



CONSTRUCTION OF ARAB ETHNIC IDENTITY IN MEDAN

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Abstract

This article was written to understand the construction of Arab ethnic identity in the city of Medan, regarding various aspects of social life which manifest in educational, economic, social, political and religious issues. Of course, the focus of this research also does not ignore the history of ethnic Arabs migrating to the city of Medan and the motives driving them to migrate, either from the spread of Islam or for their economic prosperity. This research is qualitative in nature with an ethnographic writing approach. The results of the research show that Arab ethnics, in this case, construct their identity from their various social lives, both in terms of education, economics, social and politics, as an instrument to fight for and defend the religion they believe in, Islam, amidst the diverse development of the city of Medan. The identity construction carried out by the Arab ethnic group builds a balanced cultural ecosystem in the city of Medan. So that the city of Medan does not become a city that seems very Christian or very Hindu or even Confucian or very Buddhist. But it still maintains the existence of Islam as an Arab ethnic identity in filling the miniature beauty of a diverse city frame. The whole thing is outlined in the history of Arab ethnic migration in the city of Medan and their social life in various educational, economic, social, political and religious aspects.

Key words: Identity Construction, Arab Ethnicity, Medan

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INTRODUCTION

Medan City is the capital of North Sumatra Province and Medan City is the third largest city in Indonesia, after Jakarta and Surabaya. It is not surprising that this third largest city is inhabited by people from various different cultures and Indonesian nations. Therefore, the city of Medan can be said to be a plural city and can be seen as a reflection of the Indonesian nation which is rich in ethnic, religious and racial differences as well as the diversity of customs and culture (Suparlan 2005:196).

The diversity of the city of Medan certainly cannot be separated from the urban attitude that supports the creation of a plural city, by the absence of dominant ethnicities and cultures in the city of Medan (Bruner in Suparlan; 2005). This situation opens up freedom for other ethnic groups to migrate and live in accordance with the culture according to their ethnicity. This reason makes ethnic immigrants living and settling in the city of Medan, such as indigenous ethnicities (Javanese, Sundanese, Banjarese and Madurese and others) and non-indigenous ethnicities (ethnic Chinese, Arabs and Punjabis).

During the Dutch colonial era in 1905, Arab ethnicities were classified as Foreign Eastern Ethnicities along with Chinese and Indian ethnicities. The history of the arrival of foreign eastern ethnic groups (Arabs, Indians and Chinese) to the city of Medan cannot be separated from the Dutch East Indies government's policy of implementing an "open door" policy. The opening of the plantation also marked the transfer of the center of government and trade in Sumatra from Bengkalis to Medan in 1877 (Sinar in Fachruddin 2005). This situation was also well used by ethnic Arabs to migrate to the city of Medan. Trade is the main goal of ethnic Arabs inhabiting this multicultural city.

Various ethnicities that migrate to new areas of residence (overseas) will still maintain their entity as ethnicities that have their own cultural characteristics. Therefore, it is important that every member of an ethnicity has an understanding of ethnic identity, this is so that each individual has a reference in interpreting their social world. In accordance with Rajab (2014), ethnic identity is the pattern maintenance code system of individual personality.

Historically, ethnic identity was formed during the era of colonialism (Geertz; 1967). As

also explained by Okamura (1981), ethnic identity has strengthened since the era of colonialism. This strengthening consists of three things; 1) the formation of ethnicity, namely the 'feeling of being part of', emerged when local residents came into contact with colonialism, 2) ethnicity was formed by creating maps of colonialism based on views that were considered fundamental, and 3) colonialism divided local communities based on ethnic boundaries. and religion that obeys the local government.

In relation to ethnic identity and religion, it has a strong influence. According to Geertz (1967), religion is a cultural system that is conceptualized as a source of multiple social patterns. Conceptualization is carried out by adapting cultural patterns to religion or adapting religion to culture. Religion, which is part of culture or vice versa, provides an understanding that ethnic identity can be reflected in this conceptualization (Eriyanti: 2008). As research conducted by Damanik (2017) shows that the ethnic identity of Simalungun is reflected in the religion in Simalungun.

Arab ethnicity cannot be separated from the teachings of the religion they follow, namely Islam. Even though Arab ethnicity (Arabian Peninsula) is not only Muslim, in Indonesia knowing Arab ethnicity is the same as knowing Islam. This is based on history, Berg (2010) said that ethnic Arabs who came from Hadramaut, Yemen, were trading and spreading Islam.

Furthermore, an ethnic group needs space to express their culture, with the aim of maintaining their ethnic identity. Pelly (2013; 5) in this regard, agrees that maintaining ethnic identity by providing an organizational forum can help to express ethnic interests. Arab ethnic identity through organizations is manifested in carrying out social ties and religious expressions (Haryono: 2013).

Various forms of ethnic identity are characteristic of ethnic migration in Medan City. Of course, it can become knowledge of the identity of membership in the Arab ethnicity, so that one can know the ethnic identity to which one belongs (Zaini: 2014). Which actually rejects a statement from the writer Alhabysi (2022) that Arab identity is an illusion. Arab ethnic identity was previously integrated from economics, education and religion (Azis: 2020).

Therefore, it is important that this article was written to find out the efforts of the Arab ethnic group in constructing their ethnic

identity in the city of Medan through various aspects including education, economics, social, political and most importantly religion.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, namely by looking at how the Arab ethnic lives in a pluralistic society in the city of Medan. To sharpen the research, this research also uses the ethnographic method (Spradley: 1997) which emphasizes the use of the method of involved experience (participant observation), to be able to describe the culture of the society being studied in a comprehensive and comprehensive manner so that the cultural patterns of a particular society are visible. By using this method the researcher is among the members of the community he is studying, with a clear identity, to study the Arab ethnic identity that they express in their individual or collective lives.

This research was conducted in Medan City using interview data collection techniques and field observations. The location that will definitely be the researcher's field work is the Arab ethnic settlement in Tanjung Mulia, namely the Sei Dadap sub-district. Apart from that, the place of economic activity is also something to pay attention to in the research location, such as ethnic Arabs who carry out trading activities in Medan City, namely the Fish Tax, of course equipped with the chairman of the Al-Massawa Arab Mosque BKM in the Kesawan area as well as young people who will become regeneration in identity construction Arab ethnicity. The research informants in this study are of course ethnic Arabs in the city of Medan such as religious leaders, youth or parents, founders or implementers of education, traditional leaders or figures in their organizations, as well as economic actors.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The constructivist perspective sees ethnic identity as socially constructed and is a fluid entity that can be formed through various means such as conquest, colonization or migration (Wimmer 2008). This view actually contradicts the primordialist perspective which says that ethnicity is something descriptive or natural. However, according to constructivists, Hale (2004) states that ethnicity is not something that is given (ascriptive) or natural, but is also a

construction that aims to achieve goals or interests. In the end, Hale (2004) also concluded that ethnicity is a social radar, namely a personal reference, source of motivation and social construction for assessing and understanding the social world (social world understanding).

Researchers using a constructivist perspective looking at Arab ethnic identity in the city of Medan were inspired by looking at Damanik (2018) in his neat writing about the dynamics of identity seen from local politics which are packaged from various religious, economic and political based ethnic identities which manifest as village sentiment, sentiment, religion, sentiment between clans (marga), territorial sentiment and cultural sentiment. Therefore, researchers pay attention to several of the most important parts of identity construction carried out by Arab ethnic groups in the city of Medan. Of course, identity concerns various aspects of life which manifest in educational, economic, social, political and religious issues which are usually constructed by them either explicitly or hiddenly.

1. Construction of Arab Ethnic Identity in Education

Education is the most important center for building human resources. In line with this, it can be seen that the various ethnicities in the city of Medan certainly have identical understandings regarding the views of education, whether in the formal, informal or non-formal education sectors. This understanding is of course built on the basis of ethnic views in assessing education based on experience or responding to various challenges faced by various ethnicities in maintaining their identity.

Ethnic Arabs in Medan City have a role in implementing education in the formal sector. There are several formal schools that are currently still operating as a place for formal education, such as the An-Nizam School and the Insan Cita School.

However, Arab ethnic groups in the city of Medan do not require their children to go to school owned by one of the ethnic Arab migrants in the city of Medan. So this is sufficient evidence that it is true that there is nothing specifically in their formal education to socialize their Arab ethnic identity, such as their own Arab ethnic culture.

2. Construction of Arab Ethnic Identity in Economics

To fulfill the needs of the Arab ethnic group in the city of Medan, historically those who came here were initially more dominant as traders. The trade they carried out at that time was in the urban center of the city of Medan which was familiarly known to the public as the fish tax.

The Fish Tax, which is located next to the main station in the city of Medan, is the trade for the Arab ethnic group in Medan City. Where in this place you can find shops with the names of Arab ethnic groups or their surnames, such as Toko UD. Zubaidi. Research conducted on January 16 2024 on Fish Tax by looking for ethnic Arab traders was very difficult to find. It's just that there is a shop that is old and quite famous because the shop is located on Jl. Train. This shop is owned by an ethnic Arab named H. Abu Bakar Zein Zubaidi. This shop is a legacy from his father H. Abu Bakar Zein Zubaidi and was inherited by him since the 1980s.

Apart from that, there is development of Arab ethnic trade in the city of Medan by building cafes, cellphone businesses and modern Arab markets whose products are typical of the Middle East. Of course, this business follows developments in the city of Medan. Even though various economic developments carried out by Arab ethnic groups in the city of Medan will not eliminate their identity as Muslims. In this sense, the Arab ethnic group in the city of Medan will always be in contact with their mission of migrating to the archipelago, especially in the economic aspect as a way to continue to spread and maintain the Islamic religion.

3. Construction of Arab Ethnic Identity in Social Affairs

Ethnic Arabs in the city of Medan founded a social organization which became a place to strengthen their identity, namely Annadi Al-Islamy. Annadi Al-Islamy is the first social organization to bring together ethnic Arabs in the city of Medan. Apart from that, there is also a social organization founded by ethnic Arab women in Medan City called Al-Ichwani Arabia. There is also an organization founded by Arab ethnic youth in the city of Medan called As-Syabab. Of course, each social organization formed by ethnic Arabs in the city of Medan emerged in accordance with the needs and demands of their respective

circumstances at that time.

Based on the results of interviews with informant Usman Balatif (56 years old), it was found that before 2017 the social organization owned by the Arab ethnic group in Medan City was just the name of their association. As for the activities or activeness of the social organizations An-Nadi Al-Islamy and Al-Ichwani Al-Arabia, it turns out that they do not exist or can be said to have been on hiatus for a long time and have stopped holding social activities. Therefore, to respond to the negligence of social activities carried out by ethnic Arab associations, they created or reformed a new association called Al-Jamiyatul Al-Arabiyah.

The social organization Al-Jamiyatul Al-Arabiyah is chaired by Mr H. Saifullah Hedra and advisor Mr Abdillah Al Mahdaly (Former Mayor of Medan). There are also social activities of this organization in the form of compensation for misfortune. This compensation, which is directly managed by Al-Jamiyatul Al-Arabiyah, is given not only to ethnic Arabs who receive surnames ascriptively (descendants) but members who are registered as ethnic Arabs in Medan City and their nuclear families.

The special cemetery for Arab ethnic groups or what is known as the Sei Mati Arab Cemetery is also part of the social activities carried out by Al-Jamiyatul Al-Arabiyah. This cemetery is located on Jln. Brigadier General Katamso No. 208 Sei Mati Village, Medan Maimun District, Medan City. If you look at the cemetery, there are various kinds of Arab ethnic clans who once lived in the city of Medan. Approximately 1,000 ethnic Arabs have been buried in the Arab Ethnic cemetery. Even though it is not mandatory for members of the Arab ethnic group to be buried there, there are privileges given by social organizations or associations, namely being allowed and assisted with various funeral activities carried out by ethnic Arabs at the Arab Ethnic Cemetery.

Arab ethnic social organizations in the city of Medan certainly support the continuation of the various cultures of their entities and unity for the Arab ethnic group. As is the case with the social organization founded by the Zubaidi clan, namely IKBAZ (Zubaidi Extended Family Association. The most visible social activity is haflatul ied, namely gathering to carry out introduction activities to all ethnic

Arabs with the Zubaidi surname. Usually this activity is carried out once a year, precisely on the second day of Eid Al-Fitr.

4. Construction of Arab Ethnic Identity in Politics

This political struggle seems normal for the Arab ethnic group in the city of Medan. In this case, they act elegantly by using the strategic identity of their Arab ethnic identity, namely the similarity of religion which is more of a determining factor in their choice.

Based on information from informant Abdulatif Ahmad Balatif (43 years old) that ethnic Arabs, generally through their personal and organizational ties (Al-Jamiyatul Al-Arabiyah), were more likely to participate in the 2018 gubernatorial election based on the same religious identity as theirs. Although, apart from that, this new Arab ethnic group will also see the personality records of each existing candidate pair. Of course, the actions taken by the Arab ethnic group in this case are not mere politicization of religion, but there is an order as well as a recommendation to choose leaders according to their religion which is contained in the holy book they believe in, namely the Koran.

Activities that are designed specifically for certain candidate pairs are not very prominent. It's just that, there is an explanation that if asked by social organizations (Al-Jamiyatul Al-Arabiyah) or even figures represented by Arab ethnic groups in the city of Medan, they will answer according to what they choose without directing them to follow their choice. Of course, this action is not unexpected but has become a habit where in choosing there is freedom without criticizing different choices.

So, in short, the Arab ethnic group in the city of Medan in the 2018 election for Governor of North Sumatra at that time was not right to instill or spread a bad stigma such as infidels, accountability in the afterlife and even not being prayed for when they died at a different choice to their ethnic group. So none of this was found to be done by the Arab ethnic group in the city of Medan, even though this Arab ethnic group was already inclined towards one of the candidate pairs, namely Eramas.

This is different from the election that took place in the 2024 presidential election. There are the same candidate pairs when

viewed from a religious perspective, namely that each candidate pair has Islamic beliefs. Only territorial, political party, ethnic and other differences were found from the various backgrounds of each candidate pair. Of course, the focus is on candidate pair 01 (Amin) Anis Rasyid Baswedan and Cak Imin who are part of the Arab ethnic group in Indonesia. This understanding is of course known for certain by Arab ethnic groups in various regions of Indonesia, including North Sumatra and especially the city of Medan.

This view is very strongly influenced by ethnicity in political chess this year. There are similarities that attract attention and build active ethnic identity according to each candidate's candidate pair. Like the Arab ethnic group, it cannot be denied that they will vote for Mr. Anis Rasyid Baswedan as the 2024 presidential candidate and Mr. H. Abdillah Al Mahdaly as the people's representative in the central arena. There are various posters and banners on major main roads in Medan juxtaposing two candidates who are members of the Arab ethnic group. This figure is the missionary of the Governor of DKI Jakarta Anis Rasyid Baswedan who is nominating as a Presidential Candidate and the missionary of the Mayor of Medan H. Abdillah Al Mahdaly as DPR-RI. Both are promoted by the same party, namely Nasdem.

Most importantly, the Arab ethnic group is of the view that when a candidate pair is seen to have a good lineage, then spontaneously (directly) the Arab ethnic group will choose the candidate pair without having to be directed or forced to choose them by means of materialistic gifts. Furthermore, the support given to candidate pair Amin in the 2024 presidential election is clearly visible in places of worship such as mosques. At the Al-Falah mosque in Sei Dadap (formerly known as the Arab village) there is a poster of Anis Rasyid Baswedan.

Based on the results of existing data, it is not just the same ethnic identity in a descriptive way that makes them make choices or directions from Arab ethnic leaders in the city of Medan. But further than that, looking from various directions, such as the character of the leader himself and even the religious reflection of that figure, will also be able to stir their conscience so that they can firmly choose him. However, it is important to know that in politics ethnic identity is often activated either

through religious sentiments and clan sentiments or similarities in hometowns which historically have similarities to the Arab ethnic group in the archipelago, as well as the Arab ethnic group in the city of Medan. So, it is very close and inseparable that the ethnic identity that is echoed can be loved by the political elite by bringing to life aspects of local politics such as ethnic identity, clan (marga), territorial similarities, hometown, local people, and religion.

5. Construction of Arab Ethnic Identity in Religion

In order to maintain and practice their religious teachings, the Arab ethnic group in Medan City built places of worship such as mosques. There is a mosque that has become famous and has become an Arab ethnic identity that still exists today (Bahri: 2023). In fact, the name of the mosque is often known in the community as the Arab mosque. The name of this mosque is taken from the name of its founder, Sheikh Abdurrahman Al-Massawa. So this mosque was named Al-Massawa Mosque. The Al-Massawa Mosque is at the end of Jalan Tumenggung so its position is at the corner of the road and meets Jl. Arab. Exactly according to what is written on the map, namely Jl. Tumenggung No.2-4, Kesawan, West Medan District, Medan City, North Sumatra. This mosque is close to the Bangkok mosque. This mosque has a very strategic position in the former administrative business center of Kesawan.

Not only the Al-Massawa mosque is a true characteristic of Arab mosques. There is one mosque that if we look at the Arab ethnic group in the city of Medan, this mosque cannot be separated from it. This mosque is called Al-Falaah Mosque. Al-Falaah when viewed from the Arabic meaning is "victory". But it seems that the name of the mosque follows its location, where the mosque is located on Jln Al Falah, Glugur Darat I, East Medan District, Medan City, North Sumatra. The location of this mosque is familiarly known to the public as Dadap village, where this village was also known as an Arab village in the past.

Lastly, the mosque that cannot be separated when discussing Arab ethnicity in the city of Medan is the Ash Sholihin mosque. This mosque is in front of the Arab cemetery on Jalan Brigjend Katamso No. 218, Sei Mati, District. Medan Maimun, Medan City, North

Sumatra. This mosque was built by the former mayor of Medan City who was an Arab ethnic figure in Medan City, namely Drs. Abdillah, SE, Sk.M.BA. The management of the Ash Sholihin Mosque is different from mosques built by other Arab ethnic groups. This mosque is managed jointly by the surrounding community.

Some ethnic Arabs in the city of Medan who still have blood ties to the Prophet Muhammad are known as dzurriyah rasul (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad). Most of the Dzuriyyah Rasul groups in Medan City have become religious leaders and convey Islamic da'wah through various recitations such as the Al-Ittihad Ta'lim Assembly which was held directly at the house of one Habib Hayqal Alaydrus at the same time on Jln Merak No. 67, Sunggal, Medan. Of course the recitation they present is the routine recitation of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah and is free of charge. In fact, it is common for them to serve various dishes at the recitations for students of knowledge or members of this recitation.

So, it can be seen that this identity construction is actually to ensure the continuity of the Islamic religion so that it remains alive along with the development of the city of Medan which is developed by various respective ethnic identities. Of course, this is strongly supported by the opinion of Hale (2008) who says that ethnicity is a personal reference, source of motivation and construction of social symbols as a social radar for understanding the social world. Arab ethnics in this case determine or activate their identity from their various social lives both in terms of education, economics, social and politics as an instrument to fight for and maintain the religion they adhere to amidst the development of the pluralistic city of Medan.

Of course, the identity construction carried out by the Arab ethnic group builds a balanced cultural ecosystem. So that the city of Medan does not become a city that seems very Christian or very Hindu or even Confucian or very Buddhist. However, we still maintain the existence of Islam within the framework of this pluralistic city by activating various values of Islamic religious teachings or symbols in the Islamic religion in every social life, including education, economics, social and politics. This construction, which is invisible to the naked eye, is carried out by the Arab ethnic group in Medan City at a glance. Therefore, it is

necessary for researchers to base their expressions on the theory of ethnic identity construction in order to know how important ethnicity is in influencing and being a source of reference for them in carrying out all activities or social activities in the city of Medan.

CONCLUSION

The construction of ethnic identity occurs on the basis of ethnicity, which is not something that is fixed (fixed) but fluid (fluid) and dynamic regarding oneself and ethnic background. Self-identity is constructed and modified when individuals become aware of their ethnicity, within a broad sociocultural setting.

The construction of an Arab ethnic identity in the city of Medan is actually to ensure the continuity of the Islamic religion so that it remains alive along with the development of the city of Medan which is developed by various respective ethnic identities.

In this case, Arab ethnics construct their identity from their various social lives in terms of education, economics, social and politics as instruments/tools to fight for and defend the religion they adhere to amidst the development of the diverse city of Medan. Of course, the identity construction carried out by the Arab ethnic group aims to build a balanced cultural ecosystem. So that the city of Medan does not become a city that seems very Christian or very Hindu or even Confucian or very Buddhist. However, we still maintain the existence of Islam within the framework of this pluralistic city by activating various values of Islamic religious teachings or symbols in the Islamic religion in every social life, including education, economics, social and politics.

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