

THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN BANDA ACEH: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT, CULTURAL INTEGRATION, AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOCIAL PROGRESS OF THE MUSLIM SOCIETY

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Abstract

This study explores the historical presence of the Chinese ethnic community in Banda Aceh and their integration within the local Muslim society. Using a qualitative research approach and literature review, this research investigates the interrelation between historical migration, socio-cultural adaptation, and the community's contributions to social and economic development. The findings reveal that the Chinese community has played a significant role in trade, education, and cultural exchange, serving as a bridge between local and global networks. Despite initial challenges related to religion and cultural identity, mutual tolerance and cooperation have fostered a harmonious coexistence between the Chinese and Muslim populations. This research highlights that the integration of Chinese culture within Acehnese society not only strengthens social cohesion but also enriches the multicultural character of Banda Aceh.

Keywords: Chinese Ethnic Group, Banda Aceh, Cultural Integration, Muslim Society, Social Development, History.

A. Introduction

Banda Aceh the capital city of Aceh Province, has long been recognized as a prominent center of Islamic civilization that experienced significant growth beginning in the sixteenth century. As a region whose population predominantly adheres to Islam, Aceh possesses a rich historical tapestry marked by sustained intercultural interactions among diverse ethnic communities, including the Chinese ethnic group. The presence of the Chinese community in Banda Aceh can be historically traced to commercial exchanges between the Sultanate of Aceh and the Chinese Empire during the seventeenth century. Although numerically minor in comparison to other ethnic groups, the Chinese community has played a substantial role in shaping the social and economic landscape of the region. Their participation has not only contributed to local economic advancement but has also facilitated broader processes of social integration and cultural exchange within the predominantly Muslim society of Aceh (Syamsuar et al., 2024).

Over time, the Chinese ethnic community in Banda Aceh has evolved beyond its traditional role as merchants to become an integral component of the city's broader social structure. The interaction between the Chinese and the Acehnese Muslim communities has given rise to a compelling social phenomenon characterized by mutual adaptation and reciprocal contribution to the advancement of Banda Aceh's social, cultural, and economic spheres. Accordingly, it is essential to undertake a deeper exploration of the historical trajectory of Chinese migration to Banda Aceh, the processes of cultural integration between the Chinese and the Muslim communities, and their roles in fostering social and economic development—particularly in strengthening the progress and resilience of the Acehnese Muslim society.

The presence of the Chinese ethnic community in Aceh originated from the flourishing trade interactions between the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam and various regions across Southeast Asia, including China. During the seventeenth century, Banda Aceh emerged as one of the major port cities linking the trade routes between the East and the West. Chinese merchants played a pivotal role in facilitating the exchange of spices and other commodities, thereby becoming an integral component of Aceh's economic structure during that period. Their participation not only strengthened the commercial network of the Sultanate but also contributed to the broader process of cultural and economic interconnection within the region. (Suryadinata, 2002) In the early stages, the Chinese ethnic group primarily served as traders who arrived in Aceh to engage in the exchange of spices and various goods imported from China. Along with their commercial activities, they also introduced their cultural values and traditions, which gradually assimilated with the local Acehnese culture. Over time, many among them chose to settle permanently in Aceh and establish families, leading to the formation of a more stable and enduring Chinese community within the city. This process of settlement and cultural adaptation marked a significant phase in the historical development of Aceh's multicultural society.

However, despite the significant economic role played by the Chinese ethnic community, they encountered considerable challenges in terms of cultural and religious integration (Abdurrahman et al., 2025). The predominantly Muslim Acehnese society often regarded the arrival of the Chinese with a degree of suspicion and social distance, primarily due to substantial differences in religious beliefs and cultural practices. Nevertheless, their presence also generated positive impacts on Aceh's economic development and opened new avenues for social interaction between the two communities. Banda Aceh, as a city rich in history and culture, has thus evolved into a meeting ground for diverse ethnic groups, where mutual encounters and exchanges—including those involving the Chinese community—have contributed to the shaping of its plural and dynamic social fabric. (Wang, 2004)

Although they constitute a minority, the Chinese community has made significant contributions to the social and economic spheres, thereby reinforcing the position of the Acehnese Muslim society within the broader framework of regional development. Through a process of harmonious cultural integration, the Chinese and Muslim communities in Banda Aceh have been able to mutually benefit from each other in various aspects of social, economic, and cultural life. Hence, it is essential to develop a deeper understanding of the history, processes of integration, and contributions of the Chinese community in Banda Aceh in order to provide a more comprehensive depiction of the existing social dynamics within the region. (R. Hidayat, 2022) In light of the historical facts concerning the social presence and contributions of the Chinese community to the development of Islamic society in Aceh, a central research question emerges: *How did the history of the arrival and development of the Chinese ethnic community in Banda Aceh unfold, and what were the processes of their integration with the local Muslim society?* This question is crucial as it provides a focused lens through which to examine both the historical trajectory and the dynamics of cultural and social integration of the Chinese community within the predominantly Muslim context of Acehnese society.

Understanding how the Chinese community arrived and interacted with the local population allows us to trace the roots of their existing relationships and to identify the factors that have influenced their continuity as part of the broader Acehnese community. This formulation provides a comprehensive perspective on the historical background and dynamics of interethnic and interreligious relations in Banda Aceh. It is therefore highly relevant in

explaining how the Chinese community has evolved and sustained its presence within a culturally and religiously diverse society.

B. Research Methods

This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the historical background of the Chinese community's arrival in Banda Aceh, their process of integration with the local Muslim society, and their role in social and economic development that has contributed to the advancement of the Muslim community. To achieve these objectives, this research employs a qualitative approach through library research and content analysis methods, drawing upon various primary and secondary sources relevant to the topic. (Babbie, 2010) The research approach employed in this study is qualitative, emphasizing a deep understanding of the phenomena under investigation—particularly those related to the historical background, cultural integration, and the social and economic impacts of the Chinese community on the Muslim society in Banda Aceh. This approach was chosen because it enables a more comprehensive and detailed portrayal of the social and historical processes occurring within the local context. The research method applied is library research, which allows the researcher to gather and analyze information from a variety of existing scholarly and documentary sources. (Abdurahman, 2011) This method is considered effective for historical and social research, as it allows access to a wide range of information sources related to the history of the Chinese community's arrival, their processes of cultural integration, and their socio-economic contributions within the Banda Aceh society.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Arrival and Development of the Chinese Ethnic Community in Banda Aceh

The arrival of the Chinese ethnic community in Banda Aceh constitutes an integral part of the long historical trajectory of trade interactions between China and the Indonesian archipelago, which further expanded during the period of Dutch colonial presence. The process of their integration with the Muslim community of Aceh occurred gradually through continuous economic, social, and cultural interactions. Despite facing various challenges, including issues of identity tension and social prejudice, this integration process has brought significant positive impacts on the economic and social development of Banda Aceh while simultaneously enriching the local culture. Hence, the successful integration of the Chinese community within Acehnese society illustrates the importance of tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect for diversity in maintaining social harmony and fostering collective progress. At present, the Chinese community in Banda Aceh continues to preserve many of its traditional practices in the realms of culture, religion, and language. They maintain their religious observances, including Buddhism and Taoism, and continue to celebrate various Chinese festivals such as *Imlek* (Chinese New Year) and *Cap Go Meh*. However, they have also increasingly integrated with the Muslim society of Aceh, with many adopting certain local social and cultural norms, particularly in aspects such as marriage customs and everyday language use. (Suryadi, 2022) The Acehnese community, known for its strong adherence to Islamic values, continues to uphold social harmony by respecting and accommodating the cultural diversity that includes the traditions of the Chinese community.

- a. The Historical Arrival and Development of the Chinese Ethnic Community in Banda Aceh

The arrival of the Chinese ethnic community in Indonesia, including in Banda Aceh, cannot be separated from the long history of maritime trade routes connecting China and the Indonesian archipelago. Since the seventh century, Chinese traders had already begun interacting with various regions of Indonesia through maritime trade networks, establishing early forms of economic and cultural exchange that would later influence the development of local societies. (X. Liu, 2005)

The city of Banda Aceh, which served as one of the principal ports of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate in the fifteenth century, attracted numerous traders from various parts of the world, including China. During this period, Chinese merchants were predominantly engaged in the trade of spices, pepper, and other valuable commodities that constituted key products in international commerce. These trading activities not only strengthened economic relations between Aceh and China but also laid the foundation for early cultural exchanges and mutual influence between the two regions. (Suryadi, 2022)

Since the seventh century, maritime trade routes between China and the Indonesian archipelago had developed intensively, facilitated by the strategic roles of ports along the Indonesian coastline, including those in Aceh. The Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam, established in the fifteenth century, emerged as one of the major trading centers in Southeast Asia, particularly renowned for its spice trade. This economic prominence attracted merchants from various nations, including China, to engage in commercial activities in Aceh, thereby fostering early cross-cultural and economic interactions between the two regions.

b. The Chinese Ethnic Community during the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate

The presence of the Chinese in Aceh during this period is believed to have been part of their active involvement in international trade networks. As noted by Liu (2005), the Chinese possessed an extensive trading system that spanned across Southeast Asia and even reached as far as the Middle East. Port cities such as those in Aceh, Makassar, and Malacca served as major hubs where Chinese merchants conducted trade with merchants from India, Arabia, and Europe. These interactions not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also contributed to the transmission of cultural influences and economic practices across regions. (X. Liu, 2005) During that period, Chinese merchants did not merely come to engage in commercial transactions but also interacted with the local population, introduced new technologies, and established mutually beneficial economic relationships. These interactions laid the foundation for the emergence and gradual growth of the Chinese community in the region, which continued to expand over the following centuries. The sustained presence of these traders contributed not only to the economic vitality of Aceh but also to the broader patterns of cultural exchange that shaped the historical development of the area.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, following the rise of the Aceh Sultanate as one of the most powerful maritime kingdoms in Southeast Asia, the role of the Chinese community became increasingly significant. They were not only engaged as traders but also served as intermediaries between the Aceh Sultanate and the outside world. As an Islamic kingdom that had achieved remarkable progress in the fields of economy and commerce, Aceh provided space for the Chinese to interact with the local society. Under the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607–1636), Aceh flourished as a major trading hub, attracting an even greater number of foreign merchants and strengthening its position within regional and international trade networks.

During this period, the Chinese community in Aceh was frequently involved in the trade of pepper, coffee, and other spices, while also importing goods such as silk, porcelain, and various luxury items from China. In many respects, the Chinese community also contributed significantly to the distribution of goods to other regions across the Indonesian archipelago. Several historical sources indicate that Chinese merchants played a vital role in establishing marketplaces and trade networks in Banda Aceh and its surrounding areas. Furthermore, they were instrumental in introducing certain technologies and administrative systems implemented in Aceh's ports, which further strengthened.

c. The Chinese Ethnic Community During Dutch Colonialism in Aceh

When the Dutch began to dominate Indonesia in the 17th century—and particularly during the Dutch colonial period in Aceh in the 19th century—the colonial policies implemented had a significant impact on the Chinese community in Aceh and other regions. The Dutch colonial administration introduced a more structured system to manage the Chinese population, often viewing them as a group “separate” from the indigenous people of Indonesia. Initially, the Dutch applied a policy of social segregation, which required the Chinese to reside in designated areas and imposed restrictions on their economic activities. Despite these limitations, however, the Chinese community continued to play an essential role in Aceh's economy, particularly in trade and small-scale industries. Banda Aceh, as the administrative center of Dutch colonial rule, also witnessed a significant increase in the Chinese population, who played an important role in supporting the logistical and commercial needs of the Dutch administration. During this period, the Chinese community in Aceh began to expand more rapidly, and by the 19th century, they were not only involved in trade but also contributed to the development of local infrastructure such as shops, hospitals, and schools. This development marked a new phase in the socio-economic presence of the Chinese in Banda Aceh, highlighting their growing integration and contribution to the region's urban and economic landscape.(Mulyana, 2009)

d. The Chinese Ethnic Community in the Post-Independence Era

Following Indonesia's independence in 1945, the Chinese community in Aceh underwent several significant transformations. During the post-independence period, this community, like their counterparts across the archipelago, had to adapt to the rapidly changing political and social landscape of the newly established nation. Despite facing political tensions and social challenges—particularly during the New Order era, when Chinese identity and cultural expression were heavily restricted—the Chinese community in Aceh continued to play a vital role in the local economy. Their involvement remained prominent in sectors such as trade, small-scale industries, and entrepreneurship, contributing substantially to the region's economic development and urban livelihood.

During this period, although many members of the Chinese community continued to preserve their cultural identity through religious and social activities, they also made considerable efforts to integrate more fully into the broader Indonesian society. In Banda Aceh, several Chinese families began to assimilate with the local population, particularly through interethnic marriages, which significantly facilitated social and cultural integration. This gradual process of adaptation allowed the Chinese community to maintain elements of their heritage while simultaneously becoming an integral part of the socio-cultural fabric of Acehnese society. Moreover, elements of Chinese culture have gradually become visible in the daily life of Acehnese society, particularly in the realms of cuisine and festive

celebrations. For instance, the Chinese New Year (Imlek), which was initially celebrated exclusively by the Chinese community, has increasingly gained broader recognition and acceptance among the Acehese people. This phenomenon reflects a growing sense of cultural tolerance and mutual respect between the Chinese ethnic community and the Muslim population of Aceh, symbolizing a harmonious coexistence within a diverse social fabric. (Rahman, 2011)

2. .The Process of Integration with the Local Muslim Community

The integration of the Chinese ethnic community with the Muslim society of Aceh represents a complex and multifaceted process. This interaction involves two groups with distinct cultural and religious backgrounds, yet bound by a long history of mutual contact and adaptation. The process of integration has been influenced by various factors—economic, social, cultural, and religious—which have played roles both in bridging and, at times, deepening the gaps between the two communities. Therefore, the integration of the Chinese in Aceh’s Muslim society can be understood as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by continuous negotiation, mutual understanding, and shared participation in the local socio-economic structure.

Economic factors have served as a primary bridge strengthening the relationship between the two communities. In addition, interethnic marriages, cultural acculturation, and religious tolerance have also played pivotal roles in fostering deeper integration. Despite the challenges—particularly those related to discrimination and religious differences—the Acehese and Chinese communities in Banda Aceh have successfully built a more harmonious relationship. This harmony is reflected in the increasing levels of social, economic, and cultural cooperation that have developed over time, demonstrating a mutual commitment to coexistence and shared progress. (Darmono, 2020)

The process of integration between the Chinese ethnic community in Banda Aceh and the Muslim Acehese population has occurred gradually through several channels—social, cultural, and economic. One of the primary pathways has been economic interaction. A significant portion of the Chinese population in Banda Aceh engaged as small-scale entrepreneurs and traders, particularly in the trade of pepper, copra, and various other spice commodities, which facilitated direct contact with the local Acehese community. This economic collaboration provided opportunities for continuous interaction and the establishment of enduring social relationships between the two groups.

a. Economic Factors and Interethnic Marriages between the Acehese and the Chinese

integration between the Chinese and Acehese communities also occurred through interethnic marriages, which served as an effective means of reducing social tension. Although differences in religion and culture initially posed obstacles, marriages between Acehese and Chinese individuals gradually became more common during certain historical periods. These unions not only fostered closer familial ties between the two groups but also enriched the cultural heritage of both communities, creating a foundation for deeper social cohesion and mutual understanding. However, the process of integration was not entirely smooth. The Chinese community faced numerous challenges, including social prejudices that stemmed from persistent stereotypes portraying them as “foreign” and “different.” Moreover, during the New Order era, government policies that emphasized cultural

homogenization often marginalized Chinese cultural expression. Despite these constraints, the Chinese community in Banda Aceh managed to preserve their cultural identity while simultaneously adapting to the broader social life of Acehnese society. This resilience reflects their ability to coexist within a pluralistic social framework while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity. (Heryanto, 2008)

Chinese merchants brought a variety of goods that were highly valued by the Acehnese, including textiles, metalware, and porcelain from China, while in return they imported spices and other local products from Aceh. This mutually beneficial trade fostered a sense of economic interdependence between the Acehnese and the Chinese communities, ultimately strengthening the ties between the two groups. Over time, Chinese traders began to establish various enterprises in Banda Aceh, including shops, restaurants, and even hospitals, marking their growing role in the urban and economic development of the city. (D. Ang, 2021) During the Dutch colonial period, the Chinese community also played a role in supporting the colonial economic policies, which further expanded their trade networks and strengthened their influence within Aceh's local economy. Through their involvement in commerce and supply distribution, the Chinese not only became intermediaries between the colonial administration and local merchants but also contributed to the integration of Aceh's economy into the broader colonial trading system.

The presence of the Chinese ethnic community in the economic sector had a significant influence on the process of social integration, as they frequently interacted with the local population through various commercial activities involving the exchange of goods, services, and knowledge. These continuous interactions not only facilitated mutual economic benefits but also fostered cultural understanding and social cohesion between the Chinese and Acehnese communities. (Masyhuri, 2013) One of the most tangible forms of integration between the Chinese ethnic group and the Acehnese community can be observed in the phenomenon of interethnic marriage. During certain periods, particularly in the post-independence era, some individuals from the Chinese community in Banda Aceh married Acehnese people, the majority of whom are Muslims. These interethnic unions became a deeper form of integration, as the children born from such marriages often possessed a dual identity, blending elements of both Chinese and Acehnese cultures.

b. Acculturation with Acehnese Culture

This phenomenon illustrates that integration extends beyond the economic sphere, encompassing the social and cultural dimensions of everyday life. Interethnic marriages serve as a tangible manifestation of mutual willingness between the two communities to transcend cultural and religious boundaries, thereby fostering deeper social cohesion and promoting harmonious intercultural relations (Mulia et al., 2024). Furthermore, these interethnic marriages enable the emergence of a generation capable of navigating between two distinct cultural identities, thereby enriching the social life of both communities. This process, however, does not always proceed smoothly, given the significant religious differences that exist. Nevertheless, the tolerant attitude of the predominantly Muslim Acehnese society and the cultural adaptability of the Chinese community have together contributed to the creation of a more harmonious social environment. In addition to economic factors and interethnic marriages, cultural dimensions also play a pivotal role in the process of integration. The Chinese community in Banda Aceh continues to preserve various elements of their cultural heritage, including the use of the Mandarin language, the observance of religious festivities such as the Lunar New Year (*Imlek*) and *Cap Go Meh*, as well as distinctive culinary traditions. Nevertheless, they also exhibit a remarkable degree of openness toward Acehnese culture, which is deeply rooted in Islamic values.

In everyday interactions, members of the Chinese community in Banda Aceh have gradually assimilated certain aspects of local culture, such as employing the Acehnese language in daily communication and participating in customary practices during major celebrations, including *Idul Fitri*. Conversely, the Acehnese population has also begun to embrace selected elements of Chinese culture, particularly in the realm of gastronomy—for instance, *Mie Aceh*, a renowned local dish that reflects a profound influence of Chinese culinary techniques. This phenomenon signifies a deepening process of cultural acculturation between the two communities, reflecting their mutual adaptation and the gradual formation of a shared cultural identity. (Mulyana, 2009)

Conversely, segments of Acehnese society continue to perpetuate certain stereotypes toward the Chinese community, particularly in relation to religious distinctions and divergent cultural practices. However, these perceptions have not significantly impeded the social interactions and coexistence between the two groups. Rather, such differences have become a source of cultural diversity and enrichment, contributing to the broader formation of Aceh's composite social identity (Masyhuri, 2013)

c. Religious Tolerance as a Foundation for Social Integration

Religious tolerance constitutes a fundamental pillar in facilitating the integration of the Chinese ethnic minority into Aceh's predominantly Muslim society. Despite Islam being the dominant religion in the region, the Acehnese are generally characterized by a pragmatic and inclusive attitude toward religious diversity. Members of the Chinese community, the majority of whom adhere to Buddhism and Taoism, are able to exercise their religious and cultural practices with considerable freedom, as long as such expressions remain respectful of local Islamic values and do not contravene the prevailing norms of social harmony.

Such tolerance is manifested in multiple facets of social life, particularly through the active participation of members of the Chinese community in Islamic celebrations, including *Idul Fitri* and the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*Maulid Nabi Muhammad SAW*), which serve to reinforce social cohesion and mutual understanding. Conversely, the Acehnese population recognizes and accommodates the observance of Chinese cultural and religious festivities, such as the Lunar New Year (*Imlek*). Consequently, religion and interfaith tolerance emerge as vital foundations for achieving a more cohesive and harmonious integration between the Chinese and Acehnese communities. (Sihombing, 2011)

3. Challenges and Implications of the Integration Process

Despite the long-standing nature of the integration process, a number of socio-political challenges remain evident. During Indonesia's New Order regime, governmental policies toward the Chinese ethnic minority were predominantly assimilationist in nature, emphasizing the creation of a monolithic national identity at the expense of ethnic and cultural plurality. These state-imposed measures often marginalized expressions of Chinese cultural identity and compelled conformity to the dominant Indonesian sociocultural framework. Consequently, such policies had a profound impact on interethnic relations between the Chinese and Acehnese communities, constraining cultural expression while still allowing limited avenues for constructive social engagement. Moreover, social and economic disparities have constituted persistent obstacles to the full integration of the Chinese ethnic community. Some groups within Acehnese society continue to regard the Chinese as an "alien community," often

associated with disproportionate economic privilege and influence. Despite the persistence of such perceptions and structural inequalities, the broader Acehese society has generally exhibited a commendable level of tolerance and social openness, thereby fostering more effective and harmonious interethnic integration (Rahman, 2011)

The process of integration has exerted considerable influence across economic, social, and cultural spheres. Economically, the Chinese community in Banda Aceh has been central to local development, acting as a primary force in commerce and services while contributing substantively to infrastructure projects. Furthermore, they have played a critical role in generating employment opportunities for the local population. On the social front, despite persisting challenges, integration has produced positive effects by promoting cultural pluralism and enhancing interethnic understanding, thereby strengthening social cohesion within the broader community. (Mulyana, 2009)

The assimilation and acculturation processes between the Chinese ethnic minority and the Acehese community illustrate that cultural pluralism can be successfully accommodated within a society founded upon principles of tolerance. A notable example is the celebration of the Lunar New Year (*Imlek*) in Banda Aceh: initially an exclusively Chinese festivity, it has increasingly been observed by portions of the Muslim community as well, signifying a growing mutual appreciation and acceptance of cultural practices. (Masyhuri, 2013) The cultural ramifications of interethnic interaction are prominently observable within Acehese society. The Chinese community has contributed to the enrichment of local culture by introducing distinctive traditions, artistic forms, and culinary practices. Notably, Chinese culinary staples such as noodles and dumplings have been progressively adopted and assimilated into the daily routines of the Acehese population. This cultural acculturation underscores that, notwithstanding significant differences, both communities can coexist harmoniously through mutual appreciation and respect. (Rahman, 2011)

D. Conclusion

This study reveals that the history of the Chinese ethnic community in Banda Aceh originated from trade activities, which gradually evolved into broader social interactions between the Chinese and the local Muslim population. The process of cultural integration occurred progressively, influenced by various factors such as shared economic interests, common social values, and the adaptive capacities of both communities. The Chinese community has played a significant role in the social and economic development of Banda Aceh, particularly in commerce, education, and various social activities that have contributed to the advancement of the Muslim population. Despite facing challenges in preserving their cultural identity, the Chinese community has adapted effectively and made substantial contributions to regional development. This study also indicates that the relationship between the Chinese and Muslim communities in Banda Aceh exemplifies a successful case of cultural integration within a context of social and religious diversity. Employing a qualitative approach and literature-based research methods, this study provides a deeper understanding of interethnic and interreligious dynamics, while highlighting the important contributions of the Chinese community to the social and economic development of Banda Aceh.

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