

## The Branding Serambi Madinah: Half-hearted Politics of Identity in Gorontalo City

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**Abstract:** Indonesia started a reformation process and transition to democracy marked by the issuance of Local Autonomy Law year 1999/2014 and 2015. These regulations have pushed the will of every local area to rethink of their local identity and cultural values within the context of local wisdom in various areas in Indonesia. Based on the above problem, this article shows that the issue of the implementation of Local Autonomy Law no. 9 year 2015 has been interpreted into different thoughts related to local cultural context in Gorontalo. One of them is to construct branding for the capital province which is *Serambi Madinah* by imitating *Serambi Mekah* created by Aceh Province. The objective of this article is to study the factors that contribute to the failure of Gorontalo's branding as *Serambi Madinah*, based on the terms and conditions of city branding standard as the parameter. The data of this qualitative research were collected from various literature studies and one-month field observations (August - September 2018) in Gorontalo. The analysis was conducted using the theory of politics of identity and concepts related to city branding. This article questions the reasons and background of *Serambi Madinah* city branding: what is the reason and background of the *Serambi Madinah* branding? Is this branding in accordance with the terms and conditions of a city branding standard? The article concludes that the creation of the *Serambi Madinah* branding is a practice of identity politics of the elites to show their identity after separating from the province of North Sulawesi.

**Keywords:** City branding; Gorontalo; politics of identity; revitalisation of local wisdom.

**Abstrak:** Bangsa Indonesia telah menjalani proses reformasi dan transisi demokrasi, ditandai dikeluarkannya Undang-Undang Otonomi Daerah Tahun 1999/2014 dan 2015. Undang-Undang tersebut telah mendorong setiap daerah untuk menyikapi kembali identitas lokal dan nilai budaya dalam konteks kearifan lokal di berbagai daerah di Indonesia. Berdasarkan masalah di atas, artikel ini akan mengkaji isu penerapan UU Otonomi Daerah No. 9 Tahun 2015 di Kota Gorontalo yang diinterpretasikan dengan konteks budaya masyarakat setempat. Salah satunya adalah membangun branding ibu kota propinsi dengan sebutan *Serambi Madinah*, meniru branding *Serambi Mekah* di Propinsi Aceh. Tujuan artikel ini mengkaji faktor-faktor kegagalan branding kota Gorontalo sebagai *Serambi Madinah* berdasarkan syarat dan ketentuan standar *city branding* sebagai parameternya. Data riset kualitatif ini dikumpulkan dari berbagai referensi kepustakaan dan observasi lapangan selama 1 bulan (Agustus-Setember) 2018 di Gorontalo. Analisis dilakukan dengan menggunakan pendekatan teori politik identitas dan konsep-konsep yang berkaitan dengan *city branding*. Artikel ini mempertanyakan apa alasan dan latar belakang pembentukan branding *Serambi Madinah* ?; Apakah branding ini sesuai dengan syarat dan ketentuan standar suatu *city branding*? Artikel ini berkesimpulan pembuatan branding *Serambi Madinah* merupakan praktik dari politik identitas para elite untuk menunjukkan jati dirinya setelah berpisah dengan propinsi Sulawesi Utara.

**Kata Kunci:** Branding Kota; Kota Gorontalo; Politik Identitas; Revitalisasi Kearifan Lokal.

## 1. Introduction

Globalization has opened the possibility for many people to find their identity. There are five responses related to globalization to the existence of ethnic identity. First, is the defense mechanism. Second, take countermeasures. Third, the opening of the democratic system. Fourth, is creating a new identity or re-identification. Fifth, introducing local wisdom (Giddens, 2003; Singh, 2005; Woodward, 2001). In addition, after the global economic crisis, various countries began to use tourism as the main source of foreign exchange earnings. The globalization wave has swept almost all countries globally with different impacts. In Indonesia, as we experienced within the last two decades, democratization was the crucial response to globalization as the government tried to reform the system of governance to comply with the global system of democratic governance and open market economy.

In 1998 we saw the dramatic regime change in Indonesia following the weeks of violent students' protest on the street of the capital city, Jakarta, that demanded the then 32-year-ruling President under the authoritarian New Order regime, Soeharto, to step down. The political agenda in the New Order period was political and economic stability to support development plans. The strategy of identity politics during the New Order era impacted the existence of many ethnic groups in Indonesia. After the New Order Era ended, there was euphoria of awareness regarding local wisdom potential in many areas in di Indonesia. Moreover, the existence of Local Autonomy Law No. 9 year 2015 and the previous ones has triggered regions to dig their own local potential, both by exploiting natural resources and developing local wisdom. In Article 1 Law No. 32 Year 2004 and emphasized in Article 1 Law No. 9/2015, Local Autonomy is the legitimacy of local area to manage and handle their local interests based on their own opinions and social aspirations paralleled with the applied law. The principle of local autonomy uses the autonomous principle to freely manage their own local administrations (Ratnawati, 2006; Simanjuntak, 2013).

Local wisdom in its many forms teaches the concepts of social philosophy. It is also related to the will to revive local identity which has its roots in the culture of local areas. However, the impacts have triggered the will to expand an area and separate itself from its capital area, both in the province, regency, or city (Gunawan & Kuncoro, 2004; Karim, 2003). One of them is the emergence of willingness to revitalize local wisdom owned by Gorontalo's society, especially after interpreting Local Autonomy Law No. 9 Year 2015. This law is considered to give opportunity and chance to them to accommodate and actualize their local wisdom during the political process in their own area. They also use this law as one of the sources to create new political idioms needed to construct a new vision which is more democratic and can embrace local aspiration. One of the examples is the expansion of the Gorontalo area to be a new province by separating from its capital province, North Sulawesi. Moreover, this new province then created city branding using the name Serambi Madinah referring to Medina in Saudi Arabia during the presence of Prophet Muhammad PBUH.

Based on such a phenomenon, the questions that will be discussed in this article are the reason and background of the construction of the brand Serambi Madinah. Meanwhile, the objective of this article is to study the reason and factors behind the creation of Serambi Madinah brand by relating it to the condition of the homogenous society in Gorontalo. There are some reasons why Gorontalo is chosen as the research location. The first reason is that this city is considered minor or periphery, so it has not been studied from many aspects, especially those related to its social-political problem. Second, there is a phenomenon of this city's having city branding. Third, the population of Gorontalo is quite significant and dominant in the same culture and belief, which is Islam.

This article argues that the local autonomy granted by the laws pertaining to decentralization in Indonesia has given opportunity for Gorontalo's people to revitalize various local wisdom as the local identity for its government and local people. In this study, I chose the phenomenon of "Serambi Madinah" as a city branding of Gorontalo city. To examine this argument, I provide the brief sketch of the literature on decentralization in Indonesia and city branding to set the discussion in context. Recent study on decentralization and democratization in Gorontalo had been reported by de Archellie et.al. (2020). It showed that the local governance in Gorontalo was a contending arena for power struggle between formal and informal institutions. Another study before this by Amin (2010), reports that the

existence of Local Autonomy becomes a new opportunity for the people in Gorontalo to achieve fair shared welfare for the people in Gorontalo. According to Amin, by relying on the remnants from the ancestors and getting separated from North Sulawesi, Gorontalo can be more confident while dealing with the current changes, including defining their local identity.

Some studies summarized that custom is seen as an alternative effort to reclaim the land and other cultural products that the New Order government had seized (Halim, 2014; Lan & Adhuri, 2010; Nordholt & Klinken, 2007). In line with the implementation of Local Autonomy Law Year 1999, the local government of Gorontalo, which was previously part of North Sulawesi Province, was pushed to separate itself and form a new province. This willingness was realized on 23 January 2000. It is then strengthened by the issuance of Law No. 38, dated 22 December 2000, through the Determination in the Plenary Session of the House of Representatives that stipulates Gorontalo as an autonomous province (Hasanuddin & Amin, 2015, pp. 9–11). Gorontalo City was made the capital of Gorontalo Province, which was previously called Hulontalo City (Gorontalo) and now called Kota Serambi Madinah.

There were some previous studies on city branding from various disciplines. In general, the study of city branding is always associated with the tourism sector and marketing, such as Rainisto (2003) who explains the theoretical framework of place branding by focusing on the effort to market a city. To be a good brand, a city must possess defining and distinctive characteristics that can readily be identified (Bıçakçı, 2012). Also, there is a study by Kavaratzis (2004) who studies city branding within the context of city image through three stages, namely primary, secondary, and tertiary. It is because an image has an important role in giving representative meaning which is easy to understand for a city and the citizens. Moreover, an image will be the identity for a city and the citizens.

There is some research on the relation of city branding with an image of a city in Indonesia. The research conducted by Udhany (2009) shows a significant relation between the creation of city branding and the image expected from Surakarta City. In 2001, the Special Local Government of Yogyakarta tried to create city branding using the slogan "The Never Ending Asia" (Chaerani, 2011, p. 3). The same situation happened to Semarang City, which suggests "The Beauty of Asia" in 2006. *Majalah Opini* on 5 October 2008 explained that Semarang's brand needed to be reviewed based on the relevance with Semarang City which was not ready and able to provide facilities to be the leading beauty in Asia; even at national level, it was not considered capable (Chaerani, 2011, p. 3). Sinombor (2009) described that Solo in 2011 had become the pioneer in Indonesia's tourism programs by providing terraced buses and revitalizing many public spaces. The study of city branding has long been a concern outside Indonesia, as conducted by Seisdodos (2005) study in Madrid, Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006), Anholt (2010) about definitions of place branding, Wang (2012) study in Shanghai, and Bıçakçı (2012) study in Istanbul City.

This article is based on qualitative research. This article uses a descriptive analytic method and is study-oriented on the effort to describe certain social phenomena through the findings both from literature study and field data in one month in Gorontalo (August – September 2018). An exploratory method was used with relevant and significant samples representing and understanding the existing problem (Idrus, 2009, pp. 13–17). This research collected data from various references on the history of Gorontalo's people. Observation in the field is aimed to study the policies behind the creation of such a brand. Field research is needed to get data and observe the field's focus from the studied topic. Thus, depth interviews were conducted with various informants based on the criteria and research's objectives, such as the Executives (local government), Customary Institutions, NGOs, and other related parties. While gathering the data, this research used the method of focus group discussion (FGD). This method is relevant because it can gather opinions and arguments of the experts from various disciplines so that comprehensive understanding of the research's objectives can be acquired. For secondary data, literature study was done by collecting relevant data and information from books, journals, internet sites, as well as other references mainly related to cultural Gorontalo.

Based on the survey from literatures above I tried to convey the analysis of the branding of Serambi Madinah as an embodiment of politics of identity which has been tried to be realised in Gorontalo.

Politics of identity itself is an ongoing mechanism for every ethnic group, and the existence is latent, which can emerge to the surface as political power at any time. Empirically, politics of identity is a social construction from local cultural roots (Buchari, 2014; Halim, 2014).

Politics of identity then becomes the political tool for ethnic groups to achieve their objective to raise their image of identity. Its presence can be caused by some certain factors seen by an ethnic group, such as pressure, threat, injustice, and the feelings of having the same fate with other people in the area. Thus, they show their ethnic identity in a political fight to get power or separate themselves from the previous power (Buchari, 2014). In this regard, the above factors become reasons for Gorontalo's people to separate from North Sulawesi, introduce themselves, and strengthen their identity, which was previously part of a marginal society to become an independent society.

## 2. Result and Discussion

### *Geographical and Historical Background*

Gorontalo is one of the areas in Gorontalo Province which is 64,79 km or around 0,53% from the total area in Gorontalo Province. Geographically, the area of Gorontalo is adjacent to some districts and regencies, such as Bolaang Mongondow, Bone Bolango, and Teluk Tomini. It is suggested that Gorontalo City has been formed since more or less 400 years ago or around 1500s during the 16th century. Gorontalo city at that time became one of the ports in Teluk Tomini which was dwelled by people having faith in Islam aside from Ternate, Makassar, Buton, and Bone (Hasanuddin & Amin, 2015, p. 109).

Based on its history, the city of Gorontalo was one of the old cities in Sulawesi, apart from the cities of Makassar, Pare-pare and Manado. Before the colonial period, the conditions of the Gorontalo region were in the form of kingdoms which were regulated according to the Gorontalo constitutional customary law. There are five kingdoms joined in one kinship called Pohalaa and Pohalaa Gorontalo is the most prominent of the five pohalaa. Gorontalo City was formed on March 18, 1728 AD. Previously, Gorontalo City was part of North Sulawesi Province as a Municipality which was officially established on May 20, 1960. In 1965 it changed to Gorontalo Municipality, which continued to be used until 1999. Since the enactment of Law Number 22 Year 1999, the name Gorontalo became Gorontalo City until now. On February 16, 2001, Gorontalo City was officially designated as the capital of Gorontalo Province (Law Number 38 Year 2000 Article 7). The population of Gorontalo City changes every year. In 2018, the population of Gorontalo City was 210,882 people. The population of Islam is an average of 99.90% in each sub-district in the city of Gorontalo.

### *Slogan and Branding*

Since the middle until the end of the New Order era, there have been many slogans related to government's policy (Alkatiri, 2014). The creation of such slogans and logos was then followed by local areas, such as provinces, regencies, and cities. During that era, almost all borders were included in a province, regency, or city, as seen from the construction of gates marking a border to get in or out the related area. Those gates are usually decorated with many slogans marking the characteristics and identity of a province, regency, or city.

In fact, the effort made by the local government is meant to create a brand of a place. However, the term branding is more complex than slogans because it needs other basic elements for creating a brand. In other words, a brand is not only written and attached, but it also needs more certain requirements, in accordance with the terms and conditions as parameters.

City branding is a new device within the development of an area to increase its competence while facing competition at the national, regional, and global level. As a device, city branding is the continuation of marketing (place marketing), done by lots of cities in the world (Michalis Kavaratzis, 2004; Yananda & Salamah, 2014). City branding is part of city planning aiming to strengthen the identity of a city so that it can compete with other cities to attract tourists, capital investment, capable human

resources, industrial developments, as well as quality improvement of the relation between the citizens and the city (Anholt, 2010; Seisededos & Vaggione, 2005).

The phenomenon of city branding is in line with the presence of Local Autonomy which opens the perspective for local areas (province, regency, and city) to develop their assets and potential while competing with other areas. In this regard, they look back to see their assets and potential and what they can show off and introduce to other parties.

The formation of city branding within city management in Indonesia is supported by Law No. 32/2004 on Local Government, Law No.17/2007 on National Long-Term Development Plan 2005-2025, and Law No. 26/2007 on Spatial Planning. These three regulations are behind the issuance of some strategic policies supporting city development in Indonesia (Riyadi, 2009). These regulations have given freedom for local governments to construct and create the label of identity for their city. They then create or construct a brand using a tagline, motto, logo, and slogan considered suitable with their city identity and their citizens. Moreover, they realize that local identity must be demonstrated and used as a selling value for each area's bargaining power. A city needs positive identity because identity becomes an instrument to differentiate one city from another. This difference will be one of the determining factors for its excellence.

The phenomenon and awareness of the importance of city branding has appeared in almost every city in Indonesia. However, what is done by several regional governments is still very limited in its implementation. City branding efforts do not always produce the expected results. Often hindered by problems that cause not achieving the goals of branding. One example is the failure experienced by the city of Ambon in building its city branding with the tagline City of Music (Raseuki, Alkatiri, & Sondakh, 2020). One such example, shows that the brand is not well implemented due to several factors, inadequate infrastructure, and ineffective socialization.

At least, Gorontalo as a city has assets, facilities, human resources, and information technology which can be the foundation of a city's potential. However, are those aspects fulfilling the requirements to create a city branding it is expecting? The discussion below is directed at whether such a brand is suitable with the characters and identity of Gorontalo city as Serambi Madinah and whether this offered brand is able to have a selling value for Gorontalo city? Also, has Gorontalo City fulfilled the requirements for a real city branding?

#### *Aceh as the Veranda of Mecca*

To compare with another province with a similar branding, it is worth looking at Aceh with its tagline "Serambi Mekah" or the veranda of Mecca as a naming for both its province and capital city. There are several reasons why Aceh is called so. First, Aceh is considered as the first entrance for the spread of Islam in the archipelago. This is evidenced by the emergence of the first Islamic empire, the Kingdom of Perlak in 840 AD. Then in 1292, the Kingdom of Samudera Pasai was established. In the process, the Kingdom of Aceh in the 17th century once got the recognition from the Sharif of Mecca on behalf of the Caliphs of Islam in Turkey as a patron and protector of other Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago. Second, in its development, Aceh was once a science center of Islam in the archipelago, even at the Southeast Asian level. Third, since the colonial era, Aceh was also a major port to accommodate all Hajj departures in Nusantara (Indonesia).

The very dominant influence of religion and Islamic culture has indirectly shaped Aceh's image and identity as "Seuramo Mekkah" or the Veranda of Mecca. "The Veranda of Mecca" has a philosophical meaning which reflects not only that Aceh is an area that applies Islamic law, but also that this fact is strengthened by its demographic and geographical elements. The nickname Serambi Mekah seems to be the second representation after Mecca, in Saudi Arabia.

That nickname later became a justification for the regional government to implement the Islamic Sharia legal system which includes worship, *ahwal alsyakhshiyah* (family law), *muamalah* (civil law), *jinayah* (criminal law), *qadha* (justice), *tarbiya* (education), *da'wah*, *syiar*, and the defense of Islam. The provisions on the implementation of Islamic law are regulated by the Aceh's Qanun. Among the forms of implementation of the Islamic law are caning for adulterers, gamblers, thieves, and drinkers (see the

website of Provincial Regulation for the Special Territory of Aceh No. 5 of 2000: On the Implementation of Islamic Law). The enforcement of the Islamic Sharia in Aceh is carried out based on the principle of justice for everyone who is in Aceh. Every Muslim in Aceh must obey and practice the Islamic Sharia and each person who lives or is in Aceh must respect the implementation of the Islamic Sharia.

However, it seems that the branding "the Veranda of Mecca" along with its Islamic Sharia Regional Regulation provides a negative image for tourists to visit Banda Aceh since it is considered only able to lure tourists who have the same belief as its citizens but, on the contrary, looks unapproachable for non-Muslim travelers. After the tsunami disaster in 2004, the government began to create and construct a city branding for Banda Aceh City as the City of Islamic Syari'a through the program "Visit to the City of Banda Aceh 2013: Beautiful, Peaceful, & Religious". The addition in 2016 when Aceh received the World Islamic Tourism award as a model city for halal food tours. Banda Aceh also got the nickname "City of 1000 Mosques" (see: the websites of Visit Aceh 2013 and Aceh's Culture and Tourism Office).

#### *Gorontalo's Branding as the Veranda of Medina*

Gorontalo has long been known as an Islamic City. The reason is that the Gorontalo Kingdom Government had implemented Islamic law in various fields of life in the past. This can be seen from the cultural philosophy of Gorontalo which is "Adat with syarak and syarak with the Kitabullah." on that basis, Gorontalo is now designated as one of the 19 customary law regions in Indonesia. Gorontalo as *Serambi Madinah* started to be recognized when Mayor Medi Botutihe was in office (1998-2003). Even according to an informant, the slogan had already been mentioned in the beginning of 1980s by Prof. Dr. Hamka on his visit to Gorontalo. However, the branding resurfaced after Gorontalo City was established as the capital of Gorontalo Province on 16 February 2001. This showed a state of euphoria about identity confirmation that Gorontalo City had been able to be independent and separate from its town patron, Manado (North Sulawesi). Nevertheless, the branding of the city remains a mere slogan, which is generally written in various gateways in the borders of Gorontalo City. Based on research in the field, the branding has not yet been legalized through the Mayor's Regulation, let alone stipulated in the Shari'a Regional Regulations, such as in Aceh. The branding stays to be discourse that warns and signifies that Gorontalo City is a city with a large Muslim population in Gorontalo Province and is based on the formulation of traditions that breathe Islamic values, namely "saraa topa-topango to adati", meaning "sharia rests on traditions". This formulation has become Gorontalo's regional philosophy, which is popularly known as "Traditions are based on sharia, sharia is based on the book of Allah" (Hasanuddin & Amin, 2015).

Data findings from the FGD explain the principal difference between the Veranda of Mecca (Aceh) and the Veranda of Medina (Gorontalo), which lies in its philosophical problems. With the *Serambi Mekah* tagline, the Aceh model is based on direct practices in the implementation of Islam among the community, which is accompanied by various regulations in the form of Sharia Regional Regulations. Meanwhile, the *Serambi Madinah* tagline was adopted from the leadership model of the Messenger of Allah and the Caliphs in the city of Medina. In other words, the model of the Veranda of Medina is more focused on developing dignified human values, which are aligned with the principal values contained in the philosophy of Gorontalo people.

Below is a discussion on several requirements that must be met by a city which wants to establish a branding in the case of Gorontalo as "the Veranda of Medina". The discussion will look at three main components, namely identity, image, and communication (Anholt, 2010; Chaerani, 2011). These three components will be the basis for the discussion below.

*First*, a place's branding can establish a city to become known and famous (Anholt, 2007). The process of branding has become a new phenomenon of how a city has been managed well so that it forms a positive image. A city is also a complex entity that is associated with nature, people, things, and its artificial environment (public space). A city is a collection of dynamic activities that provide goods and services that are shaping an economic cluster (Mihalits Kavartzis & Ashworth, 2006). Based

on that statement, how ready is Gorontalo to introduce itself, both for its inhabitants and for other parties, amid the intricacies of branding issues that the city must face?

Based on research in the field, it can be concluded that Gorontalo seems not ready to provide the facilities and infrastructure related to the branding expressed, which at least requires a large and magnificent mosque which can at the same time become an icon for the city. In addition, related to the branding *Serambi Madinah*, Gorontalo needs to prepare educational institutions from the elementary to tertiary level that are adequate for the development of Islam in the Sulawesi region. At least Gorontalo needs to compete with the previous patron city, Manado, which is currently growing very rapidly with the provision of infrastructure and adequate public space.

The socialization of Gorontalo's city branding as the "Veranda of Medina" is also very rarely found in public space in the city of Gorontalo. According to our research in the field, the socialization of this branding which can be seen apparently is only found in the front of an ancient mosque that has been registered as a Cultural Heritage Site. The Hunto Sultan Amay mosque is located in Biawu Village, Kota Selatan District, Gorontalo City. In other public spaces, the socialization of this branding only comes in the form of few small banners. Thus, it seems that the government of Gorontalo City is not ready to put in efforts to introduce this branding to a wider audience in the city. Because the effort to introduce that branding is so limited, it is not surprising that the branding is only known in a very limited environment.

*Secondly*, if the city government manages to form its city branding, it will also be directly recognized by the outsider communities, and this can advance the local tourism sector. Another problem that must be dealt with is forming an impression so that a region does not need to try too hard to explain itself to other parties. With the success of a city branding, local communities are 'forced' to maintain and improve performance to maintain the brand. Therefore, a city branding must set a hope to be shared with all of its citizens. In this regard, does Gorontalo's government involve its citizens to participate in creating the branding of the city so that it becomes a hope shared with the citizens?

Based on observations in the field, it may be said that Gorontalo's branding is only known on the surface as a slogan without understanding the local government's concepts and objectives. This is because the branding remains at the discourse level, and regulations have not yet been made. As a result, the public does not know the concept and scheme of the making of the branding, not to mention that it is not known how the local government has socialized the branding to its citizens and what media have been used. This city's branding seems to be elitist, only known among certain political elites, especially the government officials, while among the wider community, it is not yet well known and understood. Up to this point, it seems that the branding is not internalized in the community.

*Third*, a city requires an image for two reasons since a city is both a political and an economic entity. As the center of economic growth, a city must be able to attract business people and investors. A city must also be able to attract tourists to come to visit and spend their money. The image of a city is also associated with weaknesses and strengths, both in terms of material and non-material aspects (Yananda & Salamah, 2014, pp. 40, 148). In this context, we question whether the image built based on the branding "the Veranda of Medina" has a positive or a negative value for Gorontalo, especially provided that most of the population of Gorontalo city are Muslims?

The branding *Serambi Mekah* of Aceh, for example, which has long survived and become an icon attached to the people of Aceh, has hampered the growth and development of their tourism fields as this branding leads to certain consumers, seemingly closing doors for non-Muslim travellers, especially given the issuance of Sharia Regional Regulations to control the people. The failure of the Aceh's model with "the Veranda of Mecca" branding should spark thoughts and discussion for the regional government and the citizens of Gorontalo City. Of course, to market its branding, the local government and the people of Gorontalo need to have the courage and be prepared to accept the impact or risk that must be faced. Nonetheless, they seem to be doubtful and half-hearted in realizing the branding of "the Veranda of Medina". This anxiety is due to the nature

of a branding, which, on one hand, is able to beautify the image of a city but, on the other hand, can also reverse the image of a city to become worse.

*Fourth*, the purpose of a city branding is to build a positive image by developing economic, social, political, and cultural aspects by means of urban planning and management which are more focused on and integrated with the products which need to be introduced to the internal and external stakeholders of the city (Bıçakçı, 2012). The question, then, is whether the purpose behind the creation of the branding *Serambi Madinah* is the same as the purpose of the establishment of Gorontalo City. Also, can the local government provide and prepare for the demands required for a good branding, such as providing tools and infrastructure needed?

The establishment of branding is not just the work of the local government. Instead, it requires cooperation from all parties, such as the private sector, businessmen, communities, universities, and even non-governmental organizations. A city, like a commodity, should be functional in a sense that it can offer benefits for job seekers, the manufacturing industry, the transportation industry, and the entertainment providers. A city branding serves as an instrument to define positioning as a promotional tool so that the place or area can be known at the local, national, and regional levels and at the international level. For this reason, of course, readiness, availability, capability, and sustainability of programs that support the branding are needed. It seems that these conditions cannot be met by Gorontalo City. This city is aged more than 400 years (Hasanuddin & Amin, 2015), but, because the city is in a peripheral area and had been marginalized for a long time, its readiness to take action and prepare itself has not been optimal, as judged by the standard for a city branding.

*Fifth*, Gorontalo City, which is also on the coast of Teluk Tomini and even has Limboto Lake, able to introduce its assets and the potential of its ocean and lakes so that these can form an identity that matches the branding the city intends to develop?

Gorontalo has more value than the City of Medina in Saudi Arabia, which has no sea and lake. However, Gorontalo's assets and potential do not appear to have been optimally utilized, making it unable to lift the image and icon of the city that is in a good location for industrial, tourism, and fishing industry development. Admittedly, on one hand, the location of Gorontalo is strategic, but the branding "the Veranda of Medina" can be detrimental because the image is the opposite of the actual city of Medina. Moreover, there are no regulations on governance and way of life for foreign tourists who will visit Gorontalo City. Copying Aceh's Sharia Regional Regulations is not an option either since it can bring down its dignity. It could be the impact of this loss and also the readiness of the government itself which have caused the branding "the Veranda of Medina" to become half-hearted in its realization. Evidently, the processing of marine products in Gorontalo has not been integrated well with the industry.

*Sixth*, to get a good selling point in the eyes of the community, the thing that needs to be highlighted by a region or city must be something unique and new, which is different from the others and has never been shown before or elsewhere. Does Gorontalo City have a selling value with uniqueness that is very different from other regions or cities in Sulawesi Island and its surroundings? This will be associated with the principle of the branding to be introduced.

A city with a strong brand can stand out among other cities. By applying branding, a city must be able to establish a clear identity and strong associations and embed positive attributes to position it among other cities and win the competition at the regional, national, and international scale. From observations in the field, it seems that Gorontalo does not have a clear identity, strong associations, uniqueness, and positive attributes offered to invite tourists or to differentiate itself from other cities, at least in the whole Sulawesi Island.

*Seventh*, a city can demonstrate the value of its civilization. A city is generally developing in a long historical period. Therefore, city branding is not something instant. Rather, it is born out of the deep-rooted values in the community so that it becomes a representation of the identity of citizens' lives. In relation to this, is the branding *Serambi Madinah* resulted from a top-down policy, which opens opportunities for other parties or institutions to participate in giving input? This is questionable



because it is related to the level of public trust and participation in the discourse of the branding being offered.

Developing a branding strategy basically requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including the local government, businessmen, media, local universities, cultural institutions, tourism actors, community leaders and others. This involvement will ensure diverse perspectives in mapping all the city problems so that it will make the implementation process of the branding smoother. A forced top-down approach in building a city branding will certainly fail. It can be ascertained that the branding *Serambi Madinah* disregards participation of other parties and was created without a long process. Accordingly, the spirit of togetherness does not exist among some of its people to understand the branding. In fact, the branding of Gorontalo City as the city of “the Veranda of Medina” is only artificial, like the slogan of the New Order model of urban development.

### 3. Conclusions

Based on field studies, it can be concluded that Gorontalo failed to satisfy its branding target as *Serambi Madinah* because the city does not yet have uniqueness with competitive sales value, a clear identity, a strong association, or a positive attribute, in addition to lacking facilities and infrastructure. Judging by field observations, Gorontalo’s branding of *Serambi Madinah* is only at the stage of discourse in the form of a mere slogan. The branding itself does not meet the conditions required according to the branding standards of a city. This is because brand building needs to not only invite stakeholders but also promote the brand in various ways and media so that the concept can be understood together, and this is something that the Gorontalo’s regional government has not implemented well yet.

A comprehensive branding strategy is the key to success for the development of city branding. Therefore, brand building takes a long process, needs a large research budget, and involves all stakeholders as building a brand of a city is part a practice of identity politics which needs to be introduced to other parties. That is why determining a city’s branding must not be done in a hurry or by just copying from another city without taking the applicable provisions into account. Otherwise, the city branding will only lead to a surface-level logo and tagline. Considering the terms and conditions that apply to brand building, it seems that the branding of *Serambi Madinah* offered by Gorontalo City depicts half-hearted identity politics that are only needed as a distinguishing from the province of North Sulawesi.

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