

Ethnic and Religious Identities of Chinese Indonesians who Are Muslims

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Studies on the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia usually discuss this group of people from economic or political perspectives. However, there are other aspects of this community that can be explored further. In this paper, I analyze the Chinese in Indonesia from the religious perspective, namely, Islam. The analysis is based on a case study of the ethno religious identity of Chinese Indonesian Muslims. The life-narrative of seven respondents is used as a lens through which ways of how the ethno-religious identities of Chinese Indonesian Muslims are formulated and reasons of why being Chinese and being Muslims are presented in ways as such are examined. I propose that this group of people could be categorized into three types, namely, the syncretistic, the non-negotiating, and the negotiating.

Keywords: Chinese Muslim, Indonesia, ethno-religious identities

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Studies on ethnic Chinese in Indonesia mostly focus on their dominant role in Indonesian economy, or how far they as the *nonpribumi* are assimilated into the Indonesian (*pribumi*) society¹. There are not many studies which try to see this group of people from other perspectives; for example, from religious perspective, such as Islam. Nevertheless, there are some researchers who have conducted research on Chinese Indonesian Muslim, among others, The Siauw Giap (1993), Michael Jacobson (2005), and Ubed A. Syarif (2005). However, compared to the studies on Chinese Muslims in other countries, those focusing on Chinese Muslim in Indonesia are still left behind, especially in terms of quantity. There are aspects of this community that can be explored further.

Discussions on the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia cannot be separated from the economic and political situation in the country. In the economic domain, the Chinese is considered as the minority group which dominates the Indonesian economy. But the fact is that the number of the Chinese Indonesians who are rich is far less than the poor Chinese Indonesians, and even there are Chinese who are poorer than the *pribumi*. The *pribumi* thought that the Chinese were rich because the later exploited the former. This assumption leads to the racial discrimination that targets the Chinese, both the rich and the poor.

The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were not homogenous. This group of people was in fact very diverse (Heidhues, 2004:60). This diversity is due to generation, class, background, and religion of the members of the community. And among the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, Chinese Muslims are interesting to observe.

¹ *Pribumi* refers to the indigenous ethnic groups in Indonesia. *Non pribumi* refers to the non indigenous groups, especially the Chinese. The use of those terms are not encouraged anymore. Here I am using those terms for practical reason only.

The ethnic Chinese are already socially marginalized for their race and ethnicity in Indonesia, which is culturally Javanese, Malay and Muslim. Yet, the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia are minority within the minority. They face a second level of marginalization from within their own community for their religious beliefs and practices.

Islam does not have great impact among ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, although they live in a muslim-dominated country. The 2000 population census shows that out of a total population of roughly 215 million, 2.92 million, or about 1.45% are Indonesians of Chinese descent. In 1983, the total Chinese muslim population was only about 0.5% at that time, which was itself around 2.4% of the total population. There are no statistical data on Chinese Muslims in the 2000 population census, and there was a decline in the number of Indonesians of Chinese descent in Indonesia after the turmoil in early 1998, which forced Soeharto to step down. So it is legitimate to assume that Chinese Muslims still constitute a tiny minority among the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, who either practice traditional Chinese beliefs or adhere to one of the many Christian denominations. This in itself set them apart from the general Indonesian population which was about 85% Muslims. Thus, caught between these two groups, the Chinese Muslims were not fully integrated in either of them, as well as not fully like by any of them. This is one reason why I am interested in conducting a study on Chinese Muslims in Indonesia.

The Chinese who converted to Islam faced family opposition to varying degrees, ranging from resentful tolerance to total rejection. The Chinese Muslim converts would be alienated from relatives, and perhaps friends, and accused of "betraying" their race and ethnic because converting to Islam meant becoming *pribumi* (Sutherland, 2003:6). Many families felt that conversion to Islam in the family brought shame and disgrace to the family name. In a study conducted in East Java, 83% of Chinese Muslims who participated in a survey on why they had become Muslims revealed that they had been ostracized by their family members because they had converted to Islam (The, 1993:83). Besides that, the *pribumi* Muslims were suspicious towards the Chinese who converted to Islam. The former did not trust the latter and accused the latter of taking advantage of their conversion to Islam. Nevertheless, there were still Chinese who converted to Islam.

The conversion to Islam marginalized the Chinese Muslims in relation to the non-muslim Chinese community, as the latter was quite suspicious and hostile towards the former, thus cutting off social ties with them. This made the Chinese Muslims' chineseness fade as they also wanted to hide their Chinese identities and Chineseness. Nevertheless, Chinese Muslims still faced racial discrimination due to their ethnicity, just like any other Chinese, as they still could not hide the Chinese physical features. And despite the assimilatory initiatives from the government, the most assimilated Chinese could not hide their Chinese identities as all Chinese had a special code in their ID that indicated that they were of Chinese descent, and thus not true-blue Indonesians. This is another reason why I am interested in investigating the identities of Chinese Muslims.

After the fall of Soeharto in 1998, there has been a new development in socio-political and cultural life in Indonesia bringing winds of change. The Chinese get more freedom than before. And the resistance that Chinese Muslims face nowadays is not so strong as it used to be. They are no longer hesitant in declaring their Muslim identity. At the same time, due to greater public acceptance, as well as the increased awareness towards Chinese culture, the Chinese Muslims no longer hide their Chinese identity. They are asserting their right to practice the religion of their choice, as well as, to retain their Chinese cultural heritage. Because of the reasons above, I am interested in conducting a research on the ethno-religious identity of the Chinese Indonesians who are Muslims.

1.2. Research questions

The questions this study attempts to address are: (1) how the ethno-religious identities of Chinese Indonesians who are Muslims are formulated in certain ways; and (2) why being Chinese and being Muslims are presented in ways as such.

1.3. Research Objectives

In this research I want to gauge the ideas of the Chineseness and identities of Indonesians who identify themselves as Chinese and Muslims in the new socio-political climate in Indonesia and to probe into their negotiation of their ethno-religious identities.

1.4. Methodology

In this research I use an ethnographic approach, and the method used is qualitative. Data are collected through participant-observation and interviews.

I use participant-observation method to understand the social, cultural, and political contexts in which my respondents are embedded. For this method, I will find occasions where I can participate in my respondents' activity during my field research.

The interviews are used to get more in-depth data. There are two types of interviews that I am going to use. One is focused, open-ended, semi-structured interviews guided by interviews schedule. This type is for those who feel comfortable with the interview. And the second type, which is for those who do not feel at ease with the interview, is a casual, interview-like, "everyday life" conversations.

In January – July 2006, I collected the data for my research in Surabaya. Since there is no official record on Chinese Indonesians who are Muslims, one of the most viable ways to find the respondents was through the network of the organizations of Chinese Indonesians, such as PITI, INTI (Chinese Indonesian Association), and my own social network. Within these organizations, I found one or two people who helped me introduce the respondents. I also contacted the respondents through the referral from my own social network. In this case I use snowball sampled technique (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

At first I had difficulties in finding the respondents who were willing to participate in this project. All possible respondents were reluctant to be interviewed and to make a commitment from this project (I mentioned it upfront that there was a possibility I would meet them many times, and participate in some of their activities) and mentioned the "sensitivity" of the project. To overcome the reluctance, I promised to call them in advance and of course not to press them to meet in case they were busy and not ready for the interview or the visit, even if they were willing to participate in my research. And in order to let them know that my project was not "sensitive," as they thought, I told them that in this research I was collecting the life stories of Chinese Indonesians who were Muslims. I spread the questionnaires as well, and asked them to fill it out, and told them that the interview and participation would be used for data verification. I also asked them to feel free to ask any questions about me or my research project. And definitely I guaranteed them total anonymity. Data from the questionnaires were for surfacing the profiles of the respondents only, when I chose the respondents for the interview and participation-observation.

Among the many questionnaires I sent, only 67 were returned. From the 67, I chose 35 people for the interview. In choosing the respondent, I tried to have a diverse group of people, taking into consideration of their gender, education, family background, and economic status, although I did not address the issues related to those points. In the end, only a handful number of people were willing to participate in this project.

During the field research I spoke to 19 people. At first, only two people agreed to have their stories recorded as the primary data. But after much talk and persuasion, six more people agreed to be my primary respondents, while the rest agreed to be my secondary respondents. They cited time constraint that made them unable to make full commitment.

In the first few interviews, I never went to the topic of my research directly. I had a small talk with the respondents as an icebreaker. Once I felt that the ice has been sufficiently defrosted, I asked them about their narratives about their life. I began with an adapted biographical interview beginning with questions such as "Could you please tell me the story of your life?" It often happened that the

respondents tried to find cues to start. I told them that they could start whenever they like and whatever they wanted to say first. In so doing, I hoped that I did not try to influence the direction of the interview. I also tried to be very careful throughout the interviews. When there were pauses, I did not prompt or incite any artificial or premature responses from them. But when the pauses were too long, I would get the interview going by either asking questions to clarify something that they brought up earlier or by repeating the last phrase they said. I also give signals, verbally or otherwise, to them that I was listening. Some respondents wondered about the method of the interview I employed. One made a comment: "I know that research is academic, but I really don't understand how my rant and rave could help you. You know, I may talk something, and another person you are going to interview also talk something that is different from my talk. That's why I am thinking may be, well, other people and I talk about widely different topics."²

I spent much of my time for the field research with my eight respondents. I interviewed them, observed and participated in their activities. I attended their religious and participated in their social functions where I could join, paid them social visit, and informal gathering. I sometimes also had lunch and dinner with them. I kept the details of the interviews and observation. Participating in their activities of simple spending some time together with them could help me verify the data I got from the interview (Bogdan and Taylor, 1998). I also found occasion where I could participate in the activities of other respondents, but my participation and interview were not so intense as those with the eight people. At the end of the field work, I decided to use the narration of my six respondents and left the other two. It is because in my opinion, the verification of the narratives I got from the two respondents was not so convincing to make them the primary data.

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1.5. Sources of Data

This research is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data are derived from participant-observation and interviews with six people. They identify themselves as Chinese and Muslims. The secondary data are from (1) the participation-observation and interviews with the rest of the respondents both Chinese and non Chinese, Muslims and non Muslims; (2) discussions with a number of people who have knowledge on the subject I am discussing here and with a broad network of family and friends; (3) other publications and research findings on theories on culture, society, ethnicity, and identity; Indonesian politics and society; overseas Chinese; and Chinese Indonesian society.

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1.6. Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is the negotiation of the ethno-religious identities of Chinese Indonesians who are Muslim as well as how and why being Chinese and being Muslim are formulated and presented as such. In this study I have to limit the areas for the field research so that it is manageable and can be done in an in-depth way. The respondents for this study were from Surabaya. Surabaya is chosen because of the high population of Chinese and Muslims (population census of 2000). Besides that, the association of Chinese Muslims there is very active in propagating Islam, and conducting religious and Chinese language and culture classes. Even it has its own Chinese architectural style mosque. And another reason is that my familiarity with the location (I am from Surabaya) could help me build good rapport with my possible respondents, which could help me in conducting the field research.

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2. Identity

The concept of identity is fundamental in the present-day sociology. A lot of scholars, among others, Cerulo (1997), Frable (1997), Howard (2000), Jenkins (1996 and 1997), Sanders (2002),

² Interview on 15 January 2006.

Worchel (2000), focus their attention²⁶ on the nature and formation of group identity, as well as the construction of individual identities. Identity is generally defined as individual's sense of self, group affiliation¹⁷, structural positions, and ascribed as well as achieved status. Identity, as Stuart Hall theorizes, is "a form of representation which is able to constitute us a new kind of subjects, and then thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak" (1990:236-7). It is a kind of positioning, a personal location and belonging, and is inevitably tied to the role of "Other" in distilling and delimiting a sense of one's own identity.

Identity gives individuals a sense of belonging and social existence. It can give people⁴⁸ a sense of security through a sense of belonging to a group of people who have something in common. As Jeffrey Weeks writes, "identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic, it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality" (1990:88). In other¹³ words, in the presence of other people's different identities, identity shows similarities and differences. Similarities tend to induce a sense of belonging, or "belongingness" among its members of a group and differences engender "otherness." Both processes of belonging and othering are inseparable, interdependent and crucial in defining one's identity, as Stuart Hall writes that identity is "constructed through splitting. Splitting between that which one is, and that which is the other" (1991:48). If there were no "them (other)," there would not be "us (self)."

Identity changes over time. Earlier understandings mention²⁵ that identity is fixed and immutable. But nowadays it is considered as an evolving process. Hall writes that "identities are never com³⁰pleted, never finished; that they are always as subjectivity itself is, in process" (1991: 47). That means identity can shift over time, due to personal experiences and social changes.³⁵

In the process of identification the struggles for identities are centered on this threshold⁴ "between interior and exterior, between self and other" (Weeks, 1990: 24). During this process, the expressio⁴n of identity is inside every self. When one can achieve "a personal integrity," then one can represent oneself and be recognized. Without the recognition from other, there will not be "belongingness," only "in-betweenness, belonging to neither in one place nor the other." That is why in his discussion on identity, Jonathan Rutherford introduce the word "home." He writes that "home is the place where we speak from." (Rutherford, 1990:24-26). Home is where the expression of identity is.

There are several levels in the process of identification. Bradley suggested there levels, namely, passive identity, active identity, and politicized identity (19³³25-6). Passive identity is defined as a potential identity, a derivation of live-relationships, such as class, gender, ethnicity, in which the individuals are engaged but not acted on. They are not particularly conscious of this pass¹⁵ive identity. Passive identity could turn into active identity, which occurs as an assertion or a defense against the action of others or when the individuals are consciou²⁴s being defined in a negative way. When the assertion, defense, and rejection become regular, and identity provides a more constant base for action and when individuals constantly thi¹⁵nk of themselves in terms of identity, take political action and form established collective organizations of either a defensive or affirmative nature, the active identity become politicized identity.

In the process of identity construction, as some scholars write, ethnicity plays an important role. Frable (1997) writes that ethnicity is one of the identity categories. Howard (2000) states that the³ bases of identity are ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, age, and (dis)ability. Appiah and Gates mention that gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class form the "holy trinity" in the discourse of identity (1995:1).

Another category that also attracts a lot of interest in identity formation is religio³⁷n. Some scholars, among others Haddad and Lummis (1987), Hammond (1988), Gibson (1988), War³r and Wittner (1998), Ebaugh and Chafets (2000), and Min and Kim (2000), have investigated the role of religion in maintaining one's identity and solidarity. Nevertheless, they do not focus on religion *an sich*³⁴; instead, they examine the correlation between religion and ethnicity in constructing one's identity, how religion plays an important role in preserving cultural and ethnic tradition, especially among the

immigrants. It gives support to first-generation immigrants in adjusting to the adopted homeland, and provides a source of identity for their children. There is a connection between religious and ethnic identities.

Although religion is often one of the important elements in maintaining and preserving ethnic culture, it is difficult to determine the exact relation between the two. Williams questions whether religious affiliation is essential to the ethnic community or whether religious orientation is ancillary to ethnic identity (1988:12-3). People may differ in ways they focus on and integrate their religious and ethnic identities. Some could emphasize their religious identities more than their ethnic foundation, while others perhaps stress ethnic identities and religious institution is used in preserving their ethnic boundaries. In this kind of situation, my research project investigates the identities of Chinese Indonesians who are Muslims.

3. Being Chinese in present-day Indonesia

The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have a long history. Their presence is strongly felt because of their business activities. During the new order era, the economic sector was the sector that was open for them. Most scholars write that the Chinese Indonesians play such an important role in the Indonesian economy that they are often dubbed as "new emperors." Nevertheless, they also admit that those overseas Chinese achieve what they have now is due to their hard work. They came to Indonesia as poor people, but after some time, they became successful businessmen, as a scholar formulated, "a personal career from rags to riches" (Sukisman, 1975). But their success stories do not reflect the reality, as not all overseas Chinese are "the new emperors," and those stories only highlight the bright side of the life of the successful overseas Chinese. Yet, the impact of the success stories is so great that they become the target of the social jealousy. And this culminated in 1998, when a very big anti-Chinese riot shocked the country and the world.

The year 1998 was a watershed in Indonesia's history, which started a new chapter in its political and social life specially for the Chinese Indonesians. Since Soeharto's downfall in that year, Indonesia has been in transition, from an authoritarian system to a more democratic one. In this period, drastic changes have taken place, among them, in the policies concerning the ethnic Chinese.

Formerly, during the "New Order" regime (1966-1998), the government adopted policies discriminating against the Chinese. Discriminatory laws and regulations were issued to curtail the civil and political rights of the Chinese. The government compartmentalized society and created a distinction between *pribumi* and *nonpribumi*. It also created antagonism and conflict between *pribumi* and *nonpribumi*.

The relation between these two groups was characterized by conflicts and tensions. Moreover at that time, Soeharto issued the policy of "forced assimilation," which asked the Chinese to "indonesianize" themselves, changing their names into Indonesian-sounding names, prohibiting Chinese traditions and religious practices. The government also implemented SARA (Indonesian acronym for ethnic groups, religion, race, and inter-group) policy.

The SARA policy is used for classifying the society based on the four categories in order to maintain national security and to prevent conflict. In that classification, the Chinese are considered as, to quote Ariel Heryanto (1998), "the other," and the *pribumis* are "the official self." For the first twenty years since the New Order was in power, the policy could be considered successful. But then, in the last ten years the New Order policy became a boomerang. When the democracy and openness could break the segregation, the victim was the Chinese (Massardi, 1998). They were considered too close to power, rich, and the ones who enjoyed the economic pie. The irony is that SARA policy, which was intended to address the racial problem and ethnic tension, triggered the problems and tensions, and even created a state-sponsored racial discrimination.

Chinese culture was depicted as having destructive influences and as being inappropriate for Indonesians. Thus, the study of Chinese language and culture was banned. It was against the law to

import any Chinese printed materials. The customs declaration form issued by the Directorate General of Customs and Excise listed "Chinese printing and Chinese medicines" as prohibited goods under the same category as "narcotic, drugs, fire arms, weapons, ammunition, laser guns, explosives, pornography, and cell phones." Until today, the form has not been revised.

The Chinese were not considered an ethnicity with the freedom to maintain their cultural heritage. Chinese people were expected to blend themselves in the melting pot of Indonesian nationality. They were not allowed to observe their holidays in public.²⁰

Worse, to retain Indonesian citizenship, Chinese descendants had to change their names into Indonesian names, and they were given special coding in their identity cards (Keppres No. 127/U/Kep./12/1966). Oetomo (1987) notes that many Indonesians of Chinese descent used their Indonesian names mostly in public or when filling out government-related forms, while they still used Chinese names at home and among close relatives and friends. Indonesian names were also used to save them from political discrimination in bureaucratic affairs. Unfortunately, many of them felt that there was no advantage in changing their names because every time they dealt with bureaucracies, they still had to include their Chinese names in parentheses after the Indonesian names. The government even issued a decree (Presidium Kabinet RI No. SE-06/Prekab/6/1967) changing the terms "Tionghok (中国)" or "Tionghoa (中华)" (meaning Chinese – in Minnan Hua dialect), which were widely used at that time, to the derogatory term "Cina" [Chinese – following the English term, but pronounced with Indonesian pronunciation]. As the decree was issued amidst ethnic violence in several towns, up to this day many Chinese – especially those who witnessed the social unrest in the 1960s – are offended by the term "Cina." In such ways, the "New Order" marginalized the Chinese Indonesians.

Recent administrations have opened doors to the celebration of diverse ethnicity and cultures. Chinese Indonesians who used to feel suppressed during the 32 years of Soeharto's administration suddenly found a channel to express themselves and take the opportunity to regain their sense of ethnicity. Before, the Chinese were not considered an ethnicity with the freedom to maintain their cultural heritage. Chinese people were expected to blend themselves in the melting pot of Indonesian nationality. Even Chinese culture was depicted as having destructive influences and as being inappropriate for Indonesians. Since then, Chinese cultural celebrations have got a new lease of life in Indonesia. Because of the new social and political climate, the Chinese are no longer hesitant in showing their Chinese identity, and the *pribumi*, who are mostly Muslim, show greater acceptance towards the Chinese.

After 1998, public tolerance towards Chinese and Chineseness has reappeared. Lion dance (Chinese traditional dance) is currently a favorite icon in private as well as public gatherings. Even in general election campaigns, some political parties used this kind of dance to attract people. Many radio stations broadcast Chinese songs, while almost all television stations air Chinese films and serials almost every night, which become so popular among the ethnic Chinese as well as the non Chinese. And some Chinese film stars become the youth's idols, replacing their western counterparts. The new situation has also sparked the interest to learn Chinese. Currently there are countless Chinese language programs across the country. And in some major cities in Indonesia, Chinese language newspapers are published, although their readership is still limited, due to the restriction of Chinese language and culture during the new Order era.³²

In September 1998, President BJ Habibie issued a presidential decree which prohibited the use of the term *pribumi* and *nonpribumi* in all of the formulation of the governments' policies. The decree also instructed that the bureaucracy give the service to the public without any racial and religious discrimination. Even the president asked at all laws, rules, and regulations that might be discriminative in nature were reviewed. And in 2000 President Abdurrahman Wahid issued a presidential decree that abolished the presidential decree No. 14/1967 on the restriction of Chinese customs, tradition, and religious practices. Since then on Chinese New Year could be celebrated

publicly. And the succeeding president, Megawati, in 2003 decided that Chinese New Year became a public holiday.

The participation of the Chinese Indonesians in political and social life has also developed. During the New Order Chinese Indonesians were fearful of political associations. This was partly due to the experience with Baperki (Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia – Consultative Body on Indonesian Citizenship, a political movement of the 1950s and 1960s to integrate ethnic Chinese into Indonesian society), which defended the interest of the Chinese Indonesians between 1955 – 1965. It was close to President Soekarno and left-wing and communist organizations, only to become a target of attack when the political scene changed after 1965. And as for pressure groups, any organizations dedicated to “Chinese” interests, or social organizations that seemed too “Chinese,” would have been forbidden. But after May 1998, many organizations and even political parties that emphasize Chinese characteristics have sprung up.

All these changes also affect the interethnic relationship between the Chinese and the *pribumi*. Many *pribumi* now show greater acceptance toward the Chinese. Encouraged by this positive attitude, the Chinese Indonesians begin to struggle for their rights and equality. But over time, the non Chinese think that this euphoria is “a bit too much” and some Chinese can detect this change, and warn themselves to be careful. This situation leads them to confusion. They do welcome that change, which enable them to celebrate their ethnicity. But they do not know how far they can go, or how much is too much. There seems to be an invisible line surrounding them, and if they go beyond this line the anti-Chinese feeling will be rekindled.

4. Chineseness and Islam in Indonesia

Historical records write that Chinese Muslims has been in the archipelago for centuries. It can be traced back on the expedition of the famous Chinese admiral Zheng He, a Muslim Chinese from Hui ethnic in China, in Southeast Asia in 15th century. Contrary to popular belief, the initial entry to Islam into Southeast Asia, and Indonesia in particular, was from South China (Lombard and Salmon 1993, Stoler 2001). Even six of the nine saints who propagated Islam in Java were from Hui Chinese (Muljana 2005). These show that Chineseness and Islam at that time was not something strange or something new, it was a part of ancient history of either Indonesia, although the most of the Chinese Muslims discussed were Hui Chinese, different from the majority of ethnic Chinese in present day Indonesia, who are Han Chinese. But Indonesian context does not differentiate between Hui and Han.

In 1961, *Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia* (PITI), or Indonesian Association of Chinese Muslims, was founded in Jakarta, and was initially linked to the *Muhammadiyah* organization. PITI was set up to cater the proselytization of the Islamic faith in Chinese Indonesian society. Its members saw it as one of uniting the nation because Islam did not differentiate between races and ethnicities. They also wished to show that once Chinese Indonesian became Muslims, they were completely accepted by other Indonesian Muslims. Although they were still small in number, there were more and more Chinese who embraced to Islam.

Nowadays Chineseness and Islam are apparently separated and strange in social life. Being Chinese and being Muslim are in the two opposite sides. A Chinese can't be a Muslim, and a Muslim is definitely Chinese, so is the perception of the society. Chinese and Islam are socially codified, and some scholars believe that this social codification is due to government's policy.

After the abortive communist coup in 1965, which the government and military believed that China was behind that, the state imposed forced assimilation to the Chinese in Indonesia. They Chinese were asked to “indonesianize” themselves, and one way of indonesianizing themselves was abandoning the Chinese traditional religion and adopting one of the religions recognized by the state, Islam, Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic), Hindu, and Buddhist. But adopting Islam was encouraged.

Most Chinese converted to Islam because they wanted to avoid social discrimination. They wanted a sense of security. They also hoped that by this way, they could be totally assimilated to and

Accepted by Indonesian society, as the government adopted policies discriminating against the Chinese. Discriminatory laws and regulations were issued to curtail the civil and political rights of the Chinese. The government compartmentalized society and created a distinction between *pribumi* (the indigenous) and *nonpribumi* (the non indigenous, which in Indonesian context should be read as "Chinese"). It also created antagonism and conflict between *pribumi* and *nonpribumi*. A prominent Chinese Muslim said "The Muslim community of Chinese descent, however, would ultimately become just a 'Muslim community,' and not a 'separate Chinese community with a mosque.' Conversion to Islam has been seen as a last and final act (2) finishing touch of assimilation (qtd. in The Siaw Giap (1988:336)). However, in the process of becoming Muslim, the ethnic Chinese (5) were cutting themselves off from their family, society and culture. Gradually, they were more and more isolated from the non-Muslim Chinese community. This process was reinforced by the policy of Soeharto's New Order.

When he was in power, Soeharto issued the policy of "forced assimilation," which asked the Chinese to "indonesianize" themselves, prohibiting Chinese traditions and religious practices. Conversion to Islam was a way for the ethnic Chinese to assimilate themselves into Indonesian society (The, 1993:63-66). This was also supported by Junus Jahja, a prominent Chinese Muslims, who wrote

By embracing to Islam, young ethnic Chinese experienced that immediately they are fully accepted as fellow-Muslims and compatriots by the people at large who are 90% Muslims. All kinds of hostility and controversy as an inheritance of the past disappear. They are heartily welcomed now and totally integrated within the community. So they have at last a permanent "place in the sun." This is exactly what ethnic Chinese are so looking and longing for (Leo, 1979:170).

And this conversion to Islam was seen by Soeharto's New Order regime as a proof of the success of its assimilation policy. And PITI was also asked to change its name. It had to drop the word *Tionghoa*, which means Chinese. Thus, during the New Order, in 1971, it became *Pembina Iman Tauhid Islam* (Custodian of Spiritual Defenders of Islam, PITI). But after the fall of Soeharto, PITI relaunched itself as *Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia*, Indonesian Association of Chinese Muslims, once again. Thus, stressing the Chinese identity.

Because of the experience of forced assimilation, many Chinese shunned Islam, and the families of the Chinese who converted to Islam showed rejection. They believed that when a Chinese became a Muslim, he neglected his Chineseness and thus debasing himself. That is why for many Chinese the assimilation by converting to Islam is considered as "lip hoan" (In Mandarin: ru fan - 入番, literary: "becoming barbarian"). The assimilation by converting to Islam was not successful as the *pribumis* were still suspicious and show the racial attitude towards the Chinese Muslims. They thought that the Chinese used Islam for their own benefits and interest. Thus, the Chinese who were asked to be assimilated into Indonesian society by embracing the religion adhered by the majority and thus cutting off their Chineseness, and yet they were not fully accepted as a "full member" of the Indonesian society.

5. Ethno-Religious Identities of Chinese Indonesians who are Muslim

In this research I am focusing on how the Chinese Indonesians who embrace Islam construct their ethno-religious identities. The way they construct their identities is pertinent to understanding the reasons why they present their being Chinese and being Muslims in ways as such.

Through the way they reconstruct their ethno-religious identities, I divide my respondents into three groups, namely, (1) the syncretic, (2) the non-negotiating, and (3) the negotiating. This division is used in putting forward the special features of the respondents in this project. This research does not conclude that there are three types of Chinese Indonesians who are Muslims. It could happen that there

are other types of Chinese Indonesians who are Muslims in different times and different places. Nevertheless, the division that I use here could give a clearer picture of this group of people, especially in Surabaya. The division I make is based on how they act on their sense of belonging to ethnic Chinese as well as to Muslim community.

5.1. The Syncretic

The syncretic type is exemplified by Anita and Hendra. Anita was born in a small city outside Surabaya in 1956. Whereas, Hendra was born 72 years ago in Surabaya. Both of them identified themselves as Chinese.

People in Indonesia are usually perceived as Chinese through their physical features that are considered as Chinese physical features, such as fairer skin color and slanted eyes. But this perception is often misleading as there are indigenous ethnic groups, hence non Chinese, who have the physical features considered as Chinese physical features. Dayak and Minahasa ethnic groups, for example. Many of them are considered as Chinese by others. There are also people of Chinese descent who have dark skin color and their eyes are not slanted. They resemble *pribumis*. So by physical features only, it is difficult to say whether somebody is Chinese or not. Of course there are people who can be identified as Chinese easily because of their "strong" Chinese physical features. So, in this research I rely on ethnic self-identification to determine whether my respondents are of Chinese descent or not.

In the course of the interviews, Anita and Hendra used the term *Tionghoa* (Mandarin: *zhong hua*, 中华), which means Chinese, for addressing themselves. They often said "kita orang Tionghoa" (we the Chinese). When asked why they considered themselves as Chinese, Anita answered:

Of course I am Chinese. Don't ask me that question silly question [laughing]. My ethnic background is Chinese. My father was originally from Hubei, China. Although my mother was born here, her parents were from China. The daughter of Chinese is of course Chinese.³

Hendra added:

I know why you asked me that question [smiling]. I think nowadays it is difficult (in Indonesia) to say whether someone is Chinese or not. But well, I am Chinese. And, hmm... I don't think there are people who are not Chinese considered themselves as Chinese. So I considered myself as Chinese because I am Chinese.⁴

Hendra also mentioned that his parents came from Fujian Nan'an (福建南安).

Hendra and Anita viewed their ethnicity as an ascribed characteristics of their individual selves. Nevertheless, in their childhood they did not pay attention to their Chinese ethnicity. Hendra admitted that he rarely mingled with people other than his ethnic group, except his father's workers, and all his school mates were Chinese (He attended Chinese school until he finished his high school). But it did not mean that his social circle was limited to the ethnic Chinese only. On the contrary, Anita mingled quite often with the non Chinese. She did not live in the area where there were a lot of Chinese. Besides that, she attended Chinese school until primary three. Then she moved to a Catholic school. Although the majority of students in Catholic schools were usually of Chinese descent, there were a number of the non Chinese students. Both Hendra and Anita did not think that they were different from the non Chinese. They realized that they were Chinese and some of the people around them were not Chinese. Nevertheless, the dichotomy between Chinese and non Chinese was not important as it did not bring any difference. For Hendra and Anita, their Chineseness was an "ascribed status" (Adam and Marshall, 1996) that formed their "passive identity" (Bradley, 1996).

³ Interview on 10 February 2006

⁴ Interview on 20 January 2006

When Soeharto was in power, his regime brought winds of change. It adopted the policy of othering the Chinese. And this kind of situation Hendra, Anita, and most of my other respondents started to think of their ethnicity seriously. At first, they thought that being Chinese did not make them different from *pribumis*. Now suddenly they realized that they were Chinese and different from the *pribumis*. Their sense of belonging to Indonesian community was put in doubt because of the othering process they experienced. The new situation has changed the passive identity of the Chinese into active identity, then to politicized identity. That is why when Hendra and Anita converted to Islam, they retained their ethnic identity by practicing the cultural aspects of their ethnic.

Hendra converted to Islam 10 years ago, in 1996. He was 62 years old at that time. Prior to his conversion, he had thought about Islam, although he was an active member of *Lao Mu Jiao* (老母教) temple in Surabaya. He recalled:

At first I believed in *Lao Mu Jiao*. I can't remember exactly when I started to embrace it. It was long time ago, but definitely not since I was a kid. I was brought up in a family who is not religious. Perhaps it was a few years after I got married.

My interest in Islam is a coincidence. At that time the situation was not favorable for the Chinese. The *pribumis* had prejudice towards us. They had the impression that the Chinese are bad. But you see, not all Chinese are bad. There are always rotten apples. I am sure it also happens in other ethnic groups. There are Chinese who like doing the charity, helping poor people.

My friends and I often do some charity, although we are not rich. We just share something that we can share. At that time, I often organized my friends for giving donation, if there were natural disaster, flood, etc. We usually pooled our resources together and send it via a third party. We did not there to go to the affected area alone. We are Chinese, and those living there were definitely not Chinese. Hmm, perhaps there also Chinese, but the number was very small. But we felt that our donation was not delivered properly. We had no idea what to do. Going there was out of the question. Since then, I was interested in Islam. I want to know their religion.⁵

After quite some time, Hendra did the conversion. At first, he said that his wife and his family were against it. But then, later on they accepted his decision. His wife still believes in *Lao Mu Jiao*, but his children prefer Christianity. It is not a problem for him. He thinks that religion is a personal problem. That's why he does not try to convert his wife and children. He said, "All religions are good. So it depends on the individual himself to choose the religion that fits him."⁶

After the conversion, he got the impression that other Muslims' opinion towards him had changed. They considered him as their fellow. "I think I could have a better relationship with other Muslims," he said.⁷

Anita's conversion is different. Originally Anita believed in Chinese traditional religion. Then she embraced Christianity. After she got married, she became Muslim. She said:

My husband was a Muslim Javanese. But he was not fanatical. That's why we could get married, although my parents d²¹ not give their consent. He never asked me to be a Muslim. It was my initiative that I wante²¹ be a Muslim. At first I started to learn about Islam. Although I was a Christian at that time, I felt that I did not get the spiritual help when I need it from

⁵ Interview on 5 February 2006

⁶ Interview on 20 January 2006

⁷ Interview on 5 February 2006

Christianity. So after learning about Islam, I found that it was good, and fitted me. Then I decided to be a Muslim. It was a few years after I got married.⁸

But in one interview Anita admitted that if her husband was not a Muslim, probably she would not learn about Islam.

Anita's marriage did not last long. Her husband had an extra marital affair with a woman, and then later on, he married that woman illegally. Knowing that, Anita divorced her husband. After her divorce, she lived alone with her son and daughter. She was still Muslim, and so were her Children. The daughter converted to Christianity later, to follow her husband's religion.

Not all in Anita's and Hendra's social circle knew that they were Muslim, although most knew it, or perhaps their friends just did not care. Religion was not necessarily important in friendship. So Anita and Hendra said. They felt that there was no need for them to proclaim that they were Muslims. Anita continued:

Religion is a personal matter. It is our relationship with our God. So I don't feel the need to proclaim that I am a Muslims. I don't get any benefit nor suffer from loss if the whole world knows that I am a Muslim. But I think most my friends know that I am Muslim. And the neighbors know it, too. I used to go to the mosque near by to pray during the fasting month.⁹

Hendra said:

I chose Islam to be my religion because I think the teaching of Islam fits me. But I have to admit that being a Muslim could help my business, especially when I am dealing with the government's officials who are also Muslims. I am running a travel bureau. The fact that I am a Muslim helps me in dealing with the immigration officials, both at the airport, or in the immigration office when I apply for a new passport or renew the old one on my customer's behalf. And I think all my Muslim friends know that I am also a Muslim, but I am not sure whether my all my non Muslim friends know about this. Or, perhaps they just don't care. But I often go to mosque every Friday. So I guess they know that I am a Muslim.¹⁰

Hendra did mention that he got benefits from his being Muslim, especially when he deals with the government's officials. Even other Muslims treated him more favorably. He said, "This is the blessings because of becoming a Muslim."¹¹

Both Anita and Hendra admitted that there were Muslims who were suspicious towards them. Both were considered as not sincere in their conversion. Many thought they took advantage of being Muslim. Actually this is not new. A study conducted by The Siau-w Giap in 1983 showed that the Muslims thought that the Chinese converted to Islam because they wanted favorable treatment or benefits.

Anita's and Hendra's narratives showed that when converting to a new religion, that is, Islam, they identified themselves with other Muslims. They tried to develop a sense of belonging to the Muslim community. Hendra, for example, after the conversion, he dared to go to places he used to avoid, such as places where there were no Chinese or where Muslims showed hostility to Chinese. He believed that his Islamic identity would dilute that hostility. And in fact he admitted that his being a Muslim helped him in his business as other Muslims considered him as their fellow brother. By

⁸ Interview on 10 February 2006

⁹ Interview on 15 February 2006

¹⁰ Interview on 5 February 2006

¹¹ Interview on 18 February 2006

converting to Islam, Anita also tried to identify herself with the community of her husband. They may not be so reflective with their new religion. Nonetheless, they did the practices, to a certain degree, as required by their new religion.

Although they were Muslim, Anita and Hendra still practiced Chinese traditions, such as Chinese New Year and Qingming (清明). Hendra said:

Chinese New Year in China is called Chun jie (春节), a Spring celebration. It is not a religious holiday. That is why the Chinese from any religions celebrate it. Originally it comes from the agrarian culture in China, where people celebrated the changing of the year and season.¹²

Anita added:

Of course I celebrate it. It is very important in Chinese culture. When my Husband was still with me, both of us went to my parents' house to pay respect. Paying respect to our parents is not against Islam.¹³

Both considered that celebrating Chinese New Year has nothing to do with religions, as it is a secular celebration. Nevertheless, Hendra added

On the eve of the Chinese New Year, I usually pray by using joss stick to God of Sky and God of Earth. It is a part of the tradition. So I think I have to do that. And in my opinion, praying for good luck is not against the religion.¹⁴

When confronted that it was against Syariah (the Islamic Law), Hendra replied.

For those who are fanatical, it may be against Syariah. But I see it from the praying aspect. You should realize that it is a part of the rituals. Many Javanese Muslims also do the same thing as I do. On certain Thursday night, for example, many give offerings to the spirit. God knows what spirit it is [laughingly]. Even many pray for luck in the tombs of the people who were considered as holy. But they are accepted as normal, not against Syariah.¹⁵

Anita said that she also did the same thing in her house, especially after her divorce. Before, she said that she did not do that because her husband and she usually left early in the reunion dinner on the eve of Chinese New Year, thus she rarely participated in praying to God of Sky and God of Earth, which is done exactly at midnight.¹⁶

Both also practiced the qingming ritual. Qing Ming is the day (it falls on the third month of Chinese lunar year, usually early April) when people go to the tombs of the deceased members of the family to pray. Hendra said, "Islam teaches us to respect our parents. Even after they pass away, we should pray for them. So it is not against Islam to celebrate Qingming, where we pray for our parents."¹⁷ Anita added:

¹² Interview on 7 April 2006

¹³ Interview on 15 February 2006

¹⁴ Interview on 7 April 2006

¹⁵ Interview on 7 April 2006

¹⁶ Interview on 20 March 2006

¹⁷ Interview on 7 April 2006

I also go to my parents' tombs during Qingming. I believe it is not against the Islamic law. You may aware that before the fasting month of Ramadhan, many pribumi Muslims go to the tombs of their family members to pray. So it is a part of the culture. Being a Muslim does not mean that you have to leave your culture.¹⁸

She also stresses that some Javanese Muslims that she knew also practice Javanese traditions that some might considered as against Syariah. She gave an example of "nyadran" ritual (Nyadran comes from Sanskrit words "Shraddha, a Hindu festival), where Javanese pray to their ancestor.¹⁹

Anita still went to Chinese temples to ask for lucky charm. She hanged red and yellow package blessed in the temple as the talisman. She often consulted a temple medium. And so did Hendra. Since his office faced a road junction, he put a mirror with the picture of an octagon, yinyang symbol, and head of a tiger biting a knife to avoid bad luck. All these were very Chinese practices.

Both Anita and Hendra called themselves as Chinese and Muslim. Their chineseness was reflected from their ethnicity as well as the practice of Chinese traditions and rituals, through which they identified themselves as Chinese. Yet as Muslims, they also identified themselves as a member of Muslim community. They adhered to Islam, and practiced most, if not all, its law. Nevertheless, religion is one the aspects that defined who they were.

Anita and Hendra showed how they reconciled their Chinese and Muslim identities through syncretism, the blending of Islam and Chinese traditional religions. Syncretism is not uncommon, especially for Muslim in Java. Islam in Java is very syncretic. It is very much influenced by Javanese Shivaite Hindu tradition. There are some elements from Hinduism in Islam in Java (Brakel 2004). That is why Islam in Java is different from that in other parts of Indonesia, such as in Sumatra or Kalimantan, which is culturally Malay, which is considered as "more Islamic" than that in Javanese culture. Because of the Javanese Hindu influence, some scholars categorize Islam in Java as Javanese Islam, or localized Islam, or cultural Islam. Hendra and Anita followed the step of Javanese Muslims in the practice of their religion, they blended Islam and Chinese traditional beliefs.

5.2. The Non-negotiating

Erna and Hendi are the example of the non-negotiating group. Erna was born in 1958, in a small city a few hundred kilometers southeast of Surabaya. Erna has been a Muslim since long time ago. Whereas Hendi, who was born in Surabaya, converted to Islam a few years ago.

Erna's physical features show that she is of Chinese descent. Her skin color is very fair compared to other people, and her eyes are slanted. Everybody who sees her definitely would say that she is Chinese. Erna shared her story about her childhood

I was born in a Chinese family in a small and sleepy town. My family run a grocery shop there. Because of their poor educational background, my parents did not speak Mandarin, although my father could speak one of Chinese dialect. But I don't know what dialect it is. So at home we speak Madurese, the language widely spoken in the city. Their Indonesian proficiency is not good either.²⁰

Although they were Chinese, as far as Erna remembered, her parents never practice Chinese traditions. She continued:

¹⁸ Interview on 20 March 2006

¹⁹ Interview on 20 March 2006

²⁰ Interview on 10 February 2006

At home my parents never practice any Chinese traditions and rituals. Chinese New Year passes as a normal day, except that we get *ang pao* (紅包 in Mandarin: hong bao, a red packet consisting money). So whenever I think about Chinese New Year, I am thinking about ang pao. Nevertheless, they sometimes went to a Chinese temple to ask for good luck so that their business was good. They also hanged red and yellow packets from the temple in their house in order to bring prosperity luck.²¹

So for Erna, her Chinese identity is just self-identification as Chinese, her family never rarely practiced Chinese traditions and rituals.

Erna described her family as having indifferent attitude towards religion. Even they never paid much attention to *baishen* (拜神) and praying to the ancestors, except praying for good luck. There was a family altar at home with the pictures Edna's paternal grandparents. As far as Erna remembered, the parents never prayed in front of the altar, although occasionally, they changed the offering, some fruit and cakes, put there. But that was long time ago. Erna believed that they did not do it now, they did not do that anymore even before they converted to Muslim.

The city where Erna's parents lived was a small and sleepy town, a few hundred kilometers southeast of Surabaya. The majority of the population was Madurese, who was known as conservative Muslim. There were only a small number of the Chinese in that area. Most lived in the downtown area, the "china town", which consists of several streets dominated by shops owned by Chinese. Only a handful lived outside this area. In Erna's opinion, the people and the local government showed a certain degree of hostile attitude towards the Chinese. Erna remembered a bylaw that restricted Chinese funeral rites. When an ethnic Chinese died, the bereaved family was not allow to bury the deceased if the family used Chinese style coffin. The family was asked to bury the deceased outside the area if they insisted in using the Chinese style coffin. The rationale was that Chinese style coffin was usually very big and it would use more space, which was very limited in the city.

Because of this situation, as well as their indifferent attitude towards religion and Chinese traditions, they decided to convert to Islam. So Erna and her siblings, one sister and one brother were brought up in a Muslim family. It happened when Erna was in the 4th grade of elementary school. She remembered this because she took Islam as the religion subject. She did not take that subject before.

In Indonesia, all level of education, from the primary till the tertiary level, religion was one of the compulsory subjects. Students took the religion subject according to their belief. But not all public schools had teachers teaching religion subjects except Islam. Findings teacher who taught Christianity and Catholicism is not so difficult, sometimes schools which did not have teachers teaching those two religion subjects sent their students to schools which have the resources. But it is not the case with Hinduism and Buddhism. Hindu and Buddhist students usually did not take the religion subject, and were given the passing grade for the subject in their report card (usually the grade was "six"). Erna said:

It was a surprise for my school mate, both Muslim and Chinese. My Muslims friends often asked why my family became Muslim, and accused us of currying favor with other Muslims for benefits, and my Chinese friends said that I became "hoana" (番仔, from Minan Hua dialect which means "barbarian," "fanzi in Mandarin).²²

But Erna observed that nothing had changed in the family after the conversion. Things ran as usual, no changes in family diet. They did not observe halal requirement strictly. So Erna considered her family as non-practicing muslim.

²¹ Interview on 22 February 2006

²² Interview on 10 February 2006

Erna's religious life changed when she went to university. She moved to a bigger city near by, to continue her study in a public university there. She majored in English. Because of her friends and social circle, she was involved in the "Islamic Students Association." She continued her story:

I lived together with some friends. We rented a house together. My relationship with them was close. Knowing that I am a Muslim, but I did not know much about it. They asked to join a Muslim groups in our university to learn more about Islam. So I think it was not a bad idea. There I joined that group. Later on, I also join "Islamic Students Association," a nation-wide organization.²³

She learned more about Islam, and the more she knew about Islam, the more determined she was in embracing, and tried to follow Syariah. She said, "By learning more about Islam, I know my religion better, and this leads me to a better understanding on Islam, so that I can explain to others." Nevertheless, she did not wear the headscarf. She explained:

Wearing headscarf does not make us more Islamic. Quran mentions that we have to wear modestly and decently. Wearing headscarf is a cultural thing, not a religious one. Embracing Islam does not mean that we have to adopt Arab culture. Besides that, I think wearing headscarf is not suitable with our tropical climate, especially here in Surabaya, where the temperature is very high and humid²⁴

Finishing her tertiary education, Erna moved to Surabaya in 1983 to work, and still lived there now. She married a Javanese Muslim. But her husband is nominal Muslim, who does not care about Syariah. Her husband was a social drinker, and does follow Islamic dietary rules strictly.

Hendy's conversion trajectory is different. He was born in 1960 in Surabaya. He came from a *Totok* family. His parents both speak Mandarin and Cantonese fluently. They attended Chinese secondary school. His father continued his study in Nanyang University in Singapore, a Chinese university. But her mother did not go to university, after finishing her high school. Hendy can speak Mandarin quite well, although not so good as his two older sisters (He is the youngest in the family). His two older sisters went to Taiwan to study there. But he went to an Australian university. Finishing his bachelor's degree in engineering, he went back to Indonesia to work in his parents' factory. About his conversion, he said:

I converted to Islam in 2000. But actually my interest in Islam started a few years before. You know, Indonesia faced financial crisis in 1997, and then political turmoil one year later. In 1997, the company that my parents entrusted me was in financial difficulties, and not to mention the social unrest at that time. The workers in my company staged a protest. Everything was chaotic. Until you experience by yourself, you will not know how big the burden is. Even there was time when I turned to drugs. But luckily, when I told a friend of mine, who is also Chinese, about my problems, he suggested me to come to a function held in his house. It was actually a Koran study. So definitely Islamic in nature, but the sermon was not so fundamentalist like this person [He mentioned the name of an Islamic preacher]. It sounded academic, yet could be accepted by common people. The one who gave a sermon really had a charisma. I was fascinated. So my friend introduced me to him and we talked and talked. Then I told him about my problem. Of course by talking to him, my problem would not disappear and the solution was there on the

²³ Interview on 10 February 2006

²⁴ Interview on 10 February 2006

table. But by talking to him, at least I could let out my hostility. So since then on, I often talked to him whenever I had a problem and needed a pair of ears.²⁵

The person that Hendy talked about was an Ustad (literary: teacher), an Islamic preacher. When Hendy about his problems and burdens to this Ustad, this Ustad did not preach and ask him to convert to Islam. "He did not mention any words about proselytization, and he also did not say something bad about other religions" Hendy added.²⁶ Because of this sympathetic attitude, Hendy wanted to know more about Islam.

At first, he did not have the intention to embrace Islam. But the more he knew ⁴⁵he more he was interested. Then after two years, he became a Muslim. And as other Muslims did, he prayed five times a day, tried to fast during the fasting month, and did what Islam required the Muslim to do. By doing so, Hendy constructed his Muslim identity.

Hendy felt that he was lucky because he did not live together with his parents. And until now, the parents did not know that he is a Muslim. He said

I am fortunate, I think. I don't live with my parents. So my parents do not know my conversion. My father is not religious. But when he is in a good mood, or when he has a problem he goes to the temple. My mother regularly visits the temple. But they never talk about religion to us. I think they give their children freedom in choosing the religion the children want to choose. None of my sisters go to the temple. They are Christian now. But well, I don't think they accept the religion of my choice. They have a negative opinion about Muslim. You know, Islam is always associated with backwardness, with violence. Perhaps the Muslims they know are our factory workers and our domestic helpers, whom they call *fangui* and *fanpo* [番鬼 and 番婆 Mandarin words which literally mean "barbarian devil" and "barbarian women"] and bureaucrats who are money gobblers.²⁷

Hendy's parents' opinion and also the opinion of many Chinese show that they do not trust the *pribumis*. Both the Chinese and the *pribumis* have prejudice towards each other (Suprajitno, 2005). In their opinion, the *pribumis* were superficial and insincere, they act nice to the Chinese if they want something from the later. The *pribumis* are also considered as boot-licker. They are avaricious for position and power. They are also clever in taking advantage of other people for their own benefit. The *pribumis* are considered as money gobblers. That's why the Chinese should not be too close to them.

There are Chinese who believe that *pribumis* are hypocrite. They look so religious and pious, but their religious and pious appearance is just a cover for their greed and corrupted act. In this case, they said that the Chinese, though may be much less religious and pious than *pribumi*, are than better *pribumi*. The Chinese adopted the humanistic values and practiced them in their live. This also affects their opinion towards Islam, the religion the most *pribumis* embrace.

The *pribumis*, Muslim and non Muslim, also have the prejudice towards the Chinese. They think that the Chinese are insincere and deceitful. It is difficult to trust the Chinese. They always have hidden agenda. They act nicely if they need favor. The Chinese are also considered as economic animals, who "colonize" the *pribumis* economically and did not have social concern. The Chinese are rich because they know how to make use of corrupted *pribumi* officials. Bribery and corruption are always associated with the Chinese.

The *pribumi* Muslims think that the Chinese are bad because the later do not conform to the first's religious value. Some said that the Chinese liked eating pork, the thing that their religion

²⁵ Interview on 9 March 2006

²⁶ Interview on 9 March 2006

²⁷ Interview on 3 May 2006

considered as forbidden. And Chinese are infidel. Because of this kind of environment, they disliked the Chinese, and considered that all Chinese are bad.

Because of the prejudice they had towards Muslims, and hence affected their opinion about Islam, Hendy did not tell his parents about his conversion. He said

I have not told my parents about my conversion. I don't have any plan to tell them, at least now. Although they are open-minded, as in the case of my sisters' conversion to Christianity, I think they cannot accept that I am a Muslim.²⁸

So at least, at this point of his life, Hendy did not tell his parents about his new religion.

Although Hendy embraces Islam, a religion associates with non Chinese, without any hesitation he still identified himself as Chinese. He said

The fact that I am a Muslim has nothing to do with being Chinese. No matter how, I am still Chinese. I know that Islam is always associated with non Chinese. But you see, Islam is a religion, and Chinese is a race. You cannot compare and contrast them. They are two different matters. I understand why people still draw a line between Chinese and Islam, but it is wrong. Although I am a Muslim, I still practice Chinese traditions. I celebrated Chinese New Year, I also join my parents to go to the tombs of my grandparents on Qingming day. But of course, I don't do things that are forbidden in Islam, such as ancestors worship or praying to Chinese gods in the temple.²⁹

Through his participation in the celebration of Chinese traditions, Hendy maintain his Chinese identity. Hendy reflected what Adam and Marshall (1996) write, rites and rituals cause individuals to reflect on their behavior and identity. He explain further

If I am asked who I am, definitely I say that I am Chinese. There is Chinese blood in me. And I cannot change it. Like a saying, once Chinese always Chinese. But my religion is Islam. And Islam does not change my ethnic. Religion cannot change somebody's ethnic, people can change their religion. I am "orang Tionghoa Muslim" (Muslim Chinese).³⁰

For Hendy, his ethnic comes first. That is why he stressed that he was Chinese. And Islam was his attribute.

His attitude was different from Erna. Erna said that she was Chinese because her parents were Chinese, her ancestors were also Chinese. She knew nothing about Chinese tradition and culture. She expressed no interest when asked whether she would like to know more about Chinese tradition and culture, although she said that it was fun to see the festivity of the celebration of Chinese New Year, to see Chinese dragon and lion dance. She said, "I prefer to be called as a Muslim. My religion is Islam, so of course I am a Muslim. And coincidentally, ethnically I am Chinese. So if I describe myself, I am Chinese Muslim" From her statement, it can be inferred that she considered herself a Muslim, and Chinese is just the attribute. This can also be seen from the term "As a Muslim, I....," she frequently used for referring to herself during the interviews.

Although Hendy and Erna view their ethno religious identity differently, they have something in common. They are not very concerned with the label "Muslim," in the sense that they would

²⁸ Interview on 9 March 2006

²⁹ Interview on 22 April 2006

³⁰ Interview on 3 May 2006

probably not public pronounce themselves as Muslim. They chose not to negotiate their Muslim identity at least for the time being.

Hendy, for example, does not tell his parents about his new religion. Another example of Hendy's non-negotiating strategy was that he pretends to be a vegetarian when he was having meals with his parents and relatives. Thus he was able to avoid the double bind situation of having non halal food offered for him where if he consumes it, he would be threatening his Muslim identity. And if he refuses it, he would face confrontation with his parents.

Erna, who works as an insurance agent, also took the same attitude. She said that religion is very personal. "I don't need to go around to tell anybody that I am Muslim. It is between me and God."³¹ In her work, she often gets along with many Chinese, many of whom are not Muslim. Since her friends never ask about her religion, there is no need for her to talk about her religion. Her non-negotiating attitude could also be seen when she was asked what would happened if she was asked to eat non-halal food.

Once my friends, who don't know that I am a Muslim asked me to accompany them to have meals in a congee eating house, which was famous for its pork porridge. I told them that I don't like pork, instead of telling them that I am Muslim.³²

Not all Erna's friends, especially those from Chinese background know that Erna is a Muslim. Her reason of not telling them that she is a Muslim is:

Well, simply I don't want to go for a lengthy explanation of my Muslim background. You see, I look very Chinese. And most of them, both Chinese and Non-Chinese may be very curious why I become a Muslim. Chinese Muslims are still considered as strange.³³

Nevertheless, she said would admit that she was a Muslim if she was asked her religion. Not telling others directly that she believes in Islam is just a matter of convenience, a way of not letting others to challenge her Muslim identity.

I classify Chinese Indonesians Muslims who adopt this kind of attitude into the non-negotiating group. And within this group, I divide them into two, namely, the Muslim Chinese, who emphasize more on their Chinese identity, and Chinese Muslim, who believes that their Muslimness precedes their chineseness.

Hendy's and Anita's non-negotiating attitude may stem from the stigmatization they experienced. From the Chinese point of view, they might be considered as "betraying" their ethnicity and becoming unchinese. From the Muslim point of view, they might be accused of being insincere and deceitful, and taking advantage of being Muslim. This results in their attempt to "conceal" their Muslim identity, that is, through their non-negotiating stance.

5.3. The Negotiating

The negotiating group is those who actively negotiate their ethno-religious identity, their Chinese as well as Muslim identities. My respondents who are exemplified this group is Danny and Hartono. Both were born in Surabaya. Danny was born in 1950, while Hartono was born in 1961.

Danny's parents were locally born Chinese. He did not know which generation he was in Indonesia. They believe in Sam Kauw Hui (in Mandarin: 三教会), a mix of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. He did not remember when he was interested in Islam. It was because Sam Kauw Hui

³¹ Interview on 10 February 2006

³² Interview on 5 May 2006

³³ Interview on 5 May 2006

cannot fulfill his spiritual need, he said. And he found that Islamic teaching could help him find the goal of his life. Through a friend of his, he started to learn about Islam, and in 1998, he became a Muslim. At first his wife (who believe in Sam Kauw Hui) and childrens (two sons and one daughter who are Christians) showed their objection, but he said that now they could accept his conversion to Islam, although they still hold their respective religions. His parents passed away before he converted to Islam. He said,

At first, my family could not accept my conversion, especially my children. But I told them that religion is a personal problem. That is what I think. And because of that, I give my children freedom to choose any religions they like. Finally, my wife could accept it, while my children still show a kind of disapproval. Perhaps because they are Christians.³⁴

Danny stressed that probably because his Children were Christian, they showed stronger rejection towards his conversion.

During the early years of his conversion, PTI did not have its own mosque, so he went to any mosques he liked. At first, non Chinese Muslims saw him with a strange look in their face. But they showed their respect when they knew that he could perform the shalat (Islamic prayer) well, and did all the ritual correctly. He felt that being a Muslim could help him build a good rapport with the pribumis. He said:

Embracing Islam is a good way for us, the Chinese, to have a good relationship with the non Chinese. My employees now look at me with a more favorable view. Even when I deal with the bureaucracy, I can sense their more favorable attitude to me. So it also greases the wheel of my business. This is the blessings from Allah.³⁵

He also cited an example of "the blessings from Allah." Once he got a traffic accident. The car he drove hit a motorcycle driver. The mob was about to hit and punch him, and perhaps to lynch him, it did not happened when they knew he was a Muslim.

Hartono was from *totok* family.³⁶ His parents were locally born Chinese, but his grandparents were from China. He has relatives in China, and brothers and sisters in Taiwan. He explained his family background:

Although my parents were locally born Chinese, they practiced Chinese tradition and rituals faithfully. They often went to the temple to pray, especially to ask for blessings and luck. They sent their Children to Chinese schools. They hope that education in Chinese school could inculcate Chinese values to their children.³⁷

Because of his education (he was able to complete Chinese high school), he was well-versed in Chinese tradition and culture.

³⁴ Interview on 16 March 2006

³⁵ Interview on 10 January 2006

³⁶ Although subject to criticism, the Chinese in Indonesia could be categorized into two groups. One is called *totok* Chinese (in Mandarin: *xin ke hua ren* - 新客华人), referring to the Chinese who are still culturally Chinese in the sense that they maintain their Chinese heritage including the language. They were born in China and their descendants many of whom were born in Indonesia before World War II are likely to stay *totok* culturally since they went to Chinese schools. Those who were born after the 1960s have adopted a hybrid culture of the ancestors' land, the local Javanese, and the West. Most of the *totok* observe traditional Chinese religious holidays and practices. The other is called *pevanakaw* (in Mandarin: *tu sheng hua ren* - 土生华人), referring to the Chinese who were locally born. The *pevanakaw* Chinese speak Indonesian or one of the local dialects, and those how have Dutch education speak Dutch. The majority has command of the Chinese language. Some learned Chinese in the Chinese medium schools—before the Soeharto administration closed all Chinese schools in 1966—but Chinese was never their first language.

³⁷ Interview on 12 April 2006

Like Danny, he could not remember exactly when he developed his interest in Islam. He said that his interest in Islam had nothing to do with the spiritual void in his life. As far as he could remember, he started being interested in Islam because of his business associates, who later became his friends. In his business, he often dealt with the *pribumi* Muslims. He became Muslim in mid 1990s.

As it has been the case with other Chinese Indonesians who converted to Islam, at first his family voiced their disapproval. But later on, they could accept his decision. His wife became a Muslim a few years ago, but his two Children still believed in Christianity. Describing his family, Hartono said:

At first I was the only one in the family who was a Muslim. But years later, my wife followed my step to be a Muslim. My children were still Christians. I wish they could be like those young people [he pointed to a photograph hanging on the wall, which showed some young Chinese Indonesian Muslims and him]. But it is up to them. They are free to choose any religions they like. As a father, all I can do is just praying.³⁸

But it seems that Hartono's wish does not come true, at least now, or in the near future. His oldest son prayed and hoped that God would enlighten him so that he understood that Jesus was the only way to salvation.³⁹

Like other respondents, Danny and Hartono tried to learn more about Islam in the early years of their conversion. As time went by, they began to develop a more concrete, cognitive conception of their religious identities (Johnstone 2001). They viewed religion as an identity that they constructed.

Another factor that contributed to and resulted from the increase religiosity and religious identification is friends and social circle who were also Muslims. Danny and Hartono said that their fellow Muslim friends played a role in constructing, reinforcing and reaffirming their religious identity. They said that they learnt more about Islam together with their Chinese friends who were also Muslims since they were going through the same process of religious exploration. And that helped them in the construction of their religious identity. That is why they became PITI members. They felt that PITI was important in helping and reaching out Chinese Muslims. It could offer an organizational and social setting in which the Chinese could collectively examine specific aspects of Islam and the meaning of being Chinese and Muslim, as Ammerman (2003) writes that religious organizations could provide a safe environment for discussing and practicing beliefs and ultimately constructing religious identities. Danny said,

As we know, many Chinese do not feel at ease with the Javanese and other indigenous ethnic groups here. So it is difficult for them if they want to know more about Islam but there are no classes that cater for them. That's why PITI establish the Islam classes, especially for the Chinese. Since the teacher is Chinese, and so are the participants, I think those who want to learn more about Islam will feel more comfortable.⁴⁰

Hartono added:

People here still have a wrong idea. If you are Chinese, you cannot be a Muslim. There are Muslims in China. Many people, especially in Indonesia are not aware about this fact. Islam is an international religion. That is why PITI was established. Its main objective is introducing Islam to the Chinese in Indonesia.⁴¹

³⁸ Interview on 13 February 2006

³⁹ Interview on 20 April 2006

⁴⁰ Interview on 30 March 2006

⁴¹ Interview on 12 April 2006

By participating in PITI, known as the organization of the Chinese who embrace Islam, both Danny and Hartono, negotiated their identities as Chinese as well as Muslim. They wanted to show that Islam and Chinese are two different things, Islam is a religion, and Chinese is an ethnic group.

Their opinion that many Indonesians still have a wrong idea about Islam and Chinese is true. One Chinese said, "Once you become a Muslim, you are not longer a Chinese. Why would a person still want to be a Chinese when he becomes a Muslim?"⁴² The underlying assumption here appears to be that a "Chinese" is diametrically opposed to a Muslim. And being Muslim dilutes one's Chinese identity. And a Javanese also wonder, "How come a Chinese believes in Islam?"⁴³ This thought also reflects his idea that Chinese and Islam cannot be "together." They believed that this kind of perception should be rectified.

Danny and Hartono constructed their Chinese and Muslim identities. But they have differences in the priority. Danny believed that although he was a Muslim, he was still a true blue Chinese. He said:

Some Chinese believe that when a Chinese converts to Islam, he will lose his chineseness. Some *pribumis*, especially Madurese think that A Chinese cannot be a Muslim, and even if he becomes a Muslim, he is not Chinese anymore. That's not true. I am a Muslim, but I am still Chinese.⁴⁴

Danny said that he was a true blue Chinese, and as a Chinese he still practices the Chinese traditions and rituals. But unlike Anita, he is selective in this matter. He is practicing Chinese rituals that are not against his religion. He is like Hendy. He said, "I am still celebrating Chinese New Year and Qingming. I still pay respect to my parents, but of course I do not do things that are not in line with Islam, such as, praying to the ancestors, using joss stick."⁴⁵

One interesting thing about Danny was that in order to show his Chinese Identity, he wore a Chinese Hui white hat, when he went to the mosque for prayer. He did not wear the Malay-Indonesian black hat (*songkok*) and *sarung* (a large sheet of fabric wrapped around the waist and worn as a skirt for men in Indonesia when they are going to the mosque for prayer). By so doing, he wanted to show that being a Muslim was not equal to being a Javanese or Malay, or any other ethnic group in Indonesia.

Hartono agreed with Danny. He said he also still practiced some of the Chinese rituals that were not against Islam. But as a Muslim, he believed that the Muslim part should be given weighage more than the Chinese part. While Danny preferred to call himself as Muslim Chinese, Hartono liked to be called Chinese Muslim. He said:

As a Muslim, I believe I should identify myself first as a member of Muslim community. We live in Indonesia, and the majority of the people here are Muslim. It is better to identify ourselves with them. I am aware that I am of Chinese origin. But, ethnicity often creates a problem, especially for the Chinese, who are considered as a foreign ethnic group here. Identifying ourselves with fellow Muslims could help build a sense of belonging to one community.⁴⁶

⁴² Interview on 12 March 2006

⁴³ Interview on 16 January 2006

⁴⁴ Interview on 30 March 2006

⁴⁵ Interview on 30 March 2006

⁴⁶ Interview on 12 April 2006

In Hartono's opinion, constructing Muslim identity was more important than constructing Chinese identity. Chinese identity is there already, within him. Everybody could see that, but that was not the case with his Muslim identity. Therefore, he prioritized the Muslim identity.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this research support previous studies on the heterogeneity of the Chinese Indonesians. The heterogeneous nature of this group of people is formed by, among others, different family background and experiences in their lives. Differences in viewing religion and ethnicity also contribute to the diversity of the Chinese in Indonesia. These differences influence the way they construct and reconstruct their identities.

The conceptualization of identity is always circumscribed with the overlapping and protean norms around them, that are influenced by the interaction between the Self and the Other. The enunciation of the Chinese Indonesian identity by external parties is always stereotypical. They are regarded as "exclusive," economically, politically, socially, and culturally. Economically speaking, they dominate too much. Politically speaking, they do not want to be involved in anything but economy. Socially speaking, they withdraw from the general community and create their own fortresses. Culturally speaking, their middle kingdom mentality makes them think that Chinese culture is the most civilized culture in the world. This stereotyping leads to the alienation of the Chinese from the society where they live. And this alienation is also reinforced by the policy of the New Order regime.

When the New Order regime was in power, it issued a policy of forced assimilation. All Chinese were asked to "indonesianize" themselves, to leave Chinese traditional religion, and to adopt one religion that the state recognized. And Islam, the religion of the majority of the population was promoted. This resulted in the Chinese' wrong perception towards Islam, and the people's wrong perception towards the Chinese who embraced Islam. Because of this situation, many Chinese who embraced Islam were hesitant in showing their Chinese identity. But after the fall of Soeharto, there was a new development in social and political life. Indonesian community show greater acceptance towards the Chinese.

This study highlights the process of the construction and negotiation of the ethno-religious identities of Chinese Indonesians who are Muslims. Based on the interview with the respondents, this study proposes three categories of Chinese Indonesians who are Muslims, namely, the syncretic, the non-negotiating, and the negotiating. The syncretic practices Islam and Chinese traditions and rituals. The non-negotiating and the negotiating practice Islam and are selective in choosing the Chinese traditions and rituals that they also adopt. The difference between them is that the non-negotiating is not assertive in proclaiming their religious identities and thus avoid the challenge on the construction of their identity. Whereas, the negotiating asserts their ethno-religious identities. Further, the last two groups can be categorized further into the Chinese Muslim division, which stresses on the religious identity, and the Muslim Chinese division, which prioritizes their ethnic identity.

The study contains several limitations, one of which it observes the Chinese in Surabaya, which is culturally Eastern Javanese (Dominant Javanese culture mixed with the culture of other ethnic groups in Java). It does not address the factors of gender, education, as well as economy.

Based on the findings as well as limitations of this study, There several recommendations for further research. First, it would be interesting to investigate the negotiation of the Chinese Muslims or Muslim Chinese who live in the area where the dominant culture is Javanese, such those living in Jogja or Solo, or in the area where Islam is considered "pure," and not syncretic, such as in Sumatra, where Malay culture is dominant. Another idea for further research would be taking age, gender, education, and economy factor into consideration in conducting the research.

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