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Improving Children's Moral Character through the Cultural Practice of "TABEA" in Guu Village, Batuatas Subdistrict, South Buton Regency

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Abstract

This study examines how tabea a living local cultural practice in the daily life of Guu Village, Batuatas District, South Buton Regency contributes to the formation and improvement of children's moral character. Tabea functions as an embodied expression of respect, politeness, and social ethics that is continuously transmitted across generations through everyday interaction. The research employed a descriptive qualitative design. Data were collected through direct field observation, in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, community leaders, and children, as well as documentation of community practices and school-related activities. The findings indicate that the consistent enactment of tabea within the family, school, and broader community significantly supports children's character development, particularly in cultivating courteous speech and behavior, respect for elders, self control in social interaction, and a growing sense of social responsibility. Moreover, tabea strengthens children's awareness of social norms and reinforces positive role modeling through habituation and community supervision. These results suggest that tabea is not merely a symbolic tradition, but a practical mechanism of character education embedded in local wisdom. Therefore, preserving and revitalizing tabea should be pursued through collaborative strategies involving families, schools, and village institutions, and integrated sustainably into educational patterns to strengthen the moral foundation of the younger generation.

***Keywords**: Morality, Children, Tabea Culture, Character Haracter Education, Guu Village*

Introduction

Moral character (akhlak) is a fundamental aspect of education because it forms the foundation for shaping children's character and personal quality from an early age.(Umroh, 2019) From an educational perspective, moral development does not end with understanding concepts of right and wrong; it requires a process of internalizing values that leads to habituation in real behavior. Children who understand moral values but are not accustomed to practicing them may experience a gap between knowledge and action. Therefore, moral education must be designed as a continuous, contextual process that is closely connected to children's lived experiences, so that the values taught are not abstract but are present in everyday social interactions.(Sutarto, 2023)

Within the framework of character education, a child's closest environment especially the family and the community plays a strategic role as the primary "learning space" before formal schooling. The family becomes the earliest arena for shaping attitudes through role modeling, communication, and parenting patterns, while the community broadens children's experiences in understanding norms, social boundaries, and interpersonal ethics.(Japar, Purwati, Pratama, & ..., 2023) At this point, local wisdom becomes highly relevant as a source of moral values that has been tested over time and socially accepted within the community. Local wisdom is not merely tradition; it is a living value system that is inherited and practiced socially, thus possessing strong educative power particularly when positioned as a medium for moral learning that

aligns with children's identity and cultural reality.(Rosid, 2020)

One form of local wisdom that contains moral values is the tabea culture, which thrives among the Butonese community, including in Batuatas, South Buton Regency. Tabea is widely recognized as a symbol of respect, politeness, and proper etiquette in social relations. The expression tabea is not simply a verbal greeting; it represents courteous and respectful attitudes toward others, especially elders, community leaders, and fellow citizens.(Fatchurahman, 2012) In social practice, tabea functions as an ethical tool of communication: it guides how people greet, ask permission, pass in front of others, initiate conversation, and respond to social situations that require sensitivity and appreciation. Thus, tabea contains a concrete moral dimension because it is directly linked to actions language, gestures, and attitudes that children can learn and practice from an early age.

In Guu Village, Batuatas District, the tabea culture continues to be transmitted across generations through family interactions, communal activities, and socio-religious practices. Children are habituated to saying tabea in various contexts for example, when greeting elders, entering someone's home, asking for help, or passing through a gathering. Such habituation potentially shapes character through repeated practice and social reinforcement: children learn that politeness is not merely a requirement but a social norm that is valued and positively responded to by the environment. When applied consistently, tabea can foster values such as respect for elders, self-control in communication, empathy, humility, and social responsibility. Therefore, tabea should not be understood as a purely ceremonial tradition, but rather as a contextual and functional medium of character education that supports children's moral development.(HERMANSAH, NASRULLOH, & KARTINI, 2024)

Linguistically and culturally, the term tabea found in Butonese, Cia-Cia, and Tolaki traditions has similarities with "tabe," which is widely used in Bugis and Makassar cultures. This similarity indicates an intersection of values within Indonesian etiquette traditions, especially those emphasizing respect and proper manners. However, in practice there are differences in meaning and scope. "Tabe" is more often used pragmatically in daily communication, whereas "tabea" carries broader meaning as a cultural symbol and marker of customary identity. The utterance tabea is often accompanied by a gesture of touching the chest, signifying sincerity and appreciation. In the cultural context of Butonese, Cia-Cia, and Tolaki communities, tabea is used in socially significant moments such as welcoming guests, interacting with customary leaders, and during traditional ceremonies. In other words, tabea is part of a value system that strengthens social structure, reinforces community cohesion, and maintains ethical standards of interaction.

Nevertheless, social dynamics in the modern era present challenges to the sustainability of local values. Globalization, popular culture, and the rapid spread of digital technology have changed how children interact, both through social media and instant messaging.(Harjuansari, 2021) Fast and concise communication patterns may reduce opportunities for ethical reflection in speech. In some contexts, politeness and respect for local norms are being displaced, while individualistic tendencies become more prominent. Younger generations are often more familiar with external cultural symbols than with their own heritage, making local wisdom vulnerable to being viewed as "outdated" and irrelevant. This situation raises concerns about the weakening of community-based moral education and the widening distance between children and their local cultural identity.(Azis, 2019)

This study is grounded in the concern that children's moral character development is increasingly challenged by modernization, digital communication, and shifting social interaction patterns that may weaken local norms of politeness and respect. In Guu Village, Batuatas District, the tabea cultural practice remains a living tradition that embodies respect, courtesy, and social ethics. However, its educational function has not been sufficiently examined in a systematic way, particularly regarding how tabea is transmitted through family, school, and community settings and how it shapes children's daily behavior. Therefore, this research addresses the following questions: (1) What core moral values are embedded in the tabea culture practiced in Guu Village? (2) How is tabea taught, modeled, and habituated to children within the family, school, and community environments? (3) What contributions does tabea make to children's moral character, and what challenges and strategies are relevant for sustaining this local wisdom amid contemporary social change? Research Objectives. The study

aims to identify the moral values contained in tabea, analyze the mechanisms of its socialization to children, and explain its role in strengthening children's moral character while mapping key challenges and preservation strategies. Significance/Benefits. The findings are expected to enrich character education discourse by highlighting local wisdom as a contextual moral-learning resource, provide practical recommendations for parents, teachers, and community leaders, and support cultural preservation efforts that reinforce ethical social interaction among the younger generation.

In this context, moral education should be understood as a collective responsibility, not solely the duty of schools. Schools can certainly strengthen moral values through curriculum and instruction, but their impact will be greater when the same values are also practiced at home and in the community. The tabea culture has strong potential as an integrative bridge between formal and non-formal education: it becomes a tangible practice that connects respect, politeness, and togetherness through actions that children can easily learn. Through understanding and practicing tabea, children can learn to honor others, communicate ethically, and recognize social boundaries and norms that sustain communal life.

Against this background, this study aims to explore how tabea culture contributes to improving children's moral character in Guu Village, Batuatas District. The research is also intended to identify the noble values embedded in tabea and to examine strategies for its preservation in response to modernization and social change. Through this study, it is expected that local cultural practices such as tabea can be empowered more optimally as part of children's character education, while also strengthening cultural identity in ways that remain relevant to contemporary community life.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the process of internalizing moral values through the tabea cultural practice within children's social environments. Qualitative methods enable researchers to explore the meanings, understandings, and lived experiences of informants in the context of a culture that is actively practiced in the community. The research was conducted in Guu Village, Batuatas District, South Buton Regency, over a period of two months. The research participants included elementary school–aged children and customary leaders who are directly involved in the habituation of tabea within family and community settings. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, in line with Yin (2018), who emphasizes that multiple methods can be used to obtain data in qualitative research. Hallahan and Kauffman (2020) discuss data analysis procedures, including data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Patton (2019) argues that assessing data validity involves triangulation of sources and methods.

Findings and Discussion

Implementing Tabea as a Cultural Practice for Strengthening Children's Moral Character in Guu Village, Batuatas District, South Buton Regency

The findings indicate that tabea functions strategically as a culturally grounded medium for moral formation, particularly by cultivating politeness, humility, and respect toward others especially elders and socially respected figures. When introduced in early childhood through repeated practices within the home, school, and wider community, the moral values embedded in tabea are more readily internalized and manifested in children's everyday behavior.

Children are in a developmental stage in which value internalization is strongly shaped by their immediate environments. As the primary socialization agent, the family provides initial exposure to norms through modeling and habituation, while the community serves as a broader arena where moral expectations are reinforced through social interaction and collective supervision. In this context, local cultural practices become an effective instrument for moral education because values such as respect, responsibility, and empathy are conveyed in familiar, contextual forms through mother tongue expressions, customary activities, and socially meaningful routines rather than abstract moral instruction.

To explore how tabea is practiced and interpreted by children in Guu Village, in-depth interviews were conducted. The first child informant, La Ode Eje (10 years old), demonstrated a clear understanding of tabea as a marker of respect and propriety. He reported

using tabea when passing in front of elders, entering someone's house, or apologizing. He also emphasized that the practice was taught consistently by his parents from an early age:

> "I know tabea. When I want to pass in front of elders who are sitting, I say 'tabea'… My mother and father taught me since I was little… If I don't say it, people will say I have no manners." (La Ode Eje, 10)

This account illustrates that the child not only recognizes tabea as etiquette but also associates it with moral identity and community judgment. Importantly, parental reminders function as routine reinforcement, making tabea part of the child's moral self-concept and social behavior.(Harani, Sholihah, & Indrawati, 2021)

In contrast, the second child informant, Nafia (11 years old), revealed weaker internalization. She reported only occasional use of tabea and stated that her family rarely discussed or emphasized the practice. Her awareness increased only after being reprimanded by a neighbor for failing to demonstrate respect:

> "I've heard about it, but I don't really know what it means… Sometimes I say it, but I often forget… At home it's rarely discussed… I was scolded once, and then I realized it was important." (Nafia, 11)

This case suggests that without systematic habituation at home and consistent reinforcement in children's daily environments, local moral practices do not become internalized automatically. Although Nafia began to practice tabea afterward, the process remained tentative, indicating that moral learning requires sustained socialization rather than sporadic correction.(Retno et al., 2023)

The contrast between these two children highlights the critical role of consistent cultural habituation. A child raised in a household that actively models and reinforces tabea tends to display stronger moral clarity and behavioral consistency, whereas limited family reinforcement increases the likelihood of a "value gap" reflected in less stable manners and weaker adherence to local norms.

Insights from a customary leader further strengthened this interpretation. La Usman (56 years old) emphasized that tabea is not merely a spoken expression but a moral symbol embedded in the Butonese social value system. He explained that uttering tabea signifies humility and acknowledgement of ethical order, often accompanied by a gesture of touching the chest as an expression of sincerity:

> "Tabea is not just a greeting. For us, it is a symbol of respect… It contains values: honoring elders, humility, not being arrogant, and maintaining good relations. It aligns with religious teachings and customary norms." (La Usman, 56)

This perspective positions tabea as a form of living moral curriculum: a culturally encoded mechanism through which children learn respectful communication, social boundaries, and ethical interaction in ways that are both socially meaningful and locally legitimate. Overall, the results affirm that tabea operates as an effective instrument of moral education when embedded in consistent, collective practice.(Widiatmaka, Mujahidah, Rahmap, & Arifudin, 2023)

The Roles and Challenges of Families and Communities in Cultivating Tabea in Guu Village

The study also found that the transmission of tabea in Guu Village remains fundamentally collective. The family is the first environment where children learn and practice tabea, as parents, grandparents, and older relatives serve as role models and provide routine guidance. Children are encouraged to use tabea in everyday situations such as greeting neighbors, asking permission, and interacting with elders. This gradual habituation supports the development of respectful attitudes and socially responsible behavior from an early age.

Beyond the family, community members play an active role by reminding and correcting children when local etiquette is neglected. As one parent noted, moral supervision is shared, particularly during village events and daily neighborhood interactions:

> "Here, if a child is not polite, it's not only the parents who get angry—neighbors can also correct them… We all share responsibility." (Ani, 35)

Schools also have a reinforcing function. Teachers can strengthen local character education through modeling and daily routines, for instance encouraging students to say tabea to teachers and staff. Such school-based habituation helps integrate local wisdom into children's moral development in a manner that is relevant to their lived context.(Rahmah, Jamin, & Abidah, 2023)

However, several challenges were identified that threaten the sustainability of tabea as a moral socialization practice.

a. Declining Habituation in the Family.

A major challenge is reduced parental consistency in teaching tabea. Some parents, due to work demands and modern lifestyles, do not actively guide children to practice local etiquette. One adult informant explained:

> "Children today are not like before… Many parents, including me, sometimes forget to teach it because we are busy… If children are not habituated, they become less polite." (LA)

b. The Influence of Digital Media and Technology.

Another challenge arises from children's increasing exposure to digital culture. Mobile phones, online games, and social media may reduce children's engagement with local practices, especially when there is limited parental guidance. As one mother observed:

> "Children now play on their phones more than outside… They watch YouTube and play games, so they forget habits like tabea… We need cooperation from schools and the community." (Mr, 35)

c. Limited Institutional Integration in Schools.

Some informants indicated that schools have not optimally integrated local wisdom into learning processes due to curriculum pressures and an emphasis on core academic subjects. A teacher noted that tabea could be strengthened through daily routines, but it requires institutional and parental support:

> "The practice is not yet maximal… The curriculum focuses on core subjects, so local character education is not prioritized… We need support from school leadership and parents." (RN)

d. Shifting Social Patterns Toward Individualism.

Community members also reported a decline in collective responsibility for children's moral behavior. In the past, neighbors freely corrected children; today, some parents feel offended when others reprimand their children, weakening communal supervision:

> "Before, children were not only their parents' responsibility… Now many parents get offended if their child is corrected… If no one reminds each other, children won't learn." (FW)

Taken together, these challenges suggest that the weakening of tabea is not caused by a single factor but by interacting structural changes: reduced family habituation, digital cultural dominance, limited school integration, and the erosion of collective moral responsibility. Therefore, sustaining tabea requires a comprehensive strategy that involves coordinated roles among families, schools, customary leaders, and village governance.(Rahmah et al., 2023)

Conclusion

This study underscores that tabea is a significant instrument for strengthening children's moral character in Guu Village, Batuatas District, South Buton Regency. The findings demonstrate that the synergy of family, school, and community plays a decisive role in ensuring that tabea is internalized as a lived moral practice. When these social elements function together, local values can be transmitted effectively to younger generations. Nevertheless, multiple barriers including reduced family-based habituation, insufficient school integration, and the influence of external cultures through media and technology pose serious challenges to the continuity of tabea. Consequently, sustaining tabea requires collective awareness and coordinated action across formal education and community life. Preserving this cultural practice is not merely about maintaining tradition; it is also a strategic effort to build a generation rooted in local identity and capable of practicing respectful, ethical conduct amid contemporary social change.

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