

VIEWING THE WEST: A CASE OF OCCIDENTALISM BY
MEMBERS OF AIESEC (ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE DES
ÉTUDIANTS EN SCIENCES ÉCONOMIQUES ET COMMERCIALES)
SURABAYA

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ABSTRACT

AIESEC is an international platform of youth exchange programs. In one of the writers' personal experience, most of his friends join AIESEC because they want to have 'first-hand experience' living in Western countries. The Western world has been arguably stereotyped more superior than its Eastern counterpart. The way Eastern people view the West is called Occidentalism, as the opposite of orientalism (the way the West views the East). Using Venn's definition of occidentalism, this study was conducted in AIESEC Surabaya to further investigate how its members view the West and whether they change their views after joining the exchange programs. The method applied for this research is qualitative approach by utilizing in-depth interview and participant observation. The number of informants recruited was twelve members: one male and eleven females. This study discovers the changing of AIESEC members' view towards the West after they experience in AIESEC. Although their views of the West are mostly positive (enchanted, prosperous, and modern West), AIESEC members also find 'realities' which are different from the stereotypical West through their interaction with Western people in AIESEC programs held in Indonesia or during their exchange programs in some Western countries. It is also argued that AIESEC has given its members better skills in cross cultural communication and understanding toward Western culture.

Keywords: AIESEC; Occidentalism; the West; White World; Cross-Cultural Communication; Stereotypes

1. Introduction

Globalization refers to the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterizes modern social life (Bly, 2005: 880). In the context of globalization, the one who gets the good position in the eye of the world is the West. Actually some studies about the Western in creating its good image had been done. One of the ways to achieve it was by creating their point of view toward the East which famous with the term of orientalism, popularized by Edward Said. According to Said (2003:2), "Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles". Orientalism criticizes the East and this theory of orientalism is one of the results from globalization and it is also created the image of the East. Then to counter the orientalism, some scholars created the counter attack of the orientalism which called Occidentalism, the way of how the East sees the West.

In viewing the West, some critics are built in order to give some impressions toward the West. One of the examples is taken from Budi Dharma article in *Kompas* newspaper about the dignity of our nation, Indonesia. His writing is very interesting because although we have been an independent state since 17 August 1945, we still have what is referred to as 'mentality of the colonized'. Dharma presents to his readers that is one of his friend Michael Junarko, a writer in readers' letter of *KOMPAS* became the victim of racism. It is narrated that Junarko wanted to take a photograph of a café. However the owner of the café became angry with him, asking Junarko to pay if he wanted to take the photograph. This occurred while many white people were being allowed to take photographs of the café freely, without being warned to pay by the owner.

By those examples from Budi Dharma in viewing and criticizing the West, we are interested in having the research about the way members of AIESEC Surabaya perceive the West. It is because

AIESEC is international organization and it is run by the youth, in this case globalization becomes one of some important parts in influencing AIESEC organization.

AIESEC is the world's largest youth-run organization (2010: 1). It is a French abbreviation that stands for Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Économiques et Commerciales. AIESEC's primary focus is on providing a platform for youth leadership development. AIESEC also offers young people the opportunity to become a global citizen, problemsolver as a local citizen, gain experience and skills that matter today and to change the world. AIESEC participants achieve this through having integrated AIESEC experiences, exchange and leadership opportunities in 110 countries of the AIESEC network (ibid). By joining this international organization, the youth believe that they will be one of tomorrow's leaders, who could bring positive impact to society and achieve a better life. This is stated as the primary vision of AIESEC: "*Peace and fulfillment of humankind potential*" (AIESEC International Annual Report, 2011: 4).

The members of AIESEC are special because they have weekly interaction with foreigners, especially white people during AIESEC activities such as projects in the society, welcome party gatherings, farewell party gatherings and local committee gatherings. The activities in AIESEC Surabaya, gives the members different experiences than any other organization because the members will feel the internationality in every single one of the AIESEC activities they participate in. It is believed that international experience leads individuals to begin to consider themselves part of an international professional community with peers around the world (Houston, 2006: 210). As the biggest youth organization in the world, AIESEC is giving its members the best experience of internationality. There is a possibility that AIESEC Surabaya members see the West from a different point of view than non-AIESEC members.

There have been some studies on occidentalism. The study conducted by Toyosaki (2007), for example, investigates Japanese people living in the United States of America. He explores the way the Japanese people desire the Western 'other' as they consider the white people as having more desired bodies (Toyosaki 2007, p.59). Another study was conducted by Creighton (2003) in Japan to examine how several Japanese advertisement companies created the image of the West. They have a special term for white people which called *gaijin* means the Westerner (Creighton 2003, p. 136-137). Different from those studies, our study takes the case of AIESEC specifically because of its international platform. We connect the members of AIESEC and occidentalism because AIESEC is part of an international organization that gives its members unique perspective on how they see the West. The research was conducted in AIESEC Surabaya to further investigate how its members view the West and whether they change their views after joining the exchange programs.

2. Methodology

In this research, we used qualitative method. According to Kirk and Miller, qualitative research is the tradition in social science which fundamentally depends on the observation of the human, in their environment or in the term itself (in Moleong, 2011: 4). Thus the qualitative research is emphasized to the human experience as this research purpose is to find the view of AIESEC Surabaya members toward the West.

The primary data of this research are the interview results with the members of AIESEC Surabaya and participant observation. The secondary data was taken from some articles, books journals, newspaper and website to support the main data.

In order to get a more comprehensive result, we need to set some criteria of the informants. According to Burgess (2005: 155), informants should possess five elements: having role in the community, good knowledge, willingness, communicability and impartiality. Thus, we selected only members who have leadership experience in AIESEC at least 6 month and always join AIESEC activities such as regularly meeting, welcoming party for foreign exchange participants, project involvement with society, and conference in AIESEC. They also should have contact with white people from AIESEC before.

The data are then converted into written text as a form of qualitative data. This is part of data reduction, in which the raw material is managed into a more understandable form. The next step is

data display which is the step after sorting the raw data into manageable data. As explained by Berg:

“The notion of data display is intended to convey the idea that data are presented as an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusions to be analytically drawn...[These] displays assist the researcher in understanding and or observing certain patterns in the data, or determining what additional analysis or actions must be taken” (2001: 35-36).

In this step the writer tries to analyze some important aspects inside the data of in-depth interview. By knowing some important aspects the writer finds better analysis in this research. The conclusion and verification is taken after the data is being reduced and displayed, then analytic conclusions may begin to emerge and define themselves more clearly and definitively (Berg, 2001: 36).

3. Discussion

Occidentalism can be seen as a reversal of orientalism, yet both concepts perform the same function: distorting the other and obscuring the other’s voice (Lu, 2008: 176). Here in, Indonesia we deal with how Indonesians, as AIESEC Surabaya members, view the West and its people in the sphere of occidentalism. Occidentalism touches directly on what has been primary task since inception, studying sets of people outside of the core of the West (Carrier, 2003: 12). AIESEC as international organization plays a great role in shaping its members mindset about Western world. To explain these views, we apply Venn’s theory on occidentalism. According to Venn (2000: 147), occidentalism is the institution of a particular imaginary, established in specific representations and tropes, in images, metaphors, symbols and signs which construct the frame of intelligibility of the West. The signs elaborated here are the use of *Bule* as a term of reference to White people, whiteness, and the ‘imagined’ modernity.

Constructing *Bule* as desired ‘other’

The term *bule* itself has denotative and connotative meanings. In connotative meaning, it is usually used when someone refers to something pale or white thing. The term is mostly used to some living things for example human and animals. Our societies usually call people that have blond hair and white pale skins are *bule*. The *bule* has its connotative meaning as the person who has white pale skin and blond hair. Usually it refers to foreigners that have those descriptions mentioned. The denotative meaning of *bule* is white people and they refer to Caucasoid race, where most of them are living in Europe and North America. It is proved by most of informants said that Western people are white. Several members were interviewed and one of them gave additional information on their impression of the appearance of Westerners:

“White people are more than 160 cm tall. They also have white skin, blond hair, red hair and blue eyes” (Intan Dianty Anindya).

In our society, white people are usually also the ‘desired other’. In this case some informants of this research stated clearly that white people are desired for our society and for them. One informant stated:

“First time meeting with *bule*, I think walking with *bule* is very nice. I do not know when I see them I just feel “wow” and there is a good sensation that I cannot explain. Probably when people see me walking with *bule* I will get more prestige on it because societies also think that *bule* is “wow”” (Nur Hadiyanti).

It is very clear that *bule* as desiring other here has very high value in her eyes, perhaps in others’ as well. She wanted to be recognized as somebody who has something more than the society have by walking with *bule*. Another statement from one informant said clearly about how walking and talking with *Bule* in English could make her appear more intellectual:

“Of course first time with *bule* I will feel amazing because people will see me as socialite person because I walk not only with Indonesian but also white foreigner. You know they have high intellectual and smart especially when they talk in English so people will see me as awesome person when I walk with them” (Romandhina Fajrin).

What we can say here is that the white people give positive aura toward people around them. Fajrin's statement in equating the ability of English speaking with someone's intellectual is very interesting. For someone who is able to speak English very well, English could be a language for communication, not to mention the intellectuality part by being good in English speaking because the language is international, so it is usual for some people to talk in English. Thus by speaking English people will not only able to communicate in international atmosphere but also will have intellectual value in the eyes of our people.

Antithetical Evaluation about Whiteness

In this section, the concept of white skin is contested by some AIESEC members in the way of how they valuing the concept of white beauty according to their experience. The white hegemony continues in creating the image of white itself in the eye of indigenous people, for example by spreading their world images through some Western movies. Indonesian people see a lot of Western movies through cinema and television and most of the actors and actresses are white and good looking. The images inside Western movies by viewing so many good looking white people can lead our people to make the white skin as the standard of beauty.

Apart from the common views of white skin as the ideal beauty, some informants stated that they dislike pale, white skin had by most *Bule*. As one informant said:

“Actually I do not really like white especially the pale one like those white people have. They (white people) also not really proud of their skin, so basically beauty or handsome is relative, once more I do not really like their pale white skin. They actually want to have our skin, the color of sapodilla brown” (Eka Pratiwi).

Lailul, another informant, also disagree with the concept white beauty. She thinks that Indonesian people skin color is also beautiful, the color of sapodilla brown. Puput as one of the informants said that beauty is not from the skin but from personality of the people.

The other version of beauty is the beauty of mixed race people in Indonesia called *Indo*. Prabasmoro said when *Indo* (mixed between Caucasian race and Asian race) is imagined as ideal, they actually are not the embodiment of ideal itself and their globalization still in local taste (in Yulianto, 2007: 31). So this racial mix is the second stage of beauty level after white level. The color is global but adapted into local taste that is resulted in the racial mix color. Some informants said that they prefer *Indo* as the beauty for the local taste. One of the informants said that her view of white beauty developed after she joined AIESEC. She said:

“For me the beauty is having wavy dark brown hair, sharp nose, grey eyes color, not having sapodilla brown skin but white not looks like Japanese or Chinese. White that I like is the white from racial mix between Indonesian and Caucasian after seeing *bule* in AIESEC” (Fauzia Paramitha).

She said that she is not telling the white of Caucasian but the white of racial mix is more beautiful than Caucasian white and sapodilla brown. The statement of Paramitha indicates the result of knowledge production from colonizer in the past. She stated about how beauty is being pictured in the way of having brown hair, sharp nose and grey eyes color but in the way of racial mix. Those kinds of criteria are usually owned by the pure white people, in the past people knew that those criteria were owned by the colonizer, the Dutch or British people. The beauty in Paramitha's statement should be the beauty which is already localized into Indonesian taste of beauty, the beauty of racial mix. This is called antithetical, means that she opposed the white beauty of pure white but she supported the beauty of racial mix.

Imagining the West's Modernity

Western world has been known from long time as the desired world for our society. In colonial era, Western enchantments lied at the enchantment of freedom, knowledge, liberalism, culture and education (Yulianto, 2007: 7). All those elements created the imagination of prosperity and modernity. Our people think that Western especially Europe has promising and prosperous life and they have high quality technology with all modernism with it.

As Eastern people, it seems we never catch up with Western because they always advanced in everything. White always treated the best and they are often signifiers of a world beyond the East, particularly the West (Prieler, 2010: 515). Whiteness functions in the East as the transparent and free-floating signifier of upward mobility and assimilation in “world culture”; it is the primary sign of the modern, the universal subject, the “citizen of the world (Kelsky, 2001: 421). White people are depicted as enjoying life; there is little sense of struggle with everyday problems. There is no doubt that white people and its Western world always become the symbol of modernity and prosperity in the Eastern world. There is one interesting opinion from one informant when the writer asked her about Europe. She said:

“Europe is the world of advanced civilization. Many big kingdoms were located there in the past even now some countries still become the kingdoms there. I chose Europe for exchange destination because it looks cool when you show it to your friend” (Fauzia Paramitha).

In her opinion, Europe is not only worth for visiting but also worth to be shown into our people because it has very good civilization and also good architecture buildings. Beside this the European setting is drenched with seriousness and professionalism: it is represented as a grand place at the heart of classical music (Perkins, 2010: 393) for example Mozart was born in Europe and his music nowadays is famous around the world. Dianti, one of the informants said that the first time she heard about Europe, she thinks about Eiffel, Pisa in Italy, the classic music of Mozart and Bull in Spain in other words we can say that Europe is the heart of classical Western culture with well preserved building and modern technology. Nova also said that European buildings are classing but modern and attractive so that makes her want to go to Europe to explore more about European classical building and its attractiveness.

There are some good reasons why Europe is chosen. Europe is part of Western world that has high development in technology, modern society, good architecture and excellent place. One of the informants said her opinion about the place where she wanted to go exchange:

“If I have enough budgets, I will choose Europe for my exchange destination because I want to challenge myself living far way from Indonesia. I think people in Europe are familiar with English language while in Asia I do not think that majority of people can speak English. I am afraid if I go exchange in one of the Asian countries for example India I cannot understand their language and having hard time for interaction. From what I see Europe has power in economy and politic and they are developed so much (modern)” (Lailul Maulidiyah).

From her opinion it is very clear that Europe is the place where they have everything very easy and we do not have to worry about communication problem if we go exchange to Europe, compared to Asia. She also said that Europe is the place where the economy and politic is stable and modern. We can understand this behavior as the desired behavior towards Europe and its element. Lailul imagined Europe as a modern place which has many things that could make her enjoy when she is in Europe. She choose Europe because it is more advanced than Indonesia and it has better attraction than Indonesia in the way of its development in technology and the beauty of its building.

In seeing the West, AIESEC members are influenced by AIESEC values because they live in an integrated development experience. This involves leadership opportunities, international internships and interacting with a global network to support their development (AIESEC International Annual Report, 2011: 4). Those experiences lead the members into open-minded thinking because it affords opportunities to discover new truths and to understand the conflicting beliefs of others (Adler, 2004: 131). One of informants said that the influence from his AIESEC experience makes him a developed person with open minded behavior. He said:

“I become open-minded person because of AIESEC. I can open myself and do not need to be introvert person. I become more discipline than before because Western people are discipline and their behavior impacted me. The example of that when I have to attend the project meeting in AIESEC with them, I have to arrive on time without late because late is considered as not professional behavior in meeting. They usually complain if someone is late in attending the meeting. That is why now I become open minded person and have professional value” (Andi Alvian).

The open minded thought will lead people into many positive behavior and also added value for intrapersonal skills such as professionalism. Andi stated clearly that he got professional experience by having good time management when he has meeting with the foreigners. He cannot be late in attending the meeting because it will be considered as not professional behavior.

4. Conclusion

What can we take away from this study? The main lesson is the importance of cross-cultural communication skills in this globalization era. Learning other cultures may involves stereotyping at first, but more interactions and communications will lead to mutual understanding. We could understand ourselves better when we could understand others, including their strength and weaknesses. In other words, in our attempts of making the West intelligible, we are actually trying to make sense ourselves as well. Finally, we could learn from each other without ‘repressing’ our identities as Easterners or Westerners. A global youth platform, such as AIESEC, could be a place to acquire interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills required to survive this global world.

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