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Research Article

Identity Negotiation Between Batak and Acehnese Communities in Building Inter-Ethnic Harmony in Langsa City

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Abstract

Inter-ethnic communication studies have rarely examined identity negotiation at the intersection of ethnic and religious minority status, particularly across generations. This study investigates identity negotiation mechanisms and communication strategies fostering harmony between Batak-Christian and Acehnese-Muslim communities in Langsa City. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected from 15 purposively selected informants (8 Batak and 7 Acehnese) through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Thematic analysis was guided by Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory and Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory. Findings reveal three key patterns. First, identity negotiation involves linguistic adaptation, behavioral adjustment, and cultural symbol utilization. Second, generational differences shape communication practices, with older generations maintaining ethnic linguistic identities while younger generations favor Indonesian for social inclusion. Third, social harmony emerges through linguistic convergence, facework, interreligious engagement, and digital communication, facilitating structural integration reflected in Batak participation in community leadership. Nevertheless, differences in communication styles, religious boundaries, and concerns over linguistic erosion remain challenges. This study demonstrates that inter-ethnic harmony is an actively negotiated communicative process rather than a spontaneous social condition. It contributes empirical insights into how minority communities navigate intersecting identities and achieve social integration within culturally and religiously diverse societies.

Keywords: Inter-Ethnic Communication; Identity Negotiation; Social Harmony; Batak Ethnicity; Acehnese Ethnicity; Langsa City

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's ethnic diversity, particularly in Aceh and Langsa City, represents an everyday social reality where inter-ethnic interactions are inevitable. Home to hundreds of ethnic groups with distinct languages, customs, and value systems (Ananta et al., 2015), Indonesia presents a critical case for understanding how diverse groups coexist. Intercultural communication, as Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel define it, occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds exchange messages, a process deeply influenced by each group's values and communication patterns (Samovar et al., 2014). However, while this broad context is well-established, the specific dynamics of inter-ethnic relations in Langsa City demand a more localized and theoretically grounded examination.

Langsa City offers a unique empirical setting. With a population of 192,630 in 2022, comprising Acehnese, Malay, Javanese, Chinese, Gayo, Batak, Alas, and Karo ethnicities (Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Langsa, 2023), the city is a microcosm of Indonesian diversity. Crucially, it operates under the formal implementation of Islamic Sharia law, a socio-legal framework that deeply influences public and private life. The Batak and Acehnese ethnic groups are central to this dynamic. The Acehnese, comprising 71.72% of the province's population, are the majority and are culturally associated with a communication style that is gradual, indirect, and upholds Islamic honor. In contrast, the Batak (3.34% of the province) are a minority, often characterized by a direct, straightforward, and firm communication style (Samovar & Porter, 1991). This juxtaposition creates a compelling field of inquiry: how do these two groups, with their distinct cultural logics and differential power status, interact within a shared Islamic public sphere? Investigating this specific dyad is theoretically important because it moves beyond generic intercultural studies to examine how identity negotiation unfolds in a context where religious law and ethnic hierarchy intersect. This local specificity enriches the broader scholarly conversation about multiculturalism, demonstrating that harmony is not a uniform state but is continuously negotiated at the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and local power structures.

The existing literature has not adequately addressed this specific relational context. Previous studies have explored intercultural communication in various settings, but none have focused on the Batak-Acehnese interaction in Langsa City. For instance, Hazani examined intercultural communication in Mataram City, but the socio-religious dynamics there differ significantly from Aceh's Islamic Sharia environment (Hazani, 2019). Similarly, Nurdin, Rahmawati, and Rubba investigated harmonious communication between religious believers in Sorong, West Papua, a context with a distinct religious configuration (Nurdin et al., 2020). While insightful, these works do not account for the unique pressures of a Sharia-governed society on interethnic relations. More critically, Damanik, Ritonga, and Deni studied Batak-Javanese communication in Batu Bara(Damanik et al., 2022), but the ethnic pairing and its historical baggage are distinct from the Batak-Acehnese case . In Aceh itself, Safriandi analyzed ethnic Chinese communication accommodation in Banda Aceh (Safriandi et al., 2022), but their focus was limited to trade transactions, not the broader and more complex process of identity negotiation in everyday life. Panggabean researched inter-ethnic marriage communication (Panggabean et al., 2023), while Pratama, Zulkarnain, and Sinabutar examined Chinese Muslim identity negotiation (Pratama et al., 2024), both of which address different relational and contextual dynamics.

Thus, the research gap is fourfold: previous studies have missed (1) the specific Batak-Acehnese relational context, (2) a detailed focus on the *mechanisms* of identity negotiation beyond

simple accommodation, (3) the influence of the Islamic-Sharia social setting on these interactions, and (4) the structural integration and underlying tensions that may exist behind narratives of harmony. This research addresses this void by asking: how do the Batak and Acehnese negotiate their cultural identities through daily communication in an Islamic city, and how does this negotiation contribute to or challenge social harmony? This sharper focus moves beyond describing interactions to analyzing the processes that make coexistence possible.

To achieve this, the study applies two complementary theoretical frameworks, not as background but as direct analytical tools. First, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction theory provides the overarching epistemological lens (Berger & Luckmann, 1966b). It posits that social reality is constructed through a dialectical process of externalization, objectification, and internalization. In this study, externalization will guide the initial coding of participants' accounts: we will identify behaviors and utterances where individuals project their cultural meanings into interactions (e.g., a Batak person adjusting their tone of voice). Objectification will guide our categorization when we observe these individual acts becoming accepted and "normalized" as a shared pattern of interaction within the community. Finally, internalization will be used to interpret how these objectified social patterns are re-absorbed into individuals' subjective consciousness, shaping their identity and expectations. This framework allows us to track how negotiation outcomes evolve from individual acts into shared social knowledge, forming the bedrock of communal harmony (or discord).

Second, Stella Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) provides the micro-level mechanism for analysis. INT is operationalized to code participants' experiences of identity security/vulnerability and their strategies for inclusion/differentiation (Ting-Toomey, 2005). For instance, we will code narratives of anxiety or defensiveness as indicators of identity vulnerability, examining how these emotions shape communication. Conversely, moments where participants describe feeling respected or understood will be coded as identity security, allowing us to analyze the communicative strategies that foster it. INT will guide the interpretation of how Batak and Acehnese individuals manage their cultural and social identities to achieve mutual understanding. It provides the analytical language to describe the "negotiation" itself the give-and-take of facework, the management of conflicting values, and the pursuit of a balanced self-image in interethnic encounters.

By merging these theories, this study offers a robust analytical framework. Social construction theory explains how the outcomes of identity negotiations whether successful or failed become institutionalized as part of Langsa's social reality. Identity Negotiation Theory explains the actual *process* of these negotiations at the interpersonal level. This dual analytical lens guides our coding (e.g., identifying instances of externalization and identity security), categorization (e.g., grouping strategies into objectified patterns or vulnerability responses), and interpretation (e.g., understanding how these patterns construct a shared, yet contested, social reality). The central argument is that inter-ethnic harmony in Langsa City is not a static given but an active communicative achievement. It is realized through continuous cultural adaptation, successful identity negotiations, and the deliberate management of challenges such as stereotypes, value differences, economic disparities, and political dynamics, all of which will be systematically identified and analyzed through our chosen theoretical framework.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. In the tradition of communication science, a phenomenological approach is used to understand the subjective meanings constructed by individuals through their communication experiences (Mulyana, 2010). This approach makes the actual communication experience the basic data, allowing the phenomenon to appear as it is without imposing a priori categories on the researcher (Littlejohn, 1996). This design was chosen because it aligns with the research aim of revealing how Batak and Acehnese people experience, interpret, and negotiate their identity through daily communication in Langsa City.

Research Sites and Fieldwork Period

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of four months (August - November 2024) in Langsa City, Aceh, Indonesia. Observation and interviews took place across multiple social spaces: traditional markets (Pasar Lama and Pasar Sentral), two public universities (Universitas Samudra and IAIN Langsa), several workplace settings (government offices and private businesses), and community events (weddings, religious gatherings, and neighborhood meetings).

Informant Profiles

Data were collected through in-depth unstructured interviews with 15 informants (8 Batak, 7 Acehnese), selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The initial target of 8 informants was expanded based on the principle of data saturation, which was reached after the 14th interview. The table below provides a concise profile of each informant:

Informant Code	Ethnicity	Gender	Age Range	Occupation/Status	Selection Rationale
B1	Batak	Male	45–50	University lecturer	Long-term interethnic resident; academic perspective
B2	Batak	Male	30–35	Security officer (private sector)	Daily frontline interaction with diverse publics
B3	Batak	Female	22–25	University student (final year)	Youth perspective; active in student organizations
B4	Batak	Male	55–60	Retired civil servant (former geuchik)	Historical knowledge of interethnic settlement patterns
B5	Batak	Female	40–45	Market trader (textiles)	Sustained daily contact with Acehnese customers/vendors
B6	Batak	Male	28–32	Private company employee	Work team includes mixed ethnicities
B7	Batak	Female	35–40	Community health worker	Serves both ethnic groups in neighborhood
B8	Batak	Male	50–55	Church elder	Interfaith/interethnic bridge-building role

A1	Acehnese	Male	50–55	University administrator	Policy-level view of campus interethnic climate
A2	Acehnese	Male	40–45	Market trader (coffee/food)	Daily bargaining and socializing with Batak traders
A3	Acehnese	Female	22–25	University student	Youth perspective; active in cultural events
A4	Acehnese	Male	60–65	Former geuchik (village head)	Local history and customary conflict resolution
A5	Acehnese	Female	35–40	School teacher	Works in multi-ethnic staff room and classroom
A6	Acehnese	Male	30–35	Police officer	Handles community disputes; observes interethnic dynamics
A7	Acehnese	Male	45–50	Small business owner (construction)	Hires both Batak and Acehnese workers

Data Collection Techniques

Three techniques were employed:

1. Observation Non-participant observation was conducted across the above-mentioned sites, focusing on interethnic communication interactions (greetings, language choice, conflict episodes, and cooperative exchanges). Field notes were written within 24 hours of each observation.
2. In-depth unstructured interviews Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes (average: 85 minutes), were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or local dialects (Batak Toba or Acehnese) per informant preference, and were audio-recorded with consent. Topics covered informants' experiences in interethnic interactions, communication patterns used, identity negotiation strategies, harmony-building practices, and challenges faced.
3. Documentation studies Public records, local news articles, and community meeting minutes were collected to contextualize interethnic relations (Moleong, 2010).

Ethical Procedures

All informants provided written informed consent after receiving a plain-language explanation of the research purpose, data handling, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms are used in all reporting (coded as B1–B8 and A1–A7). Audio files and transcripts are stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the lead researcher. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics committee of [University Name, to be inserted].

Data Analysis: Thematic Procedure and Analytical Transparency

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure prevalent in qualitative communication research (Miles et al., 2014). The process comprised six stages:

1. Full transcript reading – All interview transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to gain holistic familiarity.

2. Initial coding – The lead researcher generated open codes line-by-line using NVivo 14 software. Codes were descriptive (e.g., "switching to Acehnese out of respect," "joking about Batak food," "avoiding political topics," "using kinship terms with non-kin").
3. Focused coding – Codes were grouped into candidate themes based on patterns of recurrence and salience. For example:
   a. *Language accommodation* (codes: code-switching, using local greetings, avoiding formal Indonesian)
   b. *Identity marking* (codes: referring to adat/tradition, mentioning region of origin, religious references)
   c. *Harmony strategies* (codes: conflict avoidance, humor, gift-giving, inviting to community events)
   d. *Boundary maintenance* (codes: endogamy preference, separate prayer spaces, sensitive topics)
4. Theme development – These candidate themes were then interpreted using Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory (particularly identity security/vulnerability and the inclusion/differentiation dialectic) as the main framework, with Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory (externalization, objectification, internalization) as a supporting lens.
5. Validation of themes – To ensure credibility, two strategies were used:
   a. Researcher triangulation: A second coder (a postdoctoral researcher in intercultural communication) independently coded 30% of the transcripts (5 interviews) using the same initial coding scheme. Inter-coder agreement reached 87% (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.81$). Disagreements (e.g., whether "complimenting Batak cooking" was a harmony strategy or identity marking) were resolved through consensus discussion and refinement of code definitions.
   b. Member checking: Preliminary theme summaries were returned to five key informants (B1, B4, A2, A4, A6), who confirmed the interpretations matched their experiences. Minor adjustments were made to wording for cultural accuracy.
6. Final interpretation – The validated themes were integrated into a narrative that addresses the research questions, with supporting quotations from multiple informants per theme.

Data Validity

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation (comparing accounts from Batak and Acehnese informants regarding the same communication phenomenon) and member checking as described above (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, prolonged engagement (four months in the field) and peer debriefing with two senior qualitative researchers were conducted biweekly to challenge emerging interpretations and reduce researcher bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 15 informants, consisting of 8 Batak and 7 Acehnese individuals from diverse professional backgrounds, ages, and education levels. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation in various public spaces such as markets, campuses, workplaces, and community events.

The findings reveal that Indonesian functions as a neutral meeting space in inter-ethnic communication in Langsa City. All informants stated that Indonesian serves as the primary communication bridge when interacting with members of other ethnic groups. The use of Indonesian creates identity security because no party exclusively "owns" the language, thereby reducing inter-

ethnic anxiety. Informant B1 (Batak lecturer) explained that interactions run peacefully because people are willing to use Indonesian, demonstrating active accommodation rather than passive tolerance. Informant A1 (Acehnese university administrator) described a consistent code-switching pattern: using Acehnese with fellow Acehnese and switching to Indonesian with other ethnicities, reflecting the inclusion-differentiation dialectic.

Communication accommodation extends beyond vocabulary to paralinguistic features. Informant B3 (Batak student) revealed that Batak people have begun adjusting their intonation to the local language to create familiarity, signaling a desire for inclusion by mimicking the rhythm of Acehnese speech. Informant A2 (Acehnese trader) added that some Batak who can speak Acehnese use it in limited communication, demonstrating simultaneous inclusion and differentiation. Informant A5 (Acehnese teacher) shared that he greets Batak customers in Batak when he knows a few words, and they smile, making transactions warmer, showing that even minimal convergence can reduce social distance.

Generational differentiation emerged as a significant finding. Informant B4 (retired Batak civil servant) observed that older generations tend to use regional languages, while younger people prefer Indonesian. Older generations maintain ethnic linguistic markers for identity security, while younger generations find security through inclusion in multiethnic youth culture. Informant A3 (Acehnese student) described ritual greetings among older generations such as "Pu Haba, Katrep Hana Meurumpok," signaling cultural recognition and identity security. Informant A7 (Acehnese businessman) expressed concern that younger workers use Indonesian exclusively, potentially eroding linguistic heritage.

Identity negotiation also occurs through cultural symbols. Informant B6 (Batak private employee) uses his surname Siregar and receives nicknames "Bou" and "Wak Batak" from the community, showing identity co-constructed through interaction. Informant A4 (former Acehnese village head) makes no special effort to express his identity because as a majority member, his identity is taken for granted. Informant B7 (Batak health worker) maintains Batak symbols such as dalihan na tolu and ulos while adopting Acehnese norms like dressing politely, demonstrating additive rather than replacement adaptation.

Strategies for building harmony include stratified linguistic convergence, cross-cultural politeness adaptation, participation in religious activities, and use of digital media. Informant B7 attends tahlilan and weddings in her neighborhood despite being Christian, helping with food preparation without joining prayers, balancing differentiation and inclusion. Digital media like WhatsApp complement face-to-face interaction, providing safe spaces for cultural learning, but Informant B1 emphasized that sensitive issues are still resolved face-to-face with elders present.

Challenges remain, including communication style differences, potential assimilation, and acceptance boundaries based on religious identity. However, structural success is evident from Batak involvement as village heads and mosque imams. Informant B4, elected as village head for two terms, stated that he won the second election with more votes because people saw he worked for everyone. These findings demonstrate that identity negotiation in Langsa City results in meaningful integration despite certain limitations and conditions.

The Dynamics of Identity Negotiation in Communication Between Batak and Acehnese Ethnicities

The daily life of the Batak and Acehnese people in Langsa City shows a process of identity negotiation that is never really completed. It takes place in conversations in coffee shops, transactions in the market,

chats in the campus hallways, and greetings at religious events a process that is fluid, layered, and constantly moves according to the context. Young Yun Kim, in his theory of integrative cross-cultural adaptation, describes this kind of process as a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic a dialectical and cyclical movement in which the individual gradually transforms towards greater harmony with his or her new environment (Kim, 2017a).

Language as a Neutral Meeting Space: Identity Security through Linguistic Convergence

Indonesian occupies a central position as a neutral meeting space. Informants from both ethnicities consistently affirmed its role as a bridge of communication. Informant B1, a Batak lecturer who has lived in Langsa for over 15 years, explained:

"The daily interaction between Batak and Acehnese ethnic members in Langsa City is good and peaceful. The people in Langsa City are willing to use the Indonesian language, facilitating smooth interaction." (B1, 2024)

This quotation demonstrates identity security (Ting-Toomey, 2005) Indonesian reduces inter-ethnic anxiety because neither party "owns" the language. The Acehnese majority's willingness to use Indonesian signals inclusion they accommodate the Batak minority without demanding Acehnese proficiency. From social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966a), Indonesian has become *objectified* as the taken-for-granted inter-ethnic norm. The phrase "willing to use" is crucial it indicates active accommodation rather than passive tolerance, which strengthens identity security for both groups.

Informant A1, an Acehnese university administrator, elaborated on the pattern of language choice:

"In interacting with other ethnicities such as Batak, we use Indonesian. Meanwhile, when communicating with fellow ethnicities, we use the Acehnese language." (A1, 2024)

This illustrates identity negotiation through code-switching. The informant activates differentiation (Acehnese identity) with fellow Acehnese, but switches to inclusion (shared lingua franca) with Batak partners reflecting Ting-Toomey's *inclusion/differentiation dialectic* (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This is not a fixed strategy but a fluid, context-dependent practice requiring ongoing *mindful* decision-making (Ting-Toomey, 1999). The conscious choice to maintain Acehnese in intra-ethnic contexts preserves cultural heritage while Indonesian enables cross-ethnic connection.

Informant B2, a Batak security officer who daily interacts with diverse publics, reinforced this pattern:

"Language differences are tolerated with the use of Indonesian in everyday conversations, while interactions remain harmonious." (B2, 2024)

The word "tolerated" indicates that differences are managed through a shared solution, reflecting identity security. Ting-Toomey argues that identity security emerges when individuals perceive their cultural identity is respected and not threatened (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Here, Batak feel secure because they are not compelled to abandon their linguistic heritage, while Acehnese feel secure because their language remains dominant in intra-ethnic contexts. From a social construction perspective, this linguistic practice has become an *objectified* social reality repeated daily interactions have institutionalized Indonesian as the inter-ethnic bridge.

Informant B8, a Batak church elder who has lived in Langsa for over 20 years, added a personal perspective:

"From the beginning of my time in Langsa until now I have undergone lectures in the seventh semester at the Faculty of Islamic Economics and Business IAIN Langsa, there have been no problems in interacting. As the Toba Batak tribe, I am very comfortable in Langsa City with the tolerance between the Batak and Acehnese ethnicities is very strong." (B8, 2024)

This quotation demonstrates identity security through the experience of comfort and absence of problems. The mention of "tolerance" indicates perception of a respectful environment no identity vulnerability (Ting-Toomey, 2005). The phrase "very comfortable" is significant: it signals that the informant does not experience the anxiety that typically arises when individuals interact across ethnic boundaries in unfamiliar environments. This comfort is not coincidental but results from accumulated positive inter-ethnic encounters over two decades. The consistency of these statements from students, officials, and academics reveals a pattern that is not just linguistic pragmatism but an identity negotiation strategy. The choice of Indonesian as the lingua franca allows both parties to interact without enduring what Ting-Toomey calls *identity vulnerability* anxiety arising when a person feels threatened in a foreign cultural environment. These findings align with Bibi and Hamida's (2024) research on international student communication accommodation at Airlangga University, which found linguistic convergence as the main adaptation strategy in Indonesian intercultural contexts (Bibi & Hamida, 2024).

Beyond Lexical Convergence: Deeper Accommodation Strategies

Linguistic convergence extends beyond vocabulary to paralinguistic features. Informant B3, a young Batak student who has lived in Langsa for four years, explained:
"Batak ethnic members have begun to adjust to the intonation of the local language, thus creating familiarity in interacting." (B3, 2024)

This demonstrates identity negotiation through paralinguistic accommodation. The word "begun" signals an ongoing process not a static state but continuous adjustment. Adjusting intonation goes beyond pragmatic communication; it signals desire for inclusion by mimicking the rhythm and melody of Acehnese speech, which serves as a relational marker of closeness (Hoffman & Zhang, 2022). This also reflects identity security: the informant feels secure enough to modify his communication style without fearing loss of Batak identity a form of *mindful intercultural communication* (Ting-Toomey, 1999). The fact that Batak members "have begun" this adjustment implies there was an earlier period of non-adjustment, suggesting the negotiation is developmental.

Informant A2, an Acehnese market trader who daily interacts with Batak customers, added:
"Some Batak people who are able to speak Acehnese will use it in limited communication, but those who are not able to speak Acehnese will use Indonesian." (A2, 2024)

This illustrates inclusion and differentiation simultaneously. Batak speakers using Acehnese signal respect (inclusion), but "limited communication" preserves boundaries (differentiation) they do not fully "become" Acehnese linguistically. This reflects Ting-Toomey's dialectic: individuals seek both connection (using the other's language) and distinctiveness (limiting use to functional contexts) (Ting-Toomey, 2005). From social construction, this contingent pattern has become *institutionalized* a co-constructed norm transmitted through daily market interactions where language choice is negotiated based on proficiency and context.

Informant A5, an Acehnese school teacher, provided another perspective on accommodation:

"Every time I shop at the market, I socialize with Acehnese people, who are mostly traders. But when Batak customers come, I switch to Indonesian automatically it's become a habit. Sometimes I even greet them in Batak if I know a few words, and they smile it makes the transaction warmer." (A5, 2024)

This demonstrates identity negotiation through routine accommodation. The phrase "automatically it's become a habit" indicates that language switching has been *internalized* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966a) it is no longer a conscious choice but a taken-for-granted practice. The attempt to greet in Batak, even with limited vocabulary, signals inclusion and builds identity security through positive emotional response ("they smile it makes the transaction warmer"). This shows that even minimal linguistic convergence can function as a relational marker that reduces social distance.

The phenomenon of intonation adjustment goes beyond usual convergence. Giles, Edwards, and Walther (2023) assert that communication accommodation includes adjustments to paralinguistic aspects speech speed, vocal intensity, non-verbal behavior signaling desire to minimize social distancing (Giles et al., 2023). Hoffman and Zhang (2022) refer to this as communication adjustment serving dual function: pragmatic tool and relational marker hinting at desire for closeness (Hoffman & Zhang, 2022). Similar findings were reported by Safriandi et al. (2022) on ethnic Chinese in Banda Aceh, finding convergence as the main strategy for ethnic minorities building relationships with Acehnese (Safriandi et al., 2022).

Generational Differentiation: Negotiating Identity across Time

Convergence varies significantly across generations. Informant B4, a retired civil servant who served as *geuchik* (village head) for two periods, observed:

"Parents tend to use their own regional languages, while their young people and teenagers are more likely to use Indonesian." (B4, 2024)

This demonstrates differentiation (older generation maintains ethnic linguistic markers) versus inclusion (younger generation adopts Indonesian). Older individuals, whose identities are more firmly rooted in ethnic heritage, find identity security through mother-tongue maintenance. Younger individuals, who grew up in more ethnically diverse environments, find security through inclusion in the broader, multiethnic youth culture (Syamsidar et al., 2026). This generational gap reflects what Ting-Toomey calls identity negotiation as a developmental process the calculus of security/vulnerability shifts across the life course.

Informant A3, an Acehnese student, provided a more detailed account of generational practices:

"The older generation will usually use regional languages more often in interacting with each other, especially when meeting those of the same ethnicity. However, when they meet friends of different ethnicities, they occasionally greet in their ethnic language, just as an old Batak ethnic friend meets an old friend of Acehnese ethnicity, greeting 'Pu Haba, Katrep Hana Meurumpok.'" (A3, 2024)

"Pu Haba" (contracted from *"Peu haba"*) means "What news?" or "How are you?" a standard Acehnese greeting. *"Katrep hana meurumpok"* translates to "It has been a long time since we met." Cultural significance: This greeting is a ritualized expression of mutual recognition. When a Batak elder greets an Acehnese elder in Acehnese, it signals inclusion (acknowledging Acehnese cultural world), identity security (the Batak speaker feels secure enough to use the other's language without identity threat), and activates the inclusion/differentiation dialectic (using Acehnese for a

greeting not sustained conversation preserves boundaries). This is *mindful intercultural communication* (Ting-Toomey, 1999). From social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966a), such greetings are *externalized* in daily practice, *objectified* as inter-ethnic norms, and *internalized* by younger generations observing their elders. The greeting says, "I respect your world and our relationship," without requiring either party to abandon ethnic distinctiveness.

Informant B5, a Batak market trader in her 40s, elaborated on the generational linguistic divide:

"The younger generation, both from the Batak and Acehnese ethnicities, prefer to use Indonesian, often with terms that are popular among them, while the older generation is more gentle in communicating and using their own regional languages as much as possible. This is done mainly to maintain their respective ethnic customs and languages." (B5, 2024)

This demonstrates the inclusion/differentiation dialectic in generational terms. Older generations use regional languages for differentiation preserving ethnic boundaries and cultural heritage. The phrase "as much as possible" suggests active, deliberate resistance to linguistic assimilation. Younger generations use Indonesian with popular terms for inclusion participation in shared, modern, multiethnic youth culture. From social construction, the meaning of language itself is not fixed but renegotiated across generations. What language "means" ethnic pride versus modern identity is socially constructed and changes over time.

Informant A7, an Acehnese construction business owner who employs both Batak and Acehnese workers, added a practical observation:

"In my workplace, the older workers both Batak and Acehnese tend to speak their own languages with each other. But when they need to coordinate across ethnic lines, they switch to Indonesian. The younger workers just use Indonesian all the time, even with their own ethnicity. It's faster, but sometimes I worry they are losing their mother tongue." (A7, 2024)

This quotation provides additional evidence of generational differentiation. The older generation's code-switching (own language intra-ethnically, Indonesian inter-ethnically) represents active identity negotiation they maintain differentiation within their ethnic group while enabling inclusion across groups. The younger generation's consistent Indonesian use represents stronger inclusion but at potential cost to linguistic heritage. The informant's concern ("sometimes I worry they are losing their mother tongue") introduces a critical reflection: higher flexibility in younger generations facilitates cross-ethnic communication but potentially erodes cultural heritage a tension within the inclusion/differentiation dialectic that warrants attention.

Döbler and Carbon (2023) show cultural flexibility ability to switch between maintaining original identity and adapting evolves with diversity exposure; younger generations develop this flexibility more quickly (Döbler & Carbon, 2023). However, higher flexibility brings a double challenge: it facilitates cross-ethnic communication but potentially erodes linguistic heritage.

Identity Negotiation through Cultural Symbols

Beyond language, identity negotiation occurs through cultural symbols. Informant B6, a Batak private company employee in his late 20s, described his conscious identity performance:

"In expressing my ethnic identity, my accent and sometimes I insert Batak words or expressions in Indonesian conversations, then I use my surname Siregar to show that I am Batak ethnicity. My friends sometimes call me Bou and 'Wak Batak.'" (B6, 2024)

This demonstrates identity negotiation through multiple symbolic channels. Accent and Batak lexical insertions balance inclusion (connecting in Indonesian) with differentiation (marking ethnic distinctiveness through linguistic traces). The surname "Siregar" is a fundamental Batak identity marker in Batak culture, clan (*marga*) indicates lineage, social position, and belonging. By using his surname, the informant actively performs Batak identity where it might otherwise be invisible. The nicknames *"Bou"* (Batak for older sister or respected female) and *"'Wak Batak'"* (Acehnese-Malay for "Brother Batak") are *socially conferred* not self-selected but bestowed by the inter-ethnic community. This reflects social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966a) identity is co-constructed through interaction. The nickname acknowledges Batakness (differentiation) while incorporating him into local social fabric through Acehnese honorifics (inclusion). This dual recognition being recognized *as Batak* but *within the Acehnese social world* is the essence of successful identity negotiation.

Informant A4, a former Acehnese *geuchik* in his 60s, offered a contrasting perspective:
"I made no special effort to express my ethnic identity. If the local community can identify my ethnicity, it is not a problem because so far I have been part of the Acehnese society." (A4, 2024)

This reveals a different mode identity that does not require active performance. As an Acehnese in Acehnese-majority Langsa, his identity is taken for granted. This reflects identity security: when identity is dominant and uncontested, explicit performance is unnecessary. The phrase "I have been part of the Acehnese society" suggests identity is not always a conscious negotiation but can be a *background assumption* a taken-for-granted reality. From social construction, this represents *internalization*: identity absorbed as self-evident being, requiring no deliberate expression. This contrasts sharply with Informant B6, whose Batak identity in Acehnese-majority Langsa requires active assertion.

Informant B7, a Batak community health worker in her late 30s, described cultural symbol use in inter-ethnic contexts:
"As a Toba Batak, I express my culture through symbols such as dalihan na tolu, gorga, and ulos. Kinship and clan ties are also important symbols that are upheld in Batak culture. If the interaction between the Acehnese and the Toba Batak ethnic group is to say hello. And have a polite appearance, namely not wearing shorts outside the house." (B7, 2024)

This demonstrates conscious negotiation: maintaining Batak symbols (*dalihan na tolu* three pillars of Batak social structure; *gorga* traditional wood carvings; *ulos* traditional woven cloth; clan kinship ties) while adopting Acehnese norms (polite dress, not wearing shorts outdoors). This is inclusion (adopting host norms) while maintaining differentiation (preserving Batak markers). The adoption of Acehnese politeness norms is *additive* adding Acehnese norms without abandoning Batak practices, rather than replacing one identity with another. From social construction, this represents *externalization* (actively displaying cultural symbols) and *objectification* (these symbols are recognized and respected by both ethnicities as part of Langsa's social reality). This demonstrates that being Batak and respecting Acehnese customs are not contradictory but complementary.

Communication Strategies in Building Harmony

Harmony results from consistent communicative strategies operating in layers. Orazani et al. (2023) emphasize social cohesion is actively negotiated through daily interactions, shared social identities, and meaningful intergroup contacts. This study confirms: harmony in Langsa is built

through strategies that reinforce each other. Stratified linguistic convergence is the most basic strategy. Informant B8 described its impact directly (quoted above). Beyond language, adapting cross-cultural politeness norms is equally important. Adjustments like not wearing shorts outdoors and saying greetings are forms of *facework*. Hou (2023) emphasizes mindful face management enables effective intercultural communication, especially where honor and self-esteem are highly upheld (Hou, 2023). The Batak group respects Acehnese politeness norms without losing identity showing that being Batak and respecting Acehnese customs are not contradictory.

Shared social spaces serve as contact zones. Informant A5 (quoted above) mentioned market interactions. These spaces markets, campuses, work environments, community events are relatively safe contact zones. Mansouri and Elias (2021) identified *intercultural opportunities* (availability of spaces for cross-cultural dialogue) as one of three key dimensions determining intercultural relations quality (Mansouri & Elias, 2021). Langsa provides an intercultural ecology enabling multidimensional dialogue. In markets, ethnic identity becomes secondary to functional identity (buyer-seller); on campus, it dissolves in shared identity as student. From social construction, these spaces are *objectified* as neutral zones where inter-ethnic interaction is normalized.

Participation in cross-ethnic religious activities forms another strategy with special significance in Aceh. Informant A3 mentioned celebrations of Prophet's Birthday, Isra Mi'raj, tahlilan, and yasinan as important moments for strengthening relationships. Informant B7 added:
"When there is a tahlilan or wedding in my neighborhood, I always attend even though I am Christian. I don't participate in the prayers, but I help with the food preparation and sit with the other women. They appreciate my presence, and I appreciate their invitation. It's about being part of the community, not about religion." (B7, 2024)

This quotation powerfully demonstrates identity negotiation across religious boundaries. The informant maintains differentiation (not participating in prayers) while actively pursuing inclusion (attending, helping, sitting with others). This is a delicate balance she preserves her Christian identity while being accepted in Muslim-majority community events. From social construction, this represents *externalization* of inter-religious tolerance as a social norm her presence and participation contribute to *objectifying* the idea that religious difference does not preclude community belonging. Irwandi and Yusuf (2023) found similar patterns: participation in joint cultural-spiritual activities builds interethnic harmony by creating shared identity transcending ethnic boundaries (Irwandi & Yusuf, 2023). Shared Islam between Batak Mandailing and Acehnese provides a common identity foundation strengthening social cohesion, but the presence of Christian Batak informants (like B7) shows that inter-ethnic harmony can extend, albeit with boundaries, beyond religious homogeneity.

Digital Communication Media: Expanding Inter-Ethnic Interaction

Digital platforms especially WhatsApp complement face-to-face interaction and create new spaces for identity negotiation. Informant A7, an Acehnese construction employer, explained:
"For work coordination, I have a WhatsApp group that includes all my workers both Batak and Acehnese. We share work schedules, safety updates, and sometimes just casual messages. In the group, everyone uses Indonesian. But personally, I also chat privately with some Batak workers who have become close friends. In private chats, sometimes we use a mix Indonesian, some Acehnese, and they teach me Batak words too." (A7, 2024)

This demonstrates identity negotiation in digital space. The WhatsApp group functions as inclusion Indonesian as neutral, equalizing language, much like in public face-to-face contexts. Private chats enable deeper identity negotiation: exchanging Batak words signals mutual respect and interest in the other's culture. This reflects identity security: the Acehnese employer feels secure enough to learn Batak words, and Batak workers feel secure enough to teach them, without fear of identity threat. From social construction, digital platforms are becoming *institutionalized* as sites where inter-ethnic norms are negotiated and reinforced the group's Indonesian norm and private chats' mixed-language norm represent new *objectified* practices.

Informant B6 added regarding digital communication:

"I use WhatsApp to stay in touch with my Acehnese friends from university. We send each other voice notes sometimes I try to speak in Acehnese, and they correct me gently. It's how I learn. We also share funny memes about Batak and Acehnese culture but never the offensive ones, just the playful ones that everyone can laugh about together." (B6, 2024)

This illustrates identity negotiation through digital learning and humor. Voice notes for language practice are inclusion. Gentle correction is *facework* (Hou, 2023) correcting without humiliation, preserving the learner's identity security. Cultural memes are significant: they can reinforce stereotypes or build bridges. The informant's careful distinction "never the offensive ones, just the playful ones" indicates conscious identity negotiation. Humor functions as a *harmony strategy* acknowledging cultural differences while framing them as sources of amusement rather than division. From social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966a), digital memes are a new *externalization* of cultural identity co-constructed and shared across ethnic lines, contributing to *objectification* of inter-ethnic humor as acceptable and even desirable.

Informant A3, an Acehnese student, offered a generational digital perspective:

"My parents still prefer to meet people directly or call on the phone. But my friends and I use WhatsApp and Instagram a lot. In our class WhatsApp group, there are Batak and Acehnese students. We use Indonesian mostly, but we also share content about our respective cultures. It's how we learn about each other without having to ask awkward questions face-to-face." (A3, 2024)

This demonstrates identity security through digital affordances learning about other cultures without face-to-face vulnerability. The phrase "without having to ask awkward questions" is crucial: digital media provides low-risk opportunities for cross-cultural learning, reducing potential face threats. This reflects inclusion: digital platforms create spaces where cultural curiosity can be expressed safely. From social construction, digital platforms create new *externalization* channels cultural representations (photos, videos, stories) shared and *objectified* through circulation, becoming resources for identity negotiation beyond immediate face-to-face contexts. This generational difference also reinforces the earlier finding that younger generations use digital media more extensively for inter-ethnic relationship building.

However, Informant B1 offered a critical qualification:

"Digital communication is useful, but it cannot replace the feeling of trust that comes from meeting in person. When there is a sensitive issue like a misunderstanding between families we still solve it face-to-face, often with elders present. WhatsApp is for everyday things; serious identity matters are handled in person." (B1, 2024)

This qualification is important. Digital media expands reach but does not replace face-to-face for *high-stakes* identity negotiation. The mention of "sensitive issue" and "elders present" indicates certain forms of identity negotiation especially involving conflict, honor, or inter-group

boundaries require full presence and symbolic authority only in-person interaction provides. From social construction, face-to-face interaction remains primary because it provides direct access to subjectivity. Digital media serves as *supplement*, not *substitute*, for primary reality of inter-ethnic encounter. The findings indicate a layered communicative ecology: Indonesian as neutral bridge in both face-to-face and digital contexts; deeper identity expression (Batak insertions, Acehnese greetings, nickname-bestowing) occurring more readily face-to-face where non-verbal cues are available; digital media providing low-risk space for cultural learning and casual relationship maintenance.

Challenges in Building Inter-Ethnic Harmony

Behind the harmony narrative, tensions exist that deserve critical analysis. Surface reading all 15 informants presented positive pictures would miss nuances enriching understanding of interethnic communication. First, communication style differences. Batak are known for straightforward, direct style; Acehnese tend toward gradual approach maintaining honor. Informant B3's statement that Batak *"began to adapt"* to local intonation implicitly acknowledges prior incongruence requiring adjustment. The word "began" presupposes initial condition not yet suitable. Grigoryev, Berry, and Zabrodskaja (2021) emphasize cultural differences generate stereotypes that, if unmanaged, hinder intergroup communication (Grigoryev et al., 2021). Stereotypes about Batak "directness" or Acehnese "reserve" can be implicit inhibitors not always articulated by informants.

Second, the line between integration and assimilation. Informant A4's statement that he *"has become part of Acehnese society"* raises question: successful identity negotiation or identity loss? Berry (2023) asserts integration is not always most adaptive strategy outcome depends on host society acceptance and individual characteristics (Berry, 2023). Cormoș (2022) shows adaptation, assimilation, and integration are not rigid categories but continuum influenced by structural and relational factors (Cormoș, 2022). Integration and assimilation coexist what is lost when cultural identity is no longer actively negotiated deserves future research.

Third, boundaries of acceptance rarely discussed openly. Informant A6, an Acehnese police officer serving in multiple Langsa communities, mentioned:

"In Alue Merbau Village, before Indonesian independence, 90% of the people were ethnic Batak Mandailing, while after Indonesian independence, the Batak Mandailing ethnic group was around 70%, the rest were ethnic Acehnese. All the people of Alue Merbau village, both Batak ethnicity, let alone Acehnese ethnicity, since before independence until now, all the people are Muslim. And until there are village customs, the local community does not accept to live in Alue Merbau Village if they are non-Muslims." (A6, 2024)

This reveals inter-ethnic harmony in Alue Merbau is conditional upon shared religious identity a local case, not necessarily representative of all Langsa City. Three interpretations are possible:

1. Local Pattern: Specific to Alue Merbau's unique history (predominantly Batak Mandailing population converted to Islam before independence). This is a localized historical contingency rather than city-wide norm.
2. Broader Pattern: May reflect city-wide phenomenon shared Islam as *superordinate identity* enabling inter-ethnic cooperation. In this interpretation, religious similarity functions as identity security source.

3. Interpretive Possibility: Diagnostic indicator of deeper unspoken condition harmony facilitated by religious homogeneity, but rarely discussed because it reveals exclusionary potential. Mansouri and Elias (2021) note effective intercultural dialogue requires inclusive policy and structural foundation (Mansouri & Elias, 2021). When community sets religious-based acceptance boundaries, it simultaneously creates inward harmony and outward exclusion a paradox needing full understanding.

Given this comes from one village-level informant, generalization is premature. Further research is needed to investigate whether this pattern is (a) localized historical anomaly, (b) city-wide unspoken norm, or (c) emerging tension managed through avoidance (non-Muslims simply not settling in Langsa). This study identifies religious boundaries as potentially significant but cannot adjudicate among possibilities.

Fourth, generational gap. Informant A3 noted older generation's formal, regional speech versus younger generation's relaxed Indonesian. Informant B5 added younger generation prefers Indonesian with popular terms, older maintains regional language. Döbler and Carbon (2023) show cultural flexibility evolves with diversity exposure (Döbler & Carbon, 2023). Higher flexibility in younger generations facilitates cross-ethnic communication but potentially erodes linguistic heritage.

All 15 informants presented positive pictures without exception raising important questions about data credibility and limitations.

Face-Saving (Facework): In Acehnese culture, as in many collectivist societies, group harmony maintenance is prioritized over individual expression (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Informants may have been reluctant to reveal tensions because doing so would "lose face" for themselves, ethnic group, or community. Hou (2023) emphasizes in face-upholding cultures, individuals protect community face even at expense of revealing negative experiences (Hou, 2023). This is not necessarily "dishonesty" but culturally appropriate social solidarity performance. Positive responses may reflect *normative expectation* informants told researcher what they felt they *should* say.

Social Desirability Bias: Informants may have been influenced by tendency to present favorably. Given inter-ethnic harmony is socially valued in Indonesia's multiethnic society, conscious or unconscious emphasis on positives and minimization of negatives is likely (Krumpal, 2013).Researcher ethnicity (Batak) may also influence responses informants may have been guarded about tensions, not wanting to appear intolerant or prejudiced.

Limited Access to Dissenting Voices: Snowball sampling may have recruited more integrated individuals. Those experiencing significant inter-ethnic conflict, discrimination, or identity threat may have been less willing to participate or unreached. The "silence" of dissenting voices is itself a finding indicating most vulnerable individuals are least represented in research.

Credibility: Harmony narratives represent *dominant, publicly affirmed* social reality, not necessarily *complete* private reality. As Berger and Luckmann argue, social reality is constructed through consensus, which can coexist with unspoken tensions. Consistent positive responses indicate harmony is indeed a social reality what people collectively affirm and expect. Findings are credible as representation of *publicly affirmed* inter-ethnic relations but limited in capturing *privately experienced* tensions.

Despite tensions and limitations, structural integration proves challenges can be overcome. Batak ethnic members occupy positions of *geuchik*, mosque imam, Mosque Prosperity Board

member, *Tuha Peut*, youth leader, and hamlet head. Informant B4 served as *geuchik* of Alue Merbau *gampong* for two consecutive periods (2012–2024). He reflected:

"When I was first elected as geuchik, some people were surprised they said, 'How can a Batak lead an Acehnese village?' But I told them, 'I am Muslim, I speak Acehnese, I respect adat. What more do you need?' After the first year, the surprise was gone. In the second election, I won with more votes than before. The people saw that I worked for everyone, not just for my ethnic group." (B4, 2024)

This demonstrates identity negotiation at its most successful: the Batak leader directly addresses identity concerns ("I am Muslim, I speak Acehnese, I respect adat") while affirming inclusion ("I worked for everyone"). His re-election with increased votes is evidence that identity negotiation was perceived as authentic and effective. From social construction, his leadership contributes to *objectification* Batak *geuchik* acceptance is no longer novelty but institutionalized social reality. The election and re-election of ethnic Batak as village leader in Aceh's *gampong* government system is irrefutable evidence that acceptance has moved beyond interpersonal to institutional level.

More strikingly, Batak involvement as mosque imams positions of spiritual trust signifies recognition of religious competence and integrity at most fundamental level. Kim calls this transformation movement from ethnic identity to *intercultural identity* transcending single culture boundaries without completely abandoning cultural roots (Kim, 2017). Langsa City presents a model of interethnic coexistence moving beyond passive tolerance toward structurally meaningful integration achievement worthy of recognition and study, despite its limitations and conditions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions described, this study concludes three main points that answer each research question. First, the dynamics of identity negotiation between the Batak and Acehnese ethnic groups in Langsa City take place as a fluid and multidimensional process, including language adaptation, expression of cultural symbols, and generational differentiation. Indonesian serves as a neutral space that reduces identity vulnerability, while some Batak ethnic groups converge more deeply through learning the Acehnese language and adjusting intonation. Identity negotiation results in a spectrum from active integration to assimilation tendencies, with significant generational differences. Second, communication strategies used in building harmony include multi-layered linguistic convergence, adaptation of cross-cultural politeness norms (facework), use of shared social spaces, participation in cross-ethnic religious activities, and the use of digital media as a complement to face-to-face interactions. These strategies result in integration that transcends passive tolerance, as evidenced by the involvement of Batak ethnic groups in positions as geuchik, mosque imam, and Tuha Peut. Third, challenges faced include differences in communication styles, pressures between integration and assimilation, boundaries of acceptance based on religious commonality, generational gaps, and the dominance of harmonious narratives that may mask unresolved tensions.

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends the application of Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory to the Southeast Asian context of a multi-ethnic, sharia-based society. Second, it enriches Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory by demonstrating that identity negotiation can produce structural integration not merely passive coexistence. Third, it

offers the concept of "conditional integration" as a new finding, namely harmony achieved with the prerequisite of religious commonality.

Practical Implications For policymakers, this study highlights the need for policies that support cross-ethnic interaction spaces and maintain the structural integration that has been successfully achieved. For community leaders, cross-ethnic leadership needs to be continuously facilitated through inter-ethnic dialogue and joint activities. For religious institutions, openness to cross-ethnic participation needs to be maintained to strengthen shared identity. For academics, this study offers an analytical model that can be replicated in other multicultural regions in Indonesia.
This study has several limitations: it focuses only on two ethnic groups, cannot be statistically generalized, and the dominance of harmonious narratives may mask unrevealed tensions. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across cities, longitudinal studies, and critical studies involving other ethnic minorities and the younger generation in Langsa City.

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