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THE ROLE OF NATIONALISM IN REALIZING SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN THE MIDST OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN LANGSA ACEH CITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of nationalism in fostering social integration amidst ethnic diversity in Langsa City, Aceh. Langsa is inhabited by various ethnic groups with distinct cultural backgrounds, presenting challenges related to social conflict due to identity differences. Using a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and participatory observation, the study reveals that nationalism functions as a moral and social foundation capable of uniting a multi-ethnic society. Consistent with Anderson's (1983) view that nationalism is an "imagined community" with a powerful social adhesive effect, nationalist values such as love of country, a spirit of togetherness, and respect for diversity strengthen solidarity and tolerance among residents. Furthermore, active community participation in national events serves as an effective medium to reinforce social cohesion. Although challenges such as prejudice and stereotypes persist, inclusive nationalism proves to be a strategic instrument for managing diversity and achieving social harmony. These findings have important implications for the development of educational and social policies that support national integration in other multi-ethnic regions.

Keywords: Nationalism, Social Integration, Ethnic Diversity, Langsa City, Social Cohesion

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran nasionalisme dalam menciptakan integrasi sosial di tengah keberagaman etnis di Kota Langsa, Aceh. Kota Langsa merupakan wilayah yang dihuni oleh berbagai kelompok etnis dengan latar belakang budaya yang berbeda, sehingga potensi konflik sosial akibat perbedaan identitas menjadi tantangan utama dalam menjaga kerukunan. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipatif, penelitian ini mengungkap bahwa nasionalisme berfungsi sebagai landasan moral dan sosial yang mampu menyatukan masyarakat multietnis. Sejalan dengan pendapat Anderson (1983) yang menyatakan bahwa nasionalisme merupakan komunitas yang dibayangkan namun memiliki kekuatan nyata sebagai perekat sosial, nilai-nilai nasionalisme seperti rasa cinta tanah air, semangat kebersamaan, dan penghormatan terhadap perbedaan turut memperkuat solidaritas dan toleransi antarwarga. Selain itu, partisipasi aktif masyarakat dalam kegiatan nasional menjadi media efektif dalam memperkuat kohesi sosial. Meskipun masih terdapat kendala seperti prasangka dan stereotip, nasionalisme inklusif terbukti menjadi instrumen strategis dalam mengelola keragaman demi terciptanya kehidupan sosial yang harmonis. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi penting bagi pengembangan kebijakan pendidikan dan sosial yang mendukung integrasi nasional di daerah multietnis lainnya.

Kata Kunci: Nasionalisme, Integrasi Sosial, Keragaman Etnis, Kota Langsa, Kohesi Sosial

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is an archipelagic country that has a very wide ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity (Shalih, 2019). This diversity is a wealth as well as a challenge in realizing a harmonious social life. One of the important elements that is the glue in a multicultural society is nationalism, namely a sense of love and loyalty to the homeland that transcends the barriers of regional identity and ethnic groups. In this context, nationalism plays a role as a foundation in building social integration, which is a social condition characterized by unity, tolerance, and cooperation between citizens of different backgrounds (Pangalila & Mantiri, 2020).

The city of Langsa in Aceh Province is one of the areas that has ethnic diversity, such as Aceh, Gayo, Malay, Chinese, and other immigrant ethnicities (Musthafa & Darmawan, 2024). This diversity requires a collective consciousness to maintain social harmony. In reality, interethnic interaction in Langsa City is inseparable from complex social dynamics, such as economic competition, cultural differences, and the potential for horizontal conflicts.

Aceh has a long and unique history of conflicts, especially the armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia that lasted for almost three decades. The Helsinki peace agreement in 2005 became an important turning point in the process of reconciliation and reconstruction of Aceh. In this context, nationalism in Langsa not only serves as a multiethnic glue, but also as a tool for reconciliation after the trauma of the Aceh conflict, where the identities of Acehnese and Indonesians need to be reconciled and synergized in order to create sustainable social harmony. Inclusive nationalism is an important means to unite societies that have previously experienced fragmentation due to conflict.

Education and awareness of the importance of nationalism are important instruments in maintaining social integration. Through the values of nationalism, people can have a collective identity as an Indonesian nation, without erasing their respective cultural identities (Brata Ida Bagus, 2016). This research focuses on the role of nationalism in encouraging the creation of social integration in the midst of ethnic diversity in Langsa City, Aceh. By examining the extent to which nationalistic values are lived and practiced by multiethnic communities, it is hoped that this research can contribute to strengthening social cohesion at the local and national levels.

A number of previous studies have also highlighted the role of nationalism and post-conflict social reconciliation in Aceh. For example, Hasan (2018) emphasized the importance of nationalism as the basis for building peace and integration in post-Helsinki Aceh (Science et al., 2024) , while Nuraini (2021) shows how the active participation of the community in state activities strengthens the sense of unity across ethnicities. These studies reinforce the urgency of understanding how nationalism can be used as a strategic tool to strengthen social integration in areas with a background of conflict and diversity such as Langsa.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research shows that nationalism plays an important role in strengthening social ties in the people of Langsa City which consists of various ethnic groups. Nationalism, understood as awareness and love for the homeland, is the main basis for uniting citizens from different ethnic backgrounds. This finding is in line with the opinion of Smith (1991) who states that nationalism functions as a tool of collective identity that binds individuals within a wider community.

Data obtained from interviews with community leaders, government officials, and citizens of various ethnicities indicate that nationalism is not only seen as a symbol of the state such as the flag and national anthem, but also as a social value that puts unity above differences. For example, active participation in national day celebrations such as Independence Day and Youth Pledge Day is an important moment that strengthens inter-ethnic solidarity (Anderson, 1983). These activities provide a space for social interaction that encourages tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect for cultural diversity.

However, social integration in Langsa City cannot be separated from the challenges of prejudice and stereotypes between ethnicities, especially in the local economic and political fields. This condition is in line with the findings of Putnam (2007) who emphasized that ethnic diversity can trigger conflict if it is not accompanied by shared values, such as inclusive nationalism. In this situation, the role of community leaders and educational institutions is very important to instill and strengthen an inclusive nationalism that is able to adapt to social diversity.

In addition, this study found that nationalism functions as a social capital that connects diverse cultural identities with unifying national identities. These findings

support Durkheim's (1984) theory of organic solidarity, which states that modern societies with high diversity require collective values that are able to unite differences in order to achieve stable social cohesion. Thus, nationalism is not only a political concept, but also an important moral and social basis in realizing social integration in Langsa City.

In addition to functioning as a social glue, nationalism has also been found to act as an effective source of motivation and collective identity in reducing the potential for conflict between ethnic groups. In Langsa City, which is inhabited by diverse tribes such as Acehnese, Gayo, Malays, Chinese, and other immigrants, nationalism serves as a central value that unites diverse cultural and historical backgrounds within the framework of Indonesian nationality. This is in line with the concept of inclusive nationalism according to Kohn (1944), which emphasizes nationalism that is open and able to accept diversity without eliminating the characteristics of ethnic groups.

In addition, national education and the role of community leaders as agents of social change are important factors in the success of social integration. Formal and informal education in Langsa City has tried to instill the values of nationalism and tolerance from an early age. Other research has also shown that nationality education can reduce social stereotypes and prejudices (Banks, 2008). The role of community leaders and indigenous leaders in facilitating dialogue between ethnic groups is also crucial as a mechanism for managing differences and strengthening social cohesion.

However, power dynamics and socio-economic inequality remain challenges that can strengthen ethnic segregation if not handled appropriately. Horowitz (1985) stated that economic and political inequality is often a trigger for conflicts between ethnic groups, so affirmative policies and the enforcement of social justice are needed as part of an inclusive nationalism strategy. Therefore, the principles of social justice and equitable distribution of welfare must be an integral part of supporting sustainable social integration in Langsa City.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research, it is recommended that the Langsa City Government integrate local content related to Aceh's multiethnic history into the formal and non-formal school curriculum. This aims to foster an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity from an early age, while instilling the values of inclusive nationalism that are able to embrace ethnic identity without eliminating local uniqueness. In addition,

it is necessary to strengthen the role of community leaders and indigenous leaders in facilitating cross-ethnic dialogue as a vehicle to strengthen social cohesion and peaceful conflict resolution.

Original Research Contributions

In contrast to the study of nationalism which focuses more on the Javanese context which is more related to the history of the independence struggle, this study shows that nationalism in Langsa City was actually built through the post-peace conflict resolution process of GAM-RI (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka-Republic of Indonesia). This research also reveals that inclusive nationalism in Aceh must negotiate with Islamic law, a dimension that has not received much attention in the literature on nationalism in Indonesia. Thus, this study enriches understanding of the dynamics of nationalism in conflict areas that have unique cultural and religious complexity.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study confirm that nationalism plays a strategic role in building and maintaining social integration in the midst of ethnic diversity in Langsa City. The values of nationalism—which are reflected in the love for the homeland, the spirit of togetherness, and respect for cultural differences—serve as the main foundation for the creation of harmonious and sustainable social cohesion. This finding reinforces Anderson's (1983) idea that nationalism is a *imagined community*, but in Langsa City nationalism has also become *lived experience*, which manifests itself in everyday social practice.

The active participation of the community in national social and ceremonial activities is not only a symbol, but also an effective space for social interaction to strengthen inter-ethnic solidarity. The collective awareness that national identity is able to bridge cultural differences and origins affirms the concept of inclusive nationalism that is in harmony with the principles *Unity in Diversity*. However, the local context in Langsa presents unique challenges, especially in negotiations with Islamic sharia values that have shaped the dynamics of nationalism in the region.

Based on these findings, several recommendations were submitted. First, strengthening character education based on national values must be a priority, both in the formal and informal spheres, in order to foster collective awareness of the importance of

inclusive nationalism in the context of diversity. Second, local governments and community leaders need to create a space for participatory inter-ethnic dialogue and collaboration, so that social integration develops in a real and not just symbolic way. Third, local media and public broadcasting institutions should play an active role in spreading positive narratives about diversity and unity, so that people avoid the influence of divisive sectarian discourse.

Thus, the nationalism formed in Langsa is an adaptive, open, and prioritized social integrity within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, while being able to answer the typical socio-cultural challenges in the area.

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