RE-IMMIGRATION OF EX-LAOTIAN REFUGEES IN INDONESIA:
THE MEANING OF IDENTITY THROUGH NOSTALGIA
FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

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ABSTRACT

In 1975, the communist revolution in Laos forced approximately 400,000 Lao citizens into exile. They had no other choice besides leaving their home country. These refugees are scattered in western countries and neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. The detachment of the ex-refugees next generation to their home country (Laos) becomes a problem in determining their identity when they return to Laos. This research focuses on narrating the identity of the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees in Indonesia. The next generation of ex-Laotian refugees in Indonesia interprets their identity as Indonesians rather than Laotians. This study will provide an overview of how identity is interpreted as a structure of feeling for a space in the form of nostalgia. Considering the phenomenon of forced migration will form a sentimental sense that forms self-determination to define the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees' identity. Through Cultural Studies especially using ethnography, this research will examine how the identity of the next generation of ex-refugees is constructed through a series of nostalgia for their refugee places in Indonesia.

KEYWORDS: refugees, next-generation, identity, structure of feelings

INTRODUCTION

Saturday morning, August 3, 2019, was the day when the Indonesians and Laotians gathered to celebrate the 74th Indonesian Independence Day at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos. The event started with a morning exercise, accompanied by a traditional song from Maluku, Poco-poco. I participated in the joint gymnastics event with the Indonesian people, Lao citizens, and the Indonesian Embassy staff. Mrs. AI and Mr. YT, whom I met and talked to the other day, also joined the exercise. The event was then followed by lunch. In an ethnographic data collection (Gray, 2003), approaching prospective research respondents is required to obtain their approval for interviews. In this regard, the researcher triggered the respondents to use the storytelling method so that the narration would become rich. Therefore, the interview date was agreed with Mrs. AI on August 3, 2019, Mr. YT on August 6, 2019, and Mr. AS on August 9, 2019.

The interview sessions with the three respondents resulted in the following information: (1) Mrs. AI was 49 years old and had lived in Indonesia for 15 years in Bogor. Mrs. AI is the third generation of ex-refugees from Laos who works as an Indonesian language teacher at the
Indonesian Embassy in Laos. (2) Mr. AS was 48 years old and had lived in Indonesia for 18 years in Bukit Tinggi. Mr. AS now works as one of the directors of a Laos airline. (3) Mr. YT was 53 years old and had lived in Indonesia for 23 years in Depok. Mr. YT is now working as a private employee in Laos. From the interview results with those respondents, it was found that their migration was based on the conflict in their home country, forcing them to migrate to Indonesia.

The communist revolution in 1975 aimed to take over the previous government system and replace it with a communist system. The 1975 conflict in Laos forced approximately 400,000 Lao citizens into exile (Souvannavong, 1999). The security issue during the survival of the Laotians was a solid impetus to leave their home country, Laos. For the descendants of the Lao royal family and those having strong ties to the kingdom, their goal was to move to the developed capitalist countries such as the U.S.A., France, Australia, Sweden, New Zealand, and other western countries. However, this study finds that the refugees were not only the Laotian elite but also the Laotian middle class. Fortunately, these middle-class refugees came from wealthy families so they could live in exile for a lengthy period. Besides being wealthy, they could evacuate by making use of the relations they have abroad.

The Next Generation of ex-Laotian Refugees who have Lived in Indonesia

As the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees, Mrs. AI, Mr. AS, and Mr. YT were detached from their home country since childhood. The adaptation process in an unfamiliar environment formed a memory of their locality in Indonesia (Manas, 2008). Thus, the feeling of being Indonesian is more significant than being Laotians, although they are Lao descendants. It became a problem when they returned to Laos. The identity formation for the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees who have lived in Indonesia is in line with their sense of belonging to a particular place (Chow, Wichelen, & Kloet, 2016). The identity formation through the memories of a nostalgic space where they spent their childhood is more vital than their origins (citizenship) and descendants (the origin of their parents).

Through the above explanation, nostalgia becomes a marker in the identity formation for the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees. Following the arguments (Budianta, 2016) and (Somerville, 1992), the nostalgic space for the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees forms a definition of their home and root. Through this presentation, the nostalgic space becomes a marker of Indonesian identity for the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees.

During an interview with a respondent, Mrs. AI, a designation of a nostalgic space was based on memories of pleasant experiences while living in Bogor. The experiences of 15 years in Bogor show a formation of home and root through the structure of feelings. This presentation is in line with (Derrien, 2014) statement that lovely sentiments about Bogor construct a present meaning in terms of a new place (118). Mrs. AI's statement regarding the affordable cost of living in Bogor produces a particular meaning if it is connected to the country of origin of A.I.’s mother. During (Evans, 1999) the overthrow of Laos’ old government (kingdom) by the new government of Lao P.D.R., economic and resource crisis happened in Laos. The takeover gave the L.P.D.R. government complete control of all resource sectors, making it difficult for the Laotians to access basic daily necessities, except for the groups that were part of the new government. By linking these two places (Bogor and Laos), this study finds irony in Mrs. AI's statement. The security,
comfort, and easy access to food Mrs. AI gets while living in Bogor contrasts with Mrs. AI's country of origin. It strengthens the formation of the Indonesian identity of Mrs. AI through a series of the structure of feelings.

The thing that connects home as a nostalgic space is also found in Mr. YT's statement. He associates Depok as a place to play with his old friends and a place to be happy. The place is interpreted as a nostalgia for the pleasant feelings during his childhood, which later formed a meaning of home or hometown for Mr. YT. For Mr. AS, home or hometown is also interpreted as a place where the respondent lived during his childhood in Bukit Tinggi. The expression of pleasant feelings, one of which is expressed through enjoying the regional specialties, was explicitly mentioned in the interview. Besides, Mr. AS plans to go to Indonesia to live permanently after his retirement.

The statements of those three selected respondents are in line with the argument (Chow, Wichelen, & Kloet, 2016), which states that home or hometown is based on the structure of feelings – feelings that are owned and connect them with the place. The sentimental association of home evokes a sense of intimacy, warmth, and nostalgia with positive meaning and influence (244). From the discussion of the three respondents above, it can be concluded that they defined home as pleasant nostalgia when they lived in Indonesia. Their statements show a sense of belonging to the place they have lived. Therefore, they define themselves as a part of Indonesian.

When they return to their home countries, their feelings of longing and recognition of the places they have lived in can be expressed through the Indonesian community space in Laos. The Indonesian community in Laos was formed through a series of events organized by the Indonesian Embassy. With the Indonesian community in Laos, they can create a platform to reduce their homesickness in Indonesia; a place where they can share experiences among the community; a place where they can re-experience Indonesian cuisine and various Indonesian activities in Laos. The presentation about feeling happy, safe, and comfortable in the place that they have inhabited supports the definition of home, which is interpreted as nostalgia, preserving their Indonesian identity when they return to their home country.

The Space of the Indonesian Embassy in Laos Offers the Meaning of Indonesian Identity for the Next Generation of Laotian ex-Refugees

This study examines the role of the spatial structure formed at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos in the identity formation of the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees. A previous study (Kusno, 2004) suggests the government tried to build nationalism in the capital city of Jakarta by focusing on developing state assets in Jakarta. Therefore, there is a commodification of the economy to represent Indonesia broadly. From the results of observations at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos, some elements of Indonesia are displayed through the placement of certain materials. Likewise (Voulteenaho & Berg, 2009). Material culture is a crucial element in forming the ideology and meaning of cultural space. It can be seen in Figure 4 and Figure 5.
Figure 1:
Board with the theme of *government to government* and *economic section* at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos (Source: Researcher's documentation)

Figure 2:
These photos show Indonesian language learning facilities in the Indonesian Embassy of Laos that bring an Indonesian atmosphere to life (Source: Researcher's documentation)

Figure 1 illustrates the economic cooperation between Indonesia and Laos. The two images can be interpreted as nationalism in the form of an economy. The two boards also indicate nationalism constructed within the scope of the Indonesian Embassy in Laos. These ways of expressing nationalism are interpreted by the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees in this study as Indonesian identity.

Figure 2 shows a picture taken in the cultural facility room at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos. The two images present the Indonesian atmosphere by depicting the Borobudur temple and Tedung Bali. Material culture such as Tedung Bali and pictures of the Borobudur temple in the cultural facilities room at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos are memories and narratives of Indonesia. It can be seen through the interview with the respondent, Mrs. AI. In one of her statements, Mrs. AI said that Indonesia was a favorite tourist destination for foreigners, supported
by cultural diversity and tourism places. The statement of Mrs. AI reflects that the Indonesian embassy brings back memories regarding Indonesia.

These depictions of Indonesia are also supported by the placement of material culture, specifically traditional musical instruments (Angklung and Gamelan), and a statue of Garuda Pancasila at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos. For Mrs. AI, this material culture (Garuda Pancasila) became a marker in interpreting identity by bringing back memories from the past. Through Mrs. AI's statement, the Garuda Pancasila statue reminded the respondents of the times when they lived in Bogor. Material culture (Garuda Pancasila) plays a role in re-visualizing her memories of when she lived and studied in Bogor. Thus, the space created by the Indonesian Embassy can define the Indonesian identity for Mrs. AI.

The researcher sees the Garuda Pancasila statue as the material culture which becomes a nostalgic medium that brings memories home. In another sense, the elements on the Garuda Pancasila statue are used as a representation of Indonesian national identity. Elements on the Garuda Pancasila statue insert Indonesian identity by linking past life experiences to Mrs. AI's. The connection between nostalgia involves the dimension of discourse through the medium of childhood memory, operated in the practice of everyday life, which then forms a meaning of their home or origin. The discourse continuously forms an awareness of the identity of the people in the Indonesian Embassy space.

![Figure 3: Cultural center space at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos (Source: researcher's documentation)](image)
By placing the pictures of Borobudur and Tedung Bali, the Indonesian Embassy in Laos rebuilt the Indonesian atmosphere in the embassy space. The material culture displayed by the Indonesian Embassy evokes a sense of belonging to Indonesia. It can affect the subject in reconstructing their memories of a specific space. It is in line with the statement (Dawis, 2010), which says, "Memory work helps us understand the world in which we live" (3). Thus, a feeling of longing arises in Mrs. AI's mind through a series of nostalgia. The depiction of Indonesia is also shown through a series of events organized by the Indonesian Embassy in Laos. The events to celebrate the 74th Indonesian Independence Day and the Wonderful Indonesia Cultural Night 2019 also played a role in constructing identity for the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees who had lived in Indonesia.

Figure 4:
Gaple playing competition at the Indonesian Embassy during the celebration of the 74th Indonesian Independence Day (Source: kemlu.go.id)
The 2019 Wonderful Indonesia Cultural Night in Laos invited all levels of society in Laos. Since 2016, the Indonesian Embassy in Laos has collaborated with the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education, and the B.K.P.M. to hold several events such as exhibitions and educational forums, which were responded positively by the guests. Among the previously held events, the Wonderful Indonesia Cultural Night in 2019 was one of the most successful events. Several dance performances such as Rampak Kendang, Saman, and Angklung also enlivened the event. (Maxwell, 2013) in his research entitled: Creating Indonesia in Australia: Bridges, Communities and Identities through Music, he explains how the music played during the performance has projected their diverse Indonesian cultural roots, and explored the Indonesian ancestor or other bonds. Playing traditional Indonesian musical instruments is a collective, collaborative activity, creating a 'community' that is bound not only by the experience of learning and playing together but also by the associated social activities, of listening to one another, mutual trust, and sublimation of individuals in groups (256). Therefore, it can be said that holding an Indonesian event such as the Wonderful Indonesia Cultural Night in 2019 formed an Indonesian identity for the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees.

One of studies (Kabir, 2014) explains how diaspora people define their identity through their heritage, food, and language, especially at current local, national, and international events (278). This study also looks at the celebration of the 74th Indonesian Independence Day, which is interpreted by the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees as their Indonesian identity. Thus, the participation of the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees who have lived in Indonesia in the celebration of the 74th Indonesian Independence Day in Laos is an effort and an acknowledgment of being a part of Indonesia.
In Figure 6, the flag ceremony held to commemorate the 74th Indonesian Independence Day at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos involved Indonesian-Laotian descendants as members of the Paskibra (Pasukan Pengibar Bendera Pusaka - Heritage Flag-raising Troop). One of the concerns in this research is that the Indonesian Embassy in Laos also involved the son of Mrs. AI as a member of the Paskibra in the Indonesian Independence Day ceremony. Through this involvement, the Indonesian Embassy in Laos can strengthen Indonesian identity, especially for Mrs. AI's family, by involving them in national events. For Mrs. AI, this can be a nostalgia to remind her of her hometown, Bogor. The celebration of the 74th Indonesian Independence Day at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos is also interpreted by Mr. YT as a nostalgia that shapes Indonesian identity. During the interview, Mr. YT revealed that he could feel the Indonesian atmosphere again at the celebration of the 74th Indonesian Independence Day at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos, although Mr. YT had long left Indonesia. Thus, the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees' participation in celebrating the 74th Indonesian Independence Day is interpreted as a form of identity through a series of nostalgia for living in Indonesia.

The Role of Nostalgia for the Three Respondents

All respondents, namely Mrs. AI, Mr. AS, and Mr. YT, are the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees who fled to avoid the adverse effects of war in their country (Laos). The 1975 communist revolution in Laos was a significant reason for their cross-border migration. The same case was also found when (Kabir, 2014) the Somali diaspora traveled to Australia and the United States because of the conflict in their home country, which harmed the safety of the Somali diaspora. The findings in this study also reveal that the ex-Laotian refugees were being forced to
leave their country of origin. The feeling of being forced contributes to the formation of sentiments towards their country of origin and the country of their destination. From the statements regarding home, none of the three respondents mentioned the nostalgia they experienced when they returned to their home country. They prefer to mention the memories they experienced while living in Indonesia. Disclosures such as showing a sense of pleasure in the place they inhabited while in Indonesia are interpreted as their identity. The coercion to leave their home country constructs a bad sentiment or feeling for Laos. They did not get the protection, comfort, welfare, and other services the state should offer when conflict broke out in their home country. Those services were given when they left Laos and became refugees in Indonesia.

The detachment of the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees from their home country makes them feel alienated in their own country of origin. In the previous discussion, the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees interprets their identity as Indonesian based on the nostalgic space of the place they lived in Indonesia. The efforts made by the Lao government to summon the Laotians were successful. The Lao government is offering opportunities to build a new life in their home countries, which triggers some Laotian refugees abroad to return. The return of some refugees also brings in the next generations of Laotian refugees. The experiences they had while living in an exile were brought along with the language and culture of the place. From being diaspora, the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees tends to define their identity as part of the country of exile compared to their own country of origin (Laos). However, the values they brought with them had to be readjusted when they returned to Laos. Referring to the presentation (Hall, 2003), the diaspora experience can be used to examine this issue. Hall defines diaspora as recognizing heterogeneous and diverse cultures (235). Based on Mr. YT’s statement, Indonesian was a second language. It was due to boundaries (Ang, 2016) that limited Mr. YT in expressing his Indonesian identity when facing Lao social space. As a result, it requires Mr. YT to use the Lao language in the Lao social space. However, Mr. YT can only express Indonesian identity when attending the events organized by the Indonesian Embassy in Laos.

From Mr. YT and Mrs. AI, this study finds the existence of a heterogeneous culture and identity. Nostalgia in Indonesia creates a meaning of home. However, when facing the Lao social space, their culture and experiences while living in Indonesia had to be readjusted to the social sphere in Laos. The explanations from the respondents above also provide an overview of the heterogeneous identities using language in everyday life. The link between heterogeneous identities in the second and third generation of ex-Laotian refugees involves language as a medium operated in daily practices, forming a meaning of identity. Thus, Lao social space is interpreted as a practice using everyday language that plays a role in the meaning of identity, which involves elements of place-making (Budianta, 2016), and has implications for the formation of cross-border community-based social structures.

From Mrs. AI, this study finds that Indonesian is used as a second language after Lao. As an Indonesian teacher at the Indonesian Embassy in Laos, Ms. AI only uses Indonesian when she works and attends Indonesian events. Apart from the Indonesian work and events she attended, Ms. AI uses the Lao language as the primary language in Lao social space. The same practice is also conducted by Mr. AS, for the Indonesian language cannot be expressed in Lao social space. The return of Mrs. AI, Mr. YT, and Mr. AS to their home country requires them to readjust the values they brought while living in Indonesia, one of which is the use of language.
The Reality that is not in Line with the Dream of the Homeland

In the previous discussion, we narrated how the values brought by the next generation of Laotian ex-refugees had to be adjusted when brought into the Lao social space. This study also reveals the formation of Lao identity in the Lao social space. (Lefebvre, 1991) explains that space always contains relations that produce and reproduce the meaning of social life in it (151). These meanings are then applied to the Lao New Year celebrations.

Figure 7:
Lao New Year celebrations in Luang Prabang (Source: travel.kompas.com)

After the new L.P.D.R. government's overthrow of the royal government system, all aspects of politics, economy, society, and culture are fully controlled by the L.P.D.R. government (Evans, 2012). The focus is to change the meaning of the Lao New Year by eliminating the importance of Luang Prabang in shaping the collective identity of the past. It was done with a series of renaming and changes to the function of Luang Prabang. The reinterpretation conducted by the competent authorities in the Luang Prabang space was constructed ideologically through symbols, icons, memories, and narratives by the L.P.D.R. government and was accepted by the people around them. In a study (Dawis, 2010), it is said that memory work plays a role in achieving a collective identity (3). To achieve this, (Trankell, 1999) explained the importance of parading and displaying public culture during festivals as an expression of social memory (192). Lao New Year celebrations should be seen as a form of remembrance of the cultural heritage that connects people to the past. However, this study saw no collective identity formation that reminded them of the past (Laos) through memory work among the three respondents. In Mrs. AI's explanation, celebrating the new year was interpreted as a day to gather with family and carry out spiritual activities. For Mr. YT, Lao New Year is interpreted as a day for holidays with family. Similarly, for Mr. AS, Lao New Year is interpreted as a day to gather with his family. The detachment of Mrs. AI, Mr. YT, and Mr. AS from their home country (Laos) removes the acknowledgment of the importance of the Lao New Year celebration. This study reveals the efforts
of the L.P.D.R government to erase memories of the previous Laotian identity of these three respondents. Therefore, there may be more efforts made by the L.P.D.R. government to cover, eliminate, and replace the identity of the Laotian people with an identity the government wants. Therefore, the respondents' expectations of Laos clash with the reality of returning to Laos.

CONCLUSION

Through a series of identity discoveries in the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees, this study finds the existence of multiple identities among the respondent. These multiple identities are constructed from the previous culture during their diasporic experiences. The respondents in this study interpret their identity as Indonesian through nostalgia from pleasant experiences shown in the places they lived in Indonesia. This research examines the psychological aspect that determines where they come from and defines identity. The feeling of comfort among the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees stems from what they did not get from their home country, Laos.

This research also finds that the Indonesian embassy plays a significant role in maintaining the Indonesian identity. It is also a place to reminisce about Indonesia through the respondents' memories during their exile in Indonesia. The efforts of the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees to gain recognition as part of Indonesia are shown through their participation in Indonesian events organized by the Indonesian Embassy in Laos. Their participation in Indonesian events organized by the Indonesian Embassy in Laos also opened a platform for them to express their Indonesian identity.

This study also finds a form of readjustment among the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees in maintaining their Indonesian identity when they return to Laos. An aspect of Lao social space limits them from expressing their Indonesian identity, especially using language. Their return to their home country is inseparable from the boundaries they must face.

This research also reveals the success of the L.P.D.R. in eliminating and forgetting the identity of Laos (the identity of the Lao people before L.P.D.R.'s occupation) through the reconstruction of the Lao New Year celebration. The detachment of the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees from their home countries has eliminated the significance of the Lao New Year celebrations and the collective identity of the past. Thus, the L.P.D.R. successfully reconstructed a new identity based on the L.P.D.R. version among the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees in this study. As a result, the expectation regarding Laos among the next generation of ex-Laotian refugees is different from what they expected.

Overall, this study describes the life journey of the diaspora who migrated because of compulsion. Their efforts to migrate aimed to defend their right to live. This compulsion then creates particular sentiments if it is associated with the country of origin and destination.
REFERENCES

Supporting sources