

## Nationalism in Border Communities: A Phenomenological Study of the Natuna Community

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**Abstract:** This research aims to explore the understanding of nationalism among the Natuna community through a phenomenological approach by detailing the factors that influence their perceptions. The research findings show that national identity in Natuna develops from shared cultural history and myths and is stronger than ethnic identity or origin. The concept of "imagined community" is reflected in the Natuna community's understanding of themselves as part of Indonesia. Phenomenology is used because it allows for exploring and analyzing the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of the Natuna community towards the concept of nationalism in border areas. This research reveals that perceptions of territorial boundaries are considered social constructs that emphasize the imaginary nature of state borders. Education and media play important roles in shaping the understanding of nationalism in Natuna. Cultural and ethnic diversity is seen as unifying rather than divisive.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Border Communities, Phenomenology, Natuna Community

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nationalism is one of the most important concepts in sociological and political science studies. As an ideology, nationalism functions to form collective identity, provide a sense of unity, and create loyalty to the state. This concept becomes increasingly complex when applied to border regions, where national identity often overlaps with diverse ethnic, cultural, and historical identities. One interesting example of the dynamics of nationalism in border regions is the Natuna community, located in the northern part of Indonesia and directly bordering Malaysia and Singapore (Wulandari, 2021), (Hsin-Wen, L., & Sungmoon, 2017)

Natuna has a very important strategic position both economically and politically. This archipelago is rich in natural resources, especially oil and natural gas, which play a major role in Indonesia's economy (BPS, 2020), (M., Abdullah, I., , R., Prasojo, Z., Yuniar, R., & Ritonga, 2017). However, despite having abundant natural wealth, the Natuna community has not fully felt the positive impact of this wealth in the form of economic prosperity and infrastructure development. Natuna's history also shows that this region has been subject to disputes between Indonesia and neighboring countries, adding complexity to building and maintaining nationalism among the Natuna community. (Setiawan, n.d.), (Murtadha, 2019).

Research on nationalism in border regions like Natuna becomes very relevant considering the influence of neighboring countries and unique local dynamics. Several previous studies have examined nationalism in Indonesian border regions, such as in Kalimantan and Papua. Arifin found that border communities have strong cultural identities but are often influenced by foreign cultures, causing dilemmas in their national loyalty (Arifin, 2016), Hartono showed that government programs are effective in increasing national awareness in the Kalimantan-Malaysia border region, although economic dependence on neighboring countries remains a major obstacle (Hartono, 2018). Meanwhile, Rahmawati found dual loyalty among border communities in Papua due to ethnic ties and history with neighboring countries (Rahmawati, 2019),

However, these studies generally focus more on border regions in Kalimantan and Papua, while the context of Natuna, which has unique geographical and historical characteristics, has not been extensively studied in depth. The main weakness of previous research is the lack of focus on the subjective experiences of individuals in border regions that can provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of nationalism in these areas. To fill this gap, this research uses a phenomenological approach to explore how the Natuna community interprets nationalism in their daily lives (Susilawati, 2018), (Iliescu, 2013), (Istighofar, 2021)

The phenomenological approach allows researchers to understand the subjective experiences of individuals and how social, cultural, and economic factors influence their national identity and loyalty. Through this approach, this research is expected to provide deeper insights into the dynamics of nationalism in the Natuna border region and how its community interacts with various external actors, such as the central government and neighboring countries. (Nindito, 2013)

In addition, this research will also evaluate how government policies affect nationalism in Natuna and provide recommendations for developing more relevant and effective policies in the future. By understanding the dynamics of nationalism in Natuna, it is hoped that this research can make a significant contribution to efforts to strengthen national unity and integrity in Indonesia's border regions.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

The approach used in this research is a phenomenological approach, which aims to understand the subjective experience of the Natuna community regarding nationalism. This method involves in-depth interviews with the Natuna community to identify the main themes that emerge from their experiences. In addition, researchers also conducted participatory observations to support interview data.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Ethnosymbolism and Collective Identity

The theory of nationalism proposed by Anthony D. Smith emphasizes the importance of ethnosymbolism in shaping and strengthening national identity. Ethnosymbolism is an approach that highlights the role of symbols, myths, and traditions in building the collective identity of an ethnic group or nation. In the context of Natuna, ethnosymbolism plays a key role in shaping the national identity of the local community (Smith, 1991).

In Natuna, the national identity of the community is enriched by symbols, myths, and traditions that reflect rich ethnic and historical backgrounds. For example, the Natuna community has origin narratives that include stories of migration, cultural assimilation, and historical interactions with neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. These narratives strengthen their sense of togetherness and collective identity as part of Indonesia.

Cultural symbols such as language, music, dance, and religious rituals play an important role in strengthening national identity in Natuna. The Malay language, for example, is not only a means of communication but also a symbol of identity that unites Natuna residents with the wider Malay world while affirming their sovereignty as part of Indonesia. The use of Malay as a cultural symbol shows how language can function as a unifying tool and strong national identity.

Celebrations of national holidays such as Indonesia's Independence Day also become important moments in strengthening national identity in Natuna. Citizen participation in these celebrations shows their commitment to the state and strengthens their sense of nationality. In addition, national symbols such as flags, state emblems, and national anthems are often used in local events and traditional ceremonies, strengthening collective identity and sense of togetherness.

Stories about ancestors who came from various regions such as Malay, Bugis, and Chinese not only reflect genetic and cultural diversity but also strengthen a sense of togetherness within the framework of Indonesian nationalism. According to Smith, these myths and legends are often centered on a 'golden age' or legendary figures that affirm the uniqueness and dignity of the group. In Natuna, these myths strengthen local identity while affirming their membership in the Indonesian nation.

Local history and myths in Natuna also play an important role in shaping national identity. Strong historical narratives provide a basis for a solid collective identity. For example, stories about the past, the struggles of ancestors, and relationships with great kingdoms in the past provide a strong foundation for national identity. These narratives are often conveyed through oral stories, cultural festivals, and traditional ceremonies, strengthening the sense of togetherness and national identity among the Natuna community.

Overall, ethnosymbolism in Natuna society not only strengthens national identity but also creates a deep sense of togetherness. The use of symbols, myths, and traditions as unifying tools shows that national identity is not only shaped by external factors such as government policies, but also by internal factors originating from local culture and history. Thus, the ethnosymbolism approach provides deeper insights into how national identity can be formed and maintained in the context of border communities such as Natuna.

### 3.2. Cultural Symbols and Traditions

Cultural symbols and traditions play an important role in strengthening national identity in Natuna. Through various cultural elements such as language, music, dance, and religious rituals, the Natuna community not only expresses their identity but also affirms their closeness to the Indonesian nation.

The Malay language, for example, is not only a means of communication but also a symbol of identity that unites Natuna residents with the wider Malay world while affirming their sovereignty as part of Indonesia. This language is used in daily life, education, and traditional ceremonies, making it an important component in the collective identity of the Natuna community.

Traditional music and dance also become important cultural symbols. Zapin dance, for example, is one of the dances often performed in official events and cultural festivals in Natuna. This dance not only shows the beauty of traditional art but also strengthens the sense of togetherness and national identity. Through the performance of this dance, the Natuna community celebrates their cultural heritage and affirms their ties to Indonesian national identity.

Religious rituals such as Maulid Nabi and Eid al-Fitr also play an important role in strengthening national identity in Natuna. These celebrations not only become moments to strengthen social bonds among residents but also affirm the national and religious values adhered to by the community. Citizen participation in these celebrations shows their commitment to the state and religion, strengthening their sense of nationality.

Celebrations of national holidays such as Indonesia's Independence Day also become important moments in strengthening national identity in Natuna. On that day, various activities such as flag ceremonies, traditional competitions, and cultural parades are held. The active participation of the community in these activities shows their commitment to the state and strengthens their sense of nationality. In addition, national symbols such as flags, state emblems, and national anthems are often used in local events and traditional ceremonies, strengthening collective identity and sense of togetherness.

Local festivals also play an important role in strengthening national identity. For example, the Natuna Island Festival held every year showcases various traditional arts and cultures, such as dance, music, and Natuna's signature cuisine. This festival not only becomes a venue to promote local culture but also to strengthen the sense of togetherness and national identity among the Natuna community.

The use of cultural symbols and traditions as unifying tools shows how national identity can be built and maintained through existing cultural elements. These symbols not only strengthen the sense of togetherness but also affirm the collective identity of the community as part of the Indonesian nation. Through language, music, dance, religious rituals, and celebrations of major holidays, the Natuna community affirms their identity and strengthens their ties to the nation and state.

Local history and myths play an important role in shaping national identity in Natuna. Historical narratives and myths that develop among the Natuna community not only reflect genetic and cultural diversity but also strengthen a sense of togetherness within the framework of Indonesian nationalism. According to Anthony D. Smith's theory, myths and legends are often centered on a 'golden age' or legendary figures that affirm the uniqueness and dignity of the group.

The Natuna community has various stories about their origins that include migration and cultural assimilation from various tribes, such as Malay, Bugis, and Chinese. These stories are often passed down orally from generation to generation, strengthening social bonds and collective identity among residents. For example, there are stories about ancestors who sailed from the Malay Peninsula and settled in Natuna, bringing their traditions and culture which then blended with local culture.

One of the famous local myths in Natuna is about the origin of Natuna Island. This myth tells that the island was formed from fragments of a large stone thrown by a legendary figure in an attempt to protect the area from enemy attacks. This story not only becomes part of the cultural heritage but also strengthens the sense of pride and love for the homeland among the Natuna community.

Myths and legends about heroic figures are also very influential in shaping national identity in Natuna. Figures such as Tok Nyong dan Megat Hitam are often mentioned in folklore as heroes who defended the sovereignty of the region from external threats. These stories not only strengthen collective identity but also inspire the younger generation to preserve and maintain their cultural heritage.

The history of colonialism also plays an important role in shaping national identity in Natuna. Past experiences under Dutch and Japanese colonial rule left a deep impression on the collective memory of the community. Rebellion and resistance against colonizers often become central themes in local historical narratives, affirming the courage and fighting spirit of the Natuna community in defending their independence. This narrative strengthens the sense of nationality and national identity, showing that they are an integral part of Indonesia's struggle history. (Tarhusin, 2000)

Local history also includes interactions with great kingdoms in the past, such as the Johor Sultanate and the Riau-Lingga Sultanate. Historical relationships with these kingdoms enrich Natuna's cultural heritage and provide a broader historical context for their national identity. The strong Malay cultural influence from these kingdoms is seen in the language, customs, and cultural arts in Natuna, showing how local history and myths can shape national identity.

Thus, local history and myths in Natuna not only become a means to understand the past but also effective tools to strengthen national identity and sense of togetherness. Through these narratives, the Natuna community builds and maintains their identity as part of the Indonesian nation, showing that local history and myths play an important role in the formation and maintenance of nationalism in border regions.

### **3.3. Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner's Theories in Natuna**

Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner are two highly influential figures in the study of nationalism. Both offer different but complementary perspectives in understanding how nationalism is formed and developed in social and cultural contexts. In the case of Natuna, both theories provide important insights to understand the dynamics of nationalism in border regions.

### **3.4. Benedict Anderson's Theory: Imagined Communities**

Benedict Anderson in his book *\*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism\** states that the nation is an "imagined" community. According to Anderson, this community is imagined because its members, although never meeting each other, have a mental image of their togetherness. Nationalism, in Anderson's view, is a product of the development of print technology and language that allows the spread of ideas about nationality. (Anderson, 1991)

In Natuna, this concept of "imagined communities" can be seen in the way the community forms their national identity. Through education, media, rituals, and national symbols, the Natuna community strengthens their identity as part of Indonesia. Schools in Natuna follow the national curriculum which ensures that students receive the same knowledge about Indonesian history and national values. Textbooks, history lessons, and Indonesian as the language of instruction play an important role in shaping this imagined community.

Mass media also plays an important role in spreading ideas about nationality. Nationally managed newspapers, television, and radio bring news and information that connects Natuna with other regions in Indonesia. Television programs that showcase national culture and events help strengthen the sense of nationality among the Natuna community. Thus, through media, the Natuna community remains connected to the national flow of information, strengthening their national identity.

National rituals and symbols such as flag ceremonies, Independence Day celebrations, and the use of state emblems in official events also play a role in shaping national identity. Participation in these rituals shows citizens' commitment to the state and strengthens their sense of nationality. Thus, Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" is very relevant in understanding how nationalism is formed and developed in Natuna.

### 3.5. Ernest Gellner's Theory: Cultural Homogenization\*\*

Ernest Gellner in his book *\*Nations and Nationalism\** argues that nationalism is the result of a cultural homogenization process required by the modern state for administrative and industrial efficiency. According to Gellner, heterogeneous agrarian societies must be transformed into homogeneous industrial societies through education and the use of national language (Gellner, 1983)

In Natuna, this cultural homogenization process is clearly visible through the use of Indonesian as the language of instruction in schools and media. Education in Natuna plays an important role in this process, with a centralized and uniform education system ensuring that all students receive the same values and knowledge about Indonesia. The use of Indonesian is not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of national identity that strengthens unity among various ethnic groups in Natuna.

Cultural homogenization is also supported by government policies that focus on infrastructure development and public services in Natuna. The construction of roads, ports, and other public facilities not only facilitates mobility and access but also integrates Natuna more closely with other regions in Indonesia. These projects demonstrate the state's efforts to unite border regions with the center through equitable development.

Modernization in Natuna also includes increased access to technology and information. The use of the internet and other communication technologies helps connect the Natuna community with national and global information flows, strengthening their national identity as part of modern Indonesian society. Thus, Gellner's theory of cultural homogenization provides a relevant framework for understanding how nationalism is shaped through modernization and development processes in Natuna.

The dominance of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner's theories in Natuna shows how nationalism can be understood through the process of forming imagined communities and cultural homogenization. Although Anthony D. Smith's theory of ethnosymbolism is also relevant, Anderson and Gellner's theories provide deep insights into how national identity is formed and maintained through education, media, and development in Natuna. Thus, this approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of nationalism in border regions.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The dominance of Anthony D. Smith's theory in Natuna is due to the strong element of ethnosymbolism in Natuna society, which includes the use of local symbols, traditions, and myths to strengthen national identity. Although Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner's theories are also relevant, Smith's theory better reflects the social and cultural reality in Natuna, where collective identity and history play an important role in shaping and maintaining nationalism.

This research provides deep insights into how the Natuna community interprets nationalism and how various theories of nationalism can be applied to understand this phenomenon in the context of borders. These findings are important for developing more effective policies in strengthening nationalism in Indonesia's border regions.

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