



## Recontextualization of Islamic-Malay Ethics through Modern Zapin: A Didactic Analysis of Lesti Kejora's Song in Character Education

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### Abstract

The erosion of cultural identity among Generation Z necessitates an innovative approach to character education through the recontextualization of local wisdom. This study aims to analyze the integration of moral and cultural values within the song "Zapin Melayu," a modern adaptation performed by Lesti Kejora, and evaluates its relevance as a pedagogical medium for character formation in contemporary education. Employing a qualitative descriptive design with content analysis, this research examines lyrical narratives and historical archives to interpret latent didactic messages. The findings reveal that "Zapin Melayu" serves as a sophisticated synthesis of Islamic theological principles and indigenous Malay ethics, encompassing themes of sincerity (ikhlas), social decorum (adab), and collective harmony. The results demonstrate that through its "dynamic packaging," this modern iteration successfully preserves the ontological essence of traditional art while resonating with modern musical sensibilities. Consequently, the song functions not merely as aesthetic entertainment but as a critical ethno-pedagogical tool that fosters spiritual awareness and social solidarity. This study concludes that the revitalization of traditional arts through contemporary media is imperative for fortifying national identity and internalizing akhlaql karimah amidst the pressures of global homogenization.

### Keywords:

Malay Zapin, Moral Values, Character Education, Ethno-pedagogy, Malay Identity

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional Malay art serves as a multifaceted cultural manifestation in the Indonesian archipelago, functioning beyond mere aesthetics to act as a primary instrument for disseminating moral, social, and didactic messages (Elmustian et al., 2024; Ritawati, 2025). A preeminent example of this is Zapin Melayu, a performing art that represents a sophisticated synthesis of Islamic theological principles and indigenous local wisdom evolved since the 16th century (Anggela et al., 2025; Erni & Artis, 2025; Lestari et al., 2024; Suparno et al., 2020).

Rather than being confined to rhythmic choreography, Zapin constitutes a profound cultural expression reflecting Islamic spirituality and the socio-ethical framework of Malay society (Arifin, 2025; Suradi, 2022). Zapin art integrates the aesthetics of flexible movement, percussive rhythm, and poetic elements as a persuasive preaching instrument to strengthen ethical values and social order in society (Mardiah, 2018).

Within the framework of character education, Zapin Melayu offers a viable source of values and a contextual learning medium (Suryani & Evadila, 2025). Its intrinsic attributes, encompassing sincerity, decorum

(adab), collectivity, and ancestral reverence. This aligns with previous research stating that Islamic education must go beyond cognitive mastery to internalize moral-social values as a foundation for student character development (Mastura & Darwis, [2023](#)). The narratives embedded within Zapin compositions, which articulate social ethics and existential harmony, provide a significant cultural anchor for fostering a national identity (Ambriyani et al., [2025](#); Johan, [2020](#))

The structural and stylistic evolution of Zapin Melayu demonstrates a resilient capacity for innovation that does not compromise its ontological essence. A contemporary manifestation of this trend is observed in the adaptation by Lesti Kejora, which harmonizes modern musical aesthetics with traditional sensibilities. By utilizing dynamic arrangements while preserving lyrics centered on filial piety and cultural respect, this modern iteration illustrates how heritage can be revitalized to resonate with younger demographics without eroding its pedagogical function (Suryani et al., [2025](#)). Such adaptations testify to the durability of traditional arts in navigating modernity while sustaining their didactic relevance.

Despite these cultural assets, contemporary education faces systemic challenges, including moral attrition, identity crises, and a widening disconnect between religious values and formal schooling. In an effort to build an ideal educational model, integration between the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains needs to be realized through an approach based on the local cultural context (Achieng, [2016](#); Alafnan, [2025](#); Khobir & Hasanah, [2021](#); Subedi, [2022](#)). Paradoxically, current practices often prioritize formalistic academic benchmarks at the expense of the moral-spiritual dimensions essential for nation-building (Rinovian R et al., [2025](#)). Consequently, the revitalization of traditional arts like Zapin Melayu becomes

imperative, serving not only as cultural preservation but as a critical pedagogical strategy for character reinforcement.

Scholarly discourse has previously examined the intersection of Malay arts and value-based education. The integration of movement and literary elements in Zapin significantly contributes to the development of spirituality (Mardiah, [2018](#)). This is reinforced by previous research which stated that students' social ethics are developed through the use of traditional lyrics in the learning process (Mastura & Darwis, [2023](#)). This study highlights the socio-ethical relevance of traditional Malay lyrics in the classroom environment. Furthermore, other research states that internalizing Malay cultural values in the madrasah environment effectively improves student morality, provided there is active involvement from educators (Rinovian R et al., [2025](#)).

While prior research has established the general moral significance of Malay art, a distinct research gap remains concerning the reception and pedagogical utility of contemporary adaptations for Generation Z. The novelty of this study lies in its specific analytical focus on the integration of moral and cultural values within modern versions of Zapin Melayu as a contemporary source for character education. This inquiry is intended to offer theoretical contributions to ethno-pedagogy and provide a strategic framework for fortifying the cultural identity of the youth amidst the pressures of global homogenization.

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## METHODS

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design centered on content analysis to systematically investigate the religious, moral, and cultural dimensions within lyrical texts. Content analysis was

selected for its efficacy in interpreting the latent meanings and didactic messages embedded in artistic communication (Krippendorff, [2018](#)). Through this framework, the study elucidates the educational narratives within the contemporary version of the Zapin Melayu lyrics, analyzing their relevance to character formation within the modern Malay-Muslim sociocultural context.

### **Data Collection and Sources**

Data were gathered through a systematic literary study and lyrical text analysis. The primary data source is the song "Zapin Melayu," performed by Lesti Kejora (released January 25, 2016, under Trinity Optima Production). This specific version, composed and arranged by the renowned Malaysian musician Pak Ngah, was purposively selected as it represents a significant cultural innovation. While maintaining the upbeat rhythm and traditional essence of the Zapin, a folk tradition prevalent in North Sumatra, Riau, Jambi, South Sumatra, and Bengkulu the song successfully integrates modern musical elements that resonate with Generation Z (Martiar, [2019](#); Nor, [1990](#)).

Secondary data were derived from a comprehensive review of academic journals, monographs, and cultural archives regarding Zapin aesthetics, Islamic pedagogy, and Malay cultural identity. These sources provide the necessary theoretical triangulation to validate the interpretative analysis of the song's lyrics.

### **Data Analysis**

The analytical process followed a systematic qualitative framework, as proposed by (Elo & Kyngäs, [2008](#)), consisting of the following stages:

- Immersion and Data Condensation: An in-depth, repetitive reading of the "Zapin Melayu" lyrics to gain a holistic understanding of the narrative structure.
- Coding and Categorization: Identifying and isolating textual segments containing religious, moral, and socio-cultural values.
- Thematic Analysis: Categorizing the extracted data into dominant themes, specifically: (a) God-consciousness (piety), (b) social ethics (adab), (c) local wisdom, and (d) preservation of Malay-Islamic traditions.
- Inference and Interpretation: Contextualizing these themes within the framework of Islamic education and the contemporary reality of character development.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the findings were subjected to theoretical triangulation (Denzin, [2017](#)). This involved comparing the interpreted meanings with established Islamic educational theories, previous scholarly findings, and the perspectives of Malay cultural experts. This rigorous process ensures that the analysis of the song's function as a moral learning medium remains objective and academically sound.

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## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Results**

#### **A. The Religious and Moral Values**

Religious values are principles or guidelines related to the practice of religious teachings in daily life, including attitudes, behaviors, and intentions that are in harmony with spiritual teachings. Moral values, on the other hand, have to do with the principles that govern the behavior of individuals in society, encompassing attitudes, actions, and decisions that are considered good or bad by social norms. In Jambi Malay culture, moral values include respect, politeness, honesty, fairness, hard work, and a sense of responsibility, which need to be maintained and maintained so as not to damage cultural

values (Ramlji, [2014](#)). In the song Zapin Melayu there are several lyrics that contain religious and moral values (Putri et al., [2025](#)), including:

### ***The value of sincerity in Work***

In the lyrics "*"Menari menarilah sejajar hatimu, menari menarilah tanpa rasa jemu"*" emphasizing sincerity as a foundation in work. The phrase "sejajar hatimu" shows that every action, including art and dance, should be based on sincere intentions, in accordance with the principle of sincerity in Islamic teachings. Religious values in Malay culture are very well maintained because they are sourced from teachings *Kitabullah*, which emphasizes purity of intention in every activity (Hidayat et al, [2025](#)). This also shows that the song Zapin Melayu not only serves as entertainment, but also as a means of expressing gratitude, getting closer to God, and instilling spiritual awareness in social life.

### ***The Value of Politeness and Ethics in Malay Culture***

Moral values are also found in other lyrics that have a similar meaning, namely in the section "*Menjeling dara di ekor mata, terpaut rasa oi dalam hati*", these lyrics describe respect and manners in social interaction that exist in Malay culture. Although these lyrics also express feelings of love, there is an emphasis on manners that show the importance of ethics and manners in relationships between individuals, in accordance with the moral values upheld in Malay society. In addition, there are also other lyrics that read "*Cantik dan anggun senyum menguntum, gadis Melayu rancak bertandak*" in this lyric displays a picture of a polite, graceful, and civilized Malay woman. Politeness is reflected through gestures, smiles, and manners, can indirectly reflect the moral values of Malay Islamic culture, such as gentleness, maintaining self-respect, and

respecting others. The Malay community in their daily lives is accustomed to emphasizing moral and ethical indicators such as respect, honesty, justice, hard work, and responsibility, which must be maintained so that cultural values are not lost to modernization (Mairista et al., [2025](#)).

Thus, the Malay Zapin song not only serves as a means of entertainment, but also serves as a medium of expression that is full of religious and moral values. The values of sincerity, politeness, and ethics reflected in the lyrics of the song show the integration between spiritual teachings and social norms in Malay culture, as well as being able to strengthen the cultural identity and moral awareness of the community written through the lyrics of the song.

## **B. Cultural and Social Values**

Cultural values are social norms, traditions, and practices that are passed down from generation to generation, which shape the identity of a community and become a guideline for behavior in daily life. These values include respect for customs, preservation of traditional arts, social manners, and awareness of cultural symbols that characterize a society. In Malay culture, cultural values are reflected through traditional art practices, historical preservation, and social interaction procedures that emphasize harmony and harmony. Social values are values related to interaction, solidarity, and cooperation between community members, which encourage harmony and order in living together. In Malay culture, cultural and social values are reflected through traditional art practices, historical preservation, and social interaction procedures that emphasize harmony and harmony in the community (Rizki, [2024](#)). In the song Zapin Melayu there are several lyrics that contain cultural and social values, including:

## **Preservation of Cultural Heritage through Zapin**

In the lyrics "*Irama lama tinggalan sejarah, janganlah canggung hai duduk mengalun*" has the importance of preserving cultural heritage. The mention of "old rhythm" shows that Zapin is part of a tradition that has historical value and a symbol of Malay identity. These lyrics teach the younger generation to appreciate and adapt to customs in art practice, while maintaining cultural sustainability (Lailatul Qodriah et al., 2023).

## **Preserving Traditions in the Midst of Changing Times**

In addition, another lyric that reads "*Walau dunia terbelah dua, seni ibunda tetap dijaga*" shows that even though times are changing and modernization is hit, the preservation of art and culture remains a priority so that it does not become extinct. The phrase "*seni ibunda*" contains a symbolic meaning that culture is a heritage of ancestors that must be preserved. This shows how important cultural continuity and collective awareness are in the community to maintain Malay identity in the midst of the current era of globalization. Scholars argue that traditional arts serve as a core mechanism for maintaining cultural identity in modern society: for example, cultural arts act as a social binder that maintains local traditions and values despite globalization pressures, reinforcing local identity and cultural awareness (Saputra et al., 2024).

## **Social Dimension and Harmony in Culture**

Furthermore, in the lyrics that read: "*Berdentam-dentam dentum hoi tingkah rebana, berpasang-pasang tari hoi geraknya tari*" and lyrics "*Jeling-jeling pandang tersenyum, tangan bertaut menyapa teman*" describes the social aspects of Zapin culture. Simultaneous and rhythmic dance moves

show order, harmony, and cooperation in the group. The cultural value in these lyrics emphasizes that the Zapin tradition is not only entertainment, but also a means of strengthening social solidarity and harmony between members of the Malay community. While the second lyric means that there is an interaction between individuals that is full of manners and respect, so that it reflects the values of solidarity, mutual cooperation, and social harmony in the daily culture of the Malay community. Traditional dance performances are not merely artistic expressions, but also serve as cultural practices that strengthen social bonds and preserve communal values passed down from generation to generation (Aditya et al., 2024).

## **Aesthetics and Manners in Malay Culture**

In the next part of the lyrics it reads "*Cantik dan anggun senyum menguntum, gadis Melayu rancak bertandak*" displaying the aesthetic value of Malay culture. Elegance, politeness, and neatly arranged manners depict cultural norms in daily life, which shows harmony, manners, and appreciation for the beauty of art. These lyrics show how aesthetic and modesty aspects are an integral part of the cultural identity of the Malay community.

Thus, the Malay Zapin song not only functions as a means of entertainment, but also as a medium of expression that is full of cultural values. The value of preserving tradition, historical awareness, social harmony, as well as manners and aesthetics reflected in the lyrics of the song shows the integration of cultural symbols and social practices in the life of the Malay community, while strengthening cultural identity and collective awareness of ancestral heritage (Wiradharma et al., 2017).

### C. Relevance to Islamic Character Education

The religious and moral values contained in the Malay Zapin song, such as sincerity in work, and ethics in social interaction have direct relevance to character education in schools. Sincerity teaches students to cultivate sincere intentions in every action, both academic and non-academic, in accordance with the principle of sincerity in Islamic teachings. Politeness, manners, and social ethics emphasize the importance of respecting others and maintaining harmonious relationships with peers, teachers, and members of the school community (Iwan, [2020](#)).

The cultural and social values reflected in Zapin, among its forms, are the preservation of traditions in the form of social and cultural harmony in collective movement, as well as the existence of aesthetic values and Malay cultural manners that can provide a concrete learning experience. Teachers can take advantage of this traditional art to instill the value of cooperation, responsibility, discipline, and social concern in students. Thus, character education is not only focused on theory, but also through direct experience that is relevant to daily life in learning (Hidayatulloh et al, [2024](#)).

Through the practice of dancing or learning Zapin songs and culture, students can also learn to cultivate awareness of cultural identity and a sense of pride in their ancestral heritage and Malay culture. This activity can also encourage the internalization of knowledge of religious, moral, social, and cultural values, so that students' Islamic character is formed through real, contextual experiences. Every value reflected in the Malay Zapin song can be an exemplary model of behavior, strengthening the attitudes, ethics, and cultural identity of the younger generation today.

### Discussions

#### *Sincerity and Modesty as Spiritual Anchors in Moral Formation*

The internalization of the value of sincerity represented in the lyrics of "*menari sejujur hatimu*" (dance honestly with your heart) reflects a deep theological foundation in Malay culture. From an Islamic perspective, honesty of heart, or *ikhlas*, is a primary prerequisite for an act of worship to be accepted, both in the context of ritual worship and social activities. The use of the phrase "*sejujur hatimu*" (honest with your heart) is not merely an artistic instruction for dancers, but rather a philosophical message that all outward manifestations of behavior must stem from pure inner intentions. This aligns with concepts in Islamic aesthetic philosophy that view art not as an end in itself but as a path to spiritual proximity and moral refinement. Malay society views aesthetics not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to attain God's approval through the purification of sincere work motivations (Sulaiman, [2021](#)).

Furthermore, the value of politeness depicted through the metaphors of "*menjeling di ekor mata*" (a look in the corner of the eye) and "*senyum menguntum*" (a smile that is unseen) demonstrates a well-maintained social code of ethics in interactions between the sexes. Amidst the tide of modernization that tends to break down the boundaries of privacy and politeness, these lyrics serve as a reminder of the importance of *adab* (ethics) or social etiquette. Politeness in Malay culture is not merely viewed as a social norm, but as an integral part of faith. This aligns with Wiradharma's ([2017](#)) premise that religion-based character education must be able to manifest spiritual values in concrete polite behavior in social life.

In the context of character education, strengthening the values of sincerity and politeness provides an alternative solution to

the moral crisis of contemporary youth. Instilling these values through popular media, such as modern Zapin songs, allows students to internalize the concept of akhlaql karimah (good morals) without feeling dictated by rigid doctrine. The graceful and polite character of the "Malay girl" in this song symbolizes the ideals of character that uphold self-respect (muru'ah) and gentle speech. As emphasized by Puspita (2023), moral indicators such as respect and responsibility are the main bulwarks that prevent cultural identity from being eroded by the negative impacts of globalization.

### ***Negotiating Tradition and Identity Resilience in the Global Era***

The commitment to preserving cultural heritage, expressed through the lyrics "mother's art remains preserved," demonstrates a cultural resistance to the hegemony of globalization. In studies of cultural sociology, the phrase "mother's art" has a powerful symbolic meaning, positioning traditional art as the root of a society's sociocultural life. The emphasis that this art must be preserved "even if the world is split in two" reflects a collective determination to maintain identity amidst the onslaught of foreign cultures that often align with local values. Elmustian (2024) emphasizes that the resilience of Malay culture lies in its ability to maintain core traditional values while continuously adapting to changing times.

The historical awareness expressed in the lyrics "*irama lama tinggalan sejarah*" (old rhythms of historical heritage) underscores the importance of intergenerational continuity. History, in the context of Zapin, is not simply a narrative of the past, but rather an instrument for understanding the evolution of Islamic values in the archipelago. By encouraging listeners to avoid feeling awkward in adapting to tradition, this song attempts to dismantle the stigma that

traditional art is an outdated, irrelevant entity. The transformation of Zapin into a more dynamic form by musicians like Pak Ngah demonstrates the fluidity of tradition. Citrawati et al, (2025) argues that innovation in the performing arts is key to ensuring that old values remain accessible to new generations without losing their educational essence.

Academically, this modern Zapin innovation demonstrates that Malay identity has a "constant core" but with "dynamic packaging." Lesti Kejora's musical adaptation maintains a strong Malay nuance, demonstrating that modernity need not destroy tradition. This contributes to the idea that cultural education should not be confined to museums but should be brought into public spaces. Setyo et al, (2021) state that strengthening identity through local wisdom is the most effective strategy for building a national character that is globally competitive while remaining grounded in the noble values of our ancestors.

### ***Collective Movement as a Metaphor for Social Solidarity***

The social dimension depicted in the description of the "beating" and "paired" Zapin dance movements reflects a profound philosophy of togetherness. The synchronized and rhythmic dance movements demand coordination, discipline, and mutual trust between individuals. From the perspective of the sociology of education, this represents collective harmony, where group interests take precedence over personal ambitions. Through Zapin, society is taught that social order can only be achieved if each individual is able to align their movements and steps with a common goal, a concept known in Malay culture as the principle of *seiya sekata* (*seiya sekata*). In line with this, research on traditional performing arts such as Guel music and dance shows they serve as agents of social

cohesion and cultural sustainability, strengthening community belonging and shared values through collective participation (Herdianti et al, [2025](#)).

Furthermore, social interaction in Zapin is vividly conveyed through lyrics such as "*berpasang-pasang tari, hoi geraknya tari*" (paired dancing steps), which reflect collective movement and mutual engagement among participants, underscoring values of togetherness and communal harmony in Malay cultural practice, demonstrate the importance of hospitality and acknowledging the presence of others. This value of solidarity is highly relevant in addressing the increasingly acute problem of individualism in the digital age. Interpersonal relationships in Zapin are not based on competition, but rather on compassionate togetherness. Sahnir & Jamilah ([2024](#)) explains that traditional arts practices are a highly effective medium for strengthening social bonds, as they can diffuse individual tensions through shared aesthetic harmony.

In implementing character education in schools, the social aspects of Zapin can be adopted through collaborative learning methods. By practicing the movements or studying Zapin lyrics, students learn not only about music but also about the importance of social responsibility and empathy. Every wrong move in the dance will affect the overall aesthetic of the group, indirectly teaching that individual behavior has consequences for the social order. Edinon ([2022](#)) asserts that education that utilizes traditional arts can create a stronger collective consciousness than simply teaching moral theory in the classroom.

### ***Ethno-Pedagogy: Integrating Local Wisdom into Character Education***

The relevance of Malay Zapin to Islamic character education lies in its ability to present abstract values in concrete,

experiential forms. As emphasized by Solissa et al, ([2024](#)) ideal education must be able to integrate cognitive and affective aspects rooted in national culture. Zapin provides a "learning space" for students to practice the values of discipline through precise tempo and religious values through understanding lyrics. This approach is a concrete form of ethno-pedagogy, where local wisdom serves as the basis for instructional strategies to develop resilient personalities.

The use of artistic media, such as modern Zapin songs, also addresses the challenge of young people's low interest in conventional character education. Through dynamic music, messages about ethics, love of culture, and religious obedience are conveyed subliminally. Teachers can leverage the appeal of this popular culture as a gateway for deeper discussions about national identity. According to Setiyatna et al. ([2025](#)), character formed through real-life experiences and media relevant to students' lives is more likely to be retained (long-term memory) than simply memorizing academic material.

Theoretically, the integration of traditional arts into the curriculum strengthens the synergy between morality and creativity. Holistically instilling values through art fosters both aesthetic sensitivity and moral integrity in students. By internalizing Zapin values, students are encouraged not only to be intellectually intelligent but also to possess refined character. Tambak et al. ([2020](#)) concluded that internalizing local cultural values in education is the main key in fostering the morality of madrasa students, so that the revitalization of traditional arts is a very urgent agenda in the national education system.

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### **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that the recontextualization of Islamic-Malay ethics

through a modern adaptation of the song "Zapin Melayu" by Lesti Kejora serves as an effective pedagogical instrument for strengthening character education in the contemporary era. Textual and discursive analysis demonstrates that this artwork successfully integrates the values of spirituality (ikhlas), social ethics (adab), and collective harmony without diminishing the ontological essence of the Zapin tradition itself. This musical innovation has proven capable of bridging the generational gap, transforming the perception of traditional art from a static entity into a dynamic and relevant learning medium for Generation Z.

Furthermore, the integration of the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains in Zapin provides the foundation for a holistic ethno-pedagogical model, in which moral values are not merely understood theoretically but internalized through aesthetic experiences and collective movement. Theoretically, this study asserts that the resilience of cultural identity amidst globalization depends on the tradition's ability to adapt through "a constant core with a dynamic packaging." As a practical implication, the revitalization of traditional arts such as Zapin in formal and non-formal education curricula is a crucial agenda for fostering a competitive national character that remains rooted in local wisdom values.

### Author's Declaration Regarding the Use of LLM

The author used the Large Language Model (LLM/Gemini) as an aid in drafting certain texts, while retaining full control over the development of ideas and arguments. A thorough curation and editing process was undertaken to ensure scientific integrity. Therefore, final responsibility for the validity and content of this article rests solely with the author.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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