

Research Article

Existence and Transformation of the Traditional Miti-Miti Dance in the Development of Cultural Tourism in Pulau-Pulau Batu District, South Nias Regency

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Abstract: Miti-Miti Dance is a traditional performing arts heritage originating from Pulau-Pulau Batu District, South Nias Regency, which plays a vital role as a marker of the socio-cultural identity of the Ono Niha community. Amid the currents of modernization and globalization, this dance faces complex dynamics: on one hand, it has the potential to become a leading asset in cultural tourism; on the other, it is vulnerable to commodification processes that may displace its original meaning and spiritual values. This study aims to examine the existence of Miti-Miti Dance as a local cultural identity and analyze its transformation process within the context of cultural tourism development. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven key informants, participatory observation, and documentary study. The findings reveal that the transformation of Miti-Miti Dance occurs multidimensionally encompassing choreographic dimensions, performance contexts, promotional media, and dancer regeneration. This transformation, when carried out participatorily with local communities as the primary actors, actually strengthens the dance's existence as a tourism asset without sacrificing its authenticity. Multi-party collaboration among indigenous communities, local government, educational institutions, and the private sector proves to be the key to successful preservation as well as responsible commercialization. This study recommends a community-based cultural tourism management model as the primary strategy for the sustainable development of Miti-Miti Dance in the modern era.

Keywords: Commodification; Cultural Preservation; Cultural Tourism; Miti-Miti Dance; South Nias

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1. Introduction

Pulau-Pulau Batu District in South Nias Regency harbours an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage, one of the most distinguished expressions of which is the Miti-Miti Dance. As an integral part of the cultural system of the Ono Niha people, this dance is far more than mere entertainment; it serves as an intergenerational medium of communication imbued with moral values, spiritual meaning, and local wisdom transmitted through the centuries. Miti-Miti performances have traditionally been held in the context of customary wedding ceremonies, the welcoming of distinguished guests, and the life-cycle rituals of the local community. Its rhythmic movements, distinctive traditional costumes, and the hypnotic accompaniment of gondrang music collectively constitute one of the highest artistic expressions within the Ono Niha civilization a living tradition that has endured for hundreds of years.

In the context of national development, the existence of traditional performing arts such as Miti-Miti Dance carries increasingly strategic relevance. Law Number 5 of 2017 on the Advancement of Culture explicitly mandates the state to protect, develop, and utilize objects of cultural advancement including performing arts as foundational assets for national development. Within this framework, cultural tourism has emerged as one of the primary channels enabling a productive interaction between cultural heritage and community

economy. At the global level, UNESCO (2003), through the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, has established that ICH which encompasses traditional performing arts constitutes a source of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development, thereby positioning traditional dance not as a relic of the past but as a living resource that continuously generates meaning for contemporary communities (Kim et al., 2019; Braña-Rey, 2024).

Cultural tourism based on traditional performing arts is now among the fastest-growing tourism segments globally. Richards (2011), in his conceptualization of creative tourism, argues that modern tourists are increasingly moving away from passive tourism models towards participatory and immersive cultural experiences a shift that opens enormous opportunities for destinations with authentic performing arts heritage, such as the Nias Archipelago. However, Yanan et al. (2024) caution that the benefits of tourism for local communities and cultural sustainability do not arise automatically; they require careful planning, inclusive governance, and collective commitment from all stakeholders. This challenge is rendered even more complex in remote island territories like Pulau-Pulau Batu, where limitations in infrastructure, accessibility, and human resources often constitute structural barriers to sustainable cultural tourism development.

Prior studies on traditional Indonesian dance in tourism contexts have generally been concentrated in regions with well-established tourism industries, such as Bali, Java, and parts of Sulawesi (Abdillah et al., 2022; Jamilah et al., 2025; Handayani et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the Nias region particularly its surrounding island clusters has received comparatively little academic attention, despite possessing a performing arts heritage of no less significance. This uneven distribution of research creates a serious knowledge gap: policymakers and tourism managers in South Nias are compelled to adopt strategies developed for geographically and culturally distinct contexts, without a relevant and contextually grounded empirical basis. This situation underscores the urgency of research specifically examining the dynamics of Nias traditional arts within their relationship to cultural tourism, and producing policy recommendations genuinely rooted in local realities (Umbu & Listyorini, 2025; Paranti & Putra, 2019).

Theoretically, this study is built upon a conceptual framework that integrates three primary perspectives. First, cultural identity theory, which regards performing arts as markers and shapers of a community's collective identity (Jamilah et al., 2025; Flores, 2025). Second, the adaptive transformation perspective, which views change in traditional arts not as a threat but as a natural survival strategy indeed a necessary one to ensure relevance amid evolving social contexts (Nerosti, 2021; Elfariyah et al., 2025). Third, the community-based tourism (CBT) perspective, which emphasizes the importance of local community empowerment and sovereignty across the entire value chain of tourism development (Yanan et al., 2024; Umbu & Listyorini, 2025). The integration of these three perspectives is intended to produce a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the existence and transformation of Miti-Miti Dance. Furthermore, commodification defined as the process of converting cultural expressions into economic commodities has been widely identified as a central tension in heritage tourism that demands careful management (Abdillah et al., 2022; Hafidhoh, 2025; Kim et al., 2019). Kim et al. (2019) specifically assert that authenticity in the context of ICH constitutes a holistic concept that integrates inherited tradition, stored meaning, and the identity of its practitioners and therefore cannot be arbitrarily compromised for market interests.

Based on the foregoing background, this study seeks to answer two principal research questions: First, how does the Miti-Miti Dance maintain its existence in constructing and preserving the socio-cultural identity of the Pulau-Pulau Batu community amid the forces of modernization? Second, how does the transformation of Miti-Miti Dance unfold, and what are its implications for sustainable cultural tourism development in Pulau-Pulau Batu District? This research is expected to contribute not only theoretically to the development of ethnochoreographic and cultural tourism scholarship, but also practically as a policy recommendation for stakeholders in South Nias Regency.

3. Research Method

In this section, you need to describe the proposed method step by step. Explanations accompanied by equations and flow diagrams as illustrations will make it easier for readers to understand your research.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study research design focused on Miti-Miti Dance in Pulau-Pulau Batu District, South Nias Regency. The choice of

approach is grounded in the recognition that the phenomena of existence and transformation in traditional performing arts represent complex, contextual socio-cultural processes that cannot be reduced to statistical figures alone. Case study research, as articulated by Yin (2018), is particularly suited to situations where the researcher aims to understand contemporary phenomena in depth within the context of real life, especially when the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is not entirely clear.

The study was conducted between January and April 2025 in Pulau-Pulau Batu District, with focus locations in villages that have active communities of Miti-Miti dancers and traditional custodians. The selection of this location was based on the consideration that the district constitutes the geographic and cultural epicentre of the dance under study, and is simultaneously one of the cultural tourism destinations currently being developed by the South Nias Regency Government.

Table 1. Research Informant Profiles

No.	Informant Name	Role / Position	Data Collection Method
1	Traditional Custodian (Ono Niha)	Local Cultural Elder	In-Depth Interview
2	Senior Miti-Miti Dancer	Traditional Performing Artist	Interview & Observation
3	Junior Miti-Miti Dancer	Next-Generation Performer	Interview & Observation
4	Head of Tourism Office	Policy Stakeholder	In-Depth Interview
5	Arts Studio Manager	Arts Education Institution	Interview & Documentation
6	Domestic Tourist	Cultural Tourism Consumer	Questionnaire & Brief Interview
7	Local Community Leader	Community Representative	FGD & Interview

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Data collection in this study employed three primary and complementary methods. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven key informants selected purposively based on the relevance of their roles, knowledge, and experience with Miti-Miti Dance. The interview guide was semi-structured to allow for more flexible exploration of topics and responsiveness to information emerging from the field. Second, participatory observation was carried out through the direct observation of two Miti-Miti Dance performances one in a ceremonial context and one in a cultural tourism festival to understand significant contextual differences. Third, documentary study was conducted by analysing photographs, performance video recordings, regional cultural archives, and South Nias Regency tourism policy documents.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), comprising three iterative stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, member checking with key informants, and peer debriefing with academic colleagues specializing in performing arts studies and cultural tourism.

4. Results and Discussion

The Existence of Miti-Miti Dance as a Marker of Socio-Cultural Identity

Field findings confirm that Miti-Miti Dance is not merely a performance that can be appreciated aesthetically, but rather a complex system of meaning that lives within the daily existence of the Ono Niha community. Informants from among the traditional custodians consistently affirmed that every movement within Miti-Miti carries a narrative and symbolism rooted in the cosmology and value system of the local community. The coordinated bodily movements of the dancers reflect the principle of mutual cooperation and social harmony that serves as the foundation of the communal life of Pulau-Pulau Batu society.

From a sociological perspective, Miti-Miti Dance functions as an effective mechanism of social integration. In the processes of preparation and performance, all elements of society young and old, women and men, customary leaders and ordinary community members become involved in roles that have been culturally defined. This phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Jamilah et al. (2025), who found that traditional dance in South Sulawesi communities likewise functions as a medium for reinforcing social identity that extends far beyond mere performance. Observational results revealed that audience enthusiasm at a ceremonial performance differed substantially in quality from that at a tourism performance in the former, there was a profound emotional and spiritual engagement from the entire community present.

The distinctiveness of Miti-Miti Dance also lies in its pedagogical function. Through the dance, noble values such as courage (*fame'e*), adherence to customary law (*fondrakö*), and reverence for ancestors are transmitted to the younger generation organically and engagingly. A senior dancer interviewed acknowledged that he came to understand the life philosophy of the Nias people not from textbooks, but rather from every Miti-Miti training session with the village elders. It is precisely this pedagogical dimension that elevates the dance beyond a mere cultural asset; it is a non-formal educational institution that has been operating for centuries.

Multidimensional Transformation: Between Innovation and Preservation

The transformation process of Miti-Miti Dance unfolds across several interrelated dimensions, as summarised in Table 2 below. This transformation is neither linear nor singular, but rather represents an ongoing negotiation between the pressures of externally-driven modernization and the core values guarded by the community from within.

Table 2. Dimensions of Miti-Miti Dance Transformation and Implications for Tourism

Transformation Dimension	Form of Change	Implications for Tourism
Choreography	Movement adjustments, shortened performance duration, modern stage design	Enhances visual appeal for domestic and international tourists
Costume & Props	Costume modification for aesthetics while retaining cultural symbols	Creates strong visual identity as a tourism branding asset
Performance Context	From ceremonial rituals to festival stages and tourism events	Broadens audience reach and increases performance frequency
Promotional Media	Use of social media, short videos, and digital platforms	Increases global visibility of the tourism destination
Dancer Regeneration	Involving youth through studios and school programmes	Ensures cultural sustainability while strengthening tourism human resources

Source: Primary Data, 2025 (processed from interview and observation results)

In the choreographic dimension, the most conspicuous transformation is observable in the shortening of performance duration from what would originally unfold over several hours in a ceremonial context to approximately 15–20 minutes in the tourism performance format. This adjustment, though it may appear superficial, in fact requires considerable cultural negotiation among artists, traditional custodians, and tourism managers. Traditional custodians were initially highly resistant to this shortening, fearing the fragmentation of the cultural narrative embedded in the sequence of movements. However, through an intensive process of dialogue, a compromise was ultimately reached involving the selection of movement segments that are most representative and carry the highest symbolic value, to be retained in the tourism version. A similar negotiation pattern was identified by Handyaningrum et al. (2021) in their study of performing arts conservation management in East Java, where the success of traditional dance preservation was largely determined by the capacity of studios to adapt the cultural thinking of their respective communities.

The promotional media dimension has undergone the most sweeping and rapid transformation. The use of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has significantly expanded the reach of information about Miti-Miti Dance to a far broader audience. Research by Raihan Sabili et al. (2023) on the effectiveness of digital platforms for preserving traditional Indonesian dances found that digital media not only increases visibility but also opens space for the active participation of young people in the processes of documenting and disseminating cultural heritage. The Head of the South Nias Regency Tourism Office noted that since the intensification of digital promotion in 2023, the number of tourists specifically mentioning Miti-Miti Dance as the primary attraction of their visit has increased significantly. This finding is consistent with the argument of Hafidhoh (2025) that the digitalization of cultural promotion is a double-edged sword on one side opening new market opportunities, on the other requiring strict narrative control to prevent cultural representation from becoming distorted. Citrawati et al. (2025) further assert that the revitalization of traditional dance in the digital era will be more successful when young people are engaged not merely as passive recipients of heritage, but as active co-creators in documenting, reinterpreting, and disseminating their cultural heritage in ways relevant to their own peer groups.

Commodification and the Challenge of Authenticity

The tension between market demands and the imperative of preserving authenticity constitutes the most crucial finding of this research. Analysis of the two Miti-Miti Dance performances observed one in a ceremonial context and one in a tourism context reveals stark

differences not only in technical execution, but also in the quality of meaning transmitted to the audience.

Table 3. Analysis of Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, and Threats in the Preservation of Miti-Miti Dance

Strengths & Opportunities	Weaknesses & Threats
Rich and unique movements of high cultural value as a key attraction	Over-commodification risks eroding the spiritual meaning and ritual values of the dance
Support from the indigenous community (Ono Niha) as guardians of authenticity	Regeneration crisis: declining youth interest in traditional performing arts
Integration potential within marine and cultural tourism packages in South Nias	Limited tourism infrastructure in Pulau-Pulau Batu District
Growing trend of experiential and cultural tourism globally	Global popular culture overshadowing appreciation of local arts

Source: Primary and Secondary Data Analysis, 2025

In the ceremonial performance, all elements from costumes and props to musical accompaniment and the sequence of movements adhered strictly to conventions established by tradition. Audience members were actively engaged, both physically (participating in certain ritual segments) and emotionally (weeping, praying, and offering invocations). In stark contrast, performance in the tourism festival context tended to be more theatrical in character dramatic stage lighting, costumes modified to be more photogenic, and dancer-audience interaction of a superficial nature directed towards photographic documentation.

Commodification does not necessarily carry negative connotations when managed wisely. Informants from among arts studio managers revealed that income from tourism performances enables them to pay instructors, purchase training equipment, and provide scholarships to talented children from disadvantaged families. In this sense, commercialization actually becomes the driving force enabling the financial sustainability of cultural preservation programmes. This finding reinforces the argument of Abdillah et al. (2022) that innovation in Balinese performing arts, when managed responsibly, can constitute an effective preservation strategy within the context of special interest tourism.

The greatest threat lies not in transformation itself, but in the loss of local community control over the narrative and direction of that transformation. When management is entirely delegated to tourism operators without the involvement of traditional custodians and dancers, the risk of authentic value degradation becomes very high. Zhang et al. (2024), in their phenomenological study of alienation and authenticity in ICH tourism, identified six dimensions of alienation experienced by ICH practitioners: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, self-estrangement, and cultural alienation a condition that arises when practitioners no longer hold agency over how their cultural heritage is represented. Mahendra (2024) similarly observed this phenomenon in Bali, where unchecked tourism pressure can result in a gradual yet significant transformation of the cultural identity of the host community. Several informants in the present study expressed concern about the tendency of external parties to 'manipulate' elements of Miti-Miti to meet tourist expectations that are sometimes unrealistic or even stereotypical regarding Nias culture.

Multi-Party Collaboration as the Key to Sustainability

Across all research findings, the most consistently recurring thread is that the success of preserving and developing Miti-Miti Dance as a cultural tourism resource depends fundamentally on the quality of collaboration among the various actors with a stake in the process. No single party is capable of managing this complexity alone.

Table 4. Multi-Party Collaboration Model for the Preservation and Tourism Development of Miti-Miti Dance

Actor	Strategic Role	Form of Intervention
Local Community (Ono Niha)	Guardian of authenticity and intergenerational cultural transmission	Ceremonial practice, junior dancer training, cultural preservation FGDs
Local Government	Policy facilitator and funding provider for cultural programmes	Budget allocation for festivals, cultural heritage protection regulations
Educational Institutions & Studios	Socialization agents and formalizers of traditional arts education	Local dance curriculum, extracurricular programmes, dancer scholarships
Private Sector & Tourism Industry	Responsible commercialization partner (responsible tourism)	Cultural tourism packages, professional documentation, digital promotion
Media & Digital Technology	Amplifier of cultural narratives to broader audiences	Social media content, cultural webinars, digital performance archives

Source: In-Depth Interview Data Analysis Results, 2025

Annually held cultural festivals have proven to be the most effective instrument for integrating the diverse interests and actors involved. Within festivals, the local community assumes the role of host and guardian of authenticity; the local government is present as facilitator and regulatory authority; the private sector contributes financing and promotion; while educational institutions ensure the involvement of the younger generation. Sahar (2024), in his study on the revitalization of tradition through cultural festivals, identified a similar pattern, whereby festivals function not merely as performance venues but also as forums for negotiation among stakeholders regarding the direction of sustainable artistic development. Braña-Rey (2024), in his study of a 700-year-old traditional festival in Galicia, Spain, found that ICH centred on local community perspectives demonstrably and significantly strengthened sense of community, perceptions of authenticity, and depth of emotional experience three elements that jointly determine the satisfaction of all stakeholders, both host communities and tourists.

A significant implication of this finding is the necessity of formalizing collaboration mechanisms through a permanent institutional body, such as a Cultural Council or South Nias Cultural Tourism Forum. Such a forum could serve as a platform for joint decision-making, conflict resolution, authenticity monitoring, and capacity development an institutional ecosystem ensuring that the transformation of Miti-Miti Dance always proceeds along a path that honours its core values.

Dancer Regeneration and the Challenge of Intergenerational Sustainability

One of the most concerning findings of this research is the dancer regeneration crisis within the Miti-Miti tradition that has become increasingly apparent over the past decade. Field data indicate that the average age of active dancers registered with local traditional arts groups exceeds 35 years, while the number of dancers under the age of 20 is extremely limited. This phenomenon reflects a broader trend identified by Elfariyah et al. (2025), namely that young people in the era of modernization tend to be exposed to global popular culture through digital media long before they have had adequate socialization into local cultural arts. The result is a form of 'generational void' that, if not addressed promptly, threatens the sustainability of Miti-Miti Dance in the medium term. Arts studio managers interviewed acknowledged that youth dancer recruitment programmes launched in 2021 faced significant difficulties in maintaining consistent attendance, primarily due to competition from various modern extracurricular activities perceived as more prestigious by parents.

In response to this challenge, several promising regeneration initiatives have begun to emerge from within the community itself. Raihan Sabili et al. (2023) found that approaches combining digital elements such as creative content production based on traditional dance with technical dance training proved far more effective in attracting youth interest compared to conventional instructive approaches. In Pulau-Pulau Batu, several junior dancers interviewed acknowledged that their interest in Miti-Miti was first sparked by watching short-form performance videos uploaded to social media an irony that simultaneously contains reason for optimism. Citrawati et al. (2025) emphasize that the revitalization of traditional dance in the digital era will be more successful when young people are engaged not merely as passive heirs, but as active co-creators who document, reinterpret, and disseminate their cultural heritage in ways relevant to their peers. This co-creation model is precisely what needs to be developed systematically through collaboration among arts studios, schools, and digital platforms within a sustainable Miti-Miti Dance regeneration ecosystem.

Table 5. Comparative Analysis: Ceremonial vs. Tourism Performance

Aspect	CEREMONIAL Context	TOURISM Context
Performance Duration	2–5 hours (full ceremony)	15–20 minutes (selected segments)
Primary Purpose	Ritual & sacred ceremony	Entertainment & tourism promotion
Audience	Indigenous community members	Domestic / international tourists
Costume & Props	Strict traditional conventions	Modified for photogenic appeal
Audience Engagement	Active & emotional (ritual participation)	Passive & appreciative
Venue	Traditional house / ritual space	Festival stage / tourism venue
Dominant Value	Spiritual & communal	Aesthetic & economic
Frequency	Dependent on ceremonial cycle	Scheduled & recurring

Source: Field Observation Results, 2025

Research Gap Analysis

Prior studies reviewed reveal an uneven distribution of academic attention across the various thematic dimensions of traditional dance and cultural tourism research. Figure 4 below maps these gaps according to a matrix of themes and research attributes.

The matrix identifies that studies on the digitalization of promotion within the context of commodification and authenticity, as well as the role of formal education in dance preservation, remain very sparse. These gaps open important avenues for further research, particularly in light of the accelerated adoption of digital technology in the tourism industry in the post-pandemic period. Studies examining how digitalization influences tourist perceptions of cultural authenticity, and how school curricula can be integrated with traditional arts preservation programmes, are urgently needed to complete the existing knowledge landscape.

6. Conclusion

This study has successfully revealed that the existence of Miti-Miti Dance in Pulau-Pulau Batu District is not static, but rather constitutes a dynamic cultural entity in constant negotiation with the context of its era. The dance remains existent and relevant precisely because of its capacity for adaptive transformation without relinquishing the root core values that constitute its very soul. The multidimensional transformation that has occurred at the levels of choreography, performance context, promotional media, and dancer regeneration represents an organic community response to the pressures and opportunities brought by the modern tourism industry.

The principal findings of this research affirm three things. First, that preservation and transformation are not mutually opposed dichotomies, but rather two sides of the same coin both can and must proceed harmoniously in tandem. Second, that the local community (Ono Niha) must always be positioned as the primary subject and ultimate decision-maker in every transformation process, rather than merely serving as a content provider for industrial interests. Third, that structured, trust-based multi-party collaboration constitutes an absolute prerequisite for the sustainability of Miti-Miti Dance both as a cultural tourism asset and as a guardian of South Nias cultural identity.

Based on these findings, this study recommends three strategic steps. First, the establishment of a South Nias Cultural Tourism Forum as a formal institutional body for permanent multi-party coordination. Second, the development of a Community-Based Cultural Tourism (CBCT) programme that positions dancer communities and traditional custodians as the primary managers of Miti-Miti Dance tourism packages. Third, the integration of Miti-Miti Dance into the local content curriculum of schools across South Nias Regency, as a means of dancer regeneration and the early internalization of cultural values.

This study has limitations in terms of temporal and geographic scope. Further research employing longitudinal methods tracking the dynamics of Miti-Miti Dance transformation over an extended period as well as expansion to other districts in South Nias that possess similar dance traditions, would substantially enrich our understanding of the complexity of the relationship between traditional arts and cultural tourism in remote Indonesian island territories.

Author Contributions: A short paragraph specifying their individual contributions must be provided for research articles with several authors (**mandatory for more than 1 author**). The following statements should be used “Conceptualization: X.X. and Y.Y.; Methodology: X.X.; Software: X.X.; Validation: X.X., Y.Y. and Z.Z.; Formal analysis: X.X.; Investigation: X.X.; Resources: X.X.; Data curation: X.X.; Writing—original draft preparation: X.X.; Writing—review and editing: X.X.; Visualization: X.X.; Supervision: X.X.; Project administration: X.X.; Funding acquisition: Y.Y.”

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