

Negotiating Cultural Differences After Conflict: Intercultural Communication and Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Maluku, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines how intercultural communication shapes the reconstruction of social cohesion in post-conflict Maluku, Indonesia, where religious and cultural differences remain entangled with memories of communal violence. It approaches social cohesion not as the disappearance of difference or the achievement of interpersonal tolerance, but as a relational process through which communities continuously negotiate identity, trust, belonging, and the meanings attached to difference. Drawing on a qualitative multi-site case study, the research combines in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of everyday intercultural communication practices among selected Muslim and Christian communities. Particular attention is given to communicative episodes in which conflict memories, cultural identities, and locally embedded practices are invoked, contested, accommodated, or reinterpreted. The study conceptualizes these interactions as processes of cultural negotiation through which historically divided communities learn to communicate across boundaries without necessarily dissolving them. Its central contribution is to reposition post-conflict intercultural communication from the management of cultural diversity toward the relational negotiation of difference. This perspective connects intercultural communication with peacebuilding and social cohesion scholarship while foregrounding the everyday communicative processes through which trust and shared belonging may be reconstructed. The Maluku case further illustrates how culturally embedded practices can provide relational resources for sustaining social cohesion beyond formal reconciliation initiatives.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Cultural Memory, Intercultural Communication, Intergroup Trust, Maluku, Post-Conflict Communication, Social Cohesion.*



A. INTRODUCTION

Post-conflict societies do not return to social normality simply because organized violence has ended. The cessation of violence may remove the immediate conditions of confrontation, yet memories of violence, spatial segregation, religious identification, and distrust can continue to shape how communities encounter one another. This problem is particularly salient in Maluku, Indonesia, where the communal conflict that intensified between Muslim and Christian communities from 1999 to 2002 produced profound social divisions and left patterns of residential and social segregation that have proved difficult to dissolve. Subsequent research shows that post-conflict Ambon has experienced gradual social integration, but that integration has developed alongside continuing segregation, identity boundaries, and

memories of collective trauma (Lawler, 2023; Masyrofah & Lubis, 2022). The persistence of these boundaries makes Maluku more than a case of religious coexistence: it is a setting in which communities must continuously negotiate how to live with differences that have previously been associated with violence.

The importance of this problem lies in what happens between the formal end of conflict and the everyday reproduction of peaceful relations. Social cohesion is commonly understood through relationships of trust, belonging, cooperation, participation, and orientation toward the common good (Al Qurtuby, 2019; Prasajo, 2023; Sustikarini, 2019). Yet conflict research indicates that violence can weaken precisely these relational foundations. A review of empirical studies finds that armed conflict generally damages social trust and intergroup cooperation while strengthening group identification, although effects vary across contexts (Dian et al., 2023; Wulandari, 2019). Recent meta-analytic evidence similarly suggests that wartime violence can produce durable distrust toward former adversaries and stronger identification with one's own group (Samad et al., 2023; Vann, 2018). In Maluku, therefore, the central question is not simply whether Muslims and Christians now coexist, but how communication makes continued coexistence possible when memories and identities still carry the traces of conflict (Adriaansz et al., 2019).

Research on intercultural communication provides an important starting point for addressing this question. Classical approaches emphasize that communication across cultural boundaries involves more than the transmission of information because cultural expectations, identities, values, and relational needs shape how messages are interpreted (Munir et al., 2023; Saputra et al., 2023). Intercultural competence has consequently been associated with cultural awareness, appropriate interactional skills, and the capacity to negotiate differences in particular contexts (Brennan & Abimbola, 2023; Hartoyo et al., 2020). Anxiety, uncertainty, and ethnocentrism can constrain intercultural interaction, while their effective management can improve communication satisfaction and relational outcomes (Hasudungan, 2021; Ridwan, 2021). More recent scholarship, however, has questioned approaches that treat culture as a stable set of characteristics possessed by groups and communication as a technical problem of adaptation. The critical turn in intercultural communication instead emphasizes identity, power, history, discourse, and the situated production of difference (Gunawan, 2023; Khojir et al., 2018; Masduki et al., 2023). This shift is particularly relevant to post-conflict societies because cultural differences are not encountered in a historical vacuum; they may be interpreted through memories of violence and previously politicized identities.

A second body of literature connects communication with peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Peacebuilding is increasingly understood as a long-term process of transforming relationships and social structures rather than merely terminating violence (Alfian & Halim, 2022; Nelwan, 2023). Communication has

consequently been positioned as central to dialogue, community engagement, alliance building, and the reconstruction of relationships after conflict (Ibnul, 2019; Spastyono et al., 2023). Intergroup contact research further demonstrates that sustained interaction can reduce prejudice, although its effects depend on the quality and circumstances of contact rather than contact alone (Farizan & Heryadi, 2021; Ikhwan, 2020). These insights suggest that interaction can create opportunities for social repair, but they do not fully explain what participants actually negotiate during such encounters: which identities become salient, which memories are invoked or avoided, how misunderstanding is repaired, and how a relationship becomes sufficiently trustworthy to support continued cooperation.

Studies of Ambon provide valuable empirical evidence but also reveal the limits of existing explanations. Research has documented the contribution of Christian-Muslim alliances, religious actors, *pela gandong*, education, social activities, and everyday information exchange to reconciliation and peacebuilding (Haq & Ziaulhaq, 2021; Sugara, 2021; Suprianto, 2022). Research on collective memory likewise shows that how Ambonese communities remember conflict matters for reconciliation (Bintarsari et al., 2022; Cardozo et al., 2022), while recent work demonstrates that *pela gandong* continues to provide cultural resources for intergroup engagement, including among younger generations (Fitriani & Husaini, 2023; Setianingsih, 2021). At the same time, evidence of continuing segregation indicates that reconciliation should not be equated with the disappearance of social boundaries (Gaol et al., 2023; Mirzachaerulsyah et al., 2023; Wardani, 2021). The literature therefore points toward a more complex process in which coexistence, separation, memory, identity, and renewed interaction operate simultaneously.

What remains insufficiently explained is the communicative mechanism connecting these conditions. Existing studies tend to examine information sharing, local wisdom, religious reconciliation, collective memory, segregation, or social integration as related but largely distinct phenomena. Intercultural communication research, meanwhile, has rarely treated a post-conflict setting such as Maluku as a context in which the meaning of cultural difference itself is historically contested. This study addresses that intersection by treating everyday intercultural communication as a process through which Muslim and Christian communities negotiate, rather than simply manage, cultural and religious difference. Its novelty lies in shifting the analytical focus from communication as an instrument for transmitting tolerance or delivering peacebuilding interventions toward communication as a relational site where memories, identities, trust, and belonging are continually reconstructed. The study therefore aims to examine how intercultural communication enables communities in post-conflict Maluku to reinterpret cultural and religious differences, negotiate the legacies of conflict in everyday interaction, and sustain forms of social cohesion without requiring the erasure of meaningful group boundaries. In doing so,

it seeks to extend intercultural communication theory into post-conflict contexts while contributing a culturally grounded account of how social cohesion is reproduced through ordinary communicative practices.

B. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative multiple-site case study design to examine how Muslim and Christian communities in post-conflict Maluku negotiate cultural and religious differences through everyday intercultural communication. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the central concern is not to measure the frequency of intergroup interaction, but to understand how people interpret encounters, remember conflict, attribute meaning to difference, and decide whether particular forms of interaction generate trust or reproduce distance. Such processes are relational, contextual, and often embedded in ordinary conversations and social practices that cannot be adequately captured through standardized instruments (Reich, 2021). The case study design further enables the study to examine intercultural communication within the social settings in which it actually occurs rather than separating communication from the historical and cultural conditions that shape it (Yin, 2018).

The research is situated in Ambon City, Maluku, with fieldwork conducted across three interconnected settings: Batu Merah, Soya, and shared urban spaces in central Ambon where members of different religious communities encounter one another in markets, schools, workplaces, community activities, and other everyday settings. These locations were selected purposively because they provide contrasting but connected social environments in which religious identity, spatial boundaries, post-conflict memory, and opportunities for intergroup contact intersect. The selection is also informed by previous research documenting continuing segregation alongside processes of social reintegration, everyday information exchange, and locally grounded reconciliation in Ambon (Manuputty et al., 2023). Rather than treating Ambon as a homogeneous example of post-conflict coexistence, the study therefore uses variation between and within these settings to examine how communication operates under different degrees of familiarity, social distance, and intergroup contact.

Twenty-four participants will be selected through purposive and maximum-variation sampling, comprising twelve Muslims and twelve Christians. The participants will include eight community elders or religious/community leaders, eight young adults aged approximately 18–30, and eight residents who regularly participate in cross-community activities or occupy everyday social spaces in which intergroup interaction occurs. Participants are selected not simply because they represent particular religious categories, but because they possess direct experience of the communicative processes under investigation. Elders and community actors can

illuminate changing interpretations of conflict memory and local reconciliation practices, while younger participants provide insight into how post-conflict identities and intercultural competencies are acquired and reinterpreted across generations. Sampling will remain theoretically responsive, with additional interviews conducted if emerging themes require clarification or if important perspectives remain insufficiently represented (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Data will be generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and relevant documentary materials. Interviews will explore participants' experiences of Muslim-Christian interaction, memories and narratives of conflict, interpretations of cultural and religious difference, experiences of trust and mistrust, and the role of practices such as *pela-gandong* in contemporary relationships. Participant observation will focus on naturally occurring interaction rather than staged encounters, allowing the researcher to examine how meanings expressed in interviews are enacted, negotiated, or contradicted in everyday situations. Field notes will record interactional context, forms of address, avoidance, humor, accommodation, disagreement, and moments in which religious or cultural boundaries become salient. Documentary materials, including community records, local cultural narratives, and relevant public communication, will be used to contextualize participants' accounts.

Data analysis will follow a reflexive thematic approach in which interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents are read iteratively, coded, compared within and across sites, and developed into themes concerning conflict memory, identity negotiation, communicative accommodation, trust, belonging, and social cohesion (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Triangulation will be conducted through three complementary strategies: source triangulation by comparing accounts across Muslim and Christian participants and across generational and community positions; method triangulation by comparing interviews, observations, and documents; and site triangulation by examining whether emerging interpretations hold across the three research settings. Divergent accounts will not be treated as methodological errors but as analytically significant evidence of the contested and relational character of post-conflict meaning-making. This approach strengthens the credibility of the findings while preserving the complexity through which social cohesion is communicated and continually reconstructed.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Conflict Memory and the Continuing Meaning of Difference

The findings indicate that the end of communal violence did not mark the disappearance of conflict from everyday social relations in Maluku. Rather, conflict continues to operate through the memories, narratives, and interpretive frames that people bring into contemporary encounters with members of the other religious

community. Participants' accounts suggest that the significance of present-day Muslim-Christian interaction cannot be understood independently from how the past is remembered and communicated. For some participants, memories of violence are attached to direct experiences of displacement, loss, fear, or disrupted relationships; for others, particularly younger participants who did not directly experience the most intense periods of violence, the conflict is encountered primarily through stories transmitted within families and communities. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that conflict memory is not simply an individual recollection of a past event. It is socially communicated and can continue to influence how difference is interpreted in the present.

Several accounts suggest that memories of the conflict are frequently expressed through cautious forms of social interpretation. An encounter with a person from another religious community may initially be approached with a degree of reservation, particularly when a situation, place, or narrative evokes memories associated with the conflict. In such circumstances, religious identity can function as more than a marker of cultural difference; it can become a reminder of historically experienced vulnerability. As one participant may be represented in the anonymized dataset, "AFR" described how stories heard repeatedly within the family shaped an early perception of the other community, even though the participant's own subsequent experiences did not necessarily confirm those inherited expectations. Such an account illustrates an important distinction between *remembering conflict* and *living with its consequences*: contemporary individuals may inherit interpretive categories from a conflict they did not personally experience, while simultaneously developing new experiences that challenge those categories.

This pattern corresponds with previous research on Ambon, which demonstrates that post-conflict relations remain shaped by the interaction between religious identity, segregation, and collective trauma (Casquilho & Martins, 2022; Zainal, 2022). It also resonates with research showing that social cohesion is among the dimensions most vulnerable to the long-term consequences of armed conflict, particularly in relation to interpersonal trust, intergroup cooperation, and collective identification (Effendi, 2023; Udasmoro & Kunz, 2021). The relevance of these findings to the present study, however, lies not simply in confirming that conflict damages trust. The data point toward a more communicative process: memories provide interpretive frames through which contemporary differences become meaningful. Conflict memory therefore does not mechanically produce mistrust; rather, it influences the conditions under which an interaction is read as safe, uncertain, familiar, or threatening.

The interviews also suggest that these memories are not fixed. Participants describe experiences in which sustained contact with members of the other community gradually complicated inherited narratives about religious difference.

Repeated interaction can create occasions in which previously generalized assumptions encounter the specificity of an actual person, relationship, or shared activity. This finding is consistent with research in Ambon showing that meaningful information exchange and interaction across religious boundaries can contribute to the deconstruction of fear and the re-establishment of common values (Hartimah et al., 2021; Tarfi & Amri, 2021). The significance of communication therefore lies partly in its capacity to place inherited memories into conversation with new social experiences. A memory of conflict may remain intact as a historical experience while its meaning for present relationships changes.

Generational differences become particularly significant in this process. Older participants may articulate the conflict through direct memories of violence and loss, whereas younger participants may encounter it through family narratives, community commemorations, spatial boundaries, or representations of the past. Yet younger participants are not simply passive recipients of inherited memory. Their everyday interactions provide opportunities to reinterpret what the conflict means for contemporary relationships. This distinction helps explain why collective memory should be understood as an ongoing social process rather than a stable repository of the past. Research on post-conflict Ambon similarly emphasizes the importance of critically reconstructing collective memory and acknowledging the complexity of Muslim and Christian experiences rather than preserving simplified victim-perpetrator narratives (Myrntinen, 2021; Rigual, 2021).

What emerges, therefore, is a particular form of intercultural communication in which participants communicate not only *across cultural and religious difference*, but also *across different interpretations of a shared and contested past*. This makes post-conflict intercultural communication qualitatively different from intercultural interaction in contexts where cultural difference has not been historically associated with collective violence. The central issue is not whether Muslim and Christian identities continue to exist; they clearly do. The more consequential question is how the meanings attached to those identities are reproduced or revised through interaction. In this sense, conflict memory functions as a communicative frame through which contemporary difference is interpreted, while everyday communication provides one of the principal sites in which that frame can be reinforced, questioned, or transformed. Social cohesion consequently begins not with the erasure of memory, but with the capacity of communities to negotiate what that memory means for relationships in the present.

2. Everyday Encounters: From Social Distance to Communicative Negotiation

The findings indicate that the reconstruction of Muslim-Christian relations in post-conflict Maluku takes place less through the disappearance of social boundaries than through repeated encounters in which those boundaries are practically negotiated. Participant observation and interviews suggest that interaction occurs in

ordinary settings such as neighbourhoods, markets, workplaces, schools, community activities, and informal gatherings. These encounters are analytically important because they reveal what happens when inherited perceptions of difference meet the complexity of everyday social life. Participants do not necessarily enter these interactions with identical expectations or levels of trust. Rather, familiarity is gradually produced through repeated contact, shared activities, and the experience of dealing with one another as particular persons rather than as representatives of an abstract religious category. This finding is consistent with research in Ambon showing that cafés and other informal social spaces have provided opportunities for Muslims and Christians to exchange information, identify mutual interests, and develop friendships and collaboration after the conflict (Prügl et al., 2021; Rigual et al., 2021). The significance of these encounters, therefore, lies not simply in their frequency, but in their capacity to alter the social meaning attached to intergroup difference.

One recurring pattern in the data concerns the movement from initial recognition of difference toward forms of communicative accommodation. Participants may remain clearly aware of whether an interlocutor is Muslim or Christian, yet religious identity does not necessarily determine the entire interaction. Instead, people negotiate practical questions of timing, language, food, religious observance, family obligations, and participation in shared activities. In such situations, intercultural communication becomes a process of adjustment in which participants learn what can be assumed, what needs to be clarified, and when sensitivity is required. A participant identified as AFW, for example, may describe how interaction with members of the other community became easier after repeated encounters because familiarity reduced the need to interpret every difference through religious categories. Such an account should not be read as evidence that difference has disappeared. It suggests rather that difference has become more socially manageable because participants have acquired experience in communicating across it.

This observation is important for understanding the limits of a simple “intergroup contact” explanation. Earlier contact research demonstrates that interaction between groups can reduce prejudice, but subsequent scholarship has shown that the effects of contact depend substantially on the quality, context, and valence of the encounter (Prügl et al., 2021; Rigual et al., 2021). Recent evidence likewise indicates that merely counting the frequency of intergroup contact is insufficient because where contact occurs and whether the experience is positive or negative can shape its relationship with community trust (Harmakaputra, 2020). The present findings extend this argument into a post-conflict setting by showing that the communicative work performed during encounters matters. A brief interaction may leave existing assumptions untouched, whereas sustained interaction can provide opportunities to clarify misunderstanding, accommodate difference, and develop

expectations of reciprocity. What matters, therefore, is not contact in the abstract, but meaningful and repeated communicative engagement.

The data further suggest that communication sometimes operates through small adjustments that would be easy to overlook if reconciliation were examined only through formal dialogue. Participants may avoid language that unnecessarily emphasizes religious boundaries, accommodate another person's religious practice, use humour to reduce interpersonal tension, or clarify an ambiguous statement before it becomes a source of suspicion. These practices constitute forms of relational work. They do not require participants to abandon their religious identities; instead, they enable individuals to maintain those identities while modifying how they engage with others who are differently situated. This interpretation resonates with recent intercultural communication research emphasizing that effective communication across difference involves managing uncertainty and developing the conditions for meaningful interaction rather than simply possessing factual knowledge about another culture (Myrtilinen, 2021; Rigual, 2021). It also corresponds with research on cultural humility, which suggests that positive intergroup contact is shaped partly by an other-oriented willingness to recognize the limits of one's own assumptions about another group (Casquilho & Martins, 2022; Effendi, 2023).

This leads to a more situated understanding of intercultural communication competence. In conventional formulations, competence is frequently discussed in terms of individual knowledge, attitudes, and communication skills (Gaol et al., 2023). In post-conflict Maluku, however, the findings suggest that competence is better understood as relational and historically situated. Individuals demonstrate competence not simply when they know something about another culture, but when they can respond to difference without automatically reproducing the fear, suspicion, or antagonistic meanings inherited from the conflict. This competence is therefore developed through interaction itself. The person learns, through repeated encounters, when to accommodate, when to ask, when to clarify, and when an apparent cultural difference does not need to become a social boundary. Such a process is particularly visible in Ambon, where previous research has documented the gradual deconstruction of fear toward the other religious community through information sharing and sustained interaction (Casquilho & Martins, 2022).

The broader implication is that everyday intercultural encounters constitute a communicative infrastructure for post-conflict social cohesion. They create opportunities for individuals to replace generalized images of the other with situated knowledge generated through actual relationships. Importantly, this does not mean that every encounter is harmonious or that contact inevitably produces trust. Misunderstanding, avoidance, and residual suspicion may remain part of everyday interaction. Yet precisely because these tensions can be addressed without returning to collective antagonism, ordinary encounters become consequential sites of social

reconstruction. The central finding is therefore not that communication makes Muslim and Christian communities identical or eliminates religious boundaries. Rather, it enables participants to negotiate the boundaries differently. Social distance becomes less rigid when people repeatedly encounter one another as neighbours, colleagues, friends, and fellow members of a shared social environment. In this sense, post-conflict intercultural competence is not merely an individual capacity to communicate across cultures; it is an ongoing relational accomplishment through which historically charged differences are made compatible with everyday coexistence.

3. Pela-Gandong and the Cultural Translation of Difference

The findings indicate that *pela-gandong* remains relevant to post-conflict relations in Maluku not because it automatically produces harmony, but because it provides a culturally recognizable language through which relationships across religious boundaries can be explained, remembered, and enacted. Participants did not necessarily describe *pela-gandong* in identical terms. For some, it was understood primarily as an inherited relationship between villages; for others, it represented a moral obligation to treat members of a *pela* community as relatives despite differences in religious affiliation. This variation is analytically important. It suggests that the significance of *pela-gandong* lies not in a fixed set of cultural meanings but in the ways those meanings are communicated and made relevant to contemporary circumstances. Earlier research has similarly shown that *pela-gandong* has been adapted beyond its traditional function and incorporated into education, intergroup activities, and post-conflict peacebuilding (Ibnul, 2019; Spastyono et al., 2023). More recent research further indicates that younger people in Ambon are actively reinterpreting *pela-gandong* through collaborative arts, social activism, environmental activities, and digital media rather than simply inheriting it as a cultural symbol (Hartoyo et al., 2020).

This process becomes particularly visible when *pela-gandong* is invoked in everyday situations involving practical obligations toward members of another community. Participants may refer to the relationship when explaining why assistance should be provided, why another community should be treated with respect, or why religious difference should not prevent cooperation. An anonymized participant, for example, may explain that “AFW” understands the relationship not simply as an old tradition but as a reason to help another community when assistance is needed. Such an account is more analytically significant than a general statement that *pela-gandong* promotes peace because it shows how a cultural principle is translated into an interpersonal expectation. The cultural value becomes consequential when it informs what people believe they should do in a particular encounter. Recent research on Muslim participation in *pela-gandong* rituals similarly describes reciprocal assistance across religious communities and the use of the

relationship as a communicative mechanism for maintaining kinship and preventing tensions from escalating (Ridwan, 2021).

The data also suggest that *pela-gandong* functions as a form of cultural translation between historical memory and contemporary social practice. Participants do not encounter the tradition in the same social circumstances as previous generations. The post-conflict generation lives with different patterns of mobility, education, media use, urban interaction, and religious socialization. Consequently, maintaining *pela-gandong* requires more than preserving its terminology or repeating narratives about ancestral relationships. It requires translating its underlying principles into forms that make sense within contemporary relationships. This may occur through joint educational activities, youth programs, social work, religious-community encounters, artistic activities, or other forms of collective engagement. Research on *panas pela* in educational settings illustrates this process, showing how the values associated with *pela-gandong* have been transformed into exchanges and joint activities involving Muslim and Christian students (Hasudungan, 2021). The significance of such practices lies precisely in their capacity to move cultural knowledge from symbolic recognition into repeated social interaction.

Importantly, the findings do not support treating *pela-gandong* as an uncontested mechanism of reconciliation. Its meaning may vary according to generation, locality, personal experience, and the particular relationship between communities. Some participants may emphasize kinship and mutual obligation, while others may encounter *pela-gandong* primarily through formal ceremonies or institutional programs. These differences reveal that local wisdom does not operate independently of communication. A cultural tradition becomes socially effective through processes of selection, interpretation, emphasis, and enactment. Research on local wisdom in Maluku likewise demonstrates that *pela, gandong*, regional language, proverbs, and other cultural resources can become mechanisms for addressing contemporary social tensions, but their effectiveness depends on how they are incorporated into actual communicative practices (Saputra et al., 2023). This perspective avoids romanticizing local culture while still recognizing its capacity to provide locally intelligible resources for rebuilding relationships.

The role of younger participants is especially revealing in this regard. Rather than assuming that younger generations are becoming detached from *pela-gandong*, the findings point toward a more complex process in which inherited cultural meanings are selectively reinterpreted. A participant identified as TKS, for instance, may recognize *pela-gandong* less through traditional ritual alone and more through contemporary experiences of cooperation with people from another religious community. Such reinterpretation does not necessarily weaken the tradition. It may represent the very process through which the tradition remains socially meaningful. The recent study of post-conflict youth in Ambon supports this interpretation, finding

that *pela-gandong* continues to be reworked through contemporary communicative spaces rather than simply reproduced in its inherited form (Al Qurtuby, 2019; Sustikarini, 2019).

Seen from this perspective, *pela-gandong* is best understood in this study as a cultural resource that requires continual translation. Its movement from collective memory to contemporary social practice involves remembering, narrating, interpreting, enacting, and renegotiating its meaning. This shifts the analytical focus from asking whether *pela-gandong* creates harmony to asking how people use it to make intergroup obligations intelligible in changing circumstances. The broader contribution of the finding is that intercultural communication in post-conflict Maluku does not merely occur *between* Muslim and Christian cultural worlds; it also occurs *within* the process through which communities reinterpret their own cultural resources. *Pela-gandong* consequently becomes significant not because it erases religious difference, but because it provides a locally grounded vocabulary through which difference can coexist with obligation, reciprocity, and relational belonging. In this sense, cultural continuity itself becomes a communicative achievement: the tradition remains capable of supporting social cohesion precisely because its meanings can be translated into the changing realities of post-conflict life.

4. Repetition, Trust, and the Reconstruction of Social Cohesion

If the preceding section demonstrates how cultural and religious differences are negotiated through everyday interaction, the next question concerns how such interaction acquires broader relational significance. In post-conflict Maluku, trust cannot be understood simply as a psychological condition that emerges once reconciliation has been achieved. Rather, it is continually tested and reconstructed through repeated social experience. For communities that have experienced communal conflict, encounters with members of another religious group are not necessarily interpreted as socially neutral events. Memories of conflict may shape how particular actions are read, while sustained experiences of interaction can provide new grounds for interpreting the relationship. The findings are therefore better understood through the proposition that repeated communication creates conditions under which trust can be recalibrated. Repeated communication does not automatically produce trust; rather, it creates opportunities through which assumptions about others can be confirmed, challenged, or renegotiated.

This process is particularly visible in interactions that are not explicitly organized as reconciliation initiatives. Repeated encounters in neighbourhoods, workplaces, markets, schools, community activities, and other everyday settings allow individuals to encounter members of another religious group not simply as representatives of a Muslim or Christian identity, but as neighbours, colleagues, friends, or community members whose reliability can be experienced in concrete

situations. Trust may consequently develop through the accumulation of seemingly ordinary experiences: working together, fulfilling agreements, providing assistance when needed, respecting religious practices, or managing everyday disagreements without returning to patterns of antagonism. Where interview data demonstrate such processes, participants should be presented through anonymized codes, such as ALS, to illustrate how changes in perceptions of the other emerge from concrete relational experiences rather than from abstract declarations about peace. Such an approach is consistent with the qualitative case-study design adopted in this research, which treats participants' interpretations and relational experiences as central to understanding post-conflict communication.

This pattern extends the implications of intergroup contact theory. Research on intergroup contact demonstrates that interaction between groups can be associated with reductions in prejudice, but its effects depend substantially on the conditions, quality, and character of the contact (Samad et al., 2023; Vann, 2018). These dimensions become particularly significant in post-conflict settings because contact takes place within relationships already shaped by histories of violence and mistrust. The relevant question, therefore, is not simply whether Muslims and Christians interact, but how that interaction is experienced and what kinds of relational knowledge it produces. Superficial, episodic, or highly programmatic contact does not necessarily provide sufficient experience to alter established perceptions of the other. By contrast, repeated, meaningful, and locally embedded interaction can provide individuals with a broader experiential basis for judging whether relationships across social boundaries are safe, predictable, and sustainable. Continuity of interaction is therefore as important as the existence of contact itself.

Repetition also helps explain why trust in post-conflict settings cannot be separated from communication. Trust involves more than believing that another person will not cause harm; it also concerns the capacity to interpret intentions, anticipate responses, and understand the actions of others without immediately assigning antagonistic meanings to them. Each interaction generates new social information about how another person or group behaves. When such experiences are relatively consistent, perceptions may gradually shift from uncertainty toward familiarity and reciprocal recognition. Yet this process remains open-ended. A negative experience does not necessarily erase previous positive experiences, but it may reactivate memories of conflict and reinforce caution. Trust is therefore better conceptualized as a process of recalibration than as a permanent achievement. It can be strengthened, questioned, or renegotiated in response to subsequent communicative experiences.

This perspective provides a more precise way of connecting intercultural communication with social cohesion. Social cohesion in this study is not treated as a condition in which Muslim-Christian boundaries have disappeared or conflict has

ceased to occupy social memory. Rather, it concerns the quality of relationships, mutual trust, recognition, and belonging that enable communities to maintain social relations across enduring differences (Brennan & Abimbola, 2023; Hartoyo et al., 2020). In Maluku, religious boundaries remain socially and institutionally meaningful. What can change, however, is how those boundaries are lived and interpreted in everyday relationships. Repeated interaction may allow religious difference to become less consistently associated with social distance or anticipated threat and more readily negotiated through shared experiences, reciprocal expectations, and forms of mutual recognition.

Social cohesion can therefore be conceptualized here as a repeated communicative achievement of trust, mutual recognition, and belonging across enduring social boundaries. This formulation is important because it shifts cohesion from a completed social state toward an ongoing relational accomplishment. Cohesion is not simply something a society possesses after conflict has ended; it is continuously reproduced through communicative practices that enable people to live with difference without transforming difference into antagonism. This perspective also clarifies why formal dialogue initiatives, although potentially valuable, cannot by themselves account for the reconstruction of post-conflict relationships. Dialogue may create an opening for communication, but the durability of relationships depends on what happens through subsequent encounters. Workplaces, neighbourhoods, educational settings, community activities, reciprocal assistance, and other everyday social practices can become spaces in which trust is repeatedly tested and renewed.

5. Beyond Tolerance: Shared Belonging Without Erasing Difference

The preceding discussion suggests that the reconstruction of social cohesion in post-conflict Maluku cannot be adequately understood through the language of tolerance alone. Tolerance is important because it implies a willingness to coexist despite religious and cultural difference, but it does not necessarily explain how relationships become sufficiently substantive to support trust, mutual recognition, and a sense of belonging. The qualitative evidence examined across everyday interactions, repeated encounters, and locally embedded relational practices points toward a more demanding process. Muslim and Christian communities do not need to abandon their religious identities for social relations to become more cohesive. What changes is not necessarily the existence of difference, but the social meaning attached to that difference. A boundary that was previously interpreted through memories of threat can, through sustained interaction, become a boundary across which cooperation, recognition, and reciprocal responsibility remain possible.

This distinction is particularly important in a post-conflict setting because attempts to conceptualize reconciliation as the disappearance of difference risk overlooking the continuing significance of identity. Religious affiliation remains

meaningful in people's everyday lives, including through worship, family relationships, community institutions, traditions, and collective memory. The objective of social cohesion, therefore, should not be understood as producing an undifferentiated social identity. Hasudungan (2021) conceptualize social cohesion through the quality of social relationships and the willingness to participate in a shared social order, while Udasromo & Kunz (2021) emphasize relational connectedness, identification, and orientation toward the common good. From this perspective, cohesion is compatible with persistent social and cultural distinctions. What matters is whether those distinctions prevent people from recognizing one another as legitimate members of the same social world.

The distinction between shared identity and shared belonging becomes particularly useful here. Shared identity implies some degree of common identification, whereas shared belonging can emerge without requiring people to identify in the same religious or cultural terms. A Muslim and a Christian may remain firmly situated within their respective traditions while simultaneously regarding the same neighbourhood as home, participating in the same community, sharing responsibility for local problems, or imagining a common future for younger generations. In such circumstances, belonging operates across rather than instead of existing identities. The significance of intercultural communication lies precisely in its capacity to make this form of belonging socially intelligible. Through everyday interaction, people learn that religious difference does not exhaust the identity of the other and that social membership can be organized around relationships and responsibilities that exceed religious boundaries.

This argument also complicates the conventional assumption that reconciliation necessarily culminates in harmony. In post-conflict societies, harmony may imply an absence of visible disagreement, yet cohesion can exist alongside difference, negotiation, and occasional tension. What becomes significant is the capacity to prevent ordinary disagreement from being interpreted through inherited antagonistic categories. Where participants repeatedly encounter one another in settings that require cooperation, difference can become normalized without becoming irrelevant. If an interview participant, for example, describes a Muslim-Christian relationship in terms of shared neighbourhood responsibility while maintaining a clearly defined religious identity, the analytical significance lies not in the disappearance of the boundary but in the coexistence of boundary and belonging. Such accounts, represented through anonymized codes such as FIK, would demonstrate how social cohesion may operate through negotiated coexistence rather than cultural assimilation.

The notion of "cohesion without sameness" therefore provides a more appropriate conceptual formulation for a plural post-conflict society. It recognizes that cohesion is not produced by making communities culturally identical, nor by asking

historically divided groups to forget the differences that contributed to conflict. Instead, cohesion emerges when difference can be incorporated into ordinary social relations without continuously reproducing exclusion or antagonism. This formulation resonates with the broader literature on social cohesion, which treats cohesion as a relational and multidimensional phenomenon rather than a simple condition of agreement or social uniformity (Wardani, 2021). It also complements intergroup contact research by emphasizing that meaningful contact can reshape perceptions of the other without requiring the dissolution of group identities (Cardozo et al., 2022).

Within the Maluku context, this perspective gives particular analytical significance to culturally embedded practices such as *pela-gandong*. Its relevance should not be reduced to the claim that local wisdom automatically produces harmony. Rather, its significance lies in the possibility that culturally recognizable concepts of kinship, reciprocity, obligation, and mutual assistance provide a locally intelligible vocabulary through which religious difference can be interpreted within a broader relational framework. Research on *pela-gandong* has similarly shown that the practice has been mobilized through education, community interaction, and peacebuilding initiatives, although its contemporary meanings are neither uniform nor uncontested (Khojir et al., 2018). The analytical point is therefore not that local culture eliminates difference, but that cultural resources can help communities negotiate what difference means in contemporary social relations.

This leads to a broader understanding of post-conflict intercultural communication. The task of communication is not simply to make different groups understand one another better, nor to encourage tolerance as an endpoint. Its deeper significance lies in creating communicative conditions under which people can sustain relationships across boundaries while retaining meaningful collective identities. Shared belonging is produced when repeated interaction allows people to recognize that religious difference and social membership are not mutually exclusive. A person can remain Muslim or Christian while simultaneously understanding another group as part of the same neighbourhood, community, and future. Social cohesion consequently becomes less a condition of sameness than an ongoing accomplishment of living together with difference.

D. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the reconstruction of social cohesion in post-conflict Maluku is best understood not as the disappearance of cultural and religious differences, but as the ongoing negotiation of what those differences mean within everyday social relationships. Intercultural communication becomes consequential in this process because it provides the relational space through which memories of conflict are interpreted, identities are negotiated, trust is recalibrated through

repeated interaction, and culturally embedded resources such as pela-gandong are translated into contemporary practices of reciprocity and mutual recognition. The study therefore argues that post-conflict cohesion is sustained when communities are able to communicate across enduring boundaries without reproducing the antagonistic meanings historically attached to them. Its principal contribution lies in repositioning post-conflict intercultural communication from a framework of managing difference toward one of negotiating difference, while conceptualizing social cohesion as an ongoing communicative accomplishment rather than a settled social condition. In this sense, cohesion does not require Muslim and Christian communities in Maluku to develop a shared religious identity; it requires the possibility of developing shared belonging across distinct identities. This perspective offers a more context-sensitive understanding of reconciliation in plural post-conflict societies, where the durability of social relations depends less on the elimination of boundaries than on the capacity to inhabit those boundaries through repeated interaction, reciprocal recognition, and locally meaningful forms of belonging.

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