

## The role of cultural identity in sustaining village-level conflict: Lessons from Pombewe, Indonesia

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**Abstract:** This study explores the role of cultural identity in sustaining village-level conflicts in Pombewe, Indonesia, where historical grievances and communal loyalties shape inter-Dusun (inter-village) relations. Using qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews and participant observation, the study finds that these conflicts are deeply embedded in cultural narratives and social identities, often intensified by concerns over honor and territorial claims. While socio-economic factors, such as resource competition, may act as catalysts, it is the cultural dimensions that sustain long-standing tensions, reinforcing cycles of hostility and mistrust. The findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive conflict resolution strategies that engage community leaders in fostering dialogue and reconciliation. However, as the research focuses on a single village, further studies across diverse rural settings in Indonesia are necessary to identify broader patterns and develop effective interventions. By addressing the cultural foundations of conflict, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers and community leaders working toward sustainable peace in conflict-prone regions.

**Keywords:** Conflict resolution, Cultural identity, Historical grievances, Village-level conflict.

### 1. Introduction

Village-level conflicts are a significant yet often overlooked issue in rural regions, where deeply rooted cultural identities and communal tensions shape interpersonal and intergroup dynamics [1]. These conflicts are not only influenced by immediate triggers but are also sustained by long-standing social identities, cultural histories, and communal narratives that create a framework for understanding and perpetuating disputes [2, 3]. In Indonesia, particularly in areas like Central Sulawesi, such conflicts have become recurrent and intense, with certain villages engaged in protracted disputes over issues related to social hierarchy, territorial claims, and even generational feuds.

The case of Pombewe, a village in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, provides a profound example of how cultural identity plays a central role in sustaining local conflicts. Here, historical rivalries, perceptions of honor, and communal loyalty fuel clashes between groups, often resulting in cycles of violence and retribution [4]. According to local historical accounts, the roots of these conflicts trace back to longstanding disputes within and between *dusun* (sub-village) communities, where the notions of “us” versus “them” are amplified by generational teachings and local folklore. The Pombewe conflicts are deeply embedded in local culture, where acts of aggression are sometimes justified by the desire to uphold family or group honor, leading to a reinforcing loop of resentment and conflict.

Research on village-level conflict often emphasizes socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and competition over resources [5]. However, these explanations are insufficient for fully understanding the perpetuation of conflicts in areas like Pombewe, where cultural identity and historical grievances play a critical role. Cultural identity in this context involves a shared understanding of lineage, territory, and societal roles passed down through generations [6]. This

inherited identity fosters a strong sense of belonging but can also create rigid social boundaries between groups, contributing to a hostile environment where even minor disputes may escalate into prolonged hostilities. This phenomenon aligns with social identity theory, which suggests that individuals derive a sense of self from group affiliations, often leading to prejudice and competition against out-groups [7].

The persistence of conflict in Pombewe highlights the need for a nuanced approach to conflict resolution that addresses cultural factors alongside socio-economic and political strategies. Traditional approaches, often focused on mediation and enforcement of peace agreements, may prove inadequate if they fail to consider the cultural dimensions that fuel these conflicts [8]. Effective interventions in Pombewe, and similar settings, should aim to integrate cultural understanding and involve community leaders who can bridge divides and foster dialogue rooted in mutual respect for each group's historical perspective.

This study aims to explore the role of cultural identity in sustaining village-level conflicts in Pombewe, Indonesia, analyzing how deeply ingrained beliefs, historical grievances, and communal loyalty contribute to conflict dynamics. By investigating the intersection of cultural identity and conflict, this research provides valuable insights into how localized disputes can be addressed more effectively, offering lessons for policymakers and community leaders working in conflict-prone rural areas. The findings may contribute to broader discussions on peacebuilding strategies in Indonesia, particularly in regions where cultural identity remains a significant factor in shaping social interactions and community resilience. Hence, it delves into the following research problems “How does cultural identity sustain and perpetuate village-level conflicts in Pombewe, Indonesia?”

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to explore the role of cultural identity in sustaining inter-*dusun* (sub-village) conflicts in Pombewe, Indonesia. A qualitative approach allows for a detailed understanding of social and cultural nuances, providing insights into how historical grievances, communal identities, and local customs contribute to ongoing conflict [9]. According to Creswell [10] qualitative research is suitable for examining complex social phenomena as it provides a holistic view based on participants' perspectives

### 2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in Pombewe, a village in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, known for its inter-*dusun* conflicts, which have persisted over decades. Pombewe is composed of four *Dusun*, each with unique social dynamics, traditions, and cultural identities. This setting is particularly relevant as it embodies a mix of ethnic and cultural identities within a close-knit community structure, often leading to disputes triggered by cultural and territorial factors

Participants were purposively selected from among key stakeholders involved in the conflict, including community leaders, elders, local youth, and government officials [11]. These individuals represent different perspectives and roles in both perpetuating and resolving the conflict. Snowball sampling was also employed to identify additional informants, allowing the researcher to reach influential community members who could provide further insights into the cultural underpinnings of the conflict [12].

### 2.3. Data Collection

Data collection involved in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately 20 participants to gather first-hand accounts of the origins, developments, and cultural significance of the conflicts. Interviews were designed to explore participants' perspectives on identity, historical grievances, and local practices contributing to the ongoing discord.

Participant observation was conducted during community events and conflict-resolution meetings. Observing these interactions provided insights into the group dynamics and cultural norms that shape inter-*dusun* relationships. Additionally, the research included an analysis of village records, local ordinances, and historical documents to contextualize the participants' narratives within the larger historical and cultural framework of Pombewe.

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. After transcription, data were coded to identify recurring themes, including cultural identity markers, historical rivalries, and perceptions of honor and respect. The analysis involved categorizing data into thematic units to reveal patterns that contribute to sustaining the conflict. Techniques such as horizontalization and textural descriptions were used to ensure that all relevant perspectives were represented equally, minimizing researcher bias [13].

To enhance validity, the study employed triangulation by cross-referencing interview data with observations and historical documents. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural elements influencing the conflict [14]. The analysis was further validated through member checking, where participants reviewed preliminary findings to ensure their views were accurately represented.

#### 2.5. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, ethical considerations were a priority [15]. This study adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the Indonesian Higher Education Research Ethics Committee (LPPM/KEP), ensuring compliance with national and international research ethics standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the research purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and data security protocols were strictly followed. Additionally, the study was conducted with respect for local customs and aimed to minimize any disruption to the community.

#### 2.6. Findings

The analysis of the inter-*Dusun* conflict in Pombewe reveals several critical insights into the dynamics of village-level disputes and the role of cultural identity in sustaining them. The findings highlight the intricate interplay of historical grievances, social identity dynamics, and the limitations of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in addressing deep-rooted issues. Historical grievances between *Dusun I* and *Dusun II* form the backbone of the conflict, perpetuated through generational narratives and cultural traditions [16]. Historical accounts and interviews suggest that these grievances often originate from individual disputes [17] such as altercations at communal events like weddings, which escalate into broader hostilities encompassing entire *Dusun* communities. As one community leader described: 'There were victims who died in Hamlet II; for the residents of Hamlet II, of course, they were angry and vengeful, so they demanded revenge for the death of their siblings. They demand to be balanced so that they are satisfied. This led to a more intense and violent conflict between Hamlet I and Hamlet II' (MT, Community Leader, Interview).

The cultural importance placed on concepts such as honor and retribution catalyzes this escalation [18]. Recurring cycles of violence are not merely reactions to immediate provocations but are deeply embedded in intergenerational teachings that emphasize loyalty and protection of one's group. As Leary, et al. [19] observed, even minor provocations can trigger cycles of conflict due to these deeply ingrained narratives.

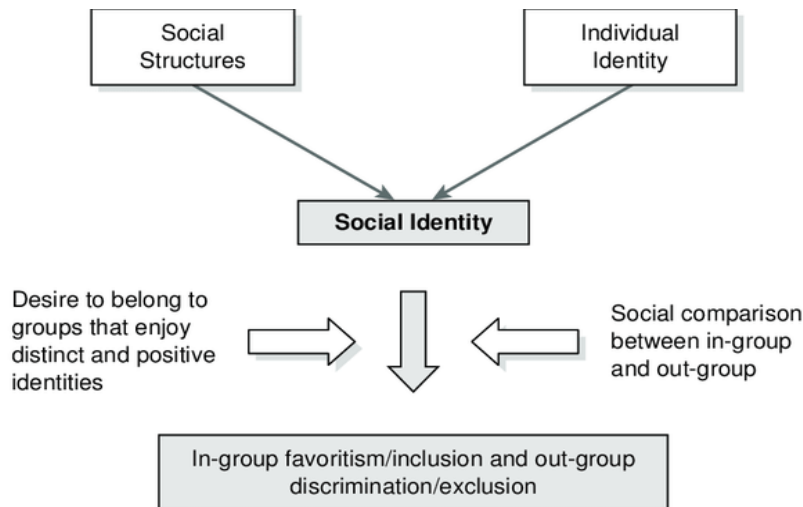
The role of social identity is another pivotal factor, amplifying the divisions between *Dusun I* and *Dusun II* and reinforcing an "us versus them" mentality. Cultural practices and communal narratives act as mechanisms to sharpen these identities, creating a heightened sense of in-group solidarity while fostering animosity toward the out-group [6]. Social Identity Theory (see Figure 1) provides a lens to understand this phenomenon, as it posits that individuals derive significant aspects of their self-concept

from their group affiliations, which often leads to prejudice and intergroup conflict [7]. In Pombewe, these dynamics were particularly evident during peace-making efforts, where mistrust and the persistence of identity-based distinctions hindered long-term reconciliation. The visible markers of identity, such as traditional attire and ceremonial practices, further solidified these divisions during periods of violence.

The ineffectiveness of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms has been a persistent issue in Pombewe. Mediation efforts by local government officials often fail to address the deeper cultural roots of the conflict. While these initiatives have been successful in temporarily reducing violence, they do not tackle the underlying narratives of animosity and mistrust that sustain the conflict. In contrast, customary law has, in certain instances, proven more effective in holding perpetrators accountable. As one community leader shared: “Customary law is enforced—whoever starts the conflict must pay a fine of Rp. 5 million and will also face legal proceedings. So far, customary law has been applied in two cases, and it has been very effective” (ND, Pombewe Village Secretary, interview). Despite the shortcomings of government-led mediation, which often fail to engage cultural leaders or understand the cultural complexities involved, customary law has filled some of the gaps. Informants noted that the lack of cultural sensitivity in peace-making efforts, combined with a deep mistrust of formal authorities, has left many underlying issues unresolved [20, 21]. While traditional methods have helped manage immediate symptoms of conflict, they have fallen short of addressing its deeper cultural and identity-driven causes.

### 3. Discussion

The findings underscore the centrality of cultural identity in shaping and sustaining conflicts in rural communities like Pombewe. Although socio-economic factors such as resource competition and poverty often serve as triggers [22] the cultural dimensions—specifically, the perpetuation of historical grievances and the delineation of social identities—are critical in understanding the persistence and escalation of these conflicts [23]. Popescu and Pudelko [24] said that the deeply rooted nature of these cultural identities, shaped by generational narratives and communal practices, makes resolution particularly challenging. Theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory (SIT) and aspects of Lewis Coser’s conflict theories provide valuable insights into these dynamics [7] (see Figure 1). SIT’s emphasis on intergroup polarization aligns with the observed sharpening of in-group and out-group boundaries in Pombewe, where cultural markers play a significant role in sustaining divisions. Similarly, Coser’s proposition that conflict strengthens internal group cohesion is reflected in the heightened solidarity within each *Dusun* during periods of hostility. However, this increased internal cohesion also presents significant obstacles to reconciliation, as it deepens mistrust and entrenches antagonistic narratives.



**Figure 1.**  
Social identity theory (SIT) framework.

Practically, the study calls for a paradigm shift in conflict resolution strategies. Traditional methods focusing on mediation and peace agreements must be supplemented with culturally sensitive approaches that address the identity-based aspects of conflict [8]. Moreover, recent research suggests that technological literacy and innovative pedagogical models can facilitate meaningful engagement and knowledge transfer in community settings [25]. One crucial step is the involvement of cultural leaders who hold significant sway within the community and can foster dialogue that respects and integrates diverse historical perspectives. Community-centered dialogues provide a platform for addressing past grievances and building a shared vision for peaceful coexistence. Similar approaches in structured educational settings, such as collaborative discussion models, have been shown to improve engagement and reconciliation [26]. Furthermore, Mahmududdin [27] emphasizes that incorporating local rituals and cultural practices into reconciliation efforts can bridge divides, as these hold substantial symbolic and emotional significance for the involved parties. For example, traditional ceremonies that emphasize communal unity and mutual respect could be adapted as tools for conflict resolution, creating opportunities for healing and rebuilding trust.

Despite the comprehensive insights provided by this study, its scope is limited to a single village, and future research should aim to explore comparative studies across similar rural settings in Indonesia to identify broader patterns and strategies. Additionally, integrating quantitative methods alongside qualitative approaches could provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between cultural identity and conflict. The findings also suggest that long-term conflict resolution requires a focus on transforming the narratives that sustain animosity and fostering an environment where shared identities can emerge.

Hence, the conflict in Pombewe exemplifies the intricate interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors in sustaining village-level disputes. Addressing such conflicts requires moving beyond conventional resolution methods to culturally nuanced strategies that prioritize identity reconciliation and community-driven solutions [28]. By acknowledging and addressing the cultural roots of the conflict, policymakers, and community leaders can pave the way for enduring peace in Pombewe and similar conflict-prone regions.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of cultural identity in sustaining village-level conflicts in Pombewe, Indonesia. The findings reveal that deeply ingrained beliefs, historical grievances, and communal loyalties are critical factors that contribute to the persistence and escalation

of these disputes. While socio-economic issues often act as triggers, it is the cultural dimensions that underpin the ongoing tensions, emphasizing the need for conflict resolution strategies that are sensitive to these cultural contexts. The implications of this research extend beyond Pombewe, suggesting that policymakers and community leaders in similar conflict-prone areas should prioritize culturally informed approaches that foster dialogue and reconciliation. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single village, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to explore comparative studies across various rural settings in Indonesia to identify broader patterns and effective strategies for conflict resolution. Additionally, integrating quantitative methods alongside qualitative approaches could provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between cultural identity and conflict dynamics, ultimately contributing to more effective peacebuilding efforts.

### Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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