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Preserving the *Gendong* Dance: Cultural Continuity and Modernity in Penyengat Village, Riau, Indonesia

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Abstract

Within Southeast Asian dance anthropology, the traditions of geographically remote Indigenous minority communities are often overshadowed by mainstream court cultures. This study critically examines the Gendong Dance of the Indigenous Anak Rawa (Akit) community in Penyengat Village, Siak Regency, Riau Province, Indonesia, focusing on its cultural meanings, continuity, and negotiation with modernity. Grounded in critical ethnography and performance theory, the study collected qualitative data through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews with ritual authorities (*bomo*), dancers, and Indigenous youth, and ethnographic archival analysis. The corpus was examined using reflexive thematic analysis, supported by triangulation across data sources and methods. The findings show that the Gendong Dance transcends aesthetic entertainment by functioning as a sacred apotropaic ritual (*tolak bala*) and a form of cosmic mediation rooted in animist cosmology and ancestor veneration. Community narratives trace the ritual to collective traumatic memory and coercive royal punishment, from which it developed into a symbolic mechanism for restoring communal dignity, ecological equilibrium, and social cohesion. Its choreographic structure has remained largely intact despite limited material adaptations, including modern woven fabrics and Western violin instrumentation. Nevertheless, its continuity is increasingly threatened by peatland ecological degradation, market pressures, and an intergenerational transmission crisis characterised by weakening youth

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understanding of and identification with sacred taboos. The study demonstrates that cultural continuity is sustained through selective adaptation rather than static preservation. It contributes to dance anthropology by illuminating the interconnections among ritual performance, ecological relations, historical memory, and Indigenous cultural sovereignty. Sustainable safeguarding should therefore resist reductive tourism commodification and prioritise institutionally supported, community-led documentation and pedagogical regeneration centred on the dance's sacred foundations.

Keywords: Anak Rawa (Akit); Animist Cosmology; Cultural Resilience; Gendong Dance; Intangible Cultural Heritage

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's socio-cultural diversity is shaped through the complex interactions of history, archipelagic geography, and ethnic dynamics. Within the national cultural landscape, anthropological discourse is often dominated by the traditions of major ethnic groups or court culture, leaving the traditions of remote indigenous minorities largely overlooked in mainstream cultural narratives (Cai et al., 2022). This phenomenon is contradictory, given that it is within these indigenous groups that cosmological systems, local ecological knowledge (Rustam & Ichsan, 2020), and authentic performative practices that reflect the early stages of human adaptation to their landscapes are preserved (Wulandari, 2021).

Riau Province, historically identified with the hegemony of Malay culture and the influence of the Siak Sri Indrapura Sultanate, in fact harbors heterogeneous ethnodemographic diversity. Outside the urban and coastal Malay community structures, there are pockets of indigenous wetland and peat swamp communities, such as the *Anak Rawa* Tribe (often culturally associated with the *Akit* Tribe) who inhabit Penyengat Village, Sungai Apit District, Siak Regency (Utami, 2020). This community has developed distinctive patterns of cultural resistance and adaptation mechanisms for riverbank and swamp forest habitats, which are deeply reflected in their oral traditions, traditional medicine (*bele kampong*), and communal performative rituals.

One of the oldest and most sacred intangible cultural artifacts passed down through generations by the *Anak Rawa* people is the *Gendong* Dance. Unlike secular performing arts, the historical narrative and origins of the *Gendong* Dance are rooted in both traumatic and mythic collective memory; the term *Gendong* originates from a story of a historical

subordination relationship when a ruler's daughter punished the *Anak Rawa* ancestors to dance before their ancestral spirits (Citra et al., 2018). Over time, this coercive event underwent symbolic sublimation into a rite of honor, cosmic reconciliation, and prayer for protection performed during the harvest cycle, communal wedding ceremonies, and ceremonies to ward off evil spirits.

The performative structure of the *Gendong* Dance cannot be categorized simply as an aesthetic folkloric performance, but rather as a sacred ritual praxis supported by animist ontology and ancestor veneration, typical of inland communities. The *Anak Rawa* Tribe believes in the existence of a parallel spiritual realm where ancestral spirits reside and act as guardian spirits for the safety of their descendants (Siregar & Herman, 2026). Therefore, all movement procedures, floor patterns, mantra recitations, and the preparation of offerings in the *Gendong* Dance are symbolic mediation instruments to re-establish ontological connectedness between the profane realm of humans and the sacred realm of ancestral spirits.

Although the *Gendong* Dance plays a central role in social reproduction and community spiritual cohesion, its existence currently faces existential vulnerability. The expansion of industrial-scale monoculture plantations and the degradation of the peat swamp ecosystem on the Riau coast have not only transformed the biophysical landscape of the *Anak Rawa* Tribe but also disrupted the traditional living space structures where these rituals are rooted (Meilinda, 2025). The pressures of the market economy and this spatial transformation have gradually weakened customary autonomy and reduced communal spaces that previously served as the primary venues for village ritual performances.

This external vulnerability is exacerbated by an internal crisis related to the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. The penetration of modern popular culture, the expansion of formal institutions, and the stigmatization of animist practices have triggered a cognitive dissociation among indigenous youth toward their ancestral heritage (Suhantoro et al., 2024). The younger generation of the *Anak Rawa* Tribe is increasingly reluctant to internalize the complexity of the movement patterns, philosophical values, and ritual burden of the *Gendong* Dance, so that the regeneration of dance practitioners is at a critical point that threatens the sustainability of this tradition in the next decade.

Previous studies on traditional arts in Riau have largely focused on Malay court art, pantun, or formal, nationally accredited coastal dances, such as the *Zapin* Dance or *Joget*

Lambak (Marsan & Siregar, 2021). The few studies that address the existence of the *Anak Rawa* Tribe in Siak tend to be limited to ethnobotanical aspects of herbal medicine or monographic descriptive reports (Citra et al., 2018; Utami, 2020). There has been no critical study that comprehensively examines the dialectical tension between the sacred-cosmological function of the *Gendong* Dance and the hegemony of modernization, as well as the cultural resilience strategies employed by the *Anak Rawa* Tribe in maintaining its cultural agency.

Filling this literature gap is urgent, both theoretically within the umbrella of performance anthropology and practically in formulating policies for the protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Through the conceptual lens of Schechner (2003) and Turner (1982) on liminality and restored behavior, an in-depth investigation of the *Gendong* Dance provides a new paradigm for how marginalized indigenous communities negotiate communal identity, past collective trauma, and resistance to modern cultural homogenization through the dancing body.

Based on this analytical background, this article aims to critically investigate the practice of the *Gendong* Dance within the trajectory of social change in Penyengat Village. Specifically, this study answers three main questions: (1) How is the historical deconstruction and ontological function of the *Gendong* Dance as a spiritual mediation of ancestors in the Suku *Anak Rawa* community? (2) How are performative articulations, movement structures, and ritual dimensions practiced during the performance? and (3) What forms of contemporary socio-ecological threats and modalities of resistance have indigenous communities developed in preserving this tradition in the era of modernization? Through a qualitative ethnographic approach, the findings of this article are expected to enrich the discourse on the anthropology of Indonesian dance and serve as an empirical reference for advocacy for the cultural rights of isolated indigenous communities.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative methodology with a critical ethnographic approach rooted in the interpretive-constructivist paradigm (Abdussamad, 2021; Creswell, 2015). This approach was chosen deliberately because its goal is to go beyond merely describing the aesthetics of dance movements; it allows researchers to unpack historical power relations, symbolic-transcendental meanings, and the agency of indigenous communities amidst the pressures of modernity. By combining empirical investigation and historical-contextual

analysis, this study positions the *Gendong* Dance not as a static artifact, but as a dynamic cultural practice (lived cultural practice) that reflects the animist cosmology and collective memory of indigenous communities in the interior.

The research location was purposively centered in Penyengat Village, Sungai Apit District, Siak Regency, Riau Province, Indonesia—a wetland settlement that serves as the primary habitat of the *Anak Rawa* Tribe. Informants were selected using purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling to reach credible holders of indigenous knowledge (Patton, 2015). Key participants included: (1) elders/traditional figures (ritual leaders) who master the mythological narrative, mantra recitation, and magical rituals of the *Gendong* Dance; (2) generations of practicing dancers and traditional instrument players actively involved in the performance; (3) representatives of the younger generation of the *Anak Rawa* Tribe to explore intergenerational perceptions; and (4) village officials and local cultural activists in Siak Regency. These inclusion criteria were designed to represent the diversity of voices within the indigenous community (polyvocality).

Primary and secondary data collection was carried out through an integration of three techniques: participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic archival research (Alaslan, 2021; Suwendra, 2018). Direct observation focused on reconstructing movements, spatial patterns, ritual attributes, and offerings used in the performance cycle. In-depth interviews were guided by a flexible interview protocol that explored the mythical history of royal princess subordination, the socio-spiritual function of warding off disaster, and the obstacles to the inheritance of tradition. To ensure data validity (data trustworthiness), this study employed source and method triangulation (Satori & Komariah, 2017) by comparing informants' oral narratives with previous ethnographic field data, historical manuscripts/monographs of the *Siak Sultanate*, and anthropological literature related to the *Akit/Anak Rawa* Tribe.

The qualitative data corpus was systematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis technique, which involves six stages: data familiarization, initial coding, grouping candidate themes, reviewing themes in their overall context, defining essential themes, and narrative synthesis. The three main thematic domains extracted include: (a) the mythical genealogy and ontological-sacred significance of the *Gendong* Dance, (b) the performance anatomy and performative structure of communal rites, and (c) the dynamics of socio-ecological transformation and cultural resilience in the modern era. Research

credibility was strengthened through member-checking procedures with traditional stakeholders to ensure the researcher's interpretations represented the community's emic perspective. Finally, all field procedures adhered to indigenous research ethics, including free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), anonymization at the request of the speakers, and absolute respect for sacred taboos that should not be published profanely.

RESULTS

The Origins and Meaning of the *Gendong* Dance in Riau

Historically and socio-culturally, the *Gendong* Dance represents the oldest performing arts heritage deeply rooted in the collective memory of the indigenous *Anak Rawa* community in the coastal wetlands of Riau. The existence of this dance marks the initial encounter between the animist-cosmological traditions of the peat swamp inland community and the political-cultural expansion of the maritime monarchy of the Siak Sri Indrapura Sultanate. The identity of "*Anak Rawa*" itself reflects the intimate ontological and ecological connection between human existence and the swampy landscape (swamp ecology). In the mythological narrative passed down through generations, the *Gendong* nomenclature stems from an unequal power relationship: an insult by a royal princess that required the indigenous subjects to dance before ancestral spirits as a symbolic payment for subordination. Through a long-term process of cultural negotiation, this rite of punishment was transformed (cultural appropriation) into a medium for restoring communal dignity and a mechanism for reconciliation between the human world (profane) and the ancestral spirit world (sacred) (Citra et al., 2018).

Within the framework of performance anthropology (performance studies), the *Gendong* Dance functions not merely as aesthetic entertainment, but also as a communal ritual with prophetic dimensions and an apotropaic ritual. Symbolic movements, mantra recitations, and the provision of offerings during the dance are positioned as cosmic mediation tools to ward off danger, accompany initiation ceremonies, traditional healing rituals, and even celebrate the village's agrarian-maritime cycle. Performing this dance requires the presence of a traditional elder (*bomo* or *pawang*) as a spiritual authority who bridges transcendental communication with guardian spirits. This sacred meaning emphasizes that the dancing body in the *Gendong* Dance is a vessel for the articulation of ancestral faith (animistic embodiment), where ontological boundaries between the living and

the memory of ancestors are dissolved in a single liminal space of the ceremony (Fadila, 2016).

Spatially and ethnodemographically, the cultural traces of the *Gendong* Dance cross modern administrative boundaries on the east coast of Sumatra, with the main concentration in Penyengat Village (Sungai Apit District, Siak Regency), as well as pockets of the *Akit* Tribe kinship group in the Bengkalis Regency and Meranti Islands Regency. This geographical distribution proves the existence of a solid maritime-swamp cultural corridor (peatland cultural landscape) before post-colonial geopolitical fragmentation. However, along with the acceleration of the conversion of peat swamp land into monoculture plantations, the flow of modernization, and the transformation of the socio-religious affiliations of the younger generation in these regions, the continuity of the transmission of the *Gendong* Dance is now facing a crisis of practitioner attrition and desacralization of the meaning of tradition. Re-examining the origins and spatial space of this dance becomes a critical foundation for reconstructing the history of the struggle for indigenous identity (indigenous resilience) of the *Anak Rawa* Tribe in maintaining its cultural agency in the contemporary era (Ansor & Masyhur, 2023).

Function of Rituals and Belief Systems

In the taxonomy of traditional performing arts, the *Gendong* Dance represents a complete integration between physical aesthetic praxis and the instrumental function of sacred rituals. Referring to the conceptual framework of dance functions (Soedarsono, 1998; Turner, 1982), this dance is classified as a ceremonial/ritual dance whose existence is absolutely tied to sacred space, a certain cosmic rotation time, and adherence to communal taboos. In the Tolak Bala ceremony, the *Gendong* Dance is positioned as a medium for restoring ecological and spiritual equilibrium between human entities, the natural swamp waters, and supernatural powers. The participation of a group of indigenous women dancing in a circle around a replica of the *Lancang Kuning* ship presents a spatial metaphor for cyclical protection; the movement around the boat functions as a concentration of energy to ward off danger before the boat is launched into open waters, symbolizing the removal of all social anomalies, disease outbreaks, and cosmic imbalances from the living space of Penyengat Village (Ansor & Masyhur, 2023).

The performative dimension of the *Gendong* Dance is deeply rooted in animist cosmology and the ancestral veneration system that forms the foundation of the indigenous

religiosity of the *Suku Anak Rawa* people. For this indigenous community, the existence of the spirits of their ancestors is not interrupted by physical death, but rather transformed into supernatural forces that control the order of nature and safeguard the safety of their descendants. Therefore, the dance performance does not serve as an isolated entertainment attraction, but rather a series of spiritual pilgrimages led hierarchically by a traditional leader (*ketua adat*) and a spiritual handler (*bomo*). The *bomo* figure acts as a transcendental mediator (spiritual broker) who directs the dancers' movements toward the sacred graves of their ancestors, facilitates intentional communication with unseen entities, and ensures that the liminal boundary between the profane world of humans and the sacred world of spirits is maintained during the metaphysical interaction (Fadila, 2016).

The ontological significance of this dance is materially manifested through the provision of a variety of ritual offerings rich in symbolic language. Offering elements such as yellow rice dyed with turmeric (a symbol of nobility and the regeneration of prosperity), *betel* and *pinang* (a representation of the etiquette of interdimensional cultural diplomacy), raw chicken eggs (a symbol of the seeds of life and cosmic integrity), sticky rice cakes (a metaphor for social cohesion and inner harmony), and the burning of frankincense (Styrax) function as sensory media. The waft of frankincense smoke not only purifies the performance space from the interference of evil entities, but also serves as a vehicle for conveying communal prayers to the transcendent realm. The strict ritual prescriptions in the preparation of these offerings underscore that every detail of the materiality in the *Gendong* Dance has a sacramental function that cannot be deconstructed carelessly without bearing the consequences of disrupting the cosmological order of the indigenous community (Gunda Imu, 2026).

Movement, Music, and Costume

Choreographically, the *Gendong* Dance exhibits a distinctive structural structure, beginning with the sprinkling of turmeric rice as a sacred sign of the start of the performance. This opening movement then transitions into a variety of movements, including *maslendong* and *bencak*, which combine vertical accentuations of the body rising and falling with rhythmic diagonal rotations of the arms and torso to the right and left. This performance is participatory and inclusive, involving both male and female dancers without any restrictions on the number of participants. This kinetic harmony is supported by an accompanying musical ensemble that combines traditional membranophone and idiophone instruments,

such as the drum (*bebano*) and gong (*tetawak*), as well as a wind aerophone in the form of a *serunai* (*sunai*). Over time, Western melodic elements, such as the violin, have been adapted to enrich the auditory texture without diminishing the rhythmic essence of the traditional performance.

The dynamics of traditional materiality are also reflected in the evolution of the dancers' attire. In the past, dancers' costumes were made from processed bark fiber; however, due to the limited durability of this material, clothing has shifted to more adaptable woven fabrics. The female dancers wear *kebaya* combined with long sarongs and shoulder scarves, while the male dancers wear plain black suits complete with a traditional head covering, a destar. The continued performance of the *Gendong* Dance at various communal events and annual ceremonial cycles demonstrates the cultural resilience of the local indigenous community, as captured in the following visual documentation:



Figure 1. Implementation of the *Gendong* Busana Dance Tradition

Gendong Dance Performance Procession

The *Gendong* Dance ritual by the indigenous *Anak Rawa* people begins with a pre-ceremonial stage steeped in sacred values and requests for metaphysical permission. The day

before the performance, the traditional leader and the *bomo* perform spiritual practices to align themselves with the supernatural realm, seek the blessings of their ancestors, and purify the performance space. This procession is accompanied by the preparation of offerings such as fried rice sprinkled with spices (*meghetih*), betel leaves in a *tepak betel* (a traditional bamboo basket), chicken eggs, sticky rice *wajik* (rice cakes), turmeric rice, and the burning of incense. Delivering the offerings to the burial area aims to establish harmonious communication with the ancestral entities and fortify the ritual series from negative energy disturbances (evil spirits). Once this spiritual permission is completed in the morning or afternoon, the dance ceremony is deemed ready to be performed, with the guarantee of sacred safety for all participants (Alit, 2026).

On the second day, the socio-religious dimension is manifested through communal culinary preparations led by the women of the *Anak Rawa* tribe. The communal cooking activity is not merely a domestic technical activity, but an integral part of the ward-off ritual that combines animal, plant, and coastal traditions. Dishes prepared include yellow rice, sticky rice (*wajik*), chicken eggs, and local specialties such as mangrove snails (*temilok*), coastal shellfish (*sepetang*), lomek fish, and *sago*-based *rendang*. The preparation of these foods serves a dual function: as the main offering to the protective spirits to legitimize the sacred performance, while also emphasizing the division of social roles and mutual cooperation among residents in mitigating collective danger (Novaria et al., 2026).

In the context of marriage, the *Gendong* Dance transforms into a magical purification tool to protect the bride and groom and their guests from supernatural threats through the mediation of a sacred vessel called the puan raja. In the past, the presence of nobles or rulers was invited to legitimize customary ties, so the representation of the *puan raja* was presented as a symbol of the highest respect for the ancestral line of worldly and spiritual power. The *puan's* physical structure, which combines four dragon heads and four *keris* blades on each side, represents the four cardinal directions—north, south, west, and east. Cosmologically, this orientation reflects the origins, natural forces, and the integrated protection of the ancestral spirits of the *Anak Rawa* tribe, personified by the authority of the *keris* (Evawarni & Galba, 2005).

After all the offerings have been neatly arranged in the puan raja, the dancers perform the opening *Gendong* Dance as an expression of gratitude before the container is paraded around the village. The procession is led by a *bomo* (a traditional Javanese singer) who scatters

turmeric rice along the processional path to the arena, accompanied by the rhythm of traditional music and the dancers. This parade acts as a visual and auditory communal announcement, with residents spontaneously stopping their daily activities to respect the procession. This collective participation reflects the high level of social cohesion of indigenous communities in maintaining the balance of their living space from the threat of cosmic disaster (Alit, 2026).

Upon arrival at the center of the performance, the queen is placed in the exact center of the arena, followed by the *bomo* sprinkling turmeric rice around the dance arena to seal in protection from uninvited wild entities during the performance. The culmination of the ceremony is marked by the tradition of a communal meal (*kenduri*) after official remarks from the Traditional Leader and the Chieftain. The feast features local culinary specialties, particularly *temilok* (rice cake), *sago rendang* (rice cake), *sepetang* (fried rice), and *lomek* fish, followed by the distribution of the queen's main offerings—yellow rice, *wajik* (rice cake), and eggs—to all residents and invited guests. The distribution of this sacred food not only symbolically concludes the rite of warding off evil, but also strengthens social integration, fosters togetherness, and strengthens ties among community members.

DISCUSSION

The Challenge of Sustainability Amidst the Current of Modernization

The material changes in the *Anak Rawa* tribe's *Gendong* Dance demonstrate the dynamics of selective aesthetic adaptation without overhauling its core choreographic structure. The most striking modifications are the updated costume design and the integration of violin instruments into the accompanying musical ensemble. The addition of Western instruments indicates an openness of traditional art to external influences, likely adopted to enrich the melodic texture without shifting the deeply rooted sacred rhythm. Although the visual and auditory forms have undergone functional adjustments, the dance substantially maintains the movement patterns, offerings, and ritual symbolism of warding off evil (Citra et al., 2018).

The most critical challenge to the continuity of this tradition lies in the sociocultural dimension, namely the drastic decline in community participation and the weakening of intergenerational transmission. The tide of modernization and the penetration of popular culture have gradually shifted the communal interaction space that once served as the

collective glue of the *Anak Rawa* tribe, thus eroding the spirit of togetherness (gotong royong) that underpins the ceremony. At the same time, the younger generation is experiencing a cultural disconnection from their ancestral homeland, resulting in motoric and spiritual inadequacies in performing this sacred dance (Alit, 2026). This lack of regeneration is not simply a loss of kinesthetic skills, but rather a sign of a broken chain of understanding of the philosophical values and symbolic meanings inherent in their traditional identity.

The existential fragility of the *Gendong* Dance is increasingly apparent given that this tradition is not merely a profane entertainment performance, but rather a comprehensive ritual bound by a strict system of beliefs, religious practices, and customary taboos. As a ritual to ward off disaster, its effectiveness and sustainability depend heavily on total adherence to the procedures of ancestor worship, bomo prayers, and taboos, which can only be maintained through ongoing empirical practice. If future generations no longer internalize these sacred rules, the *Gendong* Dance is at risk of diminishing its meaning or even total extinction. The survival of this dance ultimately demands a cultural inheritance strategy capable of bridging the relevance of tradition amidst the pressures of modernity without destroying the essence of the sacredness that underpins it (Acin et al., 2025).

The findings above indicate that the *Gendong* Dance has its own characteristics compared to other Malay dances in Sungai Apit District, such as Joget Sargek from Bunsur Village, which is recreational in nature and has no age restrictions. Conversely, the *Gendong* Dance serves a religious-magical function as a medium of spiritual communication between the community and ancestors, thus its performances are bound by various customary taboos (Syarif, 2020). This difference in function also distinguishes the types of threats to extinction faced: social dance is more vulnerable to erosion by shifts in public entertainment preferences, while the existence of the *Gendong* Dance is threatened by the erosion of customary knowledge and the reluctance of the younger generation to perform ritual procedures, such as offerings and ancestor worship.

Therefore, the preservation strategy for the *Gendong* Dance must be grounded in its sacred nature. An urgent initial step is comprehensive documentation of the processional sequence, taboo system, and philosophical meaning with traditional leaders and *bomo* (heads of the community), to anticipate the loss of oral tradition with the passing of key speakers. Furthermore, a gradual regeneration process needs to be designed through the involvement

of the youth of Penyengat Village while maintaining the integrity of the sacred tradition. This step requires synergy with the Siak Regency Tourism and Culture Office in fostering the *Anak Rawa* indigenous community, in line with the status of Penyengat Village as a traditional village based on regional regulations (Syarif, 2020). This institutional support is crucial to ensure that the *Gendong* Dance is protected as a sacred ritual heritage, not merely a commodification of tourism performances as is common with profane dance arts.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that the *Gendong* Dance in the indigenous community of the *Anak Rawa* Tribe in Penyengat Village is not merely a profane aesthetic expression, but rather a sacred ritual practice based on animist cosmology and ancestor worship that binds collective memory, social cohesion, and the ecological balance of the wetland community. Although minor material adaptations occur through the accommodation of modern clothing and instruments without reducing its choreographic structure, the continuity of this tradition faces existential threats due to the degradation of peatland living space, the penetration of modernization, and the crisis of intergenerational transmission that breaks the inheritance of philosophical values and ritual obedience. Therefore, the sustainability of the *Gendong* Dance demands a reorientation of preservation policies based on the protection of sacredness through the codification of indigenous knowledge, community-based youth regeneration, and the integration of local government institutions that reject the commodification of reductive tourism in order to maintain cultural sovereignty and the rights of minority indigenous communities.

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