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The Meaning of *Beseprah* (*Bekerobok*): A Symbolic Interactionism Study among the Kutai People in East Kalimantan

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the meaning of the *Beseprah* (also known as *Bekerobok*) communal eating tradition among the Kutai people in East Kalimantan, who continue to preserve local customs amid the forces of modernisation. The research employs a qualitative, ethnographic approach, involving participant observation and in-depth interviews to understand the values and symbols embedded in this cultural practice. The findings reveal that the *beseprah* tradition holds significant symbolic meaning in fostering togetherness, strengthening social bonds, and expressing gratitude. The shared meals reflect local wisdom and serve as a space to introduce traditional Kutai cuisine. This tradition also functions as a symbolic interaction arena, where social relationships are reinforced and class distinctions are reduced. However, its practice faces challenges, such as limited institutional support and shifting meanings due to modern influences. Nonetheless, through stakeholder cooperation, *Beseprah*'s core values can still be preserved. This

study contributes to academic discussions in cultural anthropology and symbolic interactionism, particularly in understanding how local traditions are maintained and reinterpreted in the modern era. It highlights how social interaction and cultural symbols construct shared meanings, while also opening dialogue on the community's role in sustaining local culture as a long-term source of social strength.

Keywords: *local tradition, beseprah/berkerobok eating, symbolic interactionism, kutai community*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menggali makna tradisi makan Beseprah (juga dikenal sebagai Bekerobok) pada masyarakat Kutai di Kalimantan Timur, yang tetap dilestarikan di tengah arus modernisasi. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan etnografi, dilaksanakan di Tenggarong pada tahun 2023 dengan melibatkan 12 informan yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif dan wawancara mendalam untuk memahami nilai dan simbol yang terkandung dalam praktik ini. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tradisi *beseprah* memiliki makna simbolik dalam mempererat kebersamaan, memperkuat silaturahmi, mengurangi sekat status sosial, serta menjadi sarana ekspresi rasa syukur. Dari perspektif interaksionisme simbolik, tradisi ini berfungsi sebagai arena interaksi sosial yang membentuk simbol-simbol kebersamaan dan identitas kolektif masyarakat Kutai. Kontribusi orisinal studi ini terletak pada pengungkapan peran *beseprah* sebagai praktik budaya yang bukan hanya berfungsi seremonial, tetapi juga menjadi strategi resistensi terhadap homogenisasi budaya global. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini memperkaya kajian antropologi budaya dan membuka ruang diskusi tentang bagaimana komunitas lokal dapat mempertahankan sekaligus memaknai ulang tradisi di era modern.

Kata Kunci: *tradisi lokal, makan beseprah/berkerobok, interaksionisme simbolik, masyarakat Kutai*

A. Introduction

The expansion of global systems marks modernisation, cooperation between nations and individuals, and the collapse of geographical and cultural boundaries. Technological advancement, especially in the era of globalisation, has been widely welcomed by most Indonesians, although they also face significant challenges in practice. This positive response is evident in the growing public preference for high technology, which has impacted various sectors such as the economy, politics, and society.

Information technology is one of the most rapidly developing areas, particularly in human communication and interaction. The internet, for example, has made it easier for people to work, communicate, and increase productivity without the constraints of space and time. This has made the internet a primary medium for accelerating interpersonal connections (Saleh, 2018).

However, technological development and globalisation have also affected the preservation of local cultures. Western traditions, often seen as symbols of modernity, are frequently adopted by Indonesian society, even though they are not always aligned with the Eastern values traditionally upheld. As a result, awareness of the importance of local traditions to national identity has gradually declined. Nevertheless, communities continue to uphold traditional values, as seen among the Kutai people in East Kalimantan. To situate the discussion, it is essential first to consider how communal eating rituals have been understood more broadly in anthropological and communication scholarship.

In anthropological and communication studies, communal eating rituals (often termed *commensality*) have long been recognised as essential cultural practices that construct social bonds, reinforce group identity, and negotiate social hierarchies (Fischler, 2011; Ruhlmann, 2018). Studies in various societies show that eating together is not only a biological necessity but also a symbolic act through which meanings of solidarity, inclusion, and exclusion are produced. For example, research on *kenduri* or *slametan* in Javanese communities highlights the role of food-sharing in creating a sense of collective harmony and spiritual protection (Clifford, 1981). In West Sumatra, the tradition of *makan bajamba* has been analysed as a means of maintaining social equality and reinforcing adat-based solidarity (Efrianti, 2025). Similarly, the Balinese *megibung* ritual is studied as a symbol of unity and shared identity in the midst of tourism-driven cultural shifts (Subadra & Sudiarta, 2025). These comparative cases show how food-sharing rituals across different regions embody values of solidarity and continuity, yet they also highlight the lack of scholarly attention to *beseprah* in East Kalimantan.

Within Indonesian scholarship, communal eating has primarily been examined in the context of religious rituals, festivals, and adat ceremonies, emphasising its functions of social cohesion and cultural continuity. However, studies rarely focus specifically on *beseprah* as practised among the Kutai people of East Kalimantan. Most available writings on *beseprah* are descriptive, highlighting its festive dimension in Erau ceremonies or local festivals, but they do not engage with theoretical perspectives from communication or symbolic interactionism. This gap provides the entry point for the present study.

This study addresses that gap by analysing *beseprah* not merely as a cultural performance but as a communicative practice in which symbols and meanings are actively negotiated through interaction. By adopting a symbolic interactionist lens, the research offers an original perspective that situates *beseprah* within broader discourses on commensality, while also highlighting its unique role in Kutai society as both a marker of identity and a form of cultural resilience against the homogenising forces of globalisation.

One example of cultural preservation is the tradition of Makan Bekerobok, also known as *Beseprah*. This tradition involves eating together face-to-face on a mat or banana leaves. Among the Kutai people, this tradition embodies a deep sense of solidarity and togetherness. The act of communal eating is interpreted as an effort to unite the community within a shared social and cultural space (*Ratusan Masyarakat Kubar Ikuti Makan Bekerobok Besela di Festival Melayu Gemeoh / MEDIA KALTIM*, 2023).

Makan Bekerobok/*Beseprah* is an intangible cultural heritage practised since ancient times, especially during mugal (rice planting) activities. It is also carried out as a form of thanksgiving for regional safety or a bountiful harvest. In West Kutai, this tradition is a key part of the Gemeoh Malay Festival, held to commemorate the anniversary of the Melak Subdistrict. The festival, now in its second year, has become a significant symbol of unity amid intense globalisation.

Based on a preliminary interview with the Melak Subdistrict Head, the purpose of holding Makan Bekerobok/*Beseprah* during the Gemeoh Festival is to strengthen interethnic relations, reinforce solidarity, and instil appreciation for Kutai traditional foods such as *gangan*, *jukut patin*, and *baong*. It also serves as a tribute to West Kutai's natural resources. A similar tradition is preserved in Kutai Kartanegara Regency, particularly during the Erau Adat Pelas Benua ceremony at the EIFAF International Festival. In this context, Makan *Beseprah* is an essential part of the celebration, symbolising the Sultan's hospitality toward his people and fostering unity (2022).

This study aims to explore the meaning of the local tradition of makan Bekerobok/*Beseprah* through the lens of symbolic interactionism, with a view to understanding the symbols, values, and social meanings embedded in this tradition among the Kutai people of East Kalimantan.

The research adopts a symbolic interactionist approach, a sociological theory that emphasises the role of symbols and meanings in human social interaction. From this perspective, humans are seen as social beings who act toward things based on the meanings those things hold for them. These meanings are formed and developed through social interaction (Siregar, 2012). Rather than responding automatically to the actions of others, individuals actively interpret and assign meanings to those actions (Ritzer, 2014).

George Herbert Mead, the pioneer of symbolic interactionism, argued that individual identity is formed through symbolic interaction. Herbert Blumer, who further developed Mead's ideas, outlined three key premises of this theory: meaning, language, and thought. Meaning arises through social interaction, is conveyed through language as the primary symbol of communication, and is

interpreted internally by individuals through thought. In this framework, mind refers to the individual's capacity to understand social meanings through symbols; self is the awareness one has of oneself from others' perspectives; and society is the network of social relationships in which individuals actively perform their roles (Siregar, 2012).

Furthermore, Mukti Ali asserts that, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, social life is conceptualised as a series of human interactions mediated by symbols. The primary focus is on how meaning is conveyed when individuals communicate and how that symbolic communication influences social action (Ali, 2017a). This suggests that human actions, including in cultural practices such as the tradition of eating together, are always mediated by socially agreed symbols and meanings.

In the context of anthropology, symbolic interactionism is relevant to understanding tradition as meaningful social action. Individuals are seen as actors who actively create and negotiate the meaning of traditions in everyday life (Irianto, 2015). Therefore, this approach is well-suited to examining how the Kutai people interpret the tradition of eating Bekerobok/Beseprah as a symbol of togetherness, cultural identity, and social structure in their society.

Makan Bekerobok or Beseprah is a tradition of eating together, with people sitting cross-legged, facing each other on the floor, and food served on a long leaf or seprah (cloth mat). This tradition symbolises the value of togetherness, social equality, and collective participation in Kutai society (Redaksi, 2023). In West Kutai and Kutai Kartanegara, eating Bekerobok/Beseprah symbolises social solidarity and also respect for the diversity of crops that are enjoyed together (Azzuhdi, 2022).

Historically, this tradition originated in the community's practices during mugal (rice planting) and has become an integral part of thanksgiving ceremonies for successful harvests or for the establishment of peace and security. Beseprah also represents the Sultan's gesture of appreciation toward his people, where he serves food to all members of society regardless of social status, thereby fostering a sense of closeness between the ruler and the people (Kominfo Kubar, 2023). This tradition is believed to have existed since the 12th century and is closely associated with Erau (the traditional ceremony of Kutai Kartanegara), although the beseprah itself is non-ritualistic and functions more as a social activity accompanying the cultural celebration (Azzuhdi, 2022).

The *Makan Bekerobok* or *Beseprah* tradition features a variety of traditional Kutai dishes, such as nasi kebuli, nasi kuning, gence ruan (snakehead fish), semur, bubur, and traditional cakes such as *serabai*, *putu labu*, and *roti gembong*. These dishes are neatly arranged on woven trays or banana leaves and placed on a *seprah*—a white cloth laid out as the base for the food (Azzuhdi, 2022). During the beseprah event, all participants sit in groups surrounding the prepared food. The ceremony begins with a communal prayer led by a designated individual. Only after the Sultan strikes the gong are the participants allowed to start eating (Admin, 2023).

The main components of beseprah include the seprah (cloth mat), eating utensils (such as plates and spoons), and the face-to-face seating arrangement. All

food must be placed on the seprah, while participants sit outside its boundary to maintain the symbolic order and purity of the mat. In earlier times, banana leaves were often used as plate substitutes, especially in field or garden settings (Azzuhdi, 2022).

B. Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with an ethnographic perspective to explore the symbolic meanings of the Makan Bekerobok/Beseprah tradition among the Kutai community in East Kalimantan. Ethnography allows researchers to immerse themselves in the community, observing and participating in everyday life to gain a deep understanding of cultural practices, values, and the symbolic meanings embedded within them (Siddiq, 2019). This approach is particularly suitable for studying traditions that involve complex social interactions, such as Beseprah, in which symbols, rituals, and collective behaviours are tightly intertwined with social norms and identity.

Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and supporting documentation. The study involved 10 purposively selected informants who were directly involved in or knowledgeable about the tradition, including traditional leaders, festival organisers, and ordinary community members. Informants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years and were drawn from multiple locations, including Melak, West Kutai, and Kutai Kartanegara. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer yielded new insights. An interview guide, included as Appendix 1, ensured consistency in the topics explored while allowing flexibility for informants to share their experiences and interpretations in depth.

Participant observation was carried out during the performance of the Beseprah tradition, enabling the researcher to document social interactions, the arrangement and sharing of food, and the emergence of cultural symbols in real time. The documentation included photographs, videos, and archival materials that supported the analysis of the tradition's historical and contemporary aspects. This combination of methods provided a holistic view of the practice, capturing both its symbolic and practical dimensions in the Kutai context.

Data were analysed narratively with reference to symbolic interactionism, focusing on how individuals actively interpret and assign meaning to social actions through interaction. Analysis involved reviewing interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents to identify recurring themes and patterns of symbolic meaning. Key themes included togetherness, social solidarity, respect for local customs, and communal participation, all of which illustrate how the Beseprah tradition functions as a communicative practice. Selected quotations from informants were used to support each theme, providing concrete examples of how meanings are negotiated in everyday interactions. This process reflects the core principles of symbolic interactionism, which emphasise that social realities are constructed through shared symbols and ongoing human interaction (Ali, 2017; Salmaniah Siregar, 2016).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. All informants provided written consent, and permissions for photography and videography were obtained. The study adhered to local cultural norms and institutional ethical guidelines where applicable, ensuring that participants' rights and privacy were respected. Data were treated confidentially and used solely for academic purposes. By combining ethnographic immersion with a symbolic interactionist lens, this study not only describes the cultural practice of Beseprah but also analyses the processes through which individuals and communities construct, negotiate, and maintain the symbolic meanings of their traditions. This methodology enables the research to offer original insights into communal eating rituals as dynamic sites of social meaning, identity, and cultural resilience in the face of modernisation.

C. Results and Discussion

This study explores the local tradition of Makan Bekerobok or Beseprah across three regions: Melak, Muara Pahu, and Kutai Kartanegara. This tradition is more than a communal meal; it serves as a vital medium for strengthening togetherness, dissolving social hierarchies, and preserving Kutai cultural identity. Through field observations and documentation, the study reveals how each region interprets and practices this tradition, and how social and cultural values are reflected in both daily practice and major celebrations. The results are presented descriptively for each region, highlighting recurring core themes, including community solidarity, cross-group participation, and responses to the influence of modernisation.

Regional Practices of *Makan Bekerobok (Beseprah)* in Melak, Muara Pahu, and Kutai Kartanegara

In Melak District, the Makan Bekerobok tradition is an integral part of the Festival Gemeoh, held to commemorate Melak's anniversary. This festival not only serves as a gathering for residents but also functions as a platform to showcase and celebrate the cultural richness of West Kutai (Redaksi, 2023). The tradition originates from a community initiative to strengthen social bonds through communal dining featuring traditional Kutai dishes. The entire community is actively involved in its preparation, beginning with neighbourhood meetings, collecting contributions, and collectively preparing and serving the food. Meals are laid out on tarpaulins spread across the road, where residents sit cross-legged and dine together. One local participant emphasized the theme of togetherness: "*Kami semua duduk bersila di atas tarpaulin, tidak ada yang duduk lebih tinggi atau lebih rendah, hanya ada kebersamaan.*" ("We all sit cross-legged on the tarpaulin; no one sits higher or lower, only togetherness.") This illustrates how the tradition actively reduces social barriers and fosters a sense of equality among community members.

The event has also proven effective in enhancing neighbourly relations and boosting the local economy through culinary and souvenir sales. Another resident remarked on the community's cooperative spirit: "*Setiap RT ikut menyumbang dan memasak, jadi semua merasa ikut memiliki acara ini.*" ("Each neighbourhood unit contributes and cooks, so everyone feels they own the event.") This reflects the value of shared responsibility and collective participation.

Furthermore, the festival serves as a medium to introduce and preserve local cultural heritage for younger generations, as well as to promote it beyond West Kutai (Saparuddin, 2024). One organiser noted the impact of modernisation on participation: "*Anak muda sekarang kadang sibuk dengan gadget, tapi saat beseprah mereka kembali merasakan pentingnya kebersamaan dan tradisi.*" ("Young people today are sometimes busy with gadgets, but during Beseprah they feel the importance of togetherness and tradition.") This shows a subtle negotiation between modern influences and the preservation of local values. Public response has been enthusiastic, despite challenges with funding and provincial government promotion. The local government and West Kutai Tourism Office have shown strong support, and the event has been included in the annual cultural calendar, further institutionalising it as a cultural asset.

In Muara Pahu District, the Makan Bekerobok tradition is similarly part of the Festival Gemeoh. Information gathered indicates that this practice has been carried out since the ancestors of the Kutai people and is traditionally associated with ceremonies such as harvests and communal celebrations. The tradition is seen as a way to preserve cultural heritage and symbolises unity by breaking down social barriers within the community. A community elder emphasized the theme of unity: "*Dalam setiap makan bekerobok, semua orang dari berbagai suku dan agama duduk bersama, tidak ada sekat di antara kami.*" ("In every Makan Bekerobok, people from different ethnicities and religions sit together; there are no barriers among us.") This demonstrates how the tradition functions as a tool for social cohesion and inclusivity.

Preparations include collecting contributions from each neighbourhood unit (RT) and cooking traditional dishes such as *gangan labu besahang*, *jajak basah*, and *gence ruan*. One local participant highlighted the cooperative spirit: "*Setiap RT ikut menyumbang bahan makanan dan ikut memasak, sehingga semua merasa memiliki bagian dari tradisi ini.*" ("Each neighbourhood unit contributes ingredients and helps cook, so everyone feels they have a part in this tradition.") This reflects the values of shared responsibility and collective engagement. Beyond promoting traditional cuisine, the event is also believed to foster social integration across ethnic, racial, and religious lines. Public participation in the event is high, though some groups have expressed objections, arguing that certain ritual elements conflict with spiritual teachings. Nevertheless, the event receives full support from both the government and traditional institutions, reinforcing its status as an essential cultural practice in Muara Pahu.

Meanwhile, in Kutai Kartanegara Regency, the Beseprah tradition is a formal and integral component of the Erau festival. It originated in the tradition of large family meals held on the floor with cloth mats (*seprah*), which evolved into a communal meal shared between the Sultan and the people. This practice emphasises the values of simplicity, equality, and solidarity, in which all members of society sit at the same level to eat together.

A participant noted the inclusivity of the event: "*Semua duduk di seprah yang sama, mulai dari Sultan hingga masyarakat biasa. Tidak ada perbedaan, semua sama.*" ("Everyone sits on the same seprah, from the Sultan to ordinary citizens.

There is no distinction; everyone is equal.”) This illustrates how Beseprah embodies equality and strengthens social cohesion. The event begins with an announcement from the Sultan and a drum signal, after which participants sit cross-legged and enjoy dishes such as *nasi bekepor*, *ikan bertus*, and various traditional *jajak* (snacks). A local government official commented: “*Tradisi Beseprah tidak hanya melestarikan budaya, tapi juga mendekatkan masyarakat dengan pemerintah dan institusi lokal.*” (“The Beseprah tradition not only preserves culture but also brings the community closer to the government and local institutions.”) The public, local government agencies (OPD), and different institutional representatives actively participate in the event. It has become an iconic part of the Erau festival and contributes positively to the local economy, social cohesion, and cultural preservation. However, challenges remain in logistics, space management, and the behaviour of some attendees who bring food home, which is seen as detracting from the spirit of communal dining.

Overall, the observations across Melak, Muara Pahu, and Kutai Kartanegara highlight that Makan Bekerobok (Beseprah) is not merely a communal dining activity but a culturally rich practice that fosters social cohesion, inclusivity, and equality. Across all three regions, the tradition encourages collective participation, breaks down social hierarchies, and strengthens connections between community members, local institutions, and governing authorities. Moreover, it serves as a vehicle for cultural preservation, transmitting values and practices to younger generations while negotiating the influences of modernisation. These findings establish Makan Bekerobok (Beseprah) as a key element of Kutai cultural identity and provide a foundation for deeper discussion on its symbolic and social significance.

Symbolic Meaning and Social Significance of *Makan Bekerobok (Beseprah)*

In general, all three regions—Melak, Muara Pahu, and Kutai Kartanegara demonstrate high levels of community involvement, alongside strong support from local governments and traditional institutions in preserving and promoting the tradition of *Makan Bekerobok (Beseprah)* as a core aspect of Kutai cultural identity. This tradition is more than a communal dining activity; it represents a cultural text rich in meaning and symbolism, continuously reproduced and reinterpreted by the Kutai people across generations. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, Makan Bekerobok serves as a social space where the community collectively constructs, maintains, and transforms its identity.

This is evident from field observations in Melak, Muara Pahu, and Kutai Kartanegara: residents from different social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds sit together on seprah mats, share traditional dishes, and participate in ceremonial sequences, such as the handover of agricultural produce to the Sultan. Interviews and participant statements reinforce this: for example, one local in Melak noted, “*Kami semua duduk bersila di atas tarpaulin, tidak ada yang duduk lebih tinggi atau lebih rendah, hanya ada kebersamaan*” (“We all sit cross-legged on the tarpaulin; no one sits higher or lower, only togetherness”). Such practices illustrate how social hierarchies are temporarily dissolved, norms are reinforced, and communal bonds are strengthened. Traditions like these act as binding forces that unite individuals,

cultivate shared identity, and enhance social cohesion, encompassing practices, values, and actions transmitted from one generation to the next (Rahman & Azmi Ali Yafie, 2023).

The Beseprah tradition in Kutai Kartanegara stands out as a social phenomenon laden with symbolic meaning, offering fertile ground for symbolic interactionist analysis. Drawing upon scholars such as George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, this analysis can illuminate how the tradition is socially constructed, how meaning is formed and exchanged through interaction, and how it adapts to social change (Raho, 2007). Beyond continuity, the tradition also reflects dynamic processes of change. Key actors, including the younger generation, local government, and economic stakeholders, actively influence how the practice is performed and understood. Modernisation and globalisation, for instance, have prompted adjustments in food offerings, procedural sequences, and participation styles, while the core values of togetherness, equality, and communal solidarity are maintained.

In addition to continuity and reinterpretation, the *Makan Bekerobok* (*Beseprah*) tradition also demonstrates elements of cultural hybridity, as conceptualised by Homi Bhabha. Modern influences, such as the inclusion of contemporary or non-traditional dishes alongside classic Kutai foods during festivals, exemplify how the practice adapts to current social and economic contexts without losing its symbolic core. For instance, during the Erau festival and Gemeoh celebrations, participants often serve both traditional dishes like *gangan labu besahang* and modern items, reflecting a hybrid practice that blends past and present culinary forms. This coexistence of old and new illustrates the “third space” in Bhabha’s theory (Bhabha, 2003), where tradition and modernity interact, negotiate, and produce new cultural meanings while maintaining the underlying values of togetherness, equality, and communal solidarity. Such hybrid practices underscore the adaptability of *Makan Bekerobok*, allowing it to remain socially relevant and symbolically potent in a rapidly changing society.

Each element of *Makan Bekerobok*, food, space, gestures, and collective rituals, functions as a meaningful symbol. Participation allows individuals to internalise social norms, understand communal roles, and negotiate the meaning of cultural practices in relation to ongoing social changes. The involvement of youth in organising the event illustrates a reinterpretation of leadership and engagement, whereas government support institutionalises the tradition and reinforces its cultural significance. These interactions collectively sustain the symbolic and social vitality of *Makan Bekerobok*, demonstrating that the tradition is both resilient and adaptive in a modernising society.

These symbolic and social dimensions are clearly reflected in the tradition's actual practice. The term *Makan Bekerobok* (*Beseprah*) refers to eating in proximity or in large groups, often sitting cross-legged on mats. Traditionally, it is a communal dining custom among the Kutai people, in which individuals gather to eat and socialise. This concept transcends mere food consumption; it embodies togetherness and equality. The purpose of *Makan Bekerobok* is to strengthen social bonds and dissolve hierarchical boundaries through shared experiences. This was

clearly observed during fieldwork, where the unity among the royal court, government representatives, and the general public illustrated a strong sense of solidarity and inclusivity that embraced all levels of society, regardless of social status. This observation is further affirmed through the following documentation:

Figure 1: Documentation of the Beseprah Tradition in Kutai Kartanegara during the 2024 Erau Cultural Festival



In addition, during the Gemeoh cultural festival held in West Kutai Regency, the implementation of the makan bekerobok/beseprah tradition is illustrated in the following documentation:

Figure 2: Documentation of the Beseprah Tradition in West Kutai during the 2024 Gemeoh Cultural Festival



This documentation shows that there are no social boundaries between the District Head (Camat), local officials of Melak Subdistrict, and the general public during the communal dining procession. In this context, the event reflects the values of unity and the close bonds among all layers of society, regardless of ethnicity, race, or religion.

In the implementation of the makan bekerobok/beseprah tradition, procedural variations occur in the sequence of events. For example, in West Kutai Regency, the communal meal begins with a typical ceremonial agenda such as speeches by the organising committee, the district head, or local officials, followed by a prayer, and then the main event: the beseprah communal meal.

In contrast, the tradition in Kutai Kartanegara Regency includes a symbolic handover of agricultural produce from the community to the Sultan of Kutai

Kartanegara as part of the ceremonial proceedings. This handover is an integral part of the Erau celebration, carrying symbolic meaning as an expression of gratitude for the harvest and natural abundance bestowed by God. During the ceremony, produce such as rice, vegetables, fruits, and other agricultural goods are presented to the Sultan or local leaders as a sign of respect and thankfulness for the community's prosperity. This is depicted in the following image:

Figure 3: The Sultan of Kutai Kartanegara receiving agricultural produce from the Kutai community



The ceremony of handing over agricultural produce to the Sultan of Kutai symbolises the community's respect and gratitude for the Sultan as their leader who protects and governs their lives. In this tradition, the people hand over their harvest as a contribution and show loyalty, while the Sultan provides protection and welfare. This procession also reflects the reciprocal relationship between the ruler and the people and strengthens social, cultural, and traditional bonds passed down through generations in Kutai society.

Besides the handover of the agricultural produce, another step is performed before the *beseprah* meal begins: the beating of the *kentongan*. The *kentongan* is a traditional instrument made from wood or bamboo, used to signal or notify, usually by being struck. The *kentongan* is often used in the community as a communication tool to attract attention or signal specific times, such as during major events.

The sound produced by beating the *kentongan* is quite loud and can be heard from afar, making it effective for giving warnings or announcements in a wide area. In the context of the *beseprah* event, the *kentongan* is used by the Sultan to signal that the meal will begin after a prayer is recited. After the Sultan announces the start of the *beseprah*, someone will beat the *kelotok* or *kentongan* so that people at the far ends can hear the signal that the meal has begun. The *kentongan* becomes a vital tool to mark the beginning of the *beseprah* event. After the prayer is read, the Sultan will strike the *kentongan* to signal that the meal can now begin. Besides the *kentongan*, several other items must be prepared, such as a white *seprah* cloth as a dining mat, plates, a basin for washing hands, glasses for drinking, and napkins for wiping hands.

Figure 4: Documentation of the Kentongan as a Sign for the Start of the Makan Beseprah Activity



Participation in the Beseprah tradition provides a clear illustration of symbolic interaction at work. According to Mead, social interaction is crucial for the formation of the “self.” In this context, engagement in the communal dining ritual allows individuals to internalise cultural norms, understand expected social roles, and cultivate both personal and collective identities. The self emerges through repeated interactions with peers, elders, and leaders, embedding participants within the broader societal context (Ritzer, 2014).

On the other hand, Blumer emphasises the dynamic process of interpretation, in which individuals assign meaning to stimuli rather than react. Applied to *Beseprah*, participants interpret food, seating arrangements, gestures, and ritual sequences differently, depending on personal experience, social position, and cultural knowledge. (Harwanto, 2021). Together, these perspectives highlight that *Beseprah* is not only a social gathering but also a meaning-making process, where symbols such as food, space, and body language continually evolve to reflect cultural values, social hierarchies, and ongoing societal changes.

The food served, the space where the event takes place, and the body language and gestures used all become symbols full of meaning. This process of meaning creation is dynamic and continues to evolve along with social and cultural changes. (Kim et al., 2022). The beseprah tradition serves not only as a social gathering place but also as a transitional ritual marking the passage from one phase of life to another.

The symbols in this tradition include: Food as a Symbol of Status and Identity: Food in beseprah not only fulfils physical needs, but also serves as a symbol of social status, power, and group identity. The choice of food, the way it is served, and the order in which it is served reflect the social hierarchy and cultural values held by the Kutai people. Space as a Shaper of Meaning: The space in which beseprah takes place, such as a traditional hall or an open field, carries strong symbolic meaning. This space not only serves as a physical gathering place but also fosters social interaction and collective identity formation. Body Language and Gestures: The body language, facial expressions, and gestures used during beseprah play an essential role in conveying meaning and building social relationships. These non-verbal actions are often more powerful than words in communicating emotions, attitudes, and values. In intercultural contexts, where verbal language is often

insufficient to convey cultural nuances, nonverbal communication becomes key to building trust, reducing misunderstandings, and conforming to local cultural norms (Alwan et al., 2024).

In the practice of makan bekerobok/beseprah, food is the main element and a mandatory requirement. The beseprah tradition has become a part of daily life, so the types of food vary depending on the context. For everyday activities, the menu typically features traditional dishes. However, for significant events like Erau, the food combines both traditional and modern dishes. Since it has become a daily custom, the beseprah tradition is regarded as a special part of the culture, especially now that it is included in the highly anticipated Erau event. This also adds an exceptional value to the tradition, as the food is distributed for free, and anyone can sit and join. The food served during the makan bekerobok/beseprah ceremony is shown in the following images:

Figure 5: Nasi Bekepor, Untuk-untuk, Serabai, and Traditional Kutai Dishes



In addition, the menu served at the bekerobok meal event, as one of the traditional series of the Gemeoh Festival in Melak sub-district, West Kutai district, is as follows:

Figure 6: Gence Ruan, Gangan Santan Labu Besahang, Serondeng Jagong, Gangan Asam, and Various Other Traditional Kutai Dishes



The stages of this communal dining procession are pretty simple. First, the organising committee lays out the *seprah*, usually using a white cloth, though occasionally batik cloth, and places hand-washing bowls (*kobokan*) at each end. The plates to be used are still covered and placed on top of the *kobokan*. After that, a variety of traditional Kutai foods such as *gence ruan*, stir-fried *tempeh*, and *lodeh* are arranged on the *seprah*. Before the meal, a blessing prayer is usually recited, such as a prayer for the deceased, and only then does the meal begin.

There are also established rules of etiquette during the meal. It is strongly encouraged to pray before eating. Usually, elders or respected individuals are allowed to eat first. When dining with elders, they typically begin by serving themselves rice. There is also a custom of offering plates, in which the older person hands a plate to the younger person. As descendants of the Aji royal lineage, we are not allowed to speak or make noise while eating, especially when eating rice. These are the dining manners that we uphold. At the Erau event, the procession begins with the Sultan, as the cultural and traditional leader, who leads the prayer and starts the meal. The regent and local government officials follow this, and finally, the community. The Sultan always begins first, followed by the others.

Globalisation has brought significant changes to the *beseprah* tradition. Modernisation and globalisation have created a very complex way of life (Amallia et al., 2024). The Beseprah tradition has adapted to foreign cultural influences, lifestyle changes, and modernisation without losing its core identity. This study shows that elements such as the inclusion of modern dishes alongside traditional Kutai foods exemplify a hybrid practice, reflecting Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space," where tradition and modernity interact to produce new cultural meanings. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, these adaptations demonstrate how the community negotiates and reinterprets social norms, roles, and collective values while maintaining togetherness, equality, and communal solidarity. This highlights the resilience and evolving nature of *Makan Bekerobok (Beseprah)* in contemporary society.

D. Conclusion

The tradition of makan beseprah or bekerobok holds deep meaning as a symbol of togetherness, social harmony, and gratitude that connects all levels of society, including the people and their leaders. This tradition also serves to preserve customs and introduce traditional Kutai cuisine, while simultaneously strengthening cultural identity within a multiethnic community. The success of the event is highly influenced by active community participation and cross-institutional collaboration, involving government agencies, the sultanate, and public service institutions such as sanitation and security. However, challenges remain, particularly the lack of financial support from the provincial government, technical coordination during implementation, and a tendency among some community members to shift the meaning of the tradition by taking food home for consumption outside a ceremonial setting.

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