



Wayang: Indonesia's Cultural Legacy Animating Mythology and Epic Tales

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Abstract

This article examines wayang as an Indonesian cultural heritage that brings mythology and epic narratives to life through historical, cultural, and philosophical perspectives, while also exploring young people's interest in preserving Wayang Banyumas as a distinctive local puppetry tradition. This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design. The findings indicate that most respondents possess a basic level of familiarity with Wayang Banyumas, although their direct participation in live performances remains relatively limited. Knowledge of wayang is acquired through various channels, with social environments, educational institutions, and digital media emerging as the dominant agents of cultural transmission, while the influence of the family has gradually declined. In addition, the cultural consumption patterns of younger generations increasingly take place through virtual platforms rather than in situ performances. These findings suggest that interest in Wayang Banyumas among younger generations persists in a latent form and is strongly influenced by the modes and contexts of cultural presentation.

Keywords: Cultural Legacy, Epic Tales, Indonesia, Mythology, Wayang.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji wayang sebagai warisan budaya Indonesia yang menghidupkan mitologi dan kisah-kisah epik melalui perspektif historis, kultural, dan filosofis, sekaligus mengeksplorasi minat generasi muda dalam melestarikan Wayang Banyumas sebagai salah satu tradisi pedalangan lokal yang khas. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif-eksploratif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar responden memiliki tingkat familiaritas dasar terhadap Wayang Banyumas, meskipun partisipasi langsung mereka dalam pertunjukan secara langsung masih relatif terbatas. Pengetahuan tentang wayang diperoleh melalui berbagai saluran, dengan lingkungan sosial, institusi pendidikan, dan media digital muncul sebagai agen transmisi budaya yang dominan, sementara pengaruh keluarga cenderung mengalami penurunan. Selain itu, pola konsumsi budaya generasi muda semakin banyak berlangsung melalui platform virtual dibandingkan dengan pertunjukan secara langsung. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa minat generasi muda terhadap Wayang Banyumas masih bertahan dalam bentuk laten dan sangat dipengaruhi oleh moda serta konteks penyajian budaya.

Kata Kunci: Warisan Budaya, Kisah Epik, Indonesia, Mitologi, Wayang.



INTRODUCTION

Scholars estimate that around 1500 BCE, long before foreign religions and cultures entered the Indonesian archipelago, wayang had already existed and developed in Indonesia (Wibawa, 2024). The term *wayang* originates from the Javanese language, meaning “shadow.” Philosophically, wayang represents a reflection or manifestation of various human characteristics, such as anger, greed, stinginess, wisdom, and other moral traits (Varela, 2014). For centuries, wayang has been an inseparable part of Indonesian culture, remaining a source of national pride and standing as one of Indonesia's traditional performing arts distinguished by a high degree of aesthetic, historical, and philosophical complexity. As an intangible cultural heritage, wayang functions not merely as entertainment but also as a symbolic system that represents worldviews, moral values, and social structures within Nusantara society (Fibiona et al., 2024). UNESCO's recognition in 2003 of Indonesian *wayang kulit* as a *Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* (Purbasari & Carrollina, 2023) affirms wayang's position as a cultural expression of universal value with relevance across generations and cultures. This recognition further situates wayang as a significant object of inquiry within global academic discourse, particularly in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, performing arts, and values education (Hayati, 2024).

Historically, wayang has evolved through a long process of cultural acculturation and transformation (Weifen, 2022). Rooted in local animistic traditions, it later absorbed strong Hindu-Buddhist influences following the introduction of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics to the archipelago in the early Common Era (Sanusi & Legino, 2015). Historical evidence, including inscriptions from the reign of King Airlangga in the tenth century, indicates that wayang performances already served ritualistic and sacred functions in Javanese society (Sedana & Foley, 2016). During the Majapahit and Mataram periods, wayang developed as a medium for political legitimation, court entertainment, and moral education (Soedarsono, 2021). Furthermore, its adaptation by the *Wali Songo* as a medium for Islamic proselytization demonstrates wayang's flexibility as a form of cultural communication capable of absorbing and representing diverse ideological values without losing its fundamental identity (Hidayat et al., 2025).

The strength of wayang lies in its ability to animate mythology and epic narratives through creative and contextual localization (Thiruchelvam & Abdullah, 2019). In the Indonesian wayang tradition, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are not presented as static narratives but are continually reinterpreted through characters, plots, and symbols that reflect local social realities and cultural values (Sedana, 2019). The presence of *lakon carangan* (creative or derivative plays), the *punakawan* characters, and the wide variety of wayang forms, such as *wayang kulit*, *wayang golek*, *wayang orang*, and *wayang beber* demonstrates that wayang constitutes a dynamic narrative system. In this sense, wayang functions as a dialogical space between grand narratives and local lived experiences, while simultaneously serving as a medium for cultural identity formation (Hu et al., 2024).

Beyond enlivening mythology and epic stories, wayang also carries strong pedagogical and reflective functions (Dodiya, 2024). Philosophical values such as *dharma* (truth and moral duty), balance in life, and the relationship between power and morality are articulated through



characterizations and conflicts. The Pandawa figures embody ethical ideals and exemplary leadership, whereas antagonistic figures such as the Kurawa and Rahwana illustrate the consequences of greed and the abuse of power (Sharma et al., 2025). Moreover, the *punakawan*, Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong play a strategic role as agents of social criticism (Yoesoef, 2018). Through humor and vernacular language, they articulate social anxieties, injustice, and moral deviation, positioning wayang as an egalitarian medium of critique that remains relevant across time (Hadzantonis, 2022).

Nevertheless, amid globalization, digitalization, and shifting preferences among younger generations, the sustainability of wayang faces serious challenges. Changes in cultural consumption patterns, the dominance of modern popular media, and the declining regeneration of *dalang* and *pengrawit* threaten wayang's continuity as a living cultural practice (Wibawa, 2024). Although various innovations have emerged such as contemporary wayang performances, the use of digital technologies, integration into formal education, and the organization of festivals and competitions comprehensive academic studies that position wayang as a living medium of mythology, epic narratives, moral education, and cultural diplomacy remain relatively limited, particularly within high-impact international literature. One specific development of wayang that this article addresses is Wayang Banyumas, as seen in picture 1.



Figure 1. Wayang Banyumas

Wayang Banyumas, also known as *wayang kulit* in the Banyumasan style (*gagrag Banyumasan*), is one of the puppetry traditions in Java, commonly referred to as *pakeliran* (Dzikriyah & Fauji, 2022). It functions both as an art form of refined aesthetic enjoyment (*klangenan*) and as a medium for sustaining ethical, devotional, and entertainment values, all of which are carefully preserved and rigorously cultivated by practitioners with deep expertise. This *pakeliran* encompasses various elements, including the *lakon* (narrative structure and meaning), *sabet* (puppet movements), *catur* (narration and dialogue), and *karawitan* (musical accompaniment, *sulukan*, and stage properties) (Nugroho et al., 2019). In recent years, Wayang Banyumas has gained increasing popularity among the general public, both within the Banyumas region and surrounding areas, and various efforts have been

undertaken to preserve and develop this performing art (Hanif et al., 2024). However, between approximately 2020 and 2023, the intensity of Wayang Banyumas performances experienced a noticeable decline (Hanif et al., 2024).

Academic studies on wayang have developed extensively, encompassing historical, aesthetic, philosophical, and anthropological dimensions (Hariyanto, 2018). A number of studies position wayang as a medium for the transmission of moral values, character education, and representations of Javanese and broader Nusantara worldviews (Daryono et al., 2024). Other research highlights the role of wayang in ritual practices, political legitimation, religious propagation, and cultural transformation in response to globalization and modernization. More recent scholarship has also begun to address innovations in wayang through the use of digital technologies, contemporary performances, and its integration into formal education and the creative industries. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature remains relatively general in nature and tends to focus on mainstream wayang traditions, particularly Wayang Kulit in the Surakarta and Yogyakarta styles, or to discuss wayang preservation within largely normative frameworks (Fibiona et al., 2024). Studies that explicitly conceptualize wayang as a living medium integrating mythology, epic narratives, moral education, and the dynamics of younger generations' cultural engagement especially within the context of local puppetry styles remain limited. Furthermore, research that systematically examines the relationship between changing cultural consumption patterns among younger generations and the sustainability of wayang as a form of living heritage is still underrepresented, particularly in high impact international publications.

In this context, scholarly attention to Wayang Banyumas remains scarce. Despite its distinctive aesthetic, narrative, and performative characteristics, Wayang Banyumas has rarely been examined as a dynamic cultural practice confronting the challenges of globalization, digitalization, and shifting youth preferences. This article therefore contributes novelty by positioning Wayang Banyumas not merely as a local variant of the wayang tradition, but as an adaptive system of cultural knowledge that animates mythology and epic narratives while reflecting the interplay between tradition, media, and younger generations' interests. By integrating historical, cultural, and philosophical approaches with empirical analysis of youth interest, this study addresses an important research gap and enriches the broader discourse on wayang as a form of living cultural heritage.

In light of these conditions, this article aims to analyze wayang as an Indonesian cultural heritage that brings mythology and epic narratives to life through historical, cultural, and philosophical approaches, while also examining the interest of younger generations particularly young people in the Banyumas region in preserving Wayang Banyumas. By referring to the diversity of wayang forms, narrative structures, the roles of the *dalang* and gamelan, and the values embedded within them, this article positions wayang as an adaptive and sustainable system of cultural knowledge at both national and local levels. This study is expected not only to contribute theoretically to cultural and performing arts studies but also to strengthen the position of wayang, especially Wayang Banyumas, as a regional cultural identity that plays a strategic role in shaping national identity and enhancing Indonesia's cultural soft power in the global context.



METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a grounded theory method. In this approach, data are collected through questionnaire-based surveys, from which conclusions are drawn based on the empirical findings of the research. The study aims to observe and elucidate the importance of Wayang Banyumas as a cultural heritage within community life, as well as to examine public perceptions of Wayang Banyumas in the contemporary era.

The research adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive–exploratory design (Miles et al., 2018). This approach is selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, knowledge, and interests of younger generations regarding Wayang Banyumas as part of local cultural heritage. A qualitative design allows researchers to explore social and cultural phenomena contextually, particularly in understanding the dynamics of traditional art preservation amid ongoing social and cultural change.

The study was conducted in Banyumas Regency, Central Java, which is recognized as one of the centers for the development of Wayang Kulit in the Banyumasan style (gagrag Banyumasan). The research participants consisted of young people residing in the Banyumas region, aged between 15 and 34 years. This age range was selected as it represents a transitional cultural phase and plays a strategic role in the sustainability of traditional arts. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account the diversity of educational and social backgrounds.

Data were collected using three primary techniques: questionnaires, document analysis (secondary data), and qualitative data analysis. Questionnaires were employed to collect primary data related to the level of knowledge, interest, and intensity of younger generations in attending Wayang Banyumas performances. The questionnaire instrument consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions to provide respondents with opportunities to express their perspectives. The aspects examined included: (a) basic knowledge of Wayang Banyumas, (b) frequency and experience of attending performances, and (c) attitudes and interest in the future preservation of Wayang Banyumas. Secondary data were obtained through the analysis of relevant documents, such as archives of wayang performances, reports on cultural activities, publications from local government institutions, and academic literature addressing Wayang Banyumas and the preservation of traditional arts. This document analysis aimed to strengthen the historical and cultural context of the study and to support the interpretation of primary data. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive–interpretative analysis techniques. Questionnaire responses were categorized into thematic groups reflecting levels of knowledge and interest in Wayang Banyumas. Secondary data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns, trends, and key issues related to the preservation of Wayang Banyumas. The analytical process was conducted iteratively by comparing findings across multiple data sources to achieve a comprehensive understanding.

To ensure data validity, this study applied source and method triangulation techniques. Triangulation was conducted by comparing questionnaire data with findings from document analysis and relevant literature. In addition, the analytical process was carried out carefully



and systematically to minimize researcher bias and to enhance the credibility of the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 40 respondents who participated in completing the questionnaire. In terms of gender distribution, 25 respondents were female and 15 were male. The respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 34 years, representing a diverse segment of the younger generation. The age distribution indicates that the majority of respondents were between 18 and 19 years old, suggesting the dominance of late adolescents in this study. Specifically, 20 respondents were aged 18, 16 respondents were aged 19, 8 respondents were aged 20, 3 respondents were aged 21, and one respondent each was aged 17, 26, and 34. These findings indicate that perceptions and interests regarding Wayang Banyumas in this study are primarily represented by individuals in late adolescence and early adulthood.

The questionnaire results reveal that the respondents' level of knowledge about Wayang Banyumas is relatively high. Of the 40 respondents, 37 stated that they were familiar with Wayang Banyumas, while only 3 respondents reported having no knowledge of it. This finding suggests that Wayang Banyumas remains relatively well known among younger generations, particularly in the Banyumas region and its surrounding areas. The high level of recognition indicates that this traditional performing art continues to exist within the collective memory of young people, although the degree of direct engagement with live performances varies.

With regard to how respondents access Wayang Banyumas performances, the data reveal diverse patterns of cultural consumption. Of the 40 respondents, 30 reported having watched Wayang Banyumas virtually through digital media, 8 had watched performances live, and only 2 respondents had experienced both live and virtual performances.

These findings indicate that digital media has become the primary means through which younger generations access Wayang Banyumas. The dominance of virtual access reflects a shift in the appreciation of traditional performing arts from conventional performance spaces to digital platforms, in line with technological advancements and changing youth lifestyles. The analysis also highlights the diversity of sources through which respondents acquire knowledge about Wayang Banyumas. Of the 40 respondents, 11 stated that they learned about Wayang Banyumas from their surrounding environment, such as local communities or society. Eight respondents obtained knowledge through schools, demonstrating the role of educational institutions in introducing local cultural heritage.

In addition, 7 respondents learned about Wayang Banyumas through social media, while another 7 respondents gained knowledge through performances or museum visits. Family sources also contributed, although to a lesser extent: 2 respondents obtained information from their parents and 2 from their grandparents. Meanwhile, 3 respondents reported having no knowledge of Wayang Banyumas at all.

This distribution of knowledge sources indicates that the cultural transmission of Wayang Banyumas occurs through multiple channels, both formal and informal. Social environments and educational institutions play a significant role, while digital media is



increasingly assuming a strategic position as a source of cultural information. The dominance of respondents aged 18–19 who possess knowledge of Wayang Banyumas suggests that younger generations continue to show interest in this traditional performing art. Although most respondents access Wayang Banyumas through virtual means, these findings still indicate a sustained connection and latent interest among young people in local culture.

Nevertheless, the relatively low number of respondents who attend live performances highlights challenges in sustaining conventional Wayang Banyumas performances. This finding underscores the importance of adaptive preservation strategies, particularly through the utilization of digital media and the integration of Wayang Banyumas into formal education and community-based activities.

The results of the study indicate that Wayang Banyumas is still recognized by the majority of the younger generation, particularly in the Banyumas region, although patterns of engagement and mechanisms of cultural transmission have undergone significant changes. These findings reinforce the view that traditional arts have not been entirely abandoned by younger generations but have instead transformed in terms of how they are accessed and interpreted (Sullivan, 2015). Accordingly, the sustainability of wayang cannot be separated from the social and cultural contexts of contemporary generations.

The dominance of respondents in the 18–19 age group suggests that late adolescence is a critical period for the formation of cultural identity. At this stage, individuals begin to develop awareness of social and cultural values that shape their collective identity (Lee et al., 2010). Respondents' knowledge within this age group was largely acquired through social environments and educational institutions, underscoring the strategic role of schools and communities in the transmission of local culture. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that formal education has considerable potential as an agent of traditional cultural preservation, particularly as the role of the family in cultural transmission begins to weaken (Chen et al., 2024).

Shifts in cultural transmission patterns are also evident in the declining role of nuclear and extended families as primary sources of knowledge about Wayang Banyumas. Only a small proportion of respondents obtained such knowledge from parents or grandparents, while the majority relied on social environments, schools, and media. This phenomenon reflects a transition from vertical (intergenerational) transmission to horizontal and institutional transmission of culture (Brannen, 2006). In modern societies, such shifts are often inevitable; however, they may result in a reduced depth of cultural meaning and experiential engagement among younger generations.

Digital media has emerged as an important factor in introducing Wayang Banyumas to younger audiences. Most respondents accessed wayang performances through virtual media, while relatively few attended live performances. This finding confirms the view that cultural digitalization serves as a means of expanding access to and exposure to traditional arts (Shaban, 2024). Nevertheless, virtual engagement may risk diminishing the ritualistic, aesthetic, and sacred dimensions that are traditionally embedded in wayang performances.



Therefore, digitalization should be positioned as a complementary strategy that supports, rather than replaces, live performance practices.

The presence of respondents who were unfamiliar with Wayang Banyumas, although relatively small in number, indicates gaps in the local cultural preservation system. This phenomenon suggests that the existence of wayang has not fully reached the entire spectrum of the younger generation, particularly among young adults. This condition is consistent with previous research indicating that traditional arts face serious challenges in maintaining relevance amid the dominance of global popular culture (Rogers, 2006). From a cultural perspective, Wayang Banyumas functions not only as a performing art but also as a system of knowledge that embodies ethical values, life philosophies, and social critique. The decline in the frequency of live performances during the 2020–2023 period may potentially weaken the reflective and pedagogical functions of wayang in social life. In fact, traditional performing arts such as wayang play a crucial role in fostering moral and social awareness through symbols, narratives, and characters that represent the realities of human life (Abbas et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that young people's interest in Wayang Banyumas persists, although it tends to be latent and strongly influenced by the medium and context of presentation. Younger generations show more positive responses to adaptive approaches, such as integrating Wayang Banyumas into formal education, creatively utilizing digital media, and packaging performances in ways that resonate with contemporary issues. These findings align with the concept of cultural sustainability, which emphasizes the importance of balancing tradition preservation with innovation to ensure that cultural heritage remains alive and meaningful (Muthuswamy & Esakki, 2024)

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Wayang Banyumas continues to maintain its existence and a relatively high level of recognition among the younger generation, particularly in the Banyumas region. The majority of respondents were aware of Wayang Banyumas, indicating that this traditional performing art has not been entirely eroded by globalization and modern popular culture. Nevertheless, the nature of young people's engagement with Wayang Banyumas has shifted, both in terms of sources of knowledge and patterns of performance consumption.

The findings reveal that the transmission of knowledge about Wayang Banyumas is no longer predominantly mediated by the family as the primary agent of cultural inheritance. Instead, it increasingly occurs through social environments, educational institutions, and digital media. Schools and local communities play a strategic role in introducing Wayang Banyumas to younger generations, while social media and virtual platforms have become the main channels for accessing wayang performances. This shift reflects changes in the social structure of modern society and calls for more adaptive and contextual approaches to cultural preservation.



Furthermore, the low level of attendance at live Wayang Banyumas performances highlights serious challenges in sustaining traditional performance practices. Although digital access has expanded the reach and visibility of wayang, virtual engagement has not fully replaced the aesthetic, ritualistic, and philosophical experiences derived from live performances. Therefore, digitalization should be positioned as a complementary strategy rather than a substitute for conventional cultural practices.

Conceptually, the findings affirm that Wayang Banyumas functions not only as a performing art but also as a system of cultural knowledge encompassing ethical values, life philosophies, and social critique. While interest in Wayang Banyumas among younger generations persists, it tends to be latent and highly dependent on the mode of presentation and its relevance to their everyday lives. This underscores the importance of innovation in presenting Wayang Banyumas without compromising the essence of its traditional values. Accordingly, the sustainability of Wayang Banyumas requires synergy among artists, educational institutions, cultural communities, and policymakers. Integrating Wayang Banyumas into formal education, strengthening local arts communities, and creatively and responsibly utilizing digital media are strategic measures to sustain Wayang Banyumas as a living cultural heritage. This study is expected to serve as a foundation for the development of more sustainable cultural preservation policies and strategies, as well as to open avenues for further research on youth engagement in the preservation of local cultural heritage.

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Finally, it is hoped that this research will contribute to the development of studies on local cultural preservation, particularly Wayang Banyumas, and serve as a reference for future research in related fields.



Declarations

Author Contribution : LAP: Conceptualization, Writing-Original Draft, and Editing
AM: Formal Analysis, Resources, Validation, Investigation, Methodology and Supervision

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