

Songs as a Medium for Reflecting Cross-Cultural Tensions: An Analysis of the Lyrics of the Song 'Mangu' in the Context of Indonesian Diversity

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 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jerkin.v4i2.3538>

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 13 Nov 2025

Revised: 19 Nov 2025

Accepted: 25 Nov 2025

Kata Kunci:

Lagu Mangu, Hubungan Antaragama, Ketegangan Budaya, Ekspresi Emosional, Teks Budaya, Fourtwnty.

Keywords:

Mangu Song, Interfaith Relations, Cultural Tensions, Emotional Expression, Cultural Texts, Fourtwnty.



ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis lagu “Mangu” karya Fourtwnty sebagai medium simbolik yang merefleksikan ketegangan dalam hubungan antaragama dan antarbudaya di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode naratif, penelitian ini mengkaji keterkaitan antara lirik lagu dan pengalaman personal seorang informan bernama Marhamah Khoirunnisa, yang menjalin hubungan dengan pasangan berbeda agama dan budaya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa lagu Mangu tidak hanya merepresentasikan ekspresi kesedihan pribadi, tetapi juga memuat narasi kolektif tentang cinta yang terhalang oleh batasan agama, tekanan keluarga, serta norma sosial yang telah mengakar. Lirik seperti “kau di sana, aku di seberangmu” mengandung makna simbolik yang mencerminkan jarak emosional dan struktural yang sulit dijumpai. Lagu ini berfungsi sebagai sarana katarsis emosional dan negosiasi identitas bagi individu yang berada pada persimpangan antara cinta dan keyakinan. Dengan demikian, Mangu diposisikan sebagai teks kultural yang berperan dalam merepresentasikan kompleksitas keberagaman Indonesia melalui medium musik.

This study aims to analyze the song Mangu by Fourtwnty as a symbolic medium that reflects the tension in interfaith and cultural relations in Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach and narrative method, this study examines the relationship between song lyrics and the personal experience of an informant named Marhamah Khoirunnisa, who is in a relationship with a couple of different faiths and cultures. The findings show that Mangu's song is not only an expression of personal grief, but also contains a collective narrative of love that is hindered by religious boundaries, family pressure, and established social norms. Lyrics like "you there, I'm across from you" contain symbolic meanings that reflect emotional and structural distances that are difficult to bridge. This song proves to be a means of emotional catharsis and identity negotiation for individuals who are at the intersection of love and trust. Thus, Mangu is positioned as a cultural text that plays a role in representing the complexity of Indonesia's diversity through the medium of music.



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How to Cite: Virga Putra Darma, et al (2025). Songs as a Medium for Reflecting Cross-Cultural Tensions: An Analysis of the Lyrics of the Song 'Mangu' in the Context of Indonesian Diversity, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.31004/jerkin.v4i2.3538>

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely known as a country with extraordinary cultural and religious diversity. The national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Different but still one") does represent a pluralistic identity, but in practice this diversity often poses complex challenges, especially in interfaith and cross-cultural relations (Adil & Jamil, 2023). This kind of relationship in Indonesia often faces rejection rooted in legal

boundaries and deep-rooted social norms (Nurdiani & Suartini, 2024). In many cases, individuals in interfaith relationships experience emotional distress, social alienation, and legal uncertainty.

In this context, music emerged as an important cultural artifact to channel emotional expression and socio-cultural representation. Songs are often a mirror of collective sentiment and a tool to challenge dominant narratives in the social and religious realms (Amin et al., 2023). In particular, music composition can be a means of emotional catharsis and discourse resistance in a society that is negotiating with the reality of cultural pluralism (Widyawati, 2024)

The song Indonesia *Mangu* by Fourtwnty captures the emotional complexity of cross-cultural love through the symbolism of the word "*mangu*", which refers to a state of contemplation and silence due to sadness or disappointment. The song represents the inner conflicts that individuals often experience in interfaith relationships, while also being a powerful medium to connect personal emotions with broader cultural dynamics. This is consistent with the findings (Lee et al., 2021) which show that mood perceptions in pop music are strongly influenced by cultural contexts; melancholy or longing lyrics can produce different emotional resonances depending on the listener's cultural background. In addition, (Brand et al., 2019) in a study of cultural evolution over song lyrics found an increase in negative and reflective tones in modern popular music, suggesting that lyrics contain symbolic and reflective value in response to social tensions—a phenomenon that is also evident in *Mangu*.

This study aims to analyze how the lyrics of *the Mangu* song reflect the emotional and cultural tensions inherent in interfaith relationships in Indonesia. Taking Marhamah Khoirunnisa's real narrative as the primary source of data, this paper explores how one song can represent the collective experience of Indonesia's young generation navigating love, faith, and identity.

METHOD

Theoretical Foundation

1. Music as Cultural Representation and Identity Negotiation

Similarly, in Trisutji Kamal's *opera Loro Jonggrang*, the cross-cultural dissonance between Javanese and Western elements reflects complex and often contradictory social realities (Nainggolan et al., 2022). In this context, music becomes a medium that reflects and shapes the construction of identity through culturally internalized symbols, narratives, and emotional expressions.

2. Cross-Cultural and Religious Relations in Indonesian Society

Cross-cultural and religious relations in Indonesia are often faced with social and institutional challenges. Recent studies show that this relationship becomes an identity battleground influenced by cultural and religious value systems (Yunita et al., 2022). In Batak-Chinese marriages, for example, cultural negotiations are carried out through communication strategies to maintain family harmony.

On the other hand, music is also used as a means of representing identity in a global context. The performance of *the Cingcangkeling* regional song in an international choir festival is a form of articulation of Sundanese identity on the global stage (Gustina et al., 2023). In this context, music allows individuals and groups to negotiate identity boundaries without directly challenging prevailing social or institutional norms.

3. Song Lyrics as Catharsis and Collective Emotional Space

More than just melodies and rhythms, song lyrics provide space for emotional catharsis, especially for individuals who do not have a safe container to express their personal experiences. Songs are a medium to channel emotional burdens in repressive social situations.

Recent research also shows that the selection of songs with sad or ambiguous nuances is often done by listeners who are in emotionally vulnerable conditions, such as depression (Chowdary et al., 2024). In addition, cross-cultural research reveals that the perception of emotion in music is not always universal; although basic emotions such as sad or cheerful can be recognized across countries, meanings such as "full of love" or "melancholy" are highly dependent on the cultural background (Celen et al., 2025). Thus, song lyrics serve as a space of emotional solidarity that is not only personal, but also collective and culturally contextual.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a narrative method to capture subjective experiences and the structure of meaning behind cross-cultural and religious relationships. Primary data were

collected through unstructured narrative interviews with Marhamah Khoirunnisa, an individual who lived in cross-cultural relationships—this method allowed the interviewees to tell stories naturally and emotionally.

The narrative approach also emphasizes the importance of story co-construction, which is a dynamic interaction between researchers and sources, where narratives are constructed together. The interview transcript was then combined with the lyric data of *the Mangu* song, so that the analyst could explore the intersection between personal narratives and cultural texts.

For analysis, the researcher applied thematic narrative analysis: the stages of data familiarization—marking relevant quotes—grouping of thematic codes—to final interpretation based on Marhamah's life narrative and the meaning of songs. This process includes a reflexivity journal, where the researcher critically examines his subjective position in reading the data (Thematic Analysis methodology). This approach ensures that the results of the analysis are not only focused on the frequency of a particular theme, but also on the way the narrative is culturally and emotionally shaped.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1

Can you tell us a little bit about your background and your partner (religion, culture, place of origin)?	
Marhamah Khoirunnisa	<i>“Hi, my partner and I have been building a long-distance relationship for almost 2 years, we are no longer different religions but cultures, I am in West Java, Cirebon. He is in Manado, North Sulawesi.”</i>

The narrative from Marhamah Khoirunnisa reveals the dynamics of cross-cultural and religious relations, as well as the challenges that arise from these differences. This remark highlights how their relationship is not only tested by geographical distance, but also by the cultural differences inherent in regional origins — West Java and North Sulawesi. Previous studies have shown that interfaith and cultural relationships have the potential to produce emotional distress and social isolation (Widyawati, 2024).

Within the framework of cultural-linguistic analysis, the phrase *“no longer different religions but cultures”* describes an explicit shift towards cultural identity as a source of friction. This is in line with research (Dewatara & Agustin, 2021), which found that identity negotiation in cross-cultural relationships affects communication, social acceptance, and family support.

The lyrics of *the song Mangu*, such as *“You're there, I'm across you”*, reflect not only physical distance, but also symbolic boundaries—that is, representations of cultural identities and social practices that arise from the background of the place of origin. The harmony between Marhamah's narrative and lyrical text reinforces the song's position as a resonant cultural text for individuals in cross-cultural relations in Indonesia.

The nearly two-year time Marhamah mentions contains elements of emotional resilience and the exhaustion of waiting for clarity—a phenomenon reinforced by research (Celen et al., 2025) in cross-cultural emotional studies, suggesting that conflicts of cultural and religious values can deepen psychological distress in couples.

Thus, Marhamah's narrative is not just for the sake of revealing personal experiences; rather, it opens up an anthropological understanding of how the choice of love across cultures demands symbolic negotiation in a pluralistic society.

Table 2

What was your first impression when listening to the song Mangu? Are there any lyric parts that feel "close" to your personal experience?	
Marhamah Khoirunnisa	<i>“There's, in your lyrics there, I'm across from you, it's one sentence that has answered everything that we won't be able to be together.”</i>

Marhamah Khoirunnisa expressed a deep emotional impression when she first heard *the song Mangu*. For Marhamah, the lyrics *“you are there, I am across you”* is not just a depiction of physical distance, but a symbol of the reality of relationships that cannot be united.

He calls this phrase "one sentence that has answered everything", which shows how strong the resonance between personal experiences and the message carried by the song is. This song, in his view, became a kind of medium of validation for feelings that he found difficult to express verbally.

The lyrics reflect what researchers call *emotional mirroring*—when a work of art is able to reflect the internal conflicts of its listeners (Chowdary et al., 2024). In this context, the song becomes not only an aesthetic consumption, but also a cathartic space, where the listener finds relief because his feelings are "represented" by cultural texts. Marhamah is not just about listening to songs; He finds himself in it.

The meaning of "crossed" in this context also has a deep symbolic charge. He points out boundaries that are not only geographical, but also spiritual, social, and cultural—which, in Marhamah's experience, cannot be united by love alone. This supports the idea that popular song lyrics can be cultural discourses that represent the tension between personal feelings and larger social structures (Epure et al., 2020).

Thus, Marhamah's response to *Mangu's* song shows how cultural texts work personally and collectively. Simple lyrics can contain layers of complex meaning, depending on the listener's experience. In this case, *Mangu* serves as a narrative mirror—an emotional text that bridges individual grief with broader social reality.

Table 3

What do you think is the main message conveyed in the song Mangu?	
Marhamah Khoirunnisa	<i>"In my opinion, the message is that couples who are of different religions and already know different beliefs but insist on staying in a relationship where the ending already exists, that is, they will not be able to be together forever."</i>

Marhamah Khoirunnisa interprets that the main message in *the song Mangu* is about two people who maintain a relationship despite realizing a fundamental difference in beliefs. In his view, this song voices the bitter reality that love alone is not enough to unite two people with different religious backgrounds. This narrative shows an awareness of the limits that cannot be crossed, as well as the pain of keeping trying.

Songs with themes of emotional relationships often represent the conflict between personal feelings and dominant social norms. *Mangu's lyrics* offer a symbolic space for listeners who are experiencing a similar situation, namely loving someone but being trapped in a religious structure that does not provide a way out. Marhamah's interpretation reinforces that *Mangu* not only tells an ordinary love story, but also becomes a social reflection on the limitations of interfaith relationships.

More broadly, this response shows how song can serve as an ideological marker—conveying the tension between the freedom to choose love and the fact that social institutions, such as religion and family, remain the final determinants in many cases of relationships (Celen et al., 2025). Thus, *Mangu* is understood not only as an expression of loss, but as a gentle warning that some loves are indeed destined not to end together.

Table 4

How would you interpret the lyrics of Mangu's song in the context of interfaith relationships?	
Marhamah Khoirunnisa	<i>"In my opinion, the Mangu song can be interpreted as a symbol of love that transcends religious and social boundaries, as well as as a recognition of similarities and differences in interfaith relationships."</i>

Marhamah Khoirunnisa interprets *the song Mangu* as a symbol of love that dares to transcend the boundaries set by religion and social norms. For Marhamah, the lyrics of the song represent the spirit to continue to love and appreciate someone even though differences in beliefs cannot be institutionally united. This confirms that the lyrics in popular songs have the potential to be a symbolic narrative about the courage to love within society's defined limitations.

This interpretation is in line with the view that music can be a medium to voice a "non-normative" form of love, especially in the context of a society that has strict boundaries between religion, culture, and personal relationships (Adil & Jamil, 2023). In this case, *Mangu* is not only a reflection of sadness, but also a statement of the existence of sincere love in the midst of social structures that do not always accept diversity. This song, through Marhamah's perspective, serves as a representation space that

acknowledges differences, without denying the existence of similarities of feelings that remain valid and meaningful.

Table 5

During your relationship, what challenges did you face regarding religious or cultural differences?	
Marhamah Khoirunnisa	<i>“The challenge is I because we have different religions, so the question of stepping to a serious level is always a problem, both he and I will not leave their respective religions.”</i>

Marhamah Khoirunnisa revealed that the main challenge in this regard is the impossibility of stepping to a more serious level due to religious differences. Although the two love each other, the decision to stick to each other's beliefs leaves the future of their relationship like a dead end. This is in line with the findings (Adil & Jamil, 2023), which state that interfaith marriages in Indonesia are often hampered not by a lack of emotional commitment, but by tensions between love and religious fervor that cannot be legally or spiritually compromised.

Table 6

Have you ever felt social, family, or institutional pressures because of these differences?	
Marhamah Khoirunnisa	<i>“The pressure is more on my family because the majority of the extended family is Muslim and my parents don't want my partner to be a convert or have a different faith, while in his family there are converts so it's not a problem to have different beliefs.”</i>

In her narrative, Marhamah Khoirunnisa reveals that the main form of pressure she faced came from the family environment, especially since the majority of her extended family members strictly adhered to Islam. He stated that his parents did not want a partner of another religion, and did not even want a partner who became a convert just for the sake of marriage.

This attitude reflects how religious preferences in the family can form non-negotiable boundaries, even when there is love and commitment between spouses. On the other hand, Marhamah also mentioned that her partner's family is more flexible, because some family members on the male side are converts and open to differences in beliefs.

This experience shows an imbalance of pressure in interfaith relationships, where one side faces more rigid family norms, while the other is relatively more open. This is in line with the findings (Nurdiani & Suartini, 2024), which explain that in the Indonesian context, family institutions are often the main actors in enforcing religious and cultural boundaries in personal relationships. Marhamah is a concrete example of how individuals are in a dilemma between loyalty to family and the desire to maintain relationships. When institutional pressures such as the law have not yet emerged, the pressure from the nuclear family is strong enough to thwart any serious attempt to continue the relationship.

Table 7

How do you and your spouse respond to or resolve differences in worship practices, holiday celebrations, or religious values?	
Marhamah Khoirunnisa	<i>“We are both reminded of each other's religions, especially if there is a celebration of the holiday.”</i>

In the face of differences in religious practices, Marhamah explained that she and her partner chose a mutual respectful and educational approach. They do not impose their own beliefs, but instead remind each other and learn about each other's religion. "We just remind each other," he said, which reflects an open and supportive communication pattern. This approach suggests a constructive form of value negotiation, in which interfaith understanding is built not to unite beliefs, but to create a space for tolerance in relationships.

Both sides also show a healthy curiosity about their respective worship practices and celebrations. Marhamah said that she and her partner told each other and explained the meaning of the religious celebrations they were undergoing, so that both understood their respective spiritual contexts without feeling threatened in terms of identity. This attitude reflects the practice of *interfaith literacy*, which is the ability to understand the religious traditions of others without losing personal beliefs. It also shows that in an ideal relationship, differences are not an absolute obstacle, but an opportunity to build a bridge of understanding.

This experience reinforces the argument that in interfaith relationships, the ability to empathize and communicate openly is the key to maintaining harmony. Successful interfaith couples in the medium term typically show a pattern of openness to different values—not by being uniform, but by understanding each other's boundaries. In the case of Marhamah, the practice of reminding each other and learning about religion became a form of symbolic adaptation that was able to mitigate potential conflicts, even though they realized that these differences remained institutionally unreconcilable.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of data analysis from the distribution of respondents' answers, it can be concluded that the integration of local culture in English learning received very strong support from the respondents. The majority of them agreed with various statements that emphasized the importance of local culture as a relevant, easy-to-understand, and able to increase student motivation and engagement.

This integration is not only considered to be able to enrich learning content, but also serves as a medium to strengthen students' cultural identities and foster multicultural attitudes. These findings indicate that local culture-based approaches have great potential to be adopted more widely in English language learning practices, especially in the context of education in Indonesia.

However, respondents also highlighted that the representation of local culture in textbooks or learning materials is still not optimal. Therefore, real efforts are needed from teachers, curriculum makers, and material developers to better accommodate local culture in the English teaching process so that it is more contextual and meaningful for students.

The Mangu *song* serves as a critical cultural and emotional text in the context of interfaith and cultural relations in Indonesia. The lyrics "*you are there, I am across you*" become a symbolic depiction of inner conflict—a strong love but clashed with religious and cultural structures—which is in line with findings in the analysis of music as an agent of identity negotiation (Nainggolan et al., 2022; Sunarto et al., 2020). This study confirms that popular music, as stated by (Gustina et al., 2023) and (Yunita et al., 2022), is able to maintain cross-cultural dialogue without erasing differences, but rather by bridging the value gap in the form of open and empathetic communication.

In addition, *Mangu* emphasizes the importance of emotional catharsis and symbolic power to offer articulation space for individuals caught up in the value dilemma between love and religion. This is supported by (Chowdary et al., 2024), (Lee et al., 2021), and (Celen et al., 2025), which suggest that song lyrics can be a coping mechanism as well as a pathway of collective expression in multicultural societies. This song invites the listener to acknowledge disagreements, in the sense not to resolve them, but to provide a common understanding through shared emotional experiences.

These findings are in line with the framework of narrative theory and discourse analysis—that religious and cultural identities are not just settings, but configurators of meaning in modern love narratives (Anderson, 2007). Music becomes an arena of negotiation where the inner conflict between love and the bond of great identity can continue to be recognized and celebrated as a valid human experience.

Finally, this study emphasizes that *Mangu's* song is not just an aesthetic work; it is a cultural artifact that provides emotional and symbolic recognition to those at the intersection of heart and identity. Cross-cultural and religious relations remain a realm of negotiation and reflection of values, where music provides a symbolic pathway that not only reflects, but also makes room for possible social change—though not always to a rhetorical ending.

THANK-YOU NOTE

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to all individuals and institutions who have contributed to the completion of this study. Our highest appreciation is extended to Mr. Virga Putra Dharma, our supervisor, for his invaluable guidance, constructive direction, and insightful feedback throughout the process of writing this journal. His continuous support has been instrumental in shaping the quality and depth of this research.

Sincere appreciation is also conveyed to Marhamah Khoirunnisa, whose openness in sharing her personal narrative provided profound insights into the cultural and emotional dimensions explored in this paper. Her contribution has been essential in bridging the theoretical framework with real-life experiences.

The authors are likewise grateful to colleagues and mentors who offered thoughtful suggestions and encouragement during the research and writing stages. Their perspectives have significantly enriched the analytical depth and academic value of this study. Finally, the authors hope that this research will serve as a meaningful contribution to the broader academic discourse on interfaith and cross-cultural relations in Indonesia, and inspire further scholarly exploration into how music functions as a reflective and unifying cultural medium within diverse societies.

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