Abstract: By attending to the conceptualisations of interfaith student and youth groups in Bandung, Indonesia, in response to state ideologies and regulatory policies, this article examines new approaches to the concept of pluralism – approaches that recognise the affective economies of how people construe and deal with difference. Conceptualisations of ‘authentic encounter’ not only pose a direct critique to the dividing effects of the legal codification and categorisation of difference – a critique that anthropologists working in societies characterised by ethnic and religious diversity voiced alongside feminist thinkers – but also reveal great potential for theoretical reflections from below. By drawing on contemporary anthropological work on pluralism in Southeast Asia and leaning on the anthropological literature on affect, this article shows how conceptualisations of ‘authentic encounter’, which circulate among groups of predominantly young activists, situate feelings and emotional states directly into ideas of how diversity should be dealt with. By doing so, they not only challenge the limits of pluralism as a politico-legal category but also espouse a concept of pluralism that is essentially embedded in the emotional life and social activities of those living with difference.

Keywords: affect, authentic encounter, Indonesia, Pancasila, pluralism

... pluralism has almost always (but, of course, not always consciously) the function to cover up for, distract attention from, elevate to a level of abstract inevitability, relations of unequal multiplicity. (Fabian 1985: 139)

I arrived at the site of the Youth Interfaith Peace Camp on Friday morning. The wisma was situated in the south of Bandung, on the main road connecting the eastern and western parts of the city. The air was heavy with humidity and dust. I seemed to be the only one bothered by the ceaseless noise coming from the road, as the majority of the participants, mainly university students, stayed not far from this area. I was placed in a room together with two Muslim girls from Bandung’s State Islamic University and a Christian girl who came from Sulawesi for the camp. The room was tiny, with four beds, two of which were merely a mattress on the tiled floor. The two Muslim girls immediately chose to sleep there – a sign of religiously inspired politeness, I assumed. We started the day by getting to know each other through games. For the first game, all thirty participants – fifteen Muslims and fifteen Christians – and the organisers stood in a circle and each had to tell her or his name, place of origin, and a word that describes her or him best and starts with the same letter as the name. Then the next person had to repeat all that has been said, before giving her or his name, until all participants have had their turn. The second game aimed at mixing people, requiring them to move and
sit elsewhere, which the organisers used again and again to prevent the same people from sitting together. We also learned to greet each other with slogans, such as ‘Salam Peace Shalom’, the answer to which would be ‘Shalom Peace Salam’. The organisers used these to retain attention throughout the days, which were packed with presentations and activities. We also learned ways to acknowledge and support each other, for example, through ‘Tepuk Salut’ (applause), or a slight grip on one’s shoulder saying something nice. These verbal and bodily forms of interaction both tested limits and signalised affection from the very beginning of what was meant to ‘knit’ the young participants in intimate interfaith friendships.

As anthropologist Johannes Fabian insists in an essay on religious pluralism in sub-Saharan Africa, ‘we must consider the possibility that “pluralism” is irretrievably compromised as a thoroughly ideological concept’ (1985: 139). This is particularly true in those parts of the world where diverse populations have more or less (often more) forcefully been integrated into political entities. As Fabian (1985: 140) indicates, the central motives behind such efforts have been to impose ‘order and harmony’ over conflicting views, and the groups who hold them. Such impositions paradoxically reinforce hegemonic relations rather than resolve internal tensions.

In his seminal work on gender pluralism in Southeast Asia, Michael Peletz distances himself from the ‘principles of hierarchy, exclusion, and incommensurability’ that define earlier concepts of pluralism and discerns between ‘pluralism across ethnic/racial/religious divides’ and ‘pluralistic sentiments and dispositions within variously defined social entities’ (2009: 8–9). I see much potential in this focus on sentiments – a stance that essentially derives from my ethnographic experience with groups, such as the Young Interfaith Peacemaker Community (YIPC), which also provides the material for the introductory vignette. As I will show in this article, affect features as a central component of how they conceptualise pluralism. Following anthropological reflections on affect that recognise its relationality (Navaro-Yashin 2009; Röttger-Rössler and Slaby 2018) and sociality (Jones 2004; Martin 2013; Muehlebach 2011), I take Peletz’ approach to pluralism further and propose a focus on conceptualisations of pluralism that emphasise social activities and interpersonal relations – a focus that acknowledges the affective economies of how people construe cultural difference, diversity and pluralism as a value and social norm. Being inspired by my interlocutors in Bandung, I argue that a concept of pluralism that accounts for affective practices allows us to better understand how pluralism is imagined and construed within groups of people, connecting individuals beyond difference and thus containing what they perceive as a genuine experience of pluralism. By doing so, I recognise the role of feelings and emotions not only in confrontational debates among proponents and antagonists of pluralism in highly politicised fields (Kersten 2015: 2), but also in the way people living with difference place feelings at the core of what they perceive as a viable response to the challenge of diversity. Among the groups that I study, emotions constitute a legitimate signpost for what is perceived as a lived pluralism. They are not just key to new conceptualisations of pluralism, but also expose what is perceived as so far missing in ideological debates in Indonesia, namely, the value of practice, experience and sincere engagement.
The data for this analysis derive from a one-year ethnographic fieldwork among three interfaith student and youth groups and a couple of loosely defined associations of proponents of religious pluralism in Bandung in 2018. This was the year of regional elections, preceding presidential elections in 2019, and a time of elevated anxiety among representatives of different religious groups and interfaith alliances against the threat of Islamist political agendas that may curtail pluralism and religious inclusiveness in Indonesia. Yet, political debate is conspicuously absent from the ideologies I examine in this article. The insights gathered into alternative conceptualisations of pluralism derive mainly from participant observation in the regular meetings, camps and other outreach activities, and online chat groups of the above-mentioned groups, and from interviews and regular talks (online and offline) with the leaders and members of these groups. I also collected data from the groups’ public presence on social media and other digital and print outlets.

While the communities that allowed me to immerse in their activities – particularly those who consulted senior proponents of pluralism both from Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (Indonesia’s biggest Muslim mass organisations) and from local Catholic and Protestant churches – are well acquainted with national history and local ideals of ‘unity in diversity’ – the state motto of Indonesia – their approach directly challenges dominant state rhetoric. In contrast, they embrace means and technologies that are consistent with youth and urban culture, such as informal discussions, camps and festivals, to promote what they describe as an ‘authentic encounter’ (perjumpaan otentik). What makes their conceptualisations of pluralism new is the central role ascribed to affect and emotions, not only in relations of difference and inequality but also in dealing with diversity (and eventually managing such relations). The instance of such efforts to cultivate pluralistic sensibilities in a country characterised by diversity and founded on principles of pluralism not only reveals the limits of normative pluralism, but also points to the potential of differing interpretations of living together (with or without difference). It is the ability of grassroots activists to reflect and navigate ideals of pluralism embedded in everyday experience that renders their voices crucial in anthropological analysis of pluralism and attempts at theorising ‘from below’ (Fabian 1985: 144, 159).

**Pluralism: Classic Theory, Critique and Contemporary Approaches**

In anthropology, the concept of pluralism entered theoretical debates through the concept of ‘plural society’, coined by J. S. Furnivall (1948) in his discussion of colonial policy and practice in Burma and Indonesia. M. G. Smith – acclaimed as the ‘the most prolific exponent of plural society theorizing in anthropology’ (Vincent 2000: 426) – took the idea of plural society to analyse Caribbean (Smith 1965) and African societies (Kuper and Smith 1969) which were characterised by ‘sharp cleavages between different population groups brought together within the same political unit’ (Kuper and Smith 1969: 3). Critique of the concept came from scholars working in those same regions (McKenzie 1966; Mitchell 1966), suggesting that plural society is best seen as a colonial construct based on the categorisation and legal codification of ethnic and
racial difference. Later, similar critique targeted theoretical conceptualisations and representations of culture as an integrated whole, ignoring internal variation, principles of exclusion and unequal power relations.

The concept of cultural pluralism (also referred to as ‘multiculturalism’) emerged at the juncture of scholarly and political debates in the 1980s and 1990s. While it holds that discrete ethnic groups should be equally acknowledged within a dominant political culture (Eriksen 2001: 280), its argument continues on the premises of a strong interpretation of (historic cultural) difference. Much contemporary work on multiculturalism in Europe recognises the emotional repercussions of multiculturalism debates and policies. Ralf Grillo (2003), for example, points to the anxieties surrounding an essentialist use of the concept of ‘culture’ in political and media debates, while Michalinos Zembylas (2010) investigates the emotional work of teachers in response to the growing diversity in their classes and to debates on multiculturalism in Cyprus. As Sabine Strasser (2011: 271) elaborates, in Europe, emotionalised themes regarding (the threat) of diversity have too often been controlled by right-wing populist groups. More recently, Robert Hefner shows similar tendencies in Indonesia – the cradle of the concept of plural society – pointing to a ‘sobering but general truth’ (2020: 13), namely, the space that a culture of equality and inclusivity may offer for the ascendance of majoritarian movements that discard these same ideals.

Notwithstanding scholarly critique of the essentialisation of difference (and culture) and the inability of political entities to reconcile contrasting systems of meaning, categories and values, alternative conceptualisations of pluralism – such as those that are closer to contemporary interpretations of (religious) pluralism as ‘a mutual pledge to engage, respect and protect each other’ (Seiple 2018, cited in Hefner 2020: 1) – are gaining currency. Such conceptualisations locate pluralism in social relationships and societal behaviour (Eck 2015; Formichi 2014). Stressing the importance of dialogue, mutuality and exchange, these conceptualisations are deeply interwoven in various processes of democratisation and their theoretical and ideological underpinnings. Although they pose a critique to normative visions of pluralism and their dividing rather than unifying effects, such conceptualisations stand in stark contrast to contemporary tendencies to dismiss pluralism in political discourse (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010) or as an analytical category of the whole (Berry 2001).

Any effort to study pluralism beyond its legal and political underpinnings, due to its conflations with concepts of multiculturalism as politics of identity or government policy, requires an ethnographically grounded understanding and analysis of how people (other than governments) deal with diversity. The region of Southeast Asia has proven a prolific source for new contemplations and theoretical contributions to the study of pluralism in anthropology and neighbouring disciplines. Considering the plurality of values that Indonesians seek to navigate and reconcile in their efforts to ‘live together’, John R. Bowen investigates what he defines as ‘socially embedded forms of public reasoning’ (2003: 5) or, in other words, interpretations of and arguments about competing norms and values embedded in everyday contexts. An anthropology of public reasoning, he argues, allows a full appreciation of conflict in efforts to create legitimacy within social formations (Bowen 2003: 8). In a similar vein, the aforementioned Michael Peletz proposes a definition of pluralism that recognises ‘the
existence of pluralistic sentiments and dispositions within variously defined social entities, regardless of whether or not they are heterogeneous in ethnic, racial, or religious terms’ (2009: 9; emphasis in original). By looking at processes in which norms, values, beliefs and ways of being are assessed by social actors, both authors refer to the work of contemporary political theorists (e.g. Walzer 1997), yet distance themselves from their overall legalistic approach and conceptualisations along ethnic/racial/religious divides. Their take on pluralism recognises the plurality of values that is explicitly reasoned about in daily practices and social affairs (Bowen 2003: 268) and emphasises the role of dispositions and sensibilities rather than ‘formal creed or doctrine’ (Peletz 2009: 7).

Early anthropological work on affect (Abu-Lughod 1986; Rosaldo 1980) focused on emotions as indicators of what ‘moves and matters in human life’ (Lutz 2017: 182), embracing a more social, relational and contextual perspective than their counterparts in psychoanalysis. It also placed a strong critique on the rigid dichotomies of mind and body, reason and passion that had informed much of our discipline. Such dichotomies, anthropologists and critical theorists warn (Boellstorff and Lindquist 2004; Leys 2011; Martin 2013), reproduce the scientific practice of studying meaning and signification independently from affect and hence gendered hierarchies within our conceptual apparatus. On the contrary, they recognise that social life is emotional life, and that language can tell us much about how people express anxieties related to their immediate surroundings and how they formulate strategies in dealing with power asymmetries, conflict and processes of transformation in general. An anthropological approach to pluralism that goes beyond the language of legitimacy and reasoning considers affect as the site where new conceptualisations of dealing with diversity are born, and as the social glue that builds and perpetuates groups and communities (Stodulka and Röttger-Rössler 2018).

Members of interreligious associations in Bandung have been exposed to differing interpretations of pluralism, ranging from the legacies of a state-driven glorification of Pancasila, to pluralistic interpretations of ‘unity in diversity’ (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika) and intellectual recuperations of religious pluralism, to very narrow interpretations of pluralism following changes in Indonesia’s political climate in the last two decades (Bourchier 2019; Kersten 2015: 221–277; Pedersen 2016; Widiyanto 2013) – debates which I will turn to in the following section. It is within this highly discursive environment that young people pursue new conceptualisations of pluralism that resonate with their daily emotional experiences. By espousing ‘engagement’ (keterlibatan) as the only way of dealing with the prejudice (prasangka), discomfort (ketidaknyamanan) and inner conflict (konfl ik batin) affecting interpersonal relations, they define both the problem of diversity and its solutions in affective terms. To gain a better understanding of the discursive environment that shapes young people’s responses to diversity and difference in Bandung today, in what follows, I will recapitulate the main ideological currents of pluralism discourse since the formation of the Indonesian state. As Robert Hefner (2020: 3–5) recognises, the state ideology Pancasila comprises an Indonesian version of pluralism that builds on mutual respect and engagement. Nevertheless, the history of Pancasila is riven with ideological battles and, as David Bourchier stresses, ‘all ideological battles are in a sense battles over the interpretation of Pancasila’ (2019:
Hence, discussion about pluralism in Indonesia almost always entails debates about the state ideology.

State Ideology and Religious Pluralism in Indonesia

Pancasila (literally, Five Pillars) is the ideological foundation of the Indonesian state and consists of five principles formulated by Indonesia’s first president Sukarno and enshrined in the preamble to the Indonesian Constitution since 1945. As a state ideology, Pancasila sought to ‘overcome differences within the nation’s elite’ (Barker 2008: 528), particularly differences with regard to ideology, religion and ethnicity. The principle of ‘Belief in Almighty God’ (*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*), for instance, is meant to promote a nation in which members of all state-recognised religions are seen as equal citizens. Yet, from its inception, Pancasila bore different strands of antagonistic tensions (Burhanudin and Dijk 2013: 8). Proponents of an Islamic state insisted on an obligation for Muslims to abide by Islamic law (cf. Burhani 2013: 35), a demand that continues to resonate with Islamist organisations in Indonesia today. The other strand of tensions revolves around the limitations of Pancasila, associated with the state’s narrow definition of religion in the Presidential Decision No.1 (1965), on the one hand, and the exclusion of non-belief and deviant belief as legitimate categories in public life, on the other (Howell 2005; Menchik 2014: 607; Pedersen 2016: 390). In any case, the stipulation that Indonesia is ‘a theistic state with obligation to uphold belief in God and to regulate religious practice’ (Bourchier 2019: 721) has often overshadowed the other four principles within political discourse and limited the potential of Pancasila as a genuine formula of pluralism.³

Pancasila ascended into Indonesian political discourse in two dominant ways – as a state-driven programme to ensure social order and curb all leftist, liberal and Islamist opposition during the Suharto regime (1966–1998), and as a symbol of tolerance and pluralism in the context of liberal democratic aspirations and affinity to universal human rights principles (cf. Bourchier 2019: 714, 727). Often stressed, under the first body of literature, are Suharto’s authoritarian policies, including the imposition on all social organisations to pledge allegiance to Pancasila as their ‘sole foundation’ (*azas tunggal*) (Ramage 1995: 5; Menchik 2016: 81), the inclusion of Pancasila ideology in all national curricula (Barker 2008: 533; Bourchier 2019: 715) and the obligation of all citizens to acknowledge one of a limited number of ‘world religions’ (Howell 2005: 474; Hefner 2011). Suharto’s dogmatic inculcation of Pancasila not only circumscribed religion but also reduced ‘culture’ (*kebudayaan*) to dehistoricised and depoliticised depictions of cultural traits (Barker 2008: 534). One effect of Suharto’s ‘authoritarian pluralism’, as Daromir Rudnyckyj argues, is that Indonesian citizens have been ‘compelled to publicly proclaim pure identities’ (2010: 190–194). Julia Day Howell’s detailed analysis of Suharto’s policing of religion and belief affirms this observation by showing how cultural and religious heterodoxies of Indonesia were gradually subjected to ‘administrative rationalization and pillarization’ (2005: 479). A steady trend towards the judicalisation of inter-religious relations reveals the state’s continuous attempts to regulate religious identities well into present day (Bourchier 2019; Crouch 2013; Fenwick 2017).
Little surprising is that pluralistic interpretations of Pancasila are largely preoccupied with the role of religion in public life. From the mid-1980s onwards, Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005), a prominent Islamic intellectual and exponent of pluralist Islamic thought in Indonesia, energetically promoted a notion of Islam that struck ‘a balance between the universal aspects of Islam’s doctrinal teaching and the Muslim world’s cosmopolitanism’ (Kersten 2014: 29). He interpreted the plurality among groups of people as a ‘divine order’ (sunnatullah) and emphasised the importance of finding common terms between religions (Madjid 2019: 55, 57). Pancasila is seen as one such common term (Madjid 2019: 60). Madjid’s ideas have found resonance among younger generations of Muslims at higher educational institutions. Today, state Islamic universities continue to be at the forefront in promoting pluralist interpretations of Islam. In Bandung, interfaith activist groups attract students from various faculties as an opportunity of adding practical experience to curricular activities. A number of networks and foundations continue to preserve Nurcholish’s legacy today, including the Paramadina Foundation (founded by Madjid in 1986), Paramadina University, and the International Center of Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), among others (Kersten 2014). Budhy Munawar Rachman, one of Madjid’s closest colleagues at Paramadina University, regularly presents lectures for students and activists in Bandung. As Kersten denotes, Rachman’s emphasis on inclusiveness ‘continues to color the Indonesian Muslim discourse on religious diversity’ today (2015: 228).

On the political scene, an alignment of pro-Pancasila, pro-democracy and pro-human rights voices became louder under the leading Muslim figure of Abdurrahman Wahid. As the former chairman of Indonesia’s biggest Muslim mass organisation, Nahdatul Ulama (NU), Wahid became president in 1999, after the Suharto regime had come to an end. In Bandung, he is still recalled as the father of interfaith dialogue. Established by his supporters, the Wahid Institute is part of a larger network of organisations, such as Maarif Institute, the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace, and Interfidei, all of which promote ideas of religious freedom, peace and tolerance. The early days of the democratic reform instigated a wave of what Julia Day Howell read as ‘the signs of a new acceptance of unrestricted pluralism’ (2014: 218). Intellectuals like Azyumardi Azra have called for a ‘rejuvenation of Pancasila . . . as the basis of Indonesian pluralism’ (Azra 2013: 86). This was also a time of much optimism related to the ideal of ‘civil society’ espoused by the (local and international) NGOs working with conflict-riven communities as the main actors behind processes of democratisation and reconciliation. Yet, as Howell (2014) and others (Bourchier 2019; Kersten 2014) indicate, the reception of pluralism went little beyond inclined circles of the urban educated middle classes.

This discursive context of pluralism in Indonesia has at least two implications. First, as already mentioned, pluralism and particularly intellectual advances in religious pluralism are often confined to the spheres of higher education, although, as more Indonesians enjoy tertiary education, one could also argue that pluralist discourse has also broadened its basis. Second, and more crucial, ideas of pluralism are closely interwoven with the organisation of inter-religious relations, ideals of interfaith dialogue and pluralistic sensibilities among Muslims. This often entails the exclusion of other minority groups, such as intra-Islamic or gender minorities. In 2018, I
witnessed a number of attempts to overcome the confines of these contexts, for example, when participants of Bandung’s School of Peace (BSOP) spent an afternoon knitting plastic bags with members of an LGBTQ community as a sign of solidarity and engagement, as non-heteronormative communities have increasingly come under pressure in recent years in Indonesia (Peletz 2020). A middle-aged woman invited us to her home and, one by one, members of her community arrived. We sat together on the tile floor of the otherwise empty room, sorted out plastic bags, and cut them in strings, while the woman shared her life story. On the same day, a BSOP leader posted on his Instagram account:

We shared each other’s experiences. From here, we all weaved into one knitwork, knitting differences through knitting plastic into beautiful bags. We came with all our differences but it didn’t matter as long as we sought peace, at least for ourselves and for others. (Instagram posting, 2 July 2018)

On another occasion, I observed a small but intriguing question-and-answer round between students and two representatives of the local Shi’a and Ahmadiyya communities, which constitute minorities within Islam in Indonesia and frequently suffer from discrimination (Schäfer 2018). Before their presentations, BSOP participants were asked to write down anything they have heard and know about the two communities so far, not excluding ‘yang buruk’ (literally, ‘the bad things’). After his presentation, the Shi’a representative quickly looked at some of the questions. His unprompted grin and facial expressions revealed that what he read was quite familiar to him. He took the time to relate to each of these comments. These occasions expose the struggle of young activists in Bandung to challenge established frameworks, on the one hand, and their often personalised and improvised ways of responding to the limits of pluralism on the ground, on the other. In their efforts to address the emotional cleavages of everyday experience, these groups fashioned their own understanding of pluralism, espousing ‘authentic encounters’ and togetherness between those who are discursively marked as different.

**From Discourses of ‘Tolerance’ to ‘Authentic Encounters’**

When it comes to diversity, Indonesians have a great repertoire of stories and histories of living together with difference. When asking about ideals of pluralism, most Indonesians instantly recount situations of collaboration between neighbours regardless of religious backgrounds, or examples of different houses of worship standing side by side, or again the politeness of a Muslim greeting her Christian friend on Christmas. However, practices like the latter are nowadays increasingly contested, not least among young social-media-savvy Muslims concerned with ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ in practising their faith (Lengauer 2018). Adding to these anxieties are Islamist movements and forms of religiously inspired vigilantism (cf. Telle 2013; Wilson 2014), although the appalling violence that shook some regions of Indonesia after the fall of the authoritarian regime, and that prompted the formation of numerous NGOs working on post-violence reconciliation, has largely ceased today. These tensions are amplified...
by the continuous attempts on the part of the state to regulate religious relations, for example, through the so-called ‘religious harmony’ regulation of 2006 that requires the consent of the religious majority for a minority to build a house of worship in a given area (Telle 2016). The concern with the inability of the state to address interreligious hierarchies extends to the national motto of ‘unity in diversity’. As one of the leaders of Jaringan Kerja Antar Umat Beragama (Interreligious Work Network, JAKATARUB) exclaimed:

What is ‘unity in diversity’!? How can this idea enter into our behaviour? Until now, people speak about ‘unity in diversity’ as if it were a myth, something untouchable, somewhere in the clouds. It’s like a concept that is too difficult to grasp; but hey, actually, it’s all around us and we can do something about it. (Interview, 9 December 2018)

JAKATARUB emerged as an initiative of NU students at Bandung’s State Islamic University to collaborate with members of other religious communities against what they perceived as creeping sharia regulations in 2000 and 2001. Stressing the phenomenon of ‘grassroots peacebuilding’ in Indonesia, Sumanto al Qurtuby (2012/2013) describes similar local groups and leading figures engaging in building civic peace in Central Java through informal interfaith gatherings, communal prayers, ‘live ins’ and visits to sacred sites, which groups like JAKATARUB embrace as models of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Today, JAKATARUB is led by a ‘third generation’ of young people from various religious backgrounds and its activities culminate in two yearly organised events – a ‘youth interfaith camp’ and a ‘peace festival’ in the city of Bandung. The key idea behind both events is to bring together young people, preferably from different religious backgrounds, and let them interact with each other in rather casual and intimate settings. This is what groups like JAKATARUB, YIPC and BSOP consider an ‘authentic encounter’ (perjumpaan yang otentik) – not a dialog between religious representatives with an established ‘code of conduct’, but a first-hand, intimate experience between ordinary people: ‘What we want to build is a daily space for friendship and to be able to talk about religion’ (JAKATARUB leader, casual conversation at JAKATARUB’s interfaith camp, 26 October 2018).7

The space that interfaith groups open up for dialogue is ‘daily’ in terms of its familiarity, or the language and practices of youth, while friendship (persahabatan) features as the central trope in speaking about empathy (empati) and acceptance (penerimaan).8 ‘Dialogue starts with friendship’ is the motto of JAKATARUB’s yearly festival Bandung Lautan Damai (literally, Bandung’s Sea of Peace), contained in a series of concerts, exhibitions, film screenings and workshops.9 In a presentation at the Student Forum of Religious Studies at Bandung’s State Islamic University, JAKATARUB’s leader, Wawan Gunawan, explained to the student audiences who filled the hall that pluralism had to move beyond ‘differentiating’ (membedakan) religious views and towards ‘involving’ (melibatkan) people from different religious backgrounds. This, he further highlighted, could be reached through empathy. ‘One way to erase stigmata’, he explained, ‘is through meeting, getting to know each other, and building friendships’ (Forum Mahasiswa Studi Agama-Agama, 16 April 2018). A facilitator of YIPC’s peace camp in Jakarta further explains in a live broadcast widely disseminated via Facebook:
We think that these Muslim and Christian students need to sit together, for a long time, to be able to feel each other or have an experience of a deep encounter, not just a superficial one, ... not a cognitive one, we really want them to have an experience of deeper interaction with those of a different religion ... This encounter will clarify a lot of prejudice – it’s much more effective. (KBR live broadcast, 13 March 2019)

In other words, they essentially locate pluralism in the emotional work of people in the context of interpersonal interaction. Such conceptualisations recall practices of reconciliation arguably transmitted through the work of NGOs in Indonesia’s conflict-riven regions (Bräuchler 2009). After the fall of Suharto’s regime, humanitarian groups encountered the democratic aspirations of young people, including unfolding discourses on human rights and social justice, and ideals of religious pluralism that had found their way into the educated middle classes since the 1980s. Groups like JAKATARUB were initiated at that time. Yet, the conflict that interfaith groups in Bandung (and some other cities across the archipelago) seek to resolve today is fundamentally intimate and affective – a conflict that is depicted as a feeling of discomfort (ketidaknyamanan) and suspicion (kecurigaan) – an emotional distress that is rooted in everyday social life. A central aim of YIPC’s activities is to transform the ‘inner conflict’ (konflik batin), suspicion (kecurigaan) and doubt (keraguan) of those participating in their camps into a ‘feeling of comfort and peace’ (rasa nyaman dan damai). All three groups share the perception that this transformation is first and foremost a relational act:

It’s not about the content but the process, because the encounter happens in the process. This is what we engineer. If we would create one event – that’s it! But we advise them to organize as many meetings as possible. The encounter happens in the meeting. (JAKATARUB leader, interview, 9 December 2018)

The conceptualisations of pluralism that circulate among interfaith groups place a critique on top-down forms of domination, whether in terms of state dogma, religious regulations or intellectual discourse that tends to evoke ideals of ‘tolerance’ (toleransi) and ‘harmony’ (kerukunan). As the leader of BSOP explained to me before the meeting with the Ahmadiyya and Shi’a representatives: ‘If I am tolerant, this doesn’t automatically mean that I would take part [in such an event]’ (casual conversation, Masjid Mubarak, 14 July 2018). The pluralism interfaith groups envision begins at the grassroots and with those young people who experience diversity as an awkward thing. In stressing personal involvement, such conceptualisations embrace a phenomenological approach towards pluralism – an approach that underlies the idea of authentic encounter. The concept of ‘encounter’ (perjumpaan) is known from practices of interreligious dialogue, pointing to the legacies and reach of particular intellectual currents in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. Authenticity, however, was conceptualised as a process outside of official frameworks and independent of dominant discourses. Authenticity is established in direct, intimate interaction between people (and not religions). It is an alternative personal experience, validated in the course of interaction. Initiated by students for students, this form of encounter represents a claim to truth and transparency – an antithesis to state-sponsored enactments of mutual understanding (Strassler 2010: 54), or – especially nowadays – the opacity of the internet. This authenticity is still limited. The more elaborate an event is, the less ‘everyday’ and the more mediated
is the process of encounter. A claim to authenticity, however, remains possible, as such events occupy a space that is independent of the structuring effects of established institutions and forms of mediation. Recurrent moments of sharing a common experience as a counter-cultural act produce what Victor Turner termed *communitas* – a sense of equality and solidarity that stands in contrast to the dividing structures of everyday life. Additionally, an elaborate media use can stimulate the sense of immediacy because of ‘the tendency of media to “disappear” in the act of mediation’, and this has an impact on claims to authenticity, as Patrick Eisenlohr (2011: 44) elucidates.

Back to the Youth Interfaith Peace Camp. On the third day, Fine – one of the two Muslimah who shared a room with me – stepped forward to recall her experiences in a collective exercise narrating the difficulties of coping with pain:

I used to live in a majority Muslim area, but there was this one Christian Chinese family that lived not too far away from my home. Although I always passed their house, I never talked to them, there was no interaction, the front gates were always closed. Since then, I thought that Christians are ‘exclusive’. But now I feel that Christians are people whom one can have a lot of fun with.

‘Having fun’ (*bergaul*) – through singing, dancing, playing games, building a bonfire, and melting marshmallows – was the goal of the camps’ Saturday evening programme. Moments of exuberance were captured through professional cameras and shared as testimonies to the pleasures of (interfaith) friendship. Fine is now a facilitator of YIPC’s peace camps in Bandung and part of YIPC’s *komunitas* (literally, community; see also Lengauer 2021).

**Conclusion**

This article began with a review of theoretical work on, and critique of, the concept of pluralism in anthropology and neighbouring disciplines. It then turned to a region that has been the source of stimulating theoretical and methodological innovation, from the late colonial concept of ‘plural societies’, to more discourse-focused reflections on pluralism as public reasoning, to pluralism that is discernible in dispositions and sensibilities. As the subsequently presented examples of new conceptualisations of pluralism show, some of the central critique of pluralism – that targets the exclusivist and dividing forces associated with strong interpretations of (cultural, religious) difference – is still relevant. In Indonesia, state ideologies of multiculturalism and diversity can equally be described as attempts at covering up ‘relations of unequal multiplicity’ (Fabian 1985: 139). Religious heterodoxies have been administratively rationalised, economic and political hierarchies reinforced and minority–majority relations strained. By distancing themselves from notions of tolerance, including official discourses of the state ideology of Pancasila, proponents of pluralism pursue a disconnection not only from the legacies of authoritarian Pancasila pluralism but also from anti-pluralistic, exclusivist interpretations of Pancasila that Islamist circles have used in order to seize control of political discourse. Instead, they search for the essence of pluralism in what they conceive of as an authentic encounter – a direct, affective
meeting between ordinary people that would ideally resolve the anxieties and discomfort they experience when it comes to questions of religious (or ethnic, or gender) identity and practice.

This concept of authentic encounter places a direct critique on top-down, state-induced approaches to pluralism and opens room for further reflections. First, such conceptualisations appear to drop any hold on strong cultural, ethnic or religious difference, or on the legal language of equal rights (although some groups are well-versed in human rights and social justice terminologies, arguably as a result of their connections to an international scene of NGOs and donors who support their work). Second, they recognise that (the problem of) difference is not static but construed in interpersonal relations. Hence, new conceptualisations of pluralism define the problem of living with difference in affective terms – in ways that are not disconnected from the social activities and emotional life of ordinary people and that stand in stark contrast to official state ideology and discourse. In searching for a solution to this problem, interfaith activist groups have adopted a rhetoric of reconciliation that has entered into activist discourse since the democratic reform. Yet, what are in need of reconciliation are not conflicting parties, or different views, but the anxieties revolving around diversity and pluralism discourse in Indonesia today. What such conceptualisations indicate is that pluralism – as an imposed rationalisation of difference – essentially overlooks not only ensuing conflict but also the affective labour that people put into relations of difference and inequality. If we are to study how ordinary people in ‘small places’ – or not so small places like Bandung – deal with ‘large issues’, as implied by Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2001), then it is important to grant such ideas central attention in our attempts at theorising from below. By considering a ‘pluralism’ that accounts for the relational and affective dimensions of dealing with difference, we might well understand why such terms continue to be relevant among the people we study and work with today.

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Notes
1. A wisma is usually a building conceptualised as a place where one can hold seminars or trainings and stay overnight.
2. Pancasila, or Five Pillars, figures as the ideological foundation of the Indonesian state, enshrined in the preamble of the Indonesian constitution. It builds on five principles that can be sum-
marized as (1) belief in God; (2) just and civilised humanity; (3) unity; (4) democracy; and (5) social justice. Indonesia's second president, Suharto (1966–1998), elevated Pancasila to become the sole national ideology, while also using it as an instrument of political control.

3. Due to limitations and hegemonic interpretations, Indonesia's state ideology has been described as either an exponent of a 'delimited pluralism' (Howell 2005: 474) or 'godly nationalism' (Menchik 2014).

4. For a comprehensive account of religious pluralism and its leading figures in Indonesia, see Kersten (2015, Chapter 6).

5. I restrict here to naming only the institutions that were relevant to the groups I studied in 2018, either due to collaborations or shared materials and publications. For a comprehensive study of (Muslim) intellectual developments in Indonesia, see Kersten (2015: 42–73).


7. For a similar interpretation of a 'genuine religious dialogue', see al Qurtuby (2012/2013: 153).

8. For young people's aspirations towards relationships that are 'more egalitarian and interactionally fluid' in Indonesia's urban centres, see Smith-Hefner (2007); for affective practices among youth on Java, see Slama (2010); for the value of friendship among youth in West Sumatra, see Parker (2016).

9. This is an allusion to the memorial event of Bandung Lautan Api (literally, Bandung’s Sea of Fire) that took place during the Indonesian National Revolution.

10. For student activism and the spirit of political reform, see Lee (2016).

11. Some of Bandung's communities have branched out or collaborated with other groups across Indonesia.

12. In 2016, an interreligious study programme at the Duta Wacana Christian University published a book with the title Menuju Perjumpaan Otentik Islam-Kristen. However, this book was not a direct reference for the groups I studied.

References


**À la recherche d’une ‘rencontre authentique’**

*Explorer de nouvelles conceptualisations du pluralisme en Indonésie*

**Résumé** : Cet article propose une nouvelle approche du concept de pluralisme. Il propose une enquête sur les conceptions des groupes étudiants et de jeunesse interreligieux en réponse aux idéologies d’État et aux politiques de contrôle à Bandung en Indonésie. Je suis intéressons particulièrement aux « économies affectives » qui permettent aux personnes d’interpréter et de mieux comprendre la différence. Les conceptualisations de la rencontre authentique ne posent pas seulement une critique directe aux effets de démarcation liés à la codification juridique et au classement de la différence – les anthropologues qui travaillent dans des sociétés caractérisées par la diversité religieuse et ethnique, ainsi que les chercheurs féministes, ont déjà exprimé cette critique. Ces mêmes conceptualisations possèdent également un potentiel pour la réflexion théorique, notamment sur le pluralisme en Asie du sud-est et pour l’anthropologie des affects. Je montre comment les conceptualisations de la rencontre authentique, qui circulent parmi des groupes activistes majeurement jeunes, transposent des sentiments et des états émotionnels en idées pour interpréter la diversité. En agissant ainsi, ces groupes contestent les limites de pluralisme en tant que catégorie politique et légale. Ils expriment aussi un concept de pluralisme ancré dans la vie émotionnelle et les activités sociales de ceux qui vivent avec la différence.

**Mots-clés** : affect, Indonésie, Pancasila, pluralisme, rencontre authentique