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The Construction of Acehese Identity in Serambi Indonesia after the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding

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Abstract

The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Government of Indonesia and The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in 2005 in Helsinki officially ended the armed separatist movement in Aceh. The long history of separatist movement in the region has created the question of identity between Acehese and Indonesian identities among Acehese. This study investigated the construction of Acehese identity in relation to Indonesian identity in *Serambi Indonesia*, the most prominent local media, after the signing of the Helsinki peace accord. This study has used a textual analysis to examine the construction of Acehese identity through the use of symbolic language. The sample of 88 articles collected from July 2012 to May 2013 were analysed based on five coding categories; themes, framing perspectives, labels to describe Aceh, labels to describe Indonesia, and depiction of Aceh-Indonesia relations. Findings reveal that *Serambi Indonesia* has managed to negotiate the tension between Acehese and Indonesian identities. The newspaper overtly legitimates Aceh as an Indonesian region while maintaining the specialty of Aceh in comparison to other provinces of Indonesia. These findings suggested that the local media have played a significant role in identity reconciliation during the reconciliation process in post-conflict area.

Keywords: identity construction; local newspaper; national identity; post-conflict; reconciliation

1. Introduction

The Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) had been fighting for Aceh independence from Indonesia for about 30 years. The separatist insurgency in Aceh in which between 10,000 and 30,000 people were killed (Amnesty International, 2013) officially ended in August 2005 after the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Indonesian Government and GAM in Helsinki, Finland.

Since the Helsinki peace talk the Aceh peace process has been viewed as a promising model for peace implementation in other conflict areas (Ahtisaari, 2007; Lingga, 2007; Baron & Burke, 2008). However, it is argued that separatist intentions and violence are always possibilities due to the long historical background of conflict in Aceh. Susanti and Fredriksson found that Aceh is still vulnerable to violent conflict. They further emphasise “the need of sustained peace building to consolidate the peace” in Aceh (2008, p. 24).

Aceh has a long history of independence movement. In the period 1953-1962, Daud Beureu'eh led Aceh into rebellion against Indonesia striving for an Islamic nation-state (Reid, 2004, p. 302). In 1976, another rebellion erupted with the establishment of GAM striving for independence from Indonesia (Reid, 2004, p. 307). The conflict escalated from 1989 to 1998 when the region was placed under a Military Operation Zone (Baron & Burke, 2008, p. 5). In November 1999, huge numbers of Acehese people gathered in Banda Aceh calling for a referendum for

independence (Reid, 2004, p. 309). This event drew international attention calling for the establishment of peace negotiations in Aceh, resulting in the peace agreement between the Indonesian Government and GAM mediated by the Henry Dunant Centre in December 2002 (Reid, 2004, p. 312). However, the first round peace accord failed in 2003 when the Indonesian Government launched a military operation in Aceh to eradicate the rebellion (Reid, 2004, p. 311). The struggle for independence ended with the signing of the Helsinki MoU (Baron & Burke, 2008, p. 5), authorising 'self-government' for Aceh within the Indonesian state.

The history of struggle for Aceh independence has contributed to the tension between Acehnese and Indonesian identities. There exists a general unease amongst Acehnese with respect to their identity as part of their national identity in Indonesia. To some extent, Acehnese and Indonesian identities can be considered as mutually exclusive forms of identities, what it means to be Acehnese is hence to consider oneself as 'not being Indonesian'.

It then becomes important to interrogate Acehnese identity after the signing of the peace treaty. An anti-essentialism view maintains that cultural identities are not fixed but are culturally produced phenomena (Barker, 2012, p. 217). Cultural identities are discursive constructions of meanings, continually being produced over time (Hall, 1996, p. 4; Barker, 2012, p. 229). In this regard, media are central to the discursive construction of cultural identities and therefore cultural identities are constructed within media representation (Hall, 1996, p. 4; Barker, 2012, p. 216). Georgiou argues that "media as means/technologies/contexts for communication in specific locations and beyond, have become institutions and organised mechanisms of great significance for constructing identities in local, national and transnational contexts within modernity" (2006, p. 11). Media plays a significant role in influencing the way people see themselves and others. In doing so, media provides a wide range of representations which is part of a complex process involved in the formation of identity. It is argued that identities are constructed within, not outside representation (Hall, 1996, p. 4; Barker, 2012, p. 216).

Media representation delivers a narrative of identity which defines the boundaries of one identity to another (Schneeberger, 2009, p. 87); in this context: Acehnese and Indonesian identities. The representation of a particular group of people delivers a narrative of identity which is surrounded by symbolic codes in opposition to other identities. It then provides audiences with the symbolic codes for distinguishing between self and other (Schlesinger, 2003, cited in Schneeberger, 2009, p. 87). It can be concluded that media takes part in the identity formation process through the representation of the mediated notion of difference. Thus, media representation is influential in the shaping of our perception of self and others. Further, media representation has a strong tendency to drive an individual's attitude and behaviour. Dyer argues, "how we are seen determines in part how we are treated, how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation" (1993, p. 1).

In particular, local newspapers possess the potential to set agendas within local communities as they are specifically directed towards their own regions. Local newspapers are implicated in the construction of local identity (Richardson et al., 2008). Anderson (1983) foregrounds the significance of the print technologies as the creator of homogenous national identities. Anderson (1983) proposes the idea that specifically refers to the role of newspapers in connecting citizens through the ritual of reading newspapers to form what Anderson (1983) defines as an 'imagined community'. A nation's capacity to create and sustain their imagined communities is made possible by a number of processes, one of the most important being media and mass communication. The press enables people to simultaneously imagine they belong to the same national community. Anderson (1983) emphasises that the ritual of reading newspapers has made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others. When all fellow members in a particular geographic area are performing the same ritual of reading newspapers, it allows the communion being imagined in the minds of readers.

Likewise, using the concept of banal nationalism, Billig extends the idea of the newspaper as a vehicle for the reproduction of imagined communities (1995, pp. 93-127). Banal nationalism refers to the everyday representations of the nation which build an imagined sense of nationalism amongst the inhabitants of a particular territory. Billig (1995) explores how daily rituals and symbols, in the case of newspapers, can help to reproduce feelings of nationalism within various nations. Newspapers, through constantly repeated and subliminal semiotics, shape the ideological notion of 'nation' (Billig, 1995, p. 8). Newspapers reinforce nationhood through the use of implied togetherness, routine rhetoric and the presentation of the nation-centric news, for example, the use of terms 'here' and 'there,' 'us' and 'them', and 'domestic' and 'international' news. The symbolic use of language therefore provokes a strong awareness amongst the members of a nation, of the existence of their nation, and its position in relation to other nations.

In summation, Anderson (1983) and Billig (1995) agree that the construction of national identity is a never ending process; media is needed to construct and maintain national identity amongst the fellow members of the nation. Newspapers are the vehicle for the reproduction of imagined communities through reading and the use of language. Local newspapers significantly contribute to the process of local identity formation and reproduction to form what Anderson (1983) defines as an 'imagined community'. In this process, local newspapers provide the everyday representations of the 'imagined community', building a collective identity amongst the inhabitants in the local area (Billig, 1995).

In relation to this, Acehese identity as a collective group identity is, as Barker (2012, p. 253) asserts, intrinsically connected to, and constituted by, their local newspapers. *Serambi Indonesia*. *Serambi Indonesia* is the most prominent media outlet amongst other local media platforms in Aceh. The newspaper is distributed throughout the Aceh province, read by various parts of Acehese society and often forms the basis for discussion amongst Acehese people (Bahari, 2005, p. 3). The circulation of the newspaper is approximately 48,000 per day (Bahri, personal communication, 20 May, 2012). Eighty-five per cent of the daily copies of the newspaper are bought by permanent subscribers: institutional and individual subscribers (Bahri, personal communication, 20 May 2012). Income from advertisements is high, accounting for approximately 50% of revenue (Din, 2009, p. 127).

With respect to its importance within Acehese society, *Serambi Indonesia* can be considered as a core site of investigation in the collective identity formation process in Acehese society during the reconciliation. *Serambi Indonesia* which is specifically directed towards people living in the Aceh province, becomes the agent of the construction of Acehese group identity through ritual of reading and the use of language. It shares a common local identity amongst Acehese within the area of Aceh. The representation of Acehese in their own local newspaper influences the way Acehese define themselves in relation to Indonesia and how they see other ethnic groups in Indonesia. Therefore, how *Serambi Indonesia* represents Acehese after the Helsinki peace deal can actually contribute to the integration of Acehese or dislocation of Acehese within the Indonesian community.

Earlier study explicitly shows the media dualism role in conflict. Sahin (2011) in his research found that the changes in the characteristics of national identity in North Cyprus are influenced by the representation of Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots in newspapers. When Turkish Cypriots were constructed as a separate group in opposition to Greek Cypriots, it created a distinctive national identity; yet, when the cultural similarities of both communities were highlighted and their differences were suppressed, the construction of a common Cypriot identity was facilitated. Therefore, how the local newspaper covers tension between Acehese and Indonesian identities is a substantial means in promoting peace as well as escalating conflict in Aceh.

Taking into account the aforementioned background, the present research sought to investigate to what extent the local newspaper *Serambi Indonesia* construct Acehese identity as distinct from Indonesian national identity after the signing of the Helsinki peace accord. This study sets out to bridge the gap in the media studies literature on how a separatist ethnic group is positioned vis-à-vis its nation-state in its own local media. This study examines the representation of Acehese in the local newspaper in terms of Anderson's (1983) 'imagined community', Billig's (1995) 'banal nationalism', as well as 'media representation and identity'. In doing so, this study attempts to give a more comprehensive approach to show that the local newspaper is a means for the reproduction of 'imagined communities' and the delivery of the narrative of collective identity through the everyday representations of the nation.

2. Methods

Data was gathered from the digital version of *Serambi Indonesia*. The time span for data collection was after the peace accord: September 2005 onwards. However, as the data collection was reliant on the digital news, it was subject to the limitation of online data availability; data became available from 29 July 2011. A preliminary investigation was conducted to see the trends of news coverage from July 2011 to May 2013. This investigation informed me that there was little or no news coverage involving the issue between Aceh and Indonesia during July 2011 to June 2012, as the news coverage was dominated by issues of the governor election. Thus it was decided to collect data within the period from July 2012 to May 2013. The terms 'GAM', 'MoU', and 'Kanun' were employed in the data selection process. The sample for this study included hard news stories, opinion pieces, editorials, and letters to the editor. The selection of hard news stories was restricted to politics and national sections which were

assumed to have a more local-national perspective. All articles included were also checked manually to make sure that they contained the appropriate Aceh-Indonesia dimension. The total sample was 88 articles, consisting of 60 news stories, 18 opinion pieces, seven editorials, and three letters to the editor.

This study employed a quantitative content analysis. The total of 88 news articles were analysed using five coding categories: themes, framing perspectives, labels for Aceh, labels for Indonesia, and depiction of Aceh-Indonesia relations. The construction of coding categories considered the literature review, the established coding categories, and the sample of data, as suggested by Weerakkody (2009, p. 152). The coding categories were modified from Eurosphere's coding categories for European Print and Broadcast Media, namely: 'labels when referring to groups/individuals, depiction of persons/groups' belonging, and framing perspective' (Sicakkan & Tonnevold, 2008, pp. 2-5).

A pilot study of 10 articles was conducted to perform inter-coder reliability with the help of one independent coder. It was found that the agreement percentage was in the range between 85% and 95%. As the minimum acceptable level of agreement between coders should be 80% (Weerakkody, 2009, p. 158), all categories were scientifically valid to use in this content analysis.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Themes

This study has documented several main themes of news coverage in *Serambi Indonesia* from July 2012 to May 2013. Those themes were categorised into eight themes. The most significant theme was the dispute over the official flag of Aceh which accounted for 63% of the overall 819 news coverage. Further, the rest of themes included the local election (10%), Aceh Governing Law (6%), *Wali Nanggroe* (5%), bylaws (3%), Aceh development (2%), Aceh history (2%), and other (9%). The full picture of themes is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of the Article Themes.

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Aceh Flag	55	63
Local Election	9	10
Aceh Governing Law	5	6
Wali Nanggroe	4	5
Aceh Bylaw	3	3
Aceh Development	2	2
Aceh History	2	2
Other	8	9

In addition, even though most of the themes discussed issues regarding regulation, two themes on Aceh development and Aceh history were exceptions. Both themes took different positions from most other themes, capturing relationships between Aceh and Indonesia through the focus on the Aceh-Indonesia relationship in the past and in the future.

Despite a variety of themes, those listed shared a common ground. The themes suggested ongoing tensions in relation to the Aceh-Indonesia relationship after the Helsinki accord. Also, most of the themes have confirmed the assumption described in the previous chapter about the problem of dual sovereignty in Aceh after the 2005 agreement.

Framing Perspectives

This category aimed to identify the perspective from which a theme was discussed and evaluated in the news article. This category was intended to capture a spatial coverage of the news article, classified into individual, group, local, and national perspectives.

In general, the most dominant framing perspective found in connection with Aceh-Indonesia relations was a local perspective with 68%. Other perspectives included national perspective (19%), followed by group perspective (8%), and individual perspective (5%). The overview of framing perspectives is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage of the Framing Perspectives.

Framing Perspective	Frequency	Percentage
National	17	19
Local	60	68
Group	7	8
Individual	4	5

As far as the framing perspective is concerned, this local framing perspective may be justified as the nature of a local newspaper. However, considering such perspectives were found within the issue of Aceh-Indonesia relations, the use of a framing perspective could suggest a tendency towards exclusivity of Aceh.

Labels for Aceh

Labels for Aceh' aimed to discover words used in news articles when referring to Aceh, including: government, body, people, legislation, and symbols. This study found that there were three main types of labels, namely: references to government, people, and flag/emblem. The references to government included Aceh government (32%) and the local/provincial government (12%), followed by the reference to the head of administration as governor (13%). Further, the references to people included citizenry (1%), citizen (13%), and society (17%). Finally, the references to flag/emblem included the GAM flag/emblem (4%) and Crescent-Star flag/*Bouraq*-Lion emblem (8%). Table 3 gives a brief summary of labels for Aceh.

Table 3. Percentage of the Labels for Aceh-associated Words.

Labels for Aceh	Frequency	Percentage
Aceh Government	76	32
Local Government	28	12
Governor/vice governor	31	13
GAM flag/emblem	9	4
Crescent-Star/ <i>Bouraq</i> -Lion	19	8
Citizenry	3	1
Citizen	30	13
Society	40	17

In terms of the use of the label for government, it could be seen that the use of 'Aceh government' was not always followed with that of 'the local/provincial government'. Yet, the use of the local/provincial government to mention the government of Aceh might be regarded as a referential word to Indonesia. It also applied to the governor/vice governor. When referring to the head of administration in Aceh, it frequently used the names of governor and vice governor, instead of using the labels governor/vice governor. Yet, labels of governor and vice governor indicated reference to Indonesia.

Moreover, this study also documented three labels used to describe the people of Aceh. The most used label to call Acehnese was society, followed by citizen, and the least significant label was citizenry. The use of such words might imply a particular meaning. In Indonesian language, citizenry is a label mostly used to describe the group of people who live in a particular city, town, or province, while citizen is a label specifically used to call the group of members of a particular country. Therefore, citizen is used to describe people of Indonesia, while people in a particular province or area in Indonesia are called citizenry. Hence, the label 'citizen' to describe Acehnese people

might give a sense as if Aceh was an independent country. In addition, society was deemed a neutral word to refer to people, unlike citizen or citizenry.

Finally, the most significant label to describe Aceh's flag and emblem was Crescent-Star flag and *Bouraq*-Lion emblem. The use of both labels were considered as neutral words to refer to Aceh's provincial flag and emblem as the dispute over the current flag and emblem between the Indonesian Government and Aceh administration still continues.

Labels for Indonesia

In the same way, 'labels for Indonesia' attempted to capture words to describe Indonesia in association with Aceh. This study discovered two main labels, namely labels for government and flag. The government was described as Indonesian Government and the central/national government, in which president was used to denote the head of the government. Also, the national flag of Indonesia was called 'Red-White flag'. Table 4 illustrates proportion of labels for Indonesia.

Table 4. Percentage of the Labels for Indonesia-associated Words.

Labels for Indonesia	Frequency	Percentage
Indonesian government	43	33
Central government	60	45
President/ Minister	15	11
Red-White flag	14	11

In contrast to labels for the government of Aceh, the words central or national governments were mostly used to mention the government of Indonesia, which accounted for 45% of the overall sample. Another significant label for the government was Indonesian Government with 33%. Further, in relation to the head of the government, Indonesian labels also presented a converse finding to Acehnese labels. Labels such as 'President of Indonesia' or 'Minister of Home Affairs' were employed to describe the head of the government of Indonesia or the authorised minister responsible in the field of domestic governance, instead of using only the names of the president or the minister. The use of such labels, central government or president, unconsciously created a sense of Aceh as part of Indonesia.

Depiction of Aceh-Indonesia relations. This category was expected to give an overall evaluation based on general impressions after reading news articles. Specifically, this category aimed to encapsulate Aceh-Indonesia relations in a general sense. Therefore, it provided two options regarding Aceh-Indonesia relations: Aceh within Indonesia or Aceh detached from Indonesia. The results showed that all news articles promoted the 'Aceh within Indonesia' frame, albeit with different levels of allegiance (see Table 5).

Table 5. Percentage of the Depiction of Aceh-Indonesia Relations.

Depiction	Frequency	Percentage
Aceh within Indonesia	88	100
Aceh as detached from Indonesia	0	0

The findings of this study reveal that in construction of Acehnese identity, *Serambi Indonesia* has not constructed a separate Acehnese identity from Indonesia identity. It is apparent in the results of coding categories which demonstrated concurrently two constrating indications in favor of distinction and allegiance to Indonesian state. The newspaper does embrace distinct Acehnese identity. It further attempts to construct the distinctive identity within the symbolic boundary of Indonesian identity. A source of distinction was evident in themes capturing disputes between Indonesian government and Aceh administration, local framing perspectives, and the use of distinctive labels for including the government of Aceh and citizen which indicate the exclusivity of Aceh as a free nation. On the other hand, a source of allegiance could be found in the use of relational labels for Indonesia including the central/national government which signpost Aceh as part of Indonesian state and the depiction of 'Aceh within Indonesia'

Serambi Indonesia preserves ethnic chauvinism, on one side, but stands against separatism issues, on the other side. In other words, the distinctive cultural identity of Acehnese is developed and maintained by this newspaper as long as it does not show the intention of seceding from Indonesia. In doing so, this media outlet contributes simultaneously to the integration and dislocation of Acehnese within the Indonesian community. In brief, *Serambi Indonesia* has delivered identity narratives distinctly Acehnese within the Indonesian state.

These findings have challenged Sahin's findings (2011) on the representation of Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots in newspapers. His study found that the construction of a common Cypriot identity was facilitated when the cultural similarities of both communities were highlighted and their differences were suppressed. While this study discovered that a conciliatory identity between Acehnese and Indonesian identities is facilitated through simultaneously highlighting the specialty of Aceh, as well as the idea of peace and the political commitment, to remain in the Unitary Republic of Indonesia. In this regard, the speciality of Aceh which is a source of difference in Aceh-Indonesia relations is not suppressed, but Aceh's political commitment for peacekeeping in Aceh which acts as a source of similarities is maintained.

Although such construction of identity seems somewhat paradoxical, it is in accordance to Indonesia's motto 'Unity in Diversity', meaning that different identities are welcomed provided that they remain under the Unitary Republic of Indonesia. In a vast ethnically and culturally diverse country such as Indonesia, maintaining and developing a cultural identity is acceptable, yet to ignite segregation from Indonesia is taken very seriously indeed as it will cause an unpleasant atmosphere in the central government as well as other areas of Indonesia.

These empirical results have confirmed theoretical considerations that newspapers contribute to the construction of collective identity to form what Anderson (1983) has called 'imagined community' through the representation of nation-state. In this case, *Serambi Indonesia* has contributed to the reproduction of national consciousness through symbol and discourse of Aceh and Indonesia. With the symbolic use of language, such as 'citizen', 'government of Aceh', and 'central government', as Billig (1995) argues, *Serambi Indonesia* provokes a strong awareness amongst the members of a nation of the existence of Aceh as a nation, and its position in relation to Indonesia. It then delivers a strong impression that Aceh is a state in the Unitary Republic of Indonesia.

However, there are some limitations of this study in term of the methodology. The last issue is method of analysis. One of the coding categories, depiction of Aceh-Indonesia relations, could not capture the different attachments of Aceh to Indonesia as it did not have the options to do so. Instead, all news articles promoting the allegiance of Aceh to Indonesia, regardless of their different levels of allegiance, are categorised into the same option 'Aceh within Indonesia'. This category could be used better by providing the level of allegiance to Indonesia, such as: zero, weak, moderate, and strong. Further, this study only investigated the local media. Future research might benefit from the comparison of Aceh identity in national and local media. This study also covered small aspects of the construction of Acehnese identity in *Serambi Indonesia* through textual analysis. The study did not examine the news production process and the impact on readers in relation to the construction of identity discovered from the media texts. Therefore, there is a need to provide and conduct further studies and research involving the whole process; media production, text, and consumption, to get a wider picture of the construction of Acehnese identity in local media.

4. Conclusion

This study has revealed that *Serambi Indonesia*, the only local newspaper in Aceh, has been involved in the construction of Acehnese identity in relation to Indonesian identity during the reconciliation process in Aceh. The newspaper has delivered a conciliatory representation for Acehnese in connection to Indonesia. It overtly legitimates Aceh as an Indonesian region while maintaining the specialty and uniqueness of Aceh in comparison to other provinces of Indonesia. Although this representation may be considered the best possible representation to manage tension between Acehnese and Indonesian identities, the tendency of ethnocentrism found in this paper should be taken with care as well. Therefore, establishing and implementing a comprehensive strategy for the sustainability of peace in Aceh should include the local media.

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