

Bridging Islam and the West: Toward the Development of Intercultural Understanding

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ABSTRAK

Tidak mudah bagi bangsa Indonesia, termasuk kaum Muslimnya, untuk menjalin hubungan yang selaras dan menguntungkan dengan bangsa-bangsa Barat. Usaha itu akan lebih mungkin terlaksana jika di Indonesia sendiri sudah terjalin hubungan yang harmonis antara berbagai kelompok (etnik, ras, agama). Sayangnya, sepanjang sejarahnya Indonesia penuh dengan berbagai konflik antarkelompok, khususnya dalam beberapa tahun belakangan ini. Problem nasional ini harus diselesaikan terlebih dulu sebelum kita menyelesaikan problem internasional. Setidaknya ada dua faktor yang menghambat terbentuknya Indonesia yang rukun dan makmur: pertama, faktor struktural yang mencakup perbedaan kaya-miskin dan keterbelakangan pendidikan kebanyakan rakyat Indonesia; dan kedua, faktor kultural, yakni, terdapat begitu banyaknya kelompok suku dengan bahasa masing-masing yang masih saling berprasangka dengan sesamanya, baik secara terbuka ataupun secara laten. Dalam hubungannya dengan Barat, secara psikologis bangsa Indonesia masih menderita penyakit rendah-diri akut yang ditandai dengan kekaguman pada Barat serta peniruan atas nilai dan gaya hidup Barat yang berlebihan. Sebagai solusi untuk mengatasi masalah-masalah di atas, Indonesia perlu merumuskan kembali identitas nasional dan budayanya yang terdiri dari nilai-nilai positif dari sejarah, budaya (termasuk nilai-nilai agama universal), serta dari sumber budaya manapun sejauh aspek-aspek budaya tersebut meningkatkan martabat manusia Indonesia. Implisit dalam usaha itu adalah reorientasi pendidikan nasional yang ditandai dengan terselenggaranya pendidikan multibudaya di segala tingkatan pendidikan serta melalui media massa, disertai dengan usaha untuk mengatasi kendala struktural yang ada.

Introduction

Indonesia is now part of a globalized world. To be a prosperous country respected by others, it must develop and maintain good relationships with them. This ideal is not easy to achieve. There are cultural, economic, political, and psychological obstacles to overcome, some of which stem from our own weaknesses. For many nations, a balanced and harmonious global world — a world in which there are no conflicts, whether it be political or cultural (religious) is still a dream. Specifically from the Indonesian perspective, being part

of a civilized world characterized by interreligious understanding and harmony is still very far from reality since in our own country we still have problems of interethnic and interreligious intolerance and enmity as boldly indicated by various riots among ethnic and religious groups causing the death of thousands of people in several parts of Indonesia, notably in Aceh, Papua, Maluku, and Poso. It is probably too early for us—if not an irony—to discuss the possibility of a peaceful co-existence with other nations, particularly the West. How can we become a member of a civilized and prosperous world when many ethnic and religious

communities in Indonesia still distrust and even hate each other? This problem within our country must be first solved before we overcome problems with other countries.

Problems Within

For three decades, the Soeharto regime promoted the slogan "*persatuan dan kesatuan Indonesia*" (unity of Indonesia), along with other slogans such as "*bhineka tunggal ika* (unity in diversity), "*pembangunan manusia seutuhnya*" (intact human development), "*tinggal landas*" (take-off), etc. without planned and concrete programs. While there was economic development benefiting certain groups of people (Soeharto's family members, relatives, and business cliques), human (cultural and moral) development was much neglected by the government. The primary development indicators used by the New Order were quantitative, particularly in terms of economic progress (although it turned out to be a failure), instead of qualitative ones such as the quality of democracy practiced by the government and its people, the degree of tolerance among various Indonesian cultural groups, and the standard of its people's morality.

Consequently, our people have not reached the genuine cultural and moral standard frequently claimed by both the government and the people themselves, such as that "*Orang Indonesia ramah-tamah*" (Indonesian people are friendly), "*Terdapat toleransi antaragama yang kuat di Indonesia*" (There is strong interreligious tolerance in Indonesia). Rather, these claims are more likely to be ethnocentric statements. In fact, every nation tends to be ethnocentric, claiming that they are friendly, although this friendliness may be implemented in different ways. No people in this world admits that they are unkind or barbaric.

Some scholars in Indonesia have challenged the notion that Indonesian people have been kind and tolerant people, due to the fact that there were a lot of conflicts and rebellions within and among various Indonesian kingdoms in the past. The killings of thousands of people alleged as commu-

nists by the mass backed up by the government and the military in the 1960s are other instances that have made some of us doubt whether Indonesians deserve such an honour. In addition, the clashes among followers of different political parties before and during each election leading to the death of dozens of people for three decades, and the intercultural clashes (riots and slaughtering) among ethnic and racial groups in Indonesia for the last several years have undermined such an idealistic notion. From the cases above, many Indonesians can be considered as bad-tempered; they bear a grudge against others. This is partly due to their inability to settle intergroup or even interpersonal differences and conflicts. Their traditional-collectivistic orientation, as implied in the popular concepts of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and *musyawarah untuk mufakat* (deliberation to reach an agreement), in contrast to western people's individualistic orientation, makes them more accustomed to maintaining social harmony, being silent or giving in when facing others but grumbling behind their backs, leaving such conflicts prolonged or even unsettled. For decades this cultural tendency was intensified by the monolithic perspective maintained by the New Order, emphasizing the monoloyalty of groups of people to the government.

Some intergroup conflicts that have taken place in the last several years include the following: In May 1998 Chinese shops in Jakarta were destroyed (with products being stolen) by the so called *pribumi* (native Indonesians). Not long after that there was also an interethnic riot between the Dayak and the Madurese in Sambas, West Kalimantan, causing hundreds of Madurese killed and hundreds of houses burned. Soon there were also serious interreligious group conflicts (riots and slaughtering) between Muslims and Christians in Maluku. The incident in that region was never anticipated, since cultural groups there had always been in harmony as implied in the concept *Pella Gandong*. Since the year 2000 there have also been riots between Muslims and Christians in Poso, Central Sulawesi, leading to the killings of hundreds of people from both sides, while the conflict

in Maluku is still critical.

While the friction between the Acehnese and the militay representing the central government (and to some degree the Javanese) has deteriorated, some frictions among ethnic groups are still latent. These latent frictions may come to the surface if they are not managed as early as possible. In Pekanbaru of the Riau province, for example, there has been an ethnic tension between the Riau Malays and the Minangkabau. The Malays feel dominated economically by the Minangkabau. The Minangkabau are considered as aggressive in business since they have a lot of experience in that field, while the Malays are humble, less--motivated and somewhat fatalistic. When I visited Kendari in Southeast Sulawesi recently, based on my personal communication with local people (lecturers at the Haluoleo University), I also found a similar incident in Kendari. Latent ethnic tensions also prevail both at this university, and more significantly in the provincial political arena. In the most election of the Jakarta governor, it was still a crucial issue whether the governor should be a *Putra Betawi* (Native Son of Jakarta) or not. All these tensions may not be admitted openly by local authorities. Yet, the tensions still have to be anticipated, especially among common people, since conflicts occur more readily among these people. Clearly, while some members of ethnic groups have meaningful and friendly relationships with each other, characterized by depth and empathy (the I — Thou relationship according to Martin Buber, 1970), the rest, perhaps in a larger number, interact with others superficially; they treat others as their contemporaries (Schutz, 1972), that is, people who live in the same period of time without facing each other, not as their consociates who share the same space and time and communicate face-to-face intensively characterized by high intersubjectivity (Thou-orientation). In other words, their interethnic communication is still based on their sociological information about each other, particularly stereotypes from secondary sources (parents, relatives, peer groups, books, and mass media) rather than on their direct personal experiences. They still consider others as

strangers (Simmel, 1950:402-408) who are far psychologically, although they are close physically, maybe as neighbours.

Factors Leading to Intergroup Conflicts

It is very difficult to discern all the factors contributing to ethnic, racial and religions conflicts and riots in Indonesia. The structural factor includes economic inequality among ethnic and racial groups (Indonesian natives vs. Chinese, Dayak vs. Madurese, Ambonese vs. Bugis, etc), unequal access to jobs and employment, lack of education, etc. Sayidiman Suryohadiprojo (*Kompas*, March 25, 1999) suggests that the practice of education be evaluated, the correct educational approach be formulated, considering that the frequent interethnic conflicts are caused by the lack of adaptability of the migrants. In the same vein, Rachbini (1999) suggests that while for well-educated urbans ethnic differences are not important, they are sensitive to low-educated people who constitute the larger portion of the Indonesian population. Rachbini cites a case in Sambas, West Kalimantan, where Madurese are seen by local people as rude, impolite, and hard to adapt to their local environment.

Although on the surface Indonesians seem united as a nation with its distinct culture, this is not really the case. From a cultural point of view, interethnic stereotypes still prevail among various ethnic, racial and religious groups in Indonesia, while the concept of Indonesian culture itself is still questioned whether it is already established or not. For instance, the Javanese and the Sundanese think that they are *halus* (soft) dan *sopan* (polite) and that the Batak are coarse, determined, hard-headed, loud and noisy, bad-tempered, and aggressive. Interestingly, the Batak view themselves as brave, open, straightforward, clever, diligent, strong, and tough. They consider the Javanese and the Sundanese as soft and polite, but they are cowards, weak and like beating around the bush. For the Batak, it is honesty what others think as rudeness, while interpreting the softness of the Sundanese and the Javanese as hypocrisy.

Defining culture in a broad sense (incorporating all types of groups), the cultural diversity of Indonesia is very complex. The Indonesian population consists of several different religious groups—each having several subgroups—and hundreds of ethnic groups with their respective languages. The population also includes “strange” or “weird” cultural or subcultural groups, such as “sub-primitive” ethnic groups (for example the Baduy in West Java, the Sakai in Sumatra and the Amungme in Papbta), *waria* (transvestites), *preman* (street criminals), and *dukun* (native/traditional healers, fortune tellers, and magicians). Value differences and stereotypes among these existing groups, ethnic groups in particular, are still widespread. In 1970s Schweizer found strong interethnic stereotypes among Gadjah Mada University students, when she compared the Javanese, the Batak, and the Bugis-Macassarese (see Mulyana and Rakhmat, 1996). In 1980s and 1990s, based on some observation, interethnic stereotypes were also commonplace among communication students at Padjadjaran University and at Bandung Islamic University.

Although the various cultural (ethnic, racial, religious) groups interact more frequently, even using the same (national) language, this intercultural interaction does not necessarily lead to mutual understanding, since each group is prejudiced against each other to various degrees. This intergroup prejudice will not diminish if it is not well-managed. Using Arnett’s perspective, the main problem is communication from polarized positions (Gudykunst and Kim, 1992:258), namely the inability to believe or seriously take one’s own view as wrong and others’ opinions as right. Communication is characterized by rhetoric that “we are right” and “they are wrong.” In other words, each cultural group tends to view one’s own culture as superior to other cultures and measuring other cultures by their own cultural standard.

When we communicate with people from other ethnic, racial, or religious groups, we are confronted with different value systems and rules. It will be difficult to understand their communication if we are ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism is not

dangerous as long as it is kept in mind. Yet, when it is activated through statements (stereotypes), attitude (prejudice), and behavior (discrimination), the consequences can be dreadful, as can be seen in the conflict between the Dayak and the Madurese in Sambas, West Kalimantan. Stereotypes lead to “self fulfilling prophecy,” that is a prediction that becomes a reality because, whether we realize it or not, we believe and say that it will become a reality (Verderber, 1996:37). Once you characterize an individual—due to his or her group membership—as stingy, coarse, wild, soft, a coward, a terrorist, or whatsoever, your statement or behavior will stimulate the other to behave the way you expect. Whatever the other says or does, you will interpret the statement or the action according to your biased (pre)conceptions. In other words, the statement or the behavior tends to reinforce your preconceptions.

Identity Crisis

From a psychological point of view, we Indonesians are suffering from a chronic identity crisis, especially in dealing with people from the West. We tend to imitate their way of life, following their values and life styles. Here is an illustration: A young sexy Indonesian female singer (who often lets her belly-button visible) is proud because her fans associate her with Britney Spears, while a popular Malaysian singer, Siti Nurhaliza (who covers herself modestly), does not want to be associated with anyone else, except herself (as a Malay woman). In a wider scope, it is easy to find evidences indicating our obsession to “swallow” foreign values: fastfood restaurants (McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken), fashion, entertainment (especially music), real estates (houses with Mediterranean or American designs). The fact that we admire white people conspicuously is portrayed in many TV commercials (for example those promoting skin creams claimed to whiten women’s skin and make them more beautiful).

To attract more viewers, since decades ago Indonesian films and soap operas have included stars who have *Indo* faces. For example, in the film

Roro Mendut, made in 1983 and directed by Ami Priyono, Meriam Bellina stars as the main character although according to the novel (written by Y.B. Mangunwijaya), Roro Mendut is depicted as a woman from a coast whose skin is *hitam manis* (sweet black). In a recent Indonesian TV soap opera entitled *Terpikat*, all the three stars: Wulan Guritno, Nafa Urbach, and Indra L. Brugmann, have *Indo* faces. All those cases, and so many other cases that cannot be described here due to the limited space, constitute symptoms that we have been suffering from a sort of psychological illness, or more specifically, an inferiority complex. Apparently we have inherited this tendency from our forebears who were once colonized by the Dutch for three hundred and fifty years. Dr. Sudjoko, a former lecturer at the Bandung Institute of Technology, characterized this tendency as *krocojiwa* (having low souls). He describes Indonesians as “being inferior vis-a-vis the West they admire, blindly imitating their attitude, behavior, and appearance.” Ironically, this inferiority complex is also felt by many Indonesian Muslims who should feel confident and stand firmly against others, including the West. What the Muslim sociologist Ibnu Khaldun said in the 14th century in his well-known book, *Muqaddimah*, may be true that the conquered people always imitate the conqueror in their fashion, decoration, beliefs, and other customs. According to this scholar, this tendency stems from the obsession of the conquered to associate themselves with those who have defeated them. The conquered respected the conqueror excessively, while they feel that this imitation will erase all the factors leading to their defeat (see also Mulyana, 1999:43).

Proposed Solution

To reiterate, it will be difficult for Indonesians (including the Muslims) to develop relationships with the West, if we cannot overcome intergroup conflicts within our country. Concrete efforts should be conducted first to solve the problem at this national level before we solve the problem at the international level.

First of all, we have to reconstruct our culture and develop relatively-new civilization. So far we have talked much about our national culture, yet we do not really know what is meant by Indonesian culture. From my point of view, Indonesian culture is an ever-changing process; it is never final. So from time to time we have to reformulate the parameters of our national culture. In principle, as the renowned poet WS Rendra once asserted, we may adopt cultural aspects from any cultural source, as long as they improve our human dignity. This means we can and have to abandon any traditional aspect of our culture that inhibits human development, such as the rubber-time custom, laziness, etc. and adopt any “foreign” cultural aspect that is beneficial to develop our humanity, such as self-discipline, hardwork, honesty, cleanliness, etc. An anecdote on the laziness of Indonesians describes that in the Arab kingdom Koreans are sweaty when they are working while Indonesians are sweaty when they are eating.

Second, to reformulate the constructive national culture and develop our civilization, perhaps we have to establish a national cultural council composed of independent members besides government representatives. This council is in charge of redefining our national identity and formulating the cultural strategies of Indonesia in dealing with foreign cultures. It is evident that while the government has allowed its people to be greatly influenced by western cultures (through television in particular), the government has not fairly treated all cultural groups throughout the country. In this context, the cultural council should cooperate with main educational institutions and nongovernmental organizations to formulate and socialize the cultural policies (including laws pertaining to ethnic, racial, or religious discrimination, for example). It should also gather knowledge on cultural beliefs, values, and practices of all potential cultural groups in Indonesia. Social scientists, especially anthropologists, sociologists, and communicologists, who were ignored by the Soeharto regime can be assigned by the government to gather this knowledge and to investigate

any intergroup conflict and propose recommendation to tackle the problem.

So far the government's ignorance of cultural beliefs of a community may have constrained the development of that community. The lack of knowledge and empathy of the government with the cultural beliefs of the Amungme in Papua, for instance, have caused the Amungme to suffer from alienation in their own homeland while it is exploited as a mining area by the Freeport company endorsed by the Indonesian government. In the eyes of the Amungme, the land is sacred and as a center of their spiritual life. The population occupying Bintuni and Windesi in the Manokwari Regency believe that *Gunung Nabi* (Mount Prophet) is a holy place where 'the Creator' resides. The Amungme in Papua say "*Te Aro Neweak I am O*" meaning that 'Nature is myself.' As human beings they feel they have never been separated from their natural environment. They believe they come from nature, and they consider their land as their mother giving birth and nourishment to them, so the land must be respected. Based on such beliefs, the Amungme in Iembagapura rejected "modern shelters" provided by the government in Timika, although the new shelters were given freely and were much better than their traditional houses called *Honay*, and although they were taught to have a modern life, to cultivate local fisheries, and to utilize plants for their health (Mulyana, 2000:200-201).

The prospective national cultural council's task also includes the reformulation of the problem of SARA (*Suku, Agama Ras, dan Antar golongan*) (Ethnic, Racial, Religious, and Intergroup problems), so that the problem becomes more rational. Until recently, this problem had always been concealed. Discourse on ethnic, racial and religious differences had been taboo among the citizens. These cultural differences are to be managed rather than avoided. Without discussing these differences, intercultural stereotypes potentially leading to conflicts will still prevail, while on the surface they are latent. Once a friction takes place, its consequences can be so terrifying, because people are not accustomed to getting over such a friction, as indicated by many

cases in the last few years.

Without improving our ideas and policies on SARA problems, intercultural conflicts may happen again in the future. We have to eliminate concepts and terms covering up the real problems such as *pribumi* (native), *nonpribumi* (non-native), *WNI Keturunan* (WNI descent), and the term SARA itself. According Daniel S. Lev, an Indonesianist at the University of Washington, Seattle, historically the politics of SARA has always been created from the top. It used to be a tactic of the colonialist government to make people ununited, since Unity is a big power threatening the government (*Kompas*, June 10, 1998).

The Indonesian government needs to develop a multicultural policy that guarantees each group to preserve its culture. We should not be worried that the development of each culture will undermine the so called national culture. The cultural diversity will even enrich our experiences as individuals as well as a nation. In fact, individuals are able to broaden their cultural parameters further. In Chicago, for example, Chinese, Greeks, and Polish establish their own ethnic communities, yet they also proudly share their American identity. So, Indonesians can also become good Javanese, Indonesians, Muslims or Christians, and even the citizens of the world, without contradicting one identity with another. We should cast away the idea that when individuals stick to their ethnic culture they are less nationalist (Indonesian). Thus, there should not any bans on the display of Chinese cultural aspects such as the *Barongsay* dance and the Chinese cookies *Dodol Cina* like in the past. Indonesia has to be culturally open, flexible, and at the same time confident.

In developing our multicultural policy, we need to establish community centers enabling people from various cultural groups to socialize. Various community and cultural programs, including nonformal educational programs, can be carried out so that these cultural groups can understand each other, assisted by local authorities as facilitators who should first undergo intercultural training programs led by experts in this field. Local governments can hold intercultural activities en-

abling each cultural group to display its culture such as traditional food, traditional costumes, handicrafts, arts, etc. This Indonesian multicultural policy should also be realized through intercultural education at all levels (from primary level to tertiary level). Intercultural misunderstanding can be minimized through the understanding of values, expectation dan behavior of other cultural groups, and apply such knowledge in our communication with them. In fact, a broader project called global education has long been promoted by UNESCO. In its assembly in 1994 in Geneva, UNESCO reasserted its commitment to recommend the following: education should develop the capacity to recognize and accept values inherent in the diversity of individuals, genders, communities, and cultures, and develop the capability to communicate, share and cooperate with others.

We can also spread this intercultural knowledge and empathy through the printed media (newspaper articles, magazines, books, etc.) and the electronic media (radio and television programs focusing on the diversity of Indonesian subcultures and the importance of mutual cultural understanding) . This will be a great aid to this formal and informal intercultural education. Television in particular may broadcast programs containing a certain ethnic or racial group's lifestyle. Until now most television characters portrayed by Indonesian television have reflected those from urban areas (especially Jakarta), well-educated classes, and dominant ethnic groups such as the Javanese and the Sundanese. Stories broadcast by television have barely touched other ethnic or racial groups such as the Sasak, the Banjar, the Menadonese, let alone the Chinese, the Indians or the Arabs. The government has always been proud that Indonesia is composed of hundreds of ethnic groups with each having its own language, yet the perspective used in television programs is the Jakarta perspective. Local programs depicting various lifestyles of Indonesian people may at the same time minimize our dependence on imported programs, particularly western ones frequently not suitable for Indonesian people. An interesting television program may delineate a conflict between a

Javanese and a Chinese in an elegant, creative and funny way, and at the same time may propose a smart solution to the problem. Ethnic and racial problems may occur anywhere: in neighborhood, schools, offices, or parks. Intercultural themes are so abundant and will never be worn out. However, certain rules still have to be set up. For instance, no television program should defame any religion. Certain programs promoting chances of minority ethnic groups to progress (for example, to be high-ranking officials, even to be the President of Indonesia) may also be produced and broadcast. This aims to eradicate a strong impression held by the people so far that only members of certain dominant ethnic groups can be the president. While in the past there was an 'unwritten law' that only a Javanese can be the president, it is now still difficult to imagine that a Papua, an Ambonese, a Sasak, or an Aceh can reach that political position.

Concluding Remarks

To develop mutual-beneficial relationships with other countries, particularly the West, first we have to solve our internal problems which include mainly the intergroup conflicts in our country and the lack of education among the people. The solution to these problems basically pertains to the development of relatively-new Indonesian civilization based on selective, constructive values such as independence, self-discipline, hardwork, steadfastness, honesty, responsibility, accountability, punctuality, cleanliness, etc. This reformulation of national identity and culture requires strong leadership and determination, especially in the effort to be free from the negative (cultural, political, and economic) influence of other nations and international organizations. Part of this radical solution is the development of the Indonesian multicultural policy which can be applied in the form of multicultural education at all levels and throughout the mass media. ❶

Endnote:

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