

Depati Leadership Values from a Cultural Citizenship Perspective: Evidence from Selected Kerinci Indigenous Communities

Puja Rahmanu Gusmer^{1*}, Fatmariza², Susi Fitria Dewi³, Isnarmi Moeis⁴

¹⁻⁴ Master's Program in Pancasila and Citizenship Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia

Abstract

This study examines the leadership values embodied by the Depati through a cultural citizenship perspective in selected Kerinci indigenous communities. Using a qualitative case study design, fieldwork was conducted from March to May 2026 with nine purposively selected participants: six Depati, two community members, and one academic. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, nonparticipant observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis by systematically coding, comparing, and grouping interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary evidence, while cultural citizenship served as the interpretive framework. The analysis identified eight interrelated leadership values that consistently emerged across participants' accounts and customary practices: authority, moral integrity, justice, responsibility, trustworthiness, exemplary conduct, deliberation, and legitimacy. The findings indicate that Depati leadership functions as a culturally embedded system of governance that promotes collective responsibility, participatory decision-making, ethical leadership, and social cohesion within indigenous communities. This study contributes to citizenship scholarship by demonstrating how indigenous leadership values provide a culturally grounded understanding of cultural citizenship and extend discussions of citizenship beyond formal state institutions through customary governance practices.

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

***Puja Rahmanu Gusmer**, Master's Program in Pancasila and Citizenship Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universitas Negeri Padang.

Email: pujarahmanu72@gmail.com

Introduction

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes that indigenous leadership institutions are not merely cultural legacies but continue to function as systems of governance that shape civic participation, collective responsibility, and community legitimacy. Despite this growing attention, research examining how customary leadership contributes to culturally grounded forms of citizenship remains limited, particularly in the context of indigenous governance. This gap is significant because many indigenous communities continue to regulate social life through customary law, deliberation, and traditional leadership. In Indonesia, one example is the Depati leadership institution within the Kerinci indigenous community, which plays an important role in maintaining social order, resolving conflicts, and preserving cultural values across generations (Sibarani, 2020).

Customary leadership in Indonesia has developed through diverse institutional arrangements that reflect the historical and sociocultural contexts of each indigenous community. Rather than functioning solely as traditional authority, these institutions continue to regulate community life through customary law, deliberative decision-making, and socially recognized leadership. Within this broader context, the Depati institution represents a distinctive form of customary leadership in the Kerinci indigenous community. Its authority is based not only on inherited status but also on

customary legitimacy, moral responsibility, and a commitment to maintaining social harmony and the continuity of customary values (Indah & Rohmah, 2022).

Although many studies describe customary leadership primarily as a mechanism for preserving tradition, the Depati institution offers a broader perspective on how indigenous leadership shapes civic life within the community. Through its authority in customary decision-making, conflict resolution, and the enforcement of customary norms, the Depati institution reflects leadership practices that integrate moral responsibility, collective participation, and social legitimacy. These characteristics make the Kerinci case particularly relevant for examining how culturally grounded citizenship is enacted through indigenous governance rather than solely through formal state institutions.

In the Kerinci indigenous community, the traditional leadership system is embodied in the Depati, who occupies an important position within the customary structure. A Depati is recognized through community-based social mechanisms and agreements among community members and customary authorities in accordance with the provisions of each customary territory. The Depati leads deliberations, ensures the implementation of customary law, preserves cultural values transmitted across generations, and serves as a role model for the Kerinci community. Inauguration occurs through sacred customary stages and includes the Karang Setio oath, which is generally administered before the Kenduri Sko ceremony. Depati leadership therefore functions not only as part of a customary institution but also as an expression of citizenship values embedded within the Kerinci indigenous community (Suryaningsih et al., 2023).

From a cultural citizenship perspective, citizenship is understood not merely as a legal status or a formal relationship between individuals and the state, but also as the ways people exercise rights, responsibilities, participation, and belonging through culturally embedded social practices (Rosaldo, 1994). This perspective emphasizes that citizenship is enacted in everyday community life, including through indigenous institutions that cultivate shared norms, collective responsibility, deliberation, justice, and commitment to the common good. In this study, these dimensions provide the analytical framework for interpreting the leadership values embodied by the Depati. Examining Depati leadership through cultural citizenship therefore clarifies how citizenship values are practiced, negotiated, and sustained within the customary governance of the Kerinci indigenous community.

Previous studies of the Kerinci indigenous community have primarily examined customary institutions from three perspectives. First, several studies have highlighted the role of customary institutions in maintaining social order and regulating community life, demonstrating their continuing significance within Kerinci society (Maulana et al., 2021). Second, a substantial body of research has focused on the Kenduri Sko tradition, emphasizing its philosophy, ritual processes, cultural values, social functions, and continuity as an important expression of Kerinci cultural identity (Manik, 2021a, 2021b; Wahyuni & Arafik, 2022; Hajri, 2023; Wianda & Siregar, 2024; Fajri et al., 2025). Third, other studies have examined customary title conferment, leadership inheritance, and the contribution of local wisdom to strengthening citizenship values (Martias, 2022; Darmawan, 2023; Suryaningsih et al., 2023; Kiptiah et al., 2025). Although these studies provide important insights into Kerinci customary institutions, they devote limited attention to the leadership values embodied by the Depati and do not explicitly examine them through a cultural citizenship perspective.

Although previous studies have demonstrated the importance of customary institutions, the Kenduri Sko tradition, leadership inheritance, and local wisdom in the Kerinci indigenous community, they have not sufficiently explained how the leadership values embodied by the Depati are translated into cultural citizenship practices within customary governance. Consequently, the relationship between indigenous leadership values and culturally grounded citizenship remains insufficiently understood. This study therefore addresses the following research question: How are the leadership values embodied by the Depati represented and interpreted through a cultural citizenship perspective within the Kerinci indigenous community? Empirically, the study identifies leadership values derived from the lived experiences and narratives of Depati and other community members. Theoretically, it extends discussions of cultural citizenship by demonstrating how indigenous leadership institutions function as culturally embedded spaces for enacting citizenship values beyond formal state institutions.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using an instrumental single-case study design to examine the leadership values embodied by the Depati through a cultural citizenship perspective. The case study design enabled an in-depth exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its social setting are closely intertwined (Yin, 2018). The unit of analysis comprised the leadership values and practices of the Depati within the Kerinci indigenous community. The case was bounded geographically by selected Kerinci indigenous communities and institutionally by the Depati customary leadership institution. Fieldwork was conducted from March to May 2026. The qualitative approach was appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of meanings, experiences, and social interactions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods (Sugiyono, 2013).

The study was conducted in Kerinci Regency, Jambi Province, where the Depati customary leadership institution continues to function as an integral component of the indigenous governance system. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct knowledge, experience, and involvement in Depati leadership and customary governance (Patton, 2002). The inclusion criteria required participants either to have actively engaged in customary leadership practices or to possess substantial knowledge of the Depati institution. Nine participants were recruited: six Depati representing several luhah in Kerinci Regency, two members of the indigenous community familiar with customary practices, and one local academic with expertise in Kerinci customary institutions. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, as indicated by recurring patterns and the absence of new themes relevant to the research objectives during the final stage of data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were collected through semistructured interviews, nonparticipant observation, and document analysis. Semistructured interviews explored each participant's experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of Depati leadership. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian. Nonparticipant observation was used to examine how Depati leadership was practiced in community life, while document analysis supplemented the findings through customary documents, archives, and records of activities related to Depati leadership.

The data were analyzed through the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted

inductively so that the themes were grounded in the empirical field data. During interpretation, the cultural citizenship framework was used to explain how the identified leadership values related to participation, responsibility, belonging, justice, and the common good in Depati leadership practices.

Data trustworthiness was strengthened through source and methodological triangulation by comparing evidence from interviews, nonparticipant observations, and documents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher also examined negative cases and maintained an audit trail documenting data organization, coding, theme development, and interpretation to support dependability and confirmability. Before data collection, permission was obtained from the relevant customary and local authorities. All participants received information about the purpose of the study and voluntarily provided informed consent. Personal identities were anonymized throughout the research process and in the reporting of findings.

Result and Discussion

Result

The findings indicate that Depati leadership within the Kerinci indigenous community is characterized by eight interconnected values that shape the appointment, exercise, and orientation of customary leadership. Through inductive thematic analysis of interview data from Depati, community members, and a local academic, the study identified authority, moral integrity, justice, responsibility, trustworthiness, exemplary conduct, deliberation, and legitimacy. Table 1 summarizes the evidence linking each value to representative codes, participant groups, and interview excerpts.

Table 1. Evidence matrix of Depati leadership values derived from thematic analysis

Leadership value	Representative codes	Participant group(s)	Representative quotation
Authority	Highest customary authority; final decision maker; Tigo Sko Tigo Takah	Depati	"Depati ini merupakan sko yang tertinggi di alam Kerinci." (D2)
Moral Integrity	Understanding customary law; religious values; ethical leadership	Depati	"Orang yang sudah diangkat jadi Depati benar-benar paham hadis Nabi, Al-Qur'an, adat istiadat, serta paham benar dan salah." (D4)
Justice	Fairness; impartiality; Karang Setio oath	Depati	"Menimbang harus sama berat, membagi harus sama adil, tidak boleh menjadi pemimpin yang zalim." (D5)
Responsibility	Serving the community; protecting customary members; responsiveness	Depati	"Ketika anak buah datang tengah malam, kita harus membuka pintu dan membantu mereka." (D6)
Trustworthiness	Trustworthiness; honesty; moral commitment	Community	"Depati adalah orang yang lurus, berkata benar, berbuat adil, memiliki amanah dan tanggung jawab." (M2)
Exemplary conduct	Role model; guiding community behavior	Community, Academic	"Depati merupakan pedoman kehidupan masyarakat." (M2); "Jika pemimpin salah maka anak buah akan ikut salah." (A1)
Deliberation	Community consultation; consensus; collective decision-making	Community, Academic	"Dalam pemilihan Depati dilakukan musyawarah, siapa yang paling berkompeten akan dipilih." (M2)

Leadership value	Representative codes	Participant group(s)	Representative quotation
Legitimacy	Community recognition; customary selection; social acceptance	Community	<i>"Depati benar-benar diseleksi oleh anak betino... orang yang berkompeten dalam adat dan kehidupan sosial." (M1)</i>

As shown in Table 1, eight leadership values were consistently identified through recurring codes across the interview data and participant groups. Although some values were expressed more prominently by Depati, the perspectives of community members and the academic participant reinforced their interpretation as shared principles underlying customary leadership. Convergence across interview, observation, and documentary evidence suggests that Depati leadership is understood not merely as a position of authority but as a culturally embedded practice grounded in legitimacy, moral integrity, fairness, responsibility, trustworthiness, deliberation, and exemplary conduct. These findings provide the basis for discussing each leadership value from a cultural citizenship perspective.

The appointment of a Depati is characterized by three interrelated values: legitimacy, deliberation, and moral integrity. Legitimacy is established through the customary selection process conducted by the *anak batino* within the *suku*, *kalbu*, or *luhah*, emphasizing community recognition and competence rather than lineage alone. As explained by a community participant (M1, translated from Indonesian), *"A person who has become a Depati is someone who has truly been selected by the anak batino within the suku, kalbu, or luhah. They are genuinely competent in customary matters and competent in social life."* Observation and documentary evidence further confirmed that community recognition forms the basis of customary legitimacy.

The appointment process is also guided by deliberation, through which community members collectively determine the most qualified candidate. As stated by another community participant (M2, translated from Indonesian), *"In the selection of a Depati, deliberation is conducted, and the person who is the most competent will be chosen to become the Depati."* In addition, moral integrity is regarded as an essential qualification. A Depati participant (D4, translated from Indonesian) explained that a customary leader must understand the Qur'an, the Hadith of the Prophet, customary traditions, and the distinction between right and wrong. Together, these findings show that the appointment of a Depati is grounded in customary legitimacy, collective deliberation, and moral integrity.

The implementation of Depati leadership is characterized by the values of authority, justice, and trustworthiness. Within the *Tigo Sko Tigo Takah* system, unresolved disputes at the household and extended-family levels are referred to the Depati as the highest customary authority. As explained by a Depati participant (D3, translated from Indonesian), *"When a matter reaches the Depati, it means 'air lah beriak, dahanlah inggu' ... the Depati has the authority to 'memenggal putus memakan habis' in resolving customary matters."* These customary expressions indicate the Depati's role as the final authority in resolving disputes.

The exercise of authority is guided by justice and trustworthiness, as reinforced through the *Karang Setio oath*. A Depati participant (D5, translated from Indonesian) explained, *"Kalu menimbang mak samo berat, kalu mengukum mak samo adil. Jangan pulo senggam kiri senggam kanan."* The oath emphasizes fairness, impartiality, and accountability in exercising customary authority, while its accompanying proverb symbolizes the moral consequences of abusing power. Interview,

observation, and documentary evidence consistently show that customary authority is exercised within an ethical framework that prioritizes justice and public trust.

Responsibility and exemplary conduct characterize the relationship between the Depati and the indigenous community. Responsibility refers to the obligation to protect, guide, and serve community members. As explained by a Depati participant (D6, translated from Indonesian), "*Di Imbau Cepat Tibo, Di Panggin Cepat Datang*" ("When summoned, arrive quickly; when called, come promptly"), illustrating the expectation that a Depati remains available whenever the community requires assistance.

Exemplary conduct is reflected in the expectation that a Depati serves as a moral role model. Community members (M2, translated from Indonesian) described the Depati as a wise, honest, and just leader whose behavior becomes a reference for others. Likewise, the academic participant (A1, translated from Indonesian) explained that customary decisions continue to prioritize community deliberation despite the Depati's authority. Across participant groups, responsibility was consistently associated with service, whereas exemplary conduct reflected moral leadership supported by collective decision-making.

Overall, the findings show that the eight leadership values operate across three interconnected dimensions of Depati leadership. Legitimacy, moral integrity, and deliberation characterize the appointment of a Depati; authority, justice, and trustworthiness guide the exercise of customary authority and conflict resolution; and responsibility and exemplary conduct shape the Depati's relationship with the community through service and moral example. Based on these empirical relationships, this study proposes an integrated model of Depati leadership linking leadership selection, customary governance, and community service within the Kerinci indigenous community.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Depati leadership in the Kerinci indigenous community extends beyond a formal position within the *Tigo Sko Tigo Takah* customary structure. Instead, leadership is constructed through an interaction between legitimacy, community participation, and moral responsibility. The findings show that a Depati does not obtain authority solely through the matrilineal inheritance system but must also demonstrate competence in customary law, religious knowledge, social relations, and personal integrity. Consequently, leadership legitimacy is understood as a form of public trust that is continuously maintained through community recognition rather than inherited authority alone.

These findings extend the studies of Darmawan (2023) and Martias (2022), which primarily examined the institutional structure of customary leadership and the inheritance of customary titles in the Kerinci indigenous community. While previous studies emphasized how the position of Depati is transmitted within the customary system, the present study demonstrates that legitimacy is also socially negotiated through community recognition, deliberation, and the leader's moral capacity. This finding is consistent with Suryaningsih et al. (2023), who argue that local wisdom provides an important foundation for citizenship values. Accordingly, Depati leadership illustrates that customary authority is sustained through a reciprocal relationship between the community's recognition and the leader's responsibility to serve the public interest.

This interpretation reinforces the perspective of cultural citizenship, which views citizenship as emerging from shared cultural values, collective recognition, and participation in community life

rather than from legal status alone. In the Kerinci indigenous community, legitimacy is continuously reproduced through everyday leadership practices that reflect integrity, responsibility, and commitment to customary values. Rather than functioning solely as a customary institution, Depati leadership serves as a cultural mechanism through which citizenship values are maintained and transmitted across generations.

The findings further indicate that leadership selection is based on deliberation and community participation rather than lineage alone. Prospective Depati are expected to possess knowledge of customary law, religious principles, and social life before receiving community approval. This deliberative process demonstrates that indigenous community members actively participate in selecting leaders considered capable of representing collective interests. The finding supports Banks's (2008) argument that citizenship is expressed through participation in community decision-making and aligns with Kymlicka's (1995) view that citizenship values can develop through culturally embedded institutions.

These findings are also consistent with Dayani et al. (2025), who found that the Depati institution continues to enjoy legitimacy within indigenous decision-making processes. However, the present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that legitimacy is maintained not only through customary institutions themselves but also through continuous interaction between leaders and community members. The selection and deliberation processes position the community as an active participant in constructing leadership authority rather than merely accepting customary decisions. This finding reflects Branson's (1999) conception of citizenship as active participation directed toward the common good.

The continuity of Depati leadership appears to support social cohesion because customary institutions remain socially recognized mechanisms for regulating relationships between leaders and community members. The Tigo Sko Tigo Takah structure, customary deliberation, and community recognition collectively strengthen social relationships within the Kerinci indigenous community. Although the customary system remains hierarchical, participants did not describe these mechanisms as restricting participation. Instead, legitimacy was portrayed as being strengthened through deliberation, shared values, and mutual recognition, consistent with cultural citizenship's emphasis on participation and belonging (Kymlicka, 1995; Rosaldo, 1994).

The findings indicate that the legitimacy of Depati leadership is inseparable from moral capacity. Beyond obtaining community recognition through customary deliberation, a prospective Depati is expected to possess a thorough understanding of customary law, religious principles, and the ability to distinguish right from wrong when resolving community issues. These findings demonstrate that leadership in the Kerinci indigenous community is regarded as a social trust requiring integrity rather than as a privilege derived solely from lineage or customary status. This extends Manik's (2021a) discussion of the philosophical values embodied in the Kenduri Sko tradition. Whereas that study highlighted cultural values within customary ceremonies, the present study shows how such values are operationalized as criteria for selecting and evaluating customary leaders. Trustworthiness, integrity, and responsibility therefore function not only as cultural ideals but also as practical leadership standards.

From the citizenship perspective adopted in this study, these findings reflect civic virtue, which emphasizes that citizenship requires moral character alongside knowledge of rights and responsibilities (Branson, 1998). The expectation that a Depati demonstrates honesty, integrity, and

concern for community welfare illustrates that leadership legitimacy is grounded in ethical conduct rather than formal authority alone. In this respect, customary leadership represents a culturally embedded form of civic virtue in which leaders are expected to exercise authority responsibly while prioritizing the common good. Local wisdom likewise functions as a moral and character resource that guides individual and collective behavior (Indah & Rohmah, 2022). The findings therefore suggest that local wisdom not only preserves cultural identity but also shapes leadership character that supports citizenship values.

The moral foundation of Depati leadership is further institutionalized through the Karang Setio oath, which establishes ethical boundaries for exercising customary authority. The findings show that the oath requires a Depati to act fairly, impartially, and responsibly in carrying out customary duties, thereby reinforcing the principle that authority is inseparable from accountability. Rather than conferring unrestricted power, the oath serves as a customary mechanism through which the community defines acceptable standards of leadership behavior. This interpretation is consistent with Westheimer and Kahne (2004), whose concepts of the personally responsible citizen and the participatory citizen emphasize responsibility, public accountability, and commitment to the common good as essential dimensions of citizenship. Similarly, Geertz (1973) argued that rituals function as systems of meaning that shape social behavior. In the Kerinci indigenous community, the Karang Setio oath therefore operates not merely as a ceremonial tradition but also as a moral institution that reinforces justice, responsibility, and public trust.

The findings further demonstrate that responsibility constitutes a defining characteristic of Depati leadership. Beyond resolving customary disputes, a Depati is expected to protect community members, assist *anak kemenakan*, and remain available whenever needed. These responsibilities indicate that the relationship between the Depati and the community extends beyond hierarchical authority to include service, care, and social commitment. Such findings support Ferry and Ramadani (2021), who found that customary leaders play an important role in maintaining community order through local wisdom. However, this study extends their findings by demonstrating that social responsibility also strengthens citizenship practices through reciprocal relationships between leaders and community members.

Empirically, responsibility, fairness, and deliberative decision-making emerge as interconnected leadership practices rather than isolated moral attributes. These values are reflected in the obligation to resolve disputes impartially, prioritize community welfare, and base important decisions on deliberation. From Branson's (1998) perspective, these practices represent civic virtue because they demonstrate moral responsibility and commitment to the common good. Galston (2001) similarly emphasizes that public authority should be exercised through ethical judgment and concern for collective welfare. Rather than merely relabeling customary values as citizenship values, this study demonstrates that indigenous leadership institutions provide culturally grounded mechanisms through which responsibility, justice, participation, and public service are enacted in everyday community life.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the values embodied in Depati leadership constitute an integrated system of customary governance rather than a collection of independent leadership attributes. Legitimacy provides the foundation for obtaining authority, while moral integrity, justice, responsibility, and exemplary conduct sustain public trust throughout the exercise of leadership. Deliberation connects these values by ensuring that leadership decisions are based on

collective agreement rather than individual authority. Together, these values establish a reciprocal relationship in which community recognition strengthens leadership legitimacy, and leadership, in turn, is expected to protect the common good through ethical conduct and public service. This integrated relationship represents an empirical finding derived from the interaction of the eight leadership values identified in the present study.

From a cultural citizenship perspective, the findings demonstrate that citizenship practices can be reproduced through indigenous governance institutions rather than exclusively through formal civic or state institutions. Community participation in selecting a Depati, the emphasis on moral qualifications, the Karang Setio oath, and the expectation that leaders protect and serve the community collectively illustrate how citizenship values are embedded in everyday customary practices. These findings support Banks's (2008) view that citizenship is expressed through participation and social engagement and reinforce Osler and Starkey's (2005) understanding of citizenship as a social practice shaped by identity, responsibility, and relationships among community members. In the Kerinci indigenous community, citizenship is therefore enacted through customary institutions that cultivate collective responsibility, justice, participation, and belonging within local cultural life.

The findings further indicate that customary institutions should not be viewed solely as mechanisms for preserving cultural traditions but also as social institutions that contribute to the development of citizenship values. The *Tigo Sko Tigo Takah* system, the customary leadership selection process, and the ethical obligations attached to the Depati institution collectively demonstrate how indigenous governance provides opportunities for community participation, deliberation, and responsibility. Rather than existing in opposition to citizenship principles, these customary practices illustrate how local cultural institutions can reinforce civic values through socially embedded leadership practices.

The findings of the present study are consistent with recent global scholarship demonstrating that indigenous leadership should not be understood merely as a residual form of hereditary authority but as a dynamic governance institution whose legitimacy is continuously negotiated through ethical performance, community recognition, and public responsibility. Studies conducted in Namibia, Ghana, Malawi, Eswatini, and other African contexts show that traditional leaders retain legitimacy when they remain accessible, responsive to community needs, and capable of mediating relationships between customary communities and formal governmental institutions (Boateng & Afranie, 2020; Chlouba, 2020; Kwarkye, 2021; Marrengane, 2021; Robinson, 2024). These studies also indicate that customary institutions can strengthen social cohesion, public service delivery, conflict resolution, and community participation when leadership authority is accompanied by accountability and cooperation with local communities. This international evidence supports the present finding that the authority of a Depati is not maintained through matrilineal succession alone but through the leader's ability to demonstrate integrity, social competence, responsiveness, and commitment to collective welfare.

The moral and relational characteristics of Depati leadership also correspond with international perspectives on indigenous leadership as a form of collective and service-oriented leadership. Gram-Hanssen (2021) demonstrates that indigenous leadership is commonly grounded in reciprocity, relational responsibility, collective decision-making, and service to present and future generations. Similarly, Aliye (2020) shows that indigenous governance principles can embody

participation, accountability, consensus, and responsibility comparable to democratic governance values. Research on customary authority further confirms that rituals, installation procedures, collective memories, and culturally recognized symbols can provide an ethical and social basis for leadership legitimacy (Anamzoya & Gariba, 2022; Prempeh, 2022). In the Kerinci context, the Karang Setio oath performs a comparable function because it transforms customary authority into a morally regulated responsibility rather than an unrestricted privilege.

Nevertheless, international studies also caution that customary authority does not automatically promote democratic citizenship. Traditional institutions may become contested when leadership appointments lack community recognition, when customary leaders are politically co-opted, or when authority is separated from accountability (Ebiede & Nyiayaana, 2022; Krämer, 2020; Mustasilta, 2021). The effectiveness of customary leadership therefore depends on whether communities have opportunities to participate in leadership selection, evaluate leadership conduct, and contest the misuse of authority. Studies in Ghana and Nigeria similarly demonstrate that collaboration between customary and formal institutions can produce both community empowerment and unequal representation, depending on the transparency of decision-making and the distribution of authority (Debrah, 2022; Ehrhardt, 2023; Lamidi et al., 2023). These comparative findings reinforce the significance of deliberation within the Tigo Sko Tigo Takah structure because community participation operates as a social mechanism for ensuring that inherited authority remains publicly accountable.

Recent scholarship on indigenous citizenship provides additional support for interpreting Depati leadership through the cultural citizenship framework. Indigenous citizenship is increasingly understood as a multilayered and relational practice encompassing collective identity, territorial belonging, historical recognition, political participation, and community responsibility rather than merely formal membership in a state (Iamamoto, 2022; O'Sullivan, 2020). Indigenous communities may exercise citizenship through culturally embedded institutions, collective action, and the negotiation of authority within both customary and state systems (Preci, 2026; Romio et al., 2026). Moreover, indigenous leadership research emphasizes that customary knowledge and leadership principles can provide locally grounded resources for addressing contemporary governance challenges rather than functioning only as remnants of the past (Mududa Bukusi et al., 2023). Taken together, these global studies position the Depati institution within a broader international pattern in which indigenous leadership sustains citizenship through reciprocal legitimacy, moral accountability, deliberative participation, public service, and culturally grounded belonging.

Within the Indonesian context, the findings correspond with an expanding body of research demonstrating that customary leadership remains influential in governance, social organization, cultural preservation, and community development. A systematic review of Indonesian customary leadership studies found that indigenous leaders continue to maintain cultural identity, mediate local interests, and support social stability, although their authority increasingly interacts with formal regulations and governmental institutions (Wance et al., 2025). In Teluk Bintuni, customary leaders function as policy interpreters, conflict mediators, negotiators of indigenous rights, and intermediaries between indigenous communities and formal government structures (Merina & Bawulang, 2025). Similarly, research on Big Man and Ondoafi leadership in Papua shows that indigenous leadership organizes territorial relationships, resource access, community mobilization, and engagement with governmental development processes (Ramandei et al., 2026). These findings

strengthen the present interpretation of Depati leadership as an active governance institution rather than a purely symbolic or ceremonial position.

Studies of culturally embedded Indonesian leadership also emphasize that authority is sustained through moral character, religious values, kinship relationships, and service to the community. Research on Ondofolo leadership among the Sentani people identifies honesty, integrity, service, exemplary conduct, and responsibility as central expectations attached to customary leadership (Warwer & Pontoan, 2023). Kultsum et al. (2023) similarly demonstrate that Indonesian indigenous leadership is strongly influenced by kinship, religious values, trust, and culturally grounded interpersonal relationships. In the Banjar community, the leadership of Tatuha Luang is constructed through experience, cultural competence, occupational knowledge, responsibility, and recognition from community members rather than through organizational position alone (Mohd Noor et al., 2023). These studies support the present finding that a prospective Depati must possess customary, religious, and social knowledge and must demonstrate trustworthy conduct before receiving full community recognition.

Recent Indonesian studies further indicate that indigenous leadership continues to adapt to contemporary economic, environmental, and institutional conditions. The role of Ninik Mamak in Minangkabau communities demonstrates that customary leaders can contribute to rural development and collective decision-making, although their influence varies according to the type of responsibility and institutional context (Putra et al., 2026). Research on the Kasepuhan Ciusul community likewise shows that customary leaders remain central to decision-making, cultural continuity, and the regulation of community relationships (Fajriati et al., 2024). In coastal tourism governance, local wisdom and indigenous participation have been identified as essential components of community-based management and institutional effectiveness (Wanusmawatie et al., 2026). These studies indicate that the relevance of customary leadership depends on its capacity to translate traditional authority into practical contributions to contemporary community life.

The present study also extends emerging Indonesian discussions of citizenship beyond state-centered and juridical frameworks. Research on the Bissu community introduces an understanding of indigenous political belonging grounded in relational ethics, cosmological responsibility, cultural recognition, and collective participation (Iman et al., 2026). This perspective is particularly relevant to Depati leadership because the Tigo Sko Tigo Takah structure organizes not only customary authority but also relationships of responsibility, belonging, recognition, and participation among community members. However, the present study differs from previous Indonesian studies by specifically identifying how legitimacy, deliberation, moral integrity, justice, trustworthiness, responsibility, authority, and exemplary conduct operate together as an integrated mechanism for reproducing cultural citizenship. Therefore, the Kerinci case provides an empirically grounded explanation of how customary leadership values are translated into everyday citizenship practices through leadership selection, ethical oaths, dispute resolution, community service, and reciprocal public recognition.

Overall, this study contributes to citizenship scholarship by refining the understanding of cultural citizenship within indigenous customary governance. Rather than simply applying an existing citizenship framework to a new setting, the study demonstrates an empirical relationship between customary authority and citizenship practice. Specifically, authority, legitimacy, deliberation, moral integrity, justice, trustworthiness, responsibility, and exemplary conduct operate

as interconnected mechanisms through which customary leadership reproduces participation, public responsibility, and the common good. The study therefore extends cultural citizenship scholarship by showing that citizenship values can be institutionalized through indigenous leadership systems alongside formal civic institutions. Because these conclusions derive from a bounded qualitative case study of the Kerinci indigenous community, the findings should be understood as analytically transferable to indigenous communities with comparable customary governance systems rather than statistically generalizable to all indigenous communities.

Thus, this study expands the understanding of customary leadership by demonstrating that the legitimacy of indigenous leaders is sustained not only through inherited customary structures but also through community recognition, moral accountability, and active participation in customary governance. The Depati institution illustrates how indigenous leadership functions simultaneously as a mechanism for preserving local culture and as a cultural arena in which citizenship values are practiced, transmitted, and sustained across generations.

The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing Depati leadership not merely as a hereditary customary office, an institutional component of the Tigo Sko Tigo Takah structure, or a mechanism for preserving Kerinci cultural traditions, but as an integrated cultural citizenship system through which authority, legitimacy, deliberation, moral integrity, justice, trustworthiness, responsibility, and exemplary conduct are mutually reinforced. The study introduces a reciprocal model of indigenous leadership legitimacy in which customary lineage provides an initial basis for leadership eligibility, while community recognition, moral competence, deliberative participation, and public service continuously validate the exercise of authority. Theoretically, this finding extends cultural citizenship scholarship by demonstrating that citizenship values can be institutionally reproduced through indigenous governance structures alongside formal state institutions. Empirically, it explains how abstract citizenship values are enacted through the selection of a Depati, the Karang Setio oath, customary deliberation, dispute resolution, community protection, and service to anak kemenakan. Practically, the findings provide a culturally grounded framework that can inform citizenship education, indigenous leadership regeneration, customary institutional strengthening, and the development of collaborative governance between customary communities and formal governmental institutions.

This study is limited by its bounded qualitative case-study design, which concentrates on Depati leadership within the Kerinci indigenous community and therefore does not permit statistical generalization to all indigenous leadership systems in Indonesia. The findings are also shaped by the experiences and interpretations of the selected participants, while possible differences based on gender, generation, customary status, geographical location, and level of involvement in customary institutions have not been examined systematically. In addition, the study focuses primarily on socially recognized leadership values and may not fully capture internal disagreements, leadership failures, political intervention, changing youth attitudes, or tensions between customary authority and formal governmental regulation. Future studies should undertake comparative research across different Kerinci territories and other Indonesian indigenous communities, include women and younger community members more extensively, and examine how leadership legitimacy changes across generations. Longitudinal, ethnographic, participatory, and mixed-method research could also test the relationships among community recognition, moral accountability, participation, trust, and social cohesion. Further research should investigate how Depati institutions interact with village

governments, religious authorities, educational institutions, digital communication, tourism development, environmental governance, and indigenous-rights policies, as well as how the identified leadership values can be translated into culturally responsive citizenship education.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Depati leadership in the Kerinci indigenous community is understood not merely as the highest position within the customary governance system but as an indigenous leadership institution through which cultural citizenship is practiced. The findings show that the interrelationship among authority, legitimacy, deliberation, moral integrity, justice, responsibility, trustworthiness, and exemplary conduct shapes leadership practices and community relations. From a cultural citizenship perspective, these values are enacted through customary mechanisms of leader selection, decision-making, conflict resolution, and public service, indicating that citizenship practices are embedded in indigenous governance rooted in local wisdom rather than exclusively in formal civic or state institutions.

The present research contributes to citizenship scholarship by providing empirical evidence that customary leadership can function as a culturally grounded arena for the enactment of citizenship values within indigenous communities. However, because this research was conducted as a bounded qualitative case study in the Kerinci indigenous community, the findings should be interpreted as analytically transferable to similar customary governance contexts rather than statistically generalizable. Future studies may employ comparative or mixed-methods approaches to examine how indigenous leadership systems shape cultural citizenship across different sociocultural settings.

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