



The Dynamics of Social Identity in A Multicultural Society in Central Kalimantan

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Article Info :

Received:
12-03-2025
Revised:
20-03-2025
Accepted:
02-04-2026

Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of social identity within a multicultural society in Central Kalimantan through an empirical qualitative approach grounded in a descriptive-exploratory design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis involving diverse ethnic groups, including Dayak, Banjar, Javanese, and Madurese communities. The findings reveal that social identity is continuously constructed through everyday interactions, negotiated within contexts of cultural difference and historical tension, and reconfigured through institutional mediation. Patterns of identity formation are shaped by symbolic practices and shared experiences, while negotiation processes reflect adaptive strategies to manage interethnic relations and mitigate conflict. Institutional actors, including educational, religious, and customary bodies, play a crucial role in stabilizing identity dynamics by fostering inclusive norms and redistributing symbolic power. The study contributes to theoretical discussions on social identity by demonstrating the interplay between micro-level interactions, meso-level negotiations, and macro-level institutional frameworks. It also highlights the importance of culturally embedded mechanisms and participatory governance in sustaining multicultural cohesion. These findings offer insights for policy development aimed at strengthening social integration in diverse societies.

Keywords : *Social Identity, Multicultural Society, Institutional Mediation, Interethnic Relations, Central Kalimantan.*



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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary debates in the field of social identity have increasingly shifted toward examining identity as a fluid, relational, and context-dependent construct shaped by global transformations such as migration, digital communication, and the intensification of multicultural encounters, rather than as a fixed or essentialist category. Foundational perspectives have long emphasized that identity emerges through socially constructed realities and symbolic systems embedded in everyday life, as articulated by Berger and Luckmann (1966), while subsequent developments highlight the role of meaning-making processes and cultural interpretation in shaping collective belonging (Geertz, 1973). More recent theoretical advancements foreground the interplay between identity, power, and networked societies, positioning identity as both a resource and a site of contestation within broader socio-political structures (Castells, 2010). Within this evolving intellectual landscape, the study of multicultural societies in Southeast Asia and Indonesia in particular has gained prominence due to the region's complex historical layering of ethnicities, religions, and local traditions, which continuously renegotiate social cohesion and difference in the face of globalization.

Empirical studies have provided important insights into how social identity is negotiated within plural societies, revealing that identity formation is deeply embedded in everyday interactions, institutional arrangements, and discursive practices. Research in Indonesian contexts, for instance, demonstrates that ethnic and linguistic differences can simultaneously facilitate cultural exchange and generate tensions, particularly when mediated through unequal power relations or exclusionary narratives (Dewantara et al., 2024a; Dewantara et al., 2024b). Studies on local belief systems and cultural practices further suggest that indigenous values and religious interpretations play a crucial role in preserving social harmony while accommodating diversity (Fithriani et al., 2024). At the same time, investigations into shifting indigenous identities, such as those of the Dayak communities, indicate that

identity is neither static nor purely traditional, but continuously reshaped by socio-political changes, economic pressures, and external influences (Haridison et al., 2024). These findings collectively reinforce the argument that identity operates as an ongoing process of negotiation, shaped by both structural conditions and cultural agency (Jenkins, 2014).

Despite these advances, the existing body of literature reveals several critical limitations that constrain a comprehensive understanding of social identity dynamics in multicultural settings. A significant portion of prior research tends to isolate specific dimensions of identity such as ethnicity, language, or religion without adequately capturing their intersectional and relational nature within broader socio-economic and political contexts. Moreover, there remains an inconsistency in explaining how local wisdom and global forces interact in shaping identity transformation, often resulting in fragmented analyses that overlook the simultaneity of integration and conflict. In the Indonesian case, much of the empirical focus has been directed toward regions with visible histories of ethnic conflict, leaving other areas, such as Central Kalimantan, underexplored despite their equally complex multicultural configurations (Haba, 2012). Conceptually, there is also a tendency to underutilize integrative theoretical frameworks that can bridge micro-level interactions with macro-level structures of power and meaning, limiting the explanatory depth of existing studies.

These gaps underscore the urgency of advancing a more nuanced and context-sensitive analysis of social identity, particularly in regions where multicultural coexistence is both a source of resilience and potential tension. The case of Central Kalimantan presents a compelling context in which diverse ethnic groups—including Dayak, Banjar, Javanese, and Madurese communities engage in continuous interaction across economic, cultural, and social domains, producing complex patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and hybridization. Persistent issues such as social inequality, stereotyping, and uneven access to resources further complicate these dynamics, suggesting that identity cannot be disentangled from structural conditions that shape everyday experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). At the same time, the presence of local philosophical values, such as communal living principles, introduces additional layers of meaning that mediate social relations and identity formation, pointing to the need for a multidimensional analytical approach that captures both conflictual and integrative processes.

Positioned within this scholarly landscape, the present study seeks to address these conceptual and empirical shortcomings by examining the dynamics of social identity in Central Kalimantan through an integrative theoretical lens that combines the perspectives of Hall, Castells, and Jenkins. Such a framework enables a more comprehensive understanding of identity as a process of becoming, as a source of meaning intertwined with power relations, and as an outcome of social interaction and recognition. By situating identity within the interplay of globalization, local wisdom, and structural inequalities, this research moves beyond reductionist accounts and contributes to bridging the gap between micro-level experiences and macro-level transformations. In doing so, it aligns with broader efforts in social sciences to reconceptualize identity as a dynamic, negotiated, and contextually embedded phenomenon.

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of social identity in a multicultural society in Central Kalimantan using a qualitative descriptive-exploratory approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. It seeks to elucidate how identities are constructed, transformed, and negotiated within everyday social interactions, while also examining their relationship with power structures, cultural meanings, and processes of social recognition. Theoretically, the study contributes to the advancement of social identity scholarship by integrating multiple perspectives into a coherent analytical framework capable of capturing the complexity of multicultural contexts. Methodologically, it offers an in-depth, context-rich analysis that highlights the value of qualitative approaches in uncovering the lived realities of identity negotiation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is grounded in an empirical qualitative paradigm, employing a descriptive-exploratory design to generate an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of social identity within a multicultural society in Central Kalimantan. The selection of an empirical approach is justified by the availability of rich, context-bound data derived from direct engagement with social actors and lived experiences in heterogeneous community settings. The research was conducted in purposively selected sites characterized by high ethnic diversity, particularly in Palangka Raya and its surrounding areas, where

interactions among Dayak, Banjar, Javanese, and Madurese communities are prominently observable. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, guided by criteria emphasizing experiential relevance, social involvement, and knowledge of interethnic relations, resulting in the inclusion of customary leaders, religious figures, community representatives, and ordinary citizens from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Data collection was carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture subjective meanings and identity narratives, participant observation to document everyday social interactions and symbolic practices, and documentation analysis to contextualize findings within broader socio-cultural and institutional frameworks.

The research instruments consisted of interview guides, observation protocols, and documentation checklists, all of which were iteratively refined to ensure alignment with the study's analytical focus on identity construction, negotiation, and transformation. The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through methodological triangulation across data sources and techniques, as well as member checking procedures to validate participants' interpretations and minimize researcher bias. Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), encompassing data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, conducted simultaneously throughout the research process to enable iterative refinement and analytical depth. Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and maintaining sensitivity to cultural norms and local values throughout fieldwork. This methodological configuration facilitates a robust and contextually grounded analysis of social identity dynamics, capturing both the complexity of lived experiences and the structural conditions shaping multicultural interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Construction and Transformation in Multicultural Contexts

Empirical findings indicate that the construction of social identity in Central Kalimantan unfolds as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by continuous social interaction. Informants consistently articulated identity as fluid and situational, rather than fixed, reflecting a processual understanding aligned with contemporary identity theory. This pattern corresponds with the notion of identity as "becoming," where individuals continuously reconstruct their sense of self through lived experiences (Hall, 1996). Observational data further revealed that identity markers such as ethnicity and religion are mobilized differently depending on social context.

The qualitative data demonstrate that individuals navigate multiple identity layers simultaneously, often combining ethnic, occupational, and generational dimensions. This multilayered identity formation resonates with sociological perspectives emphasizing the social construction of reality through interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Interview narratives revealed that individuals frequently shift between identities in family, community, and digital settings. Such shifts indicate that identity operates as a flexible resource shaped by situational demands.

Field observations highlight the increasing influence of globalization on identity transformation, particularly among younger participants. Respondents reported integrating global cultural elements into their local identity expressions, reflecting hybridization processes. This phenomenon aligns with findings on socio-cultural transformation in Kalimantan, where environmental and economic shifts contribute to identity reconfiguration (Sriyana, 2025). The integration of global and local elements underscores the adaptive nature of identity in contemporary multicultural societies.

The role of digital media emerged as a significant factor in shaping identity construction, particularly in how individuals present themselves publicly. Participants described social media as a space for selective identity performance, where symbolic representations often differ from offline realities. This observation reflects broader patterns of mediated identity construction identified in multicultural communication studies (Syam et al., 2023). The digital sphere thus expands the arenas in which identity is negotiated and displayed.

Educational background was also identified as a key determinant influencing identity openness and inclusivity. Participants with higher educational exposure demonstrated greater acceptance of diversity and more flexible identity orientations. This finding aligns with research on multicultural pedagogy emphasizing the role of education in fostering cultural awareness (Maemonah et al., 2025). Educational institutions therefore function as important sites for shaping inclusive identity frameworks.

Table 1. Patterns of Identity Construction and Transformation in Central Kalimantan

Dimension of Identity	Observed Characteristics	Empirical Indicators
Ethnic Identity	Fluid and contextual	Shifting identification across settings
Cultural Identity	Hybridized	Integration of local and global values
Digital Identity	Performative	Selective self-representation online
Educational Influence	Inclusive orientation	Higher tolerance among educated groups

Source: Field Data Analysis (2026), processed using Miles et al. (2014)

The data presented in Table 1 illustrate that identity construction is not confined to a single domain but spans multiple intersecting dimensions. Ethnic identity remains significant, yet it is continuously reinterpreted in response to changing social contexts. The emergence of hybrid cultural identities reflects the interplay between globalization and local traditions. These patterns reinforce the argument that identity is inherently multidimensional and contextually negotiated.

Further analysis reveals that generational differences significantly influence identity transformation processes. Younger participants tend to adopt more flexible and hybrid identities, while older generations emphasize the preservation of traditional values. This generational divergence reflects broader socio-cultural transitions observed in Indonesian society (Kartono et al., 2023). The coexistence of these perspectives creates both continuity and tension within identity dynamics.

Cultural practices and local traditions continue to play a crucial role in maintaining identity continuity amid transformation. Informants frequently referenced traditional values as anchors that provide stability in times of change. This finding is consistent with anthropological perspectives emphasizing the interpretive role of culture in shaping meaning systems (Geertz, 1973). Cultural continuity thus coexists with adaptive transformation in identity processes.

The persistence of social inequalities also shapes identity construction by influencing access to resources and opportunities. Participants from marginalized groups often develop more defensive or exclusive identity orientations. This pattern aligns with research highlighting the relationship between migration, inequality, and social change in Kalimantan (Harsono et al., 2024). Structural conditions therefore play a critical role in shaping identity trajectories.

Identity construction in this context reflects an ongoing negotiation between stability and change, shaped by both internal and external forces. Individuals continuously adapt their identities in response to shifting social, cultural, and economic conditions. This dynamic process illustrates the complexity of identity formation in multicultural societies. The findings affirm that identity is not merely inherited but actively constructed through social engagement.

Identity as a Source of Meaning and Power in Multicultural Society

Empirical findings reveal that social identity in Central Kalimantan operates as a strategic resource that structures access to meaning and power within everyday social relations. Informants consistently described identity markers such as ethnicity and religion as influential in determining social positioning and legitimacy in community interactions. This pattern aligns with the theoretical proposition that identity functions as a source of meaning embedded within power structures (Castells, 2010). The qualitative evidence indicates that identity is actively mobilized to negotiate authority and influence in both formal and informal social arenas.

Narratives from community leaders highlight how identity is often institutionalized through local governance and customary practices. These institutional forms reinforce particular identities while marginalizing others, thereby shaping unequal distributions of symbolic and material resources. This observation resonates with studies on identity politics in Indonesia, where ethnic and cultural affiliations are frequently instrumentalized in governance processes (Suryadinata, 2015). The interplay between identity and institutional power reveals a structured dimension of social inequality.

Participants also emphasized that identity-based hierarchies are not static but continuously reproduced through social practices. In everyday interactions, subtle forms of recognition and exclusion

contribute to maintaining these hierarchies. This dynamic reflects broader sociological arguments that identity is constructed and reinforced through ongoing social processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The persistence of such hierarchies indicates the embeddedness of identity within structural relations.

Religious identity emerged as a particularly salient dimension influencing access to social legitimacy and communal participation. Respondents described how religious affiliations shape trust, cooperation, and social acceptance within diverse communities. This finding corresponds with research on religious pluralism in Central Kalimantan, where shared philosophical values such as *Huma Betang* mediate interreligious relations (Pattiasina, 2024). Religious identity thus operates as both a unifying and differentiating force.

Economic factors further intersect with identity to produce differentiated power relations among groups. Participants noted that certain ethnic groups have greater access to economic opportunities, which reinforces their social dominance. This observation aligns with studies on migration and socio-economic transformation in Kalimantan (Harsono et al., 2024). Economic capital therefore interacts with identity to shape power dynamics in multicultural settings.

Table 2. Dimensions of Identity as Sources of Meaning and Power

Identity Dimension	Function in Social Structure	Observed Impact
Ethnicity	Social positioning	Access to leadership roles
Religion	Moral legitimacy	Trust and community inclusion
Economic Identity	Resource control	Unequal opportunities
Cultural Identity	Symbolic authority	Influence in customary practices

Source: Field Data Analysis (2026), interpreted using Castells (2010) and Miles et al. (2014).

The data in Table 2 illustrate how multiple identity dimensions intersect to produce complex configurations of power and meaning. Ethnicity and religion emerge as dominant factors shaping social legitimacy, while economic identity influences material access. Cultural identity, particularly in customary contexts, provides symbolic authority that reinforces group cohesion. These findings demonstrate that identity operates across both symbolic and material domains.

Identity also functions as a mechanism of resistance for marginalized groups seeking to challenge dominant structures. Informants from minority backgrounds described using cultural and religious identity to assert their presence and negotiate inclusion. This pattern is consistent with studies on post-conflict identity reconstruction, where marginalized communities mobilize identity as a form of resistance (Jailani et al., 2025). Resistance practices highlight the agency embedded within identity processes.

At the same time, identity-based mobilization can intensify social divisions when linked to political interests. Participants noted that identity is sometimes instrumentalized in local political contests, leading to polarization among communities. This observation reflects findings on ethnic conflict and discrimination in multi-ethnic contexts (Dewantara et al., 2024b). The ambivalence of identity as both integrative and divisive underscores its complexity.

The findings further indicate that collective identity formation plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion. Community initiatives that emphasize shared values and common goals contribute to the development of inclusive identities. This aligns with research on social capital, which highlights the importance of collective identity in strengthening community bonds (Putnam, 2000). Collective identity thus serves as a counterbalance to fragmentation.

Identity as a source of meaning and power in Central Kalimantan reflects a multidimensional and relational process shaped by structural inequalities and cultural practices. The empirical evidence demonstrates that identity influences both access to resources and patterns of social interaction. These dynamics highlight the need to understand identity within broader socio-political and economic contexts. The findings affirm that identity is not merely symbolic but deeply embedded in power relations that shape multicultural societies.

Institutional Mediation and the Reconfiguration of Social Identity in Multicultural Contexts

The final analytical focus highlights the role of institutional mediation in shaping adaptive forms of social identity within multicultural settings in Central Kalimantan. Empirical findings indicate that local governance structures, religious councils, and customary institutions act as mediating agents that regulate interethnic boundaries while enabling flexible identity articulation. Participants emphasized that institutional legitimacy enhances trust and reduces symbolic contestation across groups, aligning with the notion of identity as relational and negotiated (Jenkins, 2014). This pattern reflects how institutional frameworks function as stabilizing mechanisms in contexts characterized by cultural plurality and historical tensions.

Field observations reveal that institutionalized dialogue platforms, such as interfaith forums and customary assemblies, facilitate structured interactions that reshape identity perceptions over time. These platforms provide discursive spaces where individuals reinterpret their social positions through collective narratives, reinforcing Berger and Luckmann's (1966) argument on the social construction of reality. Informants noted that repeated participation in such forums leads to the internalization of shared norms, reducing ethnocentric biases. The findings suggest that identity transformation is not spontaneous but mediated through structured communicative processes embedded in institutional settings.

The data further demonstrate that institutional interventions contribute to redefining symbolic hierarchies among ethnic groups. In several cases, participants reported a decline in perceived dominance of particular groups due to inclusive representation mechanisms within local governance. This aligns with Castells' (2010) concept of legitimizing identity, where institutions reshape power relations by redistributing symbolic capital. The empirical evidence indicates that institutional inclusivity fosters a more balanced recognition of diverse identities, mitigating structural inequalities in multicultural contexts.

Table 3. Institutional Mechanisms and Identity Adaptation Patterns in Central Kalimantan

Institutional Mechanism	Observed Function	Impact on Social Identity Dynamics
Interfaith Dialogue Forums	Facilitating cross-religious communication	Strengthening inclusive identity narratives
Customary Councils	Regulating cultural norms	Preserving ethnic identity while enabling coexistence
Local Government Policies	Promoting participatory governance	Reducing interethnic hierarchical tensions
Educational Institutions	Embedding multicultural values	Encouraging hybrid and adaptive identity forms

Source: Processed qualitative data based on field interviews and supported by Maemonah et al. (2025), Saputri & PS (2025), Miles et al. (2014).

The table illustrates how different institutional mechanisms contribute to distinct yet interconnected identity outcomes. Educational institutions, for instance, play a critical role in embedding multicultural awareness, particularly through culturally responsive pedagogy that shapes early identity formation (Maemonah et al., 2025). Participants highlighted that exposure to pluralistic values in schools fosters openness and reduces identity rigidity. This finding underscores the importance of formal education in cultivating long-term social cohesion in diverse societies.

Further analysis indicates that institutional mediation also mitigates the risk of pseudo-multiculturalism, where superficial tolerance masks underlying inequalities. Some participants expressed concerns that symbolic inclusivity without structural change may reproduce latent tensions, echoing critiques raised by Ruslan et al. (2024). This suggests that effective institutional engagement requires not only representation but also substantive equity in decision-making processes. The findings highlight the need for continuous evaluation of institutional practices to ensure genuine inclusivity.

Religious institutions emerge as significant actors in negotiating identity boundaries through moral and ethical frameworks. Interview data reveal that religious leaders often reinterpret doctrinal teachings to promote coexistence, aligning with Fikri's (2023) perspective on adaptive religious

discourse in multicultural societies. This adaptive approach allows communities to maintain spiritual identity while embracing pluralism. The results indicate that religion functions not merely as a marker of difference but as a resource for integration when mediated constructively.

The role of customary law and local wisdom is also evident in sustaining identity continuity while enabling adaptation. Participants described how traditional values such as Huma Betang philosophy reinforce collective coexistence without erasing ethnic distinctions (Pattiasina, 2024). This reflects Koentjaraningrat's (2009) view that cultural systems provide normative frameworks guiding social behavior. The findings suggest that local wisdom operates as a culturally embedded mechanism for balancing identity preservation and social integration.

Institutional dynamics further intersect with broader socio-political narratives that influence identity construction. Respondents noted that national discourse on unity and diversity shapes local interpretations of belonging, particularly in regions with complex migration histories (Sudagung & Darajati, 2024). This interaction between macro-level narratives and local practices demonstrates the multi-layered nature of identity formation. The results indicate that institutional mediation operates across scales, linking local experiences with national identity frameworks.

In addition, the study identifies that institutional trust significantly affects the effectiveness of identity negotiation processes. Communities with higher trust in institutions exhibit more cooperative interethnic interactions and lower levels of symbolic conflict, supporting Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital. Participants emphasized that transparency and fairness in institutional practices enhance legitimacy and participation. This finding reinforces the argument that institutional credibility is central to sustaining multicultural harmony.

The analysis also reveals that institutional mediation is not static but evolves in response to socio-cultural transformations. Environmental and spatial changes, such as shifts from river-based to land-based livelihoods, influence institutional roles and identity expressions (Sriyana, 2025). These transformations require adaptive governance strategies that accommodate changing social realities. The findings demonstrate that institutions must remain flexible to effectively manage evolving identity dynamics.

Institutional mediation constitutes a critical dimension in the dynamics of social identity in Central Kalimantan. By facilitating interaction, redistributing symbolic power, and embedding inclusive norms, institutions shape the trajectory of identity negotiation and transformation. The empirical evidence highlights that sustainable multicultural coexistence depends on the capacity of institutions to balance diversity and cohesion. This reinforces the broader theoretical understanding that identity is continuously constructed through structured social processes embedded in institutional contexts (Hall, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of social identity in Central Kalimantan demonstrate a complex interplay between interactional processes, adaptive negotiations, and institutional mediation that collectively shape the trajectories of multicultural coexistence. Identity emerges as a fluid and relational construct formed through everyday encounters, where symbolic meanings and cultural practices continuously redefine group boundaries and affiliations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hall, 1996). These processes are further influenced by negotiation mechanisms that enable individuals and communities to manage differences, reduce tensions, and reconstruct trust within plural social environments (Jailani et al., 2025). Institutional structures reinforce these dynamics by providing legitimized spaces for dialogue, embedding inclusive norms, and redistributing symbolic power, thereby enhancing social cohesion and stability (Putnam, 2000). The integration of micro-level experiences, meso-level interactions, and macro-level governance highlights that sustainable multiculturalism depends on the capacity to align cultural diversity with shared social frameworks. This study affirms that identity in multicultural contexts is neither static nor singular but continuously shaped through interconnected social processes and institutional arrangements.

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