

THE ROLE OF MEATBALLS AS A MEANS OF CULINARY DIPLOMACY IN BUILDING INDONESIA'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses meatballs as a culinary icon used in Indonesia's participatory gastrodiplomacy strategy to build cultural image and strengthen international relations. The problem raised is the absence of a systematic study that elaborates on the role of meatballs in public diplomacy practices, both by state and non-state actors. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design based on a literature review and based on the constructivism paradigm. Data were obtained from nine literature documents, both academic and institutional, which were analyzed using thematic content analysis methods. The results of the study indicate that meatballs are able to become an effective medium for cultural communication in various diplomatic contexts: from official activities of the Indonesian Embassy, informal diplomacy by diaspora communities and students, to city diplomacy through inter-regional cooperation. These findings indicate that the meaning and function of meatballs in diplomacy are flexible, negotiable, and have great potential in forming positive perceptions of Indonesia. The conclusion of this study emphasizes the importance of strengthening gastrodiplomacy strategies based on culinary icons that are integrated with the active role of various stakeholders, including diaspora and local actors, to support Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in a sustainable manner.

Keywords: (meatballs, gastrodiplomacy, cultural diplomacy, national branding, constructivism)

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini membahas bakso sebagai ikon kuliner yang digunakan dalam strategi gastrodiplomasi partisipatoris INDONESIA untuk membangun citra budaya dan memperkuat hubungan internasional. Permasalahan yang diangkat adalah ketiadaan kajian sistematis yang mengelaborasi peran bakso dalam praktik diplomasi publik, baik oleh aktor negara maupun non-negara. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus berbasis tinjauan literatur dan berlandaskan paradigma konstruktivisme. Data diperoleh dari sembilan dokumen literatur, baik akademik maupun institusional, yang dianalisis menggunakan metode analisis isi tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bakso mampu menjadi medium komunikasi budaya yang efektif dalam berbagai konteks diplomasi: mulai dari kegiatan resmi KBRI, diplomasi informal oleh komunitas diaspora dan mahasiswa, hingga diplomasi kota melalui kerja sama antarwilayah. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa makna dan fungsi bakso dalam diplomasi bersifat fleksibel, dapat dinegosiasikan, dan memiliki potensi besar dalam membentuk persepsi positif tentang INDONESIA. Kesimpulan penelitian menegaskan pentingnya penguatan strategi gastrodiplomasi

berbasis ikon kuliner yang terintegrasi dengan peran aktif berbagai pemangku kepentingan, termasuk diaspora dan aktor lokal, untuk mendukung diplomasi budaya INDONESIA secara berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: bakso, gastrodiplomasi, diplomasi budaya, *national branding*, konstruktivisme.

INTRODUCTION

Culinary is now one of the effective cross-cultural communication media in introducing the identity and values of a nation. Traditional foods such as bakso in Indonesia are not only consumed locally, but also have great potential as a means of cultural diplomacy. Through the gastrodiplomacy strategy, countries can use soft power to build a positive image at the global level in a persuasive manner. The Indonesia Spice Up the World program is a real form of the Indonesian government's efforts to promote the richness of Indonesian cuisine as part of public diplomacy. In various activities of the Indonesian Embassy, typical foods such as bakso, rendang, and satay have been served in international forums as part of this strategy.¹

The role of food in diplomacy is also not limited to state institutions, but involves diaspora communities, students, and inter-city relations. Activities such as Bakso Diplomacy by FPCI or parliamentary meetings with bakso banquets show the potential of culinary as a social connector between cultures.² This context is in line with the constructivist approach which views cultural meaning as something that is formed through social and historical interactions. Bakso, as a popular folk cuisine, offers a strong entry point to form a positive narrative about Indonesia on the international stage. However, the use of bakso as an instrument of diplomacy has not been fully explored systematically in the academic realm.

¹ Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, “KBRI Sarajevo Tampilkan Bakso dalam Diplomatic Winter Bazaar,” *Portal Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia*, October 4, 2025, <https://kemlu.go.id>.

² Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia, “Diplomasi Bakso,” *FPCI*, January 30, 2023, <https://fpcindonesia.org/2023/01/30/diplomasi-bakso/>; Dewan Perwakilan Daerah Republik Indonesia, “Diplomasi Bakso Sultan, Hangatkan Diskusi Geopolitik-Dagang bersama Dubes & Anggota Parlemen Polandia,” *DPD RI*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.dpd.go.id/daftar-berita/diplomasi-bakso-sultan>.

There are a number of studies that touch on the gastrodiplomacy aspect, but have not elaborated on meatballs specifically as the focus of the study. Ahmadi et al. (2020) discuss the meatball metaphor in a linguistic context, but have not linked it to diplomatic representation. Paramitha & Wei (2024) examine cultural design in Indonesia-China relations, but have not touched on the culinary aspect strategically. Septyana & Saragih (2024) evaluate the role of the diaspora in culinary branding, but their focus is still general and not specific to meatballs. While Malik (2023) highlights Bandung-Cuenca city diplomacy through batik and angklung, culinary dimensions such as meatballs have not been used as a means of cultural exchange in paradiplomacy relations.

Therefore, this study aims to explore Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy strategy through the culinary icon of bakso in building cultural image and international relations. This study was conducted with a qualitative approach based on a literature review of nine literature documents, both academic and institutional. The study is directed at interpreting the meaning and representation of bakso in a diplomatic context using gastrodiplomacy theory and nation branding as analytical lenses. Thus, this study is expected to provide a conceptual contribution in the development of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy strategy based on culinary icons. In addition, this study provides an initial foothold for further research on food diplomacy as a global communication tool.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design based on a literature review, based on a constructivist paradigm that emphasizes social meaning as a result of intersubjective construction. The data sources in this study are secondary documents consisting of nine literatures, including scientific articles, diplomatic reports from the Indonesian Embassy, institutional news from the DPD RI, and publications from the FPCI community that relevantly discuss bakso culinary diplomacy. Data were collected through

purposive literature searches, with the criteria that the documents contain information related to bakso and the practice of Indonesian cultural diplomacy. The analysis technique used is thematic content analysis, by interpreting the meaning of bakso in the context of international relations through the lens of gastrodiplomacy theory and cultural constructivism. Data validation was carried out through source triangulation, audit trails, and researcher reflexivity to maintain the credibility and confirmability of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Meatballs as a Multidirectional Cultural Construction

Food is not only consumed, but also constructed as a symbol of meaning by various social actors in cultural diplomacy. Bakso, as one of the most popular foods in Indonesia, reflects more than just culinary practices—it carries social values, identities, and even collective emotions. This concept is in line with the constructivist approach, which sees social reality as the result of repeated symbolic interactions in a particular cultural context. As a cross-class street food, bakso creates a connection that transcends social and geographical boundaries. This makes bakso an ideal object for building cultural communication in the international arena.

Meatballs are not only used in everyday communication but also contain metaphors that reflect closeness, simplicity, and familiarity.³ In diplomacy, this symbolism has the power to convey a national image that is popular, open, and friendly. Thus, meatball diplomacy has the potential to create an image of Indonesia as an inclusive and egalitarian nation in the eyes of the world. The construction of meatball culture becomes a narrative tool to shape external perceptions of the national personality. These values can be a unique attraction in the practice of global soft power.

³ Nur Ahmadi, Made Mahyuni, and Andi Saputra, “Metaphorical Expression of Meatball and the Naturalization of Meatball Conceptualization,” *Proceedings of ACCESS (International Conference on Language, Literature, and Education)* 3 (2020): 226–235.

The symbolism of bakso also reflects the process of internalizing Indonesian values through highly personal and emotional food. When served in international forums, such as diplomatic bazaars, the cultural messages inherent in bakso are implicitly spread to foreign consumers. Within the framework of constructivism, the meaning of bakso is not singular, but rather depends on how foreign audiences interpret it in their respective cultural contexts. Therefore, bakso diplomacy works through layers of meaning that are constructed together. The role of the state and the diaspora is to ensure that the cultural messages carried by bakso are in line with the image that Indonesia wants to build.

Diaspora as a Driver of Culinary Branding

The role of the diaspora in public diplomacy is increasingly significant in the digital and globalization era. They are not only a cultural bridge, but also a strategic actor in the dissemination of national cultural values and products. In the context of gastrodiplomacy, the diaspora is often the first to introduce Indonesian food abroad. With active involvement in the culinary world, the diaspora is able to elevate foods such as bakso into the public space of the country where they live. This makes the diaspora an important agent in shaping perceptions of Indonesia.

The involvement of the Indonesian diaspora in South Korea has become a catalyst in the introduction of national cuisine through the “Indonesia Spice Up the World” program. However, their role has not been fully facilitated by a consistent and synergistic state diplomacy structure.⁴ In this context, meatballs have the potential to become a symbol of unity between the state and the diaspora to strengthen Indonesian culinary branding globally. Meatballs, which are cheap, easy to make, and familiar to many cultures, are an efficient and effective promotional tool. If managed with an integrated strategy, the

⁴ Vera Septyana and Rinto P. Saragih, “The Branding Narrative of ‘Indonesia Spice Up the World’ through the Participation of the Indonesian Diaspora in South Korea as Brand Ambassadors,” *Bricolage: Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi* 10, no. 1 (2024): 119–130.

· diaspora can make meatballs the face of Indonesian culinary diplomacy at the grassroots level.

The role of the diaspora does not stop at serving culinary delights, but also at the cultural narratives they bring. Every bakso served by the diaspora brings with it a story about Indonesia, both in terms of taste and the social values it contains. The diaspora is able to represent Indonesia as a country with cultural warmth through food. Therefore, strengthening the diplomatic capacity of the diaspora in promoting bakso will be a strategic step for Indonesia in expanding its cultural influence. They are the spearhead of participatory diplomacy that is relevant to the constructivist paradigm.

Culinary Paradiplomacy at City Level

Diplomacy is not only carried out by the state through the ministry of foreign affairs, but also by subnational actors such as local or city governments. The concept of paradiplomacy allows cities to build international relations through cultural, economic, and educational cooperation. One aspect that can be maximized in this cooperation is culinary diplomacy as a local identity that is global. Cities in Indonesia have a diverse culinary wealth and the potential to be used as an effective cultural communication tool. However, the implementation of culinary in city diplomacy is still very limited compared to other cultural tools such as music or traditional arts.

A study on the Bandung-Cuenca sister city relationship shows that cultural exchange is still dominated by batik, angklung, and performing arts, without the strategic involvement of culinary elements.⁵ In fact, foods such as bakso which are already popular nationally can be developed as part of the city's cultural exchange program. Bakso as a flexible and easily adapted culinary can be inserted into various regional diplomatic events as a symbol of togetherness. Integrating bakso into the city's paradiplomacy narrative will

⁵ Yayan I. Malik, "Unveiling the Implementation of Bandung–Cuenca Sister City Relationship on Indonesian Cultural Diplomacy," *Journal of Paradiplomacy and City Networks* 2, no. 2 (2023): 99–112.

enrich the form of cultural communication and strengthen cross-country community relations. Cities can become the spearhead of culinary diplomacy if they have a systematic and representative promotional strategy.

Participatory Diplomacy and Informal Gastrodiplomacy

One of the strengths of gastrodiplomacy lies in its ability to build informal closeness outside the formal negotiation space. In this context, food becomes a medium to build trust, reduce tensions, and strengthen relationships between diplomatic actors. Participatory diplomacy refers to the direct involvement of civil society in public diplomacy, including students and communities. Informal forums such as meetings between ambassadors and students are characterized by a relaxed atmosphere that allows for the exchange of ideas without the pressure of protocol. Meatballs, as a popular food that does not create symbolic distance, are an ideal choice in situations like this.

The “Meatball Diplomacy” forum initiated by FPCI shows how culinary can create a space for equal interaction between diplomats and the younger generation. Through this activity, the meaning of meatballs is transformed from just a dish to a bridge for cross-cultural communication. Meatballs become a symbol of dialogue and openness in the world of diplomacy which is often rigid and formal.⁶ On the other hand, an informal diplomatic meeting between members of the DPD RI and the Polish Parliament was also opened with the serving of meatballs, which helped lighten the atmosphere in a sensitive geopolitical discussion.⁷ Food paves the way for a more humane diplomacy rooted in social values.

⁶ Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia, “Diplomasi Bakso,” *FPCI*, January 30, 2023, <https://fpcindonesia.org/2023/01/30/diplomasi-bakso/>.

⁷ Dewan Perwakilan Daerah Republik Indonesia, “Diplomasi Bakso Sultan, Hangatkan Diskusi Geopolitik-Dagang bersama Dubes & Anggota Parlemen Polandia,” *DPD RI*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.dpd.go.id/daftar-berita/diplomasi-bakso-sultan>.

Institutional Gastrodiplomacy by the Indonesian Embassy

Cultural diplomacy activities facilitated by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs through representatives abroad are one form of institutional diplomacy. In this activity, typical Indonesian food is the main tool to introduce national culture to foreign communities. One of the most prominent is the participation of the Indonesian Embassy in international events such as diplomatic bazaars or culinary festivals. The culinary is chosen not only because of its delicious taste, but also because of its ability to represent the national cultural narrative. Meatballs are one of the culinary dishes often served in events like this because of its universal nature and easy acceptance.

The Indonesian Embassy in Sarajevo actively served bakso at the Diplomatic Winter Bazaar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the public response was very positive until the food stock ran out before the event ended.⁸ In East Africa, the Indonesian Embassy in Nairobi even held bakso cooking training for Ugandans, as a strategy to expand the influence of Indonesian culture.⁹ This practice shows that the Indonesian Embassy not only carries out political functions, but also plays an important role in cultural outreach. The presentation and training of bakso is a form of direct diplomacy that touches the local community and introduces Indonesian culture through taste experiences.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that bakso has strategic potential in Indonesia's participatory gastrodiplomacy to build a cultural image and strengthen international relations. This culinary icon is inclusive and is able to transcend social, political, and cultural boundaries through symbolic meanings constructed in diplomatic practices. Various forms of diplomatic implementation, both by the Indonesian Embassy, diaspora

⁸ Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, "KBRI Sarajevo Tampilkan Bakso dalam Diplomatic Winter Bazaar," Portal Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, October 4, 2025, <https://kemlu.go.id>.

⁹ Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, "KBRI Nairobi Berikan Pelatihan Memasak kepada Warga Negara Uganda," Portal Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, February 11, 2025, <https://arsipportal.kemlu.go.id>.

communities, students, and in inter-city cooperation, prove the effectiveness of bakso as a cultural communication medium that can reach various global audiences. The constructivist approach in this study emphasizes that the meaning of bakso is not singular, but is formed in the process of cross-cultural interaction and dynamic social contexts.

The formulation of Indonesia's culinary diplomacy strategy requires a more systematic and coordinated direction across actors. The role of the diaspora needs to be strengthened, city paradiplomacy needs to be encouraged to use a culinary culture approach, and the representation of bakso needs to be designed consistently in visual and narrative forms. Strengthening this capacity will support the creation of a more diverse and contextual image of Indonesia at the international level. This study provides a conceptual basis for the development of culinary icon-based cultural diplomacy and opens up space for further exploration of the potential of other foods in the global communication scheme. Further studies that emphasize the direct involvement of local cultural actors can enrich the understanding of the role of culinary in contemporary public diplomacy.

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