Understanding *Ngokang* as a Cultural and Livelihood Practice in Dumai, Indonesia

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Abstract

Coastal areas have become a home for 50.4% (140 million) of the population in Indonesia. Coastal communities have a way of life closely related to the sea and its natural resources. One of the practices that has been carried out for generations among the coastal communities of Dumai is the "*Ngokang*" activity. This study examines how *Ngokang* practice is a source of livelihood and plays a vital role in shaping the identity and cultural practices of the local community. Qualitative methods were used in this study, such as collecting data through in-depth interviews with 10 *pengokang* and community leaders and tracing secondary sources. The study results indicate that the practice of *Ngokang* is part of a broader culture or tradition of society that has been passed down from generation to generation in the Dumai City area. *Ngokang* is an adoption of the Japanese word 交換 "*kokan,*" which means to exchange. *Ngokang* is a livelihood activity of the community that involves buying and selling on the sea, with large ships docked around the port of Dumai City. This buying and selling activity is unique because the payment system still uses "*barter*." This activity supports the local economy and is some people's primary source of income. However, the *Ngokang* activity is currently facing a serious dilemma because *Ngokang* is considered by most people to be an illegal activity. This activity also raises the potential for danger and loss for *Pengokang* in terms of material and non-material.

Keywords: culture, coastal communities, Dumai, livelihood, *Ngokang*

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Introduction

Indonesia is a maritime country with a water area of 3.25 million square kilometers, which accounts for approximately 63% of its national territory (Aguw et al., 2021). As an archipelago comprising more than 17,000 islands and bordered by two major oceans, Indonesia has tremendous marine potential in the marine and fisheries sector, maritime transportation, as well as marine tourism, which are important aspects of national development (Ramadhan & Chaerul, 2023). The country's geographical characteristics, primarily defined by its vast water expanse, provide significant opportunities for livelihoods, especially for communities residing in coastal areas (Susanti, 2023). Therefore, the sea's existence is not only a part of Indonesia's geographical identity but also significantly supports the lives of millions of coastal communities across the archipelago.

Indonesia's coastal areas have become home to 50.4% (140 million) of the population in Indonesia (Nuryanto & Haryono, 2017). According to the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the Republic of Indonesia, as many as 1.28 million households depend on capture fisheries activities for their livelihoods. The large number of people living in this area shows that the coast is very strategic as a center of economic, social, and cultural activities (Sambodo et al., 2023). People who live in coastal areas generally have a way of life that is very closely related to the sea and its natural resources, such as fisheries, marine cultivation, marine trade, and tourism (Hajrah, 2016). This dependence makes the sea the primary source of livelihood and part of their cultural identity, which has a major impact on the welfare and survival of coastal communities.

One of the most famous coastal areas in Indonesia is Dumai City, located in the waters of the Malacca Strait, which is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, making Dumai waters a port city that plays a vital role in international trade (Amin et al., 2009; Santosa et al., 2024). Since 1956, a pier has been built as a dock for tanker ships (oil distribution). Its strategic location has made Dumai develop rapidly as a center for maritime economic activities and sea transportation, significantly contributing to regional economic growth. On the other hand, the people who lived on the coast of Dumai, some of whom worked as fishermen at that time, experienced obstacles due to the decline in fish catches at sea. Various factors, including changes in marine environmental conditions, overfishing, and pollution from industrial waste and shipping activities around the coastal area, greatly influence this condition. In addition, climate change causes shifts in seasons and ocean current patterns, affecting fish availability in the coastal waters of Dumai.

The potential for busy Dumai waters by tankers, in addition to the declining fish catch, has encouraged fishermen to look for alternative sources of income. This condition is where the community's livelihoods changed from "fishermen" to "*Ngokang*." The *Ngokang* activity is a buying and selling activity in the form of food ingredients, including fruits, vegetables, and drinks for the crew's needs. Over time, this practice has not only become an economic solution for fishermen's families but has also developed into part of the culture and identity of the Dumai coastal community. *Ngokang* is also considered a local heritage passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the heavy traffic of tankers in the busy waters of Dumai, combined with a declining fish catch, which has prompted fishermen to seek alternative sources of income. As a result, the community has shifted from relying solely on fishing to engaging in a practice known as "*Ngokang*." To meet the crew's needs, *Ngokang* involves buying and selling various food items, such as fruits, vegetables, and beverages. Over time, this practice has become more than just an economic solution for fishermen's

families; it has also evolved into a significant part of the culture and identity of the Dumai coastal community. *Ngokang* is viewed as a local heritage passed down through generations, reflecting the community's ability to adapt to the social and economic changes in this strategically crucial coastal area community's adaptation to this strategic coastal area's social and economic dynamics.

Ngokang is understood as a form of adaptive strategy carried out by the Dumai coastal community in responding to the decline in fish catches at sea. In this context, the practice of *Ngokang* emerged as an alternative livelihood that utilizes the potential for new livelihoods that are considered more sustainable. The transition effort from fishermen to *Ngokang* can be seen as a form of rational adaptation due to external pressures. The community is not only looking for ways to survive economically, but also trying to maintain their social and cultural continuity. Therefore, this study examines how the practice of *Ngokang* becomes a source of livelihood and plays an important role in shaping the identity and cultural practices of the local community.

Methods

This research was conducted from August 2024 to January 2025 in the coastal area of Dumai, Riau Province, Indonesia. The approach used in this study was a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) to understand the practice of *Ngokang* in depth as part of the livelihood strategy as well as the cultural identity of coastal communities. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with key informants (Boyce & Neale, 2006): active *Ngokang* actors (*Pengokang*) and local community leaders. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in *Ngokang* practices and their knowledge of the socio-cultural dynamics in coastal communities. Some of the questions asked to informants include: (1) When did you start getting involved in *Ngokang* activities? (2) What motivated you to move from working as a fisherman to *Ngokang*? (3) How does this activity affect your economic and social life? (4) What are the main challenges faced in conducting *Ngokang* practices today? In addition to primary data, this study is also supported by secondary data obtained from local government documents, previous research reports, local news, and other written sources relevant to the social and economic context of Dumai coastal communities. The data obtained were then analyzed thematically to identify patterns of meaning, motivation, and structural changes related to the practice of *Ngokang* in the context of social, economic, and cultural changes in Dumai coastal communities.

Result and Discussion

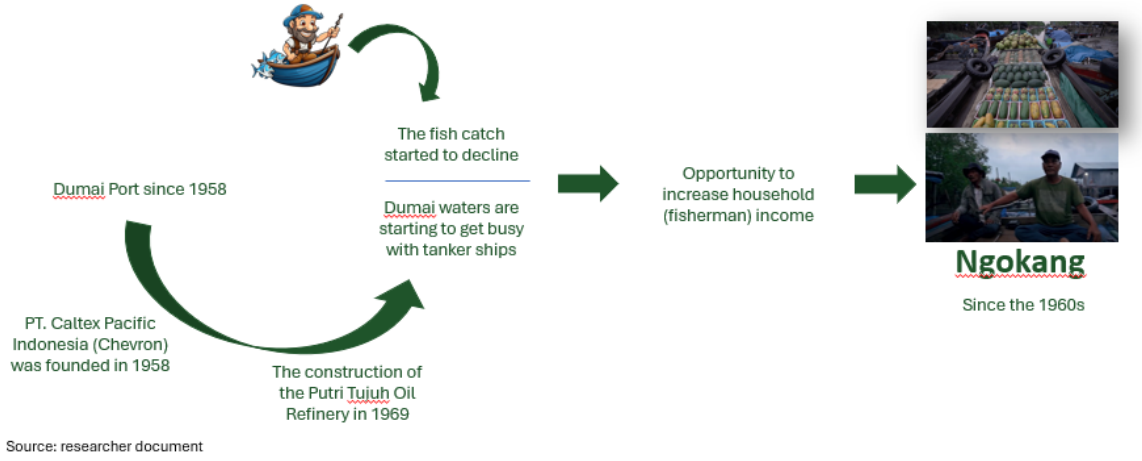
The *Ngokang* in History

Historically, *Ngokang* originated from the problems experienced by fishermen fishing in Dumai waters. Since 1956, a port has been built as a dock for tanker ships (oil distribution). Its strategic location has allowed Dumai to develop rapidly as a center for maritime economic activities and sea transportation, significantly contributing to regional economic growth. On the other hand, the coastal communities of Dumai, primarily composed of fishermen, have encountered difficulties due to a decline in fish catches. Various factors, including changes in marine environmental conditions, overfishing, and pollution from industrial waste and shipping activities around the coastal area, greatly influence this condition. In addition, climate change causes shifts in seasons and ocean current patterns, affecting fishermen's income.

The potential for Dumai waters to be crowded by tankers, in addition to the declining fish catch, has encouraged fishermen to look for alternative sources of income. Seeing the high ship traffic as an opportunity, some have started to switch professions by offering services to docked ships; this activity is then known as "*Ngokang*." Over time, this practice has not only become an economic solution for fishermen's families but has also developed into part of the culture and identity of the Dumai coastal community. *Ngokang* is also considered a local heritage passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the community's adaptation to the social and economic dynamics in this strategic coastal area.

Figure 1

"Ngokang" in History



Source: researcher document

The term "*Ngokang*" is derived from the Japanese word "*kokan*" (交換), meaning "exchange" or barter. It refers to a traditional economic practice in Dumai City, Riau Province. *Ngokang* refers to the community's buying and selling activities directly at sea, precisely around the Dumai Strait, from one large ship to another ship that is moored there. This "*Ngokang*" livelihood activity is unique because the transaction system still uses the barter method, where goods are exchanged for goods rather than money. The community approaches the docked ship with small boats carrying materials to be sold, including fruits, vegetables, and drinks, to be exchanged for used goods from the boat.

Figure 2
The "Pengokang" Activity Brings Market Products to Tanker Ships

Although it seems simple and still relies on a traditional barter system, the *Ngokang* activity plays a crucial role in the people's economic life on the Dumai coast. For most people, this activity is not just a way to meet daily needs but also a source of primary income that supports their families. In this condition, the *Ngokang* activity not only has value for increasing the family economy, but this livelihood activity also reflects local wisdom, namely the ability of the community to adapt and utilize the resources available in their environment. During the increasingly widespread flow of modernization and digital trading systems, the sustainability of *Ngokang* shows cultural resilience—an ability to maintain local identity and traditions without closing oneself off from the developments of the times. This activity symbolizes the adaptation of traditional communities that continue to survive and are economically empowered through methods passed down from generation to generation.

Ngokang as the Livelihood Practices

Ngokang emerged as a response from the coastal communities of Dumai to changing economic conditions, particularly in light of declining income from the fisheries sector. As fishing became insufficient to support their livelihoods, some fishermen turned to *Ngokang* activities as an alternative source of income. Over time, *Ngokang* has become a crucial livelihood for specific households in Dumai City. This activity falls within the informal trade sector and features a distinct transactional system based on barter. The goods exchanged typically consist of food items such as fruits, vegetables, and young coconuts, which are traded for used items from ships, including scrap iron, used drums, and other metal goods. The sector features a unique transaction system based on barter. The goods exchanged typically include food items such as fruits, vegetables, and young coconuts, which are traded for used items from ships, like scrap iron, used drums, and other metal goods.

Figure 3
"Ngokang" Activities in Dumai Waters

In practice, the *Pengokang* will approach tankers anchored in Dumai waters to offer food and drinks to the crew. This activity is carried out directly from one ship to another with barter transactions on the water so that the *Ngokang* activity can create economic dynamics that are not found in other areas of Indonesia. Its uniqueness and close relationship with geographical and socio-cultural conditions make *Ngokang* a distinctive identity of Dumai City.

> If our family only depends on the results of ngokang, it will not be enough. That is why we must look for other jobs when not at sea. (rmn ,45 y/o)

However, along with the development of the era and increasingly complex economic needs, people engaged in business are now starting to diversify their income. They make *Ngokang* an additional livelihood while pursuing other jobs on land to increase their revenue and reduce dependence on just one source of income. This condition is done because the income from *Ngokang* has not been able to meet the needs of the family, so it is necessary to find other income on land to meet the needs of the family, such as that done by PT Kilang Pertamina Internasional Refinery Unit II Dumai which empowers (*Pengokang* families) in improving the economy through the Corporate Social Responsibility program.

Ngokang as the Cultural "Identity" From Dumai

The practice of *Ngokang* reflects how traditional communities can creatively adapt to external economic and social pressures. Although initially emerging as a response to declining marine yields and pressing financial needs, looking has now developed into a unique part of the maritime culture in Dumai City. This activity is not only a livelihood but also reflects traditional values, local resilience, and the ability of communities to maintain their identity amidst the ongoing changes in Indonesia's economic conditions.

Figure 4
"Ngokang" Journey to the Tanker in Dumai Waters

Ngokang shows adaptation is about survival and building an economic system that fits the local context. In practice, the skills needed in *Ngokang* cannot be learned instantly. Knowledge such as how to navigate a tanker, communicate with foreign crews, and understand the ebb and flow of the sea is a form of hereditary expertise passed down from generation to generation, usually from father to son. This condition makes looking not just a livelihood but part of a cultural heritage deeply embedded in everyday life in certain areas.

More than just an economic activity, *Ngokang* has become part of the local identity of the Dumai community. The uniqueness of this practice lies in the fact that it is not found in other areas of Indonesia, making it a very distinctive social and cultural phenomenon. The activity of *Ngokang* reflects the way of life of the Dumai coastal community, which is closely related to the sea, especially in trade. The attachment between this practice and geographical conditions and local values makes it a means of earning a living and a symbol of uniqueness that represents the character and cultural heritage of the local community.

The practice of buying and selling that still uses the barter system is of particular concern because it shows an effort to maintain the traditional payment system inherited from our ancestors. Although most transactions have shifted to cash or digital payment systems in the modern era, barter practices such as in *Ngokang* activities reflect the strength of local cultural values that remain alive amidst the changing times. This system not only functions as a means of exchange but also as a symbol of social and economic ties built on trust and mutual needs between transaction actors. Thus, the sustainability of the barter system in the practice of *Ngokang* shows the resilience of coastal communities' culture in maintaining their ancestral traditions.

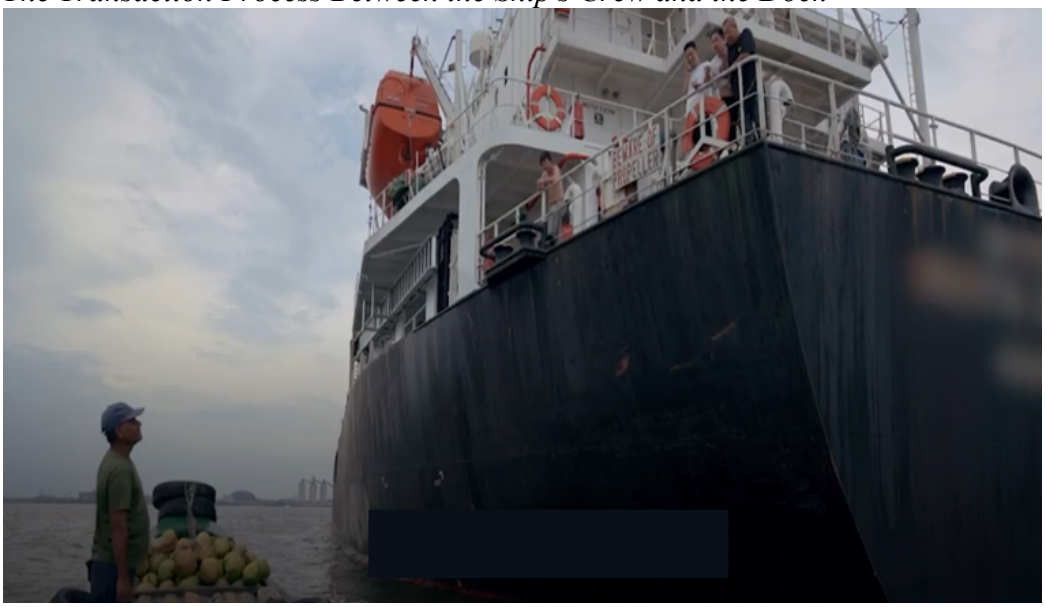
The Challenges of *Ngokang* in the New Era

In the current situation, *Ngokang* activities as a livelihood for coastal communities face a serious dilemma. The first challenge is its status as a form of informal trade that the government has not officially regulated. In fact, in some cases, this activity is considered illegal because it does not have a clear legal basis, especially regarding licensing,

supervision, and legal protection for the perpetrators. Moreover, "KEPMENHUB No. 819 of 2018 Concerning the Determination of Shipping Lanes, Route Systems, Traffic Procedures, and Ship Anchoring Areas According to Their Interests in Shipping Lanes Entering Dumai Port" explains that all ships owned by the community are prohibited from approaching the vessel crossing route that will dock at Dumai City Port (Mulyani, Wahyuni, et al., 2024). This activity is undoubtedly against the law, so those involved will face legal consequences that can further worsen the situation of the *Pengokang* families.

Figure 5

The Transaction Process Between the Ship's Crew and the Dock



Second, the practice of *Ngokang* has the potential for significant danger and loss, both in terms of material and the safety of the perpetrators' lives. The *Ngokang* must face various risks, such as bad weather, sea accidents, and damage or loss of merchandise during the barter process in the middle of the sea. *Ngokang* activities are generally carried out using small boats that must be alongside large ships during the transaction. This condition is hazardous because if not carried out carefully and without adequate safety procedures, the ships can collide with each other, which has the potential to cause small boats to capsize or sink. The lack of infrastructure support and social protection for *Ngokang* fishermen further exacerbates this risk. In addition, the lack of guaranteed security at sea makes the *Ngokang* vulnerable to crime or fraud. *Ngokang* activities also have the potential for illegal buying and selling activities in the waters. The barter process used in *Ngokang* activities usually occurs by exchanging goods that are no longer used on ships. However, this condition is what triggers the exchange of illegal goods such as oil and drugs. Transactions carried out above waters and not monitored become a means to circulate these illegal goods (Mulyani, Fatkhullah, et al., 2024).

> Dumai waters are an area where it is very easy to spread drugs because the location is very strategic. (akm, 54 y/o)

Figure 6
The Arrest of Several "Pengokang" for Violating Sea Lanes

Third, the increasingly uncertain climate conditions in the Dumai region are one of the main challenges threatening the safety and continuity of *Ngokang* activities. Extreme weather, such as heavy rain, coastal storms, and strong winds, often occur suddenly and are difficult to predict. This situation is perilous for *Ngokang*, who use small boats to approach large ships in the middle of the sea. Light and open boats are very vulnerable to being tossed by waves or even capsized when hit by high waves. In bad weather conditions, visibility decreases drastically, increasing the possibility of collisions between small boats and tankers. In addition, uncertain tidal conditions also worsen the situation. High tides can make it difficult to dock with large ships, while low tides can cause boats to run aground or make it difficult to return to land. In addition to impacting safety, changes in weather and tides also impact merchandise, especially fruits and perishable foods. These goods can get wet from seawater, rot due to the hampered buying and selling process, or be damaged during the unstable transportation process due to waves. As a result, the *Ngokang* often suffer economic losses, especially if they carry large quantities of merchandise. These conditions indicate that climate factors significantly influence the sustainability and safety of *Ngokang* practices, so better anticipation and protection are needed for the perpetrators.

> The current problem we face when carrying fruit is hazardous because the freshness of the fruit is not long; we go to the hot sea, making the goods we sell rot quickly. This kind of condition makes us lose money. The weather lately is also unpredictable, sometimes hot, sometimes rainy. (rmn, 45 y/o)

Various problems faced in the practice of *Ngokang*, ranging from safety risks due to extreme weather and traditional transaction systems that are no longer efficient to the threat of economic loss, have contributed to a significant decline in the number of *Ngokang* practitioners. It is estimated that only around 50 to 60 people are still actively practising this profession in Dumai waters. This number shows a fairly drastic decline compared to previous times when *Ngokang* was one of the main livelihoods of coastal communities. This decline

reflects the weakening interest of the younger generation in continuing this tradition, both for safety reasons, economic challenges, and shifts in cultural values.

Most now consider *Ngokang* only a side job, no longer a primary source of income. To meet the economic needs of their families, they must look for additional work on land, both in the formal and informal sectors. This condition reflects that although *Ngokang* is a unique cultural heritage and local identity, without regulatory support, protection, and official recognition from the government, this tradition is at risk of extinction in the future.

Conclusion

The activity of *Ngokang* in Dumai waters has been considered a local heritage passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the community's adaptation to the social and economic dynamics in the coastal areas of Dumai. The activity of *Ngokang* has become a livelihood for the community, involving unique buying and selling at sea because the payment system still uses "barter," with large ships anchored around the port of Dumai City.

Ngokang is currently facing a serious dilemma because *Ngokang* is considered by most people as an illegal activity. This activity also poses potential dangers and losses for *Sengkang* materially and non-materially. The practice of *Ngokang* is undoubtedly a challenge because it is in the informal economy, which sometimes intersects with aspects of legality or shipping regulations. This condition caused some of the informants we interviewed to hesitate to openly convey information in this study.

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