



Cultural Meanings and Social Functions of Raw Shellfish Consumption in a Coastal Indonesian Community

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Abstract

This study aims to uncover the unique coastal culture of the Riau Islands, namely the culture of processed raw shellfish. The habit of consuming processed raw shellfish is certainly familiar to both traditional and modern communities. Raw shellfish consumption is widely found in various places around the world, including Asia; for example, in Japan, there's sashimi; in Europe, specifically in Spain, there's ceviche de calamares; and in Korea, there's sannakji. The approach used in this study is a descriptive qualitative study with a specific case study of the culinary scene in Tanjung Bungsu Village, Resun Pesisir, North Lingga District, Lingga Regency, Riau Islands Province. This small village has inherited a distinctive coastal culture, with fishing as the primary livelihood of the local community in the Riau Islands region. The results of this study found a common practice of consuming raw shellfish made from various types of shellfish, especially clams (*Tridacna gigas*), mixed with natural spices and prepared traditionally. They call it bekasam, a fermented product made from raw shellfish.

Keywords: Fresh Shellfish, Coastal Culture, Riau Islands, Community



1. INTRODUCTION

The Riau Islands Province is one of Indonesia's relatively young provinces compared to other provinces. However, it can be considered a miniature Indonesia, meaning its water area is disproportionate to its land area. The sea is larger than the land. Its population is also diverse, with many ethnicities, including Malay, Sundanese, Javanese, Bugis, Batak, and others, and a maritime socio-cultural heritage (Yuliaty et al., 2019). Another interesting aspect is the culinary culture in one of the regencies in the Riau Islands, namely Tanjung Bungsu Village, Resun Pesisir Village, North Lingga District, Lingga Regency. Lingga Regency itself covers an area of 2,205 km² with a population of 94,962 people spread across 13 districts, 9 sub-districts, and 75 villages (BPS Kepri, 2020).

There are many unique traditions within the coastal culture of Tanjung Bungsu Village, Resun Pesisir District, Lingga Utara District, Lingga Regency, including raw shellfish dishes. This tradition has long been passed down from generation to generation, and continues to this day. However, the consumption of raw shellfish, originally consumed by families as an accompaniment to rice, has now become a mere snack. It is no longer a staple food or a side dish with rice. Consequently, this culinary experience has become limited to a select few communities.

Within coastal culture, many traditional dishes are made from seafood: squid, tuna, small shrimp, and various shellfish. Tuna mixed with spices and vegetables in Natuna Regency creates a specialty dish called Silong (Hasmiza & Bakar, 2024). This tradition has been passed down from generation to generation and is still preserved today. Calo, a fermented raw dish made from small shrimp, is also popular. Bekasam is also made from various types of sea fish, although not all sea fish can be processed or fermented in the traditional way. The consumption of shellfish and sea fish is a distinctive coastal culture in Indonesia. This occurs in many places such as in Halerman Village, Southwest Alor Regency (Suniarti et al., 2019).

Apart from that, the typical style of looking for shells for coastal cultures is called "bekarang". Bekarang means looking for sea fish including shellfish when the water recedes or recedes. When the sea recedes, the water becomes very shallow, people usually flock to the sea to look for various sea fish which can be caught with their bare hands or using simple tools. Bekarang is a typical style of coastal culture in the Riau Islands and continues to this day. In fact, coral has become an inseparable part of survival strategies (Januariusdi, 2023). Another thing is "manongkah", a tradition of catching shellfish with simple tools found in the culture of the sea tribe in Kuala Patah Parang Indragiri Hilir Village. This tradition is not only unique, but especially at the same time maintaining the survival of the sea; do not take shellfish carelessly. Even before hunting for shellfish, they first perform a ceremony according to the traditions and culture of the sea tribe (Salmiah, 2021).

In the past, processed raw clams were served as a side dish to accompany rice; a staple food. This could be enjoyed by families, from mothers, fathers, and children. This meant that everyone enjoyed it: the elderly, the middle-aged, and even small children. Now fermented raw clams are no longer as popular as they once were, and consumption of fermented raw clams is dwindling and becoming less popular. Only a few communities remain who still faithfully prepare raw clams. This raw clam dish, made from giant clams (*Tridacna gigas*), is called bekasam. This custom still exists among a limited number of people in Tanjung Bungsu Village, Resun District, North Lingga District, Lingga Regency, Riau Islands Province.

The persistence of raw shellfish consumption in Tanjung Bungsu Village represents more than a culinary practice; it embodies a system of traditional ecological knowledge deeply embedded in coastal livelihoods. This knowledge encompasses an understanding of tidal cycles, seasonal variations, and marine biodiversity, enabling communities to determine appropriate harvesting times and consumption practices. Such locally rooted knowledge systems demonstrate adaptive strategies that have evolved through long-term interaction with the marine environment.

From an anthropological standpoint, traditional food practices function as cultural symbols that reinforce collective identity and social cohesion. In coastal Malay communities, food serves not only nutritional needs but also social and cultural functions, acting as a medium for transmitting



values, norms, and intergenerational knowledge. The communal preparation and consumption of raw shellfish historically strengthened kinship ties and facilitated the continuity of cultural traditions within households and village networks.

Nevertheless, processes of modernization have significantly altered local food systems. Increased exposure to urban lifestyles, processed foods, and modern health discourses has contributed to the declining popularity of fermented and raw seafood. Younger generations, in particular, tend to associate traditional foods with outdated practices, leading to a weakening of intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge and cultural skills.

Environmental transformations further exacerbate the decline of raw shellfish traditions. Coastal ecosystem degradation, pollution, and overexploitation of marine resources have reduced the availability of shellfish species traditionally used in local cuisine. The giant clam (*Tridacna gigas*), for instance, has experienced population decline and is subject to conservation regulations in many regions, complicating its continued use in traditional food preparation.

Despite these challenges, coastal food practices remain closely aligned with principles of environmental stewardship. Traditional harvesting methods such as *bekarang* and *manongkah* are governed by customary norms that regulate access to marine resources. These practices promote selective harvesting and discourage overexploitation, illustrating how indigenous knowledge systems contribute to sustainable coastal resource management.

The ritualized aspects of shellfish harvesting further reflect the spiritual relationship between coastal communities and the marine environment. Ceremonial practices performed prior to harvesting, particularly among sea-oriented ethnic groups, symbolize respect, gratitude, and moral responsibility toward nature. Such rituals function as informal regulatory mechanisms that reinforce ethical resource use and ecological balance.

In the context of cultural heritage studies, fermented raw shellfish dishes can be understood as elements of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage. Their gradual disappearance signals not only a loss of culinary diversity but also the erosion of cultural memory and identity. Documenting and safeguarding these practices is therefore essential to prevent the marginalization of local knowledge systems within dominant narratives of development and modernization.

At the same time, there is potential to revitalize traditional shellfish cuisine through culturally sensitive tourism and heritage-based economic initiatives. By reframing dishes such as *bekasam* as heritage foods rather than everyday staples, communities may create alternative livelihood opportunities while maintaining cultural integrity. However, such initiatives must be carefully managed to avoid excessive commercialization that could distort traditional meanings and practices.

Institutional support plays a critical role in sustaining coastal food traditions. Local governments, educational institutions, and cultural organizations can contribute by integrating local culinary heritage into formal education, community-based workshops, and cultural documentation programs. These efforts may foster cultural pride and encourage younger generations to engage with their heritage in meaningful ways.

In conclusion, the survival of raw shellfish traditions in Tanjung Bungsu Village depends on the dynamic interaction between cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and social change. Although these practices may no longer function as staple food systems, their continued existence as cultural expressions underscores the enduring relationship between coastal communities and the sea. Preserving such traditions is essential to ensuring that local knowledge remains a living and evolving heritage rather than a residual artifact of the past.

2. METHOD

This research employed a qualitative design with a case study approach, focusing on key participants in raw shellfish consumption. The aim was to uncover the consumption habits of fermented raw shellfish products, based on in-depth interviews with the research subjects. The criteria for selecting research subjects were those involved in and producing raw shellfish culinary



products. The researcher employed a narrative strategy, collecting data and information from individuals or groups, then narrating the participants' lives using a narrative style, using the steps of the Miles & Huberman model: data analysis techniques with the following stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusions (Creswell, 2010).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The habit of consuming fresh raw shellfish and fish, whether from freshwater (rivers) or saltwater (seas), has become part of the culinary heritage of several cultures around the world. Besides offering a unique taste experience, this social practice also symbolizes the meticulousness in selecting and preparing ingredients. In recent years, the culture of eating raw fish has spread to various countries around the world, generating new innovations and creating unique and interesting flavor combinations. Over time, the culture of eating raw fish continues to evolve and adapt to the times, while maintaining and offering the essence of beauty and the enjoyment of fresh, delicious food (Handayani et al., 2020).

Before consuming fresh raw fish directly, some people around the world have long been familiar with the culture of fermenting fresh raw fish. The raw fish fermentation process does not involve heat or water; instead, the fresh fish is processed with salt and spices to preserve it for a long time. These fermented culinary products are made from shellfish and fish. The culture of fermenting shellfish and fish has long existed and is maintained to this day. Numerous fermented products are found throughout the Indonesian archipelago, such as shrimp paste, peda, calo, and nairura, which are all fermented raw fish products (Mulyani et al., 2022).

Among the many raw fish that are processed directly mixed with herbs and spices to be served fresh is the shellfish family. This marine biota is found in many areas that have vast seas. This shellfish, in addition to having many genetic variations, is also easily spread and almost throughout the world, there are various types of shellfish. It is a marine mollusk that is widely distributed in the world. Shellfish in Indonesia are also numerous. Clams (*tridacna gigas*) include Kingdom: Animalia Phylum: Mollusca Class: Bivalvia Subclass: Autobranchia Infraclass: Pteriomorphia Order: Ostreida Superfamily: Pinnoidea Family: Pinnidae Genus: *Atrina* Species: *Atrina pectinata*. The shellfish family has 12 types; Axe clam (*Atrina pectinata*), clam (*Tridacna gigas*), green clam (*Perna viridis*), white clam (*Meretrix meretrix*), blood clam (*Anadara granosa*), batik clam (*Paratapes undulatus*), brown clam (*Meretrix lusoria*), kor-kor clam (genus *Anadara*), Pacific oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*), fan clam (*Mimachlamys varia*) (Rahmana Putri et al., 2025).

In the squid family, for example, there are two similar squids: cuttlefish and octopus. Although similar, they are not the same. Squid are longer than cuttlefish, while octopus tend to be round and short (Wulandari, 2018). While both squid and cuttlefish have diamond-shaped fins, octopuses lack fins; their bodies are more like eight-legged bubbles equipped with a swimming membrane (Budiyanto and Sugiarto, 1997). Furthermore, squid, cuttlefish, and octopus all possess defense mechanisms, common to other fish. However, unlike other fish, when facing predators, squid release dark, even black, ink to deceive predators and hide from their attacks (Jereb and Roper, 2006).

Based on custom, in many culinary, this black ink is often cooked as a mainstay menu with the popular term cuttlefish cooked in black, meaning together with the ink. And it turns out that most people like to consume squid and cuttlefish along with their ink, because the content in squid ink contains melanin granules (black pigment), melanin is naturally a melano protein containing 10-15% protein as good as the protein found in meat (Astawan, 2008). In addition, the content in squid ink also contains other contents such as glycosaminoglycans, fats and essential amino acids in the form of lysine, arginine, leucine and phenylalanine (Agusandi et al., 2013).

This raw and fresh culinary dish made from squid, cuttlefish, and octopus has become a global phenomenon. This means that almost every continent has a culture or custom of consuming raw



squid. For example, in Japan, there is Sashimi Ika, which is thinly sliced raw squid served with soy sauce, mixed with wasabi and ginger as a pickle (Tsuji, S, 1980).

Then in Korea, there is Sannakji, which is thinly sliced raw squid, still alive, and served with a spicy sauce (Park, H, 2018). Meanwhile, in Thailand, there is something called Larb Pla Muk, this is a raw squid salad with a mixture of spicy spices mixed with herbs and nuts (Thompson, D, 2010).

There are raw squid dishes in the European continent, including in Italy there is Crudo di Calamari, which is thinly sliced raw squid, served with a mixture of olive oil, lemon and salt (Hazan, M, 1973). Likewise in Spain there is Ceviche de Calamares, raw squid marinated in lemon or orange juice with additional spices and vegetables (Roden, C, 2012). Meanwhile in Peru there is Ceviche de Calamar, which is raw squid marinated in lemon or orange juice with additional spices and mixed with vegetables (Presilla, M. E, 2013). Ceviche de Calamar is also found in Mexico using fresher raw squid and very spicy spices (Lopez, B., & Cabral, J, 2019). Poisson Cru de Poulpe is a processed raw squid marinated in coconut milk and lemon juice with additional spices and vegetables, found on the island of Tahiti, French Polynesia (Pernet, J-P, 2008).

In addition to processed raw squid, fermented raw shellfish is also found in the Riau Islands, specifically in Resun Village, North Lingga District, Lingga Regency. There is a raw shellfish dish that is processed traditionally and naturally called bekasam. Bekasam is made from raw shellfish, especially clams, mixed with other shellfish with the following processing process; First, remove the shells, then wash them clean, then put them into the processed mixture. Second, after being clean, the fresh raw shellfish are then cut into small pieces. Third, they are then mixed with yeast and spices and table salt. Third, the raw shellfish that have been coated with yeast and spices are then put into a bottle and left for approximately one or two weeks before being consumed, either as a stir-fry mixture with vegetables or eaten directly.

The tradition of consuming bekasam in coastal island cultures has long been practiced and maintained to this day. Bekasam processing and consumption are now less popular. This is likely due to the influx of modern culture, including the introduction of many new foods into these communities. This has resulted in most residents abandoning bekasam consumption. Once enjoyed by all groups, bekasam is now only a select few who faithfully prepare and enjoy bekasam, even though bekasam is actually a fermented culinary tradition in the Riau Islands.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, based on research results, bekasam is to the people of the Riau Islands what sashimi is to the Japanese. Culinary preparations made from raw shellfish are indeed very popular, having existed throughout the world for a long time. However, what's interesting about bekasam is its simple, natural, and traditional preparation. While sashimi doesn't use ink, bekasam actually uses raw shellfish as an ingredient.

This simple process certainly involves long-standing customs. Bekasam isn't always made from raw shellfish; it can also be made from other sea fish. However, people often make bekasam from raw shellfish as a side dish with rice. This study, based on the case of the bekasam lover community and examined from a cultural perspective, is crucial. Further research on bekasam is crucial. It should also be scientifically examined for its health and nutritional content when consumed raw, fermented, and traditionally. A comprehensive approach can lead to the preservation and promotion of bekasam as an alternative culinary specialty of coastal cultures. This is not without reason, given the basic ingredients and strategic geography of the Riau Islands, making it highly likely that bekasam will be promoted as a culinary specialty of the Riau Islands' coastal culture. Bekasam is a fermented tradition in the Riau Islands.



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