

Religion and local culture have successfully created social harmony post-conflict in Aceh

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Abstract

The struggle between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government has caused social disruption, collective trauma, and community social breakdown. Building trust, solidarity, and social harmony after the war is the biggest challenge, even with the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding peace agreement in place. Social stability in Acehnese society is due to its internal strengths, particularly a strong Islamic religious approach and a deeply rooted local culture. This article examines the religious and local cultural approaches to post-conflict social harmony in Aceh. Description-interpretation is used in this qualitative study. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and surveys. The data were collected after the Helsinki peace agreement to evaluate peace consolidation and community recovery. In Pidie, North Aceh, and Bireuen, the sources of data included religious leaders (ulama), traditional leaders, former GAM combatants, women leaders, youth, and village officials. A thematic approach is used to reduce, categorise, interpret, and draw inductive conclusions from the data. The active roles of ulama, religious gatherings (*majelis taklim*), and Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have restored religious beliefs and community social ethics. While *peusijek* (traditional blessing rituals), *gampong* deliberations, and village institutions have helped social reconciliation, community ties, and horizontal conflicts, religious values and local wisdom have created a strong social system for peace and conflict prevention. Religion and local culture have been key to social harmony in post-conflict Aceh. Conflict-torn regions seeking peace through local potential can use this model.

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Introduction

The strength of religious values and local culture has proven effective in reconstructing social harmony in post-conflict Aceh. The community's deeply held beliefs and local values form the foundation of this approach, as they are inherently collaborative and easily accepted and internalised by the people. The principles of moderate Islam, combined with traditional practices such as *peusijuek* and *meudrah*, strengthen the reconciliation process emotionally and spiritually. Religious leaders (*ulama*) and traditional figures are essential for upholding social norms and revitalising the connections disrupted during the conflict. According to data from BPS Aceh (2023), the social cohesion index increased from 61.2 in 2012 to 75.4 in 2022 in former conflict-affected areas. LIPI (2020) reports that 82% of respondents preferred resolving conflicts through traditional and religious mechanisms rather than formal legal channels. The Ministry of Home Affairs (2021) notes that 70% of *meunasah* (local prayer houses) in Aceh now function as both places of worship and forums for local social mediation.

Through strengthening customary institutions, aligning local values with regional regulations, and encouraging active community involvement, this approach has not only succeeded in restoring post-conflict social conditions but has also laid a strong foundation for sustainable peace rooted in Aceh's cultural and social context. If current trends continue, the indicators of social cohesion are likely to show further improvement in 2024 and 2025, as the consolidation of peace institutions becomes stronger and intergenerational transmission of cultural and religious values deepens (Feener, 2021; Indainanto et al., 2023). Although statistical projections are not yet available, the consistent upward trend from 2012 to 2022 suggests that Aceh's model of combining religious and cultural approaches will continue reinforcing social harmony in the coming years.

The Acehnese people have successfully reinforced solidarity and peace through moderate Islamic teachings and local cultural practices. Several previous studies affirm that Islamic teachings serve as an ethical guide by emphasising peace and tolerance when addressing social divisions caused by conflict (Fithriyyah, 2018). Cultural institutions such as the *meunasah* and traditional councils play crucial roles in facilitating communication, strengthening social bonds, and easing tensions (Zikri, 2017). Rituals like *peusijuek* contribute to symbolic healing and restore mutual trust (Islami, 2025). Adlina (2025) found that most traditional village forums effectively prevented conflicts within the community. The ASEAN-IPR Report (2022) highlights that the active involvement of local communities, traditional wisdom, and social solidarity significantly shapes the success of social recovery and peacebuilding in Aceh. These elements have bolstered reconciliation efforts and played a crucial role in fostering sustainable peace in the region. Rahman et al. (2023) also emphasise the importance of *meunasah* for reinforcing social cohesion. This culturally grounded approach has demonstrated its effectiveness and deserves further study to support efforts toward sustainable peace.

This study aims to fill a gap in the literature that has yet to thoroughly examine the contribution of religious and culturally based approaches in creating post-conflict social harmony in Aceh. Previous reconciliation research has primarily focused on political and economic dimensions (Rettbeg & Ugarriza, 2016), leaving spiritual and cultural aspects underexplored (Inbadas, 2016). The primary focus of this study is to explore how religious values and Acehnese local traditions contribute to shaping social reconciliation, particularly in addressing the psychological and communal dimensions of post-conflict recovery. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How do religious values support rebuilding trust and solidarity in post-conflict Aceh? (2) What role do local traditions and cultural rituals play in fostering reconciliation? (3) In what ways do religious leaders and customary institutions sustain long-term social harmony? Rather than quantitatively testing its "effectiveness", this study employs a qualitative approach to interpret the contributions, roles, and perceived impacts of religious and cultural mechanisms within communities. The findings of this study are set to enhance reconciliation theory and act as a strategic guide for other regions aiming to attain sustainable peace following conflict.

The central argument of this study is that religion- and culture-based approaches in Aceh play a crucial role in creating and maintaining post-conflict social harmony (Wibowo, 2020). These approaches combine moderate Islamic teachings with local cultural traditions such as *peusijek* and *meudrah*, which are more relevant and sustainable than formal approaches to post-conflict reconciliation. The religious and cultural approaches align with values long respected by the Acehnese people, offering a sense of closeness, social legitimacy, and stronger trust between individuals and groups previously divided by conflict (Ridha, 2023). It becomes a key factor in the reconciliation process, where the active roles of ulama, traditional leaders, and community participation in religious and cultural activities reinforce social ties (Sahlan et al., 2019). This research proposes that the strength of religious and local cultural values accepted and respected by the community largely shapes post-conflict social harmony in Aceh, rather than political or economic factors alone determining it.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive and interpretative approach, aiming to deeply understand how religious and local cultural approaches have successfully fostered social harmony in post-conflict Aceh. Researchers chose qualitative methods to capture the complexity of social phenomena, especially those related to cultural and spiritual aspects that quantitative methods struggle to measure (Creswell, 2013). This approach allows the researcher to obtain rich and detailed insights into the community's meanings and lived experiences in the post-conflict social reconciliation process. To strengthen the interpretation of qualitative findings, supporting data such as descriptive survey results and secondary statistical reports were used only as contextual background, without altering the qualitative orientation of this study.

The primary data collection technique involved in-depth interviews with 15 key informants selected purposively. These informants represented various segments of society that played significant roles in the reconciliation process, consisting of 3 religious leaders (*ulama*), 2 traditional leaders, 3 former GAM combatants, 2 female community leaders, 2 youth representatives, and 3 village officials. The informants were recruited through community networks, recommendations from village heads and customary authorities, and referrals from earlier participants using snowball sampling. The selection focused on individuals with knowledge and direct experience in reconciliation efforts rooted in religious and local cultural values. The in-depth interviews sought to investigate each social actor's subjective narratives and unique perspectives regarding the dynamics and processes of reconciliation (Patton, 2015).

Table 1.

List of Key Informants

Informant Category	Sum	Selection Criteria
Religious Leaders (<i>Ulama</i>)	3	Have religious influence and be actively involved in reconciliation-focused preaching
Traditional Leaders	2	Promoters of local cultural values in conflict resolution
Former GAM Combatants	3	Historical actors who directly experienced the conflict and reconciliation process
Female Community Figures	2	Activists or community leaders involved in grassroots peacebuilding
Youth Leaders	2	Initiators of reconciliation programs among youth
Village Officials	3	Hold administrative and social roles in strengthening local harmony
Total	15	

Sources: Research Data, 2025.

In addition to in-depth interviews, this study also collected quantitative data through a survey of 100 respondents selected purposively. The respondents were selected based on their involvement in post-conflict social dynamics – either as victims, reconciliation actors, or residents living in affected areas. The survey was supposed to investigate individual

experiences, attitudes toward the reconciliation process, and the level of public trust in the social harmony established after the conflict. The collected data included perceptions of justice, a sense of security, social participation, and the sustainability of peace. The survey results provided a quantitative dimension that complemented and strengthened the qualitative findings from the in-depth interviews. Thus, the quantitative data functioned as a complement and a triangulative validation of the subjective narratives revealed through the qualitative approach, thereby enriching the overall analysis (Bryman, 2016).

Table 2.

Categories of Respondents and Focus of Information Collected

Respondent Category	Sum	Focus of Information Collected	Reason for Purposive Selection
Conflict-affected community	40	Direct experiences during and after the conflict	Directly experienced the impact of the conflict and reconciliation
Local community leaders	20	Attitudes and perspectives on the reconciliation process	Hold social influence and have a deep community understanding
Women	20	Women's roles, trauma experiences, and attitudes toward peace	Women are often socially and emotionally affected by conflict
Youth	20	Hopes for the future, attitudes toward social harmony, and participation	Represent the next generation in the reconciliation process
Total	100		

Sources: Research Data, 2025.

In addition to interviews and surveys, data collection techniques also included document analysis. The documents reviewed comprised official government reports, academic studies, customary law texts, and religious documents relevant to the reconciliation process. This document analysis enhanced the validity of data obtained from interviews and surveys and provided the historical and policy context underlying the social reconciliation process in Aceh (Bowen, 2009). By incorporating document analysis, the study gained a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the success of religious and local cultural approaches in fostering social harmony.

The researchers conducted qualitative data analysis using a thematic approach, coding, categorising, and identifying key themes. This study uncovers patterns of social reconciliation that emerge from interview and document data, focusing on the role of religion and culture in creating harmony (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The survey team analysed the quantitative data descriptively, using frequency and percentage statistics to illustrate general community perceptions (Field, 2013). Additionally, researchers applied data triangulation techniques to integrate findings from interviews, surveys, and document analysis, producing a holistic, in-depth, and valid understanding of how religious and local cultural approaches foster post-conflict social harmony in Aceh (Flick, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Result

The Impact of Conflict on Social Life

The findings of this study reveal a complex picture of the post-conflict social conditions in Aceh, with positive indications regarding the reconciliation process. Most informants acknowledged that the armed conflict, which lasted for decades, left a profound impact on the social structure of the community, including the loss of mutual trust, collective trauma, and fractured relationships among residents. Although the post-conflict social conditions still exhibit certain vulnerabilities, reconciliation efforts carried out collaboratively by traditional leaders, religious figures, and the wider community have continued to show promising progress.

Table 3 illustrates the results of in-depth interviews with religious leaders, traditional leaders, former GAM combatants, women leaders, youth, and village officials. Each group experienced the impacts of the conflict distinctively according to their social roles and

positions. Both religious leaders and former GAM combatants highlighted the loss of mutual trust and collective trauma as the main consequences of the armed conflict. One ulama noted, *"People were afraid to trust each other, even neighbours—because suspicion had become part of daily life."* Similarly, a former combatant explained, *"After we laid down arms, we realised the hardest part was not with the government but with our people, on how to regain their trust."* Traditional leaders highlighted the fragmentation of relationships among community members due to polarisation during the conflict. *"The conflict divided villages into sides; even family members no longer remained united,"* said one leader.

Table 3.

Impact of Conflict on Social Life

Category	Informants	Perceived Impact of the Conflict
Religious Leaders (ulama)	5	Loss of mutual trust, trauma
Traditional Leaders	5	Fractured relationships among community members
Former GAM Combatants	5	Collective trauma, loss of trust
Women Leaders	4	Social insecurity, tensions among residents
Youth	3	Mutual suspicion, lack of social interaction
Village Officials	3	Social fragmentation, low levels of trust

Sources: Research Data, 2025.

Meanwhile, women leaders expressed insecurity and tension in social life, especially within households and communities. A female informant shared, "We carried fear every day; even going to the market felt unsafe." Youth experienced social alienation and mutual suspicion. A youth representative remarked, "We grew up seeing violence; it made us doubt whether friendship across groups could really exist." Village officials noted social fragmentation and a decline in trust within the community. A village official explained, "After the conflict, we focused not just on administration but also on rebuilding trust between residents who had been divided for years."

However, in addition to describing the impacts they experienced, the informants also reflected active participation in building reconciliation. Religious leaders played an important role through religious sermons and interfaith dialogues to strengthen the values of peace. Traditional leaders acted as unifiers by conducting joint rituals and customary-based mediation. Former GAM combatants participated in reintegration and community discussions, reinforcing their peaceful presence in society. Women leaders initiated inclusive social activities such as joint skills training to build peace. Youth fostered solidarity through arts and sports activities that united different groups. Village officials supported reconciliation by facilitating dialogue among residents and promoting cross-group cooperation in development efforts. This data shows that social reconciliation in Aceh occurs through a collaborative, cultural, and participatory approach involving all layers of society as peace actors.

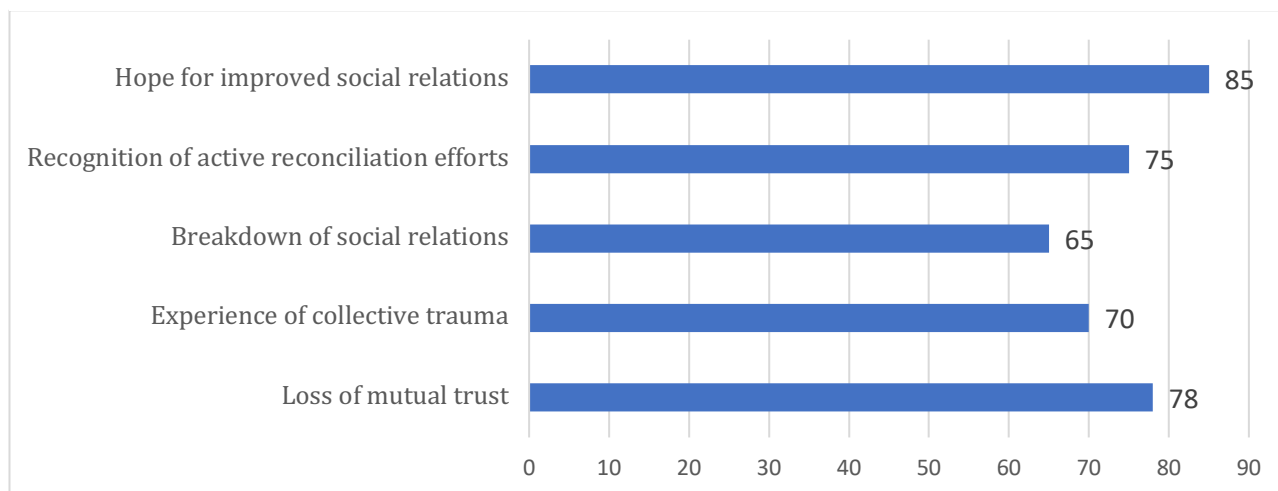
Besides conducting in-depth interviews, this study also involved a survey of purposively selected respondents from the same communities. The selection of respondents considered the diversity of social backgrounds so that the data obtained would reflect a more comprehensive view of society. Respondents included community leaders, housewives, youth, and village officials. With this variation, the study captured different social perspectives on post-conflict conditions. This quantitative survey aimed to complement the qualitative data from the interviews, resulting in a more comprehensive picture of social perceptions and realities in the field. This approach enables a more valid and representative analysis of the social impacts of the conflict as well as the recovery processes occurring within the community. Therefore, the research findings can provide more accurate and well-founded recommendations.

The survey results clearly reveal how the community perceives post-conflict social conditions. Most respondents (78%) acknowledge losing mutual trust among community members after the conflict. The prolonged armed conflict has left deep wounds that affect everyday social interactions, making people more cautious and suspicious of one another. Additionally, 70% of respondents indicated that the community continues to experience collective trauma due to the violence and events that occurred during the conflict period. This

trauma is not only psychological but also influences social dynamics and relationships between community groups. Additionally, 65% of respondents reported a breakdown in social relationships among residents, impacting cooperation and social cohesion. This fragmentation shows that the community still faces division that requires urgent attention to rebuild harmony.

Figure 1.

Post-Conflict Social Conditions in Aceh Based on Survey Results



Sources: Research Data, 2025.

However, there are also positive signs, with 75% of respondents acknowledging active reconciliation efforts by various parties, including traditional leaders, religious figures, and community organisations. These efforts include inter-group dialogues, joint social activities, and the implementation of customary rituals to heal social wounds and strengthen relationships among community members. The hope for improved social relations stands at a high 85%. The community shows strong optimism that, through collective efforts and ongoing commitment, social conditions will recover and improve significantly in the future. These results show a post-conflict social situation that faces serious challenges, yet the community actively works with strong efforts and hopes to rebuild peace and social harmony.

Reconciliation Through Religious and Local Cultural Approaches

The research findings indicate that the religious approach plays a central role in social healing and restoring relationships among community members after the conflict. People view religious leaders and figures as neutral, respected, and morally influential individuals who can guide the community back to a peaceful path. Religious sermons at mosques, regular study groups, and peace campaigns rooted in Islamic values effectively reduce resentment and increase social empathy. Several informants from former combatants mentioned that the religious approach helped them accept the reintegration process more readily because it emphasised spiritual messages of forgiveness, patience, and brotherhood (*ukhuwah*). Traditional leaders and women emphasised that religion served as a unifying value, bringing together previously divided groups.

Table 4 shows that religion-based approaches play a central and multifunctional role in the post-conflict reconciliation process in Aceh. This finding highlights that religion operates in both the normative and spiritual realms and acts as a social and cultural instrument that mediates, stabilises, and rebuilds social networks damaged by prolonged conflict.

Religious leaders (*ulama*) asserted the strategic role of religion as both a peacemaker and a guardian of public morality. In religious spaces, such as mosques and study groups, they deliver systematic messages of peace through sermons and Friday khutbahs centred on reconciliation. One *ulama* explained, "*Through Friday sermons, we remind people that forgiveness is better than revenge, and this message slowly reduces hostility among villagers.*" This function demonstrates that *ulama* are not only spiritual leaders but also peace actors who

actively shape public opinion while instilling transformative values based on reconciliatory theology.

Table 4.

The Role of Religious Approaches in Post-Conflict Reconciliation in Aceh

Category	Views on the Role of Religion	Religious Activities
Religious Leaders (<i>ulama</i>)	Religion as a peacemaker and guardian of public morality	Peace sermons, Friday sermons on reconciliation
Traditional Leaders	Religion as a peacemaker and guardian of public morality	Collaboration in <i>zikr</i> and customary feasts
Former GAM Combatants	Religious sermons encourage acceptance and self-reflection	Religious studies for ex-combatants, spiritual guidance
Women Leaders	Religion promotes values of compassion and peace within families	Religious study groups, faith-based peace campaigns
Youth	Religion as a moral compass for the younger generation	Islamic studies, peace preaching in the community
Village Officials	Religion facilitates dialogue among community members	joint prayers, mosque activities

Sources: Research Data, 2025.

On the other hand, traditional leaders view religion as strengthening the legitimacy of local value systems that have long supported community-based conflict resolution mechanisms. Collaboration between customary traditions and religion, such as collective *zikr* rituals and customary feasts, creates sacred and inclusive cultural spaces that enable emotional sublimation and strengthen collective identities based on peace. One traditional leader reflected, "*When zikr and feasts are held, people who used to be divided sit together, eat together, and pray together; it is both religious and cultural reconciliation.*"

Former combatants of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) provide a significant perspective. For them, religious approaches such as study groups and spiritual guidance encourage introspection, self-acceptance, and reintegration into society. A former combatant shared, "*The religious study we joined helped us to let go of anger and to attain peace within ourselves before returning to society.*" This psychological transformation shows that religion functions as a social healing mechanism, addressing collective trauma while facilitating the transition from violence to peaceful living.

From a gender perspective, women's leaders see religion as a force that internalises values like compassion, gentleness, and peace in domestic and social environments. Religious activities such as study groups and faith-based peace campaigns allow women to actively participate in constructing a grassroots culture of peace. A female informant shared, "When women join study groups, we learn about faith and how to teach forgiveness and patience to our children." This affirms that women play both roles as objects and subjects of peace.

The youth interpret religion as a moral compass guiding their social direction amid post-conflict dynamics. By engaging in Islamic studies and participating in peace preaching within their communities, the younger generation becomes agents who help reproduce values of peace across generations. A youth leader remarked, "*We need religion to teach us not to repeat the mistakes of the past; Islamic studies and peace preaching are ways for us to move forward.*" In this context, religion also serves as a platform for articulating the aspirations and reconciliatory energy of the youth.

Meanwhile, village officials believe that religious approaches enhance dialogue among community members. Village mosques conduct joint prayers and community-based religious activities that rebuild social communication that has once broken down. One village head noted, "*When we hold joint prayers in the mosque, people who rarely talk to each other meet again; it is an effective way to rebuild trust.*" This reconciliatory function indicates that religion has integrative power capable of restoring social trust and strengthening local social capital.

In the Aceh context, religious approaches function not only as sources of spirituality but also as socio-cultural foundations that enable the formation of inclusive, organic, and contextual

reconciliation structures. From a theoretical perspective, these findings enrich the discourse on religion as an effective non-state actor in peacebuilding practices in post-conflict societies. Furthermore, through in-depth interviews, data were obtained describing perceptions and experiences related to the role of local cultural approaches in the post-conflict reconciliation process. The table below summarises the main findings, showing that local cultural approaches have successfully built peace and social harmony in Aceh.

Table 5 shows that local cultural approaches have proven to be highly significant in the post-conflict reconciliation process in Aceh. Traditional leaders emphasise the values of deliberation (*musyawarah*) and consensus (*mufakat*), which create spaces for inclusive, consensus-based, and peaceful dialogue. These values are deeply rooted in tradition and serve as a normative framework for conflict resolution. Religious figures add that the synergy between religious and cultural values strengthens Acehese society's social bonds and moral foundation, thus enabling sustainable reconciliation. Community leaders highlight the role of traditional rituals as tools for psychological healing and the reinforcement of social solidarity. Conflict-affected residents believe that applying local cultural values makes the reconciliation process feel more sincere and meaningful, enhancing its social legitimacy.

Table 5.

Local Cultural Approaches in the Post-Conflict Reconciliation Process in Aceh

Category	Informant Statement	Findings
Traditional Leader	Acehnese customs teach the values of deliberation and consensus, which are very helpful in resolving conflict.	Customary approaches promote dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution.
Religious Figure	A religious approach combined with local culture strengthens social bonds after the conflict.	When religion and culture coexist, social harmony is easier to achieve.
Community Leader	Traditional ceremonies and cultural rituals serve as mediums to restore trust and solidarity.	Cultural symbols function as tools for psychological healing within the community.
Conflict-Affected Resident	Applying local cultural values makes the reconciliation process feel more sincere and meaningful.	Local culture provides social legitimacy for the reconciliation process.
Women Leaders	Local traditions allow women to contribute to peacebuilding through family and community roles.	Cultural practices identify women as key players in promoting reconciliation and social healing.
Village Youth	Young people are encouraged to understand local culture and history in order to help maintain peace.	Cultural approaches also help build the younger generation's awareness of the importance of peace.

Sources: Research Data, 2025.

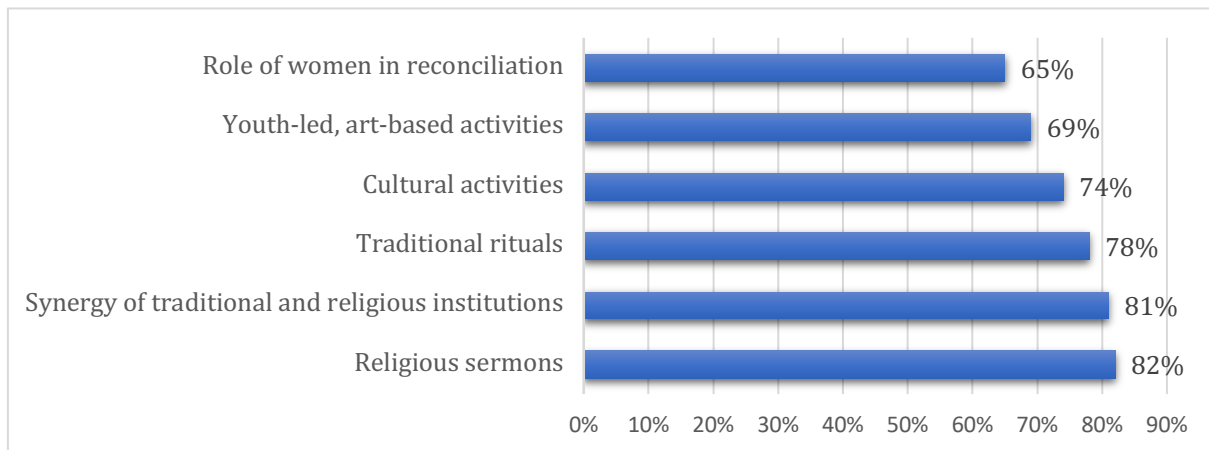
Traditional leaders' use of local language and symbols further fosters a sense of belonging and a shared commitment to maintaining peace. Village youth stress the importance of involving the younger generation through cultural and historical education so that they develop an awareness of peace values and are prepared to carry the reconciliation process forward. In this way, local cultural approaches become an intergenerational foundation for sustainable peace in Aceh.

In addition, survey findings reinforce the notion that religion holds a highly strategic and determining role in consolidating the post-conflict reconciliation process in Aceh. Religion is not merely present as a spiritual expression. However, it functions as a cultural instrument capable of reconstructing social relations, fostering an ethics of peace, and shaping a new, inclusive collective consciousness. In the Acehese context, religion is a transformative medium that bridges sociopolitical fragmentation, strengthens the legitimacy of restorative justice values, and reintegrates societal elements previously polarised by prolonged conflict. This

strategic role positions religion as a symbolic and substantive actor in sustainable social recovery.

Figure 2.

Perceptions of Religious Approaches in Post-Conflict Reconciliation in Aceh



Sources: Research Data, 2025.

The data presented in Figure 2 illustrates public perceptions regarding religious and cultural approaches' contribution to fostering post-conflict social harmony in Aceh. This perception data is important because it reflects how communities themselves evaluate and acknowledge the role of these approaches in social recovery, which is directly aligned with the research problem of this study.

A total of 82% of respondents agreed that religious sermons effectively promote peaceful attitudes among community members, suggesting that sermons and Islamic study sessions serve not only as spiritual rituals but also as platforms for shaping collective awareness that emphasise ending hostility and restoring social trust. Furthermore, 81% of respondents stated that the synergy between traditional and religious institutions is more effective than formal approaches. This indicates that reconciliation rooted in social structures and local values is more authentic and contextually appropriate for addressing the social wounds caused by conflict. This synergy acts as a catalyst for social recovery because it is based on communal consensus, rather than solely on legal-formal norms.

In addition, 78% believe traditional rituals are essential for eliminating social resentment. Cultural practices such as *kenduri* (communal feasts) and *peusijek* (blessing rituals) serve as emotional healing tools and facilitate interpersonal reconciliation. Moreover, 74% of respondents noted that cultural activities help strengthen community solidarity, demonstrating that cultural expressions, such as performing arts and traditional festivals, build relational bridges between previously polarised groups. Further, 69% agreed that youth-led, art-based activities are important in building intergenerational relationships, enabling progressive and reconciliatory dialogue. Although slightly lower, 65% of respondents recognised the significant role of women as social agents who uphold the values of compassion, forgiveness, and social care in the community.

Taken together, this perception data confirms that religious and local cultural approaches are valued positively and considered by the community as fundamental contributors to post-conflict social harmony. Thus, the survey findings complement the qualitative evidence and reinforce the conclusion that sustainable peace in Aceh is inseparable from the active role of religious values and local wisdom.

Discussion

This study critically reveals the complexity of collective trauma following the armed conflict in Aceh, which continues to linger within the social structure of the community. The social wounds inflicted are not limited to physical or economic damage but also manifest as deep psychological trauma and the erosion of social capital, such as trust between community

groups. This trauma is systemic and ongoing, in line with the theory of recurring conflict proposed by Sugiono and Nazala (2016), which states that repeated conflicts often arise from the failure to rebuild social cohesion in post-conflict settings.

Fractured relationships among citizens, growing suspicion, and increasing social fragmentation indicate ongoing instability. The data in this study aligns with the report from BPS Aceh (2023), which shows a low social cohesion index and emphasises that social and psychological dimensions remain major obstacles to reconciliation and sustainable peacebuilding. Therefore, this study underscores the need for a more holistic approach to addressing the impacts of conflict, one that goes beyond legal or political channels to include efforts to restore eroded social values, particularly trust and communal solidarity (Parawansa, 2023).

One of the significant findings of this study is the strengthening of religion's position as a central element in the social reconciliation process in Aceh. In the post-conflict context, religion functions as a source of moral values and an effective "social glue" that helps reintegrate society. Religious leaders and scholars play a key role through sermons, Islamic study groups, and peace campaigns that convey messages of reconciliation and promote peaceful coexistence across groups. These efforts provide social legitimacy to the reintegration process, particularly in facilitating the return of former combatants into society in a peaceful and accepted manner. This approach reflects the spirit of moderate Islam—non-extremist, inclusive, and centred on spiritual and social ethics. By positioning religion as a space for rebuilding social solidarity, the people of Aceh are equipped with a strong framework for healing collective trauma and restoring social networks that were damaged by prolonged conflict (Mardhiah, 2021).

This religious-based approach is not only normative but also practical and participatory. The study shows that women and youth are actively engaged as agents of social change, transmitting peace values across generations. This inclusivity enhances the community's capacity to collectively respond to post-conflict dynamics. Religion is a durable peace mechanism because it fosters new forms of social capital and helps build a more inclusive and adaptive collective identity.

In the post-conflict Aceh region, religion and local culture have both played substantial roles in the promotion of social harmony. The promotion of tolerance, solidarity, and cooperation among the various ethnic groups that reside in Aceh has been heavily reliant on local wisdom. Ethnographic research conducted in Langsa has demonstrated that customs that are based on the wisdom of the local people have been successful in encouraging recognition of the fundamental similarities that exist between ethnic groups, thereby minimising differences and strengthening social resilience (Rahman et al., 2023). The first thing you should do is make sure you have a good understanding of the material. This approach has organically prevented social disasters and fostered a peaceful coexistence in the post-conflict society.

Additionally, the synergy between religious values and local culture, such as customary practices and consensus-based deliberation (*musyawarah*), is vital in managing social tensions and healing emotional wounds. Activities such as communal religious gatherings, traditional rituals, and community dialogues help revive a sense of togetherness that had been eroded. Cultural education for the younger generation is also identified as a key factor in maintaining peace's continuity, preventing social polarisation, and strengthening long-term social cohesion. Thus, a holistic approach combining spiritual values, local customs, and community participation is a strategic foundation for sustainable post-conflict reconciliation in Aceh.

This study also confirms that religious approaches are normative but also praxis-oriented and participatory, involving women and youth as social agents and transmitters of peace values across generations. This reinforces the findings of Ridho and Kurniawati (2024), who emphasise the importance of community empowerment and integrating religious and cultural values to strengthen local social capacity. In this context, religion is a durable peace mechanism that nurtures new social capital and an inclusive collective identity, both essential for sustainable social recovery. The study highlights the strategic synergy between religion and local culture as an authentic and effective foundation for post-conflict reconciliation.

Integrating traditional rituals with shared religious practices acts as both emotional sublimation and a symbolic healing mechanism that strengthens fractured social solidarity (Effendi, 2019).

The customary value of deliberative consensus (*musyawarah mufakat*) forms the basis for inclusive dialogue, aligned with Aceh's social character. It helps address the limitations of formal legal mechanisms that often lack social legitimacy (Adila & Alexandra, 2025). Cultural education for youth is a key factor in sustaining peace values, preventing social polarisation, and fostering long-term social cohesion (Irwan et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with the theory of social cohesion (Haryono et al., 2025) and community social integration (Ar, 2013), highlighting the importance of social norms and rituals as cohesive forces in pluralistic societies.

Overall, the findings affirm that post-conflict social reconciliation in Aceh must be understood as an organic, contextual, and inclusive peacebuilding process, not merely a formal legal mechanism (Eko & Tjoetra, 2012). This model prioritises new forms of social capital trust, solidarity, and spiritual values as the foundation for sustainable social reconstruction, while also creating space for active community participation through religious and cultural approaches (Prayitno & Subagiyo, 2018). The study also emphasises the importance of local institutions such as *meunasah* (community prayer houses) as centres for social mediation and implementers of religious and customary-based approaches (Kasim & Nurdin, 2016). Therefore, this study provides empirical and conceptual contributions to the literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-conflict societies, particularly those rooted in religious and local cultural values. In addition to these contributions, the study proposes a conceptual model of post-conflict social harmony and explains its theoretical implications, as elaborated below.

Based on the findings, this study proposes a model of post-conflict social harmony in Aceh that rests on two interdependent pillars: religious and local cultural approaches. Religious approaches provide spiritual legitimacy and normative guidance through the active roles of *ulama*, sermons, *pesantren*, and community religious gatherings, which restore moral values, forgiveness, and trust. Meanwhile, cultural approaches such as *peusijek* rituals, communal feasts (*kenduri*), and village deliberations (*musyawarah gampong*) serve as social mechanisms for reconciliation, symbolic healing, and strengthening communal solidarity.

The interaction between these two pillars creates a hybrid reconciliation space that is bottom-up, participatory, and culturally embedded. Within this model, religious leaders, traditional figures, women, youth, and village officials act as peace agents who mediate tensions, encourage forgiveness, and reconstruct broken social relations. Thus, the Aceh model of post-conflict harmony can be visualised as a synergistic *system*, where religion supplies the ethical foundation while culture provides the social instruments for practical reconciliation.

The results of this study also reaffirm and extend existing theories. *First*, the persistence of trauma and social fragmentation in Aceh supports the theory of recurring conflict (Sugiono & Nazala, 2016), which argues that conflicts tend to reemerge when social cohesion is not rebuilt. The Aceh case demonstrates that religious and cultural mechanisms directly address this gap by rebuilding trust and solidarity, two elements that political and legal approaches often fail to restore.

Second, the findings resonate with social cohesion theory (Haryono et al., 2025) and community integration theory (Ar, 2013). Both theories highlight the centrality of shared norms, trust, and rituals in maintaining unity within plural societies. In Aceh, religious rituals (such as sermons and collective prayers) and cultural traditions (such as *peusijek* and *kenduri*) are practical embodiments of these theoretical concepts, acting as cohesive forces that heal divisions and sustain harmony.

Therefore, the model derived from this study does not merely describe Aceh's unique context but also contributes to the broader literature on peacebuilding by demonstrating how religious values and local wisdom can operationalise theories of cohesion and integration in post-conflict societies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religion and local culture serve not merely as abstract values but as concrete mechanisms for restoring social harmony in post-conflict Aceh. The contribution of religion is evident in the way *ulama* and Islamic institutions use sermons, study sessions, and faith-based campaigns as platforms for rebuilding trust, transmitting values of forgiveness, and reintegrating former combatants into the community. Local culture contributes through traditional rituals, such as *peusijek* and *kenduri*, as well as village deliberations (*musyawarah gampong*), which provide symbolic healing, reaffirm collective identity, and create legitimate spaces for dialogue. Together, these approaches directly address the wounds left by the conflict, collective trauma, social fragmentation, and mistrust by transforming them into opportunities for reconciliation and renewed solidarity.

According to these findings, the study proposes a model of post-conflict reconciliation in Aceh that is synergistic, participatory, and grounded in local values. The model operates through two interdependent pillars: religious approaches that provide ethical-spiritual legitimacy and cultural approaches that serve as practical instruments of reconciliation. The interaction between the two produces a bottom-up peacebuilding system in which community actors, religious leaders, traditional figures, women, youth, and village officials act as peace agents. This hybrid model shows how conflict resolution works: religion supplies moral authority and shared ethics, while culture provides communal rituals and deliberative mechanisms that transform mistrust into cooperation.

Therefore, the contribution of this study lies not only in reaffirming the importance of religion and culture in peacebuilding but also in demonstrating how these values operate as an integrated system that sustains social harmony in Aceh. This offers theoretical enrichment for reconciliation studies and a practical reference for conflict-affected regions seeking culturally embedded strategies for durable peace.

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This study did not require ethical approval, as it did not involve human participants, animal subjects, or their biological materials.

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