



Beyond Genealogy: The Keturah Narrative as a Symbolic Framework for Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Religious narratives have long shaped collective identities and intergroup relations, yet their potential contribution to contemporary peacebuilding remains underexplored. Among the Abrahamic traditions, the narrative of Keturah (Genesis 25:1-6) has received comparatively limited scholarly attention, with existing studies focusing primarily on genealogy, biblical history, and theological interpretation. This study examines how the Keturah narrative may be reinterpreted as a symbolic cultural resource for fostering social cohesion and peacebuilding in Southeast Asia. Using a qualitative thematic synthesis, the study integrates interdisciplinary literature with semi-structured interviews conducted with two anthropologists and three religious scholars representing Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Data were analyzed through thematic coding and cross-source comparison to identify recurring interpretive patterns concerning genealogy, shared ancestry, symbolic identity, and intergroup relations. The findings indicate that the Keturah narrative can be understood beyond biological descent as a symbolic representation of shared ancestry. This reinterpretation supports the development of symbolic kinship, which encourages recognition of broader human connectedness while respecting distinct religious identities. The analysis further suggests that symbolic kinship may strengthen social cohesion by fostering trust, reciprocity, and constructive engagement across religious and cultural boundaries, thereby contributing to conditions that support positive peace. Rather than proposing a historical account of ancestry, the study offers a conceptual pathway illustrating how religious narratives may be reinterpreted as symbolic resources for dialogue and coexistence. The study contributes to scholarship by introducing symbolic kinship as an analytical framework linking Abrahamic narratives, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. It also demonstrates how underexplored religious narratives can inform culturally grounded approaches to peacebuilding within plural societies.

Keywords: Countering violent extremism, Peacebuilding, Peacekeeping, Shared ancestry, Social cohesion, Southeast Asia, Symbolic kinship.

1. Introduction

In an era marked by geopolitical polarization, transnational conflicts, wars, violent extremism, and the rapid circulation of ideological movements, questions of social cohesion and peacebuilding have become increasingly important across diverse societies. While peacebuilding has traditionally been associated with political agreements, institutional reforms, and conflict resolution mechanisms, contemporary scholarship recognizes that sustainable peace also depends upon shared narratives, collective identities, and symbolic frameworks that enable communities to imagine coexistence despite differences (Galtung, 1969; Lederach, 1997). Communities do not merely live within political systems; they also inhabit stories that provide meaning, continuity, and belonging. These stories often shape how groups understand themselves, their relationship with others, and their place within larger historical processes.

Within this context, religious narratives occupy a particularly significant role. Religious traditions provide not only theological doctrines but also symbolic resources through which communities interpret social realities. Such resources may function as mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, reconciliation, or integration depending on how they are understood and mobilized. Scholars of religion and identity have long observed that narratives concerning origins, ancestry, and sacred history often serve as powerful tools for constructing collective identities (Anderson, 2006; Ricoeur, 1984). In many cases, the social significance of these narratives does not depend on their historical verifiability. Rather, their influence derives from their capacity to create shared meanings and to position communities within broader moral and civilizational frameworks.

Among the most influential origin narratives in world history are those associated with the Abrahamic traditions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each trace important aspects of their religious heritage to Abraham, who occupies a central place as a patriarchal figure and a symbol of faith. Abrahamic genealogies have often served

as foundations for both solidarity and differentiation, creating narratives of belonging while simultaneously establishing boundaries between communities (Firestone, 1990). In much of the Abrahamic tradition, public attention has tended to focus on the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael. These two genealogical lines have become deeply embedded within theological, historical, and cultural discourses. The Isaac-Ishmael framework has frequently functioned as a symbolic structure through which communities interpret religious identities and historical relationships. Consequently, scholarly discussions of Abrahamic genealogy often revolve around these dominant lineages and their implications for interreligious relations. Yet the broader Abrahamic tradition contains additional genealogical narratives that have received considerably less attention. One such narrative concerns Keturah, who is described in the Book of Genesis as a wife of Abraham after the death of Sarah and as the mother of several of his descendants (Genesis 25:1–6).

Compared with Isaac and Ishmael, Keturah occupies a relatively marginal position in mainstream theological discourse, receiving far less scholarly attention than other Abrahamic lineages. Yet this relative marginality may itself be significant. Because the Keturah narrative has remained less closely associated with dominant theological and geopolitical claims, it offers greater scope for symbolic reinterpretation. Rather than serving as a marker of religious differentiation, Keturah may instead be understood as a genealogical figure whose symbolic potential remains comparatively open and flexible. This flexibility becomes particularly relevant when examining how communities outside the traditional centers of Abrahamic civilization engage with sacred genealogies. Across different regions, local intellectual traditions have often adapted, reinterpreted, and localized broader religious narratives in ways that address specific historical and social circumstances. Religious ideas rarely travel unchanged; they are continually reshaped through encounters with new cultural contexts and social realities. As Geertz (1960) argued, religious systems become meaningful through their integration into local cultural frameworks. Consequently, the significance of a narrative may differ substantially from one society to another, even when the narrative originates from a shared textual tradition.

Southeast Asia provides an especially important context for examining such processes of reinterpretation. The region is characterized by extraordinary religious, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. Throughout its history, Southeast Asia has been shaped by extensive interactions among indigenous traditions, Hindu-Buddhist influences, Islamic networks, Chinese diasporic communities, and Western colonial powers (Reid, 1993). These encounters generated complex forms of cultural accommodation and adaptation, producing societies that frequently emphasize coexistence and negotiated forms of diversity. Although the region has certainly experienced conflict, it has also developed numerous mechanisms for managing pluralism and maintaining social cohesion across highly diverse populations.

Scholars have often noted that Southeast Asian societies have historically demonstrated remarkable capacities for integrating external influences without entirely abandoning local cultural foundations (Lombard, 1990; Reid, 1993). Religious traditions entering the region were not simply imposed upon passive populations. Instead, they were interpreted, translated, and woven into existing social and cultural systems. This process created distinctive forms of religious expression characterized by adaptation, synthesis, and negotiation. Such patterns suggest that symbolic narratives may play an important role in fostering social cohesion by providing shared frameworks that connect local communities to broader civilizational traditions while preserving local identities.

Within this broader context, the Keturah narrative presents an intriguing case for investigation. In certain intellectual, religious, and oral traditions, references to Keturah have occasionally been associated with discussions of identity, ancestry, and the place of Southeast Asian societies within wider Abrahamic history. Whether such associations are historically accurate is not the primary concern of this study. Rather, the present research approaches the Keturah narrative as a symbolic resource whose social significance lies in the meanings attributed to it by communities and intellectual actors. The focus is therefore not on genealogy as biological fact but on genealogy as social imagination. This distinction is important. Social identities are often constructed through narratives that operate symbolically rather than empirically. Anderson (2006) famously argued that nations are “imagined communities,” not because they are fictional, but because their members participate in shared narratives that create a sense of collective belonging. Similarly, Ricoeur (1984) emphasized that identities are formed through narrative processes that provide coherence to individual and collective experiences. From this perspective, the social power of a narrative does not depend solely on historical verification. Instead, narratives acquire significance through their ability to organize meaning, shape perceptions, and foster connections among individuals and groups.

Viewed through this lens, the Keturah narrative may be understood as a symbolic framework that enables alternative forms of identification within the broader Abrahamic imagination. Unlike genealogical narratives strongly associated with particular religious or geopolitical centers, Keturah occupies a comparatively peripheral position. This peripherality may allow the narrative to function as a symbolic space that is less constrained by existing rivalries and historical antagonisms. In other words, the narrative may offer communities a means of imagining inclusion within Abrahamic history without requiring direct identification with dominant genealogical divisions.

Such a possibility is particularly relevant in discussions of peacebuilding. Contemporary peacebuilding scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of cultural and symbolic dimensions of peace. Lederach (1997) argues that sustainable peace emerges not only from institutional arrangements but also from the transformation of relationships and social imaginaries. Peacebuilding therefore involves the creation of narratives that enable communities to envision shared futures despite differences. Similarly, Galtung’s (1969) concept of positive peace emphasizes the importance of social structures and cultural conditions that support harmonious relationships rather than merely the absence of violence.

Within this framework, symbolic narratives can contribute to peacebuilding by expanding the boundaries of belonging and reducing perceptions of irreconcilable difference. Narratives that provide inclusive frameworks of identity may strengthen social cohesion by encouraging communities to view themselves as participants in broader moral and historical communities. The Keturah narrative may be significant precisely because it has the potential

to function as such an inclusive framework. As a symbolic resource, it may offer a way of imagining connections that transcend dominant categories while avoiding direct involvement in existing civilizational rivalries.

The concept of social cohesion is likewise relevant to this discussion. Social cohesion generally refers to the capacity of a society to maintain cooperative relationships, mutual trust, and a sense of shared belonging among diverse groups (Chan et al., 2006). In plural societies, social cohesion depends not only on formal institutions but also on symbolic structures that support collective identification. Shared narratives often play a crucial role in this process by providing common points of reference through which individuals interpret their relationships with others. Consequently, examining the symbolic functions of narratives can contribute to a deeper understanding of how cohesion is constructed and maintained within diverse societies.

Despite extensive scholarship on peacebuilding, social cohesion, religious identity, and Southeast Asian societies, relatively little attention has been devoted to the symbolic role of the Keturah narrative. Existing studies have largely focused on dominant Abrahamic genealogies, interreligious relations, or historical processes of religious transmission. The potential significance of marginal genealogical narratives as resources for social cohesion and peacebuilding remains underexplored. This gap is particularly notable given the increasing scholarly interest in the role of narratives, memory, and symbolic systems in shaping collective identities and social relationships. Recent scholarship on symbolic kinship suggests that genealogical narratives need not function as claims of biological descent. Rather, they operate as symbolic systems through which communities construct perceived relatedness, shared belonging, and moral obligations across social boundaries. From this perspective, Keturah may be understood not primarily as a genealogical ancestor but as a symbolic kinship narrative capable of fostering inclusive identities that strengthen social cohesion and ultimately contribute to peacebuilding.

The present study addresses the following research question: What symbolic meanings within the Keturah narrative may contribute to identity construction, social cohesion, and peacebuilding in Southeast Asia? Rather than examining the historical validity of genealogical claims, the study explores how the symbolic meanings embedded in the Keturah narrative have been interpreted by historians and religious scholars, and how these interpretations may provide an inclusive conceptual framework for understanding shared identity, intergroup connectedness, and peaceful coexistence within the culturally and religiously diverse societies of Southeast Asia.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the Keturah narrative as a symbolic resource for social cohesion and peacebuilding within Southeast Asia. Rather than evaluating claims of historical descent, the study investigates how the narrative may function within processes of identity construction, social integration, and collective meaning-making. By focusing on symbolic function rather than genealogical validity, the research contributes to broader discussions concerning the role of religious narratives in shaping social imaginaries and supporting peaceful coexistence. Ultimately, this study argues that the significance of the Keturah narrative lies not in its capacity to establish biological ancestry but in its potential to provide an inclusive symbolic framework through which communities can imagine belonging, connection, and coexistence. In a period marked by fragmentation and polarization, understanding how such narratives operate may offer valuable insights into the cultural dimensions of social cohesion and peacebuilding in Southeast Asia.

2. Keturah in the Biblical Narrative

Keturah occupies a brief but genealogically significant place within the Abrahamic tradition. She appears in only a handful of biblical passages, yet her presence has drawn considerable scholarly attention because of her place within the broader narrative of Abraham as patriarch of multiple nations. Unlike Sarah and Hagar, whose stories receive extensive theological and literary development throughout Genesis, Keturah shows up mainly in the genealogical account that follows Sarah's death - and many biblical scholars caution against reading that brevity as a sign of insignificance: Keturah completes the Abraham cycle and reinforces the biblical portrayal of Abraham as ancestor of numerous peoples (Hamilton, 1995; Sarna, 1989).

The core biblical account is Genesis 25:1-6, which records that after Sarah's death, Abraham took Keturah as his wife. Six sons are attributed to the union - Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah - along with several additional tribal groups descended from them (Genesis 25:1-4). Isaac remained Abraham's primary heir and inherited the covenantal promise established earlier in Genesis; Abraham nonetheless gave gifts to Keturah's sons before sending them eastward, away from Isaac (Genesis 25:5-6). Scholars generally read this geographical separation not as a rejection of Keturah's descendants but as a narrative device preserving Isaac's unique covenantal role while still acknowledging Abraham's broader paternal relationship to other peoples (Wenham, 1994; Westermann, 1985).

Where this genealogy sits in the text is also telling: it appears immediately before the account of Abraham's death, and many commentators read that placement as deliberate - Genesis closing Abraham's life by pointing to the fulfillment of God's promise that he would become "the father of many nations" (Genesis 17:4-5). On this reading, Keturah's descendants represent a real dimension of Abraham's legacy beyond the covenant line running through Isaac. Sarna (1989) argues that this concluding genealogy shows divine promises about Abraham's fruitfulness extending well past the immediate covenant community, feeding into the emergence of multiple neighboring peoples across the ancient Near East.

Keturah's precise social status has also generated debate. Genesis 25:1 calls her Abraham's wife (*ishshah*), while Chronicles 1:32-33 calls her his concubine; some scholars read the Chronicler's version as a later interpretive move meant to preserve Sarah's exclusive status as Abraham's principal wife, while others argue "wife" and "concubine" simply reflected overlapping legal or social categories in the patriarchal period, not mutually exclusive ones (Hamilton, 1995; Wenham, 1994). Jewish exegetical traditions add another layer of disagreement. Some rabbinic commentators identified Keturah with Hagar, suggesting Abraham remarried her after Sarah's death; most modern biblical scholarship treats Keturah as a distinct figure, since the text introduces her independently without ever equating the two women (Alter, 1996; Sarna, 1989).

Scholars have also looked at the ethnographic weight of Keturah's descendants. Several names tied to her lineage - Midian, Sheba, Dedan among them - later appear throughout the Hebrew Bible as tribes of northwestern Arabia and the surrounding desert regions, and archaeological and historical research broadly supports reading

these genealogies less as biological family records than as literary representations of political, geographical, and cultural relationships among neighboring peoples (Knauf, 1992; Westermann, 1985). Ancient Near Eastern genealogies typically organized complex networks of tribes and ethnic communities within a shared ancestral framework, expressing perceived affinity rather than documenting verifiable biological descent. Many historians therefore read Keturah's genealogy primarily as a symbolic map of intergroup relationships rather than a literal historical record.

That symbolic reading matters for how we think about the narrative's continuing relevance. The genealogy does more than extend Abraham's family tree; it illustrates an ancient literary strategy for imagining diversity within a shared ancestral frame – Abraham as patriarch of multiple peoples whose subsequent histories diverge while still sharing a common point of origin. The narrative holds difference and relatedness together, preserving distinct identities without denying shared origins. Brueggemann (1982) reads the Abraham narratives as consistently negotiating the tension between election and universality, affirming both the particular covenant with Israel and God's broader relationship with surrounding nations – Keturah, in this frame, sits as a literary bridge between covenantal particularity and the wider human community descended from Abraham.

Most of the scholarship on Keturah, though, stays close to textual, historical, and genealogical questions. Comparatively little of it asks what her narrative might mean beyond the ancient Near Eastern context: how the symbolic content of this genealogy might speak to contemporary discussions of collective identity, social cohesion, and peacebuilding, particularly in culturally plural societies like those of Southeast Asia. That is the gap this study takes up.

3. Historical and Scholarly Interpretations of Keturah

The biblical account of Keturah is short, but its interpretation has produced a wide range of scholarly debate across Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and historical traditions. Scholars have mostly worked through three related questions rather than focusing on her individually: who was Keturah, what historical function did her genealogy serve, and why did the biblical authors fold her descendants into the Abrahamic tradition? These questions open onto larger debates about genealogy, ethnicity, and collective memory in the ancient Near East.

Within Jewish scholarship, one long-running debate is whether Keturah was a distinct individual or another name for Hagar. Rabbinic literature – *Genesis Rabbah* and later medieval commentators such as Rashi – proposed that Hagar returned to Abraham after Sarah's death under the name Keturah, a reading that preserved Abraham's marital history while emphasizing repentance and reconciliation within the household (Sarna, 1989). Most contemporary biblical scholars reject the identification, arguing that Genesis introduces Keturah as a new character with no textual evidence linking her to Hagar. Alter (1996) makes the point simply: if the author had meant readers to see Keturah as Hagar, the text would likely have said so, rather than introducing her independently after Sarah's death.

Historical-critical scholarship has instead focused on the genealogical function of the narrative. Rather than treating Genesis 25 as straightforward history, many scholars place it within the Hebrew Bible's broader ethnographic tradition, where genealogies often served as ways of organizing relationships among tribes, kingdoms, and neighboring peoples (Van Seters, 1975; Hendel, 2013). Descent, in this context, does not necessarily mean biological ancestry; it can function as a symbolic language for political alliance, geographic proximity, cultural contact, or perceived historical affinity. On this reading, Keturah's descendants – Midian, Sheba, Dedan, and other Arabian tribes – are widely understood as representing populations of northwestern Arabia and its surrounding regions during the first millennium BCE (Knauf, 1992). This fits a broader pattern in biblical genealogy generally. Wilson (1977) describes genealogical narratives as social maps that define relationships among communities rather than literal family histories: genealogy establishes boundaries, legitimizes identities, and situates groups within a meaningful historical frame. Keturah's descendants, from this angle, function less as the biological offspring of one historical woman than as narrative stand-ins for peoples connected to Israel through a shared Abrahamic ancestry – kinship language of this kind was common across the ancient Near East as a way of explaining complicated political and cultural relationships.

Archaeology has taken an interest in this too. Several of the names in Genesis 25 – Midian, Sheba, Dedan in particular – correspond to tribal confederations and commercial centers that show up independently in biblical, Assyrian, and Arabian historical records, and evidence suggests these groups were active participants in long-distance trade networks linking southern Arabia, the Levant, and Mesopotamia during the Iron Age (Kitchen, 2003). That evidence cannot confirm Keturah's own historical existence, but it does support the idea that the genealogy reflects real knowledge of populations on the Arabian Peninsula. Knauf (1992) makes a related point: biblical genealogies often preserve memories of regional relationships even where the literary presentation stays theological rather than historiographical.

Islamic scholarship comes at Keturah from a different angle. The Qur'an does not mention her by name, but later Islamic historical writing recognizes Abraham as ancestor to peoples well beyond the line of Isaac and Ishmael; historians such as al-Ṭabarī drew on biblical and extra-biblical material (*Isrāʾīliyyāt*) in their broader accounts of Abraham's descendants, though Keturah plays a minor role next to Sarah and Hagar (Firestone, 1990). Islamic scholarship has, correspondingly, given her far less attention than Ishmael, whose lineage is central to Islamic understandings of Abrahamic ancestry. Even so, Firestone (1990) argues that the wider Abrahamic tradition consistently frames Abraham as a patriarch whose descendants span diverse ethnic and geographic communities – an image of plurality rather than exclusivity.

More recent scholarship reads these genealogies through the lens of collective memory rather than historical reconstruction alone. Levenson (2012) argues that biblical genealogies are best understood as narratives through which communities remember themselves, work out their origins, and define their relationships to neighboring peoples; Hendel (2013) makes a similar case, that genealogical traditions function as cultural memory, giving societies symbolic frameworks that organize both historical experience and social identity. Under this reading, Keturah matters less for establishing biological descent than for expressing a remembered relationship among communities sharing an Abrahamic horizon. This shift, from historical verification toward symbolic interpretation,

has become influential in biblical studies generally. Instead of asking whether Keturah's genealogy is historically accurate, scholars increasingly ask what social function the narrative served for the communities that preserved it. Smith (2001) argues that biblical narratives build identity not through objective historical description but through symbolic representations that create shared understandings of belonging, difference, and continuity across generations. Genealogy, on this account, becomes an instrument of social imagination - a way of holding diversity and relatedness together within one narrative frame.

Even so, existing scholarship stays largely within historical, theological, or philological analysis. Most studies treat Keturah as a figure within the Abraham cycle, an ethnographic tradition, or the historical geography of Arabia; almost none asks what her genealogy might mean for symbolic identity, intercultural coexistence, or peacebuilding, and virtually none considers how those symbolic meanings might bear on social cohesion in religiously and culturally plural societies such as those of Southeast Asia. Given how much attention shared narratives, collective memory, and symbolic kinship have received elsewhere as forces shaping intergroup relations, this is a notable gap, and the one this study sets out to address - moving from questions of historical origin toward the symbolic meanings of the Keturah narrative as a possible resource for identity construction and peacebuilding in contemporary Southeast Asia.

4. Keturah as a Genealogical and Symbolic Figure

The discussion so far points toward a broader interpretive shift: contemporary scholarship increasingly treats biblical genealogies as symbolic constructions rather than literal historical records. That shift is the foundation for reconsidering Keturah beyond questions of ancestry. The more useful scholarly question is not whether communities can trace a historical lineage back to Keturah, but what symbolic meanings her narrative carries and how those meanings might shape collective identity. In that sense, Keturah's story is an example of symbolic kinship: a narrative framework through which diverse communities imagine relatedness without needing demonstrable biological descent.

Genealogical narratives have long served societies as a way of organizing collective memory and defining social relationships. Anthropological and historical scholarship shows fairly consistently that genealogy is not merely a record of biological succession - it is a cultural language through which communities explain origins, establish legitimacy, and negotiate relationships with others (Assmann, 2011; Wilson, 1977). These narratives let groups locate themselves within a broader historical continuum while distinguishing themselves from neighbors; genealogy's significance lies less in biological accuracy than in its capacity to give collective existence a coherent symbolic frame.

Keturah occupies a distinctive spot within this picture. Sarah and Hagar's stories became tightly bound to the covenantal identities of Israel and the Arab-Islamic tradition, respectively, while Keturah's descendants instead represent a wider constellation of peoples situated beyond the principal covenantal line. Genesis 25 depicts Abraham as common ancestor to multiple communities whose later histories diverged geographically and culturally. Rather than emphasizing exclusivity, the narrative holds diversity and common origin together - difference, here, reads not as separation from Abraham but as variation within a broader familial horizon.

This lines up with contemporary theories of symbolic ethnicity and collective identity. Gans (1979) describes symbolic ethnicity as shared cultural symbols that give people a sense of belonging even without continuous social or biological connection, and collective identities more broadly are built through shared narratives, memories, and symbols that let individuals and communities imagine themselves as part of something larger (Hall, 1996). Identity is not fixed by objective ancestry; it is continually produced through cultural interpretation and shared storytelling. Keturah's genealogy is a useful illustration of how symbolic ancestry can serve as a resource for building inclusive identities rather than rigid biological categories.

Shared ancestry, however, does not automatically generate symbolic kinship. Rather, symbolic kinship emerges through a process of social interpretation in which narratives of common ancestry foster a shared social identity and a perception of relatedness among individuals and groups. Social identity theory suggests that collective identities are constructed not solely through objective ancestry but through shared meanings, narratives, and symbolic representations that define who belongs within a broader social community (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Brewer, 1999). When communities perceive themselves as sharing a common ancestral narrative, this perceived relatedness may strengthen a superordinate sense of belonging without eliminating existing religious or cultural identities. Symbolic kinship therefore represents a socially constructed extension of shared ancestry, transforming genealogical memory into an inclusive identity capable of connecting otherwise distinct communities.

The literature on nationalism and collective imagination reinforces this reading. Anderson's (1983) idea of imagined communities holds that large communities cohere not because every member knows every other member personally, but because they share in narratives that produce an imagined sense of connectedness. Anderson developed this in relation to modern nations, but similar mechanisms operate within religious traditions: shared genealogies build symbolic relationships among geographically scattered populations by giving them a common narrative of origin. On this framework, Keturah's significance is not about proving descent - it is about offering an imaginative language through which multiple communities can recognize a shared Abrahamic heritage while keeping their own cultural identities distinct.

Memory studies point in the same direction: genealogical narratives function as a form of cultural memory. Assmann (2011) argues that cultural memory preserves foundational narratives that let societies maintain continuity across generations, not by simply transmitting historical information but by shaping collective self-understanding around meaningful origins and shared reference points. Ricoeur (2004) makes a related argument - that collective memory is inherently interpretive, letting communities reconstruct the past in ways that support present identities and future aspirations. Keturah, under this view, is not merely a historical figure but a symbolic memory, a site where ideas of common ancestry, coexistence, and interconnectedness keep getting reinterpreted.

These symbolic readings connect directly to discussions of social cohesion. Contemporary theory generally defines social cohesion as a society's capacity to sustain trust, cooperation, inclusion, and a shared sense of belonging despite cultural, ethnic, or religious diversity (Chan et al., 2006; OECD, 2011). Cohesive societies do not

require uniformity; they sustain relationships across difference while preserving multiple identities. Symbolic narratives often play a central role here because they provide common reference points that cut across political or ethnic boundaries, and shared narratives contribute to what Putnam (2000) calls bridging social capital, strengthening ties among groups that might otherwise stay socially distant.

Within peacebuilding scholarship, symbolic narratives are increasingly seen as important cultural resources for reconciliation and coexistence. Lederach (1997) argues that sustainable peace needs more than institutional agreement; it depends on transforming relationships and building shared meanings capable of bridging historical divisions. Bar-Tal (2013) shows that collective narratives shape intergroup perception by influencing beliefs about identity, legitimacy, and belonging - narratives that emphasize common origin or shared humanity can soften the rigid in-group/out-group distinctions that so often feed social polarization.

Read through these lenses, Keturah's narrative offers a symbolic framework distinct from readings that emphasize exclusive descent or theological competition. It highlights Abraham as progenitor of multiple peoples whose diversity coexists with a common genealogical origin, a reading that does not require treating the genealogy as historical fact. Its significance instead lies in its symbolic capacity to describe a model of relatedness that accommodates plurality without erasing difference - an idea that fits comfortably within contemporary peacebuilding approaches built around inclusive identity, shared belonging, and recognition across diversity.

Beyond strengthening social cohesion, symbolic narratives may also contribute to peacebuilding. Contemporary peacebuilding scholarship increasingly recognizes that sustainable peace depends not only on political institutions but also on shared meanings, inclusive identities, and symbolic resources that transform intergroup relationships (Lederach, 1997; Bar-Tal, 2013). Symbolic kinship therefore provides a potential cultural mechanism through which shared ancestry may contribute not only to social cohesion but also to broader peacebuilding processes.

Existing scholarship, though, has rarely put the Keturah narrative in conversation with either social cohesion or peacebuilding as fields. Biblical scholarship has stayed largely within textual criticism, historical reconstruction, and theological interpretation; peacebuilding research has focused mostly on institutional, political, or psychological processes. What gets lost between these two literatures is the potential of genealogical narratives as symbolic resources for inclusive identity, and this study tries to bridge that gap - examining how the symbolic meanings in the Keturah narrative might contribute to identity construction, social cohesion, and peacebuilding in Southeast Asia, and shifting the question from historical descent toward the broader social functions shared narratives can perform in culturally diverse societies.

5. Contemporary Relevance for Southeast Asia: Keturah as an Inclusive Symbolic Narrative

The Keturah narrative has mostly stayed within biblical studies, and its broader symbolic implications have gotten little attention in contemporary peacebuilding scholarship. Existing work has focused on textual interpretation, historical geography, or the genealogy of Abraham's descendants, with little consideration of how the narrative might function as a symbolic resource for building inclusive identity within culturally diverse societies. That gap matters especially in Southeast Asia, where religious plurality, ethnic diversity, and competing historical narratives shape both opportunities for cooperation and sources of social tension.

Southeast Asia is one of the world's most religiously and culturally diverse regions. Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and numerous indigenous traditions coexist within a complex history of migration, trade, colonialism, and cultural exchange, and that diversity has produced rich traditions of coexistence but also periodic communal conflict, religious polarization, identity politics, and social fragmentation (Acharya, 2017; Hefner, 2010). Peacebuilding scholars increasingly stress that sustainable cohesion needs more than effective institutions - it needs shared symbolic resources that nurture trust, mutual recognition, and a sense of common belonging across diverse communities (Lederach, 1997; OECD, 2011).

Beyond its remarkable diversity, Southeast Asia has developed distinctive traditions of managing pluralism through both institutional and cultural approaches. At the regional level, ASEAN has consistently emphasized dialogue, consensus, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence as core principles of regional cooperation. At the national level, countries such as Indonesia have promoted *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) as a foundational principle for maintaining social cohesion across religious and ethnic differences, while other Southeast Asian societies have similarly cultivated traditions of multicultural accommodation and interfaith coexistence. These regional experiences suggest that peacebuilding in Southeast Asia has historically depended not only on formal political institutions but also on shared cultural values and inclusive narratives that reinforce trust, mutual recognition, and collective belonging. Within this context, the Keturah narrative is proposed not as a replacement for existing peacebuilding approaches, but as a complementary symbolic resource that may further strengthen interreligious dialogue and social cohesion across diverse communities.

The Keturah narrative offers an interesting possibility here. Unlike the better-known Sarah-Isaac or Hagar-Ishmael narratives, which have often been read within competing covenantal or religious frameworks, Keturah occupies a comparatively uncontested position in the broader Abrahamic tradition: her descendants are acknowledged in the text without becoming central figures in later theological disputes. As a result, her genealogy emphasizes Abraham's wider legacy rather than exclusive covenantal succession - a relative absence of contestation that lets the narrative be read less as a claim of religious superiority and more as an affirmation of plurality within a shared ancestral origin.

To be clear, this study does not argue that Southeast Asian populations are historically descended from Keturah, nor does it attempt to validate genealogical claims about ethnic origin; those questions sit outside its scope and remain contested among historians. Instead it takes a symbolic approach, on the premise that narratives shape social reality regardless of whether they can be historically verified. As Ricoeur (2004) argues, narratives give communities interpretive structures for building meaning, identity, and collective memory. Keturah's significance, on this reading, lies not in biological ancestry but in her symbolic capacity to articulate an inclusive vision of interconnectedness across diversity.

This fits well with contemporary theories of social identity complexity and inclusive identity formation. Brewer (2008) argues that individuals and communities typically hold multiple, overlapping identities that need not conflict with one another, and Gaertner and Dovidio's (2000) Common Ingroup Identity Model shows that perceiving a shared identity can reduce intergroup prejudice by encouraging people to see former out-groups as part of a broader collective. Inclusive identities of this kind do not eliminate cultural or religious distinction; they add a superordinate frame within which diversity can coexist. Keturah's narrative can be read as a symbolic representation of exactly this process: multiple communities keeping their distinct identities while recognizing a shared genealogical horizon through Abraham.

Symbolic frameworks like this matter for peacebuilding efforts that try to transform adversarial relationships without erasing cultural diversity. Lederach (1997) argues that peacebuilding requires narratives capable of transcending polarized identities while still respecting historical difference, and Bar-Tal (2013) shows that collective narratives shape intergroup attitudes by influencing perceptions of legitimacy, trust, and common destiny. Narratives that stress shared origin can function as cultural resources for dialogue, empathy, and recognition across social boundaries - and within this framework, Keturah's genealogy offers a language of plurality rather than exclusion, one that stresses coexistence among communities linked by a common ancestral story.

Southeast Asia is a fitting setting for exploring this. Religious coexistence in the region has historically rested on cultural accommodation, shared public space, and overlapping identity rather than strict communal separation (Hefner, 2010). Indonesia's national philosophy of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity"), Malaysia's multicultural constitutional framework, and Singapore's emphasis on multiracial harmony all reflect institutional efforts to build cohesion across diversity, but these arrangements need continual reinforcement through cultural narratives that build belonging beyond legal or political structure. Symbolic narratives rooted in widely recognized religious traditions can complement existing peacebuilding strategies by adding cultural resources for dialogue and mutual understanding.

Keturah's narrative, then, is not a historical explanation for Southeast Asian identity but a symbolic bridge: an invitation to imagine coexistence through shared humanity rather than exclusive lineage. Where some narratives reinforce a binary between insiders and outsiders, Keturah's genealogy widens the Abrahamic family, acknowledging multiple descendants whose diversity stays connected through a common point of origin. That orientation lines up closely with contemporary understandings of social cohesion, which stress inclusion, reciprocity, trust, and recognition across difference rather than cultural uniformity (Chan et al., 2006; OECD, 2011).

The present study's contribution, then, is to move past the historical and theological debates that have dominated discussion of Keturah - her identity, marital status, genealogical descendants, historical place within the Abraham cycle - toward reading her as an inclusive symbolic narrative that can enrich interdisciplinary discussion of collective identity, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. By drawing together historians' and religious scholars' interpretations, it shows how a relatively marginal genealogical tradition can offer conceptual resources for imagining coexistence in one of the world's most culturally diverse regions - a contribution to Abrahamic studies, but also to the broader literature on symbolic narrative, collective memory, and culturally grounded peacebuilding.

6. Method

This study used a qualitative literature review complemented by expert interviews to examine the symbolic meanings of the Keturah narrative and its possible contribution to social cohesion and peacebuilding in Southeast Asia. The experts consulted were two anthropologists and three religious scholars. Rather than testing the historical validity of genealogical claims, the study looked at how Keturah has been interpreted across historical and religious scholarship, and how those interpretations might offer an inclusive symbolic framework for understanding identity, belonging, and peaceful coexistence.

The literature review drew on academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, biblical commentaries, and historical studies addressing Keturah, Abrahamic genealogies, symbolic kinship, collective memory, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. Sources were identified through academic databases and university library resources using the keywords *Keturah*, *Abrahamic genealogy*, *symbolic kinship*, *collective identity*, *social cohesion*, and *peacebuilding*, and the literature was analyzed thematically, allowing recurrent concepts and symbolic meanings to be identified, compared, and synthesized into broader conceptual themes. This approach suits interdisciplinary scholarship well, since it lets conceptual relationships surface across historical, religious, and social science literature.

To complement the documentary analysis, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with three religious scholars, one from each Abrahamic tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Participants were selected purposively for their recognized expertise in Abrahamic scripture, religious history, or interfaith dialogue. The interviews explored how each participant interpreted the Keturah narrative, its symbolic meanings, and its perceived relevance for interreligious understanding, social cohesion, and peacebuilding in plural societies - semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow flexibility while still keeping comparable themes across participants, a standard approach in qualitative research.

Data from the literature review and the interviews were analyzed through an iterative thematic process. Initial codes were developed inductively from the literature and the interview transcripts, then grouped into higher-order themes, with particular attention to shared ancestry, symbolic kinship, inclusive identity, collective memory, belonging, and peaceful coexistence. Findings from the two sources were compared through data triangulation to strengthen interpretive credibility and identify where perspectives on Keturah's symbolic significance converged or diverged. The analysis stayed interpretive rather than historical throughout, focused on the social meanings attached to the narrative rather than on establishing historical or genealogical accuracy.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1. Reinterpreting Keturah: From Genealogical Narrative to Shared Ancestry

The literature and the expert interviews together suggest that Keturah's significance goes beyond questions of historical lineage or biological descent. Classical Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions have long debated the genealogical status of Abraham's descendants, but the present findings point toward reading Keturah more as a symbolic narrative - one through which communities interpret shared origins, collective memory, and intergroup relationships. Rather than trying to verify Keturah's historical descendants, the evidence consistently points toward the narrative's symbolic capacity to offer an inclusive framework for understanding common ancestry across diverse communities.

Across the Abrahamic traditions, genealogy does considerably more work than biological documentation. It functions as a cultural text that preserves collective memory, establishes social identity, and communicates moral relationships between communities (Assmann, 2011; Wilson, 1977). Within that tradition, Keturah sits differently than Isaac or Ishmael, whose genealogies have often become focal points of theological and historical contestation; because her narrative carries relatively little doctrinal weight, contemporary interpretation increasingly treats Keturah less as an object of historical dispute and more as a narrative capable of generating meaning that transcends literal ancestry.

The expert interviews reflected this consistently. Rather than pressing for historical verification, participants pointed to the broader theological message in the narrative - that Keturah's importance lies not in identifying biological descendants but in recognizing Abraham's broader legacy as ancestor to multiple peoples. That shifts the analytical focus from genealogical exclusivity toward a more inclusive understanding of shared human origin. Instead of treating Keturah as a competing genealogical claim, participants stressed that her narrative illustrates the expansive scope of Abraham's descendants and the universal dimensions of God's covenantal purposes, reinforcing the idea that genealogical narratives can function symbolically by broadening, rather than narrowing, communal identity. On this reading, diversity itself sits within a common ancestral horizon rather than outside it. The Muslim interviewee, while noting Keturah's modest place in Islamic tradition, stressed that the Qur'anic tradition consistently portrays Abraham (Ibrahim) as patriarch of numerous peoples whose legacy crosses ethnic boundaries - a view that resonates with broader Islamic understandings of humanity's shared origin and the Qur'anic emphasis on diversity as part of divine creation rather than a basis for division (Qur'an 49:13). Keturah's narrative, then, need not compete with Isaac's or Ishmael's; it can instead be read as one part of Abraham's wider symbolic legacy.

Taken together, these findings show a striking convergence across the three Abrahamic traditions. The three interviewees differed in theological emphasis, but each read Keturah primarily through a lens of inclusiveness rather than exclusivity, and that convergence is worth noting: it suggests the narrative has real interpretive flexibility, capable of supporting dialogue across religious traditions. Rather than reinforcing competing claims of descent, Keturah works as a reminder that multiple communities can acknowledge a common ancestral horizon while keeping their own theological identities intact.

The literature backs up this reading. Scholars of cultural memory argue that genealogical narratives often work as symbolic resources for constructing collective belonging rather than as literal historical record (Assmann, 2011). Wilson (1977) makes a similar case: genealogies should be read as social narratives that organize relationships and identity within communities. Seen this way, Keturah's significance lies less in settling who biologically descended from Abraham than in showing how shared ancestry can become a symbolic framework for recognizing interconnection among diverse peoples.

It is worth being clear that these findings do not attempt to establish historical or genetic relationships between contemporary Southeast Asian populations and Keturah's descendants; such claims remain historically uncertain and fall outside this study's scope. What the analysis does show is that Keturah's narrative carries symbolic value that can be mobilized independently of biological descent - its significance lies in its capacity to foster an understanding of common ancestry as shared cultural imagination rather than verifiable historical fact. This is the first major theme to emerge from the analysis: Keturah reinterpreted from genealogical figure to symbolic representation of shared ancestry, and the foundation for the next stage of analysis, which looks at how shared ancestry can develop into the symbolic kinship that fosters inclusive identity across diverse religious and cultural communities.

"We, the people of Southeast Asia, are believed to share a common ancestral mother: Keturah, the third wife of the Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim). According to some historical and traditional accounts, Keturah's descendants were regarded as possessing noble character and strong moral values. Because of this, it is said that they did not require the succession of many prophets or revealed scriptures to reform or guide their conduct. This stands in contrast to the descendants of Sarah and Hagar, whose lineages are often portrayed in religious history as experiencing repeated conflicts and divisions. In these traditions, we are considered descendants of Keturah, whose lineage is associated with virtue, wisdom, and moral integrity." (A historian and prominent religious scholar)

7.2. Keturah as Symbolic Kinship: From Shared Ancestry to Inclusive Identity

The first theme established Keturah as a symbolic representation of shared ancestry rather than a strictly genealogical figure. The second builds on that: shared ancestry takes on broader social significance once it is read as symbolic kinship. Unlike biological or genealogical relationship, symbolic kinship refers to a socially constructed sense of relatedness - one through which communities recognize common belonging, shared moral obligation, and mutual respect while still holding onto distinct religious, ethnic, or cultural identities. Within this framework, Keturah's narrative functions less as historical genealogy than as a symbolic cultural resource for building inclusive identity across diverse communities.

The literature consistently points toward genealogies performing symbolic rather than biological functions. Assmann (2011) argues that cultural memory lets communities preserve narratives that shape collective identity independently of historical verification; Wilson (1977) makes a similar point, that genealogical traditions organize

social relationships by expressing shared origin and communal belonging, not simply by documenting descent. Keturah's narrative, on this view, matters not because it establishes verifiable lineage but because it offers a symbolic language through which different communities can recognize one another as part of a broader Abrahamic heritage.

This symbolic reading came through consistently in the expert interviews. Read as an affirmation of symbolic relatedness rather than as evidence for biological descent, participants' emphasis on Abraham's wider legacy suggests that genealogical narratives can encourage communities to see themselves as connected within a common historical and moral horizon, even while their theological traditions stay distinct. They also stressed that Keturah's significance lies in broadening how Abraham's descendants get understood, beyond exclusive covenantal interpretation. This is an important feature of symbolic kinship: it does not replace existing religious identity but adds a higher-order framework through which diversity becomes compatible with shared belonging. It resonates with the Common Ingroup Identity Model, which holds that intergroup prejudice can lessen once different groups start to see themselves as members of a more inclusive social category (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Abraham, in the present study, works as that superordinate identity, with Keturah representing one narrative through which shared identity gets articulated. The Muslim scholar likewise described Abraham as a unifying rather than dividing figure, reinforcing the idea that symbolic kinship does not require doctrinal uniformity: it recognizes instead that distinct religious communities can hold onto theological difference while still acknowledging shared historical narratives that encourage mutual respect. That kind of symbolic recognition matters especially in plural societies, where peaceful coexistence depends less on agreement than on a willingness to see others as legitimate members of a broader moral community.

These findings extend previous scholarship by proposing symbolic kinship as the central mechanism linking genealogy with social identity. Existing studies have mostly read Keturah through historical, biblical, or theological lenses (e.g., Firestone, 1990; Midrashic traditions), with comparatively little attention to her sociological significance, and the synthesis offered here - that Keturah can function as a symbolic kinship narrative capable of turning genealogical memory into inclusive social identity - is the study's central theoretical contribution.

To be clear, symbolic kinship should not be read as an attempt to dissolve theological distinction or manufacture a homogenized Abrahamic identity. It offers instead a symbolic framework within which multiple identities stay intact while becoming embedded in a broader narrative of interconnectedness. Brewer's (1999) theory of optimal distinctiveness holds that people seek both uniqueness and belonging at once, and symbolic kinship accommodates both needs, letting communities preserve their distinctive traditions while recognizing shared ancestral narratives that reach past exclusive group boundaries.

The findings also point to practical implications beyond theological discourse. When communities see one another as symbolically related rather than fundamentally unrelated, dialogue, empathy, and cooperation become more likely. Genealogical narratives, then, are not just repositories of collective memory; they are symbolic resources that can reshape intergroup perception. None of this requires certainty about biological descent - it depends instead on communities' willingness to reinterpret inherited narratives as resources for coexistence. The second theme, accordingly, identifies symbolic kinship as the central mechanism through which shared ancestry becomes inclusive identity: not an endpoint in itself, but a sociological bridge linking collective memory to broader processes of trust, cooperation, and intergroup solidarity. The next section turns to how symbolic kinship might contribute to bridging social capital and, through it, social cohesion in plural societies.

"Let people in other parts of the world engage in their conflicts, disputes, or wars, but we in Southeast Asia should not be drawn into them. These are not merely religious conflicts; they also involve disputes over land ownership, territorial claims, inheritance, and competition for natural resources in the Middle East and elsewhere. As Southeast Asians, we do not need to become participants in these wars. According to this perspective, these are conflicts between the descendants of Hagar and the descendants of Sarah. Our role should be to help promote peace and reconciliation, rather than joining the fighting or sending people to fight. We need to understand this historical context so that we do not become caught in a toxic spiral of conflict by taking part in wars that, historically, are not our own. These conflicts have deep historical roots involving struggles for power, wealth, territory, and resources. People in Southeast Asia would be better served by remaining committed to peace rather than becoming entangled in them." (an eminent anthropologist)

7.3. From Symbolic Kinship to Social Cohesion: The Role of Bridging Social Capital

Having established Keturah as a form of symbolic kinship, the analysis turns to the social processes through which such narratives might contribute to peaceful coexistence. The literature and the interviews both suggest that the value of the Keturah narrative lies not in reconstructing historical descent but in fostering a sense of connectedness among communities otherwise separated by religious, ethnic, or cultural boundaries. Symbolic kinship, in this sense, works as a cultural resource capable of generating bridging social capital, which in turn strengthens social cohesion.

Bridging social capital differs from bonding social capital, which reinforces solidarity within homogeneous groups; bridging capital instead describes relationships that connect individuals and communities across existing social boundaries (Putnam, 2000). These cross-cutting relationships build trust, reciprocity, mutual recognition, and cooperation among groups that differ in identity but remain willing to engage constructively with each other. In plural societies, bridging social capital is close to essential - it is the mechanism through which diversity becomes a source of resilience rather than fragmentation.

The present findings suggest that Keturah's narrative supports this bridging function. Because she has never sat at the center of theological contestation, her narrative opens an interpretive space where different Abrahamic communities can acknowledge shared historical memory without needing to agree on doctrine or exclusive covenantal claims. Instead of asking *who are the true descendants of Abraham*, the symbolic reading points toward a different question: *how might diverse communities understand themselves as sharing a broader moral and historical horizon?* That shift showed up consistently across the interviews. Participants stressed that Abraham's significance reaches

beyond the genealogy of any single community: the Christian participant argued that the narrative should be read as emphasizing the inclusiveness of Abraham's legacy rather than exclusive inheritance, and the Muslim scholar likewise read Abraham primarily as a unifying figure whose legacy spans multiple peoples rather than competing lineages.

Though expressed through different theological traditions, these interpretations converge on a common sociological point. None of the participants proposed dissolving religious distinction or downplaying doctrinal difference; each instead described the Keturah narrative as encouraging a recognition of relationships that extend beyond one's own religious community - precisely the disposition associated with bridging social capital, a willingness to build constructive relationships across social boundaries while keeping distinct collective identities intact.

The social cohesion literature supports this reading. Chan et al. (2006) treat social cohesion as a multidimensional process built on trust, shared values, social participation, and a sense of belonging among society's members. The OECD (2011) makes a similar point: socially cohesive societies are marked not by uniformity but by their capacity to sustain cooperation, inclusion, and mutual trust across differences in background and identity. Cohesion, on both accounts, is not achieved by erasing diversity but by strengthening the relationships that let diversity function constructively.

Symbolic kinship, viewed this way, is one possible cultural mechanism for strengthening social cohesion. Genealogical narratives cannot resolve conflict by themselves, nor do they automatically transform social relationships; their contribution lies instead in shaping collective imagination. When communities come to see themselves as symbolically connected through shared ancestral narrative, opportunities for empathy, dialogue, and cooperative engagement become more available. Symbolic kinship, then, functions less as a historical claim than as a narrative resource that expands people's sense of social belonging.

It is worth being modest about what the findings actually show. The claim here is not that the Keturah narrative directly produces social cohesion, but that the narrative contributes to the symbolic conditions under which bridging social capital can develop. As trust, reciprocity, and cross-group interaction strengthen, broader social cohesion becomes more possible - though the relationship is neither deterministic nor linear; it is mediated by how communities interpret and use symbolic narratives within their own social contexts.

This also helps explain why symbolic genealogy still matters in contemporary plural societies. Modern communities are rarely organized around ancient genealogical structures, but symbolic narratives keep shaping perceptions of identity, belonging, and intergroup relations regardless. Keturah's narrative shows how religious traditions can feed not just theological reflection but the kind of civic relationship that supports inclusive societies.

The thematic synthesis, then, identifies bridging social capital as the principal mechanism linking symbolic kinship with social cohesion. Rather than explaining ethnic origin historically, Keturah's narrative operates as a symbolic resource that encourages recognition, trust, and cooperation across social boundaries. These findings set up the final theme, which considers how strengthened social cohesion might feed into broader peacebuilding processes in Southeast Asia.

"Unlike Isaac or Ishmael, Keturah has never become a central figure of theological contestation. Consequently, discussions concerning Keturah are generally less associated with exclusive religious claims." (a religious scholar)

"According to some tradition, we, the descendants of Keturah, are distinct from the descendants of Hagar and Sarah. The lineages of Hagar and Sarah receive far greater attention because they are prominently featured in the sacred scriptures. Keturah, by contrast, is not a central figure in the major theological narratives. She is portrayed as a more secluded and less prominent wife of the Prophet Abraham. [...] The name Keturah is often understood to mean "incense" or "fragrant smoke", the aromatic resin that is burned in spiritual and religious rituals. Incense has long been used in many traditional spiritual practices and indigenous belief systems. From this perspective, Keturah's very name symbolizes spirituality, harmony with nature, and sacred tradition. [...] Those who identify themselves as descendants of Keturah sometimes see a connection between this symbolism and the indigenous cultures of the Nusantara and Southeast Asia. For example, some members of the Baduy community in West Java claim that they are direct descendants of the Prophet Abraham through Keturah. According to this tradition, Keturah journeyed to Southeast Asia, where her descendants established communities that have preserved nature for generations; protecting forests, refraining from unnecessary tree-cutting, and living in harmony with the environment. They regard themselves as preserving the original Abrahamic values of stewardship of nature through the lineage of Keturah." (a public figure, a religious scholar)

7.4. Implications for Peacebuilding in Southeast Asia: Keturah as a Symbolic Narrative for Inclusive Coexistence

Three interconnected themes emerge from the literature and the expert interviews. First, Keturah can be read as a symbolic representation of shared ancestry rather than a historical claim of biological descent. Second, this symbolic understanding opens onto symbolic kinship, through which diverse communities can recognize broader relationships of shared belonging while keeping distinct theological identities. Third, symbolic kinship can contribute to bridging social capital, creating conditions that strengthen social cohesion through trust, reciprocity, and cooperation across social boundaries.

Together, these themes suggest that Keturah's narrative carries significance beyond biblical or theological interpretation. It is not just an ancient genealogical account; it can work as a symbolic cultural resource that supports peacebuilding by encouraging inclusive understandings of identity within plural societies. This reading does not depend on historically verifying genealogical descent, but on the capacity of shared narrative to shape how people perceive intergroup relationships and collective belonging in the present.

This is especially relevant in the Southeast Asian context, where extensive ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity means peaceful coexistence depends not on social uniformity but on communities' ability to sustain mutual respect while keeping their distinct identities. Symbolic narratives that emphasize common humanity can complement existing peacebuilding initiatives here by offering cultural resources for dialogue, empathy, and

collaborative engagement. The expert interviews reflected this consistently: each participant approached Keturah's narrative from a different theological tradition, but none read the genealogy as grounds for exclusivist claims about contemporary populations. All emphasized shared humanity, Abraham's broader legacy, and the value of interpreting genealogical narrative in ways that build constructive relationships across communities.

"What I mean is not that we cannot become agents of peace. On the contrary, I am saying exactly the opposite. Precisely because we have not been drawn into these conflicts, we have a unique opportunity, and perhaps even a responsibility, to become peacemakers in the world. Who are 'we'? We are the people of Southeast Asia. Because we have not been dragged into these long-standing wars, we can offer a fresh perspective. We can serve as descendants of Abraham who help reconcile Abraham's other descendants. Rather than taking sides, we should actively work to promote peace. [...] In Indonesia, this is consistent with the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution, which affirms our commitment to actively contribute to the establishment of world peace. So my point is not that we should ignore wars or remain indifferent to them. Quite the opposite, we should become ambassadors and agents of peace on the global stage. [...] Of course, if we aspire to be peacemakers, we must also maintain peace within our own region. Southeast Asia, and ASEAN in particular, should continue to strengthen harmony and cooperation internally. That is the central point I am trying to make." (a politician, a senior Muslim scholar)

These perspectives do not aim to erase theological difference. They show instead how symbolic narratives can encourage communities to recognize one another within a broader moral horizon, and that recognition matters for peacebuilding because sustainable peace is built not only through political agreement or institutional arrangement but through narratives that promote mutual recognition and trust (Lederach, 1997). The contribution of this study, then, is not to offer Keturah as a historical explanation for the origins of Southeast Asian peoples, nor to suggest that symbolic narratives alone can prevent conflict; it is to show how reinterpreting a relatively underexplored biblical figure can expand contemporary peacebuilding discussion by connecting genealogy, symbolic kinship, and social cohesion within a single conceptual framework. Figure 1 sets out a heuristic pathway for how the Keturah narrative might be read as a symbolic resource linking shared ancestry, symbolic kinship, social cohesion, and peacebuilding.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the significance of the Keturah narrative extends beyond its historical and theological dimensions. Drawing on a thematic synthesis of interdisciplinary literature and expert interviews, the findings suggest that Keturah may be reinterpreted as a symbolic cultural resource that contributes to peacebuilding in religiously plural societies. Rather than emphasizing biological descent, the narrative is understood as a symbolic representation of shared ancestry that may foster symbolic kinship, strengthen bridging social capital, enhance social cohesion, and ultimately support conditions conducive to positive peace.

The principal contribution of this study is the development of a heuristic conceptual framework linking shared ancestry, symbolic kinship, bridging social capital, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. Rather than proposing a deterministic causal model, the framework synthesizes relationships emerging from the literature and expert interpretations into a coherent conceptual pathway. In doing so, the study extends existing scholarship by shifting attention from the historical and theological interpretation of Keturah toward its broader sociological significance as a symbolic narrative capable of encouraging inclusive identities, mutual recognition, trust, and cooperation across religious and cultural boundaries.

The findings have particular relevance for Southeast Asia, where maintaining peaceful coexistence depends upon strengthening relationships across diverse religious and cultural communities. The Keturah narrative is not presented as evidence of historical ancestry, nor as a universal solution to intergroup conflict. Instead, it is proposed as a culturally grounded symbolic resource that may complement existing institutional and policy-based approaches to peacebuilding. More broadly, this study illustrates how underexplored religious narratives can enrich contemporary peacebuilding by providing inclusive symbolic frameworks that strengthen social cohesion while respecting enduring theological and cultural diversity.

Finally, the proposed framework should be understood within the limitations of the present qualitative design. It is derived from thematic synthesis and a small number of expert interviews and therefore represents an interpretive rather than empirically validated model. Future research should examine how symbolic kinship is understood, negotiated, and mobilized across different religious and cultural contexts, and should empirically investigate the proposed relationships through broader qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research. Such work would help assess the applicability and explanatory value of the framework across diverse plural societies.

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