

Muslim Politics Review

Vol. 4 No. 1, 2025, 213-217

<https://doi.org/10.56529/mpr.v4i1.440>

Book Review:

New Approach in Interreligious Dialogue Sought

Rethinking Interreligious Dialogue: Orality, Collective Memory, and Christian-Muslim Engagements in Indonesia
by **Izak Y.M. Lattu** (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2023).

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This important book, published in 2023, explores interreligious conflict in Maluku, particularly in Ambon City, between 1999 and 2004, involving Muslims and Christians. What started as a trivial dispute between two young men of different religions and ethnicities (one a Muslim Bugis migrant and the other a Christian Malukan local) escalated into a deadly conflict. The conflict intensified, resulting in thousands of casualties and displacing around one million people in the region, alongside the destruction of 80 percent of infrastructure. As a result, the conflict in Ambon is intractable, with a history of past domination and inequitable conditions, changes in domination, and a complex mixture of economic, political, and cultural issues (Coleman, 2006).

The conflict largely subsided following resolution in 1999, which was comprised of various efforts, such as sending delegations for



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negotiations, enforcing area blockades, and conducting military operations. The conflict was formally settled through the 2002 Malino II Peace Agreement, yet the impacts of the conflict were still apparent until around 2010-2011. Additionally, there was a civil society movement in Ambon City which aimed to foster a peaceful community. This stems from the fact that the people are essentially bound by blood relations (*pela*) before being 'divided' by religion. This movement included various initiatives, such as research groups and NGOs, discussed in Chapter Five of this book. The most widely used conflict resolution effort in Maluku conflict involving civil society is dialogue resolution, including interreligious dialogue. Meanwhile, narratives and collective memory to stop conflict through songs, culture, rituals, and other oral stories have little place in interreligious dialogue discourses. Therefore, this book is here to explore the local dynamics of interreligious engagements in Maluku through a collective study of the memory of *pela* relationships. This is the puzzle and novelty that this book offers.

The concept of interreligious dialogue is now widely discussed as a means to support conflict resolution and peacebuilding in areas ravaged by religious conflicts, such as Ambon City. Traditional interreligious dialogue is usually characterised as a distinctive engagement between religious groups seeking to foster mutual understanding. Theological, political, and peacebuilding perspectives are the three main approaches to understanding change through dialogue (Neufeldt, 2011). Furthermore, normatively, interreligious dialogue typically involves formal roundtable discussions in physical spaces with religious leaders, predominantly men, and is based on written texts. Most studies of interreligious dialogue focus on the study of religious texts.

The author of this book, Izak Y. M. Lattu, is a dedicated scholar of religious studies and a peace activist. Lattu builds on the work of many scholars who have explored the Ambon conflict but offers a unique perspective of his own. This book takes a different approach from most books on interreligious dialogue that favour texts (canon). Lattu states

firmly that this book analyses interfaith engagement based on local practices rooted in the orality of a cultural network of *pela-gandong* relations (a bond of unity by officially naming each other as brothers). In short, this book provides a different view of interreligious dialogue that centres on texts as well as formal encounters and physical spaces. Lattu's different perspective on interreligious dialogue enriches the discourse.

Lattu divides his book into six chapters. In the first chapter, he examines the historical aspects of Maluku dating back to the pre-colonial era, when it was referred to as the Spice Islands. This reputation attracted traders from Java, India, China, and Persian Arabia, who came to engage in trade. Trade interactions with the locals allowed crops from Maluku to spread to the Byzantine Empire and the Arab-Persian world. Furthermore, this book explores the historical relationship between religion and culture in Maluku, tracing its development from the spice trade era to the colonial period. During this time, colonial powers sought to control the spice trade while pressuring the local population to adopt specific religions. They also enforced religion-based segregation among the locals. In detail, this chapter explores the foundations of social and cultural relations in Maluku society through the concept of *pela* as a mode of social networking and a cultural defence mechanism.

Chapter Two of this book examines in detail the role of folk songs as a tool of collective memory in Maluku. Known as *kapata*, folk songs function as a mnemonic vehicle that accommodates the recollection and social effectiveness that constitute socio-cultural solidarity in Maluku. In this case, oral narratives act as cultural capital through which Malukan people maintain communal teachings and values. The author asserts here that folk songs serve as a trove for collective memory, which nurtures solidarity between Muslims and Christians. In terms of peacebuilding, these folk songs unite the people of Maluku, transcending religious differences. In a more modern development, reproducing Malukan cultural memory in video compact discs and sharing folk songs

on YouTube have disseminated collective identity and formed an 'imagined community' in Maluku.

Chapter Three discusses the performative aspects of rituals that preserve collective memory and their role as a repository of cultural teachings in Maluku. The chapter also analyses forms of ritual performance that demonstrate the important involvement of local people in interfaith peace work. Through various activities such as performances, symbols, folk songs, food sharing, and other initiatives, communities that have endured the hardships of past conflicts can revitalise the collective memory of siblinghood across communal and religious boundaries.

Chapter Four deals with the top-down approach to peace through government agencies (military and police). The author attempts to answer why the government failed to make peace among the Malukan people. Lattu explains that hegemony suppressed local political structures during the New Order era. The government replaced local leaders in Maluku with individuals from outside the region and military personnel. As a result, when riots occurred, the local government was unable to prevent the conflicts effectively.

Chapter Five examines how civic networks have contributed to restoring respect, mutual trust, and tolerance in Maluku. This has been achieved through informal networks and associations and through the everyday interactions of its multi-religious and multi-ethnic citizens. Lattu details the activities of various civil societies and their efforts in promoting sustainable peace. This effort shows that religious walls and boundaries no longer appear to be a barrier. According to the author, the spirit of Malukan siblinghood, along with pre- and post-conflict siblinghood, serve as the foundation for the involvement of informal community organisations and networks in achieving peace.

In Chapter Six, Lattu establishes a model of interfaith engagement in the Maluku context where community members maintain and mobilise

oral collective memory. In practice, Muslim and Christian communities communicate primarily through oral rather than written forms through folk songs, rituals, and oral narratives that model appropriate interfaith relations for oral communities. In this chapter, he maintains that oral-based interfaith engagement is an alternative to peaceful interaction among multi-religious and cultural communities.

Overall, this book offers rich historical narratives about Maluku during both pre- and post-colonial times, as well as the conflict situation there. The book also discusses the richness of folk songs, rituals, and narratives as alternative forms of interfaith engagement within communities rooted in oral culture. This study can be extended to interfaith engagement studies in other regions of Indonesia and beyond. However, for those unfamiliar with cultural studies, especially folk songs and rituals, this study could be considerably challenging to understand. Finally, this book is an important and valuable read for scholars of interfaith dialogue, religious studies, cultural studies and peace studies.

References

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