

Building Character Through Kuntau Martial Arts in Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency

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Abstract: Kuntau martial arts are a cultural heritage that develops in various regions in Indonesia, especially in Kalimantan and Sumatra. Kuntau not only serves as a self-defense technique, but also as a symbol of cultural identity and local wisdom values. This research aims to describe the history, philosophy, and social role of Kuntau in people's lives. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, data was collected through literature studies and interviews with Kuntau practitioners. The results of the study show that Kuntau contains elements of spirituality, discipline, and community solidarity. In addition, Kuntau also plays a role in preserving traditions and becoming a medium for character education for the younger generation. The preservation of Kuntau requires attention from various parties so that this martial art does not become extinct in the midst of modernization.

Keywords: Kuntau, martial arts, local culture, preservation of traditions, character education

1. Introduction

Martial arts are an integral part of the nation's culture that reflects the identity, noble values, and long history of a community (Guodong et al., 2016). Among the variety of traditional martial arts that have developed in Indonesia, Kuntau is one of the cultural heritages that has strong historical roots and holds a wealth of philosophical values (Li et al., 2025). Although not as popular as pencak silat on the national stage, Kuntau is still alive and thriving in the midst of certain communities, especially in the Kalimantan and Sumatra regions. The existence of Kuntau is not only a self-defense technique, but also a symbol of resistance, wisdom, and honor that is inherited from generation to generation. Kuntau is believed to be related to the influence of Chinese culture which was then assimilated into the local culture in the archipelago (Hernando et al., 2018). This assimilation gave birth to a distinctive form of martial art, which not only relied on the physical, but also prioritized a balance between movement, breath and mind. In its development, Kuntau then fused with the values of local wisdom, so that it grew as a martial art not only studied for fighting skills, but also for shaping personality and ethics. Values such as patience, perseverance, and respect for teachers and others are an integral part of the Kuntau practice.

In some areas, Kuntau has become a symbol of community pride. The community makes it part of traditional rituals, art performances, and character training events for the younger generation (Wang & Ke, 2024). However, despite having an important cultural role, this martial art is now beginning to be marginalized by the currents of modernization and a lack of documentation and promotion. Many young generations no longer know or learn Kuntau because it is considered ancient and irrelevant to today's life. This is a challenge in itself in efforts to preserve local culture in the era of globalization.

The existence of Kuntau as an intangible cultural heritage is actually very potential to be further developed. It can be part of a strategy to strengthen local identity as well as an attractive cultural tourism asset. In addition, if packaged in a modern way without abandoning its original values, Kuntau has a great chance of becoming an alternative martial art that is in demand by the younger generation. However, this requires synergy between local governments, cultural institutions, and the Kuntau practitioner community in promoting and developing the existing potential.

In the context of character education, Kuntau can be an effective medium to instill the values of discipline, responsibility, and confidence. Through consistent and appreciative practice, students are not only trained physically, but also mentally and emotionally. Kuntau emphasizes the importance of self-control and respect for others, which are

important foundations in personality formation. Therefore, the integration of Kuntau in the informal and extracurricular education system of schools is one of the strategic steps that should be considered.

As awareness of the importance of cultural preservation increases, a number of local communities have begun to revive the practice of Kuntau. They organize training, performances, and martial arts festivals in an effort to introduce Kuntau to the wider community. However, these efforts are still limited and often face various obstacles, such as lack of financial support, lack of professional trainers, and limited promotional media. If it is not immediately taken seriously, then it is feared that Kuntau's martial arts will only become part of the historical record without a successor who applies them in the future (Liau et al., 2024).

The martial art of Kuntau also holds a wealth of movements that are aesthetic and full of symbolic meaning. Each movement in Kuntau has its own philosophy that reflects the values of life, such as harmony with nature, the balance between strength and softness, and the importance of inner reflection. These movements are often accompanied by traditional music and distinctive clothing, which makes Kuntau performances a visually appealing art offering. The art element in Kuntau is a potential entrance to attract the attention of the general public and make it part of the creative industry based on local culture.

Anthropologically, Kuntau is not only a tool of self-defense, but also a social identity and a symbol of solidarity in the community. In some cases, this martial art is used as a means to resolve conflicts or as a test of courage in certain traditions. The social function of Kuntau makes it more than just a physical sport, but rather a cultural instrument that unites communities and strengthens social cohesion. Thus, the preservation of Kuntau also means maintaining the social harmony that has long been part of the structure of traditional society.

Through this study, the author seeks to re-elevate the existence of Kuntau as part of Indonesia's cultural richness that needs to be recognized, understood, and preserved. This study is expected to be a scientific contribution in strengthening documentation and understanding of traditional martial arts, especially Kuntau. In addition, this paper is expected to be an inspiration for various parties to participate in preserving cultural heritage, both through educational approaches, cultural promotion, and sustainable preservation policies.

2. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. This approach was chosen because the research aims to describe in depth the social and cultural phenomena related to the martial arts of Kuntau. The qualitative descriptive method allows researchers to explore the meaning, value, and role of Kuntau in people's lives, particularly in the regions where this martial art developed (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). This research does not aim to measure or test hypotheses statistically, but to understand social reality from the perspective of actors and the surrounding community.

The location of the research was determined purposively, namely areas that are known to still have active Kuntau martial arts activities, such as in South Kalimantan, West Kalimantan and South Sumatra. The selection of this location was based on the consideration that the area has an existing Kuntau community and regular activities such as exercises, performances, and training. In addition, the affordability of the location and access to the resource persons are also considerations in determining the place of this research.

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with Kuntau practitioners, traditional leaders, trainers, and members of the local community who are directly involved in the preservation of this martial art. Interviews are conducted semi-structurally so that researchers can explore information flexibly, but still refer to pre-prepared guidelines. In addition to interviews, primary data was also obtained from direct observation of Kuntau's training activities and performances at the research site.

Secondary data in this study was collected from various documents, such as Kuntau community archives, scientific articles, local cultural books, and historical records that contain information about the development of Kuntau martial arts. These secondary sources are used to enrich the analysis and provide historical and theoretical context to the data obtained from the field. By combining primary and secondary data, it is hoped that the results of this study will have comprehensive interpretive power (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017).

Data collection techniques are carried out through three main methods, namely observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations are carried out in a participatory or non-participatory manner depending on the situation, to understand the movements, rites, and social context of the practice of Kuntau. The interviews were used to explore the narratives, experiences, and views of Kuntau practitioners regarding this martial art. Meanwhile, documentation is carried out by collecting and analyzing various notes, photos, and videos of relevant Kuntau activities.

Data analysis was carried out thematically, namely by identifying, grouping, and interpreting themes that emerged from interviews, observations, and documentation (Xu & Zammit, 2020). This process starts from the transcription of raw data, then encodes data that has similar or related meanings. After that, the data that has been categorized is further analyzed to find patterns, relationships between themes, and socio-cultural meanings contained in the practice of Kuntau. Interpretation is done carefully with reference to the local context and cultural theory.

To maintain the validity of the data, source triangulation techniques and techniques are used. Source triangulation is done by comparing information from various different sources, while triangulation techniques are done by comparing the results of different data collection methods (observations, interviews, documentation). In addition,

member checks are carried out by confirming provisional results to the resource persons to ensure the correctness and suitability of the researcher's interpretation of the reality in the field.

3. Results and Discussion

Kuntau martial arts are a form of intangible cultural heritage that reflects the diversity of ethnic identities and a long history of cultural interaction in Indonesia. Kuntau is growing rapidly in several regions such as South Kalimantan, West Kalimantan, South Sumatra, and parts of Sulawesi (Ruswinarsih et al., 2023). Its existence cannot be separated from the influence of Chinese culture that entered the archipelago through trade routes from the 7th to the 15th centuries. In the process of cultural interaction, the martial arts that were initially brought by Chinese immigrants experienced acculturation with local values, so a new form called Kuntau was formed. In contrast to pure Chinese martial arts such as Kungfu, Kuntau is more grounded and has strong local values.

One of the main characteristics of Kuntau is the subtle element of movement but has a hidden power in it. His movements, which look like dances, are actually effective defense and attack techniques (DeMarco, 2017). Many of the Kuntau movement's philosophy adopts the principle of natural balance, such as the movement of wind, water, or animals. The movement is not just a physical technique, but also contains spiritual values that teach a balance between body and soul. Every movement taught in Kuntau carries a moral and ethical message, so Kuntau training is not only to strengthen the body, but also to shape one's character and character.

In practice, Kuntau training emphasizes discipline and respect for teachers (old teachers) and fellow students. The relationship between teacher and student is not only limited to teaching martial techniques, but also reflects a close spiritual relationship. A student must be submissive and respectful to his teacher, and willing to accept teachings not only in technical matters, but also in the values of life. This philosophy makes Kuntau an important part of character education in traditional communities.

Kuntau is also often displayed in traditional events and religious ceremonies as a form of respect for ancestors. In this context, Kuntau is not solely positioned as a martial art, but rather as part of a spiritual ritual that is full of symbolic meaning. Kuntau performances are usually accompanied by traditional music and use distinctive clothing, thus creating harmony between movement, sound, and atmosphere. This shows that Kuntau also has a high aesthetic value and can be categorized as a cultural performance art.

However, along with the times, Kuntau's existence began to be displaced by the dominance of more popular modern martial arts such as Taekwondo, Karate, or even pencak silat. One of the main causes of this decline is the lack of written documentation and promotion of Kuntau to the wider community. In many places, Kuntau is known only orally and taught from generation to generation, making it vulnerable to extinction if there is no regeneration. Young people are more interested in martial arts which are often shown in the mass media, while Kuntau is considered to be less sociable and not adaptive to the times.

Another problem faced in the preservation of Kuntau is the lack of support from local governments and cultural institutions. In some communities, Kuntau coaches have to use personal funds to rent training grounds or buy basic equipment. In fact, not a few Kuntau teachers stopped teaching because of the absence of students. If allowed to drag on, this martial art will lose its prestige and only become part of the past story that no longer lives in people's daily lives. However, there are still positive efforts made by the local community in reviving Kuntau. Several martial arts groups began to establish studios or padepokan that focused on intensive Kuntau training. They tried to document the movement, philosophy, and history of Kuntau in the form of videos, books, and other digital media. This effort is important to create awareness of the importance of cultural heritage and encourage the younger generation to be actively involved in its preservation.

From an educational perspective, Kuntau has great potential as a tool to strengthen character and national values. If integrated into school extracurricular activities, Kuntau can be a fun and meaningful learning medium. Through regular practice, students can learn about cooperation, responsibility, and respect for traditions. In addition, Kuntau learning can be packaged interactively to make it more attractive to students, for example by combining elements of art and technology in the teaching process.

Kuntau can also be a cultural tourism attraction if developed professionally. Kuntau performances that are packaged in the form of cultural attractions can attract the interest of local and foreign tourists. By elevating local stories, traditional costumes, and ethnic music, Kuntau performances can be a powerful means of promoting culture. Several tourist villages in Kalimantan and Sumatra have even started to integrate Kuntau in their cultural tour packages. In terms of academic studies, Kuntau opens up a large space for multidisciplinary exploration. Anthropology, history, sociology, and art studies can be used to dissect more deeply the meaning and social function of Kuntau. Research on Kuntau is also important in the context of postcolonial studies and identity, where this martial art became a symbol of resistance to foreign cultural domination. Through a more comprehensive study, it is hoped that this martial art will get a proper place on the national cultural map.

The surviving Kuntau community faces great challenges in terms of developing a systematic and standardized training curriculum. Today, each group has a variety of different techniques, movement names, and training structures. While this reflects local wealth, too large a difference can complicate widespread standardization and promotion efforts.

Therefore, a communication forum between communities is needed to equalize the vision of conservation and develop a mutually agreed training curriculum.

Kuntau's social function as the glue of the community cannot be ignored. In many societies, Kuntau practice becomes a cross-generational meeting space that strengthens social bonds. Young children learn from older ones, and parents feel valued for still being able to contribute to the teaching process. In an increasingly individualistic world, social functions like this are essential in maintaining social harmony and solidarity. In the economic aspect, Kuntau can also open up new business opportunities, such as private martial arts training, making costumes and traditional training tools, to digital content production. MSME actors can take advantage of this opportunity to develop culture-based local products. If managed properly, Kuntau can be part of an economically profitable creative industry while strengthening cultural identity. Kuntau's philosophy that emphasizes balance and inner peace has similarities with other spiritual practices such as yoga or tai chi. This makes Kuntau relevant to be developed as a form of holistic health-oriented therapy or fitness exercise. In the stressful situation of modern society, practices such as Kuntau can be an alternative to a healthy lifestyle that combines physical and spiritual aspects.

The public's acceptance of Kuntau is highly dependent on how this martial art is communicated. The narrative about Kuntau needs to be directed at modern values such as self-empowerment, courage, and equality. With an adaptive approach to cultural communication, Kuntau can be explained not only as a legacy of the past, but also as an inspiration for the future. The preparation of this narrative is very important to bridge the gap between tradition and the millennial generation. The role of mass media and social media in introducing Kuntau also cannot be ignored. Today, digital content such as short videos, documentaries, and podcasts are becoming effective tools in conveying cultural messages. Kuntau activists need to collaborate with content creators, cultural influencers, and creative communities to make Kuntau present in the digital public space. This strategy will increase visibility while opening up opportunities for collaboration with foreign parties (Sulianta, 2024).

Kuntau's presence in national and international cultural festivals needs to be improved. Events such as the National Cultural Week, the Indonesian Arts Festival, and cultural exchanges between countries can be a stage for Kuntau to show its existence. In addition, cooperation with cultural institutions such as Taman Mini, LIPI, or Unesco can also strengthen Kuntau's position as a world heritage that should be preserved together. The local government has a strategic role in preserving Kuntau. Affirmative policies such as the official recognition of the Kuntau community, the provision of training budgets, and the construction of training facilities can encourage the existence of this martial art. In addition, the integration of Kuntau in the local content curriculum or school extracurriculars is also a concrete step that can be taken by the education office.

Higher education can also contribute through research and community service. Students from anthropology, sports education, or performing arts majors can conduct field research on Kuntau, create scientific papers, and help with documentation and training. The collaboration between the campus and the Kuntau community will provide mutual benefits that enrich both parties. Kuntau is not only a martial movement, but also a narrative of cultural identity and sustainability. When this martial art is endangered, we not only lose a fighting technique, but also lose a very valuable way of life, values of life, and ancestral heritage. Kuntau conservation is a collective responsibility that requires cross-sectoral and generational cooperation.

Seeing the potential and challenges faced, the preservation of Kuntau must be carried out comprehensively with a participatory approach. All parties, from the community, academia, government, to the private sector, must be actively involved in maintaining the sustainability of this martial art. Kuntau must not stop as a marginalized local tradition, but must be revived as a cultural force of the nation. In the future, it is important to develop a roadmap for the preservation of Kuntau which includes aspects of education, documentation, promotion, and international collaboration. With a mature strategy, Kuntau will not only survive, but also develop as part of Indonesia's proud cultural identity. Thus, future generations can still know, learn, and love the martial art of Kuntau as part of the noble heritage of our ancestors (Lubis et al., 2016).

a. History and Origins of Kuntau Martial Arts

Kuntau martial arts is a form of intangible cultural heritage that develops in various regions of the archipelago, especially in Kalimantan, Sumatra, and parts of Sulawesi. The term "Kuntau" is believed to have originated from the Hokkian language, namely "kun" (power) and "tao" (road), which means the way of power or the way of processing power. This indicates the influence of Chinese culture in the initial process of its emergence, before then experiencing assimilation with the local culture. In its development, Kuntau is not only a means of self-defense, but also a spiritual means and character education for the community.

Kuntau was initially taught in a closed environment in a certain family environment or group that had a certain lineage. Noble values such as discipline, determination, sincerity, and respect for teachers and ancestors are strongly instilled from an early age. Each movement of Kuntau has a deep philosophical meaning, representing a balance between innate and inner powers. Its existence is a symbol of the existence of a cultural identity that is able to unite communities and strengthen social solidarity.

In various oral historical records of the community, this martial art also played a role in the struggle against the colonizers, both the Dutch and the Japanese. The Kuntau warriors were often involved in securing the village or being part of the people's soldiers who relied on physical abilities and agility on the battlefield.

The courage and agility trained through Kuntau made him not only an art, but also a survival strategy in the midst of past social and political conflicts.

Although it has undergone various transformations with the times, the cultural and philosophical roots of Kuntau are still maintained by the communities that have inherited it from generation to generation. This long history is an important foundation to understand that Kuntau is not just a sport or art performance, but also a reflection of the social, cultural, and spiritual dynamics of Indonesian society since ancient times.

b. Cultural Values in the Kuntau Movement and Philosophy

Movement in Kuntau has a meaning that goes beyond just attack or self-defense techniques. Each step, punch, or parry is structured based on the principles of balance, harmony, and self-control. For example, in some Kuntau traditions, there are circular movements that symbolize the cycle of life, as well as the movement of parrying that teaches the principle of not attacking first, but responding wisely. These values reflect the teachings on the importance of patience, emotional control, and respect for the opponent. In addition to the technical aspect, Kuntau also contains a strong element of spirituality. Many Kuntau trainers or warriors begin their training with prayers, meditations, or special rituals as a form of purification of themselves and the environment. This shows that the physical exercises in Kuntau are also aimed at forming a strong mental and spiritual body. Values such as honesty, sincerity, and perseverance are taught not only verbally, but also through example in the practice process.

Furthermore, Kuntau is often taught in a community context that emphasizes the value of kinship and mutual cooperation. The learning process does not only occur in the training arena, but also in daily life through social interaction between school members. In this case, martial arts act as a vehicle for character formation and social integration, which fosters solidarity, mutual trust, and a sense of collective responsibility for traditions and the environment. Thus, Kuntau not only trains the body, but also the soul. It is a martial art that teaches humans to live in balance: strong yet not arrogant, fast yet still cautious, and skilled yet always humble. The cultural values embedded in Kuntau make it a form of local wisdom that should be maintained and inherited to future generations.

c. Challenges and Strategies for Preserving Kuntau Martial Arts

Despite its high historical and cultural value, the martial art of Kuntau faces great challenges in the modern era. One of the main problems is the lack of interest of the younger generation in this cultural heritage. Many young people are more interested in modern martial arts or other popular sports that are considered more prestigious and commercial. This led to a reduction in the regeneration of Kuntau warriors and trainers, which ultimately threatened the continuity of this tradition in the future.

In addition, the weak documentation and scientific research on Kuntau has also aggravated the situation. Many of Kuntau's streams and moves are only transmitted orally and practically, without adequate written or audiovisual records. As a result, when a Kuntau teacher dies without having time to transfer his knowledge, the knowledge is also lost. This is a great irony for a tradition that is so rich that it has not received much attention from academics and formal cultural institutions.

To overcome this, there needs to be a preservation strategy that involves various parties, ranging from indigenous communities, educational institutions, the government, to the media. Kuntau can be included in the local content curriculum in schools as a means of character and cultural education. In addition, promotion through social media, documentaries, and cultural festivals is also an effective means to introduce Kuntau to the wider public, especially the younger generation who are more familiar with the digital world. Another strategic step is to register Kuntau as an intangible cultural heritage to UNESCO or similar institutions, as well as to initiate cross-disciplinary academic research on Kuntau. Collaboration with the academic world can help archive the movement, history, and philosophy of Kuntau systematically. With the right approach and cross-sector support, Kuntau can continue to live and thrive as a strong and proud cultural identity.

4. Conclusion

As a cultural heritage full of historical and philosophical value, Kuntau martial arts have an important role in shaping the identity of the local community and enriching the cultural treasures of the Indonesian nation. The movements in Kuntau are not only self-defense techniques, but also a reflection of deep moral, spiritual, and aesthetic values. In the social context, Kuntau is also able to strengthen intergenerational relationships and foster a spirit of togetherness in the communities where he develops.

However, this martial art is facing great challenges amid the currents of modernization and globalization. The lack of documentation, regeneration, and support from the government and the community makes its existence endangered. Therefore, structured and collaborative preservation efforts are needed, ranging from education, digital promotion, integration in formal education, to development as cultural attractions and creative industry products. Kuntau belongs not only to the past, but also to the potential of the future. With the right approach and comprehensive support, this martial art can be a bridge between tradition and innovation, and help strengthen the nation's identity in the midst of the dynamics of the modern world. The preservation of Kuntau is not only the task of the local community, but a shared responsibility as a nation that upholds ancestral cultural values.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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