

Ethnic Conflict Between Mandailing and Minangkabau in Padang Lawas Regency: Background, Drivers, and Management Strategies

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Abstract

This article aims to explain the causes of social conflict between the Mandailing and Minangkabau ethnic groups in Padang Lawas. It raises two main questions: what are the causes of the conflict, and how is the conflict managed? This study employs a qualitative approach with a field research design, while the data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings show that the conflict stems from clashes in communication culture, cultural differences, acculturation in interethnic marriages, and domination of the economic sphere as sources of intergroup tension. As a result, equal and dialogical social integration has failed to develop. In certain contexts, the Minangkabau ethnic group, as migrants, is perceived as not having fully assimilated into the local customs and culture of the Mandailing community, thereby creating social distance, prejudice, and stereotypes that continue to be reproduced in everyday interactions. On the other hand, interethnic marriage often becomes an arena of identity negotiation laden with cultural pressures, while domination in the economic sector further reinforces social boundaries between the two groups. This article emphasizes that social conflict in a plural society is not merely the result of ethnic difference itself, but rather the product of disrupted communication, fragile acculturation, and unequal power relations. Therefore, conflict resolution requires a more transformative cultural approach through cultural dialogue, the strengthening of social empathy, and the reconstruction of more inclusive interethnic relations. These findings demonstrate that without fair management of pluralism, diversity can easily shift from being a social asset into a latent source of social fragmentation.

Keywords: *Ethnic Conflict, Mandailing, Minangkabau, Resolution*

Abstrak: Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan penyebab konflik sosial antara etnis Mandailing dan Minangkabau di Padang Lawas. Diajukan pertanyaan apa penyebab konflik dan bagaimana pengelolaan konflik tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian lapangan, sementara data diperoleh melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa konflik lahir dari benturan budaya komunikasi, perbedaan kultur, akulturasi dalam pernikahan beda etnis, dan dominasi ruang ekonomi sebagai sumber ketegangan antarkelompok perbedaan etnis itu sendiri, akibatnya gagal membangun pembauran sosial yang setara dan dialogis. Etnis Minangkabau sebagai kelompok perantau dalam konteks tertentu dipersepsikan belum sepenuhnya menyatu dengan kebiasaan dan kultur lokal Mandailing, sehingga melahirkan jarak sosial, prasangka, dan stereotip yang terus direproduksi dalam interaksi sehari-hari. Di sisi lain, pernikahan beda etnis justru sering menjadi arena negosiasi identitas yang sarat tekanan kultural, sedangkan dominasi pada sektor ekonomi semakin memperkeras batas-batas sosial di antara kedua kelompok. Artikel ini menegaskan bahwa konflik sosial di masyarakat plural bukanlah sekadar akibat perbedaan, tetapi lebih merupakan produk dari komunikasi yang terputus, akulturasi yang rapuh, dan relasi kuasa yang timpang. Oleh karena itu, penyelesaian konflik menuntut pendekatan kultural yang lebih transformatif melalui dialog budaya, penguatan empati sosial, dan rekonstruksi relasi antaretnis yang lebih inklusif. Temuan ini memperlihatkan bahwa tanpa pengelolaan pluralitas yang adil, keberagaman mudah berubah dari aset sosial menjadi sumber fragmentasi sosial yang laten.

Kata Kunci: Konflik Etnik, Mandailing; Minang; Resolusi

Introduction

Indonesia is a pluralistic society built upon a vast diversity of ethnicities, cultures, languages, and social systems. Within an ideal framework, Islam—as the majority religion—offers an appreciative theological perspective toward plurality, asserting that differences are a divine will intended to be managed through mutual recognition (*li ta'arafu*), mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. These values should theoretically serve as the moral foundation for establishing harmonious social relations in a diverse society. However, in reality, diversity does not always culminate in robust social integration. In various regions, identity differences remains susceptible to social tension, particularly when groups prioritize primordial ties over collective solidarity. This situation indicates that normative religious teachings advocating for human brotherhood have not been fully internalized within the social practices of the community (Bilven, Nyúl, and Kende 2022).

This problem is evident in the dynamics of social relations between the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities in Padang Lawas. Ethnic

differences in this region are not merely markers of cultural diversity but also harbor latent social friction. In daily life, intergroup relations are frequently overshadowed by prejudice, stereotypes, and identity sentiments that hinder healthy social interaction. Disparities in perspectives, customs, and social systems between the two ethnicities potentially widen social distance if not managed wisely. Consequently, social spaces intended as arenas for encounter and cooperation may transform into spheres of competition, suspicion, and hidden conflict. This condition represents a critical issue to examine, as it highlights the gap between ideal religious values emphasizing peace and the empirical reality of communities still struggling with social cohesion amidst plurality.

Social conflict between the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities cannot be detached from fundamental differences in their social systems. The Mandailing community tends to be oriented toward a patrilineal kinship system, whereas the Minangkabau are characterized by a strong matrilineal system and the philosophy of *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* (custom based on Sharia, Sharia based on the Quran). These structural differences have implications for perceptions of family, inheritance, customary authority, and intergroup social relations. In certain situations, these differences create a space for identity contestation that triggers tension, especially when groups maintain their customary values exclusively. Furthermore, economic competition, access to bureaucracy, and issues surrounding inter-ethnic marriage further exacerbate the potential for conflict within the society.

A number of previous studies have discussed inter-ethnic relations and social conflict. Research by Hos et al. (2022) found that differences in social functions between ethnicities open avenues for competition that often develop into unhealthy relationships. Tarigan et al. (2024) emphasized that inter-ethnic marriages often face serious challenges if not accompanied by adequate cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, Hartoyo et al. (2020) demonstrated that social conflict in multi-ethnic societies can be triggered by differences in social structures, cultures, and family relationship patterns. This research seeks to examine the phenomena of conflict backgrounds and causes through a multidimensional lens, specifically within the domestic/family sphere of the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities in Padang Lawas.

Based on the aforementioned context, the novelty of this paper lies in its attempt to analyze the social conflict between the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities not only from the perspective of customary clashes, identity, and resource competition but also from the perspective of conflict resolution foundations. Thus, this article does not stop at identifying the causes of conflict; rather, it endeavors to offer a more integrative reading between sociology of conflict approaches in building a peaceful, inclusive, and civilized social relation model within a multi-ethnic society.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in-depth the dynamics of differing social perspectives between the Mandailing and Minangkabau ethnic groups in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra. This location was selected through purposive sampling as it represents a typology of a plural society with high cultural identity complexity. Primary data were gathered through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with key informants, specifically inter-ethnic married couples (Mandailing-Minangkabau). The selection of these informants aimed to capture authentic narratives regarding how diverging value systems are negotiated within domestic and social spheres.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, this research implemented comprehensive documentation techniques, including the analysis of reputable journal articles, reference books, dissertations/theses, and secondary data from mass media and official online news portals. All collected data were then analyzed using an interactive model consisting of three main stages: data reduction to filter relevant information, data display for systematic presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. The analysis was conducted through a descriptive-analytical method to dissect the root causes of social conflict and the emerging integration patterns, thereby providing a holistic overview of the phenomenon of pluralism at the research site.

Results and Discussion

Defining Conflict

Conflict can be defined as a state of opposition arising from differences in interests, goals, perspectives, or emotions between two or more parties, where each side perceives that their desires and expectations cannot be achieved simultaneously. Etymologically, the term "conflict" is derived from the Latin *configere*, meaning "to strike together" or "to clash." In a social context, conflict does not always imply physical violence; it can also manifest as tension, divergent opinions, competition, or even emotional friction occurring within relationships between individuals or groups. Consequently, conflict is an inherent part of social interaction processes born from existing differences within society (Neudorfer, Theuerkauf, and Wolff 2025).

Referring to Haris (2019), conflict is understood as a perception of differing interests or the belief that the goals of each party cannot be reached concurrently. This view emphasizes that conflict is rooted in the incompatibility between what one party desires and what another seeks. Meanwhile, Schermerhorn explains that conflict arises when one party disagrees on significant issues or experiences emotional clashes that subsequently create tension in their relationship. From these two perspectives, it can be concluded that conflict is caused not only by objective differences in interests but also by subjective factors such as

perceived offense, prejudice, or the inability to accept differing viewpoints.

In a pluralistic society, conflict often stems from diversity itself. Differences in ethnicity, culture, language, religion, customs, and value systems can serve as social assets, yet they also harbor the potential for opposition if not managed properly. At this juncture, the concept of pluralism becomes essential. Etymologically, pluralism originates from the word *plural*, meaning many or diverse, and the suffix *-ism*, denoting a belief or school of thought. Thus, pluralism can be interpreted as a view that acknowledges social reality as being composed of various distinct elements. In a social context, pluralism is not merely the factual existence of diversity, but also the willingness to accept, respect, and coexist with those differences.

Based on the explanation above, it is understood that conflict is a form of opposition arising from differences in interests, perspectives, goals, and emotions within social interactions, whether between individuals or groups. Conflict becomes increasingly complex in a plural society because each group carries its own identity, values, and interests. Therefore, conflict cannot be detached from the reality of pluralism. In a diverse society, conflict may emerge as a consequence of intense social interaction, but conversely, it can be managed through mutual respect, tolerance, and the recognition of diversity (Truna and Zakaria 2022).

Background of Social Conflict

The conflict between the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities within the context of pluralism is a multidimensional issue that transcends a single aspect, originating instead from intertwined social, cultural, and economic dynamics. In the social dimension, this conflict reflects a lack of inter-ethnic dialogue, as elucidated by social conflict theory (Collier, 2009), which emphasizes the importance of open communication between groups to reduce prejudice and stereotypes. According to Novri Susum (2019), there are three primary causal factors and forms of conflict within this pluralistic context:

Social conflict in a diverse society is inextricably linked to group identity. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), individuals inherently tend to categorize themselves into specific social groups (*in-groups*) and distinguish themselves from others (*out-groups*). Membership in these groups provides individuals with a sense of belonging, security, self-esteem, and social orientation. However, in a multi-ethnic society, excessive reinforcement of group identity often creates rigid social boundaries between "us" and "them." When group identity is prioritized over collective interests, a tendency emerges to view one's own group as the most righteous, superior, and deserving compared to others.

This condition is closely related to the emergence of egocentrism—an attitude that positions one's own group as the center of evaluation for social reality. According to Pius (1994), egocentrism drives individuals or

groups to judge others based on their own cultural standards without a willingness to understand the perspectives of other groups. In the relationship between the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities, such attitudes can trigger prejudice, stereotypes, and misunderstandings in social interactions. Each group may perceive its own values, customs, and habits as the primary standard for judging the behavior of the other. Consequently, social relations are built not on mutual understanding, but on claims of cultural truth. This situation can generate intrapersonal conflict for individuals living at the intersection of two cultures, especially when they experience identity confusion, social pressure, or a tug-of-war between loyalty to their original group and the demands of adapting to the other.

Beyond social identity, conflict can also be triggered by economic factors. In this regard, Karl Marx's conflict theory explains that social structure is essentially shaped by conflicting interests between groups competing for resources. Economic resources—such as land, employment, trade, capital, and access to welfare—frequently become arenas for intergroup competition. When the distribution of resources is perceived as unjust, it leads to social jealousy, dissatisfaction, and resistance. In the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities, economic competition may occur when one group is perceived as more dominant in a particular sector, while the other feels marginalized or denied equal opportunity. Such situations have the potential to spark intergroup conflict, as economic issues are no longer understood as individual problems but as collective competition involving ethnic identity (Maher, 1994).

Another factor with the potential to incite conflict is inter-ethnic marriage. In a plural society, inter-ethnic marriage can serve as a vehicle for social integration; however, it also presents various challenges. Differences in customs, language, communication patterns, family values, and social expectations from each side can create domestic tension. Individuals in inter-ethnic marriages are often faced with demands to conform to their partner's culture, sometimes even dealing with pressure from extended families on both sides. Various potential issues may arise, such as adjustment difficulties, a tendency to withdraw, anxiety, prejudice, dominance by one party, ethnocentrism, and culture shock. If these conditions are not managed through effective communication and mutual understanding, domestic conflict can escalate into prolonged disputes, relationship fractures, or even divorce (Yulianto et al., 2022).

In conclusion, social conflict between the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities is not influenced by a single factor, but rather by various interrelated elements. The reinforcement of exclusive group identities, cultural egocentrism, economic competition, and issues in inter-ethnic marriage are critical factors that can drive conflict, whether in the form of intrapersonal, inter-individual, or intergroup conflict. Therefore, a comprehensive study of social conflict in a diverse society is essential to identify both the root causes and the potential steps for resolution.

Causes of Conflict

Based on field data and observations, the conflict between the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities in the context of pluralism is inextricably linked to interrelated social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Generally, this conflict does not manifest as open or frontal confrontation; instead, it frequently appears in a latent form—hidden yet palpable in daily interactions.

First, within the dimension of social identity, as explained by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, both groups tend to identify themselves as part of an exclusive "in-group," particularly regarding customs, language, and social relationship patterns. The author found that in several areas, the exclusive reinforcement of cultural identity strengthens social barriers, subsequently fostering prejudice and stereotypes between groups (Paolo and Shidiqi 2025). Culturally, a strong ethnic identity without spaces for mutual understanding of value systems can trigger friction. For instance, differences in social structures, traditions, and perceptions of societal roles become sources of misunderstanding, especially when amplified by negative intergroup narratives. The egocentric attitudes emerging from both sides lead to intrapersonal conflict, where individuals feel pressured or alienated when situated in a social environment dominated by the other group (Bazzi et al. 2019).

Second, in the economic aspect, competition appears more tangible. Observations indicate that the Minangkabau group, with their long-standing tradition of *merantau* (migration) and trading, tends to dominate the commercial sector in specific areas. Meanwhile, the Mandailing community, supported by strong local networks, holds more sway in the bureaucracy and land-based or local commodity sectors. This socio-economic disparity serves as a structural root that exacerbates conflict. When one group feels marginalized in accessing other economic resources, it fosters a sense of injustice and social jealousy, potentially creating horizontal tension (Yulianto, Swastika, and Kiling 2024). In the perspective of Marx's conflict theory, these differing strategies for resource control create tensions that can evolve into intergroup conflict, particularly when one group perceives an unfair lack of access to resources (Arditya Pratama 2019).

Third, inter-ethnic marriage between the Mandailing and Minangkabau communities also serves as a potential source of cultural conflict. The author found cases—such as an interview with informant N—where these cross-cultural unions struggled: *"Communication with my husband was poor; our different backgrounds led to misunderstandings. We lived in Barumon, which is predominantly Mandailing, and my husband found it difficult to adapt to the community. Eventually, he left me and the children a long time ago."* Such couples often face difficulties reconciling differing values, communication styles, and the expectations of extended families. An inability to adapt, coupled with the cultural dominance of one

party, can trigger domestic friction that may lead to divorce. This aligns with cross-cultural marriage conflict theory, which highlights challenges in navigating deep-seated cultural system differences (Tilaar 2004).

Conflict Management

Through the lens of pluralism, the author argues that the occurring conflicts do not stem merely from the differences themselves, but rather from a lack of dialogue space, unequal access, and the absence of effective social mechanisms to build cross-cultural understanding. An interview with informant K revealed: *"I have lived in Barumun for a long time and my relationship with the community is generally good. However, the dialogue between us is not open, which limits my interaction. My goal here is simply to migrate and improve my family's economy"* (Rahman 2021). Therefore, efforts to strengthen social integration must go beyond cultural approaches; they must be accompanied by equitable access to economy, education, and inter-ethnic communication spaces (Sestito 2025). Consequently, a comprehensive conflict resolution approach is required, involving open and sustainable inter-ethnic dialogue. Equitable economic empowerment is essential to ensure no group feels left behind. Furthermore, multicultural education should instill the value of respecting diversity from an early age, supported by culture-sensitive government policies that involve customary and community leaders.

Managing diversity in a pluralistic society like Barumun requires a multidimensional approach encompassing theological, sociological, cultural, and legal aspects. Proposed solutions include multicultural education and inclusive Islamic values at the community level to foster tolerance (Maulin Permata 2023). Regular intercultural and interreligious dialogues are necessary to strengthen mutual understanding between the Mandailing and Minangkabau people. Additionally, inclusive economic empowerment can reduce inequality and encourage cross-ethnic cooperation. If pluralism is implemented not merely as a discourse but as a systemic social practice, harmonious coexistence will become a reality rather than a utopian ideal. Barumun, with all its complexities, can serve as a micro-model for how Indonesia manages pluralism at a local level to prevent conflict and strengthen national unity (Yulianto et al. 2022).

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the social conflict between the Mandailing and Minangkabau ethnic groups is driven by differences in communication styles, cultural disparities, and the suboptimal development of social integration processes within the Padang Lawas community. In certain contexts, the Minangkabau—as a migrant or *perantau* group—are perceived as not having fully assimilated into the local Mandailing customs and culture, thereby generating social distance, prejudice, and intergroup stereotypes. The conflict is further exacerbated by differing patterns of communicative acculturation in

inter-ethnic marriages, which frequently lead to clashes in traditions, values, and cultural perspectives. Additionally, dominance within economic spheres serves as a factor that amplifies social tension, particularly when one group is perceived to exert greater control over the trade sector and access to economic resources.

Consequently, managing social conflict between the Mandailing and Minangkabau requires a cultural approach centered on intercultural dialogue, the strengthening of cross-ethnic communication, and the cultivation of a collective consciousness regarding the importance of harmonious coexistence. This approach is vital for fostering mutual understanding, respect, and social empathy between the two ethnic groups. The implications of this research suggest that resolving inter-ethnic conflict cannot rely solely on formal regulations; rather, it must be directed toward sustainable social integration by involving traditional leaders, religious figures, local government, and the community. Thus, this study reaffirms that conflict in a pluralistic society must be addressed through social and cultural approaches capable of strengthening social cohesion amidst diversity.

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