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Research Paper

The Obon Custom in Singkil Weddings in Rundeng District, Subulussalam City: Symbolic Meanings, Continuity and Makers

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Abstract

Obon is the decorated container of betel, leaves, fruits and other objects that the groom's family carries in procession to the bride's house in Singkil weddings. Studies of Singkil weddings describe the stages of the ceremony, but none itemises the contents of obon or records who prepares it. This study describes the meanings of the objects in obon, the factors that sustain the custom and the people involved in making it in Rundeng District, Subulussalam City, Aceh. A qualitative descriptive design was used, with observation, documentation and interviews with three informants: the chair of the city's Aceh Customary Council (MAA), the acting head of Oboh Village and a woman customary figure. Obon contains 21 objects, each with a stated meaning that concerns hardship, family unity, respect for the bride's kin and elders, good conduct and resilience in marriage. Obon is required only when a wedding follows customary rites, and its use is declining because the city's population is increasingly mixed. Cultural awareness, active customary elders, mutual help and the support of customary and religious figures sustain it. Obon is prepared by the groom's extended family, chiefly older women, after consultation with the elders. Transmission rests on a few skilled women.

Keywords: Obon; Singkil people; Wedding custom; Symbolic meaning; Cultural continuity; Subulussalam.

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1. Introduction

Wedding customs in Aceh are changing under the influence of migration, Islamic law and the market, while their symbols continue to carry local values. Among the Gayo, the older juelen and angkap marriage systems have largely given way to kuso kini after contact with migrants [1], adat has been reshaped since the Aceh government formalised it [2], and the communal kenduri of sintê mungêrjê is turning into a commercial party culture [3]. Religion and custom have been harmonised in Gayo weddings without coercion [4]. Similar changes in the stages of wedding custom are reported for the Tolaki in Southeast Sulawesi [5].

Studies that document individual wedding rites show what is at stake in these changes. The melengkan speeches of the Gayo are preserved through competitions and school lessons [6], the

sebuku lament conveys advice to the couple [7], and the sintê mungêrjê procession contains both sacred and ritual spaces [8]. Outside Aceh, the gotongan bumbu rampen custom in Central Java is sustained by mutual help and solidarity [9]. Customary norms in general guide behaviour and identity but are under pressure from modernisation [10].

The Singkil people, whose coastal identity has been shaped by Malay and Minangkabau influences [11], have their own sequence of wedding rites, which in Lae Butar combines marriage and custom on the same day [12]. The Dampeng dance that accompanies the groom has been studied in Rundeng and Longkib [13], [14]. Obon, the decorated container that the groom's family carries to the bride's house, has been described only in a booklet of the Aceh Customary Council (Majelis Adat Aceh, MAA) of Subulussalam [15]. No study has itemised its contents with their meanings, examined why it is still used, or recorded who makes it. This study aims to describe (1) the meanings of the objects in obon, (2) the factors that sustain the custom, and (3) the people involved in preparing it in Rundeng District, Subulussalam City.

2. Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive design, which describes a phenomenon in its own setting and stays close to the informants' accounts [16]. It was conducted in Oboh Village, Rundeng District, Subulussalam City, a district that belonged to Aceh Singkil Regency until Subulussalam City was formed in 2007. Data were collected through observation, documentation and in-depth interviews.

Three informants were interviewed: the chair of the MAA of Subulussalam City (HB), the acting head of Oboh Village (EW), and a housewife who is a customary figure and a khuwiyyah in Oboh (AS). HB described the objects in obon and their meanings, EW the factors that sustain the custom, and AS the preparation of obon. The MAA booklet on obon [15] was used as a documentary source. The data were condensed, displayed as narrative and a table, and summarised. The accounts of the informants were compared with one another and with the booklet as a form of source triangulation [17].

3. Results and Discussion

Function of Obon

According to HB, obon is an essential part of Singkil wedding custom. It accompanies the groom when he is escorted in procession to the bride's house and expresses the respect of the groom's side for the bride and her family through the offerings (luah) it contains. Obon is a condition for the customary validity of the wedding: it is required when the wedding follows customary rites and not required when it does not. Its use is declining in Subulussalam City because the population is increasingly mixed and not all residents are Singkil, although native Singkil families continue to keep it as a heritage.

Objects and Their Meanings

HB listed 21 objects that make up obon (Table 1). The container itself is a round vessel resembling a steamer pot, closed by an inner cover of carved paper and an outer cover (sahokh). Three arrangements of betel (belo) are addressed to particular persons: one placed face to face for the two families, one for the bride's maternal uncle and one for the customary elders. Areca blossom and areca nut, yellow rice, fragrant oil, the bride price wrapped in yellow cloth, a cord, a fruit and seven kinds of leaves complete the contents. HB added that the five colours of sahokh stand for the king, the commander, the religious scholar, the astrologer and the learned, united in one society.

Table 1. Objects in obon and their stated meanings

No.	Object	Stated meaning	Value category
1	Round vessel (dandang)	The world and a life full of challenges	Religious
2	Inner cover (carved paper)	A life carved with courage and purity	Symbolic
3	Sahokh (outer cover)	Diversity and unity of the Singkil community	Symbolic
4	Belo pekhadep adep	Harmony between the two families	Social
5	Belo mejantung	Betel for the bride's maternal uncle, a sign of respect	Social
6	Belo payung	Respect for the customary elders	Social
7	Mayang pinang	A household that grows and prospers	Symbolic
8	Mutik pinang	A fence; protection and maturity	Symbolic
9	Bekhas gekhsing (yellow rice)	Life and honour	Religious
10	Minak atakh (fragrant oil)	Harmony and courtesy	Religious
11	Jenamu (bride price)	Esteem in custom; wrapped in yellow cloth	Religious
12	Sinaga tali (cord)	The bond between the two families	Social
13	Kadam bak gembut	Hope for good character	Educative
14	Ballo perekat	The couple as unifiers, not dividers	Social
15	Bulung tekhutung (leaf)	A prayer that the couple will be fortunate	Moral
16	Bulung belimbing (leaf)	A sour life that still benefits others	Moral
17	Bulung ubi kekhangen (leaf)	Self-reliance even in a foreign place	Moral
18	Bulung jejabi (leaf)	Shade and help for others	Moral
19	Bulung ketemba (leaf)	Uniting the family; a remedy for broken bones	Philosophical
20	Bulung sukat (leaf)	A firm base; a fertile household with many descendants	Philosophical
21	Buah kekhas (candlenut)	Toughness needed to face the hardships of married life	Philosophical

Source: Interview with HB (meanings); value categories assigned by the authors.

The authors grouped the meanings into six categories. Religious and spiritual meanings concern prayers for honour and welfare and the seriousness of the bride price. Social and kinship meanings concern the bond and harmony between the two families and respect for the maternal uncle and the elders. Symbolic and aesthetic meanings are carried by the covers and areca. One object has an educative meaning, and the leaves and the candlenut carry moral and philosophical messages about self-reliance, helpfulness and resilience in married life.

Factors Sustaining the Custom

EW named four factors that sustain obon in Rundeng. First, a part of the community still cares about its culture. Second, customary elders (sintua) remain active and teach customary values to the community. Third, weddings are occasions of mutual help (gotong royong) at which residents gather and strengthen their relations. Fourth, customary and religious figures support the custom. He reported that a family in Oboh was about to hold a wedding in which the groom's side would carry obon. He also noted a change: the Dampeng dance that used to accompany the procession is now rarely performed, and often only its song is played.

People Involved in Making Obon

According to AS, the groom's extended family bears the main responsibility for preparing obon, particularly its mothers and older women. These women know how to arrange the betel, prepare the leaves, weave and decorate the container according to customary rules on form, colour and order. Customary elders are consulted from the beginning about the timing, the

required contents and the people to be involved, and they check that the contents follow custom. Neighbours and relatives arrive a day before the celebration to cook and decorate, and some contribute materials such as leaves, areca nuts or flowers. Table 2 summarises the findings by research question.

Table 2. Summary of findings

Research question	Findings	Informant
Meanings of the objects	21 objects; meanings on hardship, family unity, respect for kin and elders, good conduct, resilience	HB
Status of the custom	Required only in customary weddings; declining as the population becomes mixed	HB
Sustaining factors	Cultural awareness; active elders; mutual help; support of customary and religious figures	EW
Change observed	Dampeng dance in the procession rarely performed; often replaced by its song	EW
Makers	Groom's extended family, chiefly older women; elders consulted; neighbours help and contribute materials	AS

Source: Interviews (processed by the authors).

Discussion

The meanings of obon are consistent with what is known of Singkil wedding custom. In Lae Butar the rites are interpreted as blessings for the couple and as a link between the two families [12], and in Rundeng the Dampeng dance that accompanies the groom expresses protection of the honoured guest and the unity of a plural society [13]. Obon conveys the same two themes through objects: respect directed at named members of the bride's kin, and advice to the couple. Comparable use of objects and verbal arts to transmit advice in Aceh weddings is reported for melengkan and sebuku among the Gayo [6], [7].

The reason HB gave for the decline differs from the reasons most often reported. Studies of other traditions attribute declining use to globalisation and the interests of young people [18], or to consumerism and wedding organisers [3]. In Subulussalam the decline is attributed to population mixing: obon belongs to Singkil customary weddings, and families that are not Singkil or that do not follow customary rites do not use it. This resembles the shift in the Gayo marriage system after migrants brought other values [1]. Obon is therefore likely to continue among Singkil families while its share of weddings in the city falls.

The factors that sustain obon are social rather than individual. Active elders, consultation before the wedding and mutual help among neighbours correspond to the solidarity that sustains wedding customs in Central Java [9] and to the link between group performance and social cohesion reported in South Aceh [19]. The same structure creates a risk. The knowledge needed to arrange obon is held by older women of the groom's family, and young people help with cooking and decorating but are not reported to learn the arrangement itself. When transmission rests on a few skilled holders, a tradition can contract quickly [20]; youth involvement grows when young people learn alongside culture bearers [21]. The replacement of the live Dampeng dance by a recording shows that parts of the procession are already being simplified, as reported for wedding customs elsewhere [5].

This study has limitations. Only three informants were interviewed, and each answered a different question, so the meanings of the objects rest on the account of one informant and the MAA booklet. No groom's family, young people or non-Singkil residents were interviewed, no wedding was observed from preparation to procession, and the number of weddings that still

use obon was not recorded. Variations in the contents of obon between villages were not examined.

4. Conclusion

Obon in Rundeng District contains 21 objects whose stated meanings concern the hardships of life, the bond between the two families, respect for the bride's maternal uncle and the customary elders, good conduct and resilience in marriage. Obon is required only in weddings that follow customary rites, and its use is declining as the population of Subulussalam City becomes more mixed. Cultural awareness, active customary elders, mutual help and the support of customary and religious figures sustain it. It is prepared by the groom's extended family, chiefly older women, after consultation with the elders and with the help of neighbours.

The MAA and village heads are advised to document each object of obon with photographs and its meaning, and to organise sessions in which older women teach young people to arrange obon. Future studies should observe complete weddings, interview young people and families who no longer use obon, compare the contents between villages, and record how many weddings still include it.

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Authors' contributions and responsibilities

Hasanah: supervision, methodology, writing – review & editing. Erni Marwiyah: conceptualization, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. Asih Winarty: validation, writing – review & editing. Saifuddin: validation, writing – review & editing. Tamarli: validation, writing – review & editing. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The interview notes and photographs are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, in a form that does not identify the informants.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The research consisted of interviews with adult residents and local officials concerning a customary wedding practice and did not involve vulnerable groups or the collection of sensitive personal data; accordingly, formal approval from an ethics committee was not sought. Participation was voluntary, and every informant agreed to be interviewed after the objectives of the study had been explained. In this article, informants are identified only by their initials.

Declaration of generative AI use

The authors used generative AI in revising this article to produce the English version of the Indonesian draft, to arrange the 21 objects and their stated meanings into a table, to point out

inconsistencies between the results and the discussion, and to locate and verify comparison studies. The objects, meanings and interview statements were taken from the authors' fieldwork. Every revised passage was read against the field notes by the authors, who are accountable for the article.

Additional information

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