

# The Role of Religious Leaders in Conflict Resolution in Papua

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study examines the role of religious leaders in conflict resolution in Papua, focusing on their strategies and social legitimacy in mediating relationships among communities, the government, and armed groups.

**Research Methodology:** This study employed a qualitative approach grounded in conflict resolution theory and local actor-based peacebuilding perspectives. Data were collected through field observations, limited participation, and in-depth interviews with church leaders, Muslim figures, and indigenous customary leaders who were involved in mediation and peace. The data were analyzed qualitatively using an ethnographic approach involving systematic coding and thematic interpretation to identify patterns related to mediation strategies, social legitimacy, and trust-building processes.

**Results:** The findings indicate that religious leaders serve as trusted moral mediators within their communities. Their roles include facilitating dialogue, advocating for humanitarian concerns, maintaining informal communication across conflicting parties, and strengthening social cohesion through religious activities and peace education. Their community-based authority enables them to operate effectively in a polarized conflict setting.

**Conclusions:** Religious leaders remain important actors in advancing reconciliation and supporting sustainable peace in Papua. Their moral authority and strong community ties allow them to maintain dialogue and foster trust, despite ongoing political and security challenges.

**Limitations:** Limited access to certain conflict areas and the relatively small number of participants may have affected the broader applicability of the findings.

**Contributions:** This study contributes empirical insights into the role of locally embedded religious actors in peacebuilding processes within plural and conflict-affected societies.

**Keywords:** *Conflict Resolution, Ethnography, Peace, Reconciliation, Religious Leaders, Social Mediation*

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## 1. Introduction

Papua represents one of Indonesia's most complex socio-political landscapes. The region is marked by high ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, alongside a long historical trajectory shaped by colonialism, political integration, and prolonged conflict across different historical periods that continue to influence present-day governance and community relations, shaping patterns of political participation and public trust in state institutions, as well as intergroup perceptions and collective regional identity formation (Wenda, Rumainum, Mambor, & Wenda, 2025). Since Papua was incorporated into Indonesia through the 1969 Act of Free Choice (Pepera), tensions related to political status, security operations, and resistance movements have continued to surface in different forms. Over time, the

conflict has evolved into a multidimensional phenomenon, involving not only political violence but also development disparities, questions of social justice, identity recognition, and unequal power relations between the central government and local communities.

Various state responses, ranging from security-based approaches and infrastructure expansion to the implementation of special autonomy, have sought to stabilize the region. Nevertheless, many observers note that these measures have not fully resolved deeper issues, such as distrust, collective trauma, and perceived injustice, within segments of Papuan society. The conflict has also become intertwined with broader national and international interests, including natural resource governance and debates surrounding self-determination. Consequently, the conflict cannot be understood solely as a political-security issue; it is equally embedded in the symbolic, cultural, and relational dimensions of social life.

Within this context, religious leaders occupy a distinctive position in Papuan society. Religion plays an important role in everyday life, both through indigenous belief systems and Christianity and Islam, which have developed through long processes of social interaction and acculturation. Therefore, religious leaders are not merely spiritual figures; they are also respected social actors whose moral standing is deeply rooted in local communities. In moments of tension, uncertainty, or humanitarian crises, communities often turn to them for guidance, mediation, and reassurance.

The role of religious leaders in conflict resolution can be approached through actor-based perspectives on peacebuilding, which emphasize the importance of locally embedded actors in shaping sustainable peace ([Fithriya, 2024](#)). From this standpoint, peace is not limited to formal agreements or elite negotiations, but is produced through everyday interactions, shared values, and social relationships. Cultural approaches to conflict further underline that disputes and reconciliation processes are shaped by systems of meaning and symbols within society ([Saydullayevich, 2025](#)). In addition, social resilience theory highlights the importance of trust, cohesion, and adaptive capacity in communities facing prolonged instability ([Folke, Biggs, Norström, Reyers, & Rockström, 2016](#)). Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how moral and cultural authority can function as resources for conflict mediation.

Previous studies have examined conflict and religion in Papua from different angles. The involvement of religious leaders in countering separatist narratives from a national stability perspective. [Ridwan \(2022\)](#) explored interfaith dialogue initiatives but largely concentrated on formal forums and elite-level interactions. ([Kurnianto, Santoso, & Utama, 2022](#)) analyzed government-led humanistic mediation efforts with limited attention to everyday community practices. While these studies offer valuable insights, they tend to position religious leaders within formal or policy-oriented frameworks and pay less attention to their lived experiences, informal strategies, and daily mediation practices at the grassroots level.

This study attempts to address this gap by employing an ethnographic approach to examine religious leaders as moral and cultural mediators within local conflict dynamics. Rather than focusing solely on institutional roles or official initiatives, the research centers on social practices, community interactions, and informal mechanisms through which religious leaders build trust, facilitate dialogue, and strengthen social cohesion. By placing lived experience and everyday engagement at the center of the analysis, this study aims to provide a more grounded and context-sensitive understanding of conflict resolution in Papua.

Accordingly, this study analyzes the strategies, mediation mechanisms, and forms of social legitimacy that enable religious leaders to facilitate dialogue, encourage reconciliation, and contribute to the foundations of sustainable peace in Papua. In doing so, it responds to calls for approaches that move beyond security-oriented policies and instead recognize the significance of locally legitimate actors in plural and conflict-affected societies ([Aituru, 2019](#); [Mawardi, Taufiq, & Sulaiman, 2024](#); [Moningkey, Hidayat, Wahyudi, & Widodo, 2023](#); [Ridwan, 2022](#)).

## 2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Conflict in Papua has long been understood as a multidimensional issue shaped not only by political contestation but also by historical grievances, structural inequality, economic marginalization, and cultural exclusion ([Anas, Sukendro, Malik, Widodo, & Chandra, 2024](#)). The complexity of this conflict cannot be reduced to sporadic incidents of violence or separatist tensions alone. Instead, it is deeply rooted in contested narratives of identity, development disparities, and perceived injustices that have accumulated over decades.

Several scholars have argued that approaches dominated by security operations have not sufficiently addressed the relational, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of the conflict. While security stabilization may reduce visible violence, it often leaves underlying distrust and resentment unresolved. For this reason, sustainable peace requires processes that are locally grounded, socially embedded, and attentive to community dynamics ([Aituru, 2019](#); [Khairunnisa, Utama, & Setiawan, 2024](#)). These arguments shift attention away from state-centered interventions and toward community-based actors who possess social legitimacy and everyday influence. Within this broader landscape, religion occupies a central position in Papuan society. Religious institutions are not peripheral entities; rather, they are deeply interwoven into patterns of community life. Churches, mosques, and faith-based organizations function as spaces for moral formation, collective gatherings, and social coordination.

Religious narratives contribute to identity construction and shape perceptions of justice, suffering, and reconciliation. Research indicates that religious leaders in Papua have played important roles in post-conflict recovery by encouraging interreligious dialogue, facilitating communication between divided groups, and promoting values of peace and forgiveness ([Khotimah, 2024](#)). However, much of this literature tends to describe their involvement in broad or normative terms, emphasizing their moral authority without closely examining the concrete mechanisms through which mediation unfolds in everyday contexts. There remains a need to explore how religious authority is enacted in practice, how trust is cultivated, and how symbolic language translates into tangible reconciliation efforts.

Studies from other parts of Indonesia have further illuminated the mediating role of religious actors in conflict resolution. [Ridwan \(2022\)](#) shows that religious leaders often facilitate dialogue through ethical guidance, scriptural interpretation, and interpersonal engagement, which transcends political polarization. Rather than positioning themselves as political negotiators, they frequently act as moral interlocutors who frame disputes within a shared ethical vocabulary. Similarly, research conducted in Jayapura demonstrates that religiously inspired community forums can generate shared moral frameworks that reduce suspicion and foster mutual respect among groups with differing affiliations ([Amirullah & Islamy, 2022](#)). These initiatives illustrate how religious authority can function as a bridge across divided communities, particularly in contexts where formal institutions lack public trust.

At the same time, broader analyses of religion and conflict in Indonesia caution against romanticizing the role of religious actors. [Qurtuby \(2016\)](#) emphasizes that religion is socially constructed and politically situated. Depending on how religious narratives are mobilized, they can either intensify divisions or contribute to peacebuilding. This dual capacity underscores the importance of context. Religious leaders do not operate in isolation from political pressures, kinship structures, or institutional constraints. Their authority is negotiated within specific sociopolitical environments, and their influence depends on how communities interpret their actions. This perspective invites closer attention to the everyday interpretive frameworks through which religious leaders construct peace-oriented engagement and navigate complex power relations.

The concept of social resilience provides another lens for understanding the potential contributions of religious actors. Community resilience theory highlights the importance of trust, collective identity, adaptive capacity, and social networks in sustaining social harmony during prolonged instability ([Berkes & Ross, 2013](#); [Ungar, 2021](#)). Resilient communities are not conflict-free, but capable of managing tensions without descending into fragmentation. Although resilience scholarship acknowledges the role of local networks and informal leadership, it rarely offers detailed accounts of how religious leaders actively cultivate resilience through routine interactions, ritual practices, and

informal mediation. In contexts such as Papua, where faith institutions are central to daily life, religious leaders may contribute to resilience by reinforcing moral norms, maintaining communication channels, and providing emotional and spiritual support during periods of uncertainty.

Legal and policy-oriented analyses add another dimension to the discussion. Conflicts in Papua have also been examined in relation to constitutional regulations and state responses to prolonged violence. [Wibowo \(2025\)](#) argues that legal frameworks alone cannot secure peace unless they are supported by social trust and institutional credibility. Legal measures may establish formal order; however, without relational legitimacy, they risk being perceived as distant or imposed. This insight reinforces the idea that structural and community-based approaches must operate simultaneously. In other words, peacebuilding requires not only regulatory reform but also culturally resonant mediation practices that address lived experiences.

Beyond legal considerations, socioeconomic and development-oriented studies highlight the interplay between instability and community participation. [Omoniyi \(2026\)](#) demonstrated that prolonged conflict affects public engagement, weakens social cohesion, and complicates development initiatives. In environments characterized by distrust and uncertainty, community participation declines, and institutional collaboration becomes fragile. These conditions create space for non-state actors, including religious leaders, to assume bridging roles. Because they are embedded in daily social life, religious leaders often retain access to community networks even when formal governance structures encounter resistance. Their involvement may therefore complement broader development and policy strategies.

Recent discussions on religious moderation and inclusive engagement also offer relevant insights. [Irwansuri \(2025\)](#) and [Qizi \(2025\)](#) show that structured religious engagement, when oriented toward dialogue and mutual recognition, can strengthen social cohesion in plural settings. Through educational programs, interfaith meetings, and value-based discourse, religious actors can shape narratives that discourage violence and encourage coexistence. [Kholikovna \(2023\)](#) further argues that sustainable peace strategies require collaboration among civic actors, educational institutions, and moral authorities. Their findings suggest that peacebuilding is not a single event but an ongoing process that involves coordinated efforts across sectors.

Existing scholarship consistently recognizes the importance of religious leaders in conflict contexts. However, much of the literature situates them within formal dialogue initiatives, institutional frameworks, or normative discussions about tolerance and moderation. There remains limited ethnographic attention to how religious leaders in Papua navigate daily tensions, negotiate legitimacy, and exercise moral-cultural authority within polarized communities. How do they interpret their responsibilities? How do they balance neutrality with communal expectations? How do ritual practices, sermons, and informal conversations contribute to mediation? These questions require close engagement with lived experiences rather than abstract policy analysis.

This study addresses this gap by examining the role of religious leaders in Papua through a locally grounded perspective. By focusing on their everyday practices, mediation strategies, and forms of social legitimacy, it seeks to illuminate how peace-oriented engagement is constructed within the social fabric of Papuan communities. Rather than treating religious leadership as a static moral category, this research approaches it as a dynamic and negotiated practice embedded in cultural norms, historical memories, and relational networks. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on conflict resolution, social mediation, and community resilience in contexts marked by prolonged instability.

In addition to institutional and structural explanations, peace studies scholars emphasize that transforming protracted conflicts requires attention to symbolic communication and moral imagination. Reconciliation is not achieved solely through political agreements, but through the gradual rebuilding of relationships across multiple social levels. In contexts marked by long-standing suspicion, healing often begins with everyday encounters to restore dignity and mutual recognition. In Papua, where collective memory and narratives of marginalization shape perceptions of injustice, moral authority becomes a negotiated resource rather than an automatic attribute of the religious office. Religious

leaders who maintain inclusive engagement and distance from partisan interests tend to retain broader legitimacy, while those perceived as politically aligned risk losing trust.

Informal mediation further illustrates how many tensions are addressed outside formal legal mechanisms, relying instead on kinship networks, small-group dialogues, pastoral counselling, and culturally grounded deliberation. Through sermons, theological reflection, and routine interpersonal interactions, religious leaders may reframe disputes in moral language that encourages restraint and forgiveness. Although these relational and symbolic practices are less visible than official negotiations, they contribute to preventing escalation and sustaining social cohesion. By foregrounding these everyday dimensions, the study of religious leadership moves beyond abstract discussions of tolerance and highlights peacebuilding as a lived and continuously negotiated social process within Papuan communities.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive design to explore the role of religious leaders in conflict resolution in Papua. A qualitative strategy was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of social meanings, lived experiences, and relational dynamics within specific contexts ([Creswell & Poth, 2016](#); [Flick, 2022](#)). The research was guided by an ethnographic orientation, emphasizing direct engagement with participants, attention to socio-religious practices, and sensitivity to everyday interactions to understand how mediation processes unfold within the social fabric of Papuan society.

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in peace initiatives and their knowledge of conflict dynamics in Papua. The selection process was then expanded through snowball sampling to reach additional relevant informants. A total of 13 participants were involved, including interfaith religious leaders, customary leaders, government representatives, academics, and local media actors. The focus of inquiry covered mediation strategies, religious practices supporting peace, interactions between religious leaders and communities, and public perceptions regarding their contributions to reconciliation efforts.

Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis, and audio-visual documentation. Interviews were conducted using flexible interview guides to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining a thematic focus. Field observations were systematically recorded in field notes to capture contextual details and informal interactions.

Data analysis was conducted thematically and concurrently with data collection. The analytical process followed several stages: (1) organizing and preparing the data, (2) initial coding of transcripts and field notes, (3) categorizing codes into broader themes, and (4) interpreting patterns in relation to the sociocultural and religious context of Papua. The coding process drew on principles of systematic qualitative coding as outlined by [Saldaña \(2020\)](#), while theme development followed the analytical procedures described by [Braun & Clarke, 2021](#). Themes were gradually refined as the researcher compared emerging patterns with field observations and interview data.

Several validation strategies have been employed to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. These include triangulation of data sources and methods, prolonged engagement in the field, member checking with selected participants to confirm interpretive accuracy, and detailed descriptive reporting to provide transparency of the context and process ([Creswell & Poth, 2016](#); [Flick, 2022](#)). Through these procedures, this study sought to ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' experiences and reflective of the broader social realities in which they are embedded.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### **4.1. Moral Authority and Mediation Role**

These findings indicate that religious leaders are widely perceived as figures with strong moral legitimacy. In situations of rising tension, community members often contact pastors, priests, or imams before approaching formal authorities.

A pastor from Jayawijaya explained:

*“We do not have weapons like the security forces or armed groups; however, our voice is still heard. Usually, the community calls us first to calm the situation.”*

Field observations have revealed that churches and mosques frequently function as safe spaces during periods of unrest. Joint prayers, informal meetings, and direct visits to affected families have repeatedly been observed as practical efforts to reduce tension. An imam from Mimika noted that community members were sometimes more willing to engage in dialogue through religious leaders than through direct communication with state officials. These findings suggest that religious leaders function as communication bridges at the grassroots level, particularly when trust in formal institutions is limited.

### **4.2. Peacebuilding Strategies**

The strategies employed by religious leaders can be grouped into four interconnected categories:

1. The spiritual approach.

Peace messages are consistently conveyed through sermons, interfaith prayers, and religious gatherings, emphasizing love, forgiveness, and respect for human dignity.

2. The cultural approach.

Religious teachings are often integrated with customary mechanisms, such as traditional deliberation forums. Dialogues are conducted alongside tribal and customary leaders to ensure that peace messages resonate within local cultural frameworks.

3. Women and youth empowerment

Interfaith women’s prayer gatherings and shared social activities foster solidarity across communities. Young people are engaged in music, sports, and discussion forums to provide constructive outlets and reduce vulnerability to provocation.

4. Socio-economic approach.

Some religious institutions facilitate small-scale business training, educational support, and humanitarian assistance for families affected by conflicts. These initiatives aim to address the underlying social tensions and promote long-term resilience.

Together, these strategies demonstrate that peacebuilding efforts extend beyond symbolic gestures and are embedded in everyday social practices.

### **4.3. Community Perceptions**

Interviews and FGDs reveal a relatively high level of trust in religious leaders. Many participants described them as being closer to everyday realities than formal government officials.

A university student in Wamena stated,

*“When the government talks about conflict, people are often suspicious. But when religious leaders speak, people are more willing to listen.”*

However, the participants also acknowledged the limitations of religious leaders’ influence. In conflicts involving large-scale political or economic interests, voices are not always sufficient to affect structural decisions. This combination of trust and recognition of limitations reflects a nuanced community perspective.

### **4.4. Cultural and Social Determinants**

Cultural values, such as respect for elders, kinship solidarity, and traditions of deliberation, strengthen the legitimacy of religious leaders as mediators. Their emotional closeness and consistent presence during crises further reinforce public trust. At the same time, kinship ties can complicate neutrality when conflicts involve specific clans or customary affiliations. Limited institutional resources also

constrain the scope of humanitarian and social interventions. These findings indicate that the same cultural and social factors that enhance legitimacy can also shape the boundaries of religious leaders' influence.

#### **4.5. Discussion**

The findings show that religious leaders in Papua do not operate only within the boundaries of ritual or doctrinal teaching. In practice, they step into moments of tension, accompany families affected by violence, facilitate dialogue between groups, and help maintain communication when formal channels become strained. Their authority does not come from political office or institutional power, but from their long-term presence in the community. Because they are known personally and regularly interact with congregations, their words tend to carry weight during times of uncertainty.

This situation reflects what recent peacebuilding scholarship describes as the “local turn” [Leonardsson and Rudd \(2015\)](#); [Ginty \(2014\)](#) argue that peace initiatives often gain traction not through elite agreements alone, but through actors who are socially rooted in local contexts. In Papua, religious leaders occupy precisely this space. Their involvement is not episodic; it is woven into routine worship, pastoral visits, customary meetings, and interfaith encounters. Because of this embeddedness, they are able to calm tensions in ways that feel legitimate to local communities.

In the Indonesian context, these findings also connect with the work of [Qurtuby \(2016\)](#), who examines how religion interacts with identity and conflict in plural societies. The Papuan case suggests that religion cannot be reduced to a source of polarization. While it may intersect with identity politics, it also provides moral language that discourages violence. When religious leaders speak about dignity, forgiveness, or shared humanity, they shift the conversation away from retaliation and toward coexistence. In this sense, religion functions as a moral restraint rather than a trigger.

The emphasis on moderation and interfaith cooperation in this study also resonates with recent research on religious moderation in Papua ([Hakim & Abdurahman, 2023](#); [Islamy & Amirullah, 2022](#)). These studies show that post-conflict reconciliation often depends on the interpretation and practice of religious identities. The strategies observed in this research—joint prayers, cross-community forums, and dialogues grounded in local custom—demonstrate that moderation is not merely a slogan. It is enacted through concrete interactions and shared activities.

Community trust in religious leaders can also be understood through resilience scholarship. Studies by [Berkes and Ross \(2013\)](#); [Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, and Pfefferbaum \(2008\)](#); [Ungar \(2021\)](#) emphasize that resilience is built through networks, shared norms, and the ability of communities to respond collectively to crisis. In Papua, religious leaders contribute to these elements by maintaining regular contact with congregations, organizing collective gatherings, and offering moral reassurance. Their presence during tense periods strengthens the sense of continuity and shared responsibility.

At the same time, the limits of their influence are evident. Research on marginalization and conflict in Papua, as in [Moningkey et al. \(2023\)](#), shows that many tensions are rooted in structural inequalities, land disputes, and political grievances. In such circumstances, appeals to peace, however sincere, cannot by themselves resolve deeper injustices. Religious leaders may prevent escalation and keep the dialogue open, but policy change and institutional reform require action beyond the religious sphere.

Taken together, these findings indicate that religious leaders in Papua occupy a socially embedded position that allows them to mediate, accompany, and stabilize communities during periods of tension. Their influence grows from familiarity, cultural proximity, and accumulated trust rather than formal authority. However, their role should not be overstated. While they are able to reduce hostility and sustain dialogue at the community level, structural problems linked to governance, economic inequality, and political representation remain beyond their direct control. As noted by [Leonardsson and Rudd \(2015\)](#) and [Ginty \(2014\)](#), durable peace requires interaction between local initiatives and broader structural transformation. In Papua, religious leaders represent an important part of that local foundation; however, they cannot replace systemic change.

## **5. Conclusions**

### **5.1. Conclusion**

This study concludes that religious leaders in Papua play a substantive and socially embedded role in mitigating conflict at the community level. Their authority derives not from formal political power but from moral credibility, cultural proximity, and sustained interaction within everyday social life. Through dialogue facilitation, ethical framing of disputes, pastoral engagement, and informal mediation, they contribute to reducing tension and maintaining communication across divided groups. Their presence helps stabilize fragile social relations in contexts marked by historical grievances and distrust. The findings demonstrate that peacebuilding in Papua is not limited to institutional negotiation but is also constructed through relational processes grounded in local moral authority and communal trust.

At the same time, this study affirms that the influence of religious leaders operates primarily within the relational sphere. While they are effective in preventing escalation and nurturing coexistence, their mediation does not automatically resolve the structural inequalities that underlie the conflict. This indicates that conflict dynamics in Papua involve multiple social, cultural, political, and economic layers, requiring differentiated forms of engagement. By foregrounding the lived practices and everyday strategies of religious leaders, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of conflict resolution that recognizes the importance of locally embedded actors within complex and prolonged instability.

### **5.2. Research Limitations**

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and focus on selected districts in Papua, which may not fully capture the diversity of conflict dynamics across the region. The data were primarily obtained from religious leaders and community members directly involved in mediation processes, while the perspectives of higher-level policymakers and security actors were not extensively explored. Additionally, given the sensitivity of conflict-related issues, some participants may have exercised caution in expressing their views, which could influence the depth of disclosure despite the use of triangulation techniques.

### **5.3. Suggestions and Direction for Future Studies**

The findings suggest that religious leaders should be formally integrated into sustained, community-based peacebuilding mechanisms rather than engaged only symbolically in reconciliation forums. Policymakers should strengthen collaboration between religious institutions, customary leaders, and local governments, while also supporting socioeconomic empowerment initiatives, particularly for youth and women, to address underlying vulnerabilities that may fuel conflict. A balanced approach combining relational mediation and structural reform is essential for sustainable peace in Papua.

Future studies could expand the geographical coverage to include a broader range of districts in Papua or conduct comparative research with other conflict-affected regions in Indonesia to better understand variations in religious mediation practices. Employing mixed-method approaches may also provide deeper insights into the measurable impact of religious leadership on community resilience and long-term conflict reduction. Further research examining the interaction between grassroots mediation and institutional policy reform would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable peacebuilding.

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