



# The Border-Crossing Women: Feminist Cross-Textual Reading by Muslim and Christian Sumbanese Women in North Wendewa

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the application of cross-textual reading on the story of women around Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible by grassroots Muslim and Christian women in the village of Wendewa Utara, Central Sumba. Due to the involvement of women, I apply the feminist approach to analyze the dynamics of cross-textual reading. During several focus group discussions, cross-textual reading was run smoothly because the participants are bound by kinship ties. They are also rooted in Sumbanese cultural values that reflect Marapu religious values. In other words, Muslim and Christian women are living in a context of socio-religious-cultural hybridity in which their religious identity intermingles with their cultural identity. For this reason, this paper describes a project bringing these women into another space of dialogue through cross-textual reading. In the cross-textual reading, both grassroots Muslim and Christian women are crossing their religious borders by finding resonant commonalities between the two texts, as they explore the affirmative, enriched, and irreconcilable difference as well. Cross-textual reading is a new adventure for both Muslim and Christian women in Wendewa Utara. The participants were enthusiastic because the material readings encourage them to share their problems, joys, hopes, and dreams. By reflecting on the struggle of women around Moses, the participants are committed to supporting one another in their daily life. Accordingly, this model of reading creates a safe space for grassroots Muslim and Christian women to learn from one another for mutual enrichment.*

*Keywords: cross-textual reading, interreligious women's engagement, mutual enrichment.*

## **Introduction**

Women are one of the most vulnerable groups in a patriarchal society dealing with gender-based violence that results in discrimination, marginalization, and exploitation. Data on gender-based violence against women from a 2019 World Bank 2019 report show that 35% of women have experienced both physical and sexual violence, a phenomenon that closely correlates to socio-economic problems. Accordingly, the World Bank report recommends advocating women's empowerment to increase women's participation in the economic sector.[1]

The social status of women, in addition to being an economic issue, is a religious one that needs the attention of interreligious scholars and practitioners. Besides, most women and children from different religious backgrounds share similar sufferings due to injustice, oppression, poverty, violence, discrimination, and marginalization. For this reason, women's voices and experiences are essential to the table of dialogue. It opens a space for women from different religions to voice their issues. Regarding this idea, Nguyen, an interreligious dialogue scholar, on 'the vision of Asian women highlighted the importance of women's participation in interreligious dialogue as a way to build solidarity among women against violence, exploitation, marginalization and injustice cases. In his writing, he underlined the shared-struggle of Asian

women regardless of their religious backgrounds related to oppression and injustice issues. In more specific work, he emphasized the efforts of Asian Christian women to initiate dialogue with women from other religions for their liberation and transformation.[2]

In many women's dialogue forums, their strategy is interconnected with other women. They are present in many informal spaces of dialogue, particularly in the dialogue of life. Another work of women's role in crossing religious borders is also described by Septemmy Lakawa, one of the feminist theologians in Indonesia in her research "Aftermath, Survivors and local Christian narratives in Duma Village, Halmahera, North Maluku. Lakawa highlighted the narratives of Christian women who are the survivors of communal violence. Lakawa underlined that these women were moving and struggling to heal their pain and trauma through their re-encountering with Muslim women. For her, these women have taken the role of the peace agency in the post-conflict area.[3]

However, in many cases, not all women can have a chance to speak for their rights due to a patriarchal culture that limits their participation. The exclusion of women also occurs in the space of interreligious dialogue in a formal setting where only a few women even scarcely attend. Many interreligious forums are mainly occupied by male religious leaders,

and if there were women, they might be professional women who have certain privileges. This happens because most religious leaders are men and only a small number of women occupy leadership positions. For instance, in a meeting of Christians and Muslims organized by the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue (CID) and Christians involved in the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2015, there were only four women out of fourteen participants. Of the four women, there was only one Muslim woman. It is one example of interreligious forums that are dominated by male leaders.[4]

In other cases, not all women have the opportunity to join inter-religious women's forums. Usually, only women with certain positions and capabilities such as experts, scholars, and activists can join in such interreligious women's forums. Even in programs or projects that aim to increase women's capacity in interreligious dialogue, only certain women can participate. For instance, KAICIID Dialogue Centre organized interreligious women's dialogue to respond to the lack of women in leadership roles in interreligious dialogue, but only seventeen female experts from ten countries and a diversity of religious backgrounds attended.[5]

To address this imbalance, I am interested in highlighting interreligious women's dialogue, especially at the

grassroots level. This study describes a project which created a dialogue space or a safe space where women could freely express their experiences, problems, and hopes, a circle of solidarity for grassroots interreligious women. The study was conducted in the village of North Wendewa, which is located in the Mamboro subdistrict area, Central Sumba. I choose North Wendewa because this village is well-known as a tolerant village in Central Sumba. In 2019, the Ministry of Religion of Central Sumba declared the village of North Wendewa as a tolerant village where there is a monument in the form of a traditional Sumba house with a philosophy that represents the local wisdom of Sumba people in general and Mamboro people in particular.[6] The monument is named '*rumah kerukunan*', a house of tolerance. The philosophy of the house is *tana nyuwu watu lissi*, which means the strong solidarity of the people who live in the same land regardless of their religion, social status, education, and ethnic background.

In this village, Muslim women and Christian women are intermingled in their daily life encounters because of their kinship ties. Additionally, Muslims and Christians have been living together in this village long before Indonesian independence. Muslims and Christians in this village are mostly from the Marapu religion. Marapu is the indigenous religion of the Sumbanese

people. According to A.A. Yewangoe, a Christian theologian in Indonesia, marapu has two meanings as the hidden/unseen ultimate being and the ancestral spirit.[7] Again, Marapu is the symbol of the identity of Sumbanese people besides the *paraingu* (the settlement) and the *kabihu* (clan). Among these three symbols of identity, Marapu is the most important one because it represents the religious aspect of the Sumbanese people.[8]

Marapu values through cultural events have been embedded in the daily life of Sumbanese Christian and Muslims. Interestingly, Muslim migrants who have already settled for a long time in North Wendewa have been rooted in Sumbanese cultural values that reflect the marapu worldview. In other words, those Muslims and Christians have a hybrid identity as Sumbanese, Marapu, and as Muslim and Christian. Although there are new migrant Muslims from Bima, they do not have a major influence on the historically harmonious relationship of the people of North Wendewa village.

In this work, I bring Muslim women and Christian women in North Wendewa village together to have a cross-textual reading of the stories of women around Moses' life in the Islamic and Christian traditions. This model of reading did not occur naturally, but it was a facilitated meeting to open a space for interreligious womens dialogue. This

research is inspired by the work of Daniel Listijabudi on his dissertation research about a cross-textual reading of the Stories of Dewa Ruci and Jacob at the Jabbok as a Contribution to Asian Multi-faith Hermeneutics. Since Listijabudi proposed the participation of interreligious communities to a cross-textual reading through what he called a communitarian reading, I have been working to practice this model of reading in a grassroots interreligious women's community.[9]

As noted by Kwok Pui Lan, an Asian feminist theologian, in the context of multifaith hermeneutics, "the texts that can be crossed at least should have similar motifs." [10] This point was highlighted by Listijabudi in his research by raising the mystical aspect of the story of Dewa Ruci in Javanese tradition and the story of Jacob at Jabbok in the Christian tradition. Through his work, Listijabudi also realizes the influence of the *Kejawen* worlds on Muslim and Christian life in Java.[11] Therefore, I work with the story of the women around Moses because these two stories are closely related to women's activities in crossing the religious border to save Moses' life. These two similar stories are owned by Christians and Muslims and closely related to women's struggle to preserve life. The focus of my study is the dynamics of Muslim and Christian women's dialogue in the space of cross-textual reading. Since my participants

are women, I also apply a feminist lens to analyze the significant contribution of interreligious women's engagement and how women participate by bringing their perspectives, experiences, and voices to dialogue.

My reason for inviting women to a communitarian cross-textual reading is to amplify or to strengthen their daily dialogue. Although they already have a peaceful encounter, it is not guaranteed that they will preserve it in the future. At this point, interreligious engagement in the social, cultural, and religious spheres can reinforce one another. Having an interreligious engagement culturally and socially is not enough without an effort to cross the religious border in the sense of encountering other traditions for mutual understanding and mutual growth. My main focus is on the dynamics of the encounter of grassroots Muslim and Christian women: the process of reading, the interaction, and the obstacles. This study is not pure hermeneutic, but it is mixed with field research due to the participation of Christian women and Muslims in the space of cross-textual reading. The process of reading is describing the dynamics of interaction within the social context where the two groups meet in everyday life.

Due to the involvement of the grassroots religious women's groups in the interreligious reading, I use qualitative research methods to examine

the social interaction of women in a particular social context. Qualitative research aims to investigate the whole picture of the social context within the lives of the research subjects.

This method also explores the hidden phenomenon by describing the attitudes, behavior, and experiences through such methods as interviews or focus groups. In this approach, a researcher should have direct and intense contact with the participants.[12]

To conduct a cross-textual reading, I employ a focus group discussion where Muslim women and Christian women gather to discuss a selected text that has a similar sound. Focus group methodology is a way of collecting qualitative data that involves a small number of people in an informal group discussion, 'focused' around a particular topic or set of issues. According to Wilkinson," the researcher generally acts as a 'moderator' for the group: posing questions, keeping the discussion flowing, and enabling group members to participate fully." [13] To collect the data, I utilize participant observation that aims to capture the dynamics of encounters and interactions between Christian and Muslim women in North Wendewa village. I lived in North Wendewa for two months and observed the daily activities of women in their houses, neighborhoods, and markets where interactions with other groups happen. Besides, I also conducted an in-depth interview with religious leaders

and traditional figures as well as the representatives of women's participants. In this study, I interview four religious leaders, four traditional figures, and six women's representatives.

### **A Glimpse of Cross-Textual Reading in the Frame of Interreligious Reading**

An interreligious dialogue takes many forms including an interreligious reading of sacred texts. In this section, I highlight cross-textual reading in the sense of dialogical hermeneutics which includes two religious communities to cross their reading for mutual spiritual growth. I limit my focus on interreligious grassroots women because I want to open the space for women's voices and perspectives in a cross-textual reading.

It should be noted that the concept of cross-textual reading was generated from the Asian context which is known as a multicultural and multi-scriptural context. Some Asian Biblical scholars were concerned about the hybridity in Asia that requires a new model of reading the Bible among many Scriptures in Asia. Sugirtharajah, one of the leading Asian biblical scholars underscores the awareness of interpreting the Bible in the multi-faith context which should be put into consideration the presence of other scriptural texts and the audience of the biblical message which is not exclusively Christian. He examines

a dialogical approach to counter the conquest and reorientation approach in the Christian tradition. For him, the Asian context requires multifaith hermeneutics that is dialogical. It means the Bible should have a mutual interaction with other Asian texts both written and oral texts.[14]

The idea of multi-faith hermeneutics arises from the critique of Sugirtharajah to encompass three modes of interpretation: the anglicist mode, the orientalist mode, and the nativist model, which are seen as colonialistic. Then, Sugirtharajah raised postcolonial criticism as an alternative critical approach to reconstruct the new relationship between the Bible and other Asian texts. Postcolonial criticism highlights the hybridity of Christianity in Asia. For him, postcolonial reading opens a space for reading the Bible along with other Asian scriptures. The postcolonial approach attempts to place the Christian Bible as one among many scriptures in Asia. In this context, there will be an equal dialogue among the scriptures or oral traditions in Asia. At this point, the Bible and other Asian scriptures become a partner of dialogue than can enrich one another.[15]

In parallel with Sugirtharajah, Kwok Pui Lan, an Asian feminist postcolonial scholar, maintains that Asia is a multifaceted and multireligious society in which people have many scriptures and multiple religious narratives. Therefore, she recommends

that Asian Christians should reinterpret their Christianity in a deep dialogue with other truths. From this perspective, Asian Christians should listen to other religious narratives carefully. In her work, Pui Lan emphasized that “the selfhood of Asian people cannot be seen as a single identity, but it is built-in multiple relationships in plurality and multiplicity.” In the context of Asian Christianity, the identity of Christians is formed by their encounter with other Asian traditions and religions.[16] Furthermore, Pui Lan underlines that in terms of biblical interpretation, “the interpreters should consider the multiple Asian traditions both written and oral as references. It is in line with the spirit of multifaith hermeneutics that seeks the truth and wisdom in the cultures, histories, and religions of Asian people.”[17]

Again, this method requires an openness to learn about other religious traditions and the humility to accept the assessment from religious others. [18] In line with Sugirtharajah and Kwok Pui Lan, Archie Lee, an Asian biblical scholar, highlights multifaith hermeneutics and dialogical hermeneutics in the form of cross-textual reading. Lee introduced cross-textual reading as an effort to create a space where the Bible and other Asian scriptures have a mutual dialogue. For him, focusing on the Bible alone is not relevant in the Asian context where many religions are living together in the

same neighborhood. His idea is derived from postcolonial thinking which tries to accommodate Asian cultures and particularly Asian scriptures into a dialogical reading with the Bible.[19]

In his writing, Archie Lee criticizes two models of interpretation that are not relevant to the Asian multifaceted context. The first model is the text-alone approach as taught by Christian missionaries and still practiced in many churches in Asia. This approach has placed the Bible as superior against other Asian scriptures and traditions. Lee contends that the “text alone” approach does not support the struggles of Asian people dealing with the complexity of Asian society. The second model is the text-context interpretive mode which is focusing on the meaning of the text rather than highlighting the Asian context. In this mode, only text can speak to the context. In other words, the Asian context will be less important due to the dominance of the message of the Bible.[20]

After criticizing the two models of interpretation, then Lee proposed what he called a cross-textual hermeneutics to dialogue or to bridge the biblical texts and the Asian texts. For him, this kind of approach will open the equal relationship of the Bible and other Asian texts within the social context of Asia. According to Lee, cross-textual hermeneutics is in line with the socio-religious and cultural hybridity in Asia. He maintained that Christian people in

Asia are fully attached to their Asian identity. In this context, Christianity and Asian cultures cannot be separated.[21]

The main point of cross-textual reading is reading the Bible alongside other Asian texts. In his work, Lee draws “the term cross in the sense of interaction, encounter, and dialogue between two texts.”[22] Furthermore, Lee underlined that cross-textual interpretation requires the willingness of each religious and cultural group to have multiple crossings that reflects a comprehensive dialogue on their sacred texts. This activity may help each religious group to capture the essence of their religious tradition by exploring other traditions deeply. It means cross-textual reading is a process of knowing one’s self better by meeting with others.[23]

The idea of cross-textual reading is clearer still in terms of the patterns of the model in the dissertation work of Daniel Listijabudi, an Indonesian biblical scholar. In his research, Listijabudi applied Lee’s idea, but with several critical remarks that results in the pattern of cross-textual reading. One of his critical evaluations of Lee’s work is the limitation of cross-textual reading by only crossing the commonalities and differences. Listijabudi goes further to create the pattern of cross-textual reading that resonates with the commonalities of the two different texts and divides the differences into three parts: affirmative differences,

enriching differences, and irreconcilable differences. This is part of the novelty in the work of cross-textual reading as introduced by Listijabudi.[24]

Listijabudi is very optimistic that cross-textual reading will be one approach among many other approaches in interreligious hermeneutics that contribute to peace building work. In his work, Listijabudi takes a role as a scholar who conducted a cross-textual reading on the two texts in the context of a hybrid Javanese society where the Javanese text is an inseparable part of Javanese society in general, including for Javanese Christian communities. [25] By referring to Pui Lan’s work, Listijabudi also added that this cross-textual reading can be implemented by the two religious communities in a hybrid socio-religious-cultural identity.[26] Therefore, Listijabudi underlines that “having cross-textual reading aims to put the Bible side by side with other scriptures in Asia for mutual transformation and enrichment”. Here, reading other religious traditions including other sacred texts does not aim to dominate one over others, but to learn from other traditions for mutual growth.[27]

In his work, Lee did not suggest the idea of the involvement of interreligious religious communities in the process of cross-textual reading. This idea comes from Listijabudi in the last part of his dissertation research. Listijabudi proposes a communitarian cross-textual

reading which invites the participation of interreligious communities to cross-textual reading by considering the hybridity of the identity of the communities. He emphasizes the “common ground such as socio-religio-cultural hybridity of interreligious groups” who join the communitarian cross-textual reading.[28]

From the explanation above, it is clear that cross-textual reading is one approach that responds to the multifaceted context of Asia. In the context of a multi-religious society such as in Asia, and especially in Indonesia, interreligious people do not live in separate areas, rather they intermingle with religious others. One challenging point is they must face a realm of many truths besides their truth. Therefore, it demands the courage to learn other truths to strengthen one’s truth. Entering other truth does not necessarily lead to one’s conversion but helps one’s transformative understanding toward the religious other. In my view, cross-textual reading is an experience of crossing religious borders in which religious people have a shared-space for reading their sacred texts. This model of reading aims to broaden the horizons of one’s self and religious other.

By referring to the work of Lee and Listijabudi, I apply this model by inviting Muslim and Christian women in North Wendewa to share a cross-textual reading. In the context of North Wendewa, including women in

a communitarian cross-textual reading affirms their role as the life-giver in society and encourages women’s solidarity amidst the economic crisis. Many women in North Wendewa struggle with economic problems. Many of them are working as fish and salt sellers. As stated by Lee that the context of the reader becomes the starting point in a cross-textual reading, their context is the socio-political struggle of the people and the context of religious plurality.[29] Again, the communitarian cross-textual reading is not only done for a better understanding of each other but more importantly to celebrate the differences as part of their daily life. Although they come from different religious backgrounds, they share social, economic, political, and cultural oppression as women. The invitation of interreligious women to have cross-textual reading aims to strengthen then their engagement at the level of dialogue of life. Therefore, the participation of women in this model of interreligious reading helps them to learn more about their religious traditions and brings them to a new experience by learning other traditions.

### **The Dynamics of Muslim and Christian Women’s Dialogue**

Since this study is about examining cross-textual reading in the grassroots interreligious women’s communities, it is important to also highlight one condition in which the locus should

reflect the socio-religious-cultural hybridity. Dealing with this point, in the context of North Wendewa, Muslims and Christians are deeply rooted in the Sumbanese culture which reflects the Marapu[30] teachings. Most Muslims in this village are originally Mamboro people who converted to Islam because of inter-marriage relationships with the Endehnese migrants and some migrants from Bima who settled in Mamboro long before Independence Day. Recently, there are new migrant Muslims from Bima, but they do not influence the intimate relationship with Christians. In this area, most Christians are originally Mamboro and only a few are Savunese and Timorese. In this context, the migrant people are closely integrated with the local values in their daily life.

It is noteworthy that before the coming of Islam and Christianity in Mamboro, the local people were attached to their indigenous religion, called Marapu. However, the number of adherents to the Marapu religion has diminished due to many factors, such as the evangelization work of Christian leaders since the Zending time until today and because of intermarriage with Muslims and Christian. Although large numbers of Marapu members are not there anymore, the Marapu worldview is very strong in the daily relationships of the people in this village.[31]

Relations between Muslims and Christians in Mamboro are still very

well maintained today due to family relationships and because of strong cultural values as the foundation of living together. In a strong kinship relationship, the issue of religious differences is rarely highlighted. In general, almost all Muslims and Christians in the Mamboro region have family relations.

Two major cultural values in Mamboro that arise from Marapu values are (1) *tana nyuwu watu lissi* and (2) *palomai/palonggamai, pandula wikki, paoli*. *Tana nyuwu watu lissi* which can be literally translated as “adjacent stones and continuous land”. This concept represents a strong bond of brotherhood and sisterhood that transcends any boundaries in the land of Sumba, which is well-known as the island of Marapu. This value is the glue of interreligious people in this area. Besides, there are also values of cooperation called *palomai/palonggamai, pandula wikki, paoli* which also describe the solidarity of the people regardless of their backgrounds. This principle is rooted in the Marapu tradition and is still lived by the interreligious people in Mamboro to this day.[32]

In a socio-religious-cultural hybridity context, Muslim women and Christian women with their hybrid identities have the opportunity to enter the space of cross-textual reading by bringing their experiences and social context as well. Interestingly, the

women participants have known each other in the neighborhood and their daily encounters. They are not strangers to each other.

In this work, I involved 25 Muslim and 25 Christian women to hold a cross-textual reading, bringing together 50 participants representing two religious communities. The participants came from different educational backgrounds and professions. Of 50 participants, there are 13 with undergraduate university degrees, 13 high school graduates, 13 junior middle school graduates, and 11 elementary school graduates. Of all the participants, 35 work as housewives and fish sellers, two are self-employed, ten are teachers, and three are medical workers.

Before conducting a cross-textual reading, the participants first conducted a reading within their religious traditions. In the Christian context, women discussed the story of women surrounding Moses in a Bible study meeting. The Muslim women discussed this topic based on the Qur'anic teaching in the activity of '*pengajian*' in each Majelis Taklim meeting.

The selected reading is about the struggle of women around Moses in saving lives, both in Christian and Muslim traditions. I chose this reading because one of the conditions of cross-textual reading as highlighted by Listijabudi by referring to the work of Kwok is that the two selected texts must at least have the same core.[33]

My main focus in this research is the dynamics of encounter through cross-textual reading, while also highlighting the way women extracted ideas from these texts, not in the sense of interpreting the text using the academic method.

After each group had a discussion in their group about the selected texts, they then began to meet intensely once a week, which is four times over one month. In reading the selected texts, both the Muslim and Christian participants had almost the first experience of entering another space of dialogue, especially sitting side by side to discuss one part of their sacred texts. The participants recognized that they have never had such a meeting before. Usually, they just interact in their daily encounter by sharing daily needs. Therefore, cross-textual reading is a new experience for the grassroots Muslim and Christian women in Mambaro.

During this process of reading, I did not find any debate during the process of reading, instead, they learned from each other's traditions. Even when discussing in mixed groups, the stories as described in the Bible and the Qur'an



Fig. 1. The Process of cross-textual reading (Author's personal collection, taken on March 5, 2020)

are close together and sometimes overlap one another. Here, Muslim women used the Indonesian translation of the Qur'an because not all of them are fluent in reading the Qur'an in the Arabic version.

Interestingly, the atmosphere of the discussion was warm and friendly, full of respect, they fully listened to other opinions, and were open-minded. All women's participants were actively involved to listen to the recitation of this story in the Qur'an and the Bible. During the process of reading, the participants brought their sacred books. Muslim women brought the Arabic Qur'an as well as translations Qur'an. Likewise, Christian women brought the Bible. During several meetings, all women were enthusiastic about learning from the stories in the Bible and the Qur'an. The activity was opened with a prayer by the pastor and the Ustad, followed by reading the Bible and Qur'an by representatives of women from Christianity and Islam, and then continued with discussion and



Fig. 2. A Muslim and A Christian Women in an activity of crossing the texts (Author's personal collection, taken on March 5, 2020)

reflection.

Referring to the pattern of cross-textual reading in the work of Listijabudi,[34] I acted as a facilitator to encourage the participants to find the similarities and the differences of the selected stories and then encouraged them to resonate with the similarities while noticing the differences that might enrich their understanding of one another. During the process, the activities of crossing their texts are very interesting. The participants were curious to know more about each other traditions related to the stories of women that save Moses' life.

From the cross-textual reading, there are several resonant similarities about the story of women surrounding Moses both in the Qur'an and the Bible that were discovered by the participants: (1) the Pharaoh announced his intention to kill every Hebrew/Israelite male-baby; (2) Baby Moses was saved by women; (3) Baby Moses was breastfed by his Mother; (4) Baby Moses was hidden in the Nile River and he was watched by his sister from afar.

The affirmative and enriched differences are: (1) The differences of names of the figures, which the parents



Fig. 3. Mixed-Group Presentation (Author's personal collection, taken on March 5, 2020)

of Moses are Imran bin Qahats (Moses' father) and Yukhabad (Moses' mother), and their name in the Bible are Amran (Moses' father) and Yokhebed (Moses' mother). The name of Moses' sister in the Bible is Miryam and the name in the Qur'an is Maryam; (2) In the Qur'an, Moses is appointed as an apostle and prophet while in the Bible Moses is appointed as the leader of Israel; (3) In the Bible, two midwives assisted Moses' mother in the baby's delivery, while in the Qur'an there were none mentioned.

From the cross-textual reading, there is an irreconcilable difference that characterizes each religious tradition regarding the role of Moses. In the Christian tradition, Moses is the leader of the Israelites while in the Islamic tradition, Moses is an Apostle and a Prophet. This was also evident in the discussion process where Muslim participants always referred to Moses as the prophet *Musa As*. However, these differences did not affect the desire to learn from each other and enrich one another.

One interesting point I observed in the cross-textual reading process was that the participants also build reflections or meanings from these two almost the same but different readings. They both looked at the cooperation of women from two different nationalities and who are struggling to face the risk of saving the lives of the Israelite infants who were vulnerable to violence at that time. By reflecting on the two

reading materials that have been crossed, both Muslim and Christian women's participants were committed to being life-givers in their local context.

Dealing with their daily encounters, some participants confidently stated that the spirit of women around Moses's life encouraged them to maintain their solidarity especially during the time of economic crisis. As mentioned by Siti Anisa, Halimah Tushadia, Hadijah Said, the representatives of Muslim women's participants, the spirit of women around Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible has touched their life especially related to the compassion of women. They tried to also draw the line of the struggle of women in saving one's life with their struggle to fulfill their family's daily needs.[35] Actually, women's spirit in crossing religious border to saving lives correlates closely with the concept of solidarity in the Marapu worldview through the value of *pandula wikki* and *palomai* that encourage them to offer help to one another as a way to protect the land of Marapu that called the *tana nyuwu watu lissi* as the land without borders. Here, people from different backgrounds have a responsibility to maintain solidarity among them to maintain cosmology balance that is highly valued in the Marapu context.

The experience of cross-textual reading was fascinating for all Muslim and Christian women's participants because the reading material was about

women's struggle. This statement was uttered by Cornelia Bokol, Lourensia Nao, and Elysabeth Wanaway, the representatives of Christian women's participants. Overall, the activity of crossing the border through cross-textual reading on the story of women around Moses's life was a new experience for both Muslim and Christian women. Usually, they only practice dialogue of life through their daily encounter. Here, cross-textual reading brought Muslim and Christian women crossing the border through exchanging their sacred texts. Accordingly, cross-textual reading in the context of grass-root Muslim and Christian women in North Wendewa was a new adventure for interreligious dialogue on theological matters. The dialogue was light because the reading materials were around women's lives in the Qur'an and the Bible. The participants were easily engaged with the reading materials because of those texts about women's solidarity in preserving life that in line with their daily struggle.

From the interviews with the representatives of women's participants from both religious groups, I found that the experience of journeying together through cross-textual reading was enriching women's insights toward one another. From the discussion in the mixed-group of Muslim and Christian women, the participants reflected on the example of women around Moses by

sharing their daily experiences. In their family and neighborhood context, they also take a pivotal role as caregivers that offers help and support to save one's life. They usually exchange daily needs such as food, clean water, and other stuff in the neighborhood.

All participants reported that they enjoyed the process of reading and said that it was a pleasant experience because previously they were afraid to touch on matters related to their sacred texts. However, in this opportunity, they also crossed borders to understand other traditions more closely and learn about the values of other traditions which then enriched their insights even deeper into their traditions.

### **Highlighting Women's Role in Cross-Textual Reading: A Feminist Analysis**

At this point, gender and feminist lens can amplify women's voices to be heard and to be celebrated particularly in the space of cross-textual reading. Indeed, having a cross-textual reading is a unique experience for Muslim and Christian women in North Wendewa. Usually, they only meet in their daily activities in the traditional market, neighborhoods, family gatherings, and other activities. It is noted that when Muslim and Christian women are committed to entering a cross-textual reading, they have moved beyond their particular space to the universal space. It does not mean that cross-textual will

remove one's particular space, but it brings these two religious women's groups to have a mutual reflection on the selected text.

In this section, I employ feminist thinking to analyze the process of cross-textual reading in North Wendewa. Here, the feminist lens is a tool to criticize the blind spot of interreligious dialogue that sometimes ignores the complexity of women's experiences especially at the grassroots level where women experience multiple sufferings and struggles.

The presence of both Muslim and Christian women's groups in the space of cross-textual reading was through the permission of male-religious leaders. At the beginning of this process, I started communicating with Muslim and Christian leaders who are male leaders. Therefore, during the process, the male leaders were always present to accompany each women's group. In the first meeting, each religious leader gave a short introduction and interpretation of the selected text. However, during the process of cross-textual reading, the male-religious leaders did not intervene in the interaction of women's participants. Their presence was part of their support to women's groups.

The attendance of Muslim women in a space of cross-textual reading is a counter-narrative to a gender-biased interpretation of the Qur'an. As noted by the progressive Muslim female scholar Amina Wadud, many traditional

interpretations (*tafsir*) are biased against women and very male-oriented. The traditional interpretation has framed the position of women as a voiceless and submissive group. Along with Islamic history, women are often treated differently from men, and women's experiences tend to be either excluded or interpreted through the male vision, perspective, desire, or the needs of men. In response to this situation, Wadud tries to explore the Qur'an in its context and liberate it from the traditional interpretation and develop a model interpretation concerned with the issue of woman.[37]

Furthermore, Wadud found that women's experiences have been excluded from many Quranic interpretations. It seems unfair for women since their voices have been represented by men. Thus, Amina emphasizes the efforts to embrace women's perspectives in reading the Qur'an. Her main point is the Qur'an teaches about gender justice, therefore, women and men are equal before God. In her work, Wadud has been concerned about how the perception of women influences the interpretations of the Qur'an on women.[38]

By reflecting on the critical point of Wadud, I found that those women Muslims break the authority and the privilege of male leaders to interpret the Qur'an. In this work, Muslim women in North Wendewa have a chance to reflect on the story of women surrounding

Moses in the Qur'an and then cross the border to learn about this theme in the Bible. Although the Ustad was with them along the process of cross-textual reading, it did not influence the active participation of Muslim women's participants.

Interestingly, in cross-textual reading, even if there are interpretations delivered by Ustad, grassroots Muslim women also have the authority to respond to the reading by bringing their experiences. They can share their ideas related to seeking the similarities and differences of the story of women surrounding Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible. In the process of cross-textual reading, they are not under the pressure of male religious authority. In the context of North Wendewa, Muslim women rarely bring the Qur'an when attending recitation meetings, because the lecture is usually led by the Ustad. However, through cross-textual reading, they had experience reading Qur'anic texts themselves and even had experience reading the Bible.

From a Christian feminist lens, I apply the feminist paradigm proposed by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza who proposed a critical feminist biblical interpretation that discloses the patriarchal legitimization in the Bible. She tried to deconstruct the patriarchal pyramid and provides a space for women's experience in approaching the Bible. She refused all forms of discrimination, marginalization,

violence, and dehumanization toward women by using the Bible. Honestly, for long centuries, women's experiences are excluded from biblical interpretation. Thus, the Bible must be reinterpreted by using a critical feminist interpretation. She assured that the efforts to apply a critical re-reading on the Bible in a feminist key and from women's perspectives will uncover the lost traditions and correcting mistranslations and rediscover the new dimensions of biblical symbols and theological meanings. Her main point is highlighting the liberating and transformative aspects of the Bible. Fiorenza opens a space to raise women's voices and experiences.[39]

In my study, Christian women in North Wendewa did not conduct a critical feminist interpretation as proposed by Fiorenza. However, they practiced feminist reading in terms of highlighting women's experiences when they read the story of Moses. Those women were interested in the struggle of women in saving Moses' life. It can be seen also in a process of crossing the texts. They can approach the texts without using academic interpretation. They apply reader-response where they can directly draw the meaning of the reading from their understanding.

From Wadud and Fiorenza's thinking, it is clear that in North Wendewa both Muslim and Christian women's groups' access to interreligious spaces was through the permission of

male-religious leaders. At the beginning of this process, I started communicating with Muslim and Christian leaders who are male leaders. Therefore, during the process, the male leaders always present to accompany each women's group. In the first meeting (within each tradition), each religious leader gave a short introduction and interpretation of the selected text. However, during the process of cross-textual reading, the male religious leaders did not intervene in the interaction of women's participants. Their presence is part of their support to women's groups.

In North Wendewa village, cross-textual reading is a new experience for Muslim and Christian women. To invite the presence of Muslim and Christian women, I first coordinated these activities with both Muslim and Christian leaders. After that, the religious leaders gathered the women to be present in the internal reading space to discuss the selected text. Furthermore, both Muslim and Christian women come to the arena of cross-text reading. In the reading process, both Muslim and Christian women approached the text guided by the interpretations of their respective religious leaders. Then they share a mutual reflection on the selected text that is connected to the values possessed by female characters. Muslim and Christian women were excited to read a similar story related to Moses which is written in the Qur'an and the Bible.

They felt comfortable because the reading is in the form of a story and it is related to women's struggles to save one's life. During the cross-textual reading, they are connected when they discuss the role of women in saving Moses' life.

From a feminist lens, the participation of grassroots Muslim and Christian women in a cross-textual reading space is remarkable. Those women have a willingness to sit side by side discussing one selected theme dealing with womanhood values as practiced by women surrounding Moses in both Islam and Christian tradition. Through this space of reading, Muslim and Christian women have a chance to share their ideas, voices, experiences, problems, and hopes, and dreams as well. During several meetings of cross-textual reading, both Muslim and Christian women trust one another by sharing their personal and family problems. Some women's participants had the courage to tell about their pain dealing with domestic violence, their struggle to fulfill their family's daily needs by selling fish and salts day by day. Due to the economic issue, all women's participants are committed to supporting one another through sharing and exchanging daily needs in their neighborhood. Those women have similar dreams to have a peaceful relationship in the present and future time. Most of them hoped their children can maintain the kinship ties

among Muslim and Christian and the local values that become the basis of interreligious engagement in this area.

From these feminist insights, it can be said that Muslim women and Christian women in North Wendewa have created another safe space where they can embrace each other's voices. In this research, the ordinary women from two religious groups are having a conversation that goes beyond their particular space. They are practicing dialogue through cross-textual reading to amplify their daily encounter. Since both Muslim and Christian women have grown in a socio-religious hybridity context, then it is easy for them to have a mutual dialogue by crossing their sacred texts. Through a cross-textual reading, women create a safe space to resonate with their commonalities and to celebrate their differences while promoting a transformative reading for mutual enlightenment. Indeed, they are feminists in their context since they move beyond their particular space to dialogue with their fellow Christians dealing with women's struggles to save a life.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I argue that cross-textual reading is applicable as a space of mutual learning for Muslim women and Christian women within their shared socio-religio-cultural hybridity. This model of reading opens another space of engagement besides their daily

encounter in a neighborhood. Through this model of reading, Muslim and Christian women have mutual learning related to the story of women's struggle in the story of Moses in the Qur'an and the Bible.

The activities of crossing the border through a cross-textual reading are a new experience for grassroots Muslim and Christian women in North Wendewa village. Muslim and Christian participants experienced a new adventure of crossing religious borders by reading each others' traditions. Grassroots women could enter the dialogue space by bringing their experiences dealing with their daily struggle as breadwinners for their family, their experience of being women in a patriarchal context. Again, the activities of cross-textual reading were fascinating because the reading materials were about women's struggle that is close to women's daily struggle in the midst of economic problems.

The story of women around Moses has a powerful message that encourages Muslim and Christian women in North Wendewa to also relate with their daily experiences. Most of the women participants were working hard to meet the family needs. In their daily lives and their neighborhood, they also help each other by providing food and other assistance regardless of religious differences. They also support each other in various domestic and public affairs.

Cross-textual reading in the context of North Wendewa is a women's learning space for mutual empowerment. The effort to invite women in the cross-textual reading circle of sacred texts aims to bring women's perspectives in the interreligious reading. The involvement of grassroots Muslim and Christian women in the cross-textual reading proves that women have their specific ways to approach each other sacred texts. They practiced cross-textual reading in a circle of friendship and hospitality. It can be seen during the process, that they can cross their sacred texts full of respect for each other. Cross-textual reading can be one safe space for Muslim and Christian women at the grassroots level as long the selected text is closely related to women's life. The cross-textual reading has enhanced grassroots Muslim and Christian women's interreligious activism dealing with interreligious mutual learning.

This study is interesting to do at the grassroots interreligious women's communities, but with several

conditions: (1) It can be done in a context where interreligious people have a strong engagement. As happened in North Wendewa, where Muslim and Christian women are tied in kinship relationships; (2) Considering the background of the participants which includes the level of education, the level of participation in their religious community. Muslim and Christian women in North Wendewa are members of their women's religious organization (2) considering the reading materials that connect with grassroots women's social context. Cross-textual reading worked well among the grassroots interreligious women's community because the reading materials were relevant to the lives and struggles of Muslim and Christian women in North Wendewa village. (3) Cross-textual reading is effective because it takes place in a community with a hybrid identity, socio-religious-cultural hybridity. Muslim and Christian women in North Wendewa are actively practicing the Sumbanese cultural values which reflect the Marapu values. []

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