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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

Hybrid Mediation and Meaning-Making in Religious Conflict Resolution: A Phenomenological Study from East Java, Indonesia

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Abstract

Religious conflict in plural societies remains a persistent challenge, particularly where religious authority, state governance, and local social relations intersect. In Indonesia, tensions within religious communities continue despite constitutional guarantees of equality and religious freedom. This study examines the dynamics, escalation mechanisms, and resolution processes of religious conflict in East Java, focusing on how religious and state actors negotiate legitimacy and authority amid sectarian tensions. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with religious leaders, government representatives, and community figures familiar with conflict incidents. The findings reveal that religious conflict is shaped less by theological differences than by struggles over authority, symbolic legitimacy, and social recognition. Conflict escalation is reinforced by institutional ambiguity, weak coordination, and communication failures, whereas de-escalation becomes more effective through collaborative mediation between religious elites and state authorities grounded in shared social meanings.

Keywords

Religious Conflict; Conflict Resolution; Hybrid Mediation; Religious Authority; Meaning-Making

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Introduction

The study of social conflict has consistently attracted scholarly attention, particularly in societies undergoing rapid social, political, and cultural transformation. Social change frequently generates friction arising from competing interests, shifting authority structures, identity contestation, and uneven access to resources, which may manifest in both horizontal conflicts between social groups and vertical conflicts involving state institutions (Avelino 2021; Coser 1998; Setiyani 2016; Tsikata & Seini 2004). Indonesia represents a particularly salient context for examining such dynamics due to its plural and heterogeneous social composition, encompassing diverse ethnicities, religions, ideologies, and cultural traditions (Barron et al. 2016; Hasan 2017; Mazya et al. 2024; Rasyid et al. 2023; Ristawati & Salman 2023; Sanjaya et al. 2023). Normatively, Indonesia is grounded in a constitutional commitment to equality, justice, and human rights. The 1945 Constitution guarantees equal legal standing for all citizens, while Law No. 39 of 1999 affirms freedom of religion and belief, subject to limitations related to public order and the rights of others (Bimasakti 2025; Chaney 2020; Rahman et al. 2024; Sulubara et al. 2024; Tibaka & Rosdian 2018). Despite this normative framework, tensions and conflicts persist in practice, indicating a gap between legal guarantees and social realities.

Since the post-authoritarian transition of the late 1990s, Indonesia has experienced a significant escalation of social conflict (Anggono et al. 2023; Harpendya et al. 2022; Kammen 2023; Pulubuhu et al. 2020). Empirical records indicate thousands of incidents involving violence and discrimination, with religious background or interpretation frequently identified as a dominant factor (Hasan 2017; Regus 2020). Such conflicts have taken multiple forms, including inter-communal violence, intra- and inter-religious tensions, and confrontations between communities and state authorities (Idris et al. 2025; Jubba & Hidayati 2018; Sebastian & Arifianto 2020). These phenomena stand in stark contrast to Indonesia's cultural narratives of harmony, cooperation, and deliberative consensus, raising critical questions about the underlying drivers of religiously framed violence.

From a human rights perspective, the persistence of religious conflict poses serious challenges. Indonesia has ratified international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, thereby assuming obligations to protect fundamental freedoms such as the right to life, freedom from torture, and access to justice (Arumbinang 2021; Chaney 2020; Fenton 2016; Hasani & Halili 2022; Liem et al. 2024; Oegrosoeno 2021). Yet empirical evidence suggests that religious minorities and dissenting groups have frequently faced intimidation, restrictions on worship, destruction of places of worship, forced displacement, and physical violence (Barsihannor et al. 2023; Jubba & Hidayati 2018; Kuswantin 2022; Miichi & Kayane 2020; Putri 2023). These patterns indicate that legal protections alone are insufficient to prevent conflict escalation when social, symbolic, and institutional dynamics remain unaddressed.

Historically, conflict associated with religious narratives is not a novel phenomenon. Religious traditions themselves contain stories of rivalry, violence, and moral struggle, often invoked symbolically in contemporary discourse to legitimize collective action (Baidhowi et al. 2024; Cavanaugh 2012; Juergensmeyer 2024; Popa 2023; Schissler et al. 2017). However, interpreting modern religious violence as an inevitable extension of scriptural narratives risks obscuring the social processes through which religious meanings are mobilized. In the Indonesian context, episodes of violence involving Ahmadiyah communities, Sunni–Shia tensions in Sampang, and subsequent conflicts in Puger, East Java, illustrate that intra-religious violence can emerge even within a religious majority often associated with tolerance and moderation.

Scholarly approaches to social and religious conflict have developed across multiple theoretical traditions. Classical perspectives emphasize conflict as an inherent feature of social structures and group relations (Coser 1998), while contemporary approaches highlight the psychological and relational mechanisms through which conflict emerges and escalates (Dreu & Gross 2019). More recent perspectives further

underscore the role of meaning-making processes, suggesting that conflict is shaped not only by material interests but also by how actors interpret, construct, and negotiate social realities (Valsiner 2019).

However, existing approaches remain limited in their ability to adequately explain how symbolic authority, institutional ambiguity, and communicative breakdown interact in specific contexts of religious conflict. This study builds on these perspectives by integrating them into a process-based framework that emphasizes the dynamic interplay between authority contestation and meaning-making. Interactionist perspectives conceptualize conflict as a dynamic process shaped by cycles of action and reaction, where escalation emerges through reciprocal responses and defensive positioning. Such processes often generate enduring psychological and structural consequences that complicate conflict resolution (Malešević 2021).

While these frameworks offer important insights, their application to religious conflict remains constrained by an overreliance on rationalist or materialist assumptions. Many studies interpret religious violence primarily as an extension of political or economic interests, thereby overlooking the symbolic and moral dimensions of religious action (Basedau et al. 2016; Brubaker 2015; Ferreri 2020; Silberman 2005). Conversely, other approaches reduce religious conflict to doctrinal incompatibility, treating theological difference as the primary causal mechanism (Badarussyamsi & Ermawati 2022; Basedau et al. 2016; Syed & Ali 2021; Wahab et al. 2024). Such perspectives risk reifying religious identity as a fixed variable rather than recognizing it as a socially constructed and strategically mobilized resource.

Recent scholarship has sought to move beyond these limitations by emphasizing the relational and symbolic dimensions of conflict. Drawing on theories of symbolic power, scholars highlight how religious labels function as instruments through which actors compete for legitimacy, authority, and recognition within contested social fields. In this view, sectarian narratives are actively produced and mobilized to justify exclusion, organize collective action, and legitimize coercive practices.

Previous studies on Sunni–Shi'i conflict in Indonesia have provided important insights into the political, legal, and institutional dimensions of sectarian tension. Amal (2020) emphasizes the role of state inclusiveness and democratic governance in managing Sunni–Shi'i relations, while Rokhmad (2019) examines how religious judgment and accusations of blasphemy contributed to sectarian conflict in Madura. Similarly, Miichi and Kayane (2020) analyse the responses of Shi'i communities to exclusion and discrimination following the Sampang incidents in East Java. In the context of Puger, Umiarso and Asnawan (2022) highlight efforts toward ideological reconciliation and social conflict resolution among Islamic groups. These studies have significantly contributed to understanding Sunni–Shi'i conflict in Indonesia, particularly in relation to governance, pluralism, and institutional response.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. Existing research on Sunni–Shia relations in Muslim-majority contexts continues to prioritize macro-level political or ideological explanations while underexploring micro-level dynamics of local authority contestation (Savirani 2020). As a result, sectarian identity is often treated as a causal explanation rather than as a symbolic frame embedded in everyday struggles over recognition and power. Consequently, the mechanisms through which sectarian narratives shape conflict escalation and resolution at the grassroots level remain insufficiently theorized, particularly in the Indonesian context.

This study addresses these gaps by examining recurring religious conflict in a sub-district in East Java, Indonesia. Rather than treating the conflict as a theological dispute, this research investigates how sectarian labels operate as symbolic instruments in struggles over local authority, institutional legitimacy, and social recognition. Drawing on qualitative interviews with religious leaders and community actors, the study situates local experiences within broader debates on symbolic power and conflict processes.

The central argument advanced in this article is that Sunni–Shia tensions function less as expressions of doctrinal antagonism and more as manifestations of contested authority within a fragmented religious field. Sectarian narratives serve to legitimize exclusion, mobilize collective action, and justify violence,

while obscuring underlying rivalries among religious elites and institutions. Consequently, conflict resolution strategies that focus narrowly on theological reconciliation or legal enforcement are likely to remain insufficient unless they address deeper issues of authority recognition, symbolic domination, and communicative mediation (Miklian & Medina Bickel 2020). By reframing religious conflict as an authority-based and relational phenomenon, this study contributes to the literature by advancing a framework that foregrounds symbolic power, institutional rivalry, and bottom-up mediation as key dimensions of conflict resolution in plural societies.

Context of the Conflict: Chronological Overview

The religious conflict examined in this study is situated in Puger Sub-district, Jember Regency, East Java, an area characterised by dense social interaction, strong religious adherence, and diverse intra-Islamic affiliations. The conflict has primarily involved tensions between Sunni and Shi'i communities, reflecting broader patterns of intra-religious contestation observed in several regions of East Java.

The roots of the conflict can be traced to the gradual emergence of doctrinal differences that became socially and politically significant within local community structures (Amal 2020; Umiarso & Asnawan 2022). Initially, these differences were expressed through religious gatherings, sermons, and informal discussions. However, over time, these differences evolved into competing claims over religious authority, legitimacy, and the right to define 'orthodox' belief. The first major incident occurred in June 2012, when a religious gathering (pengajian) became a point of tension between community groups, resulting in physical altercations and injuries among several residents. This incident marked a shift from latent tension to overt conflict, as religious differences began to be publicly contested. The conflict escalated further in September 2013 during a community cultural event, which was intended to be a social celebration but became a site of confrontation. The escalation during this period was characterised by the circulation of rumours, the use of sectarian labels, and the mobilisation of group solidarity along religious lines. These dynamics intensified mistrust between communities and increased the scale of confrontation, ultimately resulting in fatalities.

The actors involved in the conflict included local religious leaders (ulama), community members affiliated with Sunni and Shi'i groups, and local government authorities. Religious leaders played a dual role, both as actors embedded within the conflict and as potential mediators. Meanwhile, the local government's response was initially perceived as inconsistent, contributing to uncertainty and allowing the conflict to escalate.

Following the escalation, efforts toward conflict resolution began to emerge through coordinated interventions involving religious leaders and government authorities. Mediation processes were initiated to restore communication between groups, reduce tensions, and prevent further violence. These efforts gradually transformed the conflict from a confrontational dynamic into a more manageable and negotiable process. Despite the reduction in overt violence, the conflict did not fully disappear but remained embedded within social relations as a latent tension. This situation highlights the importance of examining not only the immediate resolution of conflict but also the longer-term processes of meaning-making, trust reconstruction, and social reconciliation.

Methods

RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to examine how religious conflict is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by social actors in Puger

Sub-district, Jember Regency, East Java, Indonesia. This specific locus was selected due to its recurrent intra-religious tensions, particularly involving Sunni and Shi'i communities, making it a critical site for analysing localized dynamics of religious conflict.

Interpretative phenomenology is employed not only as a methodological technique but also as an epistemological stance that foregrounds the co-constructed nature of meaning between participants and researcher. This approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of conflict and instead explore how actors interpret authority, legitimacy, and social relations within conflict situations (Vagle 2019). In this sense, the study aligns with interpretive traditions that conceptualise conflict as a socially constructed and meaning-driven process rather than a purely doctrinal or structural phenomenon (Valsiner 2019). The phenomenological framework was operationalised across all stages of the research, including sampling, interviewing, analysis, and interpretation. This ensured that the study consistently focused on lived experiences and meaning-making processes while maintaining analytical rigor.

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING STRATEGY

The primary data source consisted of key actors directly involved in or possessing experiential knowledge of religious conflict in the research site. Participants included ulama figures, government officials, and community leaders who were either directly involved in the conflict, affected by its consequences, or institutionally responsible for its management. Importantly, the participants represented diverse positionalities within the conflict structure, including individuals affiliated with Sunni, Shi'i, and neutral community perspectives. Some participants were directly embedded in the conflict dynamics, while others functioned as mediators or institutional actors, allowing the study to capture both insider and intermediary perspectives.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on predefined criteria emphasising experiential relevance and contextual knowledge (Creswell & Poth 2018). This strategy was designed to prioritise depth and analytical richness rather than statistical representativeness, which is consistent with phenomenological inquiry. A total of twelve individuals were initially identified, of whom eight agreed to participate as key informants, while four declined for contextual reasons. Although the number of participants is limited, this is methodologically appropriate for phenomenological studies, which emphasise intensive engagement with a small number of information-rich cases (Vagle 2019). To ensure confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymised using initials. The profiles of participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the institutional and social positions of the participants, reflecting the diversity of actors involved in the conflict context. This variation enabled the study to examine the interplay between religious authority, state governance, and community dynamics in shaping conflict processes.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between July and September 2025. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of religious conflict. The interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives freely while maintaining focus on key research themes. The interview guide included topics such as perceptions of conflict causes, experiences of violence, the role of religious authority, the use of sectarian labels, and mechanisms of conflict resolution. While structured thematically, the interviews remained flexible, enabling participants to emphasise aspects they considered most meaningful. This flexibility is essential in phenomenological research, where depth and authenticity of experience are prioritised (Vagle 2019).

Table 1. Participant Profile

Initial	Position
AHS	Chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council
MZAD	Regent
HM	Ulama figure
M	Ulama figure
NH	Village head
AH	Village chief
HA	Chaplain
F	Chaplain

All interviews were conducted directly by the researcher following informed consent. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve narrative detail. Field notes were also maintained to capture contextual observations and reflexive insights that informed subsequent analysis (Elliott 2018).

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data analysis followed an iterative and interpretative process consistent with phenomenological analysis. The researcher began by identifying significant statements from interview transcripts, which were then coded and organised systematically (Miles & Huberman 1994). These statements were subjected to data reduction, focusing on extracting core meanings while excluding peripheral information. The refined data were then grouped into thematic clusters that reflected shared patterns of experience across participants.

The analysis proceeded through the development of textural descriptions (what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how those experiences were shaped by social and institutional contexts) (Vagle 2019). This dual analytical process enabled a deeper understanding of how conflict is both experienced and constructed within specific socio-cultural conditions.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed multiple validation strategies. Data triangulation was conducted across different participant categories, ensuring that findings were not derived from single or isolated perspectives. Information was cross-checked between participants representing different positionalities, including conflicting and mediating actors, to ensure consistency and credibility. The analysis also involved iterative comparison of narratives, allowing the researcher to identify convergences and discrepancies across accounts. This approach strengthened the robustness of interpretations and reduced the risk of bias arising from partial or one-sided data. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher continuously examining their interpretative role and potential assumptions. This ensured that the findings remained grounded in participants' perspectives while acknowledging the co-constructed nature of qualitative interpretation.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and given the right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymisation was applied to protect identities and minimise potential risks.

Given the context-specific nature of the study, the findings are not intended to be generalisable beyond the research setting. Rather, they provide analytically grounded insights into the mechanisms of religious conflict and resolution within a specific local context.

Results

The findings reveal that religious conflict in the study context is not primarily doctrinal but is shaped by authority contestation, symbolic labelling, institutional dynamics, and mediated negotiation.

AUTHORITY CONTESTATION AS THE PRIMARY DRIVER OF CONFLICT

The findings indicate that the religious conflict in Puger was not primarily driven by doctrinal incompatibility, but by competing claims over religious authority and legitimacy. This dynamic became particularly visible during the early phase of escalation around 2012, when religious gatherings began to function as arenas for asserting interpretative dominance and delegitimising alternative practices.

An ulama figure explained: 'The problem is not belief itself. The conflict began when certain groups claimed that only their interpretation was correct, and others were labelled as deviant' (HM, Ulama figure). This labelling process carried immediate social consequences, as reflected by a community leader: 'Once a group is called deviant, people start to avoid them. It creates separation in daily life, not just in religious matters' (AH, Village chief). Another religious figure emphasized how such claims transformed into collective positioning: 'The issue became serious when religious authority was used to justify exclusion. That is when people began to take sides' (M, Ulama figure). From the perspective of local governance, similar patterns were observed: 'We saw that the conflict was not only about differences in teaching, but about who had the authority to define what is considered correct' (MZAD, Regent).

This pattern was consistently reported across participants from religious, community, and governmental backgrounds, indicating that doctrinal differences became conflict-generating when mobilised as symbolic resources for asserting authority and legitimising exclusion. These dynamics were already evident during the 2012 incident, when tensions emerging in religious gatherings escalated into open confrontation.

ESCALATION THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL AMBIGUITY AND GOVERNANCE GAPS

The escalation of conflict between 2012 and 2013 was closely associated with perceived ambiguity in state responses. Participants consistently described how delayed or inconsistent intervention created uncertainty, which in turn intensified tensions and encouraged autonomous group action. A village head recalled: 'At the beginning, there was no clear response from the authorities. People did not know what actions were allowed and what were not' (NH, Village head). This perception was also acknowledged by a government representative: 'We were cautious in responding, but that caution was interpreted as indecisiveness by the community' (MZAD, Regent).

A religious leader highlighted how this uncertainty affected group behaviour: 'Because there was no firm decision, each group followed its own leaders. That is when the situation became more divided' (HM, Ulama figure). Another community actor added: 'People started to take matters into their own hands. When there is no clear authority, conflict becomes easier to escalate' (AH, Village chief). Importantly, participants referred explicitly to the escalation phase around 2013, when tensions intensified rapidly following earlier unresolved incidents. As one informant noted: 'During the 2013 incident, emotions were already high. Even small issues could trigger confrontation' (HA, Chaplain).

These accounts, consistently observed across different participant groups, indicate that institutional ambiguity created a governance vacuum that enabled informal authority structures to dominate, thereby accelerating the transition from latent tension (2012) to overt conflict (2013).

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN AND THE CIRCULATION OF MISINFORMATION

Another critical factor contributing to escalation was the breakdown of communication between groups, which facilitated the spread of misinformation and reinforced mutual distrust. Participants described how indirect communication channels became dominant, particularly during the peak of conflict. A community leader explained: 'People did not communicate directly. Information spread through sermons and informal conversations, often without verification' (AH, Village chief). A religious figure reinforced this dynamic: 'Each group only listened to its own leaders. There was no dialogue, so misunderstandings kept growing' (M, Ulama figure). Another participant described the speed at which rumours circulated: 'Rumours spread faster than clarification. By the time we tried to explain, people were already angry' (HA, Chaplain). From a governmental perspective, this issue was also recognised: 'We realised that lack of communication was one of the main problems. Without dialogue, every message became distorted' (MZAD, Regent).

These patterns were consistently reported across participants, indicating that communication failure functioned as a key mechanism of escalation. In the absence of cross-group dialogue, misinformation became a powerful mobilising force that transformed existing tensions into collective hostility, particularly during the 2013 escalation phase.

HYBRID MEDIATION AS A MECHANISM OF DE-ESCALATION

The findings show that de-escalation became possible when religious leaders and state actors collaborated in mediation efforts following the peak of conflict in 2013. This hybrid mediation model combined moral authority with institutional capacity, thereby enhancing both legitimacy and effectiveness.

A chaplain described the shift: 'When ulama and the government worked together, people began to listen. It was not seen as pressure, but as guidance' (F, Chaplain). A government representative confirmed this: 'We realised that without involving religious leaders, our intervention would not be accepted by the community' (MZAD, Regent). An ulama figure further explained the role of religious authority: 'People trust religious leaders. When we speak about peace, it carries moral weight' (HM, Ulama figure). Another participant reflected on the impact: 'The conflict did not disappear immediately, but it became manageable once both sides were involved in mediation' (NH, Village head)

These findings, consistently reported across participants, demonstrate that hybrid mediation transformed the conflict dynamic from confrontation into negotiation. This shift marked a critical turning point in reducing violence and restoring communication between groups.

MEANING-MAKING AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

While mediation reduced overt violence, participants emphasised that sustainable peace required deeper processes of meaning-making, trust reconstruction, and social reconciliation beyond immediate settlement. An ulama figure stated: 'Peace is not only about stopping violence. It is about rebuilding understanding between communities' (M, Ulama figure). A chaplain highlighted the fragility of post-conflict conditions: 'If suspicion remains, the conflict can return at any time. Peace must be maintained continuously' (HA, Chaplain). A community leader reflected on long-term effects: 'Even after the conflict ended, people still felt uncomfortable. Trust had to be rebuilt slowly' (AH, Village chief). From a governance perspective, the importance of continuity was emphasised: 'Our task was not only to stop the conflict but to ensure that communication continued afterward' (MZAD, Regent).

These accounts, consistently observed across different participant groups, indicate that conflict resolution is not a single event but an ongoing social process. Sustainable peace depends on reconstructing shared meanings, restoring trust, and maintaining dialogue within the community.

Discussion

This study examines how religious conflict emerges, escalates, and is resolved within a specific local context, namely Puger Sub-district, Jember Regency, East Java. By integrating empirical findings with theoretical perspectives, the study demonstrates that religious conflict is not primarily driven by doctrinal disagreement, but by a set of interconnected social processes involving authority contestation, institutional ambiguity, communication breakdown, and meaning-making.

FROM DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCE TO AUTHORITY CONTESTATION

The findings indicate that the conflict in Puger did not originate from differences in religious doctrine, but from competing claims over authority and legitimacy. Empirical data show that tensions began when certain religious actors claimed exclusive authority to define correct religious practice and labelled others as deviant. These labelling practices were not merely symbolic; they shaped social interactions, reinforced group boundaries, and justified exclusion.

This finding supports the view that conflict is fundamentally linked to struggles over recognition and legitimacy rather than theological incompatibility. Classical conflict theory emphasizes that social conflict often arises from competition over values and authority (Coser 1998), while contemporary perspectives highlight that power operates through the ability to define meaning and social norms (Avelino 2021). In the Puger context, religious authority functioned as symbolic power, enabling actors to influence collective perceptions and mobilize group action.

At the same time, this finding aligns with phenomenological perspectives, which emphasize that social reality is constructed through lived experience and interpretation (Vagle 2019; Valsiner 2019). Sectarian identity, therefore, is not inherently conflictual; it becomes so when it is mobilized within struggles over legitimacy. This confirms that the conflict is better understood as a socially constructed process rather than a purely doctrinal issue.

INSTITUTIONAL AMBIGUITY AND THE ESCALATION OF CONFLICT

The escalation of conflict in Puger between 2012 and 2013 was closely linked to institutional ambiguity. The empirical findings show that early tensions were not immediately addressed by local authorities, creating uncertainty among community members. This lack of a clear and consistent response allowed informal actors to take the lead in defining the situation, which intensified polarization.

This finding is consistent with studies that emphasize the role of institutional weakness in conflict escalation (cf. Dreu & Gross 2019; Sambanis & Schulhofer-Wohl 2019). However, the present study adds an important insight: escalation is shaped not only by the absence of institutional action, but by how such action is perceived by the community. When authorities are seen as hesitant or inconsistent, their legitimacy declines, and alternative authority structures become more influential.

In the Puger case, this dynamic transformed latent tensions into open conflict. The shift from everyday disagreement to collective confrontation occurred gradually, as uncertainty increased and group identities became more rigid. This highlights that escalation is a process, not a single event, and is shaped by the interaction between institutional conditions and social perceptions.

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONFLICT

Another key mechanism identified in this study is the breakdown of communication between groups. Empirical data show that information was not exchanged through direct dialogue, but circulated through informal channels such as sermons and community gatherings. This created space for rumours and selective interpretations to spread, reinforcing mistrust.

This finding is consistent with interactionist perspectives, which view conflict as a cumulative process shaped by repeated misunderstandings (cf. Malešević 2021). It also aligns with qualitative research emphasizing that meaning is constructed through communication (e.g. Elliott 2018). In this case, communication breakdown did not simply transmit information; it actively shaped perceptions and emotional responses.

From a phenomenological perspective, this reflects a disruption in shared meaning-making. As emphasized in interpretative phenomenology, social reality is co-constructed through interaction and interpretation (Vagle 2019). When communication fails, shared meaning collapses, and conflict becomes more likely. In the Puger case, this process explains how tension evolved into sustained hostility.

HYBRID MEDIATION AND THE DE-ESCALATION OF CONFLICT

The findings also show that conflict de-escalation became possible through hybrid mediation involving both religious leaders and state actors. Empirical evidence indicates that this collaboration was crucial in reducing tensions after the peak of conflict.

Religious leaders played a key role in influencing community perceptions and reframing the conflict, while state actors provided institutional support and coordination. This combination created a more legitimate and effective mediation process. The findings support existing research on peacebuilding, which highlights the importance of culturally embedded mediators (Malihah et al. 2015; Miklian & Medina Bickel 2020).

However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that legitimacy is not derived from a single source, but from the interaction between different forms of authority. In the Puger case, hybrid mediation enabled dialogue, reduced uncertainty, and facilitated negotiated solutions that were acceptable to all parties.

MEANING-MAKING AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF PEACE

Beyond immediate de-escalation, the study highlights that sustainable peace depends on processes of meaning-making. Participants emphasized that ending violence did not automatically restore trust. Instead, reconciliation required ongoing efforts to rebuild relationships and reinterpret social identities. This finding is strongly aligned with phenomenological theory, which emphasizes that meaning is central to human experience (Vagle 2019). Valsiner (2019) further explains that meaning-making shapes how individuals understand and respond to social situations. In this context, peace becomes sustainable only when conflicting groups are able to redefine each other not as threats, but as legitimate members of a shared community.

This shifts the understanding of conflict resolution from procedural settlement to deeper processes of symbolic and relational transformation. It also highlights that conflict resolution is not a one-time event, but an ongoing social process.

CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING STUDIES AND CONTEXTUAL SPECIFICITY

This study contributes to existing scholarship on Sunni–Shi'i conflict in Indonesia by extending analyses that have previously focused on legal frameworks, state responses, and macro-political dynamics (for example, Amal 2020; Hasan 2017; Regus 2020; Umiarso & Asnawan 2022). Previous studies on Sunni–Shi'i conflict in East Java have provided important insights into the structural, political, and institutional dimensions of sectarian tension. Amal (2020) emphasizes the role of state inclusiveness and democratic governance in responding to Sunni–Shi'i conflict, while Rokhmad (2019) highlights how religious judgment and accusations of blasphemy contributed to sectarian polarization in Madura. Similarly, Miichi

and Kayane (2020) examine the responses of Shi'i communities to exclusion and discrimination following the Sampang conflict, whereas Umiarso and Asnawan (2022) focus on social reconciliation and ideological conflict resolution in the Puger context. Collectively, these studies have significantly contributed to understanding the governance, pluralism, and institutional dimensions of sectarian conflict in Indonesia.

However, the present study places greater emphasis on the micro-level dynamics through which conflict is socially constructed, negotiated, and intensified within everyday community interaction. The study shows conflict is shaped not only by institutional or political conditions, but also by authority claims, symbolic labelling, communication breakdown, and struggles over social legitimacy within local social relations. In this sense, sectarian identity does not operate as a fixed or inherently violent category, but as a symbolic resource mobilized in contests over recognition and influence.

By grounding the analysis in the specific context of Puger Sub-district, this study avoids overgeneralization and demonstrates that conflict dynamics are deeply context-dependent. Although similar sectarian tensions may appear in other regions of Indonesia, the mechanisms identified in this study are shaped by local social, cultural, and institutional conditions. The findings therefore extend previous scholarship by demonstrating that religious conflict cannot be understood solely through doctrinal or macro-political explanations, but must also be examined through lived experiences, interactional processes, and meaning-making practices that influence how conflict emerges, escalates, and is resolved at the community level.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically, this study offers a mechanism-based explanation of religious conflict by integrating symbolic power, interactionist perspectives, and phenomenological approaches. It advances the literature by showing how authority contestation, institutional ambiguity, communication breakdown, and meaning-making interact to shape conflict dynamics. Practically, the findings suggest that effective conflict management requires more than legal enforcement or doctrinal dialogue. It requires clear and consistent institutional responses, open communication between groups, and collaboration between formal authorities and culturally legitimate actors. These insights are particularly relevant for policymakers and practitioners working in plural societies.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single local context, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the number of participants is relatively small, although this is consistent with phenomenological research that prioritizes depth over breadth. Third, the findings rely on interpretive accounts, which reflect participants' perspectives. Future research could expand this study through comparative approaches across regions or by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining how meaning-making processes evolve over time and influence long-term conflict dynamics.

Conclusion

This study examines how religious conflict emerges, escalates, and is resolved within a specific local context in Puger Sub-district, Jember Regency, East Java, Indonesia. It addresses the question of whether religious conflict is fundamentally driven by doctrinal differences or by broader social processes. The findings clearly demonstrate that conflict is not primarily rooted in theological incompatibility, but in struggles over authority, symbolic legitimacy, and social recognition among religious actors. Conflict emerges when certain groups claim exclusive authority and use labelling to define others as deviant, thereby reinforcing social

boundaries and exclusion. It escalates when institutional responses are perceived as unclear or inconsistent, creating uncertainty that encourages group polarization, while communication breakdown further amplifies mistrust and misinformation. At the same time, the study shows that conflict can be effectively de-escalated through hybrid mediation. Collaboration between religious leaders and state actors combines moral legitimacy with institutional capacity, transforming confrontation into negotiation.

The study contributes to conflict resolution scholarship by offering a mechanism-based explanation that integrates authority contestation, institutional ambiguity, communication breakdown, and meaning-making as interconnected processes that shape conflict dynamics. It extends existing literature by demonstrating that religious conflict should be understood as a socially constructed and context-dependent process rather than a purely doctrinal issue. Practically, the findings suggest that sustainable conflict management requires not only formal intervention but also culturally legitimate mediation and continuous dialogue to rebuild trust and shared understanding. However, this study is limited by its focus on a single local case and a relatively small number of participants, which constrains broader generalization. Future research is therefore needed to test these mechanisms across different contexts through comparative or mixed-method approaches, as well as to explore how meaning-making processes evolve over time to shape long-term conflict transformation.

Disclosure of AI Use

No AI tools were used.

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List of Interviews

Interview with AHS on 15 July 2025

Interview with NH on 01 August 2025

Interview with HM on 20 July 2025

Interview with F on 16 August 2025

Interview with HA on 16 August 2025

Interview with M on 10 September 2025