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Religious Freedom in Tanzania: Balancing Diversity and Social Cohesion in a Multicultural Society

**Wolność religijna w Tanzanii: równowaga między różnorodnością a spójnością społeczną
w społeczeństwie wielokulturowym**

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between religious freedom and social cohesion in Tanzania as a religiously pluralistic society. Using historical, legal, and socio-political analysis, the study explores the evolution of religious diversity from pre-colonial traditions through colonial influences to the post-independence secular model shaped by Ujamaa philosophy. The research analyses constitutional provisions, statutory law, and selected case law concerning religious freedom, customary law, and interfaith relations. It argues that religious tensions in Tanzania are primarily political-structural rather than purely theological. The article concludes that Tanzania's model of regulated pluralism effectively promotes peaceful coexistence while requiring continued interfaith dialogue and minority-rights protection.

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje relacje między wolnością religijną a spójnością społeczną w pluralistycznej religijnie Tanzanii. Przedstawia rozwój różnorodności wyznaniowej – od tradycji przedkolonialnych, przez okres kolonialny, po świecki model postpodległościowy ukształtowany filozofią Ujamaa. Omawia konstytucyjne i ustawowe gwarancje wolności religijnej, ze szczególnym naciskiem na

model regulowanego pluralizmu – praktyki religijne i zwyczajowe są dopuszczalne w granicach nadrzędności konstytucji, równości i godności człowieka. Praca argumentuje, że konflikty religijne rzadko mają charakter czysto teologiczny, częściej polityczno-strukturalny (formowanie tożsamości, rywalizacja o władzę, debaty o modelach rządzenia). Proponuje wielowarstwowy model rozumienia napięć religijnych. Tanzania skutecznie łączy różnorodność z pokojem społecznym. Wnioskuje, że Tanzania jest dobrym przykładem współistnienia międzywyznaniowego, lecz harmonia wymaga włączającego zarządzania, dialogu międzyreligijnego i ochrony praw mniejszości.

Keywords: religious freedom, Tanzania, social cohesion, interfaith relations, religious diversity

Słowa kluczowe: wolność religijna, Tanzania, spójność społeczna, relacje międzywyznaniowe, różnorodność religijna

The Concept of Religious Freedom and Diversity in Tanzania

Introduction

Religion, both as an individual and a social force, plays a central role in shaping individuals' identities, value systems, and political institutions. Case law in various jurisdictions consistently emphasizes this dual nature of religion. The Supreme Court of Canada in *Syndicat Northcrest v. Amselem* ([2004] 2 S.C.R. 551) defined religion as a deeply personal system of beliefs closely linked to an individual's spiritual fulfillment. Similarly, the Supreme Court of India in *Commissioner, Hindu Religious Endowments, Madras v. Sri Lakshmindra Thirtha Swamiar of Sri Shirur Mutt* (1954) and the House of Lords in the United Kingdom in *Regina v. Secretary of State for Education and Employment, ex parte Williamson* [2005] UKHL 15 affirmed the autonomy of the sphere of faith while recognizing the state's right to protect public order.

A similar approach to balancing religious freedom with the requirements of equality and public safety is evident in Polish constitutional law. Article 53 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland guarantees freedom of conscience and religion, allowing restrictions only by statute for the protection of public safety, public order, health, morality, or the freedoms and rights of others – a solution consistent with the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, including the judgment in *Grzelak v. Poland* (2010) (Jabłońska, 2022).

International and domestic case law reveals a fundamental tension: how should the state protect individual religious freedom without violating equality, public order, and social cohesion?

This tension takes on particular significance in Tanzania – a society characterized by deep religious pluralism, shaped by Islamic and Christian traditions as well as still-vibrant indigenous belief systems.

Julius Kambarage Nyerere, widely regarded as the father of Tanzanian independence, formulated the fundamental principle of secular state governance in the following words: “Nchi yetu haina dini. Watu wetu wana dini...” (“Our country has no religion. Our people have religion”). This concise statement expresses the model of state religious neutrality. However, neutrality itself requires more detailed analysis and critical examination of its practical application.

Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, Tanzania is regarded as an example of peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, challenges persist on Zanzibar and the coast related to social pressure and sporadic incidents against religious minorities (Jabłońska, 2026).

Tanzania is widely perceived as one of the strongest examples of peaceful religious coexistence in East Africa. However, periodically emerging tensions – especially on Zanzibar and in major urban centers – demonstrate that this harmony is not a permanent, given state. Religious freedom should therefore be analyzed not merely as a constitutional declaration, but as a living, dynamic, and sometimes contested reality shaped by law, politics, and social change.

This article examines how Tanzania reconciles constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom with the imperative of social cohesion. The central focus is on the following research questions:

- What historical, legal, and social mechanisms enable the peaceful coexistence of different religious traditions?
- Should the Tanzanian model of secularism be classified as procedural neutrality or rather substantive neutrality?
- In the event of a conflict between religious practices and constitutional guarantees of gender equality – which value should take precedence?
- What challenges arise from regional tensions (especially on Zanzibar) and how do they affect the stability of this model?

By analyzing the constitutional-legal framework, social dynamics, and the effects of urbanization and globalization processes, the article identifies potential strategies for strengthening religious

harmony – in particular interfaith education and more effective protection of the rights of religious minorities.

The Significance of Religious Freedom in the Context of Tanzania as a Multicultural Nation

Tanzania's multicultural identity is inextricably linked to its religious diversity. Islam, Christianity, and indigenous belief systems form overlapping layers of identity that shape both individuals' private lives and the functioning of public institutions. In this context, religious freedom goes beyond the sphere of personal conscience – it becomes a structural principle essential for ensuring political stability and national unity.

Religious freedom plays a key role in the social and political fabric of Tanzania – a country with exceptional cultural and religious diversity. As a multicultural society, Tanzania encompasses a broad spectrum of communities: Muslim, Christian, and numerous groups practicing indigenous traditional beliefs. This plurality affects not only individual identities but also community dynamics and the shaping of national identity. Religious freedom appears here not merely as an individual right, but as the foundation of social cohesion and peacebuilding. As the Court of Appeal emphasized in the case of *Hamisi Rajabu Dibagula v. The Republic* (Criminal Appeal No. 53 of 2001, judgment of 2003), mutual respect and tolerance constitute the fundamental principles of good citizenship in the United Republic of Tanzania.

The constitutional guarantee of religious freedom reflects the state's commitment to respecting individual rights while simultaneously strengthening the sense of national unity. The position of the Tanzanian government, rooted in the principles formulated by the first president – Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere – emphasizes the state's neutrality towards religion. Such neutrality enables the free practice of faith and protects religious communities from discrimination or marginalization. Nyerere's vision of a secular state, in which citizens can profess their faith without state interference, has significantly contributed to maintaining intergroup harmony. This approach is confirmed by the Court of Appeal's ruling in *Zakaria Kamwela and 126 Others v. Minister of Education and Vocational Training and the Attorney General* (Civil Appeal No. 3 of 2012, judgment of 2013), in which the court overturned administrative decisions that violated the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witness students (refusal to sing the national anthem), emphasizing the constitutional protection of sincerely held religious beliefs even when they conflict with state obligations.

Religious freedom is not only a condition for social harmony but also a key element in shaping a coherent national identity that respects the cultural and religious diversity of all citizens. By ensuring the freedom to practice religion without interference, Tanzania creates space for the peaceful coexistence of different communities, which directly strengthens the stability of the state. This inclusiveness deepens the sense of national belonging regardless of religious affiliation.

Furthermore, religious freedom promotes social equality and civic responsibility – elements essential for the country’s economic development. By guaranteeing individuals the right to profess their faith without fear of discrimination, the state builds equality among citizens irrespective of religious affiliation. This sense of equality supports social integration and fosters a shared sense of responsibility, which is necessary for the functioning of a vibrant democracy. For example, religious freedom enables full participation in economic life without the risk of exclusion. Religious communities – Christian, Muslim, and traditional – actively contribute to development through charitable activities, entrepreneurship, and investment. Christian and Islamic organizations, in particular, have established numerous schools, hospitals, and other social institutions serving the entire society. These facilities create jobs, improve quality of life, and – especially in the education sector – provide high-quality teaching to students from diverse backgrounds, thereby accelerating the country’s progress.

In the broader context of Tanzania’s development, religious freedom also plays an important role in promoting social justice. It protects against marginalization and discrimination based on religion, building a more inclusive society. Such inclusiveness is a condition for progress because it mobilizes the active participation of all citizens – regardless of their religious background – in social, political, and economic spheres.

In conclusion, religious freedom in Tanzania is not limited to the role of a constitutional right – it constitutes an integral element of the nation’s multicultural identity. It supports the peaceful coexistence of religious groups, strengthens social cohesion, and contributes to the sustainable development of the state. The effective protection and active promotion of this freedom remain essential for maintaining Tanzania’s reputation as a model of religious tolerance and pluralism in East Africa.

The Historical Context of Religious Diversity in Tanzania

Introduction

The history of religious diversity in Tanzania is deeply intertwined with the country's ethnic, cultural, and socio-political development. From the pre-colonial period to contemporary times, the evolution of religious practices and relations between different religious communities has played a key role in shaping the country's social fabric. The complexity of Tanzania's religious landscape reflects broader historical dynamics of cultural exchange, colonization and resistance, as well as the ongoing negotiation of identity and religious expression in a multicultural society.

Pre-colonial Traditional Beliefs and Their Role in Tribal Communities

Before the arrival of external religious influences, the peoples of present-day Tanzania practiced a wide range of indigenous belief systems deeply rooted in their cultures and natural environments. These systems were not limited to the spiritual sphere – they formed an integral part of the social, cultural, and political life of numerous tribal communities, each with its own distinct religious practices, rituals, and cosmologies (Tanzania Specialist, 2024). Indigenous religions were predominantly animistic, emphasizing the interconnectedness between people, nature, and ancestors in the organization of various ethnic groups in the region (Joel, 2023).

For example, the religion of the Chagga people – a traditional Bantu religion of those living on the slopes of Kilimanjaro – focused on the veneration of natural forces and deities associated with agriculture and the landscape (Yonge, 1979, 43–48; Shoup, 2011, 67). Similarly, the Hadzabe people, one of Tanzania's most traditional ethnic groups, illustrate pre-colonial spiritual practices: they do not follow a formal religion and do not believe in an afterlife; their practices center around celestial bodies such as the Sun (Ishoko) and the Moon (Haine), especially during hunting activities (Marlowe, 2010, pp. 17–18, 285–286). The Maasai, on the other hand, possess a rich religious tradition centered on nature – they believe in Enkai (or Engai), an androgynous Supreme Creator embodying both male and female principles (Asante & Mazama, 2009, p. 427).

Pre-colonial Tanzania was thus characterized by a rich mosaic of religious practices that constituted an integral part not only of individuals' spiritual lives but also of governance and social organization within individual tribal communities. Although colonial influences introduced foreign religions, indigenous belief systems continue to shape the country's religious landscape, leaving a lasting imprint on post-colonial religious diversity. The examples of these tribal groups illustrate the key role of religious and spiritual leadership in maintaining social order and forms

of governance, highlighting the complex relationship between religion and politics in pre-colonial Tanzanian society (Heilman & Kaiser, 2002, p. 698).

The Impact of Colonialism: The Introduction of Christianity by Missionaries and the Development of Islam Along the Coast

Tanzania's religious landscape is characterized by profound diversity resulting from centuries of interactions and exchanges between different cultures, empires, and religious traditions. The arrival of Arab traders in the 11th century introduced Islam along the East African coast, especially in areas such as Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam, which became key centers of Islamic influence. As early as around 1000 CE, coastal trading centers – Kilwa, Mafia, and Zanzibar – established enduring trade links with the Arab world (Davidson, 1980, p. 181). When the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century, they found an already well-developed and flourishing long-distance trade network operated mainly by African caravans connecting the coast with the interior and enabling two-way exchange of goods. These trade exchanges significantly contributed to various developmental processes, including the emergence of long-term settlements such as Engaruka in the Great Rift Valley (Davidson, 1980, pp. 181–182). This early interaction, driven by trade networks, facilitated the introduction of both religious and cultural aspects of Islam, which gradually integrated with local traditions and cultures of the region (Halloran, 2013).

Parallel to the development of Islam, European colonialism – first German at the end of the 19th century, then British after World War I – significantly altered the region's religious dynamics (Halloran, 2013). Christian missionaries played a crucial role in transforming the religious landscape. Colonial authorities viewed the spread of Christianity as part of a civilizing mission, linking religious proselytism with broader colonial objectives: social control, economic exploitation, and cultural assimilation. Missionaries, often working in cooperation with colonial administration, established churches, schools, and hospitals that became central to their religious and social activities. These institutions, while promoting education and healthcare, also served as tools for converting the local population to Christianity, particularly in the central and southern regions of the country (Kafumu, 2017, pp. 233–240).

Missionary activities led to mass conversions among Tanzania's indigenous inhabitants, especially in the interior areas where Christianity took root. The establishment of schools and churches not only facilitated religious conversion but also introduced Western education, further

influencing Tanzania's social structures. These actions, however, were often perceived as an extension of colonial control, as they played a significant role in creating social divisions between coastal Muslim communities and inland Christian populations (Fischer, 2011, pp. 96–121).

At the same time, the spread of Islam along the Swahili coast continued uninterrupted. The introduction of Christianity did not overshadow the presence of Islam but rather interacted with it, often leading to complex relations of coexistence and tension. Zanzibar, for example, emerged as a key center of Islamic culture, while Dar es Salaam became a hub of Islamic learning and religious practice. The continued influence of Arab traders, combined with the flourishing trade networks of the Swahili coast, ensured the further expansion of Islamic culture, strengthening Islam's position as an essential element of the region's identity. Over time, coastal Muslim communities began to perceive Islam not only as a religious practice but also as a symbol of historical and cultural ties to the wider Islamic world, further deepening the divide between coastal and inland populations (Anthony, 2002).

The impact of colonialism on Tanzania's religious landscape was therefore multidimensional and profoundly shaped the nation's religious identity in a deep and lasting way. The introduction of Christianity through missionary activity and the continued expansion of Islam along the coast led to the emergence of a society with significant religious diversity, featuring distinct Christian and Muslim communities. The legacy of colonial religious divisions continues to influence Tanzania's social fabric, creating both opportunities for interfaith dialogue and sources of tension that remain central to the ongoing challenge of balancing religious diversity with social cohesion in a multicultural society.

Ujamaa Policy after Independence: Efforts to Build National Unity Beyond Religious Divisions

After gaining independence from Great Britain in 1961, President Julius Nyerere sought to create a unified nation that would transcend the ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions inherited from the colonial era (Delehanty, 2020, pp. 289–314). At the heart of this vision was the Ujamaa policy, based on socialist principles of communal life, self-sufficiency, and national solidarity. A key element of this policy was the promotion of a secular state, in which religion was removed from the public sphere and national unity was placed above religious differences (Huizer, 1973, p. 189). Nyerere's Ujamaa philosophy emphasised unity, aiming to overcome regional, ethnic,

and religious divisions in order to forge a cohesive and cooperative national identity (TANU, 1967, pp. 1–29).

One of the fundamental elements of Ujamaa was the promotion of a secular state. Nyerere believed that a government based on religious principles would undermine national cohesion (TANU, 1967). Therefore, his policy emphasised religious freedom while maintaining neutrality in religious matters. Secularism in post-independence Tanzania allowed religious communities to freely practise their faith, but required them to place national unity above religious identities. This approach was an integral part of Nyerere's vision of a united Tanzanian identity focused on national solidarity rather than religious divisions (Pratt, 1999, pp. 137–152).

The Ujamaa philosophy extended beyond the economic and political spheres — it also had profound cultural implications (Jennings, 2017). In education, for example, the government promoted Swahili as a unifying national language, aiming to reduce linguistic barriers that could exacerbate ethnic or religious tensions. Schools were designed to foster a common Tanzanian identity regardless of pupils' religious or ethnic backgrounds (Lal, 2010, p. 7). Furthermore, Nyerere's policy emphasised collective responsibility and social integration, which was evident in the creation of Ujamaa villages. These villages were intended to bring together people from diverse backgrounds, encouraging communal farming and development. They embodied the idea of coexistence and collective work, in which people placed the common good above individual or group identities, including religious ones (Boesl, 2023, pp. 1–10).

Despite Nyerere's efforts to promote religious tolerance and respect, religious diversity remained a significant aspect of Tanzanian national identity (TANU, 1967). The legacy of colonial religious divisions continued to exist, especially in coastal regions where Muslims and Christians had historically lived in close proximity. However, Nyerere's Ujamaa policy provided space for the expression of religious identities, provided they did not threaten national unity. Nyerere's emphasis on unity over religious affiliation helped minimise the potential for religious conflicts, and his leadership played a key role in preventing the escalation of such tensions (Pratt, 1999, pp. 137–152).

Nyerere's Ujamaa policy thus aimed to build national unity by promoting secularism and shaping a collective Tanzanian identity. Although religious freedom was respected, the priority of the policy was social cohesion, with an emphasis on a shared national goal above religious or

ethnic divisions. This balance between religious pluralism and national unity remains a defining feature of Tanzania's ongoing efforts to manage the complexities of a multicultural society.

Legal Framework of Religious Freedom

Introduction

The legal framework governing religious freedom in Tanzania plays a crucial role in balancing the country's religious diversity with social cohesion. This section discusses the constitutional and statutory provisions protecting the right to religious freedom and analyses their practical implications for managing religious pluralism. Religious freedom is defined as the right to practise, express, and profess one's own religious beliefs without interference from the state or other entities.

Basic Legal Provisions

The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania of 1977 (as amended from time to time) is the supreme law of the country and guarantees the rights and duties of citizens. As the Court emphasised in *Director of Public Prosecutions v. Daudi Pete* [1993] T.L.R. p. 22, constitutional provisions are of a fundamental nature. Article 19(1) of the Constitution guarantees everyone the right to freedom of conscience, belief, and choice in religious matters, including the right to change religion or belief – forming the basic guarantee of religious freedom.

Furthermore, the Basic Rights and Duties Enforcement Act (BRADEA), Chapter 3 Revised Edition of 2023, establishes a mechanism for the enforcement of constitutional basic rights and duties and regulates the related procedural issues.

Additionally, the Penal Code, Chapter 16 Revised Edition of 2023, in particular Chapter XIV (sections 125–129), protects religious freedom by penalising acts that offend religious feelings or disturb religious practices. These provisions include, among others, profanation of places of worship (s. 125), disturbance of religious assemblies (s. 126), unlawful interference with burial places (s. 127), prevention of burial (s. 128), and uttering words with the intention of wounding religious feelings (s. 129). These regulations strengthen respect for religious practices, the sanctity of places of worship, and the emotional well-being of individuals, thereby contributing to the protection of religious freedom.

Significant case law confirms these guarantees. In *Hamisi Rajabu Dibagula v. The Republic* (Criminal Appeal No. 53 of 2001), the Court of Appeal emphasised the importance of mutual respect and tolerance within the Tanzanian Constitution. The case concerned charges of

statements offending Christian feelings; the court ruled that the lack of evidence of intent to offend religious feelings precluded conviction, highlighting the limits of freedom of expression in the context of religious freedom.

Similarly, in *Zakaria Kamwela and 126 Others v. Minister of Education and Vocational Training and the Attorney General* (Civil Appeal No. 3 of 2012, pp. 44–45), the Court of Appeal held that state officials may not compel individuals to act contrary to their sincere religious beliefs (in this case, Jehovah’s Witnesses refused to sing the national anthem). This ruling confirmed the constitutional protection of religious freedom even when it conflicts with public duties.

These guarantees are consistent with international human rights instruments to which Tanzania is a party, in particular the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1986) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966). These treaties oblige the state to respect religious freedom within its domestic legal obligations.

Despite these safeguards, the concept of “religion” in Tanzanian law remains partially imprecise. Neither the Constitution nor the Interpretation of Laws Act, Cap. 1 R.E. 2023, contains a strict definition of religion. A broader understanding is, however, provided by the Law of Marriage Act, Cap. 29 R.E. 2019, section 2(1), which recognises the diversity of religious systems, including various denominations, sects, and indigenous associations.

Recognition of Religious Diversity in the Legal System

Tanzania’s legal system recognises and accommodates religious diversity through provisions that enable pluralism, particularly in family and inheritance law. An example is the Law of Marriage Act, which permits polygamous marriages in accordance with Islamic and customary law. Section 11 of the Judicature and Application of Laws Act, Cap. 358 R.E. 2019, further highlights the state’s efforts to balance religious freedom with social requirements by recognising Muslim marriages despite their potential conflict with Christian doctrines. The recognition of such practices – even when they conflict with dominant beliefs – reflects Tanzania’s commitment to respecting diverse religious traditions.

Polygamy, accepted in the Muslim community, remains controversial among Christians, who traditionally reject it. Nevertheless, the legal framework provides for the recognition and respect of various religious practices within the Tanzanian legal order.

Religious and Customary Law in Inheritance Matters

Tanzania's legal framework regulates the intersection of religious and customary law in the field of succession and inheritance. Section 18(2) of the Magistrates' Courts Act, Cap. 11 R.E. 2019, empowers the Chief Justice to confer jurisdiction on primary courts in the administration of estates of deceased persons subject to Islamic or customary law. This enables interested parties to choose the legal system, provided it does not conflict with the Constitution or statutory provisions.

In the Muslim community, Islamic inheritance law (Sharia) governs the distribution of a deceased person's estate, specifying shares for children, spouses, and parents (Quran 4:11).

In the context of religious freedom, particularly with regard to children as subjects of this freedom, religious and customary practices must take into account the child's autonomy and parental rights, as emphasised in Polish jurisprudence based on Articles 48 and 53 of the Polish Constitution, where parents have the right to religious upbringing, but with respect for the child's maturity and a prohibition on coercion (Jabłońska, 2023).

Similarly, customary inheritance laws apply in various ethnic groups in Tanzania, depending on patrilineal or matrilineal systems, provided they are established and accepted by members of the community. These systems are recognised under section 11 of the Judicature and Application of Laws Act, Cap. 358 R.E. 2019, on the condition that they do not contradict statutory law.

Customary inheritance practices are often criticised due to gender inequality – women frequently receive a smaller share of the inheritance or are entirely excluded. An example is the case *Bernardo Ephraim v. Holaria Pastory*, High Court of Tanzania at Mwanza (Civil Appeal number 70 of 1989), in which the High Court ruled that depriving a woman of the right to inherit land (in this case under Haya custom) was inconsistent with the Constitution and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979. The Court declared such customs to be “repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience.” Similarly, in *John Mwombeki Byombalirwa v. Regional Commissioner and Regional Police Commander, Bukoba and Another* [1986] T.L.R 73, the court upheld human rights principles, stating, *inter alia*: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is the core of international human rights law, has been incorporated into Article 9(f) of our Constitution. Article 7 of the Declaration provides for equality before the law and prohibits discrimination.

The interaction between religious and customary inheritance systems can lead to legal conflicts, especially when family members follow different traditions. For example, in Islam, a child may be disinherited for converting to another religion (Quran 30:30), which may conflict with the customs of other communities.

Tanzania's legal system enables courts to resolve such disputes, guaranteeing justice and fairness. The courts balance constitutional rights, religious freedom, and customary practices, while supporting ongoing reforms aimed at eliminating gender inequalities in inheritance law.

Harmonization of Religious, Customary, and Statutory Law

Tanzania's legal system is characterized by a complex intersection of statutory, religious, and customary frameworks. Although the legal system generally respects and accommodates religious and cultural traditions, challenges remain in reconciling these practices with broader human rights principles, particularly regarding gender equality and the protection of individual rights. The Constitution remains the supreme law of the land – as stipulated in Article 64(5), which declares that any law contrary to the provisions of the Constitution is void, and the Constitution takes precedence.

The ongoing dialogue between religious, customary, and statutory law plays a key role in shaping a legal framework that accommodates Tanzania's diverse society while upholding universal human rights standards.

Tanzanian legal pluralism thus reflects a constitutional compromise between respect for religious identity and a commitment to universal rights. Although statutory law permits Islamic and customary norms in areas such as marriage and inheritance, Article 64(5) of the Constitution establishes its supremacy. This creates a hierarchical system in which religious and customary law is valid only insofar as it does not contradict constitutional principles – particularly equality and human dignity. The judgment in the case of *Bernardo Ephraim v. Holaria Pastory* demonstrates that where customary or religious norms violate gender equality, constitutional guarantees take precedence. The Tanzanian model is therefore not unlimited pluralism, but regulated pluralism – a system that allows legal diversity while preserving the Constitution and the judiciary's ultimate interpretive authority.

Social Dynamics and Challenges

Introduction

Tanzania is a country of profound religious diversity, where Christians, Muslims, and adherents of indigenous traditional beliefs generally coexist peacefully. Nevertheless, underlying tensions, particularly in Zanzibar, reveal challenges arising from the intersection of religion, politics, and regional identity. These dynamics directly affect national unity and social cohesion.

This section critically examines both the strengths and weaknesses of the Tanzanian model of religious coexistence. It goes beyond descriptive characterization to investigate the structural and political factors shaping interfaith relations. While everyday pluralism remains a distinctive feature of Tanzanian society, periodic tensions demonstrate how religious identity can be instrumentalized in broader political struggles. The analysis also includes the role of religious leaders in mediating conflicts and peacebuilding, combining empirical observations with theoretical frameworks to explain how religious actors influence social cohesion in a multi-religious state.

Coexistence of Different Religious Communities

Tanzania's religious landscape is dominated by Christianity and Islam, alongside enduring traditions of indigenous beliefs (Pew Research Center, 2010). In urban centers, especially Dar es Salaam, this diversity often manifests in visible and symbolic forms of peaceful coexistence. The joint celebration of Christian and Muslim holidays, mutual visits during Eid and Christmas, and the participation of representatives from different faiths in state ceremonies all strengthen a shared civic identity. The state's recognition of both Christian and Islamic holidays as public holidays further institutionalizes inclusivity within the framework of a secular constitution.

In many respects, this model corresponds to what researchers describe as everyday pluralism – a living tolerance rooted in daily social interactions, neighborly life, and shared economic spaces. Religious differences rarely prevent cooperation in markets, schools, or the civil service. The state's commitment to religious freedom has helped foster a political culture that avoids the formal privileging of one faith over another.

The key question, however, is whether this coexistence is deeply integrated or rather ceremonial and superficial.

In this context, the state consistently strives for neutrality and national unity. The recognition of religious holidays as public days off under the Public Holidays Act, Chapter 35 Revised Edition of 2023, underscores its commitment to religious inclusivity. In urban environments, interfaith cooperation is often perceived as an integral part of Tanzanian identity.

Joint religious observances, community events, and overlapping spaces of worship contribute to a culture of tolerance. Inviting religious leaders and traditional chiefs to official government events is one of the most important mechanisms for harmonizing society, building a sense of unity and belonging, and negotiating conflicts.

However, the religious harmony observed in urban centers is not always reflected in more politically or religiously homogeneous regions, such as Zanzibar (Ramadhani, 2017, p. 85).

Challenges

Despite long periods of peaceful coexistence, religious tensions persist in Tanzania, most visibly on Zanzibar, where religion, politics, and regional identity are closely intertwined.

Constitutional and Political Position of Zanzibar

Zanzibar occupies a unique constitutional position within the United Republic of Tanzania. It has its own House of Representatives, president, and semi-autonomous government structure. Additionally, kadhi courts operate there, adjudicating matters of Islamic personal law. Although defence, foreign affairs, and union matters remain under the central government's authority, Zanzibar exercises significant autonomy in many internal affairs.

This semi-autonomous arrangement strengthens a distinct political identity that strongly intersects with religion, given the island's predominantly Muslim population. As a result, religious identity often overlaps with constitutional debates concerning autonomy, representation, and the division of power within the union.

Religion as a Structurally Political Force

Religious tensions in Tanzania are rarely purely theological – they are primarily structurally political.

On Zanzibar, political rivalry often takes on a religious dimension, leading to social and political inequalities (Larsen, 2024, p. 143; Lupa, 2017, p. 102). Politicians may mobilise religious identity to consolidate support, especially during controversial elections (Ramadhani, 2017, p. 188). Consequently, what appears to be a sectarian conflict often reflects deeper struggles for power and legitimacy.

Incidents such as church arsons, acid attacks, and bomb attacks in Zanzibar and Arusha illustrate this intertwining of religion and politics. As LeSage (2014) argues, these acts rarely stem solely from doctrinal differences; more often, they reflect political agendas that instrumentalise religious identity.

For example, in 2013 there was a petrol bomb attack on a church in Dar es Salaam (reported by Mwananchi), and in 2015 churches were set on fire in the Kagera region (BBC Swahili). Although the perpetrators were never definitively identified, these events raised concerns about growing intolerance and religious polarisation, testing the state's ability to ensure security.

Tensions escalated further in 2021 following the release of Sheikh Farid Hadi Ahmed and Msellem Ali Msellem – leaders of Zanzibar's Islamic group Uamsho (Association for Islamic Mobilisation and Propagation, JUMIKI) – who had spent around eight years in detention on terrorism charges (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Many members of Zanzibar's Muslim community viewed their arrest and detention as motivated by both political and religious factors (Mwananchi, 2021). The leaders' release (after the Attorney General dropped the charges in June 2021) re-ignited debate on how the state handles religiously motivated political dissent and further highlighted the fragility of the relationship between religion, justice, and governance in Tanzania.

These challenges point to the urgent need for a multifaceted approach to resolving religious conflicts. Strengthening interfaith dialogue, promoting inclusive governance, and preventing the politicisation of religion are essential to preserving Tanzania's religious harmony. Civil society organisations, religious leaders, and state institutions must cooperate to protect religious freedoms, counter extremism, and shape a cohesive national identity based on mutual respect and pluralism.

The Role of Religious Leaders in Mediation and Promoting Interfaith Dialogue

In the face of the numerous challenges facing Tanzanian society, religious leaders occupy key positions within their communities. They serve not only as spiritual guides but also as mediators and peacebuilders – both within their own congregations and in the broader interfaith context (Bakari & Suleiman, 2017, pp. 1–9). Their involvement in conflict resolution, the development of inter-religious dialogue, and the promotion of community harmony takes on particular significance in societies where religious tensions can evolve into wider social disputes (Mshani & Ndaluka, 2024, pp. 1–16). Drawing on observations from various community settings, this section analyses how religious leaders conduct mediation processes and encourage interfaith dialogue to enhance mutual understanding, reconciliation, and lasting peace.

Religious organisations such as the Christian Council of Tanzania and the Tanzania Muslim Council (BAKWATA) have played a significant role in promoting dialogue and fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect. Within their own faith communities, religious leaders often take responsibility for mediating internal conflicts (Mpehongwa, & Rashidi, 2026). Using their moral authority and the trust of the community, they encourage the faithful to look beyond superficial misunderstandings and consider the deeper, underlying causes of disputes (Mshani & Ndaluka, 2024, p. 3). They are able to guide people from immediate grievances to self-reflection – a process deeply rooted in Christian teaching on reconciliation.

Through this reflective approach, religious leaders help individuals examine their own role in the conflict, building empathy and mutual understanding. This approach aligns with René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, which posits that conflicts often arise from the imitation of others' desires or from social pressure. In this framework, religious leaders become key guides toward repentance and forgiveness, transforming conflict resolution into a process focused on empathy rather than revenge.

Effective mediation is not limited to resolving immediate disputes – it also involves encouraging long-term attitude change and moral healing. According to Mshani and Ndaluka (2024), respondents in their study indicated that successful conflict resolution often leads to both emotional and spiritual renewal. This outcome reflects Christian and Islamic principles of reparation and reconciliation, which encourage seeking forgiveness and repairing harm done (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13; Mt 6:14–15; Mk 11:25; Jas 5:16; Lk 6:37; Quran 2:54; 7:23; 71:28). Structured mediation therefore promotes deep introspection and helps build lasting respect and cohesion within communities.

Communication is a key element of this process. Religious leaders must create spaces where open and honest dialogue is possible. As one respondent emphasised, skilled management of communication styles is essential to prevent further escalation. By modelling active listening, transparency, and fairness, leaders teach their followers constructive communication techniques that prioritise dialogue over silence or avoidance (Mshani & Ndaluka, 2024). These methods not only help defuse current tensions but also create lasting frameworks for managing future conflicts.

Beyond intra-faith mediation, religious leaders also play a significant role in developing interfaith dialogue – especially where theological differences, competition for followers, or resource

conflicts can intensify tensions (Mazuri & Katundu, 2016, pp. 15–21). One respondent noted that competition for members and financial support between Christian denominations sometimes fuels conflict (Mrutu, 2023, pp. 8–20). In response, religious leaders have the opportunity to redirect attention from rivalry toward shared values such as peace, compassion, and community service (Mrutu, 2023). In this way, interfaith cooperation becomes possible even while maintaining doctrinal differences. Initiatives such as joint community service projects allow different religious groups to work together toward common goals, helping to break down barriers and challenge stereotypes.

Education constitutes another powerful tool for promoting mutual understanding. Religious leaders often use platforms such as churches, mosques, schools, and affiliated institutions to provide both theological and practical education (Masanja, 2018, p.1–11). Such educational opportunities contribute to self-sufficiency, social stability, and the reduction of conflicts stemming from ignorance or misinformation. One respondent in the Mshani and Ndaluka (2024) study emphasised the importance of changing religious education – moving away from fear-based teaching toward a more inclusive and nuanced theological discourse. This helps limit the spread of divisive beliefs and fosters greater tolerance. It also underscores the need for stronger state mechanisms to protect religious minorities.

Furthermore, ensuring effective leadership succession is crucial for maintaining harmony within religious communities. Training future leaders in conflict resolution, ethical governance, and pastoral care is essential to prevent internal disputes and leadership crises (Afolaranmi, 2022, pp. 1–12). A well-prepared leadership cadre can sustain community values and make a significant contribution to long-term peace and stability (Mshani & Ndaluka, 2024, pp. 5–16).

Humility also emerges as a distinguishing feature of effective religious leadership. Groups that emphasise superiority or exclusivity risk deepening divisions and blocking dialogue. By modelling humility and encouraging mutual respect, religious leaders create space for open interfaith communication and shared growth (Mshani & Ndaluka, 2024, p. 6).

In conclusion, religious leaders play an extremely important and multidimensional role in mediating conflicts and promoting interfaith dialogue. Through empathetic communication, inclusive education, and value-based leadership, they help resolve disputes and build peace both within and between communities. Their ability to guide individuals through processes of

introspection, forgiveness, and reconciliation is essential for shaping cohesive and harmonious societies – both in Tanzania and beyond its borders.

Conflict Management in a Country with High Religious Diversity: Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding and Resolving Disputes

Understanding religious dynamics in Tanzania requires an integrated theoretical approach rather than the application of isolated conceptual perspectives.

Social Identity Theory explains how individuals derive a sense of meaning and self-worth from religious belonging. In contexts of political competition, religious identity can sharpen divisions between “us” and “them,” strengthening in-group solidarity while increasing distrust toward the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, pp. 33–47). Building on this, René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire shows how rivalry intensifies. When groups imitate each other’s pursuit of recognition, power, or resources, competition escalates and can lead to the scapegoat mechanism, in which one community is blamed for broader structural frustrations (Girard, 1987, p. 122).

At the structural level, Max Weber’s conflict theory (as interpreted by British sociologists, e.g., Turner, 1975, pp. 618–627) reveals how power hierarchies shape these dynamics. Religious tensions often reflect struggles over political representation, resource allocation, and institutional control, rather than purely doctrinal differences. In Zanzibar’s semi-autonomous arrangement, questions of governance further intensify these tensions.

Finally, Johan Galtung’s theory of conflict transformation (1969) points the way forward. Instead of merely suppressing direct violence, sustainable peace requires addressing root causes — political exclusion, economic and social inequalities, and intergroup distrust. Religious institutions, thanks to their moral authority and broad social reach, are particularly well positioned to facilitate dialogue, challenge unjust structures, and promote reconciliation.

Relationship of the Theories to the Study

Taken together, these theories create a multi-layered analytical framework for the present study. Social Identity Theory explains the mechanisms of religious group formation and the definition of belonging boundaries. Girard’s theory of mimetic desire clarifies how imitation and rivalry can escalate tensions. Weber’s conflict theory situates these dynamics within broader struggles for power and resources. Galtung’s theory of conflict transformation, in turn, provides a normative framework for addressing root causes and achieving lasting peace. Combined, they enable a

comprehensive understanding of how religious identity in Tanzania is shaped, politicized, contested, and — potentially — transformed toward greater inclusiveness and harmony.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Tanzania has made significant progress in balancing religious freedom with national unity by maintaining state neutrality, constitutional guarantees, and the active promotion of interfaith dialogue. Key findings indicate that the secular policy inspired by Julius Nyerere, enshrined in the Constitution and supported by mediation from religious leaders, has enabled the peaceful coexistence of Christians, Muslims, and followers of indigenous traditional beliefs.

Nevertheless, this balance continues to face challenges — primarily in the form of growing religious tensions in Zanzibar, the politicization of religion, and the changing nature of religious identity in urban environments under the influence of urbanization and globalization. These dynamics underscore the need for inclusive and flexible strategies that protect both religious freedom and national cohesion. To further strengthen this balance, the following actions are recommended:

1. Introduce interfaith education programs in public schools to foster mutual understanding and respect among students from different religious communities;
2. Establish a nationwide interfaith dialogue platform to facilitate ongoing engagement and cooperation between religious groups and government representatives;
3. Provide regular training for religious leaders in conflict mediation and peacebuilding to strengthen their role as active agents of social cohesion;
4. Strengthen legal protection for religious minorities, including effective mechanisms to counter discrimination and religiously motivated violence.

As a model of religious pluralism, Tanzania demonstrates that inclusiveness, state neutrality, and active interfaith dialogue are essential for social harmony. This model serves as an inspiration for other nations grappling with religious diversity amid rapid social and political change.

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