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Liturgical Inculturation and Cultural Identity: The Meaning of Likurai Dance for Catholic Youth at the Station of Saint Francis Marco de Fatima Nailera

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Abstract

This study explores how Catholic youth at the Station of Saint Francisco Marco de Fatima Nailera interpret the liturgical and spiritual meaning of the Likurai dance within the Eucharistic celebration. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Findings indicate that although some youth recognize Likurai as a form of thanksgiving and spiritual expression, the majority perceive it merely as cultural performance without fully grasping its theological symbolism. The role of the dance in liturgical inculturation is not yet well understood by many participants, and their involvement often stems from a sense of obligation rather than religious conviction. Contributing factors include the influence of popular culture, lack of catechesis, limited traditional dance instructors, and minimal collaboration between church, school, and family. The study recommends integrating cultural education and liturgical formation into pastoral programs, along with intergenerational dialogue and contextual faith development initiatives. A holistic approach is necessary to preserve Likurai not only as a cultural asset but also as a medium of contextual Catholic faith expression.

Keywords: Catholic Youth, Cultural, Eucharistic, Liturgical Inculturation, Likurai Dance.

Introduction

Traditional dance constitutes a vital part of a community's cultural heritage, embodying aesthetic, spiritual, and social values. In Belu and Malaka, East Nusa Tenggara, the Likurai dance is regarded as a symbol of cultural identity, representing history, solidarity, and national spirit. Historically, it was performed by noblewomen as a gesture of respect toward warriors returning from battle. Over time, Likurai evolved not only as an artistic expression but also as a means for transmitting values and expressing gratitude for life (Metan et al., 2019).

As its function expanded, Likurai began to appear in religious contexts, particularly within Catholic faith celebrations (Pietrosanti, 2019). It is now frequently incorporated into liturgical events such as priestly ordinations, episcopal receptions, and offertory processions during the Eucharist (Pesulima, 2021). This development reflects a process of inculturation,

whereby local cultural elements are harmoniously integrated into the Catholic Church's rites (Chupungco, 2003). In the context of faith, the presence of Likurai within liturgy serves not merely as a visual accompaniment but as a form of spiritual expression that connects the faithful with God through meaningful and familiar cultural symbols (You & Ji, 2023).

Despite this development, significant challenges have emerged regarding its interpretation and preservation, particularly among Catholic youth (Gasparillo, 2021). At the Station of Saint Francis Marco de Fatima, many young people appear to be increasingly disconnected from this cultural heritage (Bevins, 2020). They tend to perceive Likurai as a mere ceremonial performance, lacking an understanding of its historical, symbolic, or spiritual meanings (Silpanus, 2020). The dominance of popular culture and the lack of catechetical and cultural-liturgy formation have contributed to their alienation from local symbols used in worship (Smith, 2013).

This situation is further exacerbated by substitution practices, where traditional Likurai music is no longer performed live but played through digital recordings (Ikechukwu & Kanu, 2021). This diminishes the performative and spiritual power of the dance, which ideally should stir the soul through its living movements, sounds, and meanings *(Blackstock, 2008)*. Consequently, the inculturated value of Likurai in the Eucharistic celebration has been increasingly reduced, putting its theological context at risk.

The Catholic Church strongly encourages the integration of local culture into liturgy, provided that the sacredness of the celebration and its spiritual meaning are preserved. It is therefore crucial to foster a deeper understanding of cultural symbols used in liturgical contexts, including Likurai, so that the faithful, especially young people, can internalize their faith contextually and authentically. In liturgical theology, every symbol possesses a meaning that directs the community toward the mystery of Christ, and active participation, particularly among the youth in interpreting these symbols is essential for holistic faith formation.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the meaning of Likurai dance within the context of the Eucharist and to explore how Catholic youth at the Station of Saint Francis Marco de Fatima understand and interpret this dance in their spiritual lives. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: how do Catholic youth interpret the spiritual and liturgical meaning of Likurai, and to what extent are they involved in preserving it as an expression of cultural identity and faith?

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach using a naturalistic descriptive method. This approach was chosen for its suitability in exploring the symbolic meanings, cultural expressions, and religious experiences of the faithful within their natural setting. The study was conducted at the Station of Saint Francis Marco de Fatima Nailera, which is part of the Parish of Saint Francis Xavier Bolan in Malaka Regency. The focus was on how Catholic youth interpret the presence of Likurai dance within the Eucharistic celebration. This approach enabled the researchers to grasp the meanings attributed by participants to cultural symbols in local liturgical practice.

Data collection techniques included participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Referring to Habermas's theory of communicative action, interviews were carried out in dialogical settings to explore normative, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of participants' experiences. Observation was also used to record non-verbal expressions, symbolic gestures, and ritual dynamics during Eucharistic celebrations involving the Likurai dance. Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles et al. (2014), which comprises three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting relevant information and organizing it into narratives and thematic matrices. Conclusions were drawn through data comparison and verified using source triangulation, including interviews, field notes, and documents.

Research Findings

The research findings are summarized in the matrix below, which presents six key subthemes responding to the central research questions. These subthemes address the spiritual and liturgical understanding of Likurai dance and the extent to which Catholic youth at the Station of Saint Francis Marco de Fatima Nailera are engaged in its preservation.

Table 1. Matrix of Research Findings

Subtheme	Focus of Discussion	Key Findings	Supporting/Hindering Factors	Implications
1. Spiritual Meaning of Likurai Dance	Youth perceptions of the dance's spiritual dimension	Some view it as a form of gratitude and prayer, while many lack spiritual understanding	Inadequate cultural and liturgical formation; insufficient explanation of movement symbolism	Need for strengthened faith education and liturgical symbolism
2. Liturgical and Inculturated	The role of dance in the Eucharistic	Recognized for enhancing reverence and participation,	Limited awareness of liturgical meaning; participation often seen as	Need for contextual liturgical

Function	celebration	though its inculturated role is often misunderstood	obligation	education for youth
3. Cultural and Faith Identity	Relationship between local culture and Catholic faith	Some understand it as a symbol of cultural-faith integration; others see it as irrelevant	Influence of modernity; lack of cultural literacy	Need for contextual strategies to integrate culture and faith
4. Youth Participation	Youth involvement in the practice and preservation of Likurai	Participation varies; some are active, others passive due to limited spiritual understanding	Preference for pop culture; lack of religious meaning	Cultural and faith value transmission to younger generations is challenged
5. Supporting Factors and Challenges	Factors influencing youth involvement	Support from parents, teachers, religious and customary leaders; challenges include limited instructors and influence of pop culture	Institutional support helps; lack of training and pop culture hinders	Strengthening cultural-liturgical ecosystems at the community level is necessary
6. Preservation Strategies	Efforts by the Church, schools, and community	Dance studios, regular training, cultural festivals, inculturated liturgies are present	Spiritual accompaniment is not yet intensive; focus remains on technical performance	Collaboration among Church, school, and family is needed for spiritual-cultural integration

The matrix above outlines the core research findings regarding how Catholic youth understand the spiritual and liturgical meaning of Likurai and their level of involvement in preserving it as an expression of cultural identity and faith. The following sections elaborate on each subtheme in detail.

The Spiritual Meaning of Likurai Dance for Catholic Youth

A portion of the Catholic youth at the Station of Saint Francis Marco de Fatima Nailera perceive the Likurai dance as an expression of gratitude to God and a form of prayer embodied through bodily movement. For them, this dance reinforces a sense of communal unity and evokes a sacred atmosphere during the Eucharistic celebration. However, the research revealed that such understanding is not widespread. Many young individuals still regard Likurai merely as a cultural performance or ceremonial tradition, lacking awareness of its spiritual meaning and symbolic gestures. This limited understanding is attributed to the absence of cultural and liturgical formation, along with insufficient explanation regarding the relationship between the dance's movements and the values of the Catholic faith.

Likurai Dance as a Component of Liturgical Inculturation

Some youth acknowledge that Likurai functions not only as entertainment but also as a means of enhancing liturgical solemnity. The dance is frequently presented during processions toward the altar or in thanksgiving Masses, adding spiritual depth to the Eucharist and increasing congregational engagement. Nevertheless, a significant number of youth still fail to recognize the inculturated role of this dance in liturgy. For them, participation is more of a communal duty or social obligation than a means of spiritual expression.

Cultural and Faith Identity in the Practice of Likurai

Informants who comprehend the significance of the dance asserted that Likurai symbolizes the unity between local culture and Catholic faith. They understood that preserving the dance equates to safeguarding cultural identity while simultaneously expressing faith in a contextual manner. Conversely, those with limited understanding often consider Likurai as an outdated practice irrelevant to contemporary life. This perspective highlights the need to reinforce awareness that cultural identity is inseparable from the expression of faith.

Youth Involvement in the Preservation of Likurai Dance

Youth participation in preserving Likurai varies significantly. Some are actively involved in rehearsals conducted by school or church-based dance studios, and they also participate in cultural festivals and inculturated liturgies. However, many others remain disengaged, either due to a lack of understanding of the dance's spiritual significance or a perception that it holds little importance in daily life. Several participants admitted being more drawn to modern entertainment than to traditional arts. This low level of interest poses a substantial challenge to the transmission of cultural and religious values to younger generations.

Supporting Factors and Challenges in Youth Engagement

Youth engagement is supported by parental encouragement, guidance from teachers and clergy, and the exemplary roles of customary leaders. These figures play a vital role in fostering a sense of cultural ownership and pride. Nonetheless, several obstacles persist, including inadequate education on the dance's spiritual significance, a shortage of traditional dance instructors, and the pervasive influence of popular culture that further alienates youth from local traditions. As a result, many young people learn the dance merely as a sequence of movements, without internalizing its religious philosophy and symbolic value.

Preservation Strategies: Roles of Schools, Churches, and Communities

Preservation efforts have been undertaken through the establishment of dance studios, regular training sessions, and the inclusion of Likurai in liturgical celebrations. Cultural festivals and inculturated Masses have also been used as platforms to increase youth involvement. However, informants emphasized the necessity of more intensive spiritual accompaniment so that the Likurai dance is not reduced to a technical skill but internalized as a faith based practice. Collaboration between schools, the Church, and families is considered essential to foster both cultural awareness and spiritual depth.

Discussion

The spiritual interpretation of Likurai dance among Catholic youth at the Station of Saint Francis Marco de Fatima Nailera reflects a diversity of perspectives shaped by each individual's experience of faith. While some young people internalize the dance as a form of thanksgiving to God, expressed through bodily movement and communal prayer during the Eucharist, others continue to view it solely as a cultural spectacle devoid of theological or symbolic significance (Angrosino, 1994). This gap reveals a weak internalization of faith values in the transmission of local traditions (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009). The lack of structured formation concerning the relationship between culture and liturgy, coupled with limited open dialogue on faith meanings embedded in artistic expressions like dance (Smith, 2007), has contributed to this disconnect. Consequently, the incomplete spiritual interpretation of Likurai deserves serious pastoral and educational attention (Isbăşoiu, 2015).

Within the liturgical context, Likurai holds significant potential as a medium for inculturating the Catholic faith, as it enables a harmonious encounter between local tradition and religious expression (Goula, 2014). Some youth are aware that the dance, particularly when performed during processions or thanksgiving Masses, not only enhances visual solemnity but also deepens the symbolic and spiritual experience of the celebration (Agbo, 2017). The dance becomes a bodily medium through which gratitude, reverence, and divine presence are expressed during the rite (Mulwa, 2021).

Nevertheless, this awareness has not yet been broadly embraced by the youth. For many, participating in Likurai remains a social obligation or a communal responsibility, rather than an act of spiritual engagement (Calvillo & Bailey, 2015). When faith is not the underlying motivation for such involvement, the dance loses its essence as a form of spiritual

communication and collective faith expression (Kama & Klaasen, 2023). This condition underscores the importance of strengthening young people's liturgical understanding through contextual, dialogical, and reflective pastoral approaches (Ujan, 2012), so that Likurai can truly serve as a means of proclaiming the faith within local culture.

Furthermore, the cultural and religious identity embedded in Likurai should be emphasized in youth formation (de Theije & Mariz, 2008). For those who understand its meaning, Likurai reflects the convergence of cultural heritage and Catholic values. Preserving this dance affirms a collective identity and highlights a distinctive way of expressing religiosity (Okigbo, 2021). However, many young people continue to dismiss it as obsolete and irrelevant to modern life (Klau, 2020). This disregard reflects a growing disconnection from traditional roots. In a society increasingly shaped by global popular culture, local values are often displaced by digital entertainment trends and instant lifestyles. Without renewal in contemporary contexts, traditional practices like Likurai risk becoming obsolete. Thus, it is essential to instill the understanding that cultural expression can serve as an integral aspect of Christian witness.

Youth participation in Likurai preservation demonstrates varied levels of engagement. Some actively take part in dance rehearsals at school and in church communities, and they perform in inculturated Masses and cultural festivals (Okigbo, 2021). This involvement offers a concrete pathway for transmitting both cultural and faith-based values. However, many remain uninvolved due to limited understanding or a lack of encouragement from their environment.

Supporting factors include encouragement from parents, guidance from teachers and pastors, and the exemplary role of traditional leaders (Mulwa, 2021). Their presence nurtures a sense of belonging and pride in local culture. Meanwhile, the primary challenges involve inadequate education on the dance's spiritual meaning, limited availability of qualified instructors, and the overpowering influence of pop culture that distracts young people from local traditions.

Preservation strategies have been implemented through joint efforts among schools, churches, and community groups. Schools offer regular training, churches organize inculturated Masses, and community centers establish art studios to encourage youth involvement (Klau, 2020). However, the findings indicate that technical training alone is insufficient unless accompanied by spiritual formation. Every preservation effort must be rooted in faith reflection to prevent the erosion of the dance's religious meaning (Smith, 2007).

Collaboration between schools, churches, and families is essential for uniting educational, pastoral, and cultural approaches (Goula, 2014). These three entities must work together to instill in youth the importance of preserving cultural heritage as a vibrant expression of faith. Activities such as workshops, cultural catechesis, and intergenerational dialogue can provide opportunities for shared reflection (de Theije & Mariz, 2008). In this way, Likurai can be sustained not only as a technical skill but also as a deeply spiritual tradition.

The findings affirm that preserving the Likurai dance is not merely an act of cultural conservation, but also a process of contextual faith proclamation. When young people come to see that faith can be expressed through culture, they are more likely to engage actively. Therefore, spiritual interpretation, youth involvement, and preservation strategies must be developed concurrently as part of Catholic faith formation rooted in local values.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study was confined to a single station within one parish and therefore may not fully represent the experiences of Catholic youth in other areas of East Nusa Tenggara. The limited sample size and geographic scope restrict the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the study relied on qualitative data without longitudinal observation to assess changes in youth perspectives following pastoral interventions. Future studies are encouraged to examine the impact of structured cultural catechesis programs across multiple parishes and to compare these with other forms of liturgical dance in Indonesia. It is also important to explore how digital media influences youth perceptions of traditional liturgical elements to better inform adaptive pastoral strategies in contemporary contexts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that although Likurai dance has been incorporated into the Eucharistic celebration, it is not yet fully understood by Catholic youth as a medium of spiritual expression and liturgical participation. Some participants recognize the dance as an expression of gratitude and communal prayer, yet many remain unaware of its theological symbolism. This points to the urgent need for contextual liturgical education that bridges cultural heritage with faith formation. Additionally, while preservation efforts have been initiated through collaboration among churches, schools, and communities, these often focus more on technical performance than on spiritual meaning. The strong influence of popular culture and the lack of systematic pastoral accompaniment hinder the development of deep cultural-religious

identity among youth. Therefore, sustained spiritual guidance and inter-institutional collaboration are crucial.

The integration of local traditions such as Likurai into liturgy should not be merely aesthetic but must become a meaningful expression of living faith for the younger generation. Through catechesis, workshops, and open dialogue, the Church can facilitate a renewed practice of inculturation that aligns with both local culture and Catholic teachings.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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