

Ethnographic Study On The Minang Aek Tradition Of The Tambelan Community, Riau Archipelago

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Abstract. His study aims to describe and ethnographically examine the ritual aspects, cultural meanings, and social functions of the Minang Aek tradition practiced by the Tambelan community. The research employs an ethnographic approach, with data collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, community figures, and ritual participants, video documentation, and literature review. The findings reveal that the Minang Aek tradition is performed during celebrations such as weddings or circumcision ceremonies. In this study, the Minang Aek tradition was observed during a circumcision event, with the following procession: a household performing a circumcision for a family member, and on the second day of the event, several community members, including the family hosting the celebration, carried water jugs. A middle-aged man dressed as a woman and wearing a shawl, a boat helmsman, and a drummer were also present. The tradition involves using a decorated boat adorned with small red and white flags attached to poles and a batik cloth tied at the rear of the boat as they visit seven water sources. The water collected is then blessed by an imam or traditional leader and used to bathe the circumcised child. The event concludes with prayers and a communal meal.

1 Introduction

The Riau Archipelago (Kepri) is a province in Indonesia with a strategic location, directly bordering Singapore and Malaysia [1]. This province has unique characteristics, where 96% of its territory consists of oceans, covering a total area of approximately 252,601 km². The Riau Archipelago holds significant potential in preserving Malay culture, which is the dominant ethnicity in the region [2]. One effort to preserve this culture is through the Kepri Maritime Festival, which also serves as a means of promoting international tourism, showcasing Malay cultural and culinary wealth. Based on the latest data up to 2024,

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Kepri's administrative regions consist of 2 cities: Tanjungpinang and Batam, as well as 5 regencies: Bintan, Karimun, Natuna, Lingga, and the Anambas Islands [3].

The Riau Archipelago encompasses a total of 1,796 islands, demonstrating the province's geographical wealth. Of these, 394 islands are named and inhabited, while the rest remain unnamed or uninhabited [4]. This situation presents both challenges and opportunities in terms of regional development and natural resource management. Kepri's maritime potential is not limited to cultural and tourism aspects, but also includes economic sectors such as fisheries, maritime transportation, and marine industries [5]. The development of these sectors is a focus of the provincial government in its efforts to improve the welfare of the community and strengthen Kepri's position as one of Indonesia's leading maritime provinces.

The Riau Archipelago has a diverse population composition, reflecting the richness of the region's culture and migration history [6]. Based on the latest census data and demographic projections through 2024, the predominant ethnic groups in Kepri have been identified, with the Malay ethnic group dominating the population composition of the province [7]. The Malay people represent the largest ethnic group in Kepri, comprising about 35-40% of the total population [8]. The Malay community is spread across the entire Riau Archipelago, with the largest concentrations found in three main areas:

1. Tanjungpinang: As the provincial capital, Tanjungpinang serves as an administrative and cultural center that attracts a large Malay population.
2. Bintan: This island has a long history as a center of the Malay kingdom and remains a stronghold of Malay culture today.
3. Lingga: This regency also has deep historical roots in Malay culture and is home to a significant Malay community.

The concentration of the Malay ethnic group in these areas not only reflects historical settlement patterns but also highlights the important role this group plays in shaping Kepri's cultural and social identity [9]. Since the era of the Malay Sultanate, Islam has been the foundation of spiritual and social life in the Riau Archipelago [10]. Islamic values are deeply embedded in the customs, arts, and traditions practiced by the local community [11]. The influence of Islam is evident in various aspects of daily life, from the conduct of traditional ceremonies to social ethics [8]. One region in the Riau Archipelago that still practices traditional culture with strong Islamic influences is the Tambelan subdistrict [12]. Tambelan is known for its strong communal life and customs that are still shaped by Islamic values, which have become an integral part of their culture for a long time [13].

The Tambelan subdistrict has an area of approximately 169.42 km² and consists of four villages: Pengikik, Kampung Melayu, Kampung Hilir, and Seraya [14]. The population of Tambelan in 2023 is estimated at around 5,000 people. The majority of Tambelan's population are ethnic Malays who still adhere strongly to customs and Islamic values in their daily lives. The Tambelan community in the Riau Archipelago has many traditional rituals that reflect a combination of local traditions and Islamic teachings [15]. This phenomenon shows how Islam has deeply integrated with local culture, creating unique forms of religious expression [16]. The Minang Aek tradition, one of the important rituals for the Tambelan community, is a clear example of how local rituals can be intertwined with Islamic values. The Minang Aek tradition is a form of gratitude for the sustenance received and a plea for safety.

Based on interviews conducted by the researcher with the younger generation of the Tambelan community, it was found that in this era of globalization, the younger generation does not recognize the Minang Aek tradition. Interviews with several traditional leaders in Tambelan revealed that the Minang Aek tradition has not been practiced by the Tambelan community since the introduction of mass circumcision programs to the region. Gradually, the community began to abandon this tradition. The researcher believes that if this trend continues, the Minang Aek tradition, which is rich in local wisdom, will be forgotten and eventually lost.

Based on the above explanation, the researcher is interested in describing and ethnographically examining the ritual aspects, cultural meanings, and social functions within the Minang Aek tradition practiced by the Tambelan community as an effort to reintroduce and preserve this cultural heritage of the Tambelan community in the Riau Archipelago.

1.2 Research Problem

How does the ethnographic study of the ritual aspects, cultural meanings, and social functions within the Minang Aek tradition of the Tambelan community unfold?

1.3 Research Objective

This study aims to describe and ethnographically examine the Minang Aek tradition, focusing on its ritual aspects, cultural meanings, and social functions as practiced by the Tambelan community.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

1.4.1 Definition of Tradition According to Experts

Various definitions of tradition have been put forward by experts. Edward Shils views tradition as a dynamic entity transmitted from the past to the present, emphasizing its role in shaping group identity through continuous interpretation and adaptation [17]. Eric Hobsbawm refers to tradition as "invented tradition," highlighting how tradition is often a modern construct created for specific purposes, such as instilling values and norms of behavior through the repetition of ritual or symbolic practices [18]. Anthony Giddens expands this understanding by emphasizing that tradition is not just about the persistence of the past, but also about how the past is actively shaped and interpreted in contemporary contexts, playing a crucial role in forming both collective and individual identities [19].

Additionally, Kwame Gyekye, a Ghanaian philosopher, defines tradition as a cultural heritage that includes values, practices, and artifacts that are not only passed down but also adapted by new generations to meet contemporary needs, thus playing a critical role in shaping cultural identity and the moral framework of society [20]. Based on these perspectives, the researcher concludes that tradition is a complex phenomenon that reflects the legacy of the past and an active process of interpretation, adaptation, and negotiation within contemporary socio-cultural contexts. This suggests that tradition is not merely a passive inheritance from the past but an ongoing active process of interpretation, adaptation, and negotiation in the social and cultural contexts of both present and future times.

1.4.2 Theories Related to the Minang Aek Tradition

The Minang Aek tradition is one of the cultural heritages of the Tambelan community on Bintan Island, Riau Archipelago. This practice has deep historical roots and reflects the local wisdom of the community in utilizing water resources [21]. The study of the Minang Aek tradition is grounded in several relevant theories, including (1) Structural Functionalism Theory proposed by Bronislaw Malinowski [22]. This theory posits that every cultural element has a specific function in maintaining social equilibrium. The Minang Aek tradition functions as a ritual that strengthens social bonds, preserves cultural values, and facilitates the transmission of knowledge across generations [23].

(2) Symbolic Interactionism Theory, developed by Herbert Blumer, is also relevant in analyzing the Minang Aek tradition [24]. This theory focuses on how individuals interpret symbols in social interactions. In the context of Minang Aek, water is not merely seen as a physical element but also as a symbol of purity, spiritual cleanliness, and fertility [25].

Furthermore, (3) Cultural Ecology Theory, developed by Julian Steward, can be used to understand the relationship between the Minang Aek tradition and the natural environment of Tambelan [26]. This theory emphasizes that cultural practices evolve as adaptations to environmental conditions. The Minang Aek tradition reflects the Tambelan community's adaptation to the availability of water resources and the geographical conditions of their island [27].

Finally, (4) Social Change Theory, proposed by William F. Ogburn, is employed to analyze the transformation of the Minang Aek tradition over time [28]. This theory explains how technological and economic changes can affect cultural practices. In the case of Minang Aek, modernization and lifestyle changes have presented new challenges in preserving this tradition [29].

1.4.3 The Functions and Benefits of Tradition for Society

Tradition in coastal communities plays a vital role that goes beyond mere ancient practices, embodying a system of knowledge and behavior with diverse functions and significant benefits for the survival and well-being of the community [30]. Socio-culturally, tradition plays a crucial role in strengthening social cohesion and collective identity, as seen in rituals such as the Labuhan ceremony in Java or Mane'e in North Sulawesi, which serve as mechanisms for reinforcing communal bonds and affirming shared values [31]. Moreover, tradition functions as a medium for transmitting knowledge across generations, ensuring the continuity of time-tested local wisdom [32].

From an economic perspective, the traditions of coastal communities are often closely linked to sustainable marine resource management practices, such as the sasi system in Maluku, which is a form of traditional fisheries management that ensures the sustainability of fish stocks and a more equitable distribution of marine resources [33].

Ecologically, many coastal traditions inherently contain environmental conservation principles, such as the Awig-awig practices in Bali and Lombok, which regulate the use of

coastal resources by considering environmental carrying capacities [34,35]. Tradition also has important psychological functions, where rituals and customary ceremonies often serve as collective coping mechanisms in dealing with the uncertainty and inherent dangers of life in coastal areas [36,37]. Given these multidimensional functions and benefits, efforts to preserve and revitalize coastal traditions should be seen as an integral part of sustainable development strategies in coastal and small island areas. Hence, tradition is not only relevant in addressing contemporary challenges such as environmental degradation, climate change, and modernization pressures but also vital for the resilience and sustainability of coastal communities in the future.

2 Research Method

The research method used in the study of the Minang Aek tradition of the Tambelan community is an ethnographic approach, a qualitative approach aimed at deeply understanding the cultural aspects, meanings, and social functions of this nearly extinct tradition. Ethnographic research emphasizes the direct involvement of researchers in the field to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural practices of the community [38]. The ethnographic approach allows researchers not only to observe community behavior but also to understand the cultural and historical backgrounds underlying these practices [39].

In the context of the Minang Aek tradition, the researcher focuses on rituals related to water bathing, the cultural meanings embedded in the practice, and its social functions in strengthening the bonds among community members [40]. Four main data collection techniques are used in this study: participant observation, in-depth interviews, documentary videos, and literature reviews.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Ritual Aspects in the Minang Aek Tradition

This ritual aspect reflects a blend of Islamic values and local wisdom that has developed over centuries. Minang Aek, which literally means "requesting water," is a ceremony performed to ask for blessings and safety for the Tambelan community [41]. The Minang Aek ritual is usually conducted during life events such as weddings or circumcisions. In this study, the researcher focuses on the circumcision ritual of a child from one of the Tambelan residents (based on interviews with the tradition bearers and the leaders of the KEPRI Cultural Institution on August 10, 2024). The stages include:

1. The child who will be circumcised is paraded around the village wearing fine clothes while carrying decorated eggs.
2. This is followed by the Quran recitation ceremony.
3. The next event is the circumcision.
4. On the second day, the Minang Aek tradition takes place.

The event concludes with prayers and a communal meal, where the Minang Aek tradition and prayers are led by a religious leader with deep knowledge of the tradition and Islamic teachings [42].

Although containing pre-Islamic elements, this ritual has undergone significant Islamization. The Minang Aek ritual begins with the recitation of prayers in Arabic, including safety prayers and prayers for protection, drawn from the Quran and Hadith, with verses related to safety, sustenance, and protection from harm [43]. This practice shows how Islamic values have been integrated into traditional rituals, giving religious legitimacy to local cultural practices.

Furthermore, interviews with tradition bearers mentioned that "on the second day, the circumcised child is bathed with water drawn from seven wells and placed in a water vessel called pasu. This water, after the recitation of safety and protection prayers, is believed to have spiritual power to cleanse and protect" [44]. This concept of purification aligns with the Islamic teaching of *thaharah* or purification, albeit in a different context [45].

One important aspect of the Minang Aek ritual is the value of charity and togetherness, marked by a communal meal as a gesture of gratitude. This practice reflects Islamic values of sharing and social solidarity. However, as religious understanding deepens and modernization progresses, some elements of the Minang Aek ritual have begun to change. Certain practices considered incompatible with Islamic teachings are being abandoned or modified, indicating an ongoing negotiation process between tradition and religion [46]. Despite these changes, the core values of the Minang Aek ritual, such as gratitude to Allah SWT, togetherness, and harmony with nature, remain preserved. This suggests that the spiritual essence of the ritual continues to be relevant to modern Tambelan society [47].

3.2. Cultural Meaning

The Minang Aek tradition of the Tambelan community in the Riau Archipelago is a rich manifestation of symbolism and cultural meaning. Through the Minang Aek ritual, the Tambelan community communicates their noble values, cosmology, and worldview. Each element in this ritual holds hidden meanings that have been passed down through generations, making it a complex cultural text filled with knowledge about the universe and human life.

The symbols in the ritual are not merely decorative elements; they are imbued with social, cultural, and religious meanings. These symbols play a role in shaping social actions and the collective identity of the community. Turner emphasizes how rituals serve as mechanisms that enable communities to transition from one social status to another, reinforcing social bonds and affirming the shared cultural values held by the community [48]. The tools used in the Minang Aek tradition, along with their explanations, are as follows:

3.2.1 Water

In the Minang Aek tradition, water plays a central role as a medium of purification. The use of water in the bathing ritual reflects a belief in the natural power to cleanse the soul from negative energy and sins. This view aligns with several anthropologists who see water as a universal symbol in various spiritual traditions. As Elmira Derkaoui states, water in the context of rituals reflects “transition and renewal,” an element that is not only physical but also metaphysical, bringing about profound spiritual cleansing[49]. The use of water from seven sources holds significant spiritual symbolism in the Minang Aek tradition. The number seven in many local and global traditions is often associated with perfection or spiritual completion. Based on an interview with Atmadinata, a figure from the Malay Customary Institution of KEPRI, it was stated that, “in the Minang Aek tradition, the number seven has profound meaning in spiritual and religious contexts. This number is not only related to the number of verses in Surah Al-Fatihah in the Quran but also reflects the seven layers of heaven. The connection between the number seven and Surah Al-Fatihah highlights the importance of this number in religious practices.”

3.2.2 Women's Clothing

Uniquely, in the Minang Aek tradition, one of the processes involves a man dressed as a woman. This can be viewed as a form of gender symbolism that reflects role flexibility in certain rituals. According to recent research by Nurul Huda, rituals involving gender impersonation hold deeper meanings, reflecting dualism or balance in human life, and are sometimes used to express reverence towards androgynous spiritual entities[50].

3.2.3 Water Jug

The water jug used in the Minang Aek procession symbolizes purity and life. Water drawn from natural sources using the jug serves not only physical needs but also becomes a symbol of spirituality that purifies and sanctifies the individual undergoing the ritual. This view is supported by Grace H. Campbell, who, in her research on the use of jugs in various Southeast Asian rituals, states that a jug is a “spiritual vessel that contains the essence of life,” and is symbolically identified with the womb that gives birth to new life following the purification process[51]. In the context of Minang Aek, the water jug also represents the cycle of life and the purity that is continually renewed through ritual processes.

3.2.4 Sampan (Small Boat)

The sampan adorned with small red-and-white flags and batik cloth at the back hold strong symbolism. The red-and-white flag represents nationalism and local pride, while the batik cloth signifies a deep connection to local cultural heritage. As explained by Pak Imam Haryono in his research, the sampan in Malay maritime tradition serves not only as a means of transportation but also carries spiritual meaning as a link between the physical and metaphysical worlds[52]. The decoration of small red-and-white flags indicates that although the Tambelan community maintains traditional values, they also honor national identity in a modern context.

3.2.5 Boat Master and Drummer

The presence of the boat master and drummer holds deeper significance beyond their functions as the boat operator and the rhythm provider for the ritual. In Malay cultural contexts, the drummer acts as a guardian of social and spiritual rhythms, where the sound of the drum is considered a connection between humans and the spirit world. According to Dewa Santika's study, the sound of drums in traditional ceremonies is often regarded as "the voice of nature that guides spiritual energy to flow harmoniously", thus the presence of the drummer in the Minang Aek ritual symbolizes the unification of the rhythms of nature, humanity, and the spiritual realm. In Malay maritime tradition, the sampan serves not only as a mode of transportation but also as a ritual tool for communication with the spirit world[53]. The small red-and-white flags adorning the sampan in the Minang Aek procession can be understood as a symbol linking the physical and metaphysical worlds. In some local traditions, the color red is often associated with strength and bravery, while white symbolizes purity and protection from malevolent spirits. This aligns with research stating that "the sampan in the mystical traditions of coastal communities is often used as a ritual medium to appease sea spirits or seek permission from supernatural entities residing in the waters."

3.2.6 Batik Cloth

The batik cloth tied at the back of the sampan has meanings beyond mere decoration. Batik, with its distinctive motifs, is often viewed as a symbol of spiritual protection. Certain batik motifs are believed to possess magical powers, used in rituals to protect individuals or groups from malevolent spirits. In the Minang Aek tradition, the batik cloth adorning the sampan can be seen as a mystical means to protect the ritual procession from negative energy influences. An interview with a Tambelan community figure, Mr. Syafaruddin, indicated that: "the batik cloth tied at the back of the sampan is considered to have mystical power accompanying the team that seeks water from the seven wells or seven springs." This view is supported by Eni Kusuma in her study on batik in Nusantara rituals, where she mentions that "certain batik motifs are believed to repel disasters and attract positive energy from nature and ancestors"[54].

3.3. Social Functions of Minang Aek

The social functions inherent in the Minang Aek tradition performed by the Tambelan community in the Riau Archipelago include:

3.3.1 Social Relationships

In traditional societies such as the Tambelan community, customary rituals often function as social binding tools. Through participation in rituals like Minang Aek, various elements of society, from customary leaders and community figures to families and other community members, actively engage in processes that collectively create strong social bonds. The Minang Aek event, which involves many community members in its execution, serves to strengthen social ties among members of the community. The procession, which includes several citizens carrying water jugs and preparing the celebration, highlights the importance of togetherness and collaboration. According to Nadia, social activities that involve the

community in ritual celebrations enhance trust and relationships among individuals, which is crucial for social stability[55].

3.3.2 Relationship between the Community and Nature

The process of visiting seven water sources in the Minang Aek tradition reveals hidden ecological meanings. Water drawn from natural sources signifies that the Tambelan community maintains a strong relationship with nature and its environmental resources. Recent research by Zulkarnain indicates that nature's involvement in rituals like this can be seen as a manifestation of environmental sustainability, where humans act as stewards of nature while simultaneously utilizing it for their spiritual and physical well-being [56].

3.3.3 Respect for Ancestors as Cultural and Spiritual Heritage

Through the bathing and prayer process led by customary leaders, the community shows respect for ancestors and the cultural heritage that has been passed down. In this context, the Minang Aek tradition serves not only as a ritual tool but also as an educational instrument for the younger generation regarding the importance of preserving and honoring existing cultural values. Research by Yanti indicates that rituals like Minang Aek are vital in maintaining and transmitting traditions to future generations so that they can understand the meanings and values of their ancestors [57].

4 Conclusion

The Minang Aek tradition is a ritual that demonstrates the dynamics of Islam within the context of local culture while reflecting the richness of maritime traditions in the archipelago. Ethnographic studies in this research reveal ritual aspects that encompass the stages of the tradition, cultural meanings associated with the tools used, and social factors that include the bonds of social relationships, correlations between the community, nature, and their environment, as well as a strong reverence for ancestors with spiritual values. The supporting community is derived from the acculturation and local culture of the Tambelan people living on the coast. Through rituals like this, Islamic values continue to thrive and evolve in a unique and meaningful form for the Tambelan community. Studying the ethnography of the Minang Aek tradition is an effort to reintroduce the wealth of local wisdom of the Tambelan people of Riau Archipelago to younger generations. To ensure that the Minang Aek tradition does not fade away among the Tambelan community specifically and in Indonesia generally, it is the responsibility of the government to undertake cultural heritage preservation efforts by holding meetings with customary leaders, intellectuals, and the management of the Malay Customary Institute of Riau Archipelago to re-implement this tradition within the Tambelan community.

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