

FROM SYMBOLIC CONFLICTS TO CULTURAL COLLABORATION

The Role of Local Intelligence in Indonesian Religious Coexistence

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KEYWORD	ABSTRACT
Interreligious coexistence; Symbolic conflict; Local intelligence; Praxis-based dialogue; Conflict transformation; Indonesia	Interreligious relations in Indonesia are often framed through narratives of harmony or overt conflict, while the dynamics of symbolic conflict embedded in everyday social life tend to be overlooked. This article aims to analyze how symbolic interreligious conflicts in Indonesia are mediated and transformed through culturally grounded local intelligence and everyday social practices. Employing a qualitative approach based on literature analysis and conceptual reflection on a range of empirical studies on religious conflict and coexistence in Indonesia, this article examines the forms of symbolic conflict that emerge in ritual contestations, struggles over public space, and the negotiation of religious identities, as well as the cultural mechanisms through which communities mitigate these tensions. The findings demonstrate that interreligious conflict in Indonesia is more frequently manifested as symbolic conflict rather than open physical violence, and that local communities do not rely solely on formal regulations or state intervention in managing such tensions. Instead, they activate forms of local intelligence rooted in local wisdom, everyday social relations, and historical experiences of coexistence. These practices reflect an implicit and contextual form of praxis-based dialogue, functioning as mechanisms of conflict transformation that shift symbolic tensions toward cultural collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is often portrayed as a social laboratory for religious coexistence in the midst of profound ethnic, cultural, and normative diversity. Numerous studies demonstrate that interreligious harmony in Indonesia is not sustained solely by state regulation or theological doctrines, but is deeply rooted in locally embedded socio-cultural mechanisms. Within this context, the concepts of local wisdom and *local intelligence* have become central in explaining how communities pragmatically and contextually negotiate religious difference.

A substantial body of research suggests that local wisdom functions as a foundation for social integration and conflict prevention. Mufidah and Hidayat (2019), Purna (2016), and Erawadi and Setiadi (2024) show that customary values—such as *Dalihan Na Tolu*, village communal ethics, and kinship-based relational norms—create spaces of adaptation toward religious plurality. Within this framework, harmony is understood as an outcome of cultural capacities to adjust, build solidarity, and maintain cross-religious social cohesion. Similar findings are presented by Toisuta et al. (2022), who demonstrate that local traditions such as *Pela Gandong* and *Masohi* in Maluku operate as mediums of reconciliation and interfaith collaboration in post-conflict settings.

However, most studies tend to portray local wisdom as a relatively stable and harmonious value system, implicitly suggesting that interreligious relations unfold without significant symbolic tensions. Conflict is often positioned as an anomaly that must be prevented, rather than an inherent dimension of coexistence itself. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how symbolic differences—such as religious language, rituals, identities, and sacred meanings—are actually negotiated in everyday social interaction.

Conversely, scholarship focusing on *local intelligence* in managing religious conflict has largely developed within security-oriented frameworks. Purwanto (2022) highlights the importance of mobilizing local intelligence through interfaith dialogue, joint prayer, and facilitated communication to mitigate the escalation of ethnoreligious conflict. This approach is extended by Sulvinajayanti et al. (2025) through the Cultural Synergy Model (CPCSM), which emphasizes collaborative engagement among opinion leaders, educational actors, and digital media in maintaining religious harmony. While these studies offer important contributions, *local intelligence* remains predominantly conceptualized as a technocratic instrument for social stabilization. Local knowledge is reduced to an early-warning tool or a managerial mechanism for maintaining order, rather than examined as a living cultural practice that emerges from ongoing social interaction. In other words, the reflective, symbolic, and relational dimensions of *local intelligence* remain underexplored.

Approaches that foreground religious inculturation and religion–culture dialogue also occupy a significant portion of the literature. Supriadin and Pababari (2024) and Maimun et al. (2025) demonstrate that the inculturation of religion into local culture can strengthen religious moderation and social cohesion through shared rituals and communal cultural practices. This perspective underscores that religion never exists in a vacuum; rather, it continually negotiates with the socio-cultural contexts in which it is embedded. Yet, inculturation in these studies is often understood as a linear and peaceful adaptive process, with insufficient attention to symbolic power relations or the potential for competing meanings.

Meanwhile, the normative pluralism proposed by Biyanto (2015) stresses the importance of multiculturalism, emotional intelligence, and ethics of coexistence in sustaining religious diversity in Indonesia. While providing a strong philosophical foundation, this approach remains largely abstract and does not fully capture how pluralism is enacted in everyday social practice—particularly when symbolic differences and religious identities become directly entangled in daily encounters.

More recent research by Kadenun and Abdurrohman (2025) begins to shift attention away from formal regulation and theological dialogue toward everyday practice as the basis for interreligious coexistence, particularly in peripheral regions of Indonesia. Their study shows that economic cooperation, communal solidarity, and routine encounters are often more effective in building cross-religious relations than normative or legalistic approaches. Nevertheless, their findings remain predominantly descriptive and do not yet offer a conceptual framework explaining how such practices transform symbolic tensions into sustained cultural collaboration.

Taken together, the literature reveals that although the importance of local wisdom and *local intelligence* in sustaining interreligious harmony in Indonesia has been widely affirmed, an analytical gap persists in understanding the transformative processes that link symbolic conflict to cultural collaboration. Most studies sharply separate conflict from harmony, treating them as mutually exclusive conditions rather than as interconnected points along the same social continuum.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how *local intelligence* operates as a cultural mechanism enabling communities to move from symbolic tension toward interreligious cooperation. Rather than viewing symbolic conflict as a failure of coexistence, this article conceptualizes it as an arena of meaning negotiation that can open pathways for cultural collaboration. In doing so, the study not only expands understandings of religious coexistence in

Indonesia but also offers an alternative perspective that positions *local intelligence* as a living, reflective, and socially embedded practice grounded in the everyday experiences of communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates the sociology of religion, cultural anthropology, and conflict resolution studies. The framework is designed to analyze how interreligious symbolic conflict does not necessarily lead to social disintegration, but can be transformed into cultural collaboration through the operation of *local intelligence*. Four major theoretical approaches are employed as analytical tools.

First, Symbolic Conflict in Interreligious Relations. Interreligious conflict does not always manifest as physical violence or overt confrontation; rather, it often operates at the symbolic level—through differing meanings, rituals, identities, and truth claims. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic conflict (1989, 1999) and the work of Hoffman et al. (1993), religious symbols function as cultural capital contested within social space. When particular symbols are perceived as threatening the legitimacy or dominance of other groups, conflict becomes difficult to avoid.

In the Indonesian context, symbolic conflict frequently appears in controversies surrounding the construction of houses of worship, divergent ritual expressions in public space, or competing interpretations of local traditions associated with particular religious identities. Such conflicts are latent yet hold the potential for escalation if not mediated through adaptive social mechanisms. For this reason, symbolic conflict theory is used here to identify forms of interreligious tension that are not always visible as open conflict, but nonetheless significantly affect social relations.

Second, Local Intelligence as Social and Cultural Capital. In this study, *local intelligence* is understood as the collective capacity of local communities to read social situations, interpret differences, and formulate adaptive strategies rooted in local knowledge. This understanding aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capital (1989) and is further developed through perspectives on local wisdom (Geertz, 1988; Suparlan, 2004).

Local intelligence encompasses not only customary knowledge and traditional values, but also relational intelligence, symbolic sensitivity, and social negotiation skills that emerge from historical experiences of living together. In the context of religious coexistence, local intelligence functions as an informal mechanism that enables communities to reduce symbolic tensions without erasing theological differences.

Within this framework, the article examines how local practices—such as communal rituals, economic cooperation, shared cultural language, and local social ethics—serve as forms of cultural capital that simultaneously mitigate conflict and build cross-religious solidarity.

Third, Praxis-Based Dialogue and Cultural Collaboration. Distinct from formal interfaith dialogue that is theological and elite-driven, this article adopts the concept of *praxis-based dialogue* as articulated by Leonard Swidler (2014) and Catherine Cornille (in Knitter, 2013). Praxis-based dialogue foregrounds everyday interactions as the primary locus of interfaith encounter, where practical cooperation matters more for shaping social relations than doctrinal agreement.

Within this perspective, cultural collaboration is understood as a form of non-verbal dialogue expressed through collective actions—such as shared customary celebrations, cooperative labor (*gotong royong*), or cross-religious participation in local rituals. Such collaboration enables mutual recognition without diluting the religious identities of the actors involved.

This theoretical lens is essential for explaining the shift from symbolic conflict to pragmatic coexistence, in which differences of faith are not negated but negotiated through shared cultural practices.

Fourth, Conflict Transformation and Dynamic Coexistence. To interpret the shift in interreligious relations from tension to collaboration, the article draws on Johan Galtung's theory of conflict transformation (2001). Unlike conflict resolution, which aims merely to end conflict, conflict transformation emphasizes changes in social relations, meaning structures, and long-term interaction patterns. From this perspective, religious coexistence is understood as a dynamic condition continually shaped through processes of social transformation.

Local intelligence acts as a catalyst for transforming symbolic conflict into opportunities for social learning and cultural creativity. Harmony is thus not defined as the absence of conflict, but as the community's capacity to manage difference constructively.

These four theoretical approaches are synthesized to construct a comprehensive analytical framework. Symbolic conflict serves as the point of departure; local intelligence operates as a mediating mechanism; praxis-based dialogue and cultural collaboration constitute the operational arena of transformation; and conflict transformation theory explains the longer-term shifts in interreligious relations.

Through this framework, the article does not merely analyze how interreligious conflicts may be prevented, but also how symbolic differences can become sources of cultural collaboration that strengthen social cohesion. This theoretical architecture is subsequently employed as the principal analytical tool for examining empirical findings and assessing the strategic role of local intelligence in sustaining religious coexistence in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative–interpretive approach employing a critical literature study design combined with conceptual–reflective analysis. This methodological orientation was selected because the aim of the research is not to statistically measure levels of tolerance or frequencies of conflict, but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of how *local intelligence* operates as a socio-cultural mechanism in transforming symbolic conflict into interreligious cultural collaboration. The primary data consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and relevant empirical research on symbolic conflict, local wisdom, praxis-based dialogue, and religious coexistence in Indonesia.

The research process proceeded through three major stages. First, data collection and source selection were carried out purposively, considering both theoretical relevance and empirical contributions to the topic. The analyzed materials include studies on interreligious conflict and harmony, the role of local wisdom, and cross-faith cultural collaboration across diverse Indonesian contexts.

Second, a critical reading and thematic categorization were conducted, mapping previous research findings into analytical themes such as symbolic conflict, local adaptive mechanisms, forms of praxis-based dialogue, and transformations in social relations. This stage enabled the identification of recurring patterns as well as contextual variations in practices of religious coexistence.

Third, a theoretical synthesis was undertaken by situating the thematic findings within the study's established theoretical framework. At this stage, the concepts of symbolic conflict, local intelligence, praxis-based dialogue, and conflict transformation were employed as analytical tools to interpret how local communities in Indonesia manage religious differences in everyday life. The analysis does not seek to produce universal generalizations; rather, it aims to develop a contextual and reflective conceptual understanding.

Through this methodological design, the article contributes to the enrichment of theoretical

discussions on religious coexistence while offering an analytical framework that may inform future empirical studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that religious coexistence in Indonesia cannot be understood as a static and conflict-free condition, but rather as a dynamic social process that is continuously negotiated through symbolic interaction and cultural practice. The central outcome of this study demonstrates that symbolic conflict among religious groups is an inherent feature of plural societies, yet does not necessarily result in social disintegration. On the contrary, in many local contexts, symbolic conflict becomes a starting point for strengthening *local intelligence*, which in turn facilitates cross-religious cultural collaboration.

Symbolic Conflict as an Inevitable Social Reality

The literature review reveals that interreligious conflict in Indonesia more frequently materializes as symbolic conflict rather than overt physical violence. Symbolic conflict refers to contests over meaning embedded in religious and cultural symbols that operate within social space, either latently or openly. In the Indonesian context, such symbols do not merely represent religious expression but are intertwined with ethnic identity, local history, and power relations at the community level. As a result, symbolic differences are often perceived as threats to established social orders—even in the absence of explicit confrontational intent.

One of the most common forms of symbolic conflict concerns contests over public space, such as disputes over the construction of houses of worship, the use of loudspeakers, or the performance of religious rituals in communal areas. Several studies show that objections to the construction of houses of worship are rarely grounded in theological arguments, but rather in the symbolism of space—namely, questions of who is “entitled” to be visible and present in particular public domains (Hefner, 2011; Mujiburrahman, 2006). In this context, a house of worship is not merely a physical building but a symbol of presence, dominance, and social recognition of a religious group. When such symbols are perceived as shifting majority-minority relations, tensions emerge in the form of social resistance.

Symbolic conflict also emerges through differing interpretations of local rituals and traditions. In many regions across Indonesia, cultural practices such as harvest rituals, customary ceremonies, or ancestral veneration become arenas of semantic contestation between formal religious institutions and local cultural traditions. When one group interprets these practices as elements of cultural heritage, while another condemns them as religious deviation, cultural symbols are converted into sources of tension (Beatty, 2001; Supriadin & Pababari, 2024). In such cases, the conflict does not originate from doctrinal texts but from divergent readings of cultural symbols attached to religious identity.

In the religious domain, mosques often serve as crucial loci of symbolic conflict, especially between traditionalist Muslim groups and Salafi movements. Jahroni (2018) demonstrates that disputes over Islamic ritual practices—such as pilgrimage to graves (*ziyarah*), *tahlilan*, or the celebration of Islamic holidays—extend beyond theological debate and involve the politicization of mosques as symbols of religious authority. The Salafi emphasis on doctrinal purification and textual literalism challenges longstanding local Islamic traditions. Consequently, traditionalist groups are compelled to expand and reaffirm the legitimacy of their ritual practices as components of Indonesian Islamic identity (Jamhari & Jahroni, 2004). Here, the mosque becomes more than a space of worship; it becomes a symbolic arena in which truth claims and religious authority are negotiated.

Contestation over public space also unfolds at the intersection of politics and culture,

particularly since the implementation of decentralization and Law No. 6/2014 on Villages. Tamrin et al. (2020) note that this regulatory shift has opened new avenues for the expression of local identity while simultaneously generating disputes over the governance of public space and village leadership. Local governments and community actors frequently hold differing interpretations regarding which cultural or religious symbols are appropriate for display in shared public spaces. In many cases, village public spaces become arenas of contention between national development agendas and local identity aspirations, producing symbolic tensions within everyday governance.

The public assertion of religious identity in everyday life further contributes to symbolic conflict. Religious attire, symbolic language in religious celebrations, and moral claims articulated by particular groups are often interpreted by others as hegemonic moves. Purwanto (2022) shows that interreligious frictions are frequently triggered by identity symbols mobilized without sensitivity to local context, thereby generating perceptions of threat among other communities. Similar observations are made by Sulvinajayanti et al. (2025), who emphasize that interreligious conflict at the local level is often provoked by exclusive symbolic representation rather than fundamental theological disagreement.

Moreover, Indonesia's public sphere has become a site of ideological contestation within the dynamics of political Islam. Zuly Qodir (2011) observes that various Islamic groups—modernist, revivalist, and progressive—seek to assert their influence through symbols, discourses, and public practices. In recent developments, both political Islam and popular Islam tend to dominate the public sphere, marginalizing more cultural or contextual forms of Islamic expression. Such symbolic dominance reinforces internal hierarchies within the Muslim community while distancing Muslim groups from religious others, thereby heightening the potential for symbolic conflict.

Taken together, struggles over public space in Indonesia demonstrate that interreligious and intergroup conflict is not primarily rooted in doctrinal disagreement but in contests over meaning, visibility, and symbolic legitimacy. The public sphere becomes a key arena in which religious, cultural, and political symbols intersect and compete. Understanding this dynamic highlights the need for contextually and symbolically sensitive approaches, because governance strategies that ignore symbolic meanings and power relations risk exacerbating rather than mitigating social tension.

From the perspective of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic conflict (1999), religious symbols function as cultural capital contested within social space. Groups that successfully dominate public symbols tend to acquire greater social legitimacy, while others experience marginalization. Consequently, symbolic conflict in Indonesia cannot be separated from power relations, majority–minority histories, and collective memories of past conflict. Religious symbols are sensitive not merely because of their intrinsic meaning but because they represent social position and collective recognition.

In this regard, interreligious conflict in Indonesia is more accurately characterized as a conflict over meaning and representation rather than doctrinal contradiction. This insight is important because it demonstrates that conflict management cannot rely solely on theological dialogue or formal regulation. Instead, socio-cultural mechanisms—such as *local intelligence*—are required to interpret symbolic sensitivities, negotiate meanings, and prevent escalation before tension evolves into overt violence.

Local Intelligence as a Mechanism for Negotiating Conflict

One of the most significant findings of this study concerns the central role of *local intelligence* as an effective social mechanism for mitigating and negotiating symbolic interreligious conflict. Analysis of relevant studies shows that in many Indonesian local contexts, communities do not rely exclusively on formal regulations, state apparatuses, or top–down conflict-resolution schemes. While legal frameworks and state policies remain relevant, the sustainability of interreligious coexistence is

more frequently supported by the community's internal capacity to read social situations, understand symbolic sensitivities, and respond to differences contextually.

Local intelligence operates through the activation of cultural mechanisms rooted in local values, social ethics, and everyday interpersonal relations. These mechanisms include the use of shared cultural language, the reinforcement of customary norms, the maintenance of cross-religious personal ties, and communal practices that emphasize solidarity over identity fragmentation. Historical experiences of living together within shared social spaces produce a form of collective memory regarding symbolic boundaries that must be respected, alongside zones of compromise that enable negotiation without escalating tensions.

Within this framework, *local intelligence* does not function by eliminating conflict but by enabling symbolic negotiation, allowing differences to be acknowledged without absolutization. When tensions arise—for example concerning ritual practices, the use of public space, or the expression of religious identity—local communities tend to prioritize deliberation (*musyawarah*), spatial-temporal adjustments, and culturally acceptable compromises. These practices reveal that social harmony is not constructed through the homogenization of belief, but through the collective capacity to manage difference reflectively and pragmatically.

This finding underscores that *local intelligence* constitutes a crucial form of socio-cultural capital in multicultural contexts such as Indonesia. It acts as a bridge between symbolic tension and cultural collaboration, while serving as a primary buffer for social cohesion in settings where formal state intervention is limited. Strengthening *local intelligence* at the community level thus becomes a strategic element in fostering religious coexistence that is not only stable, but also adaptive to changing social dynamics.

Research on *Dalihan Na Tolu* (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024), *Pela Gandong* in Maluku (Toisuta et al., 2022), and local wisdom in Desa Mbawa (Purna, 2016) demonstrates that *local intelligence* operates as a form of collective social intelligence. Through customary norms, shared cultural language, and relational ethics, communities are able to de-escalate conflict without removing symbolic religious differences. In Bourdieu's (1999) terms, *local intelligence* may be understood as social and cultural capital that facilitates trust and solidarity across identities.

This central role of *local intelligence* in managing symbolic conflict can be further illuminated through the theoretical lenses of praxis-based dialogue and conflict transformation. In the praxis-based approach developed by Swidler (2014) and Cornille (2013), interreligious dialogue does not require formal theological debate or elite institutional forums. Instead, dialogue is most effective when embedded in daily interaction, practical cooperation, and shared engagement in everyday social settings. Here, *local intelligence* functions as a cultural prerequisite for praxis-based dialogue by providing the social vocabulary, relational ethics, and symbolic sensitivity necessary for building cross-faith trust.

In local practice, communities rarely begin dialogue with the question "what do we believe?", but rather with "what can we do together?". Joint economic activities, participation in customary rituals, *gotong royong*, and shared management of public spaces become implicit yet effective forms of dialogue. Through these practices, symbolic religious differences are not erased but situated within broader social relations. *Local intelligence* thus enables grounded praxis-based dialogue in which mutual recognition emerges through shared experiences rather than doctrinal agreement.

Moreover, these findings resonate with conflict transformation theory as developed by Galtung (1996) and Lederach (2003). Within this perspective, conflict is not treated as an anomaly to be extinguished, but as a social reality to be transformed through shifts in relationships, meaning structures, and interaction patterns. *Local intelligence* serves as a transformational mechanism that redirects symbolic conflict from a source of polarization into an opportunity for social learning.

When communities successfully negotiate contested symbols—such as through ritual adjustments, spatial arrangements, or reinterpretation of traditions—conflict ceases to function destructively and instead becomes productive for social cohesion.

From a conflict transformation standpoint, harmony is not defined as the absence of tension but as the collective capacity to manage difference sustainably. *Local intelligence* enables such transformation by building informal mechanisms that are flexible, adaptive, and contextually embedded—features that are often unattainable through legalistic or standardized state interventions. In this sense, praxis-based dialogue and conflict transformation converge within *local intelligence*: praxis provides the arena of everyday interaction, while conflict transformation explains the long-term relational shifts produced by that interaction.

By connecting these empirical findings to both theoretical frameworks, this article argues that religious coexistence in Indonesia does not depend on the elimination of symbolic conflict, but on the ability of local communities to transform it through grounded dialogical practice and living cultural mechanisms. In this respect, *local intelligence* is not merely a local strategy, but a theoretical and practical foundation for a dynamic and sustainable model of religious coexistence. Kadenun and Abdurrohman (2025) reinforce this argument by demonstrating that everyday encounters—such as economic cooperation, participation in customary rituals, and communal solidarity—constitute the primary arenas of praxis-based interreligious dialogue. These practices facilitate mutual recognition without necessitating theological convergence.

Within the praxis-based framework (Cornille, 2013), cultural collaboration functions as a grounded and inclusive medium of cross-faith communication. Such collaboration does not demand symbolic agreement, but a willingness to work together in shared social spaces. These findings support the view that religious coexistence in Indonesia is fundamentally pragmatic and relational rather than normative or ideological.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that religious coexistence in Indonesia cannot be understood solely through normative frames of harmony or the mere absence of conflict. Instead, interreligious relations should be conceptualized as a dynamic social process in which symbolic conflict constitutes an inherent component of interaction within a multicultural society. Such conflict emerges through contested meanings over religious symbols, public space, and cultural practices, all of which intersect with social identities and power relations. However, the central finding of this study asserts that symbolic conflict does not necessarily lead to social disintegration; rather, it can be transformed into cultural collaboration through the activation of *local intelligence*.

Theoretically, this article contributes by positioning *local intelligence* as a key concept in the study of religious coexistence. In contrast to approaches emphasizing formal regulation, theological dialogue, or state intervention, this study shows that the cultural capacities of local communities—shaped by historical experiences of cohabitation, customary values, and everyday social relations—play a more decisive role in mitigating and negotiating symbolic conflict. By linking these findings to theories of praxis-based dialogue and conflict transformation, the article expands current understandings of how interreligious dialogue may unfold implicitly through social and cultural practices, and how conflict may be managed as a long-term process of social learning.

Furthermore, the article advances the development of a dynamic and contextual theoretical perspective on religious coexistence. Harmony is not conceptualized as an ideal condition free from frictions, but rather as the collective ability to manage differences reflectively and adaptively. Within this framework, symbolic conflict is not interpreted as a failure of coexistence, but as part of an ongoing process of negotiating meaning that—when appropriately managed—can strengthen social

cohesion.

Finally, the article opens space for future empirical and comparative research to examine how *local intelligence* operates across diverse local contexts in Indonesia. In doing so, this study not only contributes to the enrichment of theories of interreligious relations but also offers a practical framework for building religious coexistence that is inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable amidst the complexities of Indonesian society.

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