

## Research Article

# A Comparative Study of Thanksgiving Traditions: Gotilon in Batak Culture and Erntedankfest in German Society

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze and compare the thanksgiving tradition of Gotilon in Batak society with the celebration of Erntedankfest in German culture. Both traditions are expressions of gratitude for the harvest and life's blessings, yet they have developed within different cultural, social, and religious contexts. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method with a comparative-analytical approach. The findings reveal that Gotilon carries a strong religious dimension integrated with Batak customary practices, whereas Erntedankfest is more symbolic in modern German society, focusing on church services and social activities. This comparison highlights how values of gratitude are manifested through traditions shaped by cultural norms and societal development. This study is expected to enrich cross-cultural understanding and foster greater appreciation for both local and global heritage traditions.

**Keywords:** Batak Culture; Comparative Analysis; Erntedankfest; German Culture; Gotilon; Thanksgiving Celebration.

## 1. Introduction

Indonesia is a developing country that has not yet fully recognized the importance of protecting traditional knowledge and cultural expressions. This has allowed certain nations both developing and developed to claim the traditional knowledge of others as their own inventions, registering them under intellectual property laws. This situation clearly disadvantages indigenous peoples as the rightful cultural owners, preventing them from utilizing their cultural heritage to establish a solid economic foundation for their livelihoods.

Culture emerges as a system of ideas developed through actions that are passed on to the next generation. It includes all the knowledge, art, laws, and customs of a society, making it highly complex. Tradition, as a part of culture [7], arises from actions performed in the past, transmitted from generation to generation, and may transform over time. Even when traditions change, they continue to be practiced and eventually become embedded in the culture itself. This evolution of tradition can result from various factors, one of which is the encounter and mutual influence of two or more cultures.

Gratitude is experienced and expressed by individuals in a variety of ways. It may involve reflecting on the past with thankfulness for memories and blessings, embracing the present without taking it for granted, or looking toward the future with hope and optimism. Regardless of one's level of gratitude, this quality can be cultivated and developed further [2].

According to [8]:

*“Gratitude is shown to relate to various clinically relevant phenomena, including psychopathology, adaptive personality characteristics, health, positive relationships, subjective and eudemonic well-being, and humanistically orientated functioning. Four forms of interventions to increase gratitude are critically considered, along with methodological critiques, and a research agenda for the future study of these techniques.”*

Gratitude is significantly different from other moral emotions such as empathy, sympathy, guilt, and shame [2].

The HKBP congregation in Germany emerged in the 1960s when some Batak people living in Germany felt the need for a place to worship that aligned with both their cultural

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traditions and Christian faith. Initially informal, these gatherings led to the establishment of an organized church under the HKBP in 1966 [5]. Today, the HKBP in Germany serves not only Batak individuals but also other Indonesians and even some Germans interested in Batak culture and Christianity. Churches were founded in major cities such as Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Berlin, which have become key centers of the Indonesian diaspora in Europe.

In Germany, Erntedankfest is mostly celebrated in churches. Since 1972, this tradition has been observed annually on the first Sunday of October, following the initiative of the German Bishops' Conference. Offerings and decorations made of dried flowers, grains, and fruits are used to adorn the altar. Straw wreaths and crowns are also displayed as symbolic ornaments. The celebration serves as a reminder that the harvest is not solely the result of human labor but also a gift from the Almighty.

The Gotilon Festival is a sacred celebration of the Toba Batak people held to express gratitude for agricultural abundance. It not only commemorates successful harvests but also acknowledges that all blessings ultimately come from God. The festival includes a combination of rituals such as prayers and ancestral honor, making it a meaningful moment that reinforces social cohesion and communal solidarity. Gotilon also plays a key role in preserving cultural values handed down through generations.

The purpose of this study is to explain the implementation of the Gotilon tradition within the Batak community and compare it to a similar tradition in Germany. The term *Gotilon* in the Batak language means *manjomput*, or "gathering rice," a symbolic act of gratitude for agricultural blessings. This research was conducted because the Gotilon festival continues to be remembered and practiced by the HKBP Janji Matogu Church community. The festival, held in November after the harvest season, is considered unique for incorporating both rice gathering (*eme*) and pig slaughtering, which enrich its cultural character. This was confirmed in an interview on October 7, 2024, with Rev. Dr. Simarmata, M.Si, the church administrator of HKBP Janji Matogu in Simalungun Regency.

In a follow-up interview with the church's youth coordinator [6], the researcher learned that there are two perspectives among the younger generation regarding Gotilon: one held by youth in rural areas and another by those in urban areas. Rural youth are generally more familiar with the tradition, whereas many young people living in urban settings are unaware of its significance. This finding indicates a knowledge gap among the younger generation particularly in cities which could lead to the fading of traditional practices. Therefore, raising awareness and educating youth about local culture is essential to ensure its continued appreciation and preservation.

Due to the rapid advancement of technology and the strong influence of global culture, today's youth are increasingly exposed to foreign cultural norms and practices. As a result, local traditions and cultural heritage risk being neglected or forgotten. This threatens not only the practice of these traditions but also the cultural identity of communities. It is thus vital for younger generations to receive education on local cultural values and to engage in cultural activities so that they can develop pride in their heritage. Cultural preservation efforts should become part of everyday life not merely an academic endeavor.

To understand how religious and cultural values shape the way people express gratitude, this study compares how thankfulness is celebrated in Batak and German traditions. While both aim to express appreciation for life's blessings, the forms and meanings of these expressions are deeply influenced by their respective cultural contexts. In Germany, thanksgiving tends to be more formal and rational, reflecting values of individualism and order. In contrast, the Batak express gratitude through emotional and communal rituals that emphasize family ties and social harmony. This comparative perspective highlights not only the differences and similarities in these traditions but also how cultural frameworks shape the meaning of gratitude itself.

## 2. Literature Review

Understanding Gotilon and Erntedankfest as cultural expressions of gratitude requires a review of literature related to religious practices, cultural construction, and ritual theory. This review is organized into three main areas: (1) prior studies on Gotilon and Erntedankfest, (2) theories of ritual and culture, and (3) identifying gaps in existing research.

## 2.1. Previous Studies on Gotilon and Erntedankfest

Research on Gotilon is primarily conducted in local contexts. For instance, highlights the role of the church and indigenous community in preserving spiritual values and social solidarity through Gotilon. Conversely, explores Erntedankfest in modern Germany, emphasizing its shift from a sacred ritual to a more symbolic, culturally oriented celebration [4].

Although these studies offer valuable insights, they lack a systematic comparative approach. Furthermore, few studies have examined how religious, social, and cultural elements interact across these two geographically and historically distinct traditions.

## 2.2 Theories of Ritual and Culture

Theory of *communitas* explains how rituals foster social cohesion. This is relevant to Gotilon, which serves as a medium for reinforcing social bonds and Batak cultural identity. Emphasized the significance of symbols in religion and culture, which applies to modern Erntedankfest rituals such as harvest decorations and church services [3].

These theories provide a framework for analyzing how thanksgiving rituals shape religious and social meanings. They also allow for exploration into how globalization and secularization influence the transformation of such traditions.

## 2.3 Research Gaps

There exists a significant gap in current literature a lack of cross-cultural approaches that directly compare Gotilon and Erntedankfest across religious, social, and cultural dimensions. Moreover, the impact of social changes such as modernization on the meaning and function of these traditions has not been fully explored. This study seeks to address these gaps by applying cultural and ritual theories to analyze both traditions in contemporary contexts.

## 3. Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a comparative analysis method. The focus of this method is to explore and compare the meaning, function, and implementation of the Gotilon tradition in Batak society with the Erntedankfest celebration in German society. The research is carried out through the following systematic steps:

- **Literature Study**  
The initial step involves gathering and reviewing various literature sources, including theories related to culture, religion, and ritual, as well as previous research discussing the Gotilon and Erntedankfest traditions.
- **Primary Data Collection**  
Primary data is obtained through observation and interviews. Observation is conducted during Gotilon celebrations in the HKBP church environment. Interviews are conducted with informants such as church leaders, Batak traditional figures, and congregation members directly involved in the tradition. Data on Erntedankfest is obtained through written documents, documentary videos, and official reports publicly available.
- **Data Categorization and Reduction**  
Collected data is categorized into three main dimensions: religious, social, and cultural. Data reduction is then performed to filter the most relevant information according to the research objectives.
- **Comparative Analysis**  
Data from both traditions are compared systematically based on the established categories. The analysis highlights similarities, differences, and the socio-religious context surrounding both traditions.
- **Conclusion Drawing**  
The final step is formulating the results of the analysis into conclusions that address the research questions and objectives.

### 3.1. Algorithm/Pseudocode

To clarify the comparison between the Gotilon and Erntedankfest traditions, the data collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis were examined based on three main dimensions: religious, social, and cultural. These dimensions were selected as they represent the most dominant aspects shaping the meaning and practice of the two

thanksgiving traditions. The following table presents a comparative overview resulting from the data categorization and analysis conducted in this study.

**Table 1.** Comparative Analysis of Gotilon and Erntedankfest Traditions

**Algoritma 1.** Comparative Analysis of Gotilon and Erntedankfest Traditions

INPUT: Observational and interview data on Gotilon and Erntedankfest

OUTPUT: Comparative analysis results of religious, social, and cultural dimensions

- 1: Collect relevant literature on cultural, religious, and ritual theories
- 2: Conduct observation of Gotilon celebration in the HKBP church context
- 3: Conduct interviews with key informants (church leaders, traditional figures, congregation members)
- 4: Gather documentary data on Erntedankfest from written and audiovisual sources
- 5: Categorize data into three dimensions: religious, social, and cultural
- 6: Reduce data to filter the most relevant information
- 7: Compare Gotilon and Erntedankfest data based on predetermined dimensions
- 8: Analyze similarities and differences across each dimension
- 9: Formulate conclusions based on the comparative findings
- 10: End

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the data analysis process obtained through observation, interviews, and documentary study regarding the Gotilon and Erntedankfest traditions. The explanation is structured systematically by describing the tools and data sources used, the initial stages of data analysis and categorization, the findings based on religious, social, and cultural dimensions, and an in-depth discussion that links the results to the initial hypothesis. By presenting data in table format along with critical interpretation of each finding, this section aims to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of how gratitude is expressed within these two distinct cultural contexts.

##### 4.1 Tools and Data Sources

This study did not utilize sophisticated hardware or software, as it is a qualitative study. However, documentation tools such as a camera, voice recorder, and notebook were used during observations and interviews to collect accurate data. Primary data sources were obtained through direct observation of Gotilon celebrations at HKBP and interviews with key informants, including church leaders, traditional figures, and congregation members. For Erntedankfest, data was sourced from written documentation and public video materials available online, including church celebration recordings and cultural articles.

##### 4.2 Preliminary Analysis and Data Categorization

The collected data were categorized into three dimensions: religious, social, and cultural, aligned with the study's analytical focus. Data reduction was conducted to filter out only the most relevant information in addressing the research questions.

##### 4.3 Comparison Results and Analysis

The comparative results between the two traditions are presented in Table 1 below:

**Table 2.** Comparative Analysis of Gotilon and Erntedankfest Based on Three Dimensions

Dimension	Gotilon (Batak)	Erntedankfest (Germany)
Religious	Conducted in church with liturgy, hymns, and thanksgiving prayers	Held in church with worship and harvest-themed decorations
Social	Strengthens solidarity among Batak congregation and families	Participated in more symbolically, often individually
Cultural	Integrated with Batak customs (manortor, traditional rituals)	Not integrated with local customs, more symbolic in nature

From the table above, it is evident that Gotilon offers a more complex integration of religious and cultural elements, blending Batak tradition with Christian worship. In contrast,

Erntedankfest tends to be secularized, especially in modern German society, where its religious meaning is fading and its practice is becoming more symbolic.

### 4.3 Discussion and Hypothesis Connection

The initial hypothesis proposed that differences in cultural background and social development affect how thanksgiving is practiced and understood. The findings support this hypothesis. Gotilon thrives in a society that highly values tradition and familial structure, making its religious and cultural values deeply intertwined. Meanwhile, Erntedankfest, practiced in a more individualistic and secular society, has shifted toward symbolic and aesthetic celebration.

A key finding of this study is that gratitude is a universal value, but its expression is profoundly shaped by a community's social, cultural, and religious structures. Gotilon and Erntedankfest serve as clear examples of how religion, culture, and society interact to shape collective expressions of thanksgiving.

## 5. Comparison with State-of-the-Art Research

To complement the results and discussion, this study is compared with several relevant previous works to more precisely highlight its contribution. Most prior research on Gotilon, tends to focus solely on the liturgical aspects and the church's role in the practice of the tradition. Meanwhile, studies on Erntedankfest in Germany, as reflected in regional church reports, emphasize its spiritual meaning or religious history in the context of modern society.

However, there has been no prior study that directly compares Gotilon and Erntedankfest within a single cross-cultural analytical framework. This is where the key contribution of this study lies: offering a systematic mapping of similarities and differences between the two thanksgiving traditions rooted in distinct religious and cultural contexts, using cultural and ritual theoretical approaches.

Furthermore, this research broadens the understanding of how gratitude, as a universal value, is expressed locally and contextually, depending on each society's social structure and cultural heritage. These findings position the study as both a complement and a development of prior research in the field.

## 6. Conclusion

This study compares the Gotilon tradition in Batak society and the Erntedankfest celebration in German society based on religious, social, and cultural dimensions. The main findings indicate that Gotilon strongly integrates Christian religious elements with Batak cultural practices, while Erntedankfest in Germany has undergone a shift toward symbolic celebration, with weaker religious associations.

These findings support the initial hypothesis that cultural background and social structure significantly influence how gratitude is expressed through traditional practices. Gotilon reflects the closeness between religion and custom in Batak society, which values kinship and collective traditions. In contrast, Erntedankfest reflects a modern society that is more individualistic and secular.

The implications of these findings suggest that gratitude, as a universal concept, manifests in diverse forms depending on the surrounding societal structure. This study contributes to broader cross-cultural understanding of the relationship between religion, culture, and tradition in collective expressions.

The limitation of this study lies in the fact that Erntedankfest data were not obtained through direct observation, but through literature and documentary sources. Future research is encouraged to conduct direct fieldwork in Germany and expand the range of participants to enrich the analysis. Additionally, follow-up studies may explore how younger generations interpret and preserve these traditions amid the forces of globalization.

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