



***Lapo* as a Communicative Space: Constructing Batak Identity and Cultural Memory Among Migrants in Greater Jakarta**

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Abstrak

This study analyzes the role of *Lapo* in the Greater Jakarta (*Jabodetabek*) area as a space for communication and cultural reproduction for the Batak ethnic community in an urban context. In a metropolitan environment characterized by high mobility and ethnic diversity, ethnic culinary spaces serve not only as places of food consumption but also as space for constructing and maintaining social identity. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with three informants, complemented by field observations and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed for data interpretation. The findings reveal three main dimensions of *Lapo*'s role: First, it serves as a space for the construction and reaffirmation of Batak identity through consumption practices and social interactions among diaspora members. Second, Batak identity is represented through cultural signifiers such as traditional food, Batak music, and spatial atmosphere, balancing ethnic identity and urban professionalism. Third, *Lapo* activates collective memory and transmits identity across generations through shared sensory experiences and communal dining. This study concludes that *Lapo* is not just a culinary venue but a social space that produces and reproduces Batak cultural identity in an urban environment, contributing to cultural communication and social construction studies.

Keywords:

lapo, social identity; cultural communication; batak diaspora; collective memory.

INTRODUCTION

The process of urbanization and migration from various regions to large cities forms a plural social landscape, where identity is no longer singular and static, but is negotiated in daily life (Kochan 2016; Sharma 2021). In the perspective of social construction, reality and identity are formed through repetitive social interactions, experiences, and practices (Berger et al. 2023; Longhofer et al. 2016). In the midst of complex metropolitan dynamics, urban societies need social spaces that allow them to maintain a sense of cultural attachment and community solidarity. One of the important mediums in the process is culinary.

Food not only functions as a biological need, but also as a cultural practice that is full of symbolic, social, and historical meaning (Neuman 2019; Patra 2022; Zykova et al. 2015). Ethnic restaurants and food stalls in large cities are often social spaces where collective memory, cultural identity, and community solidarity are reproduced (Duruz & Khoo, 2015). In the context of diaspora communities, food can play a role as an identity marker that brings together the past and present, as well as bridging generations (Neuman 2019; Patra 2022). Therefore, the culinary space is not only a space for consumption, but also a space for cultural communication.

In the context of the Batak community in Greater Jakarta, one of the forms of ethnic cuisine that is developing is *Lapo*. Historically, *Lapo* is known as a typical Batak stall or shop that has a social function in the life of the people of North Sumatra, not only as a place to eat but also as a space for community interaction and conversation (Sihombing, 2018). When present in urban spaces such as Jakarta and its surroundings, *Lapo* enters a new dynamic: adapting to metropolitan demands while maintaining certain cultural symbols. In the perspective of cultural representation, identity is formed through the system of signs and the practice of signification (MacCannell 2021). Food menus, spatial layout, music, language, and interaction patterns become symbolic elements that produce cultural meaning in the ethnic culinary space.

A number of previous studies have highlighted the relationship between food and cultural identity. Azhari, Pillai, and Mat Isa (2023) show how Melaka Portuguese cookbooks represent cultural identity through culinary texts and symbols. Pugra, Kencanawati, and Kurniawan (2025) emphasized that traditional food plays a role in shaping social identity while facing the challenges of modernization and commodification. Lal and Jayakumar (2025) found that food practices in the Malayalee diaspora in Canada became a medium for the enculturation of second-generation identity. Wallenböck (2026) shows that food was able to maintain the ethnic identity of Tibetan Muslims in Saudi Arabia even when the language was shifting. In addition, a study of the politics of authenticity in Makassar's culinary tourism shows that traditional foods are often negotiated between cultural heritage and economic commodities (Putra et al., 2025).

Although these studies affirm the importance of food in identity formation, there are still limited studies that specifically examine the ethnic culinary space in the Indonesian metropolitan area as a space for social communication and cultural reproduction of diaspora communities in daily practice. The study of *Lapo* as a social space for the Batak community in Greater Jakarta from the perspective of social construction and cultural communication is still relatively limited. Academically, this research has urgency because it expands the study of food and identity from the realm of symbolic representation to the analysis of concrete social spaces where identity is negotiated and institutionalized in urban life. Using the perspective of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and cultural representation (Hall, 1997), this study seeks to see *Lapo* as a simultaneous space of identity construction, cultural communication, and social reproduction in the context of metropolitan Indonesia. Based on this background, this study seeks to answer How does *Lapo* in Greater Jakarta play a role as a space for communication and reproduction of the identity of the Batak ethnic community in the urban environment?

Berger and Luckmann (1996) argue that social reality is not understood as something objective and fixed, but rather as the result of a construction process that takes place through daily social interaction. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* affirm that society is a human product as well as an objective reality that then reshapes individual consciousness through a dialectical process of externalization, objectification, and internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Identity, in this framework, is not an essential attribute that is naturally attached, but the result of social processes that are constantly reproduced in everyday life. Repetitive practices such as conversation, eating habits, language

use, and participation in communal activities result in habitualization that is ultimately institutionalized and accepted as a social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the context of migration, new social situations require individuals to renegotiate their identity through interaction with fellow community members as well as with the wider environment. Meeting spaces such as *lapo* can be understood as a social space where the reality of "*Batakness*" is externalized through cultural practices, objectified through collective routines (e.g., social gatherings, Batak music, typical food consumption), and then internalized as part of the self-consciousness of the nomads. Thus, the *lapo* does not only function as a physical location, but as a social structure that allows for the sustainable production and reproduction of ethnic identity in urban life.

If Berger and Luckmann provide a foundation for how social reality is constructed, Stuart Hall provides a foothold for analysis of how identity is produced through cultural representations and practices. Hall rejects the view of identity as static or essential; on the contrary, cultural identity is understood as a process of "becoming" that is always in formation and negotiation (Hall, 1990). Identity is formed through systems of representation language, symbols, images, and narratives that allow individuals to interpret themselves and their communities (Hall, 1997). In the context of ethnic culinary spaces, food, traditional music, regional languages, and visual symbols function as a medium of representation that produces and articulates meanings about ethnicity. *Lapo*, in this perspective, can be understood as a space of identity articulation where "*Batakness*" is not only remembered but also performed, negotiated, and affirmed through everyday communication practices.

The practice of singing Batak songs, speaking in regional languages, or sharing stories about hometown becomes representational acts that shape and affirm collective identity. Hall also emphasizes that diaspora identity never completely returns to its pure form of origin, but is always formed in contemporary historical and social conditions (Hall, 1990). Thus, Batak identity in urban areas such as Greater Jakarta is not a reproduction of an identity that is identical to that in the land of origin, but the result of new articulation formed in urban space through social interaction. *Lapo* is a medium of communication that allows this representation process to take place dynamically.

The temporal dimension of such identity construction is clarified through Maurice Halbwachs's thinking on collective memory. Halbwachs argues that memory is never fully individual, but rather is always formed within social frameworks that provide language, symbols, and a common reference structure (Halbwachs, 1992). Individuals remember as members of the group; Even personal experiences are mediated by shared social categories. In the context of migration, memories about hometown acquire their meaning when they are activated in collective interaction. Certain social spaces can serve as "memory buffers" that allow past experiences to be reconstructed and shared communally (Halbwachs, 1992). The practice of eating together, conversations about the origins of the region, or listening to traditional music creates social conditions that allow the activation of these collective memories. Thus, nostalgia for Batak land is not just an individual emotional experience, but a social process that is validated through group interaction. The integration of the thinking of Berger and Luckmann (1966), Hall (1990; 1997), and Halbwachs (1992) allows this study to position *lapo* as a communication space that connects social, symbolic, and temporal dimensions in the construction of ethnic identity. Batak identity in domestic migration is

understood as the result of communicative, representational, and collective memory-based social processes that are continuously reproduced in urban daily spaces.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a qualitative. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand the meaning of *Lapo* as a social space in shaping and reproducing Batak identity in the context of the urban diaspora. In the constructivist paradigm, social reality is understood as the result of the construction of meaning constructed through social interaction and subjective experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Thus, the focus of this research is not on quantitative measurements of consumption behavior, but on how informants interpret their experiences in *Lapo* as part of identity, memory, and daily social practices. This paradigm allows researchers to explore the process of meaning-formation contextually and reflectively.

The research subjects consisted of three people who were purposively selected based on their involvement and experience in visiting *Lapo* in the Greater Jakarta area. The purposive sampling technique is used to select participants who have direct relevance to the research focus (Patton, 2015). The main data collection technique is in-depth interviews in a semi-structured format, which gives informants the flexibility to develop a broad and reflective narrative of their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interviews were conducted to explore personal experiences, perceptions of culinary authenticity, the meaning of cultural symbols, and the practice of inheriting identity in the context of families and diaspora communities.

In addition to interviews, this study also uses field observation and documentation studies as a form of data triangulation. Observations were carried out in several *Lapo* in the Greater Jakarta area to observe the atmosphere of the space, cultural symbols displayed, visitor interaction, and consumption practices that took place. Field observation allows researchers to understand the social context directly and capture spatial dynamics that are not always revealed in interviews (Angrosino, 2007; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Documentation studies are carried out through the search of promotional materials, visual documentation, and relevant academic literature to enrich the analysis and strengthen the validity of the findings (Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The combination of these three techniques interviews, observations, and documentation—is used to increase the credibility and depth of research analysis.

The data analysis in this study was carried out in stages using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows researchers to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning that emerge from interview and observation data systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process begins at the data collection stage, where the researcher transcribes interviews, rereads the data thoroughly, and makes initial notes on the themes that emerge.

The first stage is open coding, which is identifying the units of significance from interview excerpts and observation notes. The second stage is axial coding, which is grouping the initial codes into more conceptual categories based on the interconnectedness of meaning. The third stage is selective coding, which is compiling large themes that represent the

construction of meaning as a whole. This process is carried out reflexively and iteratively, in line with the constructivist approach that views analysis as a dialogical process between data and researchers (Charmaz, 2014). The resulting final theme is then interpreted by linking it to the theoretical frameworks of social construction, cultural representation, and collective memory.

The validity of data in this qualitative research is maintained through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is achieved through triangulation techniques, namely the use of in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation studies to enrich and verify data (Patton, 2015). In addition, the researcher conducted repeated readings of the transcript and matched the findings between informants to ensure consistency of meaning.

Transferability is maintained by providing a thick description of the research context, informant characteristics, and social situation of *Lapo* in Greater Jakarta, so that readers can assess the possibility of applying the findings to other contexts. Dependability is carried out through systematic documentation of the research process, including field notes and data analysis stages. Meanwhile, confirmability is maintained by ensuring that the interpretation is based on empirical data citations and not solely on the researchers' assumptions. With these steps, this study seeks to maintain methodological consistency while maintaining the depth of interpretation within a constructivist framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lapo as a Space for Construction and Reaffirmation of Batak Identity

The results of the study show that *Lapo* is interpreted as a daily space where Batak identity is practiced through eating habits that have been internalized since childhood. The choice to eat at *Lapo* is not just a culinary preference, but is rooted in a habitus of taste and personal comfort. The first subject of this study stated that he chose *Lapo* because he was "used to... already know what the expectations are". A similar thing is expressed by the second Subject who affirms that "the tongue is accustomed from childhood... feel good until now". While the second subject simplifies the experience by saying, "if we miss the village, we just eat at *Lapo*". These quotes show that the practice of eating in *Lapo* becomes an expression of identity that is not always reflexively conscious, but lives in the habits of the body and tastes.

Apart from being an individual practice, *Lapo* also functions as a social space that brings together and reaffirms collective identity. The first subject explained that *Lapo* is now not only a place to eat or a culinary space but has been transformed into a "place of social gathering... Meeting... even 3M events". The third subject added that the most meaningful experience was when meeting old relatives or colleagues in *Lapo*, communication that had been cut off due to lost contact, reconnected when meeting in *Lapo* even if by accident. Even the second subject mentioned that even before the Christmas meeting, the Christmas committee from his community often chose to eat together in *Lapo*. These findings show that *Lapo* has evolved from a mere food stall to a social node of the diaspora, where Batak identity is affirmed through interaction and togetherness.

"Now there are a lot of *lapos* so it's like a place to hang out, a place to meet people. So, now that *Lapo-Lapo* is on average they provide *live music*, and they provide space for social gatherings, for example the capacity for how many *pax* like that. So, on average, in Bekasi too,

I know some *Lapo* in Bekasi and in Jakarta as well, so it's not just a place to eat, but a reunion with friends as well, family gatherings as well (Subject 1)

"Well, this one is special. If we go to *Lapo*, we like to meet old friends who maybe 10-20 years we haven't met, then meet in *Lapo*, that's something for me. When I met a friend 10-20 years ago, met there, wow, immediately exchanged cellphones, so keep in touch again, that's indeed the place. So, indeed, if for example to *Lapo*, I must like that. Wow, that's what I know. Who is it? I know his face, so I remember an old friend again" (Subject 3)

"yes, it's like I used to go to the Christmas committee; it's a meal." We eat at *Lapo* first before the meeting," he said. Yes, it must be intense" (Subject 2).



Figure 1. Relaxing Atmosphere at Several Batak *Lapo*: Entertainment, Cuisine, and the Delight of Tradition

Source: Various Batak Restaurant Promotions and Events

Lapo also acts as an identity reaffirmation. The presence of *lapo* reactivates identity reflectively through the experience of space and regional or ethnic menus as well as the cultural symbols contained in it. The first subject of this study stated that he chose *lapo* because in addition to being used to the taste since childhood when he was in his hometown, *lapo* also reminded him of his identity overseas as a Batak ethnicity.

Cultural Representation and Authenticity in the *Lapo* Space

The second theme shows that Batak identity in *Lapo* is represented through strong cultural symbols, especially food and music. Typical menus such as *Saksang*, *Arsik* carp, *gotta* chicken emerged as the most dominant markers. The second subject stated emphatically, "if there is no *saksang* or baked B2, it is not *Lapo*". The same thing was also expressed by the

third subject who said that the *saksang* or grilled menu showed Batak identity. In fact, he associates it with traditional practices and authentic tastes, such as "roasted mixed with blood is really a typical Batak taste". These statements show that certain menus are not just consumed, but interpreted as a valid and authentic symbol of belief.

Referring to the second and third subjects, certain menus, especially *saksang*, are the main markers of a *Lapo*. For them, the menu is the main marker of *Kebatakan's* identity. The menu becomes a symbolic representation of collective identity.

"If there is no *saksang* and grilled menu, it is not *Lapo*" (Subject 2)

In addition to food, Batak music is also an important element in building an atmosphere of identity. The subjects of this study said that the existence of *live music* with the nuances of Batak songs made them able to spend longer in a *Lapo*. The subjects said that when they heard the Batak songs being sung together, they felt as if they were in their hometown.

"... once meal, dance, sing" can be 3 to 4 hours in *Lapo* (Subject 3)

"If you have heard music or there is live music, you will feel more in the village" (Subject 2)
"Besides eating deliciously, reminding us of our typical foods from the region, and then chatting with friends, so what's the term... *The vibes*, huh? *The vibes* are like we are in Tapanuli" (Subject 1)

Even so, the authenticity of *lapo* in Tapanuli is stronger and felt than *lapo* in urban areas. There is a tension between authenticity and modernization. As stated by the first subject, *Lapo* in Tapanuli feels more authentic. On the other hand, the first and third subjects assessed that some *Lapo* is not professional such as mall restaurants, there are still many services that are not in accordance with consumer expectations such as toilet cleanliness, friendliness of management services, completeness of menus, etc. In some places, the second subject even revealed that the menu served was often not in accordance with the original menu, such as spices and how to process certain menus so that it caused a loss of desire to return to the *lapo* because it was not authentic. These findings show that the representation of the *Lapo* is negotiated between the purity of taste and the demands of urban management.

***Lapo* as a Diaspora Collective Memory Space and Identity Reproduction**

Lapo serves as a space for the activation of the diaspora's collective memory. The taste and aroma of food is a trigger for hometown nostalgia. The subject of this study revealed that when longing for the atmosphere in the hometown, the simplest solution is to eat at *Lapo*. The first subject also admitted that being in *Lapo* often made her realize her identity as a Batak woman.

"What is certain is that Batak is, for me, like for myself, identity. An identity that will not be able to disappear at any time, even though it is actually not proud either, maybe it is just because I am used to the Batak environment So, there is something that sometimes realizes that "Oh yes, I am Batak". Thus, sometimes it reminds us of our identity when we have been in community with people outside of us for too long, so when we come to *Lapo*, I am like myself "Oh yes, I'm a Batak person" with for example, like ulos and all kinds of things. Sometimes it is made there" (Subject1)

Lapo in this case is also a space that connects past experiences with current urban life, bringing back collective memories through sensory experiences. Furthermore, *Lapo* also plays a role in the transmission of identity to the next generation. The third subject expressed his happiness when his grandson enjoyed the traditional Batak menu served at home, "I am very

happy... if you have enjoyed *Saksang*, it is true that it is Batak". He even emphasized that the appetite should be reproduced to the next generation. These findings suggest that identity reproduction does not only take place through formal language or customs, but through the practice of eating in the family and visits to *Lapo*. Thus, *Lapo* becomes a space for the reproduction of memory and cross-generational identity in the context of the Batak diaspora in the Urban Jabodetabek community.

Overall, the findings of this study show that *Lapo* cannot be understood solely as a culinary space, but as a meaningful social space in the life of the Batak diaspora in Greater Jakarta. Through repeated eating practices, cultural symbols such as traditional Batak food and music as well as Batak songs, ulos and languages, as well as cross-generational experiences, *Lapo* becomes a space where Batak identity is practiced, represented, and inherited. The identity does not appear as something fixed and essential, but is built in the interactions, habits, and daily experiences of the research subjects. Thus, the meaning of *Lapo* is formed through the social processes that continue to take place in relationships between individuals and communities.

Overall, the findings of this study show that *Lapo* in Greater Jakarta is not just a space for food consumption, but a space for the social construction of Batak identity in the context of the urban diaspora. Referring to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), social identity is formed through the process of externalization, objectification, and internalization. The practice of eating in *Lapo* is a form of externalizing identity through repetitive daily actions "used to it", "the tongue is used to it from childhood". *Lapo* then underwent a transformation as a diaspora social institution a place for social gatherings, reunions, community meetings, and even accidental meetings with old friends. Batak identity in this context is not inherited through formal doctrine, but is institutionalized in the practice of space and collective customs.

When compared to the research of Sarah Sakeenah Azhari et al. (2023) on the representation of cultural identity in Melaka Portuguese cookbooks, there are similarities in seeing food as a medium of identity articulation. But the difference lies in the locus of the production of meaning. In Azhari et al.'s study, identity is constructed through text and narrative recipes as symbolic representations. In this study, Batak identity is constructed in direct social practice through space, interaction, and bodily experience. Thus, this study expands the study of culinary representation from the textual realm to the realm of diaspora social praxis.

The dimension of representation in this study also strengthens the argument of Stuart Hall (1997) that identity is formed through a sign system. The *Saksang* menu, which is mainly made from pork, appears as the central signifier of the bait "if there is no *saksang* and roasted, it is not *Lapo*"; "The scattered menu shows the Batak identity". It is not just a menu, but a symbol that condenses the meaning of customs, togetherness, and collective history. This finding intersects with the research of I Wayan Pugra et al. (2025) which shows that traditional food plays an important role in shaping Indonesia's social identity while facing modernization challenges. In the context of *Lapo*, the tension between "more authentic in Tapanuli" and the demands of the city's professionalization suggests that the Batak culinary identity is negotiated within the logic of the urban market. Authenticity is a space of contestation between cultural heritage and economic commodities.

Furthermore, this study shows that *Lapo* functions as a diaspora collective memory space. Referring to the concept of Halbwachs (1992), collective memory lives within a concrete social framework. Batak taste, aroma, and music trigger memories of hometown. Accidental meetings with friends or relatives show that *Lapo* has become a space for social network reconnection that renews ethnic solidarity. These findings are in line with Lijo Lal and Jayakumar's (2025) study of the Malayalee diaspora in Canada, which found that food is a medium for the enculturation of second-generation identity. Similarly, Wallenböck's (2026) research suggests that food can retain Tibetan identity even when the language is shifting. Likewise, research from Tran (2023) on traditional culinary practices in Hanoi on culinary practices that play a role in the construction of class identity. In the context of the Batak ethnicity, *Lapo* is a space where the unity is maintained not through formal language, but through the experience of taste and togetherness.

In addition, this study also confirms the existence of the politics of authenticity in the culinary space, as discussed in the study "From Heritage to Commodity: The Politics of Authenticity in Makassar's Culinary Tourism". Authenticity in *Lapo* is negotiated between "roasted with blood" as a symbol of purity and the need for professionalization, cleanliness, and urban comfort. One of the research subjects even stated that *Lapo* in Medan is "not as professional as a mall restaurant". This means that the Batak ethnic identity does not stand outside capitalism, but adapts to it. *Lapo* becomes a hybrid space: between cultural heritage and business strategy.

In terms of identity reproduction, this study shows that the inheritance of identity takes place through the experience of the body and taste. The pride when grandchildren enjoy traditional Batak ethnic menus shows that identity enculturation occurs through family consumption practices. This expands on the findings of Lal & Jayakumar (2025) that the diaspora maintains identity through domestic rituals and everyday practices. In the context of the Batak ethnicity, *Lapo* became a bridge between the first generation of migrants and the next generation of urbanists.

Theoretically, this research makes three main contributions. First, it expands on Berger & Luckmann's theory of social construction by showing that the institutionalization of identity occurs not only in formal institutions, but also in diaspora culinary spaces. Second, it enriches Stuart Hall's theory of representation by showing that certain traditional foods of an ethnicity can serve as a master signifier that centralizes ethnic identity. Third, it strengthens the concept of collective memory by showing that ethnic memory can be activated through sensory experiences (taste, food menus, aromas, music), not just through historical narratives.

Practically, this study shows the importance of managing *Lapo* as a cultural space as well as a business space. Professionalization of services and cleanliness is the key to keeping *Lapo* relevant in big cities, without losing the authenticity of taste. In addition, *Lapo* can function as a cultural education space for the young generation of the diaspora through community programs, *thematic live music*, or cultural activities. Thus, the preservation of Batak identity does not only depend on formal customary institutions, but also on the sustainability of the ethnic culinary space as a space for the production of daily identity.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that *Lapo* in Greater Jakarta is not just a space for culinary consumption, but a social space where Batak identity is constructed, represented, and reproduced in the context of the urban diaspora. Through the practice of eating that is internalized since childhood, *Lapo* becomes a medium of expression of identity that lives in the habits and experiences of the body. Cultural symbols such as traditional cuisine, Batak music, and the atmosphere of the space serve as markers that condense the meaning of *kebata*, while the social interactions in its social gatherings, reunions, community meetings make *Lapo* a diaspora social institution that brings together and affirms ethnic solidarity. In addition, *Lapo* also functions as a space for the activation of collective memory and the inheritance of identity across generations. The taste, smell, and experience of togetherness bring back memories of hometown while strengthening the attachment to Batak identity in the midst of multicultural metropolitan life. The inheritance of tastes and consumption practices to children and grandchildren shows that identity is not only transmitted through traditional discourse or language, but through concrete everyday experiences. Thus, *Lapo* can be understood as a social space that simultaneously builds meaning, maintains cultural sustainability, and negotiates Batak identity in the dynamics of big cities.

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