

Sustaining Gantei: Cultural Performance and Heritage Continuity Among the Mada People of Nasarawa State, Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Indigenous performance traditions constitute important repositories of embodied knowledge, cultural memory, and communal identity, yet many are increasingly challenged by socio-cultural transformation. This study examined Mada *Gantei* performance in selected communities in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, focusing on its structural composition, cultural significance, and factors contributing to its decline. The study adopted a qualitative, practice-informed ethnographic approach, drawing on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions involving 29 participants comprising performers, elders, and young people across four selected Mada communities: Gwanje, Ningo, Kegbe, and Njigban. Findings indicate that *Gantei* is not merely an instrumental or musical form but a multilayered cultural performance involving music, movement, symbolism, ritual elements, and communal participation. The findings further show that the performance has historically facilitated cultural transmission, moral instruction, collective participation, and the expression of communal identity and memory. Its continuity, however, is challenged by religious transformation, urbanisation, declining youth participation and intergenerational transmission, as well as limited institutional support. The study argues that these challenges represent broader disruptions in the transmission of indigenous cultural knowledge. Drawing on Practice-as-Research and an applied theatre orientation, the study demonstrates the potential of participatory performance processes to support cultural reflection, intergenerational engagement, and the reconstruction and transmission of endangered performance knowledge. It therefore proposes community-centred performance reconstruction as one possible strategy for strengthening the continuity of *Gantei*. The study contributes to African performance and cultural studies by providing an empirically grounded account of *Gantei* as a living cultural practice and by demonstrating how practice-based theatrical approaches can contribute to community-led cultural safeguarding.

Keywords: Applied Theatre; Cultural Memory; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Mada *Gantei*; Practice-as-Research; Cultural Safeguarding.

Introduction

Indigenous performance traditions constitute dynamic systems through which communities produce, transmit, and negotiate cultural knowledge. In many African societies, music, dance, storytelling, ritual, masquerade, costume, and communal participation operate not merely as entertainment but as interconnected practices through which historical memory, social values, identity, spirituality, and communal relationships are expressed and transmitted. Performance can therefore function as both artistic activity and embodied knowledge production, with knowledge encoded in ritual, movement, sound, gesture, and communal participation rather than exclusively in written records (Schechner, 2020). Cultural continuity depends not only on preserving material artefacts but also on sustaining the people who possess, perform, interpret, and transmit such knowledge across generations.

In Nigeria, indigenous performance traditions are embedded within socio-cultural systems and may serve educational, moral, social, ritual, and identity-related functions. Rapid socio-cultural transformations - including urbanisation, migration, formal education, changing religious orientations, digital media, new forms of entertainment, and declining participation in traditional community activities - can disrupt the social environments through which such knowledge is transmitted. The vulnerability of oral and performative traditions is therefore closely connected to disruptions in intergenerational transmission, community participation, and the contexts in which cultural knowledge is practised. Many traditions are also increasingly encountered in transformed settings, including festivals, exhibitions, and staged cultural displays.

The *Gantei* performance tradition of the Mada people of Nasarawa State exemplifies this condition. *Gantei* designates both a traditional raft-zither instrument and a broader performance tradition integrating music, dance, costume, masking, ritual and symbolic enactment, spatial organisation, and audience participation. The distinction matters: an exclusive focus on the instrument overlooks the wider cultural system within which it operates. Historically, *Gantei* has served cultural education, moral instruction, the transmission of historical and cultural memory, communal interaction, identity formation, ritual expression, and intergenerational transmission within communal and ritual contexts.

The 2025 field investigation nevertheless revealed significant challenges to continuity: changing religious orientations, youth disengagement, migration and urbanisation, changing cultural preferences, weakening intergenerational transmission structures, the transformation of performances into staged displays, and inadequate institutional support. Emerging studies indicate that the tradition has become fragmented, rarely performed in authentic contexts, and poorly documented, while younger Mada community members demonstrate limited knowledge of and engagement with it. These developments raise a cultural sustainability question: if *Gantei* is understood only as an instrument or a festival display, important dimensions of its knowledge system — much of which is embodied in performance and cannot be adequately captured through textual description — may be overlooked. Sustainable safeguarding must therefore address the people who possess, perform, transmit, organise, interpret, support, and participate in the tradition.

The present study accordingly examines *Gantei* as a living, multidimensional cultural-performance system rather than a mere musical artefact. Three objectives guide it: to examine the structural composition of *Gantei* performance among selected Mada communities; to examine its cultural and functional significance within Mada society; and to identify the factors contributing to its perceived decline and sustainability challenges. The study draws on Stakeholder Theory to consider the roles and relationships of actors involved in the tradition's continuity, while Practice-as-Research (PaR) frames embodied and performative knowledge as central to understanding it. Adopting a qualitative ethnographic and practice-informed approach, it draws on 2025 fieldwork across Gwanje, Ningo, Kegbe, and Njigban — comprising interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, field notes, and audiovisual documentation — to establish an empirical baseline of *Gantei*'s contemporary condition. By situating *Gantei* within broader debates on applied theatre and cultural sustainability, the study provides an empirical foundation for revitalisation and safeguarding strategies; rather than claiming a complete intervention, it establishes the cultural and structural conditions that must be understood before such intervention can be designed, contributing to scholarship on indigenous performance, cultural memory, stakeholder participation, and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Indigenous Performance, Cultural Knowledge and Memory

Indigenous performance traditions in Africa constitute important systems of cultural knowledge through which artistic expression intersects with education, ritual, social organisation, identity, and communal

memory. Performance extends beyond the production of an artistic object to include the processes through which communities reproduce and negotiate cultural meanings. Songs, dances, narratives, ritual actions, and other embodied practices can therefore function as vehicles for transmitting historically accumulated knowledge and collective values.

Performance scholarship emphasises the embodied character of cultural practice, in which knowledge can be communicated through participation, movement, sound, ritual, and social interaction rather than exclusively through written or verbal forms (Schechner, 2020). In such contexts, knowledge is held not only in texts or objects but also in the bodies, voices, gestures, skills, and relationships of practitioners. Performance can consequently operate as a form of cultural archive, although its continuity depends upon continued enactment.

This perspective is reinforced by Assmann's (2011) concept of cultural memory, which explains how societies maintain relationships with the past through symbolic practices and shared forms of remembrance. Performance provides a particularly significant medium for such memory because historical knowledge, values, identities, and social relationships may be embodied in songs, movement, costume, ritual, and participation. Unlike a static archive, however, performative memory is continually reactivated and potentially transformed through each enactment.

For indigenous traditions such as *Gantei*, this relationship between performance and memory is significant because cultural knowledge is distributed across interconnected performative elements rather than contained within a single artefact. The decline of performance may therefore affect not only an artistic practice but also the embodied processes through which cultural knowledge and collective memory are transmitted.

Gantei as an Integrated Performance Tradition

A central conceptual issue in the study is the distinction between *Gantei* as an instrument and *Gantei* as a broader performance tradition. The *Gantei* is a traditional raft-zither instrument associated with the Mada people of Nasarawa State. However, understanding the cultural practice requires attention to the wider performance environment in which the instrument operates. This includes music, dance, vocal expression, costume, masking, ritual activity, spatial organisation, and audience participation.

This distinction has important implications for cultural safeguarding. An instrument can be photographed, measured, catalogued, or preserved as an artefact, but such procedures cannot by themselves preserve the embodied and relational knowledge required to perform the tradition. Knowledge of musical coordination, movement, performance roles, ritual protocols, spatial relationships, and interaction with audiences resides substantially in practice and in the relationships among practitioners and communities.

The concept of performance sustainability therefore needs to extend beyond the physical survival of instruments, costumes, or masks. Sustainability concerns the continuing capacity of a community to perform, interpret, transmit, and assign meaning to its cultural practices. A tradition may remain visible through staged cultural displays while losing some of the participatory relationships and contextual knowledge that sustain it. The present study consequently approaches *Gantei* as an integrated performance ecology rather than as an isolated musical artefact.

Cultural Sustainability and Stakeholder Relationships

The sustainability of indigenous performance traditions depends substantially on the people and relationships through which knowledge is produced, transmitted, interpreted, and supported. Freeman's Stakeholder Theory (1984) provides a useful framework for examining this relational dimension. Stakeholders are groups or individuals who can affect or are affected by the achievement of an

organisation's purposes. Applied to cultural sustainability, this perspective draws attention to the multiple actors whose knowledge, decisions, participation, and interests influence the continuity of a tradition.

Relevant stakeholders in the *Gantei* context include elders and cultural custodians, *Gantei* players, dancers, community leaders, cultural officers, younger participants, cultural associations, educational institutions, researchers, government agencies, and audiences. These groups do not possess identical roles or authority. Elders may hold historical and interpretative knowledge; performers and dancers possess embodied skills; younger participants represent an important constituency for future transmission; community leaders and cultural officers facilitate organisation and representation; while institutions may provide documentation, funding, infrastructure, and educational support.

From this perspective, cultural decline can be understood partly through weakened relationships among stakeholders. Intergenerational transmission becomes vulnerable when links between elders and youth weaken; performance opportunities diminish when relationships between performers, organisers, and communities deteriorate; and institutional safeguarding becomes limited when communities and cultural agencies lack sustained collaboration. Stakeholder Theory therefore provides a basis for examining cultural sustainability as a shared and relational process rather than the responsibility of a single custodian or institution.

Practice-as-Research, Participation and Cultural Revitalisation

Practice-as-Research (PaR) provides an appropriate framework for investigating cultural knowledge that is embodied, experiential, and difficult to communicate fully through textual description. Nelson (2022) describes PaR as an approach in which creative practice becomes a means of inquiry and knowledge production. Rather than treating practice as the application of previously established knowledge, PaR recognises making, performing, observing, and reflecting as processes through which knowledge can be generated.

This approach is particularly relevant to indigenous performance because knowledge of timing, rhythm, movement, spatial relationships, gesture, coordination, and audience interaction is demonstrated through practice. Schechner's (2020) understanding of performance as embodied, repeated, and transformed behaviour further supports a processual conception of performance in which meaning emerges through relationships among performers, actions, materials, and audiences.

Participatory approaches complement PaR by positioning communities as active agents in cultural continuity. Applied theatre can create spaces for dialogue, collective reflection, embodied exploration, storytelling, improvisation, and collaborative performance (Prendergast & Saxton, 2016). Such processes may facilitate intergenerational engagement by bringing cultural custodians and younger participants into shared activities through which knowledge can be encountered and practised.

Participation, however, should not be equated with the inclusion of community members in externally predetermined programmes. Meaningful participation requires community agency in defining cultural priorities, determining appropriate forms of representation, and deciding what knowledge may be shared, adapted, restricted, or transmitted. For *Gantei*, this is particularly important because some performance elements may possess ritual or cultural meanings that cannot be separated from their community contexts without transformation.

The intersection of PaR and participatory approaches therefore provides a basis for examining *Gantei* not as a static heritage object but as living cultural practice. It also creates a conceptual foundation for considering how practice-based and community-centred interventions might contribute to cultural safeguarding without displacing indigenous authority.

Research Gap

The literature establishes that indigenous performance functions as a medium of embodied cultural knowledge, memory, identity, social interaction, and intergenerational transmission. It also demonstrates the importance of participation and stakeholder relationships to cultural sustainability and highlights the value of practice-based approaches for engaging forms of knowledge that cannot be adequately represented through text alone.

However, important gaps remain in relation to *Gantei*. First, there is limited empirical documentation of the multidimensional structure of *Gantei* performance among the Mada people of Nasarawa State, particularly the ways in which its musical, choreographic, visual, ritual, spatial, and participatory elements operate together. Second, existing discussions of cultural decline do not sufficiently examine the stakeholder and intergenerational relationships through which the continuity of *Gantei* is enabled or constrained. Third, *Gantei* requires greater attention as an embodied performance system rather than simply a musical instrument or staged cultural display.

The present study addresses these gaps through a qualitative, ethnographic and practice-informed investigation conducted across Gwanje, Ningo, Kegbe, and Njigban. By bringing ethnographic evidence into dialogue with Stakeholder Theory and Practice-as-Research, the study examines the structure and cultural functions of *Gantei* and the factors shaping its contemporary continuity. It contributes an empirically grounded account of *Gantei* as living cultural practice and provides a basis for considering community-centred approaches to cultural safeguarding.

Mada and Gantei Cultural Context

The Mada people are concentrated principally in Nasarawa State, with communities also extending into parts of Kaduna State. Agriculture, craft production, communal institutions, festivals, and performance traditions form important aspects of Mada social and cultural life. Within this setting, *Gantei* refers both to a traditional raft-zither instrument and to a wider cultural-performance tradition in which music, dance, vocal expression, costume, masking, ritual symbolism, spatial organisation, and audience participation intersect.

Field accounts in this study associate *Gantei* with communal ceremonies, agricultural and seasonal activities, masquerade practices, moral instruction, social interaction, and the transmission of cultural memory. Its significance therefore lies not only in the material instrument but in the network of performers, custodians, participants, meanings, and occasions through which the tradition is enacted. This integrated understanding provides the basis for examining *Gantei* as living cultural heritage and for assessing the pressures affecting its continuity.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study uses Stakeholder Theory as its principal theoretical lens and Practice-as-Research (PaR) as a complementary methodological and epistemological framework. The distinction is important because the two frameworks perform different analytical functions.

Stakeholder Theory, originally developed by Freeman (1984), directs attention to actors who can affect or are affected by an activity or institutional purpose. Applied to cultural sustainability, it provides a useful lens for examining the relationships among elders and cultural custodians, performers, dancers, younger participants, traditional institutions, cultural associations, educational institutions, cultural agencies, and audiences. The continuity of *Gantei* depends not only on the existence of cultural knowledge but also on the relationships through which knowledge is authorised, practised, transmitted, supported, and renewed. Stakeholder Theory therefore guides the analysis of participation, authority, responsibility, intergenerational linkages, and institutional support.

Practice-as-Research provides the complementary framework for understanding the embodied dimensions of *Gantei*. Nelson (2022) positions creative practice as a legitimate mode of inquiry and knowledge production. This is particularly appropriate to *Gantei* because important aspects of its knowledge are carried through sound, movement, rhythm, gesture, spatial relationships, costume, masking, ritual action, rehearsal, and participation. PaR therefore informs the study's practice-informed orientation and supports the interpretation of performance itself as a source of cultural knowledge rather than merely an object of textual description.

Used together, Stakeholder Theory explains the social relationships and institutional conditions affecting continuity, while PaR illuminates the embodied and performative processes through which cultural knowledge is produced and transmitted.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic and practice-informed research design to investigate the structure, cultural significance, and contemporary sustainability challenges of the *Gantei* performance tradition among the Mada people of Nasarawa State, Nigeria. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study was concerned with meanings, experiences, cultural knowledge, performance practices, and community perspectives that cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measures alone.

The ethnographic component enabled the researcher to engage with *Gantei* within its socio-cultural environment and to examine the tradition as a lived and embodied cultural practice. Attention was given to the relationships among music, dance, costume, masquerade, ritual action, audience participation, performance space, and the social functions associated with the tradition. The practice-informed orientation complemented the ethnographic approach by recognising performance itself as a source of knowledge. In this regard, the study was concerned not only with what participants said about *Gantei* but also with how knowledge was embodied and expressed through performance practices.

The study was further informed by Practice-as-Research (PaR), which recognises creative and embodied practice as a legitimate means of generating and interpreting knowledge in the arts and performance disciplines (Nelson, 2022). PaR was particularly relevant to the study because *Gantei* is transmitted substantially through embodied, oral, musical, visual, and participatory processes. The framework therefore provided a basis for examining *Gantei* as a living performance system rather than solely as an object of textual description.

Study Area

The study was conducted among four Mada communities in Nasarawa State, Nigeria: Gwanje, Ningo, Kegbe, and Njigban. These communities were selected because of their continuing association with Mada cultural practices and their relevance to the study of *Gantei* performance.

The selection of the four communities also enabled the study to examine variations in the performance, transmission, and contemporary interpretation of *Gantei* across different Mada community settings. Rather than treating the Mada community as culturally homogeneous, the study recognised that particular performance practices, knowledge systems, performers, and forms of participation may vary from one community to another.

Study Population

The study population comprised individuals with cultural, experiential, organisational, or practical knowledge of *Gantei* and related Mada performance practices. The population included elders and cultural custodians, *Gantei* players, dancers, community leaders, cultural officers, and members of the younger generation involved in or familiar with contemporary cultural activities.

The inclusion of participants occupying different positions within the cultural environment was deliberate. Elders and cultural custodians provided historical and cultural knowledge concerning the tradition, while performers contributed embodied and practical knowledge of its musical, movement, and performative dimensions. Community leaders and cultural officers provided perspectives on cultural organisation, transmission, and contemporary challenges, while younger participants provided insight into changing patterns of participation and intergenerational continuity.

Sampling Technique and Participant Selection

A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify participants who possessed relevant knowledge, experience, or involvement in *Gantei* performance and Mada cultural activities. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the study did not seek statistical representation of the entire Mada population. Instead, it sought information-rich participants capable of providing experiential, historical, practical, and community-based perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation.

Participant selection was therefore guided by cultural relevance and experiential knowledge. Particular attention was given to individuals who had direct experience of *Gantei* performance, knowledge of its cultural functions, involvement in its transmission, or responsibility for cultural activities within their communities.

Participants and Distribution

A total of twenty-nine (29) participants contributed directly to the study. Five participants took part in semi-structured individual interviews, while twenty-four participants participated in four focus group discussions.

The five interview participants comprised elders and cultural custodians drawn from the selected communities. One elder/cultural custodian was selected from each of the four communities, with an additional elderly woman from Gwanje included because of her specialised practical involvement in cultural performance. Four of the five interview participants were *Gantei* players and cultural custodians. The additional female participant was a dancer and leader of a young girls' dance troupe. Their contributions provided historical, cultural, musical, performative, and intergenerational perspectives on *Gantei*.

The focus group component comprised four groups, with six participants in each group, giving a total of twenty-four participants. The FGD participants included community leaders, cultural officers from both youth and elder groups, and dancers. Their participation enabled the study to obtain perspectives on contemporary cultural participation, transmission, performance practice, changing attitudes toward *Gantei*, and factors affecting its continuity.

Thus, the total number of participants directly involved through interviews and focus group discussions was twenty-nine (29). Informal interactions and observational encounters that occurred during fieldwork were treated as supplementary ethnographic observations rather than additional participants in the reported sample.

Data-Collection Methods and Procedures

Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, field notes, and audiovisual documentation during field engagement in 2025. The combination of these methods enabled the researcher to examine *Gantei* from complementary perspectives and to compare participants' accounts with observed performance practices.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with elders and cultural custodians possessing direct knowledge of *Gantei*. The interviews explored the history and cultural meanings of *Gantei*, its performance structure, the roles of music and dance, ritual and spiritual dimensions, patterns of transmission, changing participation, and perceived challenges to its continuity.

The semi-structured format provided sufficient consistency across the interviews while allowing participants to introduce issues that emerged from their individual experiences and cultural knowledge. Particular attention was given to the distinction between *Gantei* as a musical instrument and *Gantei* as a broader performance tradition involving music, dance, ritual, costume, masquerade, movement, and communal participation.

Focus Group Discussions

Four focus group discussions were conducted, with six participants in each group. The discussions engaged community leaders, cultural officers, and dancers and focused on contemporary perceptions of *Gantei*, patterns of participation, intergenerational transmission, changing performance contexts, youth engagement, and factors perceived to contribute to the decline or transformation of the tradition.

The group format enabled participants to respond to one another's experiences and recollections, thereby generating collective as well as individual perspectives. It also provided an opportunity to identify areas of agreement, difference, and contestation concerning the contemporary status and future of *Gantei*.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was used to examine *Gantei* as an embodied and socially situated performance practice. The researcher observed relevant performance activities and paid particular attention to musical structures, dance movements, costume and masking, ritual actions, performer-audience relationships, spatial formations, symbolic expressions, and patterns of communal participation.

Observation was important because several dimensions of *Gantei* knowledge are embodied and may not be fully captured through verbal accounts. The observational component therefore complemented the interview and focus group data by providing evidence of how aspects of the tradition were enacted within performance contexts.

Field Notes and Audiovisual Documentation

Field notes were maintained throughout the fieldwork process to record observations, contextual information, emerging analytical ideas, participant interactions, and reflections concerning the performance practices encountered. Audiovisual documentation was also used as a supplementary source of evidence for examining performance elements that are primarily visual, musical, spatial, and embodied.

The audiovisual and observational materials provided an additional basis for examining the relationship between participants' verbal accounts and the performance practices observed during field engagement.

Data Analysis

The data generated through interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, field notes, and audiovisual documentation were analysed thematically. The analysis involved repeated engagement with the collected materials to identify recurring ideas, patterns, meanings, and relationships relevant to the objectives of the study.

The analytical process involved organising the field materials, identifying significant statements and observations, grouping related ideas, and developing broader themes corresponding to the research

questions and objectives. Particular attention was given to themes concerning the structural composition of *Gantei*, its cultural and social functions, its role in cultural memory and intergenerational transmission, and the factors contributing to its perceived decline.

The analysis also involved comparing information obtained through different data-collection methods. Accounts obtained from elders and cultural custodians were considered alongside perspectives from performers, dancers, cultural officers, and community leaders, while interview and focus group accounts were compared with observational and audiovisual evidence. This process enabled the researcher to identify areas of convergence and divergence and to interpret *Gantei* as both a lived cultural practice and a changing performance system.

The resulting themes were subsequently interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical frameworks. Stakeholder Theory was used to examine the roles and relationships of the different actors involved in the continuity of *Gantei*, while Practice-as-Research provided a framework for understanding the embodied and performative dimensions of cultural knowledge and their implications for safeguarding and continuity.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The study's credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation. The researcher compared information from individual interviews with evidence from focus group discussions, participant observation, field notes, and audiovisual documentation. Participants from different cultural and generational backgrounds also provided multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon.

Using four different community settings also enabled the researcher to examine *Gantei* beyond a single local context and identify both shared and community-specific perspectives. The convergence of evidence across participant accounts and observed practices provided a basis for developing the major themes presented in the findings.

The study also maintained a distinction between participants' accounts, the researcher's observations, and subsequent scholarly interpretation. This distinction was important in ensuring that analytical conclusions were grounded in the field materials rather than presented as direct participant claims.

Ethical Considerations

Given the study's engagement with indigenous cultural knowledge and performance practices, ethical considerations extended beyond conventional research participation to include respect for community authority, cultural ownership, and the sensitivity of culturally significant knowledge.

Participation in interviews and focus group discussions was voluntary. Participants were informed that the study aimed to document and understand *Gantei* and its contemporary cultural context, and consent was sought for their participation and for relevant performance documentation. Permission was sought from relevant participants and cultural custodians to document performance-related materials, and care was taken in handling information concerning ritual, spiritual, and culturally sensitive practices.

Particular attention was given to the distinction between knowledge that could be openly discussed and cultural information that may be subject to community-specific restrictions. Audiovisual materials and field records were therefore treated as research documentation rather than as unrestricted public property. The study also recognised that knowledge concerning *Gantei* is embedded within the wider Mada community and should not be understood solely as individually owned information.

These considerations informed the researcher's engagement with elders, cultural custodians, performers, community leaders, and other participants throughout the fieldwork process. The study

sought to maintain respect for participants, cultural custodianship, and the integrity of the *Gantei* tradition while documenting its contemporary condition.

The study does not report a formal institutional ethics-approval reference number. Accordingly, its ethical account is presented in terms of voluntary participation, consent, cultural permission, community authority, and restrictions governing culturally sensitive knowledge.

Results

The findings presented in this section derive from the 2025 field engagement conducted across Gwanje, Ningo, Kegbe, and Njigban communities. Data were generated through interviews with five elders and cultural custodians, four focus group discussions involving 24 participants, participant observation, field notes, and audiovisual documentation. The findings are organised around three major concerns of the study: the structural composition of *Gantei* performance, its cultural and social functions, and factors affecting its continuity and transformation.

Gantei as an Integrated Performance System

Field observations and participants' accounts revealed that *Gantei* extends beyond the playing of the traditional raft-zither instrument. It constitutes an integrated performance system involving music, dance, vocal expression, costume, masking, ritual action, spatial organisation, and audience participation. The findings therefore distinguish between *Gantei* as an instrument and *Gantei* as a broader cultural performance tradition. The instrument represents the raft-zither itself, whereas the performance tradition encompasses the interconnected musical, choreographic, visual, ritual, spatial, and social practices surrounding it.

Music provides an important basis for organising movement and interaction. Participants and observations indicated that changes in musical patterns can cue movement and shifts in performance energy, while singing, chanting, humming, and other vocal expressions contribute to the communicative dimension. Dance functions as more than musical accompaniment. Performers use stylised movements, rhythmic patterns, gestures, formations, and spatial changes to express cultural meanings and social relationships.

Costume and masking further contribute to the visual and symbolic character of *Gantei*. Field observations showed that specialised costumes help distinguish performance roles, while masquerade manifestations associated with *Gantei*, including Njwei Kpenkpan and Njwei *Gantei*, connect performance with ritual symbolism and culturally recognised identities. Participants' accounts also associated aspects of *Gantei* with communal ceremonies, seasonal activities, agricultural cycles, masquerade practices, and other culturally significant events. These associations indicate that particular performance elements acquire meanings from the social and ritual contexts in which they occur.

Audience participation emerged as another important structural feature. Rather than maintaining a strict performer-spectator separation, *Gantei* performance may involve singing, dancing, cheering, ululation, rhythmic responses, and other forms of interaction. Such participation contributes to the communal character of the performance and provides opportunities for younger community members to encounter songs, movements, roles, and other elements of performance knowledge.

The organisation of performance space also varies according to context. Field observations identified cyclical, linear, and directional formations through which performers, musicians, dancers, and audiences interact. These spatial relationships contribute to the organisation and meaning of performance rather than serving merely as physical arrangements. Overall, the findings establish *Gantei* as a multilayered performance system in which musical, choreographic, visual, ritual, spatial, and participatory elements operate interdependently.

Cultural Functions and Intergenerational Transmission

Participants' accounts and field observations indicate that *Gantei* performs several cultural and social functions beyond entertainment. These include cultural education, moral instruction, collective memory, social interaction, ritual expression, identity formation, and intergenerational transmission.

Gantei provides opportunities for cultural learning through songs, narratives, movement, performance roles, and participation in communal events. Participants indicated that songs, proverbs, narratives, symbolic enactments, and other performance practices may communicate moral expectations and social values. Such learning occurs informally through observation, imitation, participation, and interaction with experienced practitioners rather than exclusively through formal educational institutions.

The findings further indicate that *Gantei* contributes to the maintenance and transmission of collective memory. Songs, movements, stories, ritual actions, and performance conventions may embed historical experiences, social values, traditional knowledge, and cultural meanings. Elders and cultural custodians remain important repositories of this knowledge, while performers and dancers embody and reproduce it through practice. The findings suggest, however, that cultural memory is sustained not simply by remembering but through repeated participation in performance.

Gantei also creates spaces for social interaction and collective participation. Festivals, ceremonies, cultural gatherings, and other performance events bring together elders, performers, dancers, young people, community leaders, and wider audiences. Participation through movement, singing, rhythmic response, and other forms of engagement contributes to social interaction and reinforces shared cultural belonging.

Certain manifestations of *Gantei* also possess ritual and spiritual significance. Participants connected particular masquerade and performance practices with ancestral presence, spiritual forces, communal wellbeing, and ritual activities. At the same time, the findings indicate that younger generations continue to encounter *Gantei* within changing social environments. Their participation demonstrates continuing cultural engagement, although the frequency and forms of participation are changing.

Intergenerational transmission emerged as particularly important to continuity. Elders and custodians possess historical and practical knowledge, while younger performers and dancers acquire aspects of this knowledge through observation, apprenticeship, practice, and performance. The findings indicate that transmission requires more than the existence of cultural knowledge; it depends on sustained opportunities for younger people to learn, practise, perform, and assume culturally recognised roles.

Factors Shaping the Continuity and Transformation of Gantei

The findings identified several interconnected factors affecting the continuity of *Gantei*, including religious transformation, youth disengagement and changing cultural preferences, migration and urbanisation, changing performance contexts, weakening transmission structures, and limited institutional support.

Participants identified religious transformation as one factor affecting participation in aspects of traditional performance. Some adherents of Christianity or Islam may view practices associated with traditional spirituality, ancestral symbolism, masquerade, or ritual activity negatively. When individuals or families withdraw from activities perceived as incompatible with their religious commitments, opportunities for participation and transmission may decline. The findings do not suggest that religious affiliation affects all Mada people uniformly; rather, changing religious orientations form part of a broader transformation in the social environment within which *Gantei* is negotiated.

Participants also identified changing patterns of youth participation. Younger people increasingly encounter alternative forms of entertainment and cultural expression through education, urban lifestyles, television, smartphones, social media, and digital platforms. The findings do not indicate a complete rejection of Mada culture by young people but suggest that the environments through which cultural practices are encountered and practised are changing. Reduced participation can nevertheless affect the acquisition of skills in music, dance, costume, ritual procedures, and other embodied aspects of *Gantei*.

Migration and urbanisation further affect continuity. Young people may leave community environments for education, employment, and other opportunities, reducing their regular contact with traditional performance. This mobility affects *Gantei* not simply through physical absence but by weakening the social environments in which apprenticeship, observation, rehearsal, and communal performance take place.

The findings also reveal a transformation in performance context. Elements of *Gantei* are increasingly presented through organised cultural events, festivals, exhibitions, and other public occasions. Such staging creates opportunities for visibility and wider cultural engagement but may also separate selected performance elements from the communal, ritual, or seasonal contexts that previously gave them meaning. This produces a tension between cultural visibility and cultural continuity: staging can expose *Gantei* to new audiences while potentially transforming its original functions and participation patterns.

Finally, the findings indicate a weakening of traditional transmission structures and limited institutional support. Elders and custodians still hold important knowledge, but opportunities for sustained intergenerational learning appear less consistent. Participants and field observations also pointed to limited systematic documentation, structured cultural education, regular performance opportunities, and institutionalised safeguarding initiatives. Audiovisual documentation undertaken during the study demonstrated the value of recording embodied performance knowledge, but the findings suggest that documentation alone cannot ensure continuity. Sustaining *Gantei* requires documentation alongside opportunities for performance, intergenerational learning, community participation, and meaningful community control over cultural knowledge.

Summary of Major Findings

The findings establish three broad dimensions of the contemporary *Gantei* performance tradition.

First, *Gantei* is an integrated performance system rather than merely the playing of the *Gantei* raft-zither instrument. Its structure involves music, dance, costume, masking, ritual and symbolic action, spatial organisation, and active audience participation.

Second, *Gantei* performs multiple cultural and social functions. It contributes to cultural education, moral instruction, historical and cultural memory, social cohesion, ritual expression, identity formation, and intergenerational transmission.

Third, interconnected socio-cultural changes challenge *Gantei*'s continuity. Religious transformation, youth disengagement, migration and urbanisation, changing patterns of cultural consumption, the shift from traditional performance to staged cultural display, weakened transmission structures, and inadequate institutional support collectively affect the tradition's sustainability.

The findings therefore present *Gantei* as a living cultural practice in transformation rather than a static cultural artefact. Its future continuity depends not only on preserving existing performance materials but also on sustaining the social relationships, knowledge systems, participation structures, and cultural contexts through which the tradition is transmitted.

Discussion

Gantei as an Integrated Performance and Knowledge System

The findings demonstrate that *Gantei* operates at two interconnected levels: as a traditional raft-zither instrument and as a broader performance tradition involving music, dance, vocal expression, costume, masking, ritual action, spatial organisation, and audience participation. Treating *Gantei* primarily as an instrument therefore risks overlooking the wider cultural knowledge embedded in its performance. Its musical, visual, embodied, ritual, and communal dimensions continuously shape one another. Safeguarding consequently requires a shift from object-centred preservation to a system-centred approach that recognises the relationships, practices, meanings, skills, and forms of participation through which *Gantei* remains culturally meaningful.

Gantei also functions as embodied cultural memory. Knowledge is transmitted through songs, movement, musical patterns, costume, masquerade, ritual actions, and participation, consistent with Assmann's (2011) view of cultural memory as maintaining relationships with the past through symbolic practices. Because such knowledge depends on practitioners who can enact it, declining participation threatens not only performance continuity but also the transmission of cultural memory. The involvement of younger participants demonstrates, however, that youth should not be regarded merely as recipients of inherited knowledge; they can become future bearers, interpreters, and custodians. Safeguarding therefore requires sustained opportunities for participation, apprenticeship, rehearsal, and performance rather than occasional observation at festivals.

Stakeholder Relationships, Cultural Ownership and Sustainability

Viewed through Stakeholder Theory, the findings reveal that *Gantei* sustainability depends on a network of interconnected actors, including elders and custodians, musicians, dancers, community leaders, cultural officers, younger participants, traditional institutions, cultural associations, audiences, and the wider community. These stakeholders hold different forms of knowledge, authority, responsibility, and interest in the tradition's continuation.

The decline of *Gantei* can consequently be understood partly as a weakening of these relationships. Migration, religious transformation, changing entertainment preferences, and reduced participation have disrupted traditional links between elders and youth, performers and apprentices, communities and cultural authorities, and performers and audiences. An elder's knowledge becomes vulnerable without younger practitioners, while youthful interest cannot develop into competence without access to practitioners, instruments, rehearsal spaces, performance opportunities, and community support.

This has important implications for cultural ownership. External institutions cannot assume that documenting, archiving, or staging *Gantei* automatically preserves it. Decisions concerning documentation, teaching, adaptation, public presentation, and culturally restricted knowledge should remain substantially grounded in community authority. Researchers, cultural agencies, and institutions can provide documentation, resources, training, and facilitation, but should complement rather than replace indigenous cultural authority. Sustainability is therefore best understood as a collaborative process involving relationships among stakeholders rather than the responsibility of a single institution.

Practice-as-Research and Gantei as Living Heritage

Practice-as-Research (PaR) provides an important methodological and conceptual basis for understanding *Gantei* because significant dimensions of its knowledge are embodied rather than exclusively verbal. Interviews can provide information about history, meanings, instrument functions, and performance practices. Still, they cannot fully reproduce knowledge contained in movement, musical coordination, spatial relationships, audience response, or the experiential dynamics of performance. Observation, rehearsal, embodied engagement, performance, and reflection can therefore reveal relationships that textual description alone may not adequately capture.

This perspective challenges treating endangered traditions as static cultural objects. *Gantei* exists through practice: it survives when people play, dance, sing, teach, rehearse, adapt, and participate. Consequently, documentation is necessary but insufficient. A recording can preserve evidence of a performance, but cannot by itself create new performers or sustain the social relationships required for transmission. Safeguarding should therefore incorporate apprenticeship, intergenerational workshops, rehearsal, re-performance, experimentation, and community-based reconstruction.

This does not require reproducing an imagined historical form unchanged. Cultural continuity can accommodate transformation, provided communities retain the capacity to determine which aspects of the practice remain culturally significant and how to express them under contemporary conditions. In this sense, cultural continuity does not require cultural immobility.

Preservation, Transformation and Cultural Negotiation

The findings indicate that the staging of *Gantei* as a cultural display creates both opportunities and challenges. Festivals, exhibitions, educational events, and other public performances can increase visibility and expose younger audiences to the tradition. However, removing *Gantei* from its original social and ritual contexts may alter its meanings, retaining visible elements such as music, movement, costume, and spectacle while weakening the relationships, beliefs, obligations, and forms of participation that give the practice significance.

The influence of Christianity, Islam, urbanisation, migration, education, employment, and digital media should similarly not be interpreted simply as evidence that modernity destroys culture. Rather, the findings point to an ongoing process of cultural negotiation in which Mada people navigate traditional expectations alongside contemporary social, religious, educational, and technological environments. A sustainable safeguarding strategy must therefore recognise this negotiation rather than demand a complete return to historical conditions.

Stakeholder Theory and PaR provide complementary perspectives here. Stakeholder Theory foregrounds questions of authority, participation, responsibility, and ownership, while PaR foregrounds what embodied practice can learn and transmit. Together, they support an approach in which adaptation is negotiated rather than imposed and cultural knowledge remains connected to the community that owns and practises it.

Toward Community-Centred Cultural Safeguarding and Applied Theatre

The findings point toward a community-centred safeguarding approach based on four interconnected principles: documentation, intergenerational transmission, community authority, and creative revitalisation. Documentation through audio, video, photography, interviews, and field notes can create records of cultural knowledge; intergenerational transmission can be strengthened through apprenticeship, workshops, rehearsal, and performance; community authority can guide decisions about what should be shared, restricted, adapted, or publicly presented; and creative revitalisation can provide participatory spaces in which *Gantei* is practised and transmitted rather than merely displayed.

Within this framework, Applied Theatre offers a potential means of facilitating cultural reflection, dialogue, experimentation, and intergenerational engagement. Workshops, storytelling, re-enactment, improvisation, and participatory performance can create opportunities for communities to encounter and negotiate cultural memory in contemporary contexts. However, Applied Theatre should not be presented as an external solution imposed upon the Mada community. Its value lies in facilitating processes through which cultural stakeholders can articulate, practise, transmit, and negotiate their own cultural knowledge.

