

Preserving Religious Harmony: A Case Study of the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School in Alor, East Nusa Tenggara

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abstract: the vast migration and rapid growth of information technology have triggered concern over the threat to religious harmony in Indonesia. This condition motivated different parties to take part in preserving religious diversity, particularly in Alor. The case study in this area focuses on a multicultural elementary school called "Cermin" (Cerdas dan Beriman) and their effort to conserve religious harmony values in Alor. This study uses qualitative as a research method and descriptive analysis through interviews, documentation, and references study for data collection. The result has shown that the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School was consistent in implementing religious harmony values to their student. It can be seen from various activities carried out by the school every year. Although this school was owned by a Christian foundation, it does not limit the opportunity for other children from any religion and ethnicity to participate and study. Implementing local wisdom, such as the harmony between mountain and beach, offers a positive impact not only on growing harmony between diverse religions but also on various ethnic groups living in Alor. Students are taught about how to deal with diversity. The use of local wisdom as an approach to convey inter-religion harmony values is very useful because it is closer to the student's character.

Keywords: inter-religion harmony values, multiculturalism, elementary education, diversity, Eastern Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Modernization has brought merits where the public can easily access information technology. In the past, it might take a longer time to obtain information, which is hugely different from today. These days, everyone can dig up information anywhere and anytime once they open gadgets. It is not surprising that nowadays everything can be done with the help of interconnected devices, resulting in the flow of information transfers faster. Massive access to information technology changes the way how to attain information and communicate with each individual and household (Budiman et al., 2014). Information technology is a medium of change in society both positively and negatively in terms of patterns in society.

One of the impacts of the existence of information technology is the spread of new ideologies that come from outside. These ideologies seek to influence and change what has

been established in a society, including religious harmony. If those ideologies are in line with the culture in society, they will be well-received. On the contrary, if they are not in accordance and cannot adapt to society, they will be declined and have the potential to cause conflict. Not only information technology but also the rapid flow of population movement has the potential to carry ideologies from outside. It comes as no surprise that population growth and the rapid development of information technology have brought concerns about the spread of these ideologies.

Alor Regency is facing this problem. Our resource person, M (57 years old) expressed concern about the spread of ideologies disturbing religious harmony in Alor. He was concerned about the fears in the future with the arrival of residents from other regions disrupting the existing order, especially regarding inter-religious harmony (M (57 years old), personal communication, August 2022). Moreover, according to predictions made by Pandu (2020), it is said that in 2030, the population in Alor Regency will be as many as 222,661. The study also mentioned how from 2011 to 2018, Alor Regency experienced an increase in population every year. F (46 years old), one of our other resources, also expressed concern about the notions that disturb religious harmony in Alor. She mentioned the people who return from other places or those who come to Alor might bring undesirable consequences along with their ideologies (F (46 years), personal communication, August 2022). Alor is known as a tolerant regency. This can be seen from the Harmony Awards received by the regency in 2016. Unsurprisingly, these concerns arise because maintaining religious harmony amid modernization is very challenging.

For this reason, efforts are needed to maintain religious harmony in Alor. Many efforts have been made to address these concerns, one of which is by establishing schools, the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School. The selection of the school as an effort to overcome existing concerns is considered appropriate because education is a means to instill the values of religious harmony. Schools as institutions function to maintain and develop social order and social control using the assimilation and values of diverse sub-groups, into the dominant values adopted by the community (Pebrianto & Hadi, 2021) (Sujana, 2019: 35). This means that schools must be able to become a place for various existing values and bridge between the values adopted by the surrounding community and the various existing values.

Schools are indeed used to maintain the culture that exists in society. According to the research conducted by Pebrianto & Hadi (2021), a school in Malang, the School of Culture of

Tunggulwulung, routinely conducts cultural studies or *ngangsu kaweruh*. The purpose of holding these routines is to preserve culture, especially Javanese culture so that the culture is timeless. Another study by Syafar & Damopolii (2019) conducted research at State Elementary School 46 Hulontalangi, Gorontalo. The research discusses how to harmonize the heterogeneous students, of which there are 331 Muslims, 67 Christians, and 42 Buddhists students. The habit of coexistence is the key to success in training the students to live side by side. The implication is the perspective and action in dealing with heterogeneity by all elements of the school in daily activities. Further, Solihin, (2008) in his research, explains the heterogeneity of religious communities in Vocational High School of Yadika 5 Pondok Aren. Schools have an essential role in the harmonization of religious communities among their students. This can be seen from how the school strives to fulfill the rights of each student indiscriminately, such as the construction of places of worship, school medical rooms for religious essentials, as well as accommodating the talents and interests of the students through curricular and extracurricular activities.

From the three previous studies, which have been explained above, it can be said that the important point for creating religious harmony in the school environment is the school itself. This means that schools become facilitators to build religious harmony in schools. Through the activities carried out by the school, it is expected that religious harmony can be created. It is irrefutable that there are indeed several obstacles to the creation of religious harmony in schools, such as the abyss of radicalism among the students caused by the increasingly easy access to information. Yudi Hartono (in Amin, 2018) said that basically, multicultural education is education that respects differences. The meaning of multicultural here does not only refer to ethnic differences. It also refers to the religious differences of each adherent. In addition, another point and the most important of the three studies is that schools, which are educational institutions, do not only act as a place to discover “values”. Schools also have an obligation to maintain culture and religious harmony. This is similar to the research we conducted at the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School, such as the composition of students from different backgrounds and how the school executes the preservation of local culture, in this case in Alor.

In theory, talking about multicultural education means talking about how to conceptualize an education that is friendly to all differences. Musa Asy’arie (in Amin, 2018: 28) explains that multicultural education is a process in which a tolerant, sincere, and respectful

way of life is implemented and lived in a pluralistic society. The purpose of cultural education itself is to provide an understanding of acceptance of social differences, especially religion, race, culture, and gender to create peace and tranquility and eliminate discrimination, negative stigma, and horizontal conflicts (Nanggala, 2020). Another opinion regarding the meaning of multicultural education is conveyed by Banks who states that multicultural education is a set of beliefs and explanations that examines and assesses the importance of cultural and ethnic diversity in shaping lifestyles, social experiences, personal identity, educational opportunities for individuals, groups, and countries (Najmina, 2018). After the existence of multicultural education, it is expected that the new generations will be tolerant, able to maintain religious harmony and create harmonization between religious communities.

This study aims to determine the role of the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School in maintaining and instilling the values of religious harmony in its students. The considerations and activities executed by the school that have an impact on the creation of the values of religious harmony among students are one of the important components that will be discussed in this research. In the introduction, it will be explained how population growth and the existence of increasingly rapid information technology raise a concern about the loss of the values of religious harmony in Alor. Therefore, there is a need to uncover a concrete solution to handle the problem properly. In the method sub-section, there will explanation of the type of methods used in the research and how the researchers collected data. In the results and discussion sub-section, an overview of religious harmony in Alor Regency will elaborate a brief profile of the school, school activities, and the supporting factors for religious harmony.

METHODS

The method used in this research was qualitative and a descriptive analysis approach was administered to analyze the data. Interviews, documentation, and a literature study were conducted for the data collection. The selection of qualitative as a research method aimed to describe people's behavior, events in the field, and certain activities in detail and depth. The main sources that the researchers used were interviews with the teachers and principals of the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School, the administrators of the Foundation, as well as field documentation at the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School. The secondary sources used were scientific journals and books related to the research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. A Brief Overview of Religious Harmony in Alor

Administratively, Alor is an area that is included in the province of East Nusa Tenggara. Alor Regency is an area in the north of Timor Island. The population is dominated by three religions: Christian (68.05%), Islam (28.79%), and Catholic (3.09%). Whereas, Hindu/Buddhist is 0.06%. Furthermore, Alor also consists of many ethnic groups varying from immigrants such as Javanese, Bugis, Balinese, etc.

According to Klamer (in Sulistyono, 2022), the ancestors of the Alor people came from western lands and came there at least 500 thousand years ago. The next development is the increase in the population of Alor mostly caused by trade and marriage. At first, the people of Alor were adherents of animism and dynamism. However, over time, the arrival of traders from Ternate brought Islam there. When the Dutch came to Alor officially around 1908, the coastal people were appointed as kings by the Dutch East Indies government to control the interiors (Du Bois, 1944: 16). The arrival of the Dutch brought along missionaries who would later spread Christianity.

As already mentioned, Islam came to Alor and was brought by the Ternate people who traded there. In Alor and Pantar, there are five Muslim villages: Alor Besar, Pandai, Baranusa, Bakalang, and Lerabing, which are close to each other (Rodemeier, 2010). These villages are located in coastal areas. As expected, the beach was a bustling area visited by traders and became a place of trade. Those who had lived there for a long time were married to the natives and spread Islam. Initially, the arrival of Islam was challenging for the people of Alor and East Nusa Tenggara in general. In the early period, Islam was daunting to expand in the Lamakera, Lohayong, Labala, Kedang, or Ende areas (on Flores Island), Kupang (on Timor Island), Kalabahi (on Alor Island), as well as on the islands of Sumba and Rote (Kasim, 2018).

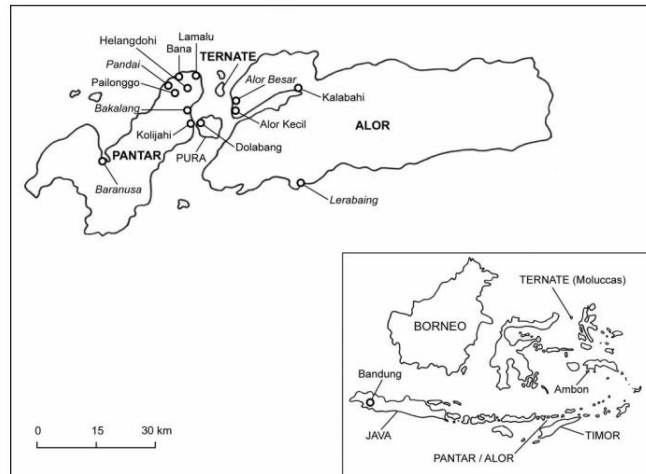


Figure 1. Map of Alor and Pantar Islands (Source: Rodemeier, 2010)

Christianity came along with the *zending* Dutch who did have a mission to spread Christianity. Christianization in Alor was brought about by the *Nederlandsch Zendeling Genootschap* (NZG). In 1916, the spread of Christianity in Alor was embarked, and by 1938 there were 66,850 people from Alor and Pantar who were Christians (Th van den End, 2008). After the independence, in 1947, the congregations became independent and built the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor (GMIT). Christianity continues to grow until now and becomes the majority of Alor people.

The evolvement of Hinduism and Buddhism in Alor is not easy to uncover in terms of the time of arrival and who brought them. According to one of our resources, who is Hindu, it was very arduous to find Hindus when he first went to Alor in the mid-1980s. With the growing number of migrations, many Balinese Hindus lived and settled in Alor. Most of them came from the police agency on duty from Bali to Denpasar. Meanwhile, Hinduism was very arduous to expand in Alor because many Hindu police officers from Bali were feeling unsettled and after two years of staying there, they returned to Bali. Even so, there is a place of worship for Hindus in Alor named Pura Dharma Giri Alor which is located close to Kalabahi.

Most of Alor people are Protestantism and Islam. The two adherents of these religions interact with each other creating religious harmony. In Alor, it is very easy to find one family consisting of Christians and Muslims at the same time, for example, a family consisting of a Christian older brother and a Muslim younger brother. When religious differences are not a big issue in the family, the kinship system has an important role in this.

There are factors why there are religious differences even within the same family. Marriage is the most common reason why there are religious differences in one family. In the Alor community system, it is women who must follow the religion of their husbands. If the husband is Christian and the wife is Muslim, then the wife must convert to Christianity. Even so, sometimes, there are reasons the rule does not apply, being the strongest reason is economic factors. If the husband is a Christian and the wife is a Muslim who is economically more secure than her husband, then usually the husband will be the one who convert to Islam, and vice versa.

In Alor, religious conversion is not an issue since there is local wisdom that becomes the determining factor. One of this local wisdom is the mythology of mountains and beaches. The mythology refers to the pattern of settlements for the Alor people: Mountains for Christians, and Beaches for Muslims. Mountains and beaches are likened to a single unit on the island of Alor. There is no specific date marking the first appearance of the mythology. It is passed down from parents to their children. One of our resources, Mr. Y, said that the mountains and beaches are symbols of the Alor people’s brotherhood.

“Back when there was danger, an attack from outside, brothers and sisters would protect each other. The younger siblings were told to climb the mountain and the older ones who protected their younger siblings would be going to the beach. If someone wanted to harm the younger siblings, then the attacker must step over the corpse of their older siblings who were on the beach. The younger ones would prepare their older siblings’ supplies.”
 (Pak Y, personal communication, August 2022).

Another example of religious harmony in Alor can be seen in how these two religious communities help each other in the construction of worship places. In Lawahing, a church was built with assistance from Muslims from the Tinahing Mosque and the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor (GMIT) Buta, Lawahing Village, Kabola District (radarntt.com, 26 July 2020). In addition, there is the Ismail Church in Ilawe which was built on the initiative of Muslims. The church is adjacent to the Ishak Mosque which is still in the same village.



Ismail Church in Ilawe. (Personal documentation, August 3, 2022).

2. The Importance of Maintaining Religious Harmony in Alor

2.1 Brief Profile and State of the School

The Cermin Multicultural Elementary School was established in 2016. This school is owned by a Christian Foundation called the Bonet Pinguwir Foundation. The name of the Foundation is taken from the local language. Bonet, taken from the Dawan language, Timor, means dance. As for Pinguwir, which is taken from the Bajar language, Flore, it means happy. When combined, the name of the foundation means a happy dance. The dance symbolizes brotherhood while the happy part means fun. Thus, what the foundation wants to achieve is to knit the ties of brotherhood with happiness. The Cermin Multicultural Elementary School is located on Dahlia Steet No. 15 Mata Air, Kalabahi City, Alor Regency.

At the front of the school, there is a school sign that stands firmly and is guarded safely by a fence made of bamboo. When entering the school through the fence, there will be a view of the children playing in the schoolyard. Some were running here and there, some were playing on the rides prepared by the school, some were playing hide-and-seek, and some were playing ball. Compared to other elementary schools in Kalabahi, the school was simpler. There are not many classrooms there, but sufficient to accommodate students from grades one to six. Next to a classroom, there is a library adjacent to the teacher's room.

The library stores books that can be accessed by students during recess. The lessons start at 7 and end at 12.

The school has a vision, mission, and educational goals. The following are the vision, mission, and goals of education (quoted from school documents):

Education Unit Vision

“Building a Leading Educational Institution in the Form of Multicultural Character, Intelligent and Faithful, Global Insight and Acting Locally”

Mission

1. Guiding Students to Have Multicultural Values and Faith, Responsibility, and Independence.
2. Educating Students to Have Academic Ability, Creative and Critical Thinking
3. Growing and Developing Clean, Orderly, and Healthy Living Habits

Purpose of Education Unit

1. Improving learning mastery through student achievement of minimum completeness criteria in all school subjects
2. Developing student performance/appearance in each learning process with a group or individual approach
3. Increasing the frequency and quality of exercise to cultivate positive and meaningful speech, attitude, and appearance habits
4. Developing teacher skills in innovating learning methods and media in all subjects
5. Improving students’ communication skills using varied and innovative learning methods and media
6. Evaluating learning through the application of objective and reliable evaluation systems and techniques
7. Improving practical exercises for students in communicating both in academic matters and in non-academic matters
8. Increasing independence in managing learning aspects in all subjects
9. Increasing the frequency and quality of student leadership exercises through the application of learning methods, assignments, and exercises in extra-curricular activities.

10. Increasing the participation of parents and the community through school committees in planning, implementing, and evaluating school activities
11. Celebrating the differences among all components of the school including parents and society
12. Improving the quality of planning, organizing, monitoring, and evaluating school programs.
13. Developing school leadership through the implementation of the following functions: leadership and team development, team member motivation, time management and priorities, encouraging team development through effective delegation, increasing team effectiveness at team meetings, managing conflict successfully, management review leadership, training for team performance better culture and action research among teams.

2.2 Humanism in Cultivating the Values of Religious Harmony

“In the classroom, we have emphasized that we are created equal. Even though we come from different diversity, we are still the same as human beings with the same rights regardless of religion and others, we still play together in class and do group work together.” (Mrs. M (32 years old), personal communication, August 2022).

That is a quote we derived from an interview with Ms. M, the principal of the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School. The quote illustrates how the school tries hard to instill in its students to love and care for each other because basically everything is God’s creation. The composition of the students consists of several ethnicities and religions. Some students come from Chinese, Javanese, Pura, Pantar, Kabola, Rote, and Sabu ethnic. When viewed from the religious aspect, the school community consists of Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, and Protestants. Although the number of students from Protestant and other religions is not balanced, this does not prevent them from making friends with each other.

In the friendship of youngsters, it is normal to have small arguments, because they are still young. The point is, does the argument lead to SARA? According to the narrative given by Ms. M, throughout her service there, no argument has led to SARA (Ms. M (32 years), personal communication, August 2022). This happens because the school has provided an understanding that all students are the same even though they may come from different religions or ethnicities. Moreover, the punishment system

offered by the school is enough to make the students never draw on SARA in any of their conflicts.

The punishment system never uses violence. In the beginning, students will be allowed to agree with the teachers about what consequences will be taken if students make mistakes. It educates the students who want to apologize and forgive. In other schools, sometimes, students who are rather slow learners will be scolded by the teachers, however, that doesn't apply here in the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School. When the students are lacking in a lesson, the teacher will do more introspection and try to find solutions.

Not only students are taught to forgive each other and be patient, but also their parents are fostered. Every three months, the school holds a parent day where teachers will be met with the parents. The purpose of the event is to guide the parents to educate their children without violence. According to Mr. F, the purpose of the event is to change the parents' mindset so that they no longer use violence when educating their children to instill the characteristics of being gentle and having a good personality.

Another way of indoctrinating the values of religious harmony is at the beginning of the lesson which is usually initiated with a prayer. The different thing from other schools is that the prayer is general and said in English. It is intended that students do not discriminate against each other. In addition, the school also supports a financing system based on the economic status of the student's parents. Even more, financially stable parents will provide financial support to students whose parents are less stable financially. Although at the beginning there were a few protests because it was considered discriminatory, it was successfully quelled by the school by asking for the parent's understanding.

2.3 Incorporating Local Elements in Classroom Learning

As has been mentioned a little earlier, Alor people teach their children the mythology of mountain and beach mythology. At school, the teachers also teach this to their students. The goal is to introduce the mythology to not only students from Alor but also those who come from other ethnicities and religions. This is very important to be taught because those whose parents are immigrants have no idea of what the mythology is.

From that, it is expected that religious harmony can be preserved, thus there is a need to spread the local values in daily learning.

Cultural preservation is indeed one of the things that must be done amid modernization which may eliminate many local identities. In daily learning, students at the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School are taught to preserve their local language, so that the next generation can sustain the language. However, in everyday life, Alor people usually speak in Indonesian. The use of regional languages is usually for communicating within certain communities. Moreover, students are taught to sing folk songs after singing Indonesia Raya. It is expected that they can preserve the existing culture.

Another way used by the school to introduce and preserve local culture to their students is by doing field trips to weaving workshops. Alor is indeed very famous for its woven fabrics which is a special attraction for tourists. Woven fabrics in Alor are known to have beautiful patterns and have their own meaning. Therefore, students are introduced to Alor woven fabrics. In addition, on the field trip, they were also taught how to make woven fabrics. Therefore, students know the process of making woven fabrics from unfinished materials into the final products. Learning about locality is included in the PLSBD (Introduction to the Socio-Cultural Environment) subject.

2.4 “Celebrating Togetherness”

One of the interesting things about this school is their program, which they often practice called “celebrating togetherness”. The program is a school effort to instill the values of religious harmony in its students. This is based on the differences in religions of the students. The students are invited to see from various perspectives regarding religious differences. Not only students but their parents are also invited to celebrate this togetherness.

“We introduce religious diversity through events held at schools, we celebrate diversity. So, for example, Christmas means that we celebrate it including all students regardless of their religion. Then there is Islam. When Eid Al-Fitr we celebrate Halal bi Halal. That day we all have Muslim nuances. Then, we always involve students in every process, so when we celebrate diversity, it is them who become Master of Ceremony. Then, they also show values that they can describe through short fragments or dances that can show that diversity, but there is unity in it, for example, we had Halal bi Halal held in a city park. We gave Muslim children the opportunity to recite prayers, then we involved other children who sang songs with Muslim nuances. So, everything does involve children with their diversity. We are grateful because here, they don’t point out the finger “you are this religion, you can’t be friends with this”.

It's not like that, but everything is in unity, everyone is playing together. It is manifested in daily processes". (Ms. M (32 years old), personal communication, August 2022).

If the event were to be held in Java, it might cause some problems. However, in Alor, it is not a matter. Two main factors allow it to happen. The first reason is that the school's communication pattern with the parents is very good. As already mentioned, once every three months, there is a parent day event. Second, the culture in Alor allows such things to become commonplace. Several religious activities in Alor also involve representatives from other religions to participate in these activities. For example, when the 2022 hajj returned home, not only Muslims came to welcome them, but also representatives from Hindus, Christians, and Catholics. Another example is when there is a church construction, then the Muslims will help, whether it is in the form of energy, financial, consumption, or building materials. Thus, the school's "celebrating togetherness" activity is a small part of what has often been practiced in Alor.

CONCLUSION

Alor is one of the areas in East Nusa Tenggara. On top of being known for its natural beauty, it is also known for its beautiful religious harmony. One of the schools that caught our attention while conducting research in Alor was the Cermin Multicultural Elementary School. Amid concerns about the loss of religious harmony and their identity caused by population growth and modernization, they attempt to keep instilling the values of religious harmony and preserving local identity through their activities. Activities such as celebrating diversity, field trips, parent day, etc. are a form of the school's concern to continue to maintain and preserve the values of religious harmony so that it can be benefited from in the future.

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