



The Transformation of *Betangas* in Contemporary Malay Society: From Communal Rituals to Modern Care

Fitriah^{1*}, Cholidi², Mohammad Syawaludin³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang

*email: fitriah_uin@radenfatah.ac.id

Abstract. This study examines *betangas*, a traditional Malay steam-bathing practice, as a dynamic cultural ritual undergoing transformation in contemporary society. Previous studies have largely approached *betangas* from descriptive ethnobotanical or functional perspectives, emphasizing plant knowledge, ritual stages, or symbolic meanings, while paying limited attention to its ongoing transformation within changing social structures. Addressing this gap, the present research analyzes *betangas* as a cultural practice that is continuously reconfigured in response to modernity, shifting bodily regimes, and changing knowledge authorities. Drawing on an ethnographic approach with historical and cultural perspectives, this study integrates literature analysis with field-based insights from Malay communities in South Sumatra to capture both continuity and change in practice. The findings reveal three interrelated patterns of transformation: the expansion of *betangas* from a pre-marital communal ritual into therapeutic, relaxation, and cosmetic practices; the shift from collective, family-based rituals to more individualized and service-oriented forms; and the reproduction of local ethnobotanical knowledge into scientific, educational, and commercial formats. These transformations reflect broader processes of rationalization, individualization, and commodification of traditional knowledge, while simultaneously generating new forms of legitimacy for *betangas* in contemporary health and lifestyle contexts. Rather than signaling cultural decline, the transformation of *betangas* demonstrates a process of reinterpretation and adaptation, where ritual meanings, bodily practices, and local knowledge are renegotiated within modern social, economic, and epistemic frameworks. This study contributes to debates on ritual change, the sociology of the body, and postcolonial discussions on the commodification of indigenous knowledge, highlighting how traditional body care practices persist through transformation rather than disappearance.

Keywords: *betangas*; ritual transformation; Malay culture; ethnobotany; sociology of the body; traditional knowledge

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengkaji *betangas*, sebuah praktik mandi uap tradisional Melayu, sebagai ritual budaya yang dinamis dan terus mengalami transformasi dalam masyarakat kontemporer. Kajian-kajian sebelumnya cenderung menempatkan *betangas* dalam kerangka deskriptif etnobotani atau fungsional, dengan menekankan pengetahuan tumbuhan, tahapan

ritual, atau makna simbolik, namun masih terbatas dalam membahas proses transformasi praktik ini dalam konteks perubahan struktur sosial. Menjawab celah tersebut, penelitian ini menganalisis betangas sebagai praktik budaya yang senantiasa direkonfigurasi seiring dengan modernitas, perubahan rezim tubuh, dan pergeseran otoritas pengetahuan. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan etnografis yang diperkaya perspektif historis dan kultural, penelitian ini memadukan kajian literatur dengan temuan lapangan pada komunitas Melayu di Sumatera Selatan untuk menangkap dinamika kesinambungan dan perubahan praktik betangas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga pola transformasi yang saling terkait, yaitu: perluasan fungsi betangas dari ritual komunal pra-nikah menjadi praktik terapeutik, relaksasi, dan kosmetik; pergeseran dari ritual kolektif berbasis keluarga menuju bentuk praktik yang lebih individual dan berbasis layanan; serta reproduksi pengetahuan etnobotani lokal ke dalam format ilmiah, edukatif, dan komersial. Transformasi ini mencerminkan proses rasionalisasi, individualisasi, dan komodifikasi pengetahuan tradisional, sekaligus membentuk sumber legitimasi baru bagi betangas dalam konteks kesehatan dan gaya hidup kontemporer. Alih-alih menunjukkan kemunduran budaya, transformasi betangas memperlihatkan proses reinterpretasi dan adaptasi, di mana makna ritual, praktik tubuh, dan pengetahuan lokal dinegosiasikan ulang dalam kerangka sosial, ekonomi, dan epistemik modern. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan tentang perubahan ritual, sosiologi tubuh, serta kajian poskolonial mengenai komodifikasi pengetahuan tradisional, dengan menegaskan bahwa praktik perawatan tubuh tradisional bertahan melalui transformasi, bukan melalui kepunahan.

Kata kunci: *betangas; transformasi ritual; budaya Melayu; etnobotani; sosiologi tubuh; pengetahuan tradisional*

INTRODUCTION

In Malay society, the body is not understood solely as an individual biological entity, but rather as a social and symbolic space through which honor, moral worth, and social readiness are constructed within customary structures and collective life. The body functions as a medium through which cultural values, social norms, and community expectations are embedded, disciplined, and negotiated. Consequently, body care practices in Malay tradition are inseparable from the broader value system and social order that bind individuals to their communities. One practice that clearly represents this relationship is *betangas*, a traditional steam bath using boiled spices or aromatic plants that has been transmitted across generations.

A growing body of literature confirms that *betangas* remains practiced in various Malay regions, although with variations in form, function, and social context. Ethnobotanical research among the Seberang Malay community in Jambi City, for instance, documents *betangas* as a traditional steam-bathing practice grounded in local plant knowledge, identifying dozens of plant species, ritual stages, and cultural meanings measured through the *Index of Cultural Significance* (Asra et al., 2024). This study demonstrates that *betangas* is

not merely an orally transmitted custom but part of a structured local knowledge system with strong social legitimacy. Similarly, research in the Malay community of Musi Rawas, South Sumatra, situates *betangas* within pre-wedding customs, showing its role in preparing the bodies of brides and grooms to meet aesthetic and moral standards prior to marriage (W P Sari & Susetyo, 2022). Studies in the Sambas Malay community further interpret *betangas* as a cultural mechanism linking bodily care to collective identity and social recognition (Ramadhan et al., 2023).

Despite these valuable contributions, existing studies largely remain within descriptive, functional, and synchronic frameworks. *Betangas* is predominantly analyzed as a ritual practice, an ethnobotanical tradition, or a symbol of beauty and identity. While variation across regions is acknowledged, such variation is generally treated as a static cultural difference rather than as evidence of historical change or ongoing transformation. Consequently, previous research tends to emphasize continuity and preservation, offering limited analysis of how *betangas* respond to shifting social structures, changing power relations, and new regimes of cultural authority. In this sense, the literature has not sufficiently examined *betangas* as a dynamic cultural practice that transforms over time and across historical contexts.

This limitation becomes particularly evident when *betangas* are situated within contemporary Malay society. Social transformations marked by urbanization, increased labor mobility, changes in family structure, the expansion of the modern beauty and wellness industry, and the rise of digital culture have reshaped how traditional practices are performed and interpreted. Ethnographic observations reported in regional studies—and reinforced by preliminary field encounters—indicate that *betangas* are no longer confined to communal life-cycle rituals such as weddings, but are increasingly practiced for traditional healing, relaxation, and everyday bodily care, often with more flexible procedures and individualized meanings. These changes point to a historical shift from symbolically dense, communal rituals toward more pragmatic and context-dependent practices.

From a cultural and historical anthropological perspective, this shift reflects a process of ritual transformation and cultural adaptation. Historically, *betangas* were embedded in communal settings regulated by customary authority and collective norms. In contemporary contexts, however, the body is increasingly framed as an individual project shaped by

personal choice, medicalized health discourses, and market-oriented values. Alongside this shift, the authority of knowledge surrounding *betangas* has moved from oral transmission by elders and traditional practitioners toward forms of knowledge mediated by commercial services, social media, and modern wellness narratives. This transformation generates cultural tensions between adat-based values and modern interpretations, positioning *betangas* as an arena of negotiation between tradition and change rather than a practice that simply persists unchanged.

Such historically layered and culturally contested dynamics cannot be adequately captured through textual analysis or literature review alone. Understanding *betangas* as a transforming practice requires attention to lived experience, embodied memory, intergenerational narratives, and everyday social interaction. For this reason, an ethnographic approach informed by historical and cultural analysis is essential. Ethnography enables the researcher to trace how meanings of *betangas* are remembered, reworked, and recontextualized across generations, while a historical perspective situates these changes within longer trajectories of social and cultural transformation in Malay society.

Based on this background, the research gap addressed in this article can be stated explicitly: while previous studies document the ritual form, ethnobotanical knowledge, and symbolic meaning of *betangas*, they have not sufficiently analyzed it as a historically transforming cultural practice shaped by social change, nor examined the cultural tensions and negotiations that accompany this transformation. This study seeks to fill that gap by positioning *betangas* as an arena of ritual transformation in contemporary Malay society.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to analyze ethnographically and historically the forms of transformation experienced by *betangas*, identify the socio-cultural factors driving these changes, and examine their implications for the sustainability of tradition, the authority of local knowledge, and the construction of Malay cultural identity. By integrating ethnographic fieldwork with historical and cultural analysis, this article contributes to broader theoretical discussions on ritual change, the anthropology of the body, and cultural adaptation in societies undergoing social transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

***Betangas* as a Ritual of Care: Structure of Practice, Symbolic Logic, and Ritual Framework**

In its classic form, *betangas* is a ritualized body care practice that combines material elements (herbal ingredients, steam, and ritual space) with social elements (family involvement, timing, and behavioral prescriptions). The ritual usually takes place in a private or semi-private domestic space, using simple equipment that allows hot steam from boiled herbs to envelop the body. The individual undergoing *betangas* is commonly accompanied by elder women or close family members who guide the process and ensure adherence to customary norms.

This combination of material and social components demonstrates that *betangas* is not merely a hygienic or therapeutic technique. Rather, it is a culturally regulated practice that mediates the relationship between the body, the community, and shared moral values. As ethnobotanical research in the Seberang Malay community of Jambi City shows, *betangas* follows a structured sequence—from the preparation of herbal ingredients and equipment to the steaming process itself—guided by inherited knowledge regarding plant species, processing methods, and ritual timing (Asra et al., 2024). This knowledge is transmitted intergenerationally and practiced within specific social contexts, indicating that *betangas* operate as a normative cultural system rather than an ad hoc bodily treatment.

When interpreted through ritual theory, particularly rites-of-passage frameworks, *betangas* function as a liminal ritual, especially in pre-marital contexts. The body of the individual undergoing *betangas* occupies a transitional state: separated from a previous social status and prepared for incorporation into a new one. Sweating, bodily enclosure by steam, and post-ritual behavioral restrictions symbolically mark this threshold phase. Empirical research in Musi Rawas, South Sumatra, demonstrates that *betangas* not only beautifies the body but also signifies readiness to appear publicly with a new social status, reinforcing the body as the primary medium of social transition (Windi Puspita Sari & Susetyo, 2022).

Community involvement further strengthens the ritual dimension of *betangas*. The presence of family members—particularly elderly women—creates an intense but temporary form of social solidarity, reinforcing collective bonds and moral supervision. In this sense, *betangas* not only

reshapes the body physically, but also reaffirms social relations and cultural continuity. Research in the Sambas Malay community shows that *betangas* embody values that extend from aesthetics to identity, positioning the body as a representation of collective Malayness rather than a purely private entity (Ramadhan et al., 2023).

Table 1

Ritual Components of Betangas and Their Symbolic Meanings

Ritual Component	Tools / Materials Used	Practical Function	Symbolic Meaning
Herbal ingredients	Leaves, roots, bark, spices (e.g., ginger, lemongrass, turmeric, aromatic plants)	Produce steam, cleanse skin, remove odor	Purification of body; removal of physical and symbolic impurities
Boiling vessel	Pot, kettle, or metal container	Heat herbs and generate steam	Transformation through heat; activation of ritual process
Steam (uap panas)	Vapor from boiled herbs	Induce sweating, open pores	Liminal condition; bodily transition and release from previous status
Enclosure device	Blanket, cloth, mat, or small tent-like structure	Trap steam around the body	Separation from ordinary social space; ritual boundary
Ritual space	Bedroom, enclosed room, or special domestic area	Provide privacy and focus	Sacred or semi-sacred space within domestic life
Elder women / family	Mothers, aunts, senior female relatives	Guide ritual, enforce norms	Authority of tradition; intergenerational transmission
Timing of ritual	Pre-wedding period, healing phase	Align ritual with life-cycle events	Synchronization of body with social time
Post-betangas rules	Rest, dietary restrictions, avoidance of cold	Maintain bodily condition	Protection of liminal body; safeguarding transformation

Across its ritual structure, *betangas* embodies three interrelated layers of meaning. First, purification, where sweating is understood as both physical cleansing and symbolic moral readiness. Second, status transition, particularly in marriage rituals, where bodily preparation legitimizes social transformation. Third, aesthetics and cultural identity, where bodily care becomes a medium for expressing collective values and Malay identity.

Understanding *betangas* as a ritual of care highlights how the body is not treated as individual property but as a social entity that must be prepared, regulated, and displayed according to cultural norms. This perspective also

clarifies what is at stake in contemporary transformations of *betangas*. As the practice becomes more individualized, therapeutic, or spa-like, many ritual elements—liminality, community involvement, and symbolic transition—are simplified or weakened, while practical comfort and personal benefit become more prominent.

Thus, modernization does not merely alter the technical form of *betangas*, but reshapes its ritual logic, shifting it from a communal rite embedded in social structure toward a rationalized and contextualized form of individual body care. This transformation underscores why *betangas* must be analyzed not only as a cultural heritage practice, but as a dynamic ritual system negotiating continuity and change within contemporary Malay society.

***Betangas* Ethnobotany: Plant Knowledge as a Basis for Legitimacy**

The persistence and transformation of *betangas* in contemporary Malay society cannot be separated from the ethnobotanical knowledge that underpins the practice. *Betangas* is not merely a steam-based technique, but a culturally embedded body care ritual grounded in local understandings of plant properties, human–nature relations, and embodied empirical experience transmitted across generations. Ethnobotanical research conducted in the Melayu Seberang community of Jambi City documents the use of 31 plant species from 18 botanical families, with dominant representation from *Zingiberaceae*, *Rutaceae*, and *Poaceae*, indicating that *betangas* relies on a complex herbal composition rather than a single active ingredient (Asra et al., 2024).

The study further demonstrates that plant selection in *betangas* follows a local classificatory logic rather than arbitrary choice. Through the measurement of the Index of Cultural Significance (ICS), certain plants are shown to occupy a central position within the ritual structure. Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon nardus*), for instance, records the highest ICS value, reflecting its frequent use, perceived efficacy, and strong symbolic association with purification and bodily readiness. This hierarchy confirms that ethnobotanical knowledge in *betangas* operates as a normative system in which plants carry differentiated practical and symbolic meanings.

Table 2
Core Plants Used in Betangas and Their Meanings

Local Name	Scientific Name	Family	Part Used	Practical Function	Symbolic Meaning
Serai	<i>Cymbopogon nardus</i>	Poaceae	Leaves	Produces aroma, induces warmth, relaxes body	Purification, freshness, readiness
Jahe	<i>Zingiber officinale</i>	Zingiberaceae	Rhizome	Improves circulation, increases heat	Vitality, inner strength
Kunyit	<i>Curcuma longa</i>	Zingiberaceae	Rhizome	Skin care, anti-inflammatory	Cleansing, harmony
Lengkuas	<i>Alpinia galanga</i>	Zingiberaceae	Rhizome	Deodorizing, warming	Protection, resilience
Jeruk purut	<i>Citrus hystrix</i>	Rutaceae	Leaves/p eel	Removes odor, aromatic cleansing	Moral purity
Pandan	<i>Pandanus amaryllifolius</i>	Pandanaceae	Leaves	Fragrance, calming effect	Aesthetic refinement
Kayu manis	<i>Cinnamomum burmannii</i>	Lauraceae	Bark	Enhances heat and scent	Attraction, warmth
Daun sirih	<i>Piper betle</i>	Piperaceae	Leaves	Antiseptic, skin cleansing	Femininity, propriety

From a sociocultural perspective, ethnobotanical knowledge in *betangas* serves a dual function. Practically, it provides the material basis for bodily effects—warmth, sweating, relaxation—that sustain belief in the efficacy of the ritual. Symbolically, it legitimizes *betangas* as a rational and explainable practice rooted in empirical experience rather than mere belief. Scientific documentation of plant species, parts used, and cultural significance thus reinforces *betangas* as a structured local knowledge system (Asra et al., 2024)

When situated in a broader comparative frame, the uniqueness of *betangas* becomes more apparent. Regionally, practices such as *bertungku* (Malay Peninsula) or postpartum herbal saunas in Thailand emphasize recovery and biomedical function. Globally, Finnish saunas prioritize endurance and individual discipline, while Native American sweat lodges

foreground spiritual cosmology. *Betangas* differs in that it integrates ritual transition, bodily aesthetics, health, and cultural identity simultaneously, particularly in pre-marital contexts. This hybrid logic—neither purely medical nor purely spiritual—marks *betangas* as a distinctive Malay cultural practice.

At the same time, the ethnobotanical foundation of *betangas* enables its transformation. As plant knowledge becomes documented and circulated beyond the community, *betangas* are increasingly repositioned as alternative therapy or tradition-based wellness care. While this process supports sustainability, it also shifts knowledge authority from communal oral transmission toward academic and institutional domains. Thus, ethnobotany functions not only as documentation but as a strategic bridge linking tradition, science, and social change.

Within this framework, *betangas* can be understood as a care ritual whose legitimacy rests on plant knowledge, allowing it to persist, adapt, and remain meaningful within the changing cultural landscape of Malay society.

Direction of Transformation: from Communal Ritual to Flexible Therapeutic-Cosmetic Practice

A synthesis of ethnographic, ethnobotanical, and sociocultural studies demonstrates that the transformation of *betangas* in contemporary Malay society represents a structural reorientation rather than a simple decline of tradition. This transformation unfolds through three interrelated processes: the expansion of ritual functions, the reconfiguration of ritual practice and social relations, and the reproduction of local knowledge into standardized and transferable formats. Together, these processes signal a directional shift of *betangas* from a communal ritual embedded in adat and life-cycle transitions toward a flexible therapeutic–cosmetic practice compatible with the logic of modernity, individualization, and market rationality.

The first transformation concerns the expansion and redefinition of ritual function. Traditionally, *betangas* functioned as a pre-wedding rite that symbolically prepared the body for a new social status, embedding bodily care within moral order and customary legitimacy. However, research in Musi Rawas, South Sumatra, shows that *betangas* are increasingly perceived as “similar to a spa or sauna,” practiced not only for marriage rituals but also for relaxation, traditional healing, and beauty maintenance (W P Sari & Susetyo, 2022). This functional expansion reflects a broader shift in the cultural logic of the body: from a socially regulated ritual body toward a body

understood as an object of personal health management and aesthetic self-care.

Ethnobotanical research in the Melayu Seberang community of Jambi City corroborates this shift, demonstrating that *betangas* are practiced in both ritual and therapeutic contexts, with flexible rules of implementation—nighttime for pre-wedding preparation and daytime for medicinal purposes (Asra et al., 2024). Similar patterns are observable in parts of South Sumatra, including Palembang and Ogan Ilir, where field observations and informal interviews with practitioners indicate that *betangas* is increasingly performed outside ceremonial cycles, particularly by middle-aged women seeking relief from fatigue, musculoskeletal discomfort, or skin problems. From a sociocultural perspective, this flexibility reflects a process of rationalization, in which immediate utility and bodily efficacy become dominant criteria for practice, superseding ritual obligation and fixed ceremonial timing.

The second transformation involves a reconfiguration of ritual form and social organization. In its classical form, *betangas* was a communal practice carried out within the domestic sphere, involving elder women, kinship supervision, and collective moral regulation. Such arrangements exemplify what Turner(1969), describes as the collective and liminal dimensions of ritual, where the body is temporarily withdrawn from ordinary social roles and reintegrated through shared symbolic action. In contemporary South Sumatran contexts, however, the proliferation of salons, spas, and wellness services offers alternative models of body care that emphasize efficiency, hygiene, privacy, and urban lifestyle symbolism.

Studies in Musi Rawas indicate that urban residents increasingly prefer modern treatment services, while traditional *betangas* persists in rural areas or is rebranded as a form of “*traditional salon*” (Windi Puspita Sari & Susetyo, 2022). Comparable tendencies are evident in Palembang, where some practitioners adapt *betangas* techniques for home-based services offered on a paid basis, often promoted through social media as “*natural*” or “*herbal*” treatments. This shift indicates a transformation in the social structure of ritual practice: communal solidarity and customary authority are gradually replaced by consumer–service provider relationships. Within ritual anthropology, this change marks a weakening of collective symbolism and liminality, alongside a strengthening of pragmatic, individualized orientations toward bodily care (Bell, 1992).

The third transformation concerns the reproduction and circulation of *betangas* knowledge into new formats, including education, scientific publications, and media-based learning tools. This process is evident in initiatives that package *betangas* knowledge into transferable forms, such as instructional pocket books that identify medicinal plants, standardize preparation methods, and promote therapeutic applications (Grasilla et al., 2024). From the sociology of knowledge perspective, this represents a shift from embodied, experience-based oral transmission to formalized, institutionalized documentation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). While such documentation expands the reach and legitimacy of *betangas*, it also relocates epistemic authority from indigenous practitioners to academic, educational, and biomedical institutions.

In South Sumatra, this shift is reflected in the growing presence of *betangas* in educational discussions, cultural exhibitions, and online content, where ritual knowledge is increasingly framed in scientific or wellness-oriented language. Although this process contributes to preservation and adaptation, it simultaneously transforms the power relations of knowledge, reducing community control over interpretation and practice. Local practitioners interviewed in Palembang and Musi Rawas often emphasize that “cara lama” (the old way) of *betangas* is becoming secondary to simplified, commercially viable versions, suggesting an ongoing tension between continuity and commodification.

Taken together, these transformations indicate that *betangas* is not undergoing extinction but redefinition. Its movement from a communal ritual toward a flexible therapeutic–cosmetic practice reflects broader processes of modernization, individualization, and market integration. Ritual elements, ethnobotanical knowledge, and modern wellness logics now coexist in hybrid forms, producing new meanings and functions for *betangas* in contemporary Malay society. This transformation underscores that cultural practices do not simply disappear under modern pressures; rather, they are rearticulated within new social, economic, and epistemic frameworks, shaping a dynamic and contested future for traditional body care practices in South Sumatra and beyond.

Driving Factors of Transformation

The transformation of *betangas* from a communal ritual to a more flexible care practice did not occur spontaneously, but was driven by a

number of intertwined structural and cultural factors. Based on a comparison of various research sources, particularly local and ethnobotanical studies, several key factors can be identified that have driven changes in how *betangas* is practiced and interpreted in contemporary Malay society.

The first factor is urbanization and lifestyle changes. The development of urban areas and increased job mobility have changed the rhythm of life for Malay communities, especially in urban and semi-urban areas (Al Jufri, 2022). Time constraints, productivity demands, and changing consumption patterns are driving people to seek more practical and efficient forms of body care. Research in Musi Rawas shows that *betangas* are now often compared to modern spa or salon services, which are perceived as faster, more hygienic, and more suited to urban lifestyles. In this context, traditional *betangas*, which require lengthy preparation, family support, and post-ritual procedures, tend to be practiced more concisely or even partially replaced by modern services (W P Sari & Susetyo, 2022).

Sociologically, this change reflects a shift from communal lifestyles to an individual orientation. *Betangas* is no longer understood as a customary obligation to be carried out collectively, but rather as a personal choice in caring for one's body. This shift aligns with the weakening of traditional extended family ties and the strengthening of the logic of efficiency in daily life.

The second factor is the commercialization of body care. Within the context of the cultural economy, traditional care practices have the potential to be "repackaged" into valuable products or services. *Betangas*, with its natural image and knowledge base of local plants, is relatively easily positioned as an exotic and healthy traditional treatment. This process drives the shift of *Betangas* from a communal, custom-based practice to a part of the care economy, where social relations shift into consumer-service provider relationships.

This commercialization has two sides. On the one hand, it opens up opportunities for the sustainability of the practice through economic incentives and expands the reach of *betangas* to a wider audience. On the other hand, commercialization has the potential to diminish the ritual and symbolic dimensions of *betangas*, as the primary focus shifts to practical benefits and consumer satisfaction. Thus, *betangas* no longer functions solely as a transition ritual or an expression of tradition, but rather as a care service subject to market logic.

The third factor is the reconfiguration of knowledge authority. In traditional practices, knowledge of *betangas* rested with the authority of female elders or traditional experts who gained legitimacy through experience and social recognition. However, as ethnobotanical research shows, this knowledge is now systematically documented in the form of scientific publications, measurements, and other forms of knowledge. *Index of Cultural Significance*, and educational media. This process transforms *betangas* into more standardized knowledge that can be learned outside the context of the original community (Asra et al., 2024)

This reconfiguration marks a shift from experience-based knowledge to institution-based knowledge. Authority is no longer monopolized by indigenous communities, but also held by researchers, educators, content writers, and business actors. From a sociology of knowledge perspective, this shift expands the legitimacy of *betangas*, but simultaneously has the potential to marginalize local actors as primary authority holders. In other words, *betangas* knowledge is becoming more inclusive, but also more detached from its original socio-cultural context.

The fourth factor is digital mediation. In the era of social media and digital platforms, traditions like *betangas* are increasingly present in public narratives, whether as cultural content, tourism promotions, or health education. Digital mediation allows *betangas* to be known to a wider audience and contributes to strengthening Malay cultural identity in the public sphere. However, at the same time, digitalization also encourages a simplification of meaning, as complex practices like *betangas* are often represented in short visual formats or popular narratives that emphasize aesthetic aspects and immediate benefits.

In this context, digital mediation acts as an accelerator of transformation. It accelerates the shift of *betangas* from a communal ritual to a practice that can be consumed symbolically and visually. Traditions are not only practiced but also displayed, promoted, and reinterpreted according to the logic of the media.

Overall, the factors driving the transformation of *betangas* demonstrate that changes in cultural practices are the result of the interaction between social, economic, and technological structures. Urbanization, commercialization, the reconfiguration of knowledge, and digital mediation work simultaneously to shape the new face of *betangas*. This transformation confirms that *betangas* are not simply a matter of survival or disappearance,

but are continually negotiated within the context of Malay society undergoing rapid and multidimensional social change.

Socio-Cultural Implications: Knowledge Authority, Identity, and Resistance

The transformation of *betangas* from a communal ritual to a flexible therapeutic-cosmetic practice carries complex and layered socio-cultural implications. This change extends beyond the technical aspects of ritual performance to influence power relations in knowledge production, the way cultural identities are constructed and displayed, and the community's strategies for responding to the pressures of modernization. Therefore, the transformation of *betangas* must be read as a social process fraught with negotiations of meaning, not as a neutral or natural shift.

The first and most fundamental implication is a shift in the authority of knowledge. In traditional practice, *betangas* knowledge is rooted in collective experience and is under the authority of the community, particularly older women or traditional leaders who are considered to possess expertise, experience, and moral legitimacy. This knowledge is contextual, passed down orally, and linked to specific social situations, such as wedding preparations or health recovery. Authority is not established through formal certification, but rather through social recognition born of repeated practice and empirical success.

However, as shown by ethnobotanical research (Asra et al., 2024) and the development of *betangas* learning media (Grasilla et al., 2024), this knowledge is now undergoing a process of epistemic rearticulation. Local knowledge about plants, concoctions, and *betangas* procedures is being reduced to scientific categories, systematically documented, and published in academic articles or handbooks. From a sociology of knowledge perspective, this process marks a shift from *local knowledge* going to *institutionalized knowledge*, where the validity of knowledge is increasingly determined by scientific standards, formal methodologies, and institutional authority.

This institutionalization process is ambivalent. On the one hand, it strengthens the legitimacy of *betangas* in the modern public sphere, opens up opportunities for preservation, and enables dialogue with contemporary health discourses. However, on the other hand, it has the potential to shift the center of authority from indigenous communities to academics, educational institutions, or even market actors. As noted by Sedyawati (2014)

and Ahimsa-Putra (2012), the objectification and standardization of local knowledge often simplifies the surrounding socio-cultural context, risking local actors being reduced to “data sources” rather than primary subjects of knowledge. In the context of *betangas*, this shift can marginalize the role of indigenous women as holders of ritual authority, while simultaneously altering power relations in the production and distribution of knowledge.

The second implication relates to the reconstruction of cultural identity. The transformation of *betangas* demonstrates that Malay cultural identity is not static, but is continually reshaped through interactions with modernity, science, and the market. Research on the Sambas Malay community indicates that *betangas* has undergone a shift in meaning from a beauty practice to a marker of cultural identity (Ramadhan et al., 2023). In this context, *betangas* function as a symbol of "Malayness" that can be presented in various arenas, from traditional rituals to alternative health discourse and representations of popular culture.

This identity reconstruction aligns with Abdullah (2015) is view that cultural identity is a process of continuous negotiation, not a fixed legacy. When *betangas* is positioned as a natural and traditional treatment, it gains new symbolic value amidst growing ecological awareness and criticism of modern, chemical-based products. Thus, the transformation of *betangas* does not necessarily lead to identity erosion, but can instead strengthen cultural identity in a more adaptive and communicative form with the outside world.

However, this reconstruction of identity also carries the risk of commodification. Symbolic. When *betangas* are promoted as cultural icons or traditional care products, cultural identity is potentially reduced to a label or marketed image. In this context, cultural identity no longer solely functions as a framework of values, but also as a source of economic and symbolic value. The tension between preserving meaning and commercializing identity is a crucial dynamic in the transformation of *betangas*.

The third implication is the emergence of cultural resistance, which does not always manifest as an open rejection of modernity. A study in Musi Rawas showed that although *betangas* compete with modern salon services, the practice persists within wedding contexts as part of customary law (W P Sari & Susetyo, 2022). This type of resistance is better understood as selective resistance, where communities choose to maintain traditional practices in certain contexts, while in others they are willing to accept modifications or substitutions.

Within the framework of the anthropology of cultural change, this resistance is understood as an adaptive strategy that demonstrates the cultural agency of the community (Hannerz, 1992; Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Malay society is not passive towards change, but rather actively negotiates the boundaries between tradition and modernity. *Betangas* is maintained as a ritual at moments that are considered sacred and socially meaningful, while in everyday needs it can be modified into more practical care practices. This pattern shows that the sustainability of tradition does not depend on a total rejection of change, but on the community's ability to manage such change in accordance with values that are considered essential.

Overall, the socio-cultural implications of the transformation of *betangas* demonstrate that changes in traditional practices always involve dynamics of power, identity, and agency. *Betangas* evolves not only as a body care ritual, but also as a social field where various interests custom, science, market, and identity, interact. This analysis emphasizes that understanding the transformation of *betangas* means understanding how contemporary Malay society responds to modernity with strategies that are not singular, but rather diverse, reflective, and contextual.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *betangas* should not be understood as a static or declining tradition, but as a dynamic cultural practice undergoing continuous transformation in response to social change. The findings demonstrate that *betangas* have shifted from a communal ritual embedded in adat and life-cycle ceremonies—particularly pre-marital rites—toward a more flexible therapeutic–cosmetic practice oriented to individual health, relaxation, and bodily aesthetics. This transformation occurs through the expansion of functions, the reconfiguration of ritual forms from collective to individualized and service-based practices, and the reproduction of local knowledge into scientific, educational, and commercial formats. Field evidence from South Sumatra confirms that while symbolic and communal dimensions have been partially reduced, *betangas* remain culturally meaningful through processes of adaptation and reinterpretation, rather than through simple continuity or disappearance.

Based on these conclusions, future research is recommended to examine more critically the politics of knowledge and power relations

involved in the transformation of betangas, particularly in relation to the commodification and institutionalization of traditional knowledge within scientific and market frameworks. Further studies employing multi-sited ethnography and longitudinal approaches would be valuable to capture generational, gendered, and class-based variations in the practice. Comparative research across Malay regions and with other steam-bathing traditions globally would also deepen understanding of how local body care rituals are rearticulated within broader processes of modernity, cultural globalization, and postcolonial negotiation

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