
EARTH OVEN DIPLOMACY: A NEW PARADIGM FOR REGIONAL COHESION

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji Diplomasi Oven Bumi sebagai paradigma baru untuk memperkuat kohesi regional antara Indonesia dan negara-negara Kepulauan Pasifik. Berangkat dari keterbatasan diplomasi formal yang sering bertumpu pada protokol kenegaraan, bantuan ekonomi, dan retorika strategis, kajian ini berargumen bahwa praktik budaya Melanesia menawarkan jalur yang lebih relasional dalam membangun kepercayaan di kawasan Pasifik. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif-analitis, artikel ini bertumpu pada observasi partisipan, wawancara dengan pelaku budaya, serta kajian literatur tentang diplomasi budaya, soft power, middle power norm entrepreneurship, relasionalitas Melanesia, dan kedaulatan pangan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Bakar Batu bukan sekadar tradisi kuliner, melainkan protokol komunal tempat nilai hospitalitas, rekonsiliasi, kerja kolektif, dan penghormatan terhadap tanah diwujudkan. Dengan mengonseptualisasikan Bakar Batu sebagai Diplomasi Oven Bumi, artikel ini menunjukkan bagaimana pangan, ritual, dan partisipasi tubuh dapat bekerja sebagai instrumen diplomasi budaya. Kajian ini berkontribusi dengan menawarkan model berbasis lokal untuk memajukan visi Pacific Elevation Indonesia melalui martabat, kekerabatan, dan identitas bersama Melanesia.

Katakunci: Diplomasi Oven Bumi, Bakar Batu, Melanesia, Pacific Elevation, Kohesi Regional.

ABSTRACT

This article examines Earth Oven Diplomacy as a new paradigm for strengthening regional cohesion between Indonesia and Pacific Island countries. Departing from the limitations of formal diplomacy, which often relies on state-centered protocols, economic assistance, and strategic rhetoric, this study argues that Melanesian cultural practices offer a more relational pathway for building trust in the Pacific. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical method, the article draws on participant observation, interviews with cultural practitioners, and literature on cultural diplomacy, soft power, middle power norm entrepreneurship, Melanesian relationalism, and food sovereignty. The findings show that Bakar Batu is not merely a culinary tradition, but a communal protocol through which hospitality, reconciliation, collective labor, and respect for land are enacted. By conceptualizing Bakar Batu as Earth Oven Diplomacy, this article demonstrates how food, ritual, and embodied participation can operate as instruments of cultural diplomacy. The study contributes a locally grounded model for advancing Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision through dignity, kinship, and shared Melanesian identity.

Keywords: Earth Oven Diplomacy, Bakar Batu, Melanesia, Pacific Elevation, Regional Cohesion.

BACKGROUND

The changing geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific has placed Indonesia in a strategic position that cannot be understood solely through conventional diplomatic frameworks. As an archipelagic state with historical, geographical, and cultural connections to Melanesian communities, Indonesia has a significant opportunity to strengthen its engagement with Pacific Island countries through a more culturally grounded approach. The Pacific Elevation vision reflects Indonesia's effort to expand strategic engagement, development cooperation, and regional diplomacy in the Pacific (Herindrasti, Fernando, and Hop 2025). However, the success of this vision depends not only on formal state diplomacy, economic assistance, or security-oriented dialogue, but also on Indonesia's ability to communicate through cultural forms that are meaningful to Pacific societies.

One of the central challenges in Indonesia's engagement with the Pacific is the gap between state-centered diplomacy and the relational worldview of Melanesian societies. Indonesia's diplomacy in the Pacific has often been shaped by sensitive perceptions around Papua and regional political contestation, which require a more careful and culturally responsive approach (Wangge and Lawson 2023). At the same time, discussions on peace and political communication in Papua cannot be separated from the need to rethink externally imposed or state-dominated concepts of peace (Pamungkas 2022). These conditions show that diplomatic engagement in the Pacific should not be reduced to technical cooperation or official statements. It must also address questions of trust, recognition, dignity, and cultural belonging.

This article argues that cultural diplomacy in the Pacific requires a more embodied and locally rooted paradigm. Soft power, as explained by Nye (2008), works through attraction, legitimacy, and shared values rather than coercion. In the Pacific context, this means that culture should not be treated merely as a decorative element of foreign policy, but as a strategic medium for building mutual understanding. Earth Oven Diplomacy is proposed in this article as a model of cultural diplomacy that draws on Melanesian values of hospitality, reconciliation, land-based identity, and communal participation. This model responds to the limitation of conventional diplomacy by placing cultural practice at the center of trust-building and regional cohesion.

In this context, the Papuan tradition of Bakar Batu offers an important conceptual and practical entry point. Bakar Batu, known among several communities in Papua, is not merely a traditional cooking technique. It is a communal event in which stones are heated, food is prepared collectively, and the harvest of the land is shared among participants. Existing studies show that Bakar Batu contains important social meanings for Dani communities, including togetherness, gratitude, social solidarity, and cultural identity (Kotib, Salviana DS, and Kumalasari 2022). Other studies also emphasize the role of Bakar Batu in strengthening hospitality and social relations within Papuan communities (Loho and Sianipar 2025). These findings support the argument that Bakar Batu should be understood not only as culinary heritage, but also as a relational cultural protocol.

The significance of Bakar Batu becomes stronger when it is placed within the wider logic of Melanesian relationalism. In Melanesian and Pacific societies, identity and political life are often shaped through kinship, land, exchange, reciprocity, and embodied social relations. Taylor et al. (2023) argue that relational thinking offers an important lens for understanding Indigenous and Pacific approaches to foreign policy. From this perspective, relations are not built only through verbal agreement, but through shared presence, material exchange, food, ritual, and mutual obligation. Bakar Batu embodies this relational worldview because it gathers people around the same earth oven and transforms food preparation into a process of recognition, participation, and social renewal.

Bakar Batu also has a strong relevance to reconciliation and social cohesion. In several Papuan contexts, the ritual has been understood as a cultural mechanism for resolving conflict and restoring social harmony. Wenda and Purwanti (2023) explain that Bakar Batu can function as a medium for addressing horizontal conflict in Dani society, while Tabuni (2023) highlights its role in strengthening inter-ethnic relations in the Papuan highlands. These studies show that the ritual is not simply ceremonial. It carries a social function that allows communities to soften tension, rebuild communication, and reaffirm collective dignity. This aspect is crucial for cultural diplomacy because regional cohesion also depends on the ability to create spaces where trust can be restored.

The diplomatic value of Bakar Batu is also connected to food sovereignty and ecological memory. In Pacific societies, food is closely tied to land, identity, community resilience, and cultural survival. Studies on Pacific food cultures show that local food systems are not only nutritional resources, but also social and political foundations of well-being (Serra-Mallol et al. 2021). Indigenous food systems in the South Pacific are also closely related to sustainability, ecological knowledge, and the protection of community autonomy (Naika, Pillay, and Paliwal 2024). Through this lens, Bakar Batu can be read as a cultural practice that affirms the dignity of local food, the value of communal labor, and the relationship between people and land.

Although scholarly discussions on cultural diplomacy, soft power, and gastrodiploamacy have grown significantly, the diplomatic potential of Indigenous food rituals remains underexplored. Existing studies on gastrodiploamacy tend to emphasize national branding, culinary promotion, and public diplomacy campaigns. Such approaches are useful, but they often treat food as an object of representation rather than a living protocol of relation-making. Earth Oven Diplomacy offers a different perspective. It shifts the focus from food as national image to food as embodied communication. In this framework, Bakar Batu becomes a diplomatic space where dialogue is enacted through collective work, shared food, sensory experience, and respect for ancestral land.

The strategic relevance of Earth Oven Diplomacy is also connected to Indonesia's role as a middle power norm entrepreneur. Putra, Cangara, and Darwis (2024) show that Indonesia can strengthen its regional position by promoting normative ideas that resonate with regional communities. In the Pacific context, this means that Indonesia does not need to rely only on the diplomatic language of major

powers. Instead, it can offer a culturally grounded norm of diplomacy rooted in Papuan, Melanesian, and Pacific values. By conceptualizing Bakar Batu as Earth Oven Diplomacy, Indonesia can communicate its Pacific engagement not merely as state interest, but as a shared cultural commitment to dignity, kinship, and regional cohesion.

Based on the above discussion, the research problem addressed in this article is formulated as follows: how can the Bakar Batu tradition be conceptualized as Earth Oven Diplomacy within Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision? From this main question, this article examines three related issues. First, how does Bakar Batu embody Melanesian values of hospitality, reconciliation, and relationality? Second, how can the ritual be interpreted as a cultural instrument for trust-building between Indonesia and Pacific Island countries? Third, how can Earth Oven Diplomacy contribute to a more dignified and locally grounded model of regional cohesion in the Pacific?

The purpose of this article is to analyze the strategic relevance of Bakar Batu as a framework for Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the Pacific. It seeks to show that the revitalization of Bakar Batu is not only an act of cultural preservation, but also a way of rethinking diplomacy through local wisdom, food sovereignty, and Melanesian relationality. The article contributes theoretically by introducing Earth Oven Diplomacy as a locally rooted concept in cultural diplomacy studies. It also contributes practically by offering a policy-oriented perspective for strengthening Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision through cultural exchange, grassroots engagement, and shared Pacific traditions.

By placing Bakar Batu at the center of diplomatic analysis, this article proposes a shift from diplomacy as representation to diplomacy as relation. Regional cohesion cannot be built only through infrastructure, aid, strategic declarations, or formal meetings. It also requires trust, cultural sensitivity, shared memory, and the recognition of relational values. Earth Oven Diplomacy offers one possible pathway toward that goal: a diplomacy rooted in the land, warmed by fire, carried by collective labor, and shared through food as a sign of dignity, kinship, and peace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This article is grounded in the intersection of cultural diplomacy, soft power, gastrodplomacy, middle power norm entrepreneurship, Melanesian relationalism, and food sovereignty. These perspectives are used to explain how Bakar Batu can be conceptualized as Earth Oven Diplomacy within Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision. The main argument is that Bakar Batu should not be understood only as a Papuan culinary or ceremonial tradition, but as a relational cultural protocol that can support trust-building, reconciliation, and regional cohesion in the Pacific.

The first theoretical foundation is cultural diplomacy and soft power. Nye (2008) explains that soft power works through attraction, legitimacy, values, and culture rather than coercion. In this sense, culture can become a strategic medium for communicating identity and intention in international relations. This perspective is relevant to Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision, which seeks to strengthen Indonesia's

strategic engagement and regional diplomacy with Pacific Island countries (Herindrasti, Fernando, and Hop 2025). However, cultural diplomacy in the Pacific cannot be reduced to state branding or ceremonial performance. It must be able to speak to the relational values, historical memory, and cultural sensitivity of Pacific societies.

The second foundation is gastrodiploamacy. Existing studies show that food can function as a medium of public diplomacy, identity projection, and cross-cultural communication (Flowers 2024; Kusnedi et al. 2025; Li and Mok 2025). Cabral et al. (2025) also emphasize that food and dining practices may carry political, symbolic, and geopolitical meanings. However, much of gastrodiploamacy still focuses on cuisine as national branding or tourism promotion. *Earth Oven Diplomacy* expands this perspective by shifting attention from food as representation to food as relation. In Bakar Batu, food is not simply displayed or consumed. It is prepared collectively, connected to land, shared among participants, and used to renew social bonds.

The anthropological perspective on food sharing strengthens this argument. Kishigami (2022) explains that food sharing creates cooperation, reciprocity, moral obligation, and belonging in human societies. This idea is important for understanding Bakar Batu because the ritual reaches its full meaning when food is distributed and eaten together. The act of sharing transforms the earth oven into a communal space where hospitality, gratitude, and recognition are enacted. Therefore, Bakar Batu can be read as a form of embodied diplomacy in which social relations are built through labor, waiting, food, and collective participation.

The third foundation is the concept of the middle power norm entrepreneur. Putra, Cangara, and Darwis (2024) argue that Indonesia can strengthen its regional role by promoting normative ideas that are acceptable to regional communities. In the Pacific context, this means that Indonesia does not need to imitate the geopolitical language of major powers. Instead, Indonesia can offer a diplomatic norm rooted in Papuan, Melanesian, and wider Pacific cultural experience. *Earth Oven Diplomacy* supports this role by proposing a model of diplomacy based on hospitality, reciprocity, respect for land, and communal dignity.

The fourth foundation is Melanesian relationalism. Taylor et al. (2023) argue that relational thinking is essential for understanding Indigenous and Pacific approaches to political life. Naupa (2025) also shows that the Melanesian Way remains important in contemporary cultural and political practices. In Melanesian societies, relations are shaped through kinship, land, exchange, obligation, and shared memory. Bakar Batu embodies this worldview because it gathers people into a shared process of preparation, waiting, distribution, and communal eating. The ritual becomes a space where social distance can be reduced and collective recognition can be performed.

Studies on Bakar Batu support this interpretation. Kotib, Salviana DS, and Kumalasari (2022) show that Bakar Batu among Dani communities contains meanings

of togetherness, gratitude, solidarity, and cultural identity. Loho and Sianipar (2025) highlight its role in strengthening hospitality within Papuan society. Wenda and Purwanti (2023) explain that Bakar Batu can function as a cultural mechanism for resolving horizontal conflict, while Tabuni (2023) emphasizes its value in strengthening inter-ethnic relations in the Papuan highlands. These studies indicate that Bakar Batu is not merely a traditional cooking technique, but a social institution that organizes relation, reconciliation, and belonging.

The final foundation is food sovereignty. In Pacific societies, food is closely connected to land, identity, ecological knowledge, and community resilience. Serra-Mallol et al. (2021) show that Pacific food cultures are shaped by local understandings of eating well, social norms, and community well-being. Naika, Pillay, and Paliwal (2024) further emphasize that Indigenous food systems in the South Pacific are important for sustainability and cultural continuity. In the Papuan context, Powell Davies (2021) shows that food practices are also connected to dependency, autonomy, ritual time, and social change. These perspectives help explain why Bakar Batu is relevant not only as heritage, but also as a cultural expression of food sovereignty and ecological memory.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide the analytical foundation for Earth Oven Diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy and soft power explain why culture matters in international relations. Gastrodiplomacy and food sharing explain how food can become a medium of diplomatic communication and relation-making. Middle power norm entrepreneurship explains Indonesia's opportunity to introduce locally grounded diplomatic norms in the Pacific. Melanesian relationalism explains why Bakar Batu is socially meaningful as a protocol of hospitality and reconciliation. Food sovereignty links the ritual to sustainability, autonomy, and regional resilience. Therefore, Earth Oven Diplomacy is not merely a metaphor, but a locally rooted framework for advancing Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision through trust, dignity, and shared cultural practice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical method to examine the strategic relevance of Bakar Batu as a framework for Earth Oven Diplomacy within Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision. This method was chosen because the research problem does not aim to measure cultural practice statistically, but to interpret the meanings, values, and diplomatic possibilities embedded in a living Melanesian tradition. Bakar Batu is analyzed not only as a culinary practice, but also as a social, symbolic, performative, and relational process through which hospitality, reconciliation, collective labor, respect for land, and communal dignity are enacted.

The research uses a transdisciplinary ethnographic orientation by connecting cultural diplomacy, international relations, anthropology of food, sociology of art, and Melanesian cultural studies. This orientation is necessary because Earth Oven Diplomacy stands at the intersection of local cultural practice and regional foreign

policy. In this article, Bakar Batu is not positioned merely as an object of cultural preservation, but as a possible diplomatic protocol that can contribute to trust-building, people-to-people engagement, and regional cohesion between Indonesia and Pacific Island countries. This approach allows the study to move beyond a narrow understanding of culture as performance and to examine culture as a living source of diplomatic knowledge.

Data were collected through three main techniques: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and literature study. Participant observation was conducted by observing and engaging with Bakar Batu practices in Papuan cultural contexts, particularly in communal and performative settings where the ritual was presented as a space of gathering, hospitality, cultural transmission, and public participation. The observation focused on the stages of the ritual, including the preparation of stones and firewood, the heating of stones, the arrangement of food, the covering of the earth oven, the collective waiting process, the distribution of food, and communal eating. These stages were treated as meaningful cultural actions rather than as technical procedures alone.

The participant observation was important because the diplomatic meaning of Bakar Batu cannot be fully understood only through textual sources. The ritual involves sensory and embodied dimensions, including heat, smoke, smell, sound, movement, waiting, touch, and shared eating. These elements produce forms of communication that are not always expressed verbally. In the context of Earth Oven Diplomacy, such embodied experience is significant because it shows how trust, recognition, and solidarity may be built through shared cultural participation. The researcher therefore treated the ritual process as a field of meaning where political and cultural communication is enacted through the body, material objects, food, and collective labor.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected cultural practitioners, community figures, artists, and participants who had direct knowledge of Bakar Batu and its social meanings. Informants were selected purposively based on their cultural experience, involvement in ritual practice, and ability to explain the values embedded in Bakar Batu. The interviews explored several themes, including the meaning of Bakar Batu, its role in strengthening social relations, its function in hospitality and reconciliation, its connection to land and food, and its possible relevance for cultural diplomacy in the Pacific. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain analytical focus while still giving space for informants to express their lived experiences and cultural interpretations.

The literature study was conducted by reviewing scholarly works and policy-related sources on cultural diplomacy, soft power, gastrodiploamacy, middle power norm entrepreneurship, Melanesian relationalism, food sovereignty, Bakar Batu, and Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision. The literature was used to build the theoretical foundation of the article and to situate Bakar Batu within wider debates on diplomacy, regional identity, Indigenous knowledge, and Pacific cultural politics. Comparative references to other Pacific earth oven traditions, such as Mumu in Papua New Guinea

and Hāngī in Aotearoa New Zealand, were also used to show that earth oven practices are part of a broader Pacific cultural grammar.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by content analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns from field observation, interview narratives, and relevant literature. These patterns were then organized into several analytical themes: hospitality, performative reconciliation, Melanesian relationality, food sovereignty, cultural legitimacy, and regional cohesion. Content analysis was used to examine how concepts such as Pacific Elevation, cultural diplomacy, soft power, and middle power norm entrepreneurship frame Indonesia's engagement with Pacific Island countries. By combining thematic and content analysis, the study connects micro-level cultural practice with macro-level diplomatic discourse.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, this study applied source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from observation, interviews, and literature. Methodological triangulation was applied by combining ethnographic observation, interview-based interpretation, and textual analysis. This process helped ensure that the interpretation of Bakar Batu as Earth Oven Diplomacy was not based on a single source of data. Instead, the concept was developed through the convergence of ritual observation, cultural testimony, and theoretical analysis.

The study also used thick description to present Bakar Batu as a cultural process with social, sensory, symbolic, and political dimensions. Thick description is important because the diplomatic meaning of the ritual lies not only in the final act of eating together, but also in the entire process through which people gather, prepare, wait, share, and recognize one another. By describing the ritual as a process, this study seeks to show how Bakar Batu works as a cultural mechanism for producing relation, not merely as a culinary object or ethnic symbol.

The position of the researcher is also relevant in this study. As an academic and cultural actor who has direct engagement with Papuan artistic and cultural practices, the researcher occupies the position of a participant-observer. This position provides access to embodied knowledge, field experience, and cultural interpretation that may not be available through distant observation alone. At the same time, reflexive awareness was maintained to avoid treating personal involvement as unquestioned evidence. The analysis was developed by balancing lived cultural experience with interview narratives, theoretical interpretation, and scholarly sources.

Through this methodological framework, the study seeks to answer the central research question: how can Bakar Batu be conceptualized as Earth Oven Diplomacy within Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision? The chosen method is appropriate because it allows the research to interpret Bakar Batu as both a cultural practice and a diplomatic possibility. It also helps demonstrate that Earth Oven Diplomacy is not merely a metaphor, but a locally grounded analytical framework derived from the lived values, ritual processes, and relational worldview of Melanesian communities.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Bakar Batu within Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision shows that Earth Oven Diplomacy is not merely a symbolic extension of cultural promotion. It represents a relational diplomatic paradigm grounded in Melanesian cultural practice, where trust is built through shared presence, collective labor, food distribution, and respect for ancestral land. In this sense, Bakar Batu offers a different way of understanding diplomacy. It does not begin with formal negotiation, diplomatic protocol, or strategic rhetoric, but with the willingness to gather, work, wait, eat, and recognize one another within a communal space. This finding is consistent with the logic of soft power, where attraction and legitimacy are produced through values, culture, and meaningful social recognition rather than coercion (Nye 2008).

The first important finding concerns the role of Bakar Batu as a protocol of hospitality. In many Papuan cultural contexts, the preparation of Bakar Batu is not only a technical process of cooking food with heated stones. It is a social event that requires participation, patience, and collective responsibility. People gather materials, prepare firewood, heat stones, arrange food, cover the earth oven, and wait together until the food is ready to be shared. Each stage produces social meaning. The ritual does not separate host and guest in a rigid way; rather, it creates a shared atmosphere in which participation becomes a form of recognition. Studies on Bakar Batu also show that this tradition carries meanings of togetherness, gratitude, solidarity, and cultural identity among Papuan communities (Kotib, Salviana DS, and Kumalasari 2022; Loho and Sianipar 2025).

This finding is important for cultural diplomacy because trust in Melanesian and Pacific societies is often built through relational experience rather than formal statements alone. Diplomatic communication that depends solely on official speeches, development promises, or institutional agreements can remain distant from the cultural logic of Pacific communities. Bakar Batu offers a more embodied form of communication. The aroma of smoke, the heat of stones, the collective movement of preparing food, and the final act of eating together generate a sensory and emotional environment where social distance can be reduced. Through this process, diplomacy becomes not only a matter of representation, but also a matter of presence.

The second finding relates to Bakar Batu as a medium of performative reconciliation. In the logic of Earth Oven Diplomacy, reconciliation is not treated as an abstract political statement. It is enacted through a shared process that transforms tension into communal participation. The earth oven creates a temporary neutral ground where different people can gather without immediately being trapped in formal hierarchy. The process of collective labor allows participants to experience interdependence. No single person can complete the ritual alone. The work of preparing stones, fire, food, leaves, and distribution requires coordination and mutual respect. This is why Bakar Batu can be understood as a cultural technology of relation-making.

This performative dimension is especially relevant in the context of Indonesia's engagement with the Pacific. Indonesia's diplomacy in the Pacific has been shaped by complex perceptions, particularly regarding Papua and regional political sensitivity (Wangge and Lawson 2023). Pamungkas (2022) also reminds us that peace in Papua needs to be reconsidered through perspectives that are not solely state-centered, but attentive to Indigenous and decolonial understandings of relation and justice. In such a context, the challenge is not only to communicate policy, but also to rebuild trust. Earth Oven Diplomacy offers a culturally grounded way to address this challenge. It does not replace formal diplomacy, but it can humanize it. By placing people around the same earth oven, the ritual creates a symbolic and practical space where political communication may be softened by cultural intimacy.

The reconciliatory value of Bakar Batu is also supported by studies that examine its social role in Papuan communities. Wenda and Purwanti (2023) show that Bakar Batu can function as a cultural mechanism for resolving horizontal conflict in Dani society. Tabuni (2023) further emphasizes that the ritual strengthens inter-ethnic relations in the Papuan highlands by creating a shared space for communication and solidarity. These studies indicate that Bakar Batu has the capacity to mediate social tension through culturally legitimate processes. In diplomatic terms, this means that the ritual can be interpreted as more than a heritage practice. It can be read as an Indigenous protocol for restoring damaged relations.

The third finding concerns the relation between Bakar Batu and Melanesian relationalism. In Melanesian societies, identity is not understood as something purely individual. It is shaped by kinship, land, exchange, memory, and reciprocal obligation. Taylor et al. (2023) argue that relational thinking is crucial for understanding Pacific and Indigenous approaches to political life. Naupa (2025) also shows that the Melanesian Way continues to influence contemporary cultural and political practices in the Pacific. Bakar Batu embodies this relational worldview because it brings together people, land, food, ancestors, and social obligations in one cultural event. The ritual shows that social harmony is not built through individual achievement, but through the renewal of relationships.

This relational logic provides an important correction to state-centered diplomacy. Conventional diplomacy often imagines relations between countries as formal interactions among state representatives. Earth Oven Diplomacy expands this imagination by showing that relations between Indonesia and Pacific Island countries can also be strengthened through shared cultural protocols. In this framework, grassroots actors such as cultural practitioners, customary leaders, artists, youth communities, and local institutions become important diplomatic actors. They do not merely perform culture for state ceremonies; they carry the living knowledge through which regional trust can be cultivated.

The fourth finding is related to food sovereignty. Bakar Batu is deeply connected to local food systems, land-based knowledge, and ecological memory. The ritual depends on local harvests and the cultural understanding of how food should be prepared, shared, and respected. This aspect is highly relevant to contemporary Pacific concerns. Many Pacific communities face challenges related to imported food

dependency, climate change, ecological vulnerability, and the gradual weakening of local food knowledge. Studies on Pacific food cultures show that traditional food practices are closely linked to cultural resilience, community well-being, and local understandings of eating well (Serra-Mallol et al. 2021). Indigenous food systems in the South Pacific are also important for sustainability, ecological knowledge, and cultural continuity (Naika, Pillay, and Paliwal 2024).

By foregrounding Bakar Batu, Earth Oven Diplomacy connects cultural diplomacy with regional sustainability. It suggests that Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision can be strengthened not only through infrastructure or development cooperation, but also through programs that support local food knowledge, cultural resilience, and community-based ecological awareness. In this sense, Bakar Batu is not a nostalgic return to the past. It is a living resource for imagining a more sustainable Pacific future. The ritual reminds communities that food is not merely a commodity; it is a source of identity, autonomy, and social continuity.

The meaning of food in Papuan societies is also visible in broader studies of local food systems. Powell Davies (2021) shows that food practices in Asmat, particularly the relation between sago and rice, are connected to ritual spacetime, dependency, and social transformation. This insight is useful for understanding Bakar Batu because it shows that food in Papua is not simply about consumption. It is also a cultural field where autonomy, dependency, memory, and identity are negotiated. Earth Oven Diplomacy therefore places food sovereignty at the center of diplomatic imagination by affirming local food systems as sources of cultural and political dignity.

From the perspective of gastrodiploacy, Earth Oven Diplomacy offers a necessary expansion of existing approaches. Studies on gastrodiploacy show that food can support public diplomacy, identity projection, and international communication (Flowers 2024; Kusnedi et al. 2025; Li and Mok 2025). Cabral et al. (2025) further show that dining practices may communicate power, hospitality, and geopolitical meaning. However, Bakar Batu differs from many state-sponsored culinary campaigns because it does not operate primarily as a branding tool. Its diplomatic force lies in its communal process. The ritual invites people not only to taste food, but to enter a shared cultural time where relation is produced through labor, waiting, and distribution. This is what makes Earth Oven Diplomacy distinct from conventional gastrodiploacy.

The anthropological perspective on food sharing strengthens this point. Kishigami (2022) explains that food sharing creates cooperation, reciprocity, moral obligation, and belonging in human societies. Bakar Batu demonstrates this principle in a Papuan context. The diplomatic value of the ritual emerges not from the food alone, but from the way food is collectively prepared and distributed. Sharing food becomes a political-cultural act because it affirms who belongs, who is welcomed, and how social relations are renewed. In this sense, the earth oven becomes a medium through which community and diplomacy meet.

Table 1 summarizes the paradigmatic distinction between conventional formal diplomacy and Earth Oven Diplomacy.

Table 1. Paradigmatic Comparison between Formal Diplomacy and Earth Oven Diplomacy

Analytical Dimension	Formal Diplomacy	Earth Oven Diplomacy
Nature of Relation	State-centered and often transactional	Relational, communal, and kinship-based
Communication Medium	Official speech, policy statement, and negotiation	Food, ritual, body, land, and cultural performance
Main Actors	Political elites, diplomats, and state officials	Customary leaders, cultural practitioners, artists, communities, and grassroots actors
Source of Influence	Institutional authority, economic assistance, and strategic interest	Cultural legitimacy, hospitality, shared identity, and trust
Diplomatic Objective	Agreement, cooperation, and policy coordination	Trust-building, reconciliation, dignity, and regional cohesion
Cultural Position	Culture as representation or ceremony	Culture as living protocol and relational practice

Source: Developed by the authors from field interpretation and literature analysis.

The table shows that Earth Oven Diplomacy does not reject formal diplomacy, but complements it by offering a culturally grounded layer of engagement. Formal diplomacy remains necessary for policy coordination, institutional cooperation, and strategic decision-making. However, in the Pacific context, it may not be sufficient if it is not supported by relational trust. Earth Oven Diplomacy fills this gap by providing a cultural method for producing closeness, recognition, and shared emotional ground. It turns diplomacy from a distant state activity into a lived social encounter.

Within the Pacific Elevation vision, this approach provides Indonesia with a distinctive diplomatic advantage. Herindrasti, Fernando, and Hop (2025) explain that Pacific Elevation reflects Indonesia’s effort to expand strategic engagement and regional diplomacy in the Pacific. Earth Oven Diplomacy contributes to this agenda by offering a more culturally resonant mode of engagement. It allows Indonesia to approach Pacific Island countries not only as partners in geopolitical strategy, but also as relatives within a wider cultural ecology. This distinction is crucial. If Indonesia wants to be seen as an authentic Pacific actor, it must communicate through values and practices that are meaningful within Pacific societies.

This approach also supports Indonesia’s potential role as a middle power norm entrepreneur. Putra, Cangara, and Darwis (2024) argue that Indonesia can strengthen its regional influence by promoting normative ideas that are relevant and acceptable to regional communities. Earth Oven Diplomacy fits this role because it proposes a

diplomatic norm rooted in hospitality, reciprocity, land-based identity, and collective dignity. Rather than imitating the geopolitical style of major powers in the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia can present a culturally grounded diplomatic model that emerges from its own Papuan and Melanesian realities.

However, the institutionalization of Earth Oven Diplomacy must be approached carefully. Bakar Batu should not be reduced into a decorative performance for state events or a touristic spectacle detached from its cultural meaning. Such reduction would weaken the ethical foundation of the concept. The ritual must be treated with respect for customary authority, local knowledge, and community participation. Cultural practitioners and Indigenous communities should not only be invited as performers, but also recognized as knowledge holders and diplomatic actors. Without this ethical sensitivity, Earth Oven Diplomacy risks reproducing the same extractive logic that it seeks to overcome.

For this reason, any policy application of Earth Oven Diplomacy should be developed through collaborative mechanisms. Cultural institutions in Papua, universities, local communities, and government agencies can work together to design cultural diplomacy programs that are participatory and accountable. One possible model is the establishment of a Cultural Diplomacy Laboratory in Papua. Such a laboratory could document earth oven traditions, facilitate regional exchanges with Pacific communities, develop cultural diplomacy training, and create artistic or audiovisual works that communicate the values of Bakar Batu to wider audiences. This model would allow Earth Oven Diplomacy to grow not as a state-imposed agenda, but as a co-created cultural platform.

Another practical implication is the development of Pacific cultural exchange programs based on food, dance, film, and oral history. These programs could bring together Papuan communities, Pacific artists, cultural leaders, youth groups, and scholars to explore shared earth oven traditions and local food systems. Through such programs, diplomacy would not be limited to elite forums. It would move into community spaces where cultural knowledge is practiced and transmitted. This is important because regional cohesion cannot be produced only through agreements among officials. It must also be nurtured through shared cultural experiences at the grassroots level.

The findings of this article therefore suggest that Earth Oven Diplomacy can contribute to Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision in three main ways. First, it provides a culturally resonant language for trust-building by using Bakar Batu as a protocol of hospitality and recognition. Second, it strengthens Indonesia's identity as part of the Pacific cultural world by connecting Papuan traditions with wider Melanesian and Pacific earth oven practices. Third, it links cultural diplomacy with food sovereignty and sustainability, two issues that are increasingly important for Pacific Island countries.

In summary, Earth Oven Diplomacy reframes Bakar Batu from a local cultural tradition into a regional diplomatic paradigm. It shows that diplomacy can be cooked through shared labor, warmed by cultural intimacy, and distributed through food as

a sign of peace. This does not mean that cultural ritual can solve all geopolitical problems. Rather, it means that diplomacy becomes more meaningful when it is grounded in the cultural worlds of the people it seeks to engage. For Indonesia, this offers a strategic and ethical pathway to strengthen regional cohesion in the Pacific: not by speaking above communities, but by sitting with them around the same earth oven.

CONCLUSIONS

This article concludes that Earth Oven Diplomacy offers a new relational paradigm for strengthening regional cohesion between Indonesia and Pacific Island countries. By placing Bakar Batu within the framework of Indonesia's Pacific Elevation vision, the study shows that diplomacy in the Pacific cannot rely solely on formal negotiation, economic cooperation, development assistance, or strategic rhetoric. These instruments remain necessary, but they need to be complemented by cultural approaches that are closer to the lived values of Melanesian and Pacific societies. Bakar Batu demonstrates that diplomacy can also be enacted through food, land, fire, stone, collective labor, hospitality, and shared participation.

The main contribution of this article lies in its conceptualization of Bakar Batu as Earth Oven Diplomacy. This concept reframes Bakar Batu from a local culinary or ceremonial practice into a diplomatic protocol rooted in relation, dignity, and communal recognition. The ritual contains values that are relevant to regional trust-building, including hospitality, reconciliation, reciprocity, respect for land, and collective responsibility. Through this perspective, Bakar Batu should not be understood merely as cultural heritage to be preserved, but as living knowledge that can enrich Indonesia's diplomatic imagination in the Pacific.

The study also shows that Earth Oven Diplomacy can support Indonesia's role as a culturally grounded Pacific actor. Rather than imitating the geopolitical language of major powers, Indonesia can offer a diplomatic model that grows from Papuan, Melanesian, and wider Pacific cultural experience. This model emphasizes relation over domination, presence over distance, and cultural recognition over transactional exchange. Such an approach is important because Indonesia's engagement with Pacific Island countries requires not only policy coordination, but also trust, sensitivity, and shared cultural legitimacy.

Practically, this article recommends three strategic steps. First, Indonesia should develop a Cultural Diplomacy Laboratory in Papua as a collaborative space for documenting Indigenous protocols, conducting research on Pacific cultural diplomacy, training young cultural actors, and designing community-based diplomatic programs. Second, Indonesia should initiate Pacific cultural exchange programs based on food, dance, film, oral history, and local ecological knowledge. These programs can connect Papuan communities with Pacific artists, cultural leaders, youth groups, scholars, and policymakers through shared cultural experience. Third,

Bakar Batu may be used as a cultural protocol in selected regional meetings, festivals, and people-to-people diplomacy programs, provided that it is carried out ethically with the involvement and consent of customary communities.

These recommendations require careful ethical consideration. Earth Oven Diplomacy should not reduce Bakar Batu into a decorative performance for state ceremonies or a touristic spectacle detached from its cultural meaning. Customary leaders, cultural practitioners, and local communities must be recognized as knowledge holders, not merely as performers. Their authority, interpretation, and participation should shape any diplomatic use of the ritual. Without this ethical foundation, the concept risks losing its relational value and may reproduce the extractive treatment of Indigenous culture that it seeks to overcome.

Finally, Earth Oven Diplomacy offers an alternative way of imagining Indonesia's future role in the Pacific. Regional cohesion is not built only through policy documents, infrastructure projects, diplomatic statements, or development programs. It is also formed through trust, cultural sensitivity, shared memory, and embodied recognition. By placing Bakar Batu at the center of cultural diplomacy, Indonesia can approach the Pacific not as a distant state seeking influence, but as a cultural relative willing to sit, work, and share food within the same regional hearth. This is the deeper promise of Earth Oven Diplomacy: a diplomacy rooted in the land, warmed by collective labor, and directed toward dignity, kinship, and peace.

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