The Dynamics of Culture Shock and Identity Negotiation among Migrant Students at IAIN Langsa

Sri Anjeni[1]✉, Zulkarnain [2], Mawardi Siregar[3]
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Langsa, Indonesia
✉*Email: srianjenni@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Moving to a new environment with a different cultural background often leads to the phenomenon of *culture shock*, particularly among migrant students who leave their hometowns to pursue higher education. Students from outside Aceh who study at IAIN Langsa face adaptation challenges within a social and cultural environment strongly influenced by Islamic law and local traditions. The mismatch between their initial expectations and the realities they encounter often triggers psychological and social reactions such as confusion, stress, and social isolation. This study aims to explore the dynamics of *culture shock* and the process of identity negotiation experienced by migrant students during their adaptation to the academic and social environment at IAIN Langsa. Using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, the study focuses on understanding the participants' subjective experiences, with data collected through in-depth interviews involving eight purposively selected migrant students. The findings reveal that common forms of *culture shock* include differences in language, food, dress codes, and social interaction patterns shaped by strong religious norms. Over time, students overcome these challenges through identity negotiation by adjusting their appearance, communication style, and social behavior while constructing hybrid identities through maintaining relationships within fellow migrant communities, building cross-cultural friendships, and reinforcing their Islamic values as a means of integration. The study highlights the importance of institutional support for migrant students in their process of cultural adaptation and emphasizes the need for intercultural engagement programs on campus to foster a more inclusive and harmonious academic environment.

Keywords: *Culture Shock, Identity Negotiation, Migrant Students, IAIN Langsa.*

ABSTRAK

Berpindah ke lingkungan baru dengan latar belakang budaya yang berbeda sering kali menimbulkan fenomena *culture shock*, terutama di kalangan mahasiswa perantau yang meninggalkan daerah asalnya untuk melanjutkan pendidikan tinggi. Mahasiswa dari luar

Aceh yang menempuh studi di IAIN Langsa menghadapi tantangan adaptasi terhadap lingkungan sosial dan budaya yang sangat dipengaruhi oleh penerapan syariat Islam dan tradisi lokal. Ketidaksesuaian antara harapan awal dan realitas yang dihadapi sering kali memicu reaksi psikologis dan sosial seperti kebingungan, stres, dan isolasi sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dinamika *culture shock* dan proses negosiasi identitas yang dialami oleh mahasiswa perantau selama beradaptasi dengan lingkungan akademik dan sosial di IAIN Langsa. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode fenomenologi, penelitian ini berfokus pada pemahaman terhadap pengalaman subjektif para partisipan, dengan data yang dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap delapan mahasiswa perantau yang dipilih secara purposif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bentuk *culture shock* yang umum dialami meliputi perbedaan dalam bahasa, makanan, aturan berpakaian, dan pola interaksi sosial yang dibentuk oleh norma agama yang kuat. Seiring waktu, mahasiswa mampu mengatasi tantangan tersebut melalui proses negosiasi identitas dengan menyesuaikan penampilan, gaya komunikasi, dan perilaku sosial, serta membangun identitas gabungan melalui hubungan dengan komunitas sesama perantau, pertemanan lintas budaya, dan penguatan nilai-nilai keislaman sebagai sarana integrasi. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya dukungan institusional bagi mahasiswa perantau dalam proses adaptasi budaya serta menekankan perlunya program interaksi lintas budaya di lingkungan kampus untuk mewujudkan suasana akademik yang lebih inklusif dan harmonis.

Kata kunci: *Culture shock, Negosiasi Identitas, Mahasiswa Perantau, IAIN Langsa*

Introduction

Relocating to a new environment with unfamiliar cultural norms often gives rise to the phenomenon known as culture shock. This condition refers to the psychological discomfort or disorientation experienced when an individual is exposed to a set of cultural values, symbols, and social behaviors that differ from those in their place of origin. Hall (1959) described culture shock as a form of disturbance that emerges when people lose familiar social cues and patterns of interaction. Similarly, Bochner defined it as a psychological reaction to an unfamiliar environment that generates anxiety and uncertainty. Muizzah further emphasized that culture shock arises when individuals confront new cultural systems that create frustration and emotional strain due to conflicting values and practices.

Migrant students represent one of the groups most vulnerable to culture shock, as they must adapt not only to academic demands but also to new cultural and social expectations. Previous studies, such as that of Niam on non-Javanese students at Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, revealed that students employ various coping mechanisms to manage culture shock (Brahmandika, 2023). These include seeking social support, accepting differences, engaging in religious activities, maintaining self-control, and negotiating cultural boundaries to achieve adaptation (Agestia et al., 2024).

A similar situation occurs among students from outside Aceh who pursue higher education at the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Langsa. The province of Aceh possesses a

distinctive cultural and social landscape shaped by the formal implementation of Islamic law (qanun), strict social norms, and high levels of religiosity. Students who come from other regions often struggle to adjust to differences in language, food, lifestyle, communication style, and social conduct—all of which are influenced by Islamic moral codes. Preliminary observations show that these differences frequently cause feelings of alienation and confusion among migrant students in their early stages of adaptation (Hadawiah, 2019).

Beyond the initial psychological impact, students must also navigate a deeper process of identity negotiation—an attempt to balance their original cultural identity with the expectations of the host culture (Fasadena & Jannah, 2024). As noted by Ubaidillah, identity negotiation is a communicative process that allows individuals to express their cultural selves while maintaining mutual respect for others. For newcomers at IAIN Langsa, this negotiation becomes particularly complex because it involves reconciling personal values with community norms that are heavily shaped by religion and morality. The process of adapting to such a unique sociocultural environment requires not only behavioral adjustment but also the redefinition of self-identity in interaction with the local community (Fuadi & Yanti Haryanti, 2018).

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to explore culture shock through the lens of identity negotiation within the specific context of Aceh's Islamic cultural setting. While earlier research tends to emphasize general coping strategies, this study focuses on how migrant students reconstruct and integrate their cultural and religious identities as part of their adaptation process.

This topic is particularly compelling because it captures the intersection between cultural diversity and Islamic educational contexts, highlighting how students negotiate personal identity amid strong religious norms. Understanding this phenomenon provides a nuanced view of intercultural adaptation in Indonesia and contributes to the broader discourse on cultural communication within Islamic higher education institutions. Ultimately, the findings of this study are expected to enrich theoretical discussions on the relationship between culture shock and identity negotiation, while offering practical insights for universities in developing culturally responsive support systems. Such initiatives can foster more inclusive, empathetic, and harmonious academic environments that empower migrant students to succeed both socially and academically.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, focusing on a deep understanding of the real-life experiences of migrant students who encounter culture shock at the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) of Langsa (Ramdhan, 2021). Rather than merely describing the phenomenon in general terms, the research seeks to explore the adaptive processes and identity negotiations that students undergo in both academic and social contexts (Tersiana, 2018). The fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period, from

February to April 2025, involving direct engagement with students in classrooms, dormitories, and community settings. Through this immersive involvement, the researcher was able to observe authentic interactions and behaviors, gaining insights into emotional responses, communication strategies, and ways students adjusted to the cultural and religious norms prevalent in Aceh.
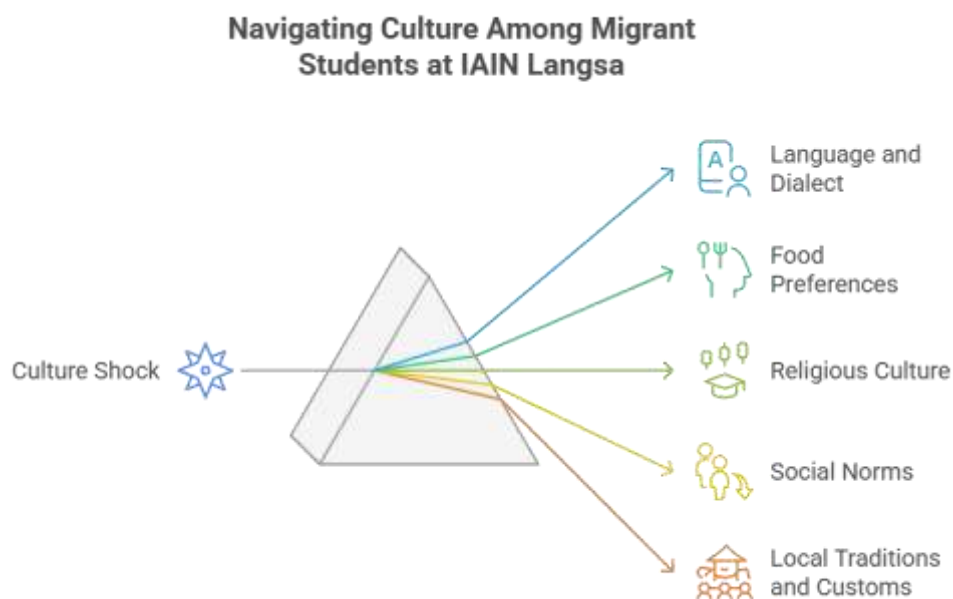
The primary data were obtained from eight migrant students originating from outside the Aceh Province, selected using a *purposive sampling* technique to ensure representation of diverse regional and cultural backgrounds. In-depth face-to-face interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted with each participant to explore their experiences of cultural differences, adaptation strategies, and identity negotiation processes (Fasadena & Jannah, 2024). Participant observation was used to record students' behaviors and social interactions in natural settings, while supporting documentation such as photographs, field notes, and personal archives was collected to strengthen the findings. Secondary data were drawn from books, academic journals, and prior studies to enrich contextual understanding. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, involving continuous cycles of data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing until consistent patterns emerged. Through this process, the study aims to generate a practical and grounded understanding of how migrant students at IAIN Langsa adapt and negotiate their identities amid cultural differences in their new environment.

Results and Discussion

Results

Culture Shock Experienced by Migrant Students at IAIN Langsa

Based on interviews with eight informants from various regions, several forms of culture shock were identified among migrant students at IAIN Langsa. The most dominant forms include difficulties related to language and dialect, food, religious culture, social habits, as well as local customs and traditions.

Navigating Culture Among Migrant Students at IAIN Langsa

Difficulties in Language and Dialect

Most informants revealed that the main obstacle they encountered was the difference in language and accent. Students from Sumatra, Java, and Kalimantan found it challenging to understand the Acehnese language used in daily interactions. KA (an informant from Lampung), in an interview conducted on April 16, 2025, stated:

> "The biggest difficulty I face here is the language. I really struggle to understand the Acehnese language because people speak very fast. Even when they use Indonesian, the Acehnese accent is still strong and often mixed, so it's hard to understand what they mean."

KA explained that she found it difficult to follow conversations with locals due to the speed of speech and the blending of dialects. Similarly, UH (an informant from Jambi), in an interview on the same date, said:

> "At first, I was quite confused with the Acehnese language, especially when people mixed it with Indonesian. The vocabulary became unclear, and I didn't know how to respond. It took time to adapt."

These statements indicate that language differences are among the primary causes of confusion and cultural shock during the early stages of adaptation in Aceh.

Difficulties with Food

In addition to language barriers, some informants also experienced challenges adapting to the distinctive taste of Acehnese food, which they found stronger and different from what they were used to. AG (an informant from South Sumatra) explained on April 15, 2025:

> "The food here in Langsa is different from what I usually eat in Palembang. I do like spicy food, but Acehnese dishes are mostly very spicy and heavily seasoned, which feels quite unfamiliar to my taste."

Similarly, WY (an informant from West Sumatra) and GU (from Java) expressed that Acehnese food "doesn't quite fit their palate." GU added that, in his home region, food tends to be sweet and savory, while in Aceh it is predominantly spicy and sour. Both admitted losing their appetite during the first weeks of arrival due to the unfamiliar flavors. However, not all students shared the same experience. YA (an informant from North Sumatra) noted on April 16, 2025:

> "When it comes to food, I don't have much difficulty. The food here suits my taste just fine."

This suggests that culinary-related culture shock is relative and largely influenced by one's cultural background and previous eating habits.

Strict Religious Culture

As a province implementing Islamic law, Aceh presents a distinct cultural and religious environment that poses unique challenges for migrant students. YA (from North

Sumatra) shared:

> "In Aceh, I have to be more careful about how I dress. For example, at home I usually wear shorts above the knee, but here that's not allowed."

Similarly, RH (from Kalimantan) admitted feeling "a bit pressured" by strict regulations, such as the closure of eateries during Friday and Maghrib prayers. Students also mentioned the presence of *Wilayatul Hisbah* (religious police) as a new and sometimes intimidating experience. JS (from Riau) was surprised to learn about an official institution enforcing Islamic law, while KA (from Lampung) admitted feeling anxious when seeing *WH* patrols monitoring attire and social interactions.

The students recognized that these strict religious rules are part of Aceh's cultural identity, and therefore, they needed to adjust their behavior and clothing accordingly.

Differences in Social Habits and Norms

Several informants were also surprised by Aceh's strong coffee culture. YS (from North Sumatra), interviewed on April 16, 2025, commented:

> "At first, I was surprised that almost everyone here spends time drinking coffee. Then I learned that coffee shops aren't just for hanging out—they're also places for work and discussion."

Additionally, AG (from South Sumatra) mentioned that it took time to adapt to the local norms of politeness in speech. He explained that using the word "aku" (I) is considered impolite when talking to older people, unlike in his home region. He has since learned to use "kami" (we) or refer to himself by name to show respect.

Local Customs and Traditions in Aceh

Cultural traditions also became a major source of culture shock for migrant students. KA (from Lampung) shared her experience witnessing the *zikir* (chanting) ritual with rhythmic movements during the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday in Aceh:

> "It was my first time seeing people perform *zikir* while moving their bodies. In my hometown, *zikir* is usually done quietly, only by reciting."

WY (from West Sumatra) also admitted being initially confused by this practice but later came to appreciate it as a unique form of religious expression in Aceh. Meanwhile, JS (from Riau) noted that the *Maulid Nabi* celebration in Aceh could last up to three months, often involving communal feasts held in mosques. For many migrant students, these experiences were both challenging and enlightening. Although initially causing culture shock, over time they learned to appreciate the cultural richness and religious significance embedded in Acehnese traditions.

Navigating Difference: Cultural Adaptation and Identity Construction of Migrant Students in Aceh's Islamic Context

The findings of this study reveal that migrant students at IAIN Langsa experience

various forms of culture shock that significantly affect their social and psychological adaptation within the new environment. Drawing upon Kalervo Oberg's theory of culture shock and Stella Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory, the experiences of these students reflect a complex dynamic between the acceptance of new cultural values and the preservation of their original identities. In the initial stage, students from outside Aceh generally express enthusiasm and curiosity toward the region's strong Islamic and cultural atmosphere. However, this initial fascination gradually shifts into feelings of confusion and social tension due to linguistic barriers, differences in dress codes, the strict implementation of Islamic law, and contrasting patterns of social interaction. These challenges often lead to emotional reactions such as anxiety, awkwardness, and isolation. Over time, through increased interaction and social engagement, most students develop adaptive strategies, enabling them to integrate more effectively and embrace certain local values in their daily lives (Handayani & Yuca, 2018).

In the process of adjustment, migrant students do not entirely lose their original cultural identity but instead undergo a dynamic negotiation process. They strive to adapt to local social norms while maintaining essential aspects of their personal and cultural values. One of the most visible forms of identity negotiation is reflected in the adaptation of clothing styles, speech patterns, and social behaviors. Many students gradually modify their dress to align with Acehnese norms of modesty and adjust their communication styles—both in tone and word choice—to facilitate smoother interaction with local peers. Such adaptations are not merely social adjustments but also reflect a form of identity compromise that allows them to be accepted in the new environment without sacrificing their sense of self. Some students also develop a hybrid identity that blends elements of their original culture with aspects of Acehnese society. They may use their regional dialects when interacting within their own communities while adopting the local manner of speech and behavior when engaging in broader social settings. This demonstrates a flexible and selective form of adaptation, maintaining balance between cultural preservation and social integration (Irianto & Yanti Haryanti, 2020).

Another important strategy in the identity negotiation process is the formation of peer support networks among fellow migrant students. These communities serve as safe spaces where students can express themselves freely, share experiences, and offer mutual assistance in dealing with cultural and academic challenges (Syafrida & Azhar, 2023). The presence of such networks helps them maintain their sense of belonging to their home culture while simultaneously fostering adaptation to the Acehnese environment. Although these students often find comfort in their own regional groups, they also build meaningful relationships with local students, which facilitates intercultural understanding and accelerates their adjustment. Interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds helps them broaden their perspectives, reduce feelings of alienation, and view cultural diversity as an enriching experience rather than a barrier (Maizan et al., 2020).

The religious atmosphere in Aceh plays a crucial role in shaping the adaptation and identity negotiation of migrant students. Many participants describe a sense of spiritual comfort and growth resulting from the strong Islamic environment on campus and in the surrounding community (Sumiati & Utami, 2025). Participation in religious activities—such as Qur'an study groups, Islamic discussions, and community-based worship—provides not only social inclusion but also opportunities for deepening their understanding of Islamic values. Religion thus becomes a unifying platform through which students reinterpret their identities and find inner peace. Rather than feeling restricted by the religious norms, several students report becoming more disciplined, spiritually grounded, and reflective. The process of identity negotiation therefore extends beyond behavioral adaptation to encompass personal transformation and the internalization of Islamic values as part of their self-concept (Mirrotin, 2024).

The strong Islamic culture in Aceh, while initially a source of cultural tension, ultimately becomes a source of admiration and self-reflection for many migrant students. They express appreciation for the visible integration of religion into daily life—such as regular Qur'an classes for children, active community recitations, and the communal spirit that emphasizes moral discipline. This environment motivates them to carry similar values back to their home regions and to strengthen their own religious identities. Over time, they begin to perceive cultural differences not as obstacles but as opportunities for spiritual and personal enrichment (Olivia et al., 2024). Their experiences illustrate that exposure to a new religious and cultural context fosters both social adaptability and inner growth.

The process of identity negotiation among migrant students at IAIN Langsa highlights how intercultural experiences can lead to the development of a more inclusive and mature sense of self. Their identities evolve beyond mere social adaptation toward a deeper awareness of cultural and spiritual harmony. By integrating elements of both their home and host cultures, these students construct a balanced Islamic identity—one that embraces diversity, respects differences, and remains rooted in shared moral values. This phenomenon demonstrates that cross-cultural encounters, when approached with openness and reflection, can cultivate tolerance, broaden perspectives, and foster the creation of individuals capable of bridging cultural and religious differences in academic and social contexts.

Conclusion

The findings of this research indicate that migrant students at IAIN Langsa encounter diverse cultural challenges as they adjust to an environment shaped by Aceh's strong Islamic traditions and social norms. The most frequently experienced difficulties involve differences in language and dialect, food preferences, religious practices, patterns of social interaction, and local customs. These contrasts often lead to initial confusion, discomfort, and social withdrawal among students who are unfamiliar with the region's

cultural expectations. Nevertheless, as they spend more time within the community, students begin to adapt by learning the local language nuances, becoming accustomed to the regional cuisine, following religious and social rules, and modifying their behavior to align with community standards. This adaptive process encourages the development of hybrid identities, allowing them to integrate aspects of both their original and new cultural backgrounds.

The results highlight the need for universities to provide structured cultural orientation and ongoing support for migrant students. Initiatives such as cross-cultural mentorship programs, intercultural dialogue activities, and inclusive student communities can help reduce culture shock and foster mutual understanding. By nurturing these efforts, higher education institutions not only ease students' transition into a new cultural setting but also promote a more inclusive, respectful, and cohesive academic environment.

References

Agestia, E., Safitri, D., & Sujarwo, S. (2024). Adaptasi Mahasiswa Dalam Mengatasi Culture Shock Dalam Perkuliahan. *RISOMA : Jurnal Riset Sosial Humaniora Dan Pendidikan*, *2*(4), 253–264. https://doi.org/10.62383/risoma.v2i4.180

Brahmandika, L. (2023). Menelaah Fenomena Culture Shock pada Perantau. *Jurnal Peradaban*, *3*(2), 86–93. https://doi.org/10.51353/jpb.v3i2.570

Fasadena, N. S., & Jannah, W. (2024). Shock Culture Komunikasi Antarbudaya Siswa Luar Daerah Di Madrasah Pendhalungan. *International Conference on Humanity Education and Society (ICHES)*, *3*(1), 1–9.

Fuadi, M. H., & Yanti Haryanti, M. A. (2018). *Culture Shock Pada Mahasiswa Asal Riau di Surakarta* [S1, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta]. https://eprints.ums.ac.id/63078/

Hadawiah, H. (2019). Fenomena (Gegar Budaya) Pada Mahasiswa Perantauan Di Universitas Muslim Indonesia. *Al-MUNZIR*, *12*(1), 149–164. https://doi.org/10.31332/am.v12i1.1310

Handayani, P. G., & Yuca, V. (2018). Fenomena Culture Shock Pada Mahasiswa Perantauan Tingkat 1 Universitas Negeri Padang. *Jurnal Konseling dan Pendidikan*, *6*(3), 198–204. https://doi.org/10.29210/129000

Irianto, W. A., & Yanti Haryanti, M. A. (2020). *Culture Shock Pada Mahasiswa Asal Papua Di Kota Yogyakarta* [S1, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta]. https://eprints.ums.ac.id/86449/

Maizan, S. H., Bashori, K., & Hayati, E. N. (2020). Analytical Theory: Gegar Budaya (Culture Shock). *Psycho Idea*, *18*(2), 147–154. https://doi.org/10.30595/psychoidea.v18i2.6566

Mirrotin, B. H. (2024). Komunikasi Antar Budaya Mahasiswa KKN UINSA 2024 Dalam Mengahadapi Culture shock di Kota Probolinggo. *Konferensi Media Dan Komunikasi*, *1*(1), 40–48.

Olivia, H., Sudarsono, A. B., & Sarasati, F. (2024). Fenomena Culture Shock Mahasiswa Perantauan di Kabupaten Bekasi. *Jurnal Pustaka Komunikasi*, *7*(1), 174–184. https://doi.org/10.32509/pustakom.v7i1.3741

Ramdhan, M. (2021). *Metode Penelitian*. Cipta Media Nusantara.

Sumiati, J. V., & Utami, L. S. S. (2025). Culture Shock dalam Adaptasi Sosial Remaja Perantau. *Koneksi*, *9*(2), 345–355. https://doi.org/10.24912/kn.v9i2.33323

Syafrida, S., & Azhar, A. A. (2023). Culture Shock Dalam Interaksi Komunikasi Antarbudaya Suku Jawa dan Suku Batak di Kota Medan. *Reslaj : Religion Education Social Laa Roiba Journal*, *5*(6), 3171–3187. https://doi.org/10.47467/reslaj.v5i6.3870

Tersiana, A. (2018). *Metode Penelitian*. Anak Hebat Indonesia.