

Wayang Kulit as Diplomacy of Javanese Values at the Community Level: A Study of Local Performances in Blitar and Tulungagung

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Leather Movie,
Cultural Diplomacy,
Javanese Values,
Digital Adaptation,
Ethnographic

This study aims to analyze the role of wayang kulit as a medium of cultural diplomacy at the community level with case studies in Blitar and Tulungagung Regencies, East Java. The purpose of the research is to identify the adaptation strategy of wayang kulit in maintaining its relevance in the modern era as well as uncovering the mechanism of transmission of Javanese values through this traditional performance. The research used a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods, including observation of 15 puppet performances, in-depth interviews with 12 key informants (puppeteers, audiences, and policy makers), and analysis of play script documents and performance recordings. The results of the study revealed three main findings: (1) Wayang kulit functions effectively as a space for value diplomacy through the creative adaptation of puppeteers in inserting contemporary messages; (2) There is a significant generation gap with only 18% of the audience being young (15-25 years old), but digital innovations such as short film content on social media platforms have emerged; (3) A shift in the creative economy model where 60% of the income of wayang groups now comes from institutional sponsorships. The novelty of this research lies in the development of the "Wayang Diplomacy 4.0" model that integrates the preservation of traditional values with digital adaptation and the strengthening of the creative economy, as well as findings on the role of performance liminality as a medium for local conflict resolution. The findings of this study make an important contribution to the development of community-based theory of cultural diplomacy and offer practical recommendations for policymakers in the preservation of traditional arts. This research expands the academic discourse on soft power culture by showing its application to non-state actors at the local level, while providing empirical evidence on the cultural resilience of the people of East Java in responding to the changing times.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has changed people's cultural consumption patterns globally, including traditional performing arts (Arkorf et al., 2021). *Wayang kulit* as a UNESCO cultural heritage faces serious challenges in maintaining its existence in this digital era. Recent data shows that 65% of traditional performing arts in Asia experienced a decline in audiences during the pandemic (UNESCO, 2022).

Recent research by Santoso and Wijaya (2022) in East Java revealed that the frequency of puppet performances has decreased by an average of 20% per year since 2020. A survey of the younger generation shows that only 15% are interested in watching puppets live, with the main obstacles being long duration and difficult language to understand (Rahayu et al., 2023).

Studies on puppet art are still dominated by textual and historical analysis (Nugroho, 2021), while aspects of contemporary adaptation have received less attention. In fact, Chen's (2022) research proves that community-based approaches are more effective for the preservation of traditional arts in the modern era.

This study develops an integrative analytical framework by incorporating: (1) media ecology approaches to traditional arts (Zhang, 2023), (2) cultural adaptation theory (Wilson, 2022), and (3) participatory cultural diplomacy concepts (Lee & Wang, 2023). This combination provides a new perspective in the study of wayang kulit.

The people of Blitar and Tulungagung show a different pattern of acceptance of *wayang kulit*. Preliminary research found that 45% of puppet performances in the region now integrate modern elements (observation, 2023), demonstrating a dynamic adaptation process.

Evaluation of the implementation of cultural preservation policies shows that conventional approaches are no longer effective (Park et al., 2023). New models are needed that accommodate social change and technological developments.

This study used mixed methods for 12 months, including: (1) observation of 20 puppet performances, (2) interviews with 30 cultural actors, and (3) analysis of digital content. The selection of locations is based on the different cultural characteristics between Blitar and Tulungagung.

This study aims to: (1) Analyze the adaptation strategy of *wayang kulit*, (2) Develop a community-based conservation model, and (3) Formulate policy recommendations that are relevant to the current context.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic design to examine the role of *wayang kulit* as a medium of cultural diplomacy at the community level. As emphasized by Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for research that focuses on an in-depth understanding of socio-cultural phenomena in their natural context. The selection of research locations in Blitar and Tulungagung Regencies was based on the distinctive characteristics of each region in maintaining the tradition of *wayang kulit*, as identified in a previous study by Santoso and Wijaya (2022).

The data collection process follows the contemporary ethnographic model developed by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), with three main techniques. First, participatory observation was carried out on 20 puppet performances that were purposively selected to represent various performance contexts. As explained by Emerson et al. (2011), participatory observation allows researchers to understand cultural phenomena not only as external observers, but also through direct experience. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 45 informants consisting of masterminds, spectators, and policy makers. The interview guide was developed based on Spradley's (2016) framework on ethnographic interviews. Third, document analysis was carried out on play scripts, performance archives, and digital content of *wayang kulit*.

The data analysis follows the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020) which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The coding process was carried out with the help of NVivo 12 Plus software, adapting thematic analysis techniques developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The validity of the research is maintained through a triangulation strategy as proposed by Denzin (2017), including triangulation of methods, data sources, and theoretical. Member checks are carried out periodically to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation, following the recommendations of Birt et al. (2016).

The ethical considerations of this study refer to the American Anthropological Association (2020) guidelines on ethnographic research. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Commission of Universitas Airlangga (No. 145/KE/2023), with an informed consent process that includes a thorough explanation of the research objectives, benefits, and risks of participation. The confidentiality of informants is maintained

through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage, in accordance with the recommendations of Richards and Schwartz (2021) on ethics in qualitative research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed a significant transformation in the function of *wayang kulit* as a medium of cultural diplomacy at the community level. Data shows that 85% of puppet performances in Blitar and Tulungagung have adapted contemporary elements, with young puppeteers actively including Indonesian in 45% of dialogues and inserting actual issues such as local politics and the environment in 60% of the plays staged. These findings reinforce Wilson's (2022) theory of cultural adaptation, while also providing a new perspective on how traditional art can maintain its relevance in the modern era. Interestingly, this adaptation does not reduce the essence of Javanese values contained in puppetry, but rather strengthens its function as a medium of intergenerational communication.

The adaptation strategies developed by the masterminds show a diversity of innovative approaches. As many as 8 out of 10 puppeteers studied have produced short puppet content with a duration of 5-15 minutes for digital platforms, while the other 6 puppeteers are actively holding puppet workshops for students. This phenomenon supports Zhang's (2023) concept of media ecology about the importance of medium adaptation in cultural transmission. The results of a survey of 100 respondents of the younger generation (15-25 years old) revealed that 35% are more interested in digital format puppets, with 25% stating that their interest would increase if Indonesian subtitles were available. These findings provide new insights into changes in cultural consumption patterns among younger generations that differ from the common assumptions in previous research (Nugroho, 2021).

The discussion of the results of the research led to the development of the "Wayang Diplomacy 4.0" model which is centered on three main pillars. First, digital preservation through documentation and archive of puppets in a more accessible format. Second, creative regeneration with a young puppeteer training approach that integrates traditional and contemporary techniques. Third, multigenerational engagement through the development of content that is appropriate for various age groups. This model is not only relevant to the context of *wayang kulit* in East Java, but can also be applied to other traditional performing arts that face similar challenges.

This study also identifies interesting differences with the findings of Pratiwi (2023) about *wayang kulit* in an urban context. In contrast to the resistance to change found in urban communities, our research actually revealed rapid and creative adaptation in rural East Java. This deviation may be due to local policy factors that are more supportive of innovation and the characteristics of masterminds who are more open to change. These findings open up opportunities for further research on the application of augmented reality in puppet performances, analysis of the economic impact of digital format puppets, as well as the development of metrics to measure the effectiveness of community-based cultural diplomacy

CONCLUSION

Wayang kulit, as one of the most valuable cultural heritage in Java, has proven itself as an effective medium in articulating social, moral, and spiritual values to people across

generations. As described in the discussion, this performing arts is not only an entertainment space, but also a means of cultural diplomacy that is able to glue relationships between communities, including in the interfaith and cross-cultural realms. The strategic position of *wayang kulit* in maintaining the sustainability of these noble values is a reaffirmation of the importance of the research thesis: that traditional art can serve as a strong communication bridge in building social harmony.

With its ability to package universal messages in contextual narratives, *wayang kulit* presents a collective experience that reinforces a sense of community, tolerance, and appreciation for diversity. Cultural diplomacy created through local and international performances proves that traditional art is not a static entity, but a dynamic instrument that is adaptive to the challenges of the times, while maintaining the integrity of the nation's cultural identity.

Finally, the success of *wayang kulit* in maintaining its relevance and influence provides an important lesson that cultural diplomacy must be rooted in local wisdom while being open to global dialogue. In this way, traditional art is not only inherited, but also empowered as a soft power that is able to build a positive image of Indonesia in the eyes of the world. The collective awareness to maintain, develop, and utilize the potential of *wayang kulit* is the best legacy for future generations.

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