



RELIGION AND LOCAL CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INDONESIA'S PLURAL SOCIETY: A SOCIOLOGICAL THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

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Abstract

Religion is deeply involved in the construction and transmission of local cultural identity in Indonesia. However, its relationship with local culture is neither uniformly integrative nor inherently conflictual. Previous studies have documented particular communities, traditions, and religious encounters, but the mechanisms through which religion contributes to cultural continuity, social integration, and contestation remain insufficiently synthesized. This article examines how religion participates in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of local cultural identity in Indonesia's plural society. It uses a qualitative structured thematic review of scholarly publications located through Google Scholar, Garuda, and Crossref using Indonesian and English search terms. The review primarily covers publications from 2016 to 2025 while retaining earlier works required for conceptual and historical interpretation. The sources were analyzed across four domains: normative values, ritual and symbolic practices, institutional mediation, and cultural adaptation or contestation. The analysis identifies four connected mechanisms. Religious values supply moral frameworks for interpreting communal life; rituals and symbols embody collective belonging; religious and cultural institutions authorize and transmit shared meanings; and adaptive negotiation enables communities to respond to social and cultural change. These mechanisms can support integration when communities sustain reciprocal participation, institutional recognition, and negotiated coexistence. They may also reinforce social boundaries when authority is concentrated, local practices are delegitimized, or political interests intensify religious differentiation. The article develops a conditional sociological account of religion–culture relations that avoids treating religion as either an automatic source of harmony or an inevitable cause of conflict.

Keywords: *Religion; Local Cultural Identity; Religious Pluralism; Sociology of Religion; Indonesia*

A. Introduction

Indonesia's cultural and religious diversity is not simply a demographic characteristic; it is continually produced and negotiated through everyday relationships, public institutions, rituals, and community traditions. Religion occupies an important place in this process because it provides moral vocabularies, collective symbols, and institutional practices through which communities interpret social life. At the same time, Indonesia's accommodation of religious diversity does not automatically eliminate

unequal recognition or disagreement over legitimate religious expression. Religious multiculturalism therefore involves both the recognition of difference and continuing negotiations over belonging, authority, citizenship, and participation in public life (Hoon, 2017; Menchik, 2014; Parker & Hoon, 2013).

Within this social setting, local cultural identity can be understood as a shared but evolving sense of belonging expressed through *adat* (customary traditions), language, ritual, collective memory, kinship, and locally meaningful symbols. Such an identity is inherited across generations, but it is not preserved unchanged. Communities reinterpret inherited practices as they respond to religious institutions, state policies, migration, education, and wider social change. Studies of the Kaharingan community in Kalimantan, for example, demonstrate that religious identity and ritual practices have been modified in response to institutional recognition and pressures toward religious orthodoxy (Herrmans, 2017). Religion and local culture should therefore not be treated as separate or fixed domains. Their relationship is better understood as an ongoing process of adaptation, selection, and reinterpretation.

This relationship is visible in various Indonesian communities. The Sapan-Aprilan celebration in Central Java combines Christian narratives, local cultural texts, and civic meanings, illustrating how a transformed ritual can retain elements of Javanese identity while creating space for interreligious engagement (Lattu, 2025). Similarly, the Nyadran tradition in Getas Village is practiced by Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians and functions as a shared cultural setting in which religious values and communal relationships are negotiated (Prihantoro, 2025). These cases suggest that religious and cultural boundaries are neither completely separate nor fully merged. Local actors selectively maintain, modify, or contest particular practices according to their social circumstances.

Nevertheless, the relationship between religion and local cultural identity is not invariably harmonious. Religion can strengthen solidarity and provide ethical foundations for collective life, but religious classifications and claims to orthodoxy can also marginalize beliefs or practices considered insufficiently legitimate. Menchik (2014), for instance, shows that religiously grounded nationalism in Indonesia can accommodate plurality while still excluding heterodox communities. Hoon (2017) similarly argues that religious difference must be examined as a substantive dimension of Indonesian multiculturalism rather than being reduced to ethnic or cultural diversity. These studies indicate that the social effects of religion depend on who defines acceptable practice, which institutions exercise authority, and how communities negotiate competing interpretations.

Globalization further complicates these processes. Digital communication, migration, consumer culture, and transnational religious movements expose local communities to new identities and moral frameworks. These influences may weaken certain inherited practices, but they can also encourage communities to redefine and publicly reaffirm local traditions. Consequently, globalization should not be understood only as a force that erodes local culture. It also creates new arenas in which cultural

identity is selected, reconstructed, and communicated. Indonesian scholarship has highlighted the need to protect local cultural knowledge while avoiding a rigid opposition between local and global values (Suradi, 2018). Institutional responses also matter: religious education, for example, is implemented through negotiations among national policies, school actors, religious diversity, and local contexts rather than through a uniform model (Harjatanaya, 2025).

Empirical scholarship on religion and local cultural identity in Indonesia has developed primarily through studies of particular communities, rituals, and institutions. Herrmans (2017) examined how institutional recognition and religious orthodoxy reshaped Kaharingan identity and ritual practices in Kalimantan. Rofiq (2024) traced continuity and change in the Javanese Suroan tradition, while Hanif et al. (2024) investigated the role of the *temanten mandi* ritual in sustaining cultural values and community resilience in Central Java. Other studies have analyzed interreligious dimensions of local traditions: Lattu (2025) interpreted the Saparan-Aprilan celebration as an interreligious civil sphere, whereas Prihantoro (2025) examined the participation of Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians in the Nyadran tradition. At the institutional level, Harjatanaya (2025) demonstrated how religious education is negotiated through national policy, school practices, religious diversity, and local contexts. Collectively, these studies show that religion interacts with local identity through ritual adaptation, institutional mediation, cultural continuity, and interreligious participation. However, because they concentrate on particular communities, traditions, or institutions, their findings have not yet been sufficiently integrated into a broader sociological explanation of the mechanisms through which religion forms, maintains, and transforms local cultural identity. It also remains necessary to distinguish the conditions under which this relationship supports social integration from those under which it produces boundary-making, negotiation, or contestation.

To address this analytical gap, this article examines the processes through which religion participates in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of local cultural identity in Indonesia's plural society. The analysis is guided by three questions: (1) through what values, rituals, symbols, and institutions does religion contribute to local cultural identity; (2) under what conditions does the relationship between religion and local culture support social integration or generate contestation; and (3) how do globalization and institutional mediation reshape this relationship? By organizing relevant scholarship around normative, ritual-symbolic, institutional, and adaptive mechanisms, this structured thematic review develops a sociological synthesis that conceptualizes local cultural identity as a dynamic outcome of religious meaning, cultural inheritance, institutional authority, and social change.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative, structured thematic literature review to examine how religion participates in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of local cultural identity in Indonesia's plural society. The units of analysis were the

arguments, concepts, and findings reported in scholarly publications addressing the relationship among religion, local culture, collective identity, religious diversity, and social change. A structured review was selected because the study sought to compare and synthesize existing knowledge rather than collect primary data or estimate an intervention effect. The design follows the principle that a literature review must make its selection and synthesis procedures sufficiently transparent while remaining proportionate to its analytical purpose (Snyder, 2019). The article therefore does not claim to provide an exhaustive systematic review or a statistical representation of all scholarship on religion and local identity.

The literature search used Google Scholar, Garuda, and Crossref to locate Indonesian- and English-language publications. The Indonesian search terms included “agama,” “identitas budaya lokal,” “sosiologi agama,” “pluralisme agama,” “hubungan agama dan budaya,” and “masyarakat plural.” The corresponding English terms included “religion,” “local cultural identity,” “sociology of religion,” “religious pluralism,” “religion and local culture,” and “religion and plural society.” These terms were used individually and in relevant combinations. The search prioritized publications issued between 2016 and 2025, while earlier studies were retained when they provided a necessary conceptual or empirical foundation for the analysis. Eligible sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and relevant proceedings that directly examined religious values, rituals, cultural identity, institutional mediation, interreligious relations, cultural adaptation, or contestation in Indonesia. Popular articles, news reports, opinion pieces, duplicate records, publications without traceable bibliographic information, and sources that mentioned religion or culture only incidentally were excluded. Each retained source was checked for identifiable authorship, publication information, thematic relevance, and, where available, a valid DOI or stable publisher record. The final analytical corpus comprised 28 substantive publications. Snyder (2019) and Thomas and Harden (2008) were used only to justify the review design and thematic synthesis procedure. The final reference set was bibliographically rechecked in July 2026.

The selected publications were analyzed through thematic synthesis. The analysis first identified each source’s research context, object of study, principal argument, and account of the relationship between religion and local culture. The findings were then compared across four analytical domains derived from the research questions: normative values, ritual and symbolic practices, institutional mediation, and cultural adaptation or contestation. Attention was given not only to convergent accounts of social integration and cultural continuity but also to evidence of exclusion, disagreement, reinterpretation, and conflict. Following the logic of thematic synthesis, descriptive patterns were compared and organized into broader analytical themes without treating findings from different communities as directly equivalent (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The resulting synthesis is therefore interpretive and comparative: it identifies recurring mechanisms and tensions in the literature but does not establish causal effects or claim that the reviewed cases represent every religious or cultural community in Indonesia.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Local Cultural Identity as a Dynamic Social Formation

The reviewed literature treats local cultural identity as a socially produced sense of belonging rather than a fixed collection of inherited customs. Its principal elements include *adat* (customary traditions), language, ritual, collective memory, moral expectations, and symbols through which communities distinguish themselves from others. Brata (2016) presents local wisdom as a resource for collective and national identity, while Setyaningrum (2018) argues that local culture provides communities with values and ethical orientations amid social change. These accounts support the view that cultural identity is maintained through repeated social recognition, not merely through the continued existence of cultural objects. For followers of indigenous religions, *adat* may also institutionalize relational understandings of dignity that connect human, nonhuman, and communal relations. This illustrates why customary identity cannot always be separated from religious belonging or reduced to cultural heritage alone (Maarif, 2023).

The synthesis also indicates that continuity does not mean the absence of change. Communities may preserve the name or outward form of a tradition while modifying its religious meaning, institutional location, or social function. Herrmans (2017), for example, demonstrates that Kaharingan communities adjusted rituals and religious categories in response to state recognition and pressures toward orthodoxy. In an introduction to a thematic cluster, Rodemeier (2017) frames negotiations between *adat* and officially recognized religion as expressions of individual agency under changing institutional conditions and personal religious commitments. Local cultural identity is therefore better understood as a process of selective continuity: communities retain certain practices, reinterpret others, and sometimes abandon forms that no longer receive social or religious legitimacy.

This interpretation shifts the analytical emphasis from preservation alone to the social processes through which identity is authorized, practiced, and reinterpreted. Inheritance remains important, but identity also depends on present-day actors, institutions, and relations of authority. The sociological issue is not only whether a tradition survives, but who is authorized to define its meaning and which elements are recognized as cultural, religious, or inappropriate.

2. Religion as a Normative and Symbolic Resource

A recurrent pattern in the literature is that religion contributes to local cultural identity by providing moral vocabularies, collective symbols, and narratives of belonging. Values such as responsibility, mutual assistance, gratitude, dignity, and social obligation may be articulated through religious language and incorporated into community practices. Religion thus offers resources through which inherited customs can be explained, justified, or revised. However, the literature does not establish that these values arise exclusively from religion or that religious commitment automatically produces socially desirable conduct.

Ritual constitutes a particularly important connection between normative meaning and collective identity. Rumahuru (2018) argues that ritual functions as a medium through which communities construct and reproduce identity. Comparable evidence appears in Andries's (2018) study of the *pukul sapu* ritual in Maluku, where religious and customary meanings are integrated through adaptation, social relations, and negotiation. The case supports an understanding of ritual as a medium through which cultural and religious identities are constructed rather than merely inherited. Its significance lies not only in repeated performance but also in its capacity to recall shared histories, express relationships, and make collective membership visible. Lattu's (2025) study of the Saparan-Aprilan celebration similarly shows how religious narratives and local cultural texts can be combined in a shared public performance. Prihantoro (2025) finds that the Nyadran tradition in Getas Village provides a setting in which Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians participate in a locally meaningful practice.

These studies indicate that religion contributes to cultural identity through mediated social practices rather than through doctrine alone. Religious values become socially consequential when they are embedded in recognizable symbols, institutions, and forms of participation. The same process, however, can also define boundaries. A ritual may strengthen solidarity among participants while distinguishing insiders from people whose beliefs or practices are considered incompatible. Religion's normative role should therefore be analyzed in relation to participation, recognition, and authority rather than assumed to be uniformly integrative.

3. Ritual Negotiation between Religion and Local Culture

The literature does not support a simple opposition between religion and local tradition. Several studies instead describe continuity, adaptation, hybridization, and reinterpretation. Rofiq (2024) demonstrates that the Javanese Suroan tradition has undergone both continuity and change as Islamic understandings of Muharram interacted with preexisting Javanese practices. Rostiyati et al. (2024) similarly show that the Sundanese *mikul lodong* ceremony combines a local ritual setting with Islamic meanings and the transmission of moral, social, and religious values. Hanif et al. (2024) interpret the *temanten mandi* ritual at Sendang Modo as a source of cultural resilience that connects religious meaning, social relations, and community livelihoods.

Christian communities display comparable processes of cultural negotiation. Halawa and Suhadi (2025) describe Christian cultural hybridity as an encounter between Christian teaching and locally situated symbolic and social practices. Lattu's (2025) analysis of Saparan-Aprilan further shows that religious transformation does not necessarily erase earlier cultural meanings. In that case, Javanese elements remained embedded in a celebration framed through Christian narratives and interreligious civic participation.

These examples support the argument that religion and culture can interact adaptively. Nevertheless, the term *syncretism* should not be used as though it describes a uniform or uncontested process. Communities may disagree over whether adaptation

represents legitimate contextualization, cultural preservation, or an unacceptable modification of religious teaching. Herrmans (2017) shows that pressures toward orthodoxy can produce different strategies even among communities sharing a related religious tradition. McDaniel (2017) likewise demonstrates that Indonesian Hinduism has been reformulated through religious institutions, educational curricula, state categories, and local experimentation.

Ritual adaptation is thus neither the automatic replacement of local culture nor the unproblematic blending of two stable systems. It is a negotiated process in which religious authorities, customary leaders, state institutions, and community members may assign different meanings to the same practice. This explains why similar forms of cultural accommodation can produce acceptance in one setting and disagreement in another.

4. Institutional Mediation and Intergenerational Transmission

Religious institutions mediate the relationship between doctrine and local cultural identity. Schools, churches, mosques, pesantren, religious organizations, and customary institutions select the values and practices to be transmitted to subsequent generations. Their role is not limited to preserving existing traditions. They classify practices, authorize interpretations, and determine which local elements can be incorporated into religious education or public worship.

Harjatanaya (2025) demonstrates that religious education in Indonesia is implemented through negotiation among national policy, school practices, religious composition, and local circumstances. Schools do not translate national policy into a single uniform practice; they make contextual decisions concerning prayers, greetings, worship spaces, dress, and accommodation of religious minorities. McDaniel (2017) provides a related example from Indonesian Hinduism, where educational curricula and religious organizations participated in reformulating theology, ritual, and public religious identity. Herrmans (2017) shows that official recognition can similarly encourage the rationalization and modification of ritual practices.

Institutional mediation can therefore support cultural continuity while simultaneously narrowing acceptable forms of expression. Religious education may connect ethical teaching with local knowledge, but it may also standardize traditions that were previously diverse. Rodemeier (2017) notes that increased doctrinal purification can place heterogeneous local practices under pressure from more standardized understandings of religion. The institutional transmission of culture is consequently selective and authority-laden rather than a neutral transfer of heritage.

These findings indicate that the integration of local culture into religious education requires attention to representation, participation, and interpretive authority. Such integration may be constructive, but it requires consultation with the communities whose traditions are being represented. Without this participation, local content can be reduced to decorative symbols while institutional authorities retain exclusive control over its meaning.

5. Religious Pluralism, Social Integration, and Boundary-Making

The literature presents religious pluralism as a conditional social process rather than a direct consequence of demographic diversity. Iqbal (2023) identifies cooperation, coexistence with social boundaries, and potential conflict within an urban religiously diverse community. Hoon (2017) likewise argues that religious difference must be treated as a substantive dimension of Indonesian multiculturalism. Recognition of diversity is therefore distinct from equal participation, and peaceful coexistence does not necessarily eliminate social distance or unequal authority.

Local traditions can create opportunities for repeated interaction. Lattu (2025) and Prihantoro (2025) describe rituals in which people from different religious backgrounds participate in shared cultural performances. Such settings may support integration when participants recognize the tradition as legitimate, share practical responsibilities, and have space to maintain distinct religious identities. Bräuchler's (2009) analysis of the revival of *pela* traditions in post-conflict Maluku, however, demonstrates that traditions presented as instruments of reconciliation may contain both integrative and exclusionary elements. Local culture cannot therefore be assumed to resolve religious conflict independently of power relations and historical divisions.

Research on religious attitudes further challenges a uniformly affirmative account. Using nationally representative survey data, Prasetyo and Halimatusa'diyah (2024) found that religiosity was not, by itself, associated with tolerance toward ordinary non-Muslims. Mietzner and Muhtadi (2020) also identified a mismatch between the pluralist public position of Nahdlatul Ulama's leadership and the attitudes of parts of its grassroots constituency. These findings indicate that institutional discourse, personal religiosity, and everyday tolerance are analytically distinct. Related evidence indicates that religious schemas and the social environments of educational institutions are associated with different levels of tolerance toward adherents of indigenous beliefs and atheists (Ardi et al., 2021). At the conceptual level, an intersubjective model of religiosity frames engagement across religious difference as a reciprocal interpretive process rather than the abandonment of religious commitment (Abdullah, 2020). These studies strengthen the distinction between formal religious commitment, intergroup contact, and the social recognition of minority communities.

Studies of religious minorities reveal more explicit forms of exclusion. Menchik (2014) argues that Indonesian nationalism can accommodate recognized religious plurality while marginalizing heterodox communities. Burhani (2014) shows how the classification of Ahmadiyya as heretical places its members in an insecure position between recognized religious categories. Soedirgo (2018) further demonstrates that discrimination against Ahmadiyya communities is shaped not only by doctrine but also by local political and clientelist networks. These studies show why religious conflict cannot be explained solely as a failure of mutual understanding; institutional classifications, political interests, and unequal access to authority also influence who can participate as a legitimate member of a plural society.

The synthesis therefore identifies several conditions associated with different outcomes. Social integration is more plausible when traditions enable sustained interaction, reciprocal participation, and recognition across religious boundaries. Contestation becomes more likely when religious authority is monopolized, local practices are classified as deviant, or political actors benefit from reinforcing communal boundaries. Religion can contribute to both outcomes because its social effects are mediated by institutions, interpretations, and distributions of power.

6. Globalization, Cultural Change, and Adaptive Strategies

Some of the reviewed literature describes globalization primarily as a threat to local identity. Setyaningrum (2018) and Suradi (2018) associate technological and social change with shifts in values and declining engagement with inherited cultural practices. This concern remains relevant, particularly when younger generations encounter cultural and religious references through digital media rather than local institutions. However, the evidence does not support a simple narrative in which global culture replaces an otherwise stable local identity.

Globalization also creates opportunities for cultural reformulation, circulation, and public recognition. Rofiq (2024) shows that religious traditions can preserve continuity through historical reinterpretation, while Hanif et al. (2024) describe a local ritual whose social meaning is connected to contemporary cultural resilience and community livelihoods. Cultural change may also involve commodification. Irianto (2016) demonstrates that tourism-driven commodification can convert traditional art into a marketable cultural object, creating financial incentives while raising questions about community control and changes in cultural meaning. Adaptation must therefore be assessed in relation to who benefits from change and whether local communities retain authority over their traditions.

The literature proposes several responses: contextual religious education, dialogue among religious and customary leaders, community participation in cultural transmission, and institutional recognition of diverse local practices. These strategies should not be presented as universally effective solutions. Their usefulness depends on whether they allow disagreement, protect minority participation, and avoid reducing culture to a fixed symbol of harmony. Educational and religious institutions can serve as bridges between religious teaching and local inheritance, but they can also become sites of standardization and exclusion.

The principal result of this synthesis is therefore a conditional sociological synthesis of religion's relationship with local cultural identity. Religion contributes through four connected mechanisms: normative orientation, ritual-symbolic practice, institutional mediation, and adaptive negotiation. None of these mechanisms produces a predetermined outcome. Their effects depend on local authority, institutional recognition, opportunities for participation, political interests, and the capacity of communities to negotiate social change. This framework explains why religion may sustain cultural

continuity and social integration in one context while contributing to boundary-making or contestation in another.

D. Conclusion

This article examined how religion participates in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of local cultural identity in Indonesia's plural society. The thematic synthesis identifies four connected mechanisms: normative orientation, ritual and symbolic practice, institutional mediation, and adaptive negotiation. Through these mechanisms, religious meanings become embedded in moral expectations, communal ceremonies, cultural symbols, and institutions that transmit identity across generations. Local cultural identity is therefore not a fixed inheritance. It is continually interpreted and renegotiated as communities relate religious commitments to cultural traditions and changing social conditions.

The relationship between religion and local culture produces conditional rather than uniform outcomes. It can support social integration when religious and cultural actors maintain reciprocal participation, recognize locally embedded practices, and negotiate differences without denying minority identities. Conversely, it can intensify boundary-making and contestation when interpretive authority is monopolized, local traditions are treated as religiously illegitimate, or political interests reinforce communal divisions. Globalization further complicates this relationship by exposing communities to new religious discourses, media environments, and cultural markets. Communities may consequently preserve, modify, reframe, or selectively abandon inherited practices. This conditional framework offers a sociological basis for understanding why similar religious traditions can contribute to cultural continuity in one setting and social exclusion in another.

The review is limited by its reliance on accessible published scholarship, its primary focus on Indonesia, and the uneven documentation of communities and regions within the available literature. As a thematic review, it identifies recurring mechanisms and conditions but does not establish causal effects or represent every local religious tradition. Future research should compare these mechanisms across regions, religious communities, generations, and institutional settings. Field-based and digital ethnographic research would be particularly useful for examining how local identities are renegotiated through migration, social media, religious education, cultural policy, and changing structures of authority.

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