



Intersection of Cultural Identity, Politics, and RMS Stigma in Moluccas

Christian Herman Johan De Fretes

International Relations Department, Satya Wacana Christian University, Indonesia

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v11i5.5741>

Abstract

This article will provide a review by highlighting RMS impacts on Moluccas society, a region that was spearheaded by Dr. Soumokil, who chose to reject joining the Republic of Indonesia in 1950. During this period of rebellion, cultural terms such as *mena muria* were used for political purposes. Its impact is still associated with separatism. The arrest and reprimand by state apparatus against Moluccans wearing clothing with *mena muria* written on it is an indicator that the cultural terms have been affected by the RMS (Republic of South Moluccas) movement, creates dynamics that impact various sectors. On the other hand, through the lens of stigma, this article will explain the Intersection of cultural identity, politics and RMS stigma in Moluccas.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity; stigma; RMS; Moluccas; Mena Muria*

Introduction

The arrest of police officers against Glendy Somae on May 26, 2018, cannot be separated from stigmatization (Indah; mediaharapan.com 2018). Stigmatization began with labeling, stereotyping, emotional reactions, and culminated in discrimination through cultural narratives associated with the issue of separatism. Referring to the Glendy Somae case, it can be inferred that the state, through its authorities, became entangled in the dichotomy of politicized cultural narratives. The process of Glendy Somae's arrest, who was wearing a *mena muria* shirt, began with a collective protest to the Moluccan provincial government in Ambon, regarding the use of traditional symbols on the sidewalks which were seen as a violation of Moluccan customs and culture. However, the situation was further influenced by the alleged connection between Glendy Somae and separatism based on the *mena muria* shirt worn by him. "We may perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect, and then see both defect and response as just retribution for something he or his parents or his tribe did, and hence a justification of the way we treat him" (Goffman 1963). Referring to what Goffman said that the response felt and experienced by the Moluccans today is a result of what happened in the past that was done by predecessors in Moluccas. A situation that is not only influenced by the social conditions of the Moluccans but is also dominated by changes in Indonesian politics.

In the 1950s, *mena muria* was used by the RMS (Republic of South Moluccas) as a political expression and slogan. Therefore, according to the police, the arrest was justified due to the issue of separatism. The shift in the meaning of *mena muria* cannot be denied, greatly influenced by RMS activists who associate cultural terms with political movements. This politicization is evident from the

active use of this term by RMS activist suspects based on court documents from the Supreme Court Directory of Decisions of the Republic of Indonesia in 2019. The confession of one of the arresting officers also did not understand the meaning of *mena muria* but knew that *mena muria* was identical to RMS. (putusan.mahkamahagung.go.id). Through this court decision document, it can also be seen from the statements of each witness that always associate *mena muria* with RMS. It is as if *mena muria* is an indication of the perpetrator's involvement with RMS. The lack of knowledge about the meaning of *mena muria* resulted in a clash between what was considered a violation of positive law (separatism) by state officials and what was believed by society as a cultural legacy and part of their collective identity.

The limited literacy discussing the relationship between RMS stigmatization and the Moluccan community is due to the lack of freedom in discussing separatism, resulting from political pressure during the New Order era. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the RMS as a "value" and its historical movement within Moluccan society in the 1950s, as well as the significance of the RMS among the diaspora in the Netherlands. Moreover, studies related to the history of the RMS are still scarce due to it being considered taboo to discuss or address since the New Order era. To this day, the community remains fearful of using cultural narratives that were once used by the RMS groups, such as *mena muria*. Therefore, this research discusses the Intersection of Cultural Identity, Politics, and RMS Stigma in Moluccas.

Methodology

The research method used in this writing is qualitative, utilizing texts and data as the basis for elaborating on the research topic. Data collection techniques used include interviews with informants, documentation, and observation. Therefore, the data used consist of both primary and secondary data. Primary data is obtained from interviews with several informants in Ambon, including figures from Moluccas, journalists, parties directly involved with the stigma, and other relevant informants concerning the research topic.

To explain the influence of stigma in the intersection of cultural identity and politics within society, the researcher will elaborate on the impact of stigma and then its influence on cultural and political identity. Stigma as an attribute that can be deeply discrediting, which reduces whole persons to tainted and discounted others. Goffman reveals that stigma is an attribute that can be highly discrediting, reducing someone's worth to stigmatize and look down on others. This discrediting starts from the attributes possessed and then framed within social constructivism, (Goffman 1963). A stigmatized society will be a setback for the creation of ideal social, political, and cultural conditions. Not only in social, political, and cultural aspects, but also security will become vulnerable to conflicts. This stigma condition will also hinder democratization due to inequalities within the structure (structural inequalities) influenced by stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination in both society and government, (Frost 2011). Through this approach, it is hoped that an explanation can be provided regarding the Intersection of transnational Cultural Identity, Politics, and RMS Stigma in Moluccas

Intersection of Cultural Identity, Politics, And Rms Stigma in Moluccas

The incident involving Glendy Somawe provides a glimpse into why stigmatization leading to discrimination and coercion continues to exist in social life, particularly in the Moluccas. Consequently, people's fear and anxiety regarding the consequences of such stigmatization persist. The process begins with a politicized cultural narrative, which results in prejudice and is ultimately manifested through the actions and behaviors of both the police and the community, solely based on superficial stigmatization. State apparatus personally in Moluccas who associate *mena muria* with symbols and political expressions of the RMS are unconsciously trapped in the stigmatization caused by the politicization of culture and customs. This politicization has historical roots, dating back to national fighters like the 1913 Mena Moeria Association and Alexander Jacob Patty, as well as newspapers named *Mena muria* in 1922. Since

then, the RMS started using *mena muria* as a greeting in the 1950s, but it remained a "taboo" during the New Order era and continues to be so today.

The politicization of cultural expressions by RMS fighters was a means to gain the sympathy and support of the Moluccans through culture. By emphasizing cultural values as the identity of the Moluccans, they aimed to foster a sense of belonging between the "values" of the RMS and the Moluccan people. The identity politics implemented by the RMS came to an end with the 1950 military operation led by Lt Col Slamet Rijadi and Col. A.E. Kawilarang, as well as the execution of Dr. Ch Soumokil in 1966 on Obi Island, marking the end of the RMS struggle in the Moluccas. However, the impact of the RMS movement still lingers in the form of stigma. The stigmatization of cultural narratives, which transformed into political narratives of the RMS, remains deeply intertwined.

The RMS upheaval, military operations in the 1950s, and the process of "nationalization" created social and political trauma within society. This is why RMS stigmatization within the community had the potential to become a commodity or instrument in fueling public anger, as seen in the 1999 Moluccas conflict. Past trauma related to the RMS continues to be ingrained in the collective memory of the Moluccans, especially on April 25th. As stated by Jacky Manuputty in an interview, "the government in the New Order era, through the military, always used the RMS issue to demonstrate their military strength in the Moluccas," (Fretes and Hiariej 2013). He further explained that every year during the New Order period, former RMS members were arrested by the military, paraded in trucks with weapons on April 25th, and released several days later only if they or their families had made contact or used terms associated with the RMS. According to Jacky Manuputty, the state apparatus not only arrested former RMS members but also targeted any citizen who was suspected or indicated to be involved with the RMS. These individuals would be transported in pickup trucks or landrovers and convoyed through predominantly Christian settlements. This "ritual" served as a justification to reinforce the stigma that the Republic of South Moluccas (RMS), once mistaken as the Republic of Moluccas "Serani" (Christian), remains embedded to this day. The impact of this phenomenon can be observed in society, as people have become hesitant to use the term *mena muria*, predominantly in Christian communities rather than Muslim ones. This observation is further supported by statements from Azis Tunny (interview by author, January 04, 2019), who hails from the predominantly Muslim area of Liang in the Moluccas. Asiz's statement highlights that there is no inherent issue with using the term *mena muria*, as it is still commonly used in daily conversations by individuals like Fathur in his village. However, such usage is less prevalent in Christian villages. Fathur believes that *mena muria* must be reclaimed and freed from false associations, dichotomies, and stigma.

The results of the convoy carried out by the government instilled fear within the community regarding the impact of the RMS. The RMS became an invisible ghost that remained a threat, (Hiariej and Panggabean 2011). The methods employed by the Soeharto government were successful in creating paranoia among the Moluccans, particularly the Ambonese, regarding anything associated with the RMS. This situation contrasts with the ritual of flag-raising that takes place almost every April since the outbreak of the conflict in 1999. The traumatic and paranoid society finds rational reasons to fear any symbol, attribute, or instrument associated with the RMS, especially the act of raising the RMS flag in 1999. To this day, the individual responsible for raising the RMS flag in 1999 has never been apprehended, and the true culprit remains unknown.

In addressing this phenomenon, Professor Wahab Watloy argues that the RMS movement that occurred was a phenomenal and unstructured occurrence without historical connections to the RMS movement in 1950, (Fretes and Hiariej 2013). Thus, it can be concluded that there are variations in how the community interprets and applies the value of the RMS. Further exploration is needed to investigate claims suggesting funding from the diaspora community and the involvement of the military in raising the RMS flag in the Moluccas.

The Restoration of *Mena Muria* as the Culture of Moluccas Society

Moluccas differs from most areas in Indonesia, which traditionally have a written culture. Historical Moluccas is dominated by oral traditions. This factor has led to a distortion of knowledge that should ideally be passed down through generations, as it cannot be clarified through written sources. Especially during the New Order era, authoritarian and centralistic policies tightly controlled all information related to separatism to prevent political instability that could undermine government authority. Additionally, the emphasis on the Pancasila ideology with Indonesia as a unitary state makes narratives of separatism like RMS a political taboo that could threaten national integrity and the process of national integration.

The Moluccans' oral traditions and culture, which differ from civilizations that rely on writing as a primary communication tool, the oral tradition played a significant role in how the events of 1988 in Seram spread to Ambon and continued to be passed down through generations via storytelling. The accusations of being RMS activists in opposition to the Djayanti Group in Seram had a profound impact on the community, leading them to become afraid of engaging in political actions and movements that indicated opposition to the government. The Moluccans were conditioned to be passive in participating in political collective action. This passivity is evident in the absence of movements or political actions such as demonstrations since the Djayanti Seram event in 1988. It was only in 1998 that the first demonstration took place against the government, led by students from the University of Pattimura (UNPATTI) in support of the overthrow of Soeharto, the ruler of the New Order era. The passive and weakened civil society, due to past traumas, resulted in the limited function of community control over the process of good governance, which in turn affected development in the province, (Fretes 2022).

Mena muria is a customary term originating from the Moluccas language as part of the cultural heritage of Melanesia. Specifically, *mena muria* comes from the Alune language, spoken predominantly by coastal inhabitants of Seram Island. *Mena muria* carries the philosophical meaning of "moving forward without retreat" (Latupeirissa 2017). It also signifies a division between older and younger siblings (older and younger brothers) referred to as *Sia Mena* and *Ile Mena*. In Seram, there are three sources of water (rivers): Tala, Eti, and Sapalewa, which also represent the territories of three sibling groups. The older sibling, Ile Mena, follows the Tala river, Ile Talele follows the Eti river, and the Sapalewa river is followed by Ile Muli. In the mapping and division of communities in the area, there are also references to *Hatu Mena* and *Hatu Muli (muria)*. *Mena* refers to those who guard the front area (entrance to the clan's territory), while *Muli (muria)* guards the rear area (Latupeirissa 2017).

During the movement for separation from Indonesia by the RMS, the term *mena muria* was used as a slogan or greeting during activities or specific practical moments. This period resulted in linguistic determinism at the social level of Moluccas society, where the process of digesting *mena muria* as part of the culture was eliminated within the framework of RMS's identity politics (Soukotta 2021). According to one cultural activist and chairman of the Kalesang Moluccas Community, Vigel Fokaubun (interview by author, June 23, 2018), the language of *mena muria* cannot be eradicated just because it is associated with RMS. Vigel states that the greeting *mena muria* is a symbol of the Moluccas community's encounter. According to the opinion obtained from the elders of tradition, *Mena* is the first greeting that must be shouted loudly when meeting someone, and it must then be responded to with the shout *Muria*. However, the interpretation of these words by the police has a negative connotation. Negative because this greeting has been and always used for activities related to RMS. On the other hand, what is intended to be displayed is a movement to preserve the traditional language, and *mena muria* is one of the terms that must be maintained as the traditional language of the Moluccas community. Also, because this stigma has created its own fear among the people of Maluku, who are always overshadowed by the anxiety and concern of the resurgence of the ghosts of the past known as RMS, (Fretes 2022).

As previously explained, in terminology, the meaning of *mena* is the person at the forefront who is ready, and *muria* means the person at the back who is also ready. According to the latest reference from traditional elders to avoid problems with the police, when there is a greeting of *mena* and it is responded to with *muria*, both parties must simultaneously say *mese*. *Mese* has a broad meaning, it can mean united or strong, so when there are shouts of *mena* and *muria*, whether we like it or not, we must also say *mese*, which means overall, "both the front and back are equally strong in protecting Moluccas". Therefore, this greeting should not be lost or eliminated. Furthermore, Vigel also emphasizes that if outsiders can use "lu or gue"¹ language, can't we, Moluccans, use our own traditional language? Vigel concluded his explanation by stating that he strongly disagrees with the notion that *mena muria* is the language of the separatist RMS, as many people believe. The campaign conducted by Kalesang Moluccas to combat stigma also includes producing *Mena muria* shirts as a means of restoring the traditional language and educating people about the importance of preserving it. Considering that the native language of the Moluccas region is one of the endangered languages in Indonesia.

Conclusion

Through the elaboration above, the intersection between cultural identity and politics in the term *mena muria* has been interpreted freely by the community. *Mena muria* can then be arbitrarily interpreted as cultural richness or as an indicator of separatism. This condition makes the term *mena muria* as a local cultural identity asset threatened to no longer be used because of the fear of being associated with separatism. Modifying *mena muria* to neutralize it from political terms is not a solution, as cultural narratives must be free from destructive political values. It is hoped that through this study, new thoughts can be provided so that people are no longer afraid to use the cultural identities they have. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the influence of the New Order policies has successfully suppressed the use of cultural identities related to separatism. However, how *mena muria* can transform and be accepted as a narrative considered threatening by the community is something interesting to be further studied.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the Satya Wacana Christian University. They have supported and funded the research for writing this article under the Internal Grant Funding. The author sincerely acknowledges the contributions of all those mentioned above and deeply appreciate their support throughout this research. Their encouragement has been pivotal to the completion of this research. Thank you.

Funding

The Satya Wacana Christian University Internal grant funding scheme.

Statement of Human Rights

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

Statement on the Welfare of Animals

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by the author.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ADLu or gue : A local Jakarta idiom means you or me

References

- Aschroft, Bill, Griffiths G, and Tiffin H. 2007. *Post Colonial studies*. Taylor & Francis, Routledge.
- Chauvel, Richard. 1990. *Nationalist, Soldiers and Separatists: The Ambonese Islands from Colonialism to Revolt 1880 – 1950*. KITLV Press, Leiden.
- Fretes, Christian H J de;, and Eric; Hiariej. 2013. “Kemunculan Isu RMS Dan Pengaruhnya Dalam Konflik Ambon 1999.” Gadjah Mada University.
- Fretes, Christian H J de. 2022. “Stigma Di Antara Republik Maluku Selatan ‘RMS’: Pembangunan Dan Demokrasi Di Maluku.” *KRITIS* 31 (1): 39–58.
- Fretes, Johannes Dirk de. 2007. *Kebenaran Melebihi Persahabatan*. PT Harman Pitalex.
- Frost, David M. 2011. “Social Stigma and Its Consequences for the Socially Stigmatized.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 5 (11): 824–39.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. “Embarrassment and Social Organization.”
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma*. London: Penguin.
- Gurr, T.R. 1993. *Minorities at Risk*. United States Institute of Peace Press. Washington DC.
- Hiariej, Eric;, and Rizal Panggabean. 2011. *Peace and Security*. Universitas Gadjah Mada.
- Latupeirissa, Clara. 2017. “Makna Mena Muria Bagi Masyarakat Aboru Di Pulau Haruku.” Magister Sosiologi Agama Program Pascasarjana FTEO-UKSW.
- Leirissa, Richard Z. 1975. *Maluku dalam Perjalanan Nasional Indonesia*. Lembaga Sejarah Fakultas Sastra Universitas Indonesia.
- Steijlen, Fridus. 2015. *In and Out Uniform*. Taylor & Francis.
- Soukotta, Ferdy Karel. 2021. “Konstruksi Makna Identitas Mena Muria Pada ‘Kutikata.’”
- Indah, rachmi. 2018. “Pakai Baju Tulisan ‘Mena Muria’ Seorang Pemuda Maluku Ditahan, MCC Desak Polisi Minta Maaf.” *MediaHarapan.Com*, May 27, 2018. <https://mediaharapan.com/pakai-baju-tulisan-mena-muria-seorang-pemuda-maluku-ditahan-mcc-desak-polisi-minta-maaf/>.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).