Social Conflict, Identity Boundaries, and Resource Competition: The Alas–Batak Case in Southeast Aceh (1950–1970)

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Abstract

This study examines the social conflict between the Alas and Batak communities in Kuta Batu, Southeast Aceh, during the period 1950–1970. The research aims to analyze the underlying causes, the dynamics of conflict escalation, and the forms of conflict resolution that emerged within the local context. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, drawing on in-depth interviews with seven informants and supported by documentary analysis. Data were analyzed through thematic coding and triangulation to reconstruct the historical process of conflict. The findings indicate that the conflict developed through the interaction of economic imbalance, identity formation, and weak institutional regulation. Differences in agricultural productivity were perceived as unequal access to resources, generating collective resentment. As competition intensified, ethnic and religious identities became more salient, reinforcing group boundaries and contributing to polarization. The absence of effective dispute management allowed tensions to escalate into violence, resulting in forced migration and the persistence of collective trauma. Conflict resolution efforts were largely informal and temporary, focusing on short-term mediation rather than structural transformation. As a result, the conflict was not fully resolved but instead left unresolved tensions embedded in social memory. The study highlights that social conflict in multiethnic societies is closely linked to the management of social change, resource distribution, and institutional capacity. These findings contribute to the understanding of conflict processes in local contexts and offer insights for developing more sustainable approaches to conflict prevention and reconciliation.

Keywords: *Social Conflict, Ethnic Relations, Identity Boundaries, Resource Competition, Southeast Aceh*

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A. Introduction

Social conflict frequently emerges in plural societies as a result of differences in interests, values, identities, and the distribution of resources across groups (Lan 2011; Sujarwoto 2015). In sociological analysis, conflict is not limited to overt confrontation but is understood as a social process rooted in the

construction of identity boundaries, the legitimation of power, and the contestation of meaning within social space. This dynamic is reflected in the historical experience of the Kuta Batu community in Southeast Aceh during the period 1950–1970, when significant social changes followed the arrival of migrant groups. In this regard, social conflict can be understood as a relational process shaped by competition over resources, identity construction, and unequal access to power within a changing social structure.

In the early 1950s, Kuta Batu was an agrarian area dominated by the Alas ethnic group as the indigenous population, with land tenure and social organization structured around customary norms. The arrival of Batak migrants during this period, driven by the search for agricultural land and post-independence mobility, introduced new patterns of interaction between local residents and newcomers. Differences in cultural background, customary practices, and interests in accessing village resources gradually created conditions for social tension that later developed into interethnic conflict (Barter and Côté 2015; Goma, Rijanta, and Putri 2026).

Within the Alas–Batak community, identity boundaries were shaped not only by ethnicity but also by religious differentiation, which functioned as a symbolic boundary. Islam, dominant among the Alas community, and Christianity, associated with segments of the Batak community, operated as social markers that strengthened internal cohesion while limiting intergroup integration. Under stable conditions, such symbolic boundaries did not necessarily lead to open conflict. However, in situations marked by competition over resources and local power, they could be mobilized to reinforce collective sentiments. In this context, religion functioned both as a source of moral legitimacy and as a medium through which social actors interpreted and responded to conflict situations.

Max Weber's (1946) concept of social action emphasizes that human interaction is guided by meaningful action, including affective action shaped by emotions and social attachments. In this setting, traditional and religious leaders played a significant role in shaping how conflict was defined and managed. Their symbolic authority enabled them to influence whether conflict was framed as a threat to collective identity or as a social issue open to negotiation. At the same time, unequal access to economic and social resources encouraged certain groups to maintain or expand their positions within the local structure (Maulana and Ferdian 2025). In multiethnic societies, unmanaged differences in interests can escalate into open rivalry and social violence (Barter and Côté 2015; Lan 2011).

Conflict is also shaped by structural factors such as uneven policy implementation and by cultural factors including stereotypes, prejudice, and inherited patterns of intergroup relations (Sujarwoto 2015; Lampe and Anriani 2017). In the sociology of religion, rituals, institutions, and moral narratives can

either justify or restrain collective violence (Brubaker 2015). Narratives about customary rights, ancestral land, and the protection of community integrity can legitimize collective action, while moral teachings emphasizing peace and solidarity may function as mechanisms for conflict resolution (Bakker 2022; Kasim and Nurdin 2016). Conflict therefore emerges from the accumulation of competing ideas, perceptions, values, and interests within society, while also serving as a space where identity and symbolic power are continuously negotiated (Brubaker 2015; Barter and Côté 2015).

Previous studies have examined various forms of social conflict from multiple perspectives. Azzahra, Faijah, and Adiansah (2023), for instance, analyzed the stages of ethnic conflict between Lampung and Balinese communities and the subsequent efforts at conflict resolution. While such studies offer valuable insight into the immediate dynamics and management of communal tensions, they remain largely focused on contemporary and situational cases. Broader work on conflict in Indonesia has also shown that scholarship has often paid greater attention to large-scale and highly visible violence than to historically embedded local conflicts at lower levels of social organization (Barron, Kaiser, and Pradhan 2009). Existing literature still leaves limited room for analyzing conflict within a deeper historical frame in which religion becomes intertwined with political and social contestation. Brubaker (2015) shows that religion can shape political conflict and violence in distinctive ways, while Kipp (1996) demonstrates that in Northern Sumatra ethnicity and religion have long been entangled in the making of social boundaries. At the local level, moreover, authority is often not divided neatly between formal administration and communal leadership, since village heads and religious figures may simultaneously operate as state agents and community leaders, thereby shaping the moral and political contours of conflict (Kloos 2018). Against this background, the Alas–Batak conflict in Kuta Batu offers a more specific contribution to understanding how ethnicity, religion, and local authority interacted in a historically grounded village conflict

Methodologically, this study examines events that occurred between 1950-1970, while primary data were collected through field interviews conducted in 2025 with seven informants. This condition introduces the possibility of memory bias, particularly when informants were not direct witnesses or experienced the events at a young age. To address this limitation, the study provides detailed profiles of informants, including age, social background, and their position during the conflict period. Cross-checking among informants was carried out to identify narrative consistency and potential distortions. Oral accounts were also compared with available written sources such as village records, administrative archives, and local historical documents to strengthen the validity of findings and reduce subjectivity (Patton 1999; Ritchie 2015).

The absence of focused studies on the Alas–Batak conflict in Kuta Batu indicates an important research gap. The conflict was not limited to ethnic differences but involved issues related to land control, access to village resources, the distribution of roles in local governance, and the legitimacy of customary and religious identities. The Alas community, as the indigenous group, claimed stronger cultural rights over territory and social structure, while the Batak community, as long-term migrants, sought recognition and equal opportunity. In this situation, symbolic boundaries tied to religion and custom intersected with the distribution of local power, making the conflict more complex than a simple horizontal dispute. The accumulation of inequality, intergroup prejudice, and weak social communication contributed to the persistence of latent tensions that continued to shape social relations over time (Sujarwoto 2015; Lampe and Anriani 2017).

Based on this context, this study aims to identify the factors that contributed to the social conflict between the Alas and Batak communities in Kuta Batu, Southeast Aceh, during the period 1950–1970, and to analyze its dynamics and the forms of conflict resolution that emerged within the local context. The study draws on social conflict theory and the sociology of religion to examine conflict as a social process linked to the fulfillment of fundamental human needs such as recognition, justice, security, and identity. The analysis is intended to provide an objective and critical understanding of the conflict without assigning blame to any particular group. The findings are expected to contribute to broader reflections on conflict prevention and to offer both theoretical and empirical insights into the study of social conflict in multiethnic societies.

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design to examine the social conflict between the Alas and Batak communities in Kuta Batu, Southeast Aceh, during the period 1950–1970. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, the construction of meaning, and the socio-historical context surrounding the conflict. The research site was selected purposively, as Kuta Batu represents the primary location where the conflict unfolded. The study relies on collective memory and available local documentation to reconstruct the dynamics of interethnic relations during that period (Fiantika et al. 2022).

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) possessing knowledge or experience related to the conflict, (2) being recognized within the community as credible sources, and (3) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. A total of seven informants were involved, consisting of four males and three females, with four from the

Alas community and three from the Batak community. They included two customary leaders, two religious figures, and three community members, all aged between 75 and 90 years. Some informants had direct experience of the conflict during their youth or early adulthood, while others acquired their knowledge through intergenerational narratives. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted at the informants' residences, with each session lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. Several informants were interviewed more than once to clarify and deepen the data. The interviews focused on village conditions prior to the conflict, the emergence of tension, the role of local leaders, forms of violence, and efforts at conflict resolution (Sahir 2021).

Given the historical nature of the study, particular attention was given to minimizing memory bias and narrative distortion. This was addressed through cross-checking among informants, comparing accounts based on social position and ethnic background, and distinguishing between factual recollection and personal interpretation. In addition, documentary sources were examined as part of data triangulation, including village administrative records, migration data, local government reports, and available historical documents (Patton 1999). Data analysis followed a thematic approach involving transcription, coding, categorization, and the development of key themes related to identity boundaries, resource competition, and conflict resolution mechanisms (Braun and Clarke 2008). The findings were then presented through a process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process, including the use of informed consent and the protection of informants' identities (Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden 2001).

C. Results and Discussion
1. Results

The findings show that the conflict between the Alas and Batak communities in Kuta Batu developed as a gradual historical process shaped by multiple interrelated factors. The data indicate three central aspects of the conflict: first, the emergence of economic imbalance linked to differences in agricultural productivity; second, the strengthening of ethnic and religious identity boundaries in the context of resource competition; and third, the absence of effective local mechanisms to regulate tension and resolve disputes. These conditions contributed to a transformation of the conflict from latent tension into open violence, followed by forced migration and the persistence of collective trauma.

The reconstruction of this process is presented through several phases, while distinguishing between direct testimony and intergenerational narratives.

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The phases presented below are analytical reconstructions based on oral testimonies and available documentary sources. Because the events were reconstructed from retrospective accounts, the temporal boundaries between phases should be understood as approximate rather than strictly fixed.

1) **Phase of Initial Contact and Relative Coexistence (ca. early 1950s)**

In the early phase, relations between the Alas community as the indigenous population and the Batak community as migrants were relatively harmonious. The arrival of Batak migrants did not take place through coercive expansion but through kinship networks and shared clan affiliations. The Alas social structure recognized the Munthe clan, which had historical links with Batak Toba groups. This connection facilitated acceptance and reduced initial resistance.

Ucok Sihombing, who obtained information from his father, a Batak figure at the time, explained:

> "At that time, our community was accepted in the village because of the connection in clan lineage. In Kuta Batu, there was the Munthe clan, which is related to us. Because of that, we were welcomed and treated as part of the community. My father said that after being accepted, they asked permission from the village elders to open farmland to support their families. We were allowed to farm and cultivate land in the village." (Interview with Ucok Sihombing, May 2025)

During this phase, migrants cleared land, developed agricultural activities, and built their livelihoods through farming and livestock. Social interaction was characterized by mutual dependence. The Alas community maintained customary authority, while the Batak community gained economic space to grow.

However, differences in productivity gradually became visible. The relative success of Batak farmers began to alter the local economic balance. Lukman Hakim, a customary leader who witnessed these developments, stated:

> "At that time, I saw that the Batak community worked harder in farming compared to the local people. Their harvests were better and more successful than those of the Alas community. From there, jealousy started to grow, and feelings of resentment toward the Batak community began to appear." (Interview with Lukman Hakim, May 2025)

This phase highlights that the early roots of conflict were closely tied to perceived economic imbalance. The success of migrant farmers was interpreted as a shift in local power relations, which gradually produced feelings of relative deprivation among segments of the indigenous community.

2) Phase of Emerging Economic Tension (ca. mid-1950s)

Latent tensions gradually shifted into more direct actions targeting the economic activities of the Batak community. Sanan, who witnessed the events as a child, described:

> "When I was 11 years old, I saw some members of the Alas community disturb the Batak people by blocking water channels so that water could not reach their rice fields. They also stole crops and carried out acts of violence against them." (Interview with Sanan, May 2025)

These actions indicate that conflict began to undermine the economic foundations of the migrant community. Disruption of irrigation systems and theft of agricultural produce not only affected livelihoods but also intensified distrust and insecurity. Muhardi further explained:

> "At that time, when people from the Alas community stole crops from Batak farmers, they often used knives to threaten them so they would not resist. Because these actions were not met with firm social sanctions, some local people became increasingly bold in repeating such acts." (Interview with Muhardi, May 2025)

The absence of effective social control contributed to the escalation of conflict. Customary norms, which should have functioned as mechanisms of regulation, failed to operate effectively. As a result, economic competition was no longer managed through social negotiation but began to take the form of coercion and intimidation.

3) Phase of Escalation and Identity Polarization (ca. late 1950s–1960s)

The conflict eventually escalated into open violence, including collective acts such as mass stone-throwing in the early 1950s. Religious and customary leaders attempted to mediate, but these efforts remained limited and did not address the structural roots of the conflict. Hamidah, the wife of the late village imam, stated:

> "Peace efforts had been made by my late husband, Umar. At that time, a Batak resident reported a theft committed by an Alas individual. My husband acted as a mediator and managed to reconcile both sides. However, not long after the agreement, acts of violence by the Alas community continued." (Interview with Hamidah, May 2025)

These mediation efforts were informal and temporary. There were no written agreements, collective sanctions, or institutional arrangements to regulate resource distribution or ensure long-term security. At the same time, religious identity increasingly reinforced social boundaries. Hamidah added:

> "The Batak community, who were Christian, had two villages, Durin and Setinjak, where they built churches. Those areas were previously inhabited by the Alas community. Meanwhile, the Alas community only had one village and one small mosque. This made the Alas people feel uneasy and threatened." (Interview with Hamidah, May 2025)

This phase shows that identity boundaries became more rigid under conditions of competition. Religious symbols functioned as markers of territorial presence and were interpreted as signs of expansion, which further intensified intergroup division.

4) **Phase of Systematic Violence and Forced Displacement (ca. late 1960s–1970)**

The conflict reached its peak when acts of violence became more systematic and widespread. Sanan recalled:

"The Alas community carried out acts of terror against the Batak people, such as beating school children, committing sexual violence, and repeatedly stealing agricultural produce." (Interview with Sanan, May 2025)

This phase reflects a transition from localized conflict to organized collective violence. Certain local actors were identified as playing key roles in sustaining the conflict. Lukman and Sanan mentioned:

"There were five individuals who were considered the main actors behind the conflict: Badal, Ribun, Lek, Pante, and Saduman. All of them have now passed away."

Their role suggests that the conflict was shaped not only by structural conditions but also by informal leadership that mobilized collective action and maintained hostility. As a result of continuous violence and insecurity, the Batak community gradually left Kuta Batu around 1970. Samirah explained:

"We, the Batak community, experienced prolonged trauma due to these acts of terror. We had lived together peacefully before, but in the end, we were forced to leave the land where we made our living." (Interview with Samirah, May 2025)

Migration occurred as a survival strategy. Many agricultural lands were abandoned or sold at low prices. Although physical conflict subsided after the exodus, its impact persisted through collective memory and intergenerational narratives. Sanan further noted that in 1986, members of the Batu Rongkam community returned to relocate the graves of their ancestors. This act symbolized the final severance of historical and emotional ties between the Batak community and Kuta Batu. This final phase also indicates that conflict resolution mechanisms were limited in scope and effectiveness. Mediation efforts were unable to address underlying structural inequalities, and no sustainable institutional arrangements were established. As a result, the conflict ended not through reconciliation but through the displacement of one group, leaving unresolved tensions embedded in collective memory.

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2. Discussion

The findings show that the conflict between the Alas and Batak communities developed through a structured interaction between economic competition, identity formation, and institutional weakness. Rather than emerging from a single cause, the conflict reflects a cumulative process shaped by perceived inequality and shifting social relations. From an economic perspective, the conflict is closely linked to relative deprivation. This concept explains that conflict emerges when groups perceive themselves as disadvantaged compared to others, particularly when such comparisons generate feelings of injustice and resentment (Smith and Huo 2014). In Kuta Batu, the increasing productivity of Batak migrants was interpreted by segments of the Alas community as a loss of relative position. Relative deprivation does not depend solely on objective inequality but on perceived comparison, which often becomes a stronger trigger for collective tension (Walker and Pettigrew 1984). Empirical studies further show that group-based deprivation can generate frustration that leads to collective action, including conflict (Runciman 1966). This pattern is evident in the findings, where economic differences were transformed into collective grievances.

Economic competition was further intensified by processes of identity construction. As interaction between the two groups became increasingly shaped by competition, ethnic and religious identities were reinforced as boundaries that structured social relations. In intergroup conflict, identity plays a central role in organizing collective behavior, especially when groups compete over limited resources (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Identity-based distinctions become more salient when groups perceive threats to their status, often leading to polarization and reduced intergroup cooperation (Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006). In this case, religious institutions and ethnic affiliation functioned as markers of group belonging and territorial presence, strengthening internal solidarity while deepening division between groups.

This dynamic is consistent with ethnic competition theory, which explains that groups sharing the same geographical space tend to politicize identity when competing over economic and social resources (Olzak 1992). Competition over land, recognition, and social status encourages the redefinition of group boundaries and the emergence of exclusionary practices (Horowitz 1985). In Kuta Batu, this process can be observed in the shift from relatively flexible coexistence to rigid identity polarization, where ethnicity and religion became central in defining group interests.

The escalation of conflict was also shaped by the absence of effective institutional regulation. The findings indicate that disputes were managed through informal mechanisms that lacked enforcement and continuity. Research on conflict dynamics shows that weak institutions often allow small-scale

disputes to accumulate into broader patterns of violence, particularly when there is no consistent mechanism for conflict management (Wig and Tollefsen 2016). In such conditions, individuals and groups may resort to coercion as an alternative means of resolving disputes. This explains why economic competition in Kuta Batu evolved into intimidation and violence rather than negotiation.

Another important aspect is the role of actors in mobilizing conflict. The identification of specific individuals as key figures suggests that conflict was shaped not only by structural conditions but also by agency. Studies on collective conflict emphasize that leaders or influential actors play a critical role in framing grievances and transforming them into collective action (Tilly 1978). This process is visible in the findings, where certain actors sustained hostility and reinforced group-based narratives over time. Finally, the persistence of collective trauma indicates that the conflict did not end with the cessation of violence. Research shows that collective memory functions as a mechanism through which past conflict continues to shape present social relations (Halbwachs 1992). The forced migration of the Batak community and the symbolic relocation of ancestral graves reflect unresolved tensions that remain embedded in the social fabric.

The findings also indicate that conflict resolution efforts in Kuta Batu were limited and largely ineffective in addressing the root causes of conflict. Mediation by religious and customary leaders played a role in reducing immediate tension, but these efforts were informal and lacked institutional support. In conflict resolution theory, such conditions are often described as negative peace, where the absence of violence does not indicate the resolution of underlying issues (Galtung 1969). Without addressing structural inequality and identity-based exclusion, conflict tends to re-emerge in different forms. In Kuta Batu, mediation focused on short-term reconciliation rather than long-term transformation, which explains why violence continued despite repeated peace efforts.

Sustainable conflict resolution requires the integration of resolution, management, and reconciliation. Resolution focuses on addressing root causes such as inequality and lack of recognition. Management involves preventing escalation through consistent regulation and early intervention. Reconciliation addresses the psychological and relational dimensions of conflict. Studies show that without these combined approaches, conflicts are often suspended rather than resolved (Lederach 1997).

The findings suggest that the absence of institutional mechanisms in Kuta Batu prevented the development of sustainable peace. The displacement of the Batak community effectively ended open violence but did not create conditions for reconciliation. This outcome reflects a pattern found in many intergroup conflicts, where the removal of one group reduces immediate tension but leaves unresolved structural and psychological issues (Bar-Tal 2007). At the same time, the findings indicate that local cultural and religious frameworks hold potential

for future reconciliation. Religious values emphasizing peace and shared humanity, along with customary norms regulating social relations, can serve as foundations for rebuilding intergroup trust. However, these mechanisms require institutional reinforcement to ensure that they are applied consistently and inclusively. Without such reinforcement, local conflict resolution efforts remain fragile and unable to prevent the recurrence of similar tensions (Lederach 1997).

D. Conclusion

This study shows that the conflict between the Alas and Batak communities in Kuta Batu developed through a gradual transformation shaped by economic imbalance, the strengthening of identity boundaries, and the absence of effective institutional regulation. The findings demonstrate that differences in agricultural productivity were interpreted as a shift in local power relations, which generated collective resentment and contributed to the emergence of tension. As competition over resources intensified, ethnic and religious identities became more salient, reinforcing group boundaries and reducing opportunities for cooperation.

The escalation of conflict was closely linked to the inability of local mechanisms to manage disputes and prevent the accumulation of grievances. Informal mediation efforts were able to reduce tension temporarily but did not address structural inequalities or provide long-term security. As a result, the conflict evolved into open violence and ultimately led to the displacement of the Batak community, leaving unresolved tensions embedded in collective memory. These findings indicate that social conflict in multiethnic rural settings cannot be understood solely in terms of cultural difference. It is closely related to how social change, resource distribution, and institutional capacity are managed at the local level. Sustainable peace requires not only short-term conflict resolution but also the integration of conflict management and reconciliation strategies that address both structural and relational dimensions. Strengthening local institutions and fostering inclusive dialogue based on shared social values remain essential for preventing similar conflicts in the future. These findings offer a grounded understanding of how local conflict emerges and persists, providing a basis for more context-sensitive approaches to conflict prevention in multiethnic societies.

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