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# Islamic–Chinese Interaction in Cap Go Meh: Ritual Resistance and Its Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

*Tjik Harun<sup>1\*</sup>, Ris'an Rusli<sup>2</sup>, Choirun Niswah<sup>3</sup>, Reza Aprianti<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>Social Communication, Baku State University, Baku, Azerbaijan

<sup>1\*</sup>[tjikharun@radenfatah.ac.id](mailto:tjikharun@radenfatah.ac.id), <sup>2</sup>[risanrusli\\_uin@radenfatah.ac.id](mailto:risanrusli_uin@radenfatah.ac.id),

<sup>3</sup>[choirunniswah\\_uin@radenfatah.ac.id](mailto:choirunniswah_uin@radenfatah.ac.id), <sup>4</sup>[reza.aprianti@bsu.edu.az](mailto:reza.aprianti@bsu.edu.az)

## Abstract

**Objective:** This study aims to examine Islamic–Chinese interaction during the Cap Go Meh celebration on Kemaro Island, Palembang, by analyzing ritual resistance and cultural dialogue as mechanisms for preserving Chinese cultural identity while fostering interreligious coexistence and contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). **Theoretical framework:** The research is grounded in theories of ritual resistance, symbolic interactionism, and multiculturalism, which explain how religious symbols, collective memory, and cultural negotiation shape social integration within plural societies. **Literature review:** Previous studies have primarily discussed Cap Go Meh from perspectives of tourism, cultural heritage, or Chinese identity, while limited attention has been given to its role as a site of Islamic–Chinese interaction and its relevance to sustainable development. This study addresses that gap by integrating ritual analysis with the SDGs framework. **Method:** Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with community leaders, religious figures, festival participants, and local residents, complemented by documentary analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic interpretation to identify patterns of symbolic interaction, ritual adaptation, and social acceptance. **Results:** The findings reveal that ritual symbols, including lanterns, lion dances, incense, and the legendary narrative of Siti Fatimah and Tan Bun An, function as adaptive cultural strategies rather than exclusive religious expressions. These symbols facilitate intercultural dialogue, strengthen mutual trust, and transform historical resistance into collaborative social engagement accepted by the surrounding Muslim community. Such interactions reinforce social cohesion, preserve cultural diversity, and support peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, the festival contributes directly to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by safeguarding cultural heritage and strengthening inclusive communities, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by promoting tolerance, dialogue, and social harmony. **Implications:** The findings demonstrate that local cultural traditions can serve as practical models for intercultural governance and sustainable community development in multicultural societies. **Novelty:** This study offers a novel perspective by conceptualizing Cap Go Meh as an adaptive arena of ritual resistance that simultaneously functions as a platform for Islamic–Chinese interaction and a cultural mechanism supporting the achievement of the SDGs.

**Keywords:** cap go meh, islamic–chinese interaction, ritual resistance, sustainable development goals (sdgs), kemaro island.

## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of cultural globalization accompanied by the acceleration of information and technology flows has changed the way people interpret and practice traditions [1]. Traditions and rituals that once functioned as a support for social structures and means of inheriting values are now often commodified and transformed into mere cultural attractions [2]. In this context, modernization not only brought economic and social change, but also gave rise to identity crises in local communities that faced pressure to conform to dominant cultural norms [3], [4]. This condition shows that in the midst of the homogenization of global values, local communities are still trying to maintain rituals and cultural symbols as a means of affirming their identity and existence. Several recent studies highlight that ritual practices that survive in the modern era actually function as a form of cultural resilience, namely the ability of people to adapt without losing their traditional roots [5], [6]. Therefore, understanding the role of ritual in the context of a multicultural society is important to explain how local culture can survive in the midst of the tide of modernization and globalization that is uniform in value and symbolism.

At a broader social level, pluralism and intercultural interaction further reinforce the urgency of the study of the relationship between ritual, identity, and cultural resistance [7]. Indonesian society as a multicultural country becomes a social laboratory space where the processes of acculturation, assimilation, and cultural resistance take place dynamically [8], [9]. In a Muslim-majority society like Indonesia, ethnic minority rituals such as Cap Go Meh present both challenges and opportunities for social integration. These rituals not only contain spiritual significance, but also represent the process of negotiating identity and social solidarity among different ethnic groups [10], [11]. Thus, studying traditions such as Cap Go Meh becomes scientifically important because it offers an understanding of how minority communities negotiate their existence in plural public spaces. Socially, this study is relevant because it provides a model of tolerance and constructive cultural dialogue, where differences are not positioned as a source of conflict [12], but as a foundation for togetherness in building an inclusive and civilized multicultural society.

Cap Go Meh is one of the important rituals in Chinese culture that has transformed into a multicultural social phenomenon in Indonesia [13], [14]. This festival marks the closing of the Chinese New Year celebration and contains a deep spiritual and social meaning, namely the hope for welfare, harmony, and solidarity among citizens. In the context of a plural and Muslim-majority Indonesia, Cap Go Meh has a unique position as a space for inter-ethnic and religious interaction [11]. In some areas, such as Singkawang and Pontianak, research shows that these festivals function as a means of preserving identity and strengthening inter-community relationships [15]. However, in Palembang, especially on Kemaro Island, the Cap Go Meh tradition has its own characteristics because it takes place in the midst of an urban society with a long history of acculturation between Chinese, Malay, and Islamic cultures.

Kemaro Island has historically been known as a symbolic space for the meeting of two major cultures [16], as manifested in the legends of Siti Fatimah and Tan Bun An which depict the unification of Islamic and Chinese values in a local context [17]. The island serves not only as a religious site, but also as a social arena where people negotiate their identity in the midst of the modernization of the city of Palembang. In the celebration of Cap Go Meh, there is a meeting between local spiritual, economic, and cultural elements that show how the Chinese community seeks to maintain its rituals while adapting to the social norms of the surrounding community [18].

Previous studies on Cap Go Meh have generally focused on the dimensions of cultural tourism and the creative economy. Mandasari (2023) highlights aspects of tourism attraction and the festival's contribution to the promotion of local culture, while Habibi (2024) emphasizes the role of ritual in maintaining the sustainability of traditional values amid globalization. A study by Irawan et al., (2025) on the symbolism of dragon burning in the Cap Go Meh festival in Pontianak confirms the importance of the symbolic dimension in building community cohesion. However, there is still a research gap due to the lack of studies

examining Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island as a form of ritual resistance—a cultural strategy of minority communities to maintain their identity and symbolic autonomy in the social context of the majority. Ritual resistance on Kemaro Island is not confrontational, but rather present in the form of adaptations of symbols, local narratives, and cross-ethnic participation that affirm the community's ability to survive and negotiate in the midst of social change.

In a theoretical framework, this study combines the concepts of ritual resistance, cultural representation, and cultural resilience to read Cap Go Meh in Palembang as a complex cultural phenomenon. The concept of ritual resistance explains how religious or symbolic actions can function as a form of resistance to cultural homogenization without giving rise to open conflict [19], [20]. Meanwhile, the theory of representation of local culture emphasizes that each ritual practice represents the social values that live in the community and acts as a medium of intercultural communication [6], [10]. In this case, the symbols and processions of Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island can be read as social texts that affirm identity, resistance, and integration.

This study seeks to answer how Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island functions as a mechanism of cultural resistance and local representation in the midst of a Muslim-majority society. With an ethnographic approach, this analysis explores the social, symbolic, and historical dimensions of the ever-evolving ritual. Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island is not only a cultural heritage, but also an arena for identity negotiation where the Chinese community negotiates their existence peacefully within Palembang's multicultural social landscape. This phenomenon shows how tradition is able to transform into a space for civilizational dialogue that binds society together through tolerance and mutual understanding [4].

Thus, this research is expected to expand the understanding of the relationship between ritual, identity, and cultural resistance in pluralistic societies. In addition to enriching the discourse of symbolic anthropology and the study of multiculturalism, these findings also make a practical contribution to the development of cultural preservation policies that are sensitive to social contexts and local values.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of cultural resistance and ritual representation in the context of multicultural societies has been of concern to a number of researchers in the past decade. Gunawan shows that the Cap Go Meh festival functions as a space for the formation of collective memory and the strengthening of Chinese ethnic identity in Indonesia, where public symbols and narratives become a negotiating tool for the discourse of the majority. Mandasari research highlights the economic and tourism dimensions of Cap Go Meh in Singkawang, which shows how religious rituals are transformed into social capital as well as cultural tourism attractions. In a different context, Chan and Subianto [10] interpret public rituals as a form of ethnic resistance in post-reform Indonesia, which serves to maintain the symbolic autonomy of minority groups after a long period of cultural repression.

Habibi 's research expands the understanding of cultural resilience by emphasizing that local communities are able to adapt to modernization trends through the reinterpretation of traditions without losing the essence of local values. Meanwhile, Rupiassa found that the practice of traditional narratives and rituals in Papua is a form of everyday resistance to development structures that ignore the cultural dimension of indigenous peoples. Similar findings were also expressed by Maulidi who researched agrarian rituals in Banyuwangi as an instrument for the formation of cultural resilience and resistance to the dominance of capitalistic values.

Theoretically, these studies are rooted in the concepts of ritual resistance and cultural resilience that highlight the ability of society to maintain symbolic space through rituals and cultural representations. However, most of the research still focuses on the context of tourism or indigenous communities, not on multiethnic urban communities such as Palembang. Thus, there is still a gap in understanding how the Chinese community on Kemaro Island uses the

Cap Go Meh ritual as a strategy of resistance and cultural representation in the Muslim-majority community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses an ethnographic qualitative approach to deeply understand the symbolic meaning, social dynamics, and forms of cultural resistance in the celebration of Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island, Palembang. The ethnographic approach was chosen because it is able to explore cultural experiences, narratives, and representations from the perspective of ritual actors and local communities holistically. Data were collected through participatory observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies of ritual processions, religious symbols, and accompanying social activities. Observations were conducted during a series of celebrations, while semi-structured interviews involved religious leaders, the Cap Go Meh committee, community leaders, and cross-ethnic participants to gain a contextual understanding of the cultural values that were preserved.

Secondary data were obtained from community archives, scientific literature, and local media that recorded the dynamics of the celebration. The analysis was carried out using thematic analysis that focused on three main themes: ritual resistance, cultural representation, and cultural resilience. Each data is encoded and interpreted through the framework of James C. Scott's theories of everyday resistance, Stuart Hall and Roland Barthes of cultural representation, and C.S. Holling's of cultural resilience. To maintain the validity and credibility of the data, this study applied triangulation of sources and techniques, member checking of key informants, and peer debriefing with academics in the field of cultural anthropology.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Ritual Resistance in the Cap Go Meh Celebration on Kemaro Island**

#### **Symbolic Resistance and Ritual Practices**

In a repressive socio-political landscape such as the New Order period, Chinese cultural expression in Indonesia became one of the main victims of forced assimilation policies that marginalized ethnic minority identities from the public sphere. However, cultural practices never completely disappear. In Palembang, the Chinese community developed a strategy of covert resistance through symbols and rituals that were carried out in secret, especially in the celebration of Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island. This tradition, despite being suppressed by state prohibitions, persists through meticulous and meaningful symbolic means. Based on observations and interviews conducted by researchers, researchers found that in the 1980s until the beginning of the reforms, the Chinese community continued to install red lanterns in the courtyards of houses on a limited basis, light incense on domestic altars, and hold lion bears in narrow alleys in a symbolic form of resistance that is not frontal but strategic.

One of the traditional Chinese figures, Halim Susanto, described this practice as a form of "silent courage" that was passed down from generation to generation. In the interview he stated that "as long as we can still light incense at home, Cap Go Meh lives on in our blood." The results of these interviews show that resistance does not have to be in the form of grand demonstrations or open rejections, but simply through a continuity of carefully guarded symbols and rites. This is in line with the theory of hidden transcripts and infrapolitics from James C. Scott, who states that subordinate groups will create a space of disguised expression to maintain identity and voice cultural resistance. Cap Go Meh in this context becomes a tacit language of resistance, a silent language that is full of cultural political meaning.

In Barthes's semiotic framework [21], symbols such as red lanterns, lion lilies, altars, and incense can't be read solely as cultural artifacts, but as social texts that voice the existence of communities in landscapes that reject their formal presence. The simple-looking red lantern actually carries a connotative message as a marker of hope and sustainability, a lion as a

protective force, and incense as an unbroken bridge of spirituality. Through the concept of secondary signification, Barthes emphasizes that symbols have an ideological layer that can serve as a tool of resistance to the dominant narrative. Meanwhile, Lotman [22] through the concept of the semiosphere, places ritual as a process of cultural communication that reinforces the boundaries of group identity. In Cap Go Meh, the symbolic ritual not only strengthens internal solidarity, but also expands the boundaries of identity negotiation in the public sphere, especially after the reform.

In his study *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*, Jeremy Menchik [23] asserts that civil tolerance in Indonesia is often built through the practices of grassroots communities with moderate Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah playing an important role in strengthening social pluralism and contextual democratic frameworks that include the rights of different groups.

The statement of a local Muslim figure, H. Hary Tubagus, "the symbol of Cap Go Meh is not a threat to faith, but a cultural richness that strengthens us as a nation," emphasizing that Chinese cultural symbols have been accepted as part of inclusive local diversity. This perspective is in line with Menchik's finding [23] that community involvement and local interpretations of cultural symbols play an important role in building social cohesion.

Chang Yau Hoon's study in *Chinese Identity in PostSuharto Indonesia: Culture, Politics and Media* reveals how, in the post-Suharto era, the return of Chinese identity did not simply replicate pre-1965 conditions, but was shaped by new dynamics including global and local factors such as the rise of the economic value of the Chinese language and the policy of multiculturalism.

Research by Chang-Yau Hoon [24] shows that in the post-Reformation context, the Chinese community in Indonesia negotiated their cultural symbols in the public space as a form of cultural adaptation strategy. Similarly, Suryadinata emphasizes that Chinese cultural symbols are often accepted in Muslim-majority societies when presented as cultural expressions, rather than as an exclusive religious practice. Meanwhile, studies such as Pamela Allen [25] in the context of Chinese-Indonesian identity construction discuss the dynamics of political-multiculturalism in negotiating Chinese identity in the post-Suharto public sphere, as well as how minority symbols are rearticulated to fit the national narrative of 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika'.

In comparison, cross-Southeast Asian studies show that traditional festivals including celebrations such as Cap Go Meh are not only expressions of cultural identity, but also serve as a medium of cultural diplomacy and collective allotment of identity. A study by Nguyen Minh Tri [26] highlights how traditional festivals in Southeast Asia facilitate social cohesion, strengthen national identity, and build cross-cultural appreciation within the framework of "unity in diversity".

In addition, the concept of cultural diplomacy through festivals has been discussed in the study of the role of arts and festivals as soft power in inter-ASEAN relations [27]. This practice reflects on how festivals can reduce political tensions, break stereotypes, and form inclusive regional identities in line with the common finding that festivals can build shared understanding through collaborative cultural experiences [28]. In the context of Palembang, resistance does not occur through space battles, but through the strategy of inserting narratives in the available gaps, as shown by observations of domestic ritual practices, the narrative of the legend of Siti Fatimah, and the participation of non-Chinese communities which actually strengthen the legitimacy of Cap Go Meh as a shared cultural heritage.

Thus, the field finding that symbolic practices such as Cap Go Meh are more acceptable when delivered through cultural approaches rather than religiously reinforces the idea that minority symbols, when expressed inclusively, can be part of dynamic local pluralism while strengthening social resilience.



## The Role of Local Narratives in Cultural Resistance

Local narratives play an important role in the cultural strategy of the Palembang Chinese community, especially in the context of the Cap Go Meh celebration on Kemaro Island. Amid the pressures of cultural assimilation and symbolic repression that took place during the New Order period, the community not only maintained visual rituals such as lion lilies and lanterns, but also built a historical narrative that was deeply rooted in the collective imagination of local people: the tragic love story of Siti Fatimah and Tan Bun An. This narrative has become a cultural instrument that has allowed the Chinese community to not only survive, but also be recognized as an integral part of Palembang's historical heritage.

Based on the results of an interview with a traditional Chinese leader, Halim Susanto (65), it shows that this story is deliberately strengthened as a form of cultural diplomacy. "The legend of Siti Fatimah is not just a story, it is a kind of root that makes us not considered outsiders,". This statement is reinforced by documentation found in the form of pamphlets and historical plaques in the Hok Cheng Bio Temple area, which narrates the story of Tan Bun An and Siti Fatimah as a symbol of cross-cultural love, sacrifice, and blending. The narrative has been internalized not only by the Chinese community, but also by the Malay-Muslim community around Kemaro Island, including religious leaders such as H. Hary Tubagus who in an interview said: "The story of Siti Fatimah does not only belong to the Chinese, but also part of the big story of Palembang."

This narrative serves as an integrative cultural resistance not by rejecting dominant values, but by embracing them through a reinterpretation of history. In the context of the theory of cultural resistance developed by James C. Scott, such a narrative can be categorized as a hidden transcript that transitions into a public transcript when marginalized communities manage to articulate themselves in a framework that is acceptable to the public. Siti Fatimah's narrative becomes a kind of "social contract" that unites Chinese and Malay identities in local history, and thus weakens the dichotomy between the "native" and the "immigrant".

If referring to the cultural narrative approach of Somers and Gibson [29], the story of Tan Bun An and Siti Fatimah serves as a process in which elements of identity are associated with a particular time, space, and meaning so as to form a cohesive social narrative. The Chinese community uses this story as a way to establish cultural legitimacy through the integration of collective memory into the local historical landscape.

For the Chinese community in Palembang, this story not only serves as a love legend, but also as a narrative strategy to build cultural legitimacy. Through the integration of collective memory into the local historical landscape, the story of Tan Bun An–Siti Fatimah becomes a means of articulating identity and negotiating the position of communities within the broader social structure. In line with Assmann's [30] view of cultural memory, this kind of narrative allows minority communities to tie personal and collective histories into spatial symbols, thereby reinforcing their existential claims in multicultural societies.

When viewed in comparison with previous studies, this narrative strategy has many similarities as well as a number of important differences. For example, Chang-Yau Hoon 's research [24] on post-Suharto Chinese identity shows that local historical narratives and cultural symbols are used by diaspora communities to build a sense of belonging to spaces previously fragmented by state policies. There, local legends and stories serve as a medium to strengthen horizontal solidarity and mitigate potential ethnic conflicts through cultural representation. A similar thing was found in a study by Tan Chee-Beng [31] that highlighted the Chinese community in Penang. Tan explains how mythological figures and local legends are re-narrated as an integral part of the city's historical identity, serving to reinforce symbolic claims to cultural space amid the dynamics of modernization and tourism.

Meanwhile, Ong's [32] research on the Cap Go Meh celebration in Singkawang shows that the Chinese community there emphasizes ritual and performative elements such as barongsai, tatung, and processions rather than historical narratives. As a result, the symbol's connection to local history is not as strong as in Palembang, where the legend of Tan Bun An-Siti Fatimah

plays a central role as the foundation of the cultural narrative. These findings reinforce the position of this study that the local narrative in Cap Go Meh Palembang is not just a cultural complement, but functions as the main tool for social integration as well as a strategy for legitimizing community identity.

Aljunied's research in Singapore also found that historical narratives are used to reframe the position of ethnic minorities in national historiography. Just like Cap Go Meh in Palembang, Singapore's Chinese community positions historical figures in a format that supports pluralism and social tolerance. In this context, the narrative of Siti Fatimah and Tan Bun An can be seen as a mirror of a similar strategy.

Similar to the Cap Go Meh celebrations in Palembang, the local narrative of Siti Fatimah and Tan Bun An can be understood as a cultural strategy to affirm the Chinese community's contribution to local history. This legend is not only a folklore, but also a symbolic instrument that functions like a minority narrative in Singapore, articulating inclusion, tolerance, and cultural legitimacy in a pluralistic social landscape.

When viewed in comparison with previous studies, the narrative strategy of the Palembang Chinese community through the stories of Tan Bun An and Siti Fatimah has similarities with patterns in various Southeast Asian contexts. Mary Somers Heidhues [33] points out that the Chinese community in West Kalimantan maintains identity through collective memories and local stories attached to specific historical spaces, despite being under political and social pressure. Khoo Gaik Cheng [34] highlights how ethnic narratives in Malaysia are reproduced through cultural and literary mediums to negotiate public spaces in multiethnic societies, demonstrating the function of narrative as an instrument of identity politics.

When compared to previous studies, the narrative strategy of the Palembang Chinese community through the stories of Tan Bun An and Siti Fatimah shows a similar pattern in other contexts in Southeast Asia. Mary Somers Heidhues [33] points out that in West Kalimantan, the Chinese community maintains their identity through collective memories and local stories tied to a specific historical space. Charles Coppel [35] adds that the study of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia shows how symbols and narratives are used to negotiate social positions in a political landscape that often limits the space for cultural expression.

Thus, it can be concluded that the role of local narratives in Cap Go Meh is not only a complement to tradition, but is at the core of a smart, adaptive, and collaborative cultural resistance strategy. Instead of reinforcing identity segregation, this narrative serves as a symbolic bridge that brings together diverse cultural backgrounds in a spirit of togetherness. The narrative works as a cultural script that shapes meaning, instills collective memories, and expands the space of expression of the Chinese community in the plural social landscape of Palembang. Through this approach, Cap Go Meh evolves from an ethnic celebration to an inclusive urban cultural festival, a transformation that cannot be separated from the power of local narratives that continue to be nurtured and reproduced across generations.

## **Religious Studies Perspectives on the Interaction of Islam and Chinese Culture**

### **Alternative Narratives and Interpretations of "Non-Islamic" Accusations**

In a Palembang society that consists of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, accusations that Chinese symbols in Cap Go Meh celebrations are "non-Islamic" reflect the tension between cultural expressions and certain religious understandings. Elements such as sacrificial altars, incense, lion lilies, and goat slaughter processions are often narrowly associated as part of the worship practices of other religions. This then triggered the rejection of some Muslims who adhered to exclusive religious interpretations.



**Figure 1. The Goat Slaughter Process on the Outer Side of the Temple  
At the time of the Cap Go Meh**

The picture above shows the goat slaughter procession which is carried out in public. H. Hary Tubagus explained that the goat meat was distributed to the wider community, including Muslims. This practice is not only part of the ritual, but also a symbol of social integration and interfaith solidarity. However, the results of the study show that most of the people of Palembang, especially residents who live directly in coexistence with the Chinese community, have a more open view. They interpret these symbols as part of a cultural heritage that does not interfere with personal beliefs, so they choose to accept their existence as part of the local cultural diversity. This kind of attitude shows a strong social acceptance of cultural diversity in daily life.

One of the local Islamic religious figures, H. Hary Tubagus, expressed a moderate attitude towards the presence of Chinese cultural symbols. In his interview, he stated: "I as a Muslim do not see Cap Go Meh as a threat to the faith. We come there not to worship, but to respect the traditions of others. Just like they also don't mind when we hold takbiran or maulid." (Interview, February 12, 2025). This expression reflects the existence of an alternative interpretive space that sees cultural symbols not solely as representations of certain religious beliefs, but as part of social relations and the construction of urban identity.

According to the hidden transcripts theory put forward by James C. Scott (1990), such expressions reflect a form of tacit resistance to the dominant narrative that tries to monopolize religious interpretations. Scott mentioned that society often builds a counter-discourse in a space that is invisible to hegemonic power. In the context of Cap Go Meh, the presence of Muslims in the festival, even without ritualistic participation, is part of infrapolitics, which is a form of social engagement that rejects the exclusive dichotomy between "Islam" and "non-Islam". They reproduce new meanings of these symbols within the cultural framework of the city, rather than within the framework of the sacredness of other religions.

A similar attitude was also expressed by Dela Nur Rahmah, a Muslim student from the Comparative Religions study program: "I came to Cap Go Meh because I wanted to get to know other cultures. I don't feel like my confidence is compromised. Instead, I learned that symbols such as incense and altars can be interpreted as spiritual expressions of others, not as forms of shirk for us." (Interview, February 12, 2025). Dela's view shows the ability of the younger generation of Muslims to carry out symbolic deconstruction, which according to Stuart Hall (1997) is part of the process of social representation that is open to the multiplication of meanings.

Stuart Hall emphasizes that meaning is not permanently attached to a symbol, but can change and depend on the social context and the way society interprets it. Therefore, the representation of incense or lion in the public space of Palembang should not necessarily be understood as a religious practice that is contrary to Islamic teachings, but as part of a culture that has undergone a change in meaning according to the conditions of the local community. This process allows for symbolic adjustments that open up space for acceptance and harmony between Chinese cultural expressions and the life of the Muslim community in Palembang.



Based on the results of observations made by researchers during the Cap Go Meh event on Kemaro Island, this finding is strengthened. Many Muslim citizens, including traders, housewives, and traditional leaders, were also present and interacted in the midst of the festival atmosphere. They passed the altar and incense without showing an attitude of refusal, and even some Muslim figures gave speeches at the opening ceremony. This shows that these symbols are no longer seen literally, but have undergone cultural translation within the framework of social harmony.

These findings are consistent with the study of Syawaludin and Fikri [36] which showed that the city of Palembang has strong roots in the tradition of religious moderation, where cultural narratives are often more effective in bridging differences than formal religious narratives that are dogmatic. This study is also in line with Pamuji's research [37] which confirms that social harmony is more often formed through shared ritual interactions than simply formal discourse of interreligious dialogue.

In addition, research by Nugroho [38] on the Chinese Muslim community in Palembang shows that narratives about "non-Islam" are irrelevant in the realities of everyday life. The Muslim-Chinese community continues to celebrate Chinese New Year and Cap Go Meh, but with symbolic adaptations such as not using incense, and emphasizing the meaning of friendship and culture. This confirms that religious interpretations can be contextual and flexible in a multicultural social space.

Thus, the "non-Islamic" accusation against the symbols of Cap Go Meh can be criticized through an interpretive approach. The people of Palembang do not adopt the symbol as a religious practice, but as part of the common civic culture. This process reflects a symbolic resistance to religious exclusivism, while opening up space for the emergence of plural and inclusive representations of identity. As Hall argues, representation is not a mirror of reality, but a social construct that allows the negotiation of meaning. In this context, Cap Go Meh becomes an arena where symbols that were originally exclusive are collectively reinterpreted as cross-religious expressions of the city's culture.

Overall, this subsection shows that resistance to the accusation of "non-Islam" does not occur frontally, but in the form of adaptive social praxis and narratives full of symbolic strategies. The presence of Muslims in the Cap Go Meh arena, their participation in bazaars and cultural spectacles, and the reinterpretation of Chinese symbols show that Palembang has established a social ecology that allows for the coexistence and transformation of interfaith meanings. This is a tangible form of hidden transcript that affirms diversity contextually.

### **Non-Chinese People's Response to Cap Go Meh**

The response and participation of non-Chinese people to the Cap Go Meh celebration on Kemaro Island shows the high level of social openness in Palembang's cultural landscape. This celebration is no longer limited to Chinese cultural expressions alone, but has undergone a transformation of meaning to become part of the collective experience of interfaith and ethnic city-dwellers. The involvement of Muslims, Christians, and other ethnic groups can be seen in various activities, ranging from watching lion parades and dragon dances, shopping at culinary bazaars, to interacting directly with organizers and performers. They are not just passive spectators, but active actors in the cultural process that takes place in public spaces.

This phenomenon is clearly recorded in the results of field observations and interviews with informants. Dela Nur Rahmah, a Muslim student majoring in Religious Studies, said: "Cap Go Meh is like a folk party. We watch the barongsai, eat together, and get to know other cultures. Nothing disturbs beliefs, this actually expands tolerance." (Interview, February 12, 2025)

This statement reflects the separation between cultural practices and religious doctrines in the understanding of the younger generation of Muslims. This phenomenon is in line with the concept of everyday multiculturalism put forward by Wise and Velayutham [39], namely diversity that is lived practically in daily life without explicit ideological conflicts.

A positive attitude is also seen in the Christian community. Anggiat Rio Murbowo, a Christian teacher, said: "I take my children to watch Cap Go Meh because it's part of living in a pluralistic city. I also explain to my students that this is a culture, not a matter of religion." (Interview, February 13, 2025)

This statement indicates the internalization of the value of civic pluralism as put forward by Kymlicka [40], who emphasizes the importance of citizens' active participation in a shared public space without negating their individual identities. In the context of Cap Go Meh, this pluralism becomes evident not only in the rhetoric of tolerance, but in everyday social practice, when symbols of Chinese culture are accepted as part of the city's pluralistic cultural expression.

The results of the observation also show that Muslim people from various groups of teenagers, housewives, traders, and community leaders do not show resistance to religious symbols such as incense, altars, and dragon statues. In fact, a number of Muslim traders open stalls in the bazaar area and interact fluidly with other visitors without awkwardness. This shows the occurrence of cultural desensitization, which is the release of exclusive meanings from ritual symbols into cultural artifacts that are open to be reinterpreted in an inclusive context.

These findings are reinforced by a recent study from Indriani [41], which notes that although Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island is being revitalized as a cultural heritage, the participation of non-Chinese communities continues to increase. However, they also note that such engagement is not yet fully evenly distributed, so further efforts are needed to expand the reach of participatory across identities on a sustainable basis. The study also confirms that the preservation of Cap Go Meh depends not only on the Chinese community, but also on broader public involvement within the city's cultural framework. It can be seen in the following image.



**Figure 2. Crowds of Visitors from Various Ethnicities**

From Figure 2. It can be found that during the celebration, thousands of visitors flock to Kemaro Island, ranging from Malay locals to immigrants from outside the city. The Hok Cheng Bio temple area is a center of cultural and spiritual attractions. There are no barriers between Chinese and non-Chinese visitors all coming together in a festive and solemn atmosphere

Meanwhile, Abrar [42] highlights that Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island has become a cultural peace production space where multi-ethnic and interfaith people come not only to enjoy performances, but also to learn history, visit the legendary tombs of Tan Bun An and Siti Fatimah, and negotiate the values of living together. He said that the participation of non-Chinese people in Cap Go Meh creates an atmosphere of peace that is not artificial, but rooted in social interaction and shared cultural experiences.

A similar study by Nasifa [43] in Padang City shows that the Minangkabau people view Cap Go Meh as a form of cultural acculturation that should be celebrated together. They actively participate in this celebration and do not see it as a threat to Islamic values. This study

emphasizes that cross-identity acceptance of Chinese symbols does not only occur in Palembang, but also in other cities with similar social characteristics.

In a theoretical context, Cap Go Meh's experience in Palembang shows that cultural representation is not a static entity, but rather the result of a dynamic social negotiation process. Hall [44] emphasizes that representation is a discursive practice that shapes and is shaped by the public that accesses it. When non-Chinese people accept the symbols of Cap Go Meh as part of the city's culture, there is a symbolic rearticulation that makes the festival no longer exclusive, but rather inclusive and multivocal.

The concept of cultural conviviality from Ash Amin [45] is also a relevant framework in explaining this phenomenon. He said that intercultural togetherness is not always formed by formal institutions, but by liquid social practices in spaces of mutual interaction. In the context of Cap Go Meh, these spaces are performance stages, culinary bazaars, open altars, and other public areas that become a field for the negotiation of meaning and symbolic acceptance across identities.

Thus, the response of non-Chinese communities to Cap Go Meh in Palembang reflects a cultural process that is not only tolerant, but also participatory and transformative. This celebration has become a field of social inclusion, a place for the strengthening of the value of pluralism, and an arena for intercultural dialogue that lives in practice, not just in discourse.

### **Tolerance and Interfaith Dialogue**

The Cap Go Meh celebration on Kemaro Island has not only become a cultural expression of the Chinese community, but has developed into a collective medium for the growth of tolerance and fluid interfaith relations. In the context of a plural and multicultural Palembang society, Cap Go Meh presents a social stage where interactions between Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and adherents of other faiths take place equally, without symbolic tensions or boundaries of religious identity exclusivity.



**Figure 3. Interfaith Dialogue in Front of Kramat Siti Fatimah**

The picture above shows the dialogue that took place between Muslim community leaders and Chinese figures, the presence of the Muslim community in this celebration, ranging from children to community leaders, is an important indicator that religious practices in Palembang have passed the stage of normative tolerance towards a form of convivial coexistence or friendly coexistence. There was no resistance to the presence of incense, altars, lion lilies, or other Chinese religious symbols. In fact, Muslims actively open stalls in bazaars, help arrange parking, clean celebration areas, and engage in informal communication with followers of other religions.

H. Hary Tubagus, one of the local Islamic religious leaders who regularly attends this celebration, said: "I have never seen Cap Go Meh as a threat to Muslims. Instead, I see that there is a spirit of mutual cooperation, there is tolerance. Young Muslims helped clean up, some even helped guard the parking lot. We take care of each other. This is a broader form of da'wah and social da'wah." (Interview, February 12, 2025)

This statement shows that religious practices can be transformed into a shared moral space, where universal values such as mutual cooperation, solidarity, and empathy are realized through interfaith work. Religious dialogue in this context does not appear in the form of formal forums, but is manifested in everyday interactions based on actions, not arguments. This phenomenon is in accordance with the concept of everyday religious tolerance, where diversity is not only recognized, but actively lived in social practices.

Based on the results of observations made by researchers, researchers found that during the celebration, Muslim mothers were seen inviting their children to watch the lion and participating in buying Chinese snacks around the altar. In an atmosphere full of enthusiasm and brotherhood, people from various backgrounds seemed to greet each other, take pictures together, and even provide information related to the meaning of culture in the celebration. Religious symbols do not trigger barriers, but rather become entry points to expand interfaith understanding.

This phenomenon is also reinforced by various findings of previous research. Dwi Maharani [46], in his phenomenological study in Palembang, shows that Kemaro Island is perceived by visitors as an open and inclusive spiritual and cultural space. Visitors do not only come for religious or tourist reasons, but also as a form of cultural connection and interfaith respect. The study confirms that symbols such as altars, pagodas, and temples are being reinterpreted as part of the "city's culture", rather than simply symbols of religious exclusivity.

A study conducted by Handayani [47] in the 10 Ulu area, Jakabaring District, Palembang, recorded a real practice of tolerance in the context of the Cap Go Meh celebration. One concrete form of this mutual respect can be seen when the courtyard of the Al-Ghazali Mosque which is located adjacent to the temple area is allowed to be used as a parking lot by the festival committee. Not only was there no rejection from the worshippers, but the local Muslim community even helped regulate traffic and maintain order during the event. This reflects a reciprocal social trust between citizens from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, a form of social relations that Robert Putnam [48] argues is at the core of social capital that allows society to build social bridges (bridging social capital) cross-identity. In this context, the relationship that is built is not only formal, but born from the daily lives of residents who have lived side by side for a long time in a multicultural environment. As Coleman [49] explains, social capital arises from norms, networks, and relationships of mutual trust that allow for coordination and cooperation for the common good. The Cap Go Meh celebration in Palembang, in this case, is not only an expression of Chinese culture, but also a medium that brings to life cross-community solidarity through the practice of living together that is peaceful, mutually helpful, and open to differences.

In a study entitled "Cap Go Meh Cultural Tourism as an Effort to Maintain SocioCultural Resistance in the Singkawang City", Runturambi [50] showed that the Cap Go Meh Festival in Singkawang involved all ethnicities in the city, not only the Chinese community, but also actors of Malay, Dayak, Javanese traditional institutions, local governments, to the legislature and youth and tourism bureaucracy. This confirms that the festival not only strengthens Chinese cultural identity, but also serves as a means to build social and cultural resilience across communities, as well as reflecting widely accepted practices of inclusivity and plurality.

Holina and Muhlas [51], in their ethnographic study at the Chandra Nadi Temple in Palembang, reinforced this. They note that this temple has been an open space for all devotees for more than two centuries. In the celebration of Cap Go Meh, the committee actively accepted volunteers from among Muslims and Christians and adjusted the layout of the event to be inclusive of all visitors. This kind of action proves that the Chinese culture represented in Cap Go Meh is not a closed entity, but an adaptive and dialogical.

Furthermore, research by fitria [52] called Kemaro Island a "symbol of tolerance between religions" that is unique in South Sumatra. The author states that the narrative of the legend of Siti Fatimah and Tan Bun An which was revived in the Cap Go Meh celebration became a



cultural bridge that brought together Chinese and Malay-Muslim identities in a collective historical unit.

Theoretically, the experience of Cap Go Meh in Palembang reinforces John Hick's argument [53] that true pluralism grows when religions do not only dialogue on the pulpit, but when religious communities actively share space, symbols, and meanings with each other. Stuart Hall (1997) also emphasized that cultural representation is never neutral. In the context of Cap Go Meh, the representation of Chinese culture is renegotiated into a symbol of the city's diversity, through a process of social interaction that takes place every year.

Thus, tolerance and interfaith dialogue in the celebration of Cap Go Meh is not only an indicator of social cohesion, but also concrete evidence that the people of Palembang have the ability to transform public spaces into a dynamic arena of cultural and religious inclusion. This celebration is not just a ritual activity of the Chinese community, but has transformed into a collective stage across ethnicities and religions, a place where differences are not positioned as a threat, but rather as a common strength that is nurtured through social interaction, cooperation, and mutual understanding. It is a form of tolerance that is alive and rooted in the daily practices of society, which moves beyond the symbolic boundaries of houses of worship into wider social realms: from mosque courtyards to narrow alleys, from sacrificial altars to rows of culinary bazaar tents, from cultural performance stages to family rooms of people of different faiths who together watch the lion festival or simply enjoy the atmosphere of togetherness.

The public space in this context is no longer exclusive or sectarian, but serves as a space of intercultural dialogue, a place where religious expression and ethnic identity undergo an inclusive symbolic re-articulation. This shows that the people of Palembang not only passively tolerate differences, but also bring them to life in the form of active participation and social negotiation that allows the practice of togetherness to continue in the midst of diversity.

Within this framework, Cap Go Meh becomes more than just a festival; Cap Go Meh is transformed into a miniature national narrative, where the values of diversity, mutual respect, and solidarity between communities are articulated through symbols, food, folklore, and the structure of open urban spaces. Tolerance, then, is no longer normative jargon, but a way of life shaped by history, reinforced by habits, and nurtured through constant encounters between the different but equal.

## CONCLUSION

The celebration of Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island, Palembang, demonstrates that ritual practices function as dynamic spaces for symbolic resistance and intercultural dialogue, enabling the Chinese minority community to preserve its cultural identity while strengthening harmonious relations with the surrounding Muslim society. Through cultural expressions such as lantern displays, lion dances, and incense offerings, the Chinese community negotiates its identity in an adaptive and nonconfrontational manner, reflecting James C. Scott's concept of hidden transcripts that have gradually evolved into open and publicly accepted cultural expressions in the post-Reformasi era. Rather than being perceived as theological challenges, these ritual symbols are increasingly recognized by the Malay-Muslim community as valuable elements of Indonesia's multicultural heritage. Furthermore, the local legend of Siti Fatimah and Tan Bun An serves as a symbolic historical bridge that reinforces mutual trust, shared identity, and intercultural understanding between the Chinese and Muslim communities in Palembang. Consequently, Cap Go Meh on Kemaro Island should be understood not merely as a religious festival but as a collaborative arena of Islamic–Chinese interaction, adaptive ritual resistance, and cultural negotiation that promotes peaceful coexistence. These findings demonstrate that local cultural traditions can make meaningful contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) through the preservation of cultural heritage and the strengthening of inclusive communities, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by fostering tolerance, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable peace. The study therefore affirms that the integration



of local wisdom, religious moderation, and cultural diversity represents an effective model for advancing sustainable and harmonious multicultural societies.

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### Author Contribution

This research was carried out by the team with the following division of tasks: Tjik Harun acted as the head of the research who played a major role in the collection of ethnographic observation field data on Kemaro Island and data analysis. Risan Rusli and Choirun Niswah contributed as members of the research team responsible for data analysis, interpretation of findings, as well as the preparation of results and discussions. All authors actively participate in the literature review, preparation of the final manuscript, and approve the final version of the article for publication.

### Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in the process of writing or publishing this article.

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