

Inter-Village Conflict and Communal Violence in Bima, Indonesia: A Political Sociology Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the persistence of inter-village conflict in Bima, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia—an ethnically and religiously homogeneous region often regarded as culturally devout. Drawing on a qualitative approach, the research explores how historical memory, youth dynamics, and symbolic narratives contribute to recurring communal violence in a context otherwise associated with Islamic civility. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings reveal that conflict escalation typically follows a three-stage pattern: latent grievances, amplifying factors, and triggering events—often involving youth mobilization around issues of honor, revenge, or misinformation. Economic hardship, unemployment, and low educational attainment among young men further intensify this dynamic. Additionally, institutional responses to early-stage conflicts are often inadequate or absent, enabling escalation and reinforcing cycles of retaliation. While traditional elders play a role in informal mediation, sustainable peace requires a dual-track strategy: early prevention through community engagement, and firm law enforcement when violence erupts. This study offers a localized framework for understanding identity-driven communal violence in ethnically homogeneous rural areas—a domain often overlooked in mainstream conflict literature—and contributes to both the theoretical discourse on horizontal conflict and the practical development of conflict-sensitive governance and youth-oriented peacebuilding.

Keywords: *Conflict, Violence, Inter-village, Youth, Bima NTB*

A. Introduction

The fall of Indonesia's New Order regime ushered in a period of intense political euphoria, marked by the rise of new political actors, the proliferation of mass organizations, paramilitary groups, and civil society movements. This democratic transition not only expanded civil liberties but also significantly

restructured state institutions—particularly through the reduction of military power, which had long been the backbone of authoritarian control. One major reform was the separation of defense (military) and security (police) functions, a shift that coincided with the growth of civilian militias and a surge in horizontal conflict across the archipelago. These transformations were further accelerated by the liberalization of the press, the release of political prisoners, and the enactment of decentralization laws (Law No. 22/1999 on Regional Autonomy and Law No. 25/1999 on Fiscal Balance). From a sociological perspective, these policies not only redefined state-society relations but also opened space for new local power dynamics, including the proliferation of communal conflicts.

The post-New Order political structure granted regions greater authority to shape their development trajectories in accordance with local values. However, this decentralization also exposed the limits of state control, especially in areas where local governance was weak or contested. As a result, various forms of social conflict emerged—ranging from vertical struggles between state and society, such as in Aceh and Papua, to horizontal conflicts between citizens. In particular, inter-community conflicts—ethnic, religious, or territorial—escalated during this period, as seen in Maluku, Poso, Kalimantan, and parts of East Nusa Tenggara (Sihbudi & Nurhasyim, 2001; Trijono, 2002).

Although religion and ethnicity were often used to justify these conflicts, the actual drivers tended to be political or economic in nature. In Ambon and Poso, for instance, religious symbols were mobilized to mask underlying criminal or political agendas. In Kalimantan and Kupang, ethnic tensions were rooted in resource competition and socioeconomic disparity. Other longstanding conflicts—such as the armed struggle in Aceh or the independence movement in Papua—were eventually resolved through political negotiation and the granting of special autonomy. While these high-profile conflicts have attracted significant scholarly attention, less notice has been given to the steady rise of inter-village conflicts, particularly in regions with relatively homogenous populations. These localized disputes often reflect deeper issues related to social identity, historical grievances, and generational dynamics. In Bima, West Nusa Tenggara, such conflicts have become endemic, with the prolonged rivalry between Ngali and Renda villages serving as a particularly stark example (Adam, 2012). Although historical land disputes have subsided, the legacy of past conflict—such as the 1908 Ngali War—continues to shape local perceptions and inter-group relations.

In Bima, communal identity is closely tied to village affiliation. During times of tension, solidarity within villages intensifies, transforming social cohesion into a mechanism of collective mobilization. This phenomenon is exemplified by *ndempa*, a traditional ritual of open-handed sparring among Ngali youths. While the practice reinforces internal unity, it also underscores the

village's readiness to confront external threats. In this context, conflict becomes both a reflection of internal solidarity and a manifestation of inter-group rivalry.

Perspectives on the causes of inter-village conflict in Bima vary widely. Some view them as spontaneous eruptions driven by youthful provocation, while others suggest elite manipulation or strategic destabilization. Nevertheless, local narratives often emphasize emotional triggers—minor disputes that escalate rapidly due to pride, revenge, or misinformation. This study seeks to understand how and why a community with strong Islamic values and a reputation for civility—the so-called “Veranda of Medina” in eastern Indonesia—can become so vulnerable to communal violence. In doing so, the article aims to uncover the historical, structural, and psychological underpinnings of inter-village conflict in Bima. It explores how socio-cultural identity, memory of past injustice, and youth dynamics converge to produce cycles of violence, and how these might be interrupted through locally grounded strategies for peacebuilding.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the dynamics of inter-village conflict in Bima, focusing on the lived experiences of affected rural communities. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to capture the complexity of social interactions, historical grievances, and symbolic meanings that underlie communal violence in the region. Three primary data collection methods were employed: observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations—both direct and participant—were conducted to gain insight into the behavioral patterns and contextual nuances that contribute to conflict escalation (Agustinova, 2017, pp. 36–37). These observations allowed the researcher to examine social interactions in natural settings and identify unspoken norms and group dynamics.

In-depth interviews were carried out with five purposively selected informants based on their knowledge of and direct involvement in inter-village conflicts. The selection was guided by their positional relevance within the community and their ability to provide rich, reflective narratives (Murdiyanto, 2020, p. 59). The interview process emphasized open-ended questions and dialogic engagement, enabling respondents to articulate their perspectives and emotional responses to specific incidents. In addition, secondary data were collected through document analysis, including local reports, scholarly literature, and media coverage related to conflict in Bima. These materials served to triangulate findings from the field and provide historical context to current events.

Data analysis followed the framework developed by Miles and Huberman (1992), which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion

drawing. The reduction process involved selecting, categorizing, and condensing raw field data to identify patterns relevant to the research objectives. Data were then organized and presented in narrative form, supported by charts or matrices when applicable (Hardani et al., 2020, p. 167). The final stage involved synthesizing and interpreting the findings to generate thematic insights and theoretical implications, in line with the study's aim to uncover the root causes and escalation mechanisms of inter-village conflict in Bima (Arikunto, 1993, p. 112). Throughout the research process, attention was given to ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the sensitivity of the topic. The study also acknowledged the positionality of the researcher and the potential influence of their presence during fieldwork—an important consideration in qualitative research involving sensitive community issues.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Understanding Inter-Village Conflict through Social Theory

To frame the analysis of inter-village conflict in Bima, this study draws on the theoretical contributions of Ted Robert Gurr, Charles Tilly, Johan Galtung, and Georg Simmel—each offering a distinct yet complementary lens on collective violence and social conflict. Gurr's theory of relative deprivation (1970) posits that political violence arises when there is a perceived gap between what individuals believe they are entitled to (value expectations) and what they actually receive (value capabilities). When this disparity becomes intolerable, it generates frustration that may lead to collective aggression. In the context of Bima, such frustration may emerge from historical grievances or unmet communal aspirations, particularly among youth who feel economically or socially marginalized.

Charles Tilly (1978) emphasizes the role of mobilization in collective action. He argues that conflict escalates when groups organize and access the necessary resources—material, symbolic, or organizational—to challenge authority or assert identity. In rural Bima, this often manifests through informal village networks or youth groups that mobilize in defense of perceived threats to communal dignity.

Johan Galtung (1996) offers a triadic model of violence comprising direct, structural, and cultural dimensions. Direct violence refers to observable acts of harm, such as fighting or destruction. Structural violence is embedded in social systems that systematically disadvantage certain groups—through poverty, exclusion, or legal inequality. Cultural violence legitimizes both direct and structural forms through narratives, ideologies, or social norms. In Bima, all three dimensions are present: direct violence during clashes, structural inequality in access to justice, and cultural narratives that frame conflict as a matter of honor or village pride.

Georg Simmel (1986) views conflict not as a breakdown of social order but as a constitutive element of social cohesion. He suggests that conflict can actually strengthen internal solidarity, especially when groups face external threats. This insight helps explain why relatively minor disputes in Bima—such as personal altercations between youths—can rapidly escalate into broader communal confrontations. The high emotional investment in village identity, coupled with a legacy of historical antagonism, amplifies group solidarity and fuels cycles of retaliation.

Together, these frameworks allow us to understand inter-village conflict in Bima not as random or irrational acts, but as deeply embedded social phenomena. They emerge from perceived injustices, collective memory, and identity-driven mobilization—where village affiliation becomes the primary axis of group formation and resistance. The intersection of these theoretical perspectives provides a robust analytical foundation for interpreting the patterns, triggers, and persistence of rural violence in post-New Order Indonesia.

2. Historical and Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Conflict in Bima

Conflict and violence are deeply embedded in the histories of societies across the globe. In earlier eras, large-scale conflicts were typically waged by state actors in pursuit of ideological or territorial goals, as seen in the world wars and ongoing unrest in the Middle East. In the contemporary period, however, many conflicts have shifted to the societal level, taking place within or between communities. Samuel Huntington's (1993) thesis on the "clash of civilizations" offers one such macro-level explanation, suggesting that post-Cold War conflicts would arise primarily between cultural and religious blocs. Yet, this framework offers limited explanatory power in the context of Bima, where both villages involved in conflict share the same religion, ethnicity, and cultural values.

Historically, conflict in Bima has often been tied to political contestation and resistance to domination. During the colonial era, village communities such as Ngali and others in the region resisted Dutch interference, particularly regarding taxation and tribute demands imposed through the sultanate's compliance with colonial rule. One landmark episode, the Ngali War of 1908, saw village leader Salasa Ompu Kapa'a mobilize local resistance against both Dutch forces and the Bima sultanate that supported them. The resulting battle left deep historical wounds and shaped long-standing communal narratives around pride, resistance, and betrayal (Jurdi, 2008; Rachman, 2009).

These historical memories remain embedded in collective consciousness. While territorial disputes between villages like Ngali and Renda have largely subsided, the legacy of inter-group antagonism continues to influence perceptions and behaviors. Villages that once fought colonial forces side by side now find themselves embroiled in localized rivalries—fueled more by symbolic affronts and pride than by structural inequality.

In the post-independence period, particularly during the New Order, the state maintained strong control over local conflicts, suppressing public expressions of dissent and minimizing communal violence. As such, inter-village tensions rarely escalated beyond minor disputes. However, the democratization process after 1998 relaxed these controls, creating space for local actors to assert their identities and grievances more openly. Although Bima is ethnically and religiously homogenous—predominantly Muslim and culturally *santri* as described by Clifford Geertz (2007)—this homogeneity has not translated into lasting social harmony.

Religious identity in Bima serves both as a unifying force and, at times, as a source of collective mobilization. In most cases, it contributes to social cohesion and mutual respect. Yet, specific incidents—such as a case in the 1970s where human waste was deliberately placed in a mosque—demonstrate how even in culturally cohesive settings, provocations can inflame public sentiment. Although law enforcement successfully managed that particular crisis, the underlying volatility remains.

Economic and social changes have also shaped the character of conflict. Since the 1980s, youth from Ngali have increasingly migrated to urban centers for higher education, while Renda maintained its focus on agriculture. This divergence in socio-economic orientation has contributed to subtle differences in outlook and opportunity between the two villages, though neither suffers from extreme inequality. Inter-village conflict, then, cannot be explained by class antagonism alone. Rather, it often arises from interpersonal tensions—jealousy, romantic disputes, or misunderstandings—that are magnified through village-based identities.

Social media and mass communication further intensify these tensions, providing platforms for misinformation and provocation. Despite rising literacy and the expansion of local universities in Bima, youth remain at the center of most inter-village clashes. While educational advancement should, in theory, reduce the propensity for violence, it has not significantly altered the patterns of youth involvement in conflict.

Culturally, Bima does not possess a tradition of organized communal violence. The *ndempa* tradition of ritual sparring in Ngali illustrates how controlled expressions of aggression can serve as cultural outlets. These symbolic performances affirm internal unity and identity, rather than promoting hostility toward others. However, when informal norms are violated—particularly during festive events or public celebrations—tensions can escalate rapidly, especially when young men are involved.

Field observations and community interviews reveal that many recent conflicts are politically manipulated, particularly in the lead-up to local elections. Nevertheless, not all conflicts are driven by elite interests. Spontaneous

escalation—rooted in unresolved interpersonal disputes, rumor, or provocation—remains a dominant pattern. As such, understanding the historical and socio-cultural dimensions of conflict in Bima requires attention not only to structural or ideological forces, but also to everyday practices of honor, pride, and symbolic recognition among youth and community members.

3. Dynamics of Inter-Village Conflict in Bima

Conflict, while often viewed as destructive, can also serve important social functions—particularly in reinforcing group identity and recalibrating power relations. In the cases of Aceh and Papua, conflict resolution has taken the form of negotiated autonomy, enabling regions to preserve distinct identities while integrating into the national framework. Such cases illustrate how conflict, when addressed constructively, can become a catalyst for more equitable governance and political inclusion. However, in Bima, the dynamics of inter-village conflict unfold quite differently. Rather than being rooted in prolonged structural injustice or political repression, these conflicts tend to emerge from emotionally charged, localized incidents—often involving youth. What is notable in Bima is not the scale of the conflict but its repetitive and explosive nature: minor disputes between individuals quickly escalate into large-scale village clashes, often lacking clear ideological or political agendas.

Field data suggest that these conflicts are generally produced through a three-stage process: underlying grievances (sources), accelerating factors (amplifiers), and immediate triggers. While latent tensions may exist due to unresolved historical rivalries or interpersonal resentment, conflict only erupts when a triggering event—such as a physical altercation, a romantic dispute, or a perceived insult—mobilizes emotional responses. A recurring theme is the centrality of youth in these dynamics. Many young men in Bima are either unemployed or underemployed, and lack structured daily routines. In this context, informal gatherings, wedding celebrations, and entertainment events become sites of interaction—and sometimes confrontation. When disputes arise, they often escalate not because of the severity of the offense but because of how they are framed: as insults to village honor.

One frequently cited case involves the stabbing of a young man from Ngali, allegedly by a youth from Renda. The incident, while criminal in nature, was rapidly transformed into a communal issue. When the victim's family sought justice and failed to receive a satisfactory response, the narrative shifted from personal grievance to collective retaliation. Villagers from both sides began establishing roadblocks, patrolling key access routes, and engaging in preemptive strikes against perceived threats. This pattern exemplifies what DiRenzo (1990) describes as the mobilization of social resources—leadership, loyal supporters, access to weapons or networks—which transforms a private incident into public conflict.

Crucially, the escalation is not merely about retaliation; it is also about narrative control. Youths and other actors frame incidents as attacks on communal dignity, using emotionally charged language to rally support. In many cases, slogans such as "defend our village" or "protect our people" are invoked, creating a climate of urgency and polarization. Other common triggers include theft (especially livestock), romantic entanglements, and confrontations at cultural events such as music concerts or wedding receptions. These events, which bring together youths from different villages, often serve as flashpoints for conflict. A minor jostling on a dance floor, for instance, can be interpreted as intentional disrespect, prompting a rapid escalation. Once again, what begins as a personal issue is reframed through a collective lens and amplified via social media, rumor, and retaliatory action. Notably, many of these conflicts lack a coherent goal or outcome. Unlike class-based struggles or ideological rebellions, inter-village clashes in Bima often end without negotiation or resolution, only to reemerge months or years later. This cyclical pattern suggests that the conflict serves a symbolic function—reaffirming boundaries, enforcing loyalty, and maintaining internal cohesion.

Applying Galtung's (1996, 2001) typology, the conflicts in Bima contain elements of structural violence (unequal law enforcement and impunity), cultural violence (narratives that legitimize aggression), and direct violence (physical harm). Structural grievances emerge when authorities fail to enforce justice impartially, especially in cases involving influential families or repeat offenders. Cultural violence is reflected in the glorification of revenge and honor-based action, particularly among young men. Direct violence occurs through physical confrontations, property destruction, and, in some cases, fatalities. Ultimately, the dynamic of inter-village conflict in Bima is not driven by systemic deprivation or resource scarcity alone. Rather, it is maintained through a combination of emotional mobilization, collective memory, and weak institutional capacity to resolve grievances. These conflicts reflect a pattern in which local actors—especially youth—use village identity as both shield and weapon in response to perceived injustice. Until underlying mechanisms such as youth alienation, narrative escalation, and symbolic retaliation are addressed, these cycles are likely to continue.

4. Collaboration for Conflict Resolution: Government, People, and Civil Society

Despite the recurrent nature of inter-village conflict in Bima, response mechanisms have remained largely reactive and fragmented. Government authorities typically intervene only after violence erupts, focusing on short-term containment rather than long-term resolution. There is little evidence of a systematic or institutionalized framework for preventing or transforming conflict at the village level. This lack of strategic planning reflects broader challenges in

local governance – particularly in translating state resources, such as the Village Fund (*Dana Desa*), into effective conflict mitigation tools (Atmadja & Saputra, 2018).

Theoretically, conflict resolution at the community level requires multi-dimensional strategies. Drawing on Jack Rothman's (1996) model of conflict intervention, four key approaches can be identified: coercive strategies (through regulation and enforcement), incentive-based approaches (rewarding positive peacekeeping efforts), persuasive communication (addressing dissatisfaction through dialogue), and normative action (shaping public perceptions and values around peace and justice). In Bima, however, such approaches are rarely applied in an integrated manner. While law enforcement may implement coercive measures during outbreaks, these are seldom followed by restorative or dialogic initiatives.

Lessons from global civil society movements offer relevant insights. Mahatma Gandhi's concept of *Ahimsa* – nonviolent resistance rooted in compassion and moral clarity – illustrates how spiritual and ethical values can counteract cycles of aggression. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr.'s campaigns against racial injustice in the United States exemplify how structured, nonviolent mobilization can achieve long-term societal transformation through dialogue and perseverance. While the context in Bima differs, these examples underline the importance of leadership, values, and community participation in de-escalating conflict.

Locally, Bima's village communities possess strong social and cultural bonds that can serve as foundations for peacebuilding. Daily interactions in farming fields, shared religious spaces, and kinship ties foster interpersonal familiarity – even between residents of rival villages. When conflict arises, these social relations often become channels for informal diplomacy, especially when elders (*dou matua*) step in as mediators. Their moral authority and historical memory of coexistence position them as key actors in defusing tensions.

Nevertheless, reliance on traditional mechanisms alone is insufficient. For long-term peacebuilding, intentional and structured dialogue is essential – particularly among youth, religious leaders, and customary authorities. Communication must go beyond surface reconciliation to address emotional grievances, perceived injustices, and miscommunication that often underlie conflict. This includes creating safe spaces for storytelling, joint reflection, and developing a shared understanding of the conflict's roots and impacts.

Such dialogical efforts must also be aligned with broader democratic values – human rights, pluralism, gender equality, and social justice. In this regard, inter-village dialogue should not be limited to elite actors or formal representatives, but must involve diverse community voices. Collaborative activities – such as joint youth programs, sports, arts, and community service –

can help rebuild trust, rehumanize the "other," and shift the focus from rivalry to mutual benefit.

Furthermore, the government's role must evolve from reactive actor to strategic facilitator. Conflict-sensitive governance entails investing in community-based early warning systems, training local mediators, and embedding peace education in schools. The Village Fund, for example, could be partially allocated for peace initiatives, youth development, and inter-village engagement programs. Ultimately, the resolution of inter-village conflict in Bima demands a hybrid approach – one that respects local traditions while integrating democratic values and institutional support. Social harmony cannot be imposed solely through state intervention or traditional norms; it must be cultivated through shared commitment, inclusive dialogue, and sustained collaboration among all stakeholders.

D. Conclusion

Inter-village conflict in Bima, particularly between Ngali and Renda, reflects a persistent pattern of communal violence shaped by historical grievances, generational anxiety, and fragmented institutional responses. While these conflicts often begin with minor or personal disputes, they escalate rapidly due to strong emotional identification with village-based identities and collective narratives of pride and revenge. Most actors involved are young men – many of whom are unemployed and have limited educational attainment – whose frustrations are exacerbated by economic hardship and social stagnation. This underscores the dual dimensions of the conflict: structural factors such as unemployment and economic vulnerability, and cultural-symbolic dynamics involving honor, memory, and group solidarity.

Despite Bima's cultural and religious homogeneity, inter-village clashes recur frequently, revealing a disconnect between social cohesion and actual communal relations. Law enforcement and local governance mechanisms have often failed to address the root causes of conflict or to deter provocations effectively. In some cases, authorities appear to tolerate or neglect early signs of escalation, allowing minor incidents to spiral into organized violence. To break this cycle, a two-pronged strategy is needed. First, persuasive and preventive measures must be prioritized to de-escalate tensions before they erupt, including youth engagement, education, and community dialogue. Second, when preventive efforts fail and violence erupts, the state must respond decisively through law enforcement to re-establish boundaries of accountability. Ultimately, sustainable peace in Bima requires a hybrid approach that combines the wisdom of local traditions with inclusive governance, institutional reform, and sustained investment in youth empowerment and justice mechanisms.

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