



Cultural Memory and Identity Politics: An Ethnographic Study of Manuscript Preservation Practices at Sanggar Surya Pringga Dermayu, Indramayu

Ute Lies Khadijah¹, Elnovani Lusiana², Agus Rusmana³, Rully Khairul Anwar⁴

¹ Universitas Padjajaran, Indonesia, E-mail: ute.lies@unpad.ac.id

² Universitas Padjajaran, Indonesia, E-mail: elnovani.lusiana@unpad.ac.id

³ Universitas Padjajaran, Indonesia, E-mail: a.rusmana@unpad.ac.id

⁴ Universitas Padjajaran, Indonesia, E-mail: ully.khairul@unpad.ac.id

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Submitted: 11st November, 2025.

Review: 11st April, 2026.

Accepted: 27th April, 2026.

Published: 26th July, 2026.

KEYWORDS

Cultural memory, identity politics, manuscript preservation, indigenous knowledge, community ethnography

CORRESPONDENCE

E-mail: ute.lies@unpad.ac.id

A B S T R A C T

Using six months of participant observation (2024) and in-depth interviews with 15 community members, this research reveals three key findings. First, manuscripts are understood as animate entities with ancestral agency, requiring ritual care rather than technical conservation alone. Second, preservation activities – including transliteration workshops and ritual readings – function as cultural performances where community members actively negotiate contested meanings of "tradition," "authenticity," and "modernity." Third, significant power asymmetries based on gender and generation shape access to manuscript knowledge, with elder men monopolizing textual expertise while women and youth employ subtle forms of resistance. The study demonstrates how manuscripts function as "living archives" – sites of active cultural production rather than passive storage. In post-Suharto Indonesia, manuscript preservation serves as regional identity politics, as the sanggar uses Javanese-script texts to assert Javanese identity against Sundanese cultural hegemony. However, the sanggar faces severe structural constraints – financial precarity, institutional marginalization, and succession crisis – that threaten long-term sustainability. This study contributes to Indonesian anthropology by theorizing community heritage practices as dynamic identity formation processes embedded in power relations and neoliberal governance, where communities bear preservation responsibility without corresponding state support.

A. INTRODUCTION

In the dimly lit room of a traditional Javanese house in Cikedung Lor Village, Indramayu, Ki Tarka carefully opens a wooden box containing a 200-year-old manuscript. Before touching the yellowed pages, he murmurs a prayer in Javanese: "Kula nyuwun pangapunten, mbah. Kula badhe maca warisan panjenengan" (I ask for forgiveness, ancestor. I will read your legacy). This ritual gesture is far from mere formality. It reveals a profound ontological relationship between the living and the dead, mediated through material texts. For this community, manuscripts are not passive repositories of historical information awaiting scholarly decipherment. Rather, they are understood as living entities – pusaka imbued with ancestral spirits – demanding respect, ritual

engagement, and reciprocal care. This single ethnographic moment encapsulates what is at stake in this study: the cultural work of memory-making in contemporary Indonesia.

This scene raises the central problematic that animates this research: How do communities in post-Suharto Indonesia – an era marked simultaneously by democratic opening and profound cultural anxiety – negotiate their collective identity through the preservation of ancient manuscripts? More specifically, this study asks: How does Sanggar Aksara Jawa Surya Pringga Dermayu, a grassroots cultural organization in Indramayu, actively construct, maintain, and transmit collective memory and local identity through its everyday practices of manuscript preservation, transliteration, and ritual performance? What power relations structure access to this textual heritage?

And how do these localized practices articulate with broader transformations in Indonesia's cultural politics?

These questions matter because in contemporary Indonesia, the very category of "cultural heritage" has become intensely contested terrain. We are witnessing an ongoing struggle among multiple actors—local communities, state cultural agencies, academic institutions, and transnational heritage regimes like UNESCO—each competing to define what constitutes "authentic" tradition and, crucially, who possesses the legitimate authority to preserve, interpret, and represent it (Acridi, 2020; Khadijah et al., 2024). The post-1998 Reformasi period and subsequent administrative decentralization ostensibly opened vital political spaces for grassroots cultural initiatives to flourish outside state control. Yet as this study will demonstrate, community-based preservation practices often remain structurally marginalized. They continue to be overshadowed in national heritage discourses, which are still dominated by centralized, bureaucratic, and expert-driven institutional frameworks that privilege technical conservation over cultural meaning (Afifah, 2024; Wibowo et al., 2024). This gap between democratic rhetoric and institutional reality forms the political backdrop of this study.

Existing scholarship on manuscript preservation in Indonesia has made valuable contributions but remains limited by disciplinary boundaries. The dominant approaches have focused overwhelmingly on two areas: technical conservation science (examining chemical treatments, environmental controls, and material stabilization) and classical philology (conducting textual criticism, paleographic analysis, and editorial reconstruction) (Fakhriati et al., 2022; Rachman et al., 2022). While methodologically rigorous, these approaches share a fundamental limitation: they treat manuscripts primarily as static, decontextualized objects requiring expert intervention. In doing so, they systematically overlook the rich, dynamic, and often-contested social contexts in which manuscripts acquire profound cultural meaning and everyday value for the communities who live with them. Recent anthropological scholarship has begun to address this gap by examining how heritage practices are embedded within local knowledge systems, social relations, and power structures (Atmanegara et al., 2023; Rosyiqoh et al., 2023). However, what remains critically underexplored is a theoretically robust analysis of the intersection between manuscript preservation, cultural memory, and identity politics—particularly in the specific historical conjuncture of post-Suharto Indonesia.

This study addresses three interconnected gaps in the literature. First, most existing studies adopt either technical-conservation or policy-oriented perspectives, thereby systematically neglecting the lived experiences, embodied practices, and culturally specific meanings that communities themselves attach to heritage objects (Oladeji et al., 2022; Sihotang & Sitanggang, 2022). Second, there remains insufficient critical analysis of power dynamics within community archives. Scholars often assume these spaces are inherently egalitarian and participatory, yet we know remarkably little about how social hierarchies based on gender, generation, education, and social status actually shape differential access to cultural knowledge and interpretive authority (Hasan et al., 2022). Third, the

specific political relationship between manuscript preservation practices and contemporary identity politics—especially in the complex, decentralized, and ethnically plural landscape of post-Suharto Indonesia—remains critically undertheorized.

To address these gaps, this study integrates three interconnected theoretical frameworks drawn from anthropological theory. First, I draw on theories of social memory and collective identity, particularly the foundational work of Paul Connerton (1989) and Maurice Halbwachs (1992). Following Connerton, I conceptualize manuscript preservation not simply as the physical saving of material objects, but as a form of "inscribing practice"—a cultural technique that encodes collective memory into durable material forms, making it transmissible across generations and available for contestation. Connerton's crucial distinction between "incorporating practices" (memory embodied in bodily performances, gestures, and rituals) and "inscribing practices" (memory externalized in texts, monuments, and objects) is particularly productive here. The ethnographic case of Sanggar Surya Pringga Dermayu demonstrates precisely how these two modalities are not separate but deeply intertwined: the manuscripts themselves serve as "inscribed memory," while the ritualized practices of reading, transliterating, and handling them constitute the "incorporating practices" that animate and actualize that memory in the present.

Second, this study employs Pierre Bourdieu's (2020) practice theory, particularly his concepts of habitus, field, and cultural capital, to analyze the micropolitics of heritage work. I argue that preservation practices at the sanggar are never neutral technical activities. Rather, they generate and reproduce a distinctive habitus—a set of durable, embodied dispositions, classificatory schemes, and a practical "feel for the game" that shapes how community members perceive, value, and engage with their textual heritage. Crucially, within this cultural field, specialized knowledge—such as literacy in Javanese script (aksara Jawa) and the ability to interpret archaic textual forms—functions as a form of cultural capital. This knowledge is not equally distributed; it confers symbolic prestige, social distinction, and interpretive authority within the community. Bourdieu's framework thus allows for a critical analysis of how ostensibly "traditional" cultural practices can simultaneously reproduce existing social hierarchies while also, in certain moments, opening spaces for their contestation and transformation.

Third, I employ theories of cultural performance as articulated by Richard Schechner (2017) and Victor Turner (1988). I conceptualize the sanggar's manuscript reading sessions and transliteration workshops not as mundane technical tasks or simple literacy classes, but as significant "cultural performances"—structured, heightened, and reflexive events in which community members actively enact, display, negotiate, and sometimes contest shared meanings and collective identities. Following Schechner (2017) insight, these performances are not mere representations of a pre-existing, static culture. Rather, they are constitutive acts that actively produce and reproduce culture in the present moment. Performance, as Schechner argues, is fundamentally "restored behavior"—actions that are repeated, rehearsed, learned, and transmitted across time. Yet crucially, this restoration is never mechanical

reproduction; it always involves improvisation, reinterpretation, and the possibility of transformation, as we will see in the sanggar's debates over authenticity and accessibility.

Despite growing scholarly attention to community-based heritage initiatives, significant analytical gaps persist, which this study directly addresses. First, most studies remain locked within either technical-conservation paradigms or top-down policy analysis, thereby neglecting the phenomenological dimension—how heritage is actually experienced, embodied, and made meaningful in everyday life (Oladeji et al., 2022; Sihotang & Sitanggang, 2022). Second, there is insufficient critical attention to the internal power dynamics within community archives. The assumption of egalitarian participation obscures how gender ideologies, generational hierarchies, and educational credentials structure differential access to cultural authority (Hasan et al., 2022). Third, the specific articulation between manuscript preservation and identity politics in post-Suharto Indonesia—where decentralization has intensified regional identity claims and ethnic boundary-making—remains empirically and theoretically underdeveloped.

This study addresses these three gaps by offering a richly detailed ethnographic account of how one community in West Java engages with its manuscript heritage. It aims to provide: (1) a thick ethnographic description of manuscript preservation as lived practice; (2) a critical analysis of how these practices function as cultural performances that construct collective memory and negotiate cultural authority; (3) a systematic examination of the power dynamics—particularly around gender and generation—that structure participation and interpretive authority within the community; and (4) a theoretically informed argument that situates these localized cultural practices within the broader structural transformations and political struggles shaping post-Suharto Indonesia. In doing so, this research makes three contributions to Indonesian anthropology: it develops the concept of "living archives" as sites of active cultural production rather than passive storage; it reveals the often-invisible power relations embedded in community heritage practices; and it theorizes the political economy of heritage in neoliberal contexts where communities are responsabilized for cultural preservation without corresponding institutional support or recognition.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach grounded in the interpretive tradition of anthropology (Fenn & Geertz, 1974). This methodological choice is deliberate and theoretically motivated. Unlike positivist approaches that seek to explain cultural phenomena through causal laws, interpretive ethnography prioritizes understanding—the thick description of cultural meanings, the interpretation of symbolic systems, and the analysis of how social actors themselves make sense of their worlds. This approach is particularly appropriate for this research because the central concern is not the technical efficacy of preservation methods, but rather the cultural work that preservation practices perform: how they construct identity, encode

memory, and negotiate power. The goal is not to measure outcomes but to interpret meanings.

The research design follows what George Marcus (1995) terms "multi-sited ethnography"—an approach that recognizes how cultural phenomena are constituted across multiple, interconnected sites rather than bounded within a single locale. Fieldwork was therefore strategically distributed across several key sites: the sanggar's headquarters in Cikedung Lor Village, Indramayu (where formal activities occur); community members' private homes (where manuscripts are stored and family histories are narrated); public cultural events and performances (where heritage is displayed to external audiences); and educational workshops in schools and community centers (where knowledge is transmitted to younger generations). This multi-sited design was methodologically crucial because it allowed me to trace the social life of manuscripts as they circulated across different contexts, accumulating different meanings and mobilizing different social relations in each site. It also enabled analysis of how the sanggar strategically performs different versions of "tradition" for different audiences—internal members, local government officials, academic researchers, and the broader public.

Intensive fieldwork was conducted over a six-month period from March to August 2024 at Sanggar Aksara Jawa Surya Pringga Dermayu, a community-based cultural organization founded in 2015 with approximately 40 active members. The sanggar was selected as the primary research site through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) it has been actively engaged in manuscript preservation for nearly a decade, providing sufficient temporal depth; (2) it operates independently from state institutions, allowing analysis of grassroots agency; and (3) preliminary research indicated significant internal diversity in terms of gender, generation, and educational background, enabling examination of power dynamics. Within this site, 15 key informants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. The sample was deliberately constructed to ensure maximum variation across social positions: the founder and chief ritual specialist (Ki Tarka), 5 senior members (ages 50-70, high traditional cultural capital), 4 young members (ages 20-35, high modern educational capital), 3 women members (to examine gendered participation), and 2 manuscript owners from outside the sanggar (to understand community-sanggar relations). This sampling strategy was designed specifically to capture the full spectrum of perspectives and to enable systematic analysis of how social position shapes engagement with heritage.

Data collection employed methodological triangulation through three primary techniques, each addressing different dimensions of the research problem. First, participant observation involved intensive, sustained participation in the sanggar's everyday life over the entire six-month period. This included attending and actively participating in 24 weekly manuscript reading sessions (maosan naskah), 6 monthly transliteration workshops, 3 major public cultural performances, and numerous informal gatherings. Crucially, I adopted an apprentice role, actively learning to read Javanese script under Ki Tarka's tutelage. This embodied learning was not merely a rapport-building technique; it was an epistemological strategy that provided insider access to the tacit, embodied

dimensions of textual knowledge that cannot be captured through interviews alone. Detailed fieldnotes were recorded daily, documenting not only observable behaviors and spoken discourse, but also spatial arrangements, bodily hexis, emotional atmospheres, and my own reflexive responses as a positioned observer.

Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 15 key informants, with each interview lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and Javanese (with translation assistance when needed), audio-recorded with informed consent, and fully transcribed. The interview protocol was designed to explore four key domains: (1) personal biographies and trajectories of involvement with the sanggar; (2) cultural meanings attributed to manuscripts and preservation practices; (3) perceptions of tradition, authenticity, and modernity; and (4) awareness of and reflections on power dynamics within the community. Importantly, the semi-structured format allowed for emergent themes and for informants to guide the conversation toward issues they deemed significant, rather than imposing a rigid predetermined framework. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 8 informants to clarify ambiguities and explore emerging analytical themes.

Third, document analysis was performed on multiple textual materials to triangulate and contextualize ethnographic data. This included: (1) the manuscripts themselves—examining their material form, script style, and content; (2) transliteration products created by the sanggar—analyzing translation choices, annotations, and editorial decisions; (3) organizational documents—including meeting minutes, program proposals, and correspondence with government agencies; and (4) digital media—the sanggar's social media posts, YouTube videos, and online discussions, which reveal how heritage is strategically represented to virtual publics. This documentary analysis provided crucial insight into the sanggar's institutional logic, its strategic framing of heritage work, and the gaps between official rhetoric and everyday practice.

Data analysis followed the iterative, interpretive model outlined by Miles et al. (2014), adapted for ethnographic research. The analytical process unfolded in three recursive phases. First, data reduction involved systematically coding all fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and documents using thematic analysis. Initial open coding identified recurring patterns, key terms, and significant moments. These were then organized into focused codes aligned with the study's theoretical frameworks (e.g., "ritual practices," "authenticity debates," "gendered participation," "generational tensions"). This coding was performed manually and using NVivo software to ensure systematic coverage. Second, data display involved organizing coded data into structured analytical categories and creating visual matrices to identify relationships, contradictions, and patterns across different informant groups and observational contexts. This phase made visible how different social positions (gender, generation, education) correlated with different perspectives on heritage. Third, interpretation and verification involved moving from descriptive codes to analytical themes, interpreting these themes through the study's theoretical lenses (social memory theory, practice theory, performance theory), and

systematically checking interpretations against the full dataset to ensure empirical grounding. Member checking was conducted with three key informants to validate interpretations, though I recognize that anthropological interpretation always involves a degree of analytical distance from informants' own self-understandings.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. "Manuscripts Have Souls": Ontological Perspectives on Textual Heritage

The sanggar's approach to manuscript preservation is grounded in a distinctive ontological framework that fundamentally differs from institutional archival paradigms. This difference became ethnographically visible during a fieldwork encounter in May 2024. Before opening a 200-year-old manuscript inherited from his grandfather, Ki Tarka performed an elaborate ritual sequence: burning incense (*dupa*) that filled the room with fragrant smoke, sprinkling fresh flower petals (*kembang telon*) around the wooden storage box, and reciting a Javanese prayer (*donga*) in a low, respectful tone. When asked to explain the necessity of this ritual, Ki Tarka responded with a statement that encapsulates the community's cosmological framework:

Naskah iki dudu mung kertas, Mbak. Iki nyawa leluhur kita. Yen ora ngajeni, bisa nesu (This manuscript is not just paper, Miss. It's the soul of our ancestors. If we don't respect it, they might become angry).

This statement reveals what Philippe Descola (2012) terms an "animistic ontology"—a cosmological system in which non-human entities, including material objects like manuscripts, are understood to possess interiority, intentionality, and agency. Within this framework, manuscripts are not inert repositories of textual information awaiting scholarly decipherment. Rather, they are conceptualized as *pusaka*—sacred heirlooms animated by ancestral presence. This ontological position was consistently articulated across multiple informants. Pak Darma (58 years old), a senior member with deep knowledge of ritual protocols, elaborated this relational epistemology:

Ketika kita membaca naskah kuno, kita tidak hanya membaca kata-kata. Kita berkomunikasi dengan arwah leluhur yang menulis naskah itu. Mereka memberikan kita berkah dan pengetahuan (When we read ancient manuscripts, we're not just reading words. We communicate with ancestral spirits who wrote them. They give us blessings and knowledge).

This animistic understanding generates practical consequences for preservation methodology. Unlike institutional archives that prioritize environmental controls (temperature, humidity, light exposure) and chemical interventions (de-acidification, fumigation) to stabilize material objects, the sanggar employs what might be termed "relational care"—preservation practices that acknowledge and maintain social relationships with manuscripts as sentient beings. Storage methods exemplify this approach. Manuscripts are kept in wooden boxes (*peti*)

lined with aromatic leaves, typically pandanus (*pandan*) or clove (*cengkeh*). While these leaves do possess practical insecticidal properties, informants consistently emphasized their spiritual function. The aromatic leaves are understood to create a protective barrier against malevolent spiritual forces (*roh jahat*) that might disturb the ancestral spirits residing in the manuscripts. This practice thus operates simultaneously on material and spiritual registers, refusing the Western ontological separation between physical preservation and spiritual protection.

Drawing on Igor Kopytoff's (1986) concept of the "cultural biography of things," manuscripts at the *sanggar* can be understood as possessing complex social lives characterized by multiple status transitions. A single manuscript may move through several phases: initially a sacred family heirloom (*pusaka keluarga*) stored in a private home and accessed only by direct descendants; then an endangered object requiring rescue when the family can no longer care for it; subsequently communal heritage (*warisan bersama*) curated collectively by the *sanggar*; and finally a pedagogical tool deployed in educational workshops for youth. Each of these transitions involves ritual marking—prayers, offerings, formal requests for permission—that acknowledges the manuscript's personhood and renegotiates its social relationships. This ritualized movement through different social contexts demonstrates what Appadurai (1986) calls the "social life of things"—the ways objects acquire meaning through their circulation within and across different value regimes.

The theoretical significance of this finding lies in its challenge to Western archival epistemology. Dominant conservation paradigms, rooted in Enlightenment rationality, treat documents as passive carriers of information requiring expert technical intervention to arrest material decay. The *sanggar*'s animistic approach, by contrast, suggests an alternative indigenous epistemology in which knowledge is fundamentally relational, preservation is an ongoing social practice rather than a technical fix, and manuscripts are active participants in intergenerational communication rather than inert objects of scholarly analysis. This ontological difference has profound implications for heritage policy, suggesting that effective preservation must engage with communities' own cosmological frameworks rather than imposing external technical standards.

2. Transliteration as Cultural Performance: Contested Meanings of Tradition

The *sanggar*'s weekly transliteration workshops constitute what Richard Schechner (2017) terms "cultural performances"—structured, reflexive events in which participants do not merely transmit pre-existing cultural content but actively produce, negotiate, and contest meanings in the present. These workshops follow a consistent format: members gather in a circle, a manuscript is placed at the center, and participants collectively transliterate Javanese script (*aksara Jawa*) into Latin characters while discussing interpretation. This seemingly technical activity functions as a social arena where fundamental questions about tradition, authenticity, and modernity are debated and temporarily resolved.

Figure 1. Transliteration and translation process



Source: Private Document 2024

An ethnographic incident from June 12, 2024, crystallizes these dynamics. The group was transliterating a 19th-century manuscript containing *pranata mangsa*—a Javanese agricultural calendar system integrating astronomical observations, seasonal patterns, and ritual prescriptions. When they encountered the phrase "*wuku wayang*" (a specific unit in the Javanese calendrical system), a heated debate erupted that revealed deep generational and epistemological tensions:

Mas Agung (32 years old, university-educated): *Kita harus tambahkan penjelasan tentang wuku wayang di catatan kaki. Generasi muda tidak tahu ini* (We should add an explanation about wuku wayang in footnotes. Young people don't know this).

Ki Tarka: *Tidak perlu. Kalau mereka tidak tahu, mereka harus belajar. Kita tidak boleh mengubah naskah asli* (No need. If they don't know, they should learn. We shouldn't alter the original manuscript).

Ibu Siti (45 years old, elementary school teacher): *Tapi Pak, kalau terlalu sulit, anak-anak tidak akan tertarik membaca. Kita harus membuat relevan dengan kehidupan sekarang* (But Sir, if it's too difficult, children won't be interested in reading. We must make it relevant to contemporary life).

This exchange reveals three competing positions on heritage mediation, each grounded in different forms of authority and cultural capital. Ki Tarka's position articulates what Regina Bendix (2009) calls "authenticity anxiety"—the fear that any mediation, translation, or contextualization will corrupt the essential purity of tradition. His insistence on preserving the manuscript "as is" reflects a preservationist ideology that equates authenticity with non-intervention. This position derives its authority from traditional cultural capital: Ki Tarka's genealogical connection to manuscript-owning families, his mastery of ritual knowledge, and his recognized status as *sesepuh* (respected elder) within the community.

Mas Agung's position, by contrast, reflects what might be termed "pedagogical pragmatism"—the view that heritage must be made accessible to remain relevant. His call for

explanatory footnotes draws on a different form of authority: institutionalized educational capital derived from his university degree and his professional position in the district cultural office. His intervention represents the voice of modern bureaucratic rationality entering the traditional space of the sanggar.

Ibu Siti's position introduces a third dimension: gendered practical knowledge. As an elementary school teacher and mother, she claims authority based on everyday pedagogical experience with children. Her emphasis on "relevance to contemporary life" challenges both Ki Tarka's preservationism and Mas Agung's academic approach, insisting that heritage must serve living communities rather than abstract ideals of purity or scholarly standards.

The debate's resolution is significant. After extended discussion, Ki Tarka's position prevailed—the group decided against adding extensive annotations, opting instead for minimal footnotes only for completely obscure terms. This outcome reflects the persistence of gerontocratic authority within the sanggar's decision-making structure. However, the story does not end there. In a private conversation after the workshop, Ibu Siti revealed a crucial submerged perspective:

Saya menghormati Pak Tarka, tapi kadang saya merasa pendapat perempuan tidak terlalu didengar. Kami yang mengajar anak-anak, jadi kami lebih tahu apa yang mereka butuhkan (I respect Pak Tarka, but sometimes I feel women's opinions aren't really heard. We're the ones teaching children, so we know better what they need).

This statement exposes the gendered dimensions of cultural authority. (Brenner, 2012). While women actively participate in sanggar activities—indeed, they constitute the majority of participants in cultural performances and teaching activities—their voices carry less weight in formal decision-making moments, particularly when debates concern textual interpretation and preservation standards. Using Bourdieu's (2020) framework, we can analyze this as a hierarchy of cultural capital. Within the sanggar's field, traditional textual knowledge (literacy in Javanese script, ability to interpret archaic language, familiarity with ritual protocols) functions as the dominant form of cultural capital, conferring symbolic authority and decision-making power. This knowledge is disproportionately held by elder men, who had greater access to traditional education in their youth. Women's practical pedagogical knowledge, while valuable, occupies a subordinate position in this hierarchy, recognized as useful for implementation but not authoritative for interpretation.

Yet this is not a static or uncontested hierarchy. The debate itself demonstrates what Scott (1985) calls "everyday resistance"—the subtle ways subordinated groups challenge dominant power without open confrontation. Ibu Siti's public advocacy for accessibility, even when ultimately overruled, plants seeds of doubt about preservationist orthodoxy. More significantly, in her role as teacher, she exercises considerable autonomy in how heritage is actually transmitted to children, effectively implementing her pedagogical philosophy in practice even when it is rejected in formal policy. Similarly, Mas Agung's invocation of institutional authority (his position in the cultural office) represents an alternative power base that,

while not yet dominant, signals the gradual entry of bureaucratic-modern forms of authority into traditional spaces.

The theoretical significance of this finding lies in demonstrating that heritage practices are not neutral technical activities but sites of ongoing cultural politics. The transliteration workshop functions as what Turner (1988) calls "social drama"—a structured arena where latent social tensions (between generations, genders, and epistemologies) become visible and are temporarily negotiated. These performances do not resolve contradictions but manage them, allowing the sanggar to maintain collective identity despite internal diversity. The debates over authenticity and accessibility are, fundamentally, debates about who has the right to interpret the past and define its relevance for the future—questions that go to the heart of cultural authority in post-Suharto Indonesia.

3. Intergenerational Transmission and the Politics of Relevance

The sanggar's "Jangjawokan" program (2023-2024) provides a crucial site for analyzing how cultural memory is transmitted—and transformed—across generations. This program explicitly aims to bridge the generational gap by bringing elders (*sesepuh*) who possess embodied memories of pre-Green Revolution agricultural practices together with youth (ages 15-25) who are learning Javanese script. The program's name itself is significant: *jangjawokan* is a Javanese term meaning "to make Javanese" or "to teach Javanese ways," signaling its explicit identity-formation agenda.

During a session observed in July 2024, Mbah Kartini (72 years old, former rice farmer) taught a group of eight young participants a traditional rice-planting chant (*cangkriman*) drawn from a manuscript. The chant takes the form of a riddle:

Pitik walik saba kebon, ora mangan ora ngombe, mung nguntal ludira dhewe. (A reversed chicken wanders the garden, doesn't eat or drink, only swallows its own saliva). The answer—jarum (needle)—encodes a moral lesson about patience, self-reliance, and the value of labor.

After the youth struggled to transcribe the archaic Javanese text and recite it correctly, Mbah Kartini provided cultural context that revealed her sense of profound historical rupture:

Jaman saya muda, kami menyanyikan ini sambil menanam padi. Ini bukan hanya hiburan, tapi cara mengajar nilai-nilai kehidupan. Sekarang anak-anak tidak tahu lagi. (When I was young, we sang this while planting rice. It's not just entertainment, but a way to teach life values. Now children don't know anymore).

Mbah Kartini's narrative frames the chant as embedded knowledge—inseparable from the embodied practice of rice cultivation. The riddles were not abstract texts to be studied but practical mnemonics that structured agricultural labor and transmitted cultural values through repetitive performance. Her lament about loss reflects what Cole & Lambek (2003) calls "memory crisis"—the anxiety

that emerges when the social conditions that sustained particular memory practices disappear, threatening the continuity of cultural transmission.

The youth participants' responses, however, revealed a more complex and ambivalent relationship to this heritage. Dimas (19 years old, high school graduate preparing for university entrance exams) articulated this tension with striking clarity:

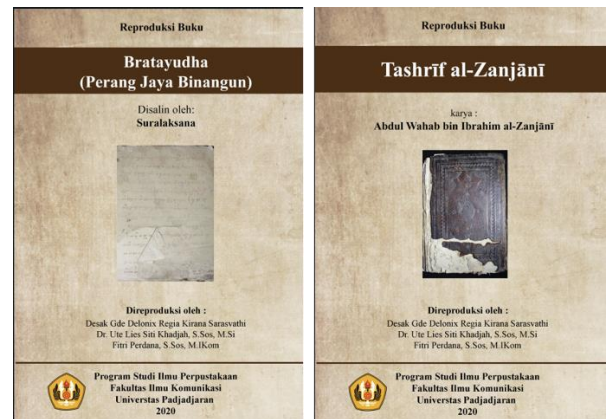
Saya senang belajar ini karena bagian dari identitas saya sebagai orang Jawa. Tapi jujur, saya tidak tahu bagaimana menggunakan ini dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Saya tidak bertani, saya mau kuliah komputer. (I'm happy learning this because it's part of my identity as Javanese. But honestly, I don't know how to use this in daily life. I don't farm, I want to study computer science).

This single response brilliantly reveals the central tension of the sanggar's project: the gap between heritage as an identity marker versus heritage as a lived practice. For youth like Dimas, learning Javanese script and agricultural rituals is not about acquiring practical, usable knowledge for everyday life. Instead, it functions primarily as symbolic identity work. It is a way to claim an "authentic" Javanese identity in an increasingly globalized and homogenized world, distinguishing himself from the default "modern" Indonesian.

This statement brilliantly captures what Gilroy (2004) calls the distinction between "roots" and "routes"—between heritage as fixed ancestral inheritance versus heritage as resource for navigating contemporary mobility. For Dimas, learning Javanese script and agricultural riddles is not about acquiring practical, usable knowledge for everyday life. Rather, it functions as symbolic identity work—a way to claim an "authentic" Javanese identity that distinguishes him from the homogenized "modern Indonesian" subject while simultaneously pursuing modern aspirations (university education, urban migration, technological careers). He is not choosing between tradition and modernity but strategically deploying tradition as a marker of distinction within modernity.

This dynamic exemplifies what Hobsbawm & Ranger (2012) famously theorized as the "invention of tradition"—the process by which cultural practices are detached from their original social contexts and reframed as "heritage" or "tradition" for new purposes. The Jangjawokan program does not—and cannot—simply transmit an unchanged tradition from Mbah Kartini's generation to Dimas's generation. The social world that gave those practices meaning (subsistence rice farming, village-based social organization, limited geographic mobility) has been fundamentally transformed by capitalist development, urbanization, and mass education. What the program actually does is recontextualize agricultural manuscripts, decoupling the chants from rice cultivation and recoding them as "cultural heritage"—objects of knowledge, pride, and identity rather than tools of production.

Figure 2: Reproduced manuscript covers for contemporary audiences



Source: Private Document 2024

Following de Zoysa & Appadurai (1998) concept of "production of locality," the sanggar's intergenerational programs can be understood as "techniques of locality production"—structured activities that generate feelings of belonging to a specific place and cultural tradition even for youth who will likely leave that place. The manuscript reading sessions, transliteration workshops, and ritual performances create what Appadurai calls a "structure of feeling" that binds participants to an imagined Javanese community, providing what Anderson (2020) terms an "imagined community" that transcends face-to-face interaction.

However, this process is neither seamless nor uncontested. Dimas's ambivalence—his simultaneous embrace of Javanese identity and acknowledgment of its limited practical utility—reveals what Bhabha (2012) theorizes as "cultural hybridity." Rather than inhabiting a stable, coherent cultural identity, youth like Dimas occupy what Bhabha calls a "third space"—an interstitial zone where multiple, sometimes contradictory cultural logics coexist without synthesis. They are neither fully "traditional" (they will not farm, will not live in villages, will not practice the rituals in their original contexts) nor fully "modern" (they still claim Javanese identity, still value ancestral knowledge, still participate in heritage activities). This hybridity is not a transitional phase to be resolved but an enduring condition of postcolonial subjectivity.

The theoretical significance of this finding challenges linear narratives of cultural loss or preservation. The sanggar is not simply "saving" a disappearing tradition, nor is tradition simply "dying." Rather, we are witnessing the active transformation of cultural practices as they are rearticulated for new social conditions. Agricultural knowledge is being converted into ethnic identity markers; embodied practices are being textualized; local knowledge is being pedagogized. These transformations involve both loss (the disappearance of rice-planting chants from actual rice fields) and creation (the emergence of heritage education as a new form of cultural practice). Understanding this requires moving beyond preservationist nostalgia to analyze heritage as an ongoing process of cultural production.

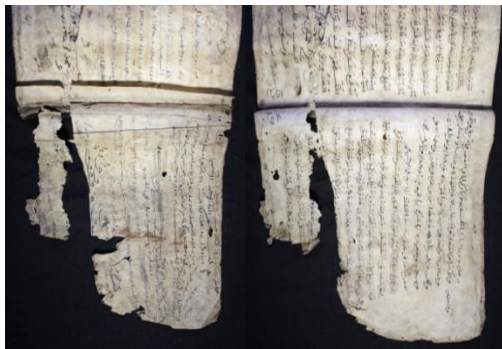
4. Structural Constraints and the Political Economy of Community Heritage

Despite its cultural vitality and community commitment, the sanggar faces severe structural constraints that reveal the contradictions of heritage policy in neoliberal Indonesia. These constraints operate across three interconnected dimensions: financial precarity, institutional marginalization, and demographic sustainability.

Financial precarity is immediate and material. The sanggar operates on an annual budget of approximately 5-10 million rupiah (roughly USD 320-640), sourced entirely from member contributions (iuran anggota) and occasional small grants from local government or private donors. This minimal funding directly limits the sanggar's capacity to fulfill its preservation mission. It prevents acquisition of endangered manuscripts from private owners who might be willing to sell or donate but require compensation for perceived economic value. It precludes access to professional conservation materials (acid-free paper, archival boxes, humidity control equipment) that could improve preservation quality. It makes impossible the payment of skilled transliterators, teachers, or administrators, forcing reliance on volunteer labor that is inherently unstable. Pak Darma articulated this frustration with painful specificity:

Banyak naskah kuno di tangan warga yang kondisinya rusak parah. Kami ingin membeli atau meminjam untuk dirawat, tapi tidak punya uang. Akhirnya naskah itu hilang atau hancur (Many ancient manuscripts in residents' hands are severely damaged. We want to buy or borrow them for care, but we have no money. Eventually those manuscripts are lost or destroyed).

Figure 3: The damaged physical condition of manuscripts, a major challenge for the sanggar



Source: Private Document 2024

This financial constraint is structurally linked to institutional marginalization. Despite producing valuable cultural work, the sanggar remains largely invisible within official heritage systems. Regional cultural agencies (Dinas Kebudayaan) rarely consult the sanggar in heritage policymaking, instead privileging bureaucratic procedures and credentialed experts. Academic researchers frequently treat the sanggar as a data source—photographing manuscripts, interviewing members, extracting information—without meaningful reciprocity or collaboration. Ki Tarka expressed deep frustration with this extractive pattern:

Profesor-profesor dari Jakarta datang, foto naskah kami, terus pulang bikin penelitian. Kami tidak dapat apa-apa. Mereka dapat gelar, kami tetap miskin (Professors from Jakarta come, photograph our manuscripts, then go home and do research. We get nothing. They get degrees, we remain poor).

This statement reveals what Smith (2021) calls "research as imperialism", the ways academic knowledge production can reproduce colonial patterns of extraction, where marginalized communities provide raw data while metropolitan institutions monopolize symbolic and economic benefits. The sanggar's marginalization reflects broader patterns in Indonesian heritage governance, where despite decentralization rhetoric, cultural authority remains concentrated in credentialed institutions (universities, national museums, government agencies) that systematically exclude community knowledge.

Finally, the sanggar faces a profound succession crisis that threatens long-term sustainability. Ethnographic observation reveals a stark demographic pattern: most active members are over 45 years old, with the core leadership (Ki Tarka and senior ritual specialists) in their 60s and 70s. Youth participation remains limited despite explicit recruitment efforts. This generational gap reflects multiple intersecting factors. Urban migration for education and employment drains potential young members from the village. The perception of heritage work as "old-fashioned" (kuno) or irrelevant to modern life discourages participation. Most critically, the absence of economic incentives makes sustained involvement difficult for youth facing economic pressures. Ibu Siti articulated this anxiety about continuity:

Ini yang paling saya khawatirkan. Kalau generasi tua seperti Pak Tarka, Mbah Kartini, meninggal, siapa yang akan melanjutkan? Anak-anak muda sibuk dengan HP, media sosial, cari kerja. Mereka datang sekali-sekali kalau ada acara besar, tapi tidak aktif rutin. Pengetahuan yang dimiliki sesepuh itu tidak bisa dipelajari dalam sehari. Butuh waktu bertahun-tahun. Kalau tidak ada regenerasi, sanggar ini akan mati perlahan (This is what worries me most. When the old generation like Pak Tarka, Mbah Kartini, die, who will continue? Young people are busy with phones, social media, looking for work. They come occasionally for big events, but aren't regularly active. The knowledge held by elders can't be learned in a day. It takes years. If there's no regeneration, this sanggar will slowly die).

These three constraints—financial, institutional, demographic—are not independent problems but interconnected dimensions of what Yúdice (2003) calls the "expediency of culture" under neoliberalism. Contemporary cultural policy increasingly emphasizes community self-reliance, participatory governance, and grassroots initiative while simultaneously withdrawing state support and privatizing cultural resources. Communities are responsabilized for heritage preservation—told it is their duty, their identity, their responsibility—but denied the institutional recognition, financial resources, and structural support necessary for sustainable practice.

The sanggar's predicament exemplifies what Ferguson (2020) theorizes as "responsibilization"—the neoliberal governmental technique of devolving responsibility to individuals and communities without corresponding redistribution of resources or power. The sanggar is given the profound responsibility to preserve national heritage (manuscripts are legally state property under Indonesian law) but denied the resources to do so effectively. This creates what Ferguson calls "declarations of dependence"—situations where communities must constantly appeal to external patrons (government, NGOs, researchers) for support, reproducing relations of dependence rather than enabling autonomy.

The succession crisis, in this light, is not simply a failure of youth engagement or cultural transmission. It reflects the rational tension between heritage preservation and capitalist modernity. For youth facing economic precarity, limited employment opportunities, and pressure to pursue formal education and urban careers, unpaid cultural work—no matter how spiritually fulfilling or identity-affirming—appears as an untenable luxury. The sanggar asks youth to invest time, energy, and commitment in activities that provide cultural capital (Javanese identity, traditional knowledge) but little economic capital (income, employment, material security). In a context where economic survival is increasingly precarious, this exchange becomes difficult to sustain.

This analysis reveals the fundamental contradiction of community-based heritage in neoliberal contexts: preservation is framed as a community responsibility, but the structural conditions that would make it sustainable—adequate funding, institutional recognition, economic viability—are systematically withheld. The sanggar's struggles are not unique failures but symptomatic of broader patterns in Indonesian cultural policy, where decentralization has devolved responsibility without corresponding resources, and where heritage is celebrated rhetorically while being marginalized materially.

CONCLUSIONS

This ethnographic study reveals that manuscript preservation at Sanggar Aksara Jawa Surya Pringga Dermayu is not merely technical conservation. It is a complex cultural process through which community members construct collective identity, negotiate power relations, and assert political claims in post-Suharto Indonesia. The key findings are as follows: First, manuscripts are understood not as inert documents but as animate entities imbued with ancestral agency. Second, preservation activities like transliteration function as cultural performances where meanings of tradition, authenticity, and modernity are actively negotiated. Third, the sanggar is not an egalitarian space. Significant power asymmetries based on gender and generation exist, though they are met with subtle resistance. Fourth, the sanggar's work is a form of regional identity politics, using Javanese manuscript manuscripts to assert Javanese identity against Sundanese cultural hegemony. Fifth, the sanggar faces severe structural constraints—financial, technical, and institutional—that threaten its long-term sustainability. This study contributes to anthropological theory by: (1) Developing the concept of the "living archive" as a site of

active cultural production; (2) Demonstrating the integration of practice theory, social memory theory, and performance theory for analyzing heritage; and (3) Revealing the political economy of community heritage in a neoliberal context.

This study is limited by its six-month fieldwork and focus on a single sanggar. Future research should conduct comparative ethnography and employ more collaborative methodologies. Practically, this study implies that policymakers must move beyond technical support. They must provide sustainable funding mechanisms, offer institutional recognition of community archives, and foster equitable partnerships. Ultimately, this study affirms that sustainable heritage preservation requires not just technical expertise but deep cultural understanding, equitable power relations, and structural support. The Sanggar demonstrates that communities possess the commitment to preserve their heritage; what they lack is resources and recognition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I express deep gratitude to Ki Tarka and all members of Sanggar Aksara Jawa Surya Pringga Dermayu for their generosity and trust. I would also like to thank all research participants, who took the time to be interviewed and share their invaluable knowledge, experiences, and observations.

REFERENCES

- Acri, A. (2020). Recent Publications on Indonesian Manuscripts. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 51(1-2), 271-283. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463420000260>
- Afifah, D. N. (2024). Proyek Digitalisasi Naskah Sebagai Upaya Pelestarian Kekayaan Budaya Indonesia. *Parataksis: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Pembelajaran Bahasa Indonesia*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.31851/parataksis.v7i1.13581>
- Anderson, B. (2020). Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. In *The New Social Theory Reader* (pp. 282-288). Routledge.
- Appadurai, A. (1986). Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value. In *The Social Life of Things* (pp. 3-63). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582.003>
- Atmanegara, L. K., Aswandikari, & Saharudin. (2023). The Function of Old Manuscript Reading and Its Preservation in the Sasak Community of West Sakra District. *RETORIKA: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa*, 9(2), 232-241. <https://doi.org/10.55637/jr.9.2.7299.232-241>
- Bendix, R. (2009). *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Univ of Wisconsin Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2012). The Location of Culture. In *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (Vol. 2, Issue 2). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551>

- Bourdieu, P. (2020). Outline of a Theory of Practice. In *The New Social Theory Reader* (pp. 80–86). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003060963-11>
- Brenner, S. A. (2012). *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*. Princeton University Press.
- Cole, J., & Lambek, M. (2003). The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 36(3), 649. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3559442>
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press.
- de Zoysa, D. A., & Appadurai, A. (1998). Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. *International Migration Review*, 32(4), 1073. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2547675>
- Descola, P. (2012). Beyond Nature and Culture. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2(1), 473–500. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau2.1.021>
- Fakhriati, F., Mu'jizah, M., Holil, M., & Permadi, T. (2022). Don't Leave Indonesian Manuscripts in Danger: An Analysis of Digitalization and Preservation. *Preservation, Digital Technology and Culture*, 51(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1515/PDTC-2021-0017>
- Fenn, R., & Geertz, C. (1974). The Interpretation of Cultures. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13(2), 248. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1384392>
- Ferguson, J. (2020). *Give a Man a Fish*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822375524>
- Gilroy, P. (2004). *After Empire* (Vol. 105). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203482810>
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory* (L. A. Coser (ed.)). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hasan, M. H., Chowdhury, M. A., & Wakil, M. A. (2022). Community Engagement and Public Education in Northwestern Part of Bangladesh: A Study Regarding Heritage Conservation. *Heliyon*, 8(3), e09005. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09005>
- Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (2012). *The Invention of Tradition* (E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (eds.)). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295636>
- Khadijah, U. L. S., Winoto, Y., Shuhidan, S. M., Anwar, R. K., & Lusiana, E. (2024). Community Participation in Preserving the History of Heritage Tourism Sites. *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development*, 12(1), e2504. <https://doi.org/10.55908/sdgs.v12i1.2504>
- Kopytoff, I. (1986). The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In *The Social Life of Things* (pp. 64–92). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582.004>
- Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1), 95–117. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. SAGE.
- Oladeji, S. O., Grace, O., & Ayodeji, A. A. (2022). Community Participation in Conservation and Management of Cultural Heritage Resources in Yoruba Ethnic Group of South Western Nigeria. *Sage Open*, 12(4), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221130987>
- Rachman, Y. B., Salim, T. A., Rachman, M. A., & Ratnasari, W. (2022). Dluwang Manuscripts from Royal Surakarta, Indonesia: Deterioration Phenomena and Care Practices. *Studies in Conservation*, 67(5), 289–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2021.1923284>
- Rosyiqoh, H., Hayati, N., & Lolytasari, L. (2023). Peran Yayasan Surya Pringga Dermayu dalam Pelestarian Manuskrip Koleksi Masyarakat Indramayu. *Manuskripta*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.33656/MANUSKRIPTA.V13I2.220>
- Schechner, R. (2017). *Performance Studies*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203125168>
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of The Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press.
- Sihotang, M. M., & Sitanggang, T. (2022). Cultural Heritage Preservation and Manuscript Conservation: Safeguarding the Laklak Batak Manuscript of Batak Culture in Indonesia. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Dan Humaniora*, 11(2), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.35335/jiph.v11i2.17>
- Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Turner, V. W. (1988). *The Anthropology of Performance* (Vol. 185). PAJ publications New York.
- Wibowo, S. F., Alfida, Fuad, K., Ma'Rifat, D. F., Zuhrah, F., & Warnis. (2024). Preservation as a Shared Responsibility: Collaboration for the Sustainable Preservation of Ambon Manuscripts. *Preservation, Digital Technology and Culture*, 53(2), 91–106. <https://doi.org/10.1515/PDTC-2024-0014>
- Yúdice, G. (2003). *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*. Duke University Press.