

The Role of Chinese Ethnic Associations in Maintaining Social Harmony in the Cap Go Meh Tradition in Singkawang

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ABSTRACT: This research examines the role of Chinese ethnic associations in maintaining social harmony within the Cap Go Meh tradition in Singkawang City, offering a novel perspective on community based multicultural integration. Employing a qualitative ethnographic design, the research investigates key concepts of social harmony, interethnic relations, and collaborative cultural practices among Chinese, Malay, and Dayak communities. Data were collected through systematic document analysis of primary and secondary sources, including organizational records, policy documents, and festival reports spanning 2016–2026. The findings indicate that ethnic associations function as pivotal social mediators by institutionalizing cooperation, fostering intercultural dialogue, and reinforcing collective participation. These results underscore the strategic role of community-based cultural institutions in sustaining social cohesion and provide practical insights for managing diversity in plural societies.

KEYWORDS: Chinese Ethnic Associations, Cap Go Meh, Interethnic Relations, Multiculturalism, Social Harmony.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's multicultural society is characterized by a complex and dynamic interplay of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, which simultaneously serves as a valuable social asset and a potential source of conflict if not effectively managed. In regions with a historical background of interethnic tensions, such as West Kalimantan, the sustainability of social harmony cannot rely solely on formal governance structures, but also requires the presence of culturally embedded social mechanisms that facilitate interaction, negotiation, and mutual understanding among diverse groups. Social harmony, in this sense, is not merely defined by the absence of conflict, but rather by the presence of active cooperation, shared norms, and continuous social interaction among different communities (Ranjabar, 2016). Within this context, Singkawang City represents a distinctive and empirically significant case, widely recognized as a successful model of interethnic coexistence in Indonesia, where Chinese, Malay, and Dayak communities maintain relatively stable and harmonious social relations. Particularly evident in the implementation of shared cultural practices that serve as platforms for intercultural engagement. One of the most prominent manifestations of this coexistence is the Cap Go Meh tradition, which has undergone a significant transformation from a predominantly religious and cultural celebration of the Chinese community into an inclusive multicultural public festival. From the perspective of multiculturalism, such transformation reflects the recognition and integration of cultural diversity into collective social life through inclusive participation and equal representation (Tilaar, 2017). Furthermore, cultural events are understood as important social spaces that enable interaction, communication, and identity formation among participants, thereby strengthening social cohesion (Getz, 2010).

The sustainability of interethnic relations within such cultural practices can be explained through the concept of social capital, which emphasizes the role of trust, networks, and shared norms in facilitating coordinated action within society (Putnam, 2000). The repeated interactions and collaborative involvement of different ethnic groups in the Cap Go Meh festival contribute to the development of bridging social capital, which connects diverse communities and reduces social distance. This dynamic aligns with Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity, where social cohesion in heterogeneous societies is maintained through interdependence and functional cooperation among diverse groups (Durkheim, 1997). Therefore, the Cap Go Meh tradition not only represents a cultural expression but also functions as a socially constructed mechanism that reinforces tolerance, strengthens interethnic networks, and sustains long-term social harmony in a multicultural context.

From a phenomenological perspective, the Cap Go Meh tradition reflects lived experiences of interethnic interaction, negotiation, and cooperation in everyday social life. The active involvement of various ethnic associations, including Chinese, Malay, and Dayak organizations, demonstrates how cultural events function not merely as symbolic expressions but also as social arenas for constructing mutual understanding and reinforcing collective identity. Ethnic associations serve as mediating institutions



that bridge cultural differences, promote tolerance, and facilitate coordinated action among diverse groups (Setiadi & Kolip, 2019). Such dynamics highlight the role of community-based organizations in transforming cultural diversity into a resource for social integration rather than division (Ranjabar, 2016).

Despite the growing body of literature on Cap Go Meh, previous studies have predominantly focused on tourism development, economic impacts, and cultural symbolism (Merry & Rianto, 2023; Wicaksono et al., 2024). Limited attention has been given to the micro-level social processes, particularly the role of ethnic associations as key actors in maintaining and negotiating social harmony within a multicultural setting. This gap indicates the need for a more in-depth exploration of how interethnic relations are constructed, sustained, and institutionalized through community-based cultural practices. Therefore, this study contributes to knowledge enrichment by positioning ethnic associations as central agents of social cohesion, offering a nuanced understanding of multiculturalism grounded in local practices and social interactions.

Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative ethnographic approach with a focus on document analysis, enabling a longitudinal and contextual interpretation of social dynamics from 2016 to 2026. The use of Singkawang as a case study represents a niche sample, as it captures a unique model of interethnic harmony rooted in cultural tradition and collective participation. This approach not only enriches theoretical discussions on social harmony and multiculturalism but also provides empirical insights into the role of local institutions in managing diversity within plural societies.

Based on these considerations, this study seeks to explore how Chinese ethnic associations contribute to the organization and implementation of the Cap Go Meh tradition, how their roles support the maintenance of social harmony through interethnic collaboration, and how the tradition itself functions as a medium for strengthening social cohesion and preventing potential interethnic tensions in Singkawang City.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to explore the role of Chinese ethnic associations in maintaining social harmony within the Cap Go Meh tradition in Singkawang City. The research focuses on a contextual and in-depth understanding of interethnic relations and cultural practices. The population of this study consists of ethnic-based community organizations, particularly Chinese, Malay, and Dayak associations, while the sample is purposively selected from key institutions such as Majelis Adat Budaya Tionghoa, Majelis Adat Budaya Melayu, and Dewan Adat Dayak, which are actively involved in the organization of the Cap Go Meh festival.

Data were collected primarily through document analysis, including organizational records, official reports, policy documents, and archived materials related to the Cap Go Meh festival from 2016 to 2026. These sources were selected to capture the longitudinal dynamics of interethnic collaboration and the evolving roles of ethnic associations. To ensure data credibility, triangulation was applied by comparing multiple sources across different institutions.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, involving data reduction, categorization, and thematic interpretation following an interactive model (Miles & Huberman, 2014). This approach allows for the identification of patterns, relationships, and meanings related to social harmony and interethnic cooperation. The findings are interpreted within the framework of social harmony, multiculturalism, and social capital theories to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings based on systematic document analysis of institutional records, policy documents, and archival materials related to the Cap Go Meh festival in Singkawang from 2016 to 2026. The analysis was conducted through several stages to identify patterns of interethnic collaboration and the role of ethnic associations in maintaining social harmony. All collected documents were classified into primary and secondary sources. Primary data included organizational records from Chinese, Malay, and Dayak associations, while secondary data consisted of government reports, media publications, and cultural documentation. The classification enabled the identification of key actors and their institutional roles in the Cap Go Meh festival.

The data were coded using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to interethnic interaction, cooperation, and social harmony. Three main categories emerged: (1) organizational roles in festival management, (2) interethnic collaboration mechanisms, and (3) contributions to social cohesion. The findings show that ethnic associations perform multiple roles, including



coordinators of cultural activities, facilitators of interethnic communication, and mediators in maintaining social stability. Chinese associations primarily lead ritual and cultural preservation activities, while Malay and Dayak associations contribute to security, logistics, and symbolic participation, reflecting a structured division of roles.

The results indicate that collaboration among ethnic associations is institutionalized through formal coordination mechanisms and shared responsibilities. This collaboration fosters mutual trust, strengthens social networks, and enhances collective participation, which are essential elements of social harmony. The integration of cultural practices and interethnic cooperation within the Cap Go Meh festival contributes to the formation of a cohesive social environment. The festival functions as a platform for reinforcing tolerance, reducing potential social tensions, and promoting a shared cultural identity among diverse communities.

Table 1. Summary of Ethnic Associations' Roles in Cap Go Meh Festival

No	Ethnic Association	Main Roles	Contribution to Social Harmony
1.	Chinese Association	Cultural rituals, festival organization	Preservation of cultural identity and inclusivity
2.	Malay Association	Security, coordination support	Social stability and interethnic cooperation
3.	Dayak Association	Logistical support, participation	Strengthening solidarity and mutual respect

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that ethnic associations play a central role in sustaining social harmony through structured collaboration and cultural participation. This result aligns with social harmony theory, which emphasizes that harmony is actively constructed through interaction, cooperation, and shared values rather than merely the absence of conflict (Ranjabar, 2016). The coordinated involvement of Chinese, Malay, and Dayak associations reflects a stable pattern of interethnic cooperation that reinforces social cohesion.

From a multiculturalism perspective, the Cap Go Meh festival represents an inclusive cultural space where diversity is not only recognized but also actively integrated into collective practices (Tilaar, 2017). The transformation of Cap Go Meh from an ethnic-specific ritual into a multicultural festival highlights how cultural traditions can function as platforms for social integration. This supports the idea that multiculturalism operates effectively when supported by participatory cultural institutions.

Furthermore, the findings confirm the relevance of social capital theory, particularly in terms of bridging social capital. The collaboration among ethnic associations fosters trust, shared norms, and intergroup networks that facilitate cooperation across ethnic boundaries (Putnam, 2000). These elements are essential for maintaining long-term social stability in diverse societies. The repeated interactions within the Cap Go Meh festival strengthen these networks and institutionalize interethnic cooperation.

The study also supports cultural event theory, which posits that festivals serve as social arenas for interaction, communication, and identity formation (Getz, 2010). Cap Go Meh functions not only as a cultural performance but also as a mechanism for reinforcing collective identity and reducing potential social tensions. The event creates opportunities for direct engagement among different ethnic groups, contributing to mutual understanding and respect.

In terms of contribution to knowledge, this study offers a novel perspective by positioning ethnic associations as key mediators of social harmony within a multicultural context. Unlike previous studies that focus on tourism or economic aspects, this research highlights the micro-level social processes and institutional roles that sustain interethnic relations. The findings provide practical implications for policymakers and community leaders in managing cultural diversity through community-based approaches.

Overall, the results indicate that the sustainability of social harmony in Singkawang is not incidental but is systematically maintained through the active roles of ethnic associations, supported by cultural traditions such as the Cap Go Meh festival. This model can serve as a reference for other multicultural societies seeking to strengthen social cohesion through local cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions

Concludes that ethnic associations play a pivotal and strategic role in maintaining social harmony within the Cap Go Meh tradition in Singkawang City. Their involvement extends far beyond the preservation of cultural heritage, as they function as key mediating institutions that actively facilitate interethnic cooperation, enhance communication, and promote inclusive collective



participation among diverse communities. The structured and sustained collaboration among Chinese, Malay, and Dayak associations reflects a well-established and adaptive model of social integration, in which cultural diversity is not perceived as a source of division, but rather transformed into a foundation for mutual understanding and social cohesion.

Furthermore, the Cap Go Meh festival operates as a dynamic cultural platform that institutionalizes intercultural interaction through repeated social engagement, symbolic representation, and shared public experiences. This process contributes significantly to the reinforcement of tolerance, the strengthening of social networks, and the construction of a shared collective identity among heterogeneous groups. In this context, the findings highlight that social harmony is not an incidental outcome, but a socially constructed and continuously maintained condition supported by community-based institutions. Therefore, this study affirms that ethnic associations, as culturally embedded social actors, are essential in sustaining long-term social harmony and resilience in multicultural societies, particularly in regions with complex interethnic dynamics.

Recommendations

Several recommendations can be proposed to enhance both theoretical development and practical implementation. First, local governments are encouraged to strengthen institutional support for ethnic associations by integrating them into formal policy frameworks and facilitating inclusive cultural programs that promote sustained interethnic collaboration. Such support is crucial to ensure the continuity and scalability of community-based cultural initiatives as instruments of social cohesion. Second, community leaders and cultural organizations should further institutionalize cooperative practices within cultural events by promoting inclusive participation, strengthening inter-organizational coordination, and fostering continuous dialogue among ethnic groups. These efforts are essential for maintaining trust, reinforcing shared norms, and preventing potential social tensions in multicultural settings. Third, future research should expand the scope of investigation by incorporating field-based methodologies such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic engagement to capture richer and more nuanced social dynamics. Comparative studies across different multicultural regions are also recommended to examine the transferability and adaptability of the Singkawang model in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Finally, the collaborative model observed in Singkawang can be developed into a practical framework for policymakers and practitioners in managing diversity and preventing social conflict. By emphasizing community participation, cultural inclusivity, and institutional collaboration, this model offers valuable insights for strengthening social cohesion and promoting peaceful coexistence in other plural societies.

FURTHER STUDY

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research relies primarily on document analysis, which may limit the depth of insight into lived experiences and direct interactions among ethnic groups. Second, the study focuses on a single case, namely Singkawang City, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other multicultural contexts. Third, the absence of primary field data such as interviews or participant observation may constrain the exploration of dynamic social processes and individual perspectives. Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to incorporate qualitative fieldwork methods, including in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation, to capture richer and more nuanced social interactions. Comparative studies across different regions with similar multicultural characteristics are also encouraged to examine the applicability of the findings in broader contexts. Additionally, future studies may explore the role of younger generations and digital media in sustaining cultural traditions and social harmony, providing a more comprehensive understanding of evolving multicultural dynamics.

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