

Indigenous Religious Believers' Experience to Manage Stigma in Indonesia

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Abstract

The state acknowledges the existence of indigenous religious believers, yet given the social stigma since considered primitive, heresy, and even atheist. The stigma given to the indigenous religious believers negatively results in personal and social relationships eventually influencing the believers' life aspects. Thus, the stigma management communication strategies of the believers are essential when interacting with other people in their environments. This research depicts how indigenous religious believers manage the stigma of living in society. It was conducted in Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia. The 28 groups of believers were listed on Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan YME (MLKI) of Banyumas. The study used a phenomenological approach. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 participants from some communities of believers. Seventeen years participants were selected using a snowball sampling technique. The researchers then classified them into some categories based on the predetermined themes. The research finding showed that stigma limited the believers' interactions with non-believers. In responding to these stigmas, the believers developed different management communication strategies: accepting, denying by providing information, denying by discrediting the discreditor, avoiding, reducing offensiveness, and ignoring.

Keywords: Management communication; Stigma; Indigenous religion; Believer; Identity

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Pengalaman Penghayat dalam Mengelola Stigma di Indonesia

Abstrak

Penghayat kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa meskipun keberadaannya diakui oleh negara namun seringkali menjadi kelompok yang mendapat stigma sosial karena dianggap primitif, sesat bahkan ateis. Stigma yang disematkan pada penghayat kepercayaan berdampak negatif pada hubungan personal dan sosial serta mempengaruhi semua aspek kehidupan penghayat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui strategi manajemen komunikasi stigma penghayat saat berinteraksi dengan masyarakat di lingkungannya. Penelitian ini dilakukan di Banyumas, kabupaten yang terletak di Jawa Tengah. Jumlah kelompok penghayat yang terdaftar pada Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan YME (MLKI) Kabupaten Banyumas sebanyak 28 paguyuban. Hal

tersebut menandakan bahwa Kabupaten Banyumas merupakan wilayah yang multikultur sehingga upaya untuk membangun masyarakat inklusif merupakan tanggung jawab semua pihak. Oleh karena itu peneliti melakukan riset untuk mendapatkan gambaran bagaimana penghayat kepercayaan mengelola stigma dalam kehidupan bermasyarakat. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif menggunakan metode fenomenologi. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap 10 partisipan penelitian yang berasal dari beberapa komunitas penghayat. Partisipan berusia 17 tahun ke atas dan diperoleh dengan metode snowball sampling. Dari data yang terkumpul, peneliti bagi menjadi beberapa kategori berdasarkan tema-tema yang telah disusun. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa stigma membatasi interaksi penghayat dengan orang yang bukan penghayat. Dalam menghadapi stigma, penghayat mengembangkan strategi komunikasi yang berbeda antara satu dengan yang lain yaitu dengan cara menerima, menyangkal dengan memberikan informasi, menyangkal dengan mendiskreditkan orang yang memberi stigma, menghindari, mengurangi tekanan dan mengabaikan stigma yang ditujukan kepadanya.

Kata kunci: *Manajemen komunikasi; Stigma; penghayat; Penganut kepercayaan; Identitas*

INTRODUCTION

Based on data from the Directorate General of Population and Civil Registration (Dukcapil), Ministry of Home Affairs (Kemendagri), 102,508 people in Indonesia acknowledged themselves as indigenous religious believers in June 2020. It equals to 0.04% of the Indonesian population, recently reaching 272.23 million people (Kusnandar, 2021).

Indigenous religious believers have been living throughout Indonesia for decades. Ministry of Education and Culture, through the Directorate of Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Traditions recorded 187 indigenous religious believers in 13 Provinces, of which 53 groups are in Central Java (Putra, 2017).

Although the believers have already been able to mention their belief in their Indonesian Identity Card since 2017, many still need to change their previous religion mentioned in the column for religion in their Indonesian Identity Card. They still worried of being discriminated against by others, knowing their belief through their Indonesian Identity Card.

The main threat to minority religious groups is being subjected to bias (Pasek & Cook, 2019). The indigenous religious believers in Indonesia feel that their identity inhibits their moves and activities. The social stigma adhered to by these groups makes them inhibited when making the personal and social relationships with the other people living in their environments. Psychologically, the believers need more confident with their Indonesian Identity Cards. Thus, it can be threaten the next generations of indigenous religious believers.

In Banyumas Regency, 28 groups of indigenous religious believers listed in 2017 (Findi, 2017). Those groups were facilitated by Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa Indonesia (MLKI) of Banyumas Regency. MLKI is the only national institution enabling Indonesia's indigenous religious belief organizations. Although the number of groups is considered many, their existence in Banyumas Regency is still unseen due to the tendency to hide their identity resulting from the stigma in their environments. Stigma shows people's discredited identity

or questioned moral status (Goffman, 1963). At least there are three stigma types: physical, social, and ethical (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Who and what to become the stigma vary depending on time, place, and group. Humans will always face the stigma since stigma builds group solidarity differentiating insiders and outsiders.

The need to manage someone's stigma has resulted from the relationship between stigma and adverse outcomes, such as deficient social identity, stereotypes, discrimination, and refusal. The other negative impacts of stigma include low confidence, decreased health, and increased anxiety (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Therefore, this research aims to depict how indigenous religious believers manage the stigma of living in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on indigenous religious believers from the perspective of communication sciences still need to be conducted. The previously worked research has just observed the indigenous religious believers from the spiritual and religious views, legal aspects of fulfilling believers' rights (Rohmawati, 2020) and symbols when making rituals or prayers based on their beliefs (Khoirnafiya, 2020). The observed stigma is mostly from occupations, physical conditions, or health instead of that sourced from the following thoughts. This article will qualitatively discuss the stigma attached to the indigenous religious believers in Banyumas.

From the communication perspective, someone's vulnerability or resiliency to stigma focuses on how someone fights

and reacts against stigma. A stigma is social construct based on an individual's stigmatized or non-stigmatized good perception. Since considered a social construct, stigma is not something permanent, yet it possibly changes following the discourse and material conditions making someone stigmatized (Meisenbach, 2010).

Rebecca J. Meisenbach developed the typology of stigma management communication strategies when someone was stigmatized. According to Meisenbach, individuals will choose the Stigma Management Communication strategies based on their attitudes toward implementing public stigma addressed to them and those to fight against or defend other people's perception of stigma.

The social stigma attached to the indigenous religious believers limited their moves and expressions. As a minority group, indigenous religious believers should create robust discourse and identity to grow their confidence. Confidence and pride in their group can be energy to express their existence in society and mutually realize inclusive communities.

METHODS

This study used qualitative research methods. Qualitative research explores and understands the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The research data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach to explore participants' experiences facing stigma. A phenomenological study describes the ordinary meaning for several individuals

of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell John W. & Poth Cheryl N., 2018).

To obtain in-depth data, the researchers selected the key informants using a purposive sampling technique and the following informants using a snowball sampling technique. Using those techniques, the researchers obtained 10 informants per the predetermined criteria, such as the believers joined in groups of believers listed in MLKI, aged varying from 20 to 60 years old, as well as various genders, marital status, and family backgrounds. The data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The obtained data were then descriptively analyzed using manual data analysis procedures, starting by making interview transcripts and field notes, and then coded by identifying some keywords and phrases categorized to

build certain themed groups (Setiansah, Novianti, Rahmawati, & Agustina, 2021).

The researchers used source- and method-based on triangulation techniques to improve the data validity. The source-based triangulation was conducted by comparing the data obtained from different sources, such as other informants. Meanwhile, method-based triangulation was conducted by comparing the data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation. Triangulation is undertaken to bring truth and understand and interpret the data (Sugiyono, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research involved ten participants obtained using a snowball sampling technique. The participants were from four groups of believers in Banyumas: Kerohanian Sapta Darma, Kapribaden, Rukun Warga, and Pengudian Tri Tunggal Bayu.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Name (Initial)	Age	Gender	Occupation	Group Name
Ang	35	F	Social Worker	Kerohanian Sapta Darma
Aj	33	M	Private Employee	Kapribaden
Si	30	M	Belief Extension Worker, still studying belief education believer	Kapribaden
Am	30	M	entrepreneur	Kapribaden
Ty	32	F	Librarianship Student	Rukun warga
Fe	40	F	Librarian	Rukun warga
Agr	22	M	Student	Pengudian Tri Tunggal Bayu
Wa	22	F	Student	Kerohanian Sapta Darma
Spr	64	M	retired Civil Servant	Rukun warga
Ad	44	F	Student	Kerohanian Sapta Darma

Source: processed by the researchers

The paths becoming indigenous religious believers vary among the participants. Some participants were born and raised in the believers' families; others were from families with one of the majority religions in Indonesia.

The identity as a new believer can be included in his Indonesian Identity Card since 2018 following the Constitutional Court Verdict No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016 officially applied by the government. Before the verdict was issued, the column for religion in the Indonesian Identity Card was left empty. Then it triggered the occurrence of stigma and discrimination against indigenous religious believers. Many believers were forced to follow a religion acknowledged by the government to meet the administrative requirements.

Ang, Ty, Fe, Agr, Wa, and Ad were born to the indigenous religiously believing

parents. However, since attending their elementary schools, their written religion was "Islam" to ease their school administration. They had to receive Islamic religious teaching materials, yet they did their prayers at home based on their indigenous religious beliefs.

Ang said that since childhood, she was taught by her mother Sapta Darma prayers, but she became an indigenous religious believer after graduating from Senior High School.

"Since childhood, my mother introduced and taught me: Sapta Darma starting from its religious teachings and prayers, yet when attending the educational institutions, I did *sholat* (obligatory Islamic prayers) since there were only 5 acknowledged religions at school. I became an indigenous religious believer after graduating from Senior High School" (Ang).

Table 2. Paths to become an indigenous religious believer

Name	When starting to become a believer
Ang	Since childhood, when Sapta Darma was first introduced and taught by her mother and then she decided to ultimately become a believer after graduating from Senior High School.
Aj	From a Moslem family. After going to college, he decided to become an indigenous religious believer.
Si	From a Moslem family and becoming an indigenous religious believer since at Senior High School
Am	From a Moslem Family, becoming an indigenous religious believer in college
Ty	From a family of indigenous religious believers, written with the religion of Islam from Elementary School to College, married in Islam, after 2018 changing the religion column in her Indonesian Identity Card into an indigenous religious believer.
Fe	From a family of indigenous religious believers, written with the religion of Islam from Elementary School to College, married as an indigenous religious believer,
Agr	From a family of indigenous religious believers born as indigenous religious believers, yet written with the religion of Islam from Elementary School to Junior High School. Attending Senior High School as an indigenous religious believer
Wa	From a family of indigenous religious believers, yet written with the religion of Islam from Elementary School to Senior High School. When reaching the age of 17 years old, she was confident to write in the religion column of her Indonesian Identity Card as an indigenous religious believer
Spr	Since 1985, we have become indigenous religious believers, so, the religion column was left empty on his Indonesian Identity Card. In 1985, he was considered an atheist since he thought having no religion.

Ad From a family of indigenous religious believers, yet she was written with the religion of Islam from Elementary School to Junior High School. Attending Senior High School, she dared to show her identity as an indigenous religious believer.

Source: processed by the researchers

Wa and Ad at the age of 17 years old, in which Indonesian citizens were obliged to have the Indonesian Identity Card and decided to follow their parents' beliefs. Initially, their parents disagreed because they worried about their children's future. However, Wa and Ad could assure their parents that they were able and strong enough to face the risks as indigenous religious believers.

Figure 1. Indonesian Identity Cards of Indigenous religious believers in Indonesia



Source: Document by the researchers

Stigma Addressed to the Believers

The believers' life is inseparable from stigma. The research participants also confessed that the stigma has contributed to how they behave in their social life. The stigmas attached to the believers were as follows:

Heresy

Indigenous religious believers were frequently stigmatized as followers of heresy. All they did had the meanings believed by the adherents as explained by Fe as follows:

“The stigma given by the society had been attached to the indigenous religious believers that they were considered heresy, because some religions thought that what they believed was heresy: had no God, different worshipping ways, and different holy-book-like. It was a classical belief, but people sometimes said that the believers worshiped the trees. When we made offerings, those were considered that we were feeding demons and considered mystical, yet actually not as they thought since everything has purposes.”

Shaman

The believers were also stigmatized by society as shamans, as explained by Aj as follows:

“Since meeting for the first time, many friends have laughed at me. My office colleagues and village friends also said that I was considered a shaman.”

Worshiping Demons

Stigma as demon worshipers is also given to the indigenous religious believers, as explained by Si:

"People commonly viewed that the believers were in a relationship with supernatural things, such as by burning benzoin, considering that the believers were having communications with supernatural creatures, yet it was only a media for meditation; offerings were also presumably presented for supernatural creatures, yet in facts, they were just offerings known as 'sejati rasa siji' representing hopes which cannot be conveyed verbally but in the forms of feelings depicted not for humans but the whole universe as the realization of feelings manifested in the forms of offerings. In ancient times, the offerings were in the form of flowers in seven colors, yet recently only a glass of plain water, plain tea/coffee, and yellow water. With a glass of plain water, we realized that we were from the holy water (sperm) of our parents to develop better generations, a glass of plain tea or coffee as a form of bitter life challenges and yellow rice as the manifestation of prosperity."

Members of the Communist Party banned in Indonesia

The indigenous religious believers did not follow the religions acknowledged by the Indonesian government, so they were considered as a part of the forbidden organization in Indonesia. Am explained it to the researchers:

"People who did not follow one of the acknowledged religions in Indonesia were considered a part of the forbidden

organization, heresy, and others, thus, having significant impacts."

The other participant, Ty also explained that her father was a believer who was once humiliated by his mother-in-law by saying that her father was a member of the communist party. Ty was distraught. Moreover, she also told that to her child.

"My child once said to me that the grandfather was a member of the communist party because he did not sholat, had no religion. In fact, my child was still in Grade II of Elementary School."

Atheist

The believers were also stigmatized as atheists. Wa mentioned her experience that her friends considered her an atheist.

"My friend considered me as a fanatic and atheist person, yet I then explained that based on the Verdict issued by the Constitutional Law, the indigenous religious believers have been legally acknowledged so that my friend started excepting my explanations."

Bullying Experienced by the Believers

Becoming a minority with various stigmas attached to the believers made participants susceptible to being bullied by families, friends, teachers, working partners, or the surrounding communities. One of the participants, Wa explained that when worshiping, he was considered weird by the people.

"When we were worshiping, many people cynically noticed and even a child once threw something to our worshiping place." (Wa).

The other participant, Fe mentioned that finding a school for her daughter took work. Some schools frequently refused her daughter since there was no education for the indigenous religious believers in the related schools. Fe's daughter has been bullied by her peers. Fe moved her daughter to a school concerned with pluralism value, so the student could play and study without fear of being seen as a minority group. Within the school environment, students from minority groups will join groups to face discrimination and prejudice from the larger community. Even some students will assert their religious identity when faced with adversity (Boucher & Kucinskas, 2016).

Another participant, Ad revealed that she was once humiliated in front of the class because the teacher asked her about religion, as she told the researcher during the interview:

Ad : I was ashamed in grade 10 of a Senior High School. My teacher asked me to come to the front of the class and discuss my religion.

Researcher : What teacher was he/she?

Ad : Physics. There was no relationship with physics. I said that I was an indigenous religious believer. What kind of religion was that? I answered, 'Maybe you do not know, sir. However, you can Google and figure it out by surfing through the internet.' I was ashamed because the teacher asked me.

Although it happened long ago, Ad considered it an unforgettable experience and has not forgotten it since being humiliated in front of her friends. Spr, a senior believer who was also a presidium at MLKI Banyumas, also explained:

"Becoming a believer is not easy, requiring a huge effort to deal with society. About bullying, society extraordinarily connoted the believers as shamans and demon friends... I was one of ten siblings and considered an enemy because I was different from the others. All my brothers and sisters were Moslems. Since 1985, I have had the Identity as an indigenous religious believer, so there was no religion written on my Indonesian Identity card. I was considered atheist and had no religion."

Strategy to Manage Stigma

The responses that participants gave when they were in a situation where they were stigmatized differed from one another. Ang said that "It is OK if some people considered my heresy. I don't want to debate over beliefs since there will be no meeting points."

In contrast to Ang, who tended to accept, several participants denied the stigma. According to Aj, he will try to explain to the stigmatized person that an indigenous religious believer is not as bad as they think.

Another participant, Spr, has even ignored the existing stigma. Instead, he shows his identity and behavior as a believer to the people around him.

There were six Stigma Management Communication (SMC) strategies: accepting, avoiding, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, denying, and ignoring/displaying (Meisenbach, 2010). The categorization results in the participants' experiences when responding to those stigmas.

By following the categorization by Meisenbach, the stigma management communication strategies used by indigenous religious believers in this study are as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Stigma Management Communication Strategies of Believers in Indonesia

Name	Stigma Management Communication Strategies
Ang	Accepting
Aj	Denying by providing evidence/information
Si	Avoiding
Am	Denying by discrediting the discreditors
Ty	Reducing offensiveness
Fe	Denying by providing information
Agr	Denying by providing information
Wa	Denying by providing information
Spr	Ignoring/Displaying
Ad	Avoiding

Source: processed by the researchers

Stigma threatens the regeneration of indigenous religious believers. In Indonesia, most people want their children to follow their religion. There is even child abuse when their children decide to embrace a religion different from that of their parents (Nurtjahyo, 2021). Differently, this does not occur with the believers' families. The believers even ask their children not to follow their beliefs. The children had to choose one of the six religions acknowledged by the Government (Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hindu,

Buddhism, and Confucianism) when they are 17 years old, where Indonesian citizens must have a Resident Identity Card. Therefore, the religious difference is familiar in the believers' families since religion or belief is negotiable for them (Harnish, 2021). Parents' decision in the believers' families encouraging them to choose one of the religions officially acknowledged by the Indonesia Government can certainly not be separated from the dark history of believers' past life in the country. The G 30 S/PKI event 1965 changed the believers' peaceful life in Indonesia into darkness. The believers were positioned as part of the event. The stigmatization that connected the believers to the 1965 tragedy caused the believers' mass exodus to other "official" religions. Those who kept being believers became a class two community under that of religions officially acknowledged by the state (Budijanto, 2016). Unsurprisingly, some informants stated that one stigma they received was that they were assumed part of PKI, leading to discriminative behaviors they had to receive. Choosing to encourage their children not to be believers is undoubtedly the best choice for believers' families in avoidance of stigmatization in the context of that time. The rise of conservative views is also a threat to the existence of indigenous religious believers because people who lack respect for social diversity are increasing (Jubba, Awang, Qodir, Hannani, & Pabbajah, 2022).

Stigma is attaching a "mark" or brand that separates an individual from other individuals based on the community's evaluation that a person or a group of people are deemed to "have defamed or be lower than" them (Pescosolido, Martin,

Lang, & Olafsdottir, 2008). With such a stigma definition, stigmatizing a person or group of people leads to opposing views, stereotypes, prejudice, desire to ignore or keep the stigmatized group away from the majority, and other various discriminative treatments. In the face of stigma, the participants applied different strategies. Out of the ten participants, five chose to deny by presenting evidence or information on believers (Denying), two decided to avoid, one chose to reduce offensiveness, one decided to show the existing stigma (Displaying), and one chose to accept the stigma. This choice of strategies is a discursive action. They contemplated any risks which might arise from the stigma they received and chose the stigma management strategy most comfortable for them.

In observance of this research's results, in which five believers or half of the informants chose to reject the stigma attached to them by presenting evidence or information on believers to others, this way is correct. Avoiding will not disappear the stigma people typically give since they need to help understand what the believers do or practice. They define the indigenous religious believer's phenomena based on a piece of information inherited hereditarily, either formally or through historical books or culturally through word of mouth that often contains bias therein. Giving complete information and building external party's understanding of stigmatized groups is also recommended by the US Drug Policy Commission to reduce the stigmatization of drug abusers (UK Drug Policy Commission, 2010). Stigma on drug abusers is deemed getting

more severe, and giving treatment and therapy to ex-users gets more complicated. Improving the public's knowledge and understanding of stigmatized groups will reduce fear of or blaming them. Eliminating or at least reducing negative stigma on indigenous religious believers cannot be done only from believers' perspective, since as Goffman said, stigma is a social phenomenon rooted in social relationships and formed by the community's culture and structure (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). Therefore, the surrounding environment and society must reduce stigma by improving the community's knowledge and understanding of indigenous religious believers.

Although rejection and presentation of information of indigenous religious believers are deemed the best ways the face stigma, these do not necessarily make other choices taken by the believers to face stigma, such as avoiding and ignoring stigma wrong ways. However, there is no single correct way for all people in the face of stigma. With different problems, conditions, and contexts each person faces, believers cannot always apply the same way in the face of stigma. Stigmatized group members are generally aware that what they do does not always influence themselves but their community members, which naturally strengthens the negative stigma on the group (Levin & Laar, 2016). Therefore, many group harmony-oriented people decide to be non-confrontational to those who stigmatize them. Likewise, the informants in this research have different social-cultural background, age, gender, occupation and education. Thus, they indeed have different ways in the face of

such stigma. How they deal with stigma is a strategy they use to survive in social change (Chakim, 2022).

The research participants indeed chose different ways to face any stigma they received, which some were avoiding, denying, and ignoring. However, not all of them agreed on the stigma given to them. They hoped that all believers would be willing to show their existence since they were sure that with their different existence shown, the community would accept them. The results of this research conform to the study entitled *The Self-Concept of Indigenous Religious Believers in Yayasan Cendekiawan Kampung Indonesia* (Ardiansyah, 2022), revealing that the indigenous religious believers have positive self-regard and self-concept. They want to be placed and treated equally to other communities. One of the believers in Yayasan Cendekiawan Kampung Indonesia from Buru Island, Maluku said that he took higher education to bring and make the believers in his region of origin, Widit Adat Community in Buru Island, to betterment.

CONCLUSION

Living a minority in a heterogeneous society has many challenges. One of those challenges is defending and fighting against stigmas attached to a minority group. Indigenous religious believers in Banyumas were stigmatized as heresy, shamans, demon worshipers, and part of the criminal organization in Indonesia (known as PKI/Indonesian Communist Party), and atheists. Those stigmas brought considerable impacts on the believers' life. Some believers confidently attached their

identity as indigenous religious believers to their Indonesian Identity Card. However, many others were still with their previously written religion, yet they worshiped based on their beliefs in their daily life. This dualism was still something familiar and understood by the believers.

In responding to these stigmas, the believers developed different management communication strategies: accepting, denying by providing information, denying by discrediting the discreditors, avoiding, reducing offensiveness, and ignoring. The believers believed that by showing their existence and giving information related to their belief to the Almighty God, acknowledged and protected by the Indonesian government, those stigmas were gradually eliminated.

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