

# “SPICE ROUTE” AUTHORITY AND LEGITIMACY IN THE PROCESS OF RECONSTRUCTING NATIONAL HISTORY THROUGH CULTURAL-HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

This study discusses the dynamics of relations and contestation between society, corporations and the state, in its attempt to redefine Indonesian identity and to reconstruct national history through the invention of tradition. This study aims to describe the process of interaction that occurs behind the reconstruction of the history of spice route in Indonesia by its actors, both theoretically and empirically. Through this research, I would like to show that the process of reconstruction of national history is not always initiated by political and state elites as the highest authority. I conducted this research through comparative methods, direct observation, participant-observation, in-depth interview, descriptive and reflective analysis. Based on the research conducted, I have discovered that, (1) democratization became a sphere where negotiation of contesting ideas of society, corporations, and the state, took place due to equality in authority and legitimacy; (2) relativity of legitimacy mechanisms as a result of parallel relations and the absence of dominant authority; (3) a two-way cycle of legitimacy as a consequence of democratization; and (4) free interpretation of market-oriented ideology. In conclusion, the process of reinvention of tradition within cultural-historical narrative reconstruction that is completely disconnected from the dominant authority's intervention leads to a new meaning that reduces the political ideology to become highly market-oriented.

**Keywords:** Spice Route, Authority and Legitimacy, Invention of Tradition, Market-Oriented Ideology, Reproduction of Nationalism.

## ABSTRAK

Tesis ini membahas dinamika relasi dan kontestasi antara masyarakat, korporasi dan negara, dalam upayanya mendefinisikan identitas ke-Indonesia-an dan merekonstruksi sejarah nasional melalui rekayasa tradisi. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menguraikan proses interaksi yang terjadi di balik rekonstruksi sejarah jalur perdagangan rempah Indonesia, yang dikenal dengan sebutan “Jalur Rempah”, oleh para aktornya baik secara teoritik

maupun empirik. Melalui penelitian ini, penulis ingin memperlihatkan bahwa proses rekonstruksi sejarah nasional tidak selalu merupakan inisiasi para elit politik maupun negara sebagai pemegang otoritas tertinggi. Dalam kajian ini penulis melakukan penelitian dengan metode komparasi, pengamatan langsung, pengamatan-terlibat (*participant-observation*), wawancara mendalam (*in-depth interview*), analisis deskriptif dan reflektif. Berdasarkan penelitian yang dilakukan, penulis menemukan bahwa, (1) demokratisasi menjadi ruang negosiasi bagi kontestasi gagasan dari masyarakat, korporasi dan negara karena adanya kesetaraan dalam otoritas dan legitimasi; (2) relatifitas mekanisme legitimasi sebagai akibat dari relasi sejajar dan ketiadaan otoritas dominan; (3) adanya siklus legitimasi dua arah (bolak-balik) sebagai konsekuensi dari demokratisasi; dan (4) terjadi pemaknaan bebas atas ideologi yang berorientasi pada pasar. Sebagai kesimpulan, proses rekacipta tradisi dalam rekonstruksi naratif kulturalhistoris yang terlepas sama sekali dari intervensi otoritas dominan menimbulkan pemaknaan baru yang mereduksi ideologi politis menjadi sangat berorientasi pasar.

Kata Kunci: Jalur Rempah, Ideologi Berorientasi Pasar, Otoritas dan Legitimasi, Rekacipta Tradisi, Reproduksi Nasionalisme.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years, there has been a lot of public activity concerning to improve the condition and the less desired image of Indonesia. Its activities are quite varied, ranging from movement in support to green environment, education, preservation of culture, and other social activities, which mostly initiated by public community. Among the reasons is to reviving nationalism and the Indonesian spirit which - according to them - is said to have faded. In addition, the skepticism toward the state and its actors is another reason why these communities feel the need to take a role outside the state system. Culture is considered to be the last effort capable of warding off the image of Indonesia which is doomed in many ways, although it seems that the understanding of what is meant by culture is at a very superficial level, that is limited to the arts (Jones, 2015). Normatively, they believe that what they do can contribute to the growing spirit of Indonesia, more over to the preservation of culture. Thus, image becomes important. They must appear idealistic, cultured, caring about the problems of the nation, as well as popular in public.

The intention to redefine Indonesian identity and reproducing nationalism independently by the community, is seemingly triggered by crisis of identity caused by intense contestation and conflict of interests in today's globalized era. The increasingly unobscure boundaries of the concept of Indonesia as a nation, gave rise to the interpretive ideas on cosmopolitanism over the diversity and history of Indonesia. Besides, for more than half a century, these cultural diversity have been deliberately erased from the official history and collective memory of society by the ruling regime (Heryanto, 2015). Being alienated from its own history and culture, and lost in the contemporary realm, this society unconsciously creating its own imagination in celebrating differences. It is noteworthy that because of being pulled off from its origins

and lack of insight, the society whom are divided into these diverse communities often have different imaginations between each other and even become hyper-nationalist in imagining an ideal vision of Indonesian. In an empirical level, for instance, the overwhelming and exaggerated public reaction to the claims against Indonesia's cultural heritage by foreign country, can be an indicator of how limited the public's knowledge of its own history and culture.

Efforts to redefine nationalism that normally had always been in the hands of government's authority since this country established until the collapse of the New Order, now needs to be reviewed when the opportunity is available to public participation. The discourse of nationalism framed in cultural-historical narratives has the potential to find its new meaning to society as part of urban lifestyle trends closely linked to popular culture, which then is reproduced instantly by the mass media. Romantic cultural-historical narrative seems capable of generating a sense of nationalism while simultaneously giving a new meaning of what it means to be a nation, albeit to varying degrees for everyone. This massive role of mass media cannot be separated from its interests as a profit-oriented corporation. Nationalism, which is closely related with knowledge, is then commodified to drive the market. On the other hand, although often addressed with suspicion, the role of the state is still needed and being yearned for by its people because it is related to funding, facilities and legitimacy. To that extend, I was intrigued to examine further how the efforts of reproducing nationalism when it is done by a plural and democratic society.

To find out how nationalism is reproduced by actors outside the elite political (nonelitist) circle, I have observed communities' actions that volunteered in reconstructing an idealized image of Indonesia, and being facilitated by corporations and the state. Empirical data that I have examined is the participation of communities in developing culturalhistorical narratives about the spice trade in Indonesian archipelago popularly known as the the "Spice Route" in *Museum Week*, an event held as multi-activities exhibition. Museum Week is an annual program organized by the leading mass media company The Jakarta Post. It was held in the National Museum at the end of 2015. In this event, actors involved have diverse motivations. Starting from patriotic spirit, desire to follow trend, became popular to achieve status, to business opportunities and investment. Eventually the cultural-historical narrative of the "Spice Route" has been transformed into an asset to which the rights are fought by many. It transforms into a commodity in the form of brand and intellectual property rights that are ready to be further commodified through diversification of programs and various derivatives, over the long term. This study will also explore the magnitude of the differences of interests between expert, community, media (as corporations) and the state, so that the process of reconstructing the ideal image of Indonesia is like an arena of contestation of ideas.

The aims of this study are as follows: (1) A theoretical description that can explain the reasoning and logic that works behind the reproduction of nationalism constructed by a non-elitist plural society through inventing history. (2) Empirically, describes the interaction process that takes place between society, corporations and the state in reconstructing the ideal imagination of Indonesia and how the imagination is narrated to become a means to redefine identity and reproduce nationalism.

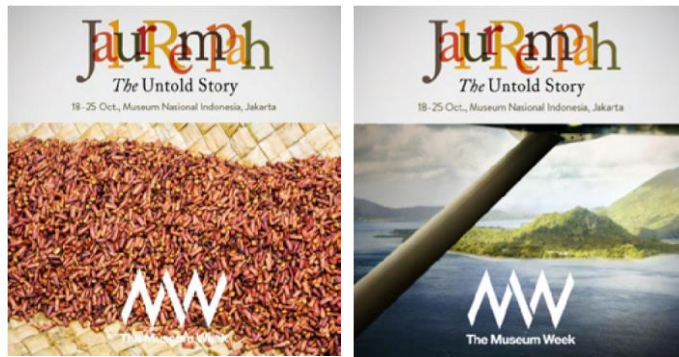


Fig. 1 – Promotional materials in social medias : Facebook & Twitter

## METODOLOGY

Due to the topic of my contemporary ethnographic research which examines further the contestation between state actors and non-state actors in the process of reconstruction of national history, the reproduction of nationalism and its relation to the market, I used multi-sited ethnography as a method. In this method, I have included a comparative study in order to find answers to previously unknown questions of what to do with the object of research but assumed to have contributed to the formation of the phenomena. In other words, no theoretical concepts nor descriptive models have been found to explain it. The absence of a macro model in contextualizing research referrals leads me to enter the crossdisciplinary realm and turn to contemporary sociocultural thinkers to explore further contemporary cultural studies. In addition, the media adds to the complexity of ethnographic research that has reached the multi-site level in constructing its research objects. Now, the new research area through the media tends to further strengthen the design of ethnographic research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Understanding "Spice Route" as a Tradition*

Firstly, as an idea, the "Spice Route" is built in narrative construction. In the construction, Nusantara (a previous name to address Indonesian archipelago) is an ideal model of a civil society that has a certain tradition that runs continuously in a long period of time. The tradition intended in the narrative of the spice route is none other than the intellectual tradition, which is as if the people of the archipelago have a certain ethos that makes it glorious in the past, however this ethos disappears at a certain period of time. The spice route becomes very ideological when it is associated with a value system - which is inseparable from the relation of society to its past history. It does not cease merely as a spice trade route, but becomes a means of enabling intercultural exchange that embodies concepts, ideas and practices. The excellence of the people of Nusantara from time to time (including the state-formation) are assumed to be realized only if the people have a set of values and the ability to benefit from such intercultural exchanges.

Dynamic society, able to adapt to diversity, has the intelligence to optimally empower its natural resources (mainly spices), while playing a vital role in the regional economy and politics. Moreover, the characteristics of a maritime nation - although there is never a standard convention on the subject - in my study, currently became a fantasy of which is being wanted to be reinvented by the society and the state. Even, symbols that evoke patriotic feelings by creating past glorification which are used to go beyond the effectiveness of its historical continuity, to some extent become fiction that led to historical falsification. Historical reconstruction that carries ideas about the past glorious ultimately has a pretension to be preserved, which stops it developing in the context of space and time. It contains a contradiction because if a tradition from time to time remains alive and unchanged, it is assumed that the tradition will never be renewed, in other words, there will never be a reinvention of tradition. In fact, tradition is not static, but social change is constant (Hobsbawm, 1983: p.2).

Secondly, the attempt to reconstruct national history is itself a tradition commonly practiced by the state in order to redefine identity, and to reproduce nationalism. The logical consequence of this tradition is authority and legitimacy. However, regardless of the ideological context above, in a more operational context there has been a tradition breakthrough in efforts to reconstruct national history. In an era of democratization, the discourse of the spice route does not arise through the initiation of the state, but arises from public initiation. It arises in the public domain in a more popular form, as an event program that allows various stakeholders took part. The people's desire to reconstruct their own identity cultivates a tradition of learning and understanding history, in other words an intellectual tradition. Invention of tradition is necessary as to re-aligning with previously constructed vision, or eliminating non-adaptive and non-flexible traditions toward constant change. The invention of tradition may also be the answer to filling the ideological void that once occurred in a particular regime, when the state deliberately undertook uniformity in its cultural policies including how to define identity.



Fig. 2 – The *padewakang* boat that was taken directly from Mandar, West Sulawesi, as an artistic focal point at "Spice Route" exhibition at the National Museum. The replica of this boat is important to be presented to strengthen the characteristics of maritime nations.

### *The Relative Mechanism of Legitimacy*

Still related to the above description, the stakeholders who are dominated by nonstate actors consist of general public with a very heterogeneous background. Both in terms of education and experience, mostly their background were unrelated to the field of history. Other non-state stakeholders are the media corporations who are the program facilitators. While on the other hand, the participation of the state is represented only by the National Museum that provides means for all stakeholders to interpret national history. Here, I found a parallel power relation from the stakeholders. The absence of dominant authority in this three relation is particularly problematic when it comes to the interests that underlie the enthusiasm of each side interpreting and reinterpreting national history. Normatively, each stakeholder has an idealized picture of Indonesia imagined through a cultural-historical narrative that corresponds to its importance. However, when state seems to be ignorant of the people's initiative to reconstruct its own history, corporation takes over the authority to define national history more solely on its capacity to mobilize resources which one of those include capital. Here, I found a parallel power relation from the stakeholders. The absence of dominant authority in this three relation is particularly problematic when it comes to the interests that underlie the enthusiasm of each side interpreting and reinterpreting national history. Normatively, each stakeholder has an idealized picture of Indonesia imagined through a cultural-historical narrative that corresponds to its importance. However, when state seems to be ignorant of the people's initiative to reconstruct its own history, corporation takes over the authority to define national history more solely on its capacity to mobilize resources which one of those include capital. To balance the suddenly unbalanced power relations, the community as the other non-state actors, seeks to gain legitimacy outside the state. And mobilization of experts is one way to gain that legitimacy. However, as the parallel relations between society (represented by the community) and corporation become more unbalanced by changing interests, community needs a stronger legitimator than the intellectual legitimacy from the experts to maintain the position of equality. On the other hand, corporations also need legitimator for another different interests. The only legitimator that can be a counterbalance is the state. Although at first, both the community and corporations tend to look down with cynicism and even skepticism about the role of the state, yet its presence is still wanted.

This is where I find the relative mechanisms of legitimacy. When the state is passive and people turn to the intellectuals to gain legitimacy over the redefinition of identity and cultural-historical reconstruction they seek, new problems arise. Academic legitimacy is actually quite problematic and not as simple as imagined. Expert mobilization that holds various opinions of experts ranging from assumptions to theoretical constructs, incapable of being perfectly absorbed by society (in this case represented by the community) that lacks capacity to reinterpret and re-articulate it in the form of cultural-historical narrative. The opinions of experts who are not always mutually supportive and even crossed one another, eventually demand legitimacy as well. As academic legitimacy is loaded with debate and contestating notions, it could fall when it comes to institutional legitimation, and vice versa. Even complicated, there are

experts within the circle of the state as well as outside the state. These two conditions contribute to the complexity of mechanism of legitimacy.

### ***Free Interpretation upon Market-Oriented Ideology***

I see a common thread between the absence of dominant authority and legitimacy with the democratization that allows the free interpretation of nationalism. Democratization has always been open to market entry. As has been illustrated in the previous description, the stakeholders have differences in motivation. One of the stakeholders that is the non-state actors represented by initiator community of the program have the idealism to bring the cultural-historical narrative of the spice route by sharing knowledge. Sharing becomes important to this community because it puts them in a continuity of history in building a sustainable intellectual tradition, albeit through a simple role. In that sense, they do not have to be a historian in order to be part of cultural-historical reconstruction to reinvent national history. Programs that were designed by the community's development team of the spice route exhibition, had laid distribution of knowledge as its main feature. Therefore, sustainable programs for the next five years would be the formal inclusion of the history of spice route in education curriculum at schools, book publishing, book distribution for local libraries, and infographic timeline exhibition to regions especially related to the history of the spice trade itself. Monthly discussions with inter-disciplinary expert resources in public spaces, to derivative programs that allow for public participation as simple as cooking events that involve wider community for instance, are also considered important to be done. However, knowledge sharing has implications in the availability of resources, especially funding. By highlighting the romantic cultural-historical narrative construction of spice trade, the initiator community were able to manage the program by relying on cross-community networks. They believe that what they do is a contribution to the realization of the ideal picture of Indonesia. The spirit to take part in the process of reconstructing national history has become an attraction for other communities to join and contribute to it. Thus, the lack of funding resources is not an issue any longer, as this community network works together hand-in-hand.

Program acquisition by other stakeholders, in this case corporation, has substantial impact regarding the sustainability of the program. Free interpretations of nationalism in a form of historical-cultural narrative construction found its new meaning and became highly market-oriented. Besides the reduction of the historical-cultural narrative, issue of authority and legitimacy once again surfaced. The disappointment felt by the program initiator community were concerning the need for legitimacy, as well as change in the cultural-historical narrative just for the sake of market. It also means overhauling narrative constructs that have been built before. Debate over intellectual property rights increasingly provides a clearer picture on how corporate desires to take control, without leaving room for other stakeholders to participate reinterpreting the ideal image of Indonesia, as imagined through the construction of cultural-historical narratives in spice route. Since corporate takeovers, programs which were initially designed with an orientation towards knowledge distribution, have undergone significant changes. In the logic of corporation, cultural-historical narrative that reconstructs

national history is an ideal means for corporate branding. Spice route is not more than a brand that could be utilized for both the corporation itself and others who need it. Marketing strategy that involved the appearance of brand ambassadors also known as 'the ambassadors of Spice Route', enthusiasm of celebrities and socialites as visitors, massive media coverage, provide a concrete picture that the legitimacy from the intellectuals is less important compared to market legitimacy. What happens next is negotiating interests to maintain fairness among the stakeholders. Nevertheless, negotiations to find a way out of disagreements often face deadlocks because all stakeholders feel they have equality of authority to legitimize. As a result, the ideological level of history has a potential reduction in ambiguity because it moves like a wild ball that is free to interpret.



Fig. 3 – Special feature with Nicholas Saputra and Happy Salma as 'brand ambassador' for Spice Route. Published in *The Jakarta Post* in *J-Plus*, 18-24 Oktober 2015 as a supplement edition.

### ***Two-Way Legitimacy Cycle, Consequence of Democratization***

In an atmosphere of democratization, when effort to reconstruct national history that was traditionally practiced by the state is now initiated by the public, it will automatically have implications towards the mechanism of legitimacy. The state as the supreme authority has the opportunity to observe and examine how far community can be elaborated or adopted for national interest. Because, the movements of society within certain limits facilitate the work of the state in determining popular policies. The mobilization of resources is not in the hands of the state, but in the hands of the people who are attached to market. If community has gained legitimacy from the market, then the state does not need to strive to gain legitimacy from community. The state only takes momentum to give its 'stamp' to society, then authoritations and legitimacy are fulfilled. In other words, it is not only the people who need the legitimacy of the state, but rather, the state needs the legitimacy from the the people as well. The two-way mechanism of legitimacy between state and community is a cycle of legitimacy applied in the era of democracy. Corporation (in this case representing the market), are more of a catalyst in this process of legitimacy. Even more likely, it is more important for the state to gain legitimacy from the people, rather than the people get legitimacy from the state. This is because society is able to move alone with its catalyst. Meanwhile as a political project,



the state no longer sees reinventing national history as ideologically, but even more fluid by generating market-oriented policies and strategies.

## CONCLUSION

First, the concept of invention tradition by Hobsbawm (1983) places authority and legitimacy as crucial in the process of formalizing traditions that take reference from the past to national interests, especially those that are ideological and political. In this case, the role of the state and the elite is urgently needed as a front-line initiator. Hobsbawm undertook his studies in countries affected by the industrial revolution in Europe. In Indonesia, the process of reconstructing national history through the invention of tradition as part of the process of redefining identity and nationalism, is in fact no longer always initiated by political and state elites as the supreme authority, but rather by a pluralistic non-elitist society. The state is no longer the only dominant authority.

Secondly, the ideal imagination of Indonesia that the society is about to revive is a re-interpretation of the cultural-historical narrative of spice trade in which the reexcavation of symbols of social cohesion and the present value system of society is assumed to be related to its past history, particularly the trace as a maritime nation. In reconstructing the history and redefinition of this identity, the society seek to learn and understand its own history. What they do not realize is that they initiates a breakthrough in common tradition that previously places the state as a patron in defining Indonesia's identity. Besides reinventing tradition as a maritime nation, there is also an invented tradition to re-understand history, and it can be regarded as consciousness to cultivate an intellectual tradition.

Third, there is a parallel relationship between stakeholders that consists of community, corporation, and state, each of which has different interests. This parallel relationship then reaps the problems both in the short and long term due to the absence of dominant authority as it is customary in a process of invention of tradition. The dynamics of contestation between the state and other stakeholders ultimately opens up new spaces in negotiating new discourses. The role of experts as the guardian angel in reconstruction of cultural-historical narrative is also not in a dominant position. This raises the relative legitimacy mechanism.

Fourth, Calhoun (2007) states that nationalism and democracy simultaneously play an important role in maintaining solidarity amidst cultural differences. Democratization nevertheless opens up space for market entry, although the market still has its own logic that freely regulates itself. While invention of tradition in the form of reconstruction national history is apart from the intervention of dominant authority such as the state, the diversity of cultural identity which is celebrated and interpreted freely, in the end gives rise to its own irony. Over interpretation increasingly creates alienated society from its root of culture. This is where the market is using a plural society.

Fifth, in an era of democratization, relation between state and community has always been attracting each other, with market as its catalyst. When cultural-historical narrative construction undergoes market-oriented interpretation, it will embody into popular policies as well as cultural products of creative industry that will continue to experience new meaning. Instead of a very political ideology, national history is now

capable of transforming into branding content as well as educational curriculum content. It can be reborn in widescreen movies as well as the content of presidential speeches. was reborn in the policy of cultural diplomacy as well as the flagship tourism theme of the Ministry of Tourism. In other words, the reconstruction of national history and the redefinition of a market-oriented identity give a new color to the process of reproduction of nationalism.

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