

Research Proposal by Mahardhika Sjamsoeod Sadjad

Narratives of Solidarity Among and Between Different Muslim Identities: The Case of Acehese Communities and Rohingya Refugees

Proposal Summary

This research centres on the issue of transnational migration within the Southeast Asian region, particularly through the perspectives of Acehese fishermen communities that rescued and shared space with the Rohingya refugees stranded on Indonesian waters. By rescuing the Rohingya refugees, the fishermen went against government orders. These acts of disobedience, described by the media as acts of solidarity, led to a shift in the Indonesian government's stance for the repatriation and resettlement of these refugees.

Through a multi-sited ethnography, I will explore narratives of solidarity among and between different Muslim identities, particularly between members of Acehese fishermen communities and Rohingya refugees. I hope to understand how these narratives travel and are constructed and relationally constituted within their particular geographies. By taking on the subject of transnational migration and religious identities through a human geography lens, I believe my research can contribute to knowledge production on people, place, and community – all of which are at the heart of development studies. I am confident that my research will produce reflections regarding different issues that are central to our generation: the nation-state and transnational migration, social exclusion and inequalities, Islam and Muslim identities, human rights and solidarity towards refugees.

Introduction: Rohingya Refugees in Aceh, Indonesia

The presence of refugees in Indonesia is commonly not an issue that receives much media attention. Indonesia mainly sees itself as a transit country for refugees aiming for Australia and Malaysia, rather than a final destination. As Taylor and Raffert-Brown (2010, 144-145) have noted, the government of Indonesia does not have any legal or administrative procedures to identify refugees and mainly depends on the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to conduct refugee status determinations within its territory. Therefore, when 469 Rohingya refugees were found stranded in the waters of North Aceh on 10 May 2015 (Galih. 05/10/2015), they immediately became the centre of media attention and political debates.

As the number of refugees stranded on the shores grew, the Indonesian government refused to provide refuge and forbade Acehese fishermen from rescuing and bringing the refugees into Indonesian territory, unless their boats were sinking (Permana. 05/19/2015). However, this order was not heeded. Within a week, the UNHCR reported that Indonesian fishermen have rescued more than 1,300 Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees that have drifted onto the shores of Aceh in North Sumatera (Suryono. 05/08/2015). The fishermen invited the refugees to take refuge in their homes and inside their local mosques.

During this period, national and international media constructed narratives of fishermen communities offering help to the Rohingya refugees during a time when the Indonesian government refused to take part in the refugee crisis. These narratives were interwoven with notions of solidarity for fellow Muslims who were being prosecuted abroad by Burmese Buddhist

Monks. Fahri Idris, the Deputy Leader of the House of Representatives was quoted to say, ‘If a Muslim is a perpetrator there will be public uproar, but when Muslims are the victims everyone is silent’ (Ali. 05/22/2015). These narratives set the tone for debates surrounding the presence of Rohingya refugees in Indonesia.

Relationships between Rohingya refugees and the communities where they find refuge are often given meaning through an identified common Muslim identity. One fisherman, Suryadi, who used his boat to help Rohingya refugees get to land, spoke about his motives, ‘We helped out of solidarity. If we find someone in the ocean we have to help them no matter who they are. The police did not like us helping but we could not avoid it. Our sense of humanity was higher. So we just helped with the limited resources that we had at the time’ (Lamb. 05/18/2015).

A local Acehnese woman, Rasmawati, that had invited Fatimah, a Rohingya refugee, and her daughter to clean up at her house was quoted to say, ‘We speak a different language, it’s very difficult to understand what they are saying, but I know that we have the same religion and we feel that they need to be helped’.

In response, Fatimah said, ‘The fishermen and the local people are extremely helpful and kind to us. They took us to the closest mosque and allowed us to rest while providing us with food, water and snacks... Only Allah can return their kindness to us’ (Suryono. 05/08/2015).

On 20 May 2015, after facing domestic and international pressure to help Rohingya refugees, the Indonesian government, together with the Malaysian government, shifted their original stance and declared that they will provide temporary shelter to up to 7,000 Rohingya refugees, with one year to process repatriation and resettlement (The Guardian. 05/20/2015). However, the government made it clear that the assistance was temporary, would not exceed the 7000-refugees limit, and was dependent on support from the international community. On June 2015, Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that approximately 964 Rohingya refugees would be given temporary shelters in Lhokseumawe, East Aceh, and North Aceh for the following year (BBC Indonesia. 06/04/2015).

Research Objectives and Methodology

Through my research I aim to understand narratives of solidarity between different Muslim identities in the case of the Rohingya refugees in Indonesia. This aim differs from most studies on the topic that predominantly focus on Rohingya Muslim identities *vis-à-vis* the Burmese Buddhist identities (Brooten L. et al. 2015, Farzana 2015, Kipgen 2014, Regan 2015). These studies emphasise the experiences of the Rohingya people, both those that live in the Rakhine state and in exile around the South-East Asian region. Little attention has been given to unpack the Muslim identities often association with the Rohingya particularly from the perspectives of countries and communities where they have found or seek to find refuge.

My research would like to address the question:

How are narratives of solidarity among and between different Muslim identities constructed and relationally constituted within particular geographies and between different nationalities?

To address this question, I would like to conduct an ethnography in Aceh, Indonesia, where several Rohingya refugee camps have been set up. In conducting my ethnographic study I would pose the following sub-questions:

1. How do Acehnese fishermen and Rohingya refugees give meaning to their own and each other's Muslim identities?
2. How are these Muslim identities situated within the South-East Asian region and how do they intersect with ethnic, national, gender, and refugee status identities?
3. How do narratives of solidarity between different Muslim identities travel and are used by different political and social institutions to suit/ fulfil different interests?

In order to understand how narratives of solidarity are constructed, travel, and then reconstructed, I will use a multi-site approach by doing ethnographies in other relevant sites. These sites include the fishermen communities whose members hosted and rescued the Rohingya refugees, the headquarters of UNHCR and International Organisation for Migration, two leading organisations involved in the settlement of Rohingya refugees in Aceh, and the Republic of Indonesia's migration offices in Aceh. By doing a multi-sited ethnography one can investigate how ideas and identities travel through different sites that are connected, rather than isolated, with one another, therefore situating the study as part of larger world systems (Marcus 1995, 97). By doing ethnographic research in these sites on top of the villages where camps were set up, I could compare different narratives of solidarity and aid and how these narratives influence policies related to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Indonesia.

Since this study will likely be conducted after the one-year repatriation and resettlement process by the Indonesian government, several aspects of this study needs to be clarified through initial field work. The government of Indonesia has yet announced an established long term plan on what will happen to the Rohingya refugees after one year, it is uncertain whether the refugee camps will still exist in Aceh after June 2016. This may mean that the main participants of this study will be the Acehnese community members, focusing mainly on their own subjectivities and narratives regarding their motivations and experiences in helping the Rohingya refugee 'other'.

Time will also be an important aspect in this study. I am interested in comparing research participants' testimony on relationships with the Rohingya refugee during the one year of their interactions, asking participants to identify possible changes of attitudes and relationships when the refugees first arrived, set up camps, lived, and possibly left.

Migration, Solidarity, and Muslim Identities

Often referred to as the 'most prosecuted people on earth' or the 'boat people', the Rohingya people of Myanmar have been at the centre of numerous studies covering a wide range of issues such as human rights, conflict and violence, identities, transnational movements, and national borders. Their stateless status makes them a challenge to internationalist studies that tend to draw imagined lines between nation-states. By trying to understand expressions of solidarity between different Muslim identities, I am resisting internationalist politics that often situate internationalism as separate from the experiences of the everyday, removed from particular contexts in which interactions are situated (Featherstone 2012, 46). Through participants' narratives, collective identities are constructed beyond the limits of national borders.

The ever increasing movement of people across state borders have raised more nuanced discussions about citizenship and nationhood, some arguing that migration has led to the formation of emerging global citizenship (Ferreira and Ferreira-Snyman 2012, 133). The idea of a global citizenship requires us to rethink the connection between nationality and citizenship, allowing for new perspectives to citizens' protection and participation in governance. Shared values, identities, and sense of belonging need to be given more space in these discussions.

The idea of a global village, coloured by norms of solidarity, egalitarianism, and social justice, is commonly depicted in the normatively infused internationalist foreign policies coming from most Western countries after the Cold War particularly, USA and the United Kingdom (Lawler 2007, 102). Such normative internationalism is often accompanied by protectionist policies that intend to strengthen national borders as a way to deal with and limit migration of people, therefore rendering the idea of global citizenship as a privilege allowed only to the small few whose nationalities grant them access. This inconsistency between normative internationalism and protectionist national policies was particularly apparent when dealing with the recent unprecedented increase of Syrian refugees entering Europe. This has led to debates that contrast concerns over national security with solidarity based on universal human rights.

The debate regarding Rohingya refugees in Indonesia has been slightly different. Proponents to helping the refugees also based their arguments on narratives of solidarity, but they are coloured by an emphasis on shared Muslim identities. Religious elements were emphasised in news covering the oppression that Rohingya people faced in their homelands and the rescue and help the refugees received in Aceh, Indonesia.

While the commonality of a Muslim identity seems to play a strong part in dominant narratives of solidarity, it would be flawed to assume that this identity is monolithic. As McGinty (2015, 1188) has pointed out through her work on Palestinian, Arab, American, and Muslim categories and meanings, individual agency and subjectivities are paramount in understanding one's interpretation and manoeuvring of self within and between different categories. Muslim identities intersect with national, ethnic, gender, political, and geographic identities.

Moreover, this perception of self is often negotiated in contrast and in conjunction to ideas of the other. Lucking (2014, 131) showed how Indonesian, and in particular Javanese, Muslim identities were influenced by experiences of travelling and meeting Arab Muslims, Southeast Asian Muslims, and other Indonesian Muslims during pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia. These Muslim identities were co-constituted by identified similarities and differences between the self and the other, legitimized by experiences of travelling and encountering the other directly.

Lucking (*Ibid.*, 148-149) also points out that '... the sense of unity, equality and globality, is limited to the period of the ritual and that differences are reasserted – even more strongly and more specifically – once the ritual has ended'. Therefore, the narrative of a shared Muslim identity is also subject to time and the existence of a common goal. My research aims to explore how these identities play out within narratives of solidarity, in the case of the Rohingya refugees in Aceh.

Positioning My Research and Myself

Development studies often focuses on the state as the main actor that drives development strategies within its territory. However, this approach often leads to the exclusion of migrants and refugees whose statuses do not fall neatly within state systems. My research takes a post-development

perspective, positioning my research participants as centres and agents of knowledge production (Escobar 2007, 21). The narratives of solidarity that mobilised Acehese fishermen communities to rescue the Rohingya refugees offer insight into their individual and collective agency within the limits of national and international structures.

In writing this research proposal, I have been mostly interested in the relationships between people and the spaces in which they are situated. My study also speaks to the challenges of human geography of religion, to see how ‘... different groups of men and women with different markers of social difference – race, class, age, disability, sexuality, locality – experience their religion and their use of religious space and how do these people respond to other groups of men and women’ (Hopkins 2009, 12). What makes such a study more interesting to me is that these experiences are situated within the context of larger world systems.

My study will mostly be situated in Nangroe Aceh Darussalam (referred in short above as Aceh), the only province in Indonesia that has been given full autonomy in implementing Islamic law (Siregar 2009, 144). Historically and culturally, Aceh has had a special relationship with Islam being the entry point for Islam into Indonesia and was united through the formation of the Aceh sultanate during the seventeenth century (Ibid., 147-148). Often called *Serambi Mekkah* (the foyer of Mekkah), Acehese Muslim identity is arguably distinct from Muslim identities in other parts of Indonesia.

While Aceh offers unique insights into Muslim identities, it is still part of Indonesia, which in turn is an active member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) socio-cultural, economic, and political security communities. These overlapping world systems are important contexts to the grass-root relationships established between the Acehese community and the Rohingya refugees who they assisted. These world systems will be important to analyse scale and the relationship between the local, the regional, and the global. Rather than perceiving these as hierarchical political and social scales, I understand them as interrelational. As Mamadouh et.al (2004, 457) write: ‘If scale is a matter of *relation*, the accent lies on the mutually constitutive character of scales. No scale exists without the others. No analysis can be limited to one scale: scales are constructed in relation to each other.’ Through narratives of solidarity that start at local levels, I hope to understand how these narratives travel and are constructed and relationally constituted within their particular geographies.

Finally, it is also necessary to position myself as I plan my research on this topic. As a female, educated, middle-class, Javanese-Indonesian, Muslim, I have both several similarities and differences with my potential participants, designating me to the position of betweenness (Hopkins 2009, 6). It is important to me that my research works with, rather than writes about or speaks for, my participants. As of this moment, I would position myself as someone who is critical of Sharia law, with academic and political views influenced by feminist epistemologies, but still identifies deeply with my own roots in Muslim communities. As an academic-activist, I also deeply empathise with the struggles that the Rohingya refugees face but do not pretend that I can fully understand their experiences and represent their voices.

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