

## **“ENDA KALAK SINGKEL” STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL**

**Muhajir Al-Fairusy**

Fakulty of Dakwah, STAIN Teungku Dirundeng, Meulaboh, Indonesia  
\*e-mail: muhajiralfairusy@staindirundeng.ac.id

**Irwan Abdullah**

Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
e-mail: irwan.fib@ugm.ac.id

### **Abstract**

*This study is an effort to look deeper into the movement to strengthen ethnic identity in Singkil, Aceh. Singkil is one of the border districts of Aceh, and is actually affiliated with the meaning of an area that is inhabited by cross-ethnic and religious communities. So far, the Singkil community has identified itself on a territorial basis; pesisir and hulu. The Singkil Pesisir community is characterized by the use of the Malay-Minang language and settling along the coast. As for the hulu community, they are often identified as part of Pakpak and Alas because they use the kampung language (similar to the Pakpak language), most of whom live on the edge of the Singkil river. Even so, in the last half decade, discourse emerged through a cultural movement initiated by a handful of elite hulu communities, by campaigning for the Singkel (original) term, accompanied by the rejection of Pakpak label as the identity of Singkel as self identity. The question arises as to why ethnic identity strengthens in the midst of the Singkil community's communal life, which should be integrated in one regional identity. The purpose of this study is to measure descriptively the strengthening of ethnic identity in Singkil Regency. The research method used is qualitative with a grounded research approach. Data was also collected through reading related to the study of identity and the Singkil community. The results of the study indicate, if the awareness of ethnic identity strengthens amid the diversity of the Singkil community due to several factors; socio-political, religious, economic conditions and denial of identification of outsiders to the Singkil hulu identity are Pakpak sub-ethnic groups which are seen as degrading.*

**Keywords:** *Strengthening, Identity Awareness, Singkil Society*

### **Abstrak**

*Studi ini berupaya mengkaji secara mendalam gerakan untuk memperkuar identitas etnis di Singkil, Aceh. Singkil merupakan salah satu wilayah perbatasan di Aceh, yang merupakan kawasan pertemuan masyarakat lintas etnis dan agama. Sejauh ini masyarakat Singkil diidentifikasi berdasarkan basis territorial, pesisir dan hulu. Masyarakat pesisir Singkil dikarakteristikan melalui penggunaan Bahasa Melayu-Minang dan menghuni wilayah pantai. Adapun masyarakat hulu seringkali diidentifikasi sebagai bagian dari Pakpak dan Alas dikarenakan mereka*

---

\* Corresponding author, email: [muhajiralfairusy@staindirundeng.ac.id](mailto:muhajiralfairusy@staindirundeng.ac.id)

Citation: Al-fairusy, Muhajir, and Irwan Abdullah. ““ENDA KALAK SINGKEL’ STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL.” *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 20, no. 2 (2020): 196–210.

# “ENDA KALAK SINGKEL” STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL

*menggunakan bahasa kampong (mirip dengan Bahasa Pakpak), kebanyakan mereka ini menghuni wilayah sungai Singkil. Meski demikian, dalam kurun waktu setengah dekade terakhir, diskursus muncul melalui gerakan budaya yang diprakarsai oleh beberapa komunitas elit hulu, dengan mengkampanyekan istilah Singkel (asli), disertai dengan penolakan label Pakpak sebagai identitas Singkel sebagai identitas diri. Muncul pertanyaan mengapa identitas etnis menguat di tengah kehidupan komunal komunitas Singkil, yang harus diintegrasikan dalam satu identitas regional. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengukur secara deskriptif penguatan identitas etnis di Kabupaten Singkil. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah berbentuk kualitatif dengan pendekatan grounded. Data studi ini juga dikumpulkan melalui bacaan yang berkaitan dengan studi identitas dan komunitas Singkil. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesadaran identitas etnis menguat di tengah keragaman masyarakat Singkil dikarenakan beberapa faktor meliputi: kondisi sosial-politik, keagamaan, ekonomi dan penolakan identifikasi orang luar dengan identitas Singkil hulu yaitu kelompok sub-etnis Pakpak yang justru dianggap merendahkan martabat mereka.*

**Kata kunci:** Kontestasi, Identitas, Singkil

## مستخلص

هذه الدراسة هي محاولة للنظر أعمق في الحركة لتعزيز الهوية العرقية في منطقة Singkil ، آتشييه. Singkil هي واحدة من المناطق الحدودية في آتشييه ، وهي في الواقع تابعة لمعنى منطقة تسكنها مجتمعات عرقية ودينية. حتى الآن ، عرف مجتمع Singkil نفسه على أساس إقليمي. الساحلية والمنبع. يتميز مجتمع Singkil الساحلي باستخدام لغة (Singkil Malay–Minang)، والاستقرار على طول الساحل. بالنسبة لمجتمع المنبع ، غالباً ما يتم تحديده كجزء من عشائر باكباك وألاس. يستخدمون لغة القرية ( Singkil kade–kade ) ، ولديهم عشائر ، ويستقرون في الغالب على ضفاف نهر Singkil. ومع ذلك ، في النصف الأخير من العقد ، ظهر الخطاب من خلال حركة ثقافية بدأتها حفنة من مجتمعات المنبع العليا ، من خلال حملة على مصطلح Singkel (الأصلي) ، مصحوباً برفض تسمية Pakpak على أنها هوية سلوك Singkel. السؤال الذي يطرح نفسه لماذا تقوى الهوية العرقية في خضم الحياة المجتمعية لمجتمع Singkil ، والتي ينبغي دمجها في هوية إقليمية واحدة. الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو القياس الوصفي لتقوية الهوية العرقية في Singkil Regency. أسلوب البحث المستخدم نوعي مع نهج بحثي قائم على أساس. كما تم جمع البيانات من خلال القراءة المتعلقة بدراسة الهوية ومجتمع Singkil. تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أنه إذا تعزز الوعي بالهوية العرقية وسط تنوع مجتمع Singkil بسبب عدة عوامل ؛ الظروف الاجتماعية السياسية والدينية والاقتصادية ورفض تحديد هوية الغريب المنبع هوية Singkil هي مجموعات Pakpak شبه العرقية التي ينظر إليها على أنها مهينة ثقافياً لهم .

الكلمات الرئيسية: تعزيز توعية الهوية ؛ Singkil

## A. INTRODUCTION

Aceh is one of the provinces in Indonesia, which is located at the northernmost tip of Sumatra, and also borders directly with the Province of North Sumatra. The districts / cities which are located adjacent to the neighboring provinces are known as "border districts."<sup>1</sup> This term does not merely refer to the location, social and cultural conditions that are different from most other regencies / cities in Aceh. The identity of the people in the border districts, generally no longer represent Aceh as the ethnic and Muslim majority. Tamiang Regency, for example, is a representation of ethnic Malay. Southeast Aceh Regency is an area inhabited by the majority ethnic Alas and Karo, with the largest number of churches in Aceh. Whereas Aceh Singkil Regency and Subulussalam City, which are the focus of this study, are areas inhabited by cross-ethnic communities; Singkil, Pakpak, Javanese, Aceh, Nias and Malay-Minang.<sup>2</sup>

Singkil Regency was originally part of the South Aceh District, and split in 1999. In historical context, the "Singkel" area (old spelling) is a strategic porter, as well as camphor producers adjoining Barus. Since the 16th century AD, Singkil has been a melting pot of people from across the coast in Sumatra and merchants from outside (the Middle East and China). This strategic position also catapulted the names of Singkil and Barus to the map of world trade as a producer of lime (camphor) in its time.<sup>3</sup>

After the historical traces of "Singkel lama" were buried along with successive natural disasters (earthquake and tsunami), Singkil is now only one of the districts on the Aceh border that is inhabited by a multi-cultural society. However, it is often stereotyped "*left behind*."<sup>4</sup> Ethnic diversity in Singkil is due to its position flanked by six districts / cities in Aceh and North Sumatra. In the context of local demographic understanding, Singkil residents often identify themselves based on two regions; Coastal Singkil and Singkil Hulu. On the coast,

---

<sup>1</sup> These four areas were also given attention to strengthen the Islamic Sharia by holding the Aceh Border Dai program. The borders of Aceh are assumed to be points that are considered vulnerable to weak enforcement of Islamic Shari'a, so that they need to be strengthened by the spread of the border preachers.

<sup>2</sup> Junus M Melalatoa, *Ensiklopedi Suku Bangsa Di Indonesia ; Jilid L-Z* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1995); Sri Wahyuni and Dkk, "Makalah" Laporan Budaya Masyarakat Suku Bangsa Singkil" (Banda Aceh, 2003); Mu'adz Vohry, *Warisan Sejarah Dan Budaya Singkil* (Singkil: Yapiqi, 2013); T Lembong Misbah, "Interaksi Sosial Keagamaan Masyarakat Singkil Pasca Perjanjian Tahun 1979 (Upaya Konstruktif Dalam Merekat Hubungan Antarumat Beragama Yang Kondusif)" (Universitas Islam Negeri Ar Raniry, Banda Aceh, 2009); Muhajir Al Fairusy, "'Menjadi Singkel Menjadi Aceh, Menjadi Aceh Menjadi Islam' (Membaca Identitas Masyarakat Majemuk Dan Refleksi Konflik Agama Di Wilayah Perbatasan Aceh Singkel)," *Sosiologi USK* 9, no. 1 (2016): 17-33; Muhajir Al Fairusy, *Singkel : Sejarah, Etnisitas Dan Dinamika Sosial*, ed. Muhajir Al-Fairusy, I (Bali: Pustaka Larasan, 2016); Sadri Oндang Jaya, *Singkil Dalam Konstelasi Sejarah Aceh* (Kediri: FAM Publishing, 2015); Budi Agustono, "Rekonstruksi Identitas Etnik ; Sejarah Sosial-Politik Orang Pakpak Di Sumatera Utara 1958-2003" (Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Claude Guillot (Peny), *Lobu Tua : Sejarah Awal Barus* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2014); Fairusy, *Singkel : Sejarah, Etnisitas Dan Dinamika Sosial*.

<sup>4</sup> Fairusy, *Singkel : Sejarah, Etnisitas Dan Dinamika Sosial*.

## **“ENDA KALAK SINGKIL” STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL**

people use the Malay-Minang language (Singkil; *baapo*), and in the upstream population speak languages similar to the Pakpak and Alas ethnic groups (Singkil; *kade-kade* or *kalak kampung*).

Since blooming as a district, there have been two events that have arisen in Singkil concerning identity; friction in the construction of houses of worship (churches) and the recognition of the Singkil tribe. The term "*Singkil tribe*" was discussed by several actors from the old group (politicians, bureaucrats and local intellectuals), especially those from upstream Singkil. The term Singkil is a movement to identify the identity of the *hulu* community as the Singkil (native) tribe. They openly reject the Pakpak identity which is already pinned to the upstream Singkil. Moreover, since the conflict in the name of religion continues to swipe in Singkil, the term Pakpak has increasingly become stilted as non-Muslim residents from the upstream elite. Various reasons that the upstream Singkil are a Singkil tribe continue to be voiced. In fact, the culmination of the Singkil ethnic group's affirmation was the rejection of the construction of the Pakpak monument on 12 November 2019 in the City of Subulussalam. Even so, this discourse has never arisen in coastal populations considered by the *Jamee* or *Baapo* (newcomers) by the elite of the Singkil movement. In fact, until now the coastal Singkil community has only identified itself as a person or resident of Singkil, not the Singkil people.

Based on this background, the question arises as to why social identity thickens in the Singkil community which should be integrated in a unity of regional identity. What is the history of the development of the Singkil community group, and what factors influence the strengthening of the Singkil ethnic identity?

### **B. METHOD**

This research is analytical descriptive in order to find a description of a situation with a grounded research approach. As written by Abdurrahman in the book *Religion Research; Problems and Thought*, grounded research is a qualitative approach that allows researchers without being bound or aiming to prove whether or not a theory has been put forward by experts.<sup>5</sup> As a method derived from cultural anthropology and sociology in America, qualitative methods always emphasize the perceptions and experiences of participants, and

---

<sup>5</sup> Mulyanto Sumardi and Dkk, *Penelitian Agama : Masalah Dan Pemikiran* (Jakarta: PT. Sinar Agape Press, 1982).

how they make sense of life. Therefore, the informant is placed as a subject (emic) who will be examined as a source of knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

According to Abdurrahman, in the implementation of grounded research there is a technique known as constant comparison, which is the effort of researchers during the field to grow categories and concepts based on the reality obtained as a building analysis. Therefore, this method does not use random sampling instructions that are commonly used in quantitative structural research, bearing in mind that many analytical developments will emerge in the field.

Data collection starts from observations involved as an effort to understand the events themselves that are the focus of research, as said by Jorgensen "... *direct observation is the primary method of gathering information.*"<sup>7</sup> Then proceed with the interview, both without a plan (unstandardized interview) but lead (focused interview). This effort is expected to provide data on information and views on the Singkil tribe that are reproduced by elites and identity movement actors in Singkil. As a form of research consistency, the researcher stays with the community for several months in order to explore the real situation. The researcher is an outsider in the community of Singkil Regency. So, the first step is to look for several key informants. Informant is the main subject of knowledge sources in qualitative research. Spradley gave two considerations in the selection of key informants; local people who understand and have mature experience. Furthermore, able to provide analysis and interpretation from the perspective of folk theory (local concept).<sup>8</sup> In this case, the key informant referred to the Singkil tribal leaders, political actors, and some of the Singkil cultural and cultural community associates at the study site.

In addition, in the process of collecting data, literature study becomes an inseparable part of a research. Before conducting research and during diving into events in the community, researchers continue to read, especially the culture of the area to be studied. From the literature study, researchers can get an understanding of the local culture, the history of Singkil, the narrative of identity elsewhere, and the description of the Singkil people who have been the focus of strengthening the identity of the Singkil Hulu's people.

The final stage is data analysis based on qualitative methods to answer research problems. Data analysis must be done with seriousness, foresight, and caution. In qualitative

---

<sup>6</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design ; Pendekatan Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, Dan Mixed (Edisi Ketiga)*, Ketiga (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Danny L. Jorgensen, *Participant Observation ; A Methodology for Human Studies* (London, United Kingdom, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> James P Spradley, *Metode Etnografi (Terjemahan)* (Jakarta: PT. Gramedia, 1997).

# **“ENDA KALAK SINGKEL” STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL**

research, data collection and analysis must take place simultaneously.<sup>9</sup> Data analysis has started since the research process took place, where researchers must be clever, creative and sensitive to choose and sort out which data is important or not.

## **C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. People, History and Culture of Singkil**

The Aceh Center for Research and Cultural Values (BPNB) once issued a report entitled "Cultural Reports of the Singkil Nation," an assessment portraying Singkil culture as a community of people living in Aceh. From this report, Singkil is defined as an area of cross-tribal human gathering flow, which now inhabits these border districts. Since the 90s the Singkil area has indeed become a transit point for goods to be traded from Alas, Dairi, Simeulu, and Pulau Banyak.<sup>10</sup>

In the historical context, Singkil and Barus are two great and famous cities. Both play an important role in the development of Islam in Indonesia. Both Aceh and Barus, which are adjacent to Singkil, are suspected of having an archaeological foundation as the first Islamic center to come. Barus itself is an area that has been known for a long time as an exporter of camphor (camphor) produced in Singkil. The progress of the trading port here has pushed the crowds of traders from outside including the Middle East to stop by the 15th century AD.<sup>11</sup> Also, in Singkil has given birth to several important figures in the narrative of Indonesian Islamic history, including Sheikh Hamzah Fansuri and Sheikh Abdurrauf as-Singkily. The two most influential intellectuals in the development of Islam in the archipelago, especially in the history and civilization of Islam in Aceh.<sup>12</sup>

As an area that once triumphed with sea port and trade routes, Singkil inherited the traces of the story of glory centuries ago. Archaeological traces of Islamic civilization such as old gravestones can still be found at several points, such as the Berok area which is known by the local community as the former “Singkel lama” area.<sup>13</sup> Since a number of natural disasters have hit Singkil, the old Singkil area as a historical trail has been buried. Now, Singkil, as reported by BPNB Aceh, is only one of the districts on the Aceh border that is inhabited by people of various ethnic backgrounds.

---

<sup>9</sup> Creswell, *Research Design ; Pendekatan Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, Dan Mixed (Edisi Ketiga)*.

<sup>10</sup> Wahyuni and Dkk, “Makalah” Laporan Budaya Masyarakat Suku Bangsa Singkil.”

<sup>11</sup> Guillot (Peny), *Lobu Tua : Sejarah Awal Barus*.

<sup>12</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII Dan XVIII* (Bandung: Mizan, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Fairusy, *Singkel : Sejarah, Etnisitas Dan Dinamika Sosial*.

Regarding the number of ethnicities or tribes inhabiting Singkil Regency, it is indeed uncertain. From the notes of a research report conducted by the Aceh Culture and Tourism Office (2008), there are 15 ethnic groups mentioned. However, as far as observations made since this research were carried out, the identity of the Singkil community was constructed in two large groups, based on the settlements occupied;

*First*, The Singkil Pesisir community. This community group, generally lives and settles along the Singkil coast, including the Kepulauan Banyak which is adjacent to the Nias Islands. The Singkil Pesisir area has always been known as a trade route. Merchants from West Sumatra, Aceh and Nias have been involved in economic activities here for a long time along with the development of Islam in the region. A Pariaman merchant, Muhammad Saleh once wrote an autobiographical note, if he had ever stopped by one of the Singkil coastal ports in the early 90s, and saw first hand the trading activities in the coastal port.<sup>14</sup> It can be said, if the identity of the Singkil coast, actually developed through coastal culture until now.

Singkil Pesisir language (Singkil: baapo) a blend of Malay and Minang languages is a market language (*lingua franca*) that is still used today. In the context of Singkil, the coastal baapo language, which has a lot of Minang influence, occupies a privileged position, compared to the Hulu language which is often considered hick. Also, Pulau Banyak as one of the Singkil coastal areas, once ruled by a king brought in from Pagaruyung, Minangkabau.<sup>15</sup> In the context of the kinship of coastal communities, the term *ninikmamak* also appears, and in cycle life ceremonies, ranging from birth to death, customary attire, are heavily influenced by the Minangkabau. Minang itself is part of the Deutro Melayu (Young Malay) community.<sup>16</sup>

The Singkil Pesisir settlement is now the center of the Singkil district government. This condition has indirectly led to an understanding of outsiders visiting Singkil, placing the identity of coastal Singkil as the Singkil tribe unilaterally. This condition is one of the factors causing the rise of upstream community awareness to campaign for their identity as Singkil to outsiders. The phenomenon of contact with identity in the context of the construction of Singkil ethnic identity gave rise to what is referred to as the rule of conduct and the rule of behavior as Singkil people agreed under the shadow of collective imagination in Singkil Regency.

---

<sup>14</sup> Mestika Zed, *Saudagar Pariaman Menerjang Ombak Membangun Maskapai* (Depok: LP3ES, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Muhajir Al Fairusy, "Sistem Patronase (Tauke-Palawik) Dalam Dunia Ekonomi Perikanan (Studi Hubungan Kerja Nelayan Pulau Banyak, Aceh Singkil)" (Universitas Gadjah Mada Yogyakarta, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Riniwati Makmur, *Orang Padang Tionghoa; Dimana Bumi Dipijak, Disinan Langit Dijunjuang* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2018).

## **“ENDA KALAK SINGKEL” STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL**

*Second*, The Singkil Hulu community. There are many terms for this second group, those who are thought to have originally settled along the Singkil river and are connected to Southeast Aceh and Gayo Luwes. Thus, there are many similarities in language and several slices of identity between residents along this river. In addition to the term "upstream people," some Singkil residents refer to this community group in terms of villagers and kade-kade. In collective consciousness, a portion of the upstream population often identifies themselves as the Singkil ethnic group, or the native Singkil ethnic group.

If observed deeper, the Singkil Hulu community has many similarities with the Pakpak ethnicity. Because of this, some researchers tend to include them as Pakpak sub-ethnic groups.<sup>17</sup> Iskandar Norman, in the rubric of one of the local newspapers (Aceh daily), once wrote about "The Distribution of Acehnese Tribes," mentioning that most of the Singkil residents are descendants of the Batak ethnicity, namely Pakpak Dairi and Pakpak Boang or better known by the Julu tribe. immigrated to Singkil. Geographically, the position of Singkil Regency is indeed adjacent to several Pakpak communities, such as Central Tapanuli and Dairi, North Sumatra.

Melalatoa, in the ethnic encyclopedia in Indonesia, briefly described the existence of these two groups as the face of the Singkil people,

"... Villages, generally located in coastal areas, along rivers, and in hills. The house is usually built on wooden poles about three meters high from the ground, like a house on stilts. This house model is a combination of the coastal house model and the upstream river house. Houses upriver are often referred to as Sapo, while on the coast people call them khumah (houses). The basic shape of the two houses is the same, the inside is a large room without dividing walls. Family bedrooms are usually only limited by cloth curtains. The most basic difference is only in the attic, where the house is equipped with an attic while the sapo is not, how many vocabularies (maybe) have experienced modification, integration, and integration with Tapanuli and Minang languages - according to some informants who intensively told me, especially related to language development in society Singkil."<sup>18</sup>

In fact, within these two large communities (Pesisir and Hulu), other ethnic groups on a minority scale, such as Aceh, Minang, Javanese, Nias, and Pakpak, also settled. The small ethnic group chose to merge and integrate themselves in the cultural influences of coastal and upstream Singkil cultures. Not surprisingly, some Singkil residents can communicate in

---

<sup>17</sup> Agustono, "Rekonstruksi Identitas Etnik ; Sejarah Sosial-Politik Orang Pakpak Di Sumatera Utara 1958-2003."

<sup>18</sup> Melalatoa, *Ensiklopedi Suku Bangsa Di Indonesia ; Jilid L-Z*.

several local languages (Minang, Boang, Haloban, Nias, Pakpak, Aceh, and Javanese). Based on BPS data (2010), from 120 villages / villages spread across ten sub-districts in Singkil Regency, it can be seen the distribution of these ethnic groups. Therefore, Singkil is basically a home for ethnically integrated groups in one Singkil Regency identity.

## 2. Strengthening Awareness of Ethnic and Religious Identity in Singkil (Hulu).

As already explained, the meaning of Singkil was originally an area affiliated with a cross-ethnic and religious population composition. At first glance, on the surface it appears that people live side by side and get along well in the same identity as "Singkil people." However, when immersed, appearing ripples of identity recognition based on ethnic and religious identity. Moreover, in the last half decade, the emergence of several associations in the name of the "savior of the Singkil tribe" has become increasingly transparent as a movement and public discourse for the Singkil identity for a group of people there.

One of the actors in the movement to save the Singkil tribe, from Rundeng, Subulussalam, DMH (57 years) tells how he worked with several colleagues to build awareness in the upstream community in Singkil and Subulussalam as Singkil, not Pakpak. DMH is an elite in the Subulussalam City Government. In a number of rituals in the name of the local government, he often inserts speeches on the Singkil ethnic identity terms. One of his speeches was when the closing of the MTQ Subulussalam festival in 2018. In front of thousands of masses, DMH not only delivered religious messages and the meaning of the scriptures, he also measured the awareness of the local community, the importance of maintaining awareness of the Singkil ethnic identity. "... *Singkil are as ethnic as other ethnic groups in Indonesia, and are not Pakpak sub-ethnic groups.*" That is the sentence that is often said every time I meet writers and researchers, including the festival which is then videotaped by the local government's Public Relations department.

When interviewing DMH, he firmly stated that Singkil was not limited to the meaning of the area inhabited by a cross-ethnic group of people, but rather ethnic groups. The books of Lukman Sinar, are often the main reference, about the suitability of the community in an area that deserves to be called ethnic.<sup>19</sup> For almost decades, DMH along with several other actors have campaigned about the identity of the Singkil people. In this movement several other influential elites from the old group, such as AK who are retired civil servants and are now

---

<sup>19</sup> H.T Luckman Sinar and Dkk, *Mengenal Adat Budaya Pesisir Tapanuli Tengah –Sibolga* (Medan: Forkala Sumut, 2010).

## **“ENDA KALAK SINGKEL” STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL**

partisans of one political party, and participated in one of the former vice-regents of the MV as well as having spawned a number of Singkil affirmation books are tribal.<sup>20</sup>

They keep moving to voice Singkil is a tribe, and erase the stereotype of Pakpak Boang that is attached to Singkil. Beginning in 2018, this association established a community on behalf of the Singkil Tribal Cultural Protection Foundation (Yapeksi), by recruiting and involving several young generations as the successors to the identity movement. One of the routine activities carried out is monthly discussion and talk with the theme of Singkil Hulu culture, this monthly discussion is called "*sinanggal*."

In the midst of strengthening awareness of the Singkil ethnic identity, conflicts over houses of worship that dragged religious identities between the upstream Muslim population and Pakpak Christians, and have been going on for decades are still taking place in a silent conflict until now. This conflict, increasingly sharpened the distance between the upstream community and Pakpak. Excess, Pakpak meaning part of Christian identity began to thicken, even this variable is the reason for upstream Muslims no longer want to be identified as Pakpak sub-ethnicity. Adapted from the Misbah study, religious friction in Singkil was caused more by the practice of agitation carried out by a few irresponsible communities - because of political interests.<sup>21</sup>

Non-Muslim Pakpak residents living in Singkil Regency, especially in settlements bordering North Sumatra have been around for a long time, especially in the Dutch colonial era. Most of them are oil palm plantation workers who deliberately brought by the Dutch. Therefore, their settlements are generally covered by old palm oil plantations. Some churches have been founded on deaconia which developed in Christian communities. The growth and development of the church is so rapid, triggering the social relations between Singkil residents. Moreover, considering that Singkil is part of Aceh which is identical with Islamic identity.

Between the Singkil Hulu and Pakpak communities do have many similarities, ranging from language to the use of clans. Similarities between Singkil and Pakpak according to the study of Alamsyah et al in their research report on language have phoneme closeness, and

---

<sup>20</sup> Mu'adz Vohry, *Nanggakh Basa Singkil* (Singkil: Yapiqi, 2017); Vohry, *Warisan Sejarah Dan Budaya Singkil*.

<sup>21</sup> T Lembong Misbah, "Interaksi Sosial Keagamaan Masyarakat Singkil Pasca Perjanjian Tahun 1979 (Upaya Konstruktif Dalam Merekat Hubungan Antarumat Beragama Yang Kondusif)."

dialect in their pronunciation.<sup>22</sup> In addition, most clans are similar between the Muslim upstream community and the Christian Pakpak, such as Bancin, Cibro, Manik, Tumangger, and several others. Also, most of the upstream and Pakpak residents still admit that they are in the same ancestors line.<sup>23</sup> In fact, it is not uncommon in one Pakpak tribe family in Singkil, there are family members who embrace Islam and some others in Christianity. However, this phenomenon has never been found in upstream community settlements that settle on the banks of rivers. Because indeed, they are the majority of Muslims, although in the use of clans cannot be ignored, between the upstream and Pakpak are the same clan.

Some previous studies tend to include Singkil as an area inhabited by residents of Pakpak Boang. Pakpak is one of the ethnic groups that formed the Batak people. There are six clans who built the Batak people, including the Karo, Toba, Simalungun, Angkola, Mandailing, and Pakpak (Dairi) people. The Pakpak tribe is scattered in several districts / cities in North Sumatra and Aceh, namely in the Dairi Regency, Pakpak Bharat Regency, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, Central Tapanuli, Aceh Singkil Regency, and Subulussalam-Aceh City.<sup>24</sup> The study that called Singkil was Pakpak, was indirectly rejected by the Singkil tribal movement group, for them Pakpak was very different from Singkil upstream by referring to the symbols of traditional houses, traditional clothing, and religion. On the other hand, thickening of ethnic identity and conflict in the name of religion is almost unheard of in the Singkil coastal area. Also, there are no other ethnic stereotypes attached to coastal communities such as Pakpak in the upstream. Singkil coastal area is located at three settlement points; settlements along the road leading to the government center of Singkil, Kepulauan Banyak and settlements separated by river mouths that are directly connected to the sea (Kuala Baru). The inhabitants of the coast of the archipelago can be marked from the physical face, most of them are descendants of Nias, especially those living on Pulau Banyak and Kuala Baru. As for those who settled along the coast towards the center of government, generally from Barus, Sibolga, Mandailing and West Sumatra. As far as observation is concerned, coastal residents rarely identify themselves as the Singkil people, but rather are limited to the term “Orang Singkil.”

---

<sup>22</sup> Teuku Alamsyah, Armia, and Azwardi, “Pengaruh Bahasa Pakpak Di Wilayah Perbatasan Aceh Singkil Terhadap Pemakaian Bahasa Boang Singkil Di Aceh Singkil” (Banda Aceh, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Ansor, “We Are From the Same Ancestors’: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporay Aceh Singkil,” *Al Albab, Borneo Journal of Religious Studies* 3, no. No. 1 Juni (2014): 3–24; Fairusy, “‘Menjadi Singkel Menjadi Aceh, Menjadi Aceh Menjadi Islam’ (Membaca Identitas Masyarakat Majemuk Dan Refleksi Konflik Agama Di Wilayah Perbatasan Aceh Singkel)”; Fairusy, *Singkel : Sejarah, Etnisitas Dan Dinamika Sosial*.

<sup>24</sup> Hisarma Saragih, “Zending Di Tanah Batak, Studi Tentang Konversi Di Kalangan Masyarakat Simalungun 1930-1942” (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2000).

## **“ENDA KALAK SINGKEL” STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL**

In the coastal area of Singkil, non-Muslim communities can only be found in the Pulau Banyak. The majority of them are migrants from Nias who have lived there for a long time. Economic relations in the fishing industry between Muslim tauke and Christian fishermen have blurred the boundaries of identity beliefs.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the attitude of identity as one islander has become a social cohesion so far. The wheel of an established economy, encouraging the integration of coastal communities is more secure.

The series of events in the middle of the Singkil Hulu and Pakpak communities became the basis for reading the phenomenon of identity thickening in the Singkil community. Therefore, it is necessary to dig deeper into the motives that have led to the tightening of ethnic and religious identity in Singkil. Berger and Luckmann explain the influence of the social environment in the formation of identity.<sup>26</sup> According to Habermas (1975), the position of the identity of traditional societies is more secure and cannot be changed, in contrast to modern global societies, where identity can be obtained and can be lost, highly dependent on individual desires. Modernization has pushed identity to become relative. In a broader context, identity as meaning for social actors, determines how the objectives of certain actions are symbolically identified.<sup>27</sup>

Singkil which was originally a regional identity, was composed in the current context by the actors to obtain tribal identity. Motivation, motives and encouragement of change into the Singkil tribe are;

*First*, The existence of the people of Singkil hulu is considered low in the pace of Singkil development as a district. The term village people who are attached to them is no longer interpreted as residents who live in villages along the river. "Villagers" for the Singkil tribal movement actors have claimed to have a low connotation, compared to coastal Singkil who are placed more dignified. Singkil Hulu has long been eliminated as marginalized communities by placing them as Pakpak sub-ethnic groups according to the Singkil tribal actors.

*Secondly*, since Singkil became part of Aceh, the religious (Islamic) identity has gained a privileged place. Becoming Singkil became Aceh, Becoming Aceh became Islam,

---

<sup>25</sup> Fairusy, “‘Menjadi Singkel Menjadi Aceh, Menjadi Aceh Menjadi Islam’ (Membaca Identitas Masyarakat Majemuk Dan Refleksi Konflik Agama Di Wilayah Perbatasan Aceh Singkel).”

<sup>26</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality ; A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (England: Penguin Books, 1967).

<sup>27</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad ; Islam, Militansi, Dan Pencarian Identitas Di Indonesia Pasca-Orde Baru* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2008).

along with widespread social and administrative recognition.<sup>28</sup> Pakpak people who (still) adhere to Christianity, are not fully regarded as Singkil people in culture and identity. Therefore, the Singkil tribe is a new strategy to distinguish Muslims from Pakpaks who are still Christian. Here, identity has been interpreted as a set of symbols or signs, both physical, material and behavioral, which makes a person or a group of individuals different from the group of other individual groups.<sup>29</sup>

*Third*, political motivation. Since Singkil became its own district, twice the local Regional Head (regent) is a representative of the upstream community clan. Demographically, the population of Singkil upstream is indeed more than that of coastal Singkil. However, in the third period, the elected regent was precisely from the Javanese transmigration clan. Similar conditions also occur in Subulussalam, as a fractional municipality of Singkil Regency. Representatives were elected in the third period of the Pakpak clan. This condition, indirectly is a severe blow to the upstream community. So, when there was a discourse on the construction of the Pakpak tribe in Subulussalam City, there was a wave of rejection on 12 November 2019 by local students.

From a series of events that emerged in the middle of the Singkil community, the meaning of the Singkil people living in one region began to transform to form a new identification, the Singkil Tribe. This condition shifts the old definition from various studies that have included Singkil as sub-Pakpak, now Singkil is a tribe. In addition, friction of religious identity contributes to the thickening of the upstream community's identity as the Singkil tribe, as well as blurring the appearance of clans between the upstream community and Pakpak. Singkil (hulu) is Muslim, and Pakpak is Christian is an implied connotation. This condition, what is meant as the process of identity construction, starts from aspects of subjectivation, objectivation, to internalization.<sup>30</sup>

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

The rise of ethnic awareness and the thickening of religious identity in Singkil has been a social dynamic in the last half decade on the Aceh border. From the description above, there are some important things to underline;

---

<sup>28</sup> Fairusy, “‘Menjadi Singkel Menjadi Aceh, Menjadi Aceh Menjadi Islam’ (Membaca Identitas Masyarakat Majemuk Dan Refleksi Konflik Agama Di Wilayah Perbatasan Aceh Singkel).”

<sup>29</sup> Heddy Shri Ahimsa-Putra, “Budaya Bangsa, Jati Diri, Dan Integrasi Nasional ; Sebuah Teori,” *Jejak Nusantara* I (2013).

<sup>30</sup> Ibnu Mujib, Irwan Abdullah, and Heru Nugroho, “Gagasan Aceh Baru : Pembentukan Identitas Aceh Dari Dalam Reaktualisasi Ruang Publik Bagi Aksi Pengelolaan Kearifan Lokal Pasca-Konflik Dan Tsunami,” *Kawistara* 4 (2014): 49–62.

## **“ENDA KALAK SINGKEL” STRENGTHENING CONSCIOUSNESS OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF ACEH’S BORDER; ETHNIC CONTESTATION AND RELIGION IN SINGKIL**

First, community studies on the Aceh border must find a place in the context of social studies in Aceh, through this research it appears that people living in the Aceh border experience social dynamics and change as the region enters into Aceh, particularly from identity transformation.

Second, the people who inhabit Singkil Regency, can no longer be generalized and identified as the Pakpak Boang tribe, as is usual in previous studies that often identify the Singkil community is Pakpak. This condition is in line with the emergence of Singkil ethnic identity awareness. Also, Singkil as an area only identifies itself based on pesisir and hulu identity rather than Pakpak.

Third, the identity and thickening of Singkil's identity as a tribe that is driven by some upstream community actors, is a cultural response to their condition which has often been considered second-class people in the pace of Singkil development compared to coastal communities. In addition, the stereotype of Pakpak Boang pinned by other parties on the upstream Singkil identity seems very disturbing of their identity as Singkil people, the majority of whom embrace Islam and have long settled in Singkil Regency as a region that had triumphed in the 17th century AD.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Agustono, Budi. “Rekonstruksi Identitas Etnik ; Sejarah Sosial-Politik Orang Pakpak Di Sumatera Utara 1958-2003.” Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, 2010.
- Ahimsa-Putra, Heddy Shri. “Budaya Bangsa, Jati Diri, Dan Integrasi Nasional ; Sebuah Teori.” *Jejak Nusantara* I (2013).
- Alamsyah, Teuku, Armia, and Azwardi. “Pengaruh Bahasa Pakpak Di Wilayah Perbatasan Aceh Singkil Terhadap Pemakaian Bahasa Boang Singkil Di Aceh Singkil.” Banda Aceh, 2006.
- Ansor, Muhammad. “We Are From the Same Ancestors’: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporay Aceh Singkil.” *Al Albab, Borneo Journal of Religious Studies* 3, no. No. 1 Juni (2014): 3–24.
- Azra, Azyumardi. *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII Dan XVIII*. Bandung: Mizan, 1999.
- Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality ; A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. England: Penguin Books, 1967.
- Creswell, John W. *Research Design ; Pendekatan Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, Dan Mixed (Edisi Ketiga)*. Ketiga. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2010.
- Fairusy, Muhajir Al. “Menjadi Singkel Menjadi Aceh, Menjadi Aceh Menjadi Islam’ (Membaca Identitas Masyarakat Majemuk Dan Refleksi Konflik Agama Di Wilayah Perbatasan Aceh Singkel).” *Soiologi USK* 9, no. 1 (2016): 17–33.
- . *Singkel : Sejarah, Etnisitas Dan Dinamika Sosial*. Edited by Muhajir Al-Fairusy. I. Bali: Pustaka Larasan, 2016.
- . “Sistem Patronase (Tauke-Palawik) Dalam Dunia Ekonomi Perikanan (Studi

- Hubungan Kerja Nelayan Pulau Banyak, Aceh Singkil)." Universitas Gadjah Mada Yogyakarta, 2012.
- Guillot (Peny), Claude. *Lobu Tua : Sejarah Awal Baru*. Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2014.
- Hasan, Noorhaidi. *Laskar Jihad ; Islam, Militansi, Dan Pencarian Identitas Di Indonesia Pasca-Orde Baru*. Jakarta: LP3ES, 2008.
- Jaya, Sadri Ondang. *Singkil Dalam Konstelasi Sejarah Aceh*. Kediri: FAM Publishing, 2015.
- Jorgensen, Danny L. *Participant Observation ; A Methodology for Human Studies*. London, United Kingdom, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1989.
- Makmur, Riniwati. *Orang Padang Tionghoa ; Dimana Bumi Dipijak, Disinan Langit Dijunjuang*. Jakarta: Kompas, 2018.
- Melalatoa, Junus M. *Ensiklopedi Suku Bangsa Di Indonesia ; Jilid L-Z*. Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1995.
- Mujib, Ibnu, Irwan Abdullah, and Heru Nugroho. "Gagasan Aceh Baru : Pembentukan Identitas Aceh Dari Dalam Reaktualisasi Ruang Publik Bagi Aksi Pengelolaan Kearifan Lokal Pasca-Konflik Dan Tsunami." *Kawistara* 4 (2014): 49–62.
- Saragih, Hisarma. "Zending Di Tanah Batak, Studi Tentang Konversi Di Kalangan Masyarakat Simalungun 1930-1942." Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2000.
- Sinar, H.T Luckman, and Dkk. *Mengenal Adat Budaya Pesisir Tapanuli Tengah –Sibolga*. Medan: Forkala Sumut, 2010.
- Spradley, James P. *Metode Etnografi (Terjemahan)*. Jakarta: PT. Gramedia, 1997.
- Sumardi, Mulyanto, and Dkk. *Penelitian Agama : Masalah Dan Pemikiran*. Jakarta: PT. Sinar Agape Press, 1982.
- T Lembong Misbah. "Interaksi Sosial Keagamaan Masyarakat Singkil Pasca Perjanjian Tahun 1979 (Upaya Konstruktif Dalam Merekat Hubungan Antarumat Beragama Yang Kondusif)." Universitas Islam Negeri Ar Raniry, Banda Aceh, 2009.
- Vohry, Mu'adz. *Nanggakh Basa Singkil*. Singkil: Yapiqi, 2017.
- . *Warisan Sejarah Dan Budaya Singkil*. Singkil: Yapiqi, 2013.
- Wahyuni, Sri, and Dkk. "Makalah" "Laporan Budaya Masyarakat Suku Bangsa Singkil." Banda Aceh, 2003.
- Zed, Mestika. *Saudagar Pariaman Menerjang Ombak Membangun Maskapai*. Depok: LP3ES, 2017.