



Identity Negotiation of Indigenous Religious Believers in Banyumas, Central Java

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ABSTRACT: Indigenous religious are often labelled as primitive, misguided, and even atheistic. As a stigmatized group, these believers negotiate their identity by communicating with people outside their community. This negotiation is carried out by the believers to be accepted in their social environment. This study aims to understand the identity negotiation of believers in Banyumas Regency. The research employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Data collection is conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The findings reveal that identity negotiation is carried out through openness to the surrounding community to build mutual trust. The believers exhibit polite and ethical behaviour as part of a positive self-presentation. They also prioritize harmony and avoid coercive actions as an expression of their commitment to respecting differences. This approach reflects their efforts to integrate while maintaining their identity.

KEYWORDS: believers, communication management, identity negotiation, indigenous religion, stigma.

INTRODUCTION

The existence of indigenous belief practitioners, a minority group in Indonesia, remains stigmatized by society [1,2]. Data show a decline in the number of believers, decreasing from approximately 0.04% of the population in 2020 to 0.03% in 2024 [3,4]. This indicates that issues of religious freedom and belief remain complex in Indonesia. Although officially recognized by the state in 2017, allowing them to include their beliefs on identity cards and no longer categorized as engaging in illegal practices, they are still stigmatized as primitive, misguided, and even atheistic [5,6].

Believers have existed in Indonesia long before independence and prior to the introduction of mainstream religions. However, this does not mean that their teachings are heretical. The prevalent stigma is quite contradictory to reality, as history shows that believers have been supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture [7]. The differences with the six other religions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs do not justify negative actions in the social environment against adherents of these believers.

In general terms, stigma cannot be separated from acts of discrimination. These two actions complement each other as something that can harm individuals or groups [8,9]. Stigma can be considered as a basis that often leads to discriminatory actions. Previous studies highlight the importance of focusing on the prevention of these two actions because every individual has human rights and the freedom to practice their religion. In the long term, stigma and discrimination can lead to societal conflicts and other negative impacts [10–12].

One example that highlights the peak of discrimination against believers occurred in 1965 during the G30SPKI event. At that time, believers from various regions, such as the Kawruh Naluri/KWN followers in Banyumas, Central Java, and the Mollo Community in East Nusa Tenggara, were forced to choose and adhere to one of Indonesia's official religions [13,14]. The consequence for those who refused was being classified as communist or supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party. In the same year, the government and parliament enacted Law Number 1 PNPS of 1965 concerning the Prevention of Religious Abuse and/or Blasphemy. Many people misunderstood this law. They interpret being part of a believers as dangerous because it can divide national unity and tarnish religion. This law is used as a basis to legitimize the notion that only six religions are recognized in Indonesia, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Confucianism [5]. In fact, the law emphasizes that other religions such as Judaism, Shinto, and belief organizations are not considered dangerous or prohibited. Their existence will be allowed as long as they do not violate the provisions contained in this regulation or other laws.

The limited opportunities for believers to engage in society as freely as those who follow one of Indonesia's officially recognized religions impacts their attitudes and behavior, leading them to be more cautious in social interactions. Identity preservation is not solely an individual effort, others in the community also play a contributing role. In this context, there are two types of individuals,



those who maintain their identity after receiving positive feedback from their environment, and those who adjust their identity to align with societal expectations when they do not receive the anticipated feedback [15]. The second type typically seeks to cultivate a positive perception from the surrounding community, as belief practitioners aim for social acceptance without compromising their identity. This process is known as identity negotiation.

Identity negotiation is an effort undertaken by individuals to define, affirm, challenge, and reinforce a desired self-image through transactional interactions with people from different cultures. This process is considered effective when both parties feel respected, valued, and understood by one another [16]. Similar to Indonesia's major religions, believers also engage in various community activities, such as the Suran commemoration ritual [17]. This ritual is typically held on the 1st of Sura in the Javanese calendar as a thanksgiving event for believers, providing them an opportunity to share offerings (food and drink) with the surrounding community [18]. Beyond sharing food and drink, believers invite community members, other practitioners, and even government representatives. This event aims to introduce their culture firsthand and foster harmonious relationships with individuals outside their community.

Such activities, which involve the participation of the surrounding community, represent one form of identity negotiation for believers. This negotiation is expected to build trust and reduce social stigma, potentially mitigating future discrimination. Thus, identity negotiation is a crucial effort for believers to maintain the existence of their unique identity and culture. Based on this context, the researchers posed the question, "How does the identity negotiation process of believers in Banyumas, Central Java, unfold?" The study aims to identify conflicts and analyze the identity negotiation among belief practitioners in Banyumas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Stigma*

Dayanti & Legowo as cited in Trinugraha et al., (2023) define stigma as a mark that can damage the self-image of an individual or group, significantly influencing the personality and behavior of those affected [19,20]. They are often perceived as having behaviors that are different or deviant, such as being traitorous or criminal. The mark in stigma can be visible or invisible, controllable or uncontrollable, and is frequently associated with appearance, behavior, or membership in certain groups [21,22]. Furthermore, individuals or groups who are stigmatized experience discrimination within various social settings, including educational environments, workplaces, the criminal justice system, and even healthcare [22].

B. *Belief*

The term belief can be defined from various perspectives. Some interpret it as a doctrine that acknowledges the existence of The One Almighty God but is not part of one of the officially recognized religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, and Confucianism) [23]. Meanwhile, Hannan (2022) synthesizes these definitions, concluding that conceptually, belief encompasses a set of values, including truth, wisdom, honesty, and a personal recognition of the existence of a universal God [24].

C. *Believers*

Believers represent a spiritual belief system encompassing the freedom to express Indonesia's diverse cultural traditions [25]. Although closely associated with Indonesia's cultural diversity, this belief system is not categorized as an indigenous tradition. Sofwan (in Riski, 2022) describes believers as adherents of Aliran Kebatitan or a belief in The One Almighty God. Believers uphold principles such as devotion to God Almighty for human perfection, welfare, and inner and outer happiness in the world, remaining faithful to the Almighty, the Merciful, the Just, the All-Powerful, and the Eternal [25,26].

Believers are categorized into three groups, pure believers, religious believers, and mixed believers [18]. Individuals who follow the spiritual teachings of their belief and are identified as adherents of the belief in the The One Almighty God. Religious believers identify as believers but also study specific religious teachings. Mixed believers, on the other hand, are those who formally identify with a recognized religion on their ID cards but sympathize with the teachings of believers [27].

D. *Communication Management*

The concept of communication management inherently intersects with the fields of applied communication and management science [28]. Management is closely related to social interactions, and thus this concept is understood as the ability to position oneself appropriately in specific situations to influence others through interaction. The goal is to achieve harmony in communication [29]. In the absence of effective communication management, there is potential for negative feelings and thoughts among individuals [30].



Kaye (in Suwarso et al., 2019), in his work titled Communication Management, analogizes this concept to Russian Matryoshka dolls. The process of communication management comprises four interrelated elements [31,32]. The following is an explanation of these components:

- 1) Self Doll: This is the smallest doll, representing the self. When individuals communicate, they require sensation, perception, memory, and critical thinking.
- 2) Interpersonal Doll: Outside the self doll is another doll known as the interpersonal doll. Its focus is on how the self communicates with others, including the process of giving and receiving meaning from a message. This can certainly influence and bring about change in an individual.
- 3) People-in-System Doll: The third-layer doll illustrates how the environment or social system can affect communication. This is closely related to the customs, norms, and values that may vary among individuals.
- 4) Competence Doll: This is the doll that encompasses all the others. It indicates that competence in communication management includes the aforementioned components.

Furthermore, the concept of communication management relates to the underlying theory, which is the Theory of Identity Negotiation. One way to negotiate identity is through the process of communication management, which can be conducted both explicitly and implicitly.

THEORY/ CONCEPT

Identity Negotiation

In this research, the theory utilized to support the analysis is the Identity Negotiation Theory proposed by Stella Ting Toomey [33]. Based on communication studies, which encompass the seven traditions outlined by Craig (2016), Identity Negotiation Theory falls within the sociocultural tradition. This tradition posits that identity is formed through interactions with their surrounding environment. It is important to note that the process of identity negotiation is not inherently negative; rather, it is essential, especially when facing specific situations and conditions [34,35].

Broadly speaking, Identity Negotiation Theory explores the process through which identities are negotiated during interactions, particularly among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This assertion is supported by research conducted by Afriza et al. (2021), which explains that this theory can serve as a tool for cross-cultural communication, facilitating the best possible solutions in particular situations, or win-win solutions [36]. Interestingly, identity negotiation does not necessarily have to rely on verbal communication, as detailed below:

People may communicate their identities before they even open their mouths by displaying identity cues [15]. This statement implies that individuals can express their identities without necessarily engaging in verbal communication beforehand. The success of intercultural communication is influenced by the effectiveness of the identity negotiation process itself. The components that serve as benchmarks for success in the identity negotiation process are commonly referred to as intercultural competence.

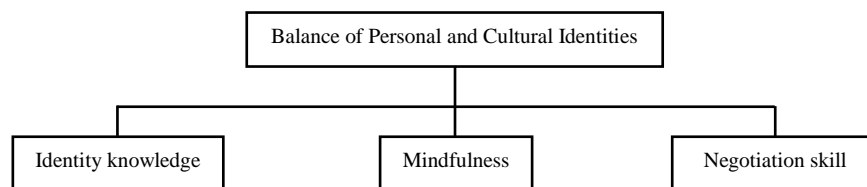


Figure 1. Model of intercultural competence

Toomey (in Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017) outlines its components, which include identity knowledge, mindfulness regarding situational contexts, and negotiation skills. This competence applies not only to one party but to both [16,33]

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach aimed at uncovering identity negotiation through the exploration, understanding, and interpretation of phenomena, events, and their relationships with practitioners of belief systems.



Phenomenology itself is a research design rooted in philosophical and psychological studies [37]. In other words, phenomenology in this research reveals the meanings behind the interactions occurring between the research subjects and their environment. Furthermore, the interpretive paradigm is a way for researchers to view each subject as having their own choices regarding their subjective perspectives in interpreting their own experiences.

A. Data Collection Techniques

The data collection techniques used in this qualitative research include in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, explained as follows:

1) In-Depth Interviews

The data collection technique using interviews is employed to extract more profound information from a set of designated informants. The researcher poses questions based on a pre-designed interview draft, with some questions being asked repeatedly to the informants. This approach aims to minimize the likelihood of modified or similar responses.

2) Observation

Observation is conducted by directly observing the interactions and activities carried out by the research subjects. This is done to gain a broader and more tangible understanding of the behaviors, habits, and relationships established among individuals within the target group.

3) Documentation

The researcher also utilizes a documentation technique for data collection, sourcing information from photographs, videos, journals, books, and relevant and credible websites. Photos and videos are taken directly during the observation and interview processes as evidence to support the data presented in the article. National and international journals are used to reinforce the accuracy of the analysis during data interpretation, particularly concerning the results of the conducted interviews.

B. Research Informants

The researcher employs purposive sampling techniques to identify research subjects or informants based on specific criteria that can support the study being conducted. The following are the criteria for the informants in this research:

- 1) Male and female participants;
- 2) Aged between 22 and 75 years;
- 3) Residing in Banyumas Regency; and
- 4) Identified as practitioners of pure belief systems, mixed beliefs, or religions.

Based on the above criteria, a number of informants were selected who meet the specified qualifications. Below is further information regarding these informants.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Informant Code	Age	Gender	Category of believers
Informant 1	73	Male	Religion believers
Informant 2	54	Male	Pure believers
Informant 3	44	Female	Pure believers
Informant 4	41	Male	Pure believers
Informant 5	42	Female	Pure believers
Informant 6	25	Female	Pure believers

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the relationship between believers, social stigma, and the importance of identity negotiation in addressing emerging challenges. Some of the findings underline how believers encounter stigma, while trying to maintain their identity.

A. Stigma

Previously, it has been explained about the concept of stigma that can lead to discrimination. The data analysis in this sub-chapter will connect the stigma associated with believers to the concept of communication management. Viewed through the lens



of self-doll, stigma and discrimination can make it challenging for believers to represent themselves, leading to psychological distress and inhibiting their self-confidence. Furthermore, such behavior can lead to conflicts in interpersonal relationships, which is related to the concept of interpersonal doll. According to the results of in-depth interviews, informants who gave statements based on their respective experiences mentioned that such behavior had occurred in the educational environment, although they did not escalate into significant conflicts.

Sometimes classmates say things like, 'Oh, believers don't even pray'. There's quite a bit of bullying like that. (Informant 3, interview on July 12, 2024)

Since there are students who are believers, many students are in a trance. Reports were made without any background check, and the student was directly accused. However, upon further investigation, it was found that the student participated in traditional kuda lumping performances. (Informant 4, interview on July 12, 2024)

"Why aren't you Muslim anymore? But instead became a believer? Didn't you used to participate in Islamic studies?" Well, I started to feel a bit excluded, I felt that my friends were moving away. (Informant 6, interview on July 3, 2024)

The stigma described by Informant 3 and the discrimination experienced by Informant 6 illustrate that believers are still viewed as heretical and godless. This is deeply unfortunate, as every individual should have equal rights to represent themselves. Educational settings, in particular, should serve as safe spaces for all school members and foster openness and mutual respect despite differing backgrounds.

Meanwhile, the concept of "people-in-system doll" represents a broader communication management context within society. Discrimination in this context is more systemic, manifesting, for instance, in difficulties with official documentation or access to public services such as education. These challenges were evident in statements from several informants.

The previous principal didn't allow believer students to participate in learning activities. (Informant 3, interview on July 12, 2024)

There are parents who struggle to guide their children because they are enrolled in religious education at school. Why do they follow religious education? Because in some regions, there are no teachers who teaches belief. (Informant 2, interview on July 12, 2024)

Meanwhile, regarding administrative matters, another informant confirmed that the process is not difficult.

We are now equal; before the law, we are the same. Identity cards are already facilitated, and the state provides support. I encourage young peers to be confident". (Informant 6, interview on July 3, 2024).

Informant 1 also stated that their ID card has not yet been updated to "Belief in God" not because the process is difficult, but for reasons unrelated to discrimination. Furthermore, based on observations, major events involving indigenous believers, such as the 1 Sura Celebration, actually receive support and assistance from the surrounding community and government authorities.

Lastly, the concept of 'competence doll' reflects the capability of believers to face and overcome the challenges they encounter. Despite often being underestimated, many develop skills to endure and courageously advocate for their rights in public spaces. Consequently, stigma and discrimination impact not only their personal lives but also their social relationships and interactions with the broader community. Further details on this will be elaborated in the identity negotiation process discussed in the following subsection.

B. Forms and Supporting Factors of Identity Negotiation

Believers in Banyumas Regency, in their efforts at identity negotiation, implement various strategies expressed through both verbal and non-verbal communication management. These strategies are based on their observations of the surrounding community and are informed by insights constructed through learning and interactions with fellow adherents. The forms of these strategies include:

- 1) An open attitude towards the surrounding community to foster mutual trust

A key component in establishing positive relationships is the development of mutual trust. Openness in communication about their identity is consistently practiced by believers in interactions with individuals or the broader community. They believe



that by openly sharing their identity and practices, that have become part of who they are, mutual trust between believers and the community will flourish. This, in turn, encourages acceptance and tolerance. The following are interview quotes from research informants related to this.

I don't want to hide it, i want mutual understanding, so there's no suspicion between us. (Informant 4, interview on July 12, 2024)

I am a believer in identity and behaviour, which allows me to feel more honest with myself and freer with friends or in the predominantly religious workplace. My colleagues would say, 'Oh, you're an believer?' thinking i was Christian. Now they realize that there are belief systems beyond established religions. It's more comfortable now, as my colleagues respect me, and i respect them as well. (Informant 6, interview on July 3, 2024)

These statements illustrate that an open attitude toward the surrounding community fosters mutual trust and strengthens interpersonal relationships. Additionally, openness can serve as a crucial first step in addressing stigma and discrimination, as honest communication helps reduce misunderstandings and prejudices often stemming from a lack of awareness.

2) Politeness and Ethical Behavior as Part of Positive Self-Branding

Attitudes and behavior within the community are equally important components to manage, particularly for believers. The Banyumas community, located within the Javanese ethnic group, is known for its deeply ingrained values instilled from a young age. Idrus (in Diananda, 2021) notes that politeness and noble character are two of the 17 esteemed values that form the behavioral standards and cultural expectations of Javanese society [38,39]. These values are similarly upheld by believers in their daily lives. From their mannerisms to their attire, there is a constant orientation toward ethical conduct and politeness.

When interacting with others, we try to set a good example so that people see us as, 'Oh, it turns out believers are good people. (Informant 4, interview on July 12, 2024)

As believers, it's more about modest clothing. I want to maintain the image as an believer because we are Javanese, and Javanese culture values politeness. Through our words and actions, we want to show people that believers are also good. When attending friends' gatherings, I wear a kebaya, but a modern one. Friends respond positively to it. (Informant 6, interview on July 3, 2024)

This management of polite and ethical behavior reflects the practice of identity negotiation as it ought to be. Believers in Banyumas strive to harmonize their beliefs' traditions with the foundational values of the Banyumas community at large. Rather than abandoning their identity as believers, they blend it with the cultural values of the local society, creating a positive habit that contributes to a favorable image of believers in the public eye.

3) Use of Communication Styles Adjusted to Context and Situational Dynamics in Interactions with the Surrounding Community

Identity negotiation, inherently involving verbal interaction between individuals, necessitates adaptation in communication styles. Believers when conveying messages about their identity, seek to adjust their communication style to suit the interaction partner they are engaging with. This adaptation extends not only to the conversation partner but also to the context and situational dynamics at play during the interaction. The following interview excerpt illustrates how communication style adjustments contribute to identity negotiation:

Then, someone asked, 'Is it okay? What will happen when you die?' I responded, 'Well, passing away is like anyone else, you just stop breathing, like in other religions'. Someone else asked, 'Aren't you afraid that no one will take care of things afterward?' I answered, 'Well, I have family, so naturally they'll handle everything.' But I tried to explain it in a lighthearted way, with humor and laughter. PKK mothers tend to ask these kinds of questions, so I took it in stride since it's normal for them to be curious. (Informant 3, interview on July 12, 2024)

Identity negotiation through communication style adaptation serves as an indirect approach for informants to clarify aspects of their belief system without offending any parties involved.



4) Upholding Harmony and Avoiding Coercion

Believers consistently uphold and teach values of harmony and tolerance to their children and relatives as a fundamental basis for community life. They respect and acknowledge the religious or spiritual diversity present within the surrounding community. Without discriminating against or disparaging other religions or belief systems, believers even invite local residents and government representatives to participate in the Suran commemoration on the 1st of Suro, sharing food and drinks with them. One informant expressed their view on interpersonal harmony across various religions and beliefs:

Namanya orang yang penting apik karo sing nggawe urip. Kae ya apik, kana ya apik. Ora kena njelek njelekna sing sejen, ora apik enggane. Sing Islam monggo, sing Kristen monggo, sing Buddha monggo, kulo menganut kepercayaan. Sing penting nyong teyeng golet duit, teyeng sembayang, waktune bisa dibagi. Niku pendapat kulo piyambak. (Informant 1, interview on August 14, 2024)

Translation:

"For us, what matters is being respectful to 'the Creator'. That is good here, and good there. We should not speak ill of those who are different, it is not right. Those who are Muslim, Christian, Buddhist—all are welcome, and i on my own beliefs. What matters is that i can earn a living, pray, and manage my time. That is my personal view". (Informant 1, interview on August 14, 2024)

In line with the application of values of harmony in community life, believers consistently ensure that there is no coercion for others to adopt their belief system. One organization that upholds this practice is the Paguyuban Budaya Bangsa (PBB). Below is an excerpt from an interview with a member of the Paguyuban Budaya Bangsa.

Perhaps one example is that PBB never forces people to join or convert. For instance, if someone has found a life partner or anything of that sort, they're free to make their own choice. Additionally, if someone wishes to join us, they must attend seven manisan sessions in Gombong. This requirement ensures that they are genuinely interested in joining us, coming from their own awareness and choice. (Informant 3, interview on July 12, 2024)

By fostering attitudes and behaviors that prioritize harmony with all elements of society, peaceful, secure, and amicable relations can be easily established between believers and the surrounding community. This approach not only enhances social cohesion but also indirectly supports successful identity negotiation by building a positive image through the values upheld by believers.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the identity negotiation strategies employed by indigenous religious believers in Banyumas, Central Java, a marginalized group often subjected to societal stigma. The findings indicate that these individuals actively engage in a process of identity negotiation through strategic communication with the broader community. By prioritizing openness, ethical conduct, and positive self-presentation, the believers aim to build trust and dismantle negative stereotypes associated with their religious practices. Their deliberate efforts to present themselves with politeness and respect serve as a means of countering the stigmatization of their beliefs, thus facilitating greater acceptance within the social fabric. In doing so, they manage to maintain their religious identity while navigating the expectations and judgments of the surrounding society.

Moreover, the study highlights the centrality of non-coercion and harmony in the negotiation of identity. The indigenous believers emphasize peaceful coexistence and mutual respect in their interactions, avoiding confrontational or forceful actions in favor of dialogue and understanding. This approach reflects their commitment to both social integration and the preservation of their cultural and religious practices. The contributions of this research lie in its exploration of how stigmatized groups use communication strategies to negotiate their identities while maintaining core values. It also sheds light on the complexities of identity management in the context of indigenous belief systems. Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring the role of media and digital platforms in shaping the identity negotiation processes of indigenous religious communities, as well as examining similar processes in other cultural contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how identity negotiation evolves over time in response to changing social dynamics and external pressures.



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