

Countering Cultural Stigmatization in a Decolonized System of Inter-ritual Encounters in Aceh, Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines how inter-ritual encounters in Aceh, Indonesia, function as a decolonized system that counters cultural stigmatization by challenging dominant narratives and reshaping religious boundaries through community-based interactions. Addressing prevalent perceptions of Aceh as socially exclusive due to its strong Islamic identity, this study emphasizes everyday interreligious engagements emerging through ritual presence, communal participation, and reciprocal social practices. Utilizing qualitative data drawn from digital archives, online media, and visual documentation, the research explores how Muslim communities participate in Hindu Tamil and Chinese festivals, while non-Muslim residents engage with Islamic spaces and events. These interactions, such as observing public rituals, providing technical assistance, food sharing, and visiting sacred sites, represent localized forms of mutual recognition rooted in community proximity and historical coexistence. The findings demonstrate that these inter-ritual practices constitute relational strategies affirming coexistence and rejecting externally imposed stigmas of intolerance. Framed within a decolonial perspective, the article highlights how everyday ritual interactions reflect alternative epistemologies grounded in lived social realities rather than institutional or legal frameworks. The study contributes to broader discussions of interreligious dynamics, suggesting its relevance to other global contexts where religious majorities significantly shape public life and interreligious relations, thus expanding the understanding of cultural coexistence and mutual respect in diverse religious environments.

Keywords: Countering Cultural, Stigmatization, Decolonized System, Inter-ritual, and Encounters.

Introduction

Public perception of Aceh has long been shaped by its formal implementation of Sharia law, granted in 2005 through a special autonomy framework following the peace agreement between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government (Aksa et al., 2023). This legal framework has strengthened the visibility of Islamic norms in the public sphere and contributed to the widespread image of Aceh as a region governed by religious standards favoring the Muslim majority (Feener, 2021). Media representations, particularly



at national and global levels, often emphasize punitive aspects such as public caning, reinforcing a narrative of religious rigidity and intolerance (Affan, 2017; Artharini, 2016; BBC, 2014; ICJR, 2017). These portrayals are shaped by dominant systems of meaning-making that tend to marginalize local perspectives. Such representational dynamics echo critiques of how global knowledge systems establish normative viewpoints that overlook the situated nature of local experiences (Mignolo, 2010). Platform technologies operate within broader capitalist systems that reproduce asymmetrical power relations between dominant and marginal regions (Yong Jin, 2015, p. 69). These discursive patterns have sustained portrayals of Aceh as religiously exceptional, based on external assumptions. This study, grounded in the social realities of Aceh, Indonesia, presents inter-ritual practices as expressions of relational coexistence that reflect decolonial ways of living together.

Research on interreligious life in Aceh has primarily focused on structural and legal issues, such as the implementation of Sharia law, identity negotiation, and strategies of adaptation among non-Muslim communities (Djawas et al., 2023; Fasya, 2021; Ichwan et al., 2020; Siregar & Dalimunthe, 2024). These studies have provided valuable insights into how minority groups navigate institutional frameworks and negotiate their presence in public life. However, they generally do not address how interreligious relations unfold through ritual presence or embodied participation in shared celebrations. Some works have noted moments of inter-ritual encounters, such as Muslim presence at Hindu Tamil festivals like Panghuni Uthiram or attendance in Chinese New Year events (Muhammad & Amrina, 2021; Srimulyani et al., 2018), yet these observations remain descriptive and are not analyzed through a conceptual framework that centers ritual, spatial, and relational dimensions. The absence of such approaches may reflect the influence of colonial-era narratives that constructed Aceh as religiously rigid and resistant to pluralism (Kloos, 2014), as well as patterns of internal colonialism that have historically positioned Aceh as a peripheral object within the national project (Li & Zheng, 2023). Broader critiques of knowledge production in postcolonial Indonesia have highlighted how colonial epistemologies continue to shape what is considered valid knowledge in academic and institutional spaces, often sidelining local religious practices and their embedded meanings (Takbir et al., 2022). Even studies that address cultural representation in Aceh, such as through museum narratives, have not extended their analysis to the lived interreligious practices of communities (Arainikasih & Hafnidar, 2018). This study seeks to respond to those absences by applying the lens of inter-rituality to examine how ritual presence across religious boundaries can be interpreted as a decolonial form of relational practice that reimagines religious boundaries in post-conflict Aceh, Indonesia.

This article aims to explore how interreligious interaction in Aceh takes shape through ritual presence across religious boundaries, particularly in everyday settings where Muslim and non-Muslim communities encounter one another through public celebrations. By applying the concept of inter-rituality (Lattu, 2023, 2025; Moyaert, 2019), the study seeks to examine how these ritual engagements function not merely as cultural performances or acts of tolerance, but as socially negotiated expressions of coexistence within a dominant Islamic public sphere. This approach is informed by a decolonial perspective that values religious practices as sites of relational knowledge (Mignolo, 2010, 2012; Omer, 2020; Poell et al.,

2024). The study is guided by the following question: how do inter-ritual encounters in Aceh function as decolonial practices that challenge dominant narratives and reimagine religious boundaries from below? Through this question, the study aims to reposition interreligious engagement as a lived, embodied, and relational phenomenon that operates as a form of local sovereignty.

Despite Aceh's demographic and legal character as a Muslim-majority region governed by Sharia law, this study finds that interreligious engagement occurs through everyday ritual presence across religious boundaries in public spaces. These interactions take the form of observing non-Muslim religious festivals, participating in culturally acts, visiting Islamic sacred spaces, and sharing food during religious events. Using a qualitative approach and drawing from digital archives, media reports, and visual data, this study analyzes such encounters through the lens of inter-rituality. These practices reflect relational presence embedded in proximity and shared space. Rather than indicating theological, they express coexistence shaped by mutual recognition and everyday social ties. Positioned conceptually, these findings challenge dominant portrayals of Aceh as religiously exclusive and highlight lived modes of interreligious life. Inter-rituality emerges not only as a descriptive tool but also as a decolonial practice that resists dominant epistemologies and affirms local religious knowledge and coexistence (Mignolo, 2010; Moyaert, 2019; Schilbrack, 2019).

Mapping Religious Presence and Everyday Religious Encounters in Aceh, Indonesia

Aceh is a province with a predominantly Muslim population. As of 2024, the total population of Aceh is approximately 5,623,454 people, of which approximately 5,492,487 adhere to Islam (Darmawan, 2025b). The strong presence of Islam in the region is closely linked to its historical position as a gateway for the early spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago (Arif & Siraj, 2020). Around the late 13th century, Islam began to enter Aceh through trade and cultural exchanges with Muslim merchants in many nations, particularly from Asia (Reid, 2010). The establishment of the Samudera Pasai Sultanate marked an important milestone in institutionalizing Islamic practices in northern Sumatra. This kingdom not only maintained diplomatic and commercial relations with the Islamic world but also supported Islamic education and legal traditions (Hall, 2017; Peacock, 2016). In the 17th century, the rise of the Aceh Sultanate further reinforced the role of Islam as the foundation of political authority and cultural identity. Through religious scholarship, mosque-based learning, and syariah-oriented governance, Islam became deeply rooted in Acehnese society (Burhanudin, 2021). These developments laid the foundation for the region's enduring Islamic character, which remains influential in shaping public life today. Here is the table of the diverse religious population in Aceh for the year 2024.

Table 1
The Number of People in Aceh by Religion in 2024

No.	Religion	Estimated Population (\pm)	Percentage (%)
1.	Islam	5.492.487	98.91
2.	Christianity	64.984	0.79
3.	Buddhism	6.658	0.19

4.	Catholicism	5.982	0.11
5.	Hinduism	90	0.0016

Source: (Darmawan, 2025)

Table 1 shows the percentage of the population in Aceh by religion in 2024, indicating that Islam is overwhelmingly dominant. Accounting for 98.91 percent of the total population, while adherents of other religions such as Christianity (0.79 percent), Buddhism (0.19 percent), Catholicism (0.11 percent), and Hinduism (0.0016 percent) constitute very small minority groups (Darmawan, 2025b). This demographic composition often shapes the perception that Aceh's social space is exclusive to the Muslim majority (Ekawati & Hidayatullah, 2024). This study reveals that interreligious involvement does occur through acts of presence in celebrations and public religious settings. These forms of interaction emerge from social proximity and historical coexistence (Djawas et al., 2023; Zain et al., 2019). Muslims are present in non-Muslim rituals such as Chinese New Year and Tamil Hindu processions, while non-Muslims engage in Islamic settings by visiting mosques, receiving *qurban* (ritual animal sacrifice during Eid al-Adha) meat, and shopping in Ramadan markets. These everyday encounters demonstrate patterns of mutual recognition and community-based negotiation. Inter-ritual engagements reflect localized expressions of coexistence rooted in shared space and lived social relations. From a decolonial perspective, these practices reject the narrative imposed by global narratives on Aceh as a backward or intolerant region and trace a framework of knowledge rooted in local realities.

Decolonializing Religious Coexistence through Muslim Presence in Non-Muslim Rituals

A decolonial approach provides a critical perspective to understanding interreligious engagement as a social and political practice grounded in everyday experience. This view is important to recognize that the presence of religious communities in spaces of other faiths can act as a response to epistemic domination. Previous studies suggest that being present and overcoming exclusion can be interpreted as forms of decolonial politics (Omer, 2020). The concept of inter-rituality supports this idea by showing that participating in religious rituals across traditions, such as observing, assisting, or helping with preparations, reflects a kind of social involvement that does not rely entirely on theological meaning (Schilbrack, 2019). In this context, the involvement of Muslims in non-Muslim rituals in Aceh, Indonesia, can be seen as a form of interreligious social practice and a way to affirm presence within religious spaces shaped by structures of power.

Interreligious relations in Aceh began before the colonial period and developed within a society that accepted religious diversity. In the precolonial era, Aceh became a place where various ethnic and religious communities gathered for trade and often stayed for long periods (Reid, 1990, 2010). This created a diverse social setting that was open to outside influences (Nurlaila, 2022). During the colonial period, the Dutch disrupted this environment through divide-and-rule policies. They sent Snouck Hurgronje to influence local society through religious instruction and used internal divisions to weaken community cohesion (Fahira, 2024). After the end of colonial rule, non-Muslim places of worship were still allowed to stand and function. This reflected the respect of Acehnese society for different religious

practices (M. Nur et al., 2020). These developments show that interreligious presence in Aceh today continues a long history of religious diversity and social strength in the face of external control.

Inter-rituality in the currently context of Aceh is manifested through the social involvement of Muslim communities in the religious celebrations of non-Muslim groups. This involvement takes the form of presence and non-ritual participation in events such as Chinese New Year and Panghuni Uthiram. Muslim residents are seen participating in lion dance performances (*barongsai*) and attending Hindu Tamil ritual processions in public spaces. In some cases, participation is also evident in the form of logistical and technical support, such as helping to prepare for the celebrations (Muhammad & Amrina, 2021). This kind of cross-community engagement reflects interreligious social practices that emerge from everyday relationships between the Muslim majority and Chinese minorities (Srimulyani et al., 2018). Inter-rituality occurs through acts of presence, assistance, and witnessing, embedded in collective and social routines.

Figure 1
A Muslim Woman Engages in Lion Dance (*Barongsai*) Rituals



Source: (Setyadi, 2017)

Figure 1 shows the participation of a Muslim woman in a Chinese New Year celebration, which reflects a form of active inter-rituality within a religious and social context dominated by a Muslim-majority population (Figure 1). The woman, plays the cymbals in the Golden Dragon lion dance (*barongsai*) team and has regularly participated in Chinese New Year performances since 2013 (Setyadi, 2017b). Her involvement illustrates a conscious integration of elements from another religious tradition, such as music and bodily technique, which can take place in inter-ritual practice as part of a shared social experience (Schilbrack, 2019). This activity occurs in a public space that enables interreligious practices to appear as part of the social representation of diversity in everyday life, including interactions between

religious expression and public space (Griera, 2019, p. 36). Presence, technical involvement, and sustained participation in such religious celebrations demonstrate that inter-rituality in Aceh, Indonesia, unfolds through social practices rooted in community closeness and interpersonal relationships

Figure 2
Muslims in Aceh observe the Cithirai Maha Puja ritual



Source: (Aceh, 2023)

In another instance, the presence of Acehnese Muslims at the Chithirai Maha Puja celebration, which took place in a public space, illustrates a form of inter-rituality categorized as observational presence (Mardili, 2025). In Figure 2, several Muslim residents are seen standing by the roadside, watching the Tamil Hindu ritual procession without showing signs of rejection or disruption (Figure 2). This act of being present reflects a form of social involvement that does not constitute formal ritual participation yet allows for the formation of mutual recognition among religious communities in shared social life. From a theoretical perspective, this form of inter-rituality can be understood as side-by-side presence that does not involve intervention or active participation in the ritual itself (Albera, 2019, p. 151). In addition to serving as a form of recognition, such rituals also function as public events that are socially visible and open to others, reinforcing a sense of togetherness through visual engagement in shared space (Griera, 2019). In the local context, the recurring presence of Muslims at such rituals also indicates a level of social openness, as shown by their voluntary attendance or their help in making the Hindu Tamil community events run smoothly (Muhammad & Amrina, 2021). Thus, inter-rituality in this case reflects a form of social engagement that emerges through spatial proximity and interpersonal relations within everyday religious dynamics.

Inter-rituality in Aceh, Indonesia, takes place through forms of social involvement that emerge during the religious celebrations of non-Muslim communities. Muslim residents are

present as observers or as part of supportive activities during events such as Chinese New Year and Panghuni Uthiram (Muhammad & Amrina, 2021; Srimulyani et al., 2018). This kind of involvement reflects interreligious encounters that are built through shared presence within the same social space (Albera, 2019). Religious celebrations that are conducted openly provide space for social interaction, which is often responded to positively by the surrounding community (Griera, 2019). In Aceh, such relationships have developed from shared experiences of rebuilding social life in the aftermath of conflict and disaster (Srimulyani et al., 2018). These inter-ritual practices can also be read as acts of reclaiming social space that had previously been fragmented by colonial strategies that disrupted cohesion among Muslim communities through religious manipulation and internal division (Fahira, 2024). The continued presence of non-Muslim places of worship after the colonial period, and their respectful acceptance by the local Muslim community, further indicates a persistent culture of religious tolerance (M. Nur et al., 2020). From a decolonial perspective, such practices represent a form of relational agency that challenges dominant frameworks of separation and affirms modes of coexistence grounded in lived social proximity (Omer, 2020).

The Openness of Muslim Social and Ritual Relations Towards Non-Muslims

The involvement of non-Muslims in Islamic religious spaces and atmospheres in Aceh can be understood as part of a social practice that does not always rely on normative or formal frameworks. The concept of decoloniality views social experience as a form of knowledge and as a means of disengaging from colonial modes of thought that tend to standardize social relations from an external perspective (Mignolo, 2010). Interactions between religious communities within religiously shaped public spaces take place through shared daily life and embedded social norms. This concept aligns with the view that interreligious relations can emerge from everyday encounters that foster proximity and cooperation (Omer, 2020). Understanding social experience as a source of knowledge allows such interreligious involvement in Aceh to be seen as a form of social relation grounded in local realities.

Aceh has a long history of social relations shaped by political change and colonial authority. Colonial discourse often portrayed the region as isolated and violent, largely due to its strong religious identity. These narratives constructed Aceh as a closed and socially disconnected space (Kloos, 2021). However, current social life reflects sustained engagement among diverse groups through shared everyday practices. Studies show that non-Muslim residents in Aceh participate in supporting Islamic religious celebrations and adapt their economic and social practices in accordance with locally accepted norms (Abdullah et al., 2021). In public institutions, non-Muslims perform their duties under Islamic-oriented policies, including wearing the hijab as part of the official uniform, without experiencing coercion in terms of religious identity (Mustaqilla et al., 2024). These findings indicate that non-Muslim involvement in religiously influenced social spaces operates through local norms shaped by longstanding social dynamics.

Forms of inter-rituality in Aceh are also visible in the involvement of non-Muslims within Islamic religious settings. This presence occurs in various social situations, including visits to places of worship, acts of sharing, and participation in religious moments such as

joining in the search for *takjil* (snacks and drinks consumed to break the fast) at sunset during the month of Ramadan in Islamic society (Abonita, 2021; Novianti, 2025b; Yusuf, 2023). Such involvement shows that Muslim religious spaces in Aceh are accessible and openly engaged with by members of other communities. These findings highlight an inter-ritual dimension that operates through shared presence and social interaction within a majority-Muslim environment.

Figure 3

The presence of non-Muslims at Masjid Raya Baiturrahman, Aceh, Indonesia



Description: Image showing non-Muslims visiting a Muslim worship space. They greet each other and respect religious differences.

Source: (Abonita, 2021; Antara, 2018).

The presence of non-Muslims at the Masjid Raya Baiturrahman in Aceh, Indonesia, as shown in Figure 3, illustrates a form of inter-rituality in the context of interreligious presence within an Islamic place of worship (Figure 3). Foreign visitors enter the mosque courtyard by following local rules, such as wearing modest clothing that covers the body, and they engage with the sacred space as visitors rather than worshippers. This phenomenon reflects a form of social connectedness that arises from interreligious encounters at sacred sites, which does not depend on shared belief (Albera, 2019). In this context, religious sites function as open spaces that allow for interaction and recognition across religious identities. Such presence also illustrates a dimension of social relations formed through visits to sacred places and participation in religious atmospheres, without requiring ritual involvement

(Kreinath, 2021, p. 366). The image demonstrates how mosque courtyard in Aceh serves not only religious functions but also operate as open relational spaces in interreligious life.

Figure 4
The distribution of Qurban meat to non-Muslims



Source: (Bahagia & Kuwado, 2019)

Figure 5
Non-Muslim participation in the takjil market during Ramadan



Source: (Novianti, 2025)

Food-based forms of inter-rituality are also present in the religious life of Acehnese society. Figure 4 shows the distribution of *qurban* meat to non-Muslim residents in Aceh

Tengah regency during Eid al-Adha (Figure 4). This act reflects a form of social hospitality rooted in religious practice, where the sharing of food is not restricted by religious identity (Bahagia & Kuwado, 2019). This phenomenon aligns with the idea that in several traditions, food such as *iftar* or *prasad* can be shared with members of other religions as a way of fostering interreligious relationships (Moyaert, 2019). On a social level, this practice also demonstrates the role of ritual in managing relationships and addressing social inequalities within a community (Widlok, 2021). In addition, Figure 5 shows non-Muslim residents taking part in the activity of buying *takjil* or *iftar*, referring to snacks and drinks used to break the fast, at a Ramadan market (Figure 5). Although the interaction is part of ordinary economic exchange, it takes place within a religious atmosphere shaped by the timing and customs of breaking the fast (Novianti, 2025). This presence indicates a form of involvement in a religiously influenced public space, where food becomes a bridge for intercommunal relationships in everyday life (Lattu, 2023, 2025). Together, these two images illustrate an understanding of inter-rituality as a social practice that develops through participation in shared religious experiences, whether through acts of giving or through presence.

Although inter-ritual practices such as these occur regularly, they rarely appear in national or global narratives about Aceh. This absence reflects deeper discursive structures that tend to prioritize legal or conflict-oriented frameworks while neglecting the everyday religious intimacy found in local social life. Several studies have shown that dominant knowledge systems in media and academic discourse often marginalize local experiences through what has been described as information imperialism or platform imperialism (Bannerman, 2024; Yong Jin, 2015). The dominance of Western theories as primary points of reference in platform studies and cultural production tends to sideline locally rooted concepts and experiences, which are rarely treated as sources of conceptual insight (Poell et al., 2024). Within such an epistemic order, inter-rituality in Aceh is often not recognized as a meaningful form of interreligious engagement. From a decolonial perspective, these practices can be understood as forms of local knowledge assertion, revealing alternative modes of social understanding that operate beyond the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo, 2010).

Conclusion

This study departs from a critique of dominant narratives that portray Aceh as a socially and religiously closed region due to the implementation of Sharia law. Such representations often emphasize legalistic aspects and overlook the social practices within local communities. By employing inter-rituality as an analytical lens grounded in a decolonial approach, this study demonstrates that inter-religious engagement in Aceh unfolds through shared presence in religious celebrations and communal activities. Instances such as witnessing ritual processions, assisting in festival preparations, and sharing food illustrate that religious boundaries in Aceh are enacted through social practices that accommodate the presence of others. These findings respond to the research question by showing that inter-ritual involvement in Aceh is not only possible, but forms part of a sustained relational pattern embedded in everyday life.

The inter-ritual approach offers a perspective on interreligious relations that move beyond legal discourse and formal notions of tolerance. Physical presence in religious spaces,

participation in shared activities, and acts of exchange within ritual contexts reflect forms of connection grounded in spatial proximity and daily interaction. Within this framework, interreligious engagement is understood as a form of knowledge shaped by lived experience. This perspective affirms a decolonial position by recognizing local practices as expressions of refusal against external narratives and dominant knowledge systems. Inter-rituality becomes a relational strategy through which Acehnese communities negotiate difference by revitalizing social bonds fragmented by colonial histories and identity politics. As such, this study not only addresses a gap in the literature on interreligious practices but also advances a decolonial approach that centers lived experience as a legitimate source of social and political authority.

The limitations of this study rely on its use of data based on online media and online visual documentation, which do not fully capture the affective dynamics or internal perspectives of those involved. It has yet to be explored how different communities interpret their participation in inter-ritual practices or how these relations evolve in diverse social contexts. Furthermore, the study's focus on urban areas may overlook variations in rural settings. To extend this line of inquiry, future research should incorporate critical ethnographic methods, participatory interviews, and immersive fieldwork across different regions of Aceh. Comparative studies in other areas with similar religious majorities are also needed to deepen the understanding of how inter-ritual practices operate under distinct sociopolitical conditions. Such approaches will further develop inter-rituality both as an analytical tool for studying interreligious relations and as a decolonial practice in postcolonial societies.

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