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Reimagining Multicultural Identity through Tourism: Host Agency, Cultural Reconfiguration, and Identity Reconstruction on Belitung Island, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the residents of Belitung Island, Indonesia, actively shape tourism resources by reinterpreting local cultural practices, thereby reconstructing a shared sense of belonging and collective identity. It asks how host communities decide which cultural elements become tourism representations and how such choices entail cultural reinterpretation and identity reconstruction. Following the 2008 film adaptation of Andrea Hirata's novel *Laskar Pelangi* (The Rainbow Troops), tourism expanded rapidly through resident-led initiatives, not state-led planning, initially in response to visitors' expectations. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted intermittently during 2018-2023, this study shows how rituals and cultural events, such as *Cap Go Meh* and *Buang Jong*, have been reframed for tourism while remaining anchored in local historical narratives and inter-ethnic social relations. These practical judgements about what to display to outsiders reveal an ethical dimension of hosting that is often overlooked in tourism ethics debates centred on tourists' conduct or top-down codes. The study argues that tourism ethics also emerges from the hosts' situated agency in cultural representation, and that these practises help articulate "*Orang Belitong*-ness" as an inclusive collective identity in contemporary tourism development. By positioning hosts as ethical agents, this study contributes to debates on tourism ethics, representation, and identity.

Keywords: *Tourism development; Agency; Tourism ethics; Identity; Cultural representation; Belitung Island.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the release of the film adaptation of *Laskar Pelangi* (The Rainbow Troops) in 2008, tourism on Belitung Island in Indonesia's Bangka Belitung Province has expanded rapidly. Crucially, this expansion was not driven by top-down government planning; instead, it emerged through bottom-up initiatives led by local residents and tourism practitioners in response to visitor expectations shaped by the novel and film. As tourism development accelerated, hosts sought to identify what they could present to guests as "*Belitong*-ness" and experimented with reframing local landscapes, heritage sites, and cultural events as tourism resources.

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At first glance, these practises may suggest passive acceptance of the tourist gaze. In practise, however, hosts actively engage with—while not simply reproducing—visitors' images of Belitung. Specifically, they respond to visitors' expectations by selectively presenting elements of *Belitong*-ness as tourism resources and shaping how these are framed and narrated. This paper approaches these host-led choices as an ethical practice, using the term "ethical agents" to describe hosts who make situated judgements about cultural representation under the structurally asymmetrical relationship between visitors and destination communities. Through these choices, hosts also articulate *Belitong*-ness as an inclusive sense of belonging, alluding to *Orang Belitong* as island residents' chosen identity marker.

Situating this case within Indonesia is essential. Indonesia is a multi-ethnic nation with the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), and tourism has long been promoted as a key sector for national and regional development. Multiculturalism in Indonesia is frequently articulated through state discourse and policy, yet also negotiated in everyday inter-ethnic relations at the local level. "Multicultural Indonesia" is thus more than a national ideal; it is lived and negotiated through particular local histories and inter-ethnic relations. Belitung—shaped by long histories of tin mining, labour migration, and ethnic mixing—offers a distinctive setting in which multicultural belonging is not only narrated but also practically reworked through tourism.

Tourism, while beneficial, poses challenges for host communities. In Bali and Tana Toraja on Sulawesi Island, scholars have noted the emergence of economic and psychological disparities between residents engaged in tourism and those who are not (cf. Picard, 1996; Hitchcock & Putra, 2007; Cole, 2008). Environmental degradation from overtourism is a pressing issue, not unique to Indonesia but one that is observed globally and has attracted significant scholarly and public attention. In response, initiatives envisioning "new forms of tourism," alongside proposals for tourism ethics as a normative framework have emerged. The following paragraph summarizes key debates in prior studies and situates this paper within that discourse.

While tourism has emerged as a globally significant economic activity, it is also recognised as a complex social phenomenon intersecting with regional development, cultural policy, and environmental conservation. In the 1970s, research primarily focused on economic aspects, including the impacts and motivations of tourists. The 1980s witnessed the rise of critical perspectives influenced by anthropology and sociology, which examined the relationships among tourism, culture, power, and representation. Greenwood's (1989) critique of the "staging" of culture and Urry's (1990) concept of the "tourist gaze" are foundational contributions. By the 1990s, scholarly concern had extended to the negative consequences of tourism, including cultural degradation, environmental pressures, and tensions with host communities, —increasing attention to the ethics of tourism. The "irresponsible tourist" concept prompted organisations such as UN Tourism and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) to issue ethical codes addressing "how tourists ought to behave" (Hara, 2022). At the same time, scholars are increasingly arguing that—beyond individual conduct—ethical questions must also address the structural conditions and governance of tourism development, particularly under overtourism and tourism-dependent growth models (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2019).

Research on tourism ethics has diversified, encompassing ethical theories such as utilitarianism and justice, codified ethics, and education-focused perspectives that promote responsible behaviour and ethical consumption (Holden, 2003; MacCannell, 2011). Other

studies emphasise structural inequalities and institutional frameworks, critically examining the power relations underlying discourses of "sustainability" and the marginalisation of local community interests (Mowforth & Munt, 2003). Additional contributions have explored themes of "surveillance" and "discipline" in tourist spaces (Cheong & Miller, 2000). More recently, discussions have intersected with postcolonial theory and degrowth perspectives, focusing on justice, redistribution, and empowerment (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). Community-Based Tourism (CBT) emphasises the importance of empowerment and participation (Scheyvens, 2002), portraying host-led tourism as an exemplary model. These concerns have been further developed in recent tourism-ethics agendas, advocating attention to destination-level values and stakeholder relations rather than treating ethics solely as a matter of tourists' behaviour (e.g. Tolkach, 2024). In addition, digitally mediated tourism has intensified the politics of representation as social media continually shapes what is made visible as "local" and thus what hosts are expected to curate and perform (e.g. Canavan, 2020; Lee et al., 2023).

In summary, scholarship on tourism ethics has evolved from focusing on individual moral conduct to incorporating structural and relational perspectives. However, discussions in this field often remain theoretical and normative, lacking reflection of the lived realities and diverse values of host societies. There is considerable scope for examining the agency of local residents—how they conceptualise and practise tourism, as well as their understanding of tourism ethics. Such practises extend beyond tourism management, they are intricately linked to how communities reinterpret their unique cultures and reconstruct their identities. This article advances these debates by foregrounding hosts as ethical agents and examining their situated judgements about cultural representation—what to display and how to frame as well as narrate it—as an ethical practice intertwined with identity reconstruction. Accordingly, this study asks: how do host communities determine which cultural elements to present as tourism resources, and how do they reinterpret local culture and reconstruct collective identity in the process? To answer these questions, this paper is organised as follows. After outlining the ethnographic methods and analytic approach, it analyses how tourist expectations shaped by *Laskar Pelangi* are negotiated through host-led cultural representation in Belitung, focusing on the reconfiguration of rituals and heritage displays. It then concludes by discussing the implications of the Belitung case for tourism ethics, host agency, and debates on multicultural identity in Indonesia.

METHODS

To address these questions, this study views host communities not as merely passive victims of tourism exploitation or as resistors but as active agents who adapt to and negotiate social change. A qualitative and ethnographic approach was employed to explore how local residents respond to tourism development, reconstruct cultural resources, and re-evaluate the significance of tourism. The research focused on Belitung Island, located in the Bangka Belitung Province of Indonesia, with fieldwork centring in Tanjung Pandan, Manggar, and Gantung, where tourism development is particularly prominent.

The fieldwork was conducted intermittently from 2018 to 2023, primarily utilising semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Interviews involved tourism practitioners, cultural actors, local residents (*warga biasa*), and government officials who were directly or

indirectly engaged in tourism. One of the initial participants was a *tokoh budaya* (local cultural figure) whose name repeatedly emerged in informal conversations during the early phase of fieldwork. After participating in an interview, this individual also provided an entry point into local networks, which enabled the referral network to expand through snowball sampling. The perspectives cited here include formal or semi-official standpoints (e.g., from tourism-office actors), narratives of cultural intermediaries such as the *tokoh budaya*, and the experiences of *warga biasa* grounded in everyday life. Most interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia with prior informed consent obtained from participants. Audio recordings were made when permitted and supplemented with detailed field notes. Additionally, participant observation was done during traditional rituals, tourism events, and informal gatherings among tourism stakeholders, enabling the researcher to examine how residents practised, narrated, and negotiated tourism in their daily lives. Field notes were systematically compiled and organised, serving as both primary data and contextual supplements to the interviews.

The recordings and field notes were analysed using narrative analysis. This focused on how participants constructed narratives about tourism and cultural practices as tourism resources and how these narratives reflected their sense of self and community. Interview recordings were revisited as needed to confirm content, with transcripts produced where necessary. Field notes were also re-read to identify passages relevant to the research questions. Relevant quotations and key scenes were extracted, checked against the audio recordings as well as the field notes, and organised by case. The analysis was conducted manually, and no specialised software was used. In addition, materials were compared across interlocutor positions (tourism-office actors, tourism practitioners, *tokoh budaya*, and *warga biasa*) and across settings to examine what was being claimed and how it was framed. In this process, attention was paid to not only narrative content and context, but also to structure, storytelling modes, and points of emphasis. Moreover, narratives were treated as processes through which culture is endowed with meaning and represented within the course of tourism development, rather than straightforward descriptions of facts. This approach revealed that residents were active agents in reshaping the meanings and practises of tourism development rather than merely passive respondents.

The researcher entered the field as an external observer, mindful that this positionality could influence data collection and interpretation. Efforts were made to establish trust with community members and maintain transparency about research objectives, while reflexively considering how the researcher's background and standpoint shaped interactions and interpretations. Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Prior to each interview or observation, participants were informed about the research purpose and the intended use of the data before they provided consent. Pseudonyms are employed in this article to ensure confidentiality, and identifying details have been removed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Research Area

The study site, Belitung Island, is situated within Bangka Belitung Province off the southeastern coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, which separated from South Sumatra Province in 2000 (Figure 1). Bangka Belitung Province consists of one city and six regencies: Bangka Island (Pangkalpinang

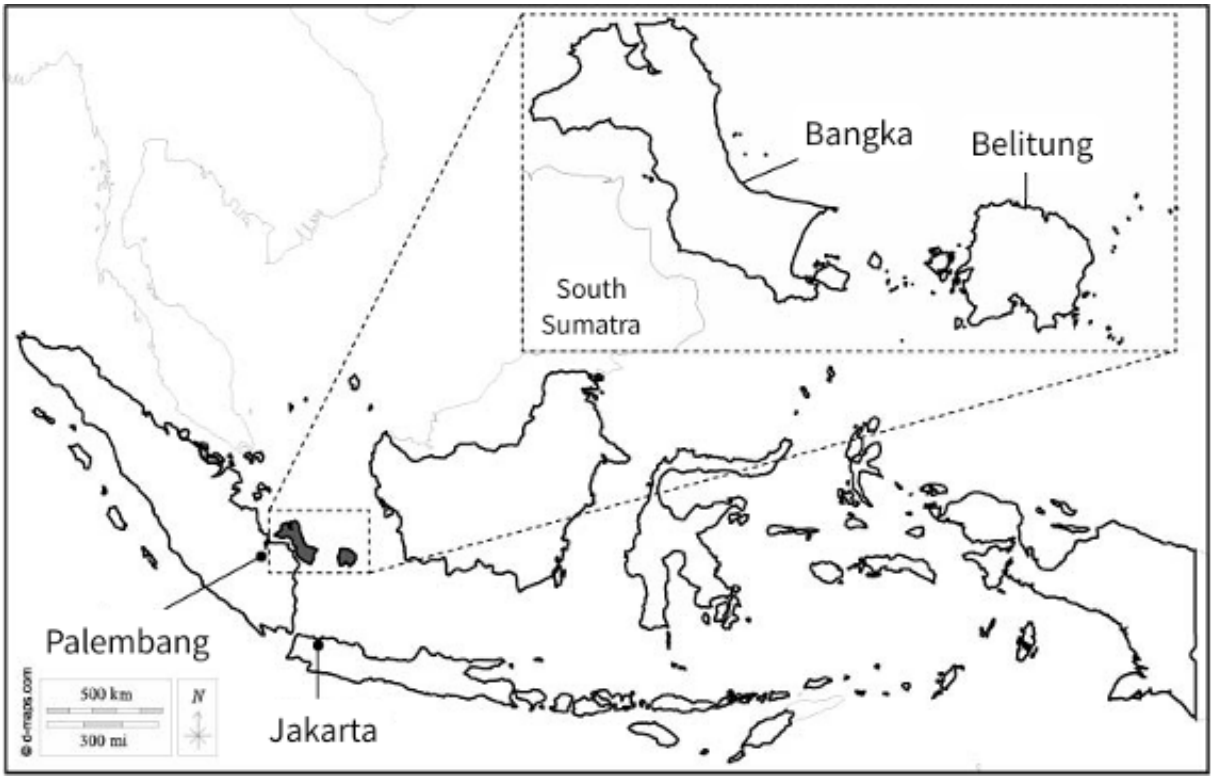


Figure 1. Map of Bangka Belitung Province. Source: d-maps.com (2023)

City—the provincial capital—, Bangka Regency, West Bangka Regency, Central Bangka Regency, and South Bangka Regency) and Belitung Island (Belitung Regency and East Belitung Regency).

The total area of Bangka Belitung Province is 16,424.06 km² of land and 65,301.00 km² of maritime territory, with Belitung Island comprising 4,800.52 km² of land. As of September 2023, the population of the province was 1,531,530, including 324,240 inhabitants on Belitung Island. According to the 2010 census, approximately 69.0% of residents were classified under 'other ethnic groups originating from Sumatra' (Suku asal Sumatera lainnya), 8.4% as Javanese, 8.3% as Chinese, and 2.8% as Bugis, among other groups, while approximately 1.5% were classified as Malay (*Melayu*). The former category included Bangka, Belitung, and Sawang, among several other ethnic groups. This classification differs from the 2000 census, in which approximately 70% of residents were classified as Malay (Suryadinata et al., 2003: 19), partly reflecting differences in the categorisation of groups such as Bangka and Belitung.

The principal languages spoken alongside the Indonesian national language in the province include, Malay (in its Bangka Malay and Belitung Malay varieties), Hakka, and Hokkien. In everyday communication, Malay and Hakka/Hokkien are commonly used with speakers alternating between languages based on the interlocutor, social context, and setting.

According to the Gross Regional Domestic Product (*Produk Domestik Regional Bruto*) for the second quarter of 2025, the province's primary industries include agriculture, forestry, fisheries, manufacturing, trade, construction, and mining. Tin and white pepper have been the province's

signature products since the Dutch colonial period, with tin sustaining the provincial economy for over two centuries. However, concerns about tin depletion emerged in the 1990s, leading to a decline in the mining sector's share of the provincial economy in recent years. Consequently, the provincial government has shifted its focus to agriculture and tourism as alternative industries to replace mining (Valeriani, 2010:4).

Bangka Belitung has a history of significant ethnic and cultural diversity, largely due to the influx of migrant labourers from diverse backgrounds during the development of the tin mining industry. Residents of Belitung Island commonly identify as *Orang Belitong*. "*Belitong*" is the Belitung Malay term for the island of Belitung. In administrative contexts, "Belitung" refers to Belitung Regency, while "*Belitong*" is used when referring to the island or its inhabitants. In other regions of Indonesia, the phrase *Orang* [place name] typically denotes "people from [place name]." However, *Orang Belitong* signifies more than a geographic designation; it serves as an important identity marker for the island's residents, reflecting a sense of belonging that transcends ethnic differences.

This multi-ethnic social history is not always reflected straightforwardly in public-facing cultural representation. At provincial, regency, and municipal levels, a series of local regulations have institutionalised *adat* (custom) and customary dress in explicitly Malay terms. In particular, multiple regulations govern the preservation and activation of "Malay customary organisations" and on "Malay" customary attire (e.g. *Peraturan Provinsi Kepulauan Bangka Belitung No. 4/2012* [Bangka Belitung Islands Provincial Regulation No. 4/2012 on the Preservation of Customary Institutions and Customs]; *Peraturan Daerah Kabupaten Belitung Timur No. 11/2015* [East Belitung Regency Regulation No. 11/2015 on Malay Customary Institutions]; *Peraturan Daerah Kota Pangkalpinang No. 2/2015* [Pangkalpinang Municipal Regulation No. 2/2015 on the Preservation of Malay Customs and Customary Institutions]; *Peraturan Daerah Provinsi Kepulauan Bangka Belitung No. 3/2025* [Bangka Belitung Islands Provincial Regulation No. 3/2025 on Malay Customary Dress]). This institutional landscape helps explain why *Malayness* may be foregrounded in public heritage settings and explanatory narratives, even as residents' everyday experiences and accounts of belonging point to a more multi-ethnic understanding of local culture.

Tourism Development in Indonesia

Tourism development is a vital sector of the Indonesian economy. According to Statistics Indonesia (*Badan Pusat Statistik*, BPS), the tourism industry contributed 4.01% to Indonesia's GDP in 2024. In response to the increasing number of domestic and international visitors, the Indonesian government has implemented various policies and programmes to promote tourism.

The origins of tourism development in Indonesia are linked to the Dutch colonial administration's Ethical Policy, which arose amid growing European interest in "humanitarian colonialism" (Izawa, 2017). Tourism was recognised as essential for economic growth during the leadership of Indonesia's second president, Suharto. The First Five-Year Development Plan—established in 1969—explicitly identified tourism development as crucial for advancing economic progress (Kagami, 2000). Since then, tourism has been consistently integrated into Indonesia's national development programmes.

Initially, tourism development in Indonesia was led by the central government. However, through decentralisation policies introduced during B. J. Habibie's administration in 1999 following

Suharto's resignation, local governments were empowered to pursue tourism initiatives aligned with regional priorities.

Since 2000, both domestic and international tourist arrivals in Indonesia have increased steadily. This growth is partly due to policy measures such as the expansion of visa-free entry for inbound visitors and the launch of the *"Sepuluh Bali Baru"* (Ten New Balis) program in 2016. This initiative selected ten regions outside of Bali for development as comparable tourist destinations, providing government support through promotional campaigns and subsidies for tourism infrastructure. In 2016, Tanjung Kelayang, located on the western part of Belitung Island in Bangka Belitung Province, was designated as one of the *Sepuluh Bali Baru*.

Beginnings of Tourism Development on Belitung Island

According to the interviews conducted prior to 2008, the tourism industry on Belitung Island lagged behind mining and agriculture in terms of scale and dynamism due to the province's historical focus on tin mining—which had been active since the eighteenth century—and pepper cultivation. However, from 2008 onwards, enthusiasm for tourism development began to emerge across the island (Figure 2). The 2008 release of the film *Laskar Pelangi* (The Rainbow Troops) served as a significant catalyst for both the provincial government and local residents to intensify engagement in tourism development. In 2009, a Tourism Office was established in East Belitung Regency alongside the existing Tourism Office of Belitung Regency.

Laskar Pelangi is a novel by Andrea Hirata published in 2005. It was adapted into a film in 2008; both the novel and the movie are set on Belitung Island. The narrative unfolds in the 1970s in Gantung, a town in East Belitung Regency notable for its active tin mining industry. Gantung hosts two contrasting primary schools: a private institution catering to the children of affluent tin mining employees and the Muhammadiyah Elementary School, which provides free education to children from impoverished families. While Muhammadiyah schools are typically viewed as

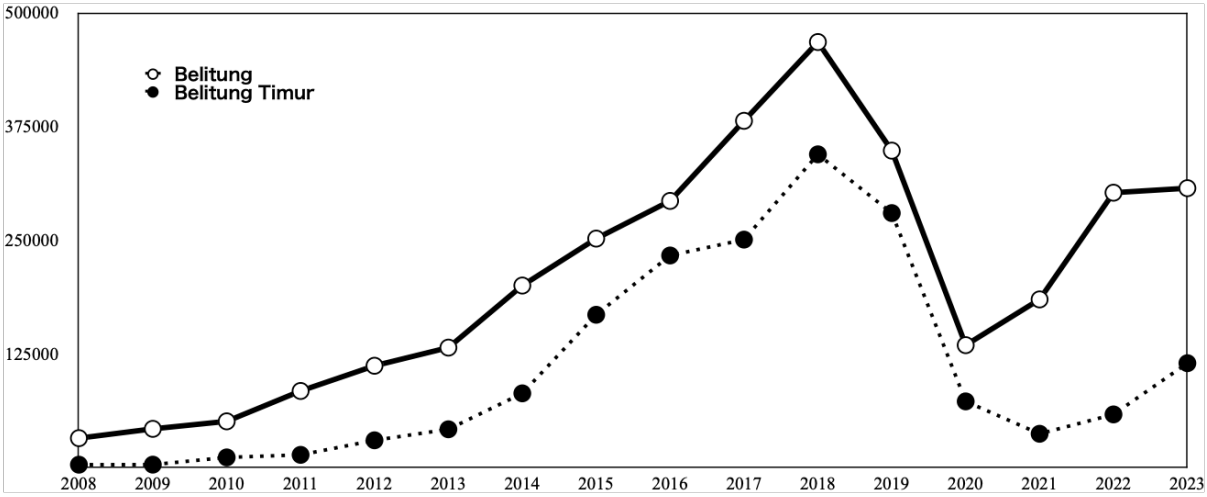


Figure 2. Trend of tourist arrivals in Belitung Island. Source: Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Belitung (2008-2023); Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Belitung Timur (2008-2023)



Figure 3. *Museum Kata Andrea Hirata* (Andrea Hirata Literary Museum). Source: Author's photograph (September 9, 2018)

urban institutions that deliver modern education, the Muhammadiyah Elementary School in *Laskar Pelangi* serves local children from poor labourer families, sustained by community donations (Hirata, 2022). Established in 1912 as part of the modernist Islamic reform movement in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah is a nationwide Islamic organisation.

The protagonist, Ikal, is depicted as a young man who, after graduating from Muhammadiyah school and studying abroad, returns to Gantung. The story opens with Ikal reminiscing during his journey home, recalling his childhood alongside nine classmates—collectively known as the "Rainbow Troops"—and their devoted Muslim teacher, Muslima, as they navigate challenges and grow despite their difficult circumstances.

Andrea Hirata, the author of *Laskar Pelangi*, was born in Gantung, East Belitung. The novel was initially written as a gift for his former teacher and later expanded for publication. Before pursuing a literary career, Hirata worked in the telecommunications industry. However, the remarkable success of *Laskar Pelangi* prompted him to become a full-time author. As of January 2022, he has published over ten novels, including *Sang Pemimpi* (The Dreamer). The novel, *Laskar Pelangi*, and its film version achieved significant commercial success and are credited with accelerating tourism growth on Belitung Island.[1)]

Tourism development in Belitung originated as a grassroots initiative spearheaded by local residents who recognised the area's tourism potential, including Hirata himself. Following the release of the film, Hirata utilised his personal funds to establish Gantung's *Museum Kata Andrea Hirata* (Andrea Hirata Literary Museum) in 2010 (Ahmad, personal interview, September 2018) (Figure 3). Concurrently, travel agency owners in Belitung Regency began offering *Laskar Pelangi* tour packages. Despite initial scepticism, the significant increase in tourist arrivals after the film's release encouraged more residents to pursue tourism-related opportunities.

Infrastructure development has significantly facilitated this growth. In 2016, HAS

Hanandjoedin Airport in Tanjung Pandan was upgraded to international status, followed by the inauguration of a direct flight route between Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Belitung in 2017. These developments support local narratives expressed by both residents and tourism officials in interviews, stating that "*Laskar Pelangi* awakened us to tourism development" and that "*Laskar Pelangi* and Andrea Hirata opened the way for Belitung tourism."

The tourism boom has prompted local communities and government agencies to invest in tourism-related activities[2]. Provincial and regency tourism offices have invited staff from the Ministry of Tourism to the island, organised workshops for members of tourism villages (*Desa Wisata*) as well as tourism communities (*Komunitas Pariwisata* or *Kelompok Sadar Wisata*), and implemented programmes to provide financial support, improve infrastructure, and enhance education. As of September 2019, Belitung Regency had 13 tourism villages while East Belitung Regency had 10, each accompanied by its own tourism community. Stakeholders in Belitung's tourism sector include the Ministry of Tourism, the Bangka Belitung Provincial Tourism Office, the Tourism Offices of Belitung and East Belitung Regencies, tourism villages and communities throughout the island, individuals in tourism-related industries, and local cultural figures (*Tokoh Budaya*).

Given this context, the following section examines how local residents—as hosts—experience and respond to the changes brought by tourism development.

Tourist Gaze and Host Responses

According to Urry (2014), the "gaze" that tourists direct towards a destination is shaped by their socio-cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Tourists do not perceive the scenery of a tourist site as it objectively exists but rather through frameworks influenced by their experiences, memories, and prior knowledge. Furthermore, this "tourist gaze" is affected by the images and texts circulated about specific places (Urry, 2014). As noted earlier, the emergence of Belitung Island as a prominent tourist destination was driven by the popularity of *Laskar Pelangi*. To examine how this gaze has transformed local culture into a tourism resource, this article will first summarize how Belitung is represented in *Laskar Pelangi* and then analyse the types of gazes tourists have cast upon the island as a result.

The tourism boom in Belitung was catalysed by the film adaptation of *Laskar Pelangi*, directed by Riri Riza and Mira Lesmana. Unlike most Indonesian films set in urban centres like Jakarta or Bandung, these filmmakers create "regional rediscovery" works that highlight rural societies previously overlooked. As Koike (2016) notes, audiences in urban areas primarily rediscover rural locales through such films. These works often portray natural environments in a way that conveys a sense of exoticism. For instance, in *Pendekar Tongkat Emas* (The Golden Cane Warrior), the landscapes of Sumba Island—featuring its picturesque grasslands and traditional musical instruments—are prominently showcased, emphasising the region's distinctive cultural and natural attributes (Koike,2016).

In the film adaptation of *Laskar Pelangi*, the most prominent "exotic" landscapes include the townscapes surrounding tin mining sites and the beaches frequented by the children. Tanjung Tinggi Beach in Belitung Regency has gained popularity and is now often featured in tour package itineraries (Figure 4). Other filming locations have also attracted significant attention. The beaches showcased in the film are located in Belitung Regency, while the Muhammadiyah school and tin



Figure 4. Tanjung Tinggi Beach. Source: Author's photograph (September 16, 2018)

mining sites are in East Belitung Regency. Furthermore, a notable aspect of the film is that the children, including the protagonist Ikal, speak Malay (*Melayu*). The novel frequently employs the term "Melayu," which—while not explicitly stated—implicitly conveys the cultural background of the Melayu people.

Thus, in *Laskar Pelangi*, Belitung is depicted as an exotic island rich in Melayu cultural heritage and stunning natural landscapes—including its beaches. Informed by the novel and film, tourists anticipate Belitung as the setting for *Laskar Pelangi* and a place to experience the scenery and atmosphere portrayed in the work. This search for authentic *Belitong*-ness has elicited two primary responses from local hosts. First, in line with tourist expectations, local tourism development has increasingly focused on beach tourism sites associated with *Laskar Pelangi*. Second, the influx of tourists has led residents to recognise that the culture of Belitung Island is not well known to outsiders (Budi, personal interview, September 2018; Candra, personal interview, August 2019). Over time, this concern became more explicit in local discussions about the limits of an exclusively landscape-centred offer. The initial expansion in visitor numbers was most visible in the years following the 2008 film release, as tour operators and local actors rapidly developed beach and filming-site itineraries. Although by the late 2010s, tourism practitioners progressively discussed the offer's limits and began to foreground *Budaya Belitong* [Belitung's culture] in order to sustain tourism beyond the film-driven boom. This shift was not done to reject tourists' expectations, but it was driven by the hosts' concerns about sustainability. An awareness that film-driven tourism could be fleeting, coupled with a desire to represent *Belitong*-ness through cultural practices and cultural representation have led the hosts to agree on the change. While sustainable tourism has become a prominent policy discourse, this article emphasises host-led discussions and practises as the primary drivers of the shift towards culture-oriented tourism in Belitung.

Belitung has experienced a tourist gaze heavily influenced by *Laskar Pelangi*. Tourists frequently photograph and film their experiences, sharing them on social media platforms. Urry



Figure 5. *Rumah Adat* (literal translation: customary house). Source: Author's photograph (February 20, 2019)

(2014) likens digital photography to "live postcards," suggesting that visual information can be transmitted instantly across time and space to audiences not physically present. Consequently, the tourist gaze is continuously reproduced through social media. Images of Belitung's beaches and natural landscapes—which evoke *Laskar Pelangi*—are disseminated online by tourists, leading to the perception of Belitung as both the setting of *Laskar Pelangi* and a destination for pristine beauty. New tourists replicate this process by uploading their own images, further reinforcing the tourist gaze. In response, local hosts continually enhance tourism resources to align with this gaze.

From the early stages of the tourism boom, local actors in Belitung have actively transformed sites associated with *Laskar Pelangi* into tourism resources. Tour itineraries in Belitung Regency and East Belitung Regency frequently feature these locations. The notable sites in Belitung Regency include various coastal beaches, while East Belitung Regency offers the film set and the Andrea Hirata Museum. Specific filming locations have been marked with signs identifying them as "*Laskar Pelangi* Filming Sites." Souvenir shops across Belitung sell local products as well as T-shirts, keychains, and other merchandise branded with "*Laskar Pelangi*." These initiatives allow tourists to fully experience Belitung as "the land of *Laskar Pelangi*." Although non-film-related destinations are also included in tour packages or promoted on social media, they primarily highlight natural sites such as beaches, former mining pits, and lakes.

At first glance, the hosts in Belitung may seem like passive recipients of the tourist gaze. However, residents engaged in tourism have not only internalised the images of Belitung assigned by visitors, they have also expressed concerns about the uncritical acceptance of this gaze. For instance, Deni, a travel agency operator in Tanjung Pandan, Belitung Regency, stated the following:

> "Tourism benefits not only those directly involved in the industry but also society as a whole. To date, tourism in Belitung has promoted its natural assets, such as beaches. However, this alone is insufficient. We must introduce tourists to *Budaya*

> *Belitong* (Belitung People's culture). Otherwise, tourism will be nothing more than a passing fad."
>
> (Deni, personal interview, September 2018)

Tourism in Belitung is expected to significantly contribute to the local economy as a non-mining industry. As the island has gained recognition as a tourist destination, residents have started to understand how outsiders perceive Belitung through the tourist gaze. The gaze portrays Belitung as the setting of *Laskar Pelangi*, a rural society enriched with beautiful beaches and natural scenery. Awareness of the significance of local culture in tourism—as expressed by Deni—is widely shared, particularly among *Tokoh Budaya* (cultural figures) who are well-versed in the island's history and traditions. This concern has prompted local discussions on the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry, occurring in both formal tourism community meetings and informal settings. During my fieldwork, I engaged in such conversations. A group of four tourism practitioners repeatedly referred to Kyoto, Japan, as an example of how a tourism destination rooted in local history and culture can achieve enduring success. These conversations indicate that hosts' responses were not limited to matching tourist expectations. They also shared a concern about the beach-centred image and endeavoured to broaden *Belitong*-ness by foregrounding *Budaya Belitong* in the cultural representation.

Host-led Re-Creation of *Budaya Belitong*

The post-tourism boom period in Belitung has continued to leverage cultural elements as tourism resources. In Tanjung Pandan, the administrative centre of Belitung Regency, a museum is modelled after a stilt traditional Malay house known as *Rumah Adat* (literal translation: customary house) (Figure 5). The construction commenced in 2004, and it opened to the public in 2009. Inside the *Rumah Adat*, visitors can find exhibits of traditional Malay musical instruments, farming tools, infant-care implements, and replicas of wedding rituals alongside traditional clothing. Additionally, the Malay ritual *Maras Taun* is occasionally staged for visitors and incorporated into the local tourism calendar. *Maras Taun* is derived from the Belitung Malay words *Maras* (cut) and *Taun* (year), it is conducted annually after the rice harvest. The festival prays for a bountiful harvest and a good catch, featuring farmers' dances and rituals. Participants take home the leaves used in the ceremonies as symbols of abundance, while red rice and glutinous rice wrapped in leaves called *lepat* are shared among attendees.

At first glance, such practises seem to position Malay culture as the sole representative heritage of the province. However, the cultural identity envisioned by local residents extends beyond Malay heritage. As previously noted, while Malay culture is prominent in public representations of Belitung, the population is ethnically heterogeneous, and everyday cultural practices reflect a blend of diverse influences. In rethinking "local culture" through the lens of tourist expectations, various customs and rituals have been reframed as tourist events. Additionally, museums and cultural centres are now presenting the "*Budaya Belitong*" that cannot be reduced to Malay culture. In the ethical practice, through which hosts select cultural elements to present as tourism resources, they do not fix Malay culture as the sole representative heritage. Rather, they assemble an image of *Budaya Belitong* combining multiple cultural elements.

In February 2019, Belitung celebrated its inaugural *Cap Go Meh* (Mandarin: *Yuanxiao Jie* or

Lantern Festival), which is a Chinese-Indonesian event marking the fifteenth day of the lunar new year, coinciding with the first full moon after the Lunar New Year and traditionally concluding the festivities. The event was organised by the Chinese community in Belitung collaborating with the local tourism office, and included participation from ethnic Malay residents. Informal discussions indicated the involvement of Bugis and Balinese residents as well. Starting at 3 p.m., the festivities featured a Chinese master of ceremonies. A stage was set at the rear of the venue, with covered seating for spectators and refreshment stalls nearby. The refreshments included snacks and beverages, and were served by women in hijabs, presumed to be Malays. Children gathered in front of the stage during the *Barongsai* (lion dance) performance, offering *Ampao* (red envelopes) to the lion—a customarily Chinese practice, although children who were not Chinese were also encouraged to participate (Figure 6). According to Eddy, a Chinese organiser, the *Barongsai* troupe included both Chinese and Malay youth volunteers. Chinese-derived customs such as *Cap Go Meh*, are widely recognised in Bangka Belitung as practices involving multiple ethnic groups. For example, regarding Lunar New Year customs, the residents explained:

> "On Lunar New Year's morning, children sit in front of Chinese houses holding red envelopes. We give *Ampao* to not only Chinese children but also Malay children."
> (Fenny, a Chinese female resident, personal interview, October 2022)

> "When joining the *Barongsai*, I looked forward to receiving an *Ampao*. The ones placed high up had more money inside, so everyone was eager to climb for them."
> (Guntur, a Malay male resident, personal interview, October 2022)

Such cross-ethnic participation in *Barongsai* has also been observed in other Indonesian regions, particularly in the post-Suharto period, when public expressions of Chinese culture became increasingly visible following decades of restriction under assimilation policies. During and after the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), Chinese cultural celebrations regained official recognition, enabling events such as *Cap Go Meh* to be organised openly across the country.



Figure 6. Offering *Ampao* (red envelopes) to *Barongsai*. Source: Author's photograph (February 20, 2019)



Figure 7. *Buang Jong*. Source: Author's photograph (October 20, 2020)

These accounts suggest that the now-tourism-oriented *Cap Go Meh* was not merely an invented attraction for visitors but rather extended from pre-existing local practices. In Belitung, the event is framed as not simply a revival of Chinese culture but also part of *Budaya Belitong* where everyday multi-ethnic participation is reframed as a publicly legible marker of local identity. Although most participants appeared to be local residents, *Cap Go Meh* was explicitly organised as a tourism-facing occasion, collaboratively staged by the Chinese community and the local tourism office. A similar pattern was observed in the *Buang Jong*.

Buang Jong, originally a sea-offering ceremony of the Sawang—former sea nomads who have settled in Belitung—involves sending a small wooden boat laden with offerings out to sea, praying for safety and abundance in fishing (Figure 7). The *Buang Jong* is held annually on October 10, and has been transformed into a tourist event featuring joint performances by Sawang ritual specialists and Malay *Dukun* (shamans), who conduct prayers onshore and offshore, respectively. Sawang leader, Hadi, recounted the origins of this shared practice as follows:

> "Long before Indonesian independence, Malays in northern Belitung were dying from an unknown illness. A Sawang shaman treated them, and the disease disappeared. Out of gratitude, the Malays began participating in *Buang Jong*, and this continues today."
>
> (Hadi, personal interview, October 2022)

This narrative reinforces that even when rituals become tourist events, they are not necessarily divorced from their historical context. It also indicates that touristic staging of the *Buang Jong* ritual is linked to a shared history of inter-ethnic mutual assistance and thus considered appropriate to display as a tourism resource.

An additional example emerged during a visit to the *Rumah Adat*. While viewing the displayed traditional attire, I conversed with a staff member.

Staff : "These garments use red and gold—colours symbolizing happiness and prosperity. This is due to the influence of Chinese culture. Many Chinese people live here, and their culture has long been a part of ours. We live together and support each other. This is the costume for Belitung dance: its form follows Malay tradition; its colours follow Chinese tradition."

Author : "It reminds me somewhat of Batak traditional attire from Sumatra."

Staff : "Exactly. The form is shared with the Malay cultural sphere, like Riau or Malaysia."

Author : "Do they also use red and yellow there?"

Staff : "No, they do not. Here, other colours can also be used, but red and yellow remain the main combination."

(*Rumah Adat* staff, personal communication, February 2019)

Although *Rumah Adat* primarily showcases Malay culture, staff explanations to tourists also emphasise the Chinese influence. The association of costume colours with Chinese heritage may seem unexpected, yet it reflects a conscious assertion that Belitung's culture is shaped by more

than Malay traditions. Such explanations indicate that multiculturalism in Belitung is experienced and narrated by residents in everyday life. Through such narratives, hosts may position Chinese culture as a constituent element of local culture, thereby shaping visitors' understanding of what constitutes "local."[3)]

Similarly, the Belitung Regency Museum, which was established in 1962 by a tin-mining company and initially focused on geological exhibits, has recently expanded its historical displays. As of 2022, the renovation plan targeted for completion in 2023 included revisions to object arrangements and explanatory labels to highlight Belitung's multi-ethnic past. Current exhibits feature cloaks worn by Chinese labourers in the Dutch colonial tin industry, as well as kris (ceremonial daggers) of non-local origin discovered on the island, accompanied by interpretive notes that detail their historical backgrounds. This curatorial shift indicates that *Budaya Belitong* is becoming visible not only through festivals and events but also within museum displays as an institutional setting.

In summary, the tourist gaze has prompted local actors to reconsider and rearticulate local culture through various representational strategies. If culture is defined as "a construct formed and shared within a specific group, closely tied to collective identity," then the locally reimagined *Budaya Belitong*—shaped by multiple actors—provides insight into the shared identity of Bangka Belitung society. As the Belitung Regency Head of Tourism remarked:

> "What constitutes the unique culture of a region is a difficult question. Yet, I believe that Belitung's culture can be understood as the amalgamation of the cultures of various ethnic groups. Belitung is, in essence, a place that has embraced cultural diversity."'
>
> (Ibrahim, personal interview, August 22, 2019)

Similar ideas were also expressed in everyday terms by local residents. As one interlocutor stated:

> "Inter-ethnic relations are good in Belitung because there is no single 'original culture' here; local culture has been formed by incorporating influences from elsewhere."
>
> (Johan, personal interview, October 27, 2022)

Here, "no original culture" does not imply an absence of culture, but rather rejects a notion of cultural purity and frames hybridity as the basis of belonging.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that Belitung's cultural diversity is not only an official narrative but also an everyday interpretive framework through which hosts make sense of local identity. While shaped by visitor expectations, local residents actively renegotiate the meaning and representation of their cultural identity. Through this process, local culture is redefined as a tourism resource, resulting in an image of Belitung rooted in ethnic diversity—distinct from the version popularised by *Laskar Pelangi* (The Rainbow Troops).

A noteworthy aspect of Belitung's cultural reconfiguration is the selection process for elements deemed to be *Budaya Belitong* (Belitung culture). Typically, the selection of cultural components for tourism development involves tensions and contestations. However, in Belitung, traditions of non-Malay origin have been presented to tourists with remarkably little friction. This relative absence of conflict is rooted in Belitung's long history of ethnic intermingling. Since

the eighteenth century, Bangka-Belitung has been recognised as a major tin-producing region where the Dutch colonial period attracted a significant influx of Chinese labourers. This led to increased intermarriage and cultural mixing between Chinese migrants and local Malays (*Pribumi*). Unlike other colonial contexts, there were no rigid socio-economic divisions between Chinese and *Pribumi*. Moreover, Malays and Chinese collaborated in labour struggles over mining conditions, and diverse groups united across ethnic boundaries in the political movement to separate from South Sumatra and establish a new province alongside Bangka. These historical experiences are encapsulated in the provincial slogan *Tongin Fangin Jit Jong* (Malays and Chinese are the same). Against this backdrop, the question of which ethnic culture to present to tourists has not caused any contention; rather, as noted by the tourism office head, multiple ethnic traditions have been actively embraced as components of *Budaya Belitong*.

Ethical Stakes of Selection and Funding

From the perspective of groups whose practises were selected and reshaped for tourism, the ethics of this process are often experienced in terms of recognition, resources, and sustainability. Nevertheless, frictions arise between cultures commodified as tourism resources and those that remain outside this process. These tensions stem not from choosing which traditions belong to *Budaya Belitong* but from conflicts between local communities and the regional government regarding the consequences of tourism commodification. For instance, the ritual *Buang Jong*—known in the Sawang language as *Muang Jong*—has been reframed as a tourism event and categorized under *Budaya Belitong* as Sawang cultural heritage. However, the Sawang people continue to perform *Muang Jong* as their own ritual practice rather than simply as a tourism event reframed as *Buang Jong*. A Sawang leader noted that *Buang Jong* fosters a cooperative relationship between Malays and Sawang, but its ritual procedures differ significantly from those of *Muang Jong* (Hadi, personal interview, October 2022). The Sawang regard *Muang Jong* as more authentic and traditional, with a longer and more complex ceremonial structure (Hadi, personal interview, October 2022). For this community, *Muang Jong* holds greater cultural significance than *Buang Jong*. However, financial support from the regional government is essential for sustaining rituals, and funding is exclusively allocated to *Buang Jong*. Consequently, the non-commodified *Muang Jong* struggles to secure resources, making its continued practise increasingly challenging each year (Hadi, personal interview, July 2023). Thus, while disputes over the cultural content of *Budaya Belitong* are rare, tensions arise between a government that funds commodified culture and residents who seek to preserve non-commodified culture. This tension highlights a crucial ethical stake for hosts: they must consider not only what to stage but also how funding regimes and institutional priorities shape which forms of culture become publicly visible and sustainable over time.

Taken together, these cases suggest that hosts act as ethical agents insofar as they make situated judgements about cultural representation—selecting, framing, and justifying what can stand for *Budaya Belitong* under asymmetric tourist–host relations.

The case of tourism development and cultural reconfiguration in Belitung highlights the agency of local hosts. The ethical dimension of tourism centres on which cultural practices should be transformed into tourism resources. While visitors engage with Belitung and its people through the lens of *Laskar Pelangi*, local actors actively reinterpret traditions, framing them as appropriate

tourism resources that reflect their own socio-cultural histories.

In representing *Budaya Belitong* within tourism, no clear or uniform criteria emerged. However, several recurring perspectives were identified from residents' narratives. The positioning of long-standing rituals, such as *Maras Taun* and *Buang Jong* as traditional culture indicates the importance of continuity. Inclusivity was emphasised, with events showcasing multi-ethnic characteristics (e.g., *Cap Go Meh* and *Buang Jong*) and museums incorporating relevant exhibitions and explanations. These elements are essential for expressing the uniqueness of *Budaya Belitong*. Furthermore, these perspectives suggest that the question of what should be presented to tourists as *Budaya Belitong* was shaped by ethical choices rather than neutral selection.

As discussed above, these dynamics illustrate a form of cultural commodification. Practises such as *Maras Taun*, *Muang Jong*, and *Cap Go Meh* are reframed as tourism resources, while adapted forms—such as *Buang Jong*—are created for visitors. Here, commodification is not merely imposed from the outside. Rather, it is integrated into the process by which local residents actively negotiate what aspects of *Budaya Belitong* are being presented to tourists.

CONCLUSION

Studies on tourism ethics have evolved from focusing on individual guests' moral behaviour to critical approaches that incorporate structural and relational perspectives. This evolution has shifted the attention from guests to hosts, with recent research on tourism ethics debating how tourism practices can promote social justice. However, discussions on tourism ethics often remain theoretical or normative, and the key challenge is examining the actual conditions of host communities, their diverse values, and the agency of local residents in contemplating and practising tourism ethics. In response, this study ethnographically describes the process of reconstructing culture as a tourism resource, demonstrating that local residents are not merely passive respondents to tourism but active agents in redefining their culture.

This study focuses on the cultural reconsideration process on Belitung Island in Bangka Belitung Province, where tourism development has accelerated since 2008, largely following the film adaptation of the popular Indonesian novel *Laskar Pelangi*. Tourism initiatives in Belitung emerged from a bottom-up approach, primarily driven by local residents involved in tourism-related industries rather than administrative authorities. These developments were influenced by the perceptions of visitors, who arrive with expectations shaped by the images presented in *Laskar Pelangi*. The tourism sector has provided resources aligned with these expectations. However, local residents—the hosts—do not respond passively. They actively reassess their culture and reconstruct it as a tourism resource. While there is no explicit consensus on what should represent *Budaya Belitong*, the residents' narratives on which cultural aspects to showcase reflect considerations of continuity, inclusivity, and uniqueness. As a result, the tourism experience now embodies "*Orang Belitong*-ness" through *Budaya Belitong*, which includes not only Malay culture but also the intersecting cultures of the Chinese and Sawang communities.

This cultural reinvention of Belitung represents more than a mere commodification. It can be understood as an ethical practice by hosts rooted in historical and social contexts. Thus, the commodification should be viewed not as an externally imposed process but as a dimension of the hosts' agency, reflected in their ethical negotiations over what to stage as tourism resources

and how to represent a multi-ethnic *Budaya Belitong*. In this sense, hosts can be understood as ethical agents who actively adapt to and engage with tourism.

These ethical negotiations are visible in concrete representational practices: the reframing of *Cap Go Meh* and *Buang Jong* as multi-ethnic events, on-site explanations at the *Rumah Adat* that present Chinese influence as part of local culture, and curatorial shifts in the Belitung Regency Museum that emphasise a multi-ethnic past. Conversely, the contrast between the tourism-oriented *Buang Jong* and the underfunded *Muang Jong* highlights a crucial ethical stake for hosts, who must consider not only what to stage but also how funding regimes and institutional priorities shape which forms of culture can be publicly visible and sustainable over time. The Belitung case thus shows how multicultural Indonesia is negotiated through both state ideals and the tension between Malay-centred cultural institutionalisation and locally lived, multi-ethnic cultural practices.

Traditional studies on tourism ethics have focused on the conduct of individual guests, top-down guidelines, and codes of conduct. By contrast, this study shows how ethics can emerge through the hosts' situated judgements about cultural representation under asymmetric tourist–host relations, as they actively reinterpret and reconstruct cultural heritage as tourism resources. In this sense, ethics is embedded in the process of cultural reconsideration and reconstruction, rather than being limited to harm avoidance or prescriptive good conduct.

However, this study is limited to a single regional case, Belitung Island. Future research should include comparative studies with other regions to elucidate the diverse forms of ethical practices by hosts. Additionally, this study does not examine in detail how certain cultural elements may dominate others. Clarifying these dynamics and their interpretations by local communities is an important direction for future research.

BACK MATTER

Declaration of Author Contributions

Kazuyo Futaesaku: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Funding acquisition, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization.

Disclosure of Competing Interests

The author declares no competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the research, writing, or publication of this paper.

Disclosure of the Use of AI-Tools and Supportive Applications

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) in order to assist with language editing and improve the clarity of English expressions. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article and for any potential issue related to the originality and ethics.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

The author obtained informed consent from the interviewees and participants for their participation in the research and for the use of the information provided for academic purposes. Thus, the author

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Any remaining errors are my own.

Declaration of Publication Agreement

The author hereby declares to have reviewed and approved the final manuscript and agree to its publication in this journal. The author assumes full responsibility for any issues related to authorship, originality, ethics, or publication rights associated with this article.

ENDNOTES

1) The novel had reportedly sold more than 500,000 copies in Indonesia by the time of the film's release in 2008 and later exceeded five million copies in cumulative sales, with translated editions published in multiple countries. The film attracted more than four million viewers within seven weeks and ultimately reached 4,719,453 viewers in Indonesian cinemas. Tourist arrivals in Belitung Regency also rose from 31,998 in 2008 to 199,823 in 2014. While these figures do not prove a direct causal relationship, they suggest that *Laskar Pelangi* helped bring Belitung to wider public attention. See The Jakarta Post 2008; The Jakarta Post 2014; Miles Films 2008; Film Indonesia n.d. Tourist arrival figures for Belitung Regency are based on unpublished statistical data provided to the author by the Dinas Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif Kabupaten Belitung during fieldwork.
2) Tourist arrivals increased in both Belitung Regency and East Belitung Regency after the release of *Laskar Pelangi*. In Belitung Regency, tourist arrivals rose from 31,998 in 2008 to 199,823 in 2014, while in East Belitung Regency, they increased from 1,549 in 2008 to 81,273 in 2014. Although these figures do not prove a direct causal relationship, they indicate the growing visibility of Belitung Island as a tourist destination after the success of the novel and film. Figures for Belitung Regency are based on unpublished statistical data provided to the author by the Dinas Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif Kabupaten Belitung during fieldwork. Figures for East Belitung Regency are based on Septyani (2016), which cites data from the Dinas Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata Kabupaten Belitung Timur.
3) This interpretation is based on an on-site encounter in which a staff member mentioned Chinese influence while guiding a visitor through the exhibits; it was not elicited by a leading question. Although the frequency of such explanations across visitors was not assessed, this episode nonetheless suggests how multicultural *Budaya Belitong* may be articulated through interpretive narrations even when not immediately visible in the site's material design.

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