

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND MIGRANTS IN BUILDING TOLERANCE IN ASAHAN REGION

Suwardi Lubis, Rizabuana, Riko Andika Rahmat Pohan

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara

Fakulty of Vocational Education, Universitas Sumatera Utara

CORRESPONDENCE: ✉ suwardi@usu.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study explores intercultural communication between migrant communities and indigenous populations in Asahan, North Sumatra Province. The research adopts a qualitative methodology utilizing Symbolic Interaction and Uncertainty and Anxiety Management theories. The primary objective is to understand and analyze intercultural communication between indigenous people and migrants in fostering tolerance in Asahan. Employing a qualitative approach, the research emphasizes meaning over generalization. It elucidates how intercultural communication contributes to tolerance-building among residents. Findings indicate that effective communication exists between migrants and the indigenous Asahan community, despite initial uncertainty and anxiety among migrants, as Asahan is reputed for its tolerance, and its people are notably welcoming to newcomers. Symbolic interactions give rise to new meanings and social structures, aligning with the essence of symbolic interaction theory, which posits that meaning and social structure are created and maintained through social interaction. Intercultural communication occurs daily in activities such as shopping, taking children to school, and hosting events. The intended outcome of this research is a publication in a reputable international journal.

Keywords: Communication, Cross-cultural, Society

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a process through which interaction occurs between a communicator and a communicant, involving the exchange of messages either directly or indirectly. Communication can be regarded as one of the most crucial aspects of human life. Social interaction becomes meaningless if

communication does not proceed properly, thus making social relationships a key determinant in the success of communication processes. Misinterpretations often arise due to the differing perceptions of individuals. Human civilization has evolved to become highly complex. Humans, as social beings,

live in groups and communicate with one another, while also being individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds. They encounter each other either face-to-face or through communication media. Consequently, it is not surprising that today's world is progressing towards becoming a global village.

According to Herimanto & Winarno (2014:19), this condition drives humans to utilize their intellect to create, innovate, manage, improve, develop, and enhance existing things for human benefit. Intercultural communication refers to situations where the sender of a message belongs to one culture and the receiver belongs to another. In such situations, the communicator or communicant is faced with challenges where a message encoded in one cultural context must be decoded in

another (Deddy Mulyana & Jalaludin Rahmat, 2010:20).

The phenomenon of intercultural communication is also evident in Asahan Regency, North Sumatra Province, where a significant number of migrants coexist harmoniously with the indigenous population. These migrants come from various regions such as Java, Padang, Nias, Batak Toba, and other parts of Indonesia. The diverse cultural backgrounds of these migrants influence the communication dynamics within the community, yet harmonious relationships among the members of the village are well maintained. Asahan was selected as the research location due to its ethnic diversity, necessitating a study on cross-cultural communication between local and migrant communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Intercultural Communication

Communication and culture are two inseparable concepts. Both focus on

the various ways and processes through which humans communicate across communities or social groups. Hall initially differentiated between

high-context cultures and low-context cultures. Low-context cultures are characterized by explicit, verbal communication, direct and straightforward speaking styles. Adherents of this culture tend to "say what they mean" and "mean what they say." Conversely, high-context cultures rely heavily on implicit, indirect, and nuanced messages, where the actual meaning may be conveyed through non-verbal cues, voice intonation, hand gestures, and deeper contextual understanding. These cultures are generally more accommodating and tolerant of diverse societal cultures. Verbal statements in high-context cultures may sometimes contradict non-verbal cues. People from high-context cultures are more adept at interpreting non-verbal behavior and expect the same from others. High-context communication is typically durable, resistant to change, and binds the group that practices it. Individuals from high-context cultures are more aware of cultural filtering processes compared to those from low-context cultures.

2.2. Elements of Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication occurs within a social context that is dynamic and evolves over time, influenced by specific situations and conditions, depending on the effectiveness of its elements. According to Alo Liliweri (2011), the key elements of the intercultural communication process include:

a. Communicator:

In intercultural communication, the communicator initiates the exchange of messages with another party, known as the communicant. The communicator comes from a specific cultural background (including ethnic, racial, demographic factors such as age, gender, and political systems), which may differ from that of the communicant. The communicant is the recipient of the message, becoming the target or focus of the communication. The communicator must ensure the

message is engaging enough to capture attention and be comprehensible to the communicant.

b. Message/Symbol:

In the communication process, the message consists of thoughts, ideas, emotions sent by the communicator to the communicant in symbolic form. Symbols represent specific meanings, such as spoken or written words, or non-verbal expressions conveyed through body language, colors, artifacts, images, clothing, etc., which are generally understood connotatively.

c. Purpose of Intercultural Communication:

The main goals of intercultural communication include expressing social identity and bridging cultural differences by acquiring new information, learning about previously unknown cultural elements, and seeking entertainment or relief. Intensive intercultural

communication can change people's perceptions and attitudes, even enhancing human creativity. Frequent miscommunications in intercultural settings often arise due to a lack of awareness or inability to adopt effective cross-cultural communication strategies (Alo Liliweri, 2012).

According to William Howell (2011) as cited in Alo Liliweri (2012), individuals have varying levels of awareness and competence in intercultural communication, which include:

1. Awareness of being unable to understand other cultures – an honest recognition of one's limitations, which can motivate effective intercultural communication efforts.
2. Awareness of being able to understand other cultures – the ideal state, where awareness drives one to comprehend, maintain, and manage intercultural interactions.

3. Unawareness of being able to understand other cultures – a state where a person is capable but unaware of their own ability to comprehend others' behaviors.
4. Unawareness of being unable to cope with cultural differences – a complete lack of awareness about one's inability to engage with other cultural behaviors.

Intercultural communication is essential to foster mutual trust and respect among culturally diverse groups, narrowing misunderstandings and dissolving racial, ethnic, and primordial prejudices (Litvin, in Purwasito, 2013:47).

2.3. Tolerance

The concept of tolerance is closely related to one's attitude toward diversity. It involves respecting, appreciating, being empathetic, and providing opportunities for differing perspectives and existence. Tolerance implies refraining from insult, criticism, or self-righteousness in a

shared social environment. For example, enjoying music through a tape recorder illustrates tolerance: while everyone has the right to enjoy music, one must consider the surrounding conditions. Playing loud music during a neighbor's mourning or a solemn event is inappropriate and disruptive. Conversely, enjoying music at a reasonable volume shows respect for others' comfort—a practical example of tolerance.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, which, according to Sugiyono (2011:9), is a research method grounded in post-positivist philosophy, used to investigate natural settings, with the researcher acting as the key instrument. Data collection is conducted through triangulation (a combination of techniques). Data analysis is inductive or qualitative in nature, with the research findings emphasizing meaning rather than generalization. This qualitative approach allows for a detailed exploration of intercultural communication between indigenous

residents and migrants in fostering tolerance in Asahan Regency, North Sumatra Province.

The rationale for adopting this approach is the researcher's intent to obtain in-depth and detailed information from selected sources. The collected data serve as the basis for analyzing intercultural communication dynamics between indigenous and migrant populations in relation to tolerance-building.

As a qualitative study, data collection applies four commonly used techniques in qualitative research: in-depth, open-ended interviews; direct, participatory observation; and the analysis of written documents.

In accordance with the qualitative ethnographic model proposed by Spradley (2014), the data gathered from interviews are analyzed using ethnographic interview analysis, domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis. Data obtained from direct and participatory observations are similarly analyzed through domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Communication Between Indigenous and Migrant Communities

Asahan Regency is located on the eastern coastal region of North Sumatra Province, at an elevation of 0–1000 meters above sea level. Geographically, Asahan lies between 2°03'00"–3°26'00" North Latitude and 99°01'–100°00' East Longitude, covering an area of 371,945 hectares. It consists of 13 sub-districts and 176 definitive villages/urban wards, with administrative borders as follows:

1. North: bordered by Batubara and Simalungun Regencies
2. East: bordered by the Malacca Strait
3. South: bordered by Labuhan Batu and Toba Samosir Regencies
4. West: bordered by Simalungun Regency.

As of 2007, the religious demographics of Asahan were predominantly Muslim (594,250 people or 87.83%), followed by

Protestants (65,769 or 9.72%), Buddhists (9,079 or 1.34%), Catholics (7,085 or 1.05%), and Hindus (382 or 0.06%). The largest ethnic group is Javanese (59.11%), followed by Batak (29.68%), Malays (5.32%), and others including Minangkabau, Banjar, Acehnese, and others (5.89%).

Religious services and activities are actively maintained and supported as a foundation for facing various societal challenges. For example, in 2007, 306 pilgrims from Asahan undertook the Hajj pilgrimage, coordinated by the local government—a slight decrease from 394 pilgrims in 2006.

The majority of Asahan's population is of Malay ethnicity (approximately 75%), often referred to as Asahan Malays or Batubara Malays. Other significant ethnic groups include Batak from Toba, Simalungun, and Mandailing regions. The Batak Toba are the largest Batak group in the area, particularly in the sub-district of Bandar Pasir Mandoge, where they are locally known as "Batak Pardembanan." Interestingly, in coastal areas like Tanjung Balai,

some Batak individuals prefer to identify as Malays, despite having traditional Batak clan names. This is because many Batak people in coastal Asahan have assimilated into Malay culture. Additionally, urban centers like Kisaran are home to Chinese Indonesians, while Javanese transmigrants are also widely settled across the region.

The existence of diverse human social groups necessitates different terms to distinguish various social units, such as society, social category, social class, community, group, and association (Koentjaraningrat, 2009:115). Koentjaraningrat further states that society is a collection of people who interact with one another, forming a social unit with the infrastructure necessary for interaction. Modern states exemplify such units, with complex communication infrastructures such as roads, railways, air routes, telecommunications, radio, television systems, national newspapers, and national celebrations that facilitate intensive interactions.

Smaller geographic entities allow for more intensive interaction than larger ones, especially in archipelagic countries like Indonesia. Infrastructure fosters interaction among people in a social unit, but the mere potential for interaction does not guarantee that it will occur.

Soekanto (1990:162) defines society as a group of individuals who live together in a way that fulfills essential needs, creating mutual social relationships. Society refers to a geographical and social unit marked by a specific degree of social cohesion among its members. Societies always have a locality, even nomadic ones, which gather at specific times for rituals or ceremonies. Societies with permanent settlements often develop strong solidarity due to shared living spaces.

Soekanto (1990:164) identifies the following unifying elements of society:

1. Shared Sentiment:

Individuals identify with the group, aligning personal interests with those of the group, fostering solidarity.

2. Common Fate: Individuals recognize their roles within the group, which provides them with a clear social position.

3. Mutual Dependence:

Individuals rely on their community for both physical and psychological needs, finding protection and identity within it.

These elements manifest in distinct cultural behaviors, such as dialects unique to specific communities.

Communication patterns between indigenous Malays and migrant Javanese in Asahan reflect this social structure. Javanese migrants often interact among themselves in Javanese, yet not all Javanese in Asahan engage in intensive interactions with others solely based on shared ethnicity. Not all gatherings constitute a society—e.g., people queuing for street food may interact briefly, but without enduring social ties.

True social cohesion requires stable, ongoing patterns of behavior that evolve into distinct customs. Groups

qualify as societies when they exhibit systems of interaction, customs, norms, continuity, and a shared sense of identity. Groups may also have organizational structures and leadership systems, forming and dissolving repeatedly.

In Asahan, interactions between indigenous and migrant communities are harmonious, free from significant social friction. Mutual respect and tolerance are prioritized in these intergroup relations. The societal ideal is harmonious, respectful co-existence, with critical awareness towards disturbances and personal ambition. Javanese in Asahan recognize hierarchical social relations, and they generally exhibit modesty in social interactions.

4.2 The Role of Society in Maintaining Tolerance Toward Migrants

The practice of supporting tolerance in a multicultural society, such as in Asahan Regency, is crucial and necessitates deliberate efforts to ensure that these values are continually upheld. It is important to recognize that multicultural societies

inherently possess potential for division and conflict. The theoretical framework adopted in this study highlights a basic analogy of coexistence: each individual inherently differs from others in terms of knowledge, judgment, interests, and experiences.

Even the smallest social unit—the family—does not always maintain perfect balance, despite clear definitions of roles, values, and norms within it. Social control within a family might be relatively manageable, yet conflicts can still arise, threatening familial cohesion. In such small units, unity and disunity are always possible, and this reality is amplified in larger social groupings such as neighborhoods, broader communities, and particularly, multicultural societies (Boty, 2017:6). Asahan Regency exemplifies a multicultural society.

In Asahan, various ethnic groups live in close proximity. The dominant Malay-Asahan community shares residential areas with Javanese and other ethnic groups. Religious institutions such as mosques, Islamic

boarding schools, Buddhist temples (Viharas), and Chinese temples (Klentengs) stand amidst these diverse communities. Daily interactions—whether in passing, during community events, or at places of worship—are commonplace in Asahan, presenting both opportunities for unity and risks of conflict.

Social integration within a society is a fundamental goal of every nation, as it is essential for achieving national greatness and collective objectives. A society plagued by constant conflict and discord suffers both physically and materially, including damage to infrastructure and public facilities (Agus, 2016:22). In Asahan, there is a strong awareness of the importance of preserving unity, as reflected in the community's behaviors and attitudes. Harmonious inter-religious life remains a central aspiration.

Support for social integration is evident through the roles played by key community figures in Karangturi Village, including village leaders, religious figures, and youth leaders.

At the level of religious leadership, leaders from various faiths maintain strong interfaith and interethnic relations. The religious leaders encountered during this study exemplify tolerance by engaging with each other respectfully, demonstrating that mutual regard can prevail even at the leadership level. Such harmony among leaders serves as a powerful example for their followers.

Among the youth, support for tolerance is demonstrated through active engagement with both older and younger generations. Young people do not isolate themselves from the broader community. Instead, they consciously participate in communal activities, such as village clean-up efforts and collective work projects. Respect for elders is a deeply held value among the youth, evident in their courteous behavior, such as greeting and shaking hands with community members, especially religious leaders in Asahan.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion drawn from this research is that the community in

Asahan Regency, predominantly composed of indigenous Malays, upholds strong values of tolerance in their interactions with migrant communities. Potential conflicts arising from multiculturalism in Asahan have been effectively mitigated through continuous community engagement at various social levels, including religious leaders, youth groups, and traditional institutions.

The patterns of both individual and group communication among the diverse ethnic and religious communities in Asahan demonstrate a well-maintained harmony. This cohesion reflects the community's commitment to mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, ensuring that social integration remains a cornerstone of life in this multicultural region.

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