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Local Islam as a Site of Meaning Negotiation: Symbolic Re-signification and Religious Experience in the *Cokaiba* Tradition

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how ritual symbols, religious experience, and social meanings are negotiated within the *Cokaiba* tradition as a localized expression of Islam in Halmahera, Eastern Indonesia. Using a qualitative ethnographic case study design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, visual documentation, and document analysis. Fieldwork was conducted in Patani, Central Halmahera. Informants include religious leaders, community elders, youth participants, local scholars, and government officials with direct engagement in the tradition. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of symbolic interpretation, embodied religious practice, and social negotiation. The findings show that ritual elements such as masks, white costumes, mosque miniatures, and collective recitations of *ṣalawāt* and *dhikr* are not merely cultural artifacts but are actively reinterpreted as expressions of devotion to the Prophet Muhammad, markers of communal identity, and media of social cohesion. These meanings emerge through lived participation rather than fixed doctrinal interpretation. The study further reveals that *Cokaiba* functions as a site of lived religion where emotional engagement, intergenerational participation, and embodied ritual practices shape everyday Islamic experience. However, certain symbols particularly masks remain contested, reflecting ongoing negotiation between local ritual heritage and normative Islamic interpretations. The article contributes to scholarship on Islam *lokal* by demonstrating that religious meaning is continuously produced through processes of symbolic re-signification and discursive negotiation embedded in everyday social life.

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INTRODUCTION

The Prophet Muhammad's Birthday tradition is one of the religious practices that has an important position in the lives of Muslims in various regions of Indonesia (Sibaweh et al., 2023). In addition to being understood as a form of respect for the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, the Maulid commemoration also develops as a space for religious expression that shows the diversity of Islamic practices in different social and cultural contexts. In various regions, the celebration of Maulid is not only manifested through the recitation of *ṣalawāt*, *dhikr*, prayer, and *Barzanjī*, but also through various forms of local rituals that develop according to the history and experience of the local community (Azra, 2002; Woodward, 2011). This diversity shows that religious practices do not take place in a space separate from culture, but rather are formed through a dynamic interaction between Islamic teachings, social experiences, and local traditions (Andini et al., 2026).

In the study of local Islam, the relationship between religion and culture is understood as an ongoing process that produces various expressions of Islam in Muslim societies (Supriadin and Pababari, 2024). This pattern is also visible in other Indonesian local Islamic traditions. The *Kabanti* tradition in Buton, for example, demonstrates how local literary expression functions as a medium for transmitting Islamic social ethics, moral education, communal identity, and cultural preservation, while the *Atib Koambai* tradition in Riau shows how collective *dhikr* and ritual participation become lived expressions of Qur'anic remembrance within a specific Malay Muslim context (Hidayat et al., 2024; Tambunan et al., 2025). Islam does not always exist in a uniform form, but undergoes adaptation and contextualization according to the social, historical, and cultural conditions of the people who receive it (Azra, 2002; Woodward, 2011). Therefore, various local religious traditions cannot be understood only as remnants of the culture of the past, but rather as part of the process of forming a religious identity that continues to develop in people's lives.

One of the traditions that shows this dynamic is *Cokaiba* which developed in the Gamrange cultural area, Halmahera, North Maluku (Widjayengrono, 2023). This tradition is known as part of the series of celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday and is characterized by the use of various ritual symbols such as masks, white costumes, miniature mosques, *ṣalawāt* and *Barzanjī* readings, as well as communal processions that involve the community at large. The *Cokaiba* tradition can still be found in several areas such as Patani, Veda, and Maba.

In Patani, *Cokaiba* is not only an annual religious celebration, but also a social space that brings together various community groups in one collective activity. Religious leaders, traditional leaders, youth, women, and children are involved in various stages of the ritual, from preparation to the implementation of the procession. Such extensive involvement suggests that *Cokaiba* not only functions as a religious ritual, but also as a medium that strengthens social solidarity, collective memory, and community identity (Jamal and Umar, 2020).

From the perspective of religious anthropology, religious practices can be understood through the symbols that people use to articulate their beliefs and experiences. Geertz explained that religious symbols function as a system of meaning that connects values, emotions, and social actions in daily life (Geertz, 1973). In the context of *Cokaiba*, symbols such as masks, white costumes, miniature mosques, *ṣalawāt*, and ritual processions are not only present as visual attributes, but also as a medium used by the community to express respect for the Prophet Muhammad and build their religious understanding.

In addition to symbols, the experiential dimension is also important to understand how religion is carried out in people's lives. The perspective of lived religion emphasizes that religious life can be understood not only through formal doctrine or religious institutions, but also through daily practices, emotional experiences, social relations, and cultural activities undertaken by individuals and communities (Ammerman, 2016; McGuire, 2008). This approach allows researchers to see how religious experiences are shaped through participation in rituals and involvement in people's social lives.

A number of previous studies have discussed the *Cokaiba* tradition from various perspectives. Karim examines the symbolic meaning of *Cokaiba* in Vedic society and highlights its relationship to local cultural identity (Karim, 2015). Jamal and Umar show that the Patani people maintain this tradition because it contains traditional values, social solidarity, and respect for the Prophet Muhammad (Jamal and Umar, 2020). Ahmad and Wenti found Cokaiba's contribution to strengthening social relations and moral values of the people of East Halmahera (Ahmad and Wenti, 2024). Widjayengrono places *Cokaiba* as part of the transformation of Austronesian culture in the development of local Islam in

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Halmahera (Widjayengrono, 2023), while Alhadar et al. affirm the close relationship between religion and culture in the implementation of the tradition (Alhadar et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, most previous research has focused on aspects of history, cultural preservation, or the social function of traditions. Studies that specifically examine how ritual symbols are interpreted by participants, how religious experiences are shaped through involvement in rituals, and how societies negotiate the relationship between local cultural traditions and a more normative understanding of Islam are still relatively limited. In fact, these aspects are important to explain why this tradition has survived and is seen as relevant by society in the midst of social change and the development of various contemporary religious discourses.

In addition, ritual symbols in *Cokaiba* are often understood as cultural heritage that has a permanent meaning (Jamal and Umar, 2020). The initial findings of this study actually show that the meaning of these symbols continues to undergo reinterpretation in accordance with changes in the social and religious context of society. Masks, for example, are not solely understood as cultural attributes, but are interpreted as a symbol of collective joy in commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW.

Based on this background, this article aims to analyze how ritual symbols, religious experiences, and social practices are interpreted and negotiated in the *Cokaiba* tradition. This research focuses on the implementation of the *Cokaiba* tradition in Patani, Central Halmahera, by utilizing information about the practice of *Cokaiba* in Vedic and New Year's Eve as a comparative context. In particular, this study examines how people interpret ritual symbols, how religious experiences are shaped through collective participation, and how the *Cokaiba* tradition becomes a space for negotiating meaning between local culture and a more normative understanding of Islam. This article seeks to contribute to the study of local Islam and lived religion through an analysis of symbolic re-signification and meaning negotiation in the religious life of the Muslim community of Halmahera.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an ethnographic case study design to understand how ritual symbols are interpreted, how religious experiences are experienced, and how the process of negotiation of meaning takes place in the *Cokaiba* tradition. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in depth the experiences, interpretations, and social practices of the people involved in the implementation of rituals (Moleong, 2017). The research focuses on the *Cokaiba* tradition in Patani, Central Halmahera, which is the main location for field data collection. Patani was chosen because the *Cokaiba* tradition is still actively implemented and involves the participation of the community in a series of commemorations of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday.

Data collection was carried out in January–April 2026 through field observations, semi-structured interviews, visual documentation, and literature studies. Observations were made during the implementation of the *Cokaiba* tradition, including the stages of ritual preparation, the recitation of *ṣalawāt* and *Barzanjī*, the use of ritual symbols, processions, and community involvement in various activities that accompany the celebration of the Prophet's Birthday. In addition to direct observation, this study also utilizes visual documentation obtained from local communities with the consent of the party documenting the activity. The documentation is used as supporting data to assist in the interpretation of ritual symbols and the dynamics of the implementation of traditions.

The research informants were selected purposively based on their level of knowledge, experience, and involvement in the *Cokaiba* tradition. This research involved five main informants, namely B. Idris, a youth leader who is active in the implementation of *Cokaiba* in Patani; H. Muhammad, a community leader who has knowledge of history and the development of traditions; Sahabudin Hi Ahad, mosque imams and religious leaders involved in the implementation of religious activities; Agus Hi Jamal, an academic at the University of Muhammadiyah North Maluku as well as a researcher of the *Cokaiba* tradition; and M. Zulkiram, Head of Islamic Community Guidance Division of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religion of North Maluku Province. The diversity of informant backgrounds allows the research to obtain different perspectives on the history of traditions, symbolic meanings, religious experiences, social functions, as well as various views related to the position of tradition in the religious life of the community.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with a duration of between 45 to 90

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minutes. Interview questions covered the history and development of *Cokaiba*, the meaning of ritual symbols, participants' religious experiences, the social function of traditions, as well as views on the relationship between local cultural traditions and a more normative understanding of Islam. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the informant, then supplemented with field notes made during the research process.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke. The analysis is carried out through several stages, namely reading all the data repeatedly, performing initial encoding, grouping the code into broader themes, and reviewing themes based on the relationship between the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This process resulted in four main themes of research, namely the genealogy and transformation of the *Cokaiba* tradition, the symbolic meaning of rituals, religious experience and social solidarity, and the negotiation of meaning between local traditions and normative Islamic understandings.

To improve the credibility of the findings, this study applied source triangulation and data triangulation by comparing information obtained from interviews, field observations, visual documentation, and relevant academic literature. Through this process, the resulting interpretation does not only rely on one data source, but is built through cross-confirmation from various sources so as to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the *Cokaiba* tradition in the life of the contemporary Halmahera people.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Genealogy and Transformation of the *Cokaiba* Tradition in the Gamrange Society

The *Cokaiba* tradition is a form of celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday which is still practiced by the community in the Gamrange cultural area which includes Patani, Veda, and Maba in Halmahera (Alhadar et al., 2024). In contemporary practice, this tradition is known through the recitation of *ṣalawāt*, *dhikr*, *Barzanjī*, the use of white costumes, masks, miniature mosques, and communal processions involving the participation of the community at large (Parninsih et al., 2025). Although *Cokaiba* is currently understood as part of the commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday, various studies show that the tradition developed through a long historical process that brought together local cultural heritage with the development of Islam in the Halmahera region (Karim, 2015; Widjayengrono, 2023).

This research does not seek to definitively reconstruct the historical origins of Cokaiba, but rather to understand how people interpret the history and sustainability of the tradition in their lives today. Based on interviews with informants, *Cokaiba* is understood as a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation and has become an important part of the religious identity of the community. H. Muhammad explained: "This tradition has existed since the time of our parents and ancestors. Every year the community continues to carry it out because it is considered part of the Maulid celebration and the togetherness of the village." (H. Muhammad, personal communication, 2026).

The statement shows that the legitimacy of *Cokaiba* in society does not primarily come from written historical records, but from collective memories that are passed down from generation to generation. Tradition obtains its sustainability through the process of social inheritance that continues to be reproduced in people's lives (Aulia et al., 2026). The celebration that is held every year is a means to maintain the relationship between the current generation and the religious and cultural experiences inherited by previous generations.

Field observations show that the implementation of *Cokaiba* in Patani still involves various community groups, ranging from religious leaders, traditional leaders, youth, women, to children. Such extensive involvement shows that tradition is not only preserved as a religious ritual, but also as part of the social life of the community. Through repeated participation from year to year, the community actively maintains the existence of tradition while introducing the values contained in it to the younger generation.

Despite retaining its core elements, *Cokaiba* does not exist as a completely static tradition. The results of the interviews show that the community is aware of various changes in the implementation of the ritual from time to time. These changes are not understood as the loss of traditions, but as a form of adjustment to the social developments that occur in society. Agus Hi Jamal explained: "Some elements in the implementation of rituals have indeed undergone adjustments from time to time, but the main

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goal remains the same, which is to commemorate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH as well as strengthen the social relations of the community. This adaptation is actually one way to keep the tradition alive and relevant for the current generation." (A. H. Jamal, personal communication, 2026).

The information shows that the sustainability of *Cokaiba* depends on the community's ability to maintain a balance between continuity and change. The basic values of ritual are retained, but their forms of expression can undergo adjustment according to the evolving social context. Transformation is not seen as a threat to tradition, but as a mechanism that allows tradition to continue to live and be accepted by society (Sokk, 2024).

Field findings also show that the various symbols used in *Cokaiba* acquire new meanings along with the changing social and religious context of the community. Elements of ritual that were once understood primarily as part of the customs inherited by ancestors are now increasingly explained in relation to respect for the Prophet Muhammad SAW, strengthening Islamic identity, and social solidarity of the community (Dharma et al., 2024). The change in the way the tradition is explained suggests that the sustainability of the ritual occurs not only at the level of practice, but also at the level of meaning.

From the perspective of religious anthropology, it suggests that religious traditions develop through a dynamic relationship between inheritance and reinterpretation. Asad explained that Islamic traditions are not fixed and homogeneous, but continue to be formed through social practices, interpretations, and discussions about how religion is understood in people's lives (Asad, 1986). The findings of this study show that *Cokaiba* evolved through a similar process. Traditions are maintained not because their ritual form has not changed, but because society continues to provide new reasons and meanings that keep it relevant.

The genealogy of *Cokaiba* cannot be understood solely as a history of the origins of a ritual. This tradition is the result of a historical process that brings together local cultural heritage, social experiences of the community, and Islamic religious practices in one distinctive religious expression. Its sustainability to date shows that society is not only inheriting traditions from the past, but also actively reshaping its meaning and relevance in contemporary social and religious life.

Symbolic Meaning and Religious Expression in the *Cokaiba* Tradition

One of the main characteristics of the *Cokaiba* tradition is the use of various ritual symbols that accompany the series of celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday (Alhadar et al., 2024). These symbols not only serve as visual attributes in rituals, but also become a medium used by people to express respect for the Prophet Muhammad SAW, strengthen collective identity, and present a religious atmosphere in their social spaces. The results of the interviews show that people do not view these symbols as stand-alone objects or attributes. Symbolic meaning emerges through the involvement of the community in the entire series of rituals and experiences that accompany them (Sitoto et al., 2021). In this context, symbols acquire meaning because they are placed in religious events that are considered important by society.

One of the most prominent symbols in the *Cokaiba* tradition is the mask used in the procession (Ahmad and Wenti, 2024). Visually, masks are an element that distinguishes *Cokaiba* from many Maulid celebrations in other areas. However, field findings suggest that people do not associate masks with certain belief practices outside of the Islamic context. Rather, masks are understood as part of the collective expression of joy in welcoming and commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. B. Idris explained: "The masks and various equipment used in *Cokaiba* are not for entertainment alone. For the community, it is a way to show joy in commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Therefore, the community participates and enlivens the celebration." (B. Idris, personal communication, 2026).

The statement shows that the meaning of masks does not come from their physical form, but from the interpretation given by the community to their use in rituals. Masks are a symbol of collective participation and joy that accompanies the Birthday commemoration. Thus, the symbol acquires religious significance through the social context and ritual experience that surrounds it (Mensah et al., 2025).

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Figure 2. Collective Formation of *Cokaiba* Participants during the Commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday in Patani, Central Halmahera.
Source: Community Documentation

In addition to masks, the use of white costumes is a dominant visual element in the implementation of *Cokaiba*. Based on field observations, the procession participants wore white clothes when participating in processions and other ritual activities. The informant explained that the color white is understood as a symbol of purity, sincerity, and respect for the Prophet Muhammad SAW. The community understands that this celebration must be done with respect and sincerity." (S. H. Sunday, personal communication, 2026).

The meaning attached to the white costume shows that the visual symbols in *Cokaiba* do not only serve as markers of the identity of the ritual participants. White is also a representation of moral values that want to be displayed and lived during the celebration (Sherman and Clore, 2009). In practice, the symbol helps to create an atmosphere that is in accordance with the ritual's religious purpose, namely the reverence of the Prophet and the strengthening of the religious consciousness of the community.

Another symbol that has an important position in the ritual is the miniature mosque displayed in the procession. Based on field observations and documentation, the miniature is one of the centerpieces in the *Cokaiba* procession and is always present as part of a series of ritual symbols. The informant explained that the miniature mosque is understood as a representation of the Islamic identity of the community as well as a reminder of the importance of religious life. According to H. Muhammad: "The miniature mosque reminds the community of places of worship and religious life. Therefore, its existence in *Cokaiba* is considered important as a symbol of people's relations with Islam." (H. Muhammad, personal communication, 2026). The information shows that the miniature mosque is not understood as a mere ritual decoration. Its presence emphasizes the connection between local traditions and the religious identity of the community. Through this symbol, the community displays the message that the *Cokaiba* celebration is part of Islamic life that they live and inherit from generation to generation (Karim, 2015).

In addition to visual symbols, the recitation of *ṣalawāt*, *dhikr*, and *Barzanjī* also have a central position in the entire ritual series. In contrast to masks, white costumes, or miniatures of mosques that appear in visual form, *ṣalawāt* and *Barzanjī* present a verbal and spiritual dimension that directly connects the community with the figure of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Therefore, for society, the visual elements and the religious elements are not understood as two separate things, but as part of a unified ritual experience (Sun and Kim, 2025).

The findings of the study show that the symbolic meaning in *Cokaiba* is formed through the close relationship between symbols, ritual practices, and social experiences of the community. This is in line with Geertz's view that religious symbols function as a medium that connects the system of meaning with the life experiences of its perpetrators (Geertz, 1973). In the context of *Cokaiba*, ritual symbols not only represent certain values, but also help people experience and express those values through collective actions carried out together.

Furthermore, these findings suggest that the ritual symbols in *Cokaiba* do not have a fixed and

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universal meaning. The meaning of symbols is constructed, maintained, and understood through the social experiences of the people involved in the ritual. Therefore, symbols such as masks, white costumes, and miniature mosques cannot be understood simply as cultural relics of the past. These symbols continue to gain relevance as people actively associate them with the reverence for the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic identity, and their social life today.

Cokaiba Tradition as a Space for Religious Experience and Social Solidarity

In addition to containing various ritual symbols that are full of meaning, the *Cokaiba* tradition is also a space for religious experiences that are collectively lived by the community. Based on field observations and interviews with informants, community involvement in *Cokaiba* is not limited to the implementation of formal rituals such as *ṣalawāt* reading, *dhikr*, and *Barzanjī*. Religious experiences are also formed through various social activities that accompany the implementation of traditions, ranging from the preparation of activities, cooperation between citizens, family involvement, to participation in communal processions that take place during the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday (Sa'idah et al., 2026).

For the people of Patani, *Cokaiba* is not only an annual religious event, but also a momentum that brings community members together in one shared experience. During the implementation of the ritual, various community groups are involved in interrelated activities, both as organizers, procession participants, *ṣalawāt* readers, and supporters of other activities (Ahmad and Wenti, 2024). The engagement creates a space of interaction that strengthens social relationships while deepening the participants' religious experience. B. Idris explained: "If *Cokaiba* is implemented, almost all communities are involved. Some help with preparations, some participate in the procession, some take care of equipment. The atmosphere of togetherness makes the community always wait for its implementation every year." (B. Idris, personal communication, 2026).

The statement shows that the religious experience in *Cokaiba* is not only shaped through formal worship activities, but also through social engagement that allows people to feel together as part of the Muslim community. In this context, religious experience is not separated from the social relationships that develop during the performance of rituals.

Field observations show that ritual preparations are often carried out by cooperation by the community. Residents are involved in the manufacture and preparation of various ritual equipment, the arrangement of processions, and the implementation of religious activities that accompany the celebration of Maulid. These activities not only serve to ensure the smooth implementation of rituals but also serve as a means of building solidarity and strengthening social ties among community members. According to H. Muhammad: "What is important in *Cokaiba* is not only the event, but also the togetherness of the community. From preparation to completion, the community works together. That's what keeps the relationship between residents maintained." (H. Muhammad, personal communication, 2026).

The findings show that the value of togetherness is an important part of the experience generated through the *Cokaiba* tradition. Rituals not only serve as a medium of homage to the Prophet Muhammad, but also as a means by which people can renew their social relationships through collective participation (Heridianto, 2025). In practice, the religious dimension and the social dimension do not exist as two separate aspects, but rather reinforce each other in the experience of society (Yaden et al., 2023).

In addition to strengthening social solidarity, *Cokaiba* is also an important medium in the process of transmitting religious and cultural values between generations. The involvement of children and youth in the various stages of the ritual allows them to learn the traditions firsthand through experience and participation. In contrast to the learning process that only takes place through verbal explanations, involvement in rituals provides an opportunity for the younger generation to understand the meaning of tradition through their own practice. Agus Hi Jamal explained: "One of the reasons *Cokaiba* has survived is because the younger generation not only hears stories about this tradition but is directly involved in its implementation. Through that involvement, they understand the values inherited by the community." (A. H. Jamal, personal communication, 2026).

This information shows that the continuity of tradition does not only depend on the inheritance of knowledge, but also on the inheritance of experience. Through direct involvement in rituals, the

younger generation not only gets to know the symbols used in *Cokaiba*, but also understands the social and religious values that underlie them. Thus, tradition functions as a space for cultural reproduction as well as the reproduction of religious experiences in society (Gladyshev et al., 2019).

The findings of this study are in line with the perspective *of lived religion* which emphasizes that religion is not only present in the form of formal doctrines, rules, or institutions, but also in the daily practices that are carried out and lived by society (Ammerman, 2016; McGuire, 2008). Within this framework, religious experience lies not solely in the recitation of *ṣalawāt* or the execution of formal rituals, but also in the social interactions, emotional engagement, and collective activities that accompany such religious practices.

In the *Cokaiba* tradition, people experience religion through joint actions, social cooperation, the emotional atmosphere of celebration, and intergenerational relationships that are built during the implementation of rituals (Karim, 2015). These experiences give a broader meaning to religious practices and help explain why these traditions are preserved today. The sustainability of *Cokaiba* depends not only on the symbols or forms of ritual that are inherited, but also on the ability of the tradition to continue to present religious experiences that are felt to be meaningful by the community.

Cokaiba can be understood as a space where religion is lived in people's daily lives. Through collective involvement, social solidarity, and the emotional experiences that come with it, these traditions allow people to build relationships with religion as well as with their communities. These findings show that religious experiences in local Islam are formed not only through formal worship doctrines and practices, but also through social relations and collective experiences that develop within the religious traditions of communities.

Negotiation of Meaning: Between Local Traditions and Normative Islamic Understanding

The findings of the study show that the sustainability of the *Cokaiba* tradition is not only determined by cultural heritage, symbolic meaning, or religious experiences generated through rituals. This tradition also survives because of the ongoing process of negotiation of meaning among the perpetrators. In the context of the Gamrange community, *Cokaiba* is not just a passively accepted cultural heritage, but a social space where people discuss, interpret, and adapt various elements of ritual to a growing religious understanding. This process has become increasingly important amid the strengthening of various discourses on religious purification that often question the legitimacy of local religious traditions.

The results of the interviews show that most people see *Cokaiba* as part of the respect for the Prophet Muhammad SAW and a means of strengthening social solidarity. Nevertheless, some ritual symbols, particularly masks, are the objects of discussion that most often give rise to differences of opinion. Some people understand masks as part of an expression of joy in the celebration of the Prophet's Birthday, while others question their relevance in religious rituals because they do not directly come from normative Islamic religious practices. B. Idris explained: "For the people here, the mask is not something that is worshipped or believed to have a certain power. Masks are worn as part of the celebration and to enliven the Prophet's Birthday. What is important for the community is the intention and purpose of its implementation." (B. Idris, personal communication, 2026).

This statement shows that society places the meaning of symbols not on their physical form, but on the purpose and context of their use (Favareau, 2015). In this view, the mask is not understood as a stand-alone symbol, but as part of an entire series of rituals intended to express respect for the Prophet Muhammad.

On the other hand, some informants admit that there is a more critical view of certain cultural elements in the *Cokaiba* tradition. The development of access to religious education, digital media, and various da'wah movements has introduced various perspectives on religious practices that are considered to be in accordance with Islamic teachings (Ikhsan and Anggraeni, 2026). As a result, some people have begun to question some ritual symbols that are considered to have no clear basis in Islamic religious traditions.

Agus Hi Jamal, who has a more critical view of the use of masks, stated that the symbol has no clear basis in Islamic religious practice. "If *ṣalawāt, dhikr*, and the recitation of *Barzanjī* are certainly not a problem because it is part of the commemoration of *mawlid*. But the use of masks often raises questions because there are no direct examples of religious practices taught in Islam. Therefore, some

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people feel that this element needs to be reviewed." (A. H. Jamal, personal communication, 2026).

The statement suggests that criticism of *Cokaiba* is not always directed at the entire tradition, but rather at certain symbols that are considered to require stronger religious legitimacy. Thus, the debate that arises is more related to the interpretation of the ritual elements than the rejection of the Maulid commemoration itself.

This phenomenon suggests that *Cokaiba* is in a situation of ongoing dialogue between local traditions and a more normative understanding of Islam (Alhadar et al., 2024). However, the findings of the study show that these differences of view do not always lead to rejection of tradition. On the contrary, people tend to adjust the meaning so that traditions remain acceptable in their religious lives.

This view is also seen in the statement of M. Zulkiram, Head of Islamic Community Guidance at the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religion of North Maluku Province. According to him, the existence of local religious traditions needs to be understood through the substance of the values it contains, not only through its symbolic forms. "Religious traditions that develop in society can basically be a medium for strengthening Islamic values as long as their substance leads to respect for the Prophet, strengthens *ukhuwwah*, and does not contradict the basic principles of Islamic teachings. Therefore, what is important is not only the form of the tradition, but how the community interprets it." (M. Zulkiram, personal communication, 2026).

The statement shows that the debate over local religious traditions is not always about the existence of the symbol itself, but rather with the community's interpretation of the symbol. In other words, the social and religious meaning attached to the symbol is an important factor in determining the acceptance of a ritual practice.

The findings of the study show that ritual symbols in *Cokaiba* undergo a process of *symbolic re-signification*, which is the formation and giving new meaning to cultural symbols so that they remain relevant in the religious life of contemporary society. Masks, for example, are no longer understood solely as cultural attributes or elements of traditional performance but are reinterpreted as symbols of collective joy in commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Agus Hi Jamal explained: "What makes *Cokaiba* survive is not because all its symbols are understood exactly as they used to be, but because people continue to give meaning that suits their lives now. These symbols are still used because they are considered to convey religious values that are important to society." (A. H. Jamal, personal communication, 2026). The information shows that the sustainability of tradition does not depend on the preservation of the form of the symbol, but on the ability of the community to continue to reinterpret the meaning of the symbol according to the changing context. Through this process, cultural symbols gain new legitimacy as part of the religious practices of Muslim communities.

These findings show that *Cokaiba* is an arena *for meaning negotiation*, which is a space where various understandings of religion, culture, and identity meet and negotiate. Religious meaning does not exist as something completely fixed and final, but rather is formed through social interactions, collective experiences, and ongoing dialogue among ritual practitioners (Griffioen, 2021). In the process, people not only maintain traditions inherited from the past, but also actively reconstruct the relevance of those traditions in their current lives.

The findings of this study are in line with the concept *of discursive tradition* put forward by Asad, which emphasizes that Islamic traditions continue to be shaped through practice, interpretation, and debate on how religious teachings are understood in certain social contexts (Asad, 1986). In this framework, *Cokaiba* cannot be understood as a form of syncretism that brings together two separate elements between religion and culture. Rather, it is a religious practice that is constantly being produced and negotiated through the interaction between local cultural heritage, people's religious experiences, and various understandings of Islam that are developing in contemporary public spaces.

Cokaiba shows that local Islam is not just a form of cultural adaptation to religion, but a dynamic space for negotiation of meaning. The continuity of this tradition does not lie in the ability of the community to maintain the form of ritual intact, but in their ability to carry *out meaning negotiation* and *symbolic re-signification* so that cultural symbols can still be understood as part of Muslim religious life. These findings confirm that religious meanings are always shaped through the dynamic relationship between traditions, experiences, and social interpretations in people's lives.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the *Cokaiba* tradition is a form of local Islamic expression that develops through the historical interaction between the cultural heritage of the Gamrange people and Islamic religious practices. The sustainability of this tradition is not only sustained by intergenerational inheritance, but also by the ability of people to adapt and reinterpret various elements of ritual according to the social and religious changes they face. Symbols such as masks, white costumes, miniature mosques, *ṣalawāt*, and communal processions are not understood solely as cultural attributes but are interpreted as a form of respect for the Prophet Muhammad SAW, strengthening collective identity, and a means of maintaining the social and religious memory of the community.

The findings of the study also show that religious experiences in the *Cokaib*a tradition are shaped through collective participation, emotional engagement, and social relationships that develop during the performance of rituals. Religious experience is not only present through the recitation of *ṣalawāt, dhikr*, and *Barzanjī*, but also through social cooperation, mutual cooperation, and the involvement of various generations in the entire series of activities. This finding confirms that religion is lived and carried out through daily social practices, so that the *Cokaiba* tradition can be understood as *a space of lived religion* that brings together the religious dimension and social life of the community.

Furthermore, this study found that *Cokaiba* became an arena for negotiating meaning between local cultural traditions and a more normative understanding of Islam. Differing views on some ritual symbols, especially masks, show that religious meanings are not singular and fixed, but continue to be formed through the process of interpretation, dialogue, and adjustment that takes place in society. In this context, ritual symbols undergo *symbolic re-signification*, which is the process of giving new meanings that allow traditions to remain relevant in contemporary Muslim life. These findings enrich the study of local Islam and *lived religion* by showing that religious traditions are a dynamic space where religious meaning, identity, and experience are continuously produced, negotiated, and reconstructed in the social life of the community.

Declarations

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