

## Customary Leadership Amidst the Flow of Modernity: The Voices of Dayak Ma'anyan Youth in East Kutai

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### ABSTRACT

This research explores the dynamics of traditional leadership in the *Ma'anyan Dayak* community in East Kutai amidst modernity and digital transformation. Using a qualitative approach with interpretive phenomenological methods, this study delves into the subjective experience of an indigenous youth named TP in understanding, responding to, and reflecting on changes to the values and structure of indigenous leadership in his community. The findings show that although the formal structure of indigenous leadership has experienced a decline in authority, foundational values such as deliberation, mutual cooperation, respect for ancestors, and solidarity remain alive and are maintained through cultural mechanisms. Youth play an important role in cultural revitalization, particularly through art studios, traditional craft training, and the use of social media as spaces for documentation and informal education. Traditional leadership is no longer viewed solely from a structural or hereditary perspective but must possess social credibility, personal charisma, and the ability to bridge local values with the demands of the times. Social media, for example, is an effective means of disseminating cultural values to the digital-native younger generation. The main contribution of this study is to highlight the importance of local narratives as a form of resistance to cultural marginalization in national discourse, as well as to open up space for community-based policies and interventions.

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### Introduction

Indonesia is known as the largest archipelago in the world, consisting of more than 17,000 islands and inhabited by hundreds of ethnic groups. This diversity is reflected in various aspects of people's lives—ranging from regional languages, customary systems, cultural values, social norms, to diverse religious practices. With more than 700 regional languages still in active use, Indonesia is one of the countries with the highest linguistic and cultural diversity in the world (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2023).

One of the regions that is very culturally rich is Kalimantan. The island, also known as Borneo, is home to various indigenous tribes, including *Dayak*, *Banjar*, *Kutai*, and others. Each has a unique local culture, belief system, and customary governance that has been passed down from generation to generation. In the *Dayak* indigenous people, for example, the existence of indigenous leaders is not only symbolic but also

holds an important function in resolving disputes, maintaining social harmony, and being the guardian of ancestral values. However, along with the rapid pace of modernization and digital transformation, the role of local leadership in various regions is experiencing great challenges. The entry of information technology, the globalization of values, as well as changes in the mindset of the younger generation have led to a shift in the traditional authority structure. In some regions, indigenous leaders have begun to lose their authority because they are considered irrelevant to the needs of the fast-paced and digital-based times. The younger generation tends to be more connected to the outside world through social media and the internet, which often bring new values that differ from traditional values (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). This phenomenon indicates the importance of efforts to preserve and adapt local cultural values with a contextual and inclusive approach. Indigenous leadership needs to be strengthened not only as a symbol of cultural identity but also as an active actor in responding to today's social and ecological challenges. The involvement of the younger generation in traditional preservation, the integration of local knowledge systems into formal education, and policy support from the government are strategic steps in ensuring that the cultural values of the archipelago remain alive and relevant in the global era (Widyastini et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2023).

In Kalimantan, for example, digital transformation can be directed to preserve local culture through digitization of traditional archives, documentation of regional languages, or the promotion of traditional arts through online platforms (Adeniran & Abiodun, 2023; Coates et al., 2021; Flicker et al., 2018). Regional leaders are expected to collaborate with the younger generation, strengthen digital literacy, and at the same time, instill the values of local wisdom as the foundation of identity in the midst of globalization (Juliarsih et al., 2025; Nishijima, 2022; Sugiyanti & Pambudi, 2025). Traditional leadership is the foundation of the social system of the *Ma'anyan Dayak* community, which has survived since the time of the ancient kingdom of *Nan Sarunai*. In the structure of traditional *Dayak Ma'anyan* society, traditional leadership is not only a social institution but also a spiritual, political, and cultural symbol that holds authority over the life of the community as a whole (Hadi, 2018). Figures such as *Damang* and *Mantir* are not only the implementers of traditional ceremonies but also moral decision-makers and guardians of harmony between humans and nature (Hadi, 2019).

The traditional leadership system of the *Dayak Ma'anyan* is based on five main sources of legitimacy: *Alatala* (God), *Nanyu* (ancestral spirit), *Hurui* (lineage), *Panatau* (symbolic treasure), and *Inheritance of Majesty*. These sources are not only the foundation of customary law but also the pillars of community ethics (Hadi, 2019). In practice, this power is affirmed through customary ceremonies, such as *dudus*, which mark the sacred and symbolic appointment of indigenous leaders. However, as modernization progresses, the traditional leadership structure experiences challenges and transformations. Globalization, formal education, social media, and national governance systems have created parallel power structures that have slowly pushed the role of indigenous leaders into a purely symbolic territory (Purwanto & Haryono, 2019). In East Kalimantan, especially in East Kutai, which is a migration area for various *Dayak* sub-ethnicities, including *Dayak Ma'anyan*, the position of traditional leaders has become increasingly complex because they have to deal with the village bureaucratic structure, the influence of religious leaders, and the expectations of the younger generation who are more rational and digital native. It is in this context that it is important to understand how the younger generation, especially the *Dayak Ma'anyan* youth, reinterpret the role of indigenous leadership in the current reality. An interview with one of the speakers, TP, a young man active in the *Dusmala* organization (*Dayak Dusun, Ma'anyan, Lawangan*) in East Kutai, indicated that although the structural function of indigenous leaders is beginning to decrease, the values of traditional leadership such as deliberation, mutual cooperation, respect for ancestors, and solidarity continue to live on through community activities (TP, 2025).

In the monthly gathering of the *Dusmala* community, which is a cross-generational and interfaith forum, the values of traditional leadership are culturally inherited through stories, art practices, and deliberations. Even activities such as training in making *mandau* (traditional weapons) and dance studios become informal educational means about the history and social structure of *Dayak Ma'anyan* (TP, 2025). The concept of traditional leadership in *Dayak* society cannot be separated from the value system and the kinship structure that accompanies it. In a study conducted by Efrata (2022), it was shown that the existence of traditional leadership is still closely related to the existence of rituals and religious functions in the community. Indigenous leaders who are considered sacred have the authority to resolve conflicts, lead religious ceremonies, and maintain the ecosystem and living space of the community. However, in an increasingly plural and rational social structure, charisma and hereditary authority are no longer necessarily accepted by the younger generation. As stated by TP, indigenous leadership will lose relevance if it does not have the social ability to

protect and become a representation of community aspirations (TP, 2025). This aligns with Yofa's (2016) study, which states that traditional heads will only be effective if they are able to establish inter-ethnic communication and respond to the real needs of the community.

In addition, in *Dayak Ma'anyan* history, the concept of power is not only sacred but also political. In the tradition of the *Nan Sarunai* kingdom, the figures of *Pangulu Isa* and *Damang* are not only spiritual leaders but also symbols of political power that represent the people in the presence of external authorities. The studies of Kisno (2018) and Yusuf Hidayat show that these leadership values have subsequently undergone repoliticization in the contemporary context, where traditional leaders are also tools for identity mobilization in local political contests.

The transformation of indigenous leadership is inseparable from the development of technology and media. TP said that social media is now a new means used by communities to document and disseminate traditional activities. In other words, today's indigenous leaders must be able to be present digitally and adaptively to the language of the younger generation. This is also in line with the concept of "symbolic leadership" in post-traditional societies, where legitimacy is derived from the representation of values and social interactions, rather than solely from structural positions (Purwanto & Haryono, 2019). Taking these dynamics into account, the research questions asked are: How do *Ma'anyan Dayak* youth in East Kutai interpret traditional leadership in the context of modernity? Is indigenous leadership still considered relevant? Or has it been reduced to a cultural symbol with no real political and social function?

Previous qualitative studies have made important contributions to understanding the dynamics of cultural change and social roles in indigenous peoples, especially in the midst of modernization and globalization. Many studies have highlighted how social transformation affects traditional identities, local values, and leadership structures. One of the approaches used is critical ethnography, as conducted by Tania Li and Anna Tsing, which describes how indigenous peoples negotiate with the discourse of state development and the global economy. Their research shows a tension between the collective identity of indigenous peoples and the demands for integration into the modern social system. However, the focus of this study is more on structural analysis and power relations, rather than on individual subjective experiences.

Other relevant qualitative research, such as those conducted by Acciaioli and Colchester & Chao (2011), also highlights the changing position of indigenous leaders in the context of state development policies. They show that traditional leaders often experience delegitimization or symbolization when local values are no longer a reference in the social and political decision-making process. However, studies that specifically use interpretive phenomenological approaches to explore the personal experiences of young indigenous individuals in relation to the crisis and transformation of ancestral values are still very limited. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring the experience of an indigenous youth, TP, in understanding and interpreting the changes occurring in his community. This focus on personal narratives provides a rich, reflective, and contextual micro-perspective on the socio-cultural changes experienced by indigenous peoples.

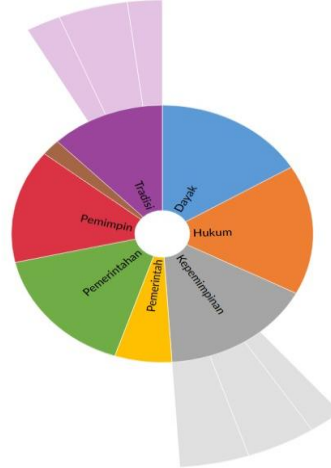
Therefore, this research is important because it highlights local narratives that are often marginalized in national policy discourse. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, this study aims to capture the subjective experience and critical reflection of an indigenous youth toward ancestral values and contemporary challenges. In the midst of the vortex of modernity, voices like TP's represent both anxiety and hope for the future of traditional leadership that not only survives symbolically but also lives socially.

It can be affirmed that traditional leadership in the *Dayak Ma'anyan* community is undergoing a complex transformation process. It is not extinct but evolved. It is no longer absolute but negotiable. And amid these changes, youth have a strategic role as a bridge between old values and the demands of the new age. Based on the above explanation, the objectives of this study are (1) to explore how *Ma'anyan Dayak* youth in East Kutai interpret and respond to the transformation of indigenous leadership in facing the challenges of modernity and globalization; and (2) to analyze how the role of youth, digital media, and indigenous leadership structures contribute to the process of revitalizing the values and functions of indigenous leadership amid social change.

## Research Method

This study uses a qualitative method with an interpretive phenomenological approach. The data collection technique was carried out through an in-depth interview with one main source as a respondent, namely a 35-year-old, TP, who has lived in the *Sangatta* sub-district area since 1990. He is known as a *Ma'anyan Dayak* youth who is active in the *Dusmala* indigenous community. The selection of informants was carried out purposively based on active involvement in indigenous community activities. The interview process took place





**Figure 2. Hierarchy Chart**

Source: Nvivo Data Processing Results 15, 2025



**Figure 3 Hierarchy Chart Sub Theme**

Source: Nvivo Data Processing Results 15, 2025

Figure 2 and 3 above is a Hierarchy Chart of the results of qualitative analysis using NVivo software which displays the proportions and hierarchical structure of various themes or codes generated. This visualization is in the form of a pie chart that shows how much contribution or frequency each category appears in the overall encoded data. From the graph, it can be seen that "leadership" is a key element in Dayak society, it can be seen that in the sub-theme the main focus discussed is on "Traditional Leaders" and "Leadership Structures" inherent in daily life. Traditional Leaders or commonly referred to as Damang still retain power as Traditional Heads covering several sub-districts. In this graph we know that the role of the Customary Head in development has a very important role and a great responsibility to achieve common goals and receive full support. The role of the Leadership of the Traditional Head is expected to be a role model, motivator, mover and guide as a traditional stakeholder. Likewise, the Leadership Structure that is the foundation for the community how Dayak traditional traditions in the world of modernization will be applied, modernization often brings new values that can threaten the sustainability of traditional traditions. Dayak people need to find ways to maintain their identity in the midst of global currents so that people need to be aware of the importance of preserving their traditions, despite the shame or stigma that may arise due to cultural differences with other peoples. The leadership structure of the Dayak community plays an important role in maintaining traditional traditions in the midst of modernization, by integrating traditional values and modern innovations, the Dayak people can preserve their culture while adapting to the changing times. So that the role of the Traditional Leadership Structure has the responsibility to maintain and pass on cultural values to the younger generation. They serve as a link between tradition and modernity, ensuring that cultural heritage remains relevant.

## DISCUSSION

Dusmala Custom is a term that refers to the combination of indigenous peoples from three Dayak sub-tribes in Central Kalimantan, namely Dusun, Ma'anyan and Lawangan. The term DusMaLa is an acronym for the three names and reflects the cultural unity and customary institutions that developed in various regions in Central Kalimantan, especially in the areas of East Barito, Murung Raya, South Barito, and Palangka Raya. Despite coming from different subethnicities, the three have similar customary values, especially in terms of respect for ancestors, the mutual cooperation system, and the spiritual relationship between humans, nature, and the supernatural world. Dusmala Customs is a form of cultural unity of the Dayak people spread across the Central Kalimantan region, especially in the areas of East Barito, South Barito, Murung Raya, and Palangka Raya City. These three sub-ethnicities, although they have their own peculiarities, are connected by common cultural roots and uphold indigenous values, ancestral spirituality, and collective social principles that are passed down from generation to generation.

Historically, the Dusmala people came from the interior of the upper Barito river which is known as the center of the eastern Dayak civilization. They have a well-organized social system, based on kinship structures and strong indigenous leadership. In the Dusmala community, traditional figures such as Mantir and Damang play a central role as spiritual leaders as well as social conflict resolvers. The process of inaugurating Mantir by the Dusmala Customary Institution not only means the formal appointment of indigenous leaders (see Figure 4 and Figure 5), but also becomes a symbol of identity strengthening, tradition continuity, and the active role of indigenous communities in responding to the challenges of the times. Below is an example of one of the Mantir inauguration events that was carried out in a deliberate and sacred manner.



**Figure 4. Inauguration of Mantir by the Management of Dusmala Customary Institution**



**Figure 5. Inauguration of Mantir by the Management of Dusmala Customary Institution**

One of the main characteristics of Dusmala customary is the existence of customary law (customary institution rights) that governs various aspects of people's lives, such as marriage, inheritance, customary land ownership, and dispute resolution procedures. The legal process is carried out with customary deliberation that upholds the values of justice, harmony, and recognition of collective responsibility. Violations of customs are not only considered to defame individuals, but also impact the honor of the community and spiritual balance with nature.

Traditional ceremonies such as Wadian, Tiwa, Balian, and Bahangka Laluhan have become an important part of the life cycle of the Dusmala community. These ceremonies are not only ceremonial, but also contain deep spiritual and cosmological significance. Through the procession, the community communicates with the spirit of their ancestors, asks for protection, and affirms loyalty to the prevailing customary norms. In the context of marriage, the Bahangka Laluhan ceremony is a sacred moment that combines social and spiritual aspects, marking the union of two families in a traditional framework. One of the sacred events that is still carried out by the Ma'anyan people to maintain the preservation and belief in the ancestors from descent is the wedding procession (See Figure 6) which not only takes place symbolically, but is also accompanied by traditional music, ritual dances, and traditional rhymes sung by the bride's family as a form of joy and respect (see Figure 7). After the blessing is carried out, the community will hold a traditional party as an expression of gratitude and a form of social participation for the unity of two families.



**Figure 6. Wedding Blessing Procession in Ma'anyan Dayak Custom**



**Figure 7. Traditional Dayak Ma'anyan Dance**





**Figure 8. Traditional Dayak Ma'anyan Dance Ritual**



**Figure 9. Ma'anyan Dayak Traditional Dancers**

In traditional events, it always shows the harmony of Dayak Ma'anyan that is always attended by all ancestors and elders to youth. This shows that the value system in Dasmala society emphasizes the importance

of gotong royong (handep hapakat), honesty, and responsibility towards the community. These principles are internalized from an early age through informal education in the family and community life. Local languages such as Ma'anyan and Lawangan, as well as forms of cultural expression such as traditional dance, carving, and distinctive weaving, have helped strengthen the cultural identity of the Dasmala community amid the rapid flow of globalization. In modern reality, Dasmala customs show adaptability without losing core values. The Ma'anyan and Lawangan communities do not reject change, but instead place traditional values as the foundation in facing new challenges. Thus, Dasmala customs are not only a legacy of the past, but also a dynamic and relevant framework of life in maintaining identity, social harmony, and the sustainability of local culture in Central Kalimantan.

Therefore, ethical research was carried out on the Dayak Ma'anyan culture in the transition of moderation in technology and people's lifestyles, the results of the interviews revealed four main themes:

Dualism of Traditional Leadership: "The chairman of this customary harmony is more focused on taking care of the Maanyan customs themselves. For external affairs, we have the head of a customary institution."

TP distinguishes between traditional spiritual figures who take care of internal affairs and community representative figures in external social structures (Purwanto & Haryono, 2019).

This statement is in line with the theory of the dual role of indigenous leaders outlined by Geertz (1980), in which traditional leaders play symbolic and administrative functions at the same time. In the modern context, this separation can also be read as a form of adaptation to changes in social structure and societal expectations.

Revitalization Through Culture: The role of dance studios, training in making mandau, and the involvement of the younger generation are the keys to preserving traditional leadership values.

This reinforces the idea of culture as an arena of value education, as described in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and praxis, in which social actions reflect values learned through repeated experiences in a given social space. Studios and cultural communities are an incubation space for traditional leadership values in a more contextual form and accepted by the younger generation.

Challenges of Customary Authorities: "A leader is weak internally, let alone externally. It's getting more and more powerless."

TP stated that traditional leaders who lack charisma and emotional closeness are considered ineffective and easily forgotten by the younger generation.

The above view is in line with Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, which states that the legitimacy of a leader does not only come from structure, but from the emotional and spiritual recognition of his personal qualities. When a leader is no longer a source of inspiration or trust, his authority becomes fragile in the midst of social change.

Social Media Integration: Social media is used as a tool for documenting and disseminating cultural values, as well as an informal educational space about community identity and history.

Social Media Integration is based on the theory of "mediatized traditions" (Hjarvard, 2011) which explains how traditional cultures undergo transformation through digital media. Traditions do not become extinct, but change the format and container. In this context, social media becomes a space for informal education and value distribution, reaching a more visual and digital-native generation (Effrata, 2022).

## Conclusion

This study confirms that the sustainability of indigenous leadership is highly dependent on the revitalization of the role and function of indigenous leaders themselves. Such revitalization cannot be achieved simply by maintaining symbolism or descent but must occur through the active participation of youth, cross-generational collaboration, and integration with modern systems such as digital media, formal education, and public policy. This is in line with Hadi's (2018; 2019) finding that the traditional leadership of *Dayak Ma'anyan* in the past was dialogical and flexible to power dynamics. A participatory approach is needed in redesigning the structure of indigenous leadership in order to effectively respond to contemporary challenges. For example, indigenous leaders must have the capacity for digital literacy to document and disseminate cultural values. In addition, activities such as cultural social gatherings, art studios, and craft training must function as spaces for the regeneration of traditional leadership values among youth.

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