

Negotiating Identity of Indonesian Muslims in Australia

Asep S. Muhtadi, Moch Fakhruroji, Dede Syarif and Aam Abdillah
UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Bandung, Indonesia
moch.fakhruroji@uinsgd.ac.id

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Abstract: This paper seeks to scrutinize the process of identity formation of Indonesian Muslim in their new and different milieu in Australia. Using qualitative method, particularly a case study, focusing on IMCV (Indonesian Muslim Community of Victoria) as object of analysis, this paper argues that identity is dynamic and fluid. The identity is changing due to its new environment and to its relation with other identity. This is clear among Indonesian Muslims living in Australia where an environment was diverse comparing with their home country. As they arrived in new milieu, Indonesian Muslim become a minority group in Australia, thus they are potentially facing the process of identity crisis where they force to negotiate their original identity brought from their homeland towards new diverse milieu in Australia. To deal with it, efforts were conducted to conserve their identity in various negotiation processes which occurred within community and in relation to others community. The efforts within community were implemented in various activities to solidify “the brought original identity”. This includes performing Islamic study groups, organizing sport and cultural festival, celebrating religious and national day, and to some extents in the way they dress up in daily activities like wearing veil and Indonesian Muslims cloth. While implicitly, an efforts directed in responds to outside environment was expressed by their accommodation to the Australian culture which is suitable to the core values of their original identity. Through this negotiation process, Indonesian Muslim living in Australia was identified for their accommodation and toleration to new environment making them as welcomed community among new different social and political milieu.

1 INTRODUCTION

Identity is fluid and dynamic. It is negotiated in reciprocal relations between self and society. Theoretically, it is strongly associated with the symbolic interactionist view that society affects social behaviour through its influence on self (in Ritzer 2005), and was developed in part in order to explain the central views of symbolic interactionism into an empirically testable set of propositions (Stryker and Serpe 1982). Identity theory, however, discards the symbolic interactionist view of society as a relatively undifferentiated, cooperative whole (Stryker and Serpe 1982: 206), arguing instead that society is complexly differentiated but nevertheless organized (Stryker and Serpe 1982:206). This idea of society forms the basis for the central intention on which identity theory is predicated: that identity as a reflection of society, the self should be regarded as a complicated and organized construct.

This theoretical description of identity was shown in the negotiation process of Indonesian Muslim living in Australia which was brought when

they arrived in new environment. The Indonesian Muslim Identity is a reflection of society and at the same time, the environment and the society where they living now, mirrored in their contemporary self identity.

This paper aims to investigate how identity of Indonesian Muslims migrates to Australia as new environment which is differ to their original milieu affected in constructing “a new identity”. To analysis this, we will firstly explore historical *trajectories* of relation of Indonesian Muslim with Australia.

According to Saeed (2003), Islam has entered Australia continent through the sailors from Makassar, an eastern region of the archipelago that was under the reign of the Islamic sultanate. Saeed found the fact that Indonesian Muslims from Makassar had arrived in Australia since the 1750s as exploring to the northern part of Australia to get the catch of sea cucumbers. In this exploration, they interacted with the indigenous Australians.

Contacts between Indonesian and Australian also occur with the *Kupangnese* and Javanese people who were taken as workers in the pearl processing

industry and the planting of raw materials for sugar that lasted since the late 19th century (Saeed, 2003). The arrival of Indonesian to Australia subsequently took place in the 1950s through an Australian government education scholarship scheme to train Indonesians at Australian universities. During this period, several Indonesians came to Australia to teach Bahasa Indonesia. Those who choose to settle in Australia during this period later became the embryo of the birth of the Indonesian Muslim community in Australia.

Nowadays, the population of Muslim in Australia continues to grow, especially as the wave of immigrants from other Middle Eastern and Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Turkey, Bosnia, Bangladesh, Africa and also from Southeast Asia. The diversity of ethnicity and cultural backgrounds of these Muslim immigrants culminates in the Australian Muslims identity. This is why Saeed (2003) identify Australian Muslims as *“a diverse group of people, coming from more than 70 different countries.”*

In the 2001 census, total Muslim population in Australia amounted to 281,572 or about 1.5 percent of Australian total population of 13,629,700 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). Most of Australian Muslim population comes from Lebanon, Turkey, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Bangladesh, and Iran. In addition to immigrant Muslim generations, there is also a new generation of Muslims born in Australia (Muslims Australian-born), which about 36.5% of the total Muslim population in Australia. Therefore statistically, almost half of Australian Muslims aged fewer than 24 are generally dispersed in two large cities, Sydney and Melbourne. In the Sydney area, Muslim communities are in Auburn, Greenacre, Bankstown, Lakemba, and Punchbowl. While for the Melbourne community the Muslim community occupies suburbs such as Meadow Heights, Reservoir, Dallas, Noble Park and Coburg. Some smaller communities can be found in outer areas of the city such as Shepparton located in northern Victoria.

This paper aims to reveal the facts on socio-religious solidarity and identity negotiation as a social process among Indonesia Muslims with fellow Muslims and both Australia public and government. Using qualitative method with a case study, this research was conducted in one of the largest Muslim communities in Australia, the Indonesian Muslim Community of Victoria (IMCV) based in Melbourne.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of identity is available in cross contemporary social sciences from sociology, psychoanalysis through psychology, history and political science. General usage of the term, however, ignores the considerable variability in both its conceptual meanings and its theoretical role. Restricting consideration to sociology and social psychology, variation is still considerable. Among them there are three relatively distinct usages of this concept. First, those who use the term to refer essentially to the culture of a people without distinction between identity and, for example, ethnicity, thus blurring the theoretical point of its introduction.

Second, scholars use the concept of identity to refer to common identification with a collectiveness or social category as in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982). Finally, the third scholars who use the concept with reference to parts of a self composed of the meanings attached by persons to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies and environment.

In general, Identity theory has evolved in two somewhat different, yet robustly related, directions, particularly on the goal to understand and explain how social structures impact self and how self-impact social behaviours.

The first direction is represented by work of Stryker and colleagues (e.g., Stryker 1980; Stryker and Serpe 1982), concentrates on investigating how social structures impact the structure of self and the impact of the latter on social behavior, while the second as founded on the work of Burke and colleagues (Burke and Reitzes 1991; Burke and Stets 1999) concentrates on the internal dynamics of self-processes as these impact social behavior. Thus, in degree, the first neglects internal dynamics of self-processes, the second ways in which external social structures impose on the internal processes.

The process of identity construction occurred when people engage in particular social group for instances religion, community, sport organization etc. Referring to the theoretical frame work as explained earlier, this paper scrutinize the identity formation in religious community such as dakwah community.

Meanwhile, religions are able to bind solidarity and identity among its adherents. However, Annemarie de Waal Malefijt (1968: 290) remarks that the religious function can be seen significantly in their social relationships with the individual or community of its adherents. These functions can be

seen in the relationships it establishes with the family institutions, political organizations, economies, or values contained in other social structures.

As noted by Tischler (1990: 569-570) social solidarity “*emerges from the people’s commitment and conformity to the society’s collective conscience*”. When a strong collective awareness exists among members of the community coupled with the strong commitment amongst them will mechanically form a strong togetherness as well. In this context, religion itself according to its characteristics becomes a force that shapes commitment among fellow believers, thus create group identity. In the view of Donald W. Klopf (1989: 34-35), one of the factors that constitute the community is that individuals who engage in the community hope to find an image of their status. Another reason why a person joins a community is that the reasons for the expected values can be derived from the behavior of serving each other among their community members.

Even in Sociology, the term of community is often explained by a set of people bound to each other by certain similarities and purposes, such as regional equality, hobbies, and interests. As a concept, community is different from society. Ferdinand Tonnies (in Fuchs, 2008: 340) reveals that community (*gemeinschaft*) lies in the awareness of mutual belonging and affirmation of the interdependence among its members, whereas society (*gesellschaft*) is a concept that simply refers to the common goal of the activity.

On the other hand, social interaction can also be seen as an interaction that involves various identities. Sociologically for traditional societies, identity cannot be questioned because it has attached itself to a person when he was born and grows. Perhaps this is caused by the identity itself is often associated with the concept of belonging, which is about what one’s equality with others or what distinguishes one with another. Moreover, fundamentally, identity is also often shown by location and associated with individuality (Weedon, 2004: 1).

Nevertheless, identity discourse becomes very different in the context of modernity where identity becomes more mobile, multiple, personal, tends to change, and can be created. It can also be social and related to self-consciousness that can arise by itself (Kellner 2000: 316). This is in line with the theoretical explained in the first section of this paper which states that identity is something fluid and negotiable. To this idea, the notion of identity crisis

helps to understand the dynamic of particular identity both due to internal and external factors. Term ‘identity crisis’ in this context is seen as part of a broader process of change that breaks away from the central structures and processes of modern society and undermines the framework previously built by the social world. This concept at the same time clarifies the reason why person chooses a friend or to adhere to an organization, association, and so forth. In other words, self-identification process is nothing but the process of self-classification with those who has the same meaning of something. Thus, all human identities are essentially social identities. The process of self-identification or others is a matter of meaning and always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation (Jenkins, 2004: 4).

Nevertheless, these distinct groups can interact effectively if each can engage in identity negotiations. Generally speaking, identity negotiation generally occurs in the context of intercultural communication and interaction aimed at achieving an understanding of different group identities. Ting-Toomey (1999: 39-40) believes that identity negotiation is a form of mutual-communication activity. It is not only a communication act that is active but also mutual. Individuals try to generate the identity they want in interaction, they also try to challenge or support another identity.

Identity negotiation is not related to the diminishing of one's identity, but instead, provides the way for identities to exist in the context of even a plural society. Therefore, identity negotiation requires *mindfulness*, the readiness to shift the frame of reference, the motivation to use new categories to understand cultural or ethnic differences, and readiness to experiment with creative opportunities from decision-making and problem-solving. Instead of mindlessness is a great dependence on familiar reference frames, categories and designs that are routine and ways of doing things that have become habitual. Therefore, the practice of identity negotiation is more likely in the context of an open, modern society with adequate levels of education.

3 METHOD

This is mainly qualitative method with a case study approach. To gain data, this research deploys in depth interview conducted among Indonesia Muslim Community in Victoria, observation in community

hub (mosque, family, *majelis taklim*, and offices), and document analysis relating to the topic of this research. This include archives of IMCV, brochure, and government regulation on community in Australia. The constructive case study does not assume a mere reality and believes that empirical reality and theoretical concepts are mutually reinforcing. Therefore, case studies of this type focus on processes that bridge concrete observations and abstract meanings using interpretive techniques (Given, 2008: 69). As Yin (1994: 13) points out, case studies are studies that investigate contemporary phenomena in the context of everyday real life, especially when the boundary between phenomena and context is not very clear. This study does not situate the Indonesian Muslim Community of Victoria (IMCV) as the main subject but makes it a medium for understanding the phenomenon of social solidarity and identity negotiation in the context of a secular state so that it can be viewed as a typical description of other cases or even the case that it stands Independently and represents only a unique and non-general phenomenon.

4 DISCUSSION

Indonesian Muslims migrated to Australia for different motivations. Some were coming for studying and they could be identified as student, while others were arriving in for economic reason as they tried to find jobs in Australia. They reside in two concentrated cities, Sydney and Melbourne in the state of Victoria. This paper focus on Indonesia Muslim Community in Victoria (IMCV), for several reasons. First, IMCV accommodates members from diverse Islamic religious background, such as Nahdhatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam as well as *tarbiyah* religious background such as PKS. This characteristic signified the melting identity across mass organization boundaries which is problematic in context of Indonesia, a homeland to the IMCV members. Second, IMCV represents a dynamic identity both intra community and intergroup community.

IMCV organizes six Indonesian Muslim communities that share various religious activities, such as; *Pengajian Brunswick, SAS (Sulit Air Sepakat) Study, Pengajian LaTrobe, Monash Indonesian Islamic Society (MIIS), Young Indonesian Muslim Students Association (YIMSA), and Pengajian At Taqwa* (later known as *Pengajian Westall*). In 1997, all these study groups then agreed to establish a kind of container that could shelter all

these groups which were later called Indonesian Muslim Community of Victoria (IMCV). After IMCV was formed, then several other groups joined among others; *Pengajian Footscray* and *Pengajian An-Nur*. Indonesian Muslim Community of Victoria (IMCV) is the only institution that embraces almost all Islamic organizations in the state of Victoria, Australia.

Westall Mosque is not the only center for the activities of Indonesian Muslims in Victoria. In addition to Westall, there is Surau Kita Mosque in Coburg North and Baitul Ma'mur Mosque in Laverton which both serve as a center of IMCV activities with somewhat distant area but still in the State of Victoria. In addition to these three mosques, some small religious activities are still being held by the mentioned above.

In Australia, however, Indonesian Muslims are minority, both ethnically and religiously. This awareness formed in the process of establishing the Indonesian Muslim community in Victoria. In the span of the journey of the establishment of the Indonesian Muslim community in Victoria, the issue of the identity of their origin social organization (such as *Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah* or *Persatuan Islam*) in Indonesia has appeared several times. But along with the growing awareness of their community as immigrants, they are aware of the emergence of a common identity as an Indonesian Muslim. They can find a common identity that transcends the different religious organizations.

In its development today, the presence of the Westall Mosque is not only a facility of worship and social activity for Indonesian citizens, but it becomes a meeting point for Muslims from various other countries, such as the Middle East and other Arab countries. This scene is unique, especially as shown in mosques in the Victoria area associated with the identity of the country's origin of the immigrants such as the mosque of Bangladesh, Turkish mosque, Mosque Lebanon and others. The mosques not only serve as a place of worship but also as a community center. In such a function, the mosque serves as a primordial bonding tie that can treat and nourish the immigrant's longing in a foreign land called Australia.

But on the other hand, the identification of mosques with certain ethnicities creates a boundary between one ethnic and another ethnic becomes so obvious. Generally, one particular ethnic Muslim group would prefer to come to a mosque in accordance with ethnicity. But what happened in Westall Mosque as Indonesian mosque is quite different since they serve Muslim from other

community, like Arab Muslim who well received even get a role in many activities at Westall Mosque as seen in *tahfidz Al-Quran* for children who guided by an *ustadz* who is Arabic for instance.

In this secularized state of Australia, Indonesian Muslim community embodies the tolerant face of Islam beyond the *mazhab* (*school of thoughts*), ethnicities and states barriers. It is precisely in this secular milieu that the figure of Nusantara Islam finds its form. Nusantara Islam is no longer limited to claims as a particular religious identity of *madhab*, but rather as a representation of the Islamic face of Indonesia which is the color of the united state of the Republic of Indonesia.

5 CONCLUSIONS

IMCV has strengthened solidarity among Indonesian Muslims. This is reflected in a number of activities held, both religious and social, IMCV has become a glue of the Indonesian Islamic community in Australia that not only strengthens the existence of each study group spread in several places practically but also structurally has become a unifying society Indonesian Islam in Victoria so that more systematic and more have a more qualified bargaining position.

Regarding identity, IMCV also serves as one of the institutions that bridging identity negotiation. The practice of identity negotiation undertaken by Indonesian Muslims in Victoria can be identified through several matters, among others; they do not use mosques for Friday prayers given government regulations since some mosques do not have adequate parking facilities. More broadly, the negotiation of Islamic identity of Indonesia is illustrated by the first Indonesian Muslim Congress which was held in Melbourne in September 2016. This conference is not only the momentum of affirmation of the existence of Muslims in Australia growing and growing but also as the practice of identity negotiation of Indonesian Muslims in the West as inclusive Islam.

This study offers an important contribution to understanding the dynamic of identity particularly in realm where the original identity constructed by religious values, as the IMCV members in Australia adhered; interact with new milieu, such as secularism, which is in opposition with the Islamic values. The results provide evidence that formal religious participation is associated with having a stronger religious social identity and that this aspect of identity, in turn, accounts for constructing identity to others community and different milieu. The

findings are noteworthy in terms of their addressing a relatively understudied factor within empirical investigations of religion, secular environment and social identity. Results also point to the promise of continuing to apply and extend identity on group processes and individual outcomes to the social scientific study of religion and identity construction.

As this research only covered the identity within certain situation, the question of how this identity renegotiated when the IMCV members return to Indonesia, their homeland, is remain critical for further research.

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