



## The Cosmic Character of Sumbanese Indigenous Belief (*Marapu*) to Enhance Religious Moderation

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**Abstract:** Diversity of religion, culture, and ethnicity is an undeniable reality that can potentially contribute to conflicts and divisions. In this context, religious moderation must be continuously upheld and enhanced through interfaith dialogue. However, in many regions, grassroots communities inherently live out and exercise religious moderation without formal interreligious dialogue programs. The underlying strength of naturally lived religious moderation is understood as cosmic religiosity. The cosmic religion, characterized by harmony, is the earliest layer of Indonesian culture. This research aims to analyze the cosmic character of the *Marapu* belief as an indigenous religion and its contribution towards strengthening religious moderation. Data were collected through interviews and participant observation using a qualitative research approach. The results show that (1) the cosmic character of the *Marapu* belief is uncovered through views of harmonious interconnection among the supernatural world, humans, and nature; (2) this interconnection leads to a philosophy of harmony, and *Marapu* adherents strive to live in harmonious relationships; and (3) the philosophy of harmony shapes a way of life and does not allow extreme or exclusive attitudes. *Marapu* adherents naturally live peacefully, regardless of religious, ethnic, or cultural differences.

**Key words:** Cosmic Religion; *Marapu* Belief; Philosophy of Harmony; Religious Moderation

### Introduction

This article examines the cosmic character of the *Marapu* belief as an indigenous religion and its contribution to strengthening religious moderation. As a concept, religious moderation emphasizes the idea of tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and harmony among communities with different cultural and religious backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> The peaceful coexistence of residents inhabiting the same area is essential in every country characterized by ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. However, such diversity can trigger conflicts and divisions.<sup>2</sup> In this context, a crucial need is the strengthening of religious moderation among adherents of various religions.

<sup>1</sup> W. Egginton, *In Defense of Religious Moderation* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Taufik Taufik, "Ethnocultural Empathy in A Pluralistic Society: Inter-Ethnic Relationships of Javanese and Chinese Children in Surakarta," *The Open Psychology Journal* 12, no. 1 (2019): 95–101, <https://doi.org/10.2174/1874350101912010095>.

Every religion possesses an internal strength in promoting moderation. However, major religions, specifically those emphasizing Divine Revelation, tend to uphold non-negotiable dogmatic truths. In Indonesia, this dogma can lead to the rejection of the multireligious reality despite Indonesia's explicit recognition of diversity as part of its founding principles. Rejection surfaces in the form of conflicts and violence perpetrated in the name of religion. Jonathan et al. observed that the roots of exclusivism in religious life originated primarily in the teachings of religious concept.<sup>3</sup> This attitude is reinforced by political exclusivism when the state favors a specific religion. In addition, educational schemes in schools that teach only one religion<sup>4</sup> with a rigid and closed understanding of religion, which prevents interaction with outside groups can lead to the problem of exclusivism.<sup>5</sup> Despite promoting the moderation concept in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church is still considered to practice "half-hearted inclusivism" because of the teachings that the fullness of salvation is only found in the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup> As such, eliminating the potential for exclusivism is very difficult based on Divine Revelation.

Interfaith or interreligious dialogues have been proposed as a solution to religious exclusivism. However, interfaith dialogue has been ineffective in eliminating potential interreligious conflicts. The latent threat of conflict can resurface under the influence of radical groups, such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Wahhabism.<sup>7</sup> Effective dialogue presupposes a willingness on the part of the religious communities to engage. Dialogue cannot be wholehearted, particularly when certain preachers or religious leaders encourage their followers to reject diversity without question.

Meanwhile, grassroots communities naturally maintain harmony among people of different religions and cultures in their daily lives, as they cultivate mutual respect for differences, live in a spirit of togetherness, and celebrate religious holidays of various faiths. In this context, several bombings of churches have been perpetrated by external radicals. Therefore, followers of different religions have taken the initiative to ensure security during major religious celebrations to preserve harmony jointly. For example, during Christmas 2023, an Islamic youth group (*Remaja Masjid*) from Istiqlal Mosque helped maintain security during the Mass at the Jakarta Catholic Cathedral.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, local Islamic youth assisted

<sup>3</sup> A Jonathan, P Widjaja, and F Husein, "Fostering Religious Exclusivism and Political Pluralism in Indonesia Through Interfaith-Based Student Community," *KnE Social Sciences* 3, no. 5 (May 23, 2018): 53, <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v3i5.2325>.

<sup>4</sup> Carmelo Galioto and Cristóbal Bellolio, "Towards a Reform of Religious Teaching in the Chilean School System," *International Journal of Educational Development* 100 (July 2023): 102791, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102791>.

<sup>5</sup> Rahkman Ardi and Diah Budiarti, "The Role of Religious Beliefs and Collective Narcissism in Interreligious Contact on University Students," *Heliyon* 6, no. 9 (2020): e04939, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04939>.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Nor Ichwan, "Half-Hearted Inclusivism: The Theological Doctrine of Salvation in the Document of Lumen Gentium and the Fate of Others," *Jurnal Theologia* 33, no. 2 (2022): 277–94, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2022.33.2.16654>.

<sup>7</sup> Jafar Ahmad, Hengki Firmanda, and Mahmud Hibatul Wafi, "Models and Political Attitudes of Fundamentalist Groups in Indonesian Presidential Elections," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 11, no. 2 (2023): 569–90, <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v11i2.903>; Wahyudin Hafid, "Geneologi Radikalisme Di Indonesia (Melacak Akar Sejarah Gerakan Radikal)," *Al-Tafaqquh: Journal of Islamic Law* 1, no. 1 (2020): 31, <https://doi.org/10.33096/altafaqquh.v1i1.37>.

<sup>8</sup> Vina Oktavia and Rebiyyah Salasah, "Natal di Jakarta, Remaja Masjid Istiqlal Turut Membantu," *Kompas Online*, December 22, 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/metro/2023/12/21/perayaan-natal-dijaga-bersama>.

with security during Christmas Mass in Labuan Bajo, Flores.<sup>9</sup> These instances are examples of numerous similar activities at the grassroots level.

In Indonesia, another dynamic exists in grassroots communities that transcend the general human attitude, as evident in the dialogue of life and action. Grassroots communities naturally accept this dynamic to embody a multicultural and multireligious spirit. This force is popularly known as cosmic religiosity, an original spirit of the Nusantara people who lived for thousands of years before the arrival of major world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. There are remnants of cosmic religiosity in several indigenous beliefs, but the number of followers is limited.

Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan theologian, discussed cosmic religion, referring to the indigenous religious beliefs among tribes in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Cosmic religion differs from meta-cosmic religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.<sup>10</sup> Pieris' understanding of cosmic religion has been applied in studies on traditional religions in East Nusa Tenggara.<sup>11</sup> The *Marapu* belief in Sumba can also be viewed as a cosmic religion in line with Pieris' view.<sup>12</sup>

These indigenous cosmic religions have several characteristics, including an understanding of the interconnectedness of elements of nature. This interconnectedness is crucial in maintaining balance and harmony within society and nature. The philosophy of balance shapes a human attitude to uphold tolerance and mutual respect. Each group has beliefs reflected in its openness to differences and cooperation.

As a cosmic religiosity, *Marapu* is inclusive, allowing its adherents to coexist peacefully with the world's major religions. *Marapu* is a traditional belief in Indonesia, including *Kaharingan* (Kalimantan), *Sunda Wiwitan* (West Java), *Parmalin* (North Sumatra), *Kejawen* (Central Java), and *Aluk To Dolo* (Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi). By showing the cosmic character of traditional beliefs, adherents of the world's major religions can re-establish a continuous dialogue with the roots of human life. This character has been partly absorbed into major religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Therefore, religious people in rural areas have a strong spirit of religious moderation. Even though they have embraced universal religions, grassroots communities still maintain the archipelago's original cultural heritage, which fosters a natural, peaceful coexistence.

Several scholars have studied the *Marapu* belief on the island of Sumba. The core of *Marapu*'s beliefs includes belief in the Creator called Magholo-Marawi (creators) and the intermediary spirits between humans and the Creator called *Marapu*, both of which existed before the creation of humans, as well as the spirits of deceased ancestors.<sup>13</sup> In the last decade, there have been many studies on the relationship between

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<sup>9</sup> Ambrosius Ardin, "Indahnya Toleransi, Remaja Masjid Bantu Amankan Misa Natal di Labuan Bajo," *detikBali*, 2023, <https://www.detik.com/bali/nusra/d-7107341/indahnya-toleransi-remaja-masjid-bantu-amankan-misa-natal-di-labuan-bajo>.

<sup>10</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Clark, 1988), 71.

<sup>11</sup> John Mansford Prior, *Bejana Tanah Nan Indah* (Ende: Nusa Indah, 1993), 79.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Woga, *Der Parentale Gott: Zum Dialog Zwischen d. Religion d. Indonesischen Völker Sumbas Und Dem Christentum* (Steyler Verl., 1994), 281.

<sup>13</sup> Herman Punda Panda, "Perjalanan Jiwa ke 'Kampung Leluhur': Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (*Marapu*) dan Perjumpaannya dengan Ajaran Katolik," *Lumen Veritatis* 10, no. 1 (2020): 197-220, <https://doi.org/doi: 10.30822/lumenveritatis.v10i2.478>; Teresia Noiman Derung et al., "Makna Upacara Kematian dalam Keagamaan *Marapu*," *In Theos: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Theologi* 2, no. 4 (2022): 125-31,

*Marapu* beliefs and modernity, as well as major religions. Soeriadiredja's study shows that *Marapu* beliefs experience discrimination due to negative portrayals of these beliefs, which come from modern understandings and major religions.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the most talked about is related to Christianity, which is now practiced by most of the inhabitants of the island of Sumba. Discrimination occurs, among others, in government administration. Many *Marapu* adherents do not have access to the world of education and work because they do not have family cards, ID cards, or birth certificates. Therefore, although the people of Sumba could not let go of *Marapu*, they *de facto* adhered to Christianity to access the world of education.<sup>15</sup> Over time, throughout history, the people of Sumba have built a new cultural identity formed from the interaction between *Marapu* beliefs and Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Kamuri also observed discrimination on the part of the government that did not recognize the original belief, at least for a very long time in the post-colonial era.<sup>17</sup> As a result, until 2016, the *Marapu* belief did not have the same status as the religions officially recognized by the state, namely Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Meanwhile, there are still a significant number of *Marapu* adherents. In addition, the *Marapu* belief is attached to the cultural identity of the Sumbanese people so that even though they have become Christians, they still carry out the *Marapu* ritual.<sup>18</sup>

It was only in 2016, thanks to the persistent struggle of its adherents, that *Marapu's* faith received official recognition through the Constitutional Court decision No. 97/PPU-XIV/2016.<sup>19</sup> However, the people of Sumba have not fully implemented this decision. In East Sumba Regency, it is only in 2023 that adherents of the *Marapu* faith are registered in the state administration under the category of Believers in God Almighty, and approximately 90 % of them have received Family Cards and Identity Cards.<sup>20</sup> Previously, most *Marapu* believers, especially in the interior, had no identity card unless registered as adherents of one of the officially recognized religions, such as Protestant Christianity or Catholicism.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the official state recognition of the *Marapu* belief and recording of the customary belief's identity in the citizen's identity card is considered the most progressive change in religious politics in Indonesia.<sup>22</sup>

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<https://doi.org/10.56393/intheos.v2i4.1268>; Selan. Yunus & Marlince Kadiwano, "Studi Perbandingan Tentang Keselamatan Dalam Kepercayaan *Marapu* Dengan Iman Kristen," *Jurnal Luxnos* 6, no. 2 (2020): 97-120.

<sup>14</sup> Purwadi Soeriadiredja, "*Marapu*: Konstruksi Identitas Budaya Orang Sumba, NTT," *Antropologi Indonesia; Indonesian Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology* 34, no. 2 (2013): 101-12.

<sup>15</sup> Jacqueline A. C. VEL, "Sumba and the State," in *Uma Politics* (Brill, 2006), 38, Brill.com11/27/2020 01:33:07AM.

<sup>16</sup> Soeriadiredja, "*Marapu*: Konstruksi Identitas Budaya Orang Sumba, NTT."

<sup>17</sup> Johanis Putratama Kamuri, "Transformasi Wawasan Dunia *Marapu*: Tantangan Pembinaan Warga Gereja di Sumba," *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili Dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat* 4, no. 2 (2020): 131-43.

<sup>18</sup> Herman P. Panda, "Mengapa Orang Katolik Masih Menjalankan Ritual *Marapu*? Menguk Praktik Iman Ganda di Loura," *Jurnal Ledalero* 13, no. 1 (2014): 119-31.

<sup>19</sup> Kristina Viri and Zarida Febriany, "Dinamika Pengakuan Penghayat Kepercayaan di Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Religion and Society* 2, no. 2 (2020): 97-112, <https://doi.org/10.36256/ijrs.v2i2.119>.

<sup>20</sup> Mutiara Christin Melany, "Penghayat *Marapu* Dapat Pengakuan Agama Kepercayaan kepada Tuhan Yang Maha Esa," *Pos Kupang*, 2023, <https://kupang.tribunnews.com/2023/09/10/penghayat-Marapu-dapat-pengakuan-agama-kepercayaan-kepada-tuhan-yang-maha-esa>.

<sup>21</sup> VEL, "Sumba and the State."

<sup>22</sup> Krisharyanto Umbu Deta, "Deconstructing the Dichotomy of Agama and Kepercayaan: A Transformative Strategy in the Politic of Recognition towards *Marapu* Indigenous Religion," *Religio: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 12, no. 1 (2022): 102-25, <https://doi.org/10.15642/religio.v12i1.1863>.

Other scholars have sought to explore the potential of *Marapu*'s beliefs, which have contributed to modern human life. Some rituals in the *Marapu* belief system express essential values relevant to multidimensional human life. Wohangara examined the *Hupu Liku Warung* rite, which demonstrates the harmonious unity of the Sumba people with nature. In addition, the ritual also contains ecological ethics according to the original view of the people of Sumba.<sup>23</sup> Some other rites speak of the unity of man with the supernatural world. In the *Marapu* faith, every stage of human life, from birth to death, is colored by the belief in the participation of the *Marapu*. The funeral ritual of the deceased describes the relationship between humans and the supernatural world. According to Derung, through funeral ceremonies in the *Marapu* faith, humans build a harmonious relationship with the deceased's spirits, especially their ancestors.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, Pati et al. discuss the *Moritana* ceremony, which functions not only to build relationships with the supernatural world but also to foster social cohesion among residents, starting from residents in a *kabizu* (patrilineal clan), *parona* (village), and the harmony of social relations in the broader context.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the previous research, this study raises the cosmic character of *Marapu* beliefs as the contribution of the original religion of Sumba to the strengthening of religious moderation in Indonesia. The elements discussed above show a philosophy of harmony in three directions: with nature, with fellow humans, and with the supernatural world. The three are related, the central point being the belief in *Marapu*. The harmonious relationship with the three directions is part of the *Li'i Marapu* (*Marapu* Words), which are transmitted orally and preserved by its adherents, especially ceremonial leaders, from generation to generation.

## Research Method

This research was conducted in Karuni and Pogotena, Loura District, Southwest Sumba Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. The district is a sub-ethnic region of Sumba with a traditional territory and a distinct regional dialect. According to 2021 data from the Central Bureau of Statistics of Southwest Sumba Regency, the population of Loura District was 18,535. The religious demographics include 9,641 Catholics, 7,564 Protestants, 1,020 Muslims, 80 Hindus, and 230 followers of other beliefs (*Marapu*). Meanwhile, the two selected villages have a combined population of 4,221.

The location was chosen for the following reasons: (1) These two villages have adherents of the indigenous *Marapu* religion who live and possess strong familial ties with followers of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. (2) The study's principal investigator (first author) is well-versed in the *Loura* dialect spoken in the locations. This qualification facilitates authentic data collection through interviews with local traditional leaders in the native language. Therefore, the results were based on the experiences

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<sup>23</sup> Retang Wohangara, Ridwan Sanjaya, and Benny D. Setiyanto, "Sumbanese's Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK): Warung Hupu Liku Ritual and Ecological Ethics," *Celt: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching & Literature* 23, no. 2 (2023): 223–35, <https://doi.org/10.24167/celt.v23i2.9812>.

<sup>24</sup> Derung et al., "Makna Upacara Kematian dalam Keagamaan *Marapu*."

<sup>25</sup> Yohanes Ronaldo Kowak Pati, Herman Punda Panda, and Oktovianus Naif, "Nilai Kearifan Lokal Ritual Moritana dalam Kepercayaan *Marapu* di Sumba Barat Daya," *Ideas* 10, no. 4 (2024): 1085–94, <https://doi.org/10.32884/ideas.v10i4.1721>.

of the indigenous people (emic perspective). The research fieldwork took place from October to December 2023.

A qualitative research approach was used to obtain the data. In social research, a qualitative approach is commonly used to uncover hidden meanings, understand social interactions, develop theories, validate data accuracy, and investigate various historical developments. This research adopted a combination of phenomenological and ethnographic designs to explore and illustrate how meanings are derived from the subjects' experiences or how the subjects make sense of a particular religious and cultural experience. The research team immersed themselves in the world of the subjects to understand the perception of events in natural settings. The ethnographic method includes examining the culture of a group in natural conditions to learn and describe the patterns of the group, including beliefs, language, and shared views.

The data collection methods included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In qualitative research, in-depth interviews are complemented by participant observation and direct observation of individual behaviors and interactions. Therefore, this research was directly connected to the daily lives of the research participants. The primary instrument used by the research team was an interview guide. The guide for the unstructured interviews was developed to reflect the objectives. The interviews were carried out once or twice. During the process, informants were also engaged in discussions to uncover hidden and shared meanings. Group interviews and focus group discussions were held with key informants. Observations were also conducted in two traditional villages in Karuni. The observations focused on *Marapu* worship rituals and the places where these rituals were performed.

In this research, analysis was conducted descriptively, including the explanation, depiction, and summary of data points identified according to existing characteristics. Additionally, on-site analysis was performed by continuously developing analytical questions. The results were obtained by summarizing structures and formulating relationships between important research topics inductively based on field facts. Therefore, enduring meanings were discovered after verification, and the results from the field were systematically organized.

## Results and Discussion

### Interconnectedness and the Philosophy of Harmony

The terms *Marapu* and *Ata Bara* refer to the indigenous beliefs of Sumba coined by outsiders and the Sumbanese, respectively. These indigenous beliefs are forms of spirituality integrated into daily life and culture. The term *Marapu* does not refer to a specific belief system but serves as a general term for the spirits worshipped by the Sumbanese.

Data were obtained regarding the perspective on the supernatural world, humans, and nature as interconnected entities representing a philosophy of balance through interviews with informants and observations at the research site. At the core of the belief is the recognition of the Supreme Being and spirits known as *Magholo-Marawi* and *Marapu*, respectively. Prayer is part of the religious practice in the *Marapu* belief system. The purpose of prayer is directed toward the Supreme Being through intermediaries, namely

*Marapu*, arranged hierarchically from the lowest (*Marapu Uma*, the clan protector) to the highest (the great *Marapu* or God of the sky or the heavens) and the Creator.

This purpose is evident from the narratives told by the respondents. A ritual leader in Karuni Village expressed metaphorically that *Marapu* is “a bridge across or a stick extended” by humans to reach *Magholo Marawi*. A “bridge” is necessary because *Magholo-Marawi* is great, powerful, and unreachable. *Marapu* serve as intermediaries and are generally divided into three groups: *Marapu Boto* (big *Marapu*) or *Marapu Awang* (sky *Marapu*), *Marapu Uma* (human ancestors), and *Marapu alam* (spirits inhabiting corners of nature).

According to *Marapu*’s belief, existence cannot be separated from all other elements. Humans are seen as subjects closely connected to nature’s elements. In mythological stories told by a respondent, plants as a source of human food are viewed as the incarnation of the sister of the first human child on Earth. During famine and lack of food, she is willing to be killed, and her blood grows into rice plants while the other parts of her body grow into corn, tubers, nuts, and fruit trees. Other mythological stories reveal that all natural elements, such as plants, animals, and inanimate objects, could talk in the past. Life was greatly facilitated for humans because of the ability to converse with natural elements. For example, a tree can make a boat and be willing to be cut down. Mythological stories in the *Marapu* belief are not just fairy tales; they have messages that provide guidance and direction. The essential meaning is that natural elements have life, and all food plants should be treated as human relatives because nature is humanity’s closest friend.

Since nature is also connected to the spirits (*Marapu alam*), humans must work in harmony with nature by clearing fields, planting, and harvesting crops. This work is preceded by a ritual marked by submitting a request for permission, protection, and good luck from the spirits who inhabit nature. For example, one *Marata* ritual is an offering to the spirits of the forest dwellers before cutting down trees in the forest as materials to build a house.

Within the interconnectedness, humans play an essential role in communicating with the spirit world. The original view of the Sumbanese regarding human uniqueness can be seen in the Sumbanese version of the ontological constitution. According to the Sumbanese view, humans include three main components, namely *tou* (body), *dewa* (soul), and *magho* (life force principle). *Magho* is a general component existing as a principle of life in every creature. *Magho* connects humans with other cosmic elements. Meanwhile, *dewa* is the soul, a unique human component.

From the description, followers of *Marapu* highly prioritize balance and harmony in life by nurturing good relationships with the Creator and spirits (*Marapu*), other humans, and nature. Any disturbance in the balance of the three relationships may lead to danger. For instance, violations of the balance between the three parties can cause illnesses, disasters, and calamities. In such events, humans, through specific rituals, seek the cause from supernatural forces and make customary pledges to be more disciplined and obedient to various prohibitions and commands because supernatural forces strongly influence aspects of human life. The balance is reflected in cultural arts, social and religious lives, ethics, and morals.

### Religious Moderation in the Daily Life of *Marapu*'s Adherents

The followers of *Marapu* maintain and uphold kinship and social relationships. These individuals freely accept other religions, such as relatives who become Christians, and allow them to actively participate in rituals. Conversely, others perform their religious rituals without abandoning *Marapu*. Children are also allowed to choose modern religions, believing that the same God is worshipped and revered. A traditional leader in Pogotena said:

All my children are Catholics, although I still follow the old belief to protect the tribal heritage. Similarly, many other relatives have become Catholics or Protestants and are present during the *Marapu* ceremony. Generally, these relatives are willing to attend by 'standing from behind'.<sup>26</sup>

The expression 'standing from behind' refers to supporting the *Marapu* ceremony, including covering the costs of organizing the event. However, relatives who are Catholics or Protestants are no longer actively involved in the *Marapu* ritual. *Marapu* adherents are also willing to participate in other religious rituals without leaving *Marapu* and do not believe that active participation in other ceremonies causes the religion to fade. A traditional figure in Karuni village stated:

I was once asked to deliver a greeting in traditional poetry, representing the voices of Catholics welcoming the bishop in the churchyard. I have had opportunities like that several times. Even though I am not a church member, I attend church ceremonies wholeheartedly because I know that the one worshipped in the Church is the same God we call *Magholo-Marawi*.<sup>27</sup>

Another phenomenon that demonstrates an attitude of moderation is hospitality in accepting people from other ethnicities or religions. The Sumbanese graciously accept the presence of people from different cultures and religions. In this context, there is a greeting ceremony in the form of poetic expressions in the local language, accompanied by the symbolic act of draping a woven cloth around the neck. The content of the greeting expresses heartfelt welcome, recognizing guests as friends, companions, and relatives. The draping of local handwoven cloth symbolizes acceptance and warmth. A traditional figure who participated in this study interpreted the use of woven fabric in welcoming people from outside the tribe as a symbol of a network of life. "Just like a woven cloth, which becomes neat and complete through intertwining threads, humans establish relationships of harmony."<sup>28</sup>

### *Marapu* as Cosmic Religion

The study results cover views on the interconnectedness of all natural elements, the philosophy of balance, and attitudes toward religious moderation in everyday life. These three elements are part of the characteristics of cosmic religion. The term Cosmic Religion is most commonly associated with physicist Albert Einstein. The concept was described as a spirituality arising from awe and admiration for the vastness and orderliness of the universe in relation to science.<sup>29</sup> The sense of awe and wonder at the magnificence

<sup>26</sup> Interview in Pogotena, October 21, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Interview in Karuni, October 24, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Interview in Pogotena, October 25, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Einstein, "Religion and Science," *New York Times Magazine* (New York, November 1930).

and orderliness of the universe evokes a feeling of unity with existence and a quest for cosmic meaning. However, Einstein's cosmic religion is more closely related to science, and applying the concept is a religious practice. Religion was also criticized harshly, based on the idea that the acknowledgment of a personal God contradicts science. In this context, Judaism and the Christian Church were specifically condemned.

Another expert who discussed cosmic religion is the Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris, who extensively wrote about the concept in the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. His work focused on the idea that cosmic religion was a universal and transcendent force underlying religious traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity.<sup>30</sup> The concept bridges the gap between religious traditions in determining common ground for spiritual growth and understanding. Unlike Einstein, who referred to cosmic religions as “religions of fear,” Pieris viewed traditional religions more positively. The character of cosmic religion includes a close relationship with forces such as fire, heat, water, rain, floods, seas, storms, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. The natural elements, summarized as fire and water, are essential but can also be feared when excessive, which is why their ambivalent power is used in everyday life and religious rituals.

Cosmic religiosity emphasizes universal connection and respect for nature, contributing to a more inclusive and tolerant approach to religious beliefs and practices. These efforts enhance a sentiment different from religiosity in major religions, cultivating a more nuanced perspective. Therefore, cosmic religiosity provides a framework for exploring spirituality beyond specific doctrines and contributes to religious moderation by promoting broader understandings of divinity and the universe. The concept refers to the spiritual or religious aspect of belief systems, including the universe and the relationship between humanity and transcendent reality.

The cosmic character of a traditional belief system is evident in the close relationship between humans, nature, and God. This system is called cosmic metaphysics, religion,<sup>31</sup> and cosmological systems.<sup>32</sup> *Marapu*'s belief also has the character of cosmic harmony, which manifests in the close connection between humans, nature, and the supernatural world (spirits, gods, or God).

Following Pieris' assertion, Prior categorized East Nusa Tenggara's pre-Christian indigenous religion as cosmic.<sup>33</sup> In the indigenous religion of Nusa Tenggara, there is an integration between the sacred and the profane, as well as divine and worldly. Humans are often vulnerable to unseen powers or spirits. Prayers are offered to the Highest Unreachable Being through the familiar faces of ancestral spirits. Prior argued that the Divine was manifested in the human soul and nature as both one and diverse. Moreover, rituals function to maintain and restore balance. The indigenous belief in Sumba (*Marapu*) also manifests as a religion with a cosmic character in line with Pieris's contention.

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<sup>30</sup> Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> M Rahayu, F F Susanto, and F Sukma, “Religious Cosmology Indonesian Legal Studies (Basic Philosophical Understanding of Indonesian Law Based on Wisdom),” *Review of International Geographical Education (RIGEO)* 11, no. 8 (2021): 2785–91, <https://doi.org/10.48047/rigeo.11.08.260>.

<sup>32</sup> Samsul Maarif, “Human (Relational) Dignity: Perspectives of Followers of Indigenous Religions of Indonesia,” *Religions* 14, no. 7 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070848>.

<sup>33</sup> Prior, *Bejana Tanah Nan Indah*.

Asian cosmic religions strongly view the interconnectedness of God, humans, and nature. The transcendent God becomes immanent in humans and nature.<sup>34</sup> This perspective also emphasizes the position of humans as part of the interconnected system or as citizens of the same ecosystem.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the relationship between humans and each other is also understood in supporting and conflict-avoiding.

This harmony of life was lived through kinship ties within a tribe or kinship due to blood relations and marriage. As a philosophy of life, social attitudes become habits in building relationships with fellow humans and tribal ties. These views are found in indigenous religious thought in Asia and tribal religions in Africa. Ude suggested that connectedness in African human thought had become a way of understanding and analyzing the world.<sup>36</sup> The Toba Batak people have a philosophy of social life called *Dalihan Na Tolu* that includes kinship ties between *Hula-Hula* (wife-giving party), *Dongan Sabutuha* (siblings and clan), and *Boru* (wife-taking party).<sup>37</sup> According to Harahap et al., the people of South Tapanuli use the *Dalihan Na Tolu* philosophy as a source of culture and social cohesion in daily activities.<sup>38</sup> The idea of *Dalihan Na Tolu* developed into a cohesive social unit uniting people in harmony. For the Toraja people (South Sulawesi), Tongkonan is a kinship bond formed in each village consisting of extended family members. This kinship formed the attitude of the Toraja people, who adhere to the motto of living together: “*Misa’ kada dipotuo, Pantan kada dipomate*” (united we stand, divided we fall).<sup>39</sup>

This idea of interconnectedness leads to the philosophy of balance or harmony. Harmony is considered essential for maintaining balance in relations between humans and nature. This variable is often seen as the ability to produce unity or connectedness through diversity. The perspective of Indigenous religions with a cosmic character can be seen as a force in increasing religious moderation in contemporary religious pluralism.<sup>40</sup>

The Indonesian national motto, “*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*” (unity in diversity), underlines the importance of harmony and peaceful coexistence. Harmony has a moral appeal, as it acknowledges the uniqueness of each person’s culture or religion on the one hand and fosters a culture of continuous dialogue and unity on the other. In addition, Pancasila (the five principles) has been accepted as an Indonesian foundational philosophy and ideology whose primary purpose is to manage the reality of pluralism. As a

<sup>34</sup> Prior.

<sup>35</sup> Nahdhiyah et al., “Ecocritical Study on Relationships between Humans, Nature, and God in the Novel the Alchemist,” *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2170019>.

<sup>36</sup> Donald Mark C. Ude, “The Sense of Interconnectedness in African Thought-Patterns: In Search of a More Useful Philosophical Idiom,” *Philosophy Today* 66, no. 4 (2022): 707–23, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday2022624457>.

<sup>37</sup> Rufer Firma Harianja and Ajat Sudrajat, “The Local Wisdom of Batak Toba through the Philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu in a Kinship Environment,” *Budapest International Research and Critics in Linguistics and Education (BirLE) Journal* 4, no. 2 (2021): 759–65, <https://doi.org/10.33258/birle.v4i2.1838>.

<sup>38</sup> Anwar Sadat Harahap et al., “Dalihan Na Tolu as a Model for Resolving Religious Conflicts in North Sumatera: An Anthropological and Sociological Perspective,” *Samarah* 7, no. 3 (2023): 1943–70, <https://doi.org/10.22373/sjkh.v7i3.13091>.

<sup>39</sup> Hadi Pajarianto, Imam Pribadi, and Puspa Sari, “Tolerance between Religions through the Role of Local Wisdom and Religious Moderation,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7043>.

<sup>40</sup> Heni Francis Ariina, “Indigenous Perspective on Religious Pluralism: A Tribal Response,” in *Re-Thinking Religious Pluralism* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 157–70, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9540-0\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9540-0_14).

foundational philosophy, Pancasila emphasizes harmonious relations amidst ethnic and religious diversity. Considering the theology of harmony, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) observed that Pancasila represents a cosmic worldview serving as a cultural heritage.<sup>41</sup> According to FABC, the five principles reflect a harmonious interrelation between God, the universe, and the human environment. Such interrelationships are essential because they foster calmness, peace, and inner balance.

Pancasila is the crystallization of the noble values of the Indonesian nation. These noble values are found in the original forms of most indigenous religions' original forms. The philosophy of balance in indigenous religions shapes an attitude of moderation by prioritizing tolerance and respect for human dignity and differences. Indigenous religious philosophies emphasize respect for the beliefs and cultural practices of others. This attitude enhances the willingness to tolerate and accept differences and is essential to maintain harmony and peace among diverse groups.<sup>42</sup> The method also emphasizes the importance of tolerance and peaceful coexistence of religious communities. The principle of moderation in indigenous religions promotes a balanced attitude between practicing one's religion and respecting the beliefs of others. This balance creates a tolerant environment in which different religions coexist peacefully.<sup>43</sup>

The indigenous worldview strongly influences the philosophy of harmony emerging from the habitus of grassroots communities. Therefore, a false harmony imposed from outside is irrelevant for indigenous people. Indigenous religious philosophy rejects the idea of forced harmony in which the majority obtains privileges to achieve superficial peace. The disadvantaged group may be calm, but a passive attitude of not disturbing others or accepting differences with a hateful heart is not enough.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, the indigenous worldview of the grassroots environment promotes a sincere and voluntary acceptance of differences, leading to a sustainable and inclusive form of coexistence.

Religious moderation or a moderate attitude has recently attracted public discussion and scholarly research. This interest is understandable since the latent danger of radicalism can occur at any time. This awareness leads to understanding the importance of religious moderation in Indonesia. Therefore, the Indonesian Minister of Religion for the 2014-2019 period, Lukman Hakim Syaifuddin, released a compilation book entitled *Religious Moderation* (2019) to support maintaining the diversity and differences in Indonesia through a moderate attitude from various parties. This book also provides references and guidelines for implementing religious moderation in Indonesia. Public errors due to religious manipulation carried out by some political elites can be prevented through religious moderation.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> F. J. Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Claretian Publications, 1997), 244.

<sup>42</sup> Abdullah Idi and Deni Priansyah, "The Role of Religious Moderation in Indonesian Multicultural Society: A Sociological Perspective," *Asian Journal of Engineering, Social and Health* 2, no. 4 (2023): 246–58, <https://doi.org/10.46799/ajesh.v2i4.55>.

<sup>43</sup> Ambo Tang and Arif Pramana Aji, "The Leadership of the Village Head in Implementing the Values of Religious Moderation in the Village of Harmony in Sorong District, Southwest Papua," *Proceedings of the 1 St International Conference on Science and Islamic Studies* 9058 (2023): 1980–93.

<sup>44</sup> Radea Yuli. A Hambali, "The Dilemma of Religious Tolerance: Levinasian Critique and Proposal," *International Journal of Nusantara Islam* 11, no. 2 (2023): 300–312, <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijni.v11i2.31226>.

<sup>45</sup> Tim Penyusun Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, *Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

There are several definitions of religious moderation. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Religion, religious moderation avoids violence and extremism. The variable describes the attitude or behavior that takes a middle way, acts pretty, and is not extreme in religious matters.<sup>46</sup> According to Mufi et al., moderation can be understood as distancing a person from extreme attitudes and trying to take a balanced position, especially in dealing with intolerance and sectarianism due to religious differences.<sup>47</sup> Viktorahadi believes that religious moderation means prioritizing religion as an essential element in maintaining balance to support diversity.<sup>48</sup> Magnis-Suseno understands religious moderation as a philosophy of life for Indonesian people.<sup>49</sup> In this context, a moderate attitude towards religion is a philosophy of accepting the existence of every Indonesian citizen with different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, harmony in living with diversity is only possible when a moderate attitude is applied consistently.

From the perspective of universal religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Catholicism, moderation is understood as part of the teachings. The concept is discussed from an Islamic perspective, and the religion does not teach radicalism but a moderate attitude in doctrine and life practices.<sup>50</sup> Several Christian writers also state that religious moderation is Biblical teaching and can be applied in family life, education, and social life.<sup>51</sup> The Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council, has promoted inclusivism as evidenced in *Lumen Gentium* 16; *Nostra Aetate* 2, 4; *Ad Gentes* 11; *Dialogue and Proclamation* 82.<sup>52</sup> At the Asian level, the FABC published several documents regarding interreligious dialogue. These documents include the FABC Plenary Session and results released by the Bishop's Institute for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.<sup>53</sup> The Catholic Church in Asia develops an attitude of religious moderation through dioceses. FABC also analyzes the theology of harmony as a local wisdom found in Asian countries.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Tim Penyusun Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia.

<sup>47</sup> Akhmad Munir Mufi, Aminullah Elhady, and Mursalim Mursalim, "Section Articles Internalization of Religious Moderation Values: Active Tolerance and Social Harmony in Education in Indonesia," *El-Tarbawi* 16, no. 1 (2023): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.20885/tarbawi.vol16.iss1.art1>.

<sup>48</sup> R. F. Bhanu Viktorahadi, "The Meaning of Religious Moderation According to Franz Magnis-Suseno: A Phenomenological Approach," *Jurnal Iman Dan Spiritualitas* 2, no. 2 (2022): 177–86, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v2i2.17912>.

<sup>49</sup> F Magnis-Suseno, *Mencari Makna Kebangsaan* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> Siti Solikhati et al., "Religious Moderation and the Struggle for Identity Through New Media: Study of the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation," *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama Dan Lintas Budaya* 6, no. 2 (2022): 195–210, <https://doi.org/10.15575/rjsalb.v6i2.15058>.

<sup>51</sup> Jefrit Johanis Messakh et al., "Peran Pendidikan Agama Kristen dalam Membangun Moderasi Beragama di Era 5.0," *Edukatif: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan* 5, no. 5 (2023): 2160–72, <https://doi.org/10.31004/edukatif.v5i5.5678>.

<sup>52</sup> R. Hardawiryana, *Dokumen Konsili Vatikan II (VIII)* (Jakarta: KWI -Obor, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> G. B. Rosales and C. G Arevalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991* (Orbis Books, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia*.

### ***Marapu's Contribution to Strengthening Religious Moderation***

The original beliefs of the Indonesian people are related to *Marapu* in Sumba. The essence of the *Marapu* belief lies in the recognition of the existence of a Creator known as *Magholo-Marawi* (Creator and Maker), namely God the Almighty. There is also a spirit creature known as *Marapu*, divided into *Marapu Lyangita* (God of the sky) and *Marapu Mate* (spirits of the dead).<sup>55</sup> *Marapu Lyangita* is a spirit creature whose existence is believed to be eternal and who lives in a heavenly realm. Some are believed to be responsible for ruling and supervising the lower spirits, while others function as the primary intermediaries between humans and the Creator.

Meanwhile, *Marapu Mate* refers to the spirit of a deceased person who is believed to have arrived in the heavenly realm and to live in the presence of the heavenly *Marapu*. In general, adherents' primary object of worship is the spirits of ancestors. There is also *Marapu*, who lives in nature as the owner and protector of all elements of the universe.

The contribution of *Marapu* belief to strengthening religious moderation and contemporary life has not received serious attention. However, the belief has been undermined by state institutions and major religions.<sup>56</sup> *Marapu* faces administrative discrimination since the state recognizes only six official religions. Therefore, marriages of *Marapu* adherents are not recorded in the Population and Civil Registration Office. Consequently, children cannot have birth certificates issued by the office, although a birth certificate is a requirement for school enrollment. Major religions, such as Christianity, provide assistance while simultaneously taking advantage of the opportunities to convert children before issuing baptism certificates. In Sumba, baptism and birth certificates are often considered equivalent, fulfilling the requirements for school admission. Conversely, human rights must be defended, as *Marapu* adherents are targeted for conversion efforts. Some tend to eradicate *Marapu* belief and replace the concept with Christianity.<sup>57</sup> Others express concern regarding the discriminatory attitudes of the state and religious institutions.<sup>58</sup>

*Marapu* continues to exist alongside modern religions due to the strong sense of kinship within communities. Kinship and cooperation are fundamental principles for *Marapu* adherents. Every ritual involves all clan members and relatives.<sup>59</sup> Although *Marapu* belief persists as a minority in Sumba, where the population comprises adherents of all six officially recognized religions. Followers of the belief peacefully coexist with adherents of major religions. The philosophy of harmony from *Marapu's* cosmic character does not allow for extreme attitudes in thinking and behavior.

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<sup>55</sup> H. Hadiwijono, *Religi Suku Murba di Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2000).

<sup>56</sup> Wedasantara, Ida Ayu Alit Laksmiwati, and Nissa Puspitaning Adni, "*Marapu: Menyusuri Jati Diri Orang Sumba di Tengah Globalisasi*," in *SEMINAR NASIONAL BAHASA, SASTRA, DAN BUDAYA 2023 "Meningkatkan Apresiasi Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Budaya Untuk Memperkokoh Jati Diri Bangsa*," 2023, 72–80.

<sup>57</sup> Mawida, "Metode Penginjilan Kontekstual terhadap Penganut *Marapu* di Sumba," *Jurnal Arrabona* 6, no. 1 (2023): 15–33, <https://doi.org/10.57058/juar.v6i1.95>.

<sup>58</sup> Wedasantara, Laksmiwati, and Adni, "*Marapu: Menyusuri Jati Diri Orang Sumba di Tengah Globalisasi*."

<sup>59</sup> Nyoman Arisanti, "Eksistensi Kampung Adat Di Sumba Tengah," *Forum Arkeologi* 32, no. 2 (2019): 117, <https://doi.org/10.24832/fa.v32i2.553>.

Syuhudi and Rismawidiawati in Kodi (Southwest Sumba) demonstrates that a key to understanding religious harmony is cultural heritage and *Marapu* identity.<sup>60</sup> Regardless of the religious identity adopted, *Marapu* remains an inseparable part of cultural heritage. Even the members become Protestant or Catholic, the traditions strongly influence the communities. In this context, communities must maintain respect for and pride in their identity and culture. Consequently, *Marapu* adherents practice values of religious tolerance in daily life, where individuals of different faiths respect one another despite differences in beliefs, religious practices, and understanding.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research demonstrates the significant contribution of *Marapu* belief to religious moderation in Indonesia. The importance of the cosmic religiosity of *Marapu* belief in Sumba is highlighted in enhancing religious moderation, especially in the Indonesian context of religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. The *Marapu* belief emphasizes the interconnectedness of all creatures and promotes a sense of shared responsibility and values among adherents of different religions. This commonality of goals and values contributes to a culture of tolerance, religious harmony, and respect for human rights and dignity. *Marapu* belief focuses on everyday relationships and symbolic interactions that emphasize respect for others. *Marapu* serves as a bridge between different religious groups and contributes to a culture of cooperation and mutual understanding. Based on the results, it can be argued that *Marapu* belief plays an important role in promoting religious moderation in Indonesia. Therefore, the philosophy of harmony should be integrated with a human rights approach to protect religious freedom, equality, and non-discrimination. This harmonization creates a legal framework that helps promote religious moderation and harmony. By adhering to these principles, the philosophy of harmony in indigenous religions fosters a moderate attitude characterized by tolerance, respect, and a willingness to coexist peacefully.

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<sup>60</sup> Muhammad Irfan Syuhudi and Rismawidiawati, "Harmoni Agama: Merajut Toleransi Umat Kristen dan *Marapu* di Komunitas Adat Mbuku Bani Kodi," *Mimikri* 9, no. 2 (2023): 272–90.

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