

Women's Agency in the Belangar Funeral Ritual: Social Solidarity in the Sasak Community of Lombok

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ABSTRACT

The Belangar tradition is a funeral ritual practiced by the Sasak community in Lombok that functions not only as a religious and cultural practice, but also as a social mechanism for building and sustaining communal solidarity. This study aims to examine how women interpret and enact their roles within the Belangar tradition and how their participation contributes to the formation of social solidarity. Employing a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design, the research was conducted in Surabaya Village, East Lombok. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that women act as organizers of collective action, maintainers of reciprocal social relations, and mediators of collective emotions within the Belangar ritual. These practices reflect women's social agency operating through non-formal and relational processes that actively produce and sustain social solidarity. The study concludes that social solidarity in the Belangar tradition is not an automatic outcome of cultural inheritance, but a socially constructed process mediated through women's ritual and relational labor. Theoretically, this research contributes to discussions on social solidarity and social capital in indigenous contexts, while offering practical implications for social education and culturally grounded community development.

Tradisi Belangar merupakan ritual kematian yang diperaktikkan oleh masyarakat Sasak di Lombok dan berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai praktik keagamaan dan kebudayaan, tetapi juga sebagai mekanisme sosial dalam membangun dan mempertahankan solidaritas komunitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana perempuan memaknai dan menjalankan peran mereka dalam tradisi Belangar serta bagaimana keterlibatan tersebut berkontribusi terhadap pembentukan solidaritas sosial. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus intrinsik dan dilaksanakan di Desa Surabaya, Lombok Timur. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan telaah dokumen, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik refleksif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan berperan sebagai pengorganisasi tindakan kolektif, penjaga relasi sosial yang bersifat timbal balik, serta mediator emosi kolektif dalam pelaksanaan ritual Belangar. Praktik-praktik tersebut mencerminkan agensi sosial perempuan yang beroperasi melalui proses non-formal dan relasional dalam memproduksi dan mempertahankan solidaritas sosial. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa solidaritas sosial dalam tradisi Belangar tidak terbentuk secara otomatis sebagai warisan budaya, melainkan merupakan hasil konstruksi sosial yang dimediasi melalui kerja ritual dan kerja relasional perempuan. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap kajian solidaritas sosial dan modal sosial dalam konteks masyarakat adat, sekaligus menawarkan implikasi praktis bagi pendidikan sosial dan pengembangan komunitas berbasis kearifan lokal.

Keywords: belangar, tradition, social solidarity, indigenous community

Introduction

Local traditions in Indonesia have long functioned as more than symbolic cultural expressions; they operate as social institutions through which communities construct meaning, regulate social relations, and sustain collective cohesion. Within indigenous societies, ritual practices, particularly those associated with death, constitute critical moments in which communal values such as empathy, reciprocity, and moral obligation are enacted in concrete and observable forms. Classical sociological thought emphasizes that death rituals play a fundamental role in reaffirming social solidarity, as they mobilize collective participation and reinforce shared moral consciousness during moments of communal crisis (Durkheim, 2014). Contemporary perspectives further suggest that such practices strengthen social trust and civic engagement by embedding individuals within dense networks of mutual support and obligation (Putnam, 2015). Empirical studies on social capital have consistently shown that trust, norms, and social networks generated through collective practices contribute significantly to social cohesion and well-being (Burelli, 2023; Deng, 2024; Sakamoto, 2024; Seo, 2024; Singgalen, 2020). Despite this recognition, many studies on ritual practices continue to treat rituals as socially integrative yet analytically neutral in terms of gender, thereby overlooking how specific social actors, particularly women, actively shape and sustain solidaristic processes.

In the Sasak community of Lombok, the Belangar tradition represents a deeply embedded funeral ritual that continues to structure social relations at the community level. While commonly understood as an expression of condolence and religious devotion, Belangar simultaneously operates as a reciprocal system of social assistance through which community members provide material contributions and emotional support to bereaved families. Similar ritual-based practices among the Sasak, such as Bales Nae and Bebangar, have been shown to strengthen social cohesion and reinforce collective responsibility through reciprocal exchanges (Nurohmah, 2024; Yazid et al., 2024). Studies focusing on Belangar and its related practices also highlight the presence of local wisdom that regulates social obligations and communal solidarity (Hidayati, 2024). However, much of the existing literature remains centered on ritual functions and symbolic meanings, offering limited attention to the social actors who sustain these practices in everyday communal life.

Research on women's roles within local and indigenous traditions in Indonesia increasingly challenges the assumption that customary systems uniformly marginalize female participation. A growing body of scholarship demonstrates that women frequently exercise agency through culturally embedded practices, acting as custodians of values, mediators of social relations, and transmitters of collective memory (Adeney-Risakotta, 2016; Kaunda, 2021; Pakuna, 2024). Ethnographic and philosophical studies of Lombok traditions, including Maulid Adat Bayan, further reveal that ritual practices function as spaces where collective values and social identities are reproduced through repeated

participation (Hifzurrohmi, 2023; Muhammad, 2023; Sekarlangit, 2025). Nevertheless, these studies tend to approach women's participation descriptively or symbolically, rather than examining how women's ritual practices contribute directly to the formation of social solidarity as a dynamic sociological process. This limitation is particularly evident in studies of funeral rituals, where emotional labor, coordination, and reciprocal engagement, domains largely managed by women, remain underexamined as sources of social influence.

This study is theoretically grounded in an integrative framework that combines the concept of women's agency in cultural practices with Durkheim's theory of social solidarity and the notion of social capital articulated by Putnam and Bourdieu. Social solidarity is understood not merely as a normative condition or collective sentiment, but as an outcome of repeated social practices mediated by specific actors within a particular cultural context (Bourdieu, 2002; Durkheim, 2014). From this perspective, women's participation in the Belangar ritual constitutes a form of social capital production through which trust, reciprocity, and collective norms are continuously reinforced (Putnam, 2015; Deng et al., 2024). Bourdieu's relational approach further enables an understanding of how women, despite lacking formal authority, exercise social influence through their strategic positioning within community networks.

Against this background, the present study aims to explore how women interpret, negotiate, and enact their roles within the Belangar tradition, and how their participation contributes to the formation and maintenance of social solidarity in the Sasak community of Lombok. Employing a qualitative approach, this research seeks to bridge the analytical divide between gender studies and sociological analyses of solidarity by situating women's ritual practices within broader social processes. By foregrounding women as active cultural agents rather than passive participants, this study contributes to ongoing debates on gender, tradition, and social cohesion in indigenous societies, while offering conceptual insights relevant to social education and cultural sociology in contexts where local wisdom continues to shape communal resilience amid social change.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach using an intrinsic case study design to explore women's participation in the Belangar tradition within the Sasak community of Lombok. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth examination of social meanings, cultural practices, and lived experiences that are contextually embedded and cannot be captured through quantitative measurement (J. W. Creswell, 2018). The intrinsic case study design was selected to allow a focused and holistic understanding of a culturally significant phenomenon that is unique to a particular social setting (Stake, 1995). In this research, the Belangar tradition is treated as a socially

situated practice through which women's agency and social solidarity are continuously produced and negotiated.

The study was conducted in Surabaya Village, East Lombok Regency, where the Belangar tradition remains actively practiced. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the relevance and richness of the data (Patton, 2015). The primary participants consisted of adult women who were directly involved in organizing and implementing Belangar activities, while additional informants included community elders, religious leaders, and village officials who possessed in-depth knowledge of local customs. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation focused on women's roles in coordinating contributions, managing ritual processes, and sustaining social interactions during Belangar events. Interviews were conducted to capture participants' interpretations and experiences, while documents such as photographs and informal village records were used to support contextual understanding and triangulation.

Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019a, 2019b). The analysis began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes, followed by inductive coding to identify recurring patterns related to women's roles, agency, and social solidarity. Codes were then organized into broader themes through an iterative analytical process that connected empirical findings with theoretical concepts. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, including informed consent, participant anonymity, and cultural sensitivity, particularly given the emotionally sensitive context of funeral rituals. The researcher also maintained reflexivity to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' perspectives while minimizing personal bias (J. W. , & P. C. N. Creswell, 2018; J. W. Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Result

The findings of this study indicate that the Belangar tradition functions as a socially embedded ritual in which women play a central and continuous role in sustaining communal relations. Women's participation in Belangar extends beyond technical involvement and reflects deeply rooted social practices that shape patterns of cooperation, reciprocity, and emotional engagement within the Sasak community. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews, three major themes emerged that describe how women's roles are enacted and experienced in everyday ritual practice.

Women as Organizers of Collective Action in the Belangar Tradition

Women were consistently identified as the primary organizers of Belangar activities, particularly during the early stages following a death. Their involvement begins with initiating communication across households, informing neighbors, and coordinating the

collection of contributions needed for the ritual. Women move from house to house, gathering rice, sugar, money, and other necessities, while simultaneously maintaining social interaction with community members. This process is not merely logistical; it reflects socially recognized patterns of cooperation that are embedded in long-standing communal norms.

Observational data show that women possess detailed knowledge regarding who should be approached, the appropriate timing of visits, and the customary forms of contribution. Their organizational role ensures that participation remains inclusive and that no household is excluded from the collective response to loss. Through these practices, women sustain the operational continuity of Belangar and reinforce shared expectations of mutual involvement. Although these activities are rarely formalized, they constitute the backbone of the ritual's implementation and are widely acknowledged by community members as essential to its success.

Belangar as a Space for Reciprocal Social Relations and Communal Support

The findings further reveal that Belangar is understood by participants as part of an ongoing system of reciprocal social relations rather than a one-time expression of condolence. Community members interpret contributions made during Belangar as acts that will be remembered and reciprocated in future moments of loss. Women play a key role in maintaining this system by preserving collective memory related to past interactions and contributions. Through informal conversations and everyday encounters, women ensure that social ties are continually reaffirmed and that reciprocal obligations remain active.

During Belangar gatherings, women also facilitate communal support by creating an environment in which individuals feel encouraged to participate and express empathy. Their presence helps transform the ritual into a shared social experience that extends beyond the bereaved family. Interviews indicate that women perceive their involvement as a moral responsibility toward the community, rooted in values of togetherness and mutual care. This shared understanding strengthens social bonds and reinforces the sense that communal life is sustained through collective action during times of vulnerability.

Non-Formal Leadership and Emotional Mediation by Women

Another significant theme that emerged from the findings concerns the form of leadership exercised by women within the Belangar tradition. Although women are rarely involved in formal village leadership structures, they hold considerable influence through non-formal means. Women are frequently consulted regarding appropriate ritual procedures, the distribution of responsibilities, and the management of social

interactions during the event. Their guidance is based on experience, trust, and long-standing social relationships rather than official authority.

Women also play an important role in mediating collective emotions during Belangar. They provide emotional support to the bereaved family, help regulate expressions of grief, and maintain a calm and respectful atmosphere throughout the ritual. This emotional labor contributes to the stability of the communal response to death and helps prevent social tension during sensitive moments. Through these practices, women act as stabilizing agents who ensure that the ritual remains both meaningful and socially cohesive. Overall, the results demonstrate that women's participation in the Belangar tradition is integral to the functioning of the ritual and to the maintenance of social solidarity within the Sasak community. Women emerge not as peripheral helpers, but as central actors whose organizational skills, relational work, and emotional engagement continuously reproduce the social bonds that underpin communal life in Lombok.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that women's participation in the Belangar tradition cannot be reduced to technical or supportive roles within a funeral ritual. Instead, women emerge as active social agents whose practices play a decisive role in the formation and maintenance of social solidarity within the Sasak community of Lombok. The results indicate that solidarity in Belangar is not an automatic consequence of tradition itself, but rather a socially constructed process that is continuously reproduced through women's organizational work, reciprocal relations, and emotional mediation. This underscores the importance of viewing ritual practices as dynamic social arenas shaped by specific actors rather than as static cultural forms.

From the perspective of Durkheim's theory of social solidarity, death rituals serve as moments of collective crisis that reaffirm shared moral consciousness and strengthen social cohesion (Durkheim, 2014). The Belangar tradition reflects this function by mobilizing communal participation in response to loss. However, this study extends Durkheim's framework by revealing that collective consciousness is not generated spontaneously. Instead, it is actively organized and sustained through women's ritual labor. Women's roles in coordinating participation, ensuring adherence to customary norms, and facilitating collective responses demonstrate that solidarity is materially enacted through patterned social practices. In this sense, Belangar represents a lived expression of mechanical solidarity, mediated through women's everyday actions that translate shared values into concrete social behavior.

The findings also align closely with Putnam's concept of social capital, particularly with regard to trust, reciprocity, and social networks as foundations of social cohesion (Putnam, 2015). Women's involvement in Belangar facilitates the continuous renewal of

social capital by maintaining dense interpersonal connections and reinforcing expectations of mutual assistance. The reciprocal nature of Belangar, preserved through women's collective memory and informal communication, illustrates how trust is sustained across time through ritualized exchanges. These practices are not transactional in nature, but are embedded within moral obligations that bind families and individuals into enduring social relationships. Women's roles thus function as a critical mechanism through which bonding social capital is reproduced within the Sasak community.

Bourdieu's conception of social capital and symbolic power further illuminates the form of leadership exercised by women in the Belangar tradition. According to Bourdieu (1986), power does not operate solely through formal institutions, but also through relational positions and the accumulation of symbolic resources. Although women in the Sasak community rarely occupy formal leadership roles within village governance, their influence is evident in their control over ritual knowledge, social coordination, and emotional regulation. Through these forms of cultural competence, women exercise symbolic power that shapes collective behavior without overt domination. This non-formal leadership challenges conventional assumptions that equate power exclusively with institutional authority and highlights the relational nature of agency within traditional social structures.

Importantly, the findings contribute to broader debates on women's agency in indigenous and traditional societies. Previous studies have shown that women often act as cultural custodians and mediators within religious and customary practices (Adeney-Risakotta, 2016; Kaunda, 2021). This study builds on that scholarship by demonstrating that women's agency in Belangar is expressed not through resistance to tradition, but through active engagement within it. Rather than positioning tradition as inherently restrictive, the Belangar case illustrates how local cultural practices can provide meaningful spaces for women to exercise influence and sustain social cohesion. Empowerment in this context emerges through the reinforcement and reinterpretation of existing social roles rather than through structural transformation alone. Overall, this discussion highlights that the Belangar tradition operates as both a cultural ritual and a social mechanism through which women actively sustain communal solidarity. By integrating empirical findings with classical and contemporary sociological theories, this study demonstrates that social solidarity is not an abstract or static condition, but a lived process produced through ritualized practices, relational labor, and collective moral engagement. These insights contribute to the fields of cultural sociology, social education, and gender studies by offering a nuanced understanding of how women's agency and local wisdom intersect to support resilient community life in indigenous societies.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women's participation in the Belangar tradition constitutes a significant form of social agency that plays a central role in the formation and maintenance of social solidarity within the Sasak community of Lombok. Women are not merely involved in the technical execution of the ritual, but act as social organizers, guardians of reciprocal relations, and mediators of collective emotions that sustain solidaristic practices rooted in local wisdom. The findings demonstrate that social solidarity within the Belangar tradition is not an automatic outcome of cultural inheritance, but a socially produced process mediated through women's relational and ritual labor. Theoretically, this study contributes to discussions on social solidarity and social capital by foregrounding women as key actors in community-based ritual practices. Practically, the findings offer important implications for social education and culturally grounded community development, while also providing a foundation for future research on women's agency and the transformation of local traditions amid ongoing social change.

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