

## THE BELANGAR TRADITION OF THE SASAK COMMUNITY: ARTICULATION OF RELIGIOUS VALUES AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

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### Abstract

The Belangar tradition is a cultural heritage practiced by the Sasak community in Lombok, reflecting a syncretism between Islamic values and local wisdom. This study aims to examine the role of Belangar in strengthening social solidarity and aligning religious values with local culture, employing the theory of religious-cultural syncretism and Durkheim's theory of collective ritual as the epistemological foundation for reading the relationship between ritual practice and social cohesion. Unlike previous studies on Belangar, which tend to be descriptive, this research offers novelty by exploring the internal tensions between Belangar practices and more puritanical religious views, as well as critically analyzing the adaptation of this tradition in the digital era. Utilizing a qualitative approach and case study methodology, data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. The findings indicate that Belangar serves not only as a religious ritual but also as a platform for enhancing social bonds within the community, involving various social strata, including the youth, who now leverage social media to promote this rich and meaningful tradition. The results depict the adaptation of the Belangar tradition in the face of modernization, where the use of digital technology helps maintain the relevance of local culture. This research underscores the importance of cultural education to ensure the continuity of local values in a modern context. As a symbol of unity and social concern, Belangar reflects the dynamics between culture and religion in the lives of the Sasak people.

**Keywords:** *Belangar Tradition; Sasak Community; Social Solidarity; Religion; Culture*

### Abstrak

Tradisi Belangar merupakan warisan budaya yang dijalankan oleh masyarakat Sasak di Lombok, yang merefleksikan sinkretisme antara nilai-nilai keislaman dan kearifan lokal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran Belangar dalam memperkuat solidaritas sosial dan menyelaraskan nilai-nilai agama serta budaya lokal, dengan menggunakan kerangka teori sinkretisme agama-budaya dan teori ritual kolektif Durkheim sebagai landasan epistemologis untuk membaca relasi antara praktik ritual dan kohesi sosial. Berbeda dari kajian-kajian terdahulu tentang Belangar yang cenderung deskriptif, penelitian ini menawarkan kebaruan dengan menelusuri ketegangan internal antara praktik Belangar dan pandangan keagamaan yang lebih puritan, serta menganalisis adaptasi tradisi ini di era digital secara lebih kritis. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif dan metode studi kasus, data diperoleh melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan analisis dokumentasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Belangar tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai ritual keagamaan tetapi juga sebagai platform penguatan ikatan sosial dalam komunitas, dengan pelibatan berbagai lapisan masyarakat, termasuk generasi muda yang kini memanfaatkan media sosial untuk mempromosikan tradisi yang kaya akan makna ini. Hasil penelitian menggambarkan adaptasi tradisi Belangar dalam menghadapi modernisasi, di mana penggunaan teknologi digital mampu menjaga relevansi budaya lokal. Penelitian ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya pendidikan budaya untuk memastikan kesinambungan nilai-nilai lokal dalam konteks modern. Sebagai

simbol persatuan dan kepedulian sosial, Belangar mencerminkan dinamika antara budaya dan agama dalam kehidupan masyarakat Sasak.

**Kata kunci:** *Tradisi Belangar; Masyarakat Sasak; Solidaritas Sosial; Agama; Budaya*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tradition is a cultural heritage preserved from generation to generation as the identity of a community. In Lombok, the Sasak community has a unique tradition called "Belangar," a series of mourning rituals performed after a person's death. This tradition serves not only as a final tribute to the deceased, but also as a means of healing for the grieving family and a vehicle for strengthening social bonds within the community (Hayati, 2020).

The implementation of Belangar takes place gradually over several important periods. The main stages include Belangar Nelong (the third day), Mituk (the seventh day), Nyiwak (the ninth day), Metang (the fortieth day), Nyatus (the hundredth day), and Haul (the annual commemoration). Each stage carries its own philosophical meaning according to the beliefs of the Sasak community. On the third and seventh days, the focus is on the release of the spirit and the acceptance of loss, while the fortieth and hundredth days are believed to mark the completion of the spirit's journey toward the realm of Barzakh (the intermediate realm).

From a fiqh perspective, the practices of tahlilan and the recitation of Surat Yasin, which form the core of the Belangar ritual, have a basis in the ahlussunnah tradition, particularly in the view held by the majority of Nahdlatul Ulama scholars, who regard alms, prayer, and the recitation of the Qur'an for the deceased as beneficial deeds based on general religious teachings concerning prayer and charity for those who have passed away. However, the practice of designating specific commemorative days such as Nelong, Mituk, and Nyatus has no explicit textual basis in the Qur'an and Hadith, and is regarded by some scholars as a practice derived from custom (al-'urf) that was subsequently given an Islamic character (the Islamization of custom). Debates among local scholars regarding the validity of this practice generally revolve around the concept of al-'urf al-shahih (legitimate custom) versus bid'ah, a debate that will be discussed further in the discussion section.

The implementation of Belangar involves various religious and cultural rituals. The grieving family invites neighbors and relatives to perform tahlilan together (collective prayer recitation), recitation of the Qur'an (particularly Surat Yasin), and prayers for the honor of the deceased. Distinctively, this tradition is accompanied by the distribution of food known as berkat, consisting of rice and side dishes shared among all participants. This food carries not only social value, but is also regarded as a form of charity for the deceased (Saputra, 2018).

Social and religious life in Indonesia generally reflects a unique diversity, in which religious values interact dynamically with local traditions in each region. As a country with a multi-religious society, Indonesia exhibits a distinctive pattern of religious interaction, in which religion is not merely a private matter but also influences various aspects of

social and cultural life. In many regions, including within the Sasak community in Lombok, religion functions as a moral compass and a social adhesive that unites the community within a framework of noble values (Harnish, 2005).

The Sasak community, as part of Indonesia's cultural mosaic, has developed a distinctive religious life by integrating the Islamic teachings adhered to by the majority with deeply rooted local wisdom. Here, religion and tradition do not negate one another, but rather enrich each other in shaping a harmonious social life. Mosques and prayer halls (musholla) serve as multifunctional centers not only for worship, but also for community deliberation, the resolution of social issues, and educational activities.

The social aspect of Belangar is particularly prominent. The Sasak community upholds the principle of "easing burdens together," such that when a person dies, the entire community works together to provide assistance. Such assistance may take the form of labor, food supplies, or monetary contributions. This tradition reflects the solidarity characteristic of agrarian societies that highly value communal life. Indeed, within Sasak social structure, the scale and grandeur of a Belangar event often reflects the social status of the family within the community.

The Belangar tradition plays an important role in the religious and social life of the Sasak community, an ethnic group residing on the island of Lombok, Indonesia. This tradition stems from spiritual and social practices, and functions not only as a tribute to ancestral spirits, but also as a platform for strengthening solidarity among community members. This practice reflects the interaction between religious values and local wisdom, as expressed by Clifford Geertz (1960, p. 112), who stated that "culture is an inherited system of symbolic meanings that enables individuals to understand meaning in their lives." However, Geertz's work on Islam in Java has often been criticized for tending to view the religious syncretism of local communities through an exotic-Western framework that positions "local" Islamic practices as a less pure variant compared to normative Islam. More emic studies on the dynamics of Islam in Lombok, such as research on Islam Wetu Telu conducted by local scholars (Cederroth, 1981; Telle, 2009), offer a more contextual perspective: that the relationship between adat and shariah in Lombok is not a mixture of two separate entities, but rather a continuum of Islamic understanding interpreted differently by different communities, including those of Islam Wetu Telu and Islam Waktu Lima. This perspective offers a more accurate framework for reading the position of Belangar not as a "mixture" of Islam and culture, but as one of the legitimate expressions of Sasak Islam in the view of the community that practices it.

The Sasak community often finds itself caught in a debate between modernity and tradition. Research by Kottak (2012, p. 114) emphasizes that "cultural adaptation is an important response to environmental change, including globalization, which threatens the continuity of local traditions." The Belangar tradition demonstrates its ability to transform in order to remain relevant without losing its spiritual essence, such as through the use of social media to disseminate information and carry out rituals.

This study aims to examine how the religious values of the Sasak community are integrated into the cultural practice of Belangar, as noted by Arbuckle (2010, p. 45), who

stated that “religious and cultural practices are inseparable; both shape each other through complex interactions.” Using a qualitative approach and case study method, this research seeks to uncover the dynamics of socio-religious life within the Belangar tradition in Dusun Kelebut, Desa Kebon Ayu, while also filling a gap in previous studies that have not examined the internal tensions between this customary practice and more puritanical religious views, as well as the gender dimension embedded in the division of ritual roles.

## **METHOD**

To examine the Belangar tradition within the Sasak community, this research employs a qualitative approach using a case study method. This approach enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning and social context of cultural practices. As noted by Creswell (2014, p. 41), “qualitative approaches focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of people and situations within a specific social context.” The case study method was chosen because, as explained by Yin (2014, p. 16), “this method is used to understand a phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident.”

Data collection was carried out through three main techniques. First, participatory observation, in which the researcher was directly involved in the implementation of the Belangar ritual in Dusun Kelebut. According to Spradley (2016, p. 69), “participatory observation provides the researcher with direct access to the social experiences encountered by the research subjects.” Second, in-depth interviews with community leaders, religious figures, and members of the Sasak community to obtain firsthand perspectives on the meaning and purpose of the tradition. Kvale (2007, p. 43) asserts that “in-depth interviews provide an opportunity to explore individuals' subjective views within their social context.” Third, documentary analysis involving texts, photographs, and videos related to the Belangar tradition. Bowen (2009, p. 33) states that “document analysis can provide deep historical and cultural context for understanding present-day practices.”

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Research Findings**

#### **a. Adaptation of Tradition in the Modern Context**

Based on observation, interviews, and documentation in Dusun Kelebut, it was found that the community uses smartphones and tablets to document moments of Belangar and share them on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Many residents create special hashtags to reach a wider audience. Digital posters and invitations are created using graphic design applications and distributed through community WhatsApp groups, replacing the traditional word-of-mouth method.

One community leader, Mr. Mahsin, stated, “With social media, we can invite more people to participate in the Belangar tradition.” This statement reflects how digital

media does not replace the social function of the tradition, but rather expands the reach of invitations that were previously limited to face-to-face relationships. Ms. Harni, from the younger generation, added, "I feel more involved because I can see photos and videos from friends on social media, which encourages me to understand the values of Belangar more deeply." Ms. Harni's statement is significant because it shows that the digital engagement of the younger generation is not passive, as mere spectators, but rather serves as an entry point for the process of internalizing values that were previously considered "a matter for the elders." The community has also produced documentary videos uploaded to YouTube, introducing this tradition to communities outside the region.

This digital adaptation aligns with Kottak's (2012, p. 114) statement that "cultural adaptation is an important response to environmental change, including globalization, which threatens the continuity of local traditions," and with Wahid's (2017, p. 88) findings regarding the role of social media in preserving traditions in Lombok. Nevertheless, digital adaptation alone does not guarantee a deep transmission of values to the younger generation if it is not accompanied by a more systematic educational pathway. Based on findings at the research site, no local content curriculum program has been identified at the elementary or junior secondary school level in Desa Kebon Ayu that explicitly incorporates material on the Belangar tradition or Sasak customary death rituals in general. Learning about the values of Belangar currently still takes place informally, through the direct participation of children and adolescents in rituals alongside their parents, as well as through religious study sessions (*pengajian*) at the *musholla* that occasionally touch on the meaning of *tahlilan* and charity for the deceased. The absence of this formal educational pathway represents a vulnerable point for the continuity of the tradition a finding that will be followed up in the recommendations section.

## **b. Strengthening Social Solidarity**

Observations show that during the implementation of Belangar, the community gathers in large groups. This moment is used not only for ritual purposes, but also as an opportunity for interaction and sharing stories. Ms. Mahnik, a local resident, explained, "Besides honoring our ancestors, we gather to strengthen relationships with neighbors and family. During Belangar, we share our joys and sorrows, which makes us feel closer to one another." Ms. Mahnik's emphasis on "sharing joys and sorrows" indicates that the function of Belangar does not stop merely at the moment of death itself, but becomes a social space that reopens networks of relationships that may have loosened in everyday life due to each individual's busy schedule.

Mr. Suhur, a community leader, affirmed, "Belangar is an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of brotherhood. In the busyness of life, we may find it difficult to meet; but at this event, we can exchange stories and support one another." This statement underscores the function of Belangar as a mechanism of social compensation amid increasingly individualistic modern life patterns the ritual of death, paradoxically, becomes one of the few spaces that still compels intensive collective involvement. Photo and video documentation depict moments of strong social interaction: children playing

together, adults sharing stories, families gathering in one place. After Belangar, many participants continue their interactions through reunions and group discussion forums.

This finding aligns with Geertz's (1960, p. 112) statement that "culture is an inherited system of symbolic meanings that enables individuals to understand meaning in their lives." In this context, Belangar becomes a symbol of unity and social concern that strengthens bonds among community members, as will be elaborated further through Durkheim's (1912) theory of collective ritual in the discussion section.

### **c. Synergy between Religion and Culture, and the Division of Gender Roles**

Observations during the Belangar ritual revealed strong religious elements: prayers and offerings before the event begins, recitation of sacred verses during the serving of food, as well as the slaughtering of animals carried out with great respect. Kiai Abdul, a local religious figure, stated, "Belangar is not merely about celebrating tradition; it is also about remembering and giving thanks for Allah's blessings. Every act within it is a form of our devotion."

Ms. Sari added, "During Belangar, we always pray for Allah's blessings for our family and community. This is the right moment to draw closer to Allah while preserving our culture." The statements from Kiai Abdul and Ms. Sari, when read side by side, illustrate how formal religious authority (represented by the religious figure) and personal religious devotion (represented by an ordinary community member) reinforce one another in interpreting Belangar as worship not merely as custom a convergence of meaning that is one of the keys to the widespread acceptance of this tradition among the religious Sasak community.

In terms of role distribution, field observations show a gender-based differentiation of roles in the implementation of Belangar, although this differentiation is complementary in nature and does not indicate an explicit hierarchy in terms of social status. Men generally take on roles in ritual aspects that are public and directly related to formal religious authority: leading the tahlilan and the recitation of Yasin, organizing the slaughtering of animals, and serving as male hosts. Women, on the other hand, take on the primary role in the domestic-productive domain that forms the logistical backbone of Belangar: preparing and managing the distribution of berkat, coordinating the communal kitchen, and hosting female guests. This division reflects a common pattern in religious rituals in many Indonesian Muslim communities, in which the public-ritual domain tends to be dominated by men while the domestic-logistical domain becomes the domain of women. It is important to note that this division does not necessarily imply subordination; as seen in the central roles of Ms. Mahnik and Ms. Sari in providing meaning and spiritual narrative to this tradition, women possess significant agency in passing down and negotiating the meaning of Belangar to the next generation, although this role takes place within an informal domain and rarely receives the formal recognition accorded to male religious figures. This initial finding indicates that the gender dimension in Belangar requires further, more in-depth study, particularly regarding how women produce and transmit ritual knowledge across generations.

This finding aligns with the view of Arbuckle (2010, p. 45), who highlights that “religious and cultural practices are inseparable; both shape each other through complex interactions.” The Sasak community demonstrates how the integration of spirituality and culture provides deeper meaning in their daily lives.

## 2. Discussion

The Belangar tradition within the Sasak community functions as a reflection of various aspects of socio-religious life. To gain a deeper understanding of how Belangar produces social cohesion, this research operationalizes Émile Durkheim's theory of collective ritual as formulated in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Durkheim argued that religious rituals function to create what he termed “effervescence collective” an intense shared emotional state that is generated when a large number of individuals gather and engage in the same symbolic activity. In this state, the boundaries of individuals temporarily dissolve, and the sense of attachment to the group is significantly strengthened.

Operationalizing this concept against field data shows clear correspondence. The moment of the community gathering in large numbers during Belangar, the collective recitation of prayers, and the ritual of collectively eating *berkat* can be read as “moments of effervescence” in the Durkheimian sense moments in which individual identity is temporarily dissolved into a larger communal identity, as reflected in the testimonies of Ms. Mahnik and Mr. Suhur about “feeling closer to one another” and “strengthening the bonds of brotherhood.” Furthermore, Durkheim also distinguishes between objects considered profane (everyday) and sacred (extraordinary). In Belangar, *berkat* food which in everyday life is a profane object (merely food) is elevated through the ritual process into an object bearing sacred meaning, namely charity for the deceased a transformation of meaning that lies at the heart of what Durkheim calls the social function of religion: creating collective moral bonds through the veneration of shared symbols.

Nevertheless, the narrative of Belangar as a source of harmonious social cohesion should not be understood too idealistically without considering the tensions underlying it. As mentioned in the introduction, the practice of designating specific commemorative days in Belangar such as *Nelong*, *Mituk*, *Nyatus*, and *Haul* falls into the category of practices regarded by some as *bid'ah* due to the absence of explicit textual grounding. Groups with more puritanical or reformist religious orientations in Lombok, as in many other regions of Indonesia, tend to reject the designation of these commemorative days, although they generally do not reject the practices of *tahlilan* and *almsgiving* for the deceased themselves as practices separate from their scheduling. This tension, although not observed in the form of open conflict in *Dusun Kelebut*, is part of the broader religious discursive field within which the practice of Belangar exists. Acknowledging this tension is important because it shows that Belangar is not a practice accepted monolithically by all Muslims in Lombok, but rather a practice whose position is continuously negotiated within a plural field of Islamic discourse a dynamic that enriches, rather than weakens, our understanding of how local traditions and religious interpretations interact with one another.

The strength of Belangar in creating social solidarity, therefore, must be understood as a solidarity produced among the community that accepts and practices this tradition not as a universal consensus of the entire Sasak Muslim society. Within the context of the community that practices it, when the community unites in the Belangar ceremony, they not only support one another materially, but also reinforce the structure of social relations and the hierarchy of roles within it, including the gender-based division of roles as discussed in the findings section.

The challenge of preserving Belangar amid modernization underscores the importance of cultural education, as raised by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983, p. 3): tradition must be nurtured and maintained within a contemporary context in order to remain relevant. Geertz (1973, p. 89) also emphasizes the importance of understanding cultural symbols and social practices as a method of adaptation. Through Belangar, the Sasak community finds a way to embrace modern values without losing the spirit of their tradition, demonstrating that culture and religion can mutually reinforce each other in an ever-changing context although, as has been described, this process of reinforcement takes place within a dynamic field of negotiation that is not entirely free from internal tension.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Belangar tradition within the Sasak community reflects the complexity of the interaction between cultural preservation and the challenges of modernization. This practice serves not only as a means of maintaining cultural identity, but also as a pathway for fostering solidarity within the community through the mechanism of collective ritual, as explained by Durkheim. Adaptation through digital technology demonstrates that local traditions can remain relevant without losing their spiritual essence, as long as the underlying values continue to be upheld and passed down. At the same time, this study shows that Belangar is not a static tradition accepted uniformly, but rather a practice whose position is constantly negotiated within the local Islamic discursive field, and one that has a structure of gender role division warranting further attention in future studies.

Based on these findings, this research proposes several more specific and operationalizable recommendations:

- (1) Integration of a local content curriculum: The Education Office of West Lombok Regency, together with the Subject Teachers' Working Group (MGMP) for Islamic Religious Education at the elementary and junior secondary school levels, may develop a local content module containing material on the Belangar tradition, covering its procedures, the philosophical meaning of each stage, and its fiqh foundations. This module can be integrated into the subjects of Islamic Religious Education and Character Building, or into local content subjects related to regional culture.
- (2) Structural involvement of customary communities: The Village Government of Kebon Ayu may facilitate regular forums among customary leaders, religious figures, and schools to design field trip activities for students to ongoing Belangar

events, accompanied by explanations from community leaders such as Mr. Mahsin or Mr. Suhur, so that the transmission of values takes place contextually and directly from the holders of traditional knowledge.

- (3) Strengthening participatory digital documentation: A collaborative program between the local youth organization (karang taruna) and the cultural affairs office can be directed toward training the younger generation in more systematic audiovisual documentation of the Belangar tradition, including recording oral narratives from community leaders as a form of local knowledge archive accessible across generations.
- (4) Further research on the gender dimension: Given the initial findings regarding the division of gender roles in Belangar, which have not been explored in depth in this study, further research with a specific focus on women's experiences and agency in Sasak customary death rituals particularly their role in the intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge is highly recommended.

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