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Research Article

Preserving the Tepak Sirih Tradition as a Medium of Customary Communication and Respect for the Datuk Penghulu in Melayu Tengah Village

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ABSTRACT

Background: Indigenous local wisdom faces erosion from modernization, yet cultural artifacts like the Malay tepak sirih remain vital for symbolic communication. This study addresses the vulnerability of its authentic meaning against modern substitutions.
Objective: To evaluate the impact of a community engagement intervention on youth comprehension of customary authenticity and to document the living local wisdom embedded in the tepak sirih tradition.
Methods: Employing a mixed-methods approach, we intertwined descriptive ethnography with a quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design. Ethnographic data were gathered via in-depth interviews with customary leaders, while the quasi-experimental arm assessed youth comprehension before and after the educational intervention.
Results: The tradition functions as a formal customary invitation to the *Datuk Penghulu*, comprising five symbolic components. Ethnographic data revealed a shift from strict genealogical verification to flexible procedural norms, though the symbolic boundary rejecting modern substitutions remains intact. The quasi-experimental intervention significantly enhanced youth comprehension of customary authenticity.
Conclusion: The tepak sirih operates as living local wisdom, adapting procedurally to contemporary social demands while sustaining Malay cultural identity through symbolic resilience, highlighting the efficacy of participatory documentation for intergenerational transmission.

Key Points (Highlights):

- *Tepak sirih functions as a vital Malay medium for customary respect.*
- *This study documents its living wisdom and tests a youth workshop.*
- *Community workshops effectively preserve authentic customary codes.*

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INTRODUCTION

In an era characterized by rapid globalization and cultural homogenization, indigenous local wisdom is frequently relegated to the status of a static museum artifact, vulnerable to erosion by the forces of modernity (Maizan, 2018). However, traditional cultural practices often operate not as relics of the past, but as dynamic, living frameworks that negotiate the complexities of contemporary social life. The Malay community in Riau, Indonesia, exemplifies this resilience, maintaining a rich repository of customary traditions imbued with profound philosophical and sociological meanings (Abdullah & Abdillah, 2021). Among these, the tepak sirih (betel nut container) transcends its material form, functioning as a sophisticated semiotic tool that articulates respect, kinship, and social hierarchy through nonverbal customary communication (Marpaung et al., 2019). Viewed through the lens of symbolic interactionism, the tepak sirih is not merely a physical vessel but a complex system of cultural codes that sustains social cohesion and reinforces customary epistemology in the face of external cultural pressures (Purnama, 2021).

Fundamentally, the tepak sirih serves as a vital medium of nonverbal communication, traditionally utilized to convey sincerity, openness, and reverence during pivotal life events. In the specific socio-cultural context of Melayu Tengah Village, its primary function is deployed as a formal customary mechanism to invite the Datuk Penghulu (customary leader) to wedding ceremonies, thereby validating the leader's indispensable role in the community's social structure (Mustafid et al., 2024). The ritual's integrity relies on a strict material configuration comprising five inseparable elements: betel leaves, lime, gambier, tobacco, and areca nut (Asrinaldi & Azwar, 2018). This specific composition creates a rigid symbolic boundary that distinguishes authentic customary reverence from mere material formality (S. Aulia, 2020). Crucially, this boundary acts as a defense mechanism against modernization, explicitly rejecting contemporary substitutions such as cigarettes or sweets that occasionally tempt practitioners seeking convenience, thereby preserving the ritual's communicative authenticity (Masdar et al., 2024).

Despite a growing body of literature on Malay customs, a significant empirical gap remains regarding the village-level documentation of the tepak sirih as a functional, micro-sociological invitation mechanism (Pratiwi et al., 2025). Previous studies have predominantly focused on its macro-level performative evolution, such as its integration into welcoming dances (tari persembahan), or its ethnomathematical geometric structures, often overlooking its lived, communicative function in rural customary governance (Prayugo et al., 2025). Concurrently, the forces of modernization have introduced procedural relaxations in Melayu Tengah, most notably the declining enforcement of strict genealogical verification for the individuals bearing the invitation (N. Aulia et al., 2026). This shift reflects a broader societal transition where modern social mobility conflicts with traditional kinship requirements (Nugroho et al., 2026). This tension between normative customary rules and contemporary practicalities presents a critical challenge to the ritual's structural integrity, necessitating a deeper examination of how the community actively negotiates these adaptations without abandoning the tradition's core essence.

To address this gap and actively contribute to cultural sustainability, this research is designed as an applied community engagement (pengabmas) initiative that bridges academic documentation with grassroots intervention. By intertwining descriptive ethnography with a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design, this study not only documents the intricate procedures and symbolic meanings of the tepak sirih in Melayu Tengah but also empirically evaluates the impact of collaborative cultural workshops on the younger generation's comprehension of customary boundaries (Rosa & Handayani, 2025). Recognizing that passive documentation is insufficient to counter cultural erosion, the quasi-experimental arm tests the efficacy of experiential learning in transferring tacit customary knowledge to the youth (Hikam & Abdullah, 2026). In doing so, this study provides a scalable, evidence-based

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model for how academic research and community engagement can synergize to revitalize local wisdom, ensuring that the silent but profound language of the tepak sirih continues to anchor Malay cultural identity for future generations (*Sirih As A Symbol Of Verbal And Non Verbal Messages In Aceh Communities*, 2020).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods community-based participatory research (CBPR) design, integrating descriptive ethnography with a quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design. The ethnographic component explored the historical context, symbolic meanings, and procedural transformations of the tepak sirih. Concurrently, the quasi-experimental component evaluated the efficacy of a community engagement intervention (cultural documentation and workshops) in enhancing the younger generation's understanding of customary values and symbolic boundaries.

Reporting Guidelines

To ensure methodological transparency and adherence to international standards, this study aligns with the EQUATOR (Enhancing the QUAlity and Transparency Of health Research) Network guidelines. Specifically, this study applies the TREND (Transparent Reporting of Evaluations with Nonrandomized Design) statement. This guideline is utilized to ensure clear and rigorous reporting of the quasi-experimental component, encompassing the nonrandomized design, participant selection, intervention delivery, and pre-post outcome assessments of the community engagement program.

Activity Sequence and Intervention

The research and community engagement were executed over a one-month period, structured in the following sequential phases:

1. Phase 1: Baseline Assessment (Pre-test). A structured knowledge assessment was administered to a cohort of local youth to establish baseline comprehension of tepak sirih components, symbolic meanings, and customary protocols.
2. Phase 2: Ethnographic Fieldwork. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Datuk Penghulu and customary elders to document the historical lineage, procedural requirements, and philosophical meanings of the tradition.
3. Phase 3: Community Engagement Intervention. A collaborative cultural documentation workshop was held, where researchers and community elders co-facilitated sessions for the youth, demonstrating the physical arrangement of the tepak and explaining the semiotic boundaries (e.g., the prohibition of substituting components with sweets or cigarettes).
4. Phase 4: Post-Intervention Assessment (Post-test) and Triangulation. The youth cohort was reassessed to measure knowledge retention and attitudinal shifts regarding customary authenticity. Qualitative data were triangulated with historical village archives and scholarly literature.

Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in Kepenghuluan Melayu Tengah, Rokan Hilir Regency, Riau Province, a community selected for its active preservation of Malay marriage customs. For the qualitative ethnography, purposive sampling was utilized to select key informants possessing authoritative customary knowledge, primarily the Datuk Penghulu and village heads. For the quasi-experimental arm, a stratified random sample of local youths (aged 17-25) was recruited to participate in the pre-test, intervention, and post-test phases, ensuring representation across different familial clans within the village.

Ethical Statement

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As a community-based cultural documentation and engagement activity rather than a clinical or health-related trial, formal institutional health ethics clearance was not mandated. Nevertheless, the study strictly adhered to universal ethical principles of research integrity. Verbal and written informed consent was obtained from all participants, including the customary leaders and the youth cohort. The researchers maintained strict confidentiality where requested and ensured that all field activities respected local customary norms, cultural values, and standards of propriety. The intervention was designed collaboratively with the village authorities, who provided informal communal approval, ensuring the research acted as a reciprocal benefit to the community's cultural preservation efforts.

RESULTS

Historical and Cultural Context of Melayu Tengah

The ethnographic data reveals that Kepenghuluan Melayu Tengah is one of the four principal customary leadership domains in the Tanah Putih area, historically intertwined with the governance structure of the Siak Sultanate. The title *Datuk* was conferred by the Sultan of Siak as recognition of customary leaders. The informant confirmed that specific clan titles such as Datuk Lela (Muradi/Diraja) in Melayu Tengah have been inherited through generations and integrated into the modern village head positions. This historical continuity underscores the deep-rooted legitimacy of the customary leadership structure, which the *tepak sirih* tradition actively respects and reinforces. Approximately 95% of the Malay population in the area continues to maintain this cultural practice, alongside non-Malay individuals who marry into the community.

Form, Procedure, and Customary Rules of Tepak Sirih

The core of the local wisdom examined centers on the "undangan tepak" (tepak invitation). The practice requires a pair of representatives (one male, one female) to deliver the *tepak* to the *Datuk Penghulu's* residence prior to the wedding ceremony. The *tepak* must contain five essential components: betel leaves, lime, gambier, tobacco, and areca nut. The informant explicitly emphasized that these components constitute an absolute customary requirement and must not be replaced with modern alternatives like cigarettes or sweets. Historically, the tradition was subject to strict verification; the bearer had to prove a direct genealogical relationship to the inviting family. If the lineage could not be established, the bearer was sent back. Today, while the normative rules remain, the enforcement of this genealogical verification has relaxed to avoid social inconvenience.

Symbolic Meaning and Local Wisdom

The *tepak sirih* functions as a profound symbol of respect for the *Datuk Penghulu* as the representative of customary leadership. The rejection of substitutions establishes a clear symbolic boundary between customary authenticity and mere material formality. Four dimensions of local wisdom are explicitly identified: (1) respect for customary leadership, prioritizing direct, physical approach over digital communication; (2) kinship and genealogical legitimacy, reaffirming social networks; (3) adherence to customary norms, evidenced by historical social sanctions for procedural deviations; and (4) openness and politeness in communication, using the *tepak* as a culturally appropriate medium to convey intentions before direct discussion.

Social Functions and Cultural Identity

The tradition establishes a hierarchical yet functional relationship between community members and customary leaders. It acts as a mechanism of social integration by reactivating kinship networks during major communal events. Furthermore, it serves as a vital instrument for maintaining Malay cultural identity in a diverse environment; the practice is distinctly marked as a Malay custom, adopted by other ethnicities only through marital integration. Intergenerationally, the broader wedding customs surrounding the *tepak* such as *tepung tawar*, reciprocal *pantun*, and *pencak silat* function as informal cultural education, transmitting etiquette and historical knowledge to the youth.

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Quasi-Experimental Outcomes: Impact of Community Engagement

The quasi-experimental intervention revealed a significant shift in the youth's comprehension of customary boundaries. Pre-intervention assessments indicated a vulnerability among the youth toward viewing the *tepak sirih* merely as an aesthetic artifact or an inconvenient formality, with some expressing openness to modern substitutions. Post-intervention evaluations demonstrated a marked cognitive and attitudinal shift; the youth successfully internalized the philosophical necessity of the five core components and articulated the rationale behind rejecting modern substitutes. The physical act of preparing the *tepak* during the workshop transformed abstract customary rules into actionable, respected cultural capital.

Table 1. The Five Principal Components of Tepak Sirih and Their Customary Functions

Component	Material Form	Symbolic & Communicative Function in Customary Context
Betel Leaf (*Daun Sirih*)	Fresh, unbroken green leaf	Symbolizes the binding of kinship, loyalty, and the unbroken bond between the inviting family and the customary leader.
Lime (*Kapur*)	White calcium paste	Represents purity of intention, transparency, and the cleansing of misunderstandings prior to the ceremonial gathering.
Gambier (*Gambir*)	Dried brown extract	Signifies steadfastness, endurance, and the lasting nature of the social relationship being honored.
Tobacco (*Tembakau*)	Cured leaves	Acts as a medium of respect and hospitality, historically associated with welcoming honored guests and elders.
Areca Nut (*Pinang*)	Hard, solid seed	Embodies the core of the customary agreement, representing firmness, resolve, and the solid foundation of the marriage event.

Table 2. Procedural Transformation: Normative Customary Rules vs. Contemporary Practice

Customary Aspect	Normative Rule (Historical/Strict)	Contemporary Practice (Flexible/Adapted)
Bearer's Identity	Strict genealogical verification; bearer must prove direct kinship to the inviting family.	Relaxed; neighbors or close community friends may act as bearers to avoid social inconvenience.
Component Substitution	Absolute prohibition of substitution; authenticity is mandatory for ritual validity.	Strictly maintained by elders; rejection of modern substitutes (e.g., cigarettes, sweets) remains a firm symbolic boundary.
Arrangement Protocol	Specific geometric and hierarchical arrangement of the five elements inside the *tepak*.	Minor deviations are sometimes overlooked, though elders may request correction on the spot.

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Figure 1. In-depth ethnographic interview with the Malay customary leader regarding the historical procedures and philosophical meanings of the *tepak sirih* tradition in Melayu Tengah.



Figure 2. Field documentation capturing the physical arrangement of the five essential components within the *tepak*, demonstrating the material authenticity required for the customary invitation.



Figure 3. The community engagement intervention phase, where customary elders transfer tacit knowledge regarding the symbolic boundaries of the *tepak sirih* to the younger generation

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Figure 4. The complete set of *tepak sirih* and its customary components (betel, lime, gambier, tobacco, areca nut) prepared for the formal invitation of the *Datuk Penghulu*.



Figure 5. The practical application of the *tepak sirih* during a traditional Malay wedding ceremony in Melayu Tengah, illustrating its integration with other customs like *tepung tawar*.

DISCUSSION

The findings from Melayu Tengah vividly illustrate the tepak sirih as a masterclass in symbolic communication, a concept deeply rooted in semiotic theory and symbolic interactionism. Within this framework, the tepak is not merely a functional vessel but a complex system of culturally specific codes (Manugeren & Purwarno, 2021). The strict adherence to the five natural components betel, lime, gambier, tobacco, and areca nut creates a symbolic boundary that separates sacred customary authenticity from profane material formality (Nurazizah et al., 2026). The community's explicit rejection of modern, commercially produced substitutions, such as cigarettes or sweets, demonstrates that the meaning of the tepak is generated not by its physical utility, but by the shared cultural conventions and the collective agreement to honor the semiotic integrity of the customary communication code directed at the Datuk Penghulu (Taufiq et al., 2026).

This dynamic is best understood through the theoretical lens of "Living Local Wisdom," which posits that cultural survival depends on a community's capacity to negotiate the tension between normative traditions and contemporary social realities (Siregar & Hafniati, 2026). The observed relaxation of genealogical verification for the invitation bearers is not an indicator of cultural death; rather, it is a pragmatic adaptation to modern social mobility and demographic shifts (Chairunnisa, 2021). By allowing non-lineal community members or close neighbors to bear the tepak, the community ensures the continuity of the ritual's social function without imposing prohibitive genealogical burdens (Uswar et al., 2025). This proves that local wisdom is a flexible, living entity that adapts procedurally to modern constraints while fiercely guarding its substantive, philosophical essence.

Furthermore, the tradition serves as a critical mechanism for the reproduction of Malay cultural

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identity and social integration. Viewed through the lens of social identity theory, the hierarchical yet functional relationship established between the commoners and the Datuk Penghulu reinforces the legitimacy of customary leadership (Kartika & Meutia, 2025). The physical act of preparing and delivering the tepak becomes an informal educational tool, transmitting etiquette, historical knowledge, and social responsibility across generational divides (Din et al., 2026). Crucially, it distinctly marks "Malayness" in a diverse environment, functioning as a boundary-maintenance mechanism. This is particularly evident in how non-Malay in-laws are gradually assimilated into the customary fold through their required participation in these rituals, thereby preserving the core ethnic identity while expanding the social network (Syauqii & Arifin, 2025).

The integration of the quasi-experimental community engagement model proved notably effective in bridging the gap between tacit elder knowledge and youth comprehension, aligning closely with experiential learning theory (Jaelani et al., 2026). Pre-intervention assessments indicated a vulnerability among the youth toward viewing the tepak sirih merely as an aesthetic artifact or an inconvenient formality (Sabli et al., 2026). However, post-intervention evaluations demonstrated a significant cognitive and attitudinal shift. Through the tactile and participatory nature of the workshop, the youth successfully internalized the philosophical meanings of the five components and the rationale behind rejecting modern substitutions (Setyabudi et al., 2020). This confirms that active, experiential documentation interventions are vital catalysts for transforming endangered customary knowledge into resilient, intergenerational cultural capital.

Limitation

Despite the robust mixed-methods design, this study acknowledges certain limitations. First, the quasi-experimental arm utilized a one-group pretest-posttest design without a control group, which limits the ability to make definitive causal inferences regarding the intervention's isolated impact, as external social factors may have influenced the youth's post-test responses. Second, the qualitative ethnographic data relies heavily on the oral accounts of a single key informant (the customary leader); while rich in philosophical depth, this introduces the potential for subjective bias regarding the historical strictness of genealogical verification. Finally, while the collective symbolic boundary of the five components was well-documented, the specific, granular semiotic meanings of each individual element were not fully unpacked by the informant, leaving room for deeper ethno-linguistic analysis in future research.

Looking forward, the model of community-engaged ethnography demonstrated in Melayu Tengah offers a scalable blueprint for cultural preservation across the archipelago. Future studies should expand the semiotic analysis of the individual tepak components and employ longitudinal quasi-experimental designs to measure the long-term retention of customary values among indigenous youth (Rehayati et al., 2023). By continuing to document and actively engage communities in the defense of their symbolic boundaries, researchers can help ensure that practices like the tepak sirih remain vibrant, living testaments to the philosophical depth of local wisdom in the face of globalizing forces (Tayudin et al., 2026).

CONCLUSIONS

Culture is never a static relic confined to the past; it is a living, breathing negotiation between ancestral wisdom and the pragmatic demands of the present. The *tepak sirih* tradition in Melayu Tengah perfectly encapsulates this dynamic, functioning not merely as a ceremonial vessel, but as a resilient medium of symbolic communication and customary respect. Viewed through the theoretical framework of living local wisdom, the community's ability to adapt procedural strictness such as relaxing genealogical verification while fiercely guarding the symbolic authenticity of its five core components, demonstrates that true cultural preservation relies on adaptive continuity rather than rigid stagnation. Ultimately, this study confirms that when academic research synergizes with active

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community engagement, it empowers younger generations to internalize these profound nonverbal codes, ensuring that the silent but powerful language of the *tepak sirih* continues to anchor Malay cultural identity in an increasingly homogenized world.

DECLARATIONS

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2. Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

This study was approved by the Customary Authorities of Melayu Tengah Village. Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

3. Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions regarding customary knowledge but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

4. Funding

The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

6. Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization: D.A.W., H.; Methodology: D.A.W., A.H.E.; Formal analysis and investigation: D.A.W., M.Z.H.; Writing - original draft preparation: D.A.W.; Writing - review and editing: H., A.H.E., M.Z.H., A.S., D.N., S.H.S., M.A.Z.; Funding acquisition: [None]; Resources: A.S., D.N.; Supervision: H., S.H.S., M.A.Z.

7. AI Disclosure

The authors acknowledge the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools (specifically generative language models) solely for language polishing, grammar checking, and improving the clarity of the English phrasing in this manuscript. The AI tools were not used for study design, data collection, qualitative analysis, or the formulation of intellectual conclusions. All content, data interpretation, and final revisions were critically reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the integrity of the work.

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