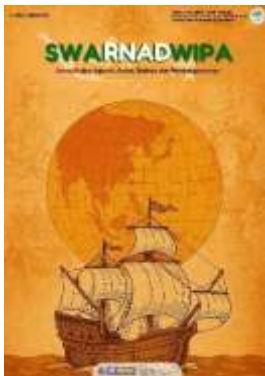


The Development of the Sihali Aek Ceremonial Tradition in Tipang Village, Baktiraja District (2013–2024)

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Abstract

This study examines the development of the Sihali Aek ritual tradition in Tipang Village, Baktiraja Subdistrict, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, from 2013 to 2024. The Sihali Aek tradition is a customary ritual of the Batak Toba people related to prayers for soil fertility, the flow of water sources, and community well being, particularly in the agricultural sector. This study aims to understand the background of the emergence of the Sihali Aek tradition, the process of conducting the ceremony, and the development of this tradition in the daily lives of the people of Tipang Village. The research method employed was a qualitative approach with a historical perspective, utilizing data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, and documentation. The results indicate that the Sihali Aek tradition holds significant social, religious, and cultural value for the community. Over time, the tradition has undergone several changes in its implementation, yet it continues to preserve the customary values that define the identity of the Batak Toba people.

Keywords: tradition, silahi aek, tipang village.

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INTRODUCTION

North Sumatra Province is one of the regions in Indonesia rich in ethnic diversity, including the Batak Toba, Karo, Simalungun, Mandailing, Malay, and Nias peoples. Each of these ethnic groups possesses unique characteristics and traditions passed down from generation to generation through the transmission of norms and values upheld by the community. Additionally, each region possesses distinct ancestral legacies as part of efforts to preserve and pass on culture and local wisdom to strengthen and build a sense of identity (Firdaus, 2017). It turns out that in some areas, there are still communities that firmly uphold their ancestral heritage. One location that continues to preserve its ancestral cultural heritage is Tipang Village, located in Baktiraja Subdistrict, Humbang Hasundutan Regency. Although Tipang Village is surrounded by steep cliffs, the local residents have utilized the area for agricultural land. Tipang Village is known as one of the villages that still employs traditional methods in managing rice field irrigation. This traditional irrigation method holds significant potential to support food security and meet the needs of the community in Tipang Village. The local community continues to uphold this traditional irrigation practice to encourage residents to preserve and sustain the cultural heritage values passed down by their ancestors (Manalu et al., 2024). The local knowledge passed down by ancestors regarding traditional irrigation is known as sihali

aek, or “water digging” in Indonesian. The sihali aek tradition plays a vital role in strengthening community solidarity through collective effort (*arsiruppa*). The sihali aek tradition is one of the traditions that is still preserved today in Tipang Village. The practice of the sihali aek tradition is estimated to have existed for 200 years (Harvina, 2022).

The Sihali Aek tradition is a system that governs irrigation in the village of Tipang. The community responsible for traditional irrigation in Tipang Village is known as the Sihali Aek. The Sihali Aek management consists of 120 people and is divided into two groups. The first group is called Sihali Aek Dolok. The second group is called Sihali Aek Toba. Additionally, there are two people who serve as *parhara*. Agricultural irrigation for the rice fields in Tipang Village has a unique characteristic compared to other areas: water from two river streams can flow to rice fields located higher than the river mouth. This irrigation pattern supplies water to rice fields that are not near a lake or river mouth. Sihali aek is carried out in October after the harvest season has ended for the farmers, and it begins before the farmers start plowing the fields so that the soil can be easily tilled during preparation. The Sihali aek process takes 3–4 days to complete, from cleaning the channels to *manabar* (reopening the water channels). The Sihali Aek tradition, which is gradually undergoing changes, has begun to raise concerns about its future sustainability; there are fears that this tradition will either endure or, conversely, deteriorate and lose its meaning. Therefore, an in depth study of the development of this tradition is crucial. This is to understand how the tradition has been able to adapt or, conversely, faces the threat of extinction due to the social changes occurring between 2013 and 2024. The research timeframe is limited to this period because 2013 marks the starting point when official documents, village reports, or academic publications regarding the Sihali Aek tradition began to be systematically recorded. Consequently, researchers can more easily access data through archives or interviews with living informants

RESEARCH METHODS

In conducting research, certain procedures are followed, including ensuring the use of what is known as a method or technique. The research method used in this study is the Qualitative Descriptive method, which involves describing the collected data, analyzing it, and interpreting it in order to identify principles, patterns, values, and norms of the phenomenon under study (Hutasoit & Tampubolon, 2021).

Qualitative research is a research approach that generates descriptive information in the form of text regarding individuals or their expressions as well as observable actions. Thus, qualitative research allows us to understand individuals in depth and observe their development based on their perspectives of the reality they experience. Through a qualitative approach, we can gain deeper insight into individuals, groups, and experiences that may previously have been outside our knowledge (Nursanjaya, 2021).

Based on expert opinions, it can be concluded that the qualitative descriptive research method is a research approach aimed at understanding and describing a phenomenon in depth within its natural context. This research focuses on data in the form of words, both spoken and written, as well as behavior observed directly in the field. This method does not aim to test hypotheses or produce generalizations, but rather to gain a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of an event, experience, or action of the individuals being studied.

In qualitative descriptive research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument in the data collection and analysis process, using techniques such as observation, interviews, and document analysis. The ultimate goal is to produce a systematic, factual,

and holistic description of the phenomenon under study, thereby providing a deep understanding of the meaning behind the realities observed in the field.

In conducting this study, the author selected the research location in Baktiraja Subdistrict, specifically in Humbang Hasundutan Regency. Baktiraja Subdistrict is one of the subdistricts in Humbang Hasundutan Regency, consisting of several villages. The reason the researcher chose this location is that in Baktiraja Subdistrict, specifically in Tipang Village, the Sihali Aek tradition is still practiced to this day.

In this study, the author used two types of data, namely:

a. Primary Data

Primary data is data where the source or the author of the source witnessed, heard firsthand, or personally experienced the events described in the source (Herlina, 2020). The researcher collected this data using methods such as interviews, observations, and personal notes, ensuring that the information obtained remains authentic and has not been processed by others. One of the advantages of primary data is its ability to provide up to date information, in line with the research objectives.

b. Secondary Data

Secondary data consists of sources that have been processed beforehand, such as books and research articles on a particular event. In this study, secondary data includes village historical records, archives from the village office, BPS reports on community lifestyles, and references discussing social and economic changes within the community. Secondary data serves to supplement and strengthen the primary data, thereby making the analysis in the study more comprehensive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Geographically, Tipang Village is one of seven villages within the administrative area of Baktiraja Subdistrict, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, North Sumatra Province. The village's topography is dominated by hills and rocky terrain, most of which is used by the community for rice paddies. Additionally, Tipang Village is located directly adjacent to Lake Toba.

The distance from Tipang Village to the subdistrict capital is 5 km, a journey that takes about 15 minutes. The distance from Tipang Village to the regency capital, Dolok Sanggul, is 20 km, a journey that takes approximately 45 minutes. Administratively, Tipang Village is one of the self reliant villages under the supervision of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Tipang Village has existed for 31 years since the establishment of its government in 1993. Currently, Juanda Sihombing serves as the head of Tipang Village for the term from 2022 to 2027. The total area of Tipang Village is approximately 4,7862 km², consisting of residential areas in each hamlet (Hutasoit, 2024).

Background of the Sihali Aek Tradition

Sihali aek is not only found in Tipang Village. This system can be found in various regions, such as in Bali, where it is called subak; in West Sumatra, where the Minangkabau people call it batang air; and in Central Java, where several villages also implement a similar system known as a weir. Sihali aek is a system that regulates irrigation in Tipang Village, implemented as a means of managing water resources to be utilized optimally for the community's livelihood by channeling water to rice fields (Situmorang et al., 2021). In a statement from the source, Mr. Dennis Nababan, one of the turpuk leaders of the seven clans in Tipang Village, explained that the Sihali tradition originated because Tipang Village has steep valleys, barren land, and uneven terrain, which limited the community's ability to manage agriculture optimally.

Early Preparations for the Sihali Aek Tradition

The first stage in the implementation of the Sihali Aek Tradition is the preparatory stage, which serves as the primary foundation before the main activities take place. This preparatory stage plays a crucial role because it determines the smooth running of the entire series of activities to be carried out. In the context of the Tipang Village community, preparations are not carried out spontaneously, but rather through customary mechanisms that have been passed down from generation to generation. This process demonstrates that the Sihali Aek Tradition is not merely a technical activity of cleaning water channels, but a customary activity with specific rules, structures, and protocols that must be respected and carried out collectively. The preparation phase begins with a deliberation meeting involving the Raja Jolo as traditional custodians and figures holding authority within the community's social structure. The Raja Jolo act as representatives of two ancestral lines and two main regions: Simamora Dolok, Simamora Toba, Sihombing Dolok, and Sihombing Toba (Nababan et al., 2024).

Their involvement in the deliberations demonstrates that the decisions made are not individual decisions but rather the result of a collective agreement representing all elements of the community. Within the social system of Tipang Village, the Kings of Jolo possess strong traditional legitimacy, ensuring that every decision reached through the deliberative forum holds moral and social authority that the community is bound to uphold. The Bolon Meeting of the Kings of Napitu (Harvina et al., 2020).

Rapot Bolon Raja Napitu

The Rapot Bolon Raja Napitu is a major meeting involving clan leaders within the traditional community structure of Tipang Village. This meeting holds significant importance as it serves as the official forum for discussing various matters of common interest, including preparations for the Sihali Aek tradition. The clan leaders who are members of the Raja Napitu are invited by one of the clan leaders whose turn it is to host the meeting. The rotation is determined on a rotating basis as a form of collective responsibility and equitable distribution of roles within the traditional leadership structure. Before the official meeting is held, preliminary informal discussions usually take place with several Raja Jolo when they meet in public places, especially as October approaches. These preliminary discussions serve as an initial communication to ensure readiness and agree on the timing of the meeting, which is generally held in July.

The Rapot Bolon Raja Napitu ceremony is typically held at the home of the clan leader whose turn it is to host the event, a role known in traditional terms as the toguan. This home serves as the center of deliberations and symbolizes the organizer's responsibility to honor the meeting participants.

The process of delivering invitations or notifications regarding the meeting is carried out through the respective parhara. The parhara serves as the messenger of traditional customs, ensuring that information is conveyed officially and in accordance with established procedures. This mechanism demonstrates that every stage of the meeting is conducted in a structured manner and follows customary rules that have been passed down through generations.

The Implementation of Marsiruppa Sihali Aek

The essence of the Sihali Aek tradition lies in the comprehensive cleaning of irrigation channels, carried out from the upstream to the downstream sections without exception. This activity is not merely a physical task of cleaning the irrigation channels, but also a manifestation of the community's collective responsibility in maintaining the

sustainability of the rice field irrigation system. Every section of the canal is given equal attention to ensure there are no obstructions that could disrupt the flow of water to the farmland.

In practice, everyone involved is assigned clear responsibilities that must be carried out to the best of their ability. This division of labor aims to ensure that water flows smoothly to all the rice fields that depend on the irrigation channels.

Through shared responsibility, the community recognizes that a successful harvest depends not only on individual effort, but also on cooperation and concern for the common good. Before the community work or marsirimpa begins, the community first holds a Mangallang Indahan Siporhis event a communal meal intended to foster togetherness and strengthen solidarity.

This activity holds symbolic significance: it strengthens social bonds among workers before undertaking the strenuous task. Once the communal meal concludes, all workers proceed to the designated site to clear a 9.04 kilometer long water channel.

The work is fairly distributed among 120 workers, comprising 60 workers in Dolok and 60 workers in Toba. This division was carried out proportionally so that the workload was evenly distributed and did not burden one side. With a well organized division system and a strong spirit of togetherness, the Sihali Aek tradition serves as tangible proof of how the value of mutual cooperation is still preserved in agrarian communities.

Mangallang Indahan Siporhis

In the Sihali Aek tradition, there is a practice called Mangallang Indahan Siporhis. Literally, this translates to: "Mangallang" means "to eat," and "Indahan Siporhis" means "healthy rice." This healthy rice is called *tumba* or turmeric rice, cooked using a special spice blend known as *sorbuk*. This ritual is routinely performed before the *marsarimpa* ceremony. The Sihali Aek tradition is carried out as an expression of gratitude for the bountiful harvest bestowed upon the entire Tipang community. This gratitude is symbolized by serving delicious food to the community, especially those who have contributed to the success of the harvest namely the members of Sihali Aek. This symbolism is reflected in the dish, which consists of yellow rice served in a container wider than a plate, with a larger portion of rice, accompanied by fish. In this context, meat dishes especially B1 (dog) and B2 (pork) are strictly prohibited, as are other types of meat. This prohibition applies throughout the entire Sihali Aek tradition. The most recommended dish is freshwater fish, such as *pora-pora* (similar to *bilih* fish).

The host usually places the rice and side dishes into a container made of woven pandan leaves, resembling a mat called a *tandok*, to be distributed. Each *tandok* contains food for each respective clan, the number of which has been recorded in detail. Some groups consist of 7, 8, or 9 people. The *tandok* is received by the respective Jolo kings of each clan and then distributed to their members.

After the meal is finished, the *tandok* is returned to the host along with all leftover food. The return is carried out in an orderly and sequential manner, starting with the oldest clan and proceeding to the youngest. This is followed by the consumption of betel nut. As a complement to the Mangallang Indahan Siporhis ceremony, betel nut is also provided to be eaten after the rice meal. For the Batak people, betel is an important element in traditional ceremonies. Betel, known in the Batak language as *demban* or *sirumata bulung* meaning "green leaves" or *napuran/na nihapuran*, which translates to "mixed with lime." A stack of betel is handed over to the eldest Raja Jolo. He then distributes the betel, which has been prepared with areca nuts, lime, and gambier, to each Raja Jolo.

The final stage of the Mangallang Indah Siporhis procession is the marhata nauli, during which the paso-paso are delivered. The marhata nauli serves as a forum for deliberation on important matters that need to be discussed, should any relevant issues arise that require attention, including the possibility of rescheduling the marsirimpa sihali aek in light of the latest conditions in Tipang. This consultation is led by Raja Jolo Marga Purba as the senior clan among the seven clans within Raja Napitu. Afterward, they return home while shaking hands to prepare, particularly the tools and manpower, for the marsirimpa Sihali Aek according to the established schedule. Uniquely, even in terms of speaking, they have unwritten rules that have been followed from the past until now. It begins with the Purba clan and ends with the Hutasoit clan, following a hierarchical order. And this rule exists only here. This means that the people of Tipang deeply value the kinship system, respect the elderly, and care for the young. They pay close attention to small yet psychologically significant details, which ultimately create an order that has a profound impact on peace. Below is the sequence of speaking opportunities in the traditional customs of Tipang.

The Effect of Sihali Aek on Food Security in Tipang Village

The Sihali Aek tradition is an expression of local wisdom in Tipang Village and plays a crucial role in sustaining the local community's agricultural system. Fundamentally, this tradition involves a collective effort by villagers to clean, repair, and manage the water channels that serve as a source of irrigation for agricultural areas. In agricultural communities like Tipang Village, the availability of water significantly impacts the success of crop yields, particularly in rice cultivation. Therefore, the practice of the Sihali Aek tradition not only holds cultural and social value but also has a major impact on food security in the village.

One of the significant impacts of the Sihali Aek tradition on food security is its ability to ensure the availability of water for agricultural land. Water is a crucial component in the plant growth process, especially for rice, which requires a consistent water supply throughout its growth cycle. By practicing the Sihali Aek tradition, the community comes together to clear irrigation channels of various obstructions such as mud, weeds, and other materials that can block the flow of water. With proper maintenance of irrigation channels, water from springs or rivers can flow smoothly to farmland. This situation allows farmers to carry out agricultural activities more efficiently, ensuring that crop yields are maintained and the community's food needs are met.

In addition to ensuring water availability, the Sihali Aek tradition also serves to create a fair and orderly water management system within the community. In practice, water distribution to farmers is not done randomly but follows customary norms agreed upon collectively among community members. These norms aim to ensure that every farmer receives equal rights in utilizing the available water resources.

With such arrangements in place, the potential for conflicts among farmers arising from water disputes can be minimized. Maintaining social stability among farmers undoubtedly has a positive effect on agricultural activities, as they can carry out their farming practices without being disrupted by disputes over water distribution.

Another equally significant impact of the Sihali Aek tradition is the reinforcement of the principle of mutual cooperation within the community of Tipang Village. The practice of this tradition involves the active participation of all community members, particularly the farmers who utilize the irrigation channels. Activities such as cleaning and repairing the water channels are carried out collectively without expecting financial compensation, but rather based on a shared awareness of the importance of maintaining

the sustainability of water resources. Through this collaborative process, social solidarity among residents grows stronger. The value of mutual cooperation, which is internalized in the Sihali Aek tradition, ultimately plays a role in maintaining the sustainability of the community's agricultural system, as each individual feels a collective responsibility to maintain the irrigation infrastructure that serves as the main pillar of food production.

CONCLUSION

The Sihali Aek tradition is a manifestation of the local community's knowledge, which plays a crucial role in water management and the sustainability of the agricultural system in the region. This tradition has developed within an agrarian community that relies heavily on water to support agricultural activities, particularly the cultivation of rice as the primary food source. Through the Sihali Aek tradition, residents collectively maintain and clean irrigation channels to ensure water flows smoothly from its source to the farmlands. Therefore, this tradition is not merely a cultural ritual passed down from generation to generation but also functions as a natural resource management system that supports the sustainability of the village community's agricultural activities.

In addition to serving as a water management tool, the Sihali Aek tradition also reflects a social structure that governs the fair distribution and use of water resources among farmers. In practice, water allocation is based on agreements and norms collectively recognized by the community. This mechanism is designed to ensure that all farmers have equal rights to access available water resources. These customary regulations play a crucial role in preventing conflicts among farmers that could disrupt the social balance within the community. With a clear system that is consistently enforced, agricultural activities can proceed harmoniously and support sustainability.

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