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Negotiating Rural Harmony: Community-Based Restrictions, Bengkulu Newcomers, and Cross-Cultural Conflict in Nilo Dingin Village, Masurai, Merangin, Jambi, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a rural cross cultural conflict in Nilo Dingin Village, Masurai District, Merangin Regency, Jambi, Indonesia, where a community agreement emerged to restrict the settlement of certain newcomers associated with Bengkulu. The study highlights how village moral values, especially musyawarah or deliberation, gotong royong or cooperation, and collective security routines, can be challenged when repeated insecurity is experienced and publicly interpreted as norm violation. Using a qualitative case study design, the article explores how local values, communication practices, and institutional responses intersected with reported incidents involving property loss, land disputes, intimidation, and a public road harassment episode. Data were collected through field observations, semi structured interviews with village stakeholders and residents, and document review of meeting notes and informal community agreements during 2025. Thematic analysis reveals four connected processes: the formation of a security narrative that reframed difference as risk, escalation from interpersonal grievances to collective sanctions, institutionalization of boundaries through community restrictions and intensified monitoring, and legal pluralism in practice where customary mechanisms and formal law enforcement were used at different moments. The findings highlight a key tension: community based order can stabilize daily life and reduce immediate fear, yet it may also normalize stigma and exclusion when group categorization replaces individual accountability. The article proposes culturally grounded and rights sensitive strategies, including restorative forums, transparent land tenure mediation, and procedural collaboration between community leaders and state institutions.

Keywords: cross cultural conflict, rural communities, security narratives, boundary making, legal pluralism, adat, Indonesia

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1. Introduction

In recent years, internal mobility and labor circulation have continued to shape rural social life in Indonesia, producing complex movement trajectories rather than a single rural to urban path. Pitoyo et al. 2025 show that internal migration patterns in Indonesia remain diverse and dynamic across regions and time. In land and commodity dependent villages, such mobility may support local economies while also increasing contestation over livelihood security, land access, and everyday social order. Cabieses et al. 2024 highlight how stigmatizing narratives can amplify social harms by shaping how communities interpret and respond to those labeled as outsiders.

Previous studies in intercultural conflict emphasize that conflict escalation is closely tied to identity concerns and face sensitive interaction, where communication is interpreted as respect,

threat, or refusal to cooperate. Hou 2023 explains how face and identity operate as central mechanisms in intercultural conflict management. In parallel, boundary making research shows that insider and outsider distinctions are produced through social closure, language, and ideological framing, and these mechanisms can harden categorical separation even when initial problems involve only a limited set of actors. Synnes 2022 demonstrates how boundary making is shaped by multiple dimensions that structure inclusion and exclusion in everyday life.

In the Indonesian context, research on post conflict peacebuilding emphasizes that stereotypes and stigmatizing perceptions can magnify tensions and transform isolated incidents into wider communal risks, making trust building and narrative control central to prevention. Rozaki 2025 shows how post conflict settings involve cultural reconstruction processes that reorganize social roles and collective meaning. Meanwhile, legal pluralism scholarship explains that rural communities often navigate multiple normative orders, including customary deliberation, social sanctions, and formal law enforcement, depending on the dispute type and perceived urgency. Harper 2021 discusses why customary justice remains influential in fragile and post conflict contexts and why justice interventions must address political economy and human rights challenges. Sukriono et al. 2025 further explain how Indonesian communities acknowledge alternative dispute resolution grounded in local wisdom. Research on land conflict in Indonesia also indicates that overlapping statutory and customary systems can generate ambiguity that fuels disputes and weakens local mediation when institutional support is limited. Goma et al. 2026 show how land tenure diversity and interethnic relations shape conflict dynamics in Indonesian development settings.

However, very little attention has been paid to how rural communities translate repeated insecurity into a security narrative that legitimizes community based restrictions on settlement, and how this boundary making process intersects with legal pluralism in everyday village governance in internal migration settings outside major urban centers. This gap matters because collective restrictions can function as protection and as exclusion at the same time, stabilizing daily life while risking stigma and unequal access to justice.

Therefore, this study investigates the case of Nilo Dingin Village to explain how cross cultural interaction escalated into conflict, how collective sanctions were justified, and how customary mechanisms and positive law were mobilized across the conflict trajectory. The study addresses four questions.

1. The first question asks how everyday interaction developed into cross cultural conflict.
2. The second question asks what forms of conflict emerged in relation to values, norms, communication styles, and access to resources.
3. The third question asks what social, economic, and cultural impacts the conflict produced for community relations.
4. The fourth question asks how customary mechanisms and positive law interacted in conflict management and security governance.

2. Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative methodology with a case study approach to examine cross cultural conflict and the emergence of a community based restriction on newcomers associated with Bengkulu in Nilo Dingin Village, Masurai District, Merangin Regency, Jambi, Indonesia. Qualitative inquiry was selected because the study aims to understand meanings, interpretations, and social processes that cannot be captured adequately through numerical measures, particularly when the phenomenon involves moral values, communication practices, and collective decision making in a specific local context (Creswell, 2013). A case study design is appropriate because it enables an in depth exploration of a bounded case within its real life setting and supports the use of multiple data sources to reconstruct how events, narratives, and institutional responses developed over time (Yin, 2018).

The research site was Nilo Dingin Village, a rural highland community whose economic life is strongly tied to agriculture and plantation commodities. The case was bounded by place, timeframe, and governance processes, focusing on the period in which community members discussed insecurity, deliberated responses, and formulated an agreement that restricted settlement. Site access was obtained through initial communication with village stakeholders and community representatives. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, the types of participation requested, and the protections for confidentiality, then proceeded only after receiving consent from participants and

gatekeepers.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure that the data reflected perspectives directly relevant to the conflict trajectory and the village response. The study included village stakeholders such as local officials and community leaders who were involved in deliberation forums, as well as residents who had knowledge of security routines, land related disputes, and community discussions surrounding reported incidents. This sampling strategy was used to obtain information rich accounts from individuals positioned to describe both the cultural expectations that governed village life and the institutional pathways taken when conflict escalated (Creswell, 2013).

Because qualitative interpretation is shaped by the researcher's standpoint, the study incorporated researcher positionality and reflexivity throughout fieldwork and analysis. The researcher maintained reflective notes to examine assumptions, monitor potential bias, and prevent the analysis from reproducing stereotypes or converting community narratives into generalized claims about any group. This reflexive practice was particularly important because the case involves sensitive intergroup labeling and the risk that research reporting could unintentionally reinforce stigma.

Data were collected through semi structured interviews, field observations, and document review during 2025. Semi structured interviews were used to elicit participants' accounts of local values, interaction patterns, perceived turning points, deliberation practices, and the role of customary mechanisms and formal law enforcement. Observations were conducted to capture everyday routines related to security, public discussion, and community coordination, and they were recorded as detailed field notes. Document review was conducted to examine meeting notes, locally circulated agreements, and available records that helped clarify timelines and the language of community decisions. Document analysis was included because documents can function as meaningful evidence of social processes, institutional practices, and public reasoning within a case (Morgan, 2022).

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures to identify patterns of meaning across interviews, observations, and documents (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher began by familiarizing with the dataset through repeated reading and memo writing, then generated initial codes linked to the research questions. The next stage involved grouping codes into candidate themes that explained how insecurity narratives formed, how boundaries were drawn between insiders and outsiders, how interpersonal grievances escalated into collective sanctions, and how legal pluralism operated in practice. Themes were then reviewed against the dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness, refined through clear definitions and naming, and finally developed into an analytic narrative that connects themes to the cultural and institutional dynamics of the case.

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study used triangulation across methods and sources by comparing accounts from different participants with observation notes and documents. An audit trail was maintained through coding memos, analytic decisions, and reflexive notes to support dependability and confirmability. Where feasible, member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review concise summaries of key interpretations to confirm that the analysis accurately represented their intended meanings, while still protecting confidentiality and minimizing potential social risk.

Ethical considerations guided all stages of the study. The article uses role based descriptors and removes identifying details to reduce the risk of harm. Importantly, the study does not aim to determine legal guilt or innocence. Reported incidents are treated as community narratives that shaped collective meaning making and governance responses, and the analysis focuses on social processes, communication dynamics, and institutional decision making rather than adjudicating criminal responsibility.

3. Discussion

The Nilo Dingin case shows how a rural community can move from initial accommodation of newcomers toward collective restriction when repeated insecurity is narrated as a pattern of norm violation. In the case document, residents describe a sequence of incidents that include alleged shop theft, cinnamon bark theft, and coffee theft that occurred at night despite the presence of a night patrol system . These accounts function not only as reports of economic loss but also as public stories that redefine what is at stake in everyday interaction. When livelihood commodities are repeatedly threatened, the community's concern shifts from isolated wrongdoing to a broader interpretation of risk, which then becomes attached to a social category of outsiders. This dynamic is consistent with cultural analyses of stigma, where repeated negative labeling can transform a group into a taken for

granted object of suspicion and social distancing (Goffman, 1963).

A key process in this case is the transformation of conflict into a security narrative. The document explicitly notes that the village developed an unwritten but collectively agreed rule restricting settlement of immigrants from Bengkulu as a response to experiences considered disturbing and potentially disruptive to order . In that narrative, difference is no longer treated as normal variation in communication or lifestyle but as a signal of danger. Once this narrative stabilizes, everyday ambiguity becomes easier to interpret as hostile intent, and the room for trust becomes smaller. This is important for cross cultural understanding because it shows how conflict escalation is driven by meaning making as much as by events themselves, and how face sensitive interaction and perceived disrespect can intensify escalation when local norms privilege calm deliberation and peaceful settlement.

The case also illustrates how livelihood and moral order become intertwined. Alleged theft of agricultural products is described as creating significant economic loss and forcing residents to increase vigilance, including through patrols and surveillance of land and crops . In rural communities where household stability depends on commodity cycles, theft is experienced as a direct threat to wellbeing and dignity, not merely a material loss. This helps explain why the community response becomes collective rather than purely individual. When villagers interpret repeated property loss as an attack on shared norms and shared survival, collective action becomes morally legitimate in local reasoning.

Land conflict narratives appear to operate as a major escalation trigger because they combine material stakes with symbolic claims to rightful belonging. The document reports that some immigrants refused to attend discussion forums and rejected revenue sharing or legal purchase proposals, which widened tension. The narrative then escalates further when residents describe threats of violence, including death threats, which produced fear and trauma. In cultural terms, refusal to enter deliberation forums undermines the moral authority of Musyawarah and signals that shared rules are not recognized. When intimidation appears, the interaction frame shifts from disagreement to danger, and collective restriction becomes easier to justify as prevention.

Boundary making is the clearest cultural outcome of this trajectory. The document states that repeated conflict formed negative perceptions of immigrants, which developed into vigilance and social rejection, eventually encouraging social exclusion through community agreements and village institutions. This is a classic mechanism of boundary making, where insiders and outsiders are distinguished through moral labeling and social closure, and where categorical boundaries become institutionalized as rules and routine practices (Synnes, 2022). The case therefore demonstrates that the community agreement is not only a security measure but also a symbolic boundary that communicates who is considered eligible to live in the village.

Legal pluralism is another central thread in this case, because residents describe responses that combine customary norms with formal law enforcement. The document frames theft and violence as criminal offences under the KUHP and links them to specific provisions, while also describing customary law as an unwritten norm system used to maintain social order. It further argues that conflict resolution requires balancing formal law enforcement and respect for local values. This reflects a plural legal reality in many rural settings, where communities move between deliberation, social sanctions, and reporting to police depending on the perceived seriousness of events and the willingness of parties to participate in customary processes (Merry, 1988). In this case, the combination of customary sanction in the form of settlement restriction and formal law enforcement for selected incidents shows how communities pursue immediate stability while also seeking deterrence through the state.

The discussion highlights an ethical tension that is important for cultural studies and for practice. The village response may reduce immediate fear and restore a sense of control, yet it can also normalize stigma and exclusion if group categorization replaces individual accountability. The document itself notes that differences in values and communication styles became obstacles to harmonious relations and increased social distance. This implies that future prevention should focus on procedures that protect security while reducing the risk of collective labeling. A rights sensitive approach would prioritize transparent mediation for land disputes, restorative forums that remain culturally legitimate through Musyawarah, and proportional cooperation with formal law enforcement that targets specific wrongdoing rather than group identity.

4. Conclusion

This study examined cross cultural conflict in a rural community by focusing on Nilo Dingin Village, Masurai District, Merangin Regency, Jambi, Indonesia, and by analysing how a community based restriction on newcomers associated with Bengkulu emerged as a response to repeated insecurity narratives. The findings show that the conflict developed through an interaction between material threats to livelihood, culturally grounded expectations of social order, and communication dynamics that shaped how intentions were interpreted. In the case narrative, repeated reports of property loss and theft, including shop goods, cinnamon bark, and coffee, were understood by residents as direct threats to household economy and collective security, which encouraged heightened vigilance and the strengthening of night patrol and monitoring routines.

The study also found that land related disputes became a major escalation point because they combined economic stakes with symbolic claims to legitimate belonging. Community accounts describe attempts at deliberation and negotiation, including revenue sharing and proposals for legal purchase, followed by refusal to participate and the emergence of intimidation narratives. These experiences narrowed the space for trust and contributed to a shift from case by case problem solving toward categorical boundary making, where outsider identity became linked to perceived risk. The community agreement restricting settlement functioned as a collective sanction intended to protect social harmony, yet it also institutionalized social distance and increased the risk of stigma when group categorization replaced individual accountability.

Another key conclusion concerns legal pluralism in practice. The case demonstrates that villagers navigated both customary mechanisms and positive law. Customary governance prioritized musyawarah, social harmony, and preventive arrangements such as community agreements and patrol routines, while formal law enforcement was invoked for incidents framed as criminal and threatening. This combination reflects a pragmatic approach to rural conflict management, where communities pursue immediate stability through locally legitimate norms while also seeking deterrence and procedural authority through the state.

Overall, the case highlights an ethical tension that is central for cultural studies of rural conflict. Community based order making can restore a sense of safety and control, but it can also normalize exclusionary boundaries if insecurity narratives are generalized into group labels. Based on these conclusions, the study recommends conflict management strategies that remain culturally grounded while being rights sensitive. Such strategies include restorative forums facilitated through Musyawarah with clear procedures, transparent mediation for land tenure disputes supported by written agreements, and structured collaboration between community leaders and state institutions that focuses on specific wrongdoing rather than collective stigmatization. Future research should incorporate the perspectives of newcomers, examine structural drivers such as commodity volatility and land tenure ambiguity, and compare similar rural cases to identify broader patterns of escalation and prevention.

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