

## **Nationality, Locality, and Religiosity: Works and Thoughts of Maria Theresia Geme of the Forum for Religious Harmony of East Nusa Tenggara**

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Received: 2022-08-14; Accepted: 2022-11-21; Published: 2022-12-26

**Abstract:** This article examines Maria Theresia Geme's thoughts and works on the issue of religious harmony through Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). This is a qualitative study which gathers data through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. This research aims to address three primary questions: (1) How the agency of "women's leadership" of Maria T. Geme within FKUB NTT?; (2) What is her perspective on women's involvement in issues of religious harmony and peace building?; (3) What are Maria thoughts and works while leading FKUB NTT, and what it's implications for interfaith dialogue and religious harmony? This study concluded that Geme is the first and only woman in the history of Indonesia to lead FKUB at the provincial level. Her leadership strategy is to integrate women's leadership and her agency in the development of FKUB initiatives, in order to emphasizes women's involvement on the issue of religious harmony with *mubadalah* paradigm (mutuality). For Geme, the Indonesian identity will be strengthened through a balanced relationship between religious values and local wisdom. Therefore, preserving and strengthening local wisdom is one of important things in developing and fostering interfaith dialogue and religious harmony.

**Keywords:** FKUB; harmony; local wisdom; nationality; women.

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengkaji pemikiran dan karya Maria Theresia Geme dalam isu kerukunan umat beragama melalui Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB) Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT). Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif yang mengumpulkan data melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan analisis dokumen. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjawab tiga pertanyaan pokok: (1) Bagaimanakah agensi "kepemimpinan perempuan" Maria T. Geme di lingkungan FKUB NTT?; (2) Bagaimana pandangannya tentang keterlibatan perempuan dalam isu kerukunan umat beragama dan pembangunan perdamaian?; (3) Apa pemikiran dan karya Maria selama memimpin FKUB NTT, dan apa implikasinya bagi dialog antaragama dan kerukunan umat beragama? Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Geme adalah perempuan pertama dan satu-satunya dalam sejarah Indonesia yang memimpin FKUB di tingkat provinsi. Strategi kepemimpinannya adalah mengintegrasikan kepemimpinan perempuan dan agensinya dalam pengembangan inisiatif FKUB, untuk menekankan keterlibatan perempuan dalam masalah kerukunan umat beragama dengan *mubadalah* (kebersamaan). Bagi Geme, identitas keindonesiaan akan diperkuat melalui hubungan yang seimbang antara nilai agama dan kearifan lokal. Oleh karena itu, melestarikan dan memperkuat kearifan lokal merupakan salah satu hal penting dalam mengembangkan dan membina dialog antar umat beragama dan kerukunan umat beragama.

**Kata Kunci:** FKUB; kerukunan; kearifan local; kebangsaan; perempuan.

## 1. Introduction

In interreligious dialogue discourse and practice, women's voices and roles are rarely examined. This indicates that men continue to dominate the culture of leadership in Indonesian society. In the political culture of Indonesia, the dominance of male leadership as patronage is a phenomenon known as fatherism (Hermawan, Arief, & Patmi Rahayu, 2018). Especially in New Order administration, Suharto's paternalistic policies were extremely prominent. According to Endraswara, fatherism was influenced by the misapplication of Javanese power ideology by the New Order. The authorities have twisted Javanese power, which should be based on revelation or *pulung*, such that a corrupt paternal patronage system has developed (Endraswara, 2016). Likewise, men continue to dominate religious organization leadership. According to some studies, religious institutions as a whole are patriarchal and dominated by men, particularly in official religious structures including interfaith dialogue (Abu-Nimer, 2015; D'Souza, 2003; Marshall, 2017; Mir, Lawler, & Godfrey, 2010; Stuart, 2010).

The Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) cannot be separated from discussions regarding interreligious dialogue in Indonesia. FKUB was established at the province, district, and city levels after the Reformation to promote religious tolerance in Indonesia (Kurniawan, 2021). According to the Joint Ministerial Regulation of Minister of Religious Affairs and Minister of Home Affairs (PBM), Numbers 8 and 9 of 2006, the FKUB established with the premise that religious conflicts can be managed by facilitating communication between different religious leaders (Hakim, 2018). This forum has a strategic role and function in managing diversity in Indonesia's plural society (Bagir & Sormin, 2022).

In this context, women have not been given enough opportunity to participate, either as board members or as recipients of FKUB initiatives. This is evidenced by the fact that just 8% of board members in 34 provincial FKUBs and more than 500 Regency/City FKUBs are women (Wiwin S.A. Rohmawati, 2020; Wiwin Siti Aminah Rohmawati, Hamidah, & Gayatri, 2021). 99.9 percent of the top positions in this religiously diverse forum are held by men. Of the 34 provincial FKUBs in Indonesia, only Mrs. Maria Theresia Geme of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Province FKUB attained the position of chairperson. Given that FKUB NTT is led by a woman, it is crucial and intriguing to examine this issue in deeper level.

There are studies relevant to the research of FKUB in NTT. Research conducted by Taopan, Ly and Lobo discussed the types of NTT FKUB programs such as dialogues, competitions, book publishing, and campaigns, as well as the obstacles encountered both internally and externally and the efforts made to overcome them. They found that harmony in the city of Kupang is exceptionally high due to the community's preservation of its ancestors' legacy of mutual respect and tolerance (Taopan, Ly, & Lobo, 2020). Aziz's research concluded that NTT has a richness of local wisdom that the majority of people use to create harmony and to prevent conflict. This research demonstrates, that the local government in NTT has not utilized this local wisdom in a planned and systematic manner so that it can work more effectively in the midst of fast societal change (Aziz, 2018).

Parera and Marzukis' study concluded that religious plurality in NTT is well maintained due to the utilization of local wisdom. This study discovered various local wisdoms such as *Nusi* (mutual cooperation), *Butukila* (holding a spirit of fraternity), *Suki Toka Apa* (supporting and assisting one another) and *Muki Nena* (a sense of belonging). In addition, *Lil Au Nol Dael Banan*, as Kupang people's philosophy of life indicates that constructing and preserving the city of Kupang is the responsibility of all inhabitants regardless their background (Parera & Marzuki, 2020). Meanwhile, Ahmad Sodli researched the forms of relations between adherents of various religions in NTT, particularly Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism, and sought both variables that promote cooperation and those that generate conflict (Sodli, 2009). His study concluded that the collaboration between the three religious communities includes the construction of houses of worship, the celebration of religious holidays, and the celebration of the New Year. Religious teachings, the government, and religious leaders generally encourage this collaboration. Meanwhile, tensions arise among them in commercial activity and religious broadcasting (Sodli, 2009).

Unlike earlier studies, this article addresses a number of crucial questions. *First*, how does Geme's women's leadership function within NTT FKUB? *Second*, what is her perspective on women's involvement in issues of religious harmony? *Third*, what are her thoughts and works that she developed while leading NTT FKUB, and what their implications for the realization of interfaith harmony?

Theoretically, the study of female figures and their contributions to issues of diversity and religious harmony is crucial to sociology. In practice, the strategies and methods employed by women in organizational leadership have unique characteristics. Therefore, lessons and models that can be replicated and developed as best practices for managing diversity in society can be extracted from both. Institutionally, it is envisaged that this study would be used to explore structural and functional improvements to FKUB at the national level.

This is a field study employing a qualitative methodology and a character study theoretical framework. A qualitative research question is an interrogative statement that inquires about the process, issue, or phenomenon under investigation (Aspers & Godart, 2013). Therefore, this study will describe and analyze Geme's leadership and agency, as well as her thoughts and works at NTT FKUB. This study will also expose the challenges she faces and the strategies she employs to foster religious harmony. Maria Theresia Geme as Chairperson of the NTT FKUB is the subject of this study, particularly in terms of her role in fostering interreligious harmony and its dynamic. Observation, in-depth interviews and documentation were used to collect the data. The phases of data collection occurred between September 25, 2020 and December 15, 2022. With the informants' consent, their identities are mentioned in this research. The systematically and holistically acquired data are subsequently examined and conclusions drawn (Lahlou, Le Bellu, & Boesen-Mariani, 2015; Madison, 2022; Malachowski, Skorobohacz, & Stasiulis, 2017; McGranahan, 2018)

## 2. Result and Discussion

### *Arena, Habitus and Women's Leadership*

Bourdieu developed the arena and habitus theories to explain how the dialectic between objective structures and subjective occurrences shapes social reality. This theory in Bourdieu's terminology called genetic structuralism (Bourdieu, 2020). Bourdieu states, social reality must be viewed as a dialectical interaction between persons (agents, subjective structures) and the objective structure. Yet dialectical interaction includes subjective factors such as mindset, experience structure, and cognitive structure (Postone, LiPuma, & Calhoun, 1993). The dialectical interaction results in what is known as "practice" (Nulley-Valdés, 2022).

Habitus is a cognitive structure that mediates between an individual's and society's realities (Benson & Fowler, 1999). Habitus is also defined as the disposition and inculcated cultural capital, comprising values, beliefs, and preferences, among others (Nulley-Valdés, 2022). Habitus develops as a result of learning through familial upbringing, association, and education (Postone et al., 1993). Thus, an individual's habitus is established by their interactions with other persons in social space. According to Richard Schusterman (Wilkoszewska, 2018), habitus comprises all social relations and connotations:

"The habitus acts through its bodily incorporation of social relationships and meanings (i.e. those involving reference to others) but without needing to articulate them in terms of explicit rules or reasons."

According to Bourdieu, the field is a competitive social arena where numerous encounters, transactions, and events occur. There are roles of social agents (human or institutional) in the social arena, resulting in rivalry. A range of techniques are employed by social agents to maintain or enhance their positions in relation to habitus and capital (Nulley-Valdés, 2022). It is the interaction of individuals' practices in this arena that gives rise to "capital" in many manifestations, including social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capitals (Benson & Fowler, 1999). From habitus, arena, and capital, symbolic power is produced (Bourdieu, 2020). Habitus and capital have a strong association due to

the fact that certain habitus serve as multipliers of various forms of capital. Then, this capital becomes the basis for an individual's dominance and legitimacy (Nulley-Valdés, 2022).

In this study, the notions of habitus and arena are utilized to examine Maria Theresia Geme's role and agency as the female leader of FKUB of NTT. In Indonesia, women's leadership still faces many obstacles, particularly in critical positions that can affect public policy. In fact, the data indicates that women possess the same leadership and change agent capabilities as men. Due to structural and cultural constraints, the greatest obstacle to women's leadership is the lack of room for participation in all spheres of life. This study will utilize habitus and arena theory to examine how Geme plays her agency as a woman leader, what capital she has, and how the habitus surrounding her affects her ability to lead NTT FKUB. This paper also seeks to examine the social and cultural structures of NTT as the "arena" that enables a woman to become an FKUB leader.

According to research by the ILO in 2020, increasing gender diversity in the workplace, including at the board level, will provide benefits and productivity. Because when women become leaders, they develop a variety of abilities, have an imaginative perspective, and most crucially, stimulate the structural and cultural development of good solutions (UN Women, 2012). Gallup reported in 2015 that female leaders inspire greater employee engagement and enthusiasm among both male and female employees. This study demonstrates that women leaders outperform males in 11 of 12 engagement criteria (Fitch & Agrawal, 2015). As leaders, women also tend to treat their colleagues fairly, value employee feedback, and are adept at enhancing employee welfare (Hassan & Silong, 2008).

At least four core values define women's leadership. *First*, women's leadership is not motivated primarily by wealth and prestige. Because they feel they are compensated according to their accomplishments, women manage their positions based on competency achievement. *Second*, maintain positive relationships with colleagues. *Third*, women prefer to collaborate and empower others when leading. *Fourth*, women tend to balance job and family responsibilities (Wells & Fleshman, 2020).

Meanwhile, several factors encourage the leadership characteristics of women. *First*, maternal thinking. This is a nonviolent style of thinking and action (O'Reilly & Ruddick, 2009), providing a means to construct a politics of peace, because the values that are established are care and affection (O'Reilly & Ruddick, 2009; Radosh, 2008). *Second*, Caring. According to Noddings, caring is a distinct strategy based on receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness. This principle relates to the mother's principle of complete acceptance and closeness with the kid. This characteristic remains when women become leaders (Scheper-Hughes, 1985). *Third*, Ethic of Care. According to Gilligan (Hassan & Silong, 2008), the foundation of women's morality is the "attachment and union" idea in regard to other individuals. This is very close to the motherhood experience of women. Consequently, women tend to care more about the pain of others. In Hanah Arendt's thoughts, (Alphandary, 2015; Chiba, 1995) the three things explained are condensed into two, love and forgiveness. These two ethical principles attempt to preserve human relationships. Thus, the leadership of women can foster harmony and peace.

In the context of Geme-led NTT FKUB, women's agencies cannot be separated. It refers to their ability to set and pursue goals, make crucial decisions, and participate in the public life (Postone et al., 1993; Tardelly, 2011). Moreover, agency is the capacity to make decisions and then act upon them. As individuals and collectively within the family, as well as through their participation in markets, politics, and other formal and informal networks, women's agency is viewed from multiple perspectives. There are various manifestations of agency, including "bargaining and negotiation, subversion and resistance, and more intangible cognitive reflection and analysis" (Kurniawan, 2021).

#### *Biography of Maria Theresia Geme*

Maria Theresia Geme was born on January 28, 1961, in Bajawa, Ngada, NTT. Geme is a member of a multireligious family. The brother of her grandfather is a Muslim. Therefore, she has lived with religious differences in her family since childhood. Geme is aware of what is permissible and

forbidden for Muslim. When Geme Muslim brothers gather for the annual ceremony, they show mutual respect. In accordance with NTT family custom, pork must be served as a side dish during traditional rituals. Her Muslim brothers and sisters are still active in customary activities, even observing the slaughtering and cooking of pig. "However, we prepare meals specifically for them, and they cook it themselves in accordance with Islam," added Geme (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021). Since childhood, she has been exposed to this type of environment, including diversity and mutual respect. This influences Geme's acceptance of different religious communities.

Geme has been a lecturer at the Faculty of Law, Widya Mandira Catholic University in Kupang since 1987. She held positions on this campus such as head of Department of Civil Law, vice dean, dean, and secretary of the university senate. Geme has been the Director of her campus's Center for the Study of Law, Human Rights, and Gender since 2018. She is also a member of the Association of Indonesian Law and Gender Lecturers and an observer at the Association of Indonesian Traditional Law Teachers.

She is both a scholar and an activist who is involved in a number of organizations. She has been a member of the Indonesian Catholic Women in NTT since 1988, and in 2015 she served as Chair of the Santa Familia Branch in Kupang. From 2007 until 2021, she was a member of the NTT FKUB, and from 2015 to 2021, the wife of Dr. Paulus Bhuja, Lecturer in the Faculty of Science and Engineering at Nusa Cendana University, served as Chair of the NTT FKUB. She has also been involved in a number of other organizations, including the NTT Indonesian Democracy Index Working Group since 2016, the NTT Counter-Terrorism Coordination Forum's since 2018, and the NTT Province Local Law Society Study Team under the NTT Environment Agency.

Geme's life motto is "collecting little roses through humble actions" (Admin, 2019), has written numerous scholarly works in the form of books, and journal articles. She published books such as *Agrarian Law* in 2021, and *Nagekeo Design: Land Ownership and Management Based on Local Wisdom Within the Frame of National Policy*, in 2007. Her articles have been published in the *Prajna Journal*, such as "Indonesian Women Between Convention and Reservation Protection," in 2004, "Law and Women in the Implementation of Regional Autonomy," in 2005, and "Women's Participation in Decision Making" in 2010. Her other articles were published in *Aequitas Juris Journal* including "Customary Law Community-Based Collaborative Forest Resource Management," in 2017 and "The Function of *Ngadhu-Bhaga* as a Normative Document for the Langa Customary Law Community in Golewa Barat, Ngada," in 2018.

She has delivered numerous papers at several events. In terms of the legal theme, she wrote "Perspective of Customary Rights in the Acceleration of Regional Autonomy," presented at the Regional Social Potential Consolidation workshop, in 2005, "Marriage according to Codex Iuris Canonici," presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Teachers and Observers of Gender and Law, in 2006 and "Reading the Legal Character of Local Wisdom in the Context of Strengthening Legal Diversity," presented at Widya Mandira Catholic University in 2020. In terms of religious harmony theme, she has authored a number of papers, including "Legal Pluralism in the Context of Religious Harmony," presented at seminar in Kalabahi-Alor in 2013 dan "The Role of FKUB from the Perspective of PBM Regarding the Establishment of Houses of Worship," presented at Ministry of Religious Affairs of NTT in 2014.

Geme's works above reflect the depth of her concern for gender equality, harmony and local wisdom.

#### *Became Head of FKUB NTT and Geme's Programs*

According to observations and in-depth interviews, Maria Theresia Geme is the first woman in Indonesia to lead an FKUB at the provincial level. In the interview, Geme discussed her appointment as the head of NTT FKUB in 2015:

Throughout Indonesia, FKUB chairmen often come from the majority population. Even so in NTT. Since the majority is Catholic, so is the FKUB chairman. Tradition dictates that FKUB

members are typically religious figures chosen by the leadership. The bishop has recommended me for the position of head of the FKUB (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

However, according to the tradition of leadership, Geme comes from a minority group, namely women. Therein lies its distinctiveness. Prior to Geme's appointment as chairman, the NTT FKUB was headed by a Catholic priest (Romo). But following Romo's death in May 2015 (Berita Satu, 2015), there was a structural change at FKUB of NTT in which Geme was appointed to succeed Romo by the Bishop of NTT. Upon closer examination, Geme's primary motivation for accepting the position of FKUB leader was her devotion to the Bishop's orders. When Geme is recommended by the Bishop, she must express her readiness. Her readiness reflects not only devotion to Bishop commands and his, but also trust in her abilities and her presence is important to FKUB's leadership (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021). Therefore, Geme strives to meet the expectations of others, particularly the Bishop who nominated her. Thus, it is clear that Geme has a strong commitment and a comprehensive vision in her leadership.

The programs implemented by NTT FKUB under Geme's leadership, can be described as innovative and creative. In addition to dialogue programs such as regular meetings between religious and cultural leaders (Admin, 2022), and programs to build cooperation and synergy with local governments, the NTT FKUB undertakes non-formal programs through cultural arts activities. For instance, in 2019, the NTT FKUB hosted a higher education hymn and march singing contest with the theme "Singing Harmony in Diversity: Towards NTT Rising and Prosperous" (Nong, 2019). In 2020, it held a short story contest for students with the goal of educating them about the importance of religious harmony (Keda, 2020).

Another program is an interfaith *live-in* that takes place in rural communities where culture and customs are still strongly adhered to. This program is aimed to facilitate direct interaction between different people and is executed in a lighthearted manner, "so that individuals and group can interact directly with others from different religious, social, economic, cultural, and natural environmental backgrounds," said Geme (Nong, 2021)

The NTT FKUB has engaged in numerous activities to prevent conflict and violence, such as expressing calls for peace and nonviolence, and promoting the internalization of Pancasila values. After the bombing of a church in Makassar on March 28, 2021, the NTT FKUB immediately gathered with other stakeholders to express their deep concern and appeal to the public to remain calm and maintain unity, and not allow themselves to be provoked by the media into violence. Geme explained that "NTT FKUB strongly opposes all forms of violence against mankind, whatever of motivation, as it is contrary to the principles of every faith." (Nong, 2019).

The NTT FKUB has also published a series of books discussing the values of harmony in local wisdom in NTT. The book series is an integral part of efforts to preserve and strengthen the harmony in society. As an activist for gender equality, Geme also pays close attention to women's issues at FKUB. Geme created a network and collaborated with religious women's organizations such as Muslimat NU, Aisyiyah, Christian and Catholic Women, upon her appointment as Chair of the NTT FKUB (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

### *Women's Leadership at FKUB: Challenges and Strategies for Overcoming Them*

Geme's leadership at FKUB is noteworthy because she is both a woman and a non-religious leader. Men have always represented interfaith dialogue in various parts of the world to date (Gruber, 2020). Nevertheless, FKUB in Indonesia are typically male and led by religious leaders. As a result of patriarchal culture's continued dominance in Indonesian society, there is insufficient room for women's leadership in religious institutions. Geme is an exception in this case. She held the position as a head of NTT FKUB. Her leadership in this institution was successful for a number of reasons. *First*, Geme possesses significant social and cultural capitals. She has been involved with Catholic women's organizations for many years and is a scholar with competence in law. In addition, since the establishment of FKUB in 2007, Geme has been a member and has served as secretary.

*Second*, Geme's acceptance as FKUB leader cannot be separated from the Christian tradition of granting women the pulpit, especially among Protestants. Under Geme, both Catholics and Christians embrace women's leadership. However, there is always a stigma and mistrust of women who become leaders, despite the fact that they have significant capital and the same skills as men. Geme explains:

Not everyone acknowledges a woman's capabilities. Systematically, men do not permit women to be in such spaces. It has a connection to the cultural system. Regardless, for instance, a woman can be capable of leadership. However, women must demonstrate twice the strength of men (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

Realizing the patriarchal society, Geme has become one of the women's rights activists. She leads the Center for Study of Law, Human Rights, and Gender at her campus and a member of the Indonesian Association of Law, Human Rights, and Gender Teachers. She conducted a conference on "Women's Strategic Role for Religious Harmony" in partnership with various religious women's organizations shortly after being chosen as a head of the FKUB in 2015. This event's purpose is to underline the importance of women's contributions to religious harmony in Indonesia. In her opinion, women must participate in all facets of development, but it requires not only the quantity but also the quality and competence (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021). She explains further:

No matter how intelligent a man is, he will not be able to properly articulate women's needs. Therefore, women must have a direct voice in numerous facets of policy and development. In addition, women must recognize that no matter how intelligent they are, they cannot perfectly articulate the needs of men. Therefore, there must be a channel of communication and an attitude of mutual respect in order to comprehend one another and meet the needs of both parties.

Geme employs the perspective of mutuality or *mubadalah*; the concept of mutuality in relationships, by upholding the norms of equality, reciprocity, sameness, and the like (Kodir, 2019). It appears that she uses *mubadalah* as a core value in her leadership of FKUB. Despite this, Geme remains critical. She argues that men's thinking is constantly biased against women despite their efforts to include women. Quantitatively, the number of men and women in FKUB NTT is not equivalent. To address this issue, she provided a sufficient room for women at FKUB by appointing four women to the board.

Geme tried to include women's perspectives on the issue of harmony. One of her aims is to engage women in interfaith discourse. However, she stated that recruiting Muslim women was challenging, because the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) prefers sending male representatives to the FKUB. Nonetheless, she believes that there are many prospective Muslim women. In this sense, Geme negotiated with Islamic religious leaders in order to ensure that female representation is included in future MUI management. Thus, it is envisaged that MUI women will be part of boards at FKUB (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021). To address the underrepresentation of Muslim women at FKUB, Geme also invited Muslim women to act as resource persons, so that they may remain involved and she can continue to absorb and incorporate Muslim women's ideas (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

In general, Geme's leadership at NTT FKUB was deemed effective as seen by the aforementioned innovations and accomplishments. Her achievement inseparable from her unique female leadership. If women have been stigmatized in the past, the above-mentioned 2015 Gallup research really demonstrates the leadership success of women (Fitch & Agrawal, 2015). As mentioned by Koland and Wells & Fleshman, Geme overcomes the aforementioned issues with strategic actions that emphasize collaboration and aim to achieve balance and mutuality (Fitch & Agrawal, 2015). The methods she devised while directing the NTT FKUB exemplifies the distinctiveness of her leadership style. Using an informal approach, paying close attention to components of art and culture, and highlighting the importance of caring for local wisdom, which she sees as a critical source for creating religious harmony. These strategies show the characteristics of typical female leadership, namely *caring* (Scheper-Hughes, 1985) and *ethic of care* (Hassan & Silong, 2008).

Sarlinda, a board member of NTT FKUB, believes that Geme's leadership style is calm, maternal, offers various ways of thinking and behaving, and takes a very detailed approach to analyzing situations (Sarlinda, Personal Communication, November 21, 2021). Other Geme's colleague at NTT FKUB, Leyloh, asserts that Geme is a leader who always acts fast and proactively, as she explains below:

When there was a bomb in Makassar, Geme immediately posted about it on social media, saying "don't be provoked, don't burn," and we always make statements at press conferences, so the response is prompt. This outlook makes me feel at home at FKUB, because nearly all of my friends have an open mind (Yetty Leyloh, Personal Communication, December 13, 2021).

In the opinion of AKM, Deputy Chairperson of FKUB of NTT, her leadership was excellent since it utilized a good strategy and treated all members equally (AKM, Personal Communication, February 28, 2022).

The aforementioned thought of Geme's colleague demonstrate the distinction and uniqueness of women's leadership, which men do not necessarily possess, particularly in problem-solving.

### *Nationality, Locality and Religiosity*

Geme's thoughts and works in FKUB are closely related to three main discourses of nationality, locality, and religiosity. Her understanding of nationality is closely intertwined to her position as a law professor. Her expertise in the subject of law has given her an established perspective on nationality. Furthermore, Geme's nationalism inseparable from the construction of nationalism as a type of contextual theology in the history of Christianity in Indonesia. It enriches to the Christian perspective on Indonesian history's interreligious theology (Ruhlessin & Parihala, 2021). Therefore, Geme underlines that Indonesianness should be the identity that FKUB strives for.

The identity for which FKUB should aim is Indonesianness. Our Indonesianness, not our religiousness. We have a strong plan to strengthen the national and Indonesian identity (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

Thus, Geme's primary goal is to make Indonesia a diverse home for all citizens. In her view, the largest challenge for FKUB is the fanaticism of religious communities. Therefore, FKUB should facilitate interreligious encounters. She demonstrated her leadership by attempting to build bridges between religious communities in order to emphasize national interests. Geme strives to broaden the perceptions of religious members so that they become inclusive and have an appreciation for difference. Her efforts in this area are part of women's movement on nationalism (Pohlman, 2014).

Based on Bourdieu's theory, Geme's leadership is reinforced by her capitals. *First*, a highly educated and experienced person. Geme is a law professor who has taught for decades at Widya Mandira Catholic University. Geme, in addition to teaching, has held other important positions on this campus, as previously mentioned. This has a significant impact on the vision of her leadership.

*Second*, involvement in many organizations. She has served as chair of the Women's Catholic organization in Kupang until now. Her leadership in NTT FKUB has been enhanced by her strategic position within Catholic groups, as Catholicism is the predominant religion in NTT. As stated in her biography, Geme is also involved with some other organizations. Her views on nationality, locality, and religiosity were profoundly impacted by her involvement in these many organizations. Hence, in NTT's social space, as an arena, she is able to play her agency into social reality by selecting strategic issues that must be addressed, particularly on religious harmony. As a result, her FKUB programs and strategies can be approved by its members and the wider public.

*Third*, possess experience with diverse religions, ethnic, and cultures. As is evident from Geme's biography, her family background is multireligious. Since childhood, she has interacted with individuals of various religions. As an adult, she lived in Bali and Malang, which are more closely associated with other religions and cultures. Obviously, this enhanced her sense of both nationality and locality.



*Fourth*, born and nurtured within a matrilineal society. Two regions in NTT adhere to a matrilineal culture, namely Bajawa in Ngada and Malacca in Timor Island. These regions' matrilineal culture placed women in a prominent position. For instance, at the time of the wedding, the woman's family picks up her husband in a traditional ceremony and takes him to her home. This marriage system has placed women in a very prominent position, specifically as the head of the household's inheritance (Tahu & Magalhaes, 2020). In Ngada's culture, where Geme was born, the wives primary responsibility is to be the leader of the household, who makes all decisions, while the husband is treated as a distinguished guest and a visitor. This demonstrates that local cultural instruments have contributed to the social capital of Geme as leader.

In addition, Geme is also adaptable and friendly. She tries to be present for all groups and is eager to gain knowledge from all religious communities. Geme confesses that she has gained a lot from religious leaders, particularly about the universal values of peace. Geme addresses this notion, so that the interreligious community's social interactions become more intimate and fluid. In her opinion, the religious community is not required to defend internal truths, but rather must discuss communal concerns.

But let's talk about a big issue that is in the collective interest and will benefit everyone, namely that FKUB must be placed within the framework of our national identity (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

Based on this statement, Geme has a very strong conception of nationality. She has always put national identity as a communal identity above of religious identities.

Geme also has a strong local and religious perspectives. To comprehend her notion of locality, namely the local wisdom of traditions and customs, as well as her religiosity, which is also understood in the context of locality, it is necessary to examine the sociocultural context of Ngada and NTT in general. In this context, her opinion on the relationship between religion and local wisdom aligns with Gus Dur's views on the indigenization of Islam, also known as "*Islam Nusantara*" in recent years (Fitria, 2020; Ramdhan, 2018). As Geme's place of growth, Ngada's social milieu will have a significant impact on her worldview, which will become her "*habitus*." Tradition and local wisdom (Maretha, 2020; Takdir, 2017), which contain religious values, are one of the social assets produced by Geme in an effort to create harmony amongst religions. In the "arena" of NTT, these two items can serve as a bridge different religions. For her, harmony and peace must be facilitated through culture. Because cultural devices can serve as a glue for generating encounters between religious groups. As a result, religious communities will become closer and more receptive (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

The people of NTT maintain and preserve a number of local wisdoms, particularly related to harmony and togetherness such as *Nusi*, *Butukila*, *Suki Toka Apa*, and *Muki Nena* in the City of Kupang (Parera & Marzuki, 2020). There is also a local proverb "*Katong Samua Basodara*" that encourages people to live in harmony. In West Manggarai, *Nempung* is the phrase that implies to assemble for deliberation and in Sikka, *Kulababong* culture encourages heart-to-heart communication in order to solve problems. Commonalities are prioritized above distinctions. Before the establishment of religions in NTT, certain local traditions already existed. The wisdom values of the ancient society were later inculturated with the emergence of major religions, so that their positive values were integrated into the major religions' belief systems (Parera & Marzuki, 2020).

The NTT FKUB highlighted the importance of cultivating local wisdom as a tool for religious moderation. Local wisdom strengthens national identity and prevents religious fundamentalism. For this reason, NTT FKUB has created an annual regional dialogue initiative to map local wisdom. The first year is dedicated to Timor, the second to Flores, the third to Sumba, and the fourth to Alor. Geme undertook this attempt to foster religious harmony and enhance social solidarity by utilizing local wisdom (Mukti, 2019; Tahu & Magalhaes, 2020). The results of the dialogues at the four locations were published in four book series titled "Finding the Harmony in Local Wisdom." She highlighted this topic on purpose to encourage religious leaders to give space for the appreciation of local wisdom. Geme's challenge in running this program is to explore the relationship between religion

and local wisdom. They are prone to value conflicts because religious values frequently contradict local wisdom values. For her, NTT FKUB's homework includes the following:

How to find common ground between normative religious doctrines and local wisdom is religious community homework, especially at FKUB. It is critical that religious and cultural leaders conducting dialogue on a regular basis in order to develop a shared understanding of the mutualistic relationship between religion and culture as a means of building harmony (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

In the social structure of the NTT, religious and cultural figures play vital roles in fostering harmony. Because their edict can serve as a source of legitimacy for society to establish the common good, which is based on both religious teachings and local wisdom. Religion has an impact on the acculturation of NTT cultures. In fact, it is found almost everywhere in Indonesia. The architecture of their houses of worship, for example, has absorbed local culture in the NTT tradition. A small minority of people who do not comprehend the relationship between religion and culture are occasionally critical. They were perplexed as to why the church structures in NTT were so tall. Therefore, grassroots understanding of religion and culture as complementing entities must be increased. So that everyone understands the two's relationship. Unfortunately, religious community, according to Geme, has always been more interested in symbols than in essences. Her expression is a critique of the expressions of religious groups that emphasize formalism, such as Islamic formalism, Christian formalism, and others, which have a tendency to be exclusive and can occasionally become extremist (Sihotang, 2012). As a result, when they saw a different symbol, they experienced an allergic reaction. She explains

We are not discussing function, but the physique. When people see a building, they experience fear; the larger and taller the building, the more frightening it is. Function should be the subject of discussion (Geme, Personal Communication, November 18, 2021).

From the above explanation, it can be concluded that Geme's interpreted and practiced religiosity based on Catholic religious values that have been acculturated with local traditions. As Catholics, she practices worship rituals in accordance with the Catholic religion's teaching. However, she also relies on local traditions to strengthen her religiosity. This is evident at least through Geme's care for and promotion of local wisdom through numerous programs.

It is clear from the preceding paragraphs that Geme's agency has enabled her to become a successful and well-respected leader within the NTT FKUB. Geme's distinctive thoughts and works as a female leader have had direct or indirect effects on the development of interreligious harmony in NTT. Geme's leadership style and her innovative initiatives that has designed with a feminine approach have had an impact on both the NTT FKUB's internal members and the community. Internally at the NTT FKUB, Geme's leadership was considered as successful and positively affected her colleagues. This is shown by her colleagues statements, which were described previously. Externally, the NTT FKUB activities have also contributed to the realization of peace within the NTT society. This is illustrated via programs such as short story competitions, choral competitions, live-in, and dialogues. The programs reach the broader community, including religious leaders, youth, students, and women. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Province of NTT and the City of Kupang have been honored multiple times as the most tolerant provinces and cities in Indonesia.

### 3. Conclusion

Maria Thereia Geme is the first female FKUB leader in Indonesia's history. Her leadership is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Her leadership at FKUB illustrates that women have the potential to become agen of peace. She has been quite successful in executing FKUB programs to foster religious harmony in NTT by utilizing her agency and a unique women's leadership. Geme attempts to mainstream women's involvement in the issue of religious harmony by referring to the mubadalah (mutuality) principle. She believes that women are capable of and must participate in public affairs. For Geme, nationality is a communal identity that must be prioritized.

Therefore, Indonesianness must take precedence above religious identity, race, etc. Nationality will develop in conjunction with the maintenance of local wisdom. Consequently, preserving and strengthening local wisdom is one of its primary tasks in developing and fostering harmony. Geme religiosity is perceived and practiced within the context of acculturated religious (Catholic) with local values and spirituality. Geme strengthens her religiosity by employing local wisdom as a foundation. The harmonious interaction between religious and local wisdom will develop Indonesian national identity.

### Acknowledgement

This article is based on my dissertation research titled “*Perempuan dalam Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama: Oase di Tengah Malestream Dialog Antar-Agama di Indonesia* [Women in the Forum for Religious Harmony: An Oasis Amidst the Malestream of Interfaith Dialogue in Indonesia],” as stated in the Rector's Decree of UIN Sunan Kalijaga Number: 207.1 Tahun 2021, under the supervision of Dr. Suhadi, S.Ag., M.A. This research was conducted as part of the requirements for the Doctoral Program in Islamic Studies at the School of Graduate Studies, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta.

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