



# Local wisdom for civil religious harmony in Indonesia: An ethnographic investigation on Mbah Moni's grave ritual in Babatan village, Wiyung sub-district, Surabaya city, Jawa Timur province

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## Abstract

This article explains the phenomenon of the Mbah Moni *punden* (grave) ritual related to the harmony of a plural religious community in Babatan village, Wiyung, Surabaya, East Java. It is argued that the Mbah Moni's grave ritual holds an ethical heritage that contributes positively to the harmony of the interfaith in Babatan village. To prove it, an ethnographic investigation was conducted by observing Mbah Moni's grave, *sedekah bumi* (earth alms) rituals, and interreligious harmony practices in Babatan. Data were collected inductively and interpreted by interviewing 20 religious and community leaders and conducting focus group discussions with 12 representatives from different religious groups in order to provide a comprehensive explanation. The results indicated that the Babatan villagers carried out *sedekah bumi* ritual to invoke the blessings of God through the protection of Mbah Moni as *danyang* (guardian spirit); they interpret Mbah Moni as a friendly and tolerant figure who gets along well with her sister, Mbah Aminah, despite having different religion; they frame the spirit of interreligious harmony from Mbah Moni's ethical values in the earth alms ritual and apply it in everyday life with the slogans, "*Babatan guyup-rukun* (Babatan get along well); *sepi ing pamrih, rame marang gawe* (in sincerity and hard work)".

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## Introduction

In a religiously plural society, interfaith conflict is a threat because it can result in the loss of innocent human lives. Therefore, conflicts between different religious

communities have always been a hot topic of discussion (Henne & Klocek, 2019), both at local and global level. Such conflicts are clearly religious deviations that should not occur (Mirnajafi & Barlow, 2019).

Actually, Western theological figures, such as Paul Tillich (Dreisbach, 1975), Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Almond, 1983), Karl Rahner (Kilby, 2002), Raimundo Panikar (Min, 2010), John Hick (Cheetham, 2017), and a number of other social scientists are very hopeful of the positive role of religion. In addition John Hick offered a good concept to build a humanist theology in which God is

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described as belonging to all human beings, who are always present with various names and identities, to bless all humans, whatever their path of faith (Hick, 1982). The idea was so relevant in the effort of building harmony among religions that subsequent intellectuals such as Andrew Shank and Robert N. Bellah developed it and initiated the idea of religious harmony in the concept of ‘civil religion’ (Gehrig, 1981). The concept portrayed religions as a worldview that emphasized the spirit of humanism. A similar idea that was also important was the idea of ‘global ethics’ offered by Hans Kung. The idea was intended by Kung to be a guide for all parties in order to build harmonious relations between religious communities (Küng & Ng, 1998).

In Indonesia, in the past five years, the forum for religious harmony has been initiated by the government on synergy with religious leaders. The result was the form of interfaith organizations, for example, in the form of the ‘Forum for Religious Harmony’ (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama/FKUB*) (Muwahidah, 2008). The forum promoted the spirit of religious harmony in order to unite the Indonesian nation into a nation that is religious, prosperous, and blessed by God.

However, this success still has weaknesses, for example, there are still religious groups who refuse to get along with others, sometimes in the form of religious terrorism as was the case in Surabaya. This has really confused proponents of interreligious cooperation in formulating a method to handle it. In such atmosphere of confusion, there is an interesting phenomenon, namely a pluralistic religious community in Babatan village, Surabaya city, Jawa Timur (East Java), which includes Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Catholics, and groups with belief in God Almighty. They interact peacefully without friction, so the head of the local state police precinct stated that the Babatan community is a miniature model of Indonesia, namely in the terms of its harmony amidst religious diversity.

As it turns out, in Babatan village there is an ancient grave of the village ancestor named Mbah Moni. Mbah Moni was believed to be a *danyang*, a spiritual figure, who protects and guards the village. Mbah Moni's grave has been treated by the community as the identity of the village, because it was the tomb of the *danyang* called *punden*. So, *punden* is a grave of *danyang* (Masruri, 2013).

The community glorified the Mbah Moni's *punden* by ‘*nyekar*’ (to pray and give offerings to her tomb) and *sedekah bumi* (alms earth) rites to ask for *punden* blessing. Thus, this article focused on explaining the relationship between Mbah Moni *punden* and the reality of religious harmony in the village of Babatan.

## Literature Review

The conceptual framework for explaining the research of Mbah Moni *punden* ritual is the symbolic interpretation of tradition. Traditions that live in a community have many meanings that serve as people's knowledge to organize their lives. Some examples are; the tradition of *bersih desa* (cleansing the village) in *Sekoto* to reject the plague (Masruri, 2013); the pilgrimage ritual to the tomb of Nyai Ageng Bakaran in order to preserve the history and traditions of the ancestors (Alfian, 2019); the *bersih bumi* ritual (cleansing the Earth) in Karang Ploso village in order to protect the environment from plague (*wabah begebluk*) (Ainiyah & Mardani, 2019); the ritual of Mbah Buyut Tunggon in the meaning of togetherness to easily ward off evil.

The information above shows that research on *punden* is widely practiced, and it is known that the study on Mbah Moni *punden* ritual in Babatan village has different aspect and uniqueness in terms of its strength in ushering interfaith harmony because the village where Mbah Moni's *punden* was located is inhabited by a plural religious community.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework used to explain the phenomenon of religious harmony in Babatan is the concept of ‘civil religion’ which locates religion in a natural setting, far from the pressure of political power. The concept of civil religion considers religion reaching maturity in the power of society (Shanks, 1995).

## Methodology

This research was conducted in a case study model towards a local tradition, namely the annual ‘*sedekah bumi*’ ritual of Mbah Moni's grave. The research setting is the interfaith society of Babatan village. The focus of the study is cultural situations and interactional behavior based on community cultural understanding. Thus, the data collection used an ethnographic inquiry directed at the rituals around Mbah Moni *punden*, namely, the celebration of the *sedekah bumi* ritual associated with the practice of interfaith harmony in Babatan.

### Data Collection

This research was conducted inductively for 2 years (2018–2020). The data were collected using thematical observation towards the tomb of Mbah Moni and people's practices glorifying the *punden*; using participant observation in *sedekah bumi* rituals; also recording and documenting visible culture symbols. To sharpen the meaning of cultural symbols as well as complete partial data, it was confirmed using triangulation techniques

(Dodgson, 2019) by interviewing 10 religious leaders, 10 community leaders coupled with conducting focus group discussions (FGD) involving 5 key informants from the adult population and 7 representatives of youth population to produce complete data.

The entire data collection process was analytical-critical, and the meaning of the data was carried out since in the field with stages; identifying data, initial coding, theoretical sampling, intermediate sampling, advanced coding, and theoretical sensitivity to produce natural interpretation of data (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019).

### Data Analysis

Because the collected data was dominated by symbols, both traditional terms and cultural actions, the method of analysis used taxonomic techniques in the following steps; (1) establish the cultural domain, namely the *Sedekah Bumi* ritual with all terms covered, (2) identify the substitution framework for tracing symbol meanings, (3) look for details of the symbol sub-system in the form of the cultural terms covered, (4) find or conceptualize domains that were more encompassing to frame a more complete understanding of symbols, (5) create a temporary taxonomy to explain semantic relations between symbol sub-systems to facilitate its significance, (6) make a complete taxonomy and describe the results of the interpretation of cultural symbols as a whole and, finally, formulate an ethnographic report as culture knowledge of the community (Spradley, 2016).

## Results

### History of Mbah Moni's Grave (punden) and People's Confession

Mbah Moni was the ancestor who was believed to have 'opened' Babatan village, Wiyung, Surabaya, Jawa Timur (East Java). Her tomb was preserved by the community as *punden* (holy tomb) (Supardi, 22 September 2018). People also believe that the spirit of Mbah Moni resides in Babatan and safeguards it from bad things, so she is called *danyang* (guardian spirit). Sapari stated, "Mbah Moni iku wanito, tapi ono seng ngarani lanang; wong kono-kono madani, Babatan iku yen ono maling konangan ora iso kacekel, soale 'danyange' wadon" (Mbah Moni was a woman, so that many outsiders mock, thieves in Babatan are difficult to catch, because the *danyang* is a woman). In the past, Mbah Moni's tomb was a rickety shed, but now it is an enclosed building from a well-funded renovation making it easier for pilgrims to *nyekar* (pray in the tomb site) (Sari, 8 September 2019). The shrine of Mbah Moni consists of



**Figure 1** Mbah Moni's Grave along with her sister, Aminah

two graves, Mbah Moni herself and Mbah Aminah, her sister, as seen in Figure 1.

Sari, Sapari's wife, stated, "Mbah Moni lan Mbah Aminah iku sedulur, seng Mbah Moni nganut agomo Jowo, yen seng Mbah Aminah nganut agomo Islam, krono digarwo karo Mbah Usap, seng ejek onok nasab karo Sunan Giri" (Mbah Moni and Mbah Aminah were sisters, while Mbah Moni practiced Javanese religion, Mbah Aminah practiced Islam because she was married to Mbah Usap who was related to Sunan Giri). Mbah Moni herself, whose full name was Hayomo Moni, practiced ancient Javanese religion (Supardi, 16 September 2019), while according to Sumarti, she was a Hindu (Sumarti, 14 September 2019). Mbah Aminah was a Muslim, following her husband, named Mbah Usap, who was related to Sunan Giri, a well-known early Muslim preacher in Surabaya-Gresik region. Regarding Mbah Moni's lifetime, Sapari asserted, "ora ono seng weruh kapan uripe Mbah Moni; awet aku sek cilik, yo wes ono punden Mbah Moni iku" (there are no written records about Mbah Moni's lifetime; since Sapari was a child, Mbah Moni's tomb had been there). It was found, from other sources, that Mbah Moni lived during the Sunan Giri period, namely in the 15th century (surabaya.tribunews.com, 2011; terganjal konflik tanah).

According to Suis, a Muslim figure, Babatan community have considered the figure of Mbah Moni as the guardian spirit of the Babatan, even as the protector of the community, so people make pilgrimage to his grave to pray there (Javanese: '*nyekar*') for many purposes.

### Religious Plurality in Babatan Village

Babatan is one of 4 villages in Wiyung sub-district, Surabaya city, Jawa Timur province. This village has the most extensive area among the four villages in Wiyung,

which is 4.40 km<sup>2</sup>. The other 3 villages are Wiyung village located in the middle of the sub-district; Jajar Tunggal village in the East; and Balas Klumprik village in the South.

Babatan is in the Western part of Wiyung District and is the most populous village with 29,675 people. Babatan is separated by Wiyung–Menganti arterial road, from East to the West, dividing it into two parts, namely South Babatan as a residential area, and North Babatan as a densely populated area, the unit of cultural community, as an object of this research.

The population of Babatan village is heterogeneous and plural. In terms of religion, there are 19,259 Muslims; 5,496 Christians, 3,498 Catholics, 593 Hindus; 786 Buddhists; and 12 people from the group believe in God (Monograph of Babatan Village, 2019).

There is no strict separation between many places of worship. For example, the *Baitul Muslimin* Mosque is only 15 meters away from Jawi Wetan Protestant Church. Likewise, in central Babatan, there are two *Musallas*, Moslem places of worship, adjacent to the *Tirta Empul* temple, a place of worship for Hindus. This phenomenon shows the existence of mutual respect among religious adherents. I Wayan Runtun stated that when Hindus celebrate the carnival ceremony ahead of the ‘*Nyepi*’ feast, which is the burning party of *Ogoh-Ogoh* puppets, a symbol of a bad giant that disturbs humans, followers of other religions also enjoy carnival processions, and are involved in burning down the *Ogoh-Ogoh* puppet (Wayan, 2 September 2018).

#### *Mbah Moni's Punden Rituals and the Harmony of the Interreligious Community of Babatan*

The villagers of Babatan feel proud to have the *punden* of Mbah Moni, so *sedekah bumi* has become an annual ritual, which they perform to honor the *punden*. They don't care about people, especially from puritan Muslim groups, who stigmatize the villagers of Babatan as heretics, because they preserve the ‘*punden*’ (grave). The Babatan villagers fended off such stigma, as Sutar-a Muslim and an interfaith youth pioneer--said, if anyone says that preserving Mbah Moni's grave is ‘*shirk*’ (act of idolatry), then that person is stupid, ignorant of history (Sutar, Interviewed 8 September 2018).

According to Lubis, *sedekah bumi* is a rite that aims to ask for the safety of *Gusti Pangeran* (God Almighty), and its form is *kenduren* (eat together) or *bari'an*. According to him, the ritual proceeding includes; (1) presentation of offering by each resident to the pavement of the Babatan cemetery to be exchanged with one another; (2) performance of *ngremo* dance accompanied by ‘*gamelan*’

music (Lubis, 2 September 2018). Someone said that the spirit of Mbah Moni often shows herself (Javanese: *ngaton*) to certain people who do mental exercise while dancing (Javanese: *ngremo*) and it shows that her hobby, *ngremo* dancing, was observed. Therefore, on *sedekah bumi* ritual, the *ngremo* event was displayed (Sardi, 7 Januari 2020).

Regarding the implementation of *sedekah bumi* ritual, Lubis stated, that *sedekah bumi* is *gawene kampong* (villagers event). Therefore, all components of the Babatan people collaborate. Sutar added that *sedekah bumi* belongs to the community regardless of their religious background. They are all involved in it. Bayu also added, that as the tradition of *sedekah bumi* in this village is in the interest of all people, regardless of their religion, the implementation has become festive and takes place over many days.

Suis asserted, that *sedekah bumi* festival, besides being community entertainment, is also a vehicle for mental strengthening for the community. Thus, the themes of the show are many. The first day is cleaning the village by trimming trees and weeding around the village, cleaning drainage system and sewage, installing village equipment and improving road facilities and infrastructure. The second day is carnival in which participants march in the village wearing colorful costumes full of attractive decorations, creating a festive spectacle. In the event, slogans are related to the *sedekah bumi* ritual, such as “*Babatan guyup-rukun*” (Babatan in harmony); “*berbeda bukan halangan untuk bersatu bahu-membahu*” (being different is not an obstacle to unite and be shoulder to shoulder); and many more. The third day is a performance of modern art and culture as mass entertainment held at night by showing attractions presented by the interfaith community. There is even collaboration in the appearance of interfaith music art; The fourth day is a performance of traditional arts and culture in the form of *ngremo* dance and *ludruk* drama by the Babatan art community. In addition, shadow puppets (wayang kulit) perform throughout the night; The fifth day is interfaith prayer asking for *Gusti Pangeran* blessing of the village and protection of *danyang* Mbah Moni (the *punden*). The series of *sedekah bumi* prayers is preceded by remembrance and reflection session on Mbah Moni in order to understand and emulate her figure, and when finished, the *bari'an* event will take place. A collaboration music attraction is seen in Figure 2.

Moestono, a Christian figure, added that in the *bari'an* event, all people gathered in the same place, there was no distinction between the poor and the rich, between those who were Muslims, Christian, Hindus or others (Moestono, 11 September 2018). An example of *bari'an* in ‘*sedekah bumi*’, is seen in Figure 3.



**Figure 2** Interfaith Collaborative Arts Performances



**Figure 3** Bari'an on *sedekah bumi* ritual

I Wayan Runtun, a Hindu figure, asserted that whole process of the *sedekah bumi* event was actually tiring, but in reality, the community, including the committee, became happy. The proof is that every year the *sedekah bumi* is held, everyone willingly becomes a committee member (Wayan, 2 September 2018).

On October 28th 2018, when the carnival staged the *sedekah bumi* ritual, the researchers (authors) observed and documented the festive atmosphere of the carnival, that featured various slogans reflecting harmony among the people, for example, “dari ‘sedekah bumi’ Babatan menuju persatuan bangsa” (From the *sedekah bumi* of Babatan village to the national unity); “Sedekah bumi; dengan keragaman budaya, mari kita tingkatkan hubungan antar penganut agama untuk memperkuat masyarakat bangsa dan negara kesatuan Republik Indonesia” (Sedekah Bumi: with cultural diversity let’s improve the relationship between religious adherents to strengthen the national community and the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia); “Melestarikan tradisi Jawa, menciptakan

harmoni” (Preserving Javanese tradition, creating harmony); “Satu Nusa, Satu Bangsa, Satu Indonesia” (One archipelago, one nation, one Indonesia); and others (observation, 2018).

In addition to participatory observing the ritual of *sedekah bumi*, 2018, the researcher also observed the life of the people in the context of religious harmony. First is the public cemetery. In Babatan there is only one cemetery for all residents without any distinction of religion. However, there are groupings inside the cemetery, namely; the place of Christians in the North, Hindus in the South, group of faith in God in the West, and Muslims in the East connecting to the middle. The cemetery in Babatan is seen in Figure 4.

Second is in terms of religious harmony in the family environment. There is a phenomenon of many families whose members have diverse religious beliefs, such as the Bayu family. In this family, the father is a Hindu along with two sons, Bayu and his brother. Bayu was originally Hindu, but when he married a Muslim woman, he converted to Islam. Meanwhile, his brother married a Christian woman. In this family, religious tolerance has been instilled since childhood (Bayu, Interviewed 11 September 2019).

The phenomenon of religious diversity also occurs in the Sumiati family. She is a Hindu, but her family are Christians. Sumiati stated, “my husband was originally a muslim, but now has converted to Hinduism, while, my own son became a Christian minister”. Furthermore, she explained, “partnership and cooperation between people of different religions in this village have become a tradition”. She continued, “I myself, for example, if there were religious ceremonies performed by Muslims, I also participated, for example, on *Eid al-Adha*, when Muslims slaughter cows, sheep, and goats for sacrifice, I was also given meat, and I accepted it gladly” (Sumiati, Interviewed 22 September 2019).



**Figure 4** Public Cemetery of Babatan

**Discussion**

Religious harmony in the village of Babatan shows the existence of ‘religious maturity’ of the villagers, so that religious differences do not become obstacles in daily social interaction. The existence of Mbah Moni’s *punden*, in terms of religious harmony in Babatan, can be understood and seen in Figure 5 below:

The schematic above shows that Mbah Moni’s *punden* has become a moral guardian, as a source of ethics, which gives birth to a sense of kinship and brotherly spirit and forms a morality of harmony in the mutual cooperation tradition. The *sedekah bumi*, with all its processes, creates an awareness that they are a large family of Mbah Moni’s *punden*.

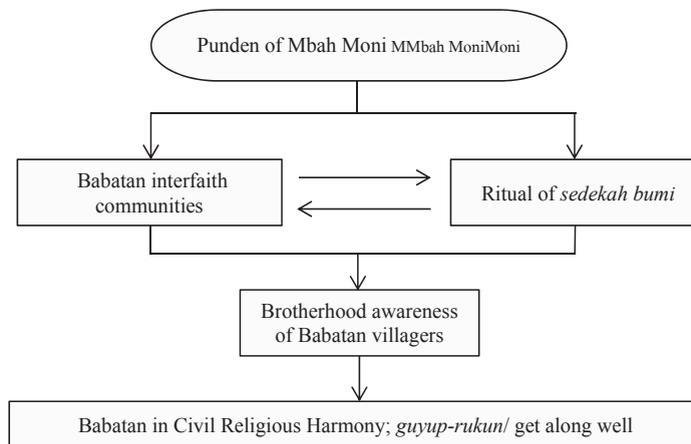
It seems that the harmony among different religious adherents in Babatan has become a ‘replica’ of the concept of ‘civil religion’ because the following elements have been fulfilled; *Firstly*, there has been knowledge of universal ethics, namely ‘humanitarian awareness’ which suggests that all humans are brothers, not enemies in warfare. Such awareness is a global ethics (Apel, 2000) that glorifies human values. *Secondly*, the living formal religions present substance and do not promote their exoteric side. Related to this, the religious community in Babatan has been able to let go of aspects of the formality of religion so that they can see the followers of other religions as brothers. This is evident in the tradition of working together in carrying out social service activities, cleaning up the village environment, repairing clogged gutters, and so on. Likewise, in family life, religion is not used as an accessory but is really lived out of its substance, which is to affirm the values of godliness in life.

Third, there is no politicization of religion by the state (Makin, 2018). In this context, the government (the police

chief and the village head of Babatan) does not interfere in religious affairs in Babatan. On the other hand, the people are welcome to arrange their own interactions with other religions as a family. As can be seen in the research data, people with different religious background in Babatan fix themselves independently and want to learn and cooperate with others in real life. This is spearheaded by religious leaders who establish close interactions in cooperation for benefit of the village.

The diversity of religions in Babatan, it seems, does not create an atmosphere of anxiety and animosity, because they do not suspect each other, rather, they comfort one another because all of them understand and are kind enough to think that those who uphold their religion firmly strengthen their belief. They are not disrespectful toward religion of others by boasting about their own religion. This is reflected in many religious rituals in which people of different religions participate, for example, when Hindu people carry out the *ogoh-ogoh* carnival, there will non-Hindus who take part.

The development of religious youths in Babatan also works well in Babatan as has happened in many countries, such as in Malaysia (Awang, Ahmad, & Rahman, 2019 and Thailand (Laeheem, 2019). That is, the development is based on the awareness of the youth themselves, not instructions from the government (Schweiker, 2006). An example is the harmony of interfaith youth who are members of the ‘*Karang Taruna*’ (a term for village-level of youth organization) in Babatan called ‘*Studio 5*’ (an office of youth organization). One of the roles of this institution is to promote *sedekah bumi* ritual by displaying a mix of artistic attractions from the art of religions, namely Islamic *salawat Hadrah*, church singing, and Hindu *gamelan* music.



**Figure 5** Scheme Transmission of Mbah Moni’s *punden* meaning

Furthermore, the Babatan villagers do not debate theological issues, and all religious adherents feel like brothers. Similar to that, in the concept of civil religion, theology is considered as a crucial problem that often presents truth claims, so must be softened. For example, it is framed with the concept of humanism that displays the figure of God as a Protector of all human beings regardless their religions; as a Provider of peaceful life. Therefore, God is close to the heart and can be understood by humans with unlimited quality and names (Hick, 1982).

In the context of Babatan people, God is understood to be present giving blessings through the medium of a village founder who is subsequently glorified as a *punden*. Thus, the theological concept of community becomes inclusive carried by the values of *punden*. God is perceived inclusively with the word '*Pangeran*' (Prince), '*Gusti*' (Sir), '*Tuhan Yang Maha Esa* (God Almighty), and others. Thus, giving thanks to Mbah Moni is considered giving thanks to God. This is where civil theology emerged that introduced God with various names and titles as above (Bellah & Hammond, 2013).

In addition, the concept of civil religion that teaches social theology based on civil theology has become a practical reality in the Babatan community because they can build an ethical set of social values based on awareness as a large family of Mbah Moni's *punden* that is inclusive and tolerant, even believing that Mbah Moni is God Blessed and is providing the blessing of life in Babatan. Therefore, respecting Mbah Moni and imitating her friendly and tolerant image is a moral obligation.

The tolerant attitude of the community grew from the *sedekah bumi* ritual, especially from understanding the image of Mbah Moni, who was friendly and tolerant, because she had interacted harmoniously with her sister, Aminah, who had a different religious belief. Mbah Moni's image has become a moral reference for the people of Babatan to realize togetherness and harmony in social life. The spirit of brotherhood and kinship has finally become an ethos of personality for the Babatan community.

Symbolically, the *sedekah bumi* ritual functions as a social institution that teaches many things as wisdom about life. The teachings accommodate normative concepts of religion, so that the teachings of religions are culturally framed to become a spirit on forming social ideals (Hindriks & Guala, 2019), for example, "Babatan *guyup-rukun*", "*sepi ing pamrih-rame marang gawe*", and others.

This means that the values of religious teachings are detached from a formalistic frame, which usually interferes with social intimacy and creates a rigid social distance. Religious values underlie the process of regulating everyday behavior patterns. Therefore, the values of religious teachings are humanized into social moral

teachings as cultural property actualized in cultural behaviors that shape the spirit of harmony such as mutual cooperation, for example, caring for a corpse and burying the dead. All social deeds are believed to be Divine virtues and religious duties carried out with utmost sincerity in order to get blessings (Hindriks & Guala, 2019).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Finally, it can be concluded that: *First*, Mbah Moni's *punden* has become the 'ethical frame' for the building of harmony and fraternity in the village of Babatan, Wiyung, Surabaya. The ethical frame is in the form of 'familial awareness' that all humans are brothers. Such awareness fosters tolerance and a spirit of mutual cooperation among fellow villagers of Babatan. *Secondly*, harmony among religions based on a sense of kinship-brotherhood removes the theological formalities of religion, so that, the term of '*Gusti, Pangeran* (Sir, Prince), *Kang Moho Kuoso* (God Almighty) becomes a theological concept that satisfies everyone, and also underlies the spirit of working hard sincerely and *guyup-rukun* (work together) as a Divine worship and social piety. Thus, it can be recommended; *firstly*, traditions that develop in the community should be maintained as source of local wisdom that can direct the community to the true way of life. Therefore, there must be further research about it; *Secondly*, the keyword to be able to realize permanent religious harmony anywhere, both nationally and globally, is on 'universal ethical awareness' that is 'humanism awareness' which shows that all human beings are brothers, and it can be constructed from a living tradition.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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