

# Situational Identity: A Study of Identity Communication in Bengkulu City

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## Abstract

This study examines the issue of identity confusion among the people of Bengkulu, which is characterized by a heterogeneous population. The research is based on field phenomena where many migrants and their descendants still experience uncertainty in expressing their cultural identity. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach focused on the community of Bengkulu City. These findings are analyzed using Michael Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), which conceptualizes identity as something that is formed, negotiated, and maintained through communication across four interpenetrative layers. The research informants consist of community leaders and academics who meet the established criteria. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The results were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman approach and validated through source triangulation. The findings reveal that identity confusion is particularly evident among the younger generation whose parents are not originally from Bengkulu City. Oneway individuals attempt to construct their identity is by aligning themselves with one of the available "stocks of identity" in Bengkulu. These include: first, identifying as Orang Bengkulu (People of Bengkulu) and second, as Orang Melayu Bengkulu (Ethnic Malay of Bengkulu).

**Keywords:** Malay, identity; Malay; communication; City; Bengkulu

## INTRODUCTION

Young people born and living in Bengkulu City but lacking ties to their native ethnic group do not automatically adopt their parents' ethnic identity. This is because adopting an identity as an ethnic immigrant is disadvantageous. Therefore, those born and raised in Bengkulu City have various alternatives in choosing their cultural identity. This occurs because efforts to identify ethnic identity depend on the situation and context in which a person finds themselves (Marzuki, 2010). How they choose their ethnic identity in Bengkulu City is one of the focuses of this research study. This phenomenon demonstrates that ethnic identity is not fixed, but rather dynamic and can be negotiated according to social needs and the context of relationships between individuals and groups. In this regard, several previous studies also provide a foundation for understanding these dynamics.

A study on identity was conducted by Rozi (2013), who examined changes in ethnic identity on the Rao border in Pasaman, between the Minangkabau and Mandailing people. Rozi's research illustrates that the interaction process is a factor in changing cultural identity, even forming new identities. Furthermore, research by Sjaf et al. (2012), which examined ethnic identity in the local political economy, found that there is a dialectical space between actors and ethnic groups, thus forming a shared identity.

Identity is formed from various elements such as religion, culture, education, family values, and belief systems, making it a complex concept. However, understanding identity is highly personal because it depends on how individuals understand themselves and how others perceive

them (Fathurroja et al., 2018, p. 109). Each individual possesses a collective identity, which refers to our recognition of belonging to a particular social category, such as religion and culture.

The process of social identity formation is a product of the human mind, which requires recognition of affiliation as a member of a particular group. Therefore, every individual has a need for affiliation and belonging to a social group. Ethnic identity is a manifestation of an individual's need to affiliate with an ethnic group and, ultimately, the desire to be recognized as part of that particular ethnic group. The process of ethnic identity formation occurs through social interaction. The result of this interaction is an awareness of cultural differences and similarities between individuals. This awareness of differences and similarities forms the basis for individuals to conceptualize their ethnic identity (Arianto, 2012). Barth called this concept of identity, which adapts to the interaction environment, situational ethnicity. This concept of situational ethnicity reflects individuals' efforts to exploit symbols and display behaviors consistent with their social roles and interests, often referred to as cultural borrowing (Arianto, 2012).

The situational identity approach serves as an instrument to explain how those born in Bengkulu City label themselves in communicating their ethnicity to the public. This study explores the dynamics of identity in a heterogeneous region where individuals can choose an ethnic identity based on the available stock within Bengkulu City.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to in-depth describe the dynamics of identity communication in Bengkulu City within a situational context. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand complex and contextual social realities, particularly in observing how individuals form, negotiate, and display their identities in various communication situations. According to Sugiyono (2022), descriptive qualitative research methods are based on the philosophy of postpositivity and are used to research natural object conditions, where researchers are key instruments in digging up data in depth through interviews, observation, and documentation. In this study, the author used descriptive qualitative research methods in the form of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The research results were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman approach and validated using source triangulation.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **RESULT**

Based on research conducted with several informants, including Malay figures from Bengkulu City, cultural figures, artists, coastal communities, and academics, we obtained a picture of the existence and development of community identity groups, or stock identities, in Bengkulu City. Data collection methods included direct interviews, observation, and focus group discussions. This research revealed that the community in Bengkulu City currently comprises various ethnic groups, both immigrants and indigenous people originating from various regions in Bengkulu Province, such as Malay, Rejang, Lembak, Serawai, Semende, Javanese, Sundanese, Bugis, Minang, Batak, Pekal, and several other ethnic groups.

While these ethnic groups have officially agreed-upon customs and traditions, there are also communities in Bengkulu City who do not share biological ancestry with these ethnic groups. These communities have developed new identities known as Orang Bengkulu, Orang Melayu Kota Bengkulu, and Orang Melayu Lembak Bengkulu. These three categories represent the stock identities currently developing in Bengkulu City.

### **Bengkulu People**

Research has shown that a group of people in Bengkulu City refer to themselves as Bengkulu People. The term "Bengkulu People" is used by a group of people who feel they are indigenous and have long resided in Bengkulu City. Individuals who identify themselves as Bengkulu people claim to have lived in this area for generations. This statement demonstrates that the identity of

"Bengkulu People" is not solely determined by their current residence, but also by the length of time an individual or group has resided in the area. The longer a person lives in Bengkulu, the stronger their claim to identity as an indigenous community. This identity serves as a symbol of existence, recognition, and historical roots inherent in a community that feels authentically part of Bengkulu.

The research found that identity as Bengkulu people is not always formed through biological ancestry, but also through attachment to the region they have long inhabited. Claims to be Bengkulu people are not always based on biological ancestry, but rather on territorial attachment. Individuals tend to refer to themselves as Bengkulu people because they feel more secure in their territorial identity. When someone is asked, "Where are you from?", the safest and most common answer is to refer to your geographic origin, namely Bengkulu. This is especially true for people who don't have direct ancestry from Bengkulu's indigenous tribes, such as the Rejang, Lembak, Serawai, or Pekal. They feel they lack a strong biological cultural identity, so they tend to adopt a broader or neutral ethnic identity, namely Malay, or more commonly refer to themselves as "Orang Bengkulu." Thus, the identity of "Orang Bengkulu" in this context is built on claims to their residential area, not solely on lineage, and symbolizes their emotional and social attachment to Bengkulu City as a living space they have occupied for generations.

### **Malay People of Bengkulu City**

The presence of the Malay ethnic group in Bengkulu City has existed since 1897, according to data contained in the book "Bunga Rampai Melayu Bengkulu" (Sarwono et al., 2004, p. 111). Research has shown that the formation of ethnic identity in Bengkulu City stems not only from lineage but is also influenced by the social history and community organizations that developed in the region. One piece of historical evidence regarding the existence and recognition of Malay identity in Bengkulu City was expressed by Junai, Head of the Berkas Customary Community, who stated that the presence of the Malay ethnic group in Bengkulu City has recorded since the early 20th century. Junai stated that the term Malay began to be known in Bengkulu City around the 1900s, precisely after the formation of the Bengkulu Malay Community Association. He stated that it was only in the 1900s, since the establishment of the Bengkulu Malay Community Association, that the term Malay appeared in Bengkulu City. This statement supports the information contained in the book *Bunga Rampai Melayu Bengkulu* regarding the existence of the Malay ethnic group since 1897, which shows that the Malay ethnic group has long been part of the Bengkulu City community. As social life in this city developed, claims of identity as Malay people of Bengkulu City also emerged, especially from people who do not have biological lineage from tribes such as the Rejang, Lembak, or Serawai. This claim emerged in response to social segmentation and the need for identity recognition within a multi-ethnic society. For those who have long lived there but lack genealogical affiliation, the identity of "Bengkulu City Malays" serves as an alternative representation, considered more inclusive and relevant, to affirm their presence and connection to Bengkulu City.

Social segmentation persists despite peaceful coexistence between ethnic groups, and this is used to differentiate between ethnic groups based on the boundaries of their cultural identities. Some people who do not have ancestry from Bengkulu's indigenous tribes, such as the Rejang, Lembak, or Serawai, desire recognition of their ethnic identity in Bengkulu City. Therefore, they have adopted the identity of "Bengkulu City Malays" as a form of ethnic representation that is perceived as inclusive and open. Although the Malays have long existed in Bengkulu, their identity boundaries, based on customs and traditions, are less restrictive than those of other ethnic groups, thus creating a space for identity claims by groups outside the dominant ethnic structure in Bengkulu City.

According to Setiyanto, an academic who studies Bengkulu culture, the social identity of the people of Bengkulu City is heavily influenced by strong tribal affiliations. Setiyanto stated that people from tribes such as the Rejang and Lembak prefer to refer to themselves based on their

respective tribal identities rather than using the general term "Bengkulu People." He emphasized that sometimes the social identities of the Rejang, Lembak, and others do not want to be called Bengkulu People, preferring to be referred to as people from their respective tribes. This indicates that social segmentation in Bengkulu City is formed due to the limitations of cultural identity that have been ingrained for a long time and become a source of pride for each group. As a result, people who do not have lineal ties to indigenous tribes such as the Rejang, Lembak, Serawai, or Pekal, but have long lived in Bengkulu, feel the need to build identity claims through other, more open ethnic channels. In this context, "Bengkulu City Malay" becomes an identity choice that can represent feelings of attachment to their region and social existence. However, in everyday life, the Malay community of Bengkulu City also often refers to themselves as "Bengkulu People" to emphasize their existence as part of the city's indigenous community.

## DISCUSSION

Identity claims such as "Bengkulu People" and "Urban Malay People" do not emerge spontaneously. They emerge from a long process of social interactions, historical experiences, and negotiations of meaning between individuals and communities. Using the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) analysis tool, we map identity into four main dimensions: personal, enacted, relational, and communal. The following is a detailed discussion based on each layer within the CTI:

### Personal Layer

This layer reflects how individuals subjectively define themselves.

#### 1. Bengkulu People

In this context, identity as a Bengkulu person is not based on lineage, but on personal experiences of living and interacting for a long time in the Bengkulu region. Individuals feel an emotional and historical attachment to the local community (Hecht & Choi, 2020). Individuals who identify as Bengkulu people generally do not come from indigenous ethnic groups such as the Rejang, Lembak, or Serawai, but feel a strong attachment to Bengkulu City due to their long-standing residence and residence there. They define this identity based on their life experiences, participation in social life, and a sense of belonging to the region.

#### 2. Bengkulu City Malay

Individuals who do not belong to indigenous ethnic groups such as the Rejang, Lembak, or Serawai construct a personal identity as Malay based on historical ties and life experiences in the city. This identity is adaptive to the multi-ethnic cultural space (Mekuria & Roos, 2020). This identity emerges from individuals who feel unaccommodated by traditional ethnic categories. They define themselves as part of the Bengkulu City Malay community because they feel they align better with their values, lifestyle, and historical ties.

### Enacted Layer (Actualized Identity)

This layer shows how identity emerges in social actions and communication.

#### 1. Bengkulu People

The identity of Bengkulu people in the enacted layer, which is when people use the term Orang Bengkulu in social interactions as an existential marker. As explained by Zhu and Li (2021), in urban communities, identity is often constructed and communicated through linguistic symbols that convey a sense of attachment to living space.

#### 2. Malay in Bengkulu City

The Malay identity of Bengkulu City developed in response to the strict genealogical structure of indigenous tribes in Bengkulu. Individuals who felt they did not

belong to the Rejang, Lembak, or Serawai groups then constructed a more fluid and open identity. This identity was then actualized and enacted through the use of Malay cultural symbols in social activities, such as traditional ceremonies and regional organizations (Wulandari & Fitriani, 2020). This constitutes a form of identity enactment that is not passive, but rather active and symbolic.

### **Communal Layer (Collective or Communal Identity)**

This layer relates to how identity is affirmed or questioned in relationships between individuals or groups.

#### 1. Bengkulu People

This identity was formed collectively by people who have long lived together in Bengkulu, despite coming from diverse backgrounds. They construct a shared narrative as Bengkulu people based on their shared experiences, involvement in local socio-political dynamics, and a sense of attachment to the region (Indrawan & Mahfud, 2023).

#### 2. Bengkulu Urban Malay

The communal layer is formed when this community begins to construct a collective narrative as an urban Malay group distinct from both Lembak Malay and indigenous tribes. In this regard, Kustanti & Yani (2021) emphasize the importance of collective narratives in the formation of a flexible community identity.

Based on analysis using Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), it can be concluded that identity in a multiethnic society like Bengkulu City is formed through a complex and layered communication process. The four layers of identity—personal, enacted, relational, and communal—do not stand alone but interact to shape our understanding of who we are amidst social diversity. Thus, identity in Bengkulu is not static or solely determined by descent, but is the result of ongoing communication processes at various levels of social life. CTI allows us to understand that identity is a dynamic, contextual, and multidimensional construct, which is continuously shaped by interactions between individuals and communities in diverse social spaces.

Thus, if we look at the term "Bengkulu People" in this study, it can be understood from two different perspectives but still with the same meaning, namely as the native people of Bengkulu, only seen as two things from different points of view, namely: first, the term "Bengkulu People" which is based on the native people of Bengkulu who have long inhabited the Bengkulu City area. Their identity as "Bengkulu People" is based on the perspective of their residential area by looking at the period of residence and geography that they have, namely in Bengkulu City. Second, the term "Bengkulu People" is based on the people who are the native people of Bengkulu but are not affiliated with the native tribes of Bengkulu who have had identity boundaries such as the Rejang, Lembak, Serawai, and others, only they want to claim their identity by looking from a tribal perspective. The tribe that has open identity boundaries is the Malay tribe.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study shows that the identities of the Bengkulu City community, such as the Bengkulu People and the Bengkulu City Malays, are formed through a complex social communication process, as explained in the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). Identity is not only based on lineage, but also on territorial ties, shared life experiences, cultural symbols, and social interactions. The Bengkulu People represent an inclusive identity formed through historical and emotional attachment to the region. The Bengkulu People and the Bengkulu City Malays emerge as identity options for individuals who lack indigenous ethnic affiliations but seek social recognition. These findings collectively confirm that Bengkulu community identity is dynamic, negotiated in layers, and heavily influenced by multi-ethnic contexts and intergroup communication.

The author's suggestions in compiling this research are as follows:

Instilling cultural values in local content in schools should help the younger generation understand the ethnic identities of Bengkulu City and how to guide local values in their attitudes and behaviors.

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