

Ritual, Bureaucracy, and Belonging: Survival Strategies of the Masade Community in North Sulawesi

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Abstract

This study explores the survival strategies of the Masade community, a unique syncretic religious group in the Sangihe Islands, North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Living among a predominantly Protestant population with a significant Muslim minority, the Masade ritual practice shares formal affinities with Islam while remaining embedded in Masade religious authority and cosmology. Using a qualitative approach, this research employs participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to examine how the community navigates religious pluralism and modernization. The findings reveal five key adaptive strategies: (1) Ritual syncretism – blending Islamic practices (Friday prayers, Ramadan fasting) with local traditions (bell-ringing worship calls); (2) Administrative flexibility – registering as Muslim in official documents while preserving Masade beliefs; (3) Organizational advocacy – utilizing the Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan Indonesia (MLKI) to seek legal recognition; (4) Community bonding – strengthening cohesion through *Sholat Jumatee* and *Diko'u Soro* rituals; and (5) Proactive tolerance – fostering interfaith harmony through shared customs. This study highlights how the Masade strategically balance external conformity with internal identity preservation, demonstrating resilience in a pluralistic society. It contributes to discussions on religious syncretism and the adaptation of minority communities in modernizing contexts.

Keywords: Religious syncretism, Minority resilience, Cultural adaptation, Masade community, Pluralistic society

1 Introduction

The sound of a bell marks the commencement of worship. A group of men dressed neatly, some in long robes, sarongs, and *peci* (caps), while women wear *mukena* (prayer garments), walk to a place of worship. This scene unfolds not on Sunday but on a Friday. Their house of worship is called *masjid* or “mosque”. Unlike typical mosques in the Indonesian archipelago, which characteristically feature minarets, domes, and drums (*beduk*), this mosque resembles a church, complete with a hanging bell rung every Friday to signal prayer time. Upon seeing the bell, one might assume it is a church (Aziz, 2019).

Judging by their Friday prayers and attire, they appear indistinguishable from the majority of Muslims in Indonesia. However, they do not self-identify as Muslims. They call themselves Masade, whereas the broader Sangihe community refers to them as *Islam Tua* (“Old Islam”). The term distinguishes them from *Islam Muda* (“Young Islam”), which Masade followers call *Islam Qur'an* (“Qur’anic Islam”) (Macpal et al., 2025).

Although Masade’s religious rituals and traditions closely mirror Islamic practices, such as Friday prayers, fasting during Ramadan and celebrating Eid al-Fitr, significant divergences exist. For instance, during the *Shalat Jumaate* (Friday prayer) ritual, Masade worshippers sit in a circle around the Imam, who burns incense while reciting prayers, predominantly in Arabic, similar to prayers typically recited by

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Indonesian Muslims. Unlike normative Islam, where the Qur'an serves as the central epistemological and normative reference, Masade adherents regard the spiritual authority of the Imam as their primary guide for life, through whom religious teachings and everyday practices are interpreted and enacted (Masihor, 2024). Adherents profess faith in Allah, commemorate the Maulid (the prophet's nativity), and practice dietary restrictions such as abstaining from pork (Masade Informant 01, 2024; Masihor, 2024; Takaweian, 2024); yet, their integration of Christian-centric symbols like the church bell and local traditions engenders a unique syncretic identity.

Demographically, according to 2023 North Sulawesi Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) data, the Masade community occupies a highly vulnerable minority position. The Sangihe population is dominated by Protestants (77.34%), Muslims (21.29%), and Catholics (0.89%). The existence of Masade is not explicitly recorded. They are instead aggregated into the marginal 0.47% category of "Believers in One Almighty God" (Penghayat Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa (Sulut, 2024). This marginal socio-legal position inflicts bureaucratic impediments, such as complex marriage registration processes that compel some members to live in unregistered customary marriages unrecognized by the state.

Within sociological and anthropological discourse, adherents of indigenous belief systems in Indonesia are frequently analysed through a unilineal evolutionist lens, applying colonial paradigms that problematically categorize them as primitive or isolated communities. This label is typically applied to communities such as the Orang Rimba in Sumatera, the Tenggerese in East Java, or the Baduy tribe in Banten, who are assumed to have survived precisely because they chose spatial and cultural isolation in hinterland regions following the collapse of the Hindu-Buddhist Kingdoms (Hakiki, 2011; Setiawan, 2023; Sintya & Siregar, 2023; Ului & Sudrajat, 2024).

Historically, the Masade tradition is rooted in the northern route of Islamization (via Mindanao and Sulu) propagated by Umar Masade or Mas'udi in the seventeenth century, earning them the moniker *Kaum Tua* (The Old Group) or *Islam Tua* to distinguish them from normative Islam (Aziz, 2015; Kaunang, 2013; Makaminan, 1927). In late 1971 in response to institutional needs, a formal organization named Islam Masade was established. However, the use of the term "Islam" generated identity contestation with mainstream Islam, prompting state intervention (Aziz, 2015; Kaunang, 2013). As a result, in 1978 the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs reclassified it as a belief system (Aliran Kepercayaan). This belief system was subsequently integrated into the official Association of Adherents of Belief System (Himpunan Penghayat Kepercayaan/HPK) in 1984 under the auspices of Ministry of Education and Culture (Masihor, 2024). Consequently, the community collectively adopted the name "Masade" for both their organizational identity and their belief system.

While previous scholarship has extensively documented the historical origins of the *Islam Tua* transmission route (Aziz, 2015, 2019; Kaunang, 2013) and its syncretic dimensions (Macpal et al., 2025), a significant literature gap persists regarding the survival mechanisms of this community in the contemporary era. Existing studies tend to be preoccupied with formal theological debates or state-driven legal-formal classifications. Insufficient academic attention has been paid to how an indigenous minority community—which eschews geographical isolation and remains continuously exposed to modernization and the hegemony of two major global religions—manages to sustain cultural resilience and a hybrid identity without succumbing to mainstream assimilation. This study bridges this gap by intersecting indigenous religion studies, theories of syncretism, and the dynamics of state recognition.

Building upon this background and addressing the identified literature gap, this study formulates a fundamental question: How does the Masade community manage to sustain its existence and cultural resilience amidst the pressures of dominant religions and waves of modernization in the Sangihe Islands?

This study offers critical contributions in three distinct areas. First, theoretically, it advances the concept of "inclusive resilience" within indigenous religion studies, challenging long-standing assumptions that the continuity of indigenous beliefs invariably depends on spatial isolation. Second, empirically, this article enriches the scholarship on majority-minority dynamics within the under-researched Indonesia-Philippines borderlands. Third, practically, this inquiry provides a critical evaluation of state recognition policies regarding civil rights for indigenous belief adherents living within pluralistic societies.

2 Conceptual framework

In analyzing the social position and adaptation of the Masade community, the concept of social boundaries (Simmel, 2007) provides an important analytical framework. Simmel (2007) argues that social life is structured through boundaries that regulate interaction between individuals and groups, defining the limits of participation, rights and recognition within the collective order. Boundaries do not merely separate groups. They also create relationship by clarifying who belongs, to what extent, and under what condition. For religious minorities such as the Masade community, these boundaries become visible in the ways the group negotiates its identity with the surrounding dominant religious structures. The distinction between “inside” and “outside” membership, as well varying degrees of acceptance within broader Muslim society, illustrates Simmel (2007)’s notion that collective membership is not always absolute but can take the form of partial or negotiated inclusion. Through these processes the Masade community continuously constructs and redefines its social position, balancing internal religious tradition with the expectations and norms of the wider social environment. Thus social boundaries function not only as markers of difference but also as mechanism through which adaptation, coexistence, and identity formation occur within plural societies.

There are many traditional or indigenous religions in Indonesian society, each with its unique ritual traditions. Research conducted by Johan Weintre on the Anak Dalam tribe in the interior of Jambi, Sumatra, revealed that the Anak Dalam tribe worships deities in the form of certain animals or plants. Although they survive by hunting, these animals or plants are not to be eaten. A similar phenomenon exists among the Aboriginal people of Australia. Emile Durkheim, according to (Pals, 1996) stated that the primitive clans of the Aboriginal tribes have totems, which can be animals, plants, or other objects that are sacred. Animals designated as totems are forbidden to be eaten because they are considered sacred, except under certain conditions such as during religious ceremonies or when the animal is offered as a sacrifice. In contrast, animals and plants that are not considered totems may be hunted and eaten.

Although the Anak Dalam live in remote areas and strongly adhere to tradition, Weintre’s research shows the dynamic aspects of their culture. In some cases, the Anak Dalam accept external innovations. For example, they use flashlights when hunting at night and batteries to power a radio. They have also changed some of their traditional rules. In the past, part of the hunt’s yield had to be handed over to the *Tumenggung* (leader), but this rule was later altered due to concerns about members leaving the group, which could weaken the position of certain Anak Dalam tribes (Weintre, 2003).

Of course, not all of their traditions have changed. Many rules and traditions remain intact, such as the prohibition on eating forbidden animals when an Anak Dalam wishes to return to the forest. They are also forbidden from using soap for a certain period, as this is considered an insult to the Anak Dalam deities. As a minority group, the survival of the Anak Dalam involves adopting certain external innovations and eliminating traditional rules that might threaten their existence. However, they continue to maintain several traditional practices. Additionally, the system of marriage among the Anak Dalam helps preserve their community (Weintre, 2003).

In Sumatra, there is another local belief system called Parmalim. Parmalim has religious traditions or rituals, such as offering sacred sacrifices to Debata Mulajadi Nabolon as an expression of gratitude. During the Bius Ceremony, a buffalo called Horbo Santi or Horbo Bius is offered as a sacrifice (Katimin, 2012; Kubitscheck, 1997; Nainggolan, 2021).

During the Christianization process under Dutch colonialism, Raja Mulia strengthened his position by not presenting himself as an anti-colonial figure. This position led Raja Mulia to develop a close relationship with the missionary Nommensen in Sigumpar. This approach was taken to maintain their existence and as a covert strategy to prevent the Christian missionary movement and colonialism from weakening their position (Katimin, 2012; Manurung et al., 2024).

Several important values were instilled in Parmalim members to ensure their continuity: *Parbinotoan Naimbaru* (accepting the development of science and technology to improve resources for humans), *Ngolu Naimbaru* (accepting changes to improve welfare and civilization without violating social ethics according to the Ugamo Malim teachings), and *Tondi na Marsihohot* (remaining faithful to God Debata Mulajadi Nabolon through the teachings of Sisingamangaraja – Raja Nasiakbagi, without being influenced by other religions).

Additionally, Parmalim practices *Ugasan Torop*, where each member contributes basic foodstuffs or money to a communal fund that is used to assist members in need.

In Java, the Badui tribe has religious traditions influenced by Hinduism and Islam. The Badui community is made up of ascetics. They have sacred sites such as *Arca Domas* on Mount Kendang and *Kosala* in Karang. *Arca Domas* is archaeologically a cemetery, but the Badui believe it is the place where their ancestors left the mortal world through a process called *nyahyang*, the soul's departure from the body. The Badui community refers to this sacred place as *Kabuyutan* (the resting place of the ancestors). Some researchers note many similarities between the Badui community and Islam, particularly in their kinship system and other cultural elements, such as their origin from the Lebak Parahiangan area (Edwar et al., 2021; Suidat et al., 2023).

Geertz (1960) wrote that in Javanese culture Islam, Hinduism and indigenous animism hold specific positions within the existing social system. Geertz (1960) identified the *abangan* group as representing animism within the syncretic Javanese tradition. The *abangan* usually consists of the lower classes of society, while the *priyayi* (elite) are the social group that incorporated Hindu teachings into the bureaucracy, as they were government officials (Geertz, 1960).

A similar dynamic exists in Bali. Geertz observed that although the religion of the Balinese people is called Hinduism, it cannot be equated with Hinduism in India. Balinese Hinduism is not the mysticism of Indian intellectuals, but rather a form of polytheism and mythology that can be found in every village in Bali. In other words, Balinese Hinduism fits Max Weber's concept of "magical religion," where people perceive divinity in every tree or stone. Followers of magical religion conduct rituals at various life cycle stages. In magical religion, there is no rationalized theology. Instead, the focus is on the feeling of divinity experienced everywhere (Wartayasa, 2018).

Bali is an island that has undergone significant social changes, largely due to the winds of Indonesian independence, modern education, political awareness, tourism and communication networks, which have opened opportunities for the Balinese people to make contact with the outside world. The transformation from villages to cities and the increasing pressure from population changes have affected traditional communities. This social tension has led to a sense of dissonance in their world, marking the end of the "magical religion" era, which the modern Balinese community is now experiencing. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the Balinese community is undergoing a process that Weber would call "internal conversion," a continuous transformation from traditional worship practices toward a rationalized form of religion (Subawa, 2024; Wartayasa, 2018).

Change colours the journey of every society. No society is static, whether traditional or modern, although the pace of change may differ. As a minority group, the followers of Masade live amidst the great changes occurring outside of them. Naturally, this brings a significant impact on the traditions and culture of Masade. Like other communities, the Masade people often undergo change and adapt to these broader forces in order to preserve their existence.

According to Suyuti (2011) (p. 131), Suparlan states that changes within a society occur due to several reasons, namely: (a) The intensity of contact with external societies; (b) New elements that are accepted because they are not seen as conflicting with local beliefs; (c) The social structure of the society is not authoritarian; (d) The emergence of new ideas that are seen as similar to local culture; and (e) These new elements are perceived as beneficial by the local community (Suyuti, 2011).

Suparlan's theory of change is appropriate to understand the cultural changes occurring in the Masade community. The Masade community is not an isolated group. They live amidst the general society, which necessitates interaction with non-Masade communities because they share the same environment. This interaction exposes the Masade to new ideas that differ from what they have traditionally believed. Naturally, the Masade community can accept new ideas from outside that are seen as non-conflicting with their beliefs or beneficial to their community. Additionally, the leaders or Imams of Masade often attend meetings with other belief groups, both at the regional and national levels.

Cultural change among the followers of Masade is an adaptation to survive amidst the dominant culture and the wave of modernity. Not everything changes, of course. Many aspects of Masade's traditions remain intact, particularly those related to religious beliefs and rituals. The ability to pursue change while

adhering to fundamental principles has allowed the Masade community to endure without being swept away by the forces of change. Masade continues to exist and endure to this day without having to isolate itself from the general society.

Based on data on Masade adherents (2024), in terms of social class this belief tradition is predominantly practiced by farmers and fisherman, although a small number of adherents are also employed as civil servants (Pegawai Negeri Sipil) as well as member of the Indonesian National Police and the military. In their dominant marriage practices, the Masade community demonstrates greater tolerance towards marriage with Muslim, largely due to the perceived similarities in religious beliefs and ritual practices. Nevertheless, when a Masade marries a Muslim, the marriage is typically conducted in two stages. First the couple perform the Islamic marriage contract (akad nikah) according to Islamic law, and this is subsequently followed by a marriage ritual conducted according to the Masade tradition. Such a practice can be observed in the marriage of Masade Informant 02, a Masade man and his wife who is Muslim.

A different pattern emerges in marriage between Masade and Christian. In such case, one of the partners is generally required to convert, either becoming a Masade or by embracing Christianity. This dynamic is illustrated in the case of Boby Masihor (the son of Agung Masihor) and his wife, who was originally Protestant; in this instance, his wife eventually became a member of the Masade community.

3 Research method

This research is a field study conducted in Lenganeng Village, North Tabukan Subdistrict, Sangihe Islands Regency, North Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, from July to October 2024. This location was chosen because it is the center of the development of the local religion of Masade in Sangihe, although this religion is also present in the Kalekube, Mala, and Nusa Tabukan islands.

This study employs a qualitative approach, using a case study method to understand the survival strategies of the Masade Muslim community as a minority in Sangihe. The case study method was chosen to explore the life, customs, and culture of the community through direct observation and in-depth interaction with its members. In the context of this research, the method is used to explore how the Masade community adapts to a social environment dominated by the majority religion. Data collection was carried out through participant observation, where the researchers directly engaged in the daily activities of the Masade community, such as attending religious rituals and other social activities. This allowed the researchers to observe behaviour, interaction patterns, and social dynamics within the community from an inside perspective.

Additionally, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with key figures in the Masade community, including the Chairperson of MLKI (Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan Indonesia), the *Kapitalaung* (village head), and members of the Masade adherents. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling approach based on two primary criteria. First holding a leadership, institutional or traditional role within the Masade community or local village governance. Second, being an active member of the Masade adherents for at least five years to ensure deep experiential knowledge of their cultural and religious adaptation. A total of eight informants participated in this study, consisting of five males and three females. The interviews were conducted informally during daily activities and interactions to maintain a comfortable atmosphere. Given the highly sensitive nature of the topics discussed including religious identity, institutional discrimination, marriage hurdles, strict ethical protocols were observed. Explicit written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The questions were designed to explore the challenges in maintaining their belief identity. Table 1 provides details of informant demographics.

Each informant was provided with a full explanation of the research objectives and methods, and their consent to participate was obtained. The researchers also ensured the confidentiality of the informants' personal information and that the data collected would only be used for research purposes. The results of this study are expected to provide in-depth insights into how the Masade community navigates the complexities of life among the majority religion while maintaining their identity and beliefs.

Although the researchers prepared key questions for the interviews, the process was intended to flow naturally during daily activities and interactions. This was important to create an informal atmosphere so

Table 1: Informants interviewed in the course of the study

No.	Name/pseudonym	Gender	Age	Role/Affiliation
1	Agung Masihor	Male	61	Chairperson of MLKI, prominent Masade figure
2	Masade Informant 1	Female	43	Masade adherent, civil servant
3	Patuwo Takaweian	Male	63	The Imam of Masade
4	Hengki O Sasundu	Male	52	Kapitalaung / Lenganeng village head
5	Masade Informant 2	Male	33	Masade adherent
6	Masade Informant 3	Female	32	Muslim woman married with Masade adherent
7	Masade Informant 4	Female	56	Masade adherent, convert from Christian to Masade when getting married
8	Masade Informant 5	Male	22	Masade adherent, police officer

that the informants would feel comfortable and be able to share more in-depth information. For this reason, the study does not include the specific dates and times of the interviews in the quotes from informants, whether direct or indirect.

The researchers also collected various official documents, such as administrative records (ID cards, marriage registrations), and visual documentation including photos of ritual activities, religious holiday celebrations, and social activities among village residents. Additionally, documentation on local and national policies affecting the local religious community was also gathered.

The data obtained through observations and interviews were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify key patterns in the social and religious adaptation of the Masade community. Emerging themes include interfaith tolerance in Lenganeng Village and the identity struggles faced by followers of Masade. To ensure rigor, validity and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, data triangulation was implemented by cross-verifying the interview transcripts against participant observation field notes and the collected official administrative and policy documents. Furthermore, data validation was achieved through member checking, where preliminary findings, interpretation and transcribed quotes were shared back with key informants to confirm that their perspective and experiences were accurately and faithfully represented. The researchers are aware that direct involvement in the community may affect perceptions and observations. Therefore, the researchers maintained objectivity by staying sensitive to the values and norms upheld by the Masade community.

4 Results

4.1 *Identity and challenges as a minority*

In the Masade community, religious identity is a complex issue, especially when community members interact with the outside world. One striking example is the experience of a Masade member, MJ, who chose to conceal his belief identity when socializing with friends outside the community. MJ admitted that when he was in school, he adapted to his Muslim friends by participating in prayers. Even when registering as a civil servant, MJ listed Islam as his religion on his ID card, even though his belief remained as a follower of Masade. "I joined the prayer when my Muslim friends invited me, and I listed Islam on my ID card to avoid any problems," said MJ. MJ's choice highlights a clear manifestation of pragmatic accommodation and coerced conformity, where minority individuals adopt the identity of the dominant group to bypass structural barriers and avoid social friction.

Hendri Habimaissa, a Masade member who once attended SD GMIST Syaloom Lenganeng, experienced something similar. At this Christian school, he took Christian religious studies because no other religious subjects were offered. His parents were also not opposed. However, when Hendri continued his education at SMP Negeri 5 Tahuna, he chose to take Islamic studies, as he felt there was a similarity be-

tween Islamic rituals and Masade teachings. Hendri's experience, along with those of his peers, shows that the education system at that time did not provide space for adherents of beliefs to formally learn about their faith. Although the teachers in school understood the situation of the belief-following students, the students still participated in Islamic religious lessons to earn grades, most of which were based on their character. This dynamic serves as an example of administrative mimicry and strategic boundary negotiation, wherein students utilize external similarities with a recognized religion to meet formal institutional requirements without genuinely relinquishing their internal belief system.

Agung Masihor played a crucial role in coordinating belief-following students in schools to ensure they were accepted and embraced by the school community. He personally visited schools to provide understanding and ensure that students following beliefs were not discriminated against. "We want to ensure that they can continue their education without sacrificing their identity", he explained.

Religious identity became even more sensitive when community members entered the workforce or higher education. For instance, MJ, who continued his studies in Manado, felt the need to hide his identity as a follower of a belief when interacting with his Muslim and Christian friends. However, when asked directly, MJ explained his belief. He admitted to having experienced discrimination from his Muslim friends. "They judged me for not praying and said I would go to hell", he said. This made MJ even more reluctant to disclose his religious identity in public spaces.

Masade Informant 01 also shared her experience of listing Islam as her religion on her ID card, despite being a follower of the belief. This was done because their community was often referred to as "Old Islam" by outsiders. Additionally, when she took the civil servant entrance test in 1994, she faced discrimination because she could not perform the Islamic prayers or recite Islamic prayers, even though her ID card listed Islam as her religion. "I was called an infidel and told I had no religion by the examiners. I was also taken to the military district command (KODIM)," she said. Masade Informant 01's severe experience illustrates how administrative mimicry can fail under rigorous external scrutiny, revealing the underlying pressure of coerced conformity imposed by state apparatuses at the time.

Masade Informant 01 also decided to transfer her child from SD GMIST Syaloom Lenganeng to a public school so that her child could receive more appropriate religious education. She was concerned that her child would only learn Christianity at the school, while she wanted her child to have a foundation in Islam for the future, especially when her child continued higher education. "I don't mind my child learning Islam, because there are similarities between Masade teachings and Islam, such as the recitation of Al-Fatihah and the Shahada," she explained. A similar admission came from Agung Masihor, who chose to list Islam as his religious identity on his ID card because of the ritual similarities between Islam and Masade belief. "Our rituals are similar to Islam, so I felt more comfortable listing Islam on my ID card than Christianity," he explained. These decisions further illuminate their strategic boundary negotiation; by aligning with Islam over Christianity, due the ritual commonalities, they minimized external friction while preserving the core tenants of Masade within private spaces.

These stories show that religious identity within the Masade community is often adjusted to the social context faced by everyone. There is adaptation and compromise made to maintain harmony with the outside environment, although in the end, the identity of belief adherents remains at the core of their beliefs and spiritual practices.

Masade Informant 01 also mentioned that one of the major issues for the Masade community was marriage. In the past, when they wanted to marry, belief adherents had to go through a court process, waiting about 10 days to get a hearing letter, and only then could they hold a traditional wedding ceremony. In 1977, some belief followers tried to marry at the Religious Affairs Office (KUA) but were required to perform the Islamic prayer rituals. This led them to be excluded from the Masade community after marrying at KUA. As a result, they sought alternative solutions, which eventually involved the court and civil registration. Through updates to the civil registration and population administration framework, including later regulations such as Government Regulation No. 40/2019, which strengthened the legal framework for recording marriages of Indigenous belief adherents, belief followers are now able to marry according to their belief practices, with the marriage being recorded by civil registry.

One case example in the Masade community is the marriage of Masade Informant 02 (33 years old)

to Masade Informant 3 (32 years old), who is Muslim. Initially, the wife's family rejected the marriage, but Masade Informant 2 convinced them that the marriage would be carried out according to Islamic practices. The marriage took place at KUA, where Masade Informant 2 was asked to recite the two shahadas. For Masade Informant 2, this was not a problem because the Masade community also has the concept of the two shahadas. After the wedding, the couple held a thanksgiving event in Desa Lenganeng, attended by neighbours from various religious backgrounds, including Christians and Masade. Despite having different religions, the couple agreed to uphold their respective beliefs, and to this day, they have been blessed with two daughters, now 5 and 3 years old. Throughout their marriage, they have never experienced religious conflict within their household.

Masade Informant 01 explained that another issue faced by the followers of the Masade belief is education. Many children from the Masade community attend SD GMIST Syaloom Lenganeng, a Christian-based private school. As a result, the children of belief followers are forced to take Christian religious lessons, as there are no other elementary schools in Lenganeng village that can accommodate them. After entering junior high school, religious studies become elective subjects for students. Some Masade children take Islamic religious lessons, but those who are unable to take Islamic religious lessons usually opt for Christian religious education. A challenge for children wanting to study Islam is the requirement to memorize and read the Qur'an, which makes some children struggle, ultimately leading them to choose Christian religious studies instead.

In fact, the Masade community wishes to develop religious education for children so they can understand the Masade belief. Furthermore, Masade Informant 01 said, the Masade community even aspires to establish a Masade-specific religious educational institution. However, this desire is still hindered by funding issues. Formally, the desire has been accommodated by the state through the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 27/2017 on the Educational Services for Belief in God Almighty in Education unit, enacted in 2016. In 2018, there was even a training session for belief education counsellors, which was hoped to enable them to teach children in public schools.

Counsellors are belief followers who volunteer as teachers in public schools. In the Nusa Tabuka highland area there are five counsellors, but in the islands there are only two. Students who cannot be reached by counsellors can study at the mosque or at the home of the Masade community secretary every Sunday. However, Masade Informant 01 complained about the lack of successors for belief counsellors because the children of belief followers are scattered across different schools, which raises concerns about them losing focus on their belief. The seven Masade counsellors want to enlighten the community, but they are hindered by a lack of funding.

The Masade organization raises funds for mosque renovations during Friday prayers and weekly prayers. In June 2024, Masade Informant 01 proposed a fund of 25 million for the activities, but the Head of the Cultural Department stated that the funds would be redirected to another post. Meanwhile, government assistance only consists of textbooks for belief followers. The printing of books and other learning materials must be funded by the personal funds of the Masade organization secretary. Overall, the Masade organization is working hard to ensure education for the next generation, despite having to spend personal funds and facing many challenges from various parties.

Masade Informant 01 explained that between 2002 and 2016, the Masade community faced difficulties in listing their religious identity on their ID cards. During that time, their ID cards only had a hyphen (-) as a sign that they did not have a clearly defined religious identity. However, when dealing with government documents, many community members felt the need to fill in the religion column on their ID cards, and some of them chose to write Islam, while others listed Christianity. Masade Informant 01 mentioned that some people chose Islam because they felt there were visible similarities in rituals between Islam and Masade, while those who chose Christianity generally followed the religion of one of their parents. In this case, the inclusion of a religious identity on the ID card became a requirement mandated by the government, especially when processing documents to become civil servants.

The followers of the belief felt the need to replace the empty religion field with one of the six official religions in Indonesia. The hyphen in the religion column did not mean they had no religion. It rather indicated that they were followers of a belief. Eventually, the Ministry of Home Affairs Regulation allowed

followers of “non-standard” religions to fill the religion column with a hyphen (-), indicating that they were followers of a belief. Constitutional Court’s Decision No. 97/PUU-VIX/2016 of 7 November 2017, concerning indigenous belief adherents and the religion column on identity documents, also marked an important turning point, where followers of a belief were allowed to list “Belief in God Almighty” as their religious identity on their ID cards. Since then, the religious identity of Masade community members, including Masade Informant 01 and the head of the MLKI district, has been changed to “Followers of Belief in God Almighty.”

Masade Informant 01 also added that the administrative process for followers of belief, including processing ID cards and marriage registrations, has become easier. For those who do not yet have an ID card, only a letter from the neighbourhood head is required to obtain one. Additionally, for marriage registration, followers of belief no longer have to go through a court hearing but can simply visit the civil registry. Masade Informant 01 acknowledged this as a significant advancement in the state’s recognition of the rights of the Masade community in Indonesia.

Another issue faced by the Masade community is funding. According to Masade Informant 01, this has caused the Masade community difficulties in carrying out various activities, including mosque repairs and the construction of other religious facilities. She further explained that the Masade leadership had actually planned to build a secretariat office as a centre for activities and administration. To realize this plan, they had requested donations twice from Masade community members and support from local residents. Of course, the donations were not enough because the Masade members are not many, and most are not from the upper class. However, this issue was addressed with the help of the local government, where the Masade leadership submitted a proposal for assistance to the Regent of Sangihe Islands Regency and received a grant of IDR 50 million. The funds raised were used to build the secretariat office. The local government’s attention to the religious needs of the Masade community has actually been quite good. In addition to helping build the secretariat office, the local government also assisted in the renovation and repair of several religious facilities of Masade.

4.2 *Fighting for rights through organization*

Masade Informant 01 explained that the struggle of the Masade community to gain recognition of their rights as citizens has been very difficult. The Masade community can only voice its complaints to the central government, with the final decision remaining in the hands of the government. According to Masade Informant 01, MLKI (Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan Indonesia), the Supreme Assembly of Indonesian Religious Beliefs, plays the role of coordinator between religious belief communities, conveying the complaints and aspirations of these communities, including Masade, to the national level to fight for their rights to be recognized by the state. Previously, organizations such as BKOK (Badan Koordinasi Organisasi Kepercayaan) and HPK (Himpunan Penghayat Kepercayaan) also played a role in this struggle before eventually evolving into MLKI (Viri & Febriany, 2020).

Agung Masihor explained that the issues faced by religious belief communities throughout Indonesia are discussed in MLKI forums attended by representatives of various communities. After listening to the issues from each community, MLKI brings these issues to the National Work Meeting (Rakernas). Operationally, MLKI executes its mandate through a multi-tiered approach that spans legal advocacy, documentation support and educational counselling. For example, issues of discrimination are discussed with the Human Rights Office to find protection solutions, while education-related issues are submitted to the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) and discussed in joint sessions with the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI). To bridge national policies with grassroots realities, MLKI also provides direct local mediation between the Masade community and municipal authorities who are often reluctant to enforce new regulation, alongside educational counselling for public school to ensure they accommodate belief-based curricula.

Source: Masihor, Personal Documentation, 2024

In conveying their aspirations to the local government, besides directly meeting with them, government officials are also invited to attend events organized by the Masade community. They usually invite local



Figure 1: MLKI National Work Meeting, 2023

government officials to attend the *Diko'u Soro* festival. The presence of officials at the festival becomes an opportunity for the MLKI chairperson to voice the complaints and aspirations of the Masade community so that the officials can better understand and empathize with their struggle. Agung, as one of the MLKI leaders, often becomes the “messenger” conveying these complaints to the national level.

To some extent, the struggle through MLKI has been quite successful. Several complaints that had been voiced by religious belief communities have eventually been formally recognized by the state. Specifically, MLKI Sangihe has significantly advanced the legal recognition and civil administration of the Masade adherents, particularly regarding marriage verification. Currently the community relies on three

designated marriage registrars who have been officially recognized through formal decrees (SK) issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture. These registrars are distributed over specific territorial areas to ensure accessible administrative service. Aking Muli, serving the registration area of Lenganeng; Patuwo Takaweian serving the Kalekube, and Abdalin Karaling serving the Nusa. The institutionalization of these specialized marriage registrars for Indigenous faith followers (Penghayat) has eliminated previous barriers to state recognition. Consequently, all marriage practices celebrated within the Masade community are now officially and legally documented under the state's civil registry office, securing their constitutional rights as citizens.

In addition to marriage registration, the legal recognition of the Masade adherents is also reflected in their civic identity documents. Based on the information provided by Masihor, there has been a significant transformation in the civic documentation of the Masade community. The amendment of personal data on national Identity Cards (KTP), specifically changing the religion column to *Penghayat Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*, has reached close to 100% coverage. The only individuals who have not updated their administrative status are a small number of elderly citizen, who generally face limitations in modifying their personal identification document.

Conversely, challenges persist regarding the implementation of educational rights, showing that policy changes do not automatically guarantee local execution. Formal access to belief-based religious education for Masade children has not yet been realized on the ground. According to Masihor, this is currently an active front of administrative struggle; MLKI Central is heavily engaging with the ministry to fight for the procurement and official appointment of specialized religious teachers for penghayat students. Although achieving these structural milestones has required tireless efforts and a long time, the resilience of Masade and its followers is not solely due to MLKI and state recognition. There are other factors that serve as the foundation for their continued adherence to their beliefs. The following explains these factors.

4.3 *Rituals as a builder of collective bonds*

During this research, we had the opportunity to interview several key figures and members of the Masade community. What we discovered was more than just quantitative facts: there is a rich social relationship and unique traditions that strengthen bonds between individuals, transcending religious boundaries, and seem to serve as a safeguard against modernization. Crucially, these rituals do not merely serve a symbolic purpose; they function as active mechanisms of collective identity, social reproduction and boundary maintenance that preserve the community's structural integrity. Here are some observations that provide an insight into how the Masade community builds collective ties through worship, prayer, celebrations, and moments of death.

When we participated in the *Sholat Jumatee* (Friday prayers), we felt the uniqueness and intimacy of the worship atmosphere in the Masade community. Around 11:00 AM, the congregation began to arrive: children, teenagers, adults and the elderly all made their way to the Masade mosque. The utilization of a bell rather than the conventional Islamic adhan (call to prayer) serves as an immediate mechanism of boundary maintenance, asserting a localized religious identity by altering a universally recognized sonic marker of Islam orthodoxies.

Outside the mosque, small groups gathered. Children sat cross-legged with their worship report books in hand, while the men casually chatted on the porch of the house next to the mosque. The women, dressed in hijabs and long skirts, were conversing in the courtyard in front of the mosque. The physical presence and light interactions before prayer time created a strong sense of togetherness, as if every moment before worship began was an opportunity to strengthen relationships. Upon entering the mosque, there was intimacy in the seating arrangement: the men sat in a circle around the imam, while some women leaned against the wall, listening attentively. The imam ensured that all the congregants were gathered before beginning the prayer. This structural insistence on complete assembly operates as a mechanism of social reproduction, reinforcing the structural value that presence and togetherness were the essence of worship itself. This reframes attendance not merely as an individual spiritual duty, but as a collective civic

obligation. This requirement ensures that the community reproduces itself in its entirety during every ritual cycle.

After the prayer and *dhikr* (remembrance of God), the greeting process began, but this was not just a formality. As explained by Agung Masihor, the greeting is divided into three levels: with elders, the younger person holds the elder's hand; with peers, hands clasp tightly and are then placed on the forehead. This gesture is not only physical but also emotional—a symbol of acceptance without regard to age or status.

The Masade community also maintains their togetherness through weekly group prayers, held every Thursday afternoon. When we attended one of the group prayers, the atmosphere was very familiar. The host warmly greeted guests at the door, inviting them into a neatly arranged house. The worshippers, both men and women, sat in a circle, creating a striking circle of togetherness.

As with *Sholat Jumatee*, the greeting after prayer followed the same structure, reflecting the age hierarchy that is respected in this community. But what made this event special was that after the prayer, the worshippers gathered in the yard for a shared meal. Sitting on mats, they shared food equally, without regard to gender. This moment of communal eating depicted harmony in simplicity, showing that the togetherness of the Masade community is not only tied by religion but also by life experiences shared collectively.

After the meal there was a simple raffle with matchsticks, conducted as a form of recreational activity. The joy that emerged from this raffle showed that the Masade community does not only worship together, but also celebrates joy in a unique way, strengthening the bonds between members in a very human manner.

This dynamic becomes even more pronounced during major public events. The Eid al-Fitr celebration in the Masade community which is closely tied to the traditional practice of Diko'u Soro, lasts for two months and becomes an inclusive celebration involving the entire village, including Christians. Analytically, Diko'u Soro can be interpreted as a public ritual of recognition (Figure 2). It function as a strategic platform that allows the Masade community to formally appear and legitimize themselves before both the broader village and apparatus of the state. This togetherness is the most concrete form of interfaith harmony, where everyone is invited to participate, and absence is considered a "social debt". Agung Masihor explained how the government figures present at the celebration became a symbol that the Masade community had received wider acceptance, not only within the village but also from outside. Through Diko'u Soro, the community navigates a complex process of boundary maintenance, they open their borders to external political validation and interfaith participation, yet they use this very visibility to fortify their distinct traditional values against complete external assimilation.

When someone dies, the funeral procession in the Masade community is a sacred moment that brings the whole community together, including Christians and Muslims. At this juncture, the community approach to boundary maintenance shifts from defining distinction to radical inclusivity. The funeral ceremony is a time when there are no differences; everyone is involved, both in helping with logistics and providing moral support. The process of washing the body by the imam and family members is done with solemnity, while the prayers said during the hundred days after the burial ensure that the grieving community members do not feel alone.

Agung Masihor stated that the involvement of the entire community, even from other religions, shows extraordinary solidarity. Death, which usually separates, in the context of Masade actually strengthens social bonds, ensuring that everyone has a place and role in every phase of life. In our observations, what makes the Masade community resilient is not only their religious practices but how they utilize these rituals as dynamic social mechanisms. Through them, they successfully manage inter-generational transmission, continuously reproduce their social order, maintain flexible boundaries with neighbouring groups, and secure vital public recognition from the state, thereby preserving their collective identity in a changing world.

4.4 *Interfaith tolerance*

The Masade community is located in the midst of major religious communities, particularly Protestantism. Despite this, the Masade community experiences a sense of tolerance and harmony among the followers of different religions, especially in Lenganeng. This is acknowledged by Masade Informant 01. This Informant gives an example that when the Christian community celebrates major holidays such as Christmas or holds

wedding celebrations, they do not slaughter pigs in the village. They slaughter pigs in another village or purchase pre-slaughtered pork from other villages and then cook it. This is done to respect the beliefs of the Masade community, which like the Muslims forbids pork.

A similar sentiment is expressed by Agung Masihor. Agung explains that when the Christian community holds large events involving the general public, they often provide non-pork animals, such as cows or goats, for the Masade followers. These animals are handed over to the Masade imam to be slaughtered and cooked as offerings for the Masade community. This reflects a strong form of tolerance between the two groups.

This tolerance not only applies to Christian religious celebrations but also to the major holidays of Masade. Agung Masihor explains that when the Masade community celebrates Eid al-Fitr, the Christian residents of the village often visit the homes of Masade members to socialize and share meals. Likewise, during Christmas, members of Masade are invited to visit the homes of the Christian community.

In conversations with various parties in Lenganeng Village, the researchers learned that the villagers indeed have a tradition of visiting each other during the major religious holidays of every faith. For example, when the Masade celebrate *Diko'u Soro*, the event is also attended by Christians and Muslims from the entire village, as well as government officials who are invited to celebrate together. During this event, the Masade community also expresses their grievances to the attending officials.

On the tradition of the *Diko'u Soro* celebration, Agung Masihor explained that the event is celebrated with unique rituals, including the creation of a *gunungan* (a ceremonial mound). This *gunungan* is made from *ketupat*, *dodol* (a type of traditional sweet), and fruits, all hung above sugarcane. The sugarcane used in the *gunungan* has symbolic meaning, with vertical and horizontal ties. "The vertically tied sugarcane symbolizes the relationship of the Masade community with the Creator, while the horizontal ties symbolize relationships among fellow humans," explained Agung.

Agung also mentioned that during the Islamic holidays in the Sangihe Islands, the Masade community often participates in the *tawaf* (walking around to visit the houses of the villagers). The villagers, both Christians and Masade community members, warmly welcome the Muslims performing *tawaf* by providing food and fostering social connections. This strengthens interfaith relationships in the village and demonstrates their close-knit unity.

Interfaith tolerance is not only seen in religious celebrations but also in their daily lives. According to Fahru Raji Makangiras, when Masade residents perform the Friday prayer or weekly prayers, the Christian community in the village refrains from activities that might disturb the worship, such as noisy work. In return, the Masade community also halts any activities that could create a disturbance when the Christian community is holding their Sunday services.

4.5 Social solidarity among villagers

Interfaith tolerance in Lenganeng goes hand in hand with the strong social bonds among its residents, demonstrating how village solidarity functions as a vital form of social infrastructure that actively protects minority communities from social exclusion. Hesky O Sasundu explained that the people of Lenganeng have long lived in groups to meet their daily needs, through farming groups and blacksmiths (Sasundu, 2024). The farming groups are generally composed of women, while the blacksmiths are predominantly men. The farming groups were formed through the initiative of the local community, while blacksmithing is the main livelihood of the village. Within both groups, there is no distinction between religions or families. This has created strong social ties among the villagers, establishing an inclusive framework where minority groups are structurally integrated into the local economy. The farming groups, which consist of 10 groups, were initially formed independently, but the village authorities later helped organize them for better structure. The village authorities, particularly the *Kapitalaung* (a title for the village head), also play a role in managing agricultural aid from the central government ensuring equitable resource distribution that prevents the marginalization of religious minorities.

The agricultural produce from the farming groups is used individually by each group. Meanwhile, for the blacksmiths, when there is a wedding or mourning in the village, they gather to make swords (*peda*),

which are then given to the family celebrating or mourning, regardless of their religion. This communal action helps ease the burden on the family involved by strengthening the harmonious relationships among the villagers, serving as a protective safety net during critical life events. Masade Informant 2 further emphasized this communal infrastructure by recounting that when he built his house, the people of Lenganeng voluntarily came to help without being asked. The work was done in a *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) manner, with 16 people participating. The host provided coffee for the workers, and the house was completed in just one day, illustrating how organic social cooperation acts as a structural buffer against economic and social isolation for minority households.

Agung Masihor also acknowledged the strong social and familial bonds among the villagers, particularly those of the minority Masade faith, highlighting how these dense social networks shield them from alienation. Agung gave an example, stating that during major religious celebrations like Eid Fitri and Christmas, people visit their relatives and neighbours. When a family is unable to visit their relatives during the celebration, they usually wait for a later time to ensure that the bond of kinship remains intact. This family connection is further strengthened through clan relationships. Agung explained that the Masade community does not allow marriages within the same clan as they are considered to be one family. This is their way of maintaining a strong lineage and family relationships, while also expanding kinship ties with other clans. This embeds the minority population into a wide, cross-cutting social fabric that inherently resists exclusionary practices.

The importance of family relationships is also reflected in how they manage funerals. Many Masade families bury their loved ones on private land behind their homes, regardless of religion. For example, in Masade Informant 2's family burial site, his grandfather, who was Christian, and his grandmother, who was Masade, are buried side by side. A similar situation occurs in Agung Masihor's family, where members of different religions are buried in the same location. All this demonstrates their close relationship despite religious differences, proving that village solidarity extends even beyond life to ensure that minorities are never segregated or excluded from the collective memory of the community.

Solidarity among fellow villagers, even across different beliefs, is also shown in mutual assistance activities reaffirming that kinship functions as a reliable defence mechanism against discrimination. For instance, on July 25, 2024, Mrs. Femi (54 years old) came to help her sister, Masade Informant 04, who had an event. These two siblings have different beliefs: Mrs. Femi is Christian, while Masade Informant 04 converted after marrying a Masade man. Despite their different religions, they maintain a good relationship, visiting and helping each other during major celebrations like Idul Fitri, Christmas, and *Diko'u Soro*. Religious differences do not hinder their family harmony. This underscores how everyday solidarity forms a resilient social infrastructure that naturally insulates religious minorities from potential exclusion.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the survival strategies employed by the Masade community in Indonesia. As a religious minority, they encounter significant challenges in preserving their cultural and spiritual identity while coexisting with dominant religious groups. Their adaptation mechanisms provide insight into how minority groups navigate socio-religious pressures and institutional constraints. A key finding is the syncretic nature of Masade religious practices, which blend elements of Islam, Christianity, and local traditions. This approach enables them to maintain their unique identity while incorporating practices that resonate with the broader religious landscape in Sangihe. By embracing external religious elements such as Friday prayers, Ramadan fasting and Eid celebrations, they mitigate the risk of exclusion while upholding their belief system. This aligns with Clifford Geertz's (Geertz, 1960) concept of religious adaptation, where communities selectively adopt external influences to survive without fully assimilating.

The Masade's strategy exemplifies a pragmatic adaptation that ensures continuity while minimizing social friction. The study also emphasizes the strategic adaptation of Masade followers in navigating bureaucratic challenges. Many members register as Muslims or Christians on official documents to access social and economic opportunities, including education, employment, and civil registration. This bureaucratic adaptation is vital for survival, as Indonesia's legal framework has historically marginalized local religious

communities outside of the six officially recognized religions. Similar strategies are observed among other religious minorities, such as the Parmalim in Sumatra and the Sunda Wiwitan adherents in West Java, who also face bureaucratic constraints (Edwar et al., 2021; Katimin, 2012). The choice to align with mainstream religious identities in official records underscores the complexities of religious identity in Indonesia, where administrative practices often shape personal beliefs.

The role of Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan Indonesia (MLKI) is a crucial part of their strategy for survival. MLKI acts as a bridge between belief-based communities and the government, making sure that minority groups gain recognition and legal protections. This organization has been vital in achieving legal recognition for Masade marriage registrations, education rights, and documentation of religious identity. Similar advocacy efforts can be seen globally, where organized representation is essential in safeguarding indigenous beliefs and cultural practices (Viri & Febriany, 2020). The success of MLKI highlights the significance of institutional involvement in securing rights for marginalized communities.

Even though they are a minority, the Masade community enjoys a relatively high level of religious tolerance in Lenganeng Village. The mutual respect between Masade followers and the neighbouring Christian and Muslim communities promotes a peaceful coexistence. Shared religious celebrations, support during community events, and the provision of alternative food options during interfaith gatherings reflect their dedication to interfaith harmony. This is consistent with research on interfaith relations in Indonesia, where local cultural norms and historical coexistence help navigate religious differences (Setiawan, 2023). The Masade's ability to maintain social cohesion despite religious differences indicates that interfaith harmony can thrive through mutual respect and cultural understanding.

The Masade community has shown impressive resilience, but they still face several challenges. One major issue is educational access for Masade children, as the absence of formal religious instruction that aligns with their beliefs puts them at a disadvantage compared to students from officially recognized religions. Financial limitations also hinder their efforts to create new religious education institutions or enhance existing ones. The future sustainability of the Masade community hinges on ongoing legal recognition and institutional support. Strengthening advocacy through MLKI, boosting financial aid from local and national governments, and promoting interfaith dialogue will be essential for the long-term survival of the Masade tradition (Suyuti, 2011). The ability of the Masade community to endure amidst religious and bureaucratic obstacles highlights their adaptability and resilience. By utilizing strategies such as religious syncretism, bureaucratic flexibility, organizational advocacy, and interfaith engagement, they have managed to preserve their unique identity while coexisting with larger religious groups. This study emphasizes the critical role of legal recognition and social tolerance in ensuring the sustainability of minority religious communities, both in Indonesia and beyond.

6 Conclusion

This study reveals that the Masade community has managed to survive as a minority group despite the dominance of major religions (Christianity and Islam) and the wave of modernization by adopting unique adaptation strategies. They have engaged in syncretism by blending elements of Islam, Christianity, and local traditions in their religious practices. Additionally, community members often disguise their religious identities, particularly in bureaucratic matters. Although initially done out of necessity, this approach has proven effective in maintaining their existence.

However, the Masade community faces challenges in accessing formal education that aligns with their beliefs, as there is no specific curriculum for local belief adherents. Nevertheless, they strive to preserve their teachings through informal education within families and communities. Their existence is further reinforced through organizations like MLKI, which advocate for the rights of local belief followers, including recognition of identity and ease of marriage administration.

The Masade community's existence is maintained through religious rituals and traditions that not only strengthen internal solidarity but also foster positive interactions with the wider society. Their harmonious relationship with the majority religious groups in Desa Lenganeng demonstrates a high level of tolerance, where participation in each other's religious celebrations is key to maintaining harmony. This study concludes

that the resilience of the Masade community lies in its ability to adapt to social changes while preserving its religious identity and traditions, through tolerance, solidarity, and collective struggle.

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