

## Article History

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# Tongkonan as a Living Curriculum: Intergenerational Transmission of Torajan Cultural Knowledge through Spatial and Ritual Practices

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## Abstract

*A key example of how cultural spaces transmit indigenous knowledge is the concept of traditional house of the Toraja people, the tongkonan. To comprehend the educational and cultural role of the tongkonan, this research explores its structural and symbolic aspects, rituals, and communal practices. Using a qualitative and ethnographic approach, the data were collected from participant observation, interviews and interdisciplinary analysis. Results illuminate that architectural design and symbolic carving of the tongkonan serves as pedagogical tools, and rituals and intergenerational exchanges collectively contribute to cultural continuity and communal identity. Yet modernization and globalization pose significant threats to the longevity of these practices, thus requiring creative adaptations, including digital documentation, community and social driven initiatives, and sustainable tourism models. These efforts not only protect Torajan cultural resources but also provide lessons for other indigenous people confronting similar predicaments. This research emphasizes the significance of the combination of traditional knowledge and contemporary practice to offer a crucial to the survival of cultures in a modern world.*

**Keywords:** hidden curriculum; indigenous knowledge; pedagogy; tongkonan; Torajan heritage

## Introduction

The *tongkonan*, a traditional house of the Toraja people in Indonesia, represents a cornerstone of cultural identity and historical significance. These structures transcend their architectural essence, encapsulating the values, beliefs, and intricate social hierarchies of the Toraja community (Adams, 2021; Kobong, 2008). Historically, *tongkonan* served as ancestral homes, hosting pivotal rituals and ceremonies that reinforced familial bonds and sustained cultural continuity. Their intricate designs and the use of local materials showcase a harmonious interplay between artistry and functionality, reflecting the Toraja people's deep connection to their environment and heritage (Putra, 2023; Amirullah, 2024). Culturally, *tongkonan* play a central role in various social rituals, such as marriages and funerals, which involve elaborate community participation. These gatherings not only serve spiritual and social purposes but also reinforce the *tongkonan's* role as a cultural and educational center, where traditional knowledge is imparted across generations (Putra, 2024; Muttaqin, 2023).

A key concept relevant to this cultural practice is the hidden curriculum, which refers to the lessons learned informally outside structured educational systems. In the context of the *tongkonan*, this curriculum manifests through participation in rituals and ceremonies, where younger generations learn social norms, values, and cultural identity. This experiential learning fosters a profound sense of belonging and continuity, as individuals internalize the narratives and traditions that define their community (Putra, 2024; Muttaqin, 2023). Furthermore, intergenerational learning, wherein elders pass down knowledge, skills, and cultural practices, is critical for preserving the intangible heritage embedded in the *tongkonan*. This process not only sustains traditional customs but also fortifies community ties, enabling resilience against external influences that may threaten cultural preservation (Putra, 2023; Amirullah, 2024).

However, the *tongkonan* and the cultural knowledge it embodies face significant challenges from modernization, urbanization, and globalization. These forces often disrupt traditional practices and knowledge systems by altering lifestyles and prioritizing Western norms over indigenous values. For instance, urban migration among younger Torajans in search of economic opportunities distances them from their cultural roots, while urban environments frequently lack spaces conducive to cultural expression. This disconnection hampers intergenerational transmission of knowledge, as elders have fewer opportunities to engage with younger members in meaningful ways (Ferguson et al., 2021; Miltenburg, 2023). Additionally, globalization introduces external cultural influences that can dilute local traditions, leading to the homogenization of practices and the erosion of indigenous identities (Colussi et al., 2022; Blatman & Mays, 2022).

Despite these challenges, various strategies are emerging to safeguard traditional knowledge and practices. Initiatives like cultural camps and mentorship programs provide platforms for youth to engage with their heritage through hands-on learning experiences. Such programs often involve storytelling, ritual enactments, and traditional skills training, fostering deeper connections between generations (Ferguson et al., 2021; Moola, 2024). Additionally, urban indigenous organizations advocate for the inclusion of indigenous perspectives in public policy and urban planning to create spaces that honor cultural identities (Blatman & Mays, 2022). Technological advancements also present opportunities for preservation through digital storytelling, online archives, and social media platforms, which amplify the reach of indigenous narratives and practices (Miltenburg, 2023; Moola, 2024).

The relationship between spatial ideologies and cultural identity is a pivotal theme in understanding the *tongkonan*'s role in Torajan society. Traditional architectural designs, such as those of the *tongkonan*, are deeply rooted in cosmological beliefs and communal values. These structures are not mere dwellings but reflections of social and spiritual order, with spaces designed to foster communal activities and rituals that strengthen social bonds (Colussi et al., 2022; Blatman & Mays, 2022). Additionally, the sustainable practices evident in indigenous architecture, such as the use of local materials and environmentally harmonious construction techniques, underscore a profound respect for the natural world and a commitment to ecological balance (Miltenburg, 2023; Colussi et al., 2022).

The primary issue explored in this study is the declining role of the *tongkonan* as a medium for cultural knowledge transmission in the face of modern pressures. Urbanization,

digitalization, and economic migration have disrupted traditional ways of life, weakening the intergenerational links essential for preserving cultural practices. This erosion poses the risk of losing invaluable cultural heritage and weakening communal identity among the Torajan people (Ferguson et al., 2021; Miltenburg, 2023). Addressing this issue requires a deeper understanding of how tongkonan function as cultural and educational spaces and how they can adapt to contemporary challenges while maintaining their essence.

Several approaches have been proposed in the literature to address these challenges. First, the establishment of cultural centers and community-led initiatives has proven effective in revitalizing traditional knowledge and practices. These centers often collaborate with educational institutions to incorporate indigenous perspectives into curricula, thereby fostering awareness and respect for Torajan culture (Moola, 2024; Jernigan, 2023). Second, leveraging digital technologies, such as creating virtual archives and interactive platforms, enables the documentation and dissemination of rituals, oral histories, and traditional skills to a broader audience. These tools not only preserve cultural knowledge but also make it accessible to younger generations who may be disconnected from their roots (Miltenburg, 2023; Moola, 2024).

Moreover, community engagement in urban planning and policymaking can help ensure that cultural spaces are preserved and integrated into modern landscapes. This includes designing urban spaces that accommodate traditional practices, such as ceremonial grounds or communal gathering areas, which reinforce the cultural significance of the tongkonan (Blatman & Mays, 2022; Mays, 2022). These solutions emphasize the importance of innovation and adaptability in preserving the tongkonan's cultural and educational functions.

Previous research has extensively documented the symbolic and functional roles of the tongkonan in Torajan culture. Studies highlight its architectural significance, its centrality in rituals, and its role as a "hidden curriculum," a concept pioneered by scholars like Philip Jackson in the context of informal education, that facilitates cultural knowledge transmission through practices embedded within tradition and culture. In cultural spaces such as the tongkonan, this hidden curriculum conveys unwritten lessons and shared values that shape social behavior, cultural identity, and community cohesion (Jackson, 1968; Giroux, 1983). (Putra, 2023; Muttaqin, 2023). However, there is limited exploration of how modernization impacts these dynamics and how the tongkonan can be adapted to contemporary contexts without compromising its cultural integrity. This gap underscores the need for research that not only examines the tongkonan's traditional functions but also proposes sustainable strategies for its preservation.

This study aims to explore the tongkonan's role as a living curriculum for intergenerational cultural knowledge transmission. By examining its architectural, symbolic, and ritualistic dimensions, the research seeks to identify strategies for sustaining its relevance amidst modern challenges. The study's novelty lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining cultural anthropology, educational theory, and sustainable heritage practices to address the complexities of preserving the tongkonan. The hypothesis posits that the tongkonan, through its embedded practices and spatial ideologies, remains an effective medium for cultural knowledge transmission but requires innovative adaptations to thrive in contemporary society.

## **Methods**

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to explore the tongkonan's role as a living curriculum for intergenerational cultural knowledge transmission. The study employs a qualitative and ethnographic approach to delve into the intricate cultural practices, spatial ideologies, and ritualistic dimensions of the tongkonan. By utilizing participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and interdisciplinary frameworks, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how cultural knowledge is transmitted across generations in Torajan society.

### ***Research Design***

The qualitative and ethnographic methods chosen for this study emphasize understanding the lived experiences and cultural practices of the Torajan people. These methods are particularly suited for exploring how the tongkonan operates as an educational and cultural hub. The study's design integrates extended fieldwork, focusing on observing and engaging with the community in natural settings to capture authentic cultural expressions (Shi, 2023; Meng, 2024). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the tongkonan's architectural, symbolic, and ritualistic aspects.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

Participant observation involves the researcher immersing themselves in the daily life and rituals of the Torajan community. This method enables the researcher to document cultural practices, including ceremonies and communal gatherings, within the tongkonan. Observing interactions between elders and younger generations during rituals provides insights into how cultural values and knowledge are transmitted. For instance, attending ceremonies such as funerals or weddings allows the researcher to witness storytelling, symbolic acts, and shared activities that reinforce cultural identity (Shi, 2023). Non-verbal communication, such as gestures and expressions, is also documented to capture nuanced cultural meanings.

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a diverse range of participants, including elders, community leaders, and youth, to understand their perspectives on cultural transmission. This flexible interview format encourages participants to share personal stories and insights while allowing the researcher to probe deeper into specific topics of interest. For example, interviews with elders might focus on their role in teaching rituals and maintaining traditions, while discussions with younger participants explore their perceptions of the tongkonan in contemporary contexts (Meng, 2024). These interviews provide rich, qualitative data that complement the observations made during fieldwork.

### ***Geographic and Demographic Scope***

The study focuses on the Toraja region in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, encompassing rural and urban settings to capture diverse perspectives on the tongkonan. Participants are selected from different demographic groups, including elders, adults, and youth, to explore generational dynamics in cultural knowledge transmission. This inclusivity ensures a holistic understanding of how the tongkonan's role evolves across different societal strata and contexts.

### **Analytical Framework**

The analytical framework integrates insights from cultural anthropology, educational theory, and sustainable heritage practices to analyze the collected data. This interdisciplinary approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between cultural practices, spatial ideologies, and educational functions within the tongkonan. For example, cultural anthropology provides tools for interpreting symbolic meanings embedded in rituals, while educational theory highlights the informal learning processes occurring within the tongkonan (Eisenhart, 2021; Vries, 2021). Reflexivity is a critical component of this research, ensuring that the researcher remains aware of their positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation. Regular self-assessment and journaling are employed to mitigate biases and maintain objectivity (Huang, 2023). Additionally, ethical considerations are prioritized, including obtaining informed consent from participants, respecting cultural protocols, and ensuring that findings benefit the Torajan community. Collaboration with local leaders helps to align the research process with the community's values and expectations (Kajanus, 2023).

### **Challenges and Mitigation Strategies**

Conducting research in traditional communities presents unique challenges. One significant issue is the potential for misinterpretation of cultural practices due to the researcher's outsider perspective. To address this, the researcher engages in prolonged engagement and builds trust with community members to gain a deeper understanding of cultural nuances (Guo, 2024). Another challenge is balancing the need for academic rigor with the community's expectations and sensitivities. Adopting a collaborative approach, where community members are involved in shaping the research process, helps to ensure cultural respect and relevance.

The methodological framework outlined in this chapter provides a robust foundation for exploring the tongkonan's role as a living curriculum. By employing qualitative and ethnographic methods, the study captures the rich, multifaceted nature of cultural knowledge transmission in Torajan society. The integration of interdisciplinary frameworks and ethical research practices ensures that the findings contribute meaningfully to both academic discourse and the preservation of Torajan heritage.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This chapter presents the findings of the study on the *tongkonan's* role in cultural knowledge transmission within Torajan society. The results are organized into thematic sections, including the structural and symbolic dimensions of the *tongkonan*, its role in rituals as a hidden curriculum, intergenerational dynamics in knowledge transmission, the impact of modernization, and strategies for cultural preservation.

### **Structural Dimensions**

The tongkonan's architectural features are integral to its role as a medium for cultural transmission. The unique roof design, resembling buffalo horns, symbolizes wealth and status in Torajan culture. This connection to the buffalo reflects the community's agricultural heritage and underscores its central role in traditional ceremonies, particularly funerals (Amirullah, 2024; Rombe et al., 2022). The layout of the tongkonan is another critical structural element,

divided into sections that represent familial and social hierarchies, reinforcing the social fabric of the Toraja people (Aldana & Sunarmi, 2021). Additionally, the use of locally sourced materials such as wood and bamboo reflects the Torajan's respect for their natural environment and their commitment to sustainability. These materials are a medium through which traditional craftsmanship and construction techniques are passed down, demonstrating the integration of tangible and intangible cultural knowledge (Natsir, 2023).

### ***Symbolic Dimensions***

The symbolic aspects of the *tongkonan* further enhance its role in cultural preservation. Carvings and decorations on the structure represent ancestral stories, social status, and cultural beliefs. For instance, the intricate carvings act as visual narratives that connect current generations with their lineage, embodying a physical representation of cultural memory (Amirullah, 2024; Aldana & Sunarmi, 2021). Moreover, the *tongkonan's* role as a site for various rituals and ceremonies creates opportunities for communal learning. Events such as funerals, weddings, and harvest celebrations are rich with symbolic meaning and provide a dynamic setting for imparting cultural values and traditions to younger generations (Rombe et al., 2022).

### ***Rituals as Hidden Curriculum***

Rituals performed in the *tongkonan* act as a hidden curriculum, where cultural values and identity are conveyed implicitly through participation and observation. These rituals serve as vehicles for intergenerational learning, embedding shared beliefs and norms within the community's collective consciousness (Barbaroux et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023). For example, funeral ceremonies often involve storytelling by elders, who recount ancestral histories and highlight communal values. These stories reinforce the significance of kinship and communal responsibility, fostering a sense of pride and identity among participants (Mgobozi et al., 2023; Kachel et al., 2021). The experiential nature of these rituals ensures that cultural knowledge is not merely transmitted verbally but is internalized through active engagement.

### ***Intergenerational Dynamics in Knowledge Transmission***

The *tongkonan* facilitates intergenerational interactions that are vital for cultural knowledge transmission. Elders play a pivotal role as custodians of traditional wisdom, sharing stories, skills, and practices with younger members of the community. This exchange often occurs during communal activities, such as the preparation of rituals or the maintenance of the *tongkonan* itself. Younger generations, in turn, gain a deeper appreciation for their heritage through these interactions, which foster a sense of belonging and responsibility toward their cultural identity (Amirullah, 2024; Aldana & Sunarmi, 2021). However, the dynamics of intergenerational transmission are increasingly challenged by urban migration and modernization, which limit opportunities for these meaningful exchanges.

### ***Impact of Modernization on Cultural Transmission***

Modernization and urbanization present significant challenges to the traditional role of the *tongkonan*. The migration of younger generations to urban areas in search of economic opportunities has resulted in a disconnect from their cultural roots. Urban environments often lack spaces conducive to cultural practices, leading to a decline in participation in rituals and communal activities (Ferguson et al., 2021; Miltenburg, 2023). Additionally, globalization introduces external cultural influences that overshadow local traditions, contributing to the homogenization of practices and the erosion of indigenous identities (Colussi et al., 2022; Blatman & Mays, 2022).

### ***Strategies for Cultural Preservation***

To counteract the challenges posed by modernization, several strategies have been identified to sustain the *tongkonan*'s role in cultural knowledge transmission. First, community-led initiatives. Organizing cultural festivals, workshops, and educational programs can engage youth and encourage participation in traditional practices. These events provide platforms for intergenerational dialogue and foster pride in cultural heritage (Rombe et al., 2022; Aldana & Sunarmi, 2021). Second, digital storytelling and documentation. Leveraging digital technologies to document rituals, oral histories, and traditional practices ensures broader accessibility and engagement. Platforms such as social media can reach younger audiences and amplify the preservation of Torajan culture (Miltenburg, 2023; Moola, 2024). Third, revitalization of traditional spaces. Integrating traditional spaces like the *tongkonan* into modern urban planning can maintain their relevance. For instance, creating cultural centers that incorporate the architectural and symbolic elements of the *tongkonan* allows for the coexistence of modernity and tradition (Blatman & Mays, 2022). Fourth, interdisciplinary approaches. Collaborative research initiatives that involve anthropologists, educators, and local leaders can provide holistic insights into the preservation of cultural heritage. These partnerships can inform policies that align with the community's needs and values (Eisenhart, 2021; Vries, 2021).

### ***Discussion and Implications***

The findings of this study on the *tongkonan*, the traditional house of the Toraja people, provide a significant lens through which to examine cultural transmission within indigenous communities, offering critical insights into global discussions on cultural preservation. These findings inform policies aimed at safeguarding indigenous heritage by demonstrating how traditional spaces like the *tongkonan* function as dynamic hubs for cultural and educational exchange. By understanding its role, policymakers and cultural advocates can develop frameworks that balance tradition and modernity, ensuring the sustainable transmission of heritage while addressing contemporary societal challenges. The *tongkonan*'s structural and symbolic dimensions, its role as a site for rituals, and its facilitation of intergenerational learning collectively contribute to its status as a "living curriculum." This discussion contextualizes these findings within broader theoretical frameworks of cultural transmission and addresses the challenges posed by modernization and globalization, offering insights into strategies for cultural preservation.

The role of the *tongkonan* aligns closely with established theories of cultural transmission, such as those articulated by Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman (1981) and Boyd and Richerson (1985), which emphasize the importance of social interactions and communal practices in the learning and perpetuation of culture. Rituals conducted within and around the *tongkonan* serve as dynamic spaces for intergenerational knowledge transfer, embodying the concept of a "hidden curriculum." In this context, younger generations learn values, norms, and traditions through observation and participation, as opposed to formal instruction. This experiential learning reinforces cultural identity and social cohesion, both of which are fundamental elements of cultural transmission (Djafar, 2024; Ambtman-Smith, 2024). For example, funerary rituals not only honor ancestors but also provide a platform for elders to narrate family histories and teach communal values to youth, ensuring the continuity of Torajan identity.

Intergenerational learning is particularly evident in the *tongkonan*'s integration of elders into communal activities, where they serve as custodians of traditional knowledge. Their mentorship of younger community members highlights the importance of role modeling in transmitting cultural wisdom, as noted in various educational and anthropological studies (Amirullah, 2024; Martínez-Huamán et al., 2023). These dynamic underscores the *tongkonan*'s function as both a physical and symbolic space for cultural education, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. However, as younger generations migrate to urban areas in pursuit of economic opportunities, these intergenerational exchanges are increasingly at risk of disruption, threatening the sustainability of traditional practices.

The symbolic aspects of the *tongkonan*—such as its carvings, architectural layout, and use of space—further contribute to its pedagogical function. These elements serve as visual and spatial narratives that connect individuals to their ancestral lineage and cosmological beliefs. This symbolic transmission of knowledge complements the verbal and participatory learning that occurs during rituals and communal gatherings. The buffalo horn-shaped roof, for instance, symbolizes wealth and status, reinforcing the agricultural roots of Torajan society (Amirullah, 2024; Rombe et al., 2022). Such symbolic elements embed layers of meaning that are internalized by community members through repeated engagement with the space, demonstrating how architecture itself can function as an educational tool.

Despite its robust role in cultural transmission, the *tongkonan* faces significant challenges in adapting to the pressures of modernization and globalization. Urban migration has created physical and cultural distance between younger generations and their traditional roots, while the rise of digital technologies has shifted the ways in which cultural knowledge is accessed and valued. These shifts challenge traditional theories of cultural transmission, which often assume a stable and continuous process rooted in face-to-face interactions (Kwame, 2021; Millang, 2024). For instance, while digital platforms offer opportunities to document and disseminate cultural knowledge, they may also encourage a superficial engagement with traditions, prioritizing convenience over experiential learning.

Globalization further complicates the preservation of Torajan culture by introducing external influences that may overshadow local traditions. For example, the proliferation of Western consumer culture often prioritizes individualism, which contrasts with the communal values central to Torajan rituals and practices. Additionally, the dominance of global media



introduces cultural narratives that may diminish the perceived relevance of indigenous traditions among younger generations. These influences, coupled with the commodification of cultural practices for tourism, present significant challenges to maintaining the authenticity and continuity of Torajan heritage. The commodification of cultural practices for tourism, for example, can undermine the authenticity of rituals and the integrity of knowledge transmission. When the tongkonan is transformed into a tourist attraction, its primary function as a site for communal learning and cultural continuity risks being diluted. This phenomenon highlights a critical divergence from traditional cultural transmission theories, which view such practices as sacred and communal rather than commercial (Alberghina, 2021; Bogiannidis et al., 2021).

To address these challenges, innovative strategies are needed to sustain the tongkonan's relevance as a cultural and educational space. Integrating modern educational practices with traditional knowledge systems offers a promising path forward. For example, using virtual reality or multimedia presentations to simulate traditional rituals can engage younger audiences while preserving the cultural significance of these practices. Such technological adaptations provide an opportunity to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary learning environments, fostering a deeper connection to heritage (Chen, 2024).

Community engagement is another critical factor in preserving the tongkonan's role in cultural transmission. Initiatives that involve youth in the planning and execution of cultural events can instill a sense of ownership and pride in their heritage. Collaborations with local schools to incorporate Torajan traditions into curricula further strengthen the integration of cultural knowledge into formal education systems (Hipolito, 2024; Martínez-Huamán et al., 2023). These efforts not only reinforce cultural identity but also ensure that the tongkonan remains a living, dynamic space for learning and community building.

Sustainable tourism models can also play a role in preserving the cultural and educational functions of the tongkonan. These models emphasize community-driven initiatives that prioritize cultural authenticity and local engagement. For instance, organizing guided tours led by community members can educate visitors about the history, symbolism, and rituals associated with the tongkonan while ensuring that revenues directly support the local community. Additionally, integrating cultural workshops, such as traditional carving or cooking classes, allows tourists to experience Torajan heritage in an interactive and respectful manner. By fostering such inclusive and educational experiences, sustainable tourism models help safeguard the tongkonan's legacy while creating economic opportunities for the Toraja people. By promoting authentic cultural experiences that educate visitors about Torajan traditions and values, communities can generate economic benefits while safeguarding their heritage. However, such initiatives must be community-driven and culturally sensitive to avoid the pitfalls of commodification. For instance, ensuring that tourism revenue directly benefits the local community and supports cultural preservation efforts can mitigate the risks associated with cultural commercialization (Quang et al., 2023; Swiderska et al., 2022).

The findings of this study also have broader implications for the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage in other contexts. The Torajan experience underscores the importance of traditional spaces as hubs for cultural transmission and community cohesion. Indigenous communities worldwide can draw on these lessons to develop strategies that

balance the preservation of their heritage with the demands of modern life. Collaborative approaches that integrate traditional knowledge with contemporary practices, such as sustainable development and digital documentation, offer a viable framework for achieving this balance. For instance, participatory research projects can involve local Torajan leaders and youth to ensure that preservation initiatives are culturally sensitive and community-driven. Additionally, integrating traditional ecological knowledge into modern sustainability practices—such as agroforestry systems inspired by Torajan traditions—provides practical applications that benefit both cultural and environmental objectives. Furthermore, digital platforms can serve as repositories for oral histories and ritual documentation, making these resources accessible to younger generations while respecting traditional ownership rights (Lusianawati, 2023; Masenya, 2022).

## Conclusion

The tongkonan, as a traditional house of the Toraja people, serves as a vital cultural and educational hub that facilitates intergenerational knowledge transmission. This study highlights the tongkonan's structural and symbolic dimensions, rituals, and communal practices as integral to preserving Torajan heritage. Findings reveal that the architectural features and symbolic carvings of the tongkonan not only embody cultural values but also act as pedagogical tools. Rituals performed within its spaces reinforce communal identity and transmit cultural knowledge through experiential learning. These cultural values hold urgent implications for andragogy and heuristic methods, as they underscore the importance of experiential and participatory learning for adult education and problem-solving strategies. However, modernization, urban migration, and globalization present challenges to the sustainability of these practices, leading to potential erosion of cultural knowledge. Innovative strategies such as integrating digital tools, promoting community engagement, and adopting sustainable tourism models are proposed to safeguard the tongkonan's role in cultural transmission. These findings contribute to broader discussions on preserving indigenous knowledge systems, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary approaches that blend tradition with modernity. Future research could explore the impact of digital technologies on enhancing cultural engagement or develop comparative studies across other indigenous communities to refine preservation strategies.

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