

NAHDLATUL ULAMA'S CULTURAL DA'WAH STRATEGY IN BUILDING RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN JEPARA REGENCY: RITUALIZED BRIDGING IN A POST-CONFLICT SETTING

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyses how Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) cultural da'wah strategy and the role of religious leaders build religious harmony in Jepara Regency, Central Java, a post-conflict area that experienced religiously charged unrest in 1998 and a church-construction dispute lasting nearly two decades. **Design/methodology/approach:** An embedded single-case qualitative design was applied across three sub-districts. Data were gathered through participatory observation (April and June 2025), semi-structured interviews with nine informants, including two non-Muslim religious leaders, and documentation. They were analysed through open, axial and selective coding and triangulated by method, source and investigator. **Findings:** Cultural da'wah (tahlilan, maulidan, syawalan, sedekah laut) dominates, supported structurally by the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) and grounded in tawassuth, tawazun, tasamuh and amar makruf nahi mungkar. Religious leaders act simultaneously as guardians of social norms, channels of communication and mediators of disputes. Routine rituals that consolidate bonding social capital within NU are opened to non-Muslim neighbours and thereby generate bridging social capital, a mechanism termed ritualized bridging. **Research limitations/implications:** Informants come predominantly from the NU community, non-Muslim voices derive from one village, and textually oriented Muslim groups were not studied; intra-Muslim "invisible conflict" lies beyond the mechanism's reach. **Practical implications:** Religious moderation programmes can optimize existing socio-religious infrastructure, such as FKUB capacity and mediation training for young religious leaders, rather than importing new interventions. **Originality/value:** The study integrates da'wah strategy, social capital and role theory, and specifies a micro-mechanism through which post-conflict harmony emerges from consciously managed everyday practice.

Keywords: cultural da'wah strategy, religious harmony, Nahdlatul Ulama, religious leaders, social capital

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In 1998, Jepara was shaken by religious riots, and a church-building dispute in one village dragged on for nearly twenty years. Today, neighbours of different faiths there attend one another's religious celebrations without hesitation. This study asks how that happened and finds that much of the credit belongs to Nahdlatul Ulama's everyday habits: shared meals, communal prayers and small acts of deference rather than grand programmes. Most da'wah research overlooks this practical layer. For religious leaders and policymakers in places still scarred by conflict, the lesson is clear: harmony rarely occurs by itself; someone must keep tending it.

INTRODUCTION

Religious polarization and interfaith tension remain persistent global challenges, from the contested integration of religious minorities in parts of Europe to episodes of communal violence across South and Southeast Asia. This has prompted a growing body of scholarship to search for locally grounded mechanisms capable of sustaining peaceful coexistence between faith communities (Driessen, 2025; Kwuelum, 2024). Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population alongside sizeable religious minorities, offers a particularly instructive setting for this global question. Its pluralist legacy has been analysed as an enduring quest for an inclusive public ethics (Hefner, 2024), while its multi-religious context continues to carry the potential for horizontal conflict (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024). Jepara Regency in Central Java illustrates these dynamics vividly. On 7 July 1998, on the eve of the reform movement that was also stirring at the local level, unrest coloured by the politicization of religion broke out in the regency, leaving casualties and considerable material loss (Rabbani, 2020). In Dermolo Village, Kembang Sub-district, interfaith tension lasted nearly two decades because of a dispute over the construction of a church deemed to lack a permit (Mashudi, 2016). Such episodes were not unique to Jepara; riots in Poso, Situbondo, Tasikmalaya and Ambon around the same period likewise destroyed houses of worship across religions (Zainuddin, n.d.). What is striking about Jepara, however, is that after passing through a phase of conflict it is now known as a relatively harmonious area. In Bondo Village, Bangsri Sub-district, for instance, the Muslim and Christian populations are nearly balanced, yet residents' everyday lives proceed with little friction.

Research on da'wah strategy and religious harmony in Indonesia is extensive. On the da'wah side, Zulfa (2015) examined da'wah patterns among isolated tribal communities in South Kalimantan, Aliadin et al. (2021) studied traditionalist da'wah in Kampung Adat Cireundeu, and Syamsuri (2017) analysed the multicultural da'wah strategy of preachers in Palu. On the harmony side, Lubis (2022) assessed the role of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) in preventing religious conflict in Labuhan Batu, Mawardi and Ruslan (2021) analysed Tarmizi Taher's concept of pluralism, Samuel and Tumonglo (2023) and Zuhriah (2020) highlighted religious leaders as a bond of tolerance, and Wibowo (2016) and Toweren (2018) recorded how the exemplary conduct of religious leaders sustains harmony in Kediri and Central Aceh. Studies in internationally indexed outlets point to local wisdom and community-level engagement as important resources. Agung et al. (2024) show that local wisdom operates as cultural capital in interfaith communication in Malang and that community leaders act as charismatic, traditional and legal actors; Garing et al. (2023) examine how local wisdom can be used to identify and resolve conflicts; Jati (2024) highlights the role of Muslim youth in grassroots interfaith dialogue; and Taufik et al. (2025) examine religious literacy and youth peacebuilding in Indonesian communities. Comparative work on religious leaders in conflict-affected settings asks when and why they act as peacebuilders (Odak, 2024), whereas Adil and Jamil (2023) document the divergent positions of religious leaders and community organisations on interfaith marriage, a reminder that leaders also police the boundaries between faiths. Despite this richness, the findings diverge on what sustains harmony, formal institutions or informal local practice, and most studies read harmony and the role of religious leaders separately from the da'wah strategy of the organisation that shelters them, or discuss da'wah strategy without linking it to a post-conflict context.

Based on this review, the study identifies a gap that has not been widely addressed: few studies examine the da'wah strategy of NU and the operational role of religious leaders together, in a single locus with a history of overt religious conflict. The gap is also theoretical. The existing literature rarely links the da'wah strategy framework with social capital theory to

explain the mechanism behind harmony that persists after conflict; where bonding and bridging social capital have been examined in post-conflict settings, the focus has often been economic networks (Kopren & Westlund, 2021) rather than religious ritual. At the international level, scholarship on interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding continues to grow: Driessen (2025) reviews the tools of interreligious dialogue and the criticisms levelled at it as a model of conflict resolution, and Kwuelum (2024) calls for community-led, localized inter-religious peacebuilding. What remains underexplored is how the da'wah strategy of a mass-based religious organisation sustains harmony through everyday practice. Research on collective ritual shows that active participation is associated with feelings of social cohesion (Irving et al., 2024), yet it seldom asks whether routine religious ritual can extend cohesion across faith boundaries. Finally, NU is acknowledged to have played an active role in building religious pluralism and countering violent extremism (Hamdi, 2021) amid continuing contestation between conservative and moderate Muslim groups (Jubba et al., 2022), while critical scholarship cautions that NU's pluralist theology does not always translate into tolerant grassroots practice (Arifianto, 2017; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). This contestation is rarely examined through concrete cultural da'wah strategies at the grassroots level, as in Jepara.

Building on this gap, the study aims to analyse how NU's da'wah strategy builds religious harmony in Jepara Regency and what role religious leaders play in that process. Two research questions guide the inquiry: (RQ1) How does NU's da'wah strategy build religious harmony in Jepara Regency? (RQ2) What roles do religious leaders play in that process? The two questions are answered together because da'wah strategy in practice is always carried out by particular actors, while the meaning of an actor's role can only be understood in relation to the strategy that actor carries out.

The study offers novelty and contribution on three fronts. Theoretically, it combines the frameworks of da'wah strategy, the trilogy of harmony, role theory and social capital (bonding and bridging), which are rarely used together in da'wah studies, and it proposes ritualized bridging as a mechanism that converts bonding into bridging social capital through routine, low-stakes ritual practice. Empirically, it provides new evidence on how a large mass-based religious organisation manages post-conflict harmony in a coastal rural area, including the testimony of non-Muslim neighbours. Methodologically, it combines participatory observation across sub-districts with in-depth interviews and an explicit coding trail, in order to capture dynamics of da'wah strategy that are difficult to see through secondary data alone. In doing so, it aims to offer practical implications for formulating religious moderation strategies in other post-conflict regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical discussion rests on four bodies of literature, summarised in Table 1, each of which explains part of the phenomenon while leaving a distinct gap. Together they define the grand theoretical anchors of the study: the typology of da'wah strategy, social capital theory, role theory and the trilogy of harmony.

Da'wah strategy and the trilogy of harmony. Conceptually, da'wah is understood as a call toward goodness delivered with wisdom and good counsel (Shihab, 1992). Da'wah strategy is commonly divided into three types: cultural, which draws on society's socio-cultural tendencies; structural, which uses government bureaucratic channels; and transformative, which emphasizes direct accompaniment within the community (Aripudin & Azra, 2011; Saputra, 2011). Government policy formalizes religious harmony into three clusters, the so-

called trilogy of harmony: harmony within a religious community, harmony among religious communities, and harmony between religious communities and the government (Syaukani, 2008). This literature is useful for classifying da'wah practice, but it tends to treat strategy types and harmony categories as static ends in themselves, without explaining the mechanism through which a cultural strategy actually produces harmony across, rather than merely within, a religious community.

The bonding–bridging puzzle in social capital theory. A second body of work draws on Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding social capital, which strengthens cohesion within an already homogeneous group, and bridging social capital, which connects groups of different backgrounds. Putnam's original account, and much of the subsequent literature on religious organisations, treats the two as being in tension: strong bonding within a tightly knit religious group is more often associated with insularity toward outsiders than with openness. In post-conflict settings, the balance between the two forms has been examined mainly in economic networks (Kopren & Westlund, 2021), while Indonesian interfaith research has mobilized social capital through Bourdieu's lens of cultural capital (Agung et al., 2024). The tension is visible in scholarship on NU specifically: while NU is widely regarded as a pillar of Indonesian religious pluralism (Hamdi, 2021), critical studies caution that its pluralist theological articulation does not always translate into tolerant practice at the grassroots level (Arifianto, 2017; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020), and that moderate and conservative strands within Indonesian Islam remain in active contestation over whose version of Islam prevails locally (Jubba et al., 2022). This leaves an unresolved theoretical puzzle: under what conditions does strong bonding social capital within a religious organisation such as NU coexist with, rather than crowd out, bridging social capital toward other faiths?

Role theory and religious authority. To read the function of religious leaders, the study draws on role theory, which views role as the dynamic aspect of a person's social position, enacted rather than simply occupied (Soekanto, 2010). The framework is consistent with findings that the traditional authority of religious leaders such as kiai is often a primary driver of strengthened religious moderation in local contexts in Indonesia (Faisal et al., 2022), and with the observation that community leaders act as charismatic, traditional and legal actors in interfaith communication (Agung et al., 2024). Comparative research likewise treats the actions of religious leaders during and after violent conflict as a distinct object of analysis (Odak, 2024). These accounts suggest that harmony is less a property of doctrine than of who enacts it, and how.

Structural mechanisms and everyday practice. A fourth, complementary body of work examines the formal institutional channels through which harmony is managed, particularly the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB), which in Aceh has been analysed in terms of its strategies, roles and barriers (Nurdin et al., 2021), and the broader principle of inclusive da'wah planning, which treats transparency, empathy and interfaith communication as prerequisites for social cohesion (Hamsiyah & Mahmuddin, 2025). Yet this institutional literature, like the strategy-classification literature above, says comparatively little about the everyday, informal practices, such as ritual and tradition, through which cohesion within a group is quietly extended to include outsiders. Research on collective ritual suggests why such practices matter: active participation in a low-arousal collective ritual has been associated with feelings of social cohesion (Irving et al., 2024). At the same time, Pangalila and Rumbay (2024) caution that in some settings relations between religious communities remain confined to celebrating each other's rituals without touching deeper values, so that ritual contact is not automatically substantive.

Table 1
Bodies of Literature Informing the Study and the Gaps They Leave

Strand	Representative sources	What it explains	Remaining gap
Da'wah strategy and the trilogy of harmony	Aripudin & Azra (2011); Saputra (2011); Syaukani (2008); Hamsiyah & Mahmuddin (2025)	Typology of cultural, structural and transformative strategies; clusters of harmony; inclusive da'wah planning	Treats types as static; no mechanism by which cultural strategy produces cross-faith harmony
Social capital (bonding and bridging)	Putnam (2000); Agung et al. (2024); Kopren & Westlund (2021)	Distinction between within-group and cross-group ties; local wisdom as cultural capital; post-conflict economic networks	Bonding–bridging tension unresolved for religious organisations; ritual rarely examined
NU, pluralism and contestation	Hamdi (2021); Arifianto (2017); Mietzner & Muhtadi (2020); Jubba et al. (2022)	NU as a pillar of pluralism; gap between theology and practice; conservative–moderate contestation	Grassroots cultural da'wah seldom examined
Religious authority and role theory	Soekanto (2010); Faisal et al. (2022); Odak (2024); Samuel & Tumonglo (2023); Zuhriah (2020)	Leaders as moderating authorities and bonds of tolerance; leaders' conduct in and after conflict	Roles examined separately from the strategy they enact
Formal institutions and everyday practice	Nurdin et al. (2021); Driessen (2025); Kwuelum (2024); Irving et al. (2024)	FKUB roles and barriers; dialogue as conflict resolution; localized peacebuilding; ritual and cohesion	Everyday informal practice that extends cohesion to outsiders

Source: Compiled by the authors from the literature reviewed.

Toward ritualized bridging. Taken together, these bodies of literature leave a gap that the study addresses directly: existing frameworks classify da'wah strategies, formal institutions and religious roles, but do not adequately explain the micro-mechanism by which bonding social capital is converted into bridging social capital without institutional intervention. The study proposes ritualized bridging as that mechanism: the process by which routine, low-stakes, tradition-based religious practices, such as tahlilan, sedekah laut, maulidan and syawalan, that originally function to consolidate bonding social capital within the NU community are incrementally extended to include non-Muslim participation, thereby converting bonding into bridging social capital without requiring formal interfaith dialogue, doctrinal negotiation or the weakening of internal cohesion. Because these practices are ritual rather than deliberative, participation carries a lower symbolic threshold than formal dialogue does, which helps explain why harmony in Jepara appears to be sustained more by informal cultural pathways than by the formal institutional pathways emphasized in earlier studies.

Research Propositions

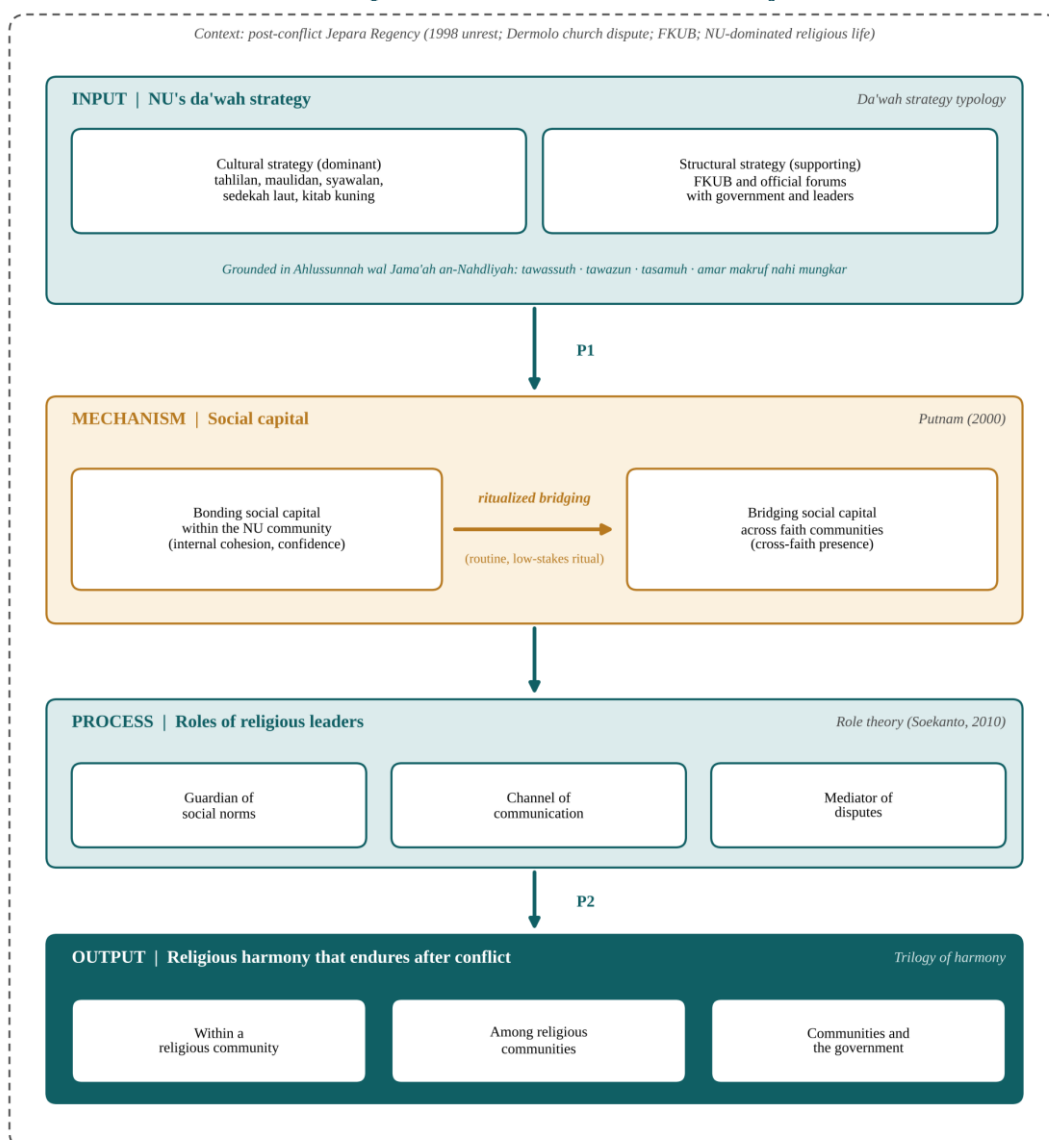
Because the research is qualitative, the study advances research propositions rather than hypotheses. **Proposition 1 (P1):** NU's cultural da'wah strategy in Jepara functions largely as bonding social capital among NU members themselves, while spaces for cross-faith encounter function as bridging social capital among religious communities, and the two forms of social capital reinforce rather than negate one another. **Proposition 2 (P2):** The roles of religious leaders as guardians of norms, channels of communication and mediators of disputes operate

simultaneously, so that post-conflict harmony is more likely to endure when all three roles are carried out together by the same religious leader than when only one role stands out.

Research Model

The two propositions are woven into a conceptual model (Figure 1). NU's cultural and structural da'wah strategies produce bonding and bridging social capital, which is then maintained and operationalized in daily life through the three roles of religious leaders (guardian of norms, channel of communication, mediator of disputes), culminating in religious harmony that endures after conflict. The model places da'wah strategy as the input, social capital as the connecting mechanism, the roles of religious leaders as the operational process and harmony as the output. It thereby aligns the research objectives, the theoretical framework and the propositions, and provides a coherent analytical frame for the method and results that follow.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of the Study



Source: Authors' conceptualization, based on Putnam (2000), Soekanto (2010) and Syaukani (2008).

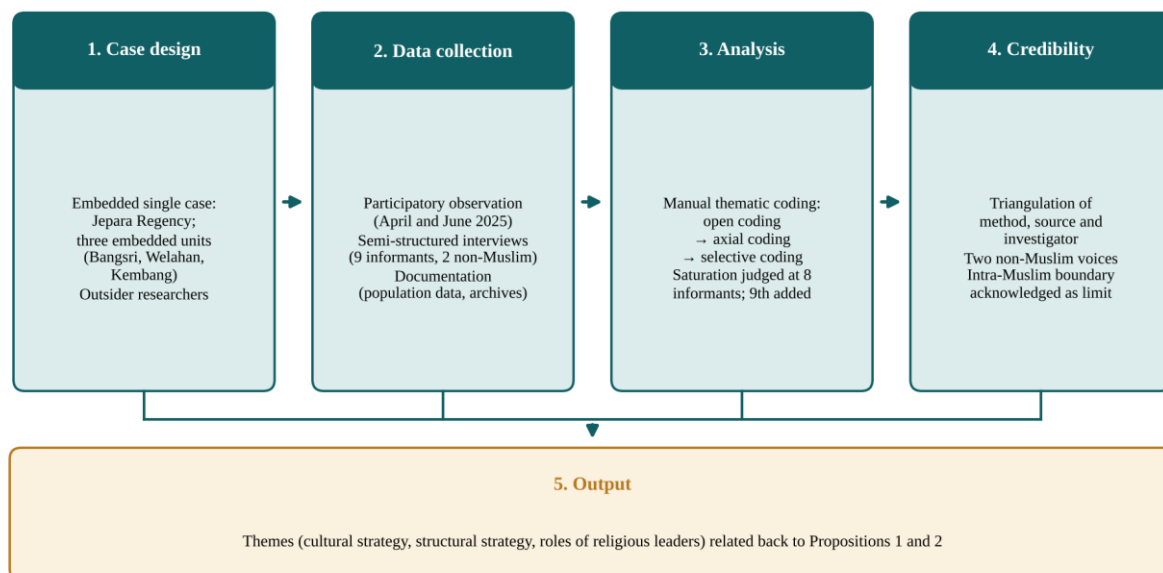
METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a critical-descriptive method, chosen because its aim is to understand the meanings and social processes behind da'wah strategy and the role of religious leaders rather than to measure relationships between variables. A case study design was selected because it can capture the depth of Jepara's local context as a post-conflict region, which large-scale surveys cannot easily achieve (Yin, 2018). The study adopts an embedded single-case design, with Jepara Regency as the case and three sub-districts as embedded units. This allows variation in religious composition and conflict history to be compared within a single, bounded socio-political context rather than treating each sub-district as an independent case. The overall procedure is summarized in Figure 2.

The authors are external researchers with no institutional or personal affiliation to NU or to Jepara Regency. This outsider position was intended to reduce the risk of uncritical alignment with NU's own account of its role, but it also means that the study depended on informants' willingness to disclose tension candidly to researchers from outside the community, a limitation discussed further below.

Figure 2
Research Design and Analytic Procedure



Source: Authors' design.

Research Setting and Sample

The research covers three sub-districts in Jepara Regency: Bangsri (including Bondo and Wedelan villages), Welahan and Kembang (including Dermolo Village). They were selected because they represent variation in religious composition while sharing a historical connection to religious conflict events in Jepara. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on position and social influence, complemented by snowball sampling to reach additional relevant informants. Interviewing stopped once new interviews no longer produced new codes relevant to the study's themes, a criterion consistent with current discussions of thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2020; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Nine main informants were

included, as summarized in Table 2. As is usual in qualitative case research, the sample is intended to support transferability to comparable post-conflict settings rather than statistical generalization.

Table 2
Research Informant Profile

Code	Name / initials	Position	Interview date
I-1	H. Zainul Arifin	Mustasyar, MWC NU, Pecangaan Sub-district	14 April 2025
I-2	Drs. Kasim, M.Pd.I.	Religious leader and Head of Wedelan Village	13 April 2025
I-3	M. Dalhar, S.S.	Chair, FPPBS Jepara	10 April 2025
I-4	Kiai Zulaikan	Rois Syuriah, NU Teluk Welahan Branch	12 April 2025
I-5	Hj. Zahroh	Religious leader, Wedelan; former PAC Muslimat coordinator	11 April 2025
I-6	Agung Riski	Chair, GP Ansor Teluk Wetan Welahan Branch	14 April 2025
I-7	Sahal Hamid, S.Ag.	Chair, Tanfidziyah MWC NU Banjaragung	10 April 2025
I-8	Drs. Hadi Priyanto, M.M.	Chair, Kartini Indonesia Foundation; non- Muslim religious leader	14 April 2025
I-9	Heru Utomo	Non-Muslim religious leader, Bondo Village	4 September 2026

Source: Primary data, researchers' interview results (2025–2026).

Data Collection

Data were collected through three techniques. First, participatory observation of residents' religious and social activities was conducted in April and June 2025. Second, in-depth interviews with religious leaders, NU officials and community leaders were conducted with a semi-structured interview guide; eight interviews took place on 10–14 April 2025, and a ninth, with a non-Muslim religious leader in Bondo Village, took place in September 2026 as a follow-up to strengthen non-Muslim representation. Third, supporting documentation was gathered in the form of population data and archives related to the history of the conflict.

Data Analysis and Triangulation

Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed manually through thematic coding in three stages (Table 3), following the logic of systematic, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Open coding labelled recurring concepts (for example cross-faith ritual participation, mediation episodes, and expressions of caution or tension); axial coding grouped these labels into the broader themes reported in the Results (cultural da'wah strategy, structural da'wah strategy and the roles of religious leaders); and selective coding related these themes back to the study's two propositions. Sampling continued until additional interviews stopped producing new codes relevant to these themes; saturation was judged to have been reached at eight informants, after which a ninth informant was added specifically to strengthen non-Muslim representation.

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of method (interview, observation and documentation), of source (informants across different sub-districts, organizational positions and non-Muslim community leaders) and of investigator (drafts were cross-checked between the authors against the raw transcripts) (Sugiyono, 2018). The authors acknowledge that, with two non-Muslim informants and no informant from more textually oriented Muslim groups, source triangulation across the Muslim/non-Muslim boundary has been strengthened, whereas triangulation across the intra-Muslim boundary remains a limitation of this study and

a direction for future research.

Table 3
Coding Structure: From Open Codes to Themes and Propositions

Open codes (illustrative)	Axial category	Theme	Link to propositions
Tahlilan, dziba'an, maulidan, syawalan; kitab kuning study; sedekah laut reinterpreted as gratitude with prayers	Internal ritual life	Cultural da'wah strategy	P1: bonding social capital
Cross-faith presence in tahlilan, takbiran and Christmas; reciprocal invitations; participation described as comfortable	Open, reciprocal participation	Cultural da'wah strategy	P1: bridging social capital
FKUB communication as a space for managing differences; coordination among NU, leaders and officials; Aswaja principles	Institutional channels	Structural da'wah strategy	P1: supporting pillar
Granting permission and space for other religions' holidays; securing of Christmas celebrations by Banser	Norm guardianship	Roles of religious leaders	P2: simultaneous roles
Caution about learning religion on social media; coordinating the volume of worship	Communication channelling	Roles of religious leaders	P2: simultaneous roles
Long mediation in Dermolo; bringing together leaders' discourse through official forums	Dispute mediation	Roles of religious leaders	P2: simultaneous roles
"Invisible conflict" over furu'; political topics deliberately avoided	Expressions of caution or tension	Limits of the mechanism	Boundary conditions of P1

Source: Compiled by the authors from interview, observation and documentation data (2025–2026).

RESULT

Informant Characteristics

Nine informants were interviewed (Table 2). Seven were drawn from NU administrators at sub-district or branch level, religious figures and community leaders across the three sub-districts that serve as the study's focus; informants ranged in age from 35 to 66 years, with organizational involvement spanning five to more than thirty years. Two informants, I-8 and I-9, are non-Muslim religious leaders; I-9, from Bondo Village, was included in a follow-up interview because the non-Muslim perspective had been deemed underrepresented in the initial stage. This composition provides an adequate basis for examining da'wah strategy from the viewpoint of field practitioners, although, as acknowledged in the Discussion, the perspective of more textually oriented Muslim groups was not represented.

Socio-Religious Conditions

Jepara Regency is located on the north coast of Central Java, with a population of 1.19 million people in 2022 (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Jepara, 2023). Zainul Arifin, Mustasyar of MWC NU Pecangaan Sub-district, described the religious situation in Jepara in general as safe and moderate, a character embedded in the local NU tradition (interview, 14 April 2025). In Bondo Village, Bangsri Sub-district, where the Muslim and Christian populations are nearly balanced, Hadi Priyanto stated that harmony there does not come by itself but is the result of habits maintained across generations, such as cross-faith presence in

tahlilan, takbiran and Christmas celebrations (interview, 14 April 2025). In Wedelan Village, where the non-Muslim population is below one percent, Kasim, a religious leader and the village head, noted that the challenge of tolerance is actually felt more within the internal Muslim community itself, between nahdliyin circles and groups that emphasize a more textual approach (interview, 13 April 2025).

Cultural Da’wah Strategy

Field practice shows that cultural da’wah is far more dominant among NU than structural strategy (Table 4). M. Dalhar, Chair of the Forum of Youth Preserving Culture and History (FPPBS) Jepara, explained that the sedekah laut (sea alms) ritual, once heavily coloured by Javanese nuance, is now reinterpreted spiritually as an expression of fishermen’s gratitude, complete with prayers and religious study sessions (interview, 10 April 2025). Internal traditions such as syawalan, tahlilan, dziba’an, maulidan and the study of classical texts (kitab kuning) are also maintained to preserve harmony among fellow Muslims; Kiai Zulaikan noted that the study of kitab kuning remains a uniform da’wah strategy across local majelis taklim (interview, 12 April 2025).

This account is corroborated from the non-Muslim side. Heru, a non-Muslim religious leader in Bondo Village who has lived there since 1999, explained that non-Muslim households are routinely invited to these events and that declining an invitation would be socially embarrassing, just as non-Muslim households in turn invite their Muslim neighbours to their own occasions (interview, 4 September 2026). He described this participation as genuinely comfortable rather than a formality, reasoning that a merely formal relationship would have grown tiresome over time, whereas the closeness he described has been sustained for as long as he can remember, with no change in how Muslim neighbours have treated him over the past five to ten years (interview, 4 September 2026).

Structural Da’wah Strategy and the Elements of Da’wah

The structural pathway is evident in the coordination among NU administrators, religious leaders and government officials through official forums such as the FKUB. Sahal Hamid explained that communication through the FKUB is carried out not merely as ceremony but as a space for managing differences of view among leaders (interview, 10 April 2025). This finding echoes evidence from Aceh, where the FKUB has likewise been analysed as an active mechanism for preserving interfaith harmony (Nurdin et al., 2021). The strategy rests on the four basic tenets of Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah an-Nahdliyah, namely tawassuth, tawazun, tasamuh and amar makruf nahi mungkar (Tim PWNU Jawa Timur, 2007), principles that, according to recent scholarship, continue to be reproduced and modernized by NU to remain relevant to younger generations (Hasanah et al., 2023). In terms of da’wah methods, the three classical channels (da’wah bi al-lisan, bi al-hal and bi al-qalam) were found to be practised with differing emphasis: da’wah bi al-hal through the exemplary conduct of religious leaders appears most prominent in maintaining harmony, whereas da’wah bi al-qalam through media was not widely used by the informants.

Table 4
Cultural and Structural Da’wah Strategies of NU in Jepara

Dimension	Cultural strategy (dominant)	Structural strategy (supporting)
Main forms	Tahlilan, dziba’an, maulidan, syawalan, sedekah laut (reinterpreted spiritually), kitab kuning study in majelis taklim	Coordination among NU administrators, religious leaders and government officials through the FKUB and other official forums

Dimension	Cultural strategy (dominant)	Structural strategy (supporting)
Principal actors	NU administrators, kiai, FPPBS, local majelis taklim	NU administrators, religious leaders, government officials
Function for social capital	Strengthens bonding within NU; opens bridging space when non-Muslim neighbours participate and invite in turn	Provides an institutional space for managing differences of view among leaders
Illustrative evidence	I-3, I-4 (Muslim side); I-8, I-9 (non-Muslim side)	I-7 (FKUB communication “not merely ceremony”)
Normative grounding	Tawassuth, tawazun, tasamuh, amar makruf nahi mungkar	Tawassuth, tawazun, tasamuh, amar makruf nahi mungkar

Source: Compiled by the authors from interview results and field observation (2025–2026).

The Role of Religious Leaders

The field data reveal three prominent roles of religious leaders (Table 5). As guardians of social norms, leaders grant permission and space for adherents of other religions to celebrate major holidays. As channels of communication, they coordinate interfaith interaction, as in Hj. Zahroh’s caution regarding learning religion on social media (interview, 11 April 2025). As mediators of disputes, they bring together the discourse among leaders through official forums so that differences do not escalate, as affirmed by Sahal Hamid (interview, 10 April 2025). In Dermolo Village, Kembang Sub-district, whose history was once marked by conflict over church construction, conditions are now relatively conducive following a long process of mediation involving religious leaders and the local government.

Table 5
Matrix of the Role of Religious Leaders in Maintaining Harmony in Jepara

Role	Form of action	Case example
Guardian of social norms	Granting permission and space for adherents of other religions to celebrate major holidays	Securing of Christmas celebrations by Banser
Channel of communication	Coordinating the volume of worship; educating on caution in learning religion	Hj. Zahroh’s appeal regarding chains of religious knowledge (sanad) on social media
Mediator of disputes	Bringing together discourse among leaders through official forums	Mediation of the house-of-worship case in Dermolo Village; the FKUB forum

Source: Compiled by the authors from interview results and field observation (2025).

DISCUSSION

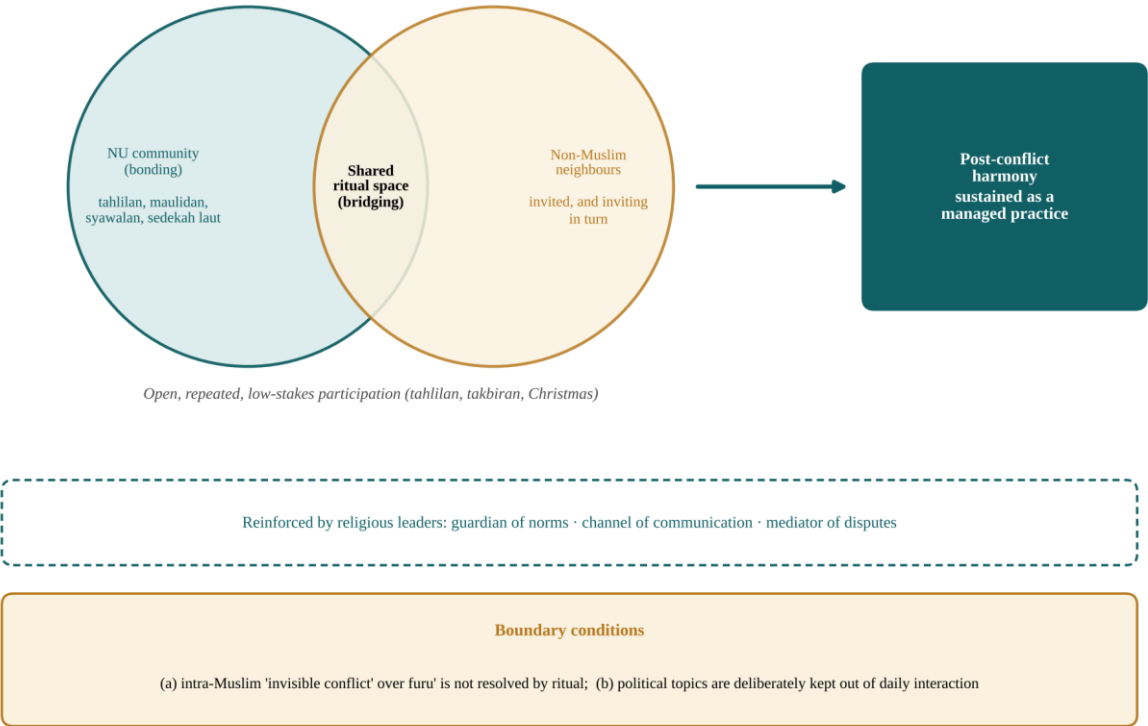
Interpreting the Findings: Confirming the Propositions

The findings show that NU’s cultural da’wah strategy in Jepara serves a dual function: it maintains the internal cohesion of NU members while opening space for cross-faith encounter. Within Putnam’s (2000) framework, tahlilan and the study of kitab kuning are more appropriately read as bonding social capital that strengthens internal cohesion, while cross-faith presence in tahlilan, takbiran and Christmas celebrations functions as bridging social capital. This confirms the first proposition: strong bonding among NU members appears to be a prerequisite for opening bridging space, because the group’s solid self-confidence means that NU members in Jepara do not feel threatened by the presence of other groups in their rituals. The mechanism is summarized in Figure 3 and assessed against the propositions in Table 6.

Regarding the role of religious leaders, the finding that all three roles (guardian of norms, channel of communication and mediator of disputes) operate simultaneously supports

the first part of the second proposition and is consistent with Wibowo (2016) in Kediri and Toweren (2018) in Central Aceh, both of whom emphasize the exemplary conduct of religious leaders as a basis for tolerance. The comparative part of the proposition, that harmony endures more readily when one leader carries all three roles than when only one role stands out, cannot be tested in a single-case design and is therefore left as a proposition for cross-case research (Table 6).

Figure 3
Ritualized Bridging: The Mechanism and Its Boundary Conditions



Source: Authors’ analysis of field data (2025–2026).

Table 6
Assessment of the Research Propositions and Their Boundary Conditions

Proposition	Principal evidence	Assessment	Boundary or open question
P1: bonding and bridging reinforce each other	Tahlilan and kitab kuning as internal ritual life; cross-faith presence in tahlilan, takbiran and Christmas; reciprocal invitations reported by I-8 and I-9	Supported in this case	Intra-Muslim “invisible conflict”; political topics kept outside ritual life
P2: three leader roles operate simultaneously	Permission and space for holidays; communication on religious learning; mediation in Dermolo and through the FKUB	Supported for simultaneous operation of the roles	Comparative claim (all three roles in one leader versus one role) requires cross-case design

Source: Authors’ analysis (2025–2026).

Comparison with Previous Studies

Compared with similar research, the results show a number of similarities and differences. NU's cultural da'wah strategy in Jepara is consistent with the findings of Ahmad and Nafis (2021) on cultural da'wah based on local wisdom in Kudus and of Nurcahyono et al. (2025) on symbolic communication in the walimatul aqiqah tradition in Lampung: both show how symbols and customary rituals become effective media for reinforcing Islamic values without formal verbal da'wah. The pattern is also consistent with Daher et al. (2023) on harmony among multireligious communities in Indonesia resting on shared everyday habits, with Jati (2024), who highlights the importance of young people's involvement in sustaining grassroots interfaith dialogue, and with Agung et al. (2024), who show that local wisdom can serve as an effective model of interfaith communication. It also resonates with Taufik et al. (2025) on youth peacebuilding through interfaith engagement and with evidence that participation in collective ritual is associated with social cohesion (Irving et al., 2024).

In contrast to Lubis's (2022) study of the MUI's role in Labuhan Batu, which emphasized formal communication channels, harmony in Jepara is sustained more by informal, tradition-based channels. This is consistent with Mawardi and Ruslan (2021), who argue that harmony depends on the extent to which individuals respect difference without asserting dominance, and with the comparative study by Muhajarah and Soebahar (2024) across Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, which indicates that a fiqh of tolerance grounded in local tradition is more durable than a purely legal-formal approach. The finding also fits the call for community-led and localized inter-religious peacebuilding (Kwuelum, 2024) and complements the review of formal dialogue as a conflict-resolution tool (Driessen, 2025) by showing a pathway that works without formal dialogue. The contextual difference, a coastal region with a history of open conflict, appears to explain why da'wah strategy in Jepara emphasizes informal cultural pathways more than the formal institutional pathways more prominent in other studies. The finding also nuances critical scholarship suggesting that NU's pluralist theological articulation does not always translate into tolerant practice at the grassroots level (Arifianto, 2017; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020): the case of Jepara indicates that such translation is achievable when cultural da'wah is deliberately sustained through everyday shared tradition rather than relying on doctrinal commitment alone. This is consistent with the principle of inclusive da'wah planning, which emphasizes transparency, empathy and interfaith communication as prerequisites for social cohesion (Hamsiyah & Mahmuddin, 2025).

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, the study reinforces and extends the da'wah strategy framework by explicitly linking it to social capital theory: cultural da'wah strategy is not merely a religious practice but a mechanism that generates bonding and bridging social capital, which is a prerequisite for post-conflict harmony. The study also enriches role theory by showing that the three roles of religious leaders are mutually interlocking rather than standing independently, a nuance not widely emphasized in previous studies of religious leaders such as Samuel and Tumonglo (2023) and Zuhriah (2020).

The study further challenges an assumption common to both classical social capital theory and critical NU scholarship: that strong internal bonding tends to crowd out openness toward outsiders, and that NU's pluralist theological commitments do not reliably translate into tolerant grassroots practice (Arifianto, 2017; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). In Jepara, ritualized bridging appears to invert this expectation. Because NU's rituals are strongly bonding, embedded, repeated and low-stakes, they generate enough internal confidence that opening

them to cross-faith participation does not feel threatening to the group's identity. This suggests that the relationship between bonding and bridging is not fixed but conditional on how bonding is enacted: bonding built through open, ritual, everyday practice appears to support bridging, whereas bonding built through more closed, doctrinal or politically mobilized channels, the kind more visible in Mietzner and Muhtadi's (2020) account, may not. Ritualized bridging is therefore offered as a scope condition on when bonding social capital helps rather than hinders interfaith bridging, not as a claim that it always does.

Boundary Conditions of Ritualized Bridging

The mechanism is not unlimited, and the data already point to where it strains. In the context of a religious and communal coastal Javanese society, harmony is not born from the absence of difference but from the community's capacity to manage what informants themselves called "invisible conflict" (konflik nirwujud): latent tension over *furu'* (secondary matters of religious practice) within the Muslim community, between *nahdliyin* circles and groups favouring a more textual approach, that does not surface openly and is not resolved by ritualized bridging (interview, Kasim, 13 April 2025). This suggests that ritualized bridging operates most effectively across the Muslim/non-Muslim boundary, where the symbolic stakes of ritual participation are relatively low, but is less effective in managing intra-religious boundary tension, where the stakes concern the correct interpretation of shared doctrine rather than coexistence between distinct traditions.

Interestingly, when a second non-Muslim informant was asked directly where the limits of open dialogue lie, he pointed not to religion but to politics: political topics are deliberately avoided in daily interaction precisely because they expose disagreement in a way that shared ritual does not (interview, Heru, 4 September 2026). Ritualized bridging is therefore not only a story about the Muslim/non-Muslim boundary: the community appears to manage several potential fault lines, religious, doctrinal and political, by selectively keeping ritual life open while keeping explicitly political discourse comparatively closed. This pattern is broadly consistent with Garing et al. (2023), who show that local wisdom is applied to identify and resolve conflict, but it says less about tension that never surfaces at all. It also qualifies the caution of Pangalila and Rumbay (2024) that interreligious relations may remain limited to celebrating rituals: in Jepara the non-Muslim informant described participation as genuinely comfortable rather than formal, although this testimony comes from a single village and should not be over-generalized. With the addition of the second non-Muslim informant, the non-Muslim perspective is now represented by two accounts rather than one, though both come from the same village; the viewpoint of more textually oriented Muslim groups falls outside the scope of this study, and testing how far the boundary of ritualized bridging extends for that group is left as a direction for future research.

Practical and Policy Implications

Practically, the findings have implications for religious extension workers, local governments and administrators of religious organisations. Religious moderation programmes do not always need to begin with new interventions, since in many regions like Jepara socio-religious infrastructure already exists that can be optimized: for example, strengthening FKUB capacity, whose roles and barriers have been documented elsewhere (Nurdin et al., 2021), or providing mediation training for young religious leaders, consistent with the emphasis on youth in grassroots interfaith work (Jati, 2024; Taufik et al., 2025). Such a model could also complement curricular efforts on religious moderation currently being developed in higher

education institutions in Indonesia (Mukhibat et al., 2024), so that the strengthening of moderation occurs not only in the classroom but is also connected to socio-religious practice in the community. For local governments, the implication is to protect and facilitate, rather than formalize or bureaucratize, the everyday ritual spaces in which cross-faith encounter already occurs.

Contextual Insights

The findings are anchored in a specific context: a coastal Javanese regency, a mass-based traditionalist organisation with a dense calendar of communal ritual, and a recent history of overt conflict. These features probably matter for the mechanism. A dense ritual calendar supplies frequent, low-stakes occasions for encounter, a traditionalist identity that is secure in its own practices lowers the threat perceived from outsiders' presence, and the memory of conflict gives leaders and residents a shared interest in keeping encounter routine. Whether ritualized bridging operates in settings where one or more of these conditions are absent, for example in religious organisations with a thinner ritual life or in regions where conflict is ongoing rather than past, remains an empirical question for comparative research.

CONCLUSION

This study reaches two main conclusions. First, NU's da'wah strategy in building religious harmony in Jepara Regency is dominated by a cultural strategy, sustained by traditions such as tahlilan, maulidan and syawalan that involve cross-faith participation, with a structural strategy (the FKUB) as a supporting pillar, grounded in the four principles of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah an-Nahdliyah. Second, religious leaders play three mutually reinforcing roles: guardian of social norms, channel of interfaith communication and mediator of disputes. The study's main contribution lies in integrating da'wah strategy with social capital theory and role theory, and in proposing ritualized bridging as the mechanism through which post-conflict harmony in Jepara emerges as the result of a consciously managed strategy rather than a condition that occurs by itself. Academically, the findings open a direction for further research that tests the da'wah strategy–social capital–role of religious leaders model in other post-conflict contexts and that tests the comparative part of the second proposition across cases. Practically, the model can serve as a reference for formulating religious moderation programmes grounded in local wisdom.

The study has limitations. It captures da'wah strategy and the role of religious leaders in general terms across three sub-districts of Jepara; informants come predominantly from the NU community; the non-Muslim perspective is represented by two informants from the same village; and the viewpoint of more textually oriented Muslim groups was not examined. Further research is recommended to address these gaps, for example by adding informants from other non-Muslim communities and from textually oriented Muslim groups, or by testing the propositions comparatively in other post-conflict regions in Indonesia.

Author Contributions

As the first author, Qomariyah bears full responsibility for conceptualization, methodology, field investigation, data analysis, drafting the initial manuscript, and reviewing and editing the final manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study did not require formal ethical review. It involved only simple interviews and observations with adult participants. These methods carried minimal risk. The study also did not involve vulnerable groups or sensitive personal data.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with language refinement, grammar checking, academic writing improvement and manuscript organization. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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