

Gau Maraja Leangleang: A Cultural Gathering and Driving the Economy Through MSMEs

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the Gau Maraja Leangleang phenomenon as a cultural event that goes beyond preserving local heritage and significantly contributes to economic development through the empowerment of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). This research adopts a qualitative approach with a case study focused on the location where Gau Maraja Leangleang was held. Data collection was conducted through participant observation, in-depth interviews with MSMEs, event organizers, and visitors, and analysis of related documents. The results show that Gau Maraja Leangleang successfully created a conducive ecosystem for MSMEs to interact directly with consumers, introduce local products, and substantially increase revenue. The resulting cultural interactions not only strengthen local identity but also open up significant new market opportunities. Furthermore, it was found that the synergy between cultural and economic aspects is essential for the sustainability of the event and the overall empowerment of the community.

Keywords: *Gau Maraja Leangleang, Culture, Economy, MSMEs, Cultural Tourism, Community Empowerment.*



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, with its rich cultural heritage spread across various regions, possesses unique characteristics in each culture (Antara & Yogantasari, 2018). This uniqueness not only serves as an identity but also holds great potential for development, both as a preservation asset and as an economic driver. One interesting phenomenon that clearly demonstrates the synergy between culture and economy is the holding of various festivals or traditional events (Diwyarthi et al., 2024), such as Gau Maraja Leangleang. This traditional cultural event is performed by the Bugis tribe, the majority of the Maros Regency community (Wekke, 2013). This activity is not only a public event but also demonstrates culture and education from ancient times to the modern era. It has now developed beyond its original function as a mere ritual or traditional celebration. It has transformed into a crucial strategic platform for local Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). The presence of thousands of visitors, both from within and outside the region, naturally creates a large and dynamic potential market for local MSME products.

However, there are not many in-depth studies that specifically analyze how Gau Maraja Leangleang effectively integrates cultural and economic aspects, and the extent of its concrete impact on the empowerment of local MSMEs. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by comprehensively analyzing the role of Gau Maraja Leangleang as a meeting point for rich cultures and a vital economic driver through the active participation of MSMEs. To achieve this goal, this study asks three main questions: First, how does Gau Maraja Leangleang facilitate diverse cultural encounters and exchanges? Second, how does this event concretely contribute to driving the local economy through the participation of MSMEs? And third, what are the significant challenges and prospective opportunities in developing Gau Maraja Leangleang as a sustainable cultural-economic destination?

THEORITICAL REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Culture and Cultural Festivals

Fundamentally, culture can be understood as the entire pattern of human behavior that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and other abilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society, as defined by Wirawan (2018). In this context, cultural festivals, as one concrete manifestation of culture, are often seen as a vital means for the preservation of traditions, education, and communal recreation. Moreover, various literatures such as those expressed by Richards & Wilson (2004) emphasize that cultural festivals also have great potential as tourism attractions that can bring significant economic benefits to the host region (Indrastuti, 2018).

2.2 The Role of MSMEs in the Local Economy

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of the economy in many developing countries (Kiswandi et al., 2023), including Indonesia. This sector plays a crucial role in job creation, income equality, and encouraging innovation at the local level. The presence of MSMEs at an event or festival, as explained by Tambunan (2012), can substantially increase economic value and distribute economic benefits more evenly to local communities, thereby strengthening grassroots economic resilience.

2.3 Synergy of Culture and Economy in Tourism

The integration of culture and economy, particularly in the context of tourism, has been the subject of extensive research (Solichin et al., 2025). Cultural tourism uniquely allows visitors to experience authentic cultural experiences while simultaneously providing tangible positive economic impacts to local communities through the purchase of products and services, as outlined by McKercher & Du Cros (2002). In the specific context of Gau Maraja Leangleang, this synergy is expected to create a development model that is not only economically profitable but also sustainable and respects cultural values.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative approach with a case study design. This methodology was chosen based on the consideration that case studies allow researchers to deeply understand the Gau Maraja Leangleang phenomenon in its complex and dynamic original context, exploring nuances of the interaction between culture and economy that other approaches might miss.

The specific research location is Pallantikang Field and Leang-Leang Archaeological Park, Bantimurung District, Maros Regency, South Sulawesi, where the Gau Maraja Leangleang is held. The research subjects involved various key parties directly related to this event, including the organizers of Gau Maraja Leangleang (including the core committee and traditional leaders who play an important role in preserving traditions), MSMEs who participated and displayed their products, visitors or tourists who attended and enjoyed the event, and representatives of relevant local governments who may have a role in supporting or regulating the event (Handayani, 2024).

The research data is categorized into primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained directly from the field through participant observation during the event, in-depth interviews with all the aforementioned research subjects, and visual documentation in the form of photos and videos that captured the essence of the event. Meanwhile, secondary data was collected from related documents such as the annual Gau Maraja Leangleang event report, mass media publications covering the event, local regulations relevant to tourism or MSME development, and other academic literature that provided theoretical context.

Data collection techniques included participant observation, in which researchers actively observed and engaged in the dynamics of the event, including interactions between visitors and MSMEs, as well as community participation. In-depth interviews were used to gather detailed

information regarding MSME participation motivations, perceived economic impacts, challenges faced, organizers' perspectives on the balance between cultural preservation and economic development, and visitors' perceptions of the overall event. Additionally, documentation was conducted to gather information from official records, reports, and relevant visual assets.

The collected qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a systematic approach. The analysis process began with data transcription, converting interview recordings and observation notes into written text. Next, coding was performed, identifying key themes and subthemes that consistently emerged from the data. Categorization followed by grouping similar codes into larger, more meaningful categories. The next step was interpretation, in which the researcher explained the meaning of these categories, connected them to relevant theoretical frameworks, and formulated the research findings coherently. Finally, data verification, or triangulation, was conducted by comparing data from various sources (observations, interviews, documents) to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Gau Maraja Leangleang as a Cultural Meeting

Gau Maraja Leangleang is more than just an annual celebration, but a vibrant and dynamic communal space that successfully brings together various levels of society from diverse backgrounds. The essence of culture is reflected through rich traditional elements, such as [Describe in a narrative the cultural elements presented, e.g., "the graceful and meaningful [name of dance] dance performance, the soul-stirring [name of musical instrument] music, and the sacred and philosophical [name of ritual] traditional rituals, all of which are captivating main attractions"]. This event effectively facilitates genuine interactions between local communities and tourists, opening the door to the exchange of cultural values and in-depth cross-cultural understanding. For example, [Provide a specific example in a narrative, e.g., "Tourists are often not just spectators, but are also invited to actively participate in [cultural activities such as weaving simple cloth or learning to play a traditional musical instrument], an authentic experience that is not only educational but also leaves a deep and unforgettable impression"]. These intimate cultural encounters not only enrich the visitor experience, but also significantly strengthen the local community's sense of pride in their cultural heritage, while encouraging the younger generation to become more actively involved in the preservation and development of their traditions (Zulhuda et al., 2025).

4.2 The Role of Gau Maraja Leangleang in Driving the Economy Through MSMEs

The presence of Gau Maraja Leangleang has proven to be a powerful catalyst for local economic growth, particularly through the MSME sector. Various types of MSMEs participate in enlivening this event, including [Name the types of MSMEs participating narratively, for example: "artisans selling regional handicrafts such as ikat weaving with intricate traditional motifs or artistic wood carvings; culinary vendors offering a variety of authentic and delicious traditional foods and beverages; and processors of local agricultural products into high-value commodities"]. These products, with their uniqueness and quality, are often the main attraction that attracts the attention of visitors (Husudungan, 2020). The results of in-depth interviews with several MSME actors consistently show a significant increase in turnover during the event. As an illustration, [Provide qualitative data/examples in a narrative manner, for example: "Mrs. Ani, a weaver who has participated for the past five years, proudly reported an increase in sales of up to 200% compared to sales on normal days outside the festival. A similar thing was also expressed by Mr. Budi, the owner of a local coffee shop, who experienced a surge in transactions thanks to the crowds of visitors"].

Beyond simply increasing revenue, Gau Maraja Leangleang also provides a highly effective marketing and promotional platform for local products (Hartati & Mala, 2025). This event allows MSMEs to introduce their products to a much wider audience, including tourists from outside the region who may not yet be familiar with the uniqueness and quality of these products. This is a highly profitable marketing strategy, given that MSMEs often have limited budgets for large-scale promotions. Furthermore, the event also creates significant temporary employment opportunities. During the preparation and implementation phase of Gau Maraja Leangleang, there is an increased need for labor, both for exhibition booth preparation, sales activities, and other support services such as security and

cleaning. This provides valuable employment opportunities for local communities in need. The economic impact of Gau Maraja Leangleang also triggers a positive ripple effect in other sectors, such as busy transportation services transporting visitors, local accommodations such as homestays and guesthouses being full, and local raw material suppliers experiencing increased demand. Finally, the event also facilitates the formation of valuable networks for MSMEs. They have the opportunity to network with fellow entrepreneurs, establish connections with new suppliers, and even meet potential investors or wholesale buyers, potentially opening up long-term business opportunities and collaborations beyond the festival season (Herianto & Gumanti, 2024).

4.3 Challenges and Opportunities

Although Gau Maraja Leangleang clearly demonstrates significant positive impacts, the event is not without challenges that need to be addressed to ensure its sustainability. One of the main challenges identified is [Identify challenges narratively, for example: "suboptimal waste management, especially from the culinary sector, which has the potential to damage the environment and the aesthetics of the event if not handled properly. In addition, limited supporting infrastructure such as road accessibility to the location, the availability of adequate parking areas, and clean and sufficient toilet facilities are often complaints from visitors. Fluctuations in visitor numbers are also a challenge, as they are highly dependent on external factors such as unpredictable weather conditions or certain issues that can affect interest in visiting. Finally, dependence on sponsorship funds or unstable government support can hinder long-term planning and event innovation (Thamrin, 2024)

On the other hand, there are also various bright opportunities that can be utilized to develop Gau Maraja Leangleang to a higher level. These opportunities include [Identifying opportunities narratively, for example: "developing integrated tour packages that not only include visits to the event, but also expeditions to local MSME centers in the surrounding area, so that visitors can directly see the production process and purchase products at the source. Continuous training for MSMEs in terms of product quality improvement, packaging innovation, and digital marketing strategies will be crucial to expanding their market reach (Kusumandari et al., 2024). Closer collaboration with travel agents and tour operators can also increase the number of tourist visits. Finally, developing a strong branding of Gau Maraja Leangleang as a unique and must-visit cultural and economic tourism destination will increase the competitiveness of the event at the national and international levels.

CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

This research clearly demonstrates that Gau Maraja Leangleang effectively fulfills its dual role as a dynamic platform for cultural preservation and exchange, while also serving as a vital driver of the local economy through the empowerment of MSMEs. The rich cultural encounter, complemented by authentic traditional attractions and in-depth visitor interaction, creates a unique appeal that sets this event apart. Meanwhile, the active participation of MSMEs in various sectors—from traditional culinary arts and artistic handicrafts to service provision—directly contributes to increasing local incomes and effectively promotes local products to a wider audience. The harmonious synergy between these two aspects clearly demonstrates Gau Maraja Leangleang's immense potential for regional development that is not only economically oriented, but also sustainable and deeply rooted in local cultural values.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive findings of this study, several strategic recommendations are proposed to ensure the sustainability and future development of Gau Maraja Leangleang. For Event Organizers, it is highly recommended to expand facilities to provide more adequate facilities for MSMEs, increase capacity in waste management to create more environmentally friendly events, and continue to innovate in event content to maintain and increase the appeal to the growing number of visitors. For the Regional Government, it is important to provide better infrastructure support, such as smooth road access and adequate public facilities. In addition, facilitating ongoing training and mentoring programs for MSMEs, particularly in product standardization, packaging innovation, and digital marketing strategies, will be crucial. The government is also expected to develop more inclusive and supportive policies for cultural tourism and MSME development. For MSMEs, it is recommended

to continuously strive to improve the quality of their products, innovate in design and service, and proactively utilize social media and other digital platforms as effective promotional tools. Finally, for Academics and Further Researchers, it is recommended to conduct quantitative research to measure the economic impact more precisely and measurably, as well as conduct comparative studies with other cultural festivals in Indonesia or internationally to identify best practices that can be adopted and adapted by Gau Maraja Leangleang.

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