Rethinking Cultural Identity and its Drivers in Present-Day Indonesia: A Case Study of the Dayak

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When we talk about the identity of a certain ethnic group, we relate it to the elements of culture utilized as markers of identity. However, markers of identity are not fixed but depend on the context. Ethnic groups usually do not make use of all the aspects of their culture or history as markers of their identities and some elements of their culture may be found amongst other groups which can make it difficult to distinguish one group from another (Eller 1999, 9) or, in Kahn’s argument, it is in a grey area (Kahn 1995). For example, in the case of the Dayak and Malays in Kalimantan, many so-called Malays share a similar culture to that of the Dayak groups because those Dayaks who convert to Islam are often thereafter considered Malay (Coomans 1987). Thus the criteria by which individuals are nominated Dayak or Malay may shift over time (Maunati 2000) something that occurs until the present day as shown in the matter of the Tidung Dayak. In this paper, I will discuss the construction of Dayak identity and its drivers merely by focusing on the significant images of the Dayak like headhunting, longhouses, and their religion and how those images of the Dayak relate to the Dayak identity in the present-day.  

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Cultural identity as constructed

According to many writers, cultural identity is constructed (King 1982; Vickers 1989; Hall 1992; Eriksen 1993; Kipp 1993; Kahn 1993; Kahn 1995; Picard 1997; Wood, 1998; etc.). As King and Wilder argue:

Ethnicity is obviously expressed as a product of the past, evoking common origins, social linkages and shared cultural values and traits like language and religion. However, the historical dimension of identity also demonstrates that rather than identities being fixed, constant and immutable, they frequently change and can be acquired (2003, 198).

For this reason, the more recent academic emphasis has been on viewing identity and identity construction as the result of a dynamic interplay between context (and history) and construct. Eriksen demonstrates some of the processes involved in the historical construction of ethnic identity in the case of Indians who migrated to Mauritius and Trinidad. In each case, the subsequent identity was different and thus works against the notion of an ‘essential’ form of Indianness (Eriksen 1993, 84-85).

Another example of how cultural identities need to be viewed as constructions is in the way identities may be strengthened when a group is under threat (Eriksen 1993). Hall (1992) in his discussion of the processes of globalization concurs with this argument. He notes the rise of particular or local cultures as a response to processes of globalization that, paradoxically, are seen to usher in cultural homogenization. The interest in larger global or national processes has given rise to a large number of studies directed at ‘minorities’ or otherwise ‘threatened’ or ‘weak’ groups, or ‘in situations of rapid social

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