



Medan as a Multicultural City: Ethnic and Cultural Dynamics in the Late 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multicultural character of Medan in the late 19th century, with a focus on the intricate ethnic and cultural dynamics that influenced the city's evolution during the colonial era. As a rapidly growing urban hub in East Sumatra, Medan attracted a diverse array of migrant communities—including Malays, Bataks, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans—each of which played a role in shaping the city's socio-cultural landscape. This research addresses the question of how these ethnic groups interacted, negotiated spatial boundaries, and coexisted within the colonial urban order. Using a qualitative historical approach, the study draws upon archival materials, colonial administrative records, and travel writings to reconstruct interethnic relations and patterns of cultural exchange. The findings suggest that Medan's multiculturalism was not simply a consequence of demographic plurality, but was deeply embedded in colonial economic imperatives, labor migration systems, and spatial planning strategies that regulated intergroup contact. Ethnic enclaves emerged as both sites of cultural preservation and zones of contestation, giving rise to hybrid identities and practices. The study concludes that 19th-century Medan offers a formative example of colonial urban multiculturalism—shaped by global migration and colonial governance—and provides valuable historical insight into the roots of ethnic pluralism in contemporary Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Located in the northeastern region of Sumatra, the city of Medan is known as one of Indonesia's most distinctly multicultural urban centers. By the late 19th century, Medan had undergone a dramatic transformation from a small rural settlement into a dynamic urban hub. This transformation was closely tied to the expansion of colonial economic interests, particularly the large-scale development of tobacco plantations, which attracted diverse ethnic groups from across the archipelago and beyond (Damanik, [2024](#)).

The Dutch colonial administration's decision to establish Medan as a plantation center facilitated massive labor migration. Workers from Java, China, and India were recruited to meet the increasing demand for labor. This influx of migrants gave rise to ethnically distinct enclaves, which enriched the city's social and cultural landscape (Idi, [2019](#)). Among these communities, the Chinese played a pivotal role in Medan's economic development. Many were involved in commerce and trade, with influential figures such as Tjong A Fie emerging as community leaders and mediators between ethnic groups and colonial authorities. Their contributions extended beyond the economy, shaping the city's cultural and social spheres (Utari, [2023](#)). Similarly, the Indian community—particularly those of Tamil descent—settled in what is now known as Kampung Madras. Engaged in trade, plantation work, and service sectors, they contributed significantly to the city's cultural repertoire through language, cuisine, and religious festivals (Suyadi, [2018](#)).

Local populations such as the Malays, Batak, Karo, and Simalungun were equally integral to shaping Medan's social identity. Interactions between indigenous groups and migrants generated a complex social dynamic, marked by both cultural acculturation and tensions over competing interests (Tanjung & Darmawan, [2022](#)). The colonial government often reinforced ethnic segmentation through residential and administrative policies that compartmentalized communities. While intended to preserve order, such policies in fact solidified collective identities (Pratama et al., [2024](#)).

Religious institutions played a central role in maintaining social cohesion. Mosques, churches, and temples served not only as places of worship but also as centers for education and community activity, reinforcing internal solidarity. Education became a vital channel for social mobility and cultural preservation. Ethnic communities established schools that taught their respective languages, religions, and cultural values to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of their identities (Jessica, [2012](#)).

Interethnic relations in late 19th-century Medan were characterized by a blend of cooperation and competition. Economic and social interactions were frequent, yet disparities in power and access to resources occasionally sparked tensions (Agustono et al., [2022](#)). Local newspapers and literature reflected the multicultural realities of the time. Publications in Chinese, Malay, and Dutch languages functioned as platforms for communication and public discourse within this diverse society (Chen, [2009](#)).

More complex interethnic relations developed in the early 20th century, particularly following the influx of Javanese contract laborers recruited for the expanding tobacco and rubber plantations in Deli. This demographic shift reshaped Medan's social structure, intensifying interactions among Chinese, European, Malay, and Javanese communities and giving rise to a distinctive socio-cultural dynamic.

Culinary traditions in Medan are perhaps the most tangible legacy of this intercultural interaction, with flavors from multiple ethnicities blending into a cuisine that remains emblematic of the city. Religious and cultural celebrations—such as Chinese New Year, Deepavali, and local harvest festivals—offered opportunities for interethnic participation, reflecting a degree of tolerance and communal cohesion (Tanjung & Darmawan, [2022](#)).

This multicultural evolution accelerated in the early 20th century, as waves of Chinese, Tamil, and Javanese migrants arrived to work in trade, service, and plantation sectors. Their presence generated rich cultural intersections—especially in foodways—that combined diverse spices, cooking techniques, and cultural symbols into the vibrant culinary identity of modern Medan.

Medan's urban architecture of the time mirrored its cultural diversity. European, Chinese, Indian, and local architectural styles stood side by side, creating a unique mosaic of urban identity. Despite colonial pressures and interethnic competition, Medan's residents demonstrated a remarkable degree of adaptability and social cohesion. Cultural blending was not passive assimilation, but an active process of creating new forms of cultural expression (Lukitaningsih & Swandhani, [2024](#)).

Scholars have explored the ethnic and cultural dynamics that shaped Medan's multicultural identity in the late 19th century. Herdiansyah, argues that Medan's development as a colonial city was fundamentally driven by the expansion of the tobacco industry, which sparked large-scale migration from China, India, and Java and reinforced ethnic structures through colonial policy (Herdiansyah, [2017](#)). Maler, focuses on the Tamil community's role in shaping Kampung Madras as a cultural and social hub for Indians in Medan, while Damanik cautions that the city's multiethnic composition also risked fostering segregation and intolerance (Damanik, [2024](#); Maler, [2018](#)). Arifin et al. contribute a local perspective by tracing indigenous narratives about how interethnic relations helped shape the city's identity (Arifin et al., [2015](#)). Chen provides a biographical lens through the story of Tjong A Fie, a Chinese elite who acted as a key mediator between colonial authorities and local communities—highlighting the Chinese community's influential role not only as laborers but also as social and economic diplomats (Chen, [2009](#)). Wandini et al. take a spatial-visual approach, demonstrating how colonial architecture reflected and reinforced ethnic segregation and urban power structures (Wandini et al., [2024](#)). Meanwhile, Lukitaningsih and Swandhani reconstruct Medan's historical narrative by focusing on everyday cultural practices among ethnic communities as central to the city's urban formation (Lukitaningsih & Swandhani, [2024](#)).

This study addresses two key research questions. First, how did ethnic configurations in Medan emerge as a result of Dutch colonial policies and the large-scale migration of the late 19th century? Specifically, how did the plantation economy and colonial power structures shape residential patterns, labor distribution, and interethnic relations among Malays, Bataks, Chinese, Tamils, and Javanese? Second, how did socio-cultural interactions unfold within Medan's fragmented colonial urban space? This includes an analysis of integration and segregation through daily life, religious practices, education, use of public spaces, and architectural expressions. These questions aim to illuminate how multicultural dynamics in Medan reflected processes of identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and the formation of both harmony and tension within a plural colonial society.

The novelty of this research lies in framing late 19th-century Medan as a case study of colonial multicultural dynamics, a subject rarely addressed in holistic terms. Unlike previous studies that often focus on plantation economies or single ethnic communities, this article examines interethnic interaction and identity negotiation within the fragmented colonial urban context. While interethnic encounters began in the late 19th century, Medan's transformation into a colonial city accelerated in the early 20th century. Thus, this article highlights the transitional phase from plantation-based settlement to colonial urbanism as the foundation for a multicultural space—an identity that continues to define Medan to this day.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical approach aimed at reconstructing the ethnic and cultural dynamics of Medan in the late 19th century, drawing upon available primary and secondary sources. This approach was selected for its capacity to interpret and contextualize past events, particularly in illuminating interethnic relations within the colonial urban setting. The research began with a heuristic method to gather written sources, including Dutch colonial archives, official reports from the Netherlands Indies government, administrative records from the Sultanate of Deli, as well as European travelogues and missionary accounts that documented Medan's social life during that period. Complementary sources include Malay and Chinese-language newspapers circulating in the late 19th century. This method was designed to yield a rich and diverse set of historical data while enhancing source validity through triangulation (Kaal & Lottum, [2021](#)).

The collected data were subjected to both external and internal source criticism to assess their authenticity and credibility. Subsequently, historical interpretation was conducted by situating the data within the broader social and political contexts of colonial rule, with the aim of uncovering patterns of interaction and segregation among ethnic communities in Medan. This analysis was further supported by a spatial approach, which involved mapping ethnic settlement distributions based on colonial documents and cartographic materials to examine the relationship between urban form and social structure. The researcher employed historical narrative as a writing model, allowing for both chronological and thematic tracing of cultural dynamics and identity negotiations among ethnic groups (Abdurrahman, [2011](#)).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Formation of Ethnic Configurations in the Colonial Urban Structure

Dutch colonial policies from the late 19th to early 20th century played a central role in shaping the social and spatial structure of Medan. Following its designation as the administrative and economic center of the Deli region, the colonial government, in coordination with plantation enterprises such as the Deli Maatschappij, actively recruited labor from outside the region—particularly from Java, China, and South India. This labor migration was part of a broader colonial strategy aimed at supporting the expansion of the tobacco export industry and constructing a racially stratified social order. The resulting ethnic diversity was thus not incidental but deliberately engineered, reinforcing a hierarchical structure based on origin and economic function (Warburton, [2018](#)).

Spatial segregation was strictly enforced through residential zoning policies that allocated urban space along ethnic lines. The Chinese community was concentrated in the Kesawan area, where they played a crucial role in commerce, finance, and logistics. Beyond their economic functions, the Chinese preserved their cultural identity through the establishment of temples, Chinese-language schools, Hanzi newspapers, and social organizations such as the Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan. Chinese culinary traditions, such as *bakmi* and mooncakes, became embedded in Medan's gastronomic identity, while public celebrations like Chinese New Year and Cap Go Meh served as visible expressions of cultural presence (Maler, [2018](#)).

South Indian Tamils were settled in what came to be known as Kampung Madras, where most worked in service sectors and as industrial laborers. They maintained cultural continuity through the construction of Hindu temples such as Shri Mariamman and the celebration of religious festivals like Thaipusam and Deepavali. The Tamil language, culinary staples like curry and *roti canai*, and kinship-based social networks were preserved as vital markers of identity in the colonial urban landscape.

Javanese migrants, recruited as contract laborers, were housed in barracks near plantations under strict oversight. Although economically marginalized, they continued to practice cultural traditions such as *selamatan*, *kenduri*, poetic recitations, and performance arts like *wayang*, which served as symbolic resistance to colonial hegemony. Their communities were organized around mutual aid (*gotong royong*) and village-based solidarity.

The local Malay Deli community occupied a symbolic role within the colonial system due to their ties with the Deli Sultanate. Their cultural expression was visible through *zapin* music, localized Islamic traditions, and representative architecture such as the Maimun Palace and Al-Mashun Grand Mosque. However, outside the royal elite, the broader Malay population had limited access to the colonial modern economy and experienced structural marginalization.

Certain Batak groups—particularly the Karo and Toba—began settling in Medan around the turn of the century. They brought *marga* (clan) values, established Christian communities, and built institutions such as schools, clan houses, and churches. Traditional ceremonies, regional languages, and distinctive foods like *nani arsik* and *saksang* enriched the city's cultural pluralism.

Segregation produced not only spatial separation but also entrenched social stratification. Europeans and elite Chinese occupied the apex of the social hierarchy, while South Indian and Javanese laborers remained at the bottom. Colonial regulations reinforced barriers to social mobility and institutionalized exclusivity across sectors such as education and religion (Idi, [2019](#)).

Social life in Medan was pluralistic yet fragmented. Interethnic interactions were largely instrumental, occurring primarily in economic spaces like markets and plantations. Medan epitomized what Furnivall termed a “plural society,” in which distinct communities lived side by side without social, religious, or cultural integration (Damanik, [2018](#)). Architectural forms reflected this ethnic separation. While European buildings and neighborhoods were grand and strategically located, ethnic settlements on the periphery suffered from limited infrastructure and access (Suyadi, 2018). The city's spatial order thus visualized power and encoded class separation.

Segregation was not imposed solely from above but was often internalized and maintained by the communities themselves. Many ethnic groups chose to preserve cultural, educational, and religious exclusivity as a strategy of identity resilience under colonial rule (Alesina et al., [2016](#)). Intercommunity relations were often confined to limited mutualistic exchanges. For instance, the Chinese maintained commercial networks with the Malays, yet such ties rarely extended into broader social integration (Muhtadi & Warburton, [2020](#)).

Economically, access to capital and resources was highly unequal. Europeans and Chinese controlled land and trade networks, while Tamils, Javanese, and Batak populations functioned primarily as labor without ownership of production means (Jessica, [2012](#)). These inequalities persisted well into the postcolonial era. In response, ethnic communities established schools, social organizations, and solidarity networks that crossed ethnic and class boundaries. These efforts demonstrate how, even in the face of rigid segregation, alternative social spaces were created (Kunarsih & Tampilen, [2022](#)).

Medan as a “plural society” emerged from the dialectic between colonial urban design and local community dynamics. The city offers a compelling case of how enforced segregation generated a vibrant yet compartmentalized cultural diversity. Understanding this ethnic configuration is critical to tracing the historical roots of contemporary social tensions and cultural pluralism in Medan.

The structure of Medan in the late 19th century was the outcome of a deliberate colonial social design. Ethnic configurations were not organically formed but strategically engineered to facilitate colonial control over labor and economic flows. This structure produced enduring social inequalities and spatial segregation, whose legacy remains imprinted on the city's modern urban form. This study affirms that unpacking colonial legacies in the shaping of urban space and ethnic configurations is essential to explaining the historical underpinnings of Indonesia's complex multicultural society.

Cultural Interaction and Identity Negotiation in a Multiethnic Society

Since the late 19th century, the city of Medan has served as a site of encounter among diverse ethnic groups, resulting in a highly complex socio-cultural landscape. Interactions between these communities have not been limited to

economic exchanges but have also taken place across social and cultural spheres—including markets, schools, places of worship, and everyday practices. The presence of multiple ethnicities such as Malays, Bataks, Chinese, Tamils, Javanese, Minangkabau, and others has enriched Medan's social fabric (Akbar, [2018](#)).

The Chinese community constructed its identity through commercial activities, temple building, Chinese-language education, and the public celebration of Chinese New Year. The Tamil community expressed its identity through Hindu temples, traditional cuisine like curry and *roti canai*, and religious festivals such as Deepavali. Javanese communities maintained their *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) ethos through *kenduri*, *selamatan* rituals, and traditional performances such as *wayang*, rooted in their plantation barrack communities. The Batak community was notable for its role in church building, clan-based lodgings, and the preservation of language and customary rituals. Meanwhile, the Malay community played a symbolic role through Islamic traditions, *zapin* music, and royal institutions that reinforced its cultural legitimacy.

Traditional markets functioned as primary public spaces for interethnic encounter in a fluid and interactive setting. Markets such as Pasar Petisah demonstrated how economic activity could serve as a cultural bridge, facilitating the exchange of symbols, language, and customs among groups (Idi, [2019](#)). In these spaces, ethnic differences were normalized and became part of everyday life.

Multicultural schools that emerged in Medan—particularly in the early 20th century—served as crucial sites for cross-cultural socialization. Institutions such as Khalsa National School and various Chinese and Islamic private schools welcomed students from multiple backgrounds, fostering inclusive environments from an early age. Within classrooms, children were introduced to values of tolerance and mutual cultural appreciation (Budianto, [2025](#)).

Places of worship further reflected Medan's cultural mosaic. In Kampung Madras, Hindu temples, mosques, churches, and Buddhist monasteries stood side by side, serving as visible symbols of religious pluralism. While each community preserved its distinct religious practices, major festivals like Deepavali, Eid al-Fitr, and Chinese New Year often drew participation from other ethnic groups, highlighting a relatively harmonious form of coexistence (Damanik, [2024](#)).

Traditional festivals served as cross-community gatherings, offering shared cultural space. Events such as Cap Go Meh, Thaipusam, and the North Sumatra Fair created opportunities for multicultural participation and collective celebration. Non-Chinese residents, for example, often attended or participated in Chinese New Year festivities, integrating them into Medan's shared urban identity (Ginting & Andayani, [2013](#)).

Despite these integrative dynamics, interethnic relations have not been free from friction. Economic disparities and colonial legacies of social segregation continue to generate social distance among communities. Minor conflicts and cultural misunderstandings occasionally arise, particularly when cross-cultural communication falters. Nevertheless, local mechanisms—such as community deliberation and interethnic networks—often succeed in resolving tensions peacefully (Iqbal et al., [2024](#)).

Amid this diversity, hybrid cultural spaces have emerged that define Medan's distinctive urban culture. The city's culinary scene exemplifies this: dishes like *nasi goreng kampung* (Malay-style fried rice), Indian-style *bihun kari*, and Chinese *bakmi* are often served side by side in a single food stall, embodying a syncretic taste culture that transcends singular identities (Alesina et al., [2016](#)). Food, in this context, becomes a universal language of unity.

Bahasa Indonesia has played a significant role in facilitating cross-ethnic interaction. As a national lingua franca, it enables communication across formerly linguistically divided communities. Simultaneously, the preservation of mother tongues—such as Tamil, Hokkien, and Batak—continues within each community as a means of cultural retention. The coexistence of national and ethnic languages illustrates that integration need not require the erasure of uniqueness (Idi, [2019](#)).

One of the most tangible expressions of identity negotiation occurs through interethnic marriage. Though challenges such as religious or customary differences remain, these unions have become increasingly common in urban multicultural contexts like Medan. Cultural adaptation through wedding rituals, cuisine, and kinship systems gives rise to new, inclusive family identities (Diprose, [2009](#)).

Community associations and cultural organizations also serve as important bridges for interethnic interaction and solidarity. Groups such as the Chinese Citizens Association, Tamil Community Association, and Batak Karo Family Union actively engage in cross-community social initiatives. These networks foster dialogue and collaboration in areas such as the arts, education, and economic development (Maler, [2018](#)). In the arts, interethnic collaborations produce performances that reflect dynamic cultural interactions—combining Malay, Batak, Indian, and Chinese elements into distinctive Medan-style productions. Artistic expression becomes both a site of reflection and a symbol of social cohesion.

The city government supports multicultural life by providing space and institutional backing for community events. Annual cultural festivals, heritage area designations such as Kesawan and Kampung Madras, and inclusive policymaking processes that involve ethnic communities are integral to this strategy. These initiatives foster a collective sense of urban belonging (Damanik, [2024](#)).

Social media has emerged as a new platform for expressing multicultural identities. Cross-ethnic creative collectives now collaborate in digital arts, culinary ventures, and creative entrepreneurship. These interactions demonstrate a shift in cultural dynamics that is no longer bound to physical space yet remains vital to shaping a shared civic identity. Medan's cultural interactions and identity negotiations illustrate that multiethnic societies do not merely coexist—they actively shape one another. The city's identity is not singular but continuously forged through ongoing encounters, exchanges, and alignments. Medan thus stands as a living embodiment of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in the context of contemporary urban life (Lukitaningsih & Swandhani, [2024](#)).

In the context of globalization and digital innovation, Medan's younger generation has leveraged social media to build and express their multicultural identities. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become virtual arenas where cultural expressions—from language and dress to cuisine and religious practices—are performed with pride and creativity. In this light, social media is not merely a communication tool but a cultural space that transcends the geographic and administrative boundaries of the city (Agustono et al., [2022](#)).

Creative communities in Medan increasingly exemplify how multiethnic dynamism can break free from the legacies of past segregation. Youth-led collaborations in mural projects, music festivals, and micro-culinary enterprises illustrate how cultural difference becomes a source of innovation. These practices signal a shift toward more dynamic and equitable cultural interaction, where all identities are equally expressed and respected (Pratama et al., [2024](#)).

One of the most visible manifestations of this is the city's evolving culinary scene. Numerous food entrepreneurs now combine recipes from different ethnic traditions into novel, inclusive culinary creations—such as Indian curry noodles cooked with Chinese techniques and presented in a Malay style. These hybrid dishes not only embody cultural negotiation but affirm that no single identity needs to dominate. This culinary innovation illustrates how Medan's multicultural heritage is being rearticulated by a new generation (Tanjung & Darmawan, [2022](#)).

In the performing arts, music and theater groups increasingly incorporate cross-cultural elements—in lyrics, instruments, and narrative themes. Batak ethnic music, for instance, is often combined with Indian melodies or Malay rhythms in compositions that reflect the city's cultural diversity. Alternative venues such as cultural cafés and art galleries now serve as inclusive spaces for open, non-hierarchical interethnic engagement—free from the structural constraints imposed by colonial-era systems (Wandini et al., [2024](#)).

Education plays a crucial role in reinforcing multicultural discourse among youth. Curricula in several Medan schools and universities have begun to include topics on tolerance, diversity, and inclusive local history. Students are introduced to historical narratives that emphasize the contributions of all ethnic groups to the city's development, cultivating a shared sense of plural identity (Damanik, [2024](#)).

Urban planning initiatives have also begun to accommodate intergroup interaction by designing inclusive public spaces such as cultural parks and street festivals. Young designers and architects increasingly engage in participatory projects aimed at integrating local cultural elements into the cityscape. These efforts create symbolic spaces where all ethnic identities receive proportionate representation.

Digital media further enables the documentation and dissemination of marginalized narratives. Vlogs, podcasts, and web series produced by local creators frequently feature stories from Kampung Madras, Chinatown in Kesawan,

and Malay neighborhoods—broadening public understanding while empowering communities to articulate their identities authentically (Sylvia et al., [2022](#)).

This phenomenon demonstrates that Medan's younger generation is not merely inheriting cultural diversity but actively shaping it into a fluid, inclusive urban identity. Identity negotiation no longer occurs within rigid or exclusive frameworks but evolves organically through daily interaction, creative collaboration, and inclusive digital narratives. Multicultural identity is no longer viewed as a difference to be bridged, but as a social asset to be collectively celebrated.

This transformation marks a paradigmatic shift—from passive pluralism to active multiculturalism. While pluralism emphasizes coexistence, active multiculturalism entails the engagement of diverse groups in building a new, equitable social order. This is precisely what Medan's youth are cultivating through their cultural practices and narratives. Today, Medan is not only a geographic space of diversity but a symbolic space of shared identity-making. Its young citizens, as key actors in this process, demonstrate that diversity is not a historical burden but a social resource for building cohesion and solidarity across communities.

CONCLUSION

Medan in the late 19th century offers a compelling example of how a colonial city was shaped through power relations, structured migration, and deliberate social engineering that gave rise to a complex multicultural landscape. The formation of segregated yet interdependent ethnic configurations within the city's economic and social structures laid the foundation for a multiethnic society in which difference coexisted with functional integration. Cultural interactions in both public and private spheres reveal that Medan's collective urban identity emerged from ongoing negotiations between diverse ethnic groups. As such, the city became not merely a site of cultural convergence, but a dynamic space for the production of shared identity. Diversity—initially governed through colonial hierarchies—has paradoxically become one of Medan's defining strengths in building a plural, adaptive, and hybrid urban identity. The findings of this study underscore the importance of understanding multiculturalism as a historically rooted and socially negotiated phenomenon, rather than as a static demographic fact.

This research opens new avenues for further study on the dynamics of multiculturalism in Medan from the postcolonial period to the present, particularly the role of youth and digital technologies in shaping emerging urban identities. Interdisciplinary approaches that draw on social history, cultural anthropology, and urban studies are crucial for unpacking how colonial legacies continue to influence Medan's spatial and social configurations today, while also identifying sources of social cohesion within an increasingly diverse population.

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