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## Cultural Identity: The Symbols, Meaning, and Interpretation of *Bakar Tongkang* Tradition

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### Abstract

This research looked at the background, history, and meaning related to this ritual and how culture plays an essential role in shaping the community identity. The *Bakar Tongkang* Ritual is a way for the Chinese community to express gratitude, honor their ancestors, and maintain their cultural identity. It also serves as a symbol of unity, commitment, and a way to connect with their faith and spirituality. It highlights the importance of symbols, meaning, and interpretation in ritual and how these elements are paramount in the overall cultural experience. The research method used a qualitative approach through observation, in-depth interviews, and documents. The results indicated a detailed exploration of the *Bakar Tongkang* ritual, its historical context, its significance in culture, and the related meanings. It underscores the importance of rituals in preserving cultural heritage, fostering unity, and expressing gratitude.

### Keywords

*Bakar Tongkang*, Chinese, meaning, *Panipaban*

### Article History

Received 01 March 2024

Accepted 13 May 2024

### How to Cite

Gusrini, E., Agustina, Efi, A., & Fitrisia, A. (2024). Cultural identity: The symbols, meaning, and interpretation of *Bakar Tongkang* tradition. *Indonesian Research Journal in Education | IRJE |*, 8(1), 323 – 338. <https://doi.org/10.22437/irje.v8i1.33192>

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## Introduction

Indonesia has different ethnicities and cultures spread across various levels of society. This diversity is a source of national pride and a characteristic that enriches cultural life in Indonesia. In Indonesia, there are several cultures, customs, languages, religions, races, and ethnicities. This diversity indicates that each ethnic or non-racial group is considered to have paramount social differences and has formed its traditions. In other words, ethnic groups are recognized as distinct entities by society. Although such differences are often related to specific ancestry, group identification can involve factors such as language, geographic region, and physical characteristics, and the combination of these aspects creates unique cultural richness.

Culture is the totality of ideas, actions, and results of human work within the social life context, which are made into human property by learning (Tambiah, 1984). Culture has a significant role for individuals and society because their needs of spiritual and material aspects can be satisfied through cultural influence (Pratama, 2022). The various needs of society can largely be met through cultural heritage originating from their own communities. Each community group has unique behavioral patterns and ways of interaction formed in their cultural context. In addition, a good introduction to cultural heritage by the next generation can strengthen the nation's traditions in responding to increasingly difficult future challenges in this era of globalization (Hasanuddin, 2016).

Even though each society has a culture that is different from the other, understanding the cultural style of a group, which is characterized by variations in physical form, ways of communicating, and belief systems, is crucial, both in the context of knowledge development and in the context of cultural development. It is because humans in this world interact with each other, either to fulfill needs or to carry out daily routines. In addition, Qurtuby and Lattu (2019) conveyed that each community group produces an exclusive culture as a responding result to the geographical environment, historical events, and social dynamics that surround them. Therefore, no cultural product can be considered "more cultural" than another. Each culture has its unique characteristics, boundaries, and characteristics.

In an area inhabited by people of various ethnicities, there are clear differences in culture between community groups. One example is in the traditional traditions and rituals carried out by specific communities, which continue today, such as in the Chinese community living in the Panipahan area. Every year, they carry out the *Bakar Tongkang* cultural attraction, which has become a highlight in the tourism sector. This ritual has a special appeal because it does not exist in other areas or is carried out by Chinese groups in other cities. It is due to the connection between the *Bakar Tongkang* ritual in Panipahan, with geographical conditions, the history of the arrival of the Chinese people in Panipahan, as well as the spiritual connection with the God of the Sea *Ki Hu Ong Ya* and *Tai Sun*.

The *Bakar Tongkang* tradition is a cultural heritage that is rich in meaning and local wisdom values. This ritual is carried out by the Chinese ethnic community in the Panipahan area, *Pasir Limau Kapas* District, Rokan Hilir Regency, Riau Province. The tradition of *Bakar Tongkang* has been passed down from generation to generation every year as a form of respect and offering to their ancestors (Wirman et al., 2018). This event is a sacred moment filled with symbolism and meaning to preserve cultural heritage and traditional values passed down from generation to generation. Symbols represent definite meanings (Elpalina et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, humans give meaning to what happens to them physically and mentally (Hoed, 2014). The process of giving meaning starts from a sign that is seen by the senses, then processes it through instant knowledge is called an object, and the final process is interpretation, the result of which is called the interpretant (Hoed, 2014; Hoopes, 1991).

Through the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition, the Chinese ethnic community in Panipahan expresses gratitude and piety to the creator for the blessings received. This ritual is a form of appreciation and effort to maintain a spiritual connection with the God of the sea *Ki Hu Ong Ya* and *Tai Sun*, who are believed to have an essential role in human life. The influence of this belief is reflected in the meaning and symbols contained in each stage of the event, such as the Middle Pillar, which is a sign of good fortune, considering the importance of success in finding a livelihood as part of the life of the Chinese ethnic community.

Apart from being a form of respect for ancestors and the Gods, the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition is also an opportunity to strengthen social ties and tolerance between the Chinese ethnic community and other ethnic groups, especially the Malay ethnic group in the Panipahan area. The process of different interpretations and meanings of the symbols in this ceremony is evidence of the cultural complexity and richness of values possessed by the Chinese ethnic community. This tradition shows the community's concern for preserving cultural identity and maintaining traditional values, which are the basis for social life.

The importance of *Bakar Tongkang* culture and traditions as a rich and valuable cultural heritage. This ritual is an integral part of the life of the Chinese ethnic community in the Panipahan area, Riau, which has been passed down from generation to generation. Chinese ethnic culture includes knowledge, values, and social practices that form the foundation of their group identity. The *Bakar Tongkang* tradition is an expression of local wisdom and community piety in respecting ancestors and preserving the values of belief in *Ki Hu Ong Ya* and *Tai Sun* (Gods). Determining meaning in the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition is a central aspect of transmitting the culture and identity of the Chinese ethnic community. The meaning given by individuals or groups of people to these cultural objects involves different understandings, interpretations, and perceptions. Symbols such as the "God Palanquin", which is interpreted as God's guidance, or the Middle Pillar as an indicator of good fortune are an essential part of this ceremony. The influence of religion and belief in the God of the sea and symbols is reflected in the offerings and respect made in the *Bakar Tongkang* ceremony.

The *Bakar Tongkang* tradition has also become a medium for the Chinese and Malay communities in Panipahan to strengthen social ties and attitudes of tolerance. The process of varying meanings regarding this ritual shows the complexity of culture and the diversity of interpretations in multiethnic societies. This tradition is a moment that integrates traditional values with an attitude of togetherness in respecting ancestors and religious beliefs. Preserving this cultural heritage is proof of the community's commitment to maintaining ethnic identity and emphasizing the role of culture in building social unity and harmony. The *Bakar Tongkang* Tradition has been built on the foundation of human values since its inception, in line with the essence of humanistic culture. The *Bakar Tongkang* Tradition contains meanings and values that can be passed on to the next generation, some of which have tourist and economic values.

## Literature Review

### *Tradition*

Hobsbawn and Ranger (1983) argued that traditions are not fixed or authentic but are the result of ongoing social construction. They stated that traditions are selected, shaped, and adapted by social groups according to their needs in certain contexts. In addition, Bourdieu (1977) emphasized that traditional acts are a tool to maintain social inequality. He explained that traditions are inherited through a process of social reproduction that involves social capital, such as knowledge, skills, and networks of social relationships obtained from families or social groups.

According to Giddens and Pierson (1998), modernity does not create traditions but changes them. In modern society, traditions have become more reflective, with individuals making more conscious choices in maintaining or changing traditions. Traditions are no longer carried out automatically but are questioned and chosen based on individual and collective values. Turner (1967) highlighted the importance of ritual in maintaining and strengthening traditions. For him, rituals are a way to express meaning and symbolism in a society's culture. Through participation in rituals, individuals and groups build and strengthen their identities and maintain traditions. Meanwhile, White (2016) introduced the theory of cultural evolution, which describes traditions as the result of change and adaptation in society. Additionally, traditions develop through cultural changes that are passed down from one to the next generation. Traditions that survive are those with adaptive value and provide benefits for the continuity of society.

In general, traditions are carried out by the community voluntarily and consciously, by traditional norms and values, which are manifested in the form of traditional ceremonies that have existed since the past and should be maintained so that they are not lost over time. Furthermore, according to Fitriani et al. (2020), traditions have an essential role as social guidelines in society. They highlighted the importance of tradition by stating that without tradition, social relations in society would be chaotic, and humans would become brutal. In conclusion, tradition is a legacy from ancestors that includes various aspects such as objects, symbols, norms, rules, and customs, which play a significant role as regulators of social interaction in society. Traditions are the result of social interactions that are influenced by culture, history, and community values. Traditions are also practices passed down from one generation to another, having an essential role in shaping social identity and collective understanding. As a link between the past, present, and future, tradition strengthens the sense of continuity and social ties in society.

### *Bakar Tongkang*

The ritual ceremony of *Bakar Tongkang* is an annual celebration held by the Chinese community as part of a cultural heritage that has continued from generation to generation (Harsono, 2019). The tradition of *Bakar Tongkang* is a ritual that has been carried out for generations by the Chinese community in Riau Province to honor and preserve the cultural

heritage of their ancestors. Also known as *Go Gek Cap Lak* in *Hokkien* or the fifth month of the Chinese New Year, namely the sixteenth, this ritual is an essential part of the community's annual celebrations. This procession involves burning a replica of a ship called a bar (*Tongkang*).

The *Bakar Tongkang* tourism event is an annual tourist event that only occurs once a year, and the uniqueness of this event can be found in Indonesia, especially in Rokan Hilir Regency (Rarasati & Arief, 2017). In the *Bakar Tongkang* ceremony, there is an interesting aspect that is worth paying attention to, namely cultural diversity, which is part of local wisdom to maintain family ties. It does not only include familial relations between the Chinese community but also maintains unity between ethnic Chinese and Malays, as well as other religious communities, even though definite cultural differences are difficult to reconcile (Pratama, 2022).

According to Sari et al. (2018), the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition is an integral part of the customs and traditions passed down from generation to generation from the Chinese tradition. This tradition is an expression of gratitude to *God Kie Ong Ya* (God of the sea) through the burning of a barge (ship), which was previously held in a ceremony. Furthermore, according to Nyoto et al. (2016), the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition also has historical roots related to the initial arrival of ethnic Chinese on the Indonesian mainland in Rokan Hilir, Riau. In this ritual, there is a myth or legend believed by the Chinese people, namely that when a group of ethnic Chinese sailed to find land in the dark of night, they offered prayers to the God *Kie Ong Ya*. At that moment, they saw twinkling lights, which they believed were a sign from the Gods to take them to the land of Rokan. On the barge (*Tongkang*), there were 18 ethnic Chinese people, all surnamed Ang, and this group is believed to be the ancestors of the ethnic Chinese in Rokan. The preparation stage in the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition is

- Determining the event schedule.
- Involving two viharas in preparation.
- Performing rituals and prayers at the main temple
- Appointing a man to be possessed by a God.
- Making a replica of the barge (*Tongkang*) according to God's instructions.
- Providing offerings and praying for the smooth running of the procession.
- Cleaning the roads that the barges will pass through.
- Performing prayers and special prayer rituals.

The implementation stage in the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition includes

- The barge (*Tongkang*) stays overnight at the vihara the night before being paraded.
- A group of men guided the barge (*Tongkang*) about 2 km from the front of the vihara on foot.
- All participants bring incense sticks (*Hio*) that are continuously lit.
- Arrived at the location that is thought to be the place where the Chinese ship first landed and was burned as a symbol of commitment not to return to their hometown in Fujian, China. At that place, a collection of paper containing Chinese writing has been prepared to place a replica of the barge (*Tongkang*) that was previously paraded.


- The moment that the Chinese community hoped for occurred when the two masts that functioned as support for the sails were waiting to fall. Residents interpreted the direction in which the two pillars fell as a sign of the good fortune they would receive from the sea.

***Meaning and philosophical values of the Bakar Tongkang tradition***

In the *Bakar Tongkang* procession, preparation for the event involves several materials with symbolic meaning and blessings. *Pekong* and firewood are the major materials that are always prepared every year, without a fixed amount, and according to the request of the God Liu Chu Ong Ya. The color of the *Pekong* and the paintings on it vary according to the preferences of the craftsman, showing artistic freedom in carrying out this tradition. The ornaments used in the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition in *Panipahan* and *Bagansiapiapi* have striking differences. The ornaments include a lion's head placed on the front of the barge (*Tongkang*), with a dragon and a dragon's head below it, and a flying horse placed on the side of the ship. Replicas of human figures also became an essential part of ornamentation, with the emphasis being that only these elements were to decorate the barges (*Tongkang*).

The barge's fill (*Tongkang*) that will be burned has a deep meaning. Inside, are replicas of sailors (fishermen), anchors, flagpoles, sails, and anchor reels, all of which are marine equipment arranged in replica form. All of this reflects the daily lives of fishermen and coastal communities who depend on the sea as a source of livelihood. Furthermore, the fill of the barge (*Tongkang*) also includes necessities such as rice, oil, sugar, and green beans in the form of replicas. The fruits are represented by paper taws in small sizes like replicas. All of this symbolizes the abundance of sustenance and blessings in everyday life. The contents of the barge (*Tongkang*) are not just physical material but also contain symbolic values that are presented to the Gods as an expression of gratitude and appreciation for the gift of life.

**Table 1.** *Ornaments on the barge (Tongkang)*

Pictures	Names	Meanings
	<p>Lion head with shining eyes</p>	<p>The ship's coat of arms, which has a lion's head with shining eyes, can be interpreted as a symbol of the ability to see clearly and move with skill.</p>



Dragon's head

By placing the dragon's head at the back, it is hoped that the dragon's bursts can increase the ship's travel speed.



Flying horse

Symbolizing that even though it is on land, the ship continues to move forward with the help of the horses.



Ship crew

The ship's crew members are depicted carrying out their respective duties.



*Qi Pai Jiang* Which means 29 general flags



Seven prayer papers It is a symbol of the 7 stars of the gods who give continuous blessings.

## Methodology

This research used a qualitative method to understand and explore the meaning and significance contained in this tradition. Qualitative research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of cultural phenomena and reveal the complexities and nuances that exist within them. Qualitative research is often called naturalistic research method because the research is carried out in natural conditions (natural settings). It is also called a qualitative method because the data collected and the analysis are more qualitative (Sarwono, 2006; Sugiyono, 2013). Additionally, in collecting the data, the researchers used observation, in-depth interviews, and documents through notes, cameras, recording devices, etc.

## Results and Discussion

### *History of the Bakar Tongkang tradition*

The tradition of *Bakar Tongkang* is a cultural phenomenon that is historically closely related to migration or large-scale movements of human groups to a definite area. This view is in line with Nugroho (2020), who considers history as the study of the life journey of figures or civilizations. This tradition often marks the arrival of new communities who seek a better life or who choose to leave their places of origin due to conflict or natural disasters. Therefore, *Bakar Tongkang* is not only a ritual ceremony, but also reflects the group's journey and struggle. In many cases, *Bakar Tongkang* has a deep symbolic meaning. The ship is not only



considered a means of transportation but also a symbol of a life's journey full of challenges. This tradition reflects the people's desire to celebrate or commemorate their historical events, which may be full of obstacles. The barge (*Tongkang*) has become a symbol of change, hope, and the transformation of a new life.

*Bakar Tongkang* often combines religious elements in it. The ceremonies and rituals carried out in this procession reflect gratitude to the spiritual powers or Gods who are believed to have protected and guided them during the journey. Through this tradition, they do not only express gratitude for their physical journey but also express spirituality that recognizes the role of supernatural forces in their life journey. In the context of the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition, barges (*Tongkang*) have a deeper meaning than just a means of everyday transportation. These ships represent a life's journey that is full of struggle and hope for a new future. The use of the barge (*Tongkang*) as a symbol highlights the importance of travel and transformation in the lives of the people who celebrate this tradition. The symbolism of the barge (*Tongkang*) also reflects the close relationship between the struggles and changes in life faced by the community holding the *Bakar Tongkang*. As a metaphor for life's journey full of challenges and obstacles, the barge (*Tongkang*) sails across the ocean of life. Therefore, when people celebrate and associate barges (*Tongkang*) with the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition, they are also celebrating a life journey that is rich in meaning and symbolism.

Looking back at the historical journey of the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition, which is related to immigrants from China who chose to leave their homeland to settle in the Riau region. *Bakar Tongkang* refers to a ritual that involves burning the last ship used by Chinese immigrants on their journey from China to Riau, and this ultimately signifies their decision to settle in Riau. These Chinese immigrants first arrived in Riau around 1826. Their journey, which included traveling through *Ombak Bono* until the moment the barge (*Tongkang*) was burned became the root of the formation of the *Bakar Tongkang* festival as it is known today.

The area where these Chinese immigrants settled in Riau is known as Rokan Hilir Riau. In a believed view, the ancestors of the Chinese community in Rokan Hilir Riau came from the descendants of the Tan-lang people who came from the Tong'an (Tang Ua) District in Xiemen, Fujian Province, South China. They decided to leave their homeland using barges (*Tongkang*), a type of ship generally used to transport sand and minerals in mines. Initially, three barges departed on this expedition, but only one ship managed to reach the coast of Sumatra.

**Figure 1.** Replica of a barge (*Tongkang*)



The origins of the *Bakar Tongkang* Ritual (*Go Gek Cap Lak*) ceremony are explained in the notes of the *Panipaban* Chinese traditional figure, John Sunaryo, who is familiarly known as Cin An. Initially, in 1820, a group of ethnic Chinese Hokkien people from Fujian Province, China, moved and crossed the ocean using a barge (*Tongkang*) to look for a better life. During a tiring journey, full of anxiety and uncertainty, the passengers on the ship offered prayers to God *Kie Ong Ya* so that they could safely reach the first land, Indonesia. After reaching the land, they made a symbol of burning the barge (*Tongkang*) on which they sailed to release all the good and bad experiences they had during the journey. The *Bakar Tongkang* also symbolizes the determination to start a new life in Indonesia. Therefore, since then, the barge (*Tongkang*) has become a symbol of good fortune and has been immortalized through the *Bakar Tongkang* Tradition, which has been passed down from generation to generation.

The immigrants made a firm promise not to return to their homelands, expressed through the symbolic act of burning the barges (*Tongkang*). It is due to the protracted unrest in their home country. For this reason, Rokan Hilir Riau was an appropriate and safe location for them to settle, and the *Panipaban* area was one of the chosen places. As a result, these immigrants eventually became the ancestors of the Chinese ethnic groups who settled in the region. In the *Bakar Tongkang* procession, the burning of the barge (*Tongkang*) is often accompanied by religious rituals that have deep meaning. People who follow this tradition believe that involving religious aspects can provide protection and blessings for their group or community. By including religious elements, this tradition is not only a celebration of history and culture but also an expression of spirituality and respect for the religious values believed in by the community.

In addition, the religious element in *Bakar Tongkang* can also strengthen social ties and togetherness between community members. Through participation in religious ceremonies related to these traditions, people can feel strong spiritual bonds and come together to celebrate shared beliefs. As a result, *Bakar Tongkang* is not only a collective celebration but also an event that strengthens solidarity and a sense of togetherness in the context of the religious values they adhere to. In the context of *Bakar Tongkang*, fire is not only seen as a heat source for burning barges (*Tongkang*) but also has a deep symbolic meaning. The process of burning a barge is often interpreted as a symbol of transformation or transition in life. Fire became a powerful metaphor for describing change, cleansing, and honoring supernatural powers.

The process of burning a ship in *Bakar Tongkang* can be interpreted as a symbol of cleansing or purification. The burning fire symbolizes a purification ritual, where people involved in this tradition release themselves from the burdens of the past and prepare to face a new phase of life. In this meaning, fire acts as a purifying agent that erases traces of the past and helps individuals or communities to start a new chapter.

*Bakar Tongkang* is often considered more than just a ceremony or tradition. It is also a community celebration that combines various social activities, arts, and traditional performances. This festival creates an opportunity for communities to come together and celebrate their cultural heritage with passion and joy. Social activities such as traditional food fairs, handicraft fairs, and local art performances are often an essential part of these celebrations, creating a lively and colorful atmosphere.

Not only as a celebration, the *Bakar Tongkang* festival also serves as an opportunity to educate the younger generation about the history and values contained in this tradition. Involving children and teenagers in various festival activities, such as art performances or educational exhibitions, allows them to understand the historical context and the deep meaning behind each step and symbol in *Bakar Tongkang*. Thus, this festival becomes an effective medium for conveying knowledge and strengthening the sense of belonging to cultural heritage to future generations.

Additionally, *Bakar Tongkang*, which includes various traditional art forms such as dance, music, and theatre, provides a platform for local artists to express their creativity. It does not only enrich local culture but also provides appreciation and support for traditional arts, which often face challenges in the modern era. Thus, this festival is not only a moment of entertainment but also a form of preserving and exhibiting traditional art, which is an integral part of the cultural identity of the people who celebrate it.

This event is celebrated every year on the 16th day of the 5th month in the Chinese calendar, and this tradition is known as *Bakar Tongkang* or *Go Ge Cap Lak* (*Go* means five, and *Cap Lak* means sixteen). This event is filled with respect for the ancestors and expressions of gratitude to God Kie Ong Ya and Tai Sun, which are carried out through the act of burning a replica of the barge (*Tongkang*). The peak procession of this festival is the burning of a replica of a traditional Chinese ship, which symbolically reflects ritual values. Before the burning stage, there is a series of rituals and prayers held by the participants at the main temple. This festival also showcases various oriental cultural attractions, such as *Barongsai* and stage performances featuring songs in the *Hokkien* dialect. All of this is part of an effort to maintain and inherit the religious culture of Chinese society.

### ***The meaning contained in the Bakar Tongkang tradition***

The ornaments found in the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition in *Panipaban*, Rokan Hilir Regency, Riau, are not just symbols but also contain hopes and prayers implicit in their making. This view is in line with Todorov (1986), who stated that symbols are symbols with a unified form and meaning. Burke (1989) also emphasized that symbols are used to communicate, express themselves, and understand the world around them. Therefore, the ornaments used in the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition have unique meaning and value. Some are lion heads, dragon heads, flying horses, ship crews, *Qi Pai Jiang*, and seven prayer papers.

The concept of meaning as a total tendency to use or respond to a form of language to understand the meaning or significance has its roots in theories proposed by several experts. Yakin and Tofu (2014) stated that every linguistic sign consists of two components: the signified element, which is the concept or meaning of a sound sign, and the signifier element, which refers to sounds originating from the phonemes of the relevant language (Hoed, 2014). It explains that language has a role in encoding events and objects into words. Language has a crucial role in culture, a requirement that supports the existence of that culture and cannot be replaced by other symbol systems.

The tradition of *Bakar Tongkang* has deep symbolic significance in the context of culture and society. In many cultures, *Bakar Tongkang* is often considered a symbol of farewell and purification ceremonies. The process of *Bakar Tongkang* symbolizes liberation from the past,

the closing of a life chapter, and preparation for starting a new one. Through this process, the fire creates an enlightening light, reflecting enlightenment and courage in facing an unpredictable future.

According to symbol theory, as proposed by the anthropologist Geertz (Aziz, 1992), cultural symbols not only have individual meaning but are also a window for understanding the overall system of a society. The *Bakar Tongkang* tradition can be interpreted as a symbol of balance and transformation in this context. The *Bakar Tongkang* becomes a change representation, illustrates how society faces transformation, and interprets it as a positive step toward cultural evolution. By understanding the meaning of this symbol, the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition is not only a physical ritual but also a deep expression of the worldview and cultural changes in the society that carries it out. The meaning contained in the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition for the Panipahan people is as follows.

***Bakar Tongkang* culture** is a form of community excellence. Culture has a crucial role in the life of a social group and even in the context of the social environment because the social environment itself is the result of culture, and it is clear how culture can be maintained or damaged by human actions. Culture is related to the way humans live their lives through communication practices and social actions. Culture includes knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, and heritage that are passed from one generation to the next through the efforts of individuals or groups.

A real example of this culture is in the Chinese ethnic group in Panipahan, which manages the cultural tourist attraction "Vihara Bodhirama" and celebrates the *Bakar Tongkang* ritual every year. This ritual is a tribute to the ancestors of the Chinese ethnic group who first landed in Rokan Hilir Riau, where 18 people with the surname *Ang* were the forerunners of the Chinese ethnic group that developed in Riau Province. This ritual is how they express their determination not to return to their ancestral land but to become Indonesian citizens and perpetuate local values inherited from generation to generation as guidelines for life in the past.

Culture refers to the complexity involving knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and the abilities and habits that humans have as part of society. Additionally, each society has a unique culture and can change over time. It is because elements in culture, such as language, religion, and art, vary in each community group. This picture shows the importance of tolerance and mutual respect between people with cultural differences. The *Bakar Tongkang* Ritual is part of the culture of the Chinese people in Malay Land. An attitude of tolerance was built between the Chinese and Malay communities in Panipahan regarding the cultural changes carried out.

***Every object has a name and meaning***, in the *Bakar Tongkang* culture, there is a term known as "God's stretcher" or chair, which has the meaning of 'God's instructions for communicating information or messages'. Some also argue that this symbolism is the result of human interpretation considering and defining objects in the context of a particular situation or that these decisions are by personal understanding of the situation at hand. This interpretation is not only based on words but rather on individual experiences and perceptions. This variation in the meaning given to the same object shows that human actions arise through interpretation that considers and defines appropriate objects and actions to the situation.

There are two essential elements in this culture: "*Tandu*" and "*Loya*". In *Tandu*, there is a statue of *Ki Hu Ong Ya* and other statues related to the *Bakar Tongkang* ritual. Several times, *Loya* also climbed on this palanquin. This symbolic concept has a close relationship with the Chinese community's beliefs. The palanquin of the Gods accompanied by smoke is a symbol indicating an effort to 'clear the way so that ships and the Gods can pass in a holy way. *Loya* and God's palanquin function as companions and maintain the purity of the path traversed by the replica Barge (*Tongkang*) and Gods when they are paraded from the "Vihara Bodhirama" to the burning place. For the people, this ritual is considered to have crucial spiritual value, where the cleanliness and holiness of the Gods are maintained.

**Figure 2.** *God's palanquin*



The *Bakar Tongkang* action is a ritual passed down from generation to generation and carried out every year by the ethnic Chinese community. For some people, this procession has the meaning of a guide to livelihood. This meaning comes from various symbols, one of which is the Middle Pillar, which is interpreted as a sign of good fortune, although not in a broad sense. The deeper meaning of *Bakar Tongkang* can be seen as a form of 'an expression of the unity and determination of Chinese ancestors not to return to their homeland'. This understanding is formed through the experiences passed and the meaning found in the symbols contained in their primary group.

Understanding the determination of sustenance is also a crucial aspect because understanding formed from an individual's perception of an object is difficult to test empirically. It is because the meaning that emerges comes from a person's interpretation of the object in a definite situation, for example, the image of a fish at the end of the Middle Pole on a replica of a barge (*Tongkang*). Of course, the interpretation of this image is related to the sea or marine products.

Figure 3. *Tongkang*



Based on a collection of data, the *Bakar Tongkang* event is related to the sea God *Ki Hu Ong Ya* and the God *Tai Sun* who reflect the power of duality, connecting good and bad, joy and sadness, as well as good fortune and misfortune. Chinese people believe that through the *Bakar Tongkang* ritual, Chinese people will achieve success in life. Not following this ritual will make their life feel less directed, without clear goals, and the success they achieve will lose meaning.

They need to follow this ritual as a form of their obedience and expression of gratitude to the creator for the help and blessings he has given to the lives of the Chinese community. The results of this research are in line with [Pratama \(2022\)](#), who that stated in the ritual process, there are symbolic elements such as dance, artistic expressions, and rituals that have meaning based on Chinese people's beliefs. The resulting conclusion is that *Bakar Tongkang* is a manifestation of the Chinese people's gratitude to God *Ki Hu Ong Ya* and God *Tai Sun* and is a symbol of their ancestors' shared determination to settle in Panipahan and not return to their homeland.

In addition, overall, the *Bakar Tongkang* tradition is not just a physical ceremony but a symbolic event full of meaning. In its symbolic stage, *Bakar Tongkang* encapsulates the concept of separation, liberation from the burden of the past, and a new beginning with the light of enlightenment. This symbol not only functions as an individual representation but also as a reflection of the cultural system of the society that carries it. The *Bakar Tongkang* tradition creates space for transformation and evolution, allowing communities to celebrate change with passion. As a deep symbol, *Bakar Tongkang* teaches us courage in facing change and the importance of preserving cultural roots while remaining open to progress. Thus, the traditional

symbol of *Bakar Tongkang* is a reminder that in every separation, there is an opportunity to build a meaningful future.

### **Conclusion**

The historical meaning behind the *Bakar Tongkang* ritual in the Panipahan area is closely related to the historical roots of the Chinese community, which originates from China. They undertake a month-long migration journey using a barge (*Tongkang*) for a better life. When they finally found land, God's instructions in the form of light from a distance guided them to land on that land, especially in the Rokan Hilir region of Riau, for example, this tradition is concrete evidence of the migration and resilience of the Chinese people who first arrived in the area in 1826 became a very significant cultural heritage. With their arrival, the *Bakar Tongkang* became a symbol of the journey not only physically but also symbolically, depicting the courage to leave one's homeland, seek a new life, and unite in a life's journey full of challenges. The process of *Bakar Tongkang* is not only a physical ceremony to destroy the ship but also a ritual filled with deep meaning. This procession reflects the cultural and spiritual richness of the people of Panipahan, Riau. The tradition begins with careful preparation, such as decorating the ship with symbolic ornaments, such as prayer paper and carvings of lion and dragon heads, which symbolize courage and protection.

This tradition contains values of solidarity and respect for the spiritual aspects that protect their journey, as seen in the offering of prayer paper and other symbolic ornaments. *Bakar Tongkang* is not only a ceremony to destroy ships but also a symbol of transformation, revival, and preservation of cultural heritage. Through the process of offering and preparing for the barge burning, the community not only celebrates its history but also strengthens its ethnic identity, strengthens community ties, and conveys a message of sustainability and courage to future generations. The history of Bakar Tongkang in Panipahan reflects the diversity and uniqueness of a cultural journey that continues to develop, deeply embedded in beliefs and values passed down from one generation to the next. All of this is a manifestation of their gratitude to the creator for the help and blessings that have been given to the lives of the Chinese ethnic community in Indonesia.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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