

The Leadership Model of Reje in Preserving The Customs and Cultural Identity of The Gayo Ethnic

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ABSTRACT


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This study investigates the role of Reje leadership in preserving the customs and cultural identity of the Gayo community in Kampung Keramat Mupakat. Utilizing a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach, the research examines the meanings, values, and practices of Reje leadership across four dimensions: religious, justice, cultural, and participatory. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and the review of customary documents, and analysed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's model. The findings reveal that Reje leadership is grounded in the principle of customs based on sharia, and sharia based on the Qur'an, affirming the spiritual legitimacy of Gayo traditions. The justice dimension is reflected in deliberative consensus, ensuring inclusive, fair, and widely accepted decisions, thereby strengthening social harmony. The cultural dimension highlights the Reje's efforts to preserve local traditions such as melengkan (a ritual speech at weddings), kenduri keramat (a sacred communal feasts), and the use of the Gayo language which are transmitted to younger generations as safeguards of identity. The participatory dimension emphasizes the inclusivity of Reje leadership through the involvement of customary, religious, and community leaders in every significant decision. Collectively, these four dimensions demonstrate that Reje leadership functions as a mediator of customary and Islamic values, a guardian of traditions, and an agent of cultural education. The study concludes that the Reje leadership model remains relevant and strategic in safeguarding Gayo customs and cultural identity amid the challenges of modernization, while also contributing significantly to academic discourse on leadership rooted in local wisdom in Indonesia.



Keywords: *Cultural Identity; Leadership Style; Reje Leadership; Gayo Ethnic; Participatory Leadership.*

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INTRODUCTION

Reje (a village leader) leadership in Gayo society serves the primary function of safeguarding customs and traditions from being eroded by rapid social change (Asdiana, 2020). This perspective highlights that the position of a *Reje* is not merely administrative but also represents a cultural symbol that binds the community to its traditional values. Yacob argues that customary leadership in various local communities across Indonesia, including the Gayo, constitutes a vital pillar in preserving ethnic identity, particularly in the era of globalization that often brings cultural homogenization (Yacob et al., 2025). This underscores the central role of the *Reje* in maintaining the boundaries of Gayo identity against external influences. According to Rahmayani & Rohani (2024), customary leadership cannot be separated from its religious dimension, as Gayo traditions are grounded in the principle *edet mungenal* Qur'an, *Qur'an mungenal edet*—meaning that customs must always align with Islamic law (Manan & Salasiyah, 2023).

This perspective reinforces the notion that the *Reje* embodies a leadership figure who integrates custom and religion within a single system of governance. Similarly, (S. Bujangga, 2024) emphasizes that local leadership in the Indonesian archipelago in general, and in the Gayo context in particular, plays a strategic role in transmitting moral values and tradition-based education to younger generations (H. Bujangga, 2023). Thus, the *Reje* can be understood not only as a social leader but also as an agent of cultural education. Furthermore, Darmawan affirms that traditional leadership models possess a high degree of adaptability, continuously adjusting to contemporary contexts while preserving a core value rooted in local wisdom (Darmawan, W., & Radiansyah, 2023; Yustinaningrum & Rahmadhani, 2018). This demonstrates that *Reje* leadership has a dynamic function: it is capable of withstanding the pressures of modernization while simultaneously safeguarding the authenticity of Gayo cultural identity (Kasmawati et al., 2021).

The cultural identity of the Gayo community is closely tied to the customary practices embedded in daily life (Kartomi & Cowen, 2014). Jamhir explains that Gayo customs are not merely ceremonial symbols but embody social regulations that bind all community members to behave in accordance with collective norms (Jamhir, 2025). Within this context, the presence of the *Reje* ensures that every customary regulation is consistently observed. argues that local leadership, such as the *Reje*, plays a pivotal role in sustaining customs as a mechanism of social control.

From an educational perspective that customary leadership serves as a medium for character education, as customary values are rich with moral and ethical teachings. This affirms that the *Reje* does not only govern village administration but also educates the community by reinforcing cultural identity (Darmawan & Radiansyah, 2023). Arifin emphasizes that traditional leadership in Indonesia often functions as a

mediator between custom and religion, positioning the *Reje* as a conciliatory figure in balancing local culture with Islamic law (Arifin Zain, 2021; Fasya, 2018).

Furthermore, Dailami demonstrates that leadership patterns grounded in custom can be an effective means of preserving local values without conflicting with modern social developments (Dailami, 2021). Thus, the role of the *Reje* in *Kampung* (a village) Keramat Mupakat represents a concrete reflection of traditional leadership that safeguards customs while simultaneously adapting to the dynamics of contemporary change.

Reje leadership in Gayo culture fundamentally rests on the principle of justice, which legitimizes the leader's authority (Wulandari et al., 2025). Justice is institutionalized through *musyawarah mufakat* (deliberative consensus), a process involving the *Reje* and *Sarak Opat*—customary-based government institutions—to resolve community issues collectively (Hills, 2018). *Musyawarah mufakat* not only ensures decision-making but also serves as a political and social pedagogical tool, cultivating democratic values and reinforcing social cohesion (Kusmayadi et al., 2025). Thus, justice in customary leadership encompasses moral obligations beyond administrative functions.

Reje leadership is characterized by participatory governance, emphasizing community involvement to preserve tradition and collective ownership of decisions. This participatory model fosters social education, promoting mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) and solidarity, aligned with Islamic democratic ideals.

The leadership role integrates custom (*adat*) and Islamic law (*syariat*), positioning the *Reje* as a mediator harmonizing cultural and religious values. Justice in this context carries spiritual significance, regarded as *amanah* (a sacred trust) accountable before God, thereby providing profound moral legitimacy. This synthesis of custom and religion forms the foundation of the *Reje's* authority, reflecting a broader effort to sustain a religiously grounded social order. *Reje* leadership embodies a justice-based, participatory system deeply rooted in both customary ethics and Islamic spirituality, ensuring social harmony and democratic education within the Gayo community (Herdiati et al., 2025).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive analytical approach. The choice of this method was based on the research objective to gain an in-depth understanding of the practice of *Reje* leadership in preserving customary traditions and safeguarding the cultural identity of the Gayo community. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to explore the meanings, values, and lived experiences embedded within traditional leadership practices. In line with the perspective of (Creswell, 2023), a qualitative method is particularly relevant when

research aims to contextualize social and cultural phenomena through the exploration of narratives, symbols, and the experiences of actors involved.

The research was conducted in *Kampung Keramat Mupakat*, a community recognized for its strong adherence to Gayo traditions in daily life. This location was purposively selected because it represents a central hub of customary activities, led by a *Reje*, whose influence is significant in shaping the social, cultural, and religious life of the community. The study involved key informants, including the *Reje*, traditional leaders, religious figures, community members, and youth representatives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and the review of customary documents. According to Yin triangulation of data sources and collection techniques is essential in qualitative research to ensure the validity and credibility of findings (Miller et al., 2018) (Yin, 2021),.

Data analysis was conducted interactively following (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, 2019) framework, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Information gathered from interviews, observations, and documentation was processed, categorized, and analyzed to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to the leadership model of the *Reje*. The analysis was iterative, allowing for the continuous refinement of interpretations until a comprehensive understanding of the *Reje's* role in preserving Gayo traditions and cultural identity was achieved. The validity of the findings was strengthened through member checking and consultations with key informants. Thus, this methodological framework provides a robust foundation for uncovering the meaning of *Reje* leadership, both academically and practically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reje leadership in Gayo society is a culturally embedded deliberative model that institutionalizes *musyawarah mufakat* through structures like the *Sarak Opat* (customary-based government institutions), promoting inclusive decision-making and community participation. This leadership integrates customary traditions with Islamic principles, serving as a moral educator who transmits intergenerational values such as respect, mutual cooperation, and social responsibility. Acting as both protector and innovator, the *Reje* adapts ancestral customs to modern contexts while safeguarding them against the pressures of globalization and cultural homogenization, thus reinforcing social cohesion and the collective Gayo identity.

In *Kampung Keramat Mupakat*, the *Reje* fulfils multiple roles—mediator balancing individual and communal interests, enforcer of customary law, and facilitator of intergenerational cultural dialogue—thereby ensuring legal, cultural, and religious legitimacy that sustains community harmony and resilience. This adaptive leadership model underscores the importance of participatory governance and value transmission grounded in local wisdom, offering a holistic framework that

educational management can leverage to foster cultural stewardship, social solidarity, and sustainable community development.

Table 1: Coding Interview

No.	Interview Transcript	Informant	Substance of Findings
1	<i>"The Reje always involves all community elements in decision-making to ensure fairness and collective agreement."</i>	Reje (A leader)	Participatory leadership; inclusive decision-making
2	<i>"Through customary deliberation, our traditions stay alive, and younger generations learn the values embedded in them."</i>	Elder Community Member	Cultural transmission; intergenerational learning
3	<i>"Resolving disputes together based on musyawarah builds trust and keeps social harmony."</i>	Religious Leader	Conflict resolution; social cohesion; justice
4	<i>"Customary laws follow Islamic principles, which strengthen our community's identity."</i>	Community Youth Representative	Integration of religion and custom; identity reinforcement
5	<i>"By maintaining rituals and language, we resist cultural erosion from outside influences."</i>	Cultural Practitioner	Cultural preservation; resistance to globalization
6	<i>"Deliberation in customary forums educates us about respect, tolerance, and collective responsibility."</i>	Young Participant	Social learning; ethical education
7	<i>"Leadership rooted in participation earns trust and sustains legitimacy among all groups."</i>	Academic Researcher	Leadership legitimacy; social capital

Reje leadership in Gayo society, particularly in *Kampung Keramat Mupakat*, extends beyond administrative functions to encompass religious, cultural, social, and participatory roles. It embodies a traditional-religious leadership model that legitimizes authority through integration of *adat* or a customary law—a deeply embedded collective identity—with Islamic norms. The *Reje* ensures customary practices align with Islamic principles, exemplified in ceremonies such as weddings, reflecting the guiding norm *"adat bersendikan syariat, syariat bersendikan Kitabullah."* This synergy between tradition and religion provides moral and social legitimacy, reinforcing the community's cohesion and identity through a harmonious fusion rather than dichotomy (Enu et al., 2023).

Beyond religiosity, *Reje* leadership also emphasizes justice and deliberation (*musyawarah*). In Gayo society, decisions on crucial matters such as the management of communal land (*tanah ulayat*), the resolution of family disputes, and the conduct of customary ceremonies—are made through deliberative forums led by the *Reje*. This mechanism ensures that decisions are widely accepted, as the process allows for community participation. Consequently, the *Reje* is not perceived as an authoritarian figure but rather as a collective leader who prioritizes consensus. This highlights how democratic values, in their localized form, are deeply embedded in Gayo social life.

The cultural dimension of *Reje* leadership is reflected in the role of the *Reje* as custodian of tradition and identity. The *Reje* is responsible for safeguarding customary practices such as *melengkan* (a ritual speech at weddings), *kenduri keramat* (a sacred communal feasts) and the preservation of the Gayo language in customary forums. Through active involvement in these cultural practices, the *Reje* ensures that younger generations remain connected to and respectful of their heritage. Field observations reveal that youth in *Kampung Keramat Mupakat* continue to express pride in Gayo traditions, as they are consistently involved in customary ceremonies directly guided by the *Reje*. Thus, *Reje* leadership functions as a mechanism of cultural regeneration.

Reje leadership in Gayo society exemplifies participatory governance by actively involving community elders, religious leaders, and youth, fostering a collective responsibility for preserving *adat* (traditions) (Gayo et al., 2024) (Albar & Suhayria, 2021). This inclusive process strengthens social cohesion and ensures that cultural practices are maintained as communal heritage rather than solely the leader's burden. The model integrates four core dimensions—religious alignment with Islamic law, just decision-making via deliberative consensus, cultural transmission across generations, and participatory engagement—forming a distinctive local leadership framework. Empirical evidence underscores *Reje* leadership's critical role in sustaining Gayo cultural identity, demonstrating that customary leadership, grounded in justice, religion, culture, and inclusive participation, remains relevant and resilient amidst globalization pressures. This framework contributes significantly to scholarly discourse on culture-based leadership and offers practical insights for educational and community management contexts.

Religious (Grounded in Islamic Values)

The religious dimension provides *Reje* leadership with strong spiritual legitimacy. Every customary procession is always preceded by prayer and carefully ensured to remain consistent with Islamic law. This integration leads the community to perceive customary practices not merely as traditional rituals but as extensions of religious values. Thus, *Reje* leadership functions as a bridge between custom and Islam, creating harmony between local culture and religious teachings.

Prioritizing Deliberation and Consensus

The principle of justice in *Reje* leadership is reflected in the practice of deliberation, which forms the foundation of every customary decision. No decision is made unilaterally; rather, it is achieved through collective consensus. This process strengthens social cohesion, as the community feels included and respected. Through deliberation, *Reje* not only safeguards harmony but also ensures social legitimacy for every customary policy (Wulandari et al., 2025).

Cultural (Preserving Gayo Tradition and Identity)

As the guardian of tradition, *Reje* plays a crucial role in preserving various customary rituals such as *melengkan*, *kenduri keramat*, and the use of the Gayo language in customary forums. *Reje* ensures that these traditions are passed on to younger generations, thereby maintaining the continuity of Gayo identity (Wulandari et al., 2025). This cultural leadership acts as a safeguard against cultural erosion in the face of modernization and globalization. These theoretical frameworks help explain the continued relevance of the *Reje* leadership model amidst modernization by revealing how traditional authority can adapt to social change without losing its core cultural and moral foundations.

Theories of traditional leadership, cultural resilience, and value-based governance demonstrate that the *Reje* model derives its legitimacy not merely from formal structures, but from its integration of religious values, customary law, justice, and participatory practices (Yacob et al., 2025). This integration enables the *Reje* to function simultaneously as a cultural guardian, moral authority, and mediator of social relations, allowing traditional norms to remain meaningful in contemporary contexts (H. Bujangga, 2023). Furthermore, modernization theory, when viewed through a culturally grounded perspective, suggests that local institutions endure when they are capable of negotiating change rather than resisting it. In this sense, the *Reje* model remains relevant because it embodies an adaptive form of leadership that aligns local wisdom with evolving social dynamics, thereby sustaining cultural identity and social cohesion in the midst of modernization.

Participatory (Engaging the Community)

The participatory dimension makes *Reje* leadership inclusive, whereby the community, religious leaders, youth, and customary figures are actively involved in the decision-making process. This inclusive approach fosters a collective sense of ownership over customary practices, as the community is not merely a passive follower but an integral part of the leadership system. Through this participation, custom becomes a shared responsibility and is collectively preserved.

The legitimacy of traditional leadership in indigenous Gayo society is reinforced through its grounding in religious values that establish a shared moral foundation, a principle actively embodied by the *Reje*. By integrating Islamic teachings with customary practices, the *Reje* fosters a spiritual consensus that strengthens social cohesion and community identity, as seen in *Kampung Keramat Mupakat* where custom and religion are inseparable. This dual role as both administrative and religious leader grants the *Reje* social and spiritual legitimacy, enabling effective mediation of internal conflicts and preserving traditional values amid modernization pressures (Barter, 2015). From an educational management perspective, this integrative leadership model functions as a strategic mechanism for sustaining

cultural and religious continuity, ensuring community adherence to norms that embody both ancestral tradition and Islamic orthodoxy (Thani & Syahrin, 2018).

The leadership of the *Reje* in Gayo society exemplifies an integrative model where Islamic religious values underpin customary practices, reinforcing cultural identity and ensuring continuity through intergenerational transmission (Pangaribuan, 2024). As a mediator between religious and customary spheres, the *Reje* ensures that rituals are spiritually meaningful rather than empty formalities, embedding prayer and Islamic law within daily customs (Gayo et al., 2024). This religious grounding enhances community cohesion and legitimacy, fostering collective deliberation (*musyawarah*) that promotes social justice and inclusive decision-making. Such participatory governance not only legitimizes *Reje* leadership socially and morally but also serves as a strategic defense against globalization's erosion of local values. Overall, *Reje* leadership reflects a culturally rooted, religiously legitimized model essential for preserving Gayo traditions and guiding community development (H. Bujangga, 2023).

Reje leadership in Gayo society employs *musyawarah*—a deliberative, consensus-based decision-making model—that actively involves community members to strengthen social cohesion and ensure justice. This participatory process affirms moral legitimacy by recognizing every voice, promoting transparency, and fostering trust in leadership. *Musyawarah* functions not only as a cultural tradition but also as religious consultation aligned with Islamic values, serving as a platform for resolving conflicts and distributing social justice. Through inclusive deliberation, the *Reje* reinforces community ownership of decisions, supports horizontal solidarity, and safeguards cultural identity amid globalization. From an educational management and local wisdom perspective, this model exemplifies effective governance that integrates cultural norms, ethical values, and collective participation to sustain social stability and identity.

Deliberative consensus-based leadership under the *Reje* plays a crucial role in ensuring justice, social cohesion, and the preservation of Gayo cultural identity by resolving conflicts and transmitting democratic values through customary practices. This leadership safeguards vital traditions such as language use and rituals, reinforcing community symbols and providing cultural education that strengthens character amid modernization challenges. By integrating local wisdom as social capital, the *Reje* functions as both guardian and educator, maintaining the continuity of ethnic identity and social harmony (Kartomi & Cowen, 2014). From an educational management and local wisdom perspective, this model exemplifies effective cultural stewardship that balances progress with tradition, fostering sustainable community development (Bengi et al., 2024).

Leadership that understands and adaptively transforms cultural values is critical to preserving customary traditions in modern contexts. In Gayo society, the *Reje*

exemplifies this role by mediating between tradition and change, ensuring customary rituals remain relevant and that cultural identity endures. The maintenance of local language within customary forums symbolizes resistance to cultural homogenization and reinforces communal resilience. Crucially, *Reje* leadership fosters ethnic pride and social solidarity by engaging the younger generation in valuing their cultural heritage, thereby preventing identity crises. This adaptive, participatory leadership is essential for sustaining the continuity and vibrancy of Gayo customs.

Reje leadership in Gayo society exemplifies an integrative cultural and participatory model that preserves ancestral values while adapting to contemporary contexts. Serving as custodians of local civilization, the *Reje* facilitates ethical education rooted in community history, fostering the collective transmission of moral values. Their leadership emphasizes inclusivity by involving community members, religious figures, and customary leaders in deliberative decision-making, thereby enhancing social legitimacy, trust, and cohesion. This participatory approach strengthens social stability and supports the regeneration of local leadership through youth engagement. Grounded in local wisdom, this leadership model functions as essential social capital, sustaining Gayo cultural identity amidst modernization challenges.

Reje leadership in Gayo society exemplifies participatory customary governance that fosters emotional bonds between leaders and community members, ensuring collective acceptance of decisions. This inclusive approach reduces internal conflict by allowing diverse voices to be heard, promotes social learning of democratic values rooted in local wisdom, and strengthens social solidarity. Active involvement of younger generations in customary forums supports the transmission and contemporary relevance of traditions, enhancing cultural legitimacy and resilience against globalization. From an educational management and local wisdom perspective, such participatory leadership is a strategic mechanism that sustains cultural identity, social harmony, and community resilience through inclusive decision-making and intergenerational engagement.

The study's findings show that *Reje* leadership plays a vital social role by preserving Gayo customs and promoting social harmony through inclusive and participatory decision-making. This leadership, grounded in both religious and customary values, strengthens community identity and solidarity, enabling the community to collectively face social changes and resist cultural loss from globalization. The participatory approach fosters justice and trust, which enhances social cohesion and makes traditions more sustainable across generations. Thus, the *Reje's* leadership not only safeguards cultural heritage but also supports social resilience and ethical education, contributing positively to the broader fabric of community life.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the leadership model of the *Reje* in *Kampung Keramat Mupakat* represents a tangible form of customary leadership that preserves tradition while reinforcing the cultural identity of the Gayo people. This leadership is not only grounded in religious legitimacy rooted in Islamic values but also strengthens the principles of justice through deliberative consensus, safeguards cultural wisdom by preserving traditions, and prioritizes collective participation. These four dimensions position the *Reje* as a central figure who mediates between custom and religion, tradition and modernization, as well as leadership and communal solidarity (Husaini & Hidayat, 2019). Thus, the *Reje's* leadership functions not merely as a regulator of social life but also as a moral guardian, cultural symbol, and protector of Gayo identity amid the dynamics of social change (Bengi et al., 2024). This affirms that the presence of the *Reje* remains both relevant and strategic in ensuring that Gayo customs and culture not only endure but thrive as a dynamic expression of the community's collective identity.



Figure 1: Reje Leadership Model

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of *Reje* leadership comprises religious, justice, cultural, and participatory dimensions, forming an integrative, adaptive, local wisdom-based leadership framework that sustains cultural identity continuity. The model's strength lies in its ability to synergize spiritual legitimacy with social legitimacy—through justice and participation—so that leadership authority is not only normatively accepted but also internalized by the community as a collective value. The religious dimension provides a transcendent ethical foundation by integrating adat (customary law) and sharia (*Islamic law*). In contrast, the justice dimension ensures an inclusive and democratic distribution of power through deliberation and consensus (*musyawarah mufakat*). Simultaneously, the cultural dimension serves as a mechanism of social reproduction, transmitting cultural values and symbols across generations, thereby preserving Gayo identity amid globalization. The participatory dimension further reinforces social cohesion by involving diverse

community actors and enhancing collective ownership of adat. Therefore, this model not only represents traditional leadership patterns but also offers a resilient leadership paradigm capable of bridging tradition and modernity, serving as a strategic mechanism to sustain local culture.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the leadership of the *Reje* in Kampung Keramat Mupakat represents a model of leadership grounded in local wisdom that plays a crucial role in sustaining Gayo customs and cultural identity. The religious dimension of *Reje* leadership provides spiritual legitimacy to customary practices, as all traditions are rooted in Islamic values, ensuring that *adat* is not perceived as separate from religion. The dimension of justice is reflected in the practice of deliberative consensus (*musyawarah mufakat*), which makes customary decisions more inclusive, equitable, and widely accepted, while simultaneously reinforcing social harmony. Meanwhile, the cultural dimension highlights the *Reje's* role as the guardian of traditions, language, and customary symbols transmitted across generations, thereby serving as a cultural bulwark against the pressures of globalization. In addition, the participatory dimension underscores the inclusivity of *Reje* leadership by involving the community, customary leaders, youth, and religious scholars in every decision-making process. This participatory pattern fosters a collective sense of ownership over *adat* as a shared heritage, strengthening both social solidarity and the continuity of tradition. Thus, the *Reje's* leadership functions not only as an administrative structure of customary governance but also as a medium of integration between religion and culture, a reinforcement of ethnic identity, and a vehicle of social education for future generations. This study demonstrates that *Reje* leadership is a traditional legacy that remains both relevant and strategic in addressing the challenges of modernization and may serve as an academic reference for understanding the dynamics of local wisdom-based leadership in Indonesia.

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