

## REPRESENTATION OF CULTURAL VALUES IN THE BESEMAH COMMUNITY OF PAGAR ALAM THROUGH THE REJUNG LITERARY ART TRADITION

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### Abstract

Indonesia has a wide variety of literary traditions that differ across each region, one of which is found in the Besemah Tribe in Pagaralam, South Sumatra. Rejung is a traditional art form that combines musical melodies and poetic verses as a form of cultural expression rich in meaning. This art form is an oral cultural heritage filled with symbolic values and social functions, especially within the context of traditional customs and culture. Through Rejung art, values such as honor, politeness, solidarity, and spirituality are transmitted from one generation to another. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe the cultural values contained in the Rejung art tradition of the Besemah community in Pagaralam, South Sumatra. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, while the data collection technique was conducted through literature studies using reliable sources such as journals, articles, undergraduate theses, dissertations, books, and other relevant references.

**Keywords:** *Rejung, representation, values, culture, literature, Besemah.*

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is an archipelagic country with an exceptionally rich cultural diversity, including in the field of arts. In community life, artistic works have become an integral part of daily practices, whether inherited from generation to generation or emerging as new forms of artistic expression. Numerous community activities involve the arts, such as dance, music, literature, and many other forms. Art is capable of creating symbols of communication that are both empirical and non-empirical within the paradigm of human thought (Susilo, 2025). Art is one of the seven elements of culture, and the element of beauty plays a crucial role in determining how artistic expressions are interpreted and appreciated by society (Wahyuni, 2022).

Indonesia possesses a wide variety of literary works that differ from one region to another, one of which can be found among the Besemah ethnic community in Pagar Alam, South Sumatra. Literature is an imaginative work created by individuals based on awareness and responsibility in terms of creativity as a form of artistic expression (Basri, 2019). One of Indonesia's cultural treasures is found within the Besemah community of Pagar Alam, South Sumatra Province. Mythologically, the term *Besemah* is derived from the root word *semah* with the prefix *be-* (*ber-*), meaning "to have," "to possess," or "to contain" the quality denoted by the root word. Thus, *Besemah* literally means "having *semah*." The term *Besemah* is often pronounced as *Pesemah*, which is believed to have originated from foreign literature, particularly writings by Dutch authors (Neisya, 2017). According to Kasiyan (2015), the term *tradition* textually refers to "customs and practices inherited from ancestors that continue to be practiced within society, based on the belief or assumption that established ways are the most appropriate and correct" (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, 2005). Considering the fundamental nature of humans as social beings who depend on and interact with one another, culture emerges through collective habits and agreements formed within human life. Consequently, culture originates from shared practices and understandings among individuals, which subsequently develop into what is recognized as a society (Ivana, 2024).

*Rejung* is a traditional art form that combines musical melodies and poetic verses as a cultural expression rich in meaning. This art form represents an oral cultural heritage that embodies profound meanings and social functions, particularly within the context of customary traditions and local culture. *Rejung* is a combination of oral literature accompanied by musical instruments such as the violin, harmonica, or the plucked accompaniment of a single guitar (Firamadhan, 2015). *Rejung* is commonly recognized as a performing art that integrates traditional musical accompaniment with lyrics containing poetic verses sung by performers. This traditional art form belongs to the

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category of oral literature that has continued to survive to the present day. Oral literature encompasses various types and genres, including *tangis ayat*, *tadud*, *guritan*, and *rejung*. Each of these forms possesses distinct characteristics, functions, variations, and cultural contexts (Rumodhon, 2018).

In the past, *Rejung* music functioned as a medium for alleviating loneliness, whether in moments of sorrow or joy, and as a means of expressing feelings among young men and women within the Besemah community of Pagar Alam (Huda, 2019). Fundamentally, *Rejung* is an art form that combines the elements of music and literature. In its performance practice, two forms of guitar accompaniment are commonly used: *Rejung* performed with a single guitar and *Rejung* performed with two guitars. From a cultural perspective, this art form can be performed by both men and women as a means of social interaction, communication, and acquaintance. The stories or themes conveyed through *Rejung* generally revolve around various aspects of human life, including love, sorrow, happiness, and other life experiences. The musical rhythm typically flows in accordance with the theme being performed; for example, songs expressing happiness are accompanied by cheerful musical melodies. The performance of *Rejung* largely depends on the verses and pantun recited by the performer. The verses of *Rejung* are generally delivered in the language of the Besemah ethnic group, and the messages conveyed vary according to the melody and style of the song. The melodic patterns of *Rejung* in Pagar Alam possess distinctive characteristics, both in terms of musical rhythm and guitar tuning used during the performance (Andre, 2023).

*Rejung* is a form of oral literary expression that is commonly performed during various traditional ceremonies, such as weddings, circumcision celebrations, and other customary events. Within community life, artistic practices have become an integral part of social traditions, whether inherited from previous generations or emerging as new forms of cultural expression in everyday life. Numerous community activities involve the arts, including dance, music, literature, and many other forms of creative expression. Literary works serve not only as a source of entertainment but also as a medium for shaping human character. In addition, literature functions as a means of communication through which communities in South Sumatra convey criticism, advice, values, and social norms. Oral literature, or spoken literary tradition, is one of the regional literary forms found in South Sumatra. Although this literary tradition encompasses a wide variety of genres, they share a common characteristic, namely their transmission through oral narration from one generation to another. Oral literary works have long been an important component of Indonesian cultural heritage, particularly among the people of South Sumatra. However, despite their cultural significance, the number of individuals who appreciate and actively engage with these traditions has gradually declined in the contemporary era.

The term *literature* refers to letters, writings, or compositions. Since writings or compositions are commonly presented in the form of books or bound sheets of paper, the term *literature* is also associated with books (Ulinsa, 2022). In contemporary society, literary traditions have become less appealing to adolescents and younger generations, who often perceive them as outdated and incompatible with the advanced forms of media that dominate modern life. Consequently, these literary traditions are more frequently appreciated and preserved by older generations, who regard them as valuable cultural traditions and artistic expressions that should be maintained. For them, literature continues to serve as a source of entertainment, a medium for conveying moral messages, and a means of recalling memories of the past. Unlike conventional oral forms such as *pantun*, oral literary traditions are not merely recited verbally but are often performed with the accompaniment of distinctive single-guitar melodies characteristic of South Sumatra. This form of oral literature has spread throughout various regions of South Sumatra, with each area developing its own unique characteristics and local language variations. As a medium through which earlier generations communicated criticism, messages, advice, and social norms, oral literature has played an important role in preserving cultural values. Many artists continue to promote and perform this tradition by expressing concerns, aspirations, and social issues experienced by the community. One example of this oral literary tradition is *Berejung*. *Berejung* is an oral tradition that has been passed down for several decades and forms an important part of the cultural heritage of the Besemah ethnic community in Pagar Alam, South Sumatra.

According to Santosa (2004:20), as cited in Elina (2018), performing arts play a highly prominent role in tourism activities and have established themselves as an important component of cultural tourism attractions. In *Rejung* performances, the pantun texts are delivered through repeated or repetitive recitations. This repetition is an essential feature that contributes to the formation of the musical structure of *Rejung* itself. Music plays a significant role in the social and cultural dimensions of human life. As a form of artistic expression, music functions not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a means of representing cultural identity and conveying moral messages (Nabilah, 2025). *Rejung* music is characterized by melodic ornamentations (*cengkok*) and lengthy, interconnected pantun verses performed responsively between singers, symbolizing the continuous flow of a river (Huda, 2019). As stated by Dharsono, repetition constitutes one of the supporting elements of *Rejung* as an artistic work. Repetition

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refers to the recurrence of artistic elements across space and time, creating a measurable pattern or interval, similar to the temporal interval between two consecutive identical musical notes (Gajah, 2017). This art form is typically performed by two individuals who exchange verses in a call-and-response manner, accompanied by the distinctive sound of a single guitar, which is often played by one of the oral poets themselves. The verses of *Berejung* are delivered in the Besemah language, the traditional language of the Besemah ethnic community in Pagar Alam. *Berejung* performances are commonly presented during specific events, including weddings, thanksgiving ceremonies, traditional Besemah cultural celebrations, and official events organized by governmental institutions as well as traditional artists in South Sumatra.

The verses of *Rejung* are delivered in the Besemah language, the indigenous language of the Besemah ethnic community in Pagar Alam. Literally, *Rejung* is understood by the Besemah people as pantun that are sung or chanted melodically. Individuals who perform *Rejung* are commonly referred to as *Rejung* singers or performers (*penembang Rejung*). The performance may be presented either with musical accompaniment or without any musical instruments (Putri, 2022). In practice, *Rejung* serves not only as a form of entertainment but also as a medium for conveying moral messages, historical narratives, and cultural values. Each verse embedded within its musical melodies and accompaniment contains a rich variety of expressive elements that reflect the philosophy of life of the Besemah community. These values include respect, togetherness, and appreciation for ancestors, all of which constitute important aspects of the cultural identity and social life of the Besemah people.

Representation is an essential part of the process of producing and exchanging meaning. The production and exchange of meaning can only be achieved through language. Language is closely associated with representation, although signs and symbols can also be used to represent meaning. Through language, individuals are able to express and communicate their thoughts and ideas. Cultural representation refers to the process through which systems of values, beliefs, and cultural symbols are conveyed and interpreted, one of which is through artistic works. Revitalization is an effort or condition aimed at renewing and adapting a principle or system to align with the contemporary conditions and needs of society (Sudarmanto, 2020).

The rapid pace of modernization has significantly affected the existence of oral literary traditions, particularly the *Berejung* tradition among the Besemah community in Pagar Alam. Today, younger generations are increasingly distancing themselves from this traditional art form, while the preservation and transmission of *Berejung* are predominantly carried out by older generations who have long served as custodians of this oral literary heritage. Given the declining number of *Berejung* practitioners and artists, it would be unfortunate to neglect the preservation of this valuable cultural tradition. Various aspects of human life, including humanitarian, aesthetic, moral, cultural, educational, and historical values, can be expressed through oral literature and spoken literary traditions. Therefore, it is important to conduct research on oral literary traditions such as *Berejung*. Such research can contribute to the preservation and promotion of the cultural values embedded within *Berejung*, ensuring that this important element of cultural heritage remains recognized and appreciated by future generations.

The number of *Rejung* guitar musicians has continued to decline in recent years. As a result, there are very few, if any, younger generations willing to continue and preserve this traditional art form. Interest in learning about and engaging with *Rejung* music is relatively low among young people, largely due to the growing influence of modern music and contemporary cultural trends. Many members of society perceive *Rejung* music as outdated and less appealing, leading younger generations to favor modern musical genres such as pop, jazz, rock, *koplo*, and others. Consequently, most *Rejung* performers and musicians today belong to the older generation, with very limited participation from younger individuals.

Representation serves as a lens through which culture can be understood and examined within a society. It reflects how meanings are assigned to objects by individuals through subjective actions, utilizing intuition, concepts, and ideas. Representation thus refers to both the process and the product of meaning-making, through which cultural values, beliefs, and social realities are expressed and interpreted (Rianingrum, 2021).

The concept of representation in a cultural context generally refers to the ways in which the meanings and identities of a social group are constructed, communicated, and maintained through symbols, language, and specific social practices. Representation is not neutral or passive; rather, it plays an active role in shaping the collective consciousness of a community. In the *Rejung* tradition, cultural values are expressed not only explicitly through the lyrics but also implicitly through the structure of the performance, the social roles of the performers, and the social contexts in which the performances take place. The cultural values represented in *Rejung* encompass various aspects of life within the Besemah community of Pagar Alam, including politeness and etiquette, mutual cooperation, family honor, loyalty, adherence to customary norms, and relationships with nature and spirituality. These moral and cultural values have been transmitted from generation to generation through meaningful poetic verses, serving as a

form of “cultural code” that is understood and shared by the community. In other words, *Rejung* functions as a cultural text that reflects and reproduces the local value system of the Besemah people.

Ancestral values also serve as guiding principles within this tradition and can be understood through the concept of local wisdom. The term *local wisdom* refers to the knowledge, capabilities, and practices possessed by a particular community (Permatasari, 2023). Through *Rejung*, the Besemah community constructs a collective narrative about who they are, what they consider important, and how they should conduct themselves within society. Values such as politeness in speech, respect for parents and customary leaders, and social harmony are represented through verses rich in subtle satire, metaphors, and analogies. The cultural values upheld by the Besemah community play a crucial role in preserving social cohesion, strengthening group identity, and guiding individual behavior. For example, in the context of marriage ceremonies, *Rejung* often functions as a medium for conveying hopes, prayers, and life advice to the bride and groom, while also reinforcing relationships among the extended families involved. The verses of *Rejung* contain numerous symbols that embody philosophical messages touching upon various dimensions of human life. However, amid the forces of globalization, which have brought rapid changes to many aspects of contemporary life, the existence and role of traditional arts such as *Rejung* face significant challenges. Many younger generations no longer understand the cultural context of *Rejung*, let alone possess the skills required to perform, preserve, and transmit this tradition to future generations.

In this regard, it is essential for academic and cultural institutions to undertake documentation, critical studies, and revitalization efforts concerning *Rejung* and the cultural values embedded within it. Without sustained initiatives to preserve and strengthen this traditional art form, there is a significant risk that it will gradually decline and eventually become extinct. Such studies are important not only for uncovering the implicit meanings contained in *Rejung* but also for understanding how this art form functions as a medium of cultural expression and the transmission of local cultural values. Based on the background outlined above, the research questions of this study are as follows: (1) What cultural values are embedded in the *Rejung* tradition? (2) How are these cultural values represented through the lyrics, performances, and social contexts of *Rejung*? and (3) What role does *Rejung* play in shaping the identity and social life of the Besemah community in Pagar Alam in the modern era?

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Cultural Values Embedded in the *Rejung* Tradition**

According to Sartono Kartodirdjo (2014:220), as cited in Indarto (2016), culture encompasses all manifestations of human activities, both in the form of structures and processes, within the ideational, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of life. Cultural wealth is not merely a legacy of the past but also serves as an identity and a reflection of the noble values that continue to live and develop within society. Through the *Rejung* tradition, the Besemah community conveys moral messages, advice, praise, and even subtle criticism through poetic and metaphorical language rich in meaning. As a form of oral literary expression, *Rejung* functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium for transmitting cultural values and social norms from one generation to another. The symbolic and poetic nature of its verses reflects the wisdom, worldview, and cultural identity of the Besemah people, thereby contributing to the preservation and continuity of their cultural heritage.

Cultural values constitute an essential element that continues to exist and be expressed within the life of a cultural community (Mari'i, 2022). They refer to the principles, norms, and beliefs that are upheld and transmitted from one generation to another within a society. In this context, *Rejung* is a distinctive oral poetic tradition originating from the Besemah community of Pagar Alam. A lack of understanding of local cultural and character values can contribute to the decline of politeness, responsibility, and other positive social behaviors (Afriandayani, 2023). The cultural values embedded in *Rejung* extend beyond mere storytelling and entertainment; they constitute the core of the community's social structure and cultural identity. Through its lyrics, melodies, symbols, and social practices, *Rejung* serves as a medium for transmitting various normative values, including ethics, kinship, spirituality, and aesthetics. Consequently, *Rejung* plays a significant role in preserving cultural heritage and reinforcing the social and moral foundations of the Besemah community.

The ethical and moral values embedded in *Rejung* play a significant role in the daily life of the community, particularly in promoting politeness and proper manners in communication. These values are reflected in the lyrics of *Rejung*, which employ refined, courteous, and respectful language. When expressing emotions, offering praise, or conveying advice, performers are expected to avoid the use of harsh, offensive, or inappropriate words. This emphasis on linguistic etiquette demonstrates the importance of respectful communication within the Besemah cultural tradition. Through its poetic expressions, *Rejung* teaches individuals to communicate thoughtfully and respectfully, thereby reinforcing moral conduct and social harmony within the community.



Another important moral value represented in *Rejung* is respect for customary leaders, parents, elders, and the ancestors of the Besemah community in Pagar Alam. *Rejung* performances frequently incorporate pantun themes that refer to *nini-nini* (ancestors) and *aum* (parents or elders), delivered in a gentle and respectful tone. For example, expressions such as “Like a rice plant that bows, respectful and serene” symbolize humility and modesty, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a humble attitude in social life. In addition, *Rejung* serves as a medium for conveying life advice and moral guidance. Beyond offering praise and entertainment, its verses often contain moral messages, such as subtle warnings against engaging in harmful behavior or encouragements to cultivate patience and self-restraint. By communicating these messages indirectly through poetic language and symbolism, *Rejung* encourages listeners to reflect upon and internalize important moral values, thereby contributing to character development and ethical awareness within the community.

In addition to conveying ethical and moral values, *Rejung* also embodies important social and kinship values within the Besemah community. These values are reflected through the communal principles represented in the performance and content of *Rejung*. One such value is mutual cooperation and solidarity. Through its verses, *Rejung* often encourages listeners to participate in collective activities and to strengthen cooperation among community members. Another important social value is deliberation and collective problem-solving. The dialogical structure of *Rejung*, in which performers alternately respond to one another through pantun, reflects the principles of dialogue, consultation, and consensus-based decision-making. This interactive exchange demonstrates the importance of communication and mutual understanding in resolving issues within the community. Furthermore, *Rejung* reflects the value of gender equality in the practice of exchanging pantun. Both men and women are given the opportunity to participate and express themselves in turn, illustrating the principles of equality, mutual respect, and appreciation between individuals. Through these social values, *Rejung* contributes to the maintenance of social harmony, communal solidarity, and positive interpersonal relationships within the Besemah community.

*Rejung* also embodies important customary and traditional values, as this art form is culturally rooted in and closely connected to the customs of the Besemah community in Pagar Alam. These values include adherence to customary norms, the preservation of language and cultural symbols, and the transmission of ancestral and genealogical narratives. The value of obedience to customary norms is reflected in the pantun performed during traditional ceremonies, such as *malam bujang gadis* and wedding celebrations. Through these occasions, *Rejung* reinforces the importance of respecting and following established customary rules and social expectations. Violations of these norms are often addressed indirectly through advice and moral guidance embedded within the pantun, serving as a means of social regulation and cultural education. The value of preserving language and cultural symbols is evident in the consistent use of the Besemah language, customary terminology, and traditional symbols such as *bakiak*, *gantang*, and *salanganang*, which frequently appear in *Rejung* verses. The continued use of these linguistic and cultural elements contributes to the preservation of local vocabulary and cultural identity in the face of modernization and cultural change. Through this process, *Rejung* functions as an important vehicle for safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Besemah community.

Furthermore, the customary values embodied in *Rejung* can also be observed through the transmission of ancestral narratives. Many *Rejung* verses refer to family genealogies, local heroes, and traditional ceremonies that have been passed down through generations. These narratives function to preserve the collective memory of the community and serve as a medium for the oral preservation of cultural heritage and historical knowledge. In this regard, *Rejung* functions as a bridge between the past and the present, connecting contemporary generations with the experiences, values, and traditions of their ancestors. By preserving and transmitting these ancestral narratives, *Rejung* strengthens cultural identity and fosters a sense of belonging and responsibility toward the cultural heritage of the Besemah community.

In addition, *Rejung* embodies spiritual and religious values that reflect the relationship between human beings, God Almighty, and the spiritual realm. According to the Ministry of National Education (*Depdiknas*, 2010), as cited in Permatasari (2023), adherence to rules and principles based on one's religious beliefs also includes the practice of tolerance toward the worship of other faiths and the ability to live harmoniously alongside others regardless of differences in ethnicity, religion, race, or social background. In relation to religion, values serve at least three important functions: as a foundation for obligations and religious commandments, as a framework for cultural orientation and thought, and as a source of specific moral traditions. Consequently, religious values may take the form of commands and prohibitions, as well as moral guidelines that regulate the relationships between humans and God, among fellow human beings, and between humans and the natural environment (Yani, 2017). Within the *Rejung* tradition, these spiritual and religious values are expressed through poetic verses that encourage moral conduct, gratitude, humility, and respect for both divine and social order. Through such expressions, *Rejung* not only preserves

cultural traditions but also reinforces the spiritual foundations and ethical principles that guide the lives of the Besemah community.

The pantun performed in *Rejung* frequently contain prayers, expressions of hope for safety, and wishes for prosperity and well-being bestowed by the Creator. These verses reflect the spiritual dimension of *Rejung*, emphasizing the importance of faith, gratitude, and dependence on divine guidance in human life. Spiritual values are also evident in the community's cosmocultural awareness, in which elements of nature such as mountains, rivers, and forests are often employed as symbols of spiritual power and significance. Through these representations, *Rejung* conveys the belief that humans coexist with nature, which is regarded as sacred and deserving of respect at all times and in all places. This perspective reflects the worldview of the Besemah people, who maintain a close connection between their daily lives, religious beliefs, and trust in supernatural forces. Therefore, *Rejung* serves not only as a representation of cultural heritage but also as a reflection of the interconnected relationships between humans and God, among fellow human beings, and between humans and the natural universe. Through its poetic expressions and symbolic meanings, *Rejung* reinforces the spiritual and cultural foundations of the Besemah community.

Aesthetic values are also prominently embedded in the *Rejung* tradition. One of the most significant aesthetic aspects is the beauty of its oral language. The verses of *Rejung* are predominantly delivered in the local language of the Besemah community in Pagar Alam. The use of literary devices such as figurative language, alliteration, *pantun*, *gurindam*, and metaphors enhances the artistic quality and expressive power of the performance. Even when the content of a verse contains criticism or admonition, it is often presented in an aesthetically refined manner, making it more acceptable and meaningful to the audience. The preservation of language through *Rejung* also serves as an effort to maintain the continued use of the Besemah language within the community (Sudarmanto, 2020). Furthermore, *Rejung* functions as a marker of the cultural identity of the Besemah people. As noted by Neisya (2017), members of the Besemah community naturally employ the Besemah language when performing and listening to *Rejung*, thereby reinforcing their linguistic and cultural identity.

Aesthetic values are also reflected in the musical elements of *Rejung*, including its rhythm, melody, and harmonic structure. Traditionally, *Rejung* is performed with the accompaniment of a single guitar, whose melodic patterns and rhythmic flow create an atmosphere that is both captivating and contemplative. The musical accompaniment not only enhances the artistic appeal of the performance but also supports its communicative and reflective functions. In addition, cultural symbols expressed through poetic language contribute to the aesthetic richness of *Rejung*. For example, the phrase "clear water, a reflection of a sincere self" symbolizes purity and honesty. Such symbolic expressions demonstrate how aesthetic beauty in *Rejung* is closely intertwined with moral and cultural meanings, allowing artistic expression to serve as a vehicle for the transmission of values and collective wisdom.

Furthermore, *Rejung* embodies educational values and moral exemplarity. Its verses frequently contain advice directed toward younger generations, encouraging them to live honestly, respect their parents, uphold the good reputation of their families, and refrain from engaging in inappropriate or dishonorable behavior. In this way, such values are transmitted indirectly through *Rejung* and become an integral part of the process of cultural internalization within the community. Moreover, *Rejung* serves as an alternative educational medium that is both enjoyable and effective, particularly for children and young people. The moral messages embedded in its verses are communicated through aesthetically appealing and emotionally engaging expressions, enabling audiences to absorb and appreciate these values more readily. Consequently, *Rejung* contributes not only to the preservation of cultural heritage but also to character development and moral education. In addition, *Rejung* reflects democratic values in its social practice. During performances, all participants are generally provided with equal opportunities to express their opinions, offer praise, or convey messages through poetic exchanges. No individual is permitted to dominate the interaction; rather, the performance is expected to proceed in a balanced manner based on mutual respect and appreciation. This practice reflects the culture of dialogue, openness, and participatory communication that characterizes the Besemah community. Through these interactions, *Rejung* reinforces the values of equality, respect, and social harmony among community members.

## **2. The Representation of Cultural Values Through the Lyrics, Performance, and Social Context of *Rejung***

*Rejung* is not merely a form of artistic performance; it also serves as a reflection of the identity, values, and worldview of the Besemah community in Pagar Alam. Through its lyrics, performance practices, and social context, *Rejung* embodies and represents cultural values that have been transmitted across generations within the Besemah society. What is celebrated through this tradition is not only the Besemah language itself but also the philosophical principles, social structures, and ethical values that continue to be upheld by the community. The uniqueness of

*Rejung* lies in the fact that it does not function solely as a form of entertainment. Rather, it is deeply integrated into the social structure of the community and fulfills both ritualistic and educational functions. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the cultural values embedded in *Rejung* requires a holistic examination of its three fundamental dimensions: the lyrics, the performance, and the social context in which it is performed.

### **1. Lyrics in *Rejung* as a Representation of Cultural Values**

The lyrics of *Rejung* typically take the form of *pantun* or rhythmic poetic verses composed in the Besemah language of Pagar Alam. These verses are rich in symbols, metaphors, and expressions of local wisdom that reflect the cultural identity of the Besemah community. Through these lyrics, cultural values are articulated, preserved, and transmitted from one generation to the next. Each stanza in *Rejung* embodies not only linguistic and aesthetic beauty but also conveys moral messages, life lessons, and social principles upheld by the local community. As a result, the lyrics function as an important medium for communicating cultural knowledge and reinforcing the values that guide social behavior and community life among the Besemah people.

One example of *Rejung* lyrics that reflects the value of kinship can be found in wedding ceremonies. In such contexts, the verses often emphasize the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships between the two extended families united through marriage. These lyrics highlight the significance of family solidarity, mutual respect, and the strengthening of social bonds as fundamental values within the Besemah community. An example of such a verse is presented below:

“The bride is a jewel of precious worth  
Courtied with courtesy and noble speech  
Two families are now united  
Becoming one in both joy and sorrow.”

The first stanza illustrates that marriage is not merely a matter concerning two individuals; rather, it represents the union of two social beings who are expected to respect, appreciate, and cooperate with one another. This verse reflects the cultural values of kinship, mutual respect, and social solidarity that are highly valued within the Besemah community. It emphasizes that marriage extends beyond a personal relationship and serves as a social bond that unites families and strengthens communal ties. In addition to conveying kinship values, *Rejung* also embodies important principles of character education. Many of its verses contain messages aimed at guiding younger generations to become polite, honest, courageous, and responsible individuals. Through these poetic expressions, moral teachings are transmitted in a manner that is both culturally meaningful and aesthetically appealing. An example of such a verse is presented below:

“Live your life with courtesy and grace,  
Do not be arrogant or conceited.  
Blessings come to those who are diligent,  
And good deeds will never be in vain.”

In this verse, the audience is encouraged to embrace the values of politeness, perseverance, and good moral character, which constitute fundamental pillars in the formation of individual character within the Besemah community of Pagar Alam. These values are regarded as essential qualities that guide personal conduct and contribute to the maintenance of social harmony and communal well-being. In addition to moral and educational values, *Rejung* also contains spiritual values that are closely associated with belief in God Almighty. Spirituality is frequently expressed through verses that contain prayers, expressions of gratitude, and praise to the Creator. Such lyrics reflect the religious worldview of the Besemah people and emphasize the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the divine. An example of a *Rejung* verse that embodies these spiritual values is presented below:

“In the name of Allah, the Almighty,  
We begin with sincere hearts.  
May this occasion receive His blessings,  
And be protected from all misfortune.”

This verse reflects the spiritual and religious values embedded within the *Rejung* tradition. Through expressions of prayer and supplication, the lyrics emphasize the importance of faith, sincerity, and reliance upon God in all aspects of life. The invocation of Allah at the beginning of the verse signifies the community’s recognition of divine authority and their belief that all human endeavors should be undertaken with spiritual awareness and devotion. Furthermore, the verse encourages individuals to continually remember God, place their trust in Him, and uphold religious values in their daily lives. The request for blessings and protection illustrates the belief that human

well-being ultimately depends upon divine guidance and mercy. Such expressions demonstrate how spiritual values are integrated into the cultural practices of the Besemah community and transmitted through the artistic medium of *Rejung*. The cultural values discussed above illustrate the ways in which *Rejung* represents and communicates the moral, social, educational, and spiritual principles upheld by the Besemah people. Through its poetic lyrics and symbolic expressions, *Rejung* functions as an important medium for preserving cultural identity, transmitting local wisdom, and reinforcing the values that guide community life across generations.

## **2. The Social Context of *Rejung* as a Reflection of Cultural Dynamics**

*Rejung* developed and flourished within the complex social context of the Besemah community. Therefore, the cultural values represented through *Rejung* reflect the social structure, customary values, and belief systems embraced by the community. Within its social context, *Rejung* functions as a unifying force, an educational medium, and a means of strengthening the cultural identity of the Besemah people. It plays an important role in various aspects of social life, including wedding ceremonies, the welcoming of customary guests, and the conferral of traditional titles.

In addition, *Rejung* plays a significant role in transmitting cultural values from one generation to another. The values embedded in this tradition form an integral part of the community's informal educational system. In contemporary settings, *Rejung* is increasingly performed on modern stages, such as cultural festivals, inter-school competitions, and tourism events. Although its performance format has been adapted to meet contemporary demands, the essence of its cultural values has been carefully preserved. This demonstrates that *Rejung* is a dynamic cultural tradition that remains open to change, provided that it does not abandon the fundamental principles of its original cultural roots.

The social context of *Rejung* also reflects the resilience of local culture in the face of globalization. Amid rapid social change and the increasing influence of modern cultural trends, *Rejung* serves as a cultural stronghold that reinforces pride in local identity. The community must continue to preserve this tradition, as safeguarding *Rejung* essentially means protecting the existence and continuity of its cultural heritage from being overshadowed by the forces of modernization.

The lyrics of *Rejung* convey moral, social, and spiritual messages that serve as guiding principles for daily life. Its performances reflect social ethics, cultural aesthetics, and the values of equality and togetherness. Furthermore, the social context of *Rejung* demonstrates that it embodies important cultural values, functioning as a unifying force, an educational medium, and a means of resisting cultural homogenization in an increasingly globalized world. To ensure the continuity of *Rejung*, the Besemah community must remain committed to preserving not only the art form itself but also the noble values that constitute the foundation of their cultural heritage.

## **3. The Role of *Rejung* in Shaping the Identity and Social Life of the Besemah Community in Pagar Alam in the Modern Era**

The rapid development of modernization and globalization has led to the gradual erosion of many local cultures. Traditional practices are increasingly being marginalized, while popular culture tends to dominate social life, particularly among younger generations. In an increasingly advanced and open modern era, there is a growing tendency to abandon local wisdom values, raising concerns about the declining understanding of local culture and the potential distortion of cultural heritage (Neisya, 2017). Globalization itself represents a form of social transformation. It is often viewed as a process of change from simple and traditional societies toward more advanced societies, involving cultural, social, and economic transformations that affect nearly every aspect of human life (Teten, 2023).

In this context, it is important to examine the extent to which *Rejung* contributes to the formation and preservation of the cultural identity of the Besemah community, as well as how this traditional art form continues to contribute to the social life of the Besemah people in the modern era.

### **1. *Rejung* as a Reflection of the Cultural Identity of the Besemah Ethnic Community, Pagaralam**

Traditional arts are one of the essential elements in preserving the cultural identity of a society. Social change is reflected in various trends and patterns, including phenomena such as urbanization, shifts in social values, and modernization influenced by the process of globalization (Alya Revalina Achmad, 2025). For the Besemah ethnic community, *Rejung* is one of the strongest symbols of cultural identity. Its language, style of expression, lyrical structure, musical composition, and thematic content all reflect the distinctive characteristics of the Besemah people. This traditional art form employs the local language, rich in symbolic metaphors. Each verse embodies a philosophy of life that conveys multiple meanings, perspectives on social relationships, and values such as togetherness,



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politeness, and respect for ancestors. For example, when performed at wedding ceremonies, Rejung conveys the importance of maintaining family harmony and emphasizing the shared responsibilities between two extended families.

Rejung is not merely a form of entertainment or a traditional performance; rather, it serves as a reflection of the cultural identity of the Besemah community, deeply embedded in their daily lives. Its interactive, communicative, and improvisational performance style reflects the character of the Besemah people, who are open to dialogue, uphold politeness, and highly value etiquette and honor in communication. Each verse functions not only as a means of conveying messages but also as a medium for demonstrating the beauty of the local language and the high level of eloquence that is highly esteemed in Besemah culture. As a traditional art form that continues to be preserved, Rejung has become a symbol of identity because it represents the worldview of the Besemah people. Values such as mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), respect for ancestors, courtesy in social interactions, and social harmony are reflected in the lyrics that are performed. Rejung also reflects the social structure of the Besemah community, as it is performed collectively rather than individually, with each member of the group or community playing a specific role.

Furthermore, Rejung serves as an effective medium of cultural education for preserving local traditions. Through this art form, younger generations learn about cultural values, local history, and the social norms upheld within the community. Cultural institutions in Pagaralam frequently organize Rejung performances, where many children and adolescents watch or actively participate. Through these experiences, they absorb valuable lessons about customs, etiquette, and culturally appropriate ways of communicating within Besemah society. Consequently, Rejung functions as a living and dynamic means of transmitting cultural values across generations. In the context of an increasingly borderless era of globalization, Rejung has become an important safeguard for preserving local cultural identity. The challenges of modernity, the influx of foreign cultures, and changes in societal lifestyles may gradually erode local cultural values if no preservation efforts are undertaken. In this regard, Rejung plays a significant role as a marker of identity that distinguishes the Besemah people from other cultural communities. Nevertheless, the existence of this traditional art form is currently facing several challenges. Younger generations, who are more familiar with digital technology and modern entertainment, often perceive Rejung as outdated and irrelevant.

One strategy for addressing this challenge is to revitalize Rejung through educational and creative approaches. This may include integrating Rejung into school curricula or organizing annual Rejung festivals that actively involve students and university learners as participants. Moreover, given the rapid advancement of technology, digital media platforms such as videos, podcasts, and social media can serve as effective tools for introducing and promoting Rejung to both local and broader audiences, particularly younger generations. In this context, a glocalization approach—combining local cultural values with global strategies—can also be implemented to revitalize Rejung as a symbol of cultural identity. Such an approach would ensure that Rejung is not merely preserved as a cultural heritage of the past but continues to evolve as an integral part of contemporary and future cultural dynamics. In addition to representing cultural identity, Rejung also reflects the linguistic identity of the Besemah community. The language used in Rejung performances is the authentic Besemah language, characterized by its distinctive dialect and vocabulary, which constitute a unique feature of the community. This demonstrates that Rejung also functions as a medium for preserving the regional language, which is increasingly threatened by the dominance of the national language and foreign languages.

As globalization becomes more intensive, it is undeniable that many local cultures are undergoing transformation. In this context, maintaining Rejung as a living part of everyday community life remains both a challenge and a necessity. Overall, Rejung represents the cultural identity of the Besemah ethnic community. It embodies noble values, local wisdom, and life philosophies that reflect the true character and identity of the people. By preserving Rejung, the Besemah community safeguards not only its cultural identity but also its language, values, and the future of the community itself.

## 2. Rejung in the Dynamics of Social Life

In addition to serving as a symbol of cultural identity, Rejung also plays a significant role in the social life of the Besemah ethnic community. Within the social structure of this indigenous society, Rejung functions as a medium of communication among community groups, a means of transmitting values, and a symbolic mechanism for conflict resolution. Furthermore, traditional arts are not merely forms of aesthetic expression but also reflections of the social life of the communities that create them. As a form of oral literary art presented through poetic verses (*pantun*),

Rejung is not only performed for ceremonial or ritual purposes but also functions to strengthen social relationships, shape cultural identity, and reflect the values of the community across various social contexts.

One of the primary functions of Rejung in social life is as a medium for interaction between individuals and among social groups. Through its verses and poetic expressions, young people are able to get acquainted with one another, exchange ideas, express emotions, and even engage in courtship in a respectful, creative manner while adhering to existing cultural norms. In this way, Rejung provides a space for communication and helps regulate intergenerational relationships within the community. Rejung also serves as a medium for social education and the transmission of cultural values. Through the pantun recited during performances, younger generations learn important life values such as honesty, politeness, hard work, responsibility, and patriotism (Alya Revalina Achmad, 2025). This function is particularly important in local communities where education has traditionally been transmitted orally and through lived experience. Consequently, Rejung forms an integral part of the social system that collectively educates and shapes the character of the community.

Over time, the social dynamics of the Besemah community have undergone significant changes due to modernization, globalization, and urbanization, all of which have substantially affected the existence of Rejung. Nevertheless, this traditional art form has not disappeared entirely. Thanks to the dedication of cultural practitioners, particularly within the Besemah community in Pagaralam, Rejung continues to be preserved and practiced. These preservation efforts demonstrate that Rejung retains its vitality despite having to adapt to continuously evolving social conditions.

### **3. Challenges Facing Rejung in the Modern Era**

In the era of globalization, traditional arts are often marginalized by popular culture, which has become increasingly universal. Many young people are more attracted to foreign cultures disseminated through social media, television, and the internet, while traditional arts are frequently perceived as outdated or irrelevant to contemporary life (Ngozi, 2022). Although Rejung plays an important role in shaping the cultural identity and social life of the Besemah community, it continues to face numerous challenges, particularly those associated with rapid societal change. One of the most significant challenges is the declining regeneration of Rejung performers and practitioners, as younger generations tend to identify more strongly with global culture than with their local cultural heritage. Another challenge is the limited documentation and institutional support available for Rejung. Many experienced artists are now elderly, and much of their knowledge has not yet been systematically documented. Modernization has also transformed public preferences, as traditional oral performances, which require time and attentive appreciation, increasingly compete with instant and visually engaging forms of digital entertainment. This situation presents a major challenge for Rejung in maintaining its relevance within a society that is becoming increasingly technology-oriented.

### **4. Opportunities for the Transformation and Preservation of Rejung**

Despite the various challenges posed by the modern era, Rejung still possesses considerable potential not only to survive but also to flourish. Several opportunities for its preservation and development are outlined below.

#### **Revitalization through Education**

Educational values constitute an essential aspect of cultural transmission, as culture is regarded as a heritage that is continuously learned, internalized, and collectively shared by members of the community (Ramli, 2021). Integrating Rejung into the local school curriculum in Pagaralam and its surrounding areas could serve as an effective preservation strategy. By incorporating Rejung into regional language courses, arts education, or local content subjects, schools would not only contribute to preserving this traditional art form but also strengthen students' cultural identity and appreciation of their heritage.

#### **Creative Repackaging of Rejung**

Rejung can also be creatively reinterpreted and presented in more contemporary performance formats without compromising its essential values. For example, it may be combined with modern musical arrangements while retaining traditional instruments, adapted into musical theatre performances, or featured in documentary films. Such creative innovations would make Rejung more appealing to contemporary audiences while preserving its cultural authenticity.

### **Cultural Festivals and Events**

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Annual cultural festivals featuring Rejung as a symbol of local cultural heritage can foster greater public appreciation and pride in this traditional art form. These festivals would not only attract tourists but also provide valuable opportunities for artists and younger generations to learn about, participate in, and preserve Rejung. Such events could serve as platforms for cultural exchange and the continued transmission of traditional knowledge.

## Digitalization and Cultural Archiving

In today's digital era, technology plays an indispensable role in everyday life. Digital technology can therefore be utilized to comprehensively document and archive Rejung, making it more accessible to both local communities and wider audiences. Producing YouTube videos, digital recordings, online archives, podcasts, and other multimedia content featuring Rejung can help ensure that this cultural heritage remains alive and relevant rather than fading with the passage of time.

## Partnerships with Cultural and Academic Institutions

Collaboration among cultural institutions, local communities, regional governments, universities, and other academic organizations can create broader opportunities for funding, research, and the development of more systematic preservation strategies. Such partnerships would strengthen conservation efforts while promoting Rejung through scholarly research, educational initiatives, cultural programs, and community engagement, thereby ensuring its sustainability for future generation.

## CONCLUSION

*Rejung* literary art serves as a reflection of the rich cultural values of the Besemah community in Pagar Alam. Through its lyrics, performances, and social context, *Rejung* functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a medium for education, social cohesion, identity reinforcement, and the preservation of local cultural values. This traditional art form is not merely a unique cultural heritage but also an important instrument in shaping and sustaining the identity and social life of the Besemah people. Through *Rejung*, values such as honor, politeness, solidarity, and spirituality are transmitted from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, *Rejung* still has the potential to survive and flourish if it receives support from all stakeholders, including the government, customary communities, artists, educators, and younger generations committed to preserving local culture. Furthermore, *Rejung* should be given greater attention and space within contemporary society, not only as a symbol of cultural nostalgia but also as an integral part of a dynamic and evolving cultural identity.

The role of *Rejung* in shaping the identity and social life of the Besemah community should not be underestimated. For the Besemah people, *Rejung* not only expresses their history and cultural values but also represents their existence and aspirations for the future of this traditional art form. Therefore, preserving *Rejung* is not merely a matter of safeguarding an artistic tradition; it is also an effort to maintain the dignity, continuity, and sustainability of a local civilization. As a recommendation, it is hoped that this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural values embedded in *Rejung* and serve as a useful reference for future research. Furthermore, this study is expected to provide a foundation for subsequent investigations into the cultural significance and preservation of *Rejung* within the Besemah community of Pagar Alam.

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