

Integrating Local Wisdom and Digital Media in Community-Based Character Education through the Merti Dusun Tradition

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Abstract

Background – Merti Dusun is a living community tradition in which residents enact and transmit cultural values through collective preparation, ritual, performance, and social participation.

Research Urgency – Research on Sedekah Bumi commonly identifies cultural values but rarely explains the community learning processes that sustain those values or the educational role of digital documentation.

Research Objectives – This study examined how Merti Dusun Tabaggunung facilitates community-based character learning and how digital media supports documentation, circulation, and intergenerational transmission.

Research Method – The study used a qualitative case-study design. Data were generated through observation, semi-structured interviews with community actors, and analysis of event records and digital documentation. Thematic analysis compared evidence across participant roles and data-collection techniques.

Research Findings – Four connected processes were identified: collective work as situated moral practice, intergenerational transmission, ecological-spiritual meaning-making, and digital mediation of cultural memory. Participation facilitated cooperation, responsibility, gratitude, solidarity, and respect for heritage. Digital media extended visibility and created reusable records, although its educational value depended on contextual explanation, consent, access, and community control.

Research Conclusion – Merti Dusun functioned as an informal and experiential community learning environment. Qualitative evidence supports a process-based interpretation and does not establish measurable character change or causal effectiveness.

Research Novelty/Contribution – The study reframes Merti Dusun from a ceremonial repository of values into a community learning ecology that connects situated participation, intergenerational guidance, reflective meaning-making, and responsible digital preservation.

Keywords: community-based education; character education; digital cultural heritage; intergenerational learning; local wisdom; Merti Dusun

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INTRODUCTION

Character learning does not occur only in classrooms. Communities cultivate values through shared work, ritual, storytelling, observation, and participation. This premise is central to nonformal education because it recognizes learning organized around community needs, local resources, and everyday experience. Community-based education treats residents as learners and producers of knowledge, while lifelong learning connects formal, nonformal, and informal settings across the life course (Benavot et al., 2022; Foley, 2024; Grotlüschen et al., 2024). From this perspective, a village tradition becomes a learning environment when community members participate, interpret its meanings, and transmit knowledge to others.

Merti Dusun, often connected with Sedekah Bumi, is a communal expression of gratitude, social reciprocity, and responsibility toward the natural environment. Its educational potential lies in practice. Residents coordinate tasks, prepare shared spaces and offerings, take part in prayer and performance, and negotiate responsibilities across age and social groups. These activities locate learning in social participation. Kirtchuk and Markless (2024) explain that people develop knowledge and identity through participation in communities of practice. Experiential learning likewise emphasizes the movement from concrete experience to reflection and renewed action (Noar et al., 2023). These perspectives clarify why participation in a cultural event may carry educational meaning without becoming a formal lesson.

Studies of Sedekah Bumi have identified religious, social, cultural, and environmental values embedded in the tradition. Hamida et al. (2022) described care, cooperation, tolerance, and responsibility in the Sedekah Bumi tradition in Raci Village. Merina and Qodariah (2023) argued that the tradition carries local-wisdom education for younger generations. Hidayati et al. (2023) interpreted it as ethnopedagogical material for social studies, while Rizkiyani and Saefudin (2024) examined its role in religious character education. These studies establish the tradition's value content. However, much of the literature treats values as attributes of the ceremony. It gives less attention to the learning processes through which community members enact, interpret, and transmit those values outside formal schooling.

This distinction matters for the Journal of Nonformal Education. A list of cultural values does not, by itself, explain how community education occurs. The analytical focus must include who participates, what they do, how knowledge moves between generations, and how community structures support learning. Informal learning often remains embedded in action and social relations rather than in an explicit curriculum (Foley, 2024). Intergenerational participation can connect cultural continuity with the agency of younger residents. The present study therefore conceptualizes Merti Dusun as a community learning ecology involving situated practice, intergenerational interaction, and collective reflection.

Digital media adds a second issue. Social media, video, photographs, and digital archives can widen access to cultural documentation and invite participation beyond the physical event. Yet digital visibility is not equivalent to learning or preservation. Abdul Aziz et al. (2023) found that social media can expand stakeholder participation in heritage management, but platform use must support meaningful community engagement. Orphanidou et al. (2024) similarly emphasize the need to connect cultural heritage, education, and digitalization. Wagner and de Clippele's (2023) digital-safeguarding analysis places communities at the center of sustaining intangible cultural heritage. Digital practice should therefore support living transmission and community ownership rather than reduce a tradition to decontextualized visual content.

The research gap concerns the intersection of these issues. Existing Sedekah Bumi studies largely focus on value identification or school-based application. Research has not sufficiently explained how Merti Dusun operates as community-based and intergenerational education, nor how digital media mediates participation, documentation, and cultural memory in a specific rural setting. This study addresses that gap through two questions: (1) How does participation in Merti Dusun Tabaggunung facilitate community-based character learning? (2) How does the community use digital media to document, communicate, and transmit the tradition? The study contributes a process-based account of cultural learning. It also proposes a bounded interpretation of digital media as a supporting layer of community education, not as evidence of educational effectiveness in itself.

Recent studies in the Journal of Nonformal Education demonstrate the breadth of community-oriented learning. They address digital media for community education, productive digital literacy, multimodal entrepreneurship, team-based digital projects, program evaluation, and partnership-based life-skills competence (Akhadi & Shofwan, 2024; Darmawan et al., 2025; Firdaus et al., 2026; Ilyas et al., 2025; Indartha et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2024; Suminar et al., 2024). Together, these studies show that nonformal education gains relevance when learning is participatory, contextual, digitally supported, and connected with

community capabilities. The present study extends this discussion to cultural practice and intergenerational character learning.

METHODS

Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative case-study design to examine Merti Dusun as a bounded community learning practice. A case study was appropriate because the research questions concerned the interaction among cultural activity, participants, place, and digital practice in a real-life setting (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The case encompassed the preparation, implementation, and digital documentation of Merti Dusun in Tabaggunung Village, Central Java, Indonesia. Fieldwork covered preparatory activities, the main cultural event, and the available post-event documentation.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were selected purposively because they had direct knowledge of organizing, performing, documenting, or participating in Merti Dusun. They included community and traditional leaders, educators, youth-group members, event organizers, and local residents. The inclusion criteria required direct involvement in the activity, residence in or an organizational connection with Tabaggunung, and knowledge of the tradition's learning or digital dimensions. This range of roles enabled the study to compare organizational, cultural, educational, and participant perspectives.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observation focused on interactions and learning practices during preparation, ritual, cultural performance, collective prayer, communal meals, environmental work, and documentation activities. Field notes recorded actors, actions, activity sequences, dialogue contexts, and cultural artifacts. Interviews explored participants' roles, interpretations of character values, intergenerational knowledge transfer, youth participation, changes in the tradition, and the functions and limitations of digital media. Documentary analysis covered cultural records, digital publications, photographs, videos, social-media content, and archival materials related to the event. Using these three techniques enabled the researcher to compare stated meanings with observed practices and available documentation.

Table 1. Data-collection grid

Domain	Key indicators	Primary source
Community learning process	Division of work; participation; peer guidance; reflection; problem solving	Observation and interviews
Character practice	Cooperation; responsibility; gratitude; tolerance; solidarity; environmental care	Observation, interviews, and event documents
Intergenerational learning	Roles of elders and youth; demonstration; storytelling; imitation; negotiation of meaning	Observation and interviews
Digital mediation	Platform; account manager; content type; intended audience; interaction; reuse; consent	Interviews and digital-document analysis
Sustainability and constraints	Youth involvement; resources; continuity; cultural accuracy; digital access and ownership	Interviews and documents

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data were analyzed thematically through familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Field notes, interview records, and documentary materials were read repeatedly. Initial codes described actions and meanings, including collective preparation, learning from elders, task responsibility, gratitude, ecological care, digital recording, content circulation, and youth participation. Related codes were compared across sources and organized into candidate themes. Themes were retained when they answered a research question, contained coherent evidence, and remained distinct from other themes. The analytic procedure combined thematic interpretation with systematic data reduction, display, and verification (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation across participant roles and technique triangulation across observation, interviews, and documents. The researcher compared convergent and divergent information before defining the final themes and maintained an analytic record linking codes, evidence, and interpretations. These procedures supported credibility and transparency without implying statistical generalizability (Ahmed, 2024).

Research Ethics

The manuscript reports the findings at an aggregated level and does not disclose personal names, private-account information, identifiable interview quotations, or identifiable screenshots. Digital materials were examined as cultural documentation rather than reproduced as personal data. Confidentiality was maintained throughout data organization and reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identified four related forms of learning. Table 2 summarizes the themes, empirical indicators, and interpretations. The findings concern perceived meaning and observed practice. They do not demonstrate a causal improvement in individual character because the study did not use pre-post measurement or longitudinal behavioral assessment.

Table 2. Themes, field indicators, and nonformal education meanings

Theme	Field indicators reported in the dataset	Interpretation
Collective work as situated moral practice	Joint preparation, cleaning, allocation of duties, scheduling, ritual support, and communal gathering	Values were enacted through participation and accountability, not taught only as abstract concepts.
Intergenerational transmission	Elders explained procedures and meanings; younger residents observed, assisted, performed, and documented	Cultural knowledge moved through guided participation and role-taking.
Ecological and spiritual meaning-making	Gratitude for harvest and natural resources; care for shared spaces; prayer and communal meals	The tradition linked moral responsibility with social, spiritual, and environmental relations.
Digital mediation of cultural memory	Photographs, videos, online announcements/posts, and digital records circulated by community actors	Digital media extended visibility and memory, but its learning value depended on context, access, consent, and community control.

Collective Work as Situated Moral Practice

The preparation and implementation of Merti Dusun created a setting in which residents had to coordinate real responsibilities. Community members organized ceremonial materials, cleaned shared spaces, arranged performances, prepared food, managed schedules, and supported religious and social activities. These tasks made cooperation observable. Responsibility appeared in completing an assigned role within a

sequence that depended on the work of others. Discipline concerned agreed times and procedures. Social solidarity developed through practical assistance across household and organizational boundaries.

This pattern positions Merti Dusun as community-based education. The community did not merely receive an externally designed character program. Residents organized the activity, supplied its cultural knowledge, and evaluated whether conduct conformed to shared expectations. Learning therefore emerged through participation in collective practice. This finding supports situated learning theory, which locates learning in changing forms of participation within a social practice (Kirtchuk & Markless, 2024), and communities-of-practice theory, which links shared activity with knowledge and identity formation (Noar et al., 2023; Beres & Janes, 2023). It also extends Foley's (2024) account of local potential in community empowerment by showing that local genius can function as an educational process during a recurring cultural event.

This community-centred interpretation also corresponds with research on living heritage and resilience. Cultural continuity depends on adaptive participation rather than static reproduction, while collective cultural practice can reinforce networks, shared identity, and the capacity to respond to social disruption (Banda et al., 2024; Gocer et al., 2024; Hanif & Maruti, 2024; Wu & Yuan, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). Heritage-making from below therefore matters educationally because residents negotiate what should be maintained, adapted, and taught through practice.

Intergenerational Transmission through Guided Participation

The event connected residents with different levels of cultural knowledge. Senior community members held knowledge about sequence, symbols, prayers, customary expectations, and local history. Younger participants learned by observing, asking questions, assisting with preparation, taking performance and logistical roles, and producing documentation. Knowledge transfer was therefore relational. Elders provided explanation and correction, while younger residents contributed labor, technical skill, and new forms of communication.

The finding goes beyond the claim that tradition preserves culture. It identifies a mechanism: guided participation across generations. Participation gave younger residents legitimate roles rather than positioning them only as an audience. It also allowed the tradition to adapt while retaining community-recognized meanings. Ouma (2022) argues that human development occurs through changing participation in cultural activities. In the present case, intergenerational activity linked cultural continuity with gradual assumption of responsibility. The result aligns with Sedekah Bumi research that identifies character and local-wisdom values (Hamida et al., 2022; Merina & Qodariah, 2023), but it shifts the analytical focus from the presence of values to their transmission through social practice. A systematic review likewise shows that local wisdom can be actualized through families, schools, and communities rather than confined to classroom instruction (Parhan & Dwiputra, 2023). This process also reflects the view of intangible heritage as a living and continuously recreated cultural production rather than a fixed object (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023; Banda et al., 2024; Shih & Tseng, 2025).

Ecological and Spiritual Meaning-Making

Participants associated Merti Dusun with gratitude for harvests, natural resources, and collective well-being. Prayer, communal food, attention to agricultural life, and cleaning of shared spaces connected spiritual gratitude with care for social and physical environments. Environmental character was not presented as a separate lesson. It appeared within a moral relationship among people, livelihood, place, and the divine.

This result needs careful interpretation. The data show cultural meanings and practices, not measured changes in environmental behavior. The tradition facilitated opportunities to discuss and enact gratitude, care, and restraint. Hidayati et al. (2023) similarly show that Sedekah Bumi contains material relevant to ethnopedagogy, while Rizkiyani and Saefudin (2024) emphasize religious character formation. The present analysis locates these meanings in a community learning process. It also treats local knowledge as dynamic. Community members interpret inherited practices under current ecological and social conditions rather than simply repeating a fixed cultural form.

Digital Mediation of Cultural Memory

Digital activity supported three functions: event communication, documentation, and post-event circulation. Community members, local organizations, and youth groups used social media, online publications, photographs, videos, and digital archives to distribute information and record preparation, ritual, performance, and communal activities. These materials extended access beyond those who attended the event and created records that residents, educators, and younger community members could revisit. Digital media therefore added a temporal and spatial layer to community learning: it connected participants before the event, recorded selected moments during it, and enabled later viewing and discussion.

The evidence does not justify the claim that technology increased the effectiveness of character education. It supports a narrower conclusion: digital media expanded visibility and produced reusable documentation. Educational value arose when content carried contextual explanation, invited conversation, or was reused in community or educational settings. A photograph without explanation may preserve appearance but not cultural meaning. Zort et al. (2023) similarly conclude that social media can broaden participation in heritage management, while Orphanidou et al. (2024) connect digitalization with sustainable cultural-heritage education. Abdul Aziz et al.'s (2023) community-centred safeguarding principle adds an important limit: communities must retain a central role in defining, transmitting, and representing their heritage.

Recent international research supports this bounded interpretation. Digital heritage systems can improve documentation and access, but they require coherent information structures, participatory governance, and attention to community-defined values (Bai et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2025). Online communities can contribute local knowledge and relational values when residents participate as co-producers rather than passive audiences (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Koutromanos et al., 2023; Sandriester et al., 2025). Current studies further emphasize digital spaces for local safeguarding, participatory recovery planning, and people-centred heritage co-production (Ginzarly & Teller, 2025; Rachman, 2024; Shirvani Dastgerdi & Kheyroddin, 2023).

Digital mediation also introduced risks. Selective posting may privilege visually attractive performances over less visible learning processes. Public circulation may detach symbols from their local meaning. Unequal access and digital skill may limit participation. Visual documentation also raises consent and ownership questions. Responsible digital preservation therefore requires community-approved curation, descriptive metadata, participant consent, access arrangements, and long-term stewardship. Technology should serve living transmission rather than replace direct participation. These concerns align with evidence that digitization can reproduce barriers to democratic heritage when platform access, representation, and institutional authority remain unequal (Wagner & de Clippele, 2023).

An Integrated Community Learning Process

Across the four themes, Merti Dusun functioned as a community learning ecology. Collective work provided concrete experience. Interaction with elders supplied cultural explanation and standards of practice. Spiritual and ecological meanings connected action with shared moral interpretation. Digital documentation extended cultural memory beyond the event. These components did not operate independently. Their educational force came from the relationship among participation, reflection, intergenerational guidance, and community ownership.

This interpretation is consistent with experiential learning, but it also reveals a limitation of applying an individual learning cycle without attention to culture. Reflection was not necessarily delivered as a formal debriefing session. It occurred through discussion, correction, storytelling, prayer, and evaluation of collective work. The community determined what counted as appropriate knowledge and conduct. The main theoretical contribution is therefore a community-centered model: character learning develops through participation in culturally meaningful responsibilities; intergenerational interaction provides interpretation; and digital media can preserve and circulate selected learning resources when governed by the community.

Implications for Nonformal Education Practice

The findings suggest four practical actions. First, community educators should map learning roles across the full event cycle, including planning and evaluation, not only the public ceremony. Second, organizers should create meaningful roles for young residents and pair them with knowledgeable elders.

Third, brief reflection sessions can help participants articulate what they learned about cooperation, responsibility, gratitude, and environmental care. Fourth, a small community archive should combine files with dates, descriptions, cultural explanations, consent status, and responsible custodians. Schools, community learning centers, youth groups, and village organizations may use approved materials as contextual learning resources, but reuse should preserve attribution and community authority.

LIMITATIONS

This study examined one tradition in one community and does not seek statistical generalization. The findings reflect participants' accounts, observed event practices, and the digital materials available during fieldwork. The design did not measure changes in character before and after participation and therefore cannot establish effectiveness or causal impact. The digital analysis focused on the content and educational functions of available documentation rather than on platform analytics or audience behavior. Researcher interpretation may also have shaped theme construction despite triangulation and analytic documentation. Future research should compare several communities, follow younger participants longitudinally, examine audience interpretations of specific digital content, and evaluate community-controlled archive models.

CONCLUSION

Merti Dusun Tabaggunung functioned as more than a cultural ceremony. It provided a community setting in which residents practiced collective responsibility, transmitted knowledge across generations, and interpreted spiritual, social, and ecological relationships. These processes locate the tradition within community-based, informal, and lifelong learning. Digital media supported communication, documentation, and circulation, but the study did not show that technology improved character outcomes. Its educational contribution depended on contextualized content, participant engagement, consent, and community control. For nonformal education, the central implication is practical: local traditions can become strong learning environments when communities make learning roles visible, support intergenerational participation, facilitate reflection, and govern digital preservation responsibly.

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