

From Cultural Motto to Character Education: Managing the *Isen Mulang Ethos* of the *Ngaju Dayak* as Local Wisdom

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Abstract

The character formation of Indonesia's young generation faces mounting pressure as globalization outpaces the transmission of inherited moral values. Local wisdom offers a grounded alternative, yet the distinctive value systems of Kalimantan remain underused in character education. This study examines the *Isen Mulang ethos* of the *Ngaju Dayak* and reframes it from a cultural motto into a working resource for local-wisdom-based character education. A qualitative descriptive design guided the research across three regions of Central Kalimantan, namely Palangka Raya, Katingan, and Gunung Mas. Data came from 18 purposively selected informants through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, and validity was secured through source, time, and technique triangulation. The findings reveal that one ethos speaks in three registers. Palangka Raya voiced a progressive spirit of hard work and forward movement, Katingan voiced social responsibility toward communal peace, and Gunung Mas voiced devotion to homeland and ancestral heritage. Read as a whole, these three value clusters form a coherent character profile that education can cultivate through planned management and transmission. The study proposes a synthesis model that moves from a single root ethos, through three regional value clusters, into an integrated character profile. Its main implication is practical. Educational managers in Central Kalimantan can draw on *Isen Mulang* to design character programs that help learners advance without losing the cultural identity that defines them.

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INTRODUCTION

The formation of character among the young generation has become one of the most pressing concerns in Indonesian education, driven by a widening gap between rapid modernization and the erosion of inherited moral values (Solissa, 2022; et al., 2020). Schools across the country report rising problems of discipline, weakening social solidarity, and a fading sense of cultural belonging, which many educators trace to a globalization that reaches learners faster than any curriculum can (Sayuti et al., 2023). National policy has responded by placing character education at the center of the school agenda, yet policy alone has not settled the deeper question of where the values themselves should come from. A growing body of scholarship argues that the strongest moral formation grows not from imported virtues but from the local wisdom already



alive in a community, since values that learners recognize from their own surroundings take hold more firmly than abstractions delivered from above (Carr, 2024; Pawl & Schnitker, 2022). This tension between global pressure and local rootedness frames the problem this study addresses.

Recent scholarship on local-wisdom-based character education converges on a shared conviction while leaving important ground uncharted. One line of work establishes that indigenous values can be taught effectively when they are woven into real learning activities, as (Hidayati et al., 2020) show among higher education students, where local wisdom strengthened moral reasoning and cultural identity together. A second line moves from classroom to community, with (Sakti et al., 2024) demonstrating through an ethnopedagogical study in Yogyakarta that local wisdom is revitalized most powerfully when family and community reinforce what the school begins. A third line documents the raw cultural material itself, as (Suswandari et al., 2022) map the surviving local wisdom of the *Dayak* in Central Kalimantan and warn that this heritage is quietly disappearing among the young. Read together, these studies affirm that local wisdom is a viable and urgent foundation for character formation.

What none of these studies has done is treat a specific *Dayak ethos* as a manageable resource for character education. The first two draw largely on Javanese settings, and while they prove the principle, they say little about the distinctive value systems of Kalimantan. The third documents *Dayak* wisdom as heritage to be preserved but stops short of connecting it to any educational or managerial framework, leaving the values as artifacts rather than as instruments of formation. No study has yet shown how a single living *Dayak* value can differentiate into distinct character strengths across communities and then be recomposed into a coherent formative goal that educational managers could actually use. This is the gap the present study fills, and its novelty lies precisely in reframing the Isen *Mulang ethos* from a cultural motto into a working model for local-wisdom-based character education.

The purpose of this study is therefore to trace the character values embedded in the Isen *Mulang ethos* as they surface in the lived responses of *Dayak communities*, and to propose how those values might be managed and transmitted through character education. The study pursues this aim by examining how three communities in Central Kalimantan reasoned through a shared public dilemma, reading their responses not as political positions but as expressions of an underlying value system. In doing so it extends the existing literature in two directions at once, moving beyond the Javanese focus of earlier work and beyond the purely descriptive treatment of *Dayak* wisdom. The relevance of this purpose is both academic, in offering a fresh conceptual model, and practical, in giving educators in Central Kalimantan a grounded starting point for building character programs from their own cultural inheritance.

The central focus of this study is the way a single cultural value speaks in more than one register without losing its coherence. Rather than measuring outcomes, the research seeks a deep understanding of how the Isen *Mulang ethos* of moving forward without retreat manifests as progressive drive in one community, as social responsibility in another, and as devotion to ancestral heritage in a third. The argument advanced here is that these three expressions are not fragments but facets of one formative resource, and that recognizing them as such is what allows the ethos to be managed educationally. Understanding this internal variation is essential before any program can be designed, which is why a qualitative approach attentive to meaning and context was chosen. The following section sets out the method through which this understanding was pursued.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach, chosen because its central question concerns meaning rather than measurement (Power et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). The aim is to understand how the character values embedded in the Isen *Mulang ethos* live in the *Dayak* community and how those values might be managed and transmitted through local-wisdom-based character education. A question of this kind cannot be reduced to numbers. It can only be grasped through the words and actions of the people who hold the values, which is why a qualitative design fits the work. The primary data consist of the informants' statements and conduct, while relevant documents and historical texts serve as secondary data. The research took place in three regions that were candidates for the new capital, namely the city of Palangka Raya, Katingan Regency, and Gunung Mas Regency. Informants were selected purposively, 18 people in all, spread evenly across the three regions, using three criteria: they were native *Ngaju Dayak* or had lived in the area for more than twenty years, they understood the local sociocultural setting, and they held a role as a customary leader, an academic, a government officer, or an affected resident. Drawing informants from different strata and occupations was meant to ensure that the range of attitudes recorded genuinely reflected the diversity of the *Dayak* community across the three sites.

Data were gathered through three techniques used together, namely in-depth interviews to probe each informant's personal reasoning and stance, focus group discussions to map the collective consensus within a community, and documentation of the historical and cultural texts relevant to the *Ngaju Dayak*. These techniques did not stand alone. They were set within a strict triangulation framework meant to secure the credibility and validity of the findings (Farquhar et al., 2020). Source triangulation cross-checked the views of actors from different strata and occupations across the three regions so that no single narrative could bias the account. Time triangulation collected data in separate phases so that the sentiments recorded proved to be settled rather than momentary (Staras et al., 2025). Technique triangulation combined the three collection methods to verify the consistency of what informants said in public and in private (Gillings & Jaworska, 2025; Liu et al., 2021). Verbal and written consent was obtained from every participant, and the informants' identities were anonymized with region-based codes, with an exception for the informant who gave his consent to be named in keeping with his historical role. The application of these three forms of triangulation is set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Triangulation matrix of the data collection process

Code	Region	Role and background	Method	Date
PLK-01	Palangka Raya	Community figure and academic	FGD	June 20, 2018
PLK-02	Palangka Raya	Local government officer	FGD	June 20, 2018
KTG-01 (Bider)	Katingan	Resident of Tumbang Samba	In-depth interview	April 19, 2018
KTG-02	Katingan	Community leader	In-depth interview	April 19, 2018
GM-01	Gunung Mas	<i>Dayak</i> customary elder	In-depth interview and FGD	May 8, 2018
GM-02	Gunung Mas	Local resident	In-depth interview	May 8, 2018

The analysis followed a sequence of connected, cyclical stages in line with the flow of qualitative data analysis (Bingham, 2023; Laari, 2025; Smith et al., 2022). The first stage prepared the raw data, turning the interview results, focus group notes, and documentation into a form ready for analysis. The next stage was a full reading of the entire body of data to gain a general sense of the meanings it held (Radez et al., 2022). The data were then analyzed in greater detail through coding, the process of grouping the informants' statements into units of meaning that were later woven into themes (Hemmler et al., 2022; Williams, 2021). On the basis of that coding, thematically organized descriptions and narratives of the findings were composed, and the process closed with an interpretation of the meanings that emerged from each theme (Naeem et al., 2025; Xu & Zammit, 2020). It was through these stages that the field data from the three regions were grouped into three response patterns, namely full agreement, rejection, and conditional acceptance, and read further as three clusters of character values. The interpretation of these patterns stayed anchored in the data actually gathered in the field, so that the conclusions drawn can be held accountable to their evidence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Hard work and a forward-looking spirit in facing change

The first response pattern, concentrated among informants in Palangka Raya, reads the capital relocation as a spur to progress rather than a threat to be feared. What separates this stance from ordinary optimism is the link informants draw between the opportunity and the concrete gains they want to secure, which gives the response the proactive temper at the core of *Isen Mulang*, the ethos of moving forward without retreat. A community figure who is also an academic laid out this spirit in detail during the focus group discussion.

"If the capital truly moves to Palangka Raya, the effect on regional progress will be enormous. Infrastructure development will surely speed up, roads will be repaired, and the community's economy will be lifted along with it. The quality of education and health will rise, and our human resources will advance. On top of that, if we have business with a ministry or the central government, we no longer need to fly all the way to Jakarta. Here is enough, which saves time and money." (PLK-01, FGD, June 20, 2018)

A local government officer reinforced the same spirit by stressing his region's readiness and advantages for taking on the new role.

"Geographically, Palangka Raya is ideal and worthy of becoming the state capital. Our position here is safe. There is no record of earthquakes, no volcanoes, and no landslide threat. Flooding rarely happens in the city center. On top of that, we still have very extensive land available for building a new center of government along with its supporting facilities." (PLK-02, FGD, June 20, 2018)

Read side by side, the two accounts show that the attitude in Palangka Raya rests on a readiness to seize an opportunity rather than merely wait for it. The first informant stresses a forward orientation that ties the relocation to the advancement of local human resources, while the second voices confidence in his region's own suitability. Seen through the lens of character education, this attitude reveals several notable

values, namely hard work, a forward-looking outlook, and a self-confidence grounded in measured judgment rather than wishful thinking. The support these informants express is not passive gratitude for having been chosen. It is an active claim that progress must be worked for and that their region is ready to do the work. Values of this kind form character capital worth transmitting through education, since they nurture a generation willing to face change and to treat it as a chance to grow.

Social responsibility and the duty to protect communal peace

A sharply different attitude emerged in Katingan, where informants rejected the relocation discourse outright. The concern here is protective. It rests on the fear that relocation would bring the social ills of a large city into a territory whose value lies precisely in its calm. This rejection does not run counter to the spirit of *Isen Mulang*. It redirects that spirit, because standing firm to defend the peace of one's own land is itself a refusal to retreat. The theme is anchored in the account of a long-settled resident of Tumbang Samba, whose name appears here with his consent given his standing in the area.

"I often read the news or watch television, and in Jakarta there is frequent flooding and a lot of crime. I have lived here in Samba for nearly fifty years, and all this time our life has been safe and peaceful. If the capital moves here, I am worried that the ills of the big city, such as crime brought in by outsiders, will move to our place too." (Bider, KTG-01, in-depth interview, April 19, 2018)

A Katingan community leader voiced the same worry in more structural terms, reading the relocation as the transfer of a social condition rather than a mere move of buildings and staff.

"We are anxious about that discourse too. Relocating the capital is not only about moving buildings or civil servants. It automatically moves the social problems as well. People from outside will surely pour in to look for opportunities. Our fear is that the collective crime and social problems common in big cities will spread on their own and damage the peace that already exists here in Katingan." (KTG-02, in-depth interview, April 19, 2018)

The two accounts meet on the same worry even though they work at different scales. The resident reasons from lived experience and from what television shows him, while the community leader reasons from a more sociological premise that treats the inflow of newcomers as the channel through which social problems spread. What binds them is a sense of responsibility for protecting the social balance their community has already achieved. Seen through the lens of character education, this attitude reveals the value of social responsibility, care for fellow residents, and prudence in weighing risk before accepting change. Their refusal is not a refusal of progress itself. It is a form of caution meant to protect a shared peace. Values of this kind, protecting harmony and bearing social responsibility, are worth cultivating through education, since they shape people who care about the wholeness and safety of the community around them.

Love of homeland and respect for ancestral heritage

The third response pattern, most visible in Gunung Mas, neither fully accepts nor flatly rejects the relocation. It grants a conditional acceptance bounded by firm terms. The informants acknowledge the promise of progress, yet they place it beneath a prior

claim, the protection of *Dayak* identity, language, and ancestral land. A customary elder framed this stance through a proverb that has become the moral center of the community's reservation.

"Tempun kajang bisa buat, tempun petak manana sare." (Do not treat us as guests on our own land.) (GM-01, in-depth interview and FGD, May 8, 2018)

A local resident filled that principle with concrete social content, spelling out the losses the conditional acceptance is meant to prevent.

"If many outsiders come into our homeland, we are deeply worried that *Dayak* culture and language will disappear, run over by the newcomers' culture. We are afraid of being pushed aside from our own ancestral land. Do not let our descendants one day become guests on their own soil because of the dominance of outsiders." (GM-02, in-depth interview, May 8, 2018)

Pairing the proverb with the testimony gives this theme a depth the other two do not reach, because the abstract principle and the lived stakes are voiced separately yet point to the same condition. The elder's proverb carries a claim to land as inheritance rather than commodity, while the resident translates that claim into measurable fears, the erosion of language, the dilution of culture by newcomers, and the prospect that later generations will be displaced. Seen through the lens of character education, this attitude reveals a love of homeland, respect for ancestral heritage, and an awareness of the importance of maintaining one's identity intact amid change. Their conditional acceptance is not fence-sitting. It is a position that opens the door to progress while demanding a guarantee that the local culture will survive. A value like this deserves a place in education, since it raises a generation open to progress without losing its cultural roots or its sense of self.

A synthesis of character values across the three regions

Taken as a whole, the three regions did not produce a single verdict on the capital relocation. They produced a range of attitudes, each rooted in its own community's concerns, yet all radiating character values that spring from the same cultural ethos. The matrix below sets out the three response patterns together with the character values identified in each and their relevance for character education, so that the contribution of these findings to the management of values in education can be seen at a glance.

Table 1. Character values drawn from the range of *Dayak* community responses across the three regions

Region and date	Response pattern	Character values identified	Relevance for character education
Palangka Raya (June 20, 2018)	Full agreement	Hard work, a forward-looking outlook, and a progressive spirit	Nurtures a generation that faces change as a chance to advance
Katingan (April 19, 2018)	Rejection	Social responsibility and care for communal harmony	Shapes people who protect the wholeness and safety of their community
Gunung Mas (May 8, 2018)	Conditional acceptance	Love of homeland and respect for ancestral heritage	This approach fosters openness to progress without the loss of cultural roots and identity.

The matrix makes clear that the difference among the three communities is a

difference of emphasis, not of underlying values. Palangka Raya foregrounds the drive to advance, Katingan foregrounds social responsibility, and Gunung Mas foregrounds cultural survival, yet all three stand on the same *Isen Mulang* temper, a firm resolve to decide one's own fate with dignity. Read as a set, these three clusters of character values form a whole profile: a person who is progressive, socially responsible, and firmly rooted in a home culture. Here lies the contribution of these findings for education, because the values alive in the *Dayak* community are a source of local wisdom worth managing and passing on in a planned way through character education, so that the next generation grows and advances without being torn from its own identity.

Discussion

The three response patterns that surfaced across Palangka Raya, Katingan, and Gunung Mas invite a reading that goes beyond the politics of the capital relocation. When the informants speak, they reason from a shared moral vocabulary, and that vocabulary carries the character values this study set out to trace. What looks at first like disagreement over a policy turns out to be a single ethos speaking in three registers. The people of Palangka Raya press forward toward opportunity, the people of Katingan hold their ground to protect a hard-won peace, and the people of Gunung Mas open the door only on terms that keep their heritage intact. Each stance draws on the *Isen Mulang* principle of refusing to be moved against one's own interest, which suggests that the value is not a slogan on a provincial emblem but a living disposition that shapes how ordinary people weigh a national decision.

Placing these findings within the literature on local wisdom clarifies why they matter for education. Scholars of character education in Indonesia have long argued that values taught in the abstract rarely take hold, and that the strongest moral formation grows from wisdom already alive in a community (Afrianto & Yusuf, 2024; Tohri et al., 2022). The *Dayak* responses give that argument something concrete to stand on. The progressive drive in Palangka Raya reads as an indigenous form of the work ethic and future orientation that character curricula try to instill. The protective caution in Katingan reads as social responsibility and care for the common good (Marek & Jabłoński, 2021). The insistence on heritage in Gunung Mas reads as love of homeland and cultural continuity (Rezaei & Khouadja, 2025). These are not values borrowed from a textbook and imposed on the region. They rise from the community itself, which is precisely what makes them durable material for education rather than fragile add-ons.

This is where the study connects to a broader conversation about transformative learning. Mezirow's account of how adults revise their frames of reference through lived experience helps explain what the relocation discourse did to these communities (Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Scheiner, 2026). The prospect of a moved capital acted as a disorienting prompt, a moment that forced people to state plainly what they value and what they are unwilling to lose. Their answers were not passive reactions but reasoned positions, arrived at by testing an external proposal against an internal compass. Character education that draws on *Isen Mulang* can work the same way, using real dilemmas rather than tidy maxims to help learners examine their own commitments. The point is not to hand students a fixed set of virtues but to give them a cultural frame strong enough to reason with when the ground shifts under them.

The management dimension deserves its own emphasis, since values that are merely present in a community are not the same as values that are deliberately

cultivated (Tan, 2024; Wardoyo, 2025). Left alone, the *Isen Mulang ethos* will keep surfacing in moments of pressure, but it will do so unevenly and without direction. The task for educational leaders and institutions is to turn a diffuse cultural inheritance into a planned program, one that identifies the core values, sequences them across grade levels, models them through teachers and school culture, and measures whether they take root (Zhu, 2025). This is the work of value management in education, and it is the bridge between an anthropological observation about the *Dayak* and a usable contribution to school practice.

The synthesis of these findings is presented in Figure 1, which maps the conceptual movement from the root ethos of *Isen Mulang*, through the three regional value clusters, into a managed program of character education, and finally into an integrated character profile. The figure is read from top to bottom, tracing how a single cultural value differentiates into three distinct character strengths and is then recomposed, through educational management, into one coherent formative goal.

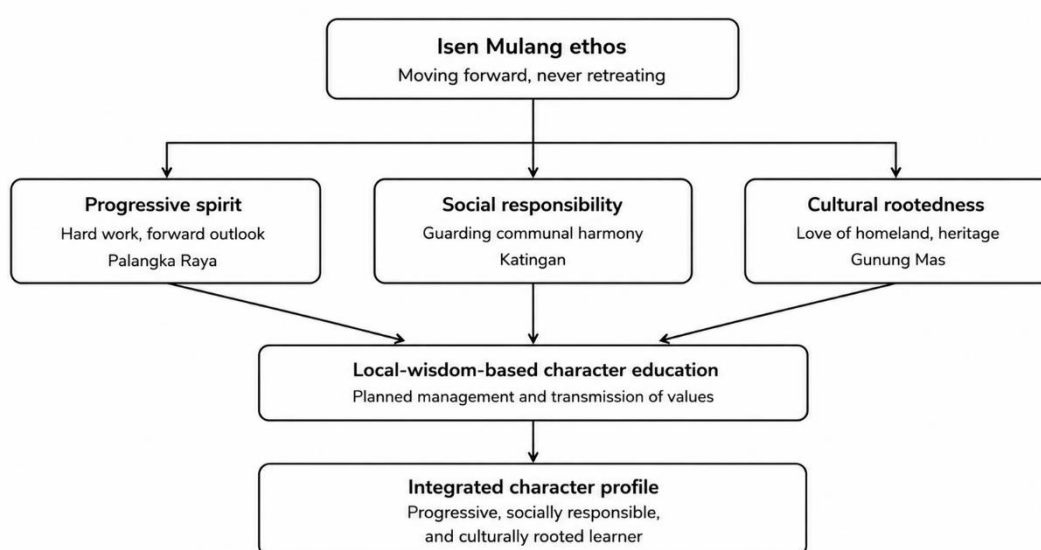


Figure 1. The *Isen Mulang* character education management model
Source: processed field data, 2018.

The synthesis in Figure 1 is where the study makes its most distinct claim. Prior work on the capital relocation has treated the *Dayak* response as a matter of economics, geography, or political sentiment, and prior work on *Dayak* culture has documented *Isen Mulang* as heritage. Neither has read the ethos as a manageable resource for character education, and neither has shown how a single value can differentiate into distinct character strengths across communities and then be recomposed into a coherent formative goal. The model proposed here does exactly that. It treats *Isen Mulang* as a root, the three regional stances as its natural branches, character education as the mechanism that gathers them, and a progressive, socially responsible, culturally rooted learner as the fruit. That movement from one root to three branches to one profile is the conceptual novelty this study offers.

Taken together, these findings point to a specific and, we believe, original contribution. This study reframes *Isen Mulang* from a cultural motto into a working framework for local-wisdom-based character education, and it supplies a synthesis

model that educational managers in Central Kalimantan can adapt into curriculum, school culture, and leadership practice. The contribution is deliberately modest in scope, since the data speak to values and dispositions rather than to classroom outcomes, and testing the model in actual schools remains a task for later research. Even so, the study moves the conversation from describing what the *Dayak* believe to proposing how those beliefs can be managed and passed on, which is the shift that turns a study of culture into a study of educational value. In doing so it offers scholars and practitioners a grounded way to build character education that helps a young generation advance without losing the identity that makes them who they are.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to trace the character values embedded in the *Isen Mulang ethos* through the way three *Dayak communities* responded to the capital relocation discourse, and it found that a single cultural value speaks in three distinct registers. The people of Palangka Raya voiced a progressive spirit of hard work and forward movement, the people of Katingan voiced a protective sense of social responsibility toward communal peace, and the people of Gunung Mas voiced a deep attachment to homeland and ancestral heritage. Read together, these three clusters form a coherent character profile that local-wisdom-based education could cultivate. The study has clear limitations. Its data speak to values and dispositions rather than to classroom practice, its informants number only 18 across three regions, and its synthesis model remains conceptual rather than tested in schools. Future research could address these gaps by examining how the proposed model works when applied in actual classrooms, by widening the participant base to include teachers and school leaders, and by measuring whether character education grounded in *Isen Mulang* produces observable change in learners. Such work would move the idea from a promising framework toward evidence of what it can achieve in practice.

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