Christian or Catholic residents. Both groups live side by side and demonstrate mutual respect for one another's religious celebrations. For instance, during Eid al-Fitr, Christian residents assist with food preparation and neighborhood security, while Muslims offer support during Christmas and Easter festivities. These practices reflect a concrete expression of religious tolerance. In a pluralistic society, tolerance is manifested not only through formal regulations but also through everyday social actions that build interfaith trust. Such "everyday tolerance" strengthens social cohesion by extending beyond government directives and taking shape through grassroots interactions. Religious tolerance is further reflected in shared participation in village activities, mutual acknowledgment of religious holidays, and inclusive

⁴² Anzar Abdullah, et.al., "Application of Multicultural Education in Strengthening Community Solidarity in Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 11, no. 3 (2023), p. 1173–98.

⁴³ Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

social solidarity—often occurring without formal institutional arrangements.⁴⁴ This form of lived pluralism is visible in collective activities such as *gotong royong*, the repair of public facilities, and various socio-religious programs that involve all residents regardless of religious affiliation, thereby fostering genuine and sustainable interfaith relations.⁴⁵

One informant, Syamsianur, a Bugis housewife, stated, “*At Christmas, we help guard our neighbors’ homes so they can worship in peace. Likewise, during Eid al-Fitr, they come to help clean the mosque. It’s like family.*”⁴⁶ Her testimony illustrates that tolerance is not merely an abstract principle but a tangible practice that strengthens interfaith harmony at the grassroots level. Religious leaders from both communities also play a crucial role as social mediators in sustaining interreligious peace. Mosque imams, pastors, and traditional leaders regularly engage in dialogue and coordination whenever potential sources of social friction arise, ensuring the continuity of harmonious relations.

Similarly, Rohman, a mosque imam in Malaka, explained, “*We often sit together with the pastor to discuss community activities. Sometimes we talk about social events; other times, we discuss matters related to young people so they are not easily provoked. This is crucial for maintaining peace.*”⁴⁷ This collaborative approach aligns with Halafoff’s view of interreligious dialogue, which emphasizes that cooperation among religious leaders not only reduces conflict but also creates social bridges that strengthen trust between communities.⁴⁸

Another important factor is the role of education and the socialization of tolerance values through both formal and informal institutions. Schools in Malaka Regency serve as key social spaces where young people learn to respect religious differences. The local curriculum integrates character education grounded in principles of religious pluralism, supported by interfaith social activities organized by teachers and community leaders.

Robertus Bria, a local teacher, noted, “*the children at our school are accustomed to participating in interfaith activities. For example, there are environmental cleanliness competitions between mosque youth and Catholic Youth (OMK). This helps them grow up with a sense of mutual respect.*”⁴⁹ Inclusive multicultural education not only familiarizes students with diversity but

⁴⁴ Muhammad, et.al., “Everyday Religious Tolerance in Gampong Keude Siblah: Social Practices and Symbolic Boundaries Between Chinese-Indonesian and Muslim Communities,” *Sinthop: Media Kajian Pendidikan, Agama, Sosial dan Budaya* 4, no. 1 (2025), p. 84–91.

⁴⁵ Haryono, et.al., “Implementation of Religious Pluralism Tolerance in the Village of Penyangkringan, Kendal Regency,” *JED (Jurnal Etika Demokrasi)* 8, no. 1 (2023), p. 56–63.

⁴⁶ Interviewed with Syamsianur, a housewife with a Bugis descent in Malaka, 2024.

⁴⁷ Interview with Rohman, an Islamic religious figure from East Java, Malaka, 2024.

⁴⁸ Anna Halafoff, “Interfaith Dialogue as a Tool for Building Social Trust,” *Social Compass* 65, no. 4 (2018), p. 562–580.

⁴⁹ Interview with Robertus Bria, a teacher in Malacca, 2024.

also plays a strategic role in fostering cross-ethnic social awareness. It promotes understanding of differences, appreciation of cultural and religious plurality, and reduces the potential for identity-based conflict, thereby contributing to social harmony and community cohesion.⁵⁰ In addition, local government policies that support interfaith communication forums further help strengthen the climate of social tolerance in Malaka.

Religious harmony in Malaka Regency thus reflects not merely symbolic coexistence but the outcome of an ongoing social learning process involving multiple social actors—community members, religious leaders, educators, and local government officials. By emphasizing communication, empathy, and interfaith participation, the Bugis community and local residents have collectively developed a model of harmony rooted in intercultural and interreligious communication, one that is particularly relevant to the sociocultural context of Eastern Indonesia. From a cross-cultural communication perspective, this phenomenon demonstrates how religion can function as a bridge of identity, serving not only as a marker of difference but also as a powerful force for building togetherness.

The Dynamics of Cultural Adaptation of the Bugis Ethnic Group with Local Residents in Malaka

The process of cultural adaptation between Bugis migrants and local residents in Malaka Regency reflects a dynamic form of cross-cultural communication oriented toward sustaining social harmony. This adaptation is not merely a matter of behavioral adjustment, but an ongoing communicative process through which meanings, values, and identities are negotiated across groups. Drawing on the Integrative Communication Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, successful intercultural adjustment depends on the extent to which both parties engage in open interaction, manage symbolic differences, and build mutual understanding through interpersonal communication and active social participation.⁵¹

The Bugis community in Malaka Regency actively engages in local sociocultural activities. Their participation is not simply an act of assimilation, but a communication strategy that cultivates social trust. Members of the Bugis community join various events—such as harvest festivals, traditional ceremonies, and local religious rituals—which function as effective avenues for fostering

⁵⁰Anzar Abdullah, et.al., “Application of Multicultural Education in Strengthening Community Solidarity in Indonesia,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 11, no. 3 (2023), p. 1173–98. Priska Natalia Silaban, et.al., Gotilon Feast and Social Identity: Actualization and Inculturation at The Onan Baru Resorts Church, Samosir, North Sumatera. *Jurnal Sosiologi Dialektika Sosial* 11, No. 2 (2025).

⁵¹Young Yun Kim, *Integrative Communication Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

emotional closeness with the host community. As noted by Haji Nurdin, a Bugis community leader, “We participate in harvest festivals and village thanksgiving celebrations not because it is obligatory, but because we feel it is part of our togetherness. Local residents also come when we hold Maulid or Aqiqah celebrations; in this context, we learn from each other.⁵² This finding supports Berry’s conceptualization of bicultural participation, in which effective cultural adaptation occurs when migrant groups maintain aspects of their native culture while simultaneously embracing the social practices of the host society.⁵³

The exchange of values and language further serves as a bridge of communication between the two groups. Cultural adaptation is also manifested through symbolic exchanges, particularly those involving language and shared social values. Some local residents have begun to incorporate Bugis greetings or expressions into their daily interactions, while the Bugis community has likewise made efforts to learn and use the local Dawan language. This practice promotes an inclusive communicative environment and strengthens a collective sense of belonging. Norbertus Nahak, a local Catholic resident and village head of Oanmane, explained, “When we converse with our Bugis neighbors, we use a mix of languages—some Bugis and some Dawan making the interaction enjoyable and friendly. They also often attend Christmas mass, simply as a gesture of respect.⁵⁴ Such practices illustrate communicative accommodation, in which groups adjust their language use and communicative behaviors to enhance interactional effectiveness, strengthen social identification, and foster cross-cultural solidarity. This aligns with the principles of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which foregrounds the role of adaptive communication in promoting social acceptance and intercultural harmony.⁵⁵

Adaptasi budaya di Malaka bukanlah proses satu arah, tetapi merupakan negosiasi identitas yang berlangsung dalam ruang sosial bersama. Masyarakat Bugis mempertahankan identitas keislaman dan nilai gotong royong, namun pada saat yang sama menginternalisasi nilai-nilai lokal seperti *mutis* (rasa hormat dan keikhlasan). Sementara itu, warga lokal mengembangkan empati dan rasa ingin tahu terhadap praktik budaya Bugis, termasuk menghadiri acara *massure*’ (doa bersama) dan *mappacci* (ritual pra-pernikahan Bugis).

Cultural adaptation in Malaka is not a one-directional process, but a negotiated reconstruction of identity that unfolds within a shared social space. The Bugis community maintains its Islamic identity and core communal values such

⁵²Interview with Haji Nurdin, a Bugis community leader in Malaka, 2024.

⁵³John W. Berry, “Acculturation and Integration: Revisiting Classic Concepts,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 73 (2019), p. 6–15.

⁵⁴Interview with Norbertus Nahak, Head of Oanmane Village in Malaka, 2024.

⁵⁵Marko Dragojevic, Jessica Gasiorek, dan Howard Giles, “Communication Accommodation Theory,” *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication*, (2015).

as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), while simultaneously internalizing local values such as *mutis* (respect and sincerity). At the same time, local residents develop empathy and curiosity toward Bugis cultural practices, including participation in *massare'* (collective prayer) and *mappacci* (a Bugis pre-wedding ritual).

As expressed by Simon Bria, a traditional leader from Malaka who is active in local customary activities, "We do not see differences as barriers. Instead, we see the Bugis as bringing new perspectives. From them, we learn discipline and hard work, and from us, they learn simplicity."⁵⁶ This statement underscores how cross-cultural communication in a pluralistic society can become an arena for social learning, where religious values, local ethics, and communal solidarity are combined to shape a new and more adaptive social order.

The dynamics of cultural adaptation between the Bugis ethnic group and the local Malaka community highlight the importance of integrative communication as a process that nurtures symbolic equality and cross-cultural empathy. Within the framework of intercultural communication theory, sustained interactions grounded in mutual respect contribute to the development of a shared social identity. Consequently, the success of this adaptation can be viewed as a model of intercultural synergy in which cultural differences are transformed into sources of collective strength, enabling the construction of social harmony in a multi-ethnic setting.⁵⁷

Intercultural Communication between Bugis and Local Residents in Malaka

Intercultural communication between Bugis migrants and local residents in Malaka Regency functions as a key social mechanism for fostering shared understanding amid differences in values, norms, and belief systems. In a multiethnic context such as Malaka, communication is not merely the transmission of messages; rather, it is a dynamic process of identity negotiation and the strengthening of social cohesion. Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory posits that effective intercultural communication is shaped by an individual's ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty during cross-cultural encounters.⁵⁸

The findings of this study indicate that both Bugis migrants and local residents employ various communication strategies aimed at reducing social tension and reinforcing interpersonal bonds. Regular community meetings, neighborhood discussions, and interfaith forums serve as open platforms for dialogue, allowing individuals to exchange perspectives without prejudice. As

⁵⁶ Interview with Simon Bria, a traditional leader in the community in Malaka, 2024.

⁵⁷ Young Yun Kim. "Intercultural Adaptation and Communicative Synergy," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 51, no. 2 (2022), p. 140–158.

⁵⁸ William B. Gudykunst, *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication: The Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Perspective* (Sage: Newbury Park, 2005).

noted by Rohman, an Islamic religious leader from East Java who serves as an imam in Malaka Regency, “We often sit with the hamlet head and pastor to discuss social activities so that everyone feels involved. If there is a small issue, we resolve it through direct conversation, not through gossip.”⁵⁹

This emphasis on direct communication reflects a central component of AUM Theory, reducing uncertainty through sustained interpersonal contact and fostering social empathy. It also aligns with insights from Chen and Starosta, who argue that intercultural awareness enhances mutual understanding and promotes more egalitarian social relations.⁶⁰ Intercultural dialogue thus emerges as a fundamental pillar of social communication in Malaka Regency. Both communities actively engage in interfaith activities, such as community service, joint celebrations of major religious holidays, and religious seminars initiated by local authorities, which help build trust and dismantle negative stereotypes.

As expressed by Yoseph Klau, a Catholic leader and local resident, “we realize that talking is the path to peace. If the Bugis and Catholics here can sit together, then differences will no longer be a problem, but a source of wealth.” This reflects the core proposition of Pettigrew’s updated Intergroup Contact Theory (2016), which asserts that cooperative and meaningful interactions across groups reduce prejudice and foster social solidarity.⁶¹ The process of intercultural communication between the Bugis migrants and local residents in Malaka illustrates that openness, empathy, and the strategic use of local social media are essential elements for fostering social cohesion.

Cross-ethnic communication not only minimizes potential misunderstandings but also functions as a symbolic mechanism for cultivating a sense of shared belonging. Accordingly, intercultural communication in Malaka Regency can be understood as a form of social practice that integrates Bugis Islamic values with the communal ethics of the local population, producing a mutually enriching social order. Both communities exhibit a high level of communicative maturity, wherein cultural differences are no longer perceived as sources of division but rather as resources for collective cultural understanding. This dynamic reflects a concrete enactment of communication grounded in mutual understanding and intercultural respect.

⁵⁹ Interview with Rohman, an Islamic religious figure from East Java, Malaka, 2024.

⁶⁰ Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta, “Mindfulness in Intercultural Communication Competence,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 66 (2018), p. 42–51.

⁶¹ Interview with Yoseph Klau, a local resident of Malaka and a Catholic religious figure, 2024.

Religious Principles in Fostering Harmony Between the Bugis and Local Residents in Malaka

Religion serves as both a moral compass and a social foundation for sustaining harmony between Bugis migrants and local residents in Malaka Regency. Religious principles function not only as spiritual guidance but also as a normative framework that shapes social interactions across ethnic and religious boundaries. In this context, values such as *ukhuwah insaniyah* (human brotherhood), tolerance, and mutual cooperation form a point of convergence between the Islamic teachings practiced by the Bugis community and the Christian values embraced by the local population. According to Berry's Acculturation and Culture Shock Theory, successful cultural adaptation occurs when individuals and groups are able to preserve their cultural identities while establishing positive relationships with members of other cultural groups.⁶² In the case of Malaka, religious values operate as an "ethical bridge" that facilitates the acculturation process between the Bugis and the local community.

Religious leaders from both communities play a strategic role in sustaining social harmony. They function not only as spiritual guides but also as facilitators of interfaith communication. Mosque imams, pastors, and traditional leaders frequently engage in interfaith dialogue to address social issues that may lead to tension. As H. Nurdin, a Bugis religious leader, stated, "here we always advise Muslims and Catholics to respect one another. If there are differences, they are not for debate but for mutual understanding. Because if there is peace, everyone can work peacefully."⁶³ This statement reflects the internalization of religious principles as instruments of social mediation. Religious practices grounded in values of tolerance and social participation thus serve as effective mechanisms for conflict resolution in multiethnic societies.

Religious activities such as mutual cooperation in constructing places of worship, participating in interfaith holiday celebrations, and engaging in joint social programs also function as meaningful avenues for strengthening social bonds. For instance, Bugis Muslims often assist with cleaning churches before Christmas, while Catholic communities participate in *iftar* gatherings during Ramadan. Father Yoseph Klau explained, "we are accustomed to helping one another. If Muslims want to build a prayer room, Catholics also contribute their labor. Because here, religion is not a divider but a way to know each other better."⁶⁴ This social reality underscores how interfaith interactions rooted in empathy

⁶² John W. Berry, "Mutual Acculturation: Conceptual Directions in the Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 61 (2017), p. 2–12.

⁶³ Interview with Haji Nurdin, a Bugis religious figure in Malaka, 2024.

⁶⁴ Interview with Yoseph Klau, a pastor in Malaka, 2024.

foster interreligious trust and reduce the potential for horizontal conflict in a pluralistic setting.⁶⁵

Religious principles further serve as moral guidelines in the daily lives of Malaka residents. Concepts such as *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil) in Islam and the Christian principle of love are translated into social practices that emphasize honesty in economic transactions, social solidarity, and collective responsibility. As noted by Dr. Simon Nahak, the Regent of Malaka and an academic, “wuse religion as a source of public ethics. So, if the Bugis and Malaka people can live in harmony, it is because they view religion as a shared value, not merely an identity.”⁶⁶ These findings suggest that religious values form a normative foundation for the development of social order in a pluralistic society, where moral teachings function as a unifying force across ethnic and religious groups. Similarly, Benavides argues that inclusive religious practices can transform religion from a potential source of conflict into a source of social cohesion.⁶⁷

In Malaka Regency, religious principles thus serve a dual function: as spiritual guidance and as a social instrument for fostering peace. When practiced openly and inclusively, religious values provide a strong foundation for harmonious coexistence across ethnic and religious boundaries. The synergy between Islamic teachings and Christian values demonstrates a complementary model of religiosity that reinforces tolerance, cooperation, and solidarity in the social life of the Malaka community.

Social Interaction and Religious Harmony between the Bugis Ethnic Group and Local Residents in Malaka

This study found that social interaction and religious harmony between Bugis migrants and local residents in Malaka Regency developed constructively through processes of cultural adaptation, effective intercultural communication, and the application of mutually respectful religious values. These dynamics indicate that social harmony in a multiethnic society does not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is formed through an ongoing, interactive, and reflective communication process grounded in shared cultural and religious principles. The cultural adaptation exhibited by the Bugis community in Malaka reflects a two-way form of integrative communication in which both Bugis migrants and local residents engage in equitable cultural exchange. In line with Integrative Communication Theory, successful adaptation is demonstrated through the willingness of both groups to adjust their values, norms, and social practices while

⁶⁵ D. Lestari, “Interreligious Empathy and Cohesion in Eastern Indonesia,” *Studia Islamika* 27, no. 3 (2020), p. 411–435.

⁶⁶ Interview with Dr. Simon Nahak, Regent and Academic in Malaka, 2024.

⁶⁷ David Benavides, “Inclusive Religious Practice and Social Harmony in Multicultural Contexts,” *Religions* 13, no. 11 (2022), p. 1054–1072.

maintaining their distinct cultural identities. In this context, the Bugis have adopted local customs such as harvest rituals, community social activities, and the use of regional languages in daily interaction. Conversely, local residents display openness by participating in Bugis religious and cultural events such as the Prophet's Birthday celebration and *Mappacci*, resulting in a symbiotic and mutually enriching communication pattern.

The process of social integration in a multicultural society requires reciprocal learning between cultural groups to achieve sustainable social stability. Field findings support this notion, as illustrated by the testimony of a Bugis community leader, H. Nurdin, who stated, "We do not feel like outsiders here, because the people of Malaka have accepted us as their own brothers. We learn their customs, and they learn ours."⁶⁸ This statement reflects the empathetic and adaptive nature of cross-cultural communication in Malaka, which fosters trust and reinforces social cohesion.

From the perspective of Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, both the Bugis and local residents are able to sustain effective communication through the management of potential prejudice and social tension. Open communication strategies are implemented through deliberation forums, collaborative community activities, and dialogue sessions involving interfaith leaders. These forums provide a platform for community members to express their perspectives in an egalitarian manner while simultaneously building mutual trust.

A concrete example can be seen in the "Border Residents' Communication Forum," initiated by the village government and local community leaders. This forum functions as a platform for addressing social issues, such as land disputes and economic activities that may generate interethnic tensions. The findings highlight the significance of horizontal, participatory dialogue in preventing social conflict within pluralistic communities.

The process of cultural adaptation also illustrates reciprocal acculturation, in which both Bugis migrants and local residents influence one another in shaping evolving social identities. Through social practices such as joint efforts in constructing houses of worship, agricultural cooperation, and collective participation in regional celebrations, both groups contribute to the formation of a shared communal identity. These activities demonstrate that the collective identity of the Malaka community is grounded in sustained cross-ethnic cooperation.

These findings further show that the success of Indonesia's pluralistic society rests on the capacity to internalize cross-cultural values without relinquishing deeply rooted religious identities. The Bugis community continues to uphold the values of *sipakatau* (mutual respect) and *sipakainge* (mutual reminder), while local residents practice the principle of *haknain* (brotherhood

⁶⁸Interview with Haji Nurdin, a Bugis figure in Malaka, 2024.

rooted in compassion). Together, these values function as a vital cultural bridge that strengthens social cohesion in everyday community life.

Religious principles function as a shared ethical foundation that reinforces social cohesion. Muslim and Christian religious leaders play a central role in promoting interfaith dialogue and facilitating social cooperation. Through collaborative activities, such as community service initiatives and interfaith social programs, they cultivate universal spiritual values, including compassion, honesty, and social responsibility.

Religion also plays a strategic role in mediating social relations and fostering trans-ethnic solidarity in border areas. This was affirmed in an interview with Pastor Yoseph Klau, who emphasized that “true faith is evident when we can live side by side without suspicion. Islam and Catholicism here are not barriers, but rather the very reasons we help one another.”⁶⁹ His statement illustrates how spiritual values function as an effective social adhesive, reducing the potential for conflict and reinforcing multicultural cohesion.

The findings of this study show that effective intercultural communication and a cooperative orientation form the basis for sustaining social harmony in Malaka Regency. Cultural adaptation, communication management, and religious values interact to shape a dynamic and enduring model of social integration. These results underscore the significance of intercultural empathy and religious civility as essential components in promoting peace within a pluralistic society. Consequently, the integration between Bugis migrants and local residents in Malaka Regency can be understood as an adaptive communicative process grounded in cultural and spiritual principles, one that offers a relevant model for social development in the multiethnic context of Eastern Indonesia.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the successful cultural adaptation and intercultural communication between Bugis migrants and local residents in Malaka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, is the outcome of a long-term, dynamic, and collaborative social process. Interactions in economic, social, cultural, educational, and religious domains demonstrate a high level of social integration, wherein both ethnic groups not only coexist peacefully but also complement one another in their daily lives. Effective intercultural communication is grounded in the capacity of both communities to manage anxiety and uncertainty consistent with the principles of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory and to cultivate open, empathetic dialogue. This communicative competence fosters a social climate conducive to the development of interethnic trust and solidarity. Moreover, the Bugis community’s cultural adaptation, which aligns closely with local norms and values, illustrates an integrative communicative approach rooted

⁶⁹ Interview with Yoseph Klau, Pastor and Catholic Leader in Malaka, 2024.

in mutual respect and a willingness to learn from other cultures. The findings further highlight the central role of religious values as moral guides and sources of social ethics that reinforce interfaith harmony. Muslim and Christian religious leaders contribute significantly to maintaining constructive interfaith communication through dialogue, collaborative social initiatives, and community engagement. In this context, religious principles function not only as expressions of spirituality but also as instruments of social reconciliation and cohesion within a multicultural environment. In essence, interethnic relations in Malaka Regency reflect the effectiveness of an intercultural communication model grounded in collective cultural and religious values. Communication serves as the primary mechanism for fostering social harmony, reducing prejudice, and strengthening a shared sense of community.

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