



ETHNIC AND CULTURAL INTERACTION IN NORTH SUMATRA: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF BATAK, MALAY, AND CHINESE INTERACTION IN MEDAN CITY 2015 – 2024

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ABSTRACT

North Sumatra is a province with high ethnic and cultural diversity, making it a dynamic yet challenging social space. Medan City, as the provincial capital, is a hub for interaction among Batak, Malay, and Chinese communities. This study examines the dynamics of these interethnic relations in the context of history, urbanization, and contemporary multiculturalism. Using a qualitative approach with historical and sociocultural methods, data were collected through literature review, in-depth interviews with community leaders and academics, and participatory observation. The findings reveal that interethnic relations in Medan are shaped by colonial legacies, social inequality, prejudice, and limited intercultural dialogue. Although cultural initiatives such as festivals foster symbolic interaction, they have not resolved structural issues of segregation. Strengthening social integration requires inclusive public policies, intercultural education, and urban planning that promotes equal encounters. This study contributes to understanding multicultural dynamics in urban Indonesia and offers insights for fostering social harmony in diverse societies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

North Sumatra is one of Indonesia's provinces with a high level of ethnic and cultural diversity, creating a dynamic and complex social space. Medan, as the provincial capital, serves as a key meeting point for various ethnic groups, including the Batak, Malay, and Chinese. This diversity forms a distinctive collective identity, but also presents challenges in the form of shifting cultural values, identity conflicts, and barriers to intercultural communication, particularly amidst globalization and urbanization (Harianto et al., 2021; Bruner, 1961).

Historically, cultural diversity in North Sumatra has been a strength in maintaining social harmony, but the potential for conflict remains, particularly due to the marginalization of certain ethnic groups and the politicization of identity in the public sphere (Rambe & Sari, 2020; Wannazemi et al., 2021). The phenomenon of ethnic mobilization in local political contests also demonstrates that ethnic identity still plays a strategic role in influencing people's political behavior, although its effectiveness varies (Xue, 2018). Furthermore, the process of Islamization and the penetration of global culture have influenced the social structure and values held by Medan's multi-ethnic communities (Purnamasari et al., 2024).

Previous research has examined ethnic interactions in Medan from historical, political, and cultural perspectives (Damanik, 2024; Hidayat & Damanik, 2018; Hamdi & Harahap, 2022). However, most studies tend to focus on a single dimension—for example, political aspects or cultural acculturation—without comprehensively integrating historical and sociocultural perspectives. This leaves a research gap in the lack of a holistic analysis linking the dynamics of cross-ethnic interactions to structural factors, public policy, and changing values resulting from globalization.

This research gap is crucial to fill, given that Medan is not only the largest city in North Sumatra but also a visible representation of urban multiculturalism in Indonesia. As a former center of colonialism and international trade, Medan retains a legacy of social segregation that still influences patterns of inter-ethnic interaction today (Lubis, 2012; Laudra et al., 2021). Thus, a deeper understanding of the interactions between Batak, Malay, and Chinese ethnic groups in Medan will contribute to the development of social integration strategies based on justice and equality.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of historical and sociocultural approaches in analyzing the dynamics of ethnic interactions in Medan, focusing on their relationship to social changes resulting from urbanization, globalization, and cross-cultural initiatives such as festivals. This approach is expected to yield a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities of multiculturalism in a major Indonesian city, while also providing relevant public policy recommendations.

Based on this background, this research aims to examine in-depth the dynamics of interactions between Batak, Malay, and Chinese ethnic groups in Medan from the perspectives of history, urbanization, and contemporary multiculturalism. In addition to providing academic contributions to the study of social history and intercultural communication, the results are expected to serve as a practical reference for policymakers, educators, and community leaders in building social harmony in multiethnic environments.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative historical approach to examine the relationships between the Batak, Malay, and Chinese ethnic groups in Medan from the colonial era to the present. This method involves examining data sources such as archives, historical documents, journals, and previous written works. The sociocultural approach, on the other hand, focuses on the social and cultural dynamics generated by inter-ethnic interactions; this includes cultural change, adaptation, and development caused by urbanization and globalization. This research is expected to provide a better understanding of how inter-ethnic interactions shape the identity and social life of local communities in Medan.

Data Collection Techniques: Literature Study: A literature study was conducted by collecting and analyzing various written sources such as books, scientific journals, research articles, academic reports, and relevant historical documents. This technique aims to obtain information regarding the history, social dynamics, and culture of the Batak, Malay, and Chinese ethnic groups in Medan, as well as to understand theories and concepts related to ethnic interactions. In-depth Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with academics, community leaders, and individuals from relevant ethnic groups to gain firsthand perspectives on social and cultural interactions in Medan. These interviews aimed to explore their experiences, opinions, and perspectives regarding inter-ethnic relations, the challenges they face, and the factors influencing social dynamics in the city. Participatory Observation: Participatory observation was conducted by directly observing the daily lives of the multi-ethnic community in Medan. This technique allows researchers to observe how social interactions occur in various contexts, such as residential neighborhoods, markets, places of worship, or cultural events. Through these observations, researchers can understand patterns of communication, cooperation, and cultural acculturation within the community.

This data collection method is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of ethnic and cultural dynamics in Medan and the factors influencing interactions between ethnic groups.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

History of Interethnic Interaction in Medan

The history of interactions between the Batak, Malay, and Chinese ethnic groups in Medan reflects the social dynamics that have existed since the pre-colonial period to the modern era. The early formation of Medan cannot be separated from the role of a Karo Batak figure named Guru Patimpus Sembiring Pelawi, who in the late 16th century established a village at the confluence of the Deli and Babura Rivers. This area later developed into Kuta Medan and became a center of interaction between the native population (Karo and Malay) and other immigrant groups. Guru Patimpus was not only a physical figure in regional

development but also a cultural agent who brought about social transformation in the area (Saragih et al., 2024).

The Malay ethnic group, who had previously inhabited the eastern coast of Sumatra, had a significant influence on the local political and cultural structures. The Deli Sultanate, established in 1632, established Medan as its center of power, with a strong cultural identity embedded in relics such as the Maimun Palace and the Al Mashun Grand Mosque. Deli Malay culture is known for its literary arts, architecture, and strong Islamic traditions, and served as the foundation of the city's civilization in the early days of Medan's establishment as a royal city (Laudra et al., 2021).

The arrival of ethnic Chinese began during the Dutch colonial period, particularly after the opening of the Deli tobacco plantations in the mid-19th century. They were brought in as contract laborers, but many later became traders after their contracts expired. Their role in shaping Medan's economic system was significant, particularly as they established trade networks with communities in Penang, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The Kesawan area in the city center became a center of economic concentration for ethnic Chinese, historically known as a trading center since the late 19th century (Saragih et al., 2024; Lubis, 2012).

These three ethnic groups subsequently interacted with each other in various ways: through intermarriage, trade, political cooperation, and social communication. However, these interactions were not always harmonious. In many cases, ethnic identities remained strongly maintained, particularly by the Chinese community, which tended to maintain its cultural, linguistic, and social exclusivity. Lubis (2012) points out that despite integration, social distance remains, characterized by residential segregation, educational systems, and economic preferences.

The process of acculturation continues to occur gradually. Ethnic Chinese who convert and intermarry with indigenous people, for example, adapt their values and behaviors to those of the majority community. On the other hand, the Batak and Malay ethnic groups also experience changes in values due to this interaction, particularly in the context of urbanization and modernization. Therefore, the dynamics created between these three ethnic groups shape the distinctive multicultural character of Medan—a city open to differences, yet complex in building social unity (Lubis, 2012; Laudra et al., 2021).

From a historical perspective, the interactions between the Batak, Malay, and Chinese ethnic groups reflect not only migration patterns and demographic changes but also the evolving process of negotiation of identity, power, and cultural values. The existence of cultural institutions, customs, and the role of local elites and ethnic entrepreneurs create a distinctive social structure in Medan that persists into the 21st century. Therefore, understanding the history of this interaction is important in assessing the contemporary social dynamics of Medan City and the future of pluralism in North Sumatra.

Medan as a Multicultural Urban Space

Medan, as the center of urbanization and the capital of North Sumatra, reflects the complexity of interactions between major ethnic groups such as the Batak, Malay, and Chinese. These three groups form a social and cultural structure interconnected through a long history that stretches from the colonial era to the current era of globalization. The Deli Malays, as the original inhabitants of Medan, have undergone significant identity transformations while retaining cultural symbols such as the Malay language, the architecture of the Maimun Palace, and the customs that characterize the city's identity (Simbolon et al., 2023). In this regard, Malay identity is not exclusive, but rather opens up space for other ethnicities to share values and social space, without creating dominance of any particular ethnicity (Nik Hasan & Arai, 2024). Meanwhile, Chinese migration to Medan since the 19th century has added to the city's diverse social structure. The Chinese community, initially employed as plantation laborers, has transformed into a middle- and upper-class economic class, contributing to the local cultural and economic landscape (Wandini et al., 2024).

The Batak ethnic group, with their dominant population and involvement in politics and education, plays a significant role in multiethnic social relations in Medan. Ethnic identity often shapes people's political orientation, including voter preferences and strong tribal-based solidarity, as seen in the local political dynamics in Simpang Selayang (Depari & Ndonga, 2025). However, beneath the surface harmony, this intercultural interaction is not free from challenges. Identity tensions, fragmented communication, and the politicization of religion and ethnicity in local politics are sources of social vulnerability that continue to require addressing (Nazla, 2024). Urbanization and modernization have accelerated shifts in local cultural values, driving acculturation and sometimes assimilation between ethnicities, as reflected in the use of colloquial languages and adaptations in arts, culture, and cuisine (Wandini et al., 2024; Simbolon et al., 2023).

Urbanization accelerates interethnic interaction through encounters in public spaces, education, and the economy. The Deli Malay ethnic group maintains cultural symbols such as language and customs, but maintains an inclusive space for other groups (Nik Hasan & Arai, 2024). The Batak ethnic group plays a

dominant role in local politics (Depari & Ndona, 2025), while the Chinese ethnic group contributes significantly to the trade sector (Wandini et al., 2024).

This phenomenon aligns with Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which states that intergroup interactions can reduce prejudice when they occur under conditions of equality. However, observations indicate that interactions in Medan are not fully equal due to residential segregation and differences in economic access, thus maintaining the potential for latent conflict.

Cultural Festivals as a Medium of Interaction

Cultural festivals are not merely entertainment or artistic performances, but also a means of social and cultural interaction between ethnic groups living side by side in Medan. One form of this interaction is evident in the Medan City Ethnic Arts and Culture Festival, also known as the Medan Arts Festival. This festival was first held in 2017 as a manifestation of the Medan City Government's commitment to facilitating cultural expression from various ethnic groups such as the Batak, Malay, Chinese, Karo, Tamil, Minang, and others. However, the COVID-19 pandemic that hit in 2020 caused the festival to be suspended for four years. It was not until 2024 that the festival was reinstated, signaling a recovery in cultural vibrancy and public participation post-pandemic.

The revival of the Medan Arts Festival marks an important milestone in local cultural dynamics, demonstrating that Medan's ethnic diversity is not only present in the social fabric but also celebrated in the cultural realm. This festival serves as a shared space where each ethnic group not only showcases their traditional arts, such as dance, music, traditional clothing, and culinary specialties, but also builds a symbolic dialogue about their existence as part of the city's identity (Nik Hasan & Arai, 2024). In this context, the festival serves as an inclusive and interactive medium that strengthens a sense of belonging to the city and strengthens social cohesion among residents of different ethnic backgrounds.

This phenomenon aligns with the concept of interculturalism, where cultural encounters are not merely coexistence, but involve exchange, collaboration, and the shared creation of new meanings. The Medan Arts Festival demonstrates how local ethnic cultural expressions can be elevated to the public sphere through a participatory and collaborative approach. This also aligns with the city's cultural strategy, which prioritizes cultural diversity as a socio-economic strength (UNESCO, 2013). The 2024 Medan Fashion Festival (MFF), which showcases textiles from various local ethnic groups in a contemporary format, also demonstrates that cultural interaction is no longer limited to the traditional realm but has expanded into the creative industry. The combination of heritage and modern design demonstrates that culture can be a source of innovation and economic prosperity, as stated by Medan Mayor Bobby Nasution, who stated that "fashion is the main weapon that elevates culture and improves community welfare" (Medan City Government, 2024).

The Medan Art Festival and the Medan Fashion Festival serve as cross-ethnic gatherings that promote diversity and build social cohesion. The participation of all ethnicities in these festivals aligns with the concept of interculturalism, which emphasizes active cultural exchange and creative collaboration (UNESCO, 2013).

However, despite their positive impact on the city's image, research findings indicate that these cultural initiatives remain largely symbolic and fail to address the root causes of social segregation (Nazla, 2024). In other words, the festivals function as soft cultural diplomacy, but are insufficient to address structural imbalances between ethnic groups.

Challenges and Barriers to Interaction Between Batak, Malay, and Chinese

Interethnic interactions in Medan, a multicultural city with diverse ethnicities such as Javanese, Batak, Malay, Chinese, and others, present various challenges in the context of identity, intercultural communication, and cultural change due to globalization and urbanization. These challenges are not only sociocultural but also structural, impacting the social cohesion of the community.

One major challenge is social exclusivity and segregation. In Medan, settlement patterns indirectly reinforce ethnic segregation. For example, the Chinese community tends to live in certain areas geographically separate from the Batak or Malay communities. Observations show that ethnic Chinese choose to live in homogeneous housing complexes such as Taman Mega Emas, Cemara Hijau, and Setia Budi Indah, and engage in economic and educational activities within their own ethnic boundaries (Lubis, 2012). This segregation hinders intensive cross-cultural interaction, strengthens in-group feelings, and creates symbolic boundaries between ethnicities.

Another challenge arises in the form of barriers to intercultural communication. Differences in language and communication styles hinder effective relationships between ethnic groups. As found in a study of the Pujakesuma Javanese community in Medan, language is a crucial element in maintaining identity. Although

some informants speak Batak, Karo, Malay, and Chinese, self-identification remains exclusively Javanese, reflecting efforts to maintain their cultural roots in a multi-ethnic environment (Yudhawirawan et al., 2024). In the context of cultural change resulting from globalization and urbanization, the greatest challenge is adapting to values and norms. Urbanization, which brings people from various regions to live in large cities like Medan, accelerates interethnic interaction but does not necessarily result in harmonious cultural integration. Some communities tend to experience cultural dissonance due to their unpreparedness to deal with differences in values and behavior. Rapid changes in social values also trigger resistance from communities seeking to maintain the authenticity of their traditions, creating a tension between cultural preservation and the demands of modernity.

Intercultural communication in Medan is often fraught with stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and prejudice. Certain ethnic communities view their cultural values as universal standards against which to judge other cultures (Subanindyo, 2006, cited in Lubis, 2012). This makes it difficult to create spaces for equal dialogue between groups, ultimately hindering the process of identity negotiation and social integration.

Inter-ethnic tensions are also exacerbated by social dynamics influenced by economic factors and colonial history. The legacy of economic inequality, which positions certain ethnic groups as capital owners while others are workers, creates hierarchical relationships rife with latent conflict. Research shows that the dominance of certain ethnic groups in the trade and service sectors in urban centers generates social jealousy from other groups (Wandini et al., 2024).

Theoretically, the research findings broaden the understanding of multiculturalism in large Indonesian cities by demonstrating that ethnic plurality does not automatically result in harmonious social integration. Public policies that emphasize structural inclusion, critical multicultural education in schools, and the design of public spaces that encourage equal interaction are needed (Samovar et al., 2007).

Practically, a recommendation is to strengthen cross-cultural programs based on economic and educational collaboration, not just ceremonial arts and culture. This approach is expected to build interethnic empathy, expand social networks, and reduce segregation at the community level.

4. CONCLUSION

This research finds that interactions between the Batak, Malay, and Chinese ethnic groups in Medan date back to the pre-colonial period and have continued to evolve into the era of globalization. Colonial history left a structural legacy of social segregation, economic inequality, and political hierarchy that still influence interethnic relations today. Although these three ethnic groups play a significant role in the city's development in the political, economic, and cultural sectors their interactions remain influenced by prejudice, stereotypes, and community exclusivity.

Cross-cultural activities such as arts and fashion festivals have contributed to the formation of collective identity and social cohesion, but remain largely symbolic and unable to address the root causes of structural problems. Urbanization and globalization have expanded the space for interethnic encounters, but also bring challenges such as shifting cultural values, identity dissonance, and resistance to change.

The implications of this research suggest that building social harmony in a multicultural city like Medan requires inclusive public policies, critical multicultural education, and urban spatial planning that encourages equal interaction among residents. Collaborative programs that integrate arts, education, and economic empowerment across ethnic groups are considered more effective than purely ceremonial activities.

Academically, this research contributes to the study of intercultural communication and multiculturalism in the Indonesian urban context by combining historical and sociocultural perspectives. The results are expected to form the basis for further studies examining social integration strategies based on structural policies and community participation to create a just, equal, and harmonious society amidst diversity.

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