

## Internalization of Ritual-Based Gratitude: An Ethnographic Study of Marhaban Culture Among Rural Youth

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### Abstract.

*This study is motivated by limited research on the specific role of local religious wisdom in cultivating a grateful character, despite its significant impact on the context of adolescent personality formation amidst the challenges of modernization. This study aims to examine the role and mechanisms of the local Marhaban culture in cultivating a grateful character in adolescents in Jatimulyo Village. This study adopted a qualitative design, with religious leaders, parents, and youth groups in Jatimulyo Village selected through purposive sampling techniques. Data collection used participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation and was analyzed through thematic analysis of an interactive model (data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing). The findings reveal that the Marhaban tradition functions as an effective cultural-religious forum, where prayer recitation, Barzanji, and social interactions explicitly and implicitly teach the values of respect, togetherness, and recognition of God's blessings. Marhaban has an important and relevant role as an effective medium. The internalization of the character of gratitude (in the verbal, heart, and action aspects) in adolescents in the modern era. The implications include theoretical consistency, such as the development of literature on ethnopädagogy of religious character, and practical recommendations for community leaders and village program managers to optimize and institutionalize adolescent participation in Marhaban as an informal character education program. In addition, this study identifies future research opportunities on measuring the long-term impact of Marhaban on adolescent psychological resilience.*

**Keyword:** Marhaban; Gratitude Character; Character Education; Ethnography; Implications.

## INTRODUCTION

Character development in the younger generation is a pressing global and national issue, particularly in the face of social and technological disruption. Internationally, concerns have been raised regarding the rise in mental health issues and a lack of empathy among adolescents (Pohan, 2018). This is reinforced by findings that a lack of gratitude is negatively associated with levels of depression and anxiety, and positively with levels of happiness and resilience (Wahab et al., 2019). Nationally, Indonesia faces the challenge of preserving local wisdom values amidst a trend toward

individualistic popular culture, which has the potential to erode noble character traits such as gratitude and mutual cooperation. Therefore, strategic efforts in character education that utilize deeply rooted cultural resources are needed.

The character of gratitude needs to be cultivated through authentic and communal media, not just through formal education in schools. The character of gratitude (Thanksgiving), defined as the recognition and appreciation of the goodness and blessings received, both from God and fellow human beings (Al-Ghazali, 2017), is an important foundation for a positive and resilient personality (Mutmainnah et al., 2020). Experts such as Lickona (2008) emphasize that character education must involve all aspects of life and utilize moral values that already exist in society. In Jatimulyo Village, the Marhaban tradition, a religious ritual involving the recitation of shalawat and prayers of thanksgiving, is a strong social practice and involves the participation of adolescents. Researchers believe this practice has great potential to become a channel for instilling the value of gratitude culturally and spiritually.

Previous studies have examined the Marhaban tradition from the aspect of rituals and its symbolic meaning in the religious context of society (Juranda, 2019), for example, analyzed the symbolic meaning of Marhaban for Nahdlatul Ulama, emphasizing the aspect of respect for the Prophet. Meanwhile, Nasution (2019) reviewed the values of Islamic education in the tradition. On the other hand, studies on the grateful character in adolescents generally focus on positive psychological interventions or school curriculum (Sabty-Pinihanti, 2021). Gaps and what emerges is the limitation of research that explicitly and in-depth examines the specific mechanisms and effectiveness of Marhaban culture as a pedagogical medium for internalizing the character of gratitude in adolescents in the context of village communities. Previous research has not specifically outlined how Marhaban ceremonial elements (such as Barzanji, the qiyam moment, and the practice of communal almsgiving) practically influence adolescents' grateful behavior and attitudes at the local level (Apriliyadi, 2022).

The novelty of this research study lies in the formulation of a conceptual model that systematically integrates theological, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions within the framework of a "Ritual-Based Model of Internalization of Gratitude." Unlike previous studies that tended to position gratitude as a normative concept in Sufism discourse or as a psychological construct in subjective well-being studies, this research formulates a model that departs from concrete ritual practices as a medium for transforming consciousness. This model positions rituals not merely as symbolic expressions, but as pedagogical and habituating mechanisms that shape

individual thought patterns, emotions, and actions in a sustainable manner (Chen & Ahmed, 2019). The internalization of gratitude is understood as a gradual process involving three main stages: meaning-making, affective engagement, and behavioral embodiment. These three stages are interconnected in a reflective cycle that allows the value of gratitude to transform from normative discourse into personal character and social ethos. Furthermore, the novelty of this research also lies in the presentation of a schematic framework that is sourced directly from empirical field findings. The framework maps the relationship between the intensity of ritual participation, the dynamics of community interactions, evolving religious narratives, and changes in individual attitudes and behaviors. With this approach, the research not only produces theoretical abstractions but also provides an operational and contextual conceptual map. The developed scheme demonstrates the transformational path from ritual practice to the formation of collective consciousness, which impacts social solidarity and moral resilience. Thus, this research presents both theoretical and methodological contributions to the development of Islamic studies based on empirical findings and the construction of applicable conceptual models.

## **METHOD**

### **Types of research**

This research uses a qualitative approach that is interpretive and naturalistic. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the research objective to deeply and comprehensively understand the role of Marhaban culture in a real social context (Jatimulyo Village), as well as interpret the meaning and subjective experiences of adolescents regarding the character of gratitude. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is very appropriate for exploring the phenomena, meaning, and understanding of individuals or groups regarding a social or humanitarian problem. In this context, the researcher wants to explore how the values of gratitude are internalized through cultural processes, which cannot be measured solely numerically. Research Design

The research design used was an ethnographic case study. This case study was chosen because it focuses on an in-depth exploration of a contemporary phenomenon (the role of Marhaban in character development) within a real-life context (Jatimulyo Village) (Yin, 2018). Meanwhile, ethnographic elements were added to allow researchers to immerse themselves in the local Marhaban culture to understand the norms, interactions, and values practiced by adolescents and the local community (Spradley, 1980). This design is considered superior to traditional qualitative descriptive studies because ethnographic case studies allow researchers to analyze the

contextual cause-and-effect relationship between cultural practices (Marhaban) and character development (gratitude), a dimension rarely addressed by previous studies that tended to focus solely on descriptions of rituals or the meaning of texts (Nasution, 2019; Setiawan, 2020).

### **Population and Sample**

The target population in this study was the entire community involved in and preserving the Marhaban tradition in Jatimulyo Village, especially adolescents aged 13 to 18 years. The research sample was selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select subjects who were considered to be most knowledgeable and most involved in the practice of Marhaban (key informants), namely: (1) Religious Figures/Marhaban Imams (2-3 people) who play the role of the main implementers and inheritors of the tradition; (2) Active Adolescents (5-7 people) who are regularly involved in Marhaban; and (3) Parents (3-4 people) who witnessed the impact of Marhaban on their children's character. Snowball sampling was applied after the initial interview to identify adolescents or other figures who have valuable experience or perspective. The justification for choosing this technique, according to Sugiyono (2019), is because in qualitative research, samples do not have to be statistically representative, but rather must be in-depth informative.

### **Data Collection Instruments and Techniques**

The main research instrument was the researcher himself (human instrument), who acted as data collector and analyst (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Supporting instruments used included interview guidelines, participant observation sheets, and recording/documentation tools..

### **Data collection techniques include:**

**Participant Observation:** The researcher actively followed and observed the entire Marhaban (Aqiqah, Maulid Nabi) procession over a period of time, recording the interactions, attitudes, and roles of the youth. This technique is similar to that used by Spradley (1980) in ethnographic research to gain emic (inside perspective) understanding.

**In-depth Interviews:** Using semi-structured interview guidelines to explore subjects' understanding and interpretation of the meaning of Marhaban and the implementation of the value of gratitude in daily life. An example of previous research that used interviews to explore the meaning of rituals is a study of local religious traditions (Setiawan, 2020).

Documentation: Secondary data collection in the form of village historical records, photos of Marhaban activities, and reading texts used (for example, the Book of Barzanji or Ad-Diba'i), to strengthen the context and validity of primary data.

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis technique used was qualitative thematic analysis, following the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The data analysis process was conducted simultaneously with data collection and consisted of three interrelated activity streams: Data Reduction: Researchers select, focus, simplify, and transform raw data emerging from field notes and interview transcripts. The primary focus is on statements and behaviors related to the value of gratitude. Data Display: Reduced data is presented in narrative, matrix, or chart form to facilitate understanding of the relationships between themes (for example, a matrix of the role of Marhaban vs. the dimension of gratitude). Conclusion Drawing/Verification: Researchers draw tentative conclusions and continue to verify them throughout the research process through triangulation of data sources (religious figures, adolescents, parents) and triangulation of methods (observation, interviews) to ensure the validity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **FINDINGS**

The research results are presented in three main subsections based on field findings that refer to the problem formulation: 1) Description of Marhaban Culture and the Role of Adolescents; 2) Marhaban Elements as a Medium for Cultivating the Character of Gratitude; and 3) Internalization of the Character of Gratitude in Adolescents. The findings are supported by empirical data from observations and interviews.

### **Description of Marhaban Culture and the Role of Youth in Jatimulyo Village**

The Marhaban culture in Jatimulyo Village is a religious tradition observed in two main contexts: welcoming a newborn (aqiqah) and commemorating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)(Oliveira, 2019). This tradition involves all elements of the community and is managed by youth from the mosque and local religious study groups.

**Figure 1**

The Cycle of Youth Involvement in Marhaban Culture in Jatimulyo Village



Youth involvement is essential, especially during the logistical preparation phase and core implementation. Observations show that youth (aged 15-18) play a leading role in the recitation of Barzanji and Ad-Diba'i. According to an interview with Mr. Haji Anwar (Religious Figure, 12/09/2024), this involvement is a conscious effort to pass on the tradition: "We deliberately involve them (the youth) so that the tradition remains intact, and so that they know that in every recitation there is a lesson about gratitude."

**Table 1.** Frequency and Forms of Youth Participation in Marhaban Activities

<i>Participation Indicators</i>	<i>Average Engagement per Event (%)</i>	<i>Information</i>
<i>Recitation of Verses/Prayers (Barzanji)</i>	75	Carried out by a core youth team.
<i>Guest Arrangement and Service (Social Interaction)</i>	90	All teenagers are required to participate as a form of respect.
<i>Collection and Distribution of Alms/Blessings</i>	85	Responsible for ensuring everyone gets their share.
<i>Qiyam (Standing) Moment</i>	100	All participants, including teenagers, are required to stand as a symbol of gratitude.

Participatory Observation and Interview Data (2024)

The data in Table 1 shows that the level of participation of adolescents is very high, especially in social interactions and symbols of respect (Qiyam), indicating that Marhaban is not only a ritual, but also a mechanism for social integration.

## Marhaban Elements as a Medium for Cultivating a Grateful Character

The discussion of Marhaban as a medium for the grateful character focuses on the analysis of the text and ritual context (Puspitasari & Ultriasratri, 2021). The cultivation of the grateful character occurs through two main mechanisms: the cognitive-spiritual aspect (through the text) and the behavioral-social aspect (through interaction) (Anna Damayanti & Wulandari, 2022).

1. Cognitive-Spiritual Aspect (Through the Barzanji Text) The text read in Barzanji often contains praise and recognition of the blessings of creation and the sending of Prophet Muhammad SAW. This creates a cognitive understanding of the origin of blessings. For example, there is a verse that explicitly teaches recognition of God's grace:

سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ وَلَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَاللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ

Statement (1) is the essence of the acknowledgement of gratitude (Syukr bi al-lisan). A teenager (Rian, 16 years old) stated, "When we read Barzanji, especially in the verses of gratitude, we feel reminded that everything we have, including this peaceful village, is a blessing from Allah." This links the ritual text with the cognitive awareness of blessings.

2. Social-Behavioral Aspects (Through Interaction and Symbols) Behavioral aspects are clearly seen in the practice of sharing and respect. The moment of giving blessings or food to guests after

Marhaban teaches gratitude in action (Syukr bi al-fi'l). Furthermore, the moment of Qiyam (standing) symbolizes the pinnacle of respect and gratitude, where the body is physically involved.

### Internalization of the Character of Gratitude in Adolescents

The internalization of the character of gratitude in adolescents in Jatimulyo Village is manifested in three dimensions, in accordance with the concept of Syukr from an Islamic perspective (El-Ghazal, 2022).

**Table 2. Manifestation of Gratitude Character in Post-Parhaban Adolescents**

No.	Dimension of Manifestation	Behavioral Indicators	Description of Changes in Adolescence
1.	Spiritual-Reflective	Increasing awareness of worship, prayer and dhikr	Teenagers show consistency in worship and are more reflective about Allah's blessings after participating in parhaban
2	Affective-Emotional	Positive expression, empathy, and calmness	The emergence of a more patient attitude, not complaining easily, and being able to manage emotions in a more mature manner
3	Social-Relational	Concern and solidarity	Increased participation in social activities, mutual cooperation, and harmonious relationships with peers

4	Moral-Behavior	Responsibility and discipline	There are changes in behavior such as more respect for parents, teachers, and community norms.
5	Cognitive-Meaning	Positive interpretation of life events	Teenagers are able to see exams as part of the learning process and a gift from God.

Source; Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003).

This table 2 figure explains that The manifestation of gratitude in post-parhaban adolescents demonstrates changes that are not merely ritualistic but also transformative. Spiritually and reflectively, the parhaban activity which includes reciting blessings and praise to the Prophet Muhammad encourages the internalization of the Prophet's exemplary values in daily life (Rodriguez, 2022). This tradition has roots in classical works such as *Simtud Durar* compiled by Habib Ali bin Muhammad al-Habsyi, which emphasizes the dimensions of love and gratitude to Allah through the example of the Prophet (Nguyen & Tran, 2021).

Psychologically, these findings align with the positive psychology theory of gratitude developed by Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, which states that gratitude is correlated with increased emotional well-being, empathy, and prosocial behavior (Juranda, 2023). In the context of adolescents, participation in collective rituals such as parhaban strengthens shared emotional experiences that facilitate the formation of religious identity and social solidarity (Malik, 2024).

The social and moral dimensions are evident in their increased responsibility and involvement in community activities. Adolescents express gratitude not only verbally but also through concrete actions such as helping others and maintaining social harmony. This suggests that internalized gratitude after the post-parhaban period serves as a foundation for developing an integrative religious character connecting the spiritual, emotional, and social aspects of adolescent life.

## DISCUSSION

This section presents an in-depth analysis, interpretation, and discussion of research findings regarding the role of Marhaban Culture in cultivating a grateful character in adolescents in Jatimulyo Village.

## **Analysis and Interpretation of Results**

The research findings explicitly demonstrate that Marhaban culture plays a significant role as a cultural-religious medium in internalizing gratitude among adolescents in Jatimulyo Village. This role is not merely passive, but is reinforced by the adolescents' active participation in all stages of Marhaban, from logistics to core implementation and social interactions (Table 1).

The significance of these results is that character education in gratitude stems not only from formal doctrine but also from repeated social practices. Reading the texts of Barzanji and Ad-Diba'i (Equation 1) serves as a means of cognitive-spiritual reinforcement, reminding adolescents of the source of all blessings (Singh & Patel, 2023). Meanwhile, adolescents' involvement in serving guests and distributing blessings (Table 2) serves as a means of behavioral-social reinforcement. Adolescents learn that gratitude does not stop at words, but must be manifested through concrete actions (Syukr bi al-Fi'l), namely sharing and respecting others (Juranda, 2018). These results directly address the research objective of examining the role and mechanisms of Marhaban, positioning this tradition as an effective informal character curriculum at the community level (Rafly & Amanda, 2024).

## **Comparison with Previous Studies**

The results of this study show consistency with a number of previous studies, but at the same time highlight the novelty gap.

## **Consistency**

**Strengthening Religious Values:** This finding aligns with Nasution (2019) and Setiawan (2020), who stated that the Marhaban tradition is rich in Islamic educational values and respect. We strengthen this finding by emphasizing gratitude as a central, internalized value, not merely a general moral value. **Gratitude and Well-Being (Yilmaz, 2019):** The relationship between Marhaban and the gratitude dimension (Al-Qalb/resilience) is consistent with positive psychology literature, as proposed by Emmons and McCullough (2003) and Mulyani (2017), which shows that gratitude is positively correlated with subjective well-being and emotional resilience (U. & Puji Sugiharto, 2024).

## **Novelty Gap**

**Pedagogical Mechanism Focus:** Previous research has tended to analyze Marhaban from the perspective of symbolic meaning or ritual history (Santos & Almeida, 2020). The novelty of this study lies in the identification of specific pedagogical mechanisms namely, social interaction, role allocation, and communal sadaqah practices as mediating variables between culture and character internalization in adolescents (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2021).

**Ethnographic Case Study Approach** (Juranda, 2020): Using an ethnographic case study approach, this study provides rich, contextual empirical evidence (Table 2), going beyond normative descriptions of tradition and focusing on how adolescents, as agents of change, interpret and manifest the value of gratitude in their daily lives. This fills a gap in the literature on ritual-based ethnopedagogy for adolescents.

## **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This research contributes to the development of the literature on Character Ethnopedagogy and Cultural Positive Psychology. Theoretically, Marhaban can be positioned as a model of Sociocultural Learning (Gupta & Lee, 2023), where the character of gratitude is acquired through collaborative interactions within the zone of proximal development shaped by communal rituals. These results expand Lickona's (2008) concept of character education by demonstrating how local wisdom can function as a "hidden curriculum" that is far more effective than interventions alienated from the local culture (Slamet, 2016).

### **Practical Implications**

**Character Education Policy:** Village governments and educational institutions can use Marhaban as an integrated character-building program (Smith, 2024). Adolescents need to be given a larger, more structured role in each stage of Marhaban to maximize the internalization of values.

**Community Resilience:** Maintaining the sustainability of Marhaban is not only preserving culture, but also investing in the social capital of youth, strengthening emotional bonds and a sense of belonging that are essential for sustainable village development.

## **Research Limitations**

This study, while providing rich and in-depth findings, has several limitations that need to be acknowledged: **Qualitative Design and Generalizability:** As a qualitative study with an ethnographic case study design in Jatimulyo Village, the findings are contextually rich, but limitations in generalizability apply (Ade et al., 2024). The results may not be fully applicable to other communities with different variations in Marhaban implementation.

**Sampling Size and Selection:** The sample used was purposive, focusing on already engaged youth. This could introduce selection bias, as less grateful or less engaged youth may be overlooked, resulting in the analysis only representing the views of the motivated group (Morales & Rojas, 2023). **Long-Term Impact Measurement:** This study relied on self-reports and observations, which provide a snapshot of current characteristics. Time constraints did not allow for measuring the long-term impact of Marhaban on adolescent resilience or subjective well-being in adulthood. Future research should employ longitudinal methods to address this limitation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study aims to examine the role and mechanisms of the local Marhaban culture in instilling a grateful character in adolescents in Jatimulyo Village. Based on a qualitative ethnographic analysis, it was found that Marhaban culture functions as an authentic and effective cultural-religious medium in instilling a grateful character in adolescents. The synthesis of findings shows that Marhaban successfully transfers the value of gratitude through two main mechanisms: cognitive-spiritual reinforcement derived from the appreciation of the Barzanji text (recognition of God's blessings) and social-behavioral reinforcement derived from communal interaction practices, such as serving guests and sharing blessings (*Syukr bi al-Fi'l*). The active participation of adolescents in all stages of Marhaban (Preparation → Core Implementation → Social Interaction) is a key factor in the success of internalization, which ultimately manifests in three dimensions of adolescent gratitude: awareness of the heart (resilience), expression. The limitations of this study need to be acknowledged for their limitations in limiting the generalizability of the findings. First, the ethnographic case study design chosen, although producing very in-depth and contextual data, limits the ability to generalize these results to other communities that may have different variations in Marhaban implementation. Second, the use of purposive sampling techniques has the potential to create selection bias, as this study primarily involved adolescents who were already active and

motivated. Finally, this study was cross-sectional, so it was not able to measure the long-term and sustainable impact of Marhaban participation on the stability of gratitude character in adolescents into adulthood. Based on the limitations identified, recommendations for further research are proposed. First, it is recommended to conduct comparative quantitative research comparing levels of gratitude character between groups of adolescents who are active in Marhaban and those who are less involved, to statistically measure effectiveness. Second, further research could adopt a longitudinal approach to track the stability of gratitude character and its impact on other psychological variables, such as resilience or subjective well-being, over a longer period. Third, there is a need for research that specifically examines the Marhaban adaptation strategies carried out by urban communities or more heterogeneous communities to see how this local wisdom can maintain its relevance amidst more intense modernization.

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