

THE RITUAL FIRE OF ILLUMINATING FAITH & TOLERANCE: THE BAKAR TONGKANG (BURNING BOAT) TRADITION IN BAGAN SIAPI-API, SUMATERA, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Bakar Tongkang ritual as a multi-dimensional phenomenon reflecting the interplay between religious values, cultural identity, and socio-economic dynamics in Bagan Siapi-api. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review, the research explores how this tradition, rooted in Chinese heritage, not only serves as an act of ancestral veneration but also operates as a social integrative mechanism in an era of globalization. Theoretical frameworks such as social identity theory and symbolic interactionism are applied to assess the evolving meanings of the ritual. Findings indicate that Bakar Tongkang contributes significantly to social cohesion, local economic revitalization, and the affirmation of cultural identity through cross-religious cooperation. These insights offer valuable implications for tourism development and cultural heritage preservation models.

Keywords: Bakar Tongkang, cultural identity, social interaction, tolerance, local wisdom.

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji ritual Bakar Tongkang sebagai sebuah fenomena multi-dimensi yang mencerminkan interaksi antara nilai keagamaan, identitas budaya, dan dinamika sosial-ekonomi di Bagan Siapi-api. Dengan menggabungkan metode kualitatif deskriptif melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan studi literatur, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana ritual yang berakar dari tradisi Tionghoa ini tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sarana pemujaan leluhur, melainkan juga sebagai mekanisme sosial yang mengintegrasikan masyarakat multikultural dalam era globalisasi. Kerangka teoretis yang digunakan mencakup teori identitas sosial, interaksionisme simbolik, dan konsep globalisasi budaya guna menilai transformasi makna ritual di tengah perubahan zaman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Bakar Tongkang berkontribusi pada kohesi sosial, revitalisasi ekonomi lokal, dan penegasan identitas budaya melalui praktik gotong royong lintas agama. Temuan ini mengindikasikan adanya potensi differentiator bagi pengembangan pariwisata dan strategi pelestarian warisan budaya yang dapat dijadikan model bagi daerah lain dengan latar belakang multikultural.

Kata kunci: Bakar Tongkang, identitas budaya, interaksi sosial, toleransi, kearifan lokal.

INTRODUCTION

What could possibly drive tens of thousands of people from all corners of the

world to embark on long journeys, crossing seas and lands, just to arrive in a small coastal town in Riau? Bagan Siapi-api a name

that might not frequently appear in popular travel books transforms each year into the grand stage of a cultural ritual that ignites passion, unites differences, and breathes life into hope: the Bakar Tongkang Festival.

Not just a simple festivity, the annual Bakar Tongkang event is a grand spectacle, with an impressive budget ranging from IDR 1 to 1.5 billion to bring it to life (Nyoto et al., 2023). This magnificent celebration is made possible through generous donations from the Chinese community, coupled with substantial contributions from local sponsors and the unwavering support of the regional government. In addition, the event receives valuable backing from the Ministry of Tourism, underscoring its cultural significance and appeal on both a regional and national level (Purnama, 2023; Riau Pos, 2023). The meticulous organization and resources poured into this vibrant celebration are a testament to the dedication and unity of all those involved, ensuring that the festival remains a prestigious and unforgettable experience year after year.

This substantial cost reflects the collective dedication of the community to preserve a noble tradition passed down through generations (Putra, 2023). Amid the roaring waves of globalization that continue to erode the boundaries of tradition, Bagan Siapi-api stands tall in preserving its ancestral heritage. Once known as one of the world's largest fish producers, this town holds more than just maritime glory. It carries a story of human courage in preserving cultural roots amidst rapid societal changes.

With a Muslim-majority population (Azra, 2020) and a Chinese community rooted since the 19th century (Liem, 2021), Bagan Siapi-api bears silent witness to the

convergence of cultures that has grown not in conflict, but in harmony. One cultural legacy that still burns brightly today is the Bakar Tongkang ritual a deeply meaningful procession that blends spirituality, togetherness, and hope. The tradition involves the burning of a large replica ship, a symbol of sacrifice and a plea for blessings to Kie Ong Ya, a deity believed to have protected the ancestors when they first set foot on this land (Suryadinata, 2022).

At present, Bakar Tongkang is more than a spiritual ritual of the Chinese community. It has transcended ethnic and religious boundaries to become a collective cultural celebration involving all layers of society (Riza & Suryani, 2023).

Each year, over 50,000 visitors from Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, China, and even Europe and the United States flood this small town (Liem, 2021; Purnama, 2023). Quiet streets transform into a sea of people. Hotels are fully booked, homes are converted into guesthouses, and the aroma of traditional food fills the corners of every street. For several days, Bagan Siapi-api pulses more vibrantly not from the hustle of urbanization, but from a surge of cultural energy that breathes life back into the soul of the town.

As a native of the region who was once actively involved in the organizing committee, the author has personally witnessed how this ritual unites the Chinese, Muslim, Christian, and other ethnic communities into a remarkable bond of mutual cooperation (Wijaya, 2021). There are no barriers, no divisions. Everyone works together from securing the procession route, building the stage, cooking for guests, to setting up culinary and souvenir stalls. Amid differing

beliefs, Bakar Tongkang offers an invaluable lesson in tolerance and patriotism.

In 2022, the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy RI, attended the event and recognized Bakar Tongkang as a cultural icon with tremendous potential to support the national creative tourism agenda (Santoso, 2023). Supported by improved land access from Pekanbaru and sea routes from Batam (Rahman, 2023; Santoso, 2023), Bagan Siapi-api is gradually establishing itself as one of Indonesia's premier cultural tourism destinations.

Beyond its cultural significance, Bakar Tongkang brings real economic blessings. During the festival, informal sector revenues soar, demand for accommodation spikes dramatically, and small- and medium-sized enterprises experience noticeable growth (Setiawan, 2023; Wijaya, 2021). This celebration not only warms the spirit but also drives the people's economy. In a world increasingly fragmented by differences, Bakar Tongkang teaches that diversity is a strength, not a threat. That local identity should not be forgotten but honored as a legacy that shapes the nation's character.

This tradition stands as proof that culture does not die; it transforms, adapts, and yet remains deeply rooted. Therefore, this study does not merely aim to examine Bakar Tongkang as a religious ritual. It seeks to explore more deeply how this tradition serves as a social adhesive, strengthens collective identity, supports local economic growth, and adapts within the digital and globalized era.

This study looks closely at the Bakar Tongkang tradition using three ideas: how people interact, group identity, and cultural changes. The fire doesn't just burn a boat. It

gives hope, shows tolerance, and brings people in Indonesia together.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Evolution and Cultural Context Existing literature, such as works by Azra (2020) and Liem (2021), highlights that Chinese religious traditions in Indonesia have undergone transformation amid the currents of globalization and social change. Historical studies show that ritual practices like Bakar Tongkang represent cultural adaptation mechanisms in response to local economic and political dynamics (Azra, 2020; Liem, 2021). Moreover, other research reveals that this ritual plays a crucial role in shaping cultural identity and fostering social solidarity within the Chinese community (Purnama, 2023; *Riau Pos*, 2023). A study by Hwang (2019) emphasizes that this tradition is not merely a religious ritual but also a tool for strengthening community bonds, especially in the context of rapid social change. Furthermore, research by Wijaya (2022) affirms that despite the challenges of globalization, the Chinese community continues to uphold this tradition as a symbol of identity and cultural resilience.

Symbolic and Spiritual Dimensions

The concept of symbolism, particularly in the use of fire, has been explained by Tan (2021) and Suryadinata (2022). In many traditions, fire is regarded as a symbol of purification, transformation, and renewal; this meaning is deeply applied in the *Bakar Tongkang* ritual as a representation of the union between the past and future hopes. The symbolic interactionism approach helps explain how the meaning of

the ritual is shaped and transmitted through social interaction.

Social Identity Theory and Cultural Globalization

The theoretical framework applied involves social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner) and cultural globalization, in which traditional rituals not only form group identity but also serve as mediating agents in cultural encounters. Studies by Wijaya (2021) and Setiawan (2023) support the idea that the integration of cultural values can be an important instrument in managing diversity and intergroup conflict.

Economic Implications of Cultural Festivals

The economic impact of cultural festivals, as described by Purnama (2023) and Santoso (2023), indicates that increased tourism and trade activity during the celebration are key indicators of local economic empowerment. This literature underscores the importance of synergy between cultural preservation and economic development within the framework of sustainable development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs several theoretical approaches to explore in greater depth the role and impact of the Bakar Tongkang tradition in Bagan Siapi-api, which encompasses not only religious aspects but also social, economic, and cultural values. The theoretical framework used in this research consists of three main approaches: Symbolic Interactionism, Social Identity Theory, and Cultural Globalization.

Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological theory that emphasizes the

importance of symbols and the meanings constructed through social interaction. In the context of the Bakar Tongkang tradition, symbols such as fire and the replica ship carry not only material or physical value but also profound symbolic meaning for the Chinese community.

In the Bakar Tongkang ritual, fire is seen as an element with the power to purify and renew. It is a spiritual symbol representing sacrifice and the cleansing of sins. The replica ship, which is set ablaze during the procession, represents a journey of the soul and a hopeful plea for fortune. These symbols carry deep significance for the Chinese community and form part of how they interact and maintain a connection with their ancestors.

The symbolic meaning of these ritual elements is shaped through social interaction among members of the community. Every individual who participates in this tradition whether as an organizer, a participant, or a spectator contributes to constructing and reinforcing these symbolic meanings. For example, even though the meanings of the fire and the ship are widely recognized, active participation in the ritual allows individuals to “breathe life” into these symbols and reinterpret them according to their personal and collective experiences (Poerana et al., 2023).

The symbolic interactionism framework thus helps us understand that the Bakar Tongkang ritual is not merely a series of acts performed to honor ancestors, but also a medium for strengthening social bonds among community members and reinforcing the connection between past and present.

Social Identity Theory explains how individuals identify themselves as members of social groups and how this group identity affects interactions between communities (Smith & Lee, 2021). In Bagan Siapi-api, the Bakar Tongkang tradition plays an important role in shaping and sustaining the group identity of the Chinese community.

Bakar Tongkang is not only a religious or cultural celebration, but also a medium through which the Chinese community builds solidarity among its members. This ritual provides a space for individuals to express their pride in being part of the Chinese ethnic group and strengthens their collective sense of identity. Participation in the celebration is not merely about performing a ritual it also reinforces deep social bonds among group members.

However, social identity theory also highlights how such celebrations interact with other groups in a multicultural society. In Bagan Siapi-api, although the Bakar Tongkang festival originates from Chinese tradition, many non-Chinese groups such as the Malay and Muslim communities also take part in the event. This cross-group participation fosters a more inclusive shared identity, leading to greater social solidarity among various ethnic and religious communities. It illustrates how group identity can serve as a bridge across differences, fostering social cohesion and strengthening a sense of togetherness in a diverse society.

Cultural globalization refers to the process by which values, ideas, and cultural practices from different parts of the world are exchanged and influence one another. In this study, we explore how the Bakar Tongkang tradition adapts and endures amid the growing forces of globalization. In a world

increasingly connected by technology and mass media, traditional practices often face significant changes driven by the influence of global culture.

Globalization has brought about major transformations in many aspects of life, including how communities celebrate their traditions. In Bagan Siapi-api, the Bakar Tongkang ritual has become more than just a local festivity it now attracts international tourists from various countries. The use of digital technology to promote the festival through social media and tourism websites has created cultural interactions between the local community and foreign visitors. This process allows Bakar Tongkang to remain relevant and accepted by younger generations who are more exposed to global cultural influences, without compromising its core essence and local values.

Cultural Globalization and the Bakar Tongkang Tradition: Cultural globalization, in this context, does not cause the Bakar Tongkang tradition to become static or disappear. On the contrary, this tradition has adapted to the changing times. Social media and digital technology have enabled the community to introduce and share this tradition with the outside world, while still preserving the meaning contained within the celebration. The tradition has become responsive to the dynamics of time and technology, bridging local culture with the global world.

By combining these three theoretical approaches, this study connects the cultural, economic, and social dimensions holistically. Symbolic interactionism helps us understand how the symbols in the Bakar Tongkang ritual function as tools for cultural communication. Social identity theory offers insights into how

this tradition shapes and strengthens group identity within a multicultural society. Meanwhile, cultural globalization shows how this tradition adapts to changes without losing its local essence.

These theoretical approaches also provide a foundation for discussing policies and strategies for preserving traditions. Given the increasing influence of globalization on local cultures, it is crucial to formulate policies that can maintain a balance between external influences and the preservation of original cultures. Through this approach, we can leverage the potential of traditions like Bakar Tongkang to support sustainable tourism development that respects local cultural values while fostering harmonious social relations in diverse communities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative methodology with a participatory observation approach, in-depth interviews, and literature review (Saldaña, 2021). This approach is chosen due to the complexity of the Bakar Tongkang tradition, which involves not only religious ritual aspects but also social, economic, and cross-cultural dynamics. Considering the limited access to written information and the challenges in obtaining authentic perspectives from various community groups, this research requires a thorough data collection process, diligence in field observation, and high interpretative skills.

As someone who has previously been involved in organizing the Bakar Tongkang celebration, the researcher had the opportunity to engage directly in various stages of preparation and ritual execution.

However, this involvement is not without challenges. Observations were carried out with a strict and systematic approach, documenting every element of the celebration while considering factors that are not always easily accessible to outsiders. Some aspects that were observed include:

Event preparation, which not only involves creating replicas of ships but also coordination among various social groups and stakeholders with different interests. The ritual process, which is rich with symbolic elements that require a deep understanding of the philosophy and beliefs of the Chinese community. Social interactions, which involve complex relationships between the Chinese community, local residents, and tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Economic impact, which is not only related to trade enhancement but also the long-term effects on the local economic structure that need to be understood in context (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2022). Observations were conducted directly through detailed note-taking, video recording, and in-depth analysis of changes occurring during the celebration. The biggest challenge in this phase is ensuring that the data collected is unbiased and accurately reflects the existing social realities.

Data Collection through Interviews:

The process of data collection through interviews faced its own challenges, particularly in building trust with respondents and obtaining honest and reflective answers. Interviews were conducted with various parties who had different perspectives. From interviews with 40 respondents including Chinese community leaders (5 people), Muslim and Christian community members (8 people),

local business owners (12 people), and domestic and international tourists (15 people) diverse insights were gathered. The number of participants in each group was determined to ensure representation of key stakeholder categories while maintaining the feasibility of in-depth qualitative analysis. Differences in sample size between groups were influenced by factors such as accessibility of respondents, thematic focus, diversity of perspectives, and the principle of data saturation where additional interviews no longer yielded new insights. Moreover, the final number of respondents also reflected the availability and willingness of individuals from each group to participate in the study.

Chinese Community Leaders: These individuals possess a deep understanding of the spiritual meaning behind the Bakar Tongkang ritual but are often reluctant to share information with outsiders. Their insights are crucial for understanding the ritual's sacred and cultural dimensions, but the sensitivity of the information requires careful negotiation to gain access.

Muslim and Christian Communities in Bagan Siapi-api: The perspectives of these communities regarding diversity in the celebration are often influenced by historical factors and sensitive social dynamics. Their views provide a broader understanding of how the Bakar Tongkang celebration is perceived by different religious groups, revealing the social fabric of the area. These insights were gathered through in-depth interviews with representatives from various religious communities in Bagan Siapi-api. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement and knowledge of the Bakar Tongkang

celebration. The collected data were then analyzed thematically to identify perceptions and the social structures emerging from the celebration.

Local Business Actors: These individuals have economic interests in the event, which adds a layer of complexity to their narratives. Their perspectives need to be critically analyzed to uncover the pragmatic aspects behind their involvement in the tradition, such as economic motivations, branding, and the commercialization of cultural practices.

Domestic and International Tourists: Tourists from various backgrounds and expectations add further complexity to understanding how the tradition is perceived outside the local community. Their views reflect a more external and globalized perspective, which can highlight the impact of cultural globalization on local traditions.

During the interviews, the researcher faced several challenges, including language barriers, narrative biases, and the tendency of some respondents to provide answers that were constructed to suit specific interests. To overcome these challenges, interviews were not conducted just once but were part of an ongoing process of discussion and follow-up, allowing the researcher to delve deeper into the meanings behind the answers provided. This iterative process helped to uncover more reflective and genuine insights into the Bakar Tongkang tradition and its various interpretations across different community segment.

This research also relies on extensive literature review, which faces challenges in finding comprehensive and credible sources. Given the limited academic studies on Bakar Tongkang in the context of local culture and

social interaction, the researcher had to gather references from:

Academic Studies on Chinese Traditions in Indonesia: These studies often remain general and do not specifically address Bakar Tongkang. Much of the literature provides broader insights into Chinese cultural practices in Indonesia, which may not always delve deeply into this particular tradition.

News Articles and Government Reports: These sources often contain biases, particularly when discussing the festival as part of the tourism industry. While they provide useful background, their perspective may overlook deeper cultural meanings and the social dynamics surrounding the event (Prilia, 2017).

Historical and Anthropological References: These sources offer valuable insights, but they require critical interpretation to understand how past values remain relevant in the modern context of the celebration. Historical narratives help connect past and present, though they may not always align with contemporary social realities (Lowenthal, 2015).

The main challenge was creating an analytical framework that connects theory and field findings clearly and deeply.

Data analysis followed a long and complex process, utilizing triangulation techniques to ensure the validity of the findings. The data collected was analyzed in several stages:

Data Coding: This stage involved grouping the findings into main themes such as spiritual meaning, social aspects, and economic impact. This process required precision and high interpretative skills to

avoid researcher bias and ensure the themes accurately represented the data.

The Narrative Analysis analysis focused on identifying patterns and relationships between various phenomena observed during the study, allowing for a deeper understanding of the connections between different aspects of the tradition. This analysis is based on data collected through in-depth interviews with selected respondents. It is not based on a survey, but rather on qualitative methods aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research highlights various perspectives on the Bakar Tongkang tradition in Bagan Siapi-api, particularly in relation to local wisdom and religious aspects. Through interviews and observations, it was found that the celebration is not only a religious ritual for the Chinese community but also a symbol of tolerance amid the diversity of the local population. Moreover, this tradition is part of a cultural identity passed down through generations, continuously adapting to the times without losing its essential meaning.

From interviews with 40 respondents, including Chinese community leaders (5 people), Muslim and Christian community members (8 people), local business owners (12 people), and domestic and international tourists (15 people), it was found that 85% of respondents believed the celebration significantly contributes to the local economy. Additionally, 70% of local business owners experienced an income increase of more than 50% during the event, while 60% of local residents believed the tradition holds strong cultural value, though there is a need

for adaptation to make it more inclusive. Other findings showed that 40% of tourists learned about the event through social media and digital promotions, indicating the role of technology in attracting visitors.

Economically, accommodation rental prices during the festival increased by 30-50%, food vendor transactions doubled, and the number of tourists attending was estimated to reach ±50,000 people. These

findings highlight the growing economic significance of the event and its increasing visibility through modern technological channels (Santoso, 2023).

Data Coding

To analyze qualitative data, data coding was conducted using a thematic approach. The following are some of the main themes that were identified:

Thematic Analysis of Community Perspectives on the Bakar Tongkang Festival

Category	Subtheme		Quote From Respondent
Religious Meaning	Offering to the Deity Kie Ong Ya		"We believe that Bakar Tongkang is a form of respect for our ancestors and our guardian deity." (R1)
Religious Meaning	Belief in Blessings and Good Fortune		"Every year we hope to receive blessings and better fortune after participating in this ritual." (R2)
Local Wisdom	Mutual Cooperation in Preparation		"This event doesn't just belong to our community, but also involves others who help with the preparations." (R3)
Local Wisdom	Positive Impact	Economic	"During the celebration, many tourists come and the hotels are fully booked. This really helps the local economy." (R4)
Socio-Cultural	Participation from Various Groups		"Although this is a Chinese tradition, local people also join in the festivities without any obstacles." (R5)

Based on the data coding results, this research reveals several key aspects that illustrate the role and impact of the Bakar Tongkang tradition in the lives of the Bagan Siapi-api community.

1. Bakar Tongkang Tradition as a Religious Symbol

The Bakar Tongkang tradition holds strong spiritual significance for the Chinese community, especially those living in Bagan Siapi-api. At its core, this ritual is not merely a ceremonial display but a sacred religious practice that reflects deep-rooted beliefs and cultural continuity. While a ceremonial display typically involves formal actions

performed mainly for tradition or social purposes without necessarily having deep spiritual meaning, this sacred religious practice holds profound spiritual significance and is performed as an act of devotion within the religious context. The ritual centers around the offering and symbolic burning of a large wooden boat (tongkang) dedicated to the deity Kie Ong Ya, a revered protector figure in the Chinese pantheon. This act represents a plea for protection, an expression of gratitude, and a prayer for health, peace, and prosperity for the entire community in the year ahead.

The offerings made to Kie Ong Ya are viewed as a form of reverence not only to the

deity but also as a symbolic gesture of honoring ancestors. This ancestral veneration is a core value in Chinese spiritual practice, emphasizing the importance of lineage, continuity, and respect for those who came before. The burning of the boat, which is believed to carry the prayers and offerings to the spirit realm, becomes a powerful moment of spiritual release and renewal.

This finding aligns closely with Tan's (2021) research, which underscores that the Bakar Tongkang ritual functions as a collective expression of belief among the Chinese diaspora. It is a cultural mechanism that allows the diaspora community to reaffirm their identity, maintain their spiritual connection to their heritage, and manifest their shared values in a public and powerful way. For many, participation in this ritual serves as a form of cultural resistance preserving traditional beliefs in the face of modernization and assimilation.

In addition to its spiritual and symbolic importance, the ritual also functions as a moment of deep reflection and communal togetherness. As the boat is set ablaze and carried by flames, thousands of devotees and spectators watch in solemn reverence, some praying silently, others weeping or offering incense. It becomes a shared emotional and spiritual experience, where individual hopes and fears are united in a single, transcendent act.

Furthermore, the ritual has a unique ability to unite the community across generations. Elder members of the community often serve as guardians of the ritual's meaning and procedure, passing down stories, prayers, and customs to younger generations. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge helps maintain the

authenticity of the tradition while fostering a deeper sense of belonging among youth.

In essence, the Bakar Tongkang ritual is far more than a religious event; it is a living symbol of spiritual endurance, communal identity, and cultural continuity. Through this act of faith, the Chinese community of Bagan Siapi-api not only honors their spiritual beliefs but also reaffirms their place within the broader mosaic of Indonesian society.

2. Local Wisdom in the Bakar Tongkang Celebration

The tradition not only forms part of the cultural identity of the Chinese community but also reflects local wisdom that involves the entire society. The concept of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) in preparing for the event demonstrates the active involvement of the Malay community and other ethnic groups. This indicates harmonious social interactions in Bagan Siapi-api, as noted by Wijaya (2021). Furthermore, the local community's participation highlights that the Bakar Tongkang tradition has become a part of the regional cultural heritage passed down through generations.

One of the tangible impacts of this celebration is the increase in economic activity, particularly in tourism and small businesses. The arrival of thousands of tourists each year leads to significant rises in demand for accommodations, food, and transportation services. This data is consistent with Purnama's (2023) report, which notes that during the festival, rental prices increase by up to three times compared to normal days. Additionally, the celebration also benefits the informal sector, such as street vendors and local tour service

providers, who experience a significant increase in income.

3. Support from Various Social Groups

The Bakar Tongkang festival stands as a shining example of social cohesion, with robust support from a wide array of social groups, including Muslim and other ethnic communities in Bagan Siapi-api. This collaborative effort highlights a remarkable level of tolerance and mutual respect. It is not just that non-Chinese communities permit the event to take place within their midst, but they actively engage in its preparation and execution. The predominantly Muslim Malay community, for example, plays a vital role by contributing essential facilities such as security and logistics, ensuring that the event runs smoothly and safely for all attendees. Additionally, local communities, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, participate in the festival by offering food, souvenirs, and other services, fostering a spirit of camaraderie and enhancing social interactions among various ethnic groups.

This collective involvement transcends religious and ethnic lines, demonstrating that the Bakar Tongkang tradition has evolved from being an ethnic celebration into a shared cultural heritage embraced by all. The active participation of diverse groups reflects a deep respect for cultural pluralism, recognizing that the values upheld by such a festival can serve as a powerful unifying force. It is a testament to the Indonesian spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) where people of all backgrounds come together to celebrate their differences and contribute to the common good.

The role of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kementerian Agama) in this context is also crucial. Through its encouragement and facilitation, the Ministry has supported the integration of religious harmony in cultural activities like Bakar Tongkang. By advocating for tolerance and ensuring that cultural expressions remain inclusive, the Ministry has helped foster an environment where religious and ethnic diversity are not seen as barriers but as opportunities for mutual enrichment. This ongoing support underscores the Ministry's commitment to strengthening national unity while preserving the rich tapestry of Indonesia's cultural heritage.

Such social harmony is not only vital for the continuity of the Bakar Tongkang festival but also plays a pivotal role in maintaining social stability in a multicultural society like Indonesia. It offers a powerful model for fostering tolerance and collaboration, which is essential in avoiding potential conflicts based on religious or ethnic identity. In a world that is often divided by differences, the Bakar Tongkang festival serves as a beacon of unity and an affirmation that cultural values, when respected and celebrated, can indeed bring people together across divides.

4. Tolerance as a Model for Other Regions

Furthermore, the tolerance demonstrated in this celebration could serve as a model for other regions in building harmonious relationships amid differences in religion and culture. The successful coexistence of various communities in Bagan Siapi-api during the Bakar Tongkang festival is not just a local achievement but also a reflection of the broader potential for unity in

diversity throughout Indonesia. It exemplifies how mutual respect and open-mindedness can flourish when cultural expressions are embraced rather than feared.

The celebration clearly shows that differences in belief systems do not have to be sources of tension. On the contrary, they can become opportunities for dialogue, appreciation, and collaboration. In Bagan Siapi-api, communities from different religious and ethnic backgrounds do not merely tolerate the event they participate in it, support it, and even celebrate alongside their Chinese neighbors. This spirit of togetherness transcends religious affiliations and paves the way for genuine social harmony.

Such tolerance does not emerge spontaneously; it is the result of years of interaction, mutual trust, and a willingness to see others as partners in community-building rather than threats. Local leaders, religious figures, and civic organizations play important roles in fostering this climate of inclusivity. Their consistent efforts in promoting cross-cultural understanding demonstrate that tolerance can be nurtured and institutionalized over time.

The involvement of local government and national institutions, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs, further strengthens the foundation for interreligious harmony. Their presence not only legitimizes the event but also sends a powerful message that cultural and religious diversity is to be celebrated as a national strength, not a liability.

For other regions in Indonesia especially those grappling with religious or ethnic tensions—the Bagan Siapi-api experience offers valuable lessons. It proves

that sustainable peace is achievable when communities prioritize shared humanity over exclusive identity. Schools, youth groups, and interfaith organizations in other areas could look to this example to develop inclusive educational programs, community events, and cultural collaborations that promote tolerance from the ground up.

Ultimately, Bagan Siapi-api shows that tolerance is not simply the absence of conflict, but the presence of genuine engagement, cooperation, and shared purpose. In a world increasingly fragmented by difference, the Bakar Tongkang festival serves as a vibrant reminder that unity is possible and that it begins with respect.

5. Sustainability and Inclusivity of the Tradition

The sustainability of this tradition reflects a deeply rooted value of inclusivity within the community. The Bakar Tongkang celebration is no longer solely the domain of the Chinese community but has become a collective pride for the entire population of Bagan Siapi-api. This growing sense of ownership and shared cultural identity has transformed the event into more than just a religious or ethnic ritual it is now a unifying force that bridges social boundaries and fosters interethnic solidarity.

Over the years, the tradition has demonstrated its remarkable adaptability. It continues to thrive not only because of its spiritual and historical significance, but also due to the strong community engagement it inspires. People from diverse backgrounds Malay, Javanese, Batak, and other local communities actively contribute to the celebration in various forms, whether through participation in logistical

preparations, economic activities, or cultural performances. This inclusiveness enhances the resilience of the tradition, ensuring its continuity across generations (Parlaungan, Rayyan, dan Nasti, 2023).

Moreover, the open and festive nature of Bakar Tongkang invites participation and appreciation from both locals and visitors, allowing for the transmission of cultural values in an accessible and joyful manner. Local schools, community organizations, and even interfaith youth groups are often involved in preparatory events, showing how the celebration has become a vehicle for cultural education and social integration.

The commitment to maintaining this tradition also receives institutional support. The involvement of government bodies such as the local government and the Ministry of Religious Affairs strengthens the formal recognition of Bakar Tongkang as a valuable part of Indonesia's cultural heritage. Their support not only ensures the logistical and regulatory aspects of the event but also reinforces the message that tradition and inclusivity can go hand in hand.

In this way, Bakar Tongkang exemplifies how a cultural tradition can be both sustainable and inclusive, by growing in relevance and accessibility while still maintaining its core identity. It stands as a living testament to the community's capacity to honor the past, celebrate the present, and build bridges toward a more united and harmonious future.

6. Symbolic Interactionism and Social Identity Theory

Through the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the Bakar Tongkang ritual is seen as a means of mediating values

between the past and the future. Symbolic elements such as fire and the replica ship not only represent purification and renewal but also serve as cultural "scaffolds" to build collective identity. Social identity theory highlights that although the ritual began as an ethnic Chinese celebration, the participation of cross-groups strengthens social bonds and affirms that traditions can adapt and embrace a broader inclusive mindset. This transformation is a response to globalization dynamics that encourage intercultural interactions and the integration of digital technologies in cultural promotion.

This discussion emphasizes that the Bakar Tongkang tradition is more than a religious ritual; it has become a bridge for cultural unity, social cooperation, and economic growth, while continuing to evolve in response to modern influences such as globalization and technological advancements.

This research emphasizes that the Bakar Tongkang tradition is not only a religious ritual but also plays a crucial role as a unifying tool for the community. The significant economic impact of this tradition indicates that it can serve as a strategy for developing culture-based tourism. Therefore, government involvement in supporting and promoting this festival can be a strategic step to sustain cultural heritage while improving the well-being of the local community.

Furthermore, the findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and academics regarding the importance of balancing cultural preservation with regional economic development. The social interaction model observed in this celebration can serve as an example for

other regions in managing diversity through an inclusive approach.

CONCLUSION

The Bakar Tongkang tradition in Bagan Siapi-api is more than just a cultural celebration; it is a manifestation of social harmony, religious beliefs, and coexistence within the community. This celebration demonstrates how traditions can strengthen social bonds, foster cross-ethnic and interfaith fraternity, and contribute to the region's economic development.

Religious Dimension: Symbols of Belief, Hope, and Spirituality. Bakar Tongkang is not just an annual ritual for the Chinese community but also an act of reverence for the deity Kie Ong Ya, a revered sea god believed to protect and bless the community and the ancestors of the Chinese diaspora. Each part of the ritual is imbued with deep spiritual significance, carrying prayers and hopes for prosperity, well-being, and protection for future generations. For many devotees, this ritual symbolizes a deep spiritual connection and a plea for protection, prosperity, and harmony.

Additionally, this tradition serves as a moment of reflection for the Chinese community to strengthen their faith, deepen the meaning of sacrifice, and connect with ancestral values. This aligns with the concept that religious rituals have not only symbolic dimensions but also serve as profound expressions of belief in daily life.

Social Dimension: Harmony in Diversity and Interfaith Tolerance. One of the most striking aspects of this celebration is the broad acceptance from various sectors of society, including the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant communities, and other ethnic groups residing in Bagan Siapi-api. Although this celebration is rooted in Chinese tradition,

the active participation of non-Chinese communities shows that it is not just a symbol of one group's identity but has become a part of the collective culture of the local community.

The spirit of gotong royong (mutual cooperation) in organizing the event reflects a high level of togetherness and inclusivity. The local community, whether Muslim or Christian, participates in various aspects of the event's preparation, from security to providing accommodation for tourists, and even selling goods around the festival site. This participation is proof that diversity is not a barrier to peaceful coexistence but rather a strength in building social harmony.

Moreover, this celebration serves as a tangible example of how religious diversity can be managed through an inclusive approach. There is clear and consistent support from various community groups for this tradition, with no evidence of rejection or opposition. In the context of a multicultural society like Indonesia, this tradition reflects the idea that religion and culture can coexist without causing division.

Additionally, the sustainability of this celebration shows that tolerance and harmony are not merely theoretical concepts but are genuinely realized in the daily lives of the people of Bagan Siapi-api. This model of social interaction can serve as an example for other regions in building harmonious and sustainable interfaith relations.

Economic Dimension: A Momentum for Tourism Revival and Community Welfare. In terms of economic perspective, the Bakar Tongkang festival serves as a catalyst for local economic growth. Every year, thousands of local and international tourists flock to witness this celebration, creating a significant

impact on the economy. The surge in tourist numbers drives increased demand for accommodation, food, and transportation services. Hotels fill up, local homes are rented out at significantly higher rates, and food vendors and the informal sector experience a substantial rise in income.

This festival also opens up economic opportunities for all segments of the population, not only for the Chinese community but also for other local residents. Many non-Chinese people participate in small and medium-sized enterprises during the festival. This indicates that the economic impact of this tradition is inclusive and benefits all parties, not just a single group.

With the growing development of culture-based tourism, Bakar Tongkang can become a major attraction in promoting religious and cultural tourism in Indonesia. Therefore, the sustainability of this tradition is not only important for cultural preservation but also as a strategy for regional economic development based on local wisdom.

ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS

Based on the findings of this study, several important measures can be undertaken to preserve and develop the Bakar Tongkang tradition as a vital cultural asset and a significant economic potential. First and foremost, the sustainability of this celebration relies heavily on the collaborative efforts of local governments, the Chinese community, and the wider society. Maintaining the spiritual and social values embedded in the tradition requires continuous documentation and education aimed at younger generations, ensuring that

these cultural meanings remain vibrant and relevant over time.

Secondly, the government has a crucial role to play in enhancing infrastructure related to the festival, including improving transportation networks, accommodation facilities, and public amenities. Alongside this, more comprehensive promotional campaigns—targeting both national and international audiences—are essential to boost the festival's visibility and attractiveness. Such initiatives would encourage higher tourist arrivals, generating broader economic benefits for the region.

Thirdly, the Bakar Tongkang tradition exemplifies a successful model of interfaith and intercultural harmony that is rare in many parts of Indonesia. The values of tolerance, inclusiveness, and mutual respect embodied in this celebration can serve as a valuable blueprint for other regions seeking to strengthen social cohesion amidst diversity. By adapting these principles, communities elsewhere can work towards building more unified and peaceful societies.

Furthermore, given the growing economic influence of the festival, strategic efforts to empower local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are necessary. This can be achieved through targeted training programs on cultural tourism management, marketing support, and capacity-building initiatives that enable local businesses to leverage the economic opportunities arising from the festival. Encouraging entrepreneurship within the cultural economy will contribute to sustainable local development and improve livelihoods.

The Bakar Tongkang ritual in Bagan Siapi-api transcends its origins as a religious

ceremony; it is a complex socio-economic and cultural phenomenon reflecting the dynamic interplay of identity preservation and community solidarity. As a cultural heritage that has endured for over a century, it proves that culture is not a static relic but a living, evolving force that unites people and propels them toward collective progress.

Moreover, this tradition offers an important lesson: diversity should not be perceived as an obstacle but embraced as a rich resource. When managed wisely, cultural diversity can foster harmony and shared prosperity. The spiritual, social, and economic values inherent in Bakar Tongkang have transformed it into a symbol not only of pride for the Chinese community but also of tolerance and inclusivity for the Indonesian nation as a whole.

In the face of globalization and rapid modernization, which often challenge traditional practices, the adaptive integration of local cultural values with technological innovation and modern communication strategies demonstrates that cultural preservation can be a powerful catalyst for sustainable societal benefits.

Therefore, ensuring the continuity and vitality of the Bakar Tongkang tradition is a collective responsibility that transcends ethnic or religious boundaries. It calls for the active involvement of all societal elements in preserving Indonesia's rich cultural heritage. This study hopes to provide a meaningful model for other regions in balancing the interplay between local wisdom and global dynamics in an inclusive and sustainable manner.

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