

From Sacred Ritual to Public Performance: Genealogical Transmission and Cultural Hybridity of the Gendong Dance in the Akit Community, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study examines the transmission and transformation of the Gendong dance among the Akit community in Riau Province, focusing on how ritual knowledge and practices are sustained or disrupted without formal institutions. The research addresses the urgency of safeguarding this endangered intangible heritage, which has undergone functional shifts under modernization and socio-economic pressures. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, and analyzed using descriptive-interpretive methods informed by cultural sociology and anthropology. The findings reveal three key dynamics: (i) the transmission of the Gendong dance is primarily genealogical, reinforced by informal apprenticeship and ritualized knowledge such as prayers, chants, and taboos; (ii) its role has shifted from sacred purification rituals, notably in *Bele Kampung*, to public performances at civic celebrations and tourism events, entailing changes in choreography, duration, and media; and (iii) the community negotiates between maintaining sacred elements in limited ritual contexts and adapting performative aspects for modern audiences. These findings imply that cultural sustainability requires integrated strategies to balance preservation with adaptation, including educational inclusion, creative economy support, and digital documentation. The originality of this research lies in its focus on micro-level processes of genealogical transmission and cultural negotiation—an underexplored dimension in previous studies that primarily emphasized symbolic, ritual, or commodified aspects. This contribution enriches academic discourse on intangible heritage and practical frameworks for inclusive cultural policy.

Keywords: Akit community; cultural transmission; intangible heritage; ritual transformation.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji transmisi dan transformasi tarian Gendong di kalangan komunitas Akit di Provinsi Riau, dengan fokus pada bagaimana pengetahuan dan praktik ritual dipertahankan atau terganggu dalam ketidakhadiran institusi formal. Penelitian ini menanggapi urgensi pelestarian warisan budaya takbenda yang terancam punah ini, yang telah mengalami pergeseran fungsi akibat modernisasi dan tekanan sosio-ekonomi. Menggunakan pendekatan etnografi kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi, serta dianalisis menggunakan metode deskriptif-interpretatif yang didasarkan pada sosiologi budaya dan antropologi. Temuan menunjukkan tiga dinamika utama: (i) transmisi tarian Gendong secara utama bersifat genealogis, diperkuat oleh magang informal dan pengetahuan ritual seperti doa, nyanyian, dan tabu; (ii) perannya telah bergeser dari ritual penyucian suci, terutama dalam *Bele Kampung*, menjadi pertunjukan publik dalam perayaan sipil dan acara pariwisata, yang melibatkan perubahan dalam koreografi, durasi, dan media; dan (iii) komunitas menegosiasikan antara mempertahankan unsur-unsur suci dalam konteks ritual terbatas dan menyesuaikan aspek performatif untuk audiens modern. Temuan ini menyiratkan bahwa keberlanjutan budaya memerlukan strategi terintegrasi, termasuk inklusi pendidikan, dukungan ekonomi kreatif, dan dokumentasi digital, untuk menyeimbangkan pelestarian dengan adaptasi.

Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada fokusnya pada proses mikro transmisi genealogis dan negosiasi budaya—dimensi yang kurang dieksplorasi dalam studi sebelumnya yang sebagian besar menekankan aspek simbolis, ritual, atau komodifikasi. Kontribusi ini memperkaya baik diskursus akademik tentang warisan budaya takbenda maupun kerangka kerja praktis untuk kebijakan budaya inklusif.

Kata Kunci: Komunitas Akit; transmisi budaya; warisan budaya takbenda; transformasi ritual.

1. Introduction

Amid the strong currents of globalization and modernization, many local cultural traditions in Indonesia face extinction risk. Research has shown that modernization and lifestyle changes have contributed to the decline of indigenous languages and ritual practices in Papua, such as those of the Ngalum, Ketengban, Lepki, and Arimtap tribes (Sitokdana, Tanone, & Tanaem, 2019a, 2019b). Similar challenges are experienced by the Meratus Dayak in South Borneo, whose traditional culture has been increasingly marginalized due to external influences and socio-religious change (Markey & Muller, 2013). National studies further indicate that participation in cultural performances and visits remains very low (5–15%), which threatens the continuity of at least 127 forms of intangible cultural heritage (Pradani & Hasibuan, 2018). In urban contexts, the Betawi language in Jakarta has also been identified as endangered, highlighting the importance of formal education, media promotion, and community-based initiatives to sustain cultural identity (Siregar & Hamzah, 2024). Moreover, cultural sustainability is vulnerable to natural and anthropogenic risks; local wisdom traditions such as those of the Sundanese in Kampung Naga play a crucial role in environmental preservation and disaster mitigation, underscoring the interconnection between ecological resilience and cultural survival (Maryani & Yani, 2016).

In the context of Riau Province, the Gendong dance of the Akit community illustrates these broader challenges of cultural survival. Once central to communal rituals such as *Bele Kampung*—a purification ceremony intended to protect villages from misfortune—the dance was a medium of ancestral reverence, collective solidarity, and spiritual protection. However, field reports and local documentation reveal that its transmission today depends almost exclusively on genealogical lines within families, with minimal institutional support from schools or cultural bodies (Aktasih, 2019; Lestari & Rosaliza, 2019). The younger generation shows decreasing interest, particularly because the dance does not provide clear economic benefits and is overshadowed by modern entertainment. Public performances of Gendong dance are now mainly limited to district-level cultural events or tourism showcases, often stripped of their ritual depth (Mayasari, 2019). This situation reflects a wider social fact: the continuity of Gendong dance is highly vulnerable, as it relies on fragile intergenerational ties and informal community commitment rather than sustainable cultural infrastructure.

Research on traditional dances can generally be grouped into three categories, the first emphasizing ritual function and spiritual significance. Numerous studies highlight that traditional dance often operates as a conduit for spirituality, connecting human communities with the divine, nature, or ancestral spirits. For example, Izu and de Villiers (2022; 2023) demonstrated how the *umxhentso* dance of the Xhosa healers in South Africa functions as a medium for trance and ancestral communication, while Bugov (2024) traced the origins of *Lengger Banyumas* in Central Java as an agricultural ritual devoted to Dewi Sri, the fertility goddess. Similarly, Yang (2025) analyzed the *Xiangxi Miao Drum Dance* in China, showing how its ritual performance embodies cosmic harmony and ancestral reverence. In the Indonesian context, Nugraheni et al. (2024) found that the *Radap Rahayu* dance of the Banjar community maintains strong ritual and social meanings in ceremonies such as weddings and communal celebrations. These studies illustrate that traditional dances are not merely aesthetic performances but are essential in maintaining spirituality, transmitting ritual values, and strengthening social cohesion. However, most of this scholarship focuses on describing symbolic meanings and ritual functions, while paying less attention to the socio-anthropological processes of how such spiritual practices are inherited, adapted, and transmitted across generations. This gap is

particularly evident in the case of the Akit community's Gendong dance, where the mechanism of genealogical transmission and its transformation under modernization remain underexplored.

The second strand of research on traditional dance highlights its symbolic dimensions and material culture as integral components of cultural expression. Studies on Shaanxi's *Ansai Waist Drum* and *Shaanbei Yangge* illustrate how dance movements, costumes, and ritual symbolism embody cosmological beliefs and reinforce communal identity (Chen, Ma, & Shang, 2025). In the Indonesian context, Jamilah et al. (2025) analyzed wedding dances such as *Tari Paduppa* and *Tari Lalusu* in South Sulawesi, showing how props, attire, and choreography symbolize gratitude, hierarchy, and social harmony. Similarly, Zhang and Pu (2024) demonstrated that Chinese folk dances carry religious philosophy and mysticism, while Khomushku, Sanchay, and Kukhta (2019) emphasized how Tuvan dances preserve ancestral symbols through sacred kinetics. Beyond ritual meaning, scholars have explored how material elements interact with visual culture; for instance, Dankworth et al. (2024) examined intersections between dance, performance, and visual arts, while Gül et al. (2024) showed that imagery practices in Turkish folk dances ensure accurate symbolic transmission across generations. Technological initiatives such as the Terpsichore project in Greece have further underscored the importance of material culture by digitizing body movements and costumes for preservation (Douka, Ziagkas, Zilidou, Loukovitis, & Tsiatsos, 2021; Ziagkas, Zilidou, Loukovitis, Douka, & Tsiatsos, 2021). While these studies underscore the richness of symbolic expression and material embodiment in traditional dance, they prioritize interpretive or technological aspects rather than investigating how such symbolic and material elements are transmitted genealogically and sustained within specific indigenous communities, such as the Akit's Gendong dance.

The third cluster of research examines how traditional dances and indigenous rituals are transformed through processes of commodification in the context of tourism. Whitford (2009) showed that while the *Guelaguetza* festival in Oaxaca, Mexico, generates economic benefits for local communities, it also risks losing its cultural authenticity as it increasingly caters to tourist consumption. Similarly, studies on the Naxi dance in Yunnan Province highlight how integration into tourism circuits can simultaneously preserve ethnic identity and provide sustainable income, yet at the cost of reshaping ritual forms into staged performances (Minyue & Hussin, 2025). In Australia, Dunphy and Ware (2019) found that indigenous dance traditions such as the *Junba* and *Milpirri Festival* significantly strengthen cultural identity and quality of life. However, their connection to cultural tourism creates tensions between heritage preservation and commodification. A case study of Aztec dance in Mexico City further illustrates this dilemma: while some groups (*chimaleros*) adapt performances for tourist audiences, others resist commercialization to safeguard ritual authenticity, creating intra-community divisions (Díaz, Jiménez, Hernández, & Villarreal, 2022). These studies underscore that tourism can be both an opportunity and a threat—it provides economic and preservation platforms for traditional dances, yet also fosters cultural alienation and dilutes sacred meanings. However, most of this literature analyzes the macro-level impacts of tourism and commodification, while insufficiently addressing the micro-level processes of negotiation and adaptation within indigenous communities themselves—such as how Akit families and performers of the Gendong dance decide what ritual elements to retain or transform in response to economic and social pressures.

Scholarship specifically addressing the Gendong dance of the Akit community remains limited but offers important insights into its ritual, symbolic, and transformative dimensions. Aktasih (2019) emphasized its function as a ritual of purification, situating the dance within the community's cosmology of protection and cleansing. Lestari and Rosaliza (2019) further analyzed the symbolic meaning of costumes, props, and movements, underscoring how material elements embody collective identity and ancestral memory. Madjid, Santoso, and Ridwan (2021) highlighted the syncretic religious expressions of the Akit, where animistic practices persist alongside formal religious affiliations, a tension clearly reflected in the performance of Gendong dance. Meanwhile, Suroyo, Wirata, and Kamaruddin (2017) examined the integration of Akit rituals into tourism frameworks, and Mayasari (Mayasari, 2019) documented the adaptation of Gendong dance for civic events, illustrating how modernization reshapes its function from sacred rite to staged performance. While these works

illuminate aspects of ritual meaning, symbolism, and commodification, they tend to be descriptive in scope. What remains underexplored is the genealogical mode of transmission and the socio-anthropological processes by which Gendong dance knowledge is inherited, adapted, or disrupted within families and communities in the face of modernization pressures.

Although previous scholarship has provided valuable insights into traditional dances' ritual functions, symbolic dimensions, and commodification processes—including specific studies on the Gendong dance—the literature remains descriptive mainly and fragmented. Much of the research focuses on documenting sacred meanings, aesthetic symbolism, or the impacts of tourism, but pays little attention to the micro-level dynamics of intergenerational transmission. In particular, there is insufficient analysis of how genealogical modes of knowledge transfer within Akit families operate without formal institutions, and how these processes are challenged by modernization, economic pressures, and shifting generational interests. Furthermore, few studies have systematically examined the negotiation between maintaining ritual authenticity and adapting to contemporary socio-cultural demands through the lens of cultural hybridity. This gap is precisely where the present study positions itself: investigating the socio-anthropological processes of transmission and transformation of the Gendong dance seeks to reveal how the Akit community negotiates continuity and change in sustaining their intangible cultural heritage.

Building on this identified gap, this study aims to examine the transmission and transformation processes of the Gendong dance within the Akit community. Specifically, the research seeks to explore how ritual knowledge, choreographic elements, and symbolic meanings are passed down through genealogical lines in the absence of formal institutions; how modernization and socio-economic pressures have reshaped the function of the dance from sacred ritual to public performance; and how the Akit community negotiates cultural hybridity in sustaining their intangible heritage. By addressing these aims, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-anthropological mechanisms that enable the continuity, adaptation, and revitalization of traditional dances in contemporary contexts.

This study argues that the continuity of the Gendong dance in the Akit community is sustained primarily through genealogical transmission and community-based practices rather than through institutional or formal education. Such reliance on familial inheritance makes the tradition vulnerable to disruption under the pressures of modernization, economic pragmatism, and shifting generational interests. This argument is reinforced by cultural transmission theory, which emphasizes that traditional knowledge is most effectively preserved through intergenerational interaction within families and communities (Schniter, Kaplan, & Gurven, 2023). At the same time, the functional shift of Gendong dance from sacred ritual to entertainment aligns with Durkheim's perspective that rituals serve as a means of collective cohesion but can transform in function as social contexts evolve. Furthermore, Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity provides a relevant framework to interpret how the Akit community negotiates between preserving ancestral values and embracing modern performance contexts, resulting in a cultural form that is adaptive yet rooted in tradition.

This study argues that the decline of interest among younger generations in the Gendong dance is primarily caused by the reliance on genealogical transmission (*turun-temurun*), which occurs orally within families without the support of formal cultural education systems. Such vulnerability is further intensified by modernization, which has shifted the dance from a sacred ritual to a ceremonial form of entertainment, thereby risking the erosion of its spiritual essence and cultural symbolism for the Akit people. This argument resonates with cultural transmission theory, which emphasizes that intergenerational transfer of knowledge within families and communities, though effective in traditional societies, becomes fragile in the absence of institutional reinforcement under modern conditions (Schniter, Kaplan, & Gurven, 2023). It also aligns with Durkheim's perspective that rituals serve as a basis for collective solidarity but may lose their integrative power when stripped of their sacred meanings in changing social contexts (E. Durkheim, 1995). Furthermore, the adaptive transformation of the Gendong dance can be interpreted through Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural

hybridity, in which traditions negotiate between ancestral values and modern cultural demands, producing hybrid forms that are both adaptive and rooted in heritage (Bhabha, 1994).

2. Method

This research was conducted in Kembung Baru Village, Bantan District, Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province. The fieldwork took place over six months, during which data collection was conducted directly on site. This study's analysis unit is the Akit community, particularly individuals actively involved in the Gendong dance tradition. This includes traditional leaders (*tokoh adat*), dance performers, and family members involved in intergenerational transmission.

A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, as this method is appropriate for exploring cultural practices and their socio-anthropological dimensions in depth (Maxwell, 2021). Using a qualitative design enabled the researcher to capture the nuanced meanings, values, and transmission processes surrounding the Gendong dance, which could not be quantified or generalized statistically.

Primary data were obtained from several sources, including key informants such as Hendi Chong Meng, a respected traditional leader in Kembung Baru Village, his daughter Putri Melsi, and other members of the Gendong dance group. These individuals were selected due to their active involvement in preserving and performing the Gendong dance and their oral knowledge of its traditions.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The interviews followed a semi-structured format guided by an interview protocol that covered themes related to transmission processes, functions of the dance, and community perceptions. Observation was carried out during dance performances and rituals, while documentation included photographs, audio-visual recordings, and field notes.

The data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The research employed descriptive-qualitative analysis with reference to theories of cultural sociology (Drysdale & Levine, 1998; Kotzé, 2021; Patel, 2017; Turner, 2014) and cultural anthropology (Spencer, Malm, & Merriam, 1966; Walker, 2001), enabling the identification of patterns in knowledge transmission and functional transformation of the Gendong dance.

3. Results

Genealogical Inheritance and Social Spirituality in the Formation of Gendong Dancers

The profession of Gendong dancer is part of a hereditary cultural tradition in the Akit community, passed down genealogically—either through family lineage, from parents to children, or through teacher-student relationships. In addition to technical mastery, such as knowledge of Akit ethnic narratives, song rhythms, musical instruments, and performance techniques, Gendong dancers are also equipped with supernatural knowledge in the form of *doa-doa* (prayers), *mantra* (magical chants), and specific codes of conduct believed to provide spiritual strength, both during performance and in social life. This knowledge can only be acquired by those who have undergone special rites and are considered “anointed.” This combination of rational, mystical, and hereditary elements forms the community called the *ilmu* or *kepandaian* Gendong (Gendong knowledge or expertise).

Most Gendong dancers have a blood relation to previous dancers. As Hendi explained:

In this Gendong dance, they say there is some kind of lineage. Because my father's grandmother was also a skilled Gendong dancer. My mother possessed a lot of Gendong knowledge. Moreover, from my mother's side (my maternal grandmother), several could tell stories or perform Gendong (Hendi Chong Meng, Personal Communication, 12 July 2023).

Another example comes from Miun, a Gendong dancer from Muntai Village—geographically distant from Kembung Luar—who also demonstrates a familial inheritance pattern. However, blood affiliation is not the only factor. A child's early involvement in Gendong performances, whether as a spectator or part of a family troupe, significantly impacts their interest and ability in adulthood. For

example, Putri Melsi, Hendi's daughter, began performing as a Gendong dancer at the age of 10 and has actively participated in various traditional events and official district-level programmes. Ramli, another young dancer, learned the dance at age 13 simply by repeatedly watching and listening to performances, before eventually recognising a senior dancer as his teacher. Despite children following their parents into the same profession, no rivalry is evident between them. The Malay culture's emphasis on social harmony encourages acceptance of new dancers, whether of direct lineage or not.

Beyond family inheritance, some Gendong dancers acquired skills by learning directly from senior performers. The Bengkalis District Tourism Office once conducted a training initiative in 2003, holding sessions in several villages for two consecutive nights in each location. The training featured Gendong dancers as resource persons to teach the basic elements of the dance.

We saw at the time that the community was very enthusiastic for two nights in each village. They even asked for the program to be extended. The results of the training were documented in cassette and book form (Sumardi, Personal Communication, 22 July 2023).

Unfortunately, none of the training participants managed to master the Gendong dance. Putri Melsi confirmed this:

Only now do we still dance the Gendong in this village. The others are not interested. Maybe because there is no money in it... since this dance is not commercialized (Putri Melsi, Personal Communication, 18 July 2023).

An interview with Hendi also revealed that in the past, Gendong performances were more of a form of traditional and voluntary entertainment. Financial rewards were rare and often came from agricultural produce rather than cash.

Table 1. Aspects of Becoming a Gendong Dancer

Background Aspect	Findings
Family Lineage	Most dancers come from a lineage of previous Gendong dancers.
Early Environmental Exposure	Children frequently watch or join performances and are more interested.
Mentorship from Seniors	Learning occurs informally from senior dancers without formal institutions.
Personal Motivation	A strong personal drive to preserve tradition or family legacy.

Becoming a Gendong dancer is deeply embedded in the cultural background and proximity to the traditional environment where the dance lives on. Many dancers come from families already rooted in the Gendong tradition—such as their mother, grandmother, or father—which allows early exposure to the practice through stories, habits, or direct experience. However, lineage is not the only path. Children growing up in social settings where Gendong is frequently performed also show organic interest and aptitude. Furthermore, informal mentorship from senior figures in the community plays a vital role in passing down skills, given the absence of formal training institutions. Despite a lack of clear economic gain, personal motivation to continue the ancestral heritage is another powerful reason some choose this path.

The data reveal several important patterns in becoming a Gendong dancer (see Table 1). First, many dancers are direct descendants of previous performers, indicating the strong role of family inheritance in preserving the tradition. Second, early socialization plays a significant role—children who grow up watching performances as audience members or as part of a family troupe tend to internalize the dance more easily. Third, the primary motivation for becoming a dancer appears rooted in cultural awareness and a sense of duty to preserve ancestral practices rather than economic incentives, as the dance is not commercialized. Together, these patterns show that the continuity of the Gendong dance relies heavily on community strength and intergenerational relationships, not institutional frameworks.

These findings demonstrate that the survival of the Gendong dance depends on informal, personalized systems of cultural inheritance (Ramdani & Restian, 2020). The lack of minimal economic support has led to slow, unstructured regeneration of dancers. However, intrinsic motivations—such as a sense of responsibility toward cultural heritage and emotional attachment to family traditions—remain key factors that keep the practice alive. This insight enriches our understanding of how traditional culture can endure structural limitations through affective networks, childhood experiences, and community values.

The Ritual Function of the Tari Gendong in the Socio-Religious Life of the Akit Community

The presence of Gendong dance in the life of the Akit ethnic community is not merely a form of performing art, but a collective expression of reverence towards ancestral spirits. The Akit people believe that performing the *Tari Gendong* helps maintain the village's harmony and protects them from disasters or supernatural disturbances.

We perform the Gendong dance not just for entertainment, but as a sign of respect to our ancestors. We fear something bad might happen to the village if we do not do it. This has been a tradition for a long time, so the village stays safe and peaceful (Putri Melsi, Personal Communication, 18 July 2023).

This understanding aligns with Soedarsono's (1976) view that dance serves three principal functions: (1) as a medium for religious and customary ceremonies; (2) as a form of joyful or social expression; and (3) as a theatrical performance. In the context of Gendong dance, all three functions are integrated within the ritual practices accompanying the dance.

Furthermore, Jilek (1987) asserts that the musical accompaniment in dance may produce neurological effects, leading performers into deep spiritual states or even *trance* (an altered state of consciousness often associated with spiritual experience). This phenomenon is clearly evident in the experiences of *Tari Gendong* dancers, who become spiritually absorbed in the rhythm of the *gendang* (traditional drum).

When the *gendang* starts and we begin dancing, it feels like I am no longer myself. My body moves independently with the rhythm, and sometimes I am unaware when it is finished. It usually happens when the intention is sincere and during traditional ceremonies (Hendi Chong Meng, Personal Communication, 12 July 2023).

These interview and observational findings indicate that Gendong dance is not merely an artistic expression, but a vital spiritual act for the Akit community. It is believed to be a protective ritual that ensures the village's safety through respect for ancestral spirits. The spiritual depth of the dance is amplified by the sound of the *gendang*, which plays a central role in inducing trance during performances. These experiences reflect that the ritual is profoundly internalised and emotionally resonant. Although the Akit people are administratively affiliated with recognized religions, they continue to maintain and practice animistic traditions—particularly ancestral veneration—which remain culturally significant within their community life (Madjid et al., 2021).

The findings from interviews and observations show that Gendong dance is not merely an artistic expression, but also a deeply vital spiritual act for the Akit community. This dance is considered a protective ritual safeguarding the village through reverence for ancestral spirits. Its spiritual dimension is heightened by the sound of the drums, which often trigger trance states during performances. This illustrates how the ritual has been deeply internalized and strongly resonates with the community. While members of the Akit are formally registered under state-recognized religions, their enduring attachment to animistic beliefs—attributing spiritual essence to nature and ancestral spirits—continues to shape their cultural identity and ritual practices (Madjid et al., 2021).

In the past, Gendong dance within the Akit tribe served a dual function: entertainment and a ritual to ward off evil. In its religious context, this dance was closely associated with the animistic beliefs of the Akit people, who revered ancestral spirits and believed in supernatural forces. Specifically, in the Bele Kampung ceremony, the Gendong dance became part of a purification ritual to drive away evil

spirits and pray for the safety of the village and its people. This dance became a symbol of spiritual power expected to protect the community from unseen threats.

In the Bele Kampung ceremony, the Gendong dance plays an integral part in the purification process, which aims to expel evil spirits and ask for the safety of the village and all its inhabitants. This belief demonstrates the deep connection between the dance and the long-standing animistic belief system within the Akit community.



Figure 1. Performing the Gendong Dance

Gendong dance, with its distinctive movements and deep music, is believed to have the power to ward off negative energy and protect the community from evil spirits (see Figure 1). Therefore, this dance functions as entertainment and a spiritual effort to maintain the order and well-being of the Akit people. This belief stems from the fact that, before being influenced by external religions, the Akit tribe generally adhered to animism and dynamism, believing in the presence of spirits and supernatural forces in nature. This belief system forms the spiritual foundation of many rituals the Akit community performs, including Gendong dance, which holds deep religious significance.

Over time, primarily through interactions with traders and settlers from outside, some members of the Akit community began to embrace religions such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. This influence changed their spiritual views, although traditional elements like Gendong dance were still preserved, albeit in a more secular and entertainment-focused form. This process reflects the dynamic cultural changes and adaptations within the Akit community over time.

Thus, Gendong dance also plays a specific role as a religious ritual rooted in animism, representing an expression of devotion to the spirits of ancestors. Although the Akit people are administratively categorized under officially recognized religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, their belief in ancestral spirits remains deeply embedded in their everyday cultural practices. Their affiliation with formal religions is often an administrative necessity for legal recognition, rather than a rejection of their traditional belief system.

This reflects Émile Durkheim's perspective that religious rituals function to bring about collective consciousness and strengthen social solidarity. Regardless of its external form, such a belief system aims to unite the community through shared symbols, actions, and meanings embedded in each ritual. Even in Mila Aktasih's (Aktasih, 2019) report, Gendong dance is described as a process of spiritual purification for the Akit community. The ritual movements, costumes, and drum rhythms are believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits and cleanse the soul from negative energy.

Transformation and Functional Shift of the Gendong Dance

Over time, the function of the Gendong dance has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a sacred ritual to a performance shaped by aesthetic and entertainment values. Historically, the dance was performed exclusively in sacred rituals such as self-purification ceremonies and community protection rites, during which dancers were often required to fast or undergo strict spiritual discipline. Today, the Gendong dance is frequently performed at celebratory events such as regional anniversaries and wedding receptions (Aktasih, 2019).

This shift illustrates how cultural heritage adapts to socio-political realities and the pressures of commodification. In public events, visual appeal and performative professionalism often supplant the spiritual depth and sacred meaning that once characterised the dance (Yuliza, 2022). This phenomenon resonates with Adorno's critique of cultural commodification, in which sacred traditions risk becoming detached from their original significance under the logic of modern consumption.

In the past, Gendong dance was sacred, with specific prayers before the performance, and not everyone was allowed to dance. Now, Gendong dance is more open; anyone can teach it, even for formal events such as festivals or cultural exhibitions. Of course, there have been changes, especially in the movements and meanings. In the past, it had a deeper meaning related to life and ancestral reverence, but now it is more about entertainment (Sumardi, Personal Communication, 22 July 2023).

This functional shift illustrates how the Gendong dance has moved from its original role as a sacred ritual toward a more performative expression shaped by social, political, and economic contexts. While once restricted to purification rites and ancestral reverence, it is now commonly presented at public events such as regional anniversaries and weddings, emphasizing entertainment and visual appeal. To highlight these changes more clearly, the differences between the original ritual function and the contemporary staged form of the Gendong dance can be summarized in a comparative format (see Table 2).

Table 2. Functional Comparison of the Gendong Dance – Then and Now

Aspect	Original Ritual Function	Modern Function
Purpose	Self-purification, ancestral reverence	Entertainment at governmental/wedding events
Meaning	Spiritual, mystical	Aesthetic, performative
Performers	Traditional figures and the local community	Professional artists, general public
Time of Performance	Sacred occasions (rituals, protection rites)	Festivals, state ceremonies
Media Used	Traditional music, spiritual elements	Modern arrangements, visual performance

This transition reveals the tension between cultural resilience and modern reinvention. Although the dance continues to function as an emblem of ethnic identity, its spiritual and philosophical depth faces increasing risk of dilution. Referring to Homi Bhabha's theory of *cultural hybridity* (the merging and negotiation of multiple cultural identities), the current form of the Gendong dance may be seen as the result of intercultural negotiation—an attempt to reconcile ancestral heritage with the aesthetics of contemporary cultural performance.

Gendong dance, once a core element of sacred ritual among the Akit people, has now shifted into entertainment and aesthetic display. Previously, only specific individuals could dance in the context of *upacara adat* (customary ceremonies) and spiritual rites, often with preparatory rituals such as fasting. The dance is open to anyone and regularly performed at official events such as regional anniversaries or weddings. This shift reflects how the Akit community has adapted ancestral traditions to the demands of modern life (Suroyo et al., 2017).

Gendong dance was also part of a cultural performance in Bengkalis. On the occasion of the 507th Anniversary of Bengkalis, which took place on Sunday, July 21, 2019, the Gendong dance was one of the ceremonial dances during the second night of the arts and cultural performance at Tugu Bengkalis Square. On this occasion, Hendi Cong Meng, the Chief of the Indigenous Tribe, who also serves as the Head of Kembung Baru Village, expressed his gratitude to the community for participating in the event. He mentioned that this event is an annual celebration, always attended by various tribes, and the Gendong dance became a major attraction for the people of Bengkalis, who were very enthusiastic about watching it. This event emphasizes that although the dance has transformed, Tari Gendong still holds an important place in the cultural life of the Bengkalis community (Mayasari, 2019).

Several key patterns in transforming the Gendong dance can be identified from the data presented. First, there is a shift in function—from its original sacred and religious role to a modern performance emphasizing visual appeal and entertainment. Second, there has been an expansion of participation, where only customary practitioners could once perform; now, anyone may learn and perform it in various events. Third, changes in media and form are apparent, shifting from traditional *gendang* (drum) and spiritual symbolism to modern musical arrangements and commercial presentation. Fourth, there is a negotiation of values between preserving sacred cultural elements and responding to economic and aesthetic demands in a globalized context. Although there has been a shift in form and meaning, the Gendong dance continues to function as a symbol of Akit identity—now presented more flexibly and adaptively within contemporary social contexts.

These findings demonstrate that cultural traditions are not static, but evolve in response to the changing times. The functional transformation of the Gendong dance reflects the Akit community's act of *cultural adaptation* (the adjustment of traditional cultural practices to modern frameworks) (Suroyo, Hermita, Ibrahim, & Putra, 2022). This phenomenon deepens our understanding of how traditional art forms can survive through ongoing negotiations of meaning and function. Nevertheless, such changes also raise critical concerns about the potential loss of spiritual depth in cultural practices and underscore the importance of maintaining a balance between preserving ancestral values and responding to the expressive needs of the present era.

4. Discussion

This study identifies three key findings regarding the continuity of the Gendong dance within the Akit community. First, transmission occurs primarily through genealogical lines and informal apprenticeship, where prospective dancers inherit *ilmu/kepandaian*—ritual knowledge encompassing prayers, chants, and taboos—legitimized through initiation rites. Second, the function of the Gendong dance has shifted from a protective and purificatory ritual, such as in the *Bele Kampung* ceremony, toward public performances at civic celebrations and weddings, marked by changes in media, duration, and choreography. Third, the community engages in negotiated practice: sacred elements are retained in restricted ritual contexts, while adapted dance versions are performed for official events and tourism purposes. Together, these findings reveal that the Gendong dance is not merely an aesthetic heritage but a dynamic cultural practice in which ancestral values are continuously negotiated with the pressures of modernity.

The findings can be explained by the community's reliance on genealogical transmission as the primary mechanism for sustaining the Gendong dance. Without formal institutions or structured cultural education, ritual knowledge is preserved almost exclusively through family ties and senior practitioners. While this transmission mode has historically ensured continuity, it becomes increasingly fragile in modernization, where social mobility, economic orientation, and shifting entertainment preferences weaken intergenerational engagement. Cultural transmission theory emphasizes that intergenerational interaction within families and communities is an effective vector for preserving essential knowledge in traditional societies, yet it also highlights the vulnerability of such systems when they lack institutional reinforcement (Schniter et al., 2023). This theoretical lens helps to clarify why the Gendong dance faces challenges in sustaining its sacred functions and ritual meanings amid contemporary socio-economic changes.

The shift in the Gendong dance from a sacred ritual to a staged performance can be understood through Durkheim's (1984) view of ritual as a central mechanism for binding collective solidarity. The Gendong dance's original form reinforced communal unity and spiritual protection by connecting the Akit people to their ancestors and shared cosmology. However, as the social field has changed—with government institutions, cultural agencies, and tourism sponsors becoming new stakeholders—the meaning and function of the dance have also shifted. Rituals that once carried protective and purificatory significance are now recontextualized as cultural showcases, serving the purposes of regional representation, identity politics, and economic gain. This transformation illustrates Durkheim's claim that while rituals maintain their role in generating social cohesion, their symbolic depth and sacred orientation can be diluted or reshaped when the audience, setting, and objectives move from inward-facing communal solidarity to outward-facing cultural display.

The adaptive forms of the Gendong dance can be explained through Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, which describes how communities negotiate a "third space" between tradition and modernity. In the case of the Akit, performers selectively retain ancestral elements such as sacred prayers, symbolic gestures, and ritual taboos, while simultaneously reshaping the performance to meet the demands of contemporary cultural stages—shortened durations, amplified sound systems, and large-scale choreography. This negotiation does not signal a complete abandonment of tradition; rather, it reflects an ongoing process of cultural translation in which ritual authenticity is rearticulated within new representation contexts. The resulting hybrid forms remain anchored in ancestral values yet are packaged for public consumption, allowing the Gendong dance to survive as both a spiritual legacy and a performative expression in modern civic and tourism arenas (Bhabha, 1994).

The findings of this study both confirm and extend the existing scholarship on traditional dances. Similar to Izu and de Villiers (2022; 2023), Bugov (2024), and Yang (2025), who emphasized traditional dances' spiritual and ritual dimensions, this research reaffirms the Gendong dance's role as a medium of ancestral reverence and communal protection. In line with Chen, Ma, and Shang (2025) and Jamilah et al. (2025), the study also illustrates how costumes, prayers, and choreographic elements encode symbolic and material values that embody the collective identity of the Akit. Furthermore, the documented functional shift resonates with Whitford's (2009) analysis of the Guelaguetza festival and Minyue and Hussin's (2025) study of the Naxi dance, showing how indigenous rituals are reconfigured under the pressures of tourism and modernization. However, unlike most previous research that remains descriptive or focused on macro-level transformations, this study contributes a more fine-grained socio-anthropological account by examining the micro-level mechanisms of genealogical transmission and cultural negotiation within the Akit community. It addresses the gap identified in earlier literature by showing how the Gendong dance is sustained through a fragile balance between inherited ritual knowledge, functional transformation, and adaptive hybridity.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the micro-level dynamics of cultural transmission and negotiation, which have been largely overlooked in previous research on traditional dances. While earlier studies have emphasized ritual meanings, symbolic dimensions, or the impacts of commodification, this research provides a detailed ethnographic account of how Gendong dance knowledge is inherited through genealogical transmission, maintained through ritualized practices, and adapted through negotiated hybridity within the Akit community. This study enriches the literature on intangible cultural heritage by documenting the interplay between sacred elements preserved in restricted contexts and performative adaptations for civic and tourism events. It offers a nuanced model of how indigenous traditions navigate continuity and change in modernization.

This study carries significant social, historical, and ideological implications. From a social perspective, the Gendong dance serves as a marker of Akit identity, fosters cohesion, and functions as a medium for transmitting values of ancestral reverence and communal harmony. Comparable examples can be seen in the Baakisimba dance among the Ugandan diaspora, which strengthens cultural belonging (Ssebulime, 2024), and the Bai ethnic dance in Yunnan, which reinforces group identity through collective participation (Liu, 2025). Similarly, the Gendong dance nurtures solidarity, trust, and intergenerational bonds. As a communal performance, it deepens emotional connections

among members and sustains collective identity despite the pressures of modernization. Thus, the Gendong dance exemplifies how traditional dances operate as a form of social glue—healing divisions, affirming shared experiences, and preserving cultural resilience—as also highlighted in comparative studies of indigenous dances and festival practices across diverse contexts (Jarvis, 2024; Kawase & Eguchi, 2025).

Historically, the Gendong dance demonstrates a pattern of adaptive resilience, showing that medium and performance context changes do not eliminate its meaning but instead shift its center of gravity from protective rituals to cultural representation in public arenas. Similar processes have been observed in other traditional dances, such as the transition of European folk dances from village rituals to staged performances, which involved both formal and stylistic transformations to suit new audiences (Kunej, 2010). Likewise, the Fon Buang Suang dance illustrates how spiritual elements can be integrated with popular culture to remain relevant in a modern context (Chalongpak & Chansuwan, 2023). In the case of the Akit, modernization and external influences have reshaped the Gendong dance into an expressive symbol of cultural identity rather than solely a vehicle of ritual protection. Yet, much like the Baakisimba dance that sustains resilience among Ugandan diaspora communities (Ssebulime, 2024) The Gendong dance preserves intergenerational memory and communal values even as its outward form evolves. This historical trajectory underscores that transformation, rather than signaling loss, can represent a strategy of cultural endurance that safeguards ancestral meaning under changing socio-political conditions.

Ideologically, the Gendong dance reflects a politics of recognition in which the Akit community negotiates visibility within the broader national and cultural landscape while striving to retain its spiritual essence. Much like the Sere Bissu Maggiriq ritual in South Sulawesi, which provides recognition to marginalized bissu shamans by showcasing their distinctive practices (Akhmar, Muhammad, Hasyim, & Rahman, 2023), the public performance of Gendong dance allows the Akit to assert cultural presence in state-sponsored events and tourism arenas. At the same time, the hybridity of its form—retaining ancestral prayers and symbolic gestures while adapting choreography, duration, and stage design—mirrors dynamics seen in hybrid ritual performances such as the Chhau dance of West Bengal, which fuses mythological and local traditions (Kumar, Nayak, & Swain, 2024). This negotiation resonates with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where the sacred and the profane, the traditional and the modern, are not opposed but continually reconfigured. In this sense, the Gendong dance embodies both resistance and adaptation: it preserves core spiritual values while strategically rearticulating its form to secure recognition, sustain relevance, and foster cultural integration in contemporary contexts, akin to how the *masselle aseng* practice among Muslim minorities evolves through syncretic adaptation (Nur, Wagay, & Nurdin, 2025).

The findings of this study highlight several constructive functions of the Gendong dance for the Akit community. As a cultural practice, it operates as a living medium of ancestral reverence, reinforcing collective identity and sustaining social cohesion across generations. Its adaptability from sacred ritual to public performance allows it to serve as a cultural showcase that affirms ethnic pride while promoting intercultural understanding. The dance also functions as an informal educational platform, transmitting values of harmony, respect, and spiritual awareness to younger generations through embodied participation. Furthermore, by gaining visibility in civic events and tourism, the Gendong dance provides opportunities for cultural diplomacy and creative economy development, offering symbolic recognition and potential socio-economic benefits. These functions underscore the resilience of traditional performance as a cultural asset that not only preserves intangible heritage but also contributes to the vitality and adaptability of community life in contemporary settings.

Despite its resilience, the transformation of the Gendong dance also presents several dysfunctions and risks. First, the adaptation of ritual performances to stage contexts often entails the trimming or modification of sacred elements, leading to a gradual erosion of ritual meaning and a potential "alienation of the sacred," a pattern also observed in Shaanxi and Indian classical dance, where modernization weakened their spiritual depth (Chen et al., 2025; Lopez Y Royo, 2010). Second, the absence of formal training pathways and economic incentives has created a generational gap, leaving

the transmission of *ilmu*—prayers, chants, and ritual prohibitions—highly vulnerable to loss, similar to the challenges faced by Indigenous and diaspora communities where modernization and urbanization disrupt intergenerational transmission (Good, Sims, Clarke, & Russo, 2021; Misaki, 2021). Third, increasing dependence on state sponsorship and tourism agendas exposes the Gendong dance to market-driven homogenization, where the need for visual appeal and standardized formats can overshadow its spiritual essence, echoing broader concerns in Vietnam's performing arts and Thai cultural industries about balancing commodification with cultural integrity (Le, 2008; Somsiriwattana, Hongsiriwat, Chandrachai, & Pungpapong, 2025). These dysfunctions highlight the fragile position of the Gendong dance: while adaptation enables visibility, it also risks diluting authenticity, disrupting transmission, and subordinating ritual meaning to market logics.

The findings of this study point to the urgent need for multi-level strategies to safeguard and revitalize the Gendong dance as intangible cultural heritage. At the educational level, including traditional arts within local school curricula and community-based workshops can provide formalized pathways for transmission, ensuring that ritual knowledge is preserved beyond genealogical lines. At the economic level, policy support for creative economy initiatives—such as cultural festivals, heritage tourism, and performance-based cooperatives—should be designed to provide fair incentives while protecting ritual authenticity from over-commercialization. At the cultural governance level, collaboration between local communities, cultural institutions, and government agencies is essential to create sustainable programs that balance visibility in public arenas with safeguarding sacred elements. Digital documentation and archiving can further complement these efforts by preserving choreography, oral traditions, and ritual contexts for future generations. Collectively, these actions will strengthen the continuity of the Gendong dance and serve as a model for the preservation of other indigenous traditions facing similar pressures of modernization and commodification.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that the survival of the Gendong dance within the Akit community depends on three interconnected dynamics: first, its transmission occurs primarily through genealogical lines and informal apprenticeship, enriched by ritualized knowledge of prayers, chants, and taboos; second, its function has shifted from a protective purification rite, as in the *Bele Kampung* ceremony, to staged performances in civic celebrations and tourism contexts; and third, the community actively negotiates between preserving sacred elements in limited ritual spaces and adapting choreographic and performative aspects for public consumption. Together, these findings illustrate that the Gendong dance is not a static tradition but an evolving cultural form that embodies resilience, adaptation, and hybridity.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its micro-level ethnographic focus on the socio-anthropological mechanisms of intergenerational transmission and negotiation—an aspect largely overlooked in previous studies that concentrated on ritual meaning, symbolic aesthetics, or commodification. By applying the theoretical lenses of cultural transmission, Durkheim's ritual solidarity, and Bhabha's hybridity, this study enriches the scholarship on intangible cultural heritage by showing how ritual practices can endure, transform, and generate new forms of meaning under the pressures of modernization and market influence. Beyond academic discourse, these insights also offer practical implications for cultural policy, education, and heritage preservation frameworks.

Nevertheless, this research is not without limitations. The fieldwork was conducted in a single village and within a specific time frame, which restricts the generalizability of the findings across other Akit communities or comparable indigenous traditions. Moreover, the study did not employ longitudinal methods that could more fully capture the evolving dynamics of transmission and adaptation over time. Therefore, Future research should pursue comparative studies across different communities, integrate digital ethnography to trace online representations of ritual dance, and explore policy-based interventions that can strengthen cultural sustainability and community agency. By addressing these directions, subsequent studies may offer a broader understanding of how intangible heritage can survive and thrive in the modern world.

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