

RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN INDONESIA: REASSESSING GALTUNG'S NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE PEACE

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how the malamang tradition in Minangkabau society continues to preserve its social values despite undergoing cultural shifts in response to contemporary social changes. The study is motivated by the impacts of modernization, changing lifestyles, and cultural commodification, which risk transforming malamang from a collective tradition rich in social and religious values into a merely ceremonial or economically oriented activity. The originality of this research lies in its integration of social value and cultural transformation perspectives, positioning malamang as a living tradition that is capable of adapting to changing circumstances without losing its social functions or its role as a marker of Minangkabau cultural identity. This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical method, incorporating literature review, field observations, and in-depth interviews with traditional leaders and practitioners of the tradition. The findings indicate that although changes have occurred in the methods of implementation, the media employed, and the contexts in which the tradition is performed, malamang continues to function as a medium for strengthening mutual cooperation, reinforcing social solidarity, maintaining social ties, and transmitting cultural values across generations. This study contributes to the advancement of local cultural studies and provides a conceptual foundation for community-based strategies to preserve traditional practices amid ongoing social change.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's religious diversity is frequently discussed through two seemingly contradictory narratives. The first emphasizes everyday coexistence, mutual assistance, local traditions, and interreligious cooperation. The second highlights recurring restrictions, discrimination, disputes over worship spaces, and pressures experienced by minority communities. Both narratives are empirically grounded. The Ministry of Religious Affairs reported that the national Religious Harmony Index reached 77.89 in 2025, the highest score in eleven years of measurement. The index is constructed around tolerance, equality, and cooperation, and therefore captures broad social attitudes and experiences of living together (Ministry of Religious Affairs 2025). At the same time, SETARA Institute documented

260 freedom of religion or belief incidents and 402 actions in 2024, compared with 217 incidents and 329 actions in 2023 (SETARA Institute 2024, 2025). The coexistence of a high harmony index and persistent violations raises a sociological question: what exactly does it mean to describe a religiously diverse society as harmonious?

Recent research shows that harmony is not produced by a single mechanism. Community studies in West Sumatra, Lombok, Bima, Madura, Central Java, Malang, and other regions identify local wisdom, everyday cooperation, shared ceremonies, religious leadership, and intergroup communication as important resources for maintaining peaceful relations (Alwada and Rozi 2022; Wahidah, Sirait, and Kusumaputri 2022; Kurniati and Muthohirin 2023; Sodikin and Umroh 2023; Agung et al. 2024; Takdir and Sumbulah 2024). Quantitative and bibliometric work also suggests that religious moderation in Indonesia is multidimensional, involving religiosity, national commitment, tolerance, accommodation of local culture, education, and social resilience (Subchi et al. 2022; Zaluchu, Widodo, and Kriswanto 2025). These studies challenge the assumption that harmony merely means the absence of open conflict.

The sociology of religion also requires attention to unequal power relations. Gaffar's study of Ahmadiyya communities in Lombok demonstrates how religious authority, local social structures, and majority–minority relations can produce exclusion even where a wider social order appears stable (Gaffar 2023). Research on communication and local religious leadership similarly shows that tolerance depends on the institutional and communicative conditions through which difference is negotiated (Putri 2023; Abadi et al. 2024). More recent governance studies emphasize that interfaith harmony becomes more sustainable when dialogue is connected to collaborative institutions such as local governments, religious organizations, and the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), rather than being treated as an occasional ceremonial activity (Priyanda and Hidayati 2025; Ramdhan et al. 2026).

Johan Galtung's peace theory offers a useful conceptual vocabulary for bringing these findings together. Negative peace refers to the absence or reduction of direct violence, whereas positive peace requires social arrangements that reduce structural inequality and enable human needs to be fulfilled without domination (Galtung 1969, 1996). Galtung later introduced cultural violence to explain how symbols, doctrines, language, and normalized assumptions can legitimize direct or structural harm (Galtung 1990). In a religiously diverse setting, this distinction allows harmony to be examined not only through whether communities fight, but also through whether minorities enjoy equal access, whether institutions protect religious practice fairly, and whether social narratives normalize exclusion.

Some of the present authors previously published a reflective chapter that applied Galtung's framework to Indonesian religious harmony and emphasized the persistence of negative peace (Rizal et al. 2022). That earlier work was based largely on literature and cases available before 2022. Since then, the empirical landscape has changed: national harmony indicators have improved, monitoring organizations have documented new patterns of violations, and a substantial body of local research has described how harmony is produced through culture, communication, and governance. The present article therefore develops a new documentary corpus and a different

analytical problem. Rather than asking whether Indonesia is peaceful or conflictual in general, it asks: (1) how can a high level of aggregate religious harmony coexist with persistent freedom – of – religion violations; (2) which social mechanisms move religious relations from negative toward positive peace; and (3) how can Galtung's violence triangle and conflict – transformation logic clarify the relationship between everyday tolerance and institutional equality? The objective is to formulate a more differentiated sociological model of religious harmony in contemporary Indonesia.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative documentary design. The unit of analysis is not individual respondents but documented patterns of religious interaction, institutional governance, and restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Indonesia. This design is appropriate because the research question concerns the relationship among different types of evidence: national indices, incident monitoring, and empirical case studies from multiple regions. The study does not claim to generate new field – interview data.

The documentary corpus was constructed in three layers. First, the theoretical layer consists of Galtung's foundational texts on violence, negative and positive peace, cultural violence, and conflict transformation (Galtung 1969, 1990, 1996). Second, the empirical layer consists primarily of peer – reviewed studies published from 2022 to 2026 that examine religious moderation, interfaith communication, local wisdom, minority experience, social tolerance, and collaborative governance in Indonesia. Sources were selected when they had a DOI or a stable online journal record and when their findings directly addressed interreligious relations. Third, the contextual layer consists of national data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and SETARA Institute, particularly the 2023 – 2025 monitoring cycle and the 2025 Religious Harmony Index (SETARA Institute 2024, 2025; Kaur and Hasan 2026; Ministry of Religious Affairs 2025).

Analysis proceeded through thematic coding. Evidence was first classified according to Galtung's distinction among direct, structural, and cultural violence. Direct violence referred to observable attacks, intimidation, or disruption of religious activity. Structural violence referred to unequal access, institutional barriers, discriminatory implementation, or governance arrangements that produce asymmetrical opportunities. Cultural violence referred to narratives, symbols, religious interpretations, or taken – for – granted assumptions that legitimize exclusion. The second coding stage identified indicators of negative peace and positive peace. The third stage compared local mechanisms of harmony – including local wisdom, mutual assistance, communication, religious leadership, and collaborative institutions – with patterns of exclusion. Finally, the findings were synthesized using Galtung's conflict – transformation logic to identify pathways from managed coexistence toward more substantive equality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Harmony as an Uneven Social Condition

The first finding is that religious harmony in Indonesia cannot be represented adequately by a single indicator. The 2025 Religious Harmony Index of 77.89 indicates strong aggregate performance in tolerance, equality,

and cooperation (Ministry of Religious Affairs 2025). This is sociologically important because it shows that everyday interreligious relations are not defined predominantly by open hostility. It is consistent with local studies that document mutual cooperation, shared community events, reciprocal participation, and practical accommodation among religious groups (Alwada and Rozi 2022; Azahra 2025). In Galtung's terms, these patterns indicate that negative peace is broadly present: direct interreligious violence is not the normal condition of social life.

However, incident – based monitoring measures a different dimension. SETARA Institute reported 217 incidents and 329 actions affecting freedom of religion or belief in 2023 and 260 incidents with 402 actions in 2024 (SETARA Institute 2024, 2025). Its 2024 monitoring also recorded 73 acts of intolerance by non – state actors, 50 discriminatory actions involving state institutions or officials, and recurring restrictions related to religious expression and worship. The 2025 monitoring report continued to describe violations alongside efforts to strengthen tolerance (Kaur and Hasan 2026). These findings do not logically invalidate the Religious Harmony Index because the instruments answer different questions. An attitude – and experience – based national index can rise while specific groups continue to encounter concentrated restrictions. The key analytical point is therefore distribution: harmony can be high in the aggregate but uneven across places, institutions, and minority positions.

This distinction helps refine the earlier conclusion that Indonesian society simply remained at the stage of negative peace (Rizal et al. 2022). Contemporary evidence suggests a more differentiated picture. Some communities have developed elements of positive peace through cooperation, reciprocal recognition, and inclusive cultural practices. At the same time, other settings retain structural and cultural mechanisms that expose minorities to unequal treatment. The national condition is thus better described as a layered peace formation in which negative peace, positive peace, and residual forms of structural or cultural violence coexist.

Cultural Resources and Everyday Positive Peace

The second finding is that positive peace is often generated from below through cultural and relational practices. In Jorong Purwajaya, West Sumatra, reog and other community cultural activities function as shared social spaces that connect Muslims and non – Muslims and help maintain interreligious relations (Alwada and Rozi 2022). Azahra's more recent study of the same multi – religious setting similarly found that community events, mutual respect, and collective participation strengthen interfaith harmonization (Azahra 2025). These findings are significant because they show that local harmony is not simply tolerance as passive endurance; it is enacted through repeated participation.

Comparable mechanisms appear elsewhere. Kurniati and Muthohirin (2023) show how local wisdom in Bima can transmit tolerance through cultural education. Sodikin and Umroh (2023) describe how local philosophies in Kaloran, Central Java, support a culture – based practice of interreligious tolerance. Agung et al. (2024) demonstrate that local wisdom can operate as cultural capital in interfaith communication, while Takdir and Sumbulah (2024) show that religious teachings and local social practices can reinforce each other in sustaining tolerance. In West Sumatra, Rusyaida et al. (2024) identify attempts to connect religious moderation with Minangkabau

cultural principles. Across these studies, cultural identity does not automatically produce conflict. Under certain conditions, it provides a shared moral vocabulary for cooperation.

From Galtung's perspective, these practices are important because they counter cultural violence. Cultural violence operates when symbols, narratives, or doctrines make exclusion appear legitimate or natural (Galtung 1990). Local wisdom can work in the opposite direction by normalizing reciprocity, hospitality, deliberation, and mutual responsibility. Yet cultural resources should not be romanticized. The existence of a local tradition does not itself guarantee equality; it becomes peace-producing only when different groups can participate without coercion and when cultural narratives do not subordinate minorities. Positive peace therefore requires examining not only whether traditions are preserved, but also who is recognized within them.

Communication, Religious Leadership, and the Social Production of Trust

The third finding concerns communication and intermediary leadership. Putri (2023) found that Muslim and Christian religious figures can reinforce religious moderation by modelling mutual respect and participating in community activities. Abadi et al. (2024), using a quantitative model, found that communication behavior mediates the influence of social prejudice, local wisdom, social piety, and religious identity on tolerance. Their result suggests that even potentially constructive cultural or religious resources require communicative practices characterized by openness and empathy before they translate into tolerance.

This finding has direct implications for Galtung's conflict – transformation approach. Conflict does not disappear merely because parties are instructed to agree. It becomes transformable when actors can articulate needs, recognize each other's legitimacy as social participants, and develop creative arrangements that move beyond incompatible positions (Galtung 1996). Interfaith dialogue is therefore most effective when it is embedded in routine relationships rather than activated only after conflict has escalated. Communication, in this sense, is not an ornamental addition to harmony; it is a mechanism through which categories of 'majority' and 'minority' can be renegotiated in everyday interaction.

At the same time, communication cannot replace structural reform. A community may maintain respectful dialogue while a minority group still faces unequal administrative access. This is where Galtung's distinction between cultural and structural violence becomes analytically useful. Dialogue may reduce prejudice and cultural legitimation of exclusion, but positive peace requires institutional arrangements that make equal recognition durable even when interpersonal relations deteriorate.

Structural Violence and the Gap between Formal Harmony and Lived Equality

The fourth finding is that the most persistent limitation on positive peace lies at the structural level. Galtung defines structural violence as harm or inequality built into social arrangements rather than caused solely by an identifiable attacker (Galtung 1969). In the Indonesian context, this

perspective directs attention toward the distribution of institutional access, the implementation of regulations, the treatment of minority religious organizations, and the ability of communities to use worship spaces safely. Gaffar's (2023) analysis of Ahmadiyya persecution illustrates how formal religious authority and local social power can combine to marginalize a minority community even without continuous direct violence.

The contemporary monitoring data reinforce this point. SETARA Institute's 2024 report distinguishes actions by state and non-state actors and records both intolerance and institutional discrimination (SETARA Institute 2025). The important analytical issue is not to equate every administrative dispute with structural violence, but to ask whether rules and institutional practices systematically distribute religious rights and opportunities unequally. When a group repeatedly depends on majority approval for access that other groups obtain routinely, the problem exceeds interpersonal prejudice. It becomes a question of institutional asymmetry.

This explains why a society may score well on general tolerance while still falling short of positive peace. Aggregate harmony measures describe the broad social climate; structural analysis identifies concentrated disadvantages. Positive peace therefore requires more than reducing the number of confrontations. It requires procedures that are predictable, transparent, equally applied, and capable of protecting minority practice without making basic rights contingent on local power. This is the point at which the sociology of religion intersects with governance: the durability of harmony depends on how social recognition is translated into institutional guarantees.

From Dialogue to Institutionalized Peacebuilding

The fifth finding is that recent research increasingly moves beyond symbolic dialogue toward collaborative governance. Priyanda and Hidayati (2025) conceptualize interfaith harmony as a product of multi-actor collaboration rather than a task of government or religious elites alone. Ramdhan et al. (2026) similarly show that FKUB can function as an institutional mediator connecting local government, religious organizations, and community leaders. Their study is particularly relevant to Galtung's positive peace because it describes harmony as institutionalized social cohesion, not merely the absence of conflict.

This governance perspective also clarifies the role of local wisdom. Nawir et al. (2025) show that culture can become an engine of interfaith harmony when it is linked to religious moderation and social inclusion. Zaluchu, Widodo, and Kriswanto (2025) find that Indonesian scholarship on religious moderation has increasingly shifted from conceptual discussion toward operational themes involving education, local culture, and social resilience. The emerging pattern is therefore integrative: culture generates shared meanings, communication builds trust, religious leaders provide moral brokerage, and institutions stabilize cooperation.

For Galtung, peacebuilding becomes substantive when the structures that reproduce conflict are transformed rather than merely suppressed. Applied to Indonesian religious relations, this implies a progression from conflict prevention to institutionalized inclusion. Preventing an immediate confrontation is necessary, but positive peace requires mechanisms that continue to function after public attention disappears. Collaborative forums,

transparent complaint procedures, interfaith networks, inclusive education, and consistent administrative practices are therefore not separate from harmony; they are its structural infrastructure.

Table 1. Analytical mapping of religious harmony through Galtung's framework

Dimension	Observed pattern	Galtungian interpretation	Peacebuilding implication
Negative peace	High aggregate harmony; everyday coexistence; low prevalence of open interreligious conflict in many settings.	Direct violence is restrained, but deeper inequalities may remain.	Maintain prevention while moving beyond mere stability.
Cultural violence	Stigma, exclusivist narratives, or religious – cultural justifications for unequal treatment.	Ideas and symbols can legitimize structural or direct harm.	Promote inclusive interpretation, interfaith communication, and shared cultural narratives.
Structural violence	Unequal institutional access, discriminatory implementation, or barriers affecting minority practice.	Inequality is embedded in procedures and power relations.	Standardize fair procedures, accountability, and equal protection.
Positive peace	Mutual cooperation, reciprocal recognition, inclusive local wisdom, collaborative governance.	Peace is produced through just and supportive social relations.	Institutionalize cooperation so inclusion does not depend on temporary goodwill.

TRANSCEND as a Multi-Level Framework for Indonesian Religious Harmony

The synthesis above allows Galtung's TRANSCEND – oriented conflict transformation to be adapted to the Indonesian context without reducing it to a single mediation technique. At the first level, conflict mapping must identify actors, goals, contradictions, and power asymmetries. A dispute over a worship space, for example, should not be framed only as a disagreement between two religious groups if administrative rules, political incentives, or unequal access shape the conflict. Mapping therefore prevents structural causes from being misidentified as purely theological hostility.

At the second level, legitimate human and civic needs must be distinguished from maximalist group demands. This is consistent with Galtung's emphasis on moving beyond zero – sum positions. In religious conflicts, the basic needs at stake may include security, freedom of worship, social recognition, neighborhood stability, and equal treatment. Treating these needs as legitimate does not require accepting every claim made by every actor. It requires identifying arrangements in which the fulfillment of

one group's basic rights does not depend on the humiliation or exclusion of another.

At the third level, creative bridging requires institutional as well as cultural solutions. Local wisdom and religious leadership can create moral legitimacy for coexistence; communication can reduce prejudice; and collaborative institutions can convert temporary agreements into stable procedures. This is where negative peace can become positive peace. The transformation is incomplete if violence stops but unequal access remains, or if an agreement is reached while stigmatizing narratives continue to circulate. A Galtungian strategy therefore requires simultaneous work on direct, structural, and cultural dimensions.

The Indonesian evidence suggests that such a multi-level approach is realistic because elements of it already exist in different localities. Community traditions generate cooperation, interfaith actors sustain communication, and FKUB-type institutions provide mediation and coordination (Putri 2023; Agung et al. 2024; Priyanda and Hidayati 2025; Ramdhan et al. 2026). The challenge is not the absence of peace resources but their uneven distribution and institutionalization. The sociological task is consequently to identify how local peace practices can be translated into durable rights, procedures, and cross-group trust without erasing religious difference.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to explain how Indonesia can simultaneously display a high level of aggregate religious harmony and persistent violations of freedom of religion or belief. The answer lies in distinguishing among levels and forms of peace. The 2025 Religious Harmony Index indicates that tolerance, equality, and cooperation have strengthened in the national aggregate, while incident monitoring shows that particular groups and localities still encounter direct, structural, or cultural forms of exclusion. These findings are not mutually exclusive. They describe different layers of the same social reality.

Galtung's framework clarifies that negative peace is necessary but insufficient. Indonesia has substantial resources for positive peace: local wisdom, everyday mutual assistance, communication across religious boundaries, religious leaders who act as brokers, and collaborative institutions that mediate diversity. Yet positive peace remains uneven where institutional access is asymmetrical, minority rights depend excessively on local approval, or cultural narratives continue to legitimize unequal treatment. Religious harmony should therefore be understood as a dynamic process of transforming relationships, structures, and cultural meanings rather than as a static national condition.

The study has two limitations. First, it is based on documentary evidence and cannot substitute for direct observation of how actors experience harmony and exclusion in specific localities. Second, national indices and civil-society monitoring reports use different units, methods, and normative frameworks, so their figures should not be mechanically combined. Future research should conduct comparative field studies across provinces or cities with contrasting harmony profiles, examine how minorities experience administrative procedures in practice, and test whether collaborative institutions such as FKUB produce measurable changes over time.

Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for determining when everyday tolerance becomes durable positive peace.

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