

# Tradition and Sprituality: Cultural Symbolism of Papuan Bakar Batu and Korean Chuseok

## Tradisi dan Spritualitas: Simbolisme Budaya pada Tradisi Bakar Batu di Papua dan Chuseok di Korea Selatan

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Paper submitted : June 26, 2024

Paper revised : November 29, 2024

Paper approved : December 27, 2024

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis perbandingan lintas budaya antara dua tradisi yang memiliki nilai spritual, yaitu Bakar Batu dari Papua, Indonesia dan Chuseok dari Korea Selatan melalui teori simbolisme budaya dari Clifford Geertz. Bakar Batu adalah ritual kuliner dan sosial di Papua yang mempertemukan masyarakat dalam kegiatan memasak bersama untuk menghormati leluhur dan alam sekitar. Sebagai perbandingan, Chuseok adalah festival panen di Korea untuk merayakan rasa syukur atas hasil panen dan mencakup ritual penghormatan kepada leluhur serta berbagi makanan tradisional secara komunal. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif untuk mengkaji makna simbolis yang terkandung dalam kedua tradisi ini melalui tinjauan pustaka dan analisis data tematis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa, di tengah pengaruh globalisasi dan modernisasi, baik Bakar Batu maupun Chuseok mempertahankan identitas kolektif dan nilai-nilai spritual, menggambarkan pandangan Geertz bahwa simbol berperan dalam mewujudkan budaya dan memperkuat persatuan sosial dan kesinambungan budaya. Masing-masing tradisi ini, meskipun terus berkembang, tetap kuat dalam menjaga makna simbolisnya, menegaskan relevansi global dari ritual budaya dalam memperkuat identitas, mempererat solidaritas komunitas, dan meneruskan nilai-nilai spritual dari satu generasi ke generasi berikutnya. Studi ini berkontribusi pada diskursus global mengenai pelestarian budaya, menekankan peran universal ritual dalam menjaga identitas dan kohesi sosial di tengah keragaman lanskap budaya.

**Kata Kunci:** Bakar Batu; Chuseok; Identitas Kolektif; Simbolisme Budaya; Spritualitas

### ABSTRACT

This research offers a cross-cultural analysis of two spiritually significant traditions, Bakar Batu from Papua and Chuseok from South Korea, within a global context, employing Clifford Geertz's theory of cultural symbolism. Bakar Batu is a deeply rooted culinary and communal ritual in Papua, bringing people together in a shared act of cooking that honors ancestral spirits and nature. In comparison, Chuseok is a Korean harvest festival that celebrates gratitude for the year's abundance and includes ancestral rites and communal sharing of traditional foods. This study uses a qualitative approach to examine the symbolic meanings embedded in these two traditions through literature review and thematic data analysis. The findings reveal that, despite the forces of globalization and modernization, both Bakar Batu and Chuseok uphold collective identity and spiritual values, illustrating Geertz's perspective that symbols embody culture and reinforce social unity and cultural continuity. Each tradition, while evolving, remains resilient in preserving its symbolic meaning, underscoring the global relevance of cultural rituals in affirming identity, fostering community solidarity, and transmitting spiritual values across generations. This study contributes to global discourses on cultural preservation, emphasizing the universal role of ritual in sustaining identity and social cohesion amidst diverse cultural landscapes.

**Keywords:** Bakar Batu; Chuseok; Collective Identity; Cultural Symbolism; Spiritual Values

### INTRODUCTION

Traditions and rituals are important in strengthening social bonds and maintaining a community's cultural identity. Through these practices, the values held by a community can be preserved and passed on from generation to generation (Geertz 2021). Traditions and rituals serve not only to commemorate important events or seasonal changes but also as a means of building solidarity, strengthening relationships between community members, and reaffirming spiritual ties (Fenn and Geertz 1974). Every ritual contains symbols with deep meaning that help individuals in the community understand and live out shared values and strengthen their sense of belonging to their culture (Durkheim 2016).

Two traditions rich in cultural and spiritual values are "*Bakar Batu*" from Papua and "*Chuseok*" from South Korea. Although they come from different geographical and cultural contexts, these two traditions share similarities in terms of celebrating togetherness and honoring ancestors. *Bakar Batu* is a profound culinary and social ceremony in which Papuan communities work together to prepare and cook food. The process involves digging a hole, heating the stone, and cooking various foods inside. This tradition is not only about cooking food but also about building solidarity, strengthening social bonds, and honoring ancestors and the surrounding nature. In the context of Papuan culture, the hot stones used in *Bakar Batu* symbolize the power of the ancestors and the unity of the community, which is the essence of the practice (Karyadi and Khasanah 2020; Tabuni 2023).

*Chuseok* is now one of the biggest festivals in South Korea, celebrating the harvest and agricultural products (Lee 2019). During *Chuseok*, Korean families gather to perform *saebae*, a tribute to the ancestors at the family tomb (Baek, Park, and Sakong 2023). Cooking and eating traditional food, such as *songpyeon* is also an important part of the celebration. The festival reflects family values, gratitude for the harvest, and togetherness (Eom, Lee, and Lee 2013; Oh 2023). *Songpyeon*, a sticky rice cake made especially for *Chuseok*, symbolizes gratitude and family togetherness in Korean culture (하수민 2015).

Geertz argues that cultural symbols are tools used to make sense of the world and human experience. In the context of ritual, these symbols help to communicate cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and community identity (Clifford Geertz 1973). Using Clifford Geertz's theory of cultural symbolism, this study aims to analyze and understand the spiritual and cultural values contained in these two traditions by exploring the deep meanings conveyed by the symbols present in these practices (Clifford Geertz 1973).

Local cultures have unique ways of articulating the values and beliefs of their communities. By examining the traditions of *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* through the lens of Clifford Geertz's symbolism, this research will uncover the deep meanings contained in these practices. This analysis is important not only to understand both traditions in their respective contexts but also to provide insights into how local traditions reflect universal values such as togetherness, respect for ancestors, and connection with nature.

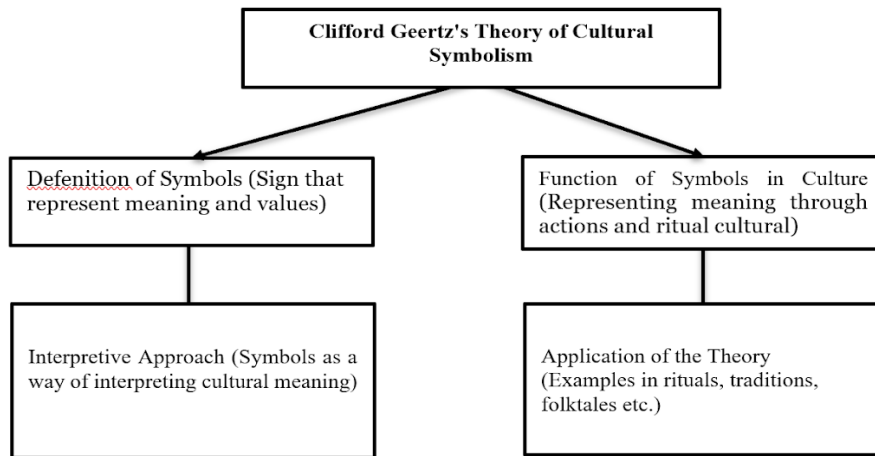
This research is particularly relevant in the context of globalization, which often threatens the sustainability of local traditions. By studying and appreciating the values contained in the *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* traditions, we can better appreciate cultural diversity and the importance of preserving cultural heritage. In addition, this research can also make an important contribution to the field of cultural anthropology by contributing to the understanding of how cultural symbols function in different contexts (Williams and Kuper 2001).

Geertz's statement cited by several studies states that symbols are representations of a deeper reality, and understanding these symbols can help us understand the underlying meanings and values of a culture. In the context of *Bakar Batu*, hot stones can be seen as a symbol of ancestral power and community unity, while in *Chuseok*, *songpyeon* can be seen as a symbol of gratitude and family togetherness (Chhikara 2022; Silva Correa et al. 2023).

This research is also relevant in the context of rapid social and cultural change. Although some studies have examined *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* individually, there is a significant lack of cross-cultural comparative research on how these traditions adapt and maintain cultural identity amidst modernization. By understanding how traditions like *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* preserve and negotiate their cultural identity, we can gain deeper insights into how communities adapt and respond to change. This study can also shed light on how cultural values can be preserved and passed on to future generations, which is crucial for sustaining global cultural diversity (Steger 2020).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1. Clifford`s Theory Framework Diagram



Source: Developed Based on Clifford's Theory

Clifford Geertz's theory on symbols emphasizes the central role in human culture as tools for transmitting meaning. According to Geertz, symbols are not merely objects or signs but have deeper values that reveal the system of meanings within a society. In his view, symbols can include physical objects, actions, language, and rituals, all of which carry specific meanings for the members of a culture. These symbols represent and communicate values, providing structure and meaning in social and cultural life. For example, in rituals or ceremonies, symbols such as clothing, colors, or specific tools carry significant meanings for participants, shaping their understanding of the world around them.

Geertz advocates for an interpretive approach to understanding symbols, meaning that we must consider how these symbols are used and understood within the broader cultural context. This approach highlights the importance of interpretation in uncovering the hidden meanings embedded in cultural practices and actions. By applying this theory, cultural analysis can explore how symbols influence social life and reveal deeper values and norms of a group. For instance, in the analysis of religious rituals, traditional practices, or even art and folklore, symbols help to illuminate the social and cultural dynamics of a particular community, offering insights into their worldview and belief systems.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study employs an interpretive approach to explore the symbolic meanings within the *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* traditions, aiming to understand their cultural, spiritual, and social importance. The research objectives include interpreting these rituals' symbolism, examining their role in cultural identity and community cohesion, analyzing globalization's impact, and highlighting their significance in preserving cultural values. As a library-based study, data collection focuses on secondary sources, including academic databases (e.g., JSTOR, Google Scholar), journals, and books. Relevant keywords include "*Bakar Batu*," "*Chuseok*," "cultural symbolism," and "Clifford Geertz." Selection criteria prioritize sources that provide in-depth descriptions, symbolism, and social analysis of the traditions.

Data analysis uses Clifford Geertz's cultural symbolism theory with thematic coding to identify key themes like "ancestral reverence" and "symbolic meanings." Comparative analysis will contrast *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* to highlight similarities and differences. Findings will be structured in sections: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion, and conclusion. Scholarly sources will include journals like *Journal of Cultural Anthropology* and *Asian Folklore Studies*, academic

books, theses, and digital archives. This study ultimately aims to deepen the understanding of the cultural and spiritual values embedded in *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok*, contributing to cultural anthropology and ritual studies.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Tradition of *Bakar Batu* in Papua**

*Bakar Batu* is a deep culinary and social tradition in Papua, reflecting togetherness and a rich cultural heritage. The tradition involves careful preparation and community collaboration to create a delicious and satisfying dish (P. Sunyap 2024). Here are the detailed steps of the stone roasting process in Papua:

#### ***Preparation of materials and tools***

The main ingredients needed for stone roasting are (McWilliam 2021): 1) *Kali* stones: The stones used should be round and sufficient to cover the entire surface of the food. 2) Firewood: The wood used should be dry and in sufficient quantity to heat the stones to a very high temperature. 3) Grass and leaves: Reeds and banana leaves are used to line the pit and protect the food from direct contact with the hot stones. 4) Food ingredients: Pork is the main ingredient, especially for ceremonies. Vegetables such as manioc, sweet potato, taro, and various tubers are also used. Chicken may be used as an alternative or supplement.

#### ***Pit preparation and tools***

Preparation steps include: 1) Digging the pond: Dig a pan-shaped hole about 50-60 cm deep. The size of the pond will depend on the amount of food to be cooked. 2) Place the stones and wood: Place the firewood at the bottom of the pond, then place the stones on top of the wood. Light the wood to heat the stones until they are red hot. 3) Setting up the pond base: Once the stones are hot enough, remove the stones and place the reeds at the bottom of the pond, then cover them with banana leaves. 4) Layering the food.

#### ***Ingredient Layering***

The process of placing the ingredients in the pond is done in stages (Flassy, Saa, and Frank 2022): 1) First layer: Place reeds on the bottom of the pond, then cover with banana leaves. 2) Second layer: Place hot stones on top of the banana leaves. 3) Third layer: Place the banana leaf on the hot stone. 4) Fourth layer: Place tubers (such as sweet potato, cassava, and taro) on top of the banana leaves. 5) Fifth layer: Cover the tubers with banana leaves. 6) Sixth layer: Place the hot stone on top of the banana leaf again. 7) Seventh layer: Cover the hot stone with banana leaves. 8) Eighth layer: Place the pork or chicken in the middle, surrounded by vegetables. 9) Ninth layer: Cover the hot stone with banana leaves and place around the meat to ensure even cooking. 10) Tenth layer: Cover the meat with the rest of the vegetables. 11) Eleventh layer: Cover the vegetables with leaves, especially banana leaves. 12) Twelfth layer: Place the remaining hot stones on top of the last layer of banana leaves.

#### ***Cooking and serving***

Cooking takes about 2 hours, depending on the number and type of ingredients to be cooked. The process requires good cooperation and coordination among community members. Everyone has an important role to play in ensuring that the process runs smoothly and successfully.

Stone burning is not only a cooking method but also a ritual that strengthens social bonds and togetherness within the community. By carefully following these steps, the end result is a delicious dish that is rich in flavor and culture. This process demonstrates the importance of cooperation and unity in Papuan traditions.

### **Analysis Using Clifford Geertz's Theory of Culture**

This tradition of *Bakar Batu* has a symbolic meaning that contributes to the preservation of cultural identity and community cohesion. The Papuan people consider

this ritual important in maintaining cultural and spiritual values in their respective communities.

### ***Symbolic Interpretation of Bakar Batu***

According to Clifford Geertz's interpretive theory of culture, culture is seen as an inherited system of ideas, expressed in symbolic forms, through which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life (Clifford Geertz 1973). *Bakar Batu*, a traditional mass cooking method using heated stones, is a rich cultural symbol among several indigenous communities in Papua, Indonesia. The method is known by different names among different ethnic groups: "Lago Lakwi" among the Lani, "Logo Lakwi" among the Dani Puncak, "Kit Abo Isogo" among the Wamena, "Kerep Kan" among the Nduga, "Hupon" in the Bintang Mountains, "Barapen" among the Biak, and "Mogo Gapil" among the Panyai (Tabuni 2023).

In addition, an interview with a tribal chief, Sukuk Una Ukam from Yahukimo Regency, Papua Mountain Province, added a deeper dimension to the practice of stone burning. According to him, the practice is not only a traditional way of cooking but also an important symbol of cultural identity and the continuation of their tribal traditions. "For us, stone burning is more than just cooking food. It is part of our ancestral heritage that we must preserve and continue to do to maintain our connection with nature and the spirits of our ancestors," said Una Ukam (P. Sunyap 2024).

Observational data also shows that stone-burning involves not only cooking techniques but also religious and social ceremonies that bind the community more deeply. A literature review confirms that the practice has become a symbol of cultural sustainability in Papua, representing collective values such as cooperation, togetherness, and the strong cultural diversity of the region Papua Pegunungan. Thus, the practice of *Bakar Batu* not only sheds light on the technical aspects of cooking but also tells a story about the rich cultural identity and values held by different ethnic groups in Papua.

### ***Cultural Identity and Community Cohesion***

According to Chief Sukuk Una Ukam, the Burning Stone ritual is a vital cultural foundation for the Lani community. He explains that preparing and sharing food in this tradition is not just a practical act, but a symbol of unity and collective responsibility in everyday life. "*Bakar Batu is not just about cooking food, it is about bringing us together as a community and upholding our values that strengthen our common identity,*" he said (P. Sunyap 2024).

A religious figure, the head of the Bethlehem Sumbat Yahukimo community, emphasized the spiritual aspect of the practice. For him, the process of preparing and sharing food has a deep meaning in terms of solidarity and mutual responsibility before God. "*When we share this food as a family of faith, we are not only strengthening social bonds but also living out the teachings of our faith that it is better to give than to receive,*" he says with conviction (A. Sunyap 2024).

Field observations confirmed that the prohibition on individuals claiming food as personal property, as the Lani adhere to the principle of "yi anamendek, yi nit nizmendek", highlights a strong communal ethos (Mawikere 2018). This emphasizes that the shared joy of sharing, even in the smallest of portions, becomes a moment to be celebrated together.

Overall, the practice of *Bakar Batu* not only preserves a rich culinary tradition but is also an important marker of Lani cultural identity and spirituality. Through this ritual, they not only preserve their ancestral heritage but also strengthen their deep-rooted social bonds and values of togetherness.

### ***Impact of Globalization and Modernization***

Globalization and modernization often promote the homogenization of cultures around the world. However, in the context of Papua, particularly in Yahukimo Regency, the *Bakar Batu* tradition demonstrates a strong cultural resilience amidst modernization.

Through interviews with various community leaders, as well as observational data and a literature review, it can be seen how this tradition has survived and adapted despite being affected by outside influences.

The chief of the Una Ukam tribe emphasized that the tradition of stone burning is an integral part of their tribal identity. "*Bakar Batu* is not just about cooking together, but it is a way for us to unite the community, resolve conflicts, and celebrate important moments," he said (P. Sunyap 2024). The chief also added that although modernization has brought about various changes, they still strive to maintain the authenticity of this tradition as a cultural heritage that must be preserved. This reflects Geertz's view that culture is not static but continues to adapt to new conditions without losing its essence.

A local religious figure, the Chairman of the Assembly of the Bethlehem Sumbat Congregation, stated that the *Bakar Batu* tradition has deep spiritual values. "*Bakar Batu is often integrated with our religious activities, such as thanksgiving and prayer together. This strengthens spiritual and community ties,*" he said (A. Sunyap 2024). According to him, globalization does not necessarily erase this tradition but instead can be used as a means to introduce the richness of local culture to the outside world. This view supports Geertz's thesis that in the process of modernization, communities can find new ways to maintain their traditions.

A representative from the parents' group explained that *Bakar Batu* is a means of teaching noble values to the younger generation. "*Through Bakar Batu, we teach our children about the importance of gotong royong, respecting ancestors, and protecting nature,*" he explained (Y. Balyo 2024). Although modernization brings many changes, this group believes that the traditional values taught through *Bakar Batu* remain relevant and important. This reflects Geertz's theory that culture is a continuous and dynamic learning process.

Ahas, a local youth, revealed that although many youths are interested in modern culture, they still value the tradition of *Bakar Batu*. "*Bakar Batu gives us a sense of identity and pride. We try not to forget our cultural roots even though the outside world offers many new things,*" he said (A. Balyo 2024). Ahas emphasizes the importance of finding a balance between respecting tradition and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by modernization. This is in line with Geertz's view that cultural change is a process that involves creative adaptation without losing core identity.

Observation data shows that the *Bakar Batu* ceremony is still often performed in various important events, such as weddings, births, and other traditional ceremonies. In addition, the literature review shows that this tradition not only survives among rural communities but has also begun to be introduced in formal events in big cities as an effort to promote Papuan culture. This indicates a conscious effort by the community to maintain and promote their cultural heritage amid globalization.

According to cultural researchers Kagitcibasi and also Grigoryev, indigenous peoples can adapt to change while maintaining their cultural identity (Grigoryev 2017; Kagitcibasi 1997). This can be seen in the way Papuans maintain the *Bakar Batu* tradition amidst the influence of modernization. Meanwhile, Clifford Geertz in his writings on cultural interpretation emphasizes that cultural meaning is the result of a dynamic interaction between tradition and change (Clifford Geertz 1973; Fenn and Geertz 1974).

In the context of *Bakar Batu*, despite the risk that modernization could erode the authenticity and symbolic meaning of this practice, the people of Yahukimo demonstrate that they can maintain this tradition with appropriate adaptations without losing its essence.

Thus, the *Bakar Batu* tradition in Papua, particularly in Yahukimo Regency, demonstrates resilience and cultural adaptability amidst globalization and modernization (Langowuyo, Reba, and Sarena 2023; Madao, Makaba, and Y. Bouway 2023). Interviews with various community leaders, field observations, and literature review confirm that despite the challenges, the local community strives to maintain the

authenticity and meaning of this tradition. Through Geertz's perspective, it can be seen that culture is a dynamic entity that continues to adapt while maintaining its core identity.

### **Maintaining Cultural and Spiritual Values**

**Figure 2.** The *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* Tradition



(a) Bakar Batu

(b) Chuseok

Source: [pesonapapua.com](https://pesonapapua.com) and [korea.net](https://korea.net)

Rituals *Bakar Batu* play a critical role in maintaining the cultural and spiritual values of the communities. Eating together on the ground, with leaves as plates, symbolizes the close relationship between humans and the earth. The earth, perceived as “mother” or “mama,” is a source of life and sustenance, reinforcing the community's spiritual connection to the land. This practice aligns with Geertz's assertion that rituals are vehicles for the expression of underlying cultural and spiritual values.

An interview with Pontius Sunyap, chief of the Sukuk Una Ukam from Yahukimo Regency, Papua Mountain Province, revealed that the tradition of stone-burning is not just an ordinary cooking event or activity, but has a deep meaning and philosophical dimension, especially in spiritual values (P. Sunyap 2024). Una Ukam explained that the practice of *bakar batu* allows community members to forgive each other and bond through eating together in one place. He highlighted that in this process, there is no distinction between them; everything they have or bring to cook together is considered common property, reflecting the spirit of solidarity and brotherhood as in the early congregation.

In addition, Una Ukam emphasized that the presence of all family and community members in one place for stone burning causes deep joy and excitement, as it becomes a rare moment to come together in a ritual rich in cultural and spiritual significance. The process of stone burning also demonstrates a strong connection with nature, using elements such as stone, fire, and earth as an integral part of the ritual. This reflects a deep respect for nature as an important life partner.

Philosophically, the *Bakar Batu* tradition also contains values of purification and cleansing, both physically and spiritually. The process is seen as a way to cleanse oneself of negative energy and sin, and to prepare oneself to receive blessings and favor. Furthermore, *Bakar Batu* often involves giving food or crops to others as part of the ritual, emphasizing the importance of generosity and concern for the needs of others (A. Sunyap 2024).

In the literature review, the practice was also linked to spiritual beliefs and customs that have been passed down in Papua, reflecting the deep connection between humans and the world of spirits, ancestors, and other supernatural forces. Overall, the *Bakar Batu* tradition not only revives ancient cooking techniques, but also nurtures a rich cultural heritage, strengthens community identity, and teaches universal values such as solidarity, togetherness, and deep spirituality.

Through the interpretive framework of Clifford Geertz, *Bakar Batu* can be understood as a profound cultural symbol that reinforces community cohesion, sustains cultural identity, and maintains spiritual values. As globalization and modernization

continue to influence indigenous cultures, the resilience of such rituals highlights their essential role in preserving the community's heritage and social fabric. The symbolic meanings embedded in the *Bakar Batu* tradition are crucial in understanding the cultural dynamics and continuity of the Papuan communities.

### **Honoring Ancestors in The *Chuseok* Tradition in South Korea**

*Chuseok*, also known as the Korean Thanksgiving Festival, is an important festival in South Korea that celebrates the harvest and honors the ancestors. The main ritual of *Chuseok* is *saebae*, where families gather to make a pilgrimage to the graves of their ancestors. This ritual not only honors the deceased ancestors but also strengthens close family ties.

*Chuseok* is one of the biggest traditional festivals in South Korea, falling in the 8th month of the lunar calendar. The festival is similar to Thanksgiving in the United States, where families gather to celebrate and give thanks for a bountiful harvest.

#### **Ingredients and preparation**

- a) Traditional food: One of the specialties of *Chuseok* is songpyeon, a sticky rice cake filled with various fillings such as red beans, sesame seeds, or walnuts. Songpyeon has a deep symbolic meaning, representing gratitude for a bountiful harvest and family happiness.
- b) Offerings: During pilgrimages to ancestral graves, families bring offerings of food and drink. Foods commonly brought include rice, vegetables, and fruit. Drinks such as soju are sometimes included in these offerings.

#### **Sequence of the *Saebae* performance**

The *Saebae* ritual is performed in a certain order to honor the ancestors politely and according to tradition:

- a) Preparation: The family prepares by taking offerings of food and drink to the ancestor's tomb.
- b) Pilgrimage to the grave: On arrival at the ancestor's grave, family members clean the grave of any leaves or dirt that may have accumulated. They also clean the gravestones and the surrounding area.
- c) Decoration: After cleaning the grave, the family decorates the grave with flowers or other tokens of respect.
- d) Presentation of offerings: Any food or drink brought is placed in front of or around the grave as a sign of respect for the ancestors.
- e) Prayer and Worship: The family honors the ancestors by praying together and expressing gratitude for their protection and blessings.

#### **Symbolic meanings**

- a) Songpyeon: This sticky rice cake is not only a delicacy but also symbolic, as its shape symbolizes the crescent moon, which is believed to bring good luck.
- b) Offerings: Offering food to ancestors is an expression of gratitude and honor for their role in building families and communities.

*Chuseok* is not only a celebration but also an important moment to maintain and strengthen family ties and to honor the cultural roots and traditions of the ancestors. Through *saebae*, the younger generation learns to cherish the heritage and values passed on to them by their ancestors, creating strong bonds between family members and the community at large.

### **Analysis Using Clifford Geertz's Theory of Culture: Honoring Ancestors in *Chuseok***

In the context of South Korea's *Chuseok* festival, Clifford Geertz's interpretive theory of culture provides a lens to understand the intricate symbolic meanings embedded in the rituals and practices surrounding ancestor veneration.

## **Symbolic Interpretation of Chuseok**

According to Clifford Geertz, culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms through which people communicate and perpetuate their beliefs and values (Clifford Geertz 1973). *Chuseok*, also known as the Korean Thanksgiving Festival, exemplifies this concept through its central ritual of *saebae*, where families gather to pay respects to their ancestors at their gravesites. This ritual is not merely a formality but a symbolic act that reinforces familial bonds and cultural continuity.

The act of preparing and presenting offerings, such as rice, vegetables, fruits, and traditional drinks like *soju*, symbolizes gratitude and reverence towards ancestors for their contributions to family and community welfare (Woo 2022). Geertz would argue that these offerings are not just material items but symbolic representations of the ongoing relationship between the living and the deceased, illustrating how cultural meanings are transmitted and reinforced through ritual practice (Suharno and Sartini 2022).

Yun, a prominent religious scholar, emphasizes the spiritual significance of *Chuseok*. According to Yun, "*The rituals performed during Chuseok are a way to maintain a spiritual connection with our ancestors. The offerings are not just food items; they are imbued with our respect, love, and gratitude*" (Yun 2024). She highlights that the meticulous preparation of these offerings represents the care and attention given to maintaining this ancestral connection.

During a press conference held in Seoul, Choi Young-gap explained how to set up a simplified ritual table. He stated, "*The essence of Chuseok lies in its ability to adapt and still retain its core values. Simplified rituals are a way to ensure that younger generations can participate without feeling burdened by complex preparations. However, the symbolic meaning remains intact; it is about honoring our past and acknowledging the continuity of our family lineage*" (Young 2024).

Minjhe provided a younger generation's perspective on *Chuseok*. She shared, "*For many young people, Chuseok is an opportunity to reconnect with our roots. Even if we don't fully understand every ritual, participating in them helps us feel connected to our cultural heritage. It's a time to learn from our elders and carry forward these traditions*" (Minjhe 2024).

Professor Park offered an academic perspective, stating, "*Chuseok serves as a living example of Geertz's theory of culture as a system of inherited conceptions. The rituals are not static; they evolve while preserving their symbolic core. This evolution is crucial for the survival of cultural practices in a rapidly changing world*" (Park 2024).

Field observations in Korea during *Chuseok* revealed the vibrant and communal nature of the festival. Families travel long distances to reunite, underscoring the festival's role in strengthening familial bonds. The preparation of traditional foods and the performance of ancestral rites are done collectively, reinforcing a sense of community and shared cultural identity.

The literature further supports these observations. According to a study by Kim and Kim (2015), "*Chuseok rituals facilitate the transmission of cultural values and social norms from one generation to the next, ensuring the continuity of Korean cultural heritage.*" Another study by Lee (2018) emphasizes that "*the symbolic acts performed during Chuseok, such as the offering of food, serve as a means of expressing collective memory and identity.*"

*Chuseok* is a profound example of Geertz's symbolic anthropology. Through its rituals and offerings, it communicates and perpetuates the core values of Korean culture—reverence for ancestors, the importance of family, and the continuity of cultural traditions. Interviews with religious leaders, youth representatives, and cultural experts, combined with field observations and academic research, underscore the festival's

enduring significance. As Choi Young-gap aptly put it, "*Chuseok* is not just about the past; it's about how we honor the past to build a meaningful present and future."

### **Cultural Identity and Community Cohesion**

Rituals during *Chuseok*, such as the pilgrimage to ancestral gravesites and meticulous cleaning, remain pivotal in reinforcing South Korea's cultural identity and community cohesion. Interviews with figures like Ibu Yun underscored the enduring significance of these practices in preserving ancestral connections and nurturing communal bonds. However, observations and literature reveal a nuanced perspective: while these traditions symbolize continuity across generations, there's a palpable tension, as highlighted by Ibu Minjhe and scholarly insights from Professor Jinkyu Park (Park 2024). They point to evolving societal norms and the burdensome gender dynamics associated with *Chuseok* preparations, reflected in recent calls for simplification by institutions like the Sungkyunkwan Commission. This discourse reflects broader societal shifts where the reverence for tradition intersects with contemporary aspirations for inclusivity and reduced holiday-related stress, shaping how *Chuseok* rituals are perceived and practiced in modern South Korea.

### **Impact of Globalization and Modernization**

Globalization and modernization have brought significant changes to traditional rituals like *Chuseok*, altering both their form and significance. Geertz's perspective on cultural change suggests that while globalization introduces new influences, rituals such as *saebae* adapt to maintain their symbolic potency. Even as the manner of observance evolves with changing times, core values like respect for ancestors and gratitude remain resilient (Faiz 2022). This analysis is enriched with insights from interviews with key figures: religious leader Ibu Yun, youth leader Ibu Minjhe, and professional expert Professor Jinkyu Park. Additionally, field observations and literature reviews provide a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

Ibu Yun emphasizes the spiritual essence of *Chuseok*, asserting that while modernization may alter the external aspects of the rituals, the underlying spiritual values remain intact. She notes, "The essence of *Chuseok* is about honoring our ancestors and expressing gratitude. These core values are immutable, even if the way we observe the rituals changes" (Yun 2024).

Youth leader Ibu Minjhe highlights the generational shift in attitudes towards *Chuseok*. She points out that many young people prefer simplified celebrations or alternative ways to honor their ancestors due to busy urban lifestyles. "*While we respect our traditions, many of us are looking for ways to make them more relevant and less burdensome. For instance, virtual gatherings and simplified rituals are becoming more common,*" she says (Minjhe 2024).

Professor Jinkyu Park provides an academic perspective, noting that modernization and globalization have led to a more pragmatic approach to *Chuseok*. "*The rituals have evolved to accommodate the realities of modern life. This is not necessarily a loss of tradition but an adaptation to ensure the rituals remain meaningful and practical,*" he explains (Park 2024).

Field observations reveal a shift towards simplified rituals and virtual celebrations, especially in urban areas. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, as many families opted for virtual gatherings to avoid the risk of infection. This shift was seen as a temporary measure but has persisted due to its convenience and efficiency.

In recent years, discussions have arisen around simplifying *Chuseok* rituals to better align with contemporary lifestyles. A study by the Sungkyunkwan Commission for Correcting Rituals found that many Koreans support these changes. Choi Young-gap, head of the commission, explained that the criticism of current practices stems from their complexity, and the commission's goal is to make the rituals more practical and in tune with modern living (Young 2024).

Additionally, Lee Yeon-woo, in an article published by *The Korea Times*, highlights the stress experienced by married women due to the extensive preparations

for *Chuseok*. She notes that the holiday does not provide a break from family duties for these women, who often face added responsibilities, such as preparing food for their in-laws, throughout the celebration. Simplifying the rituals could help reduce this burden, making the holiday more enjoyable for everyone in the family ((Woo 2022). These observations align with the findings from the study, demonstrating a shared concern about the complexity of *Chuseok* traditions and the potential benefits of simplifying them.

The introduction of simplified rituals, such as those promoted by the Confucian group, aims to address the holiday blues and stress associated with *Chuseok* preparations. These new guidelines recommend a more streamlined *Chuseok* table, focusing on a few essential items rather than an elaborate spread. "Remembering your ancestors doesn't lie in the variety of foods. We hope for *Chuseok* to become a holiday to reflect and think about your family and its roots, not a holiday to be spent cooking jeon," the commission states.

Globalization and modernization are reshaping the observance of *Chuseok*, but the core values of respect and gratitude remain steadfast. Interviews with key figures like Ibu Yun, Ibu Minjhe, and Professor Jinkyu Park, along with field observations and literature reviews, illustrate a trend towards simplified and more practical rituals. This adaptation reflects a broader cultural shift, ensuring that *Chuseok* remains a meaningful and relevant tradition in contemporary Korean society.

### **Maintaining Cultural and Spiritual Values**

*Chuseok* serves as a vital mechanism for South Koreans to uphold their cultural and spiritual values amidst societal changes. The ritual of saebae during *Chuseok* not only strengthens familial ties but also fosters a profound sense of continuity with ancestral heritage. According to Choi Young-gap, head of the Sungkyunkwan Commission for Correcting Rituals, "The simplified ritual table setup is crucial in preserving the essence of these rituals amidst modern societal dynamics"(Young 2024). This sentiment is echoed by Ibu Yun, a religious figure involved in traditional Korean practices, who emphasizes that "*Chuseok plays a crucial role in maintaining our spiritual identity and connection with ancestors*" (Yun 2024). Additionally, young voices like Ibu Minjhe highlight the broader cultural significance, stating that "*Chuseok* represents our rich cultural heritage and helps shape our identity in a globalized world." Academic perspectives from scholars such as Professor Jinkyu Park underscore that rituals like those observed during *Chuseok* are "symbols of deep cultural expression and rich symbolism, collectively contributing to the preservation of societal identity" (Park 2024). Through field observations and scholarly studies, it becomes evident that *Chuseok* is not merely a customary holiday but a cornerstone for preserving and expressing cultural and spiritual values within South Korean society.

Through Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework, *Chuseok* emerges as a profound cultural practice that reinforces familial bonds, sustains cultural identity, and preserves spiritual values. Despite the challenges posed by globalization and modernization, the resilience of *Chuseok* underscores its enduring significance in South Korean society. The symbolic meanings embedded in *Chuseok* rituals illuminate how cultural dynamics and continuity are maintained across generations, reflecting Geertz's assertion on the role of rituals in expressing underlying cultural values.

The two traditions, *Bakar Batu* in Papua and *Chuseok* celebrations in South Korea, are worth comparing because they are examples of cultural rituals that have deep symbolic meaning in maintaining cultural identity, strengthening community solidarity, and preserving spiritual values in their respective societies.

## **Discussion**

### **Similarities**

*First*, cultural symbolism: Both *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* are examples of rituals rich in cultural symbolism. According to the theory of Clifford Geertz, culture is an inherited system of ideas expressed in symbolic form. Both traditions use symbols such

as food, offerings, and certain actions to convey cultural values that are important to their communities.

*Second*, the importance of community identity and solidarity: Geertz suggests that rituals play an important role in shaping and maintaining a community's collective identity. Both *Bakar Batu* in Papua and *Chuseok* in South Korea affirm community solidarity through shared actions such as preparing food, visiting ancestral graves, and caring for cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation.

Challenges of globalization and modernization: Both traditions also face the impact of globalization and modernization. Although globalization tends to change local cultures, these traditions show adaptation to remain relevant and maintain their symbolic meaning. This is in line with Geertz's view that culture is not static but dynamic, responding to external changes.

### **Distinction**

*First*, specific contexts and symbolic meanings: While both use symbolism to convey cultural values, the specific context and symbolic meanings of *Bakar Batu* in Papua differ from *Chuseok* in South Korea. For example, *Bakar Batu* in Papua emphasizes a spiritual connection with nature and the local community, while *Chuseok* places more emphasis on respect for ancestors and family continuity.

*Second*, ritual details: The way they celebrate and perform rituals is also different. *Bakar Batu* involves cooking food together over hot stones, while *Chuseok* involves visiting ancestral graves and preparing traditional food offerings.

According to Geertz, "Culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge of and attitudes towards life" (Fenn and Geertz 1974). This quote underlines the importance of symbols in conveying deep cultural values, as seen in the use of symbols in *Bakar Batu* in Papua and *Chuseok* in South Korea to reinforce identity and spiritual values.

Geertz also writes: "Ritual is a way of defining the situation in which people find themselves; it is a way of expressing what would otherwise remain implicit". This statement highlights how rituals such as *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* not only maintain collective identity but also express values that may not be directly spoken in everyday life.

Geertz demonstrated his thoughts on cultural adaptation in his work "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind" (Clifford Geertz 1973), where he emphasized that culture is not a static entity, but evolves and adapts to changes in the external environment. This analysis is relevant in the context of how *Bakar Batu* in Papua and *Chuseok* in South Korea are responding to the influence of globalization and modernization.

### **CONCLUSION**

A comparative analysis of *Bakar Batu* in Papua and *Chuseok* in South Korea through the interpretive framework of Clifford Geertz reveals deep insights into how these cultural rituals maintain identity, foster community cohesion and preserve spiritual values in the midst of globalization and modernization.

*First*, *Bakar Batu* and *Chuseok* exemplify Geertz's view that culture is transmitted through symbolic forms. Each ritual uses certain symbols - such as food, communal actions, and the honoring of ancestors - that encapsulate deep cultural meanings and values. These symbols reinforce collective identity and underline the importance of cultural continuity within each community. *Second*, Geertz's emphasis on ritual as a means of expressing and defining cultural situations is evident in both traditions. *Bakar Batu* emphasizes communal cooking on heated stones, which embodies a spiritual connection with nature and community solidarity. In contrast, *Chuseok* focuses on honoring the ancestors through rituals of grave cleaning, offerings,

and careful family gatherings that strengthen family ties and continuity between generations.

In addition, the effects of globalization and modernization pose challenges to these traditions. However, both rituals demonstrate resilience and adaptation, preserving their symbolic meanings while accommodating contemporary influences. This resilience underscores Geertz's theory that cultures evolve dynamically in response to external changes while maintaining their core values.

As such, this comparative study highlights the enduring importance of cultural rituals in shaping identity, fostering social cohesion, and transmitting spiritual values across generations. Future research could explore how these traditions continue to adapt and resonate in a rapidly changing global landscape, further enriching our understanding of cultural dynamics and continuity.

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