



Muslim Minority and Religious Freedom in Rantepao City, North Toraja Regency

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Abstract

This anthropological study examines the experiences of the Muslim minority in Rantepao City, North Toraja Regency, focusing on religious freedom and interfaith dynamics. In a predominantly Christian region, the Muslim community navigates its religious identity within a deeply rooted Torajan cultural landscape. Through ethnographic methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, this research explores how minority Muslims practice their faith, access public space, and maintain communal harmony. The findings reveal that religious freedom in Rantepao is negotiated through a balance of cultural assimilation and religious preservation. While formal rights are generally respected, subtle social boundaries exist, particularly regarding religious expression and ritual intersections with traditional Torajan customs (Aluk To Dolo). This study highlights the resilience of the Muslim minority and demonstrates how local cultural mechanisms facilitate daily coexistence, offering crucial insights into religious tolerance and minority-majority relations in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords: Muslim minority, religious freedom, anthropology, Rantepao, Toraja culture.

INTRODUCTION

Freedom of religion is a fundamental right universally recognized in various international legal instruments. Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Furthermore, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the United Nations (UN), affirms that no individual should face discrimination based on their religion (Yunazwardi & Nabila, 2021). However, in practice, religious minorities in many countries continue to face challenges in exercising religious freedom. Some nations even maintain regulations that indirectly restrict the rights of minority groups to worship, establish places of worship, or participate in social life. Instances of discrimination against religious minorities occur frequently across the globe, demonstrating that challenges to religious freedom remain a serious global issue. Indonesia, a country with a Muslim majority, has a constitution that guarantees religious freedom for all its citizens. Article 28E, paragraph (1), and Article 29, paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution affirm that the state guarantees the freedom of every resident to embrace a religion and worship according to their respective beliefs (Utama & Toni, 2019). Additionally, Law Number 39 of 1999 concerning Human Rights reinforces the government's commitment to protecting the right to religious freedom (Mubaroq, 2024). Although religious freedom is legally guaranteed, the reality on the ground shows that religious minority groups often face challenges in practicing their faith. Incidents involving opposition to the construction of places of worship, discrimination in social life, and social pressure against minority groups continue to occur in certain regions. This indicates a gap between existing regulations and their implementation within society, necessitating further study into efforts to protect religious minority groups in Indonesia.

Fundamentally, religious moderation is a mindset or attitude that emphasizes understanding, tolerance, and balance in the observance of religious practices. Etymologically, the term derives from the Latin **moderatio**, signifying a state of balance situated between excess and deficiency. Indeed, the spirit and values of religious moderation have long been present and deeply ingrained within Indonesian society. The concept of religious moderation is also inherent in the teachings of the various religions practiced in Indonesia (Kurniawan, 2023). Religious diversity within society necessitates the ability to coexist and collaborate with groups or individuals holding different beliefs. Mutual respect and regard are key to fostering the harmony required to maintain social structural integrity. By adopting an attitude of tolerance—with the clear objective of uniting people and preventing conflict among adherents of different faiths—religions must embrace approaches grounded in mutual respect, the acknowledgment of one another's existence, and cooperation (Rifki, 2021). All human activities related to religion are rooted in an inner resonance—often termed "religious emotion"—that compels individuals to engage in religious acts; consequently, religious systems within a culture invariably seek ways to sustain this religious emotion among their followers (Koentjaraningrat, 2009).

In the normative framework, freedom of religion is a fundamental right guaranteed by various legal instruments, both national and international. Ideally, every individual—including Muslim minorities—should be able to practice their faith freely and without discrimination. However, social reality presents various obstacles hindering the realization of this right, such as restrictions on the establishment of places of worship, structural discrimination, and social and

political pressures that limit religious expression. This gap between the ideal and the reality demonstrates that, despite legal guarantees, the implementation of religious freedom faces ongoing challenges. Muslim minorities frequently encounter negative stereotypes, marginalization, and even acts of intolerance that run counter to human rights principles. Intolerance arises when individuals focus solely on negative perceptions of a minority religion while ignoring or dismissing its positive aspects. Tolerance can emerge when people have the opportunity to correct previous misconceptions; this typically occurs through interpersonal contact. Such contact allows individuals to perceive positive attributes, fostering a balanced perspective and greater respect for other faiths (Susetyo, 2017). According to Pratama (2022), freedom of religion is a universal right that must be guaranteed without discrimination. In practice, however, evidence shows that Muslim minorities in certain regions still face restrictions on worship, social discrimination, and pressure from majority groups. This reality contradicts the theoretical principle that religious freedom is equally guaranteed for all individuals. If left unresolved, this phenomenon could lead to escalating social conflict, societal polarization, and the marginalization of Muslim minorities from social and political participation. Furthermore, disparities in the implementation of religious freedom can undermine the legitimacy of laws and human rights norms, ultimately threatening social harmony and national stability. Therefore, a more inclusive and justice-oriented approach is required to guarantee religious freedom for all segments of society, including Muslim minorities.

According to Sitompul and Riza (2024), Muslim minorities often face discrimination, negative stereotypes, and marginalization that can hinder their integration into society. From a legal perspective, although freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution and human rights instruments, obstacles remain in policy implementation, which tends to be biased toward the majority group.

Politically, power dynamics often influence policies regarding religious freedom, limiting the ability of minority groups to voice their rights. This imbalance has the potential to exacerbate social tensions and weaken national cohesion. If left unresolved, the consequences could include increased inter-group conflict, the erosion of pluralism, and a shrinking space for religious freedom for Muslim minorities. Therefore, in-depth study is required to understand the factors driving these issues and to identify implementable solutions for creating a more inclusive and equitable environment.

In the South Sulawesi region—specifically North Toraja Regency—religious diversity has long been an integral part of social life. Although the majority of the Toraja population is Christian, a Muslim minority has long existed and contributes to various aspects of social and economic life. Local government, religious leaders, and the community strive to foster interfaith harmony. However, Muslim minority groups still face various challenges, particularly regarding social aspects and access to places of worship. Examples include the June 2025 controversy over the construction of a *musholla* (small prayer room) in the Buntu Burake tourist area of Tana Toraja—stalled by a lack of official permits and local opposition—as well as the debate over "halal tourism" in North Toraja, which was deemed unsuitable given the prevailing social conditions in 2024. Additionally, cultural factors and a social structure dominated by local traditions can influence how minority groups practice their religion. Therefore, it is important to examine how religious freedom for Muslim minorities in this region is practiced in daily life, as well as the social dynamics that unfold amidst this diversity.

METHOD

To capture the nuanced realities of religious freedom and social integration, this study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic research design, which is central to anthropological inquiry. This method allows the researcher to immerse themselves directly within the everyday lives of the Muslim minority and Christian majority in Rantepao City. By embedding into the local socio-cultural setting, the study aims to understand the meanings, negotiations, and lived experiences of the informants regarding interfaith harmony. The fieldwork is contextualized within the urban Torajan landscape, where religious identities constantly intersect with deeply rooted traditional customs and kinship structures.

Data collection relies primarily on participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather rich, descriptive qualitative data. Through participant observation, the researcher actively engages in daily communal activities, marketplace interactions, and pivotal life-cycle rituals such as weddings, *Rambu Solo'* (funerals), and religious holiday celebrations. This is complemented by in-depth interviews with a purposively selected group of key informants, including Muslim minority leaders, Christian church figures, traditional elders (*tokoh adat*), and local residents. These dialogues focus on their perceptions of religious tolerance, shared livelihoods, and the structural mechanisms that facilitate or challenge social cohesion.

The gathered ethnographic data, consisting of detailed field notes, interview transcripts, and archival documents, are analyzed using thematic analysis through an anthropological lens. The analysis involves iterative coding to identify recurring patterns, cultural symbols, and shared narratives related to social integration and bridging social capital. By cross-examining the perspectives of both the minority and majority groups, the researcher performs data triangulation to ensure credibility and objective depth. Ultimately, this analytical process aims to provide a "thick description" of how interfaith harmony is actively constructed, maintained, and negotiated in the daily life of Rantepao City.



Gambar 1. Suasana Peribadatan Umat Islam di Toraja

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Relations between Muslims and Christians in Toraja from the Perspective of Social

The harmonious coexistence between Muslim and Christian communities in Rantepao City serves as a compelling empirical manifestation of structural functionalism within social integration theory. According to Emile Durkheim, social integration is achieved when various components of society function cohesively to maintain systemic equilibrium. In this urban landscape, the mutual commitment to peace demonstrated by both religious groups ensures that differences do not lead to societal friction. Instead, these differences are integrated into a unified social fabric where each community plays a vital role in preserving order.

From a functionalist perspective, the mutual respect exhibited during times of worship represents a profound mechanism of institutional stabilization. Society relies on the smooth operation of its cultural and religious institutions to cultivate collective consciousness. By actively protecting each other's right to worship, Muslims and Christians in Rantepao minimize social friction and create an environment of mutual trust. This structural predictability allows both groups to practice their faith without fear of marginalization, thereby reinforcing the community's overall stability.

In the realm of daily economic life, social integration shifts from abstract values to practical, organic solidarity. Durkheim argued that modern social integration relies heavily on the division of labor, where individuals depend on one another to fulfill practical needs. In Rantepao, Muslims and Christians interact daily within the local marketplace, collaborating in agriculture, trade, and various livelihood sectors. This economic interdependence transcends theological boundaries, forcing both communities to cooperate for mutual material survival and shared economic prosperity.

The phenomenon of cross-religious cooperation during rites of passage—such as weddings and funerals—can be analyzed through the lens of Robert Putnam's Social Capital Theory. Putnam distinguishes between "bonding" social capital (connections within a group) and "bridging" social capital (connections across different groups). The active participation of Muslims in Christian weddings, and vice versa, serves as a powerful form of bridging social capital. These shared celebrations construct networks of trust and reciprocity that span across religious divisions, turning diversity into a community asset.

Rituals of death, or mortuary practices, provide an even deeper look into how local culture acts as an overarching integrative umbrella. In Toraja culture, ritual events such as *Rambu Solo'* (funerals) possess massive social gravity that compels family members, regardless of their current religious affiliations, to unite. Through the lens of social integration theory, these traditional customs serve as a supreme normative framework that takes precedence over religious differences. Kinship ties (*tongkonan*) demand collective responsibility, ensuring that grieving families are supported by a unified community.

Applying Max Weber's theory of social action, the daily helpfulness observed among the residents of Rantepao represents "wertrational" (value-rational) and "affectual" actions. Rather than acting purely out of individualistic calculations, Muslims and Christians assist one another because they value harmony as an intrinsic moral good. Decades of peaceful cohabitation have socialized individuals to view interfaith cooperation as a natural, default mode of behavior. This internalization of peaceful norms transforms potentially tense intergroup relations into a highly integrated, empathetic neighborhood dynamic.

Furthermore, Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism helps explain how the micro-level interactions between these two groups foster macroeconomic and macrosocial harmony. Social integration is not merely a top-down structural imposition; it is continuously negotiated through daily gestures, language, and shared symbols of respect. When a Christian neighbor prepares halal food for a Muslim guest at a wedding, or when a Muslim youth helps secure a

church during Christmas, these actions are symbols loaded with meaning. They communicate safety, acceptance, and mutual validation, constantly reaffirming the unwritten peace contract.

This high level of social integration also acts as a robust defense mechanism against external polarizing forces, a concept known in sociology as social resilience. In pluralistic societies, external political or religious tensions can easily trigger internal conflict if local bonds are weak. However, because the integration in Rantepao is rooted in deep structural interdependence and everyday collaboration, the community possesses the cultural elasticity to absorb external shocks. Misunderstandings are quickly mediated through local cultural channels before they can escalate into communal segregation.

It is also vital to recognize that social integration in this context does not imply assimilation or the erasure of unique religious identities. Instead, it reflects a pluralistic integration model where both Muslims and Christians maintain their distinct theological boundaries while participating fully in a shared civic life. The minority Muslim population is not forced to compromise their core Islamic beliefs, nor is the majority Christian population required to dilute their practices. Both groups co-exist within a balanced ecosystem where religious freedom and social cohesion reinforce one another.

In conclusion, the peaceful, harmonious, and supportive relationship between Muslims and Christians in Rantepao City provides an exemplary model of comprehensive social integration. By blending organic solidarity in their livelihoods with bridging social capital in their cultural and life-cycle rituals, these communities have successfully aligned their religious mandates with local cultural wisdom. This dynamic demonstrates that structural harmony is fully achievable when a society prioritizes mutual respect, functional interdependence, and the sacred bonds of shared humanity over sectarian divides.

The relationship between Muslims and Christians in Rantepao City

can be seen through the forms of associative and dissociative social interactions that occur in community life. Interviews with eight informants revealed that interfaith social relations are dominated by associative interactions in the form of cooperation, accommodation, assimilation, and acculturation. Meanwhile, dissociative forms of social interaction, such as competition, controversy, disputes, and conflict, were also found, although at a lower intensity and did not escalate into open conflict.

Cooperation

Cooperation between Muslims and Christians in Rantepao City is evident in various social and community activities, such as community service, mutual cooperation, environmental activities, and involvement in religious events and other social activities. Purnadi, the mosque imam, stated that interfaith cooperation has become a deeply rooted habit in community life.

In this neighborhood, every social activity takes place, regardless of religious background. We're so used to living side by side and helping each other that cooperation feels natural and unforced." (Interview, February 4, 2026).

Sitti Jaswati, a Muslim, believes that cooperation is fostered by an awareness of the importance of living in harmony.

We realize that living side by side requires cooperation. Therefore, whenever there's a social activity, my Christian neighbors also help us, and vice versa, we also come to their aid when there's an activity. Everyone helps each other regardless of religious differences." (Interview, February 5, 2026).

Reverend Wanses Pakambuno, a church leader, emphasized that the church always encourages the congregation to collaborate across faiths.

We continue to teach the congregation to build good relationships with all parties. Cooperation with our Muslim brothers and sisters is an important part of maintaining harmony." (Interview, February 7, 2026).

Marche, a Christian, stated that cooperation has become part of the local culture.

Helping each other has become a habit. We live side by side and feel a shared responsibility to maintain harmony in our community." (Interview, February 7, 2026).

Based on the interview results, it can be concluded that cooperation between Muslims and Christians in Rantepao City is strong, natural, and sustainable, reflected in the active involvement of all residents in various social, religious, community, and traditional activities without regard to religious differences. This cooperation is formed due to a shared awareness of the importance of living in harmony, supported by local Torajan cultural values that uphold mutual cooperation, and strengthened by the role of religious leaders and local community leaders in encouraging interfaith participation. The relationships that are established are not formal or forced, but rather grow from daily habits, a sense

of togetherness, and strong social bonds, thus creating an atmosphere of social life that is harmonious, inclusive, and mutually respectful.

Accommodation

Accommodation is evident in the way the community resolves differences of opinion and social issues through dialogue, deliberation, and a family-like approach. Purnadi, the mosque's imam, stated that open communication is key to resolving differences.

If there are differences of opinion, we immediately discuss them amicably so they don't escalate into bigger problems." (Interview, February 4, 2026).

Aan, a mosque administrator, emphasized the importance of mutual respect in maintaining harmony.

Usually, we sit down together or hold meetings to discuss problems and find the best solutions for all parties. Essentially, we always strive to understand and respect each other as much as possible, so that every problem can be resolved quickly and peacefully. (Interview, February 4, 2026).

Reverend Wanes Pakambuno, a church figure, explained that the church instills the values of peace and dialogue.

We always teach our congregation to resolve problems with a cool head and tolerance, avoiding offending others and maintaining communication to avoid misunderstandings. We are also open with our Muslim neighbors here" (interview, February 7, 2026).

Marthen Panggalo, the sub-district head, emphasized that the sub-district government plays an active role in mediating conflicts.

If there are differences, we immediately facilitate dialogue so that the problem can be resolved peacefully and openly, so that all members of the community can express their concerns (interview, February 9, 2026).

Ronaldo Sarung Allo, a traditional leader, added that Torajan customs teach conflict resolution within the family.

Every problem must first be resolved through deliberation and a traditional approach before moving on to the next party." (Interview, February 9, 2026).

Based on the interview, it can be concluded that accommodation in relations between Muslims and Christians in Rantepao City is realized through a problem-solving pattern that prioritizes dialogue, deliberation, mutual respect, and a family-like approach. Any differences of opinion or social issues are not allowed to escalate into conflict, but are immediately discussed openly to find the best solution for all parties. Mutual restraint, respect for feelings, and compromise for the common good are part of the community's social culture. Furthermore, the role of religious leaders, traditional leaders, and village government is significant in facilitating communication and mediation, so that any potential conflict can be resolved peacefully. Torajan traditional values, which emphasize deliberation and togetherness, contribute to the creation of a harmonious, tolerant, and familial social atmosphere.

Assimilation

Assimilation is evident in the close, intense, and seamless social relationships between religious communities. Social interactions are intense and show no social barriers. Sitti Hawa, a Muslim, stated that social relationships are very close.

Here, we socialize freely without regard for religious differences. Because we're used to living together, we don't feel awkward around others, even though we have different beliefs. We often visit each other at various events, whether weddings, thanksgivings, or funerals. We can usually share long conversations with other residents, so we feel like we're equals, and there are no barriers." (Interview, February 5, 2026).

Marche, a Christian, stated that interfaith interaction has become a habit.

We've lived here for a long time, and we've been friends for a long time and respect each other. So, there's no barrier to communication. Whenever there's a mourning event or thanksgiving, we always provide halal food for them. We also usually work together during social activities like mutual cooperation (gotong royong). As local residents, we should greet each other as often as possible when we meet at various activities, as this fosters closer relationships and fosters mutual understanding." (Interview, February 7, 2026).

Ronaldo Sarung Allo, a traditional leader, stated that traditional values accelerate integration and harmony.

Torajan traditional values always teach brotherhood and togetherness in community life. Therefore, every activity related to tradition always strives to involve all members of the community, regardless of differences in belief, and we also align it with the teachings of each religion." (Interview, February 9, 2026).

Based on the interview results, it can be concluded that assimilation in relations between Muslims and Christians in Rantepao City is reflected in the establishment of close, intense, and natural social relationships without any social barriers. Daily interactions are not limited by religious differences, but are based on a sense of brotherhood, mutual respect, and the habit of living side by side. The closeness of this relationship is seen in various social activities, such as visiting each other, greeting each other, in this relationship also gives rise to the emergence of new cultures such as the term "Toraja Islam" and usually this is where every traditional activity is adapted to Islamic teachings such as in the Rambu Solo' event carried out by the Muslim community, usually such as replacing several rituals such as the Ma'badong Dance which is replaced with Zikir activities, not sacrificing animals such as pigs which are generally used in the majority of Rambu Solo' activities and also of course the funeral procession uses procedures according to Islamic teachings. The high intensity of social gatherings also helps strengthen the sense of togetherness and mutual understanding between residents. In addition, Toraja traditional values that emphasize brotherhood and togetherness play an important role in accelerating the process of social integration, thus creating a harmonious, open, and inclusive community life.

Acculturation

Acculturation is evident in the fusion of Torajan traditional values with religious teachings, fostering an attitude of tolerance and togetherness. Local traditions serve as a unifying force, strengthening interfaith social relations. Ronald Sarung Allo, a traditional leader, explained that Torajan customs bind the entire community.

As we know, in Toraja, Aluk Todolo is still strongly held. Therefore, every activity related to Aluk Todolo must be in accordance with religious teachings, both Christian and Muslim. Therefore, customs play a significant role in uniting all residents, regardless of differences, especially in beliefs, for our Muslim friends." (Interview, February 9, 2026).

Purnadi, the mosque imam, stated that customs strengthen tolerance among communities.

Toraja's traditional values help us understand the importance of mutual respect, as we feel quite respected here. From my experience here, the Torajan people are always open to us, making adjustments so we can maintain our local culture. I think Torajan culture strengthens interfaith social ties." (Interview, February 4, 2026).

Siti Jaswati, a Muslim, explained that traditional activities involve the entire community.

In traditional events, we're used to helping out, and our Christian friends also know our limits. There are usually things we can't do at these events, so we feel appreciated and supported. Everyone is involved, regardless of religion." (Interview, February 5, 2026).

Reverend Wanes Pakambuno, a church leader, stated that customs serve as a unifying force.

Local cultural values here are very helpful in maintaining harmony between people of different faiths, so I think Torajan customs are very supportive of tolerance and maintaining unity in this city." (Interview, February 7, 2026).

Marche, a Christian, stated that customs teach harmonious living.

Basically, traditions and customs are central to our learning to respect each other, or sangga', within a community without any barriers. So, we learn togetherness through traditional customs." (Interview, February 7, 2026).

Based on the interview results, it can be concluded that acculturation in relations between Muslims and Christians in Rantepao City is reflected in the harmonious blend of Torajan traditional values and religious teachings, fostering attitudes of tolerance, togetherness, and mutual respect. Local traditions are not only viewed as a cultural heritage but also as an effective unifying force in strengthening cross-cultural relationships. In the context of acculturation between customs and Islamic teachings, there is the concept of a Halal Kitchen in the Rambu Tuka' and Rambu Solo' ceremonies. This practice is carried out by separating the cooking places and utensils used in each traditional activity to ensure food is free from non-halal elements. In addition, the process of slaughtering animals such as cows or buffaloes is completely handed over to the Muslim community. This proves that the involvement of all citizens in various traditional activities, without differentiating religious backgrounds, creates a space for intense and inclusive interaction.

Traditional values that emphasize brotherhood, mutual cooperation, and togetherness play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening social solidarity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the relationship between the Muslim minority and the Christian majority in Rantepao City is characterized by a high degree of social integration and functional harmony. Far from being a state of passive coexistence, interfaith relations in this urban center are actively constructed through daily interactions and a shared commitment to peace. By utilizing an anthropological lens, the research reveals that religious differences do not dictate social distance; instead, they are accommodated within a stable framework of mutual respect. Both communities have successfully fostered an environment where formal religious freedoms are preserved alongside a collective desire to maintain communal order.

The core engine driving this seamless social integration is the powerful intersection of organic economic solidarity and bridging social capital. In their daily livelihoods, Muslims and Christians depend on one another within the marketplace, transforming economic necessity into a platform for mutual trust. Furthermore, this bond is deeply reinforced by Torajan cultural mechanisms, particularly through active participation in shared life-cycle rituals such as weddings and *Rambu Solo'* (funerals). Within these cultural spaces, kinship ties (*tongkonan*) and ancestral customs take precedence over sectarian identities, acting as an overarching integrative umbrella that unites families across theological divides.

Ultimately, Rantepao serves as an exemplary empirical model of how pluralistic integration can thrive in contemporary Indonesia. The social resilience of the city enables it to absorb potential external polarizing shocks through localized communication channels and traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms. This ethnographic inquiry highlights that true harmony does not require the assimilation or erasure of minority identities, but rather the creation of a balanced ecosystem of mutual validation. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and cultural leaders, proving that when local wisdom is aligned with universal values of humanity, minority-majority dynamics can be transformed into a profound source of collective strength.

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