



Learning To Dance, Learning To Belong: Intergenerational Enculturation In Ajat Iban

Albert Sigan Anak Saliman¹, Muhammad Fazli Taib Saearani²

Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

albertsiganaksaliman@gamil.com

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Abstract

This article examines the intergenerational enculturation of Ajat Iban within the Iban community of Nanga Ibau, Kapit, Sarawak. Drawing on a qualitative ethnographic study, it explores how Ajat Iban is learned not only as dance technique but as an embodied cultural practice through which knowledge, values, social behaviour, and cultural identity develop across generations. Data were generated through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis and analysed thematically. The findings show that learning occurs through observation, imitation, participation, repetition, guidance from elders and experienced practitioners, and community affirmation. These processes enable younger generations to acquire movement knowledge alongside confidence, respect for adat, social responsibility, cultural authenticity, and a sense of belonging. The article argues that the continuity of Ajat Iban depends not simply on preserving movements, but on sustaining the intergenerational social environments through which cultural knowledge remains embodied and meaningful.

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Introduction

Ajat Iban is a traditional dance practice embedded within the cultural life of the Iban community in Sarawak. In Nanga Ibau, Kapit, dance is encountered within a wider social world of longhouse living, communal gatherings, ritual occasions, family interaction, and intergenerational relationships. It therefore cannot be adequately understood as an isolated choreographic form. Its movements, rhythms, performance qualities, and meanings are experienced within social relationships through which cultural knowledge is learned and recognised.



Scholarship on Iban society has documented adat, ritual, oral tradition, religion, migration, social organisation, and expressive culture (Sandin, 1980; Sather, 2001). However, Ajat Iban itself has received comparatively limited attention as a distinct site of cultural learning. The literature reviewed in the thesis indicates that references to dance frequently occur within broader discussions of ritual and expressive culture rather than as sustained analysis of how Ajat Iban is learned, embodied, evaluated, and maintained across generations. The research gap is therefore not simply a lack of documentation of Ajat Iban, but a limited understanding of the everyday processes through which its knowledge becomes embodied and culturally meaningful. Recent local discussions of Ngajat/Ajat Iban have contributed to cultural and semiotic understandings of the practice, but the intergenerational learning process within a specific longhouse community remains insufficiently examined in the present literature (Jamu & Thiagarajan, 2021; Kiyai et al., 2020).

This gap is important because cultural continuity is often described through the language of transmission. Transmission can imply the movement of knowledge from one generation to another, especially through teaching, inheritance, or preservation. The present study instead foregrounds enculturation because it captures the gradual acquisition of cultural knowledge, values, behaviours, and identity through participation in social life. In this perspective, learning does not necessarily begin with a formal lesson. It can develop through watching, imitating, participating, repeating, interacting, and gradually becoming familiar with the cultural environment.

This perspective is particularly relevant to Ajat Iban in Nanga Ibau. The findings demonstrate that traditional learning commonly occurs without a formal curriculum. Younger members encounter Ajat Iban through the longhouse, family members, communal gatherings, Gawai, and observation of elders and experienced practitioners. They gradually move from observation to participation, and from tentative participation towards greater embodied confidence and cultural understanding.

The central argument developed in this article is that learning Ajat Iban is simultaneously a process of learning cultural belonging. The dancer does not merely acquire a vocabulary of movements. Through participation, the dancer learns how movement should be performed, how to respond to cultural authority, how to demonstrate appropriate confidence and seriousness, how to participate in communal life, and how to recognise the meanings embedded in the practice. Dance learning therefore becomes inseparable from social formation. The article draws from the broader ethnographic study, which examined three related concerns: the intergenerational enculturation of Ajat Iban, the cultural values embedded in the practice, and factors influencing its continuity. For this article, these concerns are brought together through a focused examination of how embodied learning connects movement with identity, cultural values, and belonging.

Enculturation, Embodied Learning and Performance

The study is primarily grounded in enculturation as its central conceptual perspective. Enculturation refers broadly to the process through which individuals acquire the cultural knowledge, values, behaviours, and symbolic systems of the communities in which they live. Herskovits's early formulation of cultural learning provides a foundation for understanding culture as something acquired through participation in social life rather than simply inherited biologically (Herskovits, 1948).

For indigenous and performative traditions, this perspective is especially useful because knowledge is not necessarily separated into discrete lessons or written instructions. It may be embedded within social relationships, ritual contexts, oral exchange, observation, and bodily practice. Dance can consequently function as a form of cultural knowledge. Kaeppler (2001) argues for understanding dance through its cultural organisation and meaning rather than treating it solely as aesthetic movement. Such a perspective is consistent with the present study, in which movement cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which it is learned.

The concept of situated learning also provides a useful complementary perspective. Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasise that learning develops through participation in social practice. Although the present study is not framed primarily through situated learning theory, the concept helps explain why younger members of the

Nanga Ibau community develop knowledge by participating around people who already possess embodied competence. The learner gradually becomes more capable through involvement in the practice rather than through the passive receipt of information.

Performance is equally significant. Ajat Iban is not merely a representation of culture; performance is one of the situations in which cultural knowledge becomes visible, evaluated, and reproduced. Repeated performance allows dancers to develop movement familiarity while simultaneously learning social expectations. Community response is therefore part of the learning process. Approval, correction, observation, imitation, and recognition help establish what counts as appropriate practice.

The intangible cultural heritage perspective further situates Ajat Iban within questions of continuity and safeguarding. UNESCO (2003) emphasises that intangible heritage exists through practices recognised and maintained by communities. This is important for Ajat Iban because its continuity cannot be reduced to the preservation of a fixed choreographic form. What sustains the practice is the continued ability of community members to participate in, interpret, evaluate, and renew it.

From Cultural Transmission to Enculturation

The distinction between transmission and enculturation is central to the analytical direction of this article. A transmission model can be useful when the focus is on what is handed from one generation to another. However, the evidence from Nanga Ibau suggests that the process is more diffuse. Younger people are not simply recipients of a completed cultural package. They encounter Ajat Iban in multiple situations, observe different practitioners, attempt the practice themselves, and receive different forms of response. Their knowledge develops through continued participation.

This distinction also helps explain why individual performance can vary without necessarily being regarded as culturally incorrect. If cultural knowledge were simply a fixed sequence to be transferred, variation could be interpreted as failure to reproduce an original form. The findings instead show that community members recognise a range of individual performance while maintaining expectations about cultural appropriateness. What is reproduced is therefore not only a movement sequence but a set of embodied principles concerning posture, confidence, seriousness, contextual sensitivity, and expressive intention.

Enculturation also makes visible the temporal dimension of cultural learning. A person may encounter Ajat Iban in childhood without immediately becoming a competent dancer. Knowledge can remain latent until a later occasion creates an opportunity to participate. Gawai, communal gatherings, family interaction, or school activities may reactivate earlier observations. Cultural learning therefore accumulates across life rather than occurring within one discrete teaching event.

Embodiment and Cultural Knowledge

The findings also contribute to dance studies by positioning the body as a site of cultural knowledge. In conventional descriptions of dance, movement may be recorded through steps, patterns, choreographic structures, or visual notation. Such descriptions can be valuable, but they cannot fully capture the embodied dimensions identified in Nanga Ibau. Participants referred to feeling the story in movement, while observation revealed that qualities such as groundedness, confidence, restraint, and seriousness were learned through repeated practice and social response.

This suggests that knowledge in Ajat Iban is partly tacit. Dancers may know how a movement should feel without being able to provide a complete verbal explanation of every aspect of its execution. The learning process therefore involves sensory attention, bodily memory, timing, rhythm, spatial awareness, and social awareness. The dancer learns through doing and through being with others who already embody the practice.

This is why the community environment matters so strongly. A written description may indicate what a movement looks like, but it cannot fully reproduce the atmosphere in which the movement becomes meaningful. The presence of elders, the response of other dancers, the occasion of performance, the sound of music, and the expectations associated with adat all contribute to the dancer's understanding. Embodied knowledge is therefore relational.

Situated Participation and Generational Roles

The intergenerational structure of Ajat Iban learning also demonstrates that learners occupy changing roles. Children and younger members may begin as observers. With repeated exposure they become participants. Experienced dancers become reference figures. Some later become teachers or mentors themselves. The process therefore produces a cycle in which today's learner can become tomorrow's cultural model.

This generational movement is important because it prevents enculturation from being understood as a simple elder-to-youth transfer. Although elders hold particular cultural authority, adult practitioners and peers also contribute significantly. The younger generation is not passive either. Younger dancers interpret what they observe, negotiate external influences, and develop their own performance qualities. Enculturation is consequently intergenerational rather than merely generational.

The role of social recognition is particularly important in this process. Competence becomes visible through performance, and recognised competence can lead to further opportunities to perform and guide others. In this way, the community contributes to the reproduction of its own cultural knowledge by making certain embodied practices socially visible and valued.

Materials and Methods

Research Context

The study employed a qualitative ethnographic design and was conducted in Nanga Ibau, Kapit, Sarawak. The ethnographic orientation is consistent with the emphasis on lived cultural practice and contextual interpretation found in indigenous research approaches (Smith, 1999; Spradley, 1979). The site was selected because Ajat Iban continues to be practised in social gatherings and ceremonial contexts, providing an appropriate environment for examining cultural learning within everyday community life.

Ethnography was particularly appropriate because the research concerned processes that are difficult to understand through interviews alone. Ethnographic approaches emphasise observing cultural practices in context and attending to participants' meanings rather than abstracting practices from everyday life (Spradley, 1979). Learning often occurred informally, through observation and interaction, and some of the most significant evidence emerged through watching what people did rather than only recording what they said. Participant observation therefore focused on the ruai and wider longhouse environment, as well as communal and ritual contexts.

Fieldwork was conducted over one month. The thesis records approximately 20–40 hours of participant observation, supplemented by approximately 10 hours of more formal observation and interview sessions. Observation included everyday social interaction, communal activities, ritual contexts, event preparation, and situations in which younger people encountered experienced dancers.

Participants and Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with knowledge, experience, or active involvement in Ajat Iban. The participant group was intended to include different generational and social perspectives, including elders, adult practitioners, a younger practitioner, and a school teacher involved in formal teaching.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Iban and Malay, enabling participants to communicate comfortably. Interviews explored the cultural significance of Ajat Iban, learning experiences, teaching practices, movement interpretation, cultural values, contemporary challenges, and changing learning

environments. Participant observation was combined with interviews, field notes, photographic documentation, video and audio recordings, and document analysis. The researcher occupied an insider position as an Iban researcher with academic and practical experience in dance and Ajat Iban. This facilitated communication and recognition of culturally specific practices, while also requiring reflexivity to minimise assumptions. Reflexive notes, triangulation, and member checking were used to strengthen interpretive credibility.

Data Analysis and Ethics

Interview recordings were transcribed and field notes were organised for thematic analysis. Initial codes were generated from significant statements, actions, and descriptions relating to learning, movement, cultural values, and intergenerational interaction. These codes were grouped into broader categories and refined into themes. Comparison across participant generations and data sources was used to identify recurring patterns. The research received ethical approval from the relevant UPSI research ethics committee, and permission to conduct the research in Nanga Ibau was obtained from the Tuai Rumah and relevant community representatives. Participants provided informed consent for interviews and documentation. Research data were stored securely and used for academic purposes.

Results and Discussions

Learning Begins with Observation

One of the clearest findings is that Ajat Iban is learned through observation before it becomes deliberate performance. An elder described the earlier learning environment: “We used to learn ngajat at night after relaxing, no one instructed us. The elders just sat at the veranda, and watched us as we practiced.” (Nyambar Minda, interview, 2025)

The significance of this statement lies in the role of presence. The elders were not necessarily providing a technical lesson. Their presence established a cultural reference point around which younger people could observe, practise, and develop familiarity. The ruai therefore functioned as an informal learning environment in which dance was encountered alongside everyday communal life.

Another participant explained that he had never formally learned Ngajat but learned by watching siblings and others during Gawai. This illustrates that the family and community collectively constitute the learning environment. Parents, siblings, elders, peers, and experienced practitioners become visible examples through whom movement and cultural behaviour are acquired.

Observation should not be understood as passive. The learner is actively attending to movement quality, rhythm, timing, posture, confidence, and the social circumstances surrounding performance. Through repeated observation, the learner gradually develops an embodied sense of what is appropriate.

This finding supports the study's use of enculturation because the learning process occurs through prolonged exposure to cultural life. The knowledge is not simply delivered to the learner. It is encountered, interpreted, tried, corrected, and gradually internalised.

From Observation to Participation

Observation is followed by participation. Younger members are generally allowed to attempt Ajat Iban even when their performance is uncertain. Correction does not necessarily occur before the first attempt. Instead, learners are encouraged to try, and guidance follows when necessary.

This sequence is significant because it places confidence and willingness to participate alongside technical competence. Learning is therefore not simply a process of achieving correct movement. It is also a process of developing the confidence to enter cultural space and be seen by others.

The thesis identifies the progression from tunda, understood as following or imitating, towards teleba, referring to a more developed mastery. This progression is not presented as a formal curriculum. Rather, it describes an embodied development through repeated participation. As learners continue to watch, imitate, practise, and receive community response, movements become increasingly familiar and their performance becomes more confident and culturally grounded.

The process also allows individual variation. Practitioners do not necessarily reproduce identical performances. The community recognises acceptable variation while maintaining expectations concerning cultural appropriateness, posture, groundedness, expressive intent, and seriousness. Continuity therefore does not require choreographic uniformity.

Elders as Cultural Reference Figures

Elders occupy a central position in the enculturation process. Their authority is expressed less through continuous instruction than through presence, selective correction, recognition, and the ability to establish cultural boundaries.

Serani Ili described an earlier learning environment in which learners practiced away from public view because elders did not openly teach in front of others. This account reveals a form of cultural authority based on restraint. Knowledge is approached through patience and observation rather than through an institutional teacher–student relationship. Participant observation further showed that elders often allow learners to experiment before correcting them. Correction may focus on posture, groundedness, control, or behavioural appropriateness rather than a detailed breakdown of movement. Such selective intervention gives learners room to develop personal expression while remaining within communal expectations.

Elders therefore function as cultural reference figures. They help determine what is recognised as acceptable Ajat Iban in Nanga Iban. Their role is not simply preservationist. The findings show that elders can also mediate external influence. One elder described learning from Kayan and Kenyah people during communal celebrations. This indicates that cultural knowledge has never necessarily existed as a completely closed system. External influences may be encountered, but they are subsequently interpreted through local norms and expectations.

This is important for understanding continuity. The community does not necessarily maintain Ajat Iban by rejecting change. Instead, elders and community members evaluate change and determine whether new influences can be incorporated without undermining local cultural meaning.

Practitioners as Bridges Between Generations

Experienced practitioners provide another layer of enculturation. Their role becomes particularly important when Ajat Iban enters schools, workshops, rehearsals, and other structured environments.

Valentine Banyang explained that his approach to teaching in school was shaped by knowledge he had acquired through a KPSU course in 2008. His account demonstrates how contemporary practitioners can create additional pathways through which younger people encounter Ajat Iban.

Formal teaching increases accessibility, especially for young people who have limited exposure to longhouse-based learning. However, the findings indicate that structured instruction does not replace community-based enculturation. Practitioners may demonstrate movements, explain aspects of the dance, and provide correction, but deeper

cultural understanding remains connected to communal participation and interaction with elders.

Practitioners therefore function as bridges. They translate embodied knowledge into environments where formal teaching is possible while remaining accountable to community expectations. Their legitimacy depends on their ability to maintain a connection between contemporary teaching and culturally recognised practice.

Learning the Meaning of Movement

A significant finding is that younger dancers understand Ajat Iban as more than movement technique. Alviana Rani Murong stated:

“The movements in Ngajat are not just dance. You must feel the story in each movement.” (Alviana Rani Murong, interview, 2025)

This statement provides a concise expression of embodied cultural meaning. Movement is not treated as an empty physical sequence. The dancer is expected to understand and feel the cultural story and intention associated with performance. This finding reinforces the distinction between learning a movement and learning a cultural practice. A person may reproduce a visible movement while lacking the cultural understanding that gives the movement significance. Enculturation involves the gradual development of that understanding through exposure, participation, social interaction, and repeated performance.

Performance therefore becomes a site of knowledge production. The body remembers not only movement but also relationships, contexts, expectations, and experiences. Each performance draws upon accumulated participation in the community.

Values Embedded in Dance

The findings identify cultural authenticity, confidence, seriousness, respect for adat, social activeness or cakah, and role modelling as significant values embedded in Ajat Iban. These values are not generally taught as abstract principles. They are learned through embodied evaluation. A dancer who performs with confidence, seriousness, appropriate restraint, and cultural familiarity may receive recognition from elders and other community members. Conversely, hesitation, careless behaviour, or inappropriate movement may result in correction.

The value of confidence is particularly prominent. Dancers are encouraged to attempt the dance rather than immediately claiming an inability to perform. Confidence is therefore developed through participation itself. The dancer becomes willing to step forward, take space, and be visible. Seriousness and respect for adat are also embodied. The appropriate quality of movement changes according to context. Ritual circumstances may require restraint, while celebratory settings may allow greater expressiveness. Cultural competence therefore involves knowing how to respond to context rather than following one fixed performance quality.

Cakah, or social activeness, further demonstrates the connection between dance and social belonging. Participation in Ajat Iban creates opportunities for interaction and visibility within communal life. Dancing can become a social bridge through which younger members become more actively involved in the community. Role modelling completes this process. Skilled dancers become reference figures for younger members. Their movements, confidence, attitudes, and social behaviour can be observed and imitated. In this way, embodied competence generates aspiration, and aspiration contributes to the continuation of cultural practice.

Learning to Belong

Taken together, these findings support the central argument that learning Ajat Iban is simultaneously learning to belong.

Belonging is produced through participation. The learner moves from watching others, to trying the dance, to receiving correction, to performing before others, and eventually to becoming someone whom younger dancers can observe. The process is therefore cyclical rather than linear.

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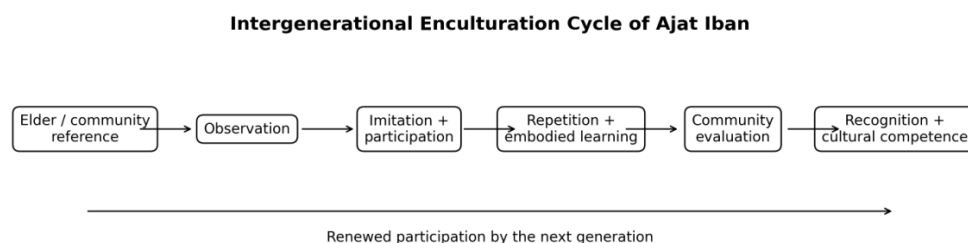


Figure 1. Intergenerational Enculturation Cycle of Ajat Iban.

Elder/community reference → observation → imitation and participation → repetition and embodied learning → community evaluation → recognition and cultural competence → renewed participation by the next generation.

The cycle shows why the continuity of Ajat Iban cannot be explained through the preservation of movement sequences alone. If the social environment disappears, opportunities for observation, interaction, correction, recognition, and aspiration are also reduced.

The longhouse is therefore not simply a physical location. It functions as a social ecosystem in which cultural learning becomes possible. The ruai is particularly significant because it places generations in proximity to one another and allows cultural knowledge to circulate through everyday interaction.

Continuity Through Adaptation

The findings also challenge the idea that continuity requires cultural practices to remain unchanged. Ajat Iban continues to encounter influences from schools, staged performances, neighbouring communities, and contemporary media. These influences can alter how younger people encounter and perform the dance.

However, the findings suggest that adaptation does not automatically result in cultural loss. External influences are evaluated against local values, embodied familiarity, elder authority, and community expectations. The result is a process of selective adaptation. This is particularly important for younger dancers. They may encounter highly codified or stylised forms of Ajat Iban through institutional training or digital media, yet longhouse-based practice remains an important reference point for authenticity. The community's evaluative framework therefore mediates change.

Continuity is consequently achieved through negotiation. Ajat Iban remains meaningful because it can respond to changing circumstances while retaining cultural principles that the community recognises as important.

The Longhouse as Cultural Infrastructure

The findings concerning the longhouse extend the argument from learning practice to cultural infrastructure. The longhouse should not be understood merely as a backdrop for Ajat Iban. It creates the social proximity through which observation and interaction are possible. When generations share spaces, cultural knowledge can circulate without needing to be scheduled.

The ruai is especially significant because it is an environment in which watching others is socially possible. A young person does not have to register for a class in order to encounter an experienced dancer. Exposure can occur while people are resting, talking, preparing for an event, or participating in communal activities. This apparently ordinary proximity is one of the conditions that makes enculturation possible.

The significance of the longhouse also clarifies the potential limitations of moving Ajat Iban entirely into institutional settings. A school can teach movement vocabulary within a defined period, but it may not reproduce the wider network of relationships through which cultural meaning is evaluated. This does not make institutional teaching ineffective. Rather, it indicates that formal settings are most powerful when they complement community-based participation.

Community Evaluation and Cultural Legitimacy

Community evaluation is another mechanism through which enculturation is sustained. Dancers learn not only by watching others but by seeing how performances are received. Praise, imitation, silence, correction, and recognition communicate cultural expectations. These responses may be subtle, but they contribute to the learner's understanding of what the community values.

This form of evaluation differs from formal assessment. There is no grading rubric or standardised examination. Cultural legitimacy develops through accumulated recognition. A dancer who repeatedly demonstrates appropriate movement quality, confidence, seriousness, and cultural familiarity may become recognised as competent. That recognition can then make the dancer a model for others.

The process is therefore recursive. Community evaluation shapes the dancer, and the dancer's subsequent performance becomes part of the environment in which other people learn. Cultural standards are reproduced through practice rather than merely stated as rules.

Authenticity as an Embodied and Negotiated Category

The findings concerning “sigi kah Iban” are particularly important for understanding authenticity. Authenticity in Nanga Ibau is not presented as certification by an external institution. It is recognised through embodied familiarity with local movement, rhythm, intention, and cultural context. This makes authenticity relational and negotiated. At the same time, authenticity should not be interpreted as absolute resistance to external influence. The evidence concerning interaction with Kayan and Kenyah communities demonstrates that cultural practices can develop through exchange. What matters is the community's ability to interpret and re-embed influences within its own cultural framework.

This understanding is useful for cultural policy and heritage practice. If authenticity is treated only as a fixed historical form, adaptation may automatically be viewed as degradation. The Nanga Ibau findings suggest a different possibility: cultural authenticity can be maintained through the community's continuing authority to decide what is meaningful and appropriate.

Implications for Cultural Sustainability

The findings have implications for how indigenous dance traditions are understood and safeguarded. First, cultural sustainability should not be reduced to documentation. Documentation can preserve information about movement, history, costume, or performance, but it cannot by itself reproduce the relationships through which cultural knowledge is embodied.

Second, formal educational programmes should be viewed as complementary rather than automatically superior to community-based learning. Schools and workshops can increase access, particularly for young people who have limited opportunities to remain in the longhouse. Yet the findings indicate that formal instruction is most meaningful when it remains connected to community knowledge holders and cultural expectations.

Third, elders should be recognised as active cultural authorities rather than treated solely as informants or sources of historical information. Their role includes evaluating practice, guiding younger people, establishing boundaries, and mediating the relationship between continuity and change.

Fourth, the longhouse and other communal environments should be considered part of the infrastructure of cultural sustainability. When younger generations lose opportunities for regular interaction with cultural practitioners, the enculturative process becomes more difficult to sustain.

Finally, cultural sustainability should recognise adaptation as part of continuity. Attempts to freeze Ajat Iban into one standardised form may overlook the community's own mechanisms for evaluating and negotiating change. The findings suggest that resilience depends on maintaining community authority over meaning, legitimacy, and participation.

Implications for Dance Education

The findings have direct implications for dance education. Teaching Ajat Iban in schools can increase access, but educators should avoid reducing the dance to a sequence of steps detached from cultural context. Learners should be exposed, where appropriate, to the cultural meanings, social contexts, and community perspectives associated with the practice.

This does not mean reproducing the longhouse in the classroom. Rather, it means acknowledging that technical instruction represents only one part of cultural learning. Opportunities to interact with cultural practitioners, observe authentic community practice, understand local terminology, and participate in culturally meaningful contexts can strengthen formal learning.

The role of practitioners is therefore particularly important. They can function as mediators between institutional education and community knowledge. However, such mediation should remain connected to cultural custodians and community expectations rather than treating the practitioner as an isolated authority.

Implications for Heritage Safeguarding

The study also suggests that safeguarding should focus on conditions of participation. Documentation remains valuable, especially for recording movement, oral histories, terminology, and local variations. Yet documentation should be treated as supporting infrastructure rather than as a substitute for practice.

Safeguarding initiatives could therefore prioritise intergenerational encounters, community-led teaching, opportunities for young people to participate in cultural events, and recognition of elders and experienced practitioners as knowledge holders. Such approaches align more closely with the enculturative processes observed in Nanga Ibau. The principle is simple: a living tradition requires living relationships. If cultural knowledge is preserved only as an archive, the archive may survive while the social process that gives the knowledge meaning weakens. Sustaining Ajat Iban therefore requires attention to both cultural expression and the community conditions in which that expression continues to be lived.

Continuity, Change and Resilience

The findings suggest that cultural resilience should be understood as the capacity to negotiate change without losing the relationships and values through which cultural practice remains meaningful. Modernisation introduces new learning environments and new aesthetic influences, but these do not

automatically produce cultural disappearance. Younger dancers encounter Ajat Iban through schools, performances, and contemporary media. These encounters can expand visibility and access. At the same time, they can introduce standardised or externally influenced movement qualities. The community's evaluative mechanisms become important because they allow new influences to be assessed rather than simply accepted or rejected.

This process demonstrates that continuity and change are not opposites. A tradition may remain continuous precisely because it can be re-embedded in new circumstances. In Ajat Iban, the enduring reference to communal values, elder guidance, embodied familiarity, and participation provides continuity while allowing individual dancers and contemporary institutions to contribute to its renewal.

Conclusion

This article has examined the intergenerational enculturation of Ajat Iban in Nanga Iban, Kapit, with particular attention to how dance learning becomes a process of cultural belonging. The findings demonstrate that Ajat Iban is learned primarily through observation, participation, imitation, repetition, guidance, correction, and community affirmation rather than through a formal curriculum.

Elders provide cultural reference points, experienced practitioners create additional learning pathways, family members and peers provide everyday models, and the longhouse creates the social environment in which these relationships can operate. Through this interconnected system, learners acquire movement knowledge alongside cultural values, social expectations, confidence, respect for adat, and a sense of belonging. The study therefore suggests that the most important object of cultural sustainability is not the dance movement in isolation but the intergenerational system that keeps the movement meaningful. Ajat Iban survives because people continue to watch, participate, perform, evaluate, recognise, and renew it.

Learning to dance is consequently inseparable from learning to belong. As long as younger generations continue to have meaningful opportunities to participate in the social and cultural environments of the community, Ajat Iban can remain a living expression of Iban identity and cultural continuity.

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