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"Digital Transformation and Sustainable Business: Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education Research and Development"

The Traditional Leadership Model of Nias as a Pillar of Local Wisdom in Strengthening Cultural Identity and Character Education

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Abstract

This article explores the traditional leadership model of the Nias people in North Sumatra as a vital source of local wisdom for strengthening cultural identity and character education. Rooted in ancestral customs, the Nias leadership structure, centered on the role of Si'ulu (hereditary chiefs) and supported by Si'ila (a council of elders), is deeply integrated into the community's cultural, moral, and social fabric. Through ethnographic analysis and a literature review. This research argues that the principles and practices of Nias leadership offer valuable frameworks for character education, particularly in the context of Indonesia's national efforts to strengthen civic and moral values in schools. The study concludes that integrating traditional leadership values into educational and community-based programs can revitalize indigenous heritage, foster intercultural understanding, and build character rooted in local wisdom. As such, the Nias leadership model remains highly relevant to contemporary cultural preservation and educational innovation.

Keywords: Traditional Leadership, Nias Culture, Local Wisdom, Cultural Identity, Character Education, Indigenous Governance.

Introduction

Indonesia is a nation rich in cultural diversity, with hundreds of ethnic groups that possess their systems of knowledge, traditions, and leadership models. Among these, the people of Nias—a group indigenous to the Nias Islands off the west coast of North Sumatra—retain a distinct traditional leadership structure rooted in ancestral customs and values. This leadership model, which includes roles such as Si'ulu (customary leaders) and Si'ila (advisory elders), represents more than just political or administrative functions; it is a vital embodiment of local wisdom (kearifan lokal) that sustains social cohesion, cultural identity, and communal values within the society (Morrison et al., 2024).

The traditional leadership system of Nias is intricately linked to the sociocultural worldview of its people. It is characterized by hierarchical roles determined by lineage, customary law, and collective consensus. Within this structure, the Si'ulu is not only a decision-maker but also a moral and cultural figurehead, responsible for guiding the community in matters of custom, conflict resolution, ritual, and ethical behavior. The legitimacy of such leadership is derived not from formal state power but from deep-rooted respect, customary authority, and the transmission of ancestral values (Julia Saiful Rahman et al., 2025).

In the face of globalization, urbanization, and the homogenizing effects of modern governance and education, traditional leadership structures across Indonesia, including those in Nias, face significant challenges. The younger generation, increasingly influenced by digital media and global culture, is at risk of detaching from indigenous knowledge systems that have shaped their communities for centuries. Consequently, there is an urgent need to document, revitalize, and integrate these traditional leadership models into broader educational and cultural preservation frameworks (Pidgeon et al., 2014).

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This article proposes that the traditional leadership model in Nias holds immense potential as a pillar of local wisdom for reinforcing cultural identity and promoting character education. Cultural identity, understood as a shared sense of belonging and rootedness in values, customs, and language, is deeply embedded in the traditional roles, rituals, and oral traditions that Nias leaders uphold. These cultural assets offer a framework for teaching character values such as respect, responsibility, honesty, solidarity, and harmony—traits that are increasingly recognized as essential components of holistic education in Indonesia's national curriculum. Moreover, the leadership model in Nias provides a living example of how authority can be exercised through communal deliberation (musyawarah), moral integrity, and restorative justice, rather than through coercion or individualistic competition. The practices of resolving disputes through customary law (adat) and honoring the wisdom of elders reflect a culturally embedded pedagogy of peace, empathy, and consensus-building. Such approaches are highly relevant in the contemporary era, where social fragmentation and moral degradation are becoming critical societal concerns.(Soselisa et al., 2024)

Recent national educational reforms and character-building initiatives in Indonesia, such as the Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter (PPK) program initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, emphasize the role of local culture as a foundational element in fostering civic values. In this context, the traditional leadership model of Nias can serve as a meaningful educational resource and community-based model for character education.(Kim et al., 2014) By aligning indigenous leadership principles with contemporary educational goals, it becomes possible to develop culturally relevant curricula and learning experiences that are not only rooted in local wisdom but also responsive to the moral and social needs of the nation.

Furthermore, the traditional leadership system plays a crucial role in maintaining intergenerational continuity. The rituals, language, symbols, and stories embedded in leadership practices act as vehicles for transmitting collective memory and cultural resilience. Integrating these into formal and informal education can empower the younger generation with a sense of pride in their heritage while also cultivating ethical leadership qualities inspired by ancestral role models.

This research aims to examine the traditional leadership model of Nias through an interdisciplinary lens that combines ethnographic insight, cultural anthropology, and educational theory. It examines the structural and symbolic aspects of traditional leadership, analyzing its significance in character education development and cultural identity preservation(Kanat & Özkan, 2009). In doing so, it seeks to offer both theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for integrating traditional leadership systems into educational policy, community empowerment programs, and cultural preservation strategies. In conclusion, the traditional leadership model of Nias is not a relic of the past, but a living system of values and practices that has the potential to inform future generations. Recognizing and revitalizing this model as a pillar of local wisdom is crucial for strengthening cultural identity and integrating moral education in a manner that is authentic, sustainable, and grounded in Indonesia's diverse cultural landscape.

Literature Review

1. The Concept of Leadership

Leadership is fundamentally pervasive and encompasses all aspects of life. Leadership is a consequence of rational living in human civilization from pre-modern to modern times. From the context of Koentajaningrat, Methods of Community Research (Nur Ilham & Sinta, n.d.), religious to social and political perspectives, leadership is inevitably linked. Clearly, leadership is essential and deserves study across various fields of knowledge. Viewed from various perspectives, Thoha explains that leadership fundamentally elicits different definitions across approaches. Humans, as social beings, need leadership because some possess strengths and

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some lack them. In this regard, some humans possess the ability to lead, while others lack it. Leadership is closely related to government, as wherever there is government, there is leadership. The purpose of leadership is to control and regulate the government's operations so that it operates according to its intended purpose. One of the functions of government is to avoid chaos in a particular area where there is a group of people or a diverse community of residents who have different views. In this regard, a powerful group was formed to protect against interference from other groups. Therefore, this powerful group is defined as the government, or in other words, the government is a group of people who hold responsibility for a power.

Definition of Leadership: Leadership is essentially the process by which an individual leads subordinates to achieve a vision, mission, and tasks, leading the organization to progress. Leadership is a relationship within a leader that encourages others to work together to achieve common goals(Sibarani, 2020). Another definition of leadership states that leadership in an organization plays a crucial role in building relationships between individuals and shaping organizational values, which serve as the foundation for achieving organizational goals .(Silaban et al., 2020) Leadership is the ability of a person (leader) to influence others (namely the person being led. Definition of Leadership Leadership is essentially a process of a person in leading his subordinates to achieve the vision, mission, and tasks to bring the organization to be more advanced. Leadership is a relationship that exists within the leader that encourages others to work together to achieve common goals. Another definition of leadership states that leadership in an organization has a very large role when building relationships between individuals and forming organizational values that are used as a basic foundation for achieving organizational goals.

2. The Concept of Local Wisdom

Local wisdom is an integral part of a society's culture that cannot be separated from the community itself. Local wisdom can be defined as values that exist within Indonesia and have been proven to contribute to or contribute to the advancement of its society. According to Sibarani, local wisdom is a form of understanding that exists within the community to regulate community life, commonly referred to as local wisdom. Local wisdom is a set of outlooks, knowledge, and life strategies embodied in the activities carried out by local communities, capable of addressing various problems in meeting their needs. Local wisdom is the fundamental knowledge of life, gained from experience or the truth of life. It can be abstract or concrete, balanced with the natural and cultural characteristics of a particular community group (Sibarani, 2015, 2020; Sibarani et al., 2021b, 2021a).

Local wisdom can also be found, both in community groups and in individuals. Local wisdom is used by the community as a controller of daily life in family relationships, with fellow siblings, and with people in the wider environment. Because its scope is knowledge, culture, and local knowledge intelligence, local wisdom is also known as local knowledge, local wisdom, or local genius. The characteristics of local wisdom are: (1) it must combine knowledge of virtue that teaches people about ethics and moral values; (2) local wisdom must teach people to love nature, not to destroy it; and (3) local wisdom must come from older members of the community. Local wisdom can take the form of values, norms, ethics, beliefs, customs, laws, traditions, and special rules.(Silaban & Sibarani, 2021) Furthermore, values relevant to local wisdom include honesty, responsibility, discipline, creativity, and hard work. In works of art, especially traditional art, local wisdom is reflected in language, both spoken and written: proverbs, rhymes, songs, or advice. Historically, traditional performing arts originated from traditional religious ceremonies and rituals that were magical, conveyed in the form of repeated mantras.

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Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using Spradley's ethnographic approach to explore and interpret the traditional leadership model of the Nias people.(*Spradley_The Ethnographic Interview.Pdf*, n.d.; Wijaya, 2015) Spradley's framework emphasizes the emic perspective, focusing on understanding cultural meanings from the point of view of community members. The research was conducted in selected villages in the Nias Islands, particularly those where traditional leadership structures (Si'ulu and Si'ila) remain active in local governance and social life. Data were analyzed using Spradley's four-step ethnographic analysis: Domain Analysis: Identifying cultural categories related to leadership, identity, and values. Taxonomic Analysis: Classifying relationships among domains to understand the structure of traditional leadership. Componential Analysis: Exploring contrasts and variations in leadership roles and moral values. Theme Analysis: Discovering overarching cultural themes that reflect the role of traditional leadership in shaping identity and character education.

Results and Discussion

Result

1. The Structure and Legitimacy of Traditional Leadership in Nias

Field data show that the traditional leadership system in Nias is a complex and hierarchical model based on ancestral lineage (fa'ulu) and customary law (adat). At the core of this system stands the Si'ulu, a hereditary leader who governs through the authority passed down through generations. The legitimacy of the Si'ulu is not derived from state-based legal recognition but from sacred oral traditions, family genealogy, and community consensus. The Si'ulu is seen as the cultural and moral guardian of the village, tasked with maintaining harmony, delivering justice, and overseeing ritual ceremonies. Supporting the Si'ulu is the Si'ila, a council of elders composed of respected community members with deep knowledge of local customs, values, and historical narratives. The Si'ila provides guidance and moral balance in decision-making, ensuring that leadership remains aligned with collective wisdom rather than personal interest.

This structural legitimacy reflects a leadership philosophy that values continuity, community wisdom, and inherited responsibility. Unlike democratic or bureaucratic models, where leadership is often based on competition or legal appointment, traditional Nias leadership emphasizes moral authority, which is sustained through trust, kinship ties, and communal respect. This model, therefore, presents a unique form of leadership that merges political governance with spiritual and ethical stewardship.

2. Leadership Practices as a Source of Cultural Identity

The daily practices and symbolic roles of Si'ulu and Si'ila function as living expressions of Nias cultural identity. Through ceremonial leadership, conflict mediation, and the enforcement of customary norms, traditional leaders play a crucial role in transmitting the values, language, and worldview of the Nias people. Several key rituals—such as owasa (thanksgiving rituals), fabanuasa (customary meetings), and manga'aga (reconciliation processes)—serve not only religious and legal purposes but also educational ones. These events teach younger generations about collective identity, history, and behavioral norms. Observations showed that during these rituals, the language used is predominantly the Nias vernacular, which reinforces linguistic pride and intergenerational continuity. In this context, leadership is deeply intertwined with cultural reproduction.

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The Si'ulu is not merely an administrator but also a storyteller, philosopher, and educator. Their presence and actions reassert a shared cultural memory and identity. In an era when globalization threatens indigenous identities, such leadership practices help resist cultural erosion and nurture a distinct sense of "being Nias." This supports theories in cultural anthropology that view leadership in traditional societies as not only political but also performative and pedagogical (Muhtadli, 2020). The symbolic power of the leader helps shape collective consciousness and preserve the intangible heritage of the community.

3. Embedded Moral Values and Character Education

The ethical dimension of traditional leadership is among its most significant contributions to character education. Interviews and observations indicate that values such as honesty (tafatalo), mutual assistance (fefu'asa), humility (manasio), and justice (hamasio) are not only advocated by traditional leaders but practiced in daily governance. For instance, in conflict resolution processes, the Si'ulu does not rely on punitive measures but rather seeks restorative justice—aiming to restore harmony within families and between clans. Public apologies, symbolic gifts, and peace offerings are integral to this process. Elders frequently frame these actions within moral narratives that link the present to ancestral teachings. These moral values align closely with the objectives of Indonesia's national program on character education (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter), which emphasizes five pillars: religious values, integrity, nationalism, independence, and cooperation. The leadership model of Nias offers a culturally contextualized expression of these values, rooted in everyday life and social interaction—not abstract classroom theories. This affirms the relevance of indigenous systems in complementing formal education. It also reinforces the argument by Freire (1970) that education is most effective when rooted in the lived reality and cultural context of learners. The model provides a "hidden curriculum" in which children learn by observing the interactions and decisions of traditional leaders, rather than through direct instruction.(Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006)

4. Intergenerational Transmission of Wisdom and Local Pedagogy

Traditional leadership in Nias functions as an informal but highly effective system of indigenous pedagogy. Young people are involved in ritual life, customary proceedings, and storytelling sessions, where they absorb the values and expectations of community life.(Susan Febriantina et al., 2024) Boys often assist the Si'ulu during ceremonies, while girls accompany women elders in preparing cultural offerings. Elders also play a vital role in oral education by transmitting mythologies, proverbs, and philosophical expressions known as sikola adat (customary teachings). These forms of communication are loaded with metaphors and layered meanings that emphasize respect for ancestors, responsibility to others, and harmony with nature.

This form of learning mirrors Spradley's (1979) model of cultural transmission through participation, observation, and narrative construction. It suggests that indigenous leadership systems can be considered community-based educational institutions. When schools integrate local content (muatan lokal) into their curriculum, traditional leadership models can serve as living laboratories of values-based education. Furthermore, such transmission counters the epistemic marginalization of indigenous knowledge, reinforcing that traditional leaders are not obstacles to modern education but potential partners in it. Recognizing them as local educators strengthens the cultural relevance of school programs and bridges the gap between formal and informal learning.

5. Resilience and Challenges in the Modern Context

While the traditional leadership model in Nias remains functional in many villages, it faces substantial challenges. The spread of formal bureaucracy, religious institutionalization (especially through church

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structures), and migration of youth to urban centers has weakened the role of customary leaders. In some areas, the authority of the Si'ulu has been reduced to symbolic functions during rituals. However, adaptive strategies have emerged. Some Si'ulu have partnered with schools to deliver cultural education; others are actively involved in village development planning alongside elected officials. Cultural festivals, youth art groups, and documentation initiatives are also helping to revitalize traditional values and leadership roles. This adaptive resilience indicates that traditional leadership is not static or incompatible with modernity. Rather, it is a dynamic system capable of reinterpreting its roles in new social configurations. As Sahlins (1999) argued, tradition is often a product of strategic adaptation rather than rigid repetition. In Nias, the blending of customary authority with developmental engagement shows how tradition can be revitalized to meet contemporary needs. The resilience of traditional leadership also challenges the dichotomy between "modern" and "traditional." When supported by policy, education, and cultural revitalization programs, models like that of Nias can evolve into sustainable forms of local governance and character development.

6. Policy and Educational Implications

Based on the findings, integrating the traditional leadership model of Nias into local educational initiatives and cultural policies is both feasible and beneficial. The potential areas of implementation include:

1) Curriculum Integration: Schools in Nias can incorporate local wisdom, moral teachings, and leadership structures into civic education or social studies.

2) Community-School Collaboration: Si'ulu and Si'ila can be formally involved in mentoring, school events, or storytelling programs.

3) Youth Cultural Programs: Cultural camps and student exchanges with elders can foster pride and understanding of Nias identity.

4) Local Governance Synergy: Village-level policies can recognize and empower traditional leaders in development and education planning.

Conclusion

The traditional leadership model of Nias, centered on the roles of Si'ulu and Si'ila, is more than a cultural remnant is a living system of governance, education, and moral guidance rooted in local wisdom. This leadership structure embodies a holistic approach to cultural identity formation, social cohesion, and character development, grounded in the values of respect, honesty, responsibility, and communal harmony. Through rituals, oral traditions, and participatory customs, the traditional leaders of Nias function as informal educators and moral exemplars for the younger generation. Despite the challenges of modernization, urban migration, and administrative shifts, the resilience of this model shows its adaptive strength and ongoing relevance. It offers an invaluable foundation for integrating local wisdom into formal and non-formal education. As Indonesia continues to strengthen its national character education agenda, indigenous leadership systems like that of Nias must be recognized, revitalized, and institutionalized through collaboration between communities, educators, and policymakers. By positioning traditional leadership not merely as cultural heritage but as a functional framework for ethical education and cultural sustainability, this study affirms its importance as a pillar of identity and a resource for building a morally grounded society in the 21st century.

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