



Cultural Foundation of Catholic-Muslim Dialogue in Manggarai, Flores-Indonesia

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Abstract: *This paper explores the cultural contributions to dialogue between Catholic and Muslim communities in Manggarai, Flores–Indonesia. While interreligious dialogue in Indonesia often focuses on theological and doctrinal commonalities, this study proposes a more contextual approach by examining the role of cultural traditions in building peaceful coexistence. Using qualitative research methods through purposive sampling and in-depth interviews with nine participants—consisting of religious and cultural leaders, community figures, and government representatives—the study reveals how cultural practices such as lejong (encounter), dodo (mutual cooperation), and the inclusive character of Manggarai society strengthen interreligious relations. The research also identifies several challenges in developing dialogue, including a lack of mutual understanding, the influence of extreme external views, and the politicization of religion. Nevertheless, the findings show that deeply rooted cultural values in Manggarai society provide a strong foundation for fostering dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation between Catholics and Muslims. By emphasizing lived experience and cultural expression, this study offers a model of interreligious dialogue grounded in the local context that can be applied in other pluralistic societies.*

Keywords: *Culture, Dialogue, Manggarai.*

Introduction

Engagement between Christians and Muslims is as old as the Islamic tradition itself. The Qur'an acknowledges this shared space, urging, “*Argue not with the People of the Book except in the most gracious manner... and say: We believe in what has been revealed to us and to you; our God and your God is One, and to Him we submit.*”¹ This long history of interaction has taken many forms—at times marked by cooperation and shared pursuit of truth, and at others shaped by tension and conflict. It is within this complex and evolving relationship that the present discussion is situated.

Building on this long and multifaceted history, the modern period introduced renewed and more intentional efforts at dialogue. The Catholic Church on its side formally initiated structured dialogue with Muslims during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In the document *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, 1965), the Council recognized the shared spiritual heritage between Christians and Muslims, particularly their belief in one God and their reverence for Abraham. It emphasized mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration, calling for dialogue based on common values while acknowledging differences. This marked the first official and systematic effort by

¹ Surah Al-Ankabut 29:46.

the Catholic Church to promote interreligious dialogue with Islam, laying the groundwork for ongoing theological, cultural, and social engagement.

However, do the Church and Islam hold comparable understandings of the common good and justice that could support such collaboration? Do they operate from similar epistemological foundations? Is there a mutual recognition that Catholics and Muslims ought to work together for the good of the human family? To explore these questions in a concrete context, it is useful to consider the situation in Indonesia, where religious diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for interfaith cooperation.

The issue of inter-religious intolerance has gained significant importance in recent times, particularly in Indonesia, a nation characterized by its rich cultural and religious diversity.² Violations of the right to religious freedom are still high, both by the state and by non-state civilians.³ Efforts to foster tolerance among religious communities typically involve formal discussions among religious leaders and various institutions, along with government-sponsored programs aimed at promoting harmony. However, achieving this goal is often more challenging than anticipated.

This broader challenge is not only a national concern but also plays out in specific local contexts. One such example is Manggarai, a region where Catholics and Muslims living side by side experience this tension. Establishing meaningful dialogue requires considerable effort, courage, and a willingness to create spaces for conversation. In the current debate on the correlation between religions, “a strange development is seen in which the cultural aspect is always in a marginal position.”⁴ Hence, looking carefully at the benefit of cultural values is one of the many ways in establishing its dialogue. Recent research on a similar topic was conducted by a group of scholars from the Catholic University of St. Paul Ruteng: Fransiska Widyawati, Yohanes Servatius Lon, Hendrikus Midun, Marcelus Ungkang. But they focus on the bigger level, a province level of Nusa Tenggara Timur with university-based participants: students and lecturers.

The research conducted by this group of scholars seeks to explore how everyday interfaith interactions, rooted in local traditions, help sustain religious harmony in the face of growing global extremism and polarization. They affirm that “the strength of local cultural frameworks in fostering interfaith harmony, demonstrating that socially embedded ethics and informal practices can be more effective than formal interventions in cultivating inclusive attitudes.”⁵ While it references “local traditions” and “local wisdom,” these are not deeply unpacked. The study does not explore how specific cultural values, norms, or customary practices shape interfaith understanding and dialogue.

Hence, this paper specifically aims to explore, in the context of Manggarai, the untapped potential of local wisdom and cultural traditions that are deeply rooted which can effectively manage its diversity and examine how dialogue is practiced among the Manggarai people in particularly between Catholics and Muslims, with the intention of reducing instances of intolerance and preventing future occurrences.

² Lene Pedersen, “Religious Pluralism in Indonesia,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 17, no. 5 (2016), 390.

³ Robertus Minsel, “Kebebasan Beragama di Indonesia dalam Perspektif Hak Asasi Manusia,” *Jurnal Ledalero* 21 no. 1 (Juni 2022), 58.

⁴ Mathias Daven, “Agama Dan Politik – Hubungan Yang Ambivalen Dialog Versus Benturan Peradaban?” *Jurnal Ledalero* 12, no. 2 (Desember 2013), 194.

⁵ Fransiska Widyawati, Yohanes Servatius Lon, Hendrikus Midun, Marcelus Ungkang, “The Model of Interfaith Pluralism among University Communities in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia” *Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama dan Lintas Budaya* 8, no. 3 (2024), 240.

The primary questions this study seeks to address are: How is interreligious dialogue between Catholic-Muslim practiced in Manggarai? What problems are faced in building relationships between these two religions? How do cultural values contribute to building relationships between these two religions in this region? This paper argues that the cultural values of Manggarai people such as its inclusivity character, *dodo* and *lejong* play a role in fostering closer dialogue between Muslims and Catholics communities in the region.

This research will be divided into five parts. The first part discusses Manggarai, second part discusses how the Catholic and Muslim come into contact. Third part explores the dynamics of the relationship between these two religions; fourth part focuses on what are the obstacles in coming together in dialogue and last part is the discussion on how the cultural values of Manggarai can help build relationship between these two religions.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach, gathering data through interviews. It employs purposive sampling, a method that involves selecting participants based on defined criteria to ensure the data collected is both relevant and representative. Interviews were conducted with key informants such as community leaders, government representatives, and religious representatives from Islam and Christianity. The names of the participants will not be included in this paper for the sake of confidentiality.

Table 1. Key characteristics of research participants in Manggarai.

Participant	Role/Identity	Religious Affiliation	Key Contributions to Study
Respondent 1: R1	Coordinator of Interreligious Harmony Forum of Ruteng	Catholic	Advocated for interfaith harmony and neighborly rights, aligning with the community's shared values and discussed the reality of interreligious dialogue in Manggarai and the dialogue of spiritual and prayer
R2	Islamic Religious member	Islam	Highlighted the importance of being welcomed and learning the culture
R3	Coordinator of Interreligious Harmony Forum and Head of Interreligious Dialogue Commission of Labuan Bajo	Catholic	Emphasized the reality of the culture of Manggarai and the welcoming nature of its people and advocated for interfaith harmony and neighborly rights, aligning with the community's shared values.
R4	Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office. Labuan Bajo	Catholic	Advocated for interfaith harmony and neighborly rights and provided insights on the roots of the problems happening between Catholics and Muslims in Manggarai
R5	Interreligious dialogue Practitioner	Catholic	Discussed mutual respects among the followers of these two religions

Participant	Role/Identity	Religious Affiliation	Key Contributions to Study
R6	Head of Interreligious Dialogue Commission of Ruteng Diocese and Academic	Catholic	Explained the integration of cultural values in strengthening the relationship between Catholics and Muslims
R7	Member of Interreligious Harmony Forum of Ruteng and Cultural Researcher	Catholic	Giving historical accounts of encounter between Catholics and Muslims in Manggarai
R8	Religious Leader	Islam	Contributed to interfaith events and promoted respect for other faiths.
R9	Cultural Elder		Contributed insights into the cultural values upheld in Manggarai

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, beginning with repeated readings of the transcripts to identify key ideas that were then coded and grouped into broader themes related to interreligious relations, cultural values, and community dynamics; these themes were refined through constant comparison across participants. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of data from diverse participants, informal member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretations, and ensuring data saturation before concluding interviews, all of which helped verify the consistency and reliability of the findings. The researcher acknowledges that personal background and assumptions may influence interpretation and therefore used reflexive notes throughout the research process to remain aware of potential bias, while making consistent efforts to represent participants' voices accurately and fairly.

Manggarai: An Overview

Manggarai is situated in the western part of Flores Island, in East Nusa Tenggara Province of Indonesia. It spans across three regencies: Manggarai, West Manggarai, and East Manggarai, covering a total area of 7,136.04 km², which is approximately one-third of Flores Island. The region includes the mainland of Flores as well as nearby islands like Komodo, Rinca, Mules, and Longos. Originally, Manggarai was a single region. However, in 2003 it was divided with the creation of West Manggarai, followed by the establishment of East Manggarai in 2007. As of 2010, the population reached 717,000, with 673,569 people. By 2020, the population had grown to 937,963.⁶

The majority of Manggarai people adhere to Catholicism (88.3%), Islam (10.9%), Protestantism (0.62%), and Hinduism (0.07%).⁷ The strong presence of Catholicism among Manggarai people can be traced back to the colonial era, especially during the Portuguese colonial period in East Timor (Timor-

⁶ Sekretariat Pastoral Keuskupan Ruteng, *Selayang Pandang Gereja Keuskupan Ruteng* (Ruteng: Sekretariat Pastoral, 1988).

⁷ Hironimus Bandur, *Muslim dan Katolik Manggarai, Flores Barat: Dari Intersubjektif Menuju Indiferen dan dari Interdominasi Menuju Interakomodasi* (Yogyakarta: Pohon Cahaya, 2023), 1.

Leste) and later when the Dutch colonial influence spread to the islands of the Lesser Sunda region (where Manggarai is located).

Despite the demographic predominance of Catholicism in Manggarai, the region is also home to communities of other faiths. This religious diversity coexists within a strong cultural framework that shapes the daily lives and interactions of its people. Manggarai's deep-rooted cultural values such as mutual respect, communal harmony, and the importance of familial and social bonds form the foundation of its societal structure. These values not only guide interpersonal relationships but also play a crucial role in nurturing dialogue and understanding between different religious groups. It is within this cultural context that the philosophy of life of the Manggarai people emerges, a worldview that emphasizes balance, respect for others, and a shared sense of community.

These include *Mbaru Gendang*⁸ as the place where important events are done, such as traditional rituals and meetings especially in solving the problem among the villagers.⁹ *Compang*¹⁰ is the village center and “its circular layout reinforces the idea of communal equality and unity under the guidance of ancestral and divine forces.”¹¹ *Wae Teku*¹² or drinking water as the source of life and the flowing water symbolizes the outpouring of grace, mercy, and life from God to the people and as an invitation to collaborate in protecting and preserving this vital resource.¹³

*Lodok*¹⁴ or spider-web patten rice field. It shows the community's characteristic of welcoming differences while staying connected to the core. This also shows how the people of Manggarai who have

⁸ Lembaga Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, *Encyclopedia Manggarai, Referensi Pendidikan Kearifan Lokal* (Bogor: LPKN, 2018), 150-152. *Mbaru Gendang*, also known as *Mbaru Tembong*, is a traditional Manggarai house characterized by its cone-shaped structure. The word *Mbaru* means “house,” while *Gendang* or *Tembong* refers to a traditional Manggarai musical instrument made from goat skin. The house is built on a circular foundation, with a central main pole supporting the structure. This circular layout reflects the broader organization of a Manggarai village, where the *Compang*, a communal stone altar serves as the central point of unity. The round-shape house symbolizes the welcoming nature of the people of Manggarai, where differences are respected and accepted and the relationship is built in the spirit of inclusivity.

⁹ R9, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

¹⁰ Lembaga Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, 25. *Compang*, a traditional altar, is a sacred site for offerings, typically located at the center of a circular Manggarai village. Constructed from carefully selected stones, the *Compang* usually features a banyan tree at its center, known locally as *haju langke* or *pohon beringin*, and is surrounded by flat stones. It is believed to be the dwelling place of village spirits (*naga tanah*), ancestral spirits (*wura agu ceki*), and the Supreme Being, God the Owner and Creator (*Mori agu Ngaran, jari agu Dedek*). It shows the traditional community system of the people of Manggarai, which is a circular community. At the heart of the village, *Compang* holds the *banyan tree*, symbolizing life, rootedness, and divine presence. It is not only a place of offering but also a center where the spiritual and physical worlds meet.

¹¹ R9, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

¹² Lembaga Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, 245. For Manggarai people, *wae teku* (drinking water) is regarded as the source of life. During traditional ceremonies like *Penti* (a thanksgiving ritual), *wae bate teku*, the flowing spring water is considered a vital element. Village elders typically present offerings and pray to *Mori Kraeng*, the Supreme Being, asking for continued blessings so that the *wae bate teku* will never cease to flow. Water is not just a natural resource; it is a spiritual gift from the Supreme Being. Water is more than physical, it is life itself, a bridge to the divine, and a sign of God's care. The flowing spring water is a manifestation of divine presence and sustenance, deeply connected to ancestral spirits, the land, and God.

¹³ R9, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

¹⁴ Lembaga Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, 106. *Lodok* is a traditional layout of rice fields and gardens in Manggarai, arranged in a pie-like pattern and distributed to community members. The division is determined by the width of the traditional leader's thumbs, creating equal proportions that expand outward, meaning the farther from the center, the larger the plots become. Each member of the community has access to the central point. These fields or gardens are established on communal land known as *lingko*. The center represents common ancestry and shared life, reminding all people that while beliefs may differ, their origin and destiny remain intertwined. In *Lodok*, each share is measured fairly, not according to power but by custom and moral leadership—reflecting the ethic of justice and respect that shapes interreligious life in Manggarai.

different rituals but share cultural values, language, land, and leadership.¹⁵ *Pa'ang*¹⁶ or the village gate serves as a cultural and social filter.¹⁷ “This practice serves as an invitation for adherents of various religions to cultivate self-awareness of their own identities and cultural foundations prior to engaging in interreligious dialogue, thereby fostering a more respectful and meaningful exchange.”¹⁸

The philosophical values embedded in Manggarai culture serve as a unifying force that transcends religious boundaries. These traditions act as social glue, helping communities stay connected and resilient in diversity. Without a foundation of meaning and life values rooted in ethical-religious and ideological traditions, the modern legal system—comprising rights and justice—would quickly collapse.¹⁹

Historical Development of Catholicism and Islam in Manggarai

Based on history, Islam was the first to enter Manggarai in 1626, and almost three centuries later, Catholicism arrived.²⁰ In Manggarai, the arrival of Islam is facilitated by traders and even political entities expanding their influence over the region. Although Islam arrived first in Manggarai, its numbers did not grow significantly. One participant states that there are several reasons, namely first, “their way of life did not support the conditions for adopting Islam (such as the consumption of pork/dog meat).” Second, “Muslims tend to have lifestyles centered around trade and fishing, while Manggarai people had an agrarian culture.” Third, “circumcision was difficult to accept because it was not part of their traditions.” Additionally, “the concept of *anak wina* and *anak rona* (types of children in social structures) and adherence to those concepts influenced their religious orientation.”²¹

The Catholic faith in Manggarai started when five local people on May 17, 1912 by a Jesuit priest, Fr. P. Loojmans, SJ.²² Before 1912, several Jesuit priests visited Manggarai to reach out to Catholics from Larantuka, eastern part of Flores, who came to Manggarai for pearl diving along the coast of Labuan Bajo. In general, it can be said that the Jesuit missionaries’ efforts in Manggarai were sporadic and focused primarily on coastal areas, without extending into the hinterland.

By the 17th century, the Portuguese and later the Dutch had become significant colonial powers in the region. The Portuguese, who were the first Europeans to establish a colonial foothold in Southeast Asia,

¹⁵ R9, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

¹⁶ Lembaga Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, 181. *Pa'ang* serves as the entrance gate to a Manggarai village and is considered a spiritual checkpoint where the screening of spirits takes place. Cemeteries are often located near this entrance, reflecting the belief that the spirits of departed family members continue to watch over the living. This deep respect for ancestral spirits is expressed through the ritual of *Teing Hang*—a ceremony where food is offered to deceased relatives as a gesture of gratitude for their protection and guidance. Functionally, *Pa'ang* is the first point of contact, who you are, where you come from, and who you belong to matters here. Spiritually, it is where spirits are screened, a liminal space where the living and the dead acknowledge each other. To truly enter a space, whether a home, a village, or a relationship, you must first pass through respect, memory, and openness.

¹⁷ R3, interview by author, 30 November, 2024.

¹⁸ R9, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

¹⁹ Otto Gusti Madung, “Pancasila, Demokrasi Liberal dan Komunitarisme,” *Jurnal Ledalero* 13, no. 2 (Desember 2014), 318.

²⁰ Sekretariat Pastoral Keuskupan Ruteng, 2. See also Hironinus Bandur & Adison Adrianus Sihombing, “Likang Telu: Cultural Basis for Muslim-Catholic Relations in Manggarai” *Jurnal Al-Albab* 2, no 1 (June 2022), 84.

²¹ R7, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

²² Max Regus and Kanisius Teobald Deki, *Gereja Menyapa Manggarai, Menghirup Keutamaan Tradisi, Menumbuhkan Cinta, Menjaga Harapan: Satu Abad Gereja Manggarai-Flores* (Jakarta Selatan: Parrhesia Institute, 2011), 206. See also Fransiska Widyawati, *Catholics in Manggarai, Flores, Eastern Indonesia* (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2018), 125.

began spreading Catholicism in the 16th century. However, due to competition with the Dutch (who were predominantly Protestant), the Portuguese influence in certain regions, such as Flores, would have been limited. The delay in Catholicism's entry into Manggarai is also linked to the strong indigenous belief systems, the political autonomy of local kingdoms, and the limited influence of European missionaries in remote interior areas. Therefore, Catholicism did not spread widely in the region until later, when missionaries arrived more systematically in the 19th century. However, it can be said that "Christianity came to Manggarai together with and through the colonial government."²³

The early encounters between Muslims and Catholics in Manggarai are mostly on the aspect of political rather than theology.²⁴ The focus on political matters rather than theological debates likely stemmed from the need to conquer Manggarai as a whole. Over time, theological discussions emerged as the relationship deepened, but initially, the priority was often on political stability and cooperation, especially in a region where religious groups might be competing for influence or resources.

Hiro Bandur explained the current relationship between Muslim-Catholic in Manggarai as moving from inter-domination to inter-accommodation.²⁵ Bandur's analysis points to a broader, more positive transformation where religious identities are not in direct competition for dominance but instead coexist in a manner that promotes understanding and cooperation. This transition also likely reflects broader social changes in the region, including the influence of education, interfaith dialogue, and the desire for peaceful coexistence in a diverse society.

Dialogue between Muslims and Catholics in Manggarai

Understanding Interreligious Dialogue

In today's world, no religion can stand on its own; each inevitably comes into contact with others at various levels of social and cultural life. This growing interconnectedness compels religious communities to continually re-examine how they relate to those of different faiths. Paul Knitter notes that "believers within various religions are feeling more and more intensely the challenge of finding and developing their individual identities within the broader community of other religions."²⁶

As religious communities grapple with this growing need for meaningful engagement, it becomes clear that dialogue requires not only personal openness but also an institutional and theological framework that supports it. In this context, interreligious dialogue can be defined as "an intentional engagement with those whose religion or faith tradition differs from our own"²⁷ to develop their identity and to grow in their respective faith.

The Christian tradition, therefore, cannot remain silent or passive in the face of increasing interreligious contact; it must articulate a vision that acknowledges the presence of truth and goodness beyond its own boundaries. Recognizing this need, the Catholic Church began to re-evaluate its stance

²³ Fransiskus Borgias, "The Quick Growth of the Catholic Church in Manggarai," *Melintas* 31, no. 3 (Maret 2015), 278.

²⁴ Bandur, *Muslim dan Katolik Manggarai*, 18.

²⁵ Bandur, 244.

²⁶ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 2002), 10.

²⁷ Miriam Therese Winter, "Doing Effective Dialogue and Loving it," in *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots* edited by Rebecca Kratz Mays (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Ecumenical Press, 2008), 27.

toward other religions in the modern era, laying the groundwork for a more positive and constructive approach to interfaith relations.

The Second Vatican Council through its document *Nostra Aetate* states the attitude of the Church toward other religion saying “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.”²⁸ The Church for the first time recognizes the validity of truth and grace found among other faiths and cultures. This is the starting point which encourages the Church to engage in dialogue with people and cultures. It regards Muslims with esteem in a theological acknowledgment because the Catholic Church shares the same kinship and partial revelation with Islam.²⁹

This notion is further explained in the document of *Dialogue and Proclamation*. This document defines dialogue as “all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individual and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment.”³⁰ The Church is not limiting dialogue to formal theological discussions. It includes everything from daily interactions to academic exchanges. Dialogue must aim to build up, not tear down. It is not debate or confrontation, but collaboration.

As religious communities navigate these complex interactions, the need for a constructive and humane approach to engaging differences become increasingly evident. Rather than retreating into isolation or responding with suspicion, communities are invited to seek forms of encounter that affirm both their own identity and the dignity of others. This requires a model of dialogue that is grounded not only in ideas but also in attitudes, gestures, and shared human experience.

Such encounters call for genuine engagement, which Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (FT), describes as “approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground.”³¹ Interreligious dialogue, in this sense, is a lived encounter that combines openness of heart, shared experiences, and practical cooperation to foster peaceful and respectful relationships between religions.

FT states that “life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter.”³² At its core, this Encyclical elevates encounter to an art, something intentional, creative, and requiring practice. In the same spirit, Panikkar views dialogue “as an art, a doing, an activity, a praxis.”³³ Unlike mere interaction or passive coexistence, encounter involves openness, vulnerability, and the willingness to truly see and hear the other. It is not about avoiding conflict but engaging with others in a way that respects their dignity and seeks common ground. The purpose of this encounter can be seen in its capacity “of transcending differences and divisions.”³⁴

This vision suggests that encounter is not automatic or easy, it must be cultivated. Just as an artist learns through effort, failure, and refinement, so too must individuals and societies learn how to engage

²⁸ Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, on The Relation of the Church toward Non-Christian Religions (October 28, 1965), no. 2.

²⁹ Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3.

³⁰ The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (19 May, 1991), 9.

³¹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Encyclical Letter, 2020, no. 198.

³² Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 215.

³³ Raimon Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament the Way to Peace* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 101.

³⁴ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 215.

differences constructively. This art involves the capacity to listen deeply, empathize with another's perspective, and remain committed to dialogue even when it is uncomfortable.

Raimon Panikkar names this type of encounter as “dialogical dialogue,” which he defines as “a dialogue among subjects aiming at being dialogue about subjects.”³⁵ It begins with the recognition that the other is likewise a genuine source of human insight and that those who engage in dialogue possess, at some level, the ability to share and convey their distinctive experiences and understandings to one another. This encounter is the encounter between persons not the belief systems. Panikkar continued that in this encounter “they dialogue about themselves and they dialogue themselves.”³⁶ The very important matter here is not merely about thought but about the real person, the subject as the source of understanding.

Such an understanding of dialogical encounter underscores that interreligious engagement cannot remain merely theoretical or abstract; it must be grounded in a concrete disposition of openness toward the lived faith of the other. If dialogue is, as Panikkar suggests, a mutual unveiling of persons, then religious traditions must develop an attitude that recognizes the presence of truth, goodness, and human depth in those beyond their own boundaries. This calls for a theological and institutional readiness to affirm the value of the religious other—a readiness that the Catholic tradition began to articulate more explicitly in the modern era.

Dialogue between Muslims and Catholics in Manggarai

The vision of encounter finds a powerful and practical embodiment in Manggarai, where Catholics and Muslims demonstrate that dialogue is not just a theological concept, but a lived reality. It lives out a model of dialogue proposed by Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), which is “intrinsic to the very life of the Church and the essential mode of all evangelization.”³⁷ Through the dialogue of life, action, religious experience, and theological exchange, these communities demonstrate that authentic dialogue is not limited to formal settings but is woven into everyday relationships, shared efforts, and mutual spiritual respect.

There are villages in Manggarai where Muslims and Catholics live in great harmony because they come from the same ethnic group, for example, in Rekas and Lengko Ajang. For them, the lineage that flows through their veins holds far greater value than religious affiliation or personal belief and this group is called ‘*Muslim Pribumi*/Native Muslim.’³⁸ As the encounter between these religions developed there are several forms of dialogue have been conducted and still in progress.

First, dialogue of life. Dialogue of life refers to a situation “where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.”³⁹ Sergey Melnik categorizes this kind of dialogue as “dialogue of hands.”⁴⁰ It refers to an everyday, grassroots form

³⁵ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New Jersey: Paulist Press 1999), 29.

³⁶ Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 30.

³⁷ Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA 1), “Statement and Recommendations of the First Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs. Bangkok, Thailand, 18 October 1979,” *For All the People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences from 1970 to 1991*, 1, ed. Rosaes, G.B. and C.G. Arevalo (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1992), 111, no. 9.

³⁸ R3, interview by author, 30 November, 2024.

³⁹ *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 42.

⁴⁰ Sergey Melnik, “Types of Interreligious Dialogue” *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31 (November 2020), 50.

of interreligious dialogue, where people of different religions live together in harmony, not through formal theological debates, but through mutual respect, shared experiences, and solidarity in daily life. It is an effort “to seek the good and heal the world” which happens only where there is collaboration with “the other.”⁴¹

In the context of Catholic and Muslim dialogue in Manggarai, this concept takes on a very real and tangible form.⁴² They work together in agriculture, celebrate weddings and funerals across religious lines, and show solidarity in times of joy and crisis.⁴³ These relationships are rooted not just in tolerance, but in a deep cultural respect and familial bonds. During religious festivals like Eid al-Fitr or Christmas, it is common for neighbors of different faiths to visit each other, share meals, and offer greetings.⁴⁴ In times of mourning, both Catholics and Muslims attend funerals regardless of the faith of the deceased, showing a communal spirit that transcends religious doctrine.⁴⁵ A participant shares how he includes Muslim youth in working with him and attending their family events.⁴⁶

Second, dialogue of action. Dialogue of action refers to a situation “in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.”⁴⁷ Dialogue of action is a form of interreligious cooperation where people of different faiths work together to address social, economic, or environmental issues. Melnik named this also as a “dialogue of hands,”⁴⁸ where people work side by side to seek the good in each other’s life.⁴⁹

It goes beyond words and becomes concrete action for the common good and impact the society as a whole. Interreligious Harmony Forum of Ruteng is very active in this dialogue of action. They form an interreligious youth groups and interreligious village and they often work together to prevent conflict, reduce prejudice, and promote unity.⁵⁰ Catholic-run schools often welcome students of all faiths, including Muslims. Teachers and staff work together to create an inclusive environment where religious differences are respected.⁵¹

Third, dialogue of religious experience. Dialogue of religious experience is “where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.”⁵² It happens when people from different faiths, like Catholics and Muslims share their inner spiritual lives: how they pray, how they experience God, and how they seek meaning or the divine. It is a “dialogue of heart,”⁵³ which “seeks the

⁴¹ Leonard Swidler, “Understanding Dialogue,” in *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots*, ed. Rebecca Kratz Mays, (Philadelphia: Ecumenical Press, 2008), 10.

⁴² R4, interview by author, 29 November, 2024.

⁴³ R1, interview by author, 15 January, 2025.

⁴⁴ All the Respondents share these same experiences.

⁴⁵ R2, interview by author, 9 December, 2024.

⁴⁶ R5, interview by author, 29 November 2024.

⁴⁷ *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 42.

⁴⁸ Sergey Melnik, “Types of Interreligious Dialogue,” 50.

⁴⁹ Leonard Swidler, “Understanding Dialogue,” 10.

⁵⁰ R1, interview by author, 15 January, 2025.

⁵¹ R8, interview by author, 11 January, 2025.

⁵² *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 42.

⁵³ Sergey Melnik, “Types of Interreligious Dialogue, 50.

beautiful.”⁵⁴ This form of dialogue does not try to convert, but rather deepens mutual respect by recognizing the beauty in each other’s religious paths.

One participant shares her experience, “we learn together how to pray with nature, finding God’s voice in His creation, which for Muslims is called *Tadabur*.”⁵⁵ During Ramadan, some Catholics join their Muslim neighbors in breaking the fast, not just for the meal, but as a way of sharing in the sacredness of the moment. Similarly, Muslims sometimes join in Catholic feasts like Easter or Christmas, appreciating the spiritual atmosphere, even if they do not share the belief.⁵⁶

The Interreligious Harmony Forum conducts also spiritual dialogue between leaders: Catholic priests, nuns and Muslim clerics sometimes hold interfaith discussions not to debate, but to share insights on themes like mercy, forgiveness, or peace from their scriptures. This helps build spiritual bridges between communities.⁵⁷

Fourth, dialogue of theological exchange. This kind of dialogue refers to a situation “where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.”⁵⁸ This is a form of “dialogue of head,”⁵⁹ which happens when religious scholars, leaders, or educated believers come together to study, reflect, and deepen understanding of each other’s faith traditions and “seeking the Truth.”⁶⁰ In serious intellectual dialogue, people should not hide the views they hold regarding the truth, on the contrary, they must express it clearly and must be open to it corrected by another view, which is perhaps closer to the truth.⁶¹ “This dialogue usually happens in the universities, where all leaders participate and share their views.”⁶²

Manggarai stands as a hopeful testimony to the broader world, showing that when theological principles are lived out in genuine relationships, they can heal divisions, strengthen communities, and reflect the heart of the Gospel. The experience of dialogue here reaffirms the Church’s call to encounter, not avoidance; collaboration, not competition. It is a reminder that in a diverse world, peace is possible, not in spite of our differences, but often because of how they choose to honor it together.

The Challenges in Catholic-Muslim Dialogue in Manggarai

There are no big clashes between these two religions in Manggarai, except conflicts in Reo and Labuan Bajo. Reo is the place where Muslim and Catholic differ only slightly in numbers.⁶³ It happened in 4 October 2014, when a group of Catholic and Muslim boys who were drunk provoked by a young man who had just returned from Makassar, to throw stones at Muslims who were holding an Eid al-Adha

⁵⁴ Leonard Swidler, “Understanding Dialogue,” 10.

⁵⁵ R1, interview by author, 15 January, 2025.

⁵⁶ All the participants share these great experiences.

⁵⁷ R1, interview by author, 15 January, 2025.

⁵⁸ *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42.

⁵⁹ Sergey Melnik, “Types of Interreligious Dialogue,” 50.

⁶⁰ Leonard Swidler, “Understanding Dialogue,” 10.

⁶¹ Georg Kirchberger, “Konsep Etos Global Hans Küng dan Relevansinya terhadap Upaya Dialog Antaragama di Indonesia,” *Jurnal Ledalero* 21, no. 1 (Juni 2022), 27.

⁶² R6, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

⁶³ Bandur, *Muslim dan Katolik Manggarai*, 116.

parade.⁶⁴ It became a major issue and the news spread all over Reo. A group of Muslims destroyed some Catholic houses and vice versa.⁶⁵

In Labuan Bajo, there are two cases; first is the idea of implementing *halal* tourism policy in 2019, especially for food.⁶⁶ The consequence of this idea is, there would be no pork sold in any restaurant in this city. It was not agreed by most of the people. One may overlook the presence of pork in that establishment, recognizing that its inclusion may not pose significant concern for all individuals or communities. The second case was an attack on a pork satay stall by a group of Muslims because it was considered to be disrupting the month of Ramadan in May 2018.⁶⁷ The person who provoked this act, later on known, is coming from another island, namely Bima.

Based on the interview and some analysis on the cases above, there are at least three challenges faced by Catholic and Muslims which hinders them from building an effective dialogue.

Lack of Knowledge about Each Other's Faith

The lack of mutual understanding remains one of the most significant obstacles to deepening Catholic-Muslim dialogue, especially at the grassroots level. While formal initiatives such as interfaith seminars, theological workshops, and government-endorsed programs on religious moderation exist, they often reach only a limited segment of the population, primarily religious leaders, scholars, or those already engaged in dialogue. As a result, large portions of society remain uninformed or misinformed about the beliefs, practices, and values of those from different faith traditions, which bring them into the seeing themselves as “the people who live and practice the truest faith of puritanism, and those who do not belong to us are *kafir* (infidel).”⁶⁸

In Manggarai, this imbalance in understanding can become even more pronounced. Without sufficient exposure or access to reliable information, members of both communities rely on secondhand knowledge, cultural assumptions, or even media portrayals that distort the reality of the other's faith. This leads to the formation of stereotypes. “There is a tendency of looking at each other based only on their teachings, not on them as human.”⁶⁹ These misconceptions breed suspicion or create invisible barriers between communities that otherwise live in close proximity.

The incidents in Reo and Labuan Bajo serve as concrete examples of how this lack of understanding can escalate into tension or conflict. In both cases, the root issue was not doctrinal disagreement, but a breakdown in communication and empathy, fueled by ignorance of each other's traditions and a lack of constructive interaction.

⁶⁴ Ardy Abba, “Gara-Gara Kerusuhan, Anak di Reo Trauma dan Takut Ke Sekolah,” *Floresa.co*, 8 Oktober 2024, <https://www.floresa.co/2014/10/08/gara-gara-kerusuhan-anak-di-reo-trauma-dan-takut-ke-sekolah/>. See also Ardy Abba, “Polisi: Pemicu Konflik di Reo Bukan Agama,” *Floresa.co*, 8 Oktober 2024, <https://floresa.co/reportase/peristiwa/2500/2014/10/08/polisi-pemicu-konflik-di-reo-bukan-agama>.

⁶⁵ R8, interview by author, 11 January, 2025.

⁶⁶ R3, interview by author, 30 November, 2024.

⁶⁷ R7, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

⁶⁸ R6, interview by author, 14 January 2025.

⁶⁹ R1, interview by author, 15 January 2025.

The Arrival of New People and New Views

The influx of new people and different perspectives can create both opportunities and challenges in interreligious dialogue. Newcomers, especially those who are not familiar with the local culture or religious dynamics, bring with them different religious practices, beliefs, and interpretations that can sometimes conflict with the established norms of the area. “The problems that occur between Catholics and Muslims in Manggarai usually have the influence of newcomers. New groups come in, recruit broad-minded young people, and force them to leave behind the old values of living together.”⁷⁰

A Participant in an interview stated that “the arrival of outsiders who bring new perspectives creates a dilemma for the followers of that religion: should they embrace what is brought from the outside as the truth, or should they continue to follow what they have been practicing all along? This dilemma is even more pronounced when the newcomers are educated individuals, as they assert that what they are spreading is also the truth.”⁷¹ They exploit existing local grievances or create new ones by inciting one group to react against the other, whether through inflammatory speech, misinformation, or direct actions.

When new residents arrive, especially those from areas with different religious dynamics, more rigid interpretations of faith, or less experience in interfaith engagement, they unintentionally disrupt this equilibrium. “They bring with them exclusivist religious ideologies, stricter practices, or suspicion toward the other, which contrasts with the more relational and inclusive religious expression found in Manggarai.”⁷²

In places like Labuan Bajo, which has experienced a surge in tourism and economic activity, these challenges are already becoming evident.⁷³ The arrival of people from outside the region, including business entrepreneurs, religious preachers, or even tourists, shift the local religious landscape. The community’s response to these new influences varies. This wariness leads to social fragmentation, with communities retreating into their own religious or ethnic identities rather than engaging openly. It also exacerbates pre-existing stereotypes, especially if the newcomers’ actions are interpreted as disrespectful or disruptive.

The Use of Religion in Politics

Religion being politicized is another significant challenge. In some cases, political leaders or groups use religious identity or religious rhetoric to gain support, mobilize followers, or deepen divides between communities. In Manggarai, sometimes political leaders frame the Catholic-Muslim divide in religious terms. “The candidates are using the name of religion and dividing our togetherness in Manggarai.”⁷⁴ The politicization of religion encourages people to view their religious affiliation as an “us vs. them” mentality.

In Manggarai, religion carries profound emotional, moral, and cultural significance. This makes it a powerful tool for political mobilization. “Politicians or political groups, seeking votes, influence, or legitimacy deliberately invoke religious rhetoric, symbols, or affiliations to galvanize support.”⁷⁵ While this may yield short-term political gains, it often comes at a high social cost. Campaign slogans, public speeches,

⁷⁰ R4, interview by author, 29 November 2024; R5, interview by author, 29 November, 2024.

⁷¹ R4, interview by author, 29 November, 2024.

⁷² R1, interview by author, 15 January 2025.

⁷³ R5, interview by author, 29 November, 2024.

⁷⁴ R8, interview by author, 11 January, 2025.

⁷⁵ R8, interview by author, 11 January, 2025.

or social media messaging may imply that one religious group is more “authentically Manggarai” than another, or that one side’s values are incompatible with those of the other. This kind of politicization can be especially damaging at the grassroots level.

The Contribution of Culture in Building Dialogue between Catholic and Muslim in Manggarai

In an increasingly interconnected world marked by great cultural, ethnic, racial, national, and religious diversity, it is essential to find ways for the human family to come together while still honoring and respecting these many differences. One meaningful way this unity is cultivated can be seen in how local cultural practices shape relationships among different religious communities.

Christopher Dawson notes that “culture is the form of society. The society without culture is a formless society—a crowd or a collection of individuals brought together by the needs of the moment—while the stronger a culture is, the more completely does it inform and transform the diverse human material of which it is composed.”⁷⁶ Culture is what turns a group of separate individuals into a real society. The stronger and more developed the culture is, the more effectively it brings people together and shapes them into a unified group.

How are culture and religion connected? Dawson beautifully explains it.

While a culture is essentially an organized way of life, it is never conceived as a purely man-made order. The social way of life is founded on a religious law of life, and this law in turn depends on non-human powers towards which man looks with hope and fear, powers which can be known in some fashion, but which remain essentially mysterious, since they are superhuman and supernatural.⁷⁷

Culture is more than human habits—it feels connected to something sacred. People believe that the rules of life ultimately come from divine or mysterious powers, which they respect, fear, and depend upon. This gives culture a spiritual foundation that shapes how society understands right and wrong, life and death, harmony and disorder.

Religion and culture are deeply interconnected. Culture encompasses the ways people live, relate to the world and to one another, and express life through the creation of symbolic forms—language being the most fundamental. Religion, meanwhile, offers meaning and inspiration by interpreting life in relation to an Ultimate reality, conveyed through myth or revelation and honored through ritual.⁷⁸

In the context of Manggarai, this idea helps explain how Catholics and Muslims build strong relationships despite religious differences. Shared Manggarai traditions give shape and unity to the community, forming a cultural identity that stands above religious boundaries. Without this shared culture, Catholics and Muslims might function only as separate groups who meet out of necessity, but Manggarai culture instead transforms this religious diversity into social cohesion. Through common practices like

⁷⁶ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 36. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10842024>.

⁷⁷ Dawson, 43.

⁷⁸ Michael Amalados, *Walking Together the Practice of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitaha Prakash, 1992), 5.

attending each other's ceremonies, participating in *adat* events, and relying on customary mechanisms for cooperation and conflict resolution, culture becomes the foundation that unites people.

Culture plays a vital role in shaping and sustaining the relationship between Catholics and Muslims in Manggarai. "A cultural approach in interreligious dialogue is very helpful in resolving issues between religions."⁷⁹ Beyond religious doctrines, it is the shared customs, values, and traditions that foster a sense of unity and mutual respect among communities. In this way, a strong Manggarai culture not only shapes society but also fosters mutual understanding, harmony, and lasting relationships between Catholics and Muslims.

Inclusivity of the people of Manggarai

The people of Manggarai are known for their strong sense of community and belonging, which naturally fosters an inclusive attitude. This inclusivity is deeply rooted in their traditional customs and social values, where unity and harmony are prioritized over religious differences. "The people of Manggarai of Manggarai are welcoming and respectful of differences, they are open to whoever comes and visit them."⁸⁰ It helps prevent conflict and promotes a sense of mutual respect.

This inclusivity is born from the people's awareness of the variety of religions in this region,⁸¹ and brings benefits to all the people. Hiro Bandur listed these positive outcomes such as "1) every individual is free to express their cultural identity amidst plurality, 2) every individual has the desire to learn other people's cultures, 3) every individual feels happy with cultural differences."⁸² The three outcomes Bandur mentions reflect a progression from acceptance, to engagement, to celebration of cultural differences. This implies that multiculturalism is not just coexistence but active interconnection.

This relationship is not merely based on tolerance but is actively nurtured through daily interactions, shared experiences, and mutual respect. A participant witnessed that "I feel very comfortable being in Manggarai, with its local culture that is very accepting. The cultural lessons at school really helped me to socialize."⁸³ This spirit of openness and acceptance aligns with Hiro Bandur's framework, where individuals freely express their identity, are eager to learn from others, and find joy in diversity. While openness and hospitality are generally positive traits, they can also be exploited.

However, one Participant pointed out another fact that "inclusivism is not always beneficial, because sometimes it happens that, due to the topography and hospitality, it becomes a comfortable place to hide and build strength from."⁸⁴ In Manggarai, certain groups take advantage of the community's inclusive nature to hide, organize, or even grow influence without proper scrutiny. This could refer to political, ideological, or even extremist groups that misuse hospitality for their own agenda.

The inclusive character of Manggarai culture functions not only as a social virtue but also as a mediating structure for theological dialogue. In this context, culture becomes the space where religious identity is expressed, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday life. Manggarai people's openness, hospitality,

⁷⁹ R4, interview by author, 29 November, 2024.

⁸⁰ R3, interview by author, 30 November, 2024.

⁸¹ Bandur, *Muslim dan Katolik Manggarai*, 184.

⁸² Bandur.

⁸³ R2, interview by author, 9 December, 2024.

⁸⁴ R3, interview by author, 30 November, 2024.

and strong communal ethos form the cultural “grammar” through which theological meaning is embodied and communicated.

First, Manggarai inclusivity provides the anthropological foundation for dialogical faith. The willingness to welcome others—regardless of religious background—creates an atmosphere where theological encounters can unfold naturally. Before doctrines are discussed, the stranger is embraced as *ata one* (a fellow person). This human recognition precedes religious identity and becomes theologically significant: it echoes the belief, shared across many faith traditions, that every person bears dignity and sacred worth.⁸⁵ Thus, the cultural value of welcoming becomes a lived expression of a theological truth.

Second, Manggarai people’s commitment to harmony mediates theological dialogue by shaping attitudes toward difference. Rather than perceiving difference as a threat, the culture encourages seeing it as a source of enrichment for communal life. This aligns with the theological understanding that the Spirit works through plurality, inviting communities to discover divine presence not just within their own religious boundaries but also in the lives of others. Bandur’s three outcomes—free expression of identity, desire to learn from others, and joy in diversity—reflect a dynamic interplay between culture and theological openness. Through everyday interactions, people implicitly practice a form of “interfaith hermeneutics,” interpreting others’ beliefs through shared cultural values of respect, learning, and conviviality.

Third, the experiences shared by participants illustrate culture’s role as a pedagogical mediator. One participant’s testimony about feeling comfortable in Manggarai due to its accepting ethos and cultural lessons at school highlights how cultural learning becomes a preparatory ground for religious coexistence. Theological dialogue is not confined to formal interreligious forums; it is cultivated in schools, households, markets, and village gatherings. Culture, therefore, teaches people how to engage religiously before they even articulate what their faith teaches about engagement.

In this light, Manggarai culture emerges as a living mediating structure—a bridge that enables dialogue of faith not primarily through abstract theological propositions, but through concrete practices of hospitality, coexistence, discernment, and communal learning. Its inclusive ethos both supports interfaith harmony and challenges communities to deepen their theological understanding of difference. Thus, culture becomes a dynamic locus where faith is interpreted, challenged, and enriched through everyday human relations.

Encounter (*Lejong*)

Lejong is a local tradition of visiting each other to chat, share news, and strengthen relationships. It is more than just a casual social visit and it builds trust and closeness. *Lejong* usually takes place over short distances, including visits to neighbors. Bandur considers this activity as “an expression of individual freedom as a social being.”⁸⁶ It highlights *lejong* as a culturally significant activity that reflects deeper social

⁸⁵ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 273. Pope Francis in FT invites everyone to respect others simply because “the transcendent dignity of the human person, as the visible image of the invisible God, with subjects of rights that no one may violate.”

⁸⁶ Bandur, *Muslim dan Katolik Manggarai*, 190.

values. The fact that *lejong* usually occurs over short distances suggests its role in maintaining close-knit community ties and daily interpersonal connections.

Lejong as an expression of individual freedom as a social being means that while individuals choose to engage in *lejong* voluntarily, their actions fulfill a fundamental human need: to connect with others. It reflects the idea that personal freedom is not limited to independence but includes the ability to build relationships and participate actively in communal life.

There are three poles that form the soul of *lejong* — the intimate relationship between humans and the Supreme Being, the relationship among fellow humans, and the relationship with the natural universe.⁸⁷ These three poles show that *lejong* is not merely a social custom but a cultural practice grounded in spiritual, human, and ecological harmony, and it is through this integrated worldview that its deeper values are expressed in everyday interactions.

Rooted in these foundational relationships, *lejong* shapes concrete attitudes and behaviors that guide how people encounter and treat one another in daily life. These values primarily relate to respect for others and the principle of equality in the relationship between the host (*ata nggara mbaru*) and the guest (*ata mai lejong*). The richness of these values is revealed in the *lejong* rituals, as explained below. First, *Reis* or *Ris*. *Reis* comes from the word *rei* in Manggarai which means “to ask.” In the context of *lejong*, *reis* is a form of exchanged greeting both the host and the guest. Essentially, *reis* is a greeting that expresses friendliness and/or intimacy between the host and the guest. *Reis* carries the meaning of mutuality. Second, *Raes*. The word *raes* means to accompany, to be with, or to attend. *Raes* creates a sense of security. In *raes*, people are moved to stay close to one another. *Raes* allows for the development of deep relationships, because through *raes*, the guest becomes part of the host. Through *raes*, the guest feels welcomed, valued, and respected. Third, *Raos*. *Raos* refers to the sense of liveliness that arises when the guest and host communicate with each other. During *raos*, they share stories and experiences related to family life as well as the wider community. *Raos* makes the guest feel acknowledged and valued. Through *raos*, the guest attains a status or position equal to that of the host. In addition, *raos* allows for mutually beneficial and enriching relationships, as both parties share experiences and affirm one another.

This idea of *lejong* closely aligns with Pope Francis’ teaching on “culture of encounter” which emphasizes the importance of personal, respectful, and meaningful engagement between individuals, especially across differences. Pope Francis frequently speaks of a culture of encounter, where people go out of their way to meet others, listen, and build relationships based on empathy and mutual recognition. He teaches that real human development happens not in isolation, but in dialogue and community.

In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, he stresses that authentic encounter involves openness, humility, and the willingness to see the dignity of the other. “We, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone.”⁸⁸ This call emphasizes the importance of actively engaging with others, especially those who are different from us, in order to foster mutual understanding and unity.

⁸⁷ Marselinus Alsadin, “Pastoral Lejong Orang Manggarai Sebagai Media Toleransi,” *BernasIndo.ID*, <https://www.bernasindo.id/2025/04/pastoral-lejong-orang-manggarai-sebagai-media-toleransi.html>

⁸⁸ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 216.

Pope Francis reflects on the nature of life as “the art of encounter,” likening it to “the oxygen of life.”⁸⁹ He suggests that life is enriched through genuine encounters with others, which require openness, listening, and compassion. These teachings resonate with the practice of *lejong* in Manggarai, where individuals engage in spontaneous visits to neighbors, transcending religious and cultural boundaries. By embracing these encounters, individuals contribute to building a more inclusive and fraternal society, in line with Pope Francis’ vision.

The tradition of *lejong* illustrates how culture operates as a living mediating structure between religious communities, shaping the conditions under which theological dialogue becomes possible. In Manggarai, culture is not an external layer added to faith but an interior space in which faith is embodied, interpreted, and shared. The practice of *lejong*—with its interplay of *reis*, *raes*, and *raos*—creates a relational environment that enables encounter not only socially but also theologically.

First, *lejong* mediates theological dialogue through relational anthropology. *Lejong* assumes that every person is a relational being linked to God, to others, and to the natural world. This triadic anthropology forms the metaphysical foundation of encounter: each visitor is not just a social guest but a bearer of sacred presence, created in relationship with the Supreme Being. Thus, when Catholics and Muslims meet through *lejong*, they enter a space already theologically charged—where the dignity of the other is affirmed culturally before it is articulated religiously. Culture prepares the heart for theological openness.

Second, *lejong* provides a symbolic structure that shapes how religious difference is engaged. The sequence of *reis* (mutual greeting), *raes* (accompaniment), and *raos* (lively exchange) forms a ritualized pathway from initial recognition to deeper sharing. This pathway mirrors a theological movement: *Reis* echoes the act of acknowledging the other as a fellow creature of God. *Raes* embodies accompaniment as a spiritual attitude—walking together, echoing themes found in Christian and Islamic traditions of compassionate companionship. *Raos*, where stories, struggles, and hopes are exchanged, becomes a space of shared revelation. In everyday narratives, people implicitly reveal their faith, moral visions, and understanding of God. Through these stages, theological dialogue emerges organically—not from formal debate but from the shared humanity that culture nurtures.

Third, *lejong* mediates dialogue by transforming the “other” into a relational subject, not an abstract category. Theological misunderstandings often arise from distance and abstraction, where the other’s religion is perceived through stereotypes. *Lejong* disrupts this dynamic by insisting on face-to-face presence. In this human nearness, religion becomes intertwined with the person: the Muslim is not merely a follower of Islam but the neighbor who offers hospitality; the Catholic is not simply a member of the Church but the friend who shares stories during *raos*. This relational shift has profound theological implications. It invites both Catholics and Muslims to see the other through the lens of compassion, respect, and mutual dignity—values deeply rooted in both traditions. Culture thus becomes the mediator that humanizes theological perceptions, allowing faith to be encountered in the warmth of hospitality rather than in doctrinal isolation.

⁸⁹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 216.

Fourth, *lejong* models a dialogical theology grounded in everyday life. Because *lejong* is practiced spontaneously and frequently, it forms a daily rhythm in which theological meanings are negotiated. When Catholics and Muslims share personal stories, cultural values, and life challenges, they often reveal how their faith inspires or sustains them. This informal exchange becomes a form of “vernacular theology”—a grassroots theological discourse emerging from lived reality. Culture, therefore, becomes the stage on which faith is expressed in ordinary language and gestures, allowing theological dialogue to be accessible, embodied, and practical.

Finally, *lejong* reflects the possibility of a sacramental reading of culture. The warm greeting, shared presence, and storytelling of *lejong* allow individuals to experience grace, trust, reconciliation, and mutual recognition—realities that many religious traditions understand as signs of divine activity. In this sense, culture becomes a mediating sacrament: an outward, communal practice that reveals deeper theological truth. Through *lejong*, people encounter not only one another but also the divine mystery working through relationships, hospitality, and compassion.

Lejong creates a transformative encounter that moves beyond polite coexistence by fostering face-to-face, heart-to-heart interactions in which Catholics and Muslims are exposed to one another’s daily religious experiences, develop empathy, and normalize differences through routine contact. The relational structure of *reis-raes-raos* embeds equality within the encounter, undermining implicit religious hierarchies by enabling host and guest to greet each other sincerely, accompany one another, and share life stories as persons of equal dignity and spiritual value.

In this sense, *lejong* becomes a lived expression of Pope Francis’ “culture of encounter,” characterized by openness, humility, attentive listening, and recognition of the inherent worth of the other. Through such practices, individuals meet not merely as neighbors but as fellow seekers of meaning. Consequently, *lejong* humanizes religious identity by replacing abstract notions of “the other religion” with concrete relationships—“my friend,” “my neighbor,” “the one who helped me,” “the one I share life with”—which reshapes attitudes, weakens prejudice, and strengthens compassion. Rather than diluting faith, this form of encounter deepens it: participants are encouraged to express their beliefs confidently, learn from the values of others, and reflect more profoundly on their own traditions. In this way, *lejong* not only maintains social harmony but enriches and transforms interreligious faith relationships.

Mutual Help (Dodo/Leles)

Dodo/Leles refers to the spirit of helping one another, especially in tasks like farming, building houses, or preparing for traditional ceremonies.⁹⁰ It is a form of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) that is essential in rural Manggarai life, which brings followers of different religions together even closer.⁹¹ *Dodo* does not discriminate, when a family needs help, neighbors come regardless of their religion. This cooperation builds deep bonds of solidarity, as people rely on each other for both physical labor and emotional support.

⁹⁰ Bandur, *Muslim dan Katolik Manggarai*, 191.

⁹¹ R7, interview by author, 14 January, 2025.

This collective mindset is not merely about accomplishing tasks, but about reinforcing communal bonds and mutual responsibility. Importantly, this cooperation is inclusive and respectful of religious diversity. As Bandur said “the fundamental basis of cooperation in Manggarai culture is a strong willingness to work together or to work collectively.”⁹²

Dodo differs from *gotong royong* because it is not merely a form of collective work, but a structured social system deeply rooted in Manggarai culture. *Dodo* has specific rules, procedures, and customary values that bind relationships among community members, making it more than just a shared practice to accomplish a task. In *dodo*, before coming together to work, people of Manggarai would invite each other, sit down and planning the work together. It can be seen in the saying “*bantang cama reje leles*” which can literally be translated: agree together invite to mutual cooperation. Fransiskus Bustan explains the meaning of this expression in relation to *dodo* or *leles*. “This traditional expression implies the importance of deliberation and consensus in the planning process and in the mechanisms involved in carrying out *dodo/leles*.”⁹³ The underlying rationale is that collective interests take precedence over individual interests.

Unlike *gotong royong*, which is broad in scope and typically initiated by community leaders or the government, *dodo* is always initiated by the community members themselves. *Dodo* is not a spontaneous gesture but a deliberately organized form of mutual assistance. Participation in *dodo* carries a moral obligation to reciprocate in the future, thereby reinforcing durable networks of social relationships, which is not in *gotong royong*.

Moreover, *dodo* fosters an existential experience in which individuals feel “present with others,” experiencing solidarity, belonging, and deep social connection—dimensions not always found in the more pragmatic practice of *gotong royong*. Ultimately, *dodo* contains symbolic values, honor, and customary meaning that go beyond the physical goal of completing work, making it a cultural practice far richer than *gotong royong* in its general sense.

In Manggarai culture, *dodo* is not simply social cooperation; it is embedded in a cosmological worldview where human actions must harmonize with the ancestral order (*adat*). Working together in *dodo* is often seen as aligning the community with the cosmic balance. Maintaining harmony among humans, land, and ancestors is considered a moral duty. This worldview gives *dodo* a sacral dimension absent in the secular, administrative logic of *gotong royong*.

As mentioned above that *dodo* fosters an experience of “presence with others.” In Manggarai thought, this sense of presence is rooted in communal personhood, shared life energy, and the feeling of being woven into a broader moral–spiritual fabric. The experience of belonging or standing together can even take on almost sacramental overtones, as cooperative labor reveals deeper truths about human identity and moral responsibility.

The spirit of synodality can be seen in *dodo/leles*, especially focus on the initiative of people against the pyramidal and hierarchical model of doing things. In his address marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis both clarified the Church’s nature and outlined the path for its reform. “The

⁹² Bandur, *Muslim dan Katolik Manggarai*, 191.

⁹³ Fransiskus Bustan, *Mozaik Kearifan Lokal Warisan Leluhur Orang Manggarai* (Yogyakarta: Jejak Pustaka, 2025), 70.

path of synodality is the path that *God expects* of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord asks of us is already contained, in a sense, in the word “synod,” which means “walking together”—*laity, pastors, Bishop of Rome*.” He continues that’s “a synodal Church is a Church that listens’, where we all listen to each other and ‘in which everyone has something to learn.’”⁹⁴

Bernard Franck notes as quoted by Rafael Luciani that “the essence of synodality is a spirit rather than a principle”⁹⁵ Because it emphasizes and reshapes the relationships and interactions among participants to achieve “unity in diversity” or “the whole within its parts.” Just as synodality fosters communal discernment and mutual responsibility in the Church, *dodo* cultivates solidarity, moral obligation, and cooperative decision-making, showing that the spirit of working together can transcend mere procedure and become a lived, relational practice.

The Manggarai practice of *dodo/leles* reveals how culture can serve as a profound mediating structure that shapes, guides, and deepens interreligious dialogue. At its core, *dodo* is not simply a socio-economic mechanism for completing communal tasks; it is an expression of a worldview that integrates spiritual, moral, and relational dimensions of human life. This integration provides fertile ground for Catholic–Muslim dialogue, where faith is not discussed in abstractions but lived through cooperative relationships.

First, *dodo* mediates theological dialogue by grounding relationships in mutual responsibility. Because *dodo* is initiated by the people themselves—through deliberation, consensus, and shared commitment—it offers a grassroots model of relationality that mirrors key theological principles found in both Christianity and Islam: caring for one another, prioritizing the common good, and embodying compassion. These values are not merely spoken but enacted. In this way, *dodo* becomes a cultural “school of communion,” a place where theological truths about human dignity, solidarity, and moral obligation are practiced in daily life. The shared labor, shared meals, and shared planning sessions become spaces where trust and respect grow naturally, making deeper theological dialogue possible.

Second, *dodo* reflects a cosmological worldview that sacralizes cooperation, allowing interreligious dialogue to emerge within a shared moral universe. Manggarai culture understands *dodo* as participation in the ancestral and cosmic order, harmonizing human effort with the moral fabric of the universe. This gives *dodo* a sacred dimension. Catholics and Muslims, while rooted in different theological traditions, find common ground in this broader sense that human cooperation participates in something larger than individual interests. The cosmological meaning of *dodo* thus mediates theological conversation: it invites participants to reflect on their own religious teachings about divine order, stewardship, community life, and moral duty. Culture becomes the interpretive lens through which each religious community understands not only the other, but also itself.

Third, *dodo*’s emphasis on reciprocal obligation and enduring bonds provides a relational structure that deepens theological encounters. Because participation in *dodo* carries a moral expectation of

⁹⁴ Francis, “Opening of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment,” October 3, 2018. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html.

⁹⁵ Rafael Luciani, *Synodality A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2022), 3. Bernard Franck, “Les expériences synodales après Vatican II,” *Communio* 3, no. 3 (1978), 77.

reciprocity, it builds long-term relationships that are not merely functional but deeply personal. This reciprocity mirrors the moral logic of both Christian charity and Islamic *ukhuwah* (brotherhood). These resonances create a shared ethical landscape where Catholics and Muslims can recognize familiar theological values in the cultural practice of the other. In this way, *dodo* becomes a mediator, a bridge that helps both groups interpret the other's faith in terms of shared virtues: generosity, responsibility, reliability, and mutual care.

Fourth, *dodo* offers a cultural parallel to the theological ideal of synodality—"walking together"—and thus becomes a model that enriches faith dialogue. The deliberative and communal nature of *dodo*, where people sit together, listen, plan, and work side by side, mirrors the synodal vision expressed by Pope Francis: a community that listens, learns from one another, and discerns together. Just as synodality reshapes the relationships within the Church, *dodo* reshapes relationships within society. In dialogue with Muslims, this shared experience of working together becomes a common "spiritual grammar" for understanding how God calls people to live in unity without erasing difference. Culture becomes a mediator that embodies theological principles: active participation, shared leadership, mutual listening, and cooperative action. Through this lens, interreligious dialogue is not simply a verbal exchange but a shared journey of "walking together" in the very concrete rhythm of Manggarai life.

Finally, *dodo* becomes a sacramental expression of fraternity, turning labor into a site of grace. In *dodo*, physical work becomes a medium for experiencing moral presence, spiritual solidarity, and mutual belonging. This experience can take on "sacramental overtones"—moments in which divine generosity, compassion, and unity become visible through human cooperation. Such experiences create a theological horizon within which Catholics and Muslims can perceive one another not as religious rivals but as companions in a shared moral and spiritual journey. The cultural act of working together becomes a mediator of God's presence, revealing how faith traditions, even when different, converge in their commitment to love, service, and justice.

Together, these cultural values: inclusivity, *lejong*, and *dodo/leles* create a strong foundation for interreligious harmony. While religion can sometimes be a dividing line in other places, in Manggarai it is softened by a shared cultural identity that emphasizes togetherness, mutual respect, and daily interaction. These cultural practices are powerful because they are lived experiences, not just ideas. They teach the community that peaceful relations are not only possible but also necessary for a good life.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that culture plays a significant and irreplaceable role in fostering interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims in Manggarai. Local cultural values such as inclusivity, mutual assistance (*dodo*), and customary gatherings (*lejong*) offer practical pathways for building trust and understanding. These cultural practices naturally promote dialogue of life, action, religious experience, and theological exchange, enabling communities to overcome religious boundaries and coexist peacefully.

While challenges such as misinformation, political manipulation of religion, and external ideological influences persist, the findings indicate that Manggarai's unique cultural landscape provides a

resilient framework for nurturing long-term interreligious harmony. Thus, Manggarai can serve as a model for other multicultural societies seeking sustainable strategies for peace-building through culture-based dialogue. Future efforts should focus on strengthening cultural education and interfaith collaboration at both grassroots and institutional levels to reinforce the positive dynamics already present in the region.

Therefore, it is imperative that policymakers, religious leaders, educators, and community actors actively invest in and expand culture-based dialogue initiatives. Strengthening cultural education, preserving local wisdom, and institutionalizing interfaith collaboration, particularly at the grassroots level must be treated not as supplementary efforts, but as urgent strategies for sustaining peace. The researcher extends sincere gratitude to all participants whose valuable time, insights, and cooperation significantly contributed to the successful completion of this study. Further research is recommended to explore how these cultural mechanisms function across different sub-regions of Manggarai, how they interact with formal religious institutions, and how they might be adapted or scaled in other multicultural contexts. Comparative studies with similar regions could also yield valuable insights into the broader applicability of culture-based peace building models.

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