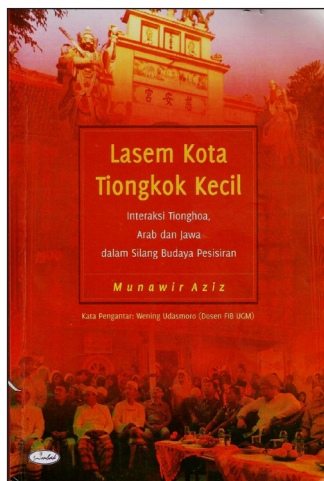


Munawir Aziz, *Lasem kota Tiongkok kecil; Interaksi Tionghoa, Arab, dan Jawa dalam silang budaya pesisiran*. Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2014, 212 pp. ISBN: 9786022581666. Price: IDR 50,000 (soft cover).



Thung Ju Lan

The Research Center for Society and Culture
The Indonesian Institute of Sciences
julan@indo.net.id

Through his study on Lasem, Munawir Aziz tries to find answer to conflicts that occur since 1996/1997 in various places of Indonesia. He believes that it is the long established social relationships between all ethnic groups in Lasem that has prevented Lasem to experience violence and destructions like Solo, Jakarta, or other places. He explained “harmony in Lasem” in the form of “good relations” between Moslem *kiai*, Chinese leaders, Chinese leaders, and businessmen which is obviously quite intense and intimate during local annual events such as *Ngandran* and *Kirab Budaya Mak Co Thian Siang Si Bo* at *Cu Ang Kiong Temple*.

This book is interesting, not because the writer is successful or failed to find the answer, but because through this book, we could learn the problematics of doing a social-cultural research on conflicts and their solution.

Firstly, Munawir Aziz places his study in the context and framework of conflict, but at the same time he avoids talking about conflict itself. Secondly, Munawir is trapped in the functionalists’ perspectives on ethnic relations which focus on assimilation, integration, and accommodation. Hence, he proposes “harmony” as another approach that is appropriate for his Lasem case. Yet, it is difficult to believe that in Lasem there has been no conflict at all. As we all know, conflict lies low in the functionalist’s agenda. Thus, as it can be expected, Munawir failed to explain how the Lasem people dealt with conflicts, albeit he is fully aware about the existing economic competition in the daily life of Lasem people. He even mentioned that the Chinese has been dominating Lasem economically (p. 61), and competition happened too between a Chinese school and a Moslem school (p. 122), but he does not say anything about how such a situation has influenced the relationships between Chinese and the Moslem Javanese. Thirdly, Munawir uses some historical facts to understand the relationship between Chinese and Indigenous Indonesians in Lasem, from the famous visits of Cheng Ho (also known as Sam Po Kong) to the history of Islam in Indonesia. He also mentioned Lasem as “*corong opium*” (opium channel) during the Dutch occupation (p. 68), but nothing was said whether the label had positive or negative impacts on the relationship between ethnic groups in Lasem, particularly between Chinese and local Javanese. One contradiction that Munawir ignores is the fact that

Syarikat Islam in Lasem had been mobilizing the people to fight against the Dutch colonial not only due to colonialism, but also because of the Javanese traders' hatred feelings toward Chinese businessmen who were trading *batik* (p. 45), so how could they be together in fighting the Dutch in *Perang Kuning* (the Yellow War)? Furthermore, even though he indicates that the effects of 1965 violent tragedy and the negative stereotypes about the Chinese that was created by the New Order government (p. 4) have caused the Chinese in Lasem to slowly shut themselves up, Munawir misleadingly assumes that the relationship between the Chinese and the Indigenous Indonesians in Lasem has always been in good terms. Therefore he incorrectly believes that those two groups stand on equal footings alongside the other, while at the same time he asserts that the Chinese have to "ask permission" from *Kiai* to carry out their religious celebration, the so-called *Kirab Budaya Mak Co Thian Siang Si Bo* (p. 11), or to contribute financially to the local religious ceremonies in order to be included as part of the local community, or in Munawir's words "*agar mendapat pengakuan dan kepercayaan dari pribumi Jawa dan Santri*" (p. 10). A side from those theoretical and methodological problems, this study shows us the importance of understanding local context in relation to the national politics on ethnic relations. Munawir correctly identifies several local factors that he called "pillars toward peace", namely cross-ethnic marriages, social network during ritual celebrations and coffee stalls as social media of interactions. Unfortunately, he fails to understand them as the negotiation channels for conflict solutions. Although he said in p. 28 that he will use concept of capital as an instrument to investigate negotiation and contestation between Chinese, Arab, and Javanese, he failed to do so. Otherwise, he might be able to provide us with detail investigation about how national politics influence local context, and how the local people at Lasem deal with those influences.

In chapter IV Munawir did talk about negotiation, which he believes, has led to *harmoni "wong" Lasem* (harmony amongst Lasem people), but his focus is on FKML (Forum Komunikasi Masyarakat Lasem), which was established after the 1998 May riots. The problem with this focus is that FKML came to existence only recently, while as he explained in the beginning, he believes that the harmony was built through a long process of interactions and relationships. That is why he could simply come up with elite as the agent of peace. Munawir could not relate the position of elite as the agent of peace to the conflicting relationships between Javanese workers and Chinese businessmen. As he said, quoting one of his informants, those workers, who were looking for an outlet for their anger and frustration toward stingy and arrogant Chinese businessmen, were pacified by their own friends (p.142). So the question remains: how do the elite actually play their role as the agent of peace in the real conflict situation?

Munawir tries to support his arguments about harmony by insisting that there are peace-building factors that maintain the integration of Lasem, from the brotherhood spirit as a legacy of *Perang Kuning* (pp.147-150), to locally blended cultural products such as *lontong tuyuhan* (local culinary) (p.167),

Chinese architectural ornaments on Mbah Sambu (p. 168), as well as the changing generations and perceptions. To some extent he might be right, particularly about the changing generations and perceptions, but so far his explanations are quite insufficient. He suggests that the moving out of Chinese businessmen to Surabaya, Semarang, and Jakarta has provided an opportunity for Javanese, *santri* and *non-santri*, to take over the middle level of the Lasem economy (p. 144), but no relevant study has been presented to support this point of view. He also talks about the recent difficulties to physically distinguish between Chinese and Javanese, but at the same time insists on the existing differences in the way of talking, dressing, or observing traditions in the daily life. So, what has actually changed in this last point, if the Chinese and Javanese dichotomy persists? The dichotomy becomes visible because in this study Munawir fails to talk about the Arab as clearly as he does about the Chinese and the Javanese. He seems to accept Arab-Javanese relationships as the given *santri-kiai* connections. Similarly, he neglects to justify the naming of Lasem as *Kota Tiongkok Kecil* (the city of Little China) from the perspective of city arrangement and architecture. Nevertheless, by placing this attractive paradox between Little China and coastline cross-culture, he provokes us to put forward this question: what is the quality of this Little China that could create a hybrid culture of Chinese, Arab, and Javanese at Java coastline? Is their Chineseness "specific" so that it gave a special touch to ethnic relations? I believe it is a new research topic for those who are interested in cross-cultural studies.
