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Impact of the Implementation of Regional Autonomy on Local Wisdom in the Colonial Era: (Case Study of Gemeente Pematang Siantar)

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Abstract

Decentralization as a precursor to the implementation of regional autonomy in Indonesia has been an issue for quite a long time and has been going on since the colonial era. It was implemented as a form of freedom given to a region to manage itself based on its own needs, as part of a liberalistic democratization. The manifestation of decentralization in the colonial period took form of gemeente, an autonomous city that later became city as we know today. Gemeente Pematang Siantar had its own uniqueness. This Gemeente was known as "Christelijke Gemeente". The region, which was formed with the development of plantation, transformed into a settlement dominated by Christians. The changes that occurred until Pematang Siantar became a gemeente will be discussed in this paper. In addition, this paper will also discuss the impact of the implementation of decentralization (regional autonomy) policies on population demography and changes in local wisdom in the community. Pematang Siantar is currently the region with the highest rate of tolerance due to the multicultural population as a result of its appointment as a gemeente.

Keywords: Regional Autonomy; Gemeente; Pematang Siantar; Local Wisdom

1. Introduction

For a long time, cultural identity, which is based on the characteristics that exist in a region or a nation, has been an urgent matter to be considered. It represents a person's identity and unifies the nation, while also acting as a differentiator amongst nations. In general, sharing the same identity helps bring a nation together. This idea of equality instills pride, love, and a sense of belonging in the region and nation.

Despite being a pluralistic, multicultural society, Indonesia has created a national identity in reaching the objectives of togetherness for a long period. Furthermore, Indonesia is made up of numerous islands, each with its own distinct culture. Both of these are obstacles to achieving national unity and cohesion. However, the presence of Indonesian national and cultural identity in its regions is decreasing, if not completely disappearing, particularly among millennials.

Similarly, to the government system, any national circumstance and regulation has an impact on the regions, and vice versa. The decline in regional cultural identity influences the loss of national identity on a national scale. This has been going on for a long time, dating back to the colonial period. From the emporium through the empire, European civilization and culture were regarded as superior and modern. Civilization, in general, is a phrase used to describe a civilization that is owned by a group of people who live in a specific location and have high morals and a sophisticated culture [1].

East Sumatra (today North Sumatra) is one of the regions where cultural identity is fading. People who lived near the coast in East Sumatra, mostly Malay, were thought to have a more sophisticated culture than those who resided in rural areas like Karo, Simalungun, etc [2]. Dutch colonialism and its development, on the other hand, modified this paradigm through their policies.

The fading of a region's local wisdom needs a further investigation, not only from a cultural approach, but also from the historical background of the place, which has resulted in disintegration, which frequently generates disintegration between people and diminishes the values of local wisdom itself. The Dutch colonialism, which allowed a region the freedom to set its own policies, had a significant impact on the cultural changes that happened in the Simalungun community, particularly in Pematang Siantar, in this context.

2. Method

In this research, primary and secondary data were collected. These data were obtained through observation in Pematang Siantar City as the research object area. Collection of supporting data in competent institutions such as the North Sumatra Provincial Library, Medan City Public Library, North Sumatra University Library, Tengku Luckman Sinar Library, and Department of Library and Archival of Pematang Siantar were also conducted in order to collect archives, books, and other forms of publication that are relevant to the topic of this research. In addition, interviews with local communities and government agencies were also conducted. The obtained data were verified and interpreted into a written form.

3. General Description of Pematang Siantar

Pematang Siantar was the capital of the Siantar Kingdom in the Simalungun region. Pematang comes from the word "Pematang" in the Simalungun language which means the village (village) which is the central and residence of the kings in Simalungun. Based on its historical background, Simalungun was one of the 7 independent regions that was formed after the downfall of the Nagur Kingdom. The Simalungun area was less populated, which fits to the meaning of its name, "Si Balungun," which means "quiet or silent" in Simalungun. According to some accounts, it derives from the words "Sima" and "Lungun," which refer to the land that was left or abandoned after the Nagur Kingdom collapsed [3]. The Siantar Kingdom covered a total area of 93.510 Ha [4], with subregions including Bandar, Sidamanik, Sipolha, Nagahuta, Silomangi, and Pematang Siantar as the capital [5].

The Simalungun government hierarchy, including Pematang Siantar, was supported by its subregions, which served as providers of the capital's everyday necessities, also known as the *tungkat* area [6]. The highest power in this country was held by the King, who served as both the head of government and the leader of the tribe. For generations, the Damanik clan reigned and dominated the Siantar kingdom as the primary clan. The Simalungun People were the first inhabitants of this area and followed a kinship system (*marga*). They occupied the areas as agreed upon for generations.

Rice fields are the main source of income for the people of Pematang Siantar. This is due to the ideal climatic conditions for rice farming in Pematang Siantar. In addition, this natural environment encourages the growth of other commodities, including tea, rubber, coffee, tobacco, and sisal. There are also livestock such as horses and pigs, as well as wild animals like bears, elephants, and other animals.

Residents believed in ancestral spirits and had to uphold moral values before the Dutch annexation and the arrival of Zending Missionaries in Pematang Siantar and other Simalungun regions. They were required to do good to others and believe that spirits (*sinumbah*, *simagod*, *begu*, and *homin*) can relate to the living humans. This tradition was believed to maintain the harmonization between humans and the ancestral spirits. This belief persisted until 1901, when Islam spread to the Bandar area and eventually to Pematang Siantar. Furthermore, after the fall of King Sang Na Ualuh in 1907, the Dutch cut off the spread of this belief by partnering with Zending Missionaries in the interests of Dutch colonization [7].

4. The Transformation of Traditional Town into a *Gemeente*

The Simalungun people, who lived in East Sumatra's rural areas, were seen as exclusive and underdeveloped. Several places in Simalungun, in fact, were involved in trading with outside communities.^[8] Pematang Siantar was

chosen as the kingdom's capital due to its strategic location, which enabled an easier management of subregions and trade distribution between the coast and rural areas.

The Pematang Siantar region experienced a rapid development during the leadership of King Sang Na Ualuh Damanik (1888-1906). During his reign, King Sang Na Ualuh prioritized policies based on the values of local wisdom. This was successful, and the Siantar Kingdom arose as a result. The creation of the Bolon House (Palace) in Pematang Siantar, complete with a Balei (a place to arrange discussions), a Lopu (a place to rest), and a Jambur (a place to gather), highlighted his successful leadership.^[9] During the time of construction, King Sang Na Ualuh encouraged the community to do *marharoan*, which essentially means working together to attain a common goal.^[10] This was one of the existing local wisdoms, and it contained values that may assist the community in addressing and meeting their needs.

Not only for the construction, by working together, the community were able to develop new skills through various activities. Women pounded rice together in a *Lesung Bolon* (a big mortar) to provide meal for soldiers on the battlefield. Men participated in another practice known as *suro*, which could be described as "compulsory work". They took turns in working at and taking care of the king's garden. *Suro* was frequently misinterpreted as forced labor, and this became one of the concerns utilized by the Dutch to bring Sang Na Ualuh down.

There were also various other local wisdoms developed in the community, such as skills in creating gunpowder (*basiu*), *laras bedil* (a type of gun), weaving *ulos/hiou* (a type of cloth), and both individually and collectively raising horses, cows, or chickens (known as *mamahan*). Since horses were used as a mode of transportation for daily activities or for war, *Mamahan Huda* became one of the King's most recommended activities.^[11] In addition, Pematang Siantar was surrounded by tea plantations, which was also the region's most profitable commodity. All of these outcomes, despite being managed traditionally, successfully supported the region and ensured its development.

Since 1863, the expansion of plantations in East Sumatra has resulted in an increase in the population along Sumatra's east coast. This resulted in a rise in the need of food. The Dutch were interested in annexing the Simalungun region because of its potential for food. When the Dutch discovered the potential of plantation in Simalungun regions like Pematang Siantar, they became even more interested. The Dutch, on the other hand, encountered strong resistance in their efforts to control Simalungun, particularly from King Rondahaim Saragih of Raya (Simalungun) and King Sang Na Ualuh Damanik of Siantar Kingdom. The Dutch attributed the Simalungun ethnic group's harsh character to the region's lack of religion and the spreading of Islam through Asahan and Padang.^[12]

Beginning in 1904 through *Zendeling* Simon, the Dutch colonial government partnered with the Zending to spread Christianity and gain the trust of the Simalungun people. This mission failed and only succeeded after the fall of Sang Na Ualuh in 1907.

The Zending's failure to carry out the mission was caused by the use of the Toba language in the mission, which was not understood by the Simalungun natives. Besides, the spread of Islamic teachings and the fact that King Sang Na Ualuh declared himself to be Muslim in 1901, attracting the people to follow him and his beliefs, contributed to this failure. As a result, the Dutch started a propaganda against Sang Na Ualuh, alleging that the government had implemented numerous inhumane policies, such as *suro*, which ordered the people to work in his gardens or fields. In response to this, Sang Na Ualuh abolished the practice of *suro*. However, it didn't stop there. The Dutch continued to do so and finally succeeded in spreading the rumors that Sang Na Ualuh had poisoned Mr. Dolok Malela Damanik who was Tuan Bah Bolag (the Royal Council of Siantar), as well as Karthaus (controleur in Batubara) during an inspection in Siantar. Sang Na Ualuh was prosecuted and then sentenced to be exiled to Bengkalis in 1906 until the end of his life in 1913.

The Dutch then took over the governing structure, keeping the King as a symbol of public faith. *Dewan Harajaan* (the kingdom council) no longer elected and appointed the King; instead, the Dutch in their interests picked and appointed kings. In 1907, all Simalungun kings were forced to submit to and sign the *Korte Verklaring*, a short treaty. The contents of *Korte Verklaring* include the following:

The king must obey all orders and regulations of the governor.

The king must admit their kingdom as part of Dutch East Indies.

The king shall establish no relation with foreign governments.

The king / kingdom does not have power over the sea area.

In the governmental system, customary law applies as long as it is in line with Dutch civilization.

Any action must be in accordance with the approval of the resident or their representative.^[13]

Following its recognition, the Dutch East Indies government began to establish plantations and relocated the *Controuler*, who had been stationed at Pardagangan Tomuan, to Pematang Siantar to monitor native resistance. Furthermore, *Afdeeling* Simalungun en de Karo Landen was established, combining the Simalungun area and the Karo Highlands under one *Afdelling*. Initially, the Simalungun and Karo areas were combined, with Seribu Dolok appointed as the capital. V.C.J Westenberg, an Assistant Resident, was in charge of this *Afdelling*. Due to the difficulty of communication, Seribu Dolok was deemed less strategic, and was replaced by Pematang Siantar in June 1907.^[14]

The Dutch East Indies government wanted to turn Simalungun's land into plantations. These lands were originally the property of the kingdoms for generations, then later controlled by the Dutch government based on agreements. To make it easier to maintain control over the kingdom's population, the Dutch granted the autonomy over their respective regions. The purpose is to ensure Dutch colonial security so that colonial benefits can be maintained.^[15]

The Dutch immediately reorganized their authority in Simalungun, and efforts to transform Pematang Siantar into a modern city were stepped up. The Pematang Siantar City Preparatory Agency was founded in 1910. Pematang Siantar was eventually transformed to *Gemeente*, which had its own autonomous authority, based on the Dutch *Staatsblad* Number 285 of July 1, 1917. The majority of cities labeled as *Gemeente* were the administrative center or capital of a residence, *Afdeeling*, or *OnderAfdeeling*, because the Dutch population was densely concentrated in these areas. They worked for the government, in offices, and on plantations. The King had to give up his land and let it become a *Gemeente*.^[16] Siantar was thereafter turned into a *Gemeente* with a City Council (*Gemeenteraad*) on January 1, 1939, based on *Staatsblad* Number 717. Then, at Pematang Siantar, 46 foreign plantations were established, and the main roads connecting Tapanuli and East Sumatra were built.

5. The Impact of Regional Autonomy to Local Wisdom in Pematang Siantar

Various traditions belonging to an ethnic group contains a purpose and considered as local wisdom. Local wisdom can be defined as human intelligence possessed by certain ethnic groups, obtained through the community's own experiences.^[17] Local wisdom is also viewed as a way of life and knowledge, as well as life strategies carried out by local communities to accommodate their purposes.^[18]

Local wisdom in society takes form in values, norms, ethics, beliefs, customs, and other forms. Due to its various forms, united in various cultures of society, the aim of a local wisdom could be either abstract or concrete. Furthermore, there are 3 characteristics of local wisdom: (1) It incorporates virtue knowledge that can teach people about ethics and moral values; (2) it can teach people to cherish nature rather than wreck or destroy it; and (3) it must originate from older community members.^[19]

The influence of Dutch colonialism with its methods in annexation to this region, particularly Pematang Siantar in the past, cannot be separated from the current shift in local wisdom in the Simalungun area. However, colonization brought a good impact as well, as evidenced by the Christianity, which was influenced through the Zending Missionaris RMG (*Rheinesche Missions Gesellschaft*) mission.

After Pematang Siantar was designated as *Gemeente* in 1917, the policies of regional autonomy (decentralization) made by the Dutch East Indies government had a fairly detrimental impact on the local population. First, from an economic point of view, it was too burdensome for the population, since they had to pay taxes on forest products, livestock, and fields to the Netherlands. In addition, there were other taxes such as land use, water use, animal slaughtering, and others. This caused the implementation of some local wisdoms such as *mamahan* (profit shared livestock) especially for horses to decline, since they were no longer profitable and were starting to fade. Likewise with chicken, cattle, sheep and pig, the farmers were taxed on animal slaughter.

Second, the long-standing tradition of collaborative working (*marharoan*) was eroding. In addition to benefiting from the plantation area and the taxes in Pematang Siantar, The Dutch East Indies government utilized the *marharoan* for development purposes that were needed by the Dutch East Indies government. For example, *marharoan*, which was originally practiced in building village roads, balei, bolon homes, and other structures, was later used by the Dutch East Indies government to construct roads to plantations, residences, clearing lands, and other structures that served the Dutch East Indies' interests.

Third, the impact on business and skills in making ulos/hiou (cloth) as local wisdom. With the rise of modern influence imposed by the Dutch East Indies government, from both the schools and the Zending missions, this

competence started fading. Clothing styles have values that indicate identity and cultural identity, not merely as a tool to cover the body. The Dutch saw the influence of modern clothes as important for establishing and strengthening their status, role, social position, and authority.^[20]

Fourth, after 1907, the expanding influence of *Zending* had a significant impact on Toba migration to the Pematang Siantar region. As a result, the *Zending* became overburdened in serving the community, demanding extra resources in ministry at *Gemeente* Pematang Siantar, which eventually crowded the region. The increase in the number of residents categorized as residents of the Governorate due to being Christians was also a factor in the decision of transforming Pematang Siantar's decision into a *Gemeente*. This region was then employed as *Zending*'s administrative center, and it became a predominantly Christian city (*Christelijke Gemeente*).

The fast introduction of Christianity had an impact on the indigenous Simalungun people. As a result, the Toba people controlled this area after their immigration to the region, and they affected the existing culture. For example, after the growth of *Zending* until 1920, the Simalungun language was rarely utilized, since the Toba language was employed even in church liturgy. The native Simalungun people had mixed feelings about it; some were fine with it, while others were not. Those who were fine with this change adapted to the use of Toba language and remained living in Pematang Siantar, although the dominant language shifted. Those who were not fine with this change moved to the outskirts of Simalungun area, started to adopt Islam or adapted to the surrounding environment.

The positive impact of the implementation of regional autonomy on local wisdom in *Gemeente* Pematang Siantar can be seen in the growing development of tea plantation cultivation and rice farming. In addition, the cultivation of other commodities such as tobacco, sisal, rubber, and oil palm advanced the skills of the population to survive.

Furthermore, the expansion of plantations undoubtedly contributed to the increase in population, causing the *Gemeente* to become a more diversified and multicultural region. This became a challenge for Pematang Siantar since these differences could lead to ethnic, racial, and religious conflicts. However, in its development, Pematang Siantar responded to this challenge with a great sense of tolerance that emerged between each other as they made necessary adjustments. Tolerance, as a form of local wisdom, is an open-minded attitude demonstrated by individuals in acknowledging the principles and beliefs of others while being true to their own. Despite its simple nature, the value of tolerance is highly important in the life of a pluralistic community.^[21] In North Sumatra, Pematang Siantar is considered as the city with the highest tolerance rating.

6. Conclusion

The practice of decentralization, which developed from colonialism, has an impact on the economics and development of the regions in which it is implemented. In reality, it has an impact on local wisdom as a communal identity. Cultural identity in a region functions as both a unifier and a differentiator amongst regions. A sense of pride, love, and solidarity for the region grows as a result of the sense of equality, which later becomes an identity of a nation. There is no permanent local wisdom, one will undoubtedly change due to internal and external influences. Changes in Pematang Siantar as a result of the colonial historical context are not necessarily negative; there are also good changes that serve as identities and perspectives on life.

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