

# Preservation and Transformation of Oral Tradition and Folk Performing Arts in East Java, Indonesia: Contemporary Challenges and Cultural Inheritance

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## [ *Abstract* ]

This research examines the current state of oral traditions and the transmission of folk performing arts in East Java, Indonesia, amidst modern societal changes. While oral traditions remain vital for cultural preservation, their conventional modes of transmission are increasingly misaligned with today's fast-paced, digital-oriented environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this issue, accelerating the shift toward digital entertainment and deepening the marginalization of traditional arts. Despite its urgency, this topic remains underexplored in academic literature. Using an ethnographic approach and drawing on cultural transmission and resilience theory, this study analyzes how folk performing arts endure, adapt, or decline in response to these challenges. It highlights the central role of transmission practices in sustaining cultural continuity. It also explores the involvement of key stakeholders, including local governments, educational institutions, and NGOs, in either supporting or neglecting these efforts. The findings reveal a persistent tension between preserving authenticity and embracing innovation. Ultimately, the study offers

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strategic insights into how East Java's rich artistic heritage can be transmitted more sustainably to future generations.

**Keywords:** cultural preservation, East Java, oral tradition, performing arts, transmission process

## I . Introduction

This study examines the preservation and transformation of traditional arts in East Java, one of Indonesia's 38 provinces, by identifying the key challenges they face in the contemporary era and proposing strategic solutions that government bodies, the arts community, and the broader public can implement. East Java is home to numerous oral traditions and performing arts, including *Ludruk*, *Ketoprak*, *Wayang Kulit*, *Reyog Ponorogo*, and *Janger Banyuwangi*. These cultural forms are increasingly under threat due to declining interest from younger generations, evolving patterns of cultural consumption, and insufficient institutional support.

Oral traditions, including myths, legends, epics, folktales, *pantun* (traditional poetry), mantras, and *petuah lama* (customary advice), have long been central to cultural transmission in East Java and throughout the Indonesian archipelago. These forms are more than mere verbal expressions; they are embedded within performances, rituals, and everyday social interactions that shape the moral, spiritual, and historical consciousness of communities. These oral traditions serve multifaceted purposes through rhythmic recitations, symbolic language, and participatory storytelling, entertaining, educating, affirming communal values, and preserving collective memory across generations (Finnegan 1992).

Traditionally, these oral forms were passed down from elders to younger community members in intimate, often ritualized settings such as village gatherings, ceremonies, or seasonal festivals. Myths and epics, for example, were frequently performed during harvest rituals or rites of passage to reaffirm the community's cosmological understandings and its relationship with nature. Meanwhile, *pantun* and folktales functioned as pedagogical tools, subtly encoding social

norms and ethical principles within their metaphorical narratives (Braginsky 2004). These genres of oral tradition reflect a worldview that values interconnectedness among humans, the spiritual realm, and the environment, providing a foundation for communal resilience and a sense of identity.

However, in recent decades, traditional arts and oral expressions in East Java have faced mounting challenges that threaten their sustainability and relevance to younger generations. The encroachment of globalized mass media, shifting educational priorities, and rapid urbanization have contributed to a cultural dislocation in which traditional forms are increasingly viewed as antiquated or incompatible with contemporary life (Heryanto 2010). Television, social media, and streaming services have largely supplanted live oral performances as the primary sources of entertainment and storytelling, especially among young people.

A decline in intergenerational transmission compounds this displacement. Fewer elders actively teach oral traditions, and fewer youth are interested or available to receive them. Moreover, as communities experience geographic dispersal due to migration and economic transformation, the communal settings that once nurtured oral practices, such as village squares, family courtyards, and local performance venues, are gradually disappearing or being repurposed for other uses. The result is a loss of traditional content and a disconnection from the embodied practices and performative contexts that give oral traditions their whole meaning (Yampolsky 2010).

Another significant factor is the lack of institutional support and integration of oral traditions into formal education systems. While some initiatives have attempted to revive local cultures through curriculum development or extracurricular arts programs, these efforts often lack depth, consistency, and the necessary resources for a sustainable impact. Furthermore, the tendency to treat oral traditions as static artifacts rather than living, evolving practices limits their potential to adapt and resonate with contemporary experiences (Urban 2025).

Nevertheless, this crisis also presents new opportunities. There

is growing recognition among scholars, educators, and cultural activists of the need to reposition oral traditions as dynamic resources for cultural resilience. Innovations such as digital archiving, multimedia storytelling, community-based cultural mapping, and interdisciplinary arts education offer promising avenues for revitalization (Nasrullah 2021). For example, some local artists and educators have begun incorporating traditional myths and legends into digital animations or podcast series, making them accessible to urban and diasporic audiences in engaging formats.

Oral traditions in East Java have historically played a vital role in shaping cultural identity, transmitting ethical values, and sustaining social cohesion. However, their future depends on the capacity of communities, institutions, and cultural intermediaries to reimagine and reintegrate these traditions into the fabric of modern life. Ensuring their survival requires preservation and innovation—approaches that respect the past while embracing the present and anticipating the future. With its distinct cultural identity, East Java has long been a vibrant center for folk performance traditions, which are deeply rooted in historical narratives and community values (Ilham 2023). Nevertheless, globalization, shifting societal norms, and rapid technological advancements have challenged the continued transmission of these values. Modernization has altered the way people engage with culture, with younger audiences gravitating toward digital media and global popular culture. Furthermore, the limited regeneration of artists, lack of financial incentives, and inconsistent policy implementation hinder the sustainability of these traditional forms.

Folk performing arts reflect a community's worldview and serve as vehicles for collective memory and knowledge systems. Scholars such as Finnegan (1992) and Eliade (2002) have highlighted how folklore functions as a sacred narrative embedded in rituals and symbolic thought, guiding the moral and cosmological understanding of a society. In traditional communities where oral culture prevails, memory once served as the primary medium for storing and transmitting knowledge; before the rise of digital technologies, structured mnemonic systems enabled the reliable passage of cultural knowledge across generations.

Today, however, these memory-based systems, upon which oral traditions have long depended, are under increasing threat from the overwhelming influx of information brought on by the rise of mass media, digital platforms, and algorithm-driven content. The saturation of visual and textual stimuli across social media, streaming services, and instant messaging channels has dramatically altered how individuals receive, store, and recall information. As Arifianto & Christiany (2022) aptly observe, culture has shifted from a condition of "stock information," where knowledge is collectively stored and periodically retrieved, to one of "flow information," in which data rushes ephemerally and often without contextual anchoring. This transition disrupts the stable, repetitive rhythms upon which oral traditions rely for transmission, comprehension, and retention.

In traditional oral cultures, knowledge transmission occurred through repeated performances, mnemonic devices, symbolic language, and ritual contexts that reinforced memory through embodied participation. These systems were finely attuned to the cognitive patterns of their communities, enabling long-term cultural continuity despite the absence of written records (Finnegan 1992). However, in the digital era, attention spans have shortened, information is increasingly consumed in fragmented, decontextualized formats, and the communal frameworks that once supported oral transmission have become diluted or displaced by individualistic consumption patterns (Carr 2010). As a result, the ability to internalize, interpret, and pass on cultural narratives in meaningful ways is weakening—particularly among younger generations who are more immersed in digital culture than traditional environments.

This condition raises a critical and timely question about how oral traditions, rooted in repetition, presence, and memory, can be preserved and revitalized in a world dominated by speed, impermanence, and distraction. Addressing this question requires rethinking the very modes of cultural transmission. Rather than viewing digital technologies as inherently antagonistic to oral tradition, some scholars and practitioners argue that they have potential as tools for reinvention. Digital media can offer new platforms for storytelling, provide spaces for performance archiving,

and enable the emergence of hybrid forms that blend oral traditions with contemporary genres such as podcasting, digital theater, or social media performance art. For instance, various community-based initiatives in Indonesia have begun experimenting with digitizing traditional performances, creating YouTube channels dedicated to *Wayang*, *Ludruk*, and *Janger*, or adapting folktales into digital comics and interactive apps for educational use. These approaches extend the reach of oral traditions to broader, often diasporic audiences and encourage creative reinterpretations that keep the narratives relevant. Furthermore, when integrated with digital literacy programs, such innovations empower younger generations to actively engage with their heritage as both consumers and creators of culture.

Nonetheless, this digital transformation must be guided by cultural sensitivity, ethical representation, and community participation to avoid the pitfalls of commodification or cultural distortion. Preservation in the digital age should not merely aim to archive static content but must also foster living traditions that can evolve organically while retaining their core meanings and values (Yampolsky 2010). While the shift from stock to flow information presents profound challenges for the continuity of oral traditions, it also opens up possibilities for imaginative, inclusive, and technologically mediated cultural preservation. The key lies in developing hybrid strategies that honor the integrity of oral heritage while embracing the dynamics of contemporary digital culture, bridging memory and media in ways that resonate with the complexities of our time.

Finnegan (1992) defines oral tradition as a non-written, community-supported form of knowledge transmission, often associated with non-elite or non-literate societies. She emphasizes that transmission is closely linked to memory, which itself can be passive, involving mere rote repetition, or active, involving interpretation, reorganization, and creative adaptation. Similarly, the transmission of oral traditions can either stagnate or evolve, depending on whether communities pass them on unchanged or reframe them for contemporary relevance.

This study aims to analyze the landscape of East Java's oral traditions and folk performing arts, focusing on how they are inherited, adapted, and sustained in modern society. It explores formal and informal mechanisms of cultural transmission, including family-based education, community performances, and government-sponsored initiatives aimed at safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, it investigates how these practices evolve in response to digitalization and globalization.

Previous research has addressed various aspects of East Java's traditional arts. Sholihah (2015) explored the cultural identity and adaptability of *Ludruk* in the face of modernization, documenting performances in both rural and urban settings. Kurniawan (2017) examined the role of local government in preserving *Reog Ponorogo*, highlighting the efforts of both municipal and provincial authorities. Purnama (2018) focused on the influence of globalization on *Wayang Kulit*, particularly regarding shifts in audience engagement driven by digital media.

While these studies have made important contributions, they have concentrated mainly on documentation and historical analysis. This research offers a contemporary perspective, emphasizing the processes of inheritance and transformation of traditional arts in the 21st century. It emphasizes the impact of digital technologies, shifting demographics, and changing community practices. This study contributes new insights into the complex negotiation between cultural preservation and modernization in East Java's dynamic oral and performance traditions.

## **II. Research Method and Theoretical Framework**

This study employs a qualitative research approach grounded in fieldwork, ethnographic observation, and thematic analysis to examine the current state of oral traditions and folk performing arts in East Java. Data collection was conducted through a combination of participant observation at local performances, festivals, and community cultural events, as well as semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. These included traditional art practitioners,

cultural leaders, educators, and local government officials involved in cultural preservation efforts. Additionally, relevant documents such as policy papers, historical records, and academic literature, were analyzed to provide context for the ongoing transformations and challenges faced by traditional arts in the region.

The research centers on three interrelated variables: (1) the present condition of traditional performing arts, (2) the actors involved, including artists and audiences alike, and (3) the dynamics of the performance context. An ethnographic approach was employed to effectively explore these dimensions. Ethnography offers a rich, in-depth understanding of sociocultural phenomena by embedding the researcher within the community under study. Specifically, this research focused on the *Janger* performance in Banyuwangi, East Java, analyzing it as a cultural expression shaped by the community's lived experiences.

Following Ben-Amos (1992), this study considers the three core components of ethnographic folklore research: the storyteller (artist), the performance, and the cultural context. Ethnography is particularly suited to this study because it explores how communities construct meaning, preserve collective memory, and enact tradition through performance. According to Creswell (2013), ethnography aims to describe and interpret a cultural or social group, capturing how its members experience and make sense of their world.

This research adopts an emic perspective (Mandavilli 2022), prioritizing the insider's viewpoint. Through this lens, cultural phenomena such as *Janger* are interpreted from within the Banyuwangi community, offering a holistic and integrative understanding of tradition as experienced by its practitioners and audiences. As Spradley (1997) explains, ethnography is not simply about observing behaviors, but about understanding the knowledge systems that inform those behaviors and how people organize cultural meaning to navigate their social realities. Ethnographic insight is drawn from three key sources: (1) what people say, (2) what people do, and (3) the artifacts they use. This reflective, multi-layered method enables a nuanced exploration of the cultural

forces shaping East Java's folk performing arts.

This study is anchored in two interrelated theoretical frameworks: cultural transmission theory and cultural resilience theory, which together provide a robust analytical lens for understanding the dynamics of East Javanese folk arts amid sociocultural transformations. Cultural transmission theory examines how cultural knowledge, values, practices, and skills are passed down across generations. It recognizes a spectrum of transmission modes from formal mechanisms, such as schooling, governmental cultural programs, and institutionalized education, to informal processes like intergenerational storytelling, apprenticeships, and community-based rituals (Cohen 2006). In the case of East Javanese performing arts, this theory helps map the ways in which oral traditions are inherited within families or local performance groups, often without standardized pedagogical frameworks. These informal processes are deeply contextual and shaped by local cosmologies, performance ethics, and social hierarchies.

Importantly, cultural transmission is not a neutral or linear process; it is susceptible to disruption or transformation when exposed to external forces such as globalization, technological change, or shifting societal values. For example, the rise of digital media and the decline of communal performance spaces in rural Java challenge the continuity of transmission, particularly as younger generations gravitate toward mass-mediated cultural forms that promise broader visibility and economic reward (Cohen 2006).

Cultural resilience theory, meanwhile, emphasizes the adaptive capacity of cultural systems to respond to and survive such pressures while retaining a coherent sense of identity and function (Berkes and Ross 2013). It foregrounds the importance of flexibility, innovation, and agency in navigating sociocultural disruptions. In East Java, cultural resilience is evident in how folk artists reinterpret traditional narratives to address contemporary social issues, integrate modern technologies in performances, or modify aesthetics to appeal to younger audiences, all while maintaining the symbolic and ritualistic core of the art form. Cultural resilience also implies a collective effort among artists, communities, and policymakers to

create spaces where traditional arts can thrive. This includes material support (such as funding or venues) and discursive support that reaffirms the relevance of local traditions in public narratives. Without this active process of regeneration and recontextualization, cultural practices risk being frozen as heritage objects rather than living traditions (Adger 2000).

Together, these two theoretical perspectives allow for a comprehensive understanding of how East Javanese oral traditions and folk arts are simultaneously conserved and transformed. Cultural transmission theory reveals the mechanisms and ruptures of inheritance, while cultural resilience theory illuminates how these traditions evolve without losing their cultural integrity. This dual lens enables a nuanced exploration of how local cultural identities are negotiated, preserved, and remade in an era marked by rapid change. These frameworks provide a robust analytical lens for understanding the sustainability of traditional arts in an era of rapid change. By combining ethnographic fieldwork with theories of cultural transmission and resilience, this research offers both academic depth and practical relevance. It contributes a contemporary perspective on the dynamic balance between preservation and transformation within East Java's oral traditions and folk performing arts. It provides insights for future cultural policy and community-based heritage initiatives.

### **III. Transmission: Inheritance and Preservation Efforts**

Transmission has long been a cornerstone in the study of oral traditions, serving not merely as a conduit for preserving texts or narratives but as a dynamic cultural process through which identities, values, and communal knowledge are sustained across generations. The concept encompasses both deliberate (active) and incidental (passive) forms of dissemination, reflecting a continuum of engagement that shapes how traditions endure or evolve within society. In this framework, oral transmission is not simply about "telling" or "retelling" but involves a complex interaction between memory, performance, social context, and cultural continuity (Goody

1987).

In the context of East Java's folk theaters, most notably *Ludruk* and *Janger*, the processes of inheritance and preservation are deeply rooted in localized patterns of oral exchange and communal performance. These traditional forms, often performed in vernacular dialects, are not merely artistic expressions but are integral components of communal identity and historical consciousness. Transmission in these contexts occurs through ritualized repetition, apprenticeship, and intergenerational performance, where knowledge is passed orally from senior performers to younger aspirants within performance troupes or family-based art groups. This practice ensures the survival of narrative content and performance techniques, stylistic nuances, and contextual improvisation skills essential to the vitality of these art forms.

Moreover, the stories performed in *Ludruk* and *Janger*, many of which originate from legendary, historical, or satirical oral traditions, retain their relevance through this oral mode of transmission. These performances often adapt their narratives to reflect contemporary issues, thus maintaining a fluid and responsive connection to societal concerns. This aligns with Ong's (1982) notion of orality as a mode of thought that emphasizes communal experience and situational adaptability over fixed textual forms. The adaptability of oral storytelling allows these art forms to serve as repositories of cultural heritage and as platforms for dialogue, criticism, and collective reflection.

Despite the cultural richness embedded in these transmission processes, there is an increasing urgency to critically examine how they are being affected by modern disruptions, such as declining interest among younger generations, reduced opportunities for live performance, and the lack of formalized pedagogical structures. Unlike classical music or dance, which often benefit from institutional frameworks for education and certification, East Javanese folk theater still relies heavily on informal modes of inheritance, leaving it vulnerable to erosion amid shifting social and economic priorities.

In light of these challenges, scholars and cultural practitioners

have called for a reevaluation of the concept of transmission, emphasizing both preservation and innovation. The integration of oral traditions into formal and informal education systems, digital storytelling platforms, and hybrid performance spaces offers promising avenues to rejuvenate interest and expand the reach of *Ludruk* and *Janger* beyond traditional audiences (Yampolsky 2010; Tsing 2005). These strategies can also foster new forms of engagement that respect the oral roots of the tradition while embracing contemporary media and pedagogical tools.

Transmitting East Java's folk theaters is not a static process but a dynamic cultural mechanism that must be actively nurtured and adapted. Recognizing the inherently oral character of these art forms enables us to appreciate the richness of their performative logic while prompting us to develop inclusive and innovative strategies for their continued survival in an increasingly digitized and globalized world. One such example is the story of Damarwulan, which began as a written text in the form of the *Serat Kanda* or *Serat Damarwulan*, a manuscript created by a writer at the Surakarta palace. Initially written, the story spread widely through oral transmission and became a core part of *Langendriyan* performances by Mangkunegara IV (1853–1881). This example demonstrates how oral traditions can adapt and endure through both oral and written forms.

The concepts of inheritance and preservation are closely linked to memory. Memory, like transmission, has both active and passive dimensions. The active aspect involves creative reconstruction, where individuals reframe or reorganize information based on their experiences and understanding. In contrast, the passive aspect of memory focuses on retaining verbatim content, akin to preserving oral traditions, where the exact words or stories are memorized and repeated (Finnegan 1992). The active dimension of transmission emphasizes creativity and the continuous reinterpretation of traditional knowledge, while passive transmission focuses on the exact replication of cultural narratives.

Oral societies, rooted in primary orality and influenced by what Ong (1982) defines as secondary orality, primarily depend on spoken language as the foundational means of cultural continuity

and transmission. In primarily oral cultures, communication is inherently ephemeral, communal, and participatory. In contrast, in societies shaped by technological advancement, this oral transmission is increasingly mediated through radio, television, social media, and other digital platforms. This shift has broadened the reach of oral traditions, enabling them to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries. It also poses significant challenges to the integrity and contextual depth of the traditions themselves (Foley 2002).

Secondary orality does not merely represent a shift in the medium; it reconfigures the relationship between memory, performance, and audience. In these contexts, the core function of oral tradition, which is remembering, remains vital. Memory is not simply the preservation of information but a dynamic cultural act. Oral societies develop complex mnemonic strategies to aid in this act of cultural remembering. These strategies are embedded in forms of folklore, which can be categorized into verbal folklore (e.g., myths, legends, riddles), partially verbal folklore (e.g., rituals, ceremonies), and nonverbal folklore (e.g., dance, crafts, symbolic gestures) (Dundes 1965). These forms serve as vessels of tradition and interpretive frameworks through which communities make sense of their social realities.

In many Indonesian communities, these folkloric elements are not merely decorative or supplemental to culture but function as epistemological tools, serving as ways of knowing, understanding, and negotiating cultural identities. The recitation of a mantra, the movements of a ritual dance, or the staging of a folk drama are all acts of transmission that carry ethical, historical, and spiritual significance. This embodied memory ensures that cultural values are not only taught but also lived and felt. As Lord (2000) points out, tradition in oral cultures is always performative, meaning it must be enacted to be remembered and to remain meaningful.

The advent of digital technologies introduces new dimensions to this ecosystem of remembering. Platforms such as YouTube, the podcast, and TikTok have enabled the recontextualization of folklore into new genres and formats, often reaching audiences who are

disconnected from their ancestral lands. However, this also creates the risk of decontextualization and superficiality if the performative and interactive dimensions of oral tradition are overlooked (Barendregt 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to balance new technologies with community-based, participatory practices that preserve the depth, nuance, and relationality inherent to oral traditions, ensuring sustainable cultural transmission in primary and secondary oral societies.

In many parts of the world, including Indonesia, the rapid development of information and communication technology has significantly altered the landscape of cultural transmission. This transformation is most notably observed in the rise of what Ong (1982) termed secondary orality, a new form of orality facilitated by electronic media that, while echoing traditional oral communication, is shaped by the characteristics of literate and digital cultures. In Indonesian folk theater, this phenomenon is evident in the increasing documentation, dissemination, and rehearsal of performances through digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram.

This technological mediation enables broader access and visibility for traditional performances, reaching audiences beyond local communities. However, it also alters the dynamics of transmission. Whereas traditional forms of oral transmission rely heavily on direct, embodied, and participatory interaction, often involving apprenticeships, communal witnessing, and contextual storytelling, the digital shift introduces a more passive, observational mode of engagement (Howard 2012). The immediacy and intimacy of live performance are partly replaced by recorded formats that, while useful for documentation, may dilute the performative and affective elements integral to the original experience.

Despite these transformations, the core of folk theater transmission in Indonesia remains grounded in interpersonal and face-to-face interaction. This is especially true in rural or semi-urban contexts, where skills, narratives, and performance ethics are transmitted informally within family lineages or performance troupes. In these contexts, knowledge is not only spoken but

embodied—transferred through gesture, mimicry, rehearsal, and lived cultural participation. This experiential learning method fosters deep cultural immersion, where values, aesthetics, and social commentary are internalized through repeated practice and observation. Moreover, the coexistence of traditional and digital modes of transmission reflects a hybridized cultural ecology. Rather than entirely replacing traditional methods, digital tools often serve as complementary means of reinforcement, archiving, or innovation. As Setyawan (2023) notes, integrating digital platforms in traditional arts does not necessarily erode authenticity but can open new spaces for intercultural dialogue, creativity, and youth engagement—provided such integration is grounded in local knowledge systems and ethical practices.

The future of folk theater transmission in Indonesia thus lies in harnessing digital technology as a tool for empowerment rather than displacement. By strategically blending face-to-face pedagogy with curated digital content, cultural practitioners can ensure the continuity, relevance, and resilience of these deeply rooted performance traditions in a rapidly digitizing world. The dynamic between folk and Western theater differs primarily in the relationship between the performer and the audience. As Brandon (1967) suggests, folk theater should not be viewed as inferior to Western theater but rather as a distinct genre with different communicative dynamics. Folk theater relies heavily on the audience's ability to receive and interpret messages, which is facilitated through mutual understanding between the artist and the audience. Encoding and decoding messages occur within specific social contexts, making the performance a site of interactive, situational learning. This informal exchange, often occurring in everyday settings such as homes, offices, or coffee shops, enables both artists and audiences to share knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives.

In particular, contemporary audiences, especially younger generations who are less immersed in oral culture, may struggle to engage with performances that once seemed concrete and self-explanatory. The transmission of folk theater requires ongoing dialogue between artists and audiences to ensure the continuity of

cultural practices, adapting to shifting cultural contexts while maintaining the core of the tradition.

Sydow (in Dundes 1980) notes that there are always active and passive bearers of tradition within a society. Active bearers engage directly in transmitting culture, such as performers, teachers, and cultural leaders. In contrast, passive bearers are recipients who may not actively participate in the process but still receive, experience, and interpret cultural messages. This conceptual distinction is fundamental in understanding how traditions are maintained, adapted, or eventually lost over time. Active bearers play a pivotal role in keeping cultural practices alive by intentionally sharing knowledge, skills, and values through performance, storytelling, or instruction. In contrast, while seemingly disengaged, passive bearers contribute to the cultural ecosystem by shaping the social context in which cultural forms are received and reinterpreted.

The existence of meaning within cultural practices is essential for successful transmission; without it, cultural practices risk becoming mere routines devoid of emotional resonance or contextual relevance. When the symbolic and functional meanings embedded in a tradition are no longer understood or valued by either group, the cultural practice can deteriorate into a hollow form, preserved only in appearance, not in spirit or purpose. This phenomenon is particularly evident in traditional performing arts, where form without meaning often leads to a detachment from local audiences and future generations. Assmann (2008) explains in his theory of cultural memory, traditions persist not merely through repetition but through meaningful engagement that aligns with collective identity and memory. In this sense, cultural continuity is contingent on repetition and relevance.

This is why inheritance and preservation are critical steps in ensuring the survival of traditional performing arts. However, preservation must not be mistaken for static conservation. As Hafstein (2009) argues, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage should be understood as enabling conditions for living traditions to evolve, not as an attempt to freeze them in a fixed form. This involves nurturing active and passive bearers through a dynamic

ecosystem that includes education, community engagement, intergenerational dialogue, and policy support. Programs to revitalize traditional performing arts must go beyond mere documentation or replication of performance. They should seek to reintegrate meaning into these traditions by connecting them to contemporary life, community narratives, and current socio-political contexts.

Moreover, the transmission process must be examined and refined to suit modern realities. As Kurin (2004) observed, traditional cultural expressions thrive when transmission is embedded in everyday practices, such as informal learning, apprenticeships, and participatory events, rather than relying solely on institutionalized training. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of how tradition functions across different community layers and how transmission mechanisms must adapt to changing modes of interaction, including digital platforms and hybrid performance spaces. For instance, digital storytelling, social media performances, and online workshops can transform passive bearers into more engaged participants, thus expanding the ecosystem of cultural inheritance.

Therefore, ensuring the vitality of traditional performing arts requires a holistic approach that empowers active bearers, mobilizes passive bearers, and reinfuses cultural practices with contemporary relevance and meaning. In this ongoing process, meaning-making, rather than mere preservation, should be the core principle guiding cultural sustainability strategies. As tradition is not a fixed entity but a living, negotiated practice, its survival depends on continuous reinterpretation, relevance, and resonance within the community that upholds it.

Inheriting oral traditions involves direct interaction between storytellers and their communities. Lord (2000) identifies three stages in the transmission of oral traditions. The first stage occurs when a prospective storyteller begins to enjoy and internalize the stories they hear, especially the recurring themes and phrases. In the second stage, the learner begins to perform the stories, initially with instrumental accompaniment. By the third stage, the individual has mastered the art of storytelling and is capable of performing a

complete narrative learned from a mentor. Folk theater, such as *Ludruk* in Surabaya and *Janger* in Banyuwangi, thrives on this inheritance process. New performers must replace those who retire, ensuring the art form's continuity. However, this process faces significant challenges. For example, despite frequent performances, top *Janger* groups in Banyuwangi often lack the opportunity to cultivate and develop new talent. Smaller groups often prefer hiring freelance performers over investing in the long-term development of new players, which creates a disconnect between experienced and emerging performers. Consequently, some senior actors are still cast in roles that should be played by younger characters, further highlighting the generational gap.

The inheritance of folk theater is a complex process that encompasses multiple artistic elements, including music, drama, dance, vocal performance, martial arts, and visual arts. Each of these elements requires a distinct inheritance system. In contrast, dance is often taught through formal or semi-formal institutions, such as schools or dance studios, where students receive structured education. While many art studios in East Java specialize in dance and music, they rarely focus on folk theater, leaving a gap in the preservation and transmission of these more intricate art forms. Groups often rely on various sources to find new performers to sustain folk theater. These sources include: (1) classical recruitment, where newcomers are trained over time through internships; (2) "imported" performers from other genres of folk theater; and (3) guest stars who are brought in for their popularity or unique appeal. However, despite these efforts, the availability of new talent remains limited, and the overall number of folk theater performers has declined.

Over time, as performers mature, they assume the role of mentors, passing on their knowledge to the next generation. For example, Sugiyo, a renowned *Janger* actor and teacher, has been educating new performers since joining the *Janger* Madyo Utomo group in 1962. Today, at 78 years old, Sugiyo continues to mentor his daughters and granddaughters, ensuring the transmission of *Janger* traditions. Similarly, the couple Rohili and Suhartatik have also embraced the role of mentors, coaching their children and

relatives to preserve the *Janger* art form.

However, these informal transmission methods face challenges in meeting the growing demands for new performers. Although there are approximately 100 *Janger* groups in Banyuwangi, the number of active players has dwindled, posing a significant threat to the sustainability of this folk tradition.

#### **IV. Preservation Challenges in Traditional Performing Arts**

The rapid decline of traditional performing arts in Indonesia can be attributed primarily to government policies that prioritize economic growth and infrastructural development at the expense of cultural sustainability. In many instances, traditional art forms are marginalized within national development agendas, receiving minimal support in terms of funding, institutional backing, and educational integration. This policy imbalance has contributed to the weakening of cultural transmission and intergenerational continuity. Lindsay (1995) offered a critical analysis of Southeast Asian cultural policies, noting that excessive governmental interference, vague strategic direction, and a failure to consider local cultural contexts have significantly undermined the resilience of traditional arts. These observations remain highly relevant in the Indonesian context, where cultural policies often emphasize tourism or commodification of heritage over holistic preservation and community-based cultural empowerment.

In recent years, scholars such as Heryanto (2010) and Hatley (2015) have echoed similar concerns, emphasizing that cultural policy in Indonesia tends to be reactive rather than proactive, frequently mobilized for political or commercial interests rather than the genuine cultivation of artistic life. As a result, many traditional performing arts have been transformed into staged spectacles devoid of their original social, spiritual, or ritual significance, thus accelerating cultural disconnection and erosion. Moreover, the state's emphasis on national identity through standardized cultural expressions, such as state-sponsored festivals and curated cultural showcases, often leads to the homogenization of diverse regional

traditions (Khim 2019). This has the unintended effect of diluting the richness of local variations and undermining the autonomy of regional cultural practices. When traditional arts are reduced to mere cultural ornaments to serve tourism or diplomacy, they lose their role as living, evolving expressions of communal knowledge and identity.

To reverse this decline, the Indonesian government must adopt a more strategic, inclusive, and culturally sensitive approach to cultural policy. This includes recognizing traditional performing arts as heritage artifacts and dynamic cultural ecosystems that require support in education, community infrastructure, digital adaptation, and fair economic opportunities for artists. As Schippers (2010) suggests, sustainable cultural development requires a model of "cultural sustainability," where safeguarding practices are embedded into everyday life and connected with local communities' aspirations. Therefore, a coherent policy framework should involve the collaboration of multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, academic institutions, cultural practitioners, and local communities, to design long-term cultural strategies. These strategies should integrate traditional arts into formal and informal education systems, incentivize young artists, and create digital platforms for broader dissemination and innovation.

Ultimately, without committed and culturally literate governance, the nation risks not only the loss of its intangible heritage but also a fundamental erosion of its collective identity and historical consciousness. As cultural policy expert Yúdice (2003) aptly puts it, culture must be understood as a resource to be managed and a constitutive element of citizenship and democratic life. In the 1960s, Java was home to more than 30 active *Wayang Orang* groups that performed nightly for large audiences (Brandon 1967). Similarly, Surabaya had five professional *Ludruk* groups that regularly performed in commercial theaters, drawing hundreds of spectators each night (Peacock 2005). By the 1990s, over 1,000 *Ketoprak* groups were spread across Yogyakarta, Central Java, and East Java (Brandon 1967). However, by the 2010s, these traditional forms had diminished significantly, with few remaining in their original vibrant capacity. This trend reflects a broader crisis facing

traditional performing arts across Indonesia.

Preserving cultural values is an inherently complex challenge, especially when it comes to maintaining and transmitting these values to future generations. Although responsibility for this transmission lies with all sectors of society, the government, particularly local governments, plays a key strategic role. This responsibility manifests in policies designed to support short-term, medium-term, and long-term cultural preservation, often formalized through regional regulations or decisions. For instance, the Banyuwangi Regency Government has made notable strides in preserving *Janger*, a traditional performing art. By granting *Janger* the status of "cultural archetype" of Banyuwangi and providing it with opportunities to perform at the "Regional Art and Culture Actualization" event, the government has committed to sustaining this cultural form. The Regency has also sent *Janger* groups to represent the region at external performances, a positive step towards ensuring its continued relevance.

Kayam (2001) emphasizes that Indonesian society traditionally utilizes three communication channels, namely religious leaders, scholars (writers), and theater (performing arts), to convey collective aspirations. While religious and scholarly messages reach specific circles, performing arts can uniquely engage broader audiences across both rural and urban settings. In rural areas of Banyuwangi, where society is transitioning to modernity, *Janger* serves as entertainment and an important medium for communication. However, preserving this art form remains fraught with challenges.

Folk theater in East Java faces significant preservation issues, as noted by Kayam (2001). For example, the Javanese *Wayang Kulit* exists in a paradoxical state. While it enjoys a large potential audience and some revival, it also faces the challenge of adapting to a radically new cultural environment. The tension between tradition and modernity creates uncertainty for both artists and audiences. Folk theater practitioners are found in diverse environments, ranging from rural agrarian communities to urban areas with strong market orientations. This geographic and cultural divide complicates artists' ability to maintain consistency in their

performances.

In traditional folk theater, the act of composition, which involves creating characters and dialogues, is central to an actor's role. Havelock, Lord, Ong, and Finnegan have described the distinct characteristics of oral composition in various Southeast Asian traditions. These rules are present in Malay oral traditions, such as *Kaba* and *Pantun* from West Sumatra, as well as in Javanese forms like *Kentrung*. However, these rules do not always apply to other folk theaters, such as *Lenong*, *Ludruk*, *Janger*, and *Ketoprak*, where the specificities of oral composition vary. For example, in the Javanese tradition, meter is not a feature of folk theater, unlike in Homer's epic poems.

Folk theater actors engage in a unique and dynamic creative process that differs fundamentally from the script-based approach typical of Western theatrical traditions. In folk theater, the narrative composition is not a fixed or finalized text, but an evolving performance that unfolds in real time on stage. Rather than relying on pre-written scripts, actors develop dialogues spontaneously, drawing from their deep familiarity with story themes, archetypal characters, local idioms, and communal experiences. This improvisational mode of performance allows for a high degree of responsiveness to the audience, enabling performers to adapt their delivery, language, and emotional tone to the social context and immediate reception of the viewers. Such performative fluidity reflects what Schechner (1985) describes as "restored behavior," in which actors continually reconstruct prior performances while incorporating new elements, producing a living, adaptive form of storytelling. In the context of folk theater, each performance becomes a unique instantiation of a familiar narrative, enriched by localized commentary, current social issues, and humor that resonates with contemporary audiences.

Moreover, this form of oral composition, often referred to as extemporaneous, is not random or chaotic. It follows implicit structures shaped by cultural memory, performance conventions, and pedagogical lineages that have been passed down through generations. The narrative trajectory, while flexible, is guided by a

repertoire of traditional motifs, character types, and moral frameworks, ensuring continuity and coherence across performances. This systematized spontaneity not only sustains cultural memory but also provides room for creativity and social critique, thereby maintaining the relevance of folk theater in a changing society (Barber 2007; Finnegan 1992).

Integrating oral composition with performative embodiment also aligns folk theater with what Ong (1982) terms "primary orality," a mode of knowledge transmission deeply rooted in communal interaction and embodied practice. Unlike literate traditions prioritizing fixed texts, oral performance relies on mnemonic techniques, rhythm, and audience engagement, creating a communal space where cultural values and histories are preserved and dynamically reinterpreted. In light of this, folk theater should not be viewed as lacking structure or sophistication. Instead, its improvisational nature reveals a complex, performative intelligence that challenges conventional hierarchies between written and oral traditions. Acknowledging the artistry and cognitive labor involved in folk theatrical composition is crucial for academic appreciation and cultural preservation efforts.

The dynamic nature of oral performance and the creation of dialogue mean that no two performances are exactly alike. Lord (2000) asserts that every performance is an original work, even if it is based on a familiar narrative. This is evident in folk theater performances like *Janger*, where actors improvise dialogue based on a shared story framework, often creating new elements that reflect their creativity. While a basic structure or outline guides the narrative, the specific performance varies each time, depending on the actors, their interpretations, and the audience's reactions.

Folk theater performers are often regarded as creators and interpreters of their own stories. They draw upon a vast store of knowledge, often passed down orally, allowing them to adapt and modify their performances in real-time. This knowledge base, known as "stock-in-trade" (Lord 1981), includes a repertoire of stories, phrases, and motifs that actors can draw upon during a performance. The actor's ability to process and creatively transform

this stock of knowledge plays a crucial role in the performance's originality and effectiveness. As Sweeney (1980) and Kumar (2024) observe, folk theater actors rely on patterns or themes that guide the storytelling process. These patterns, akin to formulas, enable the actor to shape the narrative in a dynamic way. The audience's reaction further influences the course of the performance, making the dialogue fluid and responsive to external stimuli. This adaptability is a hallmark of oral performance, where each actor contributes to the collective creation of the story.

In folk theater, the actor's memory is not just a passive repository of learned text, but an active, fluid process shaped by external and internal factors. As Goody (1977) notes, memorization is not a central feature in oral traditions; instead, it is the actor's ability to engage with and adapt the material that defines the success of the performance. This process is not merely mechanical; it involves intuition, creativity, and an ongoing relationship with the audience. Furthermore, Hatley (2007) describes in his research on *Ketoprak* in Yogyakarta that experienced actors build a mental "script" from the many plays they have encountered. This mental script is not a rigid, memorized text but a flexible collection of ideas and patterns that can be adapted to fit the demands of each performance. Over time, actors accumulate knowledge of characters, language, and movement, refining their craft through repeated performances.

In short, folk theater actors stand at the crossroads of cultural preservation and creative innovation, grappling with the challenge of maintaining traditional aesthetics while simultaneously responding to the demands of contemporary audiences. The tension between conserving inherited forms and meeting evolving societal expectations reflects a broader struggle within the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2015). These actors are not merely performers but cultural agents who reinterpret narratives, experiment with form, and infuse new meanings into age-old stories—often without losing the essence of the tradition itself.

Their adaptability lies in their mastery of performance conventions, narrative structures, and improvisational skills, enabling

them to recontextualize stories in accordance with contemporary realities. This ability to modify, expand, or compress storylines depending on time, audience, and space exemplifies what Thompson (2003) describes as "cultural dramaturgy," where performance becomes a site of negotiation between historical continuity and cultural transformation. These innovations may involve the integration of modern themes, such as migration, gender roles, or political satire, into traditional plots, allowing the art form to remain socially relevant and accessible to new generations.

Furthermore, the sustainability of folk theater is deeply tied to the performers' capacity to function as both custodians and creators. Their creative agency ensures that these art forms do not become static relics but continue to evolve as living traditions. As Hafstein (2009) highlighted, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is not about freezing traditions in time but about fostering conditions where they can flourish organically within communities. In this regard, the innovation of folk theater actors serves as a form of cultural resilience, responding to the pressures of globalization, modernization, and marginalization.

Nevertheless, this balancing act is fraught with challenges. Performers often face limited institutional support, minimal formal training infrastructure, and declining audience interest, particularly among younger generations. Despite these obstacles, their ingenuity and commitment offer a powerful model for cultural sustainability. Supporting these performers through inclusive cultural policies, increased visibility, and integration into formal and informal education systems is essential to preserving and revitalizing these artistic traditions. Ultimately, the survival and relevance of folk theater in a rapidly changing cultural landscape rests on the capacity of its actors to embody both tradition and transformation. By doing so, they ensure that folk theater remains a reflection of the past and a vibrant, evolving expression of present cultural identity.

## **V. Conclusion**

This study highlights the critical state of East Javanese oral traditions and folk performing arts, which are facing growing challenges due to globalization, modernization, and shifting audience preferences. While these cultural practices continue to be valued, their sustainability hinges on the ability of various cultural stakeholders, including performers, communities, local governments, and NGOs, to strike a balance between preservation and innovation. Although digital technology is sometimes viewed as a threat, it also offers significant opportunities to connect these folk arts with a broader, global audience.

The transmission of cultural knowledge and practices, whether through literacy or orality, relies on systematic approaches that make it easier for communities to understand and retain vital traditions. In its way, orality is a highly organized method of passing down essential cultural knowledge. However, for orality to thrive in today's context, it must be adapted and expanded to ensure it is effectively communicated and sustained across generations.

The transmission process in folk theater is central to its continuity and preservation, yet it still relies heavily on traditional methods. This lack of a formalized, systematic inheritance structure makes it difficult for new generations to access and master these arts. Unlike the more established transmission mechanisms for dance and music, folk theater lacks a structured process for passing down its techniques. The current method, where prospective folk theater performers must learn by joining existing groups, highlights the absence of a formal mechanism for cultural transmission. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of oral traditions as a vital component in preserving folk performing arts.

The preservation and transformation of traditional performing arts in East Java is a multifaceted challenge shaped by social, cultural, and technological forces. The primary obstacles include social and cultural changes, the lack of generational renewal, limited policy support, and the influence of technological advancements. Globalization brings a wave of popular culture that eclipses

traditional arts, while urbanization and modernization promote lifestyles that marginalize these cultural practices. Furthermore, the lack of interest among younger generations—who view traditional arts as irrelevant or financially unviable—exacerbates the challenge.

Another significant issue is the shortage of role models or teachers who can engage and inspire young people to continue these traditions. Limited governmental and institutional support further hinders the preservation and development of folk arts. Local governments are often slow to implement policies that support cultural preservation, whether through funding, regulation, or education. Moreover, the integration of traditional arts into the formal education system remains minimal.

To overcome these barriers, efforts to preserve and transform traditional performing arts in East Java must embrace innovation and adaptability. The key to sustaining these traditions lies in the use of arts education, the incorporation of digital media, and the strengthening of government and community support. Through a collaborative and flexible approach, traditional performing arts can remain vibrant and relevant in the modern world while retaining cultural integrity. With the right strategies and cooperation among all stakeholders, East Java's oral traditions and performing arts can continue to evolve, ensuring they remain an integral part of a dynamic and adaptive cultural identity in changing times.

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