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**Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Southeast Sulawesi:
A Socio-Cultural Analysis from a Contemporary Perspective**

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the diversity of ethnic groups and cultures in Southeast Sulawesi and how this diversity affects the social, economic, and political dynamics of local communities. Southeast Sulawesi Province is a region rich in ethnic diversity, with major ethnic groups such as Tolaki, Muna, Buton, Moronene, Bugis, and Bajo. Through a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods and literature studies, this study explores how ethnic and cultural diversity interact in the context of social change and globalization. The results of the study indicate that the wisdom of the local community of Southeast Sulawesi has enabled the formation of social harmony amidst diversity, despite challenges in the context of modernization and economic development. This study also identifies efforts to preserve culture amidst the social transformation that is occurring, as well as the role of government and society in maintaining local cultural identity as an asset for regional development.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis keragaman suku bangsa dan budaya di Sulawesi Tenggara dan bagaimana keragaman tersebut memengaruhi dinamika sosial, ekonomi, dan politik masyarakat lokal. Provinsi Sulawesi Tenggara merupakan wilayah yang kaya akan keberagaman etnis, dengan kelompok etnis utama seperti Tolaki, Muna, Buton, Moronene, Bugis, dan Bajo. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode etnografi dan studi literatur, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana keragaman etnis dan budaya tersebut berinteraksi dalam konteks perubahan sosial dan globalisasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kearifan lokal masyarakat Sulawesi Tenggara telah memungkinkan terbentuknya harmoni sosial di tengah keberagaman, meskipun terdapat tantangan dalam konteks modernisasi dan pengembangan ekonomi. Studi ini juga mengidentifikasi upaya-upaya pelestarian budaya di tengah transformasi sosial yang terjadi, serta peran pemerintah dan masyarakat dalam mempertahankan identitas budaya lokal sebagai aset pembangunan daerah.

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Sulawesi is one of Indonesia's provinces with an extraordinary wealth of ethnic and cultural diversity. Located on the southeastern peninsula of Sulawesi Island, the province is home to various ethnic groups with unique cultural characteristics. This diversity is not only a cultural treasure but also provides fascinating social dynamics for scientific study.

Historically, Southeast Sulawesi has been a melting pot of ethnic groups, both from within and outside Sulawesi. This interethnic interaction has persisted for centuries, creating a complex and rich cultural mosaic (Sunarti et al., 2019). This diversity is reflected in various aspects of life, from language and belief systems to traditional arts and social and economic systems.

The main ethnic groups inhabiting Southeast Sulawesi include the Tolaki, who predominantly inhabit the Konawe mainland; the Muna, who inhabit Muna Island; the Buton, who inhabit Buton Island and its surroundings; the Moronene in Bombana Regency; and immigrant ethnic groups such as the Bugis and Bajo, known as "sea people" (Tahara, 2018). Each of these ethnic groups has its own value systems, customs, and traditions that shape their identity.

Amidst the increasingly massive flow of globalization and modernization, the ethnic and cultural diversity of Southeast Sulawesi faces various challenges. On the one hand, there are concerns about the erosion of local cultural values due to the influx of new values from outside. On the other hand, this diversity can actually become valuable social capital for regional development if managed properly (Hafsah, 2020).

Several previous studies have demonstrated the crucial role of local wisdom in maintaining social harmony amidst ethnic diversity in Southeast Sulawesi. For example, the concept of *kalosara* in the Tolaki community serves as a unifying force and conflict resolution tool (Basri et al., 2017), or the *pobinci-binciki kuli* tradition in the Butonese community, which emphasizes mutual respect and appreciation (Umar, 2021). However, comprehensive studies analyzing ethnic and cultural diversity in Southeast Sulawesi within the context of contemporary social change are still relatively limited.

This study aims to fill this gap by comprehensively examining ethnic and cultural diversity in Southeast Sulawesi. Specifically, this study has several objectives, namely: (1) identifying the characteristics and dynamics of ethnic and cultural diversity in Southeast Sulawesi; (2) analyzing how this diversity interacts with the process of social change and development; (3) exploring the challenges and opportunities in preserving local cultural values; and (4) formulating strategies to optimize the potential of cultural diversity as a regional development asset.

This research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it will enrich the study of cultural and ethnic diversity in the context of eastern Indonesia. Practically, the results can provide input for policymakers in formulating development strategies that consider cultural diversity as social capital.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods and literature review. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of sociocultural phenomena in their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Assingkiy, 2021). Ethnographic methods were used to understand the emic perspectives (insider views) of local communities on cultural diversity and how they interpret it in their daily lives.

Data collection

Data collection was carried out using several techniques, namely:

1. Literature Review: Researchers conducted a review of various scientific literature related to ethnic and cultural diversity in Southeast Sulawesi. The literature reviewed included scientific journal articles, books, research reports, and policy documents published between

2017 and 2025. Databases used for the literature search included Google Scholar, SINTA, the Garuda Portal, and university repositories in Indonesia.

2. Participatory Observation: Researchers conducted direct observations in several ethnic communities in Southeast Sulawesi, including the Konawe (Tolaki ethnic group), Muna (Muna ethnic group), Buton (Buton ethnic group), Bombana (Moronene ethnic group), and several coastal Bajo settlements. Observations were conducted from January to June 2024.
3. In-depth Interviews: Interviews were conducted with 45 purposively selected informants, consisting of traditional figures, community leaders, academics, cultural practitioners, and local government representatives. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide developed based on the research objectives.
4. Focus Group Discussion (FGD): Five FGD sessions were conducted involving various stakeholders, each in the cities of Kendari, Raha, Baubau, Kolaka, and Wakatobi. Each FGD session was attended by 8-12 participants representing various ethnic backgrounds and professions.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis stages include:

1. Data familiarization: Researchers repeatedly read interview transcripts, field notes, and collected literature to gain in-depth understanding.
2. Coding: Raw data is coded based on themes relevant to the research objectives.
3. Identify themes: Related codes are grouped to form themes and sub-themes.
4. Theme evaluation: The identified themes are evaluated to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes.
5. Definition and naming of themes: Each theme is clearly defined and given a representative name.
6. Writing reports: Research findings are compiled in a systematic and comprehensive narrative form.

To ensure the validity of the data, researchers used triangulation techniques (sources, methods, and theories) as well as member checking by confirming the interpretation of the data with key informants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Ethnic Diversity in Southeast Sulawesi

Research results show that the ethnic diversity of Southeast Sulawesi has unique and complex characteristics. Based on collected data, there are at least 15 ethnic groups inhabiting this region, with the five largest ethnic groups being the Tolaki (25.7%), Muna (22.4%), Buton (21.8%), Bugis (8.3%), and Moronene (6.2%) (Central Statistics Agency of Southeast Sulawesi, 2023).

Ethnic distribution patterns indicate a certain geographic concentration, with the Tolaki ethnic group dominant on the Konawe mainland, the Muna ethnic group on Muna Island, the Buton ethnic group on Buton Island, the Moronene ethnic group in Bombana, and the Bajo ethnic group spread across various coastal areas. However, migration and urbanization in recent decades have led to increasingly intense ethnic mixing, particularly in urban centers such as Kendari and Baubau (Tahara & Hamid, 2019).

Linguistic plurality is also a marker of diversity in Southeast Sulawesi. According to recent linguistic studies, at least 17 regional languages are still actively spoken, with Tolaki, Muna, Buton, Wolio, and Moronene having the largest number of speakers (Andersen, 2020). Interestingly, these languages still demonstrate considerable vitality despite pressure from Indonesian as the national language.

Local Wisdom and Social Harmony in Diversity

One of the key findings of this research is the role of local wisdom in maintaining social harmony amidst ethnic diversity. Each ethnic group in Southeast Sulawesi possesses traditional concepts and values that serve as social cohesion and conflict resolution mechanisms.

In Tolaki society, the concept of kalosara is a fundamental value that regulates social relations. Kalosara, symbolized by a rattan circle, serves as an instrument for conflict resolution and community unification (Basri et al., 2017). This research found that kalosara practices remain relevant in contemporary societal contexts and have even been adapted to resolve new types of conflict, such as land disputes and political conflicts.

Meanwhile, in Butonese society, the concept of pobinci-binciki kuli, literally meaning "pinching each other's skin," is known and serves as a fundamental philosophy in social interaction. This concept embodies four main principles: pomae-maeka (mutual fear/respect), popia-piara (mutual care), pomaa-maasiaka (mutual love), and poangka-angkataka (mutual respect) (Umar, 2021). Interviews with Butonese traditional leaders revealed that these values are still passed on through various rituals and social practices, although their interpretations have evolved to reflect the context of the times.

This research also identified cultural practices that serve as bridges between ethnic groups. Cross-cultural festivals such as the Kendari Bay Festival and the Lulo Traditional Festival have become venues for interaction between various ethnic groups and fostering social cohesion (Hafid et al., 2022). As one informant expressed it:

"Cultural festivals are not only a venue for artistic performances, but also a space where people from various ethnic backgrounds can meet, interact, and build shared understanding. This is where we learn to appreciate differences while discovering common ground" (Informant 7, Kendari community leader).

Identity Dynamics in the Context of Social Change

This research reveals complex dynamics in the construction of ethnic identity amidst modernization and globalization. On the one hand, there are efforts to maintain and strengthen ethnic identity in response to concerns about cultural erosion. On the other hand, a process of identity negotiation occurs, resulting in hybrid forms of identity, particularly among the younger generation (Hafid & Rosdin, 2020).

A "cultural revival" phenomenon has been identified in several ethnic communities, marked by increased interest in regional languages, the revitalization of traditional rituals, and the development of creative industries based on local culture. For example, among the Tolaki people, there is a movement to revitalize the Tolaki language through teaching in schools and developing Tolaki-language literature (Rahmawati et al., 2021).

However, this study also found a generational gap in perceptions regarding cultural identity. Focused discussions (FGDs) with different age groups revealed that the younger generation tends to have a more flexible and adaptive interpretation of tradition, while the older generation places greater emphasis on adherence to cultural forms considered "authentic." This gap has the potential to create tension in the process of cultural inheritance (Nursalam & Irawaty, 2020).

Interestingly, this research also identified the emergence of new forms of identity that transcend conventional ethnic boundaries. In inter-ethnic border regions, for example, "hybrid" identities have emerged that adopt elements from various cultural traditions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in urban areas like Kendari City, where inter-ethnic interaction is intense (Asba, 2021).

Cultural Diversity as Development Capital

Another significant finding is the potential of cultural diversity as an asset for economic and social development. In recent years, local governments in Southeast Sulawesi have begun adopting a development approach that takes cultural aspects into account. This is evident in various policies encouraging the development of a local culture-based creative economy and cultural tourism (Mahmud et al., 2021).

In the tourism sector, the unique cultures of various ethnicities have become a major draw. Cultural tourism destinations such as the Buton Palace Fortress, the Bajo Village in Wakatobi, and the traditional Tolaki villages have developed into magnets for both domestic and international tourists. Data from the Southeast Sulawesi Provincial Tourism Office shows a significant increase in tourist visits interested in cultural tourism, with an average annual growth of 15% from 2018 to 2023 (Southeast Sulawesi Tourism Office, 2023).

The culture-based creative economy is also showing positive developments. Traditional woven crafts, such as Kamofu cloth from Muna and Kasopa cloth from Buton, have been revitalized and transformed into contemporary fashion products marketed nationally and even internationally. Similarly, traditional culinary delights from various ethnicities have now become promising economic commodities (Syahrin & Sarman, 2022).

However, this study also identified several challenges in optimizing the potential of cultural diversity as a development asset. First, there remains a capacity gap between ethnic communities in developing their cultural potential. Second, an adequate supporting ecosystem, such as infrastructure, funding, and marketing networks, has not yet been established. Third, there is the risk of excessive commodification, which could erode the intrinsic values of local culture (Mahmud et al., 2021).

Challenges and Strategies for Cultural Preservation

In the context of cultural preservation, this research identifies several key challenges faced by ethnic communities in Southeast Sulawesi. These challenges include:

1. **Transmission of traditional knowledge:** There is a gap in the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills to the younger generation. Interviews with cultural practitioners revealed concerns about the loss of various forms of local knowledge, such as traditional medicine, agricultural techniques, and handicrafts, due to the lack of interest among the younger generation in learning them (Suraya et al., 2022).
2. **Changes in the function of rituals and cultural practices:** Some rituals and cultural practices have shifted from being sacred to mere performances or tourist attractions. This has the potential to erode the intrinsic meaning and value contained within these practices (Melamba & Taewa, 2018).
3. **Penetration of global values:** The influx of global values through mass media and the internet has influenced cultural perceptions and preferences, especially among the younger generation. This trend creates challenges in maintaining the relevance of local values (Hafid & Rosdin, 2020).
4. **Limited documentation:** Many aspects of local culture remain poorly documented, making them vulnerable to extinction. This is especially true for oral traditions that rely on word-of-mouth transmission (Andersen, 2020).

Based on the identified challenges, this study proposes several cultural preservation strategies that are adaptive to changing times: first, **Integration of local knowledge in formal education:** Development of a local content curriculum that integrates traditional knowledge and values into the formal education system. Several schools in Southeast Sulawesi have begun implementing regional language and local knowledge learning with methods that are engaging for students (Rahmawati et al., 2021). Second, **Digitization of cultural heritage:** The use of digital technology to document and disseminate cultural knowledge. Initiatives such as the "Digital

Archive of Southeast Sulawesi Culture," which develops an online database on languages, oral literature, and traditional cultural practices, demonstrate the potential of technology in cultural preservation (Andersen, 2020).

Third, Revitalization through Innovation: Encouraging innovation that adapts traditional cultural elements to contemporary contexts without losing their essential value. For example, transforming traditional woven motifs into modern fashion designs or adapting traditional music into contemporary genres (Syahrin & Sarman, 2022). Fourth, Strengthening Cultural Communities: Empowering local cultural communities as the spearhead of preservation. Programs such as "Cultural Villages" initiated by local governments provide space for communities to independently manage their cultural heritage (Mahmud et al., 2021). Fifth, Developing Evidence-Based Policies: Formulating cultural preservation policies based on scientific research and involving the active participation of local communities. This approach allows for policies that are more responsive to real needs on the ground (Hafid et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This research has explored ethnic and cultural diversity in Southeast Sulawesi within the context of contemporary social change. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the collected data, several conclusions can be drawn: First, the ethnic and cultural diversity in Southeast Sulawesi has unique characteristics, marked by the existence of various ethnic groups with distinctive cultural traditions. This diversity is not static, but rather dynamic and continues to evolve in line with ongoing social change. Urbanization, migration, and the development of information technology have influenced patterns of inter-ethnic interaction and the construction of cultural identities.

Second, local wisdom such as kalosara in the Tolaki community and pobinci-binciki kuli in the Butonese community have become the foundation for social harmony amidst diversity. These traditional values are not only relevant in a historical context but also continue to adapt to address contemporary challenges, including resolving modern conflicts and building social cohesion. Third, there are complex dynamics in the construction of ethnic identity amidst the currents of modernization and globalization. On the one hand, revitalization movements have emerged that seek to strengthen ethnic identity in response to concerns about cultural erosion. On the other hand, processes of negotiation and hybridization of identities are occurring, producing new forms of identity, particularly among the younger generation and in inter-ethnic border areas.

Fourth, cultural diversity has the potential to serve as capital for economic and social development. The development of cultural tourism and a creative economy based on local culture has shown positive results in improving community well-being. However, optimizing this potential still faces various challenges, including capacity gaps, limited supporting infrastructure, and the risk of excessive commodification. Fifth, preserving culture amidst the currents of social change requires an adaptive and innovative approach. Strategies that can be implemented include integrating local knowledge into formal education, digitizing cultural heritage, revitalizing it through innovation, strengthening cultural communities, and developing evidence-based policies.

Overall, this study confirms that ethnic and cultural diversity in Southeast Sulawesi is not merely a demographic reality, but a potential social and economic asset. Wise and sustainable management of this diversity will contribute to inclusive and equitable regional development. This study has several limitations, including its geographic coverage that does not encompass all areas of Southeast Sulawesi and its inability to explore current dynamics within diaspora communities. Therefore, further research is needed to expand the geographic scope and incorporate the transnational dimensions of Southeast Sulawesi's cultural diversity.

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