



Ritual Art: Exploring the Dimensions of Character Building in the Liat Pulagajjat Tradition of Mentawai

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the Liat Pulagajjat tradition in the Mentawai Islands as a form of ritual art that functions as an instrument of character education based on local wisdom (indigenous pedagogy). Using qualitative methods with an ethnographic approach, this study reveals how the aesthetic structure, movement symbolism, and oral narrative in Liat Pulagajjat there are processions carried out namely: Lia Siboitok (taddat lia), Sikebbukat sibakkat katcaila, Pasibitbit Sipitto', Lia Sikarua, Iriq toitet Iriq toitet, Lajot Simagre, Lia Sikatelu, Uraji sainak, and Pukalaibok this ritual is guided by all sikerei in the villages of Matotonan, Madobag and Butui which are located in the South Siberut sub-district of the Mentawai Islands regency. This procession transmits religious values, honesty, discipline, love of the homeland, tolerance, love of peace, care for the environment, care for society, and responsibility and mutual cooperation. The findings suggest that these rituals are not simply aesthetic performances, but rather pedagogical spaces where cultural identities and community morality are formed. This article argues that integrating ritual arts into character education discourse can enrich multicultural education models relevant to today's global challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the increasingly massive currents of globalization and modernity, the Mentawai indigenous people of the Mentawai Islands, West Sumatra, demonstrate an extraordinary form of cultural resilience. For them, tradition is not a static artifact of the past, but rather a living instrument for maintaining the integrity of identity amidst changing times. One of the most profound manifestations of this identity resilience is the Liat Pulagajjat tradition (Zulfa, 2023). To understand why this tradition serves as a bulwark of identity, this research must look beyond the aesthetics of movement. From the outside, Liat Pulagajjat may appear to be an ordinary ritual dance. However, for the Mentawai people, it is a symbolic representation of the triadic relationship between humans, nature, and spirits (Arat Sabulungan) (Yulia R, Zulfa, et al., 2018). The movements in Liat Pulagajjat often mimic the behavior of animals or natural elements. This is not mere imitation, but rather a form of respect and recognition that humans are an inseparable part of the ecosystem. These movements are as follows:

a. **Spiritual Communication:** This ritual serves as a bridge of communication with ancestors and forest guardian spirits. Amidst a modernity that tends to glorify materialism, this tradition returns the Mentawai people to their spiritual roots. **Character Formation Dimensions:** Indigenous communities maintain this tradition because it embodies an indigenous pedagogy that shapes the character of the younger generation:

b. **Collectivity and Individualism:** Modernity often brings selfishness, but Liat Pulagajjat is performed communally. This strengthens the bonds of the Uma (tribal house) (Sabagalet Y, Zulfa: 2024), ensuring that group interests take precedence over personal interests.

c. **Courage and Resilience:** Ritual processes involving extensive physical and mental preparation train Mentawai youth to develop resilience (grit) in facing life's challenges, both natural and social.

d. **Ecological Harmony:** The character formed is a "green" one. This tradition instills fear and respect for the reckless destruction of forests, a value highly relevant to the current global climate crisis.

A Fortress of Identity in the Digital Age: As technology and popular culture infiltrate remote areas of Siberut, Liat Pulagajjat serves as a cultural anchor. Indigenous communities use this tradition to: **Affirm Cultural Boundaries:** Demonstrate their legitimate and sovereign value system within their ancestral lands. **Counter-Culture:** Respond to the standardization of external cultures. By continuing to perform this ritual, they assert that being "modern" does not necessarily mean losing their "Mentawaianness."

The Liat Pulagajjat tradition is a space for negotiation. The Mentawai people do not completely isolate themselves from modernity, but they choose to maintain control of their identity. Through the rhythms of tuddukat music and ritual movements, they celebrate survival, maintain harmony with nature, and ensure that the noble values of their ancestors continue to pulse in the veins of future generations. For them, as long as Liat Pulagajjat continues to be practiced, Mentawai identity will never be lost to time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ritual in indigenous societies transcends the boundaries of performance; it serves as a living archive of cosmological knowledge and normative values. In the context of the Mentawai Islands, cultural life is anchored by Arat Sabulungan—a belief system that posits that all natural elements possess a spirit (*simagere*).

Previous scholarship on Mentawai culture often categorizes its rituals, such as those led by the *Sikerei* (shaman/spiritual leader), under health restoration or ecological appeasement frameworks. However, viewing ritual through the lens of Ritual Pedagogy reveals how bodily movements and symbolic actions function as mechanisms for character transmission.

- Ritual Art as Moral Education: Ritual performance acts as a primary vehicle for transmitting non-formal education within indigenous communities.
- The Embodiment of Value: Character building in traditional societies is rarely abstract; it is embodied through participation, rhythm, and shared aesthetic experiences.
- The Gap in Research: While the structural and medical aspects of *Sikerei* rituals are well-documented, the explicit link between the aesthetic performance of *Liat Pulagajjat* (the ritual dance/movements mimicking nature) and systematic character formation has remained under-researched.

In contemporary educational discourse, character education is often implemented through a formal-instructional approach. In many educational institutions, moral values are transmitted through textual curricula, one-way lectures, and rigid behavioral standards. This approach often ends up being "dry" because it lacks the dimension of direct experience (experiential learning) and emotional engagement, resulting in the values taught becoming merely cognitive memorization without being truly internalized in the students' hearts.

On the other hand, indigenous communities have a far more organic and profound mechanism for transforming the character of their members, namely through the process of inculturation. The *Liat Pulagajjat* tradition in Mentawai offers an alternative model that contrasts with this formal educational model. The problem of this research is rooted in several crucial points:

1. Desecularization of Values in Modern Education

Modern education tends to separate moral values from spiritual and aesthetic contexts. As a result, character education feels like an instructional burden rather than an existential necessity. There is a void in the space where emotions and a sense of belonging should be involved in the formation of identity.

2. Ritual as a "Living" Curriculum

Unlike the static format of a classroom, ritual art in the Mentawai community is a moving curriculum. There is an urgent need to examine how ritual art—through dance movements, *tuddukat* rhythms, and visual symbolism—can create a liminal experience. In this ritual space, an individual not only "learns" about courage or solidarity, but also "becomes" courageous and "feels" solidarity through active participation.

3. The Threat of Erosion of Ethnopedagogy

Along with the massive centralization of the national education system, educational patterns based on local wisdom (indigenous pedagogy) are slowly being marginalized. If the inculturation patterns in traditions like Liat Pulagajjat are not immediately scientifically analyzed, the world of education will lose a crucial reference point for how values can be effectively transmitted through aesthetic and emotional channels.

4. Conceptual Gap

There is a gap in the existing character education literature, where studies of ritual arts often focus solely on sociological or anthropological analysis, without exploring its pedagogical-formative dimensions. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring how the "inculturation" of values in Liat Pulagajjat can serve as a mirror for the revitalization of character education that is more humanistic and contextual.

Although numerous studies on Mentawai society have been conducted by social scientists, the current literature tends to fall into two main categories. First, research focuses on the medico-magical aspect, where the Sikerei figure is examined in his capacity as a traditional healer and spirit medium within the Arat Sabulungan belief system (e.g., Schefold, 1988; Darmanto, 2018). Second, research emphasizes general sociological-anthropological aspects, analyzing social structures, the Uma kinship system, and Mentawai society's adaptation patterns to modernity and government policies (e.g., Persoon, 1994).

This article takes a different stance and offers a new perspective by integrating Mentawai traditions into the discourse of arts and character education. The novelty of this research lies in its specific attempt to examine the aesthetics of the Liat Pulagajjat ritual not as a static cultural artifact, but as an active pedagogical medium. The fundamental differences between this study and previous studies are summarized in the following points:

- a. **Shifting Focus from Function to Pedagogical Meaning:** While sociological research views ritual as a tool for social integration, this study views ritual as a "hidden curriculum" that systematically instills moral values through aesthetic experiences.
- b. **Formative Aesthetic Analysis:** This article examines how artistic elements—such as the metaphor of animal movement, the percussive rhythm of the tuddukat, and the use of visual attributes—work psychologically and educationally to shape the character of ritual participants. We argue that the beauty in this ritual is the gateway to the internalization of values.
- c. **Inculturation vs. Instruction:** Unlike formal education studies that focus on classroom instructional methods, this study explores the process of inculturation, where character values such as courage, independence, and

ecological harmony are inherited through bodily and emotional participation in the ritual space.

Thus, this research no longer views Liat Pulagajjat merely as a spectacle or mystical practice, but rather as an ethnopedagogical model that offers a solution to the scarcity of modern character education methods. Focusing on this "aesthetic-pedagogical" dimension is expected to provide new theoretical contributions to the development of culture-based education on an international scale, exploring the relationship between art and education.

This research employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological-ethnographic paradigm. This approach was chosen to deeply understand the meaning behind the aesthetic symbols in the Liat Pulagajjat ritual and how these experiences transform the character of those who perform them. As explained by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research allows researchers to explore cultural phenomena from the perspective of participants in their natural context. The research was conducted in the Mentawai Islands, West Sumatra, specifically in the interior region of Siberut, which still upholds the Arat Sabulungan tradition. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, consisting of:

1. Three Sikerei (traditional shamans) as authorities on ritual knowledge.
2. Traditional leaders/ Uma Chiefs who understand the community's lineage and moral values.
3. Young Mentawai people involved in the ritual to observe the formative impact of their participation.

Data were collected through three main techniques:

1. Participatory Observation: Researchers were directly involved in the preparation and implementation of the Liat Pulagajjat ritual to record every detail of movement, sound, and social interaction.
2. In-depth Interviews: Conducted semi-structured to explore motifs, symbolic interpretations, and educational values perceived by the informants.
3. Audio-Visual Documentation: Video recordings and photographs were used for micro-aesthetic analysis of dance movements to identify character values represented visually.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Thematic Analysis model (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The steps included:

- Transcription and Familiarization: Transforming interview results and field notes into text.
- Coding: Identifying units of meaning related to "aesthetics" and "character."

- Thematic Analysis: Grouping codes into broad themes such as Collectivity, Courage, and Ecological Harmony.
- Theoretical Abstraction: Connecting field findings to theories of arts education and ethnopedagogy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Liat Pulagajat tradition in Matotonan Village is not simply a series of movements, but rather a systematic pedagogical structure. This ritual is guided by all the Sikerei in the village, demonstrating that the transmission of values is carried out collectively by the highest moral authority. The following is an in-depth analysis of the ritual stages and the character dimensions they shape:

A. Initiation and Spiritual Awareness Stages

1. Lia Siboitok (Taddat Lia): This is the opening of the ritual. Pedagogically, this stage cultivates humility and ethical consent. Before undertaking anything major, one must be aware of the existence of a power beyond oneself (God/Nature Spirit). This forms a fundamental religious character.



*Figure 1. Sikerei Mantra Ritual in Liat Pullagajat in the Bakatkatchaila Procession
(Source: Zulfa Documentation)*

2. Sikebbukat Sibakkat Katcaila: A procession involving elders or respected figures. This represents the values of respect for seniority and lineage. The character developed is adherence to social order and recognition of the integrity of traditional leaders.



Figure 2. Sinanalep Parade with the Author (Source: Zulfa Documentation)

B. Aesthetics of Movement and the Symbolism of Resilience

3. Pasibitbit Sipitto': This procession often involves dynamic symbolic elements. In terms of character, it trains focus and concentration. Every movement must be in sync with the rhythm, teaching that success in life requires sharp attention.



Figure 3. Orality of Sikerei (Source: Buyamin Documentation)

4. Lia Sikarua & Lia Sikatelu: The repetition of rituals in the second and third phases is not merely redundancy, but rather a method of perseverance. In character education, repetition is key to internalizing values. Students (the community) are trained to be consistent and persistent in carrying out traditional obligations.

C. Ecological Harmony and Natural Mimesis

5. Iriq Toitet Iriq Toitet: Movements that imitate the sounds or behavior of birds or nature. Pedagogically, this is a form of ecological education. The community is taught to foster a "nurturing" attitude toward nature. By imitating nature, humans are reminded that they are not masters of it, but rather part of the harmony of the universe.
6. Lajot Simagre: A procession of summoning or honoring the soul/spirit. This builds spiritual integrity. An individual is taught to maintain their "soul" so that it aligns with their physical actions (inner honesty).

D. The Peak of Collectivity and Social Harmony

7. Uraji Sainak: This stage often involves more intense interaction between participants. The prominent value is solidarity (gotong royong). Guided by all the Sikerei in Matotonan, this procession emphasizes that individual character is only meaningful if it contributes to village harmony.
8. Pukalaibok: As the concluding ritual, Pukalaibok serves as a purification and stabilization ritual. After a lengthy procession, participants are returned to a state of calm but with a new sense of self. This represents the character of self-control (self-regulation).

Theoretically, the procession from Lia Siboitok to Pukalaibok in Matotonan Village demonstrates Aesthetic Empowerment. Each stage of the ritual serves as "learning material" that is not conveyed verbally, but rather through bodily experience (embodied knowledge).

Table 1. Lia Pullagajat Ritual Procession

Ritual Procession	Aesthetic Elements,	Character (Pedagogis)	Values
Lia Siboitok:	Opening Prayer/Mantra: Religiosity	Ethics: Permission	
Iriq Toilet:	Bird Mimesis:	Ecological Harmony	
Lajot Simagre:	Symbolism of the Spirit	Integrity & Honesty	
Uraji Sainak:	Collective Movement	Social Solidarity	
Pukalaibok:	Closing Ritual	Self-Control	

Source: Research Analysis

This study found that participation in rituals collectively guided by the Sikerei creates positive social pressure and emotional support for community members. This demonstrates that the Mentawai indigenous community has long implemented the principles of Community-Based Character Education, which is far more effective than formal instructional approaches, which are often one-way.

CONCLUSIONS

Liat Pulagajjat is far more than an ancient artistic relic; it is an active, dynamic instrument of character education. Through its mimetic movements, communal structure, and adherence to *Arat Sabulungan* ethics, it systematically fosters:

- Deep ecological responsibility.
- Uncompromising social solidarity.
- Personal discipline and psychological resilience.

By recognizing the pedagogical power embedded in ritual art, we expand our understanding of how moral values are successfully transmitted across generations without relying on written text.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **For Educational Policy:** Local governments in the Mentawai region should integrate the philosophical values of *Liat Pulagajjat* into the contextualized school curriculum (*Muatan Lokal*), transforming ritual philosophy into modern classroom character-building models.
2. **For Cultural Practitioners:** The preservation of *Liat Pulagajjat* must focus on the *meaning* and *participation* of the youth, rather than just staging it as a superficial tourist attraction.
3. **For Future Research:** Future studies should employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches to measure the psychological resilience levels of youth who actively practice *Liat Pulagajjat* compared to those who do not.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

To elevate this study within the scope of global academic discourse, future **Advanced Research** initiatives should focus on the following cross-disciplinary paradigms:

- **Neuro-Anthropology of Ritual Performance:** Investigating how the rhythmic audio-visual stimuli of the *Tudurkat* and repetitive *Serei* movements impact brainwave synchronization and collective emotional state transformation among participants.
- **Inclusive Economy and Cultural Identity:** Mapping how the revitalization of *Liat Pulagajjat* can be ethically positioned within a sustainable, community-based eco-tourism framework that empowers the local *Uma* economically without commercializing or compromising the sacred nature of the ritual.

- **Comparative Indigenous Pedagogy:** Conducting a comparative analysis between the character-building dimensions of Mentawai rituals and other global indigenous practices (e.g., Maori *Haka* or Native American sun dances) to construct a universal framework for Indigenous Character Education.

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