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Managing Religious Harmony: Hoaxes, Dialogue, and Conflict Resolution in Tanjung Balai, Indonesia: The Case of Meiliana

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Abstract

This study investigates the breakdown of religious harmony in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra, Indonesia, focusing on the widely publicised case known as the Meiliana tragedy, in which a non-Muslim woman was imprisoned for protesting the volume of a mosque's loudspeaker. Employing qualitative methods and a case study approach, the research gathers data through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal that diversity, when not carefully managed, can become a source of tension and conflict among local communities. The study confirms that the spread of hoaxes and misinformation significantly contributed to the escalation of the conflict. The lack of effective conflict management further intensified social unrest. To address such challenges, the study underscores the importance of honest and inclusive interfaith dialogue, policy frameworks that promote mutual understanding, and empowering local communities to take an active role in conflict resolution. The role of the state should be that of a facilitator and mediator in maintaining social and religious cohesion.

Keywords: *religious harmony, hoax, dialogue, conflict resolution.*

Introduction

Religious conflict is a recurrent challenge in pluralistic societies.

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According to Panggabean and Fauzi (2014), sectarian community groups are often the primary instigators of conflict, typically driven by social jealousy that escalates into acts of anarchy. Such acts may include, among other things, the destruction of houses of worship. Similarly, Lukito (2016) demonstrates that the broader project of Islamization can also give rise to anarchic outcomes. He identifies three contributing factors: first, the interpretation of Islamic law as a constitutional standard and aspiration; second, its function as a source of substantive law; and third, the implementation of international private law regulations that reinforce such frameworks.

In recent years, conflicts in the name of religion have intensified in Indonesia. While the causes are diverse, a significant contributing factor is the growing intolerance among followers of different religions. Intolerance may manifest in ideological, instrumental, or symbolic forms (Azca et al., 2019; Hicks, 2014), often stemming from misinterpretations of religious teachings and the practices of others. As such, ideological rigidity and misperceptions can serve as primary catalysts for the escalation of religious intolerance and conflict (Mohd Nor et al., 2018).

A narrow understanding of religious teachings can trigger conflict and anarchy. The case at hand is the tragedy that occurred in Tanjung Balai—a small town in North Sumatra. It was triggered by a narrow interpretation of religious teachings and practices. This conflict has caused trauma among worshippers in houses of worship. Many people were disturbed by the Muslim call to prayer broadcast on loudspeakers, which led to the imprisonment of some protesters.

This study aims to examine this phenomenon from a different perspective. Using a case study approach, the researchers seek to explore the dynamics of differing belief systems within society. The motives, events, and underlying purposes are among the key questions addressed. Therefore, it is important to investigate the existing phenomena in greater depth.

Methods

This case study seeks to investigate the diverse views within the community as part of the problem statement. Employing a qualitative approach, the study relies on observation, interviews, and analysis of written documents. The methodology is both descriptive and analytical, aiming to explore varying perspectives (Moradi et al., 2014). In-depth interviews were conducted to gather detailed insights from the study's participants.

The subjects of this study are religious leaders (Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist) and government officials (Ministry of Religious Affairs, Local Government, and Police) in the Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra region. Each figure from this group will be selected as a subject of study. In addition, written documents are used to support and strengthen the data gathered, providing key information relevant to the study's focus. The observation method is also employed to directly assess the current state of religious harmony in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra.

Results

Demographically, the Tanjung Balai is about 60.52 square kilometers. It can be classified as a plural town both in its religious adherents and ethnicity. Tanjung Balai is located along the Asahan River and serves as a strategic trading centre. Historically, the region developed as a hub of commerce due to its advantageous coastal position on the eastern side of Sumatra. It is situated approximately 186 kilometres from Medan and can be reached in about five hours by train. The population is predominantly Muslim (85.14%), followed by Christian Protestants (8.11%), Buddhists (5.70%), Catholics (1.01%), Hindus (0.02%), and adherents of Confucianism (0.02%). Ethnically, the majority of residents are Malays, along with significant communities of Batak, Javanese, Chinese, and Indian origin.

As of 2019, the population of Tanjung Balai was 169,627, comprising 84,476 males and 85,151 females. Tanjung Balai is a small town consisting of six sub-districts, with the population relatively evenly distributed across them. Table 1 presents the population distribution in Tanjung Balai.

Table 1. Tanjung Balai population in 2019.

No	Sub-district	Total
1	Teluknibung	40,802
2	Datuk Bandar	38,979
3	Datuk Bandar Timur	28,942
4	Sei Tualang Raso	23,712
5	Tanjung Balai Selatan	20,330
6	Tanjung Balai Utara	16,862
Total		169,627

Source: Sub-district Documentation of Tanjung Balai, 2019.

Tanjung Balai residents generally possess a moderate level of education. On average, individuals aged 20 and above have completed high school. The city hosts a range of educational institutions, from early childhood centres to higher education facilities. Schools are operated by both the government (public schools) and private institutions, covering all levels from elementary to senior high school. Various religious organisations also play a significant role in running schools in the region. These include Islamic organisations such as al-Wasliyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (more conservative), Muhammadiyah (more modernist), as well as Christian foundations. The advancement of educational institutions in Tanjung Balai can be attributed to strong community support. Furthermore, the local population demonstrates a high level of motivation in pursuing quality education.

Religiously, the people of Tanjung Balai can be considered devout due to their consistent observance of religious practices. From early childhood, individuals—particularly Muslims—are exposed to religious teachings and acts of worship. These teachings are imparted not only within the home but also through schools and community-based programmes. Children are raised in a religious environment supported by both formal and non-formal education. Religious sermons, study circles, rituals, and educational activities are regularly held in mosques throughout the Tanjung Balai region. Instruction in Islamic teachings for children typically takes place in the evenings and after sunset. Additionally, many clerics conduct Qur'an recitation lessons for children in their homes. Formal Islamic education is also widely available through dedicated institutions such as pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), as well as madrasah at the elementary (ibtidaiyah), junior high (tsanawiyah), and senior high (aliyah) levels, along with Islamic higher education institutions.

The broadening of Islamic learning in Tanjung Balai has contributed to the deepening and intensification of religious beliefs and practices, while also fostering mutual respect amidst religious and cultural differences. Various Islamic institutions—such as religious sermons, pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), and Qur'an learning centres in mosques—play a vital role in shaping the community's religious observance. Tanjung Balai has emerged as a centre for religious education, where religious harmony and tolerance are values shared among its diverse community members.

People are not easily provoked, owing to a deeper understanding of religious teachings. Religious leaders consistently engage in dialogue and

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communication to prevent the emergence of suspicion and conflict within the community. The role of religious organisations in this context is crucial for reinforcing tolerance and harmony. Many of their leaders are committed to fostering more active and sustained interfaith dialogue to strengthen mutual understanding and relationships.

The emergence of intolerant actions toward other groups—whether due to political differences, beliefs, ethnicity, or cultural backgrounds—has become increasingly prevalent in society. Such intolerance has led to disharmony and, in some cases, outright conflict among diverse communities. A notable example is the destruction of a Buddhist temple in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra, by a group of Muslims in retaliation for a protest by a woman named Meiliana, who is of Chinese descent. This act of intolerance ultimately led to Meiliana's imprisonment.

Up until now, the people of Tanjung Balai have lived in harmony despite their differences. Islam, as the majority religion, has maintained peaceful relations with minority faiths. In addition to Islam, the community includes adherents of Christianity, Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Followers of these religions have shown mutual respect and engaged in effective communication. Tolerance and harmony were well established in the area prior to the incident, largely due to this effective communication and mutual respect within the pluralistic society.

The 2016 Tanjung Balai riot, triggered by Meiliana's protest against the volume of the call to prayer from the al Makshum Mosque near her home, was truly unfortunate. What began as a seemingly ordinary complaint escalated when misinformation, hate speech, and hoaxes spread widely. This incomplete and distorted news fueled anger and emotional reactions toward Meiliana, ultimately damaging the long-standing tolerance and harmony in the community. It is essential for every sincere religious group to exercise restraint and respect others, as these are the keys to strengthening social harmony (Siregar, 2019).

Cases of intolerance in various regions require careful attention because what initially seems ordinary can quickly escalate into a crisis once elements of provocation are introduced, especially in situations involving race and inter-religious groups (*Suku, Agama, Ras, dan Antar golongan*). If not addressed promptly and appropriately, such issues can become a "time bomb" that threatens the spirit of nationalism and national unity. Similarly, the narrow and subjective understanding of "Jihad" by terrorists, who often

act in the name of religion, poses a serious challenge to achieving social harmony. In reality, Islamic values strongly uphold commitments to harmony, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence (Makin, 2017).

Indeed, the pluralistic culture of the Indonesian people is widely recognized for its tolerance, politeness, and respect for differences. The willingness to honor diversity is a noble cultural trait. A society that values such cultural principles is less likely to fall into conflict, as diversity is seen as a beauty to be preserved for the enrichment of a cultured community. Culture encompasses everything created by human intellect. Humans and culture are inseparable, existing in an intertwined relationship. Culture cannot exist without society, and no group of people—regardless of how isolated or friendly their lives—lives without culture. All human groups possess culture, differing only in their levels and standards of cultural development (Ali, 2011; Kurniawati et al., 2018; Pribadi, 2019).

When examining the teachings of each religion in Indonesia—Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—all advocate for harmony. No religion promotes conflict. However, in practice, internal conflicts among followers sometimes occur, often driven by uncontrolled emotions. To prevent such conflicts, it is essential for the government and religious leaders to continuously nurture and foster harmonious religious life (Halperin, 2014; Sidik, 2018).

The portrait of religious harmony in Tanjung Balai reflects the character of the Malay community, the dominant ethnic group in the area. The Malay community is renowned for its hospitality, honesty, and friendliness toward others. Alongside these warm traditions, the Malay people in Tanjung Balai are also known for their devout religious practice of Islam. This character serves as an asset in efforts to strengthen tolerance and harmony in the region. Similarly, the Javanese and Batak communities, which form significant portions of the population, demonstrate strong commitments to fostering tolerance and harmony. The rich cultural heritage of each ethnic group in Tanjung Balai acts as a unifying bond that deepens and sustains this harmony.

Discussion

Dialogues among religious leaders have long been facilitated by the government, including in Tanjung Balai. Many religious figures in the area are committed to fostering harmony. One effective way to strengthen

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religious harmony is through ongoing dialogue among these leaders, which promotes understanding, respect, and the prevention of potential conflicts. According to Ritonga:

“The people of Tanjung Balai maintain religious harmony through a forum dedicated to interfaith dialogue. Many religious leaders engage in communication to address and overcome potential conflicts by sustaining continuous cooperation” (Ritonga, 2019).

Habib's statement illustrates that interreligious dialogue has taken place among religious groups in Tanjung Balai. This represents a constructive step toward preventing religious conflict. Sustained dialogue can foster a peaceful and tolerant environment by minimising suspicion and hostility rooted in religious differences. When religious communities engage in sincere and continuous dialogue, mutual understanding is enhanced, and unwarranted fears are diminished. Dialogue also nurtures respect for others, regardless of differing beliefs. However, the breakdown of interreligious communication often stems from excessive egocentrism and the tendency to view dialogue partners as deviants. If dialogue is instead approached as a collaborative effort to preserve national unity, it holds the potential to yield positive and lasting outcomes.

Dialogue among religious adherents is essential for fostering peace within society. In the context of Tanjung Balai, it serves as a vital mechanism for mitigating social and religious tensions. As Sirait (2019) asserts, *“the solution to their problems lies in maintaining continuous religious harmony among religionists and the broader community.”* Implementing such dialogues at the village level is particularly important, as it helps cultivate tolerance and mutual understanding from the grassroots.

Meanwhile, mass media can enhance public understanding when managed professionally. It disseminates information that is honest and beneficial (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). When mass media and social media are used to propagate hoaxes, they can negatively impact people's lives (Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019). As a result, the case of Meiliana in Tanjung Balai occurred due to the spread of a hoax.

The Meiliana tragedy in Tanjung Balai was not only due to the protest against the *azān* (call to prayer) but was also triggered by individuals spreading hoaxes in the media, which ultimately led to a riot. There was incomplete news, which incited mass anger toward Meiliana. The hoax

stemmed from a lack of accurate reporting—what began as a simple complaint about the volume of the *azān* near her home was exaggerated on social media, falsely portraying her as committing religious blasphemy.

“The 2016 Tanjung Balai riot was influenced by the spread of hoaxes on social media. The case of Meiliana escalated when false and distorted news about the incident circulated. It was wrongly reported that a muezzin had been jailed, which fueled tensions. As a result, mobs from both the Muslim and Chinese communities became angry, leading to disruptions in economic activities. The economic advancement of the Chinese community compared to local Muslims further contributed to tensions. The spread of misleading news on social media unsettled the local population, ultimately sparking mass unrest. This led to riots in Tanjung Balai, where Buddhist temples were vandalized and set on fire”(Nasution, 2019).

Kamaluddin's statement indicates that Meiliana herself was not at fault in the case. Instead, the tragedy was triggered by the spread of hoaxes and expressions of hatred. False news circulated on social media, wrongly accusing Meiliana of denouncing religion. This accusation was excessive and untrue, as her actions were merely a protest against the volume of the *azān* (call to prayer). Her concern was reasonable, as she had an infant who was disturbed by the early morning call while still sleeping. The protest should have been addressed with a clear mind, free from religious hostility. However, when the issue was framed as blasphemy, it became extremely dangerous.

When social media users assume the role of reporters by spreading incorrect news, people's lives are put at risk. This aligns with Siregar's statement:

“The initial riots in Tanjung Balai, including the attack on Al-Makshum Mosque, were fueled by the spread of fake news. When individuals act as journalists without proper oversight and social media allows unfiltered information to spread rapidly, misinformation reaches the masses uncontrollably. This led to riots, as the news provoked anger among sensitive individuals. Had Meiliana's case not been sensationalized negatively—without a deeper understanding of the situation—the incident could have been avoided” (Siregar, 2019).

If the news had spread among educated individuals, there would have been

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efforts to counter and filter hoax news within society, reducing its negative impact. False news can be prevented through messages that promote harmony without contradicting religious values. Everyone should uphold a commitment to honesty when sharing information, as the negative impact of spreading hoaxes is highly detrimental to social life (Salam, 2018).

Thus, Meiliana's case can be examined from multiple perspectives, including a cultural lens grounded in the paradigm of multiculturalism—a discourse promoted by government policy. In essence, culture is formed to uphold human values that support harmonious coexistence. Human beings and culture are inseparable, as they are integral components of social life (Mudji & et al., 2007, p. 66).

In this regard, Williams outlined culture in three dimensions within the framework of cultural studies: first, as the development of intellectual, spiritual, and individual values, both personal and communal; second, as the mapping of intellectual and artistic activities into tangible cultural products such as film, architecture, and theatre—commonly viewed through the lens of art; and third, as a description of the totality of people's ways of life, beliefs, and everyday practices (Williams, 2011).

Tariq and Pnina (1997) stated that religious harmony can be fostered through the adoption of multiculturalism, a concept that emphasises living peacefully within a pluralistic society. (Tariq & Pnina, 1997). According to Arbuckle (1995), multiculturalism not only encourages but also enhances awareness in people's lives. His study illustrates a form of inculturation involving diverse cultures, which is also referred to as acculturation—a process that evolves within societies where multiculturalism is implemented (Ardbuckle, 1995).

The principles of multiculturalism could certainly be applied in Tanjung Balai. In the case of Meiliana, religious harmony had not been effectively fostered. Those involved in the incident lacked sufficient awareness of the values of diversity. Therefore, it is more appropriate to suggest that Meiliana's tragedy could have been prevented through the implementation of stronger policies and regulations at the local level. The values of harmony should be reflected in everyday social interactions. At the same time, the community must actively reject behaviours that incite unrest and contribute to social disorder.

Conclusion

The religious harmony in Tanjung Balai serves as a valuable lesson. Conflicts involving adherents of different religions require serious attention from various stakeholders, as religion can be a trigger for disputes in different regions of North Sumatra. This tragedy stands as a stark reminder that spreading false and hoax news can lead to uncontrolled and unlawful actions. Therefore, upholding journalistic principles is crucial to ensuring accurate and responsible reporting.

On the other hand, policies promoting multicultural understanding should not remain theoretical; they must be implemented in practice. Communities in Tanjung Balai and beyond should engage in open and honest discussions on religious harmony. This is particularly vital in regions where tensions and suspicions make them highly vulnerable to conflict. Moreover, religion in Indonesia is not only seen as a set of beliefs but also as a way of life, a source of guidance, and a framework for worship, embraced by a society known for its religiosity and piety.

Author Contributions:

Daulay: Conceptualization, design, methodology, drafting manuscript, and writing.

Khuluq: Methodology.

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