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Multiculturalism in Singkawang: tolerance and inter-ethnic communications practices among the diasporic communities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the tolerance and harmony practices between the Chinese diasporic community and the indigenous Malay and Dayak people in Singkawang town, West Kalimantan. It examines their socio-cultural practices and inter-ethnic communication, offering a multidisciplinary perspective on global migration in Indonesia. Singkawang is a peaceful and tolerant town, home to various ethnic groups such as Chinese, Malay, Dayak, Javanese and Madurese. The study aims to examine the life of tolerance and harmonisation within the Chinese diasporic community and the socio-cultural and community life, as well as inter-ethnic communication, maintained by the community. The research uses a qualitative research method, including informal conversations, in-depth interviews and focused group discussions with community leaders and representative members of the community with various ethnic backgrounds. The study concludes that public perceptions about differences are crucial for maintaining tolerance and inter-ethnic communication. The strategy of empathy or cultural empathy helps restrain ourselves' and see differences as the uniqueness of each ethnicity. Community leaders play a crucial role in minimising differences by initiating communication forums and increasing understanding of differences, despite the challenges in practice.

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Introduction

Singkawang Town was designated as the most tolerant town in Indonesia from 2018 to 2022 by the SETARA Institute (Saliro 2019). Awarded as tolerant cities according to the SETARA Institute, the town qualified in some indicators designed by the Institute included Development Plan (10%), Discriminatory Policy (20%), Intolerance Events (20%), Civil Society Dynamics (10%), Town Government Public Statement (10%), Town Government Real Action (15%), Religious Heterogeneity (5%) and Religious Social Inclusion (10%). Interestingly, so far, there has been no academic research that looks at the dynamics of migration and diasporic communities in cities that are also border areas, just like in Singkawang. Some previous studies have been conducted (Hui 2011) on issues related to the town of Singkawang as a growing urban town and Chinese culture in Singkawang (Ong, Ormond, and Sulianti 2017). Singkawang is home to the ethnic diasporas, particularly the largest ethnic Chinese in Indonesia (Setijadi 2023). The name of the town 'Singkawang' itself comes from the Chinese language: *San Khew Jong*, meaning a town at the foot of a mountain close to the mouth of the sea (Dawis 2009). Singkawang is also referred to as the town of 'Amoi' (or labelled to the Chinese girl), the Town of a 'Thousand Temples', and is also nicknamed as a 'Hong

Kong *van Borneo*' (Muhtifah et al. 2021). Singkawang is a town known for its tolerance of ethnic and religious diversity, with mosques and temples placed side-by-side. The predominantly Malay, Chinese and Dayak tribes inhabit the lively, social community, while Javanese and Madurese are minorities.

Singkawang, a town in the early 1900s, was part of the Sambas Sultanate during the gold rush. Known as '*San Keuw Jong*', it was used as a village by Chinese gold traders and miners. Since 1918, it has been designated as the town of Singkawang, showcasing its rich cultural and religious heritage (Dawis 2009). Unlike the Chinese in Java and Sumatra, who originated from Hokkien and Canton-speaking backgrounds, the Chinese travellers (or called as *fan yin*) predominantly came from Hakka and Teochiu-speaking groups (Atmaja and Fachrurazi 2018; Fachrurazi 2019). Yew-Fong's ethno-historical study on the Chinese ethnic community in Singkawang, West Kalimantan, traces the arrival of ethnic Chinese migrants and their proximity to Hong Kong-born Chinese. The Chinese people in Singkawang feel 'at home' there, but their ethnic cultural persistence remains a mainstay, as do other Chinese Indonesian diaspora who feel foreign or become strangers in the country (Hui 2011; Wahyudi et al. 2024).

Research on the Chinese ethnic community in Singkawang has focused on syncretism and religious life within the community (Hidayat 2012). The study on the economic/trading relationship between ethnic Malays and ethnic Chinese in the Northern Coast of West Kalimantan, including Singkawang, reveals that these two major ethnicities continue to negotiate their position and identity in everyday economic activities. The Malay people accept and tolerate the Chinese to preserve their 'Chinese pride' and avoid inter-ethnic conflict, which has been a traumatic violence in the area (Fachrurazi 2019). The study by Fachrurazi suggests that while Chinese and Malay traders have competed in trading, they have managed to maintain their economic status and interests by understanding their relationship. Meanwhile, Jailani, Dewantara & Rahmani's study suggests that Chinese people have successfully reconstituted and formed social relationships with Malay to prevent future inter-ethnic conflicts (Jailani, Dewantara, and Rahmani 2021). The symbolic perception and tolerance between Malays and Chinese have significantly contributed to fostering peace and reducing future ethnic conflicts.

As a tolerant city, Singkawang has a dark history between 1997 and 2001 when there was an inter-ethnic conflict there (Fanselow 2015; Peluso 2008; Watch 1997). Between December 1996 and March 1997, over a thousand people were killed in communal violence between Dayak tribes in West Kalimantan and Madurese migrants from East Java. The violence began with a fight in Sanggau Ledo, where two Dayaks were stabbed. The violence escalated to burning houses, killing inhabitants and sometimes splitting heads and eating the livers of those killed. The communal conflict became a source of terrifying news and stories, causing widespread fear among the community (see Human Rights Watch's Report, 1 December 1997). The Dayak-Madurese conflict in 1996–1997 was not the first conflict in West Kalimantan. The first conflict occurred in 1967, involving over 300 people killed and 55,000 Chinese displaced. The Indonesian military claimed it was a political conflict, claiming it was a spontaneous uprising by the Dayak people against Communist guerrillas with strong support from local ethnic Chinese. Human Rights Watch's Report suggests the military was involved in the 1967 conflict, under the political issue in West Kalimantan.

Meanwhile, Anika König (2013, 2016) suggested that the clash between the Dayak and the Madurese in 1996–1997 was coined as the conflict of identity politics. It was an issue related to the 'idea of a fixed, Borneo-wide, (pan)Dayak identity versus a common Madurese enemy' (König 2016). Moreover, König examined that the Dayak tribes was afraid of losing their cultural identity in West Kalimantan due to oppression by the state and other factors, such as stereotyping, changes in land-use system, fast development in Borneo, education improvement, migrations, the modernisation of West Kalimantan and so forth that cause the decline in Dayak cultural values and traditions (König 2013). Thus, the Dayak people thought that the unification of various small Dayak groups should be merged into one big Dayak, which is more powerful as a 'pan-Dayak' ethnic group seen as a counteract to the perceived threat to Dayak culture and identity (Koesbardiati et al. 2025;

König 2013). Previous studies highlight the importance of understanding conflict history to prevent future violence. Building inter-ethnic relationships and communication in educational institutions, such as a multi-ethnic school in West Kalimantan, and promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and multi-cultural education are suggested strategies to create social harmony (Dewantara et al. 2024); (König 2016). Singkawang town, for example, has been designated as the most tolerant town by the SETARA Institute from 2020 to 2024 (Elyta and Herlan 2021; Sugiarti et al. 2024). The spirit guardians of the people living in Singkawang play a crucial role in maintaining harmony, as they hold values, spirits and religious values as their philosophy of life. The Chinese community in Singkawang embodies political life, harmony and a tolerant city. In 2019, the first Chinese female mayor of Singkawang was elected, symbolising the semiotic of ‘Chinese pride’ among the Malay people, Dayak, Madurese and Javanese (Dewi 2019). These suggestions aim to create a harmonious and tolerant environment for multi-ethnic residents.

Departing from some previous studies and literature written above mentioned, and the desire to get the latest data and information related to the Chinese diasporic community, which migrated to West Kalimantan, especially in Singkawang, this present study aims to look at the life of tolerance and harmonisation between the Chinese diasporic community and the indigenous (Malay and Dayak) and how socio-cultural and community life and inter-ethnic communication carried out by the community in Singkawang to prevent inter-ethnic clash in the future. The questions are raised: how do the community members and their leaders think about their ethnic identity and differences from other ethnic groups in their neighbourhood environment? How have the community members and the leaders managed and reacted to any conflicts and ethnic differences taken place within the neighbourhood? For this reason, this present study also attempts to reveal and conduct direct observations of how the practice of tolerance among the diasporic community in Singkawang town, and how the socio-cultural practices and inter-ethnic perceptions have been built by the different ethnic identities in the current condition of Singkawang town.

Research methods

The research method conducted in this study is qualitative using the perspective of Inter-Ethnic and Ethno-Cultural Communication in the Anthropological tradition can reveal the socio-cultural discourse practices of the Chinese diaspora ethnic community in Singkawang in their social interaction with the Malay and Dayak ethnic groups there. This research was conducted during May 2024 in the cities of Singkawang and Pontianak, West Kalimantan. In the tradition of inter-ethnic or intercultural communication research, it is important to put oneself in the client’s cultural perspective. The ‘clients’ defined in this study are the resource persons and samples that are the target of the research, namely, individuals representing various ethnic backgrounds, such a Chinese, Malay (Riau and Riau Islands), Dayak (Sambas) and Madura. Using Bennett’s (1979) concept of the Platinum Rule in intercultural communication research that prioritises ‘empathy’ and ‘cultural empathy’ (Ridley and Lingle 1996), the data gathering approach used in this study is narrative story telling by providing opportunities for the sample subjects in this study to tell stories about what they experienced and their experiences of living together with different ethnic communities in neighbourhood. In addition, data and information in this study were also collected through in-depth interviews with NGO activists involved in the peace commission in Singkawang, and representatives of community groups from different ethnicities, namely Malay, Chinese, Dayak and Madurese who daily interact together, communicate between ethnicities and between religions/beliefs in the community, including local community leaders from different ethnicities and religious leaders in the community. In addition, interviews and focused discussions were also conducted with the Religious Communication Forum and Ethnic Groups in the town of Singkawang.

This research also observed the daily life of the people of Singkawang town by hanging out at coffee shops (*Kopi Tiam* cafés) that are widely spread in the town of Singkawang and the Capital city of Pontianak, West Kalimantan. These coffee shops are mostly owned by the local Chinese

businessmen, who used to migrate to Pontianak and Singkawang for almost a hundred years (Ramadani, Tjitrawati, and Romadhona 2024; Tjitrawati and Romadhona 2024). A typical Chinese-Malay coffee shop is almost similar to the shape of the café and the coffee and food sold, blending between Malay coffee milk and Chinese snacks. The technique of taking informants was carried out by snowball sampling, starting with entry points from community leaders and Islamic and Chinese religious figures, especially in the city of Singkawang. The number of informants, who are interviewed, will stop when the last informant confirms the information that has been obtained from the previous informants. The data that have been collected will be analysed using the perspective of communication and cultural studies. The total number of informants obtained in this study was 20 people consisting of ethnic community leaders (males 2), Muslim women leaders (females 2), college students (males 3), teachers (females and male 3), high-school girls (females 2), common grounds (males and females 6), NGO activists (males 2). Their age ranges from 16 years old to their 50s. These informants were recruited using a purposive technique sourced from the university research centre of Pontianak.

Following the tradition in Cultural Anthropology and Cultural Studies methods, this research develops an interview guideline as a framework to investigate the phenomenon, particularly for the Focus Group Discussions. The researchers first explained and asked for consent, and distributed the consent form to the participants of the FGDs. There were two FGDs conducted in the sub-district of Singkawang City. The first FGD was attended by 10 participants from various members of the community and of mixed gender, and the second one was attended by 6 participants, predominantly young people such as college students and high school students. However, during the personal interviews, the researchers tend to use informal conversation in several coffee shops with NGO activists and lecturers. To investigate the cultural/ethnic sensitivity, communication gestures and personal experiences, the researchers observed and took notes directly from the interaction during the interview and conversation with the informants. All the data gathered from the fieldwork are transcribed manually. The narrative analysis is utilised as a method of analysis in this research.

Results and discussions

Chinese diasporic in Singkawang

Studies on Chinese Indonesia or Chinese Indonesia have been attempted by scholars in Indonesia and global, ranging from citizenship issues, ethnic conflict, migration, diaspora to various violations of discrimination that have been experienced by the Chinese and their descendants in Indonesia (Hoon 2006; 2011; Hoon 2019; Kuntjara and Hoon 2020; Suryadinata 2008; Walujono 2014). The terminology 'Chinese Indonesians' or 'Chinese Indonesia' is considered less popular than the terminology 'overseas Chinese' (*huaqiao*), namely, Chinese people who cross-sea borders and live outside China in foreign countries (Lan 2018). *Huaqiao* is a term that is part of the politicisation of overseas Chinese, and the concept of 'the Yellow Peril' refers to a series of questions about the loyalty of overseas Chinese or diaspora communities (An 2019). 'Chinese overseas are no longer seeing themselves as sojourners, orphans, or patriotic Chinese nationalists whose welfare, sole future, and final resting place is to be in China' (Huang 2010). 'Many of them consistently denied any allegiance to the government of China'. Regarding the Chinese diasporic community abroad.

Among the Chinese outside China today, there are clear differences between those who have grown up in different countries or territories. For example, American-born Chinese see the world differently from new Chinese immigrants or Southeast Asian re-migrants of Chinese descent. Similarly, with the sizeable communities of settled Chinese in Western Europe, in India, Korea, or Japan, in Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti, or Mauritius. The Chinese in these communities are different again from those who have emigrated recently and directly from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the People's Republic of China.

From this explanation, it is clear that the differences between Chinese communities in different regions indicate a difference in the level of identification with the country in which they live. The

sense of belonging or emotional closeness related to the feeling of ‘home’ outside their home/country should be distinguished from the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2016). Using the concept of citizenship, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, or Chinese Indonesian, could be categorised as having citizenship on a translational national and local scale (Yuval-Davis 2016). In addition, the issue of identity and subjectivity of the Chinese diaspora in Indonesia continues to be dilemmatic (Hui 2011; Kinasih et al. 2024). On the one hand, they have felt part of Indonesia; on the other hand, discriminatory treatment is still sometimes felt.

However, not much different from studies on Chinese Indonesians, the social and cultural relations between ethnic Chinese and ethnic Malay communities in West Kalimantan continue to be problematic (Atmaja et al. 2023). Even the stereotypes that emerge about the Chinese ethnicity are still held by the Malays, so that if there is a clash between the two ethnicities, the Malays will say ‘once *Cine* stays *Cine*’ while the Chinese ethnicity nicknames the Malays as ‘*Pan Yin*’ which means half human (Hertzman 2017). In addition, studies on multiculturalism and inter-ethnic communication on the Chinese diasporic community and the locals (Dayak, Malay, Madurese and Javanese) in West Kalimantan are quite few and receive less attention from scholars both in Indonesia and overseas. Indeed, the geographical and cultural landscapes of Singkawang and West Kalimantan are quite distracted by the influence of Malay and/or Malaysian borders. Several previous studies on Singkawang and West Kalimantan were more focused on the issues of the Malaysia border and the Malaysia-Indonesian unchallenged relationship towards border problems.

Ethnic and religious symbols in Singkawang

This research data collection process took 4.5 hours at night from the city of Pontianak, the capital of West Kalimantan, to Singkawang town by road. During the trip, the landscape of land, cliffs and houses typical of the Kalimantan region, such as stilt houses built on wet peatland, is a sight of the journey to Singkawang. Congested roads crept up, containing large container trucks to and from the city of Singkawang. So the journey was quite long and slow. There is the Kijing International Port in Mempawah Regency was just inaugurated by President Joko Widodo in 2022. So trailer trucks transporting containers crowded a narrow road that could only be passed by two vehicles. Several road widening development programmes are still being carried out, so the impact of traffic jams is increasingly visible. With the presence of Kijing International Port, Mempawah Regency looks a little lively and sparkling with its lights. Mempawah Regency itself has been popular in Indonesia and foreign media reports related to the expulsion of Gafatar residents, an Islamic sect group, in Mempawah in 2015–2016 (Azizurrahman and Elyta 2020; Liem, Kadi, and Neonbasu 2024; Marshall 2018).

From Mempawah Regency, the journey is considered to have entered 50% of the distance between Pontianak capital city, and Singkawang. Entering Singkawang town, the welcome monument of Singkawang town and the 1001 Ai Round with 3 statues at the roundabout about which symbolise the three majority ethnicities there, namely, Chinese, Dayak and Malay. Various symbols of these three ethnicities can also be found in the city of Singkawang, such as Viharas and Mosques. Singkawang is also famous as the city of a thousand temples. Even in the city centre, this temple is only 100 metres away from the grand mosque of Singkawang town. The Golden Dragon Monument in the middle of the city symbolises the existence of the Chinese ethnic symbol as the largest ethnic minority in this city. Opposite the Grand Mosque, there is a statue of ‘*Istighfar*’ (repent) with so large inscription in front of this statue. The diversity between ethnicities can also be seen from the existence of buildings such as the oldest house of the Thjia family from China, the Malay wooden house and the Dayak longhouse is a symbol of togetherness in Singkawang.

The existence of coffee shops

Shops in the centre of Singkawang are dominated by Gold Shops and Tiam Coffee Shops. Tiam coffee shops are always full of visitors from city residents. In these coffee shops, the public spaces

of Singkawang young people to meet are open until night. The smell of cigarette smoke is mixed with the aroma of traditional Singkawang coffee, namely, milk coffee served with sweetened condensed milk, as a typical Tiam (Malay Chinese) coffee model, which is also famous in Singapore and Malaysian street coffees. Hanging out with young people from various ethnic backgrounds, namely, Malay (Sambas) and Madura, provided a lot of insight into how residents maintain inter-ethnic harmony there. A female student from Dayak Sambas descent explained that young people in the town of Singkawang do not care about discrimination issues. Although social media has contained discriminatory and provocative content, and provocateurs continued to broadcast negative sentiments and discrimination against the ethnic Chinese minority, young people in the city have been well-occupied and did not take seriously and were not triggered by those provocative contents.

A male informant with a Madurese ethnic background asserts that the residents of Singkawang town have learned bitter experience with the historical inter-ethnics conflicts and they do not want the incident to happen again. Many of their families, friends and relatives were victims of the conflicts. Yet, he said that the potency of conflict can happen due to the different attitudes and behaviours of people from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, the Chinese in Singkawang town predominantly own small businesses, and the Madurese people, many of them, work as shopkeepers or assistants. These two different ethnicities, of course, have different values and norms, which can spark conflict between them, but the people tend to avoid a greater clash by holding back emotion and minimising ego. The young Madurese man who has been living in Singkawang since he was born 20 years ago, tells about the daily life of the neighbourhood in his area:

I am living in the neighbourhood of the Madurese and the Chinese. In my kampong, the inhabitants are mainly Madurese and Chinese. We live with mutual tolerance with different circumstances, different cultural habits, norms, and the habit of worship. For example, when someone from the *Tonyin* [Chinese] ethnic died, the community plays music until late at night; they play music until the corpse is buried or burned. But we (the Madurese) are not a problem with the noises, we get used to the tradition and consider it a normal thing; they (the Chinese) also need to worship, and vice versa with us, the (Muslim) Madurese. If the (Muslim) Madurese have a routine worship on every Friday and Tuesday nights, we use the sound system and *hadrah* (traditional Muslim choir) until 11.00 pm (night), and the other side (the Chinese community) feels no problem with the noisy sounds. So, both communities usually talk to each other about the noises, and the people finally get used to the way different ethnic and religious people practice their worship and praying. People also enjoy the condition. And if people see a daily problem within the same community (either the Chinese or the Madurese), others will try not to interfere with the issue or the affairs of the community too much, so does the other side community. Yet, if that community asks for help, we will assist. Just like happened earlier in my area, there was someone from one Chinese household died, then we (other Chinese and the Madurese, and other ethnics living in the area) help to calm/quiet the environment, for instance by not passing by in front of that family house, we look for another path, to avoid noises from our motorbike or other noises. Usually, the mourning family will conduct a prayer for several days, but of course, it is impossible for neighbours from different religions will join the prayer. But the neighbours will support the family as far as they can, for example, by providing bottled water for the relatives and friends who visit the mourning family. (Personal interview, May 2024).

The story of this Madurese male youth shows that the residents of his area (Mungguk Pancung sub-district) in Singkawang appear to have their level of understanding towards others' culture and religiosity. However, sometimes a simple issue in the neighbourhood's daily life could ignite conflict easily. He continued during the prayer or congregation, both Muslims and the Chinese often use a loudspeaker in that particular religious moment. The noisy sounds, of course, disturbed the residents living nearby. Yet, with an attitude of concede and compromise with the noise, people seem to consider any public religious event as an ordinary cultural dynamic in the area. This story enhances the writing of Friedkin (2004) on the theory of social cohesion in which level of individual involvement in social/community relationship can be measured through two indicators: (1) the degree of individual's attitude as member of the society such as their intention to stay in the group, loyalty to the group, other attitude. (2) the behaviour of individual members, such as the decision to break, decline, keep up or strengthen the membership and participation in the

group, commitment and attachment to the group. Hence, the residents' attitude to compromise with the noisy sounds from the loudspeakers used during the religious congregation, as every ethnic group can be seen as a way individuals in the Kampung attempt to maintain their membership and social cohesion, commitment to the community, or society.

Similarly, another attitude of community members is expressed by the chairman of the Malay Traditional and Cultural Council, a middle-aged man who is also considered a community leader in Pasiran sub-district in where he lives. This man's parents were originally Malay Muslims from Riau and migrated to Singkawang for more than 30 years. Following his father's migration from Riau Island to Singkawang, this man is regarded by the fellow Malay people as their representative, and he was appointed as the chairman of the organisation and was also appointed as the head of the mosque community in Kampung Pasiran. This male leader explained that in the Pasiransub-district, there are three different ethnic groups living in the neighbourhood they are the Dayaks, Chinese and Malays. In a late afternoon discussion, he stated that a peaceful life in his Kampung environment is practised by the residents and looking after carefully to protect the neighbourhood from any provocation or fake information from external people that could cause, even, a small argument within the members of the Kampung community.

He provides an example, if there is a member passed away in the Kampung, either from a Muslim's, a non-Muslim's or a Chinese's family, the Kampung community will come to visit the family who has sadly lost its member. According to him, there are residents, especially from ethnic Chinese, who sometimes do not participate in the Chinese Association membership (such as funeral community groups), where members pay monthly dues. This Association is available in many living Kampung areas throughout Singkawang. So, when there is a family member dies, the Association will assist the family to set up for funeral service and a religious ceremony for up to seven days. Those Chinese families, who do not join memberships with the Association, will not receive any assistance for the funeral. Consequently, members of the Kampung community in the area will turn up at the house to assist the family in setting up the funeral service and the Chinese traditional ceremony. In such a condition, the indigenous Dayak people and the Malay people will also try to support the family that is not a member of the Association. Funeral ceremony in the Singkawang's Chinese tradition costs a lot of money; so, some community members give the amount of money as a form of sympathy to the family. Therefore, to maintain the cohesion within the community memberships, people from different ethnicities living in the same area provide their contributions in the form of cash and physical contributions. This is how a variety of possible individual contributions to the social cohesion of a group have been attempted to reduce segregation (Friedkin 2004).

I live in Kampung Pasiran. We live within three different ethnic groups there are Dayaks, Malays, and Chinese. We live in peace and harmony. As I am the head of the mosque in the Kampung, I appeal to my community members that whenever a member of the community passed away, whether she/he is Chinese or Dayak or Malay, we should be in groups and visit to support the losing family, and my community agree with the idea. Just like yesterday, there was a Quran recitation in a mosque, and coincidentally, a man from a Dayak Catholic family died. I immediately appealed to the people who were attending the congregation to go to that family's house to help and find out what's going on in there. It also happens that the man who died was a former sub-district head. People in the congregation were shocked by the incident cause some of them had met that man, and after the end of our prayer, we directly came to the grieving family. This is to show how we, as neighbours, do not need to consider the background (identity) of the people, the ethnicity, religion, and so forth. (Pasiran's informant in FGD, May 2024)

The above explanations show how the residents of the Singkawang city opt to actively put themselves as peacekeepers within their neighbourhood system. This is not an easy task in the context of inter-group relationships, especially for the Muslim Malays and the Madurese. It is because diverse communities are often unstable due to segregation and groups' interest forces (Schelling 1971). Moreover, diverse communities tend to be confounded by geographical and endogenous sorting (Michalopoulos 2012). As in Kalimantan, the process of integration between the global migrants and the internal transmigrants from predominantly the (Inland) Java Island (Javanese and

Madurese) during the New Order periods was serious political issues and a crucial aspect of nationalism and diversity integration in Indonesia (Hardjono 1978; Hoey 2003; Bazzi et al. 2017). As such, global migration of the Chinese and transmigration in West Kalimantan have also found and experienced problems historically, including the inter-ethnic conflict in 1967 and the Dayak-Madurese ethnic conflicts in 1996–1997.

Informants of our research, all of them, are aware of the historical bad incident, and they have tried to hold back their ethnic ego and interests and their status quo position in Singkawang. The wounds are still there, and they remain feel the hurt and sadness with the conflict. Therefore, people continue to build positive sentiments by practising positive inter-ethnic communication in their neighbourhood spheres and emphasising cultural empathy greater than their ethnic ego. In this sense, social cohesion is built by perceiving that other ethnic members are part of their neighbourhood network. The people, thus, try to control their attitude and behaviour towards other ethnic groups, particularly towards the Chinese migrants and the indigenous Dayaks. Several informants in a lower voice expressed that they were afraid of and got a traumatic feeling from the former Dayak-Madurese conflict. Even when we discussed with activists of NGOs in Pontianak city, the activists asked to lower our discussion voices and created the table as if an ordinary conversation filled with laughter, sometimes to not inviting attention from other customers of the coffee shop.

Culturally, the Tiam coffee stalls situated in the central town of Singkawang have similar architectural buildings and room layouts. Likewise, the menus offered are almost the same. There is an interesting feature conveyed by informants in our FGD that to determine whether a coffee shop or a café is marked as halal (meaning it is owned by a Malay business) or not, it is by observing the fashion performance of the female workers in the shop. If the female waitresses wear a hijab, it can be confirmed that the stall is halal. This symbolic sign has long been recognised by the locals and the frequent visitors of Singkawang. According to the explanations of several informants, ethnic Chinese (there are still many people in Singkawang who say '*Cina*' instead of '*Tionghoa*') are tolerant to the Muslim workers and visitors. When the Chinese bosses/masters employ Muslim workers or are of an ethnic Madurese background. For example, predominantly, the Muslim Madurese are employed as cleaners to sweep the floor and tidy up the tables or shops. Muslim workers are not employed to wash dishes or cups if the food stall or café sells non-halal food.

One informant with a strong Madurese accent said that currently the Chinese residents in Singkawang have employed many residents of other ethnicities such as Madurese and Javanese. The Chinese owners of stalls and shops intentionally put their valuable goods or money in any place to test whether the worker is honest or not. If the workers find the goods and return them to their Chinese employers, the employers immediately add the workers' wages at the end of the month without notifying the workers. This is to show an appreciation of the Chinese master to his/her employees.

Harmony between people does not only occur in Tiam coffee shops but it also occurs during the annual celebration of Chinese holy days. Singkawang is famous for its Chinese tradition of *Cap Go Meh* celebration, which is held ten days after the Chinese New Year. According to the Singkawang residents, this is a celebration of the Chinese people and also all residents of Singkawang. Because during the *Cap Go Meh* festival and Chinese New Year, many visitors, both from overseas and locals, come to the town to enjoy the festival and the foods offered, and of course, they will buy souvenirs, drink coffee, shop at the market and so forth, which bring fortune and contribute to income for small-medium traders from other ethnic backgrounds, who take part in the festival and celebration. Similarly, when the Muslims' Eid al-Fitr celebration takes place in the town, the Chinese traders will also gain economic benefit from this Muslim festive season. This is what they feel is a symbiosis of mutualism.

According to Caselli and Coleman II (2012), every single society and community is occupied its 'wealth-creating assets' such as land and mineral resources, or wealth-distributed assets like control of the place or the area. Thus, there will be an inducement for a subset of agents to form a group to

take control of those assets from the rest of the population. Once a particular group celebrates the control over others, it faces the issue of enforcing the exclusion of its non-member (Caselli and Coleman II 2012), and that is how discrimination, competition and inter-group conflict could spark. Competing for economic and political resources will become a crucial problem for the society in a multi-ethnic population. Discrimination and distributive conflict will take place when a particular ethnic group wins the country's wealth and riches. 'When groups can be formed along ethnic lines, ethnic identity can be used as a marker to recognize potential infiltrators' (Caselli and Coleman II 2012, 2). In the context of Singkawang, the friction or competition in economic challenges has occurred. According to the study of Fachurazi et al. (2019), the economic competition between the Chinese traders and the Malay traders, as the main players of small-medium enterprises in Singkawang, could become the source of conflict between them. The study reveals, the Malay traders tend to hold back whenever they know the Chinese trader is playing with the lower price to the customer to defeat the customers of the Malay trader. Once the Chinese trader received more profits, they would return the price to the normal price, as occurred with the Malay trader. Therefore, every ethnic group in Singkawang has done a great negotiation and practised tolerance by holding back their interests and ethnic ego to avoid conflict. Each ethnic community also tries to play carefully with the economic interests and status quo of each ethnic group to minimise the differences and discrimination.

Tackling ethnic discrimination and provocation: the existence of a customary assembly forum

Lately, it has gone viral on TikTok and other social media about women in hijab praying at temples or temples in the town of Singkawang. There is also a viral issue related to the unpleasant treatment of ethnic Malay Muslims in Singkawang. This viral content, from which the source came, could trigger another inter-ethnic dispute. The provocative content circulated on the TikTok channel in May 2024 during our fieldwork had become the discussion topic in the customary assembly forum, which was attended by representatives of each ethnic group.

One of the Malay community leaders, who is also the chairman of the Malay Foundation, said in our interview that he and the community members tried to reduce differences by conducting regular gatherings and communicating with people from different ethnic groups. The Foundation also tries to explain issues that are fake and urges not to be easily provoked by the viral issues, which are not true. According to one of the members of the Malay Indigenous and Cultural Community (hereafter abbreviated as MABM), the people of Singkawang still have wounds related to the inter-ethnics conflict that occurred in 1998–2001, and the 1990s. The conflict between the Madurese and the Dayak has become the dark history of the Singkawang and Sambas people in West Kalimantan. Therefore, responding to and anticipating the occurrence of riots due to social media content that went viral among netizens, Malay indigenous community groups intervened and provided assistance or advocacy for the Chinese ethnic group, who were disturbed by the viral content. As our informant said in the following:

In the past years of West Kalimantan, conflicts have taken place in the province. It was an inter-ethnic conflict that happened between the Madurese and the Dayak, then the Dayak and the Malay traders, and the Madurese and the Malay. We, the MABM administrators, are aware of the contents that have recently gone viral. So, we as administrators quickly anticipated [...]. Since there has been an agreement between different ethnic groups here that whenever one ethnic group violates the others, the members of that ethnic group must pay customs fees or fines agreed upon by all leaders of ethnic communities. So, if there are inter-ethnic members who argue, we try to invite the parties and the leaders to sit down together and start a dialogue and communication. We try to find a way out. This happens several times in our community. Yes, we are looking for peace, not seeking victory over others. For example, there are more problems now that young people like to play troublesome. Recently, there were Chinese people playing together with the Malays. One person hit another of a different ethnicity. We quickly responded to the incident. We find solutions and take lessons from the incident. We don't want to blame whose fault it actually is, but we try to find a solution.

The role of customary institutions is important for the realisation of peace and conducive conditions in Singkawang. These peace efforts always been shared and reminded to the community members during the customary assemblies such as conducting inter-ethnic meetings and communication between the Malay Traditional and Cultural Council (or known as MABM), the Chinese Traditional and Cultural Council (or known as MABT) and the Dayak Customary Council (or known as DAD). This inter-ethnic communication is necessary to strengthen the social cohesion of citizens (Friedkin 2004), so that they are not easily provoked by irresponsible issues. However, we, the researchers, were aware of the absence of one ethnic association, i.e. Madurese ethnic association. We asked the participants of the FGD regarding this matter, whether or not the Madurese community has a community association, and the answer was that there is a Madurese families association, but the association has not been actively involved and participated in any public domain and cultural meetings or gatherings. So, these three major ethnic associations are quite rare in having a meeting and communication with the Madurese association. Three participants from the Madurese ethnicity preferred not to speak up or talk about the reason as to why the association opted not to be involved in any inter-ethnic communication forums. Yet, the researchers heard from the answer of the representative of the customary assembly in our FGD forum, who said that stereotypically, the Madurese ethnic group is difficult to communicate with others, and because their existence is not so central in the inter-ethnic dynamics there. We continue to question and seek a clear answer whether the avoidance or the absent of the Madurese association and its representative(s) is intended or designed by the customary assembly organiser to prevent the direct meeting between the Dayak ethnic representative(s) and the Madurese group's representative(s) on the same table? Unfortunately, during the fieldwork, we were unable to reach the Madurese association's leaders because our local guide could not find the direct contact or network to the leaders. We will attempt to investigate this in our further study in Singkawang.

Social media is indeed considered toxic and able to influence the occurrence of social conflicts if not watched out for and handled wisely. The chairman of the Malay Foundation also said that the life of religious and ethnic harmony in Singkawang is also carried out through regular meetings between those ethnic groups. This is also confirmed by an activist of an NGO that the organisation works to ensure freedom and democracy within the community settlements, and the tolerance is carefully maintained and strengthened by the residents of Singkawang. The customary law assembly forum, thus, is important to strengthen the ties and social cohesion within the community. Indeed, there are still strong customary laws that must be obeyed by the residents. Because of the severe punishment, the residents of Singkawang are very careful in social interaction and communication with neighbours. This customary law starts from the lowest/least severe sanction, namely the punishment of a pig or five chickens, to beheading as the heaviest punishment if the community violates customary rules. Customary law in Singkawang has historically been adopted from the customary law of the Inland Dayak community, which continues to use customary rules as the basis for social manners and behaviour among the residents.

The existence of 'Putra Daerah' (local/indigenous son)

One informant and a local political activist, who claimed to be a Javanese and had migrated to West Kalimantan, accepting the invitation of his transmigrant parents, confirmed that Singkawang deserves to be awarded as a tolerant town in Indonesia. He has several times given examples of how tolerance in ethnic plurality occurred there. For instance, at the local political level, the town of Singkawang administration authority is open to everyone and does not distinguish between the existence of the so-called 'local/indigenous son' (or locally termed as '*putra daerah*') to other migrants to run for local political leader in the local election. This can be seen from the experience of the current female mayor of Singkawang, Tjhai Chui Mie, who is the daughter of the local Chinese born in Singkawang from the descendants of the wealthy Chinese business family in the town

who have various kinds of tourism and hospitality businesses, including hotels, shops and others. The following is what the Javanese activist explained:

To assess the diversity in Singkawang, I salute the pluralism that is preserved in the town. In Singkawang town, all ethnicities are not differentiated in terms of their political rights and opportunities. All of them have the potential to become political figures in this society. And coincidentally, today, I have also just been inaugurated a member of the Singkawang regional election commission for the 2024 Regional Election. This means that we (the Javanese people) are still given the same opportunity as other (ethnic) communities [...]. That's why it's acceptable when Singkawang received the title as the most tolerant town because in the previous eras, before I lived in Singkawang, I also lived in Bengkayang, another part of West Kalimantan. And indeed, when I compared the condition of the public acceptance toward various ethnic groups in there was very different from in here. In Bengkayang, many individuals still uphold the native (Chinese) name, but in Singkawang, it is not known whether the individual originates from Singkawang or outsider. Anyone in this town is still considered a "son of Singkawang." So, until now, when I talk to the people outside, I am confident to declare that I'm from Singkawang. And indeed, in terms of history, Singkawang has no Singkawang natives, whether they were born in Singkawang or migrated to Singkawang. Originally, the so-called "*orang Singkawang*" (Singkawan people) referred to those who lived in the Sambas area, so the Malays of Singkawang were Malay Sambas; there was no Malay Singkawang. (Personal interview, May 2024)

The dynamic of identity constructions among the residents of Singkawang is fluid and diverse. They are not only easily identified as 'the Chinese Singkawang', for instance, or as 'Singkawang people', or 'Dayak Singkawang', but rather the identities are constructed from diverse ethnic assimilation, such as mixed-marriage, migration, transmigration, displacement and (Malaysian) border connection. There is no single identity in Singkawang; there are multiple identities of people living in the place, which outsiders will not be aware of the dynamic constructions. Nevertheless, in terms of political competition and status quo position, the group's interests and privilege appear to be more contested, and ethnic identity becomes significant, especially in the determination between 'the origins' versus 'non-origins' of the ethnic line. 'Distributive conflict and discrimination should be more likely when it is possible to form groups along lines that facilitate the ex-post policing of group borders, to minimize leakage. One such set of circumstances may arise in societies with multiple ethnic groups. When groups can be formed along ethnic lines, ethnic identity can be used as a marker to recognize potential infiltrators' (Caselli and Coleman II 2012, 2). This condition exactly occurred in another district, as explained by our informant based on her experiences.

A mother from the Madura ethnic background, a resident of Singkawang and who also lives in Bengkayang, a home of Inland Dayak ethnics (80% of the Dayak population live in Bengkayang District), explained the contestation of ethnic identity and ethnic lines is crucial and significant in determining the position of individuals in political domains. In this sense, the identity segregation between the so-called '*putra daerah*' (local/indigenous son) and immigrant is quite challenging. She explained:

In Bengkayang, if you choose the head of the hamlet, you must be a local. We are not allowed to elect the immigrant. And in any situation, we, the residents, must prioritize the locals (the original Dayak lines) to lead or to organise the community; the migrants will come later. This is my point of view as a newcomer there, sometimes I saw the local/indigenous people and leaders do not have any capability to organise. But why are immigrants, who want to take the role, blocked? I don't know. (Personal interview with Madurese mother, May 2024)

The conception of ethnicity as a boundary-enforcement machine, as a case in Bengkayang for the issue of origin (locally termed as '*asli*') versus outsider or migrant for political leadership or gaining power and status quo, is that not all ethnic differences are effective ways of enforcing group membership. 'When an ethnic group gains control of the state, important economic assets are soon transferred to the members of community' (Esman 1994, 29). This Esman's argument could become an explanation as to why the ethnic migrants in Bengkayang should come later or second position in the political/power contestation. The dominant ethnic group, in turn, will discriminate against and exploit other ethnic groups. Furthermore, the conception of '*putra daerah*' (local son) identity in Singkawang continues to be debatable: who is considered or identified as the 'local son'? Is it a

Chinese born in Singkawang? Or is it the (Inland) Dayak bloodlines? From the fieldwork data and information, we, researchers, suggest that the contestation on ethnic identification between three major ethnic groups i.e. the Chinese, the Dayak, and the Malay remain persisted in the community, but it has been obscured or concealed underneath the stacks of husk, and covering considerably behind the practice of inter-ethnic relationship.

From his experience as a citizen of Chinese descent, one Chinese college student, an informant of this research, expressed his feeling of tolerance that occurs in his social environment. As a Chinese, this man feels that he and his family, so far, have never experienced discrimination from other ethnic communities, especially from the Malays, who are also the majority ethnic group in the town. He said that the inhabitants in the town are quite open, accepting and tolerant of others, especially the young people. Yet, the man was aware of the danger of discrimination, especially to the Chinese people (not only in Singkawang but also in Indonesia at large), due to the use of verbal language of name calling or the label of '*Cina*' (Chinese) or '*Tionghoa*'. (see Kuntjara and Hoon 2020; Sinaga et al. 2023). Discussing the concept of Chinese identity in Singkawang, like other previous studies, is quite subtle and stereotypical. According to that Chinese male informant, the label of name-calling is sometimes irritating for Chinese people. The man himself prefers to be called as '*Tionghoa*' ethnic rather than the word '*Cina*'.

I am a Chinese descent, but I prefer to be called *Tionghoa*. Some people think that Chinese are Chinese, even though different people call them different labels. But it is not. China is a country, and '*Tionghoa*' is a tribe. Even people can recognise the different accents of the various Chinese ethnic groups, but I keep saying that the words *cina* and *tionghoa* are different. For example, Ahok (former popular Chinese politician in Jakarta), Ahok said he is not '*Cina*', instead he is '*Tionghoa*'. It is just in here (West Kalimantan) that the Chinese ethnicity consists of various ethnic types. The type of modern *Tionghoa* is not the same as the ancient origin one in the mainland. For example, the *Tionghoa* who are considered as modern Chinese, will not have a problem with their various mixed Chinese accents. But for the Chinese origin (termed as *cina totok*) using the original Chinese language is a must, and they remain old-fashioned. Among the Chinese origin, preserving the original language is important; if you say it in the wrong accent, it will convey the wrong meaning, and you will face a problem. Another critical example here in Singkawang is the use of the word '*Amoy*'. *Amoy* in Chinese means a girl. But in Singkawang, if you use the word *Amoy*, people will relate it to mail-bride order case or women's trafficking. *Amoy* then became negative and sensitive here, which degrades the status of Chinese women of Singkawang. (personal interview, May 2024)

The feeling that a *Tionghoa* still feels treated unpleasant as '*Cina*' in Indonesia remains persisted among the Chinese ethnic members. According to that Chinese college man, there has been no naturalisation of naming identities between '*Cina*' and '*Tionghoa*' in Indonesia. This man's view confirms the arguments of Sinaga et al. (2023) that the Chinese people in Indonesia accept the use of the term '*Tionghoa*' introduced by former fourth Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) after the Indonesian reformation. It was a great cultural policy to eliminate discrimination and differences between the ethnic Chinese-Indonesian citizens and the indigenous-Indonesian citizens. This is a form of naturalisation carried out by the Indonesian government or Indonesia's citizenship policy. Unfortunately, the acceptance of the community and the treatment of *Tionghoa* citizens are sometimes not in line with the efforts to naturalise ethnic Chinese into Indonesia's citizenship system.

Inter-ethnic communication and social cohesion perspectives

Research in the study of intercultural communication has developed towards interdisciplinary cooperation studies. Motivated by the social needs of globalising worlds with hybrid identities and constant changes of ethnic boundaries, 'the field has been a meeting place for theories and methods from various disciplines' (ten Thije 2006). Thus, various perspectives and concepts are different. This study also tries to combine the perspective of intercultural communication with cultural anthropology and migration studies. Unlike the assumption that all people are basically the same or similar, the assumption that each human being is unique is why differences

between people also occur (Bennett 1998). As a consequence, many misunderstandings arise due to the differences that exist in each human being. From this assumption, the view that intercultural misunderstanding in each human being interacts can be solved by what he calls an ‘empathy strategy’.

In this view of empathy strategy, Bennett introduced the concept of ‘perspective’ or, in the actual context, called ‘shifting of perspective’ or a change of perspective when intercultural or inter-ethnic communication occurs among different people. In other words, one needs to change one’s perspective when dealing with someone different (in terms of intercultural or inter-ethnic). This empathy strategy can reduce misunderstanding. Bennett then says that one needs to build empathy by changing perspective:

a shift of perspective away from our own to an acknowledgment of the other person’s different experience. This shift in perspective is often accompanied by a willingness to participate in the other person’s experience, at least to the extent of behaving in ways appropriate to that experience. (Bennett 1998)

This view is what came to be known as ‘Bennett’s Platinum Rule’: *‘Do unto others as they would have done unto them’*. The most important thing in the study and research of intercultural communication, that the difference is not necessarily due to God’s plan, but the difference between cultures or between ethnicities is a humanistic phenomenon: ‘Most approaches to intercultural communication (and communication in general) treat it as a purely human phenomenon, not, for instance, as an expression of a divine plan’, (Bennett 1998).

Bennett then tried to formulate the steps of the empathy strategy by trying to use Erving Goffmans theory of self-concept. The steps to build empathy include Assuming Difference, Knowing Self, Suspending Self, Allowing Guided Imagination, Allowing Emphatic Experience, Re-establishing Self and Implementing Empathy. These aspects of empathy will be explored later in this study. In parallel to Bennetts theory, the concept of ‘cultural empathy’. As a strategy to overcome problems related to intercultural misunderstanding and increasing racism in various contexts of social interaction. Ridley & Ingle explained that ‘cultural empathy’ is the ability to gain an accurate understanding of one’s own experience using a cultural data interpretation approach (Ridley and Lingle 1996). In the context of resolving cases of intercultural misunderstanding that occur between humans, it can also be solved by what is called ‘cultural empathic responsiveness’, namely by changing ones perspective to understand other peoples different cultures. Ridley & Ingle then said that for example, a counsellor who wants to understand his clients who are in trouble and has intercultural differences with him, should: ‘This shift in perspective is a way of understanding clients from “the outside in”, and it stands in contrast to the adage that empathy equals “walking in another’s shoes”’ (Ridley and Lingle 1996).

Following the theory of inter-ethnic communication, scholars of Sociology and Psychology have proposed the theory of social cohesion to explain the behaviour and attitude of members of society towards one another in a social system or a social network. Yet, the definition of social cohesion itself continues to be debatable, since there is no single definition proposed by scholars in the Social Sciences toward the term (Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2018; Friedkin 2004). Social cohesion is a ‘complex social construct’ (Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2018) since societies consist of various backgrounds such as culture, geography, identity, political representation and so forth. Advancing social cohesion in a social context means allowing society members to live together with their various and diverse cultural backgrounds and identities in one unity, which could also be dubbed as unity and diversity (Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2018; Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012). Social cohesion theory, thus, have been utilised to examine and explain the collective behaviour in different types of communities (Le Bon 1897 in Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2018); an interdependence act between the individuals in the society (Durkheim 1897 in Fonseca 2018); share characteristics of individual for emotional ties; collective mentality or a common way of feeling and thinking; and many mores. In short, social cohesion is a condition that enables individuals as members of society or community to maintain their in-group feeling or maintain their affiliation by controlling their

behaviour and attitude toward one another with differences and multicultural backgrounds and conditions.

In Indonesia, social cohesion has been fostered since the beginning of the nation-state building through to these days and into the future. Just like a founding principle of other nations, uniting people from diverse cultures is a crucial attempt that needs to be stated and determined throughout the history of nation-building in this country. One of the nation's ideological values of the so-called 'unity in diversity' (known as *Bhineka Tunggal Ika*) (Feith 1962) has become long enduring nationhood spirit or the state motto to recognise differences of cultural backgrounds (ethnicities, languages, beliefs, and so forth) and geographical landscapes from thousand islands across the archipelago. Uniting people from diverse cultural backgrounds indeed is not an easy task; however, tensions over differences such as ethnicity and religious beliefs have become an enduring issue that could spark negative sentiments and become inter-ethnic conflicts in Indonesia. Unity in diversity has long been tested by the small sentiment issues to the serious inter-ethnics and inter-religious wars among the communities across the country throughout the contemporary periods. Therefore, inter-ethnic communications and peace dialogues have always been encouraged and attempted to build understanding and perceptions of the Indonesian people toward the differences in any part of everyday lives.

Conclusion

The people of Singkawang will not forget the history of inter-ethnic conflicts that occurred in the town previously. The dark past made it a lesson for community members to suppress, restrain, and not be easily ignited by emotions whenever they hear any issue that can lead to the emergence of conflicts. Past experiences with inter-ethnic violence have made the community members take mechanisms with empathy strategies by understanding the differences in religious and cultural practices of each ethnicity and religion in Singkawang. Moreover, the existence of customary institutions plays an important role in fostering inter-ethnic communication in the town. Likewise, these customary institutions are obliged to nurture their citizens to regularly build a multicultural communication mechanism to continue living in harmony. Other social institutions, such as the Malay Foundation, Chinese Associations and others, are also important and relevant because they become a shelter organisation for individual members of each ethnic group. In addition to that, the name-calling or labelling of one ethnic identity is taken seriously looking after by the members of the community. This is another way to save the inter-ethnic relationship and to keep a tolerant attitude towards each other's ethnicities. The Singkawang residents admit that the discourse of tolerance has become an ideology of their daily life. Nevertheless, content distributed on social media can sometimes spark discrimination and break the peace and goodwill attempted in Singkawang. Issues that have gone viral on social media have become a challenge for cultural ethnic groups and the religious leaders in the town to reduce and be more active in communicating with their citizens and residents across cultures and religions. At last, language and religion have become another feature of discrimination. Religion, more importantly, could be the focal trigger for discrimination and inter-ethnic conflicts in such a multi-ethnic community as in Singkawang. Thus, the degree of social cohesion and the quality of information disclosed and distributed to other ethnic members are critical, since the group cohesion is enhanced whenever personal topics are shared between individuals of the groups. As such, social cohesion involves establishing shared values and the communities of interpretations and tolerance to reduce disparities and leakage. Meanwhile, this study also found that ethnicity has helped to enforce the dominant group's monopoly of the regional assets, such as political power in the local place.

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