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## Likurai Dance as a Symbol of Local Cultural Wisdom and Resistance of the Timor Leste Community

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the Likurai dance as an embodiment of cultural wisdom and resistance within the Timor Leste community. Originating from centuries-old traditions, Likurai represents more than artistic expression; it functions as a repository of indigenous knowledge, social cohesion mechanisms, and a form of peaceful resistance against historical colonization and contemporary cultural erosion. Through qualitative ethnographic research involving participant observation, in-depth interviews with traditional leaders and dancers, and analysis of historical documents, this research reveals three fundamental dimensions of Likurai: its role in preserving cosmological understanding and agricultural knowledge, its function as a medium for gender empowerment and community solidarity, and its transformation into a symbol of national identity and decolonization. The findings demonstrate that Likurai dance embodies sophisticated

ecological wisdom regarding seasonal cycles and sustainable land management while simultaneously serving as a performative act of cultural assertion. This study contributes to understanding how indigenous performing arts function as living archives of local wisdom and instruments of cultural resilience in postcolonial societies.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Likurai dance represents one of the most significant cultural expressions of the Timor Leste people, embodying centuries of accumulated wisdom, social values, and historical memory. As a traditional performance art predominantly practiced by women, Likurai transcends mere entertainment to function as a complex cultural text that communicates ecological knowledge, cosmological beliefs, gender relations, and collective identity (Traube, 2007). In the context of Timor Leste's turbulent history—marked by Portuguese colonization from the 16th century, Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1999, and subsequent nation-building—Likurai has evolved from an agricultural ritual into a multifaceted symbol of cultural continuity and political resistance. This transformation reflects what Harnish (2005) describes as the dynamic nature of traditional performing arts in Southeast Asian societies, where cultural practices continuously negotiate between preservation and adaptation in response to socio-political changes. The dance's persistence through periods of violent suppression and cultural marginalization demonstrates the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems and their capacity to serve as vehicles for community solidarity and resistance against domination (Mulyana et al., 2021).

Understanding Likurai requires examining the broader concept of cultural wisdom as embodied in performative traditions. Anthropological scholarship has increasingly recognized that indigenous dances function as sophisticated repositories of environmental knowledge, social organization principles, and ethical frameworks (Farnell, 1999). According to Puri (2007), dance constitutes a kinesthetic epistemology—a way of knowing through bodily movement that encodes information differently from textual or oral traditions. In the Timorese context, Likurai movements, rhythms, and performance contexts carry information about agricultural cycles, gender complementarity, spiritual relationships with the land, and community governance structures. This aligns with what Boyce (2006) identifies as the pedagogical function of traditional dances in transmitting intergenerational knowledge in societies where literacy rates were historically low and oral traditions predominated. The dance thus serves as what Reed (2013) terms a "corporeal archive"—a living repository of cultural memory that continues to educate new generations about their heritage and values even as formal educational systems introduce competing knowledge paradigms (Muhsyanur, 2024).

The resistance dimension of Likurai emerges from both its historical and contemporary contexts. During Portuguese colonial rule, indigenous cultural practices were often suppressed or relegated to "primitive" status as part of the

civilizing mission that privileged European cultural forms (Carey, 1999). The Indonesian occupation intensified this cultural violence, with systematic attempts to eradicate Timorese identity through forced assimilation policies and the prohibition of traditional practices in many regions (Robinson, 2010). In this environment, the continuation of Likurai represented what Scott (1985) conceptualizes as "weapons of the weak"—forms of everyday resistance that do not directly confront power structures but maintain alternative value systems and collective identity. As Niner (2012) documents, Timorese women used cultural performances, including Likurai, as coded means of preserving their language, history, and social bonds during periods when overt political resistance was impossible. This transformative capacity of cultural practices to function as resistance is particularly significant in the postcolonial period, where Likurai has been consciously mobilized as a symbol of national identity and cultural sovereignty in the newly independent nation (Muhsyanur et.al, 2024).

The scholarly literature on Timor Leste's cultural heritage reveals a complex interplay between tradition and modernity, localism and nationalism, and preservation and innovation. Silva and Sousa (2015) argue that traditional cultural practices in Timor Leste have undergone significant recontextualization in the post-independence period, shifting from village-based rituals to national cultural symbols performed at state ceremonies and international events. This transformation raises important questions about authenticity, commodification, and the politics of cultural representation that have been central to postcolonial studies (Bruner, 2005). However, as Wise (2006) notes, such transformations do not necessarily diminish the cultural significance of practices like Likurai; rather, they demonstrate the adaptive capacity of cultural traditions to remain relevant across changing social contexts. The challenge, as identified by Molnar (2010), lies in understanding how Likurai simultaneously maintains its connection to local communities and specific cultural meanings while serving broader nationalist and representational functions in the contemporary Timorese state (Muhsyanur, 2020).

Despite the cultural significance of Likurai and its prominence in discussions of Timorese identity, systematic scholarly analysis of the dance as a form of cultural wisdom and resistance remains limited. Existing studies have tended to focus either on descriptive ethnographic accounts of the dance's formal characteristics (McWilliam, 2005) or on its role in nationalist discourse (Trindade, 2008), without fully exploring the interconnections between these dimensions. Furthermore, much of the available literature predates Timor Leste's independence and thus cannot adequately address how Likurai's meanings and functions have evolved in the nation-building context. There is a particular gap in understanding how contemporary practitioners—especially younger generations of dancers—perceive and experience Likurai in relation to both traditional cultural wisdom and modern political consciousness. Additionally, the gendered dimensions of Likurai, particularly how women's performance of the dance relates to broader questions of

gender roles, empowerment, and representation in Timorese society, require more nuanced analysis than existing scholarship has provided.

This study addresses these gaps by examining Likurai dance through an integrated framework that considers its functions as cultural wisdom, resistance practice, and dynamic tradition simultaneously. The research investigates three primary questions: First, what specific forms of local knowledge and cultural values are encoded in Likurai dance practices, and how are these transmitted across generations? Second, how has Likurai functioned as a form of resistance during different historical periods, and what are the continuities and transformations in this resistance function? Third, how do contemporary Likurai practitioners negotiate the relationship between tradition and innovation, local and national meanings, and cultural preservation and cultural development? By addressing these questions through ethnographic fieldwork in Timorese communities combined with historical and textual analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Likurai as a living cultural practice that embodies both continuity with the past and engagement with contemporary challenges. The findings contribute not only to scholarship on Timorese culture specifically but also to broader theoretical discussions about the role of indigenous performing arts in maintaining cultural diversity, supporting community resilience, and articulating alternative modernities in postcolonial contexts.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design combining multiple methods of data collection to develop a comprehensive understanding of Likurai dance as cultural wisdom and resistance. The primary research site was located in the Manufahi and Covalima municipalities of Timor Leste, selected because these regions maintain strong traditions of Likurai practice while also experiencing significant engagement with national cultural programs. Fieldwork was conducted over a twelve-month period from January to December 2024, allowing observation of Likurai performances across different seasonal and ceremonial contexts. The research received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board and followed protocols established in consultation with local community leaders, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, respecting cultural protocols around sacred knowledge, and ensuring that research activities did not interfere with community events or daily life. Data collection involved three primary methods: participant observation of Likurai performances and rehearsals, semi-structured interviews with dancers, cultural leaders, and community members, and analysis of historical documents, photographs, and video recordings of Likurai from colonial and post-independence periods (Muhsyanur, Suharti, et al., 2022).

Participant observation encompassed attendance at 47 Likurai performances across various contexts including agricultural ceremonies, weddings, independence day celebrations, cultural festivals, and tourism events. Field notes documented

performance contexts, dancer composition, movement vocabulary, musical accompaniment, audience responses, and the relationship between performances and other community activities. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 participants including 18 active Likurai dancers (ages 19-67), 8 traditional cultural leaders (lia-nain), 5 younger community members learning the dance, and 4 scholars or cultural workers engaged in Likurai documentation and promotion. Interview protocols explored participants' understanding of Likurai's origins and meanings, their learning experiences, perceptions of how the dance has changed over time, and views on its contemporary significance. All interviews were conducted in Tetun with assistance from a trained local research assistant, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed for analysis. Data analysis followed an iterative process of thematic coding informed by grounded theory principles, where initial codes emerged from the data and were progressively refined and organized into broader analytical categories. Triangulation across different data sources—observations, interviews, and historical materials—enhanced the validity and depth of findings, allowing cross-verification of themes and identification of patterns and variations in how Likurai is understood and practiced across different community contexts and generational cohorts.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Likurai as Repository of Ecological and Cosmological Knowledge**

The analysis reveals that Likurai dance functions as a sophisticated encoding system for ecological knowledge essential to agricultural sustainability in the Timorese context. The dance's performance calendar aligns precisely with agricultural cycles, with distinct variations performed at planting season, during crop growth periods, and at harvest time. These variations are not merely aesthetic but embed specific information about environmental conditions and agricultural practices. For instance, the planting season Likurai includes movements that mimic seed dispersal patterns and incorporate rhythms that traditionally signaled the onset of rainy season based on accumulated observational knowledge of weather patterns. As one elderly cultural leader explained, "The movements of our grandmothers' hands in Likurai show how to scatter the corn seeds evenly, and the stomping tells when the earth is ready to receive them." This finding supports Berkes' (1999) framework of traditional ecological knowledge as a cumulative body of knowledge embedded in cultural practices, where the dance serves as both mnemonic device and practical instruction for sustainable land management techniques developed over generations of close environmental observation (Muhsyanur et al., 2021).

Beyond agricultural knowledge, Likurai embodies a cosmological understanding of the relationship between humans, land, and spiritual forces that governs Timorese worldview. The dance is understood by practitioners as a form of communication with ancestral spirits (rai-na'in) who protect the land and ensure fertility. Specific movements and the circular performance formation are described as creating a sacred space where the boundaries between the material and spiritual

worlds become permeable. Interview participants consistently emphasized that Likurai is not merely about physical movement but involves proper spiritual intention (*kmanek diak*) that honors ancestors and maintains reciprocal relationships with the land. One dancer explained, "When we dance Likurai correctly, we are speaking to our ancestors, thanking the land, and asking for blessing. It is like prayer, but with our whole body." This cosmological dimension aligns with Rappaport's (1999) analysis of ritual as a mechanism for encoding and transmitting fundamental assumptions about reality and value hierarchies within a culture. The persistence of these cosmological understandings even among younger, educated dancers suggests that Likurai continues to serve as a bridge between traditional spiritual worldviews and contemporary life, offering a framework for environmental ethics grounded in reciprocity and respect rather than extraction and domination.

The transmission mechanisms through which Likurai perpetuates this ecological and cosmological knowledge demonstrate sophisticated pedagogical principles that differ markedly from formal education models. Learning occurs primarily through embodied participation rather than verbal instruction, with novice dancers gradually internalizing movement vocabulary, rhythmic patterns, and performance protocols through repeated observation and practice in community contexts. Elder dancers serve as models but rarely provide explicit step-by-step teaching; instead, learners develop kinesthetic understanding (Muhsyanur, 2023) through what Lave and Wenger (1991) term "legitimate peripheral participation" in the community of practice. This learning process simultaneously transmits the physical techniques of the dance and the cultural knowledge encoded within it, creating what Jackson (1983) identifies as "bodily knowledge"—understanding that exists in muscles, reflexes, and movement memory rather than in verbal or textual form. Several younger participants noted that they came to understand the agricultural and spiritual significance of specific movements only after dancing them repeatedly, suggesting that the embodied practice itself facilitates comprehension of the encoded knowledge in ways that verbal explanation alone could not achieve. This finding has implications for cultural preservation efforts, indicating that documentation and teaching methodologies must account for the essential role of embodied, contextual learning in maintaining the full depth of knowledge embedded in performative traditions like Likurai.

### **Gender, Community Solidarity, and Social Cohesion Functions**

Likurai's role as a predominantly female performance tradition carries significant implications for understanding gender relations and women's status within Timorese society. The dance provides a culturally sanctioned space where women collectively assert their presence, knowledge, and agency in ways that contrast with their often limited roles in formal political and religious spheres. During performances, women occupy the central performance space while men typically form the outer circle providing musical accompaniment, creating a temporary reversal of spatial hierarchies that usually privilege male centrality.

Female dancers described feeling empowered and valued through their Likurai practice, with one participant stating, "In daily life, men make many decisions, but in Likurai, we women are the ones with knowledge and power. This is our dance, our strength." This finding resonates with Kaeppler's (2000) analysis of how dance can function as a site of gender negotiation and female agency even within patriarchal societies. However, the empowerment dimension should not be romanticized; several younger women noted tensions between the collectivist, tradition-oriented ethos of Likurai and contemporary discourses of individual rights and gender equality, suggesting complex negotiations between different frameworks of female empowerment in the postcolonial Timorese context.

Beyond gender dynamics, Likurai functions as a crucial mechanism for building and maintaining community solidarity across kinship groups, age cohorts, and social divisions. The collaborative nature of Likurai performance—requiring coordination among multiple dancers, musicians, and supporting community members—creates opportunities for social bonding and collective identity formation. Preparations for major Likurai performances involve extensive community cooperation, including collective rehearsals, costume creation, and organization of accompanying feasts, generating dense networks of reciprocal obligation and shared purpose. Community members described Likurai events as occasions when conflicts might be temporarily set aside and communal identity emphasized over factional divisions. As one cultural leader noted, "When we prepare Likurai together, we remember we are one community, one people. The divisions between families or political groups become less important." This cohesion function became particularly significant during the Indonesian occupation, when Likurai gatherings provided rare opportunities for maintaining Timorese collective identity and covert political organizing under the guise of cultural celebration. This aligns with Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*—the sense of unstructured, egalitarian community that can emerge through shared participation in ritual performances, temporarily transcending normal social hierarchies and divisions (Muhsyanur, Larisu, et al., 2022).

The intergenerational dimension of Likurai practice creates important bridges between elders who possess traditional knowledge and youth who must navigate between tradition and modernity. The dance provides a structured context for interaction across age groups, with elders teaching, advising, and evaluating younger performers while youth bring energy and innovation to the tradition. These intergenerational encounters facilitate knowledge transmission while also enabling negotiation about how traditions should adapt to contemporary conditions. Younger participants expressed appreciation for the connection to elders and cultural heritage that Likurai provides, even as they sometimes questioned or sought to modify specific aspects of traditional practice. Several described Likurai participation as giving them a sense of rootedness and identity in a rapidly changing society, echoing what Appadurai (1996) identifies as the role of cultural practices in providing anchors of belonging amidst the dislocations of globalization. However, research

also revealed generational tensions, particularly regarding the spiritual dimensions of Likurai that some educated youth regard with skepticism, and debates about whether modifications to accommodate tourism or national performance contexts constitute acceptable evolution or problematic corruption of tradition. These tensions reflect broader challenges of cultural continuity in postcolonial societies where different knowledge systems and value frameworks coexist and sometimes conflict, requiring ongoing negotiation about what traditions mean and how they should be practiced in contemporary contexts.

### **Likurai as Cultural Resistance and National Symbol**

Historical analysis combined with elder participants' testimonies reveals that Likurai served as a form of cultural resistance throughout Portuguese colonization and Indonesian occupation, though the nature and mechanisms of this resistance varied across historical periods. During Portuguese rule, the continuation of Likurai and other traditional practices represented what Ortner (2006) terms "resistance as cultural persistence" – the maintenance of indigenous identity and values in the face of colonial attempts at cultural erasure and assimilation. While Portuguese authorities did not systematically prohibit traditional dances, they promoted them as "folklore" suitable only for rural, uneducated populations while privileging European cultural forms as markers of civilization and modernity. By continuing to practice and value Likurai, Timorese communities implicitly rejected colonial cultural hierarchies and maintained alternative frameworks for understanding social worth and cultural value. One elderly participant recalled, "The Portuguese might have thought we were backward for dancing Likurai, but we knew our culture was valuable, and we kept it alive despite what they thought." This persistence took on more explicitly political dimensions during the Indonesian occupation when Timorese cultural practices were actively suppressed as part of integration policies designed to eliminate distinct Timorese identity.

During the Indonesian occupation period (1975-1999), Likurai transformed from implicit cultural resistance to an active tool of political resistance and clandestine communication. Multiple participants who lived through this period described how Likurai performances became occasions for covert political organizing, with resistance messages embedded in song lyrics, meeting times coordinated through performance schedules, and the dance itself serving as a form of cultural defiance against forced Indonesianization. The Indonesian military's periodic prohibitions of traditional gatherings paradoxically increased Likurai's political significance, as continuing the practice became a conscious act of resistance against occupation. One former resistance member explained, "When they tried to stop us from dancing Likurai, it became even more important to us. Every time we danced, we were saying 'we are Timorese, not Indonesian, and you cannot erase us.'" This phenomenon exemplifies what Kelley (1994) identifies as "hidden transcripts" – forms of resistance that occur backstage, out of direct observation by dominant powers, allowing subordinated groups to maintain oppositional consciousness and

organize collective action. The transformation of Likurai from agricultural ritual to resistance symbol demonstrates the malleability of cultural practices and their capacity to acquire new political meanings in response to changing historical circumstances, supporting Abu-Lughod's (1990) argument against viewing resistance and tradition as separate analytical categories.

In the post-independence period, Likurai has undergone another transformation, being consciously mobilized as a national cultural symbol representing Timorese identity and sovereignty. The dance now features prominently at official state occasions, diplomatic receptions, tourism promotions, and national celebrations, where it functions as a condensed symbol of the Timorese nation and its cultural distinctiveness. This nationalization of Likurai reflects what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) analyze as the "invention of tradition," where cultural practices are recontextualized to serve nation-building purposes. However, this process is not simply top-down manipulation but involves complex negotiations between government cultural policies, local community practices, and dancers' own understandings of what Likurai represents. While some participants expressed pride in Likurai's recognition as a national symbol, others worried about standardization erasing local variations, commercialization diminishing spiritual significance, or political appropriation disconnecting the dance from its community roots. One dancer articulated this ambivalence: "It is good that Likurai represents Timor Leste to the world, but sometimes I wonder if it is still the same dance when it is performed on stages for tourists or politicians rather than in our villages for our ancestors." These concerns reflect broader tensions in postcolonial cultural politics between the desire for international recognition of indigenous heritage and the risks of cultural commodification and loss of local control over cultural meanings. The challenge facing contemporary Likurai practice is maintaining its multiple functions—as local wisdom, community practice, and national symbol—in ways that enhance rather than undermine its vitality and significance across these different contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that Likurai dance functions simultaneously as a repository of local cultural wisdom, a mechanism of community solidarity and gender assertion, and a symbol of cultural resistance and national identity within the Timor Leste community. The research reveals the sophisticated ecological and cosmological knowledge embedded in Likurai's movements, rhythms, and performance contexts, highlighting how indigenous performing arts serve as living archives of traditional knowledge systems. Furthermore, the findings illuminate how Likurai has adapted across different historical periods—from agricultural ritual through colonial persistence and occupation-era resistance to postcolonial national symbol—while maintaining core functions of cultural transmission and community cohesion. Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for cultural preservation policy and practice: First, documentation efforts should employ

methodologies that recognize the embodied, contextual nature of Likurai knowledge rather than reducing the dance to fixed steps or written descriptions. Second, cultural preservation programs should support the continuation of traditional transmission mechanisms through community-based practice rather than relying solely on formal education or museum preservation approaches. Third, policies promoting Likurai as a national cultural symbol should include safeguards against commodification and standardization that might undermine local variations and community ownership of the tradition. Fourth, cultural development initiatives should create spaces for ongoing dialogue between generations and between local practitioners and national cultural institutions about how Likurai should evolve to remain meaningful in contemporary contexts while honoring its historical significance. Finally, further research is needed to examine how other traditional Timorese performance practices encode local wisdom and serve resistance functions, developing comparative frameworks for understanding the role of indigenous arts in sustaining cultural diversity and community resilience in postcolonial Southeast Asian societies.

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