

The Role of the Kapuas River in Shaping Social Interaction and Cultural Acculturation in Multicultural Communities

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study investigates the role of the Kapuas River not only as a geographical element but also as a vital social and cultural space in shaping social interaction and cultural acculturation within Pontianak's multicultural urban community. The research addresses the lack of studies exploring the river's symbolic and sociocultural dimensions, aiming to enrich the discourse on spatial identity and interethnic relations in riparian urban settings

Design/methods/approach – A descriptive qualitative approach was used, involving participatory observation, in-depth interviews with local residents from various ethnic backgrounds, and documentation of everyday cultural and social activities along the riverbanks. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of interaction and cultural blending

Findings– The findings reveal that the Kapuas River facilitates dynamic intercultural interactions, where daily activities such as floating markets, joint religious festivals, and shared culinary traditions contribute to strengthening social cohesion and constructing a hybrid cultural identity. The study confirms that the river functions as a symbolic corridor mediating social integration and cultural negotiation among diverse urban groups.

Research implications/limitations – The study is limited to the eastern part of Pontianak and may not fully represent the entire sociocultural dynamics along the Kapuas River. The qualitative nature of the research emphasizes depth over breadth, and future studies employing mixed methods or covering wider geographical areas are recommended. Nonetheless, this study provides a foundation for integrating cultural-spatial considerations into inclusive urban development and river governance models.

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Introduction

Rivers, as geographic entities, do not merely serve ecological or economic functions but also constitute dynamic social spaces that shape cultural identity and community interaction. In the context of multicultural urban societies, rivers hold strategic positions as sites of ethnic encounters, cultural exchanges, and complex social relations. Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space (2014) asserts that space is socially constructed and imbued with meaning through human interaction. The Kapuas River, Indonesia's longest, which flows through Pontianak, serves as a socio-symbolic space rather than merely a waterway. The interactions among Malay, Chinese, Dayak, and other ethnic groups along the Kapuas River reveal processes of social negotiation and ongoing cultural acculturation embedded in the daily life of Kalimantan's urban communities.

Numerous studies have explored riverine community interactions in diverse contexts, such as the Martapura River (Juliana et al., 2022), the Amazon (Ribeiro, 2012), and the Santa Fe watershed (Flint et al., 2024). However, limited attention has been paid to how rivers serve as interethnic connectors in Indonesian urban settings. Most previous research focuses on ecological or economic aspects of rivers, often overlooking the socio-cultural dimensions and symbolic meanings embedded in riparian urban life. This research gap highlights the urgency to examine rivers as arenas for intercultural contact and identity formation, especially in multicultural cities like Pontianak. Consequently, this study occupies a strategic position in advancing academic discourse on the intersection of space, culture, and identity in urban water-based environments.

Cultural acculturation in multiethnic river communities is a multifaceted process, not always harmonious, but characterized by adaptive social creativity. Berry et al., acculturation model (2011) and Koentjaraningrat's conceptualizations of cultural blending provide useful frameworks to understand how ethnic groups interact while maintaining their core identities. Studies in Central Sulawesi (Juairiah et al., 2023) and Africa (Adams & Vijver, 2017) have demonstrated that successful acculturation depends on effective communication, identity negotiation, and inclusive social structures. In Pontianak, acculturation manifests through cultural festivals, traditional cuisine, architecture, and the integration of diverse religious symbols. However, these interactions are influenced by majority-minority power dynamics, ethnic stereotypes, and urban spatial policies that may hinder equitable acculturation.

Modern urban multiculturalism, such as in Pontianak, is the result of historical trajectories involving migration, trade, and colonialism, which shaped cities as cultural crossroads. Kisiel (2017) conceptualizes multiculturalism into immanent, instrumental, and touristic forms, each influencing cultural identity formation differently. Cities are not homogeneous entities but spaces of negotiation and identity production, wherein the Kapuas River plays a crucial role in constructing shared meanings (Moreira & Barros,

2009). Local community involvement in intercultural events, river conservation, and social activities indicates that the river acts as a socio-cultural mediator. Nevertheless, environmental degradation, infrastructure development, and pollution pose threats to the river's role as a cultural nexus, as seen in the case of the Kuin River in Banjarmasin (Fitria & Hamid, 2024).

Based on these observations, this article aims to analyze the role of the Kapuas River as a social space facilitating interethnic interaction and cultural acculturation in a multicultural urban setting. The study contributes to the broader literature on the relationship between geographic space and socio-cultural dynamics in local Indonesian contexts, employing an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates cultural geography, urban anthropology, and social interaction theory. The expected outcome is a deeper understanding of how rivers function as social bridges fostering dynamic cultural pluralism and harmony, while offering practical recommendations for preserving river-based cultural heritage in urban development policy.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design, aimed at comprehensively understanding the dynamics of social interaction and cultural acculturation along the Kapuas River within a multicultural urban community. The qualitative approach is selected due to its strength in capturing meanings, lived experiences, and the intricate web of social relationships that cannot be reduced to quantifiable variables (Creswell, 2018). A descriptive-exploratory design enables the researcher to document underexplored phenomena while constructing a contextualized understanding of how the river functions as a social space and a shared cultural site. The research is centered in Kampong Wisata Benua Melayu Laut, Pontianak, West Kalimantan an area along the Kapuas River recognized for its intense multiethnic interaction and coexistence.

Data were collected using three principal techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual and archival documentation. The observation involved active participation in public and cultural activities such as floating markets, religious ceremonies, and traditional festivals. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten purposively selected key informants who met the following criteria: (1) residents from Malay, Chinese, and Dayak ethnic backgrounds who had lived in the area for over ten years, (2) involved in local cultural or community organizations such as Pokdarwis and traditional councils, and (3) possessed in-depth knowledge of social interaction and cultural integration processes. Documentation included photographs of cultural activities, customary documents, and community archives, which served to strengthen data validity and reconstruct the social history of the river as a cultural space. The data collection

spanned two months and encompassed initial exploration, intensive data gathering, and reflective field engagement.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of analysis developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three core components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, allowing the researcher to identify emergent themes and patterns. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation and member checking with key informants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Additionally, the researcher employed positional reflexivity to critically assess their role as an outsider, thereby reducing interpretive bias and enhancing contextual accuracy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This method enables a deep and holistic answer to the research question by positioning the Kapuas River as a socio-cultural agent shaping interethnic relations and cultural acculturation in a diverse urban landscape.

Result

This study reveals that the Kapuas River serves as a vibrant social space deeply embedded in the everyday life of Pontianak's multicultural community, functioning as a primary arena for interaction, communication, and cultural exchange. Participant observation and in-depth interviews show that daily activities along the riverbank are not merely pragmatic but also symbolically and historically meaningful. The floating market, for example, is not just a site of commerce—it is a cultural meeting point where people from diverse ethnic groups, including Malay, Chinese, Dayak, Bugis, and Madurese, encounter one another and build mutual understanding. One respondent stated, *"This river is not just for earning a living. It teaches us how to live together."* This testimony reflects the river's role as a social connector that transcends cultural boundaries.

Beyond economic interactions, social cohesion is also fostered through local institutions such as schools, religious centers, and cultural communities. Several primary schools host classrooms with children from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. A teacher explained, *"In my class, there are Malay, Chinese, and Dayak students. They share food, play together, and never discriminate."* This reflects the role of education as an agent of integration and underscores the river's symbolic centrality in cultivating inclusive social values. Similar sentiments were observed in interfaith collaborations, such as joint community clean-up events near mosques, churches, and temples, emphasizing the river's role in shaping harmonious urban pluralism.

Another significant finding is the presence of a living and dynamic process of cultural acculturation, observable in culinary practices, rituals, and built forms. Riverbank communities offer hybrid cuisines such as laksa Kapuas, a fusion of Malay and Chinese flavors, and local fish curry with Bugis-style seasoning. One food stall owner remarked, *"This recipe comes from my grandmother—she was Chinese, but she cooked with Malay spices."*

Now it's everyone's favorite dish." Cultural blending is also evident in marriage ceremonies, where mixed-ethnic families combine symbolic elements from their respective traditions, and in riverbank homes that fuse Malay architecture with Chinese decorative features. These illustrate how the river space fosters adaptive cultural responses grounded in shared coexistence.

Nonetheless, the study also identifies growing challenges in sustaining the river's socio-cultural functions, particularly in the face of environmental degradation and urban restructuring. An elderly respondent expressed concern: *"Kids no longer play at the river. They prefer gadgets. The river is dirtier now and no longer a gathering place like before."* In recent years, modern housing developments, infrastructure expansion, and pollution have disrupted the organic social spaces once centered around docks, footbridges, and riverside plazas. Traditional communal activities such as collective washing, storytelling on the pier, and hosting rituals by the water have declined, indicating a spatial and social disengagement from the river due to modernization and generational shifts in values.

In response, local communities have begun launching river-based cultural conservation efforts, including river festivals, local history classes, and the restoration of public riverside spaces. An environmental activist explained, *"We organize rowing contests and river food bazaars to help children reconnect with their river culture. If we don't act now, it will all disappear."* These initiatives reflect both cultural preservation and an active reclaiming of the river's social role, reaffirming the river as a site of memory, interaction, and shared identity. Ultimately, Kapuas River communities are not passive victims of change—they are agents of cultural revitalization crafting new narratives about the relationship between space, culture, and collective life.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significance of the Kapuas River as a space for social interaction and cultural acculturation within urban multicultural communities. The river functions not merely as a geographical feature but as a social structure that shapes the ways in which individuals and groups relate to one another. Community engagement in riverside spaces reveals complex social dynamics ranging from floating markets to religious practices and intercultural celebrations. This is consistent with the view of Juliana et al. (2022), who noted that communities along the Martapura River develop socio-economic interactions based on spatial proximity and historical ties to the river. This study also reinforces Mazzarino et al.'s (2015) argument that rivers play a symbolic role in shaping social practices and identity, as reflected in how Pontianak residents instill values of tolerance and social cohesion through river-based activities.

Furthermore, the study confirms that cultural acculturation along the Kapuas River is not only an adaptive process but also a creative and constructive one. The blending of culinary traditions, architectural styles, and customary rituals combining elements of

Malay, Chinese, Dayak, and other cultures demonstrates how intercultural interaction gives rise to new forms that enrich collective identity. This extends the findings of Juairiah et al. (2023), who emphasized the role of family and social communication in forming multicultural families in Central Sulawesi. Cultural identity in Pontianak is not a static entity but is continuously negotiated through daily encounters within the river space. The concept of acculturation orientation by Erten et al. (2018) is also relevant here, as it emphasizes openness to cultural interaction alongside a commitment to preserving one's original identity.

Theoretically, the findings imply that rivers can serve as active platforms for building cohesive multicultural societies. This aligns with Kisiel's (Kisiel, 2017) notion of immanent multiculturalism, where cultural diversity arises naturally through daily urban interactions. Cities like Pontianak become arenas for the continuous reconfiguration of identities through contrast, dialogue, and cultural compromise. In this context, the Kapuas River is not merely a physical space but a symbolic arena where cultural identities are negotiated and redefined. This parallels the work of Yazdani and Lozanovska (2014), who demonstrated how urban spaces in Australia become sites for transcultural expression, where immigrants construct new identities without relinquishing their cultural roots.

The practical contribution of this study lies in its insight into the importance of preserving the social and cultural functions of rivers amidst the pressures of modernization. The findings provide a solid basis for developing community-based urban planning policies that consider the river's role in shaping identity and social interaction. The success of local communities in organizing river festivals, environmental education programs, and the revitalization of traditional architecture demonstrates their capacity to adapt while preserving the river's cultural heritage. This reinforces the Kapuas River's status as a cultural corridor, as highlighted by Umar et al. (2010) and Prabowo et al. (2024), who emphasized the significance of the Pontianak Sultanate's heritage in shaping the riverside cultural landscape.

Nonetheless, this study is not without limitations. The research's focus on the eastern urban area of Pontianak may not fully represent the broader sociocultural dynamics along the entire Kapuas River. Moreover, while the qualitative approach employed offers depth, it remains inherently subjective and context-bound. Ecological challenges such as river pollution and land conversion were not systematically addressed within this study. Therefore, future research using quantitative or mixed methods approaches and broader regional coverage is highly recommended to test the generalizability of these findings and expand the understanding of the relationships between rivers, culture, and social cohesion.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the urgency of integrating social and cultural dimensions into riverine management. The Kapuas River, as both a living space and a symbolic domain, holds great potential to serve as a model for inclusive, sustainable, and culturally grounded river governance. River conservation should be viewed as both a cultural preservation strategy and an ecological reconciliation effort. Hence, cross-sectoral collaboration among government bodies, local communities, and academics is essential to build a shared narrative that positions the river at the heart of social and cultural life in a multicultural city such as Pontianak.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Kapuas River plays a strategic role as a social and cultural space that enhances social interaction and cultural acculturation within the multicultural urban society of Pontianak. The river serves not only as a geographical element but also as a symbolic arena where collective identities are shaped and negotiated through daily intercultural encounters. These findings address the research question on how rivers mediate sociocultural dynamics and contribute significantly to the understanding of rivers' roles in fostering social cohesion and cultural identity in urban settings. The study contributes to the development of interdisciplinary research in cultural geography, urban sociology, and spatial anthropology, and recommends that future river management should not solely focus on ecological aspects, but also take into account the embedded social and cultural values.

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