

***Belacan*; Folklore, Cultural Conservation and Regional Promotion Based on Local Potential**

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ABSTRACT

Belacan Pulau Kampai is one of the foodfolk that must be preserved. It is a specialty food that is an expression of the local indigenous of the local community and ancestral heritage that has been transmitted across generations. This article explores the existence of *belacan* and identifies constraints faced by the community of Pulau Kampai related to *belacan* production, as well as strategies for revitalizing business sustainability and conserving local wisdom. This research was conducted in Pulau Kampai Village, Pangkalan Susu District, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province. The data collection techniques were participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document studies. The results showed that the obstacles faced by the community in conserving the culture of *belacan* production are the need for more availability of raw materials (*rebon* shrimp) for *belacan* processing due to conflicts of interest among the fishermen. Therefore, it is essential to establish a customary institution or instrument that regulates the division of catch areas among fishermen. It is important to note that cultural conservation efforts must also collaborate with various stakeholders, especially local communities.

Keywords: *Folklore, Cultural Conservation, Regional Promotion, Local Potential, Belacan.*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the local potentials of the Pulau Kampai community is the legendary *belacan* product. According to the Indonesian Dictionary, *belacan* is a seasoning made from fermented small fish or shrimp. Indonesians usually process *belacan* into sambal or use it as a flavour in various dishes. Another name for *belacan* is *terasi*. One of the best *belacan* in North Sumatra is produced by the people of Pulau Kampai. Many home industries produce *belacan* by utilizing marine resources in the region tersebut [1], [2]

According to Danandjaja [3], food falls into the category of non-oral folklore. Folklore is the culture of a society that is spread and passed down from generation to generation, both oral and non-oral. The word "folklore" comes from the English compound words "folk" and "lore." "Folk" refers to a group of people with similar physical, cultural and social characteristics,

while "lore" refers to customs or ancestral knowledge that is passed down across generations. Thus, folklore can be defined as human culture that is transmitted and passed down traditionally from generation to generation, both in oral and non-oral forms. Each region, ethnicity, tribe, group, nation, and religion has its folklore, so Indonesia has a variety of folklore [3].

Typical food owned by a group of people is an expression of collective intelligence that reflects local wisdom and ancestral heritage across generations. Its existence serves to define and signify the identity of ethnic groups because it is related to the way of processing, how to serve, and the function of food in a particular society [3]. According to Widyastuti in [4], the function of food in the context of social life is as follows: 1) for offerings, such as for traditional ceremonies; 2) for daily meals, whether in the form of main meals, such as rice, corn, or small meals in the form of simple snacks; 3) traditional food for special

events; and 4) traditional food as a regional cultural identity. Food also functions as a social bond, group solidarity, and identity symbolism [3].

The existence of food also symbolizes the existence of an operating cognitive system. For example, knowledge about the consumption of certain foods can cause dangerous diseases. It indicates the existence of a cognitive system formed from the accumulation of experience and the intersection of knowledge, such as the belief that one can contract syphilis from llama meat in Peruvian and Bolivian society [5], including the choice of food consumed by the community when it is associated with a condition of biological change, such as pregnancy. In this case, cultural factors and beliefs determine food choices during pregnancy and lactation. Cultural practices create adherence to consumption patterns for specific periods, and this condition will continue [6]. Therefore, food consumption patterns in many places are also identified with dimensions of health. Snow's study shows that communities have one or more traditional beliefs that are linked to health systems, such as dietary patterns and reproductive cycles [7].

The existence of *belacan* in Pulau Kampai is one of the speciality foods processed from ingredients provided by nature, namely *rebon* shrimp which is a marine product of Pulau Kampai. However, in recent times, the people of Pulau Kampai have been concerned about the sustainability of the *belacan* business. In fact, the ability to activate the knowledge and utilization of natural resources into praxis has an impact on the welfare of the community (Hu et al., 2018). Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the existence of *belacan* as one of the potentials owned by the community, as well as the various obstacles faced so that the cultural conservation agenda (local indigenous) of the Pulau Kampai community can be implemented.

On the other hand, recognizing local knowledge can increase the resilience of a community in the face of change [10]. It is hoped that understanding the cognitive system of the Kampai Island community in the business of producing *belacan* and mechanizing the transfer of knowledge into behavior will be part of the documentation and socialization of knowledge so that it can continue to be transmitted from generation to generation. The existence of local indigenous as a set of knowledge, beliefs, worldviews, understandings, and behaviors that exist in society becomes a strategy to survive in meeting their needs, both in the face of changes in the physical environment and culture [11]–[13].

2. METHOD

This research was conducted in Pulau Kampai Village, a small island located in Pangkalan Susu District, Langkat Regency. It is only 9.5 Km from the Sub-district City, which can be reached using boat transport. Based on medium-term development plan of Pulau Kampai Village, the total of population of Pulau Kampai is 4,210 people. The area is only 42.42 Km².

In data collection activities, the author used participatory observation techniques, in-depth interviews, FGD (Focus Group Discussion), and document studies. Participatory observation aims to observe various social facts, both in the form of actions, behaviours, and other symbolic dimensions presented by the community, so that the sociological picture of the community can be observed and understood to the fullest [14]. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect information, opinions, and views from the research subjects. Interviews were conducted in a structured and semi-structured manner [15]. The informants in this study were the community of Pulau Kampai, traditional elders, village officials, as well as the business actors of the *belacan* business in Pulau Kampai Village.

The FGD technique was conducted for two purposes, namely validating the previous interview data and sharpening the data that had been obtained. Data collection through focused discussions presents a more systematic and directed discussion of the problem [16]. Thus, the meaning of the themes discussed will be more in line with the emic perspective of the community group. The data obtained through FGD activities are collective and more credible [17], thus minimizing the researchers' misinterpretation of the problem focus [18]. The document study technique was carried out with the aim of supporting primary data. The documents analyzed were online newspapers, government documents, and various other documents deemed relevant to the research theme [19].

The data analysis technique in this research follows an interactive approach, which starts with finding patterns, categorizing or arranging data based on appropriate themes, analyzing relationships between concepts, and finally, interpreting data and giving meaning [20].

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Belacan* as Foodfolk of Kampai Island Community

Belacan in Kampai Island was first introduced by the Ethnic Chinese around the 1890s. At that time, the Ethnic Chinese made *belacan* as a backup food. Around 1899, *belacan* began to be traded in the Pulau Kampai

area and around the Strait of Malacca (Interview Abu Bakar, *belacan* entrepreneur). In the early phase of *belacan* production, the ethnic Chinese made their own without employing the local community. However, as demand grew over the years, the *belacan* producers agreed to employ local people.

One of the most famous *belacan* entrepreneurs in Pulau Kampai is Lim Ju Kuang. In everyday life, people often call him 'Ko Ahan.' Initially, Ko Ahan only had a *belacan* business, but later, his business expanded into other commodity sectors. Ko Ahan runs his business under the banner of the Kedaung Group. The first *belacan* brands from Pulau Kampai at that time were *belacan* A77 and *belacan* A3. Abu Bakar asserts that "who would have thought ... Ko Ahan, the son of a Kampai Island fisherman and *belacan* maker in those days, could be as successful as he is today".

Along the way, several other terms entrepreneurs began to emerge. They were residents of Kampai Island. Abu Bakar, for example, has been in the *belacan* business for 15 years. In the marketing process, Abu Bakar does it manually. He sells his *belacan* to people who come directly to his house. As for overseas sales, Abu Bakar does not send the *belacan* directly overseas, but through distributors who come to buy directly to Kampai Island and then sell to consumers abroad. Other overseas marketing is done through people from Pulau Kampai who migrate overseas. They come directly to Mr Abu Bakar to order large quantities of *belacan* (Interview Abu Bakar, 2023). According to him, until now, *belacan* Pulau Kampai has been distributed to various countries, such as Qatar, Singapore, Germany and Hong Kong.

The mechanization of *belacan* making is still done traditionally. The main ingredients needed to make *belacan* are rebon shrimp/fine shrimp and salt containing iodine. The method of making *belacan* is as follows: First, the prawns are washed thoroughly with water and dried in the sun. The drying process takes one week usually. Secondly, after drying, the dried shrimp is mixed with salt containing iodine and fermented by storing it in an airtight container for five months. Third, after fermentation, the *belacan* ingredients are ground until smooth, like porridge. After that, the material cannot be moulded immediately but must be stored again in an airtight container for two to three months so that the *belacan* produced is more durable. Finally, there is the moulding and drying stage. The drying process at this stage is done for two weeks.



Figure 1. The process of drying wet *belacan* ingredients

Source: Field documentation, 2023



Figure 2. Packed *belacan* ready to be marketed

Source: Field documentation, 2023

The existence of the *belacan* processing business in Pulau Kampai has had a significant impact on the community's economy, primarily through the absorption of a significant amount of labor, especially women. People who were previously unemployed are now able to find alternative employment. Women receive additional income from their involvement in the *belacan* production business so that they do not only rely on their husband's income as the head of the family. On the other hand, the production of the legendary *belacan* indirectly helped introduce Kampai Island to the rest of Indonesia. *Belacan* Pulau Kampai is known as the best *belacan* in North Sumatra.

The existence of *belacan* Pulau Kampai can be seen as part of food folk that reflects the creative power of the community in processing their resources [4]. *Belacan* is an essential part of the Kampai Island community. It is a folk food sourced from processed marine products. The processing mechanism and recipes also come from the habits and collective intelligence of the community, which are then passed down orally. The concept of folk food processing can be through the process of cooking or fermentation. In the cooking process can be boiled,

steamed, fried, roasted (fried not in oil or with sand), burned, baked, and pounded (Widyastuti in [4]).

Traditional food as part of folklore has specifications related to the acquisition and processing of these foods, so it is not an exaggeration to say that the *belacan* production business carried out by the Pulau Kampai community is part of a cultural preservation effort. *Belacan* Pulau Kampai has become "foodways" that are part of the collective intelligence of a cultural group [5], [21].

3.2. Problems Faced and Solutions for *Belacan* Business Sustainability

Today, Pulau Kampai's *belacan* production faces substantial obstacles that raise concerns about the sustainability of the *belacan* business in the community. Firstly, the need for more availability of the primary raw material for *belacan* producing, namely *kecepe* shrimp, a small-sized shrimp, or *rebon* shrimp as the local community knows it.

From discussions with fishermen in Kampai Island, in the past it was easy to obtain raw materials for *belacan* processing. The fishermen could easily catch *rebon* shrimp in a location not far from the mainland of Kampai Island. However, since the arrival of the *gantung* trawl (used by Kampai Island and outside Kampai Island fishermen who fish around the island), the shrimp population needs to be improved. There is a conflict between the coastal community (fishermen who only catch *rebon* shrimp to make *belacan*) and the boat fishermen who use *gantung* trawlers. There is no Panglima laut or anything like it in the Pulau Kampai area, so conflicts that occur in laut have a tiny way of being resolved.

The territorial sea differs from land in terms of ownership. The ocean cannot be privatized into individual property rights like land. The sea is a free area for anyone, especially local fishermen, to get as many resources as possible in the sea as long as it does not damage the existing ecosystem. The problem then is when the fishermen have different target catches for different types of marine resources. In the case of Pulau Kampai, some fishers target *kecepe* shrimp (*rebon* shrimp) as their main catch.

Meanwhile, other fishers do not have a specific target type of catch. This second category of fishers then uses *gantung* trawls to increase their catch. As a result, there is a conflict of interest at the fishermen's level.

To resolve the conflict of interest among fishermen, there are at least two things that can be offered as a solution. First, it is necessary to establish a customary institution or instrument that regulates the division of catch areas among fishermen. This institution or

instrument could adopt the concept of the sea commander in the Aceh region. The sea commander is a customary instrument whose role is to protect, lead and apply regulations in fishing at sea so that conflicts do not occur among fishermen. The Panglima Laut will settle disputes in the territorial waters. Panglima laut has a vital role in improving the standard of living of the fishing community because it is the leader in implementing the customary law of the sea for fishermen by dealing with various problems in fishing at sea [22].

The limits of authority and authority of this institution can be formulated and agreed upon by the people of Pulau Kampai. This institution is like a cultural institution where the existence of this institution is formed from the community, by the community, and for the community. In addition to protecting the waters around Kampai Island from over-exploitation that can damage the marine ecosystem, this institution will also be able to unravel and minimize conflicts that occur around the marine waters of Kampai Island, which until now have minimal way to resolve. Second, encouraging the creation of water regulations, at least at the district government level, for the sake of justice and the sustainability of the Pulau Kampai *belacan* production industry, which has become a regional flagship product. This regulation will regulate the boundaries of the areas where trawling can and cannot be used around the waters of Pulau Kampai.

On the other hand, the presence of a PLTU (Steam Power Plant) on Sembilan Island, a small island only 3 km from Kampai Island that has been operating since 2019, has also affected the existence of *rebon* shrimp. The waste produced by the company pollutes the sea, disrupting the sustainability of the marine biota ecosystem [23]. Of course, the above problems have an impact on the economic dimension of *belacan* business actors in particular and the community in general. Businesses do not dare to market widely and collaborate with various partners because they are worried that they will not be able to fulfil the demand if it increases. One way to deal with the shortage of raw materials is to store the raw materials when there is an overflow of raw materials in large quantities.

Another concern of the community is that there will be no more successors willing to run the *belacan* production in Pulau Kampai as time goes by. Young people today are increasingly reluctant to dive in and engage in *belacan* processing; until now, only the elderly are left to run it; unfortunately, one day, the typical *belacan* of Kampai Island will disappear. It is also necessary to contribute to the government for sustainable development and provide facilities and infrastructure so that the realization of the *belacan*

industry from Kumpai Island. For this reason, local government support in various forms, be it presenting regulations, building facilities and infrastructure, and other forms, will significantly help the development of the *belacan* business as a local product that has gone global.

4. CONCLUSION: FOODFOLK, CULTURAL CONSERVATION, AND REGIONAL PROMOTION

The existence of food is considered part of the cultural identity of a culture, so maintaining its sustainability is an essential part of cultural conservation. Cultural conservation is an effort to preserve, maintain, care for, and prevent the loss of a particular culture. "Foodfolk" is the creative work power of the community that deserves a place to be developed [4]. Foodfolk can also be associated with regional development potential, where various folklore potentials with material and immaterial heritage have meanings that are worth developing in the aspect of tourism development. Thus, folklore not only plays a role in preserving culture, but also in supporting regional promotion through tourism. It encourages the economic development of local communities, creates jobs, and maintains social relations between generations [24]. Therefore, cultural conservation contributes to social welfare and strengthening community security.

Indeed, tourism promotion can be framed with cultural narratives found in the region as they are considered to influence the emotional state of tourists [25]. The study of cultural preservation conducted by the Kejawen community in Sidorejo through folklore can be an excellent example in this regard. *Kejawen* believes in the tradition of bathing by burning offerings at the Balekambang Site. According to them, the tradition is an ancestral heritage that needs to be preserved. This effort has positive implications, namely being able to increase awareness, tolerance, and the economy of the surrounding community. When people accept a tradition and do not dispute it by showing tolerance and care, the conservation process can be carried out optimally [26].

It is important to note that traditional cultural conservation efforts must collaborate with various parties, especially local communities [27], [28], and cultural experts and activists [29]. It is also essential that multicultural-related curricula are taught in education to recreate authentic multicultural literacy, where people today are increasingly alienated and isolated from the foods, festivals and folklore of their culture [30]. Especially in the current disruptive era, local values must be revitalized in order to maintain cultural blurring as a cultural identity [31].

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