

The Tobak Tradition in Kuta Jungak Village: Islamic Acculturation, Symbolic Meanings, and Social Functions in Pakpak Bharat Regency

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical development, contemporary practice, and symbolic meanings of the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village, Pakpak Bharat Regency. The research explores how the tradition evolved, how it is implemented today, and how its meanings are interpreted amid socio-cultural change. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, documentation, and literature review, and analyzed through data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that the tradition originated from indigenous beliefs and later underwent Islamization, integrating Islamic prayers with local cultural symbols within the *Sulang Silima* kinship system. The ritual functions as a spiritual safeguard, a medium of social solidarity, and a marker of cultural identity. Its decline is associated with modernization, changing religious perspectives, weakening traditional authority, and reduced youth participation. The study concludes that the *tolak bala* tradition demonstrates the coexistence of Islamic acculturation and local wisdom while facing significant challenges from contemporary social transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

The acculturation of Islam and local cultures in Indonesia has been ongoing since Islam arrived through trade networks in the seventh century CE. Within the context of Indonesian Islam, this process is characterized by the interaction between Islamic teachings, Hindu-Buddhist traditions, and indigenous cultural practices (Al-Amri & Haramain, [2017](#)). The spread of Islam generally occurred through peaceful, persuasive means, enabling the values of *tawhid* to be integrated into local cultural systems without eliminating existing identities and traditions, as reflected in the da'wah strategies of religious figures such as the Wali Songo (Indra, [2022](#)).

One form of acculturation between Islam and local culture that continues to exist, although with decreasing intensity, is the *tolak bala* tradition practiced by communities in Pakpak Bharat Regency. This tradition is generally understood as a communal effort to prevent disasters, misfortune, or disturbances perceived as threatening collective well-being and social harmony (Nursaid et al., [2023](#)). The ritual combines Islamic prayers, including *tahlil* and *shalawat*, with local cultural elements preserved across generations. Through this integration, the community expresses spiritual devotion to God while simultaneously maintaining inherited cultural values. Similar forms of *tolak bala* rituals are found in various regions of Indonesia, although each community adapts the ritual according to its own cultural background and local traditions (Adelita et al., [2024](#)).

Culture, according to Koentjaraningrat, encompasses systems of ideas, human activities, and material products that are learned and transmitted socially from one generation to another. Tradition serves as a mechanism for maintaining cultural values and social norms within a community. Clifford Geertz further conceptualizes culture as a web of meanings expressed through symbols, rituals, and historical patterns that provide significance to social life. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding traditional rituals because ritual practices are not merely ceremonial activities but also symbolic expressions through which communities construct and communicate collective meanings. Traditional practices, therefore, contain values, beliefs, customs, and local knowledge that contribute to the formation and preservation of cultural identity amidst changing social circumstances (Indriani et al., [2022](#)).

Pakpak Bharat Regency, located in North Sumatra Province, is predominantly inhabited by the Pakpak ethnic group. Social relations within this community are regulated through a patrilineal kinship system known as *Sulang Silima*,

consisting of *perisang-isang* (*sinina situasi*), *anak boru* (*berru*), *dongan tubu* (*sibeltek*), *hula-hula* (*puang*), and *boru* (Kaban et al., [2022](#)). This kinship structure serves as an important social institution governing interpersonal relations, customary obligations, and collective community activities. Various traditional ceremonies and communal rituals are organized and conducted through the framework of *Sulang Silima*, including rituals associated with protection, thanksgiving, and social solidarity (Simanjuntak & Bangun, [2023](#)).

In the context of Kuta Jungak Village, Si Empat Rube Subdistrict, the *tolak bala* tradition has historically played an important role in community life. The ritual is commonly performed in response to situations perceived as threatening social balance, such as disease outbreaks, natural disturbances, or other forms of collective uncertainty. Beyond its spiritual dimension, the ritual functions as a mechanism for strengthening social cohesion and reinforcing relationships among community members (Zulyan & Hasibuan, [2022](#)). The collective nature of the ritual reflects the community's understanding that safety, harmony, and well-being are shared responsibilities that require communal participation and cooperation.

The implementation of *tolak bala* rituals across Indonesia demonstrates considerable diversity in both form and meaning. These variations reflect differences in local histories, cultural traditions, and patterns of interaction between religious teachings and indigenous beliefs (Zulhaiki & Wathoni, [2024](#)). In Teluk Panji Plantation Village, North Sumatra, for example, the ritual involves ceremonial preparations, collective prayers, animal sacrifices, and communal cooperation as expressions of both cultural tradition and Islamic values (Indra, [2022](#)). Such diversity indicates that *tolak bala* rituals cannot be understood solely as uniform religious practices but must also be interpreted within their specific socio-cultural contexts.

Despite its historical significance, the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village has experienced a noticeable decline in recent years. The growing influence of modernization and globalization has transformed patterns of social interaction and cultural transmission within the community (Nurrohman et al., [2024](#)). Younger generations increasingly engage with modern educational systems, digital technologies, and external cultural influences that often reduce their involvement in customary activities. Simultaneously, the role of traditional leaders as cultural custodians has gradually weakened, while some community members have begun to perceive certain traditional rituals as less relevant to contemporary religious practices. These developments have contributed to a decrease in the frequency of ritual practice and have posed challenges to the continuity of local cultural traditions (Anindia et al., [2024](#)).

Previous studies on the *tolak bala* tradition in North Sumatra have examined various aspects of its implementation, social functions, and cultural significance. Research conducted among the Javanese community in Mabar Hilir, Medan, found that the *tolak bala* ritual serves not only as a spiritual effort to seek protection from misfortune but also as a means to strengthen social solidarity and preserve cultural identity within the community (Adelita et al., [2024](#)). Studies on the Malay community in Pantai Labu, Deli Serdang, revealed that the *tolak bala* tradition has experienced both continuity and transformation in response to modernization, educational development, and changing religious perspectives, while remaining an important marker of local cultural identity (Kartolo et al., [2022](#)). Research on communities in Mandailing Natal further demonstrated that the *tolak bala* tradition is understood not merely as a ritual practice but also as a cultural mechanism for strengthening collective identity, social resilience, and community solidarity amid contemporary social change (Lubis & Saleh, [2024](#)). These studies have significantly contributed to understanding the social functions, ritual practices, and evolving meanings of the *tolak bala* tradition in North Sumatra. However, scholarly attention remains limited regarding the *tolak bala* tradition among the Pakpak people, particularly in relation to its historical development, the process of Islamic acculturation, its symbolic meanings, and the factors contributing to its declining practice in contemporary society. This gap provides the rationale for the present study, which seeks to examine the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village, Pakpak Bharat Regency, as a cultural expression reflecting the interaction between Islamic teachings and local Pakpak traditions within a distinctive socio-cultural context.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated examination of the *tolak bala* tradition within the Pakpak community of Kuta Jungak Village, Pakpak Bharat Regency, by simultaneously analyzing its historical development, Islamic acculturation, symbolic meanings, and the factors contributing to its declining practice in contemporary society. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the social functions of *tolak bala* rituals among Javanese communities in Medan, the transformation of ritual meanings among Malay communities in Pantai Labu, the religious values embedded in ritual performances in Bagan Serdang, and the phenomenon of desacralization within Mandailing

communities. Although these studies have enriched scholarly understanding of *tolak bala* traditions in North Sumatra, they have generally examined these aspects separately and within different socio-cultural settings. No previous study has specifically investigated the *tolak bala* tradition of the Pakpak people through a comprehensive ethnographic approach that connects the historical process of Islamization, the symbolic interpretation of ritual elements, the role of the *Sulang Silima* kinship system, and the contemporary challenges threatening the tradition's continuity. By addressing this gap, the present study offers a new perspective on the dynamic interaction between Islam and local culture while contributing to the broader discourse on cultural resilience, religious acculturation, and the preservation of indigenous traditions in contemporary Indonesian society.

This study has three main objectives. First, it aims to examine the history and origins of the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village, Pakpak Bharat Regency, in order to understand its historical development and the socio-cultural factors that have shaped its existence within the Pakpak community. Second, it seeks to analyze the procedures and stages involved in conducting the *tolak bala* tradition, including the roles of community members and customary leaders, and the integration of Islamic elements into the ritual process. Third, it aims to explore the symbolic meanings embedded in the *tolak bala* tradition and to investigate its significance in the community's social and religious life, particularly in relation to cultural identity, social solidarity, and the expression of religious values. Through these objectives, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the *tolak bala* tradition as a manifestation of the interaction between Islam and local culture in contemporary Pakpak society.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive ethnographic approach to understand the practices, meanings, and socio-cultural context of the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village, Si Empat Rube Subdistrict, Pakpak Bharat Regency. This approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of community perspectives regarding their experiences, knowledge, and interpretations of the ritual under study. Ethnography is particularly relevant for examining cultural practices because it allows researchers to investigate how meanings are constructed, transmitted, and maintained within a specific social setting. The fieldwork was conducted over approximately three months, from January to March 2025, enabling prolonged engagement with the research setting and the collection of rich contextual data.

The research data consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews and participant observation, while secondary data were collected from literature reviews, archival records, photographs, village documents, and relevant previous studies. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, involvement, and experience with the *tolak bala* tradition (Fiantika et al., [2022](#)). The study involved 12 key informants: three traditional leaders, two religious leaders, three ritual practitioners, two village elders, and two community members who had directly participated in the ritual. The selection criteria included active involvement in the tradition, familiarity with its historical development, and willingness to provide detailed information regarding its implementation and meaning.

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain narratives concerning the history, procedures, symbolic meanings, and contemporary challenges of the *tolak bala* tradition. Participant observation was undertaken during community activities and cultural events associated with the ritual to gain a deeper understanding of social interactions, symbolic expressions, and community participation. Documentation included photographs, field notes, local manuscripts when available, and supporting documents related to the tradition.

Data analysis was conducted using an ethnographic interpretative approach. Following data collection, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation materials were systematically organized and coded. The coding process involved identifying recurring concepts and cultural themes related to the historical development of the tradition, ritual procedures, symbolic meanings, Islamic acculturation, and factors contributing to the decline of ritual practice. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories to facilitate interpretation. The analysis proceeded through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while simultaneously employing interpretative analysis to understand how community members construct and negotiate meanings within the *tolak bala* tradition. This analytical process enabled the researcher to move beyond mere description and to examine the relationship between ritual practices, cultural identity, and social change.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from different categories of informants, observational findings, and documentary evidence. Triangulation was also conducted by cross-checking historical narratives and ritual descriptions across multiple sources to enhance the credibility and consistency of the findings. The entire research process was conducted in accordance with research ethics, including obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining confidentiality, ensuring voluntary participation, and respecting the local community's cultural values, customs, and social norms.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

History and Origins of the Tolak Bala Tradition in Kuta Jungak Village

The *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village is a cultural practice that has evolved within the community in response to the social and environmental dynamics it faces. This tradition is not merely a religious ritual but also part of the community's collective experience in maintaining the balance of life (Mustolehudin et al., [2025](#)). In agrarian societies, events such as pest infestations, crop failures, or social disturbances are viewed as conditions that require collective effort, both physical and spiritual. Therefore, the *tolak bala* tradition serves as a communal practice that integrates spiritual, social, and cultural elements into village life (Zulyan & Hasibuan, [2022](#)).

The practice of this tradition also reflects the acculturation between Islamic values and the local wisdom of the Pakpak community. The involvement of religious leaders, community figures, and the active participation of residents demonstrate that the *tolak bala* tradition serves to strengthen social solidarity and unity (Sanjani et al., [2024](#)). Through collective rituals, the community not only offers prayers as a spiritual endeavor but also reinforces social bonds among its members. From Geertz's interpretive perspective, rituals function as cultural texts through which communities communicate shared meanings and reaffirm collective identities. The *tolak bala* tradition, therefore, operates not only as a religious expression but also as a symbolic mechanism through which the Pakpak community negotiates social cohesion and cultural continuity amidst changing social circumstances (Al-Amri & Haramain, [2017](#)).

The *tolak bala* tradition has its roots in pre-Islamic belief practices that developed in various regions of Indonesia, including Sumatra and Sulawesi. During that period, indigenous communities performed rituals involving symbolic offerings, animal sacrifices, and other ceremonial acts intended to ward off agricultural pests, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters. Historical studies indicate that many of these practices were subsequently transformed through Islamization, resulting in rituals that incorporated Qur'anic recitation, collective prayers, and other Islamic elements while retaining certain local cultural features (Efia et al., [2024](#); Triadityansyah et al., [2025](#)). This pattern reflects what scholars of religious acculturation describe as a process of cultural adaptation in which new religious values are integrated into existing cultural systems rather than completely replacing them.

Historical information obtained from village records, community documentation, and oral testimonies from village elders indicates that the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village became institutionalized around 2007 following a severe agricultural crisis. According to village archives and interview data, a large-scale pest infestation significantly reduced plantation yields. It threatened the economic stability of local households whose livelihoods depended primarily on agriculture and plantation activities (Interview with Sunggul Padang, 2026). Field observations conducted by the researcher further revealed that collective memories of this event are preserved through community narratives and discussions during ritual gatherings, underscoring the crisis's importance in shaping local historical consciousness.

The ongoing crisis was not merely interpreted as an economic problem. However, within the local cultural framework, it was understood as a disturbance to the harmonious relationship among humans, nature, and divine power. Such interpretations reflect a cosmological worldview common in agrarian societies, in which environmental disturbances are frequently associated with broader social and spiritual imbalances. Observation data collected during community gatherings showed that many participants continue to articulate the ritual as a means of restoring equilibrium and reinforcing collective confidence in the face of uncertainty. This finding suggests that the ritual functions not only as a religious response but also as a cultural mechanism for managing collective anxiety and social vulnerability.

In response to these circumstances, traditional, religious, and community leaders convened a deliberative meeting to determine an appropriate course of action grounded in local cultural values and religious principles. The outcome of this meeting was the collective decision to organize the *tolak bala* ritual as a communal effort to seek divine

protection and prevent similar calamities in the future (Interview with Usman Tumangger, 2026). The researcher's direct observation of contemporary ritual practices indicates that this historical event is still remembered and symbolically reproduced during ritual performances. From the perspective of ritual studies, the continuation of the *tolak bala* tradition demonstrates how communities transform historical experiences into collective cultural practices that reinforce social solidarity and shared identity. Rather than functioning solely as a response to disaster, the ritual has become a symbolic expression of communal resilience and a form of cultural continuity maintained amid modernization and social change.

The *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak demonstrates that the community does not perceive disasters merely as material or environmental events but as social experiences that affect the collective fabric of communal life. The ritual creates a shared space in which community members reaffirm mutual trust, strengthen social cohesion, and cultivate collective optimism in the face of uncertainty. Participation in the ritual extends beyond the performance of religious practices; it represents a communal commitment to preserving social harmony and reinforcing interpersonal relationships. Through this process, the ritual functions as a mechanism for maintaining social stability while fostering a sense of belonging among community members.

The continuity of this tradition also illustrates the Pakpak community's capacity to integrate Islamic values into local cultural frameworks without diminishing the significance of either. Community members do not position Adat and Islam as competing systems of belief; instead, they understand them as complementary elements that jointly shape their social and spiritual lives. This integration is evident in the incorporation of Islamic prayers within customary ceremonial structures and in the active involvement of both religious and traditional leaders throughout the ritual process. Such a pattern reflects a dynamic form of cultural adaptation in which religious teachings are localized and embedded within existing cultural practices, producing a distinctive expression of Islamic identity rooted in local tradition.

The development of the *tolak bala* tradition following the agricultural crisis further reveals how a collective experience of hardship can evolve into a shared cultural memory that transcends generations. The community no longer regards the pest infestation and declining crop yields solely as historical events; rather, these experiences have become part of a collective narrative that shapes local identity and social consciousness. The ritual continuously reproduces this memory by transforming past adversity into a source of communal learning. It reminds community members of the importance of solidarity, cooperation, and collective responsibility in confronting challenges that threaten their livelihoods and social well-being.

The persistence of the *tolak bala* tradition amid ongoing modernization highlights its role as a symbol of cultural resilience. Although social transformation has reduced the frequency of ritual performance, the fundamental values embodied in the tradition continue to hold significance for the community. This condition demonstrates that the sustainability of a tradition depends not solely on the regularity of its practice but also on the enduring relevance of the meanings it conveys. The *tolak bala* tradition therefore represents more than a cultural legacy inherited from previous generations; it serves as a living expression of communal identity, social solidarity, and cultural continuity.

Procedures for Conducting the Tolak Bala Tradition in Kuta Jungak Village

Every traditional event, including the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village, typically involves a preparation phase conducted approximately one week before the event date. During this preparation period, the community begins holding meetings to determine the event date, assign tasks, and identify the various needs required for the ritual activities. This stage is crucial, as it reflects coordination and cooperation among residents to ensure the entire event proceeds smoothly and in accordance with customs passed down through generations (Sutikno, [2018](#)).

The implementation of the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village is carried out through systematically organized stages and conducted communally by the community. This series of activities is not merely ceremonial but reflects a collective process that integrates religious values, social solidarity, and local wisdom transmitted across generations. Each stage possesses symbolic and social functions that are interconnected, creating a coherent cultural system through which the community expresses shared beliefs and collective identity. The involvement of religious leaders, community elders, and residents demonstrates that the tradition holds an important place in village life (Interview with Syaki Padang, 2026). During field observations, the researcher noted that community participation extended beyond ritual attendance, as residents actively contributed to preparations, food provision, site organization,

and ritual coordination. This finding indicates that the tradition functions not only as a religious event but also as a mechanism for sustaining communal cooperation and social cohesion.

Determining the Location for the Tolak Bala Tradition through Community Deliberation

The initial stage of the tradition begins with determining the ritual location through community consensus. Unlike religious practices typically held in mosques, the *tolak bala* ritual in Kuta Jungak Village is conducted in open spaces, particularly along the riverbank and, occasionally, beneath a *wara* tree regarded as culturally significant by the local community. The river is an important source of life for residents, while the *wara* tree symbolizes continuity with ancestral traditions. Thus, the selection of the ritual site marks the beginning of the ceremonial sequence and reflects the community's cultural relationship with the surrounding environment (Interview with Sahap Padang, 2026).

Field observations conducted during the ritual revealed that the selected locations are not merely physical spaces but symbolic environments where social, cultural, and religious meanings converge. The river serves as a visible symbol of purification and renewal, while the *wara* tree serves as a cultural marker connecting contemporary community life to inherited traditions. Photographic documentation collected during the research further shows that ritual participants deliberately arrange themselves around these natural elements, reinforcing the symbolic connection between human life, nature, and spiritual protection. This pattern illustrates how ritual space itself becomes an active component in the production of cultural meaning rather than a passive setting for ceremonial activities.

The Recitation of the Adhan by Four Community Leaders as the Commencement of the Ritual

In Arabic, the term *adhan* denotes a public announcement or proclamation and, in Islamic practice, serves as a call inviting Muslims to worship. In the context of the *tolak bala* tradition, the *adhan* serves as the ceremonial opening, establishing a sacred atmosphere and symbolizing the invocation of divine protection for the community (Hasan, [2022](#)). Once participants have assembled at the designated ritual site, four individuals recognized for their religious knowledge and proficiency in reciting the *adhan* position themselves at four different points surrounding the gathering. The community remains at the center while the *adhan* is recited sequentially from each direction, creating a symbolic circle of spiritual protection encompassing all participants (Interview with Sunggul Padang, 2026). This ritual arrangement reinforces the Islamic character of the ceremony while simultaneously expressing communal aspirations for safety and well-being.

From a symbolic perspective, the four-directional configuration transforms the *adhan* beyond its conventional role as a call to prayer into a ritualized expression of collective protection. Observational findings indicate that participants perceive the *adhan*'s surrounding voices as forming a symbolic boundary that shields the village from misfortune and adversity. This interpretation illustrates how Islamic religious symbols are localized within a specific cultural context while retaining their theological significance. The practice reflects a process of religious acculturation in which Islamic elements are harmoniously incorporated into local traditions without generating conflict between religious doctrines and customary values. Such integration demonstrates the adaptive capacity of both religion and culture in shaping meaningful communal rituals.

Recitation of Collective Prayers as a Petition for Divine Protection

Following the *adhan*, the imam leads the collective recitation of prayers, which constitute the spiritual core of the *tolak bala* tradition. These prayers articulate requests for protection from natural disasters, pest infestations, disease outbreaks, and other threats that may endanger communal welfare. All participants engage in collective prayer, emphasizing the communal dimension of spiritual participation and shared devotion (Interview with Sunggul Padang, 2026). The ritual serves not only as an act of worship but also as a public expression of collective dependence upon divine assistance. Through this practice, religious faith becomes intertwined with communal aspirations for security and prosperity.

Field observations reveal that this stage generates a profound sense of emotional unity among participants. The collective recitation of prayers transforms individual concerns into shared aspirations, creating a communal experience that transcends personal interests. Such interaction reinforces confidence in confronting uncertainty while strengthening the bonds that connect community members. The ritual, therefore, functions simultaneously as a form of communication with God and as a social mechanism that cultivates solidarity and mutual support. Through collective

prayer, participants reaffirm both their spiritual commitments and their responsibilities toward one another within the broader community.

The Sprinkling of Blessed Water as a Symbol of Purification and Protection

Upon the conclusion of the prayers, the ritual proceeds with the sprinkling of blessed water upon participants. The water is prepared in advance and contains ritual ingredients considered culturally significant within local tradition. The instrument used for sprinkling consists of red *andong* leaves, palm fronds, and *sempilit*, which are bound together and employed to distribute the water among community members (Interview with Usman Tumangger, 2026). This stage represents one of the most visually distinctive components of the ritual and attracts considerable attention from participants. The act signifies the transmission of blessings and spiritual protection throughout the community.

Photographic documentation and direct observation indicate that participants respond to this phase with notable seriousness and attentiveness. Community members perceive the blessed water not merely as a physical substance but also as a symbolic medium that carries prayers, blessings, and hopes for protection. The sprinkling ritual represents purification from potential dangers while simultaneously distributing collective blessings among participants. Within ritual studies, water frequently symbolizes renewal, transformation, and spiritual cleansing; in this context, the blessed water materializes communal aspirations and renders them socially visible. The practice demonstrates how symbolic objects mediate the relationship between spiritual beliefs and communal experiences.

Communal Dining as an Expression of Social Equality

Following the sprinkling ceremony, community members gather to share a communal meal. Each household voluntarily contributes food, without predetermined requirements regarding menu composition or quantity, and all food is considered communal property to be shared equally among participants (Souisa, 2019). This practice reflects the collective ethos that underpins the *tolak bala* tradition and reinforces values of cooperation and mutual assistance. The communal meal provides an opportunity for social interaction beyond the formal ritual stages. It also serves as a tangible expression of solidarity among community members.

Field observations demonstrate that the absence of hierarchical seating arrangements, distinctions in food ownership, or status-based privileges reinforces principles of equality and collective belonging. Participants sit and dine together regardless of social standing, emphasizing that all members occupy an equal position within the ritual community. The subsequent practice of releasing leftover food into the river symbolizes gratitude and acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural environment. This symbolic act extends the ritual's meaning beyond social interaction by incorporating ecological values rooted in local cultural understandings: the communal meal thus functions as both a social and an environmental expression of collective responsibility.

Distribution of Blessed Water as the Final Stage of the Ritual

The final stage of the *tolak bala* tradition involves distributing the remaining blessed water to participating households. Each family receives approximately one container of water for use in domestic spaces and agricultural fields (Interview with Sahri Banurea, 2026). This practice extends the ritual beyond the ceremonial setting and embeds its symbolic meanings within everyday life. Community members regard the water as a medium through which the blessings generated during the ceremony can be sustained and transmitted. The distribution process ensures that the ritual's protective function reaches every household within the community.

Observational findings indicate that families sprinkle the water around their homes as a symbolic measure of protection and apply it to agricultural land as an expression of hope for fertile harvests and freedom from pest infestations. This practice extends the ritual's symbolic influence from communal space into domestic and agricultural environments, thereby broadening its social significance. The blessed water serves as a bridge, connecting ceremonial performance with daily experience, allowing ritual values to remain present in community members' lived realities. Through this process, the aspirations articulated during the ritual continue to shape everyday practices and perceptions. The final distribution stage, therefore, reinforces the continuity between sacred ritual activity and ordinary social life.

The sequence of activities constituting the *tolak bala* tradition demonstrates that the ritual operates as a highly structured cultural system through which religious beliefs, social relationships, and local knowledge are interconnected.

Each ritual stage contributes to the construction of a shared understanding concerning the relationship between humanity, nature, and divine power. Rather than functioning solely as a response to perceived threats, the ritual serves as a mechanism for continually reproducing cultural values and collective identity. The continuity of these ritual practices reflects the community's commitment to preserving inherited traditions while adapting them to changing social circumstances. Such continuity highlights the enduring relevance of ritual as a medium of cultural transmission and social cohesion.

The integration of Islamic elements throughout the ritual process underscores the dynamic character of religious acculturation within Pakpak society. The recitation of the *adhan*, collective prayers, and the central role of religious leaders illustrate the extent to which Islamic teachings have become embedded within the ritual framework. Simultaneously, the continued use of culturally significant locations, ritual objects, and communal customs demonstrates the persistence of local cultural expressions. This interaction produces a distinctive religious-cultural tradition that enables community members to maintain both their Islamic identity and their indigenous heritage. The ritual, therefore, exemplifies an adaptive cultural strategy through which religious and customary values coexist in a mutually reinforcing relationship.

Active community participation throughout every stage of the ritual further reveals the significance of the *tolak bala* tradition as a mechanism for strengthening social capital. Processes of deliberation, collective preparation, shared prayer, and communal dining cultivate cooperation, trust, and mutual responsibility among residents. These interactions reinforce interpersonal relationships while sustaining the solidarity necessary for communal life. The ritual consequently serves an important social function by preserving the cohesion required for collective action, particularly within communities closely connected to agricultural livelihoods and communal modes of organization. Its significance extends beyond spirituality to encompass broader dimensions of social integration and collective resilience.

The persistence of the *tolak bala* tradition amid accelerating modernization demonstrates its role as a form of cultural resilience and symbolic continuity. Social transformation has altered numerous aspects of community life, yet the ritual continues to provide a meaningful framework for expressing, negotiating, and transmitting local values across generations. The preservation of ritual practices should not be interpreted as resistance to change itself; rather, it reflects the community's capacity to engage with change while retaining cultural references that sustain social continuity. The tradition remains relevant because it enables the Pakpak community to reaffirm collective identity, strengthen social solidarity, and preserve cultural memory within an increasingly dynamic contemporary environment. Its continued practice illustrates how traditional rituals can adapt to modern realities while maintaining their cultural and spiritual significance.

The Symbolic Meaning of the Tolak Bala Tradition in Social and Religious Life

The *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village is not only a religious ritual but also carries profound symbolic meanings within the community's social life. Spiritually, this practice is understood as both an act of collective endeavor and a communal prayer seeking protection from various forms of calamity, including crop failure, disease outbreaks, and disturbances perceived as threatening the balance of community life (Interview with Nusilla Padang, 2026). Beyond its practical function, the ritual symbolizes the community's dependence on divine protection and its collective hope for safety and prosperity. Field observations revealed that participants consistently associate the ritual with feelings of reassurance, communal confidence, and spiritual security, indicating that the tradition functions as a cultural mechanism for managing uncertainty and reinforcing shared beliefs.

The selection of ritual locations along the riverbank and beneath the *wara* tree also reflects complex symbolic meanings embedded in the Pakpak community's cultural worldview. The river is perceived not merely as a physical resource but as a symbol of purification, renewal, and the continuity of life. The *wara* tree, meanwhile, serves as a cultural marker connecting the present generation with inherited traditions and ancestral memory. Observation data and photographic documentation collected during the ritual demonstrate that participants consciously position themselves around these natural elements, indicating that the ritual space itself constitutes an important symbolic component of the ceremony. From a symbolic perspective, the use of natural settings reflects the community's understanding that harmony between humans, nature, and spiritual forces is essential for maintaining social and environmental balance. The incorporation of Islamic prayers within these culturally significant spaces further illustrates the process of religious acculturation through which Islamic values become embedded within local cultural practices without eliminating indigenous meanings (Interview with Usman Tumangger, 2026).

The ritual use of blessed water constitutes another important symbolic element within the *tolak bala* tradition. Community members interpret the water not simply as a physical object but as a medium through which prayers, blessings, and hopes for protection are materialized. Observation findings indicate that participants receive the sprinkling of water with a high degree of reverence, suggesting that the ritual act serves as a visible representation of spiritual purification and divine grace. The subsequent practice of bringing the water home and applying it to houses and agricultural fields extends the ritual's symbolic influence into everyday life. This process transforms the ritual from a temporary ceremonial event into a continuing expression of faith, demonstrating how sacred meanings are integrated into domestic and economic activities that sustain community life.

The communal meal following the ritual possesses equally significant social symbolism. This tradition reinforces values of togetherness, equality, and mutual responsibility among residents. The absence of distinctions regarding food ownership or social status during the meal symbolizes the temporary dissolution of social boundaries in favor of collective unity. Direct observations showed that participants sat together regardless of age, occupation, or economic position, creating a social environment characterized by inclusivity and mutual respect. Such practices illustrate that the ritual serves not only a religious purpose but also functions as a social institution through which communal relationships are maintained and strengthened (Interview with Kaisah Padang, 2026).

An equally important dimension of the *tolak bala* tradition is its contribution to interfaith relations within the village. Although the ritual is rooted in Islamic religious practices, its social benefits extend beyond the Muslim community. Some non-Muslim residents also seek blessed water from their Muslim neighbors and express appreciation for the ritual's protective and communal values. This phenomenon demonstrates that the tradition operates as a shared social resource rather than an exclusively religious practice. The ritual, therefore, contributes to social harmony by creating opportunities for interaction, cooperation, and mutual respect among individuals from different religious backgrounds (Amanah, [2024](#)).

From an analytical perspective, the symbolic meanings embedded within the *tolak bala* tradition reveal its multifaceted role as a form of religious adaptation and cultural continuity. The ritual integrates Islamic prayers, local cosmological understandings, communal cooperation, and environmental symbolism into a single cultural framework. This integration demonstrates that the tradition is not merely a relic of the past but a dynamic cultural practice capable of adapting to changing social conditions while preserving core communal values. The ritual, therefore, functions as a medium through which religious identity and local cultural identity are continuously negotiated and reaffirmed.

The persistence of the *tolak bala* tradition amid contemporary social transformation also reflects cultural resilience. Modernization has introduced new patterns of thought, economic activity, and religious expression into village life. However, the ritual continues to provide a meaningful framework for interpreting uncertainty and maintaining social cohesion. Rather than resisting change entirely, the community selectively preserves ritual elements that remain relevant to contemporary needs. This process illustrates how traditional practices can serve as cultural resources that enable communities to navigate social change while maintaining continuity with their historical and cultural heritage.

Overall, the symbolic meaning of the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village encompasses spiritual, social, cultural, and ecological dimensions. The ritual functions as a collective expression of faith, a mechanism for strengthening social solidarity, a medium for preserving local cultural identity, and a symbol of the enduring relationship between humans, nature, and divine power. Its continued practice demonstrates that traditional rituals remain important not only for their religious significance but also for their capacity to sustain communal identity and social harmony in an increasingly dynamic contemporary environment (Interview with Sahap Padang, 2026).

The symbolic dimensions of the *tolak bala* tradition demonstrate that ritual practices function beyond a mere sequence of ceremonial activities. The ritual creates a framework through which the community interprets reality, responds to uncertainty, and constructs shared meanings about life, protection, and collective well-being. Each symbolic element—including the river, the *wara* tree, blessed water, communal prayer, and shared meals—operates within an interconnected system of meanings that helps community members understand their relationships with God, nature, and one another. The ritual, therefore, serves as a cultural language through which abstract beliefs are translated into tangible social practices.

The findings further indicate that the *tolak bala* tradition plays an important role in preserving collective memory within the Pakpak community. The ritual continuously recalls historical experiences of hardship, particularly those associated with agricultural challenges and social vulnerability, and transforms them into lessons that remain relevant for contemporary generations. Through repeated participation, community members internalize values of cooperation, mutual assistance, and collective responsibility. This process allows cultural knowledge to be transmitted not only through verbal instruction but also through direct participation in ritual activities, ensuring the continuity of local wisdom across generations.

The integration of Islamic values within the ritual also highlights the adaptive character of local culture. Rather than replacing pre-existing cultural practices, Islamic teachings have become embedded within local symbolic structures, producing a distinctive form of religious expression that reflects both faith and cultural heritage. This process illustrates that religious acculturation is not a one-sided transformation but a dynamic interaction through which communities reinterpret religious teachings within their own socio-cultural context. The *tolak bala* tradition, therefore, represents an example of how local communities actively negotiate religious and cultural identities while maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity.

The continued relevance of the *tolak bala* tradition amid modernization demonstrates its significance as a form of cultural resilience. Social and technological changes have altered many aspects of community life, yet the ritual remains meaningful because it addresses fundamental human needs for security, belonging, and collective identity. The tradition provides a symbolic resource that enables the community to maintain continuity with its historical roots while adapting to contemporary circumstances. Its endurance reflects the Pakpak community's capacity to preserve essential cultural values without isolating itself from broader social change, thereby ensuring that local identity remains a living and dynamic component of community life.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the *tolak bala* tradition in Kuta Jungak Village emerged from the community's collective experience in responding to an agricultural crisis caused by widespread pest infestations around 2007. Over time, the practice developed into a structured cultural tradition that integrates spiritual beliefs, social cooperation, and local cultural values. The ritual is conducted through a series of interconnected stages, including the determination of the ritual site through community deliberation, the recitation of the *adhan*, collective prayers, the sprinkling of blessed water, communal dining, and the distribution of blessed water to participating households. These stages reflect the interaction between Islamic teachings and Pakpak cultural traditions, illustrating a process of religious acculturation in which Islamic values are localized. In contrast, indigenous cultural meanings continue to be preserved.

The findings reveal that the symbolic meanings embedded in the *tolak bala* tradition extend far beyond its role as a ritual to seek protection from calamities. The tradition serves to strengthen social solidarity, reinforce communal identity, preserve collective cultural memory, and maintain harmonious relationships among humans, nature, and divine power. The ritual also functions as a form of religious adaptation and cultural resilience, enabling the Pakpak community to negotiate social change while maintaining continuity with its cultural heritage. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the fields of religious acculturation, ritual studies, and cultural preservation by providing ethnographic documentation of a local tradition that has received limited scholarly attention and by demonstrating how Islamic values and local wisdom are continuously integrated within contemporary community life.

This study is limited to the socio-cultural context of Kuta Jungak Village. It therefore does not represent the diversity of ritual practices and cultural interpretations that may exist across other Pakpak communities. Future research should undertake comparative studies involving different Pakpak regions to identify variations in ritual forms, symbolic meanings, and patterns of religious acculturation. Further investigation is also needed to explore generational perspectives on the *tolak bala* tradition, particularly how younger generations perceive, negotiate, and preserve traditional rituals amid modernization. Such studies would provide a broader understanding of the sustainability and transformation of local cultural traditions in contemporary Indonesian society.

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List of Informants:

- 1) Sahap Padang, 68 years old, member of the Nurul Habi Mosque congregation (March 6, 2026).
- 2) Kaisah Padang, 27 years old, member of the Nurul Habi Mosque congregation (March 2, 2026).
- 3) Sahri Banurea, 30 years old, member of the Nurul Habi Mosque congregation (March 8, 2026).
- 4) Nusilla Padang, 48 years old, member of the Nurul Habi Mosque congregation (March 1, 2026).
- 5) Usman Tumangger, 56 years old, traditional leader, Nurul Huda Mosque Welfare Board (March 6, 2026).
- 6) Sunggul Padang, 56 years old, member of the Nurul Habi Mosque congregation (March 6, 2026).
- 7) Syaki Padang, 25 years old, member of the Nurul Habi Mosque congregation (March 1, 2026).