

# *Indonesia's Sedekah Laut: Bridging National Identity and Maritime Security*

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**Abstract**— Modern culture often views the Sedekah Laut tradition as irrational and at odds with religious convictions. Even so, there are still those interested in upholding the Sedekah Laut tradition, practiced in places where most of the population makes their living as fishermen. This research aims to examine the tradition of Sedekah Laut as a hereditary activity of fishing communities in various facets of Indonesian life to help strengthen national identity and maritime security by preserving local wisdom. The formulation of this research problem is how Sedekah Laut can be related to Indonesia's national identity and maritime security. This study employed a qualitative research design using an ethnography methodology. The results demonstrated that the tradition of Sedekah Laut is directly tied to Indonesian people's cultural, social, and spiritual values, which are relevant to executing the Indonesian defense concept, especially for maritime security.

**Keywords**— Culture, Defense, Fishermen, Maritime, National Identity, Security, Tradition.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Culture can be viewed as features relating to changes in mind and behavior [1]. A tradition that is followed at a specific period and has symbolic meanings is one of the cultural legacies [2]. A community applies its culture to the norms, values, traditions, and practices that its members share. These elements are handed down to succeeding generations with an equal awareness of how to think and behave by the culture. Within the framework of sea-related Indonesian traditions, the sea serves as a source of spiritual and cultural life for Indonesians and provides them with material resources.

The Indonesian people, who have long shaped life on the country's coast and archipelago, rely heavily on the ocean in daily. The Indonesian nation has always been triumphant at sea, as evidenced by their motto, "Jalasveva Jayamahe," which means "We are victorious at the sea." This is consistent with Melaka's and Sriwijaya's existence as big maritime kingdoms. These two

kingdoms demonstrate our country's strength and maritime greatness in the past [3]. For Indonesians, maritime culture encompasses more than their historical legacy; it also refers to a way of life that is harmonious with their maritime environment. The diversity of ecosystems, the multiplicity of communities, and the complexity of issues provide the foundation of traditional maritime culture activities. Traditional practices relating to maritime culture are founded on the plurality of populations, the diversity of habitats, and the complexity of challenges in the archipelago [4]. To put it another way, Indonesians have incorporated maritime culture into their daily lives, which comprises extensive knowledge of the sea and its resources, including how to fish and survive in the marine environment. The manifestation of the respect of the Indonesian people for the wealth of the sea as a source of life, one of which is through the tradition of Sedekah Laut.

As a method to give thanks to God for fisherman safety and fishing success, Sedekah Laut is still observed today, primarily by fishing communities [5] in Java's coastal districts once a year [6]. The community thinks that by giving gifts to nature, people can communicate their hopes and desires for an abundance of marine goods and their desire to avoid various problems and disasters. This concept is the basis for the Sedekah Laut, which calls for an offering medium known as Sajen [7]. Diverse marine offerings have distinct symbolizations or symbolic meanings in addition to functions and values [8]. The fishing community actively contributes to the preservation of spirituality and cultural heritage through this rite, which has long been a significant component of the identity of the Indonesian nation for a long time.

Unfortunately for modern people who tend to think realistically, the tradition of Sedekah Laut is considered unreasonable and deviates from religious values. In this case, it can result in a lack of respect for tradition, triggering a shift in Indonesian values and cultural identity. Several groups rejected the Sedekah Laut in 2018 due to religious reasons, which led to social unrest in the community, as happened at Gantek hamlet, located in Pantai Baru village, Bantul, Yogyakarta. The presence of this group creates tension between communities that side with tradition and those who oppose it, giving rise to arguments over how to maintain tradition while tolerating diversity of opinion and tolerance [9].

The Sedekah Laut or Nyadran, is used as a cultural tourism destination and a commodity that provides added value for the Weleri community. As part of cultural tourism, the Kendal Regency Tourism Office manages and organizes this ritual. The government and the community work together to facilitate these tourism activities [10]. Then, Sedekah Laut is part of the cultural heritage of coastal communities. This event involves community participation to express gratitude and avoid danger. This tradition is scheduled every month of Dhulkaidah al, the month of Longkang, on Tuesday Kliwon, Wednesday Kliwon, and Friday Kliwon [11]. The Sedekah Laut traditional ceremony is a form of appreciation and expression of communal gratitude for the blessings given by God through abundant marine products, illustrating the harmony of the community with the environment.

The previous research has yet to explain Sedekah Laut in terms of national identity and national defense. Thus, this study aims to analyze how the Indonesian Sedekah Laut tradition contributes to the formation of national identity and the preservation of state sovereignty. This study aims to demonstrate that the Sedekah Laut tradition is not only a valuable cultural asset but also a means of bolstering national identity and promoting maritime security.

## **II. RESEARCH METHOD**

To analyze this research using ethnography qualitative methods. Ethnography is a specific approach to understanding the social and cultural life of a particular place or community. The goal is to deeply understand how people interact and live their lives in a culture [12]. This method provides a holistic and emic sense of knowledge, which means looking at life from the point of view of the people who experience it. In addition, ethnography seeks to explain the underlying meanings, beliefs, and rules that shape community social activity. Data collection for this research involved observation, interviews, indirect field recordings, and documents from reliable sources will be used to collect primary and secondary data.

## **III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 The Importance of Sedekah Laut for National Identity**

National identity is the result of cultural values that grow and develop in the lives of people with their characteristics, so the characteristics of Indonesian cultural values that grow on the earth of Indonesia become characteristics that distinguish them from other nations [13]. The primordial approach holds that national identity arises naturally because of kinship relationships among attached people from solid blood ties or kinship. On the other hand, the constructivist approach emphasizes that national identity has a continuous relationship between before and after modern times [14]. National identity is not only formed naturally from

kinship relations. However, it is also influenced by social, cultural, and political factors that develop from the past to the present to unite a nation and provide a sense of belonging.

In the context of culture, it can be identified and characterized based on several characteristics formed from the beginning. Culture derives from actual practices and material and symbolic processes. The behavior and actions of the process have a hidden essence that shapes the nation's identity [15]. Culture is divided into high and low culture. High culture is nationally recognized and preceded in history, while low culture is wild, local, spontaneous, and does not provide benefits [16]. The tradition of Sedekah Laut is an example of how a high cultural activity can continue to develop without being too influenced by the central government. Technological advances can help strengthen and spread the tradition of Sedekah Laut, better known to the community nationally and internationally as a tradition that only Indonesia has.

From the Hartono and Firdaningsih 2019, who interviewed a caretaker of Sedekah Laut in the Kebumen region. Sedekah Laut in the Padlen coastal area of Central Java has been carried out since the time of his great-grandfather A. The tradition started at the same time as all plants flowered, developed into a way to perform Sedekah Laut rites and host parties, and concluded with a shared supper and Wayang show [17]. This ceremony must have been performed by inland fishermen, who saw great significance and advantages in their yearly Sedekah Laut routine. The setting of offering Sajen to the middle of the sea can be seen in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Inland Beach Sedekah Laut Argopeni Kebumen Village (Rais, 2023)

Sedekah Laut tradition, one of which is Sedekah Laut Juwana, has been designated as Indonesia's Intangible Cultural Heritage or Warisan Budaya Takbenda (WBTB), Sedekah Laut, also known as a hereditary tradition that lasted for more than 50 years. This tradition begins with a parade of miniature fishing boats containing goat, rice tumpeng, and snacks. Residents took part in parading the miniature ship before it was thrown into the sea after prayers by local religious leaders. Apart from being a form of local culture, Sedekah Laut is also a tourist attraction and learning to help someone understand the values of hard work, discipline, and dedication embodied by fishermen in fishing at the sea [18].

By being recognized as Indonesia's cultural heritage, Sedekah Laut is not only a local tradition but also a valuable heritage that significantly enriches Indonesia's cultural diversity. This tradition reflects the close relationship between people and sea, showing their gratitude and dependence on natural resources. As more than half a century progressed, Sedekah Laut became a living proof of how ancestral beliefs and values continue to be respected by the Society. Not just a ritual, Sedekah Laut is also a forum for meeting and sharing experiences between fishing communities. Coupled with Wayang performances and other traditional activities, this tradition helps bridge the Indonesian identity closely related to familial, solidarity, and unity.

Preserving local cultural identity and values in Indonesia requires an attitude of patriotism or nationalism. This will encourage the community to unite in maintaining the dignity and unity of the country while prioritizing national interests at the global level. Indonesia's strategic environment is getting stronger by enriching the national identity through cultural values and local wisdom, which become a solid foundation for maintaining the integrity and resilience of the country in various situations [19]. However, national identity is not static; it can change and be shaped by various factors that shape the image of a nation and affect the love of the homeland and state sovereignty [20]. Through the Sedekah Laut tradition, Indonesian people preserve the environment. This is

in line with the spirit of patriotism and nationalism to preserve the sea as a vital part of the national strength of Indonesia's natural resources. By linking the tradition of Sedekah Laut to national identity, Indonesia builds an image as a country that is rich in natural beauty and a sustainable custodian of the marine environment. This creates a positive view of Indonesia in the eyes of the world, strengthening its identity as a country that values environmental sustainability as an inseparable part of its national identity.

### **3.2 Sedekah Laut and Maritime Security**

Maritime wealth and agenda were emphasized during president Joko Widodo's administration in the Indonesian archipelago through the concept of the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF), which emphasized the importance of the sea and maritime as a critical element in national security strategy and became an attractive magnet for the international community. In other words, Indonesia is a sovereign, developed, independent, and maritime-solid country. By its national interests, it can contribute to the peace and security of the region and the world as a whole [21]. As the most significant contributor to economic growth in the maritime sector [22], maritime traditions in Indonesia tend to neglect maintaining the balance of marine ecosystems. According to [23], a severe problem of marine ecosystems is plastic pollution; plastic discharge into the sea and then accumulated for 450 years will harm human health from consuming fish contaminated with microplastics. In addition, many people still need to gain knowledge about the Indonesian sea, which still needs to be fully explored by the people of Indonesia.

The practice of Sedekah Laut plays a vital role in bridging the nation's character and fostering unity among Indonesia's diverse people. As an archipelago of thousands of islands, the tradition of Sedekah Laut serves as a unifier that transcends the differences in customs of each region, uniting people in shared beliefs, gratitude, and hope. Social rituals can improve community behavior in social familiarity, creating good social conditions to develop thoughts, discourses, and social behaviors that can increase social integration in small community environments, such as families and broader community environments [24]. Sedekah Laut rituals often involve the participation of individuals from various social and religious backgrounds, symbolizing equality and mutual respect and establishing good relationships without hating each other, which characterize Indonesian society [25]. Nevertheless, global challenges such as climate change and environmental degradation demand adaptation in implementing the Sedekah Laut tradition in this modern era. Therefore, there is a need for cooperation from all levels of society to maintain the sustainability of this tradition while preserving the marine environment.

Indonesia has the concept of total people's defense. It is hoped that the community will be more united, have a high national spirit, and be able to face and ward off various threats that may arise [26]. Sedekah Laut also has significance in the context of national defense and protection. As a maritime country, Indonesia faces various security challenges and strategic problems in territorial waters and borders. The tradition of Sedekah Laut helps the concept of defense of the Indonesian universal people from the social and cultural aspects of society. Communities can build a solid foundation for internal and external national security and resilience challenges through tolerance, togetherness, and positive interaction. As was done in Tanjung Village, the majority of fishing communities in this village who participated in the Sedekah Laut tradition were not only a moment of gathering and mutual assistance but also exchanging ideas; the success of this activity depends on the involvement of the entire community. This tradition also reflects the value of tolerance, interpreted as an open attitude and respect for differences, such as race and ethnicity [27].

The tradition of Sedekah Laut can be seen as a form of spiritual defense, where the entire local community prays with intention and gratitude for the abundant sustenance of marine products and asks for God's protection to safeguard maritime interests. Thus, the tradition of Sedekah Laut is a form of religious activity and a media to strengthen harmony and ties between the Indonesian people and their maritime environment, instilling a sense of care and responsibility for the sea. This tradition promotes mutual respect, acknowledging the interconnectedness of human life with the sea. This tradition of marine alms encourages environmental awareness and conservation efforts necessary to sustain Indonesia's marine resources.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

The tradition of Sedekah Laut, prevalent throughout Indonesia's coast and archipelago, is deeply ingrained in the daily lives and beliefs of the Indonesian people. By doing this, the fishing community directly contributes to the preservation of the spirituality and cultural legacy that have long played a significant role in the identity of the Indonesian people. The traditions are maintained as historical foundations, religious symbolism, unifying power, and relevance to national defense. Understanding and appreciating Sedekah Laut helps Indonesians better comprehend Indonesia's rich cultural past and the close ties that bind its character, spirituality, and maritime heritage. Its practice demonstrates Indonesia's deep connection to its maritime heritage while

promoting unity among fishing communities. Preserving these unique cultural traditions is essential not only to maintain Indonesia's rich cultural diversity but also to uphold national values and protect the country from potential challenges in an ever-changing world.

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