

## Cultural Meaning and Social Function of Mukun Tradition in PALI Regency: A Qualitative Ethnographic Study of Local Communities

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**ABSTRACT** - One of the intangible cultural heritages that has become a cultural identity in Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir (PALI) Regency, South Sumatra, is the Mukun tradition, which is carried out prior to wedding ceremonies. This study aims to examine the philosophical meanings and social functions of the Mukun tradition amid the growing influence of modernization. The research employs a qualitative approach using the rapid ethnography method. Data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, cultural practitioners, and local community members who continue to preserve the tradition in PALI Regency. The findings reveal that modernization has influenced the form of *juadah*, or traditional offerings, within the Mukun tradition. Traditionally, community members brought homemade traditional foods as symbols of togetherness and mutual care. However, these offerings are increasingly being replaced by instant noodles, biscuits, and other practical goods due to efficiency demands and changes in modern lifestyles. Despite these material transformations, the essential social values embedded in the tradition remain intact. The distribution of Mukun, which is conducted simultaneously with the delivery of wedding invitations, creates a social bond based on reciprocity and mutual obligation among community members. During the merewang process, recipients of Mukun commonly contribute household necessities, labor assistance, or financial support to the bride and groom. The practice of recording these contributions reflects a structured social system rooted in cooperation and collective responsibility, aimed at easing the economic burden of newlyweds as they begin married life. This study concludes that the Mukun tradition continues to function as a social adhesive that adapts to societal changes without losing its core values. Although modernization has shifted the material form of the offerings from traditional foods to practical packaged goods, the essence of solidarity, mutual assistance, and communal harmony within the tradition remains well preserved.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the intangible cultural heritages that is still sustainable in Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir (PALI) Regency is the Mukun tradition. This tradition is part of a series of wedding customs that is carried out a few days before the marriage contract takes place. Mukun is not only interpreted as a ceremonial activity, but as a social interaction media loaded with cultural values, such as respect, family, solidarity, and mutual cooperation between communities.

In the perspective of communication science and sociology, the Mukun tradition can be analyzed through the theory of Symbolic Interactionism. This theory emphasizes that meaning is not intrinsically attached to an object, but is formed through a process of social interaction involving symbols, whether in the form of language, action, or object. Through Mukun, the community not only exchanges goods, but also builds and affirms the mutually agreed social meaning. Each symbol used in this tradition contains an implicit message that is understood by community members as part of their cultural identity. In early practice, Juada (traditional cake) became the main symbol in the Mukun process. Juada not only functions as food, but also as a representation of the value of warmth, sincerity, and respect to the receiving party. However, as the times develop and the flow of modernization enters, there is a transformation in the form of the symbol. Juada is now starting to be replaced by more practical products such as instant noodles and biscuits. This change shows that there is an adaptation of society to the demands of efficiency and practicality without completely abandoning the essence of the tradition itself. This phenomenon of change reinforces the relevance of the Symbolic Interactionism theory, where the meaning does not lie in its object, but in the social agreement that accompanies it. Although the physical form of the delivery has shifted, the values contained in the practice of Mukun are still maintained. The interaction that occurs in the process is still a space for the community to strengthen social relationships, build solidarity, and strengthen their collective identity.

Furthermore, the Mukun tradition also functions as a social mechanism in maintaining community harmony. Through the involvement of various parties in the preparation and implementation process, a reciprocal relationship is created that strengthens the sense of togetherness. This tradition becomes a place for communication between individuals and groups, where every action and symbol has a meaning that is understood collectively.

Thus, Mukun not only survives as a cultural heritage, but also continues to develop following the social dynamics of the community. Modernization does not immediately eliminate traditional values, but encourages the reinterpretation of more contextual symbols. As long as the social meaning contained in the interaction is maintained, the Mukun tradition will continue to live as part of the adaptive and dynamic cultural identity of the PALI community in the midst of changing times.

## METHODS AND MATERIAL

This research was carried out using a qualitative descriptive method, this research is descriptive, namely, the description of all the collected data, using qualitative methods, collecting and analyzing data in the form of words (oral or written) and human actions and this research does not analyze numbers. This research uses in-depth interview techniques to Mukun customs and traditions. To ensure the validity and depth of the data regarding the Mukun tradition in PALI Regency, informants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on the following criteria:

1. **Primary Informants:** Individuals who are indigenous members of the PALI community, have direct experience or have actively participated in the Mukun tradition (such as the *aria* or actors involved in the wedding tradition), and are willing to share their insights.
2. **Secondary/Supporting Informants:** Community leaders, cultural experts, or elders who possess extensive knowledge about the history, social functions, and cultural evolution of the Mukun tradition.
3. **General Criteria:** Informants must be residents of the local community where the tradition is actively practiced and capable of communicating clearly during the in-depth interviews.

## Research Design

The data obtained in the interview has been separated and also explained with the purpose of explaining the Cultural Meaning and Social Function of the Mukun Tradition in PALI Regency: An Ethnographic Qualitative Study on Local Communities. Despite the modernization, the Mukun tradition is not to stay away, but to take advantage and walk with modernization. The interview was conducted by the researcher to several individuals who had been directly involved in this Mukun tradition. The first interview to Ana Maria who was once the main actor in the Mukun tradition before her wedding (the bride-to-be) "When the groom came to the house to propose, that's when it was agreed on how much Mukun the groom could give to us the bride. When Mukun has been delivered to the bride's house, therefore Mukun is shared with family, friends and neighbors around. There are various kinds of mukun rewards, which can be in the form of home furnishings, or money, which is definitely very useful for us newlyweds to start a household." (The result of the interview with Ana Maria, 2026). Ana Maria, who has been the main actor in the Mukun tradition before her wedding (the bride-to-be), has experienced from the beginning to the end of the traditional procession of the Mukun tradition, which for her this custom is very helpful for newly married brides to build a household, starting from financial or functional objects. There is also a social interaction of the division of Mukun which creates a reciprocal process, becoming something that strengthens the social relationship of individuals to other communities.

The second interview with Rusdi, a traditional stakeholder in the Sukarami area, North Penukal sub-district, Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir regency, which of course often encounters the implementation of the Mukun tradition. "This marriage itself is carried out as agreed by both parties of the bride and groom, often 2 months before the wedding. We interpret Mukun as a symbol of social glue, life advice, as well as a mutual relationship. In the past, many women asked for Juada, of course it takes a long time to cook it, so Instant Noodles or Biscuits are considered more efficient to follow the progress of the times" (Interview results with Rusdi, 2026). Rusdi has been a traditional stakeholder for many years, which of course is not uncommon to encounter the implementation of Mukun customs in the Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir Regency area. Rusdi said that the implementation of Mukun does not have a time benchmark, will always adjust the agreement between the bride-to-be and the groom, often 2 months before the wedding day. Mukun has a meaning as a social adhesive symbol, which brings together various communities, life advice that teaches to continue to be good in socializing, to reciprocal relationships that remember each other's kindness. Considering that using Juada as a means of Mukun takes a long time, modernization by replacing Juada with Instant Noodles or Biscuits, is considered more efficient, also beneficial for the community.

The third interview with Dona, one of the people of Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir district, who coexist with Mukun customs. "We who accept Mukun as invited guests, often get half a carton Instant Noodles, the cardboard is cut in half, or one pack of Biscuits. We repay mukun with household furniture, it can also be in the form of money. The Mukun that we receive will certainly be consumed by us" (Dona's interview result, 2026). Dona as a community who often encounters this Mukun custom, explained that as an invited guest he often gets half a carton of Instant Noodles, which is actually the Instant Noodle carton is cut into 2 parts, or 1 pack of Biscuits. Mukun usually responds with household furniture, or money as a financial support for the bride and groom. The Mukun that he received will become a consumption material for him. The fourth interview with Thomas, one of the residents of Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir district who also felt how the Mukun tradition was carried out from the side of the bride and groom's family. "That's how Mukun is, it is a custom that is done in the village, the benefit is that we are the community as well as the family of the bride and groom, getting food from the Mukun that is given. We can return Mukun in the form of money or daily consumption materials, such as flour, bottled drinking water, live chicken, or cooking tools" (Thomas' interview results, 2026). Thomas, who has received Mukun several times as a family of the bride and groom, explained that Mukun is a useful custom that he often encounters in the village. When responding to Mukun, the Thomas family often gives cash as a form of financial support, or daily consumption materials, such as wheat flour, bottled drinking water, even chicken that is still alive and can also be in the form of cooking tools, for example frying pans.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the interview with four sources with different backgrounds, they have expressed their opinions from their respective experiences. This shows that Mukun will remain a tradition that is inherited with its valuable values and goes hand in hand with modernization. This continues to be related to the theory of Symbolic Interactionism developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, it emphasizes that humans act based on the meaning given to symbols, not just a response to physical stimuli.

Therefore, whatever the means of Mukun, be it Juada, Instant Noodles, or Biscuits, will always remain as a symbol that has its own meaning for the social life of the community. Even with the modernization, it becomes a unique thing and more value for this tradition. The development of the findings shows that the Mukun tradition not only survives as a cultural practice, but also experiences a dynamic process of negotiating meanings in the midst of social change. The results of the interview from the four sources showed that each individual, both the main actors, traditional stakeholders, and the general public, gave a relatively harmonious interpretation of the essence of Mukun as a symbol of togetherness, reciprocity, and social solidarity. The alignment of this meaning is a strong indication that the symbolic construction in the Mukun tradition is still maintained collectively, even though the material form has undergone a transformation. In the perspective of symbolic interactionism developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, meaning is not static, but continues to be formed and reproduced through social interaction.

In the context of Mukun, the change from juadah to instant noodles or biscuits is not a form of cultural degradation, but the result of the process of redefining symbols agreed upon by the community. That is, what is maintained is not only the object, but the value behind the exchange, namely social concern, collective support, and relationship commitment between individuals. The social implications of this finding are quite significant. First, the Mukun tradition functions as a local mechanism in building social resilience, especially in helping new couples economically and emotionally. The practice of recording Mukun's reply also reflects the existence of an informally organized social system, which strengthens the solidarity network in the community. Second, the sustainability of this tradition shows that modernization does not always erode local culture, but can go hand in hand through a selective adaptation process. This is a concrete example of how local communities are able to maintain cultural identity in the midst of globalization.

In addition, the cultural implications are also seen in how the younger generation reinterprets this tradition. With a more practical form transformation, Mukun becomes more easily accepted and run by the current generation, so that the chances of sustainability are even greater. Modernization in this case is actually a preservation strategy, not a threat. Academically, this research contributes to the study of cultural communication, especially in understanding how traditional symbols undergo reinterpretation without losing their basic meaning. While practically, this finding can be a basis for local governments and cultural activists to design an adaptive and contextual cultural preservation program, without having to rigidly maintain the old form. Thus, the Mukun tradition is not only relevant as a cultural heritage, but also as a social system that is alive, flexible, and able to answer the needs of society in every era.

This study contributes to the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) field by providing empirical insights into how local cultural traditions, such as Mukun, can be integrated into cultural tourism and creative hospitality curricula. Understanding the social and symbolic values of local heritage allows TVET institutions to develop culture-based vocational programs, equipping students with localized knowledge that is essential for sustainable tourism management and community-based entrepreneurship.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the Mukun tradition in Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir Regency (PALI) is an intangible cultural heritage that has a philosophical meaning and a strong social function in people's lives. This tradition is not only part of the wedding procession series, but also plays a role as a cultural communication medium that strengthens social relationships through the practice of reciprocity (reciprocity) and gotong royong. Despite undergoing modernization, especially in

the change in the form of the delivery from traditional juadah to instant noodles or biscuits, the essence of the value contained in the Mukun tradition is still maintained. The shift actually shows the community's ability to adapt to the development of the times without losing the symbolic meaning that is the core of the tradition itself. Through the perspective of symbolic interactionism, Mukun is understood as a social symbol that builds meaning through interaction between individuals. This tradition creates social commitment, solidarity, and real support for the bride and groom in starting a household life. Thus, Mukun remains relevant and functions as an adaptive social glue, maintaining the continuity of togetherness values in the midst of modernization.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## **AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION**

Ayu Indah Permata contributed to data collection, field interviews, and manuscript drafting. Suci Prestika contributed to conceptual development, data analysis, and manuscript revision. Desy Misnawati contributed to research supervision, methodological guidance, and final manuscript review. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## **AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Interview data and field notes are stored securely and may be shared for academic purposes while maintaining participant confidentiality.

## **DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI**

The authors declare that generative AI was used only as a language-support tool for grammar checking, sentence refinement, and academic writing assistance. All ideas, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions presented in this manuscript are entirely the responsibility of the authors.

## ETHIC STATEMENTS

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were fully respected throughout the study.

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