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Preserving Ancestral Heritage: The Meaning of Naga Tanah in the Cultural Consciousness of the Youth in Kampung Lete

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the understanding of the younger generation in Kampung Lete, East Manggarai, regarding the local belief in *Naga Tanah* as a symbol of communal protection. Amid the tides of globalization and the penetration of digital culture, traditional values face significant challenges, particularly in terms of intergenerational transmission. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving ten informants, including customary leaders, local youths, and migrants. The findings reveal that most young people still comprehend the basic meaning of *Naga Tanah* as an ancestral spirit and guardian of the village, although their involvement in traditional rituals has declined. The primary inhibiting factors are social media influence and social mobility. Nevertheless, there is a collective awareness of the need to preserve cultural heritage, as reflected in participatory proposals to involve youth in customary activities. These findings highlight that cultural transmission cannot rely solely on oral traditions, but must be supported by contextual and collaborative strategies. This study contributes to the discourse on cultural revitalization through youth participation in traditional societies.

Keywords: Naga Tanah, Youth, Cultural Transmission, Modernization, Manggarai Traditions.

Introduction

In the context of accelerating globalization and rapid technological advancement, the role of the younger generation in safeguarding local cultural values has become increasingly critical. Across various regions of the world, young people are facing cultural shifts that challenge traditional belief systems and local practices (Unesco, 2007). As digital platforms and global cultural flows continue to dominate everyday life, the risk of cultural homogenization has grown, particularly among youth who are more easily influenced by modern entertainment and popular media (Smith and Leavy, 2020). Within this global landscape, the preservation of indigenous knowledge and ancestral traditions is essential for maintaining cultural identity and social cohesion at the community level.

Indonesia, as a pluralistic nation comprising more than 1,300 ethnic groups, is highly vulnerable to the erosion of local traditions due to the dominance of global culture. In this context, the younger generation holds a strategic position as both heirs and protectors of cultural heritage (Ayuni et al., 2022; Sormin and Sihombing, 2023). However, various studies have documented a significant decline in youth participation in traditional ceremonies, local belief systems, and ritual practices, particularly in rural areas (Abdillah et al., 2023). This trend is often attributed to the perception that such practices are outdated and irrelevant to contemporary life, a perception that is further exacerbated by limited intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Such conditions are clearly observable in Kampung Lete, a traditional village in Gunung Village, Kota Komba District, East Manggarai Regency, where belief in *Naga Tanah*, regarded as the ancestral spirit and spiritual protector of the village, continues to be upheld. *Naga Tanah* is physically represented by the *Compang*, a sacred altar located in the village center, which symbolizes the spiritual connection between the community and their ancestors and serves as the focal point for offerings during rituals believed to provide protection from both physical and non-physical harm (Jelahut, 2020; Parli et al., 2019). Nevertheless, many young people in Kampung Lete no longer fully understand the meaning and significance of this belief. This gap in understanding is generally caused by patterns of migration, low involvement in customary rituals, and value shifts resulting from the influence of modern and digital culture (Mkwananzi et al., 2023).

Although belief in *Naga Tanah* remains a foundational element of spirituality among the older generation, the limited participation of youth raises serious concerns about cultural continuity and the preservation of local identity. A considerable number of young individuals who have migrated for work or higher education have become disconnected from inherited traditions. In addition, the prevalence of social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok has further reduced their interest in local rituals, which are increasingly seen as outdated and incompatible with contemporary lifestyles (Irawan, 2023). As a consequence, the process of cultural transmission is under threat, and traditional knowledge faces the risk of not being passed on to future generations.

While several ethnographic studies have examined ancestral belief systems in Manggarai (Lestari et al., 2023; Resmini et al., 2021), the perspectives of young people regarding such practices in contemporary contexts remain underexplored. Most of the existing research focuses

on the views of elders or the formal structure of rituals and has yet to address the intergenerational gap in cultural understanding and engagement. For this reason, a deeper investigation into how Manggarai youth perceive the belief in *Naga Tanah* is needed in order to bridge this research gap and support the continuity of local culture.

This study aims to examine the extent to which young people in Kampung Lete understand *Naga Tanah* as a spiritual guardian of their village. Specifically, it explores how this traditional belief is interpreted, internalized, or even questioned by the younger generation within the changing landscape of cultural values influenced by global forces.

The scholarly contribution of this study lies in its focus on youth perspectives within the framework of local spirituality, a topic that remains largely underrepresented in anthropological and contemporary cultural studies. By placing the views of Manggarai youth at the center of analysis, the study contributes to the discourse on local knowledge transmission and offers insights into the challenges of cultural preservation in the age of globalization. The findings are also expected to inform the development of culturally grounded educational strategies and community based preservation programs in remote areas.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach to explore the younger generation's understanding of *Naga Tanah* as the guardian spirit of Kampung Lete, located in Gunung Village, Kota Komba District, East Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province. A qualitative method was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of meaning through non-numerical data. Data collection was conducted through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The primary participants consisted of ten individuals, including traditional leaders, local youth, migrants, and the village head.

The data were analyzed qualitatively with the assistance of Nvivo software to facilitate systematic categorization, coding, and interpretation. The validity of the data was ensured through prolonged engagement and enhanced research rigor. The findings are presented descriptively to reinforce the understanding of cultural values embedded in the *Naga Tanah* tradition.

Research Findings

The findings of this study are presented in the following chart, which illustrates the distribution of informants' responses across eight key themes derived from the interviews. Each

theme reveals a distinction between dominant responses, which represent the most frequently expressed views, and supplementary responses, which serve to complement or enhance the primary information.

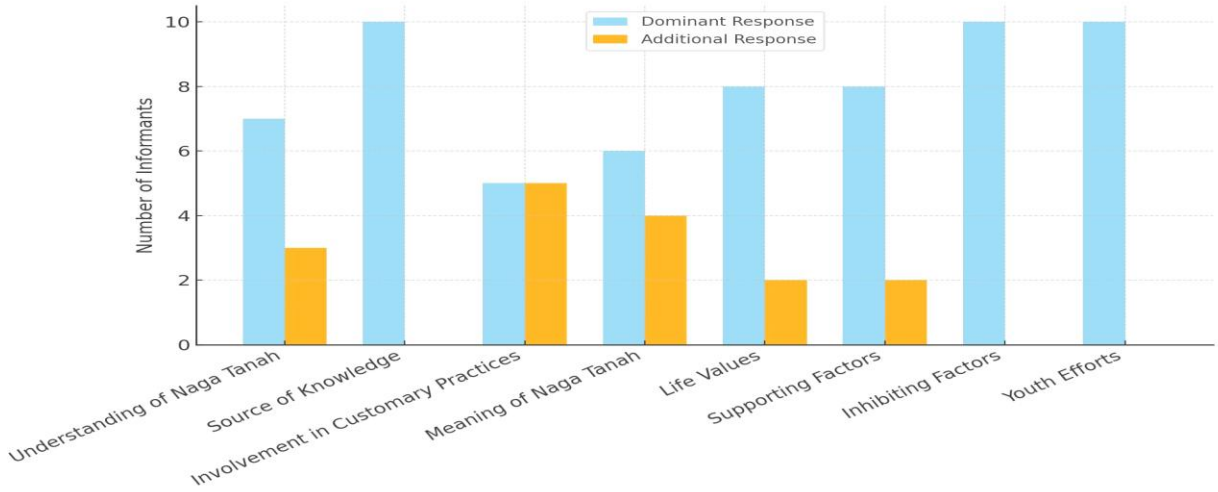


Chart: Informants' Response Distribution Chart to Interview Questions

The chart above offers a visual representation of the response patterns given by informants across eight principal themes identified through the interviews. The explanation for each theme is presented as follows.

Understanding of the Naga Tanah Concept

The majority of informants (7 out of 10) understood Naga Tanah as an ancestral spirit believed to guard the village. Three additional informants noted that Naga Tanah also functions as a customary boundary between one territory and another. This understanding indicates that the symbol of Naga Tanah carries not only a spiritual function but also a strong territorial dimension within the customary system of the Lete village community.

Sources of Knowledge about Naga Tanah

All informants reported that their understanding of Naga Tanah was acquired through oral transmission from parents or customary leaders. This suggests that cultural knowledge continues to be passed down across generations through traditional social structures.

Level of Involvement in Customary Practices

Five informants stated that they often or had previously participated in customary rituals related to Naga Tanah, while the other five admitted to infrequent involvement. This division highlights a declining participation rate among younger generations in customary practices, which warrants further attention.

The Meaning of Naga Tanah as Village Protector

Six informants interpreted Naga Tanah as a protective spirit safeguarding the village from harmful influences. Four others expanded on this meaning, referring to it as a mediator between humans and nature, a bringer of prosperity, and a marker of customary boundaries. These responses reveal that the symbolic meaning of Naga Tanah is shaped contextually within the community.

Life Values Embedded in Belief in Naga Tanah

Eight informants emphasized that belief in Naga Tanah reflects a value of cultural preservation. Two others added values such as obedience through ritual offerings, honesty in social life, and loyalty to customary norms. These values reinforce the collective ethical framework of the local society.

Supporting Factors in Community Understanding

A majority of informants (8 out of 10) identified storytelling by parents as the primary factor in understanding Naga Tanah. Two others noted that involvement in traditional activities further strengthened their comprehension. This suggests that the transmission of traditional knowledge is still taking place, though it is increasingly influenced by the level of direct participation.

Barriers to Understanding Naga Tanah

All informants (10 out of 10) agreed that technological advancement, particularly engagement with social media, serves as a major barrier to participation in customary activities. Additionally, some mentioned that migration also plays a role in distancing younger generations from their cultural traditions.

Efforts to Enhance Youth Understanding

All informants recommended that young people be actively involved in customary practices. They highlighted that efforts such as awareness initiatives by community elders, self-motivated inquiry, and direct participation in traditional rituals are effective ways to revive customary values among the younger generation.

Key Terms and Dominant Community Narratives

An analysis of the informants' narratives using qualitative data analysis software produced a visual word cloud depicting the most frequently occurring terms in the interview data. This analysis revealed that the word "adat" appeared 27 times, indicating that

interpretations of Naga Tanah are closely tied to local systems of values and traditions. The terms “leluhur” (ancestors) and “pelindung” (protector) appeared 19 and 16 times respectively, suggesting that Naga Tanah is regarded as a spiritual entity inherited from ancestors and believed to have a protective role over the village.

The terms village and customary leader were also prominent, with 14 and 11 occurrences respectively, reinforcing the notion that community understanding of Naga Tanah is inseparable from the living space and social structure of the village. Meanwhile, words such as social media, migration, and technology, which appeared 7, 6, and 5 times respectively, emerged in relation to the obstacles in preserving traditional values, reflecting lifestyle shifts among younger generations who are becoming increasingly detached from local cultural practices.



Picture Word Cloud: Keyword from Informant Narrative

Cross-Tabulation of Informants’ Responses Across Themes

To explore the interrelation among various thematic responses, the following table presents a cross-tabulation of informants’ perspectives on understanding, involvement, meaning, values, and perceived barriers:

Table: Cross-Tabulation of Informants’ Responses to Research Themes

Informant	*Understanding of Naga Tanah*	*Involvement in Customs*	*Interpretation as Protector*	*Life Values*	*Inhibiting Factors*
1	Village guardian	Frequent	Protector	Cultural preservation	Social media
2	Village guardian	Frequent	Protector	Cultural preservation	Social media
3	Village guardian	Frequent	Protector	Cultural preservation	Social media
4	Village guardian	Occasional	Protector	Cultural preservation	Migration
5	Village guardian	Occasional	Protector	Cultural preservation	Migration
6	Village guardian	Rare	Protector and connector to nature	Cultural preservation	Social media

7	Village guardian	Rare	Protector and bringer of fortune	Cultural preservation	Social media
8	Guardian and territorial marker	Rare	Protector and boundary symbol	Cultural preservation	Social media
9	Guardian and territorial marker	Rare	Protector and environmental link	Preservation and obedience	Migration
10	Guardian and territorial marker	Rare	No clear understanding	Preservation and social honesty	Social media

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that most young people in Kampung Lete retain a basic understanding of *Naga Tanah* as both an ancestral spirit and a protective figure within the village. This understanding reflects not only spiritual meaning but also encompasses social and territorial dimensions, as *Naga Tanah* is perceived as a symbol marking customary boundaries between regions. Although modernization has significantly influenced the lifestyle of youth, the symbolic meaning remains embedded in their collective memory. However, not all informants demonstrated a complete comprehension. Some recognized *Naga Tanah* merely as part of mythological narratives, without grasping its deeper cultural significance. This disparity suggests a weakening of intergenerational continuity in meaning-making (Dockery, 2019). For this reason, active participation in cultural practices has become essential, as symbolic understanding cannot be sustained through oral transmission alone.

This gap in understanding becomes more apparent when examined in relation to the sources from which youth have acquired knowledge. All informants stated that their understanding of *Naga Tanah* was derived from parents or customary leaders. This shows that traditional social structures continue to serve as custodians of cultural knowledge (Williams et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the long-standing reliance on oral tradition now faces critical challenges. Shifting communication patterns resulting from social mobility and digitalization have weakened intergenerational relationships, making informal transmission less effective. In such a context, the reinforcement of social networks and the revitalization of local institutions emerge as strategic measures to sustain the continuity of cultural inheritance (Swanson and Leader, 2023).

Cultural inheritance is challenged not only in narrative aspects but also in the form of declining youth engagement in customary rituals. The data show that only five out of ten informants had participated frequently or occasionally in rituals, while the rest reported minimal involvement. This decline is closely related to changes in life orientation among the youth, who

are increasingly influenced by academic demands, employment outside the village, and digital lifestyles. Consequently, traditional rituals are viewed as less relevant. In fact, such rituals play a vital role in constructing shared meaning and preserving the spiritual integrity of the community (Zort et al., 2023).

This condition is further complicated by the diversity of interpretations assigned to *Naga Tanah* among the younger generation. While most informants described it as a protector, others viewed it as a mediator between humans and nature, a provider of sustenance, or a marker of customary territory. This interpretive variation highlights the dynamic nature of cultural symbols, which continually evolve in accordance with social context (Polnaya et al., 2023). For this reason, customary communities must allow space for new interpretations, as long as fundamental values remain intact. An open attitude toward change is necessary to ensure that cultural symbols remain relevant and meaningful across generations.

In addition, the values embedded in the belief in *Naga Tanah* help shape the collective ethics of the Kampung Lete community. Informants emphasized the significance of cultural preservation, obedience to customary norms, social honesty, and loyalty to ancestral traditions as essential elements of communal life. However, when these values are conveyed only through symbolic forms or ceremonial expression, young people may experience difficulty internalizing them. To bridge this gap, it is necessary to adopt approaches that enable these cultural values to be applied as contextually relevant life principles (Liew et al., 2021). Through such methods, customary values can be integrated into modern life as part of contemporary ethical practice.

Within the same framework of value transmission, this study also highlights the continued role of parental storytelling in shaping cultural understanding. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this medium appears to be diminishing due to the weakening of communication across generations. This situation indicates that cultural preservation can no longer rely solely on family relationships (Mager et al., 2023). Consequently, educational institutions and local communities must assume a more active role in incorporating cultural values into both learning environments and community activities. Through these efforts, cultural transmission can occur in a more structured manner and reach a broader segment of society.

In addition to internal challenges, external factors such as technological advancement and the growing influence of social media have also contributed to the declining attention paid to local cultural traditions. All informants acknowledged that their engagement in customary

activities has diminished as a result of digital media usage. Applications such as TikTok and Instagram have reinforced instant consumption habits that often conflict with local cultural principles (Tangkelangan et al., 2022). Popular narratives promoted on social media emphasize global culture and urban lifestyles, thereby increasing the gap between youth and customary values. However, digital platforms also present an opportunity to creatively and contextually promote cultural values in ways that resonate with younger audiences (Liang et al., 2021).

In addition to technological influences, youth migration has further contributed to the weakening of cultural ties with traditional practices. Experiences of migration often disrupt emotional and cultural connections to the home village. Over time, this detachment may reduce young people's sense of responsibility toward preserving ancestral traditions (Putri et al., 2022). For this reason, cultural forums should be developed to support identity preservation among migrants originating from Kampung Lete, even while they reside outside their place of origin.

In response to these challenges, all informants agreed that involving young people in customary activities is an urgent necessity. This involvement, however, must be both participatory and inclusive. Youth should be actively engaged in the interpretation and organization of traditional activities, as such engagement fosters both a sense of responsibility and emotional connection (Rasyid et al., 2023). Support from customary leaders and community elders is essential to ensure that creative initiatives undertaken by youth remain grounded in traditional values. Through this approach, cultural preservation can emerge organically and be sustained over time (Wibowo et al., 2023).

The word cloud analysis further reinforces the importance of youth engagement. Words such as "custom," "ancestor," and "protector" appeared frequently in the narratives of informants, suggesting that cultural awareness remains embedded in youth identity. At the same time, frequent references to terms such as "social media" and "technology" reflect the tension between local values and global influences. For this reason, cultural preservation strategies must move beyond the repetition of traditional forms and instead embrace new approaches that align with current realities.

Additionally, the results of the thematic cross-tabulation confirm the significance of youth involvement in shaping the meaning of cultural values such as *Naga Tanah*. Informants who possessed deeper understanding tended to be more actively engaged in customary rituals and demonstrated greater appreciation for traditional values. In contrast, low levels of

participation were associated with weak internalization of cultural meaning. These findings underscore the notion that cultural knowledge is not merely cognitive but must be expressed through both social and spiritual practice. As such, participatory customary activities represent an essential means of revitalizing cultural meaning in the lives of the younger generation, particularly within the context of Kampung Lete.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study was limited by the small number of informants, which totaled ten individuals, and by its geographic focus on Kampung Lete alone. These factors may constrain the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the broader Manggarai community. Furthermore, the qualitative approach adopted in this research did not permit a quantitative assessment of shifts in cultural values over time. For future investigations, it is recommended that the research scope be expanded to include additional locations and that a mixed-methods approach be employed. This would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between cultural understanding and youth participation across diverse social and geographical contexts.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the younger generation in Kampung Lete retains a foundational understanding of *Naga Tanah* as both an ancestral spirit and a protective symbol of the village. However, this understanding is gradually eroding due to the influence of digitalization, social media, and increased social mobility, which have distanced young people from customary practices and communal spiritual life.

The observed gaps in understanding and participation reveal significant barriers in the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. Cultural inheritance can no longer rely solely on oral traditions but must be supported through educational and institutional strategies. These include the active involvement of youth in the planning and enactment of participatory and context-based cultural rituals.

The findings underscore the urgency of developing cultural preservation strategies that are responsive to modern lifestyles. Although digital media presents challenges, it may also serve as a valuable tool for constructing cultural narratives that resonate with younger audiences. Through such strategies, symbols like *Naga Tanah* can continue to thrive in the cultural consciousness of the community while bridging local identity with global dynamics.

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