

Enhancing Inter-Ethnic Harmony in a Multicultural Society: Lessons from a Case Study of the Harmonization of Malay and Chinese Ethnicities in Belitung Island

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Abstract

This article explores how inter-ethnic harmony in a multicultural society is formed, with a focus on the harmonization of ethnic Malays and Chinese on Belitung Island. This case study explores how interaction and integration occur between ethnic Malays and Chinese on Belitung Island so that harmonization is formed. This study uses a qualitative approach with data collection in the form of literature studies, observations and interviews with informants who come from ethnic Malays and Chinese. Social interaction between ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung has been running very harmoniously until now. Social interaction between the two ethnic groups is formed from an associative social process that arises from the principles of openness and equality. Social integration between ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung was formed from a relatively long process of social interaction with the principle of equality with the motto "*Tong Ngin Fan, Ngin Jit Jong*", which means that Chinese and Malays are the same or equal. In addition, social integration is also influenced by the high sense of tolerance between the two ethnic groups, so that social integration can be closely intertwined until now.

Keywords: *Inter-Ethnic Harmony, Malay Ethnicity, Chinese Ethnicity, Multicultural Society.*

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A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country known for its diversity of ethnicities, nations, languages and cultures. Ethnic diversity is one of the horizontal challenges that is evenly distributed throughout Indonesia from Sabang to Merauke (Satya & Maftuh, 2016). One interesting phenomenon to study is the inclusion of ethnic and religious issues in the political realm, and ethnic issues are also prone to harming democracy in Indonesia and triggering jealousy in a plural society (Ritaudin, 2017; Maharsyah, 2023; Akbar, 2020).

When looking at the historical aspect, the issue of inter-ethnic conflict has been present since the colonial period. During that time, the Dutch East Indies categorized the Chinese community as second-class citizens, ranking them below the Dutch and Europeans, while the inlanders or natives were placed in the third tier. Consequently, upon Indonesia's independence, there were intense feelings of animosity towards non-natives as the ethnic Chinese were perceived to have collaborated with the colonial rulers (Zein, 2000; Theo & Lie, 2014).

However, one of the islands in Indonesia, namely Belitung Island, with its diverse population, is able to maintain harmony between Malays and Chinese. Ethnic Malays are the majority population on Belitung Island which consists of two regencies, namely Belitung Regency and East Belitung Regency. The harmonization of Malay and Chinese communities even gave rise to the term "*Tong Ngin Fan Ngin Jit Jong*" which means that Chinese and Malays are the same (Damiasih & Riana, 2022).

History records that it is very rare to encounter or even never have conflicts between the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups on Belitung Island. The cohesiveness of the relationship between the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups in Belitung has been proven when the May riots broke out in Jakarta and a number of other places where the ethnic Chinese population in Belitung, including Bangka, were truly protected (Permana, 2002). Until now, almost never heard of any social or religious conflicts that occurred between ethnic Malays and Chinese on Belitung Island.

From a cultural perspective, the Chinese community in Belitung Island can be divided into two primary groups: *Totok* and *Peranakan* (Ibrahim, 2022; Nugroho, 2013; Reid, 2009). *Totok* refers to Chinese individuals who have a direct ancestral connection to China, commonly known as the early Chinese generation. Conversely, the Peranakans are Chinese people who have intermarried with other ethnicities or adopted a different cultural heritage. The *Totok* Chinese maintain their traditions by preserving ancestral customs, such as speaking Mandarin, observing the *Hio* Prayer, visiting ancestral graves, and upholding Chinese customs and culture. On the other hand, the Peranakan Chinese actively interact with and establish family ties with individuals from other ethnicities on Belitung Island, and some even marry outside the Chinese community. Some Peranakans have forsaken their ancestral language Mandarin, converted to other faiths, and no longer practice Confucianism.

Harmonization between ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung is so thick and intimate. This custom has been going on since the time of their ancestors. In addition, between ethnic Malays and ethnic Chinese are like two sides of a coin because on Belitung Island Chinese community groups have been united with the local land for hundreds of years (Sya et al., 2019). The two ethnic groups have merged to blend into one unit in the harmony of life. In terms of tolerance, it also occurs when celebrating the holidays of each religion from the Malay and Chinese Ethnic, where each respect, and even visits homes even though there are religious differences between the two (Destriadi et al., 2022).

In religious affairs, there is also a strong familiarity, where if we look at several corners in the island area, there are houses of worship of each religion that are side by side harmoniously, each religious activity runs smoothly, there is never any disturbance due to mutual care and respect for fellow believers. , in fact, many ethnic Malays have been found married to ethnic Chinese, this has become one of the real proofs of the harmonization of the harmony of life between the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups on Belitung Island.

Even in the political arena, currently ethnic Chinese are not left behind in taking a role, on Belitung Island itself there are already many ethnic Chinese as legislative

members, and several Chinese figures have even served as regents in Belitung Timur Regency (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok, and his younger brother Basuri Tjahaja Purnama), and also Deputy Regent of Belitung for the 2018-2023 period (Isyak Meirobie) who was elected in the midst of the Belitung community where the majority are ethnic Malays and Muslim (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the majority of ethnic Chinese on Belitung Island embrace Buddhism and Confucianism. Their presence in the political arena has proven that Belitung Island is a very harmonious area in living harmony in the shadow of differences and a region where a good and harmonious process of democracy has been running without any divisions within groups which has recently been frequently seen in media coverage. that in certain areas there is an inharmonious political process involving groups and SARA.

This research takes a case study on the harmonization of ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung Island as an example to understand the factors that influence the formation of ethnic harmony in the area. Thus, this research seeks to contribute to efforts to increase tolerance, mutual understanding, and harmonious coexistence in the midst of a multicultural Indonesian society.

B. METHOD

This study falls under the category of qualitative descriptive research with an exploratory design, aiming to depict the essence of a phenomenon that was occurring during the research and investigating the underlying causes of a specific symptom. The main purpose of qualitative descriptive research is to describe the state of a phenomenon and generate generalizations through inductive processes concerning the group, process, activity, or situation under examination (Given, 2008; Moleong, 2002; Yin, 2014). In this particular study, the exploratory description focuses on the process of harmonization between the ethnic Malays and Chinese communities on Belitung Island.

The data collection methods employed in this research consist of literature reviews, observations, and in-depth interviews with members of the indigenous Malay and Chinese communities residing on Belitung Island. The gathered data will be analyzed using a qualitative approach, incorporating three simultaneous and flexible analytical activities: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions through analysis and triangulation (Cresswell, 2017; Miles & Huberman, 2014).

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Malay-Chinese Social Interaction in Belitung

Based on their language characteristics, origins and customs, the Belitung people can be classified as a large group of ethnic Malays, so that their identity is more accurately called Belitung Malay. This community lives on Belitung Island, the Belitung Malays themselves call themselves the Belitung people. Meanwhile, ethnic Chinese are generally descendants of Chinese immigrants who entered Belitung

during the Dutch colonial period. In general, Belitung residents who come from ethnic Chinese work as traders.

Based on the explanations from the informants, the process of social interaction between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung is going well and harmoniously, they do not see any differences, for all of them it is one of the riches of diversity that exists as a characteristic of an existing multicultural society in Indonesia. The interactions between them are mutually open to each other, and they respect the differences both from individuals and groups.

In addition, in terms of communication between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community, there were no obstacles at all because in terms of language use they used Malay, while *Hakka* Chinese was only used among the Chinese community itself. The surrounding indigenous people see that the Chinese community is like a family, respecting each other's differences and not disturbing each other, they help each other when holding social activities, one of which is maintaining security and others, so that the existence of the Chinese ethnic community is the same as that of the Belitung Malay community, although there are cultural and religious differences that they each have.

The existence of a reciprocal relationship between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung, gave birth to a sense of mutual openness and respect among fellow citizens, resulting in a unified social activity that exists and has been formed to this day. This explanation describes a reality of a form of implementation carried out in terms of social interaction between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung. In this case, there is a scope of existing social interaction, namely:

First, the social interaction that exists between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung describes a process of associative social interaction. In this case, there is a form of cooperation between the two communities that is well established in terms of social, cultural and religious activities. The associative social interaction process shows a positive interaction process, which leads to a form of unity between the two ethnic groups in society. The implementation of the process of associative social interaction is reflected in the form of cooperation itself. This happened because there was good communication from both parties so that a sense of mutual need for one another emerged.

Second, the social interaction that exists between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung is open and equal between individuals and community groups with the motto "*Tong Ngin Fan, Ngin Jit Jong*", which means that Chinese and Malays are the same or equal. The existence of an open and equal attitude between the two ethnic groups facilitates the process of social interaction. This attitude of openness and equality provides a space for individuals and groups of people to make contact and communicate with each other, so that in this case forming a good relationship and leading to togetherness. This attitude of openness and equality stems from self-awareness by both the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung.

In a form of relationship of openness between people, giving birth to an implementation or form of public relations behavior in everyday life. For example, there is an attitude of familiarity and mutual mingling among the people, they are open to one another, even though in essence they have different cultural and religious backgrounds. But in this difference, it does not become an obstacle to the implementation of the process of social interaction with a sense of mutual openness to one another. This sense of openness shows that they do not close themselves either to the Chinese ethnic community towards the Malay community, in the sense that they acknowledge and are not closed to something that comes from outside their own culture or religion. Vice versa, the attitude of the Malay people as the ethnic majority is not fanatical about their own culture or religion, but they are open to each other and acknowledge the differences that exist, especially in the ethnic Chinese community in Belitung.

The phenomenon of the openness of the two communities also occurs in daily economic activities around the market, such as buying and selling activities in which they interact with each other, while sellers and buyers are ethnic Chinese and Malay. The activity went well without any obstacles, both in communication and in other matters, because the Chinese ethnic community mastered the Malay language.

Inter-ethnic harmonization on Belitung Island has existed for a long time and grows naturally without any systematic social "engineering" (Idi, 2012). This fact supports the unity of Indonesianness which is framed in unity in diversity. In Belitung, the Malay ethnic group is the largest ethnic group, while the Chinese ethnic group is a minority ethnic group. They live together and coexist in harmony, this can be seen from the culture and traditions that develop in society, from clothing to culinary arts (Setiati, 2008).

The social interaction of the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups has occurred at a number of levels of assimilation, namely structural assimilation, cultural assimilation, marital assimilation, identification assimilation, and assimilation without prejudice/discrimination (Idi, 2006). Assimilative social interaction occurs naturally and relatively full-assimilation is influenced by the social and economic conditions of the Belitung people. The social and economic conditions of the Belitung people are actually a response to social changes in a society which can therefore have a positive or negative impact on assimilation. In this study, it is social change that causes natural and relatively full-assimilation.

The social changes that are driving the assimilation of ethnic Chinese and Malays are: the economic condition of the people of Belitung which is relatively balanced; ethnic Malays as the majority and ethnic Chinese minorities in size; characteristics of the Malay ethnicity which are accommodative, tolerant, egalitarian, open (extrovert); elite status among ethnic Malays; settlements are relatively ethnically dispersed; a democratic and non-discriminatory education system; Islam as the majority in size; and a democratic political system (Idi, 2009).

In the perspective of functional structural theory, such as Merton (1949), and Parson (in Demerath & Peterson, 1966), society is a stable system of groups working

together, in which there are consensus. Like a body, both of them see society as a system consisting of interrelated parts and giving birth to a pattern of balanced relationships. Even though the condition of interconnectedness between parts of society is sometimes colored by tension and conflict, however, as a system, there is always a need to establish cooperation between parts and still demand adjustments (adaptation) in order to maintain the balance of relations in society.

2. Malay-Chinese Social Integration in Belitung in Harmony

The social integration that occurs between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung is an interesting phenomenon that is formed from social relations, where they have different characteristics, both cultural, social, and religious between the communities. In this case, the social integration that occurs also makes the Belitung people a characteristic that is known by other communities as a harmonious and peaceful society, even though it has many variations in the composition of its population, both socially, culturally and religiously. In addition, there is an attitude of mutual support and respect between the people, they do not recognize a conflict, but they believe that every element of society has a certain function as explained by the Structural-Functional theory, in this case it is a form of strong social integration that occurs in both societies. the.

The process of social interaction that occurred between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung, led to the emergence of a social integration that has been formed until now. There are several factors that lead to the formation of social integration between ethnic Malay communities and ethnic Chinese communities in Belitung. This is the cause of the strong social integration that exists and creates a harmonious social relationship in the life of the Belitung people. The factors that led to the social integration of the Malay ethnic community with the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung are as follows:

First, there is a relatively long process of social interaction with the principle of equality. The factor for the formation of social integration between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung, namely the existence of a process of interaction over a long period of time, which is based on the results of interviews with respondents in the research process, both from the community and community leaders from both parties. The existence of the process of social interaction has been going on for a long time so that it influences the attitudes of the two communities in an existing social change.

The phenomenon of social integration from the existence of a process of social interaction is related to the theory of associative and dissociative social interaction processes, proposed by Gillin & Gillin (1950), where every social interaction carried out has a process that can change a social attitude of the people towards a harmonious unity, as the social integration that occurs in the Malay ethnic community with the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung.

In addition, there was a process of interaction or relationship that occurred at that time, there were also ethnic Chinese and Malay marriages so that the term

Chinese *peranakan* appeared in Belitung at that time and strengthened social relations which led to the formation of an integration in the two communities. The process of assimilation of ethnic Chinese and local residents was mostly through marriage, so that not a few ethnic Chinese converted to religion (Zakirman et al., 2023). On average, they convert to Islam and become converts who are also known as Malay Chinese by the people of Belitung. Even these conversions are not referred to as people who convert to Islam but convert to Malay, because all Malays are Muslims (Idi, 2012). This is a form of interaction process that has existed for a long time between the Malay ethnicity and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung, which has become one of the factors in the occurrence of social integration until now.

Second, there is a high tolerance attitude between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung. The attitude of tolerance that exists between individuals and groups in these two ethnic groups is one of the factors in the formation of social integration in Belitung. In this case, it is an attitude of practice of mutual respect between people, even though basically there is a difference between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung.

Based on the results of research that came from several informants, they stated that there was a sense of tolerance that was embedded among the people, both in terms of culture, social, and religion. There is reciprocity of tolerance for an activity that exists in the two communities, which has been well established until now, and this is a form of implementing mutual respect for one another. This is a form of reality that exists in the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung, not only respecting each other in terms of social culture, but they also tolerate each other in terms of their religion, this can be seen from the various places of worship that has been established in Belitung, thereby demonstrating harmonious inter-community relations without any problems or conflicts that exist in the lives of the two communities.

Harmonization of ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung is manifested in zero conflict. Until now there has never been a conflict involving ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung, even when riots occurred in Jakarta and other areas in 1998, ethnic Chinese in Belitung still felt safe and protected (Permana, 2002). Tolerance and harmonization between ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung were born naturally. Equality between the two ethnic groups is reflected in the motto "*Tong Ngin Fan, Ngin Jit Jong*", which means that Chinese and Malays are the same or equal. This motto is not just a jargon, but the fruit of living together for more than three hundred years (Sya et al., 2019).

At the micro level, the case of ethnicity, regarding the social integration of ethnic Chinese and Malays is a "unique" thing, where the relationship between these ethnic Chinese migrants and native Malays appears assimilative and "natural". It is hoped that this can provide an important reflection for this nation on a macro level, where society appears to be pluralistic. Belitung's population has at least around 80% of the population of ethnic Malays who are predominantly Muslim. In the history of assimilation of ethnic Chinese and Malay-Belitung, Islam was not an obstacle for the

occurrence of assimilation between ethnic Chinese and Malays. This shows that Skinner's thesis stating that Islam is an obstacle to the assimilation of Chinese and native Indonesians is not proven in Belitung.

From this explanation, it can be seen that there is social integration between the Malay ethnic community and the Chinese ethnic community in Belitung, one of which is due to a sense of awareness of tolerance between the two communities. In addition, it also provides an education or lesson for us on the importance of practicing tolerance to achieve a harmonious community unit. This is also one of the teachings of religion, especially Islam in Surah Al-Kafirun verse 6, "*lakum diinukum waliyadain*" which means "To you is your religion, and to me is my religion". And it is also stated on the motto or motto of the Indonesian nation in the Garuda Pancasila symbol, namely the word "Unity in Diversity" which means "different but still one". This is applied to the phenomenon of social integration that has occurred between ethnic Malays and ethnic Chinese in Belitung until now.

D. CONCLUSION

Social interaction between ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung has been running very harmoniously until now. Social interaction between the two ethnic groups is formed from social processes that are associative. In this social interaction, there is a very close cooperative relationship carried out between the two ethnic groups, especially in terms of social, cultural and religious activities. In addition, the nature of openness between the two ethnic groups has made the process of social interaction run very well until now, they accept each other's differences, both social, cultural and religious. This facilitates the process of social relations and does not cause conflict between the two ethnic groups until now.

The factors that lead to social integration between ethnic Malays and Chinese in Belitung are: First, there is a process of social interaction that is relatively long and equal to the motto "*Tong Ngin Fan, Ngin Jit Jong*", which means that Chinese and Malays are the same or equal. With the existence of social relations or interactions that have been going on for a long time and are equal, this has led to the integration of the Malay and Chinese ethnic communities in Belitung. The second factor is the existence of a high sense of tolerance between ethnic Malays and Chinese both from individuals and groups. This mutual respect for culture and religion has resulted in social integration between the Malay and Chinese ethnic communities being closely intertwined with one another.

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