



# Ite Kakang Aring: Symbolism and Kinship in the Traditional Lego-Lego Dance

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**Keywords:** Lego-Lego Dance, Cultural Preservation, Traditional Dance.

**Abstract:** The symbolic depth of traditional dances is increasingly threatened by modernization and cultural erosion, particularly in small indigenous communities such as Alor Kecil. This study addresses the problem of diminishing cultural meaning by exploring how symbolic interactions and song lyrics within the Lego-Lego dance reflect and sustain the cultural philosophy of *Ite Kakang Aring*, a local concept emphasizing unity, kinship, and collective responsibility among clans. Using ethnographic methods that include participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, the research analyzes ritual performances of *Beku Hada (Juba Dodo)* through symbolic interaction and interpretive analysis of lyrics. Findings show that ritual stages such as *Geke Faking*, *Juba Dodo*, and *Tuho Muko* act as social instruments reinforcing inter-clan cohesion. Song lines like “*Rua kakang aring ari nolo nai apa nolo nai*” and “*Amang bapang tulung taling feking*” articulate the principles of kinship and mutual support. The seven symbolic rotations in the dance correspond to the seven clans of Alor Kecil, encoding both sociopolitical structure and collective identity. The study concludes that the Lego-Lego dance functions as a living traditional practice that preserves cultural identity, promotes social harmony, and ensures intergenerational continuity.

## Introduction

The erosion of traditional cultural expressions in the face of globalization poses a significant threat to Indonesia's intangible heritage (1, 2). According to UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, communities play a central role in maintaining living traditions through transmission, performance, and collective participation (3). Within this global framework, the *Lego-Lego* dance of Alor Kecil stands as a vital form of intangible heritage, embodying deep communal values of kinship and unity through the philosophy of *ite kakang aring* literally, “we are siblings” (4-6). This principle expresses a worldview of interdependence and mutual responsibility that historically strengthened social cohesion among Alor's multiethnic communities.

However, like many traditional practices across Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), *Lego-Lego* faces marginalization under the pressures of modernization and technological globalization (7). The rise of digital media, consumer culture, and homogenized entertainment has reduced the relevance of ritual performances in daily life, especially among younger generations (8, 9). Comparable traditions such as *Caci* in Flores or *Seka* in Lembata face similar challenges, where ritual meaning is increasingly replaced by touristic or performative functions (10). According to Zakiah et al. (2019), awareness and understanding of local traditional arts among youth in eastern Indonesia have significantly

declined, with many perceiving such practices as less relevant to modern lifestyles (11). This trend highlights the urgency of revitalizing not only the form but also the meaning of traditional performances as living systems of knowledge (12, 13).

Despite national and regional policies on cultural preservation, including the National Strategy for Intangible Cultural Heritage aligned with UNESCO guidelines, the intergenerational transmission of *Lego-Lego* remains fragile (14). While previous ethnographic studies have documented *Lego-Lego* in several Alor communities, most have focused on descriptive aspects of performance such as form, movement, or ritual setting without an in-depth analysis of its semiotic and clan-specific symbolism. This study differs by examining *Lego-Lego* within Alor Kecil, a Muslim-majority village where adaptation of ritual forms and meanings reflects negotiation between tradition and faith. It employs symbolic interactionism and semiotic analysis to interpret the communicative meanings encoded in dance gestures, song lyrics, and ceremonial context, thereby revealing how *ite kakang aring* operates as a dynamic system of values rather than a static cultural motif.

By addressing this gap, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how symbolic interpretation within *Lego-Lego* sustains community identity and moral order amid rapid cultural change. It also offers an analytical basis for integrating cultural preservation efforts with community-

based education and performance revitalization in NTT.

## Methodology

### Study Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design to explore the symbolic meaning of *Ite Kakang Aring* within the Lego-Lego dance performed by the Alor Kecil community in East Nusa Tenggara. Epistemologically, the study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that cultural reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' lived experiences, symbolic actions, and shared. Ethnography was chosen due to its effectiveness in capturing the depth of cultural practices, lived experiences, and symbolic interpretations through immersion in the community.

### Study Site and Duration

Fieldwork was conducted in Alor Kecil Village, Alor Barat Laut District, Alor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The research spanned two months, from April 9 to June 24, 2024..

### Participants and Sampling

Participants were purposively selected based on their involvement and knowledge of the Lego-Lego dance, particularly those with deep cultural and ritual insight. These included village leaders, traditional elders, musicians, and performers. Key informants were identified through community recommendations and included the village adat leader (Karim Antoni), senior cultural custodians (Amin Marweki, Abdul Samad Marweki), and dance practitioners (Jamal Niwang, Fatima Kokola). The inclusion of five key informants was determined by data saturation when no new symbolic or interpretive themes emerged and by ensuring diversity of perspectives across generational and ritual roles. This sampling approach ensured interpretive depth and cultural representativeness.

### Data Collection methods

Data for this ethnographic study were collected through three complementary methods designed to ensure the richness, depth, and reliability of cultural interpretation. These included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.

First, participant observation was conducted over an extended period, allowing the researcher to immerse in the daily life and ritual practices of the Alor Kecil community. The researcher directly participated in cultural events and observed the Lego-Lego dance performances, with particular focus on the symbolic interactions that occurred before, during, and after the dance. Observational data encompassed non-verbal cues such as body gestures, movement patterns, costume usage, musical accompaniment, and interpersonal dynamics. These observations were systematically recorded in detailed field notes for further analysis.

Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the participants' perceptions of the symbolic meanings embedded within the dance. Interviews were conducted with selected key informants, including traditional leaders, elders, musicians, and dancers, all of whom possessed firsthand knowledge of the ritual and cultural significance of the Lego-Lego performance. The interviews, each lasting approximately 45 to 90 min, were audio-

recorded with prior informed consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

Third, document analysis was employed to triangulate and support the empirical findings. This included the examination of archival materials, traditional scripts, community records, photographs, and ritual artifacts relevant to the performance of Lego-Lego. These documents provided contextual background and served as supplementary data to validate the observed and narrated symbolic elements within the dance tradition.

Through this triangulated approach, the research ensured methodological rigor and a holistic understanding of the symbolic framework inherent in the Lego-Lego dance and its connection to *Ite Kakang Aring*.

### Instruments and Tools

Fieldwork utilized voice recorders, a digital camera, observation sheets, and transcription software. NVivo was used for data coding and thematic categorization.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's qualitative analysis model: [1] data reduction by organizing and coding transcripts, [2] data display through visual mapping of symbolic themes, and [3] conclusion drawing through interpretive synthesis of emerging meanings and symbolic associations. The analysis was framed within Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism and Charles Morris's Semiotics to identify both verbal and non-verbal sign systems embedded in the dance.

To ensure credibility, methodological triangulation was conducted to enhance interpretive validity rather than verification, allowing multiple data sources to illuminate different aspects of the same cultural phenomenon. Member checking was conducted by revisiting key informants to confirm interpretations. An audit trail was maintained for transparency.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Da'wah, UIN Salatiga. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Sensitive cultural information, particularly relating to *Beku Hada* (sacred ritual aspects), was handled with strict confidentiality and in accordance with local adat restrictions.

## Results

### Lego-Lego Dance: A Symbol of Unity in Alor-Pantar

Lego-Lego is a traditional communal dance originating from the Alor-Pantar Islands in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Performed in a circular formation by both men and women holding hands, the dance transcends religious, ethnic, gender, and social boundaries. This multi-ethnic performance is guided by one or two *juru pukong* (elderly male chant leaders), who lead the traditional chants or songs recounting ancestral history, tribal migrations, and values of mutual respect and religious harmony.

Typically performed by dozens to hundreds of participants, Lego-Lego accompanies various communal events, such as opening new farmland, harvest celebrations, preparation for hunting, construction of traditional houses or places of worship, circumcision rituals (*Sunna Hada*), weddings, and welcoming ceremonies. The circular formation



**Figure 1.** Participants of the Lego-Lego dance forming a circle during the *Beku Hada* ceremony conducted by the (A) Manglolong and (B) Baorae clans in Alor Kecil Village.

symbolizes unity, collective strength, and mutual cooperation, values deeply embedded in the community's worldview (see **Figure 1**).

In Alor Kecil Village, where seven major clans coexist (Baorae, Lekaduli, Manglolong, Mudiloang, Gaeilae, Makassar, and Alukae), the performance often features the "Juba Dodo" sequence with chants like *Laira*, *Liling*, *Hanja*, *Dakaserang*, culminating in *Osang Balobe*. These verses emphasize solidarity, kinship, and territorial expansion, serving both as oral history and a tool for strengthening social cohesion.

### Geographical and Social Profile of Alor Kecil Village

Alor Regency is situated in the northeastern part of East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. The region comprises three major islands and six smaller ones, with geographic coordinates between  $08^{\circ}08'86''$  and  $08^{\circ}57'35''$  south latitude and  $123^{\circ}80'37''$  to  $125^{\circ}10'60''$  east longitude. Spanning an area of  $2,928.88 \text{ km}^2$ , Alor's terrain is characterized by a mix of mountainous landscapes and coastal zones. Administratively, the regency is divided into 17 districts: 11 on Alor Island, 1 on Pura Island, and 5 on Pantar Island. This geographical and cultural diversity makes Alor a region rich in ethnic, linguistic, and religious heritage.

This study was conducted in Alor Kecil Village, located in the northwestern coastal area of Alor Island, within the Alor Barat Laut District. The village covers approximately 132 hectares and is bounded by Levo Kisu to the east, the Pantar Strait to the west, Alor Besar to the north, and Kabola Bay to the south. Geographically, Alor Kecil is situated along the shoreline beneath hilly terrain and directly faces Kepa Island. A notable ecological event occurs annually in the sea channel known as *Mulut Kumbang*, where the convergence of cold ocean currents leads to mass fish deaths. Despite being designated as a marine tourism village, Alor Kecil experiences extreme drought during the dry season, which poses significant challenges to daily activities.

Administratively, the village consists of three hamlets (*dusun*), each divided into two community units (*RW*) and four neighborhood units (*RT*), reflecting a basic but functional local governance structure.

As of June 2024, Alor Kecil had a population of 1,670, comprising 820 males and 850 females, across 483 households. The entire population adheres to Islam,

indicating religious homogeneity in a culturally diverse setting. The age distribution reveals that the majority belong to the productive age group (16-59 years), which plays a central role in supporting the village's economic and social activities.

Employment data indicate that most residents work as fishermen or farmers, while others serve as civil servants, healthcare workers, or entrepreneurs. This composition highlights the village's reliance on primary sectors, along with emerging occupational diversity.

To explore local cultural practices, several key informants were engaged, individuals recognized for their deep understanding of Alor Kecil's traditions. A designated cultural spokesperson was officially appointed by the *Ketua Adat* (customary leader) to provide insights into the village's customary life. The informants included Karim Antoni (61), the traditional leader and entrepreneur; Amin Marweki (54), a fisherman and cultural expert; Jamal Niwang (45), a traditional drum (*tambur*) player; Fatimah Kokola, S.Pd (52), a schoolteacher and *Liang Pukong* (traditional lyricist); and Abdul Samad Marweki (91), the village elder and retired public utility worker.

### Symbolic Meaning of Attributes in the Lego-Lego Dance

Attributes are an essential element of traditional dance, serving not only as aesthetic accessories but also as conveyors of symbolic, non-verbal meaning. In the Lego-Lego dance of Alor Kecil, each attribute worn by the performers carries deep cultural and social significance, reflecting hierarchy, lineage, and tribal identity.

#### Pajong Pute

*Pajong Pute* (sacred umbrella) is used to shade princesses or female members of the royal families of the Baorae and Manglolong clans (see **Figure 2A** and **2B**). This signifies reverence toward royal lineage and is typically displayed during ceremonial performances.

#### Juba

*Juba* (headdress) is worn by women from royal households. The Baorae women wear a headdress with a seven-meter tail, while those from the Manglolong clan wear a shorter, three-span version (see **Figure 2C** and **2D**).



**Figure 2.** Comparison of traditional headdresses: Pajong Pute from the Manglolong (A) and Baorae (B) tribes, and Juba (crown) from the Manglolong (C) and Baorae (D) tribes.



**Figure 3.** Moisala (guard) of the Baorae tribe (A); Uma Tukang (B); Kafate and shawl for female (C) and male (D) dancers; and Sunjiri (long machete) (E-F).

#### Moisala

Moisala (headband) is worn by all male dancers. The style and color vary: red is reserved for Baorae warriors who guard royal women, while other clans wear different colors. The Manglolong clan ties the ends to the sides, whereas other groups let them hang in front (see Figure 3A and 3B).

#### Kafate and selendang

Kafate (woven sarong) and selendang (shawl) are traditional Lamaholot attire worn by all dancers, representing inherited tribal identity (Figure 3C and 3D).

#### Sunjiri

Sunjiri (long machete) is used by scouts or guards, particularly from the Uma Sina of the Baorae clan, emphasizing readiness and protection in ceremonial contexts (Figure 3E and 3F).

These attributes are not merely decorative but serve as material expressions of social structure, gender roles, and ancestral heritage within the performance.

#### The Symbolic Meaning of Lyrics in the Lego-Lego Dance

The lyrics of the Lego-Lego dance function as powerful cultural expressions that unify the community. These verses are not merely aesthetic compositions, but serve as carriers of moral, social, and spiritual messages. The opening stanzas, often addressed to the Manglolong and Lekaduli clans, act as ceremonial calls to assemble for traditional rituals. Subsequent lyrics emphasize communal pride, moral responsibility, and the importance of maintaining ancestral ties even in diaspora.

The closing chant, known as *Juba Dodo*, marks the arrival of the royal consort adorned with ceremonial regalia, accompanied by drum beats and collective singing. The lyrics, though not strictly adhering to syntactic conventions (such as the Subject-Predicate-Object structure), reflect a distinct local linguistic style.

Syntactically, the verses display fluid structures, while semantically they combine literal meanings (calls, labor, prayers) with deeper connotations of unity, identity, and ancestral reverence. Pragmatically, the lyrics are deeply embedded in ritual performance, functioning in tandem with dance movements to convey communal cohesion and sacred narrative continuity.

#### The Cultural Value of Ite Kakang Aring

The concept of *Ite Kakang Aring*, literally "brotherhood and sisterhood", embodies one of the most profound cultural philosophies of the Alor Kecil community. Rooted in oral history, the term narrates the origin of three siblings, Sakubalanduli, Malabaubuli, and Alabaubuli, who arrived in Alor Kecil by boat. During their journey, the eldest sought food on the coast, and upon his return, the younger siblings had been swept away by currents, one to West Pantar, the other to Flores. This tale forms the foundation of *Ite Kakang Aring*, a reminder that separated siblings still share kinship across seas and islands.

In Alor Kecil, *Ite Kakang Aring* functions as a cultural framework that guides interpersonal relationships, emphasizing unity, familial closeness, and mutual respect across communities. It serves not only as historical memory but also as a moral compass in fostering social solidarity and coexistence in diversity.

#### The Symbolic Meaning of Ite Kakang Aring in the Lego-Lego Dance

The Lego-Lego dance of Alor Kecil embodies profound symbolic meaning, especially in relation to the cultural concept of *Ite Kakang Aring*, a representation of familial bonds, brotherhood, unity, and mutual cooperation. Despite its simple movements, the dance conveys deep messages of collective identity, social cohesion, and ancestral reverence.

Dancers form a circle, linking arms and moving in seven rotations, symbolizing the seven clans of Alor Kecil: Baorae, Manglolong, Uma Sina, Makassar, Geilae, Lekaduli, and Mudiloang (see Figure 4). This circular pattern serves as a



**Figure 4.** Representation of familial closeness in the circular formation of the Lego-Lego dance (A), and the Geke Faking ritual (B), depicting the symbolic invitation from the Manglolong and Lekaduli clans for others to join the Baorae in ceremonial affairs.

visual metaphor for unity and interconnectedness among the community.

The principle of *Ite Kakang Aring* is also embodied through symbolic interactions across three ritual stages. Before the performance, a process known as *Geke Faking* occurs, where allied clans invite others to participate in assisting the Baorae clan in ceremonial duties.

During the dance, the *Juba Dodo* procession signifies the entrance of the royal consort into the dance arena, representing solidarity between the monarchy and the people. After the performance, *Tuho Muko*, the act of distributing ceremonial gifts or payments, reinforces communal gratitude and reciprocal respect.

Ultimately, the Lego-Lego dance serves not only as a cultural performance but as a living expression of Alor Kecil's social values, preserving intergenerational wisdom and maintaining harmony within the community.

## Discussion

### Symbolic Interaction in the Lego-Lego Dance

The Lego-Lego dance, locally known as *Beku*, represents a significant cultural tradition in Alor Regency (15-17). A distinct variation of this dance, *Beku Hada* or *Juba Dodo*, which translates to "the king's attire descends", is unique to the community of Alor Kecil and is performed exclusively during sacred ceremonies (18). Despite differences in how the dancers form the circle, ranging from interlinked pinkies in coastal areas to shoulder grips or elbow holds in mountainous regions, the underlying symbolism remains consistent across the island: unity, kinship, and collective solidarity.

In Alor Kecil, *Beku Hada* accompanies major community events such as circumcision rituals (*Sunna Hada*), traditional house construction, and mosque building. These performances function as ritual acts that mark the culmination of collective labor and reaffirm communal gratitude (19). The interaction unfolds through three ritual stages: *Geke Faking*, *Juba Dodo*, and *Tuho Muko*. In *Geke Faking*, the Manglolong and Lekaduli clans, symbolic siblings forbidden to intermarry, invite other clans to collaborate in ceremonial preparation, expressing mutual responsibility (20). The *Juba Dodo* procession follows, symbolizing the royal consort's participation, escorted by royal aides and guards, while seven ceremonial rotations signify the unity of Alor

Kecil's seven clans. Finally, *Tuho Muko* represents thanksgiving, where symbolic gifts are distributed to express reciprocity and balance among clans (21).

From a sociological standpoint, these ritualized gestures embody Durkheim's (1912) concept of social solidarity, in which shared ritual participation sustains moral unity and collective emotion (22). Each stage reaffirms communal interdependence through symbols, gestures, and music. The repeated circular movement becomes both a physical and spiritual metaphor of wholeness, an act that creates unity rather than merely representing it (23). Selected photographs, such as **Figure 2** and **Figure 8** visually support this interpretation by showing the dancers' formation and spatial orientation that reflect collective harmony and social balance within the ritual.

### The Meaning of the Lego-Lego Dance Lyrics and *Ite Kakang Aring*

The lyrics performed during the *Lego-Lego* dance serve as oral poetry that articulates the moral philosophy of *Ite Kakang Aring* the principle of siblinghood, unity, and collective responsibility. Each verse transmits inherited wisdom and reinforces kinship among Alor Kecil's clans (5). The lyrics are not simply songs but ethical messages embedded in everyday language and collective rhythm. They preserve values of cooperation and mutual care that guide community interaction. The lyrics are not simply songs but ethical messages embedded in everyday language and collective rhythm. They preserve values of cooperation and mutual care that guide community interaction (4).

In sacred ceremonies such as *Beku Hada*, the chants differ from casual performances by emphasizing ancestral memory and moral duty. For example, the phrase "Rua kakang aring ari nolo nai apa nolo nai" ("We are siblings, wherever we go, we remain one") has both literal and symbolic meaning. Denotatively, it invites cooperation and unity in action, while connotatively, it communicates a spiritual reminder of kinship and shared destiny. This double meaning reinforces how the community perceives moral obligation as an inherited spiritual truth. Similarly, "Amang bapang tulung taling feking" (Father and brothers, lend your strength) expresses both practical and emotional solidarity. The denotative sense refers to physical cooperation in communal labor, while the connotative sense conveys

empathy, loyalty, and moral unity. Such linguistic patterns show how repetition and rhythm transform ordinary speech into moral ritual. In this way, the lyrics bridge practical cooperation with spiritual devotion (5).

Viewed through a semiotic lens (Morris, 1946), the lyrics function as a system of signs where sound, rhythm, and tone generate social meaning. The denotative layer conveys visible action, while the connotative layer evokes invisible moral and spiritual values (24). Through performance, these chants become living signs that transmit the community's collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950). Each performance thus renews shared identity and reconnects participants with ancestral wisdom (25).

This process also aligns with Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence, where rhythmic unity produces emotional energy and moral cohesion. The repetitive verses, synchronized steps, and collective chanting elevate personal emotion into a shared spiritual experience (26). In this sense, *Lego-Lego* lyrics are both linguistic and sociological instruments that sustain cultural identity. They embody a language of faith, solidarity, and ethical belonging expressed through artistic form.

### Symbolic Meaning of Attributes in the *Lego-Lego* Dance

The attributes *Pajong Pute*, *Juba*, *Moisala*, *Kafate*, *Selendang*, and *Sunjiri* represent hierarchy, purity, and moral protection. Denotatively, they mark social roles; connotatively, they express devotion and ancestral honor. For instance, *Pajong Pute* symbolizes sacred protection, while *Sunjiri* reflects vigilance and readiness. These objects function as visual signs of *Ite Kakang Aring* (27).

Selective photographs (Figures 2 and 7) show how costume color and arrangement communicate clan identity and unity. Following Peirce's concept of *indexes*, these attributes link material form with moral function. They demonstrate how appearance in ritual space becomes a moral statement.

### The Cultural and Symbolic Value of *Ite Kakang Aring*

*Ite Kakang Aring*, meaning "brotherhood and sisterhood," is both moral code and lived philosophy. It teaches that separation does not erase kinship, shaping behavior through cooperation and shared obligation. In Durkheimian terms, it represents mechanical solidarity rooted in collective belief. The value extends beyond blood ties, guiding inter-clan harmony and intergenerational respect.

Within the dance, *Ite Kakang Aring* is embodied through physical touch, synchronized steps, and seven circular turns representing unity. Each performance renews cultural memory (Halbwachs, 1950), turning ritual into remembrance. Through repeated enactment, the community sustains its ethical identity and cultural resilience.

### Conclusion

The *Lego-Lego* dance of Alor Kecil embodies a living form of symbolic interaction where unity, kinship, and moral order are continuously performed and interpreted. Rooted in the philosophy of *Ite Kakang Aring*, it functions not merely as ritual but as a communicative system in which gestures, lyrics, and ceremonial attributes act as interconnected signs that produce and sustain shared meaning. This study contributes theoretically to symbolic interactionism by

showing that meaning in indigenous performance emerges through embodied participation and collective rhythm, transforming social values into visible and experiential forms. Through this dynamic interaction, *Lego-Lego* serves as both a cultural expression and a mechanism of social integration that maintains communal identity across generations.

However, the research acknowledges certain limitations, including a small number of key informants, potential observer bias from participatory involvement, and a limited duration of fieldwork. These constraints may influence the scope and depth of interpretive findings. Despite this, the study offers a valuable model for understanding traditional dance as a semiotic and social system that links theory with lived experience, providing insights into how indigenous performances sustain moral philosophy and cultural continuity within modern contexts.

### Declarations

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Contribution: Data Curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing.

#### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicting interest.

#### Data Availability

The unpublished data is available upon request to the corresponding author.

#### Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Da'wah, UIN Salatiga. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Sensitive cultural information, particularly relating to *Beku Hada* (sacred ritual aspects), was handled with strict confidentiality and in accordance with local adat restrictions.

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## Additional Information

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