Research Paper

Local Wisdom as Social Capital in Developing Religious Tolerance in the City of Semarang

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to elucidate the forms of local wisdom employed by the community in addressing religious diversity in Semarang City, to examine the governmental strategies implemented to sustain interfaith harmony, and to analyse local wisdom as a manifestation of social capital that fosters religious tolerance. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, the informants comprised the Head of the Semarang City Interfaith Harmony Forum (Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama, FKUB), religious leaders, community figures, and residents. The findings reveal that the Semarang City Government maintains interfaith harmony through a combination of regulatory interventions, cultural initiatives, and the strategic optimisation of the FKUB's role as a mediating institution. Overall, the study concludes that the community's conception of tolerance extends beyond mere acknowledgement of religious differences; it emphasises mutual respect, reciprocity, and the affirmation of shared civic values as the foundations of peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: local wisdom, Semarang, religious diversity, social capital, tolerance

INTRODUCTION

The Warak Ngendok, as an iconic symbol of Semarang, represents a profound semiotic condensation of the city's plural cultural identity. The composite nature of this mythical creature, combining the dragon's head (Chinese influence), buroq or camel's body (Arab–Islamic influence), and four balanced legs (Javanese cosmological symbolism), could be described as a system of symbols [1] that serves to establish robust and long-lasting moods and motivations within people. Within this framework, the Warak Ngendok exemplifies Indonesia's local enactment of multiculturalism (Bhineka Tunggal Ika, "Unity in Diversity"). As such, it functions as a performative myth, reaffirming collective commitments to pluralism through festival practices that engage Javanese, Chinese, and Arab communities alike. In theoretical terms, this aligns with the argument that religious or mythic symbols serve as collective representations that reinforce social solidarity.[2] The Warak Ngendok's continued vitality in Semarang's urban culture reveals how myth and local wisdom function as reservoirs of social meaning, offering a framework for sustaining interethnic harmony amid globalisation and urban heterogeneity.[3]

Semarang's demographic profile, comprising Javanese Muslims, Chinese Buddhists and Christians, Arab Muslims, and minor Hindu and indigenous religious minorities,[4] reflects a super-diversity where multiple cultural variables interact dynamically.[5] This demographic pluralism presents both opportunities for intercultural

enrichment and latent tensions. As noted in the literature on multicultural societies, these societies require continual renegotiation of shared norms, particularly around issues of recognition, inclusion, and respect for differences.[6] In the case of Semarang, these negotiations unfold within the framework of Pancasila pluralism and communal ethics of Javanese harmony, such as rukun (social concord) and gotong royong (cooperation).[7] However, the persistence of religious intolerance reveals the fragility of this equilibrium. The rejection of perceived alien cultural and religious expressions demonstrates that symbolic boundaries remain powerful in regulating access to public space and social recognition.[8] The incidents of religious intolerance in Semarang, ranging from disputes over festival spaces to the construction of religious buildings, illustrate the challenges of public recognition in plural societies. In this sense, acts of exclusion—such as rejecting Chinese New Year rituals or the establishment of minority churches—reflect deeper struggles over symbolic ownership of the public sphere.[9] In plural democracies, religion remains a potent source of meaning. However, public discourse must rely on translation, the process by which religious claims are expressed in terms accessible to all citizens. Failures of tolerance often result from the breakdown of such translation. Misinterpretations of sacred texts, for instance, can exacerbate these divides, converting faith into an exclusionary rather than ethical force.[10] Nevertheless, the fact that these incidents were resolved mainly through mediation demonstrates the resilience of Semarang's institutional and cultural mechanisms of tolerance. The awarding of the 2021 Harmoni Award to the Semarang city government and FKUB attests to the local authorities' commitment to the culture of peace.[11] The Warak Ngendok metaphorically encapsulates Semarang's local wisdom as a form of social capital that resides in networks of trust, reciprocity, and shared

norms.[12] These transform pluralism from a demographic condition into a relational achievement. Bringing these elements together, the study of Semarang's pluralism through the lens of local wisdom allows for a theoretical framework that integrates cultural symbolism, social capital, and tolerance theories. Thus, this research aims to extend the discussion on how local wisdom functions not as static tradition but as dynamic social capital that generates and sustains interfaith tolerance within the plural landscape of modern Indonesia. The Warak Ngendok and similar traditions become not merely a folkloric symbol but a living paradigm of intercultural coexistence where diversity is not merely tolerated but celebrated as the city's foundational ethos.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Local wisdom (kearifan local in Indonesian) represents the collective knowledge and normative framework that evolves within a community through its historical experiences, interactions with the environment, and engagement with the divine.[1] It encompasses both tangible cultural expressions (rituals, artefacts, and customary laws) and intangible dimensions (values, ethics, cosmologies, and worldviews).[13] From a philosophical standpoint, local wisdom aligns with Aristotelian practical wisdom, which emphasises prudence, moral reasoning, and the ability to act rightly in concrete situations.[14] Within this view, local wisdom operates as contextual moral reasoning, or the community's capacity to translate ethical principles into culturally meaningful action. In the Indonesian context, kearifan lokal functions not only as a repository of traditional knowledge but also as an instrument for social regulation and conflict management. Concepts such as rukun (harmony), tepa slira (empathy), and gotong royong (cooperation) illustrate how local wisdom underpins civic behaviour and intercommunal solidarity.[7] Furthermore, local wisdom also aligns with the Asian communitarian perspective, which views

personhood as inherently relational, embedded within family and society.[15] Preserving local wisdom, therefore, becomes essential in plural societies, as it serves as a cultural mechanism of resilience, offering moral and practical guidelines for coexistence and harmony, and thereby transforming diversity into a source of strength rather than conflict.[16]

The concept of tolerance originates from the Latin verb *tolerare*, meaning "to bear" or "to endure." Historically, the idea evolved from religious forbearance to a broader moral and political principle of pluralism.[17] As noted in political philosophy, tolerance involves a paradox: it requires disapproval of an action or belief, yet simultaneously allows it to exist.[18] From a sociological perspective, tolerance serves as a normative resource for social cohesion, which can be defined as an individual's willingness to coexist peacefully with those of different cultural or religious backgrounds. This disposition transforms differences into dialogue.[19] Empirically, tolerance is linked to processes of recognition and inclusive citizenship, wherein individuals affirm others' rights to difference without demanding assimilation.[20] Habermas's theory of communicative action argues that interreligious or intercultural tolerance must be discursively justified through rational dialogue within the public sphere.[19] Thus, tolerance is both ethical and procedural: it is expressed not only in sentiment but through communicative practices that sustain mutual recognition. In the Indonesian context, tolerance becomes a lived practice reflected in everyday social interactions. The use of diverse religious greetings – Assalamualaikum, Salam Sejahtera, Om Swastiastu, Shalom, Namo Buddhaya – serves as everyday enactments of Pancasila's pluralist ethos, particularly its principles of Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa (belief in one God) and Kemanusiaan yang Adil dan Beradab (just and civilised humanity). Thus, tolerance, when embedded in local wisdom, becomes not merely a defensive reaction to difference but a transformative moral disposition that fosters the politics of recognition.[9]

The concept of social capital provides a crucial theoretical bridge linking local wisdom and tolerance to the functioning of social systems. It refers to the networks, norms, and trust that enable individuals to cooperate for mutual benefit.[12] As Lyda Judson Hanifan first articulated, social capital is not material wealth but a web of intangible social resources that strengthens community life.[21] Pierre Bourdieu extends this notion by conceptualising social capital as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to durable networks of institutionalised relationships.[22] Following this, the division of social capital into two interrelated dimensions emerges: the cognitive (cultural) dimension, comprising values, attitudes, and beliefs, and the structural dimension, referring to the institutional and networked arrangements that facilitate collective action.[23] Both dimensions are visible in plural societies, such as Semarang. The cognitive dimension manifests in shared moral codes such as rukun and tepa slira. In contrast, the structural dimension operates through institutions such as the Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB), local councils, and community organisations, which sustain interreligious communication and cooperation. Putnam further distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital: bonding capital strengthens ties within homogenous groups, while bridging capital connects heterogeneous groups across social cleavages.[12] In this way, local wisdom and tolerance form the ethical and affective dimensions of social capital, while institutional networks and community practices constitute its structural embodiment.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design, an approach grounded in interpretivist epistemology that prioritises understanding social phenomena through the meanings individuals and groups assign

to them.[24] Qualitative research, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) famously argue, is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world, emphasising immersion in the natural setting and reflexive engagement with participants.[25] This perspective assumes that social reality is socially constructed, context-dependent, and multifaceted.[26] Within this epistemological frame, the qualitative descriptive approach seeks not to generalise findings statistically but to produce "thick descriptions" that illuminate how cultural meanings, practices, and policies interact in specific contexts.[1] Furthermore, the design reflects what Schwandt terms an interpretive paradigm, which positions the researcher as both participant and interpreter, constructing meaning through ongoing interaction with the field.[27]

The case study approach serves as the central methodological strategy of this research. As Yin asserts, case study research enables an in-depth, holistic investigation of a specific, real-world phenomenon within its contextual parameters.[28] In this study, the "case" is Semarang City, chosen for its pluralistic character and institutional reputation for fostering interreligious harmony. From a conceptual standpoint, the case study approach aligns with contextualist social inquiry, which emphasises understanding how local actors negotiate meaning within the context of power structures and cultural frameworks.[14] Moreover, Tracy emphasises that qualitative case studies are valuable for producing meaningful, credible, and significant research that connects local insights to broader theoretical debates.[29] In this sense, Semarang operates as a "strategic research site",[30] a location where the intersections of religion, governance, and cultural identity can be studied as microcosms of national diversity.

The use of purposive sampling reflects the interpretive researcher's goal to select participants who can provide information-rich cases, offering deep insight into the cultural and institutional processes under study.[31] Rather than seeking representativeness, purposive sampling enables access to participants directly involved in, or knowledgeable about, the issues of religious harmony and local wisdom. This includes members of the Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB), government officials, community leaders, and residents who represent different strata of civic and religious life in Semarang. The complementary use of snowball sampling, where participants refer others with relevant experiences, aligns with the networked logic of qualitative inquiry.[32] It acknowledges that knowledge in community-based contexts is embedded within relational networks, echoing Bourdieu's conception of social capital as the sum of actual and potential resources linked to membership in networks of mutual recognition.[22] The data collection process, comprising in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documentation, represents a multimodal approach aimed at achieving methodological triangulation that enhances validity and trustworthiness by cross-verifying evidence across methods and data sources.[33]

Qualitative research, particularly in intercultural and religious contexts, necessitates a reflexive stance toward the researcher's role as both instrument and interpreter of knowledge.[34] In studying religious tolerance and local wisdom in Semarang, reflexivity entails ethical attentiveness to ensure respect for participants' beliefs, cultural norms, and confidentiality.[29] Through these frameworks, the research design becomes not only a methodological tool but also a theoretically reflexive act of interpretation, seeking to illuminate how tolerance is structured, practised, and symbolised within Semarang's socio-political and cultural matrix. Ensuring rigour in qualitative research involves moving beyond positivist notions of reliability toward interpretive validity.[35]

RESULT & DISCUSSION

State Regulation and Societal Harmony

Semarang's evolution from a VOC-era coastal entrepôt into a pluralistic urban space reflects what Anthony D. King terms colonial urbanism: the creation of segregated yet interdependent spatial orders that both reproduce and negotiate colonial hierarchies.[36] The city's spatial arrangement – comprising Kota Lama (the European enclave), Pecinan (the Chinese district), Kampung Arab, and Kampung Melayu – embodies the hybrid condition in which colonial modernity produces overlapping, intersecting cultural boundaries rather than fixed identities.[37] During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC) structured Semarang along racialised lines of administration, residence, and commerce. By the 19th century, with loosening colonial restrictions, Semarang evolved into a "plural city", an urban setting in which distinct ethnic communities interacted primarily through market and administrative exchanges.[38]

Article 6 of the *Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs Number 9 of 2006* (PBM No. 9/2006) situates religious harmony (*kerukunan umat beragama*) as a shared responsibility between the state and society. Conceptually, this regulation reflects the Indonesian state's enduring commitment to the Pancasila framework, particularly the first principle, which anchors national identity in religious pluralism.[39] From a governance perspective, the regulation embodies a form of "regulatory pluralism", where state authority collaborates with community-based religious institutions to manage diversity and prevent sectarian conflict.[40] Moreover, the requirement that regional heads maintain public peace and order through religious harmony suggests that the state here acts as the guardian of Durkheimian "collective representations," ensuring that religious symbols and practices remain integrative rather than divisive. Thus, PBM No. 9/2006 functions not only as a legal instrument but also as a mechanism of moral regulation, aligning administrative governance with communal ethics.

The interdependence of legal regulation and local wisdom reflects what Giddens terms the "duality of structure":[41] institutions (such as PBM No. 9/2006) shape social practices, but those practices also reproduce and reinterpret institutional norms. The cultural agency of Central Javanese communities thus sustains and localises national policies on religious harmony, ensuring they resonate with indigenous moral frameworks. In this sense, the Semarang examples illustrate hybrid governance, where formal administrative control interacts dynamically with informal cultural systems.[42] The success of religious harmony depends not on top-down enforcement but on the mutual reinforcement between state norms and community-based cultural capital

The Semarang City Government's facilitation of interfaith activities through the Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB) represents a model in which state and civil society actors jointly deliberate to address issues of diversity. The FKUB operates as an intermediary institution mediating between top-down regulation (from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs) and bottom-up community engagement. However, this also highlights the implementation gap between institutional design and social reach. While formal structures like the FKUB are established to facilitate harmony, they often encounter limits of administrative penetration in large urban areas.[43] In Semarang, the uneven dissemination of FKUB activities across neighbourhood units (RT/RW) indicates that the "networked governance" ideal remains only partially realised. That said, by emphasising preemptive dialogue and education over direct conflict mediation, the FKUB seeks to institutionalise resilience rather than confrontation - a hallmark of what Lederach

terms "sustainable peacebuilding" through relationship-building and moral imagination.[44]

Local Wisdom as a Cultural Framework for Harmony

In Central Java, the persistence of Javanese local wisdom provides a cultural substratum for realising the goals of PBM No. 9/2006. These principles articulate what Geertz termed "religion as a cultural system," where values, symbols, and rituals organise collective meanings that sustain moral communities.[1] The emphasis on *rukun* (harmony) and *rembug* (deliberation) reflects an indigenous communitarian epistemology, wherein conflict resolution and intergroup relations are mediated through consensus rather than coercion. Such values operationalise the notion of "everyday peace",[45] a bottom-up, culturally embedded approach to social harmony that complements formal state mechanisms. Local wisdom thus acts as a cultural schema, shaping how individuals interpret and respond to diversity.[46] It internalises pluralism not as a problem to be managed but as a natural state of social life. In this sense, Javanese local wisdom functions as a normative resource for civic coexistence, providing moral legitimacy to state efforts in maintaining religious harmony.

The Javanese principle of *tepa slira*, which embodies empathic self-restraint and respect for others, can be theorised as a localised form of moral cosmopolitanism,[47] wherein ethical engagement with difference arises not from abstract universalism but from lived communal norms. In Semarang, *tepa slira* forms the cultural grammar of interethnic civility, an informal social mechanism that prevents conflict through empathy, deliberation, and mutual regard.[48] From a sociological standpoint, *tepa slira* embodies what Pierre Bourdieu calls habitus.[22-23] The internalisation of *tepa slira* as local wisdom means that tolerance in Semarang is not simply institutional or performative but

habitualized in the moral consciousness of everyday life. Moreover, this Javanese ethic aligns with the *everyday peace*[45] frameworks that emphasise the subtle, non-institutionalised acts of coexistence that prevent tension from escalating. In this regard, *tepa slira* operates as an indigenous technology of peace—integrating religion, culture, and emotion into a coherent moral order.

The occurrence of conflicts in Semarang, whether interreligious, interethnic, or intra-religious, reveals the latent fragility of pluralism in multicultural urban settings. However, in the Semarang context, most conflicts are resolved through negotiation and mediation. Many incidents, such as resistance to house-of-worship construction or festival celebrations, stem less from theological disagreement than from miscommunication and social mistrust, conditions described by Allport as obstacles to intergroup understanding.[49] Where communication channels are weak or bureaucratically opaque, local actors often resort to identity-based mobilisation.

Thus, FKUB's role in fostering dialogical spaces aligns with the theory of communicative action, where rational deliberation serves as a mechanism for mutual understanding and conflict prevention[19] caused by, among others, the "politicisation of religion", where administrative processes (such as permits to build a place of worship) become arenas for contesting symbolic dominance.[50] The eventual resolution, aided by Komnas HAM and pro-tolerance groups, underscores the importance of multi-scalar governance. Harmony is not produced solely at the municipal level, but rather through the interaction of civil society advocacy, human rights frameworks, and local bureaucratic flexibility, which is shaped by the existing cultural framework.

Local Wisdom as Social Capital: Bonding and Bridging

Local wisdom in Semarang City also serves as a form of social capital.[12] Following

Sabet and Khaksar, local wisdom can be analysed across two dimensions: values and institutions, which structure communal behaviour; and social networks, which operationalise cooperation.[51] Within this framework, two types of social capital are relevant: bonding social capital, which manifests in intra-religious cohesion and solidarity within each faith community, and bridging social capital, which facilitates interfaith cooperation and cross-cultural engagement.[52] Cultural and religious events exemplify the practice of bridging social capital. This interplay between local wisdom and social capital underlines a broader sociological insight: that religious harmony is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of shared rituals of coexistence.[53] Below is a brief description of some of the cultural events embodying the harmonic values of Semarang

Dugderan, which merges Javanese, Chinese, and Arab elements, exemplifies syncretic pluralism, demonstrating how cultural festivals serve as ritualised affirmations of coexistence.[54] Rather than erasing differences, they transform them into a shared celebration, a pattern comparable to the definition of convivial multiculturalism.[55]

Haul Mbah Depok, incorporating national symbols, demonstrates civil religion in Bellah's sense: a symbolic practice where patriotism and faith converge to affirm national unity.[56] The participation of multiple religious and ethnic groups reframes remembrance as a ritual of inclusivity, embedding religious plurality within the discourse of nationalism.

The Sam Poo Kong National Concert exemplifies Semarang as a microcosm of Indonesia, manifesting an imagined community[57] through performative nationalism, thereby ritually reaffirming the nation's plural unity within its cultural landscape.

Each of these festivals embodies what Habermas calls communicative action, that is, the pursuit of understanding and consensus through symbolic exchange that

links diverse religious communities via shared moral discourse rather than state coercion.[19] Semarang's long history of multiethnic coexistence positions it as an exemplary case of urban pluralism, where the city serves as a laboratory for intercultural negotiation. The continuity of harmony across centuries suggests that coexistence is sustained through cultural institutionalisation that transforms local wisdom into civic norms.

Drawing on Giddens' theory of structuration,[41] we can interpret Semarang's plural harmony as the duality of structure: formal institutions (city regulations, heritage management) interact with informal cultural practices (festivals, rituals) to produce a stable, adaptive social order. Semarang's plural heritage also contributes to Indonesia's broader discourse of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika ("Unity in Diversity"), functioning as what Edward Said termed a "contrapuntal space": a site where histories of colonial subjugation and postcolonial coexistence intersect to produce new cultural syntheses.[58]

The six foundations of tolerance identified in the passage – mutual trust, care, awareness of harmony, openness, recognition of diversity, and inclusivity – align with Coleman's definition of social capital as the norms and networks that facilitate cooperative action.[59] These values create what Varshney calls intercommunal civic networks, which function as informal mechanisms of conflict prevention.[48] In this sense, local wisdom manifests through rituals of respect, shared festivals, and cross-religious participation, thereby institutionalising pluralism in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the institutional mandate of PBM No. 9/2006 and the lived cultural practices of Javanese society are mutually constitutive. The regulation provides the structural legitimacy for interfaith coexistence, while local wisdom supplies the cultural legitimacy necessary

for its internalisation and sustainability. Understanding religious harmony in Indonesia, therefore, requires an integrated analytical approach to appreciate how pluralism is both governed and lived. Semarang's history and traditions illustrate how colonial pluralism evolved into postcolonial cosmopolitanism, mediated through the moral fabric of Javanese local wisdom and embodied in everyday social practices. The city's rituals and commemorations transform potential sites of division into occasions for shared meaning, bridging historical separations and reinforcing interfaith solidarity. In theoretical terms, Semarang exemplifies a model of civic hybridity—where the legacies of colonial segregation, religious diversity, and local cultural ethics coalesce into a sustainable form of intercultural harmony. This synthesis aligns with contemporary peacebuilding theory, suggesting that social cohesion in plural societies depends not merely on state policy but on culturally grounded moral economies that translate diversity into solidarity.

Semarang's experience demonstrates that sustainable interfaith harmony arises from the interaction of structural governance, cultural values, and social capital. The FKUB serves as the institutional node linking these domains, while kearifan lokal provides the moral legitimacy that sustains them. The persistence of tolerance despite sporadic conflict supports the view that plural societies maintain stability through cultural adaptation rather than uniformity (Hefner, 2018). Thus, Semarang can be conceptualised as a localised framework of coexistence shaped by tradition, negotiation, and civic participation, rather than imposed uniformity. While administrative mechanisms like FKUB provide the scaffolding, the lived practices of tepa slira, trust, and inclusivity form the emotional infrastructure of harmony.

The divergent perceptions of the FKUB's role – as preventive, reactive, or advisory – point to the duality of structure: the FKUB both shapes and is shaped by local social practices. While the FKUB is mandated by the Joint Regulation of the Ministers of Religious Affairs and Home Affairs No. 9 and 8 of 2006, its effectiveness depends on local legitimacy and public trust. When community members remain unaware of the forum's functions, the FKUB risks becoming a symbolic bureaucracy rather than an interactive platform. As Semarang's experience shows, institutionalised tolerance cannot rely solely on policy instruments; it must be co-produced through discursive engagement and trust-building between state actors and religious communities.

State agencies' strategies – comprising dialogue, education, participatory policy formulation, and ceremonial inclusivity – embody a multidimensional governance model that combines regulatory, pedagogical, and symbolic functions. These initiatives resonate with Lederach's idea of integrating top leadership (policy and institutions), middle-range leadership (FKUB and religious leaders), and grassroots actors (communities and neighbourhoods).[44] Through these strategies, Semarang's governance framework advances from mere conflict management to transformative peacebuilding, in which harmony is not merely maintained but continually renegotiated and redefined.

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