

From Religious Identity to Cultural Citizenship: Identity Transformation and Civil Rights Negotiation among MLKI Banyumas

Dari Identitas Keagamaan menuju Kewargaan Budaya: Transformasi
Identitas dan Negosiasi Hak-Hak Sipil di Kalangan MLKI Banyumas

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Abstract: *This research examines how the community of religious adherents who are members of the Supreme Council of Belief in the One Almighty God of Indonesia (MLKI) in Banyumas transforms their religious identity into a cultural identity as a strategy to negotiate recognition and obtain civil rights. This article puts forward a conceptual argument that differs from existing legal-administrative studies: rather than viewing recognition solely as a matter of state regulation, this article frames identity transformation as a deliberate practice of cultural citizenship (cultural citizenship). The analysis is built primarily on Amartya Sen's theory of identity specifically the distinction between singular identity, plural identity, and the "illusion of identity" and is strengthened by Erving Goffman's concept of stigma, Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor's theory of recognition, and Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity. Using a qualitative socio-anthropological approach through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, this study found that MLKI Banyumas reduces stigma and discrimination by highlighting cultural dimensions through activities such as visiting and participating in the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), thus transforming marginalized religious identities into recognized cultural identities without abandoning their beliefs. The novelty of this article lies in theorizing cultural identity as a form of negotiated citizenship strategy, through which marginalized faith communities gain social legitimacy while maintaining their spiritual beliefs.*

Keywords: Believers In Belief; Discrimination; Identity Transformation; MLKI; Culture.



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Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana komunitas penghayat kepercayaan yang tergabung dalam Majelis Luhur Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa Indonesia (MLKI) di Banyumas mentransformasikan identitas keagamaannya menjadi identitas kebudayaan sebagai strategi untuk menegosiasikan pengakuan dan memperoleh hak-hak sipil. Artikel ini mengajukan argumentasi konseptual yang berbeda dari studi-studi hukum-administratif yang telah ada: alih-alih memandang pengakuan semata sebagai persoalan regulasi negara, artikel ini membingkai transformasi identitas sebagai praktik kewargaan budaya (kewarganegaraan budaya) yang disengaja. Analisis dibangun terutama dengan teori identitas Amartya Sen khususnya pembedaan antara identitas tunggal, identitas jamak, dan “ilusi identitas” serta diperkuat oleh konsep stigma Erving Goffman, teori pengakuan Axel Honneth dan Charles Taylor, dan gagasan identitas budaya Stuart Hall. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif sosio-antropologis melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa MLKI Banyumas mengurangi stigma dan diskriminasi dengan menonjolkan dimensi kebudayaan melalui kegiatan seperti anjangsana dan keikutsertaan dalam Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB), sehingga mengubah identitas keagamaan yang termarginalkan menjadi identitas budaya yang diakui tanpa meninggalkan keyakinannya. Kebaruan artikel ini terletak pada penterangan identitas budaya sebagai bentuk strategi kewargaan yang dinegosiasikan, yang melaluinya komunitas kepercayaan yang termarginalkan memperoleh legitimasi sosial sambil mempertahankan keyakinan spiritualnya.

Kata Kunci: Penghayat Kepercayaan; Diskriminasi; Transformasi Identitas; MLKI; Budaya.

Introduction

The existence of believers in indigenous spirituality is inseparable from the religious history of the archipelago.¹ What is now classified as “belief” is arguably the oldest stratum of religiosity in Indonesia, predating the arrival of Hinduism, and has been variously interpreted by socio-anthropologists as religion, mysticism, and spirituality. Yet precisely because their status appears ambiguous within a modern bureaucratic state that recognizes religion through formal, document-based criteria, believers have long been positioned outside the category of “religion” and treated instead as a mere belief system.²

Since independence, groups claiming to follow ancestral religions collectively termed believers have asserted that they are not part of the six officially serviced religions.³ As citizens whose convictions are “not recognized” by the state, their existence has frequently been marginalized and their civil rights neglected.⁴ The root of this discrimination lies in a rigid and exclusive definition of religion, in which the Ministry of Religion treats a holy book, a prophet, and international recognition as the defining elements of a valid religion.⁵ This definition produced concrete civil-rights consequences, especially in public services, where believers were often compelled to select one of the recognized religions in order to register marriages or other administrative matters.

During the transition from the Old Order to the New Order (1968–1978),

negative stigma hardened into the principal public identity of the community, which was frequently equated with communism on the assumption that those without a recognized religion were godless.⁶ A brief opening came in 1973, when MPR Decree IV equated the position of religion and belief while still distinguishing them; but a subsequent decree reframed belief as a cultural identity rather than a religious one, again obstructing access to identity documents, family cards, and marriage certificates. Legal recognition was eventually secured through Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016, which affirmed the equal rights and guarantees of believers as citizens. Even so, the community continues to face stigma, the label of “deviance,” and obstacles to employment and public access, which often pushes believers to conceal their identity.

Scholarship on believers in beliefs can be grouped into two clusters. The first cluster addresses the legal and administrative dimension of recognition. Ulum and Jufri analyse the implementation of the Constitutional Court decision and the regulation of population administration, while studies of marriage registration examine procedural barriers in civil documentation.⁷ These works share a normative concern with how state regulation either secures or obstructs the rights of believers. The second cluster documents discrimination and social stigma in public services and everyday life, including Hendrik’s account of service delivery and Budijanto’s study of human-rights respect in Bandung.⁸

Taken together, these studies converge on a shared premise that the recognition of believers is primarily a problem of law and policy and they tend to portray believer as objects of state regulation whose situation improves or worsens with shifts in formal rules. What they leave under examined is the agency of believers themselves: the cultural strategies through which communities actively reposition their own identity in order to negotiate recognition from below. The conceptual gap this article addresses, therefore, is not merely the absence of a study of MLKI Banyumas as a site, but the absence of a theoretical account of how a marginalized faith community converts a stigmatized religious identity into a legitimate cultural one as a deliberate strategy of citizenship. Closing this gap requires an explicitly identity-centred and recognition-centred framework rather than a purely legal one.

This article accordingly examines the form of identity transformation undertaken by believers in God Almighty affiliated with MLKI in Banyumas, together with their efforts to sustain their existence and claim their rights as citizens. MLKI is a forum established as a representative channel between the state and the various belief organizations under its umbrella; in Banyumas it encompasses around nine associations with approximately 1,410 members. The central questions are how MLKI Banyumas transforms its identity from the religious to the cultural register, how this transformation operates as a strategy for negotiating recognition and civil rights, and

how the community sustains its spiritual convictions even as it reframes itself culturally.⁹

Research Method

This is qualitative field research employing a socio-anthropological approach, since its primary object is the community of MLKI believers in Banyumas. The design is descriptive-analytical: it describes the MLKI belief system comprehensively and analyses the process of identity transformation through which the community sustains its existence. The study draws on primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained directly through participant observation and in-depth interviews with actors directly involved in the phenomenon under study, while secondary data were drawn from relevant literature, documents, and archives.

Fieldwork was conducted in the Banyumas region over a period of several months, during which the researchers attended community activities, including *anjangsana* visits, in order to observe interaction in its natural setting. Informants were selected purposively according to explicit criteria: (1) active membership in, or leadership of, an association affiliated with MLKI Banyumas; (2) direct experience of discrimination or of the community's recognition efforts; and (3) willingness to be interviewed and to have their statements used for academic purposes. Following these criteria, the study engaged a set of key informants comprising MLKI administrators (including its secretary) and ordinary members drawn from several associations, among them *Tri Tunggal Bayu and Kapribaden*, so as to capture both organizational and grassroots perspectives. Interviews were semi-structured and guided, allowing informants to speak freely around a flexible interview guide.

Data were collected through three techniques. Observation was used to map the context and activities of the MLKI Banyumas community and to identify suitable interviewees. Interviews elicited information from purposively selected informants. Documentation captured important objects and records and served to verify previously obtained data. Analysis proceeded through what we describe as a normative-empirical reading: empirical findings from the field were systematically juxtaposed with the normative and theoretical propositions of the identity and recognition framework set out above, so that field data and concepts could be brought into dialogue and refined against one another. Here "normative" refers not to legal doctrine but to the conceptual expectations derived from the theories of Sen, Goffman, Honneth, Taylor, and Hall, against which the empirical material is interpreted. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation cross-checking interview statements against observation and documentary evidence, and comparing accounts across informants from different associations so that no single claim rests on an isolated source.

MLKI Banyumas: Organizing Faith, Culture, and Civil Rights

According to data that has been successfully collected by MLKI Banyumas, the number of believers in the Banyumas district is around 1,410, which is divided into 9 groups. All these associations have different characteristics and characteristics in undergoing each ritual of their beliefs.¹⁰ Based on the results of the research conducted, the community group of believers in Banyumas actually consists of many groups of believers and organizations. Each group must contain teachings whose substance is the same, namely, about philosophical and theological teachings and efforts to preserve ancestral traditions.¹¹

There are also two groups of believers in Banyumas, namely, groups of believers who are affiliated with the community and non-believers. The two groups have significant differences in the context of their rituals and religious practices. For the group of believers, the community tends to be more systematic and organized. Usually, in a community, there are several important figures who are a benchmark or elder in everything related to their beliefs.¹² For example, in Banyumas Regency, several associations have elders, where each of these associations has the same outline of spiritual principles, namely *Manunggaling kawulo Gusti*, which in Javanese society is understood as an individual relationship with the Supreme Creator. The following is a list of groups of believers in Banyumas that researchers have succeeded in obtaining.

Table 1. List of Faith Believers Association in Banyumas

No	Name of the Association	Address	Number of Members
1	<i>Persada Sapta Darma</i>	Karangsalam, RT 01 RW 02 Kec. Baturraden Kab. Banyumas	110/Member
2	<i>Paguyuban Budaya Bangsa (PBB)</i>	Banjarpanepen, RT 02 RW 04 Kec. Sumpiuh Kab. Banyumas	28/Member
3	<i>Tri Tunggal Bayu</i>	Jl.Purwobakti No.30 Purwanegara Kec.Purwokerto Timur Kab.Banyumas	49/Member
4	<i>Tri Luhur</i>	Jl. Tipar Baru 2 No.11 Kranji Purwokerto Kec. Purwokerto Selatan	100/Member
5	<i>Putra Rama</i>	Perum.Limas Agung Blok P.8 No.14 Bancarkembar Kec.Purwokerto Utara Kab.Banyumas	990/Member
6	<i>Wayah Kaki</i>	Desa Suro, Kecamatan Kalibagor	13/Member
7	<i>Rukun Warga</i>	Kalibagor RT 04 RW 03 Kec.Kalibagor Kab.Banyumas	70/Member
8	<i>Kaweruh Hak 101</i>	Desa Adisana RT 03 RW 03 Kec.Kebasen Kab.Banyumas	35/Member
9	<i>Kapribaden</i>	Jl. Sudagaran 1 RT 03 RW 02 Pwt Kulon	15/Member

These figures are not merely descriptive; their distribution reveals the social structure of the community and helps explain its strategic behaviour. The membership is strikingly uneven: a single association, Putra Rama, accounts for roughly 990 of the 1,410 members around seventy per cent of the total while the remaining eight associations share the rest, several with fewer than fifty members each. Three structural factors help account for this dominance. First, Putra Rama is located in the urban core of Purwokerto, where a denser and more mobile population lowers the cost of organizing and offers relative anonymity, whereas the smallest associations *Wayah Kaki* and *Kapribaden*, with thirteen and fifteen members are anchored in villages or peripheral neighbourhoods. Second, the larger, more centrally located associations are better positioned to act as interlocutors with the state, which tends to consolidate members around the organizations most visible to officialdom. Third, the prevalence of small, elder-led associations reflects a community organized around localized spiritual lineages rather than a single congregation, so that authority is dispersed across many figures of reference.

Read through the theoretical lens, this structure matters for resilience and recognition. A community fragmented into many small, village-based associations is more exposed to localized stigma and less able to press claims individually; consolidation under a single umbrella MLKI and the relative prominence of a large urban association provide the organizational capacity needed to negotiate recognition collectively. The uneven distribution, in other words, is part of what makes a federating body like MLKI both necessary and effective.

The nine associations are currently affiliated with the *Mejelis Luhur* Belief in God Almighty, or abbreviated as MLKI Banyumas. The organization is a forum for faith groups in Banyumas. Practically, this organization plays a role in providing services and advocacy from members of the faith. MLKI has a systematic structure and is practiced by members of the community who adhere to the beliefs. Among the main tasks of MLKI is to collect data on believers and help its members obtain their rights as Indonesian citizens. Another important task of MLKI is also to gather all the aspirations of faith groups as an effort to solve the problems experienced by its members, both social and related to state administration.

MLKI is also considered an official representation or representative of the entire community, adhering to the beliefs in Banyumas. It is also reflected in the MLKI emblem, which is made of gold, mountains, and red and white shawls. The gold star is used as a symbol to show the meaning of the divinity of the Almighty, while the mountain symbolizes the Javanese philosophy of "*sangkan paraning dumadi*," which means the greeting of the origin of life and the journey towards God Almighty. The symbol of the red and white shawl has the meaning of unity and unity of Indonesian citizens¹³. From the MLKI emblem itself, it can be interpreted that believers are

entities of Indonesian citizen groups who recognize the One Godhead and are virtuous. Interpreted through the framework of this study, the emblem is itself an act of identity work: it positions believers simultaneously as devout, as bearers of Javanese cultural heritage, and as loyal citizens an early, condensed expression of the plural identity that the community will later mobilize. Its stated vision to realize “a whole Indonesian human being” in a just and prosperous society, and to achieve safety and peace in the spirit of *Memayu Hayuning Bawana* frames the assertion of civil rights as continuous with, rather than opposed to, the cultural and ethical ideals of Javanese spirituality, an articulation that anticipates the community’s later strategy of social resilience through cultural belonging.

As already mentioned, one of the main tasks of MLKI is to provide public services for the community of believers. One of the efforts to do this is to hold several main activities, namely *anjangsana*, which is a visit to faith groups in Banyumas to provide socialization and various explanations related to the services provided by MLKI Banyumas to the community. In addition, MLKI can absorb all the aspirations of community groups that believe in Banyumas, if they have problems caused or caused by community trust.¹⁴

Discrimination and Challenges of MLKI Banyumas Believers

Discrimination against the existence of MLKI Banyumas belief groups is one of the reasons this research was conducted. It seems that the discrimination and stigma obtained by the MLKI Banyumas faith group involves several social elements. This element consists of the level of government as a holder of power, which then has an impact on the views of the general public. As happened to faith groups in general, they have been discriminated against since the Old Order era and continue to this day, but with a somewhat different intensity.¹⁵

Historically, this phenomenon has started since the drafting of the 1945 Constitution by BPUPKI on the issue of religious identity and Indonesian citizens. Precisely on May 30 to June 1, 1945, when Ir. Soekarno, as a representative of Muslim nationalists, proposed a national identity with a *nation state*. That, in his view, citizens should be given freedom for the Indonesian people to worship their God. This means that the identity of Indonesian citizens is not mapped to religious identity. More specifically, Soekarno then proposed that Indonesia should not only be based on Islamic principles, not Sculler, but also based on Pancasila.

The debate on religious identity in Indonesia was reaffirmed after the decree of the Ministry of Religion on January 3, 1946. Some researchers, such as Maarif, said that the establishment of the Department of Religion is a sign that Islam has become the majority religion in Indonesia, which actually has a specialty. The reason is that one of the backgrounds behind the establishment of the Ministry of Religion is to

serve Muslims in Indonesia. This argument is also strengthened by the birth of Law No. 22 of 1946 concerning marriage registration, talaq, and referral; this law is stated to be oriented exclusively to Muslims in Java and Madura.

Signals of discrimination against religious groups are increasingly shown by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. After he was given the authority to take care of the various major religions in Indonesia, including Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the Ministry of Religion overhauled one of the most fundamental things, namely the definition of "religion". Believers who were originally recognized as a religion in Indonesia must change their status to not be part of a religion, but only as a belief.¹⁶ This is marked by the definition of Religion which the Ministry of Religion states that *"Religion includes only three elements: the existence of the prophet, the holy book and international recognition."* Of course, this kind of definition is exclusive, *rigid*, and even seems sectarian, so it has a direct impact on groups of believers who are only considered as beliefs and are not part of religion.¹⁷

Since then, discrimination against faith groups has been increasingly clearly shown. The Ministry of Religion began to map religious and non-religious groups of people. In other words, for people who do not embrace the religion of the six religions recognized above, it is considered non-religious. So that in the context of the state's service and treatment of this group, it is clearly very different from the community group that embraces a recognized religion. More than that, the state then formed an institution called the Supervisory Flow of Public Trust (PAKEM). This institution was formed as a response to the many streams of spiritual beliefs among the community, which at that time amounted to around 360 religious and spiritual streams. In the practical realm, PAKEM is one of the frontlines for monitoring, checking, and dismantling groups of believers.¹⁸

The bad stigma thrown at believers was increasingly massive in 1966, precisely since the bustle of the G30 SPKI event. Religious groups are suspected of being part of the communists, so cultural experts and art actors are part of the target of kidnapping and exposure. For this reason, many faith groups have to hide and stop various rituals of belief; at a more critical level, these groups prefer to embrace a religion recognized by the state as an attempt to maintain their safety. Such cases also occurred in the Banyumas community; followers of Kaweruh Naluri (KWN) were forced to choose one of the five major religions. So, they are forced to choose from the five religions. Continuing to other schools in Banyumas, such as the adherents of Eyang Bonokeling, this group of believers was accused of being one of the groups of people who followed the PKI. This group has to accept direct discrimination from society, be chased, and become victims of violence.

Discrimination for religious groups has never occurred in history; until now, it still occurs. Based on the results of direct observation and interviews with several

members of MLKI Banyumas, they shared a lot about their condition, which has never escaped discrimination and negative stigma from society in general. As told by AZ, one of the speakers of this research, revealed various acts of discrimination carried out by the community against the group of believers in Banyumas:

“As a group of believers, they often receive discriminatory treatment. The obvious impact felt due to this discrimination is the psychological impact, where the ancestors of the believers are ridiculed and seen as godless people or are members of a forbidden group / PKI so that it puts a lot of pressure on the believers. As a result, the number of believers has decreased drastically and is coupled with a rule by the Minister of Home Affairs that states that believers must empty the religion column on their identity card or be filled in by one of the recognized religions in Indonesia. One example of conflict that occurred with the surrounding community was the destruction of a place of worship of one of the associations in Banyumas. In addition, another example of discrimination was felt by one of the believers who was looking for a job where the religion column was blanked into question by the company and became the reason for the participant’s failure in looking for a job.”

Based on AZ’s statement, it can be seen that the phenomenon of discrimination against believers experienced by the people of Banyumas consists of two elements at once. The first element comes from the ruler or government that provides rules to blank the religion column on the identity card of a group of believers. Second, discrimination comes directly from the community as shown by the incident of a place of worship in one of the *baguyuban* in Banyumas. Ironically, the discrimination also continues in the public sphere, namely, not being provided with equal employment opportunities for religious believers recognized by the state. Worse, the discrimination also spread to one family of believers.¹⁹ They are often accused and considered godless, even considered enemies of other people who embrace the official religion. This also happened to the family of Mr. Anggoro Adi P., one of the research resource persons who is a group of believers of the Tri Tunggal Bayu Association:

“Since I became a believer, there were some people who forbade their children to play with me because I was considered non-religious, until I was evacuated to another place”.

These experiences can be read directly through the framework set out above. What the informants describe is, in Goffman’s terms, the operation of a stigma symbol: the empty religion column is a visible, official mark that spoils the believer’s social identity and signals to others that the bearer is not a “normal” citizen. The mark travels from the document to the workplace, the neighbourhood, and even the playground because stigma, once attached, contaminates the bearer’s wider relationships. In Honneth’s and Taylor’s terms, this is a paradigmatic case of misrecognition: believers are denied the respect owed to them as equal members of the political community, and the harm is not only material (lost jobs, blocked

services) but also moral and psychological, as AZ's emphasis on "pressure" makes clear.

Underlying all of this is what Sen calls the illusion of identity. Believers are continually set against the adherents of the official religions, producing a fixed binary between the "religious" and the "non-religious." Yet, as citizens, believers in fact carry a complex plurality of identities; the public gaze fastens on a single aspect their belief and reduces them to it. This is the mechanism of identity reduction: a person of many affiliations is collapsed into one stigmatizing category. The point is sharply illustrated by Jatno Sigit, a believer in Kapribaden:

"My identity as a believer also causes me to be considered a shaman. In taking care of the administration, he was also considered an atheist because at that time the religion column was filled with stripe marks. Since my friends found out that I no longer followed the same religion as them, some came to my house and banged on the door and threatened to say that my blood was lawful to kill. I also had a chance to meet one of my friends when I took care of the ATM. In the management, it turned out that believers had not been facilitated, finally I chatted with my friend where in the chat I did say something wrong which finally my friend was annoyed and threatened to invite time because I thought I was lost. Discrimination also happened to my son who was about 3 years old at the time. My son is forbidden to play in the mosque next door with his friends, even though my son is still innocent. There was also an issue in the environment because the religion column on my ID card was empty."

Government regulation, compounded by the social abandonment that follows from a spoiled identity, reduces Jatno Sigit to a single label. Although he is at once a citizen, a believer, and a father, he is seen only as a "believer," and within the illusion of identity belief is positioned as wholly separate from and threatening to "religion." The reduction is then inherited by his son, who is treated not as a child like any other but as an extension of his father's single, stigmatized identity. In Sen's vocabulary, the violence here flows directly from the imposition of singularity; the remedy the community will pursue, accordingly, is the recovery and strategic deployment of plurality.

Transformation of MLKI Banyumas Identity: From Religious to Culture

Identity is stated by Amartya Sen as an aspect of a person or group that is multiple and attached to it. Through identity, it can give birth to a closeness and closeness, but on the other hand, it can give birth to separation. In the religious context, identity is often one of the causes of a divided society. One religion and another religion seem to have their own sects and rooms, which each other cannot penetrate the room. Identity is often a double-edged sword; on the one hand, through the understanding of identity, that is, complete harmony of society can be achieved

ideally, on the other hand, the reductive understanding of identity causes divisions that seem to have no solution.²⁰ It can be proven by the many social conflicts that are often caused by religious sentiments.

Amartya Sen argues that identity conflicts are caused by ‘identity illusions’, which are singular understandings of identity. On the contrary, identity must be understood in a multi-faceted manner and must not ignore the various identities in a person. So that in the case of discrimination and violence committed against members of the MLKI Banyumas faith, it occurred because of a single understanding of identity. The identity of MLKI Banyumas members is only understood as a group of people who adhere to the faith; this identity is then faced with adherents of major religions recognized by the state.

On the one hand, believers are then considered as different entities because they are not in accordance with other beliefs. So that in this case, sentiment and stigma arise. Such a phenomenon can also be explained from the point of view of discourse analysis, where *communal* understanding will defeat *non-communal* entities. Believers are *heterodox* entities, while other religions are *orthodox*. So that the gap between the community group of believers and the community group of adherents of other religions is getting deeper.²¹ It is further strengthened by the discrimination of policies given by the authorities (the government), which results in a strong understanding that it is as if the group of believers is a different entity in Indonesia.

MLKI Banyumas appears to recognize that discrimination against belief communities is closely related to what Amartya Sen calls the “illusion of identity.” For this reason, they seek to challenge the reduction of their identity to a single religious label by foregrounding the plurality of identities they possess. A key aspect of this transformation is the shift from an explicitly religious identity toward a cultural identity. MLKI Banyumas realizes that emphasizing religious identity alone may intensify social tension, discrimination, and even violence. Therefore, the community seeks to construct a new public image as a cultured, moral, and ethical community rooted in Banyumas society.

“Although our belief is not placed under the Ministry of Religious Affairs but under the category of culture, this is not a problem as long as we are able to practice our belief and live according to its teachings. What matters most is that believers are recognized. State recognition gives MLKI greater freedom to ensure that its members obtain civil rights that have long been neglected.”

This statement by Amar Kazet, the secretary of MLKI Banyumas, shows that members of the belief community do not primarily contest whether their tradition is formally recognized as a religion. Rather, they prioritize the freedom to practice their beliefs without prohibition or obstruction. This awareness is rooted in a long historical experience of stigma and exclusion. Their cultural self-presentation can

therefore be understood as an adaptive strategy: they reconstruct their public identity while maintaining their spiritual commitments. In this sense, MLKI Banyumas carefully manages the public assertion of belief identity, aware that openly emphasizing it may produce serious consequences for the community, including renewed discrimination and restrictions on their ritual practices.

The adaptive capacity described above constitutes the foundation upon which MLKI Banyumas develops a more advanced form of resilience, namely transformative capacity. Whereas adaptive capacity primarily enables the community to survive social exclusion by adjusting to prevailing social conditions, transformative capacity involves proactive efforts to reshape public perceptions and renegotiate their place within the broader social and political landscape. Rather than confronting dominant religious narratives directly, MLKI Banyumas strategically advances its identity through cultural engagement, allowing the community to participate in public life without intensifying religious polarization. This transformation reflects a shift from merely coping with discrimination to actively reconstructing social recognition through culturally embedded practices. Such a strategy depends not only on organizational leadership and collective vision but also on the community's ability to develop innovative forms of social participation that strengthen its legitimacy within the wider society.

This transformative process can also be understood through the lens of cultural citizenship; whereby marginalized communities negotiate recognition not primarily through formal legal claims but through active participation in the cultural and civic life of society. Instead of emphasizing theological distinctiveness, MLKI Banyumas seeks to demonstrate its commitment to shared social values, ethical conduct, and communal responsibility. In doing so, the community gradually reconstructs public perceptions of believers—not as outsiders or social threats, but as responsible citizens who contribute positively to social cohesion. This strategy exemplifies what Charles Taylor describes as the politics of recognition, in which dignity is achieved through reciprocal social acknowledgment rather than merely through formal legal equality, while also reflecting Honneth's understanding that recognition is cultivated through everyday social interaction and mutual respect. One participant explained this transformative strategy as follows:

"In order to practice our beliefs freely, I actively participate in community life and join neighborhood activities. At first, when local residents learned that I belonged to a belief community, many were skeptical. However, I tried to demonstrate my values through my behavior by continuing to participate in communal activities. Gradually, I was accepted. My identity as a believer was no longer seen as a problem, and I came to be regarded as no different from other members of the community."

The next strategy in transforming from religion to culture is by blending in with the community. This active participation is the main key to the existence of believers can sustain their existence and minimize discrimination. This action is actually a cultural activity, in which the community of believers does not bring the identity of their beliefs into the realm of their religion, but is based on their understanding of the basic principles of beliefs of believers, which teach about unity and morality. So that the act of blending and being honest with the community is a form of implementation of his understanding of its teachings.

MLKI Banyumas cultural activities seek to overcome discrimination and identity violence by holding a dialogue between religious communities. This step aims to ensure freedom for believers in Banyumas. Through this dialogue, it is hoped that an understanding of the importance of diversity will be created, so that discrimination against believers can be gradually eliminated. In addition to dialogue, MLKI Banyumas also innovates by holding the Anjangsana forum as part of social transformation efforts. Anjangsana is an innovation initiated by MLKI Banyumas as an effort to strengthen the community of believers in Banyumas, which has often been ignored and discriminated against. This activity aims to build solidarity, increase understanding, and create a more inclusive dialogue space for believers. This is as conveyed by AZ, one of the administrators of MLKI Banyumas:

"We hold Anjangsana activities, namely visiting associations to provide socialization or exposure related to services needed by the community of believers. We also ask what obstacles are being faced by the association so that these problems can be solved."

The anjangsana activity was carried out to greet all levels of society, whether they are members of MLKI Banyumas or not. It is one of the cultural activities that can be a forum for aspirations and demonstrations to the general public about MLKI Banyumas. With the existence of anjangsana, in addition to absorbing the aspirations of MLKI's internal members, it is also a form of introduction to the general public. This activity is usually used by MLKI to provide a good image of a good society. In addition, MLKI also provides an understanding of believers' beliefs, which are also part of the culture that needs to be preserved; thus, believers can be known as cultural actors.

Through these activities, groups of believers in Banyumas can exchange opinions, greet each other, and ask about each other's conditions. At this moment is the point where believers feel not alone. It seems to give rise to the feeling of "I have comrades in arms", and this has proven to be effective and very helpful for the existence of believers in Banyumas. From Anjangsana, MLKI also finally held an open dialogue with other religious beliefs, including official religions. That seems to be the beginning before MLKI finally joined the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB).

Although believers are not considered formally religious, MLKI joins every forum and event at FKUB. In this forum, MLKI further introduced the appreciation of their beliefs as a form of noble devotion that teaches about unity and unity. From sin, the existence of believers is increasingly appreciated, and little by little are alleviated from social discrimination and other negative stigmas by society.

“The efforts made by MLKI are to carry out socialization and education both directly and indirectly. Because the majority of believers are spread across several regions, for this reason one of the ways of socialization and education is assisted by interfaith leaders from six religions in Indonesia, including FKUB Banyumas Regency”.

The joining of MLKI Banyumas to FKUB has such a positive impact on members of the believers and the general public. For believers, their existence is increasingly recognized and avoids unilateral justification based on the illusion of identity. Although they had to put aside their religious identity, because their identity had been transformed into a culture. As for the general public, their minds begin to be open to the issue of harmony and tolerance, which will prevent them from being trapped in the illusion of identity. This understanding of multi-identity is the foundation for creating harmony and remodeling the rooms created because of religious sentiments.

The success achieved by MLKI is none other than the long journey they have gone through, starting from accepting all discrimination, hiding their identity, and finally transforming into a culture. This cultural transformation is also none other than the encouragement from the state through the policies contained in the GBHN of 1978: “Belief in God Almighty is not a religion. Coaching of Belief is carried out: 1. So as not to lead to the formation of new religions, 2. To effectively take the necessary steps so that the implementation of belief in God Almighty is according to a just and civilized human basis”.

Following up on this policy, the President issued a Decree through Presidential Decree No. 27 jo No. 40 of 1978 which contains the transfer of the management of Belief in God Almighty into the scope of the Ministry of Education and Culture within the scope of the Scope of the Directorate General of Culture, the work unit of the Directorate of Development of Belief in God Almighty. The regulation has a direct impact on the existence of believers in Indonesia; the management of beliefs is no longer under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion but has shifted to become part of the Ministry of Education and Culture. This change in status is clear evidence that the state, especially the Ministry of Religious Affairs, no longer considers believers as part of religion and, at the same time, as a trigger for discrimination in the social environment. But on the other hand, Believers have been legitimately recognized as part of the cultural wealth by the state.

Seeing this fact, MLKI Banyumas then took advantage of the current status of believers in Indonesia. Based on this cultural identity, MLKI Banyumas tries to fight for its rights as a group of citizens. The separation of institutions, which was initially carried out to separate religion and belief, was used by MLKI Banyumas to take refuge and survive in the face of all discrimination that comes from the social system. In the eyes of the state and the social environment, believers are indeed considered a culture, but in the realm of practice, they can freely carry out all their belief rituals as believers. This is what the group of believers actually wants; that is, they can practice their beliefs without interference and prohibition, but on the other hand, they also get the same rights as Indonesian citizens, and what is also important is to have an equal position in the eyes of the social system.

Theoretical Interpretation: Negotiated Identity and Cultural Citizenship

The strategy of MLKI Banyumas can be drawn together into a single conceptual claim: identity transformation here is a form of negotiated identity that functions as a practice of cultural citizenship. Three theoretical threads support this reading. First, in Sen's terms, the community moves from a position in which it is trapped by an externally imposed singular identity "non-religious" to one in which it actively asserts a plural identity, choosing to foreground the cultural affiliation it shares with the majority.²² Crucially, this is not the abandonment of belief but a reweighting of affiliations: the community decides which of its many identities to make publicly salient. Identity transformation is therefore better described as identity renegotiation than as conversion or concealment.

Second, the cultural turn is precisely a bid for recognition in the sense developed by Honneth and Taylor. Where the empty religion column delivered misrecognition, the cultural self-presentation enacted through *anjangsana*, interfaith dialogue, and membership in FKUB seeks recognition on terms the wider society can accept. By entering FKUB, believers convert themselves from objects of suspicion into participants in the very institutions through which religious harmony is publicly performed, thereby claiming the respect that misrecognition had withheld. In Hall's terms, this is the strategic production of a cultural identity: a repositioning that exploits the state's reclassification of belief as culture and turns an instrument of exclusion into a resource for inclusion.²³

Third, and most importantly for the contribution of this article, these moves amount to a claim of cultural citizenship the assertion of a right to belong and to be recognised as a full member of the political community on the basis of cultural difference rather than in spite of it. The *anjangsana* forum and participation in FKUB, which earlier studies treat merely as community activities, are better understood as the concrete practices through which cultural citizenship is enacted:

they are the arenas in which a marginalized community performs belonging, builds horizontal solidarity, and negotiates vertical recognition from the state. Read this way, MLKI Banyumas demonstrates how a stigmatized religious identity can be transformed into a legitimate cultural one and mobilized as a strategic form of negotiated citizenship securing social legitimacy and civil rights while preserving spiritual conviction.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the *penghayat kepercayaan* community affiliated with MLKI Banyumas transforms its religious identity into a cultural one in order to negotiate recognition and secure civil rights. Empirically, the community manages stigma by concealing or de-emphasizing its religious identity, blending into local social life, and foregrounding cultural activity above all the *anjangsana* forum and participation in FKUB thereby reducing discrimination while continuing to practice its beliefs.

Theoretically, the case yields a conceptual contribution that goes beyond the legal-administrative focus of prior research. The discrimination experienced by believers is generated by the illusion of identity, in Sen's sense a singular reading that reduces a plural citizen to the stigmatizing label "non-religious," operating, in Goffman's terms, through the visible stigma of the empty religion column and amounting, in Honneth's and Taylor's terms, to misrecognition. The community's response is to renegotiate its identity by asserting plurality and repositioning itself culturally, in Hall's sense, so as to claim recognition on terms society can accept.

The central argument of the article can therefore be stated conceptually: MLKI Banyumas demonstrates that cultural identity can function as a strategic form of negotiated citizenship through which marginalized faith communities gain social legitimacy while preserving their religious beliefs. Identity transformation is not capitulation but a deliberate practice of cultural citizenship, in which culture becomes both a shelter from discrimination and a platform for claiming equal civic standing. This finding suggests that culture-based strategies may offer an effective response to the identity conflicts faced by belief communities elsewhere in Indonesia, and it invites further comparative research into the conditions under which such negotiated citizenship succeeds or fails.

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