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Bakar Tongkang Festival in Bagansiapiapi, Indonesia – from Chinese Fisherman Ritual to Tourism and Economic Impact

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Abstract. *Bakar Tongkang Festival (BTF), or Go Ge Cap Lak, burning a replica of a barge or fishermen's boat festival, is a Chinese fisherman ritual in Bagansiapiapi, Indonesia. The festival is held every 5th month (Go) on the 16th (Cap Lak) of the Chinese calendar. This study aims to describe the festival and analyze the tourism aspect and the economic impact on the region. The sample populations were Chinese community leaders, Malay community leaders, tourism entrepreneurs, public transportation entrepreneurs, the government, domestic and foreign visitors, and the public audience. Data were collected through observations and interviews with the respondents. Commemoration of the arrival of ethnic Chinese in Bagansiapiapi, Indonesia marked the beginning of the birth of BTF. BTF is the biggest annual event in Rokan Hilir Regency. During this festival, visitors generally perform some rituals and pray to the gods. The procession of praying and remembering the spirits of their ancestors started from the oldest temple in Bagansiapiapi Ing Hok King Temple. The festival is also enlivened by other events and attractions. It attracted local, national, and international tourists. So far the event is well known abroad and brings tourists from Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, China, and others. Visitors no longer only come to pray, but they also come to shops, return to their hometown, leisure, and even business. The BTF had a good impact on the local economy, through visitor spending on hotels, guesthouses, increased sales and purchases of basic needs products, and use of all modes of transportation. In the future, it is highly recommended that this BTF be better organized by promoting it more broadly and in combination with other tourism events. In addition, it can be used as an event for business meetings, scientific meetings, and other cultural activities.*

Keywords: barge burning ritual, Chinese fishermen, Go Ge Cap Lak, hometown memories, Rokan Hilir Regency

JEL Codes: F15, F63, R12, Z13, Z32

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a nation that has diverse cultures, ethnic groups, customs, languages, and religions. Bakar Tongkang Festival (BTF) or barge (wood boat) burning ritual is one of the religious cultures of the Chinese community, mainly they are fishermen in Bagansiapiapi (Nurman et al., 2020). This ritual event is carried out by burning a replica of a barge or fishermen's boat. This culture is very unique and there is only one in Indonesia, even in the world, namely in Bagansiapiapi, Rokan Hilir Regency, Riau Province, Indonesia (Harsono, 2019). The government takes advantage of this by making this Chinese fishermen's culture become a national tourist attraction, which will have a positive impact on the development and progress of the local area. So this culture does not only belong to the Chinese community in Bagansiapiapi but has become the

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property of the community as a whole. It can be noted from the enthusiasm of the Chinese and non-Chinese people to participate in this ritual event (Wirman et al., 2017).

The Go Ge Cap Lak is one of the ethnic Chinese cultures in Bagansiapiapi, where the ritual is held every 5th month (Go) on the 16th (Cap Lak) of the Chinese calendar every year. This BTF activity is intended as a form of expression of gratitude to the god Kie Ong Ya (god of the sea) by burning a barge that has been prayed for by a ritual leader called "tanki". God Kie Ong Ya himself is the ruler of the ocean who is believed by the Chinese to have played an important role until they found the city of Bagansiapiapi (Wirman et al., 2018).

The BTF raises solidarity among ethnic Chinese in general and in Bagansiapiapi in particular. Then another meaning according to Chinese religious leaders is to establish brotherhood between fellow human beings. As for the attitude of the Muslim community towards the barge burning ritual, they are sympathetic and participate in their capacity as Muslims, and that participation is still within the scope of social interaction, not in worship activities. Harsono (2019) mentioned that even though the Chinese who belong to the Tridarma sect in Bagansiapiapi are a minority, in their daily life they have good social relations with Muslims, especially at this ritual party, many Muslims earn their livelihood by selling some of the prayer utensils used during the ritual process (PKRH, 2022).

The BTF is a story of the bitter struggle of the Chinese fishermen community to find a decent place and they ended up in Bagansiapiapi. The ethnic Chinese fishermen immigrants came from the Asian continent. As a result of the disaster or prolonged unrest in the country, they were forced to leave their country, looking for a safer area to live and settle. In addition, this activity which costs a lot of money is carried out by the Muslim population the majority population (DTAYS, 2019). The BTF has become an annual event and is celebrated by all levels of society. People who are Muslim and Christian generally only come to watch and enjoy the series of events presented by the event committee. However, this activity has touched all aspects of the life of the Bagansiapiapi community, including social, touristic, religious, and economic aspects of the community.

2. Research Elaboration

2.1. Research objectives

BTF is celebrated every year and is attended by an increasing number of visitors. The question is whether there is a positive impact of BTF on improving the local community's economy and which economic sectors are affected. This study aims to describe the BTF and analyze the touristic aspect and the economic impact on the Bagansiapiapi community and its surroundings.

2.2. Time and Place

This research was conducted in Bagansiapiapi, the capital of Bangko District which is also the capital of Rokan Hilir Regency, Riau Province, Indonesia, and was carried out from January to September 2022.

2.3. Research methods and data collection

This research was conducted using a survey method and the sample of respondents was selected by purposive sampling. Researchers watched and observed the festival, starting from the preparation of the festival, construction of the barge, and burning barge ritual to the end of the festival. Data were collected through direct field observations and interviews with Chinese community leaders (5), Malay community leaders (7), tourism entrepreneurs (11), public transportation entrepreneurs (18), the government (6), the festival executive committee (5), domestic visitors (22), foreign visitors (10), and surrounding communities (25). Interviews were conducted based on questionnaires that had been previously dispersed and free interviews by conducting deep interviews with some respondents. Secondary data were also collected from various reference sources. All data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively.

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3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Bakar Tongkang festival

Commemorating the arrival of ethnic Chinese in Bagansiapiapi, Indonesia marked the beginning of the birth of BTF. Sea nomads from mainland Asia, mostly fishermen, had sailed far to the South while catching fish. One day they came to an area where there was a lot of fish. They also caught fish there as much as possible and at night they began to look for the nearest land to anchor. They saw an animal flying while emitting a fire-like twinkling light (fireflies *Photuris* sp) surrounding them and flying away towards a place. They felt it was a clue about the direction to land. They followed the animal and finally, they landed in a place and that place they called Bagansiapiapi (Arifin and Suri, 2020). They have since agreed to live in this area, and are determined not to go far fishing again. They proved that promise by burning the large barge they used to sail the oceans. They were determined not to move again looking for a place to live and settled in Bagansiapiapi. This is where the BTF event begins (Rahardjo *et al*., 2018).

It is said that the first Chinese people to come to Bagansiapiapi came from the Tong'an (Tang Ua) District in Xiamen, Fujian Province, South China. However, they stopped for a while in Songkhla, Southern Thailand. They are fishermen who are also Chinese immigrants (Koestoro *et al*., 2011). They use three wooden boats (barges). Events during the journey in only one barge surviving to land. It was a barge headed by Ang Mie Kui along with 17 other passengers. The barge that survived happened to bring with it a statue of Lord Tai Sun Ong Ya which was placed at the bow and a statue of God Ki Hu Ong Ya which was placed in the fixed barge house. According to their belief, these statues will provide safety during the voyage.

BTF is the biggest annual event in Rokan Hilir Regency. During this festival, visitors generally perform some rituals and pray to the gods. The procession of praying and remembering the spirits of their ancestors started from the oldest temple in Bagansiapiapi Ing Hok King Temple. This festival is also enlivened by other events and attractions. For example, lion dance, decorative lanterns, and stage entertainment. This entertainment stage was prepared for players from Medan (North Sumatra), Singkawang (West Kalimantan) as well as from neighboring countries Malaysia, Taiwan, and Singapore. They performed Hokkien songs. There is also the Tan Ki attraction where some people demonstrate their extraordinary physical abilities by stabbing themselves with sharp knives or spears but remain unharmed.

The construction of a barge replica is usually carried out 2-3 months before the implementation of the BTF. A replica of the barge was prepared a month in advance, with a replica of the barge measuring 9.2 meters long, 2 meters wide, and a pole height of 2.7 meters and weighing 400 kilograms. The main materials in making the barge are wood, bamboo, and paper, after the barge is finished being painted and decorated with knick-knacks so that it looks very grand and festive. The barge will be kept overnight at the Ing Hok King Temple, blessed, and then taken in procession through the city to the site where a replica of this barge will be burned. Arriving at the location, thousands of pieces of yellow prayer paper will be attached to the barge carrying prayers from people for their ancestors, before the barge is finally burned.

The barge in the BTF is one of the most important things, because the object of this ritual is the burning of a barge or wood boat, for that the manufacture of this barge must be prepared before the day of its implementation. The person in charge of making the barge is the event committee for the barge-making section. The barge was made based on God Kie Ong Ya's instructions through a tank. God will give instructions about the date, day, and even a good time to build the barge. After getting good days and months, the committee in charge of barge construction began to build the ship, under the direction of a shipbuilding expert.

The barges are paraded around the town of Bagansiapiapi from the Ing Hok Kiong Temple to the burning site which is approximately 2 km away (Figure 1). Arriving at the burning arena, the direction of the bow of the barge is determined according to the instructions of Dewa Kie Ong Ya, which according to their philosophy is a sign of good fortune or goodness for the business and safety of the Bagansiapiapi Chinese community. But usually, the bow of the barge is towards the sea, like a new ship getting ready to set sail. Once the barge's bow was determined, the barge was placed on Kim's pile of papers. After being placed, the pole installation officer

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starts carrying out his duties, namely installing the pole. After that, the honorable guests such as the Ministers, the Governor of Riau, the Regent of Rokan Hilir, and other officials and elders of the Chinese community had the opportunity to board the barge to pray according to their respective requests. The barge that was ready to be burned was then lit by one of the guests of honor.

In a matter of minutes, thousands of religious papers turn into a fire that is quite large and scorches the entire ship until the ship turns to ashes. During the burning of the barge, the Chinese people stand around the burning barge praying according to their request. The Tanki run around the burning barges praying while doing attractions showing their respective skills. For example, sticking a sharp spear into his body or slashing his body with a very sharp knife without getting hurt in the slightest. The end of this ritual is to see the direction of the fall of the barge pole, which they believe will determine the direction of fortune in the following year. If the direction of falling is towards the sea, it means that the source of fortune for the following year is better and vice versa, if the direction of falling is to land, it means that the source of fortune for the following year is better and comes more from land (Sandi, 2013; Harapan, 2016, Arifin et al., 2020). After the mast falls, the barge-burning ritual ends (Figure 2).



Figure 1. A replica of the barge was paraded in Bagansiapiapi City and brought to the Ing Hok King Temple to be held for a few days.
(photo taken by the authors)

3.2. Bakar Tongkang festival and tourism

The Barge Burning Festival brings gifts to the City of Bagansiapiapi. In 2022, the peak of the event was on Sunday (19/6) 2022. The presence of tens of thousands of visitors and tourists has created an economic cycle in Rokan Hilir Regency in general and Bagansiapiapi City in particular. Their presence improved the economy of the city of Bagansiapiapi. About a week before the main event was held, Ing Hok King Temple, which is the central temple, looked livelier than usual. Visitors kept flowing to the pagoda to pray while bringing various offerings (Figures 5 and 6). Large tents were set up, and banners and stalls selling supplies for prayers were lined up neatly to the left, right, front, and even to the back of the temple.

This festival can attract local tourists, such as people around Rokan Hilir Regency, and national tourists. This festival is well known abroad and brings tourists from Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Taiwan to mainland China and others (Arfan, 2016). The number of visitors who come will have a significant effect on

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the local economy. This is why traders who sell around the event place increase their income. This event has a positive effect on the occupancy of hotels and inns in this area (TDPCB, 2019). The accommodation facilities available in Rokan Hilir Regency can be seen in Table 1. The number of visitors and tourists from 2015-2022 continues to increase (Table 2) and it is believed that there is an influence from BTF.

Table 1. The number of hotels as accommodation facilities for the BTF in Rokan Hilir Regency, 2022.

No.	Districts	Hotels		Rooms		Beds	
		Star Hotels	Budget Hotels	Star Hotels	Budget Hotels	Star Hotels	Budget Hotels
1.	Tanah Putih	-	7	-	149	-	189
2.	Bagan Sinembah	2	6	160	132	320	182
3.	Balai Jaya	-	1	-	22	-	22
4.	Kubu	-	1	-	15	-	15
5.	Pasir Limau Kapas	-	2	-	36	-	44
6.	Bangko	-	21	-	693	-	1132
7.	Bangko Pusako	-	1	-	23	-	23
	Total	2	39	160	1070	320	1607

Source: RHRF, 2022.

Table 2. Number of visitors and tourists to BTF events in Bagansiapi in 2015-2022.

No.	Year	National tourist	International tourist	Total
1.	2015	17.225	15.032	32.257
2.	2016	20.000	16.025	36.025
3.	2017	45.650	2.475	48.125
4.	2018	40.000	29.000	69.000
5.	2019	38.100	20.200	58.300
6. *	2020	-	-	-
7. *	2021	-	-	-
8. **	2022	41.500	20.000	62.500

Source: DTAYS, 2019.
* The festival was not held due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
**Processed from some sources.

This BTF was stopped for 2 years (2020 and 2021) due to the Covid 19 pandemic. However, in 2022 this event was held again, even though it was under the shadow of the Covid 19 pandemic. Based on the data above, we can see that tourist visits have increased. So that it is a blessing in itself for the people of Rokan Hilir Regency, especially those around the Bakar Barge National Tourism event. The economic sectors which is positively influenced are trade and services, thus the community's economy can become better.

3.3. The economic impact of BTF

About a week before the peak event, in Bagansiapiapi visitors and tourists started arriving, and the event committee started to hold a bazaar, selling various items such as clothes, food, sandals, shoes, accessories exhibitions about Bagansiapiapi, and so on. The number of visitors deduced from this data will no doubt have a direct or indirect impact on the Regency of Rokan Hilir's economic development. Table 3 below provides information on the Rokan Hilir Regency's overall occupancy rate for the years 2019, 2020, and 2021.

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Figure 2. The barge was burned while prayers are said and waited for it to completely burn out.
(photo taken by the authors)

Based on the data from Table 3, it is known that 124,826 persons stayed in hotels in 2019. Only 102,586 persons were occupied in 2020, a reduction in the number of occupants. This indicates a 17.80% decline in the number of visitors. Even though the Covid-19 pandemic was still ongoing in 2021 and could decrease the number of visitors, there was an increase of roughly 23.38% with 126,569 people in the year after. The rise in occupancy rate is a result of the government starting to implement travel restrictions that affect tourists visiting Bagansiapiapi (Martínez-Falcó et al., 2023; Nurman et al., 2020). Hotel occupancy will certainly provide a significant opportunity for additional local revenue.

Table 3. The number of occupancy rates of hotel/guesthouse/inn per year (2019-2021).

No.	Year	Total of visitors (person)
1	2017	124,826
2	2018	102,586
3	2019	126,569
4	2020	102,586
5	2021	126,569

Source: Regional Revenue Agency of Rokan Hilir Regency in 2021.

The development of the tourism sector provides a fairly high economic advantage. This economic advantage has an impact on state income in general and the welfare of the surrounding community in particular. Tourists are one of the foreign exchange earners for the country and can also create jobs for the community and even open new business fields (Zhang et al., 2022). The community groups who are most positively affected by the barge burning ritual are the surrounding community of the region because they are around the event, some are making business networking, some are providing services and so on which can boost their economy. This BTF had a good impact on people's income compared to previous days. The community provides the maximum means to support the economy so that the income earned is also maximized (Nuryakin et al., 2018; Amir et al., 2015; Lhutfi et al., 2020).

This event is not only for the people who get increased income but also for the local government, as it increases local revenue in the tax and retribution sector. The local tax sector consists of hotels, and restaurants. Meanwhile, in terms of the retribution sector, one of them is parking. BTF has been declared by the local government as a national and international event every year. Local governments will also receive a positive

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impact due to the implementation of major tourism events, namely an increase in income, levies, and local taxes (Kristiana et al., 2020).

The amount of money spent by visitors to the Bakar Tongkang Festival is directly correlated with the number of visitors. According to information from the Rokan Hilir Regency's Regional Revenue Agency, it is uncertain how much money was in circulation in 2016, however, there is data available for 2017 to 2019. The total amount of money (IDR; Indonesian Rupiah) in circulation throughout 2017 was IDR 788,543,750. The amount of money in circulation reached Rp. 1,382,687,500,000 in 2018. The amount of money in circulation then increased even further in 2019 to IDR 1,650,950,000,000. This number decreased drastically in 2020 and 2021 due to the absence of BTF (Table 4).

Table 4. Amount of money spent during the BTF (2017-2021) in Bagansiapiapi.

No.	Year	Amount (Indonesian Rupiah)
1	2017	788,543,750
2	2018	1,382,687,500,000
3	2019	1,650,950,000,000
4	2020	14,475,000,000
5	2021	21,766,000,000

Source: Regional Revenue Agency of Rokan Hilir Regency in 2021.

Data on local revenue for the Rokan Hilir Regency's tourism industry is only available for the year 2019. This data can be seen in Table 5. Local revenue from the hotel sector totaled IDR 1,071,931,206; that of restaurants, cafes, and other food establishments was Rp 4,432,166,721; and that of meeting rental (facilities) was Rp 260,866,122. The Rokan Hikir district government got Rp. 5,765,986,049 from these three tourism sub-sectors. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic still ongoing in 2020 and 2021, the occupancy rates of hotels, guesthouses, and inns in 2020 and 2021 are not recorded. In 2022 BTF has been held life again. However, considering that it was still a pandemic, the number of overseas visitors was still very low compared to previous years.

Table 5. Actual Rokan Hilir Regency Government Revenues during the BTF in Bagansiapiapi

No.	Categories	Amount (Indonesian Rupiah)
1.	Hotel/Guesthouse/Inn	1.071.931.206,00
2.	Restaurants/Cafes	4.432.166.721,00
3.	Meeting Room (facilities)	260.866.122,00
	Total	5.765.986.049,00

Source: Regional Revenue Agency of Rokan Hilir Regency in 2020.

The hotel, guesthouse, and inn sector are part of the infrastructure that supports BTF. Usually, tourists will book a hotel well in advance of the event. From field observations and verbal confirmation of tourists, those who book hotels are generally tourists who have long left their hometowns (moved from Bagansiapiapi). But for tourists who still have relatives, they usually stay at their family homes. From Table 5, it can be observed that only one sector, namely the hotel/guesthouse/inn sector, the Rokan Hilir district government has earned an income of Rp. 5,765,986,049. Economically, the largest multiplier effect is in the transportation, hotel, banking, restaurant, and restaurant sectors. Meanwhile, the small business sector, such as hawker stalls and the home industry, is also positively impacted. This means that the barge burning event has a broad economic impact on the economic life of the Bagansiapiapi community in particular and Rokan Hilir Regency in general (Asmit et al., 2020; Harapan, 2016).

The more measurable economic impact of BTF on several economic parameters requires further investigation. For example, the impact of BTF on the number of hotel and guest house occupancy during the festival. Likewise, positive effects on the transportation sector, for example, the number of passengers and the transaction value of each of the land transportation, sea transportation, and air transportation sub-sectors. In the culinary industry, it is necessary to measure quantitatively the extent of the impact of BTF on transactions

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in restaurants and other culinary businesses. Trading activity and volume will be affected, so it is necessary to examine trade transactions more measurably, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Strengthening economic development is directed at efforts to strengthen the economic structure so that it is more balanced and equitable for the welfare of the community. This can be carried out by taking advantage of local conditions, potentials, and opportunities by prioritizing recovery efforts, increasing cultural activities, as well as encouraging and facilitating efforts to increase regional productivity (Su, 2021; Merga, 2022; Khan et al, 2023). Therefore, economic development is prioritized on economic growth based on local economies with multiple effects, such as the industrial and trade sectors. This is because these sectors make a fairly large contribution to the regional economy and can contribute to local revenue from the tourism sector (Çağlayan et al., 2012; Mihai et al., 2019; Labiso, 2021). Therefore, it is recommended that this BTF be better organized by promoting it more broadly and in combination with other tourism events. It can also be combined with the implementation of business meeting events, scientific meetings, and other cultural activities. This will invite more visitors so that the positive impact on economic development will be greater because there has been no promotion for BTF. The visitors who attend BTF are those who have an emotional bond with their hometown; for example, those who were born and raised in Bagansiapiapi and then went abroad, as well as those who were born elsewhere but have an emotional bond because their parents are from Bagansiapiapi, and so they attend every time BTF is held.

Hopefully, BTF is organized together with other events such as scientific activities about BTF (seminars, focus group discussions, conferences), business meetings (industrial product exhibitions, business talks, bazaars), and other cultural gatherings (music festivals, dances, art, culinary and other cultural aspects) in Bagansiapiapi. Having a complementary event like this will certainly invite more participants, where coming to Bagansiapi is not only limited to BTF events, but they can also take part in other events. The cities of Pekanbaru, Dumai, and Bagan Batu are cities close to Bagansiapiapi. The distance between these cities can be covered in less than 4 hours. Tourist, business, scientific, ritual, and cultural events can also be sponsored in these cities simultaneously or complementary to BTF activities. This will also provide added value for the visitors to the BTF event. BTF is already known in several ASEAN countries, especially among the Chinese community. However, in our opinion, this event has not been packaged in a more professional manner and is only local. For this reason, this BTF event needs to be promoted more widely in several countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, Vietnam, China, and Taiwan. Thus the positive impact of BTF will be greater on the economy of Bagansiapi in particular and Riau Province in general (Arifin & Suri, 2020; Arifin et al, 2020).

The carnaval in Brazil is one of the most famous festivals in the world. Held before the fasting period, this festival is full of colorful music, dance, and festivities. Oktoberfest in Germany is a beer festival held in Munich, Germany. The festival lasts 16-18 days from September to early October. Thousands of people from all over the world gather to celebrate this festival and enjoy a wide variety of beers, German food, and traditional entertainment. Hamani in Japan is a beautiful cherry blossom viewing tradition in Japan. During the spring season, people gather in parks and open spaces to admire the beautiful cherry blossoms and celebrate with picnics and special events. The three cultural festival events were professionally organized and promoted to various countries and their success had a positive effect on the local community's economy (Segre & Morelli, 2022; Martínez-Falcó et al, 2023).

Developing destinations for tourism to encourage potential tourists to visit can also help to strengthen regional economic development. Aspects to consider when developing tourist destinations include "something to see," which means that the location must have tourist objects and tourist attractions that are distinct from other areas, "something to do," which means that the location must have things to do with its recreational facilities so that tourists feel comfortable in that location, and "something to buy," which means that the location must have shopping facilities, particularly souvenirs and folk arts and crafts to take home. It is hoped that the development of the tourist destination area can serve as a starting point for area development and its economic growth to improve the community's standard of living in Bagansiapiapi (Achmad et al., 2023; Azmi et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). The concepts currently applied to BTF are community-based tourism and historical tourism (Quan-Baffour, 2020; Sanjaya & Astina, 2023).

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4. Conclusions

Bakar Tongkang Festival has become an annual tourist event. Visitors no longer only come to pray, but they also come to shop, back to their hometown, reminisce and travel. The festival is run by Bagansiapiapi Chinese ethnic group which is held every 16th day of the 5th month of the Chinese calendar. The barge-burning ritual has been carried out for generations. In the current post-modern era, the BTF is used as a momentum to boost local revenue through the tourism sector. There are several economic effects related to the festival, namely the increase in occupancy of hotels, guesthouses, or inns; increase in the value of buying and selling transactions; increased sales and purchases of basic needs products, and increased frequency of use of all modes of transportation. However, more measurable indicators of the economic impact of BTF need to be studied. For example, the impact on the number of hotel and guest house occupancy, transactions in the transportation sector, culinary, and trade transactions during the BTF. It is recommended that BTF be organized together with other events such as scientific activities on BTF (seminars, focus group discussions, conferences), business meetings (industrial product exhibitions, business talks, bazaars), and other cultural gatherings (music festivals, dances, arts, culinary and other cultural aspects) in Bagansiapiapi. The cities of Pekanbaru, Dumai, and Bagan Batu are cities adjacent to Bagansiapiapi, so tourism, business, scientific, ritual, and cultural events can be held simultaneously or complement each other with BTF. BTF is more professionally organized and promoted widely in several countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, Vietnam, China, and Taiwan.

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