

# Religion and identity polarisation: A slight note from the frontier region



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This article examined the recent emergence of the national and international issue of religious polarisation and identity, which affects some groups' populism and fanaticism. Regarding social phenomena, religion and identity are intertwined like the two sides of a coin. This discourse has an impact how to interpret diversity on religious issues that are caused by political influences. Given the polarisation of identity politics and religion, the national and state campaign slogan 'unity in diversity' is merely wishful thinking. The polarisation of identity and religion is heavily implicated in the Indonesia–Philippines border case; consequently, in some instances, the 'seeds' of these cases are discovered, eventually resulting in group fanaticism. This article employed the historical way of writing while also taking a social science angle that interacts with the research being done. For some communities, religion and identity may take on symbolic meaning, affecting how well they adapt and are accepted. However, the qualities of a community group or region are also shaped by historical events. According to the study's findings, religion and ethnic identity have played important roles in long-standing historical processes and impacted them. This study is anticipated to 'suppress' the problem of political division involving religion and identity because the identification of 'border' communities depends not only on entity and identity issues but also on the community's culture.

**Contribution:** The contribution in this study is that it has an impact on religious issues and cultural identity relations perspectives.

**Keywords:** religion; identity; polarisation; social phenomena; borders.

## Introduction

### Background

The experience of forming and building a country is not easy for a community group to do, even with individual identity. The state, in this case, is the result of consensus and agreement received based on shared awareness, not the wishes of certain parties. It revealed that every country would accept the changes that occur because of the emergence of chaos and friction in society and have major implications for communal evolution (Tlbi 2006). The issue of political views, economic improvement, and the upper class, is considered a driving factor in the friction and chaos even though it leads to change, progress or decline. The assumption is that change will identify and strengthen their position amid influential community groups; (Hall 2021). Thus, the issue of this change because of the similarity of objectives with the pretext of religion and communal identity that brought about the impact of the change (Hall & Reid 1994; Jha 2013; Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2010).

The justifications mentioned on the event of the gubernatorial election in DKI Jakarta is officially the Special Capital Region of Jakarta, the national capital of Indonesia. By the Indonesian administration, Jakarta is a province with special regional status. In the gubernatorial election in 2017, the part of the election, issues of religion and minority appeared, and the impact on religion, ethnicity, and combined political and identity-related issues into provocations. In particular instances, identity discourse and religious extremism merge in border regions. Conflicts in Ambon and Poso spread and formed an integral aspect of North Sulawesi's efforts to moderate religion, particularly in border regions (Alganih 2016:166–174; Tidore 2020; Widayat et al. 2021). The numerous studies about religious harmony, tolerance and moderation to promote global spiritual principles support the evidence. In the border area, North Sulawesi is one of the top five regions in the study of Indonesia's index of religious harmony.

The main reason for selecting this locus is because this area is located between two areas that are experiencing horizontal conflict which is motivated by religious, political and social interests.

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Furthermore, this area became a stopover area for victims or even perpetrators in the conflicts that occurred, especially in Maluku and Poso in the late nineties and early 2000s.

From the geopolitical perspective, border residents are often seen as residents of peripheral areas far from the centre of government. In a study of *Kawasan Perbatasan, Keterbatasan, dan Pembatasan* emphasised that the border area is the front porch of a nation-state but is being left behind in deliberately marginalised policy-making. On this side, people in the area are often denied access to available information. But on the other hand, the development of digital information usually hurts people who do not get the 'touch' from policymakers (Salindeho & Sambowadile 2007). This study and views on religious issues have also become a serious discourse for the Ministry of Religion in 2016 (Hasanah 2016).

Because of the polarisation of religion and identity, which leads to the rise of religious extremism, the author attempts to present the topic of religion and identity based on the brief information provided above. This article does not only discuss political issues, but also socio-religious issues where people who experience polarisation of religion and identity are able to reduce horizontal conflicts that occur in a pluralistic society. Some cases are tried to be offered in this study. This study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What is the people's attitude at the border regarding political conflicts involving religion and identity? (2) What is the role of religious leaders in reducing issues of religious polarisation and identity? The answers to these questions provide additional views for the community in dealing with issues of religious polarisation, group fanaticism and issues of racial and ethnic identity.

## Literature review

There is not much previous research on border regions, particularly the Philippines–Indonesia border. The research of Salindeho dan Sambowadile, Lopian (2004), Ulaen (2017), Pristiwanto (2017, 2019) can be utilised to pinpoint border locations spatially. On the other hand, the ideology case in border location was gained from documents of Vila (2003), Abuza (2005), and Azis (2020) and the last emergence of identity and community entities in the present (Basit 2017). The formation of these groups cannot be separated from the network and community relations and ideology that becomes a communal phenomena of relationships (Alves 2021), builds societal harmony and peaceful coexistence (Resane 2021) and the sensation of a clash of religion and identity with polarisation and partial fanaticism.

## Research method

This historical study aims to demonstrate how religion and identity are related to social issues prevalent in a society. The data in this article should be able to be described and analysed using historical methodologies (Kuntowijoyo 2013) and the social approach. Fanaticism as a mindset will lead to a conflict

apart from the phenomenon of religion and identity and the implications of polarisation, sectarianism and group fanaticism (Azra 2014). Ultimately, the clash only leads to a prolonged conflict between the pros and cons, with partial or even no understanding (Singer et al. 2019; Valdesolo & Graham 2016:25).

## Discussion

### Border area: Historiography, geography and ideology

Humans tend to be 'mobile', by moving to suitable areas considered capable of meeting their needs of life. The process of displacement forms a pattern of relations, networks and community culture today. Relationships and networks are activities that connect individuals or groups who are not only looking for a place to live but also to liven up their habits. This process has implications for opening new areas for certain communities to remain silent and fulfil their needs. This process then results in the growth of networks that connect individuals, groups, ethnicities and ideologies. They are united by various factors from economy to ideology (Hall 2019) and lead to the relation of a nation, ethnicity, religion and language in modern times. The impact of ideology in the modern era is showing how evidence of artifacts that become relics, act as the glue in the border area. Christianity, Islam and local religions result from encountering local rulers' commercial and political networks and implies communities were an open group by the revealed of spice route (Lopian 2018; Non 1993; Oliveros 2005; Powell & Saleeby 1979; San Juan 2006; Ulaen 2017).

In the past, Maluku spices were the main attraction for people to carry out migration activities, diaspora, or even moving places. The attractiveness of the spices of Maluku brought groups of spice seekers to the islands of the Sulawesi sea area. Lopian emphasised that the Maluku spices had implications for the community (Ulaen 2003) and the sea area is a link known as the concept of 'separate that unites' that are the connecting islands of the Philippines–Maluku as a natural bridge for shipping and commerce until the 20th century. Maritime traditions and culture that persist among border area communities emphasise the role and influence of several immigrant nations and ethnicities. The local stories had shown relation among *Mindanao people, pirates and the people who lived in Sangihe Island, Gumansalangi*. The story was showing relation of Datu from Mindanao and linked to the Sangihe Island. Therefore, oral tradition developed in the Sangihe–Southern Philippines society is connected and has become a historical legacy for developing people in two countries (Hayaze et al. 1999; Russell 2008:597–598). Migration has received diverse responses from the dominant powers in the political, social and religious spheres. Assimilation, domination and cohesion are some of the responses to the integration of people who cross regional and national borders and reside within their new locations for a considerable period of time (Klaasen 2021).

When forming a modern state, geographically Indonesia–Philippines, the *cross-border agreement* emphasised that the

historical process cannot separate from the two national identities. Uniquely, even though they are distinguished based on their citizenship status, these two ethnic groups consider themselves the same entity. The historical events mentions the impact of the trade network that were formed for the cultural conditions in the community (Niemeijer 2004, pp. 6–11).

Thus, three facets of the people’s struggle in border regions have been examined up until this point. Firstly, the two ethnic identities are hardly distinguishable because of the state of society, which has nearly identical historical roots. Secondly, the emergence of communal entities in border regions is influenced by ideological domination over the immigration of foreigners. The last is the geographic one, which creates networks and connections in the axis of socioeconomic activity in border settlements and serves as the binding agent for cultural and traditional exchanges between nations.

To complete the data analysis, this paper also uses informant data, which is shown in Table 1:

Table 1 shows the demographic features of the informants such as age and experience when dealing with conditions of religious and cultural polarisation.

### Religious relations and cultural identity

The issue of ideology in the border area implies harmonisation between religions. For society, religion is an individual identity. Based on history identity established from tradition and culture on the implementations of the cultural heritage (Ikenberry & Fukuyama 1999). Furthermore, the development of religion influenced the cultural relation, political-economic hegemony and the conflict of interest in the past events. Therefore, in

border area found a group of ‘sea people’ who played a role in spreading the community in the Sulawesi Sea. They practice of shipping and commerce in the Sulawesi Sea area that indicates by the skilled community group in marine activities (Cheong & Warren 1982). It then impacts the community’s thinking construct in building their traditions and daily life.

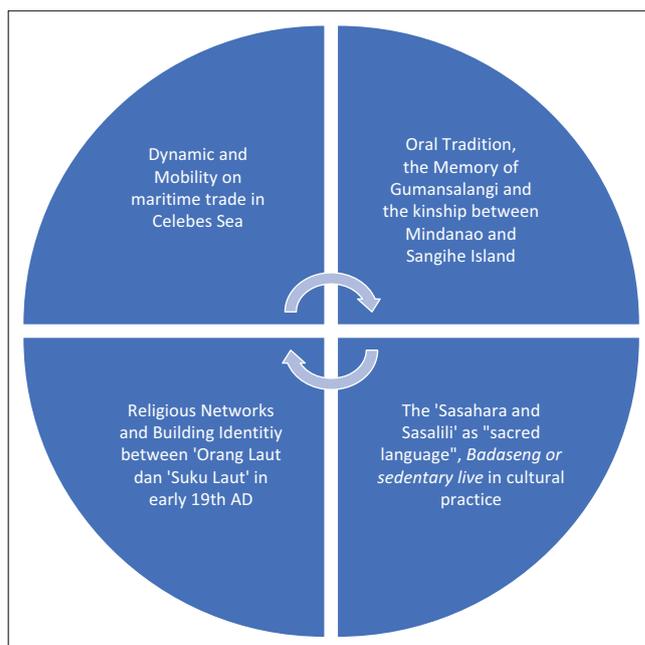
In border cases, cultural practices become a bridge for people’s religious thinking. Various kinds of religious practices intersect with the cultural processes of society, so that patterns of accommodation are found when religious and cultural practices take place. For example, the oral traditions of Sasahara and Sasali which are practised by the people of the Sangihe Island. This practice is considered a cultural form related to religion. Asking for safety while going to sea and catching fish is one of the objectives when Sasahara and Saslili are recited by the sailors. This accommodative process is not only practised by Christian communities, but some Muslims also practise the Sasahara and Saslili traditions when going to sea.

The Sulawesi Sea’s regulations impact the culture, traditions and technology that make up the community’s identity. The ‘secret’ languages are considered one of the products of the ongoing historical process. The interconnectedness of network spaces in border areas shows the role of ethnic groups such as the Sangihe, Moro, Sulu, Mindanao, and Bajau in border area. The technology and traditional equipment in boat building in border areas are considered a form of discovery of cultural practices and the culture of the supporting community. From this practice, the community also carries out social activities such as *badaseng* or temporary residence on the daily activities away from the main house. In the process, *badaseng* activities are carried out by

TABLE 1: The demongraphic features of informants.

No	Name	Age	Region	Information	Gender
1	Ridwan	32 years	Manado	Moved from Maluku to Manado because of the Ambon conflict	Male
2	Ruslan	38 years	Manado	Moved from Maluku to Manado because of the Ambon conflict	Male
3	Santo	42 years	Manado	Moved from Poso to Manado because of The Poso conflict	Male
4	Sandi	21 years	Manado	Following the Father, Santo, moved to Manado	Male
5	Opa Cilik (the late)	65 years	Tabukan, Sangihe Island	One of the cross-border actors carrying goods and passengers from Indonesia to the Philippines	Male
6	Pastor Wolf	45 years	Tabukan, Sangihe Island	One of the pastors who has congregations in Sangihe and the Philippines	Male
7	Enci marni	35 years	South Philippines	Fish collectors who carry out cross-border activities between Sangihe and the Southern Philippines and have family in Sangihe	Female
8	Opa Sabu	67 years	Marore Island, Indonesia	Has family in the Southern Philippines, and often does cross-border activities	Male
9	Oma Barahama	70 years	Marore Island, Indonesia	Has family in the Southern Philippines, and often does cross-border activities	Female

Source: Compiled by informants interviewed



Source: The process of relation on cultural and religion in the border area (Pristiwanto 2017, 2019; Ulaen 2017

FIGURE 1: The process of dynamic and relation of culture and religion on Berdersea area.

border communities as an environmental unit, *banua*, not as a 'foreign' place to be visited, see Figure 1 (Pristiwanto 2017, 2019; Ulaen 2017).

The above tradition is closely related to the activities of the people on the border who have livelihoods as sailors or fishers. They already have local wisdom long before the existence of Indonesia and the Philippines. In the past, networks and community dynamics helped shape community activities in border regions. The traditions of the people in the border areas can survive amid colonisation, and even the fishing activity shows the process of adapting habits and knowledge in the Sulawesi Sea area (Ward & Sopher 1966).

Communities in border regions use their traditional sailing skills, and occasionally some serve as guides and navigators in particular areas, particularly those near the Sulawesi Sea. The territorial restrictions, in their understanding, *de jure* and *de facto*, where territorial separation does not always follow the concept of modern national boundaries because of the similarities and unity of culture, tradition and unifying language. Their previous actions have had a good effect by forming a community that possesses the knowledge and traits of the 'sea people' because of creating identity in the border sea region (Lapian 2018).

### Religious polarisation: Responses and reflections from the periphery

The post-conflict events in Ambon and Poso, Manado are one of the destinations for people who do not want to be involved in the conflict. Conflicts motivated and considered because of the issue of 'religion' have a big impact on society and contemporary religious discourse (Mufid et al. 2023). Several solutions to the disputes were discovered as a consequence of field searches. The interview's findings provided the first reaction:

'... Since I was young, I have lived in Ambon selling clothes. I was in Ambon City during the riots, and the atmosphere was frightening. Imagine, almost every hour; someone dies because of riots. I'm looking for safety, rather than dying in Ambon, taking a ship from Ambon to Bitung, Manado ...' (Ridwan, 32 years old, Manado, July 2021)

Furthermore, the responses obtained from other interviews are as follows:

'... I am an Ambonese native living in the Vedas. When the riots occurred, I was already *nyong* (a teenager), and come to Manado because there was a riot and my uncle called me to Manado for school. When the riots, I saw people getting machetes and sticking sticks; there were also people carrying heads ...' (Ruslan, 38 years old, Manado, July 2021)

Other informants who were involved and direct witnesses in the Poso conflict also recounted:

'... I had just gotten married when the Poso riots broke out in the early 2000s. At that time, riots broke out; people said it was because of religion, not entirely because of faith, only because of the problem of young people being offended by each other. I also saw that many people sought refuge in mosques for fear of

being attacked. Until the conflict was over, I could only leave Poso and move to Manado once looking for work here ...' (Santo, 42 years old, Manado, July 2021)

The three search results above demonstrate that Manado is a secure location for them. Additionally, Manado is currently free of any horizontal religious problems, according to them, and there are not many open interreligious clashes there. Indirectly, some victims who felt the competition in the two areas tried to find other safe places, including the border area. Manado was known as a tolerant and moderate city until 2021. The younger generation's involvement as a 'shield' from religious polarisation has a positive impact. In border areas, the same is done by reviving and fostering a strong sense of religious tolerance and moderation among religious adherents. Religious barriers are visible when worship practices occur, but the obstacles to moderation and tolerance are visible when the ritual process of worship ends.

The reading above shows that society implies the existence of religious issues and discourses in response to developing problems. After Indonesia and the Philippines became modern, the country has considered preventive measures against geopolitical conflicts. There are three main points of cross-border activities in border communities, including family visits, worship and pleasures-sightseeing. These three points are full of socio-religious nuances that the community can carry within a specified period.

In general, people in border areas, especially on large islands, such as Sangihe, stated that the polarisation indirectly impacted the community. Such as interviews conducted on several people at random:

'... [O]ur understanding here is that religion is the right of each. There was a family member of another religion in the house. For instance, my sister and brother-in-law are Old Muslims, my parents and I are Protestants, and we all live side by side daily ...' ([*The late*] Opa Cilik, 65 years old, Tabukan, April 2017)

The interviews mentioned above show that it is unnecessary to talk about religion before political issues are tied into a religious conflict. The participants imply that individuals can appreciate and accept one another regardless of their religious affiliation.

Religious polarisation is a foreign thing to hear for people crossing the border. They are more active in meeting economic needs than focusing on political-religious issues.

Explicitly, religious understanding contaminated with politics is not a big concern for people at the border. They are often not affected by the confusing information, so their activities are focused on crossing and meeting economic needs. The main emphasis here is that people in border areas openly accept individuals and community groups regardless of religious background. On the other hand, the impact of religious polarisation will not last long in border areas, because of a sense of solidarity and maintaining a harmonious

life between communities. One of the strong ties to the values of harmony is cultural practices such as *mapalus* or helping one another.

Thus, if we interpret the circumstances described above, the border community's reaction to the dispute is favourable. They did not immediately justify the incident. On the other hand, they also worked to uphold religious peace and moderation so that a conflict of the same nature does not arise in the future.

### The role of religious leaders: Reducing conflict, enlivening religious moderation

The roots of religious identity in border regions appear open to interpretation and application in everyday spiritual life. Religious leaders have a significant impact on minimising conflict and religious polarisation in border regions. Religious issues will be able to connect and strengthen kinship relations that have existed between communities in border areas. With these three rules, people in border areas will not forget their place of origin always to visit. In border area the practice of religion could today provide meaningful moral guidance in solving global problems (De Villiers 2020).

When the problem of transnational *crime* emerged after the Bali Bombings I and II, religious situations in the border regions had witnessed considerable instability. Interestingly, the border guard on duty at the time was the target. Religion's top authorities successfully quelled this practice by mediating conflicts that might arise. They support entities and identities as the foundation of family and societal relationship. According to this point of view, it is possible to say that the border region residents have comparable entities but distinct entities, particularly in light of the historical narratives or events that have shaped the relationships between the two border region communities. The region in the *Banua* concept has also evolved into an indispensable component over time.

Cross-border activities also influence the dynamics of border communities. Velasco ('Navigating the Indonesian-Philippine Border: The Challenges of Life in the Borderzone' 2010) indicated that cross-border activities affect the stability of communities in border areas. The border position, a 'free' place, is considered the mainland for the people at the border. Another study stated that border areas have implications for the emergence of 'illegal' communities. Here, the term illegal communities is used to denote those people who do not have clarity of citizenship and residence that have settled after independence (Pristiwanto 2017). From these conditions, economic activity affects religious developments in the border area, including when celebration of holidays takes place. The impact is to allow for new processes of attributing meaning, changing values, and motivating people, forming new identities and thus could lead to changed communities (Kloppers 2020; Lawrie 2021).

Major religious holidays are observed differently in the two regions regarding cross-border activities. The Sangihe Islanders believe that crossing international borders is best done during religious holidays. Muslim and Christian religious celebrations will have a favourable effect on kinship ties in the neighborhood. Most people use religious holidays to deepen their bonds of kinship and friendship. The following is an example based on the findings of an interview with a pastor in the North Tabukan Sub-district:

'... I have two congregations, they are here, the Sangihe Islands are also in the Southern Philippines, Balut, Sarangani, and General Santos. Most of them are crossbreeds from Sangihe and the Philippines. In a month I usually visit once or twice as congregations across the island ...' If it's a big day, Christmas, for example, I usually stay a few days on the other side of the island for pre-Christmas worship ...' (Pastor Wolf, 45 years old, 2017)

The quote above shows that religious worship also has implications for kinship in the religious sphere. In addition to Christmas, Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr are some occasions for kinship in the two regions. Visiting family graves during Eid al-Fitr or Ramadan is common for people in border areas. These occasions help them to strengthen their relationship and kinship in the society.

As revealed by the week regarding textual and situational identities, if you look at community activities in border areas, these have a strong correlation. In the end the bargaining of discourses on identity with challenges regarding the ubiquity of power struggles, the role of resentment, the possibility of communication across boundaries, the importance of the individual and the problem of affirmation (Lawrie 2021). In the Indonesia-Philippines border area, this can be seen when the community is directly involved in cross-border trade. For them, their kinship will have an effect when carrying out cross-border activities. Some married and later became a couple from two countries with one tradition. Another interesting thing is the identity issue surrounding the people in the border area. The issue of identity has been discussed in various studies, but those studies often refer to government policies regarding 'legal' or 'illegal' communities or undocumented citizens.

## Conclusion

The history process on maritime networks was developing the community in the border region. Communities in border areas are often referred to as border sea residents. In the political issues and discourses, the response to ongoing religious polarisation only takes preventive action by reviving and practising a moderate and harmonious spiritual life. On the other hand, they are more actively involved in building networks of international entities.

The importance of religious leaders who effectively promote religious moderation cannot be divorced from efforts to strengthen religion and diversity. This behaviour extends

beyond the pulpit and affects all social strata. They actively participate in community activities where they serve as peacemakers.

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## Authors' contributions

M.N.I.A., M.A., M.S., S.S., A.A. and M.I.S. contributed to collection of data, data documenting and analysis and manuscript preparation. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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