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SYMBOLIC MEANING IN REBA TRADITIONAL RITUALS IN THE NGADA ETHNIC COMMUNITY OF EAST NUSA TENGGARA (CULTURAL COMMUNICATION STUDY)

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Abstract

The Reba Traditional Ritual is a tradition of the Ngada people in East Nusa Tenggara. This ritual is performed as a way to honor ancestors, express gratitude, and pray for safety and a better life. This study aims to identify the symbols present in the Reba Traditional Ritual, understand the meanings of these symbols, and examine how cultural communication occurs within the ritual. In this study, the researcher employed a descriptive qualitative method. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation with informants consisting of traditional leaders, religious leaders, and the younger generation of the Ngada community. The results of the study indicate that the symbols in the Reba Traditional Ritual consist of object symbols, action symbols, and verbal symbols. These symbols convey meanings of gratitude, respect for ancestors, togetherness, well-being, hard work, self-purification, and hope for a better life. Furthermore, the Reba Traditional Ritual also serves as a medium of cultural communication that conveys social, spiritual, and cultural values to future generations. These findings align with the Theory of Cultural Communication developed by Samovar and Richard, which explains that culture is transmitted through the process of communication.

Keywords: *Traditional Reba Ritual, Symbolic Meaning, Cultural Communication, Ngada People, Ethnic Identity.*

Abstrak

Ritual Adat Reba merupakan tradisi masyarakat Ngada di Nusa Tenggara Timur. Ritual ini dilaksanakan sebagai bentuk penghormatan kepada leluhur, ungkapan rasa syukur, serta doa memohon keselamatan dan kehidupan yang lebih baik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi simbol-simbol yang terdapat dalam Ritual Tradisional Reba, memahami makna simbol-simbol tersebut, serta mengkaji bagaimana komunikasi budaya berlangsung dalam ritual tersebut. Dalam penelitian ini, peneliti menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi dengan informan yang terdiri dari para pemimpin adat, pemimpin agama, serta generasi muda masyarakat Ngada. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa simbol-simbol dalam Ritual Adat Reba terdiri dari simbol benda, simbol tindakan, dan simbol verbal. Simbol-simbol ini menyampaikan makna rasa syukur, penghormatan kepada leluhur, kebersamaan, kesejahteraan, kerja keras, penyucian diri, dan harapan akan kehidupan yang lebih baik. Selain itu, Ritual Tradisional Reba juga berfungsi sebagai media komunikasi budaya yang menyampaikan nilai-nilai sosial, spiritual, dan budaya kepada generasi mendatang. Temuan

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ini sejalan dengan Teori Komunikasi Budaya yang dikembangkan oleh Samovar dan Richard, yang menjelaskan bahwa budaya ditransmisikan melalui proses komunikasi.
Kata kunci: Ritual Adat Reba, Makna Simbolik, Komunikasi Budaya, Masyarakat Ngada, Identitas Etnis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Life has so many deeper meanings beyond its form, function and basis, from which humans can see reality more fully with an understanding of symbols. In this case, Cultural Communication is an important value as a process of exchanging messages that are influenced by various differences in values, norms, and habits carried out between two people or a group. In the Communication Theory textbook (Communication Theory Textbook - Anter Venus, Samdar Rery, et al, n.d.) It is stated that cultural and intercultural communication is a field of study that understands how culture is a system of meanings, values, norms, and symbols that affect the way individuals communicate and also interpret messages. In this context, culture and communication have a reciprocal relationship where culture forms a pattern of communication, while communication becomes a means of cultural preservation, negotiation and transformation. In the science of communication, rituals are not just about celebrations that are done automatically, but are also a way to convey complex cultural messages in which symbols are used to indicate shared values, beliefs, and rules within a group. One of the traditions that is still well maintained by the community is the Reba traditional ritual that exists in the Ngada ethnic group in East Nusa Tenggara. This annual event is held as an expression of gratitude for the harvest, as a tribute to the spirit of ancestors, and also as a way to strengthen relationships between indigenous communities (Kewa Ama, 2023). According to (Tena, 2025) In building a balance in life, the Ngada people in East Nusa Tenggara have their own way of interpreting that humans are indeed supposed to protect the earth and all its contents, so that there is no intention to dominate or even target nature. As should be, the indigenous people of Ngada, as the only element of the population owned by Ngada Regency to continue to maintain nature so that it remains sustainable. This concept is the basis for people to live in balance by being able to build a good and harmonious relationship with themselves, as well as with their fellow nature around them in supernatural form.

An important phenomenon that is the focus of this research is the change in the way people understand the Reba ritual in today's times, especially among young people from the

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Ngada ethnic group. With the rapid development of modernization and urbanization, there is a tendency in which the younger generation participates in the rite only to fulfill social obligations or celebrate in a visible way, without really understanding the values and symbols that exist in it. In addition, the implementation of Reba, which is now being carried out by communities living in big cities such as Jakarta, shows that there is a change in the way of communication that requires new ways to protect cultural identities that are more flexible (Venda, 2023).

The urgency of this research lies in the effort to uncover the hidden cultural meaning behind the symbols in the Reba ritual through a cultural perspective. By making in-depth observations of visible symbols, words, and ritual actions, this study shows how those cultural messages are created and passed down. This research is very important to add new knowledge that has not been widely discussed in previous research, which mostly looks at Reba only from a purely social, religious, or historical angle. The focus on cultural communication in this study provides a clear understanding of how ritual symbols function as a tool to bring communities together. Thus, the purpose of this study is to in-depth examine the way the Reba ritual is performed, explain the meaning of the existing symbols, and describe how the process of cultural communication helps to maintain the Ngada ethnic identity.

II. THEORETICAL STUDIES

Theory of Cultural Communication

This research is based on the main idea of Cultural Communication, which is emphasized by the thoughts of Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter. Samovar revealed that culture and communication are interconnected in a very close way, culture influences the way people understand messages, while communication is the primary way to spread those cultural values across time and space. Cultural Communication according to Samovar and Richard (2014:13) is a form of communication that involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are quite different in a communication (Communication et al., 2023). Communication often occurs between people or groups of people who have different cultural backgrounds from ethnic, racial or social, therefore cultural communication theory focuses on studying how cultural backgrounds can affect the exchange of messages, meanings, and also social interactions between individuals. Cultural communication theory has a function of reducing misunderstandings, increasing knowledge about other cultures, and also helping to adapt. Intercultural communication occurs when

people of different ethnicities, nations, races, or language groups communicate. According to Liliweri (2009: 24 in Communication et al., 2023), intercultural communication can be understood as the most effective interpersonal self-expression between two people with different cultural backgrounds. In understanding the study of intercultural communication, there are several assumptions that require introduction, namely that the process of intercultural communication is actually the same as other communication processes, namely a process that is valued as interactive and transactional as well as dynamic. From this point of view, ritual is seen as a type of communication that shows actions that pool a group's shared experiences into mutually agreed upon activities.

Theory of Symbolic Communication

According to the Journal of Communication as a Symbol of the Process (2025), Symbolic communication is a way for a person to exchange meanings by using symbols that have been agreed upon by the community. This idea emphasizes that the meaning of symbols is not present automatically, but can be formed through the existence of social relationships and how the person sees them. Symbolic communication described in the theory of symbolic interactionism by Mead and Blumer in Valentiyo et al, (2025) shows how important symbols are in terms of creating social reality, constructing and shaping identities and socialization processes. An explanation of the different types of symbols such as those formed in words, gestures, images, sounds, and cultural signs can help one understand how other individuals use symbols as a conveyor of information and organize their actions. With these symbols, a person can develop their values, way of life, beliefs, and cultural identity. Cultural communication can occur when a person is in a community group and can use certain symbols as a way to maintain values and pass on culture from generation to generation (Valentiyo et al., 2025).

Ritual

Ritual is a form of practice in which it has a spiritual meaning and purpose behind the physical movements performed. The visible practice is just a symbol of what is going on in the heart. According to (Ibrahim, 2023) Ritual is not just a physical activity, but ritual has a meaning full of deep symbols both in customs and religion. Rituals include prayers, movements or readings, which are carried out routinely or specially, either individually or in groups with the aim of establishing a relationship with God Almighty, Ancestors or ancestors, and also Nature. Through regular interaction in ritual spaces, people shape, maintain, and validate their cultural reality so that they do not lose their values. According to

Emile Durkheim (1912) in the journal Transformation of the Meaning of Ritual in Modern Society: A Sociological and Cultural Analysis, Tawabie & Amin (2024) ritual is an activity that functions as a means of social bonding that can unite people in the same group and values. Rituals in a community group have an important role in strengthening and also fostering a spirit of togetherness, namely by bringing closer relationships between individuals and their groups, connecting members of a group (community) through activities that have a common symbolic meaning. In his view, when a person participates in a ritual they not only engage in symbolic activities but can also feel a spiritual emotional connection with others who are also participating, which can ultimately form a shared identity. With this, rituals are not only a means to carry out a cultural practice but can also serve to strengthen social relationships between individuals.

Ethnic Identity

Indonesia is an archipelagic country that has many ethnicities, religions, languages, races and also ethnic groups. In this diversity, Indonesian citizens are divided into several ethnicities. According to the article Kumparan (2024) Ethnicity is a group of people who have similarities in culture, language, and customs, as well as people who have a sense of awareness and identity In this case, people who belong to an ethnicity usually have a relationship with a language, and the same dialect (dialect). In Indonesia, there are around 300 types of ethnicities that can be found on various islands in Indonesia. According to the Journal, ethnicity can be a sign of a person's identity, from recognizing the ethnic origin of another person one can deduce how that person interacts, behaves, and socializes. In addition, identity is a form of self-meaning, including everything related to a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions about his or her own identity (Andayani et al., 2021). Ethnic identity is a personal way of making a person consider themselves part of an ethnic group that is indirectly connected to beliefs, values, origins, and interconnectedness with culture. Of course, each ethnicity has its own characteristics, which can be a formation of who a person is and can also affect how a person interacts with other people around him (Ter-Grigoryan et al., 2026).

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design (Sugiyono, 2023) with a focus on the phenomenon of communication in culture. The qualitative research method, according to Sugiyono (2023), is also called the *naturalistic* research method because research is carried out in natural or natural situations, it can also be called *the ethnoraphi* method, which is

because initially this method was widely used for research focusing on the field of cultural anthropology. The qualitative method is concluded because the data obtained and collected in the analysis is more qualitative. This study uses a qualitative method (Sugiyono, 2023) with a descriptive approach used to understand symbolic meaning in Reba traditional rituals.

This research highlights the understanding of symbols, cultural values, and the process of cultural communication in the Ngada Community. Data collection uses the interview method which is carried out with a face-to-face meeting and also distributes questionnaires through google forms. The author wants to understand this phenomenon in depth based on the experiences and views of indigenous peoples. This method was chosen because it is necessary to understand how social meaning is explained naturally from the point of view of the person who practices the custom. The data collection site is focused on the activities of the Ngada ethnic community, including the social networks of Ngada people living in Jakarta who routinely or have done and are involved in the implementation of this ritual. The selection of informants is carried out in a deliberate way (*purposive sampling*) to obtain reliable and authoritative data. The main informant in this study is Mr. Siprianus Bate Soro, S.Si, MA, who is a well-known traditional figure and a person who was trusted by the extended family in his traditional house to lead the Reba traditional ritual. The other two additional informants are RP. Eduardus Madha, CP (a Catholic religious leader from Ngada who represents a theo-cultural point of view) and Philipus Ronaldo Bate, S. Pd (A native young generation from Ngada). The technique to collect data is carried out by observing directly, taking pictures of ritual activities, and conducting in-depth interviews in a semi-structured format.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

Based on field data, the traditional Reba ritual among the Ngada tribe is rooted in historical narratives about a mythological figure named *Sili*. Oral tradition tells that *Sili* accidentally replaced the support wood of his sweet potato plant with *Kaju Reba* (Reba wood), which miraculously transformed his harvest into an extraordinarily bountiful harvest. As a form of fulfillment of the promise of this transcendental blessing to the spiritual powers of heaven and earth (*Dewa Zeta Nitu Zale*), the traditional ritual of Reba must be held annually, passed down from generation to generation (Tena, 2025). Structurally, the traditional Reba ritual is divided into three main chronological phases:

Kobe Dheke : Held at night inside a traditional house (*Sa'o*). This ritual centers on the slaughter of a local rooster, followed by the interpretation of omens

or prophecies about the future of the family through the internal organs of the rooster (intestines, liver, heart, and ribs). After being interpreted by the traditional leader, the sacrificial animal is cooked and offered as an offering to the ancestors before being distributed and enjoyed by all members of the tribe. Not only chickens, at this stage Moke is also used as an offering to ancestors which will later be enjoyed with the extended family in the traditional house (*Sa'o) Sedo Uwi* or *O Uwi*: The mass celebration phase takes place the next day. The entire indigenous community, dressed in traditional clothing, gathered in the central area of the village (*Kisa Nata*) to dance the O Uwi dance, accompanied by songs containing traditional poems. In its implementation, the *O uwi Dance* in the traditional ritual of Reba is carried out on the second day after *Dheke Reba*. This stage is *Sedo Uwi*, where the dance is performed en masse by all village people from all groups, ranging from children, teenagers, adults, to parents participating in the dance circle. All dancers must and must be fully clothed. Men use *Lu'e, Keru, Boku, Marangia, Lega Jara,* and *Sau* or *Tuba.* As for women's complete traditional clothing*, they use Lawo, Kasa, Kese, Keru, Marangia, and Lega Jara* or *Tuba.* This stage functions as an open social meeting that brings together families, relatives, and also friends who are a means of social interaction that unites brotherhood. *Kobe Su'i Uwi* : An evening ceremony that marks the release and closing of the ceremony. During this phase, tribal elders chant high-pitched and rhythmic prayers inside the traditional house to mention all the tribe's ancestral lands as well as say the names of family members who currently live far from their hometowns. In its implementation, the Reba Traditional Ritual has several traditional symbols that must exist and cannot be changed and do not change with the times. The Ngada people believe, Reba is a sacred ceremonial that must be carried out as a Ngada people, every beginning of the year the Ngada people will certainly prepare offerings that will be used at the time of Reba, all the necessities used at the time of Reba certainly have symbols that are understood and will continue to be preserved by the Ngada community.

A. Ubi Jalar *(Uwi)*

The main symbol that must exist and not change is Ubi or what in the Ngada regional language is called *Uwi*. Because the Ngada people believe that sweet potatoes or *uwi* are staple food ingredients that have been provided by nature and will never run out, in addition, sweet potatoes are the staple food of our ancestors where sweet potatoes were the main food at that time and there are also sweet potato stems that will later be wrapped into *Su'a* (a short stick that symbolizes the honor that exists in every traditional house in Ngada Regency).

b. Kampung Chicken and Complementary Dishes

Not only sweet potato (*uwi*), another symbol contained in the Reba Traditional Ritual that is also irreplaceable is the native chicken, with the criteria of the shape of the jengger that must be upright and not weak, which later the native chicken is presented to the ancestors, which is used to see wangsit, which means a kind of form of communication with the ancestors about good or bad news that has been or will occur during the Reba celebration or after (in the near future). then there is a white moke or tuak as a complement to the offerings to the ancestors, which will later be enjoyed with the extended family in *Sa'o*. Not only that, there is also betel nut as a complement which will later be chewed by the traditional leader in the traditional house (who leads the reba) where the sitting position of the traditional leader is in the place or stopover in the traditional house called *Mataraga* , then the chewed results of the betel nut are sprayed on the sweet potato and sweet potato stems that have been wrapped in *Su'a* which has been placed in one garbage or what in the Ngada regional language is called *Nyiru*.

c.Dance *Or Home*

In addition, during the *O uwi* dance which is a dance that is done in the morning before the night of *Kobe Su'i,* where at the time of dancing the Ngada people while chanting verses containing rhymes and they wear traditional clothes namely *Sapu* and *Lu'e* which are traditional clothes for men equipped with machetes and *Lawo* which is a traditional dress for women that is equipped with *a Tuba* which is a stick decorated with colorful cloth and sheepskin at the end. The symbols contained in the Reba Traditional Ritual are findings that are in line with the Cultural Communication Theory put forward by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, where culture and communication are two interrelated and inseparable elements. Culture influences the way people use symbols, convey messages, and understand meaning in social life. In the Reba Traditional Ritual, traditional symbols such as *Uwi* or sweet potatoes, male free-range chickens, *su'a*, betel nut, traditional clothing, and *O uwi* poetry are the media of cultural communication used by the Ngada people to convey the value of gratitude, respect for their ancestors, and cultural identity. The offerings in the Reba Traditional Ritual not only have a ritual function, but also contain cultural messages that are passed down to the next generation. Symbols such as *uwi*, free-range chicken, *moke*, betel nut, and *Su'a* became a medium to convey the value of life, gratitude, respect for ancestors, and hope for the welfare of the Ngada people. The use of offerings also shows a close relationship between humans, nature, and ancestors in the life of the Ngada indigenous people. The symbolic meaning of offerings in the Reba Traditional Ritual is in line with the

Cultural Communication Theory put forward by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter. Culture and communication are two things that are interrelated and inseparable. In the Reba Ritual, offerings become cultural symbols used by the Ngada people to convey spiritual, social, and cultural messages to community members and to their ancestors. Through these symbols, the Ngada people carry out a cultural communication process that contains the values of togetherness, respect, gratitude, and trust in their ancestors. Thus, the offerings in the Reba Traditional Ritual not only function as traditional equipment, but also as a medium of cultural communication that displays the identity, outlook on life, and cultural values of the Ngada ethnic community which are still preserved to this day.

Then there is the stage *of Kobe Su'i Uwi* which contains cultural messages related to ancestral journeys, life values, and social responsibilities that must be upheld by every member of society. Through traditional stories shared by indigenous elders, people are encouraged to understand their origins, remember the struggles of their ancestors, and learn from life experiences passed down from generation to generation. *Key Informant,* Mr. Siprianus Bate Soro explained that the ritual carried out at the end of the event also contained a message about the importance of maintaining livelihoods, strengthening unity, and ensuring the safety and welfare of the community. *Su'i Uwi* means to count all inherited lands from within the tribe and sa'o. and also to count or mention the name of the overseas place occupied by relatives in the tribe or sa'o. In short, Su'i Uwi is a stage that contains a call in the form of a poem by mentioning the ancestors of the Ngada people. This verse is spoken by a traditional leader in a traditional house during the implementation of the Su'i Uwi stage. The verses are as follows: *"Sit Down, Sit Down, Sit Down, Down, T* (A traditional call or call when harvesting and planting sweet potatoes*), uwi puu zi jo zi java laa gae go kuru nguza nee wae lina..* (Uwi that comes from the tip or opposite there [Java island or outside] is sought and treated with a clear and clean sari), *na na pepe fa'o na'na leghe lapi..* (Stored well in a coffin [in layers] or preserved in it), *kawi kao mu adho.. koba leke you mu lete..* (The roots creep down, the clump or stem creeps up), *you bhodha zu'u nee za'i.. keda nee wena..* (You must be firmly embedded underneath, firm to the bottom), *the side of nee self, sia nee ki'a..* (Has dense contents, side by side or fully filled), *side nee dhiri, wi ma'e mizo mimi.. sia nee ki'a wi ma'e mizo nipa...* (The meat is dense so that it is not eaten by termites or caterpillars, the contents are full so that it is not damaged by pests or snakes or soil pests*), go mothe ma'e ngadho, go bela ma'e de'ke..* (Don't let it wither before developing, don't let it break or break in the middle of the road*), seropo wi benu bo.. A Wolves Who Are Solely. And*

I am a sucker for Irish. (Once harvested, it can fill the container [*benu bo*], one clump fills the basket, until it is full of abundant ruah*), raba wi ledha bepa nee tenga degho*.. (So that it can be enjoyed together by the whole family or descendants who gather in the traditional house)". (Interview with Informant 2, RP Eduardus Madha CP). These findings are in line with the Theory of Cultural Communication put forward by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, which states that culture and communication are inseparable. According to Samovar and Porter, culture influences the way a person thinks and behaves, as well as the way they convey messages to others. On the other hand, communication is a means used to transmit, learn, and preserve cultural values by members of the community.

V.CONCLUSION

Based on a study entitled "Symbolic Meaning in Reba Traditional Rituals in the Ngada Ethnic Community of East Nusa Tenggara (A Study in Cultural Communication)," it can be said that the Reba Traditional Ritual is a cultural practice that is still preserved by the Ngada people to honor their ancestors, express gratitude for the life and agricultural crops, and ask for safety and happiness. This tradition is not only seen as an ordinary ritual, but also as a means to share cultural values and messages that have been passed down from generation to generation. Types of symbols found in the Reba Traditional Ritual.

This research shows that there are many symbols that are very important in the implementation of this tradition. These symbols include objects, actions, and verbal expressions. The most important symbol in the Reba Traditional Ritual is Uwi (sweet potato), which symbolizes the source of life and an expression of gratitude of the Ngada people for the harvest they receive. In addition, there are various other symbols such as real rooster, Su'a, rice (dhea), moke, betel nut, chicken blood, traditional poetry, and traditional clothes such as Sapu, Lu'e, and Lawo. In addition to material symbols, there are also symbolic actions that appear through various stages of the ceremony, such as Kobe Dheke, Kobe Dhoi, Kobe Su'i, Mate Manu, Su'i Uwi, and Rora Hota Uwi. All of these symbols are an inseparable part of the Reba Traditional Ceremony because they contain cultural goals and meanings inherited from the ancestors of the Ngada people. The meaning of symbols in the Reba Traditional Ritual.

This research shows that each symbol contains meanings related to the values of the Ngada community. Uwi is considered a symbol that represents the source of life, survival, and an expression of gratitude for agricultural crops. The free-range chickens used in the Mate Manu ritual are seen as a way to honor ancestors and also as a means to receive

guidance or inspiration that is believed to be related to the people's way of life. Moke, betel nut, and rice symbolize respect, togetherness, and offerings to ancestors. Meanwhile, the O Uwi e dance symbolizes happiness, brotherhood, openness, and mutual cooperation in the community. In addition, the movements in this ceremony also symbolize respect for ancestors, purification, reminder of the historical journey of ancestors, an invitation to work and maintain a good quality of life, and the resolution of problems in society. Thus, the symbolic meaning of the Reba Traditional Ritual is not only related to spiritual matters, but also reflects the social, ethical, historical, and cultural values that guide the Ngada people.

The Process of Cultural Communication in Reba Traditional Rituals

This research shows that cultural communication occurs through the use of traditional symbols, traditional poetry, ancestral historical narratives, ritual actions, and social interactions that take place during rituals. This communication process is clearly seen in the delivery of cultural messages related to gratitude, respect for ancestors, hard work, togetherness, harmony, social responsibility, and cultural identity of the Ngada people. These values are conveyed through community participation in every part of the ceremony, both directly and through cultural learning that is passed down from the older generation to the younger generation. The Reba Traditional Ritual also serves as a means of cultural preservation, which allows the Ngada people to maintain their cultural identity, both in the homeland and in the places where they migrate. The findings of this study are in line with the Theory of Cultural Communication put forward by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter. They explain that culture and communication are two interrelated concepts. According to Samovar and Porter, culture is inherited, learned, and preserved through communication that occurs in a sustainable manner in people's lives. In the context of Reba Traditional Rituals, cultural communication occurs through traditional symbols, ritual language, traditional poetry, symbolic actions, and social interactions that enable cultural values. In this way, the Ngada people not only preserve their ancestral heritage, but also maintain their cultural identity, foster a sense of togetherness, and uphold the principles that guide their interactions with each other. Thus, it can be concluded that the Reba Traditional Ritual is a very important means of cultural exchange and plays a crucial role in expressing and inheriting the cultural values of the Ngada people. The symbols contained in the ritual contain a deep meaning and are intended to convey a message to the community. In addition, the forms of communication that occur during the ritual help preserve the cultural identity of the Ngada

people, ensuring that the identity remains alive and does not disappear even though the times continue to change.

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