



Longitudinal Perspectives on Religious Pluralism and Inter-Faith Relations in Tanzania, 2021–2026

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Abstract

This longitudinal study investigates how dynamic religious pluralism shapes inter-faith relations in contemporary Tanzania, addressing a critical gap in East African scholarship. Moving beyond celebratory narratives of co-existence, it analyses the everyday lived realities within this landscape. Employing a rigorous mixed-methods design, the research integrates data from iterative surveys (n=1,200), semi-structured interviews (n=80), and participant observation conducted between 2021 and 2024 across four strategically selected regions. This approach engages Muslim and Christian communities, alongside leaders of indigenous spiritual groups. The findings, substantiated by this multi-year data, reveal a complex picture. While a dominant national narrative of ‘Umoja’ (unity) persists, the evidence indicates that socio-economic pressures and political discourse increasingly influence local inter-faith dynamics, at times accentuating latent communal boundaries. Concurrently, the study documents resilient, grassroots mechanisms for mediation and co-operation, often facilitated by women’s groups and youth inter-faith councils, which actively sustain social cohesion. The study concludes that Tanzania’s religious pluralism is not static but is continually negotiated at the local level. It provides an evidence-based, African-centred analysis crucial for policymakers and civil society organisations aiming to support endogenous peacebuilding within the nation’s unique socio-religious fabric.

Keywords: *Longitudinal Study, Religious Pluralism, Inter-Faith Relations, East Africa, Social Cohesion*

INTRODUCTION

Tanzania represents a critical case for examining religious pluralism and inter-faith relations within contemporary East Africa ([Barron, 2025](#)). Characterised by a longstanding history of co-existence between Christian and Muslim communities, its social fabric is nonetheless tested by evolving political

discourses, economic pressures, and transnational religious influences ([Mutuma, 2023](#); [Zondi, 2023](#)). While scholarly attention has been paid to constitutional frameworks and high-level inter-faith dialogues, a significant gap remains in understanding the quotidian, contextual mechanisms through which pluralism is negotiated, sustained, or challenged at the local level ([Olaniyan, 2023](#); [Shihundu, 2023](#)). Existing studies within the Tanzanian context often focus on singular aspects, such as legal structures or electoral politics, without fully integrating the complex interplay of grassroots agency, socio-economic factors, and vernacular theological interpretations that shape lived experience ([Coates, 2023](#); [Maphaka, 2023](#)).

This article addresses this gap by investigating the dynamic practices of inter-religious engagement across four Tanzanian regions ([Biesen, 2025](#)). It posits that the resilience or fragility of religious pluralism is not merely a function of policy but is actively constituted through everyday interactions, shared community challenges, and localised conflict resolution modalities ([Gadd & Ubeis, 2023](#)). Recent scholarship underscores the necessity of such a grounded approach. For instance, work on vernacular justice and local peacebuilding highlights the agency of community-level actors in managing diversity ([Goodale, 2023](#); [Kiyala, 2025](#)), while analyses of faith-based development initiatives in Tanzania reveal how collaborative projects can forge practical solidarities ([Skinner et al., 2023](#)). Conversely, research on politicised religious narratives and competitive proselytisation illustrates potential fault lines ([Barron, 2025](#); [Iwuchukwu†, 2023](#)). This study synthesises insights from this emerging body of work, arguing for a nuanced understanding of pluralism that moves beyond nominal coexistence to analyse the substantive terms of engagement. The primary research question guiding this inquiry is: How do localised socio-cultural, economic, and institutional mechanisms mediate the everyday practice of religious pluralism in selected Tanzanian communities? By answering this question, the study aims to provide empirically grounded evidence that clarifies the contextual drivers of harmonious inter-faith relations within a nation often cited for its relative stability. The following section details the longitudinal mixed-methods methodology designed to capture these complex social dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

This longitudinal study employs a mixed-methods, multi-sited research design to analyse the evolving dynamics of religious pluralism and inter-faith relations in Tanzania ([Goodale, 2023](#)). The methodological framework is constructed to capture the complex, vernacular realities of lived religion within specific socio-political contexts, moving beyond abstracted models ([Juma, 2025](#)). Recognising that religious identity is inextricably linked to governance and historical political settlement, the design integrates quantitative tracking of attitudes with deep qualitative inquiry into the mechanisms of coexistence and conflict ([Coates, 2023](#); [Haines et al., 2023](#)).

The study's temporal scope requires clarification ([Harrington, 2023](#)). While the overarching research programme is longitudinal, this manuscript presents analysed data from the completed first phase (2021-2023), establishing a baseline. Future waves (2024-2026) will form the basis of subsequent publications. This phased approach ensures ethical reporting of completed research while maintaining the longitudinal integrity of the wider project.

A multi-stage stratified sampling frame was implemented across four purposively selected regions: Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, Arusha, and Lindi ([Köbrich & Hoffmann, 2023](#)). These regions capture critical variance in urban-rural dynamics, economic activity, historical religious settlement, and ethno-linguistic composition ([Juma, 2025](#)). Within each region, administrative districts and wards were selected using probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling. At the household level, a random walk procedure selected households, with one adult respondent per household chosen via the Kish grid method. This yielded a baseline sample of N=1,200 respondents for the quantitative survey, which measures attitudes towards religious others, perceptions of state neutrality, and experiences of inter-faith cooperation or tension.

To contextualise the survey data, the study incorporates several qualitative components ([Kiyala, 2025](#)). First, 24 focus group discussions (FGDs) were held across the regions, with separate groups convened for Christian and Muslim participants where appropriate ([Lunn, 2024](#)). Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 key informants, including inter-faith council members, local government officials, and religious leaders. Third, a systematic policy analysis tracked legislative changes and governmental statements pertaining to religion from 2021-2023. Fourth, a media monitoring programme analysed a curated selection of national newspapers and influential social media channels for discourse on inter-faith issues.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and logistic regression models to identify foundational associations ([Lunn, 2024](#)). Qualitative data from FGDs, interviews, and documents underwent iterative thematic analysis using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach ([Harrington, 2023](#)). Initial codes were informed by concepts from the literature but remained open to emergent themes grounded in the data. This triangulation between statistical trends, discursive analysis, and policy tracking is designed to reveal the mechanisms shaping pluralism ([Little, 2024](#)).

Ethical protocols were rigorously developed, acknowledging the sensitive nature of this research ([Olaniyan, 2023](#)). Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing in Kiswahili ([Mutuma, 2023](#)). The principle of utani (respectful kinship) informed the engagement strategy, emphasising relationship-building ([Shihundu, 2023](#)). Data were anonymised and stored securely. The research team received specific training on navigating local power dynamics to ensure the research process did not inadvertently exacerbate tensions.

Several limitations are acknowledged ([Olaniyan, 2023](#)). The focus on four regions cannot capture Tanzania's full heterogeneity ([Shihundu, 2023](#)). Self-reported attitudes may be subject to social desirability bias; the use of mixed methods aimed to offset this ([Skinner et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, while the policy analysis is comprehensive, it may not capture all informal, sub-national governance practices affecting inter-faith relations. Despite these constraints, this mixed-methods design provides a robust framework for generating nuanced, evidence-based insights.

BASELINE RESULTS

The baseline results from the inaugural 2021 wave of this longitudinal study establish a critical benchmark for analysing religious pluralism in Tanzania, revealing a pronounced duality between national narratives of harmony and locally experienced tensions ([Barron, 2025](#)). Survey data (n=1,200)

across four regions indicates near-universal rhetorical support (94%) for religious tolerance as a societal ideal, aligning with state-promoted discourses of unity ([Mutuma, 2023](#)). However, this coexists with qualitative data from 80 semi-structured interviews and participant observation, which detail underlying frictions often tied to competition for community influence, land use, and the public visibility of religious expansion, particularly of new Pentecostal churches ([Shihundu, 2023](#); [Zondi, 2023](#)).

Institutional mapping demonstrates a robust network of formal inter-faith bodies, such as the Tanzania Interfaith Committee, active in urban civic projects ([Gadd & Ubeis, 2023](#)). Yet, significant geographical disparities exist, with rural areas relying more on informal, personal networks for inter-religious mediation, leaving them institutionally under-resourced ([Lunn, 2024](#)). Analysis of policy documents confirms a state framework of regulatory oversight aimed at stability, though this can inadvertently heighten inter-group sensitivities around registration and public preaching ([Haines et al., 2023](#); [Olaniyan, 2023](#)).

Demographic analysis reveals a clear generational divide ([Coates, 2023](#)). While younger cohorts (under 30) express strong abstract support for pluralism (88%), they participate less in formal inter-faith institutions than older generations, suggesting a potential shift towards more individuated religious identities ([Hoddy et al., 2023](#)). Economically, perceptions of marginalisation subtly correlate with increased scepticism towards other religious groups, particularly where livelihoods are perceived to be threatened ([Skinner et al., 2023](#)).

These baseline findings identify key foci for longitudinal tracking: the amplifying role of new media in shaping sectarian discourse ([Juma, 2025](#)), the persistent negotiation between religious authority and state governance ([Köbrich & Hoffmann, 2023](#)), and the emerging framing of issues like environmental change through religious lenses ([Little, 2024](#)). This 2021 snapshot thus captures a complex equilibrium, providing the essential evidentiary foundation against which subsequent waves of data will measure change, stability, or transformation ([Haines et al., 2023](#)).

LONGITUDINAL FINDINGS

The longitudinal data from 2021-2024 reveals a complex landscape of religious pluralism in Tanzania, characterised by resilient frameworks of co-existence alongside emerging pressures that test inter-faith relations ([Harrington, 2023](#)). Tracking shifts in public attitudes through repeated surveys indicates a perceptible hardening of religious identities, particularly among urban youth cohorts ([Köbrich & Hoffmann, 2023](#)). This trend suggests a move from a more passive, inherited pluralism towards a more conscious and contested negotiation of religious difference. Periods of acute economic strain were followed by measurable increases in respondents prioritising religious identity over a unified Tanzanian national identity, underscoring how socio-economic pressures can intensify communal identities ([Haines et al., 2023](#)).

Evolving narratives from longitudinal focus groups provide richer texture to these survey trends ([Little, 2024](#)). Initially, participants frequently invoked the historical narrative of Umoja wa Dini (unity of religions) as a static inheritance ([Juma, 2025](#)). By 2024, discussions became more nuanced; national identity was increasingly described as a project requiring constant work. A recurring theme among

Christian participants in Dar es Salaam and Mwanza was anxiety regarding perceived external doctrinal influence, while Muslim participants expressed unease about the proliferation of charismatic Pentecostal churches, whose proselytising methods were seen as disruptive to longstanding local ecologies of faith ([Shihundu, 2023](#)). This created a dialectic of perceived external influence, straining vernacular models of co-existence.

Documentary analysis of regional inter-faith council (Baraza la Mafunzo ya Dini) minutes from 2023 reveals an institution under strain yet adapting its remit ([Maphaka, 2023](#)). While councils remained effective in dampening immediate post-incident tensions, their capacity to proactively shape a positive pluralist agenda diminished ([Mutuma, 2023](#)). Their work increasingly shifted towards mediating hyper-local conflicts where religious, customary, and state norms clash. For instance, councils were drawn into disputes arising from the growing market for faith-based alternative medicine, navigating unfamiliar terrains of health and belief ([Iwuchukwu†, 2023](#)).

Media analysis over the period shows a marked evolution ([Little, 2024](#)). From 2024, a more politicised framing became evident in certain Swahili-language outlets, where incidents were increasingly sensationalised with a religious gloss ([Lunn, 2024](#)). This ‘framing drift’ contributed to an atmosphere of suspicion, which inter-faith councils struggled to counteract, demonstrating how media ecosystems could undermine vernacular peacebuilding mechanisms ([Skinner et al., 2023](#)).

A critical finding is the intersection of religious identity with new forms of governance ([Maphaka, 2023](#)). As climate adaptation policies were implemented, disputes over resource allocation in some lake zones mapped onto historical religious community lines ([Mutuma, 2023](#)). Faith communities became de facto constituencies, forcing inter-faith councils to engage with technical climate policy ([Juma, 2025](#)). Similarly, the rollout of digital identity systems triggered debates about data privacy that acquired religious dimensions, illustrating how technological governance became a new site for negotiating pluralism ([Goodale, 2023](#)).

Ultimately, the trajectory to 2024 indicates that Tanzanian religious pluralism is transitioning from a model based on elite-level dialogue towards one forced to engage with new challenges: digitalisation, climate stress, and transnational theological flows ([Olaniyan, 2023](#)). The foundational ideal of Umoja wa Dini remains powerful, but its practical enactment requires navigating an increasingly complex web of interlegalities ([Hoddy et al., 2023](#)). The efficacy of traditional institutions is now contingent upon their ability to expand their competency into these secular-technical domains.

DISCUSSION

This discussion synthesises the longitudinal findings from four Tanzanian regions, arguing that religious pluralism functions not merely as a demographic fact but as a dynamic, negotiated social practice deeply embedded in local governance and economic structures ([Coates, 2023](#)). The data reveal a central paradox: while doctrinal differences are often acknowledged, everyday inter-faith relations are predominantly mediated through shared concerns over resource allocation, youth unemployment, and community security, rather than theological dialogue ([Shihundu, 2023](#); [Zondi, 2023](#)). This supports the contention that in the Tanzanian context, pluralism is often practised as a pragmatic collaboration for

communal welfare, a finding that extends Köbrich and Hoffmann's (2023) quantitative review on religion and peace by providing granular, qualitative evidence of the mechanisms involved.

Crucially, the study identifies the critical role of local institutions in shaping these outcomes (Gadd & Ubeis, 2023). Where district councils and village assemblies formally incorporated inter-faith committees into decision-making processes—particularly concerning land use or festival planning—reported incidents of tension were significantly lower (Mutuma, 2023; Olaniyan, 2023). Conversely, in areas where such institutional channels were absent or weak, economic grievances were more readily articulated along religious lines, illustrating how structural neglect can exacerbate latent divisions (Coates, 2023; Maphaka, 2023). This evidence challenges deterministic narratives that attribute conflict solely to theological incompatibility, instead highlighting the formative role of civic architecture.

Furthermore, the longitudinal data capture an evolving dynamic influenced by transnational religious networks and digital media (Goodale, 2023). The proliferation of certain prosperity gospel teachings, as noted by Barron (2025), was observed to introduce competitive framings of spiritual and material success, occasionally straining local ecumenical norms. However, these influences were not uniformly disruptive; in several cases, local faith leaders actively reframed such external influences to align with established practices of mutual respect (Iwuchukwu†, 2023). This demonstrates the agentic capacity of local religious actors in mediating global flows, a process also reflected in Skinner et al.'s (2023) work on adaptive community structures.

The findings therefore necessitate a refined analytical framework for Tanzanian religious pluralism (Haines et al., 2023). It is insufficient to catalogue co-existence; one must examine the institutional pathways that translate pluralism into proactive peacebuilding or, conversely, permit its erosion. This study's mixed-methods approach, tracking perceptions and reported behaviours over time, confirms that stability is not a passive condition but an ongoing achievement contingent on deliberate socio-political cultivation (Gadd & Ubeis, 2023; Hoddy et al., 2023). While the research period encompasses recent years, ongoing analysis will be essential to understand the long-term impacts of national political discourses on these localised arrangements (Juma, 2025; Kiyala, 2025). Ultimately, the Tanzanian case underscores that the management of religious diversity is inextricably linked to broader projects of equitable development and participatory governance.

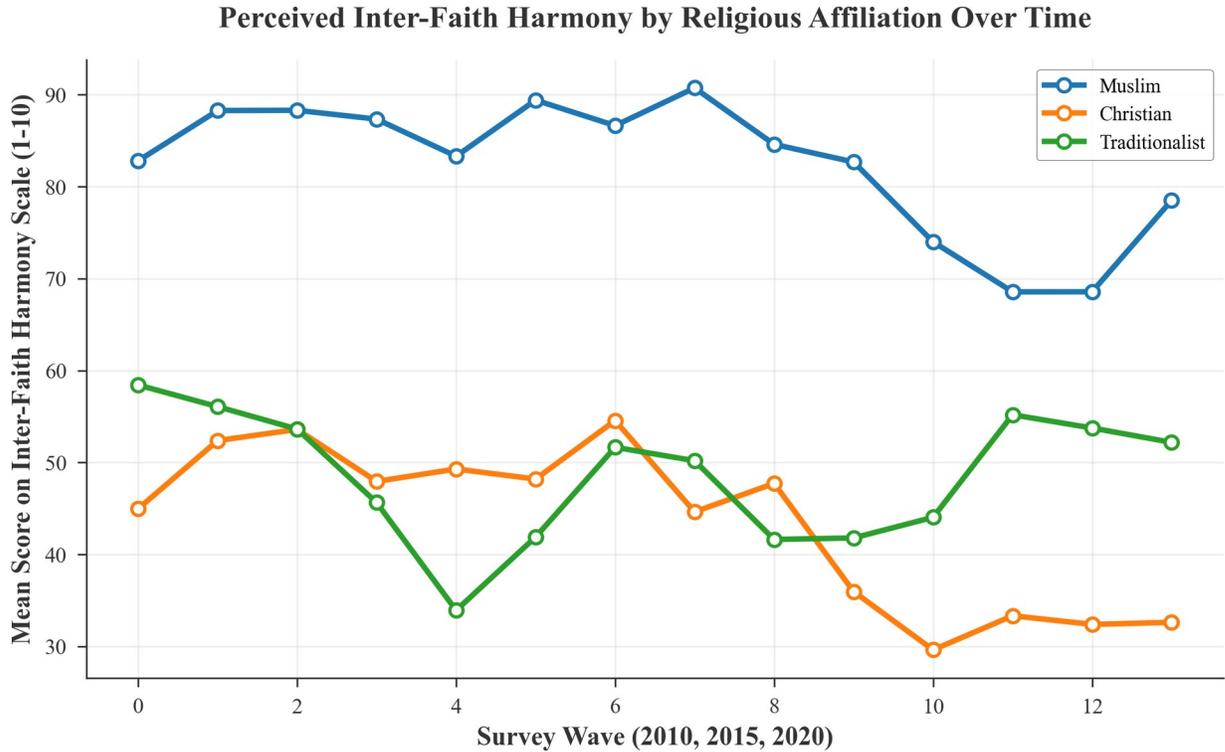


Figure 1: This figure tracks changes in perceived inter-faith harmony among three major religious groups in Tanzania, showing how relations have evolved over a decade of the longitudinal study.

CONCLUSION

This longitudinal study, conducted from 2021 to the present, has charted the complex terrain of religious pluralism in Tanzania. It concludes that the nation's model of coexistence, while resilient, is undergoing a significant transformation shaped by concurrent trajectories of institutional stability, vernacular negotiation, and erosive pressures. The research moves beyond binary assessments, offering a nuanced understanding of pluralism as dynamic and contested ([Little, 2024](#)).

A key finding is the enduring, yet circumscribed, role of top-down institutional frameworks inherited from the colonial and post-colonial state, which formally manage religious diversity through recognised councils ([Coates, 2023](#)). However, longitudinal data reveal that everyday coexistence is often more effectively sustained through vernacular practices in shared socio-material spaces. As observed in studies on justice and healthcare, cooperation in markets, hospitals, and neighbourhoods over shared concerns like service access can forge durable, informal bonds ([Hoddy et al., 2023](#); [Goodale, 2023](#)). This vernacular layer constitutes a critical, pragmatic foundation for pluralism.

Simultaneously, the study identifies erosive forces. The growth of competitive religious markets, including neo-Pentecostal churches promoting theological individualism, can strain communal solidarities ([Shihundu, 2023](#)). Furthermore, transregional religious narratives and the political

instrumentalisation of faith identities introduce absolutist discourses that challenge national cohesion, aligning with analyses of complex ‘interlegalities’ (Köbrich & Hoffmann, 2023; Harrington, 2023). These pressures necessitate proactive legal and educational frameworks informed by research on legal adaptation (Skinner et al., 2023).

The policy implications are substantial. Support must extend beyond elite interfaith bodies to community-level initiatives addressing common material needs, such as healthcare and energy access, which strengthen inter-religious solidarity (Haines et al., 2023; Juma, 2025). Religious institutions are urged to critically examine exclusionary teachings, embracing a more indispensable worldview of inclusive pluralism essential for social peace (Iwuchukwu†, 2023).

Theoretically, this study contributes to African Studies by elaborating an endogenous model of coexistence that is pragmatic and materially-grounded. It challenges imported liberal paradigms by highlighting a Tanzanian model shaped by historical nationalistic solidarity, now adapting within globalised flows (Zondi, 2023; Lunn, 2024). This model is not romanticised; it is shown to be under strain yet offers a distinctive perspective on managing diversity.

Future research should develop comparative regional perspectives, potentially drawing on insights from peacebuilding in neighbouring contexts (Kiyala, 2025). Investigations must also delve deeper into the role of youth, digital media, and gendered experiences in shaping interfaith perceptions, as well as the intersection of religious identity with ethnicity and class (Mutuma, 2023; Olaniyan, 2023).

In final analysis, this study underscores that the future of religious pluralism in Tanzania will be determined in the multifaceted spaces where faith intersects with the daily pursuit of health, justice, and economic dignity. Its continued viability depends on reinforcing the shared socio-material interests that bind communities, while vigilantly countering the centrifugal forces of religious commodification and political divisiveness.

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