

## **DIASPORIC CHINESE COMMUNITY IN POST- CONFLICT ACEH**

### **Socio-Cultural Identities and Social Relations with the Acehnese Muslim Majority<sup>1</sup>**

**Eka Srimulyani\***; **Marzi Afriko\*\***; **M. Arskal Salim\*\*\***; **Moch. Nur Ichwan\*\*\*\***

\*Ar-Raniry State Islamic University, Banda Aceh, \*\*International Centre for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies, Banda Aceh, \*\*\* Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta, \*\*\*\* Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta

*Email: ekasrimulyani@ar-raniry.ac.id*

#### **Abstract**

*This study examines the notions of identity among the minority groups of Chinese in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. It focuses on what has changed, what has been challenged and what is [still] continued, locating the discussion within a context of their social dialectics with the local majority of Muslims due to its time, spatiality and social processes. Admittedly, the history of diasporic Chinese and their social interrelation with the ethnic majority of Acehnese does not occur in static, but in a dynamic way, instead. It was continuously constructed, reconstructed and changed in a specific durability and spatiality within a negotiated space of socio-spatial dialectics between the minority and the local majority groups. Through several observations, and in-depth interviews with people from diasporic Chinese community in Banda Aceh, and with few Acehnese informants, this study discovers that some socio-political situations at macro-national level of the related policies (on minorities), as well as at micro-*

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*regional (provincial and municipal) ones, shari'a law application affected the way they interacted, responded, and acted with majority groups, with apparently more efforts being focused on creating non-conflict, harmonious relation with the local majority. Moreover, the efforts to becoming 'part' or accepted by the dominant culture is quite prevalent throughout the process, which is also combined with the strategy of building relation (social capital) with the local majority and other important stakeholders of the society, such as through their ethnic-based organization like Hakka, and others.*

*[Tulisan ini menekankan pada pembahasan identitas orang Tionghoa di Banda Aceh pasca konflik Aceh. Fokus kajian meliputi perubahan, tantangan dan apa yang sedang terjadi dalam konteks dialektika sosial terhadap mayoritas penduduk muslim Aceh dalam waktu, ruang dan proses sosialnya. Tidak dapat dipungkiri bahwa sejarah hubungan Tionghoa dengan penduduk Aceh mengalami pasang surut. Hubungan tersebut terbentuk dan berubah dalam lingkup ruang dan durasi tertentu seiring dengan bentuk dialektikal komunitas Tionghoa sebagai minoritas dan penduduk muslim Aceh sebagai mayoritas. Berdasarkan pengamatan lapangan dan wawancara mendalam sejumlah informan dari kedua pihak, kajian ini melihat adanya pengaruh kebijakan level nasional terhadap situasi di tingkat provinsi dan kabupaten. Penerapan Hukum Islam juga mempengaruhi mereka berinteraksi, merespon dan bertindak terhadap kelompok mayoritas muslim dalam usaha membangun hubungan yang harmoni dan damai. Selain itu usaha untuk 'menjadi bagian' atau diterima oleh budaya dominan cukup menonjol dalam proses sosialnya yang dikombinasikan dengan strategi membangun modal sosial, baik terhadap penduduk muslim atau pejabat pemerintah, seperti misalnya organisasi Hakka.]*

**Keywords:** Indonesian Chinese, identity, social relation, post-conflict Aceh, minority-majority, Banda Aceh.

## **A. Introduction**

The remarkable socio-political changes in Aceh after the signing of MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) of peace agreement between Indonesian central government and the Aceh Independent Movement, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) in 2005 has been possible for a variety of events. The changes were also triggered by the preceding armed

conflict, the tsunami disaster and the aftermath of both events. The phases for rehabilitation and reconstruction of both disasters occurred almost at the same time, over the range of 2005 – 2008, coordinated by Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi Aceh-Nias (The executing agency for rehabilitation and reconstruction of Aceh-Nias). The reintegration issue of the ex-combatants was tackled by Badan Reintegrasi Aceh (Aceh Reintegration Body/BRA).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the post-tsunami and post conflict humanitarian programs in Aceh catered both the physical infrastructure reconstruction as well as the non-physical rehabilitations through the empowerment projects, training, capacity building programs, and so forth. Several socio-political issues such as self-governance, special autonomy become among familiar public discourses. These discourses are inevitably related to the notions of “identity”. In Aceh, the notions of identity are very important and cannot be separated, from the aspects of religion and culture. Along with religion and culture, they are interrelated, intertwined, and to some extent undistinguishable.

The importance of the issue of ‘identity’ was seen among others as a rationale behind the aspiration among few groups of people in some districts of Aceh province such as (the West and South coast and the highland communities of Gayonese plus few other minority ethnic groups) of Aceh province to “struggle” (*berjuang*) for the idea of establishing a new province, dissolving from the current (main) Aceh province. Interestingly, this aspiration also intersected with the issue of ethnicity or cultural identity. In few cases, both regional and national politics had created ethnic based-tension, apart from the issues of social injustice, human rights abuses, especially when Aceh was under the status of DOM (Daerah Operasi Militer, military operation area). As part of the effort to solve the Aceh armed conflict, the central government of Jakarta granted the special autonomy for Aceh to apply the shari’a law for

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<sup>2</sup> The BRR is a Ministerial level governance structure; it is the national agency coordinated all of the incoming aid to Aceh for post tsunami and post conflict rehabilitation over the period of 2005 – 2008. The BRA is an Aceh provincial board established after the peace agreement signed in 2005, mandated for reintegration matters and sustaining the peace building in Aceh. Until the recent year, the BRA becomes a permanent governmental office (as *Badan*) from its ad-hoc status since 2005 to 2016.

Muslim people in the region.<sup>3</sup> While religion and culture have been among important aspects, the three decades of armed conflict, has contributed to enhance the sentiment of dominant culture, in which the non-dominant ones, are considered as socially and politically ‘marginal’ or periphery.

Given the above backgrounds, this study is focusing on observing the socio-cultural identity of the diasporic Chinese community in Banda Aceh<sup>4</sup> in a “socio-spatial dialectics” as it referred to “space, time and social being”.<sup>5</sup> Through understanding of their personal and social narratives, we have been able to observe and establish a pattern of how socio-cultural identity was constructed and reconstructed over the time within a negotiated social space. Current studies on Chinese Indonesians have focused mostly on Chinese in Java. This can be seen in the works of main scholars of Chinese Indonesians, such as Tan<sup>6</sup>, Suryadinata<sup>7</sup>, Godley

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<sup>3</sup> M. Isa Sulaiman and Gerry van Klinken, “Naik Daun dan Kejatuhan Gubernur Puteh”, in *Politik Lokal di Indonesia*, ed. by Henk Schulte Nordholt and Gerry van Klinken, trans. by Bernard Hidayat (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor - KITLV Jakarta, 2007), p. 333.

<sup>4</sup> For the research site, a fieldwork of this study was held in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh province. Compared to other cities in Aceh, Banda Aceh is a city that has the biggest number of Chinese population in the province. The study explores the contemporary socio-political dynamics of the Chinese communities in Banda Aceh, their organizations and their social interaction with the local people and the host culture. While most data of this study were mainly derived from several interviews, it also examines some other relevant data from other sources as well, including observation notes, and other relevant documents.

<sup>5</sup> Reed Taylor, “Syariah as Heterotopia: Responses from Muslim Women in Aceh, Indonesia”, *Religions*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2015), p. 567.

<sup>6</sup> Mely G. Tan, “The Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia: Issues of Identity”, in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, ed. by Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Leo Suryadinata, *The Culture of the Chinese Minority in Indonesia* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1997); Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Chinese Indonesians: State Policy, Monoculture, and Multiculture* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004); Leo Suryadinata, *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority, and China: A Study of Perceptions and Policies* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005).

and Lloyd,<sup>8</sup> Giblin,<sup>9</sup> Hoon,<sup>10</sup> Coppel,<sup>11</sup> Dawis,<sup>12</sup> Dieleman, Koning, and Post,<sup>13</sup> Lindsey and Pausacker.<sup>14</sup> Indeed there are some studies on Chinese outside Java, such as Ananta, Arifin, and Bakhtiar on Chinese in Riau,<sup>15</sup> Tsai and Kammen on Chinese in Medan,<sup>16</sup> and Hui on Chinese of West Kalimantan,<sup>17</sup> but these have been poor studies on Chinese in Aceh. There are some studies on Chinese in Aceh, such as Sulaiman,<sup>18</sup> Rusdi,<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michael R. Godley and J. Lloyd Grayson (eds.), *Perspectives on the Chinese Indonesians* (Adelaide: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Susan Giblin, "Civil Society Groups Overcoming Stereotypes? Chinese Indonesian Civil Society Groups in Post-Suharto Indonesia", *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2003), pp. 353–68.

<sup>10</sup> Chang-Yau Hoon, *Chinese Identity in Post-Subarto Indonesia: Culture, Politics and Media* (Brighton: Sussex academic Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Charles A. Coppel, *Studying Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia* (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Aimee Dawis, *The Chinese of Indonesia and Their Search for Identity: The Relationship Between Collective Memory and the Media* (Amherst, N.Y: Cambria Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Marleen Dieleman, Juliette Koning, and Peter Post (eds.), *Chinese Indonesians and Regime Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Tim Lindsey and Helen Pausacker (eds.), *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Aris Ananta, Evi Nurvidya Arifin, and Bakhtiar, "Chinese Indonesians in Indonesia and the Province of Riau Archipelago: A Demographic Analysis", in *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. by Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 17–47.

<sup>16</sup> Yen-ling Tsai and Douglas Kammen, "Anti-Communist Violence and the Ethnic Chinese in Medan, North Sumatra", in *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965-68*, ed. by Douglas Anton Kammen and Katharine E. McGregor (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), pp. 131–55.

<sup>17</sup> Yew-Foong Hui, *Strangers at Home: History and Subjectivity among the Chinese Communities of West Kalimantan, Indonesia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Irchamni Sulaiman, *Pengusaba Aceh dan Pengusaba Cina di Kotamadya Banda Aceh* (Aceh: Pusat Latihan Penelitian Ilmu-ilmu Sosial, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> Piet Rusdi, *Strategi Adaptasi Masyarakat Tionghoa Pasca Tsunami: Studi Kasus Barak Peunayong Kecamatan Kuta Alam Banda Aceh*, Laporan Hasil Penelitian (Banda Aceh: Pusat Penelitian Ilmu Sosial dan Budaya, Universitas Syiah Kuala, 2005).

Ananta,<sup>20</sup> and Usman,<sup>21</sup> but there was no specific research looking at the intersection of religion and cultural identity in relation to their interaction with local Muslim majority in post-conflict Aceh. The study of Chinese in Aceh is important because they have existed in the region since the Sultanate of Aceh in about 17th century and they live in a region which is strongly influenced by Islam and even, after the New Order, implements officially Islamic law (shari'ah).

## **B. Chinese in Banda Aceh: A Glimpse**

In general, statistically, the Banda Aceh population consisted of 216.941 Muslims, 1.571 Christians, 431 Catholics, 50 Hindus, 2.535 Buddhist, and 3 Confusianist.<sup>22</sup> The diasporic Chinese organization of Hakka Banda Aceh estimated that approximately 4.000 population of Chinese recorded as Banda Aceh residents after the 2004 tsunami disaster.

### **1. Geo-Spatial Over the Time**

There has been limited data available on the history of early Chinese diasporic arrival in Banda Aceh. Historical data suggests that there has been few Chinese groups in the Sultanate of Aceh during the seventeenth century, although their number was not known precisely. The presence of Dutch in Aceh, at the beginning of the twentieth century provided an opportunity for the Chinese to come and keep their identity, because of the apartheid policy of the Dutch East Indie government.<sup>23</sup> That is why some scholars believed that the biggest wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in Aceh coast, majorly during the Dutch colonial period.<sup>24</sup> Those immigrants had to leave their home country to pursue safety and to avoid the war. Apart from this background, some of the diasporic Chinese in the archipelago were also brought or recruited by the Dutch colonial agents

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<sup>20</sup> Aris Ananta, "The Population and Conflict", in *Aceh: A New Dawn*, ed. by Lee Poh Onn and Aris Ananta (Singapore: Insitute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Abdul Rani Usman, *Etnis Cina Perantauan di Aceh* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Seksi Statistik Sosial, *Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2010 Kota Banda Aceh* (Banda Aceh: Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Banda Aceh, 2012), p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Usman, *Etnis Cina Perantauan di Aceh*, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Sulaiman, *Pengusaba Aceh dan Pengusaba Cina di Kotamadya Banda Aceh*, p. 1.

to work in several major construction projects of buildings, bridges, etc in the archipelago.<sup>25</sup> The current spatial neighborhood of diasporic Chinese in Banda Aceh reflected the place of their ancestors' arrival in Banda Aceh. Those who arrived from Ulee Lheu harbor, their descendants nowadays live in Seutui area, and those who lived in Peunayong were those whose ancestor arrived from Lampulo harbor. Although those data could not be academically proven through a thorough and strong data, at least it suggests that historically there were several waves and groups of Chinese diasporic arrivals in Banda Aceh. This also implies the diversity of the place of their origin in the mainland of China. Seutui area is dominated by Hokkian Chinese, whereas Peunayong dominated by the Khek group as well as Canton, Hainan, Thio Chu dan Hinwha. The name of Seutui (area) itself is believed to derive from Chinese word/name "Go Sun Tui", the younger brother of Go Heng who was among the migrant's leaders in the meantime. The Seutui and Go Heng are now named after two quite well-known and central neighborhood areas in Banda Aceh city. Seutui used to be a popular business area in the city, similar in some ways to Peunayong. From administration perspectives, both Seutui and Go Heng are part of Gampong (Village) Lam Teumen Barat. Besides, there are three other areas in Banda Aceh that has a concentrated number of Chinese residents, namely Gampong Peunayong, Gampong Laksana and Gampong Mulia. According to a local historian, the name of "Peunayong" derived from the word "Peumayong" originated from payong (umbrella) because there were some traders who were also quite skillful in repairing (broken) umbrellas.<sup>26</sup>

Peunayong is a "China town" of Banda Aceh municipality. The social compositions of the ethnic groups lived in Peunayong are relatively multicultural, Chinese, Acehnese and also some other ethnic groups from North Sumatra province such as Batak. Most of them are doing trading/business in this biggest traditional market in Banda Aceh city. This area is also claimed as "Kampung Keragaman Budaya"

<sup>25</sup> They came during the colonial period for the purpose of being workers for the reconstruction projects in the Dutch colonized areas in the archipelago. A number of bridges, roads, buildings were built with the technical skills of Chinese, and the character of their construction is the big stone (batu besar) used as (the main) materials. Those constructions still survive until currently, also survived from the 2004 earthquake.

<sup>26</sup> Rusdi, *Strategi Adaptasi Masyarakat Tionghoa Pasca Tsunami*, p. 16.

(the village of cultural plurality), during the Imlek 2018, the banner said the Peunayong is “Kampung Keberagaman Budaya”<sup>27</sup> was erected near one of the entrances of Peunayong market. Since long time ago, the area of Peunayong has been well known as a popular market in Banda Aceh, whereas the surrounding villages of Gampong Laksana dan Gampong Mulia were popular as the farming and plantation areas<sup>28</sup> as well as for the livestock. Nevertheless, it has changed over the time, both Gampong Laksana and Gampong Mulia has now transformed in to the residential areas as well, including for some Chinese families who worked in Peunayong.<sup>29</sup> Until now, Peunayong is still the biggest Chinese neighborhood in the city of Banda Aceh. The houses or the shops in Peunayong are belong to their personal property, as they bought the properties, mostly *rumah toko* (shophouse) from the local (Acehnese) owners in the past.<sup>30</sup>

Since the beginning (their early arrival), Chinese diasporic community has already been well-known for their skill in trading. Shoes leather making and repairing are distinct skills among Khek sub-ethnic group, and their business centered in Kampung Baru. However, with the growth of the shoes industry, their businesses hardly to survive, hence only one shop left today. Hinwha sub-ethnic group has a bicycle related business, and a number of bicycle shops in Banda Aceh owned by these groups of Chinese. The Thio Chu and Hokkian ethnic groups are generally skillful in automotive, pharmacy, optical, stationaries related business. Hotel businesses are developed by those from Hainan sub-ethnic group such as Hotel Parapat and Hotel Medan, which are located in front of the well-known Peunayong culinary centre of “Rex area” in Peunayong. Business was also one of the reasons that influence their

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<sup>27</sup> “Peunayong is a multicultural village”

<sup>28</sup> Some parts of Gampong Mulia are used to be a wide orange plantation, which belong to the family of Yap Tiam Hien, nevertheless this has changed as his family has already left Aceh.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with a village head of Gampong Laksana, May 30, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> During the Colonial period, the Chinese usually rented the houses/shops, there was a term “Cak Te”. It means that they have a right to rent the property for the whole life, but later on then this special right was taken out from them, and then they decided to buy and own the shops instead of renting them.

decision to reside in one specific area. Some of them decided to move out to other areas in the city such as Lamlagang, Keutapang, Jambo Tape, Darussalam, Simpang Surabaya along the Mr. Muhammad Hasan new street of Batoh after Aceh Tsunami. Some of them lived in the shops due to time efficiency and security reasons, so the shops are their business place and their residential place at once.

The tsunami disaster that badly hit Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar coastal areas, also affected the social as well as spatial settlement of the Banda Aceh community, including those of Chinese neighborhood. The new settlement such as Gampong Pante Riek, located in Banda Aceh and Gampong Neuheun in Aceh Besar district, has been among the new settlement of Chinese community. Most of those who were moving out to Gampong Pantee Riek and Gampong Neuheun came from Seutui and Goheng. They received the aid of houses from the yayasan (foundation) of Buddha Tsu Chi.<sup>31</sup> Although few claimed that the Chinese settlement in Neuheun area has already started since 1970s when the municipal government of Banda Aceh rearranged their community settlement and some of Chinese families in Go Heng move out to Neuheun in the meantime, but most of them returned or continue to do their business in Banda Aceh.

### C. The Negotiated “space” and the Social Capital

Especially, within a current socio-political situation where the ‘ethno-nationalism’ emerge stronger, the diasporic Chinese community in Banda Aceh mostly tried to build a good rapport in their social interaction with the local people. It started from a relatively harmonious social coexistence to the humanitarian actions and volunteerism works.<sup>32</sup> For them, to live harmoniously in a ‘negotiated’ space with the local is part of the effort to accumulate social capital, which also would benefit them in wider aspects. As Field<sup>33</sup> mentioned that the core of social capital is indeed a “relationship matter”, with the social capital people are able to achieve the objectives that could not be achieved without the good

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<sup>31</sup> One of the organizations that provided support of housing in tsunami affected areas of Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Chinese local leader in Banda Aceh, January 12, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> John Field, *Social Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

relationship and connection.

### 1. *Socio-cultural Identity: Changes, Challenges and Commitment*

Since long time ago, the Chinese went through a continuous assimilation and adjustment process, as they inhabited the same area with other ethnic groups, especially the local Acehnese ethnic group. Amidst this assimilation, few scholars believe that there are also some degrees of exclusivity that were still preserved among some groups of diasporic Chinese community in Banda Aceh. Rani Usman, an expert from State Islamic University of Banda Aceh who conducted a close research and observation on Chinese in Aceh, mentions that at least there are four social adaptations which those Chinese went through, namely language communication, education, religion, and marriage.<sup>34</sup> In this research, our data also suggest another important strategy of their social adaptation namely (politics) organizations.

For those Chinese, their ethnic language is also among the most prevalent social identity they preserved, although, most of them speak and read Bahasa Indonesia as the national language and few of them could also speak Aceh local language. The usage of their own sub-ethnic language is still preserved, especially within a micro social interaction and communication within their household or within their in-group daily social interaction. Their commitment to utilize their own language is also supported by their intention and tradition of preserving and mainstreaming the usage of Chinese name, which practically also make them easier to trace their origin.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, the diasporic Chinese groups in Banda Aceh place strong concern on religion as one of social and cultural identity, especially as the religion is a legacy of their predecessors. Nevertheless, the history of diasporic Chinese in Aceh also marked one of the significant conversions from their predecessor's religion (Buddhists), when few of them converted from Buddhist to Christians. The Methodist church

<sup>34</sup> Usman, *Etnis Cina Perantauan di Aceh*, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> On the New Order's policy on Chinese, see Nobuhiro Aizawa, "Assimilation, Differentiation, and Depoliticization: Chinese Indonesians and The Ministry of Home Affairs in Suharto's Indonesia", in *Chinese Indonesians and Regime Change*, ed. by Marleen Dieleman, Juliette Koning, and Peter Post (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 47–64.

established in 1958 is one of the evidences of this conversion. Regardless of this conversion, but still in general, the majority of Chinese are Buddhist. The Buddhist community in Banda Aceh has four temples in the areas of Gampong Peunayong, Gampong Mulia and Gampong Laksana. Dewi Samudera temple was established and managed by the Hainan sub-ethnic group, and was also used for teaching Buddhism on Saturday weekly. Dharma Bakti temple is popular for Buddhist Chinese, located in the main road of Teungku Panglima Polem in Peunayong. This temple is managed by Hokkian. Similar to Dharma Bakti, the Maitri temple is also open and available for everyone, and it is managed by their central office management in Medan. The fourth ones is the Sakyamurni temple, which was also used for teaching Buddha every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and this temple is managed by Khek ethnic group. Seemingly, there is no serious conflict amidst the different temple management and activities. They even have a special common home for the condolence the death which is shared among all of those Chinese community that is called as Rumah Duka Umat Tionghoa, located in Gampong Mulia.

Amidst their commitment in preserving their religious and cultural identity, their perspective on mixed marriage between local (Acehnese) Muslim and Chinese somehow has changed becoming a bit more flexible than before. A marriage arrangement which was previously restricted only among those from the Chinese has shifted, as they started to also accept people from other cultural identity and religions to be their spouses or the spouses for their daughters or sons. For those being married to Muslim, they converted to Islam, or became muallaf. Especially for a Chinese woman, it has been such a difficult decision to marry an Acehnese or Muslim man. The mixed marriage like this (which is usually followed by their conversion to Islam), most frequently face serious social challenges from their families and relatives in a form of social resistances, especially from their parents or immediate family. They are perceived as not only changing religion but also changing their ‘culture’,

*“Mereka itu lebih berat, kita tidak terlalu berat, karena Cina kalau dia kawin dengan orang kita mereka kan tidak sekedar berubah agama, mereka juga harus berubah budaya juga.”*

(For them (Chinese), it is much more difficult, because for Chinese if they marry our people (Acehnese), they have to change not only their

religion but also their culture).<sup>36</sup>

For Chinese community in Banda Aceh, they found space for cultural or social engagement in the field of education, particularly for those who study in regular public schools. Their children's interaction with the local children or interaction with children and people from other religions (especially Islam) has also sometimes caused few conversions among those diasporic Chinese children in Banda Aceh. However, the preference of Chinese in Banda Aceh to send their children to regular public school seems to be limited, furthermore most of them continue their further studies for junior high school and university levels outside Aceh, such as Medan and Jakarta. This is quite common especially among the wealthy family. Whereas, some of the children also choose to continue managing their parents' business or focus to help their family business instead of going to the university.

Apparently, although their religions are not always similar (Buddhists, Christians, and few Muslims) to Chinese identity (socially and culturally) they still have some common activities and cultural event together such as in the celebration of Chinese New Year, known widely in Indonesia as "Imlek". In 2018 Imlek, people and visitors in Peunayong could watch a Barongsai performance by both Chinese and local Acehnese people and children.<sup>37</sup> They performed Barongsai dance in the main road of Peunayong and some of the dancers with the dragons entered the shops and interacted with the shop owners.

This research also found that one of the strategies for diasporic Chinese in Banda Aceh to adjust to other groups in the society, especially Muslim majority, is through their ethnic based organization. One of this organizations is Hakka which belongs to Khek ethnic groups for social and humanitarian missions. This Hakka organization later becomes a social organization that represented not only Khek, but also all of other Chinese ethnic groups. In national level, just like Hakka there was an organization called Indonesia Tionghoa (INTI) that focuses on social missions as well. In addition, this organization has ever assisted people

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with a Geuchik of Gampong Laksana, May 30, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Jujuk Ernawati and Dani Randi, "Gadis Berjilbab Jadi Tim Barongsai di Aceh", *VIVA* (16 Feb 2018), <https://www.viva.co.id/gaya-hidup/inspirasi-unik/1007946-gadis-berjilbab-jadi-tim-barongsai-di-aceh>, accessed 16 Jul 2018.

in post tsunami Aceh through their humanitarian programs. All of this has made Banda Aceh municipality to have a bit higher degree of social coexistence, plurality, compared to other districts in Aceh.

One of the news in a well-known local newspaper in 2017 Ramadhan entitled: “Komunitas Tionghoa Hakka Bagikan 1.950 Paket Sembako,”<sup>38</sup> cited that the leader of Hakka Aceh foundation, Kho Khie Siong mentioned this has been a their regular Ramadan activity of Hakka foundation since 5 (five) years ago. This is as a token of empathy of Tionghoa community for the poor people in Aceh.

*“Selama Ramadan, kebutuban pokok biasanya lebih banyak, maka kita bantu dengan membagikan sembako untuk mengurangi beban mereka...melalui kegiatan ini diharapkan persaudaraan antara warga etnis Tionghoa dan warga Muslim terus berlanjut...”*

During Ramadan, the need for goods are increasing, therefore we tried to help...we hope this activity (support) could sustain friendship between Chinese and Muslim.

The given activity can be seen as part of nurturing their social capital through building and strengthening the relation with the local people during the special religious moment of Ramadan. From the quote, we can also observe that what is being emphasized here is the Chinese or ethnic identity (*warga etnis Tionghoa*), not a religion (Buddhist or Christian), the religion is used when it refers to local community as *warga Muslim*. As mentioned earlier, organizations such as Hakka and humanitarian activity has been among few strategies adopted to bridge their relation with the local Muslim majority.

## 2. *Social Dialectics in the Neighborhood*

For the diasporic Chinese in Banda Aceh, social peaceful coexistence with the local has been among their major concerns, the intention to build a good relation with the local people is relatively high,<sup>39</sup> since this will also help them to survive socially and even ‘politically’. This effort could at least be seen from their choice of the neighborhood, near by the local people, as well as their daily social interactions. Naturally, over the years,

<sup>38</sup> “Komunitas Tionghoa Hakka Bagikan 1.950 Paket Sembako”, *Serambi Indonesia* (11 Jun 2017).

<sup>39</sup> Sulaiman, *Pengusaha Aceh dan Pengusaha Cina di Kotamadya Banda Aceh*, pp. 4–11.

it has been peaceful coexistence with the local majority, few Chinese families in Gampong Mulia for instance were elected to be member of village youth committee in Gampong Mulia, and another Chinese was elected as the village council member in Gampong Peunayong. However, almost none of them have successfully pursued a higher political position such as becoming the parliament member.

Some changes occurred instead, for instance in the engagement of Chinese in mosque-based activities. The Chinese used to be asked to contribute to some Muslim activities or charities, nevertheless, nowadays they are no longer asked to do so. For non-religious activities such as the national Indonesian Independence day celebration of August 17 and such, somehow their participation in financial donations still continues. On the one hand, Muslim community had a specific reason for this, on the other hand the Chinese somehow felt that they are 'segregated' socially. The phenomenon indicates that the social interaction among Chinese and the local who are Muslim in majority is not always stable. One of the informants in the interview said that one little trigger from a social media, for instance, might harm the existing peaceful coexistence.

As a minority within Muslim majority neighborhood, it seems that the Chinese tried to take careful manner, avoiding some possible conflict potentials as they had a hard experience of anti Cina sentiment in 1983.

*“Mereka tidak mau sembarangan melakukan tindakan-tindakan yang memicu kemarahan pribumi, karena mungkin mereka masih trauma dengan insiden demon China pada tahun 1980an itu.”*

They (Chinese) avoid careless conduct that may provoke anger of the local as they could be still in trauma of anti-China sentiment in 1980s.

Nevertheless, the anti-Chinese sentiment that was triggered by Ahok's case (The Jakarta Chinese governor) in Jakarta did not affect the same sentiment to the Chinese in Aceh.

At a glimpse, the housing characters of the Chinese residents showed some features that differ from local residence. Most of their shops/houses are surrounded by a high wall of metal fence for the second protection door. Economically, the Chinese are perceived to earned more money than the local, according the Geuchik of Gampong Laksana

*“Kalau orang kita warisan itu ada yang dijual, dan yang sanggup membeli adalah*

*China, meskipun tiga juta satu meter, mereka beli..”*

If our local people sell the inherited land, it is the Chinese who are able to purchase, although it cost three millions rupiah per meter, they will take it.

However, the current economic development especially after the tsunami disaster, with current significant changes in the local government structure, more access of businesses are available for local people such as being a contractor.<sup>40</sup> This phenomenon make some local businessmen overshadow the Chinese businessmen. It also affected the spatial composition, some informants said that few shops in Peunayong, which belong to the Chinese since long time ago, has now been purchased by the local (businessman) due to the change of their economic prosperity especially among special elitist local groups of businessmen. When local people started to engage more in the business, still the Chinese groups do not expand their activities beyond trading activities. Politics and such, do not interest them in general. At the village level, they mostly do not have a determined intention to involve in the village governance structure/system, again due to most of them more focus on business or continue their family businesses. However, they represent in Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB), a government agency that is responsible for peaceful coexistence of diverse religious communities in Indonesia. For them, their roles in this forum are still limited and insignificant as they represented only minority religious groups.

As religious minority group they showed their intention for a peaceful coexistence, side by side with the local Muslim majority under the current policy of positivization of shari'a law. The local government claimed that they do not discriminate religious minority in Aceh. On the paper, as non-Muslim, they are basically exempted from shari'a law implementation. This is mentioned in Qanun number 8, 2014 on the basic principles of sharia law implementation (in chapter 24, verse 2)

*“Setiap orang bukan beragama Islam dapat memilih dan menundukkan diri secara sukarela pada hukum jinayat...”*

The non-Muslim is freed to choose whether or not to choose and to

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<sup>40</sup> Edward Aspinall, “Combatants to Contractors: The Political Economy of Peace in Aceh”, *Indonesia*, no. 87 (2009), p. 2.

submit voluntarily to the Qanun Jinayat.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, for Chinese there have also been some policies that seem to limit their space from the particular socio-political positions such as in the conditions to stand for the governor/major/head of district election. In practice, this limitation sometimes also applied in other accesses, such as a limited engagement in providing inputs for public policies, and such.

#### **D. Relations with Local Muslim Majority: The Socio-Historical Construction and Reconstruction**

The current socio-political situation of diasporic Chinese in Aceh, and more particularly in Banda Aceh is affected by the on-going socio-historical dialectics over the periods of time. All of these contribute to social vulnerability and vice versa. Those momentums could represent the contemporary periods that reflect some historical roots needed to understand the current potentials unfinished roots of conflict over the time.

##### **1. *Pre-armed Conflict Period***

During this period, the Chinese was affected mostly by the national policy, such as anti-China which happened at the same time with the anti-Communist political party. In earlier New Order regime, the citizenship of the Chinese community in Banda Aceh as other Chinese in the archipelago live in the rural area, but concentrate mostly in the city or urban area. Some previous residential areas such as in Peukan Bada, still can be identified as the left/abandoned area since the village had the complex of Chinese tombs, yet almost none of Chinese live nearby. For those, who were worried about the future of their business and employment, decided to leave Aceh. Some of them have been very successful in income generation and gaining the economic asset or capitals. Later on, in 1970s, few returned back to Banda Aceh after the situation was getting stable and they could retain their resources as they have been owned and managed by other parties already. The political dynamics in the meantime also affected the identity issue, such as the

<sup>41</sup> One of qanun (Islamic bylaws) applied in Aceh province (Qanun Aceh No. 8 / 2014 Tentang Pokok - Pokok Syariat Islam).

using of their ethnic language. They were endorsed not to use their ethnic language, especially in a public space. In 1970, a quite significant number of Chinese proposed or applied for the Indonesian citizenship. A lot of them who were successful, therefore the later generation Chinese born in Banda Aceh automatically gained the Indonesian citizenship.

## 2. *During the Armed Conflict (1998-2005)*

The armed conflict of Aceh independence movement and the Indonesian central government occurred in three decades period of time, with numbers of civilian, GAM members, and Indonesian security forces were killed.<sup>42</sup> However, in this part, we focus on the later years which affect the Chinese community most especially after the reformation era of 1998. At least there were two prominent moments that affect the Chinese in Banda Aceh, namely the armed fighting that cause terror and trauma, and another ones is the policy of President Abdurrahman Wahid that recognized Chinese culture and traditions during his presidency term. Due to the armed fighting, the non-local people was being threatened, not only Chinese but also Javanese. A quite significant number of Javanese who migrated to Aceh under government program of “transmigrasi” had to leave Aceh (in the meantime) for security and safety reason.<sup>43</sup> Although Banda Aceh is considered among the safest zone in the meantime, few Chinese still left Banda Aceh, this was also related to the previous anti-Chinese riot in May 1998.<sup>44</sup>

## 3. *Post Armed Conflict (and the Application of Shari'a Law)*

The official implementation of shari'a law was declared before peace agreement (in 2002), and to some extent, this policy was considered as the parcel of solving Aceh armed conflict by granting the special autonomy and the right to apply sharia law for Muslims in Aceh province.<sup>45</sup> In any societies, the religious and cultural based tensions inclined to

<sup>42</sup> Edward Aspinall, “The Helsinki Agreement: A More Promising Basis for Peace in Aceh?”, *Policy Studies*, no. 20 (Washington, D.C: East-West Center, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Eva-Lotta E. Hedman (ed), “Aceh Under Martial Law: Conflict, Violence and Displacement”, *Working Paper Series*, no. 24 (Oxford: Queen Elizabeth House Department of International Development University of Oxford., 2005), p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Chinese local leader in Banda Aceh, 12 January 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Sulaiman and Klinken, “Naik Daun dan Kejatuhan Gubernur Puteh”, p. 333.

cause serious horizontal conflict among the people groups. Therefore, the notion of tolerance becomes important in Aceh, including in the social relation between Muslim and non-Muslim like Buddhist and others. In the local bylaw of 8, 2014 on the principles of sharia law implementation (Qanun Nomor 8 Tahun 2014 tentang Pokok-Pokok Syariat Islam), in article 24 dealing with the issue of *jinayah* punishment for non-Muslim people. The Chinese understood the limited support that government could provide to Chinese (Buddhist) in regards with religious education, or religious activities, yet to them there are still some areas of activities that government could support such as in arts and sport, including the Barongsai performance. Although there is a specific Barongsai organization across Indonesia including that in Aceh (as it is considered also as a sport), in general, the responsibility of preserving this art performance is left in the hand of Chinese themselves.

## E. The Efforts Towards the Plurality

### 1. Challenges

For few diasporic Chinese, the feeling of being an “Acehnese” (orang Aceh) is quite apparent,

“I am local product, originally Aceh, if someone ask where is my hometown, it (my hometown) is Aceh, and I am Indonesian, because my ID card is Indonesian identity card”.<sup>46</sup>

‘Aceh’ in this regards is not only Aceh as governmental territory as a province, but also be expanded to the cultural, ethnic identity as well. It means that the frictions of ethnicity could be reflected in Aceh that cover cultural diversity of the people who live there. The question here might be how far the issue of citizenship relates to the socio-cultural aspects of the society, since cultural and religious identity is tightly hold and preserved by the Chinese diasporic community in Banda Aceh. The diasporic Chinese in Banda Aceh are quite aware that they could not live exclusively from other social groups, especially the local Acehnese Muslim majority.

They acknowledged some changes in the child rearing, the way they

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with a Chinese woman, a teacher, 7 May 2016

educate their children. Their children are now freed to choose if they would like to pursue higher education, something not encouraged before as the children were more prioritized to be prepared as a business man/woman to continue their family business. Most of Chinese are known as businessmen, locally addressed as “*toke*”. However, within the current two decades, there have been a number of diasporic Chinese children who completed their university degree, and some of them even decided to work outside Aceh due to the available employment opportunities relevance and availability. They also acknowledged that “Acehnese are now also expert in doing business, so (the business) competition is becoming tough. Secondly, the businessmen in Medan also is no longer picky, they would lend to any ones (including businessmen in Aceh) if they do not have money”.

Their harmonious life within diversity is somehow fragile. During the interview, a Chinese man illustrates how even one comment in social media or one unprecedented policy could ruin social harmony they had with local Muslim majority, and could make thing to zero again. There are two perspectives in looking at the integration, a process of shaping and integrating while they still preserve their own social and cultural identity, and a perspective that diversity is an asset, therefore need to be preserved (this is applicable for all cultures). The Chinese do not have to submit to the dominant culture, but live peacefully with the local Acehnese Muslim community.

## 2. *The Humanitarian Works/ Activities*

Other social capital that Chinese tried to focus is through the social organization, and in this case mainly Hakka, which is initially a Khek sub-ethnic organization founded in 2011. Approximately 50 % of Chinese in Banda Aceh supported Hakka and its activities. The organization embraces all of the Chinese (Buddhist, Christians and Muslim). With the youth, the Hakka organization is developing the network both within and outside their groups, including the integration with other ethnic groups including Aceh and Muslim as dominant social group. Before Hakka, they never thought of initiating network and cooperation with NU and Muhammadiyah organizations.

*“Kalau kita diam, jurang pemisah ini semakin melebar. Dulu tidak terpikir sama*

*sekali kita bisa kerjasama sama orang NU, dengan teman-teman Muhammadiyah. Kalau dulu orang Tionghoa ini nggak peduli dengan hal-hal itu.”*

If we do not do anything, the gap becomes bigger. Before we have never thought of having a network with the NU and friends from Muhammadiyah. Before, Chinese have never care about the stuff like that.

Hakka is an organization founded in a number of countries, they have common concern and objectives, as well as challenges faced by the Chinese communities across the nations. They sometimes held several international conferences, the last of which was in China, and before was in Jakarta.<sup>47</sup> The committee in Hakka organization in Aceh admitted that the management of the organization is so far relatively well managed that could maintain the sustainability of the organization. This organization is also aimed to promote Chinese heritage history and culture. In some areas of district in Aceh that do not have Hakka organization, the cultural and humanitarian related activities are much more limited.

As mentioned before, Barongsai and some other Chinese cultural identity and tradition had more public space during the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid. The Barongsai itself is a dance that has a historical background dated back to the fourth century of Chinese history in the mainland, considered as one of the important Chinese Buddhist traditions. Apart from the cultural performance such as the Barongsai, the Indonesian national policy also allowed the usage of Chinese name in a public space or necessity, which was restricted before during the New Order regime. In Banda Aceh, Barongsai has ever been performed in a big public event, namely Festival Peunayong (2011). After some bans and restriction, in 2014, it started to be performed again. In order to avoid further polemics and rejection, the Barongsai adopted some local cultural performance such Aceh Seudati dance. The performance also nowadays engaged the local Muslim children, whereas the Barongsai is also no longer using the magical aspects and such, but purely considered as part of the sport and arts.

Regarding their organizational reach out strategy, Hakka develops the network among students from different major campuses in Aceh. They also cooperate with other organizations such as Muhammadiyah,

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Ko Khie Siong, Chief of Hakka, 26 April 2016.

Nahdhatul Ulama, NU women's wing organization of Fatayat NU, and some other socio-religious organizations. With their external activities, Hakka tried to nourish tolerance in multi-cultural and multi-religious society. Hakka in cooperation with the Kader Damai/Generasi Muda untuk Perubahan (GEMPUR)<sup>48</sup>, support the concept of "Kampung Inklusif" (inclusive village) in three villages with a higher Chinese population. One of the cadres they supported was then elected as the village head in Gampong Mulia

### 3. Convert (*muallaf*) Chinese

Hakka as an organization is aimed at producing a community that embrace tolerance in their social life. They placed their hope for those Chinese who converted to Islam, and more specifically through their convert organization, namely FORMULA (Forum Muallaf Aceh) and PEMAS (Persatuan Muallaf Aceh Sejahtera) to bridge Chinese group as minority with Muslim majority. In the mean time, both convert (*muallaf*) organizations led by Chinese who converted to Islam. The first organization (FORMULA) was founded in 2009, and led by a Chinese from Khek ethnic group, and the second ones (PEMAS) was founded in 2012 (PEMAS), PEMAS is led by a woman Hokkian Chinese. Both of the organizations are the hub organizations for any converts in Aceh, especially in Banda Aceh, and other Indonesian ethnic groups such as those for Batak, Nias or Toraja also joined the two organizations. By placing such a hope to this convert (*muallaf*) organization, the Chinese showed how social organization could be promoted to strengthen social cohesion and bridge the relation between the Chinese and the majority of Muslim population. One of the Hakka members mentioned in his conversation with a convert Chinese by saying that

*"Di pihak agama Anda di sini (Muslim), dan di pihak etnis Anda di sini (Tionghoa)"*

From religious point of view, you are Muslim, and from ethnicity point of view you are Tionghoa (Chinese)<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Young generation for changes.

<sup>49</sup> In daily conversation, for those Chinese who have converted to Islam, the local Acehnese community referred to them as "Cina muallaf".

Once in a public carnival of state Independence celebration in Banda Aceh, the Chinese carnival group also have some Muslim converts in their Chinese traditional dress to show their inclusiveness. Organizationally, the converts in Banda Aceh and Aceh in general consisted of two main organizations namely PEMAS and FORMULA. There have been some voices among few Chinese Buddhist that these two organizations could be an example of harmony, solidarity not the vice versa (conflict). Seemingly, this expectation still needs some ways and time to happen in reality.

## **F. Concluding Remarks**

Apparently, across the time, the diasporic Chinese in Aceh encountered challenges in preserving their socio-cultural identity. At the national level, the policies of President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999 – 2001) has led to important changes, especially on how the government treated its citizens of minority groups especially Chinese. At the micro provincial level, the armed conflict, and post conflict situations as well as the implementation of *shari'a* law had also affected the socio-spatial dialectics between these minority groups of Chinese and the local Muslim majority. This suggests an inconsistent image which changed in some ways and continued in others, as a result of negotiation, assimilation, and accommodation with the host culture and its society. The narratives of “who is local” and “who is non-local” is becoming stronger in contemporary Aceh especially during the armed conflict and the afterwards. Therefore, whether they are aware or not, it is always an intention to identify themselves to the narrative of the dominant culture, which to some extent is not always successful. The research also found that apart from education, religion and marriage, the (politics and) ethnic-based organization such as Hakka as means of social adaptation. The humanitarian work or charity activity are preferably considered as a way to strengthen their social capital in relation with the local Muslim majority in Aceh.

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