

## Construction of Simalungun Ethnic Identity in Regional Autonomy Era

by

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### Abstract

Regional autonomy has brought some changes and progress on Simalungun ethnic who have become entrepreneurs, leaders, erudite or professionals. On the other hand, the sense of Simalungun is often called *ahap Simalungun*, has simultaneously faded away. The result of this research shows that the construction of Simalungun ethnic identity in the regional autonomy era is based on three moments of dialectic process, i.e. dynamics externalization which can be seen from the historical ethnic of Simalungun in the kingdom, Netherland colonialism, early independence, interaction with the ethnic of immigrants, regional autonomy, the local election; objectivation moments which can be seen from family names, Tolu Sahundulan, interpreted symbols (Habonaron Do Bona and Sapangambei Manoktok Hitei) and social organizations on behalf of the ethnic; dynamics internalization which can be seen from Rondang Bintang, dressing traditional and batik clothes from Simalungun, along with symbols, pictures, and carvings of Simalungun. The obtained conclusions of this research are that externalization of Simalungun ethnic, which influences dynamics of experiences and is a motivating factor, is a stock of knowledge; objectivities of their identity is standardized by family names, organizations, and Tolu Sahundulan; internalization of Simalungun ethnic is the concept of cultural values and ideologies.

**Keywords:** Identity construction, Simalungun ethnic, Regional autonomy, etc.

### Introduction:

Simalungun is one of North Sumatera regencies, which is one the indigenous and referred as the ethnic of Simalungun (Agustono, 2001). Most of them stay there, but some of them spread into the region of Simalungun or outer province of North Sumatera (Dasuha, 2011). The ethnic of Simalungun has a long history that tells about their origins, territorial area, original language, and cultures.

According to Batara, the name of Simalungun is derived from *simou* and *lungun*. *Simou* means nebulous, between visible and not clearly visible, but clearly exist. Like sima (germ) cannot

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be seen with the eye but clearly exist, while *lungun* means lonely (Purba and Purba, 1995). It is because in the past time, this area was consisted desolate forest where the citizens are almost non-existent.

In the new era, there were some problems found in the ethnic of Simalungun themselves, as an ethnic, they experienced something that was not in a suitable way (Basrowi and Sukidin, 2003). It was related to their history which was unfavorable for the ethnicity. It started when the period of the kingdom of Simalungun and the Netherland colonialism cooperated with certain ethnicities as immigrants. Finally, at the beginning of the independent Republic of Indonesia, the ethnic of Simalungun faced a horrible experience called a social revolution in 1946 (Purba, 1997).

The process of Simalungun ethnic identity construction shows that there is really great effort from individuals or these ethnicities to construct their identity as the ethnic of Simalungun so that they find their truly strong identity to face their future. Therefore, it is required to construct relationships between individuals and other ethnicities, who always interact continuously in certain sociality to process and use their cultural symbols for their own purposes.

In the era of globalization and regional autonomy, the region needs the ability to empower potential and local characters which is able to compete both nationally and internationally (Karim, 2003). Corresponding to the existing development, then the fulfillment of services required will increase that is causing the shifting of social, economic, and culture. The social shifting can be seen from its agricultural society, who always depends on their life in agriculture production, changing to be industrial society, such as factory labor, transportation and etc (Tambak, (2019). This service sector is expected to be able to bring new economic strength. The tourism sector is one of the mainstays expected to be able to advance the economic strength because it is directly creating job vacancies.

Interaction in the ethnic of Simalungun related to construction of Simalungun ethnic identity is conducted through social organizations, such as PMS (Partua Maujana Simalungun), IKEIS (Ikatan Keluarga Islam Simalungun/Association of Islamic Simalungun), HIMAPSI (Himpunan Mahasiswa dan Pelajar Simalungun/Association of Simalungun Students), GKPS (Gereja Kristen Protestan Simalungun/ Protestant Church Simalungun) and organized event by Regent of Simalungun (2010-2015), which has role to make Simalungun ethnic be able to interpret and understand as their tradition. The social organizations are the real manifestations of the truly recognized identity so that the existence of Simalungun ethnic can be recognized and strong to face their problems (Tideman, 2012).

A problem studied in this research is on how to construct Simalungun ethnic identity in the regional autonomy era which refers to externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Santoso, 2013). This research aims for result findings as concepts and propositions about the construction of Simalungun in the regional autonomy era.

### **Material and Methods:**

This research is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach because the data of this study are the results of discursive practices meanings of identity (Denzin and Lincoln, 2009). As stated by Barker (2006), social movement apprehends ethnicity as something structured from discursive practices, speaking about group and self-identification with signs and symbols that construct Simalungun ethnicity. Researchers collected and noted the data in detail related to the problems of construction of Simalungun ethnic in the regional autonomy era.

The number of informants in this research is 23 people who are Simalungun citizens. Determination of informants is done by choosing the one who can be a representative of Simalungun ethnic or able to answer the questions in this research. The location of this research is in Simalungun Regency, especially in Pematang Raya, the capital city of Simalungun. Instruments of this research are researcher and interview guidance which containing questions.

The used data sources are primary data obtained through observation, documentation, and interview with informants; and secondary data obtained from Central Bureau of Statistic Simalungun, General Election Commissions of Simalungun Regency, *Partua Maujana Simalungun*, and Siantar Museum Foundation.

In this research, the data is analyzed textually. The textual analysis aimed at texts manifested from discursive practices done by Simalungun ethnic to understand self-identity and group identity with signs and symbols that built Simalungun ethnicity in the new order era in Simalungun Regency. Analysis method of phenomenological approach has the following steps:

- i. Doing interviews with Simalungun citizens related to the construction of Simalungun ethnic identity in the regional autonomy era. The identity of informants, such as age, education, job, hobby, address, and realities, can be observed. Question prepared in the form contained:
  - Simalungun citizens' experience which is considered important.
  - Giving the meaning of the important experience.
- ii. Observing Simalungun citizens behavior because it can describe their real thoughts.
- iii. Noting down to the field logbook began from the first day of research.
- iv. Grouping the data to the sub-topic from the research theme, namely construction of Simalungun ethnic identity in regional autonomy era.
- v. Checking data from informants with triangulation method, notes and documents or books.
- vi. Analyzing data through interpreted concept of the construction of Simalungun ethnic identity in regional autonomy era. These following steps are done to analysis the data:
  - Separating the hypothesis data and general assumption because the data should be untainted of field experience and native.
  - Finding the essences from the real phenomenon, free from hypothesis and basic assumption. This step is called data reduction.
  - Grouping the essences to sub-topics in this research, namely construction of Simalungun ethnic identity in regional autonomy era.
- vii. Arranging the whole meaning thoughts by creating the experienced symptoms.
- viii. Giving the meaning of the reflection results.

## **Result and Discussion:**

In the study of the construction of Simalungun ethnic identity in the regional autonomy era, has been found the phenomenon, which is able to be interpreted with Peter L. Berger's theory approach related to the construction of ethnic identity in the regional autonomy era. In this

research, the obtained data is based on qualitative research with a phenomenological approach; the researcher did the interview directly with the informant using the unstructured questions.

Some findings in the process of construction of Simalungun ethnic identity in regional autonomy era based on externalization dynamics, objectivation processes which can construct Simalungun ethnic identity through culture and organizations, and internalization as the self-initiative concept of cultural values and ideologies processed through the objectivation.

Based on dynamics externalization, it can be found from the construction of Simalungun ethnic identity in the regional autonomy era, interpreted with Peter L. Berger theory approach, which is self-externalization of Simalungun ethnic, such as dynamics of experiences, is a stock of knowledge, motivating and influencing factor identity formation of Simalungun ethnic.

The objectivation process is able to construct Simalungun ethnic identity through the culture and organizations. It is found that objectivation is an identification process of self-identity, such as family names, organizations, *Tolu Sahundulan*, which has been standardized dan organized for the goal of the construction of Simalungun self-identity related to their culture based on the ethnic.

Internalization, which is processed through objectivation, can show that the ethnic of Simalungun really has *ahap* Simalungun in the concept of cultural values and ideologies obtained from simultaneous processes among objectivation, externalization, and internalization.

Based on findings in fields, it can be analyzed that interpreting the process of Simalungun ethnic life reality in Simalungun Regency, especially in Pematang Raya, is still very relevant with Peter L. Berger theory related to life phenomenon of Simalungun ethnic. It is found in this research, that they have the effort to construct Simalungun ethnic identity with this theoretical approach. It means that Peter L. Berger's theory is still relevant to reveal the fact based on three simultaneous moments, namely how dynamics externalization processed through objectivation until becoming standardized form and self-outpouring of Simalungun ethnic identity as internalization.

Dynamics externalization, which is a stock of knowledge from Simalungun ethnic, is the experience that they ever have. According to Peter L. Berger, the experiences, which can be subjective or objective that still inherent in themselves, are knowledge for the ethnic and potential basic that can revive the circumstances of the reserved knowledge from Simalungun ethnic.

In dynamics externalization, after analyzing regional autonomy, the success of regional autonomy is an experience that can be used as starting point of progress and prosperity for the Simalungun ethnic (Saragih, 2014). It can be proved that there is quite rapid development that changes Simalungun Regency with its capital city, Pematang Raya, which emerges representatively.

In objectivation moment, there are some institutions which are a form of human activity through the family names, *Tolu Sahundulan*, interpreted symbols through the words such as *Habonaron Do Bona*, *Sapangambei Manoktok Hitei*, and *Palobei Idiliat Bibir Asei Marsahap* that can be a philosophy of life and social organization, which in fact can successfully revive Simalungun ethnic as an existed ethnic (Sumbayak, 2001)..

In the internalization process, there are some self-initiative of Simalungun ethnic in their life activity such as *Rondang Bintang*, dressing traditional clothes, dressing Simalungun batik clothes for students and employees, with cultural symbols and unique carvings, identical characteristics of Simalungun ethnic and have a specific meaning, which decorates almost all buildings, offices, and schools. Thus, the fact that *Rondang Bintang* was a ceremony, related to Simalungun ethnic life activity, is no longer a ceremony, but as a big event usually held in Simalungun Regency and now it is held in every sub-district in Simalungun Regency.

In the socialization process, the success of Simalungun ethnic society as agents of changes can be shown in externalization, objectivation, and internalization process, except tourism sector that still has to be the main focus so that the success for prosperity and welfare of Simalungun society with regard to access the road to tourism (Pitana, 2005).

Among the three moments in the dialectic process, in social fact, each of them corresponds to essential characteristics of the social world. Society is a human product, objective fact, and social product. The analysis is about the social world produce distortion, like the phenomenon of local election on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, which was being canceled, was a part of the moment that was not as it should be so it caused *disequilibrium*.

## Conclusion

Based on all analysis, there are some conclusions obtained in this research, namely:

i. Dynamics Externalization:

- Historical ethnic of Simalungun, at the time of the victorious kingdom, is reconstructed to become an education and a heritage for a young generation that aims to recognize their ancestors in maintaining ascendancy.
- When Netherland colonialism saw the potential of the Simalungun area, they tried to take control in various ways, such as *divide et impera* which was conducted by the authorities, even made a conflict between the ethnic of Simalungun by moving solidarity towards other ethnic and tried to eliminate and change the existing order as if the ethnic of Simalungun were non-indigenous.
- Early independence was a circumstance that is reviewed based on history, namely vacuum of power, defined as information of independence yet extends to remote areas, causing chaotic circumstances like a social revolution in 1946 which becomes historical evidence of a conference between capitalism and feudalism.
- The ethnic of Simalungun has no problem in social interaction with immigrants because they not only have good character and are friendly but also respect to the existence of other ethnicities. It can be interpreted from their mottos.
- Regional autonomy is a condition that is likely to develop and recognize the existence of Simalungun. It can also change the perspective of Simalungun ethnic to their nation (*Habonaron Do Bona* land), although there is contradictory issue that the ethnic of Simalungun does not support the government's policies in the regional development.
- The local election proves that the ethnic of Simalungun has actually realized the importance of participating in politics. It is shown in the democratic party of local election which is simultaneously held on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

- ii. Objectivation moment is something individually done as evidence to be continuously recognized as part of society until being a raw thing, well-organized, structured, active role, and legitimacy. It can be proved by several things, such as:

- Family names, which are still attached to the ethnicity of Simalungun, make them proud of it. However, some of them, who had been the ethnic of Melayu because they inhabited areas that used to be the rule of Deli Sultanate, did not use their family name anymore although they actually still know where they come from.
  - *Tolu Sahundulan* is an association, not an organization described on modern organizational form, who has a role and position in the ethnic of Simalungun that there in the certain time, place or room during a customs traditions.
  - The interpreted symbols, such as *Habonaron Do Bona*, *Sapangambei Manoktok Hitei*, though some of them are missing, it is still understood and implemented. It can be proved by the informant statement (Sumbayak, 2001).
  - Social organizations on behalf of the ethnic, such as PMS, GKPS, IKEIS, HIMAPSI, has shown that they successfully influence and make the ethnic of Simalungun still exist with their *ahap* Simalungun.
- iii. Dynamics internalization is things done by the ethnic of Simalungun, who has *ahap* Simalungun, in several ways, such as:
- *Rondang Bintang* is a ceremony surrounding the life of Simalungun ethnic since the time of the kingdom of Simalungun. Basically, it is held for direct meetings, such as among the kings and their people, or among men and women for finding their spouse. The ceremony is also held for doing rituals related to belief or Simalungun tradition and announcing policies for the ethnic of Simalungun. Thus, *Rondang Bintang* is opened to the public for the meeting among the kings and people both in the field of cultures and politics. The ceremony is currently not a big event in Simalungun Regency that is usually held in Prapat, Danau Toba, but held in every sub-district with the aim to be opened to the public.
  - The ethnic of Simalungun wears Simalungun traditional clothes at a government ceremony, such as the inauguration of councilors, wedding parties, and certain event-related to customs.
  - Clothes of batik Simalungun, are worn by employee and students and well reacted by the ethnic of Simalungun. It can be proved that informants answer with positive things when asked about this.
  - Symbols, pictures, or carvings in government offices and schools, which are identical characteristics of Simalungun ethnic and have a specific meaning, get a positive response from some informants.
- iv. The socialization process, according to Peter L. Berger, which is simultaneously based on three moments namely externalization, objectivation, and internalization, has an important role to face phenomena in real life of Simalungun ethnic, such as:
- Society, as an agent of change, means that the ethnic of Simalungun should accept the changes by sincerely taking roles like the ones who have *ahap* Simalungun for having a better life, and not deny that elite, who is also part

of the society, also takes a role in changes. Furthermore, women also have a role as part of the Simalungun ethnic.

- The educational institution has a good role in developing Simalungun cultures by socializing it with the next generations through the student's books.
- Tourism should be managed as the commodification of cultural preservation and implementation of local wisdom. One of the ways that the government of Simalungun can do is to pay more attention to the access to better roads which will be aligning to developing tourism.

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