

Communal Meaning and Religious Boundaries: Lived Religion at the Negeri Church in Waraka, Central Maluku

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Abstract

Sacred places are often understood primarily through their institutional ownership and formal religious functions. Less attention has been paid to how a sacred place associated with one religious tradition may acquire wider communal meaning without losing its particular religious identity. This study examines how Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic residents of Negeri Waraka interpret the Negeri Church and how collective memory, the *Nazar Negeri*, customary authority, and religious boundaries shape its social meaning. The study used a qualitative, focused ethnographic approach. Fieldwork was conducted in Waraka, Central Maluku, from December 2025 to January 2026 and involved 16 purposively selected participants, including customary authorities, religious leaders, village representatives, and residents from the three religious communities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, open observer-as-participant fieldwork, field notes, photographs, and relevant documents and were analyzed thematically. The findings show that the church remains a Protestant liturgical space while also functioning as a material reference point for Waraka's collective history and communal identity. The annual *Nazar Negeri* connects the Raja's house and the church through differentiated participation: Protestant residents retain liturgical authority, whereas Muslim and Catholic residents participate through customary and civic roles. The continuity of this arrangement depends on collective memory and the mediating authority of the Raja, Saniri Negeri, and religious leaders. The Waraka case demonstrates that the communal significance of a sacred place does not require the erasure of religious boundaries. Instead, shared meaning is produced through negotiated participation, customary belonging, and the continuing recognition of religious difference.

Keywords: *Lived Religion; Negeri Church; Nazar Negeri; Religious Boundaries; Central Maluku*

A. Introduction

Religious diversity in Maluku has been shaped by a long history of interaction among religious communities, customary institutions, and local social structures. This relationship became particularly significant following the communal violence that affected parts of Maluku between 1999 and 2002. Although post-conflict studies have frequently examined reconciliation, peacebuilding, and the restoration of interreligious trust, everyday religious practices in local communities also reveal forms of coexistence that cannot be

explained exclusively through formal dialogue or institutional peace programs (Waileruny 2010; Duriana 2016). Such practices are often embedded in collective memory, customary obligations, kinship relations, and participation in locally significant rituals.

The concept of lived religion provides an appropriate framework for examining these everyday expressions of religion. Rather than treating religion primarily as doctrine, formal affiliation, or institutional regulation, lived-religion scholarship focuses on how individuals and communities experience and enact religion in daily life (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2016, 2021). Religious meaning is expressed not only through worship but also through material objects, bodily practices, social relationships, memories, emotions, and engagements with particular places. This perspective therefore draws attention to the ways religious practices emerge at the intersection of official traditions and the social circumstances in which people live (Knibbe and Kupari 2020).

In Indonesia, the relationship between religion and local culture has produced diverse forms of interreligious interaction. Customary ceremonies, sacred sites, kinship networks, and community leadership may provide spaces in which people of different religious affiliations participate in a shared social life while maintaining their respective theological and ritual boundaries. Studies of local religious practices have demonstrated that coexistence is not necessarily based on the elimination of religious differences. It can instead be maintained through negotiated participation, reciprocal obligations, and culturally recognized forms of belonging (Shadiqin and Ikramatoun 2022; Ngabalin et al. 2025). These findings indicate that religious plurality is experienced not only through formal policies but also through ordinary practices that connect religion to local history and social relationships.

Research in Maluku has similarly emphasized the importance of customary institutions and local knowledge in interreligious relations. Existing studies have examined cultural mechanisms of peacebuilding, community-based religious moderation, interreligious education, and the role of local traditions in maintaining social cohesion (Ulum and Putro 2024; Arsyad, Daud, and Idris 2025; Pattiserlihun et al. 2025). This scholarship establishes that adat can serve as a social framework through which religious difference is organized and negotiated. Nevertheless, less attention has been given to how a sacred building associated with one religious community acquires broader meanings among members of other religious communities through ritual participation, collective memory, and customary leadership.

Negeri Waraka in Central Maluku offers a relevant setting in which to examine this issue. In this article, the term *Negeri Church* refers to the Protestant church situated within the customary polity of Waraka. The church remains a Protestant liturgical space, but community narratives also associate it with the

history, identity, and collective experiences of the negeri. These meanings are particularly visible in the annual *Nazar Negeri*, a customary thanksgiving observance involving the presentation of an offering to the church. Although the ritual is centered on a Protestant sacred space, members of the Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic communities participate in differentiated ways under the coordination of customary and religious leaders. Their participation does not necessarily indicate theological agreement or participation in every element of Protestant worship. Instead, it reflects locally negotiated relationships among religious identity, customary responsibility, and membership in the negeri.

The case is analytically important because it complicates an understanding of sacred places as symbols belonging exclusively to a single religious group. The Waraka case suggests that a sacred building may retain its particular religious identity while simultaneously carrying a wider communal meaning. This dual meaning is sustained through local narratives, ritual practices, embodied forms of respect, and the authority of customary institutions. It also requires attention to boundaries: shared participation does not mean that distinctions among Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim practices have disappeared. The negotiation of these distinctions is itself part of the lived religious experience of the community.

This study therefore examines how the Negeri Church is experienced and interpreted as a symbol of lived religion in Waraka's social, cultural, and interreligious life. More specifically, it investigates how the *Nazar Negeri*, collective memory, customary leadership, and religious boundaries shape the meanings attributed to the church by Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic community members. The article argues that the church acquires a shared communal significance not through the dissolution of religious differences but through differentiated participation mediated by adat, collective memory, and locally recognized relationships.

B. Methods

This qualitative study used a focused ethnographic approach to examine how the Negeri Church, the *Nazar Negeri*, customary institutions, and interreligious relations were experienced and interpreted in Negeri Waraka. A focused ethnographic design was appropriate because the study examined a bounded community, a specific annual ritual, and the meanings attached to a locally significant sacred space (Creswell 2013; Grimes 2013). Fieldwork was conducted in Negeri Waraka, Central Maluku, from December 2025 to January 2026, coinciding with the *Nazar Negeri*. The researcher adopted an open observer-as-participant position: the researcher was publicly present throughout the fieldwork and observed the ritual process without assuming a primary ritual role.

Informants were selected purposively on the basis of their knowledge of, experience with, or participation in the *Nazar Negeri* and Waraka's social and religious life. The study involved 16 informants: the Raja of Negeri Waraka, two members of the Saniri Negeri, one Protestant pastor, one Muslim imam, one Catholic station leader, five Protestant residents, three Muslim residents, and two Catholic residents. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. The data also included field observations, photographs, field notes, relevant documents, and published literature. Observation covered the ritual at the Raja's house on December 31 and the procession and presentation of the *nazar* at the Negeri Church on January 1. Attention was given to participation patterns, material symbols, clothing, bodily conduct, ritual sequences, and interactions among customary, governmental, and religious representatives (Moleong 2012; Sugiyono 2005).

The material was examined through repeated reading, initial coding, category development, and the identification of themes related to the church, collective memory, customary authority, ritual participation, and religious boundaries (Braun and Clarke 2021). These themes were subsequently interpreted through lived religion and interreligious engagement. Observations, interviews, photographs, documents, and field notes were compared to identify converging and divergent accounts. The researcher's membership in the *matarumah parentah*, or the ruling house of Negeri Waraka, facilitated cultural access but also required reflexive attention to assumptions arising from insider status. Field notes and comparison across data sources were used to distinguish observed practices from the researcher's interpretation.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

1) The Negeri Church as Collective Memory and Social Identity

The findings indicate that the Negeri Church has meanings that extend beyond its formal function as a Protestant place of worship. Participants associated it with the history of the negeri, customary institutions, village leadership, and relationships among Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim residents. A member of the Saniri Negeri recalled that members of the three religious communities participated in the construction of the church. On this basis, participants described the building as part of Waraka's collective history, although it remains institutionally and liturgically Protestant (Saniri Negeri member, interview, December 18, 2025).

The accounts of Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim participants consistently distinguished between the church's religious ownership and its broader communal meaning. Muslim and Catholic participants did not describe the church as their place of worship. They nevertheless regarded it as part of the

negeri's history and as a symbol connected to their identity as members of Waraka. A Muslim religious leader explained that participation in activities associated with the church was based on belonging to the negeri rather than conversion or theological identification with Protestantism (Muslim religious leader, interview, January 2, 2026).

Local accounts connect the social position of the church to the relationship between Christianity and customary leadership. In Waraka, oral narratives more specifically recall the baptism of the Raja and his family during that period. These narratives continue to be transmitted as part of the community's account of how the church became connected to the customary polity. Because the study did not conduct an archival reconstruction of this event, the account is treated as collective memory rather than as an independently verified chronology.

The sacred character of the church is also expressed through bodily and material practices. Field observation documented that some worshippers removed their footwear before entering the church as a sign of respect. Local clothing, including the *baniang hitam*, *kabaya hitam*, and *kaeng pikol*, was worn during church-related rituals. These practices connect bodily expressions of reverence with local cultural identity. Participants did not perceive the use of customary clothing as separate from religious practice; rather, the clothing formed part of how respect, belonging, and sacredness were enacted.

Participants also recalled that the church was used to shelter Muslim residents during the 1999 communal violence in Maluku. The Raja described this event as a decisive episode in the community's memory of the church as a place of protection (Raja of Negeri Waraka, interview, December 15, 2025). As with the narratives about the church's construction and early Christian history, this account is reported as an oral memory that shapes present interpretations of the church. The available data do not independently establish the complete historical chronology or demonstrate that the church alone prevented violence in Waraka.

2) The Nazar Negeri as Differentiated Interreligious Participation

The *Nazar Negeri* is an annual thanksgiving observance held across two connected spaces. On December 31, families bring offerings to the Raja's house, where a service begins at approximately 5:00 p.m. Eastern Indonesian Time. The service follows a Protestant liturgical structure that includes hymns, an opening prayer, a Bible reading, a reflection, intercessory prayer, and a closing blessing. On January 1, the offering is carried from the Raja's house to the Protestant church.

According to the Raja's oral account, the ritual developed from a communal prayer of repentance associated with the "Bahaya Seram" of 1889 and an epidemic in 1919. He stated that the observance became a collective responsibility of the negeri around 1920. The same account dates Muslim participation to 1935 and Catholic participation to 1973, following the

establishment of these communities in Waraka. These dates are preserved here as local oral history because no independent archival evidence was available in the study to confirm each stage of the chronology (Raja of Negeri Waraka, interview, December 15, 2025).

Field observation documented the participation of Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic residents in the gathering at the Raja's house. After the service, residents greeted one another and asked forgiveness for disagreements that had occurred during the preceding year. Their presence, however, did not have an identical religious meaning. The service retained a Protestant liturgical form, while non-Protestant residents attended as members of the negeri and in recognition of a customary obligation.

Figure 1.
The Nazar Negeri service at the Raja's house



Source: Researcher's field documentation, December 31, 2025, Waraka.

On January 1, the Raja and members of the Saniri Negeri carried the offering to the Protestant church. The Saniri includes Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic members, and field observation showed that a Muslim Saniri member carried the offering plate during the procession. At the church entrance, the Raja and the Saniri were received by the chair of the congregational council and other church representatives. The offering was then placed on the altar. According to the Catholic station leader, part of the offering received by the Protestant congregation was subsequently distributed to the Muslim and Catholic communities (Catholic station leader, interview, December 31, 2025).

Figure 2.
The presentation of the Nazar Negeri at the Negeri Church



Source: Researcher's field documentation, January 1, 2026, Waraka.

These observations show that participation in the *Nazar Negeri* is shared but differentiated. Protestant participants conduct and interpret the service

within their liturgical tradition. Muslim and Catholic residents participate through customary and civic roles, including attendance at the Raja's house, membership in the Saniri, and involvement in the procession. The available data do not indicate that these activities erased doctrinal differences or transformed the Protestant church into an interdenominational institution.

3) Adat, Customary Leadership, and the Regulation of Religious Boundaries

Participants associated the continuity of interreligious relations with customary leadership and shared identification as *anak negeri*, or members of the negeri. The Raja, Saniri Negeri, and religious leaders were described as responsible for maintaining agreements about participation in communal practices. A Saniri member stated that conduct perceived as threatening communal relations could lead to advice, reprimands, or customary intervention from village and religious authorities (Saniri Negeri member, interview, January 5, 2026).

The data indicate that this structure regulates both participation and separation. Muslim and Catholic residents may participate in the customary components of the *Nazar Negeri*, but they do not assume Protestant liturgical roles. Protestant participants, in turn, interpreted the presence of other communities as respect for the negeri's history and customary institutions rather than as acceptance of Protestant doctrine. The ritual therefore brings religious communities into the same social process while preserving different forms and degrees of participation.

Waraka's public identification with religious moderation has received institutional recognition. In 2024, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs designated Waraka as a religious-moderation village (Sahubawa 2024). A monument commemorating this designation was present during the fieldwork. This administrative designation provides external recognition of the community's interreligious profile, but it does not by itself establish how all residents experience religious relations.

Figure 3.
Religious moderation monument in Negeri Waraka



Source: Researcher's field documentation, January 10, 2026, Waraka

The interviews also identified a challenge to the intergenerational transmission of communal memory. A Muslim participant observed that younger residents continued to participate in the annual ritual but did not always understand its relationship to the history of the church or to earlier experiences of coexistence (Muslim resident, interview, January 6, 2026). Thus, the continuation of ritual participation does not necessarily ensure that all participants interpret the ritual or the church in the same way.

2. Discussion

1) Collective Memory and the Social Meaning of Sacred Space

The findings show that the Negeri Church carries two related but distinguishable meanings. It remains a Protestant liturgical space while also functioning as a material reference point for Waraka's collective history. This pattern is consistent with lived-religion scholarship, which treats religious meaning as something produced through practices, relationships, objects, stories, and places rather than solely through formal doctrine (Ammerman 2007, 2016, 2021; McGuire 2008). In Waraka, the church acquires communal meaning through narratives of its construction, the relationship between Christianity and customary leadership, the memory of protection during the 1999 conflict, and repeated participation in the *Nazar Negeri*.

The community's narratives emerged within the broader historical development of Protestant Christianity in Central Maluku during the nineteenth century (de Jong 2012). However, the specific chronology narrated in Waraka is treated as collective memory because this study did not independently verify it through archival research. Collective memory does not operate as a neutral record of the past. It selects, organizes, and transmits accounts that a community considers relevant to its identity (Assmann 1995). The accounts about the baptism of the Raja, interreligious involvement in constructing the church, and the church's protective role during the conflict should therefore not be read as an archival chronology established by this research. Their analytical importance lies in how they are repeatedly used to connect the church to the moral history of the negeri. This interpretation is consistent with Lattu's argument that oral traditions and collective memories can support interreligious belonging in Maluku, while remaining shaped by the social contexts in which they are narrated (Lattu 2023).

The church's material and spatial character is also important. Sacred space is not defined only by architecture or formal ownership; it is produced through bodily conduct, spatial rules, narratives, and patterns of access (Knott 2005). Removing footwear and wearing customary clothing demonstrate how sacredness is enacted through the body. At the same time, studies of sacred space caution that such spaces are rarely socially neutral. They can express authority, belonging, and exclusion as well as solidarity (Chidester and Linenthal 1995). The

Waraka case therefore should not be presented simply as evidence that the church belongs equally to all religious communities. The data support a more precise conclusion: the church remains Protestant, but its social meaning is not confined to Protestants.

2) Differentiated Participation and Religious Boundary Work

The *Nazar Negeri* illustrates how people may participate in a shared event without assigning the same theological meaning to it. Muslim and Catholic residents take part as members of the negeri and through customary roles, whereas the service itself retains a Protestant liturgical structure. Their involvement is consequently better described as differentiated interreligious participation than as religious integration or the dissolution of religious identity.

This distinction is important because symbolic boundaries do not necessarily disappear when groups interact. Boundaries may be maintained, crossed in limited circumstances, or renegotiated depending on the setting and the role being performed (Lamont and Molnár 2002). In Waraka, religious boundaries remain visible in the distinction between attending the gathering, carrying the offering as a Saniri member, and leading Protestant worship. Participants move across customary and social spaces while retaining limits around liturgical authority.

Studies of shared sacred sites offer both supportive and cautionary comparisons. Shared practices can provide a basis for coexistence, but they may also contain unequal forms of ownership, authority, and access (Bowman 2012; Barkan and Barkey 2014). Hayden et al. (2016) further demonstrate that the peaceful sharing of sacred sites is historically contingent and may coexist with competition between religious communities. The Waraka findings do not reveal active conflict over control of the church, but they do indicate that its shared significance depends on an accepted distinction between Protestant liturgical ownership and broader customary belonging. This arrangement should not be assumed to be permanent or free of asymmetry.

The Waraka pattern resembles other Indonesian cases in which customary ritual enables Muslim and Christian participation without eliminating religious differences. The *Tombor Maghi* ritual in West Papua, for example, demonstrates how interfaith participation may be embedded in local social obligations and lived religious practice (Ngabalin et al. 2025). Research on the Mawlid celebration in Aceh similarly shows that ritual may simultaneously carry religious, cultural, and political meanings (Shadiqin and Ikramatoun 2022). These comparisons support an interpretation of the *Nazar Negeri* as a layered practice rather than as a single expression of doctrinal agreement.

3) Customary Authority, Social Regulation, and the Limits of Harmony

The findings also show that interreligious participation is institutionally mediated. The Raja, Saniri Negeri, and religious leaders determine the sequence of the ritual, authorize particular roles, and respond to conduct perceived as disruptive. The continuity of the *Nazar Negeri* therefore cannot be attributed only to spontaneous tolerance among residents. It depends on a customary structure that possesses sufficient legitimacy to coordinate participation and define its limits.

This finding supports studies emphasizing the contribution of local institutions to interreligious relations in Maluku (Ulum and Putro 2024; Arsyad, Daud, and Idris 2025). It also requires a critical qualification. Customary authority should not automatically be treated as inclusive or free of power differences. Ritual can reproduce classifications, roles, and hierarchies at the same time that it creates solidarity (Bell 1997). In Waraka, the Raja and Saniri provide coordination, but the available data do not establish whether every resident has equal influence over the meanings and rules of the ritual. The study included officeholders and community members from all three religions, yet it did not systematically examine dissent, nonparticipation, gendered authority, or residents who may disagree with the dominant communal narrative.

The official designation of Waraka as a religious-moderation village should likewise be interpreted cautiously. Government recognition confirms that Waraka's practices have acquired public and institutional visibility, but formal recognition does not prove the absence of tension. Research on shared sacred sites shows that state involvement can protect religious plurality while also redefining local practices according to administrative categories (Barkey 2021). The designation is therefore part of Waraka's contemporary social context rather than independent evidence that moderation has been achieved uniformly.

4) Intergenerational Continuity and the Contribution to Lived-Religion Studies

The concern that some younger residents participate without understanding the historical narratives attached to the ritual reveals a distinction between ritual continuity and continuity of meaning. Repetition may sustain a practice even when participants interpret it differently or possess unequal knowledge of its history. Cultural memory requires social transmission; it is not automatically reproduced merely because a ceremony continues to be performed (Assmann 1995). This finding suggests that the future communal meaning of the church will depend on how narratives are discussed, questioned, and transmitted across generations.

Lived-religion research provides an appropriate framework for examining such changes because it recognizes that religion is continuously produced through practice and context (Karman 2021; Knibbe and Kupari 2020;

Weiss, Staring, and Twiston Davies 2022). Recent scholarship also warns against assuming a single correspondence among lived practice, theology, and institutional religion (Björkander, Nishimwe, and Sjö 2025). The meanings assigned to the Negeri Church may therefore change as patterns of leadership, migration, religious education, and generational participation change.

The principal contribution of the Waraka case is not a claim that religious boundaries have disappeared. Rather, it shows how a sacred space associated with one religious tradition can acquire a wider communal significance through customary leadership, collective memory, and differentiated ritual participation. This extends studies of lived religion by placing the social life of a sacred building—not only individual religious experience—at the center of analysis. It also qualifies overly affirmative interpretations of interreligious ritual: coexistence is produced through continuing boundary work and institutional mediation, and its continuation cannot be assumed.

D. Conclusion

The Negeri Church is experienced in Waraka both as a Protestant liturgical space and as a symbol connected to the history and collective identity of the negeri. This wider meaning is reproduced through oral accounts, embodied expressions of respect, the *Nazar Negeri*, and the involvement of customary and religious authorities. Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic residents participate in different ways: shared customary participation coexists with continuing liturgical and theological boundaries. The findings therefore answer the study's objective by showing that the church's communal significance arises not from the erasure of religious difference but from the negotiation of religious identity, adat, collective memory, and belonging as *anak negeri*.

The study contributes a locally grounded account of how sacred space can carry layered religious and communal meanings in a plural society. Its conclusions remain limited to the participants and practices examined during fieldwork in Waraka. The short interview duration, the bounded period of observation, the researcher's insider position, and the absence of a systematic study of dissent limit broader claims about the community. Further research could examine residents who do not participate, women's roles in customary decision-making, intergenerational changes, and comparable practices in other Maluku communities. These limitations do not negate the findings, but they require the Negeri Church to be understood as a negotiated and historically contingent symbol rather than as universal evidence of interreligious harmony.

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