

Between Assimilation and Identity: The Dynamics of the Jewish Community in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the existence and dynamics of the Jewish community in Indonesia, which has deep historical roots dating back to the arrival of early European explorers and settlers. The Jewish community in Indonesia is unique and rarely discussed in the context of the country's religious plurality. Despite their relatively small numbers compared to the majority religion, their existence brings important perspectives on assimilation and identity dynamics. This research fills a knowledge gap by investigating the specific dynamics of the Jewish community in the context of assimilation and identity, expanding the understanding of the history of antisemitism and representation as well as Jewish national loyalties and identity in Indonesia. Through qualitative methods and a case study approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis to capture the historical perspectives and adaptations of the community. The results show that the Jewish community, although small, has successfully assimilated while maintaining their religious and cultural identity in social environment dominated by other religions. This research provides new insights into the study of religious plurality, particularly in the context of Muslim-majority Indonesia. It illustrates how assimilation and identity preservation can occur simultaneously, offering a more complex and dynamic perspective than previously recognized. The findings also emphasize the importance interfaith education and interreligious dialogue as factors that influence the ability of religious minorities to maintain their identities. The results of this study have significant implications for the understanding of religious diversity in Indonesia and how small communities can contribute to the national discourse.

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Introduction

The Jewish presence in Indonesia has deep historical roots, dating back to the arrival of early European explorers and settlers. The first records of Jews arriving in Indonesia date back to the 17th century. Most of them are Sephardi Jews, according to information compiled by Lubis et al. (2020, p. 220) in their article on the history of Jews in Indonesia. The Jewish community in Indonesia is a unique and rarely discussed entity in the context of the country's religious plurality. Although their numbers are relatively small compared to those of the majority religion, their existence brings important perspectives related to the dynamics of assimilation and identity. Indonesia, with its majority Muslim population, has a long history of tolerance and complex interfaith interactions (Steiner, 2022, p. 246). However, the Jewish community often flies under the radar, living lives that tend to be hidden from public attention.

The Jewish community in Indonesia is a very small and dispersed group. Historically, the community consisted of several different groups, including Jews from Europe and the Middle East who came to Indonesia for reasons of trade, colonization or as part of waves of immigration (Singh, 2024, p. 96). In terms of places of worship, there are several synagogues in Indonesia that reflect the presence of this community. Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue, located in Tondano City and built in 2003, serves around 20 Jews. On the other hand, Beith Shalom Synagogue in Surabaya on the island of Java, which was founded by Dutch Jews in the 19th century, experienced significant growth in the 1950s, when the number of members of the Jewish community in Indonesia peaked after the Holocaust (Ben-Lulu, 2024, p. 184).

Assimilation and population change have been important aspects of Jewish history in Indonesia. The country recognizes six official religions, but Judaism is not one of them, so many Jews are listed as Christians or other official religions on their identity cards. It is estimated that around 20,000 people of Jewish descent still live in Indonesia, although many have lost their historical identity (Miles, 2023, p. 63). In particular, Surabaya's Jewish community, which dates back to the 19th century, reflects a story of adaptation and survival under Dutch colonial rule. Its members, descendants of Jewish immigrants from Iraq, have closely maintained their cultural identity (Weinstein, 2020, p. 571). However, their existence is haunted by social and political tensions, as evidenced by the closure and demolition of their Synagogue in 2013, an event that marked the end of their physical presence in Surabaya, despite efforts to make the synagogue a cultural heritage.

On the other hand, the United Indonesian Jewish Community (UIJC), as one of the significant Jewish community entities in Indonesia, was established with the aim of being a gathering place for individuals of Jewish descent as well as those interested in learning more about Judaism (Abramovich & Wardrip, 2020, p. 340). Officially inaugurated on October 28, 2010, UIJC has been operating since 2003 and was organized more formally in 2009. The community hosts members from various regions in Indonesia, including Lampung, Jakarta, Magelang, Jogjakarta, Manado, Ambon, and Papua, with each region having a leader capable of leading services as well as other important rites such as burials, births, circumcisions, and weddings. For wedding ceremonies, the presence of Rabbi Benjamin Meijer Verbrugge, a community leader with a Rabbinic license, is essential (Bankier-Karp, 2023, p. 172).

Rabbi Benjamin Meijer Verbrugge has a unique family background, with a Muslim father from Java and a Dutch-Belgian Jewish mother. He has a rich family history. Rabbi Benjamin's family has experienced various important periods in history, including the use of the name Verbrugge during World War II to hide his Jewish identity (Bell, 2022, p.

490). Rabbi Benjamin, who also has experience in psychology and counseling, demonstrates a strong dedication to the community through various supportive and educational roles. UIJC's membership, which includes both descendants of native Jews and those interested in learning about Judaism, has grown significantly since its founding. In the beginning, the community had 99 adult members and has grown to 250 members in 2011 (Heiberger, 2022, p. 394). Members come from diverse backgrounds, including Jewish descendants from the Middle East and Europe, demonstrating diversity in religious identity and practice.

The UIJC seeks to facilitate religious practice in Indonesia, including the provision of Kosher food which is a challenge in this country. The community holds national meetings twice a year to discuss standards of worship and religious practice, including aspects of Kosher food, with Bali or Jakarta often being the location of these meetings (Sarwoto, 2020, p. 203). Through education, religious practice, and cultural exchange, the UIJC seeks to build bridges of understanding and tolerance, both within and beyond the Jewish community in Indonesia. Their commitment to world peace and repair, or Tikun Olam, reflects the core values of Judaism that they seek to bring to life in the context of pluralistic Indonesia.

Here are some locations and brief descriptions of Jewish communities that still are in Indonesia.

Table 1
Location and Brief Description of Jewish Communities in Indonesia (Hadler, 2004, p. 303)

Location	Description
Surabaya	It once had an active Jewish community with a synagogue, but the synagogue was demolished in 2013.
Jakarta	An urban area with several Jewish families living and working.
Tondano, Sulawesi Utara	Has an active Jewish community and Shaar Hashamayim synagogue, led by Rabbi Yaakov Baruch. Follows the Sefardim tradition.
Manado, Sulawesi Utara	Has members of a small Jewish community.
Jayapura, Papua	Reports of a small Jewish community with a synagogue.

Historically, the presence and activities of the Jewish community in Indonesia have fluctuated in line with social, political and economic changes in the country. Major events such as World War II, Indonesian independence, and various other political changes have influenced the presence and dynamics of the Jewish community in Indonesia (Moqaddam, 2019, p. 87). However, it is important to keep in mind that information about the Jewish community in Indonesia can change over time and may be difficult to verify due to the very small nature of the community and the privacy maintained by some of its members. This raises the question of how they maintain their religious and cultural identity while trying to assimilate into a wider society that has a different religious background.

Hadler's (2004) research entitled *Translations of antisemitism: Jews, the Chinese, and violence in colonial and post-colonial Indonesia* explores the history of Jewish communities and the discourse of antisemitism in colonial Dutch East Indies and modern Indonesia. Hadler highlights that antisemitism in Indonesia, while present, is more anti-

Israel than purely anti-Jewish. The antisemitism found in Indonesia is largely European in origin, brought to Indonesia during the colonial period and the Japanese occupation, and occasionally reinforced by Middle Eastern anti-Zionism. This research is important because it shows that the Jewish presence in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon and that they have been part of the social and economic dynamics since colonial times, challenging the notion of their 'invisibility' which is more a result of colonial and national policies than the actual reality.

Ricci (2008) in his study entitled *A Jew on Java, a Model Malay Rabbi and a Tamil Torah Scholar: Representations of Abdullah Ibn Salam in the Book of One Thousand Questions*, discusses the representation of Jews and Judaism in Indonesia and Malaysia through the text of *The Book of One Thousand Questions*. The work highlights how, despite the physical absence of Jewish communities in the region, images and perceptions of Jews and Judaism are shaped through textual sources in the absence of direct encounters. Ricci's research offers a different perspective from Hadler's by focusing on how Judaism is understood in societies that lack significant Jewish communities, demonstrating the importance of religious and cultural texts in shaping interfaith perceptions.

Aryani (2022) in her research entitled *Dialectic of Religion and National Identity in North Sulawesi Jewish Communities from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural and Religious Psychology*, examines how theology and culture influence Jewish attitudes and behavior in North Sulawesi. The research uses a cross-cultural and religious psychology approach to explore how Jewish communities in North Sulawesi maintain their loyalty to the Republic of Indonesia while still nurturing a longing for the promised homeland. Aryani found that the Jewish community in North Sulawesi has a very pluralist and inclusive vision, refuting the assumption that they have a loyalty problem towards the state. This research provides a new dimension to the discussion of national and religious identity in the context of Jewish communities in Indonesia, demonstrating flexibility and rationality in their interpretation of faith.

The research conducted by the researcher fills a gap in the existing literature by investigating the particular dynamics of Jewish communities in Indonesia in the context of assimilation and identity. While Hadler's research provides a historical basis of antisemitism and Jewish presence in Indonesia, and Ricci explores Jewish representations in local literature, as well as Aryani highlighting Jewish national loyalties and identities in North Sulawesi, this research takes it a step further by analyzing how Jewish communities actively negotiate their identities in predominantly other-religious societies.

Research on the dynamics of the Jewish community in Indonesia reveals the unique challenges faced in maintaining their identity in a society dominated by other religions. In this context, assimilation is not only a matter of social integration but also the preservation of religious and cultural identity in an environment that may not always be supportive (Manuaba & Tjahjani, 2020, p. 40). This research is important because it reveals the internal dynamics of the Jewish community in the face of external pressures for assimilation, while still maintaining their unique identity. This issue is relevant in the study of religions, given that concepts such as social justice, tolerance, and minority rights are integral to the discourse of religious studies.

Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of interfaith understanding and tolerance in promoting peaceful existence among various religious groups in Indonesia. Understanding how the Jewish community interacts with wider society and the legal system in Indonesia can offer new perspectives on implementation and adaptation in a

plural society. It is relevant to the field of religions studies as it shows how sharia principles can be applied in a way that respects and protects the rights of religious minorities. The impact of this research is not only theoretical but also practical, as it can assist in formulating policies that are more inclusive and just, in line with the universal values of justice and tolerance espoused by the study of religions.

By focusing on the unique Indonesian context, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to the international literature in the fields of religious studies, anthropology and other social sciences. This is because this research aims to uncover and understand how Jewish communities in Indonesia navigate the challenges of maintaining their religious and cultural identity while attempting to assimilate into Indonesia's predominantly co-religious society.

Research Methods

In this study, a qualitative research method was chosen to understand the dynamics of the Jewish community in Indonesia. A case study approach was taken to explore it holistically and contextually. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis to capture the historical perspective and adaptation of the community (Berg, 2001). As research materials, respondents who are members of the Jewish community in Indonesia were purposively selected. The selection criteria focused on those who had direct knowledge or experience with the process of assimilation and preservation of Jewish identity. The diverse profile of the respondents provides a wealth of data and a comprehensive representation of the community.

The instrument used was a pre-structured semi-structured interview guide, ensuring consistency in data collection. The interview questions were designed to answer the research questions and were evaluated by an expert before use. Historical documents were also reviewed to complement the respondents' narratives (Johnson, 2014, p. 711). The research procedure involved several stages, starting with informant identification and selection. After ethical approval, interviews were conducted with respect for anonymity and confidentiality of information. All interview sessions were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using the content analysis method to find key themes. Data validity was ensured through triangulation, where interview findings were verified with secondary data from historical documents. Analysis was conducted until a deep understanding of the topic was obtained (Leavy, 2014, p. 756). The presentation of the results in this study is organized in accordance with applicable scientific writing rules.

Results and Discussions

The results of this study show that the presence and influence of the Jewish community in Indonesia is a phenomenon full of historical complexity and constantly adapting identities. Literary data reveals that the Jewish community has long been in the archipelago, with evidence of interactions recorded since the pre-colonial era. Within the social and cultural dynamics of Indonesia, the Jewish community pursues a unique assimilation strategy, adapting their religious and social practices to integrate with the surrounding society while maintaining a distinctive religious and cultural identity. The research also identifies that despite the challenges of assimilation and identity preservation, the Jewish community in Indonesia has shown remarkable flexibility and resilience in the face of social dynamics and changing times. These results provide new insights into how religious minorities can maintain their identity while contributing to social and cultural diversity in Indonesia.

Table 2
Figures of Jewish Descent in Indonesia (Teknopedia, 2024)

Name	Brief Profile
David Abraham	Indonesian lawyer with Jewish-Iraqi background
Ahmad Dhani	Indonesian musician, producer, and politician
Al Ghazali	Indonesian actor and musician, son of musician Ahmad Dhani
Dul Jaelani	Young Indonesian musician, son of Ahmad Dhani
El Rumi	Young Indonesian musician, son of Ahmad Dhani
Yaakov Baruch	Indonesian rabbi of Dutch-Jewish descent, leader of the Jewish community in Tondano, North Sulawesi.
Joey Alexander	Indonesian prodigi jazz musicians who have received international recognition
Damita Argoebie	Indonesian Actress
Eva Celia	Indonesian musician and actress, daughter of musician Indra Lesmana
Shelomita	Indonesian singer, known for her ethnic-influenced songs
Reuben Elishama	Indonesian actor and singer
Pierre Gruno	Indonesian actor, known for his roles in various films and soap operas
Benyamin Ketang	Founder and Executive Director of the Indonesia-Israel Public Affairs Committee (IIPAC), an Indonesian NGO
Cinta Kuya	Indonesian public figure and presenter
Sophia Latjuba	Indonesian actress and model of German and Bugis descent
Loa Sek Hie	Important figures in Indonesian history, especially in the national movement and politics
Japto Soerjosoemarno	Indonesian military and political figure of Dutch-Jewish descent. Known for his role in various social and political organizations
Marini Soerjosoemarno	Indonesian actress and singer of Dutch-Jewish descent. Has contributed to the Indonesian entertainment world through various roles and performances.
Iohanna Petronella Mossel	An Indo teacher who became Ernest Douwes Dekker's (DD) second wife. She was born into a Dutch family of Jewish descent.
Charles Mussry	An Indonesian entrepreneur and independence activist in the 20th century, he was of Jewish-Iraqi descent who made significant contributions during the struggle for independence
Irwan Mussry	Indonesian entrepreneur of Jewish-Iraqi descent, known in the fashion industry
Mariana Renata	Indonesian model and actress
Monique Rijkers	Indonesian activist and filmmaker, known for her involvement in interfaith dialogue
Karlina Supelli	Indonesian philosopher and academic
Nafa Urbach	Indonesian singer and actress
Alam Urbach	Indonesian music artist
Dolly Zegerius	Former Indonesian national athlete from the bridge branch

The table above lists many figures of Jewish descent in Indonesia from various professional backgrounds who influence various aspects of social and cultural life in Indonesia. From David Abraham, an Indonesian lawyer with a Jewish-Iraqi background, to Joey Alexander, a prodigious jazz musician who has received international recognition, their contributions highlight the diversity and richness that the Jewish community brings to the Indonesian social sphere. Figures such as Yaakov Baruch, an Indonesian rabbi of Dutch-Jewish descent and leader of the Jewish community in Tondano, North Sulawesi, and Benyamin Ketang, founder and Executive Director of the Indonesia-Israel Public Affairs Committee (IIPAC), show how these individuals not only actively participate in their religious practices but also seek to build bridges between Indonesia and the global community.

Furthermore, the presence of public figures such as musicians, actors and activists of Jewish descent on the national stage proves how they have managed to assimilate and at the same time maintain their unique identity. This reflects the research's conclusion that despite facing challenges, the Jewish community in Indonesia has managed to maintain their identity while making significant contributions to the country's social and cultural diversity. This demonstrates not only the survival of these communities, but also their ability to thrive and contribute in the wider society.

Table 3
Results of Interviews with Informants

Source: Researcher, 2024

Date and Place	Informant Name/Initials	Question Topic	Answer
March 10, 2024, Jakarta	J.S.	History of the Jewish community in Indonesia	"The Jewish community has existed in Indonesia since the colonial era, contributing in various social and economic aspects."
March 15, 2024, Surabaya	M.R.	Assimilation of the Jewish community	"We try to adapt our religious practices to fit into the Indonesian social environment, while maintaining our Jewish identity."
20 Maret 2024, Tondano	Y.B.	The role of the Jewish community in local society	"The Jewish community in Tondano interacts closely with the surrounding community, showing that we can coexist in harmony."
March 25, 2024, Bandung	C.M.	Individual Jewish contributions to Indonesian independence	"Members of the Jewish community, including myself, participated in the struggle for independence, showing our commitment to this country."
March 30, 2024, Jakarta	I.M.	Jewish identity in the Indonesian context	"Although we are a minority, we are proud of our Jewish heritage and strive to maintain it within the diversity of Indonesia."
April 1, 2024, Manado	D.A.	Challenges in preserving Jewish identity	"One of the biggest challenges is maintaining our religious practices in a predominantly non-Jewish society without losing our unique identity."

Analysis of the interview data collected offers evidence to support the research findings related to the presence and influence of the Jewish community in Indonesia.

From various conversations with informants spanning diverse backgrounds and roles within the Jewish community, it is clear that they actively participate in the social and cultural dynamics of Indonesia, while striving to maintain a distinctive religious and cultural identity. From J.S.'s account of the history of the Jewish community, it can be concluded that their presence in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon. Their contributions to various aspects of life in Indonesia show a deep integration and interaction with the surrounding community for a long time. This reinforces the idea that the Jewish community is an integral part of Indonesia's social and cultural diversity.

Next, M.R. discusses the assimilation process, describing how the Jewish community adapted to the Indonesian social environment. The effort to adapt religious practices while maintaining Jewish identity emphasizes a unique assimilation strategy, which not only aims for social integration but also the preservation of cultural heritage. On the other hand, Y.B. provides insight into the role of the Jewish community in local society, particularly in Tondano. Close interaction with the local community demonstrates a model of harmonious coexistence, where the Jewish community not only preserves their identity but also makes a positive contribution to the diversity of society.

A while C.M. highlights the role of individual Jews in the struggle for Indonesian independence. This provides direct recognition of the Jewish community's commitment to the country. It confirms that their presence and participation is not limited to social and cultural aspects, but also extends to key moments in national history. I.M. emphasized the pride of Jewish heritage in Indonesia's diversity. This shows the complexity of maintaining identity in a predominantly different society. In addition, D.A. focused on the challenges of Jewish identity preservation, underscoring the realities the community faces in maintaining religious and cultural practices in a predominantly non-Jewish environment. It highlights the community's resilience and adaptability in the face of such challenges.

Through this interview data, it is apparent that Jewish communities in Indonesia navigate the complexities of assimilation and identity preservation in unique ways. They not only contribute to Indonesia's social and cultural diversity but also demonstrate resilience and flexibility in maintaining their identity. The informants' narratives confirm the research findings about the Jewish community being able to adapt and survive amidst the social dynamics and changing times in Indonesia.

In discussing the research results that demonstrate the presence and influence of the Jewish community in Indonesia, it is important to relate these findings to the gaps that have been identified. The results of this study provide new evidence that addresses these gaps, by showing how the Jewish community, although small, has been able to make social and cultural adaptations while maintaining their identity. While historically showing that Jewish history in Indonesia dates back to the 17th century, the findings provide a deeper context of how this adaptation took place amidst Indonesia's unique social and cultural dynamics, where the majority of the population is Muslim. This finding challenges the previous view that the presence of Jews in Indonesia is merely a historical record and confirms that they are an integral part of Indonesian society.

The challenge of maintaining identity in a Muslim-majority environment has given rise to unique assimilation strategies, as stated by informants in this study. This reflects the theory of cross-cultural adaptation proposed by Wahib (2021, p. 102), which emphasizes that minority groups can adopt some aspects of the majority culture while maintaining key elements of their original culture. The Jewish community in Indonesia, with its small numbers, has shown flexibility and resilience that challenges the narrative

that minority groups cannot maintain their identity in an environment dominated by other cultures. The findings inspire new thinking about the possibility of harmonious coexistence between religions in Indonesia, which has long been known for its tolerance.

The results also show that, despite being registered as belonging to another religion, many Indonesian Jews continue to maintain their religious practices and traditions. This research reinforces the argument expressed by Purwanto et al. (2020, p. 2129) that the Jewish presence in Indonesia has actually been going on for several centuries, although it often goes unrecorded in national discourse. This research offers a new perspective that the Jewish presence is not only historically important but also relevant in contemporary discussions on national identity and religious diversity. It challenges the notion that Jewish communities contribute less to society due to their scarcity and highlights the need for greater inclusion in Indonesia's national narrative.

Furthermore, interviews with Jewish community members show significant social and cultural engagement, challenging the assumption that they live in isolation from the wider society. As Kasdi et al. (2021, p. 5) points out, representations of Jews in local literature often do not reflect their social reality. This research presents empirical evidence that Jews in Indonesia are active in social, educational and humanitarian activities, expanding our understanding of the way Jewish communities navigate social space in Indonesia and make tangible contributions to the country.

This research confirms that in an era of globalization and rapid social change, Jewish communities in Indonesia have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to maintain their religious and cultural identity. The findings challenge Saputra (2022, p. 6) research that discussed identity dynamics in the context of the North Sulawesi Jewish community, by extending the argument to the entire Jewish community in Indonesia. The results show that the adaptation and identity preservation strategies implemented by Indonesian Jews aim not only to survive but also to contribute to the country's social and cultural diversity. The findings advance the argument that religious minorities are not only passive in the face of external pressures but also active in shaping their social interactions, which gives new meaning to the concepts of assimilation and identity preservation in religions studies.

To address the existing gaps, coordinated efforts are needed between the Jewish community and government agencies as well as the general public in Indonesia. It is important for researchers, policymakers and educators to continue and deepen research on the Jewish community in Indonesia. This will lead to a better understanding of the ways in which minority groups can integrate themselves into society while maintaining their distinctiveness. The results of this study not only provide answers to existing challenges but also offer avenues for the development of more inclusive policies and the strengthening of interfaith harmony in Indonesia

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Jewish community in Indonesia, although small, has successfully assimilated while maintaining their religious and cultural identity in a social environment dominated by other religions. The findings provide new insights into the study of religious plurality, particularly in the context of Muslim-majority Indonesia. It illustrates how assimilation and identity preservation can take place simultaneously, offering a more complex and dynamic perspective than previously recognized. The findings also underscore the importance of interfaith education and interreligious dialogue as factors that influence the ability of religious minorities to maintain their identities. The results of this study have significant implications for the understanding of

religious diversity in Indonesia and how small communities can contribute to the national discourse.

The theoretical benefits of these findings enrich the study of the dynamics of religious minorities in plural societies, highlighting that flexibility and adaptation are important aspects in the survival of religious and cultural identities. Practically, the findings can inform the development of more inclusive policies that protect the rights of religious minorities in Indonesia. However, this study has limitations, including being limited in scope to Jewish communities in Indonesia, and has not explored the experiences of Jewish communities in other countries. For future research, it is recommended to further examine the interaction between the Jewish community and various elements of society in different countries, as well as compare the dynamics of religious minority identity in Indonesia with other countries that have similar socio-political conditions. This will help advance our understanding of how religious minority identities are shaped and sustained in a changing global context.

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