



The Symbolic Meaning of Traditional Clothing from Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai in Strengthening Indonesia's Cultural and National Identity in the Modern Era

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Article Info

ISSN (Online): 2582-7138

Impact Factor (RSIF): 7.98

Volume: 06

Issue: 05

September - October 2025

Received: 03-07-2025

Accepted: 05-08-2025

Published: 26-08-2025

Page No: 285-289

Abstract

Traditional clothing serves as a cultural symbol that reflects the identity, social values, and local wisdom of a community. This study analyzes traditional attire from three regions—Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai—as manifestations of Indonesia's rich cultural heritage. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students from these regions who are currently living away from their hometowns, as well as through literature review. The findings reveal that *Towe Songke* (Manggarai), *Baju Cele* (Maluku), and *Baru Oholu/Isito* (Nias) feature motifs and colors rich in philosophical meaning and are still worn in contemporary contexts. The study recommends the integration of cultural values into education and the development of the creative industry as strategies for cultural preservation. It concludes that traditional clothing functions as a form of living heritage that both strengthens cultural identity and remains adaptable to modern changes.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMRGE.2025.6.5.285-289>

Keywords: Traditional Clothing, Cultural Value, National Identity

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a country rich in culture, reflected in the diversity of traditional clothing of each ethnic group. Traditional clothing not only serves to cover the body but also embodies cultural values, history, and identity of a society. This study examines the diversity of traditional clothing from three regions: Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai, as a representation of the richness of Indonesian culture. The focus of this research is to analyze the motifs and cultural values contained in these traditional clothes and their role in strengthening national identity. Indonesian culture is the result of the accumulation of the wealth of tribes spread throughout the region, and is influenced by historical factors, traditions, and customs of past societies. Traditional culture is reflected in various cultural products that contribute to the growth of the creative economy. Its impact not only strengthens the national image and identity but also stimulates innovation and creativity of the younger generation. As a country rich in local culture, all stakeholders need to collaborate in efforts to preserve and develop cultural heritage sustainably. This is crucial to ensure that the noble values that constitute the identity of the Indonesian nation are maintained for future generations (Kasman, 2020) ^[4].

The importance of preserving and understanding Indonesia's rich culture, particularly traditional clothing, as part of national identity. The traditional clothing of Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai was chosen because each has unique motifs, designs, and philosophical meanings that reflect local wisdom. However, as time goes by, the younger generation's understanding of these cultural values is fading. Therefore, this study aims to uncover the meaning and cultural values contained in these traditional clothing. Student Insights into Traditional Clothing in Indonesia states that students' understanding of Indonesian traditional clothing is still limited. To improve this, the role of institutions is needed through programs to introduce traditional clothing. In addition, preservation efforts in the academic realm can be carried out by encouraging research on traditional clothing, especially those less well-known among students (Apriliyani, D., 2024) ^[2].

The theories used include three theories: cultural theory, national identity theory, and semiotics to analyze the motifs and symbols found in traditional clothing. Cultural theory helps understand how traditional clothing represents the social and spiritual values of the community, while national identity theory is used to examine the contribution of traditional clothing in shaping national identity, and semiotics to unravel the literal and symbolic meanings of the motifs, colors, and accessories of traditional clothing. Each traditional clothing, such as the traditional clothing of Manggarai, Nias, and Maluku, has a philosophical value or meaning in each motif and color. Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Manggarai is described as one of the regions in East Nusa Tenggara rich in ikat weaving culture. This woven fabric has various motifs, each containing philosophical values that reflect the beliefs of the local community. In Manggarai, ikat woven fabric is known as Towe Songke, which is the handiwork of Manggarai women passed down from generation to generation. The characteristic of Towe Songke is a black base color with motifs full of meaning. However, not all Manggarai women are able to weave Towe Songke because this skill is only possessed by certain people.

Juita, T's (2022) ^[3] research identified several main motifs, such as wela runu, ranggong, wela kaweng, ntala, su'i, and jok. The traditional Nias women's clothing called öröba si'öli is dominated by three main colors, namely gold/yellow, black, and red. Each color has a deep philosophical meaning, reflecting the noble values inherited from ancestors to shape the character of the next generation.

For example, the color gold/yellow symbolizes wealth, prosperity, glory, success, and nobility, the color red depicts courage, responsibility, and deep love, the color black symbolizes steadfastness in achieving ideals, fertility of the land, sadness, and vigilance.

In addition to color, this clothing is also adorned with unique motifs and patterns that signify social status and a brave spirit. Accessories such as gold, copper, and brass jewelry further enhance the uniqueness of this traditional attire, making it a means of visually transmitting cultural values (Zalukhu, E.E.S., 2024) ^[10].

Cele traditional clothing, like traditional attire from other regions, has distinctive characteristics. Interestingly, the color of the top worn can reflect the social standing and status of the woman wearing it. Red is worn by unmarried women or brides. Meanwhile, married women usually choose green. For women with grandchildren, the preferred colors are white or maroon. The bright colors dominant in Cele clothing reflect the vigor, assertiveness, and vivacity of the Maluku women who wear them.

In today's society, particularly the younger generation, has significantly diminished understanding of the cultural values inherent in the traditional clothing of Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai. Furthermore, the lack of documentation and in-depth research on the motifs and philosophical meanings of these traditional garments also poses a challenge to cultural preservation efforts. To address these challenges, this study will conduct an in-depth analysis of the motifs, designs, and cultural values inherent in the traditional clothing of Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the motifs and cultural values contained in the traditional clothes of Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai and to identify the role of traditional clothes in strengthening national identity, and also to provide

recommendations for the preservation and development of traditional clothes as part of Indonesia's cultural heritage.

This research is expected to contribute to efforts to preserve the richness of Indonesian culture and strengthen national identity through a deep understanding of traditional clothing as a symbol of national pride.

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the data in depth. The research location is in Banyumas Regency, Central Java Province, with the implementation time from April 1-15, 2025. The main data collection technique used is semi-structured interviews, in which the researcher asks a number of open-ended questions to informants to obtain in-depth and relevant information (Moelong, 2018). The focus of this study is to examine the diversity of traditional clothing from three ethnic groups, namely Manggarai, Nias, and Maluku, as part of the national cultural heritage. In addition, this study also explores efforts to preserve traditional clothing among the younger generation, the manufacturing process, and price factors in marketing. To strengthen the validity of the data, the researcher conducted interviews with students from the three regions. It is hoped that their participation can provide an authentic perspective on cultural values, preservation challenges, and the dynamics of production and commercialization of traditional clothing in the modern era.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Four structured questions were asked to each participant from the study areas—Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai—designed to gain in-depth information about traditional clothing, including analysis of motifs, cultural values, and its role in strengthening national identity.

The data obtained from this interview is the main basis for answering the research problem formulation related to traditional clothing as part of the cultural richness of the archipelago.

To find out the meaning of the traditional clothing of NTT Manggarai, the author interviewed a female student with the initials VW (20 years old), who comes from Lamba Keli Village, Lamba Leda Timur District, East Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province.

To find out the meaning of traditional clothing from Nias, the author interviewed a student with the initials NH (20 years old), who comes from Nias, Lahusa 1 Village, Lahusa District, South Nias Regency, North Sumatra Province.

In order to find out about the meaning of Maluku traditional clothing, the author interviewed a female student with the initials MF (20 years old), who comes from Lorulun Village, Wertambrian District, Tanimbar Islands Regency, Southwest Maluku Province.

The following is a discussion of the interview results from the 3 regions, (Manggarai, Maluku, and Nias)

The Symbolic Meaning of Manggarai Traditional Clothing
Manggarai Woven Cloth, or better known as Towe Songke, was explained by a respondent with the initials VW (20 years old) from Lamba Keli Village, Lamba Leda Timur District, East Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province. As the most famous traditional clothing of the Manggarai people, Towe Songke is often worn in various traditional ceremonies, including kenduri, musyawarah, and wedding processions. In

the Manggarai wedding tradition, this cloth plays a role as a *belis* or a form of dowry which in Javanese culture is usually called *mahar*. The process of making *Towe Songke* is done manually using traditional weaving techniques. The work takes about one month, although some skilled craftsmen can complete it in two weeks. The selling price of *Towe Songke* varies, starting from IDR 800,000.00 to IDR 1,500,000.00 per unit. In fact, currently there are some woven works that are sold for prices reaching IDR 2,000,000.00 due to their artistic value and the complexity of their creation.

According to a respondent with the initials VW, *Towe Songke* has a black base color with various motifs rich in meaning. And he stated that there are seven motifs on this woven fabric: *su'l*, *mata manuk* (chicken's eye), *wela kaweng*, *wela runu*, *ntala* (star), *ranggong*, and *jok*. Each motif contains a different philosophy and life values, but what he understands about the meaning of each motif is only four motifs, namely:

- **Su'l Motif:** This motif depicts the life of the Manggarai people, where all aspects of life are governed by strict customary norms and rules.
- **Mata Manuk Motif:** This symbol represents the sharpness of women's eyes, both physically and spiritually, including the eyes of the heart and conscience.
- **Jok Motif:** Its shape resembles a traditional Gendang house with a conical roof, symbolizing Manggarai culture and local wisdom.
- **Ntala Motif:** The star symbolizes hope for life to develop and achieve sky-high ideals.

According to VW respondents, deep pride in Manggarai traditional clothing is clearly expressed. This traditional attire is considered a cultural identity and ancestral heritage that the Manggarai people must continue to preserve. The existence of this traditional attire is seen as a way to honor traditional values while maintaining their relevance in the modern era. Based on this statement, the *Towe Songke* serves not only as a marker of cultural identity but also plays an active role in preserving traditions in the contemporary era. Research reveals that this traditional attire is still routinely worn in various important Manggarai community activities, including traditional ceremonies, wedding processions, and other cultural events. These findings demonstrate that the *Towe Songke* maintains its relevance while also serving as a medium for honoring the noble values inherited from our ancestors.

Respondents reported using the *Towe Songke* quite extensively in their daily lives. This traditional attire is often worn on various formal and informal occasions, including family gatherings, traditional feasts, and academic activities at school. Respondents shared specific experiences when they were required to wear traditional attire from their respective regions on campus. Furthermore, the *Towe Songke* is also the attire of choice for Christmas and Easter mass celebrations, demonstrating the adaptation of traditional values to a modern religious context.

The Symbolic Meaning of Maluku Traditional Clothing

Maluku Woven Cloth or better known as *Baju Cele* was explained by a respondent with the initials MF (20 years old) from Lorulun Village, Wertamrian District, Tanimbar Islands Regency, Southwest Maluku Province. As the most famous

traditional clothing of the Maluku people, *Baju Cele* is often worn in various traditional ceremonies, including welcoming guests, and wedding processions. In addition to displaying visual beauty, *Baju Cele* also reflects the identity, philosophy of life, and cultural values of the Maluku people. The process of making *Baju Cele* is done manually using traditional weaving techniques. The work takes about one month, although some skilled craftsmen are able to complete it within one month. The selling price of *Baju Cele* varies, starting from IDR 800,000.00 to IDR 1,800,000.00 per unit. According to a respondent with the initials MF, the *Cele* shirt has a white base color with various motifs rich in meaning. Some of the motifs found on this woven fabric include geometric lines or symmetrical squares. Each motif embodies a different philosophy and life values.

- **Cele checkered motif:** The most distinctive motif of the *cele* shirt is a symmetrical checkered pattern that represents order and harmony.
- **Straight lines:** Signifies a straight path in life and hard work.
- **Salawaku motif:** Sometimes used as an accessory on men's *cele* shirts, it symbolizes protection, courage, and honor.

According to respondent MF, she feels deep pride in Maluku traditional clothing because it is more than just clothing, but also a symbol of the identity and cultural heritage of the Maluku people. Through these garments, we can see the beauty of traditional art and the Maluku people's philosophy of life.

The respondent also explained that he had worn traditional Maluku clothing, namely *Baju Cele*, when holding a practical exam at school, where they were required to wear the clothes available at their place, namely *Baju Cele*.

Symbolic Meaning of Nias Traditional Clothing

Nias traditional clothing or in Nias language "*baru oholu*" for men, "*baru isito*" for women, explained by a respondent with the initials NH (20 years old) from Lahusa 1 Village, Lahusa District, South Nias Regency, North Sumatra Province. As the most famous traditional Nias clothing, "*baru oholu*" and "*baru isito*" are often worn during special events such as weddings, Nias cultural performances, and welcoming guests. The process of making Nias traditional clothing, made from *afasi niha* (cotton) this process is done by picking the cotton and taking the fibers, then the cotton fibers are spun into sewing thread after becoming thread then woven into cloth, the weaving process is done by crossing two sets of threads. The process of making Nias traditional clothing takes about one month, but can be done faster if the maker is professional. The selling price of Nias traditional clothing starts from IDR 1,000,000 per set.

According to the respondent with the initials NH, Nias traditional clothing has three basic colors, namely Black (Earth), Red (Blood), Yellow (Gold) with various motifs that are rich in meaning.

- **Black (earth):** symbolizes their homeland (*tano niha*) and fertile soil, as well as the fortitude of the Nias people.
- **Red (blood):** symbolizes the courage and ferocity of Nias warriors, as well as their clans and families.
- **Yellow (gold):** symbolizes wealth, nobility, and success.
- **Ni'ondrofi:** Star-shaped, flower-like, symbolizes wealth and good character.

- Ni'ohulayo: Triangular, spear-point-shaped, symbolizes the spirit and heroism of the Nias people.
- Ni'okindro: Diamond-shaped, symbolizes gold and wealth.
- Ni'osukhu: Comb-shaped, symbolizes a well-groomed noblewoman.

According to respondent NH, the deep pride we feel as Nias people is not only because of its beauty but also because it is a symbol of identity, and through traditional clothing we can show that we have our own uniqueness.

The respondent stated that he had worn traditional Nias clothing when taking part in an arts performance organized by their sub-district.

3.2. Discussion

Based on the interview results, traditional clothing from Manggarai (Towe Songke), Maluku (Baju Cele), and Nias (Baru Oholu and Baru Isito) not only function as traditional clothing, but also as cultural symbols that contain deep philosophical values. Cultural theory (Geertz, 1973) explains that traditional clothing is an expression of a system of meaning that is passed down from generation to generation, as seen in the Towe Songke motifs (Manggarai) which symbolize local wisdom, or the colors in Nias clothing that represent land, blood, and nobility.

Meanwhile, the theory of national identity (Anderson, 1983) emphasizes that traditional clothing plays a role in strengthening collective identity, as expressed by respondents who felt proud to wear regional clothing because it reflects their identity as part of the Nusantara culture.

From the perspective of semiotic theory (Barthes, 1967), the motifs and colors in traditional clothing act as signs that contain denotative and connotative meanings. For example, the symmetrical checkered motif on the Baju Cele (Maluku) is not merely a decorative pattern, but also symbolizes the order of community life. Similarly, the Ni'ondrofi (star) motif on Nias clothing symbolizes wealth and noble character. The use of traditional clothing in formal events (such as weddings, traditional ceremonies, or academic activities) shows that traditional values are maintained even in a modern context, in accordance with the concept of cultural globalization (Robertson, 1995).

4. Conclusion

The traditional clothing of Maluku, Nias, and Manggarai represents a cultural heritage rich in symbolic meaning. The motifs and colors reflect not only aesthetics but also the value systems that shape the cultural identity of the local communities. The use of traditional clothing by the younger generation in various contexts demonstrates the adaptive potential of tradition amidst the challenges of modernity. Preserving traditional clothing requires an integrative approach involving education, documentation of cultural meanings, and revitalization through the creative industry. Thus, traditional clothing can play a strategic role in strengthening Indonesian national identity in the era of globalization.

This research also reveals that the traditional clothing of Manggarai, Maluku, and Nias is not merely a traditional attribute, but also a medium for preserving cultural values, local identity, and a means of symbolic communication. Through an analysis of cultural theory, it is apparent that each

motif and color contains a philosophical message related to the lives of the people. Meanwhile, the theory of national identity explains the role of traditional clothing in strengthening pride as part of the Indonesian nation. A semiotic approach emphasizes that each design element in traditional clothing has a deep meaning that continues to be passed down. Thus, traditional clothing is not only a cultural heritage, but also a marker of the dynamics of society in maintaining local wisdom amidst the currents of modernization.

The traditional clothing of Manggarai, Maluku, and Nias holds profound meaning, far beyond its practical function as body covering. These traditional garments are a tangible reflection of noble values, outlooks on life, and cultural identities that have been passed down through generations.

Within their respective communities, traditional clothing serves as a marker of identity, distinguishing one tribe from another, and also serves as a means of conveying life values to the younger generation. Each motif and color on the Manggarai Songke Towe, Maluku Cele Baju, and Nias Baru Oholu and Baru Isito are not only beautiful to look at but also convey philosophical messages about the relationship between humans and nature, each other, and the Creator.

On a broader scale, the diversity of traditional clothing actually strengthens national unity. Uniquely, by appreciating the differences in each local culture, we better understand the true meaning of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). Traditional clothing is clear evidence that progress does not necessarily eliminate cultural richness.

Encouragingly, all three respondents in this study demonstrated a strong awareness of the importance of preserving traditional clothing. They continue to wear traditional attire at various modern events, proving that cultural heritage can remain relevant in the era of globalization.

Therefore, preservation efforts must encompass not only the storage of cultural objects but also the documentation of their meaning. Collaboration between the government, the community, and the younger generation is needed to develop creative ways to preserve this heritage, for example through education, cultural festivals, or the development of creative industries.

This research proves that traditional clothing is a living heritage that continues to evolve. Its preservation is not merely a remembrance of the past, but an investment in Indonesia's future, one that maintains its identity amidst changing times. Thus, traditional clothing will remain a source of national pride and a vital part of building a progressive Indonesian character that remains rooted in its own culture.

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