

**“Orang Betawi”
Construction and Transformation of a Creole Notion of Jakartan
Identity**

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I would like to give an insight into my research dealing with processes of construction and transformation of ethnic, urban and national identity in Jakarta – and with the social, cultural and political implications, effects and relevance those processes have. More precisely, I am dealing with identity which is related to the categories of “Orang Betawi”, “Orang Jakarta” and “Orang Indonesia.” “Orang Betawi” – or just “Betawi” – and “Orang Jakarta” are the two categories of people to whom Jakartan culture and identity are ascribed and by means of which Jakartan culture and identity is differentiated. Both “Orang Betawi” und “Orang Jakarta” are related – although in different ways – to the concept of “Orang Indonesia”, referring to the national context. The notions of “Orang Betawi” and “Orang Jakarta” imply concepts of culture and identity, which – although being associated with specific kinds of people – are not restricted to them. Thus, I am dealing with **Betawi** identity, which is considered to be the indigenous, primarily ethnic identity, with **Jakartan** identity, which is considered to be a primarily transethnic, urban identity and **Indonesian** identity or rather the Jakartan variety of Indonesian national identity.

All these categories are closely interrelated and overlapping in ascriptions and boundaries. Current processes of identity construction and transformation – their social, cultural and political relevance, the ways they are enacted and exploited – can only be understood if studied and analyzed in their interrelatedness and by taking into account the history and ethnogenesis of the category of people and identification which is at the very centre of these processes, namely the Betawi.



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The Betawi came into being through intercultural processes during the times of colonization in Jakarta, which was then called Batavia. A considerable proportion of these people had been exiled to Batavia from different South and Southeastasian regions from the 17th century onward, areas that had been conquered by the Dutch from the Portuguese. Later many were brought to Batavia from Bali and other islands of the Indonesian peninsula in order to serve as slaves and soldiers for the Dutch colonizers and as servants for other influential foreign populations like the Chinese. The Dutch tried to administer and settle the population of Batavia along ethnic categories, but abandoned this strategy completely in 1828 due to its inefficiency. During the same period of time the slave trade ceased. These changes generally enhanced interethnic contact and mixture but also initiated a specific process of cultural creolization among those of originally heterogeneous and often foreign origin, but also included people of indigenous decent. These people came to be the Betawi.

As a group they were long considered as backward, unwilling to modernize and anti-urban. As slaves and servants they had had little access to modern education and stuck to their traditions more than those in closer contact to the colonial elite and their educational system. Consequently, it was not the original inhabitants of Batavia who came to be the Indonesian elite in Jakarta after independence had been achieved in 1949, but rather people of mostly Javanese origin. In the following two decades the desire to develop a unique Indonesian national identity hampered the reflection upon the recent colonial past and all its unpleasant reminders – including the Betawi and their background related to slavery. Instead, a pre-colonial golden age was constructed, largely by means of employing concepts of common religious and spiritual origin, which were meant to serve as a source of national identity. Thus, after almost 350 years of foreign domination early post-colonial Indonesia came to define itself largely in pre-colonial terms.

During those days especially the urban Betawi – the so-called Betawi Kota – were more likely to hide their Betawi identity in public due to the negative stereotypes attributed to them. They often ascribed themselves to one of the other ethnic groups in order to decrease social discrimination and achieve upward social mobility.



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However, since the late 60s the Government of the City of Jakarta has changed its attitude towards the Betawi, who have since then received special attention and promotion. There are a lot of different forms through which the revival and (re)construction of Betawi-ness is enhanced. Research concerning their culture was initiated and steps taken to promote their (folk) culture. Special residential areas were reserved for them in order to enable them to maintain their customs and to enhance the practice of their traditions. During festivities related to Jakarta – like the *Hari Ulang Tahun Jakarta* – Jakarta’s birthday – Betawi dances, drama and music are performed throughout the city, sponsored by the City Government. Every year a contest – “*None dan Abang Jakarta*” / Miss and Mister Jakarta – is organized by the Governor of Jakarta, a competition all young Jakartans irrespective of their ethnic identity can partake in but within which all candidates must prove considerable knowledge of Betawi traditions as well as of Jakartan history, society and politics in general.

The reasons for this change of heart are at the heart of processes of identity construction in Jakarta and at the heart of identity politics in particular.

After some 20 years after independence had been achieved it became clear that inter-ethnic conflict had not ceased and that national identity needed more powerful symbols than merely constructed pre-colonial mythology. It was then that reflection upon the colonial past set in and the attitudes towards the Betawi changed. But why?

I argue, that as a creole notion of identity, the Betawi can – more than any other, merely **either** ethnic **or** merely **transethnic** category of people – communicate both ethnic **and** trans-ethnic reference of culture and identity at the same time. Thereby some kind of traditional authenticity can be attached to the mega-city of Jakarta on the **one** hand and inter-ethnic interaction and nationalism supported on the **other**. Now, why do I think so?

I cannot go into the theoretical implications of creolization in any detail here but will give a very limited definition only. Creolization is understood as a specific process of cultural merging among ethnically diverse people living in – usually forced – exile, who, on the background of their respective cultures of origin and usually in exchange with local populations, create new cultural representations which are increasingly equipped with a new and **common** ethnic reference – Betawi in our case. Thus, in the process of creolization



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different ethnic identities of origin are increasingly substituted by a new common ethnic identity. People who used to identify as Sundanese, Ambonese, Chinese, Indian etc. come to identify as Betawi.

I argue that both state institutions and the Betawi themselves have discovered or re-discovered the social and political potentials that lie in the creole concept of Betawi group identity and culture and that due to that it emerges as increasingly powerful in both the multi-ethnic and national context of Jakarta. There are different reasons for this specific potential of creole culture and identity.

One reason is, that during the processes of creolization many features of the different local cultures – both foreign and indigenous in origin – were incorporated into the emerging culture of the Betawi. This made and makes it possible even for those not belonging to the Betawi ethnically, to identify partly with their culture since traces of their own respective ethnic culture can easily be identified. Heterogenous origin is one of the major constituents of creole identity in general. The mixture of cultural features that goes along with it symbolizes common history insofar as some of the forefathers of the Betawi were at some stage in history also forefathers of others who did not become creolized, who did not become Betawi.

Another reason, which is more important politically is that as a creole group, the Betawi represent both a multitude of ethnicities due to their historical background, and at the same time demonstrate the capacity of creating one group on the background of ethnic diversity. This two-fold representation fits the national motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (“Unity in Diversity”) very well, which is a vital element of the *Pancasila* – the five principles of the Indonesian state ideology. Through the Betawi it can be demonstrated that ethnic diversity in a group’s origin does not need to prevent the development of common identity. On the contrary, the Betawi are an excellent proof that “Unity in Diversity” can work. In the same way they integrated the different ethno-cultural features of their diverse backgrounds and became the Betawi, the different ethnic groups of Indonesia are supposed to become one Orang Indonesia, a people united by a national culture that integrates the elements of different ethnic traditions in a peaceful and fruitful manner. In post-colonial Indonesia, which is up to date torn by ethnic and religious conflict and strife the Betawi can therefore be put into the



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context of transethnic integration and function as a counter-balance to the fear of desintegration.

There's another reason for the attractiveness of Betawi-ness with regard to the promotion of national identity. The Betawi are not only mixed in origin, they are also **not** Javanese and therefore do not belong to the group of people that has long been the most dominant group in Indonesian society and politics. This predominance has been changing lately due to the democratisation, liberalisation and decentralisation of the Indonesian political system, but nevertheless the desire to counter-balance the Javanization of Indonesia – and its capital Jakarta – was, and to some degree still is – running strong.

By promoting a **creole** culture, the State could not only demonstrate against the reproach concerning the political Javanization of Indonesia, they could do so without promoting a feeling of neglect among other ethnic groups, including the Javanese. Since the Betawi are considered mixed in origin, their culture as encompassing the different ethnic traditions of Indonesia, all ethnic groups can easily be considered to have a share in Betawi culture and identity. As such it is organized and manipulated by state institutions in manifold ways as a means to enhance transethnic Jakartan and national identity and to lessen interethnic conflict. In an official brochure published by the Governor, it says:

“In Jakarta, the Orang Betawi – the natives of the city – are the hosts of the different cultures living in Jakarta, having emerged from the melting pot of races, ethnic groups and cultures of Indonesia in the 19th century”.

And a prominent promoter of Betawi-ness said to me:

“They are like gado-gado (Betawi dish, comprising of different vegetables and peanut sauce) – mixed in its ingredients, and due to this mixture a very delicious and unique meal. Like Indonesia, many different cultures, that together make a wonderful Indonesia. The Betawi are among themselves what Indonesia should be as well: diverse in its origins, but united as Indonesians.”

For those in Jakarta, who are neither ethnic Betawi nor Javanese, nor attached closely to another ethnic group, Betawi culture and identity also counter-balances what Niels Mulder has called “this very vital Javanese-Indonesian mongrel culture” of Jakarta, which, notwithstanding its vitality, only serves as a potential source of identification for the urban



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Javanese. Because of the connection of Javanese culture with political power and dominance in the national context, which is especially visible in Jakarta, Javanese culture, mongrel or not, has its negative connotations and as such cannot function effectively as a pool of either urban or national identification for the majority of people living in Jakarta.

Betawi culture and identity on the other hand, due to its creole character, which gives it both ethnic and trans-ethnic reference, is much more accessible as a source of Jakartan identity irrespective of ethnic identity. It is an alternative to both this “Javanese mongrel culture of Jakarta” as well as to no Jakartan identity at all.

Apart from that, due to the Betawi culture having the status of being the original inhabitants’ culture in Jakarta, it also manages to supply the nation’s capital with some degree of indigenous and ethnic tradition, without which a territory is not considered a real social place in Indonesia. So, to promote the Betawi is also a way to provide Jakarta with indigenous tradition and authenticity, through which trans-ethnic Jakartan identity can be substantiated. As this ethnic tradition is constructed within the context of a creole concept of culture and identity, everyone in Jakarta can adhere to it irrespective of different ethnic backgrounds. As such it is also promoted as indigenous tradition to attract tourists to Jakarta.

The Betawi as an ethnic group re-value concepts of their community in order to advance as a community that has long been socially neglected and disadvantaged. They increasingly recognize the potentials of Betawi identity and culture and make use of their new (privileged) status by eagerly re-interpreting who and what is Betawi. On the one hand intra-ethnic differences are being enforced in order to show the multitude and wealth of Betawi culture. On the other hand newcomers are welcome to join the Betawi in order to gain in both size and thereby influence. Groups who have been refused the status of being real Betawi by the urban and more well-to-do Betawi – the so-called Betawi Kota – because of their proclaimed backwardness are now incorporated as authentic Betawi since they have the expertise concerning Betawi traditions, that need to be known and practised in public to enforce one’s status as authentic Jakartans. On the other hand, those Betawi living a more traditional life on the outskirts of Jakarta – the so-called Betawi Pinggir – have often been denying the urban Betawi the status as real Betawi because of their proclaimed lack of authenticity. Many of the



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former – the Betawi Pinggir – are now a lot more willing to accept the latter – the Betawi Kota – as real Betawi, since they are the ones most actively involved in promoting the Betawi. Thus, the Betawi Kota need the Betawi Pinggir to give the Betawi as a group some more traditional and authentic flavour and the Betawi Pinggir need the Betawi Kota as spearheads in the process of promoting the Betawi as one group.

Also many Indonesians of Chinese origin now become Betawi in order to prevent the sort of discrimination they have suffered ever since they inhabited Indonesia. They join Betawi associations and actively take part in the development of Betawi arts and the promotion of Betawi tradition in public.

Despite its official and generally acknowledged “upgrading” “Betawi” or – more fashionably – “Betawi-ness” still involves a lot of ambivalence. “Betawi” as an ethnic category is on the one hand positively connotated with tradition, authenticity and indigenesness – but, on the other – still negatively connotated with being backward, uneducated, coarse and lazy. As well as that the Betawi have also been – both accused and praised – of promoting, defending, or at least tolerating a more radical understanding of Islam, of pushing a policy of less tolerance with those not adhering to Islam faith and rules of conduct. Such connotations, of course, also involve a lot of ambivalence in the light of the radical and – in parts destructive – potential that Islam has shown to possess among specific groups and individuals in Indonesia.

Thus, the positive transethnic ascriptions suffer in popularity due to some of the ethnic connotations that go along with being Betawi. Due to this ambivalence many people prefer to be referred to as Orang Jakarta instead of Betawi unless they belong to the latter ethnically – which anyhow doesn’t solve the problem of ambivalence altogether since also the ethnic Betawi often refer to themselves as Orang Jakarta (Asli, meaning “real”, “native”).

Transethnic connotations also relate to the notion of “mixture” – the paradox being that the Betawi of today are on the whole not considered very dynamic and you often hear people say that “these Betawi always stay among themselves”. This shows that creolization does not necessarily involve a continuous process of interaction and interethnic mixture – creolization can come to an end. Nevertheless, even if this is the case, the concept of culture and identity



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underlying creole ethnogenesis may remain to be effective as what in linguistics is labelled a “creole continuum”. With regard to culture and identity it is the historical semantics of creolization that are being re-configured to comply with a contemporary need, in our case a need for a notion of culture and identity which fits the contemporary urban, multiethnic and highly dynamic setting of Jakarta. As well as that the underlying creole continuum can serve – on the part of the Betawi – as a means of renewed processes of inclusion if desired. As one Betawi put it, referring to the need for the Betawi to “gain in size” to achieve more political influence: “We should open up to other ethnic groups. After all, that’s what Betawi was all about in the first place, we accomodated people from different backgrounds. We should re-discover our integrative potentials.”

Now how does all this relate to national identity in Jakarta? Since the Betawi territory is at the same time the national center of Indonesia, Betawi culture and identity have also aquired **national** meanings and functions. The stronger being Betawi goes along with territorial awareness, the more pronounced the Betawi’s identification as both Jakartans and Indonesians becomes and the stronger they are identified as Jakarta’s locals by others. One example to illustrate this observation:

When in 2001 thousands of Indonesians from East Java threatened to overrun Jakarta in an attempt to prevent the overthrow of (former) President Wahid, the urban Betawi organized gangs of traditional Betawi militia to defend their city against the intruders. The Betawi presented themselves both as defenders of their town and territory **and** as defenders of national interests. While heavy tanks and thousands of soldiers and police-men filled the streets and guarded the parliamentary buildings, Betawi “warriors”, wearing traditional uniforms and weaponry, presented themselves as their indigenous counter-parts. One of them said to me:

“We as Betawi have to defend our town. We own this town and because of that we have to make sure that everybody can feel safe here. We don’t want outsiders to damage the reputation of Jakarta. That is important for the whole of Indonesia because Jakarta is the Indonesian capital.”

In the context of Betawi-ing Jakarta and nationalizing the Betawi there has also been a shift in attitude concerning the role the Betawi played during the time of Dutch colonization and in



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the struggle for independence. The Betawi and their role in the anti-colonial movement were largely ignored by the early post-colonial elite, which celebrated itself as emancipators of the Indonesian nation and mind. But since the late 1960s, when it had become clear that post-colonial nation-building could not be built on merely pre-colonial mysticism, the Betawi were discovered and re-valued as a group that maintained Indonesian tradition and self-respect even in the hey day of colonization and thereby set the path for regaining pride in being Indonesian. In that context tales of Betawi anti-colonial heroism were invented or rather re-invented and brought into the public sphere. For example, the legend of *Si Pitung*, a famous Betawi hero, who is claimed having fought and embarrassed the Dutch by using his spiritual powers and ingenious cleverness and wit, served as the background for films, t.v. spots, comics and theatre productions. In 2002 a competition among teachers in Jakarta was carried out, which welcomed essays dealing explicitly with Betawi contributions in the fight against colonialism and the endeavour of nation-building.

Due to the official revaluation of their culture and historical legacy the Betawi's alienation from state institutions has diminished, an alienation which used to be quite pronounced due to the low social status attributed to them and due to the social discrimination they had suffered in the years preceding and following independence. Today it is especially the urban Betawi who once used to renounce their Betawi-ness, that actively and enthusiastically promote Betawiness.

As a result of the increased awareness of both the neglect they had formerly encountered and of their political potential as the re-discovered Orang Asli, the original inhabitants of Jakarta, their engagement has become more and more politicized. For many years now the big Betawi organizations have been promoting prominent Betawi figures to become governor of Jakarta.

They claim that as the original inhabitants of Jakarta one of them should become the official representative of the nation's capital. So, it seems, that as a result of the cultural promotion of Betawi-ness, the Betawi are less and less willing to function merely as Jakarta's aborigenes, representing its traditional past, and increasingly resolved to play an active role in present day politics as well. They have not succeeded fully, as the results of the elections have shown in September 2002 but have experienced a lot of support by both Betawi and non-Betawi during



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the election campaigns, many of whom would have preferred to see a new governor, a non-Javanese, or rather, a full-fledged Jakartan civilian not attached to the former Suharto-regime, to rule what they consider their city. As a result of the election, which has been manipulated on a large scale by candidates buying votes from the electorate – the city councillors – the new Governor, as you all know, is the same as the old Governor, who is a Javanese with a military background. It is to be seen whether the Betawi will achieve more political influence in the long run. This will also depend on how political decentralisation and regional autonomy will be put into political practice in Jakarta – which, of course, is a special case since it is both the national center as well as a city and region in its own right. Thus, it has – more than any other Indonesian city or region – to accommodate both regional and national representations of political power.

Whereas Betawi culture and identity – due to its creole character located in the national center of Indonesia can – probably more than any other group's culture and identity – serve as a symbol of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and as such can effectually represent the complexity of Jakarta and Indonesia, it still remains to be seen whether the Betawi as a group will be able to make a considerable move from symbolic gatekeepers of (historical) tradition to active stakeholders in (contemporary) political power.

