

East Timor Refugee Nationalism: Adaptation and Identity Conflict in Kupang, 1998-2014

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Abstract: This study examines the dynamics of nationalism among former East Timorese refugees in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, during 1998–2014. It explores how socio-economic adaptation, identity conflict, and negotiations of belonging unfolded in the aftermath of the 1999 referendum and within the wider context of post-Reformasi Indonesia. Employing a historical method with an interdisciplinary perspective, this research draws on government archives, international reports, newspapers, and in-depth interviews with former refugees, community leaders, government officials, and NGO activists. The analysis is informed by social identity theory, Anderson's concept of imagined communities, diaspora theory, ethnic boundary-making, and refugee labeling. The findings indicate that refugee nationalism was neither fixed nor singular, but fluid, situational, and continuously renegotiated. Adaptation developed through informal economic strategies, kinship networks, intermarriage, religious participation, and everyday interaction with local communities. At the same time, identity conflict persisted through stigmatization as "refugees" or "new residents," insecure access to land and public services, unresolved trauma, and fragmented state policies. The study identifies three interrelated forms of nationalism: historical-ideological nationalism, survival nationalism, and hybrid nationalism, particularly among younger generations. These findings reveal the ambivalent character of Indonesian nationalism, which simultaneously articulates inclusion and reproduces exclusion. This study contributes to refugee and nationalism studies by highlighting how marginalized communities negotiate belonging in everyday life and by underlining the need for more inclusive and sustainable integration policies.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika nasionalisme mantan pengungsi Timor Timur di Kupang, Nusa Tenggara Timur, pada periode 1998–2014. Kajian ini berfokus pada bagaimana adaptasi sosial-ekonomi, konflik identitas, dan negosiasi rasa memiliki terhadap bangsa berlangsung pascareferendum 1999 dalam konteks Indonesia pascareformasi. Penelitian menggunakan metode sejarah dengan perspektif interdisipliner, melalui pemanfaatan arsip pemerintah, laporan lembaga internasional, surat kabar, serta wawancara mendalam dengan mantan pengungsi, tokoh masyarakat, aparat pemerintah, dan aktivis LSM. Analisis didasarkan pada teori identitas sosial, konsep imagined communities dari Anderson, teori diaspora, pembentukan batas etnis, dan pelabelan pengungsi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa nasionalisme para mantan pengungsi tidak bersifat tunggal maupun tetap, melainkan cair, situasional, dan terus dinegosiasikan. Adaptasi berlangsung melalui strategi ekonomi informal, jaringan kekerabatan, perkawinan campuran, partisipasi keagamaan, serta interaksi sehari-hari dengan masyarakat lokal. Namun demikian, konflik identitas tetap bertahan melalui stigmatisasi sebagai "pengungsi" atau "warga baru," keterbatasan akses terhadap tanah dan layanan publik, trauma yang belum sepenuhnya pulih, serta kebijakan negara yang terfragmentasi. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tiga bentuk nasionalisme yang saling berkelindan, yaitu nasionalisme historis-ideologis, nasionalisme survival, dan nasionalisme hibrid, terutama pada generasi muda. Temuan ini menegaskan ambivalensi nasionalisme Indonesia yang di satu sisi menjanjikan inklusi, tetapi di sisi lain masih mereproduksi eksklusivitas.



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INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the New Order regime in May 1998 marked a significant turning point in Indonesia's contemporary political history. The 1997/1998 Asian economic crisis, which shook the national economy's stability, coupled with rising demands for democratization and decentralization, ultimately undermined the legitimacy of Suharto's rule, which had been entrenched for more than three decades (Aspinall, 2005). The drastic changes in Indonesia's post-reform political landscape not only altered the pattern of state-to-people relations but also created space for resolving several previously suppressed conflicts that the authoritarian regime had tightly controlled (Honna, 2015).

One of the most prominent issues is East Timor's political status. Annexed in 1976 through Law No. 7/1976 and established as the 27th province, the territory has never been fully integrated socio-politically within the Republic of Indonesia (Kammen, 2015; Nevins, 2019). International reports from Amnesty International (1999), Human Rights Watch, and the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR, 2005) consistently highlight human rights violations, repressive military operations, and a lack of political legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the East Timorese people.

The regime change opened new opportunities for international diplomacy. Under President BJ Habibie's leadership, Indonesia agreed to hold a popular consultation overseen by the United Nations through the United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) on August 30, 1999 (UNAMET, 1999). The referendum results showed that 78.5% of East Timorese rejected the offer of special autonomy and voted for independence from Indonesia. This decision was immediately followed by widespread mass violence, primarily due to pro-integration militia operations supported by elements of the Indonesian military (Robinson, 2010; Silva & Ball, 2018).

In this chaotic situation, a mass exodus was inevitable. Around 250,000 people fled to East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), with Kupang serving as the main refugee center (ReliefWeb, 2000; Kent, 2016). Kupang, as the provincial capital, faced a tremendous demographic surge. Tens of thousands of refugees from diverse socio-economic backgrounds—from farmers and traders to teachers, civil servants, and members of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and Indonesian National Police (Polri)—had to be accommodated in temporary camps and new settlements (Hanpalam et al., 2024).

This situation not only created logistical and humanitarian challenges but also triggered complex identity dilemmas (UNHCR, 2021; Babo-Soares, 2020).

It is in this context that the study of former East Timorese refugees becomes crucial. It is not simply a post-conflict narrative, but an arena for understanding how Indonesian nationalism was negotiated, questioned, and lived by marginalized groups caught in the maelstrom of history. By examining their experiences in Kupang, we not only discuss the refugee issue within a humanitarian framework but also re-read the face of post-reformasi Indonesian nationalism: an ambivalent nationalism at the intersection of ideals of unity and practices of social exclusion (Anderson, 2016; Hall, 2019; Conversi, 2020).

Literature Review

Studies on former East Timorese refugees have been quite developed, particularly with a focus on international politics, conflict resolution, and human rights. Robinson's (2010) seminal work, "If You Leave Us Here, We Will Die," highlighted the systematic violence following the 1999 referendum as a planned strategy involving pro-integration militias with structural support from the Indonesian military. This study was reinforced by the findings of the CAVR (2005), *Chega! Report*, which comprehensively documented gross human rights violations during the exodus period. Silva and Ball (2018), in their quantitative research, confirmed this pattern of structured violence through statistical analysis of deaths and forced displacement.

From an international political perspective, Fox and Babo-Soares (2003) and Kent (2016) emphasize the dynamics of Timor-Leste's new nation-building and the role of the global community. Grenfell (2018) explores mechanisms of transitional justice and post-conflict reconciliation. Nevins (2019) provides a critical review of international intervention, revealing the complexities of global politics behind East Timor's decolonization process. However, in this literature, the narratives of refugees who chose to remain in Indonesia often appear as side notes, rather than the primary focus of analysis.

Contextual studies on the social impact of the presence of refugees in East Nusa Tenggara have begun to develop in the last decade. Hanpalam et al. (2024) analyzed the management efforts of the former East Timorese refugee community in NTT between 2004 and 2014, highlighting the structural burdens placed on local governments. Maing and

Jatmika (2021) examined the dynamics of regional integration using a qualitative approach and found that intermarriage, religious participation, and educational interaction were key factors. Babo-Soares (2020) explored the challenges of national identity-building and reconciliation processes in post-independence Timor-Leste, offering a critical comparative perspective.

From a political economy and human rights perspective, Maksum et al. (2020) reveal how democracy and customary authority create the potential for exclusion in accessing village funds for former refugees. This finding aligns with Crouch's (2019) study on decentralization politics in Indonesia, which demonstrates that decentralization does not automatically lead to inclusion for marginalized groups. Honna (2015) analyzes the relationship between the military, politics, and business in Indonesia's democratic transition, providing important context for understanding the position of pro-integration refugees within local power structures.

In the field of identity and nationalism studies, the theoretical works of Anderson (2016) on imagined communities, Hall (2019) on Diaspora and cultural identity, and Conversi (2020) on ethno-territorial nationalism provide relevant conceptual frameworks. Brubaker (2017) offers a critical perspective on ethnicity as a practical, rather than a substantive, category. Wimmer (2017) develops a theory of ethnic boundary-making that is highly applicable to understanding the dynamics between refugees and local communities.

From a contemporary refugee studies perspective, Zetter (2019) analyzes the evolution of the label "refugee" and its implications for policy and identity. Long (2020) explores the lived experiences of refugees in the context of urbanization and sustainable development. Chimni (2019) critiques the international refugee protection regime, which often overlooks the structural, political, and economic aspects of the issue. These studies provide a global perspective that contrasts with the local experiences of East Timorese refugees in Indonesia.

Despite significant progress in the literature, several research gaps remain unresolved. First, studies explicitly linking the experiences of former East Timorese refugees to the dynamics of post-reform Indonesian nationalism remain few. Most studies focus on security, international politics, or humanitarian dimensions, but few explore how refugees, as active social actors, negotiate their national identity under conditions of structural marginality (Wimmer, 2017; Zetter, 2019).

Second, the everyday life dimensions of refu-

gees in Kupang's local context have not received adequate attention. The existing literature focuses on the macro- and structural-level aspects. At the same time, micro elements such as survival strategies, identity negotiation in public spaces, gender dynamics, and the experiences of young people remain underexplored (Long, 2020). However, a deeper understanding of these everyday practices is crucial to capturing the complexity and ambivalence of the nationalism that refugees experience.

Third, studies on horizontal conflicts between refugees and local communities remain fragmented. Maksum et al. (2020) and Maing and Jatmika (2021) have opened this discussion, but a systematic analysis of the patterns, triggers, and mechanisms of conflict resolution is lacking. Furthermore, how these conflicts shape and reshape the national identities of both groups has also not been critically examined.

Fourth, theoretically, the literature on Indonesian nationalism generally focuses on political elites or large-scale social movements (Aspinall, 2005; Honna, 2015), whereas the nationalism of marginalized groups, such as refugees, has not received adequate theoretical attention. The application and further development of contemporary theories of nationalism (Anderson, 2016; Brubaker, 2017; Conversi, 2020) through the case of East Timorese refugees remain open questions.

Fifth, the role of the state in the refugee integration process has not been comprehensively evaluated. Although Hanpalam et al. (2024) have identified various government programs, a critical analysis of their effectiveness, sustainability, and political implications is lacking. The impact of state policies on the formation of refugee national identity has also not been thoroughly researched.

Based on the research gaps above, this study aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the socio-economic adaptation patterns of former East Timorese refugees in Kupang in the period 1998-2014, particularly in access to education, employment, and interaction with the local community? (2) How are horizontal conflicts between refugees and local communities manifested, what are the primary triggers, and how do these conflicts influence the identity formation of both groups? (3) How do former East Timorese refugees negotiate their national identity amidst stigmatization, discrimination, and restrictive state policies? (4) What are the roles of the state and civil society in the integration process, and why is integration still fragile despite having been going on for more than a decade? (5) What are the implications of the experienc-

es of East Timorese refugees for our understanding of post-reform Indonesian nationalism?

Through these questions, this study offers a twofold contribution: first, it enriches refugee studies in Indonesia by focusing on previously underexplored dimensions of identity and nationalism; and second, it deepens understanding of the ambivalence of contemporary Indonesian nationalism through the lens of the experiences of marginalized groups. Thus, this study not only fills an empirical gap but also makes a theoretical contribution to the study of nationalism, identity, and social integration in post-conflict countries.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating several cutting-edge theoretical frameworks to understand the complex experiences of East Timorese refugees. First, Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner and updated by Tajfel (2010) and Hogg (2020), serves as the foundation for analyzing in-group and out-group dynamics. This theory posits that a person's social identity originates from their membership in a specific social group, which subsequently influences their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward members of other groups (Tajfel, 2010; Hogg, 2020).

In the context of East Timorese refugees in Kupang, this theory helps explain how identities as "former refugees" or "new residents" become social markers that distinguish them from the local population, or "natives." The processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison, as described by Tajfel (2010), are evident in everyday interactions, resource competition, and horizontal conflict. Furthermore, Brubaker (2017) enriches this theory with the concept of ethnicity as a "practical category" that is not substantial but relational and situational, which is highly relevant to understanding the fluidity of refugee identities.

Second, Benedict Anderson's (2016) concept of Imagined Communities is used to analyze how Indonesian nationalism is understood and lived by refugees. Anderson (2016) argues that a nation is an "imagined political community" that is bounded yet sovereign. Members of a nation, even if they do not know one another, imagine themselves part of the same community. In the case of East Timorese refugees, the crucial question is: to what extent do they imagine themselves as part of an imagined Indonesian community? How does the trauma of displacement and marginalization influence their participation in this imagined community?

Conversi's (2020) update of Anderson's concept of ethno-territorial nationalism provides an additional dimension, particularly in understanding how Timorese ethnic identity and Indonesian territorial identity negotiate within the refugee experience. Conversi (2020) proposes that contemporary nationalism often involves a tension between ethno-cultural and civil-territorial identities, a tension particularly applicable to East Timor.

Third, Stuart Hall's (2019) theory of Diaspora and cultural identity is used to understand the identity negotiations of refugees cut off from their homelands. Hall (2019) argues that diasporic identity is not fixed but a continuous process of "becoming," shaped by experiences of displacement, collective memory, and interactions with new cultures. The concepts of "hybridity" and "third space" developed by Hall (2019) and expanded by Bhabha (2021) are beneficial for analyzing the experiences of East Timorese refugees who are between two identities: not fully Timorese (because they choose to stay in Indonesia) but also not entirely accepted as Indonesian (because of the stigma of being "immigrants").

Fourth, Andreas Wimmer's (2017, 2021) theory of Ethnic Boundary Making provides a framework for analyzing how ethnic boundaries between refugees and host communities are created, maintained, or negotiated. Wimmer (2017) identifies four boundary-making strategies: expansion (expansion of categories), contraction (narrowing of categories), inversion (reversal of hierarchies), and transvaluation (change in the value attached to categories). Analyzing how refugees and host communities use these strategies in their interactions can reveal complex dynamics of integration and conflict.

Fifth, Roger Zetter's (2019) concept of Labeling and Refugee Identity is used to analyze the impact of the "refugee" label on identity and access to resources. Zetter (2019) argues that the "refugee" label is not simply a neutral descriptor, but a bureaucratic and political tool that shapes individual identities and rights. This label can provide access to humanitarian assistance, but it can also create long-term stigma and marginalization. In the case of East Timor, although refugee status was officially revoked in 2002, the labels "former refugee" or "new resident" continue to be attached to and shape their social experiences.

Sixth, the theory of state and Refugee Integration, developed by Chimni (2019) and Long (2020), is used to analyze how state policies shape or hinder the integration process. Chimni (2019)

criticized the humanitarian approach, which ignores the structural political-economic dimensions of refugee management. Long (2020) emphasized the importance of policies that not only provide short-term assistance but also facilitate long-term socio-economic integration. This framework is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of the Indonesian government's program in handling East Timorese refugees.

The integration of these six theoretical frameworks enables a multi-level and multidimensional analysis of the East Timorese refugee experience, ranging from the micro-level (individual identities and daily interactions) to the meso-level (group and community dynamics) to the macro-level (state policies and power structures). This integrative approach aligns with recent trends in refugee studies, which emphasize the importance of understanding refugee experiences holistically and in their context (Long, 2020; Zetter, 2019).

METHOD

This research uses a historical method with an interdisciplinary approach that integrates sociological, anthropological, and political science perspectives. In accordance with the historical research tradition proposed by Gottschalk (1985) and Kuntowijoyo (2013), this research goes through the stages of heuristics (source collection), source criticism (verification and validation), interpretation (analysis and synthesis), and historiography (writing). The research period spans from 1998 to 2014, starting with the fall of the New Order regime that paved the way for the 1999 East Timor referendum, and ending in 2014, when the process of adaptation and integration of refugees had entered a consolidation phase, although structural problems remained.

The primary sources for this research consist of several types. First, government archives include official reports from the NTT Social Service and the NTT Provincial Agency for National Unity and Politics (Bakesbangpol), as well as documents from the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM, 2003), which contain data on the human rights situation of refugees. Second, documents from international institutions such as the UNAMET report (1999) on the implementation of popular consultations, the UNHCR report (2021) on refugee management, the CAVR report (2005) on human rights violations in East Timor, and documents from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on the repatriation program. Third, local and national newspapers such as *Pos*

Kupang (1999, 2006, 2018), *The Jakarta Post* (2014), *Kompas*, and *Tempo* provide a mass media perspective on refugee dynamics. Fourth, oral history through in-depth interviews with 15 key informants consisting of: 8 former refugees (4 men, four women) from various socio-economic backgrounds, three local Kupang community leaders, two local government officials, and 2 NGO activists who handle refugee issues.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. The selection criteria for refugee informants included: (1) being at least 35 years old at the time of the interview (2023) so that they had direct experience since the early refugee period, (2) having lived permanently in Kupang since 1999-2000, and (3) being willing to share experiences and provide informed consent. Interviews were conducted in January 2023 at various locations in Kupang, each lasting 60-120 minutes, and were recorded with the informant's permission. Interview transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis methods.

Secondary sources encompass academic works, books, journal articles, research reports, and dissertations that are relevant to the research topic. The literature used includes classic works such as Anderson (2016), Robinson (2010), Fox and Babo-Soares (2003), as well as more recent works such as Hanpalam et al. (2024), Maing and Jatmika (2021), Maksum et al. (2020), and various theoretical studies on identity, nationalism, and refugees from 2015 to 2024.

All sources undergo external criticism to assess the authenticity of the documents and internal criticism to test the credibility of the content. Given that most sources, especially government and media reports, are not free from political bias, critical analysis of the ideological positions and interests of the authors/institutions is an essential part of source criticism. Oral histories are also contrasted with written sources to verify accuracy and identify potential memory bias.

Data interpretation was conducted by combining a social history perspective and an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. Tajfel's (2010) social identity theory, Anderson's (2016) concept of the imagined community, Hall's (2019) diaspora studies, and Wimmer's (2017) theory of ethnic boundary formation were used in an integrative manner to analyze the data. The analysis was conducted at three levels: micro (individual experiences and daily interactions), meso (group and community dynamics), and macro (state policies and social structures). Triangulation of data from various sources

and methods was used to enhance the validity of the findings.

The research findings utilize a thematic historiographic approach, which not only describes chronological events but also interprets broader historical meanings, patterns, and dynamics. This research seeks to present a source-rich, methodologically critical, and analytical narrative that unpacks the complex experiences of East Timorese refugees in Kupang.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE 1999 REFERENDUM AND THE MASS EXODUS TO KUPANG

The fall of President Suharto in May 1998 created an unprecedented space for democratization in Indonesian history. Succeeding President B.J. Habibie took the bold step of offering a referendum to the people of East Timor, a decision that shocked the Indonesian political and military elite (Aspinall, 2005; Crouch, 2019). The May 5, 1999, agreement between Indonesia, Portugal, and the United Nations stipulated that a popular consultation would be held on August 30, 1999, under the supervision of UNAMET (UN Security Council, 1999).

The referendum result was shocking: 78.5% of voters chose independence, rejecting the option of special autonomy within the Indonesian framework (UNAMET, 1999). This decision triggered a wave of mass violence by pro-integration militias supported by elements of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI). Robinson (2010) and Silva & Ball (2018) confirmed, through quantitative analysis, that this violence was structured and planned rather than sporadic. CAVR (2005) recorded approximately 1,400 deaths and the destruction of 70-80% of East Timor's infrastructure between September and October 1999.

Table 1 shows that the mass exodus involved approximately 250,000 people, with Kupang Regen-

cy being the primary destination (48%). Although the majority (80%) returned to Timor-Leste through the UNHCR repatriation program between 2000 and 2003, approximately 50,000–100,000 remained in Indonesia. The decision not to return was influenced by several factors, including fear of reprisals from pro-independence groups, economic uncertainty in the newly independent Timor-Leste, established family ties within the local community, and identification as supporters of Indonesian integration (Kent, 2016; Maing & Jatmika, 2021).

Data also shows that, as of 2014, 4,762 families (approximately 20,000 people) were still living in refugee camps without secure land tenure and with limited access to basic services (The Jakarta Post, 2014). This situation reflects the failure of a sustainable resettlement policy. It indicates that the East Timorese refugee problem remains unresolved, even though more than a decade has passed since the referendum.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ADAPTATION: SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AND ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

In the initial phase (1999–2002), the refugees' basic needs were met mainly through international assistance from the UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and various international and local NGOs. This assistance included tents, food, clean water, basic health services, and emergency education. However, after their official refugee status was revoked in 2002 and they were granted Indonesian citizenship, humanitarian assistance was gradually reduced or stopped (ETAN, 2006).

Table 2 shows that refugees' access to basic services is minimal. Access to primary education remains moderate (65%), but access to secondary education is very low (40%) due to high costs and

Table 1. Demographic Profile of East Timorese Refugees in NTT, 1999-2002

Category	Amount/Percentage	Source
Total number of refugees to NTT (peak)	±250,000 people	ReliefWeb, 2000
Refugees in Kupang Regency	±120,000 people (48%)	NTT Social Services, 2000
Number of returnees to Timor-Leste (2000-2003)	±200,000 people (80%)	UNHCR, 2021
The number of people who choose to live in Indonesia	50,000-100,000 people	ETAN, 2006
Gender composition (refugees staying)	Male 52%, Female 48%	Hanpalam et al., 2024
Productive age group (15-64 years)	±65%	NTT Social Services, 2002
Families still in camps in 2014	4,762 families (±20,000 people)	The Jakarta Post, 2014

Source: Compiled from various sources (ReliefWeb, 2000; UNHCR, 2021; Hanpalam et al., 2024)

Table 2. East Timorese Refugees' Access to Basic Services in Kupang, 2002-2014

Type of Service	Access Level	Major Obstacles	Data source
Elementary education (SD)	Medium (65%)	Fees, birth certificate, and distance	Santos, 2007
Secondary education (junior high school/senior high school)	Low (40%)	High costs, dropping out of school	ETAN, 2006
Basic health services	Medium (70%)	Distance, cost, ID card	Yanuarto, 2008
Clean water	Low (45%)	Limited infrastructure, uneven distribution	Kupang Post, 2006
Electricity	Very Low (30%)	Remote camp location, installation costs	Hanpalam et al., 2024
Population documents (KTP, KK)	Low (55%)	Complicated bureaucracy, informal costs	Maksum et al., 2020
Social assistance (Raskin, BLT)	Low (50%)	Not registered, discrimination	Maing & Jatmika, 2021

Source: Compiled from various studies (Santos, 2007; Yanuarto, 2008; Hanpalam et al., 2024)

high dropout rates. ETAN (2006) data indicate that approximately 20,000 refugee children in Belu Regency and North Central Timor are at risk of not receiving an adequate education, with many becoming beggars or involved in street fights. This situation creates an intergenerational cycle of poverty that is difficult to break.

The main barrier to accessing services is the absence or incompleteness of official documents such as birth certificates, Family Cards (KK), and Identity Cards (KTP). Maksum et al. (2020) revealed that the document processing process is very complicated, time-consuming, and often involves informal fees. Without these documents, refugees are unable to access schools, subsidized healthcare, social assistance, and other government programs.

In the face of these limited access, refugees developed various survival strategies. Based on interviews with eight refugee informants and secondary data from Yanuarto (2008) and Hanpalam et al. (2024), several main livelihood patterns can be identified: (1) Agriculture and farm laborers (35%): working as daily laborers on residents' land or cultivating marginal land; (2) Small and informal traders (30%): selling vegetables, fish, ice, snacks in tra-

ditional or mobile markets; (3) Transportation services (15%): motorcycle taxi drivers, pedicabs, or public transportation; (4) Construction workers and artisans (10%): carpenters, bricklayers, construction workers; (5) Civil servants and formal workers (10%): former civil servants, teachers, police, and TNI who are continuing their careers.

Table 3 reveals that the majority of refugees (65%) work in the informal sector, earning low, unstable incomes (Rp 500,000-1,200,000 per month), which are far below the NTT Regional Minimum Wage (UMR) during that period (approximately Rp 1,500,000-2,000,000). This situation forces all family members, including children, to work to meet their basic needs. An interview with Mrs. Isabel (45 years old, a former refugee) on January 11, 2023, revealed: "We all have to work; no one can go to college. My children have helped sell vegetables at the market since they were little. Otherwise, we would not be able to eat."

However, not all refugees experience the same economic hardship. Those who previously worked as civil servants, teachers, police officers, or members of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) are generally able to continue their careers in

Table 3. Economic Strategies of East Timorese Refugees in Kupang

Type of work	Percentage	Average Income/Month	Characteristics
Agriculture/farm laborers	35%	Rp. 600,000-900,000	Unstable, depends on the season
Small traders	30%	Rp. 500,000-1,200,000	Low profits, high competition
Transportation services	15%	Rp. 800,000-1,500,000	Requires initial capital, high risk
Construction workers	10%	Rp. 700,000-1,000,000	Seasonal, heavy physical
Formal employees	10%	Rp. 2,000,000-4,000,000	Stable, higher education required
Others/unemployment	10%	Uncertain	Depends on assistance, odd jobs

Source: Interview results and synthesis from Yanuarto (2008), Hanpalam et al. (2024)

their new areas, although often in lower positions or ranks. Based on data from the NTT Social Services (2002) and interviews with local officials, approximately 10% of refugees fall into this category and have relatively stable incomes (Rp 2-4 million per month). This group also has easier access to basic services and enjoys a higher social status within the local community.

CULTURAL INTEGRATION: MIXED MARRIAGES, THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH, AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

Refugees' socio-cultural adaptation occurs through several key mechanisms, particularly intermarriage, participation in religious activities, and interaction in public spaces such as schools and markets. Maing and Jatmika (2021) found that intermarriage between former refugees and residents was one of the most effective strategies for integration. Data from their survey of 120 refugee families in three villages in Kupang Regency revealed that 42% of families had at least one member who was married to a resident between 2005 and 2020.

Intermarriage creates strong kinship ties between refugee and host families, facilitating social acceptance, access to land, and economic opportunities. Children of these intermarriages often bridge the gap between the two communities, embracing dual identities. An interview with Mr. Suarez (38, mixed marriage) on January 11, 2023, revealed: "I feel fortunate to have two families, two cultures. I come from East Timor, and my wife is from Kupang. I am accepted in both communities." This experience aligns with the concept of the "third space" as described by Hall (2019) and Bhabha (2021), where new hybrid identities are formed through negotiation and acculturation.

Religious institutions, particularly the Catholic and Protestant churches, play a central role in the integration process. Religious affinity (the ma-

jority of refugees and residents are Christian) provides essential social capital, facilitating interaction and building trust. Purwoko (2006) and Santos (2007) identified that church activities, such as Sunday services, prayer groups, social activities, and religious celebrations, provide safe spaces for encounters between the two communities. Pastors and church leaders often act as mediators in conflicts and facilitate intergroup dialogue.

However, the process of cultural integration is not without obstacles. The ethnic identities of refugees and residents are continually negotiated across various domains. According to Tajfel (2010) and Hogg (2020), social identity theory suggests that identity is not a fixed attribute, but instead it is constructed through social experiences and intergroup interactions. In Kupang and Kefamenanu, refugee communities have integrated while maintaining their "East Timorese" identity through traditional rituals and the use of the Tetun language (Maing & Jatmika, 2021). In Atambua, the spatial separation between "refugee" and "native" villages remains significant, despite the presence of mixed-use spaces such as markets and churches.

IDENTITY CONFLICT: STIGMATIZATION, DISCRIMINATION, AND HORIZONTAL TENSION

Despite integration efforts, identity conflicts and horizontal tensions remain a reality for refugees. The persistent use of the labels "refugee" or "new resident" creates psychological and social barriers. Although refugee status was legally abolished in 2002, the term continues to be used daily by residents and government officials (Sumule, 2003; Maing & Jatmika, 2021). These labels, as Zetter (2019) explains, are not simply neutral descriptors but categorization tools that contribute to ongoing marginalization.

Table 4 illustrates that horizontal conflicts

Table 4. Horizontal Conflict Patterns Between Refugees and Local Communities in Kupang, 2005-2012

Date	Location	Conflict Triggers	Impact	Source
July 30, 2005	Oebelo Village-Tanah Putih	Land disputes	1 dead, five houses burned, residents evacuated	Kupang Post, 2018
December 20, 2009	Oebelo-Putie Village	Inter-settlement conflict	2 critical, dozens injured	Kupang Post, 2018
February 28, 2012	Oebelo Village	Distribution of MBR houses	Physical clashes, damage to facilities	Kupang Post, 2018
Recurring 2005-2014	Various locations	Conflict between martial arts organizations (PSHT vs Kera Sakti)	Injured victims, social tensions	Eurico Guterres interview, 2023

Source: Pos Kupang (2018), interview with Eurico Guterres (2023)

recur with various triggers. Land disputes are the primary cause, primarily due to the unclear ownership status of the land occupied by refugees. The conflict on July 30, 2005, in Oebelo Village, Tanah Putih, for example, resulted in one death, five houses burned, and hundreds of residents displaced. Maksum et al. (2020) revealed that, until 2014, the majority of refugees lacked formal land certificates, which created legal uncertainty and increased their vulnerability to eviction.

Conflict is also fueled by tensions among youth, often mobilized through martial arts organizations. An interview with Eurico Guterres (January 12, 2023), a pro-integration refugee figure, revealed: "Many conflicts start as small things between youth, but then escalate into group conflicts. Organizations like PSHT and Kera Sakti are sometimes used as a platform to mobilize ethnic identity. Conflicts that initially started as personal conflicts become 'us' versus 'them'." This pattern aligns with Wimmer's (2017) theory of ethnic boundary formation, which posits that conflict reinforces in-group and out-group categorizations.

Discrimination also manifests in access to public resources. Research by Maksum et al. (2020) on democracy and customary power found that refugees face structural barriers in accessing village funds and development programs. Village governments, dominated by local customary elites, tend to allocate resources to the benefit of "indigenous residents" and neglect "new residents." Of the 15 village development programs analyzed by Maksum et al. (2020) in three villages in Kupang Regency, only three (20%) involved refugees as primary beneficiaries.

The psychological impact of displacement trauma and violence also remains a heavy burden. The ETAN (2006) report noted that many refugees, especially children, experience severe stress and psychological disorders due to experiences of violence, loss of family, and uncertainty about the future. However, mental health services are minimal, and the stigma surrounding mental health issues discourages many refugees from seeking help. This unaddressed trauma can affect their ability to adapt and be passed down to the next generation.

NEGOTIATING NATIONALISM: LIQUID NATIONALISM, SURVIVAL NATIONALISM, AND RELATIONS WITH TIMOR-LESTE

The experiences of East Timorese refugees reveal the complexities of negotiating national identity. On the one hand, many maintain an Indonesian identity due to their historical experience as part of

Indonesia for 24 years (1975-1999). Those who previously served as civil servants, security personnel, or traditional leaders tend to identify ideologically with the Indonesian nation (Da Cruz, 2010). However, on the other hand, historical trauma, severance from their homeland, and marginalization in their new territory create profound ambivalence.

The concept of "fluid nationalism" as presented by Hall (2019) and Anderson (2016) is highly relevant to understanding this experience. Refugee nationalism is not fixed but is continually negotiated in light of context and interests. In public and formal settings, refugees display their Indonesian identity by participating in flag ceremonies, celebrating Independence Day, and using the Indonesian language. However, in the private spheres of family and community, they maintain their Tetun language, Timorese traditional rituals, and collective memory of their homeland.

Furthermore, what is known as "survival nationalism" can be identified. In situations of structural marginalization, nationalism becomes a pragmatic strategy for accessing state resources and protection. By identifying as Indonesian, refugees hope to access social assistance, public services, and economic opportunities. However, when faced with discrimination and exclusion, they also maintain their Timorese identity as a source of solidarity and communal support. This fluidity of identity reflects what Brubaker (2017) refers to as "ethnicity as a practical category," a situational one.

The younger generation of refugees exhibits distinct patterns of identity negotiation. Santos (2007), in his research on youth integration, found that those born or raised in Kupang tended to identify more as Indonesian than older generations who still carried direct memories of East Timor. The younger generation was more proficient in Indonesian, participated in the national education system, and had a wider circle of friends within the local community. However, they also experienced identity dilemmas due to the continued stigmatization of "refugee children" by some members of the community.

Relations with Timor-Leste after independence also remain complex. Although the majority of refugees chose to stay in Indonesia, kinship and emotional ties to their homeland have not been completely severed. Kent (2016) and Babo-Soares (2020) note that many refugee families still have relatives in Timor-Leste and maintain sporadic contact with them. However, physical visits are severely limited due to fear of reprisals from pro-independence groups and high transportation costs.

Some refugees who have attempted to return to visit report experiences of intimidation and threats, which reinforce their decision to remain in Indonesia.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE: FRAGMENTED POLICIES AND THE ABSENCE OF A LONG-TERM INCLUSIVE STRATEGY

Analysis of state policies reveals that the refugee integration process is hindered by ineffective communication, overlapping authority, and the absence of a clear legal framework (Sumule, 2003; Hanpalam et al., 2024). Programs implemented by the central and regional governments tend to be ad hoc, reactive, and short-term, without comprehensive strategic planning. Coordination between agencies—between the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Home Affairs, provincial governments, and district governments—is very weak, resulting in duplication, inefficiency, and unequal distribution of aid.

Regarding land ownership, overlapping authority exists among central, provincial, district, and customary institutions, making the land certification process extremely complicated and taking years (Maksum et al., 2020). As of 2014, approximately 4,762 families (approximately 20,000 people) were still living in camps with unclear land status (The Jakarta Post, 2014). Government-built housing programs are often of poor quality, in remote locations far from economic centers, and with non-transparent distribution processes, leading to renewed conflict among refugees.

Social assistance programs such as Raskin (subsidized rice) and Direct Cash Assistance (BLT) also fail to reach many refugee families because they are not registered in the beneficiary database (The Jakarta Post, 2014). Complicated registration mechanisms, the requirement to have an ID card (KTP) and Family Card (Kartu Keluarga), and discriminatory practices at the village level make it difficult for refugees to access these programs. Interviews with eight refugee informants revealed that only three had regularly received Raskin assistance, while five had never received it.

More fundamentally, the government has failed to establish an effective platform for dialogue and reconciliation between refugees and local communities. The approach used tends to be top-down, repressive, and oriented toward short-term security stability rather than long-term conflict transformation (Sumule, 2003). When conflict occurs, the government's response is usually reactive—deploying security forces to quell physical vio-

lence—without addressing the structural roots of the problem, such as unequal access to resources, systemic discrimination, and collective trauma.

This limited role of the state contrasts with the potential of civil society. Religious institutions, local NGOs, and refugee community organizations have demonstrated significant capacity to facilitate bottom-up integration. However, these efforts lack systematic and sustained government support. Chimni (2019) and Long (2020) emphasize that sustainable refugee integration requires a strategic partnership between the state and civil society, with the state providing the legal framework, equitable resource allocation, and facilitating dialogue, while civil society implements programs at the grassroots level.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the experiences of former East Timorese refugees in Kupang between 1998 and 2014 reflect the ambivalence of post-reformasi Indonesian nationalism. Socio-economic adaptation has occurred through creative survival strategies, the formation of strong social networks, and gradual cultural integration through intermarriage, religious participation, and daily interactions. However, identity conflict remains a persistent reality shaped by structural discrimination, stigmatization as "immigrants," unresolved land disputes, and fragmented and unsustainable state policies.

The nationalism that develops among refugees is fluid, contextual, and constantly renegotiated. This research identifies three forms of nationalism: first, historical-ideological nationalism rooted in 24 years of experience as part of Indonesia; second, survival nationalism that is pragmatic and strategic to access state resources and protection; and third, hybrid nationalism, especially among the younger generation, that integrates Indonesian and Timorese identities in a "third space." This fluidity of identity aligns with Hall's (2019) diaspora theory, Anderson's (2016) concept of imagined communities, and Brubaker's (2017) theory of ethnicity as a practical category.

The research findings highlight that national integration cannot be proclaimed rhetorically or assumed to occur automatically. Integration requires public policies that are just, inclusive, responsive, and sustainable. These include: (1) a clear legal framework for land ownership and population documents; (2) effective coordination between government agencies; (3) fair and equitable resource allocation; (4) long-term economic empowerment programs; (5) mental health services to address

trauma; (6) well-facilitated platforms for dialogue and reconciliation; and (7) strategic partnerships between the state and civil society.

The lived experiences of former East Timorese refugees underscore that Indonesian nationalism requires a strong social foundation rooted in tolerance, recognition of diverse identities, protection of civil rights, and distributive justice to be truly experienced in the daily lives of all citizens, including marginalized groups. Without this foundation, nationalism becomes little more than empty rhetoric devoid of substantive meaning for people's lives. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of nationalism as a complex, multifaceted, and dynamic practice enacted in everyday realities—in refugee camps, traditional markets, classrooms, and local churches.

This research opens up several avenues for further investigation. First, a comparative study with refugees from other conflicts in Indonesia (Aceh, Papua, Ambon) could enrich our understanding of refugee integration patterns. Second, a longitudinal study of third-generation East Timorese refugees (grandchildren of early refugees) could reveal the dynamics of intergenerational identity transmission. Third, a survey of the role of digital technology and social media in shaping contemporary refugee identities and networks. Fourth, a more in-depth gender analysis of how experiences of displacement and integration differ between men and women.

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