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Recognition or Misrecognition? Investigating State Recognition, Structural Discrimination and the Struggle of Sunda Wiwitan in Indonesia

Rakhmat Hidayat[1]
Department of Education of Sociology, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia
Email : hidayat@unj.ac.id
ORCID : 0000-0003-1650-3684

Abstract

This paper investigates the politics behind recognition of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Indonesia by examining the lived experiences of the indigenous Sunda Wiwitan community. The study highlights a persistent contradiction between constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and the continuing dominance of state-recognized religions within Indonesia's legal and administrative systems. As a result, indigenous belief communities continue to face structural obstacles in accessing civil rights, education, religious services, and equal citizenship. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, this research is based on long-term fieldwork conducted from 2017 to 2024 in several Sunda Wiwitan communities in West Java through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that FoRB in Indonesia remains strongly influenced by an "official religion paradigm," limiting substantive equality and social inclusion despite a key 2017 Constitutional Court ruling acknowledging indigenous beliefs.

Keywords: Politics of recognition, Freedom of Religion or Belief, misrecognition, discrimination, Sunda Wiwitan, Indonesia

[1] The author is a Lecturer at the Department of Education of Sociology (Departemen Pendidikan Sosiologi), Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia

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Introduction

Freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) in Indonesia remains a persistent and unresolved issue, especially for indigenous peoples and followers of local belief traditions that are excluded from the state's official religious framework. Although the Indonesian Constitution formally affirms every citizen's right to profess a religion or belief, this constitutional promise has not been equally realized in everyday practice. Indigenous belief groups such as the Sunda Wiwitan community continue to face systematic marginalization. In both social life and interactions with local authorities, their members are frequently treated as inferior, experiencing discrimination that effectively places them outside the realm of full citizenship. These patterns of exclusion are critically examined by Bagir[2]. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from law, political science, religious studies, and human rights, he argues that FoRB restrictions in Indonesia are deeply institutionalized rather than accidental. Legal norms, state policies, and governance mechanisms jointly contribute to a regulatory environment that disadvantages religious minorities and belief communities. Central to this problem is the state's selective recognition of religions, which systematically sidelines indigenous and non-mainstream belief systems. He further demonstrates how state institutions employ laws on blasphemy, public order, and religious harmony to legitimize discriminatory practices, often under the pretext of preserving social cohesion, while ultimately eroding constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination.

The discrimination experienced by the Sunda Wiwitan community manifests in various forms. Restrictions on access to civil rights, negative ideological labelling, and the denial of their belief identity are institutionalized through state policies and exclusionary social practices[3]. This indicates that the challenges faced by Sunda Wiwitan are not merely

[2] Bagir et.al, 2019
[3] Basyar & Hamid,2025

social in nature, but are also structural problems intricately linked to the ways in which the state regulates, classifies, and recognizes religious and belief diversity among its citizens. The central issue addressed in this article is the lack of recognition of Sunda Wiwitan adherents as full subjects within Indonesia's regime of freedom of religion and belief. This absence of recognition affects not only administrative matters—such as the inclusion of religious identity in population registration documents—but also has far-reaching social and political consequences.

The politics of religious regulation and recognition has been a major focus in Indonesian social research since the 1960s. While researchers such as Pranowo approached these issues through grounded, community-based anthropological perspectives, others focused more on the institutional and bureaucratic dimensions of religious governance.[4] Ropi for instance, offers a foundational analysis by tracing the development of state policies on religion from the Dutch colonial period to the present[5]. West Java has also attracted significant scholarly attention, serving as a key site for influential studies on religious transformation, including Bamualim.[6] Safaat explains how the relationship between religion and the state in Indonesia evolved through tensions between Islamist and nationalist visions, resulting in a compromise embodied in the national ideology of Pancasila, which recognizes religious diversity without privileging a single faith.[7] Hefner and Bagir further contribute by synthesizing theoretical discussions on recognition alongside Indonesian case studies addressing citizenship and social inclusion[8]. Hurriyah examines the politics of religious freedom among minority groups, comparing Sunda Wiwitan in Kuningan Regency with Shia communities in

[4] Pranowo,1994
[5] Ropi, 2013, see also Ropi & Burhani,2015
[6] Bamualim, 2015
[7] Safa'at, 2019
[8] Hefner & Bagir (Eds.), 2021

Sampang. Collectively, these works highlight the enduring significance of religious regulation and minority governance in Indonesian scholarship.[9]

This paper argues that the FoRB issues experienced by the Sunda Wiwitan community cannot be sufficiently explained as mere violations of individual rights. Rather, they represent a manifestation of an unequal politics of recognition. Political recognition is crucial for an indigenous community.[10] The Indonesian state has established a religious hierarchy through regulations, institutions, and bureaucratic mechanisms that favor officially recognized religions while marginalizing indigenous faiths such as Sunda Wiwitan. Consequently, Sunda Wiwitan followers experience discrimination and must negotiate their identity within legal and political systems. The long-standing distinction between "religion" and "belief" has enabled systematic exclusion, allowing the state to supervise and normalize groups outside religions. As a result, Sunda Wiwitan is often reduced to a cultural tradition rather than acknowledged as a legitimate faith. This condition limits civil rights, increases legal vulnerability, and pressures adherents to adopt official religions.

This phenomenon of forced religious affiliation is not unique to the Sunda Wiwitan community, but has also been experienced by numerous other belief groups across Indonesia.[11] The state's hegemonic authority establishes a singular standard of religiosity that often neglects the diversity of beliefs and religious expressions within society. Consequently, the implementation of FoRB in Indonesia is strongly influenced by religious majoritarianism, where rights are protected only when they do not challenge the dominant state-sanctioned religious order. This paper therefore examines three central issues: the political challenges of recognition experienced by the Sunda Wiwitan community, the negotiation of their relationship with the state through legal and policy

[9] Hurriyah, 2026, 2023
[10] Arizona, et al.,2019;Jegalus,2024
[11] Hakim, Qurbani & Wahid, 2023 ; Ali-Fauzi & Darningtyas,2023

frameworks, and the advocacy strategies developed following the 2017 Constitutional Court Decision ruling acknowledging indigenous beliefs (Case No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016).[12] The paper examines how indigenous belief adherents in Indonesia gained the right to display their belief identity on national identification documents, while assessing whether this experience can guide other indigenous belief groups. It emphasizes freedom of religion and belief as a political advocacy tool for the Sunda Wiwitan community, highlighting their active role in negotiation, strategic action, and political decision-making. Consequently, FoRB is portrayed as a dynamic arena shaped by legal, cultural, and social contestation.[13]

This paper is systematically divided into three analytical sections. The first section investigates the political challenges of recognition faced by the Sunda Wiwitan community, emphasizing how ideological stigmatization and the narrowing of indigenous beliefs to cultural traditions have limited their citizenship rights. The second section analyzes the relationship between the state and the community, showing how legal frameworks and policies pressure indigenous groups to conform to officially recognized religions, thereby reinforcing exclusion and marginalization. The concluding section discusses advocacy strategies adopted by the community, particularly their critical response to state recognition mechanisms that require bureaucratic standardization of belief systems despite the opportunities created by the 2017 Constitutional Court Decision.

This study applies Nancy Fraser's theory of justice, emphasizing recognition, redistribution, and representation as interconnected dimensions shaping inequality. The framework explains the Sunda Wiwitan struggle by linking cultural discrimination with structural exclusion embedded in legal and political institutions. Fraser argues that injustice emerges through misrecognition, where marginalized groups are

[12] Hidayat, 2025
[13] Marshall, 2018

denied equal social status and participation. In Indonesia, the absence of recognition for Sunda Wiwitan restricts indigenous communities from influencing state regulations concerning religion, citizenship, and identity. Although the 2017 Constitutional Court ruling acknowledged indigenous beliefs, bureaucratic procedures still preserve unequal power relations, requiring communities to adapt to state-defined administrative categories. This paper argues that the struggle for religious freedom among the Sunda Wiwitan community requires a broader understanding of recognition that extends beyond administrative acknowledgment to include social acceptance, respect for cultural traditions, and protection of indigenous autonomy in defining belief systems. The study contributes to debates on Islam and politics by illustrating how state religious policies shape the lives of marginalized groups and influence their strategies for resisting exclusionary recognition regimes. Furthermore, the experiences of Sunda Wiwitan demonstrate that religious freedom in Indonesia is determined not only by constitutional guarantees but also by political contestation within state institutions.

Method

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic case study design to examine the politics of recognition and religion-based discrimination experienced by the Sunda Wiwitan community in Indonesia. Ethnography was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of how indigenous belief communities interpret their social realities, negotiate state recognition, and maintain cultural continuity within everyday life. The case of Sunda Wiwitan is particularly significant because it illustrates the broader challenges faced by indigenous belief communities in Indonesia, especially regarding citizenship rights, religious administration, and relations with dominant religious groups. Through this case, the study contributes to a wider understanding of how political recognition can simultaneously produce inclusion and marginalization.

Empirical data were generated through long-term multi-site fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2024 across several Sunda Wiwitan settlements, including Cigugur, Kampung Tagog–Cibunut, and Blok Pasir in Kuningan Regency; Susuru Hamlet in Ciamis Regency; Kampung Ciawi–Nagaraherang in Tasikmalaya Regency; Kampung Cireundeu in Cimahi City; Kampung Cibali, Majalengka Regency, and Kampung Pasir in Garut Regency. The multi-site approach was necessary to compare how state engagement, discrimination, and recognition were experienced differently across local contexts while also identifying recurring patterns of structural exclusion. Comparative observations revealed that, despite regional variations, Sunda Wiwitan communities consistently encountered administrative barriers, social stigma, and unequal treatment in matters related to religion and citizenship.

The research involved twenty informants selected through snowball sampling based on cultural authority and experiential knowledge. Informants included indigenous elders and youth community members, such as GBA, DK, and JD from Cigugur; SS and DH from Kampung Susuru; AW and YN from Kampung Cireundeu; and II, an anthropologist from Universitas Padjadjaran. Interviews with elders primarily focused on customary values, historical memory, and relationships with the state, while younger participants provided perspectives on identity negotiation, advocacy, education, and contemporary forms of discrimination. Data were further triangulated through participant observation, informal conversations, attendance at rituals and community meetings, and engagement with academic and public discussions concerning indigenous belief communities. This combination of interviews, observation, and multi-site comparison strengthened the credibility of the findings and enabled a more comprehensive analysis of the dynamic relationship between the Sunda Wiwitan community, the state, and dominant religious groups.

Theoretical Framework: Political Recognition and the Struggle for Legal Recognition

Within the framework of FoRB, political recognition refers to the extent to which the state acknowledges and legitimizes diverse religious identities as part of equal citizenship. Drawing on Fraser's concept of the struggle for recognition, recognition is not merely symbolic acceptance but also a political process aimed at overcoming institutionalized forms of exclusion and subordination.[14] In the context of the legal recognition struggle of the Sunda Wiwitan indigenous community in Indonesia, this perspective highlights how indigenous belief groups seek equal status within the legal and political order rather than mere cultural visibility. In Indonesia, the Constitutional Court's interpretations regarding belief systems outside the six officially recognized religions have gradually expanded the legal space for indigenous faith communities. This development reflects the growing importance of an inclusive legal framework capable of accommodating non-mainstream religious identities and indigenous belief systems within democratic citizenship. However, Fraser argues that misrecognition occurs when institutional structures deny certain groups equal participation in social life, thereby reproducing injustice through cultural domination and legal marginalization.[15] Such conditions are evident when state policies privilege dominant religions while positioning adherents of indigenous belief systems as socially and administratively inferior. Recognition therefore becomes inseparable from questions of power, citizenship, and equality. Inadequate legal recognition often exposes minority belief communities to stigma, discrimination, and uncertainty in accessing civil rights, despite the existence of constitutional protections and human rights instruments. At the international level, FoRB principles are reinforced through the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which affirms freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as

[14] Fraser, 1995; Fraser & Honneth, 2003
[15] Fraser, 2000

fundamental rights. From Fraser's perspective, meaningful recognition must go beyond formal acknowledgment toward participatory parity, where indigenous communities such as Sunda Wiwitan are able to engage equally in political, legal, and social life without experiencing exclusion or cultural devaluation.

Results and Findings:

The Politics of Differentiation: Religion versus Indigenous Beliefs

This paper conceptualizes the politics of differentiation as a process that categorizes citizens according to recognized religious identities, thereby positioning adherents of indigenous beliefs, such as the Sunda Wiwitan community, outside the boundaries of full citizenship. The actors are state institutions, authorities, and religious groups, while indigenous belief communities become the subjects of differentiation. Unlike the politics of recognition, which seeks acknowledgment of diverse identities, differentiation operates through hierarchical classification that often legitimizes religious-based discrimination. Nevertheless, both concepts are interconnected because selective recognition produces exclusion. Therefore, the theoretical framework should clarify how indigenous beliefs, recognition, and discrimination interact within the official religion paradigm. Sunda Wiwitan is one of the indigenous belief communities that has survived in contemporary Indonesia. The Sunda Wiwitan community is largely based in Cigugur, Kuningan Regency, but also has adherents spread across several regions in West Java.[16] Members of this community are often referred to as AKUR[17] (a play on the word for

[16] The Adat Karuhun Urang (AKUR) community, in its teachings, recognizes the concepts of *puseur* (center) and *wareh* (parts). In this framework, Paseban–Cigugur in Kuningan Regency, functions as the *puseur* (the central locus of teachings), while regions in which Prince Madrais once resided and where Sunda Wiwitan indigenous communities subsequently emerged are understood as *wareh*. These *wareh* communities operate in coordination with the *puseur* in Cigugur Kuningan Regency.

[17] Before being known as AKUR, the Sunda Wiwitan indigenous community referred to itself as *Agama Djawa Sunda* (ADS) (see Hidayat & Marasabessy (Eds), 2017). In 1944, ADS was dissolved

'living in harmony', in Indonesian), emphasizing their identity as custodians of ancestral traditions. Despite their longstanding presence, Sunda Wiwitan adherents continue to experience discrimination. This discrimination operates at both the grassroots social level and in their interactions with local government institutions. Sunda Wiwitan adherents are frequently positioned as second-class citizens within Indonesian society[18], referring to the unequal social and administrative treatment they experience. For example, many adherents have faced difficulties obtaining national identity cards, marriage certificates, and accessing public services because their beliefs were not officially recognized as a religion by the state. In education and employment, they also encountered social stigma and pressure to conform to officially recognized religions. These conditions illustrate how limited recognition can marginalize indigenous belief communities within broader citizenship practices. Although formally recognized as citizens, they do not enjoy equal access to rights, services, and protection under the law. State policies that privilege officially recognized religions marginalize indigenous belief systems, resulting in discrimination in population administration, education, employment, and public services[19]. As a result, indigenous communities are frequently required to adapt to dominant norms to be

due to pressure from the then-Japanese occupation authorities. In mid-1948, ADS was re-established following the end of Japanese rule and the return of Dutch control. After the establishment of the *Himpunan Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa* (HPK) in 1981, ADS was registered as a member of the *Badan Koordinasi Kebatinan Indonesia* (BKKI). ADS was later transformed into *Paguyuban Adat Cara Karuhun Urang* (PACKU), which was formally registered with the Directorate of *Bina Hayat* as an official institution under Registration No. 192/R.3/N.1/1982, operating in West Java and its surrounding regions. PACKU was a formal agreement among customary institutions, established by indigenous authorities in response to the state's program for organizational inventory and data collection of belief organizations. However, PACKU was subsequently banned via Decree of the Head of the West Java High Prosecutor's Office No. Kep. 44/K.2.3/8/82 (see Waluyajati, 2017). Following the collapse of the New Order regime, the Sunda Wiwitan indigenous community in West Java reorganized itself under the name *Adat Karuhun Urang* (AKUR).

[18] Hidayat, 2018

[19] Purba, et.al.,2023

acknowledged, rather than being recognized on their own terms. This unequal treatment positions them as citizens whose rights are conditional and incomplete, reinforcing their status as second-class citizens within the Indonesian nation-state. In this regard, YN stated :

> "In my experience as a member of the Sunda Wiwitan community, being part of AKUR means carrying forward our ancestors' values while constantly negotiating our place in modern Indonesia. We are recognized as citizens, yet in daily life we often feel invisible or treated differently, especially when accessing public services or expressing our beliefs openly." (Interview 2017, 2024)

Historically, adherents of indigenous belief systems were able to practice their faiths relatively peacefully in Indonesia. This changed dramatically following the events of the alleged aborted communist coup on 30 September 1965 (*Gerakan 30 September*). In the aftermath of this political tragedy, indigenous belief adherents (*penghayat kepercayaan* or *kebatinan*) were frequently associated with the alleged communist movement. The establishment of the Supervisory Team for Belief Streams in Society or *Tim Pengawasan Aliran Kepercayaan Masyarakat* (*PAKEM*)[20] marked the beginning of intensified surveillance and control over belief communities. As a result of stigmatization and their association with the 1965 tragedy, a large-scale exodus occurred, with many indigenous belief adherents compelled to convert to officially recognized religions. Discussions on stigmatization after the 1965 tragedy is better understood if contextualized through the lived experience of the Sunda Wiwitan

[20] The PAKEM Team is also commonly referred to as the *Badan Koordinasi Pengawasan Aliran Kepercayaan* (Bakor Pakem). To this day, this body continues to operate under the authority of the Attorney General's Office and is mandated by Law on the Prosecutor's Office No. 16/2004—specifically Article 33 paragraph (3) (d) and (e)—to supervise religious beliefs and faith communities, as well as to prevent and/or address alleged acts of religious deviation or blasphemy (see Sihombing, 2008).

community in Cigugur. There, many Sunda Wiwitan adherents faced political suspicion, social exclusion, and administrative pressure that forced them to declare an affiliation with officially recognized religions to access citizenship rights and public services. Integrating Tendi's historical analysis of the community's historical forerunner, *Agama Djawa Sunda*, clarifies the socio-political roots of this marginalization, while Hurriyah's work on Sunda Wiwitan's struggle for civic space demonstrates how indigenous believers negotiated recognition, identity, and constitutional rights within Indonesia's religious governance system. This historical trajectory later crystallized in juridical–formal debates concerning the constitutional interpretation of Article 29(2), which guarantees freedom of "religion and belief."[21] As stated by Samsul Maarif from CRCS UGM, during a FoRB Fellowship presentation on 20 May 2020 :

> "The political distinction between 'religion' and 'belief' in Indonesia is not merely conceptual, but deeply political. It functions as a mechanism of power through which the state legitimizes certain religious forms while disciplining others. By separating religion from belief, the state produces unequal citizenship, where indigenous belief communities are rendered administratively visible yet politically inferior."

Constitutionally, Indonesia is a state "based on Almighty God," but the Constitution does not specify any religions or belief systems[22]. This is left to statute, which establishes six official religions that the state supports and helps administer: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism[23]. But Indonesia is home to a rich kaleidoscope of other beliefs (*kepercayaan*), ranging from indigenous

[21] Tim Direktorat Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa,2017
[22] Bourchier, 2019
[23] Black, A. 2024

practices predating the arrival of many of the official religions to new age spiritual movements[24]. Indigenous belief groups such as Sunda Wiwitan and Wongsonagoro interpret the term "belief" in Article 29(2) as referring to what is commonly known as *aliran kepercayaan*.[25] However, competing interpretations understand "belief" merely as belief within an officially recognized religion. Under this latter interpretation, belief systems outside the official religions are classified not as religions but as cultural expressions. This ambiguity has persisted and continues to shape policy. Almost all state policies concerning indigenous belief adherents refer to Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 (*UU Pencegahan Penodaan Agama*) as their legal foundation[26]. This law, in its implementation, requires law enforcement officials to seek the views of religious authorities; it serves as a powerful legal instrument to reinforce the position of the Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*) as the primary authority, while simultaneously marginalizing groups outside the mainstream[27]. Ironically, this law explicitly frames indigenous belief adherents as potential "religious deviants," thereby denying them guarantees of freedom of belief and worship. As a result, indigenous belief adherents are institutionally positioned as second-class religious citizens, subordinate to followers of official religions. This structural discrimination is clearly reflected in population administration practices, particularly the requirement to fill in the religion column on national identity cards. Prior to the 2017 Constitutional Court ruling, Sunda Wiwitan adherents were effectively forced to choose one of the officially recognized religions, despite this being incompatible with their beliefs[28]. As explained by GBA, indigenous leader in Cigugur :

[24] Butt,2016,2020; see also Ramstedt,2019
[25] Wirya, 2020
[26] Arifin, 2010
[27] Bagir, 2023
[28] Safa'at, 2022

> "We were told that the religion column on the KTP must be filled, and the only options were the official religions. But none of them represent our belief. Choosing one would mean denying who we are. So, we chose to leave it blank. The dash ('–') on our KTP is not because we have no faith, but because the state refuses to recognize our belief. That dash is a sign of our honesty, but also a sign of discrimination."
> (Interview 2017)

Empirical evidence shows that the religion column on the identity cards of Sunda Wiwitan followers is frequently left blank or marked with a dash, exposing them to accusations of atheism within Indonesia's religious framework. Although Article 64(2) of the Population Administration Law guarantees administrative services for adherents of unrecognized beliefs, it simultaneously distinguishes belief systems from officially recognized religions. This legal arrangement creates a contradiction by providing limited recognition while sustaining social exclusion and unequal treatment. Consequently, discrimination against belief communities reflects Indonesia's recognition practices, which institutionalize inequality and marginalization[29]. These negotiations have been heavily influenced by dominant religious groups that employ religion as a source of political legitimacy and power. In this context, the politics of recognition operates as a mechanism through which majority religious identities exert pressure and control over minority belief communities. Through public mobilization and institutional infiltration, religious majorities influence state policy, resulting in laws and regulations that classify citizens into those deemed "worthy of service" (followers of official religions or *penganut agama resmi*) and those considered "unserviceable" (followers of local or ancestral beliefs or *penganut kepercayaan lokal atau leluhur*).

[29] Hidayat, Siswono, & Yanuari,2019

Negotiation with the state plays a pivotal role for the Sunda Wiwitan community in securing recognition and equal civil rights. Through this process, government institutions mediate competing interests between dominant religious organizations and indigenous belief groups in defining religious legitimacy and legal status. This negotiation involves state agencies, political elites, religious authorities, and representatives of belief communities. A key example is Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016, which permitted indigenous belief adherents to include their beliefs on their national identity cards, reflecting a major policy shift after prolonged exclusion and institutional debate. Resistance from dominant religious groups demonstrated how state recognition emerged through political negotiation rather than equal citizenship principles alone[30]. DH, as indigenous leader in Kampung Susuru, Ciamis Regency, explained :

> "In our daily lives as Sunda Wiwitan adherents, the issue of the religion column on identity cards is not merely administrative—it reflects how the state sees us. Many of our community members leave the column blank or marked with a dash, as required, but this often leads to misunderstanding. People assume that we have no religion, or worse, that we are atheists, which carries a strong stigma in Indonesia. What we experience is not only administrative exclusion but also social pressure." (Interview 2018, 2022)

This dynamic has been evident since the Old Order period and was further entrenched during the New Order. The Ministry of Religious Affairs promoted an exclusive definition of religion, requiring features such as a prophet, a holy scripture, and international recognition. The establishment of PAKEM*,* initially under the Ministry and later transferred to the Attorney General's Office, served to stigmatize indigenous belief

[30] Hiariej & Stokke, 2022

systems as threats to the state, often associating them with communism and framing them as deviations that needed to be controlled or redirected into official religions. Simultaneously, the legal system institutionalized the privileging of official religions while marginalizing non-official ones. Official religions were constructed as orthodox, authoritative, and superior, whereas indigenous belief systems were labelled deviant, misleading, or even hostile to religion[31]. During the early New Order, indigenous beliefs and mainstream religions were formally treated as equal, as identity cards did not include a religion column. In this context, the term "equal" refers specifically to administrative equality, particularly the omission of a religion column on identity cards during the early New Order era. This notion applies only to formal state administration rather than wider social or political acknowledgment. Consequently, it does not contradict the argument that recognition must extend beyond administrative policies. Although the state appeared administratively neutral, substantive equality and meaningful recognition of diverse beliefs remained constrained in practice and were not fully implemented by the government. The 1973 People's Consultative Assembly Decree (Indonesia's Broad Outlines of State Policy or *Garis-Garis Besar Haluan Negara*, GBHN)[32] explicitly stated that both religions and indigenous beliefs were valid expressions of faith in God Almighty. However, this equality was reversed in the later New Order period through MPR Decree No. IV/MPR/1978 (*Ketetapan MPR No. IV/MPR/1978*), which explicitly declared that broad faith in God Almighty was not a formal religion and should not lead to the formation of new religions. Subsequently, a series of policies and circulars issued by state institutions—including the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Departemen Agama*), the Ministry of Home Affairs

[31] Al Khanif, 2021

[32] The *Garis-Garis Besar Haluan Negara (GBHN)* were Indonesia's Broad Outlines of State Policy, established during the New Order era as national development guidelines issued by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). GBHN directed political, economic, social, and cultural policies for five-year development periods. After constitutional reforms in 1998–2002, the GBHN system was abolished and replaced by direct presidential governance programs.

(*Departemen Dalam Negeri*), the Attorney General's Office (*Kejaksaaan Agung*), and local governments—legitimized the recognition, protection, and service of only five religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. II, as an anthropologist, explained :

> "In my view, the historical construction of religion in Indonesia reflects a deliberate state project to standardize belief. By imposing criteria such as prophetic lineage, scripture, and global recognition, the state effectively excluded local belief systems from legitimacy" (Interview 2018, 2019)

In the post-Reformasi period, limited changes occurred as human rights discourse became more mainstream. Indigenous belief adherents were no longer forced to choose an official religion and were allowed to leave the religion column blank. However, this policy did not constitute substantive progress, as the act of leaving the column blank continued to institutionalize discrimination. Social stigma was thus preserved, normalized, and even transformed into a legal norm that determined whether citizens were fully served by the state. This condition illustrates a broader paradox in the practice of FoRB in Indonesia. Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom are often interpreted narrowly as freedom of worship rather than freedom of belief[33]. The primary reason for this limitation lies in the state's selective recognition of official religions and its systematic marginalization of belief systems outside that framework. As a result, Indonesia is far from realizing FoRB as a comprehensive human rights principle. Instead, FoRB operates within a regime shaped by religious majoritarianism and political Islam, where recognition and protection are unevenly distributed, privileging dominant religious identities while excluding indigenous and ancestral belief communities. This structure leads to unequal forms of recognition and protection that

[33] Maula, 2013

privilege dominant religious communities while disadvantaging indigenous and ancestral belief groups. Building on the perspectives advanced by Hefner and Bagir, FoRB should be understood through Indonesia's broader politics of citizenship and recognition.[34] According to both scholars, Indonesian citizenship has historically evolved through competing interpretations of religious legitimacy, which have generated unequal access to legal rights and recognition across communities. Consequently, dominant religions receive legal safeguards, whereas indigenous belief communities face exclusion and limited recognition.

Between "Revolutionary Patience" and Advocacy Strategies

Protection of minority rights remains a key indicator of a state's commitment to human rights principles. In Indonesia, increasing violence against religious and indigenous belief minorities has raised serious concerns, particularly because discriminatory practices continue despite post-authoritarian legal reforms and the broader expansion of human rights discourse. Groups considered outside dominant religious norms frequently experience intimidation, exclusion, and physical attacks, demonstrating that repression against minorities has become deeply systemic rather than incidental. Numerous cases further highlight that such violence often occurs with the tolerance, passive acceptance, or even involvement of state security institutions working alongside dominant religious actors. Beyond direct violence, minority communities also encounter restrictions on religious expression and worship, while accountability for these violations remains limited, reinforcing a persistent culture of impunity. Repression additionally targets activists, religious leaders, and civil society organizations advocating freedom of religion or belief. Within this context, the Sunda Wiwitan indigenous community in Paseban, Cigugur, has pursued sustained advocacy through the AKUR alliance, engaging the National Human Rights Commission

[34] Hefner,2021.

(Komnas HAM) and filing lawsuits before the State Administrative Court to challenge discriminatory civil registration policies, particularly concerning marriage recognition.

Advocacy efforts have also been strengthened through alliance-building with organizations sharing similar concerns for minority rights, including the Indonesian Congress of Mysticism (*Badan Kongres Kebatinan Indonesia*, BKKI)[35], the National Alliance for Unity in Diversity (*Aliansi Nasional Bhineka Tunggal Ika*, ANBTI), the Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago (*Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara*, AMAN)[36], and the Interfaith Networking Forum (*Jakatarub*)[37].

Advocacy for recognition among the Sunda Wiwitan community is not a recent endeavor. Historically, their struggle can be traced back to the 1920s, when Prince Madrais submitted a formal request to the Regent of Kuningan, Raden Mochammad Achmad, seeking equal recognition of their belief system alongside other religions. At the same time, Prince Madrais encouraged his followers in areas such as Cineumbeuy[38] and Walahar Cageur[39] to submit similar petitions to local authorities[40] These early efforts reflect a long-standing engagement with state institutions, even

[35] The *Badan Kongres Kebatinan Indonesia* (BKKI) is an organization established on 21 August 1955, originating from a meeting of prominent figures of Indonesia's *kebatinan* tradition. BKKI functions as a forum for discussion and as a protective platform for the existence of indigenous belief communities. A detailed discussion of BKKI can be found in Damami (2018, p. 115). The term *kebatinan* is used as an alternative designation for *penghayat kepercayaan* (see Rosidin, 2000, p. 7).

[36] *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara* (AMAN) is an independent civil society organization whose membership consists of indigenous communities from various regions across the Indonesian archipelago.

[37] *JAKATARUB* was established in 2001 with the aim of fostering interreligious tolerance and harmony through deep mutual understanding among religious communities.

[38] Cineumbeuy is the name of a village located in Lebakwangi District, Kuningan Regency, West Java Province.

[39] Walaharcageur (often referred to as Walahar Cageur) is a village located in Luragung District, Kuningan Regency, West Java. It lies in the eastern part of Kuningan and is known for a hamlet called *Dusun* Cageur.

[40] Tendi, 2015

under highly unequal power relations. During the New Order's period of political repression, Sunda Wiwitan adherents became increasingly marginalized within Indonesia's socio-political system. State surveillance, ideological suspicion, and administrative exclusion forced the community into prolonged vulnerability. Yet, rather than responding through open confrontation, many members of the community interpreted their endurance as a conscious moral and political strategy. This experience has been conceptualized by DK as "revolutionary patience" (*kesabaran revolusioner*), she explained:

> "During the New Order, we were taught to survive through patience, but not passive patience. It was patience with awareness. We knew we were treated unjustly—our beliefs were silenced, our identity erased—but reacting with anger would only destroy us. Our patience was revolutionary because it allowed us to endure repression while preserving our belief, our dignity, and our community. We waited, we taught our children quietly, and we believed that justice would come, even if it took decades." (Interview 2017; 2019)

This articulation reveals that "revolutionary patience" functioned not merely as cultural resilience, but as a gendered and ethical form of political agency. It enabled the Sunda Wiwitan community—particularly women—to sustain belief, transmit ancestral values, and prepare the ground for later advocacy in the post–New Order period. In 2016, these efforts received a partial response from the state with the establishment of the Task Force on Diversity (*Satgas Kebhinekaan*)[41], aimed at protecting citizens who adhere to indigenous belief systems. This initiative extended protection not only to Sunda Wiwitan adherents but also to other

[41] The *Satgas Kebhinekaan* (the Task Force on Diversity) is a multi-stakeholder task force established in Indonesia around 2016 to address rising religious intolerance, identity-based conflict, and threats to social pluralism.

indigenous belief communities. The most significant outcome of this advocacy emerged with a landmark ruling from the Constitutional Court, which granted petitions from indigenous belief communities to include their belief identity in the religion column of national identity cards and family cards. This decision was widely regarded as a historic milestone in the recognition of freedom of religion and belief in Indonesia[42]. The Constitutional Court ruled that Articles 61 and 64 of Law No. 23 of 2006 on Population Administration were unconstitutional because they contradicted the principles of equality before the law and equal treatment in governance. Prior to this decision, the law and its amendment, Law No. 24 of 2013, regulated Indonesia's population administration system, including identity documents such as ID cards, family cards, and birth certificates. Although intended to improve public services through accurate population data and a unified identification number system, the regulations marginalized citizens whose beliefs fell outside officially recognized religions. As a result, many faced obstacles in accessing essential rights, including marriage registration, social welfare, and birth certification. While the ruling marked a major step toward equality, discrimination persists within broader legal and bureaucratic structures, demonstrating that genuine religious freedom requires continuous social and institutional transformation.

Recognition, Administrative and Moral Burden in the Negotiation of Identity

The politics of recognition within the framework of FoRB reveals how state recognition can become a mechanism for systemic discrimination toward indigenous communities, such as the Sunda Wiwitan. Rather than functioning solely as a pathway to equality and emancipation, recognition often operates through administrative control,

[42] Bagir, et.al,2020

moral discipline, and legal normalization imposed by the state. The prolonged struggle for official recognition demonstrates how bureaucratic procedures create uncertainty, delay, and psychological exhaustion for minority believers. This condition was reflected in a statement from AW, an indigenous elder from Kampung Cireundeu, who explained that the community continuously faces changing legal requirements that force them to adapt their spiritual identity to state-defined categories. Such practices illustrate that state institutions function as dominant actors exercising control through regulatory power and administrative authority. Consequently, recognition is experienced not as liberation, but as an ongoing moral negotiation in which the Sunda Wiwitan must repeatedly justify the legitimacy of their existence and beliefs before the state. Beyond administrative struggles, recognition politics also intrudes into fundamental cultural rights (Tyson, 2010; Arizona & Cohen, 2024). JD, a female Sunda Wiwitan leader from Cigugur, described the opposition faced by the community during the construction of a cemetery:

> "When we built a burial ground in Cigugur, people protested as if we were doing something illegal. But burying our dead according to our beliefs is our right as an indigenous community. The resistance we faced showed that the problem is not land or administration, but refusal to accept our existence. Even in death, we must negotiate recognition. The state talks about tolerance, but when it comes to our most basic rights, we are still questioned and doubted." (Interview 2022)

The opposition to the establishment of a burial ground for the Sunda Wiwitan indigenous community in Kuningan Regency evolved into a national issue because it revealed entrenched structural issues related to religious recognition, minority rights, and the role of the state. The

dispute was not simply a matter of land administration, but reflected the persistent marginalization of indigenous belief systems that are frequently viewed as illegitimate or outside the realm of "proper" religion. Consequently, a basic human right—the right to conduct burial rites in accordance with one's beliefs—was rendered conditional and open to debate. This case illustrates how long-standing distinctions between officially recognized religions and local belief systems continue to shape social attitudes and state practices. The absence of equal recognition for indigenous beliefs enables discrimination at the grassroots level to be normalized. The controversy attracted national attention because it exposed a serious violation of freedom of religion and belief, drawing responses from civil society, human rights groups, and the media. More broadly, the incident showed that recognition extends beyond bureaucracy into moral and existential realms. For the Sunda Wiwitan community, recognition entails resisting frameworks that subordinate indigenous identity, while advocating for autonomy, dignity, and cultural sovereignty beyond mere administrative inclusion. While state recognition often operates as an administrative and moral struggle, the experience of the Sunda Wiwitan community also reveals how this struggle has encouraged the development of grassroots advocacy networks as a strategy of survival and resistance. This dynamic was clearly articulated by SS, an indigenous leader from Kampung Susuru. Reflecting on local initiatives, he stated:

> "At the grassroots level, we realized that facing the state alone would only exhaust us. So, we began to build networks—first with other indigenous belief communities, because they experienced the same discrimination. Then we reached out to religious leaders from different traditions: Catholic priests, Muslim *kyai*, Christian pastors, and Confucian figures who were willing to listen and stand with us. We also worked with academics who understood our beliefs and respected our struggle."(Interview 2018; 2022)

His statement illustrates how the Sunda Wiwitan community responded to the moral and administrative pressures of state recognition by transforming vulnerability into collective action. Instead of depending solely on formal legal acknowledgment, they built interfaith alliances and sought intellectual support as alternative sources of legitimacy. This grassroots approach demonstrates that recognition extends beyond bureaucratic procedures, emerging through social trust, ethical collaboration, and shared commitments to religious freedom. Advocacy networks, therefore, operate as an alternative framework of recognition, reducing the isolating effects of state-defined legitimacy while strengthening communal dignity and autonomy. However, this situation generates complex moral and political dilemmas. Administrative recognition—especially the ability to list indigenous beliefs on national identity cards following the 2017 Constitutional Court ruling—has become essential for accessing basic civil rights. Although the 2017 Constitutional Court decision formally recognized indigenous beliefs, many Sunda Wiwitan communities still face administrative barriers in practice. Difficulties remain in obtaining identity cards, marriage certificates, family registration documents, and equal access to education or public employment because local officials often lack clear implementation procedures or continue discriminatory practices. Legally, the decision strengthened constitutional protections of religious freedom, equality before the law, and recognition of indigenous belief systems. However, inconsistent enforcement and bureaucratic resistance show that formal legal protection does not always guarantee effective enjoyment of civil and social rights.

Discussion

The findings above can be further interpreted through Fraser's theory of the politics of recognition, particularly her argument that injustice is rooted not only in economic inequality but also in

institutionalized forms of cultural domination that prevent marginalized groups from participating as equals in social and political life.[43] Fraser argues that injustice cannot be understood solely through economic inequality because it also operates through cultural and symbolic exclusion. She distinguishes between maldistribution, which refers to poverty, exploitation, and economic marginalization, and misrecognition, which involves stigmatization, invisibility, humiliation, and the denial of social legitimacy. These forms of injustice frequently intersect, particularly among women, indigenous communities, religious minorities, and racialized groups. Fraser further contends that recognition should not be reduced to the celebration of identity or cultural authenticity. Instead, recognition concerns social status and the ability of individuals to participate as equal members of society. Therefore, justice requires equal access to rights, institutional legitimacy, and meaningful participation in public life. In Indonesia, the experience of the Sunda Wiwitan community illustrates this problem clearly. Although the 2017 Constitutional Court decision granted formal legal recognition, discrimination persists through bureaucratic exclusion, dominant religious norms, and unequal political power, revealing the limits of symbolic recognition without substantive equality.

This aligns with Hurriyah's analysis of the politics of FoRB in Indonesia, which demonstrates that democratization has not necessarily strengthened minority protections but instead has often intensified contestation over religious legitimacy.[44] Following the democratic reform period, greater political openness enabled conservative religious actors to influence local governance and public morality, thereby reinforcing exclusionary interpretations of citizenship. In this context, the recognition of indigenous belief groups becomes conditional upon negotiation with dominant religious norms rather than guaranteed through constitutional equality alone. The Sunda Wiwitan experience illustrates this

[43] Fraser, 2000
[44] Hurriyah, 2020

contradiction clearly: while legal reforms formally recognize indigenous beliefs, local administrative practices frequently continue to marginalize them in areas such as marriage registration, burial rights, education, and access to public services. Recognition thus remains fragmented and uneven across regions, depending heavily on local political configurations and the discretion of bureaucratic authorities. Mutaqin's discussion of the intersection of politics and law further reinforces this argument by showing that Indonesian legal reforms concerning indigenous belief communities often operate within a framework of accommodation rather than structural transformation.[45] The state recognizes cultural diversity to maintain democratic legitimacy, yet it simultaneously preserves institutional hierarchies that privilege majoritarian religious identities. This reflects Fraser's critique of affirmative recognition policies, which accommodate marginalized groups without fundamentally restructuring the systems that generate inequality.[46] In the Sunda Wiwitan case, legal inclusion does not dismantle the broader hierarchy separating "official religions" from "belief systems." Instead, indigenous spirituality is frequently positioned as cultural heritage rather than as a fully legitimate religious identity equivalent to recognized faiths. Such categorization reproduces unequal status relations because it situates indigenous communities outside the normative center of religious citizenship.

At the same time, Hefner's work on citizenship and religious diversity in Indonesia provides a broader political explanation for why recognition remains contested within democratic governance[47]. Hefner argues that Indonesian democracy is characterized by an ongoing tension between pluralist constitutional ideals and religious majoritarian pressures. Although democratization created opportunities for civil liberties and minority advocacy, it also enabled identity politics to become deeply embedded within public institutions. The politics of citizenship in

[45] Mutaqin, 2014
[46] Fraser, 1995
[47] Hefner, 2013

Indonesia therefore involves continuous negotiation over who is considered a legitimate religious subject within the nation-state. Sunda Wiwitan communities occupy an ambiguous position within this framework because they are symbolically celebrated as part of Indonesia's cultural diversity while simultaneously being excluded from equal recognition within formal religious governance. This ambiguity demonstrates how democratic inclusion can coexist with structural marginalization.

A comparison with other indigenous communities in Indonesia further illustrates the broader dynamics of recognition politics. The Parmalim community in North Sumatra, for instance, has experienced similar challenges in obtaining equal access to civil administration and public services despite formal legal recognition. Likewise, the Kaharingan community in Central Kalimantan historically gained state recognition only after being incorporated administratively into Hinduism, reflecting the pressure imposed on indigenous spiritualities to conform to existing religious categories. In contrast, the Baduy community in Banten has maintained a degree of autonomy due to its relative geographical isolation and strong customary institutions, yet it still faces limitations in accessing modern citizenship rights without compromising traditional practices. These comparisons demonstrate that recognition in Indonesia often depends on the extent to which indigenous identities can adapt to state-centered religious frameworks. Rather than transforming institutional norms, the state frequently integrates indigenous groups through mechanisms of bureaucratic assimilation.

The Sunda Wiwitan case also reflects broader global debates regarding religion and minority rights in new democracies. In many post-authoritarian societies, democratization creates opportunities for political participation while simultaneously intensifying struggles over national identity, religion, and cultural legitimacy. Majoritarian religious movements often claim the authority to define the moral boundaries of citizenship, thereby limiting the inclusion of minority groups. Indonesia

exemplifies this paradox: constitutional democracy formally guarantees religious freedom, yet public institutions continue to privilege dominant interpretations of religion in practice. As a result, FoRB becomes not merely a legal issue but a deeply political struggle over recognition, legitimacy, and belonging within the nation-state. Ultimately, our findings suggest that recognition for Sunda Wiwitan communities remains incomplete because legal reforms have not fundamentally altered the institutional hierarchy governing religious citizenship in Indonesia. Fraser's theory provides an important foundation for understanding how misrecognition operates through unequal status relations, yet the Indonesian case demonstrates the need to integrate analyses of religion, postcolonial state formation, and democratic majoritarianism into the politics of recognition. The struggle of Sunda Wiwitan communities therefore reveals that democratic inclusion requires more than constitutional acknowledgment; it requires transformative restructuring of the political and cultural institutions that continue to privilege dominant religious identities over indigenous forms of belief and citizenship.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the politics of recognition experienced by the Sunda Wiwitan community reflects a persistent contradiction within Indonesia's democratic and legal framework. While the state officially guarantees freedom of religion and belief, its implementation remains selective and hierarchical. Indigenous belief communities are still positioned outside dominant religious classifications, causing recognition to function less as a form of protection and more as an instrument of regulation and social control. Consequently, Sunda Wiwitan adherents continue to encounter structural discrimination that extends beyond symbolic exclusion into institutional practices affecting civil administration, educational access, public services, and social acceptance.

Our findings further indicate that discrimination against indigenous belief communities is embedded within broader bureaucratic and political structures that privilege officially recognized religions. In this context, recognition becomes conditional upon conformity to dominant norms, compelling minority groups to negotiate their identity within unequal power relations. Drawing on Fraser's theory of recognition, this study argues that justice cannot be achieved solely through symbolic acknowledgment or constitutional guarantees. Genuine recognition requires equal participation within social and political institutions, where indigenous belief communities are treated as full citizens rather than administratively marginalized populations. Therefore, the case of Sunda Wiwitan highlights the urgent need for a transformative approach to religious recognition in Indonesia—one that dismantles structural inequalities, respects plural belief systems, and ensures substantive equality for indigenous communities within democratic public life.

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