



An Ethnographic Study of Didong: Body Music and the Enculturation of Gayo Children

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the practice of Didong as a form of body music and its role in the enculturation process of Gayo children in Central Aceh Regency, Indonesia. It focuses on informal social spaces where children play with their peers. To analyze how body-based Didong becomes a medium of enculturation through musical experiences and spontaneous social interactions, an ethnographic-based qualitative approach is used. Data were collected through participatory observation and informal dialogue with children aged 5-10 years who practice Didong. The results reveal that rhythmic elements such as tepok tulu, tingkah, and geretek are produced through the technique of clapping both palms together in a collectively organized manner. Through peer imitation mechanisms, children can reproduce musical patterns, which internalize the Gayo cultural identity in an embodied way. Theoretically, this study contributes by deconstructing the understanding of traditional music from merely a formal performance into an autonomous system of enculturation in children's daily lives. These findings confirm that body music functions as a crucial informal pedagogical space for the sustainability of local traditions outside formal educational institutions.

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1. Introduction

Music in society is not merely an aesthetic product, but an important instrument for the formation of cultural identity and the transmission of values between generations. In the context of the Gayo community in Aceh, Didong is an art form that incorporates musical elements produced by the body as a cultural expression that combines vocals, oral literature, and the rhythm of hand clapping. This art form preserves the values and norms formulated by the Gayo ancestors. Afriadi (2020), states that Didong is a living library that is able to describe the Gayo community in terms of how they think, respond, and react in the cultural process. As a living tradition, Didong has been the subject of extensive research. However, when viewed critically, the existing literature on Didong tends to focus on analyzing Didong as a formal performance, ritual, or competition between groups (Afriadi, 2018; Akbar, 2015; Erwenta et al., 2018; Ismawirna et al., 2022; Yurida, 2017). Although these studies have succeeded in mapping the moral values and social functions of Didong, there is a tendency to view this tradition only from the perspective of adults or as a structured cultural event. This has led to the spontaneous musical practices performed by children in public spaces while playing often being overlooked in ethnomusicological studies.

This research gap becomes even more apparent when observing how children process music through their bodies. As explained in embodied cognition theory, music does not only occur in the brain, but involves active physical engagement with the environment (Nijs et al., 2023; Schyff et al., 2018). This shows that music is an important part of children's social lives, where they actively create and produce music as a way of interacting. This is in line with Niland's (2019), thinking that music is an integral part of children's social lives. In the context of Gayo children, rhythmic activities through the body (body percussion) are the foundation for the development of motor coordination, emotional control, and social cognition. However, previous studies on child development in Aceh have rarely specifically linked how traditional rhythmic patterns such as Didong become a means of stimulating natural development outside the school curriculum.

This research gap also affects the sustainability of a tradition that is determined not only by formal stages, but also by informal enculturation processes from an early age. Meriam and Nettle, Music is human behavior that is learned in its social context (Permadi, 2019). For Gayo children, Didong is not always present in the form of formal teaching, but rather appears as body music that is integrated into daily activities. This differs from formal music education research, which often associates body music with Western instructional methods, as seen in Sagala et al. (2022) study on rhythmic learning. The practice of Didong among Gayo children shows how the body, through hand clapping (*tepok tulu, tingkah, geretek*), becomes the main autonomous instrument. Here, the body becomes a medium through which cultural identity is physically internalized through fluid social interaction.

From an early childhood education perspective, musical activities are an important tool for improving children's kinesthetic intelligence and basic literacy. Musical experiences through movement and song help children explore their motor skills and strengthen their sensitivity to the social rhythms around them (Diana Putri Amalia. M et al., 2022). This is in line with the results of Didong training, where Gayo children spontaneously use their bodies as tools for artistic expression while collectively developing gross and fine motor skills. Additionally, other studies discuss how local values incorporated into early childhood activities effectively build the foundations of cultural and social identity (Lucky & Muhid, 2025; Rahmadani et al., 2018). The use of media based on local wisdom, such as traditional games and performing arts, can increase children's active involvement in a fun learning process, according to early childhood education research. Spontaneous peer interaction in Didong is an example of contextual learning in which Gayo children learn the values of togetherness and rhythmic discipline from an early age.

Didong transmission in children shows unique dynamics through peer imitation mechanisms. Music learning in traditional societies often occurs through participatory observation (Corona et al., 2015; Irawati, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023; Schippers, 2009). However, these references still present this phenomenon descriptively without critically analyzing how the transition from visual observation to complex musical motor skills in children occurs outside adult control. Most literature has not touched on how children's physical interactions and body rhythms function as independent cultural reproduction mechanisms in their everyday environments, such as when playing in rice fields, in the open air, or on the shores of Lake Lut Tawar, a place where Gayo children often play outside of formal education.

Based on these issues, this study attempts to fill the theoretical gap by analyzing in depth how Didong functions as a form of body music, as well as how the mechanisms of cultural transmission operate informally as part of their musical experience. By focusing the study on the dimensions of the body and daily activities, this study aims to deconstruct the understanding that the preservation of tradition only occurs in formal spaces, while also formulating how the enculturation of Didong in Gayo children becomes the foundation for the sustainability of their cultural identity through embodied and collective musical expression.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design to investigate the practice of Didong body music in the everyday environment of Gayo children. By choosing the ethnographic method for this study, the researcher was able to capture musical phenomena that arise naturally and spontaneously in the children's social environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure the depth of ethnographic data and the validity of the results, fieldwork was conducted for 20 months, from January 2024 to September 2025. This study involved 42 boys aged 5–10 years, who were selected purposively, as this is an important stage in the motor development and cultural enculturation of early childhood. These children came from five villages in Central Aceh Regency: Mendale Village (8 children), Kung Village (7 children), Toweren Village (12 children), Lukup Badak Village (9 children), and Weh Lah Village (6 children). The research focused on public spaces such as schoolyards, rice fields, plantations, and the natural environment around Lake Lut Tawar, where children usually gather together.

Data was collected through participatory observation, in which researchers were directly involved in children's play activities to observe physical music techniques such as *tepok tulu, tingkah, and geretek*. In addition to observation, researchers also conducted informal discussions or casual conversations with participants to find out how they viewed the movements without making them feel intimidated. Digital audio-visual recordings were used as the main database for analyzing rhythm structure and social interaction. The collected data was then analyzed descriptively and interpretively through data condensation (summarizing and selecting important data from recordings and dialogues), presented in the form of narratives and rhythm transcriptions, and produced conclusions that helped to understand the mechanisms of cultural transmission that occurred.





3. Result And Discussion

3. 1. Didong as a Form of Body Music

Didong emerged as an independent form of body music in the daily lives of Gayo children. Children's bodies function as the main and only source of sound production. From observations made of various activities of Gayo children in their play environment, ranging from the schoolyard to rice fields to bathing together in the lake, they play with their bodies as a musical activity. According to this phenomenon, music does not require external

instruments to be present in children's social spaces. Didong uses all of its physical awareness as body music, using the hands as a percussion medium to produce natural resonance from the body. This practice emerges without special preparation, planned role division, or instructions from adults. This demonstrates a high level of cultural adaptability through the use of spontaneous movements. The following table shows visual evidence of the spatial variation and spontaneity of Didong practice as body music.

Table 1, Didong Practice as a Form of Body Music

| No | Didong Practice | Description |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 |  <p data-bbox="359 716 702 750">Source: Photo Amris (2025)</p> | <p data-bbox="869 369 1444 459">Children playing in the schoolyard are able to spontaneously and simply play rhythms with their palms as Didong music.</p> |
| 2 |  <p data-bbox="359 1086 702 1120">Source: Photo Amris (2024)</p> | <p data-bbox="869 750 1444 907">Gayo children playing in the rice fields are able to play Didong spontaneously. They play rhythms with their palms, clapping their hands in various ways to accompany singers who perform songs with vocal ornaments unique to the Gayo language.</p> <p data-bbox="869 918 1444 1008">Gayo children playing together while bathing in Lake Tut Tawar, playing Didong with its distinctive rhythm, are able to play spontaneously.</p> |
| 3 |  <p data-bbox="359 1467 702 1500">Source: (Doc. Kresnawan)</p> | <p data-bbox="869 1120 1444 1276">Gayo children playing in the rice fields are able to play Didong spontaneously. They play rhythms with their palms, clapping their hands in various ways to accompany singers who perform songs with vocal ornaments unique to the Gayo language.</p> |
| 4 |  <p data-bbox="359 1892 702 1926">Source: (Doc. Wonderful Gayo)</p> | <p data-bbox="869 1512 1444 1646">Gayo children spontaneously playing Didong while playing outdoors. This shows the simplicity of Didong music, which is adaptable and easy for children in Gayo to play.</p> |

| No | Didong Practice | Description |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5 |  <p>Source: (Doc. Kelompok Didong Kemarabujang junior)</p> | Gayo children playing in nature, performing Didong art, which shows that Didong is body music. |

Data from table 1, shows that the bodies of Gayo children are not bound by formal facility limitations. This proves that body music functions as a third space, namely a bridge between play activities and the process of enculturation, where children can freely explore sounds. The consistent presence of circular or semi-circular seating formations in various children's play areas has a musical function in unifying sound reflections. In addition, this formation allows each child to interact visually by seeing the hand movements of their peers. The physical interactions recorded in various places demonstrate nonverbal communication and motor coordination. The children's ability to change the color of sound simply by adjusting how their palms produce rhythmic resonance demonstrates their deep understanding of body acoustics. Therefore, Didong as body music has artistic expression and also functions as a social mechanism in which Gayo cultural identity permeates children through collective music that unites them during daily play.

3.2 The Structure of Didong Body Music in Children in Gayo Society

The structure of Didong music played by Gayo children focuses on the organization of rhythmic elements that are built independently through clapping techniques. Based on in-depth observation, the main sound production is achieved through two basic clapping techniques, namely open palms and clenched palms. Clapping with open palms produces a wider, louder, and more resonant sound, while clapping with closed palms creates air compression that produces a shorter sound with a strong bass character. The combination of these two techniques is the main source of timbre and rhythmic intensity in Didong body music. The technique of producing rhythm from hand clapping can be seen more clearly in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Clenched and open palm clapping techniques as a source of rhythm for Didong body music.

In children's daily practice, the rhythmic structure of Didong can be identified through three main components, namely *tepok tulu*, *tingkah pumu*, and *geretek*. The first component, *tepok tulu*, functions as the basic pattern and rhythmic framework that maintains tempo stability and serves as the main framework for group members. Children play *tepok tulu* simultaneously using a combination of clenched and open hands to maintain rhythmic continuity before moving on to more complex variations. This basic pattern is illustrated in the following notation.



Figure 2. Notation *Tepok Pumu*.

Furthermore, there is a *tingkah pumu* that acts as a variation of the basic pattern with changes in accent and syncopation. This pattern is played with an open palm technique that gives the performance its dynamics. In practice, the role of a *peningkah* is to signal the start of the performance. This means that Didong is started by one of the children as a musical signal, which is then immediately followed collectively by the other members. The accent

changes in *tingkah pumu* create a more lively rhythmic texture and prevent monotony in the practice of Didong, as shown in the following notation.



Figure 3. Notasi Tingkah Pumu

The third component is *geretek*, which is played at a faster tempo and with a denser rhythm. *Geretek* fills the space between the basic pattern and variations and is often used as a fill-in or transition marker before the pattern returns to *tepok tulu*. The use of *geretek* requires a higher level of motor skill due to the intensity of the dense beats, with the following notation structure.

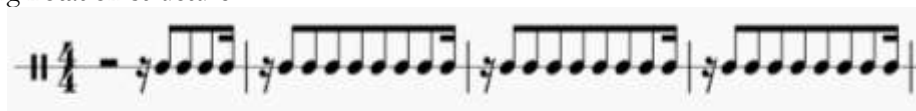



Figure 4. Notasi Geretek

During the activity, the three components of *tepok tulu*, *tingkah pumu*, and *geretek* were played in varying sequences according to nonverbal agreements within the group. Transitions between patterns were made organically without verbal cues, but rather through rhythmic gestures that had been internalized among the children as Didong performers. This phenomenon illustrates a pronounced sensitivity to musical cognition, wherein children comprehend sound structure both auditorily and kinesthetically. This synchronization without formal instruction proves that the musical structure of Didong has become part of the collective memory, allowing them to remain in unison in tempo and dynamics even when playing in a relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere.

3.3 Didong as a Medium for Cultural Transmission through Interaction and Imitation among Children

The process of transmitting Didong to Gayo children demonstrates a natural and effective model of musical learning in the context of peer interaction. Field observations reveal the unique fact that children do not receive formal verbal instruction or formal technical explanations about the complexity of the rhythmic structures they play. Instead, the transfer of cultural knowledge occurs through a highly fluid mechanism of direct observation and participatory imitation, whereby individuals learn by imitating their peers. In this process, musical knowledge is transferred through collectively shared physical experiences rather than through theory. The following table illustrates the dynamics of social interaction that serve as the primary means of disseminating these cultural values.

Table 2. Cultural Transmission through Interaction and Imitation among Children

| No | Didong Practice | Description |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 |  | The process of transmitting Didong rhythms to Gayo children occurs through social interaction and imitation. Children who are more skilled at playing rhythms teach their friends who are not yet able to do so. This happens when Gayo children are playing together. |

Source: Photo Amris (2025)

| No | Didong Practice | Description |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2 |  <p data-bbox="336 622 678 651">Source: Photo Amris (2024)</p> | <p data-bbox="831 136 1450 360">The picture shows children sheltered while waiting for the rain to subside. While waiting for the rain to stop, they engage in didong activities. The spontaneous process of didong transmission is a form of non-formal learning that takes place among Gayo children of the same age while they take shelter and wait for the rain to subside.</p> |
| 3 |  <p data-bbox="336 1196 678 1225">Source: Photo Amris (2024)</p> | <p data-bbox="831 658 1450 853">The picture shows the process of transmission among children. A child is seen watching his friend playing Didong using the hand-clapping technique. This process is done spontaneously and has become a habit among Gayo children when playing with their peers.</p> |
| 4 |  <p data-bbox="336 1608 678 1637">Source: Doc Haqi</p> | <p data-bbox="831 1234 1450 1458">Gayo children playing Didong during school breaks, showing other children how to follow the more skilled ones in learning Didong beat patterns, such as tepok tulu, tingkah pumu, and geretek. They play Didong while having fun without any specific rules. This shows the process of Didong cultural transmission among Gayo children.</p> |
| 5 |  <p data-bbox="336 2033 678 2063">Source: Photo Amris (2024)</p> | <p data-bbox="831 1644 1450 1742">Gayo children interacting and learning Gayo rhythms and vocals from their friends as they spontaneously play Didong while playing in outdoors.</p> |

Table 2 shows that transmission occurs through interaction and imitation by one child with dominant abilities as a musical spark or reference. This child is a natural rhythmic leader, playing basic *tepok tulu* patterns consistently and repetitively until other group members understand the tempo and feel the desired musicality. This rhythmic adjustment is not done through counting numbers, but through a strong synchronization process between hand movements, body coordination, and sound accents made by their peers. The other members then gradually and consistently try to replicate these movements into their own motor skills.

This transmission process is carried out with a high degree of social tolerance for inaccuracies in the rhythm patterns of peers. Although some children often experience tempo delays or errors in placing accents on certain beats with continuous collective repetition, the rhythm gradually merges into a consistent whole until the group achieves perfect synchronization. This phenomenon shows that the transmission of Didong at the children's level does not require regular verbal correction or strict division of roles as found in adults. Musical abilities and Gayo cultural values are absorbed intuitively through repeated active participation, showing that Didong functions as a powerful informal pedagogical space, where the continuity of tradition is ensured by the solidarity of social interaction and the children's deep desire to remain in tune with the harmony of their play community.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the practice of Didong among Gayo children can be understood as a form of body-based musical practice that functions as a mechanism of enculturation in the context of everyday social life. From an ethnomusicological perspective, music is not merely understood as a structure of sound but as a cultural system that lives within social practices (Lestari, 2020; Rehfeldt et al., 2021). Didong, in this context, is not only a performing art but also a space for cultural learning that takes place naturally within the community.

Rhythmic structures such as *tepok tulu*, *tingkab*, and *geretek* demonstrate clear musical organization. However, the process of internalizing these patterns in children does not take place through formal instruction but rather through collective participation and peer imitation. This idea is in line with the concept of informal music learning, which emphasizes participatory experiences and direct practice as the main medium for musical mastery (Banerjee, 2024; Li et al., 2025). Thus, Didong becomes an arena where children learn through active involvement, rather than through structured pedagogical transmission.

From an embodiment perspective, the practice of open and closed hand clapping shows that the body acts as a medium for sound production as well as cognitive and social experiences. The embodied cognition approach in music emphasizes that musical experiences are intertwined with bodily dynamics and social interactions (Oktadus & F.A. Yaqin, 2025; Walton et al., 2018). In the context of Didong, collective rhythmic coordination builds social synchronization that strengthens a sense of togetherness and community attachment, as also discussed in studies on rhythmic interaction and synchrony (Greenfield et al., 2021).

Furthermore, this process can be understood as a form of enculturation, namely the internalization of cultural values and identity through repeated participation in social practices. Gayo children not only learn rhythmic patterns, but also internalize the values of togetherness, collective discipline, and cultural identity inherent in Didong. These findings are in line with research that positions Didong as a medium for character building and preservation of local values (Daniah, 2019; SA & Habiburridho, 2024; Shaumiwaty, 2022).

Thus, this study broadens our understanding of the relationship between body-based musical practices and the process of cultural reproduction in children. Didong has survived not only as a performance tradition but also as a mechanism for cultural transmission that takes place in an embodied and collective manner. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its assertion that body music in the local Indonesian context functions as an active medium of enculturation, in which children act as agents in reproducing and maintaining the cultural practices of their community. Although this study focuses on a specific community context, these findings open up opportunities for further study on the dynamics of musical transmission in different age groups, as well as the possibility of integrating body-based musical practices into broader culture-based education.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the practice of Didong among Gayo children, which is an activity involving rhythmic play, is a body-based musical system that forms the foundation for sustainable cultural reproduction. Through mastery of the techniques of *tepok tulu*, *tingkab*, and *geretek*, children independently reconstruct the structure of Didong without adult intervention. These findings prove that the body functions as a cognitive and social instrument through which Gayo cultural identity is internalized from an early age through physical sensations and sounds.

The strength of this study lies in its finding that Didong transmission occurs through peer-to-peer (horizontal) mechanisms, which confirms the position of children as active cultural agents, not merely passive observers. This refutes the common assumption that tradition preservation only occurs on formal stages or through structured pedagogical instruction. Instead, everyday social spaces such as rice fields and lake shores, where Gayo

children play, are more effective cultural laboratories for the sustainability of Gayo traditions due to their participatory and pressure-free nature.

Theoretically, this study expands the discourse of ethnomusicology by introducing the concept of local body music as an autonomous process of enculturation. In practical terms, this research recommends the integration of traditional rhythmic practices into the Early Childhood Education (PAUD) curriculum as a more contextual alternative to Western music methods for stimulating motor and social skills. Didong practices offer a model of learning based on local wisdom that can strengthen children's socio-cultural and cultural identities from an early age.

Although it provides new insights, this study has limitations in terms of the gender diversity of participants and geographical coverage. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore variations in body music practices by conducting longitudinal studies to measure the long-term impact of musical involvement on children's cognitive and emotional development. Overall, Didong among Gayo children is evidence that body music is at the heart of the socio-cultural mechanisms that keep traditions alive amid changing times.

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