

MAKAN PATITA: COMMENSALITY AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN POST-CONFLICT SITUATION IN INDONESIA

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Abstract. *The post-conflict situation is a phase that occurs after the signing of the peace agreement. However, it cannot be assumed as the end of the conflict and the beginning of a peaceful situation because post-conflict is very fragile. The war may have ended, but small conflicts in large numbers, are still possible, and if not dealt with immediately, the situation can relapse into war. This is where the importance of intercultural dialogue is to ensure durable peace. One of the instruments of intercultural dialogue is commensality. This article then examines a form of commensality in the city of Ambon, Indonesia, as an instrument for building peace after the violent conflict of 1999-2002. The results of this study indicate that the commensality of makan patita traditions has supported the creation of space and place for intercultural dialogue. Space is a material form. The commensality tradition in Ambon which is carried out in cities or public spaces, allowing participants to gather and dialogue, while Place is more of values and meanings provided by the implementation of this tradition, such as the meaning of togetherness, and peace. and unity.*

Keywords: *commensality, intercultural dialogue, Ambon, Indonesia, makan patita*

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a Republic country in Southeast Asia. Since its independence in 1945, this country has been known as multicultural. According to the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics in 2010, Indonesia has 633 tribes, which are then divided into 31 major ethnic groups. Each ethnic group in Indonesia has its regional language, which is very different from one another. For example, someone with Javanese ethnicity and Javanese speaking, will not understand the Minang people speak Minang, if he does not learn it first. Although highly diverse, the Javanese is the largest ethnic group with a total of 95.2 million people (40.2% of Indonesia's population) (BPS 2010: 14).

In fact, in one of the most populous islands in Indonesia, Java island, there are three different provinces: West Java; Central Java; and East Java. West Java, which is dominated by the Sundanese ethnicity, has a very different language and customs from Central Java and East Java, even though all three are on the same island. These cultural differences make Indonesia a very rich country in language, customs, and culture.

Likewise with religion. Indonesia has 7 recognized religions, including local religions (religions in each region), and Islam is the majority religion, with 87.18% of the population, Christian 6.96%, Catholic 2.91%, Hindu 1.69%, Buddhism 0.72%, Confucianism (0.05%), and local religions 0.13% (BPS 2010: 19).

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One of the advantages of multiculturalism in Indonesia is the variety of culinary delights throughout Indonesia. Culinary in each of these regions is not only a means of fulfilling the biological needs of society but also a cultural identity of a community (Utami 2018: 37). Dusselier (2009: 335-337) even mentions that food is a storehouse of memories and a historical residence of a community. In addition, Indonesian societies have a penchant for enjoying various culinary delights in a tradition of feasting commensality or sharing meals (Weichart 2008). This tradition is almost the same as the tradition of dinner on Thanksgiving in the United States, or the tradition of parties on birthdays, weddings, and other celebrations around the world. The difference is, Indonesian people, not only invite their nuclear and extended family, but also people who are not bound by family ties, such as school friends, office mates, neighbors, and even new acquaintances.

Unfortunately, these extreme differences between tribes, ethnicities, and cultures in Indonesia have also caused conflict problems in almost all parts of Indonesia. Several conflicts have even entered into prolonged violent conflicts, which have started to surface since Indonesia entered the reform era in the 2000s. The inter-ethnic conflict that had developed during the authoritarian rule of President Soeharto for 32 years, was always suppressed and seemed to be hidden by the government. Consequently, when the authoritarian government was overthrown in 1998, a whole host of violent conflicts and divisions exploded to the surface (Bertrand 2003: 28-44). Violent conflicts between the Dayak and Madurese tribes on the island of Borneo, for example, this horrific bloody conflict that occurred in 2001 has caused deep trauma between the two tribes, especially as a result of the beheading of 100 Madurese by a Dayak ethnic group (Bertrand 2003: 57). Apart from that, at almost the same time, large-scale violent conflicts also occurred in several areas, such as Ambon, Poso and Papua (Bertrand 2003: 114-129; 135-144). Even today, the impact of the conflict in the form of grudges between these tribes has not disappeared.

This research will then discuss a conflict that occurred in 1999-2002 in Ambon, as well as conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts in the region. Ambon is the capital of Maluku island, located in eastern Indonesia (see Map 1). Ambon City is a multicultural city because it has residents from various ethnic groups, religions, and races. The majority ethnic group in this city is the Ambonese, a tribe that inhabits Ambon Island and the surrounding islands that are descended from the Alifuru tribe. Besides the Ambonese tribe, the city is also inhabited by other ethnicities, such as Arabs, Butonese, and Chinese who initially came to Ambon for trade purposes. In addition, there are also Minahasa, Javanese, and Minang ethnic groups who have come to Ambon since ages.



Map 1 Indonesia, Maluku Island, and Ambon City (Capital City of Maluku)

In December 1998, there were fighting and arson attacks between Christian and Muslim villages in several areas of Ambon city. A small dispute between a Christian youth from the Mardika area of Ambon and a Muslim youth from Batumerah, a village near Mardika caused the violent conflict in Ambon. However, rumours that spread in the community exacerbated the conflict between Christian and Muslim communities. At first, the fighting only took place between Christian Ambonese and Muslim immigrants from South Sulawesi (Bugis, Buton, and Makassar), and both sides launched attacks on each other (Indrawan and Putri 2022: 16). After that, the social conflict continued until it became a religious issue, and was also carried out on religious symbols, such as churches and mosques. As a result, the Ambonese people are divided into two communities, the Christian and the Muslim communities. Both communities are actively involved in social conflicts by using tools from toothed wheels, spears, arrows, stones, and self-made weapons. The social conflict in Ambon City subsided temporarily in May 1999, during the 1999 election campaign, then in July 1999, the social conflict in Ambon City re-occurred with religious issues. The people of the two communities (Christians and Muslims) mutually defended their same-religious community and attacked anyone of a different religion, then, in 2001, the Maluku Sovereignty Forum (Forum Kedaulatan Maluku/FKM) was formed and considered that the government of the Republic of Indonesia did not have the capacity or ability to resolve social conflicts in Maluku, especially in Ambon City. As a form of its manifestation, FKM brought up the issue of the RMS which had been independent since 1950, then, at the end of 2001, when the people were tired of fighting and a number of special operations were carried out, Ambon City developed to become more stable (Dandirwalu 2014: 34).

The cause of the Ambon conflict is very controversial. Some said Christians blamed radical Islam in Ambon, while others blamed Christians for intimidating Muslims in the 1999 parliamentary elections (Bertrand 2003: 117; Rabasa and Haseman 2002b: 91-97). Some think that the conflict in Ambon was deliberately created by the Soeharto regime to shake up the emerging democratic political order (Rabasa and Haseman 2002: 2). This conflict has left at least 10,000 people killed, and 700,000 people displaced (Spyer 2002: 23). The Indonesian government then gathered representatives of Christianity and Islam in Ambon, who signed a peace agreement on 20 December 2002, which was named the Malino II Agreement.

Although the conflict has been deemed over by the signing of the peace agreement, the impact of the Ambon conflict has not disappeared, and the most difficult task, namely rebuilding peace that was destroyed by the conflict, has just begun. After the Ambon conflict, segregation of people based on ethno-religiousness began to occur (Wisudo 2010: 5). Refugees and conflict victims choose to live in areas that share the same religious identity. They are reluctant to return to their places of origin even after the conflict is over. As a consequence, areas that were previously heterogeneous become homogeneous (Wisudo 2010: 25). In addition, in post-conflict areas, land disputes have become very complicated. For example, a house that originally belonged to one family and was destroyed by fire during the conflict was actually taken over by another family in a post-conflict situation. Small conflicts, both violent and non-violent, still frequently arise in Ambon.

Elements of Indonesian society want a safer and more peaceful condition in Ambon. The local government, community social institutions, and traditional and religious leaders in Ambon are striving to return Ambon to a pre-conflict situation. Fortunately, multicultural Indonesia also provides a variety of local wisdom, traditions, and culture, most of which can be used for conflict resolution and reconciliation:

These include *baku bae* ("be good to each other"), *gandong* ("uterus," meaning treating others like our siblings), *famili* ("family," meaning taking care of others like a family), *masohi* (working together in the spirit of communalism and solidarity), *makan patita* ("communal feasting" aiming at reconciling the warring parties and strengthening social bonds), *larvul ngabal* (a customary law containing mechanisms to govern social relations in Southeast Maluku), and *pela* (a pact of the relationship between two villages in central Maluku) (Qurtuby 2012)



Figure 1 Makan Patita in Ambon, Indonesia

Source: Souisa 2017: 97

Makan patita, is part of the culture of the people in the Maluku islands, inviting a large number of people to enjoy the food (see Figure 1). This culture of commensality exists in almost all tribes in Indonesia, as an instrument of social interaction whether for birthday celebrations, farewell parties, graduations, birthday celebrations, and so on. This is a way for Indonesian societies to build connections, strengthen bonds, and maintain kinship bonds amidst various cultures. The difference is that the *makan patita* tradition is carried out through several traditional processions which make it very sacred. This sacredness of commensality makes this culture appreciated by all people who live in Ambon, regardless of differences in ethnicity and religion. This tradition has often been carried out and is a sign of the end of violent conflict. Everyone gathered, differences in age, religion, ethnicity, language, and thought, were removed by a moment of eating together. Through this commensality, all people gathered will get rid of all differences in age, religion, ethnicity, language, and thought.

This phenomenon of commensality in Ambon then becomes very interesting to study, especially to answer how a simple tradition like eating together is able to establish peace between communities that have just killed each other. In addition, all parties invited to the *Makan Patita* tradition have different cultures, so how does intercultural dialogue occur in this tradition? How do they get rid of cultural and religious differences that are the cause of violent conflict?

Therefore, this article aims to explain the relationship between peace in post-conflict situations and the tradition of commensality by the Ambonese people, and how intercultural dialogue takes place in the *makan patita* culture. So that the results of this article can add to academic and practical treasures. In the academic realm, this article is expected to broaden concepts related to conflict resolution and intercultural dialogue. In the practical realm, this article can be used as a reference for building peace policies and instruments in post-conflict areas that have a tradition of commensality.

2. The Post-conflict Situation, Peacebuilding, and Intercultural Dialogue

In general, a post-conflict situation is defined as a situation after the conflict has ended with a peace agreement. Nonetheless, there is confusion about this definition. Conflicts do not necessarily end after a peace agreement is signed. Even though a large-scale violent conflict has been successfully ended, small scales of violent and non-violent conflicts are still able to emerge. If these small-scale conflicts are left unmanaged immediately, they will relapse into another war (Frère and Wilen 2015: 2). The post-conflict situation is a fragile situation that requires advanced programs and policies to form a durable peace. Therefore, instead of creating a dichotomy between conflict situations (before the peace agreement) versus peace situations (after the peace agreement), the post-conflict situation is better defined as a post-peace agreement process, to build sustainable peace (Frère and Wilen 2015: 2; Brown, Langer, and Stewart 2011: 2-4). This is where the concept of post-conflict peacebuilding as an instrument for building durable peace after the peace agreement begins.

The concept of post-conflict peacebuilding has become an international agenda since 1992, through the report of the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-namely An Agenda for Peace which defines post-conflict peacebuilding as "action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict" (Boutros-Ghali 1992: 11). Later in 2010, the UN report of inclusive dialogue and reconciliation became one of the priorities in the peace-building program (Peacebuilding Support Office 2010). Reconciliation is "a process of accommodation that presupposes the acceptance of moral conditions" (Thompson 2002, p.52).

Culture then plays an important role in the process of reconciliation in post-conflict peacebuilding. Culture is a key value considered central and worth fighting for by a group (Ross 1993: 15-16), so culture may be used as one of the reasons for violent conflict. This led Huntington to state that continuous intercultural dialogue is very important to build relationships between conflicting groups (Mollov and Schwartz 2010: 208-209; Saunders 1999). According to UNESCO, intercultural dialogue is related to an effort to establish mutual understanding between people who have different cultures and civilizations:

"Intercultural dialogue is the equitable exchange and dialogue among civilizations, cultures, and peoples, based on mutual understanding and respect. The equal dignity of all cultures is the essential prerequisite for constructing social cohesion, reconciliation among peoples and peace among nations." (UNESCO 2020: 415)

Meanwhile, the Council of Europe states that intercultural dialogue is "an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads to a deeper understanding of the other's global perception" (CoE n.d.). The dialogue structure referred to is not only in the form of inter-group conversations, but can also be introduced as intercultural contacts, intercultural communication, intercultural ties, and intercultural relations (Yevtukh 2012: 119), so that the reach of the concept of intercultural dialogue becomes wider.

3. The Commensality on *Makan Patita* as Space and Place of Intercultural Dialogue

Commensality simply means eating at the same table (*mensa*) or eating with others (Fischler 2011: 528; Sobal and Nelson 2003: 182). Etymologically, the word "*makan*" means eating, and "*patita*" means together, therefore *makan patita* is defined as eating together or sharing meals. From these two definitions, it can be concluded that the tradition of *makan patita* is a form of commensality. This tradition plays a crucial part related to

certain sacred events in the history of the Maluku people, including the inauguration of the king, the ritual of awarding a surname to a child, marriage ceremonies, bonding ceremonies between one region and another, preparation and celebration of the harvest time, even inauguration of community public facilities (Souisa 2017: 93-95). The implementation of *makan patita* is carried out with a long process. First, the raw materials for cooking dishes at this ceremony are prepared by the men by hunting or fishing, to be cooked by the women.

The menu of this dish is very diverse, ranging from authentic Maluku cuisine to adaptations of dishes from other cultures, such as *papeda*¹, bananas, sweet potatoes, fried and grilled fish, stir-fried papaya leaf, and processed beef or chicken cooked inside bamboo (Souisa 2017: 101). Furthermore, after the food is ready, the invited participants must stand or sit around where the food is served. The elders or religious leaders will then give remarks and lead the prayer together. After praying, all participants may eat the food. Although there are differences between regions and villages in eating food in the *makan patita* ritual, there are also some rules that participants generally need to understand (Souisa 2017: 104-105):

1. Participants should not take food to take home before all participants have finished eating
2. The staple food of Maluku, namely Papeda, must be eaten up
3. Leftover food that has become a certain family ration must be brought home
4. The dining table is made of coconut leaves, which are placed on the ground and the table should not be made of wood
5. Participants may not use plates and spoons (they must use fingers instead of spoons and banana leaves as a plate)
6. It is not permissible to take food then sit far from the *patita* dining table
7. There are no differences between the honorable and the mediocre participant; everyone is equal

As an instrument of intercultural dialogue, commensality processions such as *makan patita* are essential to support post-conflict peacebuilding because they provide space and place for **intercultural dialogue**. From an anthropological perspective, place and space have a major effect on the formation of culture (Low 2009: 7). Therefore, the formation of intercultural dialogue also requires adequate space and place. Space is a material aspect that can be physically measured and seen or a geographical location where cultural interaction is carried out. At the same time, the place is an immaterial aspect, the content of cultural interaction, which contains feelings, identities, and meanings:

“I consider space to be the more general and abstract construct retaining its social production and materialist origins. Space, in my rendering, is preeminently social, produced by bodies and groups of people, as well as historical and political forces. The place is used in the sense of a space that is inhabited and appropriated through the attribution of personal and group meanings, feelings, sensory perceptions and understandings” (Low 2017, p.32).

Very interesting research regarding space in intercultural dialogue comes from Aragón (2020: 7-16). According to him, the city is the most ideal place to carry out intercultural dialogue. The city is a symbol of regional segregation, where private property rights and individual freedom are the main reasons. High walls and fences bound each house to provide comfort for the residents. Urban communities become very individual and find it difficult to communicate. In addition, ethnic ties are lost in urban areas. Urbanism causes people from various tribes, religions, and races to come together, they seek to blend in and

¹ *Papeda* is a congee made from sago starch that is a staple food of the indigenous people in eastern Indonesia, namely parts of Sulawesi, Maluku Islands and Papua.

have freedom by breaking the attachment to their ethnic origin. But on the other hand, the diversity brought by the villagers to this city makes the city the right place to carry out intercultural dialogue, to avoid violent conflicts in the future (Aragón 2020: 7-16).

Space in intercultural dialogue is also defined as “a field with contacts communication, connections, relations both between the carriers of different cultures and the cultures themselves or their elements” (Yevtukh 2012: 120). Therefore, intercultural dialogue also requires space for all important actors in post-conflict peacebuilding to gather. These actors can be divided into three levels: top-level, mid-level, and community (Tappel 2016: 93-95; Lederach 1997: 38-40). At the first level is the Top Leadership of political or military leaders at the national level, who act as mediators in horizontal conflicts such as in Ambon. At the second level, there is Middle-Range Leadership, that is leaders who are respected at the regional level such as religious/ethnic leaders, academics, and Humanitarian Leaders (NGOs) who function as parties who provide conflict resolution training. Lastly is Grassroot Leadership, namely local leaders and ordinary people (Tappel 2016: 93-95; Lederach 1997: 38-40).

First, commensalism on *makan patita* creates a space for gathering all important actors in intercultural dialogue at the top, middle, and community levels. On the top level, it will invite regional and even national leaders to participate in this banquet. They gave remarks and even provided peace socialization regarding the Malino II Agreement to all participants who attended. On the mid-level, *makan patita* provides an opportunity for traditional elders and religious leaders to gather, and put aside existing religious and cultural differences. Meanwhile, ordinary people (especially conflict-affected parties) are invited and enjoy togetherness at the community level. In fact, in Ambonese culture, all participants, both at the top level and the lowest level, gather in the same room, eating the same food and the same way. The interaction in the commensality of *makan patita* becomes a horizontal interaction between all participants:

“There is a sense of togetherness, such as *makan patita* (eating together) where everyone sits in a meeting to eat together, and there are also other social activities, for example helping the underprivileged people of Maluku in treatment.” interview with Prof. Dr. Paul Tahalele (Sukemi 2009)

Second, commensality in *makan patita* plays as a meeting space of inclusivity and representation. In this tradition, the chosen space should always be able to provide a comfortable and safe meeting space for all participants. First, as a meeting space for intercultural dialogue, it needs to use public places that can accommodate participants from various backgrounds in large numbers. This is done so that this procession can invite many participants, where all parties will feel involved, and minimize the resentment from people who feel that they are not included in this tradition. The chosen place has also often been used as a place for religious and social events.

Third, this tradition is held in the city of Ambon which is rich in cultural differences. Cities have long been known for their functions on segregation and separation between regions and residents (Aragón 2020: 7). In the city of Ambon, this segregation occurs in two forms religion and ethnicity in different areas. The Ambonese, who are predominantly Christian, live in the center of Ambon city, while the immigrant ethnic groups such as Bugis, who are predominantly Muslim, choose to live in the suburb of Ambon (Hamid 2020: 220). The tradition of commensality has eliminated this segregation, by placing all parties with different religions, ethnicities, and regions, in one public place in a sacred moment. Resignifying places in urban areas as a symbol of diversity can produce a bridge of intercultural dialogue that represents a symbol of togetherness and peace (Aragón 2020: 17).

Fourth, as a communication space, the commensality ritual provides a sense of security (safe space) (Tappel 2016: 4), and allows people who have never met before, or have met but in the wrong situation (situation of violent conflict), to interact in a new, better and safer situation. Safe space is important to create change and difference. Safe space is important to create change and difference (Mitchell and Kelly 2011). During the procession of sharing food and eating together, the participants can talk about other things that are less painful than conflict (Tappel 2016: 94). Communication of actors with diverse identities in this tradition encourages a willingness to consider different perspectives, and is understood to be more effective in building beneficial engagement and long-term peace (UNESCO 2020).

Intercultural dialogue also requires a **place** that provides opportunities for humans to engage in intercultural communication. Intercultural dialogue is a concept that is increasingly developing so that the places where dialogue is carried out are increasingly diverse, namely through “verbal or non-verbal, in-person or virtual, between two or more people, or between groups” (UNESCO 2020). This article then views the tradition of commensality as a place for intercultural dialogue, due to the importance of food in culture and religion.

Food is more than just a means of survival. Food has a multidimensional element in conveying meaning, “food is considered to be multidimensional, as something that shapes us, our identities, and our cultures and in the end, our society. Just as different clothes signify different things, for example the white coat of a doctor, the uniform of a police officer or army personnel, food also transmits a meaning.” (Sibal 2018: 4). The ability of food to transmit meanings, makes it able to build kinship between people. This is especially the case in Southeast Asia, where food constructs kinship in Indonesia in two ways : through food distribution and food provision for everyone who participates (Janowski 2007: 4-5). This commensality can be structured or unstructured food. Unstructured banquets are banquets that are enjoyed without using certain rituals such as informal coffee banquets which tend to be more relaxed, while structured banquets are banquets with certain rituals that are more formal (Tappel 2016: 103-104). On the one hand, *makan patita* is actually included in a structured banquet, where the process of organizing it is carried out with a certain bureaucracy, starting from the process of requesting permission from the government, inviting participants, to the division of tasks in providing and preparing food. However, after the whole food preparation process was completed, a non-structured place started, where all participants could enjoy a free meal and have fun. They also do not need to wear formal clothes, by wearing polite and clean clothes, the participants can participate in this event comfortably.

First, as a place of intercultural dialogue, *makan patita* gives abundance meaning through the food provided due to the role of food in Southeast Asia as an important basis for building kinship. Kinship in several areas in Southeast Asia and eastern Indonesia, such as the city of Ambon, is not only determined from birth, but also related to giving certain foods (Janowski 2007: 3-5). For example, the kinship between two different tribes is solved by giving the Ambonese surname through the *Pela Gandong*² ceremony, which of course is followed by a commensality (Masringor and Sugiswati 2017: 69).

Commensality is a non-logocentric way of communication, because in practice it does not require words, but can send messages, either intentionally or unintentionally. Commensality generates bonds. It seems that in all cultures, eating the same food was

² *Pela* means a bond, while *Gandong* means brothers and sisters. *Pela Gandong* is then defined as a bond of unity and regard one another as brothers and sisters (Masringor and Sugiswati 2017: 1)

equated with producing the same flesh and blood, thus making the commensals more similar and bringing them closer together. It is said that, while absorbing the food, the subject simultaneously absorbs its salient features (Fischler 2011: 533). Menu and seating arrangements, for example, could communicate hidden meanings (Tappel 2016: 96). In the processional stage of preparing a big meal of *makan patita*, there are symbols included such as *tempat sirih* (a betel plate) as a family bonding symbol and a bottle of *sopi* (traditional liquor) as a symbol of encouragement (Reid 1988, p.49-51). In general, *makan patita* is also a symbol of a society that is trying to build its relationship with God, ancestors, others, and nature/environment (Patty 2015). In addition, this tradition has a symbol of horizontal relations between all participants, in which all participants, whether rich or poor, officials or ordinary people, women or men, all unite as one by sitting on the floor and eating food from the same plate (Reid 1988, p.49-51).

Second, commensality held in cities, such as the city of Ambon, gives the meaning of a place of diversity and peace. Multicultural Ambon City requires intercultural dialogue to communicate differences between ethnicities, religions, and races so that all parties understand each other, and conflicts in the future can be avoided. However, cultural and language differences also make it difficult for brands to interpret peace and togetherness. Therefore, a culture of sharing meals, such as *makan patita*, is full of symbolic meanings: “Through narratives and actions in the ritual of eating together, people are able to construct their life experiences from the realities of life so that they differentiate it from other acts of eating together” (Patty 2015).

4. Conclusion

Makan patita is a form of commensality culture practiced by the Ambonese in the Maluku Islands, Eastern Indonesia. After experiencing violent conflict in 1999-2002, Ambon is in a post-conflict situation prone to minor violent conflicts.

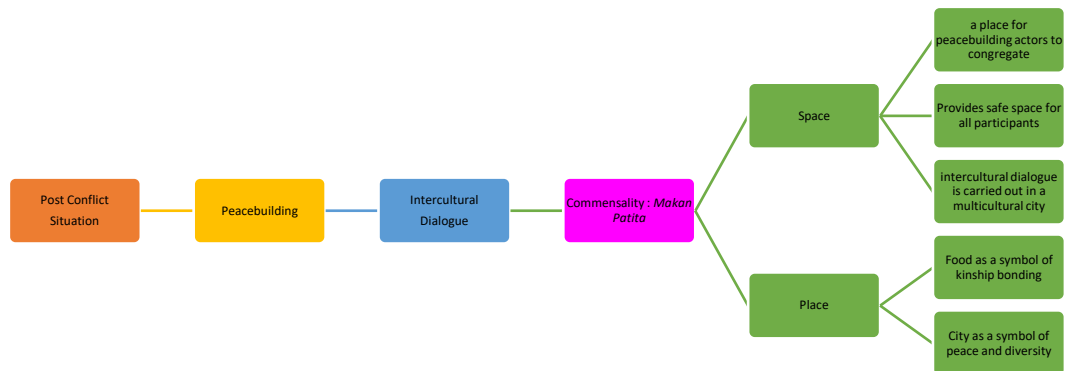


Figure 2. Research Conclusion

Therefore, a reconciliation mechanism is needed to minimize the remaining resentment and hatred due to violent conflict, and in this sense, culture provides the perfect solution. Commensality as a culture provides a deep meaning for the occurrence of intercultural dialogue. *Makan patita* for example, this culture provides a place and space for intercultural dialogue. First, as a space, commensality becomes a safe space for all peacebuilding actors, from the top, middle, to the community level, to gather and have a dialogue together. In addition, commensalities are often held in urban areas, making it easier

for participants to participate in this tradition. Second, as a space for intercultural dialogue, commensality in *makan patita* has symbols that bind kinship between conflicting parties. The city of Ambon, which is a symbol of cultural, ethnic, and religious differences, also creates a symbol of peace. Furthermore, the results of this study can be described as follows:

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