

Form, Meaning, and Wisdom of the Sowan Tradition among the *Makeang Luar* Community in South Halmahera Regency, North Maluku

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Sowan tradition on Makeang Island, South Halmahera Regency, North Maluku Province. This tradition is often practiced during Ramadan and aims to help children get used to fasting from an early age. The study will address two questions, the first being: what is the form of the Sowan tradition practiced by the Makeang Luar people? This question also serves as a prophetic effort to counter the current trend in local cultures, which is the gradual decline leading to extinction. A comprehensive description of this tradition not only illustrates how its processes and characteristics are carried out but also serves as a means of documentation that can be preserved as the collective memory of the Makeang Luar community. Additionally, it examines how the Makeang Luar people utilize the wisdom inherent in this tradition to educate children's character from an early age. The research employed a qualitative method using an analytical descriptive approach. This approach was selected because it involved participant observation, in-depth interviews, and literature reviews. Utilizing this methodology allowed the study to gather qualitative data, which was systematically presented based on the facts collected from the field. The findings illustrated how the tradition was practiced, the materials required, and the various meanings and wisdom embedded within it. In terms of meaning, the tradition encompasses several connotations, including resilience, integrity, and maturity. Additionally, regarding local wisdom, the Sowan tradition plays a significant role in shaping children's character from an early age. This character is reflected in their obedience in performing religious duties.

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1. Introduction

Local wisdom remains a central topic in various human development policies. It encompasses the indigenous knowledge or wisdom of a community, derived from the noble values of cultural traditions that govern social order (Sibarani, 2012; Akhmar et al., 2022; Suma et al., 2023; Junaid et al., 2024). In many regions, local wisdom is promoted as a vital cultural asset to support Indonesia's development. In North Maluku, higher education institutions, such as Khairun University, have even incorporated local wisdom as one of the study areas in their Research Master Plan (RIP).

Treating local wisdom as exceptional in human development policies is based on several considerations. Observations of the dynamic evolution of Indonesian culture reveal at least four reasons for this perspective (Rahman et al., 2022; Junaid et al., 2025). First, Indonesia's archipelagic nature provides it with an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage. Second, a top-down policy approach prevails, wherein national issues are invariably presumed to be resolvable through centrally designed policies. However, each region possesses a wealth of inherent wisdom capable of addressing its unique challenges. Consequently, this repository of regional wisdom must be leveraged to resolve diverse issues in accordance with distinct regional characteristics.

Third, there is a tendency towards extinction. Many Indonesian cultures are weakening, and some have already vanished. In the dialectic of life and death, without preservation and revitalization, local wisdom will eventually disappear. The fate of local wisdom may resemble that of ancestral heritage, which, over generations, decays as if consumed by termites. Today, the signs of this cultural erosion are increasingly evident (Suyatno, 2022; Sahib & Rahman, 2021). Consequently, there is an ongoing impetus to conduct studies as an intervention to continually preserve Indonesia's cultural richness.

Fourth, the morality of the younger generation. The discourse on local wisdom receives greater attention when there is a tendency to undermine moral values as a result of advances in science and technology and the accompanying cultural changes (Banda, 2016). Society believes that today's youth are considered less moral compared to previous generations. Awareness of this phenomenon has led to the understanding that moral decadence can, in fact, be overcome through the values of local wisdom.

The theme of local wisdom opens many opportunities for researchers to study the various forms of indigenous wisdom found in different regions, including North Maluku. Under this theme, a study on Sowan—one of the cultural practices of the Makeang Luar—is also conducted. Sowan is a tradition practiced during the month of Ramadan. This tradition embodies valuable wisdom for children who are just beginning to learn about fasting. Through this practice, Makeang Luar children are encouraged to observe the fast. Early habituation ensures that these children grow up to become individuals who faithfully practice fasting.

This study will vividly depict the Sowan tradition as both a cultural treasure and a manifestation of the local wisdom of the Makeang Luar community. Operationally, the research will address two questions: first, what is the form of the Sowan tradition? This question also serves as a prophetic effort to counter the common trend in local cultures of gradual decline leading to extinction. A comprehensive description of this tradition not only demonstrates how the process and characteristics of the tradition are carried out but also serves as an important act of documentation. Second, how do the Makeang Luar people use the wisdom of this tradition to shape children's character from an early age? This question takes a critical and analytical approach to internalizing local values in children. As Amin (2017) noted, local wisdom should not only romanticize the past or glorify present-day ethnocentrism.

To understand and describe the function of the Sowan tradition, the theory used is Bronislaw Malinowski's functionalism. The main argument of this theory is all elements of culture have a function in the life of the people who own the culture. This argument departs from the view that cultural elements are something that is produced because it is needed, not something that has been presented before. Community needs can be in the form of biological needs such as food and reproduction, instrumental needs such as law and education, as well as psychological needs such as spirituality and art (Syam, 2007; Marzali, 2014). Referring to this theory, the Sowan tradition as one of the cultures of the Makeang Luar Community has a function in their lives. This function is not only evidenced through the beginning of its creation but its existence until today. The Makeang Luar community still practices the Sowan tradition every 27th night of Ramadan until today.

2. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative method with an analytical descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because it involved participant observation, in-depth interviews, and literature reviews. By using this method, the study gathered qualitative data, which was then systematically presented based on factual findings from the field. The research process was carried out as follows:

First, a research plan was developed by identifying the key issues. Then, a literature review was conducted to explore relevant concepts and theories. This review aimed to gather as much information as possible from various sources to support the research. Next, in the second stage, field research was conducted. Data was collected from the field by approaching or visiting informants related to the subject of the study.

The types of data collected fell into several categories. First, the knowledge of the Makeang Luar community regarding the form and process of implementing the Sowan tradition. Second, the community's understanding of the local wisdom embedded in this tradition. Third, the Makeang Luar community's perspective on the utilization of Sowan as a source of wisdom in educating children's character from an early age.

These data were obtained by visiting the locations of designated informants. Meanwhile, data based on observation was gathered by documenting various observed phenomena. In addition, data was also collected by utilizing existing recordings or other documentation.

Field data collection utilized several instruments. First, the information obtained from informants was recorded using a recording device. Second, the information was also noted in a research notebook or documented through photographs, including details such as the date, location, name, age, and the informant's position within the community.

After all the required data had been collected, the next step was to process and analyze the information to fulfill the research objectives. Data processing in this study was carried out through several steps:

1) The recorded data was transcribed, converting audio recordings into written form. This transcription was performed while still in the field rather than waiting until all data had been collected, which was important to minimize the possibility of misinterpretation. 2) Field notes based on observations were maintained separately from the interview transcriptions. 3) Finally, the transcribed data was analyzed by linking observational facts to derive a well-balanced conclusion.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 An Overview of *Sowan*

Sowan is a tradition that originated and developed in Makeang Luar. Administratively, Makeang Luar is known as West Makian (Makian Barat) District, located in South Halmahera Regency, North Maluku Province. West Makian District includes several villages where the *Sowan* tradition is practiced. Based on field data, the *Sowan* tradition is specifically intended for young children who are just beginning to learn how to fast during the month of Ramadan. Therefore, the primary requirement for participating in *Sowan* is that the child is young and willing to fast.

Every parent in Makeang Luar hopes that their children will be able to fast for the entire month of Ramadan so they can participate in the *Sowan* ceremony. However, as part of the learning process, parents do not force their children to fast completely. Instead, children are encouraged to fast to the best of their ability. Recognizing that the children are still learning, every parent proceeds with the *Sowan* ceremony even if their child is unable to complete a full month of fasting. In some cases, parents from Makeang even admit that a *Sowan* ceremony is still held for children who only fast for three days.

Sowan is typically held only once in a child's lifetime. Children who have had a *Sowan* ceremony usually do not receive another in subsequent Ramadans. However, this once-in-a-lifetime rule is not mandatory and does not carry any burdensome or dangerous consequences. Therefore, in some cases, a child may have a *Sowan* ceremony more than once, depending entirely on the willingness and readiness of the parents to arrange another ceremony.

Sowan can also be found in several locations beyond *Makeang* Island in South Halmahera Regency. This spread occurs because, over time, the people of *Makeang Luar* have migrated to various parts of North Maluku. This dispersal process has contributed to the spread of the *Sowan* tradition. As a result, in several areas, the *Sowan* tradition is still frequently observed during the month of Ramadan. On Bacan Island in South Halmahera, for instance, there is a village predominantly inhabited by the *Makeang Luar* people, where *Sowan* is celebrated on a grand scale. The celebration is so significant that the South Halmahera Regency Family Welfare Empowerment (PKK) organizes *Sowan* competitions.

3.2 *Sowan* Materials

This tradition is easy to implement because it requires only a few simple ingredients that are readily available and can be easily prepared by the local community. The materials consist of two components: the main ingredients and additional ingredients creatively prepared by the *Sowan* organizers. The main ingredients used in every *Sowan* ceremony remain consistent, while the additional ingredients vary widely according to the preferences of the organizers. Both the main and additional ingredients are essential components of *Sowan*, functioning together as a unified set. Therefore, in terms of availability, all ingredients must be provided—both the main and the additional ones. Having only the main ingredients without the additional ones does not suffice for a proper *Sowan* ceremony. The difference between the main and additional ingredients lies solely in their variety and creative presentation. The main ingredients are fixed, whereas the additional ingredients vary based on the creativity of each *Sowan* organizer. Nonetheless, both components remain equally important and must be prepared when conducting *Sowan*.

The primary material for this tradition is the banana plant, complete with mature fruit—bananas that are suitable for consumption after processing. The provided bananas include not only the fruit but also the plant itself. The bananas required for *Sowan* are not limited to a specific type; all varieties of bananas are permitted as the main material in the *Sowan* tradition. However, the *Makeang Luar* community typically uses *pisang kepok* (*musa acuminata balbisiiana colla*). In North Maluku, this type of banana is known as *pisang spatu*. It is more commonly used because it is easy to grow, and almost every household in *Makeang Luar* has this type of banana in their garden.



Figure 1. Main materials of the Sowan tradition (Photograph by the author, 2024)

If, on the day of the Sowan ceremony, the person organizing it does not have a banana tree with ripe fruit in their garden, they typically ask a relative who has such bananas. The methods of obtaining a banana tree as the main ingredient for Sowan vary widely: some request the bananas for free, some ask with the understanding that they will exchange the same bananas once they ripen, and others purchase the bananas. Bananas for Sowan are generally provided one day before the event.

Regarding the additional ingredients, according to community accounts, in the past these typically consisted of ketupat and a type of traditional cake from North Maluku made from rice flour dough, called andara. Over time, the range of additional ingredients has become more varied, as the people of Makeang have become more familiar with different types of snacks—both homemade and packaged treats sold in stores.

Not all the items provided are food-related; some people even complement them with decorations such as balloons, decorative flags, ribbons, and even yellow janur (palm leaves) to create a festive atmosphere. The overall selection depends on the preferences of the person organizing the Sowan, with various items being added or omitted at their discretion.



Figure 2. Decorated banana tree (Photograph by the author, 2024)

Various snacks that have been prepared are then attached to the banana tree. First, the banana tree that has been provided is tied upright at a designated spot in front of the house of the person conducting Sowan. Some tie it to a terrace

pillar, while others tie it to a fence. The next step is to decorate the banana tree with the prepared decorations and snacks. Some people even add paper money as part of the ornaments that will be contested for.

3.3 Implementation of *Sowan*

The *Sowan* tradition is always held on the 27th night of Ramadan. Generally, *Sowan* is conducted after the Tarawih prayer, one of the Sunnah prayers performed after the Isha prayer. Some Makeang Luar people also often hold it in the afternoon or after the Maghrib prayer. There is no mandatory rule that dictates the timing of the *Sowan* tradition; the community is free to decide based on individual considerations, as long as *Sowan* is held on the day before or exactly on the 27th night of Ramadan.

A short while before *Sowan* begins, the prepared items must be attached to the banana tree. Meanwhile, news about the planned event and its timing has circulated among the children in the organizer's neighborhood. Consequently, just before *Sowan* is held, the children gather around the banana tree, which is decorated with various snacks and money. The children then prepare to contest for the snacks and money provided. In some *Sowan* events, adults also take part in the contest. Generally, they do not compete directly but instead help by lifting their small children so that they can easily reach the snacks and money hanging or attached to the banana tree.

After all the preparations are complete and the scheduled time arrives, *Sowan* begins with an elder or a person known for their religious knowledge in the village being invited to recite a specific prayer. Generally, the recited prayer is intended to invoke blessings for the fasting child, praying that they remain healthy and receive an abundance of blessings throughout their life. The conclusion of the prayer signals the immediate start of the contest for the *Sowan* treats; accordingly, the children present usually listen attentively for the end of the prayer. Once the prayer concludes, the children rush to grab the treats and money provided.



Figure 3. Children waiting for the prayer to finish so they can compete for the treats and money on the banana tree (Photograph by the author, 2024).

The push and shoving to secure the treats and money during the *Sowan* ceremony is one of the exciting highlights eagerly anticipated by everyone. Although the atmosphere might appear as if people are battling to claim the largest share, the contest truly showcases the exuberance of the children. This excitement makes *Sowan* highly anticipated by children in two senses: both in participating in the event and in having the *Sowan* ceremony arranged for them.

Once all the items—both the money and the treats attached or hung on the banana tree—have been claimed, *Sowan* comes to an end. There is no specific closing event; all that remains are the stories shared among the participants about who managed to claim the most items and the various moments of excitement during the hustle and bustle of contesting for the treats and money.

3.4 Meaning and Wisdom of Sowan

As mentioned above, the Sowan tradition is held on the 27th night of Ramadan, coinciding with the night of *lailatul qadar*. In the teachings of Islam—the religion practiced by all Makeang Luar people—*lailatul qadar* is one of the most eagerly awaited nights during Ramadan. Literally, the term *Lailatul Qadar* comes from Arabic and consists of two words: *Lailah* and *al-Qadr*. *Lailah* refers to the night that begins after sunset and lasts until dawn, while *al-Qadr* carries several meanings, including decree, law, majesty, and narrowness. Based on this definition, Muslims believe *lailatulqadar* to be an exceptionally noble night, as its rewards are multiplied, equivalent to performing good deeds for a thousand months (Luthfi, 2022:27-28).

According to the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language (KBBI), the belief regarding the coming of *lailatulqadar*—or the night of the descent of Allah's revelation—is not limited solely to the 27th night, but refers to all odd-numbered nights during the last ten days of Ramadan. This time concept potentially allows *lailatulqadar* to occur on nights other than the 27th night. However, the people of North Maluku, including the Makeang Luar, have the custom of considering the 27th night as *lailatulqadar*. On this night, the Makeang Luar—or more generally, Muslims in North Maluku—observe a tradition known as *ela-ela* night, during which the community simultaneously lights torches in front of each house.

The night of *lailatulqadar*, or *ela-ela* night, serves as the marker for the Sowan tradition. Based on the description above, Sowan could theoretically be held on any of the odd-numbered nights during the last ten days of Ramadan. In practice, however, it is consistently held on the 27th night, due to the community's strong belief that *lailatulqadar*, along with the *ela-ela* tradition, occurs on that specific night.

Determining the Sowan ceremony's timing on *lailatulqadar* night is based on the Makeang Luar community's understanding of the special significance of this night. *Lailatulqadar* is known as the night of a thousand months—a night in which the reward is equivalent to performing acts of worship for a thousand months—leading the Makeang Luar people to feel that all blessings will be bestowed on this night. Consequently, holding the Sowan ceremony on this night is deemed appropriate, as the children's efforts to fast will receive multiplied blessings.

Furthermore, based on their religious knowledge, the Makeang Luar community believes that *lailatulqadar* night is also the night when Allah records one's destiny. Thus, the Sowan celebration is expected to bestow a favorable destiny upon the Makeang Luar children who are learning to fast.

Symbolically, the meaning of Sowan is also reflected in the use of the banana tree as the main material. For the Makeang community, within the context of Sowan, the banana tree holds a unique significance and cannot be substituted with any other tree. Not all Makeang Luar share the same understanding about the banana tree; some believe that its use in Sowan originates from their ancestors, who conducted the ceremony using a banana tree. For that reason, the banana tree continues to be used to this day. However, for others in the community, its use carries a meaning that is closely correlated with the Sowan tradition.

Banana trees are among the plants that grow easily on Makeang Island, especially the *pisang kepok* variety. Symbolically, the banana tree represents the children of Makeang Luar, who are capable of adapting and thriving in any environment. The ability to remain resilient in every situation is the hope that parents have for their children as they grow into adulthood. In the eyes of the Makeang Luar community, the spirit of self-reliance in facing various challenges is akin to the growth of the banana tree.

During the Sowan ceremony, the bunch of bananas—complete with the entire plant—must be intact. The Makeang Luar community never uses banana trees with incomplete bunches. According to the observations in this study, every banana used has always been whole. This completeness is interpreted as a symbol of a person's integrity in worship. Through Sowan, the community hopes that their children will grow up to fully perform their religious duties.

In addition, the bananas provided are always ripe. When Sowan is conducted, not only is a banana tree bearing fruit used, but the fruit itself must be mature. Practically speaking, using ripe bananas is both reasonable and logical. If unripe bananas were used, they would inevitably be discarded after the ceremony. However, when the bananas are ripe, they can still be consumed afterward. Symbolically, the ripeness of the bananas represents the hope for the maturity of the children—both in their religious practice and in their journey through life.

Various meanings associated with Sowan reveal a wisdom that indicates that the character of the young generation in the Makeang Luar community is shaped from an early age. They recognize that the process of character formation must

begin early. For children, Sowan is a reward; for parents, it is an appreciation of the children's hard work. In order to receive this reward, children must first strive to earn it.

According to the Makeang Luar community, at the beginning of Ramadan they usually promise the children that a Sowan ceremony will be arranged for them if they fast for the entire month. Since children already have a reference point about Sowan, when they are promised a Sowan ceremony, they perceive it as a joyful celebration dedicated to them. To fulfill that promise, children are automatically motivated to strive in performing their fasting rituals.

Although, at the initial stage, it might seem that children fast solely to receive the promised reward of a Sowan ceremony, this method effectively habituates them to observe the fast. The Makeang Luar community acknowledges, based on their experience, that the promise of a Sowan ceremony has a significant impact on the children's willingness to fast.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study illustrate how the Sowan tradition is conducted, the materials required, and the various meanings and wisdom embedded within the tradition. The required materials consist of two parts: (1) the main ingredients and (2) the additional ingredients. Both components are essential, but they differ in terms of availability and creativity. For the main ingredients, there is no substitute for the banana tree. Meanwhile, although the additional ingredients are necessary, their variety depends on the creativity of the Sowan organizers. The additional ingredients are not fixed; they may vary from one household to another based on individual preferences. In terms of meaning, this tradition encompasses several interpretations, including resilience, integrity, and maturity. Regarding local wisdom, the Sowan tradition plays a significant role in shaping the character of children from an early age. This character is reflected in their obedience to performing religious duties.

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